

THE DEEP SEA CANOE

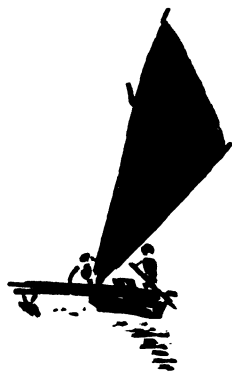
*The Story of Third World
Missionaries in the South Pacific*



ALAN R. TIPPETT

THE DEEP SEA CANOE

THE STORY OF THIRD WORLD MISSIONARIES
IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC



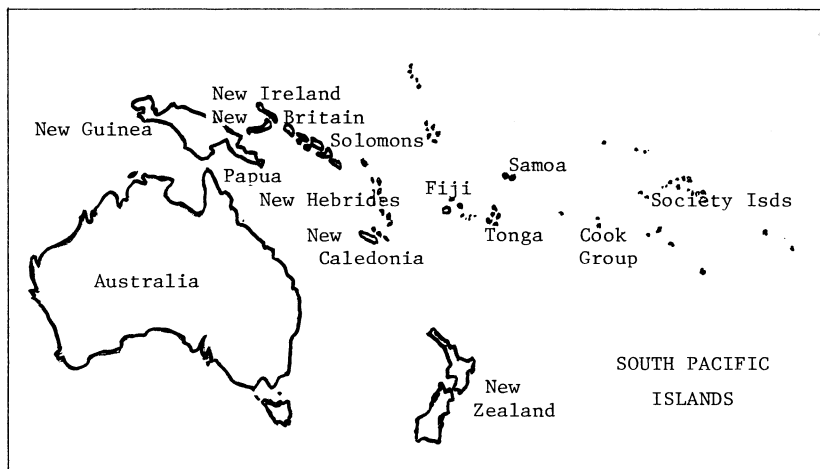


Fig. 1 Map of the South Pacific

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ALAN R. TIPPETT



William Carey Library

Pasadena, California

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Publisher's Note: The first edition of this book was prepared from a camera-ready copy created and edited by the late author, Alan Tippet. For this reprint, we have updated the title page, copyright page, and About the Author page, as well as the cover, but have left the main text as in the original.

Cover design: Chris Kim

Published by William Carey Library
1605 E. Elizabeth Street, Pasadena, California 91104
www.WCLBooks.com

William Carey Library is a ministry of the U.S. Center for World Mission,
Pasadena, California.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Tippet, Alan Richard.

The deep-sea canoe.

ISBN 0-87808-158-5

1. Missions--Oceanica. I. Title.

BV3670.T57 266'.0099 77-8660

Printed in the United States of America
17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1 SFP

THE DEEP-SEA CANOE

is dedicated to
the treasured memory of
my companions of
the Road
and the Deep

Kiniwiliame Namoumou
Elimi Kurusiga
Setareki Rika
Etuata Sokiveta
Iliesa Senikau

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Preface:

The Deep-Sea Canoe

THE DEEP-SEA CANOE is a symbol from the South Pacific World. A century and a half ago, Fijian and Tongan deep-sea canoes plied from island to island with trade, warriors and tribute. More often than not their narratives were woven into the cultural configuration of cannibalism and war. These included double canoes (*drua*), sometimes called "sacred canoes" because war and cannibalism were religiously institutionalized. Some of these were longer than Captain Cook's *Endeavour*. There were other deep-sea craft - the *tabilai* and the *camakau* - which may still be found in the outer islands today.

In the first half of the 19th Century a dramatic change took place. The use of the deep-sea canoe steadily shifted from the business of war and cannibalism to the transport of missionaries from one island group to another. These men were Tahitians, Tongans and Fijians. They spread the Gospel message beyond their own reefs right across the Pacific. They made phenomenal voyages between groups hundreds of miles apart, with remarkable skill in navigation. Joeli Bulu, Joni Havea, Juliasa Naulivou, Sailasa Faone, Wesele Lagi and Jeremaia Latu, all Tongan missionaries to Fiji before 1840, sailed over that 500 miles by deep-sea canoe.

Some of the British missionaries used this form of navigation. Thomas Williams in particular, used a canoe named *Kurabui* for his inter-insular visitation in the following decade. The canoe became a symbol for missionary expansion. In Fiji we are talking of a deep-sea canoe - a *drua*, a *camakau* or a *tabilai*, not a light-draught canoe without a proper deck, that is poled to and fro in the rivers and within the reefs (*takia*). True, many town Fijians who have been

educated for the urban rather than the nautical life, and some inland islanders, call any canoe a takia. But the whole point of this quite indigenous concept is that the missionary symbol is a deep-sea canoe. There is to be no enclosure of their Church within the reefs. The island churches found themselves compelled to reach out beyond the reefs, and that could not be done in a light-draught canoe. In my years in Kadavu I often did my own missionary itineration in a deep-sea canoe, and many times in bad weather have I been close to disaster that I am fully aware of the significance of the deep-sea descriptor.

There is a record of Joeli Bulu borrowing a large deep-sea canoe, named *Kinikinilau*, from Ratu Cakobau, in 1869, to visit the island of Nairai. They ran into a hurricane and blinding rain. The canoe rolled and plunged so violently that her fastenings were endangered, and the sailyard was jerked from its place on the bow and fell into the sea. They tugged and strained until they got it in its place again, but many of the company having given up hope, they had to lower the sail and let the storm carry them by its own force, without a sail. They lashed the sail to the deck, and Stephen, a Lasakauan, called the company to prayer, leading first himself and then asking Joeli to follow.

No sooner had the prayer ended than the storm subsided "not growing weaker, and ceasing gradually, but suddenly, in a moment. And there was a calm." [I quote Joeli's actual words]. They began to secure their parted fastenings and headed for an island that had appeared in their course, and skulled for land. As they did so the storm began again and they hoisted the sail. The wind grew stronger and stronger. A cable parted and they lost an anchor, but they were able to enter the passage through the reef, and with some difficulty managed to beach the canoe; by which time the hurricane was blowing full force again from the opposite direction. Although many trees and houses fell, they were able to "sing praises to God for his wonderful goodness" as Joeli put it. Anyone who is familiar with the circular pattern of this kind of Fijian weather disturbance will know the canoe had crossed "the eye of the hurricane".

These Fijian and Tongan missionaries could boast with Paul of suffering shipwreck, of spending days and nights in the deep, and journeying in the perils of the sea, of weariness, of cold and of watching (II Cor 11:25ff.). And as much as any western missionaries they were responsible for the spread of the Church across the South Pacific.

Seventeen years of deliberate indigenizing phased out the old colonial type of mission in Fiji. This transitional period terminated in 1964 with the inauguration of the now completely autonomous Conference. One of the rituals of the public festivities was the presentation of a model deep-sea canoe by the highest Chiefs of the land to the Church, as a symbolic reminder of their missionary commission. The first President of the Conference was installed into office by being clothed with the official presidential stole. This beautiful vestment carries two symbols - the symbol of the Faith, the cross, which is a reminder of the power of the Gospel, and a Fijian deep-sea canoe, a cultural symbol of the commission to go forth with that Gospel beyond the reefs.

This little book is an attempt to recapture something of the missionary heritage of the island people themselves, and put it in a biblical frame of reference. It is not a documented history (although it could well have been so) but is rather a simply written account for the young Christians of the Islands today, so that they may know the history of how they came by grace to their present position in the Christian Faith.

1

Mission Under God

Almighty God, who didst send Thy light on the heathen through Jesus Christ the true light; drive the dark out of our hearts with Thy Word and Thy Spirit; shine on our islands with the light of everlasting life, that they may know their sin, and may believe in Jesus the Saviour; that they may find love and peace, and fighting and heathen ways may pass away, that they may all come to Thee repenting and believing, following with all their hearts Thy rule; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Prayer of Bishop Patteson
from the Melanesian Brotherhood's
Morning and Evening Prayers

We travelled along the coast of Malaita with two Melanesian Brothers. They left our company at a place from which a trail led inland into the mountains, where the people had not yet accepted Christ. These mountaineers were enemies of the saltwater people. They had trade relations, but their market was carried out between two rows of hostile warriors. Yet the Brotherhood felt *the times were ripe*. The mountain villages were coming to Christ, forming congregations and providing pastoral nurture. Then the Brothers would depart and move on deeper into the pagan region.

In the record of Christian missions down through the centuries we come across periods of remarkable vigour when the pioneering bands have penetrated new lands and planted Christian communities across the countryside. It was like this in the 1st Century, as has been recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*. It was the same in the narrative of how the Gospel spread in Britain, and in Ireland and in Germany. However much legend has come to surround the records of Augustine, Patrick and Boniface, one thing we know - those medieval movements from animism to Christianity were the most dramatic and significant changes of faith position those people had known, and took possession of communities of people whole. They changed the course of history.

In this little book I shall narrate some of the more recent (and still documentable) events of the Christian movement in the Central South Pacific, bringing the focus not on the western missionary figures (whose presence admittedly was quite real, nevertheless), but on the South Pacific islanders themselves, in as much as they were engaged in the missionary penetration, the uprooting of animism, the substitution of Christianity and the planting of the Church. We will see how the island people themselves, once they discovered the power of the Gospel were enabled to bear persecution, to triumph in encounter with the powers of their past, and became so obsessed with the evangel that they could not rest until they had claimed their homelands for Christ. This is, therefore, a book about Third World missionaries during the 19th Century.

The modern period of Protestant missions may be said to have begun in the last decade of the 18th Century with the activities of William Carey and (as far as the Pacific was concerned) with the formation of the London Missionary Society (LMS), whose missionaries penetrated Tahiti and the surrounding islands. From the island converts of this mission, and particularly from Raiatea, came a band of men who went forth with apostolic zeal to win the Polynesian islands to the west for Christ.

Another similar British body to the LMS was the Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) whose missionaries operated in Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand. The two missions met in Samoa. The triumph of the Gospel in Tonga led to the missionary penetration of Fiji; and eventually Fijians and Tongans (some Samoans and Rotumans) carried the Gospel further westwards to New Britain and New Ireland, and subsequently to Papua, the Solomon Islands and North Australia. The Tahitian missionaries also penetrated Melanesia. Many of these Third World missionaries were 'faithful unto death' and their graves are found in foreign soil of islands that are now Christian.