

Photographic Essay

TE

WA

Traditional Canoes of Kiribati





Te Bangota

Magic plays a very important part in the construction of a canoe. Some practise magic so that the canoe will be forever catching a lot of fish, some practise magic so that the canoe will be very swift and fast when sailing. Magic is used for many reasons - for instance, some use magic to make them attractive and appealing to women, some use magic whenever participating in any kind of sport. And whenever magic is used, it has been seen to be very successful.

Tebwebwe Baurerei
Tebunginako, Abaiang
2004

A garland of vines and Christmas decorations, along with offerings such as tobacco or money are left at this remote and special shrine.



Hand Measurement

... the length of your canoe is up to you and for measuring it we use the pandanus leaf since there were no pencils in the past ... you can use it to make marks, should you decide to double it. Then you mark on that and you make a mark here and then here. ... we have to keep returning to how the keel is laid to understand this.

Tebwebwe Baurerei
Tebunginako, Abaiang
2004

As the basic unit of measure is established directly from the builder's hand, a very personal and unique relationship is formed between the builder and his canoe.





Canoe Building

It won't take long (to build a canoe) if a lot of people are involved. However, if it is only me building it, along with the person wanting the canoe, that is, if it is only the two of us, it can take about three months.

Tawaia Karakaua
Koinawa, Abaiang
2004

There is neither nail nor screw holding the canoe together. Each plank is painstakingly stitched together and each spar carefully lashed into place. It is given its existence by the combined effort, skill and traditional values of the family.



Outrigger Lashings

Te toto and te rama are held together with a complex traditional lashing within which each strand is held in place. The interweaving of the sennit string prevents the total lashing unwinding should an individual strand break - a vital survival practice, considering the ever-shifting force of the sea on the outrigger.





String Making

The woman who is responsible for preparing the string, is supposed to be of middle age and no longer menstruating. ... women who are menstruating are forbidden to touch the canoe materials.

Boraia Taokai
Baretoa, Abemama
2004

Women have a restricted access to canoes - they are a male domain. Yet women play a vital role in making the sennit string that is used in every aspect of the canoe's construction. The women's role literally holds the canoe together.



Poling

In the shallow, sheltered waters of the lagoons, canoes are often punted from place to place. The canoe provides a stable platform for bottom fishing and casting a net.





A Fishing Canoe

Well culturally, I think the canoe is part of the family you know. You have the parents – the father and the mother – and you have the children and next to that is the canoe. The canoe is very important, it's like a member of the family in a sense. ... so it's a very intimate relationship with the canoe, because we depend a lot on the sea. If you have no canoe you feel incapacitated because you can't go to the sea, you can't get fish, there is really something missing you know.

Bishop Paul Mea
Teaoraereke, South Tarawa
2004

The canoe as a work horse – patched, worn, repaired – used as transport, to carry food and goods and to go fishing. Yet I-Kiribati social existence could not be sustained without this cheap and efficient machine.



Te Tanai

Te tanai is used to carve the hull's ribs and is the fundamental tool for many other aspects of wood working. It represents the close and vital relationship between land and cultural practices.





Racing Canoe

... two people are required to sail the canoe ... one is supposed to look after the outrigger when it lifts from the water, and his job is to put more weight on the outrigger to bring it back to the water again, and the other person is responsible for steering the canoe and sailing in the right direction.

Ioaa Ioane
Kabangaki, Abemama

2004

The full racing canoe is a wonderfully elegant piece of engineering, achieving a fine balance between wind, ropes and sail. Reputed to be the fastest canoes in the Pacific, they are testimony to the ingenuity of the people of these sparsely resourced atolls. It may be through the revival of racing as a sport, that the future of the traditional canoe will be sustained.



Keakea Kabwebwenibeia

I get this kind of feeling of self-satisfaction especially because I love sailing. So if someone comes close to me I feel it's like a challenge, so I put up the sail and race after him. This is part of our Kiribati culture, it's a sport.

Keakea Kabwebwenibeia
Koinawa Village, Abaiang
2004

Keakea represents, for me, *te unimane* (the old men) who still maintain the skills of canoe building and sailing. The intergenerational continuity of these practices is threatened as the cultural gap between father and son dramatically widens.

