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# VOLUME 1 ETHNOGRAPHY



## CHAPTER 1 *INTRODUCTION*

"Tahiti is far famed yet too little known." Thus wrote J.M. Orsmond in 1848 (Henry 1928:I), and the same assertion can be made in 1972. Thousands of pages had been published about Tahiti and its neighboring islands when Orsmond uttered his judgment, and tens of thousands have been published since that time, but a unified, comprehensive, and detailed description of the pre-European ways of life of the inhabitants of those Islands is yet to appear in print. The present work, lengthy as it is, makes no such claim to comprehensiveness; rather, it is concerned mainly with the social relations of those inhabitants, and it serves up only enough about their technology, their religion, their aesthetic expressions, and so forth, to place descriptions of their social relations in context and render them more comprehensible.

I began this work many years ago, mainly to provide me and my coresearchers with a background — an ethnographic base line — or anthropological studies I was carrying out in some present-day communities in the Society Islands. As our library endeavors progressed, however, I became convinced that a study of the kind and scope now being presented would be a useful thing in itself for several reasons.

First, the picture that began to take shape was of a way of life of surprising richness, complexity, vitality, and sophistication. The institutions of this society invite comparison less with most Pacific island societies that I know about, from personal observation and from reading, than with societies that historians have come to call "civilizations." It seemed to me then, as it continues to do so now, that so populous and variegated a society as this once was deserves, and even demands, scholarly reconstruction quite apart from any scientific purposes that might therewith be served. For modern man, living in a world trending toward uniformity, some humanistic interests might be aroused and gratified by contemplation of this ancient Tahitian way of life.

Moreover, another inducement is added to the humanistic reasons for this reconstruction by the very fact that the subject is Tahiti. Ever since the *Dolphin*, *Endeavour*, and *Boudeuse* returned to Europe from these Islands two centuries ago, Tahiti has captured and held the interest of the Western

world, serving variously as a model for philosophers, an image for poets, and a mecca for romantics.<sup>1</sup>

The scientific purposes that may be served by my reconstruction derive mainly from Tahiti's ethnological situation — that is, membership in a large "genus" of Pacific island societies demonstrably interrelated historically, and probably "genetically," by many linguistic and other cultural ties. This situation, therefore, permits and encourages comparative study aimed at understanding how and why variations came about in customs that were once alike. Needless to say, scholars have grasped this opportunity with eagerness, and scores of studies comparing everything from tools and crafts to social stratification and cosmology have been published. All this would be very fine for the science of man provided the "facts" on which such comparisons were made were true.

When the comparisons I speak of have to do with such tangible, durable objects as stone tools and reconstructable temple pyramids, all well and good. But when scholars seek to compare such intangibles as "chieftainship" or "social stratification" or "sacredness," the results can be no more credible than the information and interpretations thereof on which they are based. As a result of my long and near-exhaustive study of primary materials on ancient Tahiti, I have come to doubt or discredit much of the "information" about Tahiti used in such comparisons.

One explanation for the shortcomings of many comparisons lies in the nature of the materials used by their authors — that is, almost wholly published and largely secondary materials. "Comparativists" cannot reasonably be expected to carry out the immense amount of pioneer archival research or the detailed sorting of published primary sources required for all societies in their comparisons; they should, however, be expected to exercise critical judgment about the interpretations formed in the sources they do use. It was the errors perpetrated in these latter interpretations that have led astray so many authors of comparative studies involving ancient Tahiti. Moreover, many errors have, through time and frequent repetition, acquired the respectability and unassailability of scientific dogma.

(A conclusion I have arrived at as a result of the situation just described is the desirability of postponing further comparisons until each society to be compared has been exhaustively studied; although I do not for a moment expect that a suggestion as radical as that will be accepted!)

Another explanation for the shortcomings of many comparative studies of Polynesia-wide scope is to be found in the tendency of writers to impute identical meanings to behaviors or objects of different societies because they look or sound alike. It may, of course, turn out that some things are identical in all significant respects, but that must be demonstrated and cannot safely be assumed, particularly in Polynesian societies, which share such large numbers of entities that look or sound alike.

A third reason for compiling this study has been the growing interest of historians in Tahiti and its neighbors. Most of this interest has focused, appropriately, on post-European developments there, but understanding of those developments requires some knowledge of the indigenous form of society on which the European influences played. No scholar trained mainly in the historian's craft could or should be expected to double as ethnographer (whose craft is as specialized as the historian's).

Finally, I address this study to those present-day Tahitians who would like to cut through the innumerable myths that now befog their view of their own past. Unless Tahiti proves to be different from most Pacific island polities, its indigenous peoples will eventually come to have more desire to manage their own lives and more eagerness to learn about their past.

The first Europeans known to have set eyes on Tahiti were Captain Samuel Wallis and the crew of H.M.S. *Dolphin*. The *Dolphin* reached the Islands on June 19, 1767 and remained among them until July 28; thereafter these Islands were visited by European vessels in the following order:

*Boudeuse* (and storeship *Étoile*), Louis de Bougainville commanding: remained at Hitia'a, Tahiti April 2 to 14, 1768.

H.M. Bark *Endeavour*, James Cook commanding: anchored at Matavai, Tahiti April 12 to July 12, 1769; brief visits to Huahine and Ra'iatea.

*Aguila* (Spanish), Don Domingo Boenechea commanding: anchored off Tai'arapu, Tahiti November 8 to December 20, 1772.

H.M.S. *Resolution*, James Cook commanding (accompanied by H.M.S. *Adventure*, Tobias Furneaux commanding): visited Tai'arapu and Hitia'a, Tahiti August 15 to 24, 1773; anchored at Matavai August 15 to September 1, 1773. In 1774 Cook returned to Tahiti and anchored at Matavai from April 22 to May 14. Thereafter brief visits to Huahine and Ra'iatea-Taha'a.

*Aguila* and *Jupiter*, Don Domingo Boenechea commanding: remained off Tai'arapu November 15, 1774 to January 28, 1775, except for a brief visit to Ra'iatea. Upon departure for home four Spaniards—two priests and two attendants—were left to establish a Catholic mission. On October 30, 1775, *Aguila* returned, spent another twelve days at Tai'arapu, and left for home with the mission party aboard.

H.M.S. *Resolution*, James Cook commanding (accompanied by H.M.S. *Discovery*, Charles Clerke commanding): anchored off Tai'arapu August 13 to 23, 1777, and at Matavai August 24 to September 29; brief visits to Mo'orea, Huahine, Ra'iatea, Taha'a, and Porapora.

H.M.S. *Lady Penrhyn*, Lieutenant John Watts commanding: anchored at Matavai July 10 to 24, 1788; brief visit to Huahine.

H.M.S. *Bounty*, William Bligh commanding: anchored at Matavai October

26, 1788, to collect breadfruit plantings. En route home the vessel was captured by part of its crew, and Bligh and some of his supporters were set adrift in a boat. On June 6, 1789 *Bounty* returned to Tahiti but left for Tubuai on June 23. The vessel returned on September 22, left ashore sixteen of its crew, and departed immediately for what turned out to be Pitcairn. Those “mutineers” left ashore then remained on Tahiti until captured and taken home on the H.M.S. *Pandora*.

*Mercury*, John Henry Cox commanding: anchored at Matavai August 13 to September 2, 1789; brief visit to Tetiaroa.

H.M.S. *Pandora*, Edward Edwards commanding: anchored at Matavai March 23 to May 8, 1791.

H.M.S. *Discovery*, George Vancouver commanding (accompanied by *Chatham*, Lieutenant William R. Broughton commanding): anchored at Matavai December 27–30, 1791 to January 24, 1792.

Whaleship *Matilda*, Matthew Weatherhead commanding: anchored briefly at Matavai in February 1792. Shortly afterwards *Matilda* was wrecked in the Tuamotus, but her captain and crew returned safely to Tahiti in small boats and remained there until taken off by subsequent vessels.

Schooner *Jenny*, Captain Baker commanding: anchored at Matavai March 25 to 31, 1792.

*Prince William Henry*, (captain unknown): anchored at Matavai March 26 to 29, 1792.

H.M.S. *Providence*, William Bligh commanding (accompanied by *Assistant*, Lieutenant Nathaniel Portlock commanding): anchored at Matavai April 7 to July 19, 1792, to collect a new load of breadfruit plantings.

*Daedalus* (storeship for *Discovery* and *Chatham*), Thomas New commanding: anchored at Matavai briefly in February 1793.

During the first quarter-century of European visits to these Islands, the persons involved were in fact visitors and little more, except for the lengthier stays of the Spanish mission group and the *Bounty* “mutineers,” and of a small handful of beachcombers. The arrival of the *Duff* on March 4, 1797, however, marked the beginning of a new kind of contact between the Islanders and Europeans, for this vessel landed a band of Protestant missionaries, whose purpose was to remain and win converts. Thereafter, European (and later, Australian and American) vessels visited the Islands with increasing frequency. By 1815 the effects, direct and indirect, of all these alien contacts had become potent enough to bring about radical changes in the Islanders’ political system and in many of their religious ideas.

In line with the events just outlined, volumes 1 and 2 of this work are a reconstruction of these Islanders’ way of life as I believe it to have been just before it began to be transformed by European influence—a

period I label the *Late Indigenous Era*. Volume 3 covers events in Tahiti and Mo'orea from about 1767 to 1815—a period I label the *Early European Era*.

Inasmuch as these Islanders had no system of writing, obtaining reliable information about the Late Indigenous Era poses something of a problem, to say the least. Aside from certain tangible objects, the only kinds of traits undeniably ascribable to that era are those seen and reported by the very first Europeans to visit the Islands. These visits themselves, however, started the process of radical change, and the visitors were poorly qualified to perceive or describe the indigenous customs they encountered. Subsequent visitors, such as Morrison and Bligh, and later on such missionaries as Davies, Orsmond, and Ellis, recorded, at the time of their respective visits, large quantities of what appear to be reliable data about or from the Islanders; but the question that arises is whether these data can be ascribed to the Late Indigenous Era as well. I cannot suggest any simple formula for answering this question and have had to rely on my own informed guesswork, the credibility of which the reader will have to decide.

Included in the general question just touched on are some more specific, but equally perplexing, questions having to do with linguistic data. It was not until about 1800 that any systematic and at least partly competent attempts were made to study and record the native language. Thus we are deprived of what could have been a very valuable source of information about many customs that had by that time changed. The systems of orthography in the pioneer attempts took little or no account of two important phonemic features of the indigenous language, namely, vowel length (long and short) and the glottal-stop consonant. Consequently, when having to work with untranslated native texts it is often impossible to know which of several possible references was originally meant. Adding further to the difficulties of translating many of the texts recorded a century or more ago is the fact that the indigenous language has in the interim undergone extensive changes, not only in terms of word loss but, evidently, word meanings as well.

Finally, something must be said about the main subject matter of this book—that is, ancient Tahitian society. By “ancient” I mean the eras already referred to: Late Indigenous and Early European. By “society” I refer to the kind of aggregate formerly constituted by all the inhabitants of what has come to be labeled the “Society Islands,” the archipelago that extends from Maupiti at the northwest to Me'etia at the southeast. Although communication between some of the islands was in ancient times rendered difficult by stretches of empty and perilous sea, none of them was as isolated, socially, from the rest as were all of them from other archipelagoes. Accompanying this social unity was a cultural one. As James Morrison wrote from Tahiti in 1789 or 1790:



The Manners and Customs of the other Islands [besides Tahiti] are as Near the same as those of Different Countys in the Same Kingdom, and their produce nearly the Same & the Inhabitants of all the Society Isles are one and the same people—Taheite is by Much the largest and most powerful when the Strength of the Island is united, and is therefore acknowledged Mistress Paramount of the whole. They all distinguish their Language, Customs &c. by the Name of Taheite as well at home as when they are at Taheite and there are but few Men of Property who do not visit Taheite once in their lifetime and many visit it frequently. (1935:238)

By “Mistress Paramount” Morrison was evidently referring to Tahiti’s greater size and larger population, and not to any actual or asserted political paramourty, which he well knew did not obtain.

Morrison’s statement also provides an ethnographic rationale for the title I have given to this book—that is, *Ancient Tahitian Society*. But having thus used the term *Tahitian* for the book’s title I shall not use it in this sense again. Instead, for the sake of economy and precision, I shall henceforth use the word *Maohi* to refer to the people and customs of the archipelago in general, and reserve the words *Tahiti* and *Tahitian* (or *Mo’orean*, *Ra’iatean*, etc.) for use when specifying the inhabitants and culture of any one island. *Maohi* (phonemically, *mā’ohi*) was these Islanders’ word for persons, customs, objects, and so forth, native to their archipelago, as distinct from those of elsewhere (see LMS Dictionary). In time the word came to include other Polynesian-speaking islanders, as distinct from Europeans; but during the Late Indigenous Era, and at least the early years of the Early European Era, *Maohi* seems to have referred specifically to the indigenous inhabitants and culture of this one archipelago.