SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

TWO OFFERING STANDS FROM MANGAREVA IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE PETER-THE-GREAT MUSEUM OF ST PETERSBURG AND THE MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY IN PARIS

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The Gambiers—located in the extreme southeast of French Polynesia and 1700km from Tahiti—do not really form an archipelago, since they comprise eight high islands and 18 volcanic islets inside a great lagoon measuring 30 to 35km in diameter. The total surface of these land areas does not exceed 25km²; Mangareva, at 15.4km², is the biggest island. Today, most of the population is grouped in the village of Rikitea (Atlas de la Polynésie française 1993:15). Archaeological research has dated the peopling of these lands to around the 9th or 10th century A.D. (Conte and Kirch 2005:183, M. Orliac 2003:15).

The so-called Gambier archipelago bears the name of a British admiral, bestowed by Captain James Wilson, the commander of the missionary vessel that made first European contact with these islands in 1797. Mount Duff, named after this ship, rises to 441m and is the highest summit in Mangareva (Atlas de la Polynésie française 1993:15). After James Wilson, the archipelago was visited by Europeans again in 1824, by Captain F.W. Beechey, and in 1834, by J. Moerenhout. In the latter year the evangelisation of the inhabitants began with the arrival of Father Honoré Laval, accompanied by Father François d’Assise Caret and the catechist Colomban Murphy. It was during this period, and at the end of the 19th century, that a small assemblage of carved wooden objects was collected, including two offering stands that are unique for eastern Polynesia.

THE CARVED WOODEN OBJECTS OF MANGAREVA

Only very few ethnographic objects from Mangareva exist in the collections of the world’s museums. For the most part, these objects are pestles, nacre hooks, tapa (beaten bark cloth), bands and strings, seashells and adze blades. Wooden objects are extremely rare. The British Museum in London possesses a depiction of the god Rongo and one turuturu baton (symbol of authority), and the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford has two turuturu batons. The Metropolitan Museum in New York has an anthropomorphic wooden sculpture in its collections, as do the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle and the Musée Henri Martin in Cahors, France. The richest collection of sculpted wooden objects from the Gambiers is that of the congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Rome. It comprises a small anthropomorphic
sculpture, an *eketea* (a forked baton with anthropomorphic characteristics), a bow, a “rogo baton” (so named in the inventory), again a symbol of authority, and three fragments of drums. Two depictions of divinities and an *eketea* belonging to this same collection are today on show in the Vatican Museum, Rome. A sculpture of the god Rao is displayed in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre in Paris which has morphological characteristics that are very different from those of sculptures in the other museums collections.\(^1\) The Musée du Quai Branly and the Peter-the-Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) in St Petersburg are the only museums in possession of two complete drums as well as two unusual offering stands displaying long arms ending in wide-open hands (see Fig. 1).


*The Stand from the Kunstkamera in St Petersburg*

The stand conserved in the Kunstkamera was collected in the Gambiers at the end of the 19th century by Miklukho-Maklai. Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklai was 24 years old when, in 1870, he left the port of Kronstadt on the sailing ship *Vityaz* commanded by Captain P.N. Nazimov. This young scholar was commissioned by the Russian Imperial Geographic Society to carry out scientific research in New Guinea for three years (Fischer 1997:32). On 6 July 1871 he arrived at Mangareva, where he was greeted by Father Blanc (Ivanova 2000:89) and Father Roussel (Fischer 1997:35). During his stay from 6 to 12 July, he lived at Rikitea in a little house placed at his disposal by the priests. With the assistance of Father Roussel who was his interpreter (Fischer 1997:35), he questioned Mangarevans about their history and culture. He also acquired a few objects which he scrupulously recorded in a list, accompanied by anthropological notes and six drawings (Ivanova 2000:90). His notes mention the acquisition of an adze—“given by a man who could no longer use it and who had obtained it from his father” (Ivanova 2000:90)—a *pahu* (horizontal drum), a paddle “in rose wood” and a stand.

This stand, which entered the collections of the ethnography museum in 1886, bears inventory number 168-194 (Fig. 1A). When it arrived at the museum, the object was intact, but at present the arms are separated from the shaft and held in place by pegs. The total height of this stand is 143cm. Up to the flange and in its bulging part, the shaft measures 71cm. The flange is 20cm in diameter. The cylinder at the base of the three arms measures 10cm in height and 16.5cm to 18.5 cm in diameter. The arms with hands are 42cm long and each hands (with spread fingers) measures 18.5cm, 19.5cm and 23.5cm (Ivanova 2000: 91). As in the stand of the Musée du Quai Branly, one of the hands is pierced right through by a hole. The arms and their extensions on the cylindrical base are covered with finely incised chevron motifs. The whole surface of the object looks greasy (C. Orliac 2004:13).
The Stand of the Musée du Quai Branly

The stand displayed in the Musée du Quai Branly was collected from Mangareva in 1884 by Dr Pierre Couteaud, a doctor with the Marine Nationale. This stand, which bears inventory number 29.14.921, measures 170cm in height and 24cm in maximum width (Fig. 1B). It comprises three parts: the shaft terminating in a bulge aimed at preventing rats having access to food, a circular plate at the end of this shaft, and 4 arms terminating in hands that start from this plate. The object is sculpted in a single piece of wood.

The stand’s greatest total width is 65.5cm, measured from finger to finger. The base diameter of the upper platform, from which the arms start, is 22cm, while that of the base of the upper cone is 23cm and that of the object’s base around 13cm (M. Orliac 2005). The object is intact, apart from a few missing fingers. As with the St
Petersburg post, a hole passes right through one of the hands, and likewise, the arms and their extension on the base are decorated with chevron motifs (Fig. 2).

Macroscopic analysis shows that this stand is carved from the trunk of a large tree, with a diameter of more than 65cm (M. Orliac 2005) and that it bears the traces of a yellow-orange pigment, doubtless that of *Curcuma longa* (reva), which was much used on Mangareva (C. Orliac 2002a:201-7, M. Orliac 2005).

**ETHNOLOGICAL INFORMATION ON THE USE OF OFFERING STANDS**

*The function of offering stands according to Miklukho-Maklai and Pierre Couteaud*

Miklukho-Maklai’s notes, written in Mangareva, mention that the stand which he collected was originally used for “funerals”, but then the word “funerals” was crossed out and replaced by “support”, and “place where they put corpses until they are destroyed, and in whose hands they placed batons”. His manuscript also mentions that this object was called *atakiko* and was carved in “rose wood, like the paddle and the drum”.

In view of the information provided by Laval and Beechey (see below), it is clear that Miklukho-Maklai was not correctly informed about the function of the stands that he was given. This stand’s morphology is very different from that of the posts (in the form of human legs) used for the altars designed for the exposure of the bodies of the deceased (Beechey 1831 t 3, [1]:170, Buck 1938:497). However, the indication that
the stand is carved in “rose wood” is correct (see below), as is the probable presence of batons stuck into the hands. The hole observed in one of the hands of both the Kunstkamera and Musée du Quai Branly stands substantiates this. A “banderole” was probably placed here, because “there were numerous sacred banderoles...for the gods” (notes A. Métraux, in Laval 1838:16).

In a short communication published in 1885 in the Revue d’Ethnographie, Dr Pierre Couteaud gives the following information about the post in the Musée du Quai Branly.

The dresser for human flesh that I brought back from Mangareva, Gambier Islands, consisted of a support 1.2m high, surmounted by a circular plate, 0.25m in diameter, from which rise four diverging arms of equal length, terminating in hands. The total height of the object is 1.8m; it is made from a single piece of rose wood, and crude carvings of straight striations decorate its upper half. The upper third of the support has a funnel-shape.

Here is what this apparatus was used for, according to the information provided by an old Mangarevan, but he was unable to give me the native name for it. On days of great festivities, human flesh, cut into pieces, was placed in baskets woven from coconut-palm leaves, and these baskets were attached to the hands at the end of the dresser’s arms.

The human flesh remained exposed for some time, because the funnel-shape of the support was designed to protect the flesh from being reached by rats, which are so numerous in all the Polynesian islands. It therefore seems that this was a kind of consecration of human flesh by the god of anthropophagy which means that the dresser in question was either the altar or the idol of the god.

Is this dresser unique to the natives of the Gambier Islands? Although no analogous object has been mentioned elsewhere, I am inclined to think that it must have been in use at last on Rapa, because an old native of that island, with great reticence, admitted that he knew of its use, and told me that in the past it was used on Rapa for the same purpose. (Couteaud 1885: 548-49)

The information given to Dr Couteaud is not credible. It is probably based on a mistranslation of the term ata akakiko which, according to Couteaud as well as Mikluklo-Maklai, was the name for this type of stand. The word akakiko is here broken down into aka (ata)—that is, ‘post’—and kiko, meaning ‘flesh, meat and muscle’ in the Marquesan and Pomotu languages (Stimson 1964:225). The term kiko kiko also means ‘bare, exposed flesh’, which probably lead to the confusion by Mikluklo-Maklai’s informant of the stands with the altars for exposing the dead.

The “‘ata ‘akakiko” according to Father Honoré Laval

The information given to Mikluklo-Maklai and Dr Pierre Couteaud is erroneous. The writings of Father Honoré Laval and J.W. Beechey, however, enable us to understand the function of these stands.
Father Laval, who spent 37 years on Mangareva, wrote a unique book (1938) of astute observations about the economic life, historical traditions, beliefs, rites, local customs of the inhabitants of this little archipelago. He describes this type of stand with some precision:

The ‘ata ‘akakiko is a big tree trunk, in one piece, with a pointed base stuck into the ground. Above the base, the support has an oval bulge at the level of a man’s height. It has a kind of head or sharply-angled tablet which is separated from the bulge by a narrowing. From here there rise three arms or three branches, with a hand and five fingers at each extremity. The whole thing forms a kind of inverted tripod. Onto this support they used to attach their bundles of popoi and of fish wrapped in leaves (most often of ti). Here they also hung their mats and their toga, etc. The rat could not reach them, because it could not jump from the foot of the piece of wood onto the sharply-angled shelf, which moreover was always well polished and sufficiently distant. This new type of dresser was placed in their hut, and thus sheltered from the rain. However, I have seen some outside. Because a family sometimes had two or three of them at home. (Laval 1938:282)

Laval’s drawing, which accompanies this description of the ‘ata ‘akakiko (Fig.3A), is significantly different from the morphology of the stands of St Petersburg and of the Quai Branly. The shape, to prevent rats reaching the food, is different: the drawing shows a rectangular plate placed perpendicularly to the shaft, whereas upper part of the shafts of the stands collected by Miklukho-Maklai and Couteaud have a bulge in the shape of an inverted flange. The stand drawn by Laval may have been used in a secular context, whereas the two museum specimens, which are more elaborate, may have been used in a sacred context. This, at least, is what is suggested by the description given in 1824 by J.W. Beechey. He wrote that on the marae “on each side of the image (of the god) was a stand having three carved arms, to the end of which several articles were suspended, such as carved coco-nut shells, and pieces of bamboo, perhaps musical instruments” (Beechey 1831 [1]:167; see also Buck 1938:456). These stands were made by specialists in wood carving, the taura-rakau, who “carved statues of the gods, their offering shelves, and raised their huts on the marae” (Laval 1938:319). Like everywhere else in Polynesia, woodworking required a mastery of the arts of sculpture but also of liturgy.

Laval further reports that close to these offering stands, people also erected offering platforms: made “of a tree trunk carved as in the figure opposite (Fig.3B). On top they placed flat stones which formed tables whose wooden supports constituted their base. The offerings were laid out on these tables” (Laval 1838:324). Moerenhout also reports the presence “of altars... surmounted by pieces of coral arranged in baskets in which there was fish and other foodstuffs and, at one of the extremities, there was an image, three feet high, quite well carved and with correct proportions, except for its arms which were too thin” (Moerenhout 1942:98).
DATING THE STANDS

Some samples were taken by the author in 2003 from the Kunstkamera stand and from the stand in the Musée du Quai Branly in 1986 and in 2005.

Six samples—of 3 to 11mm in length, 2 to 5mm in width and 1 to 2mm thick—were taken from the Kunstkamera post at the end of one of the three arms and from the surface of the base supporting these arms (C. Orliac 2004:11). These samples were studied by microscope to identify the species of the wood (see below) and sent to Beta Analytic Inc. in Miami to be dated using the AMS (accelerator mass spectrometry) technique. The radiocarbon date obtained (Beta 198834) represents a conventional age of 460 ± 40 B.P.—with a calibration at 2 sigma: Cal A.D. 1410 to 1480 (Cal B.P. 540 to 470).

Eight samples—of 3 to 5mm in length, 2 to 4mm in width and 1 to 2mm thick—were taken in 1986 at the base of the stand and under the flange of the shaft of the stand in the Musée du Quai Branly. These samples made it possible to identify the species of the wood (see below) (C. Orliac 1986:4). A second series of samples was taken in 2005, at the object’s base, for AMS dating by Beta Analytic Inc. in Miami. The C14 date obtained (Beta 205235) represents a conventional age of 170 ± 40 B.P.—at 2 sigma this is Cal A.D. 1650 to 1890 (Cal B.P. 300 to 60) and Cal A.D. 1910 to 1950 (Cal B.P. 40 to 0). As the object was collected in 1886, only the date Cal A.D. 1650 to 1890 (Cal BP 300 to 60) was retained.

Figure 3. Laval’s drawings. A: ‘ata ‘akakiko, B: legs of marae offering table.
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The St Petersburg Museum stand thus dates from the 15th century and the stand at the Musée du Quai Branly from the mid-17th to the late 19th century. It should be noted that the dates obtained are of the wood and not of the objects, but the tree identified as the source of the wood (see below) does not reach a great age (80 years at most), so that the margin of error is small. These dates show that this type of offering stand with human arms is ancient and dates back at least to the 15th century A.D. In view of the morphological differences between these two stands, one wonders if their size increased over time, as well as the number of arms, but these variations may also be related to the place of display and the monument to which they were attached.

BOTANICAL IDENTIFICATION OF THE OFFERING STANDS

The fine wood samples taken from these two stands were studied by the author with an optical microscope and a scanning electron microscope in order to identify the species of wood used in their production. These analyses established that the stands were sculpted in the wood of *Thespesia populnea* (Fig. 4), known on Mangareva by the name of *miro* (C. Orliac 1986:2004).

This tree, which can reach a height of 15m, belongs to the Malvaceae family. It grows in eastern Polynesia on the littoral of atolls and high islands. Its wood is of medium density, between 0.5 and 0.65 (Detienne and Jacquet 1999:57), of a slightly pinkish colour, sometimes dark red with fawn glints, and it is called “rose wood of Oceania” because it gives off a characteristically peppery scent. This fine-grained wood is easy to work with, and it polishes well.

![Figure 4. Wood of *Thespesia populnea* (Malvaceae). Transverse section of a sample taken from Musée du Quai Branly’s stand. (Photo C. Orliac, scanning electron microscope.)](image)
The wood of *Thespesia populnea* is often cited in ethnographic texts and Polynesian oral tradition in relation to the manufacture of “idols” and the sculpture of prestige objects, such as the throne and the royal sceptre (C. Orliac 1990:37). The xylological studies carried out by the author show that this wood was used in Tahiti for making finely worked dishes (*umete*), adze shafts, bows, paddles and scoops. In the Marquesas Islands it was used for producing anthropomorphic sculptures (*ti‘i*) and drums. On Easter Island, the experts chose it as their preferred material for *rongorongo* writing (C. Orliac 2005), for sculpting pectoral (*rei miro*) and neck ornaments (*tahonga*).

The xylological studies also show that this wood was highly prized on Mangareva. The *taura* ‘experts’ used it for sculpting representations of divinities, such as the sculpture of the son of the god Oro, collected in 1830 by Dumont d’Urville and held by the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle of La Rochelle (Orliac 2002b), or the statue of the god Rao, who was invoked during planting of *Curcuma longa* (C. Orliac 1999) and held by the Louvre in Paris. Close to these gods stood the offering stands, carved in the same wood. Apparently, as elsewhere in Polynesia, on Mangareva *miro* wood was considered a noble material, sacred and reserved for making divine objects.

**THE TREE OF THE GODS IN EASTERN POLYNESIA**

The texts by Laval and Moerenhout rarely mention the traditional use of the *miro* on Mangareva. It is briefly mentioned in the description of the production of *kumete* dishes, “engraved with shark teeth” (Laval 1838:210). *Thespesia populnea*, however, is not a tree like any other. In Eastern Polynesia it has the status of a sacred tree and plays an important role in most rituals. On Tahiti, it was planted within the precinct of the sanctuaries (*marae*) where it was called *amae* and *noho ahu*. It was “the most sacred... of the trees, the one that sanctifies” (Henry 1968:158), and it was indispensable as being an emanation of the god Roro‘o who inspired the priests in their devotions (Henry 1968:394). Its wood, leaves and branches were all used in numerous ceremonies. The leaves, known as *rau ava*, were placed on the edge of offering platforms and “the priests named in rotation the god to whom one of the leaves was assigned” (Henry 1968:168). Under the pillars of these platforms a stone wrapped in one or two *Thespesia* leaves was buried, known as “*iho* of the sacred altar” (Henry 1968:142). *Thespesia* leaves were also indispensable during human sacrifices and marriage ceremonies, or in preparing pigs offered to the sanctuary (Henry 1968: 290, 307, 308). Branches of this tree were necessary during the ceremony of undressing the god, known as *pai‘atua*, for the inauguration of a royal sanctuary, during rites celebrated after a combat or a naval battle, and for the consecration of a sovereign (Henry 1968:144, 169, 199, 321, 324).

Moreover, *Thespesia populnea* combines the colours of the gods, i.e., red and yellow. The “rose wood of Oceania” is slightly pinkish when it is young, but takes on a dark red colour with purplish-blue glints when the tree is old. It produces yellow flowers with a discreet perfume, and its fruits, leaves and bark provide a yellow pigment (C. Orliac 2002a:204). Through the colour of its wood, its flowers and the pigment that it yields, the *miro* combines the red and yellow colours which, in Eastern Polynesia and on Mangareva, symbolise social power and the forces of the next world.

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The analyses carried out on the two offering stands shed new light on the function and antiquity of this type of object. Ethnohistoric texts show that they were erected within the precinct of sanctuaries for the presentation of offerings to the gods: not only food offerings (hence the peculiar shape of their shafts) but also offerings of objects such as “carved coco-nut shells, pieces of bamboo, perhaps musical instruments” (Beechey 1831 [1]:167). The presence of a hole in one of the hands of both stands suggests that a stick was fixed there, as Miklukho-Maklai indicated, doubtless a sacred banderole in honour of the gods. The objects, whose antiquity dates back to at least the 15th century, were carved in the wood of Thespesia populnea, the sacred tree of Eastern Polynesia. Close to these stands, sculptures of divinities, notably that of the god Rao, displayed in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre, and that of the son of the god Oro, displayed in the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle of La Rochelle, were also carved in this precious wood which is sacred to the forces of the next world.

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NOTES

1. The sculpture was collected by the Picpus Fathers in 1836.
2. Curcuma longa is turmeric, commonly referred to as the “saffron of the Indies”.
3. Popoi is a culinary preparation primarily made from fermented breadfruit paste.
4. Ti is the common Polynesian name of Cordyline fruticosa.
5. In Mangareva toga is the name of tapa (beaten bark cloth).
6. The marae is a sanctuary where the gods and ancestors are venerated.
7. See this note by A. Métraux in Laval 1838:319: “The original meaning of the word taura is not strictly speaking priest, but technician, or expert, a priest is also a technician in divine things. Taura is synonymous with tu’unga which is the name generally used in Polynesia for a technician, whether his technique be profane or sacred.”
8. Iho means ‘the essence, the force that animates everything’; on Mangaia, and generally in the Cook Islands, it is commonly used to designate God, and it also means the ‘marrow’ or the ‘heart’ of a tree.
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