

# 34

## World Heritage papers



### World Heritage in a Sea of Islands Pacific 2009 Programme



United Nations  
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World  
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Convention



# World Heritage in a Sea of Islands

## Pacific 2009 Programme

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Kishore Rao, DIRECTOR OF THE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE

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# The Ancient Royal Tombs of Lapaha: Community and World Heritage

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Lapaha is a village community of around 2200 people in the Hahake (eastern) district of Tongatapu in the Kingdom of Tonga. It is the location of an ancient royal dynasty headed by the holder of the paramount Tu'i Tonga title, which held political authority over the dispersed islands of the Tonga Group during the 2nd millennium AD and influenced other parts of the Pacific such as Samoa, east Fiji and Wallis/Uvea Island. The royal tombs of the Tu'i Tonga were included on Tonga's Tentative List in 2007, and this paper outlines community involvement in the cultural heritage of Lapaha including recent progress on the nomination of the ancient burial structures to the World Heritage List. Community management of Lapaha's heritage sites is central to their preservation with continuing use of the ancient tombs for burial of senior title holders involving ceremony and ritual dating to the Tu'i Tonga chiefdom. The traditional burial practices demonstrate the continuing cultural significance of the royal tombs to Tongan society, which is strongly hierarchical and consists of kings, chiefs and commoners. The tombs are also emblematic of the ancient Tongan kingdom that was the only Pacific society to extend significantly to other archipelagos and islands.

## Chiefly precinct of the Tu'i Tonga

Over centuries the landscape of Lapaha was densely built up through the construction of the stone-lined tombs (*langi*) of the paramount chiefs, an administrative area located on reclaimed land on the edge of the lagoon, occupation areas used by groups from other Pacific Islands, along with prehistoric roads, canoe docks, ditches and chiefly bathing wells. The number, scale and condition of ancient sites represents a daunting cultural heritage challenge for a small and dispersed island nation.

The centerpiece of the Tu'i Tonga 'capital' were the royal tombs that signaled the prestige of individual chiefs, with the tombs collectively manifesting the power and authority of the ruling lineage that held control of Tonga from AD 1200 until AD 1865. The tombs were built of beach rock slabs quarried from coastal locations throughout Tonga,

and are among the most spectacular prehistoric constructions in the Pacific with individual stone blocks weighing up to 50 tons (Clark *et al.* 2008).

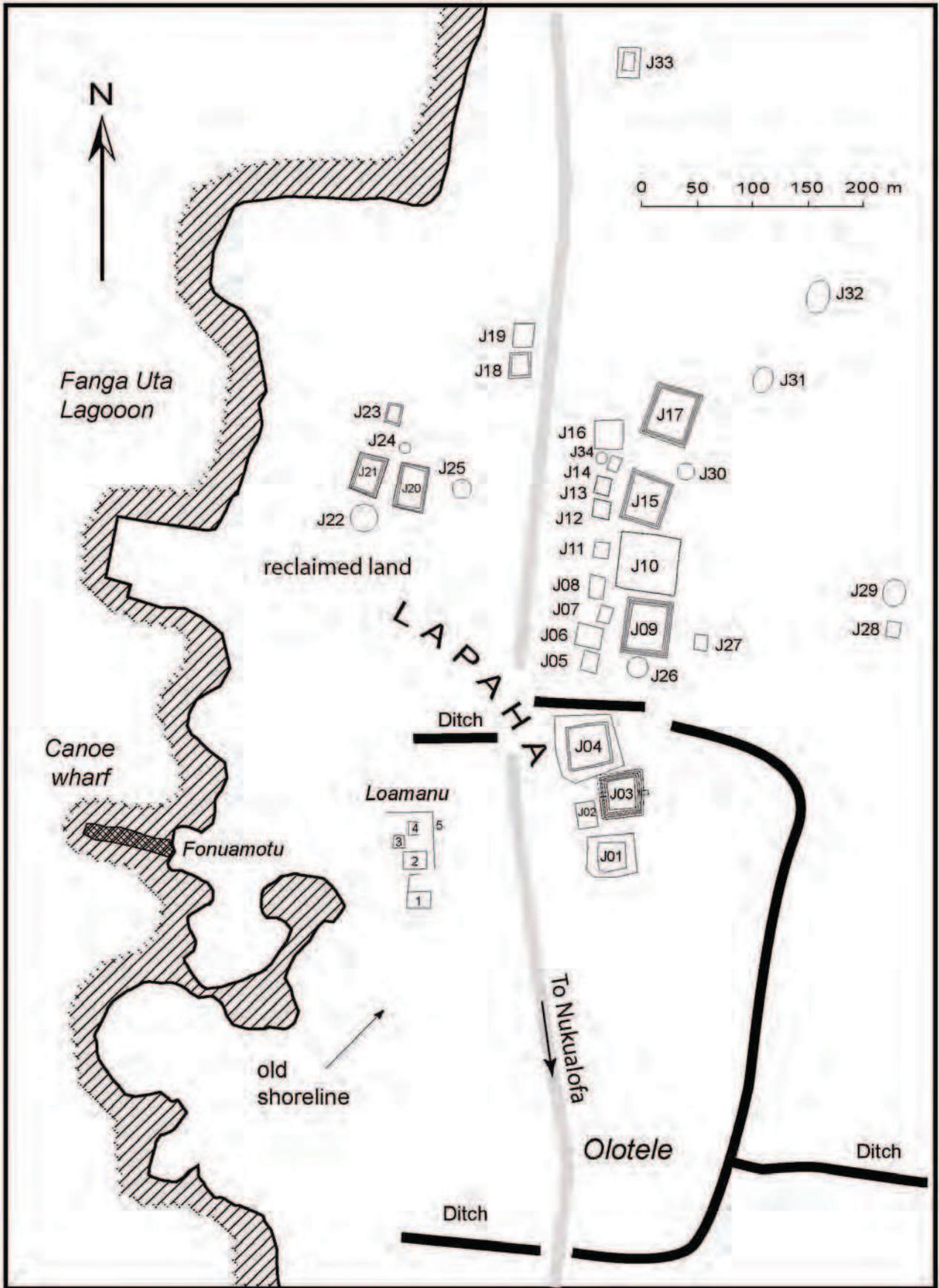
The stone-walled tombs are part of the contemporary cultural landscape as the tombs are used today by the senior title holders of Lapaha as they have been for centuries. The tomb area was also the scene of the annual First Fruits (*inasi*) ceremony where tribute from throughout the Tonga archipelago and neighboring Pacific Islands was brought to Lapaha. The close connection at Lapaha between the tangible heritage and the intangible culture is common in many parts of the Pacific, but is particularly strong at Lapaha where the scale and density of monuments in the chiefly precinct combines with hereditary roles relating to the Tu'i Tonga era that continue to structure existing community organization and behavior (Figure 1).

## Community organisation

In 2007, the Lapaha community established the Lapaha Council Inc., which was the first representative village council in Tonga to combine democratic selection of council members with elements of traditional governance. The move toward a town council arrangement began in the 1980s under the traditional owner, and gathered pace in 2006 with funding to support the new governance structure from the Commonwealth Secretariat. The adoption of a Council structure was made to engage directly with policy makers and donors to improve community conditions and was not associated with the potential WH nomination of the site. Nonetheless, the Lapaha Council Inc's. mission statement highlights the importance of cultural heritage to community well being:

*The people of Lapaha, the ancient capital of Tonga, shall preserve and enhance its pride and identity of its royal and cultural heritage through improving its physical, spiritual, social and cultural environment. Lapaha Council Inc. community presentation 2009.*

The Lapaha Council committee comprises 33 members: three members from each of the six land blocks, each village committee and subcommittee contributing one member,



Map of Lapaha showing the main Tu'i Tonga sites. Royal tombs ('J' structures), area of reclaimed land, ditches, canoe wharf and harbour (partially infilled).

the traditional land owner (Honourable Kalaniuvalu-Fotofili), Patron (Princess Mele Siu'ilikutapu Kalaniuvalu-Fotofili) and the Town Officer (Mr Nivaleti Melekiola).

Physical sites of the Tu'i Tonga era are managed by the Council Standing committees dealing with *Development and Environment* (Lands subcommittee) and *Information and Research* (History subcommittee). Within Lapaha the division of land is considered by the Lands subcommittee and if cultural sites are known, the land owner is asked to preserve these prior to land registration. As of 2011, all land owners had agreed to look after (i.e. not destroy or damage) cultural sites on their property. A high level of voluntary action regarding the preservation of cultural sites is consistent with the results of a 2009 Lapaha Council survey which revealed that 90 per cent of respondents highly valued Lapaha's historical sites.

Community management of the monuments and prehistoric structures of Lapaha is important as there are limited resources for implementation of the two national laws currently regarding the management of Tonga's tangible cultural heritage. The Parks and Reserves Act 1976 is administered by the Ministry of Lands, Survey, Natural Resources and Environment (MLSNRE), which has responsibility for cultural sites in all 'parks' and 'reserves'. The majority of royal tombs are in the hereditary estate of the traditional land owner (*The Act of the Constitution of Tonga* 1875) and are not explicitly the responsibility of the MLSNRE. The second law is *The Preservation of Objects of Archaeological Interest Act* 1969, which is administered by the Tonga Traditions Committee (TTC). The TTC has made significant contributions to the collection of traditional history and documentation of Tonga's intangible culture (Wood-Ellem, 2001:272), but the Act does not provide the direct means of preserving or managing archaeological sites (Mahina 2003). The implementation of an effective heritage site management programme is made difficult in Tonga, as is the case in many parts of the Pacific, by the limited human and financial resources (Mahina 2003; Smith and Jones, 2007), particularly of large and complex monumental sites like those in Lapaha.

### World Heritage at Lapaha

Tonga became a signatory to the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) in 2004. Despite Tonga's limited cultural heritage resources the promotion of the *World Heritage Convention* and placement in 2007 of Lapaha's royal tombs on the Tentative List has been important in creating a focus for heritage activity at Lapaha. The Lapaha Council Inc. and the Tongan government have engaged with foreign researchers and heritage experts to better understand the World Heritage concept, and to think about how sites of the Tu'i Tonga chiefdom can be managed and preserved by, and for, the community and Tonga.

Given the relative lack of capacity the preferred route to advance a WH site nomination has been to assemble an informal network composed of local leaders, academics

and government officials overseen by the Lapaha Council Inc. This allows for local management of the sites and for knowledge and information about World Heritage to circulate appropriately through community structures.

Significant actions to date include an MOU (2010) between the Lapaha Council Inc., Tonga Traditions Committee and The Australian National University to work together on the WH cultural sites dossier, rezoning of residential land around several tombs to preserve several sites and enlarge buffer zones, the relocation of the Catholic Cemetery to reduce damage to prehistoric tombs caused by a high density of modern burials, and the restriction of new interments in ancient tombs to appropriate titleholders to maintain traditional burial practices.

Local community involvement in the nomination process is also exemplified by an oral history project. As land blocks are generally owned in perpetuity by a particular family much historical information about the cultural landscape has been retained by Lapaha residents, but it is dispersed through the community and is often specific to a single location or land block. In 2011, the Lapaha community began a project to record the oral histories of Lapaha with financial support from the Australian Government. The information will be held by the community and will provide material to support the connection between the physical remains of the Tu'i Tonga chiefdom and the contemporary community in the WH nomination. A pressing issue at Lapaha is an urgent need to restore several of the largest tombs that have deteriorated significantly over centuries from wall damage caused by erosion and vegetation growth with a funding proposal to restore the tombs submitted by the MOU participants in 2011.

### Conclusion

The monuments at Lapaha speak to a time when the local inhabitants were preeminent in Tonga and the region, and the Lapaha community is proud of its unbroken connection with the Tu'i Tonga chiefdom. The opportunity to promote and preserve the tangible cultural heritage of Lapaha through WH nomination coincided, fortuitously, with the traditional leaders and Lapaha Council Inc's. goal of using cultural heritage to strengthen community identity and an international research project on the physical remains of the Tu'i Tonga chiefdom. Progress with the nomination has been made in many areas with issues of cultural heritage actively managed by the Lapaha Council Inc. Greater community involvement with WH either through attending ICOMOS/IUCN/UNESCO events or participating in local and international heritage workshops/meetings would actively support site management and lead to a deeper understanding of the *World Heritage Convention* (i.e. Smith 2011). Increased heritage support for communities involved in nominating sites would greatly benefit the region's cultural properties and the preservation of future sites on the World Heritage List by increasing the local heritage expertise in Pacific Island nations.

Preparation by the undertaker clan for the burial of the late Kalaniuvalu in April 2010 in the tomb Paepae'o'telea, reputed to have been built by the 29th Tu'i Tonga Uluakimata (Telea). © Geoff Clarke



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