

# Vaka Motu

## Okeanos Waa'Qab

**A vaka gifted to the Cook Islands is about to get a makeover and a new name**

by Rachel Reeves

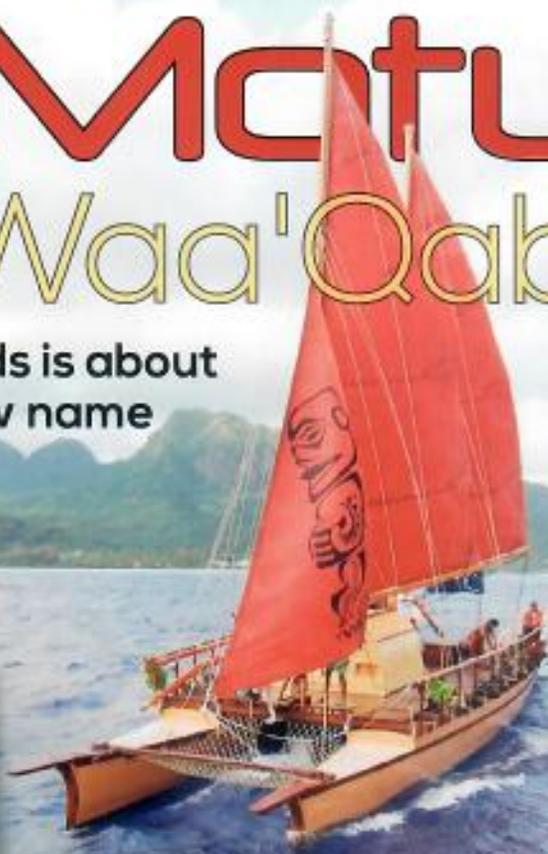


Photo courtesy Cook Islands Tourism

In February 2020, Peia Patai made the full-day journey from Yap to Honolulu for a meeting of Pwo navigators – people who, like him, know how to chart a course across oceans without GPS, a compass, or a map. What Patai didn't know, before or during that trip, was how completely it would change his life.

It wouldn't be the first time a trip to Honolulu had changed his life. Three decades earlier, in 1992, Patai was one of two Cook Islanders invited to study celestial navigation with Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson and Micronesian elder Mau Piailug. Thus began a career spanning tens of thousands of nautical miles across the Pacific Ocean. In 2011, he flew to Honolulu again, this time to accept a Pwo title, which formally designates him as someone with the knowledge and skills to find islands by following stars, swells, and the sun.

By the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the world, Patai had been living in Micronesia for three

years. He was a captain and navigator aboard traditional canoes transporting basic foodstuffs, such as rice and sugar, to tiny islands rarely visited by a cargo ship.

He enjoyed the work. It felt meaningful and rewarding. "I've seen the needs of the people," Patai said. "I always feel sorry for them. They don't have as much as we have but they don't complain. They just move on with life. I've seen the need. I really want to help."

In Micronesia, he worked for Okeanos Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded by German philanthropist Dieter Paulmann. Patai met Paulmann through Te Mana O Te Moana, a long project sponsored by Okeanos that involved the construction of seven traditional canoes that journeyed, sans navigational instruments, from the South Pacific to ports along the coasts of North and South America. The well-publicised voyage intended to deliver a simple message: we are the people of the ocean, and we are here to tell you the ocean needs help. Patai lived aboard

Marumarū Atua, a canoe later gifted to the Cook Islands, for 18 months, guiding her across the sea using the map he saw in the sky.

Following that voyage, Okeanos sent him to New Zealand to help build sailing canoes that would sustainably transport goods to tiny islands in the Marshall Islands, Vanuatu, and Micronesia. He then went to Micronesia to captain their inter-island voyages.

"Amazing, amazing time in my life," Patai said.

When he boarded a plane to attend a navigators' meeting in Honolulu in 2020, Patai had no idea that soon a deadly virus would spread through the world, governments would close their borders to keep it at bay, and he would end up back home in the Cook Islands, teaching the sacred practice of wayfinding to young Cook Islanders, particularly those who had lost their way. In hindsight, it seemed like fate.

Since training as a navigator, Patai had daydreamed about bringing his knowledge home. His teachers had encouraged him to share what he knew. Though wayfinding had once been a sacred practice, entrusted only to people from specific lineages, its proximity to extinction had changed all that.

In the 1970s, a canoe named Hōkūle'a sparked a renaissance of traditional navigation, disproving European academics who theorised that ancient Pacific Islanders drifted to their islands accidentally, rather than discovering them purposefully.

At that point, wayfinding was teetering on the brink of disappearing altogether. Men on tiny, remote islands still used the sea and the sky as guides, but the pace of change in the Pacific was accelerating. Airports were



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opening. Tourists were arriving. Young people were leaving tiny islands for brighter economic pastures. Wayfinding was becoming a practice of the past.

“Two main things ignited [the renaissance] for us,” Patai said. “One is Hōkūle‘a. Second is the Okeanos Foundation.”

Though he wanted to share wayfinding with young Cook Islanders, opportunities had led him across oceans. Now, at the Auckland airport, preparing to board his flight, the woman at the check-in desk informed him that governments were closing borders indefinitely. That was a turning point. Suddenly his daydream felt urgent.

“I think I’m one of the people under this sky that appreciate COVID,” Patai said, “because it brought me home.”

He quarantined in New Zealand for two weeks and then returned to Rarotonga aboard a repatriation flight arranged by the Cook Islands government.

Patai had been a founding member of the Cook Islands Voyaging Society, which focuses on teaching kids to sail and facilitating charters aboard Marumarū Atua. But his mission was narrower: he wanted to train a crop of navigators.

“I wanted to start a foundation that we can achieve transferring knowledge rather than just sailing and enjoying,” he said. “Those days of sailing and enjoying are gone.”

Te Puna Marama Voyaging Foundation is the tangible result of his vision. Chaired by Patai, the board hinges on Cecile Marten, who handles all fundraising, letter-writing, and administrative work, and also includes two

Cook Islanders living overseas: Tua Pittman, the other Cook Islander designated a Pwo navigator in Honolulu; and Maara Maeva, an archaeologist from Mauke who works at museums in New Zealand.

The foundation’s first order of business was to find a canoe. Paulmann helped. In September 2022, more than two years after Patai returned home, Okeanos sponsored the 3,000-mile voyage of Vaka Motu Okeanos Waa’Qab from Yap to Pohnpei to Samoa and finally to the Cook Islands. The crew, which included a teenage Cook Islander, travelled for a month to bring her home.

Patai renamed her Paikea, in homage to the Cook Islander said to have escaped death somewhere off the coast of Mauke by catching a ride on the back of a whale bound for New Zealand.

The name came in a dream Patai did not understand. When he woke, he FaceTimed Maeva, Te Puna’s cultural adviser. He also called Tuakana, an elderly man from Mauke living in New Zealand.

“What makes you think you can put that name on?” Tuakana asked him, bewildered.

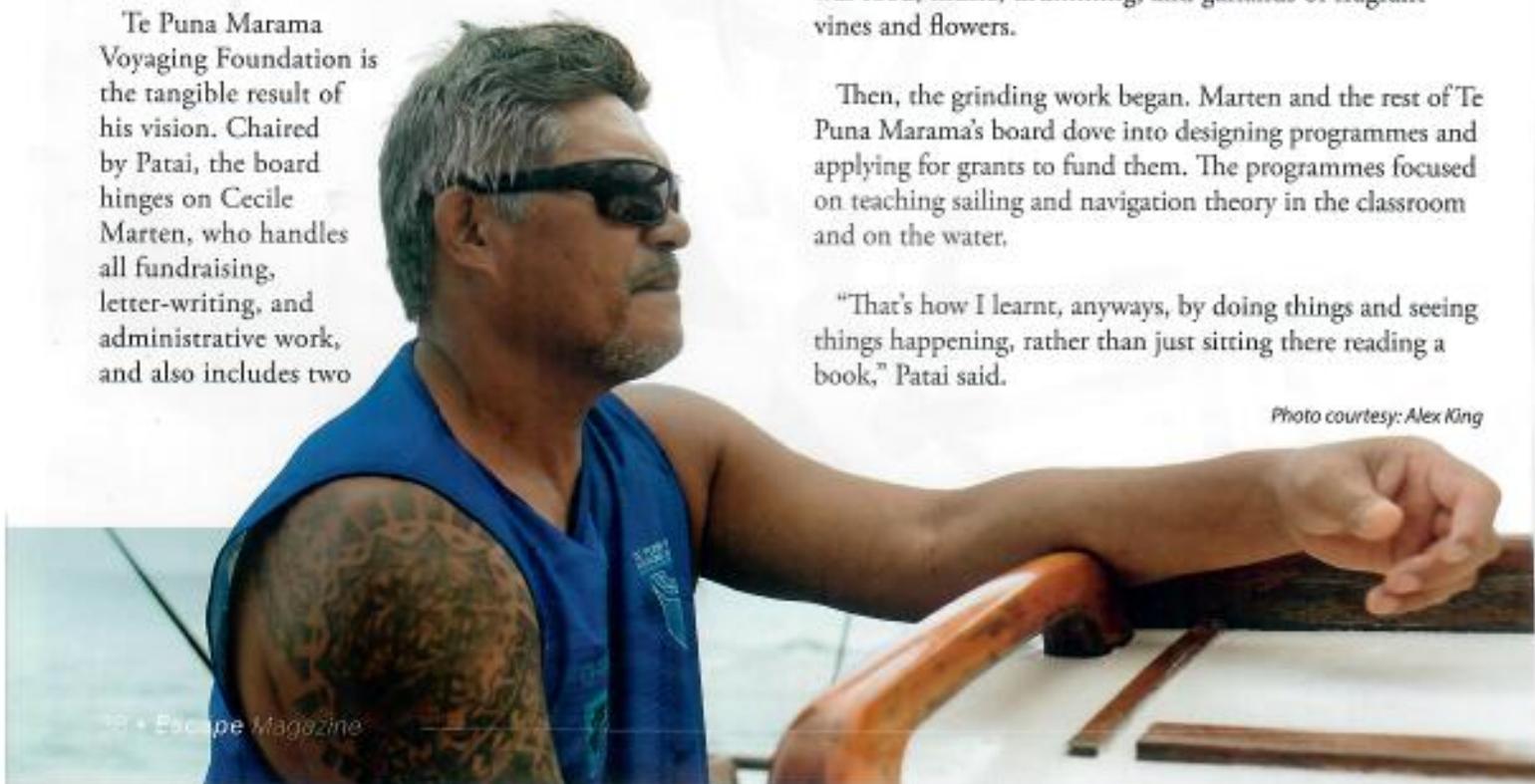
Patai was embarrassed. Tuakana continued: “The reason why the name came to you is because it needs to be revived.”

Paikea’s first voyage was to Mauke to ask the community for permission to use her name. When the vaka arrived, nearly every villager was at the harbour, waiting. There was food, music, drumming, and garlands of fragrant vines and flowers.

Then, the grinding work began. Marten and the rest of Te Puna Marama’s board dove into designing programmes and applying for grants to fund them. The programmes focused on teaching sailing and navigation theory in the classroom and on the water.

“That’s how I learnt, anyways, by doing things and seeing things happening, rather than just sitting there reading a book,” Patai said.

*Photo courtesy: Alex King*



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