

# Travel

Sunday

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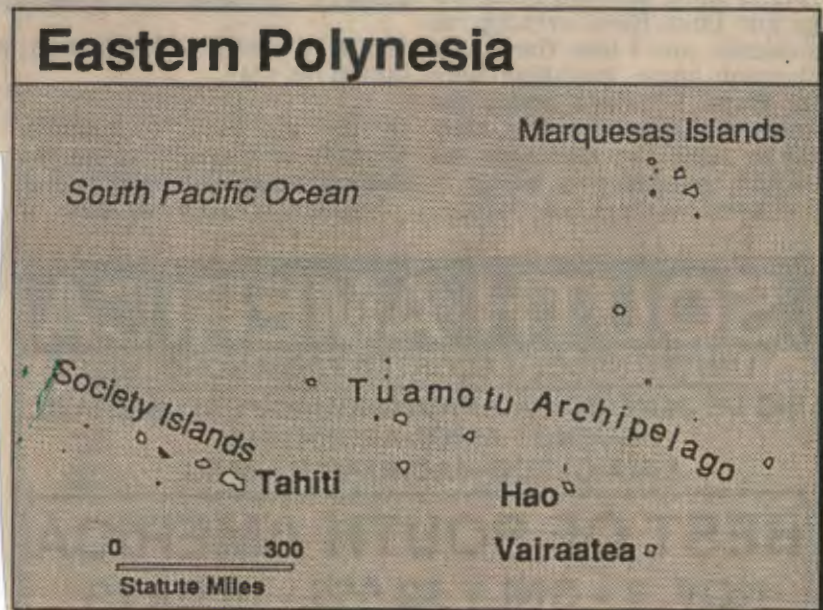
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# Paradise

Moshe Rapaport, a doctoral student in geography at the University of Hawaii, spent several weeks in the Tuamotus, coral atolls in the South Pacific so isolated most can be visited only every few months, via copra schooner. These are his memories of the tiny islet where he spent the most time.

Welcome,  
stranger! Welcome  
to the land of Vairaatea!





## By Moshe Rapaport

Special to the Advertiser

It is only a few weeks since I have returned, but the memories of Vairaatea remain remarkably vivid.

I still wake at dawn expecting to see the sun rising across Puka Runga. Opening my door, I half expect to step out onto the coral rubble in the tiny atoll village. Something calls me to head out towards the deep canyons in the reef edge and cast for fish.

In the evening, I walk around Manoa Valley, listening for the young men vigorously playing the ukulele and guitar, and chanting the songs of the gods and the heroes.

We arrived at the pier of the Vairaatea Atoll in the early morning of a Saturday. There are only eight families on the atoll, all clustered in the tiny village at the northern tip of Puka Ruga, the sole inhabited islet.

They all came down to greet us and presented us with leis and coconut frond hats.

I was invited to stay with Kahui, brother-in-law of the mayor, who had accompanied me from Papeete aboard the copra boat. On our way to his house, I noticed an old woman moving towards us rapidly and I knew it must be Nauriki, the village matriarch. I had been told about her.

Addressed simply as "the old one," she is the last of those who are still in touch with the ancient knowledge of the land, the lagoon, the sea and the sprits.

"You are Nauriki!," I greeted her.

"How do you know that?"

"Kahui told me."

"Very good, Welcome, welcome!"

In the Tuamotuan language, almost all words are doubled. Some people think it is to make sentences easier to understand.

I think it is an echo of the rhythmic motion of the sea in the subconscious of the atoll inhabitants.

I explained to Nauriki that I had come to study the life of the eastern Tuamotus. "You are most welcome," she said.

"In the past," she said, "the spirits of the ancestors used to walk the land in the evenings. The land would be blessed with frequent arrivals of migrating fish and seabirds. At regular periods, massive schools of 'ature' (scad fish) would move in the channels between the lagoon and the sea."

"It is Naurike who sent away the ature," put in another atoll resident, Andre. "She was disgusted with the way the local

so, turning Moshe into Mote.)

"What is it?," I asked.

"Wait," he said. "There will be an announcement."

Then Nauriki stood to speak. All the population had gathered on the ground in the deep darkness of the atoll. Nauriki is small and she was engulfed by a mountain of leis.

"Welcome," she said again. "Welcome to this land Vairaatea! Welcome, stranger, whom we will give a new name!"

"From now on," she said, "let nobody in this land call you Mote! For your new name, we have picked the name of an ancient 'kaito' (warrior). Your name shall be Moeava! We have selected this name because this kaito, like yourself, traveled across many lands in the Pacific seeking knowledge. He faced many challenges, all of which he overcame. You, too, will face numerous challenges which you will overcome easily!"

She then warned me about revealing my name if I visited Hao, one of the larger islands in the Tuamotan Archipelago. "They are extremely jealous of this name. If they know you are Moeava, they will attack you immediately," she said. Later that evening, I asked her, "Nauriki, what is the meaning

**WHAT:** "Vahi-Tahi Revisited: The Southeastern Tuamotus in the 1980s," a talk by doctoral candidate Moshe Rapaport on community life in one of the most isolated parts of the South Pacific, with slides and music.

**WHEN:** Noon, Tuesday.

**WHERE:** The East-West Center's Environmental Policy Institute conference room.

people gathered the fish for sport by the hundreds and let them rot."

"She walked out to the seafront one evening and commanded the ature, 'Go! Go!' They never came back."

The evening of our arrival, a table was set up in the central square. Mati, the mayor, had been to Papeete since his election the previous March, discussing the development needs of the islands with the government ministries. He explained to the people about the work he had been doing. Then he told them about my project.

When he finished, he told me, "The people have decided to honor you with a new name." (In fact, they had already done

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Photo by Moshe Rapaport

Tiny "Amanu" atoll is famous for its three churches, seen among the palms: Catholic, Morman



**Moshe Rapaport**

## **Writer turns French Polynesia into his classroom**

**By Wanda A. Adams**

*Living Section Editor*

**W**HEN Moshe Rapaport embarked on a research trip to the remote eastern islands of the Tuamotu Archipelago last July, he had no idea where he'd stay, how he'd get from island to island, whether he'd brought the right supplies or enough money.

But all turned out well.

A doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Hawaii, Rapaport found that he could drop his suitcases at the front door of any "fare" (house) in the islands and be made welcome.

Copra boats — primitive but dependable — carried him inexpensively from Tahiti to Vairaatea atoll, more than 500 miles to the east.

And his supplies, which ranged from antibiotics to toilet paper, held out well with the exception of batteries and a few minor items.

Rapaport specializes in the human geography of French Polynesia and his dissertation focuses on the challenges faced by isolated societies in the Tuamotus and the mechanisms by which these small communities cope and adapt to the constraints placed on them by distance, lack of natural resources, economic problems and natural forces (such as hurricanes and tidal waves).

He'll return to the Tuamotus briefly in October, to check out other islands, then spend the better part of a year doing the actual research for his dissertation.

Rapaport said life in the eastern Tuamotus is about as unchanged as any-

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# He'll return in October to 2nd visit

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where in the South Pacific. People still speak Tuamotuan, while people in the western islands of the archipelago have succumbed to Tahitian. And elders still remember songs, stories and traditions that are largely forgotten elsewhere.

As far back as the 1930s, researcher Kenneth Emory thought there was nothing left to research in the Tuamotus, Rapaport said. But then Emory ventured into the eastern islands and was greeted by a high priest singing the ancient songs of welcome. The 95-year-old Emory's tapes and notes now reside in the Bishop Museum and his name is spoken in hushed tones by today's researchers.

Rapaport was delighted when he was greeted with some of the same songs that Emory heard, though the high priests are long gone. He even met a woman who remembered Emory from her childhood.

Still, what's left is going fast. One woman's story tells it all: Nauriki is a woman in her 70s or



Photo by Moshe Rapaport

The lagoon at Pinaki Atoll, famous for being the site of hidden treasure. Pinaki is about 20 miles from Vairaatea.

80s; Rapaport is not sure. Of her numerous children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, not one has remained on Vairaatea. Though she knows the songs and stories of old, the young people teased her for filling Rapaport's ears with what they called, only half-joking, "the words of a pig," meaning something useless.

"One of the things I tried to do is to impress on them that I as an American am interested in the old stories, that if they weren't recorded, they would be lost and that they were valuable," he said.

He even tried to persuade one young man to make Tuamotuan

history and culture the topic of his college studies, to which the boy responded it had never occurred to him that you could major in such a thing.

Rapaport spent his days on Vairaatea simply, living as the people lived: helping to work copra (coconut meat — the chief source of income) in the mornings, fishing for his supper in the afternoons, and interviewing and taping in the evenings.

Of all the supplies he could have brought, he said, that was the most important: "an open spirit. The extent to which you're friendly and open to them is the extent to which they welcome you."

# Islanders gave him 'aloha; and gifts upon his departure

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"You have all been very kind to me. I will write to you and I will return next year."

One morning during my last weekend on Vairaatea, when we were visiting Pare Tavake, the southernmost tip of the islet, Nauriki told me, "Remember that photo of Vavega, the elder of Tokelua that you showed me? He appeared to me last night. My back had been severely hurting me because of the pandanus mat I had been working on all last week, and this Vavege appeared to me and said, 'Nauriki!' 'O!', I answered. He said, 'I have brought you medicine from Tokelau, prepared from the bones of the sea turtle, here it is!' I took the medicine and now my back feels much better."

The time had come for me to leave the islands. Everyone gathered at the pier to chant the traditional goodbye songs, accompanied by ukuleles and guitars. They sang songs of departure to far-away lands, of mothers praying for the safe re-

turn of sons, and other songs I had not yet heard. I was too distraught to have the presence of mind to record the songs.

I made a short speech thanking the people for my new name and for their kind welcome. They showered me with beautiful flower and shell leis and gave me gifts of small pandanus baskets.

On these islands, they still retain the ancient custom of rubbing noses as a sign of arofa. I rubbed noses with the people who had come to wish me goodbye, and descended into the speedboat.

The boat set out on the chan-

nel and I waved for the last time to the people who had been so hospitable to me.

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