

# From Field to Museum Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence

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Specht, Jim, Val Attenbrow, and Jim Allen. 2021. Preface .....	1
Neall, Vincent, Lucy McGee, Michael Turner, Tanya O'Neill, Anke Zernack, and J. Stephen Athens. 2021. Geochemical fingerprinting of Holocene tephra in the Willaumez Isthmus District of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea .....	5
Pengilley, Alana. 2021. Geochemistry and sources of stone tools in south-west New Britain, Papua New Guinea .....	25
Shaw, Ben, and Simon Coxe. 2021. Cannibalism and developments to socio-political systems from 540 BP in the Massim Islands of south-east Papua New Guinea .....	47
Ford, Anne, Vincent Kewibu, and Kenneth Miamba. 2021. Avanata: a possible Late Lapita site on Fergusson Island, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea .....	61
Hogg, Nicholas W. S., Glenn R. Summerhayes, and Yi-lin Elaine Chen. 2021. Moving on or settling down? Studying the nature of mobility through Lapita pottery from the Anir Islands, Papua New Guinea .....	71
Lentfer, Carol J., Alison Crowther, and Roger C. Green. 2021. The question of Early Lapita settlements in Remote Oceania and reliance on horticulture revisited: new evidence from plant microfossil studies at Reef/Santa Cruz, south-east Solomon Islands .....	87
Rath, Pip, and Nina Kononenko. 2021. Negotiating social identity through material practices with stone .....	107
Dickinson, Paul. 2021. Narrow margins: standardised manufacturing of obsidian stemmed tools as evidence for craft specialisation and social networks in mid-Holocene New Britain .....	119
Reepmeyer, Christian. 2021. Modelling prehistoric social interaction in the south-western Pacific: a view from the obsidian sources in northern Vanuatu .....	137
Barton, Huw. 2021. The cylindrical stone adzes of Borneo .....	149
Davies, Susan M., and Michael Quinnell. 2021. Up close and personal: James Edge- Partington in Australia in 1897 .....	169
Lilje, Erna, and Jude Philp. 2021. The dancing trees: objects, facts and ideas in museums .....	183
Rhoads, James W. 2021. Papuan Gulf spirit boards and detecting social boundaries: a preliminary investigation .....	195
Bonshek, Elizabeth. 2021. The Longgu community time capsule: contemporary collecting in Solomon Islands for the Australian Museum .....	219
Sheppard, Peter J. 2021. <i>Tomoko</i> : raiding canoes of the western Solomon Islands .....	231
Richards, Rhys, and Peter J. Matthews. 2021. Barkcloth from the Solomon Islands in the George Brown Collection .....	245

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## Tomoko: Raiding Canoes of the Western Solomon Islands

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**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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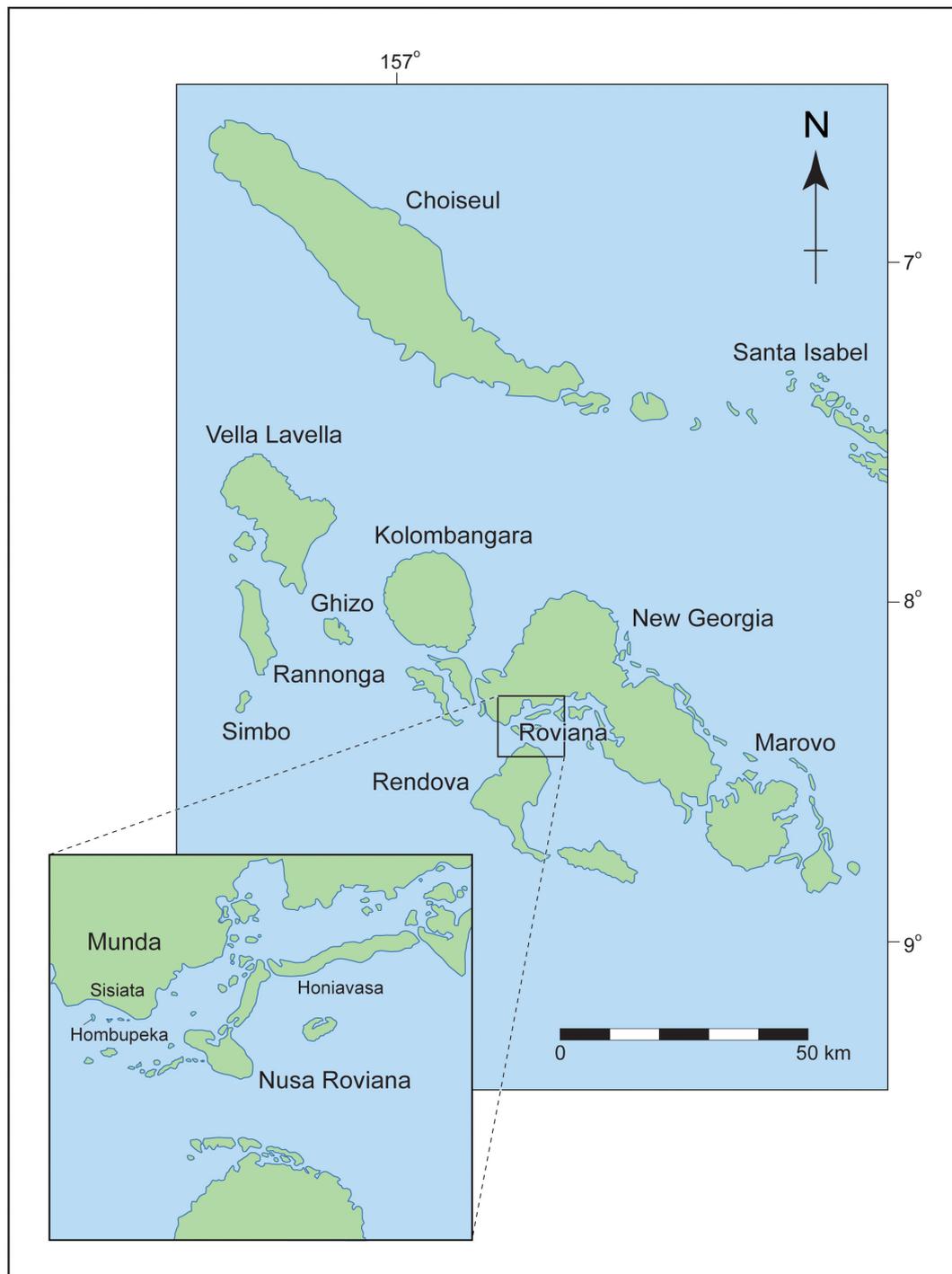


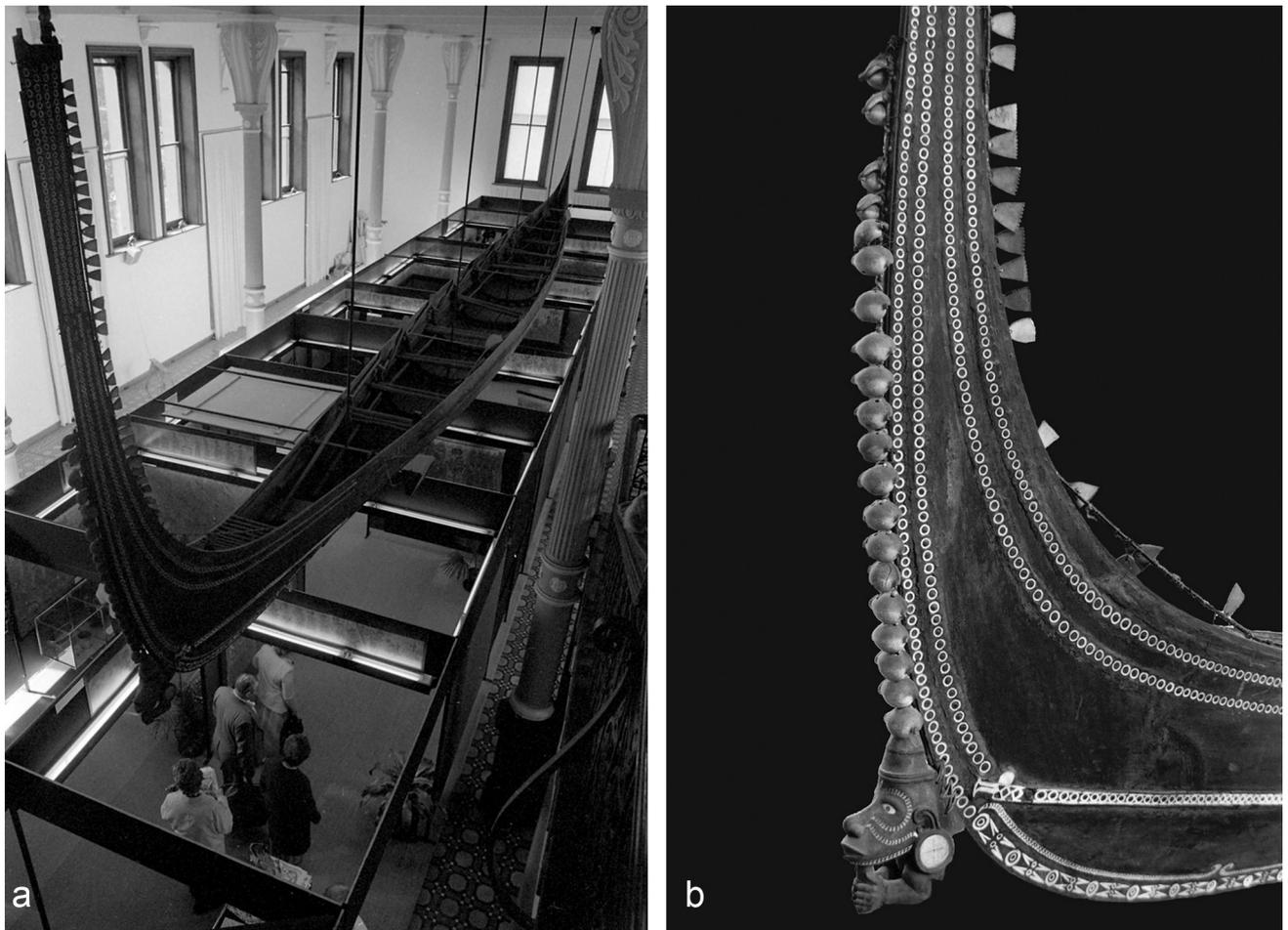
Figure 1. Map of the Western Solomon Islands.

in front (*nguzunguzu*).’ So, the people made a carving of *Tiola*’s head and hands and put it on the front of the canoe. (Silas Oka video interview Patmos (Ndora Island, Roviana Lagoon) Sept. 1997; translated from Roviana by Kenneth Roga) (see also Aswani, 1999).

The vision of a Roviana raiding canoe or *tomoko* as the body of a dog is apt given the upraised sweeping ‘tail’ at the stern of the canoe, the ribs holding planks, rather than dugout construction, and the carving of a dog-like prognathous head (*nguzunguzu*) placed just above the water line at the prow (Hviding, 2014). This plan of a plank-built canoe with upraised stern and prow is common in the western and northern Solomons and there is no reason to think the design originated in Roviana, however, the *nguzunguzu* decoration is characteristic of Roviana and the New Georgia group.

Europeans visiting the Western Solomons in the 19th century were struck by the technical virtuosity and beauty of these elegant canoes and that, plus their association with head-hunting and raiding, undoubtedly made them attractive to the museums of the world. Soon after the establishment of the British colonial government in 1893, and at a time when the colonial authorities were seizing and destroying canoes in an effort to end head-hunting, traders and administrators facilitated the movement of many canoes to Australian and European museums (e.g., the Australian Museum, The National Museum of Victoria, the British Museum, the Vatican Museum).

The canoe held in the Australian Museum (E23373) (Fig. 2a,b) was built sometime before 1910, and was acquired by Harry Wickham, son of Frank Wickham, a trader who



**Figure 2.** (a) Roviana tomoko held in the Australian Museum collection (E23373); (b) prow of the canoe showing *nguzunguzu* figure. Photo G. C. Clutton. Courtesy of Australian Museum Archives AMS391/M1289\_19.

had lived in Roviana Lagoon since 1881. In 1915 Wickham transported the canoe to Sydney where it was eventually donated to the Australian Museum. The appearance of the canoe in Sydney attracted much attention and was reported in many local papers. Upon its arrival in Sydney Harbour, on the 21st of July 1915, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had been reporting for many decades what it described as ‘outrages of the Roviana head-hunters’, made much of that connection:

A war canoe, nearly 80 ft long, and with a towering prow, was brought to Sydney yesterday by the steamer *Kulambangra*, from the Solomon Islands. As the gift, per Mr. W. T. Crick, of Mr. Harry Wickham, a planter in the Islands and the brother of Mr. A. Wickham the well-known swimmer, to the Australia Day Fund. It will shortly be either raffled or sold at auction, and it is expected that as much as 1000 guineas will probably be bid for its possession. The body of the great canoe, which will hold 28 men and which has actually taken part in various raiding expeditions, is hewn out of a single piece of timber, but the bow, with its grotesque war-god carved underneath the soaring and shell-bedizened prow, is joined on separately, and is inlaid with three rows of mother-of-pearl. Each stage of the building of this canoe was celebrated by feast and sacrifice. The canoe is at present at the Museum in College Street, where it will be on view for some days before being disposed of on behalf of the Australia Day Fund. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1915a).

The *Sydney Sun* of July 18th, 1915 printed a picture of this canoe while The *Daily Telegraph* of 31st July reported as follows:

#### HEAD HUNTERS’ CANOE

A Solomon Island head-hunting canoe has been presented to the Australia Day Fund by Mr. H. Wickham, of Hobepeka, Roviana Lagoon, New Georgia, British Solomon Islands. The canoe is 46ft. long, with a beam of nearly 4ft. The elevated bow and stern pieces are 10ft. high. The former is decorated with white egg cowry shell, whilst the hull is inlaid with mother of pearl shell. Mr. W. T. Crick, who is trustee of the canoe on behalf of the Australia Day Fund, has agreed to donate the canoe to the trustees of the Australian Museum, Sydney, if £1000 is raised for the fund. Subscriptions, endorsed Canoe Fund, Australia Day, should be sent to Mr. R. Etheridge of the Australian Museum, or to the Australia Day Committee. The canoe is on view at the Museum (*Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 1915).

Additional reporting in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of July 31st stated that: ‘It is reported that there is a move afoot to purchase the canoe and send it out of the country’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1915b). The money raised was apparently to be donated to the Red Cross for the Wounded Fund, referring to support for wounded WWI soldiers (*Sydney Sunday Times*, 1915), and as part of the very first Australia Day celebrated on 30th July 1915. How much was donated through a box at the museum, or directly, is unreported. However, the canoe appears to have remained where it was first displayed. In 1921 Mr William Thorpe described the canoe in the *Australian Museum Magazine* upon its display, after some logistical effort, in the galleries as ‘... a thing of both beauty and intricate construction.’ (Thorpe, 1921).

It is not clear why Harry Wickham sent the canoe to Sydney. He had attended school in Sydney. As well, together



**Figure 3.** Hingava's canoe house at Sisieta Munda, Roviana Lagoon. British Museum Oc, B75.1. Photo Charles Woodford 1887(?). Courtesy of the © Trustees of the British Museum.

with his brother Alec, a renowned swimmer, Harry is credited with introducing the Australian crawl (a.k.a. 'freestyle') to Australia from Roviana. Alec had at that time been a Sydney resident for 15 years and his father Frank had moved to Sydney after selling his Solomon holdings in 1908. Harry Wickham was raised in part by the Roviana chief H(I) ingava (Osmond, 2013), who was a close friend of Frank Wickham, living at his trading station on the small island of Hombupeka, just offshore from the hamlet of Sisieta. Hingava had two large canoe houses at Sisieta, in modern Munda (Fig. 3). A photograph taken by John Thurston, High Commissioner of the Western Pacific, on a visit to Munda in 1894, shows a large *tomoko* (Fig. 4) very probably owned by Hingava, offshore at Sisieta. Hingava died in 1907 (Edge-Partington, 1907) and the canoe photographed by Thurston may be the same one donated by Wickham, although it is also reported to have been built for Harry Wickham (Thorpe, 1921) in 1912 and used in races associated with the Methodist church in Munda (Mitchell, 2015). If it is not the same canoe, then the canoe in the Thurston photo is from a very similar provenance.

The estimated value of £1000 for raffle or sale of the canoe, was a considerable sum with a purchasing power of over \$100,000 in today's Australian currency (Hutchinson and Ploeckl, 2020). Such a high value reflected the dramatic presence and technical artistry of the canoe.

In the Western Solomons it was the single most economically valuable item possessed by chiefs and their people, and technically the most complicated. It was also central to the politico-religious complex which underlay head-hunting and formed the cultural focus of the societies

of the region. As such it played a pivotal role, both in the expansion of the head-hunting complex in the 19th century and the struggle between chiefs and settler colonialism wishing to create an environment more receptive to western capitalism. The donation of such a canoe by the son of Australian trader Frank Wickham and a Solomon Island mother, Ameriga, from Buin in Bougainville (Osmond, 2013), symbolises the development of this new colonial Solomon Island identity.

### Solomon Island Canoes

In the sheltered lagoons and short passages between islands in the Solomon Islands, paddle canoes are efficient means of travel and are the most common form of water transport. Haddon and Hornell, in their wonderful study of *Canoes of Oceania* (Haddon and Hornell, 1936), note only a few small outrigger canoes made by various groups in the main Solomon Islands. Nowhere do we find large sea-going outrigger sailing canoes built on dugouts such as found in the Polynesian Outliers, or to the north and west in New Guinea. Throughout the Solomons, large paddle canoes are commonly used for inter-island trade and raiding, while many smaller canoes are used for fishing or local transport. The large canoes are plank-built and follow a similar general design throughout the Solomons, with variation in details such as the height of the peaks at the bow and stern and in the presence of washboards. All would appear to have had some form of a keel as a specially designed plank or set of planks onto which plank strakes were attached. Haddon and Hornell (1936 vol. 2: fig. 56) describe four types of plank-built canoes characteristic of different regions along the



**Figure 4.** Roviana *tomoko* at Sisieta Munda, Roviana Lagoon. Photo John Thurston 1894 (Amherst and Thomson, 1901: 566).

Solomon chain. Their type 1 *mon* canoe is found throughout the Western and Northern Solomons.

The typical *mon* is a plank-built canoe of which the edges of the topstrakes are continued in an uprising curve to form a peak of variable height at each end of the canoe (figs. 66, 70). This type is characteristic of the central islands: New Georgia, Mandegesu [Simbo], Ganongga [Ranongga], Vekevekela [Vella Lavella] and Choiseul. It extends to a gradually decreasing degree as far north as Nissan and is also found in Northwest Ysabel [Santa Isabel] and to some extent in Florida [Ngella] (Haddon and Hornell, 1936 vol 2: 82, names in square brackets added).

In their figure 56 Haddon and Hornell extend the distribution of this *mon* form into the Shortland Islands, Bougainville and Buka, and report its presence in the Bismarck Archipelago as having a limited southerly distribution: ‘The *mon* of south New Ireland occurs in small numbers from Lamassa at the southwest end to the whole of the Kandass district, in the Duke of York Islands and is found sporadically in neighboring [*sic*] areas’ (Haddon and Hornell, 1936 vol 2: 123). They cite Powell (1884) as to the opinion that the natives must have learnt the art of building them from the Solomon Islanders. This distribution of the *mon* form follows closely the distribution of the Northwest Solomonic language family (Ross, 1988), which today divides the Western and Northern Solomons from the Southeast Solomons between Isabel and Malaita. This division is also seen in modern human DNA evidence which maps onto this linguistic pattern (Pugach *et al.*, 2018). A similar pattern is seen in the archaeological evidence with a distinctive Late

Lapita age (c. 2600 cal. BP) ceramic tradition found from New Ireland south through the Western Solomons where it ends on Santa Isabel (Sheppard and Walter, 2006; Sheppard and Walter, 2009; Walter and Sheppard, 2017; Garling, 2007). It is possible that the plank-built canoe tradition spread throughout the Solomons in the late-Holocene where it subsequently diversified over time. It was certainly present by 1568 AD, the time of the Spanish exploration of the Solomon Islands under Alvaro de Mendaña. At Estrella Bay, on the northeast coast of Santa Isabel where the Spanish expedition first landed, they had several encounters with crescent-shaped canoes which the people called *mola*, meaning in Roviana a built canoe as opposed to a dugout (Waterhouse, 1949: 75).

Their canoes are very well made and very light; they are shaped like a crescent, the largest holding about thirty persons. They are so swift that although our ships under sail started two leagues ahead of them, with a good wind and all sails set they caught us up within the hour. Their speed in rowing is marvelous; they row in the fashion of the people of Cartagena (Amherst and Thomson, 1901: 109).

As soon as the natives saw us a great many canoes began to come off. They were long, and pointed at the ends in the shape of a crescent moon, and full of Indians equipped for war, with their bows and arrows and clubs and lances of palm (Amherst and Thomson, 1901: 227).

Within the *mon* category, there is considerable variation in decoration and it is the subgroup characteristic of the New Georgia Group (New Georgia, Rendova, Simbo, Rannonga, Ghizo, Kolombangara, Vella Lavella, Vangunu) which is

the most highly decorated and carries various forms of the *nguzunguzu* (Roviana) figurine at the water line on the bow (Fig. 2b). While surveying New Georgia on board HMS *Penguin* in 1893–1894, Lieutenant Somerville was the first to describe these canoes in detail:

The canoes of New Georgia are built, as in the rest of the Solomon Islands, on the Malay model, with high prow and stern post. Nothing can exceed the beauty of their lines, and carefulness of build—considering the means at disposal—or their swiftness when properly propelled. They are a most astonishing revelation of scientific art in a people little removed from complete savagery. These graceful boats are of all sizes, from that of the one-man, of 8 feet long, to the great war canoe, or *tomako* [sic], of 40 to 50 feet, which will hold perhaps thirty-five men. Whatever the size, they are all built on the same lines, and in the same manner (Somerville, 1897: 369).

Somerville described in detail the decoration of the canoes and especially the distinctive figurine mounted at the bow.

The function of this *Totoishu* [Marovo] is to keep off the *Késoko*, or water fiends, which might otherwise cause the winds and waves to upset the canoe, so that they might fall on and devour its crew. This figure (*Totoishu*) has a more or less human face, of malevolent, and extremely prognathous countenance; the nose and chin being almost at a right angle to the curious pointed head, the chin resting on his two closed fists (Somerville, 1897: 371, square bracket added).

The anthropomorphic dog-like head is characteristic of the large raiding canoes of the New Georgia Group. Known as *toto ishu* in Marovo Lagoon, *nguzunguzu* in Roviana and *nujunuju* in Vella Lavella, these figurines are found on canoes constructed by all the language groups in the region including the non-Austronesian speakers of Vella Lavella and Rendova. In Vella Lavella the entire cultural complex associated with head-hunting was adopted directly from their Austronesian neighbours (Sheppard *et al.*, 2010). I have argued (Sheppard, 2019) that the head-hunting complex spread throughout the New Georgia group sometime after 1600 AD, when the Nusa Roviana hillfort was constructed, and the shrines associated with late-period Roviana appear. Such shrines were constructed in the last several hundred years in Vella Lavella and head-hunting seems to have primarily impacted islands outside the New Georgia Group (e.g., Choiseul and Santa Isabel) in the 19th century, when it intensified under the effects of access to European weapons and the desire to obtain commodities such as turtle shell used in European trade, that was abundant in the straits between Choiseul and Isabel. However, in 1768 Bougainville reported seeing a canoe in Choiseul Bay bearing a *nguzunguzu*, although the canoe might have crossed from Vella Lavella (Forster, 2000: 319).

### Manufacture

The first detailed account of *tomoko* manufacture is provided by Somerville:

The planks are planed down to about half an inch in thickness or even less, but leaving in the centre of each a strengthening rib, which projects about three-quarters of an inch along the whole length. The two corresponding planks of opposite sides of the future canoe are placed together and bent between posts struck into the ground at the necessary curve, and when each pair of planks has thus received its proper bend, the whole boat is stitched together with a three-plait of coconut fibre, or of some bush material, through holes bored about 2 inches apart, along

the sides of the planks. The seam is then caulked with a white sticky substance (*Tita*, obtained from the egg-shaped fruit of the *Parinaria Laurinum* [sic]) by rubbing its surface with a rough piece of stone. This substance, at first white and sticky, becomes when dry, black, and nearly as solid as pitch, and makes the boat watertight. It must be kept under shelter from rain during the hardening process, which takes from a week to ten days, according to weather. The shape of the boat is preserved by half a dozen strong ribs, each cut from a single piece of wood, the central one being much stronger than the remainder. At the places where the ribs are to be secured, the mid rib of the planks is left much thicker for a few inches, and, by means of a stout cane lashing, passing round the rib and through two holes in this extra piece, the sides of the boat are kept together. (Somerville, 1897: 369–370).

Charles Woodford, the first Resident Commissioner of the Solomon Islands Protectorate (Woodford, 1909), provides essentially the same description although he reports: ‘The planks, after being roughly adzed out, are lashed tightly together, the corresponding planks from each side of the future canoe, outsides together, and placed in the canoe houses to season before being finally assembled’ (Woodford, 1909: 509–510). This would allow the wood to bend and cure to shape. Recent descriptions of canoe construction and decoration are provided by Edvard Hviding (2014) based on interviews with elders in Marovo Lagoon at the eastern end of New Georgia, and Shankar Aswani (1999) based on interviews with elders in Roviana (see also Officer, 2012[1901]). Hviding (2014: 106) notes that the tall, straight growing lightweight wood of the *toba* tree was favoured for the planks of the canoe and that although somewhat brittle when dry, *toba* wood is durable and also easy to bend. The same wood was used in Roviana and called *tobo* (Waterhouse, 1949: 184). The planks of the Australian Museum canoe are probably of this wood. A variety of other woods, chosen for their mechanical properties, are used for other parts of the canoe and are described by Hviding (2014) and Aswani (1999).

Early writers describing the construction of these canoes marvelled at the ability of the New Georgia people to create such fine woodwork with ‘stone-age tools’ of stone and shell. Woodford (1909: 508) comments: ‘It is difficult to understand how the natives were able, before they became acquainted with iron tools, to adze down the canoe planks to the requisite degree of thinness and shape them with the aid only of stone implements’, although he also reports that: ‘For boring the holes the natives make use of a pump drill, tipped with a flake of chalcedony, and they appear to adhere to this primitive tool in preference even to an ordinary awl or gimlet’ (Woodford, 1909: 509). It is generally assumed that the appearance of iron tools in the 19th century greatly increased the efficiency of economic activity in the Pacific. Hviding (2014: 105, 108) suggests local traditions indicate it would take five to six years or more to make a war canoe using stone and shell technology, and that the appearance of metal tools sped up the production of canoes and intensified head-hunting. Somerville (1897: 371) reported it took two years in 1893, while Woodford reported it took 18 months to have a 24-foot scale model built.

Even though people built high-quality *tomoko* before the arrival of metal, one widespread assumption was that earlier tools were inefficient. Experimentation in the manufacture and use of stone tools for adzing planks in New Zealand has shown that the cutting edge of stone adzes can be very sharp and maintain their edge with re-sharpening (Turner, 2000). In the hands of a skilled craftsman who knows how to

haft and re-sharpen a stone adze head, it seems there is little improvement in cutting efficiency with metal. What metal does allow is much easier hafting, reuse and sharpening, perhaps reducing the expertise needed in these tasks? The skill in canoe manufacture would appear to have always been in the design, layout and execution of cutting. What tools were used before the introduction of metal is unknown, as by Somerville's time he was unable to procure any stone tools other than the chert pump drill bits that seem to have lasted well into the 20th century. Some stone adze heads have been recovered in Roviana (Felgate, 2003) although the most common discovery in areas such as the surface of the slopes of Nusa Roviana is shell adze or axe heads made from giant clam (*Tridacna* sp.).

The speed and ease of manufacture relates to the economics of canoe production and the greater head-hunting economy. The economy of the New Georgia group made use of a shell money exchange system, which allowed the near commodification of goods and facilitated inter-island trade in food, material culture and services (Aswani and Sheppard, 2003; Sheppard, 2019). The shell rings of varying value used in these exchanges were known in Roviana generically as *poata*, with the highest valued ring, called *bakiha*, made of fossil *Tridacna* shell showing a distinctive yellow stain. These were commonly mounted in fibre supports (*medaka*) and worn around the neck by chiefs and wealthy individuals.

Other *poata* included the often-smaller forms without the yellow stain, known simply as *poata*, and *hokata*, which were narrow arm rings of semi-circular cross-section worn above the elbow, seemingly made of fresh shell (Sheppard and Walter, 2014). A. M. Hocart (MSSa), an anthropologist conducting research in Roviana and Simbo in 1908, provides a table of value and commodity equivalences for the different forms of *poata*. In 1908 a large *bakiha* was worth 15 *hokata* and a large *poata* worth five. A basket of taro could be purchased for one *hokata* and a *tomoko* was valued at one *poata* per rib, with the average canoe seating 30 men having 11–13 ribs and costing 4 *bakiha*. A large *bakiha* might take up to 12.5 days work to manufacture if we use the equivalence of 1500 copra to one *bakiha* and the time required to produce that copra (Bennett, 1985: 87). A large *tomoko* might, therefore, cost the equivalent of 6000 copra, or 50 days of labour. Chiefs (*mbangara*) in Roviana could call upon the labour of ritual and technical specialists in their *mbutubutu* or cognatic corporate group, and increasingly in the 19th century, the labour of captives taken in head-hunting raids, such as shown by the shell ring manufacturer from Choiseul photographed in Nusa Roviana in the late 19th century (British Museum Oc.ca44.61). Again, it is possible that the introduction of metal wire for sawing shell, and quartz sandstone for grinding, may have sped up the process of shell ring production and the financing of *tomoko* construction.

The construction and decoration of the canoe (Waite, 1990; Hviding, 2014) was not a simple commodity transaction but a social event, and an ongoing relationship between the artisans and the chiefs sponsoring construction. As such, it was surrounded by ritual and feasting. Hocart (MSSb) in 1908 reported on the production of a large plank-built bonito fishing canoe in Simbo, based on observation of construction of a model, canoes in progress and discussions with specialist artisans called *tioni roverove*, that is men with an eye for measurement, perhaps equivalent to the Roviana specialist *matazonga*, capable of envisaging and executing designs of houses, canoes, shell valuables and discovering through ritual the location of the fossil shell used in *poata* manufacture (Aswani and Sheppard, 2003: 65; Waterhouse,

1949: 150). Both canoes used in trolling for bonito and in raiding needed to be fast, and both activities were viewed as similar forms of hunting (Hocart, 1935; Barraud, 1972). In the following quotation Hocart notes the making of taro and ngali nut (*Canarium* sp.) puddings for feasts at different stages of canoe construction, as well as the payment of the workers with shell money.

The keel, which is sometimes in two parts, is first prepared. Then the end garboard strakes (*onda*) are stitched on. Then puddings are made. This is the consecrated description of a small feast for which no pig is killed. Then come the middle garboard strakes (*lokuana*); then the end second strakes, after which puddings are made. The middle second strakes are put in next, followed by the end third strakes (*kimo*), then the middle third strakes. Then the ends are given a rest while the fourth strakes and the gunwale strakes are added to the middle part. Then there are puddings.

The caulking either comes in here, or after the large planks which form the raised ends, and are called *kapukapu*, have been added. These raised ends require much skill, and an expert has to be called in in the case of the finer canoes. About half a dozen men were mentioned as being such experts [*tioni roverove*]. The art is not taught, but a man just watches another. These planks are stitched together along the whole of their join. . . . For caulking they put the canoe on a platform. The caulking is a paste obtained from the fruit of the *Tita* tree (probably *Parinarium laurinum* A. Gray) and is itself called *tita*. Puddings are eaten on the day of caulking. The canoe is painted next, and ribs are put in. An ordinary canoe is then complete. The finer ones have to be inlaid. There is often a little prognathous figure at the prow which is familiar in museums. It is called *Aunju?unju*. *Nuzhu* in Roviana means mouth (Hocart, 1935: 98; additional notes on this can be found in Hocart, MSSb).

Both the caulking and provision of shell pieces for inlay decoration generally called for a group effort. As described to Aswani in Roviana, the caulking required preparation of the *tita* paste from seeds and rapid application, inside and out, with men assigned different segments of the canoe. When dry, after three to seven days, the canoe was painted black with paint made of charcoal from the *domu* tree (*Bischofia javanica* Blume) and then varnished with the sap of another plant *lalusu* (Aswani, 1999). The elaborate pearl shell inlay required another large group effort to produce the great number of pieces required for the highly decorated *tomoko*. When describing the decoration of canoes on Nggela or Isabel, Penny reported that:

When a chief had a canoe built, he requisitions his dependants for these prepared pieces—1000 or 2000 per village—which the artist fashions into devices and patterns on the sides of the canoe. I have heard of 50,000 of these pieces being used to inlay one canoe. This entails considerable expense in food and native [shell] money (Penny, 1888: 79–80).

### Head-hunting and Tomoko

The completion of a new canoe or new canoe house (*paele*) required an inauguration through the taking of heads. The canoe needed to be 'wetted' or *vapenja*, which Hocart interpreted as moistening or wetting, presumably with blood. The occasions of *vapenja* are new canoes, new communal houses (*paele*, *njelepande*), new skull-houses, the death of a chief, and the release from confinement of a widow (Hocart, 1931: 303). Each of these events were to be organised and financed by the chief or chiefs resident in the hamlet or hamlets in which lived the *mbutubutu* over which the chief had influence and responsibility.



**Figure 5.** Food preparation trough (*hao*) taken from a canoe house on Nusa Roviana (Vuragare?) on 25 September 1891 by Captain Edward Davis, HMS *Royalist*. British Museum Oc1903,1007.1. Courtesy of the © Trustees of the British Museum.

This new canoe bearing a new name (e.g., *Kiso* shark, *belama hite* little frigate bird (Waterhouse, 1949: 127) could be sent out alone, but most often with a group of canoes belonging to the *mbutumbutu*, each manned by 24 or more men. The object of the raid in the 19th century was to obtain heads, but also captives (*pinausu*) (McDougall, 2000) for sacrifice, or to serve as captive labour, although ultimately such captives were potentially able to marry into and strengthen the *mbutubutu*.

The object of the raid was to enhance the *mana* of chiefs who provided the canoes and financed the activity and in whose canoe house any heads would be displayed, lining the rafters. The political power of the chief, and his efficacy or *mana* (Dureau, 2000), derived from powerful ancestors from whom he descended, was made manifest by success in taking heads and captives. The size of these raids is debated (Lawrence, 2014: 92), with some early commentators talking of hundreds of canoes going out from New Georgia during the calm weather of December and January to raid Isabel and Choiseul. Such very large fleets seem unlikely, however large numbers could well have been assembled. Chiefs called upon chiefs, often relatives, in neighbouring hamlets to join together in raids and provide additional canoes (Hocart, 1931). How many canoes might be found in a small village or Roviana hamlet is unknown. At the time Woodford visited in 1887, Jackson (1978: 96) reports that Sisietia had five *tomoko*, some English-built whaleboats and a ‘large arsenal’. The elders of Pienuna village in Rannonga recalled in 2003 the names of seven canoes from their village in the early 20th century (Richards, 2012: 208). Before the impact of European disease, the population of Roviana was easily more than the 3–4000 estimated by Somerville in 1893 (1897: 359) in the villages visible to him in the open western end of the Lagoon. The coasts of Nusa Roviana are today mostly uninhabited, but the former hamlets recorded by Hocart display the remnants of large stone wharves, probably associated with canoe houses and with a chief in that hamlet or section (Nagaoka, 2011). In one village on Nusa Roviana, Woodford (1888: 360) reported in 1886 five war canoes in the principal canoe house, with the entire male population away on a raid. Adding together the potential number of canoe houses in the western end of the lagoon with those in villages in the Kalikoqu or eastern end of the lagoon, those

in Vonavona Lagoon to the west of Munda and those from the Roviana people in north Rendova, the total number of war canoes is potentially more than 30. Woodford (1888) reported 38 heads brought back from separate raids to five different villages in Roviana during a fortnight, while he visited in 1886. The fleet of 20 canoes and 500 men reported to have been led by Hingava against Santa Isabel during the latter end of Somerville’s (1897: 399) first season in 1893 in New Georgia does not seem impossible. In 1859, the crew of the *Clarence Packet*, upon leaving Rendova Harbour, came upon what may have been a returning raid, or an attempt on the ship, which seems to have included canoes from Nusa Roviana. The report of the visit to Rendova, written by a passenger and published in the Sydney paper, the *Empire* of Dec 26th, 1859 exclaimed:

... we were thunderstruck to see an immense number of canoes (estimated at from 150 to 200), hiding behind these two islands, and when they saw us coming out of the harbor, they began paddling towards us; many of these canoes had from thirty to forty men in each... (Empire, 1859).

The departure and return of the head-hunting canoes were associated with considerable ritual and feasting, designed to ensure the success of the expedition, and celebrate and reward success with both feasts and shell money being given to the warriors by chiefs (Hocart, 1931). In each large canoe house, there appears to have been a large food preparation bowl or trough used in ceremonies associated with head-hunting, possibly the launching of a raid. In 1887, Charles Woodford witnessed at Sisietia part of the inauguration of a 30-foot long bowl (*hao*) in Hingava’s canoe house, where 22 warriors arranged along the sides of the bowl, in full war regalia, rhythmically pounded the taro and ngali nuts to make feasting pudding for half an hour, after being vigorously addressed by Hingava (Woodford, 1888; Edge-Partington, 1903). A very similar trough (Fig. 5) was taken from a canoe house on Nusa Roviana, by Captain Edward Davis of HMS *Royalist* in 1891, before the villages were burnt as part of a punitive raid. This elaborately ornamented trough is decorated at its head with a crocodile swallowing a human head. The ritual pounding sounds like a *tomoko* being paddled with rhythmic strokes by its crew of 22 warriors (see also Waite, 2000: 122; Were, 2019).

Raiding may have been mostly within the New Georgia Group before the 19th century, but by the mid-19th century raiding for heads, as opposed to local revenge attacks (Hocart, 1931), was regularly moving out into neighbouring islands, with raids as far east as the Russell Islands and western Guadalcanal (Bathgate, 1985), a distance of 280 km from Roviana. *Tomoko* were regularly reported outpacing European vessels, with top speeds up to ten knots and speeds of six knots maintained for long periods without rest (Officer, 2012[1901]; Somerville, 1897). Regular raids took place into Choiseul and Santa Isabel where the collection of hawksbill turtle shell in the Arnavon Straits for European trade was combined with head-hunting. This combination allowed chiefs to both acquire *mana* and the means to engage with European traders, using the most highly valued commodity available, through chiefly sponsored activity (Sheppard, 2019). By the time Woodford sailed along the coasts of Choiseul and Santa Isabel in 1887, the coast appeared abandoned with populations having moved to the interior or to the east or west, away from the activities of the head-hunters (Woodford, 1922). This time in Santa Isabel was known as the time of flight when entire villages were destroyed and often there were not enough people left living to bury the dead (White, 1991).

### Tomoko and Western Trade

They were there before the missionaries came and it was not because of the missionaries that head-hunting stopped. It was the time when the *Pagan* [possibly HMS *Penguin* 1894] returned with Mi Gereka looking for those who still went out head-hunting. They went to Malaita and took Kamkamea and forty other Malaitans. They carried guns and when they came to Batuna just inside Marovo Lagoon they were lowered down to a small rowboat. Then Kamkamea started to order the people in the village, telling them that head-hunting must stop. (Silas Oka video interview Patmos (Ndora Island, Roviana Lagoon) Sept. 1997; translated from Roviana by Kenneth Roga).

In the mid to late 19th century, a number of traders established stations under the patronage of Roviana chiefs on the small islands in front of modern Munda, making the region the centre of European trade in the Western Solomons. In the decades before the establishment of the Protectorate in 1893, traders complained regularly through the Sydney papers about attacks on their stations and assistants by what they described as cannibal head-hunters. They requested that the British Navy do something to make trade safe and profitable. A regular request was for the destruction of the *tomoko*, which seems to have been general British navy policy, but of little effect as the navy was reluctant to pursue canoes hidden in the lagoons and bush.

In the Sydney Morning Herald, of 29th March 1889, Mr. Peter Pratt [Edmunds] a French trader with a station on Hombuhombu Island opposite Munda listed a series of 'outrages' committed against him and others in the Roviana region and demanded stronger action.

Sir, it is the opinion of all the traders right throughout the group that an example ought to be shown these natives, especially around this part of the group [New Georgia Group] where the inactivity of H.M. ships is very keenly felt. The cutting of their fruit trees or destroying their canoes, which was done in all the aforementioned cases does not seem to affect them in the least. (Edmunds, 1889).

The outcome of this letter, and additional attacks, was a raid on Roviana on Sept. 25th 1891 led by Captain Edward Davis of HMS *Royalist*. The goal was ostensibly

to find the men guilty of the murder of Mr. Pratt's assistant William Dabelle, but in effect was an attempt to destroy the base of the Roviana people at Nusa Roviana by destroying canoes, canoe houses and shrines. This was accomplished by burning all the villages on Nusa Roviana, and along the Munda coast up to Sisieta where they left Hingava's canoe houses intact as he was their main interlocutor in Roviana. Although great destruction was wrought on the thousands of people who lived in the region, Davis did not find it a complete success. In total, Davis reported they had destroyed 400 houses, 150 canoes and a thousand heads. This would have included many large canoe houses, containing the skulls of head-hunting victims and ancestral skull shrines as well as residences:

In one house I found twenty-four heads ranged along one side, but it was too dark to see the rest of the house. In Goolie's house, the Chief who murdered Dabelle, I found several guns, spears &c and from ten to fifteen heads. ... Suspecting punishment, the natives had removed their large war canoes before my arrival, and I regret I was unable to destroy them, as these boats, used on their head-hunting expeditions, are primarily the cause of most of the trouble at this end of the group ... this severe punishment will not be lost on the noted Rubiana head-hunters, who for many years have considered themselves perfectly safe in their strongholds (Davis, 1892: 21).

One of the items looted from Nusa Roviana, probably from a canoe house in the Vuragare section of the island where the killers of Dabelle had been living, is the ritual food trough shown in Fig. 5, donated to the British Museum by Rear Admiral Lord Charles Scott, then Commander in Chief of the Australian Station of the British Navy.

During the cruise of 1891 Captain Davis led many raids where canoes were targeted and destroyed, and regularly shelled canoe houses and canoes on the beaches of the New Georgia Group (Davis, 1892). The ultimate effect was limited, however, as within a few years Hingava was reported leading a large fleet of canoes against Santa Isabel (Somerville, 1897: 399). In 1893 the British Protectorate was formed and in 1896 Charles Woodford took up his post as the first Resident Commissioner. One of his earliest acts was the establishment of a government station at Ghizo where the primary goal was the suppression of head-hunting and the seizure and destruction of *tomoko*.

After his earlier tour of the Solomons as a naturalist, Woodford had recommended that efforts should be made to end head-hunting, including by destruction of canoes (Lawrence, 2014: 97). In 1900 he appointed Arthur Mahaffy Resident Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner at Ghizo. As described by Silas Oka above, Mahaffy created an armed police force of 25 men from Malaita, Savo and Santa Isabel which aggressively raided throughout the Group seizing and destroying canoes. One of these canoes, *Mbatu-mbatu* from Rannonga, was ultimately sent to the National Museum of Victoria (Richards, 2012: 207). Another canoe seized in 1910 from the Kalikogu or inner lagoon side east of Nusa Roviana, probably from the old village at the western end of Honiavasa Island, was regularly used, as described by Silas Oka, to patrol throughout the Group, including into the shallow lagoons where previously the *tomoko* were hidden. The effect of this close policing, as well as depopulation through European diseases and the benefits of the European copra trade—which could be carried out without the intervention of chiefs—was the end of head-hunting and the decline in the power of chiefs (Sheppard, 2019). In Ghizo, on 27 July 1901, Mahaffy held a great feast to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII and the end of head-hunting. The celebration



**Figure 6.** Canoes at Mbilua, Vella Lavella in 1921 as part of a re-enactment of a head-hunting raid filmed by E. Salisbury and M. Cooper (Nicholson, 1924: 48).

was attended by 1,892 people from throughout the Group. Mahaffy wrote that it was a ‘picturesque sight to see the great canoes all decorated with streamers and each with its full complement of men, coming up the [Ghizo] harbour at full speed’ (O’Brien, 2011: 204). The canoes had now taken on their central role in 20th-century colonial celebrations.

### Tomoko in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, *tomoko* were regularly incorporated into both government and mission celebrations. The Australian Museum canoe was used in 1912 in races to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Methodist Mission at Munda which had been established in 1902. Visitors in 1902 reported Hingava’s canoe house empty but saw many small canoes including small *tomoko* in construction as well as shell money in manufacture (Western Grazier, 1902). Manufacture of *tomoko* probably declined rapidly with the ending of the raiding for which they were designed, as they required considerable skill in manufacture and regular maintenance. They rapidly became leaky and needed to be stored in elaborate canoe houses which themselves were associated with head-hunting and chiefly *mana*. As an informant told Hocart in 1908 ‘now chiefs hem stop nothing’. The power of traditional chiefs had diminished significantly and was now more likely to be associated with connections to the church. One, perhaps final construction of a traditional *tomoko* was by the people of Mbilua Vella Lavella in 1910, who, encouraged by a junior colonial officer at Ghizo, R. Broadhurst-Hill, built the 11.3 m *tomoko* now held by the British Museum (Hviding, 2014: 113, Hess *et al.*, 2009).

One of the most widely publicised events displaying *tomoko* was the filming of a fleet of war canoes at Mbilua in south Vella Lavella in 1921 (Fig. 6). As part of a tour by yacht around the world, the entrepreneur Edward Salisbury, working with the cinema photographer Merian Cooper (of *King Kong* 1933 fame), wanted to film Solomon Island ‘head-hunters’ and use the footage in the production of a series of movies. Working with Rev. Reginald Nicholson, the Methodist missionary at Mbilua, a re-enactment of a raid was carried out with *circa* nine large, aging *tomoko* recruited from

Vella Lavella and Rannonga. The resulting footage was used in the production of the films *Black Shadows of the South Seas* [1923] and *Gow the Head Hunter* [1928] (Lindstrom, 2016). Several publications featuring still photographs of the canoes were also made (Salisbury, 1922; Salisbury and Cooper, 1924). Nicholson had agreed to assist with the project if in turn Salisbury would donate copies of the footage to the Methodist Society, to be used in fund-raising. Salisbury did not keep the bargain and as a result Nicholson went to Los Angeles and pursued his case in the courts, finally obtaining the footage (Roberts, 2004). The result of this was the production of the film, *The Transformed Isle* (Nicholson, 1921(?)), which contrasted the violent head-hunting past with the peaceful Christian present. The one-hour long silent film was shown widely through Australia and New Zealand. It is now available on-line through the New Zealand Nga Taonga Film and Sound archive and includes footage of *tomoko* at sea as well as a sequence of shell money production in Malaita.

Throughout the 20th century, the photogenic *tomoko* became an important symbol of the Western Province and the Solomon Islands, appearing on stamps, starting in 1939, and on banknotes and coins, including the *nguzunguzu* on the one-dollar coin today. The *nguzunguzu* became a major subject for the creation of wood carvings in the Western Solomons, supplying the growing tourist market for the late 19th century. Today it can be found filling the shelves of Honiara souvenir shops. The canoes themselves have generally become simplified in construction as the skill and time required to manufacture and assemble the thin planks and procure the material for ribs has diminished.

At some point, the canoes commonly used in celebrations became embellished dugouts. With the advent of mechanised commercial logging, large logs from the interior forests could be more easily acquired. Recently in Roviana agreements with logging companies have included the felling and transport of logs suitable for large dugouts down to work areas near the coast, where these vessels were produced using chain saws and metal adzes.

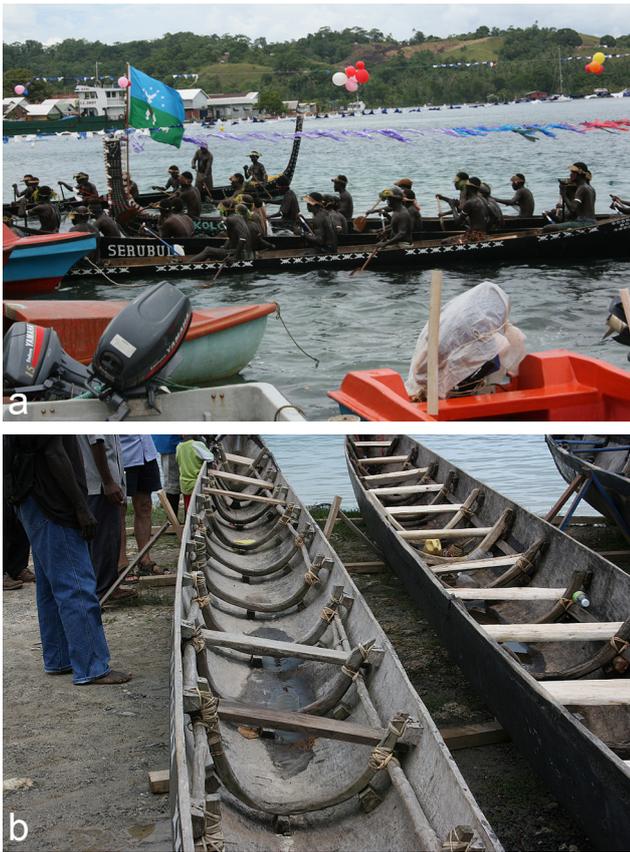
Canoes with raised prow and stern, and decorated as *tomoko*, were regularly used for celebrations during the colonial period. In March 1959, a fleet of *tomoko* from



**Figure 7.** (a) Canoe construction at Moli, Choiseul in 1958. (b) Sewn canoe at prow, Choiseul. Photo Harold Scheffler 1959. Harold Scheffler Papers, MSS 481. With the courtesy of © Jan Simpson and Special Collections & Archives, University of California, San Diego.

throughout the Western Solomons and Choiseul were photographed in Ghizo harbour (<https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/collection/bb08204951>) by the anthropologist Harold Scheffler, where they had assembled to greet Prince Philip aboard the royal yacht *Britannia*. In 1958 Scheffler had photographed the construction of plank-built canoes at

Moli in southwest Choiseul (Fig. 7a,b) and he may have accompanied them to Ghizo for the celebration. A newsreel film of the Prince being transported to shore in a large *tomoko* called *Kaliva*, in which a throne had been constructed, can be viewed on-line (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=iZnSVAIcuv5>).



**Figure 8.** (a) CFC *Tomoko* arriving for a Western Province festival at Ghizo on 7 December 2007; (b) details of the interior of the CFC canoes. Photos: P. J. Sheppard.

In 1968, it was decided to start an Annual Festival of the Solomon Seas to promote interest and pride in the arts of seamanship and in the traditional customs of the seagoing peoples of the Solomon Islands (Pacific Islands Monthly, 1968). Therefore, on Easter Monday 1968 an inaugural event was held in Honiara at which three war canoes participated, including one from Roviana. This canoe, *New Life*, which won the race, was criticised for not being a ‘real’ *tomoko* but rather a smaller *gopu* or trading canoe, possibly an embellished dugout. Because of the interest it raised, it was reported that Roviana villages were keen to build two real *tomoko* under the guidance of the last man with the requisite knowledge, 70-year-old Opero Sasabule. It is not clear if this attempt at revitalisation was successful. In August of the same year, a 16 m canoe from the Western Solomons called SDA was delivered to the Seventh Day Adventists

South Sea Islands Museum in Cooranbong in NSW Australia (Wikipedia, 2019). Presumably, decorated dugouts were increasingly used in races and displays throughout the colonial period and after the establishment of the independent Solomon Islands in 1978 (Hviding, 2014). It was not until 2004 that the next major attempt at revitalisation occurred under the auspices of the Christian Fellowship Church.

The Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) was established as a breakaway from of the Methodist Church in the 1950s by Silas Eto (Tuza, 1977). The leadership of what is now a very successful church in New Georgia passed to his son Reverend Sir Ikan Rove in 1984. In 2004 the CFC decided to stage its own 100th Anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Methodist Church at Munda (actually in 1902) and Sir Rove requested that every CFC village in New Georgia that was able, should build a *tomoko* to create a fleet for racing and display (Hviding, 2014). The result was a fleet of 15 canoes assembled at Madou village in Vonavona Lagoon west of Munda in June 2004 (Fig. 8a). These were, in fact, large dugouts with a few upper strakes sewn on and with prow and stern posts and traditional decorations including *nguzunguzu* (Fig. 8b). The very active commercial logging on CFC land in Roviana and north New Georgia at the time would have facilitated this activity. The fleet, which toured throughout the Group and was active in provincial celebrations in later years, demonstrated the success and power of the CFC and their spiritual leader in the Western Province and the Solomons more generally.

The *tomoko* remains a powerful symbol for people in the Western Solomons and the country, even though many, if not most young people have never seen one. There are none curated and displayed in the country today. People from the Western Solomons might see a model of one at a wedding, where it is filled with gifts and food used in exchange, then symbolically attacked and broken by men from the next family to have a wedding. Some large dugout *tomoko* appear to be in operation in the Western Solomons for special events, with one called *Roguana* from Lambu Lambu village in south Vella Lavella recently (2017) photographed transporting a wedding party. Unfortunately, despite there being many plank-built *tomoko* in museums around the world, most, and possibly all except for the *tomoko* in the Vatican Museum, the SDA museum in Cooranbong (NSW) and the National Museum of Victoria, are in storage and not visible to the public or Solomon Islanders, except as part of commendable attempts by museums to make their collections available to the original communities through special visits. Display of these large objects is, of course, difficult and efforts to digitise and make them available online for the people of the Solomon Islands and the world is encouraging (Hess *et al.*, 2009).

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