

# L'IDENTITE PAR LES RACINES

Or, Saying 'Indigenous' in Tahiti: The term *Mā'ohi*

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## Abstract

This article reflects upon the rise of the word *mā'ohi* since the 1980s as a term by which (French) Polynesians refer to themselves. Some older people believe the term unsuitable for humans and restrict it to plants and animals. This contrasts with contemporary identity discourses that see the term *mā'ohi* as articulating an indigenous condition and intrinsically conveying the concept of dignity. These differing interpretations express conflicting representations relating to land, praised by contemporary nationalists but sometimes perceived by older people as tainted. A comparative linguistic analysis of the term *mā'ohi* shows that it does not always express the idea of purity or dignity, even if it is often used in other Polynesian islands to designate humankind.

## Key Words

*Mā'ohi*, indigenous, behaviour, ethnic term, representation, land, identity

## Introduction

In the sphere of identity, conceived as identification with a group, analysts usually contrast primordialist, substantialist and essentialist theories and representations—whether popular or academic—with others known as constructivist. The former are based on a belief in the existence of the constituents of a group, which can be identified, isolated and recorded; conversely, the latter portray identity as a dynamic process of construction, with the group taking shape by asserting its existence rather than emerging from a previous 'substantial' or objective reality. How does this apply to identity assertion and representations in French Polynesia? Can they be attributed mainly to substantialist or constructivist approaches? To answer this question, a distinction needs to be made between the pronouncements of social scientists (whether they are Tahitian or not) concerning identity and the vocabulary of the Tahitians themselves (whether they are anonymous citizens, local political figures or intellectuals) as the subject matter for scientists' research.

Scientific theories broadly subscribing to constructivist paradigms (such as Martinello, 1995) point to the *in situ* constructed nature of identity representations in French Polynesia (see Figure 1). With regard to community and intellectual representations by

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the people of Tahiti, these can generally be included in a theoretical model that contrasts substantialist traditionalist representations at one end of the spectrum with, at the other, a multi-ethnic discourse based on the wish to take part, which is totally constructivist in nature (Saura, 1986, 2009). The various positions expressed by community groups, politicians etc. are sometimes situated at and sometimes also oscillate between these two poles; these generally match the two classical poles of theories of nation, broadly conceived either as a community linked to an origin—*ethnos*—or, conversely, as a constructed political entity—*demos*.

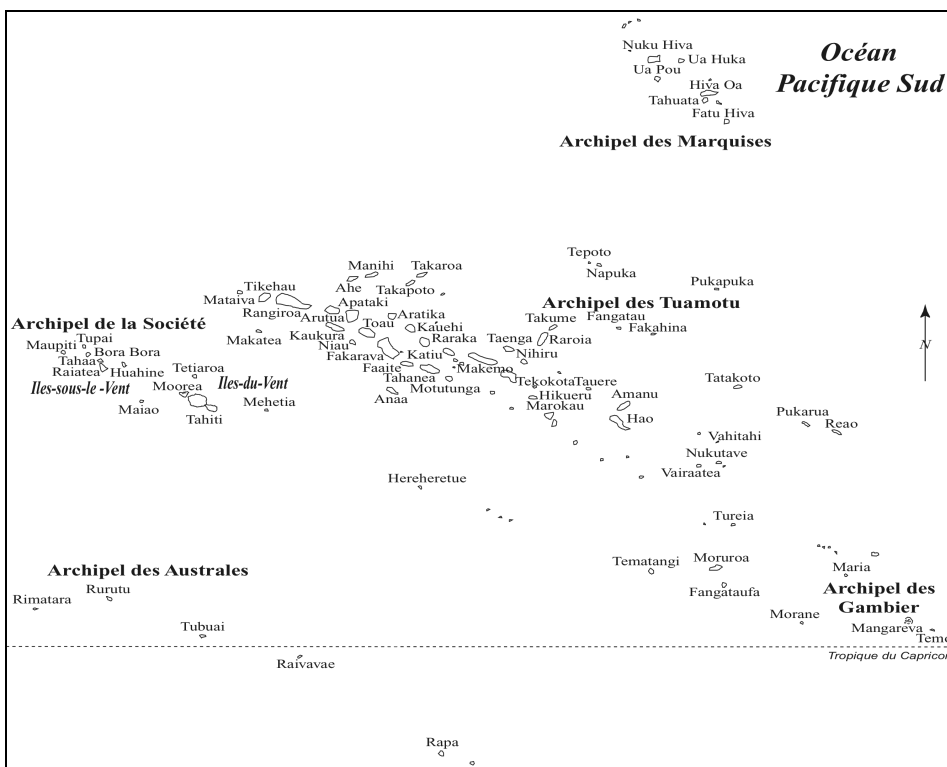


Figure 1 - Principal islands of French Polynesia

In this article, I would like to return to the substantialist discourse on Polynesian identity and, more specifically, to the fact that, since the 1970s the indigenous identity movement in Tahiti has been articulated through the use of the term *mā'ohi*. The fortunes of the term *mā'ohi* for self-designation by Polynesians of French Polynesia are not unlike those of the term *Kanak* when used by the Melanesians of New Caledonia to refer to themselves (see Angleviel, 2002); its generalisation only occurred in the 1970–1980 period, in a militant form, which gradually attracted a virtual consensus during the 1980s and 1990s.

The question I will ask in this paper is whether the term *mā'ohi* was previously as widely used by the Tahitians as today and, especially, if it was already used to designate collectively the people of Tahiti. I will endeavour firstly to report on the meaning given to

this ethnotype from the 1970s by its most enthusiastic and eminent supporters. I will then address the refusal of certain Tahitians to accept the term *mā'ohi* applied to people, wishing it to be limited to the designation of plants and animals. This opposition will open theoretical perspectives on the topic of the nature and culture categories in the order of traditional Tahitian thought. In order to come to a position as to the justification of the use of the term *mā'ohi* to refer (or not) to humans and to assess the value of its meaning as advanced by its supporters, I will perform a regional linguistic comparison across Polynesia.

## 1. The development of the use of *mā'ohi* and its dominant interpretation

The use of the term *mā'ohi* to refer to people from French Polynesia and everything related to them did not suddenly appear in the 1970s, ushered in by the 'cultural renewal' that was then happening. What was however recorded from this time on was the very rapid adoption of the use of this term in a society where it had been used very little. In addition, from the 1980s onwards—in other words in the space of barely a few years—the term *mā'ohi* was divested of the political protest dimension given to it by some of its sympathisers in the 1970s.

### 1.1 Scientific descriptive practices

Definitions for the word *mā'ohi* appear in the oldest dictionaries of the Tahitian language. The 'Davies Dictionary' (1851: 132), produced by English missionaries, presents it as an adjective meaning "common, native, not foreign"; it is not however stated whether this adjective appropriately refers to human beings or not. On the other hand, the dictionary of Bishop Tepano Jaussen (1861) does not give any definition for *Mā'ohi* but refers to *Maori*, an adjective defined as follows: "*maori, mā'ohi*, (proper noun for the native people of Polynesia and therefore), indigenous, good, perfect"<sup>1</sup>. Later, in the scientific community, ethnologists Douglas Oliver (1974) who worked in the Society Islands in the 1950s and 1960s, and Robert Levy (1966), who followed him on his 'territory' of Huahine in the early 1960s, extensively used the term *mā'ohi* in their work to refer to the indigenous people of this group.

### 1.2 Political significance?

The fact that the term *mā'ohi* was occasionally used from the earliest manifestation of organised political life in Tahiti, in other words from 1945 on, by the supporters of Pouvanaa Oopa (the main nationalist leader of the 1945–1958 period) in a context of defence of indigenous interests, gives this term a protest dimension in some people's view<sup>2</sup>. For example, in 1961 the political party *Pupu Ti'ama Mā'ohi* ('Free Mā'ohi Party') was set up by Pouvanaa Oopa's colleague Jean-Baptiste Heitarauri Cêran-Jêrusalêmy (the party was dissolved by the French Government in 1963 on the grounds of its separatism). It is, however, essential to bear in mind that the dominant term for humans in the 1950–1960 period was *ta'ata tahiti* (man/of/Tahiti) and not *mā'ohi*, as the speeches of Pouvanaa Oopa demonstrate (Saura, 2001). Over that period, in the militant pro-independence context, reference was sometimes made to Polynesian institutions (laws, parties), using the term *mā'ohi*; however, the political ideal advocated by Pouvanaa Oopa was, according to his own words, *te hō'ē fa'aterera'a ta'ata Tahiti* (a government for the *ta'ata Tahiti*—Tahitians). With him, and in a major nationalist achievement, the term *ta'ata Tahiti* had already succeeded in transcending geographical

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situations to become all-encompassing for the people of Raiatea, Rurutu and the Tuamotus, who rallied behind this collective metonym (*ta'ata Tahiti*), as opposed to the *popa'ā* (white foreigners).

### 1.3 Cultural action in the 1960s to 1980s

The introduction of the term *mā'ohi* into the area of militant cultural action, but without a recognised separatist political dimension, began in the early 1960s with the creation of a cultural renewal movement known as the Ma'ohi Club that:

*brought the use of the word ma'ohi back into fashion, at a time when it was totally overshadowed by the use of 'Tahitian'. Their goal was not only to revive people's memories of and rehabilitate Polynesian culture but also to reincorporate it into the Polynesian whole, at the scale of the eponymous triangle. (Tevane, 2000: 15 – author's translation)*

The first Tahitian students who returned home in the 1970s with their French university qualifications amplified the advocacy of the term *mā'ohi* and the values it articulated. Eminent among these were two former student pastors: Henri Hiro, a poet, actor, filmmaker and director of the youth and culture centre in Papeete in the late 1970s and his friend, also a poet and theologian, Duro Raapoto.

Hiro wore the *pāreu* (*paréo*) in public and, with other artists, revived the practice of tattooing that had been abandoned for more than a hundred years. He and Raapoto<sup>3</sup> added an intellectual dimension to their forerunners' combat: they theorised on their culture and language. For them, *Mā'ohi* was necessarily in opposition to Tahitian, as those who refused to be part of the French system were in opposition to those who agreed to meld into it and even soon became lost in it (Hiro, 1985). Similarly, they replaced the term *reo tahiti* (Tahitian language) by *reo mā'ohi*, arguing that in French Polynesia (a geographical entity that they referred to as *Mā'ohi nui* or *Ao mā'ohi*: Great *Mā'ohi* or the *Mā'ohi* Universe) there were various dialects but only one language. In this way, *reo mā'ohi* would include the Tahitian dialect (*parau tahiti*), the Leeward Island dialect (*parau raromata'i*), the Tuamotu group dialect (*parau tuamotu*, *parau pa'umotu*) etc, without any of these dialects being able to claim to be a language<sup>4</sup>. As is now clear, the focus here is on the common denominators of Polynesian culture, with local situations being perceived as sources of richness but not as identities able to prevent the emergence of the awareness of belonging to a *mā'ohi* nation.

In this connection, the reference is to both language and humankind: the indigenous person cannot refer to himself/herself in his/her own language by an adjective referring only to his/her geographical origin (*Ta'ata tahiti*, *Ta'ata mo'orea*, etc.), nor in the French language by a term from this language (Tahitian); conversely, what is needed is to use an indigenous term itself referring to indigenous status: *mā'ohi*<sup>5</sup>. Raapoto writes:

*Why Mā'ohi language and not Tahitian language? This term stems from an awakening awareness by Polynesians of their identity and a refusal to be cast in the 'Tahitian' mould, which responds specifically to tourism-related and commercial concerns. The linguistic variations from island group to island group do not detract from this renewed awareness of their unity. Today what we are witnessing, not at the level of the people, but at the level of those who have responsibilities in managing the country's affairs, is*

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*tension between those who want to live and develop the cultural unity through Reo Mā'ohi and who are accused of being pro-independence, and those who want to remain Tahitian and therefore pro-French. (p.c 1985 – author's translation)*

Even if, through the cultural work of Hiro, Raapoto and other eulogists of the *mā'ohi* identity in the 1970–1980 period, the term *mā'ohi* emerges as a form of opposition (to France and to 'Tahitianness', perceived as belonging to the West and to France), the term *mā'ohi* was over a few years emptied of its subversive baggage and its use became dominant.

With the achievement of internal self-governing status for French Polynesia within the (French) Republic, as first expressed by the establishment of a local government from 1977 onwards and strengthened in 1984 and on various occasions since, the *mā'ohi* cultural identity movement has become broadly shared by the political elites and the community at large. A consensus emerged during the 1980s on the use of the term *mā'ohi*.<sup>6</sup> Very quickly in Polynesian language practice, from top to bottom, the term of self-designation (in the Tahitian language), *ta'ata tahiti*, declined in favour of *mā'ohi*.

### 1.4 The etymology of *mā'ohi*, according to Duro Raapoto

While Hiro is the best-known defender of Polynesian identity among the broad Tahitian public (as a result of his theatrical activities), his fellow student Raapoto, the son of the former President of the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia Samuel Raapoto, has gone the furthest in theorising about the term *mā'ohi*, and both of them actively contribute to its promulgation. Raapoto famously did this in an article which is still extensively referred to, 'Ma'ohi, ou l'identité bafouée' ('Ma'ohi, or the scorned identity'), published in Paris in 1978 in the *Journal des Missions Évangéliques* ('Journal of Evangelical Missions') and reprinted a number of times subsequently in Tahiti (also translated into English and published in Fiji in 1980). This powerful poetic text carries in it the seed (in more than one sense) of all the future writings by Raapoto for the subsequent decades. To report on the content of this manifesto, I will begin by quoting the opening lines, before summarising the subsequent parts<sup>7</sup>.

*Who am I? Nothing, not yet, tomorrow, perhaps. No, civil status is no longer enough for me. I need another dimension. My name is written with the letters of the Roman alphabet, but my life will be written with my own inspiration and the inspiration of all those who suffer from a lack of existing. We are assuredly not yet. They say I'm Tahitian, but I refuse. This term is essentially designed for public appeal, tourism purposes, snobbishness and rejection. I am Maohi. Such is my life's work. (Raapoto, 1978: 114 – author's translation)*

Raapoto definitely prefers *Mā'ohi* to Tahitian because it fully expresses his commitment to the indigenous people to their country and to their land:

*Maohi is the exact opposite of hutu painu (drifting Barringtonia fruit). It is generally defined in the following way: common, native, not foreign. It is that and not that at all. (ibid)*

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Raapoto then lexically dissects the term *mā'ohi* to properly demonstrate its richness and the true meaning that he feels should be given to it. He points out that *Ma'ohi* and *Maori* are two forms of the same word, which elsewhere in Polynesia is found as *Maoli*: *Maori* is broken down in the following way: ma-ori. *Ma* means to be free of *tapu*. A *tapu* is a man destined to be sacrificed on a *marae*, a man with no dignity, no value (ibid: 115).

As can be seen, the leading criteria for defining the term *mā* are freedom and dignity. Then follow respect for the values of the group, making a person truly *mā*. "Anyone refusing is *repo*: dirty... and the *mā* being is not to be so alongside others but to be so with the others"<sup>8</sup> (ibid: 116). Only later does the reader discover that "in addition to all that, *ma* means to be clean" (ibid). The other supposed component of *maori*, *ori*—"when pronounced without a glottal stop" (ibid) is deemed to mean "to reconstitute, put back together the parts of an object to reform a whole, therefore to restore" (ibid). In total, *Ma-ori*, composed by adding *ma* to *ori*, is said to mean the true, complete, free being, he who "refuses to be dispersed" (ibid). Before continuing the reading of this text, a few comments should be made.

Apart from the cogency of splitting *māori* or *maori* into *mā* and *ori*, which will be addressed later, the interpretation of the terms *mā* and *ori* is very spiritual here, which is not really surprising on the part of a former student pastor who became an 'apostle' of the Tahitian tradition. This dimension clearly emerges in the fact that the physical or material significance of the term *mā* (clean), which is the most obvious one for the immense majority of speakers of Tahitian, should be released last in their explanations. The priority goes to a social and moral figurative reading of this term. In contrast, it is more difficult to follow Raapoto in his interpretation of the term *ori*. Other eminent Tahitian language specialists that I questioned on this topic do not know the meaning of this term as given by Raapoto. This meaning is also totally absent from the dictionaries of the Tahitian language, where *ori*, a common noun or verb, is said simply to mean "rover, prowler; strolling, roaming" (Académie tahitienne, 1999: 318).

Let us take another look at the text by Raapoto on the meaning of *mā'ohi* and *māori*. He explains that, for reasons linked to the evolution of the language, the noun *ohi*, a variation on *ori*, may have gone through a glottalisation process in the Tahitian language, resulting in the appearance of *mā'ohi* (or *māohi*) replacing *māori* and *māohi*. However the meaning of *ohi* remains that of *ohi*, in other words a term referring to a young shoot, a sprout attached to a parent plant (*tumu*: trunk, stump, origin), a shoot "which lives but which does not survive" (Raapoto, 1978: 117). Accordingly, the term *mā'ohi* is deemed to be applied to a being full of strength, free and dignified, attached to its roots.

At the end of this analysis, I have gone much further here than finding a primary definition for *mā'ohi*, simply meaning 'common, native'. Raapoto basically used the metaphorical religious and plant references that Tahitian culture likes to give a very spiritual sense to *mā'ohi*. Before wondering whether this may be a very personal reading of the matter and whether these lexical divisions are justified, mention should be made of the extreme good fortunes, in just a few years, of this way of dividing up the term *mā'ohi* to designate the Polynesian identity.

### 1.5 The fortunes of the term *mā'ohi* and the variations on this etymology

The explanation of the term *mā'ohi* supplied by Raapoto became widespread throughout French Polynesia in the 1980s through educational institutions and the Protestant Church of French Polynesia (*Eglise évangélique de Polynésie française* [EPPF]) - officially renamed *Eglise protestante mā'ohi* [Mā'ohi Protestant Church] in 2004 (see Saura, 1998a). His was the first theorisation about this word and nobody has considered publicly challenging his arguments since. The Protestant Church also espouses Raapoto's theorisation of the Mā'ohi land as a Mother (*fenua metua vahine*), on the basis of the example of the placenta, referred to in Tahitian as *pūfenua* (*pū*: core; *fenua*: land), having issued from the mother's interior (*metua vahine*) before immediately being buried. As Tahitian society was generally abandoning the generic metonym *ta'ata tahiti* and turning to *mā'ohi*, it adopted the neologisms *hiro'a tumu* and *iho tumu* (usually followed by the adjective *mā'ohi*), also forged by Raapoto and his friends to express the concepts of culture and identity. *Hiro'a* means 'consciousness, knowledge'; *iho*: 'essence, identity'; *tumu*: 'tree, origin'.

During the 1980s, an untold number of poems, songs and dance performances expressed the Polynesian identity in terms of *mā'ohi*, *hiro'a tumu* and *iho tumu*. The same can be said in political discourse of every colour, advertising, acronyms for groups and associations and the official names of public institutions (the territorial culture ministry is today officially called *Fa'aterera'a Hau nō te Hiro'a tumu mā'ohi*) etc. I will refer to only one recent example of use made of the split by Raapoto of *mā'ohi* into *mā* (clean, dignified) and *ohi* (shoot): that of one of the most fashionable Tahitian writers, Patrick Amaru. Winner of a number of Tahitian language literary prizes in 2000 and 2001, Amaru pushes the comparison of *mā'ohi* to a proud shoot or young plant very far. In his fictional work *Te oho nō te tau 'auhunera'a* ('The first fruits of abundance') (2001), the poet plays with words; pursuing the allegory of identification with the plant kingdom, he sometimes transforms *mā* into *mā'a* (food, plant food). Singing the praises, as Raapoto, of the ancestral culture in terms of *hiro'a tumu*, he fully exploits the symbolism of the nourishing earth, with particular affection for the symbol of the burying of the placenta (*pūfenua*). The case of Amaru's emerging literary work is just one example amongst others of the multiple extensions of the identity discourse at the end of the 1970s and of the fortunes of the term *mā'ohi* when seen as two parts. But does the generalised use of this term to refer to the indigenous people of French Polynesia enjoy unanimous support in its own home?

## 2. Discordant voices

Discordant voices are sometimes heard here and there, challenging either the setting aside of the reference to each person's island of origin to express their Polynesian identity, or even querying the justification of the use of *mā'ohi* to refer to humans.

### 2.1 The refusal of a term of reference perceived as Tahitian, or non-spatialised

In his PhD thesis, Edgar Tetahiotupa (1999: 34) points out quite rightly, as I was able to observe personally during a visit to the Austral Islands, that the people of island groups other than the Society Islands often tend to assimilate *reo mā'ohi* to the Tahitian language alone (which is not the one they speak), instead of perceiving it as a generic term encompassing their own language. They continue to speak of their language in

terms of *reo rurutu*, the language of Rurutu, *reo rapa*, the language of Rapa, and 'eo *enana*, the language of the Marquesas, etc; similarly, they prefer to define themselves as *ta'ata rurutu*, *ta'ata rapa*, or *enana*, abandoning the adjective *mā'ohi* to the people of Tahiti who today seem to be so keen on using it. Among the inhabitants of the 'outer' island groups, the Marquesans, whose suspiciousness about Tahitian imperialism is no secret to anyone, are the keenest on keeping their distance as regards the term *mā'ohi*. In his PhD thesis, Tetahiotupa (himself from the Marquesas) reproduces extracts from an article published in *Tahiti Pacific* under the pseudonym Dona Ferentes (1999) denouncing the fact that *mā'ohi* means 'fondling' in the Marquesan language (1999: 31)<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, the expression *reo mā'ohi* is portrayed as being inappropriate to refer to the Marquesan language. Dictionaries of Marquesan that I am familiar with (including Dordillon, 1931: 250, 256) confirm that *mā'ohi* does mean 'fondling'<sup>10</sup> in these islands.

## 2.2 *Mā'ohi*, an inappropriate term to refer to humans?

In the Tahitian world, there is another dispute internal to users of the Tahitian and public language that recently emerged with regard to the use of the term *mā'ohi*. In 1999, a genuine controversy erupted in Tahiti connected not with the possible political dimension of the term *mā'ohi*, or the justification of its division into *mā* and *ohi* by Raapoto, but over whether or not it could be applied to humans. As part of the RFO (Réseau France Outre-mer) television programme *Matahiapo* ('Elders'), a Tahitian language programme involving journalist David Maraë interviewing elderly people, one of the interviewees, and then more, stated that until the 1970s they had never heard this term used to refer to humans. They said it was only used to refer to native objects, plants or animals. The first of these people was Louis Picard, who was born in Tahiti in 1910 and had resided in Bora Bora for a substantial part of his life. 'Demi' (ie mixed-race) with a very western physique, he was nevertheless raised by his grandmother in a Tahitian environment. During the programme on 27 October 1999, he stated that he had been severely chastised by his grandmother for having used the term *mā'ohi* one day to refer to a man arriving from the neighbouring village of Papara<sup>11</sup>:

*Interviewee: I saw someone arriving from Papara and coming straight towards us; so I said: "Hey, there is a Mā'ohi coming!" My grandmother grew angry: "but why do you say a Mā'ohi? This man is not a Mā'ohi, he is a Tahitian (ta'ata tahiti: man Tahiti). And you call him a Mā'ohi? He's a Tahitian and he comes from Papara". From that moment onwards, I clearly understood that one should not say Mā'ohi*

Question (by journalist): *Why?*

*Interviewee: Because it is a dirty, grubby name that applies to dirty, grubby people. We refer to the mā'ohi breadfruit and to the mā'ohi pig and it is appropriate. In French, there is a similar word: very low class people were called serfs. Serfs: serfs, s.e.r.f.: very inferior people. The nobles are the rich people, the aristocrats... I never heard my grandmother refer to anyone as 'mā'ohi'. If she used this term, it was to refer to people who did dirty, disgusting things, unclean things (mā). And until now, I really do not like to hear anyone say "Ah! Here is a mā'ohi!, because to speak in this way is a way of belittling people. A Tahitian, is a Tahitian (ta'ata tahiti), someone from the Tuamotus is a*



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*Pa'umotu and a Marquesan is a Marquesan (nu'u hiva). That's all.*  
(author's translation)

So clearly for Picard, identity is expressed by means of a precise geographical reference and not a generic and non-spatialised term (for want of being completely 'deterritorialised') as *mā'ohi* is. This is not the least of the paradoxes because a word that some use to express a close bond between man and land may appear to others as being detached from the territorial identity that traditionally defines people of French Polynesia. Picard's account nevertheless comprises an ideological conflict between ancient and modern on the subject of the territoriality of identities. He introduces the idea that the term *mā'ohi*, far from articulating the connotation of purity and cleanliness, refers rather to dirtiness, which I will endeavour to explain later.

A few months later, it was the turn of Maraea Amaru, from Hiti'a-ō-te-rā, born in 1912 in this rural district of Tahiti where she had always lived, to be interviewed on the *Matahiapo* programme on 10 April 2000. The journalist refers to the remarks recently made in the same programme by Picard:

Question (by journalist): *In your days, didn't you hear the term mā'ohi used?*

Answer: *No. Only now do I hear it. Before, if we spoke about mā'ohi, it was to refer to pigs. Mā'ohi pig, yes, wild pig: Let's go and hunt the mā'ohi pig!" referring to the undomesticated mountain pig. So there, you see, it applies to pigs not to people. Yes! It is not for people, it is only for pigs that we use this word and nothing else, never to refer to people. Why would we call ourselves 'mā'ohi'? (author's translation)*

Finally, the most recent interviewee (so far), to have disputed the use of the term *mā'ohi* was Tere Faeta, known as Pone, born in 1915 in Papeari, head of district and then mayor of this community from 1953 to 1989, he was interviewed during the only *Matahiapo* programme broadcast in July 2000:

*Since I was born, and until now, I who am old have never heard anybody refer to the 'mā'ohi language/dialect' (parau mā'ohi) or 'mā'ohi person/man (Ta'ata mā'ohi). Never. But where does it come from? The truth is that this word, mā'ohi, has been used since the beginning, and appropriately, to refer to pigs: the mā'ohi pig, as that lady said the other day. I use it to refer to wild bananas, mei'a mā'ohi; that is how it has been for a very very long time, we talk about end mei'a mā'ohi, mā'ohi bananas and that is still so today. But for us, I don't appreciate people saying that we are mā'ohi because we are Tahitian (Ta'ata tahiti) (author's translation).*

Tere Faeta Pone then goes so far as to directly criticise the young Protestant theologians who tried to rehabilitate the word *mā'ohi*, whose attitudes he derides unreservedly with a humour that is always appreciated by eloquent speakers of the Tahitian language. He does so, even if not bearing in mind the categories of clean and dirty, at least by placing the advocates of the word *mā'ohi* in the category of disrespectful, indecent and vulgar people in their actions and in their bodies:

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*This word mā'ohi comes from just a few people who are a little bi ... a little bit crazy aren't they? There is one, whose name I will not say, who was sent to France to become a pastor; the Evangelical Church prayed for his journey, and his education and so on and so forth. He left in a suit and tie with shoes and when he came back to Tahiti he took his trousers and shoes off and started walking around in a pareo. Is there anything good about that? He began talking about mā'ohi and he is the person who is now respected, he who uses the word mā'ohi. I saw him once, I saw him clearly, one day when I was in the truck and he go[t] on at the Puna'auia. He got on and we could see his underpants. But what's the point of all that? He may as well take all his clothes off, what does it mean when you show your underpants? (ibid)*

### 2.3 The stain? A conflict in representations relating to land

All in all, from these three interviews with elderly people, we appear to be dealing with arguments and representations that do not reveal tension between individuals, but rather value conflicts within traditional Tahitian culture itself. The discourse of those who praise the attachment of Polynesians to their 'mother earth', of which they are said to be its very own new shoots (*ohi mā*), is in total opposition to very ancient Polynesian representations in which the earth, like the woman, is perceived in terms of relative impurity, staining or dirtiness.

Let us try and give an account of these representations using examples—of which there are no lack. In Tahiti, for example, the adjective *mā'ohi* today still applies to lagoon fish (*i'a mā'ohi*) as opposed to *i'a tua*, (offshore fish, such as tuna, skipjack, swordfish, etc). As the reading of the *Mémoires de Marau Taaroa* (1971), the last Queen of Tahiti, clearly establishes, in Tahitian society of ancient times, the flesh of offshore fish was considered more desirable than that of lagoon fish and much more desirable than the bland flesh of river fish. This graduation of flavours is just one element in a broader symbolic palette (which after all is quite universal), in which everything that is royal, male, savoury, strong and linked to the outside world (like the offshore fish) is superior to everything which is feminine, bland, viscous, damp, inner and grubby - and, on that basis, in Tahiti, the ordinary people, small lagoon and freshwater fish, etc. In ancient Tahiti, the inhabitants of the interior of the islands and those who worked the land had less prestige than those who were members of the aristocracy and lived in the breezy seaside areas where the main *marae*—ceremonial and religious spaces—of superior rank, were to be found. In this way it becomes clear that, if the lagoon fish is called *i'a mā'ohi*, it is because it lives close to the coast, on the edge of the land (*fenua*: land as space). Similarly, the *mā'ohi* pig, black and wild, lives in the mountains and the upper valleys. The term *mā'ohi*, used to refer to these animals or plants living on the land, in the land, in contact with the earth, intrinsically does not carry any idea of superiority and even less so the idea of cleanliness (*mā*)<sup>12</sup>.

In the Tahitian language, the earth as a material is referred to as *repo*, and *reporepo*: 'dirty', 'muddy', 'stained', etc. While some aspects of traditional Polynesian culture praise the nourishing earth and its plants, in other ways the earth is seen as dirty and carrying stains: another term to say earth (engorged with water) is *vari*, which also refers to menstrual blood. The author himself recently wrote about the burying of the placenta in eastern Polynesia (Saura, 2002) in a paper explaining that this act of burying, in

addition to the fact that it meets the symbolic logic of maintaining fertility between humans, the earth and the plants, also aims to hide this impure object filled with maternal feminine blood, which must be placed in an inner place (woman, earth, house); like the earth. The placenta is not intrinsically a valuable object and even less a pure one, but rather the meeting place of various forms of symbolic logic associating the woman sometimes with life, sometimes with a stain.

It is now easier to understand why some people refuse to apply *mā'ohi* to humans. As the heirs of traditional values in which comparison with the earth referred to as *mā'ohi* (designating animals or plants close to the earth, planted in the soil or living in the interior, as opposed to foreign or offshore species), this word for them articulates the idea of dirtiness. Its use to refer to humans would be possible but pejorative, relegating humans to the animal and plant kingdoms and, what is more, to the condition of inferior animals and humans.

### 3. The linguistics of the matter

After giving an account of the very recent generalisation of the use of the term *mā'ohi* to designate the Polynesian identity in Tahiti and explaining the opposition expressed to this usage, with regard to traditional representations of the land and everything linked to it; it is now appropriate to turn to a comparative linguistic analysis across Polynesian languages in order to go beyond a conflict of representations that the Tahitian situation alone does not permit us to elucidate. Using the main dictionaries of Polynesian languages, the author will thus endeavour to answer two major questions: firstly, do equivalents of *mā'ohi*, applying to humans, exist in other Polynesian languages? Then, from the linguistic point of view, is it justified to divide *mā'ohi* into *mā* and *ohi* (or '*ohi*)? To perform this regional comparison I had access to a marvellous tool, the computerised database of the University of Auckland, called POLLEX (Polynesian Lexicon) (1999), established by Bruce Biggs and Ross Clark.<sup>13</sup> Its goal is to endeavour to reconstitute the lexicon of the proto-Polynesian roots of some 40 Polynesian languages.

#### 3.1 A widely used and flattering term

The Tahitian word *mā'ohi* would clearly appear to be attached to the proto-Polynesian root *maqoli*. (It should be made clear that the q in *maqoli* denotes a consonant, of which the pronunciation is not necessarily that of the q that we are familiar with; the purpose is rather to mark a consonant that often, in its local expressions, takes the form of a glottal stop. For the purposes of the next part of this paper it should be added that in the POLLEX the long vowel is denoted by a doubling of that vowel.)

*Maqoli* (which could be read *ma'oli*) is a proto-Polynesian root morphologically and semantically closely linked to the neighbouring roots *maa-qoki* (which could be written *mā-okī*) and *maqoni* (which could be read *ma'oni*).

*Maa-qoki* (*mā-okī*)—with a length accent on the a—is constructed on the basis of another proto-Polynesian root: *\*(q)oki* (*'oki*), signifying 'to rest'. This idea of permanence explains that in the Eastern Futuna and Samoan languages, *maa-qoki* (*mā-okī*) has the meaning 'true, certain', 'real, genuine'. This term therefore designates the nature of what is true, understood as that which does not change.

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The roots *maqoli* (*ma'oli*) and *maqoni* (*ma'oni*), which are highly interchangeable, articulate the same idea of lastingness and, through that, of truth, 'rootedness' and sometimes perfection. Referring to humans, this term means indigenoussness, authenticity: what is *maqoli* or *maqoni* is what is not new or borrowed. Although locally these two roots take forms varying from *māori* to *moli*, *moni*, *mongi*, or *māo'i*, they are undeniably the same term, which is equivalent to the Tahitian *mā'ohi*.

Here are some examples of local variations of the root *maqoli*:

Origin	Local variation	Meaning
Proto Polynesian	* <i>maqoni</i> *	True, genuine
* Proto Nuclear *	* <i>ma(a)qoli</i>	True, real, genuine
East Futuna	<i>fakamaa`oki</i>	Approve, be genuine; assure
East Uvea (Wallis Is)	<i>ma`oni/`oni</i>	Right, true; good, proper
Hawai'i	<i>Maoli</i>	Native, indigenous, native, true, real (Pki)
New Zealand Maori	<i>Maaori</i>	Indigenous, ordinary, natural; mortal man as opposed to supernatural beings; indigenous (of people) as opposed to incomers; fresh (water) as opposed to salt
Marquesas	<i>mao'i</i>	Indigenous
Mangareva	<i>Maori</i>	Right (not left)
Niue	<i>Mooli</i>	Be true, sure
Rarotonga	<i>Maaori</i>	Of native origin, indigenous
Samoa	<i>fa`a/maoni</i>	True, loyal/ real, genuine
Tokelau	<i>Moni</i>	True, sincere, honest
Tonga	<i>mo`oni</i>	True, genuine, intrinsic

Very similar definitions are given for *maqoni*.

This comparison is altogether very enlightening. The term *mā'ohi* is the Tahitian form for a word referring to truth or authenticity, understood as having a dual material and moral sense (in other words a literal and figurative sense). The idea of indigenous or native does not seem to be the primary meaning, because the fundamental significance of *maa-qoki*, *maqoli* and *maqoni* is an anchorage in permanence and stability (as opposed to novelty). This term, which can be applied to humans, is not pejorative—quite the contrary. It is rather a flattering view articulating the idea of what is good and lasting. In fact, in Polynesian societies, what is known, ordinary, indigenous and traditional is not an object of fear and conversely makes particular sense.

The definitions for the word *mā'ohi* found in the various Tahitian dictionaries testify to the fact that in Tahiti this term does not have the figurative meaning that it carries in many of the Polynesian languages<sup>14</sup>. In Tahiti, the truth, permanence or authenticity of an idea are expressed by the adjective *mau* (set, fixed, immovable) and not *mā'ohi*. As seen before, *Mā'ohi* is used for objects, plants, animals or humans, when they are to be distinguished from their *nō rāpae* (from the outside) or *popa`ā* (Western, imported), equivalents, such as *mā'ohi* food (*mā'a mā'ohi*) as opposed to an imported foodstuff

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(*mā'a popa'ā*) or a medicine from the local pharmacopoeia (*rā'au mā'ohi*) as opposed to an imported medicine (*rā'au popa'ā*).

### 3.2 The justification for splitting the word

One remaining task is to consider the justification for the linguistic division of *mā'ohi* into *mā* (clean, dignified) and *ohi* (shoot), as put forward by Raapoto. While using the term abundantly in their speech and writing, the specialists of the Tahitian language, like Academy members Louise Peltzer (p.c, August 2003) and Myron Mataoa (p.c, November 2003), do not subscribe to the split in the term *mā'ohi* into its two components *mā* and *ohi*. The President of the Académie tahitienne, Maco Tevane holds an intermediate opinion (2000: 17). Without openly accepting the interpretation of the term by Raapoto, Tevane nevertheless partially falls into step behind him: he subscribes to the idea that *mā'ohi* can be split into two and that the first component, *mā*, means cleanliness, purity. In contrast, he would prefer to read into the second component the term '*ohi* ('to collect, to harvest') and not that, without the glottal stop, *ohi* (shoot, plant growth) as perceived by Raapoto<sup>15</sup>.

In fact, analysis reveals that the splitting of *mā'ohi* into *mā* and *ohi* raises a whole series of linguistic problems. Firstly, the possible appearance of the glottal stop, transforming *ohi* (shoot) into '*ohi* is possible in the evolution of the language (if it is assumed that the term *mā'ohi* can be split, an issue I will come back to), but it is also very hypothetical. It would be simpler to follow Tevane (2000) and to read '*ohi* and not *ohi* into *mā'ohi*. Another problem is that of inversion. *Mā'ohi* is not *ohimā* (or '*ohimā*). 'Clean shoot' could be the translation of *ohimā* and not *mā'ohi*. This is not the same word, because not everything is interchangeable in Tahitian.

Ideologically, the association of the term *mā'ohi* with the idea of cleanliness (physical and moral) said to be contained in the morpheme *mā* (which we will see is endowed with multiple meanings) is particularly pleasing: in this way the *Mā'ohi* could be said to be ontologically *mā* (clean), with the secondary meaning that they are so as opposed to strangers. This idea echoes popular ethnic representations or stereotypes that disparage the stranger, in which for example the French (*Farani*) are perceived in Tahiti as people of doubtful personal cleanliness; hence the name *farani taioro* and its shortened version *tai*, when referring to *taioro* (or *taiero*), the pungent-smelling pulp of fermented coconut (compared to the deposits of smegma that can accumulate under the foreskin of uncircumcised men – NB the majority of French are not circumcised while the majority of (French) Polynesians are)<sup>16</sup>. It therefore emerges that the term *mā* has many meanings, of which only one, the most flattering, is retained here. The Académie tahitienne dictionary states:

*Mā* (1), *adj.* Clean, pure, clear... (2) *conj.* Expresses the plural of proper nouns... (3), *n.c.* Mark on a target... (4), *n.c.* Deposit of starch obtained by decanting cassa... (5), *pref. ver... or adjectival form...* (6) *v.e.* to be ashamed... (Académie tahitienne, 1999: 231 – author's translation)

*Mā* can be included in the composition of many terms not including the idea of cleanliness. Because *mā* is a grammatical morpheme that expresses a state, as Peltzer explains:

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*The derivative forms from using the prefix mā belong only to the class of verbs and express resemblance, 'conduct an action to achieve what is expressed in the basis, be like'. [For instance] Tau "time" / mātau "be accustomed, know", 'Ute'ute "red" / mā'ute'ute "reddish", 'Ere'ere "black" / mā'ere'ere "blackish" (Peltzer 1996: 363 – author's translation).*

If it is assumed that *mā'ohi* can be split into *mā* and *ohi* (and not 'ohi), it would be more logical to think that *mā* plays the role of an affix and does not in any way articulate the idea of cleanliness or dignity. With this theory, it could express the character of what is rooted, like a small shoot (*ohi*) or what is endowed with small shoots. Unfortunately a persuasive argument invalidates all these interpretations linked to splitting *mā'ohi*: the proto-Polynesian root *maqoli* or *maqoni*, of which *mā'ohi* is only a local form, cannot be divided into two parts. It is a word in its own right, which in no Polynesian language derives from the addition of a lexeme signifying cleanliness and another said to refer to young shoots. Elsewhere in Polynesia, *mā'ohi* takes the form of *mōli*, *moni*, *mā'oni*, *mongi*, *māo'i*, etc. The fact that the long accent on the *mā* exists in some languages and not others is a supplementary argument invalidating the idea that *mā'ohi* should necessarily be read as *mā* plus *ohi*. Overall, the division of *mā'ohi* into *mā* and *ohi* and the meaning given to this term by Raapoto cannot be retained, even if they do prove particularly interesting from the point of view of the representations that some bestow upon this word today.

### Conclusion

I have outlined above the stages of the recent generalisation of the use of the term *mā'ohi* in Tahitian society to refer to indigenous status or the (French) Polynesian identity in a 'substantial' perspective. It nevertheless emerged that some people refuse to use this word to refer to humans because it does away with the geographical reference to peoples' home islands and also to humankind (referred to as *ta'ata*), both included in the term *ta'ata tahiti* (or *ta'ata ra'iatea*, *ta'ata mo'orea*). To use the same term to express the indigenous nature of humans, animals and plants was in their opinion not appropriate. The refusal was based on traditional representations in which that which is grubby, muddy or internal to the island is considered inferior, which are opposite representations to those of people who laud the osmosis between the (French) Polynesian and his land and put forward the idea that *mā'ohi* embodies the purity, cleanliness and dignity (the character of that which is *mā*) of (French) Polynesians, metaphorically compared to a young shoot (*ohi*).

A comparative analysis enabled the author both to become apprised of the fairly widespread use of local equivalents of the term *mā'ohi* in the Polynesian cultural region to refer to the population's longevity of connection to place and, through that, their indigenous status. On the other hand, the linguistic information established that this term cannot be divided into *mā* meaning 'clean' and *ohi* meaning 'shoot'. Such an etymology would be pure poetry, expressing a desire for innovation. Inaccurate from a scientific point of view, this political reading goes against naturalistic ideological representations of the plant-related type which exist in traditional Tahitian thought (Saura, 2002) within which, for example, humans are rooted in a territory (*ta'ata tumu*: the original man, indigenous) as opposed to the *hotu pāinu* (drifting fruit; metaphor for the stranger).

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In summary, the term *mā'ohi* would appear to be semantically very close to its French equivalent 'indigenous', which can be given a positive or discrediting dimension depending on the context, who uses it, about whom and the emotional load it carries. Beyond the word, and words in general, the current fortunes in Tahiti of 'substantial' representations of the Polynesian as indigenous or fruit from the earth, in reaction to a colonial situation experienced as an uprooting and deep dispossession, should also be noted. The Polynesian identity that certain ethnologists (eg Linnekin and Poyer, 1990) present as being constructed through experience (rather than in reference to roots or the primordial allegiance to a group) and open to borrowing from others, today often offers the face of resistance.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the sixth edition of this dictionary, published in 1987, without page numbering.

<sup>2</sup> Anthropologist Deborah Ellistone notes that "'Ma'ohi' is not a term tied as closely to place as is 'Tahitian', but for some Polynesians, the term had pointedly nationalist connotations. When I asked people about the differences between these terms of reference, for example, several said that 'Ma'ohi' is usually someone who is 'with the Tavini' (independence party)" (1997: 35). On the other hand (and this is more open to argument), Anna Laura Jones suggests that, "The term 'Tahitian' is rejected by some members of the Ma'ohi movement... The term Ma'ohi is used by all Tahitian speakers to refer to native Polynesians, regardless of political affiliation" (1992: 153).

<sup>3</sup> Noted above as Turo Raapoto. Turo is in fact the Tahitian pronunciation of the first name Duro. Both forms are used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Marius Raapoto, the brother of Duro Raapoto, Doctor of Linguistics, pro-Independence member of the Territorial Council since 2001, who in 2004 became the Territorial Education and Culture Minister, also strongly defends this distinction in his work and teaching at the University of French Polynesia. In his doctoral thesis (1999: 26-27), Edgar Tetahiotupa reproduced some very interesting documents on the term *mā'ohi*, including an undated text by Duro Raapoto, entitled *Aita e reo Tahiti* ('There is no Tahitian language').

<sup>5</sup> The same thing can be observed in Hawai'i where the term Hawaiian is rejected by some supporters of the indigenous sovereignty movement who favour *kanaka maoli*. See article by Kekuni Blaisdell (1989).

<sup>6</sup> Also, referring not to political circles but to the grassroots community, Alexandrine Brami clearly showed (2000) that among Tahitian youth today, the promotion of identity and Polynesian identity were no longer linked to the pro-Independence commitment, contrary to the first generation of cultural activists in the 1970s-1980s.

<sup>7</sup> In his text, the Polynesian terms are written in bold characters, without italics; the author has changed the form.

<sup>8</sup> Here the collective nature of this vision of the *mā'ohi* identity, in which the individual is never perceived as other than an element in a primordial group, can clearly be seen.

<sup>9</sup> This argument has been taken up by others including Grand (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Dordillon (1904, reprinted in 1999: 178) and Le Cleac'h (1997: 82).

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<sup>12</sup> In her article, Simone Grand (2003: 210) asks the following question about the contemporary *mā'ohi* movement: "What is it then that pushes islanders to claim with such force, such emotion, a belonging to a group by using a word meaning 'ordinary', as if it was of vital importance to do so?"

<sup>13</sup> This database is evolving all the time. The author has a 1999 version, consulted at the CREDO library in Marseille, with the help of Serge Tcherkézoff, who I wish to thank.

<sup>14</sup> The Académie tahitienne dictionary states: "*Mā'ohi*, adj. 1) ordinary, indigenous, what is not foreign. *Pape mā'ohi* = fresh water; *tiare mā'ohi* = *Gardenia tahitensis*; *pua'a mā'ohi* = pig; '*uru mā'ohi* = most common variety of breadfruit. Cf. *Māori* (1). 2) that which comes from French Polynesia. *Te reo mā'ohi* = the language spoken by (French) Polynesians, Tahitian. *Te mau reo mā'ohi* = the indigenous languages of French Polynesia. *Ve'a mā'ohi* = name of a periodical printed by the Government between the wars; n.c.; Polynesian (native to French Polynesia). *Tē ora nei 'oia mai tā te mā'ohi* = he lives like a Polynesian. Cf. *Ta'ata mā'ohi, Titumarae*" (1999: 248).

<sup>15</sup> For *ohi*, the Académie tahitienne (1999: 300) dictionary entry reads: "(1), Illness characterised by red spots on the skin... (2), n.c. banana shoot, banana sucker, etc... Cf. '*āuri* (1), '*rāuaua*, '*tīreo* (2), '*uhi* (2). Synonyms(s): '*mo'o* (3) – '*mō* – '*mu'o'o* (1)" (1999: 300). For '*ohi*: "'*ohi*, n.c. To collect wood, small items, discarded items, etc."

<sup>16</sup> On ethnic prejudice in general, refer to the article by Mondher Kilani (1997). On the Tahitian situation, the author would refer readers to (Saura, 1998b). Lastly, around the issue of identity and circumcision in French Polynesia, see Garnier (2003).

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