



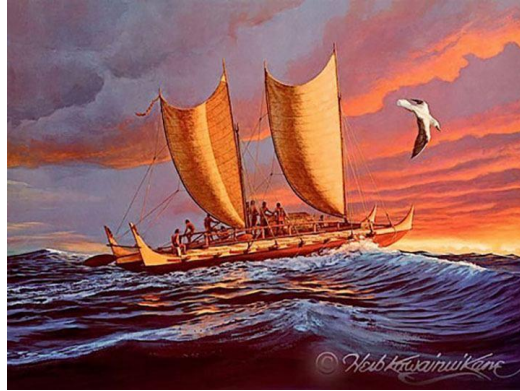
Pacific Islander Heritage and Navigation

(May 2021) - Mau Piailug (1932-2010) from Satawal, in the Caroline Islands (today part of the Federated States of Micronesia) was a skilled navigator in the once-prominent Pacific Island art of traveling by canoe across the ocean without modern instruments. He learned skills passed down by Master Navigators who observed and “read” waves, stars, weather, and marine life to navigate from island to island in the Pacific Ocean long before the use of ships and planes.



Mau Piailug (holding pointer) teaching ([Low, Vineyard Gazette, 2016](#))

In May 2000, the Smithsonian recognized Piailug as “one of the most important influences in the resurgence of cultural pride in the Pacific” ([Krauss, PIR, 2000](#)). [Papa Mau: The Wayfinder](#), tells the story about how he taught a team in Hawai’i who sought to revive their lost traditions. Together they would build a double-hulled Polynesian canoe, the Hokule’a, and in 1976, Mau would lead them as they sailed thousands of miles from Hawai’i to Tahiti, accomplishing a feat few thought possible.



An artist's rendering of the Hokule'a, a Polynesian double-hulled voyaging canoe.
Image: Herb Kane, Bishop Museum, Hawaii

Across the Micronesia region, one can still see different representations of an ancient navigating history. The Marshall Islands have stick chart handicrafts, with wood and shells representing currents and waves. They also tell ancient legends of racing canoes to choose kings. Today, the [Waan Aelōñ in Majel program](#) uses the canoe to revive and teach ancient life-sustaining skills to Marshallese youth.



Stick chart, canoe, and Marshall Islands flag on postal stamp
Image: National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution

In the islands of Palau, traditional wooden storyboards are carved to remember ancient legends. The storyboard below features Yapese navigators who traveled by canoe to Palau to quarry limestone and acquire the stone disks for which the island of Yap is well known. The risky 250-mile journey across the open ocean cost lives leaving stones at the bottom of the ocean until today.



Palau story board with Yapsee navigators.
U.S. Department of the Interior Museum, INTR 02158

Mau Piailug left a legacy in Native Hawai'ian [Master Navigator Nainoa Thompson](#), who traveled around the world in the [Mālama Honua Worldwide Voyage](#) from 2013 to 2019, to share a message of caring for the earth and sustainable living. A community-based organization in Yap called [Wa'agey](#), also inspired by Mau, teaches canoe carving and traditional navigation among other traditional skills.



CHamoru warriors and Spanish explorers on Guam in the 1500's. Image: @GuamPedia

In the Northern Mariana Islands, interest in navigation and sailing is on the rise. In [Navigating Cultures, Seafaring Returns to the CNMI](#), a Northern Marianas Humanities Council video, different groups tell of collaborating with descendants of Mau Piailug and other Carolinian Master Navigators, to revive the once-strong tradition of sailing among the CHamoru who would sail out to meet Western ships when they began arriving in the 1500s. Mau Piailug's dream to perpetuate the Pacific Island heritage of navigating is alive and continues to inspire.

By Tanya Harris Joshua, Deputy Policy Director and Communications Lead, Office of Insular Affairs, May 19, 2021 (Opinions expressed are my own.)