



Text and Performance Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpq20>

Visions of Performance in Tahiti: Vairaumati no Ra'iatea's Arioi

Andrew Cowell

Published online: 09 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Andrew Cowell (2013) Visions of Performance in Tahiti: Vairaumati no Ra'iatea's Arioi , Text and Performance Quarterly, 33:1, 42-57, DOI: [10.1080/10462937.2012.730625](https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2012.730625)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2012.730625>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Visions of Performance in Tahiti: Vairaumati no Ra'iatea's *Arioi*

Andrew Cowell

This article examines the novel Arioi by the Tahitian writer Vairaumati no Ra'iatea. The novel focuses on traditional Tahitian performers and performance practice at the time of missionary contact. The paper uses perspectives on performance adopted from ethnopoetics, folklore studies, and performance theory as a way of examining and theorizing the novel's reconstruction of indigenous performance. The central argument is that the novel presents a model of indigenous performance that is highly reflective, and that the basic feature of performance in the novel is not its orality but its ability to critically reflect on performance itself and the society which sustains that performance. As such, the novel offers its reconstruction of tradition not as a legitimization of past customs, but as a heuristic model for thinking about the need to reinvigorate critical self-reflection in modern Tahitian indigenous society, including in literary form.

Keywords: Tahiti; Arioi society; Tahitian francophone literature; Tahitian novel

Un peuple entier courait à leur rencontre. . . . On ne se découvrait pas son buste devant eux par allégeance, on ne tremblait devant eux ni de frayeur ni d'abnégation. Mais il semblait, quand ils parlaient, qu'on se découvrait soi-même, qu'on comprenait mieux soi et les autres, qu'on entendait mieux ceux qu'on côtoyait. Les ari'i eux-mêmes souriaient, pleuraient ou riaient si les Arioi l'avaient décidé, comme un enfant obéit à ses parents. (*Arioi* 103)

An entire people ran to meet them. . . . One did not bare one's chest before them to show loyalty, one did not tremble before them either from fright or abnegation. But it seemed, when they talked, that one discovered oneself, that one understood oneself and others better, that one understood better those around one. Even the ari'i [chiefs/nobles] smiled, cried, or laughed if the Arioi decided it should be so, like a child obeying its parents.¹

Andrew Cowell is Chair and Professor in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He works on both Medieval literature and Francophone literature of the Pacific. Correspondence to: Andrew Cowell, Department of French and Italian, UCB 238, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA. Email: cowellj@colorado.edu.

The preceding lines are from the 2001 novel *Arioi*, by the Tahitian writer Vairaumati no Ra'iatea.² They describe the sociocultural effects of a performance by the Tahitian class of professional entertainers, musicians, and dancers known as the Arioi, who flourished in traditional Tahitian society prior to their suppression by Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century.³ More generally, the entire novel centers on the depiction of a single key performance, and an unraveling of the meanings of that performance and how these meanings come into being both during and after the performance. Of course many francophone (and anglophone) novels integrate elements of contemporary or remembered oral performance into the text of a novel, as this is a central trope of francophone literature generally and Tahitian literature more particularly (Julien; Devatine; Mateata-Allain "Orality"). *Arioi* however represents something quite different: an indigenous imagining, reconstruction, and theorizing of a type of performance tradition that ceased to be practiced—at least in the form presented in the novel—nearly two centuries ago, though some documentation of Arioi practice exists, and oral performance traditions more generally remain a central feature of Tahitian society.⁴ It is this theorization of performance itself that especially merits attention, for Vairaumati no Ra'iatea offers not just a depiction of a Tahitian social phenomenon, but also a claim for the crucial role of traditional performance in maintaining (or re-building) social cohesion in the face of colonial pressures. As such, the novel fits in the larger framework of the revitalization of performance traditions in contemporary Tahitian society.

Although *Arioi* is not an ethnographic study, the lines quoted above are striking in that they could easily come from a book or article in the field of linguistic anthropology, and more particularly, in the field of performance studies as elaborated within linguistic anthropology by scholars such as Dell Hymes, Karl Kroeber, Richard Bauman, Charles Briggs, and Victor Turner. While performance theory originally arose from the study of actual performances or ethnographic descriptions and documentation of such performances, it can be applied to literary representations of performances as well. A juxtaposition of this novel with the anthropological theory offers an opportunity to better understand and appreciate the indigenous theorization. Therefore, in this article, I would like to pursue this encounter more closely, examining how the tenets of performance theory and the novel's exploration of this same subject offer mutually clarifying discourses. Using these findings, we can consider what the novel might suggest about the role of both performance and a critically oriented literary tradition in contemporary Tahitian society. In examining the role of artistic performativity, the novel implicitly suggests that oral performance in the indigenous language and literary production in French could function similarly: not necessarily by the ways in which indigenous orality could be integrated into the literary tradition, but rather by the ways in which an indigenous literacy could replicate (in part) the social role of the Arioi. Thus, "performance" can be understood as fundamentally lodged in a particular set of socio-cultural functions and relationships, rather than in some specific modality (oral, written, etc.). The novel is striking in its rich evocation of the multiple layers of reflexivity involved in

performance, and in its own reflection on the intricate social contract, which both enables and constrains performance in society.

Before discussing the novel however, it is important to first examine a key ethnographic document for understanding the Arioi themselves, especially as it is the central source for modern Tahitian reconstructions and re-imaginings of the Arioi. The document is Teuira Henry's *Ancient Tahiti*, published in 1928 (with French translation in 1962), and includes a compilation of information from several sources dating back to the early nineteenth century. The text contains several pages on the Arioi, provided in 1840 by King Pomare II, who is identified as "the last chief arioi of Te-ahu-upoo" (230). The account calls the Arioi both "scholars and actors" and chosen "from all ranks of people" (230). It adds that "only well-developed persons of comely appearance . . . were admitted into the society, and both sexes enjoyed the same ranks and privileges" (234). The account makes clear that a central role of the Arioi was to mock and critique the nobility: "the red girdle worn by either sex was made of paper mulberry and was sprayed with red and yellow to resemble the royal feather girdle. Other clothing used in acting was also in burlesque imitation of royal apparel" (234). Similarly: "In their plays the actors flattered or ridiculed with impunity people and even priests, from the greatest to the least, and they often did much good in thus causing faults to be corrected" (240). At the same time, the chiefs were present at these events, and indeed, their rank was clearly recognized: "the royal family had their seats of honor [at the performance]" (239). The Arioi's status as a separate, liminal social category is recognized: "in times of war or other trouble, the arioi were never molested, and they sometimes safely entertained warriors at intervals of respite on the battlefield" (241). They are also described as "libertines in the extreme" (in the eyes of the 1840s British collector of the account from Pomare, at least), but the men were also "exceedingly jealous of [their] own wife[s]," and the report notes the practice of infanticide for most of the eight ranked orders of Arioi (though not the highest order) (235). This preceding condensed description makes it clear that the Arioi themselves were virtually prototypes of "performers" in the anthropological sense, though the account from 1840 lacks many details that one would desire. Of greatest interest for this article, however, is the way that the existing information on the Arioi has been put to use for a modern re-imagining—both of their original performances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and of the role of performance generally in modern Tahiti—in light of performance theory.

Among the central tenets of performance studies are: (1) the performance involves a responsibility accepted by certain individuals to demonstrate high competency in some socially recognized form or genre; (2) the performance involves feedback and response (co-participation) by performer and spectator; (3) the performance is highly contextualized and "emergent" in its meanings and effects; (4) the performance is very often at least partially a meta-level commentary on performance itself; and (5) the performance opens up language, ideology, and social structure and relationships to evaluation, criticism, re-affirmation, or change.⁵ The lines of the novel cited above capture clearly the ideas of performer responsibility, audience feedback, and co-creation, as well as the task of "opening up" social features to

critique: the performers obviously are performing at a very high level within the constraints of traditional expectations for the genre in question; the audience is clearly involved and responding in ways to affect and reinforce the strength of the performance; and the entire audience seems to be engaged on a higher cognitive or reflective level than in “everyday” life—so that individuals see and understand things about their own lives and society that are not normally visible or salient for them, thanks to the ritualized setting outside the normal rules and constraints of social interaction, where chiefs and nobles dominate commoners. As Richard Bauman describes it, this would be a clear example of “symbolically resonant public events [such] as [a] festival, drama, or fair, in which the central meanings and values of a group are embodied, acted out, and laid open to examination and interpretation in symbolic form” (*Verbal Art* 177).

Not visible in these lines, but central to the theme of the novel as a whole, is the particular way the “opening up” occurs through performance. The key moment of the performance involves the intoning of a traditional chant, which concludes with the following lines:

Ecoute-moi Ari'i
Eloigne du palais
Les amuseurs induits de leurs huiles nouvelles
Ils sont la vanité
Et tu perdras ta flamme. (*Arioi* 94)

Listen to me, Ari'i [Chiefs/Nobles]
Chase from the palace
The sycophants who tempt with their new oils
They are mere vanity
And you will lose your flame.

As the ra'atira (leader of the Arioi) explains himself (62–64), these lines, though part of a traditional reference, are to be interpreted in the specific context of this performance set in the early 1800s (just after the arrival of the Protestant missionaries in 1797) as a critique of the noble class in Tahiti, who are clearly showing signs of excessive collaboration with the whites, and who threaten to bring down all of traditional Tahitian culture with them in this folly (as the ra'atira sees it). The original reference is to “huiles parfumées” “perfumed oils,” but:

Ces Blancs, ils étaient arrivés avec leur huiles saintes, disaient-ils. Et ils méprisaient le mono'i. Remplacer “parfumée” par “nouvelle,” quelle trouvaille satirique, quelle adaption géniale des vieux poèmes à l'époque actuelle! Tout cela enchantait notre Maître des Cérémonies. (63–64)

The Whites, they had arrived with their holy oils, they said. And they scorned the mono'i [Tahitian oil, used by the Arioi on their bodies]. Replace “perfumed” by “new,” what a wonderful satiric gesture, what a clever adaptation of the old poems to the new times! All of this charmed our Master of Ceremonies.

Here we see a perfect illustration of another of the tenets of performance theory: the highly contextualized nature of the performance and its potential meanings.

There is however a second contextual reference as well, though the ra'atira himself does not recognize it in the novel; the false "amuseurs" referenced in the chant are implicit rivals of the Arioi themselves. One of the principal overall themes of the novel is in fact that the Arioi fail to see this rivalry in play at the time of their performance. In particular the tragedy of the central character of the novel, Vahinetua, who is the one who actually performs the chant requested by the ra'atira, is her failure to understand that the arriving missionaries threaten not only the traditional social structure of Tahitian society, as incarnated in the power and independence of the ari'i, but also the very practice of traditional performance and the existence of the Arioi.

In a more abstract sense, we might say that the performers in the text fail to appreciate fully one of the key tenets of performance theory—the reflexivity of performance. Since performances are very often in some sense about performance itself, the performers too should be subject to the contextual scrutiny of performance: their performance is about themselves too, rather than just about their society. As Bauman says, the performance "may be understood as the enactment of the poetic function" and "direct[s] attention to the actual conduct of artistic verbal performance" (*Story* 3). In this case, the question that should be asked is, what are the social conditions and constraints within Tahitian society that allow the Arioi and their performance practices to exist in the first place, and to what extent do the Arioi, as Tahitians, share in those social conditions and constraints?

In contrast to this position, the ra'atira and especially Vahinetua understand the performers as apart from society, as a special class who enjoy a kind of carnivalesque liberty and freedom to judge, act, and critique:

Seuls parmi tous les autres membres de la société, ils pouvaient user des flèches de la parole contre les ari'i tout puissants, contre les seigneurs les plus avides . . . seuls, parmi leurs subordonnés, ils pouvaient leur dire: « Attention, vous aussi pouvez vous tromper ». (*Arioi* 62)

Alone among all the members of society, they could use the arrows of speech against the all-powerful nobles, against the most jealous lords . . . alone, among the subordinate classes, they could say to the powerful: "Listen, you too can be mistaken."

While readily embracing this critical power in relation to the rest of the society, they fail to ever judge or critique themselves adequately, or to recognize that they could "se tromper" "be mistaken" as well. In particular, whereas Tahitian society is presented as highly hierarchical and constraining of its individual members—"ils avaient peur de tout: les puissants, des dieux; les petits, des puissants" "they feared everything: the powerful, the gods; the little people, the powerful ones" (40)—the internal structure of the Arioi is paradoxically presented as a place of complete equality and suppression of any incipient individual tendencies toward hierarchy and rivalry. Certainly this is how Vahinetua sees the clan of the Arioi, as she neglects telltale signs that would warn her of her utopian illusions:

On nous voyait arriver, beaux, parés, les lèvres fleuries du bonheur que nous apportions. Les spectateurs accourus de partout enviaient notre charme et nos parures. Notre liberté surtout. . . J'ai eu l'impression de n'avoir peur de rien pendant ces années. Adulée et fêtée partout, ne me suffisait-il pas d'apparaître pour persuader que j'étais maîtresse de ma parole, de mes gestes, de tout mon corps? Pourtant dans le fare arioi, nous avions des doutes, des mécontentements, des hésitations. . . . Quiconque pénétrait dans le fare arioi du ra'atira Tevai-i-te-Ra'i de Maha'iatea ne pouvait manquer d'être ébloui. . . . La règle première était que nul de [sic] ne devait obliger un autre mais chacun devait s'obliger pour l'autre. (40)⁶

People saw us coming, beautiful, adorned, our lips emblazoned with the happiness that we brought with us. Spectators hurried from every direction, envying us our charm and our dress. Our liberty above all. . . . I had the impression of fearing nothing in those years. Greeted everywhere with feasts and adulation, was it not necessary simply for me to appear in order to convince all that I was master of my words, my gestures, and my body? However in the assembly [house] of the Arioi, we experienced doubts, discontent, hesitations. . . . [but] whoever entered into the assembly of the Arioi led by Tevai-i-te-Ra'i (the-water-in-the-sky) of Maha'iatea could not help but be astonished. . . . The first rule was that no one could place burdens upon another, but that they each should take on burdens for the other.

Only at the end of the novel is she informed of a different perspective, by the ra'atira Tevai-i-te-Ra'i (also referred to as Tevai). He points out a fact she knows all too well: that the Arioi cannot have children. Vahinetua's entire drama in the novel is that she is pregnant, bears a daughter, and then decides to keep the child rather than kill her as Arioi rules demand. She flees into hiding, and understands this rule of the Arioi as the one tyranny that this otherwise utopian clan exercises on her. But Tevai provides an analysis whereby this rule of the Arioi must be understood as the (Faustian?) bargain they have made with the ari'i in order to be allowed to exist (105). As he puts it, they chant the genealogies of the chiefs, but they are allowed to have no genealogy of their own (105).

Symbolically, this bargain constitutes a reciprocal relationship, and thus integrates the Arioi into the rest of Tahitian society. This is the fact Vahinetua has not grasped. And since the Arioi are integrated in this way, they must share the same social tendencies as the rest of the society. Again, Vahinetua does not understand this fully. As a result, she ignores the potential for jealousy and rivalry that her success as a manahune (commoner) incites within the Arioi clan, wherein most of the members come from higher levels of the society. She ultimately falls victim to a plot by another dancer, Maimiti. Maimiti is amorously attracted to Tevai, and mistakes Tevai's admiration of Vahinetua's artistic achievement as an amorous attachment that stands in the way of her own attraction to Tevai. She thus plots to kidnap Vahinetua and reduce her to poverty, degradation, and ugliness. This finally leads to Vahinetua parting for good from the Arioi, prior to the group's soon-to-come dissolution at the hands of the missionaries. Vahinetua's own blindness to the fact that the Arioi are themselves a society, and no less than a microcosm in some ways of the larger Tahitian society, is her greatest flaw. Henry's 1840 account of the Arioi makes it clear that they had paramount chiefs and chiefesses, eight ranked internal orders, and a

hierarchical division of labor that clearly mimicked general Tahitian society (234–41). Stated otherwise, she fails to appreciate that the “opening up” of performance is not just in relation to the “others” of the larger society, but also must be about the performers themselves, who are a part of that society as well. Instead, she extends her notion of the absolute liberty of the Arioi to a belief that the one final liberty she should pursue is the freedom to keep her child. She tells Tevai of the whites, “ils m’aideront contre nos princes, ils m’aideront contre toi” “they will help me against our leaders, they will help me against you” (*Arioi* 107). She fails to realize that the imperative not to have children is a mutual agreement between the Arioi (herself included) and the chiefs, not simply an external imposition on the group by the chiefs. She also fails to realize that the whites will not simply save her child and allow her to continue to be an Arioi; rather, they will demand their own forms of reciprocal relationships.

From a performance-theory perspective, the end of the novel suggests that there is in fact no “privileged” perspective from which to view one’s own society, unbounded by its constraints and organization. Performances are socially provided ways of exercising thought, power, and agency, and thus the performers always act within those social provisions. In this sense, the view of performance in *Arioi* aligns closely with the larger domain of practice theory and its understanding of agency as the socially mediated ability to act.⁷ In this specific text, the implications of this point play out in two key ways. Firstly, the fullest nature of the culturally external threat to Tahitian performance and Tahitian society generally is apparently very difficult to perceive from within the lens of Tahitian-specific performance practices. In particular, the ra’atira Tevai fails to see that traditional performance itself is at stake, even as his own chosen text attempts to say this to him, so to speak. He cannot see that performance risks being replaced by Biblical lessons and sermons, and nor can Vahinetua, who believes that somehow the missionaries will protect her child from infanticide while also allowing the “libertine” and non-Christian practices of the Arioi to continue. Their social vision is not large enough; it cannot escape the bounds of Tahitian practice. Secondly, the performance practices of the Arioi also seem to risk giving the individual performers an exaggerated sense of their own agency, freedom, and individuality within Tahitian society. In other words, their personal vision becomes too large in its pretensions. Vahinetua thinks that within the mini-society of the Arioi, the normal social constraints somehow do not apply, and that she is a pure “free agent.” Maimiti is driven by jealousy towards a rival, but her very understanding of the nature of Tevai’s admiration for Vahinetua is mistaken: she confuses his devotion to his art and the notion of performance itself as simply a devotion to Vahinetua on a personal, amorous level. She believes that she as an individual can be a rival source of devotion. For her, everything becomes purely personal and uninflected by social factors and constraints. Thus the performers lack a fully critical perspective on either themselves or their society, despite their socially designated roles as potential introspective social critics.

I have discussed the necessarily compromised nature of performance-based vision in relation to practice theory and socially mediated agency. But performance theory itself

clearly recognizes this as well. Lila Abu-Lughod's well-known discussion of the agency of Bedouin women in performance, as well as the ways this agency is constrained by the fact that it must be exercised through socially provided performance genres, is an exemplary case. Similarly, Judith Butler's insistence on the primacy of performativity and her refusal of notions of pre-cultural or extra-cultural "interiority" fit well with the suggestions in *Arioi* that the seductions of "free agency" and individual freedom can be highly deceptive and dangerous.⁸ More generally, that performance theory stresses the co-participation involved in performance as well as its radical contextualization makes clear that there is no way to effectively separate performer from audience, and thus no way to construct a privileged position for the performer outside of the social framework. The vision of performers is inherently limited and imperfect, and *Arioi* clearly recognizes this fact and the consequences it may have.

Despite the novel's recognition of the limitations of performance, it suggests that these are not responsible for the true tragedy of Tahitian society, however. Indeed, since these limitations are an inherent part of performance, Tahitian performance practice cannot be condemned on these grounds alone. Rather, the novel implies that the crucial failure was actually the collapse of the compact of reciprocity between the *Arioi* and the remainder of the society. In particular, the chiefs refused to remain open to the commentaries of the performers, and the performers failed to provide the critical socio-cultural interventions necessary to open up a space of reflection and contestation between the chiefs and the commoners:

C'était les élites qui trahissaient les peuples et que lui aussi il avait trahi pour avoir trop souvent obéi aux ari'i, et qu'il avait préféré par vanité les divertir et les charmer plutôt que leur faire entendre les grandes voix des ancêtres. (*Arioi* 93)

It was the elites who betrayed the people, whom he [Tevai] betrayed as well in obeying the chiefs too much, and out of vanity he had preferred to entertain and charm them rather than make them listen to the great voices of the ancestors.

As the author notes in the epilogue, "Nous mourons d'avoir trop obéi aux ari'i, ils avaient figé la société et elle s'est effondrée d'un seul bloc" "We are dying from having obeyed the chiefs too much, they had made the society rigid, and it collapsed in a single block" (123). More particularly, the fruitful reciprocity among ari'i, manahune, and *Arioi* collapsed into a society dominated purely by the ari'i, without a performance-based complement of critical reflection to maintain a balance among the social groups. Instead, the ari'i turned to a disastrous alternate reciprocity with the whites. As Tevai sees it:

Nos ari'i, dans l'ombre de leurs palais de ni'au et de bambou, *ne troquent-ils pas*, à l'insu de nous tous, les paroles tonnantes de nos Dieux contre le tonnerre acide et froid des armes du dieu blanc? (emphasis added 62)

Our leaders, in the shade of their palaces of ni'au [coconut fronds] and bamboo, *do they not exchange*, unknown to all of us, the thunderous words of our Gods for the cold and acidic thunder of the weapons of the white god?

Thus it is not the imperfections of performance that are problematic; these are inevitable. Rather, it is the inattentiveness to, or rejection of, performance itself as a

mode of reflective cultural discourse that is seen as a key element of cultural downfall in the novel. As a result, the commoners are guilty of too much obedience, the chiefs are guilty of closure to criticism, and the performers are guilty of failing to understand the essence of their role and their necessary reciprocal bond with their own society—with all the benefits and limitations this entails. In the end Vahinetua flees to the whites, exchanges her status as an Arioi for the guarantee of life for her baby, and establishes a reciprocal relationship with white society instead of upholding her end of the Arioi agreement with the ari'i. As cruel as the killing of the child might have been, the novel presents that cruelty as a necessary component of the reciprocity among social groups, which allowed for the creative tension that maintained the society.

Arioi does not provide an analysis of exactly why the three-way reciprocity among the chiefs, the commoners, and the Arioi broke down, other than suggesting the chiefs were seduced by the power offered to them through alliance with the whites. But the text can be compared profitably to another recent Tahitian novel—Louise Peltzer's *Lettre à Poutaveri* [*Letter to Bougainville*], which attempts to re-imagine early Tahiti from an indigenous perspective based on early explorer and missionary sources. Among the central suggestions of this text are: that literacy was a powerful symbol of authority that replaced indigenous performance traditions, thus undermining the Arioi; that literacy was directly linked to Christianity and the Bible, whose structures of authority undermined productive social negotiation among the chiefs, the commoners, and the Arioi, thus replacing it with a non-negotiable, eternal "law"; and that the rise of the Tahitian "sacred" monarchy and the "nation" via the alliance of the Pomare family of Tahiti with the missionaries at Pape'ete was an unnatural form of government, which further unbalanced the relationship between the rulers and the commoners and destroyed reciprocity. In the culminating scene of the novel, Peltzer presents the coronation:

Mais la cérémonie n'était pas terminée, Monsieur Tyerman s'approcha de la table, prit la Bible et la présenta au roi. Tarini s'approcha à son tour et dit à l'enfant:

"Roi Pomare, nous vous présentons ce Livre qui est l'objet le plus précieux au monde. Ce livre est la sagesse, la loi royale, les oracles vivants de Dieu. Béni soit celui qui le lit..."

... Puis Viritoni demanda à toute l'assemblée... de prier pour le roi, la Nation Tahitienne et l'Eglise de Dieu. (431)

But the ceremony was not finished, Monsieur Tyerman approached the table, took the Bible and presented it to the king. Tarini [a missionary] approached in his turn and said to the child [the king was only four years old at the time, and thus a mockery of traditional Tahitian models of chiefly authority]:

"King Pomare, we present you with this Book which is the most precious object in the world. This book is wisdom, the royal law, the living pronouncements of God. Blessed be the one who reads it..."

... Then Viritoni [a missionary] asked the entire assembly... to pray for the king, the Tahitian Nation and the Church of God.

Arioi does not present the crisis of traditional Tahitian performance in nearly such direct terms, but also certainly suggests that the purely top-down, vertical forms of authority of the literate nation-state and Western-style monarchy are incompatible with the continued vitality of Tahitian performance traditions that are based on patterns of reciprocity among the three social groups of chiefs, commoners, and Arioi. The chiefs only become rulers of the commoners and profiteers in relation to the Westerners, the commoners only obey, and the Arioi only flatter.

Can the Arioi still exist in Tahiti? Certainly not in the sense of the “confrerie” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet Tahitian music, dance, song, and chant are increasingly popular and central to the modern society, and in a sense, continue important components of the role of the Arioi in that they provide symbols of identity around which the entire indigenous society can unite. A key example is the annual *Heiva* festival, which occurs in conjunction with the July 14 French national holiday, and features a number of different traditional performance genres. Though they are certainly more than just tourist shows, it could be debated whether these performances carry out a role of social critique in any way like the Arioi, especially for Tahitian indigenous society internally. This issue is exacerbated by the loss of Tahitian language ability among many younger people, especially in Pape’ete. Most generally, as in most colonized societies, the means of public discourse are largely controlled by French-oriented producers. This means that local Tahitians not only lack the ability to speak back to the government and outsiders effectively, but also lack the capacity to engage in public debate among themselves.

Tahiti’s local literary movement, supported by local Polynesian publishers, can be seen as a response to this issue: since the 1970s, a growing body of work has developed in Tahiti, of which the novel *Arioi* is one example (see Nicole; Mateata-Allain, “Oceanic Peoples”; Stewart et al.). Yet, at least from the perspective of this literary tradition, Tahitian society has yet to establish a strong link to these potential Arioi. Owners and managers of bookstores in Pape’ete affirm that few Tahitians read literary texts, either by Tahitians or others, with the notable exception of the works of Celestine Vaite.⁹ More problematic still, several writers, playwrights, and other performers have faced strong obstacles to the publication, production, or distribution of their work, as well as personal and job-related negative consequences for this type of activity. One notable example is Henri Hiro—a noted writer, politician, and indigenous spokesperson who passed away in 1990—who was perhaps as close as one could come to a “national” poet of modern indigenous Tahiti. Hiro was certainly the most visible indigenous literary and artistic figure in Tahiti during the 1970s and 1980s, and though at times he worked for both the Tahitian-controlled Protestant Evangelical Church and the local government of Tahiti, he faced continued opposition from both these sources—as well as others more clearly allied with the French government—as he pursued his artistic and political goals (see Pambrun *Henri Hiro*).¹⁰

Clearly French presses and society pose many obstacles to Tahitian public discourse (see Mateata-Allain “Orality”), but most troublesome are what we could call the “weak reciprocity” between current Tahitian society and its potential literary Arioi.

Arioi suggests at least implicitly that contemporary Tahitian society may not be able to regain a firm footing—and a sense of independence from popa’a/white cultural dependency—until it reestablishes better links to reflective modes of performance. At one point, a text comes to Vahinetua in a dream, with the line “la réflexion seule est une conseillère” “Only reflection can provide counsel” (53). The author closes the epilogue with a similar image: “ce soir, assise devant le lagon, miroir d’eau des légendes, seule, j’attends” “this evening, seated before the lagoon, a watery mirror of our legends, alone, I wait” (124). Together, the two lines suggest a reciprocity between past and present; but more importantly, a model of reflection and reflexivity.

This scene also helps illuminate an otherwise mysterious moment in the book. Vahinetua, with her daughter, is ready to give up all hope as she is tortured by Maimiti, and hurl herself into the abyss of a deep valley (60). But, partly under the inspiration of a traditional text (of the doomed lover ‘Apetahi), she withdraws at the last instant. Upon doing so, she sees a “bassin d’eau pure, qu’une source renouvelait constamment” “basin of pure water, which a spring constantly refreshed” (60). This water is symbolically the reflective, renewable alternative to the dark abyss. She and her daughter bathe in it, and the daughter utters her only words of the text, in Tahitian: “te vai i te ra’i,” meaning “l’eau dans le ciel” “the water in the sky” (60). This image of water and sky, and of the reflective power of water, finds its echoing resonance in the concluding image of the text—another moment of potential redemption through reflection and reflective contact with the ra’i, the sky or the heavens. It also recalls a set of lines from Hiro’s well-known poem “Aitau”/“Devorer le temps parasite” [“Eat Time”/“Devour Parasitical Time”],¹¹ which seeks to imagine ways of relinking the Tahitian present to the indigenous past by somehow consuming the intervening time that separates the two eras (Hiro published bilingually; I give both his Tahitian and French versions, and translate the French, with notes where the Tahitian version differs):

Nāue atu nei au
i roto i te ānā-tau,
toro maa iho ra te aa o te tumu.
Toro maa i Taputapuātea raì,
toro maa i Taputauātea pū-fenua.

Je plonge dans la rivière du temps,
Le tronc se divise en deux racines.
L’une monte vers le marae du ciel,
L’autre s’enfonce dans le marae
de la terre natale. (*Pehepehe i taù nūnaa* 32–34)

I plunge into the river of time,
The trunk divides into two roots.
One rises towards the temple of the sky,
The other penetrates into the temple
Of the land of my birth.

Hiro's poem evokes in a slightly different way the waters that can connect heaven and earth. More importantly, his Tahitian-language version specifically identifies the marae or "temple" in question as the great marae of Taputapuātea, sacred to the Arioi. It is in fact this temple, on Ra'iatea, which is the central locale of the entire novel *Arioi*, and the location of the climactic performance by Vahinetua, during which she utters the chant that criticizes the chiefs. Both Hiro and Vairaumati no Ra'iatea propose to the reader images of water and renewal and reflexivity, linking the legends and the heavens to the present, and allowing the present to see itself better. Both ally this reflexivity to the most sacred of all Tahitian marae—Taputapuātea—the location most strongly linked to the Arioi as well as to performance. Clearly, both authors see the roots of Tahitian revival, and a renewed relationship between artist and audience, critic and society, in a rediscovered, reflective reciprocity with the ancient tradition of performance. Indeed, Hiro begins "Aitau"/"Devorer le temps parasite" ["Eat Time"/"Devour Parasitical Time"] with an image even more similar to the one that concludes *Arioi*:

Ia ù i tīfenefene noa
I te muriāvai o te tau ra,
E aroaro pīnainai taù i hāroà
No roto mai i te peho horo tāre, re,
Mai te aroaro ānāvai ra.

Je suis replié sur moi-même,
Assis à l'embouchure du temps,
J'entends se répétant un écho
Venant de la vallée profonde,
Comme le bruit d'une rivière. (*Pehepehe i taù nūnaa* 32–34)

I am inclined back towards myself,
Seated at the mouth of the river of time,
I hear a repeated echo,
Coming from the deep valley,
Like the sound of a river.

In seeking a return to indigenous sources, they are far from alone (see Devatine; Mateata-Allain "Oceanic Peoples"). And *Arioi* is certainly not the only contemporary text suggesting the possibility of a fruitful combination of these sources with new modes of performance; I will cite one final text, by the poet Flora Devatine, which resonates strongly with the closing image of *Arioi*:

On a quelque peu oublié
Les mots
Particuliers, religieux, sacrés
De la langue!
On n'a plus en mémoire la sonorité
Du verbe!

On a perdu jusqu'à l'usage
 De la parole!
 Aussi faut-il recourir
 A l'écriture
 Qui permet de retrouver
 Du souffle
 De ses profondeurs antiques
 A insuffler.
 A l'actuel discours
 Qui ne résonne ni ne sonne. (*Tergiversations et Réveries de l'écriture Orale* 37)

We have somewhat forgotten
 The words
 Specific, religious, sacred
 Of the language/the tongue!
 We no longer have in our memory the sonority
 Of the Verb!
 We have even lost the use of
 The Word!
 Thus it is necessary to return
 To Writing
 Which permits us to rediscover
 The breath
 Of its ancient depths
 To breathe life into
 The current discourse
 Which neither echoes nor is heard.

Devatine's work is itself extremely interesting in that it actually enacts the combination of traditional oral performance and literary production it talks about—the entire book is written as a series of chant-like performances. Hiro also sought to combine written production with traditional style, not only in his primary use of Tahitian language and oral performance techniques in his poetry, but also in his turn to theater and film, as well as producing and performing his poetry primarily for community and political events.¹²

But most importantly, it is the critical reflexivity of performance—as performance theory also insists—that is most crucial to its social role. The author, sitting on the shores of Ra'iatea, concludes the novel, “tout fremit et soupire que Tevai-i-te-Ra'i, de nouveau, est en route” “everything trembles and whispers that Tevai-i-te-Ra'i, once again, is in route” (124). It remains to be seen, however, when the spirit of the ra'atira will fully arrive in modern Tahitian society. It is broadly acknowledged there that indigenous productions in all media (theater, film, books) struggle for exposure in a market controlled by profit-motives and French-centered media. But *Arioi*, more than any other Tahitian text perhaps, focuses on the internal function of critical performance within indigenous communities, and the need for the community to respond; the writers meditate and speak, but their written words still seek a broader

response from a Tahitian audience, without which the emergent social work of performance cannot be accomplished.

The concluding image also invites further consideration of Mireille Nicolas's (the author) penname. Vairaumati is a figure in traditional Tahitian mythology—specifically, a young girl from Borabora with whom the god 'Oro falls in love. 'Oro and Vairaumati marry, and at the ceremony, 'Oro gives a wedding gift of his two servants, whom he has turned into pigs. These pigs eventually become the gods of the Arioi. Later, 'Oro's human incarnation, King Tamatoa, becomes the first Arioi, and organizes the first Arioi society (see Henry 230–33). Thus Vairaumati represents the human inspiration and point of origin that led 'Oro to create the Arioi. By choosing this particular penname, the author offers herself—and literary performativity more generally—as new points of inspiration that might lead to the creation of a new spirit of the Arioi in Tahiti. Thus Mireille Nicolas-as-Vairaumati no Ra'iatea is waiting at the edge of the lagoon for the arrival of 'Oro himself, in some new incarnation.¹³

At the same, time however, the use of the name evokes a number of the problems that the renewal of performance in Tahiti faces. First, there is the question of authorial identity: in the small-scale, local scene, authors in some social or governmental positions may be reluctant to use their real names due to potential negative consequences. Conversely, individual names and identities—and the status of “author”—may carry less authority with some audiences than legendary connections to oral performance. Then, there is the question of cultural identity: Nicolas herself is not native to Tahiti—it has become an adopted homeland (see Nicolas). Yet it is clear she is deeply immersed in both the ethnologic and the literary/cultural life of Tahiti. Thus the penname raises key questions about indigeneity and the authority vested in “Tahitian” identity as well. Ironically, Vaite, the most popular Tahitian writer, was born in Tahiti, lives in Australia, and writes in English; while Vairaumati/Nicolas, one of the most ethnologically oriented Tahitian writers, was born in Algeria, lives in Tahiti, and writes in French. Finally, the name(s) and persona(e) of the author, sitting and waiting at the edge of the lagoon, evoke the larger ferment within Tahiti surrounding the issue of performance: how “indigenous” is it and must it remain? How can it continue to be grounded and legitimized in “tradition” while necessarily drawing on alternative models of practice, such as literacy, as it becomes not only more hybrid but also more relevant and effective as a vehicle for social action and reflection in contemporary Tahitian society?

Notes

- [1] All translations are my own.
- [2] For an interview with the author, see Devenel. For more information on the author, see Nicolas.
- [3] A key indigenous account of the Arioi is Henry 230–46. A number of early explorer accounts contain information on the Arioi, as do some missionary manuscripts. See Ferdon, especially 138–41. Ferdon, however, does not discuss the reflexive performativity of the Arioi, focusing rather on their status as surplus members of the chiefly class, and thus as a kind of chiefly population-growth pressure valve. Salmond discusses several of the manuscript sources

- (28–31). For ethnographic analyses of the information on the Arioi, see Levy 112–13, 469; and Salmond. Levy notes, “they seemed to represent in some ways a privileged, institutionalized ‘antistructure,’ which violated many of the tabus and proprieties of old Tahiti” (469).
- [4] The most notable contemporary example of performance is the *Heiva*, which takes place each summer in Pape’ete, and lasts for an entire month. This event features multiple competitions and performances involving music, dance, and traditional material arts and sports, among others.
 - [5] The list of features is my own version of performance theory, synthesizing a number of sources. For a definition very close to that given here, see Bauman, *Story* 3–4. In terms of details, for (1) see Bauman, *Verbal Art* 11; for (2) and (3) see Bauman and Briggs 66–70; Bauman, *Verbal Art* 37, 48; Kroeber 11; and Hymes 81–83; for (4) see Bauman and Briggs 60; Kroeber 7; and for (5) see Bauman and Briggs 54–56; Bauman, *Verbal Art* 43–44; and Kroeber 6–7, 11, 17–18.
 - [6] See also 17: “[Tevai] disait qu’entre les Arioi il n’y avait pas de difference, chez les Arioi on recherchait la beaute et le talent, rien d’autre de comptait” “Tevai said that among the Arioi there were no differences, among the Arioi one sought only beauty and talent, nothing else mattered.” See 34 and 39 for the same general ideas.
 - [7] While practice theory derives ultimately from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, here I am referring specifically to its most recent variants, especially in the work of Ortner. See also Ahearn on agency. Most broadly, see Foucault’s remark: “where there is power there is resistance . . . and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95).
 - [8] See also Butler. Although Butler’s work looks more broadly at “performativity” rather than “performance” per se, 101–80, especially 163–80 on drag, looks closely at performances (of gender identity), which fall clearly into the framework of performance studies. Most generally, she claims that even “the body” is socially constructed and constantly performed, and thus cannot be taken as a stable point of reference that exists prior to and outside of culture. She also refuses the notion of “interiority,” (as compared to “performance”) as a site of pure introspection that would provide an “outsider” or “prior” position on culture.
 - [9] Personal communication, 12 May 2011, Pape’ete. Vaite’s three novels of Tahiti were originally written in English, as Vaite resides in Australia. They have since been translated into French, and are major sellers in Tahiti.
 - [10] Ironically Pambrun himself faced censorship issues concerning the production of his play, *Les parfums du silence*, as detailed in the preface to that work).
 - [11] The titles are slightly different in Tahitian and French, and thus I give English translations for both.
 - [12] This activity is described in detail in Pambrun, *Henri Hiro* 480–88. He produced two theatrical adaptations into Tahitian, wrote six original plays in Tahitian, produced seven one-act “cafe theater” pieces, was involved in producing 11 films, and recorded much of his poetry orally.
 - [13] The preceding analysis certainly does not do full justice to *Arioi*. My reading presents the text as more programmatic or ethnographic than it actually is; the novel is really an extended exploration of the single performance by the Arioi and its aftermath; the reading here neglects the details of the rich way in which the fuller realizations of the meanings in that single performance, the context around it, and its repercussions gradually unfold for both Vahinetua and the reader. The style of the novel uses an asynchronous and fragmented manner to tease out that single performance in all its richness—as well as all the failures of full comprehension surrounding it. It ultimately makes powerful claims as to the social value at stake in performance-based art.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.
- Ahearn, Laura M. "Agency." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9.1–2 (1999): 12–15.
- Bauman, Richard. "American Folklore Studies and Social Transformation: A Performance-Centered Perspective." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9.3 (1989): 175–84.
- . *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- . *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley, MA: J. Newbury House, 1977.
- Bauman, Richard, and Charles Briggs. "Poetics and Performance as Cultural Perspectives on Language and Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 59–88.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Devatine, Flora. *Tergiversations et Réveries de l'Écriture Orale; Te Pahu a Hono'ura*. Pirae, Tahiti: Au Vent des Iles, 1998.
- Devenel, Lilas. "Entretien avec Vairaumati no Ra'iatea à propos du roman Arioi." *Île en île: un site pour valoriser les ressources informatives et culturelles du monde insulaire francophone*. Web. 2 May 2012. <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/raiatea_entretien.html>.
- Ferdon, Edwin N. *Early Tahiti, As the Explorers Saw It, 1767–1797*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1981.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vols. 1 and 2*. Trans. Robert Hurley. 3 vols. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Henry, Teuira. *Ancient Tahiti*. Honolulu, HI: Bishop Museum, 1928. Bishop Museum Bulletin 48.
- Hiro, Henri. *Pehepehe i tau nūnaa/Message poétique*. Pape'été, Tahiti: Haere Po, 2004.
- Hymes, Dell. "In Vain I Tried to Tell You": *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981.
- Julien, Eileen. *African Novels and the Question of Orality*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Kroeber, Karl, ed. Introduction. *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian: Texts and Interpretations*. 2nd ed. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- Levy, Robert I. *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1973.
- Mateata-Allain, Kareva. "Oceanic Peoples in Dialogue: French Polynesian Literature as Transnational Link." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 8.3 (2005): 269–88.
- . "Orality and Mā'ohi Culture: An Introduction to Flora Devantine's 'Orality: Written Tradition, Oral Tradition, Literature, Fiuriture.'" *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 3.2 (2009): 1–9.
- "Nicolas, Mireille." Au Vent des Iles: Nos Auteurs. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://www.auventdesiles.pf/nos-auteurs/222-nicolas-mireille.html>>.
- Nicole, Robert. *The Word, the Pen, and the Pistol: Literature and Power in Tahiti*. Albany: SUNY P, 2001.
- Ortner, Sherry. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.
- Pambrun, Jean-Marc Tera'ituatini. *Henri Hiro, Héros polynésien*. Mo'orea, Tahiti: Puna Honu, 2010.
- . *Les parfums du silence: Gauguin est mort!* Pape'été, Tahiti: Editions le Motu, 2003.
- Peltzer, Louise. *Lettre à Poutaveri*. Pape'été, Tahiti: Au Vent des Iles, 2002.
- Salmond, Anne. *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2009.
- Stewart, Frank, Kareva Mateata-Allain, and Alexander Dale Mawyer, eds. *Vārua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2006.
- Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ, 1986.
- Vairaumati no Ra'iatea. *Arioi*. Pirae, Tahiti: Au Vent des Iles, 2001.
- Vaite, Celestine. *Breadfruit*. New York: Little, 2000.
- . *Frangipani*. New York: Little, 2004.
- . *Tiare in Bloom*. New York: Little, 2006.