

BURIAL CUSTOMS AND GRAVE SITES ON PRE-CHRISTIAN NGGATOKAE, WESTERN SOLOMON ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

OUR purpose is to record some aspects of the pre-Christian life of the people living on the small island of Nggatokae. During a two-week stay in 1971 we collected as much information as possible about the traditional burial customs and also examined and described in detail some of the numerous grave sites from pre-Christian times. In 1969, one of us (L.W.) visited Kavolavata village on behalf of the Solomon Islands Museum and examined three grave sites on the southeast coast. The results from that study have been incorporated in this article.³

Although we are aware of the limitations of such a short study, we thought it worthwhile to carry out the research because so little is known about the area and the pre-Christian grave sites were being disturbed and robbed of their offerings (members of the younger generation brought some stone images to Honiara for sale).

Unlike many other islands of the British Solomons Nggatokae has never been the subject of specific scientific studies. The inhabitants and their culture are in a few cases given a brief mention in connection with a description of the Marovo culture (Sommerville, 1897; Russell, 1948). The language of Nggatokae appears to be related to that of the Marovo people, about which not much is known. Apart from the few translations by missionaries noted by Capell (1943), there is only a vocabulary compiled by the lieutenants Sommerville and Weigall (1896), and a brief glossary compiled by Russell (1948).

Physical Setting. The island is situated at the southeastern end of New Georgia. It is volcanic in origin and more or less circular, approximately nine kilometres in diameter, but flanked in the east and northwest by limestone

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peninsulas. The deeply dissected central peak rises steeply to 840 metres. The eastern peninsula forms a plateau about three kilometres wide and three long. Its sheltered northern lagoon coast has cliffs and pronounced wave-cut platforms. The southern coast has steep shelving, often bouldery, beaches in the area between the Kele River and Mbiche where steep swift rivers flow down from the hills behind.

Population. This was 481 at the 1970 census (Groenewegen, 1972). According to oral tradition the people are of mixed descent resulting from the intermarriage at least six generations ago between the original inhabitants, said then to be living in the interior,⁴ and settlers from Viru Harbour on New Georgia. There was also some intermarriage with women brought from head-hunting expeditions to neighbouring islands (a woman from Isabel was mentioned in one genealogy).

Conversion. Seventh-day Adventists introduced Christianity to the Marovo in 1914 and to the Nggatokae a year later. Almost the whole population was converted quickly. The missionaries banned the old religion and in doing so destroyed the cultural and social life. Today the people are embarrassed, uninterested, or ashamed of pagan customs, which they do not keep alive even in stories or songs.

Informants. We obtained background information from Isaac Watts, a Nggatokae man resident in Honiara, and he agreed to accompany us and act as guide and interpreter. His two step-brothers, Tony and Terry Jamokolo of Kavolavata, joined him on our arrival, and the three acted as informants and interpreters throughout the two weeks' fieldwork in December 1971. Their father Jamokolo, headman of Kavolavata, was the only man who could describe some of the pre-Christian beliefs and customs, and he passed some of his knowledge on to his sons. The bulk of information here is based on his recollections, though elderly people at Mbiche village confirmed some of it.

Social structure. It was possible to achieve only a rough outline; apparently there was a distinct differentiation similar to that in other parts of Marovo and Roviana (Sommerville, 1897; Barraud, 1972). The chief (*bangara*), was the undisputed leader, followed in the social hierarchy by the headhunter

⁴We examined one old village site, Uava, situated at about 250 metres on the slopes of the mountain. Six huts of which we found postholes, varied in size from 3.8 by 4.3 metres to 4.8 by 8.3 metres. Informants said that people of a group (*butubutu*) lived in the same village, the chief and his family in the centre with the headhunters close by and the common people and servants on the outside. The average population of such a settlement is unknown. The huts were built into the hillside so that the natural rock formed the back wall. The other three were of thatched leaves with a small door in each for easy escape at times of enemy attack. A large stone at the top of the path leading into the village could be rolled down on enemies.

Evidence of former clearings for cultivation has been noted in the interior of the island.

(*varani*), common people, and slaves (*penausu*). It is not clear what position priests (*chiema*, *hopehope*) occupied, but there were at least two categories. A priest might inherit his office, or he could be chosen, though not from the headhunters.

The chief had the power of life and death over his servants, who were often men who had been captured on other islands as children. A servant had to obey his chief's commands and orders. If he refused to do so, he would be killed by a headhunter of the village by decapitation. If the village headhunters for some reason did not wish to perform the execution one from a village nearby would be requested to do it. In this case, the servant was asked to take something to the man appointed, who made a surprise attack on him during the journey.

Sometimes a servant could achieve a certain amount of social status, as when the chief, in appreciation of his fidelity, declared him to be "like his hands and mouth". People would then take orders from the servant. Such a person was called a *sinoana bangara*.

The chief was usually succeeded by his firstborn son. Whether this was always so, or whether the son had to fulfil certain conditions is not known. It was important that the successor should belong to the chief's lineage. If a chief did not have a son, his oldest daughter could succeed. She was then called *kobirava* (heir). Headhunters were also recruited from the chief's lineage. It was inconceivable for a headhunter to come from the servant class.

Supernatural concepts. There were two distinct types of supernaturals. The first were the *ponda*, all-powerful beings who looked after the people and whose power (*lingomo*) protected them from the spirits of enemies. The others were the souls of the dead (*mangonai*, 'image'), who departed at death to Ove on Simbo island.⁵

Supplications were made to the *ponda* by means of offerings to the skull of an ancestor. They included puddings of pounded Canarium almonds and other ingredients. The nuts were pounded alongside in a stone mortar, (*kato*).⁶

The power of the *ponda* could be carried from the grave by means of a charm, also called *lingomo* (see Plate IA), consisting of the tooth of the ancestor encased in a small basket decorated with rings and other pieces of carved clam and pearl-shell and slices of mitre shell.⁷ It was carried on the wrist, round the neck, or attached to a shield for strength and protection, but

⁵ Cf. Hocart (1922: 262). His map of Simbo shows a part of the island called Ove. Simbo people believed that their *mangonai* (this word is used in the Simbo language) go to the mountains of southern Bougainville.

⁶ For a description of the making of pudding see Russell (1948).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the shapes of the shell pieces on the *lingomo* from

it could also be consulted, as when a man wanted advice when going to fight-- it would tell him where the enemy was hidden. The *lingomo* of a newly deceased man could be inherited by a male relative. If taken by the enemy it would have no power. People such as commoners, unprotected by a *lingomo*, could be affected by enemy powers. One informant said that a common person going to the place of enemy skulls would feel the power of the enemy spirits because the place was taboo to him. If women, children, or common people disobeyed the taboo regarding sacred places they were punished by execution by axe.

People were mainly concerned with the distribution and effectiveness of the power of the *ponda* and did not have any views about its nature. They were afraid of the power, and an old informant was distressed to mention the *ponda* because he said he was still afraid.

Usually the spirit of a dead man (*mangonai*) on leaving his body went to Ove, a hole in the centre of the island of Simbo. Before entering the spirit started singing and marked the rock of the entrance with red clay. Isaac Watts said that the *mangonai* "looked like breath but had the form of the dead person."

There were three specific situations when the *mangonai* did not go to Ove: when a person committed suicide, when a woman died in childbirth, and when someone was executed. It was said that the *ponda* claimed such *mangonai*, which then haunted the place and frightened people and tried to do them harm. The spirit could, however, be exorcised by a priest (*hopehope*). He took a shell ring (*hokata*) in his hand and called the spirit to enter it. He then took the *hokata* to some outdoor place. There were two kinds of priest, the *chiema* who dealt with the *ponda* and touched skulls of the dead and the *hopehope* who were concerned with the *mangonai*.

Another term used in connection with supernatural belief, called *mateana*, referred to a person with powers of prophecy. Such a man, called Gela Paragava, once lived on Mbulo Island. He predicted that Mbulo would one day be deserted; it was and not very long afterwards. It was said that when he died an iguana restored him to life and he became deified as a spirit. Sacrifices were made to him on Mbulo.⁸

(Footnote 7 continued.)

Marovo in the Solomon Island Museum (Plate IA) are similar to the shape of objects found in the graves. One of us (L.W.) examined similar *lingomo* from the Marovo area in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

⁸ Although the reference to the monitor lizard was the only time informants mentioned a direct connection between animals and the supernatural, a small carved stone bird from Nggatokae is in the Solomon Islands Museum. This was said to be Selevanga, the Bird God who brought luck to fishermen. One of us (L.W.) was shown the site where the bird came from: 'sisu.

Methods of burial. The differences between chiefs, headhunters, common people, and slaves is echoed in the treatment of their bodies after death. Chiefs and headhunters were never buried in the same place as commoners and slaves, and women and children were generally buried apart from men. People regarded the head as the most important part of the body in life and in death. When a person died the *chiema* priest carried the body to a remote place in the forest. He placed it in a sitting position with its back to a tree and piled stones around it up to the neck. For a chief or headhunter the arms were left outside the stones and propped up holding a shield or an axe. The face was painted with lime as if for a headhunting expedition. Common people had their arms covered with stones inside the cairn. Later a relative would hold an armring (*hokata*) over the body. The presence of the *ponda* at the ceremony would be indicated by the shaking of the ring or even the relative holding it falling to the floor.⁹

There was no particular significance in the choice of burial site; it was for the relatives to decide. The cairn of stones enclosing the body was called *ravuravuani*. After a few weeks the priest and his assistant returned to the burial place and if decomposition had advanced sufficiently they removed the skull and placed scented leaves such as *puchupuchu* or *burongo* in the oral and nasal orifices to remove the smell. Then the priest took the skull to a special place at the beach for cleaning by a pointed stick and sand. He washed it thoroughly in salt water and left it to bleach in the sun. Later he took it to its final resting place, generally at a distance from the grave site. At the *ravuravuani* no stones or earth were placed over the top to conceal the remains of the corpse, and we examined sites where the bones of the body could clearly be seen. A chief's or headhunter's shield and axe generally went to his village for ritual purposes.

Skulls of chiefs and headhunters were taken to inaccessible places such as caves, cliff ledges, and outlying islands. The site was called *era* or, if the skull was placed in a special shrine, *oru*. A male relative might later on carve a stone image (*kimbo*) of the deceased to place at the grave site (see Plate IB). Only men could carve *kimbo* and as a rule only for a male relative, though some husbands carved one for the wife. The main purpose of the figure was to watch over the grave and frighten off intruders. Food offerings were sometimes made to the ancestor at the site.

The skulls of common people (and perhaps slaves) were taken to be cleaned in the same way. They were not removed to any special place but sometimes replaced at the site of the body. This site was then called *lovu*.

⁹Barraud (1972) refers to Hocart's description of a similar ceremony on the third day of funerary rites where the spirit is led out of the corpse by means of a shell ring (*ovala*).

TABLE 1.

Names and types of sites visited and their contents.

Name of site	Kind of sacred place (<i>hope</i>)	Contents
Loka	ritual place (<i>hope</i>)	Two stone mortars (<i>kato</i>) now in use at Kavalavata Shell money.
Vuana	ritual place (<i>hope</i>)	One stone image (<i>kimbo</i>) (Cat. no. 69.60) ⁱ
Isisu	ritual place (<i>hope</i>)	One stone mortar (<i>kato</i>) (Cat. no. 69.59.1) Shell money. Shell pendants (<i>pangusia</i>) Pearl-shell fish lures (Cat. no. 69.59 2-5) One small carved stone bird said to have come from this site (Cat. no. 69.56)
Volivoli	grave site (<i>oru</i>)	Four skulls One large triton shell (<i>buki</i>) One small metal shrine (<i>kosa</i>) One whale's tooth (<i>kalo</i>) Two clam-shell pendants (<i>pangusia</i>) Two pearl-shell pendants (<i>pangusia</i>) One china potsherd pendant; blue pattern on white ground (<i>pangusia</i>) One clam-shell canoe-prow ornament (<i>barava</i>) One small shell ring (<i>hinuili</i>) Two cut pieces of mitre shell (<i>rago</i>) Three trochus armbands (<i>hokat.a</i>) One ear ornament (<i>vikulu</i>) One ear ornament (<i>sosoa</i>) One shell money (<i>poata</i>) One shell money (<i>tinete</i>) Small seed beads
Grave of Tela, Koku, and Ari	grave site (<i>oru</i>)	Three skulls One whale's tooth (<i>kalo</i>) Two shell money (<i>tinete</i>) Two clam-shell pendants (<i>pangusia</i>) One small clam ring (<i>hinuili</i>) One cut piece of mitre shell (<i>rago</i>) One unidentified black object (potsherd?) Remains of wooden shrine (<i>kosa</i>)
Tongere Vika	grave site (<i>oru</i>)	Two skulls ⁱⁱ One stone image (<i>kimbo</i>) (Cat. no. 69.80) One pearl-shell pendant (<i>pangusia</i>) Four large shell money (<i>tinete</i>) Two shell money (<i>erevege</i>) Two arm rings (<i>hokata</i>) Two small rings (<i>hinuili</i>) One ear piece (<i>sosoa</i>)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Name of site	Kind of sacred place (<i>hope</i>)	Contents
Heramaini	grave site (<i>oru</i>)	Three stone images (<i>kimbo</i>) (Cat. no. 71.17; 71.59; 69.89)
Chumburu	grave site (<i>era</i>)	west-end: Six to eight skulls One stone mortar (<i>kato</i>) (?) ⁱⁱⁱ middle ledge: Two skulls lower ledge: One skull One fighting stone (<i>kuloboru</i>), firestones Six blue trade beads
Bebeani Hembala	grave site (<i>era</i>)	One stone mortar (<i>kato</i>) (?) One war club (<i>vendara</i>) (?) Shell money Whales' teeth (<i>kalo</i>)
Mbiche	grave site of old men (<i>lovu</i>)	One jawbone Fragments of two skulls Grave not excavated
Mbiche	grave site of enemy bones (<i>ngubunguani</i>)	Not excavated

i) A catalogue number after an item indicates that the item is now in the Solomon Islands Museum, Honiara.

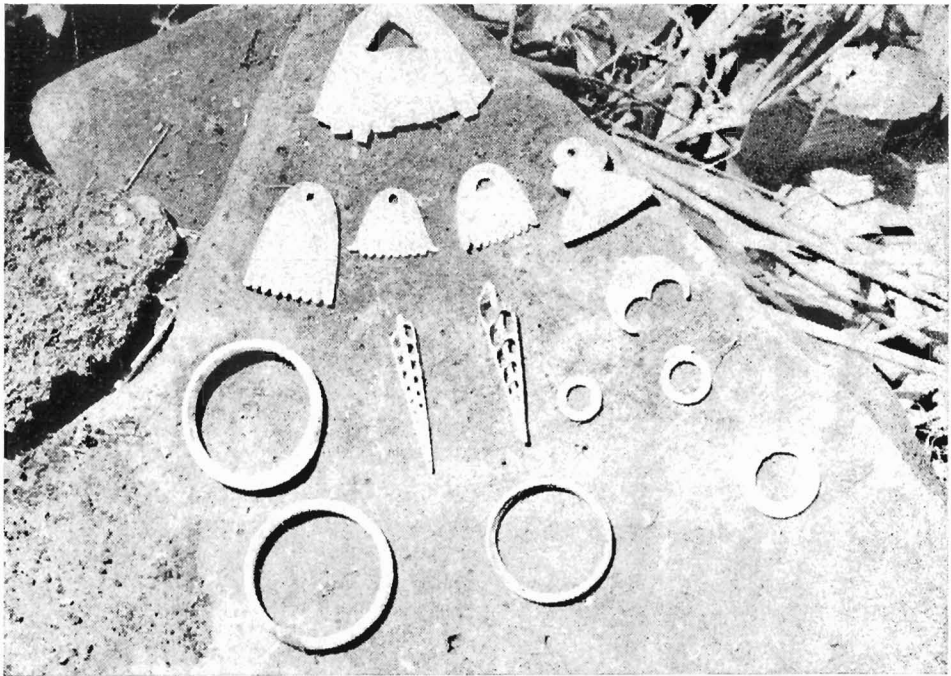
ii) The listed contents in this grave site are those recorded in 1969. On the 1971 visit the following items were missing: 1 shell money (*tinete*); 2 shell money (*erenge*); 1 arm ring (*hokata*); and 1 pendant (*pangusia*).

iii) A question mark after an item indicates that Nggatokae people said it was once at the site but was not there today.

Usually women's and children's skulls were placed with the body, though if a man was devoted he could have the skull put in a special woven basket (*kosa*) and placed in the rafters of his house. Only one skull could go into each basket.

People treated the skulls of their enemies differently. On returning from a headhunting raid to Isabel, the Russells, or Guadalcanal they placed the heads of slain enemies in the prow (*kosua*) or stern (*kolihu*) of the canoe. Sometime afterwards they cleaned the skulls and put them in a mass burial site (*bungubunguani*; possibly also used for slaves' skulls) or hung them from the rafters of the war-canoe house (*erovo*). Each headhunter placed those he had taken together so that the villagers could admire his prowess. When

BURIAL CUSTOMS AND GRAVE SITES ON NGGATOKAE. PLATE II



Contents of Volivoli grave site

Reading from top: first item, *Barava*; second row, *Pangusia*; third row, first item, *Hokuta*; second and third items, *Rago*; fourth item, *Sosou*; upper fifth item, *Vikulu*; lower sixth item, *Hinuili*.

of Isisu, southeast of Peava village. On top was a *kato* said to have been broken in the 1939 earthquake, and scattered in and among the stones were offerings of shell money. This site was used for offerings and rituals before fishing expeditions.

Volivoli. A grave situated about 50 metres inland from Kele Beach, west of the Kele River mouth. It is probably the most elaborate of the sites examined. It is surrounded by a low coral wall 80 centimetres high and 70 centimetres wide forming an irregular rectangle measuring 10.7 metres by 9.2 metres but broken in two places. A low platform (*buturu*) 80 centimetres high and 3.6 by 1.5 metres in extent is situated at the northwest corner. Inset flat stones form the edge of the *buturu* surface giving an even appearance. The interior is covered with earth and litter. Coralline slabs form a small tent-shaped shrine on the top of the platform. This contains four skulls and a great variety of offerings (Fig. 1 and Plate II). One of the skulls is said to be that of the man Munaka who was a pagan chief four generations ago.

Grave of Tela, Koku and Ari. Following the arrival of the Mission this grave was moved to the vicinity of Mbiche village as a conscious break with custom. The original site is 200 metres away in the forest to the west of the village. The shape is a copy of the older one. It is similar to Volivoli, but the surrounding wall is an oval four to six metres in diameter. The grave shrine was made of wood, and the fallen slabs can be seen on the top. The offerings are placed between two upright stone slabs nearly a metre high at the side. There are skulls of three men, Tela, Koku, and Ari.

Tongera Vika. This is on an outlying stack of the coral cliff south of Isisu Point east of Peava village. It resembles that at Loka and consists of a small slab grave on top, about 60 metres above sea level. This measures 35 by 60 centimetres and is made from seven volcanic stone slabs placed upright to form the four sides, a slab for the base and two more for the cover. One more slab and several small pieces are scattered round the site. It is said that these last were brought from the weather coast. A stone image of Juari, whose skull is buried here, originally stood beside the grave but is now in the Solomon Islands Museum. He was the father of Tarasi, whose image was at the Vuana site. A small fireplace stands nearby, together with pieces of volcanic stone and a *kuloboru* fighting stone. In 1971 some of the offerings seen two years earlier were missing (see Table 1).

Heramaini. This is an outlying rock on the beach in the bay west of Chumburu Point. One of the graves is said to date from nine generations ago. A coral rock wall one to two metres high stands on the landward side. Originally three stone figures stood on top. Two are now in the Museum. On the seaward side two slab graves, similar to Tongere Vika are on coral rock mounds, and there is also a fireplace. One of the graves, that of Noma, was

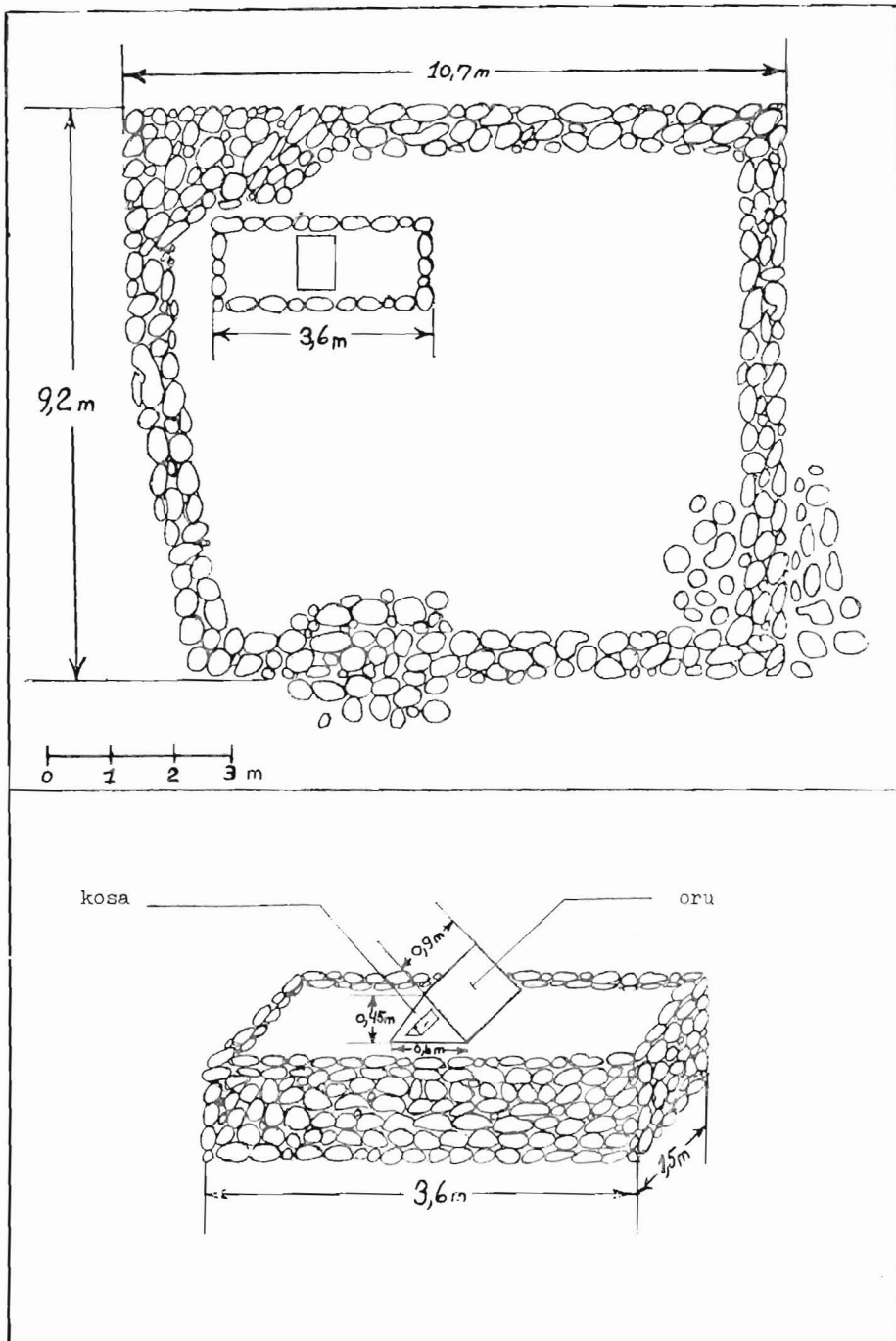


Figure 1.—Plan and sketch of Volovoli grave site.

partly covered by a termite mound and not examined. An image of Noma is in the Museum; originally it stood near the grave. The second grave is of Arik, said to have been a contemporary of Noma.

Chumburu. This is a dry sheltered cliff ledge about 50 to 100 metres above sea level reached only by a steep climb along other ledges. It consists of a series of three sand-floored ledges. There are two skull sites. One at the western end overhanging a sheer cliff had a cairn of coral rock with a hollow in the centre containing six to eight skulls. It is said that a stone mortar once stood alongside. The second site, on the middle ledge, had two skulls in a small crevice in the rock. In the sand below a *kuloboru* fighting stone, firestones and beads were found (see Table 1). One skull is lying on the third ledge where presumably it had fallen from above. Only one skull is named, that of the woman chief, Ononomo.

Bebeani Hembala. Another cliff ledge on the small headland west of Chumburu. Several skulls are located on a small cave-like ledge about 20 metres above sea level. Originally there was a stone mortar here and also a war club (*vendara*) propped across the cavity.

Grave of old men at Mbiche. Situated near the original site of Tela, Koku, and Ari west of Mbiche village. It consists of a pile of coral rock two to three metres in diameter surrounded by a low wall enclosing an area nine metres by 4.5 metres. It is said to contain the bones and skulls of several men. Fragments of two skulls and one jawbone can be seen among the rocks.

Place of enemy bones at Mbiche. A platform of coral rock surmounted by a stone pillar, thought to have once been a larger area, several metres square, where the skulls and bones of enemies were placed. On the introduction of Christianity all the skulls and bones were placed under coral rock, and the stone pillar was set up as a kind of memorial stone. We saw no bones on the surface.

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