

A STUDY OF BUKA-PASSAGE (SOLOMON ISLANDS) CEREMONIAL PADDLES

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Plates 3-15. Figs 1 and 2.

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Rec. Aust. Mus., 27, page 33.

PREFACE

It has been a very rich and rewarding experience for me, as an art-historian, to be able to do research in the field of the Solomon Islands ceremonial paddles.

My main concern was with the stylistic features of the paddles, their shapes and the specific motifs of their decoration and, to a lesser degree, with the meaning of patterns and their significance. I tried to trace the distribution of the different motifs, especially the motifs of the squatting ancestor figure in the position of adoration in the Pacific area and to draw some conclusions purely from the facts which I could establish and which might be confirmed by the findings of anthropologists.

I do not claim to have given a fully comprehensive account, as one has naturally to rely on literature and studies done so far by other scientists about the art and culture of the different island groups, but I hope this paper will serve as a basis for further research and, if I have achieved this, I will feel very satisfied.

My thanks for being able to do this work go first of all to Mr F. D. McCarthy, former Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum in Sydney, who suggested this subject to me and who was always a very helpful adviser in all questions of doubt. I am also indebted to the former Director of the Museum, Dr J. W. Evans, the Librarian, Miss M. Davies, and members of the staff who were always ready to give me their assistance.

INTRODUCTION

The large number of paddles (approximately 320), which are part of the excellent collection of objects from the Solomon Islands, were bought by the Australian Museum in Sydney in two big parcels, according to the register of the Museum, from Richard Parkinson and Captain Farrell in 1885 and 1898 respectively. The paddles are described as coming from the Buka district.

Richard Parkinson, author of the well-known book "Dreissig Jahre in der Suedsee" (Stuttgart, 1907) and many other valuable contributions to the investigations of the peoples, life and culture of the Pacific Islands, was the brother-in-law of Captain Farrell and both were related to "Queen Emma", a famous trading woman, who lived around 1880 in Rabaul.¹

This evidence shows that the paddles from the Buka district were made previous to 1885 or 1898 at the latest, when the Solomon Islanders were still more or less in their primitive state and had little contact with the white man. We therefore can look upon them as authentic specimens and products of the art expression of the Buka-Passage Islanders, inspired by the feelings and the spiritual background of their time.

The paddles are identified by their registration numbers, which are quoted in the text.

¹ According to information received from Captain Brett Hilder, Sydney.