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SIX MEN ON A RAFT

SIX men—five Norwegians and a Swede—are at the moment drifting westward across the Pacific from Peru towards the islands of Polynesia. The voyage is being made on a raft of balsa-wood (as most newspaper readers will know by now), and the object of the experiment is to prove the theory of the leader of the expedition, Thor Heyerdahl, that the South Pacific islands could have been visited, and perhaps partly peopled, from South America. So far as "The Listener" has been able to find out, however, proving such a theory would prove little else—save that it is easier to find money and publicity for a spectacular show than for sober and worthwhile research

THE latest news of Expedition Kon-tiki (as it has been called) came the other day in a message from Christchurch, where an amateur radio station (ZL3HL—Flt.-Lieut. E. W. Clutterbuck, of Wigram) reported reception of the expedition's radio messages. At that time about half of the projected journey from Callao to Tahiti, had been covered, and the raft was approximately 1800 miles west-north-west of its point of departure. The radio signals, which had been picked up daily for some time, were becoming weak, but all members of the expedition were well, and the raft was drifting steadily westward.

Seeking a scientific opinion on the value of the expedition, *The Listener* asked Dr. Ernest Beaglehole, lecturer in psychology at Victoria University College, who has done some anthropological fieldwork, what he thought about it.

Heyerdahl was unknown to him, he said, and he doubted very greatly if the voyage would serve any real purpose. Discussing Heyerdahl's theory, he said that, as far as he knew, this was the first expedition to try to prove a theory in such a way. There had been, of course, involuntary drifts across the Pacific—in most cases by canoes blown out to sea while fishing. The accepted theory was that the Polynesian triangle (see illustration) was peopled by an eastward movement, with the Society Islands as the hub, radiating to New Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, and Easter Island; and from Java through the Celebes northward.

Slight Contact with Peru

There must have been some slight contact with Peru. The distribution of the kumara (a South American plant) did not prove that that contact was a strong one. Moreover, there were no traces of contact along the route between Peru and Polynesia, or in the Gilberts, the Ellice Group, Fiji, or Tonga.

Both the megalithic structures and the elaborate featherwork said to be similar in Peru and the Pacific islands in fact showed differences, the stone platforms and Easter Island statues were local developments, and common to Polynesia, rather than importations from Peru or elsewhere.

If the Peruvians had, at one time, journeyed to the Pacific they would have had to rely on fish and sun-dried vegetables for their food, and it was doubtful if these would have lasted long enough for a voyage of 140 days—the time estimated for the drift from Peru to Tahiti. In many respects, he thought, it was a mistake to spend money on an expedition which proved nothing. The same amount applied to solving an orthodox problem would be of far more value. But money always seemed to be available for projects of the "stunt" type, though it was not so easily obtained for legitimate scientific research.

All that the raft voyagers could hope to prove would be that a big raft could drift from Peru to Polynesia, but it would be going against the weight of evidence to infer that there was any sort of continuous contact between the two peoples. Most authorities were of the opinion that the sweet potato came by chance to Polynesia as a result of a voyage made by some early Polynesian navigator, most likely from the Marquesas to Peru and back. The Peruvians themselves were not great seafaring people.

Sir Peter Buck's Views

On the subject of the kumara's distribution, Sir Peter Buck, in his book *Vikings of the Sunrise* says this: "Both

Polynesia and Peru cultivate the sweet potato, which entered Polynesia from the east. The theory of a German scientist, that it was introduced into Polynesia by Spaniards, is untenable. It was in Hawaii in 1250 A.D., and in New Zealand by 1350 at the latest, and it had reached the Society Islands before the final Polynesian voyages were made to the north and south-west."

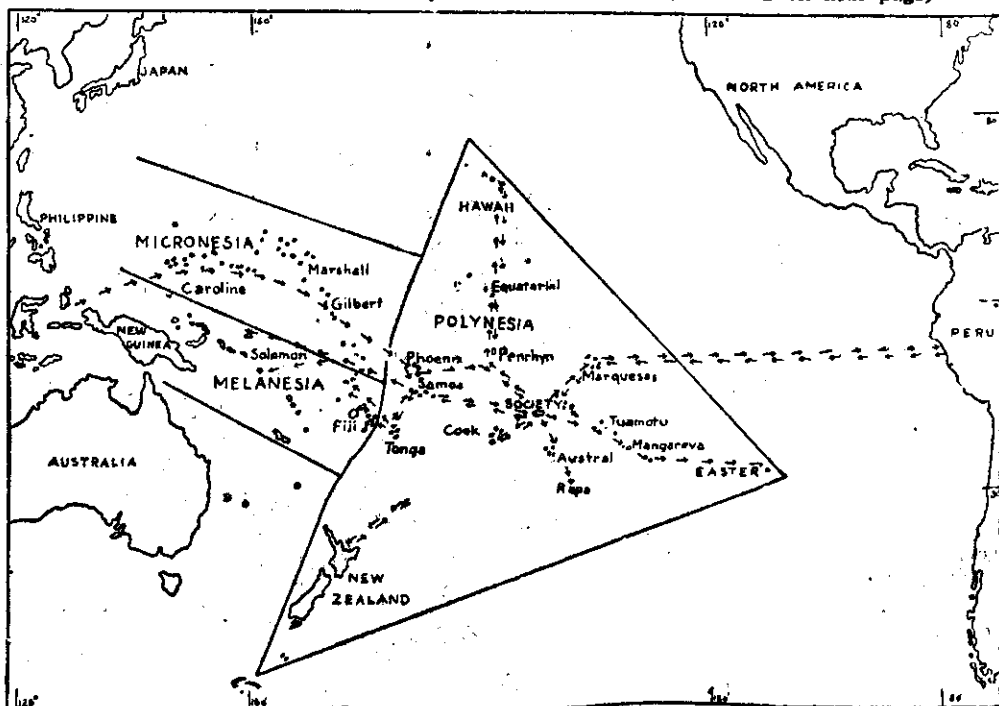
The late Professor Roland B. Dixon, he continues, was convinced that the sweet potato was in Polynesia before Columbus reached America. Dixon says that the plant could only have reached Polynesia from America by the aid of human hands, and since there is no evidence that at any time the Indians of the Pacific coast of South America, where the sweet potato was grown, had either the craft or the skill for making long sea journeys, one is forced to conclude that the transference of the plant was carried out by Polynesians.

The Unknown Sailor

Some time before the 13th Century, an unknown Polynesian voyager sailed east in search of a new land. Though Easter Island is the nearest Polynesian island to America, and the distance of 2030 miles well within the accepted compass of a Polynesian voyaging canoe, no expedition could have been inaugurated from that island because of the lack of timber to build a suitable craft. Buck believes that that expedition hoped to find land within fair distance of their place of departure and that, because of the empty eastern sea they were forced to go on till they reached the South American coast.

From the Marquesas, whence (it is assumed) this early sailor set out, to the north Peruvian coast is a little more than 4,000 miles. Dixon estimates that

(continued on next page)



THIS MAP of the Polynesian triangle is based on one printed as an end-paper to Sir Peter Buck's "Vikings of the Sunrise," but omits two supposititious routes, since rejected by him as improbable. Both of the latter, as originally shown, lay within the triangle itself.