

# 1

## Political power and *rahui* in ancient Polynesian society

Bernard Rigo

### Introduction

In keeping with Gell's<sup>1</sup> theoretical assumptions about the equivalence between ideas and object, this chapter argues that the notion of *rahui* cannot be thought of independently of the cultural logic in which it is inscribed.

In Oceania, before the sudden appearance of Westerners, the idea of power, particularly political power, was not distinguished from the idea of the sacred. The power of the Polynesian chief (*ari'i*, *ali'i*, *ariki*, *'eiki*), came from *mana*; that is, it was founded on the ancestrality of the bond with a particular land (*fenua*). The practice of *rahui* was and is an effect of these structural representations of Oceanian societies, in that it is the expression of a power for which the modality is the sacred, and the stakes of which are primarily political.

In making the connection with the past, it is therefore important to take time to examine the traditional concept of *rahui*, to recall its lexical meaning as well as to locate it in a societal and representational

---

1 Gell, A., 1993. *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Gell, A., 1998. *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

economy. *Rahui* is a term, with some subtle phonetic nuances, that is found in all Polynesian islands; for example, in Samoa, Hawai'i, the Marquesas, Tahiti, the Tuamotu and the Mangareva islands.<sup>2</sup> It refers to the prohibition or restriction applied to the consumption of a resource: fruits, animals (notably the pig, in Samoa) or any product of a particular land. Literally, it is the imposition of a *tapu* brought into effect by the sacred incantation (*rahu*) of an *ari'i* or a *tahu'a* (an expert in the relations between the world of men and the invisible entities). It is this same person who also lifts the *rahui*.

It is necessary to begin with the status of those who set the *rahui* to understand its nature and its purpose, to grasp that the former is religious and that the latter is political, as far as such a distinction is relevant in Pacific societies pre-European contact.

## Nature and modality of political power

The Polynesian *ari'i* are sacred, not as delegated representatives of a divine entity but as affiliated to the divine,<sup>3</sup> by way of genealogical networks. Vertical continuity with the gods implies a hierarchy, and that hierarchy is merely the social expression of the primacy of genealogy from which the sacred power and temporal authority of *tahu'a* and *ari'i* originate. This 'ideology of consanguinity'<sup>4</sup> — 'ideology of the blood'<sup>5</sup> — structures Polynesian society. Ancestrality is nothing other than the assertion that anteriority confers value: gods and ancestors initiate the relationship, and the principle of primogeniture defines, at least theoretically, the class of *ari'i nui*, leaders of the highest rank.

---

2 Tregear, E., 1891. *The Maori–Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*. Christchurch, Wellington and Dunedin: Whitcomb and Tombs Ltd, pp. 386–87.

3 de Bovis, E., 1978. *Etat de la société tahitienne à l'arrivée des européens*. Publication no. 4. Tahiti: Société des Études Océaniques, p. 51; Ellis, W., 1972. *A la recherche de la Polynésie d'autrefois*. Paris: Publication de la Société des océanistes, p. 91; Ellis, W., 1829. *Polynesian Researches, During a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Sea Islands*, Vols 1 & 2. Fisher, Son & Jackson.

4 Oliver, D., 1974. *Ancient Tahitian Society*. 3 vols. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai'i, p. 636.

5 Testart, A., 1986. *Essai sur les fondements de la division du travail chez les chasseurs-cueilleurs*. Paris: EHESS.

The prestige of different social classes is proportional to their degree of genealogical proximity in relation to the elder lineage. This genealogical distribution, which confers functions — first born / *ari'i* / political power; younger / *tahu'a* / religious power — and distinguishes social groups (*ari'i*, *ra'atira*, *manahune*), at the same time constructs a clan network that includes the tutelary deities. There is no dividing line between the divine and that which is not divine, as with the distinction between feminine and masculine: the chiefs are equally as sacred as gods, and they are sacred in fact and not symbolically. The extensive ethnographic literature of the early European observers described the effects in Tahiti of this divine power; for instance the customs of *amo* and *pi'i*, which were not the least spectacular. The person of the chief was so sacred that everything that touched him became *tapu*, including the ground he trod on,<sup>6</sup> or syllables contained in his name.<sup>7</sup> That a chief had to move on the backs of men as soon he left his sacred territory, and the entire community had to reform its vocabulary, under threat of having eyes gouged out, demonstrates the rather exorbitant powers linked to the *ari'i*.

It must be stressed that this power was not ceremonial or symbolic, but a practical reality. As one must not meet the eye of a god, commoners must bow before the *ari'i*, or risk losing their lives for not doing so.<sup>8</sup> *Ari'i* were perceived as gods and lived as such,<sup>9</sup> which placed them at the top of the social hierarchy but did not cut them off from the community; quite to the contrary. The leader was not the concentration of *mana* or the divine, but rather diffused it through his network of social and political associations. This means that every man was more or less sacred according to his genealogical distance from the leader. Under this logic of the clan based on blood, the head of the chief was not exclusively sacred, just more sacred. And it is in this sense, at least theoretically, that the *mana* of each individual, just like the *mana* of the community, is directly dependent on that of the chief.<sup>10</sup> A genealogical system has a network-based logic, and there is no network without this idea of a permanent circulation

6 Ellis, 1972, pp. 533–36.

7 *Bulletin de la Société d'Études Océaniques (BSEO)* March–June 1994, 261–62: 14–34.

8 Sahlins, M., 1989. *Des îles dans l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, p. 76 (1985. *Islands of History*. The University of Chicago, pp. 35, 143).

9 Oliver, 1974, pp. 1047–48.

10 See Handy, E.S.C., 1930. *History and Culture in the Society Islands*. Bulletin no. 79. Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, p. 46.

which assumes continuity of circulation: from top to bottom, from the tutelary gods to the *manahune*, something must circulate — *mana*, *mauri* (sacred, prestige)<sup>11</sup> — like a sap that comes up from the roots (*tumu*) and irrigates the slenderest twigs.

Staying with the social aspect, the chief was the one who, through his alliances, his wars, his successes and his failures, gave both form and subsistence methods to the community. He was at once a warrior chief and also a religious leader; through him passes the tutelary god's *mana* (Ta'aroa, Tane, Oro, whichever). Thanks to this *mana*, abundance and fertility were provided for all men. In the domain of the chiefdom, the *ari'i* activated both natural and human resources. Different anthropologists have understood that the majesty of the chief is linked to his power to stimulate and redistribute wealth. The prestige belonged to he who could create an abundant circulation system within his network. The various ceremonies and rituals were ways of boosting the network to enable circulation of goods; sacrifices were accompanied by feasts: each time was an opportunity to circulate goods and people, to share and spend, under the aegis of *ari'i* and his *atua* (deity in the old system of belief). Morrison was not mistaken when he noted, 'The first fruits of all kinds are offered to the god, then the chief and lord of the place before being consumed and it is the same for fish ...'.<sup>12</sup> Everything is an opportunity for a ceremony: 'If a man has a new net to use for fishing or a new canoe to launch, he organises a celebration on the *marae* (lithic platform where the old worships were held) for the priests ...'.<sup>13</sup>

This is because it took the help of the gods and their representatives for the net to be filled up and for the *va'a* (dugout, canoe) to be efficient in the waves. When one considers the considerable number of sacred sites in Polynesia, it seems that social space is covered by a dense network of places of worship: *marae tupuna* (dedicated to the ancestries), specialist *marae* (fishermen, boatmen, healers), *marae ra'atira* (minor local chiefs), *ari'i marae*, *marae mata'eina'a va'a* (members of a chiefdom), inter-island *marae*, not to mention the ocean itself (considered to be the first *marae*).<sup>14</sup> Every aspect of social life was

11 Conte, E., 2000. *L'archéologie en Polynésie Française*. Tahiti: Au vent des îles, p. 233.

12 Morrison, J., 1981. 'Journal'. Paris: Société des Études Océaniques, p. 151.

13 Morrison, J., 1981, p. 151.

14 Henry, T., 1988 (1968). *Tahiti aux temps anciens*. Paris: Publication de la Société des océanistes no. 1, p. 365.

affected by a sacred circulation, whose steady rhythm accompanies all of the important moments of everyday life and marks all levels of the hierarchy, and all aspects of human activity.

It was precisely for this reason that chiefs, as chiefs, could die, that is to say, they could be deposed.<sup>15</sup> The same applied to gods: 'Gods can and do die, when there are no priestly mediums to keep them alive'.<sup>16</sup> The superior, whatever form it took, depended on the inferior because an ascending circulation must necessarily happen and legitimise the chief or god by converging towards him. It is in this sense that the imperative of redistribution imposed at all levels of the hierarchy must be understood. Only the one who has received can give. The great chief or the great god was certainly a being that redistributed a great deal, but he was only great because he had received — or taken — a great deal. It is not surprising that if the Polynesians have always preferred to give rather than to receive,<sup>17</sup> it is not in the hope of receiving a significant gift in return, nor is it just to implement, in the medium term, a desire for power, it is first and foremost the perfect and immediate expression of a hierarchical valorisation: the power to give is *the* power. It is immediately experienced in terms of prestige. Sociopolitical circulation involves receiving goods (dependence) in order to give (*mana*), and providing — notably for prestige — in order to receive — especially loyalty. In this respect, the hierarchy of the gods was not determined by the intrinsic ontological qualities of a particular deity but rather their unequal power for (re)distribution.

Since the gods were part of a network, and sought to grow by increasing their network, they needed chiefs and active 'priests'. Thus, it can be understood that the great chief, even if he received more material goods than he redistributed, first distributed prestige to his network. The bad chief was one who did not redistribute enough material goods; he held back or failed in his political or military undertakings.

---

15 Adams, H., 1964. *Mémoires d'Ari'i Tamai*. Paris: Publication de la Société des Océanistes no. 12, Musée de l'Homme, p. 7; Hanson, A., 1973. *Rapa*. Paris: Publication de la Société des Océanistes no. 33, p. 18; Morrison, 1981, p. 138.

16 Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck), 1987. *The Coming of the Maori*. Wellington: Maori Purposes Fund Board; Whicoulls Limited, p. 473.

17 See Morrison, J., 1981, p. 174; and Crook, W.P., quoted by Oliver, 1974, p. 848: 'none of them know what it is to possess property in our sense of the word. If a native possesses many articles of property, he must distribute and cannot withhold; all his friends have a kind of positive claim, and to refuse to give would be shocking. He would be a *taata hamani ino*, literally a man that works evil.'

Of each, it can be said that ‘he does not descend very well from the gods’,<sup>18</sup> or that his god lacks power. In both cases, ‘it causes shame’ (*e mea haama*) because it is the whole community that is deprived of *mana*.

## **Rahui as sacred modality of a political power**

Polynesian gods, ancestors and leaders, did not take their place in a cosmos like the Greek pantheon of deities. The word *fenua* is not an equivalent of the word ‘nature’ (adapted in Tahitian as *natura*). It refers first of all to the particular land to which one is connected, because it is also the land of one’s ancestors. In this sense, it does not refer to the whole world, but a space to which a human network is attached, or more precisely with which something is exchanged: the power exercised on Earth (*mana ari’i*) is also a power exercised by the Earth (*mana fenua*).<sup>19</sup> If we wish to understand the concept of *rahui* and respect the originality of cultural logic, we cannot project contemporary representations and concerns onto a past where they are separated from their cultural and circumstantial context.<sup>20</sup>

Traditional cosmogonies, sacred myths and chants are framed around the themes of procreation, parthenogenesis and sexuality. It is against this background that warrior exploits and heroic deeds of a few gods, demigods or heroes provide a counterbalance to the erotic and cosmic movements. If natural events and biological functions are everywhere in these stories, ‘nature’, as a holistic and encompassing entity, is nowhere. In other words, the genealogical and energetic constitution of networks, particularly in the form of connecting by procreation, is the trademark of the main Polynesian texts.<sup>21</sup> But nature plays no role here: missing from the lexicon, it is also missing from the representations. Nature is not enchanted, because there is no nature:

18 Morrison, 1981, p. 171.

19 Sahlins, 1989, p. 76.

20 See Rigo, B., 2005, ‘L’espace et le temps, expression culturelle privilégiée’. In Rigo, B., *L’espace-temps*. Bulletin du LARSH no. 2. Papeete: Au vent des îles.

21 Beckwith, M., 1972, *The Kumulipo*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press; Henry, T., 1988, p. 343–68; Krämer, A., 1994. *The Samoa Islands*. Aotearoa: Polynesian Press; Métraux, A., 1941. *L’île de Pâques*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 108.

visible and invisible forces, female strength and male powers, gods and men are entangled in a game whose unstable forces create the precarious rules. Before contact with the West, the Polynesians did not live in nature, they lived in relationship with entities more or less loaded with sacredness in their network. The notion of *rahui* must then be linked to the economy of a human network defined by a sacred circulation, the extension of which marks the limits of a *fenua*: that particular sacred, ancestral land to which one is affiliated. The *rahui* is an act set by a sacred authority: power and sacredness are inseparable in Oceanian societies.<sup>22</sup> The nature of this sacredness must be remembered; it does not reside in a being or an intangible substance, transcending god or cosmic order, but in the power of circulation.<sup>23</sup>

The Polynesian leader, his guardian gods and his ancestors have a precarious status defined by their effective capacity to bring wealth, and their ability to redistribute it to their community of descendants and affiliates. In this, the leader is dependent on the members of his network. If the leader fails, the goods will no longer come back to him, the circulation will continue without him. It will travel elsewhere and he will literally be bypassed, losing *mana*; that is, to be socially eliminated. It is clear that this double movement constructs, on the one hand, the network in its maximum extension — from the earth and its products to the invisible entities, to whom the leader is genealogically the closest — and, on the other hand, the network in its hierarchical structure — upstream, the direction of the convergence of wealth indicates the axis of power and, downstream, redistribution, subject to formal and strategic preoccupations, designates the place and function of each member of the community.

The notion of *rahui* must, therefore, be associated with the economy of a human network defined by a sacred circulation, whose extension marks the limits of a *fenua*. The *rahui* is an act set by an authority. The prerogative of the *rahui* should, therefore, be understood in two ways: first, it is the implementation of the sacred power of the person who sets it; second, it is part of a logic which seeks to strengthen the entire network in terms of both its extension as well as in its hierarchy.

---

22 Rigo, B., 2007. 'Le pouvoir politique et le sacré en Polynésie'. In M. Chatti, N. Clinchamps and S. Vigier (eds), *Pouvoir(s) et politique(s) en Océanie*. Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 197–22.

23 Babadzan, A., 1993. *Les dépouilles des dieux*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, pp. 114–18.

It could be thought that segmentation and increasing hierarchy in certain Oceanian societies has diverted, for the benefit of a more centralised power, what was perhaps originally the implementation of social cohesion in order to manage resources. If the *tapu* is structural, the *rahui* is occasional: it adapts to the occasional demands of the natural world or of political power. All the events that affect the network — the death of an important person, alliances, the birth of a chief's son, and so on — are opportunities for important ceremonies. In these great moments of the community's life, the strength of the network is asserted by making its sacred modality into spectacle: the movement of goods. The *rahui* does not obey an ecological logic, but the sacred economy of a network society. Hence, substantiated facts all over Oceania can be easily understood: the sumptuous feast, as a demonstration of power,<sup>24</sup> is a constituent part of any exchange custom. If we cannot speak of potlatch for Oceanian societies, we can talk about agonistic logics: whether it is a question of traditional offerings on sacred *marae*, or gifts of contemporary parishioners in the Evangelical church during the *me* (collection which takes place each year in May in the Evangelical church and which results in special ceremonies) in French Polynesia, or the generosity of the Wallisians towards their Catholic parish on the occasion of communions, it is always human networks that are reaffirmed and which appear in their plurality.

We understand that the traditional ban provisionally set on products of land or sea is a necessity, less an ecological concern to maintain a resource than a religious and political calculation; one must provide oneself with the means to make available, when the time comes, the necessary abundance for the representation of the reality and the vitality of the network. This representation is in fact a necessary demonstration both for the members of the community itself and for all the others. Somehow, the *rahui* boosts the circulation and renders human networks competitive. One also grasps the dynamic ambiguity contained in the universal game of any political power involving sacredness: the *rahui* emanates from the recognised authority of a person; when used efficiently, it reinforces this authority considerably. Fortunately, Oceanian societies were, and still are, sufficiently fluid to

---

24 Douaire-Marsaudon, F., 1998. *Les premiers fruits*. Paris: CNRS Editions/Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, p. 123.

deter chiefs from the excessive use of this power.<sup>25</sup> In these societies, displays of wealth or status that are not grounded in reality are not forgiven. Abusive *rahui* that demand too many sacrifices of the population will result in the diversion of all circulation away from imprudent *ari'i*.

## Conclusion

For Polynesia in particular, and Oceania in general, there was not an encompassing nature to share, but competing networks in which all things — human or non-human — were linked. Not a common house (*oikos*, which could set up an ecologic preoccupation) but — to use a more Oceanian metaphor — rather a banyan among other banyans, each one multiplying the number of roots in land and air, both invisible and visible, in order to grow higher than the others by absorbing, for its own benefit, as much water or light as possible.<sup>26</sup>

The essential driving force behind Oceanian societies was the need to establish their status as primary and constituent in relationship to other societies. Thus, they are defined as network societies. The relationship is not status but an action whose renewal defines social space and hierarchies. The action in this case is put into circulation. The abundance of the circulation is the strength and extension of the human network.<sup>27</sup> Just as strength is not a potential assertion but an exercise actually demonstrated, the staging of circulation assumes a sacred economy of conservation for the purpose of sumptuous expenditure. The forbidden, just like a dam used to raise the level of the water, which will be released spectacularly, works to strengthen the sacred circulation and, hence, also to strengthen a religious and political social structure. This is not to say that the *rahui* had no ecological effects — the *ari'i* or the *tahu'a* had no interest in exhausting a natural resource (especially if it is dedicated exclusively for their consumption as, for example, the turtle). Rather, the *rahui's* primary logic was economical, political and religious all at once: the renewed

25 Baré, J-F., 1987. *Tahiti, Les Temps et Les Pouvoirs: Pour Une Anthropologie Historique du Tahiti Post-Européen*. Paris: Éditions de l'Orstom, pp. 75, 89.

26 Henry, T., 1988 (1968), p. 350 ; Godin, P., 2000, 'Les ancêtres, essai de définition'. In F. Angleviel (ed.), *Religion et sacré en Océanie*. Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 25–47.

27 Rigo, B., 2004. *Altérité polynésienne ou les métamorphoses de l'espace-temps*, Paris, CNRS Editions, pp. 125–89.

## THE RAHUI

need for an abundant and prestigious circulation imposed temporary restrictions which simultaneously showed and demonstrated the reality of a power and of a human network.

Thus the practice of *rahui* doubly reaffirms the hierarchy: within the network and in relation to other chiefdoms. Its logic is not that of economy but that of expense, or more precisely, it participates in an economy of expense whose aim, to be demonstrative, must be reasonably excessive.

This text is taken from *The Rahui: Legal pluralism in Polynesian traditional management of resources and territories*, edited by Tamatoa Bambridge, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.