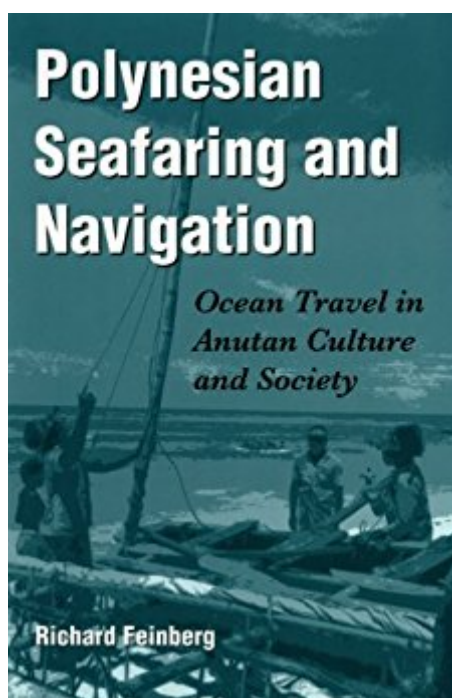


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Polynesian Seafaring And Navigation: Ocean Travel In Anutan Culture And Society



Synopsis

Without seafaring canoes, deep-sea sailing skills, and the ability to navigate by naked-eye observations of the stars and sea and bird life, there would have been no Polynesian people as we know them today. These islanders are as much a creation of their voyaging technology as they were creators of it. Had they and their ancestors not developed this technology and associated sailing and navigational skills, the ancestral Polynesians could never have ventured out into the middle of the Pacific to find and settle so many islands and thereby develop into a sizable and culturally distinct people. There are a few out-of-the-way Polynesian islands where some facets of the old maritime tradition apparently survive today. One such island is Anuta, a tiny volcanic island which, though located within the Solomon Islands of Melanesia, is populated by Polynesians. Because of the small size of the island, its remoteness, and its lack of commercially viable resources, Anutans there still live close to the traditional pattern of their ancestors. They make and sail their canoes in more or less the same way that their ancestors did, and the sea so pervades their lives that much can be learned of the way Polynesians have adapted to their oceanic environment by looking at how Anutans interact with the sea. from the Foreword by Ben Finney, Professor of Anthropology, University of Hawaii. After fourteen months of field research in 1972-73 and an additional four months of field work with Anutans in the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara in 1983, Richard Feinberg here provides a thorough study of Anutan seafaring and navigation. In doing so, he gives rare insights into the larger picture of how Polynesians have adapted to the sea. This richly illustrated book explores the theory and technique used by Anutans in construction, use, and handling of their craft; the navigational skills still employed in interisland voyaging; and their culturally patterned attitudes toward the ocean and travel on the high seas. Further, the discussion is set within the context of social relations, values, and the Anutans' own symbolic definitions of the world in which they live.

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Customer Reviews

A comprehensive, first hand account of Anutan (Polynesian) culture and seafaring. Enjoyable and personable reading, very useful for an overview of the practical skills involved.

One of the founders of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, Ben Finney, says in the foreword to this book that Pacific islanders "are as much a creation of their voyaging technology as they were creators of it." If so, the virtual extinction of that technology a hundred years ago was a cultural catastrophe for the Polynesians. (Micronesian skills were better preserved.) Any survivals of the great tradition are exceptionally valuable. Thus Anuta, a Polynesian "outlier" island in the mostly Melanesian eastern Solomons archipelago, comes to the fore. Anuta is not part of the great voyaging tradition -- not for 10 or more generations anyway -- but its insignificance helped preserve its traditions. Richard Feinberg, an anthropologist at Kent State University, did his dissertation research on Anuta in 1972. In those days, before Hokulea and the PVS, the unimpressive Anutan fleet did not seem to merit special attention. But Feinberg liked boats and kept good notes. In the late '80s he returned to Guadalcanal (the easiest place to find Anutans) and improved his knowledge, so that in "Polynesian Seafaring and Navigation" we have a rare comprehensive report of prehistoric techniques based on both foreign observation and explanations from living experts. Even Anuta, which is roughly 500 miles from anywhere, was changing rapidly by the late '80s. "The exceptional skill and knowledge (of the best living Anutan navigators) may never be recaptured in the coming generations," wrote Feinberg then. Depending upon whether you consider a glass to be half full or half empty, this book will seem depressing or heartening. Anutan canoes are not large, they make only short voyages and few of those. On the other hand, their techniques are a smaller, if not quite exact, replica of those used by the great interisland voyagers; their

craftsmanship is very fine, and their memories are long. Anuta is a tiny island, only half a mile across, and one reason Anutans don't make great voyages is that they don't produce many first-rate navigators. It may be true that on the steppes every boy becomes an expert horseman, but a canoe made from a hollowed-out tree is a much more demanding steed. Every Anutan man is a good boatman, but it appears that a really self-confident Anutan navigator comes along less than once in a generation. The ocean has many swells. While the chief and perhaps one other Anutan can steer just by the feel of the waves slapping the hull, other men admitted to Feinberg that they could not even distinguish the different swells. (The navigator of Hokulea, Nainoa Thompson, had the same experience. His teacher, Mau Piailug, worked with five swells; Thompson never learned to use more than three. See also my review of Will Kyselka, "An Ocean in Mind.") Oil may be under the sea around Anuta, and if it is, Feinberg believes, Anutan society in its authentic form is doomed. Already the islanders have switched from sennit to monofilament fishing line to lash their canoes. Still, their attitude remains steadfastly Polynesian, Anutan and premodern. : When a canoe is destroyed, it gets a human funeral.

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