Movement of peoples into Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia

www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/date/2008/04

Lapita Culture Artifacts
In all the Polynesian cultures, barkcloth and female imagery are intertwined, and serve comparable functions -- neutralizing and containing harmful divine energy through the life giving potency femininity implies. Thus we have the favoring of images of women on door-lintels -- females giving birth or the female goddess of death, to protect the vulnerable entrance into Maori meetinghouses.
Thus we find barkcloth wrapping and containing god-figures, whether the figure of a chief or an anthropomorphic wooden carving.
Digress: The deconsecration of images by unwrapping them – as they are shown in most museums (not out of respect, but either because they were unwrapped by missionaries as a gesture of power or they were deconsecrated by their custodians prior to being abandoned or turned over to missionaries as part of the conversion process.
Chief as constructed artifact – body marked and wrapped with tattoos, further transformed by being wrapped and bound with barkcloth, mats and cloaks of various kinds. The head was encased by a cloth turban, feathered helmet or headdress, and in Hawaii and Tahiti the waist and loins bound with a feathered cloth. Value was added through ornaments.
In particular, breastplates and other ornaments that gave off light and vitality were applied to the chief. All to fix and control divine power or mana.
Sacred materials included twisted and braided fibre cords, often coconut fibre, bark cloth, and feathers. The highest ranking god figures were made of materials that demanded the most labor – twine, bark cloth, feathered images.
Forest trees are associated with the body of the chief, so that the chief’s back is referred to as the back of the ‘wood’ used for large canoes and for the support posts in sacred precincts, chiefly houses—as in Maori culture.
Whale ivory as well is associated with the chief’s body, the surface of the tooth of a sperm whale in particular likened to the Chief’s skin.
Crescent – ubiquitous in Polynesian design but it achieves its greatest verbal and visual cross referencing in the Hawaiian context where the word crescent can mean an arch, as over the door of an ancient house, a design as at the base of a temple drum, a crest as on a helmet, a myriad of meanings linked to bright light, from lightning to fire, to brandishing (a spear) and opening a mouth, to ward off, to being a spirit, an apparition, or figuratively, representing honor and glory.
K suggests that the crescent motif derives from upraised human arms as on the sculptured Hawaiian drum (364). Lifting up a spear also forms a crescent. Whether holding up the sky or raising the hands in ritual movement, the symbolism must surely relate to divinity. Some of the meanings of the word, such as casting a shadow—dangerous in H thought and ‘spirit’ or ‘apparition’ are surely related to the gods—and certainly the god figures are informed by the crescent shape.
The red color and crescents on the back of a feathered cloak in addition to being glittering, flashing, and splendid, figuratively give the wearer glory, and hopefully would drive away or frighten the enemy when worn in combat. K suggests that the ultimate visual aim of a high chief was to resemble a series of crescents. His helmet was an overarching crescent set at a right angle to his cape or cloak which had the overall form of an underarching crescent. The cloak in turn had a series of crescents worked into the design, and often, when worn, met in front as a series of crescents. As these crescents were usually red, they added the sacred color quality to his appearance. As a series of crescents, the chief embodied the other figurative meanings of the word—bright light, from lightning to fire, warding off, being a spirit, being the glory and honor of his people.
All these ideas are entangled into many works of art – but particularly the image of the war god KU – linked personally to the 18th century Kamehameha with his expansionist tendencies, supported by European technology, that allowed him to unite the islands under him as king.
Polynesian philosophical systems were often based on paired opposites, complementary and necessary aspects of each other — sacred and profane, the ruler and the ruled, men and women, war and peace. There are visual consequences to this idea of complementarity and opposition. Symmetrical decoration is one consequence—as seen in Marquesan and Maori tattoos.
Kaeppler suggests that in Hawaii, the gods of peace and agriculture, women and domesticity were seen as complements but opposed to the gods associated with men’s activities -- war and destruction. In visual terms, a contrast between the visual forms of Lono (associated with peace and agriculture) and Ku (war). Lono deities in Hawaii characterized by emphasis on the backbone and its links to genealogy and succession (notions we've seen elsewhere in Polynesia), hair attached to the head, and a crescent-like chin that reflects the form of the spermwhale tooth necklace usually strong on ropes of braided human hair. (Hair is a sacred and powerful material because of its association with the most sacred and powerful part of the human body).
Ku or Warfare/Destruction deities are given visual recognition by stylized ferocity of the face, and what Kaeppler calls the mouth of disrespect with its bared teeth, flaring nostrils, enlarged eyes and up-thrust chin, and by the use of helmet forms rather than hair.

The mouth of disrespect. This facial expression features an exaggerated grimace with the chin jutting forward and the mouth opened wide, framed by concentrically carved fluting. The nostrils are flared and the teeth are displayed, sometimes along with a protruding tongue.
Kaeppler suggests that the feathered images, probably more important images in the pre-European period, simply because they required much greater input from different social groups and the extensive network of kinship relations needed to foster this cooperation. They were carefully stored out of the elements when not in use, unlike wooden images that could be left outside. Kaeppler hypothesizes that each chief had one of each type—a feathered image for the ‘community/peace/agriculture’ gods and one for the War gods—stylistically and materially differentiated by the hair or no headcovering and helmet. She further posits a relationship between the sperm whale tooth necklace with its gentle hook form with the Domestic gods and the barbed fishhook with the War gods.
I would like to turn briefly to Tattoo – Moko – in Maori. Kaeppler writes about the fascination that tattoo engendered in European visitors to Aotearoa since the time of Captain Cook’s voyages when his artists depicted several individuals with tattoos.
Facial designs were carved into the skin and bore a distinct relationship to the incised patterning on Maori sculpture. L. Contemporary artist George Nuku. R. Detail of interior support figure of the Maori house Te Hauki-Turanga carved by Raharuhi Rukupo in 1842.

Facial designs were carved into the skin and bore a distinct relationship to the incised patterning on Maori sculpture – or vice versa.
Women’s tattoos and men’s body tattoos correspond to the patterns seen elsewhere generally in Polynesia – with women’s Tattoos limited to the lips and chin, while men’s body tattooing was between the waist and the knees.

http://pem.org/exhibitions/showcase.php?id=Maori&num=1
Facial tattoos were sacred for high-born men of chiefly rank who were sacred or tapu and important and protected (again part of being tapu) during the process. They could not feed themselves, being fed through ornately carved funnels. Maori facial designs were individualized and were drawn as signatures during the 19th century. There show a preference for symmetry that reflects fundamental Maori values expressed in a series of dichotomies such as life and death, sacred and profane, male and female.
Tattooing, just like sculptural and painting styles, varied from Maori tribe to Maori tribe, region to region and certainly over time. The classical curvilinear style predominated in the 19th century, but vertical and horizontal parallel lines were also used, sometimes overlaid with curvilinear designs. References to tattooing is found on the carved figures and houseposts of the meeting houses, figures that often represented portraits, though not likenesses, of remembered ancestors. The buttocks of sculpture also displayed the tattoo patterns worn by important men.
In Micronesia, there is a particularly eloquent explanation of tattoo commented on by K. The Marshall Islanders believed that the gods gave this art to them to make them beautiful. “You should be tattooed so that you become beautiful and so your skin does not shrink with age. The fishes in the water are striped and have lines; therefore also human beings should have stripes and lines. Everything disappears after death. Only the tattoo continues to exist. It will surpass you. The human being leaves everything behind on earth, all his possessions, only the tattooing he takes with him to the grave.”
Tattoo is experiencing a revival in Polynesia. There is a feeling that tattoo makes people Polynesian, and Maori artists have depicted Captain Cook with tattoo, Christ with tattoos in liturgical art, and in 1999, in a post-modern gesture, photographer Greg Semu depicted Jesus Christ with Samoan tattoos in his Crucifixion.
The revival includes not only traditional designs, but individuals choosing to be tattooed with traditional implements and techniques. George Nuku, himself a carver who uses tattoo designs in his work, was tattooed in 2003 by Haki Williams.

George Nuku being tattooed by Haki Williams, 2003
Modern and Contemporary: the use of traditional forms linked to national identity. This is contended particularly in Australia and New Zealand where the first peoples have become minorities within these two countries and where they have not only not benefited but have been actively exploited by the dominant population.
In New Zealand there are several iterations of this – some contended and some not.
"It's more vogue to be Maori outside New Zealand than it is to be Maori inside New Zealand," she said. The 55-year-old Gaultier has used Maori art before with korus and moko designs on swimsuits but his latest campaign appears to go a step further. Ms Mead, who is a senior lecturer in Maori Business at Victoria University, said her first reaction to the ads was that they were ugly. "It's definitely Maori, no question about that," she said. Some of the imagery was culturally offensive, particularly a moko woman sitting with her legs open. Use of Maori imagery was regarded by some as flattery. "I take the line that if copying is flattery, tell that to Coca-Cola and Harrods who rigorously protect their designs. (Victoria University Maori business senior lecturer Aroha Mead)
HAKA

Maori All Blacks
Richard Bell

http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/rbell.html
http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/artworks.html

Two works from Bell’s Lichtenstein series – look at the others.
Read and Reflect on Bell’s Theorem
ABORIGINAL ART – It’s a white thing!
http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html