

HISTORY AND SOCIETY - From settlement to colonisation

ORIGIN AND SETTLEMENT

A civilisation at the heart of the Pacific

The Polynesian islands that were “discovered” by Spanish navigators were, in fact, already inhabited by peoples descended from seafarers and fishermen forming a unique and organised society, a far cry from a state of “savages”.

Four thousand years ago, a wave of settlers, coming from South-East Asia, swept over all the Melanesian and Micronesian islands. The Asian origin of these populations, travelling in successive waves of maritime migration, is evidenced by the archaeological remains of the so-called “Lapita” pottery civilisation.

Between 1000 to 1500 BC, these so-called “Austronesian” peoples continued their migration more to the east, particularly to New Caledonia and the Eastern Polynesian islands (the current islands of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga).

The birth and rise of the “Polynesians”

Over the course of about 10 centuries, isolated in an insular environment, these populations of Austronesian origin developed a unique Polynesian identity. Thus continuing their settlement movement towards the East for reasons still unknown today, these Polynesians settled, between 700 and 500 BC, in the islands of Eastern Polynesia (Cook Islands, Society Islands, Marquesas Islands, Hawaii, etc.).

Today, various opposing theories still exist regarding these migrations. According to certain researchers, the first wave of migration coming from the Samoa and Tonga islands initially settled in the Marquesas Islands. Others believe they initially settled in the Society Islands. What we do know, however, is that the archipelagos of Eastern Polynesia were colonised almost simultaneously, two to three centuries BC.

In the conquest of the remaining lands

Following a period of installation and adaptation to this new environment, the Polynesians then left to populate Hawaii, to the north (between 300 and 400 AD), and Easter Island (400 to 500 AD). Later on, a final wave of migration, undoubtedly from the Society Islands, gave rise to the colonisation of New Zealand (between 700 and 800 AD).

It is also likely that the Polynesians had some contact with the coastlines bordering the Andean Cordillera in South America. Indeed, the sweet potato, *'ūmara* or *kūmala*, a dietary staple of these island populations, is of South American origin.

The theory, however, that the Polynesian islands were originally colonised by populations from the American continent -a theory at one time promulgated by ethnologist and navigator Thor Heyerdahl - has, today, been abandoned.

An incredible maritime odyssey

The colonisation of the Polynesian islands, from 500 BC to the Millennium, is undeniably one of the greatest maritime feats in the history of Mankind. If in the West Pacific, one or two days of sailing are enough to travel from one island to another; conversely, in the East Pacific, the distances between islands require long journeys on high seas. At the very start of our modern era, this incredible human and technical adventure was made possible thanks to an extraordinary mastery of high seas navigation in a double-hull canoe or *pahī*.

Fabricated primarily out of tree trunks and plant fibres, without any metal - a material then unknown to the Polynesian peoples - these vessels could extend up to 30m in length. The largest could carry over 30 passengers laden with supplies for the journey whilst also transporting the plants and animals (dogs, pigs, chickens) that would be necessary for settling in their new host lands.

Without either compasses or measuring instruments, the Polynesians had developed reliable navigation techniques, which relied solely on their knowledge of natural points of reference (positioning of the stars, shape and direction of the swell, ocean currents, flocks of birds, winds, etc.).

PRE-EUROPEAN POLYNESIAN SOCIETY

Linguistic diversity and unity

Civilisations existing prior to European “discovery” left few visible traces. Polynesian societies were effectively oral in structure and as such, were not familiar with alphabetic writing. Knowledge was thus transferred by word of mouth within the various expressions of tradition (techniques, customs, legends and genealogies).

Language was undoubtedly the original vehicle of their culture and thus the best testament to its uniqueness. The Polynesian languages are all descended from the so-called “Proto-Eastern-Polynesian” language. They may be divided into two distinct families: Proto-Tahitian and Proto-Marquesan. *Reo ‘enata* and *‘Enana*, spoken in the Marquesas islands and Mangarevian or *Reo Ma‘areva*, spoken in the Gambier Islands are descended from Proto-Marquesan.

It may be noted that these languages are very similar to Hawaiian or *Reo vaihī* and Pascuan or *Reo rapa nui* - a fact which would appear to confirm the Marquesan origins of the Polynesian “colonisers” from Hawaii and Easter Island.

As for Proto-Tahitian, it is the basis for *Reo Tahiti*, spoken in the Society Islands; *Reo Pa‘umotu*, spoken in the Tuamotu Archipelago, and *Reo Tūha‘a Pae*, spoken in the Austral Islands. As for the *Māori* language of New Zealand and *Reo Raroto‘a* of Rarotonga, they are also derived from Proto-Tahitian.

A very structured society

Traditional Polynesian society had a complex and systemic social structure in which the numerous communities constituting it each held a part of the prestige and power or *mana*, with each one being necessary and vital to the proper functioning of that society as a whole. There was of course the community of leaders or *hui ari‘i*, which represented the power but without holding the divine and exclusive right to exercise it alone.

The *ari‘i* bore the *mana* on behalf of all, showcasing it; they served as a powerful symbol whose essential characteristic was the maintenance of an enduring position of humbleness and reserve or *ri‘i* vis-à-vis their people.

The *hui ra‘atira* represented the communities of leaders. Contemplating and creating group economic and social strategies, they were the image of the mast or *tira* bearing the sails to propel forth the canoe. Contrary to the discoverers’ pre-conceived ideas, the community of *manahune*, far from being constituted of ordinary people, paupers, or

“plebeians”, as has long been said in history books, comprised those who held and preserved the society’s potential for prestige and power. As a repository, a reserve, it was their responsibility to activate this power, to place it into the hands of the *ra‘atira* mandated with the implementation of decisions, strategies and actions. Regarding elements of a

technical and spiritual nature, the *hui tahu'a* or communities of specialists, exercised their *mana* by transferring their theoretical and practical knowledge to young initiates seeking to prepare for one discipline, specialty, profession or another. Of course, there were also the *tahu'a tahutahu*, specialised in all things magical and supernatural, the *tahu'a 'upu*, who were the priests, and then the *tahu'a va'a* (specialised in canoe construction), the *tahu'a rapa'au* (specialised in traditional medicines), and so on and so forth.

Given that Polynesian culture was oral, there were also the communities of *haere pō*, which held the *mana* of memory and the passing on of the history of the people with all its sagas, genealogies, tales and legends, songs of praise, etc. They imparted them in public places, from sunset until sunrise, etching into the memory of each individual a part, a key to their inherent heritage, the source of their very existence.

Other communities like the *hui arioi*, the *hui to'a*, the *hui vao*, the *hui teuteu*, etc., were also a part of this complex system, each holding a different and inherent part of the prestige, essential in its complementarity with the others, to the proper functioning of the system.

Social cohesion

This systemic system founded upon a common and deeply religious perception of the universe, ensured a great social cohesion between groups that were sometimes very far from one another but in regular communication. A fact, which did not prevent conflicts from being resolved through relatively frequent but ritualised clan wars.

The various expressions of life in society (food, sex life, work, clothing, marriage, funerals, etc.) were also subject to ritualised treatment.

This necessity for community life where the lives of all would be inherently bound one to the next also manifested itself in a set of prohibitions, the *tapu* (taboos), which played, to take but one example, a regulatory role in the eco-systems. As such, periods of food restriction for mankind but of reproduction for Mother Nature called *Rahu'i*, could be proclaimed on both lagoon and terrestrial areas, in certain seasons and for varying periods, with a view to future ostentatious ceremonies that required an abundance of food for the gods and men as necessary.

Religion

As polytheists, the early Polynesians were not only very religious, but everything was governed and codified by the sacred, from the rhythm of their human and economic activities to the prohibitions by the gods conveyed to them by the priests.

Their pantheon was rich with an abundance of divinities (or *atua* in Tahitian), some of whom were demi-gods or *atua ta'ata*, themselves incorporated into a hierarchy and which could vary depending on the island, district, or indeed era. They believed that these gods lived in the ten heavens layered one upon the next; according to their beliefs, this composed the upper portion of the universe, where the land of men would constitute the middle and the subterranean world of origins, the lower portion.

The presence of gods in the world of men was manifested through sacred objects such as *ti'i* or *to'o*, of which the most well known today are the *ti'i/tiki* in stone, coral or wood; as repositories of *mana*, these forces of cosmic and cosmogonic energies supposedly have the power to influence nature's elements. The gods also took on the appearance of animals, like the god 'Oro, who took the form of a Frigate bird, or the god Tāne, who took the form of a shark.

When the Europeans arrived, it was the god 'Oro, who had preeminence of the cult and we think that the majority of large marae were dedicated to him during this period. Later, the

god Ta'aroa - creator of all things and all beings - was identified as the "Yahwé" of the missionaries, thus enabling a relatively easy transition to monotheism.

Complete adaptation to the environment

This neolithic-type civilisation had extensive knowledge of its environment. It exhibited a great ingenuity in its mastery of stone and mother-of-pearl - making tools and creating a ritualistic statuary - but also of wood (canoes, constructions) and plant fibres in making clothes (*tapa*).

In the absence of metal and pottery, the early Polynesians developed basketry and weaving techniques, which enabled them to make useful, decorative, ritualistic and prestige objects. Essentially fishermen, the early Polynesians were also skilled horticulturists who learned to adapt to the islands where they cultivated the plants they had brought there (*'uru* - breadfruit trees, bananas, taro, sweet potatoes, etc.).

Their mastery of the ocean, that sacred space from which their migration was made possible, was also remarkable. They developed fishing techniques, some of which were specifically adapted to the lagoons and which can now be found in the majority of islands they inhabit. Seafood, shells and algae contributed to their nutrition, without depleting their natural reserves.

Onshore, they lived mainly on the coasts, but could also be found in most of the valleys in the high islands. There, they developed techniques relating more to horticulture than agriculture, enabling them to adapt to the land, which was often fertile and strewn with an abundance of edible vegetation (bananas, coconuts, *'uru* - breadfruit trees, etc.). As the high islands they inhabited were barely endowed with any food plants, they also practised terraced farming (sweet potatoes, yams, taro etc.).

Similarly, on the dry coral grounds of the atolls, they devised cultivation pits in which they prepared a kind of natural compost made from plant debris.

Highly developed arts

Linked to a collection of myths and rituals, but also to the available materials and tools, the arts of the early Polynesians have achieved an aesthetic value, which is recognised by European artists and writers. A large part of this artistic expression is substantiated in their art of adornment and decoration (ceremony headdresses, jewels and ornaments, sculptures, engravings, tattoos, etc.) associated with ceremonies or used as signs of social distinction. One component of this art of adornment, the tattoo (a word derived from the Polynesian *tatau*) was extensively developed in the Marquesas where it achieved an unprecedented level throughout the Pacific.

The music of the early Polynesians is known to us through accounts from travellers in the 18th century, which reported percussion or wind instruments (nose flutes, conches, whistles and drums) and sung performances associated with numerous social and religious occasions (genealogies, funeral chants, ceremonial songs, ballads, etc.). Collective representation took the form of theatrical, tragic, dramatic and burlesque performances, but also of dance. Indeed, such dances formed the basis of what is today known as the traditional dance. An eloquent and varied oral expression was also of particular use in communicating the knowledge of past generations, thanks to its rhythmic chanting and mnemonic nature.

CONTACT AND COLONISATION

First contacts

During the first world circumnavigation in history in 1521, the Portuguese explorer Magellan was, without a doubt, the first European to catch a glimpse of a Polynesian island; probably the Fakahina atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago. But it was not until 1595 that the first real contact was made between the Europeans and Polynesians. Departing from Chile, the Spanish navigator Alvaro Mendaña y Neira made a stopover in Fatuhiva and Tahuata in the Marquesas.

In 1606, Quiros, Mendaña's pilot during his first expedition, traversed the Tuamotu Archipelago and stayed on the Hao atoll itself. However, nothing ever came of these Portuguese-Spanish discoveries.

Explorers and scientists

In 1767, the ship of the English explorer Samuel Wallis came to land on the shores of the island of Tahiti, which thus welcomed its first European visitors.

A year later, the French navigator Bougainville in turn came to land on the island of Tahiti. The Tahitian Ahutoru subsequently joined this expedition becoming the first Tahitian to discover Europe.

The English captain James Cook, who headed expeditions of a scientific nature, came to land on Tahiti on three occasions - in 1769, 1773 and 1777.

Among the first expeditions, it should also be noted that of the English vessel *Bounty* commanded by William Bligh in 1788. This latter's mission was to bring back some breadfruit trees to the Antilles. Following the famous mutiny on the *Bounty*, sixteen sailors settled in Tahiti.

The other mutineers, on the orders of Fletcher Christian, first tried to settle in Tupua'i in the Austral Islands before settling on the tiny island of Pitcairn.

Culture clash

At the end of the 18th century and the very beginning of the 19th century, the frequency of commercial shipments passing through as well as the regular presence of whaler ships, little by little began to change the behaviour and way of life of the indigenous populations.

Visitors introduced not only iron but also firearms and alcohol into Polynesian society.

Although the clash of the two civilisations - relatively non-violent in comparison with other colonised regions around the same period - was somewhat tempered by the number of mixed race unions, by the same token this also translated into the introduction of unknown Polynesian diseases.

Birth of a myth

With the arrival of the first contacts was also born the myth of an "earthly paradise". This latter has its roots in the tales of the Spanish navigators Quiros and Mendaña, which lavishly described the beauty of the islands and those that populated it. But it was especially the French navigator Bougainville who, through his account of his stopover in Tahiti, would firmly establish the myth of the Tahitian "paradise" in Western imagination. Pervaded with the figure of the "noble savage" championed at the time by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and also strongly marked by what he perceived to be the heightened sensuality of the Polynesians, Bougainville did not hesitate to designate Tahiti as the "New Cythera" (named after the Mediterranean island Cythera, which according to Greek mythology was the birthplace of the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite). Naturally this was an over-simplistic vision with numerous misconceptions and errors of judgment regarding traditional Polynesian society.

Power struggles of the major powers

From the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century, Tahiti and its islands became a place of confrontation between the major powers, England and France, and to a lesser extent Germany and the United States. In a historical period strongly characterised by colonial expansion, these latter wanted to expand their area of influence in the Pacific where the island of Tahiti held a key position.

Another battle, this time denominational in nature, saw the opposition of catholic and protestant missionaries. From 1797 onwards, in the wake of the first explorers and merchants, these missionaries disembarked to convert the Polynesians.

Establishment of a dynasty

In Tahiti, at the end of the 19th century, an interim period of unification under one true dynasty, similar to those in Europe, that of Pōmare (Pōmare I and Pōmare II), was initially favoured by the then present exponents of European ambition. In addition to alliances forged with the chiefdoms of the Leeward Islands, Pōmare II was able to very skilfully lean upon these outside powers to grow and develop his own power. In 1811, he converted to Christianity. In 1815, in Tahiti, the Fē'i Pī battle - won by Pōmare II supporters through an alliance of Tahitian chiefs - definitively sealed the establishment of this dynasty.

Initially, it was British influence that permeated the Polynesian islands.

Queen Pōmare IV, successor of Pōmare III, who died at a young age, expelled the French Catholic missionaries in 1834 making Protestantism the official religion of her kingdom.

From French protectorate to annexation

Represented by Vice-Admiral Dupetit-Thomas, in 1843 France ended up proclaiming its protectorate on Tahiti and Mo'orea and thus Queen Pōmare IV, although not without resistance. A year later, this protectorate was extended to the Marquesas. In 1877, at the end of her long 50-year reign, Queen Pōmare IV died and was succeeded by her son Pōmare V. Finally, on 29 June 1880, Pōmare V abdicated and "ceded" his lands to France. In addition to the island of Tahiti, these included Mo'orea, Maia'o, Meheti'a, the Tuamotu Archipelago and Tupua'i and Ra'ivāvae from the Austral Islands. The business of annexing all the Polynesian archipelagos did not, however, prove to be immediate. Following the annexation of the Gambier Islands in 1881, it was then the turn of the Leeward Islands in 1888 and the Austral Islands in 1902.

Resistance

The enterprise of annexation and French colonisation was characterised by numerous armed conflicts. From 1844 to 1846, the chiefs who were opposed to the presence of the French rebelled, engaging in violent confrontation with the French army on the island of Tahiti. The Marquesas were also a setting for anti-French resistance.

The annexation of the Leeward Islands alone (Ra'iātea, Taha'a, Huahine, Bora Bora, Maupiti) resulted in a war between the French army and island insurgents led by chief Teraupo'o, from 1888 to 1897. Their defeat marked the end of any armed resistance to French colonisation.

Christianity

The conversion of “King” Pōmare II in 1812 paved the way for the mass conversion of the Polynesians.

This was also facilitated by the apprehension of the Polynesian populations facing an extreme demographic decline. In 1819, the establishment of the Pōmare II code, heavily influenced by the missionaries, translated into the pure and simple prohibition of traditional practices such as dance and the art of tattooing - a devaluing of traditional culture, which would result in the disappearance of whole swathes of Polynesian heritage, both material and immaterial.

The missionaries, backed by the colonial powers, swiftly gained a very significant influence over Polynesian society, in particular taking control of the education of young Polynesians with the creation of schools.

On the other hand, the missionaries also acted as an anti-establishment to the most flagrant abuses of colonisation. They played a key role in safeguarding the language, particularly through their translations of the Bible into the Polynesian languages.

Acculturation and mixed race unions

The arrival of the Europeans led to an acculturation phenomenon, which seriously undermined the foundations of traditional Polynesian society. The various island communities would progressively leave their respective chiefdoms, which were more or less rivals of one another, to be absorbed - through alliances and conversions - into the state structures. As a result of this political situation, in Tahiti (and less noticeably so in the other islands) there followed a surge of “half-casts” or mixed race from mixed marriages, having then become numerous. Over the course of the second half of the 19th century, these latter became large landowners and took up posts in the Administration, which had set up base in the small town of Papeete.

Demographic decline and emigration

The 19th century was marked by a terrible decline in demographics due, in part, to the ravages of outbreaks of diseases imported by foreign visitors, but also to the ravages caused by alcohol. In 1880, the island of Tahiti had no more than 6,680 inhabitants.

The Marquesas Islands had no more than 2,500 inhabitants compared to the 40 to 50,000 initially estimated by the first European visitors. To tackle this issue of depopulation, the colonial administration even encouraged immigration towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, in addition to European and American emigrants, a Chinese community had also established itself, accelerating the constitution of a diverse and mixed race society.

In search of the exotic

The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries were also marked by the arrival, and even settlement, of numerous foreign artists in search of “paradise”. It was a movement at the end of the 19th century characterised by the search of the exotic, which had thus guided such a number of European creators. The most significant figure of this movement is unquestionably the French painter Paul Gauguin who lived in Tahiti for several years eventually ending his life in the Marquesas Islands in 1903.

As for writers, we will remember the works of Paul Loti, Robert-Louis Stevenson, Jack London and Victor Segalen. Tahiti had thus become a powerful source of inspiration. The bibliography drafted by Father O’Reilly in 1967 counted more than 10,000 works, which made reference to Tahiti.

Filmmakers were subsequently to quickly follow on with F. Murnau's film "Tabu", which started filming in Bora Bora in 1929 and with the first ever adaptation of the Mutiny on the Bounty (based on the novel of J.N Hall and R. Nordhoff) filmed in Tahiti in 1935.