

MOTOR BOATING & SAILING

JUNE 1978

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Incredible Tale
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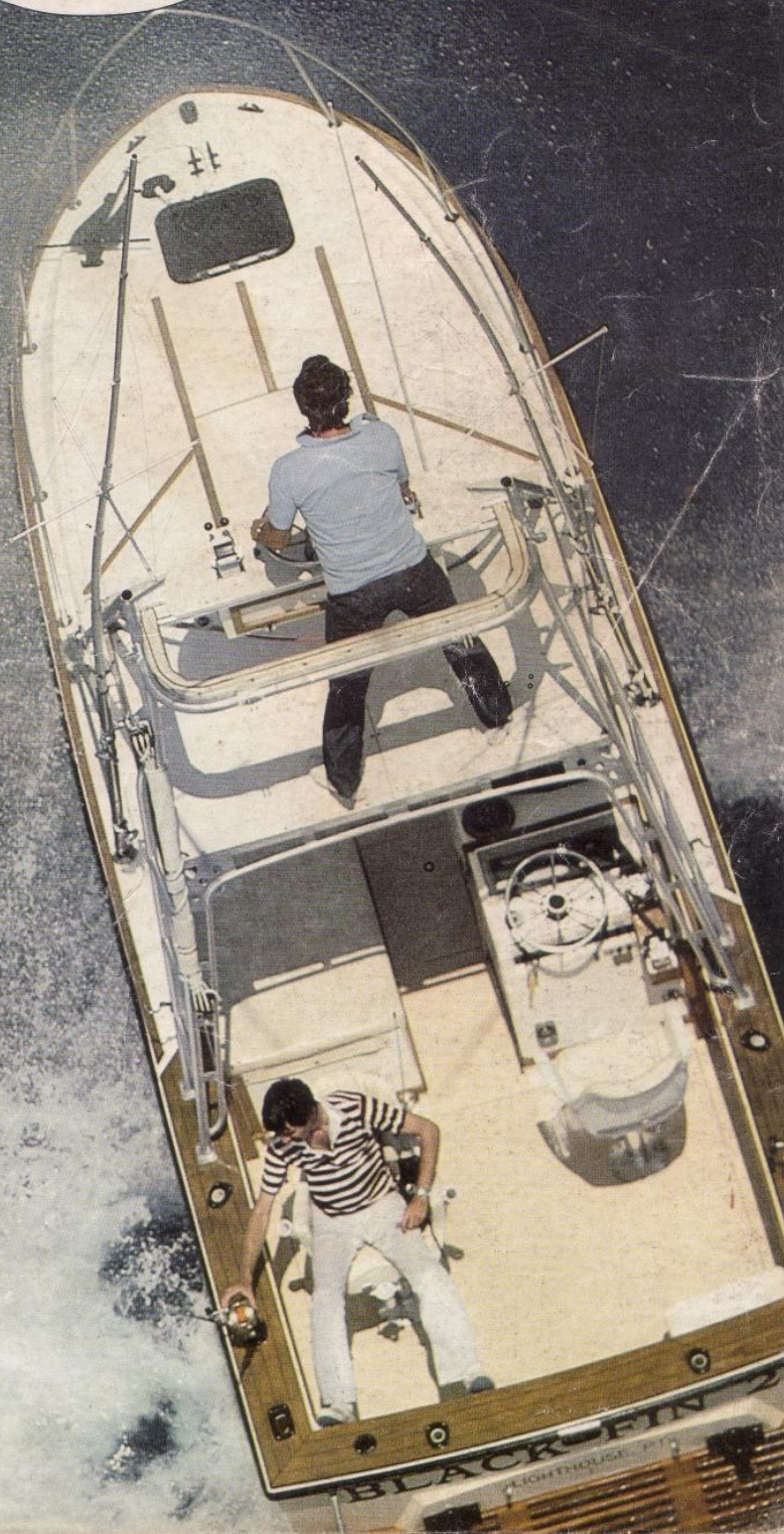
How to Keep Your Boat
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Why Recording Depth
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Make Your
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SPORTFISHING SPECIAL



Witch Doctor to Windward

By Richard Chesher

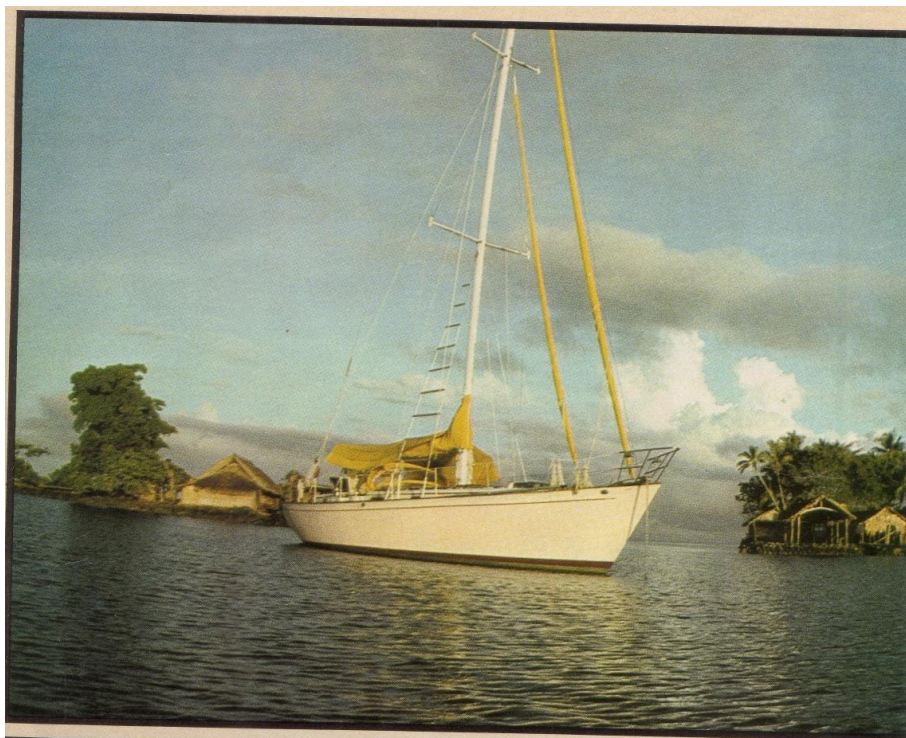
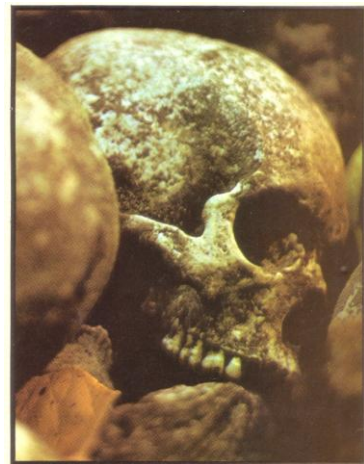
Was the cutter bewitched? For 6,000 miles she had sailed the Pacific with the wind constantly on her nose. Now the islanders hinted there was a cure. See Bosikuru, they said. He commands the sea and winds.

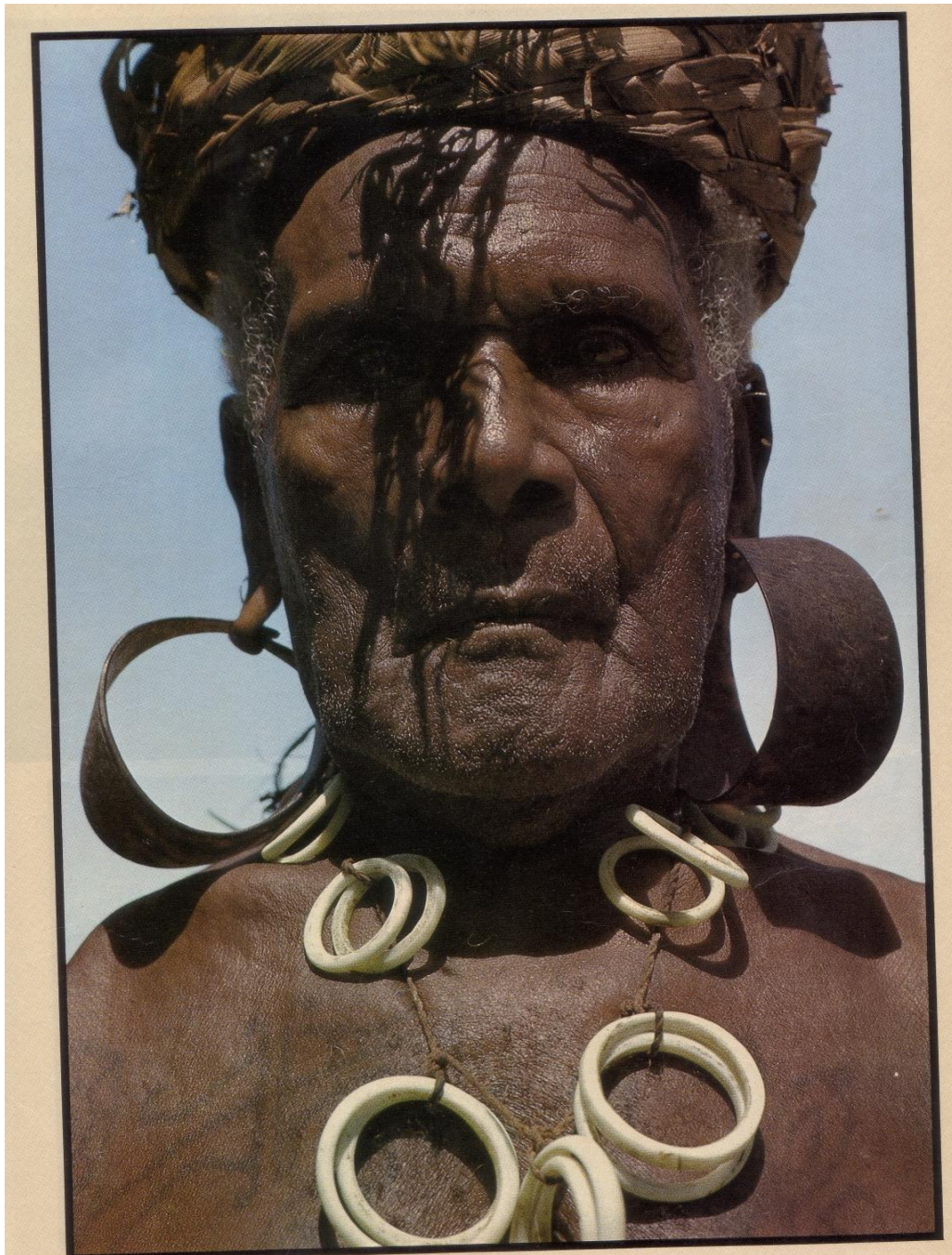
It was dark. I had trouble finding the landing in the crude stone bulkhead of the pagan village of Laulasi. It was cool, too. Much cooler than you'd think just 9° south of the equator in the Western Pacific. The cool darkness, mingled with a strange mystic aura that surrounded the village of shark worshipers, made me hesitate. I considered climbing into my dinghy and rowing back to my cutter, Moira, anchored 100 yards off the tiny man-made island. Before I could turn and retreat the red glow of a cigarette flared and bobbed toward me, suspended in the blackness.

"Hi!" I said to the glow. "Me come talk Bosikuru none."

"Umph," came a voice around the cigarette, "I am Bosikuru."

The shark high priest of Laulasi turned and I followed the crunching sound of his bare feet on the coral gravel. A door opened in one of the thatched houses and a sudden flood of lantern light silhouetted his tall, muscular frame clad in a pair of tattered shorts, no ornaments. His yellow-gray hair glowed softly above his dark-brown, sea-weathered face. His wife, a stocky woman with just a piece of cloth around her waist, glanced at me and placed a small wood bench on the ground in front of their home. She indicated I should sit there. I sat.







Bosikuru took the doorstep and began fixing himself some betel nit. I wondered how to begin the subject that brought me to this small island off the coast of Malaita. I was not sure how he might react. Most of the Solomon Islanders I had met were friendly, but this was any first visit to a pagan village.

Looking intently at the betel nut mix he was working on, the priest said, "What you like talk about?"

"Magic."

"Magic?" There was a long silence. Then, almost to himself, he mumbled, "Okay." It sounded like "Why not?"

"In many of the villages," I began, "people say their grandfathers knew strange things about weather magic. They say there were men who could make big storms come suddenly to destroy enemy canoes. They could also make the sea very calm for long canoe trips between islands or make the wind blow a certain direction."

Bosikuru transferred some betel nut from his mortar into his mouth and chewed. He nodded. "They could do this."

"But the missionaries came and today the people are Christians. They no longer remember these things." I added. "I've heard that here in Laulasi these things have not been forgotten." I said quietly, "I have also heard that you know about such things."

There ensued such a long silence I began to think I had spoken too soon.

Bedeviled words

"Why you ask these things?" he asked in his quiet, resonant voice.

"Remember when I came here? There was no wind at all. I had to motor all the way from Auki. The day before that I motored all the way from the Florida Islands to Auki. No wind. Whenever I go to sail the wind stops or it blows right from the direction I'm going. Last time I came from Florida to Malaita, I wanted to go east-southeast to Waisisi Harbor. It was in the northwest season. But the wind came directly from Waisisi Harbor to Florida. So I fell off and sailed for Alele Harbor. But, after an hour or so, the wind backed and came directly from Alele. So I fell off and headed for Auki. The wind

backed some more and then it was coming directly from Auki. Frustrated, I came about and again headed toward Waisisi. After another hour the wind stopped completely and I motored the rest of the way.

"These things happen virtually every time I go sailing, ever since I got this boat. I have traveled almost 6,000 miles on the Moira and have only sailed with a favorable wind for maybe 200 or 300 miles. Often, I wait and wait for the wind to come from the right direction and start out only to have the wind suddenly stop, turn around, and start blowing from exactly where I am headed. Not 10° or 20° on either side but EXACTLY on my compass course to the next anchorage.

"At first I kept thinking, 'coincidence, merely coincidence,' or 'the winds are bad this time of year,' but this has gone on for well over a year of cruising and I've developed a new respect for mystical beliefs concerning the wind. The law of averages was demolished months and months ago. "Other yachts that have traveled with me report by radio that conditions clear up when they get about 100 miles away from me. One yachtsman told me he never had any problem sailing in the Solomons - he simply waited until he knew I would be at anchor and then he set off with favorable winds. He kids me about it on our evening radio schedule. But it isn't funny to me."

Weather magic

"I've come to you because you are supposed to be an expert on weather magic. Can you help?" It was a long speech and I wondered if he understood my English well enough to know what I was saying.

After awhile, he said, "When I go sailing in my canoe, the wind must come from behind me. If I go to the south the wind he must come from the north. If I go to the north the wind he must come from the south." He gestured with his arm, "I have no trouble with the wind. There is such magic in my family, but I must first talk with medium to know if I can work this business on your boat."

For the next few days Frederique and I busied ourselves taking photographs around the island and getting to know the people. They were a happy, friendly people. I wandered in and out of the picturesquely crowded thatched houses, examined the huge war canoe pulled up on the shore and visited the pagan tambu area where women were never permitted-shrines complete with human skulls and ancestral spirits. Naked children played all day in the clear lagoon waters and bare-breasted women busied themselves making shell money or cooking while the powerfully built men fished, worked on the houses or sat around talking and chewing betel nut.

Then Bosikuru said, "Tonight I will talk to Anigizo, the medium."

That night when the medium stepped into the lantern light I saw a heavy-set figure with enormous, naked, tattooed breasts and a clutter of necklaces. Her black, tattooed face was grim. She began talking vehemently, swinging her arms and punctuating her staccato remarks by shaking her head and making loud hissing sounds. After a few minutes she sat on the floor and began to utter a low, steady stream of comments in the native tongue. Bosikuru casually leaned against the old wood counter and stared into space. At regular intervals he softly said something to the air. The medium hardly paused in her words. After half an hour she got very excited again and leapt to her feet. She pointed in my direction and shouted something. Then she threw up her hands and began another outburst.

I couldn't figure out what was going on. Was she angry because Bosikuru wanted to do magic with a white man? Was she talking about the boat? Or what? An hour later the medium was abruptly silent.

Chinese spell

"What did the medium say?" I asked.

"Before she talk to ancestors, she go look to your boat. She see dark cloud follow boat." He looked meaningfully at me and narrowed his eyes. He whispered, "Fadahrae!" and took a big mouthful of betel nut and lime.

"What does that mean?" I asked. "Means poison. ('Poison' in pidgin English means sorcery or evil spell.) She say maybe some Chinese man he do bad work on your boat so bugger up boat and make him drown."

"Chinese?" I asked, astounded.

"Medium say Chinese man do this to your boat."

For a moment I felt hot and cold at the same time. I had not told anyone here that the boat was made in Taiwan. How did they come up with the Chinese?

"Do the Chinese do much magic?" I asked, thinking they might blame lots of things on the Chinese.

"I don't know," answered Bosikuru thoughtfully. "I do not hear of Chinese do. magic before."

"Bosikuru, it is very interesting the medium saw this thing because my boat was built and launched in Taiwan, which is Chinese. They build the boats and ship most of them to America where they are finished and put in the water. There have been no problems with these boats. My boat was, I believe, the third boat actually put in the water in Taiwan by this boatyard. The first boat was bought by an American and he did not get along well with the Chinese. When he left the Chinese were angry with him. He sailed to Guam and was hit by two typhoons before he reached there. When he left Guam he was hit by a third typhoon and the boat sank. The man was saved but he lost everything he had."

"Maybe Chinese work some business on his boat like on your boat," Bosikuru observed.

"Yeah, maybe they did. Anyway; the next boat was built for a man who lived in Taiwan and spoke fluent Chinese, an American military man. He had no trouble with the Chinese and sailed off to the Philippines with no real weather problems. Mine was the third boat. Like the first man I did not get along well with the boatyard people. When I left there was much ill feeling between the manager and myself. We've had one typhoon and consistently dismal sailing conditions."

Guaranteed exorcism

Two days later, Bosikuru and I were sitting in silence when he suddenly said, as if he had been carrying on a conversation with himself, "But MONEY! Money you must think of me. If no money, magic can never work for you. Money for magic, not for me. I cannot spend, this money. I promise you clear now. He, the money you use him in this work. . .that's for six months. If you go through these six months but nothing good for you, same problem already, return. Take your money back! If magic not true for you, this money must be waiting for you. Or I work another magic for you. If magic true for you then I win money. You come back and we party with money."

Exorcism with a money-back guarantee! I was amazed.

Things dragged on for several days with nothing much happening when, one night, I happened to glance up the companionway. For an instant I saw an old, old woman standing looking at the steering wheel. She was so old I couldn't tell for sure if it was a man or woman. The following

day I mentioned the incident to Bosikuru, ". . a short person and very old. I saw this person but it was so fast. . then suddenly there was nobody there."

"Ah-hee-ahh!" he exclaimed.

"I could not tell if it was a man or, woman," I added.

"Medium already tell me. Woman. Devil woman! They put in this boat to cry for the wind. But now, very lucky you come here. We will do work on boat. My magic people they allow you truly to see this devil woman. Medium tell me yesterday you would see this. Say when you see devil woman, she ready for run away. Must do work quick time now."

That night he was suddenly there, standing on the afterdeck with his hair blue-white in the moonlight. The high priest seemed excited. He took a can of powder and went below. Starting in the forward cabin he talked quietly, waving his hand as if to say, "Begone! Go away!" He dipped his fingers in the white powder and, holding them to his lips, blew the powder into the air in every direction, rhythmically chanting between powerful puffs. . . puff-puff mumble-mumble puff-puff. He moved aft through the entire boat then came out on deck and, puffing, and chanting, covered the topsides with the fine powder.

He then took up another can, a talcum powder can, and repeated the entire process, this time throwing powder from the, can all over the boat. Finishing this, he poured some of the magic seawater into a cup and went below again. Dipping his fingers into the water he blew vapor into the air. His chanting was louder, as if the devil- woman was drawing further and further away. On deck he threw water from the cup over the bow and over each quarter of the boat and then into the center cockpit. Each time he threw the water his wife stood on the opposite side of the boat and loudly clapped her hands and cried out.

Next, they got into their boat and circled Moira, throwing more water on the hull at the quarter points. As his wife paddled, the shark priest stood majestically in the moonlight exorcising the devil woman. They stopped at the bow and he lit a strangely tied bundle of palm leaves and herbs. As the torch smoldered, orange flames lit their intent faces and they slowly circumnavigated the Moira, covering the entire boat with magic smoke.

Finally he came back aboard, reached into his pocket and handed me a coin, a 1948 sixpence. "I keep this boat from winds and cyclone. That's why I give you this sixpence. Big storm make waves climb 40 feet. No! You can never see this anymore if this spirit man he stay with you always in the boat. Never you can find waves like that. Never mind you go in big ocean like you work before. Wind must come for you wherever you go but he must come through side where you can sail. It can't come in front of boat.

"Spirit man he stay with you, good man, Christian name Daniel. You pay for this man with sixpence. He must help you follow all your programs. First you throw little bit of whisky or drink to give him. You talk to this man, Daniel, you tell him, 'I'm going to go this way now.'

Wind alas!

The next morning was gray and it looked like it might rain. But the magic had been completed and the villagers gathered on the shore and were cheering me on as I winched up the 200 feet of anchor chain. Bosikuru stood smiling confidently. It was dead calm. As we motored off the whole village shouted and waved. We smiled and waved our farewells and chugged out the pass to the calm, deep-blue tropical sea. I swung Moira's helm southeast and we motored along having breakfast. "Come on, Daniel, do your stuff," I said to the rigging. I tossed some tea to Daniel and added some scrambled eggs and sausage for good measure. As an afterthought, I tore off a piece of toast covered with apricot jam. "Daniel," I said in conspiratorial tones, "we are headed southeast and need a fair sailing wind from the northeast. . .or even from the east." It looked like rain. In fact, it looked like it was going to be a rotten day. Then I saw ripples and a few whitecaps spring up. "Here comes the wind!" I shouted happily to Frederique and we put up the sails.

By 1000 hours we were in a screaming, howling storm. Short, steep waves crashed over the bow from the 25-knot headwind. It poured like the skies had burst and we were drenched to the bone. All day we beat hard into it, the wind blasting directly up the coast like some laughing malevolent devil.

Motor Boating & Sailing/June 1978