

Extended Reading Comprehension:

THE BOATBUILDERS OF FIJI



Read the story below and then answer the questions that follow.

The nation of Fiji consists of 300 islands as well as the ocean between those islands. So, it is no surprise that Fijians have many names and types of sea canoes. The general type is the **cama** (outrigger). More specific types include the **velovelo**, the **camakau**, the **tabilai**, and the great **drua**. Whatever the name, legend says there was a time when Fijians didn't possess the art of canoe building. Generations of people have passed the legend down, and here is one version.



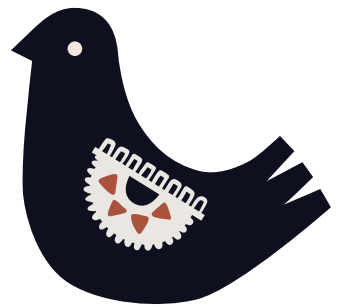
1 In those days, long, long ago, people lived in separate groups throughout Fiji's islands. People could marvel at the glistening sea breaking beyond the reef, but they could not travel across its waters. Their subsistence was limited to the food and fortune found nearby on the land and in the shallows.

2 In those days, Degei, the Serpent Creator God of Fiji, lived on the largest island in a cave in the Kouvandra mountains. It was known that he was a kind god and so took mercy on the people. He saw the Fijians struggle and decided it was time to teach one chosen group the important art of canoe building. He selected the *Matai*. *Matai* means "clever or skillful," and the Matai would become known as the boatbuilders. Degei taught them to create canoes, great and small. Not surprisingly, this knowledge gave the Matai people significant power, for they alone could make the vessels that carried Fijians from island to island. Soon, other Fijians began to admire and respect the Matai people, voyaging long distances to offer services to them in exchange for canoes.



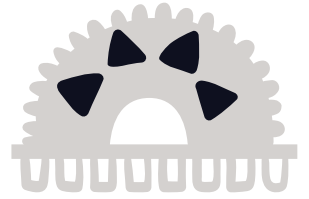
3 The Great Serpent God's cave was near the Matai home, also in the hills of Kouvandra. When Degei slept, night fell, and when he woke, day began. If he turned in his sleep, the earth would shake. Even with this **prodigious** power, Degei was fair, and the Matai had peace and prosperity. As they gained knowledge and wealth, the Matai built a great village high on a hill near Degei's cave. He would often visit and share more knowledge with them. The Matai began to see themselves as great and above the laws of others. And though boatbuilding had made them powerful, the Matai started to resent the work required to make the canoes. Some began to consider ways to escape the never-ending task of boatbuilding. One leader, Rokola, and his brother, Kusamnaria, observed their world and slowly hatched a plan.

4 An enormous *baka*, or banyan tree, stood at the mouth of Degei's cave, and an elegant black dove lived among its branches. The dove's name was Turukawa, and she was a true friend to Degei. Her gurgling "*kru, kru, kru*" would nudge the great god awake each morning, and the daylight would softly slide across the islands. This sunlight also stirred the Matai, and with daytime came the endless cycle of work.



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Continue reading.

5 One night, the brothers saw their opportunity, and they stayed awake long after Degei had fallen asleep. They slipped through the trees to the base of the great baka tree. The full moon shone through the branches, revealing Turukawa's nest. Kusamnaria pointed, and his brother shot an arrow into the sleeping bird's breast. The brothers smiled and retreated to their hilltop home—satisfied they had ended their woes and would be able to laze and sleep now forever. "Will Degei be angry, brother?" Kusamnaria whispered. Rokola answered, "He is one and we are many, and our city is strong." And so, they slept content in their fortress.



6 Hours later than usual, Degei awoke and wondered at the fact that Turukawa had failed to wake him up. He emerged from the cave and looked into the great tree to find it empty. He suddenly spotted the splendid bird, broken by the arrow in its breast, on the ground nearby. The god roared with grief and bent to examine his lost friend. He instantly recognized the arrow as Rokola's, as the Serpent God had taught the Fijian the very skill of crafting it.

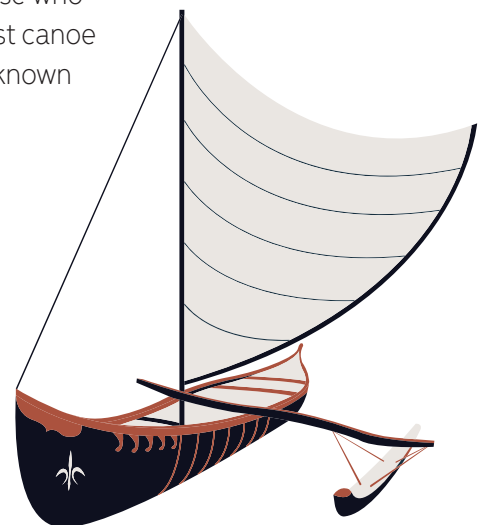
7 "Woe to you, Rokola, and all Matai, ungrateful ones!" Degei bellowed across the valleys. "Now your kingdom will be taken away, and I shall scatter you among all of Fiji! Beware!"

8 Some might have feared such a call from a powerful god, but the Matai had grown too headstrong; they believed that even Degei could not hurt them. Kusamnaria and Rokola hollered back across the valleys, "We fear you not, though you are a god!" and "Come let us fight! Our walls are high, wide, and strong! We are many, and you are but one!"

9 Degei gave a mighty laugh even as he grieved; he roared and raised his great club and hurled it skyward. It collided with the immense clouds which broke and began to pour rain. A great and terrible deluge followed, raining for days upon weeks, filling the Matai fortress and raising the seas with its great downpour. The Matai walls were swept away and so were many Matai, including Rokola, never to be seen again. Others clung to bits of wood from walls or tree trunks or, indeed, to their boats. Finally, when he saw the great waters had scattered the Matai, Degei remembered his kindness. He brought his club back to earth, and the sun shimmered once more over the great sea and islands that are Fiji.



10 The surviving Matai landed here and there across those lands. Many met with local dwellers and asked for shelter and belonging. As the waters withdrew, the Matai were accepted into other groups where they landed, and the boatbuilders willingly offered their **prodigious** knowledge and skills to their new villages. Thus, in the end, all Fijians gained the skill of boatbuilding, learning to create *cama*: *velovelos*, *camakaus*, *tabilais*, and great *druas*. And to this day, those who possess the greatest canoe craftsmanship are known as *matai*.



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Answer the questions about "The Boatbuilders of Fiji."

1. "The Boatbuilders of Fiji" is a myth that explains how the people of Fiji learned to make boats. Like many myths, it is also intended to share a message about morals and values. What is the central theme of this myth?

2. Read this sentence from paragraph 4.
"Her gurgling, 'kru, kru, kru' would nudge the great god awake each morning, and the daylight would softly slide across the islands."

Part A. Name three types of figurative language the author uses in this sentence.

Part B. What effect do these examples of figurative language have on the tone of the paragraph?

3. Reread paragraphs 6 and 7. How does the author convey the change in Degei's attitude toward the Matai?

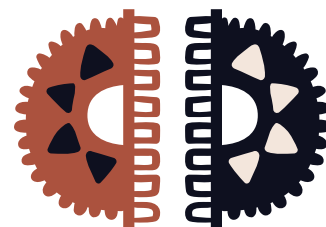
4. Why is the setting important to the story?

5. **Part A.** The author uses the word **prodigious** twice in the story, once in paragraph 3 and again in paragraph 10. What is the meaning of **prodigious** as it is used in the text?

- a. strange and unusual
- b. mysterious and secretive
- c. unbelievable and preposterous
- d. immense and impressive

Part B. What does the repeated use of this word imply about the connection between Degei and the scattered Matai?

- a. They both wanted more power than they had to start with.
- b. They both had powerful talents to be shared with others.
- c. The Matai wanted to gain more power from Degei than they did.
- d. The Matai were newly afraid of Degei's impressive power.



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6. **Part A.** What can the reader infer about Kusamnaria and Rokola?

- a. They are fearful and ungrateful.
- b. They are disobedient and thoughtless.
- c. They are scheming and arrogant.
- d. They are jealous and lazy.

Part B. Provide **two** quotations from the story that support your answer to Part A.

1. _____

2. _____

7. Many stories in mythology feature conflicts between humans and gods. Give an example of one such story, and describe how the plot is similar to and/or different from "The Boatbuilders of Fiji," including the treatment of characters, settings, and themes.

8. The author repeats the word *great* throughout the story. Which **two** words best match the meaning of *great* as it is used in the passage?

- a. powerful
- b. enjoyable
- c. high-quality
- d. large

9. What do Degei's actions in paragraph 9 reveal about his character? Cite specific examples from the text to support your answer.

10. **Part A.** What aspect of Fijian culture does this myth attempt to explain?

- a. how Fijians first learned to build canoes
- b. why there are no serpents in Fiji
- c. how the islands of Fiji came to be separated
- d. why the word *matai* is no longer used in Fiji

Part B. Cite one or more pieces of evidence from the text that support your answer in Part A.

