

Torina (Canoe Making Magic) and 'Copy-Cat': History and Discourses on the Boatbuilding Industry in Langalanga, Solomon Islands

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of Langalanga boatbuilding from the pre-colonial, colonial to post-colonial eras in the Solomon Islands. The Langalanga people reside along the central-west coast of the Malaita Islands, the Solomon Islands. With a tradition of shell money production and inter-island exchanges, the Langalanga continued to make shell money, and expanded their trading network under the British colonial regime. They also gained knowledge of new techniques in boatbuilding through various sources, including contacts with Chinese and European ships and craftsmen, a UN funded vocational school, and also spiritual assistance from clan ancestors. Today, Langalanga people dominate the domestic boatbuilding industry in the Solomon Islands, and are very active in the business of inter-island transportation of passengers and cargo. This paper examines how the Langalanga found their way in the colonial situation and post-colonial economic environment, how they attribute their success to ancestral heritage (*torina*) and their talent as 'copy-cats', and their ability to build a connection between traditional and introduced knowledge in boatbuilding.

Research Background

A visitor who takes a tour by motor boat around Langalanga Lagoon along the west coast of Malaita Island, the Solomon Islands will quickly notice the numerous large boat-building yards in the area. Some projects are on-going while some have obviously been halted for several years. A keen observer who takes a close look at Aoke Harbour, Malaita's main harbor, will see several mid-size passenger and cargo boats running between Malaita and Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. They are all built, owned and operated by Langalanga men. A walk around Honiara harbor will also reveal that most domestic transportation businesses run by Solomon islanders have similar boats, which are built and sold, and sometimes owned, by Langalanga companies.

Despite their relatively small population, the Langalanga are very well known throughout the Solomon Islands. They have substantial economic and political influence in terms of regional trading networks and exchange systems (past and present) partly through shell money circulation, and partly through their role in the country's post-colonial shipping economy. The boatbuilding industry has flourished in Langalanga for many decades; it is a pride of achievement and an important representation of Langalanga society (in addition to shell money making and artificial islet building).

Why does a small group monopolize the domestic boatbuilding industry in the Solomon Islands? How did they obtain the knowledge and develop the craftsmanship and entrepreneurship in boatbuilding? What is the Langalanga's own cultural interpretation of their success? This paper examines how the Langalanga found their way in the colonial situation and in the post-

colonial economic environment, how they interpret their success to ancestral heritage (*torina*) and their talent as 'copy-cats', and their ability to build a connection between traditional and introduced knowledge in boatbuilding.¹

Ethnographic and Historical Context

The Langalanga are a cultural-linguistic group that reside in coastal or islet settlements in the Langalanga Lagoon along the central-west coast of Malaita, the Solomon Islands. Reconstruction based on oral history shows that many clans originally came from the Kwara'ae and Kwaio mountainous areas on Malaita Island, and moved down to establish offshore settlements on natural or artificial islets. Latecomers arrived from many directions, including northern and southern Malaita, and neighboring islands such as Nggela, Guadalcanal and Isabel (see Figure 1). In the past few decades, as a result of cyclones and missionary work, most people have moved onshore to set up new villages along the coast of Malaita (Guo 2003).



Figure 1: Map of the Solomon Islands

The main genre of kinship organization throughout Malaita Island is the patrilineal clan (called *fuiwale* in Langalanga), which constitutes the core of ancestral sacrificial rites (*agalo*). In the past, a priest (*fata aabu*) sacrificed pigs to their patrilineal clan ancestors in shrines (*beu aabu*) or on particular stones, in the rear part of men's houses (*fera aabu*). However, affinal connections are also considered an important part of kinship networks. In practice, a 'contextual definition of status' (Keesing 1968, 1982) prevails, that is, a person can choose to reside and associate him/herself with his/her father/mother/spouse's clan according to their interests in different contexts.

Although only approximately eight to ten thousand strong, the Langalanga play an important role in the economy of the Solomon Islands. Their subsistence is partly based on small-scale agriculture and fishing, and partly on wage labor. However, their economy depends largely on the manufacture of shell money (*bata*), which is used as bride-wealth, compensation and personal ornaments in the region (Guo 2006). As a local currency, shell money serves as the vehicle in which the Langalanga apply alternative economic strategy and maintain their cultural

value and group identity (Guo 2008, 2009a). In addition to the shell money economy, in the past few decades, the Langalanga have dominated the boat-building industry in the region, and run several shipping companies that operate all over the nation (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: A Typical Cargo and Passenger Boat Built by the Langalanga
(Photo by Pei-yi Guo)

Why did the boatbuilding industry become such a prominent feature in Langalanga society? There are historical and geographical reasons that are described in this paper. However, the Langalanga themselves tend to attribute cultural characteristics to their own achievements. Overall, there are two main discourses regarding this matter: firstly, boat builders acquired their talent and ability through traditional canoe building magic (*torina*); secondly, Langalanga people are 'copy-cats', that is they learn by watching and are quick to put what they learn into practice. To what extent their self-interpretation accounts for the phenomena is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I argue that by looking into these local discourses, we are able to understand how the Langalanga imagine and associate themselves in relation to the technology and knowledge brought by the others, and how they position themselves and their ancestral tradition in the ever-changing world.

Below, the paper is organized according to Langalanga discourses. I will first describe the significance of canoe, seafaring and trade in Langalanga society, and how people account for the culture of canoe making, especially in relation to the idea of *torina*. I then draw an overall picture on the development of the boatbuilding industry in the region. The next section focuses on the discourse of 'copy-cat' and its meanings. In conclusion I will discuss the social and cultural significance of boatbuilding as an economic strategy applied by the Langalanga, and point out the implication of this case to the study of voyaging and seafaring in the Solomon Islands and in the Pacific.

Torina: Traditional Canoes and Canoe Making

When asking about why the boatbuilding industry thrives in Langalanga Lagoon (and not any other place in the Solomon Islands), I was often told that Langalanga people had been good at building canoes for a long time, so they were more interested in the craft and it was more

accessible. When recalling the earliest craftsmen who learnt to manufacture the new type of boats, Langalanga narrators often attributed their ability to the heritage of canoe building magic —*torina*, which was 'owned' by certain clans.

Canoes in Langalanga

The canoe is an essential part of Langalanga life. Living on artificial or semi-artificial islets, the Langalanga rely on several types of canoes (see Table 1) for daily transportation—whether they go for visiting relatives, fishing or diving, fetching fresh water from the rivers, picking up *nali* nuts and fruits, collecting firewood, farming in their small fields on the big island, or going to the markets, they travel by canoe.

Canoes are indispensable for life in Langalanga; therefore, in an ideal marriage, the natal families² should provide the new couple with a canoe, a new plot of land for the garden, and an ax or bush knife to start their home with. In the past, those who had no canoe often borrowed from their relatives and neighbors, but it was considered less convenient, and was viewed as a sign of poverty.

Table 1: Langalanga Terms for Canoes and Boats

<i>lola</i>	Small dugout canoe.
<i>lola oto</i>	Fishing canoe. <i>Oto</i> means fishing. <i>Lola oto</i> is especially used by men in the <i>fera</i> (men's house) to catch fish for their own consumption.
<i>aikarua, aikaroa</i>	Large dugout canoe.
<i>soro</i>	Canoe built by combining several wooden planks.
<i>tabafolo</i>	Large canoe. Built by the combination of 5 pieces of timber, it is long (about 15 ft), and is characterized by an additional timber added in the front. Seats (<i>lusu</i>) are installed in its design.
<i>baru bilabila</i>	Translated nowadays by islanders as 'war canoe'. Made in a similar way to a <i>soro</i> , it was the largest vessel for traditional sea transportation in the lagoon, and was used mostly for long distance trading voyages (see Figure 3).
<i>raebo</i>	In Solomon Pijin (ray boat). Motor boat, usually in the form of wooden canoe with a motor engine.
<i>sikolo</i>	Motor boat, glass fiber boat with motor engine.
<i>kata</i>	Cutter boat, introduced by the Chinese (see Figure 4).
<i>faga</i>	Lit. <i>faga</i> originally referred to plantation, and it was later used as a term for a large ship (see Figure 2).

Occasionally, people organized voyaging groups and paddled to the Florida Islands or Guadalcanal (Hogbin 1964), where they dived for shells, traded shell money for pigs and large quantities of agricultural products, and made marriage alliances. A large canoe, *baru*, which could accommodate almost twenty people, was used for a long distance trip.



Figure 3: A *Baru* Built by Late Feragwau Intended for Tourism
(Photo by Pei-yi Guo)

The Langalanga are adept at overseas expedition. One reason is that many of them came or had marriage alliance from Gela, North or South Malaita. In their narratives, the Langalanga were formed by people of various origins, who migrated to the lagoon, and contributed their special tasks and magic for the prosperity of the group (Guo 2009b).

Another reason for their practice of long distance trade is that their lagoon lacks some materials for subsistence, therefore exchange is a necessity. It is likely that the Langalanga went overseas to Gela for exchange because exchanging with the neighboring bush people in Malaita became difficult when there was tension between the two sides. For the most important *maoma* feast (Guo 2009b), one essential way to obtain a large quantity of food was through exchange with their trading partners. As the population grew and the marital networks expanded, their trading area was gradually enlarged.

On the other hand, as the manufacture of shell money increased, the need for materials—especially various kinds of shells—multiplied as well. The amount of suitable shells in the Langalanga lagoon was limited, and this might be a good reason why the Langalanga made overseas trips, to dive for torques shells and other shells to use as materials for shell money.

Torina: Magic for Canoe Making

Canoe making is considered a restricted knowledge in some Pacific societies (Feinberg 1995, D'Arcy 2006). In Langalanga, the ‘magic’ of canoe making is called ‘*torina*’, and is a speciality of certain clans and craftsmen. Among those who possessed *torina*, Lumafelo was a clan that was established mainly because of canoe building. In the legend, Mousi, the son of a prominent clan leader, was very talented in making canoe. He had the *torina* of the clan. Mousi

was very devoted to making canoes, and filled the men's house (*fera*) with many of them, making his father unhappy, with the result that he was scolded by his father one day. Angrily, Mousi moved out of the *fera*, took a raft (*ato*) from the roof, and built his own *fera*—the action also represented the break from the old clan and the establishment of a new clan (Guo 2009b). His talent for canoe making (*torina*) went with him to the new Lumafelo clan, and was passed to their descendants.

In another version concerning the establishment of the Lumafelo clan, Mousi was a latercomer to the island; he came with a canoe named Asilamalao. He wanted to build another one, but the clan that accepted him denied his request. Therefore, he went out to build his own *fera aabu*, so he could make canoes as he wished. The second canoe he built was named Raramo, which commemorated the warrior (*ramo*) who adopted him. In some other narratives on early migration to the lagoon, the canoe of latercomers was also an issue in the negotiation with the founding clans. In these accounts, canoes of newcomers were said to be sacred ('aabu'), that they embodied the supernatural power the newcomers brought with them from their original places.³

As shown by the stories above, there is more than one *torina* in the region. A person is guided by the *torina* he possesses in making canoes; different sources of *torina* lead to different styles of canoes or leave various signatures on the product. This is shown especially in a legend: a Lemafelo man met another man in South Malaita; they talked about their migration history and suspected that they both came from the same origin. The pair decided to do an experiment, that each one of them went home to build a canoe, and brought it to their next meeting. They were very surprised that the two canoes looked exactly the same. It was regarded as definite proof that they both originated from the same Alaasa clan, and possessed the same *torina*.

Those who are good at making canoes could make money from selling their products. In the 1930s, a small canoe (*lola*) would cost 6 strings of red shell money (*romu*) and one string of white shell money (*isa galia*). A large one (*tabafolo*) cost 10 strings shell money (*tafuliae*) plus one *isa galia*. In order to inherit *torina*, one had to pay the former craftsmen, who transmitted the *torina*. The late Buloli once told me that his father was born of a woman from Lumafelo, and obtained *torina* from a Lumafelo clansman Timekarabali.

After we sold canoes, a portion of the money should go back to him. It is just like the SDA church today. In SDA we give 1/10 offering. That's the same when you get a knowledge from a tribe, you give a portion of your earnings to where your knowledge originated from.

After converting to Christianity and discontinuing the worship of ancestral spirits, people no longer make this kind of payment to their masters. However, the idea that the talent and ability to make canoes is associated with *torina*, a magic based on certain ancestral spirits, and that one should pay tribute to its source, remains strong today. The notion also shapes how people expect a successful entrepreneur in boatbuilding and transportation to share their wealth with the community (Guo 2010).

Development of Boatbuilding Industry in Langalanga

Since the 1870s, many young Solomon Islanders (especially from Malaita) worked as contract laborers in the plantations of Queensland and Fiji (Belshaw 1950, Corris 1973, Keesing 1978). After the prohibition of imported labor to Australia in the early twentieth century, Malaita laborers turned to work in several plantation fields invested by large companies in the BSIP (British Solomon Islands Protectorate).

In this period of time, several “big men” in Langalanga and Lau Lagoon played the roles as middlemen in the outflow of plantation laborers. Their service included recruiting men (mainly from Malaita) to do contract work in plantations, transporting laborers between Malaita and Tulagi, and traveling with the company vessels to collect copra at various plantation ports. They monopolized the job from 1910, and were called “steamer gangs” (Bennett 1987: 187) or “passage master” (Corris 1973: 61-2)⁴. In a typical journey, the steamer gangs transported their recruits on cutter boats from Malaita to Tulagi at Nggela (the capital of BSIP at that time), where they boarded the large ships of plantation companies (such as Burns, Philip & Co.) and toured the Solomon Sea⁵. Malaita laborers worked mainly as stevedores loading copra when the vessel called at each port. After returning to Nggela, they boarded the cutter boat again, and were sent back to Malaita by the passage masters (Bennett 1987: 442).

The passage masters had the power to issue tickets for men to board the cutter boat and work as stevedores, and they took a certain percentage of the wage as their commission. Soon they accumulated enough wealth and, with a loan from the company, passage masters started to purchase cutter boats to facilitate their business. The earliest record I could find so far was from 1933 when the “natives” were said to own a cutter boat for labor transportation. However, the Langalanga must have adopted the new style of ship much earlier. For example, an old man told me that the first cutter was bought and brought into Langalanga before 1910: he recalled that it was named Kwai, and bought at the price of 4 pounds. Anistolo, an old man in his 90s, recalled that his father went with others to the Western Province to purchase a cutter boat from Burns Philip & Co., for an owner named Peter Berede (a man from the Lumafelo clan). On their way back they barely survived bad weather, the incident taking place right before Anistolo was born (around 1920).

The name of the cutter boat that Anistolo’s father brought back was “Keep Blessing,” and it relied on man-power (paddles). Sails were later attached to the boat, and it was often pointed out that when the wind was favorable, a cutter boat could travel faster than a motorboat. In the 1937 Malaita Annual Report, the district officer described the installation of an engine to a Langalanga cutter boat, and commented on how they were keen to upgrade the means of transportation⁶.

The Beginnings of the Boatbuilding Industry

The cutter boat (*kata*) played an important role in the oceanic transportation in the first few decades of the 20th century. Langalanga people often relate *kata* to the Chinese businessmen and craftsmen.⁷ The Chinese used it for wholesale and retail business: they traveled between large islands to buy and sell copra, and some businessmen used the cutter as a mobile shop

touring the region to sell food and consumption goods. Some Chinese were also hired by the British colonial officers to work on the repairs of government vessels. The 1944 Malaita Annual Report recorded that “a Chinese mechanic, Chan Wing, and two boat builders and carpenters, Messrs. Wong Kin and Li Yuen Woo, stationed at Aoke, were engaged in the repair and maintenance of government craft.”

However, the Langalanga were quick to pick up the technology for building *kata*. Both archival and oral histories indicated that some Langalanga started to participate in boatbuilding before WWII. It is unclear when it started; the earliest archival record I have located so far was the 1938 Malaita Annual Report, stating that the Langalanga made vessels for sale. According to my interviews, the first group of Langalanga men who were involved in the building of cutter boats included Maesala, Maeki, Tudia and Balifaga. They started as helpers for the Chinese cutter boat builders who came to Solomon Islands; after picking up the technique, they made their own boats and taught others in the region.

In recounts, people often pointed out the outstanding ability and intelligence of those pioneers who learnt boatbuilding. Maesala was a very smart man; he was said to have the ability to pick up a language soon after he heard it. He worked with Mr. Norman in the Western Province, and, according to several narrators, “learned how to make a boat just by looking.” It was said that Maesala built a total of four cutter boats at that time; he sold three of them, and kept one for his business. Balifaga was said to study boatbuilding at Port Moresby, and had constructed and sold three cutter boats before WWII. Interestingly, they were all closely related to the Lumafelao clan. Maesala and Maeki were clan descendants, while Tudia and Balifaga were brothers, related to Lumafelo by their sister's husband (Maeki). These are often cited as a proof that the Lumafelo *torina* is working on *faga* building.

There were difficulties and uncertainties in the early stage. An old man told me that the first *kata* they made was named “*Suinanita*,” to commemorate the process of boatbuilding. “*Sui*” means “finish,” and “*nanita*” means “when.” Maesala and his group worked on building the boat for so long that many people had doubt on the feasibility of the project. They were constantly mocked by the question: “when will the boat be finished?” Therefore, when it was finally done, they named the boat “*Suinanita*” as a way to express their feelings.

Another story also showed that in the early stage, there were uncertainties whether those pioneers could succeed. Maesala's nephew Fosala learned the craft and started his own boatbuilding project. Many people did not believe that he would succeed, so he named the ship “*Liomafla*,” which meant “wait (*masia*) and see (*lio*).”



Figure 4: A *Kata* (cutter), Broken and No Longer in Use
(Photo by Pei-yi Guo)

The work was disrupted by the war, and resumed after economic activities returned to normal. The 1953 Malaita Annual Report described that 12 vessels were under construction in Langalanga Lagoon. A sawmill was set up by a Roman Catholic mission at Buma; after cutting logs in the forest of Malaita, boatbuilders towed them to the sawmill, and made use of the timber for building boats. A shortage of nails sometimes delayed production. Some Chinese mechanics still worked on boatbuilding and repair, but it seemed that their production was limited.⁸ At the same time, “a small but flourishing boat-building industry has been established by Melanesians on Malaita, and a number of cutters for the inter-island trade have been built” (p.30). The District Commissioner J. Russell counted 16 cutters and six forty-foot boats were under construction by the end of 1955. He estimated the cost of building one boat was 600 pounds, which was sold at 1000⁹. A down payment of 100 pounds in the form of shell money, pigs, cash and other food were paid, and followed by other payments for building materials (nails, sails, caulking, spars, etc) (Malaita Annual Report 1955).

As the District Commissioner Grade pointed out in the 1953 Malaita Annual Report, “there was no shortage of buyers willing to pay the somewhat high prices asked for these cutter boats.” The Langalanga were very enthusiastic about this new industry. There were several villages devoted to boatbuilding during this time. For example, in central Langalanga, Bibira and Gwaelaga¹⁰ were two villages where people set up boatyards and worked as boatbuilders.

Colonial officers saw the Langalanga boatbuilding industry as a good example of local enterprise. When the District Commissioner of Bougainville, K.C. Anderson, went to Malaita for a meeting in 1957, he visited the Aokey shipyards, and praised “the independent action being taken by the native people themselves” ¹¹. When the High Commissioner of WPHC went to Malaita for a supervising tour, he also went to see boatbuilding at Laulasi.¹² The industry, being one of the very few indigenous businesses that reached a larger scale, was highly regarded by colonial officers. A boatbuilding school was set up in 1960, funded by international agencies; and in the 1970 Malaita Development Company listed boatbuilding as their proposed project¹³.

From *Kata* to *Faga*

Most cutter boats were small in size, and used man-power (paddles) or sails. It was the main type of vessel that islanders used for decades in domestic transportation. However, probably after WWII, it was gradually replaced by a new style of wooden boat, called *faga* in Langalanga. The term *faga* has another meaning—plantation, which indicated how it was originally used to transport laborers and copra for plantation companies. A *faga* is larger in size—usually from 40 ft to 60 ft long, and is powered by a motor engine¹⁴. Contemporary *fagas* are equipped with radio, and sometimes with GPS.

It is unclear when the Langalanga started to build *faga*. The 1955 Malaita Annual Report mentioned that there were four 40-ft boats under construction. In interviews, I was given vague dates for the transformation—the most possible year was around 1950. I will come back to this in the next section.

After the decline of the plantation economy, *faga* nowadays are mostly used for commercial fishing, as well as cargo and passenger transportation. They travel all over the Solomon Islands, but seldom go out of the country. A large *faga* can carry more than one hundred passengers, and sometimes the number doubles when they are chartered, or used to transport migrant workers back to their natal village to cast a vote. There are other styles of ships that serve as passenger boats in the Solomon Islands. Some Chinese merchants and some companies run by provincial funds purchase used ships from overseas for the purpose. The latter run at double to triple the speed of *faga*, and this is reflected in the price of their tickets. Most Solomon Islanders travel between their home island and Honiara by *faga* as an economic choice.

From *baru*, *kata* (cutter boat) to *faga*, Langalanga people not only upgraded the vessel they use for trade and travel, they also advanced their craftsmanship in boatbuilding.¹⁵ From a cultural perspective, these new boats carry with them similar meanings and notions related the ancestral spirits. They are canoes not for personal and daily usage, but for group transportation—the nature of the sociality of these large vessels continues to carry particular cultural implications, expressed in various formats. Let me briefly give two examples to illustrate its meanings.

It has been said in the last section that *baru*, especially those made by prominent figures, were considered taboo, sacred (*aabu*). Before launching any canoe, a priest (*faata aabu*) had to make a blessing; before launching a *baru*, the priest had to sacrifice pigs for the ancestral spirits (*agalo*), especially for the ones in charge of *torina*, and sometimes the power of a shark would be called for protection. Nowadays, before launching a newly completed *faga*, priests—Christian priest and ideally “kastom priest” as well—have to perform rituals of blessing. For those who are very faithful to church regulations, pig sacrifice is not practiced. In some cases when misfortune happened to the owner's family members, or to the ship itself, people often ascribed the blame to their failure to perform the right rituals.¹⁶

The naming of boats is also a very good window that shows us the cultural scenario. Ordinary dugout canoes seldom have individual names in Langalanga, but *baru*, *kata* and *faga* are carefully named, which is a way for the owner to show his memory and feelings, and even to answer his critics and counterattack.¹⁷ MV Living was the name of a *baru*, to commemorate a story during the “blackbirding” years. A recruit ship, believed to bear the name “MV Living,”

came and kidnapped people to work in Queensland. When the laborers came back, they were put to shore on another island. A woman saw them when she went to the market, and brought the news back to the village. A *baru* was named after this event; when the *baru* became rotten, the family built a big ship, so they name the new *faga* “MV Living.”

The “Copy-Cat” Discourse

Building a boat of 40-ft long is not an easy task. Three aspects have to be taken care of: firstly, the knowledge of how to build the structure of the boat, and the right materials to use; secondly, the organization of laborers to work on the project; thirdly, the financial management of boatbuilding projects, including the obtaining of materials within budget (timber, nails, engines, etc.), paying workers, and dealing with potential buyers. I will only concentrate on the technological aspect in this section, briefly discuss the third in conclusion, and analyze the second and the third aspects in another paper (Guo 2010).

For the know-how of boatbuilding, Langalanga people often attribute their ability to their *torina* heritage, and their ethnic characteristics of being “copy-cats.” The Langalanga use the term “copy-cat” without the negative connotations seen in the Western context; on the contrary, they talk about it with pride to describe the process by which they obtained the knowledge from the outside. I have interviewed boatbuilders across three generations, and there are generational differences when people comment on the act. The eldest ones, in their 70s and 80s, often claimed that they learnt the skill “naturally” when they worked under the first generation of *kata* and *faga* builders in the family. For example, Harry Mamata was a man of the sea—his daughter once commented that he was “*mauri*” (alive) when he was on a boat, and became “*maita*” (ill) when he stayed home. He started to work onboard at the age of 13, and had traveled to many places in the Pacific on a Norwegian ship when he was young. Later he worked for a steamer gang, and learnt to make cutter boats while working in the shipyard.

The second generation of boatbuilders in my interviews consists of middle age men who are currently the main workforce in the boatbuilding industry. I have observed how they work, and am very impressed by their ability to structure the whole thing without pen and paper. Usually the person who is most experienced makes a model of the boat they intend to build. At this stage it is important to decide the length and width of the boat, and the number becomes an “identity tag” for the particular boat—people will recall the length when they introduce it, and make comparisons with other ships. With the model in his head, the master directs other carpenters to cut and arrange timbers accordingly. There is no “blue print” or detail calculation. A man told me, “I and my brother only stayed in primary school for a few years. We learned to build boat by watching.” Throughout the interview, he emphasized this point several times, in a proud voice. Most middle age boatbuilders related boatbuilding to house building, because they both involved carpentry. A boatbuilder, who had worked on more than 13 boats, said,

At first I learned to build a house. In fact many people had learned that; it was taught in school. But after I came back (from vocational school), I saw the boatbuilding project... I watched and learned. Those builders did not teach me how to make a boat, I watched myself, and I learned. It's not hard for me. ...

Building a boat is similar to building a house in many ways, especially that we work with timbers. Carpentry work. But they are different as well. You have to make a model to build a boat. Also, the pieces of timber have to be very tightly joined so it will not leak; for houses there is no need to be that tight. So boatbuilding is a job that requires more patience.



Figure 5: A Shipyard in Langalanga (2007)
(Photo by Pei-yi Guo)

The youngest generation of builders, most of them are relatives of the project manager, start working in the yard after they graduate from primary school or secondary school. They learn in a similar way: watch and learn it in your heart.

Langalanga people learn *nainali* (quick, fast). We learn by looking — boatbuilding is an example. That's why we Langalanga do no have land, the population is not large, but we could survive (interview with a man in his late 20s).

After working on the topic for a while, a man I interviewed casually mentioned that there was a boatbuilding school at Aoke in the past, and maybe that had something to do with why more Langalanga people had the skill. Based on the new information, I went back to those whom I had talked to and received confirmation on the existence of such a school, and the possibility that the school might be of some help to the industry. I was puzzled by the fact that these elders collectively forgot to mention this important information when talking to me about the success of Langalanga boatbuilding industry. I brought up the question to a close friend, and he explained:

It's true that the school had two important students, who have passed away now. However, before they went to the boatbuilding school, their grandfathers already knew how to build boats. They learnt to build cutter boats from the Chinese; and in the English boatbuilding school, they learnt to build better boats. Langalanga people always learn in this way: that they learnt as they watched.

It is true that Langalanga men already learned how to build *faga* before the opening of the school.¹⁸ The District Commissioner of Malaita in the 1955 Malaita Annual Report commented that “the craftsmanship is good,” and that “a high standard of design and workmanship” in the 1959 BSIP Annual Report. It is likely that after managing to build cutter boats, some Langalanga men picked up the know-how from individual Europeans, and started to put it into practice.

The idea to set up a boatbuilding school appeared in the mid 1950s, and was listed on the 1957-58 Annual Report of BSIP.

At Laulasi, on Malaita, a flourish boat building industry has been established by Solomon Islanders, and cutters are being built for the inter-island trade. A boatbuilding school organized by the South Pacific Commission is likely to be established at Auki (Aoke), Malaita, in 1960; the school will train Solomon Islanders and pupils from other Pacific Islands in improved boatbuilding techniques for local condition, with a view to encouraging the formation of further small boatbuilding enterprises in the islands (p.30).

In 1959-60, the project was funded by the South Pacific Commission, with the assistance of United Nations Funds and a Colonial Development and Welfare grant. The school officially opened in 1960 at Aoke. It was a two-year program, with trainees from different parts of the Solomon. Their earlier project was a 25 ft fishing boat, smaller than the size worked by the Langalanga themselves reported in 1955. After the first trainees finished the course, five fishing and tour boats (25 ft) had been completed, and two more were under construction. The second class started in 1963. Two years later, when the course was over, the school was no longer funded by international grants; BSIP government took it over and turned it into a government training institute under the Marine Department. In 1967, there were 24 trainees under instruction. In 1968, the school was turned into a semi-commercial institute, taking contracts to fix wooden vessels for government and private sectors. The school was terminated in 1970, and started to run on a fully commercial basis.¹⁹ It was not clear how long it lasted; there is no sign of its material existence on the landscape today.



Figure 6: Aoke Boatbuilding School (*Source*: BSIP 1962 Annual Report)

It is hard to evaluate the impact of this 10-year school on the Langalanga boatbuilding industry, and in this paper I will mainly analyze the cultural implications of the “copy-cat” discourse.

As I have described earlier, the school was often absent in the narratives of Langalanga in recounting the development of the industry. In further examination, I argue that two things are indicated by the rhetoric of “copy-cat”: the specific way of learning a craft or knowledge (look and see), and the emphasis on action—that people put things into action instead of talking alone. A few examples can help illustrate the second point:

Here, when people see something, they put it into practice. There's no need to school for that. Shipbuilders here learn to build ships this way, by observing other's work while working with them (interview with a middle age villager).

Langalanga people say and work (*sae ma waka*), not just saying with no work. Also, we look and know what to do, “copy-cat.” That's why we are different from others in the country.... My family are [*sic*] all simple people; we are not schooled too high but we work hard. I know how to drive a truck, how to be the captain of a ship, how to operate chainsaw (in boatbuilding).... Because Langalanga people are copy-cats. I learned the guitar in this way as well. We don't need to read to know things; we learn by looking... (interview with a man in his 50s).

In the copy-cat rhetoric, it becomes clear that the narrators emphasized action—they do not see boatbuilding (and other tasks) as a kind of “knowledge” that lies there to be grasped and put into use.²⁰ In boatbuilding—*galonala faga*—the most central thing is “*galo*” (work), a term which refers to practices that generate economic yields.²¹ I have elsewhere (Guo 2003, 2008a) discussed that in the conceptualization of human relations with landscape, Langalanga people highlight the aspect of action: people's (especially ancestors') movements on and actions on the landscape (e.g., clearing a piece of land, house building, rituals, resting, and other appropriations) constitute how they come to realize the landscape. Similarly, shell money is the result of work (*galona*) by the human body; it attains its importance through human activities—especially through the delicate and hard labor, which creates the artifacts and imparts economic value (Guo 2007b). The work on boatbuilding is similar. Bodily actions in the process—the “watch-and-learn,” the heavy loads of carrying logs, the operation of chainsaw, carpentry, etc.—are the main body in shipbuilders' account of the industry. Their bodily actions give meanings to the world and history around them, whether it is an engagement with landscape, shell money in circulation, or a boat constructed and launched.

Conclusion

Nowadays the boatbuilding industry continues to flourish in Langalanga. As a man put it, boatbuilding and shipping are good business, “because there won’t be roads between islands.” Some successful businessmen started with a smaller vessel, and invested the money they generate from it to construct a larger boat to enlarge their shipping enterprise. Some businessmen earned their down payment from selling shell money to Bougainville (Guo 2009a), took up loans to invest in building a boat and running a fishing or shipping company. Boatbuilding is still considered a profitable and advantage industry in Langalanga, and a good target for development projects. A few years ago the Langalanga Member of Parliament, Ulufa’alu, organized his supporters to submit a Rural Development Project funding proposal for the construction of 18 boats (including application to the Taiwan Embassy, in the name of RCDF fund).

Boatbuilding, together with shell money production, are two pillar stones of the Langalanga economy. Moreover, they are the means by which the local culture and agency is expressed and practiced in the contemporary world. I have discussed elsewhere that the Langalanga use shell money as an alternative economic strategy in facing the weakness of their national currency. At the same time, the cultural (and sometimes called ‘*kastom*’) values carried by shell money are transmitted and retained through its circulation (Guo 2006, 2009a).

In parallel, the tradition of boatbuilding, in the form of *faga* today, plays a similar role in terms of economic plan and the continuation of tradition. The Langalanga investment in *faga* can be seen as a good commercial tactic to give them a competitive edge in the local economy. Furthermore, the discourse on *torina* and copy-cat associate boatbuilding with *kastom*, ancestral heritage and power, as well as individual agency. This helps us understand why most men did not include the school in their discourse. It was an expression of their active role in economic development, and to position their group in the country. Both *faga* (boat) and *bata* (shell money) are mobile objects that move in between islands across the sea; they are vehicles that carry people and things through places. And in doing so, they extend the voices of their makers. Langalanga people often joke about controlling the country through the circulation of shell money (Guo 2006); likewise, they are proud of their *faga*, which navigates all over the country, brings necessities to islanders’ lives, and connects people with each other and with various places.

Finally, let me give a brief note on the implication of the Langalanga case to the study of voyaging and seafaring in the Solomon Islands and in the Pacific. A great number of studies have been done on the tradition and renaissance of navigation in the Pacific, both from the angle of its technological and cultural significances (e.g. Finney 1994, Feinberg 1988, Lewis 1971, 1994). The long distance voyaging and their ‘traditional’ style of vessel are eye-catching, and sometimes embodied political rhetoric as ‘vessels of sovereignty’ and identity (DeLoughrey 2007: 118-148). On the contrary, the seafaring in more contemporary settings and in ordinary styles is less studied, with the exception of a volume edited by Feinberg (1995). There are three gaps in the analysis of contemporary vessels in Pacific Studies. Most researchers in the studies of Pacific voyage concentrate on traditional canoes or outriggers, even though motorboats have become a popular type of vessel for everyday transportation. Edvard Hvding’s article in the

above volume, in particular, fills in the gap by exploring the appropriation and the social meanings of motorboats in the Morovo lagoon, Solomon Islands.

The second gap is the lack of study of modern style boatbuilding and its meanings. Dugout canoes are widely constructed all over the Pacific today, but ships of much larger size and modern vessels are mostly imported instead of locally made. Langalanga boatbuilding industry (and its success) is an exception.

Another gap in the literature of seafaring in the contemporary Pacific is the relatively little attention given to large transportation or cargo ships operated by the Islanders. Alastair Couper (2009) in a recent book is an exception, in that he looked into several attempts ‘by Pacific people to usurp foreign dominance over trade and shipping’ (p.4), including a few (mostly Polynesian) commercial ship-owning and shipping ventures. Most of the cases he looked into were Polynesians, especially commerce initiated by royal families or high chiefs, who had capital advantages. The Langalanga share with these cases the practice of local agency through the control of the most important means of ocean transportation. And they went even further—that they not only owned large ships and operate shipping businesses, they also build the large ships themselves. Boatbuilding is more than an economic activity, but a symbolic action tied to their cultural identity. The Langalanga case illustrates how a group of Pacific Islanders, through the transformation of boat culture, finds their own way to build a bridge between traditional expertise and craftsmanship and imported knowledge, and redefined their roles in the region during the colonial and post-colonial eras.

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Malaita Annual Report

BSIP 27/IV, National Archives, Solomon Islands

Year 1931, 1933, 1935, 1936, 1944, 1953, 1955, 1970

Survey of Langalanga by J.D. 1956

BSIP 27/VII/16, National Archives, Solomon Islands

Western Pacific High Commission Archives (WPHC)

Auckland University Special Collection

Notes

¹ This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the past fifteen years, including 13 months dissertation fieldwork in 1997-1998, and eight subsequent shorter trips since 2002. In addition to participant observation and interviews, I have also conducted historical research in order to draw the larger picture of the region in chronological perspective. Archival data and maps were collected from various research libraries, the National Archives of the Solomon Islands, and from several Ministries of the Solomon Islands.

² Usually the male side was more obligated to do so; however, a woman told me that her father gave her one *soro* when she married, because he was an expert in canoe making, and if he failed to present the gift he would be under social scrutiny.

³ In the context of land dispute, there are different versions concerning the origin and precedence of various clans in Langalanga, according to different narrators. I cite these stories for the purpose of analyzing their content and underlying meanings. It does not involve any judgment of the authenticity of these versions, and thus the stories told here should not be used in court.

⁴ Several big men were recorded in archives and discussed by historians, such as Kwaisulia in Lau (Corris 1970), Billy Mahooalla (Billy Langa Langa) (Corris 1970, Wawn 1973) and Billy Bina (Corris 1973:61). I have also written about another big man Frank (Laularoma) (Guo 2007a).

⁵ They travelled from Nggela, Mboli pass, Makambo, all the way to Faisi, and even to Shortland Islands near the border, to the headquarters at Lofung, and sometimes till Rabaul in Papua New Guinea.

⁶ BSIP #27/VI/1937 District Annual Reports.

⁷ For a historical account of the Chinese in Solomon Islands, see Moore (2008).

⁸ According to the BSIP Annual Report in 1955-56, a slipway was built at Tulagi by a Chinese shipbuilder to take care of small boats in the private sector; they built cutter boats only for their own use, not for commercial sale.

⁹ An extra 250 Australian dollars would be added if two-cylinder petrol engines were installed.

¹⁰ Survey of Langalanga by J. D., BSIP 27/VII/16, National Archives, Solomon Islands.

¹¹ WPHC 16 II 101/34, Administrative conference BSIP: District Commissioner's conference 1957.

¹² WPHC 16 II F103/4/16, High Commissioner's visits and tours BSIP 1959, Malaita District.

¹³ Malaita Annual Report 1970. I will discuss this school and its impact in the next session.

¹⁴ Cutter boats were sometimes installed with engines as well. *Fagas* are all equipped with engines.

¹⁵ Most cutter boats have been replaced by *faga* already, however, there are still a few that travels in the area, and the Langalanga offer their repair service, and sometimes use these boats as an easier and cheaper way to enter transportation business. For example, a cutter boat named Earnest, originally owned and brought in by a Chinese, was later purchased by a Member of Parliament at Kwa to serve his constituency. When he was no longer able to profit from the business, a Langalanga man took over the boat at a cheap price. After fixing the leak problem and repainting the boat in 2007, he planned to run a copra shipping business between Honiara and plantation fields in Russell Islands.

¹⁶ Please see my recent paper (Guo 2009b) on detail discussions of the co-existence of powers of Christian God and *agalo*, and the dilemma Christian villagers face in time of misfortune.

¹⁷ *Sikolo*, the motorboat that is used for daily transportation, is more like a large personal/ family canoe. Unlike the traditional *aikarua*, which did not have individual names, *sikolos* are often given names, and sometimes painted on its body in artistic designs (Hviding 1995:104). My explanation is that they are expensive items which showcase the owner's wealth, and are more individualized—they are more than a transportation medium (like traditional *aikarua*), they are decorative items.

¹⁸ The 1955 Malaita Annual Report mentioned that they were building 6 *faga* in the lagoon, while the school was set up in 1960.

¹⁹ Data related to the Aoke boatbuilding school are based on the BSIP Annual Report from 1955 to 1973.

²⁰ Earlier when I wrote the abstract for this paper, my title was “bridging knowledge and expanding network.” Rethinking field materials when I wrote this paper, it became clear that I had to change my title.

²¹ Other examples such as *galonala raku* (agriculture work), *galonala bata* (making shell money).