

## ORALITY AND MĀ'OHĪ CULTURE:

An Introduction to Flora Devatine's 'Orality: Written Tradition, Oral Tradition, Literature, *Fiuriture*'<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

For many Mā'ohi people - the Polynesians indigenous to the Oceanic area known as French Polynesia - transitioning from an oral culture to transcribing the fluidity of spoken words and contexts onto the etched landscape of a page is a challenging passage. For Mā'ohi writers, writing often becomes a tool to merge oral and personal histories that are a major component of a local cultural identity that grounds Mā'ohi writing. In a colonised society such as French Polynesia in which people have traditionally remained silent, there is a general understanding that they do so. Consequently, in order for Mā'ohi writers to overcome stumbling blocks with writing, academics and traditional societies must intrinsically recognise the important contributions of Orality to modern discourses and creative production. As Flora Devatine, a Mā'ohi scholar, writer, editor, and purveyor of Mā'ohi culture contends, Orality can be a vehicle to expand one's consciousness and place in the world. Devatine's (2002a) article, 'Orality, Written Tradition, Oral Literature, and *Fiuriture*', was originally written in French with *reo* Mā'ohi insertions. She crafts her essay in a poetic style that mirrors a Mā'ohi '*orero*'<sup>2</sup>, a traditional Polynesian oratory. In this extended ode, she stresses how Orality is an ever-expanding, forever innovative concept that shifts and evolves with indigenous consciousness amidst pervasive global change.

### Keywords

Mā'ohi literature, Orality, Flora Devatine, French Polynesia

### Introduction

French Polynesia is a vast oceanic realm, over twice the size of the Mediterranean Sea, but with a total land area a third the size of Belgium. Although French Polynesia is spread over four million square kilometres of ocean in the eastern South Pacific, an area often identified as Oceania, the total land area of the 118 atolls and islands is roughly 4,000 square kilometres. These islands and atolls have been grouped into five geologically, historically, and culturally distinct archipelagos. The largest are the Society, Austral and Marquesan archipelagos, each consisting of high islands with steep inland valleys. To the southeast is the Gambier archipelago, a handful of much smaller high islands, the largest of which is Mangareva. Between the Gambier and the Marquesas is

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the Tuamotu Archipelago, which is comprised of seventy-eight sparsely populated atolls. In 2003, the total population of these islands was just over 260,000, with more than half residing on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea, where the urban and governmental centres are located. Together with New Caledonia, Wallis, and Futuna, French Polynesia is part of the French Pacific territories with its latest administrative status of *Pays d'Outre-mer*<sup>3</sup> dating back to 2004. Although France has recently transferred the majority of economic and financial powers of governance to French Polynesia, it still retains control over the defense and justice systems, law and order, immigration, citizenship, currency and secondary and higher education.



Figure 1 – Map of French Polynesia

As we know, the gap between the French Polynesian islands and the rest of Anglophone Oceania is continually widening, since much of *Mā'ohi* writing is in French, or the local speech, *kaina*, or *franitien*. *Kaina* is a Franco-*Mā'ohi* dialect that modifies French prescriptions of syntax, pronunciation, and grammar<sup>4</sup>. This colorful, local dialect is worthy of further study as a form of resistance that nativises the coloniser's language. Sometimes referred to locally as the *franitien* dialect, it is a colloquial French pronounced very much like Tahitian, with the trill of a rolled 'r' as in Spanish along with guttural vowel sounds.

While many outsiders may still view Polynesians through the distorted lens of Gauguin's paintings, Tahiti and French Polynesia have a racially/ethnically mixed population<sup>5</sup>. According to Cottom, there are four distinct ethnic groups in French Polynesia: 65% *Mā'ohi*, 16% *demis*, 5% Chinese<sup>6</sup>, and 12% European. However these 'distinct' groups do not take into consideration the exhaustive combinations of *métissage*, such as the ethnic/racial/cultural mixtures that can entail a combination of any other descents merged with *Mā'ohi*, including Asian, African, Anglo, Melanesian or Micronesian. Further, it precludes those individuals who may not be 'distinguished' as *Mā'ohi*, yet who identify as such. The *demis* are the most visible *métissés* of the populace; and although *demi* means literally 'half', the concept of *demi* is usually perceived locally as someone of mixed heritage. The *demis* in French Polynesia dominate the bourgeoisie, and despite comprising only 16% of the population, hold most of the country's wealth and privilege. However, as most *Mā'ohi* writers suggest, concepts of identity and *métissage* are not monolithic and the question of labels is most vexing<sup>7</sup>. The *métissé* identity is shaped by a combination of individual personality traits and preferences, family dynamics, and environment. What is important to note is that the key problems associated with identity point to several different 'levels' of social or cultural contexts; that is, there are multiple distinct 'issues' at stake with the debate and public negotiation of the meaning of terms such as *Mā'ohi*. One must not forget that French Polynesia is comprised of five culturally distinct island groups. From an outsider lens, the term *Mā'ohi*, like Maori, may suggest a homogenous 'native'. In French Polynesia, however, one must be on guard to dispel any myth of the monological and homogeneous 'native.' Tahiti is an ethnically diverse island with countless combinations of upbringings, cultural, racial, and ethnic mixings, backgrounds, and worldviews that distinguish each individual.

When looking at *métissage* in Tahiti, one needs a clear understanding of *métissage* within a French Polynesian context. In Tahiti, *Mā'ohi* is just as synonymous with a local consciousness and ways of being/living as it is to distinguish someone possessing Gauguinésque ethnic traits. In French Polynesia then, local use of the term *Mā'ohi* often refers to a local consciousness that does not necessarily entail indigenous full-blood quantum. In French Polynesia, the term *Mā'ohi* is often used in conjunction with those born and/or raised in the area who have ancestral and indigenous ties to the *fenua* (homeland), and who share a collective local identity rooted in local *Mā'ohi* values. 'Mā'ohi values' include, but are not limited to: speaking *reo Mā'ohi*<sup>8</sup> and/or the franco-Tahitian vernacular; being familiar with insular practices; possessing strong links to family, roots, genealogies, oral traditions, and the land; and maintaining ties with the latter through the rapid changes brought on by globalisation<sup>9</sup>.

Consequently, a Mā'ohi identity is usually entrenched in a Mā'ohi/French Polynesian consciousness. 'Mā'ohi' therefore establishes a unification of the people through a common cultural consciousness that reinforces their ancestral solidarity. In this colonised French territory, the concept of Mā'ohi 'national' identity remains virtual and obscure, therefore Mā'ohi nationalism - which I coin *Mā'ohinété* - is a symbolic consciousness. Currently, Mā'ohi people must identify as French citizens and travel on a French passport since there is still no such thing as Tahitian or islander citizenship. *Mā'ohinété* therefore encompasses a socialisation of common cultural, ancestral, territorial, oceanic and political values that unify Mā'ohi and *demis* who share similar ideologies.

As of 2006, Mā'ohi literature was published solely in Tahiti with limited circulation; and even in French Polynesia, Mā'ohi works remain relatively unknown and unavailable to a general population that is, for the most part, an oral culture that does not read. Chantal Spitz's (1991) *L'île des rêves écrasés* is considered the first Mā'ohi novel<sup>10</sup>. French publishing houses have openly refused to acknowledge this literature and these Mā'ohi works are not included in, or recognised by, the francophone canon. To exacerbate the problem, the books published in Tahiti are considered luxury items not easily accessible to the general Mā'ohi population; for not only is illiteracy pervasive, but the average book price exceeds \$40 US - an exorbitant price, especially for a nation riddled with poverty.

In all of her work, Flora Devatine stresses the importance of merging the oral and the written as a means to put a stamp on one's identity and consciousness. Once transcribed into written texts, oral stories become *oraliture*, which stems from the term *orature* coined by French linguist Claude Hagège in reference to the spoken word (*Parole Parlée*). Guadeloupan poet Ernest Pépin came up with *Oraliture* to correlate *orature* with the French noun *écriture*, which means writing. According to Parfait (2003), *Oraliture* is a term Pépin used in his paper, 'Intervention sur l'histoire de la poésie antillaise' during a round table discussion on poetry at the Ivory Coast National Library on May 24, 2000. The terms *oraliture* or *orature* tend to be used synonymously, and both define Orality as a way to transmit knowledge and experience just as legitimately as transcription. Devatine co-founded *Littéramā'ohi*, a bi-annual anthology of local writing, in 2002. Her vision for this anthology is to provide a non-judgmental environment for local authors to create, write, and publish their works and to have their voices heard while helping shatter myths about writing and Mā'ohi people. In all of her work, Devatine stresses the importance of merging the oral and the written as a means to put a stamp on one's identity and consciousness. Besides, Nicolas Cartron writes in an untitled essay in the first volume of *Littéramā'ohi*:

*Yes, French Polynesian culture is inscribed within an oral tradition, but why set up a dichotomy between the spoken and written? Why should one necessarily exclude the other? Do writing and Orality not flow into the same movement of communication, exchange, and sharing? They have been alienated by a myth for too long. (2002: 34 - author's translation)*

Evidently, Cartron is an advocate for the presence of a forum for Mā'ohi voices. His contention is that *Littéramā'ohi* provides a platform for local writers to exert their inscriptive power.

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In her extended ode to Orality (2002a and this issue), Devatine discloses the multiple roles of Orality in creative consciousness and production. Further, she recognises the role of Orality and its critical value in the creation of French Polynesian literature:

*Orality provides the roots and platform for French Polynesian literature to take off and fly. Orality is the foundation for French Polynesian literature and in this concert between ancient and modern voices, Orality filters through to enter the records where it deposits the actual imprints of its own path.* (2009: 13)

Devatine emphasises Orality's role in the construction of identity; and since writing is a reflection of identity, then Orality has its place in literature. In her article, 'Oralité-Oraliture-Littéramā'ohi' (2002b), she articulates that Orality plays a major role as a valid foundation for Mā'ohi writing, based on a rich history of oratory arts, as well as a history of inscriptions on wood, *tapa* cloth, tattooing, petroglyphs, and sand paintings. Further, as exemplified in the title, she suggests an historical progression from Orality to inscribing the oral to creating a literature that is uniquely Mā'ohi. To further instill confidence in Mā'ohi people, she reminds them that Orality entails "the origins and elaboration of thought and society of a people. It is alive, dynamic, fluid, singing, dancing, telling, nurturing, fishing, cultivating. [It is] the artist, the orator" (2002b: 232). Throughout her discourse, she implies that writing is an extension of all of these oral concepts and traditions. Writing is a reflection of a people, of a culture, of an artist; culminated through that which is danced, sung, performed in plays, put into music, rhymed, rowed, drummed, surfed, run, verbalised, screamed, and written (2009: xx). By encouraging the preservation of words, Devatine encourages the preservation of oral culture through *oraliture*. She defines *oraliture* as a "collection of spoken narratives [that involves] a particular way to leave tracks in memories through a voice that imprints and tattoos accounts into the spirit" (2002b: 232). Under the nomenclature of Orality, Devatine includes languages, traditions, narratives, poems, chants, traditional remedies, discourses and speeches. She highlights the importance of writing in order to know the self, to question the self, to answer the self, and to understand the self in order to make sense of the self and its multiple roles in the surrounding world.

## Subverting the Myths of Orality

A recurring theme in Devatine's work is that Orality is in no way stagnant; it is a forever moving, forever expanding element. It is a means to evolve consciousness and in the face of modernity, Orality is in no way limited to the transmission of myths and legends. It is fluid and expands through merging with modernity. It provides many standpoints, such as a base to merge ancient stories, myths, choreographies and performances with modern ideas derived from television, film, popular music, and academics. All these arts create and portray all aspects of humanity; and for the artist, Orality can expand that understanding. Orality is vibrant indeed, and includes radio and television interviews and forums, colloquiums, exhibitions of books, art, music, singing and performances, assemblies and conferences... many of which initiate the fodder that becomes transcribed and archived not only in audio recordings but in written documents.

In 'Orality: Written Tradition, Oral Tradition, Oral Literature, *Fiuriture*', Devatine accentuates the boundless ways in which Orality can inform a collective, social, and individual consciousness in light of modernity and cultural shifts in islander ways of knowing. Many indigenous writers and artists all over the globe have begun to engage in this collective consciousness; an awakening to the idea that there are other ways to understand the world outside the confines of dominant Western discourses. They realise that Orality and tradition, when used as a foundation, can provide a plethora of new ways of thinking and being in the world. Writing, like land, is fixed within the margins of the page. Orality, on the other hand, is much like the Ocean, in that it provides a borderless space that is dynamic, energising, and innovative. Should indigenous people recognise the validity of Orality, and engage in the blending of consciousness that Orality provides, they will transgress the confinement of emotional, stereotypical, psychological, colonial, social, linguistic and geo-political borders that stifle and inform the essence of their being. In essence, the fluidity of the sea is indicative of the infinite possibilities of the free flowing of ideas regardless of linguistic and stratifying histories. Therefore, through merging one's Orality with modernity, islanders engage in creative innovations within their own contexts. Like the *va'a*, or canoe, Orality is a conduit, "the boat that guides the navigation of one's thoughts" (2009: 10). It connects the human to creative consciousness for it entails a powerful spiritual connection to memory, to the ancestors, to communicating with people and the gods; all the while allowing access to the imagination and thoughts that can be articulated, expressed, and re-created through redefining tradition in new ways. This could be through websites and internet blogs; setting traditional songs and hymns to rap or popular dance music; creating sitcoms and plays with local allusions; merging traditional dance with jazz, classical, and modern; merging old fishing traditions with technology; or rewriting myths in modern contexts. The possibilities are infinite, depending on how far a creator is willing to push the current boundaries set forth by institutions and traditionalists alike.

### Orality and Expansion of Consciousness

In her essay, Devatine contemplates the various ways in which Orality provides an indispensable, eternally-expanding guide to reading, writing, living and creating the world. She expounds on the multi-layering of Orality through her insertion of reo Mā'ohi terms that conceptualise Orality through metaphor. The traditional Mā'ohi worldview articulates that sounds have considerable power. Sensitivity to words and to sound vibration is essential in an Oceanic context. Once words are spoken, their energy is released into the atmosphere, and certain words, connotations, and pronunciations can have spiritual ramifications if the words are used incorrectly or harshly. Speaking and oration were highly privileged in pre-colonial Tahitian society, and this privilege is still entrenched in ancestral memory. Traditional oration was a difficult art that followed strict rules. Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, oration and memory were taught in special schools reserved for those who either through birth or duty had to uphold traditional, genealogical, and cultural knowledge with authority. To err in speech, or to stumble over words due to a lapse in memory would bring ridicule to an orator in the eyes of the society as well as shame and ruthless mockery without regard for the orator's title or authority. Consequently, it was critical that oral transmissions in public speeches were free of errors in syntax, structure, pronunciation, and mechanics; for,

after all, a chief only had power if he or she maintained the gift of flawless orality in a society that privileged articulate discourse.<sup>11</sup>

To further contextualise the importance of Orality in Tahitian society, spoken words have specific power that compounds the necessity of careful and eloquent locution. Words and sounds have particular vibrational frequencies that in ancient Tahitian society could offend the gods and the ancestors, resulting in chaos, disease, and devastation. One had to be careful about words and contexts. Once sounds were dropped off the tongue, they were sent up into the cosmos and could not be taken back. Transcribing sounds on paper materialises words and speech, therefore increasing prospective social consequences. Published words can be read by others and once in print, can never be erased. This is what complicates the transition between speaking and writing for many Mā'ohi, as written words become tangible and can never be retracted. Bernard Rigo, in his preface to Devatine (1998), attempts to free prospective Mā'ohi writers from the fears that bind:

*It is through words that we liberate the written and it is through the written that we liberate the spoken. Written words are songs to the ears while sung words give rhythm and magic to writing. (1998: 5 – author's translation)*

In traditional Polynesian societies, words were sacred and sometimes heavily layered with metaphor and meaning. Devatine introduces the basic concepts of *parau pa'ari*,<sup>12</sup> *'ā'ai*, *'a'amu*,<sup>13</sup> *pehe*,<sup>14</sup> and *'orero* to set up her discussion on the importance of Orality. Oral traditions, including legends, stories, traditional singing and eloquent speeches set the tone for the fluidity, importance and perpetuation of Orality in French Polynesia. With her inclusion of *papa*, *pou*, *faura'o*, and *'avei'a*, Devatine shows the heavily layered functions of these words within the contexts of Orality. *Papa* means a family's (or society's) foundation, yet can also mean a stone basin or bench. This reflects the solidity of Orality. It is hence not as fragile as many would think. *Pou*, a sturdy pole or post, shows how Orality is a centring force that is unwavering in its importance, necessity, and validity. *Faura'o* refers to how Orality can transmit very quickly by land, air, or sea. *'Avei'a* is a compass or guide that Orality perpetuates through the wisdom of those who lived before us. Many of us have lost touch with the advice and wisdom that Orality provides. This compass appears in the form of knowledge about natural medicines, healing procedures, and herbs; ways to navigate through reading the sky, the stars and the waves; ways to be in symbiosis with nature; methods about survival and self-sufficiency; ways to fish, hunt, and prepare food; or how to practice effective cultivation, horticulture and gathering foods from nature.

In 'The Oceanic Imaginary', Subramani proposes the construction of a body of knowledge derived from Orality that encompasses "the kaleidoscope of Oceanic cultures and that traces diverse and complex forms of knowledge - philosophies, cartographies, languages, genealogies, and repressed knowledges" (2001: 151). He believes that such an ambitious undertaking is what Oceania needs in order to mitigate current disciplinary boundaries, including the dissection between Orality and written materials and the division between visual imagery and music and performance. He would also like to see more of a collapse between academic discourse and personal narratives. Subramani discloses that such a redefining "would treat Oceania as a complicated, multilayered stage on which island scholars would re-inscribe the new

epistemologies - their own epistemologies” (2001: 151). Such a de-centring - or inclusion - would at once involve the critique of oppressive systems of thinking currently in place in French Polynesia and commence the healing of a psyche squelched by Western domination. This de-centring will entail an exploration of the knowledge its people possess through privileging how vernacular philosophies of education are entrenched in local cultures and languages. In essence, this exploration will reveal how educational values of Mā'ohi culture relate to those standardised by the West. Consequently, the goal is not for a reversal of ideologies in which indigenous philosophies attempt to overwrite the West or vice versa; but rather how the two can inform each other. Devatine sees Orality as a marvelous foundation for hybridity, or *métissage*. She feels that a blending of the traditional and the modern results in more innovative ways to perceive and create the world. Realistically, in order for all Mā'ohi to compete in a world market saturated with modernity and globalisation, Western ideologies cannot go unacknowledged. On the contrary, they are just as valid as other ways to see the world. And, as Devatine concurs, they just do not have to be valued as the *only* ideas to hold.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The original French title of Flora Devatine's essay is 'L'Oralité: Tradition écrite, Tradition orale, Littérature orale, Fiuriture!' *Fiuriture* is a term originated by Devatine derived from *fioriture* (the French term for embellishment) and *fiu*, a popular Tahitian localism for fed up or bored, with its suffix also suggesting that of *littérature* (literature).

<sup>2</sup> *'Orero*: Eloquent speech or discourse; also speaker, orator.

<sup>3</sup> An overseas territory that is part of France (rather than a colony or protectorate).

<sup>4</sup> *Kaina* is Tuamotuan for a mythological race of small people. This term is used colloquially to classify someone as primitive, uneducated, illiterate, savage, or someone who follows traditional Ma'ohi ways while resisting modernisation.

<sup>5</sup> This diversity started with the arrival of the explorers mid-18th Century, before Gauguin's time. The population having been decimated due to disease, war, and explorer gunfire, relied on foreign blood to broaden the gene pool. In effect, Gauguin's quest was to find the 'pure' native and, since it was difficult to do so by the end of the 19th Century, Gauguin recreated his 'pure' nativism in his paintings. (See Paul Gauguin's *Noa Noa* [1919])

<sup>6</sup> Many local residents of French Polynesia are Chinese descendents of labourers transplanted to the region during the 19th Century.

<sup>7</sup> Miscegenation - the mixing/merging of races/cultures/heritages.

<sup>8</sup> Indigenous language of the area; although variations and dialects of the language shift depending on island group, culture, and region.

<sup>9</sup> For the reader unfamiliar with Ma'ohi literature, there are important issues to consider. First, there needs to be more of an academic consciousness of the struggles of Ma'ohi writers to be valued and published. Second, for literature scholars interested in promoting indigenous causes, there is a necessity for a supply and demand of Ma'ohi



works in English and French that will facilitate an exchange of ideas not only between Oceanic peoples, but within the United States and Europe; a move that will serve to subvert current myths and stereotypes about French Polynesians and Tahiti established through Western lenses.

<sup>10</sup> Chantal Spitz's *L'île des rêves écrasés* has been translated by Jean Anderson and is now available in English as *Island of Shattered Dreams* (2007).

<sup>11</sup> In ceremonial orations, the Great Priest, *tahu'a nui* would oversee the recitations of genealogy. The orator had to have several hundred years of genealogy from both the maternal and paternal lines embedded in memory. If the orator made one mistake, one lapse in memory, it would bring bad luck and devastation, and the speaker would develop a reputation as clumsy and inarticulate.

<sup>12</sup> *Parau Pa'ari*: legend and all that belongs to the oral tradition.

<sup>13</sup> *Ā'ai, Ā'amu*: a legend, fairytale, story, fable.

<sup>14</sup> *Pehe*: a traditional song or light-hearted simple song.

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