TAHITI and the South Sea Legend

By WILLIAM H. DAVENPORT

For two centuries popular impressions of Tahiti have been a blend of geographic fact and ethnic fancy concocted to feed the dreams of Europeans who longed for the ideal primitive life. The illusive concept of such a primitive ideal is very old in our culture, but the possibility that it might actually be found on an island in the south Pacific was one of the minor outcomes of the extraordinary voyages of discovery completed during the eighteenth century.

The first European ship to raise the spectacular peaks of Tahiti was the *Dolphin* commanded by Captain Samuel Wallis in June 1767. Close in the wake of this British ship was the French vessel *Boudeuse* commanded by Captain Louis de Bougainville who also chanced on Tahiti in April of the following year. The reports of both these able and articulate navigators caused immediate interest in all European maritime nations. In August 1768 a joint scientific expedition of the Admiralty and the Royal Society was dispatched to Tahiti to make astronomical observations and follow up Wallis' discovery. The expedition was commanded by James Cook, greatest of all the eighteenth century explorers. Captain Cook and his company stayed at Tahiti for three months during which they had close contact with Tahitians. Some of the Britons even learned to speak a little of the local Polynesian language. It was the first time that a Pacific island people had come under such close and sympathetic scrutiny. The lucid account of Cook's first voyage not only confirmed but amplified all of the observations of Wallis and de Bougainville. Tahiti was real and it was indeed a primitive paradise, an Elysium.

In the next two decades Cook returned to Tahiti on both his second and third voyages. He was followed by still other British ships, the most famous of which is the *Bounty* under the command of Captain William Bligh. The Spanish also dispatched ships to Tahiti, and they made the first attempt to establish missionaries on the island. After 1790 calls at Tahiti became almost commonplace, and although later reports offered substantially different pictures of this Polynesian paradise from those brought back by Wallis, de Bougainville, and Cook the popular impression derived from the first reports was not to be greatly changed.

The initial descriptions of Tahiti and its people stressed the pleasant appearance of many, if not all, the local inhabitants. The women, especially, were extolled both for their attractiveness and their willingness to sleep with the visitors for what seemed to be trifling considerations. Tahitian attitudes toward sex were a sailor's dream come true and a source of fascination for all Europeans but the most Puritanical.

Even though they possessed only Stone Age tools the ingenuity they displayed with these crude implements was greatly admired. Tahitian society was perceived correctly as having class distinctions. It was noted, too, that the aristocrats had both authority over lower ranks and a kind

The Island of Otaheite, bearing S.E. distant one league.
JAMES COOK, A VOYAGE TO THE SOUTH POLE, AND ROUND THE WORLD.

A Human Sacrifice in a Morai in Otaheite.
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of social arrogance and demeanor that Europeans intuitively understood and interpreted as a refinement not possessed by most other primitive peoples they had encountered elsewhere in the world.

Tahiti's climate was agreeable, the land was lush, food was plentiful. Because local life was so greatly disrupted by ships' calls the visitors could not learn how much Tahitians had to work to make their gardens and orchards bear so well. It was assumed that nature provided handsomely without demanding much sweat.

The visitors clearly understood that Tahitians lived in small political units under local chiefs and that fighting among these units was chronic. From these outsiders' point of view, however, warfare was a civilized pursuit and the fact that violence was part of Tahitian life only enhanced their high regard for the islanders.

Spear fishing in Tahiti, about 1890. Collection Viollet

To a seeker of Paradise like Gauguin it was particularly depressing to land in such an ugly little shanty town as Papeete, the Tahitian capital.

A group of Tahitians, about 1890.

The primitive social character of Tahitians was always a source of puzzlement and mild amusement. Laughter, gaiety, and effervescence were more a part of the Tahitian spirit than anything a European could imagine. Yet, Tahitians were quick to tears and desolation over what seemed to the observers to be either irrelevancies or trivialities. Shifts from one extreme mood to another were as sudden and unexpected as the changes from dazzling sunlight to torrential downpour that are characteristic of the tropical climate.

Tahitians were incorrigible thieves. Annoying as this was, it was offset by their remorse when caught and confronted. In other words, Tahitians had a moral sense which in these times was thought to be lacking among savages.

The interpretation of this unexpected configuration of traits was that Tahitians were childlike. The corollary of this (mistaken) assumption was that, because they were mere children they were lovable and teachable. The concept of the unspoiled savage took on a new reality with this imperfect knowledge of primitive Polynesians. There on Tahiti was a handsome race of naive people living in a generous tropical environment and free from oppression, excessive toil, and sustained worry. To the more religious among the Europeans these attractive islanders had been spared the burden of original sin. This, of course, could not be tolerated; religious enlightenment had to be communicated. The initial phase of contact between Tahitian and European cultures ended with the century and the establishment of a strong Protestant mission.

Tahiti could not be isolated from French and British rivalries, especially since the island had been discovered almost simultaneously by expeditions from the two powers. Responding to the strong British influence over Tahiti, the French took political control by simply turning naval guns on defenseless Tahiti and demanding submission. The British did not make a defense. A colonial future under France was determined. The puppet dynasty of local chiefs that had gained complete control of Tahiti during the early years of European contact was strengthened by French rule. In a few years Tahiti became the center of a synthetic kingdom that technically included all of the Society Islands as well as other groups claimed by France in eastern Polynesia. French cultural influences replaced British.

Despite the transformation of these isolated island societies into a French colonial satellite controlled through a farcical imitation of a European-style Tahitian monarchy, the legend of Polynesian primitiveness persisted. A South Seas genre of literature was established by such writers as the Frenchman Pierre Viaud (Pierre Loti) and the American Herman Melville, who wrote romantic novels of their experiences. This literary tradition was continued in this century by Jack London, James Hall, Charles Nordoff, Frederick O'Brien, W. Somerset Maugham, Robert Dean Frisbee, James Michener, Eugene Burdick, and others. Each of these authors has restructured the romantic vision of the South Seas to suit the tastes of his time.

When Paul Gauguin first felt the need for a social environment compatible with his primitive inspired art style it was almost preordained that he would eventually gravitate to Tahiti. Dozens of other Europeans had preceded him in search of the primitive South Sea chimera, thousands more would follow. It was predictable, too, that initially he would be disappointed when he arrived in Papeete, principal port and administrative center of the French colonies in eastern Polynesia, in 1891 to find life in the town dominated by the petty values and activities of colonial officialdom and *colons*. In *Noa Noa* he wrote, ". . . rather disappointed as I was by things being so far from what I had longed for and (this was the point) imagined, disgusted as I was by all this European triviality, I was in some sort of blind."

The artist describes the death and state funeral of King Pomare with contempt and mourning for the past. "There was one king less, and with him were vanishing the last vestiges of Maori customs. It was all over—nothing but civilized people left." This was the same theme that South Sea writers were to write book after book about. As far as true Maori, Polynesian that is, customs were concerned, Gauguin seemed not to realize then that one hundred years of European influence had already produced a South Seas culture that Wallis and Cook might not have recognized as the one they first tried to fathom.

Gauguin persisted. After a trip back to France he returned and searched the remoter parts of the island and finally moved off to the more isolated Marquesas Islands in pursuit of what he knew to be his fantasy of primitive South Sea culture. He did find some traces of these and some of them found their way into his art, but these were only superficial influences. Most obvious of these were the racial features of the Polynesians in his figures, Tahitian beliefs in ghosts which he depicts several times, and the characteristic posturing of islanders at rest and interacting with each other.

Of the Marquesas he wrote, "Many things that are strange and picturesque existed here once, but there are no traces of them left today; everything has vanished." Gauguin was unable to find the non-obvious, deep-seated and enduring aspects of Polynesian life that survived, because he could not accommodate and acculturate to the people as they were. Despite his great artistic creativity, his was a rigid personality, and as far as the South Seas were concerned he responded mainly to the popular fantasies of what they should be like. At his most enthusiastic he could say, "These nymphs, I want to perpetuate them with their golden skins, their searching animal odour, their tropical savours." These words might have been written by any of several later travel writers, who like Gauguin, wanted only to reproduce their personal impressions that had been preformed by the European South Sea legend.

Of art in general Gauguin wrote, "Art requires a philosophy, just as philosophy requires art." No one disputes that Gauguin had a philosophy and that his art states it vividly. But in the philosophy of Gauguin there was no place for the philosophy of life that guided the lives of the Polynesians with whom he lived and died.

WILLIAM H. DAVENPORT, formerly Curator of the Oceania Section of the University Museum, is now Director of the Center for South Pacific Studies of the University of California, Santa Cruz. This newly formed research institution is concerned with the entire South Pacific as represented in various disciplines—history, economics, political science, the biological sciences, anthropology. Its staff, small now but destined to grow, will consist of scholars each working in his own particular area of interest. In addition to these "armchair" studies, the Center will also sponsor field work. It has already initiated a series of lectures and symposia.