

*“Heiva”: Continuity and Change  
of a Tahitian Celebration*

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In recent years, the arts and cultural traditions of the peoples of the Pacific have drawn much attention, which is focused, not on specific traditions, but on how traditions are being used culturally, economically, and politically. Pacific Islanders are heightening their awareness of their cultural heritage, sometimes marketing this culture for economic gain, and often creating a unified ethnic identity in order to obtain political clout. As a result, cultural traditions have been revived, reinterpreted, and even created.

The scholarly literature associated with this phenomenon debates the importance of such issues as the invention and reinterpretation of traditions and identities, as well as the implications of these contemporary political myths for Pacific communities.<sup>1</sup> Scholars looking for authentic interpretations of past traditions have addressed the creative nature of the current manifestations. As a consequence they have placed themselves in the predicament of either adhering to histories created in the past (by explorers, missionaries, colonial officials, and Western academics) or condoning the contemporary rendition (Keesing 1989). Borofsky, in *Making History*, has also wrestled with this problem, whereas Denning (1980), has maintained that histories are always created and in situations of culture contact the give and take inherent in the situation will determine each group's history of the event.

The conscious manipulation of culture and tradition is a strategy used by Pacific peoples in an effort to disassociate themselves from colonial dominance. Harking back to a traditional past that was exclusively theirs, they choose the elements in their own societies that distinguish them from their oppressors (Keesing 1989, Thomas n.d.). In this selective process,

traditions are used to create a cultural identity based on values and symbols of the past. The context for this process is frequently the festival. All Pacific nations have participated in the Festival of Pacific Arts sponsored by the South Pacific Commission,<sup>2</sup> but most island entities also have their own festivals. In this milieu selected traditions are emphasized and overt assertions of cultural identity are made.

Linnekin has argued that "the selection of what constitutes tradition is always made in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to a modern significance" (1983, 241). This process is what Keesing called modern mythmaking in the Pacific (1989, 20). This myth, however, is frequently used to create a political identity. Or, as Linnekin stated, "Tradition is a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity (1983, 241)."

In Tahiti, the identity created is *la culture ma'ohi*. This concept is usually signified by the word *ma'ohi*, which can be loosely translated as "autochthon" or "indigene." Ripe with connotations, the term makes evident all distinctions between the people of Tahiti (French Polynesia in general) and the *popa'a* or "foreigner."<sup>3</sup> In the fabrication of this identity, the Tahitians are recreating histories and reinterpreting traditions. In this article I shall use these notions as well as the concepts expressed by Linnekin, Keesing, and Dening as a means of understanding the political and cultural identity created by *la culture ma'ohi*. Since this identity is most obviously portrayed within the context of the *heiva*, I shall interpret how the *heiva* has aided in the conception of *la culture ma'ohi* in contemporary Tahitian society.

The *heiva* is a Tahitian celebration with a 108-year history. Because the celebration is often linked with French independence (*La Fête Nationale* or *La Bastille*), many believe that it is not a Tahitian holiday. However, many of the events associated with the *heiva* have historical antecedents in "traditional" Tahitian culture.<sup>4</sup> These traditions have evolved over the last century, but have remained constant in their annual appearance during this festival. Notwithstanding, three events (*marae* reenactments, fire walking, and tattoo) have been introduced within the past 30 years and are rooted more firmly in current political and economic manipulations by the Tahitian Assembly than in "traditional" culture. In spite of the Assembly's promoting their perpetuation, these activities represent the conscious creation of a spectacle whose ultimate effect is to instruct Tahitians about their traditional heritage.

In this article I shall ask why these traditions are being created and who is benefiting from their creation. I shall also examine the political history of this celebration, the events that make it up, and how it is being manipulated today by Tahiti's politicians. I shall present a Tahitian example of the reinterpretation of cultural traditions and illustrate their role in the creation of a political identity, *la culture ma'ohi*. This analysis will also demonstrate that the reinterpretation of traditions has aided in the creation of this identity.

### HISTORY OF THE HEIVA, 1859–1881

*Heiva*, *tiurai*, *Fête*, and *Bastille* are all names for a Tahitian celebration that (usually) takes place in July,<sup>5</sup> and always includes traditional French and Tahitian activities such as parades, games, dance competitions, and outrigger canoe races.

The history of the *heiva* begins with the precariously balanced relationship between the French and the Tahitians. This relationship was problematic because France acquired Tahiti through political intrigue and after four years of warfare. In 1842 Queen Pomare IV was coerced into signing a protectorate agreement between Tahiti and France (Newbury 1980, 106–108), an event that stemmed from the arrest and expulsion of two French Catholic missionaries from Tahiti, grievances by French nationals in Tahiti, and a power play by Tahitian chiefs. These chiefs had their power usurped by Queen Pomare IV,<sup>6</sup> whose allegiance to the British and Anglican ideologies also created an atmosphere of nontolerance for French Catholicism. The French, wanting a foothold in the Pacific, were quick to capitalize on both the insult of expulsion and the current fragile state of the Tahitian polity.<sup>7</sup> The signing of the protectorate agreement was followed by four years of warfare.

About the end of this period, the Tahitians realized that the French were willing to pay for their colony. Pomare IV was recognized as queen and leader of the traditional political structure. The French were to pay for administrative costs, and all land and title disputes were to be settled by the Tahitian government. "Everywhere, at the end of the war, family heads were busy putting their lands in order by 'erecting houses to secure possession of them' and to profit from the demand for cash crops" (Newbury 1980, 124). The French willingness to pay generously for services and crops eased previous tensions.<sup>8</sup>

The French also relaxed many of the restrictions put into law by the English missionaries. Public displays of dance, for example, were no longer illegal, and traditional entertainments once again became commonplace. Even though the missionaries had outlawed public dancing, the Tahitians did not abandon this pastime. Dance remained a part of their entertainments, as did singing; the dance tradition was not lost but continued to thrive and develop within the period from 1819 to 1847. Because of this, together with the laissez-faire policies of many of the French governors, the French played an unwitting but integral role in sustaining Tahiti's traditional arts. There was also a need for France to accommodate Tahiti's political structure:

The politics of assimilation, then, did not result in any redistribution of power or a wholesale incorporation of Tahitians into the new institutions of administration. Rather, those institutions had either to be abandoned or modified to suit local needs. (Newbury 1980, 228)

The French used the Festival to legitimate their colonial position.

The first festival was organized in 1859 to honor Napoleon III's victory over Italy. With the news of the institution of a festival to be held on the emperor's birthday, a celebration was planned to correspond with the festivities in France. This was an overt attempt by the French to project their colonial dominance over Tahiti. However, it was interpreted by the Tahitians as an officially sanctioned opportunity to gather, sing, and dance (Bengt Danielsson, personal communication, November 1989). This *Fête* combined traditional French activities—parades, games, ceremonies, prizes, and banquets—with Tahitian activities—competitions in dancing, singing, outrigger canoe racing, horse racing, and foot racing. It lasted three days, from 14 to 16 August 1859 (Mazellier 1977, 2:463–468).

The success of the celebration led its organizers to suggest that it be an annual event. However, during the 1860s the political structure of Tahiti was quite unstable. *Ari'i* of the other islands were being dethroned, and European and American economic interests were creating a new nobility in the islands. Consequently, it was not until 1871 that the idea was again considered. Organizing the *Fête* took longer than expected and unfortunately it was canceled because of the death of Pomare IV in 1877. Organizers tried again in 1878, but the governor at that time was more concerned with problems arising from a cotton plantation, its owners, and the

importation of Chinese labor (*Encyclopédie de Polynésie* 7, 110–111). These social, economic, and political concerns took priority over both a national holiday and the traditional arts.

Discussing German activities in the Leeward Islands, Newbury stated that “the growth of foreign commerce so near to Tahiti imposed on France ‘the necessity of affirming without delay supremacy in this area’ (1980, 200). The French convinced King Pomare V to cede Tahiti to France, and the deed was officially ratified in February 1881. With this successfully accomplished, organizers set to work to prepare for a celebration of *La République* on 14 July 1881. This celebration had become an annual event in France in 1880 (Mazellier 1977, 3:441).

From its beginnings the *Fête* has always been placed within a European structure of games and activities associated with a holiday or historic event, yet this is not so different from the *heiva* in precontact Tahiti. Often defined as entertainment, the *heiva* incorporated dancing, singing, and sporting events that were accompanied by the presentation of gifts such as *tapa*, gorgets (*taumi*), and food to venerate the *arifi* and their guests (Oliver 1974; Rose 1971; Stevenson 1988). The *Fête* became a forum in which the French governors, the English and French missionaries, and the Tahitian elite were honored. In this way the traditional political structure was perpetuated through visible association with the ruling colonial elite, who were honored guests at the *Fête* (*Journal Officiel* 1881, 1883, 1885). The ease with which this “new” tradition fitted into the “traditional” complex tremendously enhanced the success of these early festivals and emphasized the Tahitian aspects of this French holiday. The *Fête* also became a celebration of the arts, crafts, and skills that remained integral components of Tahitian society. For example, the weaving of palm fronds was needed for house construction; the ability to maneuver an outrigger was essential for fishing; and the accuracy of a javelin throw was important for fishing and hunting. These activities were valued by the Tahitians and played a sustaining role in their changing society.

During the early years of the *Fête* its official function was to celebrate French independence.

*La fête anniversaire de la République française a été célébrée cette année pour la première fois à Tahiti: le 14 juillet a remplacé l'anniversaire du Protectorat. Les organisateurs des fêtes avaient tout mis en œuvre pour célébrer dignement cet anniversaire de notre grande République. (Journal Officiel, 29 July 1881)*

However, the Tahitians did not let this agenda interrupt their cause for celebration, which had nothing to do with French politics but was an excuse to travel to Pape'ete for three days of frivolity. An important event during this time was the *himene* competition. (*Himene* is derived from the Tahitian pronunciation of the English "hymn," meaning songs sung in Tahitian using a Western or religious musical structure.) These competitions were judged by members of the French and Tahitian elite (*Journal Officiel*), and were viewed by them as demonstrating both the sophistication of the Tahitians as well as their ability to assimilate European traditions. Dance, on the other hand, was slow to gain a dominant position in the Bastille Day activities (Amy Stillman, personal communication, Sept 1989). In spite of this, the *Fête* created an arena for the perpetuation of Tahitian culture. In essence it helped to sustain Tahitian identity during the colonial period.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE COLONIAL YEARS, 1881-1945

Between the years of its inception and the years following World War II, the *Fête* remained essentially an annual event, except that it was not celebrated during either of the world wars. The greatest change during this period was in the duration of the festival, which varied from two to five days. As with the first *Fête*, the organizers incorporated traditional European activities such as military parades and games (for both children and adults), as well as Tahitian events such as singing competitions and athletic endeavors. Although the events of each year's festival did vary, the intermingling of European and Tahitian activities remained constant. However, after World War II the emphasis of the *Fête* was on Tahitian, not European, activities (see Figure 1). The first change in emphasis had been after World War I, when an assertion of Tahitian identity coincided with "greater intervention by France, . . . [and] larger subsidies to the local budget" (Newbury 1980, 269).

In the interval between the two world wars, the *Fête* became unique in its role of reinforcer of both colonial power and traditional culture. The pomp and dignity provided by the military parades, the governor's ball, and the use of the French flag as a decorative element in Pape'ete bolstered France's colonial position. The Tahitian cultural presence was equally strong (see Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> The success of the *Fête* stems from the intertwining of European structure and Tahitian format. The governor's ball, a mili-

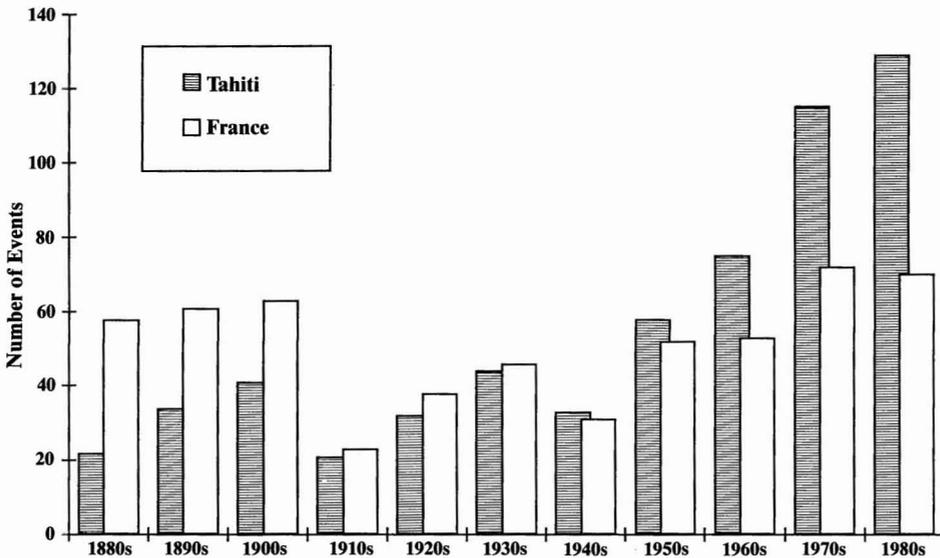


FIGURE 1. French and Tahitian events of the *heiva* by decade.

Sources: Annual listings in the *Journal Officiel* and *La Dépêche*.

Notes:

1 French events include such mainstays as a military parade, a governor's ball, a regatta, and children's games. Athletic events such as swimming, shooting, bicycling, horseracing, and track and field were more sporadic; ceremonies such as a *Fête Venitienne*, a *Fête des Fleurs*, and the decoration of cars rounded out the French program.

2 Tahitian activities were *himene*, dance, costumes, regattas, and outrigger canoe racing. The javelin throw became an annual event in the 1940s. Other athletic endeavors included horseracing, a fruit carriers' race, stone lifting, copra making, and sand carrying. These, as well as craft events, *marae* spectacles, and the *umu-ti*, flourished after 1960.

tary parade, and the flying of the Tricolor were events that reassured colonial officials, expatriates, and tourists. They could see the *Fête* as a Western enterprise. The Tahitians, on the other hand, saw the competitions in dance, singing, ancient costumes, and outrigger canoes as integral to Tahitian culture. The ability to satisfy both parties and encourage both sets of customs is the key to the success of this festival. Its role during the colonial period was to reconcile the needs of the colonial government and the traditional culture. Despite changes in the type and number of athletic events

(both European and Tahitian), the heart and soul of the *Fête* remained constant. Consequently it became renowned in both Europe and the United States.

The fame of the *Fête* was just one of Tahiti's many enticements for Europeans. A romantic perception of Tahiti had been firmly embedded in the European mind since the days of Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1768) and James Cook (1767–1780).<sup>11</sup> Artists such as Gauguin and Matisse lived and worked in Tahiti, and writers such as Melville (*Typee*) and Loti (*The Marriage of Loti*) strengthened the romanticized Western perceptions of Tahiti even further. Hollywood was lured to Tahiti to film *White Shadows of the Pacific* (1928), *Tabu* (1931), *The Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), and *Hurricane* (1937). These perceptions created the myth of Tahiti, which has always drawn tourists to these islands. During the 1930s tourist pamphlets became commonplace in Europe and America. Even with such publicity attempts to attract tourists, the *Fête* held true to its characteristic Tahitian format of athletic events, dance competitions, and frivolity. Tourism did not have a large impact on the *Fête*. "Tourist" spectacles such as the "fire walk" were commented on by visitors in 1885, 1897, and 1901, although none of these instances appeared on the *Fête* program.

After World War II France, as had the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain, decided that nuclear power was the key to a strong nation. In 1958, Charles de Gaulle assumed the presidency and a full-scale program of bomb testing got underway. The desert of Algeria was chosen as a test site, but after Algeria won its independence in 1962 France looked toward French Polynesia. "The site, established in an archipelago under French sovereignty, is made up of two uninhabited atolls [Moruroa and Fangataufa], which lie several hundred kilometres from inhabited areas. . . . There is obviously no region in Europe which has the same characteristics" (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, quoted in Firth 1987, 12). Much has been written about the atomic testing in French Polynesia (Firth 1987, Danielsson and Danielsson 1986, Danielsson 1974), and its effects on Tahiti have been tremendous. These same scholars write of the Tahitians' love-hate relationship with the bomb because of the economic "benefits" that have come with it. As a result of the testing program, military installations were enlarged, construction was needed at the test site, and an airport was built at Faaa in Tahiti to accommodate the needs of the French military. Jobs and tourism both increased, producing changes in both Tahitian culture and the *Fête*.

Essentially, the Faaa airport opened Tahiti to the modern world. Instead of an eight-day ship voyage, travelers faced an eight-hour plane ride. People, goods, mail, and news arrived on the island with increasing frequency, intensifying the imposition of Western ideologies and consumerism. The number of tourists rose from four thousand to fifty thousand a year between 1960 and 1970 (*Encyclopédie de Polynésie* 8:126–127). Obviously tourism could not escalate in such a fashion without affecting other aspects of Tahitian life. In 1963, when the French brought the bomb, military forces were expanded and money flowed in. Tens of thousands of French military personnel arrived in the islands. As in the past, the Tahitians countered this onslaught with an intensification of Tahitian activities during the *Fête*. Events that stressed the cultural and artistic values of the Tahitians helped to reinforce Tahitian ideals at a time of exaggerated foreign intervention. The *Fête* was, after all, a festival celebrating Tahitian culture, not French imperialism.

It was during this period (mid-1950s to mid-1960s) that the Tahitians began to institutionalize their culture. In 1956, Tahitian dance had been revolutionized, when Madeleine Moua created the first semiprofessional troupe in an attempt to codify the dance, enrich its traditions, and elevate it to an art form. Dance competitions were no longer between districts but between professional groups. This change also led to a revival and efflorescence of dance costuming.

In 1965 *Le Maohi Club* was organized to aid in the creation and reinterpretation of traditional values. One example is the *Tane Tahiti* (Mr Tahiti) competition, which, in distinct contrast to the European beauty pageant, symbolized traditional Tahitian values such as strength, agility, ability in subsistence activities (fishing, paddling, copra preparation), and proficiency in the Tahitian language. During this period (1967–1980) *L'Académie Tahitienne* was formed to study and standardize the Tahitian language as well as the art of oratory. The academy also recorded many genealogies and myths. *Le Musée de Tahiti et des Îles*, *Le Musée Gauguin*, *Le Centre Métiers d'Art*, and OTAC (*Office Territorial d'Action Culturelle*) were all created in this period. The function of each of these organizations, funded by the Tahitian government, was to promote Tahitian values and to teach the Tahitian people about their traditional past. Marco Tevane, the minister of Culture and Education at this time, was responsible for this overt promotion of Tahitian culture. He felt that institutionalization was necessary if the Tahitian people were to rediscover

their own traditions (Marco Tevane, personal communication, November 1989). He spent a great deal of his political life fighting for *la culture ma'ohi*.

### CONTEMPORARY POLITICS, 1960 TO THE PRESENT

By the mid-1970s another change was taking place. An important political issue in Tahiti was the call for the French to accept the Tahitian language as a national language. In 1977, the festival organizers officially changed the name from *La Fête* or *La Bastille* to *tiurai* (the Tahitian word for July). In the minds of some Tahitians this alleviated the *tiurai*'s overt association with the French. The name change gave the celebration a more explicit Tahitian identity.<sup>12</sup> *Tiurai* had been used to designate the *Fête* in the past, but at this point it became the official name.

A later political maneuver resulted in the beginning date of the *tiurai* being moved to 29 June in 1984. This date was chosen to commemorate the giving of French Polynesia to France in 1881. By starting the *tiurai* on the twenty-ninth, the Tahitian government hoped to emphasize a beneficial relationship between Tahiti and France. The *tiurai* recorded the birth of a new constitution, affirmed Tahitian identity, and strengthened the ties to France (*Tiurai i Tahiti*, 1984). The relationship between Tahiti and France was further enhanced when politicians decided that the conclusion of the *tiurai* should coincide with the beginning of the Bastille Day festivities on 14 July. Even though this relationship appears incongruous, few Tahitians think it peculiar. "Polynesian traditions and language remain firmly rooted, and many French Polynesians regard their pride in their heritage as compatible with close connections between the territory and France" (Henningham 1989, 108–109).

The political implications of these changes of names and dates are important because the changes had a role in creating a Tahitian identity. Jacques Teheiuira, who was minister of Education and Cultural Affairs at this time, played a key role in this decision-making process. In 1986 the *tiurai* was renamed *Heiva i Tahiti*, or more commonly, simply *heiva*. The dates were again changed, and continue to change each year, but are usually in July and always include a one-day recognition of *La Bastille*. In the official program of the 1986 *heiva*, Teheiuira stated:

June 29, 1986, second anniversary of the Festival of Autonomy, marks the birth of a new cultural tradition in the history of the Maohi people: that of "Heiva i

Tahiti.” *Heiva* is, first of all, the gathering of a whole community under its flag, symbol of its dawning sovereignty. *Heiva* is also the opportunity given to the Polynesian[s] to express [their] innate sense of ancestral hospitality, of love and fraternity. It is most of all the explosion of the wonderful joy of living that has always been [theirs], and is a large part of Tahiti’s international fame. *Heiva* is also the expression of our gratitude to the great lady of Tahitian dancing, Madeleine Moua, whose troupe named *Heiva*, was essential in the rebirth of traditional dancing. Beyond its historical, political, cultural meaning, its symbolics of festivities, dancing and singing, of “*joie de vivre*”, and through the homage paid to Madeleine Moua, the term *Heiva i Tahiti* does sound like an ideal name to celebrate this great annual Polynesian festival. (*Heiva i Tahiti* 1986)

The language he chose provides an insight into the framework for this Tahitian identity. The *heiva* was to be a “new cultural tradition,” implying the incorporation of new and old traditions integral to Tahitian culture. This culture is based on values that emphasize hospitality, love, fraternity, and “*joie de vivre*.” Teheiuira invoked the monarchy as an ideal as opposed to a colonial government, and spoke of the international fame—the myth of Tahiti—that brings tourism. Finally, he mentioned the dance, the heart and soul of both the *heiva* and the Tahitian people. The identity being created was therefore meaningful in terms of both the traditional past and the reinterpreted culture of the present. The following year Teheiuira addressed this new Tahitian identity and its creation:

Since the Territorial Office for Cultural Action (OTAC) has presided over the destiny of the biggest festival of Polynesian cultural identity, the *Heiva*, this celebration has undergone a continuous evolution along with the major events that have marked the history of Polynesia during the past decade. In fact, we have passed from the hundred-year-old tradition of the *Tiurai* to a new cultural tradition, that of *Heiva i Tahiti*. This mutation, however important its historical, political and cultural significance, has, in no way, shaken the symbolism of the festival, allowing [all] Polynesian[s] to express [their] innate sense of ancestral hospitality, [their] love, fraternity and wonderful “*joie de vivre*.” At the dawn of the third millennium, at a time of unprecedented development in Polynesia, when time and distances are more and more overcome, it is comforting to note that Maori traditions are thriving. I therefore invite you to share in the joy, in the quest for the memory of gestures and traditions, in the *Heiva i Tahiti*, 1987. (*Heiva i Tahiti* 1987)

In this address Teheiuira spoke of OTAC, which in 1980 was given an official mandate to develop *la culture ma’ohi*. He also addressed the concept

of a “new cultural tradition” as well as the historical and cultural significance of the festival. This mutation has cultural and symbolic value. The contemporary Tahitian identity is a creation and is acknowledged as one. The Tahitians are able to maintain their incongruous relationship with the French because their identity is seen to be in opposition to the French. The *heiva* therefore becomes not only a symbol of identity and cultural traditions, but a tool to teach the Tahitians about a traditional past—to reinterpret and to reconstruct. And the *heiva* is an event important to politicians in their attempts to control and manipulate a cultural tradition on the threshold of the twenty-first century. With this control, Tahitian leaders can encourage those cultural values they deem important to Tahiti’s survival in a changing Pacific.

In 1988 Georges Kelly replaced Teheiura as minister of Culture. In his address at the opening of the 1988 *heiva*, Kelly stated:

Even though French Polynesia is experiencing on the eve of the 21st century a spectacular development which brings it up to the rank of the greatest countries of the Pacific, the Culture and the traditional way of thinking still hold a privileged position in the Polynesian community. This Polynesia at the peak of progress, which holds the flag of faithfulness to its past up very high, that is today’s Polynesia, the “Polynesia of Contrasts.”

The *Heiva i Tahiti*, this great popular celebration which the Polynesian people can be proud of, is the most lively and indestructible witness of our proud affection for our Ma’ohi Culture. It embodies the charm, the friendliness and the gentle way of life of Polynesia through its songs, its dances, its music and its colours. It invites one to the spontaneous and generous gathering of a people proud to revive its past. The *Heiva* is the Celebration Of The Polynesian Heart. (*Heiva Taupiti* 1988)

These comments are important to this argument because of the “Tahitian identity” being created. This identity, *la culture ma’ohi*, has taken decades to become popular. After World War II, an independence movement began and the term *ma’ohi* was used to reinforce the Tahitian ethnic identity in contrast to the French (see Danielsson 1974). At this time Pouvanaa, the leader of the independence movement, suggested that the Tahitians not participate in a colonial *Fête*. He stated “*Les Tahitiens doivent s’abstenir de participer au Juillet ou ils vont faire les clowns pour amuser les popaa*” (Mazellier 1977, 464–465). The relationship between the *Fête* and Tahitian identity has been a long-standing, occasionally tense

one, in which the Tahitians came to emphasize Tahitian activities in the *Fête* rather than not participate. The term *ma'ohi* became associated with these activities and, by extension, with a Tahitian identity.

Today, *ma'ohi* is used by some to inspire independence, by others to fund cultural programs, and by still others to distinguish the Tahitians who understand their environment from the French who seek to destroy it with their bombs.

To call oneself *Maohi* is to follow the same process as that which implies the entire genealogy in Polynesia, that is to say that one can affirm with certainty that one isn't *hutu painu*, a foreigner. . . . *Maohi* is the community of all those who claim to be of the same past, culture and language which constitute the common trunk and which will have the same destiny. (Raapoto 1988, 5–6)

### THE MODERN HEIVA

The events that constitute this celebration are, for the most part, competitions—one island against another, one district against another, one group against another. Status and prestige are the integral aspects of precontact Tahitian society that have easily converted to the athletic and artistic competitions of today. Two specific competitions have not only created a national identity but given Tahiti international recognition—dance competitions and outrigger canoe racing. These activities had played an integral role in traditional Tahitian culture and were first introduced to Europe by the early explorers (Stevenson 1988; n.d.a). Other events in the *heiva* have their antecedents in long-established activities associated with warrior training as well as subsistence, social, and religious activities.

However, three events represent “new” additions to the activities associated with the *heiva*: the reenactment of ceremonies at the *marae* first seen in 1954; the fire walk beginning in 1958; and the tattoo, which was introduced in 1982. These activities are directly linked to traditional Tahitian society, and could be said to embody its essence. The *marae* was a religious enclosure where the *ari'i* would gather to pray and offer sacrifices to the gods. The belief in the gods and the descent of the *ari'i* from these gods was the central element of the Tahitian social system. The ceremonies held at the *marae* were sacred, and only a select few people were allowed to witness them. The fire walk, or *umu-ti*, was also a sacred ceremony and was practiced on Ra'iatea, the most sacred of the Society Islands. There is scant documentation of the fire walk, but Teuira Henry

does mention its existence and its essential characteristics (1928, 215), including the crossing of a heated bed of rocks by a priest and some of his assistants or followers. Chanting and the evocation of goddesses' names were part of the ceremonies that preceded and followed the "fire walk" (Henry 1928, 215). As with the *marae* ceremonies, the inherent sacredness of this ceremony limited the number of people who participated.

In contrast, everyone in Tahitian society was tattooed. These markings distinguished age grades, the social rankings of individuals, and the organizations and endeavors with which they were associated (Oliver 1974; Rose 1971; Stevenson 1988). Men also used tattoo as a means of decoration, and, as in many cultures, to demonstrate their fortitude (Rubin 1988). Missionaries limited these activities in the nineteenth century, and they ceased to have importance in a changing world.

Today the *marae* reenactments and the fire walk play a different role in Tahitian society. They attract large crowds of interested individuals, who gather to glimpse a part of their past. The *umu-ti* emphasizes a spiritual relationship between the Tahitians and their gods, and the *marae* reenactments demonstrate the elegance and pomp of Tahiti's traditional elite. Both are used to teach the Tahitians of their precolonial past—something not found in French history books. Tattoo, on the other hand, has reemerged as an art form that represents something integrally and culturally Tahitian and is a symbol of Tahitian identity.

The inclusion of these activities in the *heiva* is important in light of the function of these "traditions." Recent *marae* reenactments (1986, 1987, 1989) were masterminded by the quintessential Polynesian showman, Tavana—an American entrepreneur who claims Tahitian descent. He is perhaps best known for the Polynesian revue that bore his name at the Moana Hotel in Waikiki. His theatrical spectacles in Tahiti draw bits and pieces from all of French Polynesia and artistic license is taken in his recreations of Tahitian traditions (Stevenson n.d.b). For instance, Marquesan imagery is often seen on Tahitian *marae*, costumes have been modernized (cloth instead of *tapa*), and the themes (including chants and songs) are liberally reinterpreted from myths and historical sources. This is not bothersome to the Tahitian community, however, as many are unaware of the liberties taken, and those who are recognize that Tavana is not desecrating sacred ground. The site of Tavana's spectacles is *Marae Arahurahu*, a *marae* renovated and embellished (with stones from other *marae*) by the *Société des Océaniennes*. They:

Undertook to rebuild one marae so that the tourists might look at such a large edifice. The worked stones were collected in the vicinity. The reconstruction was based on Dr. K. P. Emory's indications. This monument was inaugurated in July 1954 by a magnificent folk procession. (Garanger 1969, 29)

This particular *marae* was created for tourism and the artistic license taken in Tavana's presentations is a reflection of the tourist milieu. Calling *Marae Arahurahu* a tourist attraction is perhaps a Western convention. The *marae* reenactments are regarded as theatrical pieces by their creators as well as by those beguiled by the spectacle created. The purpose of these events is to exemplify the practices and religious beliefs of the ancient Tahitian elite. They instruct the contemporary community about traditional Tahitian society. As spectacles, they are events for which admission is charged, and are clearly associated with tourism.

Only a small percentage of the audience is composed of tourists, however; the majority are Tahitians, French, or *demi* (half-Tahitian, half-European) who are intrigued by the cultural manifestations presented. The concept of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1973) comes into play at these spectacles. Everyone watching takes on the role of a "tourist" even though some of them might be indigenous to the island. The tourist milieu therefore provides a forum for situations and spectacles not intended for "tourist consumption."

The fire walk is also part of this same milieu. The program of the Fourth South Pacific Arts Festival described the fire walk:

Fire Walking, *umu-ti*, is a sacred ceremony respected by all. It is not any kind of folkloric activity. It has kept its authenticity.

Fire Walking nearly disappeared under the influence of Occidental civilization. This is one aspect of our culture which stayed untouched.

In the past, numerous priests have performed this ceremony. We see it as a survival of a cultural heritage handed down from generation to generation. It was perceived by the Maohi civilization as the link between [humans] and gods.

The spectacle, whose antecedents go back to the 1897 *tiurai*, consists of a priest and his assistants who invoke the names of two mythical heroines, Hina-nui-te'a'ara and Te vahine-nui-tahura'i, before crossing a pit of heated stones. Clothed in skirts, garlands, and wreaths of shredded green and yellow ti leaves, and carrying wands of ti, they would brush at the hot stones as they proceeded across. The purpose of the ceremony was to gain the favor of the gods during times of scarcity and starvation so that the

necessary nutrients for survival would be available (Henry 1928, 215). "It was a sight well worth seeing. It was a most clever and interesting piece of savage magic, but from the evidence I have just given I am obliged to say (almost regretfully) that it was not a miracle" (Langley 1901, 544).

There are many reasons for the inclusion of these activities in the *heiva*. First, in their unadulterated form they are indigenous events. Because they reenact ceremonies once sacred and associated with the gods, they are idealized acts glorifying the ancient past and are therefore an important element of Tahitian culture. Secondly, they are part of an educational process, not only to teach Tahitians about past traditions, but to transmit them from generation to generation. Finally, they are spectacles that both glorify a traditional past and counter a colonial present.

The inclusion of a tattoo artist, practicing the craft, in the *heiva* events can also be seen as a spectacle. The word itself comes from the Tahitian *tatau* and was introduced into the English language by British sailors on Cook's voyages. The traditional Tahitian designs were both bold and dainty, the primary design being the *taomaro*, or buttocks tattoo. The motifs of the *taomaro* were described by James Morrison: "everyone pleases their own fancy in the number of lines or the fashion of them, some making only one broad one, while others have 5 or 6 small ones ornamented with stars and sprigs" (1935, 221). Other images such as "ill designed figures of men, birds, or dogs, and geometric patterns of circles, crescents, and z's" were noted by Cook (1768). Tahitian tattoo was not, however, the full body tattoo found in the Marquesas. During the 1980s, Tavana created his own designs, interspersing them with ones seen in Samoa and the Marquesas. He has created both a new inventory of tattoo designs and a new function for their acquisition, and he has also perpetuated the manner in which the operation is performed—by hand, using a mallet and toothed instrument of bone. The dye is created by mixing the soot of the candlenut with water (Beaglehole 1963, 1:336).

Designs of Polynesian origin are seen on a large number of Tahitians today. A majority of these individuals appear to be involved in some way with the traditional arts and culture of Tahiti. Many dancers, for example, sport tattoos. Without an inventory it is impossible to speculate on the number and placement of these marks, but the following generalizations can be made. Women, as in precontact times, for the most part wear tattoos on their wrists and ankles. The designs employed are either geometric or leaflike and create the appearance of a bracelet or anklet.

Men, on the other hand, use more of their bodies as a canvas. I have seen tattoos on the arms, calves, thighs, chest, back, buttocks, and hip, and at least three men have full body tattoos.

A key to the florescence of this art form is its acceptance by Tahitian society as a whole. When Tavana began tattooing in the early 1980s those who were tattooed were politically associated with youth gangs or the independence movement (Tea Hirshon, personal communication, July 1989). Today the association is with a cultural ideology, that tattooing represents something inherently Tahitian. With the effort to promote *la culture ma'ohi* and to create a Tahitian identity within the Pacific region, tattoo plays a vital and important role in contemporary Tahitian society.

To some a tattoo is a mark of manhood—something macho. To others it is a fashion statement. To others still, it is a symbol of cultural awareness and commitment. An outstanding example is Ioteve Tuhipua, a dancer from the age of twelve. Teve was tattooed (with the help of Tavana) by the Samoan artist Lesa Li'ō. Since acquiring his full body tattoo, Teve has been seen in many of Tavana's *marae* spectacles, in movies, advertising, and as a key figure in the Tahitian delegation to the 1988 South Pacific Arts Festival. He is the personification of the renaissance of the tattoo.

Although the uniqueness of the *heiva*, *tiurai*, *Fête*, or *Bastille* lies in the seemingly incongruous relationship between France and Tahiti, this working relationship allows the perpetuation of the two disparate cultural traditions. As a cultural manifestation that has evolved over the past hundred years from a French festival with Tahitian events to a Tahitian festival in a French colony, the *heiva* has reinforced traditional cultural activities during a period of colonization, and has facilitated the maintenance of a Tahitian identity.

The *heiva* today is seen as a Tahitian festival put on for and by the Tahitians. Its role as a purveyor of Tahitian cultural values is implicit in the events that make it up, which have not changed drastically during the past hundred years. French children's games such as *course des échasses* (stilt-walking), *colin-maillard* (blindman's buff), and *jeux à la corde* (jump rope) have been eliminated, but have been replaced by modern carnival games and rides. The events for each *Fête* reflected a changing popular tradition as well as the interests of the organizing committee, which was responsible for deciding which events were and were not important to both the French and the Tahitians, and therefore, which events would

constitute each *Fête*. Early on, events that stressed French athleticism as well as colonialism, like sharpshooting, were intermingled with Tahitian athletic events such as outrigger canoe racing. Between World War I and World War II European games such as soccer, rugby, boxing, and basketball became popular. But after World War II the only surviving European event was horse racing, which the Tahitians had incorporated into their own milieu by riding bareback clothed in *pareu* and flower lei.

One important change, instigated after World War II, was the incorporation of competitions focusing on subsistence activities, crafts, and Tahitian games of strength or ability. These activities include copra preparation, the fruit carriers' race, the orange carriers' race, spear fishing, *tapa* making, *tifaifai* (appliqué making), plaiting, *hei* (floral garland) making, stone lifting, and the sand carriers' race.<sup>13</sup> The admission of these events into the *heiva* is directly related to a renewed French interest in the territory. That is to say, as Tahiti was declared a "*quartier de France*" the Tahitians reiterated their own identity by including events in the *Fête* that were inescapably Tahitian. At the same time there was a decline in French activities. The French no longer needed the *heiva* to assert colonial dominance: they had Moruroa, France's bomb-test site. This correlation between increased French intervention and increased awareness of Tahitian cultural activities is a survival strategy that has worked well for the Tahitians. It is a strategy important to culture change in general, and one that is exemplified by the *heiva*. (To visualize the change in emphasis from a European festival to a Tahitian festival see Figure 1).

Another important aspect of the *heiva* is that it was and continues to be underwritten by the French and Tahitian governments. This could suggest many things, but signifies most importantly the satisfaction of separate, seemingly contradictory agendas. The French encouragement of Tahitian cultural activities attracts tourism and income, as well as legitimizes the French role as protectors and preservers of cultural traditions. For their part, the Tahitians use the *Fête* to educate their people about a past not found in French history books, to sustain subsistence activities and marketable skills, and to encourage tourism, which produces income not subject to French control. Within the past twenty years the *heiva* has become increasingly Tahitian, as shown by the events that constitute it, by the audience, and by the fact that the language of the *heiva* is primarily Tahitian. There is an emphatic relationship between the *heiva* and the "traditional" culture and ideology that it nourishes. From this a Tahitian iden-

tity—aware of its past as well as its importance in the future—has been created; it demonstrates the vitality of this culture in a changing Pacific.

### THE HEIVA AND TAHITIAN IDENTITY

The political aspects of the *heiva* and the *ma'ohi* identity are couched more in rhetoric than in action. Most politicians suggest that the Tahitian cultural values they promote or legislate have created benefits for Tahitians both economically and socially; they rarely admit to any political interpretations. Others, especially the *demi*, are intrigued by the implications of this cultural identity but use it primarily for their own benefit (to acquire land).<sup>14</sup> Of course, there are others who see *la culture ma'ohi* as an assertion of identity, an identity demanding independence. However, at this juncture, the political parties in Tahiti are too divided to use their created identity in this or any other way. Some aspects of the *heiva* and *la culture ma'ohi* are yet to be exploited.

In other areas of the Pacific traditions are being used to create political identities, but there, in contrast to Tahiti, politicians are using these identities to their fullest extent. In the Solomon Islands the Pijin term *kastom* has come to mean more than “custom” or “tradition.”

Kastom everywhere represents a commitment to pride, as counter to colonial racism and scorn for ‘native’ ways, a commitment to the ancestors and their rules, a commitment to communal solidarity rather than individualism, to lands and villages rather than money and progress. (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, 371).

In Hawai'i, cultural and political identity have become intertwined (Linnekin, 1990). As Hawaiians fight political battles concerning sovereignty and land rights, their involvement in cultural activities intensifies. Hula, canoe racing, and civic clubs all promote ethnic identity. “Indeed the use of tradition to define cultural identities has become an international trend (Keesing 1982, 300).

Culture in the Pacific has become a symbol of a traditional past, an emerging political identity, and a commodity to be sold both to indigenous peoples and to the tourist market. Culture has become a means of validating a traditional past. Pacific Islanders are fashioning this past in their efforts to create a future—a future unique to themselves and separate from the colonial governments under whose reign many traditions were

lost (Linnekin, 1990). The symbolic nature of cultural traditions is evident in this argument. *Marae* reenactments, the *umu-ti*, and tattoo are manifestations of a traditional heritage transformed into currently meaningful interpretations. The revival of tattoo is, perhaps, the best example as it is a lasting symbol of commitment—a mark of cultural identity. Ancient traditions have been reinstated in a contemporary setting. Their value is not solely a link to the past; it is a hope for the future.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

1 A short list of the contributors to this debate includes: Robert Borofsky, James Clifford, Greg Dening, Eric Hobsbawm, Roger Keesing, Jocelyn Linnekin, Terence Ranger, Marshall Sahlins, and Robert Tonkinson.

2 The South Pacific Commission created the Festival of Pacific Arts to promote and perpetuate the traditional arts of the Pacific as well as to allow for a better cultural understanding between Pacific peoples. The festival takes place every four years in a different Pacific nation. The first was held in 1972.

3 The subtleties of this term and the ways in which it is currently being used will be further explained later in this article.

4 *Traditional* is a problematic term due to the various meanings and implications of the word, which are the focus of a large scholarly debate. "Traditional," for many Tahitians means the life and culture of Tahiti in the period before European enculturation (1767–1819). As in Hawai'i (Linnekin 1983, 242), the most frequently used source for this period is the writings of a nineteenth century missionary. These were compiled by Teuria Henry and published in 1928. In this article "traditional" will, therefore, denote this Tahitian definition.

5 *Heiva* and *tiurai* are both Tahitian words. *Heiva* is most often translated as "celebration" or "dance." *Tiurai* is the Tahitian version of the English "July." *La Fête* is French for festivity, festival, or holiday and *La Bastille* is the term that simultaneously symbolizes the storming of the French prison and the assertion of French liberation. As used for Tahiti's celebration, these various labels reflect the event's multiple meanings for its differing constituents.

6 Tahiti's political history is punctuated by status rivalry and a jockeying for position. The British, however, claimed Pomare II the victor after the battle of *Fei Pi* in 1815 (see Oliver 1974). Shortly afterward the *to'ohitu* (a Tahitian court) was organized, comprising seven individuals of chiefly rank, many of whom were adversaries of the Pomares. It was this organization to which these Tahitian politicians belonged.

7 At this time, Pomare IV's rivals were quite displeased by her attempts to use her position to acquire land. Land tenure was the key to Tahitian titles and rank, and the uncertainties created by land disputes contributed to the delicate state of her sovereignty (Newbury 1980, 100–102).

8 This cavalier attitude of the French, together with the Tahitian desire for monetary recompense, paved the way for Tahitian dependency on French funding.

9 I use this term to demarcate the years between 1881 (the giving of Tahiti to France) and the post World War II years leading up to the referendum in 1956 establishing internal government in Tahiti.

10 Each year, the schedule of events for the *Fête* was published in the *Journal Officiel* and *La Dépêche*.

11 Much has been written about European perceptions of the South Pacific. This literature focuses on notions of the noble savage, La Nouvelle Cythere (Bougainville's name for Tahiti), and the impact of the South Pacific on European thought. For further information see Daws 1980 and Smith 1985.

12 It is interesting to note that a word (*tiurai*) introduced by English missionaries was used to validate the Tahitian character of this event.

13 These activities are only briefly mentioned here as the purpose of this essay is to focus on three "invented" traditions: *marae* reenactments, fire walking, and tattoo. For a more elaborate discussion of the athletic and artistic endeavors of the *heiva*, see Stevenson n.d.a.

14 Within the past decade demonstrating one's genealogical ties to land has become a fashionable way of acquiring it.

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