SOPIKARIN'S FINAL JOURNEY

One of the last of the great Kula trading canoes

BY JOYCELIN LEAHY

A rare site in museums around the world is a completely rigged, full-sized Kula trading canoe. The Papua New Guinea National Museum installed one of these great canoes in the 1980s, and in 1973, the Friends of the South Australian Museum (FOSAM) acquired one of the few remaining Kula canoes called the ‘Sopikarin’.

The Sopikarin, one of the last great Kula trading canoes at the South Australian Museum.
The canoe has been on permanent display in South Australia Museum's Pacific Gallery since the 1974 Adelaide Festival of Arts.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how this acquisition, a ‘loss’ for one Australian museum, became a ‘gain’ for another through a combined community and museum effort.

This story will re-trace the story of ‘Sopikarin,’ a masawa, a type of outrigger canoe which began her journey in the Kula Ring expedition in the islands of southern New Guinea many years ago and landed on Australian shores.

The Kula trade is a powerful economic tribal voyage between the islands of the Southern and Northern Massim in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea for at least hundreds of years.

There are two types of canoes in the Kula Trade, the masawa and the nagega. (SAM Specimen Documentation Files 1973).

The masawa is a smaller, lighter and faster boat than the nagega but cannot sail as close to the wind as the bigger, more sea-worthy nagega (Malinowski 1922, 144). Canoes were built to travel thousands of kilometres in open seas and were used for war and conquests.

Those who travelled in them held esteemed positions in their communities and were regarded as “daring sailors, industrious manufacturers and keen traders” (Malinowski, 1932).

This paper will give an account of the negotiations, handling and the purchase of the Sopikarin for SAM’s collection.

The documents available in the SAM files give a detailed chronicle of the masawa and their aesthetic, social, ceremonial and spiritual value in the Trobriand Islands of the Massim area in the context of their function in the Kula Ring Trade.

It is important to note that in every collection, the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of an object are necessary to fully appreciate the culture from which it originated.

A closer study of the object, its aesthetic beauty, its creators and the events that surround the piece can make a museum officer’s job easier to interpret and educate their audiences.

THE VALUE OF A MASAWA CANOE

To a foreigner, a canoe may just be a vessel for transport, but to a Kula trader, a canoe is more than what meets the eye.

“A canoe is an item of material culture, and as such, it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum. But - and this is a truth too often overlooked - the ethnographic reality of the canoe would not be brought much nearer to a student at home, even by placing a perfect specimen right before him” (Malinowski 1922).

The masawa canoes range from six to 15 metres long and travelled in fleets for hundreds of kilometres carrying up to several adults with food, trade goods and other valuable shell items. To give an idea of scale, they would travel from somewhere like Adelaide across the two Gulfs to Port Lincoln in the west, then around to Kangaroo Island and back to Adelaide.

The expeditions were out in the open seas, and it could be dangerous. The canoes were decorated with large white cowrie shells, which held a high value and were often borrowed from family members.

The canoes were stored in houses between voyages to avoid rapid disintegration but when they did disintegrate, the cowrie shells would be returned to their owners.

Each masawa is named by its maker after the tree is felled. The original family names for canoes go back several generations. (SAM, Specimen Documentation Files 1973).

‘Sopikarin’ means: “Alas for the Blood,” because in ancestral times when a log was dragged down to the sea for carving into a canoe, it sank to the bottom of the seabed. The owners swam down to retrieve the log. This caused their ears and noses to bleed because of the depth of the ocean. Later, when the canoe was carved, the inside was painted deep red, like blood. From then on, the family named each of their Kula canoes ‘Sopikarin’.

Reverend Ralph Lawton, who worked in the Trobriand Islands as a missionary linguist, spoke with the owners of Sopikarin and found that the vessel had been taken on three separate voyages in May to July, 1972 by her owners - brothers Banadi Abel and Isaac Sikapu of Kumwageya Village in the Trobriand Islands.

She travelled less when the Kula trade canoes were abandoned for the much-preferred Western vessels such as Burns Philip boats in the 1970s (SAM Specimen Documentation Files 1973).

On July 13, 1972, Sopikarin made her last voyage. However, as late as 1990, five canoes were seen drawn up on the beach in Woodlark Island by Australia National University’s Michael Young who was doing some research in the area.

The Kula is an intricate life-long activity involving the exchange of arm-shells and necklaces. It is partly commercial and partly ceremonial and its uniqueness lies in its geographical and sociological extent.

Malinowski (1922, 239) wrote that South Sea islanders were known for their great navigation and trading skills.

KULA TRADE

In this powerful economic network, the Kula was conducted amongst several islands in the Northern and Southern Massim tribes. Southern Massim included: Milne Bay area, the D’Entrecasteaux Islands (Goodenough, Ferguson, Normanby and Dobu) and the Louisiade Archipelago (Misima, Sudest, and Rossel). Northern Massim included: Trobriand Islands (Kiriwina, Tuma, Kalleuna, Kitava, Vakuta), Amphlett Islands, Marshall Bennett Islands and Woodlark Island.

The cultural exchange created inter-island bonds in a large area with a large population (refer map A). All expedition canoes are named by their owners and all canoes undergo ceremonial rites and magic before their departure. The Trobriand Islands had a major role and the largest numbers of canoes in the Kula.

It must be said that the Kula is essentially a man’s activity and women were not permitted to sail in the major expeditions.

In the Kula, the two voyages go in opposite directions. The voyage that goes clock-wise carries cargo including spondylus shells and cowrie shells called ‘soulava’ and decorated with pandanus leaves.

The journey of the opposite direction carries bracelets called Mwalis. These are made from cone shells, artistically cut, shaped and decorated with botobota seeds and other shells (Pfund 1972, 42). Men compete to make exchanges to gain possession of the most famous of the named shell valuables, which then increases their personal prestige.

Ordinary goods including foods may be exchanged with feasting to celebrate but the main event is the ceremonial exchange of the valued shells.

Men on a Kula expedition are at physical risk from the sea and also at magical risk from witches and sorcerers. Trobriand Islanders believe in the spirit world and tribal sorcery (Pfund, 32).

The canoe is essential in the Kula Trade. The building of the sea going canoe (masawa) is a most important event. From the moment the tree is felled to its launching, there is a series of ongoing events interspersed with magic rites.

As the whole process of Kula takes place in an ancestral and spiritual environment, the technical necessities of the trade, such as the canoe, have to undergo the process of magic before the canoe can
be regarded as safe and ready for the long journey.

**SOPIKARIN**

Sopikarin was made in the early 1960s and is about two thirds smaller than a regular masawa. It is 5.5 metres long and 1.2 metres wide with a 50cm-wide hull. Sopikarin’s tabuya (wave splitter) and lagim (prow) were made in 1962.

Like most sea craft in Papua New Guinea, the most distinctive part of the canoe is the prow. Known as the lagim in Trobriand Islands, the prow is the most distinctive part of the Kula canoe and holds a large splashboard to prevent water getting into the canoe, keeping the cargo and passengers dry.

The splashboard is carved and painted with a symmetrical design and is decorated with cowrie shells. The designs on Sopikarin are of birds, snake, coconut husk and a small red fish.

When asked why Sopikarin was slightly smaller than the average Kula canoes, Banadi, replied: “We don’t decide this, the tree does. Some trees grow a little way out then flower, other trees grow a long way and flower. This tree was a short one and we have a short canoe” (SAM, Specimen Documentation Files, 1973).

**SAM’S ACQUISITION OF SOPIKARIN**

The canoe was painted with red from seed pods of the ‘Malaka’ tree; the white from lime (made by heating and crushing sea shells); and black from ash of coconut with juice of banana stalk.

Items included with the purchase of Sopikarin were paddles, steering oar, helmet shell trumpet, sail, mast and boom, ropes and two shell bailers. The total price including airfreight was AUD$6000 (SAM, Specimen Documentation File 1973). Dr Barry Craig, who is Curator of Foreign Ethnology at SAM, explained that acquiring Sopikarin was a very important decision and Graeme Pretty, Rev Lawton and The Friends of the SAM worked very hard to make it happen.

Dr Craig has spent many years working in Papua New Guinea and other South Sea islands and understands the difficulty and procedures one has to go through to acquire a piece such as Sopikarin.

Rev Lawton’s experience and knowledge as a missionary linguist and working and producing a dictionary of the Kiriwina language helped the process immensely.

Rev Lawton assisted with, or at least was present at the time when the trading canoe was restored by, and purchased from, Peter Hallinan in PNG.

The South Australian Museum (SAM) also has many canoe splashboards from the Trobriand Islands in its collection. Dr Craig said the SAM Collection Policy does not restrict acquisition of any particular types of items (except human remains).

However, some items require special consideration, for example if they are too large or irrelevant to the areas in which the museum already has strong collections and are unlikely to be acquired.

The timing of Sopikarin’s acquisition was perfect for the 1974 Adelaide Festival of Arts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVELINE</th>
<th>STEERING</th>
<th>TRUCK SUSPENSION</th>
<th>AXLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meritor</td>
<td>Roadranger</td>
<td>Meritor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filters</td>
<td>Transmission Parts</td>
<td>Hub, Drum Components</td>
<td>Clutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleetguard</td>
<td>Roadranger</td>
<td>Meritor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brake Valves</td>
<td>Brake Components</td>
<td>Bearings &amp; Seals</td>
<td>Electrical &amp; Lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendix</td>
<td>Bendix</td>
<td>G.E. Spares</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trail Couplings</td>
<td>Landing Legs</td>
<td>Trailer Suspensions</td>
<td>Load Restraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOST</td>
<td>JOST</td>
<td>PBR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooling System</td>
<td>Exhusts &amp; Intakes</td>
<td>Air Lines &amp; Fittings</td>
<td>Transport Signage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleetguard</td>
<td>PBR</td>
<td>Road Train</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information, please call us on:
Phone: 472 4447 / 479 4447 Fax: 472 5557 Mobile: 7687 6636
or email us at
sales@transports.com.pg / marketing@transports.com.pg

www.transports.com.pg
Hallinan himself was a yachtsman and had meticulously supervised the detailed rigging of Sopikarin. He required the strict usage of authentic traditional materials such as putty to bind and seal the canoe planks together as if she were being prepared for a real expedition.
THE ACQUISITION AND A QUESTION OF ETHICS

In November 1972, an art dealer called Peter Hallinan who collected extensively in the South Seas, wrote to the director of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board of a “major work” that would be significant to a Melanesian Collection and would be of interest to any Australian art gallery, particularly one with large display area.

Upon receipt of the information from Hallinan before Christmas in late 1972, Graeme Pretty, Curator of Archaeology and a consultant to the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (CAAB), was asked to assess the significance of the canoe for the Australian National Gallery.

He wrote to the Australian National Gallery Director James Mollison suggesting that Sopikarin’s detailed appearances in the Hallinan photographs were impressive. However, the fact was, the canoe was only two-thirds the size of most Kula masawa and by purchasing it, it could jeopardise future acquisition of a “fully proportioned piece”.

Pretty was employed by the SAM and had to keep his advice transparent and unbiased by the possible temptation of acquiring the canoe for his own museum.

This was the reply from Mollison: “The work is not one which I can see on display in the National Gallery. However, if your evaluation of this piece is that it is a special opportunity to acquire an exceptional work, I will not try to influence the board against buying the boat other than by pointing out that it does not come within my category of masterpieces of the visual arts of the Pacific” (Mollison, Correspondence, 1973 - SAM Specimen Documentation File, 1973).

Pretty persisted in getting more information for the gallery by contacting Rev Lawton in the Trobriand Islands and ensuring the canoe was in a good shape and had all the necessary information.

New information was collected in an interview with the owners of the canoe by Rev Lawton, interpreted through Julia Abel of Kitava Island (SAM, Specimen Documentation Files, 1973).

Pretty wrote to Rev Lawton on January 17, 1973 to say that for the Oceanic Region, CAAB’s Policy was to acquire only “works of the finest quality”. He asked whether it would be possible to commission master carvers to build a replica of a larger masawa canoe as preferred by Director Mollison, to create a permanent testament to Kiriwina art.

He asked Rev Lawton to keep their correspondence “private and between ourselves” (SAM, Specimen Documentation Files, 1973).

By February 27, 1973, Pretty saw that the negotiations to acquire the canoe had failed as he was unable to convince the National Gallery to acquire it. He wrote a brief letter to Hallinan asking him if the National Gallery did not accept Sopikarin, would he be willing to sell it to SAM.

In the meantime, Rev Lawton responded in a lengthy letter confirming that although Sopikarin was a smaller masawa, it was in superb quality and authentically restored by Hallinan with villagers during three separate trips made to Kitava Island.

Hallinan himself was a yachtsman and had meticulously supervised detailed rigging of Sopikarin.

He required strict usage of authentic traditional materials such as putty to bind and seal the canoe planks together as if she were being prepared for a real expedition.

Rev Lawton also advised Pretty that if the National Art Gallery were to commission a masawa to be built, they would need an experienced sailor on the ground to supervise the construction plus the...
materials of the canoe itself would cost up to AUD$10,000 (Lawton, Correspondence, 1973).

He signed off with a handwritten note stating that since Sopikarin had been sold to Hallinan, the vendor had died believing to be from the powers of sorcery.

Lawton was told by villagers that the vendor was punished for selling a genuine Kula canoe to an outsider. Rev Lawton himself had not mentioned this tragedy to Hallinan for fear the news would upset the art dealer.

When Pretty received Rev Lawton's lengthy letter, he proceeded to conclude that while he understood the difficulties in getting a replica of the Kula canoe, "something should be done". It was then that he decided to see if Sopikarin could be acquired for SAM. Pretty proceeded to ask the Friends of the South Australia Museum (SAM) for help.

Finally, after several fundraisings and more exchanges of letters, the Friends of SAM paid for the masawa.

Sopikarin made her final voyage, this time with the assistance of MV "Tenos" from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, to Melbourne, from where Grace Brothers transported her by road to Adelaide.

She took up 540 cubic feet in a 20 foot-long container. Upon arrival at the museum, she was placed on the second floor, joined by small model canoes to become the "Seafarers of the Pacific" exhibition.

This exhibition included photographs and illustrations of maritime trade expeditions and demonstrated that all the islands of the Pacific were occupied as a result of sea voyaging.

The acquisition of Sopikarin by SAM was an important event that added value and relevance to its Pacific Collection, particularly in the exhibition 'Seafarers of the Pacific'.

Despite Malinowski's cynical comment quoted above, there is nothing like having a real object to give your audience the appreciation of how men such as the Kula sailors braved the open sea in their passion for trading and possession of a cultural wealth.

"People can see the details of rigging, proportions of the masts and sails, all meticulously bound together in such a way that they can appreciate its relative size and how Sopikarin was able to brave the open sea" (Craig, pers. comm: 23/04/08).

The National Art Gallery's decision against obtaining Sopikarin, because of her small size and for aesthetic reasons, has cost them a masterpiece that can never be found and if reproduced, would not present the true value of a Kula masawa. It would also be very costly as evidenced in Rev Lawton's letter to Pretty (1973).

It is important to consider the ethnographic value of acquisitions like this canoe in the context of the economic history of the South Seas. If the National Art Gallery had considered more than just the "looks" of the object, they would have obtained evidence of one of the most impressive maritime trading traditions that ever existed.

For SAM, the physical splendour of having Sopikarin displayed along with its collection of model canoes, added considerable value and authenticity to its Pacific Gallery.