

Ben Finney: Anthropologist and Voyager

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OBITUARY

Ben Finney: Anthropologist and Voyager

Benjamin Rudolph Finney was born on 1 October 1933 in Southern California, the son of a navy man. He began surfing in 1953, and earned a BA from the University of California (UC), Berkeley in history, economics, and anthropology in 1955. Ben spent at least part of 1956 in Tahiti, surfing and learning French, and the rest working in Southern California's aerospace industry, at places like Kaiser Steel and General Dynamics. He then did a stint in the navy in 1957 and 1958, staying in the reserves until 1965.¹

In 1958 Ben moved to Honolulu to begin an MA in anthropology. At the University of Hawai'i (UH) at Mānoa, he worked with Katherine Luomala, a Finnish-American anthropologist who wrote a thesis on Maui in 1936 with Alfred Kroeber. Luomala, a folklorist and mythologist, was a fixture in the department – she had arrived in 1946, taught Ben in the late 1950s, and was still teaching when he returned as a colleague in the early 1970s.² Ben's supervisors also included Kenneth Emory, an archaeologist associated with the Bishop Museum, well-known for his work in the Society Islands,³ and O.A. Bushnell, who was originally trained as a microbiologist, but spent much of his career researching Hawaiian history, and is remembered for works of historical fiction set in Hawai'i.⁴ Although Emory eventually received a PhD and Bushnell had one in the life sciences, both were local-born *haole* (White person, foreigner) whose expertise in the Pacific was self-taught. In this they were similar to many historians and anthropologists who came of age before World War II, a time when professional academics shared their field with serious amateurs and museum specialists. Ben's intellectual influences, then, shared a strong historical or natural-historical focus on the Pacific. Bushnell's popular historical work was probably in Ben's mind as he turned his hand to popular nonfiction accounts of voyaging, and his collaboration with non-academics like Herb Kane doubtless has its roots in an education where the focus was on people's expertise and abilities, not their formal qualifications or the prestige of their institutional home.

Ben's 1959 MA thesis was on surfing – already a passion of his – and entitled 'Hawaiian Surfing: A Study of Cultural Change'. The thesis was inspired by Alexander Lesser's *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game*, no doubt given to him by Luomala. Lesser was a student of Franz Boas, who argued that the purpose of anthropology was 'the reconstruction of the history of mankind as a whole'.⁵ However, Boas focused on synchronic studies of the

¹ Ben Finney, CV, 2007, in author's possession. These and other dates regarding Ben's professional career come from this CV.

² Brian Niiya, 'Katherine Luomala'. Available online at <http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Katharine%20Luomala/>. Accessed 12 June 2017.

³ Patrick Kirch, 'In Memoriam: Kenneth Pike Emory, 1897–1992', *Asian Perspectives* 31:1 (1992): 1–8.

⁴ Mike Leidemann and Wanda A. Adams, 'O.A. Bushnell, Writer of Hawai'i Dies'. *Honolulu Advertiser*, 24 Aug. 2002. Available online at <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2002/Aug/24/ln/ln10a.html>. Accessed 27 July 2017.

⁵ Franz Boas, 'Report on the Academic Teaching of Anthropology', *American Anthropologist* 12:1 (1919): 42.

distribution of culture traits because he believed there were no adequate sources, oral or archival, to reconstruct the Amerindian past. Lesser's *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game*, in contrast, demonstrated that anthropologists could write the Indian past, and did so by documenting the brutal treatment of the Pawnee by American settlers. Lesser was thereby an early proponent of 'acculturation' studies. He was also one of the first to pursue what would be known in the United States as 'ethnohistory', an approach that not only recovered Indian history, but often worked alongside Indian legal claims for recognition and land rights. Luomala probably gave Ben the book because it was an acculturation study of a leisure activity and thus a suitable model for his MA on surfing. But it is not surprising that Ben, having read the book, would later on align himself with Hawaiian activists in the future.

Analytically, Ben's thesis followed Lesser's lead, looking at surfing as 'a pastime that has changed in an acculturative situation'.⁶ He reconstructed surfing in old Hawai'i, and compared it with the contemporary surfing scene in order to document how the culture complex of 'surfing' had changed over time. This impressive work includes maps of traditional and contemporary surf spots, diagrams of board shapes, photos of contemporary surfers, and rich historical and ethnographic detail. Its research findings were published in two articles in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*.⁷ It was the beginning of a long history of publications by Ben on surfing, perhaps the most well-known being his 1966 book *Surfing: Sport of Hawaiian Kings*,⁸ co-authored with James Houston, which would be reissued regularly with different subtitles. Today the history of surfing is a huge field undertaken by surfers, local historians, and academics. But Ben was there at the founding, doing something that would become typical of him: taking something seriously because he was passionate about it, and proving to the world that it had far greater depth and importance than some would imagine.

Ben's thesis might have seemed old-fashioned and provincial for mainland anthropologists of that period, since it was a time when anthropology had shifted from discourses of 'acculturation' to those of 'modernization' and 'development'. Ben was to be introduced to these more contemporary trends when he travelled to Harvard University to undertake doctoral studies under Douglas Oliver. In the late 1930s Oliver was affiliated with the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University, which had strong ties to the Bishop Museum as a result of the New England–Hawai'i relationship established by missionaries and whalers in the 19th century. This Honolulu connection probably worked to Ben's advantage. Oliver had done fieldwork in Bougainville during the late 1930s and from 1942 became a major researcher and analyst in the Pacific war. After the war, he took a position at Harvard and his ties to America's Cold War agendas in the Pacific strengthened. He helped consolidate military rule in Micronesia and ran the Modjukto Project on Indonesia, which included amongst its members Clifford Geertz and Alice Dewey, Ben's future colleague at UH Mānoa.⁹

Ben arrived at Harvard in time to participate in Oliver's next large-scale, multi-scholar study, the 'Harvard Society Islands Project', which examined social change and economic development in French Polynesia. Between 1961 and 1963, Ben studied 'Polynesian peasants and proletarians', comparing groups of farmers (peasants) and wage labourers (proletarians) to see how their lives had changed with the advent of the cash economy. He gained his PhD in 1964. This research was published in condensed form in a long article in

⁶ Ben Finney, 'Hawaiian Surfing, A Study of Cultural Change', MA thesis, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 1959, 3.

⁷ Ben Finney, 'The Development and Diffusion of Modern Hawaiian Surfing', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 69:4 (1960): 315–31; and Ben Finney, 'Surfing in Ancient Hawaii', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 68:4 (1959): 327–47.

⁸ Ben Finney and James D. Houston, *Surfing: The Sport of Hawaiian Kings* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1966).

⁹ Robert Kiste, 'Douglas Oliver 1913–2009' (Washington, DC: USA National Academy of Sciences, 2011). Available online at <http://www.nasonline.org/publications/biographical-memoirs/memoir-pdfs/oliver-douglas.pdf>. Accessed 12 June 2017.

the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* in 1965,¹⁰ and then in several shorter papers. The book-length version, incorporating the earlier work and more material from return visits to the field in 1965, 1968, and 1970, appeared in 1973 as *Polynesian Peasants and Proletariats*.¹¹ A well-known article from this period was his 'Money Work, Fast Money and Prize Money'.¹²

After earning his PhD Ben returned to Southern California in 1964 to take up a position as an assistant professor at UC at Santa Barbara. There, he no doubt spent a lot of time in the water. These were the golden years of expansion in higher education in the United States,¹³ and Ben – too old to be a baby boomer, but too young to serve in World War II – was ideally positioned to benefit from this growth. Like other anthropologists born in the early 1930s such as Marshall Sahlins and Fredrik Barth, and one of the few holders of a PhD (from Harvard no less), Ben was sought after as universities eagerly staffed up their new campuses and departments. Nowhere exemplified this growth more than the UC system. In 1940, it comprised one college (now Berkeley) with a medical school and college of agriculture. In 1965, it spanned nine separate campuses, as well as a growing community college and state university system.

It was in Santa Barbara that Ben returned to the topic of voyaging. In 1958 Luomala had given him a copy of Andrew Sharp's *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific*,¹⁴ which claimed that Polynesian canoes were crude and the settlement of Polynesia happened through drift voyaging and accident.¹⁵ This was Sharp's attempt to answer a classic problem in Polynesian culture history: How was remote Oceania settled? Some argued that people had sailed there knowingly, on goods vessels and using excellent navigational skills. But this seemed impossible given the distances involved. Others argued that Polynesian voyagers drifted aimlessly, or arrived on islands by chance after shipwreck. But this too seemed impossible given the distances involved. The argument was at an impasse. Ben had long been critical of Sharp. His very first article was a description of an adze from Kiribati, in which he argued that it and other finds were typical of Tongan material culture, indicating a history of contact and intentional voyaging from Tonga.¹⁶ Sharp's explanation that the adze must have been a result of Marquesan drift voyaging seemed untenable to Ben.

Now secure in a faculty position, Ben sought to answer the question of voyaging through experimental anthropology. He rebuilt a Hawaiian double-hulled canoe, named Nālehia, to see how it handled. Awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant, Ben and his collaborator Steve Horvath tested the canoe in Hawai'i and Santa Barbara. They discovered that it could not be paddled long distances, but that paddling could be used as a source of auxiliary power. The next step, which Ben described to the NSF in his initial grant proposal, was to gain sufficient expertise in sailing the canoe to enable him to take it from Hawai'i to Tahiti.¹⁷

But before Ben could return to the topic of sailing, his attention was diverted. In 1967 he received a Fulbright award to go to Australia, where he joined the New Guinea Research

¹⁰ Ben Finney, 'Polynesian Peasants and Proletarians: Socio-Economic Change among the Tahitians of French Polynesia', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 74:3 (1965): 269–328. Available online at <http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=3350>. Accessed 12 June 2017.

¹¹ Ben Finney, *Polynesian Peasants and Proletarians* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1973).

¹² Ben Finney, 'Money Work, Fast Money and Prize Money: Aspects of the Tahitian Labor Commitment', *Human Organization* 26:4 (1971): 195–9.

¹³ Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 65.

¹⁴ Andrew Sharp, *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific* (Wellington: Polynesian Society, 1956).

¹⁵ Ben Finney, 'Playing with Canoes', in *Pacific Places, Pacific Histories*, ed. Brij Lal (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 290.

¹⁶ Ben Finney, 'Recent Finds from Washington and Fanning Islands', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 67:1 (1958): 70–2.

¹⁷ Steven Horvath and Ben Finney, 'Paddling Experiments and the Question of Polynesian Voyaging', *American Anthropologist* 71:2 (1969): 271–6.

Unit, a section of the Australian National University (ANU). Between February and August 1967 he conducted fieldwork in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province, in the Trust Territory of New Guinea (later the independent State of Papua New Guinea or PNG). His topic was the participation of local entrepreneurs in cash cropping. Australian colonialism in PNG was quite mild compared to colonial regimes elsewhere. In Goroka Indigenous people were encouraged to become entrepreneurs, growing and selling coffee and other crops, and they took to these practices eagerly. They were, apparently, 'pre-adapted' to capitalism, with a strong, culturally specific drive to excel.

For Ben, Goroka must have seemed like heaven. In Tahiti, he saw people vulnerable to economic and imperial power. Their traditions and customs were being eroded by capitalism, leaving them with depressing lives of work on plantations and in town. In PNG, in contrast, it appeared that economic development and traditional culture were leading hand in hand towards culturally appropriate development. The result was the research report *New Guinean Entrepreneurs*, subsequently expanded into the 1973 monograph *Big-Men and Business*, and followed by a 1987 re-study. Ben's then-wife, Ruth Finney, also produced a report entitled *Would-be Entrepreneurs? A Study of Motivation in New Guinea*.¹⁸

At the end of his fieldwork Ben accepted an invitation from Henry Maude to serve as a research fellow at ANU's Department of Pacific History, where he remained until 1970.¹⁹ I suspect one reason he stayed in Australia was that the situation in Santa Barbara was not very inviting: in 1967 Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California, sought to suppress the student movement, and fired Clark Kerr as the president of the UC system.²⁰ In Santa Barbara, the protest movement radicalized and when popular anthropology professor Bill Allen was denied tenure, riots broke out.²¹ Perhaps this situation, in addition to Ben's deep love of Hawai'i, explain his decision to move to UH in 1970.

While California's education system was ending its period of post-war growth, Hawai'i's was just starting. Hawai'i had been made a state in 1959 and the 1960s were a time of tremendous economic growth and development (or, depending on how you look at it, settler colonialism and dispossession). High-rise tourist hotels sprang up in Waikiki and former farm land was converted into housing. Development and tourism replaced plantation agriculture as the central movers of the economy. UH grew at a tremendous pace during this period, strengthened by federal funding. Ben arrived at the anthropology department after its period of turmoil over the politics of tenure, promotion, and the Vietnam war.²² He was no

¹⁸ Ben Finney, *New Guinean Entrepreneurs: Indigenous Cash Cropping, Capital Formation and Investment in the New Guinea Highlands* (Canberra: Australian National University, New Guinea Research Unit, 1969); Ben Finney, *Big-Men and Business: Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth in the New Guinea Highlands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1973); Ben Finney, *Business Development in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea* (Honolulu: East-West Center, Pacific Islands Development Program, 1987); Ruth Finney, *Would-be Entrepreneurs?: A Study of Motivation in New Guinea* (Canberra: Australian National University, New Guinea Research Unit, 1971).

¹⁹ Ben Finney, 'The Order of the Faded Blue Aerogramme', *Contemporary Pacific* 21:2 (2009): 301–2.

²⁰ Grace Hechinger, 'Clark Kerr, Leading Public Educator and Former Head of California's Universities, Dies at 92', *New York Times*, 2 Dec. 2003. Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/02/us/clark-kerr-leading-public-educator-former-head-california-s-universities-dies-92.html>. Accessed 14 July 2017.

²¹ Adrienne MacIain, 'Playing on the Edge: Performance, Youth Culture, and the U.S. Carnival-esque', PhD thesis, University of California Santa Barbara, 2006, 200–12.

²² Bion Griffin, 'A History of the Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii at Mānoa 1922–2007', 16. Available online at http://anthropology.hawaii.edu/departement/history/documents/Griffin_Anthro_history_2007.pdf. Accessed 16 July 2017.

doubt welcomed as an alumnus and as a promising midcareer scholar. The year 1973, when his books on PNG and Tahiti were published, was perhaps the height of his strictly academic career. For all these reasons, a position at UH was appealing.

At this point Ben was known as an expert in the anthropology of economic development in the Pacific. But this was not a topic he wanted to continue. I asked him once why he gave up his Tahiti work and he told me it was 'too depressing'. Although his books use the language of 'social change' and 'development', in person Ben talked about the racism of Australians in PNG and the power of French colonialism in Tahiti. He was ready for a change. Or rather, a return to his pre-PNG interests.

In that same year, 1973, he became a cofounder of the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS), a group dedicated to the revival of traditional Pacific voyaging. This move was part of a more general revival of interest in Hawaiian culture. When Ben began teaching at Mānoa, it had been around 80 years since a group of American businessmen had overthrown the last Hawaiian monarch, Queen Lili'uokalani. Loss of political power was coupled with a loss of culture, history, and pride. The constant pressure to assimilate only became more intense after Hawai'i was admitted into the US as a state in 1959. In the early 1960s, a popular movement began to revalue and remember Hawaiian culture. By the early 1970s, Hawaii was just one part of a global movement of ethnic revival. The PVS quickly became caught up in this movement of renewal and resurgence.

One of the great landmarks of this 'Hawaiian renaissance' was the PVS's voyage on the *Hōkūle'a* from Hawai'i to Tahiti in 1976. Ben's goal was to create a double-hulled sailing canoe and sail it to Tahiti and back, demonstrating the competence of traditional voyagers. But the voyage was also, more importantly, a tremendous source of pride and encouragement for Hawaiian people and Pacific Islanders more generally. The voyage itself, however, was filled with conflict and some on the crew felt it inappropriate that Ben, a *haole*, should have such a prominent role in the PVS. As a result he was distanced from the PVS for several years. Nevertheless, he published an account of his voyage in 1979, entitled *Hokule'a: The Way to Tahiti* – largely because the publisher's initial payment had paid for much of the cost of the voyage.²³ The book was very successful, an alternate pick in the 'book of the month' club, and sold well. Eventually, Ben mended fences with the PVS and wrote more books chronicling their activities, such as *Voyage of Rediscovery* and *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors*.²⁴ Throughout, his clear prose mixed engineering, seamanship, and ethnography in a readable combination. As a result, he established himself as a unique blend of academic, practitioner, and public anthropologist. Today he is remembered as a founder of the PVS, which has grown from a project of Indigenous resurgence into a large-scale educational campaign which combines environmental justice with cultural heritage.

However, in the immediate aftermath of being accused as a colonizer, Ben put a positive spin on that word, moving from the peopling of Polynesia to the colonization of space. Again, his timing was right: Ronald Reagan, the former governor of California, was now the US president and his administration was heavily funding research into space flight as part of the Cold War. The space shuttle was launched in 1981 and quickly became a symbol of American optimism, scientific progress, and aerospace dominance. Ben was, after all, from Southern California, where the aerospace industry was a constant presence and where he had worked in his youth. So he began turning to his last major project: how human beings could colonize not only the ocean, but the universe.

In 1983 he organized an interdisciplinary conference on space travel whose proceedings were published in 1985 as *Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience*.²⁵ He also produced

²³ Finney, 'Playing with Canoes', 296.

²⁴ Ben Finney, *Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey through Polynesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Ben Finney, *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors: Revising Polynesian Voyaging* (Honolulu, HI: Bishop Museum Press, 2003).

a shorter volume entitled *From Sea to Space*, based on his Macmillan Brown lectures at Massey University.²⁶ Throughout, his theme was on humans as ‘the exploring animals’, ‘by nature wanderers, the inheritors of an exploring and colonizing bent that is deeply embedded in our evolutionary past’.²⁷ During this period Ben became associated with SETI, a NASA-funded institute which searched for signs of intelligent extraterrestrial life, and the International Space University in France. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ben began working on Russian scientist and philosopher Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, often collaborating with Mila Finney, his second wife.

Ben also continued to be of service to UH Mānoa, serving as chair of the anthropology department from 1986 to 1995. His 1994 article ‘The Other One-Third of the Globe’ was tremendously influential and widely taught at UH Mānoa and elsewhere.²⁸ It gives an overview of the entire history of human settlement of the Pacific from the first voyagers to the *Hōkūle‘a*, emphasizing the centrality – rather than the irrelevance – of the Pacific and its people to human history. His under-read 1991 article ‘The Sin at Awarua’ dived into the ‘invention of tradition’ debates of that period, using a detailed account of voyaging in the past and present to disprove that there was something illegitimate or inauthentic about cultural revival in Polynesia.²⁹

Ben became emeritus in 2000 but continued to visit the department regularly. He had the office two doors down from mine – he chose it shortly after our building had been built because it had an extra nook, which he used as a small private library. I first met him in 2004. He made a big impression – he was tall, lean, handsome, and weather-beaten, laconic but intelligent; one needed to spend little time around him to recognize that his reputation was well-earned. In the later years of his life, Ben received many accolades: the UH Regents’ Medal for Excellence in Research, the Royal Institute of Navigation Medal, and the French University of the Pacific Medal, to name a few. In 2012 he was declared a living treasure by the Hongwanji Mission here in Hawai‘i.

Ben Finney led a remarkable life. He managed to be at the right place at the right time, always studying topics of moment while still maintaining a coherent intellectual through-line. Indeed, Ben’s genius was to initiate projects that superficially looked very different, but which ultimately focused on the key intellectual ideas he consistently pursued throughout his life. As a scholar of Polynesia, he was the epitome of the area specialist, deeply immersed in the culture, language, and material culture of the islands. And yet his horizons were also much broader. He helped produce films and wrote popular books. He was entrepreneurial at a time when many American professors chose to live quietly off of the Cold War education boom. And above all, you got the feeling that he enjoyed himself. Ben remains a role model for all anthropologists and historians who want to engage in the fraught but important work of living and documenting significant Pacific projects.

ALEX GOLUB

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²⁵ Ben Finney and Eric Jones, *Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁶ Ben Finney, *From Sea to Space* (Palmerston North: Massey University, 1992).

²⁷ Finney and Jones, ‘The Exploring Animal’, in *Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience*, 15.

²⁸ Ben Finney, ‘The Other One-Third of the Globe’, *Journal of World History* 5:2 (1994): 273–97.

²⁹ Ben Finney, ‘The Sin at Awarua’, *The Contemporary Pacific* 11:1 (1999): 1–33. Available online at <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/13256>. Accessed 16 July 2017.