

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE  
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NEW ZEALAND'S  
COOK ISLANDS

# Paradise in Search of a Future

By MAURICE SHADBOLT

*Illustrations by National Geographic  
photographer WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD*

**T**AKE A MAP and jab a pin into the heart of the Pacific south of the Equator, and with very good luck your pinprick might demolish one of the 15 tiny islands of the Cook group. Scattered thinly over 13 degrees of latitude, between the Samoa Islands and Tahiti, they're easy to lose.

Europeans began this lottery in 1595, discovering islands and losing them, and taking 228 years to find them all (map, page 208). Centuries earlier, Polynesian voyagers found new islands by losing others, eventually settling them all like wind-sown seed.

"You can sail past one in the night and never know," the skipper told me. We stood on the bridge of a tiny trading vessel, peering into a moonless night, almost a week from last sight of an island. "It's done often."

Charts told us we were near Manihiki, in the Northern Cook Islands, but we drew a blank from the dark ocean.

"Here," he said, and handed me binoculars. "You try. First focus on a faint star. Then look at the horizon for a shape, something that might be land."

He signaled half speed to the engine room, while my eyes grew used to the feeble starlight and then searched the murk of the sea.

Something seemed to be out there. A black cloud—or could it be Manihiki?

"We'll see," said the skipper, and reduced speed still further. He took his turn with the binoculars, squinting into space and then concentrating upon an ocean which seemed almost as vast and empty.

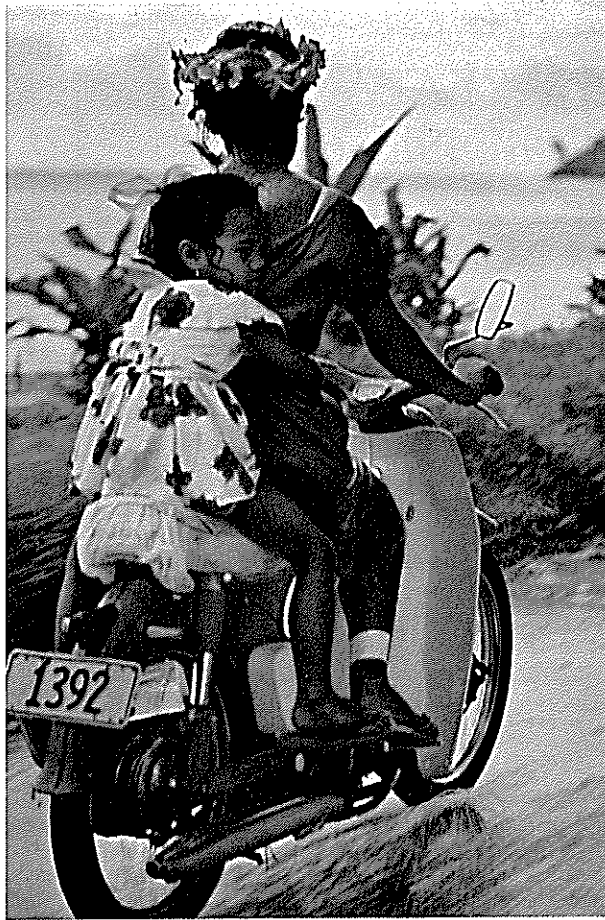
"That's it," he said. "That's Manihiki. You know how to find a Cook island now."

But I had to wait upon morning for sight of one of Polynesia's

Splintered gold of sunset silhouettes young anglers on a wave-lashed reef of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. Their sea-scattered homeland—once a stranger to time, an idyll in the dreams of Western man—now experiments with self-government. New Zealand, which extends citizenship to the islanders, supports the brave new venture of its long-time territory.

KODACHROME © N.G.S.





Sign of changing times, a scooter proclaims the affluence of a Rarotonga family. But few in the Cooks could afford such a luxury without the aid of New Zealand, which provides more than half the islands' income.

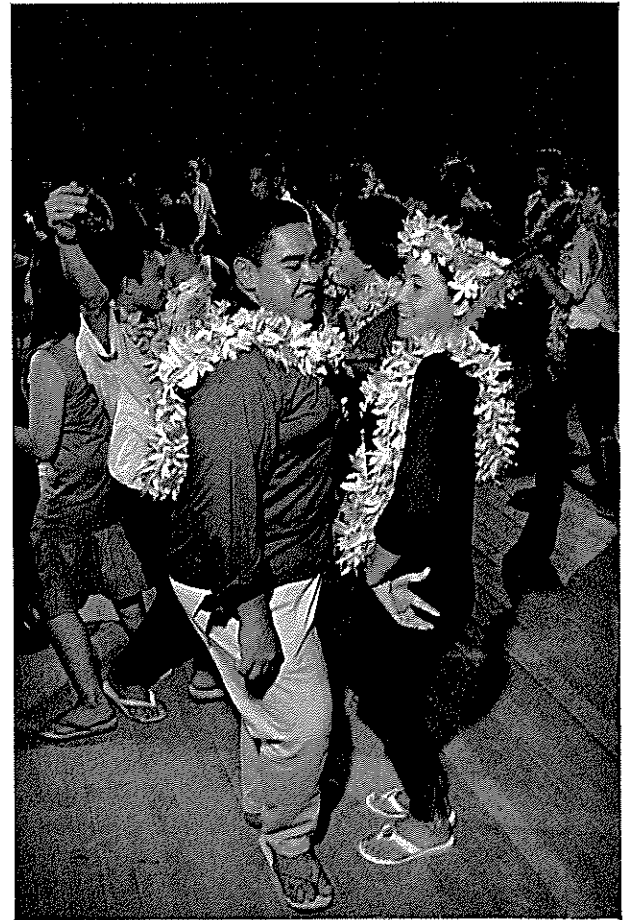
loneliest outposts. Sunrise gave color and texture to that anonymous shadow in the night.

Surf flickered along a reef where flying fish skipped. Sinewy coconut palms rose in dense green tangle above a long, low shore of pink sand and pale coral. Here and there, where palms thinned, a calm lagoon glimmered.

In a clearing stood village homes. Dark figures were shouldering boats to the surf, calling across the water.

For a moment I might have been back in

**The Author:** Gifted young New Zealand writer Maurice Shadbolt has contributed to the GEOGRAPHIC: "In Storied Lands of Malaysia," November, 1963; "Western Samoa, the Pacific's Newest Nation," October, 1962; and "New Zealand: Gift of the Sea," April, 1962. He and another New Zealander, Olaf Ruhen, are now at work on a new GEOGRAPHIC book, *Isles of the South Pacific*, to be published in February, 1968.



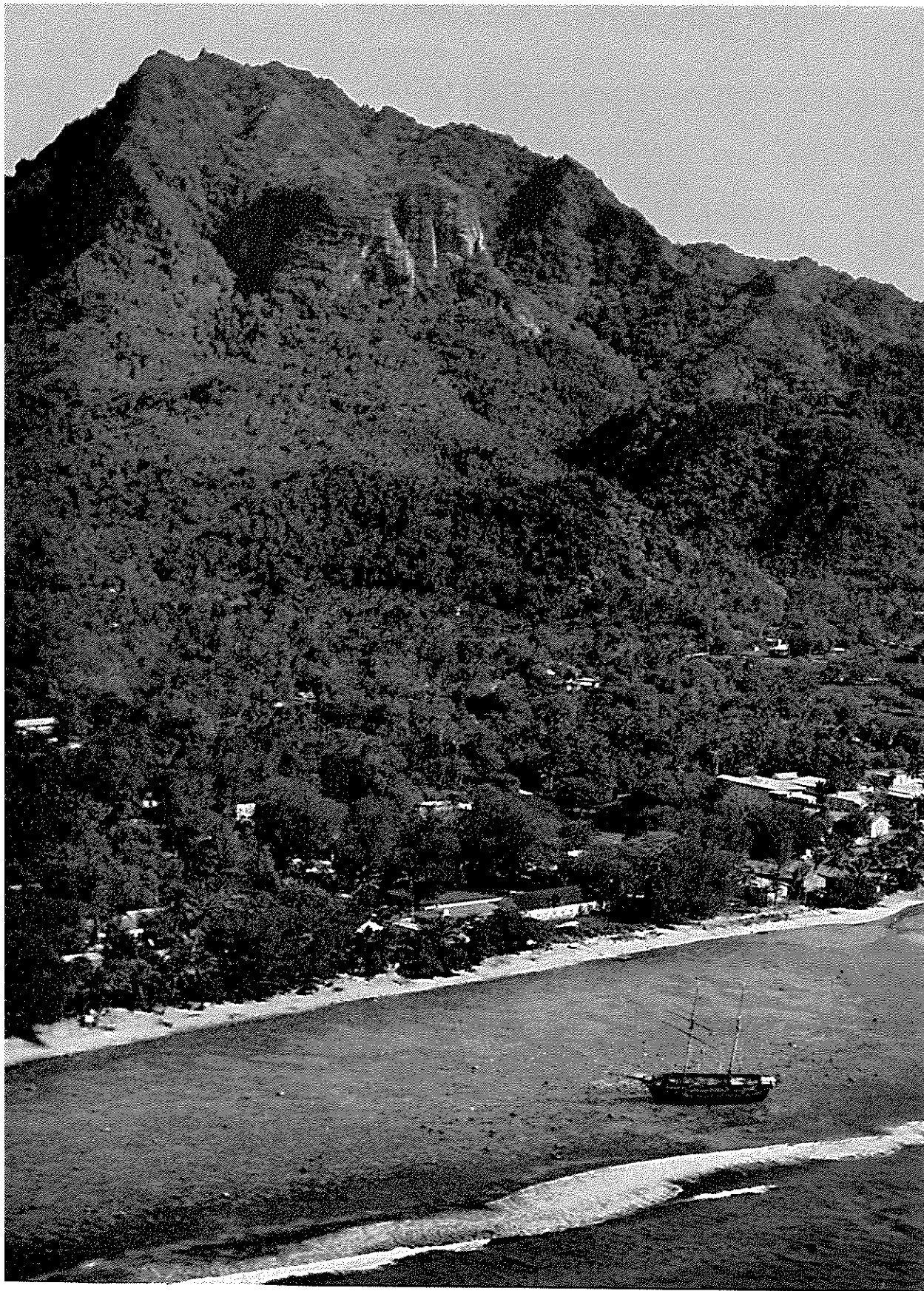
KODACHROMES © N.G.S.

Past churns with present as partners throw a bit of twist and frug into the traditional *tamure* at a Rarotonga dance hall. Garlands of frangipani, called *eis* by the islanders, jiggle in rhythm.

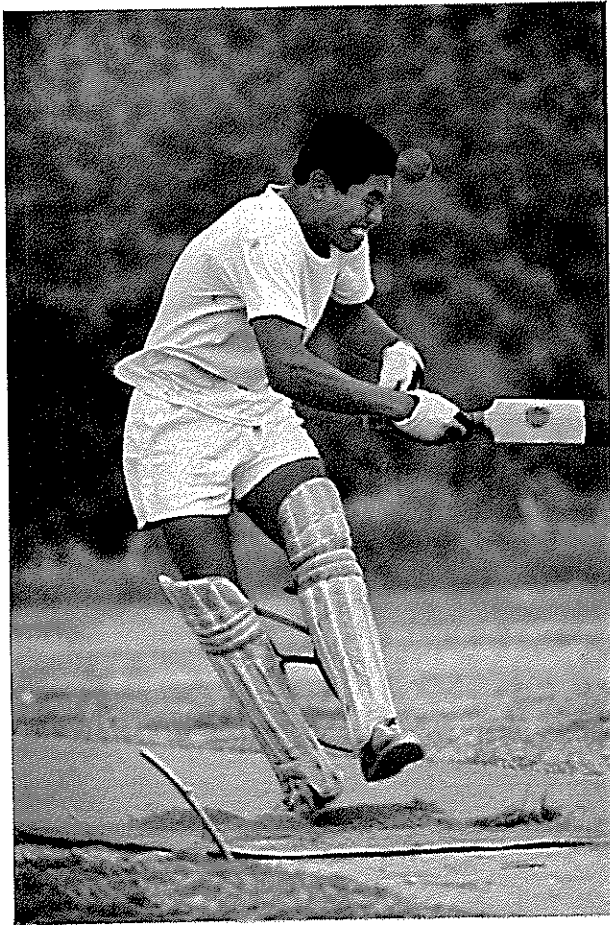
the oldest Polynesia, where virgin islands could still surprise the voyager. The haunting Polynesia of Western dreams, of the writer Melville and the painter Gauguin; the Polynesia of Rousseau's "noble savage," heaven-sent for philosopher, poet, and adventurer.

I had been under no such delusion, a week or two earlier, when radar-guided aircraft—swift jet and lumbering DC-3—winged me by stages across the Pacific to Rarotonga, major island of the Cook group.

I had, besides, some modern, down-to-earth questions on my mind: Can these out-of-the-way islands—around the corner from nowhere—survive? Can their meager resources provide a livelihood for a people bent on tackling the problems of the 20th century? If the questions themselves should surprise, then it is a measure of the tenacity of Western dreams—dreams of sunny islands garlanded



Proud peaks mantled in green and a strand of pearling surf beckon the seafarer to Rarotonga. According to island tradition, mutineer Fletcher Christian and his commandeered *Bounty* stopped briefly here in 1789 to trade, perhaps leaving Rarotonga's first



With warlike chop, a cricketer furiously swipes at a ball. Tensions that build up in insular life—once vented in almost continual strife—find release in hotly contested games of cricket, rugby, and tennis.



ERTACHROME (LEFT) AND KODACHROME © H.G.S.

Skull session gives a student firsthand knowledge of tooth and jaw formation in Rarotonga's dental clinic. In less enlightened times, jawbones hung from canoes, battle trophies of cannibal islanders.

with the fantasies of writer and film-maker.

For the fact is, the Cook Islands—now crossing the threshold of self-government—face hard political and economic problems for which there are no easy answers.

#### *Yankee Lies at Avarua's Doorstep*

The questions slipped from my mind when Moana-nui-o-kiva, the "Great Ocean of the Blue Sky" that Polynesians made their own in times remote, tossed green, surf-edged Rarotonga like a gift upon the horizon.

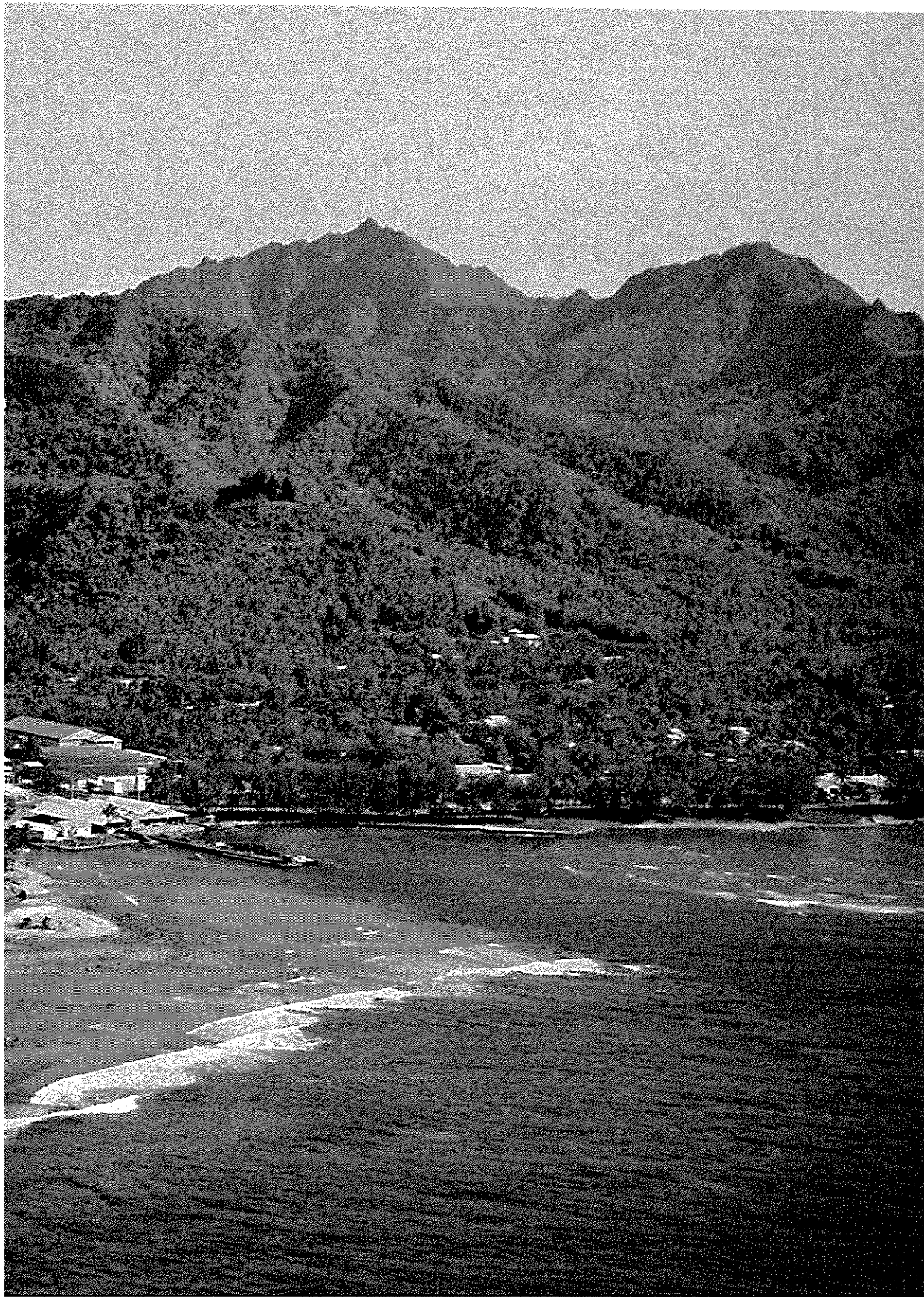
Pale transparent lagoon and long bright beach soon slid below (pages 206-7 and 219). Next came neat coastal villages and plantations and beyond them high dusky-green slopes, densely forested ridges climbing to sky-needling volcanic peaks long cooled. There was a silvery flash of falling water. The old navigators might have traded half their

precious rigging for my view. Then I had to come to ground, as they to shore.

Lying off the main shipping lanes, the Cooks are only fitfully served by sea. And new international rules, which forbid the flying of DC-3's more than 90 minutes from base, have ensured that now even my engine-straining, seven-hour flight from Samoa is no more.

One of the southern volcanic islands, Rarotonga receives a monthly trading ship from New Zealand, a few cargo boats, and brief-calling tourist vessels. The rest of the group's 13 inhabited islands, especially the Northern Cooks, exist in seldom-disturbed isolation.

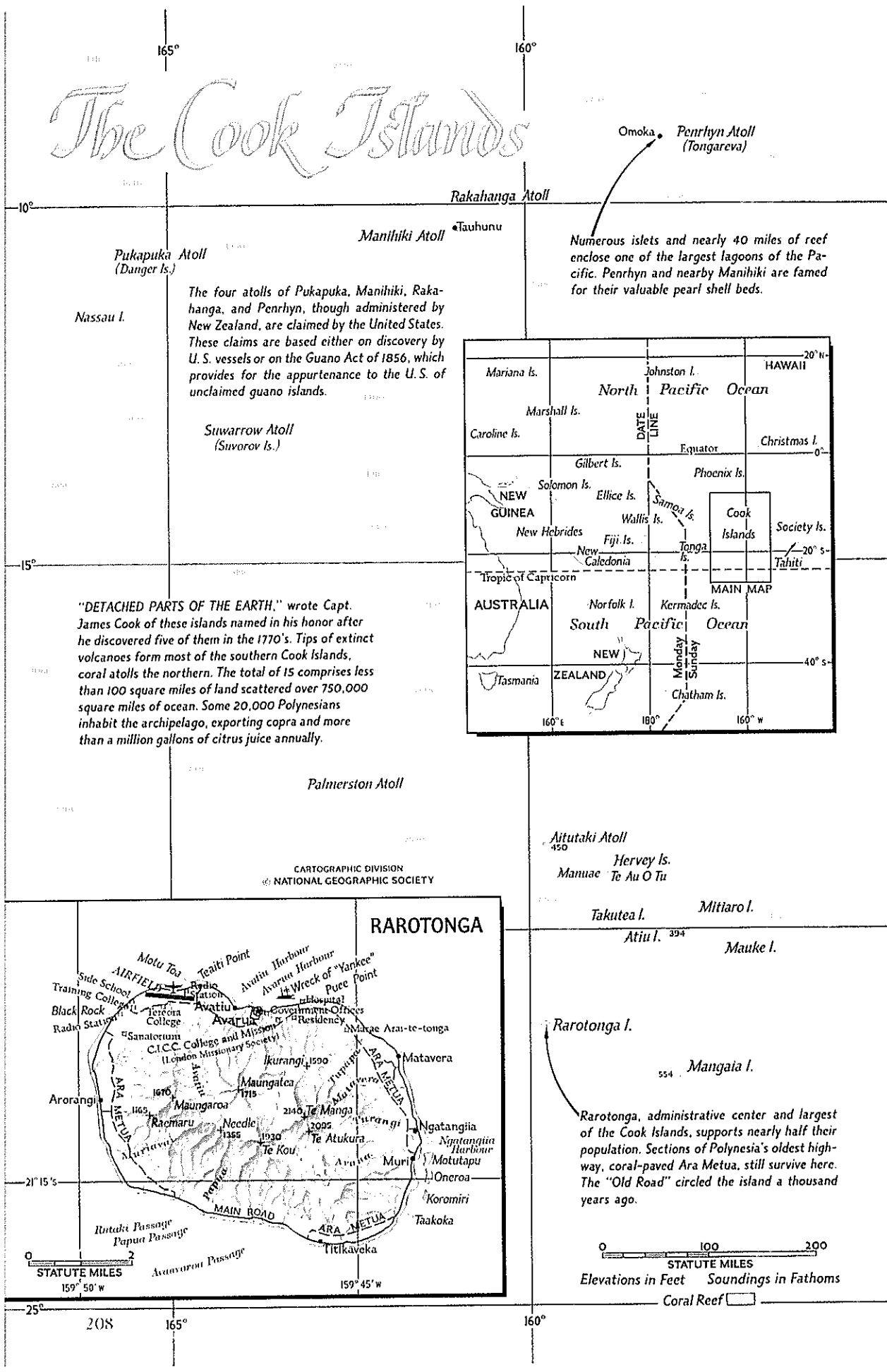
From the airport I traveled a smooth black-top highway into the overgrown village of Avarua, administrative center for the Cook Islands (inset map, page 208). The route cracked and snarled with motor scooters. Beyond the coconut palms lining the road,



EKTACHROME BY ROBERT D. JOHNSON © N.G.S.

orange seeds. Like a ghost from the golden age of sail, the brigantine *Yankee* lies in the clutch of coral off Avarua, the islands' seat of government. Former sailing home of GEOGRAPHIC author Irving Johnson, *Yankee* under new owners swept to disaster in a 1964 gale.

# The Cook Islands



Pukapuka Atoll  
(Danger Is.)

Manihiki Atoll

Rakahanga Atoll

Omoka Penrhyn Atoll  
(Tongareva)

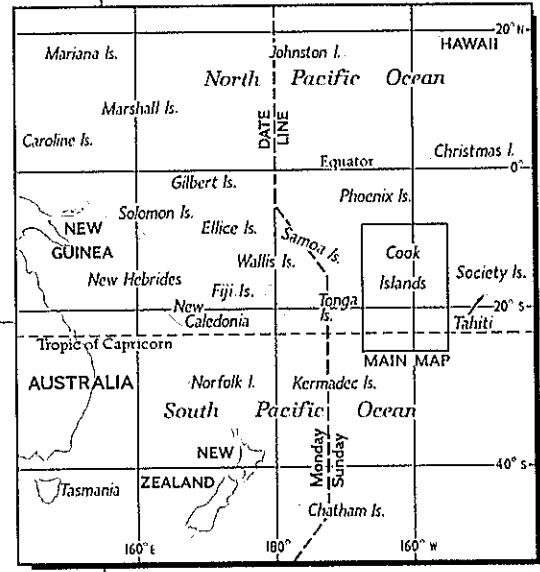
Nassau I.

The four atolls of Pukapuka, Manihiki, Rakahanga, and Penrhyn, though administered by New Zealand, are claimed by the United States. These claims are based either on discovery by U. S. vessels or on the Guano Act of 1856, which provides for the appurtenance to the U. S. of unclaimed guano islands.

Suvarrow Atoll  
(Suworov Is.)

Numerous islets and nearly 40 miles of reef enclose one of the largest lagoons of the Pacific. Penrhyn and nearby Manihiki are famed for their valuable pearl shell beds.

"DETACHED PARTS OF THE EARTH," wrote Capt. James Cook of these islands named in his honor after he discovered five of them in the 1770's. Tips of extinct volcanoes form most of the southern Cook Islands, coral atolls the northern. The total of 15 comprises less than 100 square miles of land scattered over 750,000 square miles of ocean. Some 20,000 Polynesians inhabit the archipelago, exporting copra and more than a million gallons of citrus juice annually.

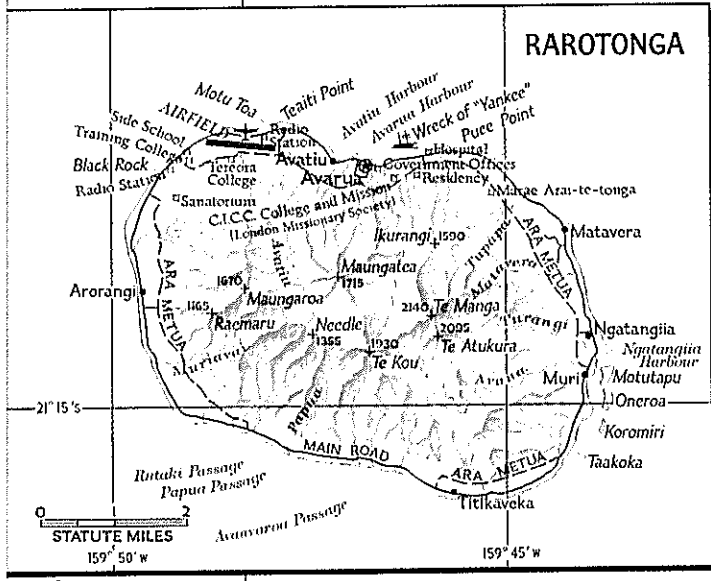


Palmerston Atoll

CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION  
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Aitutaki Atoll  
Hervey Is.  
Manuae  
Te Au O Tu

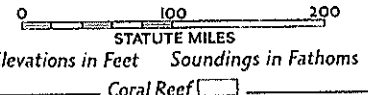
Takutea I. Mitiaro I.  
Atiu I. Mauke I.



Rarotonga I.

Mangaia I.

Rarotonga, administrative center and largest of the Cook Islands, supports nearly half their population. Sections of Polynesia's oldest highway, coral-paved Ara Metua, still survive here. The "Old Road" circled the island a thousand years ago.



though, I glimpsed fishermen in outrigger canoes bobbing near the reef.

Outrigger and motor scooter, Polynesia old and new, the contrast was immediate and everywhere. Palm-thatched, log-framed huts rose beside concrete-block cottages roofed with corrugated iron; sometimes a shiny tractor stood idle in the back yard. And the slanting late-afternoon light made golden the masts of the wrecked brigantine *Yankee*, which once took crews of young sailors to adventures in paradise.\* It lay hurricane-tumbled on the Avarua reef (page 206).

#### Maoris Embark on New Adventure

Avarua, with the untidy wood-and-iron atmosphere of a South Sea trading post, illustrates Western impact. Beached canoes may still be strewn among seafront ironwood trees, but across the road are a department store and coffee bar. A large old church tells of London Protestants who made a missionary kingdom of the Cooks in the 19th century. The collapsing palace beside it was once the home of tribal chiefs.

The heyday of the Western beachcomber may be over, but adventures are not. The Cook Island Maoris have embarked together on the greatest of them all, that of taking their destiny back into their own hands.

For in 1965 the 20,500 people of the Cooks, after 65 years of missionary lawmakers, then another 77 of paternalistic British and New Zealand rule, took over the business of governing themselves again. They elect their own legislative assembly, their own premier. Though they retain New Zealand citizenship, military protection, and financial help, their internal economic and political problems are now their own to solve—if they can.

\*After many adventurous voyages around the world—and through the pages of the *GEOGRAPHIC*—the *Yankee* was sold by Irving and Electa Johnson in 1959. Sailing with new owners, she was wrecked in the Cooks in 1964. The Johnsons have since purchased a new, smaller *Yankee* for cruising the Nile and Europe's inland waters.

Hand-shaped section of a 55-foot fishing boat bears the hallmark of Rarotonga shipwright Uapa Marsters, descendant of an English sailor who settled on Palmerston Atoll a century ago. Built for the Cook Islands Government, the boat will explore deep-sea fish resources. By going beyond lagoon and reef—overfished in recent years— Islanders hope to fill the home demand for seafood, chief source of protein in the Polynesian diet. Fish now must be imported from New Zealand to supplement local catches.

Thus began a dramatic race against time, for islands are emptying all over the Pacific, and the Cook Islands are no exception. An estimated 8,000 younger Maoris, more than a third of the total population, have already left for New Zealand's urban lights.

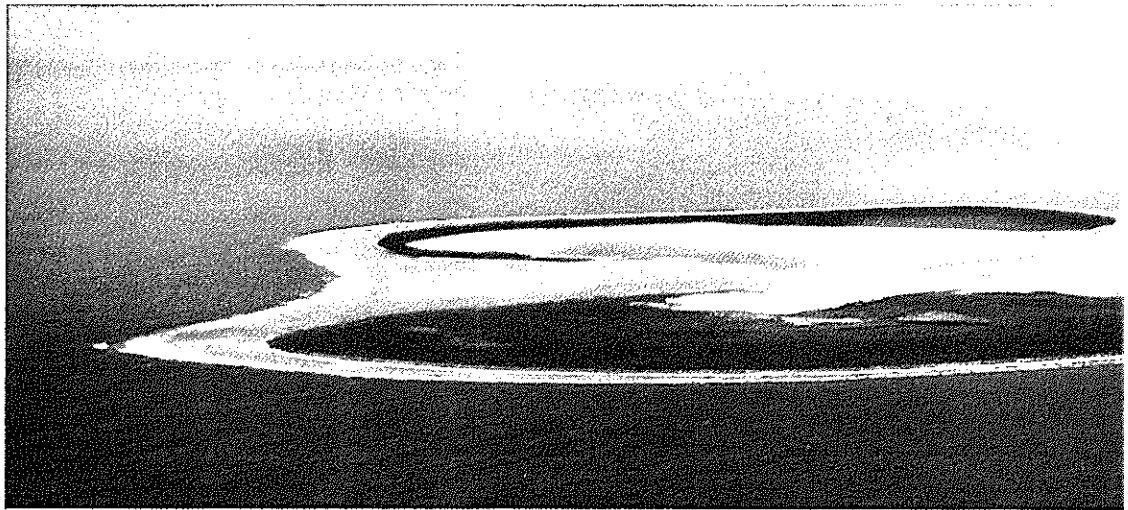
They leave behind them the question which began again to puzzle me as I walked in Avarua: Can island communities so tiny, scattered, and loosely linked survive in the 20th century?

To move, as I did, among Rarotonga's exploding population of 10,000 is to know people of the entire Cook group, for outer islanders come here in ever greater numbers from their ancestral homes. But seldom to prosper. I found immigrants from remote Pukapuka, 820 miles away, still practicing fast-vanishing island crafts. Others from Manihiki Atoll, 760 miles north, work as factory hands, fish an overfished reef, and grow a little taro on land they can lease but never own.

"Don't you want to go home?" I asked.



EKTACHROME BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.







Naked to the waist, the muscular fisherman from Manihiki unshouldered the paddles of his canoe. "Of course," he said. "And one day I might, for a visit. Up there I have family land, but good only for growing coconuts. And there is no high school—not enough people. So I brought my children here. Now we're used to Raro. Some of my children have gone to New Zealand and send back money. We get along."

A typical story, yet cheerfully told.

"Promise me one thing, though," he said as we parted. "Promise you see Manihiki, the most beautiful of the Cooks. Ride out across the lagoon—and taste the Manihiki coconut crab."

His eyes were wistful as I promised. It is that faint wistful gleam which distinguishes outer islanders from the Rarotongan: a yearning for lost islands their children may never see.

#### Politics Cloaked in Flowers and Hymns

Yet this is still Polynesia, and unhappy faces are few. Anything can be a joke; everything can become a festival.

There was the political meeting to which I went as observer. Serious? Of course; this time most ukuleles were left at home. But the thousand-odd Maoris who trooped in from the villages were tangled brightly with fresh blooms. Flowers and passionate hymns transformed Western-style politics into something peculiarly Polynesian.

Though grievances can kindle local problems to the boiling point, internal self-government came quietly to the Cooks. There were no street demonstrations, no riots.

"I don't think we could manage a real riot," a young Rarotongan said with a smile. "Someone would be bound to start playing a ukulele, and that would be the end of it."

I took to a motor scooter to see Rarotonga.

KODACHROMES BY ROBERT B. JOHNSON (BELOW) AND WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © H.G.S.



Kiting over a spun-silver sea, tuna fishermen from Penrhyn Atoll sail to the strum of wind filling patchwork canvas. Superb sailors, Polynesians of old threaded vast Pacific reaches in outriggers and double canoes, guided by stars, prevailing winds, and charts made of shells laced to grids of pandanus. Such intrepid adventurers settled the Cook Islands, which later sent out Maori colonizers to New Zealand.

Lost in an infinity of sea, a star glows in the Pacific firmament—Manuae Atoll, or Hervey's Island, as discoverer James Cook called it. Surf breaking over the coral reef frames copra plantations. To harvest the crop, some twenty men sponsored by the Cook Islands Cooperative Bank sign up for one- or two-year stays on the otherwise uninhabited atoll.

A 20-mile road circles the island; inland lies a curious and narrow coral-paved route named Ara Metua (Old Road), built a thousand years ago. Once tribesmen lived on the inland side of this road, but missionaries insisted they move to church settlements along the coast.

Today only eroding stones along this route tell of a vanished and complex Rarotongan civilization. When missionaries directed destruction of all graven images of ancient belief, Polynesian gods were vanquished forever.

Or were they?

#### Old Gods Await a Change of Faith

At affluent Arorangi village, home of the island's best agriculturalists, I paused astride my scooter. Beyond the neat Protestant church and bell tower rose the flat summit of bulky 1,165-foot Mount Raemaru.

"Up there," a Rarotongan friend explained, "is where the old gods went when the Christians came. They said they would wait there until people tired of Christianity. And they would always be there for whoever needed them. You will find a track worn to the summit by feet, human feet."

The plateau on top of Raemaru seemed an entirely proper place for gods to wait, and the tradition had echo in a conversation later with Pastor Bill Marsters of the London Missionary Society. Mr. Marsters is a member of a clan famous in the Pacific. It descends from an English sailor who settled on tiny and lonely Palmerston Atoll in the Cooks a century ago. Members of the family today number more than a thousand.

He told me, "I'm afraid Christianity no longer has so strong a hold. The example of the *papaa*—the white man—has not always been good. After all, the *papaa* brought Christianity; yet the Maoris see many white men whose behavior is far from Christian. And then, of course, the original fervor for Christianity has almost gone, and often there is a reversion to old belief, old superstition."

Though nominally one hundred percent Christian like the rest of the Cook Islands, Rarotonga is also typical in its superstitions. *Tupapaku*—ghosts—can roam the night under the star-studded Pacific sky.

At Ngatangia village, still on my scooter, I met one of Rarotonga's *papaa* characters. The lean and crisp-spoken English author Ronald Syme fell in love with the island and what he calls its "wild and lovely" people at the age of 17. He returned later in life to make a home near the pale water and palm-fringed islands of Muri lagoon.

"Legends?" he said. "This place is thick with them, old boy. Take this village, Ngatangia. It means 'the people of Tangia,' a Tahitian who went out exploring and ran across a Samoan named Karika in mid-ocean.

"They would have fought there and then, except there were no spectators to applaud a victory. So they voyaged together, discovered Rarotonga, conquered earlier arrivals, and divided the island between them. Tangia lived here, and his descendants still do."

Syme's village, on the east side of Rarotonga, is historic on another account. It was here the first Europeans made recorded contact with the island's Maoris.

Oddly, despite its size and beckoning peaks, Rarotonga was one of the last islands to be fished from the Pacific by Europeans. Capt. James Cook, for whom the group was named, missed it. Tradition has *Bounty* mutineers trading here in 1789. Then a tantalizing glimpse from a passing vessel in 1813 led speculators in Sydney, Australia, to dispatch a ship to the island. They were searching—in vain, as it turned out—for sandalwood.

#### Islanders Surprised by Visitors' Garb

Under a captain named Goodenough, the *Cumberland* glided gently up to Ngatangia in 1814. From this encounter probably came the Maori word for European, "*papaa*," which means "four layers." It records the Rarotongans' surprise when they learned that the strangers wore several layers of clothing.

The *Cumberland* expedition was a complete disaster. Not only was there no sandalwood, but five of the ship's complement were slain and eaten by Rarotongans. One was Captain Goodenough's mistress, the only known European woman to fall victim to cannibals in the Polynesian Pacific. Today a dense-branching tree overgrows the spot

**Dignity outraged**, a pint-size patient dangles from scales at a children's clinic on Rarotonga. All citizens receive free medical and surgical treatment from the islands' Public Health Services, financed by New Zealand. A medical officer resides on each inhabited island and specialists make periodic visits. A sanatorium on Rarotonga cares for patients with tuberculosis, the Cooks' most prevalent disease. EKTACHROME BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.





EXTACHROME © H.G.S.

Left alone without a middle generation, the very young and the very old cope with problems of life on Penrhyn. Many young adults forsake their homes for better jobs on other islands or in New Zealand, leaving offspring with older relatives.

where she perished, and there, on nights of full moon, Rarotongans say her restless spirit still cries for help.

Late one afternoon I set out to visit a relic of pagan Rarotonga. Following Syme's lovingly precise directions ("Very few people go there, old boy"), I skidded my way along a rain-slippery stretch of the inland Ara Metua, gloomily overhung with huge old trees. I came to a grove of tall coconut palms, exactly as he had described, their tops still lit with vagrant gleams of sunlight.

Before me lay Marae Arai-te-tonga—a square paved with volcanic rock, with an altar and coronation stone. This open-air temple, the most sacred on the island, was reserved for investing and anointing Rarotonga's high chiefs by the *ta'unga*, or priest.

For a long moment, in my imagination, it

didn't matter that weeds now sprouted in the courtyard, that the stone seats reserved for the noblemen were tumbled and spotted with lichen. All might have been fresh again, waiting for the sacred rites that would herald a new ruler. The silent valley might still have rung with the sound and song of Polynesian civilization. In quiet and seclusion the marae had survived missionaries and vandals. I moved slowly over the courtyard in the leafy green light.

Then a voice. I froze.

But it was only a middle-aged villager. He stood stripped to the waist, a little distance away, machete in hand and probably fresh from his banana plantation. All the same, I felt uneasy. Was I transgressing some ancient law, some still unlifted *tapu*?

Then he struck his machete into a tree and smiled. "*Kia orana*—may you live long," he said. "You are interested, I think, in our old ways. As you can see, this place of our forefathers is still tended, or it would have been long overgrown."

Who tended it? He shrugged. "It is done by those who still have respect. These young people today, with movies and motor scooters and money in their pockets, despise the old things.

They turn away from their proud past into emptiness. In my heart I cannot ignore the old greatness. A people with no past is nothing."

He led me along a muddy track to ground densely overgrown. More stones, clearly foundations. "Here," he said, "was the home of the *ta'unga*. And there the house where the young people grew up. And this"—he halted before a large rock—"was the stone of execution, where offenders against the law had their brains dashed out."

In fast-dimming light, I bent to examine the stone grained with the blood of centuries. But I was careful not to touch it; I have lived too long in the Polynesian Pacific not to respect *tapu* when it stares me in the face. Then the villager, approving my interest, steered me back to my scooter, where we shook hands. He vanished quickly into the dusk, for no

Maori remains near the temple after nightfall.

My scooter, when I kicked the engine into life, sounded painfully loud. My headlight flickered over orange groves, ripening fruit strung like lanterns in the trees, and I was abruptly back in the Cook Islands' present.

For the citrus tree is increasingly the money crop of the volcanic southern islands of the Cook group. It is alien to Polynesia; possibly the first orange trees grew in Rarotonga from seeds left by *Bounty* mutineers.

#### New Crops Transform Island Economy

Next day I traveled out among the citrus plantations, which now green most of the island's 5,500 arable acres. Pickers were harvesting tangerines and oranges—the best for shipment fresh to New Zealand, the rest destined for Avarua's expanding fruit-juice cannery. Started in 1961, Cook Islands' fruit-juice exports now approach a million gallons annually. Agricultural experts, looking be-

yond the time when the New Zealand market is saturated, foresee possible markets in Europe. Pineapple growing, too, has been boosted by the cannery's presence.

"You can tell the money that's coming into the islands by the number of motor scooters," a young and alert grower named Motu told me. We sat in a sunny and fruit-bright orchard sampling the finest tangerines I have ever tasted. "My wife's a nurse, gone off to New Zealand to study, and she wants me to join her down there. But I reckon we can do better for ourselves here now. There's good money, if you're prepared to work."

Elsewhere I found villagers punching tomato plants into rich black soil. The tomato thrives in the relatively cool winters, when temperatures drop as low as 48° F. from a warm annual mean of 74°. Improved shipping in recent years makes the perishable tomato another profitable export.

In the evenings, with work done, villagers

**Hungry for knowledge** of the outside world, a Rarotonga teen-ager bikes home from the public library with treasured books. New Zealand provides free primary and secondary schooling for all Cook Islands youngsters. Bright students may pursue higher education in New Zealand under government sponsorship.

EKTACHROME © N.G.S.





like sitting outdoors, as they have for centuries, to sing old love songs and watch old drum dances. At Ngatangia I dropped in on rehearsals of the village dance team.

Turepu, young schoolteacher and guitarist-coach of the team, was forthright about the difficulty of being an educated Rarotongan. He wanted to study anthropology as a career. "But how can I give my whole mind to study," he asked, "when all around me are young people who only want to be happy?"

I left Rarotongan problems behind when I boarded the midget 200-ton trading ship *Akatere*. I had a promise to keep, to a man from Manihiki. Ahead was a 1,600-mile round trip

through northern atolls of the Cook group to pick up copra and deliver mail and supplies.

"We go up when the copra makes it worthwhile," Archie Pickering, the Fijian skipper, told me. "They don't see us often—maybe three or four times a year. Our top speed is seven knots. That makes it a long haul."

We stood together on the bridge as the *Akatere* made ready to depart Rarotonga. Ashore the crowd was thick and noisy. People flung or exchanged garlands. Deck passengers were northern islanders, often elderly, returning perhaps forever to their native atolls. Younger people who had chosen life in Rarotonga or New Zealand said farewell.



EKTACHROME (ABOVE) AND KODACHROME BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.

**Late for church**, a young girl peers anxiously inside. She missed the parade and band concert that preceded the service. Churchgoing has long played an important role in island life. As early as 1823, the London Missionary Society sent its first evangelist, the Reverend John Williams, to Rarotonga. Until the southern islands became a British protectorate in 1888, missionaries virtually governed the entire area. Today the religious community also includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Congregationalists, and Latter-day Saints.

Catholic mission-school student (right) awaits a race on an interschool sports day.

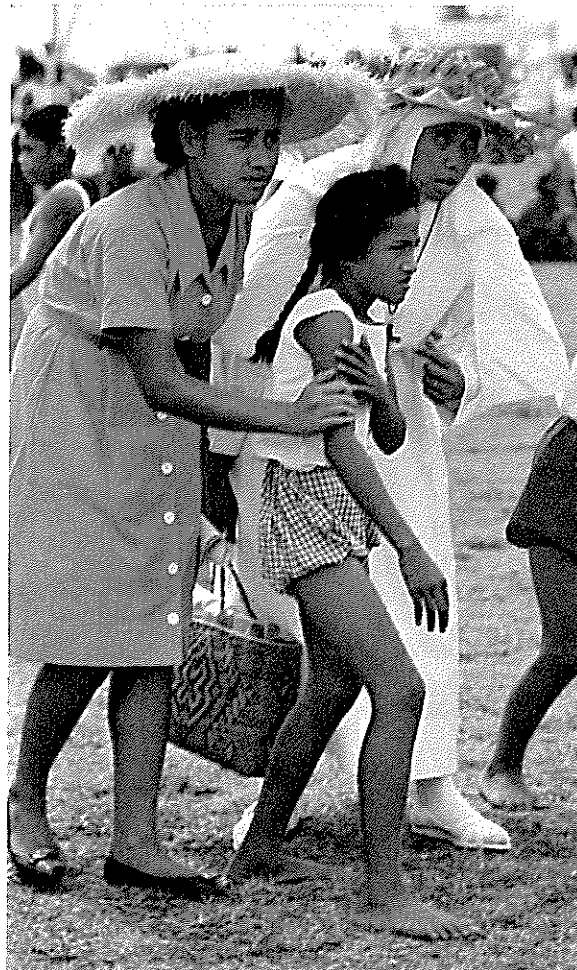
Brothers and sisters, parents and children—many were unlikely ever to see each other again. The first tears seeped, the last line dropped.

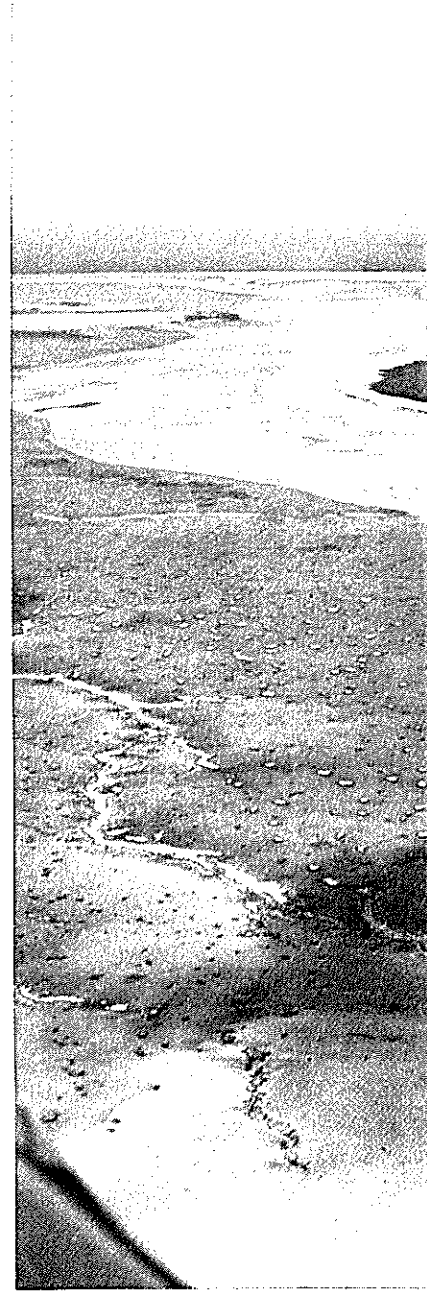
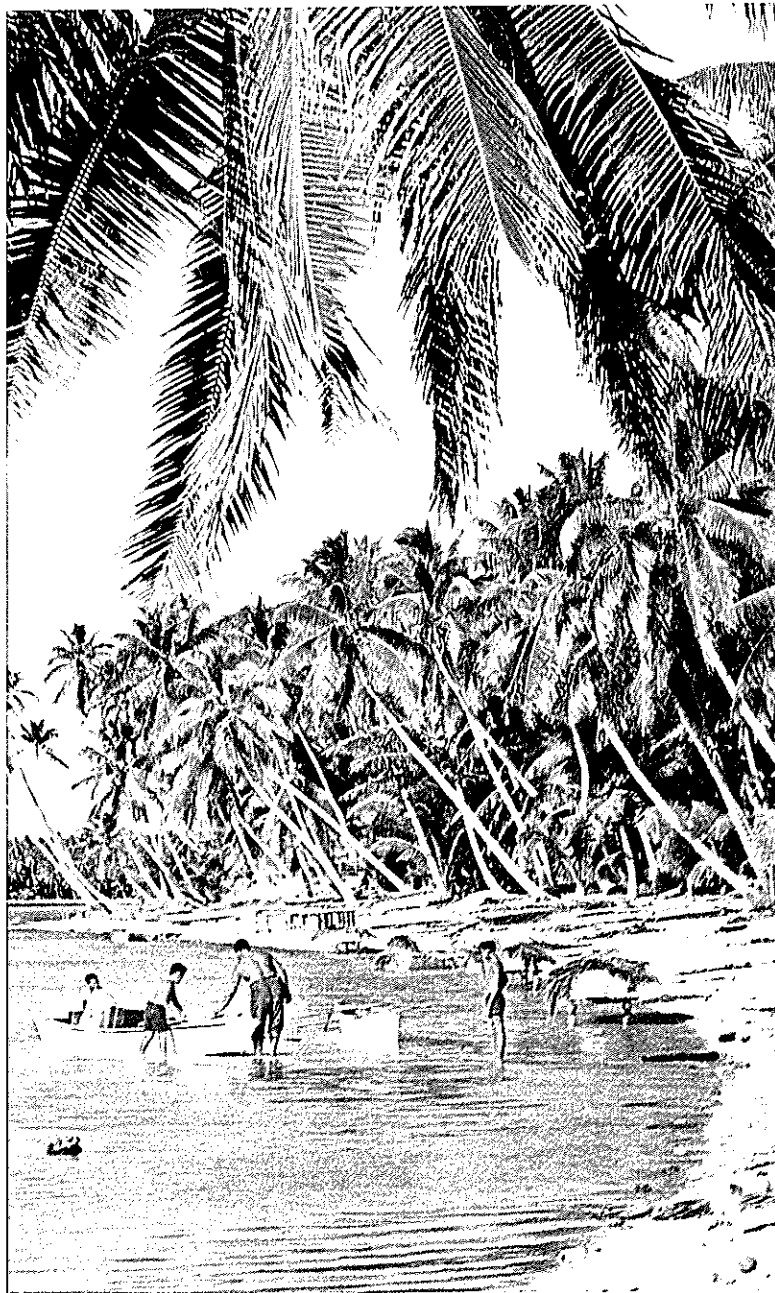
Then it came, a rumble rising to a roar—what I can only call the grief of the Pacific. The grief it has known since the first Polynesians crisscrossed their way, canoe after canoe, through its far-scattered islands, leaving friends and families behind.

With soul-shaking cries, face after face crumpled in despair and dismay; now the tears gushed as the churning *Akatere* pointed its nose toward the Equator. A wake of flowers, falling garlands, marked our way through the gap in the reef.

We were out on the loneliest of oceans. The first day we sighted a yellow Japanese fishing float, the second day a piece of driftwood. On the third day, rolling through fine weather at six knots, *Akatere* was joined by the first sea bird since Rarotonga.

Sea birds supposedly guided the old Polynesians to their islands, so I consulted my map and found that over the horizon lay Russian-named Suwarrow Atoll, uninhabited but storied nonetheless. Piracy, buried treasure, strange European ruins, flintlocks in the sand, hurricanes, and hermits constitute its





legend. Some 15,000 gold U. S. dollars were supposedly lifted from its sands in 1872.

The fourth and fifth days were empty of all but brilliant sunsets. Tiny trading ships which ply these unpredictable, hurricane-haunted waters are hundreds of miles from help. Without radar, ships depend on their skippers' instinct, and reefs grow rich in wreckage.

#### Over the Reef to Manihiki

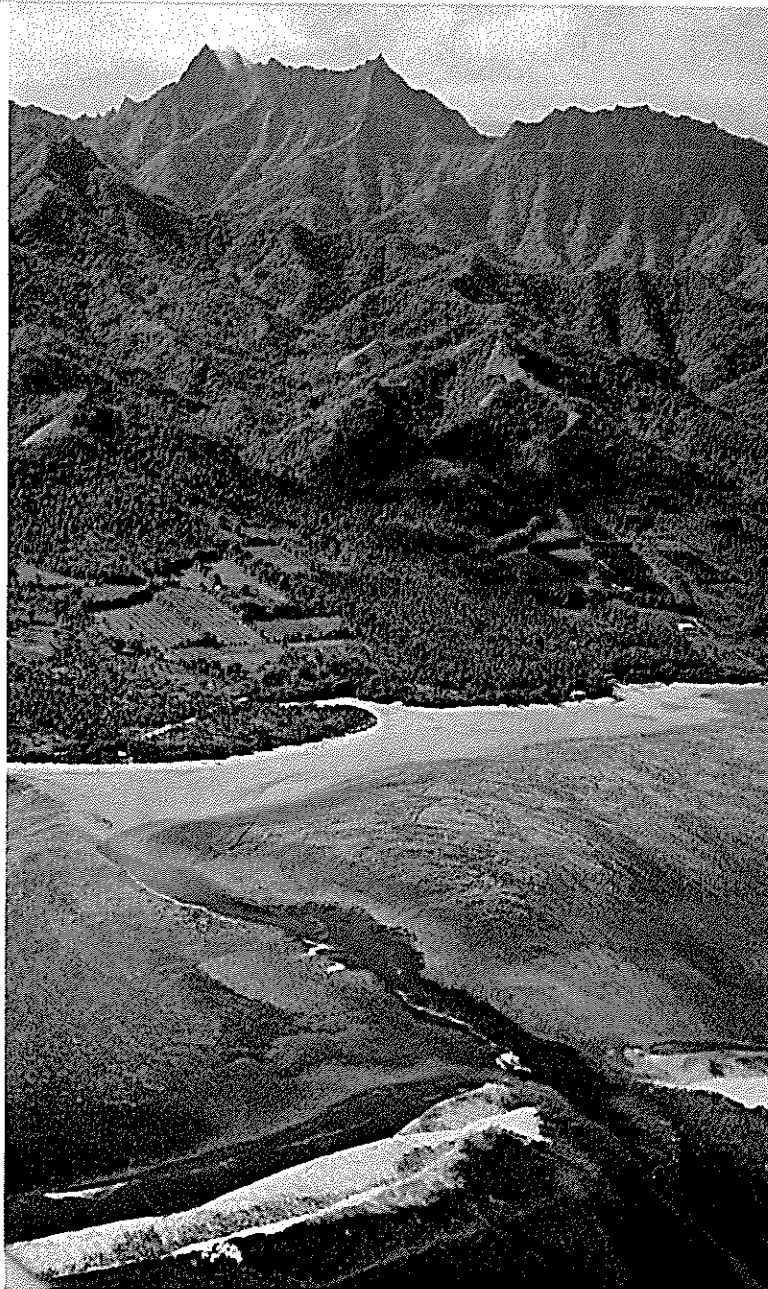
On the sixth morning the thud of the engine was muted, the ship drifting. I scrambled to the rail to see the sun rising beyond the palms of Manihiki Atoll, which I had helped find the night before. Tiny flares of red and yellow sunlight exploded through the trees, lighting whitewashed homes. Ashore there was noisy

excitement: We were the first visitors in two months. Boats swarmed to the *Akatere*.

I found myself in a slender and delicately balanced longboat, shooting the seething water of the reef. My first shoot, the first of many. "*Ariana*—Wait a moment," called the steersman, watching for the right wave. Then "*Oe!*—Pull!" when he saw our moment. Oars flashed as we hurtled forward on a high breaking wave, over perilous coral, to the safety of a pale and lovely shore.

Most of the atoll's 650 population seemed on hand to greet us. A village girl danced forward to drop an *ei*—equivalent of the Hawaiian lei—about my neck. But this one was different. It told the story of the people who, over generations, have adapted to the





EKTACHROME (ABOVE) AND KODACHROME (CENTER) BY ROBERT B. JOHNSON;  
KODACHROME BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.

demands of life on these infertile coral isles.

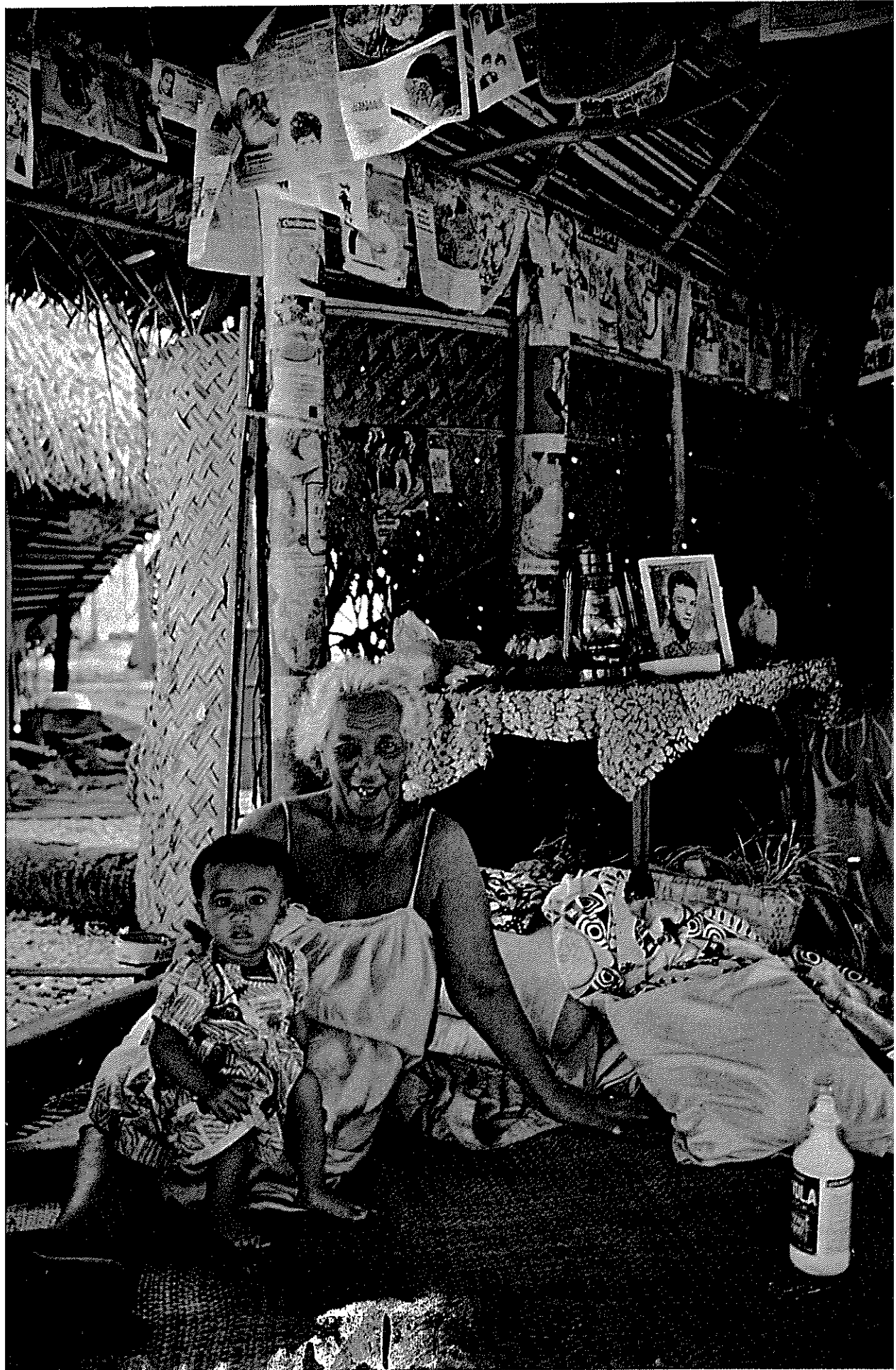
Inhabitants of this 1,350-acre atoll have learned to live without the flowers and fragrance of the green volcanic islands to the south. But imagination and patient hands had conspired with ancestral memory to create the Manihiki ei I was wearing; tiny shells of the shore were shaped into a marvelous and perfect illusion of blossoms.

I barely had time to get my breath before I was in another longboat on the other side of the land, this time with an outboard motor cutting a wake across Manihiki's wide lagoon, peaceful and luminous in the early light. Manihiki, like most atolls, is in fact many islands: a necklace of 39, most small, strung about a deep, reef-protected (and thus

Feathery fronds of coconut palms bend over a white-sand beach on Rakahanga, where men waded the shallows to load a boat.

Coral heads that can tear open a boat's hull pepper Aitutaki's reef. Rapidly multiplying colonies of polyps extract lime from sea water to build rock-hard skeletons. Each generation of tiny animals adds a layer to the growing domes.

"Deepest and most treacherous of all channels," Irving Johnson called Avaavaroa Passage (above). It slices the reef beneath the knitted brows of Rarotonga's loftiest peaks: 2,140-foot Te Manga, background, left, and 2,095-foot Te Atukura, center.



shark-safe) lagoon. I was in distinguished company, for Manihiki's pearl-shell divers are famous. The local record is 180 feet—without scuba equipment. Eighty to 120 feet is considered nothing spectacular.

In mask and flippers I could hope only to accompany them a few feet of the way down. With goggles distorting their faces, the divers shot past me, down, down, among pinnacle and crevice of bright coral, among disintegrating rainbows of tropical fish. In this shimmering world my companions grew small as they glided with incredible leisure over the lagoon floor far below. They paused and plucked and then, fast soaring, surfaced with handfuls of pearl shell to gasp precious air.

Though the market fluctuates, and the lagoon is occasionally closed for shell regeneration, mother-of-pearl has for years been a major money-maker for Manihiki; the other is copra. But where shell diving is a matter of individual skill, coconut gathering for copra is strictly a family business. So I discovered next day, when I was again escorted across the lagoon by a group of genial islanders. Each family knows its traditional land, despite lack of markers, down to the individual palm tree. Men gathered and husked the nuts, and bagged them for return to the village for sun-drying; women gathered fronds and wove baskets. Even the children helped.

After work came the best part of the day. I joined the laughing hunt for coconut crabs which hide under

**Old-style living** in a thatch-roofed *whare* affords many comforts for this woman and child on Manihiki, a northern atoll. Walls woven of palm fronds and supported by coconut trunks let in cooling breezes. All the floor's a couch with wall-to-wall straw mats. Rafters make handy hangers for decorative newspaper and magazine pages. Convenient but separate, a cookhouse lies beyond the door.

**Succulent coconut crabs** roast on a bed of hot stones at a feast in the Manihiki manner. Hunted by night, the creatures defend themselves with massive claws that can easily sever a finger. Diners prize the fat of the tail, which they eat with baked breadfruit.

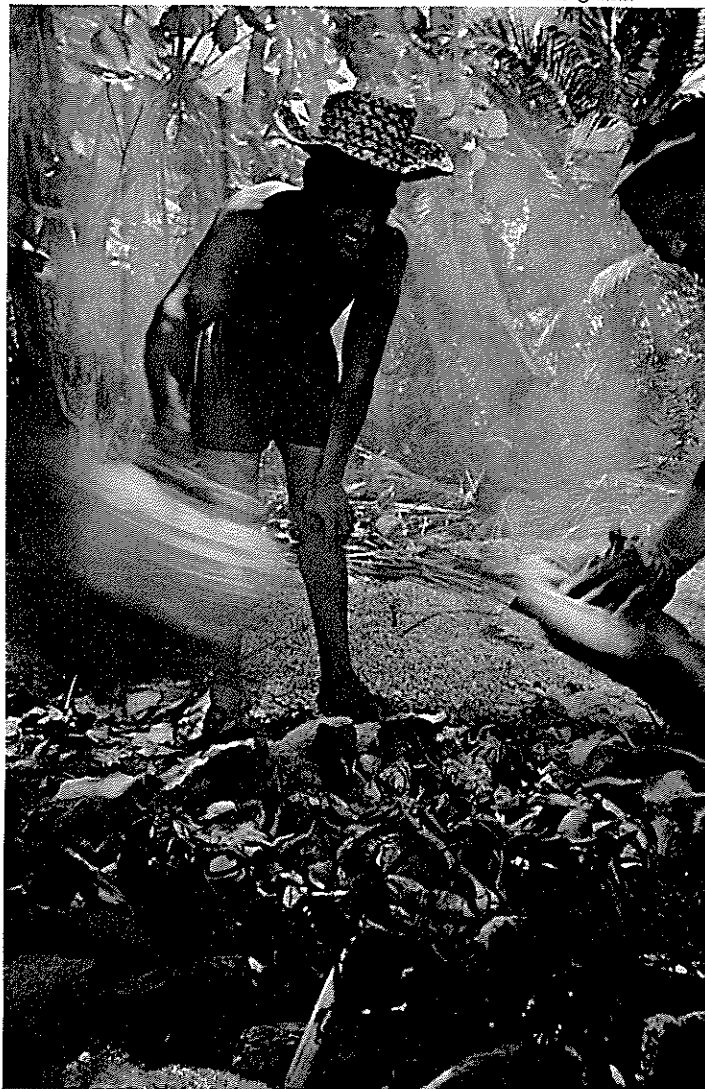
coral rubble. The fugitives, often lobster-size, were prodded from their holes, claws clashing. Cooked on fire-heated stones (below), they were delicious. *Paua*, large clams from the lagoon, spiced the feast. I was keeping my promise to the man from Manihiki.

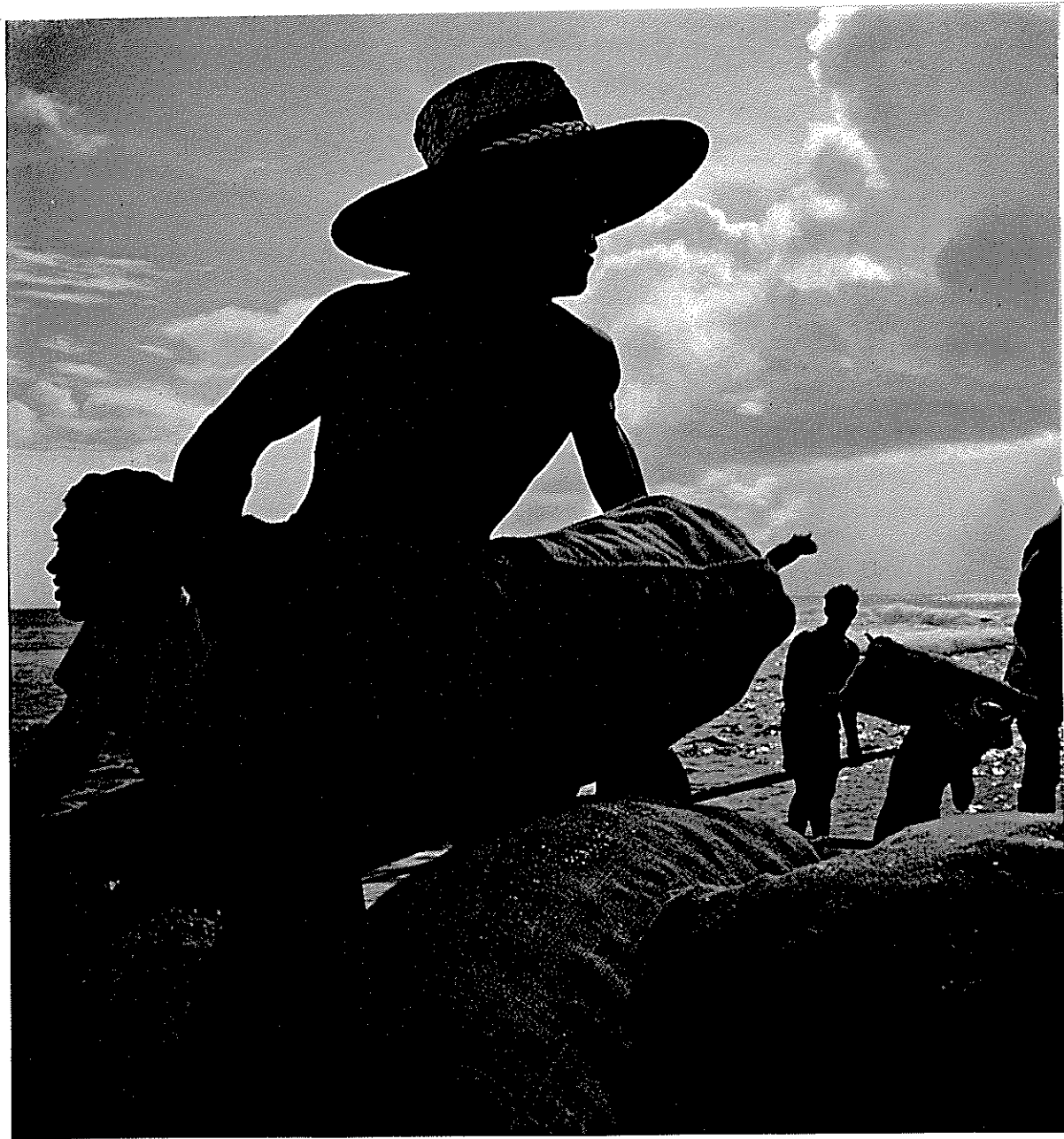
#### All Hope Goes With Islands' Young

Back at the neat, clean village of Tauhunu on the main island, I saw the longboats bounce across the reef to *Akatere*, loading some 30 tons of copra to boost the island's income by about \$4,200. We were also taking aboard another major Manihiki export: young men and women, people in the 20-40 age group.

Trader George Ellis lamented the fact to me as we sat on his stilted veranda above the lagoon: "If the young people go, everything will go. For who will there be to learn to weave the coconut frond in Manihiki style?"

KODACHROMES BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.





Who will learn to fish the Manihiki way? All custom, all tradition, will die.”

I learned about Manihiki fishing that evening, on the ocean side of the island. Our quarry was *koperu*, silver mackerel-like fish that abound at dusk—but deep. The divers, their mouths crammed with shredded coconut, went fathoms down to feed the fish, tempting them nearer the surface. Soon the *koperu* started to spiral up, climbing the coconut trail.

Then the fishing began. The men dived, carrying rods, and literally fed coconut-baited hooks to the eager *koperu*. The hunt, a fathom or two down, assumed a weird, balletlike quality, men swirling amid silver swarms of fish. Then they surfaced and flipped their catch into the boats.

Was George Ellis right—would this grace-

ful skill perish too? Surely the human race would be poorer if Manihiki, plucked from the Pacific by Spanish explorers in 1606, became one more empty name, one more uninhabited island.

Next morning we were at Rakahanga, 25 miles from Manihiki, taking aboard more copra (above). Legend has it that the two atolls were once one, together part of a great fish hauled from the sea by the mighty Polynesian folk hero Maui. It was Maui who, when the world was still young, brought fire to earth and snared the sun—and fished up islands in the great Polynesian triangle, from Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south and lonely Easter Island in the east.

Once the people of the two atolls were certainly one, sojourning in each alternately, but



KODACHROME © N.G.S.

**Hefting sacks of copra**, islanders load lighters beached on the shore of Rakahanga. Coconut plantations cover more than half the Cooks' arable acreage, but the crop yields small returns. A ton of dried coconut brings only about \$140. In the southern Cooks, farmers are finding a better living growing citrus fruits, pineapples, and tomatoes.

strange cemetery. Again I faced an obdurate and ancient custom of the islands.

Each grave was roofed, like a dwelling. And many, I soon saw, *were* dwellings, with blankets, water jugs, and lanterns; dwellings for the living as well as the dead.

"We believe," explained a Rakahangan, "that the dead must always be appeased by the company of the ones closest to them. Otherwise they might return in anger as ghosts. So mothers sleep out at night with dead children, husbands with wives." For how long? "Perhaps five years. It depends." But I saw older graves where the living still slept.

The living are healthy enough. In an empty dispensary the visiting doctor from Manihiki told me cheerfully, "Not much business here." And at the school I watched sturdy children at study and play. They studied English arduously, sometimes by radio from Rarotonga, for a future still obscure. The brightest would go south to Aitutaki Atoll and then to Rarotonga for further education, perhaps eventually to New Zealand universities. But how many would ever return?

#### Ghostly Flames Light Penrhyn Lagoon

Now *Akatere* was on the last leg of its northward journey. A night and a day after Rakahanga we came to Penrhyn, northernmost of the Cook group, nine degrees short of the Equator. An urgent message had come through even before we'd left Rarotonga. Without a ship for four months, Penrhyn islanders were out of canned meat, sugar, rice, flour, tobacco, and soap.

So we weren't surprised, when we stood off the entrance to the lagoon after nightfall, to see lights of island sailboats bobbing out toward us. "*Avaava*—cigarettes" was the call as their occupants scrambled aboard.

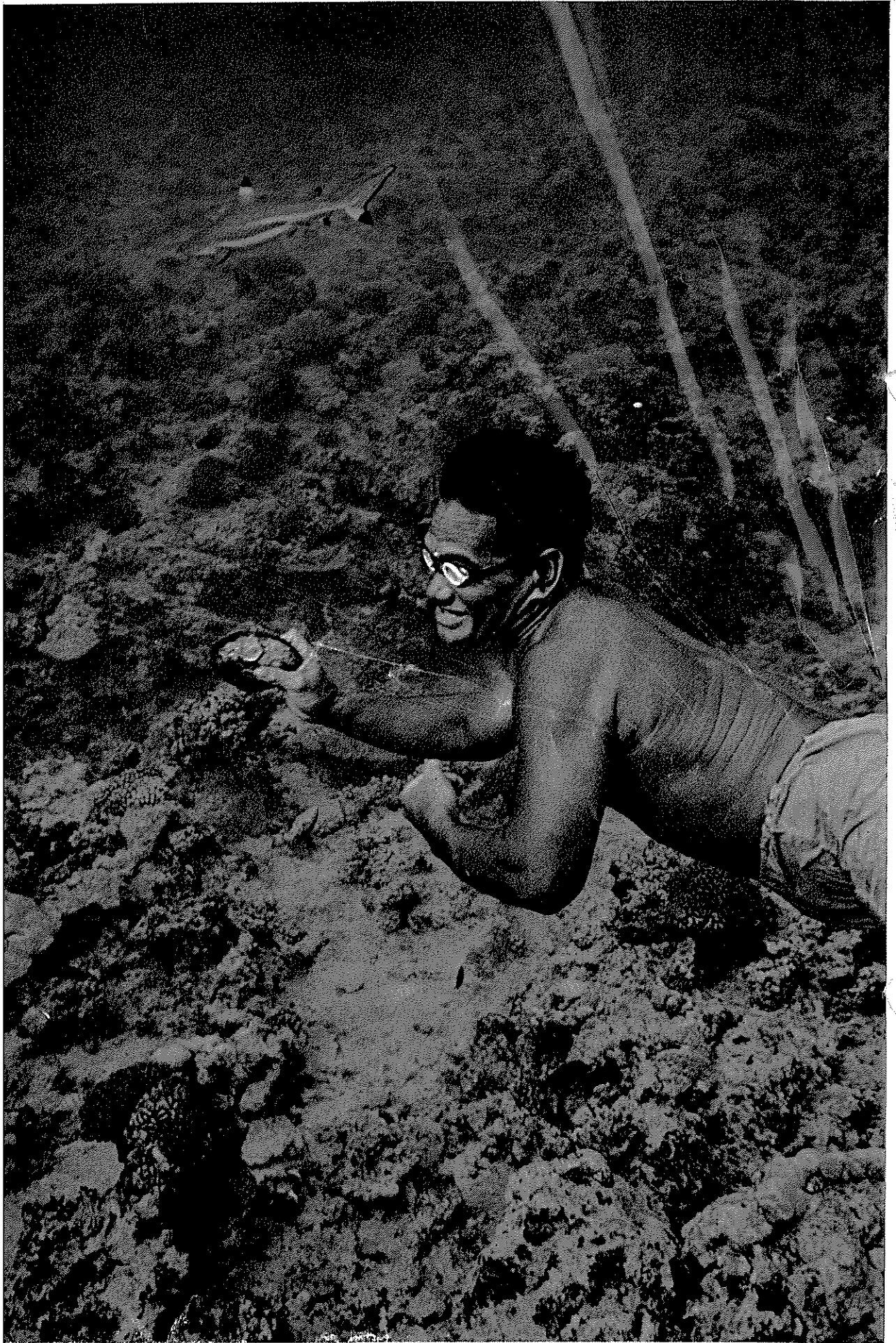
But there was a sobering note. The night before, the inexplicable "ghost fire" of Penrhyn had been seen burning in the middle of the 108-square-mile lagoon. Fluttering unpredictably several times a year, the fire is firmly believed to herald death—and that night a year-old sick child had died on the island.

Archie Pickering told me that U. S. Navy

missionaries halted the annual migration, arguing that sea travel was too costly in life.

It still is. A few years ago a boatload of Manihiki men, returning from a visit to Rakahanga, was blown 2,100 miles to the New Hebrides. Only three of seven survived the two-month ordeal. I asked one what he remembered. "Hunger and terrible thirst," he said. "And seeing land we were always too weak to reach." And what kept him alive? "Faith," he answered. "Only faith."

Today fewer than 400 people inhabit Rakahanga's one village. Without pearl shell, they rely on copra for cash. But there is some compensation in other crops from the island's thin soil. I walked past flourishing taro patches and banana plants on my way to the village school, but was stopped short by Rakahanga's



men, during World War II, crashed a PT boat on a submerged reef while seeking the source of the fire. It remains unexplained.

In the morning we were piloted into the great lagoon. To sail into remote Penrhyn, up to the crowded wharf at Omoka village, is still like sailing into a collection of Gauguin portraits. There were the stolid Polynesian women, squatting heavily or standing flat-footed, exactly as the artist painted them in Tahiti 70 years before.

Life on this most barren of atolls has given the Penrhyn Islander a reputation for toughness, and he looks his reputation. Today some 700 people occupy an atoll almost depopulated a century ago by Peruvian slavers. Next major contact with the outside world was during World War II, with hundreds of U. S. servicemen, when the island served as a Pacific base. Women still wear aluminum combs made from the wreckage of a Liberator bomber which gathers foliage beside a seldom-used airstrip.

#### Pearl Diving No Longer Pays

I looked over the faces in the crowd. There was the now-familiar selection: the very old, the very young, and few between. Children, many of them sent back to grandparents by migrant parents, swarmed over bags of copra, now the island's only substantial export.

Once it was different. Once the island was fantastically prosperous in the pearl business. There was a faint, pathetic echo of that prosperity in the islanders who shuffled up to me as soon as I stepped ashore. "Pearls," they offered, "beautiful pearls."

The market for Penrhyn pearls—high-quality natural gems—slumped before World War II, and was finished by the Japanese cultured-pearl industry afterward.

"They were great days," recalled 83-year-old Philip Woonton, onetime "Pearl King of Penrhyn," when he invited me to a cool drink on his veranda. "I remember checks for thousands of pounds passing through my hands."

Now, he told me, families hoard pearls, in the hope that the market may revive. But the

hope grows ever fainter, ever sadder. Diving gear rots in Philip Woonton's back yard, and the best divers have long since migrated.

A few still skin dive for mother-of-pearl shell rather than pearls. Manihiki divers are known for depth, Penrhyn divers for courage. A diver exchanges fear for faith in a lagoon seething with sharks.

Young schoolteacher Terepai Tutai took me out on a shell-fetching expedition with some friends. After long prayer, he observed: "Here we believe sharks only attack men of poor faith. Or those who have not paid proper attention to their prayers before diving. Now let us go over and see." He produced rubber slingshot and spear. "I will kill a few small fish to bring the sharks around."

#### Serenity Reigns Amid Circling Sharks

To me it seemed like an invitation to Russian roulette, but I followed him over the side. While his friends dived for shell, Terepai speared enough small fish to leave visible streaks of blood in the clear water. In moments the sharks began to gather, with flicking tails and questing noses.

I had surfaced in a wild explosion of water and climbed back into the boat by the time Terepai came up again. "Nothing to worry about," he reassured me. "They're just black-tipped sharks [left]. They very seldom attack. It is the *papera*, the black shark, you must watch. Come down again."

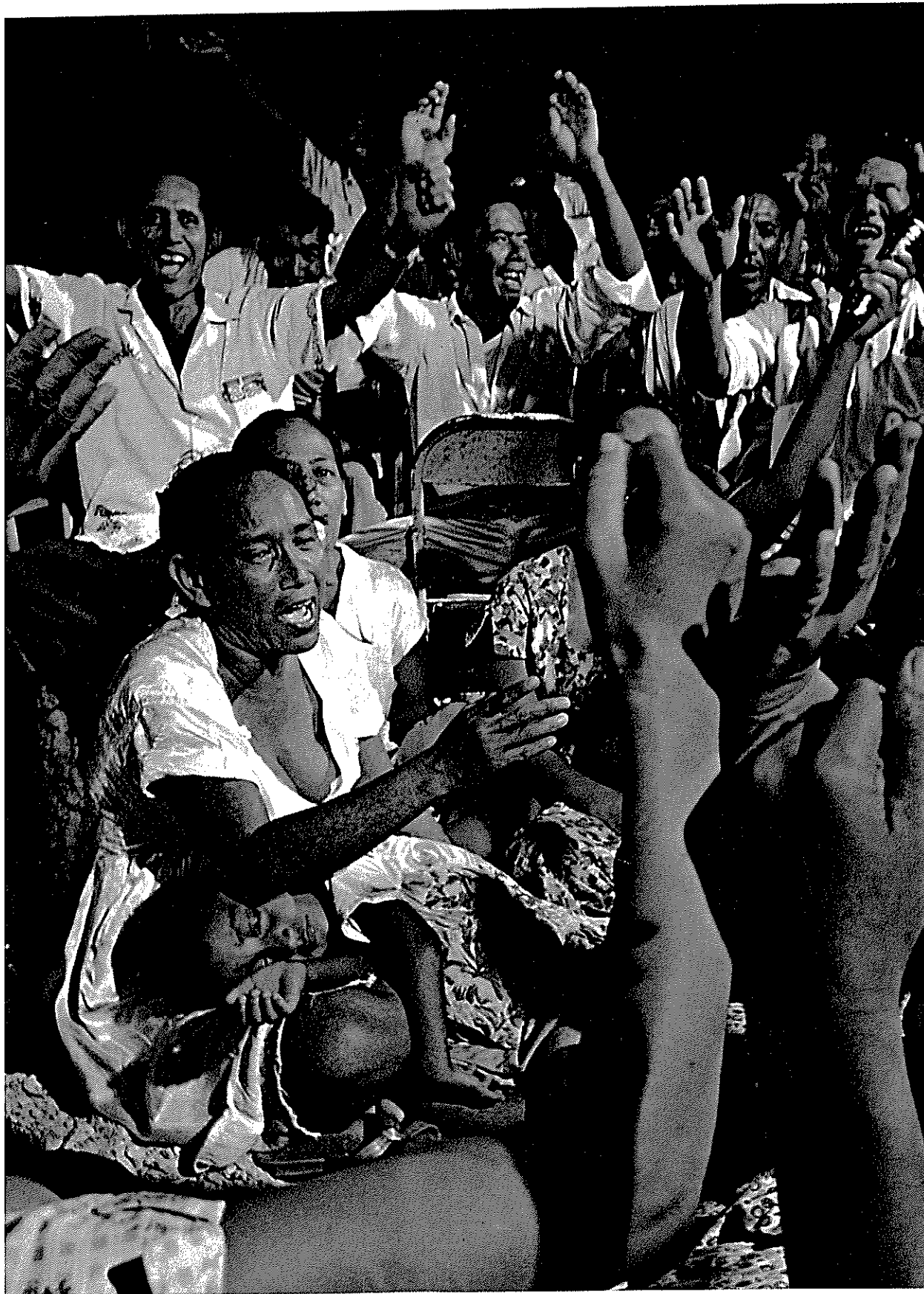
I dived beside him and made a rough estimate of about 40 circling sharks. Terepai's friends continued fetching shell, apparently serene in their charmed circle of faith. Terepai grabbed my shoulder and pointed.

There, beyond the black-tipped sharks, were the *papera*, more gray than black, looking efficient killers from snout to tail. Thereafter Terepai himself stayed close to our boat.

"If they attack," he gasped, when we surfaced to talk, "kick them in the nose. Not in the teeth. You can lose a leg that way."

The divers went on with their work, with an occasional glance over their shoulders. A

**Diving to danger in 60 feet of water** off Penrhyn, a mother-of-pearl fisherman grabs a prize oyster shell within striking range of a black-tipped shark. While the author watched from a boat, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC photographer Bill Allard worked amid a growing number of sharks that "seemed to be snicking and snapping all around," Mr. Shadbolt recalls. "Suddenly a deadly *papera*—a black shark—took an unnerving interest in Bill. I saw it break surface, swerve, and dive a few yards from him." Spotting the killer, Allard swam furiously back to the boat and clambered aboard just as the shark broke water behind him.



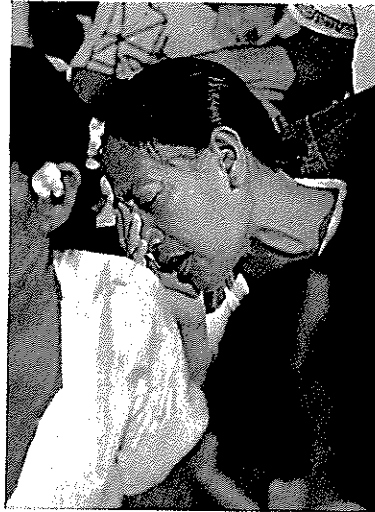
**Hallelujah! Hallelujah!** With unbounded enthusiasm, Penrhyn Islanders shout the night away at a *uapo*, or religious songfest. Villagers, divided into two teams, vie with each other at hymn singing, a favorite pastime since the 1830's. The people became "devotedly fond of singing," observed missionary Aaron Buzacott in 1831, "and seemed to





Overcome with emotion, a hymn singer holds her head during a Penrhyn uapo.

Trooping from church, Penrhyn islanders pass the grave of Maara Woonton. Her husband, now 83, reigned as "Pearl King of Penrhyn" before Japanese cultured gems depressed the market for natural ones. Graves on Rakahanga Island often lie beneath a roof that shelters a living relative, who sleeps there to appease the spirit of the departed.



KODACHROMES © N.G.S.



have no sense of fatigue. Their urgent requests to be taught *new* tunes often deprived our brethren of their rest. . . ."

sleek papera, perhaps bored, moved close.

Then I saw the Penrhyn instinct at work, the instinct of islanders who have lived long with sea and shark. They seemed to surface as one and climbed, unhurried, back into the boat. With a snap and crack of sail we glided to another part of the lagoon.

On Penrhyn, faith goes hand in hand with healthy respect. Though many islanders are savaged by sharks, few ever perish; five were attacked in the year before my visit, with no fatality. It takes a lot to kill a man of Penrhyn.

But life offers other pains than sharks. "We go hungry when ships don't call and the sea is too rough to fish," a young, well-educated islander complained to me. "I live with my family and earn about \$5.50 a month from copra. Just enough for tobacco. If I really worked hard, I might be able to earn \$10 a month. It's hopeless. I'd clear out on

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your ship if I could, but there isn't room. There's never enough room for Penrhyn people wanting to leave."

The *Akatere* had taken its maximum of deck passengers, and I found Archie Pickering checking for stowaways. But one eluded him. She revealed herself in triumph when we were well out to sea. The woman wanted to accompany her son to Rarotonga.

#### Islanders Protest French Nuclear Tests

Now the Pacific turned violent. The *Akatere* grew tiny under the tremendous waves that burst over the bridge. It lifted, heeled, and crashed backbreakingly into troughs.

"One thing about this ship," said Archie Pickering dryly at the wheel, "it's hard to sink, being so small."

After six battering days we lay up in the lee of Aitutaki, one of the southern volcanic



islands and second most populous in the Cooks. Little more than a 4,461-acre hill, with an island-dotted lagoon, it is a hybrid of volcanic outcrop and atoll (pages 218-19).

Aitutaki supports 2,900 Cook Islanders, principally through citrus-growing and copra-making. But its fame is as home of the Pacific's best dancers. Year after year, at Tahiti's Bastille Day celebrations, Aitutaki dance teams have taken first prize. In 1966, however, international politics interfered.

"No," said an adamant resident of the island. "We're not sending our team to Tahiti this year. It's the only protest we can make against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. It's costing us a lot of prize money to make that protest—and people here often neglect agriculture for their dancing."

With Archie Pickering as companion and guide, I voyaged out to other southern islands.

To 4,552-acre Mauke, where poor soil limits orange production and wild growth tangles over abandoned groves. To womanless Manuae (pages 210-11), first of the islands to be glimpsed by Captain Cook, where annually handfuls of men from Rarotonga and Aitutaki isolate themselves to harvest copra, striving to earn enough to let them stake out new lives in New Zealand.

Farther south lay rugged Mangaia, "the haunted island," second largest in the Cooks, with its ancient coral burial caves. It has now barely enough able-bodied men in the critical 20-40 age group to pick and load pineapple harvests from its 12,800 acres.

But Atiu, at the very heart of the southern islands and once home of their fiercest warriors, stood apart from all the others. Here were tidy villages, cool concrete-block homes in bright flower gardens, trim and fruitful

**Highlight of out-island life**, the arrival of the 200-ton *Akatere* draws a crowd to the beach at Mauke. Small boats set out with crates of island-grown oranges, bound for Rarotonga's juice factory; they return with new possessions ordered months ago from New Zealand. At Manihiki, the boat yields a bonnet-shaded baby; emigrant parents often send children home to live with older relatives. Only *Akatere* and two other small craft ply this long and lonely passage to the out-islands.

KODACHROMES BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD © N.G.S.



plantations of citrus and coffee. Together with intense communal pride, it had a surprising abundance of young people.

"Few ever leave for Rarotonga and New Zealand," community leader Vaine Rere explained. "We persuade adults to give land to their children as soon as they leave school. Children get a stake in the island, a steady income, and aren't tempted to go."

Today the fertile soil of Atiu's 6,650 acres supports a steady and mildly affluent population of 1,400. Once the terror of neighboring islanders, proud Atiuans now set an example for the entire Cook group.

I discussed their progress, back in Rarotonga, with the Cooks' gentle-spoken but vigorous 60-year-old Premier, Albert Henry. A teacher who spent more than 20 years in New Zealand as spokesman for Pacific islanders, Mr. Henry returned to the Cooks in 1965 with the advent of self-government. He took over leadership when his Cook Islands Party swept the polls.

"Atiu has set a good example," he agreed. "After so many years of paternal rule, the big struggle is to encourage the idea of self-help and personal initiative again. In the past everything has been handed out to the Maoris. Now they are learning that self-government means responsibility.

"The idea is being encouraged through a net of village committees. Behind them stand the traditional chiefs, in the new House of Arikis, which advises in matters of tradition and custom. Results—in just a few months—have been astonishing. In Rarotonga and elsewhere ground has been planted that lay idle for 50 years. There's a new spirit."

Tourism? "It might mean easy money," he said. "But tourism as it exists elsewhere could only lead Cook Islanders to bitter disillusionment. When we organize tourism, we won't have luxury hotels, night clubs, features alien to island life. I want to see simple tourist villages, each under control of an existing village. That way, everyone will gain. And the real attractions of the islands won't be destroyed."

Had self-government, I finally asked, come

too late? "It has come late," he said. "But I don't think too late. Migration hasn't been altogether bad. It's good for Cook Islanders to see something of the industrious outside world. With luck and hard work, we will entice many of them home."

After his wry and gently intelligent conversation, it was easier for me to be hopeful about the Cooks. Outside the Premier's office I ran into a papaa friend, young American Walter Hambuechen, whose story might illuminate the prospects of today's paradise-seekers. A onetime ecologist, he "discovered"

the South Pacific in the course of research, grew enchanted, and stayed. Now he lives with his Maori wife and children beside an idyllic Rarotongan beach.

But he has little time for lotus-eating. He may raise pigs and chickens, and fish the reef, but he also serves as chairman of his village committee and edits the daily *Cook Islands News*. "I'm working harder than I ever did in my life," he said, as he hustled past with a sheaf of paper. "But it usually seems worth it."

I journeyed to Ngatangia village to eat a last meal of taro and raw fish with friends, and stood a while beside lagoon waters. Ngatangia had a special meaning for me, a fair-skinned Pacific islander. For it was from here, centuries ago,

that Rarotongan Maoris began an epic 2,100-mile journey south to settle in my native New Zealand. But I felt I had been witness to the beginning of a new voyage as great and heroic in its way—that of a new Polynesian government in the Pacific.

For now only a boldness of spirit can save the dream islands of Western man from being handed back, one by one, to the waves and tides from which the fabled Maui fished them. Now only an imagination equal to that of the old voyagers can save the proud Polynesian, once noblest of savages, from becoming a soulless shell on display for tourists.

I had struck spirit, imagination, and growing hope. No new voyagers, launched upon this least pacific of centuries, could ask for much more.

THE END



Heartache of the islands: Leaving her home on Atiu, perhaps forever, a young girl (above) casts one last longing look toward shore. At another sailing (opposite), those left behind give way to sorrow even as hands go up in a brave farewell.



