

Land, Culture and the Little Things: Marquesan Art and the External Market
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On a recent visit to the Marquesas Islands, I awoke to the sounds of an animated discussion in the kitchen next to my bedroom. My Marquesan host father, Manuhi Timau, and his daughter Heivani were debating the purpose and meaning of art. Heivani is studying at the Centre des Métiers d'Art in Tahiti, one of the only fine arts schools in the Pacific. Manuhi has been making and selling art in Vaitahu, Tahuata, for the past twenty years. He does not generally hide his opinions, and that morning he was criticizing a piece of Heivani's because it drew inspiration from other Pacific cultures and her own imagination. "There's no story!" he protested. "You can't make something without a story. Tourists look for things with stories." He advised her to visit Tahuata's small archaeological museum and copy the work of her ancestors. That, he argued, would be "real" art.

Manuhi and Heivani represent two generations of Marquesans who share their struggle to define art. Heirs to one of the richest, most striking artistic traditions in Oceania, Marquesan Islanders are being challenged to negotiate the meaning of their past and their art as they strive to build sustainable livelihoods.

During a year of doctoral research in the Marquesas in 2013, I came into contact with artists in almost every valley of the six inhabited islands. My thesis project examines Marquesan livelihoods and their relationship to heritage. My discussions with local artists centered around their understandings of historic places and objects; a topic inseparable from Marquesan art. However, as the external market for their products grows the islanders' perspectives on their art and how it expresses their culture, their past, and themselves are changing.¹

One reason for this change is a shift in the way artists relate to the materials they use. Over the past few decades, islanders have harvested less from the land and instead begun purchasing wood, bone, shell and other items in bulk from sources throughout French Polynesia. While this allows artists to focus more on their art and spend less time seeking materials, it has also helped to alienate Marquesans from their land and their heritage.² Cultural elder Sylvia Tuieinui³ explained:

"The story of [a carving] starts with where the tree grew...The story of this object is like you. When you are in that place and you cut down the tree, the memories you have at that moment are everything your parents taught you. So this link with your parents connects you to that tree; and then you begin to carve the tree. And normally, the object that you work out of that tree tells the story...and it will never be like any other."⁴

¹ Some of the social and political complexities of this situation are discussed in Thomas, 1991.

² The term "alienation" is used here in an ideological sense, see definition in Marx, Engels, 1978, p.96; the separation of Polynesians from their land has deep cultural implications, as explained in Saura, 2008, p. 163-172.

³ Name has been changed to protect the identity of the speaker.

⁴ Personal communication, February 18, 2013.

Some artists spoke of harvesting materials in the mountains and deep valleys, and how this allowed them to learn about the land and other subjects from older generations (Figure 1). Isidore Kohumoetini credited this experience with educating him about his native island, Ua Pou.⁵ Another artist from Hanavave, Fatu Hiva described looking closely at the trees he harvests, already imagining how he will shape them into art.⁶

For many artists who live and work in the islands, however, this connection between art and the land is eroding. Veteran carver Teiki Barsinas explained how today's artists are increasingly focused on speed in order to make money quickly. By contrast, he takes his time making *ivi po'o*, a traditional kind of decorative bone bead, "in the ancient style; a copy." For his best pieces he works slowly, relying heavily upon "the old things." For him, this is what has allowed him to succeed as an artist; it is the power, or *mana*, of his art.⁷

The replication of ancestral motifs is perceived very differently from copying the work of other contemporary artists. As Félix Fii noted, artists today often copy each other in order to make money more easily but, as a result, "there's no more value" to the objects they create.⁸ Such changes are being accelerated by tourists' growing interest in price over quality.⁹

Local and non-local expectations of Marquesan art most frequently clash, and transform, during the monthly visit of the combined freighter and cruise ship, *Aranui III*. For several hours, some 200 tourists shop from local artists' tables (Figure 2). While tourists often remark on the high prices, islanders comment on the popularity of their smallest, least expensive objects. With few exceptions, most artists only sell two or three pieces per *Aranui* visit; and sometimes, they don't sell any. The attraction of producing small, inexpensive copies is therefore understandable.

Another stage for the external market is the *Salon des Marquises*, a two-week Marquesan art exposition held in Tahiti twice a year. With its high volume of visitors, this event is a rare chance for artists to sell large quantities of art. Stores and galleries also visit, collecting carvings "by the box."¹⁰ This pushes many artists who attend to produce copies of carvings, jewelry and other items in bulk (Figure 3). Whole families sometimes work towards this goal together, each person specializing in a single stage of the creation process such as rough cutting, chiseling or polishing a carving. As one Ua Huka artist noted, today "it's about the little things...before you could make only large carvings and everything would sell; but now you can only do one or two big things" that sell for two-thirds of their former price.¹¹ The great expense of attending the exposition also contributes to a heavier emphasis on profits.

As internet use spreads throughout the Marquesas, the new scale of interaction with consumers and rising monetary incentives could spur similar changes in local production and interpretation of Marquesan art. As more artists become workers with specialized tasks, copy and mass produce their art, and purchase materials in bulk, their relationship with their art and the land will shift. Ua Huka artist Raphael Toa Taiaapu described this pressure:

⁵ Personal communication, October 10, 2013; see also discussions of phenomenology, learning and relationships to place in Casey, 1996 and Ingold, 2006.

⁶ Alphonse Vaimaa, personal communication, August 22, 2013; name has been changed to protect the identity of the speaker.

⁷ Personal communication, May 1, 2013.

⁸ Personal communication, April 9, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.; Timona Tereino, personal communication, October 14, 2013.

¹⁰ Jean Matio Tamarii, personal communication, October 7, 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.; Ivory, 1999, p. 326 notes the popularity of large carvings such as clubs, spears and paddles in the mid-1990s.

"There's the power of the wood, which comes through the earth. When you hold it, you look at it and you see the color and everything, and it talks to you...But then you fall into a trap. If there are too many clients, then you fall into the trap of fast, fast...And then you feel it, you feel that it's not good—the wood doesn't speak any more. It's people and money that speak to you, then. So you have to take a break."¹²

The tension surrounding traditional remedies, or *apau*, parallels this conflict between market-based demand and a connection to the land. Today the islands have a mainly monetary economic system, but *apau* are never sold for fear that the remedy will lose its *mana*.¹³ Substituting money for a traditionally exchange-based relationship would be disrespectful to the patient as well as the spirits that support the work of healing.¹⁴

Likewise, the Marquesan creation of art has deep ties to the ancestral spirits, via the land. Although these ties have weakened over almost two centuries of selling art to visitors,¹⁵ many artists today refer to the *mana* of their work. The impending shift in the manner and scale that Marquesans interact with the global economy will likely alter this perspective, as capitalist values confront and transform the complex links between not only artist and consumer, but art, religion, culture and land.

For now, an increasingly demanding external market is pushing Marquesans to make difficult choices about the kinds of art they create. More "traditional" forms like the *ivi po'o* can have deep historic and cultural meaning; but many art school graduates and artists who attend the Tahiti exposition are pursuing more imaginative and original forms in the style of Western fine art. Others are focusing on making multiple copies of simpler forms; a more commercial kind of art with limited cultural value.

As the external market for Marquesan art continues to grow it drives these changes, but also challenges Marquesans to redefine how they express their culture, both artistically and in everyday life. The choices they make will help to determine the future of art and, more broadly, culture in the Marquesas Islands.

Photo Captions

Figure 1 (IMG_3809)

Artists often use uninhabited valleys like this one, on Fatu Hiva, to harvest wood and other materials (photo by author, 2013).

Figure 2 (IMG_3766)

An artist's table in Hapatoni, Tahuata. With the exception of the permanent art markets in Taiohae, Atuona and Ua Huka, artists arrange their products for public display for only a few hours each month, during the *Aranui III*'s visit (photo by author, 2011).

¹² Personal communication, October 4, 2013.

¹³ Thérèse, personal communication, November 21, 2013. Name shortened to protect the identity of the speaker.

¹⁴ See related discussion of relationality in Strathern, 1988.

¹⁵ See discussion of commercialism and Marquesan art in Ivory, 1999.

Figure 3 (IMG_6820)

The Vaipae, Ua Huka artist Jean Matio Tamarii's preparations for the *Salon des Marquises* include several large carvings with numerous smaller pieces and replications (photo by author, 2013).

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