

The Lure of Tahiti

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Introduction by Day →

Annie Dillard

Sirens of the South Seas

The first contact between Europeans and Tahitians goes back to the year 1767, so that more than two centuries have passed of joyous intermingling of genes between the islanders and thousands of strangers of varied ethnic groups, including a strong strain from the Orient. It is amazing, however, that one can still define and view a "typical" Tahitian type — especially among the women of the island. This truth is noted by a recent visitor from the eastern United States.

Annie Doak, born in Pittsburgh in 1945, earned both a bachelor's and master's degree in English from Hollins College, and for seven years was married to her writing professor, R.H.W. Dillard. At the age of twenty-nine, she received the Pulitzer Prize for her contemplative volume, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1975). In the summer of 1975 she journeyed to the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific to write one of her contributions to *Harper's Magazine*. Mrs. Dillard is also a poet. Her latest non-fiction volume is *Holy the Firm* (1977), and her latest travel essay is "Sirens of the South Seas."

THE Tahitians are a beautiful, languorous people devoted to pleasure. That is how they were when the missionaries found them, and that is how they are again today.

The missionaries left the Tahitians demoralized and their culture dying — but that was a long time ago. Now Tahitian culture, never completely eradicated, is enjoying a strong revival. It is so pleasure-seeking that this visitor, at least, was struck with the comical thought that what these islands need at this moment is more missionaries.

There is in Tahiti a sweet ease, a voluptuous luxury, a sense of the compliance of nature and the abundance of

time. Nothing more fully embodies this sense of sweet ease than the *vahine*, the island women. Every visitor has remarked these women — their faces, bodies, presences, motions, perfume — with good reason. They are admirable as objects, like flowers — and that is how they present themselves. Like flowers, they specialize in bright beauty, passivity, and sexuality.

Gauguin in no wise exaggerated the *vahine's* languor or simple purity of form. The girls and women you see in remote villages and on city streets and buses are just as lovely as hired bare-bellied dancers. They are wonderfully smooth of skin and round of limb, oval-faced, wide-shouldered, as flat-footed as any Gauguin woodcut girl, with long pliant fingers, cascades of scented hair stuck with blossoms, and dreamy, stony expressions that quicken when the music starts.

A girl of fifteen, wearing a red-flowered *pareu* and a white frangipani blossom over one ear, falls asleep on a leather airport bench. She languishes askew on the bench in the public lobby, unself-conscious, one smooth armpit bared, and her eyes roll back in her head completely. Her eyes roll back, and roll down, and roll back up again completely, as if she were a cat, before at last they roll up and stay up and at last her eyelids flutter and close.

The living is easy in French Polynesia, long ago and still today. Where else in the tropics are the people healthy, well-nourished, clean and prosperous? Breadfruit, coconuts, mangoes, papayas, and bananas grow on trees in the yard, among the orchids, and the clear ocean is full of snapper, and giant edible clams. There is plenty of cash, too, as tourists circulate through the villages like bubbles in a fish tank and French businesses and military concessions thrive. The climate is so pleasant you scarcely need clothes or walls in your house. Consequently the ancient Tahitians — not a particularly artistic or intellectual people — had time on their hands, and they devoted it to playing, dancing, and, especially, making love.

For the ancient Tahitians, sex was “the focus of their lives.” We have this from a sober, scholarly three-volume anthropological monograph (Douglas Oliver, 1974). When the ancient Tahitians weren’t actually making love, they they were just getting ready to. Girls of all ranks, according to a disputed 1778 account, “passed through the embraces of hundreds” before they were married. Being married, then and sometimes now, narrowed the breadth of a young girl’s interests only somewhat. (“We don’t get divorced,” one Tahitian told me. “We just have messy marriages.”) For some few girls in ancient times, monogamy seems to have been the rule. For others, girls and boys, sex was a profession. But “for the majority,” anthropologist Douglas Oliver is moved to comment somewhat giddily, “sexual intercourse was an avocation.”

People of all ages and both sexes delighted in a steady stream of sexual conversation. People starting at about age seven made love on all terrains: in sacred chestnut groves, on black sand beaches and white sand beaches, in the rain forest and on dry stream beds. Public love-making afforded special amusement to spectators, the European explorers learned. In 1772 Bougainville described the hospitality natives extended to his shipmates. Tahitians invited strolling sailors into their houses, fed them, and offered them their daughters. Immediately the house would fill with curious onlookers who surrounded the couple and spread the ground with leaves and flowers. Musicians appeared and struck up melodies on their nose-flutes. The men were “confused,” Bougainville noted, deadpan, but none, so far as he knew, “found it impossible to conquer his repugnance and conform to the customs of the country.”

Such coquetry as there was in ancient Tahiti seemed to take the unambiguous form of outright proposition. “A desire for copulation,” said one old manuscript, was “ceaselessly” signaled by unspecified gestures of women’s hands, eyes, and — not quite imaginably — toes. In the forest, a girl signaled the boy she chose by hitting him with a softly

thrown piece of fruit while he was bathing. The boy would quit the water at once and head for the bushes.

In 1767 a British explorer was intrigued to discover a Tahitian woman making fingers at him. She held "her first finger up straight and smiled, then crooked all her . . . fingers and kept playing with them and laughed very hearty . . ." At length he figured out she was offering herself at the price of one long iron nail. In 1803 a European man living in Tahiti was maddened by the sight of girls bathing in six inches of water. They choose pools by public paths, he said, and "take great care to show that they wash all parts of their bodies."

Today, European businessmen emigrating to Tahiti with their wives and children find those wives and families packed and headed homeward "within six months," said one resident. "Everyone takes a mistress — a *vahine*."

Some upper-class Tahitian girls may remain virgins until their late teens. Some set their caps for European men. You see them at the best restaurants with these older escorts. Each wears a single, enormous black pearl at her throat. Each is beautifully groomed and smiling. If you address such a one directly in a language she speaks, as if she were a person, she is apt to be too meek to answer for herself. She is so vivid, motionless, and speechless, you feel yourself to be in the presence of a hologram.

What is it like to have a *vahine* as a lover?

"She was perfectly submissive," one French resident said. We were eating veal and mangoes under a wild hibiscus tree and a swaying casuarina tree, beside a white sand beach on the island of Tahiti. Beyond the calm lagoon a lacy fringe of breakers marked the reef. This white band of waves made of the lagoon and sky a bright bauble, a gift, like the day itself, whole and enormous, presented with a ribbon. In the ocean distance rose the volcanic and verdant slopes of Moorea, which, like nearby Bora Bora, many travelers consider the most beautiful spot on the face of the globe.

"Perfectly submissive." He grimaced. This French landowner had kept his *vahine* for over a year, he said, to the delight of her large family, until his very loneliness caused them to break it off.

"She wouldn't even eat with me. 'This is for you,' she would say" — he made a graceful gesture with both hands — "'for you,' and retire, leaving me alone at the table. I never really got to know her." Now he savored his mango, his potatoes Anna, his pear tart. With us was the lively and well-educated Frenchwoman, a therapist, with whom he has lived for many years. On the beach beyond us, two bare-chested Tahitian men were launching an outrigger canoe. The outrigger's float was a piece of hand-carved, banana-shaped wood; the outrigger's arms, tidily lashed to both canoe and float, were sections of an industrial reinforcing bar.

"People say," the Frenchman went on, "that when you take a *vahine*, you should bring her friend also, so she'll have someone to talk to. For she'll never talk to you."

Tahitians are largely unmoved by the present independence conflict in New Caledonia. The Melanesians in New Caledonia are poor and chafe at their treatment by their French governors. They are black-skinned, short, and blunt-featured. The problem appears to be racial. ("Some of them are beasts," a French resident confided to *The New York Times*.) The Polynesians in French Polynesia are, by contrast, pale, rich, self-satisfied, and virtually self-governing. The French keep their islands in luxury, like girls in a harem.

"Twenty years ago," the Frenchwoman said, "Tahitians were forbidden to speak Tahitian at school, even in kindergarten. Now little children may be taught in Tahitian." I had seen 1950's photographs of Tahitians all dressed identically — in skirts and stockings, dark suits and ties. Now I saw no stockings, no ties, but bright prints everywhere, and bare feet. I saw a man lounging in a palm tree on the shore of a lagoon, wearing only a blue *pareu* around his hips.

He sprawled like a sloth. "The people were more westernized twenty years ago than they are today," the Frenchwoman said. She passed a silver platter of sauteed veal, the platter gracefully strewn, as is so much in Tahiti, with red hibiscus blossoms.

"Now Tahitian dancing is part of the school curriculum."

I had just begun to understand that the sensuous costumed dancing that *vahine* perform for tourists is not the cynical, moneymaking humiliation it had at first seemed, but instead a rather cleaned-up, neotraditional form of enjoyment for both the dancers and the musicians. The dancers are demure off-stage. I believe they enjoy dancing for its effort. Some troupes barely break even, for they must pay for their own costumes, instruments, and transportation. But who wouldn't like to sing and dance the night away? How their eyes flash and their hips roll as the grinning drummers change the pace and add a bump of syncopation! Some troupes are performing evermore traditional dances, both for tourists and for the big July festival and competition (at which everything is so traditional in spirit that costumes must not be sewn with nylon thread).

Thirty years ago only lower-class young girls danced, according to historian P. O'Reilly. In 1956 a Papeete woman organized a dance troupe for proper girls, a troupe with well-made costumes and polished orchestration. Now everyone is getting into the act—not only the luscious young girls of all classes, but also their mothers and, with visible joy, their grandmothers.

What happens to old *vahine*?

Their faces grow lined, their hair turns gray, their torsos thicken, and, rapturously, they form a dance troupe in order to knock themselves out several days a week rattling their skillful hips before a crowd.

How I love to see these grandmothers dancing in rows! They wear missionary-style dresses from chin to bare ankles. They belt out rich-voiced harmonies to the deep

pounding of the big skin drum and the snazzy clatter of the wooden slit-gongs. Their worn brown fingers flirt in the air as their great hips roll and their expressions change from flirtatious irony to flirtatious enthusiasm and back again. They are, almost all of them, devout pillars of the Protestant church—such shaking hips on those pillars! Some of them are schoolteachers. It is they who tenderly teach their toddling great-granddaughters how to answer the big drums' hard bangs with their hips. They teach the tiniest girls to hold their heads and shoulders relaxed and still while their bare bellies romp and the melody's parts split and rejoin, and to smile with a faraway look as if they were seeing the white line of breakers at the reef over the audience's heads, and to keep their ankles together like nice girls, and perhaps—for aren't traditional things coming back in Tahiti?—to make a few wee come-hither gestures with their toes.