Movement in the Flow of Seafaring’s Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Not Sitting Right

Something wasn’t sitting quite right for me in the initial days of the 2017 “Negotiating Intangible Cultural Heritage” symposium held at the National Ethnology Museum in Osaka, Japan. At first, I thought the problem was something akin to what Bill Murray’s character had undergone in the 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, in which a world-famous American comedian-actor travels to Japan to shoot commercials and appear in pop TV shows. Already unable to sleep from jetlag and growing ever-more discombobulated by the country’s exotic sights and sounds, Murray’s character discovers adventure in the wee hours of the morning, when the story arcs and crescendos into a climax of self-discovery. In the film, the narrative vessel is a touching affair that Murray develops with a young American girl who has herself begun to feel estranged from her husband-photographer, with whom she has accompanied on his job assignment to Japan.

In my own case, however, the cathartic affair that I experienced in relation to initial and unsettled feelings of being lost in cultural translation did not involve an illicit romance, but something pre-emptive of one: bowel blockage, or my body’s rebuttal at over-sitting across thousands of miles and multiple time zones. It was in a much-longed for moment of relief one evening, then, that I experienced an epiphany germane to this conference’s theme. Perched upon one of Japan’s remarkable examples of cultural self-reinvention through ingenious customization of western products -- a high tech toilet with a menu-driven remote control that regulates variables like toilet seat temperature, jet stream force (and patterns), blow dry, and, finally, choice and volume control of ambient acoustics to mask unflattering sonics – I suddenly realized that, as I saw it from where I was positioned as a researcher and a cultural practitioner in traditional seafaring in the Central Carolines, the problem I had been grappling with around the topic of intangible cultural heritage had something to do with unwitting social and political constipations at the level of conceptualization and state-sponsored operationalization practices. In this essay, I only touch on the issue of institutionalized operation, and spend more time trying to ventilate the conceptual culprits that I think might obstruct the necessary movement, so to speak, of relations and practices needed for safeguarding traditional seafaring culture.

The potential for such obstructions is ironic because traditional Micronesian seafaring culture is precisely about flow and movement, especially as these are characterized and effectuated by remarkable tangibility and materiality. As much a guarantor as a marker of the efficacy of seafaring tangi-ability, full-bodied, multi-sensory attention to multiple and shifting environmental and ecological factors and conditions render seafaring practice a highly visceral experience. Understood through indigenous critical analyses of its tangible and embodied technologies of mobility, traditional Micronesian seafaring culture offers a contrast and possible laxative to conceptual assumptions and modern state-sponsored instrumentalization of intangible cultural heritage planning and management despite the latter’s conscious desire for better preservation through more expansive definitions of cultural heritage. The potential problems, originating at the level of conceptualization and statist and bureaucratic approaches to cultural management, can amount to blockages and stoppages in what should otherwise be a smooth flow of information and equitable relations and outcomes. This essay foregrounds seafaring culture’s tangible instrumentalization of marine and other ecological knowledge through highly visceral modes of apprehension and their related social relations in the interest of keeping unimpeded the relations between ICH instrumentalization and the flow of traditional seafaring culture in the Central Carolines.

To begin, I lay a track for this objective by introducing etak/moving islands, a traditional voyaging technique in the Central Carolines that is used for determining position at sea by way of triangulating three islands (or other reference points, like reefs). The remainder of the essay will navigate three metaphorical “islands”: 1) Intangible Cultural Heritage as a target “destination” island, 2) “Knowledge Sharing” as an island of “origin” or departure, and 3) a third “reference island” that can be called “Tangible Indigeneity.”

Etak-ing: Movement with Moving Islands

Traditional navigators from the Central Carolines employ a unique instrument/technology for determining position at sea called etak or moving islands. This system works by triangulating three moving references: the island of destination, the island of departure, and a third reference point off to the side.[[1]](#footnote-1)  In briefest possible terms, etak involves “making” in the direction of the rising (or setting) star or constellation of one’s destination island as seen from the vantage point of the island of departure. This is accomplished by tracking time and speed by which that island of departure recedes from view, and other sensory perceptions, including feel, because keeping time, speed, and location also involves feeling and other sensory perceptions of waves and currents upon the craft, as well as sensing distance and size of wake or water displaced from hulls and outriggers as they cut through the water. Writing about the famous Hawaiian double hull canoe *Hokule’a*, Sam Low (2013, 122) observes that the canoe “invites the crew to dance.” This is how he describes the visceral and embodied learning of how to discern directionality by feeling what the rocking, rolling, pitching and swaying of a canoe can reveal about direction. Infamous is the story of a blind navigator from Kiribati, that in the calmest of seas and the clearest of days – conditions that furnish little signs for deciphering –he reputedly could sense directionality by laying his testicles on the bow of the boat to detect the slightest movement (Lewis 1994, 127). Even factoring in braggadocio, the anecdote illustrates well the point about embodied knowing.

At sea, a navigator is constantly taking stock of multiple, shifting factors, often at the same time. For this, Ken Brower (1983) referred to Carolinian navigators as “computers in loincloths” (128) whose bodily immersion in water also made it nearly impossible to differentiate the line that separates the human body from that of the sea (140). And, I should add, to distinguish the line between indigenous seafaring bodies and sophisticated calculating instruments. This multi-sensoried, fully-embodied attention to equally full-embodied and highly visceral elements of nature upon the remarkable physicality of the outrigger canoe illustrates seafaring’s extreme tangible instrumentality, one that arguably accounts for its efficacy. It also offers a useful counterpoint to two present day truisms: a) the paradigmatic shift to culture’s intangibles as the presumably more superior mode of understanding culture for management and preservation purposes, and b) the idea that traditional voyaging does not employ instruments. I will return later to these points. Let me return to etak.

Attending to dynamic and multivariate information thus, the navigator must also “move” a third reference island from the star or constellation under which it sits when seen from the island of origin/departure, to the stars under which it would be found if one were viewing it from the destination island. In order to move the reference island along that track, the navigator calculates the rate and speed of the canoe as culled from local ecological knowledge in the initial “leg” of the journey. This initial leg proper begins from the moment the canoe departs the home island to the moment it can no longer be seen. It is by what we might now describe as “calcu-sensing” local signs of nature in this first and most important leg or “sea” (as opposed to the vast open ocean -- signs including currents, waves, swells, and winds) that a navigator establishes a benchmark rate, the unit of analyses that will be used to move the two other two reference bodies: forward, towards the canoe, in the case of the target island of destination, and onwards, along its own aforementioned track, in the case of the third reference island. This benchmark rate is also used to divide a voyage between two islands into a set number of legs or segments – again, “seas” – with the number of legs between any two islands being established by convention developed over millennia of travel and observation. In this system, the number of legs that a canoe must travel between any two islands is also the number of legs that each of those islands are said to move incrementally in their own respective tracks. In the logic of this non-Cartesian cartographic time piece of a sensual computation you will notice that, sure as the canoe makes progress accordingly, such a movement is also made possible by tracking the rate at which the three reference islands move about as if the canoe were stationary. Thus the name, “moving islands.” Interestingly, in addition to being mobile, islands can also be made to expand both upwards and outwards, but also be made to contract, even to the point of invisibility (Diaz 2015a). This instrumentalized portability and elasticity of islands in the service of successful and effective voyaging raises important insights into how we might theorize indigeneity in ways that challenge prevailing assumptions about “nativeness” in particular, and the culture concept more generally. In view of how navigators dance the shown body of local ecological conditions into successful voyages of vast distances, we can say that the *depth* of the Indigenous local (indigenous local knowledge, culture, terrain, and identity) and the *reach* of geographic, temporal, and discursive mobility (travel) – or, to put it another way, of roots (depth) and routes (reach) -- are not mutually exclusive (Diaz 2018, 2016a, 2015a, 2015b, and Diaz and Kauanui 2001). For Native people rooted in routedness (Hau’ofa 1994; Teaiwa 1997), deep ties to place and mobility are not only *not incompatible;* they are mutually constitutive and culturally generative.

To avert potential blockages in the operationalization of ICH for stewarding traditional seafaring culture in Micronesia, we might customize etakian triangulation using three moving conceptual and pragmatic figural “islands” (of concerns): 1) a critical look at the managerial conceptualization and instrumentalization of ICH as defined and operationalized by UNESCO; 2) indigenous discourses of sharing seafaring knowledge in the Central Carolines; and 3) tenets from Critical Native Pacific Studies. What follows draws from three decades of work as an indigenous scholar and researcher, cultural practitioner, and advocate of Micronesian seafaring culture.[[2]](#footnote-2)  This work is also deeply personal, for seafaring is also my cultural inheritance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Island One. Target Destination: Intangible Cultural Heritage

The paradigmatic shift to intangibility in national and international efforts to safeguard cultural heritage is driven “partially” by UNESCO instrumentalities specifically intended to expand coverage to aspects of culture that lie beyond “cultural manifestation itself” and pertains to “the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted from one generation to the next,” the transmission of which is also relevant for both developed and developing States, as well as for minority and mainstream social groups within these States (UNESCO Webpage). In this formulation, UNESCO explicitly acknowledges the “social and economic value” of such cultural “wealth” for such actors and communities. For the record I continue to support the safeguarding of traditional seafaring cultural practice in UNESCO ICH Programme.

But I also have lingering anxiety about this new paradigm of cultural stewardship, especially in what might be identified as the interphase between statist bureaucracy and discursive knowledge production involving residual notions of the “culture concept”: how will cultural practitioners fare relative to state and non-state organizational capacity to define and manage the new terms that may turn out to harbor residual “old” ideas of the culture concept? Who (or what) gets to define and manage the terms of something so intangible as “culture,” including seafaring culture’s still overlooked *tangible* forms? How will Micronesian seafaring culture as a relatively autonomous system fare if the terms of definition and management are defined and developed from outside the Micronesian region?[[4]](#footnote-4)

The potential for blockage can be spied in the language that describes the session (Session 1) in which this paper was originally presented. Titled “Re-contextualisation of Heritage and Community,” this session sought to “problematise” the formation of ICH by foregrounding “popular awareness,” querying “(h)ow … people recognize a cultural element as their own. How …they place it at the center of their activities (…) How … they make their peers conscious of their identity.” But of what significance is it that a people might be more or less self-conscious about, or that they self-recognize, a cultural element as indeed their own, that they take pains to convince others of the fact? In classical (modernist) understandings of the “culture concept” that pertains to alterity or radical difference, the matter of “self-consciousness” has played a crucial role in defining difference from presumably modern, more precisely, western, culture. Put in the most simplest terms, *Self*-consciousness has long been seen as an exclusive domain of modernity; its absence then, has been seen as a sign of the authenticity of cultural alterity to the extent that cultural difference is understood as the (modern) Self’s Other. Here, it is the very condition of alterity or difference from modernity that defines the culture concept, whose ‘intangible’ qualities we now focus on. This condition, and anthropology’s self-authority as a science, according to James Clifford (1997), involved “spatial practices” whereby access to the truth of cultural alterity was gotten at through ethnographic travel and collection (fieldwork) at some site necessarily distant from the modern world (or free enough from modern forces of acculturation), as well as a corresponding and necessary return to the geographic and discursive site of modern (scientific) evaluation and assessment (the university, in the metropole) which provides the intellectual materiality with which to “write up” the truth of the culture’s difference. This explains the classic self-conceit in anthropology whereby natives have culture and can be informants into its workings, but it still takes a properly trained anthropologist to theorize the truth of the native’s culture. In classical anthropological theory, cultural truth is about cultural difference through discursive and geographic difference and distance from modernity. In this (modern) system of producing cultural knowledge, self-awareness and recognition through the cogito of Cartesian ontology and epistemology (“I think, therefore I am”) underwrites the western knowing self/subject and serves as the presumptive norm if not the very definition of western civilization. By definition, self-consciousness marks the absence of authentic cultural alterity, of the difference that really makes a difference (from the modern, western Self).[[5]](#footnote-5) Hence, the wording for our session equated “self-consciousness” as something to be “problematised”: “In many societies, especially those where cultural transmission is unconsciously achieved, (the) notion of cultural heritage is not necessarily evident …” To be sure, this sentence can also be read as only warning that there is a risk of overlooking it, in those societies where “culture” is not marked in conspicuous, self-conscious ways. In this way, the passage *does not* take self-consciousness as pre-emptive of the possibility of cultural alterity, as a sign of cultural inauthenticity, but rather sees the absence of self-awareness as inhibiting or blocking the possibility of the recognition and thus the safeguarding of cultural difference. Yet, state-sponsored forms of recognition can also be the new forms of hegemony over indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014; Goeman 2013; Simpson 2007, 2014). In the next section I will turn to the matter of how Polowat navigators “make their peers conscious” of their seafaring tradition through traditional and new forms of “sharing”; for now, I want to acknowledge, not criticize, the importance of paying critical attention to how contemporary “popular awareness” (and even some academic discussion of traditional Pacific seafaring in general) militates against the proper safeguarding of traditional Carolinian seafaring in particular, especially by dint of eliding Carolinian seafaring’s tangible instrumentalization.

The case involves popularized (Glaser 2018) misunderstandings of seafaring as “wayfinding” (and an academic tendency to conflate Polynesia with the entire Pacific)with wayfinding becoming more romanticized if not mystified with increasing popularity and awareness, and that comes at the expense of Carolinian seafaring’s embodied instrumentalities.[[6]](#footnote-6)

According Will Kyselka (1987), the term “wayfinding” was chosen in the mid 1980s by himself and Kanaka Maoli navigator, Nainoa Thompson, to name a highly customized system of long-distance ocean navigation without the use of modern instruments (compasses, sextants, charts, and electronic global positioning satellite data tracking devices). Kyselka worked with Thompson in the late 1970s and early 1980s while Thompson apprenticed under Mau Piailug, the famous navigator from Satawal, in the cultural and scientific voyages “of rediscovery” between Hawai’i, French Polynesia, and other islands in the Polynesian region under the auspices of the Polynesia Voyaging Society and the Hokule’a (Finney 2003 and 1994; Low 2013). Kyselka explains that Thompson created a remarkably effective system that was based in part on fundamentals and principles of Central Carolinian star knowledge and seamanship, but also on mix of other bodies of knowledge, including oral and written sources in Hawaiian cultural history, countless hours of observation at the Bishop Museum Planetarium, voracious study of sea charts and weather patterns, and Thompson’s own remarkably deep and intimate relationship with local Hawaiian waters as a waterman (Low 2013). Other important factors and resources include public and private sector support, and academia, which furnished key institutional and intellectual resources (Finney 2003, 1994). Low’s treatment of this key period of knowledge production and consolidation illustrates the hybridity and contemporaneity of Thompson’s system of wayfinding. Low describes how, on an informed hunch born of years of intensely focused observation of the stars, Thompson recruited a friend who was skilled in the use of a sextant to help him further calibrate star positions as they might be measured by using markings and finger lengths from his hand as it was held out at arm’s length against the night sky and horizon. Western mariners used a simpler version of such a technique (Kyselka 1987), especially after the 19th century adoption of the modern Geographic Coordinate System (the global grid of latitude and longitude markers). This technique wasn’t unique to the Pacific and most likely was foreign to it inasmuch as the idea of mapping time and space through a grid of latitude and longitude was a foreign and much later introduced idea. Part of Thompson’s genius (and what will surely be his legacy) is having created a magnificently effective system of wayfinding out of multiple sources and technologies. A major part of this system included how Carolinian navigators and other Austronesian-based navigational systems instrumentalized the use of stars and other ecological information conceptually. Etak, the system of triangulation that uses highly skilled calcu-sensations of local and regional environmental information, is one example. The problem is not that what Thompson produced was inauthentic but rather that, in time, the system of *non-instrument* navigation that came to be known as wayfinding also became too easily understood as non-*instrumental* navigation. It is as if demonstrating the efficacy of *ancient* *Polynesian* seafaring ability and celebrating the value of cultural alterity by contemporary voyaging without the use of western instruments (like sextants, charts, compasses and GPS devices) necessitates downplaying and even erasing modern, historical and cultural conditions and materials – including traditional instrumentalization of ecological knowledge as learnt from the Central Carolines -- that were and continue to be fundamental to the design and development of contemporary Polynesian “wayfinding.” Tossed out with the bathwater of western and modern “instruments,” unfortunately, are the cultural and historical specificities of Carolinian seafaring’s extreme tangible instrumentalization of the ocean world. In fact, Carolinian seafaring cultural specificity and historicity is being doubly displaced – first by denial that it operates by its own forms of instrumentalization, and second, by consistent mis-translation and mis construal of its specific techniques *in terms of western forms of instrumentation* anyway. An example that I will return in the next section is the equating of Paafu/the use of stars to map the relationship between positionality and directionality, as a “compass” that signifies cardinal directionality.

As Thompson’s system succeeded in teaching new generations of wayfinders from across Polynesia, and as the Polynesian revival grew and expanded in terms of area of geographic coverage, media and scholarly exposure, popularity and notoriety, the idea of what Ben Finney called “Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors” (in what began as a scientific *and cultural* “Voyage of Rediscovery”) also morphed into a discourse of non-modern, ancient, natural practice. The original and quite humble understanding of “wayfinding” as a “non-instrument” form of seafaring in time became entrenched in popular discourse as an unmediated system of ancient “non-instrumentalized” practice fundamentally distinct from western systems. In the process, that discursive voyage also had and continues to have the unfortunate effect of erasing historical and cultural specificity and factuality in favor of romanticized and even mystified understandings of Pacific indigeneity, beginning with Carolinian seafaring science and technology.

Paradigmatic of this simplistic form of historical and cultural erasure is Disney’s 2016 blockbuster animation *Moana,* and its valorization of the stylized hand gestures of ancient wayfinding (e.g. Hasler 2018). In the film’s narrative structure, in every dramatic moment where we are afforded an opportunity to actually see how real indigenous seafaring technique and technology operate, Disney imagineers resolve the pragmatic problem with divine and mystical interventions – a magical wave or the spirit of a grandmother rights an upended canoe or points the way forward – as if to honor the deep spirituality and power (mana) and oneness of Polynesian relationship with Moana the Ocean. Here, mysticism and romanticism replace history and indigenous technical knowhow, as signs of ancient prowess.

I want to close this first customized “island” by gesturing to matters involving state institutionalized “instrumentalization” of ICH in the contemporary Pacific. In preliminary planning toward getting traditional seafaring recognized in the UN’s ICH programming, we find that none of the Micronesian micro-states enjoy signatory status in UNESCO’s conventions, owing to US political pressure and influential power. This means that two of the especially famous seafaring islands, Polowat (in Chuuk State), and Satawal (in Yap State ) of the Federated States of Micronesia do not get direct representation.We are at the mercy of how ICH will be operationalized by other political, government and non-governmental entities in Asia and the Pacific. If the cultural and historical specificities of our traditional systems are already so woefully mistranslated and elided by outsiders, including cultural practitioners whose wild successes at revitalization were predicated in large part on the survival of non-Polynesian seafaring traditions, we must be ever more vigilant on ensuring the free and unobstructed and equitable flow of knowledge transmission required for the stewardship of our traditions when external bureaucratic machinery comes into play. A sense of the ideal transmission through the terms of “sharing” is covered in the next moving island.

Island Two. Origin Island: The Cultural Burden of Knowledge Flow

In our documentary, *Sacred Vessels: Navigating Tradition and Identity in Micronesia* (Diaz, DeLisle, and Nelson 1997), Celestino Emwalu explains that traditionally, the transmission of seafaring knowledge was carefully protected because it was both “sacred” and “secret.” But he, and his brother, the late navigator, Sosthenis Emwalu, also explained that for all of its spirituality, traditional seafaring was also secular and pragmatic. Canoes and the ability to voyage long distances were essential for food and emergency, for trade and commerce, for adventure, and so, for the establishment and maintenance of one’s personal and one’s clan’s reputation, which also loops back to how and why knowledge about seafaring abilities and technology is carefully guarded. There is, we might say, a tension, between the imperative to safeguard closely what one knows and the need to share it for the purposes of continuity and necessity as well as to demonstrate one’s self-worth. Much like how a canoe invites the crew to “dance” in response to waves and swells and currents, the craft of knowing when and how to share valuable seafaring knowledge is choreographed by the social “looks” and “feels” presented by interested parties and social conditions.

A sense of timing, for example, is offered in Celestino Emwalu’s explanation of the tradition of teaching. In the past, he explains, “the old navigators” prevailed upon orality through rote memorization, through mnemonic devices (like songs and chants), and even magic, to impart lessons which, they stressed, were best kept in one’s head. “If you write a knowledge,” explains Emwalu, “it can get wet when you are out there (in the ocean), or when there’s a typhoon. It can fly away.” The safest “locker,” he continues, is “your brain.” On the other hand, he says, “nowadays,” which he glosses as “in these modern times … the locker is empty, and you have to put it somewhere. And that would be on paper. Writing it down doesn’t change the element, only the method of recording it.” Signaling an already classical modality of cultural syncretism, of dynamic adaptation if not instrumental pragmatism, Emwalu also underscores the reality of engaging what has arrived from beyond the geographic and temporal horizon that Polowat navigators long breached as a matter of cultural self-realization. In these “modern times,” he explains, “the best way to save” seafaring culture “is to share it with others.” This is why his cousin, Mau Piailug, readily consented to sharing valuable information to the Hawaiians and other Polynesians. And why Emwalu’s other cousin, the Polowat navigator, Rapwi Yaluwairh, shared knowledge with the CHamoru (now navigator), Rob Limtiaco, from Guam, in the mid 1980s, and why Yaluwairh broke a tradition of keeping knowledge within clan and canoe house by establishing Polowat’s first “public school” of navigation in the late 1980s (Diaz 2002). In Polowat, the traditional teaching of seafaring knowledge is referred to as merak heky, which describes the opening of woven mats of knowledge for different aspects of seafaring. The mat for learning paafu, the instrumentalization of stars for “mapping” locations, is consistently mistranslated and misconstrued in scholarship and in popular literature as a sidereal “compass.” In paafu, stars do not mark cardinal directionality but what I’ve elsewhere described as the relationality between position and direction (Diaz 2015c). Wenewenefumwaket/Polaris is the star that doesn’t move. It happens to be Polaris, but it is not the “north” star any more than Mailap/Altair means “east” though it is the part of a constellation whose rising point just happens to lie in that direction when seen from Polowat atoll. At its setting point, Mailap points to Satawal, and the Philippine Islands further to the “west.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

But in Polowat, merak heky/“opening up the mat” (of specific sets of knowledge) also glosses in embodied terms, “opening up your heart,” thereby commenting on the reciprocal obligations and responsibilities that obtain between a teacher and student. Ideally, a teacher conveys all the teacher knows while the student makes all effort to learn and put it into correct practice. In the bonds of the exchange, the teacher gives and gets respect and tribute in return, while the student, armed with the tools for successful travel and mobility and all that comes with it, extends the value and prestige of the teacher, the canoe house, and the school of navigation. In her study of modern and traditional education in Pulap (in Chuuk State) Juliana Flynn (1992) explains that the island’s name and reputation derives from the terms Pwo Lap, or principal or main ritual initiator for conferring master navigator status, and so is a source of great pride and acknowledgement for the Pulapese. In similar fashion, Polowatese and other seafaring atolls are valorized in state and national discourse in the Federated States of Micronesia as keepers of national cultural treasures. In these “modern times,” those who hold the knowledge of seafaring too closely will lose out on new forms of prestige, resources, and benefits, the likes of which could significantly improve their social and economic standing as well as those of their kinfolk. For his role in the revival of Polynesian wayfinding, the late Mau Piailug had become a living legend across the Pacific who garnered recognition from academic institutions and even America’s highest folk arts honors. The late pwo-navigator from Polowat, Mannas Sikau, gained analogous acclaim in Guam, Japan, and Okinawa.

The bonds of sharing, however, have not always been reciprocated, at least properly. *The Last Navigator* is the same title of a book (Thomas 1987) and a video documentary (Singer 1989) about an American sailor and public television host, Stephen Thomas, who sailed to Satawal to pursue a dream of becoming a palu/navigator. Thomas had met Piailug years earlier, and now wanted to deepen his relationship with him, hoping, in fact, that Piailug might even adopt him as a son. In both the print and video texts and titles, the narrative gestures ostensibly to Piailug as the last of a long line of traditional navigators, though it is disingenuous because it really self-refers to Thomas, the western modern sailor, who, in chasing a romantic dream (and surrogate father), in the end comes to the self-realization that he is not nor can ever be “one of them” (palu), that it is a romantic delusion. The intent is meant to acknowledge and respect cultural boundaries. The problem is that this supposed realization also happens after Piailug had decided, after initial hesitation, to open his mat of knowledge as well as his heart to Thomas. In fact, other navigators in Satawal felt that Piailug shared too much with the Hawaiians, and now here was this American intruding on atoll social life to learn even more. But in opening his mat and heart to Thomas, Piailug was also commencing a process of obligation and reciprocity. Thomas’s intense and intensive but short-lived adventure to become a palu was problematic for how in effect he disavowed the responsibilities and obligations that came with becoming Piailug’s student/son. Yet another problem was that, through the process of learning, Thomas already began to use the first person plural pronoun “we” as if he had in fact become a palu. While Piailug did consent to teaching him, Thomas never actually became the palu he imagined himself to be. My hunch is that perhaps the real reason Thomas decided to abandon the quest to become a palu was after getting a taste for just how rigorous and burdensome such a life and relationship to Piailug could be. So while he sails off in his own yacht into the sunrise like some culturally-sensitive hero one also gets the distinct feeling that he was walking away from the obligations and responsibilities that come with the turf. In the end, the only thing worse than his helping himself into the cultural category was the ease by which he exited from it.

When Celestino Emwalu declared that the best way to save culture is to “share it with others,” he didn’t mean that it is there for all to take. In 1994, at the first meeting of the Micronesian Seafaring Society, Emwalu also identified the conditions upon which such “sharing” could take by placing on the agenda for discussion the need for measures to safeguard the “intellectual property rights” of seafarers. He explained that traditional passing down of oral knowledge in Polowat and the Central Carolines had always been accompanied by an organic, living understanding of the reciprocal relations of responsibilities and obligations, and of never forgetting from whence one received important knowledge. Intellectual property rights, he explained, needed to be asserted and enforced. For Emwalu, as for traditional knowledge holders across the world, the interest in sharing is always linked to ways of stressing and enforcing the need to not let recipients forget who owns the knowledge and what returns are to be expected. This point may seem trite and even problematic in that it would appear to involve non-traditional, modern and western definitions and discourses of rights, obligations, and jurisprudence connected, for instance, to private property, as if to engage the west on its own terms must necessarily signal cultural inauthenticity. And so to also misconstrue this demand as an inauthentic expression, as an imposition from without, as with the belief that modernity or even science and technology are the exclusive preserves of non-Native societies, is to also shortchange indigenous business transactions and deny them their own social valuation of “commodities,” like seafaring knowledge. Worse would be to demand or expect of such knowledge bearers the cultural performativity of intangible values, like timeless and otherworldly spirituality and mysticism, over what might be regarded as shrewd and self-serving business propositions and transactions.

In this etakian analyses, the path from an origin island involves appropriate recognition of the provenance of seafaring cultural knowledge through relations and burdens of obligation and responsibility that come with its sharing and transmission. To not heed these is to risk impeding the flow and movement of seafaring information on which safeguarding rests, but also leads to harm and theft not unlike the sins of historical and cultural erasure that we saw in our island of destination. In trying to trace the discursive conditions that begin and end the path between these two islands, we can do well to chart the necessary movement of a third, reference, island, which in turn will allow us to complete the journey but also know, at any given time in that journey, where we are in relation to both islands. The reference “island” of Indigeneity helps keep a right course.

Island Three. Reference Island: The Viscerality of Indigeneity[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the field of Critical Native Pacific Studies there is a growing body of scholarship that embraces total bodily immersion in the most visceral of cultural work that is central to projects of political and cultural reclamation and nation re-building.[[9]](#footnote-9) These projects center on food ways, traditional knowledge and technologies, performing and expressive arts, martial arts, religion and spirituality, health and wellbeing, to name some categories through which Pacific Islanders are connecting scholarship to political resurgence of their peoplehood. The immediate task in this section is not to survey the literature but to identify the key considerations that shape the successful doing of any of these full-bodied practices. At the core of such considerations is the conviction that indigeneity matters, by which I mean the claims and conditions of aboriginal belonging to ancestral places, the demands that come with them, and their analytical implications and possibilities as articulated by those communities. Indigenous matters include the ethical, historical, cultural, and political reasons for which such claims ought to be genuinely considered in research and policy pertaining to those communities. And because indigeneity matters thus, there are at least three possible subject positions in regards to engaging the full sensate of indigenous reclamation for analytical as well as for stewardship purposes: 1) when one is a non-Native person, which would basically mean keeping one’s nose out of where it doesn’t belong (with regards to ICH, see Robinson and Barnard 2007), certainly desisting from leadership positions, unless one heeds indigenously-oriented research protocol (Smith 1999; 2000); 2) when one is Native, but not of the people whose histories one wishes to research, for which one had better foreground that status of non-belonging, clarify the terms of relative involvement, and find one’s appropriate place; and 3) when the researcher is a member of the community in question, a status which presents the most difficult task given the obligations and responsibilities expected of members of the group even while specific membership in a particular family, clan, or tribe might constrain his or her speech and action with respect to the larger body.[[10]](#footnote-10)  Because indigeneity matters in our histories, it matters in our studies, and because it matters in our studies and our histories, it should also matter in policy. And for this, the mattering of indigeneity to matters of safeguarding cultural heritage and traditions means that to steward is to ensure that one knows one’s proper place and that one understands and follows through with the responsibilities and obligations that come with how one is positioned to the matter.

Sitting Right

If one calcu-senses properly the home environment of one’s first leg (the ‘local’ seas) of a voyage, that “local” information establishes a unit of measure for assessing yet new information, new “looks” and “feels” that nature presents in the next leg, which in turn provides the same for the subsequent leg and so forth. If all this is done properly, on the eve of the estimated time of arrival (of the moving island of destination), one will begin to recognize signs in the waters, beneath it, and above it, in the skies, as stars, winds, clouds, that are associated with the destination island. Such a successful voyage will have also been predicated on millennia of tested visceral sensing of the known world around different islands, indeed made possible by processes of rendering initially foreign land, sea, and air scapes into familiar ones by virtue of linking them to the known and familiar world encountered and worked in the preceding leg of a voyage. In turn, that leg, as demonstrated, will have been navigated successfully by virtue of information established in the previous leg, and so on back to the original leg of the journey.

In this essay, I have relied on the tangibility of ancient and embodied techniques of seafaring, such as etakian triangulation, in order to begin to anticipate possible moments of blockage and stoppage in what should be the free and equitable flow of information and relations -- provided one knows one’s proper place in it -- between seafaring culture and informed cultural preservation policy and practice articulated and instrumentalized in ICH. Voyaging through a metaphorical triad of islands – the target island of destination called ICH, the origin island of obligations and responsibilities surrounding the sharing of seafaring knowledge, and a third reference island of contemporary indigenous Pacific scholarship engaged in knowledge production forged in relation to cultural and environmental stewardship and nation re-building – I have attempted to underscore those conceptual and institutional practices in ICH within a recent history of seafaring survival and revitalization that might get mistranslated in cross cultural and other forms of relations and processes that are better understood as potential blockages and stoppages in otherwise noble intentions to safeguard endangered cultural heritages. Having gained insight into such conditions while perched upon a customized toilet in Japan in a moment of blockage, I should note that the same affliction is not entirely unfamiliar when sitting on canoes in long voyages at sea. There, at least, the canoe’s invitation to “dance” in step with what it encounters in nature while at sea also requires of the navigator and crew the fullest multi-sensoried attention to one’s body as an indicator of surrounding truths. No less is required when navigating ICH into someone else’s home waters.

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1. Classical treatments of etak are found in Gladwin (1974) and Lewis (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the early 1990s, I worked with the organization Traditions About Seafaring Islands, and helped convene and direct the Micronesian Seafaring Society (Diaz 1994 and 2002), a regional organization of canoe builders, navigators, and executive branch representatives from all seven nations and territories in the Micronesian region. Though short-lived, the practice of networking continues through individuals through regional festivals, including 12th Festival of Pacific Arts, hosted by Guam in 2016. The12th FestPac hosted a Canoe Summit of Pacific canoe builders and navigators from across the entire Pacific Region (Uslander 2016, UNESCO 2016) that was co-sponsored by the Guam Festpac Steering Committee, the Anthropological Institute of Nanzan University, the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (NRICP) in Tokyo, and UNESCO’s Office of Pacific States, and its Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Programme as part of an effort include “wayfinding” in UNESCO’s ICH programming. In the mid 1990s, I co-produced a documentary about a new generation of navigators from Polowat and their counterparts in Guam (Diaz, DeLisle, and Nelson 1997). In the late 1990s, I co-founded the University of Guam Seafarers Society, which included community-engaged teaching and research in the revival of seafaring knowledge under the tutelage of master navigators from Polowat. Since 2001, I have continued this work albeit in the US Midwest, with community engagement with American Indian counterparts who are also reviving their canoe and water traditions. In recent years, this work has involved advanced visualization technology of Virtual and Augmented Reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am Pohnpeian from my maternal line, and have adoptive relations in one of Polowat’s canoe houses. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hanlon’s (2009) critical assessment of Micronesia’s “relative absence” or “minimal inclusion” in the academic field of Pacific Studies offers an analogous cautionary tale. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This played out in the field of Pacific Studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Keesing 1989 and 1991, and Jolly 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On conflating one part of the Pacific with the whole with regards to seafaring prowess, Hamacher and Guedes (2017) is typical: “One of the greatest feats of human migration in history was the colonisation of the vast Pacific Ocean by Polynesian peoples.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gladwin 1970, 154; Goodenough 1953, 5 and Alkire 1970, 44, suggest that the two dimensional diagramming of paafu as a “compass” circle may be a relatively recent development to facilitate explaining paafu to outsiders. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This final section excerpts from Diaz 2016b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Aikau and Camvel (2016), Aikau, Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, and Silva (2016), Diaz (2016b and 2012), Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2013 and 2009), Teaiwa (2001, 1999, 1997, and 1995), and Tengan and Roy (2014), Tengan, Fonoti, and Ka’ili (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also Smith (1999 and 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)