

# LEMAKI, TRADITIONAL BUILDERS

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*I will do what you have asked. I will give you  
a wise and discerning heart, so that there will  
never have been anyone like you,  
nor will there ever be.*

—1 Kings 3:12

## INTRODUCTION

The people of the Pacific are well known for their way of life, which is through traditional communal living. Some writers of Pacific history have described them as sailors, with their uniquely built canoes sailing from one island to another country. This is historically documented in the Lapita history. For the Pacific islands, including those in Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji, the spirit of sharing has always been part of tradition and life. This has sustained their relationship as Pacific neighbors until today.

Significantly, the traditional structures encompassing their ways of life and the environments they live in are interlinked with each other and their survival throughout generations. As communal dwellers, the people of the Pacific live in village communities. The

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urge to reinforce and strengthen their relationships as neighbors is an ongoing scenario. For Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, there are also a lot of similarities in terms of language, food, and beliefs, utilizing and sharing the God-given talents they possess. For example, due to the importance of seafaring, the need for building big sail boats that can carry up to 200 people is an ongoing task. It also gives the boat builders a sense of pride for the talent that they have inherited.

In Fiji, the builders' clan is divided in two: carpenters and boat builders. They both have played an important role throughout the historical journeys of their people. In Fiji, they are known as the *mataisau* while in Lau they are the *lemaki*.



The clan's presence in Lau originated from the sea adventure of two Samoan brothers who ended up in Tonga. It so happened that they came across a sailing boat competition in which the King of Tonga had also competed but had never won. The adjustment made on the sailing boat by the brothers led to a win for the King's boat. As a reward, they were confirmed into the King's circle. One of their first missions after that was to accompany the King's herald to the Chief of Lau in the Fiji group to request a new sailing boat. The boat was constructed at Kabara because of the *vesi*<sup>1</sup> forests that exist there.

1. *Intsia bijuga*, *Caesalpiniaceae*.

1 Elenoa Gataialupe (interviewee). © Niumaia Gucake

2 Simione Kaulamatoa, current head of the Lemaki tribe. © Niumaia Gucake

The King of Lau was so impressed with the craftsmanship of the two that he requested to the King of Tonga for the brothers to remain in Lau and build a boat for him. Their descendants have been in Fiji ever since. After a *bure* (traditional Fijian house) building competition with the Jafau clan of Kabara<sup>2</sup> witnessed by the King of Lau, he decided that the Jafau would be his traditional boat builders while the Lemaki were to be his carpenters. The decision of the King of Lau to swap the roles of the two clans was based on one of the brother's criticisms of Jafau's *bure* that some of its structures were incomplete and not worthy of a King.



Elenoa Gataialupe, a third-generation grandchild of Ma'afu, who was the King of Lau at the time, related how in 1935 she had been part of a group of children tasked to carry stones from the beach to build the foundation of the church in Tubou.<sup>3</sup> The Tubou Methodist Church still stands today as a testimony to the intricate craftsmanship they possessed. To view the interior of it today, one can only wonder and marvel at the coconut sinnet designs displayed.

The church was built following traditional procedures and protocols. The elders stayed and drank kava<sup>4</sup> in a *bure* every day of the process. The foreman always consulted with them for every stage of construction. For every adjustment, decisions made were done in the *bure*. It was related by the current head of the Lemaki clan that they use this same process in every construction endorsed by the King.<sup>5</sup>

The same process and protocol is noted to have been used in a few other major buildings. It was used in the 1970s in Tubou to construct the Vatuwaqa Levu, the official residence of the King of Lau. However, before doing so, the late King of Lau, Ratu Sir Kamisese

2. Members of the Jafau clan of Kabara Island in the Lau group of islands are also renowned traditional builders and carvers.

3. Elenoa Gataialupe, personal communication with author, 2014.

4. A traditional drink made from the roots of the kava plant (*Piper methysticum*).

5. Simione Kaulamatoa, personal communication with author, 2014.

3 Church in Tubou, following traditional Tongan architecture. © Niумаia Gucake

4 Vatuwaqa Levu House, the traditional official residence of the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. © Niумаia Gucake

5 The traditional meeting house of the chiefly tribe at Tubou Village. © Niумаia Gucake

Mara, breached protocol by asking the Jafau, who are the traditional boat builders, to build Vatuwaqa Levu, the chiefly residence. This oversight angered the Lemaki clan, the traditional carpenters, who proclaimed that the Jafau clan would die one at a time before the building was completed and that the Vuanirewa clan would tire from providing feasts for the builders. Upon hearing this, the Jafau clan approached the Lemaki to seek traditional reconciliation by presenting kava and a whale's tooth (which is stringed and presented in certain traditional ceremonies). Fortunately, good sense prevailed, and the construction went ahead. A similar construction standing in Tubou today is the Methodist Church, built in 1992 for the annual Methodist Church Conference.

## ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Indigenous Fijians believe that their structures and talents are God-given. They have a deep belief that God is the source of life, wellbeing, and talent; thus, the significance of protocol is paramount. The head of the Lemaki clan said that they can only function as carpenters when a King of Lau is in place, as in being traditionally installed.<sup>6</sup> With the death of the last King in 2004, they cannot be directed by any person in the family of the King of Lau to build or construct. They are subservient to the King; only upon his request would they receive chiefly blessings and the traditional knowledge to build a house or to carve. Therefore, confirming the title holder of the King of Lau, which is currently vacant, is important for the

6. Ibid.



6 Church in Tubou: an internal view of the traditional architecture.  
© Niumaia Gucake

7 Church in Tubou: traditional craftsmanship of the Lemaki tribe on the ceiling.  
© Niumaia Gucake

welfare of the Lemaki carpenter's clan as well as for that of all the indigenous communities in Fiji. Without a confirmed king, there will be neither blessings nor positive results. They believe that the success of their traditional role spiritually, socially, physically, and mentally depends entirely on the confirmation of the King of Lau.

Likewise for all traditional communities, the growth and success of their roles depends on the traditional confirmation of the chiefly titleholders within their jurisdiction. Once this is done, it gives the clan protection, blessings, good life, and success in a holistic environment.

