

Mysteries and Dreams

The French in Oceania

Edited by

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Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega

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Introduction

Oceania has been the source of mysteries and dreams for the outside world since the first contact with Europe. Likewise, Indigenous Oceanians have fostered mysteries and dreams about outsiders. In the context of this volume, the outsiders under study are French.

The mysteries with which we engage encompass both the questions that Oceanians raise about French worldviews and behaviors while in their midst, and the enigmatic allure that Oceania presents to the French, laden with romantic fantasies and paternalistic notions. As to the dreams we will invoke, they also reflect the aspirations and ideals of both Indigenous Oceanians and French people as they navigate their relationships through cultural exchange, coexistence and sometimes conflict. In many cases, dreams on either side may turn into nightmares or disillusion.

Dominant colonial discourse has long painted a picture of Oceania devoid of complexity, often emphasizing a dichotomy of civilization versus savagery. It has crafted elaborate myths surrounding Indigenous cultures, distilling them to simplistic representations that fail to encapsulate their depth and richness. Aiming to recenter focus onto Oceania, this collection is an original project that offers fresh postcolonial approaches to features that have already been subjected to academic scrutiny, as well as unprecedented discussions of hitherto unexplored Francophone Oceanian figures and French figures involved in the Pacific. Our interplay of dreams and mysteries provides an innovative lens through which to examine the motivations behind diverse forms of French association with Oceania, and the responses engendered by Indigenous communities, artists and authors as they assess, challenge and reshape French narratives. This volume seeks to illuminate how these narratives are enmeshed with questions of agency, identity, and representation, aiming to reveal the reciprocal interplay between Oceanian and French perspectives.

French Presence in Oceania

French presence in Oceania has a long history. The initial ventures into the region by Europeans had their fair share of explorers, with Louis Antoine de Bougainville's voyage from 1766 to 1769 actually preceding those of the better-known British captain James Cook. Ensuing French voyages of exploration like those led by Jean-François de La Pérouse (1785-c.1788), Antoine Bruni D'Entrecasteaux (1791-1794) left their marks on European perceptions of the

Pacific, while Jules Dumont d'Urville, voyaging through the region in 1825-1829 and 1837-1840, left an arguably even more impactful legacy by coining the conventional, but controversial, division of Oceania into Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia, and "Malaysia" (Maritime Southeast Asia).¹

The second important area of French involvement in Oceania was through Roman Catholic missionaries. Two orders founded in France as part of a religious revival in the aftermath of the French revolution were assigned to spread the Catholic faith in one half of the Pacific region each: To the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts (aka Picpus Fathers) were given the Hawaiian Islands and the various islands today comprising the Cook Islands and French Polynesia, as well as Rapa Nui (Easter Island), whereas the Congregation of Mary (Marists) were assigned Aotearoa-New Zealand, Western Polynesia, and Melanesia. This led to fierce competition with English-speaking Protestants who had been on most islands a decade or two earlier, while theocracy-like Catholic strongholds were established on a few islands not previously dominated by Protestantism, notably Mangareva (Gambier Islands) in Eastern Polynesia and 'Uvea (Wallis) and Futuna in Western Polynesia.

From the late 1830s onwards, the French state projected its naval power into the region, initially precipitated by clashes between intruding Catholics and established Protestants, leading to acts of gunboat diplomacy. Their aim was initially merely to enforce French Catholic missions' right of abode, but soon, having gotten a taste of imperial power, naval captains increasingly attempted to establish political control, such as an annexation claim over the Marquesas Islands and a forced protectorate over Tahiti in 1842, as well as more vaguely formulated protectorates over Mangareva, 'Uvea and Futuna in 1844, and an annexation claim in 1853 over New Caledonia, soon to become a major penal colony. French colonialism intensified with the annexation of Tahiti in 1880, eventually gaining control by 1901 over all the islands that later became French Polynesia. Unresolvable competition with Great Britain in the New Hebrides, the future Vanuatu, led to double colonialism through the establishment of a joint naval commission in 1887 and a full-fledged joint colonial administration referred to as a condominium, rendered 'pandemonium' by its critics, in 1914. Only very rarely was colonial rule established consensually, meeting instead with fierce acts of Indigenous resistance, such as the Franco-Tahitian wars of the 1840s and 1890s or the large-scale Kanak uprisings of 1878 and 1917 in New Caledonia.

¹ See, for instance, Serge Tchekézo, "A Long and Unfortunate Voyage towards the 'Invention' of the Melanesia/Polynesia Distinction 1595-1832," *The Journal of Pacific History*, 2003, 38(2), special issue *Dumont d'Urville's Divisions of Oceania: Fundamental Precincts or Arbitrary Constructs?* (Sept. 2003), 175-196.

Unlike in many other parts of the world, France has not engaged in decolonization in Oceania and remains a late colonial power. Of the islands and archipelagos colonized in the nineteenth century, only Vanuatu has been decolonized (in 1980, mostly due to pressure from the British co-colonizers), whereas Paris has staunchly held its grip on the other territories, granting them degrees of self-governance but refusing decolonization to this day. The reasons for this anachronistic policy have been the strategically important nickel mining industry in Kanaky-New Caledonia² as well as the use of atolls near Tahiti as nuclear weapons testing sites from 1966 to 1996, both with ongoing environmental, health and economic consequences. On a more general level of geostrategic posturing, maintaining a global colonial empire of mostly small island territories provides France with a network of military bases at a relatively low cost and allows it to be the world's second maritime power.³ The long coastlines are a treasure trove of marine resources that prove increasingly valuable in times of biodiversity collapse and the global race for rare metals and sources of renewable energy.⁴

Academic studies of the French in Oceania have mainly been focused on the French state and its agents.⁵ French presence, however, has also influenced and transformed the social and cultural landscapes of the Pacific Islands. The works of such prominent figures as artist Paul Gauguin, indeed, often frame outsiders' ways of seeing Tahiti and, by extension, Oceania. The present volume, therefore, highlights that there is a much wider history of the presence of individuals of French heritage and/or culture in the Pacific region, with diverse backgrounds and interests. It presents a selection of such people, often, but not always, against the backdrop of French colonial presence.

Navigating Oceanian/French Mysteries and Dreams

The interdisciplinary essays that follow contribute to a nuanced understanding of how Indigenous Oceanians and the French have interacted and responded

² In this volume, the name 'New Caledonia' will be used to refer to the French colony that existed during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, and the name 'Kanak-New Caledonia' to refer to the second half of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries New Caledonia.

³ See for instance Valérie Niquet and Marianne Péron-Doise, *L'Indo-Pacifique, nouveau centre du monde* (Paris: Tallandier, 2024).

⁴ See for instance Claire Nouvian, *Abysses* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

⁵ See for instance, Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842-1940* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990); Jean Chesneaux and Nic Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: De Bougainville à Moruroa* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992); Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1992).

to one another over time. These chapters are interconnected through common themes of identity, representation, cultural agency and colonialism, past and present. They are organized along three lines. They first give a historical approach to French explorations, adventures, and missions of various kinds; they then engage with Francophone literature in and about Oceania; finally, they focus on artists who are Oceanian, French, or other artists who settled in French colonies. The progression of these chapters spans across Oceania, bearing testimony to the wide impact of the French on this vast region.

The first section, “French Explorations, Adventures, and Missions,” delves into the historical context of French engagements in Oceania, transitioning smoothly from Kanaky-New Caledonia to the Solomon Islands and to Hawai‘i.

Vlad Solomon’s chapter, “Lessons in Savagery: Decadence and Civilization in the ‘Canaque’ Writings of Louise Michel and Henri Rochefort,” serves as an entry point into understanding the complicated relationship between the thousands of Paris Commune insurgents deported to the New Caledonian archipelago in the 1870s and the Kanak people Indigenous to the islands. Although this relationship has been the focus of a number of scholarly works over the past decades, little attention has been devoted specifically to how Communard authors used their experiences of exile in New Caledonia to critique not only the realities of colonialism and penal servitude, but also the very idea of French (and by extension European) civilization. Solomon seeks to contribute to this developing line of research by engaging with a selection of little-known yet significant writings by the two Communard authors most closely associated (particularly in France) with New Caledonia’s period as a penal colony: Louise Michel (1830-1905) and Henri Rochefort (1831-1913). Transported to New Caledonia in 1873 on the same ship, the two remained lifelong friends even as their respective political paths began diverging in the 1880s. More importantly, both were profoundly transformed by their post-Commune exile and used their respective – and very different – dreams, expectations and experiences in Oceania as springboards for radical critiques of the very civilization that had banished them as ‘savages.’ Their writings grapple with the discrepancies between their dreams and ideals, and the realities they faced among Kanak people. Solomon’s investigation, therefore, highlights the complexities of identity formation in a colonial context, where the boundaries between oppressor and oppressed become increasingly blurred.

Following this, Anna Paini’s essay, “Early French Missionaries in Oceania: Xavier Montrouzier’s Expectations and Fantasies Challenged by Indigenous Responses,” focuses on a missionary experience often overlooked in the analyses of the French missionary presence in the Pacific, relating to early attempts at a permanent Marist settlement in the Solomon Islands and Muyuw-Murua, or Woodlark Island. The opportunity to open a window on this

early French missionary activity in Western Oceania is provided by the correspondence of Xavier Montrouzier, then a young missionary with a natural science background, who left France in February 1845 with a group of Marists. The dreams, expectations and fantasies of reaching a land where Marists, taking European superiority for granted, could bring the Gospel message, convert the inhabitants, and transform Pacific Islands into an outpost of Christendom clashed with the response of the local population. While the Marists had anticipated the possibility of hostility, they, and in particular Xavier Montrouzier, were taken aback by what amounted to a mystery to them: the Indigenous ability to engage in thoughtful criticism concerning their evangelization project and formulate remarks and comments that discomfited them. Paini's perspective throughout the chapter steps away from the stereotyped assumption that European colonials controlled the practice and representations of (early) encounters in the South Pacific and elided any traces of Indigenous presence and agency. The Islanders' standpoints and actions seep into the lengthy and detailed letters that Montrouzier wrote back to France; though they are blatantly pervaded by a language laden with stigmatizing tones and by a rhetoric which infantilizes the local population, they provide valuable descriptions of the local scene and reveal traces of Indigenous agency.

Lorenz Gonschor's chapter, "The *Esprit* of *Aloha*:"⁶ Charles de Varigny, Auguste Marques, and Their Societal and Political Visions of Late-Nineteenth-Century Hawai'i," shifts focus to a different landscape. Gonschor examines the two arguably most influential Frenchmen in the Hawaiian Kingdom, Charles de Varigny (1829-1899) and Auguste Marques (1841-1929), who remain relatively unknown in common historical accounts. Varigny was a journalist and adventurer turned diplomat and politician who ended up becoming the most important advisor to King Kamehameha V, shaping Hawaiian national policy during the late 1860s before returning to France, where he published copiously. Marques' life partly mirrored that of Varigny, as he also worked as a newspaperman, diplomat, and politician. Although he did not rise to the same levels of high statesmanship in the kingdom, his writings in French, English, and Portuguese on social, political, economic and spiritual matters were arguably just as influential. What both men had in common was a strong

⁶ A note on italics: Oceanian words (such as *aloha*, *vahine*, etc.) appear in italics throughout this volume, in accordance with Vernon Press editorial guidelines. This does not necessarily reflect the authors' choices on language representation, since it may reinforce problematic linguistic hierarchies that position Indigenous languages as 'other.' For more, see Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Always Italicise: How to Write While Colonised* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2022). Our thanks to coauthor Coline Souilhol for suggesting this note.

personal commitment to Hawai'i as an independent Indigenous monarchy and an antagonism to those working towards undermining its sovereignty, especially American missionaries and their descendants. Both envisioned a more progressive society with more respectful and equitable relations between white immigrants and Indigenous islanders. Marques went even further and questioned the then prevailing tenets of Western civilization and Christianity, promoting spiritual syncretism between Western, Eastern, and Indigenous spiritual traditions, while advocating for intermarriage between Hawaiians and foreigners as a means to absorb the latter into the national body politic of the kingdom. Embracing modernity while also being dreamers and mystics, Varigny and Marques represented a Romance countermodel to the puritanical pragmatism prevailing among Anglo-Saxon settlers that was much more in accordance with Hawaiian worldviews.

The second section, "Engaging with Francophone Literature in and about Oceania," takes the readers to Rapa Nui, then to Tahiti and back to Kanaky-New Caledonia, in contemporary times. It explores how literature from and about Oceania has constructed, challenged, and conversed with the legacies and the continuation of colonialism.

Jean Anderson's chapter, "The Stones and Stars of Rapa Nui: A Question of Epistemic (Dis)Continuity," complicates narratives surrounding Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island, by investigating how Francophone authors have interpreted the island and its culture. Rapa Nui has long fascinated many; indeed, it is almost universally associated with mystery, due mainly to several factors: its isolation, its apparent barrenness, its giant statues and its indecipherable *rongorongo* writings. These elements reappear constantly in the French (and other European) imaginary, which allows little space for local understandings. From Julien Viaud (Pierre Loti)'s influential descriptions through to more recent ethnological explorations such as those by archaeologist Francis Mazière, the same fascination that led to the more imaginative explanations of Thor Heyerdahl and even Erich von Däniken can be traced. Anderson examines two contrasting examples of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century representations, a novel by Pierrette Fleutiaux and a documentary account by Édouard Glissant and Sylvie Séma, in order to evaluate the ways in which they deal with the 'mysterious' aspects of Rapa Nui. Strongly contrasting views emerge. Fleutiaux's emphasis repeats the discontinuity of a mysterious past (the stone *moai*, the *rongorongo*) set within a barren environment interpreted as a model of our over-exploited, dying planet. Glissant, on the other hand, reflects on the continuity represented by a culture that can only (and need only) be understood from within, and sees a future diaspora of Rapanui people not as an exodus from a broken

environment but as the continuation of a history of navigation, guided by the stars.

Following Anderson, Louis Bousquet's chapter, "Old Dreams and New Beasts in Titaua Peu's Opus," turns the focus to Tahiti and the impact of colonization on disenfranchized Mā'ohi (Indigenous Tahitian) identity, through the lens of the renowned writer Titaua Peu. It examines how Peu's novels *Mutismes: E'ore te vāvā* (2003) and *Pina* (2016) wrestle with the legacies of violence inflicted by both colonial powers and internal struggles among the Mā'ohi people. By contrasting characters who embody different narratives of resistance and reconciliation against the backdrop of French domination, this chapter reveals how generational trauma continues to shape contemporary identities. Within this overall analytical framework, the chapter provides an innovative approach to gendered dynamics in Peu's literary works. It does so by focusing on the two novels' male characters – both Mā'ohi and French, but particularly the latter – which have hitherto been marginalized by academic studies that tended to analyze primarily the Indigenous female characters in each of the books. Bousquet emphasizes the need for a revival of cultural narratives that empower individuals to reclaim their collective identity. Here, the interplay between 'old dreams' – the nostalgic visions of a past unmarred by colonization – and 'new beasts' – the representations of ongoing struggles – invites readers to re-examine the complexities of cultural heritage and identity along the lines of postcolonial studies. It proposes a definition of the 'Tahitian soul,' a unifying concept, a transcendent display of resilience and unity, and a key notion at the heart of Peu's characters' struggles for survival.

In "Pierre Gope's Reimagined *Romeo and Juliet* in Kanaky-New Caledonia," Florence Boulard and Claire Hansen focus on Kanaky-New Caledonia's contemporary culture by drawing critical attention to the archipelagic territory's theatrical and performing arts histories. Through a perspective informed by postcolonial ecocritical Shakespeare studies, the authors examine how theater in Kanaky-New Caledonia appropriates William Shakespeare's works to express and articulate local socio-political, cultural, historical and environmental issues. In particular, they explore how the specific reimagining of Shakespeare in Kanaky-New Caledonia illuminates cultural entanglements with place, gender, politics, race and identity. This chapter offers a case study analysis of the production of *La nouvelle et sublime histoire de Roméo et Juliette* in Kanaky-New Caledonia, a version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* adapted by Kanak director and playwright Pierre Gope and directed by French dramatist José Renault for a 2007 production. Partly based on interviews with Gope and his French collaborators, Boulard and Hansen argue that Gope's *Roméo et Juliette* enables a playful exploration of community tensions in Kanaky-New Caledonia through an enmeshing of symbols from this English/Western

literary canon with contemporary, local concerns in a politically contested Francophone territory in Oceania. The authors emphasize the dreams held by this Indigenous artist to reshape narratives in ways that reflect the Kanak' realities and assert their cultural significance and their connection to the natural world, further stressing the importance of art as a vehicle for resistance and empowerment throughout the Pacific region.

In the final section, "Arts and Indigenous Responses," we first stay on in Kanaky-New Caledonia, this time in the company of a British-Australian photographer and a New Zealand-Samoan artist; then we are taken to a wide range of islands, including Sāmoa, Rotuma, Kiribati, and Tahiti again, and we eventually land in Aotearoa-New Zealand. This third section emphasizes how various art forms – ranging from photography to literature – serve as platforms for expressing the enduring dreams of self-reclamation nurtured and accomplished by Indigenous Oceanian cultures.

Angela Giovanangeli's chapter, "Cross-Cultural Encounters in South Pacific Photography: Allan Hughan and Greg Semu in Kanaky-New Caledonia," reminds readers that photography associated with colonial encounters has often been defined by exotic subject matters such as the representation of Indigenous peoples and their landscape, offering a colonial perspective for Western viewers. Numerous studies on photography during the expansion of the colonial Empires from the mid to late 1800s have, for a large part, explored how photography recorded the achievements of Empire in places such as Africa and India. Photographic images of the Pacific Islands, however, represent a largely untapped archive in the relation between photography and our understanding of colonial encounters in this region. Today, these images may challenge existing notions of colonial narratives about Oceania as well as reveal alternative narratives. In order to develop work on photography situated within settler colonial Pacific narratives, this chapter aims to adopt a new perspective on the representation of Indigenous peoples in photography, and in the context of this study, of Kanak peoples, as a result of French encounters in New Caledonia. It takes the example of British-Australian Allan Hughan, who worked as a professional photographer in New Caledonia in the late 1800s, and of New Zealand-Samoan contemporary artist Greg Semu, who engages with colonial archives inspired by historic image making about peoples from Oceania. This chapter argues that specific photographic work set in Oceania portrays complex and contested human geographical space made of multiple groups as a result of French settler colonial encounters.

Ian Fookes's chapter, "Fashioning Myth: Two Figures of 'Gauguin'," examines how the historical figure of Paul Gauguin and his legacy have passed into the language of contemporary poets, writers, artists, filmmakers, and critics working in Oceania. The process central to this entering into discourse relies

on the transformation of the historical Gauguin into the textual sign ‘Gauguin,’ which can be read as a series of figures within a field of interwoven discourses. Fookes explores critical works from a wide range of Oceanian and French poets, filmmakers, and visual artists: Selina Tusitala Marsh’s poem, “Guys like Gauguin” (2009); Vilsoni Hereniko and Teresia Teaiwa’s play, *Last Virgin in Paradise* (1993); a mockumentary film by Sima Urale, *Velvet Dreams* (1998); Edouard Deluc’s movie, *Gauguin: Voyage de Tahiti* (2017); and selected works from *Paradise Camp* (2022), an exhibition for the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, by Yuki Kihara. This chapter argues that while the first figure of ‘Gauguin’ effectively critiques the historical Gauguin and his legacy, the second figure seeks to renew or upcycle ‘Gauguin’ to a minimal degree in order to leverage the artist’s iconic (fallen) status within a network of global media and a web of highbrow cultural institutions. The second figure of ‘Gauguin’ is therefore shown to be deceptive and ambivalent, yet surprisingly stable due to the shared goals and practices of artists who, though pursuing radically different political goals and holding divergent stances towards ‘Gauguinism’, nevertheless rely on leveraging the discourse itself. This ongoing conversation about Gauguin reveals the complexities of cultural heritage, presenting an opportunity for Indigenous artists to critically engage with historical legacies while crafting their unique narratives.

Continuing the examination of Paul Gauguin’s impact on the Pacific region, in the concluding chapter of this section, “Must All Gauguins Fall? Translating Decolonial Literary Maps in Selina Tusitala Marsh’s Poetry,” Coline Souilhol examines two poems by prominent Pacific Islander poet and scholar Selina Tusitala Marsh, the aforementioned “Guys like Gauguin” and “Two Nudes on a Tahitian Beach, 1894.” Both poems engage critically with the colonial legacies of the artist. By analyzing Marsh’s original texts alongside French translations by Serge Tcherkézoff, Anne Magnan-Park, Nelly Gillet, and Souilhol herself, this chapter seeks to unravel the intricate processes behind their word choices and the ways translations can facilitate decolonial literary pathways. Souilhol argues that Marsh’s poetry challenges colonial narratives, promoting a detailed examination of how linguistic choices can redefine perceptions of Oceania. She emphasizes Marsh’s exploration of inter-island solidarity and the artistic responsibility of translating cultural experiences. This chapter suggests that these literary contributions are metaphorical ‘maps’ that express the dynamic exchange of cultural and historical narratives between Francophone and Anglophone communities and disrupt colonial cartographies, creating spaces for Indigenous voices to reclaim their narratives. Marsh’s poems not only critique Gauguin but also serve as a catalyst for conversations about the complexities of identity, representation, and the enduring impact of colonialism. Ultimately, Souilhol elucidates how both the original and translated works collectively contribute to reshaping the literary landscape of

Oceania, fostering a sense of empowerment and decolonization through interconnected cultural perspectives.

A Call for Dialogue and Reflection

This volume hopes to impart to readers an understanding of the way past and present narratives of mysteries and dreams resonate within contemporary Oceania. It aspires to represent a multifaceted dialogue, one that continues the work of the many scholars, artists, and activists who figure prominently in this volume, in recognizing and honoring the rich histories of the Indigenous peoples of Oceania.

Last but not least, the editors and authors of this volume are fully aware that colonialism has erected linguistic divides in Oceania, notably between English-speaking and Francophone areas, which has historically contributed to a fragmented understanding of the region, and allowed more mysteries and dreams to emerge between these regions that now speak different colonial languages. Through this volume, they therefore aim to give English-speaking readers some points of entry into Francophone spaces in Oceania.⁷ Their commitment to transcending linguistic barriers emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in providing insights into the various ways Indigenous Oceanians may perceive the French in Oceania, and vice versa. By bridging these areas together, they hope to contribute to portraying Oceania as a ‘Sea of Islands,’⁸ that it has been from time immemorial.

⁷ For a more basic and general introduction to Francophone Oceania for English readers, see Mawyer, Alexander, Terava Ka'anapu Casey, William Matt Cavert, Lorenz Gonschor, Teora Morris, Sylvie Largeaud-Ort ga, Louis Bousquet, Patrice Godin, Mirose Paia, Titaua Porcher, Bernard Rigo, Bruno Saura, Virginie Soula, Serge Tcherk zoff, and Jacques Vernaudo, *Islands of French-Speaking Oceania* (Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai'i-M noa, 2019).

⁸ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 27-40.

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