

# Feeling “Superstitious”:

## Affect and the Land in the Marquesas Islands

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### ABSTRACT

For many Indigenous peoples, ancestral lands are a source of nourishment, strength, and sovereignty that counteracts colonial legacies of violence and hegemony. However, the feelings associated with place and the land can also be complicated by embodied fear and ambivalence. What happens when the remnants of colonialism feed feelings of ambivalence, shame, or fear of the land? How do these lasting emotional scars on Indigenous minds and bodies impact Native place-making, today? This paper problematizes the role of ancestral lands and affective place-making in shaping Indigenous identity, sovereignty, resource management, and sustainability. In the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia, ancestral places are felt as much as seen, and the spirits that dwell there can be dangerous. The active concealment of these Marquesan reactions and relationships to place illustrates the blending of colonial and Indigenous histories and values in ambivalent, affective experiences on the land. Thus, even as islanders work to revitalize their traditional culture and build a sustainable future based on ancestral places, reticence complicates local relationships to the land and the vital hopes they represent. As global sustainability efforts emphasize the conservation of lands inhabited by Indigenous communities, recognizing the conflicted, emplaced emotions and experiences of local peoples will be a key part of understanding such areas and how to preserve them.

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Feeling like you belong to a place, as your ancestors did before you, is a crucial source of Indigenous strength and community.<sup>1</sup> In Hawaii this spiritual, emotional link to the land is known as *aloha ʻāina*, or “to love the land” in an active, reciprocal way that expresses “mutual benefit, commitment, and physical exchange” with resources that represent ancestral spirits.<sup>2</sup> For inhabitants of Mugaba/Rennell, in the Solomons, both people and land are “historically constituted” through the ancestors and their actions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for these islanders and many other Indigenous peoples, honouring, respecting, and autonomously tending to the land often represents a moral duty as well as a political goal rooted in affect.<sup>4</sup>

In French Polynesia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and elsewhere, communities and state governments have tried to advance conservation goals by tapping into this sense of morality through evoking the Polynesian concept of *rāhui*, a system of restricting access to certain resources based on political power, *mana* (sacred spiritual power), and a broader system of *tapu*, restrictions shaped by the sacred nature of certain things, spaces, and activities.<sup>5</sup> While Indigenous communities have long used *rāhui* to assert their own political voice and sovereignty, its use by state government focuses on state-wide policies that address international conservation pressures and objectives. Thus, governments tend to use *rāhui* in isolation from its moral context, refashioning it as “a way of asserting [the state’s] legitimacy and its sovereignty in the face of [*rāhui*’s] reassertion by indigenous communities.”<sup>6</sup> This merely nominal approach to engaging with Indigenous values and connections to resources is, however, insufficient to achieve the most effective and sustainable conservation methods.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996), 13–52.

<sup>2</sup> Kekuhi Kealiikanakaoileohaililani and Christian P. Giardina, “Embracing the sacred: an indigenous framework for tomorrow’s sustainability science,” *Sustainability Science* 11 (2016): 57–67.

<sup>3</sup> Mia Browne, “A Living Past and Uncertain Futures: *Tūpuna* (Ancestors or Grandparents) in the Ongoing Transformation of People and Place on Mugaba (Rennell Island),” in *Haunted Pacific: Anthropologists Investigate Spectral Apparitions Across Oceania*, ed. Roger Ivar Lohmann (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2019), 15–40; Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Joanne Barker, ed., *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Brian Murton, “Being in the Place World: Toward a Maori ‘Geographical Self,’” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 29, no. 1 (2012): 88.

<sup>5</sup> Tamatoa Bambridge, ed., *The Rāhui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Tamatoa Bambridge, “The *rāhui*: A tool for environmental protection or for political assertion?” in *The Rāhui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Beau J. Austin et al., “Integrated Measures of Indigenous Land and Sea Management Effectiveness: Challenges and Opportunities for Improved Conservation Partnerships in Australia,” *Conservation and Society* 16, no. 3 (2018): 372–384.

With Indigenous peoples’ lands accounting for 36 percent of the world’s intact forest landscapes, the ability to protect global biodiversity and combat climate change depends on a greater understanding and recognition of Indigenous relationships to nature and to place.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the burgeoning literature on this topic highlights the strong connection between Indigenous management strategies rooted in place and environmental sustainability.<sup>9</sup> But what happens when the feelings associated with a place are tinged by ambivalence, shame, or fear, and connections based on affect go into hiding? Conflict and violence saturate the histories of settler colonialism, leaving lasting emotional scars on Indigenous minds, bodies, and places around the world.<sup>10</sup> For many, the process of living with this past isn’t simply a matter of moving forward; it’s about building a future that effectively navigates the mixed colonial and Indigenous legacies embedded in ancestral lands. What part does affect play in this process?

This article problematizes the role of ancestral lands and affective place-making in shaping Indigenous identity, sovereignty, resource management, and sustainability. A case study of the Marquesan islanders of French Polynesia (figure 1) illustrates how affect can animate Native place-making in ambivalent ways, emphasizing the influence of not just colonial institutions but embodied experiences and the ongoing dismissal of legitimate local beliefs about the land as pre-Christian “superstitions.”<sup>11</sup> Even as Marquesans work to revitalize their traditions and build a sustainable future for their islands, hidden affective connections to the land highlight their continued navigation of a troubled past. This conflicted relationship to place evokes a complex blend of secrecy, shame, uncertainty, and ambition that represents both colonial processes and Indigenous resilience. Marquesan lands, resources, and hopes for the future are caught up in a tangled net of intermingled colonial and Indigenous understandings of history, place, and sustainability.

I approach emotion and affect as two complementary pieces of embodied experience situated in a particular cultural, political, and geographic landscape, with no hard divide between the “qualified intensity” of conscious, subjective emotions anchored in linguistic expression and the “unqualified,” unconscious, and unrecognizable intensity of affect.<sup>12</sup> Although Marquesans

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<sup>8</sup> Julia E. Fa et al., “Importance of Indigenous Peoples’ lands for the conservation of Intact Forest Landscapes,” *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 18, no. 3 (2020): 135–140.

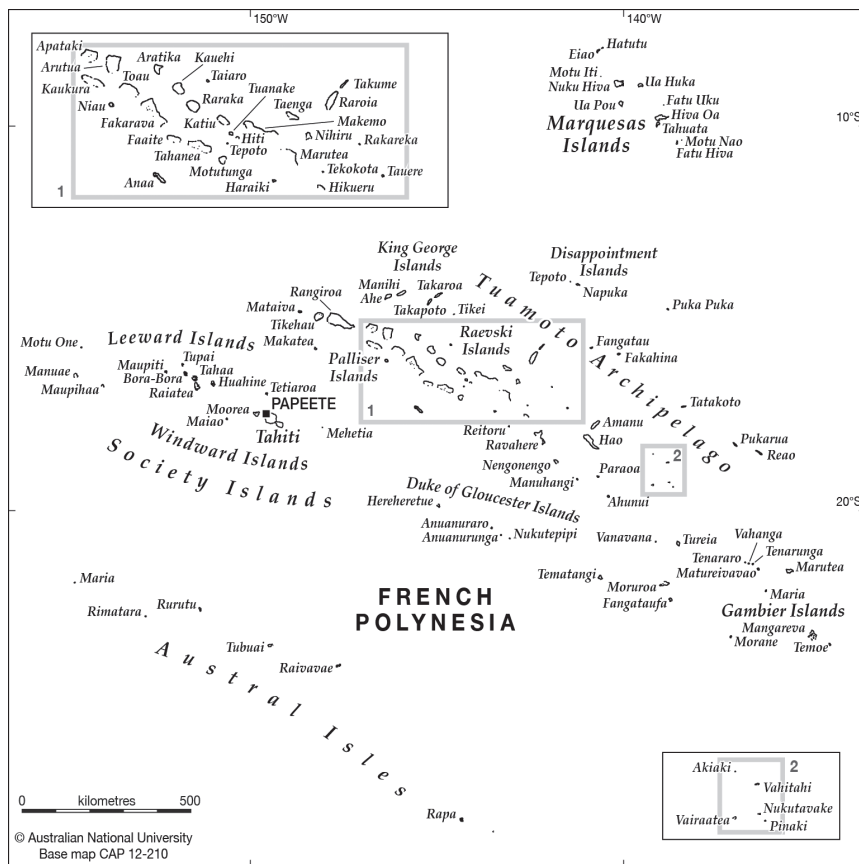
<sup>9</sup> UNEP (United Nations Environment Program), “Indigenous people and nature: a tradition of conservation” (26 April 2017), <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-people-and-nature-tradition-conservation>.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> The placemaking processes discussed here apply to all kinds of Marquesan spaces on land and sea, but this article specifically addresses land, as a key example.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

Figure 1  
Map of French Polynesia



Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Base map CAP 12-210

do not recognize affect as such, they experience ancestral places as both 1) emotive events that they identify and process; and 2) instinctive and autonomous reactions that motivate their behaviour on the land in culturally conditioned ways,<sup>13</sup> or what I call embodied experience. Local relationships to the land emerge continuously out of these two experiential processes, as the recognition of affect drives the transformation of emotions that, in turn, influence affect.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a conscious knowing of one ancestral place feeds

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Catherine Lutz, "What Matters," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 181–191.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel White, "Affect: An Introduction," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 175–180.

the instinctive response to other, similar landscapes. This relationship resonates with the uncertainties of Marquesan affect and place-making and, if recognized, it could strengthen Marquesan influence over the management of their islands, leveraging knowledge as power.<sup>15</sup>

I begin by exploring the relationship between Marquesan history and affect, including the mechanics of how involuntary responses are driven into hiding. A look at Marquesan place-making illustrates how relationships to the land are formed, as well as how they influence the use of resources and Marquesan visions for a sustainable future, emphasizing the connection between the recognition of affect and cultivating respect for Indigenous lands and resources.

I have been working in the Marquesas for the last two decades as an archaeologist and social anthropologist, mainly on the island of Tahuata. My doctoral research in 2013 and 2014 was the first ethnography of Marquesan heritage and contemporary land use. I spent over a year living with families on all six inhabited Marquesas Islands doing participant observations and site visits, taking field notes, working on the land and sea, and meeting with Marquesan collaborators. I also conducted some 400 informal, unstructured interviews with Marquesans. Continued by phone and in follow-up visits to the islands in 2016 and 2019, these discussions used no standard template and often ventured into life histories and personal accounts of family, work, food, and livelihoods. My position as an American (not French) woman, as well as my previous familiarity with the islands and the Marquesan language, also greatly benefitted this research, which serves as the primary basis for this article.

### Marquesan Places and the Past

Marquesans relate to the environment, and construct place, based on a complex combination of affect and beliefs. Places are the physical spaces rendered meaningful by cultural processes and practices,<sup>16</sup> spatial environments that anchor “individuals in the social and cultural soils from which they have sprung together, holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood.”<sup>17</sup> At one time the terms for this negotiation were molded by Marquesan gods, inspirational priests, sacred (*tapu*) rules, and personal experiences of *mana*.<sup>18</sup> Yet colonial contact,

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<sup>15</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 90, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, “Introduction” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Keith H. Basso, “Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996), 85.

<sup>18</sup> E. S. Craighill Handy, *The Native Culture in the Marquesas* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1923); Nicholas Thomas, *Marquesan Societies: Inequality and Political Transformations in Eastern Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

conquest, and conversion to Christianity have propelled this relationship almost entirely out of praxis and into the realm of affect. Traditional priests and leaders are gone, along with many of the constraints of a *tapu* system whose sacred spaces and activities once guided Marquesan movements through the landscape. What remain are visceral, embodied experiences of place that reflect both Indigenous values and colonial expectations.<sup>19</sup>

Early Marquesan voyagers colonized the islands roughly 1,000 years ago and went on to build massive village complexes of giant stones, forge extensive inter-island exchange networks, and craft ornate works of art.<sup>20</sup> But following sustained European contact in the eighteenth century, island chiefdoms were decimated by disease. By the early twentieth century the Marquesan population had contracted to roughly a tenth of its pre-contact size. Those who survived became targets for conversion by the Protestant and Catholic missionaries who first arrived in the 1820s.<sup>21</sup> Catholic influence, in particular, grew after France annexed the islands in 1842.

Despite almost a century of sustained resistance to it, by the early twentieth century Christianity had become a dominant force in Marquesan lives. It fed the destruction of ancient *tiki*, or sacred stone images of gods or ancestors, and the exorcism of “devils” from Marquesan places, bodies, and things.<sup>22</sup> Catholic priests recounted cannibal “feasts” in detail, feeding perceptions of a “savage” people.<sup>23</sup> To visitors the Marquesas were an untamed wilderness, an image cultivated by stories of cannibalism and human sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> Under the influence of Christianity, Marquesans increasingly dismissed legitimate family stories of *tapu* and *mana* as the remnants of “paganism,” or mere “superstitions.”<sup>25</sup> Through its teachings, community programs, and schooling, the Catholic Church reshaped customary spiritual beliefs and the Marquesan past, itself, into something shameful.

This shift occurred at the same time that islanders were losing their own religious leaders and knowledge keepers to violence and disease.<sup>26</sup> Today,

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<sup>19</sup> Emily C. Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors: Mana and Place in the Marquesas Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Melinda S. Allen, “Marquesan Colonisation Chronologies and Post-colonisation Interaction: Implications for Hawaiian origins and the ‘Marquesan Homeland’ hypothesis,” *Journal of Pacific Archaeology* 5, no. 2 (2014): 1–17.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Bailleul, *Les îles Marquises: Histoire de la Terre des Hommes Fenua Enata du XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle à nos jours* (Tahiti: Ministère de la Culture de Polynésie française, 2001), 73–74; Thomas, *Marquesan Societies*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick O’Reilly, “Éssai d’évangélisation des Marquises par la Société missionnaire de Hawaï (1832-1880),” *Journal de la Société des océanistes* 17 (1961): 25–34.

<sup>23</sup> S. Louvain and E. Verbiest, *Revue Catholique, Recueil religieux, philosophique, scientifique, historique et littéraire*, vol. 2 (Paris: Louvain, 1868), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Robarts, *The Marquesan Journal of Edward Robarts, 1797-1824*, ed. Greg Denning (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), 116.

<sup>25</sup> For example, William Pascoe Crook, *An Account of the Marquesas Islands 1797-1799* (Tahiti: Haere Po, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980).

## Feeling “Superstitious”

the compounded loss of lives and knowledge means that islanders live and work in landscapes populated by ancient ruins and unknown ancestral spirits (figure 2). Rooted in fragmentary knowledge about *mana* and the past, these places continue to exercise a mysterious power over local bodies. Affective experiences with ancestral spirits that dwell in ancient structures and trees guide Indigenous use of the land, influencing how islanders move and work in the forest.

*Figure 2*  
*The stone ruins of an ancient structure (paepae) of a foundation in*  
*Omoa, Fatu Hiva*



*Source:* Photo taken by author, 2013.

Notions of *mana* endure in diverse and dynamic forms throughout the Pacific. In Samoa and Fiji, Christian teachings draw upon it, and it is a keystone of contemporary Native Hawaiian and Maori arts. Native Hawaiians have also evoked it in defending their ancestral burial grounds.<sup>27</sup> In the Marquesas, *mana* today is a generative force that originates with ancestral spirits or gods and is fundamentally ambiguous, capable of either supportive or destructive power. An ambiguous blend of colonial and Indigenous

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<sup>27</sup> Matt Tomlinson and Ty Kawika Tengan, *New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures* (Canberra: Australian National Press, 2016).

influences, it plays a crucial role in Marquesan dance, art, and interactions with places on the land and sea.<sup>28</sup> In particular, *mana*'s resilient power reflects the urgent presence of the Marquesan past in the present and the future, echoing other Polynesian, nonlinear approaches to time and space. As Hūfanga Māhina notes, for many islanders of Moana (Oceania), “people are thought to walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future, both taking place in the present, where the past and future are constantly mediated in the ever-transforming present.”<sup>29</sup> Rooted in this perspective, Marquesan affective experiences of ancestral places simultaneously embody their past, present, and future.

Traditional Marquesan structures, both sacred and profane, were built upon sturdy stone foundations (*paepae*) whose ruins remain scattered throughout the islands' deep valleys—areas now used for cultivating fruit and coconut trees. Regular interactions with these sites cultivate an awareness of the spirits, whose presence is felt through affective responses to the land. When asked about his youthful experiences chopping copra (coconut meat that is then dried and processed into oil) with his family, Nuku Hiva elder Alphonse Puhetini noted how “there were places they said not to go.” Such places were *tapu*, or off-limits, “because the spirits of the ancestors are there,” he explained. If you go there, “you get goosebumps. You see? You feel there's something negative there. So when you go you must be humble. You must bring a lot of humility.”<sup>30</sup> The same involuntary, physiological response was described in the context of creative processes such as carving and dance.<sup>31</sup> Veteran dancer Edgar Tametona explained how the best dances must “come from within [oneself and the land], from our ancestors. Because a dance that's powerful, that's one where you get goosebumps, and if you have goosebumps, that means that our ancestors are there.”<sup>32</sup> Paloma Gilmore even spoke of seeing “the ancestors dancing among [living dancers], between them. And it gave me goosebumps!”<sup>33</sup>

Islanders often address the spirits in ancestral places, and they remain alert to the physical signs of unsettled spirits. In addition to goosebumps, a person may hear unusual sounds, rooster crows, or shifts in the wind, feel their head growing large or sense a sudden weight on their shoulders. These affective experiences arise subconsciously and signal hostile spirits or dangerous *mana*. They are often, but not always, associated with fear—a point clarified early

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<sup>28</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina, “*Tā, Vā, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity*,” *Pacific Studies* 33, nos. 2–3 (2010): 168–202.

<sup>30</sup> 14 September 2013, Hatiheu, Nuku Hiva. This and all subsequent quotes are from informal interviews conducted in person. The real names of the speakers are used, with their permission, unless otherwise noted. Although this and many other quotes used in this article are from 2013, they reflect attitudes about the land, spirits, and place that have endured for years and continue today.

<sup>31</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> 23 August 2013 in Hanavave, Fatu Hiva.

<sup>33</sup> 18 August 2013 in Omoa, Fatu Hiva.



on in my research, when my adoptive Marquesan sister corrected my direct (and Western) association between goosebumps and fear.

Young mother Moevai Huukena Bonno described visiting the uninhabited valley of Haawai, Nuku Hiva with her father when she was a girl. They hunted and collected wood for carving there, and she remembered seeing many ruins and “lots of things for the dead, and stones for sacrifices.” She added that “Haawai is a place where people have been played [by the spirits],” for example, feeling “like you’re being strangled in your bed,” or seeing someone when there was no one there. Because of this feeling, she said, when they visited Haawai “we were never really peaceful.”<sup>34</sup>

The involuntary quality of such experiences can deepen the sense of shame, or public judgment, instilled by centuries of Christian teachings about “paganism.” Due to a sense of collective identity and responsibility the weight of this shame here, as elsewhere in the Pacific, impacts not just individuals, but whole families.<sup>35</sup> As a result, Marquesans often dismiss stories about *tapu* and *mana* as “superstitious” (nonsense), yet still something to respect. For example, elder Marie Louise Barsinas Tetahiotupa explained:

[M]aybe for someone who doesn’t know anything about our culture, if they come and happen to take a pee on a *paepae* [stone ruin], then maybe nothing will happen to them. But if someone comes and you know that the *paepae* is a sacred place for our ancestors that you must respect, and you come and do that on purpose? Then it’s a question of respect ... [And] then maybe something will happen because you’re crushing them or wetting them with your pee. You’re mocking them.<sup>36</sup>

Like so many Marquesans, Marie Louise is a dedicated Catholic torn between the need to respect her ancestors and the uncertainty of belief and “superstitions.” The resulting ambivalence reflects the workings of entangled, conflicting colonial and Indigenous ideas about place, time, and spirituality on Marquesan places and bodies.<sup>37</sup>

This ambivalence manifests through affect, as a person’s body alerts them to ancestral places regardless of their beliefs or what they subjectively think about the transmitted stories or spirits associated with a particular place. The spot in question may be little more than a pile of rocks overgrown with weeds, a pit in the ground, or a particularly somber section of forest (for example, see figure 3). Indeed, many islanders do not actually know *tapu* places in detail, because they’ve never dared to explore. But their emotional and

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<sup>34</sup> 11 September 2013 in Taiohae, Nuku Hiva.

<sup>35</sup> Komathi Kolandai-Matchett et al., “How gambling harms experienced by Pacific people in New Zealand amplify when they are culture-related,” *Asian Journal of Gambling Issues and Public Health* 7, no. 5 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40405-017-0026-3>.

<sup>36</sup> 19 April 2013 in Vaitahu, Tahuata.

<sup>37</sup> Emily C. Donaldson, “Place, Destabilized: Ambivalent Heritage, Community and Colonialism in the Marquesas Islands,” *Oceania* 88, no. 1 (2018): 69–89.

Figure 3. A *tapu* site in Puamau, Hiva Oa



Note: The photograph shows a *paepae* (bottom, centre) overtaken by the bush (photo taken with permission from family members at the site).

Source: Photo taken by author, 2013.

physical response to these sites is immediate and real, similar to the “hauntings” observed elsewhere in the contemporary Pacific.<sup>38</sup>

Marquesan *tapu* places lack the intentionality or detailed narrative shape typical of other haunted places. The great majority of Marquesan spirits are vague and nameless, described simply as *tūpāpau*<sup>39</sup> (ghosts or the dead) or *ūhane* (spirits) depending on whether their influence is threatening or benign.<sup>40</sup> In this respect, they resemble the “undistinguished spirits” (*atua vare*) of the Anutan bush, in the Solomon Islands.<sup>41</sup> The ambiguity of Marquesan relationships to either threatening or supportive ancestral spirits recalls the haunting landscapes of Papua New Guinea’s Asabano and

<sup>38</sup> For example, Roger Ivar Lohmann, ed., *Haunted Pacific: Anthropologists Investigate Spectral Apparitions Across Oceania* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Here and throughout the paper, I use the Marquesan Academy’s orthography and vocabulary from the Southern Marquesan dialect.

<sup>40</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Feinberg, “Spirit Encounters on a Polynesian Outlier, Anuta, Solomon Islands,” in *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, eds. Jeannette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard (New York: Routledge, 1996), 107.

Bedamini.<sup>42</sup> Just as the Bedamini “sense” spirits that appear in animal form,<sup>43</sup> Marquesans feel ancestral places. Yet Marquesans also struggle to hide these emotions. Unlike the Bedamini or the Solomon Islands’ Taumoko, who integrate their beliefs in pre-Christian spirits, *mana*, and magic with a “largely complementary” and active faith in God,<sup>44</sup> Marquesan belief in ancestral spirits often comes with shame.

In knowing and experiencing ancestral places through affect, Marquesans embody understandings largely pushed out of the rest of their lives by science, rationality, and Christianity. One might discuss *tapu* or encounters with ancestral spirits in the privacy of one’s home, but such topics are absent from the broader social contexts of bingo games, community gatherings, or church. Steeped in tension, experiences of *mana* tend to generate uncertainty and a wary skepticism. Likewise, elsewhere in the Pacific, Anutans debate whether spirit encounters can be believed, asking if they are “real,”<sup>45</sup> while public discourses and behaviours relating to spirit interactions on Rotuma have markedly declined.<sup>46</sup>

The growing silence around Rotuman spirits has been linked to a decline in local exposure to the natural environment, diminished community spirit, lower mortality rates, and increased access to remote areas once inhabited by spirits. But such “demystification” has not occurred in the Marquesas,<sup>47</sup> where mortality rates and community spirit have likewise declined but reciprocity and community values continue to anchor everyday life.<sup>48</sup> While Marquesan exposure to the forest has decreased somewhat due to advancing technology and an educational system that requires pulling youth out of their villages from as early as nine years old, islanders continue to access the forest regularly on foot or horseback. These differences, and repeated references to “paganism” in Marquesan discussions of *mana* and spirits, point to Christianity as a primary factor in driving Marquesan shame and reticence regarding affective experiences of ancestral places.

For example, islanders often frame sensations of *mana* within the context

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<sup>42</sup> Roger Ivar Lohmann, “Geography of the Dead: How Asabano Places Become Haunted” in *Haunted Pacific: Anthropologists Investigate Spectral Apparitions Across Oceania*, ed. Roger Ivar Lohmann (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2019), 144; Arse Sørum, “The Spirit Within: The Landscape of Bedamini Spirit Séances,” in *Haunted Pacific: Anthropologists Investigate Spectral Apparitions Across Oceania*, ed. Roger Ivar Lohmann (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2019), 191–212.

<sup>43</sup> Sørum, “The Spirit Within,” 197.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Feinberg, “A Spiritual Melting Pot: Taumoko, Solomon Islands,” in *Haunted Pacific: Anthropologists Investigate Spectral Apparitions Across Oceania*, ed. Roger Ivar Lohmann (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2019), 90–117.

<sup>45</sup> Feinberg, “Spirit Encounters,” 107.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Howard, “Speak of the Devils: Discourse and Belief in Spirits on Rotuma,” in *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, eds. Jeannette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard (New York: Routledge, 1996), 121–146.

<sup>47</sup> Howard, “Speak of the Devils,” 132–134.

<sup>48</sup> Emily C. Donaldson, “Troubled Lands: Sovereignty and Livelihoods in the Marquesas Islands,” *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 75, no. 2 (2018): 356.

of religious conversion. One woman explained how, while collecting coconuts among ancient ruins, she would climb on top of the stones “to clear brush, and even to play. All the *tapu* is over since the missionaries came. But I think there are still certain places that are *tapu*. When you go to those places, or you go on certain *marae* (ceremonial sites), you feel a presence ... you know? Especially over in Hakaohoka, in that valley ... there’s something that remains there. You feel it.”<sup>49</sup> Such stories about lingering spirits often referred to abandoned valleys like Hakaohoka, where the forest is full of overgrown ruins. In the absence of specific histories about *paepae*, ancestral places are felt and heard as much as seen. The visceral feelings and embodied experiences that signal the presence of spirits at these sites are most often dismissed as shameful pre-Christian “superstitions.”

The resulting uncertainty about how to approach heritage highlights another tension, between Western perceptions of place as an external and material environment, and Marquesan views of place as a context for human/non-human relationships and affective spiritual connection.<sup>50</sup> Marquesans are acutely aware of this difference in understanding. When I began my doctoral research I had already been working in the Marquesas for twelve years, researching archaeological sites and exploring the relationships between islanders and their ancestral objects. Yet it wasn’t until I started asking people specifically for stories about forest ruins that I began to discover the true significance of spirits in Marquesan life and work. Repeatedly terms like *tapu* and *paioio* (guardian spirits) appeared—words I had almost never heard Marquesans mention before. Islanders’ reluctance to talk about these subjects with most foreigners illustrates the enduring shame they feel about the “paganism” of the past and their affective connections to ancestral places.

Explaining his own feelings on the topic, Marquesan priest Émile Buchin noted how there are still some Marquesans who speak with the spirits. “They speak to *paioio* and all that ... [but] I don’t think it’s good to bring that back to life. I think we must continue today, and leave the past in the past ... If not we are mixing times.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than embracing the kind of “personal pluralism” practiced by many Temne speakers in Sierra Leone,<sup>52</sup> Marquesans thus remain poised on the brink between two belief systems, or two “times,” as Émile calls it. Yet this perspective also clashes with shared Polynesian interpretations of a present moving into the past.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Pava Akafitu, 12 October 2013, in Hohoi, Ua Pou. Pseudonym used to protect the speaker’s identity.

<sup>50</sup> See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Gift and the Given: Three Nano-Essays on Kinship and Magic,” in *Kinship and Beyond: The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, eds. Sandra Bamford and James Leach (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 245; Murton, “Being in the Place World,” 95; Ruth Panelli, “More-than-human social geographies: posthuman and other possibilities,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 1 (2010): 79–87.

<sup>51</sup> 21 April 2013 in Hanavave, Fatu Hiva.

<sup>52</sup> Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 145.

<sup>53</sup> Mähina, “*Tā, Vā*.”

## Feeling “Superstitious”

As among Tuvalu islanders, the Marquesan understanding of ancestral places contains a dissonance as “the voice of belief coexists with, but contradicts, the voice of disbelief”<sup>54</sup> surrounding the presence and power (*mana*) of ancestral spirits. The resulting suppression of their embodied and emotional responses to ancestral places has generated a reticence about the past as well as the future, hindering broader recognition of the meaning of Indigenous places. A closer look at the process of Marquesan place-making reveals how ambivalence around this conflict and local relationships to the spirits impacts islanders’ understandings of the land.

### Affect and Ambivalent Place-Making

In his exploration of place as seen from an Indigenous Kwara’ae perspective, David Gegeo breaks down the concept of a “place situated in source” (*kula ni fuli*) that anchors an individual not just in terms of physical space or origins but as a social, political, economic, linguistic, epistemological, and ontological foundation independent of one’s geographic location.<sup>55</sup> Thus, place-making can occur through diverse mediums, not just the embodied experience of a particular place. For example, for Navajo Nation country musicians, the “affective attachment to particular places—temporal and geographic—is expressed specifically through musical performance” rooted in certain artistic styles and vocabularies. By creating this music, Native bands generate a rooted sense of place, race, and identity independent of the physical “rez.”<sup>56</sup> As Gegeo argues, the resulting connection to place anchors indigeneity through its shared foundation for how “we see the world, interact with it, and interpret social reality.”<sup>57</sup>

Marquesans view their islands as their *tumu* (source of existence) and define “local” based more on social networks, access to resources, and language than on race or geographic origins. Yet the close relationship between Marquesan affect and physical ancestral places troubles the perception of place-making as portable. Indeed, Brian Murton highlights the importance of the physical, and its tension with modernity, when he observes how “the older concept of identity (*tuakiri*) remains important for most [Maori] people, who still see physical landscapes as inseparable from ancestors, events, occupations, and cultural practices” despite the “dynamic

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<sup>54</sup> Niko Besnier, “Heteroglossic Discourses on Nukulaelae Spirits,” in *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, eds. Jeannette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard (New York: Routledge, 1996), 89.

<sup>55</sup> David Welchman Gegeo, “Cultural Rupture and Indigeneity: The Challenge of (Re)visioning ‘Place’ in the Pacific,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 2 (2001): 493–494.

<sup>56</sup> Kristina Jacobsen, “Rita(hhh): Placemaking and Country Music on the Navajo Nation,” *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 3 (2009): 449–477.

<sup>57</sup> Gegeo, “Cultural Rupture,” 493–494.

and diverse” character of contemporary Maori identity.<sup>58</sup> This emplaced connection has likewise emerged in recent climate change responses and displacement in Fiji, where the relocated villagers of Vunidogoloa exhumed the remains of their dead in order to rebury them on higher ground.<sup>59</sup>

Such profound Polynesian connections to the physical land (*vanua* in Fijian, *fenua* in Marquesan) are born of reciprocal relationships to resources and the ancestors, based in place-making and respect. For example, one Marquesan explained how bones were discovered during construction of her village’s Catholic church. “And they weren’t really at peace, you know? The *tupuna* (ancestors) were angry. Before it was really wild and there was still that *mana*, the *mana* of the *tupuna*.”<sup>60</sup> Étienne Tehaamoana, former mayor of the island of Hiva Oa, explained how Marquesans believe in this *mana*, “but people from outside, they don’t believe. Even the Marquesans who live in Tahiti, they don’t believe too much. But yes, when you talk about that stuff, then they know. It’s in their culture.”<sup>61</sup> For Marquesans, physical distance erodes their personal, affective relationship to place and the land (“that stuff”), but awareness of *mana* remains a key component of Marquesan identity.<sup>62</sup>

A carver and entrepreneur who frequently visits Tahiti described this physical connection to place as a creative energy or *mana*, a gift from the earth and the ancestors that dissipates the longer you stay away from “your source” (*tumu*). He noted how “the power of the wood” he uses in his art “comes through the earth. When you hold it, you look at it and you see the color and everything, and it talks to you.” I asked if young people have the same link to the *tumu* as he does. He hesitated. “Some of them, yes; you can feel it. Those who learned with their parents ... they still have it. But others, no—those who learned at school. There are many who learned carving at school, but it’s not the same result. They know how to do it, but there’s something missing.”<sup>63</sup>

In part due to the continued and regular use of ancestral lands, certain affective elements of Marquesans’ relationship to the land have persisted over the course of centuries.<sup>64</sup> In the late 1790s and mid-1800s, respectively, British missionary William Pascoe Crook and French adventurer Max

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<sup>58</sup> Murton, “Being in the Place World,” 97.

<sup>59</sup> Clothilde Tronquet, “From Vunidogoloa to Kenane: An Insight into Successful Relocation,” in *The State of Environmental Migration 2015: A Review of 2014*, eds. Francois Gemenne, Caroline Zickgraf, and Dina Ionesco (Paris: IOM UN Migration, 2015), 136.

<sup>60</sup> Lydia Vaima’a, 14 June 2013 in Hanatetena, Tahuata.

<sup>61</sup> 17 June 2013, in Atuona, Hiva Oa.

<sup>62</sup> See also Laurence Carucci, “Sentiment and Solidarities: Rooting Enewetak/Ujelang Identities in Space and Place,” *Pacific Studies* 45, no. 1 (2022): (forthcoming publication).

<sup>63</sup> Toa Taiaapu, 4 October 2013 in Vaipae, Ua Huka.

<sup>64</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 72.

Radiguet described *tapu* sites and sacred shrines.<sup>65</sup> In the 1920s, archaeologist Ralph Linton noted islanders’ refusal “to enter the precincts of *me’ae* [or ceremonial sites] through fear of the *tapu*.”<sup>66</sup> Contemporaneous ethnographer E. S. Craighill Handy observed the association between illness and the breaking of *tapu*, as well as stories about dangerous spirits known as *vehine hae* (still described today) whose presence was made known through “whistling of unknown origin,” squeaking branches, or “other eerie sounds.” Their cries could be heard “in the mountains after nightfall, and evil odors that assailed walkers at night were thought to come from these spirits,” he adds. At night, fear of *vehine hae* still drove islanders “to close up their houses as tightly as possible when they sleep.”<sup>67</sup>

Today, families working near forest ruins, or next to banyan trees whose aerial roots once held funerary remains, follow certain rules guided by oral histories transmitted across generations. Islanders carefully instruct their children in the treatment of potentially *tapu* places by telling them not to take anything or burn leaves, relieve themselves or spit on top of stone ruins. Respecting the ancestors in this way ensures that the spirits will not take offense and retaliate by bringing mysterious illnesses, death, or misfortune to family members.<sup>68</sup>

Such praxis is a powerful tool for the reinforcement and transmission of culture through place-making.<sup>69</sup> For example, one elder of Fatu Hiva explained why the breadfruit trees in his valley were not producing fruit. “I think maybe since we don’t make *ma* [a traditional breadfruit paste] any more, or collect the fruits, maybe that’s why they don’t bear fruit any more. [If they did,] what for? To go to waste and fall on the ground? Before, all the homes here made *ma*. That’s why you saw tons of breadfruit in the valley. Tons! Even the breadfruit trees in the bush had tons of fruit. But now? There’s nothing on them.”<sup>70</sup> Historically, the storage of *ma* helped whole tribes survive multi-year periods of prolonged drought. Yet the harvesting of breadfruit, a traditional staple, also represents a particular connection and reciprocity between islanders and the land.

Physical places provide the historical and environmental stage upon which contemporary actions and decisions are made, and meaning created, in the landscape.<sup>71</sup> Speaking of her fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, Miriam Kahn notes how she became Wamiran only when she became “part of Wamira,”

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<sup>65</sup> Crook, *An Account*, 68–69; Max Radiguet, *Les Derniers Sauvages: Aux îles Marquises 1842-1859* (Paris: Phébus, 2001 [1859]), 47.

<sup>66</sup> Ralph Linton, *Archaeology of the Marquesas Islands* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1925), 88.

<sup>67</sup> Handy, *The Native Culture*, 263, 256.

<sup>68</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 60.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>70</sup> Manuel Gilmore, 29 August 2013 in Omoa, Fatu Hiva.

<sup>71</sup> Barbara Bender, “Time and Landscape,” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 4 (2002): 103–112.

or when her personal experience in local places came to shape the land and trigger Wamiran “thoughts and feelings. History, biography, memory, and emotion all merged with and settled in the landscape.”<sup>72</sup>

Another classic example of this affective quality of place appears in Fred Myers’ study of the Pintupi of Australia. For the Pintupi, one’s home and place in the world are defined by a blending of the land and its inhabitants, past and present. Thus Pintupi place is “the embodiment of relationships among people,” and the sharing of a camp and subsistence activities are “the spatial expression of a group of kin.”<sup>73</sup> In colonial or post-colonial contexts this connection can become riddled with ambiguity or uncertainty. Yet through their affective, emplaced quality such relationships can also remain a source of solidarity, as they have among certain Marshall Islanders.<sup>74</sup>

Similar emotional, interpersonal qualities characterize Marquesan relationships with ancestral lands. For islanders, space acquires meaning through human and non-human exchange, as described in the breadfruit story, or through oral history and behavioural transmission. One young copra farmer explained how some ruins are “like a cemetery. They’re enclosed but you can see from the [red tuff] stones, which we call *keetu* [that it’s sacred]. People say those stones, when you see them, it means there’s a *tūpāpau* [spirits]. You must never pee there, on a *marae*; you must really respect the *marae*. Everything [like that], you must keep a certain respect.”<sup>75</sup> Across generations, expressions of this respect have become an important part of how islanders construct places in the forest.

Such place-making occurs at the confluence of contemporary change, meaning, and personal experiences that can alter understandings of the past. Rosalind Shaw’s exploration of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Sierra Leone illustrates how the region’s traumatic history has transformed in this way, over time. The landscape has changed “from one inhabited by spirits who were neighbors to one pervaded by spirits who were raiders.” As in the Marquesas, the physical remnants of this history are “more than anachronistic ‘survivals’ of a past landscape. Through them, the past [is] embodied as an active presence in practices and perceptions of the landscape.”<sup>76</sup>

As islanders process their own affective responses to such landscapes and navigate feelings of uncertainty, fear, and shame, they retreat or divert their steps to avoid ancient trees, ruins, or *tiki*. The resulting behaviours shape Marquesan use of the land and its resources, as the presence of ambiguous spirits and a conflicted, animate past mixes with heritage and commercial uses.

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<sup>72</sup> Miriam Kahn, “Your Place and Mine: Sharing Emotional Landscapes in Wamira, Papua New Guinea,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996), 188.

<sup>73</sup> Myers, *Pintupi Country*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> Carucci, “Sentiment and Solidarities.”

<sup>75</sup> Cyrille Vaki, 25 June 2013 in Taaoa, Hiva Oa.

<sup>76</sup> Shaw, *Memories*, 67, 68.



## Land Use and Affect

The great majority of Marquesans are Catholic, and many practice an active belief in God. Yet their personal and shared histories are scarred by references to “pagans,” a past from which many believe Christianity alone permitted them to escape.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, for centuries Marquesans were described by foreign missionaries and explorers as savages and cannibals,<sup>78</sup> and the impact of these historic accounts has endured. Marquesan students in Tahiti were teased with the “savage” stereotype as recently as the 1980s, and references to the Marquesas as “wild” can still be found in tourist literature. The arrival of television in the 1970s reoriented families away from storytelling, but some elders still tell stories of cannibalism and *vehine hae*, or women who lure men away to eat them at night. For example, one elderly woman recalled passing by several banyan trees up the road from her house as a child. “We’d be playing and we’d say, we must go back quickly! It’s evening. And it was all dark there with the big banyan trees, and it was scary! There were no other lights, not like now.” She continued: “I don’t know if it’s true, but my uncle said that before there was an [earth oven] in that place by the banyans, and they would cook babies in it, and eat them. That’s how it was, before!”<sup>79</sup>

The movement to revitalize Marquesan culture through celebrating language, art, and dance has refashioned the islands’ image with a focus on graceful women, fierce, resilient warriors, and ornate carvings and tattoos. Yet tensions around the past and its meaning remain prominent in local interactions with the land.

Étienne, the former mayor, observed how “young people today, if they see a [small, portable] *tiki*, they take it home. Before that was *tapu*: you had to leave it, or even clean it up. Otherwise the ancestors would get angry.” Nonetheless, he has taught his own children to respect ancestral places. “Even my children, they don’t touch anything on a *paepae*. Any *paepae*, whether it’s living [*tapu*] or not, we don’t take anything. Because it’s what our ancestors have left us. It’s respect for that, and it’s also the worry that we might get sick.”<sup>80</sup> Although I met some young people who have, indeed, taken artifacts from the forest, a much larger number of them emphasized the need for this respect.

The islands’ first Marquesan Catholic priest, Father Émile Buchin, confirmed Marquesans’ ongoing “superstitious” tendencies, noting how he has been asked to bless everything from houses to boats and cars for “security,” or the knowledge that these things will be protected from evil spirits and bad *mana*. For Marquesans, a Catholic blessing (*haàmeiè*) can exorcise the hostile *mana* from a place or thing, much in the same way Anglican priests

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<sup>77</sup> For example, Feinberg, “Spirit Encounters,” 114.

<sup>78</sup> For example, Crook, *An Account*; Radiguet, *Les Derniers Sauvages*.

<sup>79</sup> Jeanne Vahieua Tamarii, 19 October 2013 in Hakahau, Ua Pou.

<sup>80</sup> Étienne Tehaamoana, 17 June 2013 in Puamau, Hiva Oa.

invoke God's help in protecting Taumako homes from evil.<sup>81</sup> Yet even Émile, an ordained member of the Catholic Church, described his own affective response to ancestral places: "I'm a priest, but when you see Hakauai, the feeling is strange." The small valley of Hakauai was historically inhabited by a different tribe from Émile's. He went on: "When you go there, and you get off on the beach, you feel that you're not really welcome. Even though there's no one there."<sup>82</sup> Since the spirits of Hakauai recognize him as an outsider, Émile cannot feel at home there.

Rose-Nathalie Motahu, a young woman from Nuku Hiva, spoke of a similar experience in a valley still regarded as *tapu*. Pua, she said, is a "family valley that belonged to our great-grandmother, who was the princess." Littered with ancient stone ruins, Pua "cannot be a place where someone [from outside] stays a long time," because "our ancestors decide who can stay and who must leave." Rose-Nathalie's own husband can't spend more than three days in Pua because he "doesn't feel good" there and, if he did, then there would be "consequences." For example, "one time we stayed a week but when we came back his horse died." After that, he didn't want to stay there for any length of time.<sup>83</sup>

Such sinister overtones, combined with Catholic judgment, influence everyday Marquesan interactions with the land. The islands' main export is copra, followed by citrus fruits. Plantations of coconut, banana, and grapefruit overlap with ancestral ruins, while women regularly forage among forested ruins for colourful seeds to make jewelry for sale to visiting tourists. Since much of the land is owned by extended families, farmers engage in complex networks of shared use and exchange, dividing harvest profits according to a pre-determined ratio known as the *hope fenua*, or land part. Thus, driven by commercial objectives, Marquesans come in contact with the land, and ancestral ruins, daily. Yet the meaning and treatment of these places crucially hinges on their spiritual power, rather than capitalist value.

Islanders tend to avoid *tapu* places, allowing them to become overgrown. Particularly in cases where hostile spirits have been felt, this demonstrates respect. Other times, a person on their own family land will feel safe because they are a member of the family. This process reinforces the affective connection to, and reciprocity with, ancestral places. At the opposite extreme, immediate financial gain, political pressures, and tensions over land ownership or local politics have occasionally driven the destruction of ancient ruins or trees. Hundreds of sites throughout the islands have been destroyed by road construction. Whether or not those driving the bulldozers believed in *mana*, their jobs depended on following orders and moving forward, and so they went ahead with their work. Some spoke up and defended the sites

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<sup>81</sup> Feinberg, "Spirit Encounters," 110.

<sup>82</sup> 21 August 2013 in Hanavave, Fatu Hiva.

<sup>83</sup> 25 October 2013 in Taipivai, Nuku Hiva.

they knew were *tapu*.<sup>84</sup> Others were driven by the need to leave the troubled past behind. As one former bulldozer driver remarked, “*paepae* are important, but before they weren’t. Before they were bad. But today they are nice.” His niece added: “He worked on building roads, and he destroyed all the *paepae*” that were in the way.<sup>85</sup>

In other cases, family members assert their ownership of disputed land by planting it with fruit trees, building structures, or altering it in some way. The frequent incidence of absentee ownership can also play a role, as relatives who have spent much of their lives in Tahiti return home to claim and develop land in their own way. Some ambitious individuals have destroyed ancestral places as a kind of demonstration of their own wealth and power, as if showing the world that they are immune to hostile *mana*.<sup>86</sup> When these actions have led to misfortune and illness, however, they have become lasting, cautionary tales about the need to respect the ancestors.

For example, one ceremonial site on Hiva Oa was destroyed in the early 2000s, by a man from Tahiti who, as one former friend noted, was “so proud when he arrived here, he treated people like shit.” This man took a bulldozer and removed a whole section of the site, but shortly afterwards his businesses went bankrupt, he became plagued by illnesses, and “now he is naked. He has nothing left.” As the former friend explained, “those who come back from Tahiti, they don’t care about most of what happened before, or those who stayed here. [...] They think ‘I know everything. But you, you stayed here. You shut up.’”<sup>87</sup>

The resulting conflicts over land and resources point to the role of unsettled, affective experiences on the land as well as currents of ambivalence around the Marquesan past, present, and future. Indeed, the active suppression and concealment of local relationships to place illustrates the blending of colonial and Indigenous histories and values. As islanders work to revitalize their traditional culture and build a sustainable future based on ancestral places, reticence thus complicates Marquesan connections to the land and the vital hopes they represent.

### Hopes of a More Certain Future

Marquesans today seek to advance their children’s futures by earning money from lands still inhabited by ancestral spirits. Yet the educational system in which they place their hopes requires youth to speak French fluently, live away from home as early as age nine, and memorize French history and geography rather than exploring their own Marquesan heritage. In the 1970s,

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<sup>84</sup> Jean Vaiaanui, 24 October 2013 in Taipivai, Nuku Hiva.

<sup>85</sup> Boniface Hatuuku and Rosina Kautai Kaiha, 14 October 2013 in Hakahetau, Ua Pou.

<sup>86</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 54.

<sup>87</sup> François Hapatou, 4 June 2013 in Atuona, Hiva Oa. Pseudonym used to protect the speaker’s identity.

urgent concerns about these changes launched a movement to revitalize Marquesan culture and language. Today, Marquesan leaders remain deeply concerned about cultural loss as well as climate change and lagging economic and demographic growth. In 2019 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) the islands welcomed some 8,000 visitors, most of whom arrive by air from Tahiti, by private yacht, or on a cruise ship.<sup>88</sup> The main attractions are traditional artwork and tattoo, historic sites, hiking, and adventure tours.<sup>89</sup> The Marquesas' population has hovered just under 10,000 for the past two decades, and the most recent census revealed an unemployment rate (indicating those without salaried work) of 28.3 percent.<sup>90</sup> Hopes for the future have focused on celebrating the islands' rich natural and cultural heritage.

In 2012, the newly formed Communauté de Communes des Îles Marquises (CODIM), a council comprised of the six Marquesan mayors, published the islands' first sustainable development plan, whose primary objective is to "preserve, protect, share and transmit to future generations the [Marquesas'] natural, cultural and artistic heritage." Its second goal is to create jobs and stimulate economic wealth.<sup>91</sup> The plan notes that one of the Marquesas' most attractive characteristics is their "authenticity" of culture, heritage, and Indigenous inhabitants. This "living culture" is revealed through the islands' archaeological heritage and traditions, among other things, and must be both preserved and utilized as the basis for sustainable development.<sup>92</sup> Realizing this objective involves a plan for limited tourist development and increased commercialization of certain aspects of Marquesan culture.

Meanwhile, an ongoing UNESCO world heritage list (WHL) nomination proposes nine natural and cultural sites throughout the islands whose successful listing would represent the culmination of decades of work by Marquesan leaders.<sup>93</sup> It also promises a substantial boost in international attention, funding opportunities, and development for an archipelago with limited political or economic influence.<sup>94</sup> Yet, for many Marquesans, the pressure to develop historic sites for tourism threatens local understandings of place and connections to the land. Indeed, neither of these projects addresses the vital role of *mana*, the spirits and affect in local relationships to heritage. Modelled upon international standards for sustainable development and strict world heritage protocols, these initiatives have been

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<sup>88</sup> ISPF (Institut de la Statistique de la Polynésie française), "Poids du tourisme dans l'économie locale" (Papeete: ISPF, 2020).

<sup>89</sup> CODIM (Communauté de Communes des Îles Marquises), *Plan de développement économique durable de l'archipel des Marquises* (Papeete: CODIM, 2012).

<sup>90</sup> ISPF (Institut de la Statistique de la Polynésie française), "Recensement de la population: La population legale en Polynésie française au 17 août 2017" (Papeete: ISPF, 2017).

<sup>91</sup> CODIM, *Plan de développement*, 10.

<sup>92</sup> CODIM, *Plan de développement*, 17, 22, 49, 82.

<sup>93</sup> *Hiro'a*, "Inscription des Îles Marquises: sur le chemin de l'unesco," no. 157 (Tahiti: Service de la Culture et du Patrimoine, November 2020).

<sup>94</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 18.

## *Feeling “Superstitious”*

pressured to follow rationalist, scientific perspectives of resources rather than local beliefs or “superstitions” about the land and ancestral spirits.

The UNESCO WHL nomination includes the stone complex of Iipona, one of the most visited historic sites in the Marquesas and home to French Polynesia’s largest stone *tiki* (figure 4).<sup>95</sup> The draft nomination highlights the value of this site as an example of UNESCO’s selection criteria IV: “to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history.”<sup>96</sup> Unique in the world, the complex monumental architecture of Iipona illustrates the ingenuity of a culture and society that adapted to its environment.<sup>97</sup>

*Figure 4*

*The ceremonial site of Iipona, in Puamau, Hiva Oa, 2013*



Note: The largest *tiki* in French Polynesia, Tiki Takaii, stands just right of centre on the stone platform. Since the photo was taken, Takaii and the other *tiki* have been shielded from the weather by small shelters.

Source: Photo taken by author, 2013.

<sup>95</sup> *Polynésie la 1ère*, “Marquises Unesco: la demande de classement déposée,” 10 April 2018, <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/polynesie/marquises-unesco-demande-classement-deposee-577641.html>.

<sup>96</sup> UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), “The Criteria for Selection,” accessed 15 November 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria>.

<sup>97</sup> *Hiro’a*, “Inscription des Îles Marquises.”

Yet, in talking about the site, local resident Thérèse Napuauhi noted how two of its *tiki* have never been blessed by a Catholic priest. “I used to go there all the time, before,” she said, and “I heard things! I heard voices of people calling me ... and I’d say, ‘What?’” but there was no one there. “You see? Strange. No one believes in that stuff. But me, I believe it. But you must not pay attention. You tell yourself it’s only a stone, that’s it. Because there are people who don’t believe ... in superstitions. But it’s true ... [and] you must not play around with it.” She added: “I feel a presence, when I’m there. Like there’s someone watching me. And I ignore it. But if it’s too strong, I grab my stuff and go home.”<sup>98</sup>

As Thérèse points out, many Marquesans overcome the struggle between Catholic and traditional meanings by simply “not paying attention;” a phrase that captures both the hidden, affective meaning of ancestral places and the associated shame. Indeed, Marquesans frequently describe such feelings of *mana* with the same disclaimer. Thus Marie Louise, the elder who emphasized respect for ancestral spirits, also explained how the spirits can bother people only “if you really believe it. It’s a question of belief. If you believe in the devil, he will arrive! And if you don’t believe, he won’t. So for me, it’s a question of belief. If you believe in superstition, it will happen.”<sup>99</sup> And to do so would be dangerous.

An elderly couple spoke about how a relative had found an ancient shell trumpet once, and brought it home. Removing an ancient object from a site is recognized as disrespectful to the ancestors, but still there are those who do it. This man got in the habit of bringing the trumpet out fishing with him because “it was pretty, and it had a loud sound. And it was nice to look at. But each time he went fishing, he would hear the *paioio* ... the ancestors, like the spirits. But they were like birds, when he heard them. And he heard those spirits each time, singing.” Then one day he was badly cut in the stomach by a fish. So he returned the trumpet to its place in the forest, “and after that it was okay, he went fishing and never got speared [by a fish] again.” The wife in the couple explained: “You see, those things happen. But luckily there are also priests, and the missionaries who came to calm (*haàmèie*) all that. [...] For me, it’s important to renew all that stuff and ancient things again, but the priests must *haàmèie* it. Even the priests respect what the ancestors did.”<sup>100</sup>

The uncertainty and shame associated with such experiences have largely driven them into hiding, highlighting the disconnect between Marquesans’ everyday lives and their aspirations of development and international recognition. Among other things, the recognition and subsequent commoditization of heritage sites pushes capitalist economic value to the

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<sup>98</sup> 18 June 2013 in Puamau, Hiva Oa.

<sup>99</sup> 19 April 2013 in Vaitahu, Tahuata.

<sup>100</sup> Paul Teapuaohatua Vaimaa and Christine Poemioi Vaimaa, 28 November 2013 in Hapatoni, Tahuata.

fore, at the expense of largely under-valued moral or spiritual meanings. Some 4,000 miles to the west, East Rennell, in the Solomon Islands, was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1998, as part of an effort to provide new sources of income unrelated to logging. The site was hailed as a landmark, the first natural property under customary ownership and management to be inscribed on UNESCO’s WHL. But in 2013 it was identified as a World Heritage Site in Danger due to ongoing commercial logging and the destructive impact of invasive rats.<sup>101</sup>

Like East Rennell, the Marquesas WHL nomination combines both natural and cultural properties under a heritage management plan driven by local leadership. Yet it could face similar risks and challenges, due to the clash between Indigenous values, resource preservation, and financial ambitions.

For example, land use in the Marquesas is already tense. Families make their living harvesting fruit and coconuts even as colonial land tenure, family politics, and a wealth of absentee owners make ownership highly contentious. Farmers and foragers avoid certain areas due to *mana*, and certain plots of land have fallen into neglect amidst bids for power and the ongoing conflicts between customary and colonial systems of land tenure.<sup>102</sup> Like pouring oil on a fire, the push to commoditize heritage has aggravated this situation, leading to more neglect and destruction.<sup>103</sup> Greater engagement with Marquesan spiritual beliefs and affective relationships to ancestral places could not only validate Indigenous perspectives and experience but cultivate the value of local sites within the context of Marquesan history and ambitions for the future.

Physical place, as well as affect, will play a crucial role in this process, a theme that appears in the precarious place making described by Melinda Hinkson. When an interfamily feud and tightening governance forced Nungarrayi, an Aboriginal woman, to move away from home, she navigated her situation in part through her affective connections to her home and enduring connections to place, in all its aspects. Yet her forced relocation and related existential conflict left Nungarrayi deeply troubled.<sup>104</sup> In the Marquesas, islanders under age 35 face a similar crisis of hope, identity, and affect based on separation from their families and repeated relocations for education, jobs, training, or other reasons such as tensions over land and personal or family finances.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Browne, “A Living Past”; UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), “Stepping up Capacity to Assist East Rennell’s Removal from Danger List,” 26 November 2015, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1389>.

<sup>102</sup> Donaldson, “Troubled Lands.”

<sup>103</sup> Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Melinda Hinkson, “Precarious Placemaking,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 46 (2017): 49–64; see also Gegeo, “Cultural Rupture.”

<sup>105</sup> Kathleen C. Riley, “To Tangle or Not to Tangle: Shifting Language Ideologies and the Socialization of *Charabia* in the Marquesas, French Polynesia,” in *Consequences of Contact: Language Ideologies and Sociocultural Transformations in Pacific Societies*, eds. Miki Makihara and Bambi B. Shiefflin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70–95.

Marquesan leaders see a UNESCO world heritage listing as one way to address this crisis, advance their culture, and forge a sustainable future for their islands. As the president of CODIM, Félix Barsinas, noted in a presentation to the National Center of French Heritage in 2018: “The solidarity, the sharing, the communal support and the respect of our ancestors and of nature are the values that we hope to continue transmitting to our children.”<sup>106</sup> These values resonate with Marquesan culture and understandings of the land, yet Marquesan leaders have yet to fully embrace such respect for the ancestors, with all its troubled and ambivalent spiritual undertones. Doing so could unlock a more certain future based upon the solidarity and rootedness of Indigenous affect and place-making.<sup>107</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In their everyday lives, ambivalent affect guides the Marquesan creation of places as well as their use of the land. It will also shape their future. As Marquesan leaders navigate Indigenous hopes, values, and livelihoods amidst educational, religious, political, and economic pressures, they face a crucial decision about how to interpret the meaning of local resources. Greater recognition of the uncertainty and affective quality of Marquesan relationships to the land, and of how they continue to navigate a blended Indigenous and non-Indigenous past, could turn physiological responses to spirits on the land into a powerful form of knowledge<sup>108</sup>—one that might empower islanders to build a future based on their own unique understandings and experience. By recognizing Marquesan affect and the knowledge it represents, Marquesan leaders might seize upon the promise of solidarity contained in Indigenous affect and place-making.<sup>109</sup>

The Marquesan case reveals the resilience of Indigenous relationships to place despite the influence of colonial institutions and the lasting judgment of such labels as “superstitious.” It also shows how local ambivalence can become embodied, and emplaced, through affect. Here and elsewhere, overcoming the power of this uncertainty and the historical tensions it represents requires close examination of Indigenous, affective relationships to place and how they articulate with heritage, biodiversity, climate change, and other resource challenges of today. As global sustainability efforts emphasize the conservation of lands inhabited by Indigenous communities,

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<sup>106</sup> CODIM (Communauté de Communes des Îles Marquises), “UNESCO: 1ère étape de présentation de dossier ‘Îles Marquises’ au Centre National des Biens Français,” accessed 12 August 2020, <https://www.codim.pf/unesco-1ere-etape-de-presentacion-de-dossier-iles-marquises-au-centre-national-des-biens-francais>.

<sup>107</sup> Carucci, “Sentiment and Solidarities;” Donaldson, “Place, Destabilized.”

<sup>108</sup> Foucault, *The History*, 90, 100.

<sup>109</sup> Carucci, “Sentiment and Solidarities.”



*Feeling “Superstitious”*

recognizing the conflicted, emplaced emotions and experiences of these populations will be crucial to understanding such areas and how to preserve them.

*Montpelier, Vermont, USA, December 2021*



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