

Tahiti et Mama France

by

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French Polynesia is a colony. In a world that has seen so many former possessions of colonial powers achieve independence, French Polynesia remains an Overseas Territory of France. Yet, in the early post World War II years, there were prospects for political evolution. There was a nascent nationalist movement, a literate citizenry--at least in comparison with many other colonial territories--and a moderately stable economy based on farming and fishing and the export of cash crops. What happened? Why has political evolution in French Polynesia lagged behind most other South Pacific nations, as well as most other French overseas possessions?

This is not meant to be a suspense tale. As you well know, France has been most reluctant to consider independence for French Polynesia. While the South Pacific dependencies of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have progressed to independence, or close to it; while the French colonies in Asia and Africa have gained their freedom; French Polynesia remains an integral part of the metropole in French eyes. France has found this southeast corner of Polynesia to be real estate too valuable to give up, and France has also found that she can easily push the Polynesians around, or at least gain a resigned acquiescence from them for continued French control.

In 1958 French President Charles De Gaulle gave the French Polynesians a choice between voting "yes" to remain in the French community, or "no" for immediate severance from France. The late Pouvanaa A Oopa, the charismatic

Tahitian leader and head of the majority political party, campaigned for a "no" vote. He lost by a 64% to 36% margin. Shortly thereafter he was dismissed from office by De Gaulle. Then he was arrested, tried and convicted of the unlawful possession of arms and of having been an accessory in an alleged attempt to burn down the town of Papeete. Pouvanaa was sentenced to enough years in French jails, and then exile in France, to see him safely dead. Charges that the French denied Pouvanaa transport and radio time to reach outer island electorate and used other pressures to assure a "yes" vote, and charges that the case against Pouvanaa was trumped up, may well be true. But the apparent fact remains that a segment of the Polynesian population then, and perhaps an even larger segment now, has been very timid about the idea of independence. It is this timidity that the French have played upon to keep Polynesia tightly bound to France.

It is tempting, however, to imagine that French Polynesia might have gone the way of the majority of French African territories that voted "yes" in 1958. The African territories have evolved towards independence, while retaining close political, economic and cultural ties with France. The ironic fact, however, is that evolution, and the more violent process of achieving independence in Algeria, meant that French Polynesia had to remain French--to provide De Gaulle with a site for testing his atomic bombs once it had become politically impossible to continue testing in the Sahara.

The decision to transfer testing to the Pacific may well have been taken back in the late 1950's, although it was not announced to the Polynesians until 1963. The announcement was in the form of an offer that could not be refused, a Faustian bargain by fiat. The bomb, after all, was a matter of national defense, and hence beyond the concern of the Polynesians and the limited powers of their local assembly. The bomb was really a blessing,

argued De Gaulle. It would bring prosperity: the metropole would build magnificent new port facilities and undertake other infrastructure improvements; the metropole would assume a larger share of the government budget and would institute many new educational and social programs; and most of all, there would be thousands of well paying jobs for the people.<sup>1</sup>

While it might be an oversimplification to argue that opposition to the bomb--and to continued French rule--was bought off, the promise of massive French expenditures and increased economic opportunities was not lost on the Polynesians. I recall one day in 1962 when I was attending a meeting held in a rural Tahitian district. French administrators were explaining to the Tahitians a proposal to have that district, and other districts, transformed into municipalities with locally elected mayors and other officials, and local budgets. Horrified by the thought that this change might mean new taxes, one old Tahitian got up to declare that such a change might be for the good, but only so long as "Mama France" kept footing the bill.

Even then, in 1962, the Tahitians were enjoying a new prosperity in large part paid for by metropolitan taxpayers. Since then the French have, in a manner of speaking, kept their side of the atomic bargain. The tremendous inflow of funds with the bomb has transformed the territory. Agriculture and fishing no longer form the economic base. Most French Polynesians live off wage labor--and now most jobs are on Tahiti, the central island of the five archipelagoes that make up the territory. Out of a total population for French Polynesia of almost 150,000, almost 100,000 live on that island. Tahiti has become virtually one urban-suburban unit, focused on the port town of Papeete,

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<sup>1</sup>See Bengt and Marie-Thèrese Danielsson, Moruroa, Mon Amour, Penquin Books, Ringwood, Australia, 1977, for a detailed account of the French testing program and accompanying political maneuvers.

the adjacent airport and nearby military facilities.<sup>2</sup> Despite attempts to promote tourism and other industries, the testing program is the largest single employer for the Tahitians, the backbone of the economy--at least according to Paul Cousseran, France's High Commissioner in French Polynesia. Listen to what he has to say:

"One can be intellectually for the CEP [Atomic Testing Program, ed.], or one can be intellectually against it. But the fact is that this country lives off it. Three thousand, two hundred families do so quite directly, not counting Polynesian military personnel. Above all, thousands of families live off it indirectly."<sup>3</sup>

But salaries paid to Tahitian personnel employed in the testing program is only part of the picture. Especially now that the main construction phase of the testing program is over, France must keep a high level of funds flowing into the territory in order to keep the urban proletariat and the wage economy afloat. Official government transfers, excluding salaries for military personnel and civilians employed in the testing program, probably now exceeds \$1,000 per capita per annum.

Two hundred years ago Diderot used Tahiti to argue that man could live free from the constraints then binding French society. However ironic it might seem, this island, so beloved by European philosophers and romantics, has now been transformed into a "military-urban" complex. But that fate is not so unusual for Pacific islands. Hawaii has pioneered this type of development, followed by Guam, the Marshalls and now, it would seem, the Northern Marianas. This is a new type of dependency, different from the commercial arrangements of more typically colonial and neo-colonial relationships. The

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<sup>2</sup>See Ben Finney, Polynesian Peasants and Proletarians, Shenkman, Cambridge, Mass., 1973.

<sup>3</sup>Pacific Islands Monthly, April, 1979, p. 7.

islands are not significant producers of export crops for metropolitan profit, nor are they great markets for metropolitan industrial goods. Their contribution to the mother country is to provide real estate for military bases and testing facilities for exotic weaponry, with the rent paid by French taxpayers and their American colleagues.

Have the French Polynesians kept their part of the atomic bargain forced upon them? Have they remained loyal to France? In a manner of speaking, yes. At least 99.9 plus per cent of them have not openly revolted. There are two main political persuasions among the French Polynesians: a Gaullist one and a Nationalist one. The Gaullists are in the minority, although at times with the aid of French voters, including thousands of soldiers and other metropolitan testing personnel encouraged to vote in local elections, they have secured control of the local assembly. Needless to say, this group has basically supported the bomb and continued French rule on the basis that it is best for the Polynesians. While it might be easy to say that these pro-French politicians are but representatives of the local bourgeoisie desirous of maintaining their privileged position, many would appear truly to believe that it would be economic suicide for the territory to sever its ties with France.<sup>4</sup>

They are, of course, encouraged in their sentiments by French logic. Let me continue the quote from France's High Commissioner, Paul Cousseran:<sup>5</sup>

"I have said before and I repeat: Independence is not the problem faced by this country. On the contrary its problem is its dependence. Polynesia's problem is that it does not produce what it consumes, it does not produce the money necessary to pay for what it consumes, so someone must always be found to pay in its stead."

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<sup>4</sup>This paragraph simplifies a much more complex situation. See, William Tagupa, Politics in French Polynesia, New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Wellington, 1976.

<sup>5</sup>Pacific Islands Monthly, April 1979, p. 7.

The Nationalists, who command the majority of French Polynesian voters, and who have been in power most often during the last decades, have not followed a particularly radical strategy since the defeat and imprisonment of their leader Pouvanaa. Occasionally, their leaders threaten to ask for independence. Mostly, however, they have occupied themselves with protesting the bomb and asking for internal autonomy, or self-government, within the French community.

The Cook Islands next door provide the Nationalists with a model for a type of self-government that greatly loosens the political ties with the mother country but which does not cut off the flow of metropolitan funds. The Cook Islanders elect their own legislature, and their own premier, and pretty much run their own country under New Zealand auspices. Yet they are New Zealand citizens, can travel freely to New Zealand and work there, and continue to receive sizable grants from their obliging metropole. Tahitian Nationalists generally prefer this model to the one with which the French threaten them should they seek independence, the model offered by the French treatment of their former colony of Guinea. When Guinea voted "no" in 1958, the French government pulled out and cut Guinea off without a sou--at least that is what the French love to tell the Polynesians, adding that, should they wish to become independent, they will go the way of Guinea.

The Nationalists' protests against the bomb would appear to have been in vain. Protests and boycotts by New Zealand and Australia have, in contrast, been effective in helping to force the French to explode their bombs under the atolls south of Tahiti rather than in the atmosphere above them. Nor have the Nationalists' pleas for self-government been effective. The French have given way here and there, but never enough to make a crucial difference. A very sick Pouvanaa was returned early to Tahiti from exile--to die at home. And, in

response to the most radical protest staged by the Nationalists--an occupation of the house of assembly in 1976--the French promulgated a new statute which appeared to give the Polynesians a measure of autonomy. The Governor was replaced by a High Commissioner, and a local cabinet with a kind of local prime minister was instituted. However, it has not taken long to see that, despite these changes, the French are still firmly in control.

Will French Polynesia always be an Overseas Territory, a dependency of a European country half a globe away? Will the French Polynesians continue to be split between those who wish to stick tightly to France and those who ask for self-government but do not wish to totally renounce France and her aid? Jean-Claude Guilliband, the foreign affairs editor for Le Monde, has gone on record as unsure of a continuance of the pattern that has prevailed over the last decades. In his 1976 book, The Confettis of Empire, devoted to the tiny fragments of the French Empire scattered around the world, Guilliband ends his chapter of French Polynesia with the sentence: "Tahiti reserves some surprises."<sup>6</sup>

Actually, four years earlier in 1972, there occurred a seemingly surprising departure from the pattern of Tahitian acquiescence. Six young Tahitians, including one part-American who had served with the U.S. Marines in Vietnam, stole a supply of munitions from the French army to start a rebellion. Though caught in two weeks, they immediately escaped from jail, were recaptured and then promptly instigated Tahiti's first prison riot. Although this affair has its comic opera aspects, the idea of stealing arms from the French to foment a rebellion is definitely something new in recent French Polynesian history.

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<sup>6</sup>Jean-Claude Guilliband, Les Confettis de l'Empire, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1976, p. 155.

In 1977 came further surprises. A self-styled commando group calling themselves "The Blood of The Ancestors" dynamited Tahiti's waterfront post office. Then, apparently choosing their victim at random, they shot a French Metropolitan in his bed. The alleged organizer of this commando group, "the serpent in the Polynesian paradise" according to the French prosecutor, was a relative of the late leader Pouvanaa, a 42-year-old Tahitian with the improbable name of Charles Ching. Ching and the other four who actually did the dynamiting and shooting were tried and found guilty this past February.

But they did not pass up the opportunity their public trial offered to publicize their cause. Aided by Tahitian politicians called to the witness stand, Ching, especially, succeeded so well in airing Tahitian grievances against the bomb and continued colonial rule, that the Le Monde reporter offered the following comment which I will use to close this brief talk:

"This trial which was supposed to be about terrorism has become a trial of colonialism. Do these words, in 1979, mean something to the French of France who for the most part have ignored 'the crumbs of their empire'?"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Le Monde (weekly edition) 1-7 February, 1979, p. 7.