HONOIUIU

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA

Nainoa Thompson is the first Hawaiian in centuries to navigate a canoe the way his ancestors did

By Victor Lipman

Some people—entertainers and politicians come to mind—pursue publicity. Other people actively avoid it. Howard Hughes was an extreme example, or Charles Lindbergh. They are not common. But once in a while you come across an individual who has accomplished something of note, and is therefore newsworthy, who wants nothing better than to go his own way and be left alone. Nainoa Thompson, who navigated Hokule'a to and from Tahiti earlier this year, belongs in this second category.

The 1976 Hokule'a voyage demonstrated that transoceanic crossings, using an ancient Polynesian-style vessel, were indeed possible. On that voyage, the man who navigated Hokule'a, using only the stars, the sun, the waves and whatever other natural signs he could make sense of, was hand-picked by the Polynesian Voyaging Society. He was Mau Piailug from the tiny Micronesian island of Satawal, a master navigator famed among a small group of people intensely interested in non-instrument navigation but unknown to the general public, a practitioner of a dying art.

Centuries ago, before the invention of sextant or compass, radar or loran, or any of the sophisticated devices that enable a sailor to fix his position at sea with pinpoint precision, navigation was a matter of

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reading the sky, watching and feeling the waves and knowing where you were going. Over the years, technological advances made non-instrument navigators largely obsolete. Although a few still ply their trade in out-of-the-way places, like Mau in Satawal, the consensus among Polynesian Voyaging Society members is that there are probably only a handful of first-rate non-instrument navigators left in the world.

The ways non-instrument navigators make their calculations have never been thoroughly documented. The main purpose of this year's Hokule'a voyage was to focus on the navigation, to record on tape the navigator's detailed observations and later to sift through the mass of information and shape it into a coherent body of knowledge capable of being passed along. In short, if the first Hokule'a voyage proved ancient transoceanic crossings could be done, this voyage would help illuminate how they were done.

This spring, day-by-day accounts on radio, television and in newspapers monitored *Hokule'a*'s progress.

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And slowly, surely, predictably, the 60-foot canoe traveled safely to and from Tahiti. But this time the navigation was *not* being done by Mau; for the first time in centuries it was being done by a Hawaiian, by a person who had not grown up on a remote island and been schooled in the ways of the sea from the age of 6 by a father who was also a navigator, as Mau had been. Instead it was being done by a 27-year-old from Honolulu, the son of a Bishop Estate Trustee, a graduate of Punahou.

Por roughly three years, to prepare himself for the voyage, Nainoa Thompson met with 59-year-old Will Kyselka, a professor and astronomy lecturer, in the Bishop Museum planetarium. They met usually once or twice a week for an hour or two; together they spent hundreds of hours studying the stars, cramming notebooks full of information, and trying to compress into a few years the kind of knowledge Mau had accumulated almost instinctively from the age of 6.

"How did I come to instruct Nainoa? I shy away from the word 'instruct,'" says Kyselka, "because we were both learning. Let's put it this way: We were learning the sky. We were learning what happens in terms of rising and setting positions of stars along the horizon as you change latitudes—the angle changes, the spacing changes, all kinds of changes. We were learning how to determine latitude in many different ways."

Nainoa's background consisted of one college-level astronomy course and numerous nights of looking at the sky as a crew member when Hokule'a returned from Tahiti in 1976. "The initial thing," says Kyselka, "one reason why Nainoa got interested in this, and this I think is important, is that on the '76 voyage he saw two stars setting simultaneously in Tahiti-I think they were Sirius and Pollux. And his feeling was, well, what's going to happen when we change latitude? How can we use those? So the simultaneous rising and setting of stars, as far as I know, is something he worked out himself. Now Micronesian navigators sail pretty much east and west, so there's very little change in latitude. But when you make a 40-degree change in latitude [Hawaii to Tahiti], these simultaneous risings and settings become extremely important.

We probably wouldn't have discovered this without his initial wondering, and our working it out in the planetarium."

During the nights spent learning the sky together, Kyselka came to know Nainoa quite well. I asked Kyselka if, during those planetarium sessions, Nainoa ever seemed aware he was doing something unusual. His description of Nainoa was one I would hear more than once in weeks ahead. "I'm sure he was, he couldn't help it, but as far as any outward manifestation of it—no. Mostly the outward manifestation was that he was worried and that it was a big responsibility, and that he wasn't as prepared as he would like to be.

"Were the planetarium times fun? Oh, I think Nainoa would agree to that. But he has a great seriousness—he has a good sense of humor, he and Mau laugh a good deal—but he's intent, and that intensity often makes him seem very serious."

"He's pretty low-key in general," was the way Polynesian Voyaging Society member Dixon Stroup described him. "He doesn't jump up and down and wave his arms much, as you'll discover."

A lthough the 1976 voyage was considered an overall success, it was by no means problem-free. Crew conflicts and racial tensions plagued the trip down to Tahiti, culminating in the punching-out of UH professor and crew member Ben Finney. Mau was so upset by dissension among what he considered an undisciplined crew that he left the voyage in Tahiti and returned to Satawal. Navigation instruments were used on the trip home.

Due perhaps to a more careful crew selection process and the firm captaining of Gordon Pi'ianai'a, this year's voyage went more smoothly. What problems there were, particularly as they pertained to Nainoa, seemed of a much subtler nature.

Several months before the voyage, Mau was flown to Honolulu. Often in the pre-dawn hours, he, Nainoa and Will Kyselka would go out to the ocean, look at the sky, and observe the swell patterns. "Oftentimes Mau would say nothing," Kyselka recalls. "At first Nainoa was confused with that. Here they'd look, and Mau would say nothing. It isn't a didactic kind of teaching." Mau's native language is Satawalese; since he speaks only broken English, com-

"... Had he wanted to, he could have been a star. Hokule'a was big news, and Nainoa was at the heart of it..."

munication was difficult. But in his quiet way the master navigator worked with Nainoa, sharing with him what Kyselka jokingly calls "the teachings of Mau."

On the actual voyage, however, the agreement was that the navigation would be left totally to Nainoa, with Mau along as adviser, or in case of emergency. And for Mau, the experience of sitting passively on the open ocean and watching someone else make all the navigational decisions took some getting used to. "Frankly," recalls Steve Somsen, who worked closely with Nainoa on the voyage, documenting his observations on tape, "the relationship was a little strained at the beginning. It was hard for Mau to let go of being the navigator and allow Nainoa to really do the job. Indeed, in the first week Mau even broke some of the rules. I mean, I don't know if it's fair to sav that because he didn't let Nainoa know where we were at any time, but, oh, he suggested changes in the trim of the sails or ordered some of the sails to come down at a time when the wind was especially strong, at a time when Nainoa would not have chosen to do it himself.

"The first week Nainoa went along with it, because he has so much respect for Mau. But it bothered him, and he expressed this to me privately. He said, 'Hey, I hope we work this out because at some point I want to assert myself'—and what happened is Mau just backed off." At the start of the voyage, Mau was awake constantly, vigilant. After several days, sensing the navigation was in competent hands, he began to get some sleep.

Somsen on Nainoa: "He came on at first like, oh wow, I don't know if I can do this, I'm still learning. In fact, when we arrived in Tahiti he was widely quoted as saying that—'We're still learning.' And of course it's a humble response and a good one. But I felt he really knew his stuff. He'd studied long and hard, and it just seemed every day he made these consistent reports that kept putting us closer to Tahiti, in the right direction.

"He didn't allow much time for levity. I'd even say he became a little strict with the crew, in that he had very high expectations in terms of steering. Because a navigator has to know not only where you are, but in what direction you're going, and

NOTES ON NON-INSTRUMENT NAVIGATION

Non-instrument navigators rarely sleep. Since it is easy to sail off-course, the job requires near-constant concentration. According to Steve Somsen, Nainoa generally slept only two or three hours a day during the voyage, usually in 10-minute catnaps.

Non-instrument navigation is an intricate business. To give a reader a (vastly oversimplified) idea of the kind of observations involved, Somsen explains: "Nainoa uses what he calls a pair-ofstars system. He'll observe one star above the other when the pair of stars is either directly south or directly north, and he observes the height of one of those two stars above the horizon. Now he knows, for instance, how high one of those stars should be above the horizon in the latitude of the Hawaiian Islands, or what the height of those stars should be in Tahiti. And if the height is different from that, he knows he's displaced from that location and makes a determination that way. It's just that he's not using measurement, but judging how it should appear.'

Thinking over this last statement, Somsen reconsiders. "I shouldn't say that he doesn't measure. I shouldn't even imply that. He does. He just doesn't use instruments.

"He might use his outstretched hand, or a portion of his hand, or a couple of fingers, to determine the height of a star above the horizon."

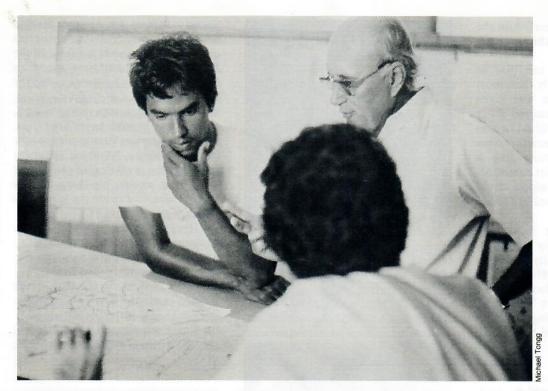
Nainoa has one navigational system and Mau has another. The conclusion of nearly everyone I talked to was that Mau's system is "bloody impossible" to understand, because of the language barrier and the casualness of his observations. In addition to stars, Mau relies frequently on waves; his years of experience at sea enable him to detect subtle differences in swell patterns that leave Nainoa

puzzled.

The difference between Mau's system and Nainoa's? Will Kyselka put it this way: "I think it's the difference between metaphor and measurement. Mau sees the totality of the sky and sea, he uses a few stars, a few birds, he has a very beautiful, a very simple system that works for him. And in sailing among the islands there in Satawal, that's apparently how they do it. They have poetic names for how to get to certain islands, like 'The Long-Handled Breadfruit Picker,' that kind of passage is that way, or 'The Place Where the Three Birds Are Flying In.' Well, maybe that was happening when the first navigator went by, and since then three birds aren't there every time, but somehow people know and they understand, and those are some of the imponderables in that system. The system Nainoa has is based on good scientific evidence. We can document that at the planetarium."

University of Hawaii oceanography professor Dixon Stroup concludes, "It's a system that comes partly from Mau, but a surprising amount of it came out of Nainoa's own head. He discovered ways to use the stars that I've never seen written down anywhere. I think there's going to be widespread interest, not just locally, but all over the world."

Steve Somsen's documenting of Nainoa's observations produced roughly 45 hours of tapes. The task now facing the Polynesian Voyaging Society is to digest this mass of raw data and present it in a clear and understandable form. An eventual practical application might be to write a non-instrument navigation "textbook" to be placed in lifeboats, for example, so that people who had met with accidents at sea, or people on boats whose electronic equipment had failed, would still be able to navigate.



Nainoa with meteorologists before the trip to Tahiti: Studying and planning for more than three years.

With his grandmother, Clorinda Lucas: "Ever since he was a little fellow, he's gone off by himself."

After the voyage: No desire to be probed publicly.





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that's determined by the person steering. If the person who's steering is kind of lackadaisical, and you're going every which way, it makes it hard. When the steering wasn't good, Nainoa got as close as he came to being depressed. I think he held back a little bit, but toward the end of the trip we'd have a group meeting with all of the crew and he'd say—and he was very tactful—you know, the navigation experiment was very important, and one of the important things was the steering, and he expected everybody to do a really

good job."

Toward the end of the voyage, Somsen did an interview with Mau and asked him for a report card on Nainoa's performance. His answer: "Nainoa real good. He no need me anymore."

But back in Honolulu, there was a get-together one night at the Thompsons'. There was plenty of liquor, and as the night progressed, Mau went around and spoke to each member of the Thompson family, saying, "You are my brother," "You are my sister," and hugging each one, imparting his

blessing on the whole event. Last he turned to Nainoa. "You are number one in Hawaii," he said, "but you still have a lot to learn. Come to Satawal and I'll teach you."

When Nainoa was about 8, he took a battery of IQ and personality tests. The findings were surprising. On some tests his scores were the highest the evaluating psychologist had ever seen. "Her estimate of his ability," recalls Nainoa's father, Bishop Estate Trustee Myron "Pinky" Thompson, "was that he far

exceeded the superior level. And she couldn't score him, she actually couldn't.

"But we also found out that he learned a little differently than most students, and therefore was given difficulty in school. He learned better if he dealt with an individual he was very fond of and respected, rather than in a group setting like a classroom." A psychiatrist commented that, if tutored, Nainoa could graduate from high school by the age of 12.

In retrospect, these early test results seem remarkably prescient. Nainoa was academically undistinguished at Punahou. "He wasn't a shining student," his father says. "No way. He just got by there." But years later, his personal tutoring with Will Kyselka and Mau would bear excellent results.

The guy has been like this all his life," Pinky Thompson says. "You know, he's always been up front with a performance deal. He's so intense that he prepares himself well for whatever the hell he's gonna do. And when it's accomplished, he backs right back. That's been the pattern. Football, he's done it the same way; canoe paddling, he's done it the same way. He received honors in football and just backed away: when they stood up to get the honors, he was standing at the back of the line.

"A perfect example is when they were coming in with the canoe here. Everybody's being introduced and Nainoa walks up and then he walks right behind the whole crowd. And everybody else is in front. That's it. It's all over."

Although Nainoa's father had occasionally talked with him before the voyage about non-instrument navigation, he had never clearly grasped what it was all about. He admits to being a bit worried as his son guided the canoe across the Pacific "because I really didn't know what the hell he was doing, or how he was doing it."

Near the end of the voyage, he received a phone call from Dixon Stroup of the Polynesian Voyaging





Society. Stroup was excited. He had been monitoring Hokule'a's progress on satellite; the canoe was east of the Big Island and had just made an important turn. The turn headed the canoe squarely in the right direction; had the critical turn been missed, much time would have been lost. Pinky Thompson later recounted the story to Nainoa. "And his comment to me, with a great deal of confidence was, 'That was no big thing. I knew where I was, so I made the turn when it was right to make it.'

"Here, I'll show you," Pinky Thompson said to me, "it's so obvious on the darn satellite picture." And he proceeded to show me the precise point on the map where Nainoa made the correct turn, shaking his head a little, deeply proud of his son in a quiet sort of way, but at the same time perhaps, not quite







From top:

Will Kyselka: "We were both learning."

Mau Piailug: "You are number one in Hawaii.'

Steve Somsen: "It was hard for Mau to let go." Hokule'a on the way to Tahiti: Illuminating how the ancient crossings were done.

understanding what makes him tick.

T ainoa has always felt close to the ocean. "As a teen-ager," his father says, "when he was frustrated for any reason, he went out to the ocean and just swam. For hours. He'd go off Koko Head, for instance. and he'd jump off and just float with the current, wherever the current was going. He was very comfortable in the ocean and found a lot of solace there, I'm sure."

"Ever since he was a little fellow," his grandmother, Clorinda Lucas, remembers, "he's gone off by himself, gone over to Black Point and jumped off the cliff there and gone swimming around, diving in rough water, and at strange times, in the early morning. He's always been like that, he has an affinity for the sea."

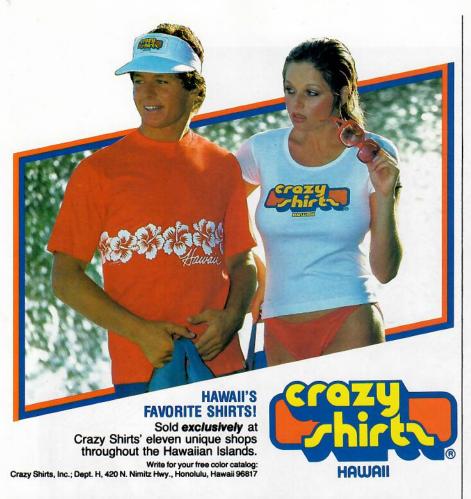
Nainoa often spent time with his

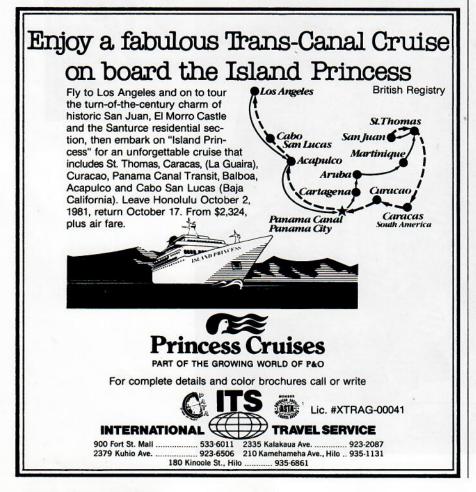
grandmother, asking about the old days and what it was like then. She said she wasn't really surprised by his role in Hokule'a, though she was of course pleased by his success, and she thanked me for my interest in him. "Oh he's a very interesting person," she added, "but a very shy one, a hard person to get to talk with."

H ad he wanted to, he could have been a star. Hokule'a was big news, and Nainoa was at the heart of it. He was the first Hawaiian in centuries to navigate a canoe the way his ancestors had—it was a pure and uncontroversial accomplishment no one could dislike, no one could take issue with. As soon as the voyage was over, Nainoa was asked to appear on television and radio shows, to sit for newspaper interviews. The Polyne-Continued on page 126

> "... After several days, sensing the navigation was in competent hands. Mau began to get some sleep"







Nainoa

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sian Voyaging Society, always anxious for publicity, was eager to oblige. Nainoa was not.

Nainoa went back to his quiet life as a fisherman, living by himself, without a telephone, in a modest cottage near the ocean in Kuliouou. Will Kyselka became his link with the media. A pattern emerged: Kyselka would commit Nainoa to an interview at a certain time, and a day or so before the interview would take place, Nainoa would tell Kyselka that he really didn't want to do it. Reluctantly, Kyselka would find a replacement. "Nainoa goes a lot by his feelings," Kyselka would explain, "and he would say it just doesn't feel right."

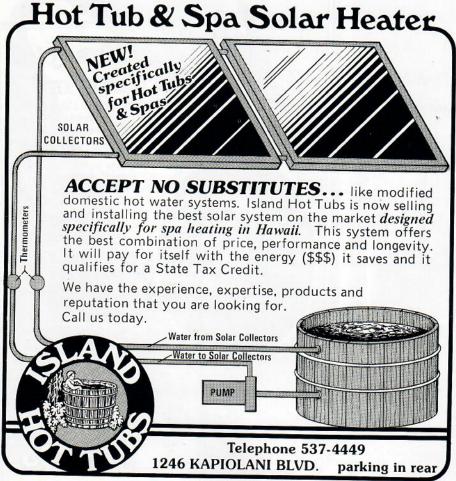
In early August I called Kyselka and explained my interest in doing an article. Could he produce Nainoa? He thought so. He wasn't sure. Negotiations dragged on for nearly a month, during which time I spoke with other people involved in the journey, other people who knew Nainoa. Finally, in early September, a meeting was arranged.

I arrived at Nainoa's house at 8 one morning. He greeted me at the door: he was polite, but quiet. His hair was wet. His place was simple, functional: a guitar in one corner, a mattress on the floor, sparingly decorated. We sat on the floor and talked; I ran a tape recorder. Kyselka was there too. We talked for about an hour; Nainoa didn't contradict anything that I believed to be true about the voyage. He answered my questions carefully, but seldom volunteered information, and by the end of the interview it was apparent that he wished he hadn't done it. He had consented to be interviewed because his friend Will Kyselka had prodded him into it, or because he hadn't wanted to say no to someone who had spent a lot of time trying to reach him. But it was clear to me that, for whatever his reasons. the voyage had been a deeply per-

Coming in

THE NORTH SHORE THEN AND NOW





sonal experience about which, at least for now, he had no desire to be probed publicly.

The next day Kyselka phoned me at my office. Could he and Nainoa come in? The moment I heard Kyselka's voice I knew what the call was about. They arrived. Nainoa asked, would it be OK if I didn't use the interview in the article? He was at pains to explain it was nothing personal and I was at pains to explain I hadn't meant to harass him. My guess is we all felt awkward and all did a reasonable job concealing it. In the end I said OK, I wouldn't use the interview, Kyselka drank a cup of black coffee, and that, I thought, was that.

The evening before land was sighted in Tahiti, the crew noticed birds flying toward the sunset. The next morning they saw similar birds flying in the opposite direction. These were good signs—the birds were probably flying out to feed in the open ocean during the day, and heading back to land at night. Later, Nainoa climbed the mast to confirm the sighting of land and there followed much whooping and hollering and embracing, plus the eating of macadamia nuts saved specially for the occasion, a general celebration.

The trip home was far different. Nainoa had wanted landfall to be Mauna Kea, Hawaii's highest peak. On June 4, as the sun was about to set, Nainoa walked quietly to the front of the canoe. A huge glare shone on the water. As the sun sank toward the ocean, it was eclipsed for an instant by a green flash that was Mauna Kea. Most of the crew was at the other end of the canoe, busy preparing dinner.

For more than three years nearly all of Nainoa's studying and planning had been building toward this moment, and several weeks after our aborted interview Nainoa surprised me by dropping off at my office a letter describing it. This is what he wrote:

"There was a sense of happiness as I heard the crew's cheers and a sense of sadness as silence set in. Next to set was Venus, it took about an hour to touch Mauna Kea. After that it was time to sleep for there was nothing else to do, almost a feeling of emptiness. But before I slept I went to check on Mau. He was already asleep, something unusual for him at that time of night."



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