Voyaging into History:
The Revival of Ancient Polynesian Voyaging

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On December 15, 2010, United States Senator and former Republican Presidential candidate, John McCain, gave a stinging speech attacking what he considered overspending in a senate-spending bill. In his speech McCain counted down the top ten earmarks that he felt needed to be eliminated. When the senator got to number one on his list, he stated, “One of my all-time favorites that is always on here every year -- $300,000 for the Polynesian Voyaging Society in Hawaii. Now some people are watching and thinking I'm making this up. I'm not making it up.” In Hawaii, the news of Senator McCain’s speech spread quickly. Members of the PVS and the native Hawaiian population were frustrated with McCain and confused why he singled out a project that contained such a large amount of cultural, anthropological, and historical relevance. In truth, McCain had selected the Polynesian Voyaging Society because he and one of his staffers had mistaken the group for a sailing organization that provides sailing trips to tourists. Nonetheless this political misstep exposed the fact that, due to Hawaii’s isolation, most Americans outside of the state of Hawaii are unaware of the Polynesian Voyaging Society and its impact on Polynesian prehistory and contemporary Hawaiian culture.

Senator McCain’s singling out of the Polynesian Voyaging Society made me personally curious about the group’s scientific impact, cultural legacy, and origin. As a native Hawaiian child, I had always been inspired by the heroic stories of the Hokulea and her crew. However, I never knew how the Hokulea, and the Voyaging Society that

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Ma ka hana ka ike.
In the action, that is where the knowledge is.
-Hawaiian Proverb

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built the canoe originated. Through my research, I quickly realized that the story behind
the PVS and the Hokulea was not as simple as the tales of Hawaiian heroes that I had
heard as a child. In fact, I found that the origins of the PVS and the Hokulea were quite
turbulent and much more complex. In actuality, the Polynesian Voyaging Society began
as an act of ant-colonial scientific research that intended to disprove the western beliefs
and reaffirm traditional mythology; however, along the way, the project also became one
of cultural significance. This combination of scientific and cultural in turn triggered a
large amount of conflict that almost collapsed the project. However, the trials and
tribulations that resulted from the conflict forced those involved to rethink the project,
take part in changes, and implement compromises that eventually strengthened the
revitalization, and in the end made the PVS as influential academically and culturally as
it is today.

Ancient History

When the first European explorers stumbled upon the tiny Hawaiian Islands in the
middle of the Pacific, they were shocked to discover the islands were already inhabited
by an aboriginal race. The explorers immediately questioned the natives, asking them
how they came to settle on such an isolated island chain. The proud Polynesians
responded to these questions by telling tales of the voyaging exploits of their legendary
ancestors. In Hawaiian oral history, it is said that their ancestors were highly skilled
voyagers and navigators, who participated in multiple waves of two-way voyaging
expeditions between Hawaii and islands as far away as Kahiki (Hawaiian for Tahiti) and
Aotearoa (Hawaiian for New Zealand).³
During the second half of the nineteenth century, Swedish born scholar, Abraham Fornander, collected the massive body of Hawaiian voyaging legends. Based on the oral histories he collected, Fornander published his historical interpretation of how the Hawaiian Islands were settled. Fornander was not alone in his trust of the validity of Hawaiian oral history. Following in his footsteps, early twentieth century historians Martha Beckwith and Peter Buck believed that although Hawaiian storytellers may have taken a great deal of poetic license in their tales of ancestral voyaging, the stories were inspired by actual voyages executed by their ancestors.

However, the work of Fornander, Beckwith, and Buck was not universally accepted. The moment these voyaging legends were committed to paper they immediately became under skepticism by the academic community. Many Western scholars found the legend-based history too far fetched to reflect an actual event. Their doubt was based on a perceived lack of technology and prerequisite intelligence. Many found it impossible to imagine that Stone Age voyagers who lacked large vessels and western navigational tools could have intentionally taken long voyages purposely across the vast Pacific Ocean.

Among the most prominent critics of the Polynesian voyaging legends was amateur New Zealand historian, Andrew Sharp. In 1957 Sharp published his research in a book entitled *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific*. Sharp undermined the legitimacy of the Hawaiian oral histories, explaining that based purely on technological inferiority, the legends were pure mythology. Finney explains that Sharp believed that, “because Polynesian canoes lacked keels, high freeboard, metal fastenings, and other features of European sailing craft, they were not seaworthy enough to deliberately undertake long
voyages, and because Polynesian navigation methods did not rely upon instruments, charts, or other aids now used for navigation, these methods could not have been accurate enough to sail intentionally to distant islands.” Instead, Sharp proposed his alternate conclusion that Polynesia was settled through a series of accidental drift voyages. Sharp theorized that the bulk of Polynesia had been colonized by a series of canoe loads of voyagers who were drifting aimlessly after severe weather or navigational discrepancies had forced them off course, and who just by chance landed upon uninhabited isles. Sharp also proposed that some of these accidental settlers included a few fleets of exiles who, after being driven from their homeland by conflict or a lack of resources, optimistically boarded canoes in hopes that the wind and ocean would propel them to a new home.

Sharp’s theory quickly found mainstream appeal amongst prehistorians who had long sought a thought process not reliant on what scholars considered to be hyperbolic Polynesian oral mythology. Finney explains that the theory’s major appeal was not only a product of Sharp’s deconstruction of the “heroic age of Polynesian voyaging,” but also a direct result that the majority of prehistorians were not watermen. Finney argues, “most scholars are landlubbers to whom the ocean, and especially the idea of sailing across it in anything less than the most modern craft navigate by the latest methods is alien.” He believed that these scholars could not grasp the concept that Polynesians could have developed efficient ocean fairing technology comparable to that was developed in Europe. Because of this, scholars conveniently attached themselves to a European centric theory that both acknowledged that long one way voyages occurred and simultaneously undermined the notion that these journeys were anything but accidental. In addition, the adoption of Sharp’s theory allowed scholars to free themselves from overly complicated
contradictory theories surrounding the settlement of Polynesia, and instead comfortably believe that settlement was simply the result of a series of independent and random mishaps.\textsuperscript{10}

Although Sharp’s work was widely accepted for years as the most feasible theory on Polynesian voyaging, many scholars of Polynesian descent found his research unproven and disagreeable. Finney described their frustration with Sharp’s theory, “A number of us thought that although Smith, Best, and other enthusiasts may have exaggerated Polynesian voyaging capabilities, Sharp had swung the pendulum too far over the other way. We felt that in labeling the process of settlement as accidental, and in denigrating the skills of Polynesian canoe builders, sailors, and navigators, Sharp had arrogantly and without foundation denied to Polynesians their rightful place in history as great voyagers and colonizers.”\textsuperscript{11} Nonetheless, Finney and other Polynesian scholars had no solid evidence to combat Sharp’s unproven claims. However, after conducting excavations throughout Polynesia during the 1950s and 1960s, archaeologists Kenneth Emory and Yoshiko Sinoto discovered evidence that rebutted Sharp’s theory. Emory and Sinoto integrated archaeological evidence and linguistic patterns with the legends recorded by Fornander, Buck and Beckwith, and concluded that Hawaii had been settled in two waves, the initial wave being from the Marquesas and the second from Tahiti. Emory and Sinoto’s two wave settlement theory was monumental because it proved that settlement was not accidental, based on the fact that the journey from the Marquesas and Tahiti through crosswinds and changing currents to the Hawaiian isles could not have been inadvertent. More importantly, Emory and Sinoto also found evidence that proved that there had been two way contact between Hawaii and Tahiti sometime between the
twelfth and fourteenth century. Although Sharp’s theory continued to be the orthodox view on Polynesian settlement, Emory and Sinoto’s research legitimized aspects of the Hawaiian oral histories, and as a result, brought the debate on the authenticity of Polynesian voyaging legends back to the forefront.

The Birth of the Revival

Historian and anthropologist Ben Finney became interested in Polynesian canoe voyaging in the spring of 1958 when he left the Navy and enrolled at the University Hawaii at Manoa’s Anthropology master’s program. Under the tutelage of established folklorist Katherine Luomala and part time professor Kenneth Emory, the California native immediately became enthralled by the then common belief that the ancient Polynesians were such accomplished seafarers. One day before a class, Professor Luomala handed Finney a copy of Sharp’s recently published book and cautioned him that he would most likely find it disagreeable. As his advisor predicted, Finney was not pleased with Sharp’s conclusion. He described his frustration in his book, *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors*. Finney wrote, “The almost gleeful way Sharp demoted Polynesian from pioneering seafarers to hapless castaways made me angry, particularly since I could see how he had selected only evidence that supported his thesis and ignored any that gave Polynesians credit for being able seafarers.” Although frustrated and backed by reputable scholars Luomala and Emory, Finney quickly realized that the debate could not be resolved with the information that was available. The counterargument that Polynesians were in fact accomplished ocean explorers hinged completely on the effectiveness of the ancient Hawaiian technology and techniques. It became apparent
that, without the actual double hauled canoes and famed navigators, it was impossible to scientifically back the oral histories. Finney explained, “Unfortunately, however ethnocentric and ill-formed Sharp’s assessment may have seemed to those who took exception to it, efforts to refute Sharp foundered on the lack of exact information about how well the Polynesians’ canoes sailed, how accurate was their navigation system, and how good was their seamanship.”  

Finney believed that because both the double hauled canoes and navigators had long gone extinct, the only way to prove they were capable of long distance two way voyaging was to recreate the canoes, relearn the navigational techniques, and test them on the ancient routes detailed in the oral histories. However, as a first year graduate student, Finney lacked the credibility or resources to execute his ambitious idea. He made the decision to keep his idea to himself and continue his education. After completing his masters degree and Ph.D. Finney taught a year at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In the spring of 1965 returned to the University of Hawaii as professor of anthropology, and in his spare time he began researching how he would go about making his dream of recreating a canoe and crew a reality. After spending time in New Guinea for anthropological research, Finney returned to Hawaii in 1970 hopeful to begin the project soon.

In the mean time, Finney was not the only scholar with aspirations to debunk Sharp and return pride to ancient Hawaiian voyaging. Finney’s former teacher Kenneth Emory teamed up with Native Hawaiian historian and artist Herb Kane to publish a sixty-two page spread in National Geographic. Emory’s article chronicles the ancient history of Polynesian voyaging, starting from its infancy in Tonga and Samoa 3,000 years ago to its boom in 400 AD with voyages of discovery to Easter Islands, New Zealand, and
Hawaii. Kane’s contribution to the spread was seven artistic diagrams and paintings. Kane’s art supplemented Emory’s writing by depicting the early voyagers, their canoes, and the techniques they used. Because of the widespread reputability of *National Geographic* as their stage, Emory and Kane were able to shift the thought process away from Sharp’s theory.¹⁶ Former *Honolulu Star Bulletin* editor A.A. Smyser wrote an article to highlight the magnitude of the *National Geographic* spread. Smyser proclaimed, “All Polynesians ought to stand straighter and prouder after reading the December issue of National Geographic magazine…Put down for all time is the idea that Pacific Island colonizations were affairs of chance. Enthroned instead is a carefully documented new knowledge that the greatest sea captains of all time were Polynesians.”¹⁷

As interest in ancient Polynesian voyaging began to gain momentum, Finney felt the timing was right to take his idea for reconstruction public. In 1973 Finney joined up with Kane and a third Polynesian voyaging enthusiast and racing canoe paddler named Tommy Holmes. Finney explains that he, together with Kane and Holmes, founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society—a nonprofit educational organization, “dedicated, in general, to conducting experimental research on Polynesian voyaging and disseminating the results of that research, and in particular, to reconstructing a voyaging canoe, testing her over the legendary Hawaii-Tahiti route, and then applying the results of our experiment to the debate about Polynesian migration.”¹⁸ Finney was chosen to be the president of the PVS, Kane the vice president, and Holmes the secretary. The three men rounded up a handful of scientists, sailors, and Hawaiian community leaders to serve as the board of directors. The society’s first task would be fundraising the $60,000 dollars
they had estimated it would take to initiate the project. Utilizing Holmes family business connections, Kane’s artistic ability and promotional experience, and Finney’s pre-established research base the PVS was able to raise enough funds in six months to begin construction.19

After fundraising was complete, the Polynesian Voyaging Society faced an equally difficult task—recreating an authentic ancient Hawaiian voyaging canoe and reviving navigational techniques that had long ago gone extinct. It was integral for the sake of scientific experimentation that both the canoe and navigational practices be as accurate as possible in order to prove Sharp’s theory invalid. The PVS outlined how they planned to reconstruct an accurate canoe and utilize ancient navigational practices in their 1973 document entitled *A Proposal for an Experimental Voyage between Hawaii and Tahiti*. In their proposal the group explained the design of the canoe. “The design of our voyaging canoe is based on a study of double-canoes that were in use in various parts of Polynesia at the time of initial European contact. Since the design is meant to be a close approximation of the voyaging craft that was in use some centuries before European contact, it has been necessary to factor out innovations and adaptations peculiar to each particular island type, and to follow those common features which appear in all designs and hence are likely to represent the basic characteristics of the ancient voyaging canoes.”20 The proposal also explained that the navigation team would be headed by Dr. David Lewis, an Australian navigator who had made the first circumnavigation of the earth in a catamaran. Lewis was also the leading authority on ancient Pacific navigation techniques and had previously conducted numerous experiments with the handful of modern day practitioners who were still alive in parts of Polynesia and Micronesia. 21
PVS also explained that one of these indigenous navigation experts from the Central Caroline Islands or Reef Islands of Micronesia would also be joining Lewis on the navigation team. Their proposal detailed that the navigators, “like ancient Polynesians, would rely on the observations of stars, winds, swells, birds and other natural phenomena to plot the course and make the landfall. No instruments, charts, or other non-Polynesian devises would be used.”

Although the PVS was founded for scientific experimentation, it quickly became apparent that the project’s potential cultural impact was going to be equally as important. In his book, *Voyage of Rediscovery*, Finney detailed the project’s two-fold purpose. “In addition to resolving the issues about Polynesian seafaring, we wanted the canoe and the voyage to serve as vehicles for the cultural revitalization of Hawaiians and other Polynesians.” By the middle of the twentieth century, Hawaiian culture had become watered down by imperialist encounters with the outside world and the epidemics, technology, and institutions that came with them. At the time of the founding of the PVS, the majority of the native Hawaiian population knew little to nothing about ancient Polynesian voyaging and the rich oral histories about two way journeys between Hawaii and Tahiti that had inspired the project in the first place. In addition to disproving Sharp, revitalizing ancient Polynesian voyaging amongst Hawaiians became a second objective integral for the success of the experiment. Finney continued, “Our hope was that from this participation knowledge of pride in Polynesia’s rich oceanic heritage would grow and spread, giving Hawaiians and other Polynesians an added degree of cultural strength with which to face the challenges of today.” As a native Hawaiian, Kane was passionate about the project’s potential cultural significance. Kane believed the project’s sacred
mission “was to uplift the Hawaiian people, to be the catalyst for the Hawaiian renaissance.” Kane felt that for a culture to be a culture it needed artifacts, and he believed that the replica ancient voyaging canoe could become an iconic Hawaiian artifact. He believed that “the restoration of the voyaging canoe, once the central artifact of Polynesian culture, would reawaken in young Hawaiians an ethnic pride worn down by the Americanization of Hawaii and all the developments that have transformed Hawaiians into an underprivileged group.”

Propelled by both the potential scientific research implications and its cultural significance, the Polynesian Voyaging Society completed building the canoe and was ready to begin testing in March of 1975, just two short years after the founding of the group. Finney, Kane, and Holmes landed on a name for the vessel that would capture the project’s two purposes by being both navigationally related and native Hawaiian. They decided that the canoe would be called the Hokule‘a, the Hawaiian word for Arcturus, which is the bright star that passes directly overhead Hawaii. In the oral traditions it was said that ancient navigators would often rely on Hokule‘a as homing beacon when returning to Hawai‘i. Finney explained, “Hoku means star, le‘a means joy; hence Hokulea is the ‘Star of Joy,’ a fitting name for a navigation star pointing the way homeward, and we though, a perfect name for our canoe.” The Polynesian Voyaging Society also decided that the Hokule‘a and her crew would set sail on a 6,000 mile roundtrip from Hawaii to Tahiti and back sometime during the bicentennial year of 1976. However, although the PVS had done the unthinkable by fundraising enough money, designing and constructing an ancient voyaging vessel, and finding navigators capable of
traditional techniques, a great deal of work remained to be done—and unbeknownst to
the PVS—many unexpected complications lay ahead.

**Rough Waters**

In the months leading up to the Hokulea’s maiden voyage to Tahiti, the
Polynesian Voyaging Society made preparations for cultural revival in addition to
scientific progress. The PVS traveled island to island with the canoe, giving public talks
and workshops, recruiting native Hawaiian crewmembers, and inviting Hawaiian
educators and community leaders to join the board. The group hoped that the voyage
would undermine Sharp and also restore pride in ancestral accomplishments. The PVS
envisioned that this return of pride would allow the Hokulea to become a floating
classroom that would travel island to island and educate Hawaiian school children.
Finney wrote, “That vision proved to be naïve. As soon as we launched the canoe and
began sailing her around the archipelago in preparation for the long voyage to Tahiti,
some highly vocal protestors started campaigning to take her over in the name of
Hawaiian nationalism…So great was their appeal among some Hawaiians, including
more than a few crewmembers, that for a while it looked like the project might dissolve
in controversy.”28 Although it seemed natural that cultural revival and scientific research
could reinforce one another, the PVS had failed to anticipate how the two agendas would
interact within the context of the modern day political and societal landscape. Finney
describes the mid-1970’s in Hawaii as “a time of growing exasperation among Hawaiians
with their status as a disposed minority in their own land.”29 Within this framework the
merging of the two agendas created an “explosive mixture” and “tapped into a reservoir
of jealousy and long-repressed resentments.” Due to these feelings, the idea of a scientific experiment taking place on an ancient Hawaiian craft appeared to be “just one more arbitrary imposition on Hawaiians by the dominating culture.” However it was too late for the PVS to refocus the project around the experimental aspect, the cultural revitalization component of the journey had become shifted to the forefront. Finney summed up the growing issue, “Reversing priorities, putting Hokulea’s cultural mission ahead of the long experimental voyage, had unwittingly opened the Hawaiian equivalent of Pandora’s box. We had sailed into the uncharted waters of an awakening Hawaiian consciousness and were being buffeted by strange winds and currents.”

As the conflict surrounding the dueling agendas continued to grow, it became apparent that the larger problem the native Hawaiian community had was less about scientific research and more about the haole (the Hawaiian word for white that carries a strong negative connotation) faces that were leading the research. By the 1970s the mentality and culture of the ethnic minority movements that had begun in the 1960s on the mainland spread to the islands and triggered a similar racial sentiment amongst Native Hawaiians. Young Hawaiians were beginning to believe that because haoles and haole culture were the oppressors, all things haole and related to haole needed to be rejected. This especially meant that no haoles should be involved on a project meant to reincarnate ancient Hawaiian culture. Despite the fact that the Hokulea project could not have become a reality without Finney, the PVS president, Holmes, a society cofounder, and Lewis, the head of the navigational team, the PVS was under great pressure to have a Hawaiian only crew. Hokulea had been advertised as an ancestral spaceship, so naturally it was outer island Hawaiian community leaders who waited to greet the vessel only to
see haole crewmembers. Finney wrote, “I saw that confusion on Hawaiian faces when, at outer island anchorages, I stepped aboard the canoe and was introduced as the president and cofounder of the Voyaging Society.” Finney goes on to describe the stunned reaction when the Hokulea docked on the island of Molokai and community leaders asked pointedly, “What are those haoles doing on the canoe? Isn’t Hokulea a Hawaiian canoe?”

Although the protests targeted the haole members involved in the project, the Hawaiian crewmembers were also under pressure to buy into the Hokulea for Hawaiians movement. In his book, Hokulea: The Way to Tahiti, Finney described that many Hawaiian members of the crew began to openly acknowledge displeasure in having to take orders form haole leadership and they also felt that the Hawaiians in leadership positions might as well have been haole because they were “coconuts,” brown on the outside and white on the inside. The board was also feeling the racially driven pressure; although the rebellious crewmembers had jeopardized the project, their dismissal, would not be well received in the Hawaiian community. The board chose to address the issue by having a Hawaiian style family intervention known as hooponopono. At the intervention the once vocal crew remained silent, seemingly unprepared to discuss the central issue of haole involvement. In an attempt to break the stalemate, Finney decided to take the floor. He stated, “I can’t ask you to quit disliking haoles…you have suffered too much over the last two hundred years for that to happen overnight…All I ask for tonight is a truce…We have a beautiful canoe, a beautiful project…The project is bigger than our conflict. I think we will all benefit by carrying it through together.” After another period of silence a Hawaiian board member responded, “There has been too much hurt, to our ancestors, to
our history. That is why we find it so hard to talk to haoles about problems like this.”

Finney responded by proposing a compromise, he asked if the crew would except the trip to Tahiti as the scientific experiment component of the project and the return leg home be the haole free Hawaiian celebratory journey. The crew begrudgingly agreed, and it appeared for the time being that the boat would be launched as scheduled and the entire project would stay afloat.35

After months of more scientific testing and racial tension, the Hokulea departed the Hawaiian Islands for Tahiti on schedule on the first of May 1976. However under the tension of life at sea, the issues of race resurfaced more violently than before. Specific Hawaiian crewmen were still not fans of taking orders from haoles. After nine days at sea an irate crewman reacted to one of Finney instructions. The crewman shouted, “The same old thing, Haoles telling Hawaiians what to do!” It became obvious to Finney, “Our differences had not been left behind in Honolulu or on the beach in Maui. The same old conflict over whether the voyage should be an ethnic experience or an attempt to re-create an ancient voyage was still very much with us.”36 More and more as the trip continued, some of the Hawaiian crewmembers saw the Voyaging Society in the same way they looked at imperialist colonial administrators. These crewmembers began to see themselves as subjugated crew of indigenous individuals forced to carry out the work requested by the white man.37 The conflict reached its height just before the trips completion after a month out at sea. On day thirty-three aboard the Hokulea, two of the most vocal and rebellious crewmen had been smoking marijuana, as they had done all trip despite it explicitly being on the contraband list. With landfall insight, the crewmen decided to take the opportunity to justify their usage of Marijuana. The crewman
explained that whenever the rebellious crewmembers felt oppressed, “We go smoke, feel good, we let it slide. Because we have to smoke. Hey, pray for pakalolo [Hawaiian for Marijuana], man. Because that’s what saved you guys lives – long time ago!”

It was shocking and scary implication that without marijuana use, select members of the crew would have resorted to violence on an isolated vessel in the middle of the ocean. Finney reacted in frustration, “We’re human beings too. We deserve to be treated like human beings.” This statement pushed the enraged crewman over the edge. He quickly slugged the captain and then moved down the line to Finney. He punched Finney in the face and continued to strike him after he went down. Members of the crew quickly held the angry crewman back, but the damage already had been done at it appeared that the haole leaders of the PVS and certain members of the Hawaiian crew had reached a point of irreconcilable differences.

As agreed upon in the intervention, haole President Ben Finney and haole navigation team leader David Lewis were to fly home together and not be apart of the return trip. On the plane home the two men discussed whether they should even stay involved with the PVS altogether. Lewis and Finney also talked about what they felt caused the conflict aboard the Hokulea. Lewis believed that the racial issues were a product of an identity crisis amongst Hawaiians living in a completely Americanized society. Lewis explained to Finney that he was shocked at how much of the conflict between the haoles and Hawaiians was a product of the Hawaiian’s want for contraband westernized things. Finney wrote, “He [Lewis] could not get over how the gang [specific rebellious crewmembers] was ‘so American’ in their craving for modern foods, beer, and marijuana, as well as in their complaining about sleeping accommodations and the lack of
a jib, keel fins and other modern aids.” Lewis pointed out that all of these wants had nothing to do with Hawaiian cultural revitalization and that the haole leadership had become a scapegoat for what the real issue, a need to ease the journey. Finney began to question whether the problem was the fact that Hawaii had become too westernized to truly embrace the Hokulea as product of both science and cultural revitalization. Finney wondered if “Hawaii had traveled too far from its Polynesian beginnings, had become too much a part of the United States and the modern world to be able to unbend completely for a canoe.” Nonetheless, the trip to Tahiti was complete, and from a scientific experimental standpoint was a success, but it remained to be seen whether the Polynesian Voyaging Society would survive the conflict and the Hokulea would ever set sail again.

**Finding Course**

After the all Hawaiian crew returned home successfully with the aid of western navigation tools, the voyaging society went back to the drawing board to create a way to successfully merge both the scientific and cultural goals of the society. Because the bulk of the at sea issues were caused by the actions of rebellious crewmembers, the PVS needed to think differently when selecting the crew for Hokulea’s future voyages. For the first voyage, the PVS had made the mistake of selecting native Hawaiian crewmen based on their physical appearance and background in surfing and lifeguarding. For example, the crewmember that eventually became violent at the end of the first trip was originally used by Kane as a model for crewmen in many of his canoe paintings. Finney explained that Kane saw that type of native Hawaiian as a must for the original crew because they were “strong, ruggedly handsome watermen who would inspire other Hawaiians by their
masterful handling of the ancestral voyaging.” Although these men were gifted swimmers, strong paddlers, and leaders amongst the Hawaiian community, they lacked sailing experience and were unprepared for life at sea. When reflecting on the issues with the crew, Finney felt that “it was a question of lifestyle and experience, not race.” He pointed out that many of the native Hawaiian crewmen performed well in the open ocean, but it was those crewmen who had had previous open ocean experience. The crewmembers that caused conflict were all watermen who were used to the surfing lifestyle. Finney wrote, “The surfing, beach oriented lifestyle with its quick and easy gratifications is probably the worst possible preparations for a voyage such as ours. It is not just that they are unaccustomed to long sea voyages. Discipline, particularly, self-discipline, had not been part of their life experiences.” The PVS would learn from this correlation and quickly make changes for the future, as they would replace the rebellious watermen on the crew with disciplined individuals with open ocean experience.

Now that the Voyaging Society knew how to go about selecting a functional crew, they turned their attention to addressing the issues of race and leadership. Although Finney and Lewis had played vital roles in the success of the maiden voyage, it was clear that the PVS needed to find native Hawaiian leaders who could fill their roles. Finney wrote, “Despite the great cultural impact of Hokulea and the pride felt by Hawaiians that the canoe had been designed, captained, and largely crewed by Hawaiians, there was one missing element: no Hawaiian was able to navigate as their ancestors once done.” The Hawaiian crew sought badly for a native Hawaiian navigator around whom they could rally and take direction. Fortunately a young Hawaiian college student named Nainoa Thompson was already interested in learning the old ways of Polynesian
navigation. Thompson was one of the replacement crewmembers that were flown to Tahiti to crew the Hokulea in her return to Hawaii in 1976. At the time, he knew nothing about navigation or astronomy—but upon his return to Hawaii, he was determined to become a navigator. Thompson enrolled in astronomy classes at the University of Hawaii, and studied Lewis’s book *We the Navigators*. He also began spending hours each day at the Bishop Museum Planetarium memorizing the simulated sky under the tutelage of planetarium lecturer Will Kyselka. After practice runs in 1977 and a failed attempt in 1978, Thompson still felt unconfident in his ability to navigate the Hokulea alone. He decided to call upon Mau Piailug, the Micronesian navigator from the island of Satawal that Lewis had brought along to guide the Hokulea in 1976. Although Mau was successful in navigating the Hokulea from Hawaii to Tahiti, he became frustrated by the conflict aboard the maiden voyage, quit when the canoe landed in Tahiti, and returned home. Fearful that the ancient navigating techniques would go extinct and impressed by Thompson’s motivation, Mau was willing to put the turbulent first voyage behind him and return to Hawaii to train Thompson. Mau began training Thompson in 1979, and by 1980, Thompson was prepared to navigate the Hokulea solo—finally giving the PVS the native Hawaiian navigator they required.\(^{45}\) Finney described the impact of Thompson’s ambition, “Nainoa Thompson set out on his own to learn the old ways of navigating, initiating a personal quest that eventually was to lead the project to new levels of cultural and scientific accomplishment.”\(^{46}\)

Following the turbulent 1976 voyage, Finney eventually took a step back from the Polynesian Voyaging Society to allow the native Hawaiian leadership to resolve the issues at hand. With Nainoa Thompson now serving as the Hokulea’s navigator, the PVS
was still in search of a native Hawaiian president to fill the void left by Finney. Fortunately for the PVS, they would not have to look beyond the Thompson home. Nainoa’s father, Myron “Pinky” Thompson, was the ideal candidate for the job. The elder Thompson was a World War II veteran who became a highly effective social worker and administrator in Hawaii. Thompson had gained notoriety for cofounding successful job training and health services programs for native Hawaiians. When his son Nainoa signed on to join the PVS crew, Pinky supported his decision despite the fact that the project would delay his son’s college education. Finney wrote, “As a teenager Pinky had been greatly inspired by Te Rangi Hiroa’s portrayal of Polynesians as great seafarers. Now, after fully realizing the damage Hawaiians had sustained from the American takeover and the repression of their language and culture, he readily grasped the potential of Hokulea as a means for Hawaiians to explore their past and demonstrate their worth.” Although Pinky had supported the project from the beginning, he had preferred to stay in the background. However, after the turbulent first voyage and the failed attempt in 1978, Thompson decided it was time to intervene. He challenged the PVS to get organized, and within months, they promoted him to president. Pinky used his passion for his native Hawaiian heritage, as well as his administrative experience, to bring much needed stability to the group during a time of great vulnerability. Finney explains Pinky’s significance, “Under his tutelage, the Polynesian Voyaging Society emerged as a stable and inspirational organization that has greatly helped Hawaiians gain a historical sense of their place in the greater Polynesian nation and a personal sense of being worthy heirs of a great seafaring tradition.”

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One of the most impactful changes the elder Thompson instituted as president was the application of native Hawaiian cultural values and ways of thinking to the way the PVS operated. Pinky’s approach, based in Hawaiian values, added the native Hawaiian ethos the group needed, in addition to providing them with the direction for which they were searching. Pinky introduced Hawaiian terms such as imiike (seeking knowledge), ao (learning and teaching), and malama (caring for) into planning documents, meetings, and discussions. A filmmaker recorded Pinky’s explanation of the importance of the Hawaiian value system. He explained,

What struck me about voyaging was that before you set out to find a new island you had to have a vision of that island over the horizon. Then you had to figure out how you are going to get there; you had to make a plan for achieving the vision. You also had to experiment to try new things. Finally, you had to get out there and take a risk. And on the voyage you had to bind the crew to each other with aloha so they could work together to overcome the risk and achieve the vision. You find them throughout the world — seeking, planning, experimenting, taking risks and the importance of the team. That process is important to pass on to our young people. The same principles are the ones we use today and that we will use into the future. No matter what culture you are, or what race, this way of doing things works.

With the Thompsons at the helm and the organization headed in a new direction channeled by Hawaiian values, the Polynesian Voyaging Society had found their course and were finally prepared to successfully merge the original scientific and cultural goals. Finney stated, “The initially problematic but later synergistic alliance of experimental voyaging and cultural revival had served its purpose.” Within the first 10 years after the changes were made to the PVS, the Hokulea had sailed up to 30,000 nautical miles, all in the name of scientific research and cultural revitalization. Finney explains the successful merging of the two agendas,
At first these approaches coexisted uneasily, and at times clashed. But as the project has matured, partisans of each approach have learned to respect each other’s concerns. Where at first many crewmembers rejected research as an alien, non-Hawaiian activity, now they have not only come to accept the experimental procedures, but even to vie for the opportunity to collect data on canoe performance and navigation because of how much these can tell them about their ancestral technology. At the same time, researchers have realized how much rituals and beliefs concerning, Hokulea as its voyagers that have been developed by participants, but do not exactly duplicate ancient precedents, make the project more meaningful to the Polynesian communities involved.52

Landing in Prehistory

Disproving Andrew Sharp and his theory of accidental drift settlement was the original goal of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, and despite the cultural conflict, the Hokulea’s 1976 maiden voyage did accomplish this goal by proving that Polynesian canoes and traditional navigational methods were capable of long distance journeys.53 Finney argued, “My contention was that the voyage to Tahiti had rescued the ancient Polynesians from their damnation as mere ‘accidental voyagers’ and put them back in their rightful place among the most daring and resourceful voyagers the world has ever seen.”54 Results from the first voyage to Tahiti were widely cited by archaeologists and have triggered the spread of much more realistic views on the capabilities of Polynesian voyaging and its role in prehistory.55 Following the restructuring of the PVS, the crew sailed the Hokulea to Tahiti again in 1980. But this time with a native Hawaiian navigator at the helm, and the usage of Polynesian voyaging techniques both on the way to Tahiti and back. By this point the PVS had truly proved “how false Sharp’s arbitrary limits on intentional voyaging had been.” Although the restructuring organization driven by the support of the recently triggered cultural revival had upended Sharp, they were not content and felt there was still work to be done. The Voyaging Society’s confident new
leaders were interested in expanding the project by proving that the Hokulea and her crew could also recreate other routes that played integral parts in Polynesian oral history. They wanted to prove that not only was Sharp wrong in his underestimation of Polynesian voyaging, but that the legends were feasible and could have been completed. Finney explained this evolution, “The insistence of those Hawaiians who have led the project over the last decade that the canoe continue to sail around Polynesia, and their enthusiasm in working with oceanographers, meteorologists and astronomers as well as anthropologists has enabled the project to extend the scientific work far beyond the original conception of single voyage between Hawaii and Tahiti to settle a controversy about the intentional sailing range of Polynesian voyagers.”

Polynesian voyaging legend told of navigators who made the journey from Hawaii to Aotearoa (New Zealand) by steering toward the setting sun during the months of October and November. Just as Sharp doubted the reality of a planned two way voyage between Hawaii and Tahiti, scholar Thor Heyerdahl thought a trip from Hawaii to Aotearoa was unrealistic due to the westerly trade winds and current patterns. In fact, Heyerdahl believed that west to east sailing was impossible for the canoes of ancient Polynesian voyagers. In 1985, five years after the Hokulea’s second journey to Tahiti, the PVS decided that they were to sail from Hawaii to Aotearoa to reaffirm another voyaging legend and disprove Heyerdahl, just as they did Sharp. After studying meteorological charts, Nainoa noticed a change in the wind and currents in the southern hemisphere during October and November. This pattern correlated directly with the oral histories and made what was supposed to be a seemingly impossible trip a reality. In December of 1985 the Hokulea and her crew landed in Aotearoa after a long journey from Hawaii with
a stop over in Rarotonga. The trip was a great success and made a huge scientific impact by debunking Heyerdahl’s theory and adding even more legitimacy to the already elevated Polynesian voyaging legends.

During the stop over in Rarotonga, the Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Henry welcomed the crew with a speech. In his speech, the Prime Minister surprised the Hokulea’s crew by recalling having to read Sharp’s book as a schoolboy. He proclaimed, “How I wish Andrew Sharp was alive today. I would have bought his ticket, given him free accommodation and bought all his food so he could see all the canoes sailing to Rarotonga using the old methods of star navigation.” Upon landing in Aotearoa, Maori leader Sir James Henare echoed Henry’s sentiments. Henare stated, “You have shown that it can be done and it was done by our ancestors. To me, this is the most important occasion, and I smile, and I laugh, and I shall smile again tomorrow at all the critics who have said it was not done.”

The Polynesian Voyaging Society has continued to sail the Hokulea around the Pacific, making trips to Tahiti, Aotearoa, Marquesas, the North American West Coast, and Rapanui. In doing so the PVS has continued to make research contributions and in turn ensured that the Polynesians take their rightful place as legendary navigators in prehistory.

Making Cultural Headway

Although the Polynesian Voyaging Society has made monumental academic contributions through the scientific experimentation done on each voyage, the impact is minute in comparison to the immeasurable cultural influence of the Hokulea, the crew, and their voyages. The PVS is credited with helping to spark the state wide Hawaiian
Renaissance, and the Hokulea is considered by many as the physical symbol of the movement. The revival of ancient Polynesian voyaging has also boosted feelings of individual and cultural worth among native Hawaiians. After years of westernization and cultural oppression, the Hawaiian people could celebrate the greatness of their ancestors by witnessing the revival of their extraordinary voyaging abilities. Navigator Nainoa Thompson describes this change. “Two hundred years ago, we lost basically all that we knew about our traditions and it’s going to be through projects like this that we can regain it. But we’re not just regaining an artifact. We are regaining pride in the culture of the people – a proud, courageous people.” Former Governor of Hawaii and first native Hawaiian governor John Waihee described the cultural impact of the PVS, and the immense personal pride he felt when witnessing the Hokulea return from Tahiti in 1976.

I am more than just governor – I am Hawaiian, and as I sat there watching Hokulea my bones screamed with pride. It is so wonderful to be Hawaiian in the Year of the Hawaiian, the Year of the Hokulea. You know that today we welcome you back with pride because you have established once and for all that our ancestors, our Polynesian ancestors, were masters of their world – and that despite those who doubted just a few years ago, they were able to navigate the seas and to work with the elements to create the civilization that Captain Cook, two hundred years ago, called the most extensive nation on earth…If they could do that, it seems to me that, conclusively their descendants have within their grasp the power to face and be masters of their own world… I want to acknowledge those of you who participated in this great voyage of discovery and those others who supported these efforts – and all of you for making this sense of pride, this sense of destiny, so available to each and every one of us on this blessed soil. Aloha.

In a sense, the Polynesian Voyaging Society and the Hokulea had not only returned cultural pride to native Hawaiian people, but also provided them with the confidence to be capable of achieving their individual and cultural goals as native people in a modern non-native society. Native Hawaiian community leader, Randie Fong,
described what the Hokulea meant to the Hawaiian culture and Polynesian lifestyle surviving in the twenty-first century. Fong stated, “You see, this really isn’t just about canoes and voyaging. This is about a race or people realizing the greatness within them – the understanding that as a community we are capable of great things. If we are grounded in our culture and dare to take risks, our Polynesian lifestyle and cultural practices will be the key to our success as a race in the 21st century. That’s what this is all about!”

The cultural resurgence caused by the Hokulea was not limited to the Hawaiian Islands. Many of the cultures across Polynesia were strongly influenced by the arrival of the Hokulea upon their shores. At the time of the Hokulea’s first two voyages to Tahiti, the native French Polynesians were in the midst of tough negotiations with the French colonial authorities for increased local self-government. The dramatic arrival of the Hokulea raised the morale of the native Tahitians, inspiring them to fight for even more rights. Later, Tahiti would adopt a canoe motif on their flag of nationhood and eventually build a canoe of their own. Tahiti would not be the only Polynesian sister country to reconstruct voyaging canoes inspired by the Hokulea; by the mid 1990’s, Aotearoa and the Cook Islands had joined Hawaii and Tahiti with canoes of their own. And in 1995, all four nations and their eight respective canoes sailed together on a voyage from Aotearoa through the Cook Islands and on to Hawaii. Finney described how the expansion of the revival across Polynesia exemplified how effective the cultural resurgence had become. He wrote, “This transformation of Hokulea into a symbol of resurgent Polynesia pride, and the way this and previous voyages have galvanized Hawaiians and other Polynesians, demonstrate how well the cultural goals of the project have been fulfilled.”
The cultural impact of the Polynesian Voyaging Society expanded geographically when the group decided to build a second canoe in 1993 using a log given to them by a native Alaskan tribe. Native Alaskan tribal leader Byron Mallet spoke inspiringly about the PVS’s cultural influence on all native peoples. He said, “Both the reality and the symbolism of the project breathes hope and inspiration into all people seeking to maintain their traditions, heritage and culture in a society that does not place a high priority on such things. In your canoe, you carry all of us who share your vision and aspiration for a people to live and prosper with their future firmly built on the knowledge of their heritage and traditions.”

Closing

According to Hawaiian oral history, ancient Polynesian voyagers were gifted explorers who possessed exceptional navigational ability. The legends boasted of a time when the ancestors used only the stars, winds, and ocean currents to guide themselves across the Pacific. But by the middle of the twentieth century, not only had westernization diluted the native Hawaiian culture to a point of near extinction, but the voyaging legends had been replaced by western scholars who believed that the oral histories were mere romanticized exaggerations of the truth. The Polynesian Voyaging Society set out to achieve two goals: to disprove these western scholars and to revitalize the Hawaiian culture. At first these two goals, one scientific and the other cultural, conflicted. But in time, after adjustments were made, the agendas became symbiotic, and in turn made the organization more influential than it ever intended on being. With the two agendas successfully merged, the PVS returned the voyaging legends
back to their proper place in prehistory and simultaneously helped to trigger a native
renaissance in Hawaii and a cultural movement throughout Polynesia.

In December of 2010 Senator John McCain naively questioned the validity of the Polynesian Voyaging Society and government funding the group received. In response, Navigator Nainoa Thompson had only one suggestion for McCain, “just come sail.”\(^7^0\) Thompson could have defended the government funding by highlighting the scientific relevance or the cultural impact of the PVS, but instead he simply invited the Senator to come aboard the Hokulea. For Thompson, countering McCain was simple, because he understood that the experience of sailing on the Hokulea speaks for itself. As the ancient proverb said, “\textit{Ma ka hana ka ike, in the action, that is where the knowledge is.}”\(^7^1\)

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