PACIFIC ARTS
Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

TARISI VUNIDILO

The Mataisau Clan of Fiji: Roles and Responsibilities

Abstract

Mataisau *is the Fijian word relating to a clan in Fiji known as the "born carpenters." They were a group of individuals gifted with carpentry skills—especially in building houses, boats, furniture, and tools—passed down by their ancestors through many generations. My paper is devoted to highlighting the role of the* mataisau *and to reaffirm how highly regarded and integral they were to Fijian society. I believe it is a traditional role that has been undervalued, underappreciated and overlooked in the literature of Pacific ethnobotany and cultural studies. Visitors to Fiji and the Pacific two centuries ago documented the vast botanical knowledge possessed by the Indigenous islanders. They utilised this knowledge to access and extract plants and trees for their survival. The islanders then incorporated a barter system to trade and exchange resources to which they did not have access. One such example was the trade route between Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. Over many centuries, they traded various resources, including people who knew how to build and carve ocean-going vessels such as the* drua *(double-hull canoes). During my research visit to the island of Kabara in 2006, I was able to witness the remnants of such ancient trade through the presence of the Lemaki clan descendants who are still proud to be engaging the craft of their forefathers. Although the number of carvers is dwindling, the knowledge of and appreciation for the* mataisau *still exists in the Lau islands.*

Keywords: *Fijian art; mataisau, carving, Kabara, ethnobotany, canoes, architecture, weapons, Lemaki clan, iTaukei*

Introduction

Humans and plants have coexisted and had an equal hand in an intertwined relationship that has spanned many millennia, predating our own recorded history. Throughout this history, many cultural groups and their respective subcultures have expanded upon this unique relationship in cultural practices related to food, medicine, arts, religion, and more. In some cases, the relationships between people and plants are at the centre of cultural belief systems, ideologies, and people's

understanding of the world around them. This is true for the *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) communities and their connection to certain trees that are vital source materials for the *mataisau* clan. The *mataisau* was a clan that specialised in wood carving in Fiji and was responsible for building houses, canoes, weapons, and food implements. It is imperative to highlight that although such ancient roles have become a collective memory of the past, it is critical to pay them the recognition that they deserve. In many parts of Oceania, Fijian wood-carving skills were respected and acknowledged. European voyagers in the eighteenth century recognised that carved wooden Fijian ocean-going vessels represented the supreme achievement of Oceanic cultures.[1]

This paper is based on personal observations and informal discussions of artistic carving traditions between the author and local villagers on the island of Kabara, Lau province, in 2006. I used a qualitative method for this research, which involved interviewing individuals who lived in the village of Naikeleyaga on the island of Kabara. In the early stage of the research, I intended to build on the work already undertaken by Dr. Steven Hooper from the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s. This involved reading his work and speaking to him for his recollection of working on Kabara. I was also blessed to be accompanied by Mr. Sepeti Matararaba who is from the neighbouring island of Matuku. Getting his perspective while discussing the role of the *mataisau* added so much value to this paper. Most of the stories gathered in 2006 are included in this paper. After describing my research methodology, I provide a brief sketch of colonial history in Fiji and discuss its impact on wood carving. I then define the word *mataisau* and examine the role that members of the *mataisau* clan played in Fiji prior to 1874. I next discuss *mataisau* knowledge of carving materials and conclude by looking at the role of *mataisau* in Fijian society today.

Fiji's Colonial History and its Impact on Wood Carving

Fiji is situated below the equator, in the centre of the southern Pacific Ocean, and is located between the cultural groupings of Melanesia to the west and Polynesia to the east. It is made up of over 300 islands (Fig. 1), with approximately one third of the islands being inhabited. The two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, have vegetation consisting mostly of rainforests and tall hardwood trees. Fiji's cultural connections to Melanesia and Polynesia are evident in its traditional arts. For context, Indigenous Fijians are officially known as *iTaukei* (literally meaning "owner"; in this case, owners of the land and resources in Fiji). Due to its

geographic location, many refer to Fiji as the "Hub of the Pacific," and this has influenced the historical and contemporary relationships Fiji has with its neighbouring islands and with Europeans.

Figure 1. Detailed map of Fiji showing the main islands. Courtesy of WorldAtlas.com

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, there were three key turning points in Fiji's history. The first was in 1774, with the arrival of British explorer Captain James Cook; the second was in 1830, when three Tahitian teachers working with the London Missionary Society introduced Fijians to Christianity; and the third was the ceding of Fiji to Great Britain in 1874. These three events each impacted the role played by Fiji's woodworking clan, as the introduction of Western goods and materials reduced the demand for wood. Cook's voyage paved the way for Europeans to pursue trade and settlement in the region. The first Europeans to settle in Fiji were seamen who either obtained proper discharge from service or deserted from sandalwood ships. The introduction of these white settlers and their weapons impacted the role of Fijian woodworking clans because they introduced alternatives to wood that were mechanical and durable. Newcomers to Fiji brought ideas and resources that replaced the raw materials that the woodworking clans were accessing.

In 1830, Tahitian missionaries working with the London Missionary Society arrived in Fiji. They were followed by Rev. William Cross and Rev. David Cargill in 1835, two missionaries who collated Fiji's Bauan dialect and compiled a dictionary. The missionaries impacted Fiji's woodworking clans by shifting their attention away from building houses and canoes to proselytising to members of their communities to serve God.

When Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, the new colonial government utilised Fijian labour to plant cotton, as well as to harvest and process copra (dried coconuts) and bêche-de-mer, also known as sea cucumber. During the First World War, the British government recruited many Fijian men, some of whom were from the *mataisau* clan, to go to war in France, Malaysia, and the Solomon Islands.

Defining *Mataisau*

Dissecting the word *mataisau* and defining each part provides more clarity of the meaning and importance of the role of *mataisau* in Fijian society. From an *iTaukei* perspective, *matai* is the prefix; it is used as an adjective to describe someone's great competence in a task or someone who is skilled. For instance, a *matai na tuli kuro* is a skilled potter, and a *matai na tara vale* is a skilled carpenter or an expert builder of houses. The word *sau* means power, known among *iTaukei* people as something that only chiefly and other highly ranked individuals possessed.

Mataisau is a kin-based group of skilled individuals whose traditional role primarily focuses on wood carving. They have always been leaders in the field of craftsmanship and traditional carpentry, spearheading projects like making canoes, building houses, and forging weapons such as war clubs and spears. Carving techniques have been passed down through many generations of *mataisau* descendants. While members of this clan acknowledge the skills and knowledge that have been passed down to them, few young men take up carpentry and woodworking roles today due to many factors including Westernisation and the prevalent use of imported materials in manufacturing. Fijians today do not build large houses or canoes as they once did, though many still manufacture smaller wooden items such as clubs and spears for the tourist market.

It can be argued that, despite the low number of Fijians taking up carpentry tools as they once did, the role of the *mataisau* was and always will be held in high regard. A large number of engineers who now work for the British Army in England are descendants of the *mataisau* clan.[2] Pauliasi Volavola, a Fijian language and culture student of mine, shared this example: When he asked his coworkers in the

British Army which clan they belonged to, many mentioned that they belonged to the *mataisau* clan. When he next asked them about their current roles in the army, they looked at each other in bewilderment, realising that they were all in the engineering division. Until that moment, they had never thought about their career choice having been influenced by the clan to which they belonged.[3]

Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills are considered to be part of a place's cultural heritage. Over time, cultural heritage is passed down through many generations and becomes part of the fabric of a people. In some instances, it forms a knowledge base that can be categorised as ancient knowledge—a taboo system that, in turn, affects people's behaviour and how they relate to one another. Clans in Fiji have been in existence for many generations. Every *iTaukei* person belongs to a clan, which holds a rank in the complex Fijian social hierarchy. Every clan has a totem tree, totem fish, and totem bird, which also have taboo or cultural rules associated with them to which clan members must adhere.[4] If one belongs to a clan that has as its totem a particular fish, bird, or tree, they may behave a certain way to another tribe that shares similar totems.

The *mataisau* are known to have descended from Rokola*,* the chief of all carpenters in Fiji. With reference to taboo, there is a strict etiquette that exists within the *mataisau* clan that includes restrictions on their interactions, as well as on what they eat. There are also restrictions prior to the cutting down of a tree that has been selected for a house or a canoe. These include not eating a certain type of fish or being required to present kava roots to the chief of the village before they cut down the tree. Adhering to such protocols brings prosperity to the village and removes any ill will toward the families of the carpenters. Additionally, in certain ceremonies their participation and salutations are verbalised by speakers who, during such events, acknowledge the work that they did.

Another name for carvers in Fiji is *liga ni kau* (*liga* means "hand" and *kau* means "wood"). *Mataisau* and *liga ni kau* are synonymous, though the term *liganikau* is often used in an endearing manner to describe the specialised work of carvers. The term is also used to highlight the role that the *mataisau* played in comparison with other clans that had different duties in the province. For instance, the *liga ni wau,* which translates as "the hand that holds the war club," refers to the warriors whose role was to protect the chief and the *vanua* (a Fijian concept often translated as "land," but which also encompasses people, community, and custom). For example, in the Namosi province, the *liga ni kau* were known to build houses, carve weaponry, and make everyday utensils such as *takona* (food bowls), *tanoa* (kava bowls), and *yaya ni kana* (food and cooking

utensils) for the paramount chief of the province known as the Tui Namosi.[5] Even though many do not practice this skill of wood carving as their forefathers did, they are still referred to as the *liga ni kau* today.

Museum director and curator Fergus Clunie distinguishes between the words *mataisau* and *matainisau*.[6] The latter, which has *ni* between *matai* and *sau*, refers particularly to the builders of the chief's canoe. The *mataisau* could build canoes for those of lower rank. Each *mataisau* clan was headed by the *matapule* (leader) who took charge of the construction of voyaging canoes. The word *matai* or *mataisau* is common across Polynesia and can be found in Sāmoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tahiti, Rennel, and Tikopia, as well as Fiji.[7] It is also included in the languages of East Uvea, East Futuna, and the Marquesas. Linguists have confirmed consistency in the meanings of this word across the region. In the case of Tonga, the Churchward Tongan-English dictionary defines *matai* as "to be an expert, to be very clever or skillful."[8] The Baker dictionary defines *matai* as "a clever one, the best one, the single one, someone who is intelligent."[9] In the table below, which combines the analyses of Tcherkezoff, one can see the similarities in the meanings of the words.[10] These words confirm the application of *matai* not only to carpentry but to other forms of art, such as tattooing, as well as to leaders of families and clans.

ISLAND NATION	**WORD**	**VARIOUS MEANINGS OF MATAI DENOTING EXPERT AND LEADER IN THE CLAN**
Rennel	Matai/sau	Expert craftsman, tattooer
Sāmoa	Matai	Titled head of extended family; master
Tahiti	Maatai	Skillful, knowing
Tikopia	Matai/tangata	Leading man
Tokelau	Matai	Male head of a clan; master; headman; boss
Tonga	Maatai	To be an expert

Table 1. Places in Polynesia that Use the Words *Matai* and *Mataisau* and their Meanings. Courtesy of Serge Tcherkezoff, "The Samoan Category Matai (Chief): A Singularity in Polynesia? Historical and Etymological Comparative Queries*," The Journal of Polynesian Society* 109, no. 2 (June 2000): 173

One can conclude that the definitions "expert," "master," "skillful," "headman," and "boss" signify the important roles of *mataisau* in Polynesian cultures; they were highly regarded and respected as both carpenters and knowledgeable

experts. Despite many *mataisau* not currently doing woodworking as they used to, they are still regarded as leaders in this field. Though they do not possess academic qualifications, their experience in dealing with trees and their environment warrants them the title of scientists and, more specifically, botanists.

The Historical Role of the Mataisau

From an Indigenous perspective, the *mataisau* historically performed a role that combined botanical, scientific, artistic, and pedagogical skills. Chiefs treated the *mataisau* with favour, gave them gifts as tokens of gratitude and appreciation, and acknowledged their roles. They were also known in the Fijian language as the *liganikau*. This means that they were renowned for their knowledge, workmanship, and craftsmanship using wood. Some products they created were *vale vakaviti* (houses), *waqa* (canoes or water vessels), *yaragi* (weapons), *iyaya ni kana* (utensils), and *wai vakaviti* (medicine).[11]

Architecture

The Indigenous architectural heritage of Fiji preserves and reveals the culture and tradition of its people and mirrors what was once their way of life. Traditional thatched homes not only provided shelter for Fijians, but served as representations of their social rank. For instance, houses that belonged to chiefs and priests were more elaborate than the average villager's home. In every traditional Fijian village, there were many different types of dwellings depending on the occupants and their purposes or functions.

Before the arrival of Europeans, a *burenisa* was a type of dwelling for young men and the *burekalou* (priest house) was the tallest building in any village. In the nineteenth century, the *burekalou* had a high *yavu* (foundation) and a very tall roof—the belief was that the taller the roof, the closer the building's occupants were to the deities that they worshipped. Inside the *burekalou*, a long piece of white *masi* (tapa or barkcloth) was attached from the top of the ceiling to the middle of the dwelling where the *bete* (priest) sat to communicate with their gods. In pre-colonial days, Fijians worshipped numerous gods and goddesses. Animism—the belief that animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, human handiwork, and, in some cases, words all possess a distinct spiritual essence—was also part of their worship. The *masi* hanging in the *burekalou* was the bridge

between the spirit world and the world of man. Next to the *burekalou* was the *vale levu* (big house), which belonged to the *turaga* (chief). It was often a large dwelling with intricate decorations on both the exterior and interior. The *mataisau* clan were the most influential in the building of these houses.

Canoe Making

Traditional ocean-going canoes represented the pinnacle of South Pacific craftsmanship, and Fijian canoes were among the finest for centuries. Pratt confirms that *mataisau* was a respectful term for a master canoe builder.[12] The special hardwood used by the Fijians for their canoes grows well on many Fijian islands. Between the 1700s and 1800s, some *mataisau* on the islands of Kabara and Fulaga (Lau province) were contracted by Tongans and Sāmoans to construct canoes at Kabara. They were known as the Lemaki clan, and in Sāmoa they were entitled and well respected. Hooper confirms that the Lemaki were skilled in the art of hull planking.[13] Their artistic skill was recognised by the king of Tonga and their services moved to Tonga at his request. Similarly in Fiji, the Tui Nayau, the paramount chief of Lau province, also requested the Lemaki's services. In the mid-eighteenth century, the island of Kabara in southern Lau was rich with *vesi* trees (*Intsia bijuga*) which were used for canoe building. Because the people of Kabara were under the rulership of the Tui Nayau, there was ease of movement of the Lemaki clans from Sāmoa to Tonga and then to Fiji. When the Tui Nayau converted to Christianity in 1853, most of the Lemaki did the same. Many stayed on Kabara after their boat-building program was completed. They married local women and their descendants continued the art of boat building and wood carving.[14] Apart from the Lemaki clan, there was also the Jafau clan, who similarly were known for their craftsmanship. The Lemaki and the Jafau were *mataisau* clans that have close affinity to Tonga and Sāmoa and now call Fiji their home.

One specific group of the *mataisau* were the canoe builders with carpentry skills. These boat builders often formed *mataqali* (clans), which were attached to a *yavusa* (tribe). Descendants of such builders are commonly found around the coastal areas and the smaller islands of Lau and Cakaudrove. Most *mataisau* based in Lau province had lineages connected to Tonga and Sāmoa and were known as Jafau and Lemaki. Today, they can be found on the islands of Fulaga and Kabara. Their descendants still continue the tradition of wood carving and boat building. The most significant non-Fijian boat builders were Sāmoans who came by way of Tonga in the 1800s, serving the Tui Nayau and settled at Kabara Island. The Tui

Nayau used the services of these artisans in building *drua* (large double-hull canoes).[15] In 1842, Thomas Williams wrote about Tui Nayau's massive canoe, *Rusaivanua*, among other well-known vessels. He described the length as 118 feet (equivalent to thirty-six metres) and the height of the mast as sixty-eight feet (twenty-one metres).[16]

Chiefs in the nineteenth century used canoes in warfare and were always looking for canoe builders. Because the Tui Nayau also had close traditional ties to Sāmoa and Tonga through marriage alliances, and due to the demand for canoes at the time, builders from both countries were serving the Tui Nayau simultaneously. These traditional kinships made the arrival of the Lemaki and Jafau more easily accepted. As intertribal and interisland war were rife at the time, canoes were an important resource. Possessing such large-scale canoes was important for chiefs, which made the *mataisau* highly sought after. Other *mataisau*, some of whom also claim direct Tongan lineage, lived in the villages of Nukutubu, Rewa, and Solotavui in Kadavu (in the southern province of Fiji). Some of these individuals moved to other parts of the country and abroad. They originated from Narauyaba, Nakauvadra Hills in the Ra province, in northeastern Viti Levu.[17]

Weaponry

Before 1830, when missionaries arrived, war was part of life in Fiji due to the many inter- and intra-migrations. Life was so dangerous that Fijian men, even during times of peace or nontribal conflict, were always armed and constantly on guard.[18] Prior to the introduction of the musket, the weapon of choice for a Fijian warrior or chief was the war club—a carved, wooden weapon designed for hand-to-hand combat. Fijian men were regarded as fierce warriors, and their war clubs were often family heirlooms passed through generations. A war club gained *mana* (spiritual power) and became *tapu* (taboo or sacred) through the killing of another person, regardless of whether they were man, woman, or child.

So revered was the war club that each was given its own name in a ceremony. Naming was also a rite of passage for a warrior, who reached a new level based on the number of people he had killed. It was common throughout Polynesia that the head of a person was *tapu*, so to take the life of another by clubbing them to death on the head exalted one to the coveted status of *koroi* (killer). The name *koroi* was bestowed on a man during a *veibuli* ceremony. The title *visa* was given to a warrior who had killed twenty individuals.[19]

Because of the aura afforded to the war club, it required a specialist craftsman to make it.[20] The *mataisau* made war clubs and spears, which came in many different types with distinct shapes and decorations.[21] In Fiji, many types of trees were used for weapon-making purposes. Using a certain type of tree was very specialised in terms of the wood's appearance and function, and with their botanical knowledge, the *mataisau* played a huge part in the fashioning of weapons. The throwing club known as *iula* was crafted in such a way that it could be propelled toward its target with speed and precision. A club known as a *vunikau* (tree) resembles the root of a tree—its rough root stubs typically proved to be deadly to its victims—and *totokia* were battle hammer clubs. From my analysis of Fijian weapons, very large clubs, often ceremonial in use, were made from ironwood. Hardwoods were often used to make clubs for combat, while the light-wood varieties were used for other purposes, such as when young boys participated in initiation rites and war combat training from the ages of six to twelve. Hardwood clubs, most with elaborate designs and decorations, were commonly collected by early explorers.

Mataisau Knowledge of Carving Material

Prior to the establishment of trade with Europe, Fijians had to look around their environment for resources to assist them in their work. *Mataisau/Liga ni kau* are known to have a deep and knowledgeable understanding of the forest, including the names of trees and plants and their many properties and functions. For instance, the *vesi,* a very robust ironwood tree that grows on large volcanic islands in Fiji, was used for building *drua*. Kabara was a wood-carving centre for many centuries due to its access to *vesi* trees and the immense knowledge of carving held by the Lemaki clan in its village of Naikeleyaga. The oldest preserved *drua* in a museum collection, the *Ratu Finau* at the Fiji Museum, is made of *vesi*.

Although the *vesi* tree was the supreme hull-building timber, according to Clunie other hardwoods such as *dilo* (genus *Calophyllum*), *tarawau* (*Dysoxylum*), and *tavola* (*Terminalia*) could be used.[22] In some instances, bamboo was used instead of hardwood.[23] It was common knowledge among the *mataisau* that at least twenty different species of plants were used in the construction of a Fijian *camakau* (sea-going outrigger canoe). Wood was skillfully chosen by the carpenters with material constraints in mind. The glue, rope, and sail were also constructed from native plant materials. The importance of canoe-building technology in the Pacific, and its unique flora, shaped Kabara into an island of

strategic influence within the South Pacific.[24] The early settlers of the islands of the South Pacific exhibited a remarkable ability to exploit the plant resources of their environment. A variety of plant species was, and continues to be, used for shelter, food, medicine, and ritual objects in Fiji today.

Other resources that were in high demand for canoe making in the 1800s were the sail mats made of pandanus leaves, coconut coir lashings, and other cordage made from *vau* (wild hibiscus plants). For natural materials that the *mataisau* may not have access to, they were able to conduct an exchange known as *veisa* (barter). During pre-colonial days, sail mats were woven by the women of Yasawa in northwest Fiji.[25] Women played a key role in the canoe-making industry, and most of them had close affiliation with the *mataisau* clan. Nemani provides a case study in the province of Namosi, where the gathering of natural resources for the building of their traditional meeting house (*valenivanua*) took place in 1935. The *valenivanua*, which is still in existence today, is an important structure in any Fijian village. It is a gathering place for the people summoned by the *turaga* (chief). In Namosi, the gathering of raw materials for the meeting house is a role that is taken seriously. Even though women may take the lead in the weaving or in the making of strings to be used for binding, men often provide their support and assist where needed. In most cases, the *mataisau* clan will take the lead in such an event. Nemani outlines how the roles were divided among five villages in the Veivatuloa district of Namosi as follows:[26]

Village	**Natural Material**	**Part of the Tree**	**Part of the House**
Veivatuloa	Sago palm	Leaves	Roof thatching
Mau	Hardwood	Trunk	Posts
Qilai	Wild hibiscus	Bast	Binding strings
Lobau	Hardwood	Branches	Roof rafters, beams, and purlins
Nakavu	Makita tree	Leaves	Wall thatching

Table 2. Distribution of Materials and Building Tasks for the *Valenivanua* in the Veivatuloa District, Namosi Province. Sipiriano Nemani, "Valenivanua: A Communal Cultural Space, The Pinnacle of Indigenous Values, Peace and Mana," *Traditional Architecture, Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ed. Angela DiSanto and Michael Peterson (Seoul: ICHCAP, 2014), 10

The Role of the Mataisau Today

Today, the *mataisau* clan still conducts traditional house building in some parts of Fiji, but it is not as prevalent as before. In some places, it is only the chief's house or the village meeting house that is built using traditional materials. Apart from the village of Navala, in Ba province, northwestern Viti Levu, many villages today have modern homes made of brick, wood, and corrugated iron. If the *mataisau* clan's skills are needed, they can be consulted for design, the gathering of raw materials such as thatching and wood, and labour, mainly through *solesolevaki* (communal work). Older people have confirmed that the negative impact of the cash economy has contributed to the decline in builders of all ages taking up the tools to build traditional *bures* (homes).[27]

Knowledge of the *mataisau* of today is conserved through oral history and storytelling. Although not many members of the *mataisau* clan actively engage in the wood-carving activities of their ancestors, evidence of such roles is still in existence today. Traditional *bure*, *waqaniviti* (canoes), and *iwau* (wooden war clubs) have been inherited and kept in homes as family heirlooms to serve as remembrances of these practices.

While working at the Waikato Museum of Art and History in New Zealand from 2003 to 2007, I was fortunate to be part of archaeological fieldwork team from the Australian National University in Canberra. Led by Dr. Geoff Clark, we travelled to the island of Kabara. British colonial administrator Basil Thompson mentions that the island of Kabara was the most esteemed island to the east of Fiji that housed descendants of canoe builders from Tonga and Sāmoa.[28] Their wood-carving skills had intrigued me for so many years, ever since I learned in school about their traditional role as wood carvers.

While on Kabara Island, I visited a mountain on the island where the *vesi* tree grew in large quantities. Nearby was a cave called Qaraitavuliti, where we conducted an excavation and found evidence of human habitation. As a team, we were also billeted near the clan that was traditionally connected to the Lemaki clan, which has links to Sāmoa. I viewed wood-carving tools that one of the descendants of the Lemaki clan, fondly known as Tua Maciu, had inherited from his father and grandfather. These included stone adzes of many shapes and sizes. Maciu shared some of his memories of his father and grandfather building canoes and making kava bowls. He remembered the name of the mountain behind the village of Naikeleyaga, near Qaraitavuliti, where men of all ages hiked to find large *vesi* trees to be harvested. He remembered some of the customs and ceremonies that were to be done prior to the collecting and harvesting of trees, one of which

was the ceremonial presenting of kava to the Tui Kabara to allow them to harvest the tree. Maciu also mentioned how elders at that time would know which tree was to be cut, based on their observations. Apart from the size and the height of the tree, they could also determine if a tree had matured.[29]

During my observations, I also noticed that Maciu was using some modern tools while carving out a kava bowl, known as *tanoa* (or *kumete* in the Lauan dialect). I asked him why he preferred the modern axe over the stone adzes. He replied that he was more comfortable with it and was able to carve much faster. He was very appreciative of the abundance of the *vesi* trees that were the source of the wood that he was carving. Wooden kava bowls like the one he was making had also become a source of income for him. He was proud to be from Kabara and to belong to the Lemaki clan. He understood the role the Lemaki clan played as *mataisau* and he took his wood-carving skills very seriously. It was a congenial experience that further confirmed that the *mataisau* clan still hold high social status due to their vast and extensive knowledge of the trees and their various uses.[30] In comparison to other tribes within Kabara, the Lemaki clan was familiar with the botany of the island. The Lemaki knew the uses of other trees for other parts of the canoe such as the outrigger, the mast, and the sail. On Kabara Island, the Lemaki held knowledge of the botanical history of the village of Naikeleyaga and its neighbours. Decisions made in the village are often taken seriously when the Lemaki clan agree on what action is to be taken. The knowledge of the trees truly connects to woodworking clans in Fiji and the conversation with Maciu, combined with my observations, reaffirms that the *mataisau* still hold high status on Kabara Island.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the role of the *mataisau* was taken seriously in the past and is still revered today. In many parts of Oceania, their roles in boat building, house building, and wood carving were respected and acknowledged. Europeans who ventured into Oceania in the 1800s confirmed the presence of ocean-going vessels that signified the supreme achievement of Oceanic cultures. Although many admired the artistic abilities of Fijian *mataisau*, surprisingly little attention has been directed to the botanical sources and raw materials that they used to create canoes, houses, weaponry, and wooden tools. The ethnobotanical aspects of such raw materials offer a rich avenue for further study. The *mataisau*'s adaptation to their island environment is clear, as they became very resourceful by

using raw materials available to them to the best of their ability. They also were able to trade with other neighbouring islands that possessed other materials for boat building or house construction.

The role of the *mataisau* is indeed special and demands recognition. Their knowledge of trees and plants is magnificent and should be remembered. Knowledge of the correct tree to use must be acquired before the physical creation of a canoe, a house, or any other wooden tool. Their skills provided shelter to many and enabled people to move across the ocean and rivers. May we continue to celebrate their stories and ensure that our current and future generations are aware of their contributions to the Pacific.

Tarisi Vunidilo earned a PhD in Pacific studies in 2016 from the University of Auckland. She also holds a MSc in anthropology and a postgraduate diploma in Maori and Pacific development from the University of Waikato, New Zealand; a postgraduate diploma in arts from Australian National University, Canberra; and a BA in geography, history, and sociology from the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. She was previously a professional teaching fellow and lecturer at the University of Auckland (2012–18) and assistant professor in anthropology at the University of Hawai`i-Hilo. She recently became assistant professor in the College of Ethnic Studies, California State University-Los Angeles. She currently holds a research fellow position with the University of Göttingen, Germany, as part of the research project "Sensitive Provenances: Human Remains from Colonial Contexts in the Collections of Göttingen University."

Notes

[1] H. E. Maude, "Beachcombers and Castaways," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 73, no. 3 (1964): 254–93.
[2] Pauliasi Volavola, personal communication, February 15, 2022.
[3] Volavola, personal communication.
[4] W. H. R. Rivers, *Totems in Fiji*, vol. 8 (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1908), 133–6.
[5] Tui is translated as "king," in the English language. Fijians are born into tribes that are ranked, from the highest level of the kings and royalty down to the commoners.
[6] Fergus Clunie, "Tongiaki to Kalia: The Micronesian-rigged Voyaging-canoes of Fiji and Western Polynesia and their Tangaloa-rigged Forebears," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 124, no. 4 (2015): 340.

[7] Simon Greenhill and Ross Clark, "POLLEX-Online: The Polynesian Lexicon Project Online," *Oceanic Linguistics* 50, no. 2 (2011): 551–9.
[8] Maxwell Churchward, *Dictionary Tongan-English, English-Tongan* (Nukualofa: Government Printing, 1959), 77.
[9] Shirley Waldemar Baker, *An English and Tongan Vocabulary, Also a Tongan and English Vocabulary* (Auckland: Kessinger Publishing, 1897), 89.
[10] Serge Tcherkezoff, "The Samoan Category Matai (Chief): A Singularity in Polynesia? Historical and Etymological Comparative Queries*," The Journal of Polynesian Society* 109, no. 2 (June 2000): 173.
[11] Basil Thompson, *The Fijians: A Study of the Decay of Custom* (London: William Heinemann, 1908): 56.
[12] George Pratt, *Pratt's Grammar and Dictionary of the Samoan Language*, Reprint of the 4th edition, 1911, (Apia: Malua Printing Press, 1977), 98.
[13] Steven Hooper, "Supreme Among Our Valuables: Whale Teeth *Tabua,* Chiefship and Power in Eastern Fiji," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 122, no. 2 (2013): 132–3.
[14] Fergus Clunie, *Yalo I Viti* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1986), 22–25.
[15] P. Nuttall, P. D'Arcy, and C. Philp, "Waqa Tabu—Sacred Ships: The Fijian Drua," *International Journal of Maritime History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 427–50.
[16] Thomas Williams, *Journal of Thomas Williams, Missionary in Fiji*, *1840–1853*, vol. 2 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson Ltd*.,* 1931), 78.
[17] Basil Thomson, *The Fijians: A Study of the Decay of Custom* (London: W.Heinemann, 1908), 292.
[18] Marian Dyer, "Traditional Fijian Weaponry on Display," *AWA: Academic Writing at Auckland* (Fall 2013): 1.
[19] A. Cappell, *The Fijian Dictionary* (Suva, Fiji: Government Printer, 1991) 102.
[20] The production of war clubs was not the domain of women. Dyer, "Traditional Fijian Weaponry," 23.
[21] Fergus Clunie, *Fijian Weapons & Warfare* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1977), 26.
[22] Clunie, "Tongiaki to Kalia," 337.
[23] Thompson, *The Fijians*, 291.
[24] Hooper, "'Supreme Among our Valuables,'" 47.
[25] Clunie, "Tongiaki to Kalia," 372.
[26] Sipiriano Nemani, "Valenivanua: A Communal Cultural Space, The Pinnacle of Indigenous Values, Peace and Mana," *Traditional Architecture, Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ed. Angela DiSanto and Michael Peterson (Seoul: ICHCAP, 2014), 10.
[27] Tua Maciu, personal communication, June 26, 2006.
[28] Thompson, *The Fijians,* 292.
[29] Maciu, personal communication.
[30] Maciu, personal communication.