

How naturism denigrated Polynesian canoes

Based on the second of two papers delivered by James Wharram at the Early Man & the Ocean conference held at the Norwegian Maritime Museum & Kontiki Museum, Oslo in September 2010.

In 2008 the Kontiki Museum organized the first Early Man & the Ocean Film Festival & Conference on maritime experimental archaeology. At this first conference my design partner, Hanneke Boon, and I gave a paper on our proposed Lapita Voyage in which we would be following the Lapita migration route into the Pacific on two traditional Pacific double canoes.

I was pleased to report that between Nov 2008 and March 2009 we successfully completed this 4,000 Nm voyage.

In Oct 2009 I should have been giving a presentation about the Lapita Voyage at ISBSA12 in Istanbul; unfortunately, on that day I was being operated on for bowel cancer.

In haste we assembled our ideas, photos and film shot on the voyage onto a DVD which was shown at the ISBSA conference in Turkey; since then it has been through some further editing and it would be shown at this film festival.

It was from our experience of the Lapita Voyage and from other of our earlier experimental voyages that I would try to answer some of the many interesting issues raised by the organizers of this 2010 conference.

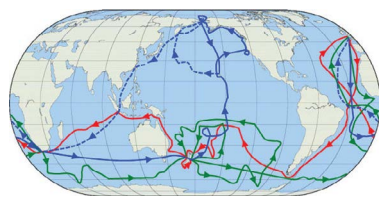
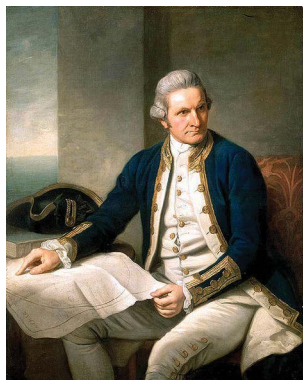
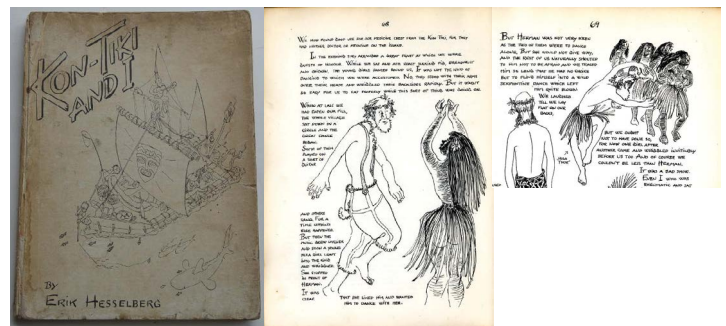
They wrote 'This conference is dedicated to how historical or experimental voyages influenced the society they were a part of, or the society with which they came in contact'.

Following their suggestion, we took the social significance of Captain Cook's voyages in the Pacific as a starting point. This led us on an interesting journey to the Western women's sexual liberation movement of the 20th century and why the Pacific canoe form craft were denigrated in the 19th century by the missionaries and in the 20th century by the New Zealander Andrew Sharp.

Cook and his crew were overwhelmed at finding a happy society where women were in control of their sexuality and bodies. In this society female nakedness was not a sin. When reports about this reached Europe this concept worked like yeast in our Western society.

The French Captain Bougainville, voyaging the Pacific at around the same time as Cook, not only commented on the freedom of women but on having discovered natural man living in a golden age. These ideas fed directly into the ideas of freedom at the time of the French Revolution, into French art, Gauguin and, later, into the green philosophy of present day Westerners. Nearly 200 years later, when Thor Heyerdahl sailed his *Kon-Tiki* voyage across the Pacific, the aspect of sexual freedom in Polynesian society still had a social impact. After the voyage, two of the crew members of the *Kon-Tiki* again drew attention to the freedom of Pacific island women.

Eric Hesselberg, in his book of drawings, *Kon-Tiki & I*, published in 1950, showed bare breasted women taking the initiative in dance.

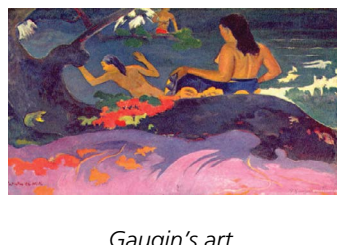


Left: Captain Cook
Above: Captain Cook's voyages.

An important social aspect of Captain Cook's voyages was that he and his crews were Christians. As Christians, their social relationships and moral code were guided by 'the book', ie the *Bible*, including the *Old Testament*.

A prominent moral issue in the *Old Testament* (as well as in the Jewish *Torah* and the Muslim *Koran*) is that a woman's sexuality and sight of her body is in total control of her nearest male relative.

With this moral attitude accepted as the norm, on arrival in Tahiti,



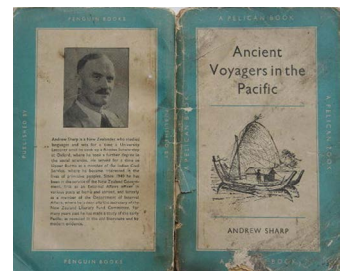
Gauguin's art.

Bengt Danielson's widely read book *Love in the South Seas*, published in 1956, gave impetus to the women's liberation movement of that time. It described attitudes to female freedom, as previously reported by Captain Cook. These women's freedoms are now an accepted part of life for modern Western women.

In 1840 the London Missionary society, concerned over the nakedness and sex habits of the people of the Pacific, went out to the Pacific to convert the natives to Godly ways. They found the canoe culture of the Polynesians was at the centre of the 'ungodly ways'. To destroy the root of the immoral society, they had to denigrate and destroy their boats.

It was through the missionaries that the concept that canoe craft were not seaworthy began.

This attitude to the unseaworthiness of the Pacific canoe form craft was still upheld 100 years later by Andrew Sharp, a retired New Zealand civil servant, who, in the mid 1950s, wrote the book *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific*.



In this book he wrote that the Pacific canoe craft could not sail to windward, waves would wash over the decks and the craft would break up in storm conditions. He also denied there was any evidence they could navigate over long distances. His opinion was that all migrations in the Pacific had been drift voyages.

In the same book he also denigrated the Viking voyages to Iceland and Greenland, claiming they could have been no more than accidental and that the Vinland voyage was a myth.

So influential were the negative writings of Sharp that the book *Polynesian Seafarers* by Edward Dodd, published in 1972, has nine references to Andrew Sharp's theories, which some people were still taking seriously.

In 1979 Ben Finney, in his book *Hokule'a, the Way to Tahiti*, describes how, in the late 1950s, Andrew Sharp's theories spurred him on to try to prove him wrong.

What Dodd and Finney either did not realize or failed to mention is that the theories of Sharp in relation to seagoing canoe craft had already been refuted, before they were even written!

In 1937-39 a Frenchman, Eric de Bisschop, built a 38 ft double canoe