

A CLOSE LOOK AT 'KON-TIKI'

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THE BEST-SELLER, *Kon-Tiki*,* has deservedly caught the imagination of the American public. This story of a voyage from the coast of Peru to the Tuamotu Islands of Polynesia, made in a balsa raft built to Inca specifications, ranks with the best tales of adventure. The first purpose of the undertaking was to demonstrate that the ancient Peruvians were capable of making voyages over such a tremendous distance in their own type of sea-going vessel. The *Kon-Tiki* expedition is sound proof that it could have been done and is a convincing answer to the skeptics who denied the feasibility of such voyages.

The second purpose of the trip was to lend support to the belief of Thor Heyerdahl, the leader of the expedition and author of the book, that the peoples and cultures of Polynesia are derived from the New World. This theory is outlined briefly in the book and through the introduction of bits of evidence is given implicit validation by Heyerdahl. However, it is one thing to demonstrate the possibility of making the voyage in a Peruvian-type raft. It is quite a different thing to demonstrate that the Polynesians actually came to their island home by raft and canoe from the shores of the Americas. As a museum curator and a professional anthropologist, both of whom are suggested in *Kon-Tiki* as being rather misguided and hopeless conservatives, I should like to point out a few reasons why Heyerdahl's ingenuous reconstruction of Polynesian prehistory is more novel than probable.

VIRACocha LEGEND

Heyerdahl uses as evidence the Peruvian legend of Viracocha, said to have been an ancient, blond, light-skinned hero-god who was supposed to have come to Peru with some followers of similar type in pre-Inca times, stayed for a time, and vanished. Heyerdahl believes that Viracocha and his colleagues actually existed, that they were responsible for the development of a culture in Peru called Tihuanaco (though it is not explicitly named in the book), and that about A.D. 500 they took to their balsa rafts and sailed to Polynesia, which they proceeded to populate with their offspring. Later, about A.D. 1100, Polynesia was supposed to have been invaded by Indians from the Northwest Coast of North America, who merged with the previous wave of migrants to form the historic Polynesian race and who evolved the historic Polynesian culture.

A few criticisms seem to be in order:

(1) Heyerdahl equates the Polynesian god Tiki with Viracocha because there is some

evidence that the pre-Incaic name for Viracocha was "Con-Tici" or "Illa Tici," and at a later date sometimes "Con Tici Viracocha." That the Polynesian "Tiki" and the Peruvian "Tici" are the same is doubtful. Occasional chance occurrences of the same word or word element in two unrelated languages is a common phenomenon, while the etymology of the Peruvian "Tici" is far from certain.

(2) Heyerdahl considers the art style of stone carvings on Easter, Pitcairn, and the Marquesas Islands in Polynesia so similar to pre-Inca (presumably Tihuanaco) carvings in Peru that they must be products of the same people. These carvings may seem similar to Heyerdahl; they have never impressed critical students of the area as being alike.

(3) He gives credence to the observations of the early Dutch explorer Roggeveen that among the people of Easter Island were light-skinned individuals, presumably descendants of Kon-Tici, while he suggests that the red stone caps placed atop the massive Easter Island carvings represent the red hair of the early Peruvian migrants. The Roggeveen expedition account is known to have been much exaggerated. Polynesians are quite light-skinned on body parts not exposed to the sun and undoubtedly have a Caucasoid-like strain in their racial ancestry. But that this strain can be assigned to the legendary Con Tici Viracocha and his followers, or that early historic Polynesians included large numbers of white-skinned individuals, is quite unproven.

(4) Heyerdahl stresses the fact that the Polynesians were a "pure stone-age people" and states that "there were no cultures in the world of any reproductive capacity" at the probable time of the Polynesian migrations except in the New World. What is meant by "reproductive capacity" is not clear. However, the Peruvians at this time were using copper for building ties and other objects and technically were not a stone-age people. On the other hand, peoples who were skillful stone workers were living at the same time in both Malaysia and Micronesia to the west of the Polynesians.

(5) The sweet potato and the gourd are two New World plants that most students accept, with Heyerdahl, as being in Polynesia at the time of European discovery. Whether they were brought by Peruvians or whether Polynesians voyaged to the New World and returned with them is not certain. However, Heyerdahl actually made the trip in a Peruvian raft, while there are no recorded voyages of Polynesian canoes making a round-trip voyage to South America and back, although long voyages were likewise possible in canoes. Yet this is slim evidence for a migration theory and, as it has been pointed out, is like saying that, because the "Irish" potato is derived from South America, Irishmen are *ipso facto* migrants from South America also.

(6) For a possible migration from the Northwest Coast of America to Polynesia, Heyerdahl mentions similarity in art styles between the two regions. It was long ago suggested that the art of the Maori of New Zealand and that of the Northwest Coast were similar. A closer and more critical inspection of Polynesian and Northwest Coast art made by later students has not indicated similarities that are convincing. Also that the Northwest Coast Indians had sea-going canoes in A.D. 1100 is not known; nor are they ever known to have made long, open-sea canoe voyages in early historic times.

CONTRARY EVIDENCE

The principal argument against Heyerdahl's theory is found, however, in the large body of contrary evidence that ties Polynesia to Micronesia and in turn to Southeastern Asia—a body of evidence that he has deliberately ignored and even implied does not exist. The Polynesian languages belong to the Malayo-Polynesian family, which stretches in a great bridge from Polynesia across Micronesia and Malaysia to the Southeastern Asian island archipelagoes. The outrigger canoe is found across this same belt and, contrary to much popular belief, is perfectly capable of sailing close to the wind and making long easterly voyages in the trade-wind latitudes, although the double-canoe was the favored Polynesian open-sea craft. A series of Oceanic food plants, such as taro, the coconut (for which there is no good evidence that it was in the New World at the time of discovery), bananas, and breadfruit as well as the domesticated pig, link Polynesia to the Old World rather than to the New. These are only a few of many cultural traits that militate against Heyerdahl's theory.

There is also negative evidence to be considered. If Polynesians are in large part sea-faring Peruvians, why are not fundamental traits such as the highly developed Peruvian textile arts and ceramics found in Polynesia, for the raw materials exist there? Also, if Viracocha and his cohorts were blond or red-headed and light-skinned, they were presumably Caucasoids, and why has not a well-defined Caucasoid element been found in pre-Inca skeletal material? Prehistory of the Andes and Polynesia is not such a misty unknown as the book implies.

These criticisms are not directed against the idea that actual voyages were occasionally made by Peruvians to Polynesia. This seems highly probable. Criticism is directed against the idea that the Polynesians migrated en masse from the New World and that Polynesian culture owes its primary patterning to New World sources. This latter belief adds spice to the grand story of Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki* voyage. The belief remains nevertheless an enthusiasm of the author rather than the most probable explanation for Polynesian origins, based on a critical appraisal of the evidence.

* *Kon-Tiki*, by Thor Heyerdahl (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1950)



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