

TATOU THE CO-OPERATIVE: BETWEEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

*Gwendoline Malogne**

In 1993, I had the opportunity to work for three months in a polynesian consumers co-operative called Tatou.¹

It is established in all archipelagos and, unlike professional co-operatives (such as those for fishermen or farmers), it is open to everyone. I was thus able to study the relations and exchanges between Tatou and the components of its social environment such as geography, history, economy and culture.

The establishment of the CEP at Moruroa and Fangataufa islands and of its military and technical logistics at Tahiti brought a huge transformation of the Polynesian economy, not only in Tahiti but also in the distant islands.²

As a consequence, at Rurutu the former districts were changed into townships in 1972; a town hall and the first salaried jobs appeared in 1975; the airport opened in 1979; the first four classes of secondary education were established in 1980; within twenty years, the traditional society based on barter turned into a society of employees with cash, electricity, roads and cars.

When observing these fast changes the question can be asked: can we speak of a "traditional society", an already "modern" one, or one on the way to becoming a "modern" one?

* Diplômée de l'institut d'études politiques de Bordeaux. DEA études politiques (Rennes I) DESS gestion des coopératives, associations, mutuelles (Université du Maine). Doctorante en anthropologie sociale à l'EHESS.

- 1 Tatou is the second consumers co-operative since World War II in French Polynesia. Its emblem is a handshake.
- 2 This decision taken by General de Gaulle was a consequence of the Algerian independence, which stopped the nuclear experimentation in Sahara. Since then, a lot of money has been introduced in the Polynesian society, creating a sudden and considerable economical growth.

If modernity can be expressed as change, tradition is more difficult to define. According to Jean-Pierre Doumenge, tradition "is neither more nor less than a modernity which has proven valid".³ And according to Georges Balandier, it should be viewed in terms of a dialectic between a traditional (and debased) system and a new one (determined from outside); a dialectic which creates a "third socio-cultural system, unstable but containing an authentic modernity".⁴

Because it is linked with all these questions, the Tatou co-operative is an excellent example for the study and discussion of the issue of economic development in French Polynesia: How does it reconcile the willingness to change with a practice based on a traditional system of community? Is it a kind of organization especially adapted to its social environment or is it a fragile organization in an unstable environment?

I TATOU BETWEEN POLITICAL TRADITIONALISM AND ECONOMICAL REVOLUTION

1.1 The legal status of the Tatou co-operative appears in fact as corresponding to a permanent structure of what Gilles Blanchet has called "self-generated development".

What does he mean with this term? Quoting from his thesis (published in 1986):⁵

The new quest for a larger self-government in French Polynesia can not be separated from the concept of global development, which refuses to reduce man to his economical dimension, it means promoting a self-generated, self-powered growth based on the dynamics of its partners who are no more considered as spectators or passive followers but as actors assuming their destiny.

Such a quest reminds the general rules of co-operative organization, implying participation and sense of responsibility - and also the concern of the initiators of Tatou to promote an integrated development of all economical sectors, for instance the ship which imports consumers goods would export local products.⁶

According to Monil Tetuanui, "the polynesian family is a natural co-operative".⁷ This fusion - and often confusion - of family and co-operative organizations is common in French

3 Jean-Pierre Doumenge, "Enjeu géopolitique et intérêt scientifique des espaces insulaires", collection Iles et Archipels n°3, Nature et hommes dans les îles tropicales, Ceget-Cret 1984. P 1 à

4 Georges Balandier, *Sens et Puissance*, PUF 1986. P 104.

5 Gilles Blanchet, *Croissance induite et développement en Polynésie Française*, thèse de doctorat d'Etat de Sciences Economiques, université de Rennes I, 1986. P 10 et s.

6 Project presented by Monil Tetuanui in May 1993.

7 Interview, May 1993.

Polynesia, with the family organization cutting short the organization of the co-operative by its own leaders and rules.

We can consider, as put forth in the "Pacte de Progrès", that:⁸

Parallel to modern economical organizations which are too complicated for a lot of Polynesians, it is necessary to promote the establishment of co-operatives and more generally, "of organizations corresponding to the cultural foundations of polynesian society.

1.2 Monil Tetuanui: From foundation to politicization of Tatou.

The co-operative originated at the meeting of the mayor of Tahaa - also a councilor of Territory since 1986 - Monil Tetuanui, and Karl Meyer, who settles in Raiatea and was the director of the co-operative until 1993.

A *The foundation of Tatou : The Rule of Pouvana's Thought*

In many aspects, the political will to create a consumer co-operative, as expressed by Monil Tetuanui since 1985, reminds that of Pouvana a Opa, the first polynesian politician, in favor of an autonomous development by co-operatives. He was himself the founder of a consumer co-operative after World War II (the only one that existed before Tatou).⁹

B *A Popular Undertaking*

Pouvana created a party, entitled "RDPT", "Democratic Union of Polynesian People" in 1949. Monil Tetuanui also insists on the idea of an union of Polynesians in a co-operative which is open to everyone, "without any consideration of religion, political party or age".¹⁰

The name he chose, Tatou, expresses this idea of union (tatou, "us", "every one") and polynesian self-government: "it is ours, it is not theirs", as Monil Tetuanui says. And he adds: "We had to find a way of uniting people in a same ideology. We had to find an idea on which people could unite: money, because people are always concerned with money".

8 Bernard Poirine, *Tahiti : stratégie pour l'après nucléaire*, chapitre 7, "les stratégies de rechange, le Pacific way et le développement self-relant", L'Harmattan, Papeete 1992 (P 180 à 197). P 197.

An extract of this book shows this merging between familial and co-operative organisations :

"The only success in the small size activities can be found in some activities of services, like the "roulottes-snack bars" and the familial and co-operative culture of the pearl, the only activity "close to the floor" that has really taken off in French Polynesia" (p 197)

9 "Pacte de Progrès économique, social et culturel de la Polynésie Française. Propositions de la Délégation polynésienne", édition Charte du Développement, Papeete, January 1993.

10 *Terres et civilisations polynésiennes* (Édition Nathan, Paris 1987) 184 and following.

In 1993, the Monil Tetuanui's speech expressed both his attachment to France and the Republic and claimed for self-sufficiency of islands with respect to Tahiti:

"Colonialism doesn't exist anymore in French Polynesia", he said, "but Tahiti is colonizing islands, especially since the achievement of internal self-government".

He did not dismiss the possibility of the independence of French Polynesia. In this case Tatou would be a "lifebuoy". The vice-president of Tatou, Luc Fatau - now its president - saw in Tatou "a way of preparing the independence of French Polynesia". Both men have since joined the Tavini of Oscar Temaru (the main party in favor of independence).

C Struggle Against Expensive Life

Pouvana's political career began in 1921 when he fought against a sale tax imposed on merchants and which would have caused an increase in retail prices.

For Monil Tetuanui, the main goal of Tatou is a struggle against expensive life as a first step to a well-balanced development.

D The Politicisation of Tatou

The politicization of Tatou was not directly linked to the position of his co-initiator : when founding the co-operative, Monil Tetuanui was first of all behaving as a "good mayor", who has to help his fellow citizens. It became real at the 1993 general elections, as Monil Tetuanui founded a new political party named Tatou party, that purposely maintained a confusion between both the party and the co-operative : same name, same kind of member cards, same places.

Relation between co-operatives and politics in French Polynesia has got a long history: ephemeral co-operatives are frequently created for the only purpose of obtaining grants for a single man or a political party. This was not the case with Monil Tetuanui, on the contrary he wanted to demonstrate to Polynesians that he was "an active man, not a politician".

This attempt of politicization in 1993 didn't give the expected results: Monil Tetuanui was relying on the vote of the co-operative's members (5000 in total), multiplied by two or three to take into account the potential influence of the co-operative's members within their family). After the event, he analyzed his failure as follow:

It was too early to politicize the co-operative but in some years, when people will see the Tatou ship, the Tatou bank, the Tatou products they will ask for a Tatou government.

This talk is not only built as a logical and chronological process, it is also a new way of thinking the independence: at the very moment when independent countries realize their

economical dependence, Monil Tetuanui proposes economical independence as a first step toward independence of the country.

1.3. Tatou, regarding its methods and spheres of action (importation of consumer goods) is a fragile organization.

Tatou imports wood, food and also TV sets, household appliances, hi-fi, contrary to the Pouvana's co-operative that dealt exclusively with food. The members' real consumption differs from one island to another: people from Rurutu become members in order to buy wood and construction material, they ask for more ordinary foodstuffs (rice, sugar,..) and scarcely for other goods.

One reason for this may be the size of the market in such small islands: it becomes very fast saturated. With 500 members, cards available for both a husband and his spouse, Tatou has come to its maximal size in Rurutu.

Tatou has to face three main impediments:

- The local markets, very small and depending on sea transportation.
- A strong dependence on international markets, which is linked to all importation businesses but which is still stronger for Tatou because of its strategy : to buy at prices as low as possible without selected suppliers.
- Legal and political impediments:

Regulation forbids importation of some products that could compete with local products, and some other products need a special importation license.

Co-operatives are both disputed (by shopkeepers who considers them as an unfair competitor) and controlled: the Territory's "service for technical assistance to co-operatives" of the Territory can proceed to any investigations without any judicial control.

II TATOU IN RURUTU: AN ADAPTABLE ORGANISATION

In 1993 the co-operative runs fourteen shops in all French Polynesia, one of them in Rurutu. In this island of the Austral archipelago, well-known for its craft industry and agriculture, the arrival of Tatou entailed some excitement, especially during Karl Meyer 's and Monil Tetuanui 's visits. However, by and by, the modern concepts introduced by Tatou have been accepted, filtered, neutralized, tamed,...

A A Co-operative Under Control

In the three villages, supporting committees were founded, however without either legal existence or rights of vote in Tatou but having a real influence. To look at their members is a

good way of assessing the importance and influence of political, social and religious authorities in Tatou.

- At Moerai, we have a former deacon, a storyteller and the son of the last king of Rurutu (Rudy Teuruarii).
- At Auti, we have a deacon, a storyteller and his sister, Mrs Walker.
- At Avera, we have a deacon and a former president of the association of parents of school children.

All have declared themselves as "elected for life, except serious offense".

Pierre Verin wrote about ancient civilization of Rurutu that:¹¹

In the social-political units all events happened as if all economical exchanges had necessarily to obtain the agreement of the chiefs, and for a large part, had to be handled by them.

Today, these "chiefs" are above all in charge of political or religious responsibilities, both closely linked.

B Political Authorities: The Essential Part of the Mayor

The mayor says : "One day Monil Tetuanui called me, and told me that with Tatou, prices would go lower". He has strongly contributed to the establishment of the co-operative, to such an extent that for one year, its office was settled in the town hall, and the first secretary has been recording the new members.

Doing this, he was not out of his duties but making his duty: to assist his fellow citizens.

C Religious Authorities

The important part of religious authorities within the co-operative is not only to be linked with their considerable part in the polynesian society. In fact, the main co-operative's principles can be considered as very close to those that the Church advocates. For example this principle, expressed by Father Hodée:¹²

The human being is always the origin and the ultimate goal of society. Economy is just a mean.

Also, in the nineteenth century, social Christianity was one of the main initiators of the western co-operative movement. Precisely, Charles Gide (1847 - 1932), Protestant and university professor elaborated the concept of the "co-operative Republic", thanks to the fast growth of Christian co-operation. The consumer's co-operative, the most democratic one -

11 Pierre Verin, *L'ancienne civilisation de Rurutu* (Collection Orstom, Paris 1969) mémoire n°33, 274.

12 Père Hodee, in *Tahiti côté montagne*, Marc Cizeron et Marianne Hienly (Édition Haere Po no Tahiti, Papeete 1991) 25 and 27.

because it is opened to everyone - would be, according to him, the first step to this "co-operative Republic".¹³ The development of consumer's co-operatives would be followed by the creation of co-operatives of production (second step) and finally by that of agricultural co-operatives (third and last step).

As Monil Tetuanui talks about a Tatou ship (before a Tatou government), importing consumer goods and exporting local products, he uses the same progress, except co-operatives of industrial production, whose part in the polynesian economy is still limited.

At last, in the polynesian religious thought, co-operatives are linked with the kibbutz of the Promised Land : Israel, a very prestigious symbol.¹⁴

However, the purpose of political and religious authorities is not to "suffocate" the co-operative. The result of their control on the co-operative is rather a sort of filter, keeping elements suspected to be too innovating out, and so allowing the Tatou co-operative to become a part of the polynesian landscape, in a more harmonious way.

D From Democracy to Reciprocity

1 A sociological approach

In France, the democratic principle - one man one voice - is usually considered as an essential element in co-operative organizations. Whereas in French Polynesia, this principle is often misunderstood, and people usually think that, obviously, someone who has got several parts in the co-operative should get several voices.¹⁵

The split into members and non-members (which is considered in France as a strong mean to emphasize the identity of an organization) is viewed in French Polynesia in a negative way, signifying the exclusion of the kin - the husband or the wife excepted.

Therefore this split is not really accepted, just as the other rule which forbids members to sell goods bought at the co-operative to other people.¹⁶

In fact, these rules can not find any place in the polynesian traditional culture, in which reciprocity remains the pillar of social relationship.

13 "Charles Gide et l'Ecole de Nîmes" in "Liaisons coopératives" n°89, April 1960.

14 Bruno Saura, citant Vittorio Lanternari, *Politique et Religion à Tahiti* (éd) (Polymages Scoop, Papeete 1993) 64 and 65.

15 I heard this remark during a formation session for the employees of the Rural Economy service, especially talking about co-operatives and organised by the service for technical assistance to co-operatives, in July 1993.

16 Meetings of the Tatou board of Rurutu.

For example, the mamas of Rurutu criticize the way they were badly welcomed at Tahaa in 1992, for the annual session of the board of direction because a delegation from Tahaa was greatly welcomed in Rurutu before.

The person in charge has a restricted latitude of action and also a duty of reciprocity. He has to be generous with his kin and electors. This notion of reciprocity is not only useful for the study of social organization but also for a geographical approach, showing reciprocities that may be struck up, out of the island (considered as too small or isolated).

2 *The geographical approach*

In 1993, a project of decentralization was elaborated, in order to change Tatou into a union of local level co-operatives. This project would have satisfied both the islander will of autonomy and the need of a lasting link with the outside.

Thus, the decentralized organization of the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia (ECPF) is a way of "*reconciling particular and general levels*", according to Jean-Pierre Doumenge: "*(..)faced with the immensity of the ocean, the islander needs a strength enabling him to go beyond his everyday horizon*".¹⁷

The geographical approach can also be used to understand how a consumer good may become a medium of social link. Indeed, in Rapa - and more or less in the other distant islands - the function of the store is different from the function stores have in western societies. It neither shows goods (there is no window), nor keeps them in stock (people make their own stock as soon as the ship is unloaded). There is no advertising and no regularity : the goods may change and, above all, the opening time is not strictly fixed. In Rapa, one guesses the store is open as some neighbours come and go with goods in their arms. The store is more a place of sociability than a "temple of consumption".

So, even if the salaried people - especially the schoolmasters - can treat themselves to cars, good houses and travels, the traditional way of consumption, based on barter and exchange networks still works. One's need money to buy flour, eggs, toilet paper and cooking utensils, but the family living in Tahiti also frequently sends some "survival supplies" to the kin still living on the native island. These "city dwellers" will get fish, shellfish, fruits and vegetables send back by the ship.

The consumer good becomes more than a simple object, it becomes a medium that revives the social link weakened by the distance. Thanks to the biscuit boxes coming from Tahiti, the Rapa people get some "civilization" and forget their isolation. By eating lobsters caught in

17 Jean-Pierre Doumenge, op cit P 6. See also Gilbert Bonnemaïson, *La dernière île* (éd, Arlea Orstom, Paris 1986) 154.

Rapa, the Rapa people living in Tahiti start up again with their native island, remember it and for a while appropriate their own "fenua" again.

Both use the good as a link between two parts of a same kin that considers itself as exile (willingly or inevitably). This is a way of rediscovering the family unity, that is always weakened and always changing. Each considers the other as an exile (meaning "to be far secluded"), as someone which can not exist without looking beyond (at the capital, the future, the young people and also the hospital and the death) or this side (at the origin, the birth, the ancestral fenua and the beloved island).

One consequence of the geographical scattering is this necessity of reviving in the same time exchanges between social places and times, between the past and the future. It seems that the only way to perceive the Rapa identity is to become aware of the existence of the others (there are some Rapa people exiled) and to go beyond this difference ("thanks to or because of them, we have to keep and keep alive the common heritage").

The consumer good travels "instead of", "for" those who can not travel. In this way, a simple consumer good can answer both to this strong attachment to the island and the need of a lasting link with the outside.

And perhaps the importance given by the co-operative to the material component of the consumer good, at the expense of its symbolical meaning has compromised its middle-term survival: it could not survive to the curiosity created by the sudden occurrence of new imported goods (but where are they coming from? Who sent them?).

The approach in terms of organization can also be used in order to understand what sort of conflicts, latent or obvious, did compromise the middle-term survival of Tatou right from its creation.

III THE ORGANISATION OF TATOU: BETWEEN CULTURAL OBSTACLES AND ORGANISATION'S LIMITS

In this last approach, I use the so-named "quadrilateral" of Henry Desroches, created to analyse the co-operative organisations. He made a double differentiation, between :

- the "functional" and the "social" hierarchy
- the base and the top of the co-operative.

TOP

Director
(functional hierarchy)

Employees

BASE

Board of direction
(social hierarchy)

Members

A Conflicts at the Top

The director and the board of direction defend two different points of view: the economical logic, of the firm and its director, recommending a political neutrality (that guarantees a stability) came into conflict with the politicization of Tatou in 1993. Then, Tatou lost its balance.

The board of direction also denounced the part of too modern consumer goods (cars, TV sets,...) in the co-operative, at the expense of food for the poorest.

In addition, the director came into conflict with a strictly commercial logic defended by the manager of the Tatou shop in Tahiti. Because of its geographical position and its rising part in the financial results of Tatou, this manager got an important role within the co-operative. Considering the shop as his own and the members as "customers", he did not care about the rule of stock and supply for the other Tatou shops that he was responsible for.

B Divergence Between the Base and the Top

The Rurutu people pointed out the lack of after-sales services and replies to their specific needs. In fact, they reproached the top of Tatou for not creating a "personal link of consumption".

The director pointed out the lack of rational management at the Rurutu's shop - especially the absence of any up-dated inventory), the fact that the members did not get involved in what they should have considered as their own co-operative. Most of the Rurutu members thought the co-operative belonged to the director or to Monil Tetuanui.

Mainly, the lack of ideology has certainly contributed to the falling implication of the members in Tatou . Money concerns a lot of people but it is not alone an idea on which people can unite in the long term. As Patrice Mann pointed it out:¹⁸

We have to pay attention to the cultural components of the collective action. In this process, ideology has a major part. It takes part in the redefinition of collective identities and is used to define the directions of the action.

¹⁸ Patrice Mann, *L'action collective, mobilisation et organisation des minorités actives* (Collection U édition A Colin, Paris, 1991) 108.