

## **Ben Finney, a founder of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, dies at 83**

Gary Kubota  
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**STAR-ADVERTISER / JAN. 2012:** University of Hawaii Professor Emeritus Ben Finney, who helped to show that ancient Polynesians sailing thousands of miles were capable of finding the Hawaiian Islands through non-instrument navigation, died at about noon Tuesday at a nursing home in Kaimuki, his son Sean said.

The last surviving founder and first president of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, who helped to debunk the scientific theory that Polynesians had drifted to Hawaii by chance, has died.

University of Hawaii Professor Emeritus Ben Finney, who helped to show that ancient Polynesians sailing thousands of miles were capable of finding the Hawaiian Islands

through non-instrument navigation, died at about noon Tuesday at a nursing home in Kaimuki, his son Sean said.

He was 83.

"The voyage changed the whole identity of the Hawaiian people. We went from being castaways...to being children of the world's greatest navigators," said Polynesian Voyaging Society President Nainoa Thompson.

"We owe it to our visionaries ... and Ben was the first."

Sean said his father was conceived in Hawaii but born in San Diego because Ben's father was reassigned by the Navy.

Ben Finney, who loved surfing, found his way back to Hawaii, eventually earning an undergraduate degree in anthropology at UH.

He received his doctorate in anthropology from Harvard University and was a senior fellow at the East-West Center.

He worked as a professor at the University of Hawaii from 1973 through 2000, including nine years as chairman of the Department of Anthropology.

"Finney combined that sense of rigorous scientific testing with a deep appreciation and aloha for the Polynesian people," said Sam Low, Hokule'a crew member and author of "Hawaiki Rising: Hokule'a, Nainoa Thompson, and the Hawaiian Renaissance."

For decades prior to the early 1970s, a popular assumption about migration was that Pacific islanders found islands such as the Hawaiian Islands by accidentally drifting as castaways in the currents — a theory supported by scientist Thor Heyerdahl aboard the experimental wooden raft Kon Tiki and writers like Andrew Sharp.

But Finney and other co-founders waterman Tommy Holmes and architect Herb Kane thought otherwise.

Kane had seen Hawaiian carvings of ancient petroglyphs of sailing canoes, heard of ancient chants about trips between Hawaii and Tahiti, and wanted to build a voyaging canoe.

Finney had heard from UH folklorist Katherine Luomala that Sharp's theory was wrong and should be challenged and Finney was also aware of Pacific Island navigators who practiced non-instrument navigation in Micronesia and he sought to find one, friends said.

Together, the three founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society in 1973 and sought support to build a traditional Hawaiian sailing canoe to embark on a voyage of more than 2,000 miles from Hawaii to Tahiti.

Finney had heard of a navigator on Satawal atoll named Mau Piailug who was known for his sailing skills and invited Mau to serve as the navigator on the voyage. But Finney

wasn't sure when or how Mau might arrive because radio communications were difficult in that part of Micronesia.

"My dad told me a story the one day, a customs guy called him up at Honolulu Airport and said, 'This guy from Micronesia is here,'" Sean recalled. "He jumped in his car to pick up Mau."

He was on the first crew along with a number of renowned Hawaiian watermen [who] sailed into Papeete in Tahiti to a crowd of thousands of people in 1976.

The culture of native voyaging has grown, with about 25 native voyaging canoes along with more than 2,000 sailors in the Pacific, including more than seven based in Hawaii.

Hokule'a, the original voyaging canoe, is completing a three-year worldwide voyage next month when it returns to Hawaii.

### **Comments:**

#### **Mythman:**

He joins the great native Hawaiian surfer Eddie Aikau. Prof William Sullivan's recent book Secret of the Incas discusses how all the planet's cultures of that time were acutely connected to the "stars", "reading" the Milky Way and if they were the elite, using this kind of insight to predict and control. The oracle at Delphi was different in how the predictions were made. Scholarship would have indicated that any assumption that they drifted and did not navigate by the stars was rubbish.

#### **Blunt:**

Good surfer but not a wise sailor. First rule of sailing is never leave a capsized boat. Kolohe.

#### **Ronin006**

In reply to:

He joins the great native Hawaiian surfer Eddie Aikau. Prof William Sullivan's recent book Secret of the Incas discusses how all the planet's cultures of that time were acutely connected to the...

— Mythman

Rubbish, you say? You are talking myth, Mythman. There is no doubt ancient Polynesians were great seafarers and were able to navigating from island to island using non-instrument navigation, but it is nonsense to say the first Polynesians to arrive here used such techniques to find the Hawaiian Islands. To navigate successfully from point A to point B using non-instrument or Celestial navigation, you must know point B exists and you must know the positioning of the sun, moon, stars and planets along the route. The first Polynesians to arrive in our islands had no idea they existed and would not have known the positioning of celestial bodies to guide them, so they could not

have used non-instrument navigation to find Hawaii. The theory that they accidentally drifted here as castaways, supported by scientist like Thor Heyerdahl, is the one that makes sense.

### **Tempmanoa**

You may be right about the first voyages and settlers-- makes sense That would make voyages after the first voyages even more remarkable, because the first voyagers who arrived by chance or their descendants had to navigate back to where they came from in the vast Pacific Ocean. They then had to use recorded memory of the first voyages made as castaways to find their way back. This memory of the ocean, currents, and the stars and the moon, had to then be conveyed to subsequent voyagers in a form which they could then transform to navigate back to Hawaii under different conditions.

Remarkable.

### **Blunt:**

What an amazing guy! If it were not for Finney, Tommy Holmes, and Herb Kane there would be no such Polynesian Voyaging Society. Very lucky such a guy like Mau Piailug was still living then.

### **allie:**

Yes, a surprising number of whites were behind the Society and white funders, as much or more than Hawaiian funders supported the project and are now. Let us be honest: this is another example of inter-racial collaboration for the good of the public. Haters love to imagine otherwise. I have heard Nainoa say this many times. Also, congrats to the UH for all they have done for this project.

### **Blunt:**

Glad you said this. Yes, it's the generous Hoales who were persistent promoting the theory that Hawaiians could sail by the stars. They helped get the money donations giving speeches and inspiring the whole project. Dr. Finney made the effort to contact Mau Piailug where no one bothered. He must have been so heart-broken when he heard the maiden voyage was ruined by a shameful false cracking of a Hoale guest. National Geographic was there to photograph the poor guy's bloody nose on his angry face, and it was seen around the world in the next issue. Mau was so disgusted he was given a bunch of impatient Waikiki beach gigolos. The doldrums are a natural part of sailing. The Hoale did not cause it. Mau quit and returned home from Tahiti. They had to be guided back to Honolulu by a ship with high tech Hoale navigation equipment. To this day nobody has admitted who this sneaky face puncher was.

### **Mythman:**

Mau definitely was not as happy as he is being portrayed....there is a lot more to the story yet to be told....

**inHilo:**

His writings inspired me to continue my studies, and I hope he now rests among the stars.

**Blunt:**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/dec/10/indian-ocean-tsunami-moken-sea-nomads-thailand>

These are the real sailors with hairy chests. The real McCoys of ancient sailing.

**Bothrops:**

Finley's book, Hokule'a The Way to Tahiti. This is a candid account of the people behind the ship.