

Ben R. Finney. *Hōkūleʻa: The Way to Tahiti*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1979. Pp. x, 301, maps, illustrations, color supplement, appendices, index. \$17.50.

To the first Europeans who visited the South' Seas, the Polynesians presented an almost intolerable mystery: how could a preliterate people have established and maintained a voyaging ability over most of the world's greatest ocean and settled practically all of its habitable islands? Without metals, how could they have built the vessels that carried whole communities with their useful plants and animals to new but surely known destinations thousands of seamiles distant from their departure point? They had established themselves in exclusive occupation of an area twice the size of the continental United States, an area 98.5 percent water. How could they have developed this voyaging ability at a time when the people of the great continents were barely able to trust themselves out of sight of land?

The comfortable answer was that they could not. Their distribution was fortuitous. Sheer chance had stranded a few fortunate survivors of thousands of maritime accidents on islands where they could survive, along with their wives, their pigs, their chickens, and a score or more of useful plants. In 1952, Thor Heyerdahl's mainly untenable theory that they had simply followed winds and currents to whatever future a blind chance might find them was widely accepted with relief; and five years later, the late Andrew Sharp's further contribution, based on the assumption that Polynesians did not have the means to mount colonizing voyages of more than a few hundred miles, was also taken seriously, though it denied a proud people any credit for one of the world's most sustained and venturesome achievements. Those who could not accept the purposeful

nature of the long-distance voyaging were unfamiliar with the maritime mentality of these island people.

My first acquaintance with Ben Finney's spirited defense of Polynesian achievement came with the essay he contributed to *Polynesian Culture History*, a Festschrift in honor of Kenneth P. Emory (Bishop Museum Press, 1967). He was already promoting pragmatic tests with a sailing double canoe, built of modern materials to an ancient Hawaiian design. His enthusiasm mated with a similar sentiment in two associates, Herb Kawainui Kane and Tommy Holmes, and the three of them formed the Polynesian Voyaging Society, a membership fund-raising corporation. They honed up the project of a Hawai'i/Tahiti return voyage for which navigation would be restricted to the noninstrument methods of the ancients, and food and equipment to such as was carried by the early voyagers. A freight of food animals and plants would be preserved alive to grow at voyage end. Though this could not prove the early two-way communication, it could certainly demolish some of the arguments in opposition. It should silence the sceptics who still could not believe in the Polynesian achievement and by their disbelief disparaged the Polynesian--and indeed the human--potential.

Kane, an excellent artist and a student of voyaging canoes, designed the vessel and his work publicized the project, accelerating a move then in progress towards a Hawaiian cultural revival. In December 1974, *National Geographic Magazine* ran a Polynesian issue featuring seven major Kane paintings and a supplement of his drawings of ancient canoe types. The following March, the Society launched the sixty-foot double canoe *Hōkūle'a*, named for Arcturus, the zenith star of Kaua'i island, the homing beacon of the ancient voyagers. The expensive project was financed in part by an arrangement with the National Geographic Society assigning film rights, and in part by donations made more impressive because of the appeal to Hawai'i's pride in her past.

Though no Hawaiian still retained the ancient skills of deep-sea navigation without instruments, they had not been lost. David Lewis, a celebrated lone-hand voyager had studied them and was proficient and could enlist the services of a Micronesian navigator Mau Piailug. Enthusiastic helpers preserved foods by ancient methods, a dog, a pig and some poultry were secured, and *Hōkūle'a* was scheduled to make her voyage in 1976, as part of Hawai'i's celebrations of the Bicentennial American Independence.

It is on record that she magnificently demonstrated the ability of the ancient canoe design to sail comfortably to windward and the trained human to navigate the ocean distances to a planned destination without

instrumental assistance. The feat was accomplished in good time, and after a crowd of record proportions greeted her arrival in Tahiti, Polynesians all over the Pacific were delighted that their version of their own history had been so thoroughly vindicated at a first attempt.

But that all was not well with the voyage was immediately obvious. Piailug refused to entertain participation in the return trip and made public his intention to have no more truck with Hawai'i or Hawaiians. Several publications admitted difficulties with a mutinous crew, including Professor Finney's contribution to *The Prehistory of Polynesia* (edited by Jesse D. Jennings, Harvard, 1979). In his *From Maui to Cook* (Doubleday, 1977), David Lewis touched very lightly indeed on the refusal of some crew members to observe the restrictions on communications and modern foods. In *The Voyaging Stars* (Collins, 1978) he observed simply: "Piailug has listed the names of those who so betrayed their trust in a subsequently recorded taped message; I think it better that their disgrace be forgotten."

But Finney has now given a very full account of everything that went wrong, apparently in justifiable reaction to the contemptuous response of some crew members to his beautifully tempered deference to national feelings, and his tribute of years of admiring study. Much more went wrong than has previously been admitted.

After a launching which followed all the precepts of tradition, *Hōkūle'a*, under the captaincy of Herb Kane, embarked on a year of sea trials, necessary because of unfamiliar design, the probable need to adjust rigging, and the intention to use no instruments. Then, Finney tells us: "Kane proved to be an inspired leader, although it was not long before his enthusiasm developed into a messianic vision. *Hōkūle'a's* sacred mission, Kane began to teach, was to uplift the Hawaiian people, to be *the* catalyst for the Hawaiian renaissance."

A tour of the Hawaiian islands had the regrettable effect of putting the cultural mission ahead of the experimental voyage; flattering receptions of crew and canoe made visiting preferable to hard training runs. The tour also got mixed up with the militant movement organized by Hawaiian malcontents for return of alienated lands. From then, it became difficult to combine scientific research and cultural revival. After a swamping incident revealed the untrained nature of the crew and the necessity of modifying the rig design, Kane was replaced by Elia Kapahu-lehua, a good captain but no disciplinarian.

Kane's continuing dedication, however, was apparent when towards the end of that year, Island Heritage published his magnificent book *Voyage: The Discovery of Hawai'i*, a book which, like the *Hōkūle'a* canoe, is

surely destined to remain a point of bright inspiration to Polynesians everywhere and their sincere admirers.

The chosen crew was a misfortunate one, apparently born of the “chiefs outnumbering the Indians.” The worst elements were encouraged by a film crew, sent by National Geographic and apparently dedicated to the recording of highly emotional moments, possibly to enhance dramatic effect. Once chosen, the crew attempted to delay departure as long as possible, with no care for the changing season. Some came aboard with supplies of marijuana. Harder drugs were suspected from their behavior, and they also managed to get some supplies of liquor. They brought a cooking stove and totally ignored the huge supplies of traditionally-preserved foods.

The troubles they caused were augmented by the film crew which, with one member on *Hōkūle‘a* herself, had arranged to make transfers of fresh and exposed film between her and the accompanying yacht. Their several attempts to communicate position reports looked like deliberate sabotage. Six members of the crew refused duties, camped in a little hide-away amidships, smoked marijuana, complained, and muttered threats. Arrived off Tahiti, they were presented at sea with a case of champagne, tossed aboard by the National Geographic people. It promoted a mêlée in which Finney, with others, was damaged. Afloat or ashore, this group continued as a heavy drag on the efforts of the other nine who in spite of them completed this magnificent voyage.

There are some, and presumably Lewis is one, who regret that such details had to be recorded, and Finney, with his great sympathy for the Polynesian race, has done it reluctantly. I believe it to have been a necessity, for it has highlighted the single factor missing from this modern expedition. In all other details, the voyage was well conceived. The one element missing was that which, in my own conviction at least, was what made possible the venturing, voyaging existence of mankind in the Pacific, the element that developed him into a superior kind of human when he reigned undisturbed in his own communities. That element was the self-sufficiency trained into him in childhood, and providing him with a happy discipline which eliminated most of the problems of living.

That element can still be found in a diminishing number of islands and groups of which I’ll instance the Kingdom of Tonga, where I have had some experience. Whenever two Tongans meet in any part of the world, one is superior to the other, and his decision on any matter where dissent arises is final. The pecking order is established in the family, then the *kainga* or expanded family, then the nation. Even the highest in the land has someone he must obey--and women top the pecking order. Even the

lowest can find someone to whom he can issue orders and expect to see them carried out. Other behavior is unthinkable. The system, a complicated one, is inherent with their history. True, there were revolts; there were also delegations of authority which temporarily altered the order. But the framework for discipline was well established and afforded the pleasure of obedience as well as the joy of command for everyone. This convention, however, has tended to disappear wherever, as in Hawai'i, Tahiti, and most other groups, a foreign authority has supplanted the Polynesian system.

It was this that was absent from the *Hökūle'a* experience, and for this reason I think that David Lewis was wrong to write: "Better that their disgrace be forgotten." Because it was the absence of this shared discipline and its linked self-confidence that almost wrecked the venture, and with it the hopes and trust of the islanders who are all too few today.

The *Hökūle'a* voyage was a great performance; and in Finney's book, we can determine the dangers of the reefs it skirted, the intensity of the storms that so nearly swallowed them up.

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