

# Legendary Master Navigator Pius “Mau” Piailug sails on

Contributed by Bill Jaynes and Tom Raffiipi  
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Mau, master navigator and progenitor of a new breed of Pacific navigators has died. Pius “Mau” Piailug was 78 years old when he died on July 13, 2010. He had suffered from diabetes for many years.

He was not the first of the traditional navigators in the Pacific and because of his life and what he chose to do with it he won't be the last.

Mau's accomplishments as a traditional navigator who used only the stars, the sun, the ocean currents, birds and keen observation of what was going around him is the stuff of legends. He was the navigator on the 1976 round trip journey from Hawaii to Tahiti. He violated his own traditions to teach his skills to potential mariners not from his own family or heritage who had demonstrated to him that they were ready to accept the knowledge.

Mau was chosen by his grandfather to be a navigator for his island of Satawal, a tiny island in Yap one mile wide and a mile and half long. It is said that when Mau was young his grandfather took the young child to several tidal pools on the island and laid him there so that he could begin to experience the movement of the water, to look up at the sky and to observe and to learn by simply being.

When he was six years old Mau's official training began in earnest and he learned from his grandfather the ways of the ancient mariners and navigators.

Nainoa Thompson who studied under Mau wrote an article about the experience and the man fourteen years ago.

Thompson said of Mau in that article, “His grandfather took him out to sail with him at age four. Mau told me that he would get seasick and when he was seven years old, his grandfather would tie his hands and drag him behind the canoe to get rid of that. This was not abuse. This was to get him ready for the task of serving his community as a navigator...

“Mau can unlock the signs of the ocean world and can feel his way through the ocean. Mau is so powerful. The first time Mau was in Hawaii, I was in awe of him-I would just watch him and didn't dare to ask him questions. One night, when we were in Snug Harbor, someone asked him where the Southern Cross was. Mau, without turning around or moving his head, pointed in the direction of a brightly lit street lamp. I was curious and checked it. I ran around the street light and there, just where Mau had pointed, was the Southern Cross. It's like magic; Mau knows where something is without seeing it&hellip;

“It's too late,” Mau said, “I am too old, our children have too much to learn, and it's too late.” That's something I never wanted to hear. But he said, “It's okay. All navigators find a way out. When they put me in the ground, it's all right because I already planted a seed in

Hawai'i. When my people want to learn, they can come to Hawai'i and learn about me.' Mau does not see navigation as cultural revival; it's his way of life. His people will never come to learn from him until they want to live that way again,' Thompson concluded.

When President Mori's Chief of Staff received the phone call telling him that Mau had sailed on to other waters I happened to be close by and I thought of the many great men of Micronesia I wish I'd had the opportunity to meet before they passed on; historic and stalwart men who accomplished so much in their lives. How to write a fitting tribute to a man like Mau has completely eluded me, though my thoughts have had an opportunity to incubate within me for nearly two weeks. Ultimately I found myself unequal to the task, daunted by the vast differences between his world and mine, and completely overwhelmed by his monumental accomplishments and the mark he made in this world before he sailed on.

Mau's nephew, Tom Raffipiy who knew his uncle extremely well had the following to say:

'In his native Satawalese vernacular 'mau' means strong, strength, hard, hardened, and mature, among other definitions. Truly, Pius 'Mau' Pailug lived up to the nickname given to him in his early adulthood. The name was supposedly given to him to describe his uncanny physique which was then thought of as a physical defect. The ripples of muscles on his back were likened to the rough shells of hawksbill turtles. However he got the nickname 'Mau' one can be certain that it was given out of love and affection as was the normal practice. Probably no one realized how the name would shape the character of the man who defied cultural belief to safeguard a dying art of Oceania – non-instrumental navigation.

'Mau was naturally strong and courageous. Mau would have been the first to admit that he might have not known as much 'talk of the sea' as most navigators of his time did, but I knew him to have more courage and to be more fearless than any of them. Mau would never allow himself to doubt his decisions and navigational tactics and that served him well throughout his life. He thrived on challenges and rarely stayed on the land. He dedicated his whole life to voyaging and to teaching. That was his passion.

'Mau's points of view frequently sparked controversies as he would always speak his mind and often challenged other people's points of views that he believed were not in line with cultural practices and beliefs. He was a man of few words but if presented with the opportunity, he would speak in burst of words in rapid fire fashion that could be intimidating to those who didn't know him.

'Among his major pet peeves was the introduction of Christianity and western education in the islands. Like many island elders, he believed western religious practices and schools contributed to the rapid erosion

of cultural arts and sciences that have kept the Pacific Island cultures alive for generations.

“Like men of his age and those before him, Mau believed that real men drink alcoholic beverages. Mau drank most of his life and that probably contributed to the downward spiral failure of his health.

“Mau fulfilled the callings of the traditional navigators and much more. He did his part in feeding the islands and upholding the honorable legacy of “two navigators.” Unlike many navigators, Mau was so giving of his knowledge and willing to teach whoever was willing to learn. Every moment was a teaching moment to Mau. He loved the dedication of the Polynesian people to learning traditional navigation, and it’s for that reason that he dedicated half of his life to teaching traditional navigation to the Polynesian people especially the Hawaiians. The Hawaiian people were very special to Mau.

“Mau left behind a legacy that is unparalleled and unmatched. Mau will be remembered by his generous gift of pride and self-identity to the people of the Pacific. His will be a legacy of teaching islands rather than individuals. Mau was a visionary man with great conviction in his knowledge, tremendous physical and mental strength, and unwavering courage to break the taboos of the teaching of navigation in order to preserve the precious “talk of the sea.”