

Tomoko: Raiding Canoes of the Western Solomon Islands

PETER J. SHEPPARD 

Department of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences,
University of Auckland, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

ABSTRACT. The Australian Museum has in its collection a fine example of a large plank-built raiding canoe from the Western Solomon Islands. This canoe was obtained in 1915 from Roviana Lagoon where it is known as a *tomoko* in the Roviana language. These canoes are examples of great technical ability and artistry. They have been and continue to be important cultural symbols in the Solomon Islands. In this paper I review the history of the *tomoko* raiding canoes in the Western Solomons and describe their role in 19th century traditional society. I discuss efforts by the British colonial government first to destroy them and the political system they represented, and then to co-opt them as symbols of the new colony and subsequently the nation-state.

Introduction

In the centre of Roviana Lagoon on the island of New Georgia in the Western Solomon Islands lies the small island of Nusa Roviana (Fig. 1), just east of the modern town of Munda. In the 19th century, this island was the political and religious focus of the Roviana people, the largest language group in the Western Solomons. Roviana's population and geographical centrality made it the focus of European trade at that time. This was despite its reputation as the home of fierce head-hunters, renowned for their 'outrages' committed against Europeans, widely publicised at that time in the newspapers of Australia and New Zealand. Nusa Roviana was densely populated in the 19th century, with a series of hamlets running along the coast below a large hillfort constructed of stone and earthen walls and terraces, spread over a distance of 700 m along the spine of the ridge in the centre of the island. Climbing the ridge from the northern end and moving south, one encounters a series of defensive walls and shrines associated with powerful ancestors and with ritual activities concerning warfare (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 2001). At the southernmost end of the fort, its highest and most heavily defended point, there is a good view over the lagoon and towards the approaches to Roviana by sea. The last shrine is encountered here. It is decorated with a small carved head of a dog, said to be the remains of a once-living dog and culture hero called *Tiola*, the watchman

of Nusa Roviana. In 1997 Mr Silas Oka of Patmos village, in the interior of Roviana Lagoon to the east of Nusa Roviana, recounted a long story involving the adventures of *Tiola* and some animal companions as they paddled around the Western Solomons. This voyage culminated with *Tiola* arriving at Nusa Roviana and turning into a human seeking marriage with a chief's daughter. *Tiola* hoped to impress the chief by presenting new ideas to the people:

Tiola gave this idea [a new house style] because he wanted to marry the *banara*'s [a *mbangara*, a chief of Roviana] daughter. But still, the *banara* wouldn't allow the marriage. So *Tiola* came up with another idea. He asked the people to build a canoe. Standing up he said the canoe should be in the shape of his body. 'Put the ribs of my body upside down so they can hold the planks together.' So, the people started to follow this design. It was the people from Vuragere [western side of Nusa Roviana] who started the war canoe (*tomoko*) with *Tiola*. The original war canoe design was more curved on the long axis than the modern one which is flatter. After they finished the war canoe *Tiola* said it was time to launch it. When they built the first one, they built it on the ground so they were sewing it with some roots which were lying on the ground. Therefore, when they wanted to launch it, they pulled the roots and the canoe came apart. *Tiola* told them to put logs (*langono*) underneath and build the canoe on top of the logs. They rebuilt the canoe and sewed it together again and carried it down to the sea. They asked 'What should we put in the boat?' *Tiola* said 'My statue will be the one

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Corresponding author: Peter J. Sheppard p.sheppard@auckland.ac.nz

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