Vengeful Spirits and Guardian Deities

Myth and Sculpture in the Eastern Solomon Islands

by William H. Davenport

Traditional sculpture in the Eastern Solomon Islands draws heavily upon mythology for its imagery. One can even say that the depiction of myth is an essential component of the Eastern Solomon sculptural tradition with respect to creating major works such as altars, posts, and other prominent architectural features of sacred structures. This applies as well to the caskets in which the skulls and sometimes long bones of notable men are encased.

In 1964–66 while I was engaged in ethnographic field research on Santa Ana (Figs. 1 and 2) and Santa Catalina Islands, the easternmost of the Solomons, I paid particular attention to the accomplished carvers of Santa Ana. These carvers were no longer being called upon to practice their skills because Christianity had all but replaced the traditional religion, and, in the Christian milieu, the depiction of sacred myths in sculpture was frowned upon. Nevertheless, the myths were still being told and retold by Christian and non-Christian alike, because they were regarded as an important part of the indigenous culture. At this time, too, the ritual fishing for skipjack tuna (bonito) in special canoes had ceased on Santa Ana (but not on neighboring Santa Catalina), yet two of the canoe houses in which these boats and other sacred objects had been stored were still standing in the village of Natagera. These canoe houses (*ofa*) were still being used as gathering places for men (women were forbidden from coming near them), but the structures themselves as well as their contents were being allowed to molder away.

During this fieldwork I also made an extensive ethnographic collection for the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and carvings and sculpture, both old specimens and pieces specially commissioned by me, were included. In this article I present two myths and two sculptural depictions of them which were carved at my request for the Museum. Both carvings are by the same individual, Nimanima of Gupuna village on Santa Ana Island. Nimanima, an avowed Christian, was one of five or six very gifted carvers on the island. I have selected his work, not because I think he was the best of the carvers, but because the two myths he chose to depict are well known throughout the Eastern Solomons culture region in general and are especially important in the oral literature of Santa Ana. Indeed, that was one of the reasons why Nimanima selected the two myths that he did.

He chose to depict the myth "Karemanua" on a carved house post of the special kind once used in the construction of "feast houses" (*ruma tora*), temporary structures in which prepared feast foods are displayed before they are publicly presented to honored guests. Nimanima chose to depict the second myth, "Waumauma," on a casket of the type formerly used to contain the skull and/or long bones of an important man. On Santa Ana Island (but not always elsewhere in the Eastern Solomons) such caskets, as well as other kinds of containers with remains of important men, were kept in ossuary sections of the canoe houses (see Davenport 1968:14).

The first myth is of a part-shark, part-human individual named Karemanua (also rendered "Karimanua" and "Kareimanua"). Versions of this myth are known throughout the Eastern Solomon Islands and carved depictions of Karemanua were still to be found in the few sacred canoe houses that remained standing. Nimanima's ancestry through his mother goes back to the island of Ulawa and to persons related to the veneration of the mythical figure Karemanua. The myth, as related by him, follows.

Fig. 1. A fisherman on the reef in front of Gupuna village, Santa Ana Island.
Photo taken August 3, 1964

The Myth of Karemanua

Karemanua, his brother Kakafu, their mother Sauariu, and their father Tekuiteu lived at Maroqorafu on the shores of Santa Ana Island, near the present-day village of Nafinuatogo. Karemanua, Kakafu, and their mother were of the Pagewa ("Shark") sublineage [now extinct], and they had their garden plots at Iqaurunganawai on the tableland of the interior called Faraina. One day while working in their garden, they became hot and thirsty, so the two brothers took their bamboo water container and went to fetch water at Wai Mafuuru. There was a running stream and a pool there then, not the dry stream bed that is there today. On the way Karemanua plucked some cordyline leaves and put them in his hair [a common practice for men who pass through forested areas as they return from their garden plots].

At the pool the brothers took a swim to cool off, and Kakafu started playing like a shark and going after his brother. Karemanua told him, "You don't act like a shark at all. You just look like a clumsy human; watch me, I'll show you how." Karemanua then took the part of the shark, swam after his brother, and bit him in two (Figs. 3, 4a). Karemanua commenced to rejoin the two halves of his brother, but he was interrupted by the arrival of their parents, who, thirsty and tired of waiting for the boys to return with the drinking water, came to the pool to get their own. They sized up the situation and ran toward Karemanua, but he thrashed and swam downstream to the mouth of the stream at the shore.

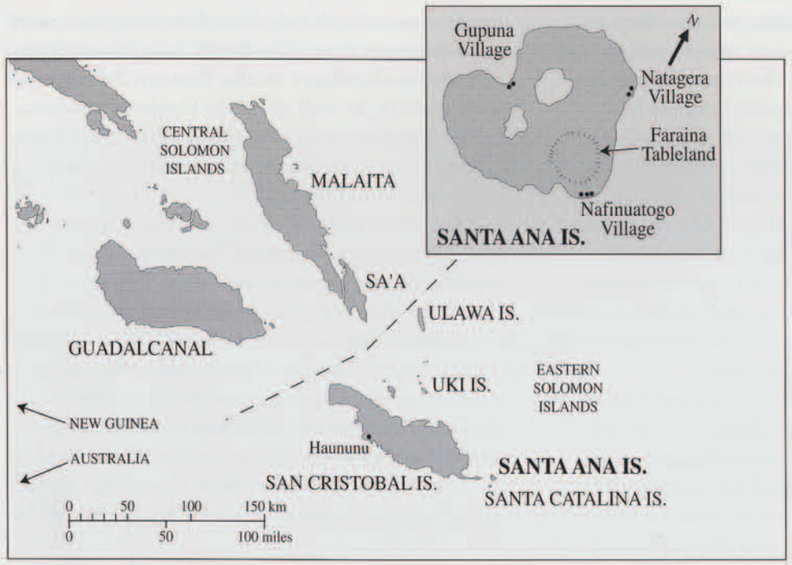

Fig. 2. Map of Eastern and Central Solomon Islands; inset, sketch map of Santa Ana Island. The Solomon Islands is an archipelago in the southwest Pacific Ocean and is now an independent nation of that name.
Map by Kevin Lamp

This was at the canoe passage and landing called Inamaroguna, close by their village. Karemanua continued swimming right on out through the passage into the open sea.

After ten days, he returned and stole food from his family's dwelling, then went back to sea, and he repeated this many times. Finally, the people of the village decided to try to catch him and force him to stay ashore. They hid all around his house and, when he came for food, they caught hold of him, but Karemanua slipped away because by then his skin was slippery from sea growth.

Realizing he was not welcome in his village, Karemanua left the waters of Santa Ana and, still

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carrying the bamboo water container and with the cordyline leaves streaming from his dorsal fin, he became a rapacious shark rampaging through the waters and islands of the Eastern Solomon Islands. Wherever he heard groups of people pounding cooked staples for the preparation of fancy feast puddings, he would steal ashore and poke his bamboo tube into the vessels holding the puddings. When the tube was filled to overflowing, he would go back to sea to consume the pudding. Wherever he swam, he was followed by a *gapagapa* bird [possibly a petrel] called Siriofa (Figs. 4b, 5), which had flown down from Faraina where his parents' gardens were located. Finally, Karemanua lost his external human features altogether and became all shark.

On Ulawa Island there was a man named Awau who was badly afflicted with elephantiasis (*pura*) of one leg, so people called him Awau-Pura. One night his tutelary, or guardian, deity spoke to him: "You and I must go out to sea and find this shark, Karemanua, who is causing so much harm and trouble." Awau-Pura got everything ready and put to sea in his canoe at daylight. The tutelary deity called out through Awau-Pura's mouth, "Who are you?" Karemanua heard him and surfaced, calling back, "Who are you?" Awau-Pura answered, "What are you, shark or human?" Karemanua was silent and made no move. The tutelary called again through Awau-Pura's mouth, "Are you Karemanua?" Karemanua replied affirmatively by nodding his head and rolling about.

"Karemanua, you come and bite my big leg," and Awau-Pura hung his elephantiasis-swollen leg over the side of his canoe. Karemanua grabbed the leg, and Awau-Pura pulled it back into the canoe. Embedded in the leg were all of Karemanua's teeth, but they were human, not shark's teeth. Awau-Pura just brushed the teeth out and hung his leg into the sea again, challenging Karemanua to bite it again. But Karemanua was cowed; he became calm and replied to Awau-Pura, "I will become a friend and guardian of yours," and they both proceeded back to the canoe passage at Mouta [on Ulawa].

Awau-Pura promised Karemanua that from then on he would make offerings to honor him at an altar at Mouta passage, if, that is, Karemanua would promise not to attack canoes and humans again. Also, Karemanua had to promise to become a guardian of canoes in rough seas and high winds, as well as a protector of men against shark attacks when they fell overboard or their canoes swamped. Since then, Karemanua has been the guardian and protector of canoes from Santa Ana, Santa Catalina, the eastern half of San Cristobal, Uki, and Ulawa Islands, and from that time on, the veneration of him has remained a rite that is observed on Ulawa alone. However,

Fig. 3. Karemanua bites his brother in half. Drawing by Wagosi of Gupuna village. This drawing and those of Figures 5 and 6 were made by informants at my request, and with materials provided by me, to draw all sorts of things we talked about. (See Davenport 1981 for other drawings.)

Karemanua will still attack canoes and fishermen from elsewhere when they enter the waters of the eastern islands.

From a religious point of view, the Karemanua myth is one of many that illustrate several important components of the traditional belief: when a person dies in a violent and bloody way, the blood, not the soul, is transformed into a "wild," uncontrolled, and dangerous supernatural being (*ataro wasi*). This wild supernatural transformation seeks to avenge his own death by menacing and killing other humans. In due course, however, some wild rampaging spirits change themselves, of their own volition, into tutelary deities by singling out certain humans and becoming their protectors against other "wild deities." In this myth it is the protective tutelary of the afflicted human Awau-Pura who subdues the transformed Karemanua. And there is another aspect of this narrative detail: Awau's affliction, *pura*, is believed to be supernaturally caused, so when the wild Karemanua bites the swollen leg, he encounters another supernatural force. But the singular aspect of Karemanua's change into a tutelary is that he becomes a protector, not of a single client as is usual, but of any man who is engaged in fishing whether it be the ritual fishing for sacred skipjack tuna, which is a major religious rite (see Davenport 1981), or for subsistence.

Nimanima's Carving

As mentioned, Nimanima chose the form of a special type of post formerly used in feast houses for his depiction of the Karemanua myth. Decorated house posts of this kind are for a major celebration or feast to which surrounding communities are invited. It is a reciprocal event. Some groups of invited guests are being paid back for a feast to which they invited their hosts some time past. For other communities it is an invitation to a feast which they will be obligated to return some time in the future. The feast houses are more or less temporary structures for displaying the masses of prepared food to be given away. After the feasts are over, the structures are left standing as mementos of the event and are sometimes put to other uses until they disintegrate and collapse. Even though these structures are more or less temporary, they should be well decorated and look very attractive, the more so the better. The prepared food must also be carefully garnished and decorated so as to please the eye as well as the palate.

To designate the Karemanua myth in carving, the figure need only have the tail of a shark with an anthropomorphic head. Usually, however, the dorsal fin is also indicated with some sort of linear motif to signify the streaming cordyline leaves (see Fig. 4b). But to show his sculptural virtuosity, Nimanima went all out in his portrayal of the myth by including as many details as he could. His

4a

4b

Fig. 4a & 4b. Side and top views of the post sculpture of Karemanua attacking his brother Kakafu, carved by Nimanima of Gupuna village. The surface is black, with painted details in white and red-earth pigment, and circular and semicircular inlays of conus shell discs.

Iconographic notes: (4a) The two fish at the top are skipjack tuna (bonito), schools of which are closely associated with certain supernaturals and the fishing for which is a sacred ritual. The bird Siriofa is carved on one side (4b), between the two bonito. The circular shell disc inlay represents the eye of the shark (4a); the dorsal fin indicates that the shark is of the white-tipped species which preys along reef fringes and often attacks humans. Streaming cordyline leaves are highlighted in white (4b). Kakafu wears a visor of the kind men wear while fishing from canoes and on his face are finely etched patterns representing facial scarification (4a). Karemanua's genitals are in human form, but the testicles also resemble a shark's anus.

The painted belt and anklets worn by Kakafu and Karemanua are personal adornments made of valuable red-shell currency that men and women wear only at celebrations. Depicting Karemanua as wearing these personal ornaments seems to be out of the narrative context of the myth, but it also indicates that supernatural beings don't always follow the conventions of humans. Karemanua's legs terminate in a fish tail (4a); the decorative band at the base is interrupted by two fish forms that represent pilot fish which always swim ahead of or alongside sharks.

UPM 67-5-130, H. 2.71 m. Negs. S4-87307-09

creative approach was analogous to a master storyteller who takes innovative liberties to enrich his tale.

The Myth of Waumauma

The second myth selected by Nimanima to be depicted on one of his carvings is that of the deity Waumauma, but the version I give here was related to me by Reresimae of Natagera village, Santa Ana Island, who was still a devoted client of that deity and the ritual leader of the last cult group on the island to yield to Christianity.

Waumauma and his maternal uncle Waita lived at Maroqorafu. One day Waumauma went to where his uncle's betel pepper vines were growing without first informing him, and he gathered leaves in an odd way: by climbing the tree on which the vines were growing and sliding back down its trunk, which stripped the pepper vines away from their support. Waita discovered the depredations to his pepper plants right away, and he asked everyone in the community if he or she had done it. No one knew anything about it, and even Waumauma denied any responsibility. Enraged, Waita swore to get even. "Since none of you owns up to anything, I will go to my tutelary deity [one manifestation of which was a shark] to get my revenge." Waita took some leaves from his vines, went to his household shrine, and holding the leaves by tongs, he burned them saying, "Whoever destroyed my pepper leaves, you must destroy him or her."

Fig. 5. Karemanua with the *gapagapa* bird Siriofa. Drawing by Sao of Gupuna village.

Not long after this Waumauma went out in his canoe to kite fish for garfish. [This involves a kite made of dried sago leaves from which is trailed a line with a lure attached.] Waita's shark tutelary attacked Waumauma's canoe and killed him. As Waita's shark swam away it snagged the kite string, and wherever the shark swam, it towed the still-flying kite behind. For five days Waumauma's wife watched her husband's kite being towed up and down the edge of the reef in front of their village. On the fifth day, the shark dived deeply to rid itself of the kite, and the string snagged on a coral outcrop near Maroqorafu. That outcrop is still pointed out as where this event took place.

When Waumauma was killed by Waita's tutelary shark the sea was red from his blood, and out of his blood was formed a wild and revengeful spirit in the form of another menacing shark (Fig. 6). It lingered there off the canoe passage, and it demanded that every canoe trying to pass out to sea first return to the village and bring back an infant or child for him to consume. Soon there were no more children left in the village. One old man, in complying with Waumauma's demand for a child, presented only a flower from a betel (areca) palm. As he placed it on the shark's head, he said, "That is all that is left here."

Waita had had his revenge on Waumauma and Waumauma had vented his anger on the entire community, so the shark manifestation of Waumauma quit Santa Ana Island altogether. But that is not the end of the story. When the human Waumauma had been killed, his blood had been transformed into several other wild deities as well: the male supernaturals Takataka, Sausifo, Pepefu, and Matana, and the female Karinga. All of these continued their retaliation of Waumauma's killing at Sueta on the west coast of Ulawa Island, where they ordered the people to acknowledge them as their principal tutelary deities. A ritual offering bowl (*apira ni mwane*) was carved, but the people failed to honor them in the proper ritual manner, so the wild deities killed many people there.

The Sueta people set the ritual bowl adrift in the sea, hoping the wild spirits would follow it away from Ulawa, and that is what happened. The bowl drifted ashore at Pegopego near Haununu on San Cristobal Island. At first the people there prospered and became exceptionally strong, so strong they could lift and carry heavy tree trunks. But soon they commenced to suffer in the same way the people of Sueta had, so they, too, set the bowl adrift to rid the place of the supernatural curse of Waumauma. The bowl drifted ashore at Tara-ufa-nialo on Santa Ana Island, and it was discovered by Mafuara and Rufa of Nafinuatogo village. They took it to their canoe house, and soon the spirit of Waumauma ordered them to make ritual bowls, one for each of Waumauma's manifestations, and gave precise instructions on how to properly venerate the tutelaries. This is the beginning of the Waumauma cult on Santa Ana.

Actually, when Waumauma's shark manifestation was told that there were no children left at Maroqorafu and the betel palm flower was placed on its head by the old man, one female child had been concealed, and through her the continuity of the Pagewa (Shark) sublineage was maintained. Subsequently, however, the Pagewa sublineage did die out, and it is remembered now only because of the myth of Waumauma. But to this day, a betel palm flower is depicted somewhere in the incised and painted decorations of the large trading canoes. It is a visual petition to Waumauma to keep the seas calm and make voyages safe for the vessel.

Waumauma's supernatural influences and powers did not extend beyond (Santa Ana) . . .

Fig. 6. Waumauma as a wild supernatural. Drawing by Reresimae of Natagera village. The double nature of a supernatural is indicated by the two heads, one shark, one human, and also by its having both pectoral fins and arms. The curled or scroll motif projecting behind the figure is not a tail, but an aesthetic convention used to indicate the figure is a supernatural being. Wild supernaturals are often pictured holding a bow, which is used by them to shoot garfish as arrows; here the arrow is held in the right hand. The garfish/arrow analogy is derived from the fact that sometimes a garfish skipping and skittering along the surface of a calm sea actually does impale a fisherman in a canoe.

As Christianity gained religious ascendancy in the two communities of Santa Ana—Gupuna and Nafinuatogo—those who remained constant to the traditional religion slowly formed a third, new community at Natagera. There the veneration of Waumauma, in his several tutelary manifestations, continued to flourish as the dominant cult. The number of different but related manifestations even increased, as some human worshipers of Waumauma suffered violent deaths and were themselves transformed into tutelaries. As explained by Reresimae, the scope of Waumauma's powers also increased, so that his cult came to dominate or incorporate all tutelary relationships on the island of Santa Ana. It was clearly acknowledged, however, that Waumauma's supernatural influences and powers did not extend beyond the island, not even to neighboring Santa Catalina Island. Even as Christianity was eclipsing the cult, it was Waumauma who instructed Reresimae to urge the younger people of Natagera to convert, leaving only himself and a few associates to carry on the traditional faith until they died.

Fig. 7. Nimanima takes a break from carving to have a chew of betel.
Photo taken at Gupuna village, July 12, 1966

Nimanima's Second Carving

Nimanima's reason for depicting the myth and image of Waumauma was obviously because of that supernatural's importance to the island. Reresimae of Natagera village, also a master sculptor, refused to depict Waumauma in his contribution to the Museum collection. He and several other older men were the last remaining worshipers of this deity. He was not opposed to carving such a depiction for me personally, nor did he mind that it would end up in the United States, but he strongly disliked the possibility that it might be put on public display, where just anyone could view it. For his sculptural contribution he chose another myth.

Why Nimanima (Fig. 7) chose to carve a casket for a second contribution was not fully explained, nor did I ask him to do so. As with his other carving, he went all out to pack in the details. Actually, it is two superimposed carvings: one of the mythical figure Waumauma being killed by Waita's avenging shark resting on a second detailed replication of a sacred bonito-fishing canoe (Fig. 8). Either one of those

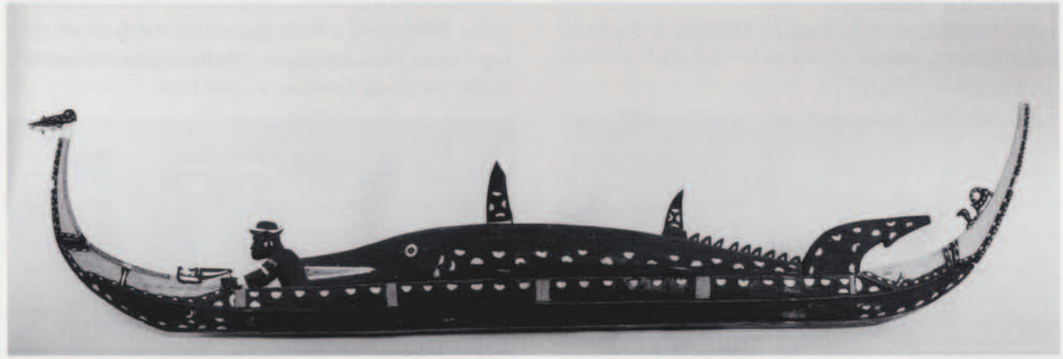

Fig. 8. A casket depicting the myth of Waumauma, protector of canoes at sea, superimposed on a model of a specialized fishing canoe used only for ritual fishing for bonito; carved by Nimanima of Gupuna village. The surface is black with inlaid decorative elements on the shark and canoe; inlays are half-round discs from a common species of conus shell and are also a kind of valuable object (like a gem) used to enhance sacred objects; they are never discarded, always transferred from one object to another.

Iconographic notes: Waumauma is being attacked by the supernatural shark manifestation of Waita, his maternal uncle. The long jaws indicate that the shark is of the *-iri* species, which seems to be a fanciful and terrifying category incorporating some features of the barracuda. The high, curving bow and stern pieces of the canoe each have a copy of the distinctive carvings that adorn only sacred bonito canoes (see Davenport 1981 and 1990).

UPM 67-5-129, L. (overall) 2.14 m, max. W. 33 cm. Neg. S4-87362. Object on indefinite loan to Temple University

carvings would constitute a very suitable casket in which to encase the skull of an important man. After he had finished it, Nimanima explained that a similar casket had been made for an important man named Mamata of Gupuna village. When that community became Christian, the casket was buried along with all the other caskets and remains that were in the ossuaries of local canoe houses. Of course, Nimanima was well aware of the fact that his elaborate casket would never serve as one, and he was very eager to show off his skill, not just to me but to other carvers in Gupuna village. However, I like to think that he wanted to create a cenotaph that enshrined the collective memory of both the last and greatest active supernatural of Santa Ana Island and all the other sacred activities that were associated with this traditional worship.

For formerly nonliterate societies in the Eastern Solomon Islands, their myths, such as the two given here, explain how and why things came to be as they are—a kind of history as understood by the people themselves. Depicted in three-dimensional wood sculpture, a myth is transformed from its fluid and ephemeral oral form into a static and concrete visual representation that can be reincorporated into social and ritual actions in the present. By this inclusion it establishes a relevant historical context for the activities at hand. Nimanima's carvings were executed not for local use or local people who would immediately understand what he was doing, but for the University of Pennsylvania Museum and unknown foreigners on the other side of the world. He was consciously trying to convey something very salient about his cultural tradition (and, of course, to demonstrate his skill as a carver). In writing this article it has been my wish to act mainly as interpreter between him—elderly resident of Gupuna village, skilled carver, spokesman of Santa Ana Island society—and those who are associated in any way at all with our Museum and its many activities.

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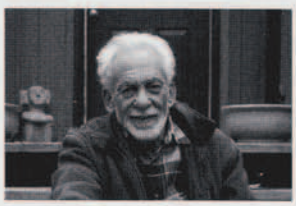

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Photograph by Edward Glendinning