and the global significance of the Pacific Islands.

LIN POYER
University of Louisville

* * *


In 1983 Stephen Thomas, a young American yachtsman, made a pilgrimage to Satawal Island in the central Caroline Islands to learn the art of traditional navigation from “Mau” Piailug, the “last navigator” of the title of this book. This is primarily a personal account in which Thomas tells why he chose Satawal and Piailug, how he finally meets Piailug on the island of Yap, convinces him of the sincerity of his quest, and becomes accepted as his pupil, and then, how once on Satawal he learns navigation and associated lore from Piailug and others both on land and at sea during interisland voyages in Piailug’s canoe.

Thomas’ style is much more John McPhee and the New Yorker than Raymond Firth and the Journal of the Polynesian Society. He focuses more on telling the tale of his quest in personal terms, than on a dispassionate rendering of what he found. While some may object that this approach leaves out vital information, immodestly emphasizes Thomas’ own qualifications as a navigator, and entangles the reader with Thomas’ yearning for an ideal father, the result is an enthralling account that reveals insights into the current state of Carolinian navigation heretofore unpublished or sketchily suggested here and there in print and in film.

Thomas’ central character is “Mau” Piailug, well-known already as the navigator of the 1976 voyage of the reconstructed voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a to Tahiti, and for his sharing of traditional Carolinian navigational knowledge with the Hōkūle‘a sailors. While Piailug may not actually be the last traditional navigator left on Satawal, much less in the rest of the Pacific, he has the reputation of being the youngest of the old guard of fully qualified traditional navigators there. He is also a man vitally concerned with the preservation and dissemination of his lore and methods, yet frustrated because few young men on his island evince much interest in such an “old fashioned” way of guiding a vessel. This, plus his ambition to know the outside world, is why Piailug was such a good choice as navigator for Hōkūle‘a in 1976 and as a teacher for Nainoa Thompson, the Hawaiian who is reviving noninstrument navigation in Polynesia. Yet, as Thomas’ narrative repeatedly indicates, Piailug is a much more complicated and ultimately more human figure than many of his admirers suppose. Piailug is a navigator, and not a chief. He rules his canoe at sea and has certain privileges ashore, but should, ideally at least, always defer to the chiefs on matters terrestrial. Yet, because of his work with Hōkūle‘a, the books, articles, and films that have featured him, and the recent award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Hawaii, Piailug has gained a Pacific-wide, if not worldwide reputation, while Satawal’s chiefs are only known
locally. The seeds for conflict are there, and as Thomas reveals in some startling incidents, Piailug has a penchant for independent action on Satawal. This leads Thomas to remark that “It was ironic to me that in a culture in which the desires of one are subjugated to the needs of many, it was this man who longed to preserve the traditional society that could not accommodate nonconformists such as himself” (127).

Following this narrative, Thomas presents ten appendixes in which he briefly lists or diagrams such navigational elements as star courses between islands, the etak system of keeping track of one’s position en route, the star courses to sea creatures arrayed around each island, and sailing directions for commonly made voyages that include how to compensate for current and how to use the etak system when tacking upwind. These contain valuable additions to our knowledge of Carolinian navigation. But the information presented in these appendixes, and other material on navigation presented in the main narrative, could have been more fully developed as a separate monograph or series of journal articles. It would be most useful, and in keeping with his pledge to help pass on this traditional knowledge, for Thomas to spell out in more detail the lore and methods he so succinctly outlines in the appendixes, and to illustrate these abstract presentations with records of his sailing and navigational observations made when sailing with Piailug, and with other relevant observations and informant testimony. Contrary to the impression some readers of the book might have, previous researchers such as Alkire, Gladwin, Goodenough, Lewis, and Riesenber have described the etak system, listed star courses between islands, analyzed lore about sea creatures, and provided other features of the Carolinian navigation system, though mostly in reference to other islands, particularly neighboring Puluwat, the home of rival navigators. It is therefore important for Thomas to point out where his data complement or contradict theirs, and also to highlight what might be his unique contribution to the body of documentation of Carolinian navigation methods. For example, I came away from my reading of Thomas with a better appreciation of how to adjust a course for current drift, and how to use the etak system to tack toward an upwind target, than I have received from other publications.

I don’t think, however, that we should hold our breath for Thomas to take up this challenge of documentation and analysis, as apparently his ambition is to be a popular writer. As such, this effort is a very good “first book,” and, although one may have reservations about his methods and styles, all in all I would say the book gives us new and valuable insights into both the practice and current state of traditional Carolinian navigation, as well as a fascinating glimpse at the personality of one of its leading practitioners.

BEN FINNEY
University of Hawaii at Manoa