

An Early Ivory Spoon with Stylistic Connections to Eastern Indonesia

by Steven G. Alpert



At Christie's London sale of June 22, 1993, a fascinating object was sold. Offered as lot 58, the catalogue caption read "superb ivory spoon... probably Baga, possibly 18th century or earlier. Provenance: James T. Hooper." Dealers, collectors, and academics eagerly previewed this lot (fig. 1), and at auction it generated an unusual amount of excitement. Countering the Baga attribution certain knowledgeable individuals prior to the auction also speculated that this piece was perhaps related to Afro-Portuguese ivories.

Recently, Steven Hooper, James Hooper's grandson, confirmed that the spoon was indeed in his grandfather's collection.¹ He also recalled that Hooper, who appreciated the spoon, considered it to be a "puzzle piece" that he kept in a desk drawer.² The spoon was taken out occasionally to show knowledgeable persons for their opinion.

Both James and Steven Hooper ultimately thought the piece most likely to be of Indonesian origin, though they did not rule out the possibility that it might have come from an obscure African group. Steven Hooper chose not to include the spoon in his book, *Art and Artefacts of the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, The James Hooper Collection*, because it was devoted solely to Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.³

Fig. 1: Ivory spoon. Proposed to be from eastern Indonesia.

Promised gift to the Dallas Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Christie's.



ORIGIN

Given the fact that the Hooper spoon appears to be unique, are there any pieces from known traditions that can stylistically be linked to it? The answer is a resounding “yes.” As this article will evidence, the general appearance as well as some of the minutest details of the Hooper spoon are consistent with elements found on certain very old items from eastern Indonesia, where a number of complex and stylistically related artistic traditions once flourished. Included in this area are the islands of Timor and Flores in the south and southwest; Leti, Lakor, Babar in the southeast; Tanimbar in the east; and the Raja Empat Islands off the coast of Irian Jaya in the north.

While aspects of the spoon can be recognized in the artistic expression of a number of these eastern Indonesian islands, the most compelling comparisons come from early, atypical items known to come from Atauro (formerly Pulau Kambing, or Pulo Cambing), a small, twin-peaked island that lies off the northwest coast of Timor. In the late 1970s and very early 1980s, political and economic pressures created by Indonesia’s absorption of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor affected Atauro, triggering a wholesale disgorging of *ruma-tara*, or paired ancestor figures, from the Island. The profusion of ancestor figures (both old examples and modern replacement figures) that subsequently appeared on the international art market tended to obscure the importance of the island’s more unusual pieces. Among these atypical Atauro items that are relevant to this discussion are a small number of unique shrine statues, two important posts, an ivory figure, and a shield adorned with a human figure (figs. 2-6). Most of the salient characteristics of the Hooper spoon’s standing figure can be found in this small group of singularly rare objects.

Among the spoon’s most unusual and prominent features that can help identify it are five major elements, each of which will be addressed below.

1. The figure’s stacked topknot

No corpus of African sculpture known to me displays a topknot or tiered headgear similar to that seen on the spoon. In eastern Indonesian art, however, topknots and tiered headdresses are common. A small standing Atauro shrine figure from the University of Indiana’s collection (fig. 2) and a pair of Atauro monumental shrine posts display just such topknots (fig. 3).



2. The distinctive treatment of the back

The back of the figure on the Hooper spoon is carved with rounded and raised shoulder blades, a prominent ridged vertebral column, and rounded buttocks. These appear in nearly identical form on the back of a very old Atauro figure formerly in the Itzikovitz collection in Paris and now in another private collection (fig. 4) as well as on the back of a figure that surmounts an unusual Atauro shield (fig. 5) in the Barbier-Mueller Museum.⁴

FIG. 2 (above left): Shrine Figure, Atauro.

Collection of the University of Indiana.

FIG. 3 (above): Monumental shrine posts, Atauro.

Photos courtesy of Sotheby’s.



Fig. 4: Squatting figure. Atauro.

Photos courtesy of Studio Contact, Paris.

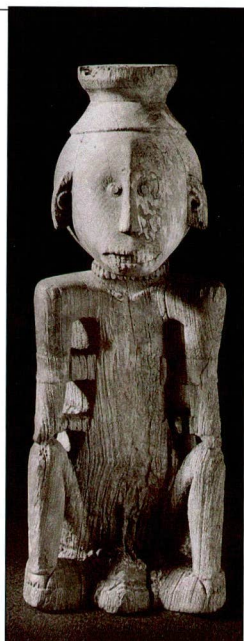
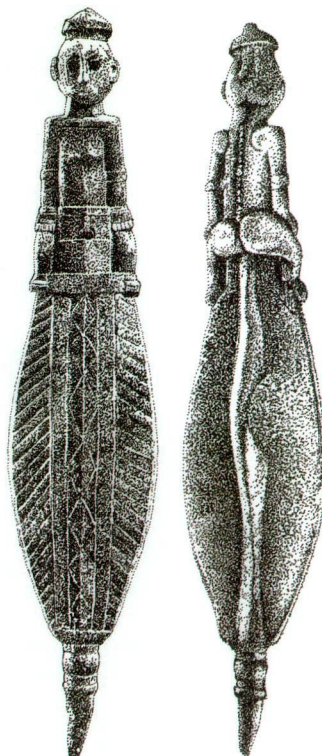


Fig. 5: Line drawing of Atauro shield with figural crest in the Barbier-Mueller collection.



3. The distinctive mid-mandibular appendage

The Hooper piece bears a mid-mandibular appendage that connects the jaw to the raised hands. This could possibly indicate a beard. Old field photos show some of the region's elders sporting wispy, sage-like goatees, and the above-mentioned shield has both chin and upper lip perforations that once anchored plugs of hair to indicate a beard and mustache. Conversely, or perhaps in addition, this appendage may simply be an element intended for structural strengthening. Connective joints are evident on the shield's figure between the elbows and torso, and also appear between the wrist and waist of a small Atauro ivory figure (fig. 6).

4. Overall facial structure

There is also a relationship between the Hooper spoon figure's head and the overall phrenal shape and frontal planes seen on other Atauro statues. One small aesthetic feature that can be said to differ from other Atauro figures is the nose's slightly flared nostrils. Even a cursory look suggests a range of narial variation, a fact clearly demonstrated by the few Atauro figures illustrated here. Just to the east in Tanimbar and to the north towards the Geelvinck Bay area of Irian Jaya, figures with both broad noses (similar to those on the Hooper spoon) and ones with sharp, extended, angular noses are found within the same sculptural tradition.⁵

5. Old repair secured with two small copper rivets

Another small but important detail common to the spoon, the shield, the ex-Itzikovitz statue, and the small ivory figurine are metal elements. The eyes of the figure on the shield are either thin copper or flat brass disks while the pupils on the above-mentioned statue are copper or brass rivets. The eyes of the ivory figurine are inlaid with tiny copper inserts that appear to be very similar to the copper rivets used to repair an old break on the neck of the spoon.

In addition to these five specific points, the overall execution of the ears, hands, rounded feet, etc., as well as the basic posture of the figure on the spoon are clearly consistent with those found on the other examples of Atauro figurative art illustrated here.

MATERIAL

The spoon's medium, African or Asian elephant ivory, also raises some interesting points about its origin. In Indonesia, tusks, handles, ornaments, and statuettes of ivory have long been valued as symbols of wealth, authority, and aristocratic display. Depictions of elephants appear in Bronze and Iron Age objects as well as on large pre-historic stones from Pasemah in South Sumatra.⁶

Chinese diplomatic annals from the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century recorded that the Emperor of Java and his courtiers sat on an "ivory throne and couches of ivory."⁷ Royal associations with elephants were also recorded in later European engravings. One of the most famous of these images from the 17th century depicts the Raja of Tuban in East Java being transported in a canopied litter strapped to a huge elephant. As late as 1940, a well-known photograph taken by Petrus Drabbe, a Catholic missionary and ethnographer, shows a group of men in Tanimbar re-enacting the ritual sectioning of an heirloom ivory tusk for making ceremonial bracelets.⁸ Throughout the archipelago, Indonesians have had a special fondness for ivory for centuries.

From the Iberian Peninsula to remote, now nearly forgotten Indonesian islands, a chain of powerful historical events was triggered by Europe's "Age of Discovery" and the rush for the spices of the East. Ivory played a role. Duarte Barbosa, one of the first Portuguese to visit Timor, wrote with enthusiasm in 1518 that "there's an abundance of sandalwood (white) to which Muslims in India and Persia give great value and where much of it is used."⁹ Portuguese demand for spices and natural products such as cloves, nutmeg, mace, and sandalwood stimulated the importation of ivory into the region as a medium of exchange. Antonio Galvao noted in *A Treatise on the Moluccas* (c. 1544) that payment for cloves was rendered "in the form of jewels, gold, copper gongs, ivory, porcelain, silk and cotton cloth."¹⁰

As Europe's first global maritime power, the long arm of Portugal extended from coastal African forts to Goa (India) to Melaka (Malaysia) by 1511, and by 1514–15 to the island of Timor, where Dili became the colony's

capital in 1596. The island of Atauro lies just twenty miles to the north-northwest of Dili. In 1886, when Anna Forbes, a plucky Victorian and the wife of the famous naturalist, Henry O. Forbes, visited the town it was long redolent and in slow tropical decline. By Forbe's day, only Dili's various disparate communities—European, Chinese, Arab, native and transported African slaves from Mozambique—even remotely attested to its colonial master's former trading power and glory.¹¹

S. W. Earl, who first arrived in the southern Moluccas in 1838, reported that when these islands were less known, "incredulous Eastern traders" would buy up ivory tusks at any price as they were able to "command the market" because of the insatiable local demand for this precious material.¹² Earl further wrote that "so great is the demand even now for these articles that Siam and India seem scarcely to afford a sufficient supply, for I see by late commercial returns that the Dutch are importing African tusks from Europe for traffic in the Moluccas."¹³

Historical testimonies such as Earl's demonstrate why ivory of different species, origin, and type circulated widely throughout the islands of eastern Indonesia. Thus, even if the Hooper spoon's ivory could be proven to be African, this would not preclude the object from being of eastern Indonesian origin.¹⁴

The strong influence of the Portuguese and the continued reverence for ivory as a valuable commodity can be seen to this day. On the neighboring island of Flores, natives still wear ceremonial dress and the Morian-Cabasset-styled helmets favored centuries ago by Iberian soldiers. Among certain groups on Flores, dowries also continue to be paid in part by the exchange of richly patinated antique ivory tusks.

Further proof of ivory's appeal is demonstrated by the number of unusual ivory pieces collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from Indonesia that now reside in Dutch museums and in private collections. A good example of these is a pair of male and female figures from northern Sulawesi collected by F. H. Linemann around 1858 and now in the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam.¹⁵ Nothing else like these figures is known to exist. In the thirty-three years that I have been associated with

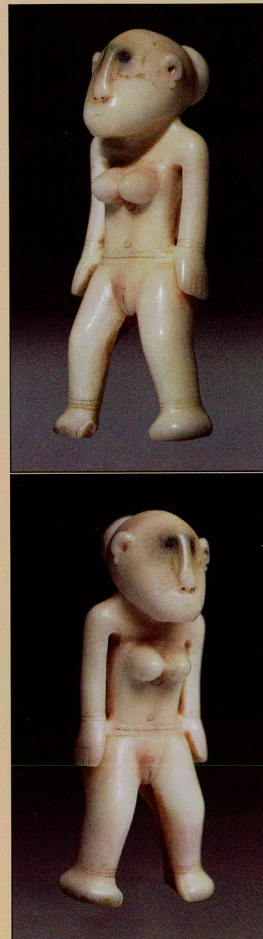


Fig. 6: Standing ivory figure. Atauro

The Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Steven G. Alpert.
Photo: S. G. Alpert.

Indonesian art, I have also handled unique figures, jewelry, and ritual items fashioned from ivory from such far-flung islands as Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sumba, Flores, Kai, Tanimbar, Leti, and Timor. Despite the fact that elephants are not indigenous to most islands, ivory was widely circulated throughout the archipelago.¹⁶

MORPHOLOGY

To my knowledge there are no fine ceremonial spoons known to be extant from Atauro. There are also no other spoons that resemble this particular specimen. However, eastern Indonesia as a whole has a rich tradition of ceremonial spoons and ladles. One has only to look at the nearby islands of Timor, Tanimbar, and Kai. There, a wide variety of spoons and ladles was finely fashioned from a range of materials that included shell, wood, bone, and horn. These traditions may be indigenous or otherwise. Spoon and ladle forms may have been indirectly influenced by ancient Hindu and Buddhist ritual paraphernalia, or by early European contact with parts of eastern Indonesia.

SCULPTURAL PARALLELISM

Aside from examining the spoon itself, two other germane topics should be discussed briefly here. One is the phenomenon of sculptural parallelism and the other is the major role played by the Dutch in reshaping traditional patterns of trade and contact in this region.

A little-explored aspect of Indonesian tribal art is the existence of “sculptural parallelism.” Sculptural parallelism in this context can be understood to mean the co-existence of rounded, realistic figures (Type “A”) with angular, abstracted ones (Type “B”) within the same sculptural tradition. Noting that parallel styles once existed within a number of tribal Indonesian sculptural traditions is essential in understanding why the Hooper spoon’s origin could have been overlooked for many years, as well as why it is also easily recognized as belonging to this area.

As an example, a clear case of sculptural parallelism exists in the wide range of figures known as *korwar* from the northwestern coast of Irian Jaya (figs. 7-12). Realistically rendered *korwar*, such as a remarkable crouched figure from the

Friede collection (fig. 7) or a famous example topped with a human skull housed in Amsterdam’s Royal Tropical Museum (fig. 9), co-exist in the same tradition with other more common, angular, and somewhat abstracted figures (fig. 9). Similar parallelisms can also be found in the stylistic range of figures from Tanimbar, Leti, Babar, and Timor.¹⁷

I believe that the co-existence of Type “A” and Type “B” styles can also be described and diagramed in this manner:

TYPE “A”

Plastic	Wide Area
Rounded	Archaic
Naturalistic	Rare
	Often Extremely Old

TYPE “B”

Rougher	Localized
Angular	Specialized
Abstracted	Not As Rare
	Often Newer

Why in eastern Indonesia are realistically rendered Type “A” pieces invariably rarer and often older than their more abstracted, sometimes rougher Type “B” counterparts? Seen only within the context of the specific island culture where they were made, Type “A” sculptures often appear to be singular anomalies. But, when these pieces are grouped together in a multi-island sample, it becomes evident that Type “A” pieces share traits—or perhaps traces—of what appears to be an archaic or general style that was once more widely spread throughout the region. On the other hand, Type “B” pieces are archaic styles that crystallized into regional sub-styles and/or became acculturated by outside influences.¹⁸

As an island society evolves, its art forms uniquely differentiate over time. This is the cultural equivalent of the biological law of “insular speciation.”

Most surviving tribal objects from this area were made either just before or in a period following the arrival of the Dutch and are easily recognizable as belonging to a specific island group. It is only with a few, very rare, old, and unusual pieces that we are able to detect stylistic

tendencies that once belonged to a more archaic and generalized style. I believe that the Hooper spoon belongs to this category of object.

Given its proximity both to Timor and the southern Maluku Islands, the art of Atauro is itself probably a speciated style that evolved largely from a greater Timor/Southern Maluku style or aesthetic. Note that a very old mask (fig. 13) and an unusual statue (fig. 14) that were originally vended as coming from Atauro are actually from northern Timor. There is a plausible explanation for such confusion. The people of Atauro themselves claim that long ago they settled the island after migrating from northern Timor. Rather than being "Atauro-esque," both these pieces derive from older traditions that most likely predate, and probably influenced, the art of Atauro.

Since this article was first written, and while recently working on another project in Holland, a curious statue came to light while I was rummaging through the back shelf of a storage case at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. An unusual figure emerged that was of a type that I had not seen before from Yamdena,

Fig. 7 (right):
Korwar figure.
Northwest coast of
Irian Jaya.

Collection of John and Marsha Friede.

Fig. 8 (below right):
Korwar figure.
Northwest coast of
Irian Jaya.

KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 9 (below left):
Korwar figure.
Northwest coast of
Irian Jaya.

Courtesy of Volkenkundig Museum "Gerardus van der Leeuw," Groningen.

Fig. 10 (bottom):
Korwar figure.
Northwest coast of
Irian Jaya.

Photo courtesy of the Fowler Museum, University of California, Los Angeles.





Fig. 11 (above centre): Ivory carving. Northwest coast of Irian Jaya.

Rijksmuseum voor Volkerkunde, Leiden.

Fig. 12 (above): Seated figures. Northwest coast of Irian Jaya.

Rijksmuseum voor Volkerkunde, Leiden.
Photo: Bart van Bussel.

Fig. 13 (above right): Mask. Northern Timor.

Collection of Davide Manfredi.

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Fig. 14: Standing figure. Northern Timor.

Collection of Dr. Albert and Elissa Yellin. Photo: Andrea de Heras.

Fig. 15: Standing figure, Yamdena, Tanimbar.

KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

Tanimbar (fig. 15). Its caption read: “1926, Soul Statue, Fleese, male, possibly genitals cut.” Despite the figure’s abstractness, Type “B” qualities, and difference in age (the statue clearly being a much more recent object than the spoon), there is a sense of compelling familiarity between the Hooper spoon and this eastern Indonesian object. Note the figure’s impressive topknot and hunkered stance. These attributes further suggest and reinforce that there is an aesthetic linkage between the spoon, this statue, and the few rare Timor and Atauro items illustrated in this article.

Dutch Intervention and the Destruction of Indigenous Art

Prior to Dutch intervention, the sculpture of indigenous peoples was spread over a wider geographic area in eastern Indonesia. One has only to trace the stylistic dispersion of the region’s hunkered ancestral figures and deities to see that nothing less than an artistic cataclysm took place there over the last three centuries. Hunkered ancestral figures were once found in both northern and southern Maluku. Several figures from the “northern” tradition from the island of Ceram exist in museum collections.

Yet, not one figure from Ambon and the surrounding islands, for example, survived the ravages of spice wars and colonization. Conversely, islands to the south—Leti, Babar, Tanimbar, and some areas in Timor, etc.—did remain active producers of traditional art until the beginning of the twentieth century. As these islands were not seriously exploited for spices, natural products, or agricultural development, they remained relatively unmolested compared to their northern neighbors. Yet, European colonial administrations and at times ardent missionary activity insured that precious little traditional art would survive in even these isolated islands.

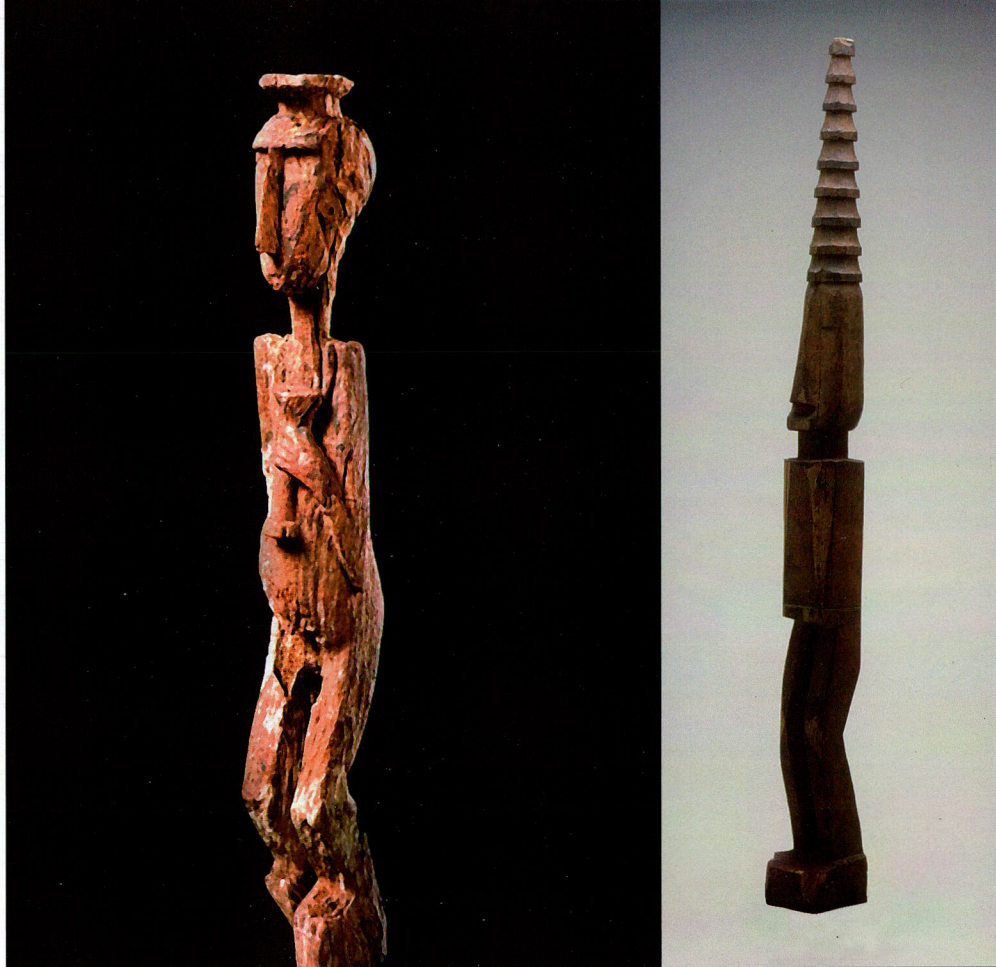
Long before the nineteenth century, the Dutch began to play a major role in cutting communication and limiting exchanges between peoples of various islands. The peoples of eastern Indonesia had always been seafarers. The Dutch impeded contact and intercourse between islanders in their attempts to insure order and to guard their spice monopolies. For example, before the end of the seventeenth century, war parties of Papuans and Raja Empat islanders, with the blessing of the Sultan of Tidore, routinely raided islands as far south as northern Timor, until the V.O.C. (the Dutch East Indies Company) forced this practice to cease.¹⁹

Without doubt, Dutch interference gradually disrupted other traditional inter-island relationships in this region. As a result, not only native trade, but also the dispersion of objects, textiles and jewelry of indigenous workmanship contracted rather than expanded over time. It is clear that artistic expression within this region was more vibrant and dispersed in the more distant past than it was 100 years ago.

In the final analysis, we can confidently state that the Hooper spoon is masterfully executed, very old, and probably unique. While we may never know its exact island of origin, aesthetic comparisons between it and the Atauro objects illustrated here have too much in common not to link this piece to eastern Indonesia. Further, the spoon has attributes that relate it to atypical pieces not only from Atauro but also to items from northern Timor, Tanimbar, and other islands to the north. We also know that this is an area whose artistic heritage suffered greatly

from the time of the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century. Thus, there is a very reasonable possibility that the spoon may be a singular survivor from a lost artistic tradition that pre-dates or disappeared with Dutch intervention into this region. Until proven otherwise, the Hooper spoon's origin should be ascribed to eastern Indonesia. A challenging object of merit, the Hooper spoon is a humbling, even daunting reminder that we have lost and destroyed far more knowledge of our collective material past than we will ever manage to know or rediscover.

Recognition and appreciation is due to the following persons who advised, read, and contributed to this article in one way or another: Dr. Bernard Tursch, Dr. Reimar Schefold, Dr. Nico de Jonge, Dr. Koos van Brakel, and Hermione Waterfield. Thank you.



NOTES:

1. Hermione Waterfield. Correspondence 1/93.
2. Dr. Steven Hooper. Personal communication. 5/03.
3. Dr. Steven Hooper. Personal communication. James Hooper had some odd bits in his collection that included, for example, some Tibetan and Indonesian items that were not published in *Arts and Artefacts of the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, The James Hooper Collection*, 1976. Note: Many of the pieces illustrated in this article were unavailable to both James, and later to Steven Hooper, as they were still in situ and/or largely unknown prior to 1976.
4. Sometime, in the late 1970's or 1980, the author purchased this shield from Mr. Goh Jin Liong, who acquired it on the island of Atauro. Mr. Goh, in sending a photograph of the shield's last owner, wrote that it was from the village of Makadadi, where it was owned by a Kepala Desa (village headman) by the name of Huze. He claimed that the shield was a family heirloom that was formerly used in the victory dances of his Atauroan ancestors (personal communication: 3/12/96). The author later traded this piece while in Bali to Mr. Robert Vanderstukken. Subsequently, this shield entered the international art trade and was eventually purchased by J.P. Barbier. A photograph of the shield's reverse appears in *Indonesian Primitive Art*, The Dallas Museum of Art, 1984, page 130, plate 41. Drawings courtesy of Marybeth Welch.
5. See plates from J.G.F. Riedel, 1886, *De Sluik-en-Kroesharige Rassen tusschen Selebeses en Papua*. Also, see *Forgotten Islands of Indonesia*, de Jonge & van Dijk for

- various narial typology from the south-east Moluccas (Maluku Tenggara).
6. See *The Sculpture of Indonesia*, Jan Fontein, Page 122-23 & *Forgotten Kingdoms in Sumatra*, F.M. Schmitger, Plate XXXVI.
7. See Seni Kriya, *The Crafts of Indonesia*, J. Ave, Chief Editor, page 219.
8. See *Tanimbar, Maluku* Plate 43. Petrus Drabbe, a missionary, lived on the Tanimbar islands from 1915-1935. There, he recorded and photographed the vanishing traditional life of the Tanimbarese people.
9. See *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*, D. Barbosa, written ca 1518/Ed. Mansel Longworth Dames. Volume II/117 & 127.
10. See *A Treatise On The Moluccas (ca 1544) of Antonio Galvao*, page 141, Jacobs, Hubert (ed & trans), Jesuit Historical Institute, 1970.
11. See *Unbeaten Tracks in Islands of the Far East*, Anna Forbes, 1886, Chapters XVII-XXI.
12. See *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*. G. Windsor Earl, 1850, Singapore, Chapter IV (On the Leading Characteristics of the Papuan, Australian, and Malayu-Polynesian Nations), pages 176-177.
13. Ibid.
14. Dr. Edgard Espinoza. Personal communication. Dr. Espinoza, a forensic expert for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, reported to me that a study of the expression of the ivory's Schreiger lines could reveal whether the ivory is of African or Asiatic origin. However, the Hooper spoon is currently on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art and because of logistical and display restraints cannot be professionally examined at this time.

15. See *Expression of Belief, Masterpieces of African, Oceanic, and Indonesian Art from the Museum Voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam*, Page 217.

16. In discussing this spoon, via correspondence, Monsignor Jorge Duarte, who wrote several important monographs on Atauro, was kind enough to write that he did not know any piece from Atauro similar to this spoon. He also wrote that because Atauro lacked elephants he doubted that the piece came from there. Personal Communication. 1/95. Author's Note: It is clear that ivory of varying type and species was once a highly valued trade item throughout the Archipelago, especially in eastern Indonesia.

Fig. 6 is an example of a unique ivory charm from the Island of Atauro.

17. See *Forgotten Islands of Indonesia*, de Jonge & van Dijk, for the stylistic ranges found in the art of southeastern Moluccas. In an intended future article, this concept will be explored in its own right, and widened to also include comparative studies of both archaic Dayak material and early Toraja tau-tau with more modern stylistic variants.

18. See *The World of Maluku*, I.Y. Andaya, page 192.

19. A further in-depth study of the different styles, ages, and origin of ceremonial gold work in the southeastern Moluccas would underscore this point as well as further elucidate historical trade patterns. The corpus of this highly varied material would also allow researchers the opportunity to compare both later pieces that display considerable European and Chinese influence with those earlier pieces that reflect indigenous or Indic traits.