

## SUMMARY REPORT

on the doctoral thesis of Emily Donaldson (McGill University)

*Living with Sacred Lands:*

*Negotiating Sustainable Heritage Management and Livelihoods in the Marquesas Islands*

### *Introduction*

In the shadows of the Marquesan forest, a giant stone structure (*paepae*) lies beneath a blanket of ferns, moss and fallen leaves. Different visitors to this place find diverse meanings in it: a foreign archaeologist sees an ancient ceremonial site; a local politician sees a potential tourist attraction; an artist sees the power and industry of his ancestors; the landowner, perhaps, sees something mysterious or even dangerous. Among these varied interpretations, whose opinion should matter most?

The story of Marquesan heritage is rich yet also conflicted. Even as cultural revitalization efforts celebrate the past and a UNESCO World Heritage List nomination, differing colonial and pre-colonial understandings of Marquesan history cast doubt on the meaning of ancestral places. My thesis explores how various views of the past influence Marquesan interactions with the land, including its use. It reveals how local views of history and experiences in the forest guide both cultural and environmental sustainability in the Marquesas Islands.

Despite terrible historic losses of Marquesan life and knowledge due to colonialism, warfare, depopulation and disease, certain local understandings of the “bush” outside of villages have survived. For generations, islanders have maintained and transmitted a tentative spiritual connection to the ancestral landscapes where they work each day. Typical Marquesan approaches to livelihoods, land ownership and use continue to rely upon traditional relationships of exchange and family lineage, thus reinforcing islanders’ relationships to ancestral spirits and places. For most Marquesans, the sacred power (*mana*) in the land guides how they view their heritage and the bush. Yet, the importance of spiritual meaning to land use and development remains largely unrecognized by existing heritage initiatives and the Marquesas’ most powerful organizational bodies, including government and the Catholic Church.

The effective management and use of Marquesan heritage requires a recognition of the islands’ tangled past, present and future, as well as the particular way in which islanders value their land. My research suggests that evaluating heritage places from a more local perspective could advance both the protection of heritage and the revitalization of Marquesan culture.

### *Methodology*

I spent the year 2013 living with families in almost every village of the Marquesas Islands, on all six inhabited islands. During that time I conducted interviews with 407 people, 400 of whom signed a consent form allowing me to use their information for my project. I also observed, photographed, documented and participated in everyday activities such as farming, foraging and planting in the bush.

The 380 Marquesans for whom I analyzed data ranged in age from 15 to 83, with an average age of 48. They included farmers, fishermen, hunters, artists, teachers, mayors, administrators, municipal workers, village elders and home makers. I spoke with 20 non-Marquesans in Tahiti and the Marquesas, including scholars, heritage workers and French

expatriates. The interviews were informal discussions about the land, farming, foraging and historic sites, and they lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to over 3 hours. Roughly a quarter of them were group interviews involving more than one person, and I spoke with roughly 45 individuals more than once.

My research was aided by more than a decade of previous experience in the Marquesas, my fluency in French and conversational knowledge of Marquesan. Recorded discussions took place largely in or around the homes of participants or in the bush. Interviews were conducted in French and Marquesan and a total of 75 were held either partly or entirely in Marquesan, with occasional help from a local translator. My main goal was to speak with people who use the land on a regular basis, including farmers, artists and hunters. Less than half of the participants have been actively involved in heritage work such as the current UNESCO World Heritage List nomination, cultural revitalization projects, archaeology or tourism.

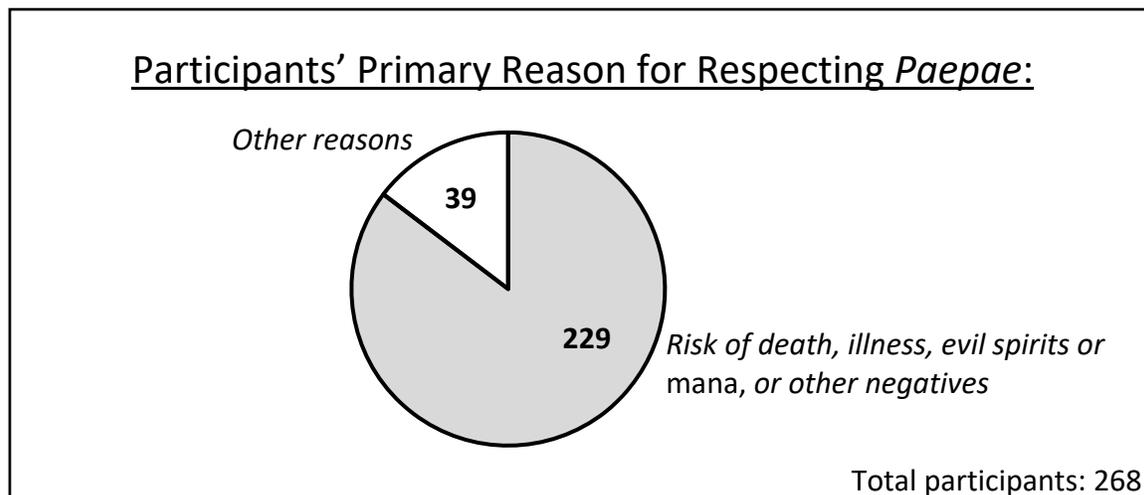
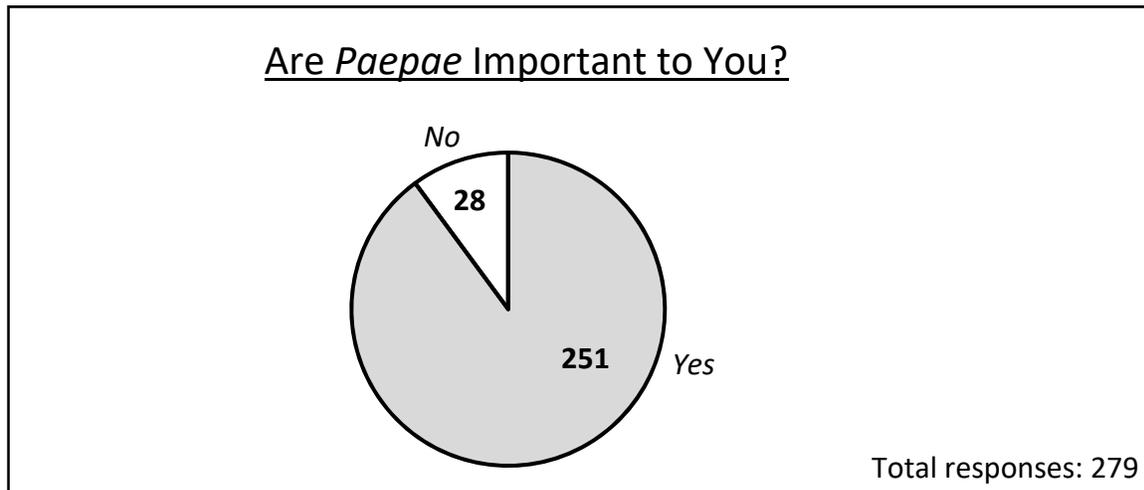
### *Findings*

My findings illustrate how conflicting views of land rights, heritage goals, economic aspirations and ancestral spirits influence Marquesan land use and heritage. Typical Western or European perspectives clash with widespread Marquesan views in three main areas: livelihoods, land ownership, and the meaning of land. The Western approach tends to focus on: 1) individual ambition and the accumulation of wealth; 2) exclusive rights to privately owned land; and 3) the aesthetic and economic value of resources. In contrast, for most Marquesans: 1) pursuing a living means making money while continuing to honor familial obligations to share and exchange non-monetary goods; 2) the use and rights to land largely owned by extended families depend on social relations and one's previous investment of labor; and 3) relationships to the land involve both resources and respect for *mana* and the spirits in the bush. Based on Western perspectives, current heritage initiatives here and around the world aim to preserve sites with clear ownership structures whose resources have obvious economic and aesthetic value. In the Marquesas, the resulting tension over the meaning of heritage helps to explain why some historic sites are maintained while others are destroyed or neglected.

Above all, each islander treats ancestral places differently, depending on how much they know and value the practices of respect transmitted across generations. By reading the environment based on what they feel or hear, Marquesans decide how to treat a site. As they interact with these places, many feel both fear and affirmation or pride. Islanders sense they are in a sacred (or *tapu*) place because they get goose bumps, their hair stands on end, they feel a weight on their shoulders or back, their head feels as if it is growing large or heavy, or they hear mysterious voices, sounds or a phantom rooster call. If you ignore these signs from the spirits and continue as you were, you risk being struck with bad luck, illness or even death.

Thus, despite generations of suppression and silence about traditional spirituality, many islanders still view the bush as alive with powerful ancestral spirits. For them, the past is still present. Although some have doubts, the majority of Marquesans remain alert to the signs of spirits in the bush, particularly around ancestral sites. Of the 279 Marquesans who were asked whether historic ruins (*paepae*) are important to them, 90% answered yes, naming reasons such as pride, educational value, value for future generations, admiration or spiritual power (*mana*). Yet, of the 268 Marquesans who mentioned respecting *paepae*, 85% did so because of associations with death, sickness, ancestral spirits or *mana* (see charts). An additional 61

participants mentioned the same associations with ruins without reference to respect, meaning that a total of 76% of the 380 Marquesans interviewed took note of these sinister meanings.



Practicing respect for ancestral sites includes not disturbing stones or urinating, defecating or climbing on top of *paepae* platforms. In many cases, this means that islanders help to preserve historic sites. For some of the most sacred sites, however, preservation is not always the result. Most islanders entirely avoid these places, even to the point of neglect and destruction due to erosion, tree growth or the activities of wild pigs.

The influence of this kind of respect and the ancestral spirits on Marquesan heritage remains largely unrecognized by historic preservation initiatives in the Marquesas. Instead, ancestral places are being viewed in terms of their value for tourism and the promotion of Marquesan culture. This selective view of culture ignores the *mana* that islanders negotiate daily in historic landscapes, creating tension over the meaning of heritage and a number of restored dance sites. As the popular interpretation of Marquesan ancestral places shifts into something monetary and political, their former importance as sites of familial respect or spiritual power begins to falter and the sites, themselves, can become endangered along with an important part of Marquesan culture.

The future of Marquesan heritage therefore depends upon a certain resistance to goals that favor state and international interests. In the Marquesas and among other indigenous peoples, those working to preserve heritage may make genuine efforts to involve and benefit local communities. Yet, Marquesan relationships to the land, livelihoods, spirits and the past demonstrate how “preserving” historic resources can in fact threaten certain cultural practices and transmission.

### *Recommendations*

As plans for heritage preservation and sustainable development in the Marquesas move forward, I strongly recommend greater attention to how spirituality, colonialism and the past influence islanders’ interactions with the land. The UNESCO project addresses only a small selection of sites, but it promises to have lasting effects on how Marquesans view their ancestral places more generally. Already, restoration and other preservation efforts have proven difficult to realize and sustain. Of the historic sites that have been restored in the Marquesas, only 30% are regularly maintained. These challenges arise from issues of land ownership, financing and local politics but also the uncertainty many islanders feel about the meaning of historic sites. A greater effort to recognize these feelings and incorporate Marquesan understandings of land, resources and ancestral places could improve the outcome of these and other future resource management projects.

This revised approach to heritage could help to ensure the future and continuity of historic landscapes that include trees, birds and ruins as well as Marquesan culture. Drawing upon existing beliefs about spirits and sacred lands as well as the ongoing, everyday practices of respect already observed by many islanders, this strategy might include the following goals, among others:

- 1) Acknowledge that respect for ancestral spirits and *mana* is a valid reason why historic places should not be destroyed, independent of their unique or future value;
- 2) Accept neglect due to spiritual meaning as a form of heritage preservation;
- 3) Avoid making assumptions about the separation of nature from culture, past from present, and the individual from his/her environment;
- 4) Avoid framing heritage management in terms of “education” and “awareness,” and instead focus on listening and discussion; and
- 5) Prioritize different forms of conveying and sharing information with islanders including oral, written and multi-media communication, at different scales such as between individuals and in both small and large groups of kin or others.

The resulting heritage management plan could be shaped around working historic landscapes that are preserved through agriculture and local land use that respects and incorporates indigenous understandings of spirituality, the land and the past. Islanders should collectively determine whether, and how, certain heritage practices or information are shared, and whether they prefer to forget certain painful aspects of their history.

This approach ultimately promises a greater and more lasting benefit to Marquesans by encouraging existing local interest as well as responsibility for how historic sites are preserved and maintained. Thus, both the Marquesan present and the past to guide the future of their culture and their islands.