

*Spirits of the Voyage*. 1996. Video, 88 min., color, stereo. Produced and directed by Eric Metzgar in association with Jesus Urupiy, Ali Haley-alur, and the people of Lamotrek. California: Triton Films (5177 Mesquite, Camarillo, CA 93012; (805) 484-2199; e-mail: Tritonfilms@vcnet.com; <http://www.Tritonfilms.com/>). US\$29.95-34.95/individuals; \$89.95-94.95/institutions.

*Reviewed by David H. Lewis, New Zealand National Maritime Museum*

This is a wonderful film, as well as being a particularly timely one. The first, because it succeeds in that most difficult synthesis: the combination of accurate documentation of a cultural event presented in the context of its own island voyaging world, in a way that is both understandable and moving to land-based outsiders. Timely, because Metzgar has filmed a seminal event, the revival after forty years of the Pwo ritual of initiation of navigators on Lamotrek Atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia, which has undoubtedly stimulated its revival elsewhere in the archipelago.

It needs to be understood that in the Micronesian voyaging atolls the title of "navigator" (*paliuw* on Lamotrek) ranks higher in many respects than that of chief. While magnetic compasses have been known there since early this century, it is considered beneath the dignity of a navigator to make use of one, except as a convenience in daytime steering when the course has already been determined by the stars. The schools of traditional navigation in the voyaging atolls like Polowat, Lamotrek, Satawal, Pulap, and Pulusuk represent an unbroken skein of actively practiced navigational and voyaging lore, which comes down to us from the far-distant age when sailors first ventured deliberately out of sight of land. Alone in the Pacific and perhaps in

the world, the Carolines have preserved, continued systematically to teach in special navigators' lodges, and practiced these ancient arts, where prodigious feats of memorization of star courses for all conditions of wind and weather, swell patterns, homing birds, deep underwater features, and much else have been infused with intense spiritual content, without which practical technology has little power. This is why the revival of Pwo is so important. It helps illuminate the essential spiritual dimension of this unique window back in time, and it has been handled in this film with great understanding.

The generation of navigators, mainly from Satawal and Polowat, who revived far-voyaging in the early 1970s, making again the 700-kilometer passage to the Marianas in their 8.5-meter sailing canoes after three lapsed generations, were initiated *paliuw*. Now only a handful are left, and these men are mostly too decrepit for sea-going. Is the millennia-old chain, then, about to be ruptured? Urupiy, now well on in his eighties, and his young initiates, among whom I was pleased to see Erailug, son of my old compatriot Repungalap, have answered this question with a resounding NO.

Neither is Lamotrek alone. Imagine my delight, when just days after viewing Urupiy's 1990 conduct of the Pwo ceremony recorded in *Spirits of the Voyage*, my old friend and "brother," the Polowat *ppalu* (a variant spelling of *paliuw*) Hipour, wrote me: "Oh my friend, I wish you would be here in August. The mayor and some young navigators asked me many times that I would perform the graduation which we traditionally called *PO* [variant spelling of Pwo, Ppwo] for them. I finally accepted their wishes and now we are getting ready to do it in the middle of August. In fact there is one going on now on the island of Pulap. There are about four who they will call *ppalu* after the ceremony. And for the one that I will perform on Polowat, there are eight of them. . . . Our traditional chiefs wanted this to happen, since there are only three *ppalus* left alive here, and if we die, part of navigation will not be strong any more, so I finally accept it and we are looking forward to do it."

Nor is the practical side of ocean navigation being neglected (and all interisland voyages traverse open Pacific). My old friend, Polowat Chief Manipe, whom I encountered at the South Pacific Festival of the Arts in Samoa in September 1997, told me that two new voyaging sailing canoes were being built on the island. And Eric Metzgar writes that two of the initiates in the film have already made their test voyage. Undoubtedly, the continuation of blue-water sea-going in traditional sailing canoes has been a central ingredient in preserving the ancient arts in the Carolines. This constant testing of the lore against the stern test of landfall helps keep it alive and very practical. That, and a relatively intact social order that embraces

schools or “lodges” of navigation, ensures its systematic and accurate transmission. Elsewhere in the Pacific the heavy hand of Western rule and adopted ideology has succeeded in extinguishing the institutions of navigational learning, most often without trace, so that, except perhaps in Kiribati and the Marshalls, the one-time existence of training schools and lodges is a matter of deduction, devoid of precise evidential backing.

There is precious little evidence of there having been separate Polynesian and Micronesian systems of navigation, most techniques having a homologue or at least an echo of distant memory in the other region. In general, it is in Micronesia that traditions are best preserved. There is no anomaly, therefore, in the navigator of *Hōkūle‘a* canoe on its voyage from Hawai‘i to Tahiti in 1976 having been the Micronesian Mau Piailug of Satawal. That voyage, synthesizing as it did living Micronesian lore with reviving Polynesian practice, was an important stimulus for the traditional navigation renaissance that now embraces Hawai‘i, Tahiti, the Cook Islands, and Aotearoa (New Zealand).

But the concepts, spiritual beliefs, and institutions of preliterate societies are far more vulnerable in the face of history than are the practical techniques. This is where *Spirits of the Voyage* comes in. It is a rare work, ranking with such classics as *Dead Birds*, in showing visually and verbally, in a clear and understandable form, a society practicing its spiritual and temporal traditions.

This review would be incomplete if it failed to point out that the drama of *Pwo* unfolds amid scenes of great beauty, and Metzgar succeeds in doing full justice to the visual impact of the South Seas.