

**SEA PEOPLE: THE PUZZLE OF POLYNESIA**  
(CHRISTINA THOMPSON)

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Interest in Polynesia is not much in fashion nowadays, except for using the islands as an exemplar of the claimed, always imminent yet never arriving, effects of global warming. Still, ever since the Spanish accidentally ran into the Marquesas, on the east side of the giant triangle that forms Polynesia, anchored on the southwest by New Zealand, the north by Hawaii, and the southeast by Easter Island, the islands have had an intermittent fascination for Europeans. In part this is the usual fascination with lands far away; in part a specific fascination with Polynesian culture, accomplishments, and, often, origins. It is this last Christina Thompson covers in this narrowly focused, but excellent, book.

The only place in Polynesia that any quantity of mainland Americans go is Hawaii, but there is a lot more to Polynesia. Many years ago, I promised an adventurous friend of mine that if I broke up with my then-girlfriend, I would go to Easter Island with him. But I failed to follow through on my promise, even when I traded up from the girlfriend. Maybe I should go now. On the other hand, I'm not really one for lazy beach vacations, and despite varied geography, it seems that most of island life is lived at a slower pace than I prefer. Not to mention we'd only get the tourist experience—Thompson makes clear in passing that her Maori husband gets a much different reception in the islands than she, whiter than rice, does. For me, I suppose, broader experience of Polynesia is probably going to be confined to YouTube and what stateside tiki bars remain. Of course, Saint Greta Thunberg keeps telling me all the islands are soon going to sink beneath the waves like Atlantis, so if I change my mind, I better hurry up.

I should be clear what this book is not. It is not a description of the varied-yet-linked cultures of Polynesia, except as those relate to the main theme. You will not find here talk of marriage customs or trade practices. Nor is *Sea People* a history of Polynesia itself, again except as related to the main theme. True, given that the major Polynesian accomplishment was arriving at all, most of what is notable about pre-European Polynesian history appears in this book, but it is still not a history book. This might seem limiting, but the book works very well,

helped by Thompson's compelling writing, and by her own detailed knowledge of Polynesia.

What mystifies the modern, and is the frame of this book, is how the Polynesians, with no writing and no metal, could have colonized such a massive area in, for the most part, less than a thousand years. How could they have located, and landed enough people and supplies to adequately colonize, hundreds of scattered islands in a vast expanse of sea? It took Europeans three hundred years to explore the area, with their vastly superior technology, yet when they arrived every inhabitable island was already inhabited (the last, New Zealand, around A.D. 1300). So what tools, what knowledge, did the Polynesians have and use?

Thompson begins with the first written knowledge of Polynesia, from the late sixteenth century, the beginning of the age of European expansion. European discoveries of Polynesian islands were, at first, random, dependent on the winds. But the Europeans had the technical ability, once an island was found, to fix its location and return, and to share that information with others. No surprise, with their insatiable curiosity, the Europeans wanted to know how the Polynesians arrived, and how they knew how to navigate between the islands. They gradually realized that the Polynesians viewed travelling the sea differently, and had certain abilities missing in the European mindset, although it was only much later that such abilities were systematically studied. Yet knowledge was exchanged, such as in a partnership between Captain James Cook and a Tahitian master navigator, Tupaia, who in the 1770s sailed with Cook and with him drew a map of the Society Islands (the island group that includes Tahiti), which Thompson reprints. It is a map from the islander perspective, showing not where the islands were precisely placed in space, but what it would take to reach them.

Thus the islanders regularly travelled over the horizon, using a variety of methods alien to the European mindset (which mostly relied on a "bird's-eye view," as we rely on today for our maps). Chief among those were "star maps," where bearings were set by frequently changing the star toward which one was sailing as stars rose over the horizon during the night. The islanders also observed natural phenomena in a way that mostly escaped Europeans, from the flights of birds to the precise interactions of waves and swell to the colors of clouds. Those were, presumably, the techniques used by Tupaia.

Tupaia, though, had only the vaguest, legendary idea of islands beyond his sailing capacity of a few hundred miles. (How many islands a given islander had actual knowledge of depended on how many islands were near—many in western Polynesia, fewer in eastern Polynesia, and zero in places like Easter Island). Much of *Sea People* revolves around the gradual realization of the Europeans that for longer voyages to unknown lands, the Polynesians, though lacking navigation instruments, were not wholly reliant on merely drifting on the wind and waves.

That Tupaia and his peers used techniques invisible and, to some extent, incomprehensible to Europeans is not really surprising. Such abilities are common to primitive peoples. Wilfred Thesiger, the first European to cross the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia on foot, in *Arabian Sands* noted how the Bedouin of the desert could often come across a camel track and identify the camel and whose it was, even if that person was not known to be anywhere near them. As with medieval Europeans, pre-moderns had to be clever, living closer to the bone than we do. They did not sit around grunting at each other. Nor were they gullible in the way often portrayed today. When James Cook discovered Hawaii in 1778, he got a warm reception, largely because he had come ashore during a particular god's festival, at a place "specifically consecrated" to the god, with certain aspects of his ships echoing the god's accoutrements. But as Thompson notes, the Hawaiians did not mistake Cook for the god—rather, "he was understood to be cloaked in the mantle of the deity's power." That's an excellent way of putting it, and I suspect the usual native way of viewing such things—probably, in fact, the way the Aztecs initially viewed Cortes. The Europeans saw this perfectly well, too—they didn't treat the islanders as stupid and gullible, if they knew what was good for them.

All the Polynesians had detailed oral histories and genealogies, and in the nineteenth century Europeans began to record these in an attempt to understand the history of Polynesia. Some of this was just the usual tendency of Europeans to classify and describe the world; some was the project of individuals who settled in Polynesia, often intermarrying with locals, and were fascinated by their now own family's past. It was around this time the Europeans began to really focus on the origins of the Polynesians, floating various theories, including wacky ones like the islands were the remains of a sunken continent, and sounder ones

like the Polynesians migrated out of Asia. The latter is correct, as it happens—DNA analysis shows that the original Polynesians were ancient inhabitants of what is now Taiwan (and are not related to the peoples of Melanesia, such as those in New Guinea, or to Australian aborigines, who arrived very much earlier to the area, though some of the southwest Polynesians show later mixing with those populations). But for a long time both Europeans and Polynesians pushed the theory that their ancestors had been the “Indo-Aryans” who occupied northern India, which supposedly linked Europeans and Polynesians ethnographically, something both were happy with. Numerous authors tried very hard to find similarities between Indo-European languages and Polynesian ones, but Polynesian is not, in fact, an Indo-European language, and the Polynesians are not “Aryans.” It took until the mid-twentieth century for that to be accepted, in part because other than language, there was little to study. None of the Polynesians ever had writing, and archaeology in the area is mostly an unrewarding activity, since climate conditions don’t favor survival of organic remains.

Leaving aside ultimate origins, how then did the Polynesians, after they arrived in western Polynesia, find distant new lands? The oral histories which described specific voyages to discover and occupy new islands, earlier accepted largely as fact, were mostly discredited. Only in the twentieth century did how the Polynesians spread become a scientific focus. Thompson does a good job describing the unfolding of this history, begun with the discovery of early pottery, a rarity in Polynesia, except in western Polynesia. Pottery revealed the previously-unknown Lapita culture, the mother culture of all Polynesian cultures, which settled Micronesia and far western Polynesia, up to Samoa, roughly between 1500 B.C. and 500 B.C. (and who, DNA tells us, came from Taiwan around 5000 B.C.) DNA studies for Polynesia are in their early stages—as David Reich notes in *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, some areas of the world, including Polynesia, so far have few comparative samples for DNA, but no doubt at least some more precision will be forthcoming about the Polynesians, thereby providing a more detailed picture of the colonization of Polynesia.

But then how did they move beyond Samoa, where they paused for several hundred years? In modern times, this question was of mostly academic interest until the explosion of public interest resulting from

Thor Heyerdahl's 1947 voyage in a giant balsa wood raft, the *Kon-Tiki*. Heyerdahl was trying to prove that Polynesia was settled from South America, by sailing west. He was wrong, and pretty much everyone in the know knew it, even then. (Well, he was probably wrong—nobody has been able to definitively explain how the sweet potato, found only in South America, quickly migrated all over Polynesia in the relatively recent past.) He did prove, though, that long ocean voyages could be made successfully with primitive equipment. And he was a tireless promoter of his ideas, so people became a lot more interested in Polynesia (which had already gotten much more of Americans' mindshare because of the war in the Pacific against Japan). In fact, as a child I remember reading a tattered old copy of Heyerdahl's book *Kon-Tiki* I found in a school library; one of many unfortunate modern losses is that school libraries don't keep such old books around, and if they did, children would be too busy on their screens to read them. Too bad.

In any case, because oral traditions had been rejected by scientists, in the 1950s the idea gained currency that the settlement of Polynesia had been wholly accidental, caused by drift of canoes in storms or by improperly executed navigation that missed close, known island destinations. By this time, Polynesians were, like other primitive cultures around the world, developing a hearty sense of ethnic unity and group rights, and they were offended, seeing their ancestors as no different than Christopher Columbus. As it happens, though, they were at least partially right—computer simulations showed that, given wind and wave patterns, drifting was unlikely to have resulted in most of Polynesia being reached (though it could explain some of the settlement). It was at this time that people revisited the old writings about collaborations such as those between Cook and Tupaia and consulted old men still navigating by hand, and learned about such practices as star maps and wave reading.

We'll never know, of course, how exactly the heroic voyages of Polynesia were accomplished. Yes, modern voyages have been made with primitive ships and tools all across Polynesia. But those mariners know where they are going and they study the stars changing on the voyage ahead of time, in planetariums. Probably, over hundreds of years, enough people chose to set out to sea with some companions, knowing there were more islands, and perhaps relying on oral traditions to assure

themselves of more certainty than they really had. Combine that with what we would think are preternatural skills in finding land (Thompson calls this effectively enlarging the target) and while no doubt some, or many, died, others succeeded, and here we are.

And why did they do it? It's impossible to precisely say, again, but the most logical explanation is the one Thompson seems to gravitate to: young men's love of adventure. Of course, in these days when little boys are never taught adventure stories, but instead are fed emasculating fables and told in school that they need to behave like little girls, this is not fashionable, but it certainly seems the most likely. (Today my young sons told me that snowball fights are forbidden at school. God help us.) This theory is reinforced by Polynesian behavior after European contact, when young Polynesian men were soon found all over the world, serving on ships everywhere in the nineteenth century (they feature in literature from *Moby Dick* to Joseph Conrad's books). Throughout history, young men seeking glory, or departing from a defeat in war or love, or simply bored, have set their eyes over the horizon. For the Polynesians, perhaps, that horizon was just more literal than most, and their young men keener to voyage than most.

Given this cultural drive, what could the Polynesians have accomplished if they were not limited by their surroundings? Hints, perhaps, come through occasionally that the Polynesians were doers limited by their surroundings. The Polynesians did a great deal with what they had, most of all in the area of ship, or rather canoe, building. None of these canoes survive, but European pictures and descriptions make clear how the Polynesians built giant canoes, sometimes from subtly stitched together pieces of wood (necessary where trees were scarce). It seems to me that from what this book describes, given different raw materials, metals especially, the Polynesians might have made great conquerors. Perhaps, given a thousand more years and a lot more land mass in the Pacific, the Europeans would have come across a much more advanced civilization. Yes, nothing like that developed in South or Central America, with plenty of resources (the Incas famously lacked even the wheel) and perhaps it's a stretch, but it would certainly make an interesting alternative history story.

Other aspects of the book also make it a pleasure to read. We get a lot of, but not too much of, fascinating technical detail. For example, I

learned about a “Ghyben-Herzberg lens,” where freshwater is accessible floating above more-dense seawater. This allows someone in the know to find drinking water where none appears to exist. Unsurprisingly, the islanders are very well versed in such things. There are also many fascinating glimpses of Polynesian culture, such as a passing mention of an eighteenth-century queen of Tahiti, who apparently ruled in her own right. Given the patriarchal nature of all primitive societies (after all, it is a myth there has ever been a single matriarchal society in all of human history), this suggests a complexity to Polynesian culture that is worth exploring. (It also fits poorly with that most islanders were very violent and, especially on larger islands, highly organized for war, and their societies were brutal in other ways, including routine forced infanticide.) Given the limitations of our knowledge, no detailed history, political or cultural, could be written of any of the islands, except a fragmentary one of the relatively recent past, so this book is probably all that makes sense to read about Polynesia, unless you have a very specific interest. Still, that doesn’t take away from *Sea People*, which I highly recommend.