

*Heirs of Lata: A Renewal of Polynesian Voyaging.* 21 minutes, 1997, VHS (NTSC), color. Filming and script by Taumako students of Vaka Taumako Project. Vaka Taumako Project Archive and Research Center, PO Box 662224, Lihue, HI 96766. US\$20.

*Vaka Taumako: The First Voyage.* 17 minutes, 1999, VHS (NTSC), color. Producer: Junihoa Productions. Vaka Taumako Project Archive and Research Center, Lihue, HI. US\$20. (Both films available as a set for US\$35.)

Taumako is the main island of the Duff Group in the Solomon Islands' Temotu Province. Like their well-documented Polynesian compatriots on Tikopia and Anuta, two hundred miles to the south-southeast, Duff Islanders are remote from centers of governmental authority and economic development; and like Tikopia and Anuta, this community of approximately five hundred people has retained much of its earlier culture and social organization. Duff Islanders are renowned throughout the Solomons for their seafaring exploits and their outstanding voyaging canoes, known as *tepuke*. Polynesians from the neighboring Reef Islands once made similar canoes and shared essentially the same seafaring traditions, as described by commentators from Haddon and Hornell to William Davenport and David Lewis.

In 1993, Taumako's elderly paramount chief, Koloso Kaveia, established the Vaka Taumako Project. His objective was to promote mastery of traditional canoe-building and voyaging skills among younger community

members by building several *tepuke* and sailing them to remote destinations under the direction of skilled navigators. The entire procedure was to be captured on video. The project was embraced and carried out by the Taumako community, with financial support from several government ministries and private businesses, and with anthropologist Mimi George serving as director and principal investigator. These two films represent a first step in documenting the project's accomplishments.

*Heirs of Lata* focuses on the process of constructing a voyaging canoe, from selection and felling of a tree for the hull to the eventual launching. It includes scenes of the community pulling an enormous log along skids from the island's interior to the beach. And it shows the major canoe-making activities: shaping the hull with axes and adzes; plaiting sennit cord; lashing pieces together; fashioning pandanus sails; and preparing wood preservative from seaweed. *Vaka Taumako* covers some of the same ground, even using some of the same video footage, but it focuses on the project's first interisland voyage. It shows preparations for departure, the canoe's performance at sea, its arrival at Nifiloli in the Reef Islands, and the voyagers' enthusiastic reception. Both films nicely depict the community working together and provide impressive views of Taumako's elaborate, sophisticated voyaging canoes with neatly crafted shelters and gracefully curved "crab-claw" sails.

The video footage raises some intriguing comparative issues. The literature on Oceanic seafaring contains descriptions of *tepuke*, including a good deal of information on how they

are put together, accompanied by a number of photographs. The photos, however, are mostly of models; and they do not show the vessels at sea. In the films, I was struck by the Taumako canoes' round hulls, which are surprisingly slender for the complex superstructure that they support. These contrast with the deep-V voyaging hulls found in such areas as Micronesia, the Polynesian outlier atolls of Papua New Guinea and the western Solomons, or Tikopia and Anuta. Unlike those hulls, which may measure four or five feet from keel to gunwales and provide plenty of freeboard, *tepuke* hulls and outriggers are entirely submerged for much of their time on the open sea. This system would seem to create a lot of drag, impair the vessels' speed and efficiency, and produce a great deal of wear and tear.

Even such basic maneuvers as bailing would appear to present an intriguing challenge. The hull is essentially a hollowed-out log with a narrow opening on top. Although the opening is covered and caulked, on a lengthy voyage there would almost certainly be leakage. And with the hull cover at the water line, one wonders how the crew accesses the interior without letting in more water than can be removed.

Despite first appearances, the system evidently works. Still, the peculiarities of hull design combined with the crab-claw sail and the fact that the shelter is perched on the outrigger platform—in contrast with the Carolinian system of placing it on the lee platform—means that *tepuke* must handle very differently from other voyaging canoes. It would be interesting to know about the differences in

sailing characteristics and their implications for interisland contact.

These films are a commendable beginning in what promises to be an ongoing project. However, they are better in conception than execution. *Heirs of Lata* was filmed by Duff Island students, and the lack of experience is evident in its cinematic quality. *Vaka Taumako* was professionally produced. The photography and color are a marked improvement, and where the same footage is used, it is handled more adeptly. Most of the first film's points are made again, but more succinctly, in the second.

Both films miss splendid opportunities to address important issues. For example, women are shown making sails and plaiting sennit, but their contribution escapes comment. Similarly, when the canoe arrives at Nifiloli in the second film, we learn that Kaveia's wife has made the journey with him, but we are given no insight into her activities during the voyage. Since most portrayals of Pacific Island seafaring treat it as a predominantly male endeavor, acknowledgment of women's contributions would have been a welcome addition.

Another issue suggested by the video but not discussed involves the integration of old and new. What, for example, does it tell us that the Islanders' attire ranges from boots, long pants, and long-sleeved shirts to *lavavas*, leaves, and bark cloth? Or that they use metal tools to hew what the notes call "completely traditional" vessels? More intriguing is the blending of religions. One scene in the first film shows Chief Kaveia sprinkling some kind of libation on a canoe hull in the early stages of construction; a

few moments later, an Anglican clergyman in full regalia appears to be blessing the same hull. Immediately thereafter, the “traditional” Islanders break out in the film’s theme song, “We Welcome You,” sung in English. None of this is mentioned, much less analyzed by the narrator.

When the canoes are launched in the first film, we are told that *tepuke* are superior to modern sailing yachts “in many ways.” Fair enough; but why not spell out those ways? Likewise, Taumako’s sophisticated navigational techniques are hinted at but not described. Such details would make the films more useful both as teaching aids in courses on the Pacific and for their avowed purpose of preserving indigenous knowledge.

The two films and accompanying literature contain several minor but annoying discrepancies. For example, the notes give the Taumako population as 500, while *Vaka Taumako* gives it as 450. The films give the distance of the voyage from Taumako to the Reef Islands as 100 miles, while my maps show it as more like 60. And the films suggest that *tepuke* have not been built since the 1950s or sailed since the 1960s. Yet, I was told during a 1983 visit to Honiara about a group of Duff Islanders who sailed a *tepuke* to the western Solomons in 1980. According to the story, they had planned to go on to Port Moresby but failed to complete the trip because of inclement weather.

Most troubling to me is the implication in *Heirs of Lata*, and the direct assertion in the notes, that Duff Islanders are the only Polynesians who still build and sail traditional voyaging canoes. In fact, Anutans have main-

tained their voyaging activities with neither Taumako’s decades-long hiatus nor the necessity for revival. And Polynesians from Ontong Java and Nukumanu sail between those two atolls, sometimes on a weekly basis. Granted, Taumako’s voyaging canoes are more spectacular than Anuta’s, while mariners from Nukumanu and Ontong Java are in the process of replacing wooden outrigger canoes with fiberglass, and sails with outboard motors. But Taumako’s uniqueness need not be exaggerated. This misstatement is particularly disturbing since the credits list Paul Keyaumi, an Ontong Javanese businessman, as one of the project’s sponsors. Surely the filmmakers knew about—and should have acknowledged—the ongoing maritime accomplishments of Keyaumi’s kin.

Despite these reservations I do not wish to sound too critical. It is gratifying to see local people take an interest in preserving traditional knowledge of canoe construction, handling, and navigation and to know of their collaboration with a representative of the scholarly community. Despite the technical shortcomings, these two films represent a good start to an exciting long-term enterprise. Improvement ought to come with practice.

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