a very useful series of “Annotated Print Sources”—the contents of Chapter 4 and, in Chapter 5, a number of “Internet Web Sites”, which are a combination of official government sites and a number of compilations of myth.

An egregious error was found (p. 288): it was not Anthony Hopper (sic) who wrote with Judith Huntsman! Also, Antony may possibly feel somewhat miffed that Judith, alone, is acknowledged as “the foremost contemporary authority on the islands of Tokelau” (ibid.)

In its style, the book (to this reader, at least) is somewhat dated, reminiscent of hegemonic ethnologies from the early 20th century. Some stories seem to have been collected from afar, possibly second or third hand, and suffer a little as a result. For instance, the Wanganui River story of the *taniwha* Tutae-poroporo is classified among the giant lizard (*moko* or *mo‘o*) stories, yet in each of the several versions known to this reviewer Tutae-poroporo was actually a giant eel.

Yet I must not quibble! The plethora of detail thoroughly outweighs the infelicities present.


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Robert Langdon’s last book, before his death in 2003, focuses on plants of South American origin and their distribution in the Pacific Islands before European contact. It consists of several journal articles and books previously written by the author. Building a case for the dispersal of cultivars by American Indians, Langdon examined a range of data from historical sources, linguistics, human biology, archaeology and botanical studies. In essence, the research is intended to vindicate Thor Heyerdahl’s “*Kon-Tiki*” thesis of South American seafaring abilities and culture contact between that continent and several East Polynesian islands, using primarily botanical evidence.

The book is organised into 14 chapters, with the majority examining a wealth of historical references related to plant distribution. This is backed up by an impressive review of the literature on plant biology, expanding the list of cultivated species beyond the better documented sweet potato and bottle gourd. But even if their presence before European contact could be established, one needs to examine alternative modes of dispersal. Langdon believes that South American Indians (fisher-folk or travellers to the Galapagos Islands) could have drifted on balsa rafts to East Polynesia, to Easter Island specifically—the gateway for subsequent plant dispersals. The alternative, that Polynesians could have reached American shores and carried these plants back with them, is rejected by the author. A third hypothesis, natural dispersal by wind, birds or ocean currents, including soil and plants embedded in driftwood, is also quickly dismissed despite recent studies on the feasibility of such transfers and computer simulations. “Natural” dispersal could also have taken place from beached rafts or other types of vessels minus the crew who might have perished at sea or close to shore.
The stage is set in the opening chapter where raftsmen from Southeast Asia are alleged to have made a landfall along the coast of Ecuador about 200 BC, carrying with them banana rootstocks. Their bamboo rafts became the prototype for the South American balsa raft. On these vessels, the sweet potato was introduced to Ecuador from Central America with the name kumar, and then to Easter Island and other Polynesian island groups, as far west as New Zealand. Its appearance in these islands is attributed to Spaniards from the San Lesmes, the “Lost Caravel”, which ran aground on Amanu Atoll east of Tahiti in 1526. Having reached the Society Islands, the crewmen discovered the sweet potato. Some of the crew, accompanied by Polynesian women, eventually made their way to New Zealand and successfully transplanted the tubers there.

Langdon’s painstaking analyses of historical texts and linguistics do not convincingly mesh with evidence from other disciplines, particularly archaeology and human genetics. Even his interpretations of the historical and linguistic data often fail to consider that early European descriptions of plants indigenous to the Americas could be based on mistaken identity, a scenario reminiscent of Columbus’ incorrect description of the coconut (Cocos nucifera) in Cuba. Moreover, as linguists point out, languages often include terms that have no known cognates, which might lend themselves to spurious reconstructions of “extinct” languages. Langdon refers to a vocabulary recorded on Anaa Atoll in the second half of the 19th century “of a now-extinct language that provides a key to some of the linguistic prehistory of Eastern Polynesia” (p. 273). The author’s convoluted argument of a link with a “South American language originally spoken on Easter Island and carried there to Anaa before AD 1100” finds little support among the majority of linguists, archaeologists and historians.

Easter Island is pivotal to Langdon’s theory of culture contact between South America and Polynesia, and here we find Heyerdahl “revisited” when describing the architectural similarities between tower-like chullpa of the Lake Titicaca region and the tupu structures of Easter Island. Indeed, Heyerdahl had assembled a wealth of photographs comparing various East Polynesian, Easter Island and South American architectural styles and statues, but with little attention to their chronological associations. Langdon further elaborates by citing two migrations to Easter Island from South America, the first one from Ecuador or northern Peru by people who were responsible for the introduction of cultivated plants, including sweet potato, banana, soapberry, capsicum, New World cotton and several other plant species, as well as a species of fowl, followed by a second migration of Uru-speakers from Lake Titicaca about AD 1100. In keeping with genealogy and oral history, the year AD 1680 is said to mark the arrival of Polynesian-speaking migrants on the island, who imposed their language while borrowing elements from their predecessors.

Rather than seeing Easter Island as a point of entry from South America before European contact, the archaeological and human biological records, including an analysis of mtDNA from a dozen pre-European burials, support settlement from the west (i.e., Polynesia). Changes in agricultural practices and social organisation can be explained by internal processes, perhaps influenced by climate change, since initial settlement by Polynesian-speakers about AD 800. It is debatable whether two-way voyages were successfully accomplished after the island’s discovery.
Despite looking in the “wrong direction”, Langdon’s work is part of an intellectual current that seeks to better define the nature of trans-Pacific voyaging and culture contact between the far reaches of Remote Oceania and the Americas. DNA analyses on Polynesian chicken bones in a pre-Columbian context in Chile, the similarity between Māori hand clubs and implements associated with the Mapuche culture of south-central Chile, the discovery of Polynesian-like crania on Mocha Island near the Chilean mainland, and parallels between Polynesian and southern California Chumash sewn-plank canoes and fishhooks provide interesting possibilities for cross-cultural contact in need of further investigation. Issues of chronology will remain critical in supporting long-distance contact. Contrary to Langdon’s thesis and in light of what we know about the Lapita expansion and their Polynesian descendants’ subsequent dispersal to the far reaches of Remote Oceania, together with ethnohistoric descriptions of navigational lore and technology, as well as oral traditions, there is compelling reason to believe that, rather than South Americans voyaging west bringing their cultivars to Polynesia, Polynesians travelled east and returned west bearing with them South American cultivars.