The interpretations of traditional Rapanui wood carvings tend to vary from one artist, salesperson or academic to another, sometimes in competition as if only one of the meanings could be valid. Seeing a well-known female figure variously referred to as *pa’apa’a* ‘dried up’ or *papa* ‘plain, flat’ could be construed as confusing or informative depending on how uniform we need understandings of cultural artefacts to be. Sometimes, as I intend to show, apparently contradictory explanations can both make perfect sense. Thus the figure of a crouching woman, *mo’ai vi’e* ‘figure of a woman’, is often said to depict a woman giving birth to a king, feet first. Campbell (1974: 309) suggested that the figure shows the typical birthing position of a Rapanui woman. A young artesan told me that the figure showed the cosmic connection between woman and earth, an explanation mockingly dismissed as esoteric by a middle-aged carver who claimed the carving showed a woman with elongated labia. His statement was supported by two elder women listening to our conversation. Seaver Kurze has expressed her own conviction that the woman’s pose is “intended to display the elongated clitoris, so desirable on certain Polynesian islands” (1997: 36).

Sometimes the so-called loss of culture is attributed to the tragic events in the 1860s, when “much of Easter Island’s original artistic and cultural heritage was lost” (Kjellgren 2001a: 20) following severe population decline owing to “enslavement, death and imported disease, and forced emigration” (Haun 2008:10), is given as reason for what is perceived as confusion and great freedom of interpretation of cultural artefacts today. The influence of Catholic missionaries can also be noted in their censuring of sexual display (Pinart 2004: 55). However, the multiple interpretations can also be understood as a continuation of a preliterate mode of knowing that values difference and flexibility in understanding and explanation (Hau’ofa 2000: 454, Hereniko 2000: 80). This fuels conversation and debate and attests to a vivid engagement with the cultural heritage, keeping it alive and relevant.

In what follows I contribute my own efforts to this theme. First, by considering the mediating qualities of important figures such as the *mo’ai kavakava* ‘figure with ribs’, *mo’ai pa’apa’a* ‘dried up figure’ and the *tangata manu* ‘birdman’, as well as of various anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs. Second, I will discuss the protective qualities certain carvings may have been thought to possess by comparing these with figures made elsewhere in Polynesia as well
as with the Polynesian art of tattoo (Gell 1995). Third and finally, I address the question of whether carved figures could possibly be portraits of particular people. This examination will be followed by a consideration of carvings being self-portraits or in some way representations of the artist himself.

**MEDIATING QUALITIES**

Mo’ai kavakava and mo’ai pa’apa’a

The meaning of the *mo’ai kavakava* (Fig. 1) has received much attention. Chauvet’s (1970: 160) suggestion that the morphology of the figure represented symptoms of a malfunctioning endocrine gland owing to malnutrition and chlorine poisoning attributed to drinking too saline water has been refuted by Englert (1974: 222-25) who explained that the Rapanui gathered rainwater for consumption and used very little salt in their food. Heyerdahl’s view that the figures were meticulous recordings of the physical appearance of two “aborigines who have been driven into the mountains by newcomers and then driven frantic by famine” (1976: 181) may be considered as strongly influenced by his theory of initial populating of the island from South America followed by a Polynesian settlement (Holton 2004). Attenborough and Broome (2000), who described Attenborough’s own *mo’ai kavakava* as “a half-starved male”, argued that it is one of the few remaining true representations of the god Makemake.

Fischer has associated the *mo’ai kavakava*, which he describes as “statuettes of an emaciated male with ribs showing”, with frequent famine in the 18th century during which the figures were produced in great numbers (2005: 43). Seaver Kurze similarly has suggested that “they could reflect the island’s scarce resources, the ravages of a debilitating disease, or the islanders’ familiarity with a dessicated body” (1997: 33).

I find it unconvincing that Rapanui carvers would have used precious wood simply to carve images of starving or ill people. Wood was scarce and very precious to the islanders and had come “to mean ‘riches’ or ‘wealth’ in the Old Rapanui language of Easter Island” (Fischer 2005: 44). It is more likely that an increase in the carving of the *kavakava* figures was associated with an upsurge in mortality rates in the 18th century, following the first European visit to the island in 1722 (Hunt and Lipo 2006: 1606). The carving of the figures would have had everything to do with the perceived increase in *akuaku* spirits as the ghosts of recently deceased people. Their portrayal as *kavakava* figures may have been a practice of fond commemoration and, at the same time, a making visible of *akuaku* spirit relations and their associated powers.

The islanders showed off their wood figures at various public feasts. The more figures a man carried the more effective would be his invocations to the
main divinity Makemake (Fischer 2005: 57). Men would carry up to 20 carvings, but it was not only the quantity of figures that was important; the superior quality of a statuette’s execution could cause jealousy, inferior carvings could evoke derision. People would rock or lull the carvings as if these were living infants, such display of affection suggesting that they embodied spirits of recently departed relatives. A report from an English visitor to the island in 1827 described the islanders setting up a great shout before “lifting the figure above their Heads several times all joining in Chorus and when upon delivery they would prop it against their brest [sic] several times” (2005: 29). In a report from the French missionary Eyraud from 1864 a similar act is mentioned, lifting the statues “into the air, making some gestures, and accompanying all of it with a sort of dance and an insignificant song”. Eyraud claimed that the many statues “about thirty centimeters high, representing male figures, fishes, birds etc.” are “undoubtedly idols, but [he has] not noticed that they have been attributed any kinds of honors” (2005: 30).

It is tempting to associate the kavakava figures as depicting decaying corpses with the idea of the akuaku as temporary spirits waiting to become pure spirits that can move on to the pō (Campbell 1974: 87, note: I have substituted pō for Campbell’s “Po”). The notion of a liminal transformative state of spiritual being corresponding to the period of bodily decomposition is known from different parts of the world (Howes 1986, 1987) and the mo‘ai kavakava may well be considered images of deceased relatives whom the living are still mourning or fondly remembering, the lulling and lifting described by early visitors being affectionate gestures.
Akuaku spirits are, generally, thought of as protective and helpful towards their living relatives, even though they are also considered capable of punishing them for not behaving according to ancestral custom. Against strangers they would be “mischievous and even hostile” (Fischer 2005: 29). I believe that the carving of the mo‘ai kavakava and the mo‘ai pa‘apa‘a is concerned with this dangerous transition of the akuaku, with how to beneficially interact with these liminal beings during their transformation from the world of the living to the divine afterworld.

This preoccupation is expressed, as I aim to show, in the account of the origins of the wood carvings. The version of the story I base my discussion on is that of Englert (1974), but with additions from a narrative collected by Metraux (Orliac and Orliac 1995) and, to a lesser extent, from accounts told to me during my stay on the island in 2002. The reason I make use of both Englert’s and Metraux’s narratives is that I believe they present two slightly different understandings of the story. In Englert’s account the focus is on the wood carvings as the main outcome of its hero’s acts, an understanding often expressed by Rapanui storytellers as the ariki ‘king’ cleverly tricking the spirits, revealing their true state of being while at the same time escaping their punishment. In Metraux’ account the introduction of food as an important element in the production of replicas of the original carvings draws attention to the ongoing relationship between the akuaku spirits and living people.

The origins of the wood carving

Tu‘u ko Iho is travelling from his house on the northwest side of the island, territory of the Kao and Rau Uri, to reach a place on the south coast on Ngatimo land. In Metraux’s account the names of various places he passes are mentioned (Orliac and Orliac 1995). At one point the king must cross the land of the Tupa Hotu Marama. It is upon entering their territory, at Puna Pau, that Tu‘u ko Iho sees the two akuaku sleeping and these spirits are awakened by an akuaku spirit on the Tangaroa hilltop. If one accepts the political map drawn by Hotu (Fig. 2), Puna Pao is situated where the territories of four different groups meet: Kote Rangi/Mata Ivi, Ngaure, Marama Miru and Marama Tupa Hotu. The Tangaroa hill is to the northeast of Puna Pao, on the border between Koti Rangi and Ngaure.

If one considers the divisions mapped by Routledge (1919) the Tangaroa hill is on the border between the realm of the spirits (uta) and the lands of the Marama (Fig. 3). The warning given by the akuaku spirits is a signaling of the king’s crossing the border from the spiritual realm to human territory which the akuaku spirits guard and in which the King is a stranger.

There is an initial contrast between the walking living king and the sleeping decaying bodies of the spirits. This contrast is mediated by the spirits taking
Figure 2. Political map of Rapanui (from Lee 1992: 13).

Figure 3. Divisions of Rapanui (in Lee 1992: 13, after Routledge 1919: 222).
on a normal human appearance upon awakening. Nevertheless the spirits do not recover their calm, since the *akuaku* on the hilltop has told them that the king has seen their putrid state. The distressed *akuaku* are determined to prevent knowledge of their true state from becoming known to living humans. The concerned spirits make several attempts to find out whether the king has discovered their secret. If he has, they will kill him. The king pretends not to have noticed anything out of the ordinary, his consistent denial finally bringing to an end the spirits’ persistent inquiries. Or almost so. They return in the guises of women. In Englert’s account the king tells the women they are beautiful; in Metraux’s version the women cover their sex with one hand (Orliac and Orliac 1995). In versions of the story I heard the female appearances are quite explicitly claimed to be *akuaku* male spirits in disguise, their true identity being revealed to the *ariki* by one of them forgetting to conceal his goatee beard. Such growth is displayed on some *pa‘apa‘a* figures. Heyerdahl (1976: Plate 31) referred to this kind of figure as hermaphrodite and according to Kjellgren (2001b: 50-51) the display of goatees as well as “in most instances, bald heads... may indicate that the power of the goddess (or possibly female ancestors) they represent was perceived as equivalent to that of their male counterparts” (2001b: 51). I believe the significance of the goatee and the covering of the sex is quite clearly in accordance with Rapanui explicit claims that these are male spirits in disguise. In Englert’s version the notion of disguise is more subtle—the women appear from the corner of an *ahu* ‘platform (often with burial chambers)’, where the *akuaku*’s earthly remains may eventually be placed. The king telling them they are beautiful confirms the earlier act of the spirits putting flesh back on to their bones, the king pronounces his acceptance of the spirits’ human appearance, and they are calmed by this deception.

In contrast to the untruth of his words, the king truthfully carves the images of the spirits out of *toromiro* firewood that has been used to transform raw foodstuffs into a cooked and edible meal. Ancestral powers are often associated with heat, and here an analogy can be understood to be drawn between fire (as firewood) and ancestral image. Here Metraux’s version appears to explain things more clearly than Englert’s does by mentioning that the king gives carved images to people in return for cooked food. Perhaps one can suggest that this exchange of figures that stand for the king’s silence—his keeping of *tapu*—elicits ancestral benevolence manifest in edible food.

To those that do not bring food in exchange for carvings the king shows the figures (as if) walking. The *akuaku* walk like the king does in the beginning of the narrative, and the initial opposition between the living, walking king and the sleeping, decaying spirits has, in Wagner’s (1978) terms, been obviated. The story possibly tells us that by showing the spirits proper respect, allowing
them to walk with the living without revealing the truth about their actual condition, will cause them to be kindly disposed.

The *mo‘ai kavakava*, in particular, seem to embody this understanding of silence, of not breaching *tapu*, and thereby maintaining peaceful and beneficial relations with the spirits. They also make evident the mortality of humans and the transitional liminal state of *akuaku* beings, as corpse-bound spirits transforming into pure spirits. This process is characterised by a period of up to three years of mourning, at the end of which there is a celebration with relatives cheerfully announcing the termination of the deceased person (Routledge 1919: 171). Perhaps this was understood as the spirits finally accomplishing entrance into the *pō*, a place of eternal peace and happiness (Campbell 1974: 87).

Tangata manu ‘Birdman’

A sequence of mediations can also be seen as embedded in the figure of the Birdman, the politico-religious leader of the island elected each year in a competition. This annual ritual, centred on Orongo, began by waiting for the arrival of the migrant sooty tern (*manutara*) to nest. The bird was understood as mediating between the island and the legendary outside world and bringing the regenerative powers of Makemake to the island’s life-world. The focus was on the terns’ nesting ground in the islet of Motu Nui and representatives of island chiefs competed to be the first to bring a sooty tern’s egg from the islet to the ceremonial ground at Orongo on the main island. As the bird mediating between the outside world and the known world, a competitor’s task was to mediate between the terns’ nesting ground on the islet and the ceremonial ground on the island, bringing the egg imbued with the powers of the god Makemake to his chief. By this act one chief of several competing chiefs was transformed into *tangata manu*, a person incorporating the external powers of Makemake brought by the migrant tern and represented by its egg brought to him by a triumphant competitor. A birdman was thought to incorporate this regenerating power for one year, possibly regaining his position the following spring or else being replaced by another chief. The mediations of the tern, between outside world and home, and egg, between nest and ceremonial ground, are the conduits of Makemake power eventually to become incorporated in one chief.

CLOSURE AND MULTIPLICATION

The oval *tahonga* pendants have been interpreted in various ways. Englert (1974: 71) suggests that it is like a heart in form, Seaver Kurze (1997: 43) believes it symbolises the coconut and Chauvet (1970: 133-34) claims that properly the *tahonga* should be carved out of coconuts that drifted onto the
island’s shores. Coconuts and tahonga carved out of wood, he continues, were hung around the necks of boys being initiated to the status of poki manu ‘bird-boy’. This act associates the tahonga with the aforementioned manutara ‘sooty tern’ and in conversations with Rapanui carvers they generally identified it with this bird’s egg. A bird’s head is sometimes placed on top of the tahonga, at other times one or two human heads, inviting the perception of bird or human being hatched from an egg. An aspect of the tahonga, important to the argument presented here, is that they were worn in pairs (Seaver Kurze 1997: 44). The same applied to the rei miro ‘canoe’ pendants, shaped as symmetrical crescents, which often have a head (or other image) carved onto each point.

The hereditary king would wear “no fewer than six examples at once—two on the chest and two hanging from each shoulder” (Kjellgren 2001b: 66). Other duplicate forms include the Janus-faced carvings on the paoa baton, the ua club and the mo‘ai aringa pendants, which were both carved out of wood and made out of barkcloth.

According to Gell (1995: 23) the Polynesian notions of the cosmos involved the understanding that the space of light and human activity had been created out of an “all embracing plenum” through acts of separation. This separation was not complete, as the concepts of mana and tapu indicate, and the close presence of the gods, their immanence, produced what Gell refers to as “ontological anxieties” in human beings, in particular men, who felt vulnerable to the divine powers. In order to keep the threatening forces at bay symbolic strategies were employed consisting essentially in “the recapitulation, in one form or another, of the process of separation on which both the cosmos in general, and the being of the individual, were founded” (1995: 25).

Symbolic strategies consisted of the protection of the more vulnerable parts of the body through closure: “the provision of extra reinforcement, hardening the target of spiritual danger”, and multiplication: “the strategy of reduplicating the person in myriad forms” (Gell 1995: 26).

The strategies of closure and multiplication can be seen in figures of Siamese twins and Janiform images from Tonga and Fiji (Gell 1995), where the duplicated, or separated, images turn their vulnerable back-parts together, thus providing closure (Gell 1998: 192ff). Examples are found of such twin figures from the Marquesas (Hooper 2006: 163), Cook Islands (Gell 1995), Society Islands (Hooper 2006: 174), Hawai‘i (Hooper 2006: 100-1, 104-6) and from the Austral Islands where the notion of back-to-back finds the expression of two men sharing a body (Kjellgren 2007: 299-300), a feature that has also been attributed to the double-headed tahonga (Raffensperger 2001).

Similar Janiform images appear on pendants (mo‘ai aringa), symbols of power (ua) and weapons (paoa). Along with the rei miro and the tahonga, these objects are either worn hanging from the neck or shoulders, or carried
about as symbolical or practical extensions of the body. The wearing of the rei miro and the tahonga in pairs, or several pairs, is consistent with the notion of protecting the body through multiplication, a feature that seemingly also appears in the tattooing of a pair of figures (faces or paddles) onto the abdomen as part of a protective girdle around the waist (Gell 1993: 273). Paddle/face motifs are also tattooed onto the backs of both men and women (Gell 1993: Figures 6.8 and 6.10) as well as a “back-face” (Figure 6.11), which Gell suggested had a “protective meaning attached to it” (1993: 274).

As for the Janiform images on the club, staff and pendant, one may consider Gell’s suggestion that these dual faces provide protection in that they watch each other’s back. I believe Kjellgren (2001b: 63) was right in arguing that the story of a Janus-faced warrior, who is killed because his two faces start arguing with each other in the middle of a battle, provides a clue to the meaning of these images. It does so as a reversal of what Janiform faces were supposed to do, provide mutual protection.

This discussion of duality takes me back to a consideration of the meaning of the mo’ai vi’e ‘figure of a woman’, discussed at the outset. The figure is variously interpreted as depicting a woman with elongated genital parts or as a woman giving birth to a child, its feet protruding from the woman’s vagina. It can, quite reasonably be argued, given the emphasis on large genitals in other wood carvings (Heyerdahl 1976: Plate XX), that “[n]ext to the ubiquitous cupules, vulva signs comprise the largest design category on the island” (Lee 1992: 193) and, of course given the actual practice of lengthening the outer labia, that the mo’ai vi’e should be understood as depicting a woman with transmuted genitals.

This interpretation was also suggested by many Rapanui who associated the practice of lengthening the labia with sexual pleasure. Others held the opposite view that the figure was associated with the birth of an ariki ‘king’. A woman working in the Moira souvenir shop (Hanga Roa), assumed the physical pose of the carved figure, squatting on the floor as if giving birth, to underline her argument: the mo’ai vi’e is a woman giving birth. Considering Gell’s argument about the protective quality of duplication, and the “direct connection between the idea of doubling and birth” (1995: 34), it appears quite reasonable also to interpret the figure from such a reproductive angle. There exist Marquesan carvings of women that are, unambiguously, giving birth (Gell 1998: 196, 213-14). The motif is not a novelty in Polynesian carving.

CARVINGS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF PARTICULAR PEOPLE

I believe Campbell made an important point when he wrote (1974: 121) that at first glance the facial characteristics of the mo’ai appear stereotyped as if they were all cast in the same mould, but that on closer examination it becomes
clear that each face is special, different and representative of a particular person. From a similar perspective Englert (1974: 77) maintains that the *mo‘ai* represent dead ancestors as *retratos al natural* ‘natural portraits’.

In a general sense these figures have been “connected with issues of competition and warfare involving society as a whole” (Kaeppler 2001: 34). Steven Fischer (2005: 32-34) associated the erection of the stone statues with changes in the “style of authority”, with a greater emphasis on the individual personality resulting in “personal aggrandizement and quantitative pomp”. The erect *mo‘ai* on their platforms were indications of a group’s economic strength and social hierarchy. They “were mana turned to stone”, personified through an individual statue’s association with a particular ancestor “worthy of being commemorated”. Accordingly, each statue has a name. Nevertheless Fischer maintains that “[s]ince the concept of realistic individualized art did not exist in ancient Polynesia, no *mo‘ai* bore an individualized appearance” (2005: 34).

Certainly we do not have knowledge of pre-contact Rapanui perceptions of what would have constituted realistic or natural likeness. Still, given that certain woodcarvings have been thought to be portraits of particular individuals (Routledge 1919), one must consider Englert’s claim that this applied to the stone statues as well.

Western art provides numerous examples of different styles in portraiture showing great variety in representation of their subjects. One can ask whether Pevsner’s rather abstract portrait of Duchamp (Arnason 1977: 413, Plate 666) is less realistic than Picasso’s caricature of Stravinsky (Arnason 1977: 332, Plate 523), and whether these portraits are more or less realistic than Ingres’ classical portrait of Bertin (Janson 1977: 583, Plate 741)? Most people would probably deem Ingres’ portrait to be the most realistic and natural representation. Picasso’s linear drawing, though, might be considered as bringing out more of its subject’s character and, perhaps to the trained eye, Pevsner’s less representational portrait might be thought to capture some true essence of Duchamp. Each portrait is realistic in its own terms—in its own style—but some artistic styles demand of their audience a more trained perception than others. The same, of course, can be argued for different cultural schools of visual representation. Neither the Western academic nor the modern Rapanui can lay claim to a pre-contact Rapanui mode of perception, but modern Rapanui who co-habit with the numerous statues on their tiny island must be considered coming closer to such appreciation.

A neighbour in Hangaroa, Tere, took me to a site on the south coast to show me the *mo‘ai* she considered to be the most beautiful on the island. She had given the statue the name of the actor Kevin Costner, whom she met during the production of the film *Rapa Nui*. The ancestors obviously did not
carve the image of Costner, but they did produce a statue that was, among
all the other mo'ai, truly exceptional to my neighbour. It was clear that her
perception of the statues was more astute than my visitor’s gaze, discerning
a great variety of different images where I could only notice a few types.

Whether they were intended to be portraits or not, to the trained eye a statue
can be personified by the projection of some particular person’s image onto
its features. Conversely, with time, the carved features of an ever-present
named mo’ai projected onto the collective memory of people will become
the image of the person it is supposed to represent.

Social portraits
Kaeppler has contrasted bark-cloth figures with woodcarvings, suggesting that
the former may have been images associated with high-ranking individuals,
whereas the wood figures were related to those of a lower status, by pointing
out the greater rarity of the bark-cloth as compared with wood. Also, she noted
that the representation on the cloth figures of “body painting and/or tattoos,
associates them with high-ranking individuals” (2001: 34-38). The likeness
between the bark-cloth figure and a particular person lies in the replication
in the figure of the person’s social skin, to borrow Turner’s (1979) notion. In
the Marquesas, the wife of a chief removed the skin from his corpse, since
the tattoos of a high-ranking man, which had provided him with a protective
wrapping during his life, became an impediment to his rejoining the clear-
skinned gods in the otherworld after his death (Gell 1998: 195). There is no
evidence of Rapanui mortuary practices akin to those of the Marquesans, but
the high-ranking Rapanui recreation of the social aspects of bygone chiefs
by fashioning and displaying skin-like images of them (Kjellgren 2001b:
Plates 24, 25 and 27) may have substituted for such mortuary practice by
symbolically removing the skin from the deceased chief. Understood as
symbolic flaying, barkcloth images would not be substitutes for wood figures
as Kaeppler (2001: 35) suggested, but a means of facilitating the entrance of
a deceased chief into the afterworld (Gell 1995).

A similar social aspect of wood and stone carvings has been suggested
by Gell who claimed that protective girdles “are prominently carved on the
sacral area at the base of stone ancestral figures, and were always included
(in stylized form) on the later wooden ancestor figures carved on the island”
(1993: 273). He went on to say that it is impossible to know whether these
markings represent clothing or tattoo, remarking that this does not, in a sense,
matter “given the scheme-transfer between textile and tattoo wrappings
throughout the area”. From a different perspective Kaeppler interprets many
of the traditional woodcarvings (mo’ai kavakava, moko and tangata maru) as
being socio-historical mnemonics with their notched backbones representing
“succeeding generations of ancestors” incorporating “genealogical metaphors of social importance” (2001: 34). But what of human figures that are without such social or historical features?

Routledge mentioned a carving, in the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, said to represent Captain Cook, who visited the island briefly in 1774. The figure is different from the usual representations of men in that it has short ears (and, according to personal communication from museum staff, a detachable penis). This is not an isolated instance of portraiture according to Routledge (1919: 217) and Kjellgren (2001b: 53-54) who have both suggested that figures of the type mo’ai tangata could be considered as portraits of particular people. In this context I would point to an interesting carving in the British Museum (Fig. 4) showing a man with a big head, dressed in a robe. His hands are clasped and his mouth open as if he is singing or sermonising. The figure is quite roughly carved and appears incomplete. The ears are large and without detail, the eyes appear closed or alternatively unfinished. There is good reason to think that this figure was made in the image of an early representative of the Catholic faith, perhaps of Father Eyraud, the first missionary on the island.

Self-portraits
A sales-woman in one of the stalls in the new market building in Hangaroa told me about a young man who had recently died. She had bought many carvings from him and pointed to a row of wood replicas of stone mo’ai, all very similar in size and shape. “What troubles me”, she said, “is that they all look like him.” Later, in an interview with a young enthusiastic apprentice a similar idea of a carving’s resemblance with its creator came up. He was studying a
moʻai paʻapaʻa a figure I had purchased, allegedly carved by the young man’s recently deceased uncle. He studied the figure closely for a while and then suggested that a brother of the deceased uncle had carved it, commenting: “It looks more like him.” He reasoned that figures tend to look like their makers because the artists carve facial features they are well familiar with. Given that our own face is usually not visible to ourselves I did not find his explanation particularly convincing, but the general idea of a carver imposing his personality onto his work is certainly possible.

In conversations with Rapanui artists a comparison with European artists such as van Gogh and Picasso was sometimes made. The perception of similarities between modern Rapanui woodcarving and late 19th century to early 20th century European art brings up questions about individual authorship. An early idea of the individual artist is found in the person of Tuʻu ko Iho in the story of the origins of woodcarving (Englert 1974) but the identity of particular carvers as artists is not mentioned in the literature on 19th century Rapanui artwork, which was presented as local crafts for sale to foreign visitors at the time (Fischer 2005). Routledge made mention of how people informed her about the wood carving in the 19th century and noted that there had been “about ten experts in the island, who made wooden articles of various descriptions” (1919: 271). She went on to write that at least three of these were alive at the time of her visit, mentioning one of them by name, Te Haha. Routledge did not mention Juan Tepano as a carver, despite their association during her stay on the island in 1914-15. Some 20 years later, in 1936, he was a prominent figure in the carving practice and “highly individualistic pieces, either carved or influenced by [him] returned to Europe with the Franco-Belgian expedition” (Seaver Kurze 1997: 19).

The notion of individualised art has not diminished among the island’s more accomplished carvers. A senior artist, Petero Pakarati, told me that now, after producing much repetitious copying, he wanted to work on his own ideas. The distinction between craft and art was clear to him: art is creating something new with feeling and concentration. In later years the image of the late Benedicto Tuki Tepano has frequently appeared in publications as representative of the island’s artists (Fischer 1999: 216, Seaver Kurze 1997: 25, Trachtman 2002: 77). He often carved his own creations based on traditional style and sometimes signed his work.

Rapanui artists’ individualised work contrasts with the anonymity often associated with communal cultural traditions where a work of art “must have been produced by an unnamed figure who represents his community and whose craftsmanship respects the dictates of its age-old traditions” (Price 2006: 56). In such a formulation artist’s agency is highly restricted, they are “cast as the servants of communal tradition, fashioning objects according to
prescriptive rules inherited from past generations” (2006: 58). Considering the great variety of carved figures on Rapa Nui—“greater than in Tahiti, the Marquesas and Hawai‘i”, a Rapanui artist proudly claimed—it is difficult to sense any strict prescriptive rules about the carving of wood figures outside the class of traditionally established carvings such as mo‘ai kavakava or mo‘ai moko. Rather, the argument could be made that there is great freedom of individual expression in woodcarving.

* * *

It is quite clear that there is no single explanation, or meaning, pertaining to any of the traditional figures carved by Rapanui artists. In this article I have suggested certain possibilities of interpretation but they are of course only partial, and may be completely misguided. The possible mediating qualities of figures such as the mo‘ai kavakava do not emerge in Rapanui carvers’ own explanations. They find both attractive and humourous the idea that the king tricked the persistent akuaku spirits. As a victory of the living in a struggle with the dead, I must concur that it is an agreeable understanding. As found elsewhere in Polynesia, dual and multiple figures seem to have been understood as having protective properties holding at bay the intrusive forces of the otherworld. However, it is clear that such concerns were only part of their import as exemplified by the mo‘ai vi‘e, a figure of a woman interpreted both as in process of giving birth and as representing a woman with lengthened labia. Again, I find it probable, given the rather sketchy carving of what I believe to be an early missionary, that certain human figures were intended to represent particular people. Certainly, some Rapanui perceive a resemblance between a carving and a particular person, but as with the meaning of the figures, this is perhaps the viewer’s creativity rather than the artist’s intention. Perhaps one should consider that meaning itself goes through a process of separation, duplication and multiplication and that whatever the mo‘ai vi‘e or the mo‘ai kavakava meant to their initial authors has been subject to reconsideration by subsequent artists and other folk.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the varied explanations, both local and academic, of Rapanui woodcarvings are discussed and some possible interpretations presented. First, it is suggested that some figures can be understood as representing processes of mediation between different cosmological spheres. Second, it is proposed that particular figures can be considered as having protective qualities similar to those of carvings elsewhere in Polynesia. Finally, the argument is made that certain carved figures should be understood as portraits of particular people.

Keywords: Rapanui, woodcarving, mediation, protection, portraiture.