

# Canoe Prow



- Melanesia
- Republic of Vanuatu. Malakula Island, northeastern area
- 20th century
- Carved wood
- H. : 104 cm
- INV. 4611

This carved wooden outrigger canoe prow called *naho* comes from the small Island of Vao off the coast of northeastern Malakula Island, northern central Vanuatu. On the neighbouring Small Island of Atchin, just 5 km to the southeast of Vao, such a canoe prow is called *solip/solüb*. The Small Islands cultures of northeast Malakula – Vao, Atchin, Wala, Rano, Uripiv and Uri – are the only cultures in Vanuatu to possess detachable carved canoe prows.

The carvings on such prows indicate the social status of the male owner (or a group of ritually related males) of the canoe in the Maki, the men's graded/ranking system in the Small Islands. The variants of this system in the area have basically two ranks – with many subdivisions – traditionally often taken jointly by groups of men and each rank sometimes takes a generation to complete. Vast numbers of tusked boars (the value of the pig depending upon the tusk curvature) are needed in the ritual payments and sacrifices involved in these complex ceremonial cycles.

The male owner of a canoe pays (in pigs) a sculptor to make a canoe prow containing the relevant elements of the former's ritual status. The main form of most prows signifies a type of revered sea-going bird that is associated with chiefly travel and endeavour.

The length/depth of the internal cut through the bird's beak and body is related to the height of the owner's rank: the full internal body cut of this prow indicates the owner was of higher Maki rank, as does also the stylised male carving, standing atop the bird's back. The latter carving can represent the canoe owner himself, but also his important male ancestors. Such prows are often brightly painted.

Kirk Huffman, *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (eds.), 2007: p. 350.*