

SOME ARTISTIC PARALLELS BETWEEN TANIMBER, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS, AND EASTER ISLAND

BY

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Among the various kinds of evidence to be used in reconstructing the cultural history of the Pacific islands, that provided by native art is undoubtedly of special importance. The accompanying illustrations are offered as a suggestion of the way in which the study of artistic analogies may be pursued within a framework broad enough to include the entire Pacific, as represented by certain islands of Indonesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia.

In comparisons among such widely separated regions, we can only deal with types of designs, or design-motives, rather than with the styles in which they are rendered. For it may be said that, while styles change from island to island, the designs which are stylized remain essentially the same. Since in each area the stylized design presents itself to us as a unity, there is no way of separating these component factors so long as we focus our attention upon the art of one particular region; but when we broaden our view to include a number of different areas, we soon become aware that each of the various peoples, expressing itself in the familiar medium of the local artistic style, is merely ringing variations upon what is, in reality, one and the same artistic theme. There is no way of identifying such themes and separating them from their union with the various local styles except by comparison—preferably comparison on a broad scale.

For the present purpose we have chosen two groups or types of designs, one of which appears in the art of Indonesia and Melanesia, the other in the art of Indonesia, Melanesia,

and Polynesia. Our point of departure in both instances is the island of Tanimber at the extreme eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago. The first type is represented by the figure of a man holding a turtle. In Figs. 1 to 3 we see how this motive is rendered in small wood-carvings of Tanimber. The man may be standing or seated, and he holds the turtle before him more or less like a shield. That a very similar motive occurs in the Solomon Islands appears from the wood-carvings represented in Figs. 4 and 5. Though the style of rendering is different than in Tanimber, the theme is obviously the same.

As for the meaning of such representations in the Tanimber Islands, it seems that under the name of *oeb'lingat* they represent the Higher Being, or God (*oeboe*) who presides over the *lingat*, a kind of men's eating and drinking house. At the time of a repast, a bit of drink is sprinkled on the image and a bit of food is placed upon it; moreover, the fisher and the hunter, if successful, offer the image the right fin of the fish and the right ear of the pig which they bring home, in token of gratitude for the help of the image in securing food¹). For the turtle held in front of the *oeboe* there seems to be no explanation; but the human image is, in any case, clearly of considerable importance. In the Solomon Islands, similarly, there is no specific explanation for the turtle held by the man. We may see a hint of the significance of such carvings, perhaps, in the circumstance that in one part of the Solomons "turtle-fishing is carried on by the favour of the dead, who control the



Fig. 1 A

Fig. 1 B
Tanimber

Fig. 2 A

Fig. 2 B
Tanimber

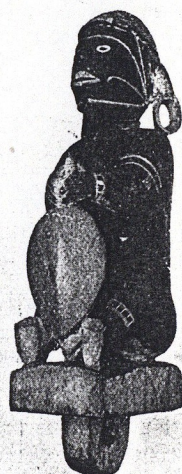
Fig. 3 A

Fig. 3 B
Tanimber

Fig. 4 A

Fig. 4 B
Solomons

Fig. 5 A

Fig. 5 B
Solomons

results. Therefore offerings are made to them by a party going turtling. In especial the men from each village will have a particular ghost who helps them in their turtle-fishing..... So when the people of a village go on a big fishing expedition, the dead are propitiated." ²⁾ This suggests that the human figures holding the turtles in Figs. 4 and 5 might be representations of ghosts or ancestors—though we do not have any explicit evidence to this effect.

These carvings serve as floats for fishing

nets. Two more net-floats from the Solomons, likewise representing human figures holding turtles, but in a somewhat different fashion, are illustrated in Figs. 6 and 7, together with a sinker of stone, Fig. 8, showing a similar arrangement. In these three carvings the relative sizes of man and turtle and their relative positions suggest an attempt to render an incident observed in the actual procedure of the turtle hunt ³⁾. In this respect they differ from the static representations of Figs. 4 and 5,

with their suggestion of a religious meaning. The idea of using such images for net-floats and net-sinkers might possibly have been suggested by a legend of totemic character recorded from the Southeastern Solomons, about the 'Great mother Turtle', who daily lugged all kinds of food to a spot in the sea, where she sank it, and then instructed her two children to make fish-hooks of her shell, and helped them pull up an island out of the sea, complete with food-bearing plants, which is now the island of Owo Raha (Santa Anna). "Here at last the turtle children felt happy and here it was that the [turtle] girl Kapwaronaru gave birth to the first human beings." ⁴⁾ Though we have no explicit statement pointing to a connection between these images and any such legend, still we are left with the impression that in the Solomons, as in Tanimber, such images were somehow associated with important ideas of a legendary or religious character. However, regardless of what these representations may have meant to the Tanimberese and the Solomon Islanders, what interests us is the simple fact that such carvings do occur in these two regions, and—so far as evidence has come to the attention of the writer—nowhere else.

Leaving open for the moment the question whether these representations in Tanimber and the Solomon Islands are specifically related to each other, let us turn to another group of parallels from these two regions. Fig. 9 represents a spoon of nautilus shell from Tanimber with incised designs, consisting chiefly of three confronted pairs of seated human figures. In the three following illustrations a pair of these Tanimber figures is aligned for comparison with similar pairs of seated figures from the Solomon Islands and from Easter Island in Eastern Polynesia. It will be seen at once that these are no ordinary human figures, but that they are intended, at least in the Solomons and Easter Island, for representations of bird-headed men. Though

this intention is perhaps not quite so clear in the Tanimberese figures as in the others, certain comparative considerations suggest that these also are really intended for bird-headed men. Thus the elongation of the fore part of the head which we see in Fig. 9 is not unique in this one example of Tanimber art. A similar beak-like face appears on the seated human figures engraved on at least one other spoon of nautilus shell from Tanimber ⁵⁾; and, moreover, this convention has its counterpart, at least occasionally, in the three-dimensional sculpture of the same island. The men with bird-like heads in our Tanimber spoon should be compared, in this respect, with the man holding the turtle in our Fig. 3. They may be compared also with an exceptionally fine specimen of Tanimber sculpture published by Mr. A. F. C. A. van Heyst in *Cultureel Indië* for 1941 ⁶⁾, which shows two seated or crouching figures placed on top of, rather than opposite, each other ⁷⁾, each figure distinguished by the absence of a mouth and by a grotesquely elongated, downward-sloping, beak-like nose, recalling the beak-like noses rendered in outlines on the Tanimber spoon, Fig. 9. Now, it is well to remember that the transformation of the human visage into a bird-like head, with the nose elongated to resemble a beak, is by no means confined to the island of Tanimber in Eastern Indonesia. Such hybrid forms are well known in wooden sculpture and in basketry masks from the Sepik River in New Guinea ⁸⁾; while, on the other hand, it is conceivable that the same primitive idea underlies a similar convention to be observed in certain forms of Javanese *wayang* masks and puppets. In this connection it is interesting to recall that over thirty years ago Fenollosa pointed to the development of elongated noses, tending toward the appearance of a bird's beak, as a common characteristic of masks in ancient Japan (as used, for example, in Shinto sacred dances), in the Philippines, and in Borneo, as well as in New Guinea ⁹⁾.

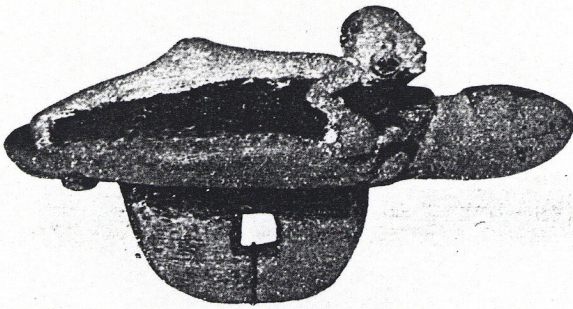


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

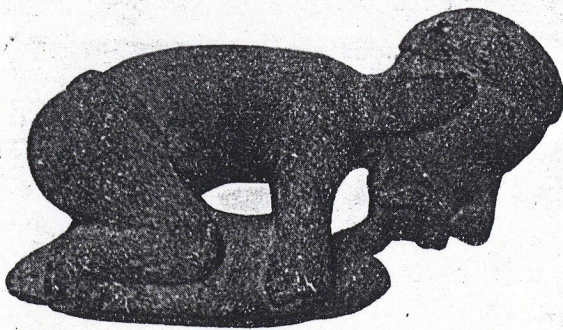


Fig. 8

Figs. 6, 7 and 8: Solomon Islands

There can hardly be any doubt, thus, that the beak-like projection of the human face in the engraved designs of the Tanimber spoon, Fig. 9, is more or less consciously inspired by this widespread, somewhat mystical, conception of avian metamorphosis.

With the character of the Tanimber figures thus established, comparison of these with the designs from the Solomons and Easter Island, Figs. 11 and 12, becomes more plausible. The motive of a seated human figure with knees and elbows touching, and with the head and beak of a bird, is very common in the Solomons. Though our illustration shows these figures seated back to back, examples can be cited in which they face each other, as in Tanimber¹⁰). In the Solomons, no less than in Tanimber, the evolution of the bird-headed man can be followed through progressive stages of conventionalization, beginning with relatively human forms which, like our Fig. 4, show a moderate degree of prognathism, and ending in human-bodied creatures with the head, eyes, and beak of the frigate bird. This tendency in the art of the Solomon Islands has been well described in an article by Henry Balfour¹¹). We may now say that this evolutionary process in the Solomons has its counterpart in the Tanimber Islands of Eastern Indonesia. Perhaps the chief difference between these processes is that in Tanimber the effect of the bird's beak is arrived at by suppression of the mouth and elongation of the nose, while in the Solomons it is achieved by a gradual lengthening of the whole lower part of the face, including the nose and the mouth; but the final result, and no doubt the intention, is in both cases the same, namely approximation to the appearance of a bird's head.

As for the bird-men of Easter Island, Fig. 12, their similarity to the bird-men of the Solomons has already been noted and discussed at length in another article by Balfour¹²). Hence we are adding nothing essentially new by comparing these figures from

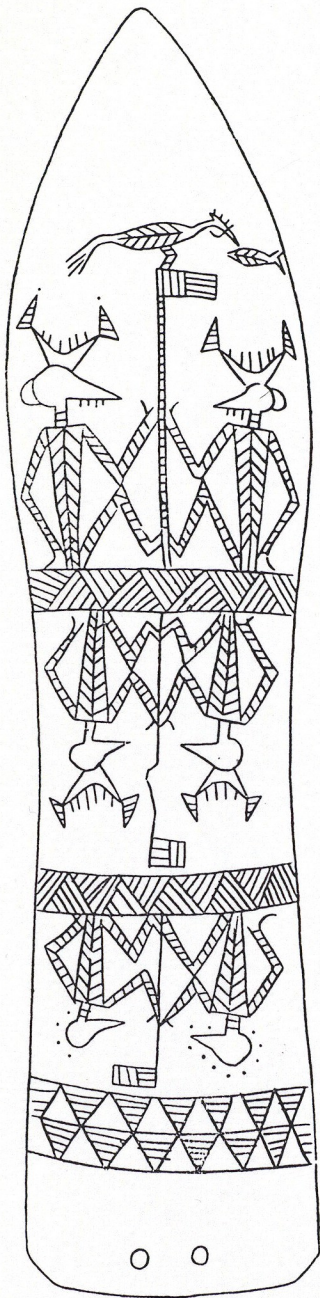


Fig. 9. Tanimber

Eastern Polynesia with those from the Solomons—except in so far as the examples we have chosen represent a confronted pair of bird-men rather than a single bird-man: for it seems that the bird-men travel in pairs¹³). In Easter Island, for the first time, we get some insight into the order of ideas underlying the representation of these ornithomorphic creatures. For on this island the image of the bird-man is clearly associated with a bird-cult, of which the most important feature is the annual capture of the first egg laid by a species of migratory tern which breeds on an islet off the shore of the main island. The man who brings back the first egg of the season is hailed as the annual champion, and as such enjoys certain honors, among them the privilege of being commemorated in sculpture. At a sacred site on the rim of a volcanic crater overlooking the sea and the breeding island below, hundreds of images are carved in low relief on the boulders, each of them depicting a crouching human figure with flexed knee and elbow, and with the head of a bird. Our Fig. 12 is a copy of a pair of images of the same type which were painted in red and black pigment on stone slabs lining the walls of little huts erected for ritual purposes on the same site. Mrs. Routledge, who in 1914 gathered the last vestiges of information we have about the folk-lore of the bird-cult of Easter Island¹⁴), came to the plausible conclusion that these figures, whether sculptured or painted, are intended to represent and commemorate the successive champions of the annual egg-hunt. This conclusion is strongly supported by the circumstance that several of

these bird-headed human figures are represented as holding an egg in the outstretched palm of the hand—a gesture like that made by the actual champion of the egg-hunt on the occasion of his triumph. The fact that the champion was called *tangata-manu* or 'bird-man' is enough in itself to account for the peculiar hybrid character of these sculptured and painted representations. The transcendent

importance of this annual event can be gathered from the circumstance that "the victor, on being successful, was ordered to take a new name... and this bird-name was given to the year in which the victory was achieved, thus forming an easily remembered system of chronology." According to native accounts, the crouching figure with the bird's head represents *Make-Make*, 'the god of the sea-bird's egg'. There

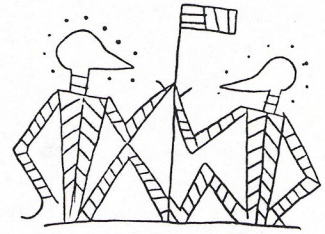


Fig. 10. Tanimber

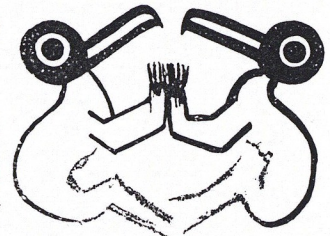


Fig. 11. Solomon Islands

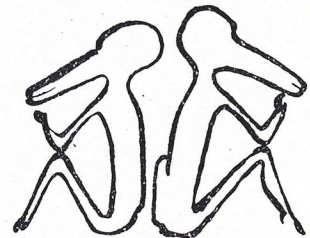


Fig. 12. Easter Island.

is no reason to doubt this explanation; for in all probability the human hero was simply an incarnation of the bird-headed god.

The association of the image of the bird-man in Easter Island with a local bird-cult raises a number of interesting questions. Perhaps foremost among these is the question whether the bird-cult of Easter Island represents a unique survival, in an isolated locality, of a cultural phenomenon which was once more widely spread, or which was carried to this remote island by peoples migrating from regions far to the west. This is an immensely complicated question, to which we shall not even attempt to suggest an answer here, except to point to our Tanimber and Solomons designs, Figs. 10 and 11, as providing a hint of the possible route of such a migration¹⁵). Another question is whether the hybrid bird-men of Tanimber, the Solomons, and Easter Island do not go back ultimately to the representation of a human figure wearing the mask of a bird. It is true that no such bird-masks are known from Easter Island, or (so far as I am aware) from the Solomons or Tanimber¹⁶). The sudden extinction of the native culture in Easter Island in the nineteenth century, which resulted in the loss of much material evidence, could easily have swept away any such specimens that might have survived—if they had been used at all. On the other hand, even though we have no surviving bird-

head masks from Easter Island, the Solomons, or Tanimber, the survival of bird-head or long-nosed masks in various parts of the Western Pacific, to which we alluded above, suggests that our hybrid figures might very well be a survival from days when masked bird-dances were of ritual importance. That ritual dances performed by men in animal and bird masks have an immense antiquity is attested by representations of dancers wearing such masks on the walls of palaeolithic caves in Western Europe. Presumably our Oceanic series of 'bird-men' represents a survival into modern times of a particular ramification of this ancient practice. The association of these figures with the important function of food-gathering on Easter Island seems, at any rate, to mark the survival of 'bird-men' on this island as particularly archaic and significant, for it clearly takes us back to the motivation of the masked dance in palaeolithic times.

There are, to be sure, other artistic parallels between the islands of Indonesia, including Tanimber, and the islands of Melanesia and Polynesia. In any attempt at reconstruction of cultural movements, all such artistic parallels should be brought under review, tabulated, and eventually coordinated with comparative data from other fields of cultural expression. The present analogies are offered merely as a contribution toward such a larger synthesis.

1) P. Drabbe, *Het leven van den Tanémbarees*, *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, supplement to vol. 38, Leiden, 1940, p. 40. In the example of the *oeb'lingat* illustrated by Drabbe, *op. cit.*, fig. 123 on pl. xlv, the turtle, greatly reduced in size, is carved under the seated figure, on the post which supports him.

2) Gerald Camden Wheeler, "Sketch of Totemism and Religion of the People of the Islands in the Bougainville Straits (Western Solomon Islands)," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 15, 1912, p. 43.

3) See the photographs of a turtle-hunt in the South-eastern Solomons in H. A. Bernatzik, *Südsee*, Leipzig, 1934 (English edition, London, 1935), figs. 35-39.

4) Bernatzik, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

5) See the specimen in the Leiden Museum, 1971/

295, illustrated in the *Catalogus van 's Rijks Ethnographisch Museum*, vol. 23, pl. i, fig. 3. The same beak-like faces appear on the human figures in another, very elaborately decorated, specimen in Bern, Historisches Museum, Cer. 5. The Leiden specimen is catalogued as from Jamdena (the main island of the Tanimber group). Though the specimen in Bern is labeled 'wahrscheinlich von Amboina,' it seems more likely that Amboina was merely the place where, in 1884, it was purchased.

6) A. F. C. A. van Heyst, "Een Ethnografisch Curiosum," *Cultureel Indië*, vol. 3, 1941, p. 41, fig. 4 and 4a.

7) It should be said that the motive of two seated men facing each other also occurs in the three-dimensional sculpture of Tanimber; thus in a small wooden carving in the Mission House of the Sacred Heart Mis-

sion in Tilburg (1939). In this sculpture the two confronted figures hold between their toes and hands a short vertical column, which evidently supports a bowl or block for offerings. This column has its material, if not conceptual, counterpart in the (meaningless?) flag-staffs of the engraved spoon, Fig. 9.

8) See, for example, Otto Reche, *Der Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss*, Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung, Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910, G. Thilenius, editor, II, A, vol. 1, Hamburg, 1913, figs. 126, 381, 424, 425, and pls. lxxi/7-8, lxxii/1, lxxv/4, 5-7, lxxviii, lxxix, lxxx/1, and specimens in many museums.

9) Ernest F. Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, New York, 1912, vol. i, p. 10, with facing plate.

10) Among examples of pairs of such figures in confronted arrangement in the Solomons may be mentioned two specimens: Cambridge, University Museum, Z 11067, and Melbourne, Australian National Museum, 7467. The seated human figures in the former are strongly prognathous, though not actually bird-headed. Their headdress is reminiscent of that of the Tanimber bird-men in Fig. 9. We have not illustrated this Cambridge specimen, however, because it includes other distracting details. The specimen in Melbourne, a turtle-float, shows two human figures with frigate-bird heads facing each other so closely that the beaks are joined at their tips. The lower parts of the human bodies are, however, so attenuated that this specimen is not suitable for inclusion in our series. These two examples suffice, nevertheless, to make it clear that bird-men may be conceived in the Solomons in confronted as well as in addorsed position.

11) Henry Balfour, "Bird and Human Designs, Illustrating the Influence of One Design over the Other," *Man*, vol. 5, 1905, no. 50. Cf. also A. M. Hocart, "Fishing in Eddystone Island," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 67, 1937, pp. 38-39.

12) Henry Balfour, "Some Ethnological Suggestions

in Regard to Easter Island," *Folklore*, vol. 28, 1917, pp. 371-379, with illustrations on pp. 363 and 365.

13) A fourth example of the motive of a pair of crouching bird-men occurs on a carved boulder in the Hawaiian Islands. As the avian identity of the heads of these Hawaiian figures is not immediately apparent, but appears only in the light of a conventionalization observed in the Easter Island writing, we have chosen not to illustrate this example here, but reserve it for discussion in a more extended publication later.

14) See Katherine (Mrs. Scoresby) Routledge, "The Bird Cult of Easter Island," *Folklore*, vol. 28, 1917, pp. 338-355; and compare, by the same author, *The Mystery of Easter Island*, London [1919], pp. 254-266.

15) Though the frigate bird is of great importance in the Solomons, no actual bird-cult, like that of Easter Island, is found in the Solomons, or for that matter in Tanimber or thereabouts. A bird-cult with some of the features of the Easter Island cult is, however, known from the isolated Micronesian island of Nauru, lying about half way, between the Solomons and the Marshall and Gilbert groups. A detailed comparison between the bird-cults of Easter Island and Nauru will appear in a later publication.

16) Though I know of no actual bird- or bird-head masks from the Solomons, it is interesting to note that the bird-man is there sometimes represented with a horizontal bar or a kind of platform separating the body from the head. Of one such representation Hocart said: "The whole can be interpreted as a man wearing a bird-head mask with the body indicated behind." (A. M. Hocart, "Fishing in Eddystone Island," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 67, 1937, p. 39). The effect of this arrangement is suggested in a native drawing representing the legendary bird-man, *Késako* or *Kesoko*, reproduced by Somerville, as cited at the end of the explanation of our Fig. 11.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. After the original (1939), London, British Museum, H.O.F. 82.

The same object is illustrated by a sketch in H. O. Forbes, *A Naturalist's Wanderings in the Eastern Archipelago*, p. 327.

Fig. 2. After the original (1939), London, British Museum, H.O.F. 83.

This and the preceding object are described by the museum catalogue as "Wooden figures, *Oebilah*, carried about when in quest of turtle shell. Ritabel village, Timor Laut." Drabbe (see note 1) does not mention such a use of these figures.

Fig. 3. After the original, Tilburg, Mission House

of the Sacred Heart Mission (1939). Height, 13.4 cm.

According to Father H. Geurtjens, M.S.C., figures of this type were set up in the house for the soul of the deceased to enter, and they must accordingly be ancestral figures. He was unable to say what particular connection the turtle has with the figure. For additional specimens of the same type—seated human figure holding a turtle—from the Southeastern Islands, see A. F. C. A. van Heyst, "Een Ethnografisch Curiosum," *Cultureel Indië*, vol. 3, 1941, p. 40, fig. 3; and two examples in Zürich, Ethnographical Collections of the University, both catalogued under the number 9069, from Tanimber.

Fig. 4. After the original (1938), Melbourne, Australian National Museum, 7478.

The museum label gives the following information: "Turtle float, *kopalla*, of wood, in the form of a man holding a turtle. Used for turtle net. Rubiana Lagoon, New Georgia."

Fig. 5. After the original (1939), Cambridge, University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Z 231. Height 15 inches (English).

Fig. 6. After the original (1938), Melbourne, Australian National Museum, 7476. Length, about 21 cm.

The museum label describes this object as a "turtle net float in form of turtle with man on its back. Rubiana Lagoon [New Georgia]."

Fig. 7. After the original (1938), Melbourne, Australian National Museum, 7466. Length, about 16 cm.

Same information as for fig. 6.

Fig. 8. Stone figure of a man crouching on a turtle. Presumably a net-sinker. Length, 15.5 cm. Probably from New Georgia. After the original, which seems to be unique, in the possession of the Reverend Tom Dent, Brisbane, Australia (1938).

Fig. 9. Sago spoon of nautilus shell with incised designs. After the original (1939), Leiden, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1935/3. Length, 15.5 cm.

Published: *Catalogus van 's Rijks Ethnographisch Museum*, vol. 23, p. 31.

The headdress worn by four of the figures might represent one of types of elaborate combs worn by the Tanimbarese: compare especially a semi-circular or crown-shaped specimen intended to encircle the back of the wearer's head, in Tilburg, Nederlands Volkenkundig Museum, m 20. On this comb, which is carved out of carabao horn, a pair of bells is attached to the upward-projecting corners. According to Father Geurtjens, such a comb would be worn by a medium who crouches before the shaman. When the spirit of a dead ancestor, who has been invoked, enters into the medium, he shakes his head so as to make the bells ring. If this explanation applies to our illustration, the little triangles at the outer corners of the headdress on the spoon, fig. 9, might represent these spirit-bells. The spikes on the top of the headdress would then represent the teeth of the comb, inverted.

Fig. 10. Detail of fig. 9.

Fig. 11. Design carved on a stone mortuary urn called *doulu*. Hinterland of Mamarana, Choiseul Island. After a photograph of the original taken *in situ* by the Reverend A. H. Voyce, of the Methodist Mission Station, Kihili, Bougainville (probably in about 1937).

A similar urn (possibly the same urn photographed from another side) is illustrated by H. A. Bernatzik, *Südsee*, fig. 43, with the caption, "The 'spirit urn'

on Choiseul, which contained human bones and represents the last trace of an unknown culture."

This carving of two bird-men seated back to back has a close counterpart in a type of wood-carving representing two addorsed figures with strongly prognathous faces, which are placed on the bows of canoes from the Shortland Islands, Vella-Lavella, and Roviana Lagoon on New Georgia. Sometimes, besides the pair of seated figures facing fore and aft on the stern of the canoe, there is another human pair, represented by heads in flat modelling, without bodies, facing to port and starboard on the stern. These addorsed figures on the stern and stern clearly serve as lookouts, keeping the crew from harm that might come from any direction. For examples from Vella-Lavella see Carl Ribbe, *Zei Jahre unter den Kannibalen der Salomo-Inseln*, figs. 61 c and 65 b (with text, p. 299), the former without bodies, the latter with bodies reduced to a pair of arms. For the Shortland Islands see Ribbe, *op. cit.*, pl. 8, a and d, and C. M. Woodford, "The Canoes of the British Solomon Islands," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 39, 1909, pl. xl and p. 509, no. 13. For New Georgia, see Woodford, *op. cit.*, pl. xli-xliv (wrongly captioned 'Ysabel'), and p. 511.

According to A. M. Hocart, "Fishing in Eddystone Island," *Jour. Roy. Anthr. Inst.*, vol. 7, 1937, pp. 38-39, the figure of a seated man with the head of a bird as it occurs in addorsed pairs on the bows of these war canoes, particularly in Vella-Lavella and New Georgia, is identified with a mythical being called *Kesoko*. Though *Kesoko* usually has the head of a frigate bird, Hocart points out that according to the legendary attributes of this being—one leg, a white head, and the habit of spearing fish—he more probably represents the crane. Hocart's supposition seems to be borne out by the bird-men of the Choiseul urn, our Fig. 11, with their long, straight, pointed beaks. For the other type of *Kesoko*, with the hooked beak of the frigate bird, see fig. 9 of Balfour, as cited in our note 12, and B. T. Somerville, "Ethnographical Notes in New Georgia, Solomon Islands," *Journ. Roy. Anthr. Inst.*, vol. 26, 1897, p. 380, native drawing e: "Man with frigate-bird's head (*Késako*)."

Fig. 12. Painting in earth-pigments on a stone slab inside a ceremonial stone hut. After Wilhelm Geiseler, *Die Osterinsel*, pl. 15.

Though the bird-man of Easter Island is generally represented, as here, with the hooked beak of the frigate bird, he sometimes occurs also with the straighter beak of another species. See, for example, fig. 17 of Balfour, as cited in our note 12. The straight-beaked bird-man, nevertheless, seems to be as much of an exception in Easter Island as in the Solomons. In both islands the bird which most commonly provides the head of the bird-man is the frigate bird.