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The hat makes the man: Masks, headdresses and skullcaps in Lapita iconography

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Abstract

At the first Lapita conference in 1988 the idea was introduced that many of the depictions on Lapita pots were of human-like faces, even if depicted in very abstract mode. Single and double face motifs were defined, and an attempt made to document a sequence of transformations in face designs. Later research by a range of scholars has cast doubt on the reality of such transformations; it may well be that the more abstract face designs were there from the beginning rather than being later in a putatively chronological sequence. After the Teouma cemetery excavations it was realised that instead of faces, the depictions were most likely those of human heads, clearly a focus of the burial rites at Teouma. In this chapter the idea is developed further to identify a range of headgear depicted on or with the Lapita heads. The so-called ‘double face’ can be interpreted as a head plus a mask. A variety of other headgear also seems to be depicted, including skullcaps and feathered headdresses, as are commonly worn in ceremonies in the Pacific to this day. It is worth noting, however, that the use of masks appears to be an entirely male prerogative everywhere in the Western Pacific. Is the Lapita head then canonically masculine?

Introduction

Roger Green’s (1979a: Figure 2.1, 1979b: Figure 1.3) iconic reproduction of part of a design on a pot from site RF-2 in the Reef Islands of the Eastern Outer Islands of the Solomons (here Figure 13.1) brought to the fore the idea that some Lapita pots possessed anthropomorphic designs.¹ In this case it was what became known later as a ‘double face’ motif, incorporating a naturalistic upper face and a lower more angular or schematic face incorporating a long nose and two eyes, and often what were later called ‘ear plugs’ and are perhaps more properly described as ‘ear spools’ to either side. The basic angular face design was known, although not necessarily identified as such, much earlier (see Spriggs 1990:83–84 for a history) but was generally considered to be a rare depiction.

¹ The word iconic is used deliberately. The design has been reproduced in a multitude of archaeology textbooks, featured in T-shirt designs such as that for the 1998 New Zealand Archaeological Association Conference, and has been included in prints by Isabelle Staron-Tutugoro, a New Caledonian artist, at many exhibitions including at the Maison Kanaky in Paris during the 2010 Lapita exhibition at the Musée de Quai Branly and again at the Eighth Lapita Conference in Port Vila in 2015.



Figure 13.1. The 'iconic' Lapita 'double face' motif from RF-2, Reef Islands, Eastern Outer Islands, Solomon Islands.

Source: Redrawn by Siri Seoule from Spriggs 1990: Figure 2, after Green 1979b:22.

In 1988, at the first in this series of Lapita conferences, held at The Australian National University, evidence was presented from multiple sites that 'face' designs—both single and double 'faces'—were in fact common motifs on Lapita pots. It was further claimed that quite small sherds with distinctive parts of such designs could be used to construct fuller 'face' motifs (Spriggs 1990, 1993).² I also attempted to present a sequence from naturalistic to increasingly abstract designs that were believed to have held some chronological significance. After a considerable degree of initial scepticism and indeed mirth from colleagues, over time the importance of 'face' designs became generally accepted among Lapita specialists (see Spriggs 2002 for a continuation of the history of research between 1988 and 2002).

In part this acceptance was to do with a further major discovery in 1995, the 'pottery pit' revealed by storm activity at the site of Lapita itself, with two complete pots surrounded by deliberately placed large fragments of further pots (Sand 1997, 1999; Sand et al. 1998). Several of these displayed

Lapita 'face' motifs. There was however here, and at some other New Caledonian sites, an inconvenient truth that more naturalistic and increasingly abstract designs appeared to be contemporaneous rather than displaying the sequence previously claimed, although finer chronological distinctions could be masked by our current methods of dating. Others too have identified chronological sequences of 'face' designs, including in New Caledonia (see for instance Chiu 2005, 2007 noting her particular reservations about the sequence; Ishimura 2002; Kirch 1997:134; Noury 2011, 2013; Noury and Galipaud 2011:67–89; Sand 2000:25–26). It may be that New Caledonia is a special case; several unique variants of the simple 'face' designs are found only there and may help define a particular 'southern' Lapita style (see Sand 2000, following the proposal of Kirch 1997:72–73).³

The discovery of the Teouma Lapita cemetery site on Efate Island, Vanuatu, in 2004 opened a new chapter in Lapita design studies (Bedford et al. 2006, 2009, 2010). This was in part because the corpus of complete Lapita pots increased considerably, but more importantly because it was a cemetery site with comparatively little disturbance since deposition. This meant that many more pieces of individual pots could be identified than at habitation sites where they tended to be much more scattered and/or disturbed. The number of fully reconstructed Lapita pot designs increased by orders of magnitude and number several hundred from that site (Bedford and Spriggs in prep.). This has allowed an assessment of just how important the 'face' motifs are in dentate-stamped Lapita assemblages as a percentage of the total number of designs. Work is ongoing, but a preliminary count suggests that about 24 per cent of dentate pots recovered were clearly depicting such designs (37/157), with a further 63 per cent (99/157)

2 Patrick Kirch (1997:133–140) stated that he had the same idea independently at about the same time and found it confirmed by my conference presentation. Kirch of course had access to what was at the time the largest collection of reconstructable Lapita 'face' motifs, from his 1985–1988 excavations at Talepakemalai in the Mussau Group of the Bismarck Archipelago.

3 Galipaud later recovered a pot with one of these 'unique' New Caledonia-like designs at the Makue site, Aore Island, northern Vanuatu, so there seems to be a sampling issue involved in the currently known distribution of such motifs (see Bedford and Galipaud 2010:135). Noury (2013:177) draws attention to this and adds other examples from Boduna in West New Britain and Nanggu in the Reefs-Santa Cruz Islands.

of possible designs—that is, much more abstract designs but which could plausibly, given their design structure, be derived from or represent transformations of ‘face’ designs. This would leave only 13 per cent (21/157) from Teouma that do not appear to represent ‘face’ designs by any stretch of the most fertile imagination.

Lapita heads and masks

I have been using ‘face’ in quotation marks because Teouma also made another thing clear. The heads of all but infant skeletons at Teouma had been removed after initial burial rituals. Some skulls had been collected and placed in multiples of three—on the chest of a skeleton in one case and between the legs of another. An arrangement of bones on top of three lower mandibles was found in another part of the cemetery, and a skull was placed within a pot in another case (Valentin et al. 2010, 2015). The special attention given to skulls at Teouma, an attention often found in Pacific burial contexts, made me realise that the pots depicted heads and not just faces; this is in fact explicit in Roger Green’s iconic example, but not so with depictions of the simple or single ‘face’ motif.⁴

At Teouma there was at least one head in a pot, and more commonly the depictions of heads on pots—including two that were directly associated with human remains contained within them as secondary burials—the flat-bottomed dish used as a lid to the pot with the skull placed inside, and as a frieze with modelled birds’ heads on the rim looking into the vessel on a pot containing a headless skeleton (Bedford and Spriggs 2007; Valentin et al. 2015).

The pattern of a more naturalistic, generally upper head and a more triangular, often abstract, lower head might suggest that the lower ‘head’ is in fact a mask, hinting that a widely shared (because widely distributed) ritual complex is being depicted on Lapita pottery. Donovan (1973b:40) long ago called the triangular heads ‘mask-motifs’, a photograph of one such is labelled as ‘Lapita pottery representing a mask’ in a later publication although not discussed in the accompanying text (Gorecki 1996: Figure 78), and general parallels between them and recent ethnographic examples of masks have also been noted (e.g. Noury 2013:291–296).

The idea that the more triangular heads of double-head motifs represent masks is strengthened by the suggestion that some of them are actually being held by the ‘arms’ of the upper figure. This requires a particular interpretation of the wider design as being of a figure with arms, whose ‘chest’ (or in one interpretation ‘legs’ (Newton 1988:15)) contains the lower head. Kirch (1997:138) has depicted the only Lapita pot from Mussau that clearly displays arms with claws or fingers at the end (usefully redrawn in Terrell and Schechter 2009:45). But the same structural features representing arms here can be seen in more abstract forms in many double-head designs. Sand (2000:25; cf. Sand 2010:147) draws attention to the Vatcha, New Caledonia, example, interpreting it as: ‘The triangular face forms the human body, whose open arms end up in rounded designs’.

⁴ Terrell and Schechter (2007, 2009) have suggested that the Lapita design described as the ‘face’ in fact represented a sea turtle’s head, an animal significant in much Pacific mythology. It was an intriguing suggestion but after the Teouma discoveries not one that has gained much traction among specialists. The two papers are, however, well worth visiting for the stimulating discussion of ‘meaning’ in Lapita design. Similarly, Noury’s (2017) interpretation of several Lapita designs as representing the heads and partial bodies of birds is intriguing. He notes that his ‘identification does not necessarily come at the expense of other interpretations’ including ‘face’ designs (Noury 2017:84).

Ishimura (2002) extends the analysis with wider comparisons, starting from the Mussau design noted above (his F-type 1). The typology he gives is somewhat subjective, however, and open to other interpretations. In regard to the Vatcha example (his F-type 4), he notes that the arms—so visible to Sand—‘almost disappear’ (2002: 81), and similarly for his F-type 3 (see here Figure 13.1): ‘the expression of arms becomes indistinct’. He is more certain about his F-type 2 (here Figure 13.6): ‘Arm-like extensions from the face are also depicted but their claws are transformed into star-shaped forms, that are labelled “earplugs” by Spriggs’ (2002:81). I find Ishimura’s suggested transformation of digits into the star-shaped forms quite persuasive. If one looks at his putative transformational sequence (2002:82), however, something unremarked stands out. When the upper head is clearly depicted and has not morphed into something else, the ‘arms’ are either horizontal or curved downwards and effectively grasp the lower triangular head (see here Figures 13.1 and 13.5). Figure 13.7 here is transitional, with the ‘arms’ coming down from what has become (see below) a ‘hat’—this is Ishimura’s F-type 6. At a later stage of transformation—Ishimura’s type 5, and here Figures 13.8a and 13.8b—the ‘arms’ are raised and could be seen to grasp the ‘hat’. Ishimura’s F-type 2 (here Figure 13.6) has a lower shield-shaped head with ‘arms’ curving upwards from it and grasping a headdress-like feature; similarly Figure 13.8d here might be interpreted as doing the same.

We thus have situations where originally the upper head was grasping the lower one, a suitable representation of putting on or removing a mask, whereas typologically later forms might show the now-single lower head grasping some kind of headgear held above it. The point is that the upper head (when depicted as such) has the agency in relation to the lower, which is thus interpreted as being a mask, an idea initially suggested by its triangular, more abstract form. The further significance of this motif will be developed later in the chapter (see Figure 13.13).



Figure 13.2. Lapita flat-bottomed dish (TD 2), Teouma, Efate, Vanuatu, showing two different ways of representing hair.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule.



Figure 13.3. The basic concept of the same pot. Although side-by-side because of space considerations, it represents a double-head design.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule.

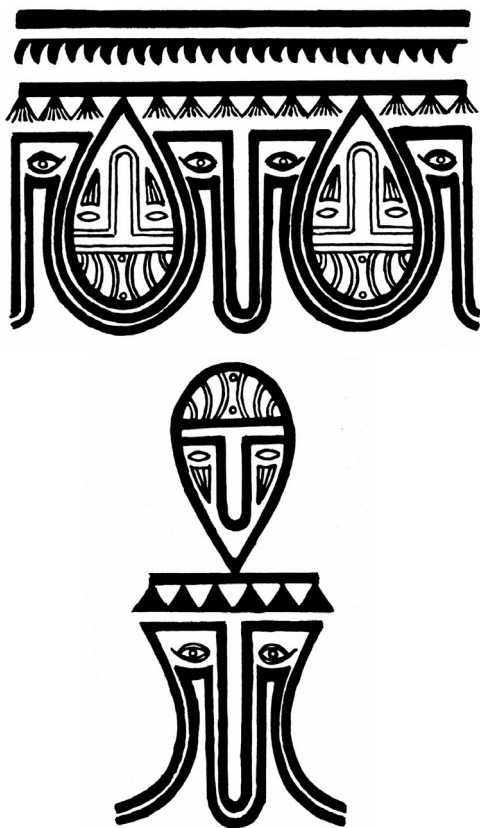


Figure 13.4. Another flat-bottomed dish (TD 1) from Teouma used as a cover for a burial vessel with a skull placed inside.

Here the double-head motif has been placed side-by-side but reversed (the basic concept is illustrated below). Note the skullcap on top of the more naturalistic upper face.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule.



Figure 13.5. A double-head vessel from Makue, Aore Island, Vanuatu, with a simpler unfilled skullcap and a schematic lower geometric head with eyes represented above it because of space constraints.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule from a photograph by Galipaud (2010:139).

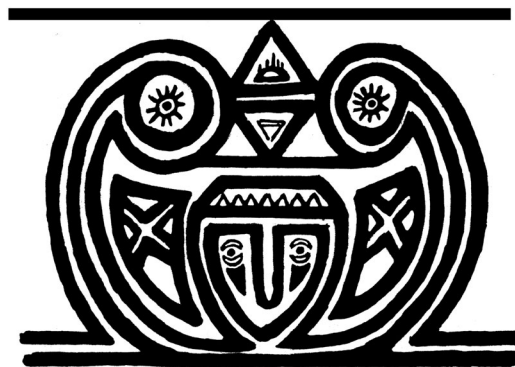


Figure 13.6. Sometimes the upper head transforms into what looks like a kind of headdress, with, in this case, a more rounded than geometric lower head.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule after Kirch (1997:137).



Figure 13.7. A design from RF-2 showing skullcap design.

Source: Redrawn by Siri Seoule from Spriggs 1990, Figure 7.

Having realised we were dealing with heads (and arguably masks) rather than faces, attention was drawn to what therefore must represent headgear of some kind depicted on many but not all of the upper double-head designs; interestingly, no such headgear is depicted on the celebrated RF-2 pot, which remains the most naturalistic anthropomorphic design recovered to date from a Lapita context.⁵ The presence of hat-like features was noted in 1990 (Spriggs 1990:93, 101) but little had been made of them at the time. If the idea of ritual masks being depicted as part of double-head designs is accepted as a possibility, then the presence of other ritual paraphernalia on Lapita pots might assist in strengthening the argument for a widespread ritual practice (cf. Best 2002; Terrell and Schechter 2009).

⁵ Green (1989:6) illustrates two further very naturalistic heads from the RF-2 site, one of which definitively and probably the other as well derive from 'double face' designs (cf. Donovan 1973a, 1973b:134). One of them may depict headgear but it is too fragmentary to be certain.

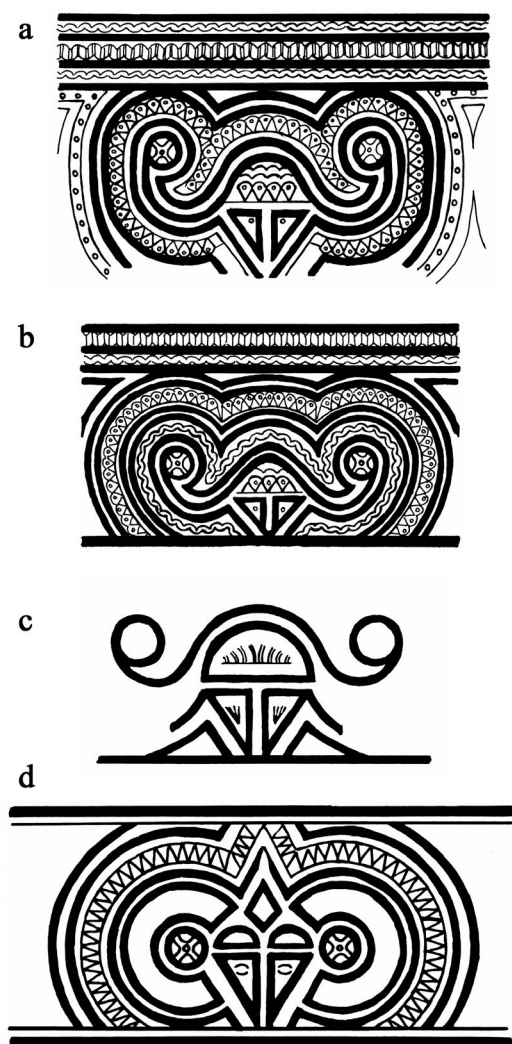


Figure 13.8. Further heads with skullcaps of different designs, from RF-2 (A, B, C) and Watom (D).

Source: Redrawn by Siri Seoule from Spriggs 1990: Figures 5, 6, 10 and 15.

Lapita hair?

First, however, we need to address whether it is caps or hats and headdresses that are being portrayed, or whether some of the patterns above the heads represent depictions of hair. The clue to this is perhaps given by the depiction of eyebrows (and/or eyelashes), most definitively hair features and ones certainly depicted on a range of head designs. From Watom, Spriggs (1990: Figure 14, after Casey 1936: Plate VII:15) depicts eyebrows/lashes as curved lines radiating from the top of the eye, four per eye. Similarly, Specht and Summerhayes (2007: Figure 12d) show a design of five curved lines coming from the top of the eye on a sherd from site FEA, Boduna Island, West New Britain. From the Apalo site in the Arawe Islands on the south coast of West New Britain come examples with seven curved eyebrow or eyelash lines (Summerhayes 2000:121). Bedford et al. (2010:151) illustrate eyebrows on a curvilinear 'upper' head on a flat-bottomed dish from Teouma (here Figures 13.2 and 13.3): again, five lines per eye are similarly curved. Moreover, radiating from the top of the head are similarly curved lines that would seem to represent head hair.

The long-nose head or mask adjacent to this representation displays filled triangles radiating from the top of the head, which may represent either a more geometric convention for hair or for a headdress—the latter suggestion was first made by Kirch (1997:136). This form of representation above the geometric lower head or single head designs is common: additional examples from Mussau and Anir in New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, and RF-2 in the Reefs-Santa Cruz are illustrated in Sand (2015), and there are similar designs from Vanuatu (Bedford et al. 2007:234–235; Noury and Galipaud 2011:76; here Figure 13.4), New Caledonia (Sand 1997:40) and Bourewa in Fiji (Noury and Galipaud 2011:101).

A very similar representation of head hair to that found on the Teouma dish upper head is found in a very roughly decorated (late?) pot from Kirch's excavations on Mussau: again, represented as pairs of curved lines, in this case incised, above a framed head.⁶ Similar arrangements but with straight lines come from Meyer's collections from Watom (see Sand 2015: Figures 12a and 12b). A unique example from Teouma presumably represents head hair by seven to nine curved lines immediately above each eyebrow (Bedford 2015:38).

When we move to the more abstract versions of the long nose form with eyes replaced with either 'X' or opposed semi-circle [] patterns, most common in New Caledonia, attention needs to be shifted to the bands above the repeated head designs for similar representations of head hair (and, as we will see later, headdresses and skullcaps). New Caledonian examples with curved lines above the eyes are illustrated for example by Chiu (2007: Figures 7.2, 7.6, 7.7 and 7.25) and with straight lines by Spriggs (1990: Figures 25, 30 and 31). Siorat (1990: Plate 4) illustrates a variant where the straight lines are alternately long and short, perhaps an abstract form of the previously mentioned infilled triangles above the heads that could represent hair or headdresses. Such triangles do in fact occur with X-shaped eyes, such as in an example from the Golson excavations at Vatcha on the Ile des Pins, New Caledonia (sherd 1285).⁷

Noury (2013; see also Noury and Galipaud 2011:47–83) considers the upper bands or 'frises annexes' in relation to several categories of design in a variety of forms that he includes as 'faces' ('visages'). He helpfully lists variants of the upper bands in relation to particular 'composites-verticaux' designs featuring eye–nose repeats and 'composites-oblique' designs that emphasise the nose more than the eyes. In an earlier publication he did explicitly suggest these upper bands might represent hats or hair (Noury 2011:121). But his purpose ultimately is to identify group markers, and in the 2013 publication he does not specifically situate the motifs in relation to the position of the nose. This means he does not usually give their full extent when they form more complex designs that can be suggested as representing headgear.

To address this possibility, however, we need first to consider designs that are more identifiably skullcaps or headdresses, which are found in direct association with and above the upper heads of double-head designs or represent the 'devolution' of the upper head itself and its transformation into some form of headgear for the generally more triangular face form below.

Lapita headgear

Figures 13.4 to 13.10 illustrate a variety of headgear that are designated here as skullcaps (Noury's 2012: Figure 12 'coiffes') where they seem to fit closely to the head (examples are Figures 13.4, 13.5, 13.7, 13.8 and 13.9), headdresses above skullcaps where feathers seem to be indicated (Figures 13.6, 13.8d (possibly) and 13.10), or more neutrally just headgear where their form is ambiguous (again perhaps Figure 13.6 and also Figure 13.14). In some cases, there is ambiguity because of transformation of the design towards a more abstract representation. Figures 13.11 and 13.12 show two logical (albeit not necessarily chronologically significant) transformations of skullcap designs until they become simply continuous bands.

6 I am grateful to Patrick Kirch for allowing me to examine and photograph sherds of this pot at the University of California, Berkeley Archaeology Laboratory.

7 I am grateful to Jack Golson for allowing me to examine and photograph this sherd at The Australian National University.

One thing that stands out with the simple skullcaps is that many of the designs on them are variants of each other, from the Bismarcks through to Vanuatu. If we take Figure 13.9a from Teouma as the basic design, it has three outcurving lines either side of a central portion with two stamped circles vertically arranged (the wider design it is part of can be seen in Figure 13.4). We can see variants of it from other sites, most closely in Figure 13.10c from the Duke of York Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago where there are now six outcurving lines per side. In Figure 13.11, a presumably later vessel from Lemau in New Ireland where the skullcap has devolved to a rectangular cartouche, the three outcurved lines and two vertical stamped circles are retained. Two more naturalistic skullcap designs from RF-2 in the Reefs-Santa Cruz Group of the Southeast Solomons (Figures 13.8c and 13.9f) have lost the stamped circles but retained the three outcurving lines (in one of the two extended to four lines). Three other examples from RF-2 present more elaborated variants (Figures 13.7, 13.8a and 13.8b). Other skullcap designs have simple series of vertical lines within the skullcap (Figures 13.9c–e, 13.10b and 13.10d all from Lapita, New Caledonia), while in Figure 13.12 the vertical lines occur within a continuous band above the head, the examples again coming from New Caledonia, this time from Vatcha on the Ile des Pins.

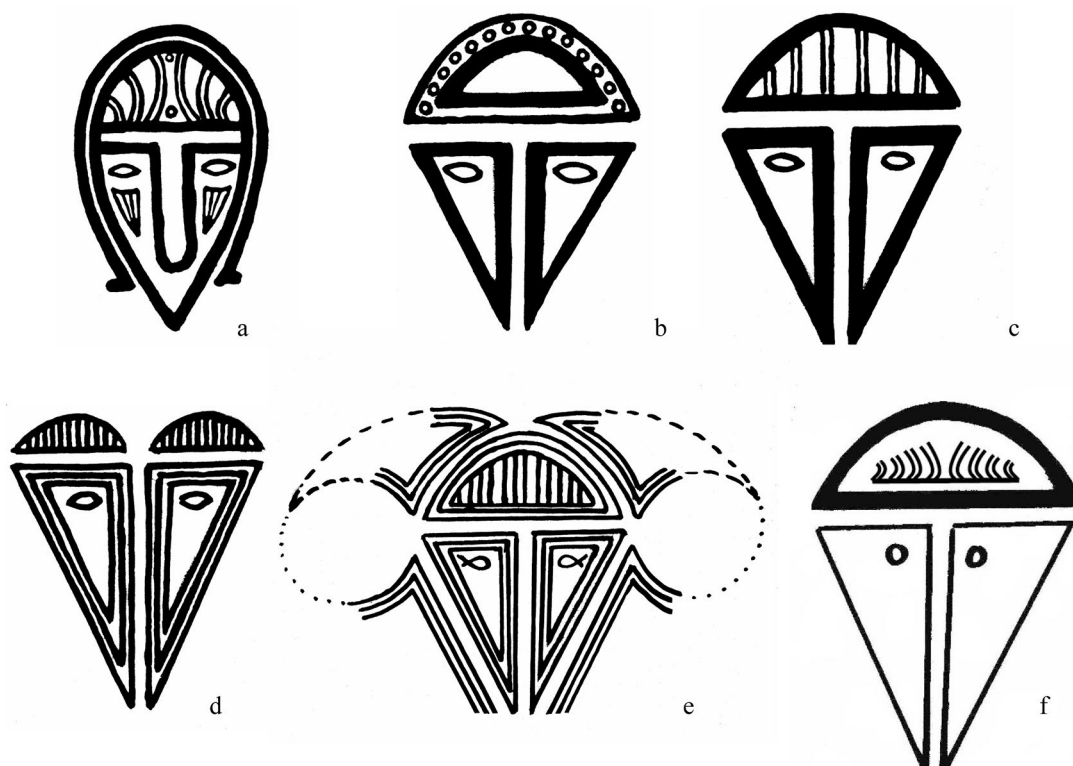


Figure 13.9. Various skullcaps from head design fragments, from Teouma (A), Lapita WK0013 (B–E) and RF-2 (F).

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule from illustrations from Noury (2013:117) and original drawings by Matthew Spriggs.

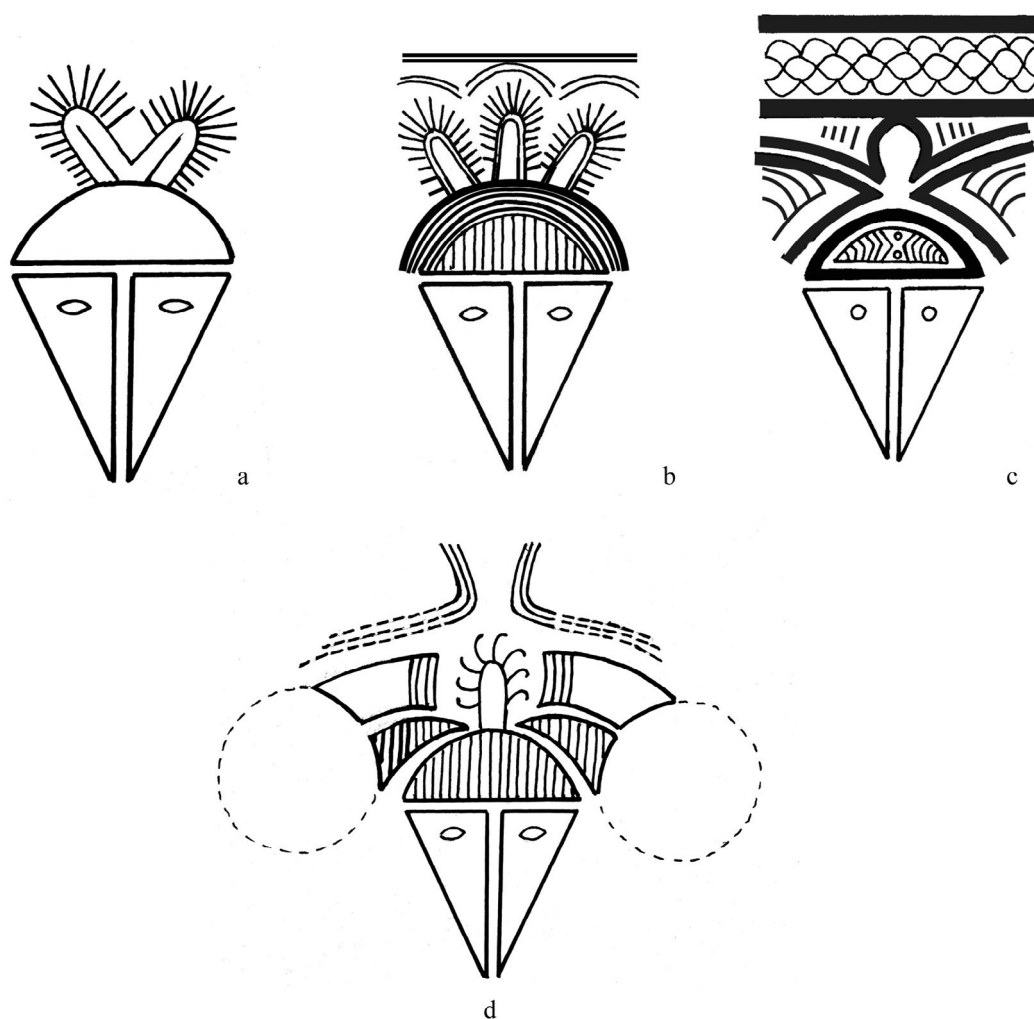


Figure 13.10. Headdress designs on top of skullcaps. From Lapita WK0013 (A, B, D) and site SFB, Duke of York Islands, East New Britain (C).

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule from Noury (2013:129–130), from photograph in White (2007:48): illustrated upside down) and original drawings by Matthew Spriggs.

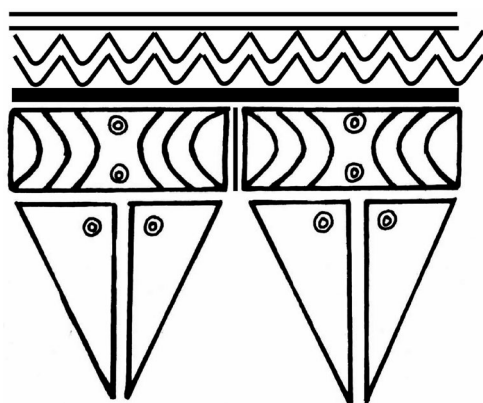


Figure 13.11. An increasing schematisation of the skullcap on a pot from site EFY, Lemau, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule from White (1992:84).

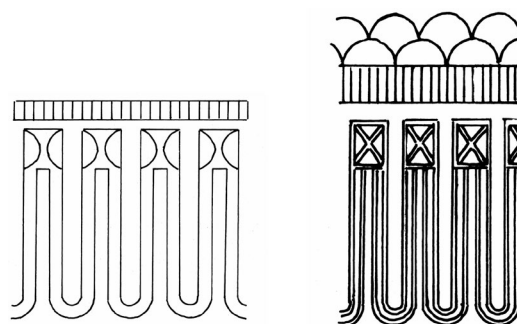


Figure 13.12. Further simplification of the skullcap to become a continuous band above the head, from Vatcha, Ile des Pins (Golson excavation), New Caledonia.

Source: Redrawn by Siri Seoule from Spriggs (1990: Figures 30 and 31).

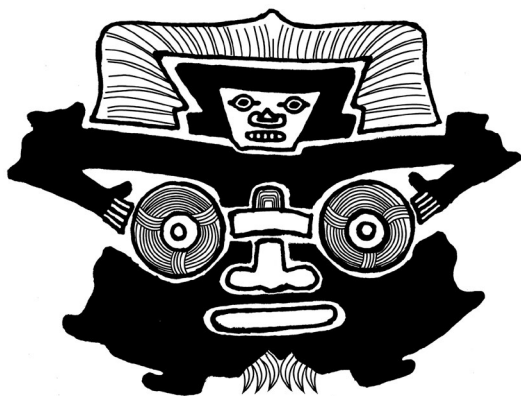


Figure 13.13. Is this the origin of the double-head design? Design on jade *cong* tube (M12:98), Fanshan Site, Liang Zhu Culture, Shanghai area, China, dating to 5200–4200 BP, described as ‘A deity and an animal face’.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule from illustration in Bin and Xiangming (2007:153, 159).

There are also skullcap examples that appear to be entirely blank, Figure 13.5 from Makue, Vanuatu, Figure 13.8d from Watom Island in the Bismarck Archipelago, and Figure 13.9b from Lapita, although the last of these does have a ring of stamped circles around the

top of the cap while maintaining an empty interior.⁸ Spriggs (1990: Figure 13) illustrates another blank example from Vatcha but failed to recognise it in the reconstructed design. One wonders whether, as Lapita pots were at least sometimes painted as well as dentate-stamped (Bedford 2006), there was once a design painted on at least some of these examples (cf. Noury 2013:116)?

The most reasonable interpretation of the features projecting from the tops of some skullcaps (Figure 13.10) is that they represent plumes of feathers. Use of chicken or other bird plumes is widespread in the Pacific as part of ritual costumes, either attached directly onto the hair at the back or projecting from caps or other frameworks. Among the vast numbers of faunal elements found at the Teouma site are rare examples of the bones of birds that are not usually known as food items but whose feathers are certainly valued for human plumage, such as those of hawks, owls and hornbills (Hawkins 2015:204–209; Worthy et al. 2015:233, 235).

The hat makes the man?

There is nothing in the depiction of the Lapita heads that is gender-specific. These are not bearded nor even moustachioed figures. Feathered headdresses or feathers attached to the hair have been associated with both men and women in the Pacific and Southeast Asia in recent times—see for instance the photograph of a particularly elaborate headdress being worn before 1932 in Taiwan by a high-ranking Atayal woman in Barbier and Newton (1988:344). Masks, however, are perhaps exclusively the preserve of men across the Western Pacific. In Vanuatu, for instance, there is no record of female masking having taken place traditionally (Bonnemaison et al. 1996; Speiser 1996). Similarly, while caps or frames may be used to support feather headdresses worn by women, the use of elaborate decorated skullcaps again appears to have been a male preserve in the recent past. The—to us—gender-neutral head depictions could be meant to stand equally for men and women, but alternatively they might all represent only one sex: clean-shaven males or females. Other sex-distinguishing features of the body are not obviously depicted in Lapita art. One must admit that while ‘the hat makes the man’ recalls a particular sartorial moment in time in the recent British and Australian past that has now largely passed, it is by no means of universal salience!

⁸ Figure 13.10a is not an example but merely a reconstructed outline of a skullcap, as the sherd does not extend down far enough to provide evidence of the internal design of the cap.

Parallels back to the East Asian area?

With the ancient DNA results revealing a close genetic link between Lapita people at Teouma and in Tonga and living Northern Philippines and Taiwanese aboriginal groups comes the suggestion of a fairly direct migratory link between these widely separated areas, with little admixture along the way (Skoglund et al. 2016). This would make earlier suggestions of links between the mythologies of aboriginal Taiwan and those of the Pacific considerably less far-fetched than they may have appeared when first promulgated (Dunis 2009), and beyond myth lies religion. Even longer-distance connections between Lapita and mainland Chinese Neolithic cultural expressions are possible, as Dunis has argued. To me they are best seen in the form of a structural link between designs on Liang Zhu jades deriving from the area of modern Shanghai (see Figure 13.13) and the Lapita double-head designs. In the former we again see a more naturalistic upper head design, with parallels in Lapita with the representation of the hair or headdress, and a lower more schematic or angular head, held in the hands of the upper figure as if it were some sort of mask. This is of course exactly the postulated arrangement of the Lapita double-head motifs with their increasingly abstract ‘arms’, discussed earlier in this paper.

The Liangzhu culture between 5200–4200 BP follows on from the Neolithic Hemudu Culture. Its sites are on lakes, rivers, coasts and islands in the Shanghai region, including on Zhoushan Island in the East China Sea. Decorated jades of this culture are found south through Zhejiang, Fujian (opposite Taiwan), Guangdong and Haifeng. Its economy was based on rice, domestic pigs and dogs and it shows evidence of social stratification (Bin and Xiangming 2007).

Peter Bellwood has often used the earlier Hemudu culture as illustrating the kinds of southern Chinese Neolithic cultures from which the Taiwanese Neolithic must have sprung (see for instance Bellwood 1997), and later scholars have taken up his suggestion (Jiao 2007). In that regard the ‘Ivory hat-shaped artifact’ illustrated in that work as coming from the Hemudu site may be significant (Jiao 2007:100). It looks like a skullcap with a Lapita-like triangular band round its lower part with ‘silkworm-shaped animal designs’ above (from the photograph they look more like birds or bats). It would not be out of place as a model for the Lapita skullcaps.

If these putative mainland Chinese parallels might be considered a bridge too far, I offer an ethnographic Taiwanese aboriginal example with very direct parallels to a Lapita pot from Teouma, both portrayed in Figure 13.14. In the Taiwanese example, admittedly a piece of tourist art but plausibly derived from a traditional design, we see a head with long nose surmounted by a piece of headgear resembling a double-headed snake, or two intertwined snakes, infilled with triangles. Above the middle of the snake motif rises a four-pronged extension on a vertical with a diamond in the middle. In the Lapita example, we have a long-nosed head surmounted by a band infilled with triangles in structurally the same position as the Taiwanese snake motif. Above its middle is a four-pronged extension, almost joined in the vertical to the triangle design with a triangle in the middle. The two designs are structurally identical.⁹

In between the Lapita area and Taiwan, parallels between Lapita anthropomorphs and ethnographic arts of the recent past have long been noted, particularly by Newton (1988). Most persuasively he linked the ‘Dongson-like’ bronze ceremonial axe designs found mainly on Roti Island in Eastern Indonesia and Lapita heads. These axes often portray figures wearing what look to be feathered headdresses, either attached to skullcaps as in the two examples he illustrates (1988:11) or seemingly springing directly from the head, as in the example illustrated here from

⁹ Noury (2011:95–100) discusses ‘serpentine’ motifs in Lapita, and the salience of snakes in both Taiwanese and wider Austronesian mythology. Sadly, the Lapita design discussed here would not qualify as one of his putative serpentine motifs.

a private collection in Cambridge, England (Figure 13.15). In all complete examples one can also note a more abstract anthropomorphic image below that of the relatively naturalistically depicted head. Some examples also depict what in Lapita have been labelled earplug or, more accurately, ear spool designs (Spriggs 2002:52).

There is no direct dating of any of these Roti axes, but assuming a general Dongson link they may be as early as about 2100 to 1500 BP, belonging to the early Indonesian Metal Age. Chen Chi-Lu has drawn attention to parallels in the ethnographic art of Taiwan for the Roti axe anthropomorphic images (Chi-Lu 1988), further allowing extension of the Lapita parallels by association across time and space—but always within an Austronesian or Austronesian-influenced milieu. He notes that such long-range comparisons between Asia and the Pacific have in fact been a staple of comparative art studies for more than a century (1988:188); but of course, this has been in the absence of Lapita comparisons until recently.



Figure 13.14. Parallels in the folk art of Taiwan? A piece of indigenous Taiwanese tourist art on a mobile phone holder purchased by Spriggs in 2005 (redrawn, to the left).

There are structural parallels in the organisation of this design and the Lapita double-head, and an explicit parallel in the four-pronged headdress design, which is also seen on Teouma Lapita vessel number TC18 (to the right). The parallels in the infill and structural arrangement of the double-headed serpent in the Taiwan example and in the border below the Lapita headdress are also notable. The diamond shape in the headdress 'stem' becomes an inverted triangle in the Lapita example.

Source: Drawn by Siri Seoule.



Figure 13.15. An Early Metal Age bronze axe, probably from Roti, Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia, with anthropomorphic figure with plumed headdress.

Source: Private collection, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Conclusions

A lot of ground has been covered rather schematically in this chapter; intentionally so, as its aim is to provoke thought rather than present a rounded or comprehensive analysis of the Lapita corpus. The recognition of the ubiquity of the Lapita head—in single or double form—on Lapita pots, is now generally accepted. From this the possibility was raised that masked and unmasked figures are being depicted, suggestive of a ritual practice. Further interrogation of the iconography reveals that skullcaps are another widespread feature, with or without feather headdresses. The widely distributed nature of this iconography, at least from the Bismarcks to Vanuatu (and probably beyond) in the Lapita world, would seem to provide indirect evidence for the existence of a widespread ritual complex; perhaps we may fairly call it a Lapita religion? Whether the figures being depicted are men or women or both is inconclusive; indeed, this ambiguity may well be intentional on the part of the artists, as no other sex-specific parts of the body are depicted elsewhere in Lapita iconography either.

The Lapita culture seems to derive fairly directly from the early Austronesian Taiwanese cultural area, both linguistically and in terms of the genes of the migrating population that carried Island Southeast Asian Neolithic traditions into the Western Pacific. I would contend therefore that the suggested long-distance iconographic parallels may not be coincidental and might indeed be expected, even extending back to the southern Chinese Neolithic cultural milieu from which the early Taiwanese Neolithic cultures emerged. Suggestive parallels in mythology, as argued by Dunis (2009) may also betoken deeply shared cultural roots. They hint at early religious beliefs that are only otherwise accessible through examining further parallels in the kinds of iconography examined here. It seems reasonable to suggest a shared ritual universe across the Early Lapita distribution based on a common iconography of ritual hats, headdresses and masks. But there are hints in this iconography too of more extended, ancestral links back into mainland East Asia that have yet to be seriously considered.

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