
Women and Navigation: Does the Exception Confirm the Rule?

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Women's roles in navigation have been downplayed, if not ignored, in the many volumes which record navigational history, lore, skills, practices and techniques in the Pacific, whether they are the works of missionaries, early ethnographers, historians or contemporary voyagers. The bulk of this literature has been written by men, many of whom have shown little curiosity or interest in women's roles and contributions to navigation.² As David Lewis has written, "[t]he powerful role of women...has been virtually ignored, except when, like the navigator Paintapu, they are glimpsed through the mist of time."³

To Lewis, women were important actors in navigation in many ways. Indeed, he added that "it was women, ashore or afloat, who held the ocean in their keeping, sharing a common affinity with the moon and with fruitfulness." "Nor is it an accident," he continued, "that, in the origin myths of the Carolines, navigation was the gift of women."⁴ Such glimpses of the more prominent

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²See for example, Jack Golson (ed.), *Polynesian Navigation: A Symposium on Andrew Sharp's Theory of Accidental Voyages* (Wellington, 1962; 3rd ed., Wellington, 1972); Edward Dodd, *Polynesian Seafaring: A Disquisition on Prehistoric Celestial Navigation and the Nature of Seagoing Double Canoes* (2 vols., New York, 1972); Ward H. Goodenough and Stephen D. Thomas, "Traditional Navigation in the Western Pacific: A Search for Pattern," *Expedition*, XXIX, No. 3 (1987), 3-14; and Geoffrey Irwin, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific* (Cambridge, 1992).

³David Lewis, *We, the Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific* (Honolulu, 1972; 2nd ed., Honolulu, 1994), 48.

⁴*Ibid.* He added that "[t]oday, after more than a century of fundamentalist Christianity, a Tongan woman must still behave with decorum while her husband is beyond the reefs, lest the fish elude him and the affronted sea destroy him."

presence of women in navigation in indigenous accounts and their relative absence from post-contact records could have a number of explanations: the loss of traditions during the disruption of European contact and colonial rule, the blinkered vision of researchers, changing patterns of female activity at sea or simply because women were never as prominent in navigation as Lewis suggested.

On the other hand, Paul D'Arcy concluded that in the Pacific "navigation seems to have been largely a male occupation."⁵ Indeed, in most contemporary and historical accounts women are absent as navigators and sailors, if not as passengers. That women "were [and are] generally believed to endanger maritime activities" seems to be a universal trait.⁶ Even today women are generally excluded from ocean-going activities – in Kiribati, for example, it was only in 2003 that the government decided to allow women to work on foreign ships and to attend the Maritime Training Centre. Since then, Kiribati women have been employed aboard cruise ships with which the government has formal agreements, and the door to the training centre is now open to women.⁷

So what should we make of this? Are we reinventing history by highlighting the role of women in navigation or are we simply correcting an omis-

⁵Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu, 2006), 90. Still, like Lewis, D'Arcy reminded us that "women did travel by sea, and they were also trained as navigators, particularly in the Marshalls and Kiribati." He went on to note the example of Baintabu (or Paintapu), the woman who was "the chief navigator on Abemana in Kiribati in the 1780s," a story to which we shall return.

⁶For example, William A. Lessa, *et al.*, *Tales from Ulithi Atoll: A Content Analysis* (Berkeley, 1961), 33, told the story of Lifagas, Pälülop's daughter, who accompanied him and three of her brothers on a doomed trip. Before leaving, Pälülop's son, Furabwai, predicted that there would be a typhoon, but the trip was still undertaken. Lessa wrote that "Ligafas stayed in the hut on the lee platform...where her father had put her." She was warned by Pälülop that if she heard voices she should ignore them and not look down, but she disobeyed. "Soon after she began to menstruate" her father told her that she was unclean and put in *taftef* (a box for storing things). Pälülop, after adding "two shells used for scraping coconuts and two fruits" threw the box overboard. "On the seventh day" the typhoon came and destroyed all, including Pälülop, but one man. The story goes on with Ligafas settling on Yap and planting trees from the two fruits and bearing two sons who built two canoes from the coconut shells given her by her father. Lessa concluded that Ligafas "had doomed the whole canoe with her presence after she had begun her menstrual flow" and added that menstruating women were forbidden to travel in large canoes.

⁷Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati (National Women's Federation of Kiribati) presentation on Kiribati (untitled intervention presented at UNIFEM Pacific CEDAW Roundtable Meeting, Nadi, Fiji, March 2006), 20-21.

sion by bringing back to light what has been hidden and ignored? Were women important in navigation, or were they for the most part peripheral? What roles did they play? Trying to find this out seems overdue. Significant research is already underway: Joe Genz of the University of Hawai'i, who completed his doctorate under the guidance of Ben Finney, has written briefly about women in Marshallese navigation. Marianne George, an anthropologist who has been involved with the Vaka Taumako Project in the Solomon Islands, has paid significant attention to women in navigation. Another work which contains a full chapter on women is *The Canoe is the People: Indigenous Navigation in the Pacific*, a UNESCO LINKS cd-rom.⁸

Researching this topic more extensively requires close collaboration with elders, particularly women, who have experienced navigation or who remember stories of women navigators from the past. Although this is not always feasible, it is what both Genz and George have sought to do. Although it may not be easy to find women in other parts of the Pacific who remember the past role of women in navigation, it may be possible. This essay focuses on readily available sources and is but a preliminary attempt to examine what has been written on women in navigation.

Voyaging Women

The story of Ru and Hina, told in 1824 by Pape-au, a Tahitian scholar, is about the voyage and exploits of Ru and his sister, whose full name was Hina-fa'auru-va'a (Hina the canoe pilot). The story was published by the Tahitian ethnologist Teuira Henry, the granddaughter of the original missionary recorder of these traditions, J.M. Orsmond. The tale says that Hina watched for land while Ru steered, but Hina's name suggests that her role was to navigate the canoe. Evidence of Hina's ubiquity in Polynesia is shown by the many places which carry her name and the many roles attributed to her, such as that of Hina-i-aa-i-te marama (Hina who stepped into the moon), who watched over travelers at night; this led her also to be known as Hinu-nui-te-araara (Great Hina the watchwoman). Teuira, in the Tahitian version of Hina's exploits, recounted that it was Hina's "love of discovery" that caused her to "set off in her canoe to make the moon a visit." On reaching the moon, however, "she was so pleased with it, that she stepped into it, leaving to the mercy of the sea her canoe, which was never seen again."⁹

⁸(Apia, Samoa, 2005).

⁹In Hawaiian tradition the story of Hina is less about her quest for exploration than about her desire to "escape the excrement of her children." See "Ru and Hina," in Teuira Henry, *et al.*, *Voyaging Chiefs of Havai'i* (Honolulu, 1995).

The absence today of women in navigation in many parts of the region leaves us little choice but to rely on names and stories, as above, to try to understand their role in the past. While in the Cook Islands for the 2006 *Vaka Eiva* canoeing race, I asked around about women navigators of the past.¹⁰ An emeritus professor of Pacific Studies and long-time resident of the Cook Islands, Ron Crocombe, who is skeptical about the role of women in navigation, kindly asked Makiuti Tongia of the Ministry of Culture, who jotted some notes which were passed to me. Tongia believes that “women in pre-missionary days were also navigators” and substantiates this by referring to oral traditions. He pointed to the story of Toa and Tapaeru Taki Etu, the ancestors of the people of Manihiki and Rakahanga who came from Rarotonga and settled in those two islands. Tapaeru is a name “reserved for the daughters of chiefs of the southern group while Taki Etu means star led or star follower, i.e., navigator,” explained Tongia, who added that Tapaeru, the higher ranking of the two (Toa being a warrior), “was more likely the navigator.”¹¹

Tongia also gave the example of Te Roro Kai Etu, an ancestor on his Mauke side “whose family today are recognized navigators of the island for travel between the islands of Nga Pu Toru.” Te Roro Kai Etu, a name given to women of the extended family, signifies “the brain that eats stars or the star eating brain,” which can be “translated to mean navigator, sextant or recorder of important navigational stars.” Tongia further argues that the famous voyaging canoe *Takitumu* was also named *Te tika a te Tuaine* (the permission of the sister). *Takitumu* was “in the custody of Tangiia’s sister called Rakanui at Huahine. Tangiia renamed the *vaka* “to commemorate or honour his sister for giving him the *vaka*.” He added that “[t]his story confirms that women of rank did have ownership of *vaka*, an object usually associated with men.”¹² These names and stories support the notion that key women played a founding role in navigation but that this did not last. This is also suggested by stories from other parts of the region. Women have already been rewritten into other as-

¹⁰This event, held off Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, is a festival featuring outrigger canoes which were used in the migration of the Maori to New Zealand.

¹¹For the story of how Toa and Tapaeru came to Manihiki and Rakahanga, see Te Rangi Hiroa, *Ethnology of Manihiki and Rakahanga* (Honolulu, 1932). Also available at <http://www.nztec.org/tm/scholarly/tei-BuxMani-t1-body-d1-d2-d1.html>.

¹²On the role of chiefly women and the importance of canoes, see Peter H. Buck, *The Material Culture of the Cook Islands* (New Plymouth, NZ, 1927; reprint, New York, 1976).

pects of history in the Pacific, such as chiefly powers, but there have been limited attempts to investigate this for navigation.¹³

Marshall Islands

There seems little question that there were qualified women navigators in the past in the Marshall Islands. Inter-island movement was important, if not vital, on this drought-prone atoll archipelago. Dirk Spenneman has written that "Marshallese have always been noted for their navigational skill and in the past only a certain few people, either men or women, were taught the secrets of sailing and navigation."¹⁴ Unfortunately, he was unable to provide further information on this, noting that although much has been written about navigation, there is nothing he "recall[s] on women," adding "that is hardly surprising keeping in mind that German anthropology was heavily gendered." He further stated that information on women's roles would have been particularly hard to come by because "the Marshalls were 'hit' by acculturation much earlier than the other areas on Micronesia (apart from Guam). And, unfortunately, the anthropologist of the German South Seas Expedition working on the Marshalls was Augustin Kraemer, an opinionated man...who had been to the Marshalls before and thus did not see things with a new light."¹⁵ The notion that Marshallese women in the past had navigational skills was reiterated in the 1995 *National Women's Policy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands*, which stated that even though "at the present time women are not expected to be canoe builders, navigators, or fishermen...oral history tells of women navigators, boat builders and fisherwomen in earlier times of Marshallese history."¹⁶

Paul D'Arcy has claimed that the Marshall Islands' *rimedo*, the select group of navigators who generally came from the privileged classes, included women as well as men. He added that they would "impart their knowledge only to their favourite children or others identified as worthy of their train-

¹³On this point, see Caroline Ralston and Nicholas Thomas (eds.), "Sanctity and Power: Gender in Polynesian History," special issue of *Journal of Pacific History*, XXII, Nos. 3-4 (1987).

¹⁴Dirk H.R. Spenneman, "Traditional Marshallese Stick Navigation," in Spenneman (ed.), *Ennaanin Eto: A Collection of Essays on the Marshallese Past* (Majuro, 1993).

¹⁵Dirk H.R. Spenneman, personal communication, 15 November 2006.

¹⁶Republic of the Marshall Islands, *National Women's Policy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (Majuro, 1995), 5.

ing.”¹⁷ He went on to discuss briefly the rivalry and secrecy between the *rimedo* who formed different schools of navigation. This secrecy and rivalry were two of the factors which contribute to the difficulty of learning about women navigators. Joe Genz, in our exchanges, wrote that one particular person who has a book on navigation that was passed on to him has vowed to take it with him to the grave without sharing it. Others who may have known something on the topic have passed away, while one woman who was identified to him has, in his words, “gone senile.” Genz did meet, however, with Lijon Eknilang from Rongelap who had knowledge of navigational “stories, legends and chants” which she learned from her elders. She reported that she might have become a navigator and could have passed her navigation test when she was young but was prevented from doing so by her father’s death and then by a move away from Rongelap.¹⁸ Moreover, Kjell Akerblom has stated that “[a]s a rule it was only the professional navigators who possessed nautical knowledge. This was regarded as a trade secret, as private incorporeal property. As such it was handed down from father to son – in the Marshall Islands from father to daughter as well – but in matrilineal societies it might also be transferred from maternal uncle to sister’s son.”¹⁹

Women in Ailuk still sail proficiently today. There are also accounts of women on other atolls sailing in fairly recent times. Jorelik Tibon remembered his mother and aunts sailing from Wotje to Majuro in a fleet of four *walap* (voyaging canoes) in the mid-1940s or early 1950s. The canoes were filled with eleven siblings with only one brother present; Jorelik’s mother directed the fleet. In another story he recounted that a ship going to Wotje for a political campaign encountered a canoe with only women aboard. Jorelik said that in this case the women had been taught by their parents to carry out “men’s chores.” His grandmother told him that children were taken into the lagoon and laid down in canoes so that they could feel the waves and currents below them. The most proficient would eventually reach the highest level, the ability to navigate without sight. Jorelik’s mother and aunts taught him how to sail and to tack and right a capsized canoe.²⁰

¹⁷D’Arcy, *People of the Sea*, 89. “Ri” means person and “medo” (meto) means at sea. Jorelik Tibon, personal communication, 19 January 2007.

¹⁸Joe Genz, personal communication, 27 November 2006. I subsequently met with Lijon who indicated clearly that she was on her way to becoming competent in navigation.

¹⁹Kjell Akerblom, *Astronomy and Navigation in Polynesia and Micronesia: A Survey* (Stockholm, 1992), 142.

²⁰Tibon, personal communication. See also Iroj Manini Mike Kabua, “Iaek-woj Eo An Jebro” (“Jebro’s Race and Liberation Celebrations”), in Anono Lieom

In the Marshall Islands, as elsewhere in Micronesia, women have played important mythical roles in navigation. That they also figured in later nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of Marshallese navigation raises the question of whether this might also be true elsewhere in the Pacific. For example, both Tahiti and the Cook Islands have traditions that are devoid of any observation of the modern continuity of female navigation. Two legends are of particular relevance: one tells of “how the sail came to the outrigger” and the other of how the gift of navigation came to the Marshalls. However, in the recounting of the former (in the many versions recorded), the important gift of the sail and the mother’s role in bestowing it often seems to be marginalized.²¹ Yet it is through the gift of the sail by Jebro’s mother, Lentañür, that Jebro won the race to decide who would become the next *iroij* (chief) of Ailinglaplap Atoll.²² Lentañür was the bestower of the sailing technology, which in this story replaced the paddle as the means of navigating the canoe. In the story Lentañür asked each of her sons to carry her on board their canoe. Upon seeing her heavy bundle each refused until Jebro, the youngest among his eleven or so siblings, accepted his mother’s request to accompany him in the race. Jebro ended up winning the race thanks to his mother’s gift of the mast and sail.

In his recounting of this legend, what Kabua highlighted was that Jebro, who was immortalized as Jeleilon, the “traditional steering constellation” of the Pleiades, became the *iroij* of Ailinglaplap, even though he was the youngest son, due to his kindness, calm and obedience. Kabua wrote that “Jebro represents the values and traditions that provide direction and strength for security, endurance, and peace.”²³ But Kabua said little about Jebro’s mother. How and why did she conceive of the sail and mast? Why is her character, obvious wisdom and knowledge, and her innovative if not revolutionary gift not as celebrated as the exploits of her son?

Loeak, Veronica C. Kiluwe and Linda Crowl (eds.), *Life in the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (Suva, 2004), 15-30.

²¹“How the sail came to the outrigger” is the title given to the legend in Jane Downing, Dirk H.R. Spennemann and Margaret Bennett (eds.) *Bwebwenatoon Etto: A Collection of Marshallese Legends and Traditions* (Majuro, 1992), 15.

²²Various spellings are given for Lentañür in the different versions of this story: she was known as Loktanur in Gerald Knight, *A History of the Marshall Islands* (Majuro, 1999), and as Liktanur in Downing, Spenneman and Bennett (eds.), *Bwebwenatoon Etto*. The different versions of the story also gave different spellings for the names of the brothers (whose number ranged from five to twelve), and the race was described in various ways.

²³Kabua, “Jaekwoj Eo An Jebro,” 16.

In the story *Lentañür* not only provided the sail and the mast but also the sailing technology when she taught her son how to use the sail. As Downing, *et al.* wrote:

It was the first sail ever made. Liktanur helped Jabro put up the mast, the *kiju*. The she helped him to place the other gear. Among the things she had brought along were the *re-pakak* and *jirukli*, one for each end of the canoe, so that Jabro could move the sail boom from one end of the canoe to the other and tack from right to left against the wind. They arranged the ropes and lines until the rigging was complete, with the lot, or pulley, at the head of the mast. Liktanur showed her son how to put up the sail and how to steer the canoe with a paddle. "Now we can go" she said....Liktanur showed Jabro how to get speed by tacking, first to starboard, the right side, and then to port, the left side.²⁴

In the version recorded by Gerald Knight there are details of the sailing techniques being passed on by Liktanur to the men on board with accompanying chants to guide them.

No one has seen sail before. Men crowd upon boat to watch. Loktanur teach them. She has man by *kubaak* (outrigger's float) adjust rope to *kubaak* till mast tilt one hand off centre toward it. Sail hang and put mast into balance...All stand back amazed...They launched boat. She give Jebro steering oar, grab rope and pull up sail chanting...Wind blow strong from southeast. They take off on tack north of west. But wind is too strong and Jeparo can't steer his boat enough off wind for proper tack. "Too much pressure on oar! Too much into wind!" She let out sheet again. Sail flap. She pull on rope until sail crease into two pocket. This time canoe steer easy to *kabbe* (sail off wind) yet quick to *bwabwe* (tack into wind) off on perfect tack. She pull sheet in a bit more. Chant:

Pull down at
Palm – crown – waow!
I can't that
Wind too strong!

²⁴Downing, Spenneman and Bennett (eds.), *Bwebwenatoon Etto*, 18-19.

They sail on and on. Our ancestors, when they tell this story say they sail on to edge of northern sky. But these days we say they turn at northern reef. "Driak!"

The story continues with Liktanur giving further sailing instructions until she and Jebro meet the older brother Tumur, who takes over the canoe and throws off his mother because he is unhappy with her letting out the sail as they pass under a storm cloud to wait for the "strong wind to blow past." "Tumur get mad and throw her overboard. Say she is getting his boat dirty."²⁵

In the Marshallese legend about how navigation skills came to the islands, a crucial role was attributed to another woman, known as Litörmalu (or Taramalu) whose mother, from the "clan of Kwajalein," married one of the two men (some stories say brothers) who landed on Namorik island after getting lost at sea.²⁶ Her adopted father and the other man taught Litörmalu, from the time she was a small girl, how to navigate through reading the weather and signs at sea, such as birds, rocks, swells and waves; they also taught her the chants associated with navigation. She spent a lot of time in a small wooden bowl (*jape*) near a small island off the reef of Namorik to learn to feel the waves coming from different directions as they encountered land. When she was older the two men built her a canoe in which she continued to train until she became an expert. They made her promise not to teach anyone from Namorik, but Taramalu taught her son, La Enjen, who became an expert navigator.

In Jack Tobin's version of "the beginning of the appearance of navigation in these atolls," as related to him by Mak Juda of Majuro in 1972, it is a mother who taught "sailing and navigation" to her two sons, who then passed it on to selected clans.²⁷ Tobin referred in particular to the Ri-Kuwajleen clan who were aware of the navigational knowledge of the northern islands of the archipelago. Those who "knew" included Kabua Kabua (a contemporary *irooj laplap*, or paramount chief), his mother, Neimat, and Neimat's maternal uncle. Mak Juda concluded by recounting that he learned navigation from Neimat and her husband, among others.

The main lesson of this legend concerns the virtues necessary to become an *irooj*. The mother's contribution to the art of navigation appears critical, but understated, even if Liktanur (= Capella) is also the "mother of all

²⁵Knight, *History*, 2-8.

²⁶In *ibid.*, 63, LaBedbedin suggested that the men might have come from Yap: "We do not know men from where – some say Yap." This was also stated in Bo Flood, Beret E. Strong and William Flood, *Micronesian Legends* (Honolulu, 2002), 178-180.

²⁷Jack A. Tobin, *Stories from the Marshall Islands* (Honolulu, 2002), 113.

stars in the sky.”²⁸ The importance of women’s contributions is highlighted in *The Canoe is the People*, where in the section on “Women and Navigation,” the story of Liktanur and Jabro is told to illustrate the importance of sailmaking by women.

Caroline Islands

There are different versions of a story relating how navigation came to the Caroline Islands, and as elsewhere these depend upon the storyteller and the island of origin. At least one version from Pulap Island (where navigation is deemed to have started, according to the different versions of the story) attributes the art of navigation as being imparted to a girl or woman.

William Lessa has provided various versions of the story in his works *Tales from Ulithi Atoll* and in *More Tales from Ulithi Atoll*. The story in which the “girl,” a daughter of the god Pälülop, learned the art of navigation was told to Lessa by a narrator named Melchethal, “who says that he heard the story only once from a man from Pulap named Mägor, after the latter had arrived in Ulithi about 1957 or 1958 from having been lost at sea.” Lessa added that “Melchethal says that Mägor told the story while teaching four or five Ulithian men some things about navigation.”²⁹ The story is entitled “How Pulap Acquired the Art of Navigation” and relates that a golden plover from Ponape was searching for a new island where he could find people to eat after he had consumed all of those on Ponape, Truk and other islands. But he could not find Pulap because its magic prevented him from doing so. In time Pälülop allowed the plover to see Pulap and called on his daughter to prepare food for the plover. She provided the plover with a constant source of replenished food until he was satisfied and thanked her by teaching her the art of navigation. He made her climb a coconut tree, which continued to grow until she could see all the islands. She learned how to calculate where all the islands were situated from that tree. Once the plover was satisfied that the daughter knew all that was necessary, he decided to leave Pulap. The daughter insisted that he take a basket of food, but it was so heavy that he fell into the ocean and drowned before reaching Truk. The narration concludes: “[t]hat is why the people of Pulap are the lords of navigation.”³⁰

²⁸Downing, Spenneman and Bennett (eds.), *Bwebwenatoon Etto*, note 5. Other references include an additional version told by Jelibor Jam about the woman Litarmelu (see p. 116) in “The Origin of the *Irooj*,” where talked about two sisters who came to the Marshall Islands in a canoe from the distant land of Ep (possibly Yap); see Tobin, *Stories*, 51.

²⁹William Lessa, *More Tales from Ulithi Atoll* (Berkeley, 1980), 39.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 40.

This story, or at least the daughter's role in it, was disputed by Lessa, however, who wrote that:

It is surprising to me that Pälülop's daughter should learn the art of navigation from the plover. In a major myth from Ulithi it is her father who is depicted as the one who imparts the art to mankind through two of his many sons. He is also characterized as the father of Yäluluwe, the patron god of navigators, who himself learned to be a navigator by eavesdropping while in his mother's womb as she sat near Pälülop during the course of his instructions on navigation to her two sons.

He adds that when he discussed this "discrepancy" with the narrator, Melchethal answered that while Pälülop is considered the source or "fountainhead" of navigation in Yap and Ulithi, this is probably not the case in Pulap, where he suggested that Pälülop may have learned the art of navigation from his daughter.³¹ Lessa then went on to refer to other versions of the myth in which the daughter played either a lesser role or no part at all. Notably, he mentioned a myth from Ifaluk entitled "How the Lore of Seamanship Spread among the Islands."³² In this version the girl had difficulty understanding the instructions and had to ask her father, who this time was not Pälülop but rather Aluluei (i.e., Yäluluwe). In this story, we are told that the girl is taught from a chart rather than a tree but "she cannot really deal with the occasion," and it was Paluelap (or Pälülop) "who teaches people the art of seamanship."³³

William Flood retold a similar version of the above legend as told by Lino Olopai of Saipan.³⁴ In this version the bird was a sandpiper that ate people; it heard about the island of Pulap but could not find it because it was protected by the magic of Pälülop, who lived there happily with his granddaughter. One day the sandpiper found the island, and the girl's grandfather advised her to prepare food and drink for it so that it would not be angered and eat her.

³¹Lessa, *Tales*, 27, also stated that Pälülop means "great canoe captain" or "great navigator."

³²Edwin G. Burrows and Melford E. Spiro, *An Atoll Culture: Ethnography of Ifaluk in the Central Carolines* (New Haven, 1952), 89-90; and Burrows, *Flower in My Ear: Arts and Ethos of Ifaluk Atoll* (Seattle, 1963), 94-95.

³³Lessa, *More Tales*, 40. Ialulwe is "the patron spirit of all canoe captains, or pelu;" see *Tales*, 27.

³⁴Bo Flood, Beret E. Strong and William Flood, *Micronesian Legends* (Honolulu, 2002), 38.

Again, the girl offered the bird a constant supply of food and drink. In return he offered a gift, saying that “I will teach you the secrets of how to sail from island to island.” The little girl was said to have been a “good student” and, with her grandfather, to have taught navigation to “many others.”³⁵

The story was also told by Mau Pailug, the famous contemporary Satawalese navigator in *The Canoe is the People*. In his version, it was a kuling bird (sandpiper), who was also a ghost, who taught Pulap’s daughter the skill of navigation. Mau Pailug recalled that the kuling flew from the Marshall Islands and killed all the people there, then went to Chuuk, killed the people there and then came to Pulap. There the kuling, possibly called by the chief of Pulap, stopped and called the chief’s daughter, asking her to feed it until it was full. The kuling added that if the girl failed she would kill all the people. The girl fed the kuling taro and gave her coconut until she was full. The kuling then offered to teach the girl to be a navigator. When the kuling was ready to leave the girl’s father ordered the women and men to collect large quantities of taro and coconut for the kuling. Weighed down by the food, the kuling fell into the sea between Chuuk and Pafang, died and was transformed into an octopus.³⁶

The role of the daughter in Caroline Island navigation was also highlighted by Ben Finney. He recounted the story told by a navigation teacher, Uurupa, to Stephan Thomas, who studied navigation on Satawal. Like the story told by Mau Pailug, the daughter of the island’s chief was visited, but this time by a rainbow which was also a spirit. Like the kuling, the spirit had “eaten all the inhabitants of Truk and Naminuoto” and was out to eat all the people of Pulap. Inosagur’s father, Sagur, instructed his daughter to feed the spirit some taro and “a small drinking coconut.” The taro and coconut were refilled each time the spirit ate and drank until Anumwercici said that he had never been “so satisfied.”

In gratitude he taught Inosagur navigation. He placed her in a small coconut tree and by magic made it grow above the clouds. Inosagur could see all the islands, all the creatures of pookof [sealife], and all the reefs, banks, and shoals. When she had memorized the stars under which everything lay, Anumwercici again made magic to sink the tree, depositing her gently on the beach.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 42.

³⁶Mau Pailug added that unless navigators used magic for protection, the octopus would pull down their canoe between Chuuk and Pafang; see *The Canoe and the People*, video 1, “Story of the Kuling Bird.”

The spirit then told Inosagur that she would have a son, Fanur, to whom she would teach navigation and “make him *pwo* [ritually initiate him as a navigator]. She would have a second son that she would name Wayerang and also “initiate in *pwo*.”³⁷ Finney argued that this and similar stories were used to explain that there are two schools of navigation, named Fanur and Wayerang. But more important for our purposes, he stated “[t]hat this tale features the female role of transmitting navigational knowledge from the spirits to humans begs the question: were there female navigators?” He added that “although the practice of navigation is generally thought of as an exclusively male activity, there are some report of female navigators in the Carolines and Santa Cruz Islands.”³⁸

In *The Canoe Is the People*, it was noted that in Satawal “girls used to be trained as navigators, but now it’s mostly a male activity. However, girls whose fathers are navigators still learn many things. This way, they can help to guide a canoe if a navigator becomes confused. It’s like a safety net.” The role of daughters was highlighted in an adjoining window, where a Satawalese woman, Lourdes Lapanemai, recounted the story of her ancestress, Ukura, who helped her navigator father, Suk, find his way. On a return trip to Satawal from Saipan, the lost canoe was drifting when a “white-tailed seabird also called Suk” appeared. It was Ukurua who remembered where the bird came from: “Father, why do you say you don’t know where that bird is coming from? You told me that Suk lives north of Fais, under the star of Weno”. The canoe was able to find its way to Fais.

In another video, Rosemary Lafilmal Apusa, also from Satawal, recalled that when she was a small girl she would look at the sky with her grandmother, Lepalmai, who knew the names of the stars. She had asked to learn but soon forgot. She now regretted not learning, concluding that “I want to learn again for when the old people leave us”, and adds “we just go to school, but we don’t care about our custom any more.”³⁹

The role of women in making *tur* (“valuable weavings”) on Satawal was also highlighted in two videos: in the first, Carmen Piaulug, the eldest daughter of Mau Piaulug, demonstrated how to weave *tur*, which is a lengthy process. In the second video, Mau Piaulug, in an initiation ceremony for navigators in 2002 (the first held in over fifty years) sat by a stack of *tur* which he “removes one by one as he calls out star paths”. The text adds, “It is the

³⁷Ben Finney and Sam Low, “Navigation,” in K.R. Howe (ed.), *Vaka Moana, Voyages of the Ancestors: The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific* (Honolulu, 2007), 185.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*The Canoe and the People*, video 2, “The Role of Women.”

women who weave these *tur* on their looms for special occasions such as this." Below the stack of *turs* is a "bowl filled with pounded breadfruit or taro, also prepared by the women."⁴⁰ The open association of women with navigational rituals challenges previous dichotomized anthropological characterizations of Carolinian worldviews and gendered spaces.⁴¹

Kiribati

David Lewis has referred to a daughter being taught navigational skills by her Beru Island father, Tewi Rewi, but he was skeptical about how much she was being taught.⁴² "Rewi is training his own son in exactly the same way that he himself was trained and his father was before him. I photographed him instructing his daughter but I suspect the girl's training was less systematic than the boys." Lewis did not explain why he suspected this, but the only other references to women in this particular book were anecdotal and rather flippant, if not sexist. One cannot help but wonder whether it was Lewis or the father who thought that the daughter's training was "less systematic than the boy's."

Yet in another volume Lewis stated, based upon reports by Fr. Ernest Sabatier, that navigational specialization was passed on to women in the past: "The semisecret arts of navigation were usually handed down from father to son, but in default of male offspring, a daughter was often trained."⁴³ Such a case involved Paintapu, a woman navigator of a war fleet that was returning from Tarawa to Abemama sometime around 1780. The incidents of the expedition partly hinged upon Paintapu's navigational methods, which were unfamiliar and strange to her uninitiated companions. She lay in the bottom of the canoe for hours gazing up at the heavens (*recouche... face au firmament*), giving orders about when to tack, for the wind was contrary. The chief of the expedition, becoming convinced that she was conducting sorcery to frustrate their landfall, had her unceremoniously thrown overboard. The last canoe in

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, video 4, "The Role of Women."

⁴¹See, for example, William H. Alkire, "Land, Sea, Gender, and Ghosts on Woleai-Lamotrek," in Mac Marshall and John L. Caughey (eds.), *Culture, Kin and Cognition in Oceania: Essays in Honor of Ward H. Goodenough* (Washington, DC, 1989), 79-94.

⁴²David Lewis, *The Voyaging Stars: Secrets of the Pacific Island Navigators* (New York, 1978), 78 and 127.

⁴³Lewis, *We, the Navigators*, 284-285. Fr. Sabatier's own words were: "Knowledge about sailing was handed down from father to son and if there was no male heir then the daughters would even inherit the skill." See Ernest Sabatier, *Astride the Equator: An Account of the Gilbert Islands* (Melbourne, 1977), 108.

the flotilla picked up the furious lady, who, not unnaturally, sulked for some days. In the end Paintapu relented and guided this one canoe to Abemama; none of the others were heard of again.

The fuller account by Sabatier seemed to indicate that Paintapu's position as a woman was not fully acknowledged and respected by her companions and thus led to her using her skills to their undoing

In about 1780 the people of Tarawa mounted an attack against Abemama and were beaten. To be really sure of victory the people of Abemama felt they must carry on the war in Tarawa (seventy miles away). There were three main leaders of these sorties: a general, a soothsayer and a navigator. This time the navigator was a woman, Baintabu, and she led the fleet. At first everything went well. Instead of meeting a bombardment from throwing spears, the Abemama warriors were presented with pieces of babai, green coconuts and fish done to a turn. There was feasting and dancing and presents were made of ornaments, mats and all sorts of things. When the sharing out was done, instead of being included with the leaders, Baintabu, a mere woman, was left out...Did she burst into tears and did she go from complaints to recriminations? The other leaders, well-fed and heaped up with gifts, took no notice and the injustice was not righted.⁴⁴

On the voyage back to Abemama they were sailing against the prevailing east wind and they had to tack. The land disappeared from sight, and night came on. The men at the steering oars of each canoe followed the leading one. Suddenly Baintabu was important again. But as Sabatier recounts, Baintabu made them sail without tacking all day. The men asked her what they should do but she would not answer. In anger they threw her overboard with her mat until the last canoe passed by and picked her up. She told them she had fallen in accidentally and thanked them for picking her up. After allowing the other canoes to get out of sight, she told them to change direction, "consulted the stars, gave her orders and lay down again, this time looking up at the sky." Her canoe was the only one to reach Abemama.

In Kiribati oral tradition, an important navigator was Nei Mangani-buka, who taught her son Teraka, who in turn becomes a celebrated navigator. There are different versions of this story – the ones covered here appear in *The Book of Banaba* and *An Anthology of Gilbertese Oral Tradition*, both edited by H.C. and H.E. Maude; in *Traditional Stories from the Northern Gilberts*, col-

⁴⁴Sabatier, *Astride the Equator*, 108-109.

lected and written by Ten Tiroba of Buariki, Tarawa; and in the field notes of Anne di Piazza, a Franco/Italian who travelled by canoe with her partner in various parts of Micronesia. Her version was recounted to her by Moriti Matitila from Kiribati.⁴⁵

Rather than recount systematically all the versions I will try to summarize the gist of the story without ignoring some of the important variations. Nei Manganibuka had three brothers (and in some versions she also had a sister) at Tebongiroro. In the Grimble version, she was the only child to be taught navigation by her father, Tebomanti, because her brothers neglected their father. This caused jealousy among the brothers, who took her out in their canoe and cast her away at sea. She landed in Nikunau where she planted her float (*betia*). In Ten Tiroba's version, Nei Manganibuka learned navigation by staying close to her parents to listen to them while her brothers were out fishing.⁴⁶ In the version told by Moriti Matitila and recorded by Anne di Piazza, Nei Manganibuka learned along with the rest of her siblings from the navigator, Nautonga, who was associated with her family. She decided to test her skills but did not have a canoe, as her brothers did, so she used a branch (*tebuka*) and eventually arrived at Nikunau after learning to read currents.

In every version, she married in Nikunau and had a son, Teraka to whom she taught navigation. In all the versions except the Banaba one, she used her son to demonstrate to her brothers her superior navigational skills. In Tiroba's version, Teraka was her third son and the one to whom she taught navigation – the other two were taught by men and died at the hands of Nei Manganibuka's brothers, who intercepted their canoes at sea and lured them back to Tebongiroro, where they were trapped. It was their lack of navigational knowledge which caused their death.

The end of the story was that Teraka was able to outmaneuver his mother's brothers, who finally understood that he was their sister's son. Nei Manganibuka's superior skills were then recognized through the achievements

⁴⁵Honor C. Maude and Henry E. Maude, *The Book of Banaba: From the Maude and Grimble Papers, and Published Works* (Suva, 1994); Maude and Maude, *An Anthology of Gilbertese Oral Tradition: From the Grimble Papers and Other Collections* (Suva, 1994); Ten Tiroba, *Traditional Stories from the Northern Gilberts* (Suva, 1989); and Anne di Piazza, "Research Notes." I would like to thank Ms. Di Piazza for kindly lending me these notes.

⁴⁶In this version, her father, Noumati, was a "master mariner, an expert traveler by land and sea, with special knowledge of ocean currents learned from Bike and Nei Tai," his parents. See Tiroba, *Traditional Stories*, 15. Tiroba wrote that "[w]hile Nei Manganibuka was mastering the skills of seamanship and how to recognize good, and how to forecast bad, sailing weather, her three brothers enjoyed fishing more. They would acquire a little knowledge and then rush off to try it out but Nei Managanibuka stuck to her task so that she might quickly learn all her parents could teach her."

of her son. In Tiroba's version, the brothers come to Nikunau to see their sister and to "beg her to teach them more of the skills of deep-sea navigation and seamanship."⁴⁷ The other versions take off in different directions and describe the further exploits and adventures of Nei Manganibuka and Teraka.

Nauru

The first canoe in Nauru was designed by a woman named Eigomwij. The legend, recounted by Head Chief Timothy Detudamo in a recently published volume, tells the story of how Eigomwij came to dream of the canoe and taught her people how to use it for fishing.⁴⁸ Eigomwij's dream came after her brother, Abwenoque, who had invented the first fishing net, did not divide equally the fish he and "his people," and Eigomwij's people, had caught. Not only did Abwenoque give Eigomwij's people the smallest and poorest fish, but he also mocked them. The story states that Eigomwij was angry but could do nothing about it until one night she dreamed of a canoe. The next day, "while the image and description of it were still vivid in her mind," she had "her men" build it. They obeyed, and once the canoe was built she sent "her men out with flares and nets to catch the fish." The men were successful but Eigomwij kept making improvements to the canoe and to the fishing methods "until her men became highly skilled in handling canoes and fishing." Eigomwij was also credited with designing fish hooks, fishing lines and nets, as well as inventing the weaving of mats, baskets and roof thatches. "She also gave names to all fish."

Solomon Islands

Taumako is a small, relatively isolated island in the Solomon Islands inhabited by Polynesians. The Vaka Taumako Project created in 1993 by Taumako's paramount chief, Koloso Kaveia, has been documented in a couple of films, and there is a website dedicated to it. The films *Heirs of Lata: A Renewal of Polynesian Voyaging* (1997) and *Vaka Taumako: The First Voyage* (1999) were reviewed by Richard Feinberg, who expressed disappointment that not enough was said about women's role in this endeavour:

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸The story, edited and translated in 1938 by Head Chief Timothy Detudamo, who was then the director of Education of Nauru, was based on "Transcript of a Series of Lectures Delivered by Native Teachers." The book, entitled *Legends, Traditions and Tales of Nauru*, was published in 2008 by IPS Publications at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. The quotes in this paragraph are from pp. 10-11.

Both films miss splendid opportunities to address important issues. For example, women are shown making sails and plaiting sennit, but their contribution escapes comment. Similarly, when the canoe arrives at Nifiloli in the second film, we learn that Kaveia's wife has made the journey with him, but we are given no insight into her activities during the voyage. Since most portrayals of Pacific Island seafaring treat it as a predominantly male endeavor, acknowledgement of women's contributions would have been a welcome addition.⁴⁹

In an unpublished paper on Taumako navigation, the anthropologist Mimi George has focused "on the recollections, explanation and demonstrations" given to her by Paramount Chief Kavea and by a "great, great, great grandmother," Joslyn Sale, "whose experiences date from the early 1900s." The Vaka Taumako Project website also refers to the role of women in navigation, but there are not many details.⁵⁰ Another website also looks at the role of women in navigation in the following passages:

[The VTP] is a rare opportunity to shed light on another controversial conundrum in Pacific studies – the traditional role of women in Polynesian voyaging. At Taumako it is said that women play as important and active roles in the process as men, including cutting the tree and bringing (actually "singing") the rough hewn log down from the mountain heights to the coast, weaving the *lauhala* [leaves of the *hala* tree] mats and making the sails, as well as the sennit rope and lashings that bind the canoe together. There were and are trained women navigators and captains, as well as girl apprentices in all the voyaging arts among these people...In 1993, [Mimi] George interviewed Reef Islands' women who were competent and very experienced in voyaging on *Te pukes* and using traditional non-instrumental navigational knowledge. In 1996, George learned that during the 40's and 50's; at least, there was a female Captain and 'owner' of a *Te puke* [vessel trading citrus fruits] from Nukapu and Pileni, named Hoakena. In 1993, George learned that the Taumakoan women throughout the entire building process will perform

⁴⁹Richard Feinberg, "Review," *Contemporary Pacific*, XIII, No. 2 (2001), 615.

⁵⁰The Vaka Taumako website is at <http://www.pacifictraditions.org/vaka>.

the oral transmission of stories, songs and chants...In 1996, George learned that it is the women's singing and chanting that is primarily responsible for the successful cutting and hauling of the log from the mountaintops to the sea where it is fashioned into Te puke. It is a Herculean task to drag a huge hardwood log down through the rainforest for miles. According to the Taumakoan it is the women who literally "sing it down."

The piece concludes by stating that "[d]ocumentation of what this actually describes will be an important part of the first account of the actual traditional voyaging knowledge and roles of women in voyaging. An account of women's work and roles in the full process will be an invaluable centrepiece for reconsideration of every aspect of voyaging knowledge and purpose from the point of view of actual knowledge of both gender roles and knowledge."⁵¹

Conclusion

The absence of women in navigation may in part be attributed to their more general absence in recorded history. This is a reflection of the gender imbalance in Pacific historiography, as well as in early anthropological records. The important role of women in culture generally has long been neglected. If there were male researchers with an interest in women's cultural production, they may have had difficulty accessing information in any case, especially if they depended upon oral interviews. It is essentially through the seminal work of a generation of female anthropologists, such as Margaret Jolly, Lissant Bolton and others, and courageous and insightful Pacific women such as Grace Molisa (who convinced the Vanuatu Kultural Senta to appoint women fieldworkers), that the role of women in culture began to be taken seriously in academic circles. But this is only part of the story.

Is it possible that women were originally active in navigation and then slowly withdrew from playing a central role? Was more permanent settlement a disincentive for women to navigate? Clearly, navigation takes many years to master – young women having children may have not been able to spend the required time or had the desire to pursue navigation. Travelling the high seas is a dangerous and uncertain activity: was it a risk that women were unwilling to take, or were they expected by the men not to undertake it?

Something that seemed originally perplexing to me was the lack of attention paid to sailmaking in the many books and articles on navigation. It is a unique and demanding skill but perhaps one that quickly became obsolete with

⁵¹Ma-Uri Institute, http://www.ma-ru.org/uk/zealand_waka02.php.

the availability of cloth. Or is it because male authors gave little consideration to sailmaking or to the associated production of goods by women?

These questions remain in suspension for the time being, but they could be answered through more extensive and local-level research. What is required are in-depth interviews and time spent with elders in the countries where navigation is still practised. Islands where women still sail actively would be an ideal place to start. One can only hope that Pacific students, especially women, will be encouraged, and sponsored, to retell the stories of their female elders and rewrite Pacific his/her-story. Both the past and the present are important, and today women are gradually making their way into contemporary voyaging, even though for some it remains a challenge to become accepted fully by the rest of the crew and to find the time to be completely committed.⁵² Nonetheless, as more young women become involved in the voyaging renaissance and retrace their ancestors' pasts, perhaps they will discover the truth as they sail ahead.

⁵²Lewis, *We, the Navigators*, 340-341, wrote that of the eight canoes voyaging to the 1992 Festival of Arts held in Rarotonga, only *Hökūle'a* had a woman crew member "included in each of the four legs" of its voyage from Hawai'i to Rarotonga (via Aitutaki). On the issue of time, I would like to thank Lyn Andrew, personal communication, Rarotonga, November 2006.