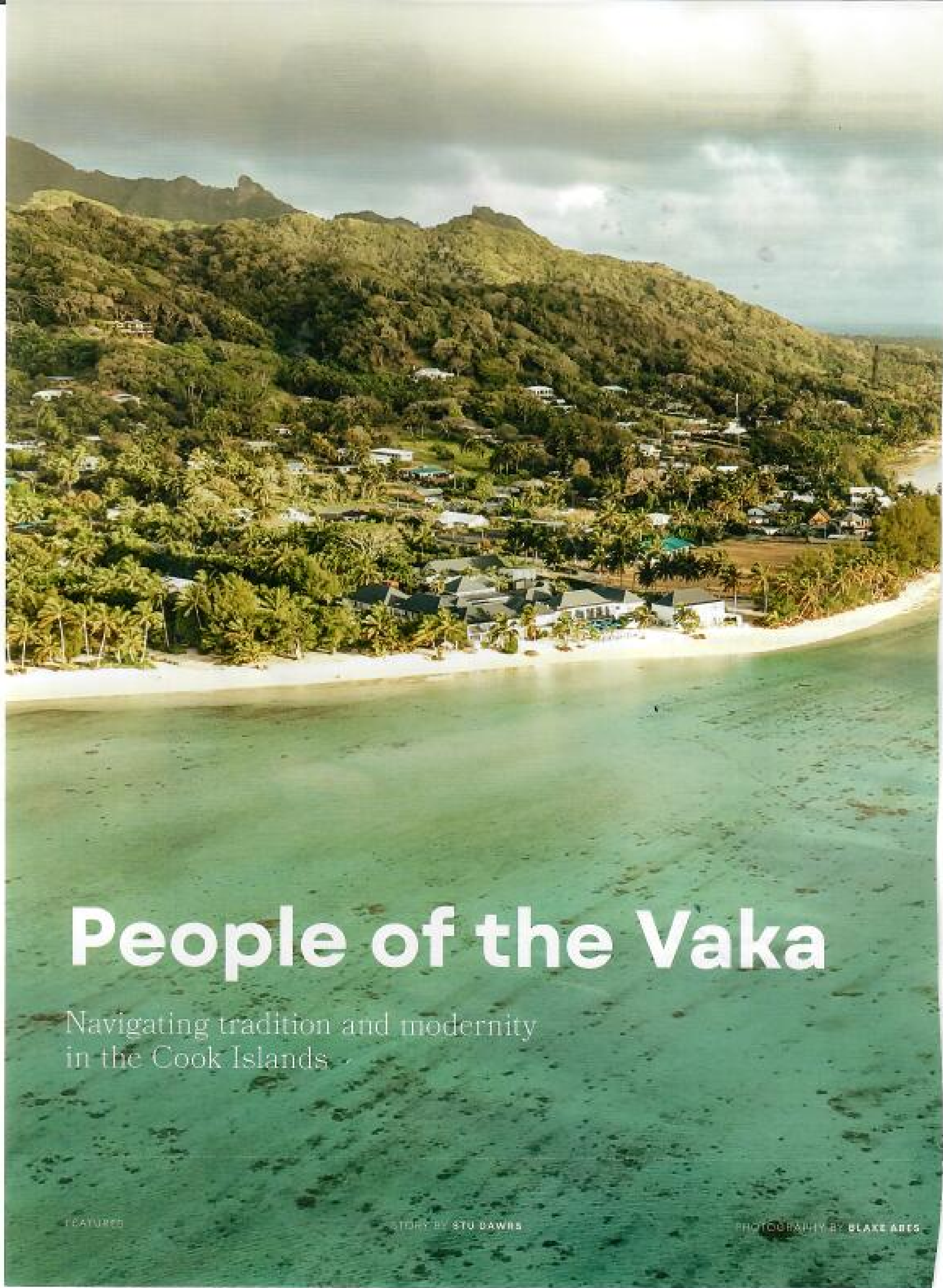
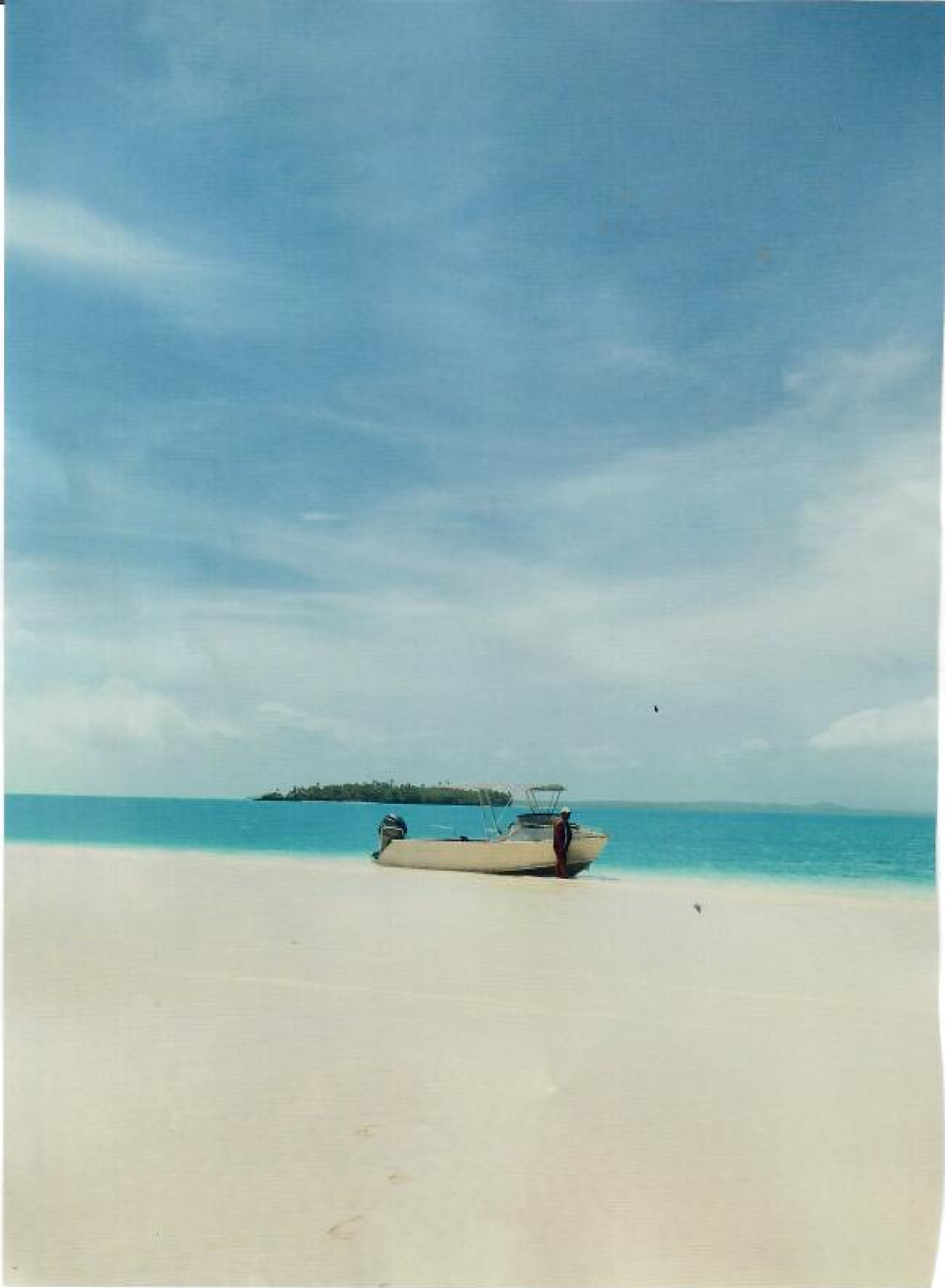


People of the Vaka

Navigating tradition and modernity in the Cook Islands

STORY BY **STU DAWRS**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BLAKE ABES**



"We're near the head of the octopus," says Deon Charles Wong, a metaphor about where the Cook Islands are in relation to the rest of Polynesia. More literally, though, we're sitting on the patio of Trader Jacks, the waterside restaurant, bar and local mainstay in the heart of Avarua on Rarotonga, the capital island and population center of the Cook Islands. The *Marumaru Atua*, a double-hulled sailing *vaka* (canoe) owned by the Cook Islands Voyaging Society (CIVS), is moored at the edge of a concrete boat ramp just opposite the patio. A few hundred yards offshore, past the rusted remains of the cargo ship *Maitai* and through a break in the island's fringing reef, is the deep blue sea. During whale season, July through October, humpbacks are *right there*. Sometimes at night, where the reef is even closer to shore, you can hear them singing.

In June, Deon and his wife, Evangeline, will be among those in line to sail the *Marumaru Atua* ("Under the Protection of God") to Pape'ete and then—after joining up with the Tahiti Voyaging Society canoe *Fa'afaite*—on to Hawai'i, where voyagers from throughout the Pacific will converge for the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FESTPAC). Fitting, because CIVS was founded in 1992, after Rarotonga hosted FESTPAC, which takes place every four years in a different Pacific Island group. CIVS president Ian Karika is also here; he carries the chiefly title *kamoe mata'iapo* and helped build the Cook Islands' first modern replica of a traditional sailing canoe, *Te Ao o Tonga*, in 1994. Deon, Evangeline and Ian all have day jobs, but they've given over their lunch hour to talk about their passion.

And passion is why we're here: As a way of introducing these islands, I originally had in mind to tell you a story of Tangaroa, the improbably well-endowed god of navigation and fertility whose image is everywhere on Rarotonga: on coins and shop signs; museum brochures and (painted graffiti-style) on bus stop shelters; carved and for sale in tourist shops.

But Tangaroa doesn't necessarily represent all the other *pa 'enua*, the outer islands—"outer," that is, relative to Rarotonga—which are just as complex (though likely more beautiful) as anywhere else. The Cook's fifteen islands and atolls are divided into the northern and southern groups. The Spanish explorer Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira was the first European to sight any of the islands, in 1606. Capt. James Cook, the archipelago's namesake, first arrived in 1773. The islands were not unified under one ruler at the time of European contact, and which islands would eventually constitute the Cooks was settled in 1915 by New Zealand's parliament. To this day there are variations in language, history and cultural practices throughout the islands.

With its gyms, beauty salons, churches and restaurants, Rarotonga is the most cosmopolitan. But each pa 'enua has its own identity, its own stories. Cook Islands Māori all identify with their island of ancestry—overseas they might refer to themselves as Cook Islanders, but within the country they're Rarotongan, Mangaian, Pukapukan. Is Tangaroa in the background of life here? Yes. But life happens in the foreground. Hence, Trader Jacks: One way to learn a bit about modern life in the Cook Islands is to spend some time listening when people talk about their passions. With the ocean so close, it makes sense to hear from canoe people.

The octopus that Deon refers to is a motif among Pacific voyagers, known from the earliest oral histories of Polynesia. It refers to how the islands of the Polynesian Triangle are oriented: The head lies roughly seven hundred miles east-northeast of Rarotonga, in Raiatea, French Polynesia—the center of gravity for voyagers ancient and modern. The tentacles trace connecting pathways outward to Hawai'i, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Sāmoa, Tonga and the rest of Polynesia.

OPENING SPREAD / **Between Sāmoa and French Polynesia lie the Cook Islands, an archipelago of fifteen islands and atolls where Polynesian traditions remain strong. Here, the islets of Koromiri, Oneroa and Motutapu in Muri Lagoon, Rarotonga.**

TOP / **Christianity plays a major role in Cook Islands life. Ebenezera, the church of the Ngatangiia Cook Islands Christian Church congregation on Rarotonga, will celebrate its ninetieth anniversary next year.**

BOTTOM / **The crew of Vaka Cruise's *Tiki-a-Tonga* are true multitaskers—cooking, teaching snorkeling and serenading guests during the six-hour cruise of Aitutaki's lagoon.**

FACING PAGE / **The twenty-square-mile lagoon of Aitutaki is larger than the island itself and filled with gemlike islets. A tour boat waits on an empty strand at Tapuaetai (a.k.a., "One Foot Island"; the name derives from a Cook Islands Māori legend), off Aitutaki. The islet of Moturakau is in the background.**

The Cooks are a major waypoint on these long-sailed pathways: The legendary navigator Kupe, whose father was from Rarotonga and mother from Raiatea, is believed by many to be the first to have reached Aotearoa, leading to its settlement. Another famed navigator, Paikea, figures in stories made popular by the film *Whale Rider*. He is well known in parts of Aotearoa, but it is sometimes forgotten that he has roots in Mauke, an island in the Cooks' southern pa 'enua. Two years ago Tua Pittman and Peia Patai—master navigators trained under the auspices of Hawai'i's Polynesian Voyaging Society—founded a second voyaging group in the Cook Islands, Te Puna Marama Voyaging Foundation, which sails a vaka named *Paikea*. Patai is himself from Mauke; the canoe's name came to him in a dream.

Deon and Evangeline are bound up in the tentacles of the octopus. There are roughly fifteen thousand residents in all of the Cook Islands, with the majority, just under eleven thousand, on Rarotonga. Meanwhile, more than eighty thousand Cook Islanders live in New Zealand, another twenty thousand-plus in Australia, and countless more scattered throughout the world. Some wags will tell you that there are actually seventeen islands in the Cooks, if you include New Zealand and Australia. Though the islands are self-governing, they are ultimately part of the Realm of New Zealand, which means that all Cook Islands nationals are also New Zealand citizens. Depopulation has been a concern in the Cook Islands since at least the 1970s, and the current government continues to seek ways to bring more working-age adults back to the islands, but it's long been a reality that people come and go and come again.

"He's a New Zealand Māori and I'm Atiuan, so that's how we came back here," says Evangeline. "We started sailing in New Zealand on another canoe, *Te Matau a Māui* (the fishhook of Māui). ... In a way it was a meeting place of both our cultures: Whereas his *marae* [community land] is his marae, and my land is *my* land"—she and Deon both laugh at her emphasis—"the vaka is a place for both of our cultures to meet."

Evangeline's subtle joke about landownership is rooted in one of the things that sets the Cook Islands apart: Land cannot be bought and sold in the Western sense. It's all a bit complicated, but basically, the land remains in the hands of Cook Islanders—people might come and go, but there will always be something to come home to.

"Rarotonga is Hawai'i 100 years ago, and Aitutaki is Hawai'i 150 years ago," says Teanaroa Paka Worthington. We're sitting on the patio of the Lucky Rooster Eatery, a few steps away from his Avarua shop, Paka's Pearls, talking story about the similarities and differences between Hawai'i and here.

Paka embodies these differences: His mother is Rarotongan and Tahitian, and his father, the late Robert Worthington, was Hawaiian. The elder Worthington served as the Cook Islands' honorary consul to the United States for thirty-five years, during which time he was also the director of financial and scholarship services at O'ahu's Kamehameha Schools. Paka was born on Rarotonga, lived in Hawai'i from age 6 to 18, earned a bachelor's and a master's in Washington DC and then returned to work in the government of Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Henry. Since leaving the public sector, he has "for many moons," as he puts it, done "a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little bit of everything."

Paka is a lifelong surfer and canoe paddler, and for many years now also an avid kitesurfer. In a few days the annual Vaka Eiva will get underway: a weeklong series of outrigger canoe races held each November, which he conceived and that first ran in 2004. He is also behind the Manureva Aquafest, a weeklong series of competitions each August that brings kitesurfers to Aitutaki's twenty-square-mile lagoon—considered one of the best venues in the world for the sport. Both Vaka Eiva and Manureva Aquafest are global draws—this year's canoe races brought more than 350 international entrants—and both were conceived to be a mix of serious competition and even more serious fun.

"The difference over here," Paka continues, "is that you're nearly free of rules and regulations. As long as you don't cross any lines, you can pretty much do whatever you want. In Hawai'i and other places, when a canoe race finishes, everyone goes their own direction. Over here we purposely broke it all up so that you race one day and the next day off. Everyone finishes and stays and parties together—you have a beer on the beach, and no one says a thing—so you can race, have a good time and don't have to worry about tomorrow."

ABOVE / **Paka Worthington on the boardwalk fronting Paka's Pearls in downtown Avarua, Rarotonga's population center.**

FACING PAGE / **The boat ramp opposite Trader Jacks restaurant in Avarua gets busy as *vaka ama* (outrigger canoes) launch during the Vaka Eiva, an annual outrigger racing competition that draws paddlers from around the world.**

These less stringent rules are not limited to canoe racing and are visible—or rather, not visible—pretty much everywhere you go in the islands, starting with the warning you're given when you pick up a rental car at the airport. "Don't park under the coconut trees." Coconuts are a staple here, and so is common sense: Unlike Hawai'i, where coconuts are trimmed to protect passersby, here you're expected to look up. Another example: On Rarotonga, at Tumutoa Tours' Umu Feast, String Band and Fire Show, Ngame and Mānia Mamanu lead groups through

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the entire process of producing a traditional feast—it's an enlightened reversal of the standard Hawaiian tourist lū'au, where islanders cook and serve. Guests handle everything from meat cleavers to red-hot rocks. The evening is capped off with a fire-knife show that includes audience participation—this might be the only place in the world where one can hand a flaming baton to a woman in rayon and urge her to give it a whirl. If it sounds like I'm poking fun, I'm not: I grew up in Hilo, when the drinking age was 18, aerial fireworks were legal and people figured how to mix those things. The Cook Islands echo those times, and I adore it.

You hear it said often that these islands are years "behind" Hawai'i, and always with pride. If you fly the fifty minutes to Aitutaki and tour the lagoon with Vaka Cruises, tour leader Alistar "Ali" Maao will tell you that Aitutaki's pristine waters are fifty years behind Hawai'i, "and we want to keep it that way." On Atiu, another short hop from Rarotonga, Atiu Villas general manager Jackey Tanga told me that the island, with its population of 383, is somewhere around thirty years behind Rarotonga. "Atiu forces you to go back in time," she says. And this is a good thing: Going back in time means knowing and caring for each other. Several years ago Roger and Kura Malcolm, the owners of Atiu Villas, began setting aside a percentage of the profit from every room rental. Each year at Christmas time, they divide the fund up equally among every man, woman and child on the island. Since 2012 their "tourist dividend" has paid out more than $100,000.

It's a beautiful thing, and only part of the Cook's appeal. "We have no homelessness, negative unemployment, free health, free education, free dental, free water, no real estate taxes," says Paka. "Foreigners can't own land, and we're in control of foreign investment, land and immigration. We're one of the last countries with no Starbucks, no KFC, no McDonald's. ... You could even make an argument that we've got the highest standard of living in the world. Honestly, you're probably talking the best country in the world—we're pretty lucky, no question about that."

There are two main roads on Rarotonga, the Ara Tapu, or coastal road, which runs the island's entire twenty-mile circumference, and the Ara Metua, which covers portions of the island about a quarter-mile inland. Up on Ara Metua, in Avarua's neighboring district of Avatiu, Gallery Tavioni and Vananga is bustling. Mike Tavioni is on the grass, laying into a log with a chain saw while his wife, Awhitia, is under the eaves, carving a smaller piece by hand. There are roughly two dozen youth scattered between them, carving, cleaning up or just watching. Mike and Awhitia are both renowned artists, though Mike—or, more properly, Mitaera Ngatae Teatuakaro Michael Tavioni BEM—tends to be the more public-facing. (The BEM stands for his most recent recognition: the British Empire Medal, which he was awarded in 2022.)

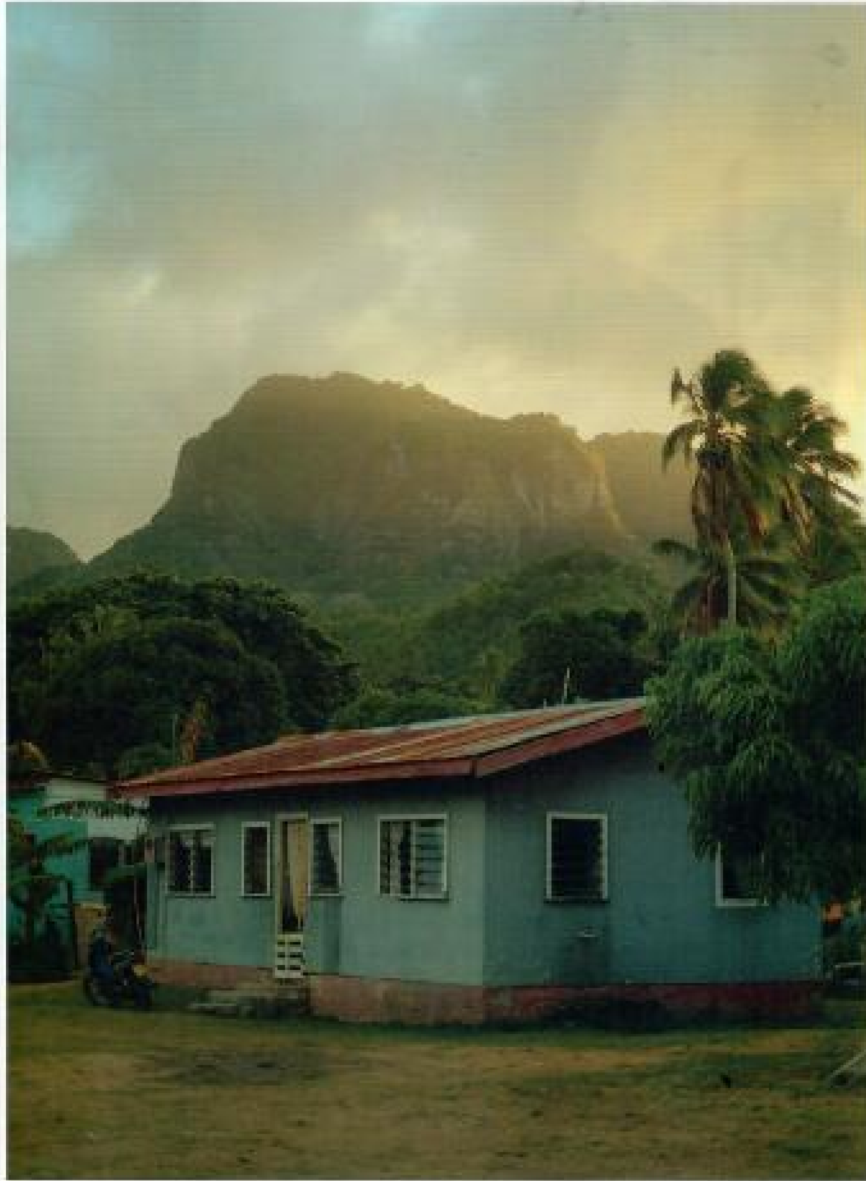
In the gallery you can buy a variety of modern and traditional art, handmade pareu and other items, some made by Mike or Awhitia, some by other local artists. But that's all background to the real function of the space. Depending on where you are in the Cooks, *vananga* translates variously as teaching, talking or sharing knowledge.

Although he works in a variety of media, Mike is best known as a carver and canoe maker. His art is easy to find on Rarotonga: Look toward the ocean as you leave the airport and you'll see the RSA Memorial Gateway, a commissioned work that he and Awhitia carved in collaboration with New Zealand artist Michel Tuffery, to honor Cook Islanders who served in World War I. He's also written several books on a variety of topics and is widely acknowledged as a repository of traditional knowledge. Now in his seventies, he devotes most of his time to teaching.

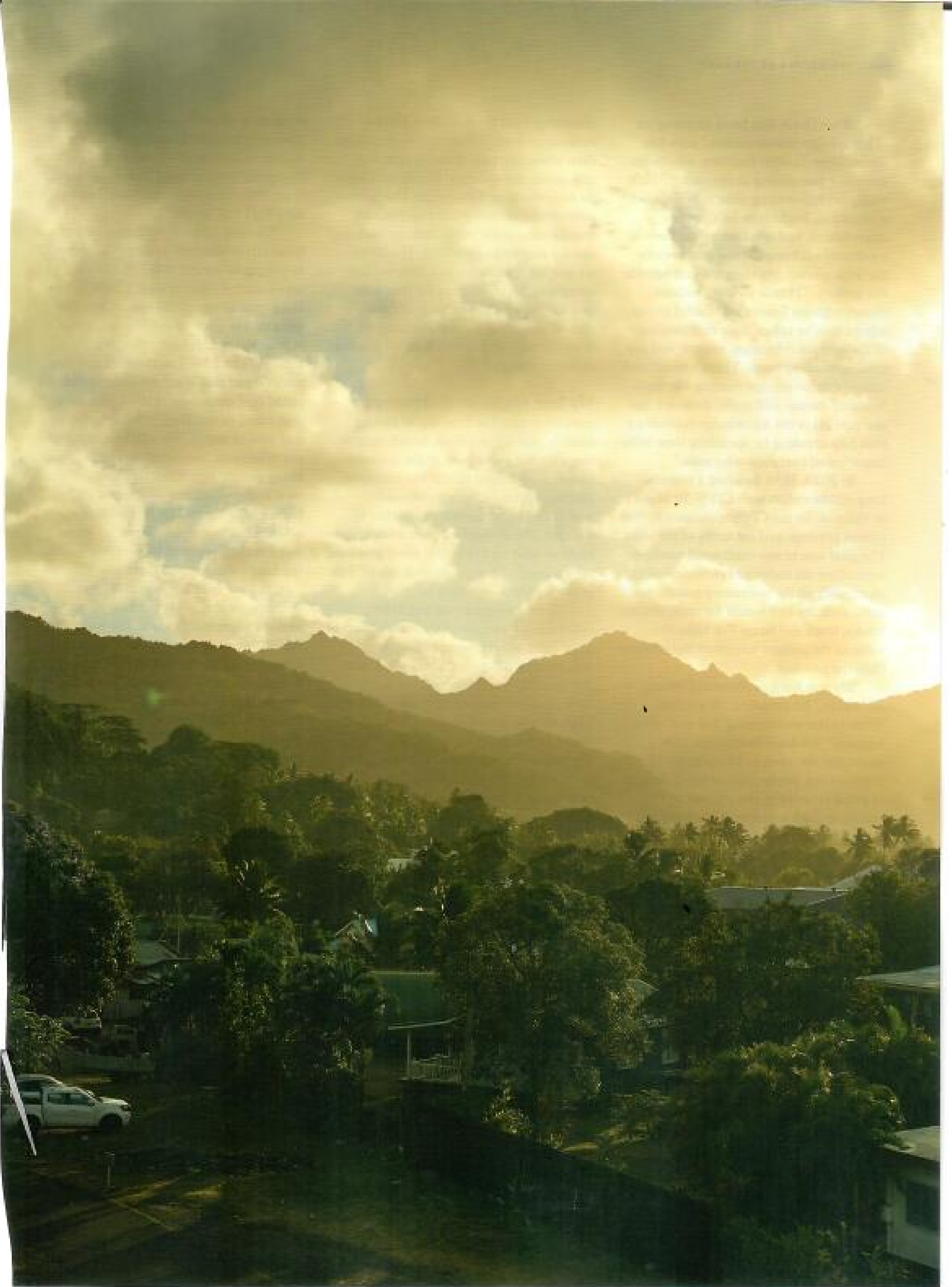
PREVIOUS SPREAD / **Mike Tavioni and his niece, Gina Tavioni Bamber, at Gallery Tavioni and Vananga, a gathering place for those who want to learn about Cook Islands arts and culture.**

TOP / **A contemporary adaptation of a Cook Islands *tivaivai* (quilt) by an unknown Tahitian artist, with Mike pictured at center in a still from a film in which he had a bit part as a chief. He carved the Atiuan *momore* (spear) he's holding, the *atamira* (chief seat) he is sitting on and made the *tapa* (bark cloth) he's wearing.**

BOTTOM / **Wooden blocks are used throughout Rarotonga to dye pareu (seen on the facing page). Mike and his wife, Awhitia, hand-carve their table-size blocks with the help of apprentices and whoever might be just passing by.**



ABOVE & FACING PAGE / **Although Rarotonga is the most populous of the Cooks, it is still a mostly rural island, with a pace to match.**



"What Uncle has been focusing on is knowledge transmission," says his niece, Gina Tavioni Bamber, who helps keep things running at the space. "He's really been investing time into the next generation. Right now he's got five apprentices, and what we've got here is a cultural exchange"—she gestures to the kids working in the yard just outside the gallery. "This is a New Zealand Māori *whānau* [extended family] group, where they've taken their children out of the normal education system and are homeschooling them. There's more and more of these groups coming through; him and Auntie still make their art, but the real art is the knowledge repository that he's creating by spending time with anyone and everyone who asks."

In 2023, Mike finished a months-long collaboration with CIVS: Te Mana o te Vaka, or, as the CIVS translates it, "the power, prestige and authority of the vaka." The goal was to use traditional methods to produce six canoes of various design, along with all the necessary components: sails, paddles and sennit for rope; fishing hooks, lines and lures. For Mike the value of the project was more the process than the product.

"My teaching is about traditional *life* skills," he explains. "If you ask 'What is the worst thing that will ever happen?' it's food insecurity. Life skills are the crux of everything: It involves the production of food—when to plant relative to the phases of the moon, to high and low tides and the month of the year. It involves when to go fish for what particular fish, what time of night, what moon phase, what time of the year. When to do voyaging, when to stop altogether. Those are the knowledges we are losing—our traditional knowledge that we've gained over thousands of years."

In other words, to build a canoe, one first has to understand how to cultivate all of its component parts. "Canoe making was never dead," he continues. "So it's not a revival, but through the *encouragement* to get more people to learn and participate in canoe making, hopefully they'll be urged to learn more: maybe more about the cosmos in relation to navigation, and then more about the cosmos in relation to planting and harvesting food, and obtaining food from the sea. Canoe making revives the art of sennit making; then when you talk about sennit, you talk about the coconut, which becomes its own world of knowledge: The leaves provide the roofs for our houses, the trunks we use for posts and the bark we use for mosquito repellent. The roots we use for fish traps, and then we use certain types of coconut for medicine and for oil, which we can make into almost anything ... soap, cooking oil. With the canoe, you touch on all kinds of different things."

My last night on Rarotonga coincides with the first day of racing for this year's Vaka Eiva, which means there's a big party over at the Islander Hotel. Standing in line at the entrance, paddlers present their wristbands, which had been passed out earlier in the day. The ocean had been rough; one paddler held up his naked wrist and said with a laugh, "Tangaroa took mine!" No problem: He was waved in.

The evening turned out to be everything I love about the Cook Islands: good food, good music and loads of fun. During the awards ceremony for the first day's races, a paddler from New Zealand receives her medal, and a Māori contingent delivers a *haka* (dance) that has the room cheering. Each time the winner in a different classification is announced, a *tini ka'ara* (drum ensemble) fires up a booming, staccato beat: *tak tak taki tak, taktaktaktaktaktak.* The Cook Islands have a national anthem, but they also have a national rhythm, and this is it. As they approach the stage, medal winners spontaneously break into steps of the lightning-fast *ura* that's danced here and farther east in Tahiti: men and women from Tahiti, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Australia, dancing and celebrating. Paka was right: This is very different.

It all brings to mind a conversation I'd had a few days earlier with Emile Kairua, the newly appointed secretary of the Cook Islands Ministry of Cultural Development. We were initially talking about the ministry's preparations to send roughly a hundred dancers, musicians and artisans to FESTPAC but drifted back toward talking about canoes and what the dual voyaging revivals in Hawai'i and the Cook Islands have in common. Years ago Emile was on *Hōkūle'a* when the Polynesian Voyaging Society made one of its early trips from Hawai'i to the Cook Islands for FESTPAC in 1992.

"We still had our language and a lot of our traditional system," he mused, speaking of the era when the CIVS was founded. "But taking it back to the vaka—not so much the vessel, but the vaka that is your island, the vaka that is your village, the vaka that is your family. Take it back to the root and you understand that if we are not careful, we could find ourselves in the same vaka that many of our Pacific Island brothers and sisters are in. We will lose our *peu*—our traditions, our identity, our language. Many people say, 'We can stand on our own and declare our own victories,' but we also have to be inclusive in celebrating our collective victories as one Pacific people of Moana Nui o Kiva—the blue continent we call home."

Tak tak taki tak, taktaktaktaktaktak. The drums play on at the Islander, and the party carries into the night. A bunch of rowdy canoe paddlers having a good time? Sure. But there's more to it. Something of Tangaroa? Perhaps. But definitely something of what Evangeline had said when we met at Trader Jacks: "One of the things about the Cook Islands is that we all come and go. We've come and gone for thousands of years: We go to Tahiti, we come back here; we go to Aotearoa, we go here, we go there and come back. This is why the vaka is a core part of our history and the metaphor everyone uses, because we are vaka people—it is a core part of who we are." **hh**

FACING PAGE / **Secretary of the Cook Islands Ministry of Cultural Development Emile Kairua holds a pate (slit drum) in Runanga Pukau, the National Museum of the Cook Islands.**

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hana hou!

STORIES FROM HAWAIIAN AIRLINES

THE HEAD OF THE OCTOPUS A Cook Islands idyll

LEI-ING IT ON THICK Hawai'i's over-the-top tradition of graduation lei **LONG LIVE THE QUEEN** Moana Jones Wong earns her crown at Pipeline