

Bellona is a Polynesian outlier island to the south of the main Solomon Islands group. Bellona, also known by the locals as Mu Ngiki, is a small elongated raised atoll which means it is almost completely surrounded by cliffs, the inhabitants occupying the interior which forms a bowl-shaped depression. This structure earns Bellona the nickname Te Baka, or The Canoe.

Bellona Island

It is the flying-fish season (*Tauika*) and I felt honored to be allowed out in the canoe as a catcher. *Tauika* in Bellona is the three-month period around Christmas when flying fish aggregate relatively near shore during the night, presumably to spawn.

On the moonless nights the youths and a few wise old men congregate on the narrow coconut-fringed shore under the steep coral cliffs at Tingoa, the eastern end of Bellona. During the day, flares (*Ngama*, from which this type of fishing takes its name) made out of coconut fronds have been carefully

prepared either by the potential fishers themselves or other people interested in qualifying for some of the highly esteemed catch. Fires are made and the flares are laid on racks over these to dry thoroughly. The people on the beach occupy themselves readying fishing gear, listening to fishing stories or sleeping.

Sometime during the night the old hands decide it is time to set out. Flares are only carried in the larger four-man outriggers where they are carefully kept dry by wrapping them in closely woven coconut matting. Fire is provided by a torch made of tightly lashed strips of dried "flower pods" from the ever present coconut palms. The smoldering torch is tied on a bed of wet sand on top of the bundle of flares. All the men help to drag the large canoes near the narrow surf-swept strip of reef. At this time, it is decided through some inscrutable means, who boards the canoe and who stays on shore to sleep and wait until the canoes return. The canoes are then launched through the surf with much shouting, flying spray and flailing of paddles.

I am apparently very lucky to be offered a place, apart from the well-known fact that white men are weedy and weak, and although there were a number of other people entitled to go. I am even more fortunate to be assigned to the position of *mongikatea* which means I can play a part in the proceedings.

Flying Fish Season (*Tauika*) in Bellona

HUGH GOVAN



The oldest and most experienced man sits at the front of the canoe with one of the two long-handled nets which look like a cross between a giant butterfly net and a lacrosse racket. His job is to direct the operation and "call" the flying-fish. Another

near the end of the Island about 500 m offshore. It is a beautiful experience, as the synchronized paddle strokes provoke flashes of luminescence which compete with the impossibly bright stars, as the canoe glides on.

At a word from the man on the bow, a flare is slipped out from the bundle and lit from the smoldering torch. As the dry coconut frond bursts into flames, the bowman calls the fish to the canoe, using ritual phrases and ceremonial language. Startled flying fish take to the air in disorder and the night is filled with sounds of shouts, splashes and the strange humming noise of air on the wings of the fish.

The nethandlers are soon busy deftly flicking their nets into the path of the fish. Although many are caught in the air, most are caught as they swim slowly towards the canoe, mesmerized by the flames. The trick is not to try and scoop up the fish but to lightly smack the water directly in front of the fish with the edge of the net and induce it to jump into the net. There are many techniques for each type of fish behavior and as many words to describe these; and the directions that the fish is swimming are mostly short words that are easily shouted.

man with a long-handled net sits at the back of the canoe. The flare lighter/holder and the *mongikatea* stand in the middle of the canoe. The *mongikatea* (me) holds a shorter, more maneuverable net, probably for catching fish missed by the other two and those that bounce off the canoe or the men.

We paddle a short distance to a point

We paddle back and forth for three or four hours lighting flares, catching fish and keeping a strict distance from the other *ngama* canoes. Men in smaller one-man canoes wield nets from certain permitted positions in the lee of the bigger flare canoes.

The flares are finished all too soon and the sea gets rough, so we race for shore and surf through the breakers into the sturdy arms of the shore-based party. The other canoes arrive shortly and all are hauled up the rocky shore with much shouting and joking.

Everybody crowds round the canoes to see the catch counted. Each fisher counts the catch in tens and at every tenth, a fish is set aside, its tail broken. Suspicions arise, and I ask why. "For the church," comes the answer and I think I detected a note of sheepishness in my friend Longuika's voice as if he, too, felt the incongruity of this alien custom.

Our canoe had caught the most fish, Longuika in the stern had caught 35 or so, and I had landed 24. The man in the bow landed 70. The counting was interesting as there are at least 15 ways of counting in Bellonese, depending on the object being counted, such as large animals, coconuts and round objects, pairs of yams, bunches of bananas, trees and long objects, flat objects, canoes, spears and so on. I had caught *mata haanga* which appeared to impress the old men who remembered the time in their own youth when they were first allowed out to catch flying fish.

On subsequent visits to Bellona I have been flattered to find myself assigned a Bellonese name with which I am often addressed. That name is *Tauika*.



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