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VISIONS & VOICES

‘I can tell the changes’: Grand master navigators on climate change and perpetuating traditions

By Jasmine Stole Weiss



From left, Grand Master Navigator Ali Haleyalur, Grand Master Navigator Sesario Sewralur, and Master Navigator Larry Raigetel at the Guam Museum Dec. 11, 2024, for the Marianas Storytelling Series Micronesia Voyaging event. Photo courtesy of *Jasmine Stole Weiss/The Husk*.

At the same moment thousands of people around the world were seated in theaters watching Disney’s Moana lead her crew across the ocean using the stars in “Moana 2,” a few dozen Guam residents were treated to an exclusive presentation by real-life esteemed wayfinders.

On Dec. 11, 2024, the stars aligned, and three of the Pacific’s most prominent living navigators – Grand Master Navigator Ali Haleyalur, Grand Master Navigator Sesario Sewralur, and Master Navigator Larry Raigetel – gathered at the Guam Museum.

Haleyalur, Sewralur, and Raigetel have navigated the Pacific by reading the wind, the sea, and the sky for decades. It’s what they’ve done diligently, quietly, and humbly for many years, and now they

each teach those sacred skills to students at colleges across Micronesia. They do this work without a Disney budget or a catchy soundtrack or a Hollywood red carpet. For them, wayfinding is their entire lives.

Donning T-shirts, shorts, and handmade mwar mwar, the master navigators spoke of the importance of perpetuating island culture and traditions, unity as people of the ocean, and what they’ve seen of climate change from their view aboard their canoes.

In true Yapese fashion, Grand Master Navigator Haleyalur offered a humble “sirow” at the start of the talk-story event.

“It is paying my respect to all of you,” Haleyalur said.

Haleyalur, Raigetel, and Sewralur acknowledged and expressed their gratitude to the people of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

The islands of the Micronesian region have a long-shared history, after all. Elders had spoken of great navigators from Guam, Rota, Tinian, and Saipan, according to Haleyalur.

“What I know,” Haleyalur said, “we have connections. All our islands. We are connected in a way because our great navigators way ahead of us, they were talking about it.”

The long-standing links between the islands of the region persist in legend and in language. For example, the best sail made of pandanus includes the word “Luta,” the Chamorro name for Rota, Master Navigator Raigetel said. “I guess you could guess where that came from,” he quipped. “Our people came here thousands of years ago and found that the best pandanus is from Rota.”

Raigetel also shared the cliff notes version of a tale of the mother of Weriyan and Fanur and her ties to the Mariana Trench.

The times that he’s crossed the Mariana Trench, Raigetel said its power could be felt.

“I had an eerie feeling just crossing that place. This is a very sacred place,” he said. “There is power, there is energy.”

Raigetel also spoke of words shared between Polowat and Guam and Lamotrek and Guam, words for fish trap and dog. Likewise, James Perez Viernes, who opened the event with an address about the resilience of the islanders in the region, spoke of his great-grandfather who also sailed to the islands and spoke the languages.

If we traded words, there’s no reason to say we didn’t trade navigation knowledge, Raigetel said.

‘Not as it was before’

The grand masters are like many Pacific Islanders on the front lines of climate change. Notably, they have an unparalleled perspective, having spent their entire lives studying the sea and the sun and the stars so closely. They notice things that many could not.

These days, there are storms during months that are typically not expected, according to Grand Master Navigator Sewralur, son of Pius “Mau” Pailug. Sewralur wore a T-shirt with his late father’s image and name.

Prediction methods are also skewed, according to Sewralur.

“Weather predictions, with our ... stars that we look at, it either happens after your prediction or before,” he said. “So it’s been all the climate change.”

For Haleyalur, first thing in the morning, he’s scouring the sky. The color, the shapes, and the movement of the clouds tell him what he

needs to know about the weather to come. At sunset, it’s the same. He scans the horizon looking for what the next day’s weather will bring. From his house in Yap, he pulls up a chair and looks to the clouds.

“So I’m really interested in observing the weather; how the stars are coming up and how far they are up. Because that’s what you can tell, when there is bad weather and good weather,” Haleyalur said. “It’s like what I see this year, and then comes next year, it’s totally different. There is a change.”

He takes note and compares his notes to previous years, and he said there’s been a gradual change.

And then there’s also the rising sea.

“It’s not just the change of the weather, but the sea level rise, yes, it’s really visible for us because the erosion is really becoming worse in our place,” he said. He doesn’t often make it out to his home islands, located beyond the bigger islands of Yap, but during one trip, he said he was surprised to see coconut trees that once lined the land now submerged in the sea.

“There’s also changes that you see in the ocean: the flow of the current, the movement of the sea, the waves. And you can tell that it’s not as it was before,” Haleyalur said. “I can tell the changes.”

Keeping culture, connection alive

Just as their ancestors connected across miles thousands of years ago, so should the people of the islands maintain connections today, the navigators said.

“I think we’re too more focused on political ties than looking into our cultural ties to bring our people together and to help our region to continue our cultural navigation legacy that’s passed on from ancestors,” Sewralur said.

Sewralur spoke of his late father’s well-known efforts in guiding the Hokule’a in 1976 and how his father shared his celestial navigation knowledge with Hawaiians.

“That’s when my dad built a bridge with the Micronesian and Polynesian islands,” Sewralur said. While Pailug understood that navigation knowledge is tightly protected among families, he also knew that those skills could be lost forever.

“The skills of navigation wouldn’t be here anymore or we wouldn’t continue. And now it’s all over the Pacific that we gain our identity as Pacific Islanders, it is because it’s the Micronesians spread into the Polynesians, and then we carry on today,” Sewralur said.

Haleyalur said he’d like to ask island leaders to promote traditions and culture. “Which is very important for us, I think, and if we are to

let go of all these things, I think we will lose our identities,”
Haleyalur said.

Raigetel offered the coconut husk as a symbol of solidarity. In his classes, he teaches his students to break down the husk to create pliable fibers. After soaking in the sea, the fibers are flimsy, but when woven together the humble coconut husk is transformed into sennit rope strong enough to lash a sail to a mast.

“You can see that when you put these two together, it's strong. And then when we weave it with three, a bit more strong. Maybe that means we just need to weave ourselves together to make a solid and strong Micronesian identity, perhaps,” Raigetel said.

All three navigators spoke about the importance of passing down what they know to those who wish to learn. Sharing this knowledge was imperative to its survival hundreds of years ago and so it should continue to be shared.

Haleyalur teaches navigation at the College of Micronesia in Yap. Sewralur teaches navigation at Palau Community College. Raigetel teaches navigation at the University of Guam.

Aside from classroom instruction, there have been filmmakers who have documented the phenom that is celestial navigation. Four of those films were shown ahead of the talk story.

Organized by Humanities Guåhan, Guampedia, the Guam Museum Foundation Inc., and the National Park Service, the event featured a speech by Viernes and screenings of “Carving the Canoe,” “Spirits of the Voyage,” “The Incredible Sail of Lamotrek,” and “Cultural Currents Routes Celebrating Lien Polowat.”

The event was also supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, United We Stand, The Mellon Foundation, and Pacific Asia Travel Association.

“We're so excited about how we can talk about navigation and all of our stories as a way to connect and build those bridges,” said CJ Ochoa, Humanities Guåhan executive director.

As the grand masters spoke about protecting traditional knowledge and culture, Raigetel shared a story of what may just be Pacific ancestors' way of preserving the best of the islands forever.

As the story goes, there was a man centuries ago who sailed throughout Micronesia and he foresaw a change coming, a change that would destroy the islands. There'd be different people soon to make their way to these waters. So the navigator went to the islands, gathered all the knowledge and greatest assets from each place and brought it all to one island. Then he sunk the island and its assets thousands of feet under the surface, Raigetel said.

“We know, because there are waypoints to find this mysterious ghost island that exists between the Carolines and Guam,” Raigetel said.

An underwater island with ties to all of the people of the ocean? It's a story with just enough intrigue that some might say it could be the plot of a multimillion-dollar movie.

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