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SHORTER COMMUNICATION

A SOLOMON ISLAND PLANK-BUILT LASHED-LUG CANOE IN THE CANTERBURY MUSEUM COLLECTION, CHRISTCHURCH

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents an acquisition history of a 7.3 m six-frame canoe from Sasamunga, Choiseul Island, collected by the Canterbury Museum in 1968. Purpose-built for the museum by local craftsmen in 1967–1968, the vessel presents the observer with a wealth of information on the methods and technology of "plank-built lashed-lug" canoe building from the northwestern region of the Solomon Islands. As well as interpreting information supplied by the master builder at the time of procurement, this paper also discusses some of the structural components and patterns of frame and plank attachment that embrace this finely crafted maritime artefact. Apart from documenting the canoe's description and provenance for public record, this paper also suggests a possible method for classifying similar plank-built lashed-lug watercraft found in the region.

Keywords: Austronesian watercraft, Solomon Island canoes, tomoko, plank-built canoes, stitched-plank canoes, sewn boats, lashed-lug frames

This paper forms a work-in-progress report on a plank-built lashed-lug canoe (accession number E173.627) located in the Canterbury Museum collection in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. A final version will be incorporated into a broader study of Austronesian plank-built lashed-lug boats and canoes from several other museum collections in Australia, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, Europe and North America to be published later. It presents what is currently known and acknowledges that a variety of sources have yet to be consulted.

Therefore, while not a complete account, this commentary presents a description of the vessel and a narrative of how, where and why the canoe was built. It also provides a brief outline of the acquisition process and the "voyage" the canoe made from its place of creation to where it now resides in museum storage in Christchurch.

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This report also presents some preliminary observations on the construction methods and techniques used and the materials contained in its build. In lieu of scientific analysis, however, some of the material identifications must be regarded as hypothetical or based on the work of others.

In addition, a possible method for identifying and classifying similar bespoke plank-built lashed-lug canoes from the region is offered. It follows a similar logic that allowed Haddon and Hornell to propose the "five-part canoe" and Burningham the "seven-part canoe" method for identifying and classifying dugout canoe types (Burningham 1993: 194; Haddon and Hornell 1975, vol. III: 5).

This report, however, does not compare or analyse the similarities or differences of other plank-built lashed-lug canoes found in the Solomon Islands, or canoes, boats or similar constructed vessels found in Southeast Asia, southern Taiwan or other parts of the world. While this is a very relevant and meaningful conversation to have, it is beyond the scope and purpose of this shorter communication.

For this discussion and subsequent debate in this space, the distinction between canoe and boat is based on how the vessel is propelled and not on the vessel's form or function. While both can be sailed, a canoe is paddled, and a boat is rowed.

CONCEPTION AND COMMISSION

In February 1967, the director of the Canterbury Museum, Roger Duff, and the membership of the Canterbury Museum Trust Board were asked by Rev. E.C. Leadley, of Munda, New Georgia, in the Western Province of Solomon Islands, if the museum would "take up a lapsed commission from a United States Museum to have a tomoko [war canoe] of traditional style" built for the Canterbury Museum's collection (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 125).

Within a month the museum agreed to the terms, and master builder Rev. Job Rotoava of Sasamunga, Choiseul Island, in Choiseul Province was given the NZ$500 commission to build the canoe (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 125). In today's monetary value, this commission would be worth approximately NZ$11,511 (Inflationtool 30 October 2023).

Leadley was clearly a man of influence. An educator, he had been in charge of the Methodist College at Kokenggolo, Munda, New Georgia, from 1934 until his evacuation by boat in January 1942 during World War II (*Courier Mail* 1942). In 1961 he was elected president of the Methodist Church in New Zealand (Moore 2020a) and from 1965 to 1968 was chairman of the Solomon Island District, Australasian Methodist Missionary Society (AMMS) (Moore 2020b).

Leadley was well versed in missionary custom as practised by the AMMS in the Solomon Islands. From its inception in 1902 the AMMS combined an "evangelistic message along with general education and industrial training"

(Moore 2020b). One of the first Methodist missionaries sent to the Solomon Islands was Rev. John Francis Goldie (1870–1955) (Moore 2020c).

Goldie developed a patronage system that exploited the existing chieftain system of leadership in the region to the mission's advantage. By educating the sons of traditional village leaders and training them to become ministers in the church or schoolteachers, they developed a vested and continuing interest in the church, the education system and leadership politics. Many of these early-twentieth-century elites became intergenerational clients and developed into some of the leading families in the Solomon Islands (Moore 2020b).

Rev. Leadley clearly understood the patron–client relationship and the benefits of networking. Having found a new commission in the form of the Canterbury Museum for his church colleague, he maintained a close relationship with both parties throughout the building process and was instrumental in seeing the canoe delivered to the museum in Christchurch.

Builder's notes, possibly a notebook written by Rotoava for Leadley in the Roviana dialect of New Georgia, are said to contain information on the origin and use of tomoko and the canoe-building process (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 127–28). Unfortunately, the Canterbury Museum does not hold this document, and a search of Methodist archives is yet to locate it, if it still exists. What is available, however, is the museum's accession register book, which provides the canoe's registration number, E173.627, together with several pages of handwritten notes (Canterbury Museum 1968a).

There is also an accession file (220/68) containing two photographic slides (numbered 16 and 17), several typed pages of information, some of which has been copied from the register book, and a few pages of miscellaneous handwritten notes. One page of typed notes dated 11 November 1968 (author unknown) is of particular interest as it contains a short description of the canoe's construction and its transportation to the museum (Canterbury Museum 1968b).

The information contained in the typed and handwritten pages most likely came from Rotoava and was translated into English by Leadley. However, it is unclear if any of the documentation was written (typed) by Leadley himself. It is likely they were transcribed by a museum employee after the canoe arrived in Christchurch and became part of the museum's collection.

It appears from the notes in the register book (and a copy in the accession file) that Rotoava's motivation for building the canoe was not just financial reward. He clearly had regrets about the loss of cultural knowledge and building practice in his community:

> The younger generation does not want to think about the work and bother to do it. They only can make dugout canoes, but I (Job) [Rotoava] am a man that loves to do the work, for I think it is a memorial to those who lived long ago and a way to remember them. (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 127)

As a Methodist minister, Rotoava's nostalgia for past cultural skill was not embedded in the ritualised warfare known as headhunting, a violent practice for which war canoes (also known as raiding canoes) were built, but in the skill and craftsmanship that built them. The plank-built canoe required more skill, proficiency and knowledge to build than a dugout canoe.

Two explanations of the tradition and cultural practice of building tomoko in the nineteenth century and their revival in the twentieth century can be found in Hviding (2014) and Sheppard (2021). An earlier work by Waite (1990: 46–48) describes the decorative elements of the Canterbury Museum canoe built by Rotoava and the shell inlay art work attached to the bow and stern.

THE BUILDING OF A WAR CANOE FROM CHOISEUL ISLAND

In March 1967 work began on the construction of a 7.3 m six-lako (frame) war canoe at Sasamunga, a village located on the west coast of Choiseul Island (Fig. 1). According to the handwritten notes in the museum register book, 22 men, plus 4 women providing food, were involved in building the canoe. The work on the canoe was completed in April 1968, having taken 13 months to construct (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 125).

Figure 1. Location map of Choiseul Island in the Solomon Islands showing the village of Sasamunga, where the war canoe was built, together with other place names mentioned in the text.

Tomoko is a Roviana name for a war canoe, but other places in the New Georgia group had other names. In the Marovo Lagoon language area they are known as magoru, and in a Vella Lavella language as niabara (Hviding 2014: 103). Most of the languages spoken in the New Georgia group are languages related to the Austronesian family. However, on Vella Lavella a Papuan or non-Austronesian language is spoken (Obata 2000).

There are eight different languages spoken on Choiseul, all related to the Austronesian language family. The largest is Babatana (Mbambatana), followed by Varisi, Vaghua and Tavula (Craven 2017 (2019): 29). Rev. Job Roviana spoke Babatana and probably one or two of the other languages as well (pp. 54–55).

On Choiseul Island war canoes were known in the Babatana language as mola sisira (p. 55), mola being a generic name for any plank-built canoe (Hviding 2014: 105). Sisira were similar, but smaller than the larger tomoko, magoru and niabara. They carried 10 to 12 men and were built for raiding along the Choiseul coast in order to supply victims for mortuary rituals. They did not carry out raids or venture "over the sea" between islands like the tomoko, magoru and niabara were known to have done (Craven 2017 (2019): 31, 55).

The tomoko in the Australian Museum collection (E23373) in Sydney and the Museums Victoria collection (X8042) in Melbourne are both 14 m long. The Vella Lavella niabara in the British Museum collection (Oc1927,1022.1) in London is 11.3 m long. The very large war canoes of 12–15 m long were said to carry as many as 35 men (Somerville 1897: 369).

Since the information about the canoe was supplied by Rotoava to Leadley in the Roviana language, Leadley used tomoko as the name for the war canoe in his translation for the museum (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 127). As a consequence of this it is possible that the canoe was misidentified at the time of acquisition as a scaled-down version or "model" of a tomoko since it was only 7.3 m long, almost half the length of the largest full-sized tomoko such as those in the Sydney and Melbourne museums. Subsequently the canoe was registered as a model tomoko E173.627 in the Canterbury Museum's acquisition register.

There is, however, a strong possibility that the canoe is not a model tomoko but a Choiseul Island sisira. The reasons for concluding that this might be the case is that the canoe builder, Rotoava, was a Choiseul Islander and the canoe was built on Choiseul Island, not Roviana in the New Georgia group. The Vatican Ethnological Museum Anima Mundi, in Rome, has a traditional full-sized Choiseul Island ceremonial (war) canoe (MV.125490) that is 9.4 m long (Musei Vaticani 2023). The Canterbury Museum canoe and the Vatican Museum canoe are therefore closer in size to each other than either of them are to the larger tomoko canoes in the Sydney and Melbourne museums or the niabara in the British Museum.

Figure 2. A port side view (bow to the left) of *Sareviala* taken from a three-dimensional model acquired using photogrammetry at the Canterbury Museum storage facility at Iron Mountain, Avonhead, June 2022.

Despite being an educated man and a minister of religion in the colonial system, Rotoava would have been bound by the protocols of his own cultural practice and those of his New Georgia neighbours. It is unlikely that he would have had the authority to build such a symbolic item as a war canoe from another's cultural precinct, present it as such and benefit financially from its construction. Further research and discussion with Choiseul Island and Roviana communities will hopefully resolve this question in the future.

In about 1905 Charles Woodford had a 7.3 m half-scale model of a tomoko built to order for Mr F.J. Wooton Isaacson. According to Woodford this was deposited in the Bethnal Green Museum collection in London (Woodford 1909: 511). The model tomoko (sisira) in the Canterbury Museum collection is approximately the same length as the Bethnal Green Museum canoe and would make an interesting comparative study, particularly as regards the length-to-breadth ratio.

Figure 3 (left). A view of the shell inlay decoration on the port side bow of *Sareviala*. The bird feathers decorating the leading edge and the top of the crescent-shaped bow proved very difficult to capture photogrammetrically and appear blurred in the image.

Figure 4 (right). A view of the shell inlay decoration on the port side stern of *Sareviala* taken from the three-dimensional photogrammetric model.

Job Rotoava named the canoe *Sareviala* (Figs 2–4) after his paternal grandfather, a famous tomoko (sisira) builder from Vuranggo, Tavula, a region on the northeastern end of Choiseul Island. Sareviala, who lived during the mid-nineteenth century, was also a master carver of stone funerary urns and a powerful man who had killed many people during his time (Canterbury Museum 1968a: 127; Craven 2017 (2019): 53).

DELIVERY AND ARRIVAL IN CHRISTCHURCH

After the canoe was finished in April 1968, it was transported from Sasamunga to Munda in New Georgia on the AMMS mission boat. At Munda it was loaded onto the *Kuala Lumpur* (Captain O. James) and travelled as open-deck cargo to Auckland via Honiara. It arrived in Auckland Harbour on Saturday 28 September 1968 (Canterbury Museum 1968b).

The canoe was then unloaded by hand from the *Kuala Lumpur* at Auckland Harbour and transported by truck to Mangere (Auckland) Airport, where it was loaded onto a National Airways Corporation Bristol 170 freighter aircraft (Canterbury Museum 1968b). Before being loaded onto the aircraft, however, the canoe's high bow and stern projections were cut off, presumably so that it could fit into the aircraft. These bow and stern pieces were later reattached (*Press* 1968).

The following morning, on Sunday 29 September, the canoe was flown from Auckland to Blenheim. On Monday morning, 30 September, the canoe was then flown from Blenheim to Harewood (Christchurch) airport. It was unloaded from the aircraft and then delivered to the Canterbury Museum (Canterbury Museum 1968b; *Christchurch Star* 1968).

SOME CONSTRUCTION DETAILS

Rotoava leaves no information regarding trees that were selected or how they were harvested and shaped into planks for the building of the canoe. Nor is there data on any of the wood types used.

Hviding (2014: 105–8), however, provides a useful account of the construction of war canoes from the Marovo and Roviana language area in New Georgia together with a list of timbers and other materials used in their construction (Table 1).

A photograph taken in July 1967 shows the canoe being built under an elevated house on a raised platform 30–40 cm off the ground (Fig. 5). The picture shows a second plank being fitted to the garboard strake and a plank in the third strake being held in place by an upright post tied under tension. A vine stitching, possibly *Lygodium trifurcatum*, a trailing fern known as amasa in the Roviana language (Hviding 2014: 107; Waterhouse and Jones 1949: 157), is used to edge join (stitch) the strakes together.

Table 1. List of canoe timbers, vines and paint names with corresponding Roviana, Marovo, scientific and common names (where known) used in the construction of war canoes (Hviding 2014: 106–8).

Part name	Roviana/Marovo	Scientific name	Common name
planks (strakes)	toba	?	?
planks	palaoto	?	?
keel plank	chovuku	*Burckella obovata*	?
gunwales	chovuku	*Burckella obovata*	?
tall bow and stern pieces	tangovo	*Alstonia scholaris*	blackboard tree
frames (ribs)	buni	*Calophyllum inophyllum*	beauty leaf
frames	kivili	*Intsia bijuga*	merbau, kwila, kayu besi
paying (caulking)	tita	*Atuna racemosa* (*Parinari laurina*)	putty nut
stitching (edge joining planks)	amasa	*Lygodium* sp. (*trifurcatum*)	trailing fern
lashing (frames to lugs)	?	?	trailing fern?
black paint (charcoal)	natongo	*Rhus taitensis*	sumac
paint (varnish)	kepukepu	*Epipremnum* sp.	?

The keel plank named by Rotoava as the kutakuta (see also Waterhouse and Jones 1949: 61) has four frames attached via lugs (Fig. 6). Numbered from the bow, the frames are two, three, four and five. The keel plank narrows to a point at each end and has a raised ridge that runs down its centre. The purpose of the centre ridges that are found on all the planks is to provide strength down the centre of an otherwise thin plank (Canterbury Museum 1968b; Woodford 1909: 508).

The keel plank, with its four frames attached via lugs, is clearly the foundation of the canoe's structure. The garboard strake (first strake) is com-

Figure 5. *Sareviala* under construction in July 1967 at Sasamunga on Choiseul Island, Solomon Islands. Photograph Job Rotoava, E173.627 Slide17, Canterbury Museum.

prised of three planks, each joined with a diagonal butt join. Each plank in the garboard strake has two frames attached. The other three strakes, second, third and fourth (top strake or gunwale), each have a plank with four frames attached via lugs.

This planking pattern provides a strong and ridged hull with longitudinal strength resistant to bending moments, even in the absence of stringers. A stringer, however, is usually attached on each side of the keel plank at a suitable height to provide support for a seating thwart for the paddlers (Woodford 1909: 514).

All the seams are payed with tita (*Atuna racemosa*) putty. The frames are solid curved timbers, grown and cut from selected tree roots. Hviding (2014: 107) states that tomoko frames are made from naturally curved roots of buni (beauty leaf, *Calophyllum inophyllum*) or similar curved pieces of kivili (merbau, *Intsia bijuga*). Woodford (1909: 508) also confirms that the "timbers [frames] are either naturally grown or shaped from the solid" and are not made from "bent [flexible] wood". Woodford (1909: 511–13) also provides an extensive list of war canoe part names in the Roviana language.

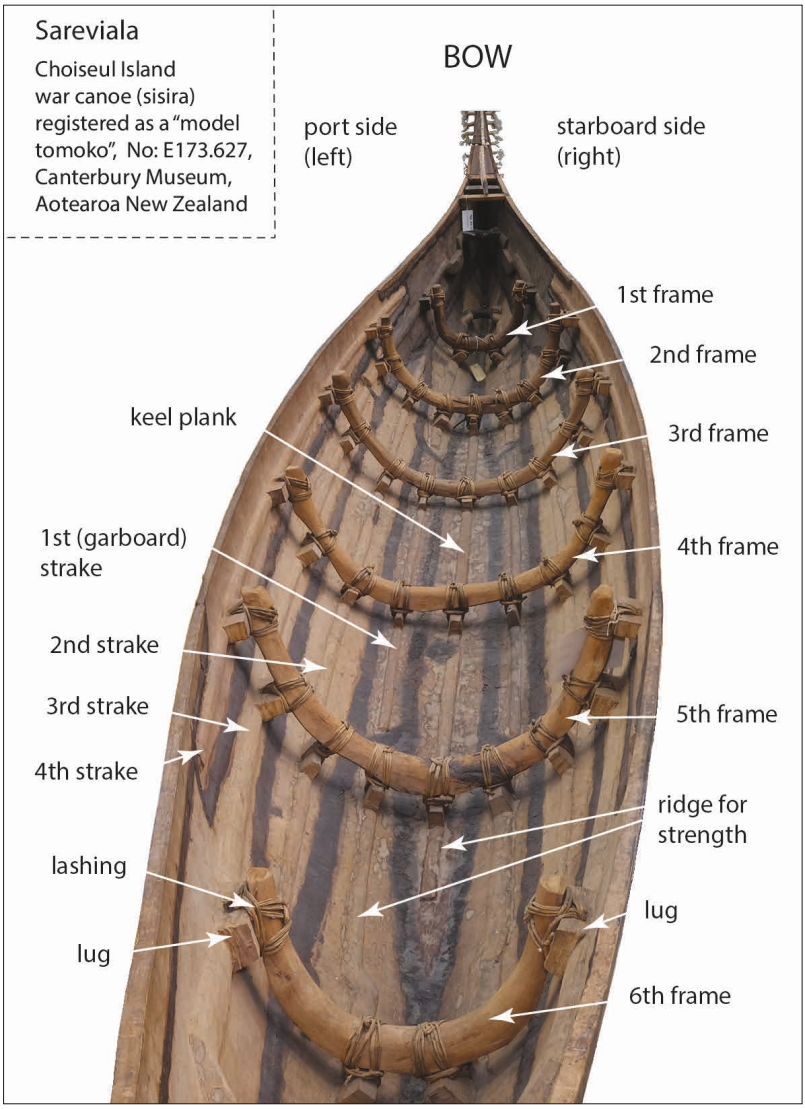

Figure 6. *Sareviala*, showing the plank and frame arrangement viewed from the stern.

A METHOD FOR CLASSIFYING PLANK-BUILT LASHED-LUG CANOES

Haddon and Hornell (1975, vol. II: 83, fig. 56) divide the Solomon Island plank-built canoe into four different types: mon, ora, lisi and binabina (Fig. 7). They are based on the style and appearance of the canoe's bow and stern profile, rather than any other characteristic or regional difference. Tomoko, magoru, niabara and sisira are all mon type canoes. While this nomenclature is adequate as a method for identifying the general geographical origin of each type, it does not allow for any analysis of size or function within each type.

Solomon Islanders were known to build a variety of plank-built canoes of various sizes and functions (Woodford 1909). The Choiseul Islanders built a canoe known as a mola gogora in the Babatana language. Similar in size to the sisira but without the upturned bow, it was used for catching turtles and dugong (Craven 2017 (2019): 55).

The proposal, therefore, is to develop a classification system that adds to Haddon and Hornell's visual identification, by adding an analysis of size and possible function within and between the regional groups. Haddon and Hornell defined a method for classifying the dugout canoe and the five-part dugout canoe (Haddon and Hornell 1975, vol. III: 5). Burningham (1993) extended Haddon and Hornell's description and described the seven-part dugout canoe of Indonesia.

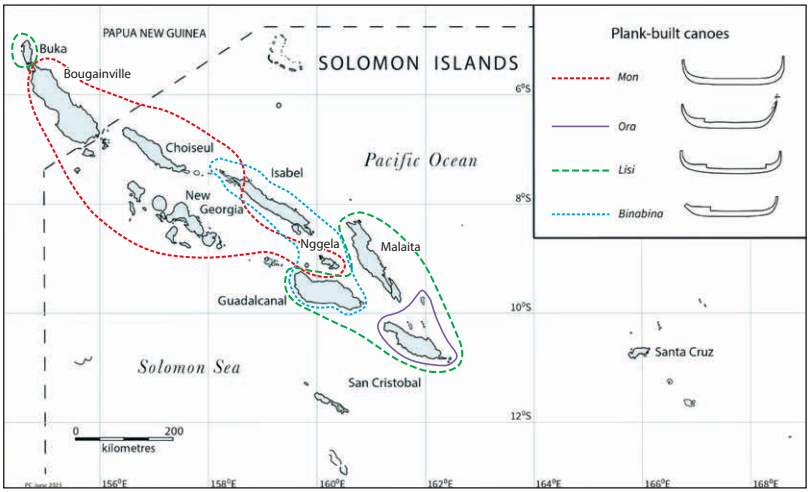

Figure 7. Map of the Solomon Islands, showing the distribution of the four main types of plank-built canoe (after Haddon and Hornell 1975, vol. II: 83, fig. 56).

The Solomon Island plank-built canoes, however, are far more complex than the five- or seven-part canoe. They can have several strakes (or planks) attached on either side of a keel plank. Strakes can be multipart with one or more planks, square end or scarf joined, to make up the length between bow and stern. In addition, the frames (ribs) that are attached to the strakes or planks by way of lugs can vary in number. Large canoes may have as many as ten to twelve frames, whereas small plank-built canoes have two or three.

The suggestion therefore is to classify plank-built lashed-lug canoes and boats in part by the number of frames and the number of strakes each side of the keel plank. For example, a large tomoko might be classified as a ten-frame four-strake canoe. Therefore, using this system, *Sareviala*, the Choiseul Island war canoe built by Job Rotoava and in the Canterbury Museum collection, could be identified as a six-frame four-strake plank-built lashed-lug canoe.

Simply counting strakes and frames, however, and relating them to length, breadth and depth measurements will only provide a proportional size differential with which to compare and order canoe types. What is also needed is identifiable structural features, such as planking patterns, keel plank arrangements, lug shapes and methods that close the ends at the bow and stern of different canoes. The presence or absence of such attributes, together with frame and plank numbers, may show sufficient variation to define more than one canoe type within a study group. The ability to identify unprovenanced canoes in museum collections based on typed attributes, for example, would be a useful tool to have. Although still a work-in-progress, this typology method for identification could equally be applied to other plank-built lashed-lug canoes and boats from other regions.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented a history of how, where and why a plank-built lashed-lug canoe from Choiseul Island was built and acquired in 1968 by the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. Identified and accessioned as a model tomoko war canoe, this work has questioned that identification and suggested that it may be a sisira war canoe. Answers to this question and to others regarding the provenance of plank-built canoes are likely to be answered in the future by museum- and university-based researchers engaging with the communities that created them.

The canoe has been in the custodianship of the Canterbury Museum for over 50 years, and its condition is a credit to museum staff, past and present, for the cultural care and attention it has received during that time. It may well be one of only two examples in existence.

This research has very briefly described the canoe's constituent parts and method of construction. It has also proposed a first attempt at developing a classification system or typology of Solomon Islands plank-built canoes from examples available in museum collections.

It has demonstrated the benefits of museum-based watercraft studies and validates the continued use of museum collections as places for education and research. Significance is often a benchmark used to measure a canoe or boat's relevance, and, in certain cases, continued existence in a museum collection may not be guaranteed without it (Clark 2014: 146).

There are many objects in museum collections whose stories have yet to be told, and large objects such as canoes and boats are especially vulnerable to this because they are difficult to display and present to the public. As Sheppard (2021: 242) has remarked, despite there being many plank-built canoes in museums around the world, most are in storage and not on display for the public or for Solomon Islanders whose ancestors created them.

This type of research and the information it produces has the potential to engage and provide a vehicle of opportunity for museums to reconnect with first-nation peoples and redress some aspects of their colonial past.

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GLOSSARY

amasa	trailing fern (Roviana)
binabina	a type of Solomon Island plank-built canoe found around Isabel, Nggela and Guadalcanal (Gela)
buni	beauty leaf, *Calophyllum inophyllum* (Roviana)
kivili	merbau, *Intsia bijuga* (Marovo)
kutakuta	keel plank (Roviana)
lako	frame (Roviana)
lisi	a type of Solomon Island plank-built canoe found around Malaita, Guadalcanal and San Cristobal (generic name)
magoru	war canoe (Marovo)
mola	plank-built canoe (Roviana, Babatana (Choiseul))
mola gogora	plank-built canoe used for catching turtles and dugong (Babatana (Choiseul))
mola sisira	war canoe (Babatana (Choiseul))

mon	a type of Solomon Island plank-built canoe found around Bougainville, Choiseul, New Georgia and Nggela (generic name)
niabara	war canoe (Vella Lavella—generic name)
ora	a type of Solomon Island plank-built canoe found around San Cristobal (generic name)
sisira	war canoe (Babatana (Choiseul))
tita	putty nut, *Atuna racemosa* (Roviana)
tomoko	war canoe (Roviana)

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