

# The bird takes you home

**Melanesian sailors are keen birdwatchers or, to put it more correctly, birds are an important part of fishing and navigational knowledge and ritual protection, and this is reflected in the canoe art of the region.**

Birds have a hugely important navigational role throughout Oceania because if you know your birds, you know how far you are from land. The tern, for example, is never more than 10 – 15 km from land, and always returns at sunset, so if you are lost at sea and you see terns, you can follow them to a beach. It is because of this homing behavior that the tern in particular has become a symbol of a safe homecoming for a canoe.



*An old tern prow from Vao Island, Vanuatu.  
Vao prows are often very sleek and well-finished.*

On Rono, Wala, Aatchin and Vao, the “smol ilans” just off Malekula in Vanuatu, the canoes of graded men each had a prow depicting a tern (“suleeb” in the language of Wala), to help bring the canoe home.

Though these small islands are more or less within sight of one another and Malekula, each has its own language (sometimes more than one) and, like every other aspect of life in Malekula, the style of tern prow varied from island to island and also depended on your grade within the *Minke* or men’s graded society<sup>1</sup>. Those of the lowest grade had a simple bird with the beak shut, while a higher grade might have the beak open, and only those at the very top had the right to an elaborate double prow, with the head and neck of the bird divided right down to the body.

A development which was probably more recent was to carve a flying fish joining the neck of the bird to the body – an innovation which reinforces the neck and helps prevent against breakage. (The head and neck were extremely vulnerable, and the fine for breaking the beak or head of a canoe prow was one pig, a punishment indeed.)

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<sup>1</sup> Layard, J: “Stone Men of Malekula”, Chatto & Windus, 1942



*An old suleeb prow from Wala with a flying fish reinforcing the neck, recently overpainted with western trade paints.*

There are plenty of canoes but very few prows left on the 'smol ilans' today and I could only find one canoe with a figurehead on the beach at Vao when I visited. Vao does, however, have the Virgin carved standing in a canoe with figurehead in the island's old Catholic church.

Another area of Melanesia famous for its many and varied bird prows is North Western New Guinea around Humboldt Bay and Cenderwasih (formerly Geelvink) Bay and on the offshore islands of Wakde and Yamne

One well known form of prow which is produced on both sides of the Papua New Guinea border combines a bird's head with several fish. In her book "Canoes of Wanamo" Hermione Frankel<sup>2</sup> describes it as the head of a friar bird, a noisy and inquisitive land bird which is recognised by the local people as a messenger for the ancestors, giving warning of danger and watching over the canoe.



*A Wanamo piu or bird prow depicting the head of a friar bird above stylised sharks and a dolphin. This prow is completely authentic, but has never been attached to a canoe.*

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<sup>2</sup> Frankel,H: "Canoes of Wanamo", Institute of PNG Studies, 1978

The bird's head and crop are always carved above stylised and entwined fish including tiger and hammerhead sharks, dolphins and the tiny sprat *mu'me'me* that follows fishing canoes. Fishermen of Wanamo hunt sharks from their frail canoes, attracting the shark with a bloody bait in the water, catching its head in a noose, and bludgeoning it to death, but the sharks are semi sacred and the fisherman himself cannot eat his catch when it is cooked for the feast that follows.

Wanamo is in PNG, but on the West Papua side of the border, Van der Sande, a Dutch anthropologist researching before 1910, describes the bird as the head of a cormorant, a fishing bird. The carving style changes in West Papua, but the basic concept of a bird's head above powerful fish remains constant.



*A prow from Wauna village, West Papua depicting the protective bird above the head of the fisherman, with stylised fish beneath.*

One local innovation which is extremely interesting is the incorporation of a human head into this schematic. Michael Howard<sup>3</sup>, who has conducted extensive research into the canoe prow styles of West Papua, identifies this style with the village of Wauna, where he was informed that the human head depicts the owner of the canoe, no doubt an added level of protection.

The other famous bird prow of the area is that of Wakde and Yamna islands, which is carved as a V-shaped figurehead rather than a prow ornament. The foremost figure is usually a stylised human face, though sometimes a bird, or both; and there is often a second piece inserted above this depicting birds and faces.

The Massim people also use birds plentifully in their canoe and other carvings, but as Massim expert Harry Beran has pointed out, these are more likely to be clan symbols than fishing or navigating icons – even when carved on canoes. Trobriands splashboards often have a row of birds swimming or walking across the top and these are commonly assumed to be seabirds such as terns or frigate birds, but may not be.

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<sup>3</sup> Published in Howard & Sanggenafa (eds): "Papers in Applied Anthropology in Irian Jaya – 11", Dept of Anthropology, Cenderwasih University.



*A composite two-part prow from the islands of Wakde or Yamna, Irian Jaya. The topmost part is held by a peg and would have been lashed onto the canoe.*

In parts of the Solomons, the frigate bird is often carved as a canoe ornament. The reason for this is twofold. First, the frigate bird is an aggressive bird which attacks other seabirds in the air and steals their food, and so has been adopted by some Solomons cultures as a headhunting symbol. Second, the frigate birds often hover over the migrating bonito schools to feed on the small fish they drive to the surface. Since the annual bonito catch was an essential part of many Solomons initiation ceremonies, the migration was eagerly awaited and the hovering frigate birds helped to pinpoint it.

**David Said**



*Many different birds are depicted on Massim kula canoe carvings, mainly as clan symbols. This sukusuku ornament is tied to the prow when approaching a trading beach to declare peaceful intentions and depicts two kinds of birds – several stylised heron heads below and two larger birds above.*