



An Ancient

Polynesian Ocean

Canoe

(Courtesy of Herb Kane)

## *Of Metaphysics and Polynesian Navigation*

by James Barr

To begin, I must relate that although a seaman and navigator, I am not an expert in ethnology, or in any related field: I make no claims on such modern Western attempts at studying other cultures. I did not attempt to read any ethnographic or anthropological material at all until long after I left the South Pacific. Essentially, these are my own observations, and if they contain error, then such is mine own responsibility. In order to study any aspect of any culture, one must attempt to come into the culture in question with the fewest preconceived ideas, with the least cultural baggage possible. One must endeavor to learn the language spoken by one's hosts as completely and thoroughly as possible; one must become completely immersed in the culture, without prejudice, and such is the method I employed.

The vastness of Oceania must be experienced in order to comprehend the greatness of the Polynesian achievement. Oceania is comprised of small islands and coral outcroppings, isolated by thousands of miles of blue water.<sup>1</sup> On these isolated islands, the various groups of Polynesians were able to build quite remarkable cultures, based upon a sacred worldview.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the cultural differences between the various islands are slight enough that the Polynesians can be said to hold a

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<sup>1</sup> "Blue water" is a seaman's term, British in origin, for water over one hundred meters in depth. (One fathom is six feet.)

<sup>2</sup> "Sacred worldview" is used here as employed by H.H. the Dalai Lama, to explain the way the phenomena of the world are viewed by traditional cultures. I use the term here because I choose to include the Polynesian cultural group as an Asiatic traditional culture.

more or less unified worldview, with only minor variations. In order to explain such a unity, one must look to the method of transportation used to cross the watery abyss. One must seek out the navigators and their craft.

On several occasions in the early 1980s I chose to study with four men who held the craft of open sea navigation. These venerable gentlemen were Tranhei Theki (Maori), J. W. Kei (Tahiti), Jacques Koah (Bora Bora), and Matthew Burke Moi (Rorotonga and Western Samoa).<sup>3</sup> My studies, excepting those with Theki, all took the form of discourse while at sea, for I served as a deckhand and Before my service, I had no idea that the art of navigation (in the traditional sense) was still alive in Oceania. Still less did I know the nature of the traditional Polynesian world, and its similarity to other systems with which I was familiar.



I had boarded the schooner Vé in early 1980, intent upon visiting the Marquesas archipelago before returning to Vanuatu and to work, and it did not take me long to notice that Captain Moi used no sextant nor did he own charts. In fact it seemed that Captain Moi seemed to do little at all to determine our direction or position. I resolved to ask about this, and was informed that the swell, the color of the sea, the clouds, and the positions of the stars, were his guides. I begged further information, and was informed that in order to learn, I must know Samoan.

After I achieved proficiency in Samoan I was able to hold various conversations with Captain Moi about his art. The captain was not particularly articulate about some of the art's finer aspects, but he did explain that there were three levels to it. Because there was no specific set of terms used to define the process, I have chosen to use these: "literal," "moral," and "anagogical."<sup>4</sup>

The first level – the literal (or physical) – entailed watching the clouds, the sea birds, the waves, and the color of the sea. To accomplish this one must clear the mind of all excess thought and focus one's full attention upon phenomena as they arise. I was made to understand that years of practice were involved in this process. One must be taught to "look," to "see" the subtle aspects of change, and to apply these to the task of direction finding.

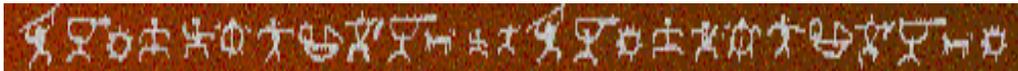
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<sup>3</sup> In order to learn anything of the navigational art from these gentlemen, I was forced to learn their languages, even though Theki spoke English, and Kei, Koah, and Moi spoke French. Of the four, only Moi was under age sixty.

<sup>4</sup> Essentially these correspond to the Vajaryana Buddhist concepts of body, speech and mind, as well as to the "three worlds" of Hermetism. I see the term "anagogical" to mean the absolute level of reality, i.e., Brahma or Dharmakaya. In essence, this is the level wherein words become meaningless – empty – being beyond concept. The term "moral" I use to indicate the level below the absolute, the subtle realm which is not solid, or rigid, yet draws one higher. And the term "literal" I use to indicate the physical world of solid manifestation – the gross level of manifestation.

Captain Moi could say very little as to the exact nature of the second level (moral) except that it involved the evocation of the sea deity. Tuaraati, the Ocean Lord, is addressed in a series of recited prayers, and a coconut is broken open, the juice of which is allowed to fall into the sea as a libation, while Tuaraati is asked to guide the mind of the navigator over his realm.<sup>5</sup> Captain Moi indicated that this was done directly, but he was unwilling to demonstrate. Of the third level I will speak in a moment.

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first level of navigation, the navigator had to spend a great deal of time at sea, alone in a small canoe. During this period the practitioner was to recite various prayers and offer these to Tuaraati. Gradually the mind was said to be “filled with the sea,” as the body is filled with blood.<sup>6</sup> On land the navigator was taught the traditional chants which convey the information on natural phenomena needed to navigate. One’s teacher was expected to impart these chants from memory and one was expected to commit them to memory verbatim. The corpus of these chants was rather extensive, and years of study were required to learn the entire cycle.<sup>7</sup>

The natural phenomena one was taught to observe in order to navigate included the behavior of cetaceans, birds and fish, wave actions, cloud formations, the taste of the water, and the positions of the stars. Small cetaceans are always attracted to the activities of humans at sea, and by watching them play about the vessel, the navigator is able to determine direction of passage and distance from land. The dolphins are said to abandon a vessel at the approach of heavy weather, and in the presence of reefs. In the open sea, the long-snouted dolphins (*stenella frontalis*), and the common

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<sup>5</sup> The pouring of libations is essential in all forms of traditional theurgy. In the Polynesian system, libations correspond to the words of the priest (or navigator) in his prayer.

<sup>6</sup> Literally, the Polynesian term used was “heart,” but as “heart” is used to indicate consciousness. I have inserted the term “mind.” I hope the reader will pardon me for my Buddhist interpretation, but I have found no other teaching to use which could render justice to the art of navigation.

<sup>7</sup> Navigators took over twenty years of study before they were able to master the art. I do not know whether this practice continues or not. I believe that it does, but only on a very limited basis. Western ideas have put an end to much of Polynesian culture, and in the major island groups, one is hard pressed to find anyone with even a smattering of traditional lore.

dolphin (*delphinus delphis*), are the cetaceans observed for purposes of navigation. Closer to archipelagoes, the bottlenose dolphin (*tursiops truncatus*) is most often observed. In essence, the navigator “reads” the dolphins’ speed and breaching patterns.

The navigator “reads” other creatures’ patterns as well. Flying fish and squid indicate extreme depth (blue water), while Portuguese Man-o-war indicate great distance from land. Surface feeding great white or hammerhead sharks indicate reefs nearby. Flocks of gulls indicate the presence of land nearby, though possibly out of sight, and by observing gull’s flight patterns, the navigator could determine both distance and direction of the land mass. Likewise, the Pacific albatross is carefully observed by the navigator, for the albatross is often sighted as much as forty miles from an archipelago, and its flight patterns are “read” in order to determine its course from land. This is just the beginning.

Additionally, the skilled navigator is able to recognize more than twenty distinct types of waves. Each of these has a separate and distinct name and function, and provides the navigator with information about direction, distance from land masses, and speed. Waves are directly associated with the winds, which are many in number and function as well. I was not told much by my mentors about these winds, as each is viewed as a very powerful *daemon*,<sup>8</sup> knowledge of whom should not be imparted to the neophyte. These wind daemons are thought to be associated with the Lord of Waters as his companions.

Several varieties of cloud formation were used by my mentors to determine the position of archipelagoes. The majority of these consisted of thunderheads, which form in the higher elevations of islands. Thunderheads formed over land look different to the trained observer than those formed over water. In general these clouds are seen as manifestations sent by the Lord of Waters to guide the navigator toward harbor. This is relatively similar to the Western mariner’s ideas about St. Elmo’s fire in storm conditions: both are seen as signs of Divine protection.

As to water’s taste, I can say little, for though I watched Captain Moi taste water repeatedly, I have no idea how it is done. I tried it, but could only taste brine. Tasting the sea is an art.

As to the stars, the brightest stars in the southern hemisphere are Sirius in the constellation Canis Major, Canopus in the constellation Carina, Rigel Kentaurus in the constellation Centaurus, Rigel in Orion, and Fomalhaut in Piscis Austrinus. All of these are watched closely by navigators: Lambda, Mu, and Nu Scorpii are known to Polynesians as the “fishhood of Maui,” Maui being a cultural hero, son of Tangaoa. Another important aid to navigation is the Southern Cross.

After teaching these aspects of the first, or literal level, Captain Moi was able to direct me to the navigator Jacques Koah of Bora Bora who was said to be a master of the system taught in that group of islands. Captain Koah was retired from a life at sea on board a small coastal freighter, and because he was fluent in French, we conversed in that language until I was able to pick up the local

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to be confused with demon (or evil spirit) of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is more akin with the “tutelary spirit” (daemonian) of Socrates (see Plato’s *Apology*, 31d; and his *Republic*, 496c).

dialect.<sup>9</sup> From him I learned something of the second and third levels of navigation, for mastery of the “literal” and “moral” aspects depended upon one’s understanding of the third level, the “anagogical.”

In order to enter this level, in order to have one’s mind “filled with the sea,” one must learn to “see with the heart,” and to “breathe with the feet.”<sup>10</sup> In essence, one must fill one’s lungs to capacity and concentrate all one’s attention upon the act of breathing. This must be done while in a vessel far enough from land that one can feel the rising and falling of the swells. One attunes one’s breath to the swells, so that as the vessel is lifted, one inhales deeply, “all the way to the feet,” and as the vessel descends, one must exhale slowly with the swell. By this practice one’s mind “becomes the sea,” and one is able to commune directly with the element, so that any change is noticed at once. One must “commune with the body of the Lord of Waves,” so as to know His mind as one’s own.<sup>11</sup>

One must call the Lord of the Sea (Turaati) and listen to His instruction via His body, and then “know His mind.” “Knowing” Turaati, one then is able to know the “Supreme One” Tangaroa. “He is the One who sails your canoe.”<sup>12</sup> One “knows” the sea, one “moves with it,” and through Tangaroa via Turaati, one sails one’s canoe to the destination.

But this is not all that one would have to know about the art of navigation, for Captain Koah mentioned the stars as well. He did not know how to commune with them, but he was able to indicate their nature. Essentially the stars are living entities which can be approached if one’s mind is “filled with the sea,” as discussed above.<sup>13</sup> They must be approached via the Lord of Waves (Turaati) and known through Him. These beings are able to provide both direction (literal), and advice (moral), but they must be known or approached via the medium of the Lord of Waves, and hence Tangaroa (anagogical).

These star daemons are considered as separate entities, each with his own attributes and manifestations. The Fetia Virua Raa (sacred spirit stars) are associated with the stars Sirius, Lambda, Mu, and Nu Scorpii (the fishhook of Maui), Fomalhaut, and Venus (known as Fetiapopoi

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<sup>9</sup> There are rather considerable differences between the various Polynesian languages, and I had to spend much time attempting to comprehend the structure and vocabulary of Bora Bora.

<sup>10</sup> Here I have attempted to relay exactly what I heard from Captain Koah.

<sup>11</sup> Literally: “To make his heart one’s own.” In essence, one’s consciousness is made to “merge” with the element in every possible way.

<sup>12</sup> Tangaroa is the supreme creator, rather like Brahman of the Hindu teaching. Tangaroa created the world with the aid of his female partner Huna (rather like Shiva and Shakti). I can make nothing other than “gnosis” of Captian Koah’s statements about Tangaroa. One’s mind must be filled with the essence of Divinity, and so one sails in harmony with the currents of the world.

<sup>13</sup> I can only interpret this as a kind of daemon which acts in harmony with the sea deity.

Hiti). These Fetia Virua Raa can be evoked at sea in time of need, though the actual theurgical rite I do not know. On the whole, they are very *tapu*, very *Raa* (sacred), but they are not Mau Atu (gods), rather being angelic in nature. In Samoan these beings are *Agaga fetu* (star spirits).

No doubt to be a full practitioner of this navigational art, one must be spiritually transformed and purified. Captain Koah said that the navigator was a very *tapu* person who must only eat a diet specified by tradition, and must follow a very strict code of living.<sup>14</sup>

In order to verify his understanding, Captain Koah consulted with Captain Kei of Tahiti, the skipper of the Moa, a trading ketch. Neither of these gentlemen would attempt to explain the actual method of practice, but both were obviously adept at it. Eventually they passed me into the hands of Théki, a Maori practitioner who spent time on Tahiti, and in the Bora Bora area.

Théki was able to describe to me the process of breathing in order to allow one's mind to enter into harmony with the sea, though he would impart little else. The spiritual nature of this art has not totally escaped me, but again I have no words with which I can describe it. Gradually I gained a modicum of his trust by discussing my conversion to Buddhism, a religion of which he had heard, and knew to be non-Western. Théki said that his people, and all the other Polynesian peoples, had been harried by Christian missionaries and by anthropologists, and what little remained of their traditions could not be transferred to a person not of their culture. He would only teach the bare fundamentals, and not a word more.

I was taken out in a small yacht tender, and asked to sit quietly and watch the sea. After two weeks of this practice, I was taken out of sight of land in a canoe. On this occasion I was asked to watch the swell, to feel the vessel rise and to breathe with it as it rose and fell. After a time, the effect was rather like the practice of zazen. Other than this, I have no words that can describe my experience.

The spiritual nature of this art has not totally escaped me, but again I have no words with which I can describe it. I have learnt to some degree how to apply the art of navigation, yet I am not skilled enough to stop using the sextant. Still I believe that if followed correctly, the traditional art of navigation could indeed be a means toward understanding many truths. Unfortunately, I cannot hope to complete the course of training, and so must base my conclusions upon my very poor understanding alone. No doubt in some ancient time, the Pacific peoples were either influenced by, or a part of the great Primordial tradition, and this being the case, we can only wonder at what was destroyed by Western encroachment and conquest. Indeed I shall never know, nor shall any European fully know the extent of what might have been in that watery civilization of the past.

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, none of the details of either diet or code were imparted to me.