

The Impact of the Hōkūle‘a Voyage on My Life

By Paulina Yourupi

Growing up on the exquisite and serene island of Pollap in Chuuk, I was angry to learn that Mau Piailug taught navigation to a Hawaiian man. It angered me to know that a foreigner was privy to this sacred art that only a few privileged ones knew in Micronesia. What could Piailug be thinking to give this away? Sons had to prove themselves constantly to their fathers, hoping that one day the knowledge would be passed on to them. Many times, distinguished navigators died without passing on their vast knowledge to their children—for various reasons, but mostly because they regarded their children as unworthy. Yet, here was a foreigner who had the knowledge that automatically placed him in one of the most prestigious positions in Micronesian culture. Why did Piailug give the art away to this man? This was a question that plagued me until I came to understand some of the issues behind this courageous act and the legacy that lives on!

Never would I have believed that in the year 2007 I would meet the very man that Piailug taught and be inspired by him to join in the same endeavor that I was so set against as a child. My views changed drastically after listening to Nainoa Thompson share his personal account of the Hōkūle‘a, the reason behind its creation, and the revival of deep sea voyaging in Hawai‘i. Never had I heard such a compelling story of revitalization and a drastic change from shame to pride in one’s heritage in the history of the Pacific islands. Listening to Thompson’s story as it unfolded, beginning with the mistreatments of Hawaiians in their own land, was agonizing and sorrowful. Being taught as



Photo by Lori J. Bell Colin, Coral Reef Research Foundation

children to be ashamed of their heritage was the worst injustice to befall Native Hawaiians—or any human beings for that matter. Thompson’s compelling story struck a chord in me, having experienced my share of shame in my own culture at some points in my life, especially as a student. I was under the mistaken impression that Western culture was better than my own. This belief was exemplified through the education systems I went through, which often emphasized Western concepts and practices. I was fortunate enough to have strong role models on my island, such as Lambert Lokopwe, Sisinio Lokopwe, and James Naich, who rarely let an opportunity pass without drilling the younger generation about the importance of knowing, understanding, and appreciating one’s roots, while at the same time taking advantage of the Western form

of schooling to better serve our people in times of change. They have strengthened my belief that, though small, our Micronesian islands have much to offer the world.

The unyielding commitment of the founders of the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS) to give pride and dignity back to the Hawaiian people is truly inspiring. The Hōkūle‘a is a powerful symbol of the commitment and pride of Hawaiian people, and it has reached far beyond the borders of Hawai‘i to touch many lives. The initiators of the PVS have much to be proud of, for their dream has restored dignity, respect, and pride in Hawaiian culture. Their legacy has lived on and expanded internationally, as is evident by the 2007 voyage from Hawai‘i to Micronesia and Japan.

Continued at the top of page 19

The story of the Hōkūle'a provided direction in my otherwise chaotic life. It enabled me to see my role as an educator clearly and with conviction to give hope to children and nurture a learning environment where they can dream. Thompson's story empowered me to move beyond my comfortable cocoon to take risks. He challenged me to search deeply within myself for my purpose in life and God's plan for me.

Western scholars disputed claims that the Hawaiian islands were founded by great Polynesian navigators. To prove them wrong and pay respect to their great seafaring ancestors, Hawaiians sailed to Tahiti in 1976 without any Western instruments. There began a leadership team bound together by shared values and vision. It is the same vision and values that drive the PVS leadership today. Observing how the leadership interacted with crew members and how decisions were made during the voyage was incredible. The first thing I noticed aboard the Hōkūle'a was the comradeship, especially between the captains and crewmembers. There was an openness in dialogue and interactions that allowed for free communication among everyone. Usually, there is a line drawn between captain and crew, and it's often difficult to cross that line. Not on this voyage! Not once did I witness any display of anger or disgruntlement. Cheerful bantering, infectious laughter, and feelings of exhilaration by our leadership were witnessed and felt by everyone onboard. I am certain none of the crewmembers were unaffected by them.

Extraordinary as the voyage was, it took me quite some time to understand its greater implications and meaning, both on a personal and a macro level. Nevertheless, this unique experience clarified my two roles—teacher and crew member—merging them into one on the voyage with a greater challenge in the end. How do I give back to the PVS or the different communities in Micronesia?

My greatest challenges after the voyage were twofold. One was to make sense of this unique experience. What lessons did I learn from the voyage?

As expertly demonstrated and revealed through the daring deeds of these navigators, the ocean is not a barrier, but a bridge that connects us all together.

~Paulina Yourupi

How do they impact my life? Second was my responsibility to the PVS and the legacy that I became a part of. What are the expectations post-voyage? How do I frame the wonderful experience in a way that positively impacts my community, especially for students? The story of the Hōkūle'a is not something that can be explained. It has to be felt in order to give hope, inspire learning, and instill pride in one's heritage. How do I connect this powerful symbol and its underlying values to the education system in Chuuk or Micronesia? What symbols or models exist in Chuuk or Micronesia that can be used as powerful messages to foster greater appreciation for life, cultural diversity, and roots? How do I educate a Micronesian child successfully, without getting lost in the very system that contributes to the disconnect between a child's traditional culture and Western culture? Where do I strike a balance between the two cultures of teaching—formal and informal education—so that children benefit from both, without losing the sense of where they came from, where they are, and where they are heading? I have a very challenging task ahead, but one that is not impossible to achieve.

The gift of the canoe, Alingano Maisu, by the Polynesian community to the teacher Mau Piailug and the bestowing of two titles upon five Polynesian navigators (Chad Baybayan, Shorty Bertelman, Nainoa Thompson, Chad Paishon, and Bruce Blankenfeld) exemplified the value of giving, which is the underlying factor in the entire endeavor. Two is an esteemed level in the hierarchy of navigation. The title comes with the huge responsibilities of "service and being the light" to one's community, and they are not to

be taken lightly. Piailug's legacy began with giving the gift of wayfinding navigation to Hawaiians to guide them in their search for freedom and identity. But behind this unselfish act was a deeper dream that one day his children in Micronesia would discover a fierce need to possess this knowledge. The seed was planted and has grown into a wonderful reality. It's up to the children in Micronesia to learn it, become part of it, and perpetuate the legacy. The message, "One Ocean, One People," epitomizes this precious gift that we experienced in the 2007 voyage. The 2007 voyage was an expedition of dreams and hope for a better world for our children. As expertly demonstrated and revealed through the daring deeds of these navigators, the ocean is not a barrier, but a bridge that connects us all together. Even though we come from diverse cultures, we are united as one by the ocean that our ancestors sailed before us, and that we are sailing today.



Photo by Liane Sting

Paulina Yourupi, former Intern, PREL, may be contacted at yourupi@hawaii.edu.

