Scholar tracks origins of Hawaii’s ancestors | Hawaii Tribune Herald

By COLIN M. STEWART

A professor of Hawaiian language believes he has traced the ancestors of Hawaii’s first inhabitants to the remote, Polynesian Outlier atolls to the southwest.

Dr. William H. “Pila” Wilson, with the University of Hawaii at Hilo’s Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikolani College of Hawaiian Language, has been studying the unique linguistic changes between East Polynesian languages — found in the huge geographic area containing Hawaii, Rapanui, and New Zealand — and the languages found in the Outlier atolls. In all, he focused on 73 differences in his article “Whence The East Polynesians?” which was published in the December 2012 issue of Oceanic Linguistics.

Wilson’s findings differ from the commonly held notion among linguists and anthropologists that East Polynesia, including Hawaii, was first settled from Central Western Polynesia, most likely from Samoa, according to his paper.

“Presented here is a very different history, one involving a northern settlement pathway from atolls of the east coast of the Solomon Islands, some 2,000 miles northwest of Samoa,” he wrote.

The findings could have a very tangible effect on the study of Hawaiian culture and language, historians’ understanding of where the Hawaiians came from, and how their ancestry affected the development of their society, he said.

“This could have a big bearing on our understanding of East Polynesia and Hawaii. People have heard me talking about it for a while, but it’s still a pretty novel idea,” Wilson said. “I think for a lot of people, it’s a surprise. It was always assumed they came from Samoa.”

Wilson explained Thursday that the idea first occurred to him in the 1980s, when he was working on his dissertation.

“When I first came to UH-Hilo, I was looking at all Polynesian languages, and pronominal systems. I
noticed a strange connection between the Outliers and Eastern Polynesia. There were interesting similarities and differences between words,” he said.

For example, the word for a type of bird with a curved beak known as the “kiu” became “kiwi” in the Outliers and early East Polynesia, which later developed into the Hawaiian bird name “‘i‘iwi.”

“The latest archaeological research indicates the initial settlement took place as recently as 1,000 years ago,” he said, “which left many wondering why the East Polynesian and Samoan languages were so different.”

Other evidence besides language appears to bear out his theory, Wilson added.

“What archaeologists seem to find is that the East Polynesians had very strong technology for deep-water fishing. But the people in Tonga and Samoa were more agriculturally oriented. They weren’t as dependent on fishing. My connection with these findings is that these tiny little islands (the Outliers) have hardly any land area to grow anything on. They had to develop fishing and navigation to survive,” he said.

The difference between the cultures has long puzzled researchers, he said, but could be explained by his theory, that the East Polynesian ancestors were separated far to the northwest of Samoa on the atolls for a considerable period before they entered East Polynesia.

Wilson was quick to say that while it is never a good idea for a person to say that they are “absolutely right” about something, he added that he would be “very surprised” if his theory is not correct.

That’s not to say, however, that his theory is not without its critics.

“There have been a couple of criticisms of the work,” he said.

One critique is that the languages of people living on an island like Hawaii share similar words for plants with other Polynesians, despite the fact that such plants are not found on the Outlier atolls, which are on average smaller in size than the UH-Hilo campus, Wilson said. Why would those people have words for plants they may have never seen?

Wilson argues, however, that just as modern-day Hawaii residents know what an oak or maple tree is, despite not having them here, so too were the Outlier ancestors aware of other islands’ ecosystems.

“I mean, these were people who were traveling thousands of miles by canoe. They would have known the plant life on a larger island,” he said. “The closest places with mountainous land were only 300 miles. That would have been nothing to people who had traveled 2,000 miles.”

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