

# Menepo: the recent evolution of a traditional wood sculpture from Santa Cruz in the Solomon Islands

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper traces the recent evolution of 'Menepo', a traditional free-standing wooden statue from Santa Cruz in the eastern Solomon Islands. Following their recent development by David Kio of Honiara, menepo-like sculptures have evolved into a new genre of contemporary carvings that are becoming national icons across the Solomon Islands.

**KEYWORDS:** Melanesian art forms, Solomon Islands, Santa Cruz, traditional and contemporary wood sculptures, 'duka', 'menepo'.

## Introduction

Across Melanesia, as in Polynesia, new generations of wood-carvers are drawing inspiration from traditional forms, yet developing distinctive contemporary styles (Kupiainen 2000). The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea, and other Pacific museums are actively acquiring contemporary wood sculptures by leading Pacific carvers. This short article concerns one recent acquisition by Te Papa – a slim, metre-high statue called 'Menepo', from the Solomon Islands (Fig 1).

During the last decade, many Solomon Island wood-carvers have added 'menepo-like' figures to their repertoires as if these are a new genre; yet several other people, including some carvers, believe that Menepo represents a purely traditional art form. Both claims are only partly true. The process by which these new 'Menepo-like' statues have evolved has stemmed almost entirely from the vigour and zest of a single old man – David Kio of Kukum market, Honiara, who died in February 2003.

## Origins

In 1990 William Davenport published an in-depth review of 53 small wooden figures removed from the Santa Cruz Islands between 1885 and 1978 that are now held in established museums in Britain and Europe, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the Solomon Islands. Davenport wrote that the diagnostic feature of these free-standing, portable, anthropomorphic statuettes was a projection downward behind the head, representing a traditional Santa Cruz head-dress of hair, vines, and cane, known locally as 'abe'. He noted that 'the last such piece to be collected was in 1958, and there is [only] a slim chance of any more coming to light' (Davenport 1990: 99). He called them 'duka' tutelary deities, after the local 'munge-dukna', 'image of a deity'. Once there were 'hundreds of them' – each duka deity had a personal name, and many had 'idiosyncratic personalities, habits or bodily characteristics', a few of which were still known to some old people on Santa Cruz in the 1960s (Gillett 1939: 148; Davenport 1968 and 1990).

Davenport has since concluded that, of the 53 statues, 52 represented a proper deity (*duka*). The remaining one was a figure of 'a class of supernaturals called *Leimumba*, very short beings who inhabit possibly a single village in the deep forest. *Leimumba* were held in awe and esteem but not exactly worshipped as were the true deities. And there were other supernatural beings that were not exactly worshipped but were also held in awe because they might cause harm. These beliefs were still strong in 1958–59.' (Davenport, pers. comm. 18 January 2002). It would seem that *menepo* was among this third category.

Subsequent research confirms Davenport's pioneer analysis. However, according to Davenport's original informant, Joseph Olu, as reported by his protégé David Kio, there was a third entity that was neither a deity that was worshiped nor a *leimumba*, but rather a sprite called 'Menepo'.

## Contemporary developments

In about 1980, an accomplished master carver, Frank Haikiu, a Polynesian from Bellona, closely examined a small wooden statue in the Honiara Museum (Register number SINM-1-SEQ-36). Haikiu made one replica, but thereafter sought to develop tall free-standing figures with slim graceful abstract forms in order, he said, to make them look 'more abstract and more African', and less traditional (Haikiu, pers. comm. 2001).

At much the same time, David Kio, an older man in his fifties from Santa Cruz, began to develop and diversify his carving skills. He used as his models Frank Haikiu's replica and a two-dimensional photocopy of a *duka* figure held in a foreign museum. Initially David carved *duka* figures, including some with variations inspired by Haikiu. Later, however, David returned to Banua village in Graciosa Bay on Santa Cruz, where he 'storied' extensively with his octogenarian uncle, Joseph Olu, Davenport's informant. David was a great storyteller, a likeable rogue, and in his own eyes a thorough-going hedonist enjoying his old age to the full. But he was adamant that his detailed knowledge of the habits and traditionally carved form of 'Menepo' came not from his fertile imagination but directly from his elders and their pre-Christian ancestors on Santa Cruz and Ngawa in the Reef Islands. (His was a mixed but highly artistic heritage drawing from both Melanesian and Polynesian sources, combining, for example, both 'Lata' and 'Maui' legends in detail, plus much Melanesian lore from Ngawa and Santa Cruz.) David

was certain that in the ancient and current legends, the two entities 'duka' and 'menepo' were different types of supernatural beings, and that their traditional representations in wood differed too.

## Menepo, his nature and lifestyle

David Kio asserted that all his free-standing statues represent 'Menepo', the unsmiling but fun-loving prankster, a hunting and fishing spirit whose main pleasures are dancing and more dancing, and stealing pigs and girls. Menepo is a harmless hedonist unless thwarted, when he can be a very dangerous enemy. He can change his bodily form quickly to be a bird, bat, human, fish, or shark. When in human form, his preferred attire includes a pearl shell gorget called 'tema', a decorated breech-clout of breadfruit tapa, and a built-up hair-piece called 'abe' or 'yu-lu' or 'nabana tapa', which projects down behind his head. His turtle shell nose-piece is a flat disc called 'temamalele', and similar earpieces are called 'nemba'. Each hand has five fingers, with extensions called 'negago'. Menepo usually wears arm and ankle bracelets like shell money, and knee bands called 'ngasi pale'. He also can have fibre shoulder pieces with tapa overlays, and a small plain square woven fibre bag decorated with a bright shell or two. Indeed Menepo will add any other ornamentation available that takes his joyful fancy.

David Kio knew many 'custom stories' of Menepo's fun-loving tricks, his supernatural powers, and his miraculous and often mischievous deeds. Menepo travels a lot, meeting many people, and dances all the time, but he never smiles or laughs out loud. He likes flying and is often heard singing in the wind or in a tree top. When fish and bird bones are found in trees or other unlikely places, they are taken as sure signs that Menepo has been there recently. Menepo is a friendly and helpful spirit, and he can heal the sick or cause illnesses, so his naughtiness is usually tolerated, but often minor annoyances are blamed on his games.

*Duka* figures in museum collections exhibit a wide range of physical features (Davenport 1990). Some are male, some female; some are solemn, some smiling; some are free-standing, some seated. David Kio believed that Menepo could adopt various physical manifestations, but was carved traditionally only in the one form that he had adopted from traditional knowledge extant on Santa Cruz and the Reef Islands. (He also carved another traditional figure, Menepo's mother, whom he called 'Dunga' or 'Hinor-ra', with breasts but no hair, and sometimes a long hat 'like a bishop'.) When

asked about the difference between duka and menepo carvings, he asserted that Menepo has no heel and knee projections, while Duka has 'spikes'. These would be rather like the 'spurs' or 'nula' on 'Tararamanu' figures on Santa Ana and Makira noted by Davenport (1968, 1990), Mead (1973), and Waite (1979), among others. Perhaps, as Davenport suggested, there is some overlapping here between the regional carving styles in Santa Ana and Santa Cruz.

### Description of 'Menepo' held by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

The wood is dark red 'rosewood' (*Pterocarpus indicus*), smooth and well oiled. The off-white tapa cloth breechclout and the open sleeve-like strips on each arm are made from the breadfruit tree (*Arctocarpus communis*) and have painted motifs and traces of tumeric. A straggle of coarse white fibres hang from both shoulders to the thighs. The longer necklace is of two forms of small red, white, and black shell discs used locally for 'shell money', while the shorter necklace, also on coconut twine, has a red and white disc cut from the circular base of a cone shell. The dimensions of this small 'menepo' sculpture are 1045 mm high, 115 mm wide, and 140 mm deep.

### Towards a new national icon

Unlike Frank Haikiu, who has produced only a few, top quality art pieces in recent years, David Kio had carved nearly one hundred 'menepo' sculptures. Almost all were made of the local rosewood and were tall and graceful, highly finished, polished, and well decorated. Most were richly adorned, and sold well to expatriates living in Honiara. (Alas, neither Haikiu nor Kio carved much after their tools were stolen during the 'ethnic tensions' in 1999.) Now Menepo statues carved by David Kio adorn the National Parliament, the international VIP lounge at Honiara airport, other public buildings, and several hotels and craft shops (Fig 7). Another, correctly attributed to David Kio, is in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea (Togna 1997: 28). One family in Canberra has a cluster of seven 'menepo' of various heights. Several dozen others are given pride of place in private collections in New Zealand and Australia.

More recently, despite the current dearth of tourists, other carvers have begun incorporating 'menepo' figures



Fig 1. 'Menepo' by David Kio, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (FE011760). Photograph by Michael Hall.

into their own repertoires of traditional and abstract styles. Thus there are 'menepo' figures carved by Polynesians on the Rennell and Bellona Islands, which are often embellished with crocodiles, sea hawks, and snakes of types that, like Menepo himself, are not indigenous there. In Marovo Lagoon in Western Province, several Melanesian carvers have also adopted Menepo, though often placing on his tall, lithely graceful torso an abstracted head that is based on a stylised nguzunguzu – a prognathous, 'dog-like' form, totally foreign to Santa Cruz, Santa Ana, and Te Motu province! Conspicuously, it is David Kio's 'menepo' figures, not 'duka', that are being copied, modified, and abstracted by many Solomon Island carvers today as 'replicas' for sale and export (Figs 3–6).

Various 'Menepo-like' styles have proliferated across the Solomons in less than a decade, without that name and without any acknowledgement or status for their preserver and progenitor, David Kio. He lived, very humbly indeed, in the squalor of Kukum market, saying that he had modelled his precarious, hand to mouth, hedonistic lifestyle on Menepo's zest for pleasure. Now David is gone, but the Menepo figure that he revived and popularised, continues to evolve. This is David's unrecognised epitaph.

### Acknowledgements

David Kio told me that he would prefer that any expressions of gratitude be made not to him, but rather to Menepo, to whom he undertook to pass mine on. I am also grateful for written comments on my earlier drafts by Prof. William Davenport, Prof. Deborah Waite, and two unnamed referees.

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Fig 2. David Kio and Menepo at Honiara Airport in 1998. This small menepo figure was recently acquired by Te Papa. David would have captioned this photograph as 'Menepo and I are two of a kind.'



Fig 6. A slim Menepo figure with a shell-inlaid Melanesian head, now in the VIP lounge, Honiara International Airport. Height 1.25 m. Carver unknown.



Fig 5. Seated Menepo figure. Height 1 m. Carved by an unrecorded Polynesian artist from Bellona Island.



Fig 3. Stylised Menepo figure. Height 1.50 m. Carver unknown, Honiara, Guadalcanal.



Fig 4. Stylised Menepo 'mother and child' figure with a nguzunguzu-like head. Height 1.60 m. Carved by Waino of Cheke village, Marovo.



Fig 7. Tall slender Menepo carved by David Kio in 1998. Height 1.50 m. Private collection, Paremata, Wellington.