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Ben  
Finney,  
Anthropologist  
Who  
Debunked  
Theory  
on  
Island  
Settlement,  
Dies  
at  
83

By WILLIAM GRIMES JUNE 17, 2017

On June 4, 1976, the Hokulea, a double-hulled sailing canoe of ancient design, glided into Papeete Harbor in Tahiti, greeted ecstatically by a crowd of 17,000 —

more than half the population of the city of Papeete. For the first time in six centuries, a traditional Polynesian sailing vessel had made the voyage from Hawaii to Tahiti, covering more than 2,700 miles without instruments.

For Ben Finney, an anthropologist at the University of Hawaii, it was sweet vindication. In an effort to prove that the settlement of Polynesia came about through deliberate exploration, rather than aimless drifting — the so-called accidental settlement hypothesis — he oversaw the construction of a 62-foot double canoe based on 18th-century illustrations made by members of Capt. James Cook’s crew.

He then found a master navigator from the Caroline Islands, Mau Piailug, who was capable of guiding the Hokulea (the name means “Star of Joy”) in the age-old way: using the rising points of the stars, supplemented by observations of the sun, the moon and ocean swells, as a natural compass.

Thirty-four days after leaving Honolua Bay, in Maui, on May 1, the Hokulea reached its destination, affirming the navigational expertise of the ancient Polynesians and throwing additional cold water on Thor Heyerdahl’s conjecture that settlers had come from South America, a theory he hoped to prove in his famous 1947 voyage aboard the raft Kon-Tiki.

In an account for the Polynesian Voyaging Society, Mr. Finney wrote, tersely, “The voyage went as planned.”

Professor Finney died on May 23 in Honolulu. He was 83. His son Sean said the cause was complications of a stroke.

Ben Rudolph Finney was born on Oct. 1, 1933, in San Diego, where his father, Leon, a Navy pilot, had recently been transferred from Hawaii. His mother, the former Melba Trefzger, was a homemaker.

The family relocated to Rio de Janeiro when Leon Finney was assigned to be the pilot for the Navy’s attaché in Brazil during World War II, but Ben grew up mostly in San Diego.

After earning a bachelor’s degree in history, economics and anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1955, he worked as a statistician at Kaiser

Steel in Fontana, Calif., and a manufacturing analyst in the Convair division of General Dynamics in San Diego. A year of active duty in the Navy followed.

He enrolled in the University of Hawaii and earned a master's degree in anthropology in 1959. His master's thesis, on surfing and Polynesian culture, evolved into a book, "Surfing: The Sport of Hawaiian Kings" (1966), written with James D. Houston. An updated edition was published in 1996 with the title "Surfing: A History of the Ancient Hawaiian Sport."

In 1964, the year he received his doctorate in anthropology from Harvard, he married Ruth Sutherlin. The marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his son Sean, he is survived by his wife, the former Liudmila Alepko; another son, Gregory; a stepdaughter, Anna Alepko; two grandchildren; and two step-grandchildren.

After teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Australian National University, Professor Finney joined the anthropology department at the University of Hawaii in 1970. He retired in 2000.

His other early books — "Polynesian Peasants and Proletarians: Socio-Economic Change Among the Tahitians of French Polynesia" (1965) and "Big-Men and Business: Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth in the New Guinea Highlands" (1973) — offered no hint of an interest in Polynesian navigation. But the topic soon took over.

"How the Polynesians, sailing in canoes hewed with stone adzes and setting their course by the stars, winds and ocean swells, were able to explore and colonize their island realm has long been one of the most intriguing questions about the spread of humankind over our planet," he wrote in "Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey Through Polynesia" (1994).

With Herbert Kawainui Kane, an artist, and Tommy Holmes, a local waterman, Professor Finney founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society in 1973 to study traditional Polynesian techniques of sailing and navigation. In 1974, he and several colleagues, including David Lewis, a New Zealand anthropologist who was an expert on ancient Micronesian navigation methods, set about recreating a facsimile of the double-hulled canoes used in ancient Polynesia, assembling a mostly Hawaiian crew and taking the vessel on test runs around Hawaii.

If the navigation went according to plan, the voyage did not. The canoe confronted fierce storms and becalmed seas. Even worse, cultural tensions arose.

Soon after setting sail, several of the Hawaiian crew members staged a mutiny, resentful that the Hokulea was not sailing around the Hawaiian Islands in a show of ethnic pride. They called Kawika Kapahulehua, the Hawaiian captain, a coconut — brown on the outside, white on the inside. When the canoe reached Tahiti, they threw punches at him and threatened to burn the boat.

Mr. Piailug, the navigator, threw up his hands in disgust and returned home. Guided by modern instruments, the Hokulea returned to Honolulu, without Mr. Finney and with a new crew.

Despite the uprising, the voyage, described by Mr. Finney in “Hokulea: The Way to Tahiti” (1979), was a triumph. “The voyage changed the whole identity of the Hawaiian people,” Nainoa Thompson, the president of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, told *The Honolulu Star-Advertiser* recently. “We went from being castaways to being children of the world’s greatest navigators.”

A voyage two years later, this time all Hawaiian, came to grief when the Hokulea capsized off Molokai six hours after setting sail. The big-wave surfing legend Eddie Aikau, a member of the crew, perished while trying to paddle 15 miles to summon help.

The Hokulea successfully repeated its maiden voyage in 1980 and undertook a more ambitious voyage in 1985, to New Zealand by way of Tahiti and the Cook Islands, returning via Tonga and Samoa. It accomplished many more voyages over the years, some described in “Voyage of Rediscovery.” It was scheduled to reach Hawaii on Saturday after a three-year tour of 85 ports in 26 countries.

When he was not looking at the oceans, Mr. Finney was pondering the stars. He maintained a deep interest in space exploration and the potential for life on other planets, reflected in his books “Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience” (1985) and “From Sea to Space” (1992). He frequently lectured at the International Space University.

***Correction: June 23, 2017***

An obituary on Sunday about the anthropologist Ben Finney referred incorrectly to the crowd that greeted the arrival of the Hokulea, the sailing canoe whose construction he oversaw, in Papeete Harbor in Tahiti in 1976. The crowd, of some 17,000 people, was more than half the population of the city of Papeete — not of all Tahiti.

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