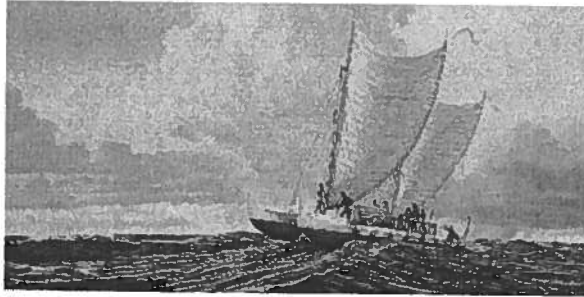


HAWAIIAN VOYAGING TRADITIONS

Founding the Polynesian Voyaging Society; Building and Naming Hōkūle'a

Herb Kawainui Kāne, from *Voyagers* (Honolulu, Whalesong: 1991)



Was Polynesian exploration and settlement intentional, involving planned voyages? Or, accidental as the result of storm-wrecked canoes drifting off course or on one-way voyages of exile?

There was no one alive who could answer the questions. For long years scholars had argued whether Polynesian navigators had the ability and the vessels to master the vast Pacific.

The two views overlap insofar as all discoveries are fortuitous, but they differ radically in their estimates of the accuracy of Polynesian navigation and their assessment of the seaworthiness and windward performance of Polynesian canoes.

The argument heated up in the 1950s and 1960s. The "intentional voyages" proponents were accused of being too romantic about Polynesian maritime capabilities, too quick to accept the voyaging legends; and the "accidental drift" theorists were accused of being overly eurocentric, unable to accept the idea that anyone except Europeans could accomplish great feats of exploration, and those only in vessels that fell within the modern definition of 'seaworthy.'

The "accidental drift" theory was shot down by computer simulations of wind patterns and ocean currents which concluded that a drifting canoe had no chance of reaching Hawai'i, Easter Island, and New Zealand from other parts of Polynesia or Micronesia.

The route between Tahiti and Hawaii passes through three ocean currents and requires sailing slightly against the wind both ways. Could the ancient voyaging canoes perform well enough to windward to make round trips? Hōkūle'a's 1976 round trip voyage proved that they could. And the navigation experiments conducted in 1976 and in subsequent voyages have proved the adequacy of Polynesian navigation.]

I knew now how the old canoes had been built. What if we actually built a full size replica of a canoe incorporating the functional design features most widely distributed throughout Polynesia? Putting such a canoe to an actual test would test as well the accounts of Polynesian navigation. An actual sailing would provide data that might settle this long dispute. Even more intriguing to me was the thought that recreating the central object of the ancient culture and taking it to sea might stimulate the growing interest in a cultural revival.

The idea attracted others. We incorporated as the Polynesian Voyaging Society and recruited members. I drew a preliminary plan for such a canoe, then made a painting. Feeling altogether foolish, I found myself flashing the painting around Honolulu, asking for money. Hundreds of volunteers came forward to contribute time, talent, and substance, and the canoe got built.

We launched it in 1975. Others looked to me with the question – "You got us into this. Now actual sailing could provide data that might how do we sail this sixty foot vessel with weird looking sails and no rudder?" Using what I had learned from sailing catamarans, I found myself as the training skipper. It was not easy. On shakedown cruises throughout the Hawaiian Islands, we were literally relearning the past.

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Hawaiian Canoe-Building Traditions (1995, online at Ulukou)

It was a wonderfully satisfying experience, but not without nerve-wracking moments. Sailing with green hands in an unforgiving vessel was a constant reminder of my old mentor's admonition about sailboats.

Navigated without charts or instruments, this replica of an ancient Eastern Polynesian voyaging canoe made two 5,500 mile round trips between Hawai'i and Tahiti in 1976 and 1980. Another very successful voyage in 1985-87 took it from Hawai'i to Tahiti, Mo'orea, Huahine, Ra'iatea, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa, then back to Hawai'i by way of the Cook Islands and Tahiti—a round trip of 16,000 miles between the northern and southern points of the Polynesian triangle.

We named the canoe Hōkūle'a ("star of gladness"), the Hawaiian name for Arcturus, a star which appears to pass directly overhead on the latitude of Hawai'i, and was thereby useful as a navigation star for the ancient voyagers. At every port of call Hōkūle'a was warmly received by Polynesians as the symbol of their mutuality, and a reminder of the resourcefulness, inventiveness, and courage of their ancestors.

Naming Hōkūle'a

This happened when the parts of the canoe were close to being completed. One day when I visited the building site, a large shed at Young Bros., one of the guys had chalked 'Da Boat' on the side of one of the hulls. When I asked the reason for the graffiti, they said it was to remind me that it was time to come up with a name.

According to Kenneth Emory, in the old days a name would come to a canoe designer in a dream. Be that as it may, we tossed the question around at the board meeting a few days later. Several names were suggested, mostly compound names, each including several words; none seemed to be what everyone was looking for. Several weeks went by.

One exceptionally clear night I stayed up quite late, star chart in hand, locating and memorizing stars and their relative positions. I think I turned in around midnight. Some time later, I dreamed of stars. My attention was attracted to Arcturus, our Hōkūle'a. It appeared to grow larger and brighter, so brilliant that I awoke.

It's been a habit for many years to keep a pad and pen on my nightstand. When the body is at rest, the mind half-awake, thoughts range about freely, and ideas form which I've found are sometimes worth noting down. Some painting ideas have come to me that way. I turned on my reading light and wrote 'Hōkūle'a.'

The next morning, I saw the notation, and immediately recognized it as a fitting name for the canoe. As a zenith star for Hawai'i it would be a star of gladness if it led to landfall. I phoned Paige Kawelo Barber; she thought it appropriate. I tried it on a few others and got a positive response. The name was proposed at the next board meeting and adopted." (e-mail from Herb, 2/20/99).

[Note 4 in *Voyagers*: On a clear night early in 1975 I spent several hours studying the stars. After retiring, I dreamed of stars. Arcturus suddenly grew brighter, until its intensity forced me awake. Before I went back to sleep I scribbled 'Hōkūle'a' (Hawaiian for Arcturus) on the notepad on my nightstand. Noticing the note in the morning, it struck me that this would be an appropriate name for the canoe. The name was proposed and received unanimous approval.

Suppose you are sailing north from Tahiti, seeking Hawai'i without radio or navigation instruments. You will notice that as Arcturus arches from east to west in the night sky the top of its arch, its zenith, becomes higher as you sail northward. You prudently sail somewhat to windward to compensate for the leeward drift of your vessel, and to gain sufficient 'easting' to arrive at Hawai'i's latitude upwind of your destination. When Arcturus passes directly overhead,

Which is probably why some ancient navigator named that star Hōkūle'a - "star of gladness."]

(For a more detailed on how Hōkūle'a was designed, see Kane's "In Search of the Ancient Polynesian Voyaging Canoe.")