

Safety at Sea

Canoe Splashboard (Lagim), Artist Unidentified

If you traveled across the ocean by boat, how would you protect yourself from splashing water?

In the past, Massim sailors in Oceania used splashboards to shield canoes from waves and mesmerize onlookers when arriving at a trade island for *Kula*, a ceremonial exchange of shells that reinforced social connections between islanders. Part of the Massim cultural area, trade islands stretched from the eastern tip of New Guinea over several hundred miles of the Pacific Ocean. Those participating in *Kula* bartered red shell necklaces, called *soulava*, and white shell armbands, called *mwali*. While the shells had no monetary value, they increased the prestige and rank of those who owned them.

To travel to nearby islands, men used canoes that measured about twenty-two feet long and five and a half feet wide and carried up to fifteen people. *Kula* traders spent a lot of time building their canoes from locally sourced wood and gave gifts of food to community members who assisted.

Integral to *Kula* canoes were intricately carved splashboards attached at the bow and stern perpendicular to the boat. The splashboard on view at the BMA features abstract designs framed by two asymmetrical volutes that spiral out and down to either side. *Bwalai*, a round-headed figure with a slender body, resides at the top of the board with sea eagles on each side.

Before a *Kula* journey, the canoe master cast a spell on *bwalai* to protect the crew. If the canoe capsized, *bwalai* was thought to summon a giant fish to bring the sailors safely ashore. If the canoe master forgot to cast the spell or the magic was not correct and the ship capsized, legend had it that *bwalai* would turn into a shark or sea monster and devour the crew.

Challenges for students

During *Kula*, *soulava*, red shell necklaces, always traveled clockwise and *mwali*, white shell armbands, traveled counterclockwise. Shells did not stay long with an owner before they were traded again. With your students, research more about the *Kula* trade route and how items were exchanged.

A *Kula* journey lasted anywhere from two weeks to two months. Write and illustrate a story from the perspective of someone traveling for *Kula*. Incorporate *bwalai* and the spell cast on *bwalai* in your story.

Soulava and *mwali* were the only items exchanged during *Kula*. Shells carried the histories of their circulation with them, which increased their value. A shell that was exchanged many times or had weathered a challenging journey was more precious than one without a story. Make a class list of items they trade. Invite students to share the stories that traded items carry.



Artist Unidentified. *Canoe Splashboard (Lagim)*. First half of 20th century. Massim region, Milne Bay, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1955.251.106

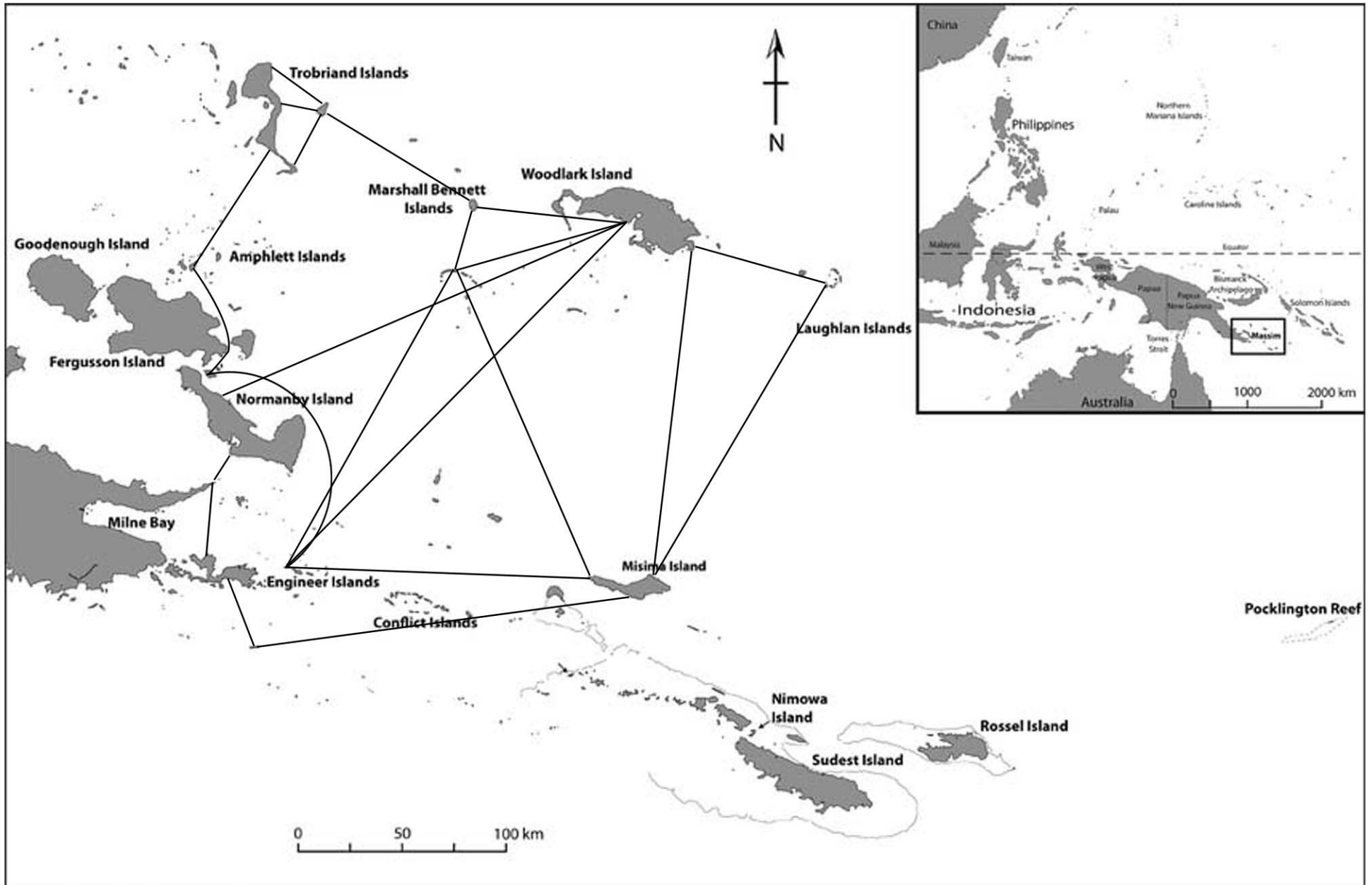
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Map of Kula Trade Route

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/kula_ring