Journey to the Isles of Hiva, 1993

Dennis Kawaharada

1. Melville’s Paepae

Four and a half days out of Pape’ete, Tahiti, Nukuhiva appeared under clouds on the northeastern horizon. On a journey from the rising sun to fading stars, the wind-blown clouds were tinted with dawn light.

We were aboard the 343-foot cargo/copra boat *Aranui*, which makes a 16-day, 2,500-mile round trip from Tahiti to the Marquesas Islands via the Tuamotu Archipelago, dropping off industrial goods and picking up bags of copra at isolated islands and valleys. It carries up to 100 passengers, locals and tourists, in three classes of travel—deck, deck with linens, and air-conditioned cabins.

At each stop, the 60 or so tourists, mainly European and American retirees and middle-aged budget travelers, went ashore on whaleboats to see the sights, be fed and entertained, and buy souvenirs of bark paintings and coconut, stone, and wood carvings. A handful of young adventurers were mixed in with the travellers. They planned to go ashore for longer stays, to explore the “Paradise” of Melville and Gauguin.

On our way to the Marquesas, we stopped at the atoll of Takapoto, with a pearl farm in its lagoon. Villagers on the beach were selling discarded, odd-shaped pearls to the tourists.

I was interested in going to the Marquesas because of the plans of the Polynesian
Voyaging Society to sail a traditional voyaging canoe from there to Hawai‘i in 1995. The voyage was intended to retrace one of the early Polynesian migration routes to Hawai‘i. Dr. Yoshihiko Sinoto, a Bishop Museum anthropologist who had done archaeological work in the Marquesas in the 1960’s and 70’s, had argued that based on similarities in the languages, cultures, artifacts, and physiology...
of indigenous Hawaiians and Marquesans, the first Hawaiians came from the Marquesas. (More recently, Pacific anthropologists have been skeptical about pinpointing exactly where the first Hawaiians came from. There are Marquesan elements in the language and culture of Hawai‘i, but whether the Marquesans were the first to arrive here can’t be determined.)

One evening, while attending a Bishop Museum lecture on the Marquesas by Dr. Barry Rollett of the UH Anthropology Department, I learned he had done work on the island of Tahuata and was planning an archaeological expedition to Nukuhiva in the summer of 1993 to excavate at sand dunes in the valley of Ha‘atuatua. I called him to ask if I could go along as an observer and writer. He agreed, as long as I paid my transportation costs.

Rollett’s group consisted of six graduate students and a photographer, as well as retired archaeologist Robert Suggs. In 1957–8, Suggs led an expedition to Nuku Hiva for the American Museum of Natural History. He found pottery fragments in the sand dunes at Ha‘atuatua that linked the early settlers of the island to the western Pacific island of Fiji, where the pottery was produced. It was brought to Nukuhiva on voyaging canoes, perhaps via Tonga or Samoa. (Later, the descendants of the settlers abandoned pottery for more durable vessels made from wood and coconuts.)

Suggs excavated numerous other sites on Nuku Hiva, finding artifacts of stone, bone, and shell and burials sites which yielded bones from 300 skeletons, which were taken to the Museum in New York. His report, The Archaeology of Nuku Hiva, Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia, is meticulously compiled.

For Suggs, it was an emotional return to Nuku Hiva, as he hadn’t been back in 35 years. In 1958, at age 26, he was just beginning a career in archaeolgy. Today, he’s retired from government service. After the excavations on Nuku Hiva, he was offered a chance to work on Mangareva, but family obligations (a newborn child) led him to pursue a better-paying career in government. A generation had passed since his last visit. Suggs’ contact in Taipivai was Pukiki, the son of the husband and wife, both deceased, with whom Suggs and his wife Rachel stayed in 1958. Pukiki was two years old then. Today he is the village policeman, with a family of his own. Suggs carried with him photos of Pukiki parents. The fuzzy gray images appeared ghost-like.

Nuku Hiva is one of the six inhabited islands located between 740-900 miles NE of Tahiti. In 1595, the southern islands were named “Las Marquesas de Mendoza” (shortened to “The Marquesas”) by Spaniard explorer Alvaro de Mendana after his patron Don Garcia Hurtado de Mendoza, Marquis de Canete, Viceroy of Peru (Dening 11). Mendana killed 200 natives before leaving.

Oral traditions suggest that the isles of Hiva were either “fished from the sea” by Maui or “born of the copulation of ocean and sky” (Dening 11). The islands were called Hiva by ancient Polynesians. Three of the six inhabited islands, including the two largest islands, contain the word “Hiva”: Nuku Hiva, Hiva Oa, and Fatu Hiva. (“Hiva” may mean “Big Country”; or “Black,” perhaps a reference to the volcanic basalt of the islands). In the Marquesan language, the islands are
also known as “Te Enata Henua,” “The Land of the People.”

Erosion has created deep valleys separated by steep basalt ridges. The islands are without inland or coastal plains, and some of valleys can only be reached from the sea. There are no offshore lagoons and reefs. The islands, peaks of submarine volcanoes, are exposed to a cold current that flows north from the Antarctic along the coast of Peru and west out into the Pacific. This cold current may account for the poor development of coral in these tropical islands. The coastlines are generally unprotected, with few good harbors or beaches.

The dominant SE tradewinds bring clouds and rain to the islands’ windward sides, which are wetter and greener than the leeward sides, where dry, desert-like conditions prevail. There is no marked rainy season, though rainfall is most frequent from January to July. Droughts affect the growth and productivity of coconuts and breadfruit. Handy reported droughts of four years on Hiva Oa and seven years on Ua Pou.
The deep, green valley of Taipivai was our first stop on Nuku Hiva. Twenty or so Taipi were gathered at the river dock as the whaleboats of the *Aranui* arrived.

A fleet of four-wheel-drive pick-ups met the tourists to take them up the valley road for a hike to Paeke, the only archaeological site that had a marked trail—“Tikis a droite” hastily scribbled on a piece of scrap lumber nailed to a...
coconut tree, with an arrow pointing back down the road, away from the site. After the hike, the tourists would be driven over the high valley wall to the west to Taiohae, the main harbor and administrative center of the Isles of Hiva. The Aranui would pick them up there after lunch.

The steep, uphill trail through a coconut plantation is overgrown and muddy. One of the elderly tourists slipped and broke her wrist. She was shocked when the driver, apparently angry at having to leave the group (perhaps he would lose tips), drove like a madman down the unpaved road back to the whaleboat so the injured woman could be taken back to the Aranui for medical help.

The day I went up alone to take some photographs, I got disoriented, and was about to head down a ridge for the road without finding the site when a flock of white terns hovered overhead.

When I turned around I saw the site through some bushes—three paepae (house foundations made of stone), one with stone tiki placed at the corners or positioned in the walls.

The significance of the site is disputed—some think it was the residence of a chief; others that it was a religious site for the whole valley. On the way back down the trail, I ran into a group of locals clearing the trail, perhaps because of the injury to the tourist a few days earlier.

Taipivai, on the southeastern coast of Nuku Hiva, is the island’s largest and most well-watered and fertile valley. The largest stream in the Isles of Hiva runs through Taipivai. During our stay, it rained everyday. Tua to Ha (the easterly trade wind) sweeps the warm, moist ocean air into the valley. One can feel the atmosphere absorbing water until it can’t hold any more. Then the sky seems
to explode, and pellets of rain pelt the corrugated metal roofs and profuse vegetation.

At the gatherings we attended, traditional food was abundant—baked and fermented breadfruit, baked taro and taro simmered in coconut milk, raw and cooked bananas, banana pudding, baked and raw fish, pig and chicken roasted in umu (earth ovens).

That Taipivai was once heavily populated is evident from the numerous, often extensive archaeological remains in the valley—paepae (house platforms), tohua
(dance platforms), meʻae (sacred sites), akaua (fortresses), and ma pits (pits for storing ma, or fermented breadfruit, eaten when the breadfruit crop failed during droughts). One finds sites wherever one looks off either side of the only road in the valley.

The population of Taipi has never recovered from the invasion of aoe. When aoe (haole) began frequenting the islands in the 19th century, there were two thousand warriors in Taipivai, forming one of the most fearsome tribes on Nuku Hiva. In 1813, American naval officer David Porter led 200 Americans and warriors from the Teiʻi and Hapaʻa tribes, traditional enemies of the Taipi, into Taipivai, killing many of the residents, torching houses and destroying breadfruit trees—the main source of food in Hiva. Porter was angry because the “incorrigible” Taipi had refused to contribute supplies to his ship and had killed one of his men in a skirmish. In the century that followed the attack, western diseases almost completed the depopulation Porter had begun. By the time archaeologist Ralph Linton visited the valley in 1920-21, there were less than a dozen adults left. Today about three hundred people reside there.

The depopulation in Taipivai mirrors the depopulation of all the isles of Hiva. When western explorers and traders began frequenting the islands in the 1700’s and early 1800’s, the population was estimated at 80,000–100,000. In 1863, there were probably nine or ten thousand people left; in 1904, only 4,000 remained; in the 1911, 2,890; by 1920-1, only 1,800 remained, “including a handful of whites, and many mixed bloods—for the most part white and Chinese mixtures with the natives….The whites have brought, and still bring, syphilis, gonorrhea, a type of rapid consumption called by the natives pakoko, influenza, and many other minor ailments. Smallpox at one time ravaged two of the northern island and the Chinese brought leprosy.” In 1923, the population was at an all time low of only 1200 inhabitants.

Handy continued, “Degeneration of the native physique is due to these diseases against which the natives have been in no way protected; to liquors, drugs, and tobacco; and to an inactive, listless life with decay of native standards resulting in the breaking down of their whole system of life and thought, and the elimination of all their natural avenues for expression—a condition that has been brought about largely by the organized and unorganized forces of white influence.”

Western capitalists never imported massive numbers of laborers to the islands of Hiva, as they did in Hawaiʻi, because there was not enough flat land to develop large plantations of tropical crops such as sugar cane or pineapple. Thus the population today remains small. Because of better health care, it is gradually increasing: 2,000 by 1926; 5,400 by 1970; in 1990 the population was 7,350.

Taipivai became notorious to the western world as the home of cannibals when Herman Melville published his fictionalized travel narrative Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life During a Four Months’ Stay in a Valley of the Marquesas (London, 1846). While Moby Dick is better known today, considered an American classic and assigned regularly in schools, Typee, because of its exotic subject matter, was better known and more widely read in Melville’s time.
Melville had deserted a whaling ship in 1842 and spent about three weeks in the valley. His account is embellished by accounts of Taipi life borrowed from Lt. Porter’s Journals and from his own fancy, based on centuries-old stereotypes of the indigenous people encountered by European explorers and colonialists. On the one hand, Melville seems intent on defending the life of the Taipi, particularly in comparison to Christian civilization. He asks “what has he [‘the Polynesian savage’] to desire at the hands of Civilization?”; he answers, based on his observations during a visit to Hawai‘i:

Let the once smiling and populous Hawaiian Islands, with their now diseased, starving, and dying natives, answer the questions. The missionaries may seek to disguise the matter as they will, but the facts are incontrovertible; and the devoutest Chrisitan who visits the group with an unbiased mind, must go away mournfully asking—“Are these, alas! the fruits of twenty-five years of enlightening?”

In a primitive state of society, the enjoyments of life, though few and simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed; but Civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve—the heart burnings, the jealousies, the social rivalries, the family dissenstions, and the thousand self-inflicted discomforts of refined life, which make up in units the swelling aggregate of human misery, are unknown among these unsophisticated people.

He goes on to argue that while the Taipi were known to be cannibals, the west was almost equally barbaric:

The fiendlike skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to disinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth.

But no matter how much he praises Taipi society in comparison to Euroamerican society, he cannot escape his condescending prejudices about savages. His story contains stereotypical descriptions of an idyllic native life that required almost no work:

The penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of the Taipi; for, with the one solitary exception of striking a light, I scarcely saw any piece of work performed there which caused the sweat to stand upon a single brow. As for digging and delving for a livelihood, the thing is altogether unknown. Nature planted the breadfruit and the banan, and in her own good time she brings them to maturity, when the idle save stretches forth his hand, and satisfies his appetite. (220)
While less work was required to live a life of subsistence (some estimate about four-or five hours a day, depending on the time of the year) than is required of an average worker in a Capitalist society, the Taipi worked.

The dietary staple was the breadfruit, and it was planted purposefully, not by nature, but by people. A tree was planted for each new-born child and henceforth the fruit of that tree belonged to the individual. Families planted trees in their yard; the chiefs had plantations. There were over thirty varieties of breadfruit. It is true that the tree did not require extensive cultivation and produced two, three, or even four crops in a year of good rain. But during droughts, the fruit fell from the trees before ripening. Thus the excess harvest of good years had to be stored in pits in a fermented form of paste, called ma, as a hedge against famine. In ma form, the pulp could be kept for forty years. Other food crops included coconut (ehi), banana, sugar cane, and taro (ta’o). Planting was done during high tides or full moons to insure strong plants and large, plentiful fruits.

Fishing was the other main source of food. It could be done either individually, or by a group of specialists who lived in a sacred precinct near the sea. These specialists usually fished with canoes and nets for the haka-iki, or chief, of the valley. If the fishing expedition was successful, a ko‘ina (feast) was held and the fish distributed to everyone living the valley. Fishing was also done with line and hook (made from pearl shell or human bone), pa (aku lures), spears and harpoons, snares, fish traps, and poison. Fish was kapu when breadfruit was not yet ripe, and free when the breadfruit was ready to harvest. This was perhaps a conservation practice.

Handy presents an extensive list of occupations requiring expertise that represented the main forms of work among the Marquesans. The type of expertise a person had gave him a rank in society. Next to the haka-iki, or chief, was the tau’a, the inspirational priests whose functions were to care for the remains of the chiefs and priests deposited at temples, preside at tribal religious ceremonies, and discover and speak the will of the gods. Next in prestige was the tuhuna o’ono (or o’oko), a chanter who presided over lesser religious ceremonies. Toa, or war leaders, were highly respected in civil affairs as well. Others occupation in which tuhuna, or experts, were recognized included: planters, fishermen, housebuilders, platform builders, diggers of ma pits, stone cutters, wood carvers, canoe builders, net makers, tapa makers, mat makers, makers of pounders, tattooers, drum makers, image carvers, makers of popoi dishes, staff makers, makers of hair ornaments, fan makers, makers of tortoise-shell crowns, makers of ear ornaments, professionals skilled in making string figures and applying them in decoration such as ornamental sennit designs, medical experts, persons who cut the foreskin, persons skilled in witchcraft, coffin carvers, storytellers, composers of chants, chanters, and genealogists.

Melville ascribes the activities of the Taipi to a kind of animal instinct:

Seeing them on these occasions [i.e., occasions when some small task was to be done], one is reminded of an infinity of black ants clustering
about and dragging away to some hole the leg of a deceased fly.

The islanders, while employed in erecting this tenement, reminded me of a colony of beavers at work.

Since these accounts of the islanders actually doing what most people think of as work contradicts Melville’s view of the islanders never having to work, he assures the reader that they were truly lazy and not actually working, but playing:

To be sure, they were hardly as silent and demure as those wonderful creatures, nor were they by any means as diligent. To tell the truth, they were somewhat inclined to be lazy, but a perfect tumult of hilarity prevailed; and they worked together so unitedly, and seemed actuated by such an instinct of friendliness, that is was truly beautiful to behold.

Melville went further in claiming that the Taipi lacked intellect:

The minds of these simple savages, unoccupied by matters of graver moment, were capable of deriving the utmost delight from circumstances which would have passed unnoticed in more intelligent communities. All their enjoyment, indeed, seemed to be made up of the little trifling incidents of the passing hour; but these diminutive items swelled altogether to an amount of happiness seldom experienced by more enlightened individuals, whose pleasures are drawn from more elevated but rarer sources.

That his conclusions were mere prejudices is clear from the fact that Melville could not speak or understand the language of the Taipi; nor did he have access to presentations, discussions and debates of politics, ethics, religion and oral traditions. And judging by the amount of time spent on playing video games or watching television and other trivial pastimes in “more intelligent communities” of the post-industrial West and East, it would be safe to say that humanity generally is given to enjoying “little trifling incidents of the passing hour” and “diminutive items swelled altogether” rather than pursuing activities “drawn from more elevated but rarer sources.”

On the third day of our stay, Suggs suggested we try to find Melville’s paepae—the stone foundation of the house where Melville stayed. He had apparently been shown the site by a native informant on his first visit to Taipivai over 30 years ago.

The search for Melville’s paepae took us on a hike up the valley road and down a steep, muddy trail toward the stream bed. It began to rain profusely. Our first attempt failed—the hardly visible trail led to a pig pen. Our next attempt brought us to the edge of the stream at the bottom of the ascent, where in a tangle
of twisting hau trees, Suggs identified the house foundation he had visited and described 35 years earlier. The paepae is at the end of one of three larger stone structures, which Suggs identified as tohua (dance plazas).

In *Typee*, Melville reports that the house he stayed in was midway on an ascent, not at the bottom, and that he was transported 200 yards to the stream on the back of Kory-Kory. Unless the stream bed has moved since Melville’s time, the site that Suggs showed us could not be the actual site.

The theme and plot of Melville’s *Typee* is escape. Melville himself perhaps signed onto a whaling ship to escape from the tedium and deadness of 19th century urban American life—the kind of life he describes in “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Bartleby, an office worker on Wall Street, is hemmed in on all sides by physical and psychological walls.

The narrator of *Typee* feels trapped on the whaling ship Dolly. He discovers that the ship is not to his liking—the captain was “tyrannical; the sick had been inhumanly neglected; the provisions had been doled out in scanty allowance; and her cruises were unreasonably protracted.” He plans to escape on Nukuhiva and join the crew of another ship heading back to civilization. When he reaches Taipi, he finds that he is trapped there as well, and wants desperately to escape. He fears being cannibalized or tattooed.

Today, the Taipi who are trapped by Melville. His story of romantic love for a Polynesian beauty and the idyllic life will attract tourists to the islands. One hundred and fifty years after Melville’s visit, the valley is on the verge of development that has already begun ten miles away in Taiohae, promoted by the French and local government and local business interests. Small hotels, restaurants, sightseeing tours, activities such as charter fishing and horseback riding, and car rentals (mainly four wheel drives in this country of mountainous, unpaved roads) have sprung up there.

In 1992, a French journalist raised a memorial to Melville on the beach at Taiohae. The memorial depicts Melville’s path over the mountains from Taiohae to Taipivai. Tourism will take the same route, and, once the trail is cleared and marked, Melville’s paepae, no doubt, will become a tourist attraction of Taipivai.

A revival of the native culture is taking place, partly driven by the tourist trade. Tattooing, once so greatly feared by Melville, is making a comeback—and ankle tatoos have become fashionable among the aoe who frequent the isles of Hiva.

On the day we arrived, a troupe of men and women performed dances after a soccer match. The performance culminated in a dance in which pairs of male dancers imitated pigs, rooting the ground and mating—one partner humping the other with comic vigor to the delight of the crowd. This pig dance is one of two dances remembered to have been practiced in traditional time; the other is the haka manu, or bird dance, in which the dancer stands stationary while making arm-motions that imitate a bird flying. An expert in Polynesian dancing told me later that both dances had been choreographed recently, as the traditional steps and movements were long forgotten.

During the last decade, the native language, still spoken in many homes, has
been added to the school curriculum. Ironically, the Catholic Church has been promoting the study of the language. During the 19th century, the Church played a major role in destroying native culture by banning native dress, dancing and chanting, kava drinking, nude-bathing in public, tattooing the dead, and other religious and cultural practices. Human sacrifice and cannibalism also ended.

Competing with the revival of the traditional culture is the onslaught of colonial consumerism. When the kids of Taipivai come home on weekends from school in Taiohae, they watch TV, which broadcasts American shows like “Dynasty” and “Santa Barbara” dubbed into French, games shows and sports events from Paris, and commercials for products the people never knew they needed. And when the kids go off to school during the week, they continue to be indoctrinated in the language, thoughts, and values of the French, who colonized the Isles of Hiva during the 19th century and still possess them as a territory. Free medical care and stipends for having children in the underpopulated islands are designed to help the French hold onto the good-will of the people.

2. The Bones of Ha'atuatua

We spent several days in Taipivai. When archaeologists Rolett and Conte arrived, we packed the equipment into five four-wheel drive trucks for the trip to Hatiheu, a valley at the end of the road to the north coast of Nuku Hiva. The rocky, unpaved road through Taipivai rises toward the back of the valley and zigzags up a ridge above two high waterfalls. Then the road goes through a pass in the mountains and zigzags down another, drier ridge into the valley of

Waterfalls at the back of Taipivai
Hatiheu. The 18-mile ride takes a couple of hours. When it’s raining, the driver guides his truck down the ruts to prevent the truck from sliding off the road and down the steep hillside.

The valley of Hatiheu is smaller than Taipivai, but it feels more spacious because the mountains are lower and the horseshoe-shaped bay, open to the north, is filled with light. Coconut plantations cover the lower valley. A jagged row of spire-like rock formations on the western side of the bay are the most distinct geological feature.

The town of Hatiheu, population 50, occupies flat land along a black sand beach. The people belong to the Taipi tribe and were allies of the Taiipi against the tribes of western parts of Nuku Hiva led by the Tei’i of Taiohae.

The mayor of Hatiheu is Yvonne Katupa, a small, energetic woman with large friendly eyes. She owns and runs a five-bungalow hotel, a restaurant, and a store. She also hosts tourists from the Aranui when the ship makes its scheduled stop in the bay. The tourists are taken to the restored tohua (dance platform) of Nanauhi for a performance of the Hatiheu Dance Troupe. (Another site shaded by a huge banyan tree, is being restored farther up the road.) After the performance, the tourists are brought back to Chez Yvonne, given a crown of local flora, and served a feast—spiny lobster a foot and a half long, shrimp, umu-cooked pig, poisson cru, and several vegetable dishes. A group of musicians provides entertainment.

With the help of archaeologists Rolett and Conte, Katupa plans to establish a small museum in the mayor’s office and put on display the artifacts discovered during the three-year excavation in Ha’atuatua, which lies two valleys to the east, past Anaho. (In ancient times, the valleys of Anaho and Ha’atuatua were
dependencies of the more fertile, populous Hatiheu.) Kaputa is helping to facilitate the expedition in exchange for artifacts and expertise in establishing a museum. She knows a museum will enhance tourism in her valley; it will also teach the children of the valley about their past.

Rolett and Conte are sensitive to the issue of exploitation of natives and native culture by anthropologists and archaeologists, especially in the past. They know they need to work with and benefit the community, if any work is to be done at all. Their expedition is co-sponsored by the Department of Archaeology of the French Polynesian Center for Human Studies in Tahiti, under the direction of Maeva Navarro, who has helped them establish local contacts. After his work on Tahuata in 1990, Rolett helped the mayor set up a museum on that island.

When the archaeological team arrived in Hatiheu, it was treated to the tourist feast at Chez Yvonne and stayed overnight.

The next day we sent the equipment around the headland to the neighboring bay of Anaho by motorboat (there is no road), then hiked over a ridge and set up temporary camp at a Catholic Church facility on the beach.

The bay of Anaho is larger than the bay of Hatiheu, but there is less land and water in the valley. The cloud-capped Tukemata ("Eyebrow") rises 1000 feet above the central part of the bay. Ridges slope down from both sides encircling the bay like arms, with a safe anchorage on the western side. Three yachts were anchored when we arrived. The strip of land between the mountains and the white sand beach and coral reef at the head of the bay is planted with coconut trees. Groves of hau trees line the shore.

The population of Anaho is ten. One of the young men was a refugee from
Pape‘ete. He said he had grown tired of the drugs, alcohol, and partying there, and found the rural life in Anaho more to his liking. The coconut plantation and a pension for yachters on the western side of the bay provide income. Fishing on the reef is good; on the morning after we arrived, an old resident laid his net as the tide was rising and brought in a catch of moi (threadfish) and baby black-fin
sharks.

At high tide the next night, Tana-oa, a native of Tahuata who was with the expedition to compile a reference collection of fish, laid his net and made a similar catch.

Writer Robert Louis Stevenson visited Anaho in 1888 during his South Pacific cruise on the schooner Casco, trying to regain his health. He described with enthusiasm the beauty of dawn in this isolated, quiet bay. He met a lonely native of O‘ahu living there who had been abandoned by a whaling ship and had married a local girl. Stevenson also reported that a relatively prosperous cotton plantation had once been located in Anaho, when cotton production was down in the American South during the Civil War (1861-1865). The plantation was destroyed by a tidal wave.

The archaeological team spent a day fixing up some dilapidated bungalows for housing before beginning excavation work. During the three-year project, Rolett and Conte plan to study early habitation sites and the relationship of the settlers to their environment over time.

They hope to study habitation sites from the period when the migrations to Hawai‘i occurred around 1600–2000 years ago. The assumption that early settlers of Hawai‘i came from the Isles of Hiva is based on linguistic evidence: the languages of the two island groups are closely related—so much so that speakers of the languages are able to understand each other partially. If the assumption is correct, comparing Ha‘atuatua and other sites in the Isles of Hiva from the migration period with sites in Hawai‘i during the settlement period should reveal similarities in the two culture and help illuminate the prehistory of both places.
Rolett and Conte also plan to begin investigating voyaging and trading practices in ancient Polynesia. The voyages of the Hokule‘a have shown that two-way, east-west voyaging was possible among the islands of the South Pacific, as oral traditions record. But physical evidence to determine what actually happened is so far very limited. How extensive was the trading? What was the pattern of trade? When and for how long did it take place? What material goods were traded?

With the latest techniques in geochemical analysis that can help identify stones from different quarries throughout the Pacific, archaeologists are now beginning to create a reference collection of Pacific island stones. Once this collection is completed, they will be able to match stones they find with stones in the collection to determine whether stone artifacts found on an island were made on that island, or were made somewhere else and carried to the island on a trading canoe.

On my last full day in Anaho, I hiked over to Ha‘atuatua with four students of the mapping team that would lay out the grid for the excavation. It was a forty-five minute walk along the beach and over a low ridge on the east side of the bay. Unlike Anaho, Ha‘atuatua is unprotected from the easterly trades, which blows straight into the valley, pushing swells before it onto the white sand beach. The ocean was rough. To the south the mountains extend down toward the shore in a ridged wall that remind one of the mountains of windward O‘ahu.

The waters are supposed to be shark-infested, but for the archaeological students, the main worry was the nono, a small, difficult-to-see stinging fly, which can swarm suddenly on a person and leave bites which form small blisters. If the bites itch and the person scratches them, they can become open sores. The team went prepared with clothing to cover as much of the body as possible
(long-sleeved shirts, pants, boots, gloves, hats, and face nets) and applied insect repellent on any exposed areas.

The nono is not indigenous to the islands. It was introduced from New Guinea during the 19th century by German trading ships on their way to Chile. Attempts to eradicate the nono have so far been unsuccessful. Conte brought along a five-gallon cannister of insecticide to spray the dunes to reduce the population during the excavations. Luckily the morning I went to Ha‘atuatua, it was windy, so the nonos were not out. (Ironically, the nono became a major focus of concern during the 1995 voyage of Hawaiian canoes retracing this early route. During the voyage, nono were discovered on board two of the canoes. The canoes had to be fumigated at sea before they arrived in Hawai‘i.)

According to oral tradition, the cultural hero Hai landed at and lived in Ha‘atuatua, bringing with him pigs, chickens, and eka, or turmeric (used to make an scented ointment for high-ranking males). The valley is capable of, and apparently did in ancient times, support many people. The earliest layer of artifacts is dated about 150 B.C., and subsequent layers indicate continuous habitation for 2,000 years.

However, in 1896, when the German anthropologist von den Steinem visited the valley, he reported that only two people were left, both women, one of whom was crazy. Western diseases had destroyed the population. Today no one lives there. A single hala tree on the dunes gives the valley a desolate feeling even in daylight.

The people believe the valley is haunted. A Tahitian who lives in Taiohae told me when he goes hunting for pig or goat in Ha‘atuatua, he hears voices coming from the deserted paepae and tohua at the back of the valley.

During the 1957–8 expedition, Suggs removed about fifty sets of bones from Ha‘atuatua. Bones, particularly the skull, embody the mana of the ancestors and were often kept in or buried under the home of the descendants or at important religious sites if the bones belonged to a chief. Stevenson writes “...the desecration of tombs, thoughtlessly ruffled in the laying down of the new roads, is a chief ingredient in the native hatred for the French.”

I asked Suggs about the possibility of returning the bones he removed in 1958 from burial sites in Ha‘atuatua (as well as other sites on Nuku Hiva) to the American Museum of Natural History. He was opposed to the idea, on scientific grounds, and also because no one had asked for the bones and, he believed, no one was left to accept and rebury the bones. But if no one is left to rebury them, the bones should be put back by whoever took them out. Perhaps the Museum could hire a native group to replace the bones in order to lay to rest this unfinished business from the era of colonial archaeology.

3. Ports of Entry

Taiohae Bay provides the largest and safest anchorage in the Isles of Hiva. Located on the southern coast of Nuku Hiva, with mountains to the east, north, and west, the u-shaped bay and its black sand beach are protected from the
prevailing easterly and seasonal northerly winds. Taiohae is the administrative center and a port of entry for vessels visiting the Isles of Hiva. Twenty-three yachts were anchored there when I arrived from Anaho on the Aranui on a rainy evening.

In 1995, the Polynesian Voyaging Society plans to use the harbor as a staging point for the newly-built traditional voyaging canoe Hawai‘i Loa’s sail from Nuku Hiva to Hawai‘i. The voyage will recreate the first voyages of the settlement of Hawai‘i from the Isles of Hiva over 1600 years ago.

Taiohae is a small town on the eastern side of the bay, with a population of 1,500 and four hotels, the largest of which has 15 bungalows. American Rose Corser owns and runs the most comfortable and expensive inn and restaurant, Keikahanui Inn, built on a hillside overlooking the western end of the bay. The wooden buildings have screened windows, a luxury in French Polynesia. Her establishment caters to French tourists and American yacht people.

Corser’s main complaint about Nuku Hiva is the unfinished development of the island’s infrastructure. The water in Taiohae is contaminated by wild goats and pigs in the hills above the town and has to be boiled to make it drinkable. The roads all over the island are unpaved, except for short stretches of concrete in Taiohae and Taipivai.

The airport is built on the dry, remote, nearly uninhabited northwest end of the island called Terre Deserte, the only place with flat land for a runway on this island of steep mountains and narrow valleys. The geologically young Isles of Hiva have no coastal plains; headlands drop straight into the sea. The government promised tourism interests an international airport on Nuku Hiva, but stopped short on the runway, which handles only local flights to and from Pape‘ete.
Transportation between Taiohae and the airport is by helicopter or four-wheel drive; there used to be a boat that went around the western end of the island, but it was not running when I was there. The dirt road between Taiohae and the airport winds in and out of steep ravines and ridges. The 20-mile ride takes about two and a half hours. The soft dirt in which the road has been bulldozed is subject to water erosion, and the road looks like it could be impassible after heavy rains.

Despite her complaints about the infrastructure of the island, Corser is planning to upgrade and expand her operation if she can get permits and bring in building materials duty-free. The cost of supplies is very high because everything is shipped to Nuku Hiva through Pape’ete. Still, Corser believes that she make a profit as tourists pushing into the relatively more remote areas of the world discover the Isles of Hiva. The government has increased the number of flights between Pape’ete and Nuku Hiva from one per week a few years ago to four per week today; it is considering adding a fifth flight, even though in this down year for international tourism, the flights are less than half full.

One of the guests I met at Corser’s inn was art historian Carol Ivory of Washington State University. She has received a grant to curate a traveling show of art from the Isles of Hiva. The show will stop at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in 1996. Ivory was in Nuku Hiva to look for works by contemporary artists to include in the show. The best works are by carvers of wood, stone, and coconut shells.

The traditional works of Hivan art are scattered all over the world in the aftermath of colonialism. As historian Greg Dening writes, “To discover them in their Diaspora demands a pilgrimage to cities on every continent, to academies
and galleries from Cape Town to Rome, from Leningrad to Dunedin. Old men’s whitebeards, ankle-bands of hair, gorgets of turtle shell, stone tiki clubs, spears and paddles, stilt stirrups, bowls and tapa-covered skulls were collected in hundreds by curious visitors as memorials of their stay on cannibal islands.”

Professor Ivory’s interest in Polynesian art began with an interest in Maori art. However, she discovered that the hostility against whites among the Maori was a hindrance to her studying their culture. A graduate student from New Zealand who was with the archaeological team at Ha’atuatua told me a similar story. He had come to study archaeology in French Polynesia because “archeology was dead in New Zealand”—the Maori were no longer cooperating with non-Maori inquiring into their past.

While the people of Hiva are perhaps less overtly hostile to aoe than Polynesians in other parts of the Pacific are, mistrust is there. Rose Corser and her husband (now deceased) began their operation in 1979, after purchasing the land on which their inn and restaurant now stands. Originally, they had planned to build in Hakatea, a valley to the west of Taiohae, where there is a spectacular 1,100 foot waterfall and an uncontaminated source of fresh water; but the man who owned the land refused to sell it after being told that the American couple was trying to rip him off. Archaeologist Robert Suggs reports that he could not get permission to excavate in a certain area on his 1957-8 expedition because of the mistrust of owner, who thought that the artifacts Suggs would carry off were worth a lot of money.

The mistrust of aoe is rooted in the 200 years of exploitive and destructive contact. After Mendana visited the southern islands of Hiva in July of 1595, and slaughtered natives with his superior firepower, the islands remained unvisited until 1774, when Captain James Cook spent four days at Vaitahu on Tahuata. One of his men killed an islander for taking a stanchion from the deck of the ship. The northern islands of Hiva were not sighted until 1791 by American Joseph Ingraham, who was engaged in the fur trade between Northwest America and China.

The undermining of Hivan culture began with the coming of the missionaries, the first being twenty-one-year-old William Pascoe Crook of the London Missionary Society who was left alone at Vaitahu on the island of Tahuata from 1797-78. Crook was not well received by the islanders. As one historian wrote: “They were contemptuous of him for being ignorant of their language.... Crook was stripped of all he had, scoffed at, left outside any system of food distribution in a time of food shortage and never given any means to obtain it.”

The commercial exploitation of the islands began with the sandalwood trade. In 1811, Captain William M. Rogers discovered sandalwood (puahi) in the islands and collected two hundred tons of the fragrant wood, which was highly sought after in China. Sandalwood continued to be gathered until the supply was depleted, around 1821. American traders also destroyed the sandalwood trees of Hawai’i by around 1840.

In 1813, American naval lieutenant David Porter, in the Pacific to capture
British whaling ships during the War of 1812, landed at Taiohae and allied himself with the Tei‘i tribe against their traditional enemies, the Hapa‘a and the Taipi of the valleys to the east. After attacking and subduing the Hapa‘a and the Taipi, he attempted to annex the isles of Hiva to the United States in 1814. His claim to the islands was based on “priority of discovery, conquest, and possession.” He gathered the chiefs of the island to sign a petition asking President Madison to be their “chief of chiefs.” Madison did not want responsibility for the islands and declined the request. After Porter departed, the contingent he left in Taiohae was attacked and fled to Hawai‘i.

In 1830, whalers began to make visits to supply their ships during a whaling boom in the Pacific that lasted from 1832-1839.

In 1832, haole missionaries from Hawai‘i landed at Taiohae with Hawaiian servants. Frustrated by lack of success at converting the people and humiliated by their irreverent attitude toward the Christian god and morality, the missionaries left after nine months, condemning the people as “unthinking,” “amoral,” and “lazy.”

In 1839, French Catholic missionaries arrived and encountered indifference and ridicule from the people; but the Catholic Church supported the missionaries and they stayed on. Eventually most of the people of Hiva were converted to Roman Catholicism. In 1842, the French admiral Dupetit-Thouars landed at Tahuata and took possession of southern islands of Hiva; later that year, he sailed into Taiohae, Nukuhiva, gathered together the chiefs of the island, and had them cede the island to France.

In 1845, the French met with violent resistance from Pakoko, a local chief of Taiohae. Pakoko ordered the killing of six French soldiers who trespassed on a kapu area, and used one of them as a sacrifice to his god. Pakoko was tried and executed by the French. He came to represent the spirit of native resistance to foreign intrusion: the idea that thunder was a sign of his return circulated among the people. [Another version of the Pakoko story was told to me by one of his descendants who grew up on Nukuhiva, but now lives in Hawai‘i: Pakoko’s daughter had been raped by a French sailor when she visited a ship anchored at Taiohae. To cleanse her, Pakoko wanted her to bathe in the blood of a Frenchman. He killed a sailor, cut off his head, and threw the body into a stream. Downstream, his daughter was positioned for a bath under a waterfall down which the blood of the sailor flowed.]

Sporadic resistance against the French, followed by French retaliation, continued through the second half of the 19th century. A rebellion on the island of Hiva Oa in 1880 was violently suppressed. However, Dupetit-Thouars’ dream of making the Isles of Hiva a naval base and the crossroads of the Pacific was never realized. In the second half of the 19th century, the French concentrated on colonizing Tahiti-nui, and the islands of Hiva were relatively neglected.

In 1863, thirty-two natives of Hiva were taken to South America by Peruvian slave-traders. The French government demanded them back, but none returned. Some died on the plantations of South America. Others died of small-pox on the voyage home. Twelve Pacific Islanders with small-pox were dropped off on the
black sands of Taiohae, and the disease spread from there.

It was Mother’s Day in France on the Sunday I spent in Taiohae, which meant the colony also had to celebrate the day. That weekend, there were canoe races, a performance of traditional dances, a mom and dad soccer game, and food booths at the community field.

At the Hotel Moana Nui, a group playing Tahitian music was hired for the day to entertain at family lunches for mothers. I ran into Jean-Claude Shigetomi, whom I met in Taipivai, and who looked neither French nor Japanese, but Polynesian. He was from Tahiti, residing in Nuku Hiva to work for the French government. A man in Pape‘ete had told me that “Shigetomi” was one of four Japanese surnames in Pape‘ete, the legacy of four Japanese immigrants who had arrived from Hawai‘i in the early 20th century.

Shigetomi introduced me to a friend named Deane, from Ra‘iatea. Deane was part-Swedish, part-Tahitian. When I mentioned I had just come from Ha‘atutauta, Deane said he knew of Sinoto, the Bishop Museum archaeologist who is well-known throughout French Polynesia and had conducted excavations in the Isles of Hiva during the 1960’s. Mistaking me for an archaeologist, Deane asked, “Where are we from?” meaning his Polynesian ancestors. “From Fiji, from Samoa and Tonga, the western Pacific,” I replied. He said he disagreed, that the winds blow from the east, so his ancestors must have come from the east, that is, from South America. He had apparently been educated by a teacher expounding Thor Heyerdahl’s fanciful, outdated theory that Polynesian had drifted to the Pacific islands on balsa rafts from the east.

Deane was unaware of the more recent archaeological, cultural, and linguistic evidence linking the Isles of Hiva to western Polynesia, or of the experimental voyaging of Hokule‘a, showing that Polynesians were capable of sailing their canoes from west to east across the Pacific by waiting on the seasonal westerly winds.

It takes years for such information to make it out to the general public through the educational system. For the Polynesians living in the relatively isolated Isles of Hiva, perhaps the quickest way to comprehend the feats of their ancestors would be for them to see Polynesian voyaging canoes gathering at Taiohae and departing for far-off Hawai‘i. The lesson will be made in 1995 when navigator and canoe builder Tava Taupu, a native son of Nuku Hiva who lives in Kona and has sailed with the Polynesian Voyaging Society for the past decade, returns to his home island with the crews of Hawai‘iloa and Hokule‘a.

For Polynesians the voyages are more than academic exercises or scientific experiments; Hokule‘a has sparked a revival of canoe-building, sailing, and navigating wherever it has visited. According to Debora Kimitete, wife of the Mayor of Taiohae, Lucien Kimitete, the people of Nuku Hiva had planned to build a canoe and sail to Hawai‘i with Hawai‘iloa. In 1992 the last master canoe builder from Taiohae travelled to Hawai‘i to observe the building of Hawai‘iloa. Unfortunately, he past away soon after he returned to Taiohae.

Oral traditions recalls that Motuhaiki, the first master canoe builder of the
Isles of Hiva and patron of woodworking once snared the sun to slow it down, so he could complete the work on his canoe. As the sun races faster and faster across the sky today and tourism begins to develop on these remote islands, the work on a descendant of that original canoe has yet to begin.

4. Ha‘apai-ano‘o

Ha‘apai-a-no‘o is the room of refuge,
The land of the little clan of the strong,
The settling place for winds,
Ha‘apai-a-no‘o is the greatest valley
A room for Tahiti,
Tahiti goes there in trouble,
To King Teta,
And escapes the searcher, escapes the battle,
At Ha‘apai-a-no‘o, breadfruit is so plentiful!

I had trouble sleeping the first night back in Papeete after the hour-long flight from Nukuhiva. My hotel room in a half-finished concrete building was small, with two sagging single beds. It overlooked a street leading out of Papeete, and at ten o’clock at night, a steady stream of cars, trucks and mopeds flowed past it, spewing exhaust. After the silence of Anaho and Taiohae, the noise seemed deafening.

The next day, I went to visit Karim Cowan, a young Tahitian I had met in Hawai‘i while he was training on Hōkūle‘a to help lead a renaissance of Tahiti voyaging. Karim talked about the resistant to more tourist development in Tahiti and mentioned that some of the resistors planned to chain themselves to trees to
stop a planned resort. If that didn’t work, perhaps they would burn down Papeete. His vision was that there would be 200 canoes built, by the year 2000, which was seven years off, and this would mark the return of the Polynesian world. He was building a canoe himself, and of course, supported Tahitian independence from France.

That day, I also talked with Mrs. Maeva Navarro, who was Director of the Tahitian Department of Archaeology and who had an office at the Museum of Tahiti and Other Islands in Punaauia.

She invited me out to stay in the guest quarters where we had stayed on our way to Nukuhiva and Anaho. She talked about the loss of language and culture and delinquency and unemployment of Tahitian youth, and suggested I visit Papeno‘o, the largest valley on the island, situated on the northern side of Tahiti Nui in a district called Aharoa. There, they were restoring some marae (religious sites) hoping to interest some of the youth in their ancestral culture and away from the destructive behaviors associated with the West.

The inner valley of Papeno‘o is the floor of the crater of the volcano which created the northwestern part of Tahiti, which like the island of Maui is made up of two land masses connected by an isthmus. The valley’s name means “confluent waters”; another of its names is Ha'apai-a-no‘o, “confluent force.” The literal reference is to its swiftly flowing stream, the largest in Tahiti, fed by smaller streams and waterfalls on both sides of the main valley. In ancient times, the valley of Papeno‘o was a place of refuge for those defeated in war.

The next day, one of the workers and I drove in a Toyota land cruiser to the valley. After we turned off the main highway and headed into Papeno‘o, we passed a large garbage dump. I was reminded of the story Karim told me about
the Frenchman who proposed to compact garbage for the government and dump it into the sea, four thousand meters down. Karim had scoffed at the idea—the plastics and other pollutants would surely float to the surface.

Past the garbage dump, we entered an area designated as a “parc naturel” by the government. The rocky road winds up into the valley, crossing the stream sixteen times, through forests of bamboo and hau. Against the steep green cliffs on both sides of the valley the tropic bird hovered, its long white tail feathers fluttering.

I began noticing a plant with broad, wide shiny leaves growing prolifically along the roadside. I assumed it was some sort of native plant and asked the driver what its Tahitian name was. He said it wasn’t a native plant, it was Miconia; it was imported and was spreading through the Tahitian mountains. (Ten years later it was growing so prolifically in the forests of Hawai’i, eradication efforts were needed as well.)

After a forty-five minute drive, we neared the end of the road. Although Maeva had mentioned a dam, I was surprised to see it, about thirty feet high across the stream bed and made of large borders stacked on each other, in the style of a traditional wall. Farther up another dam is being constructed—and the valley suddenly was filled with dump trucks, bulldozers, and caterpillars. They are gouging huge sections out of the valley walls, apparently trying to create a reservoir for the dam. The archaeological structures, which had been moved to accommodate the reservoirs, were dwarfed by the dams. The walls of the marae are a scant two-three feet high, the stones less than a foot in diameter.

When we tried to go to a second archaeological site, the way was blocked by a dump truck, so we turned around.
High on a bluff overlooking the construction in the valley is a hotel—a cluster of buildings with bungalows and a restaurant, where we went to eat lunch. One of the buildings is designated a “discotheque.” There were no guests at the newly finished hotel. Only the hotel workers were eating in the restaurants, the Tahitians at one end of the table and the French at the other end, with a Chinese woman sitting in between the two groups. The food, served cafeteria-style, was awful—so bad one couldn’t tell what it was, although I would guess an omelette made out of powdered eggs.

Who in his right mind would build a hotel in this location? I wondered as I forced the food down. Someone who believed that the hydroelectric dams, after they were completed, would be “scenic,” and that the isolation of the valley and the restored archaeological sites would be a draw. Someone who had faith in the future development of tourism in Tahiti. This vision of the future is on a collision course with Karim’s vision of the return of the Polynesian world in the year 2000. If tourism wins out, the ancient valley of Papeno’o would again be a place of refuge, but for tourists, not natives.