

Isle Scientists Explore Remote Atoll of Reao

By Helen Altonn
Star-Bulletin Writer

Two Hawaii scientists participated recently in the first extensive expedition to the remote atoll of Reao in the Tuamotu Islands, attempting to find its place in Polynesian culture.

Yoshihiko H. Sinoto, chairman of the Bishop Museum's anthropology department, and Jack Ward, University of Hawaii linguist, spent six weeks on Reao.

Kanazawa University sponsored the expedition with a grant for overseas research by Japan's Ministry of Education and sent two geologists and two anthropologists, including Sachiko Hatanaka, the project chief.

Discussing their preliminary findings in an interview, Sinoto said the people of Reao and nearby Pukarua are very dark and short compared with other Polynesians.

About 150 persons live on Reao.

IT WAS BELIEVED BOTH islands might have been settled by early Polynesian immigrants, possibly connected with Polynesian migration farther east.

Hatanaka found that both groups are linguistically very different not only from major islands of eastern Polynesia but from many other Tuamotu islands.

Kenneth Emory of the Bishop Museum studied the marae (religious structures) on Reao in 1929-30 in the first and only archaeological survey done there.

He said they were survivals of the same culture which left prehistoric marae on Necker Island in Hawaii; that they represented a form employed by the earliest settlers in Hawaii and southeastern Polynesia.

Sinoto said Emory revised his idea later, saying the Reao marae could be a modification of religious structures to the west. But Sinoto said, "One of my aims was to find out if this was so or not."

THE SCIENTISTS NOTED THAT Reao and Pukarua are on the eastern fringe of the Tuamotu Islands, which are 3,000 miles southeast of Honolulu and comprise more than 75 atolls and reef islands stretching over 1,000 miles.

Ward said changes found in the language of the Reao people do not support the idea that Reao speech was divergent from early Polynesian language.

"Generally, there seems to be quite a bit of vocabulary specialization in the Tuamotu," he said.

"Words begin to characterize an island in a set of islands because of isolation.

"Some innovations are shared throughout a good portion of the Tuamotu, but not on Reao and Pukarua. So while they look Tuamotuan in origin, in terms of isolation there is evidence of considerable local development.

"Some words that show a relationship outside of the Tuamotu might be borrowings," he added, noting that Mangareva is close by.

SINOTO EXCAVATED FOUR test sites, hoping to find a clue as to whether Marquesans might have settled Reao in their travels southeast.

Previous investigations by Sinoto and Emory point to the Marquesas as the origin of settlers of the southeast Pacific islands, including Hawaii.

"If they left the Marquesas, moving in a south-east direction, they would have hit Henderson, Pitcairn, Mangareva and Easter islands, and some voyagers might have hit Reao and Pukarua," Sinoto said.

He couldn't find evidence linking the material culture on Reao to the East Polynesia settlement period.

However, he said the type of marae and artifacts on Reao indicate it most likely was occupied by people from the west, and this is supported by Ward's linguistic findings.

SINOTO SAID THE MARAE weren't his primary interest on the atoll until he discovered a completely different form than Emory had described.

He found three marae half buried on top of a dune on one of the coral islets on the lagoon side. Those found by Emory were all on the reef side of the island and had different construction, Sinoto said.

Although the marae that he found buried were badly disturbed, he said it is believed they are older than the Reao type of structures.

He said this supports Emory's revised interpretation that they could be a modified version of the marae to the west.

Sinoto found a stone-lined wall indicating human occupation of the dune area but not a single artifact that he said could be used to interpret the culture and time period of the people who lived there and built the marae.

HE SAID HE CAN USE charcoal from many firepits in the area to date the location, but without artifacts he can't relate it to the rest of East Polynesia.

Sinoto noted that Emory had recorded 25 marae on Reao but said he was informed there were 25 more on the island.

Emory described some marae with upright slabs that had fallen. Sinoto said he found them in the exact position. "Nobody has touched them."

Sinoto restored four of the marae while doing detailed mapping and said he learned a great deal about them in the process.

He said there is one village on Reao and around it are many faro planting ditches. Some were still functioning when Emory visited but none are in use now.

Sinoto prospected around the present village and another area where he was told there had been a pre-missionary village.

HE COLLECTED A DOZEN tridacna adzes, pearl shell fishhooks, (a bonito hook point) and discovered a shrine at one site between the two village areas. But the artifacts were all on the surface and nothing turned up in excavations.

Sinoto returned to that site later and extended test pits over a large area. Then he began to find artifacts. He hit a house site with a fireplace and post hole and found pearl shell fishhooks, inner-part rejects of single hooks, sea urchin spine files and tridacna adzes.

Unfortunately, he said, it was his last day on the island.

He said much work remains to be done to answer questions of how the Reao-type marae developed from the western form, when Reao was first settled and what its relationship is to the rest of the Tuamotu Islands and East Polynesia.

He said the type of fishhooks and method of manufacture are similar to those in the west and central Tuamotu Islands. The Tuamotuans used the unique method of cutting the inner part of hooks with a sharkskin bow saw.

Other types of artifacts found on Reao are related to later Tahitian culture, Sinoto said.

He said neighboring atolls should be investigated, as well as Reao, to determine how Reao fits into the puzzle of early Polynesian migrations.

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RESTORED MARAE—Reao atoll has many religious structures such as this one, shown after the upright slabs were restored by Yosihiko Sinoto.

