

Sisters of the Wind

GEORGE F. MOBLEY BOTH NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF

A sometimes grand, sometimes sordid parade of whalers, artists, and tattooed adventurers followed Wallis. Each had his own tale on a single theme—a lush, innocent paradise where the equality of man was innate, and passion unfettered by guilt.

I came to Tahiti, as most men do, a victim of this most forceful propaganda. But no wanton vahine awaited at the international airport. And on the highway to the capital

city, Papeete, motorcycles, pickup trucks, and Peugeots jostled one another for the right to speed.

The paradise of travel posters has not changed so much as fragmented. Said a musician at the Hotel Royal Tahitien, "Now you must see the other islands to see Tahiti."

Tahiti and her sisters, mere specks of volcanic rock and coral scattered in the constant wind of the South Pacific, lie 700

flux the sea remains a cherished constant for the islanders and their traditional Polynesian way of life. And its untapped resources provide hope for a more independent future.

845



TAHITI AND BEYOND

The Society Islands,

By PRIIT J. VESILIND

Photographs by

THERE ARE ALSO MEN in Tahiti. It comes almost as a surprise, so persuasive is the myth, packaged and sold in the warm flicker of a hundred travelogues. Always the promise of trade winds sweet with hibiscus, the musk of succulent fruit, undulating palms, and women—endowed to the last with indolent grace, smooth brown skin, and laughing eyes.

They are all there. But there is more. And

there is less. In the Society Islands, myth and reality often share the same bed.

The mystique began when English Capt. James Wallis, the first European to visit the islands, anchored off Tahiti in 1767. Wallis found his frigate surrounded by hundreds of canoes filled with strong, laughing men and tantalizing young *vahine* who performed, as a ship's officer penned in his journal, "a great many droll wanton tricks."

Rhythms of the sea provide a playground off Tahiti, principal island of the French-administered Society archipelago in the South Pacific. In a time of economic and political



kilometers (430 miles) north of the Tropic of Capricorn and halfway between Australia and California (map, pages 850-51).

They were settled before the ninth century by seafaring Polynesians, who developed a complex social and political structure mired in fratricidal warfare as ruthless and bitter as any in Europe.*

Nine of the 14 Society Islands huddle to the lee of the trade winds; the others lie roughly windward. English explorer James Cook named the leeward islands the Societies because "they lay contiguous to one another," and the windwards were later included under the same rather prosaic label.

Together the Societies span 800 kilometers, one of five archipelagoes annexed by France in 1847. Along with the Marquesas, the Tuamotus, the Gambiers, and the Australs, they comprise a French overseas territory known today as French Polynesia. The principal island is Tahiti, the name often informally extended to the entire territory.

FRANCE, it is said, exports ideas but not people or enterprise. In Polynesia she administered with benign neglect for more than a century, an era of amiable but seedy insouciance and isolation—a time whose passing is still mourned by many romantics.

But it ended in the early 1960's with two jarring events. The first was a motion picture—MGM's 1962 remake of the 1935 classic *Mutiny on the Bounty*, from the book by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall. Filmed in Tahiti, the 18-million-dollar project showered the islands with jobs and money and quickened the Tahitians' own awareness and pride in their history.

Actor Marlon Brando's portrayal of mutineer Fletcher Christian led to his long romance with Polynesia. In 1966 he purchased his own atoll, a necklace of coral islands called Tetiaroa, 50 kilometers north of Tahiti. Here Brando has built a small hotel, nurtures a variety of conservation projects, and has found peace from celebrity.

Showers seldom dampen the endless summer of childhood in the islands, where the struggles of life seem secondary to the pleasures of living. Children, loved by all, are left virtually free to explore and grow, and, in a community where all men are brothers, they are unhesitatingly given for adoption to neighbors or friends who want them.

On the heels of the film came the bomb. Between 1962 and 1966, more than 15,000 French soldiers, technicians, and bureaucrats of the Centre d'Expérimentations du Pacifique (CEP) arrived in Tahiti to test nuclear weapons on Mururua atoll, 1,300 kilometers to the southeast. The agency, headquartered in Papeete, spurred the enlargement of the airport at Faaa and opened the way for the jumbo jets of mass tourism.

If the movie perpetuated the Tahitian myth, the CEP brought home the reality of colonialism and of power politics.

"And it was a great cultural shock," remembers Hans Carlson, director of industrial development for French Polynesia. "The new bureaucrats held to themselves and had their own social groups. Local people who had been happy with their lives, proud of their position, were suddenly made to feel inferior. The newcomers brought a huge amount of money . . . but they also brought materialism and unhappiness."

Wage-earning jobs quickly turned self-sufficient fishermen and farmers into proletarians as the CEP scraped the islands for able bodies. The agency now employs 10 percent of French Polynesia's labor force.

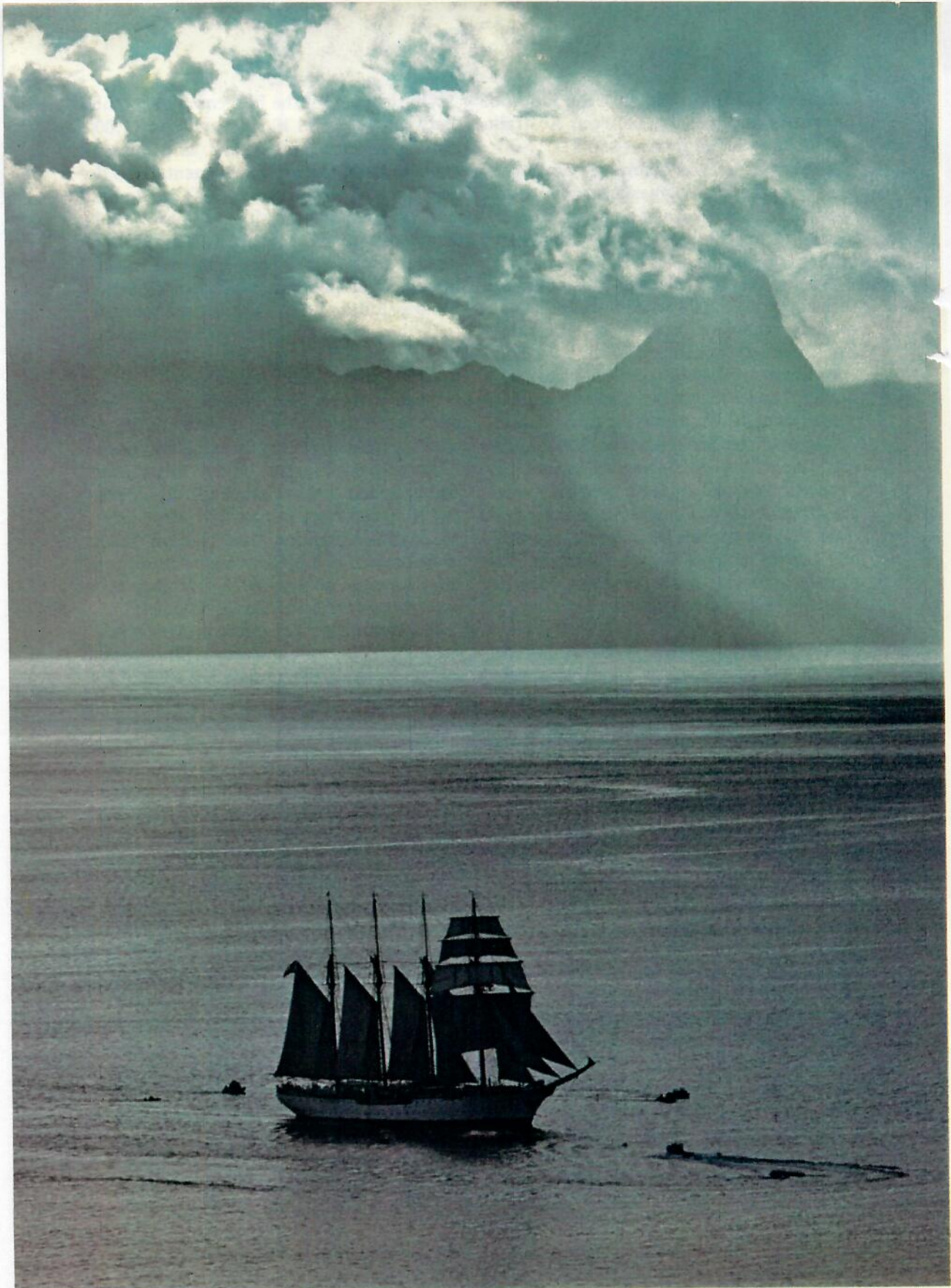
"I went to Huahine in 1963," said an American businessman who lives in Tahiti, "and in one village not a man was in sight—they were all on Mururua working for CEP. And when they got a taste for money, they didn't want to go back to Huahine."

They went instead to the urban complex around Papeete, home to nearly half of French Polynesia's 140,000 people. Often they crowded into shantytowns on the outskirts. Gangs of jobless youths appeared—anti-French, anti-European, anti anything. Small but radical independence movements exploited the frustration, spawning unaccustomed violence.

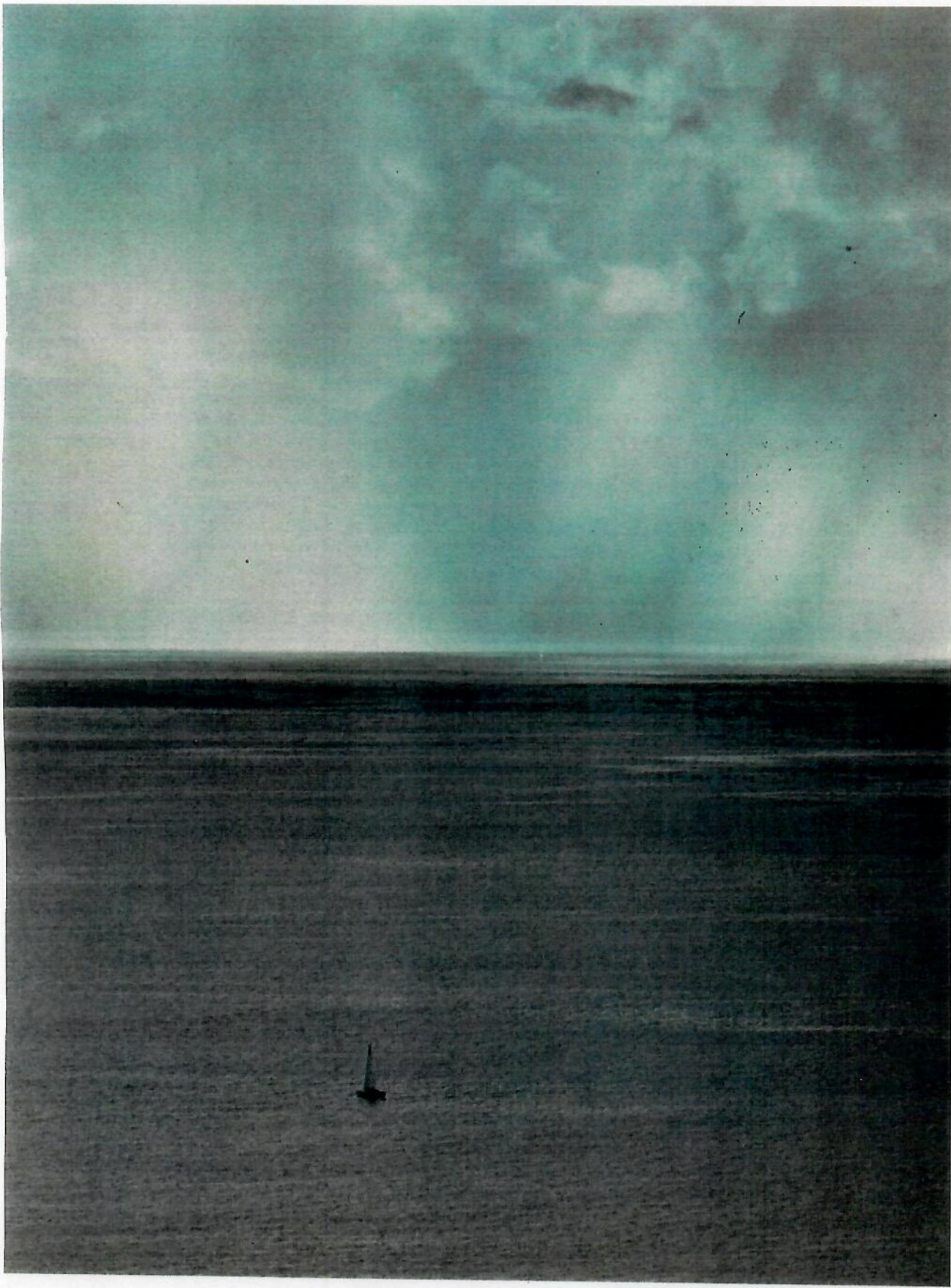
To compound the problem, better health care and a high birthrate are creating a

*An overall look at the Pacific Islands, including a double-sided supplement map, was included in the December 1974 GEOGRAPHIC.





Squalls veil Moorea island as the Chilean training ship Esmeralda leaves Tahiti.



The islands' grandeur astonished sea-weary Europeans, who first saw them in 1767.

nation of the young. By 1980, 60 percent of French Polynesia will be under 16.

Local and international protests drove the nuclear testing underground in 1975, and today the bitterness toward France seems tempered with resignation. Demonstrations against the bomb continue, but many Polynesians face the dilemma of how to criticize an unsavory benefactor—one who has brought an elevated standard of living that they have learned to accept and enjoy.

For most, life in the islands is good. Wages are adequate. There is no income tax. The sea and the land still provide.

So what, islanders say, if the economy is artificially propped up by French money? So what if things cost too much?

“*Aita e pe'ape'a*—It's no big thing.”

EVEN THE PROBLEMS that weigh on the expanding city seem to vaporize in the humid warmth of a January daybreak. At the market, under the green shag-rug mountains that press Papeete to its harbor, women wrapped in cotton pareus and crowned with plumeria chatter among the bonitos and papayas in the melodic language that few Europeans master (pages 852-3). Bargaining is *tapu*; prices are fixed.

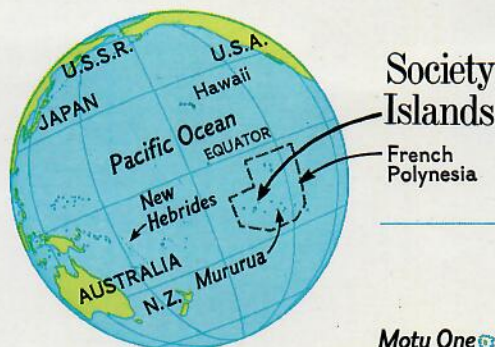
In a small Chinese café I breakfast on a steaming bowl of fresh island coffee and *firi-firi*, a kind of doughnut.

In the harbor, across the tree-lined Boulevard Pomare, outrigger canoes slide past freighters filled with flour and Datsuns, and a polynational fleet of transpacific yachts rub gunwales at the quay.

The once seamy copra port has cleaned up its waterfront. A modern shopping center called Vaima breathlessly hawks the chic of Paris and Honolulu. The strip that harbored the infamous barnacle of a dive called Quinn's has been sanitized with four-story blocks of concrete. And tourists pick and gawk at souvenir stands.

Despite the jetport, tourism has not yet eroded the fundamental dignity of Tahitian life. Tipping is vigorously discouraged. There is no servility, no hucksterism. Fewer than 100,000 visitors passed through French Polynesia in 1978—seven times the trickle of 1963, but less than a weekend's gate at California's Disneyland.

Still, many suffer in the emotional limbo



Motu One
(Bellingshausen)

LEEWARD

Manuae
(Scilly)

Maupihaa
(Mopelia)

Nearly lost in the vast Pacific, eastern Polynesia sought British protection, but was annexed by France in 1847. Internal self-rule came in 1977, but continued French nuclear testing and erosion of island culture concern leaders like Henri Hiro (below right), campaigning on Raiatea for deputy to the Territorial Assembly, the islands' governing body.

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between cultures. I sat one night at a hotel bar with Parea Moeino, a 35-year-old Polynesian who captains a charter fishing boat.

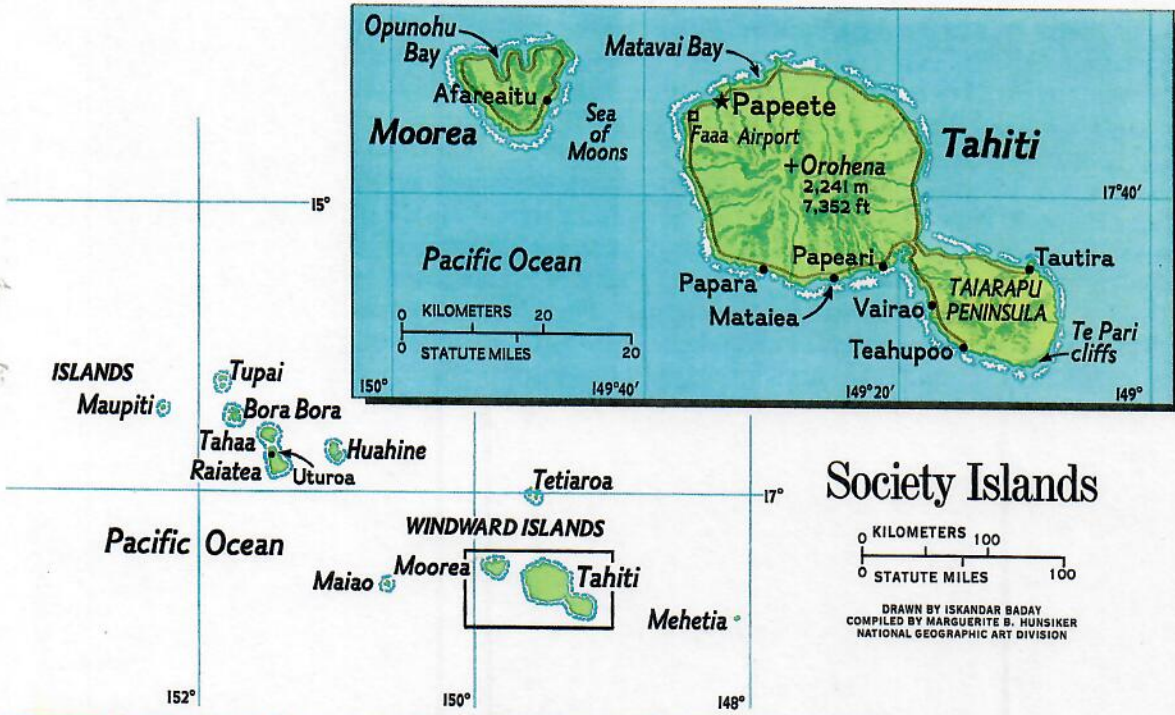
“You're looking at half a Tahitian,” he told me. “I'm like a *papa'a* [European]. I drink whiskey, I eat cheese. You know, my son is 10 years old. He won't be a Tahitian at all. He'll be a . . . a Frenchman.

“But what can we do? We can't go back now. It's too late, the Tahitians are lost.”

Few Tahitian political leaders share such pessimism. After decades of smoldering pressure for autonomy from France, a new constitution passed in 1977 gives locally elected officials control over internal affairs. The Paris-appointed high commissioner who had governed French Polynesia is the nonvoting president of a seven-member council of government.

For a nation with few natural resources, the most immediate concern of the new government is the economy. Until 1963 products such as copra and phosphate made the islands largely self-sufficient. But the price of copra fell and the phosphate ran out. The movie and the CEP brought a boom, but the new money and demand for foreign products created a dangerous imbalance between imports and exports by a ratio of 95 to 5. Suppose France decides to pull out?

“There is no reason for the French to



The Society Islands, Sisters of the Wind

leave," says Francis Sanford, Tahitian vice-president of the government council. "Where else can they make the tests? But we need to teach our youngsters that they can't all be *fonctionnaires*; we need more farmers, many more fishermen, and people to *raise* fish. The most important thing here for the next five years will be the production of protein through agriculture and aquaculture. The reality of Tahiti is the soil and the sea.

"And I think the French love Polynesia," he adds with a shrug. "It becomes for them a . . . sentimental question."

An artist in Papeete had described that relationship as one of a man to an old mistress:

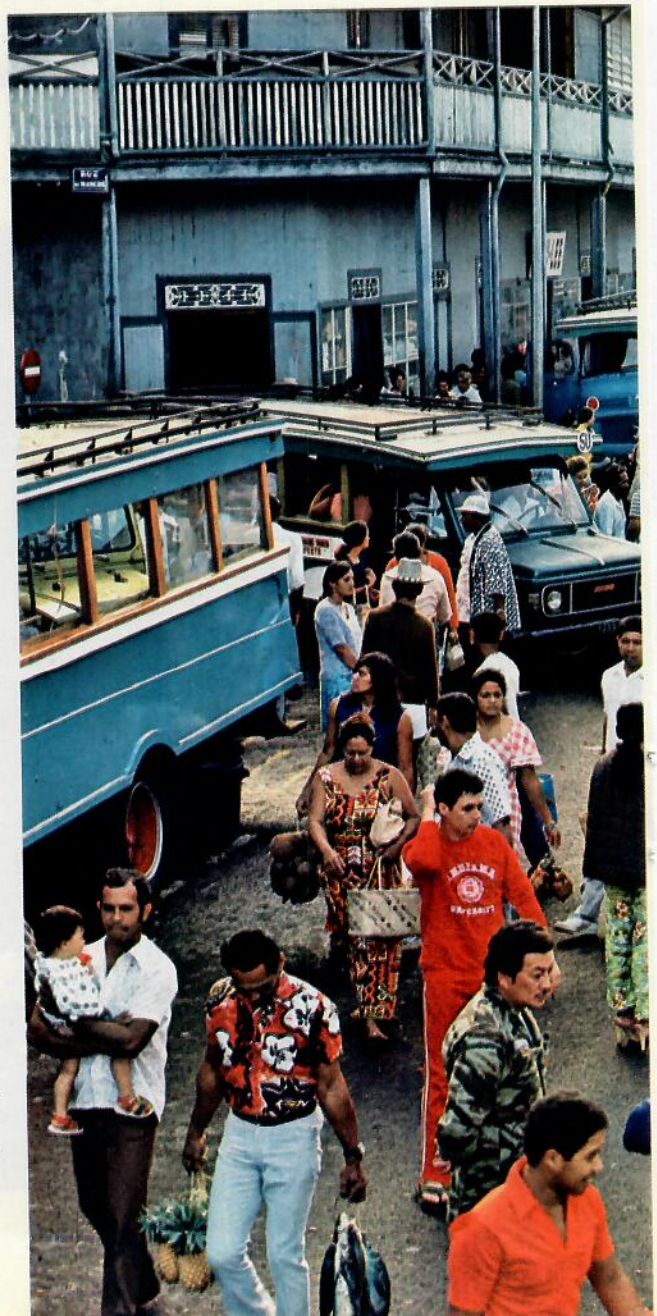
"The passions have cooled, but she's too dear to abandon now."

I SPENT several months looking for the object of that affection, starting counterclockwise around the 150-kilometer road that teeters along the shoreline of Tahiti, an island dominated by dizzying mountains, savage ravines, and legendary waterfalls.

Nearly the entire population clings to this quasi-paved highway, which seems constantly overrun by a noisy *mélange* of children, dogs, and chickens. But a few individualists still farm in the steamy interior valleys where taro and wild coffee tail off



A cultural stew simmers in Papeete, the capital and commercial center of French Polynesia (right), where buses called *les trucks* thread the central market between taro and papaya stalls and Chinese stores. A beautiful blend of nationalities shines in a young woman of Bora Bora (above).



into a crevice of rushing water, and where fence posts sprout leaves and blossom.

Near Papara I spied a figure silhouetted against the sky, a man in baggy trousers trudging up an improbably steep hillside planted with rows of crops.

"*Tinitō*—Chinese," I later learned from Henri Carsalade, then chief of agriculture in French Polynesia. "When they came to Tahiti, they had no land, so they used the mountains to grow vegetables."

More than a thousand coolies from the Hakka-speaking region of China were imported to labor on a Tahitian cotton plantation established during the U. S. Civil War,

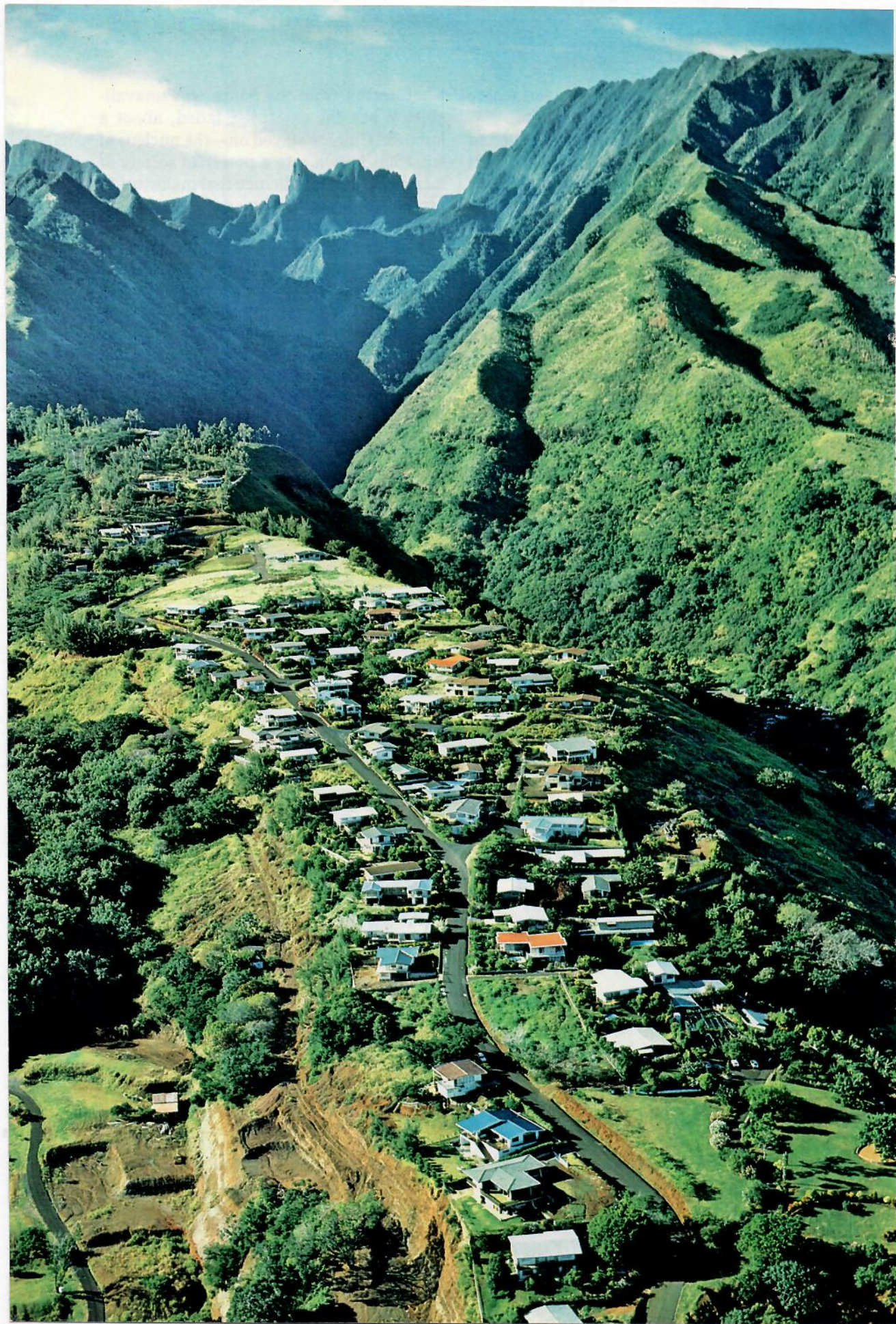
when cotton from the South was unavailable. When the enterprise faded, about a hundred Chinese stayed on—the nucleus of what has grown into a powerful society of merchants and middlemen that makes up 10 percent of French Polynesia's population.

Even in the small villages, when a Tahitian mother sends her child to the store for bread, she is apt to say, "Run to the *Tinitō*."

One afternoon I rode with Jean-Louis Reboul, French Polynesia's director of agricultural research, up a corrugated jeep trail above the village of Mataiea, where French artist Paul Gauguin had lived.

Auguste Wong, working 14 hours a day,





had carved a masterwork of his own here—in vegetables. We talked of fertilizers and the peanut farm of Jimmy Carter, and I asked why he, who had once been a hotel accountant, had been attracted by farming.

“To tell you the truth,” Wong said, “I’m in it for the money.”

The government, hoping to encourage lagging production, sets the market price of all vegetables at the price of those that are imported. Local farmers, working with little overhead, are amply rewarded.

In Tahiti you cannot freeze and you cannot starve. “The problem is overeating,” said agriculture chief Carsalade. “Obesity rather than hunger.”

Lush vegetation covers much of the island, and although agricultural acreage is scarce and the soil is tired, the sun and rain create a virtual hothouse for growth.

Why then is 65 percent of the islands’ food imported? Even the copra-oil factory in

Papeete, French Polynesia’s only real industry, was forced to bring 720 tons of copra from the New Hebrides in 1978.

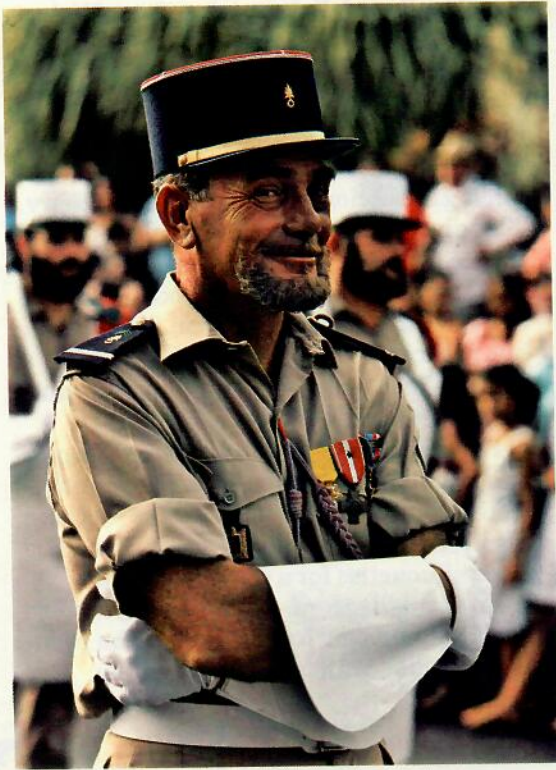
“There are few real farmers here,” says the frustrated Reboul, “only gardeners and businessmen. And sociologists keep reinforcing the notion that work is unnecessary. There have been many glib talkers here, and people will believe anything. ‘Don’t worry,’ they say. ‘The future is in the ocean. We are rich—we have plenty of ocean.’ Maybe . . . but we can’t wait for this future. It’s a dream. The reality is that now we must make the copra!”

Past Papeari the road leads through a narrow isthmus to embrace Taiarapu Peninsula, the island’s smaller lobe. On the southern coast, fishing nets hang from ironwood trees, silhouettes for a dozen postcards.

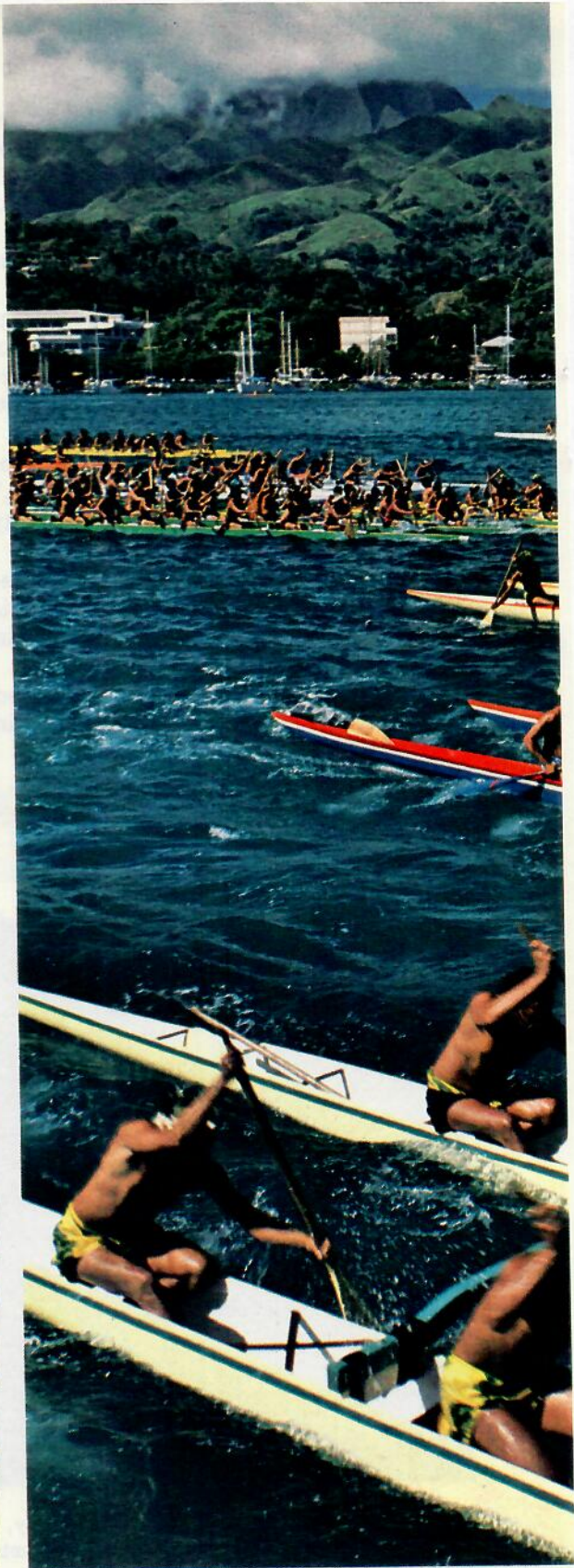
In the village of Vairao, a flying-fish fisherman named Joseph Teikivaeho invited me to dine with him and his family.



Upward mobility, boosted by French money, brings well-to-do bureaucrats and Chinese businessmen to suburban developments in the mountains behind Papeete (left). The urban area swells with 60,000 people, many of them Polynesians lured from the outer islands by the promise of wages and Western luxuries. French champagne, a symbol of the new affluence, helps enliven a birthday party on Moorea (above).



A summer smile softens a French foreign legionnaire (above) at Papeete's Bastille Day parade. Tahitians wrap a July-long revelry of Polynesian sport, music, and dance (below) around the French holiday.



Straining joyously against the water, teams of double-hulled pirogues vie in



Papeete harbor during the July competition. Teams practice year round for the events and for a chance to represent Tahiti in the annual October races in Molokai, Hawaii.

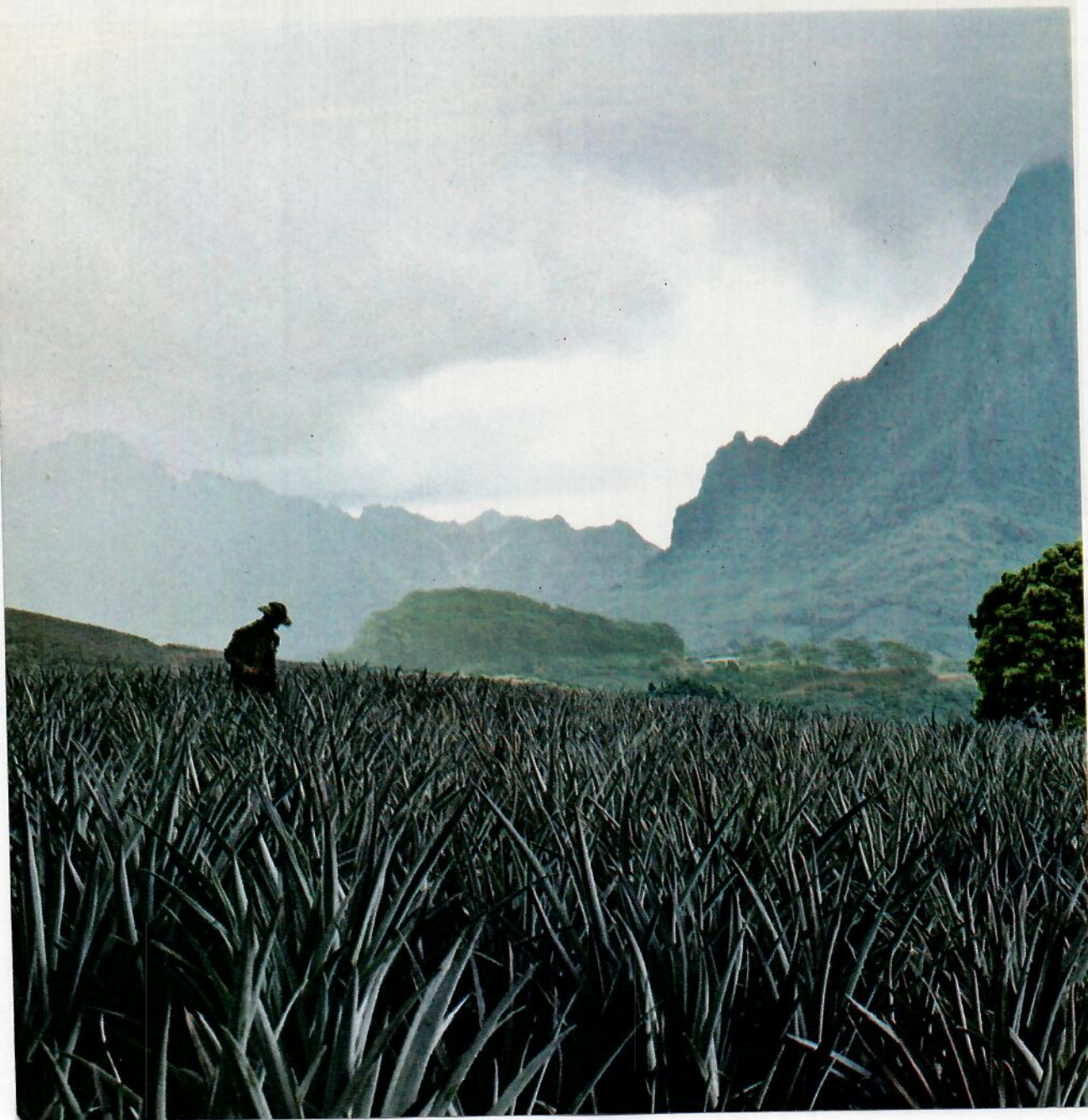
A soccer game from France fluttered incongruously from the television as I removed my shoes to enter the Teikivaehos' bungalow. Dinner was *poisson cru* (raw fish marinated in lime juice), New Zealand corn beef, baked breadfruit, and bananas, all lumped into a bowl of salted coconut milk and eaten with the fingers.

After dark we went fishing in Joseph's 50-horsepower launch. He stood in a cockpit in front, one hand on the controls, the other wielding a small net on a long bamboo pole. On his head he wore a helmet fitted with a searchlight, powered by a generator.

Joseph scanned the lagoon with his beam as we skimmed over the water, waiting for a flying fish to break the surface.

Now! A silver streak fluttered and Joseph wheeled his boat for the high-speed chase, scooping with uncanny accuracy into the foaming water, then dumping a frenzy of flapping, two-foot wingspans and nocturnal fish eyes into my lap.

Suddenly the generator coughed and quit, snuffing out the beam. Joseph cut the engine, and we were alone with the dark and the gentle swell of the lagoon. He muttered an oath; he had left his flashlight behind.



The fish sighed in the hold, their gills heaving quietly now. And then this Polynesian, whose ancestors navigated the open oceans by the stars and the feel of the waves on their hands, fixed the cursed generator anyway, holding up each part to the moon as if it were an offering.

IN THE MORNING, as Joseph slept, his wife drove the catch—500 or so flying fish—to the market, five on a stick.

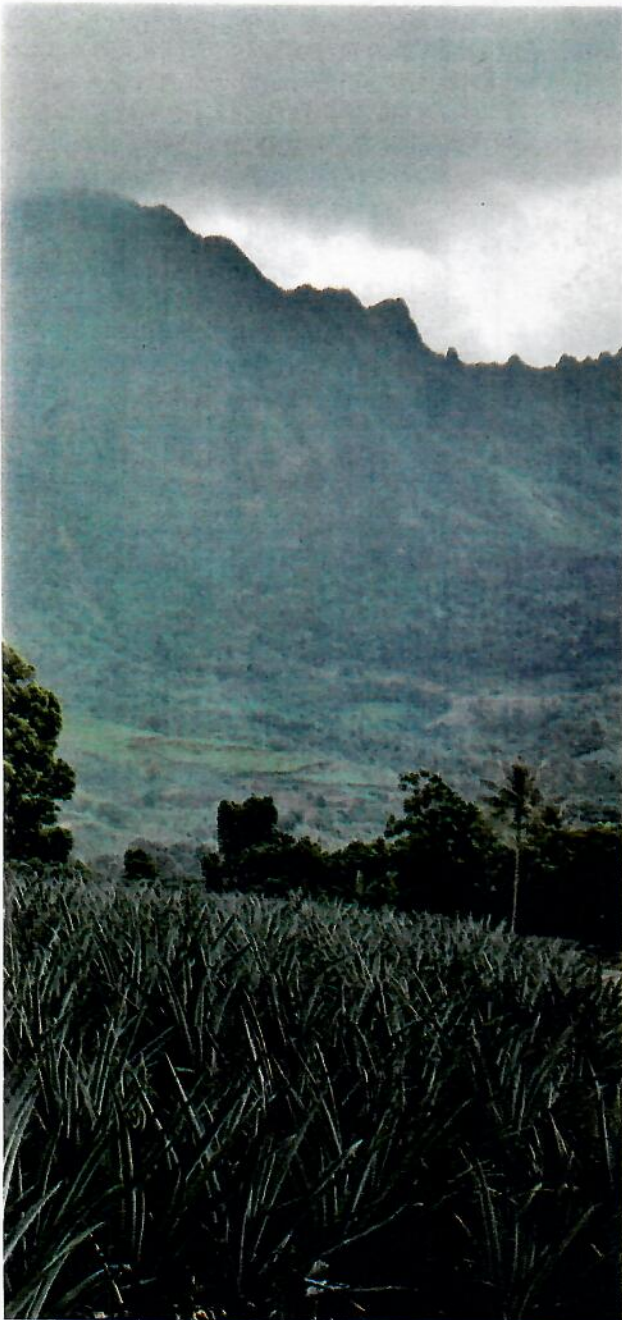
Bonito, mahimahi, white tuna, yellowfin, redeye, and spear-caught parrot fish and surgeonfish from the reef—nearly

all are sold only for local consumption.

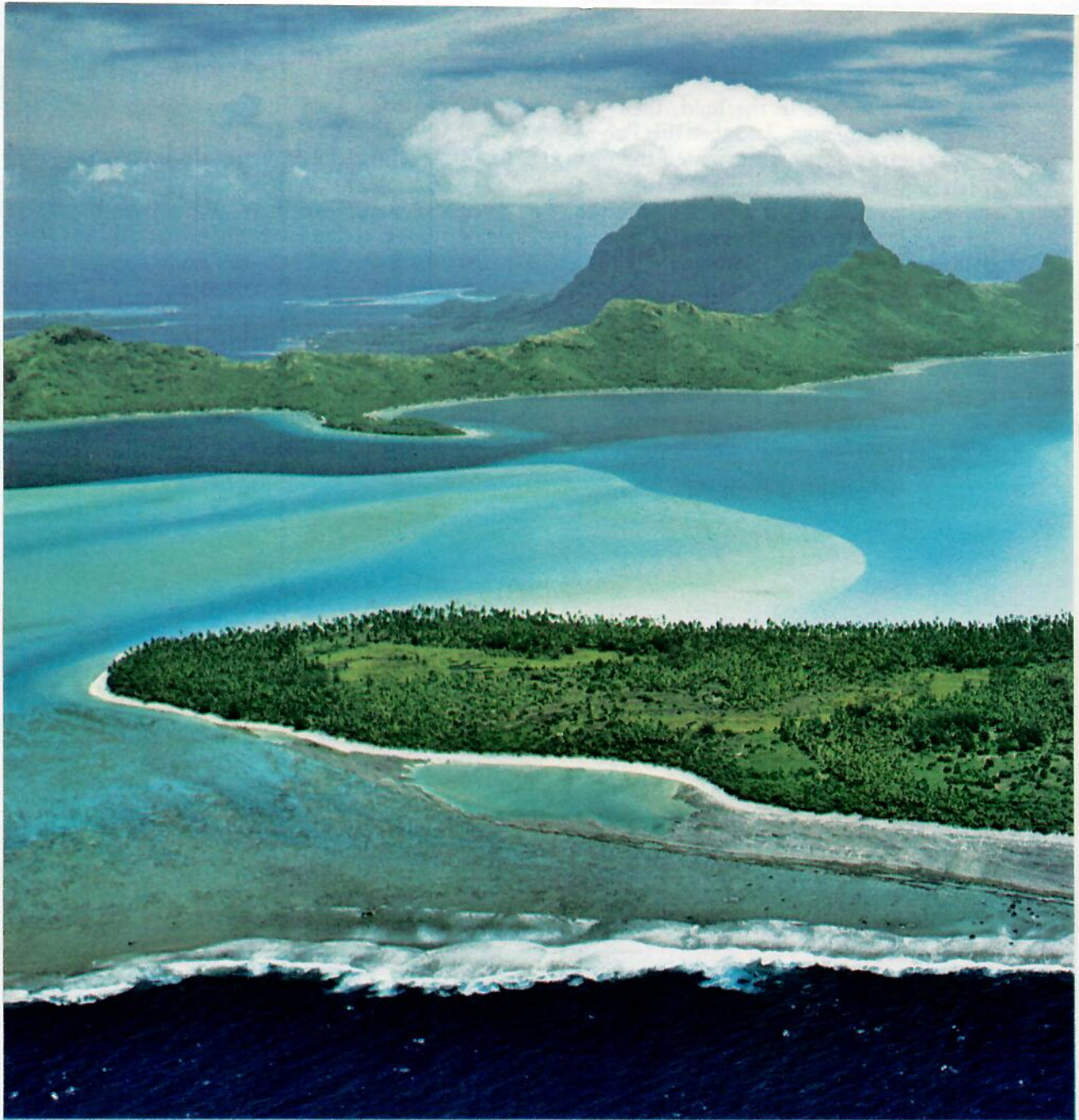
“We have problems,” says Yves Brosse, assistant director of the Bureau of Fisheries. “The water here is not very rich.”

Yet many island leaders are placing the future of Tahiti squarely on the ocean. In February 1978 the government expanded the maritime zone from 12 to 200 nautical miles around French Polynesia, adding more than four million square miles that can only be fished by official permission.

At the Polynesian branch of CNEOXO, the Centre National pour l'Exploitation des Océans, in Vairao, they are experimenting



The earth is willing in Moorea's fecund Opunohu Valley, where Ismaël Durietz (left) grows pineapples with his wife (above). But agricultural progress is slow, for few are inspired to farm in a land where fruit may literally hit you on the head.



"The most beautiful island in the world," James Michener wrote of Bora

with baitfishing for tuna, with tropical aquaculture for shrimp, and with ocean mining of metallic nodules.

From Vairao the road burrows under the weight of mango and breadfruit trees, past the village of Teahupoo, and then . . . only the *fenua 'aihere*, the brushland, and the monumental Te Pari cliffs, with their ravines strung in plumes of falling water.

I drove back toward Papeete in the darkness, the rectangles of shadeless windows

and doorways slipping by like a filmstrip. In each, a vignette: a family at supper by a kerosene lamp; a woman, haloed in the blue glow of television, nursing her baby; a man with a shiny oval face leaning back in his chair and laughing at an unknown joke.

TO MARK Bastille Day 1978, the newspapers reported, the biggest nuclear test to date was held on Mururua. The CEP "would neither confirm nor deny."



Bora, home to more than 5,000 U. S. servicemen during World War II.

There was a parade with marching soldiers, and bemedaled veterans leaning on canes on the reviewing stand, but the storming of the Bastille, far away, long ago, seemed incidental to the Fête du 14 Juillet, the carousel of sport, song, and dance that mesmerizes the islands for most of July.

Other islands celebrate, but Papeete swells with visiting dance troupes, spear throwers, and uncles and aunts. Pirogues and outrigger sailboats vie in the harbor

(pages 856-7). Burly men yoked with 110 pounds of bananas and breadfruit race through the city streets.

In the evenings the harbor sparkles with the lights of carnival. Aromatic pork and mutton hiss over charcoal grills; Chinese pitchmen sell chances on the spin of a roulette wheel. In quayside clubs, bold-faced island girls the color of café au lait toss their waist-long hair to the hip-swiveling *tāmūrē*, trailing scents of soap and flowers.

ACROSS THE SEA OF MOONS, 25 kilometers from Papeete, the mountains of Moorea lounge like slumbering dragons. It is said that an agile race of dwarfs—the lizard men—once lived among these gargoyled ridges and crags, and periodically descended to carry off wives and other useful objects.

A tingle of magic things persists on Moorea. I spent one morning deep in a steamy forest of *māpē*, Tahitian chestnuts, in the valley called Opunohu. Here amid the shadows of the *māpē*'s twisted roots lie the remains of eighty stone *marae*, centuries-old shrines where Tahitians once prayed to their ancestors. And here the aura of an unknown presence is almost palpable.

So when Medford Kellum, who owned Opunohu Valley for forty years, told me his story, I was a believer.

I sat with him and his wife, Gladys, one evening at their home on fjordlike Opunohu Bay, where the air was warm and soft with the scent of plumeria. Mr. Kellum had made a crown of flowers for his wife that morning, as he has done every day for fifty years.

"When we first came here from Honolulu in 1925," he told me, "I found a *marae* in the valley with a stone tiki still on it. I didn't know if I could bring it home, so I left it there and marked my path with blazes on trees.

"The chief down at the village said, 'Kellum, you are a good man. You wouldn't mistreat it. Take it home.' So I took a gunnysack and went back to the forest where I had been two days before. But the blaze marks were gone. Not a single one left."

Mr. Kellum came across the tiki often in later years, he said, "But I never moved it."

Shadows and sunlight flickered over the cratered road that winds 60 kilometers around Moorea. My guide, Isabel d'Etigny, and I bounced along in a rented jeep, past sheet-iron-roofed "vanilla houses," built for prominent families in the 1930's and 1940's, when the vanilla bean was an economic mainstay of the island.

Seven major hotels dominate the economy today and make Moorea an obligatory stop for tourists from Tahiti. Still, the island of 6,000 remains faithfully Polynesian, uncluttered and provincial, with little of Papeete's French dressing.

We stopped for lunch at Chez Michou,

where diners were shirtless and geckos skittered on the walls. We asked for sea urchins. "It is Sunday," came the reply with a smile. "Today the sea urchins are making love."

Three of the Society Islands' most successful hotels are run by a trio of Americans—Jay Carlisle, Hugh Kelley, and Muk McCallum—"The Bali Hai Boys."

I found McCallum barefoot, in a filthy pair of shorts, digging a drainage ditch high up in a pastoral valley. This is the Bali Hai's 410-acre farm, source of the Moorea hotel's fresh produce, field laboratory for experimental crops, and supplier of a surprising 65 percent of the Society Islands' eggs.

"To get really good workers is hard," he said. "How excited can they get about working for me? Who needs Muk? They can go out there and get a big string of fish."

It is hard to miss this constant clash of values—the achievement-oriented *pōpō* against the relaxed, indifferent Polynesian. Vice-president Sanford had warned me about this characteristic of his people.

"Their philosophy is simple," he said. "Yesterday was yesterday, today is really today, tomorrow is another day."

Life is to be enjoyed. Reasonable enough.

Fiu is a common ailment. When a worker becomes *fiu*, tired or bored, he simply leaves, seldom stopping to explain why or even to collect the last paycheck.

One concept that changed with the coming of the Europeans was communal ownership. No one really stole; he just borrowed from the common stock. Thus no man was forced to compromise his pride by accepting charity.

Medford Kellum tells of a young man who left Moorea to fight in North Africa during World War II. When he returned, his family and friends gathered around to ask what wonders had impressed him most. Was it all the cities? The strange lands? The killing?

"He said, 'Do you know what I saw?'"

"We said, 'No, Temui, what was it?'"

"I saw a man put out his hand and ask for money.'"

HUAHINE, 135 kilometers northwest of Moorea in the Leeward group, remains the most tranquil and unpretentious of the major Society Islands. Life in Fare, the principal village, still revolves

around the Wednesday-morning arrival of the copra boat, a freighter that docks under the stately 'autera'a trees of the quay. Off come bicycles, T-shirts, families flushed with city shopping, a soldier on furlough.

On the grounds of Huahine's Hotel Bali Hai, the most important archaeological dig in the Societies has yielded a treasure of preserved wooden items—the support posts of a storehouse, war clubs, and a canoe paddle—from the ninth century. The excavation, funded in part by the National Geographic Society and directed by Dr. Yosihiko H. Sinoto of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu, provides new clues to the incomplete chronology of Polynesian migrations.

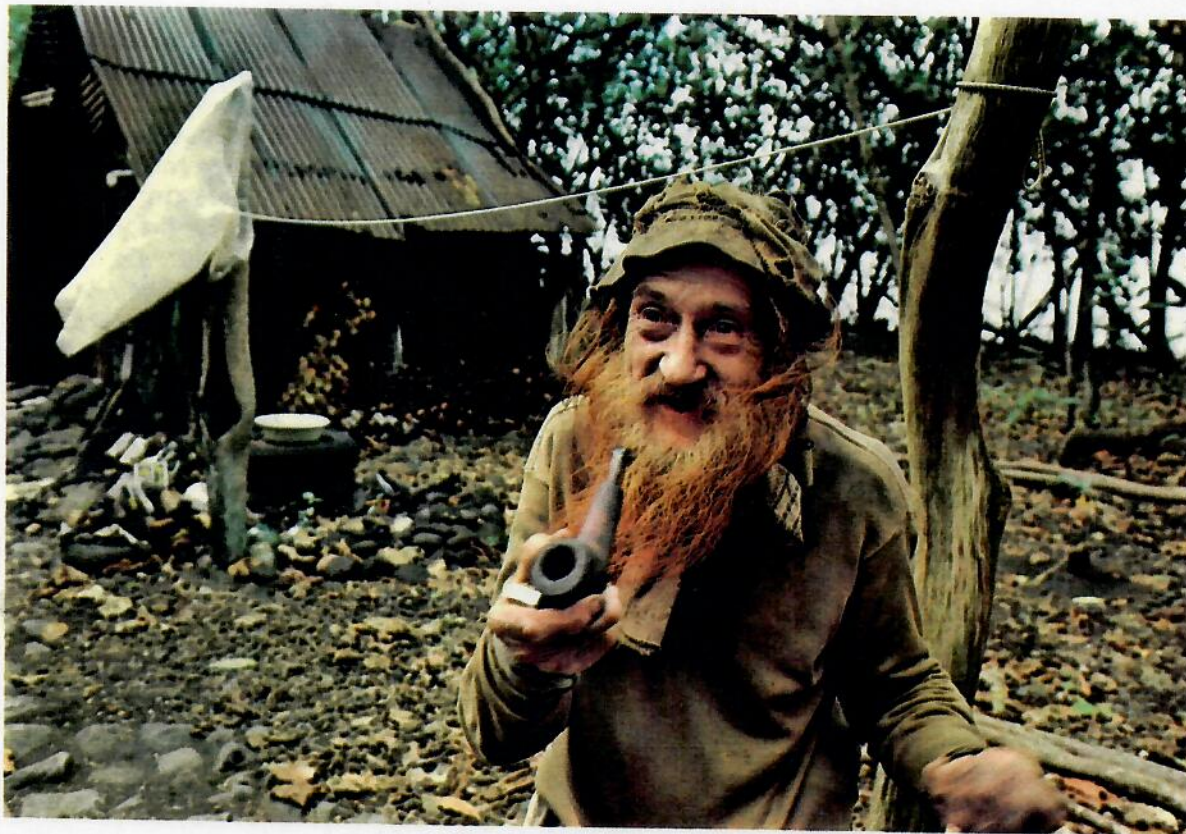
The soul of early Polynesia abides on Raiatea, second largest of the Society chain, 40 kilometers west of Huahine. Raiatea was the center of religion and the seat of a

dynasty that ruled the western islands for centuries. Today its capital, Uturoa, is the seat of government for the Leeward Islands, and the only other urban municipality, besides Papeete, in the Societies.

Near the slash of Uturoa's airport runway is the red-roofed village of Apooiti, home of Polynesia's only remaining fire walkers. I watched them one night as they stepped barefoot, stoically, in grave procession through a 25-foot-long pit of rocks heated for eight hours with burning wood.

This ancient ritual was almost forgotten, but was revived by the Bali Hai trio, who convinced elders at the village that fire-walking displays would help bring tourists and their money to the island.

On the east coast lies Opoa, the most sacred site on this most sacred island. Here, at Taputapuatea marae, the nation's elite



"My life is poisoned!" laments Raymond L'Eglise, the 72-year-old "nature man" of Tautira. "There are 250 chemicals in our food—authorized by the social communists!" For 27 years the retired French mariner has lived in isolation on the rugged east coast of Tahiti, perhaps the last of the European ascetics who came here to practice Rousseau's philosophy of the "noble savage." "I've traveled from Paris to Ceylon," says L'Eglise, "but all places are the same. The problem is the pride of man."

invested their rulers and offered human sacrifices to the fierce god Oro.

"Do people still use the marae?" I asked a villager. "The *tahu'a*—the priests," he replied carefully. "Sometimes they go at night, but nobody sees them."

The *tahu'a* of Tiva, a village on the island of Tahaa, is a kindly man with a broad face, no teeth, and a loving grandson who clings shyly to his pant legs. I had come to Tahaa, the splendid green cone linked to Raiatea by a common lagoon, to get cured.

"Yes, yes," agreed the *tahu'a* as I described my symptoms. "It is a pain that progresses like the waves of the sea, which grow stronger and then diminish. It is the illness called 'ō."

Dr. Yen Howan, a physician in Papeete, had told me, "Tahu'a in the past could make *tikis* walk. Now, no more *mana*—no more power. And trust in bad folk medicine causes the death of several babies each year—too much of a medicine or a poison."

The *tahu'a* regards an illness as either natural or supernatural. In some cases the patient must be tied down to prevent his escape, then the phantom is purged.

"But phantoms do not approach *popa'a*," the *tahu'a* of Tiva assured me. "The spirits are afraid. White people can sleep among the dead and nothing happens. I saw this on television. For Tahitians this is impossible, for the phantoms would follow them."

"What is the most serious illness you can treat?" I asked.

The *tahu'a* cradled his grandson's head in his big, rough hands. "Cancer," he said.

"You come back tomorrow. I will go into the mountains to gather fresh herbs."

Next morning I received a quart bottle containing the cure for 'ō: a thick mixture of *moa hau'a 'ino* and *pape ha' ari*, substances for which my translator could find no translation. It was the color of spinach and just sweet enough to be nauseating.

"Drink it all before eight o'clock tonight," admonished the *tahu'a*, "or the herbs will lose their power."

Again and again that miserable evening I drank of the concoction, and at five minutes to eight I breathed deeply and forced down the final swig. But it never cured the illness called 'ō—my heartburn.

BORA BORA, 20 kilometers west of Tahaa, looms from the sea like a cathedral, its triumvirate of brooding peaks sweeping down to a confection of white beaches and a lagoon whose colors shimmer from midnight blue to lemonade.

More than 5,000 U. S. troops were stationed on this tiny island during World War II, at a rearguard naval base and airstrip. Green money, Hershey bars, and Lucky Strikes controlled the economy for four years. Copra and vanilla were abandoned.

Bora Bora reverted to its old ways when the Americans left in 1946, but the afterglow of this golden age survives.

"What we have is a type of cargo cult," French teacher François Tiger had told me in Papeete. "Like a religion. The people had electricity all around the island—for free. That was thirty years ago, but the wires and poles are still there. When the Americans come back, they'll plug them in. If you ask about it, they say, 'No, we are not that childish.' But deep inside they believe it."

In 1977 Italian film mogul Dino de Laurentiis invaded the island with 300 hand-waving moviemakers who monopolized the labor, resources, and water supply. More than 200 Tahitians were hired. Faced with limited room in the island's hotels, de Laurentiis grandly erected one of his own.

The film? *Hurricane*, by *Mutiny on the Bounty* authors Nordhoff and Hall.

As happened to Tahiti 18 years ago, Bora Bora is reeling toward a loss of innocence, a time of fundamental—perhaps terminal—change. New jobs have reversed emigration to Papeete; the island's population has almost doubled since 1961. Money once again lures fishermen from their age-old tasks.

And now a complex of condominium homes has taken root on the north shore.

The world turns slowly for this island madonna, sitting in her doorway on Maupiti. The tiny, peaceful island has no tourist hotels, and its mayor, Yee On Tarano, likes it that way. "I go to the city and see the freaks," he told the author. "But I love my island. I can't stay in Papeete for more than a week. I go crazy."





Says its developer, American Robert Fraser: "The future of these islands is in their proximity to the United States. There's a travel boom in the South Pacific that's just beginning, and it's going to go all the way from Pitcairn to Papua."

"Before, people worked together," a schoolteacher in the hamlet of Faanui said darkly. "Now it's every man for himself. Everybody wants to get *more*."

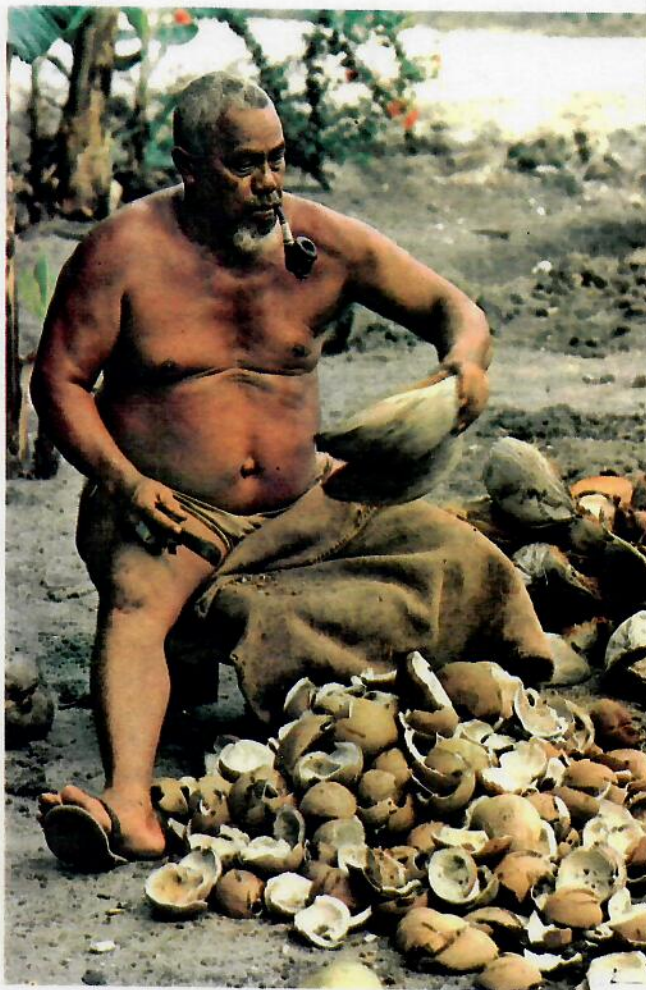
I watched a day of filming on the former soccer field, sacrificed for a facsimile of Pago Pago, Samoa, circa 1920. The set depicted the inside of a church, where 120 townspeople huddled to pray for deliverance from the hurricane. Gusts from huge wind machines (engines from World War II fighter planes) howled through the cracks of the church. Fire hoses simulated stinging rain.

All afternoon extras and stars slogged about in ten-inch-deep water. Later into the evening, Dino decided to record the villagers singing a *hīmene*, a missionary hymn set in Tahitian harmonies.

"Quiet on the set!" demanded assistant director Pepe Lopez. "Quiet!" He waved his arms at the extras. "OK—hīmene!"

The film rolled, and these Polynesian villagers, selected simply for their appearance, suddenly began to sing. No tuning notes, no director, no rehearsal, but the balance of sweetness and harmonic power gripped the film set so that no one moved. And in the eyes of an Italian technician I saw tears.

When the hymn ended, the entire film crew stood and applauded. And the villagers, understanding the nature of spiritual things, applauded them back, warmly.



FIFTY KILOMETERS west of Bora Bora lies Maupiti; beyond that, only crumbs of the Society archipelago—Maupihaa, Manuae, Motu One.

Maupiti is a rock inhabited by 700 people, and ringed by a reef with only one pass, a channel so dangerous that the freighter *Manuia* has wrecked twice in its violent currents, once with the loss of 15 lives.

For many years this island was left to the white seabirds that constantly circle its central massif, but an airstrip was opened in 1975. Still, few tourists have come to Maupiti. There are no hotels, no running water, nothing to buy. It takes only three hours to walk around the island, and people still wave and call "*Ia ora na—Health to you!*"

I remember simple pleasures from Maupiti: washing with buckets of rainwater in

Content with simpler things, young Tahitians ignore the TV sets and tape recorder that add prestige to a bamboo *fare* in Mataiea (above left). Thirteen people—two families—share the home. The head of one household is a mechanic for the French nuclear-testing agency; the other is a spear fisherman. But with only one station, why two TV's? "One is mine," explains the mechanic with a deep sense of propriety, "and the other is his."

On isolated Maupiti (above) a man prepares copra—dried coconut meat—a traditional source of income for islanders. Few Tahitians bother to do the work today. Says Papeete's copra-oil plant director Julien Siu, "They sell the coconuts to tourists for water and throw the meat away. More money."

the backyard of our guesthouse; a steaming platter of *varo*, or mantis prawn, the size of small lobsters; sitting in darkness by the wharf as neighborhood kids played guitars and sang; the intensity of burning stars.

But electricity came last summer, and with it a portent of plumbing and refrigeration, not to mention bright lights.

Even so, the town council met last spring and voted down a proposal to build a tourist hotel on Maupiti. The young mayor, Yee On Tarano, told why. "I just got back from Bora Bora," he said. "If we welcome a hotel here, it's the end of everything. Maybe the

clever European who still wants to see the roots of Polynesia will come to Maupiti. The hotel will not appear as long as I live."

The last of the Tahitians, I thought, digging the trenches.

But I remembered what Francis Sanford had told me back in Papeete. He had pointed to a large map of the Pacific on his wall.

"New Zealand, Hawaii, Tahiti"—he said. "They were discovered at approximately the same time. You had the English in New Zealand, the Americans in Hawaii, and the French here.

"We are, of course, way behind the others

"I came to find purity," says the young Frenchman who lives with his wife



economically. Look at Hawaii. Whoo! Last year almost four million tourists. Big skyscrapers, all full of pigeons.

But who are happier? That's the big question in life. We have the land. We have the language. We have the Polynesian people."

AT THE MAUPITI AIRPORT, a hut of thatch squatting beside a stretch of crushed coral, a Twin Otter waited to take us back to Papeete.

A heavyset Tahitian woman, perhaps 60, sat down beside me. On her head was a hat of pandanus, decorated with a band of *tiare*

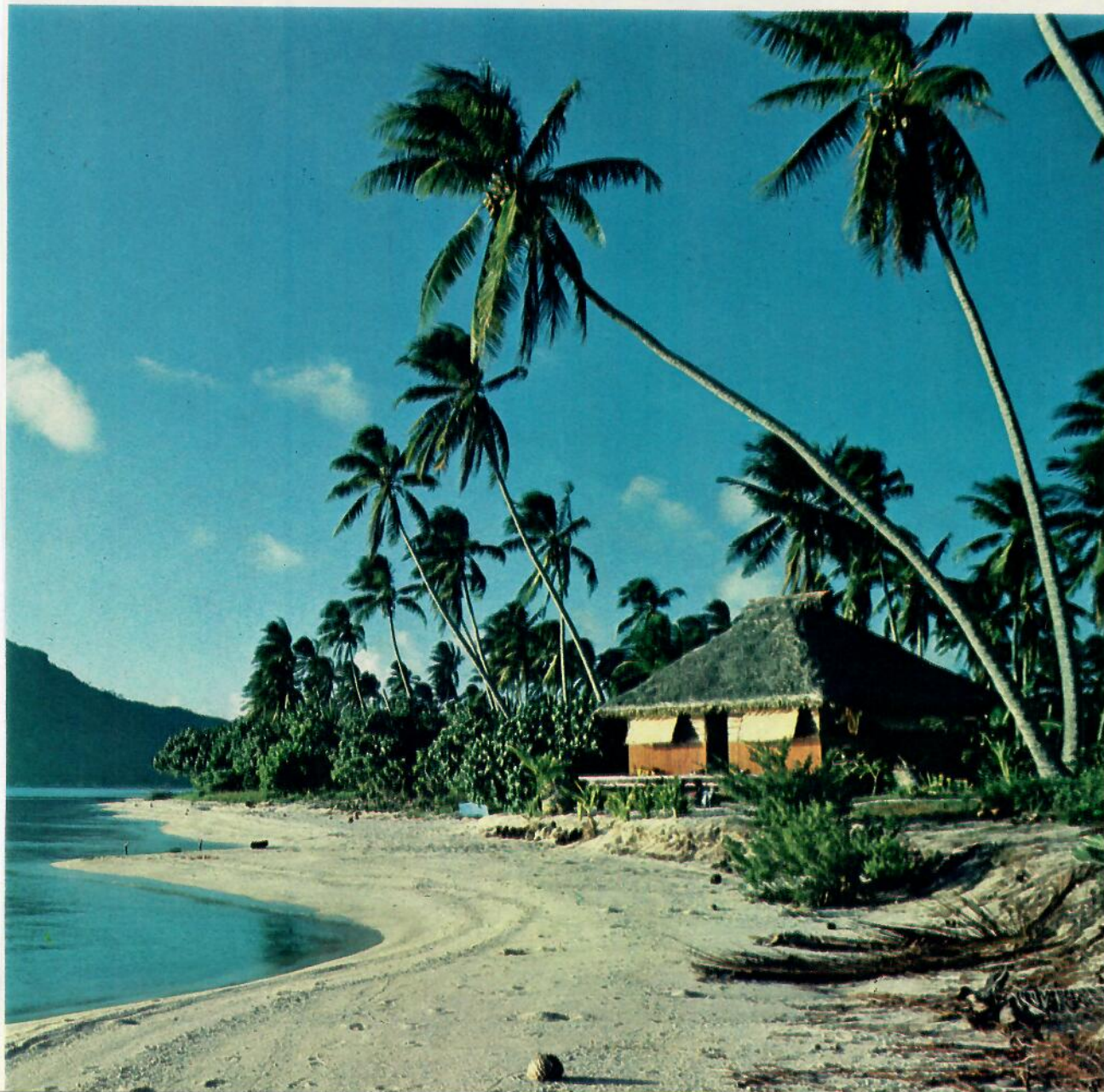
tahiti, a fragrant island gardenia. She wore a watch that didn't work, but, as she explained, she likes the way it looks. And when she smiled, gold teeth flashed.

She was barefoot, her toes splayed. As she propped her feet up in front of her, sand scattered on the Dacron of the airliner's seat.

It was her first flight, she confessed nervously, her first trip to Papeete. And when the engine coughed to life and the props kicked up coral dust from the runway, she suddenly gripped my hand in hers. And that is how we sat, suspended in space and time as the islands slipped beneath us. □

on this tiny island off Maupiti. Others have only dreamed of paradise.

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