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Encompassing the Sea of Islands

A most remarkable beach crossing

The Blue Planet we call it now that we can see our earth from space. The Great Ocean—*Moana*, the Pacific—covers a quarter of the globe's surface and gives the planet its blueness. Six thousand years ago the greater part of the ocean was without people. Its islands were without the vegetation that would make them comfortably habitable.

The story of how people have encompassed this ocean is most remarkable. I would like to tell it in part.

For forty thousand years—sixteen hundred generations—peoples had penetrated the western edge of this ocean down a corridor of islands—a "voyaging corridor" Geoffrey Irwin, the New Zealand sailor-archeologist, has called it—that reaches a thousand kilometers into the southwest Pacific. Papua-New Guinea, Bismark Archipelago, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Santa Cruz are the islands' names we now use—in the creole of exploratory language. They are intervisible, or are near enough to one another to give signs of their presence. They lie in a sort of shelter band between the northerly and southerly cyclone belts.

For three thousand years, these peoples made a homeland of the sea enclosed by Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. Hava'iki, they called it. They sailed the circuit of the sea with confidence. They traded. They raided. They adventured.

For forty thousand years—probably more—these islands of the voyaging corridor had been settled to the last headlands. We have no name for these settlers. I will call them the Sea People of the West. For forty thousand years these Sea People lived on the edge of *Moana*, the Great Ocean. All the islands of this Great Ocean, to their north, east, and south were empty of humanity. About six thousand years ago, that was about to change.

On this eastern edge of the Sea Peoples of the West venturing down the voyaging corridor, systems of weather and seasons reached out over them from the Asian regions behind them. But also on this eastern edge, they caught the weather and seasons created by the vastness of the Great Ocean. Looking east, the wind, and the sea with the wind, beat regularly into their faces from northerly and southerly directions. But from their backs the monsoonal seasons drove westerly against the regular easterlies. It was an annual cycle easily remembered. But there were other cycles every four or seven years, when the west winds won

more easily and frequently over the east winds. We, the urbanized of the twenty-first century, who live so far from the more particular signs of seasons and change, have only recently come to recognize these other cycles. We call them El Niño. Six thousand years ago the fishermen on the far eastern edge of the Pacific on the coasts of Peru would have recognized the catastrophic consequences of El Niño, in the warming of their waters, and the equally disastrous opposite, El Niña, their cooling.

Nearly as far as one could be away from Peruvian waters on the Pacific, other fishermen would have recognized these ordinary and extraordinary cycles in the weather. The cycles gave these seamen a westerly reach against an easterly regularity. The cycles gave these seamen a security that made their adventuring possible. They could sail to the east on a westerly with the assurance that an easterly would bring them home.

About six thousand years ago, after who knows how many exploratory attempts, settlement voyagers reached out across the twelve hundred kilometers of open sea to the island clusters of Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. For three thousand years, these peoples made a homeland of the sea enclosed by Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. Hava'iki, they called it. They sailed the circuit of the sea with confidence. They traded. They raided. They adventured. They were blue water sailors. Their bodies responded to the sea's demand on them. They were the largest humans on earth. They were survivors in wet and cold. They were at home on the sea, day and night and in all seasons. They learned that with the horizon all around them and a vessel in motion, the old land order no longer prevailed.

I take the liberty of inventing a name for this people who made this next step to Hava'iki. I call them the Sea People. Such a name is not really mine to invent either by right of scholarly knowledge or by right of a historical past that is mine. Scholars with far more knowledge than I have other names for my Sea People: Austronesians, Archaeo-Polynesians. The islanders of the Northern, Southern, and Central Pacific, whose ancestors the Sea People are, as yet have no name for them, though I ride a wave of their energy as they seek a name in the past that will give them identity in the present. They seek a name for the ocean habitat that is theirs. *Pacific*, *South Seas*, *Polynesia*, even *Oceania* are not theirs. *Sea of Islands*, they are suggesting, is a name that taps a mythic consciousness of themselves. Both the Sea and its Islands raise poetry, song, dance, story, history, and politics in them. I have a story to tell of how, two thousand years ago, voyagers moved out of their homeland, Hava'iki, to the far eastern edge of *Moana*, the Great Ocean. It is the most remarkable voyage of discovery and settlement in all human history. My story, with all the clumsiness with which I enter somebody else's metaphor, is how a Sea People made a Sea of Islands out of a sea of islands

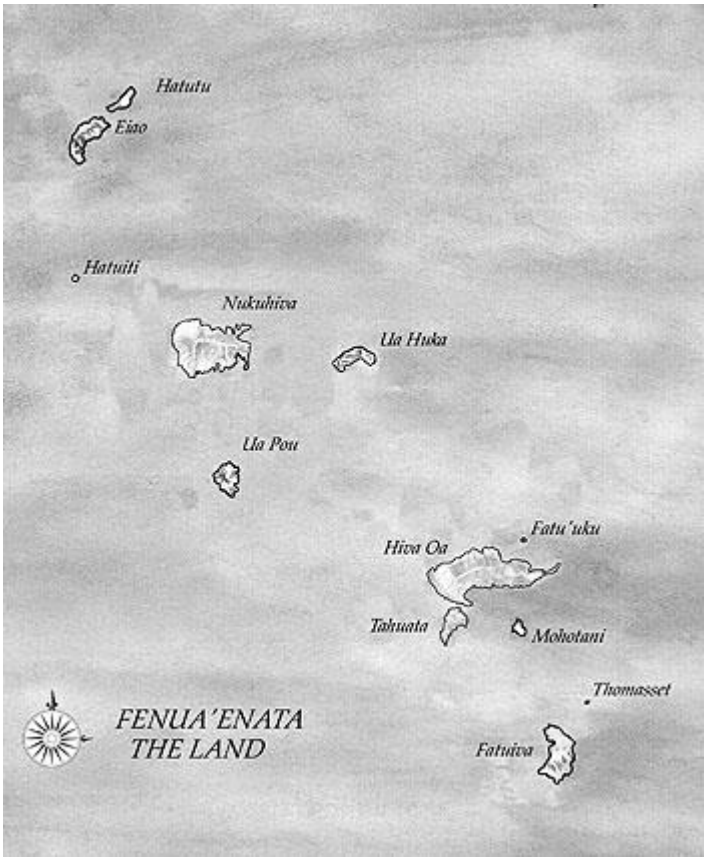


Fig. 1. Fenua'enata, the Land of the People (the Marquesas). Map by Emily Brissenden.

A Most Remarkable Voyage

The Pleiades have risen. The Mataiki, Little Eyes, are into the second of their four-month stay in the sky. The season of plenty is in harvest. The west winds are reaching further into the east against the prevailing north- and south-easterlies. The voyaging time has begun. They are well ready.

One hundred and fifty generations ready. Three millennia ready. The millennia have given this sea people an artefact of cultural genius, their *va'a*, their canoe. (*Canoe* is a word that comes to us from Christopher Columbus and the Caribbean. *Va'a* is our Sea of Islands word.) Their *va'a* is a thing imprinted with millennia of experience as generations find the woods, the fibers, the resins that pull and strain, resist work fatigue and rotting, seal. Their *va'a* is a thing of very precise design, of curves that give strength, of asymmetric shapes that play wind and water against one another, of structured balances that avoid congestion of strain, of aerodynamics that free it to fly along the wind.

It is the way of such artifacts that the real genius lies in simplicity. For the *va'a* three things made it unique in the inventiveness of humankind in mastering the sea environment. A lug. A triangular sail. An outrigger. The lug, a projection on the inside of the hull, perforated so that cordage could be pulled through, makes it possible to compress all parts of the *va'a* together. The triangular sail, without masts or stay, pivoting on its head, held high by a prop, creates a self-steering vessel without need of rudder or pulleys. These days we see the windsurfers exploit its simplicity and speed. The outrigger on the windward side, fitted to the hull by means of the lug, gives stability and maneuverability. The double *va'a*, *va'a tauna*, removed the

need of the outrigger and by means of a platform over the two hulls, perhaps four meters wide and thirteen meters long, allows the vessel to carry fifty to eighty people, a shelter, a sand fire-pit, and cargo of up to thirty thousand kilograms.

With Mataiki's rising come also Na Kao, Orion's brightest star, and Muri, the Follower of Pleiades. All these stars beckon to the northeast. In the west on the opposite horizon Metau-o Maui, Scorpius, and Maitiki, Sagittarius, are setting. So there is an arc of light over the corridor of warm waters to the northeast. The sea experts among them know every step and stage of that arc, especially the stars that stand in zenith over their homeland. The zenith stars would be like beacons beckoning them back.

Let us say that there are four families and two male servants on the *va'a tauna*—ten adults and three or four children. One of the males is a *tuhuna pu'e*, a sea expert. One is a *toa*, warrior. One or more is a fisherman. They know that they will only survive in their new land on fish till their crops take hold. On a trip so dangerous, all the males have the skills and capacity to work the *va'a* in company—steering, paddling, sailing, repairing, and bailing. The women bring their craft skills with them—bark-cloth making, weaving, food gathering, and producing.

They must cater for a voyage of three or four weeks. They must have food and water for these weeks, some extra materials—lashing, matting, stays for replacement—and the tools to manage breakages. They must have bailers and paddles. They must have their domestic utensils of wood, stone, and shell for the trip itself and then for their settlement. They will want to bring what is precious for them: their ornaments, their sacred things, their *tiki*, maybe even their house posts. They will need all the roots, seeds, cuttings for their new island home: *tiare* slips, gourd seeds, bamboo shoots, *aue* roots, *aute* twigs, *temanu* nuts, and many other green shoots and tubers.

My story takes this settlement voyage on a northern loop around the great island screen of the Tuamotu, and the central Tahitian islands that they screen. The northerly voyage is seven thousand kilometers. A southerly loop would be just as dramatic and just as long.

As they set out, the crew must provide for the possibility that they will be thirty, maybe forty, nights at sea. Experience would have told them that the west winds are not constant. Wind direction will fluctuate in a day's sailing. Inevitably for most of the time they will be sailing into or across the wind. They will be wet nearly all the time. They would have known that survival would mean maintaining their body heat, especially the women. Their body size will be their living capital. They will need daily to consume 1/50th of their weight to maintain their body heat.

If they set their course on the rising of Na Kao, 'Ana-Muri (Aldebran), and Mataiki, they move to the northeast. These will be the star settings for travel from Samoa to Pukapuka for the next two millennia. As they tack across the northeasterly trade wind that constantly returns, they inevitably move east-northeast. They are on a course that curves them to islands they will come to call Fenua'enata, the Land of the People. Since 1595 Euro-American strangers have called these islands the Marquesas.

They land on the lee side of an island they will come to call Ua Huka. No doubt the myriad of sea birds on the islet near their landing finally attracts them there. It is a dry landscape that they see, but there is a

stream and a beach to land on behind the rocky headlands. There is no reef. That will be their first surprise. They must become fishermen in ways they had never been before.

The narrow valley behind the beach leads back to the heights of the island. In time they will fill the valley with their houses. But not now. Now they must stay near the beaches and the sea. Shellfish and sea greens are there in abundance. They can wade the waters of the bay and cast their nets. They have lines and hooks for fishing off the rocks. In these first days—months? years?—they are a gathering people over again. They will have disassembled their *va'a tauna*. It is their lifeline, in their minds a means of escape, if their island proves more dangerous than it seems on their arrival. The island must have seemed barren. The basic foliage and undergrowth would have been familiar. Sea, wind, and birds had brought most of it from further west than they had come. Already through the millennia these plant and insect voyagers had begun to fill all the niches in the environment in new ways and to make new island species. The settlers must have looked closely at it to make their old life out of new things. Women looked for their oils and seeds and resins and barks that would heal, comfort, ornament, and clothe themselves and their children. The *tuhuna*, the experts, among them would have scavenged the vegetation for the materials of their crafts. No doubt, in the way of every migrant that ever was, their images of Hava'iki, their homeland, grew greener and richer.

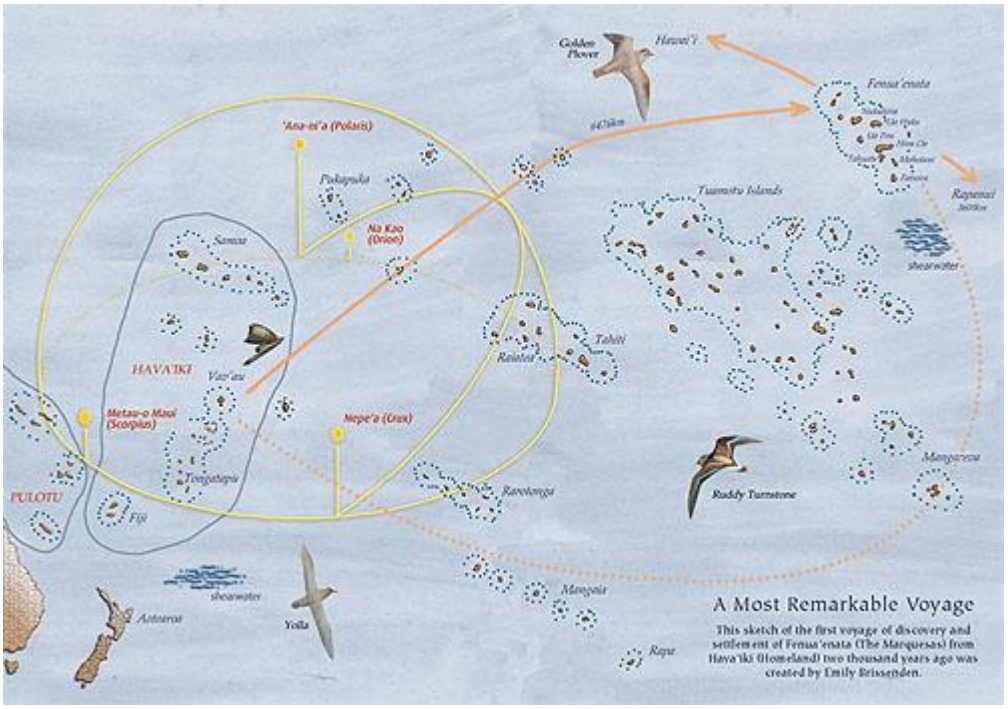


Fig. 2. The first voyage of discovery and settlement of Fenua'enata. Map by Emily Brissenden.

These Sea People are not in their land more than two or three hundred years when they are restless for discovery. They follow the Golden Plover into the Northern Hemisphere and on to Hawai'i. We do not know what takes them on to the loneliest island in the Great Ocean, Rapanui. They are there a thousand years before the Dutch give it the name of Easter Island. The spill of the wind takes their *va'a* to Tahiti. The annual procession of millions of yolla—the shearwater, the mutton-birds—takes them even further, to Aotearoa (New Zealand).

The most momentous discovery in my personal intellectual life has been the discovery that the past belongs not so much to us who spend our lives trying to uncover it as to those on whom it impinges. The past impinges on the modern descendants of the Sea People by inspiring them to re-enact the voyaging triumphs of their ancestors.

Way-finding is the word that modern islanders use to describe their craft and the craft of their ancestors in piloting their voyaging canoes around the Great Ocean, the Pacific. They prefer to call themselves way-finders rather than navigators. Navigation is a more universal science of instruments and the application of systems of time and space as broad as the cosmos itself. Way-finding is an interpretive craft closer to the signs the systems of the cosmos imprint on the environment. No navigator, certainly none of the preeminence of a James Cook let us say, would distance himself from the myriad of signs in sea and sky, in wind and water, that tell him where he is. But a navigator has the security that the system he applies in his voyaging has a life outside him, in a book, an instrument, and a map. For a way-finder no knowledge, no image is stilled either in time or in space. The temperature of the water, the movement of the waves, the seasons of the stars, the patterns of the winds, the habits of the birds are all in his head. And it is a knowledge that comes to him not through his own experience alone. It comes to him down through the ages of his line of masters and apprentices. A way-finder finds his way with style, as a surfboarder rides his wave with style. No voyage is ever the same. His way is always different, but always ruled by his confidence that he will find it.

I prefer, I must confess, to be a way-finder than a navigator in all my voyaging through learning and knowledge in all my storytelling. Metaphors are the trade winds of my mind. Models are the doldrums.

For thirty years now the Sea People have pulled on their Deep Time consciousness and have been voyaging the Sea of Islands in re-enactment of the voyages of the People of Old. They have sailed from Hawai'i to Tahiti and back, from Tahiti to Samoa, Tonga, Aotearoa. Their most recent triumphs have been their voyages from Fenua'enata to Hawai'i. There are now six voyaging canoes in the Sea of Islands.

These thirty years of this odyssey have had their pain and conflict, their tragedies and failures, their political machinations, their greed and their absurdities. But they also have been courageous overall triumphs, tapping a wellspring of cultural pride in a sense of a continuing voyaging tradition. These voyages have been the theater of the Sea of Islands these Sea People have encompassed.

Further Reading:

Epeli Hau'ofa inspired the name Sea of Islands for the Pacific in *A New Oceania: Rediscovery of our Sea of Islands* (Suva, 1993). Those who write of the Sea of Islands from outside are happy to use the name. It gives a sense of identity to those who are the descendants of the great voyages that peopled this vast ocean space.

The scholars of archaeological, anthropological, historical, and cultural studies, Patrick Kirch and Roger Green have led us all in their studies of ancestral Polynesia. Their most recent contribution is *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia* (Cambridge, 2001). Patrick Vinton Kirch, *On the Roads of the Winds: An*

Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands (Berkeley, 2000) offers a comprehensive study of the issues advanced here. The studies of Andrew Pawley, Malcolm Ross, and Darrell Tryon on comparative linguistics and of Adrian Horridge on the Sea People's *va'a* in Peter Bellwood, James J. Fox, and Darrell Tryon, eds., *The Austronesians* (Canberra, 1995) make the foundations for the story of the most remarkable voyage from Hava'iki to Fenua'enata. Geoffrey Irwin, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific* (Cambridge, 1992) outlines the debate on all issues concerning voyaging in the Pacific.

Ben Finney tells the story of the intellectual debate and cultural achievements of the voyaging canoes' re-enactment in *Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey Through Polynesia* (Berkeley, 1994) and *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors: Reviving Polynesian Voyaging* (Honolulu, 2003).

All students of Sea-of-Islands voyaging are in debt to the brilliant studies of Thomas Gladwin, *East is a Big Bird: Navigation and Logic on Pulawal Atoll* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) and David Lewis, *We the Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfalling in the Pacific* (Canberra, 1972).

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