

Colin Newbury. *Tahiti Nui; Change and Survival in French Polynesia. 1767-1945*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980. Pp. xvi, 380, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$25.00.

Among the more important themes in Pacific history is evolutionary and transitional changes in island societies. *Tahiti Nui* (Greater Tahiti) is a long-range treatment of economic development in French Polynesia in juxtaposition with concurrent political, social, and cultural changes. Fundamentally, Professor Newbury is concerned with the economic interchanges, particularly in the local market economy, which have characterized European contact with Tahiti and dependencies together with the social and political legacies resulting from such interchange.

The salutary chapters focus on the barter trade arising between European vessels and the Tahitians. The dynamics of primitive commercial transactions produced a particularly curious form of inflation, compelling Europeans to match the increased demands of more enterprising island entrepreneurs. Prostitution as a factor in local market economies is mentioned, though the point is not developed further on this important but elusive economic phenomenon. Within the context of economic developments was the exchange of ideas and new founded speculation concerning Tahiti's place in the world order. Indeed, contact with the technologies of the Europeans must have precipitated some philosophical rethinking on the nature of the outside world. Newbury concludes that

though this may have been the case, the short-term gains from such profitable transactions may have overshadowed any metaphysical contemplation undertaken by the Tahitians themselves.

Conflict over land claims emerged as the dominant issue amidst the confusion of internecine warfare, rapid depopulation, and high tribute. It was perceived by low ranking chiefs and some commoners as an opportune moment to assert real or fictitious claims over important resource tracts burdened by such disruptive circumstances. Intervention in island affairs by members of the London Missionary Society and the “conversion” to Christianity by **Pōmare**, the paramount chief of Tahiti created new circumstances for the islands. **Pōmare** assumed a position as a “new reference point” for political and economic brokerage between the Europeans and the Tahitians. The LMS, on the other hand, attempted in earnest to establish a “missionary kingdom.” This objective, in Newbury’s opinion, was not realized until after 1821 when chiefly rivalry had subsided and the pliant **Pōmare IV** had assumed rule over Tahiti. The symbiotic relationship between the missionaries and the nobility sought to regulate human behavior and lend authority to mission institutions. Small scale plantations were initiated to supplement the meager incomes of the missionaries themselves and served to instruct the Tahitians in the nobility of the work ethic and the advantages of developing a cash economy. The missionaries, moreover, were eager to develop a stable class of peasants in order to neutralize the sometimes overbearing chiefly monopoly over commerce. In spite of such well-meaning efforts, the missionaries failed to resolve fundamental problems of public and social order which eluded their control. When European concepts of property and legal redress for debt were added to the existing production and exchange systems, the authority of the chiefs was severely undermined and overextended into poorly understood areas of more complex commercial transactions.

The establishment of the French protectorate and the resulting wars of resistance troubled the initial colonial administrations. Problems raised by Mormon missionary penetration in the Tuamotus convinced the French authorities that this small but determined sect was merely an American advance guard into areas of French influence. Problems with the communal land tenure system greatly troubled the fragile and often vague jurisdictional limits of the local system and frustrated the eager concern for a more systematic means of land registration and transfer of real property interests. The emergence of a more refined and sophisticated entrepreneurial class, often resulting from the intermarriage between ambitious foreigners and the landed nobility, created a new source of informal influence over island affairs. New means of capitalization, the search for cheap and reliable labor sources, and the search for staple-

based economies marked this new era of merchant and brokerage domination of island commerce. The formation of the *Société Commerciale de l'Océanie* and the *Compagnie Française des Phosphates de l'Océanie* precipitated a new form of rivalry between the less prosperous colonial administration and the more aggressive Euro-Polynesian constituencies. While material prosperity and an administrative redefinition of Tahiti's legal status were linked to such social and economic changes, the Tahitians themselves were urged, if not compelled, to forfeit communal life and social organization to more individualized and fixed identities as part of the assimilation policies of government and business. Though assimilation did not result in any wholesale redistribution of power or substantive and widespread incorporation of the Tahitians into introduced administrative institutions, substantial modification of such new institutions were made to suit local needs or otherwise were discarded as unworkable. Twentieth century Tahiti then became more of a local *métropole* with Pape'ete as a roadstead for shipping and a municipality of heterogeneous cultures. Economic challenges, made by the middle-tier entrepreneurial Chinese to the European dominated economy were significant but short-lived. As government newspapers appeared and as education broadened, assimilation became a new rubric for directions in island society.

Tahiti Nui is more than an expansion of the author's doctoral dissertation. It is a serious consideration of new ideas which may be useful in explaining evolutionary development in tropical commerce. Newbury suggests that the enterprises of European trading firms elsewhere in the Pacific and West Africa offer parallel conditions and similarities for further study on the theme of local market economies as a link to political power. Though this work is neither elementary nor cursory reading, it does make Tahiti and dependencies an understandable case study of transitional developments in an island society.

William E. H. Tagupa
University of Hawaii
Kauai Community College