



Traditional waka helps dispel myths

Te Aurere is a traditional waka hourua (voyaging canoe) built in 1991/92 in Northland from two giant kauri trees by Hekenukumai Ngaiwi Puhipi Busby. In the past decade she has sailed from Aotearoa to Hawai'i, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Norfolk Island. She has also circumnavigated Te Ika a Maui (the North Island of Aotearoa) three times. *Te Aurere* is navigated by traditional wayfinding, using knowledge of the sun, moon, stars, wave patterns, wind, clouds, and birds.

European recognition of the prowess of Polynesian navigators dates back to James Cook who, after learning some Tahitian, investigated sailing and navigation in Tahiti. His main source was Tupa'ia, a learned Tahitian who told Cook how they sailed their canoes and navigated using the stars, moon and sun. He also gave him sailing directions to islands as far away as the Marquesas to the northwest, the Australs to the South and at least as far west as Samoa, Fiji and Rotuma. Cook was apparently sufficiently impressed with the practical seamanship and navigational skills of the Tahitians and their wide geographical knowledge, to propose that their ancestors originally came from the East Indies where related languages were spoken, and that they used their sailing canoes, non-instrument navigation, and skill at using westerly wind shifts to work their way eastward, from island to island, against the direction of the prevailing trade winds.

Over the years a number of challenges have been made to this theory, particularly in terms of how deliberate the process of colonisation was. These perhaps reached their most strident in 1957 when Andrew Sharp, a New Zealand civil servant turned historian, published *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific*, in which he claimed that Polynesia had been settled over a long period by the survivors of maritime accidents.

Te Aurere is part of a Pacific-wide movement which is redressing this patronising view. The first step in this process was the voyage of the Hawai'an double-hulled canoe *Hokule'a* from Hawai'i to Tahiti and back in 1976. With this sailing the Polynesian Voyaging Society showed that the two-way voyages celebrated in Hawaiian oral traditions could be made in a replica of an ancient voyaging canoe without using instruments. *Hokule'a* was navigated on this voyage by Mau Piailug from the Caroline Island of Satawal in Micronesia, considered to be the greatest exponent of traditional navigation still living.

On the return leg from Tahiti was Nainoa Thompson who has gone on with Mau to lead a renaissance in waka voyaging. Over the next four years, through spending many thousands of hours studying the night sky as well as months of intensive tutelage by Mau Piailug, Nainoa developed a workable system of navigation based upon traditional methods but incorporating some unique (but non-instrument) methods of observing the stars he had worked out for himself.

Nainoa has since trained navigators from around the Pacific including Jack Thatcher and Piripi Evans of *Te Aurere*. Jack and Piripi, working with the captain of *Te Aurere*, Stanley Conrad, now conduct regular wananga for people who wish to learn the ancient arts of wayfinding and waka sailing.

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TE AURERE - TEN YEARS SAILING THE PACIFIC