

Fire, Food, and Earth: The Tahitian *'Ahimā'a*

SUE SAMUELSON AWARD FOR FOODWAYS SCHOLARSHIP

FIRST PLACE

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As is the case with colonialism around the world, when Tahiti encountered European powers in 1767, later to be ceded to France as a colony in 1880 (Al Wardi 2009:196), the culture underwent massive transformations. While undeniably much was lost, there are cultural pockets of Tahiti that are anachronisms of sorts, active pushbacks to the full force of modernity; nowhere is this more palpable than in the traditional food. *'Ahimā'a* translates as fire-food, and it refers to the underground oven where Tahitian recipes are prepared for an extended period of time. In it, the much beloved local food, *mā'a tahiti*, gains its characteristic flavor and smoky scent. The practice of cooking this way would have followed the well-worn path that colonialism established, becoming an olfactory memory diffusing into the airs of history, if not for the decision that the scent of the food needed to be preserved. To better understand the role the *'ahimā'a* plays in Tahitian society and what is to be learned by how it navigates modernity, this article will provide an overview of Tahitian foodways as well as the changes brought by colonialism and industrialization. I will argue that when the *'ahimā'a* faced modernity, instinctive decisions were made as to what truly characterized the food tradition, what must be preserved, and what from the outside world could and should be included—defining the parameters of the tradition allowed it to maintain continuity while modernizing.

In this article, I utilize both archival and field research to articulate the ways in which food was cooked in the *'ahimā'a* in ancient compared to modern times as well as the impetuses of the changing foodscape. Field research was generated over four different visits to Tahiti where I stayed with a local family in the small agricultural community of Papeari, 50 kilometers from the capitol of Pape'ete. Here, I was put into contact with numerous subjects for extended interviews. Regularly hitchhiking to the main city also provided additional impromptu, randomized, and informal interviews for further context on the changing food traditions. My approach to fieldwork pulls from Folklore, and my write-up of food processes is influenced by readings on Food Studies. Interpretation of the collected material is grounded in theories of Folklore, influenced by literature from Pacific Studies and post-colonialism.

Ancient Foodways

Tahiti is the largest landmass of the Society Islands, which along with the Tuamotu Archipelago, Gambier, Marquesas, and Austral Islands, make up French Polynesia; the term, "Tahitian," is commonly used as a metonym to refer to inhabitants of the various atolls. The country is located within the larger geographic region of Polynesia, an area of the Pacific that encompasses over 1,000 different islands, including the primary regions of Cook Islands, Easter Islands, Hawai'i, New Zealand, Sāmoa, and Tonga. These various archipelagos have a similar cuisine based on a shared set of ingredients: the primary starches are taro, breadfruit, yams, cassava, and sweet potato; the main sources of protein come from

seafood, pork, and fowl; other staples include coconut, bananas, mango, papaya; and various other shoots, leaves, fruits, and nuts accompany the diet (Serra Mallol 2010:33; Haden 2009:11). Generally very healthy, traditional Polynesian foodways were low in fats, salts, and simple sugars, while being high in fiber.

Throughout Polynesia, traditional methods of food preparation involved raw food marination, cooking over an open fire, and, of course, steaming, smoking, or baking food in an underground oven. While in Tahiti this oven is called an *'ahimā'a*, variations of it are known as an *umu* or *'umu* in the other nations (Haden 2009:90). To construct the *'ahimā'a*, first a pit is excavated, usually about one meter deep and 130 centimeters to 150 centimeters across, although it can be made smaller or larger as to necessity. Dried coconut husks and coconut shells form a bottom layer, as a type of kindling, since they ignite faster. Dried local wood is then placed above this—any unprocessed wood suffices, but some families prefer to use the local ironwood tree, *'aito*, of the specific genus *casuarina equisetifolia*,² because it is capable of burning for an extended period of time at extreme temperatures. Large basalt lava rocks, *ofā'i 'ahimā'a*, are added on top of the wood so that they may heat through, becoming a type of charcoal.³ Only rocks that are especially porous are selected, for it allows them to withstand the heat; otherwise they would explode.

Once the fire is lit, it burns for roughly two hours. Whole, fresh banana leaves, about two meters long, are gently wafted over the stones until they begin to wilt, allowing the stems to be easily separated from the length of the blades and for the blades to bend without tearing. After approximately 15 are removed, the stems are then beat against stones to make them more pliable. When the flames have burnt down, the stones are raked with a piece of wood to be made level with each other, and then the stems are placed over the stones, with the hottest stones requiring the most. These stems act as buffers that keep the food from burning, a temperature control of sorts, as the amount one uses determines how fast or slow the food cooks, taking anywhere from two hours to an entire night. For an extremely large *'ahimā'a*, whole banana trunks may even be flattened and used. The food to be cooked goes on top of this, the blades of the banana leaves on top of that, and then the pit is covered with sand. The combination of the coconut, the banana leaves, and the wood all add to the flavor of the food. Traditional foods made by this technique include, but are not limited to, *po'e* (banana- *fē'i* or taro pudding), *pua'a* (pork), *pāhua* (the giant clam: *tridacna gigas*), and *fafa* (taro leaves: *xanthosoma brasiliense*).

A good example of the type of preparation this food takes is found in one of the more celebrated dishes, *fafa*,⁴ which is often referred to as Tahitian spinach. In ancient Tahiti, it was made with the basic ingredients of taro leaves, coconut milk, pork, and limes. Preparing it was a considerable expenditure of time, necessitating the collection of all of the ingredients, as well as the bark from a branch of the *pūrau* tree (*hibiscus tillieaceus*), and three fresh banana leaves. First, a young branch is cut from the *pūrau*, and the green bark is peeled off then torn into long cords. Four to six cords are placed perpendicular to each other with one shared nexus point. The banana leaves, which need to be in one complete piece and contain no tears, constitute the equivalent of a cooking dish. They are placed on the cords at complementary angles, forming a six-pointed star. About 36 taro leaves are cut

at the stalk, washed, and then the blades are cut from the stems. The blades are then individually rolled lengthwise, folded, and sliced into 2.5 centimeter strips. The skin of the stems is then peeled away, and the remaining portions are chopped into 2.5 centimeter pieces as well. Half of these pieces then go on top of the banana leaves-half of the strips on top of that. Layered on next is approximately 500 grams of uncooked, diced pork belly. The remaining taro leaves cover the plate and are topped off with the rest of the stems. The juice from two limes is squeezed on top, and then the milk from one coconut is added to the mix. The uppermost banana leaf is then folded together by gently lifting one side of the leaf and placing it over the food and then the adjoining side. This is repeated for each leaf underneath. To complete the packet, the uppermost cord is tied together. Then the same is done for each following cord. The finished product is then placed in the *'ahimā'a* to bake.

This recipe at these quantities generally fed a family of five, but as constructing the *'ahimā'a* was such a labor-intensive process, numerous other recipes tended to be prepared at the same time and the resultant food was eaten for three days, along with locally grown fruits. Additionally, neighboring families would take turns preparing *mā'a tahiti* to share some of the burden. Large communal feasts were then a central component of the *'ahimā'a* and provided a venue for forming interpersonal relationships or maintaining ties with extended family.

Foreign Influence

European colonialism, and the accompanying arrival of Asian immigrants of many ethnicities, introduced new ingredients to accommodate foreign preferences. This led to the proliferation of wheat, rice, sugar, red meats, and cooking processes, such as the use of oils to deep fry food (Haden 2009:20). A wide assortment of fruits and vegetables were also brought into the islands, such as brown onions, shallot onions, cabbages, carrots, lettuce, durian, tomatoes, eggplants, zucchini, pumpkins, and capsicums (Haden 2009:75). One of the most popular recipes utilizing many of these new ingredients is a salad dish of marinated raw fish with lime. It is known by the French name of *poisson cru* or the Tahitian *e'ia ota*.⁵

Perhaps the most significant Western contribution was the introduction of canned goods. Items such as canned tuna, Spam, or corned beef, became ubiquitous; that they kept well in the tropic heat made them perfect for long ocean voyages. Due to the insufficient land for cattle grazing and the expense of fresh beef as an import, the eventual tinning of beef also meant that early Westerners in Polynesia could avoid adapting to the local foodways. It thus enabled them to maintain an attitude that privileged European foodways. Polynesians, however, actively integrated corned beef into their traditional recipes, enjoying its taste and valuing its function as a symbol of the West. Its presence is palpable in every island grouping. New Zealand, for instance, manufactures its own corned beef, which is exported to the Cook Islands and Samoa, due to strong immigration flows between them (Alexeyeff 2004). Tahitian corned beef, known as *punu pua'atoro*, is usually cooked with onions and eaten with baked breadfruit, known as *'uru*. The individual brands sold in French Polynesia often promote themselves as having been made in *fenua* (local land), but with minimal grazing land for cattle, in most

cases, only the processing of the meat occurs in French Polynesia with the meat arriving mainly from New Zealand. Some brands, such as, Puna Pua'atoro API, are completely manufactured and processed in France and then exported to Tahiti.

One of the greatest changes to local foodways from colonialism was the influx of Asian immigrants to work in mining and agriculture industries, such as plantations for copra, vanilla, cotton, and sugar (Levy 1973:xvi). The Coolie Trade across the Pacific provided a steady stream of indentured laborers, which consisted primarily of people from Southern China, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The Chinese, however, constitute the most recognizable ethnic minority in French Polynesia, having generally arrived in two waves: in 1865 a Scottish planter by the name of William Stewart was given permission from the French colonial government to bring in 1,000 indentured laborers from Hong Kong to work on his cotton plantation; and in 1924, a direct steamship line from Hong Kong to Tahiti facilitated further immigration. While young men were the first to immigrate, after their period of indentured servitude, many chose to remain in the islands, marrying locals and creating their own families. After immigration and indentured servant labor laws loosened, whole Chinese families made the voyage. They often started small businesses importing/exporting goods or in retail stores, many of which continue to operate and occupy a niche between European importer-exporters and native Polynesian producers (Tung 2005:742). Currently, Chinese have largely assimilated into Tahitian culture, with many speaking both French and Tahitian, but their most enduring cultural tradition is their food. They introduced such common plates as *chow mein*, *chop suey*, *char siu* barbeque pork buns, Cantonese pastries, and staples like soy sauce, rice, and glass noodles. These foods, like corned beef, have usually been given local Tahitian names.

The Changing Foodscape

With the rise of colonialism and Western influence, many traditional forms of Tahitian culture began to disappear, often by active interference from religious evangelism. For instance, Tahitian dance, known as *'ori tahiti*, was banned in 1820 by missionaries who considered the movements to be licentious. They wrote that "between battles time was spent in orgies of lewd dancing" (Ferdon 1981:1) and objected to the religious purposes of the dance (Moulin 1979:11). The traditional form of tattooing, *tatau*, was banned in the 1820s (Kuwahara 2006:88) and even the Tahitian language was not allowed to be taught in schools until the 1990s. The *'ahimā'a* and *mā'a tahiti*, however, were never an active focal point in European colonialism as the food was not an affront to religious mores; rather, its deterioration was collateral damage. The introduction of new foodstuffs altered or replaced much of the local fare and industrialization became a game changer, greatly affecting how people could procure and prepare ingredients.

Fafa perfectly encapsulates the new circumstances *mā'a tahiti* found itself in and provides insight as to how far modernization can go before things are considered truly lost. Due to the desires of locals, foreign ingredients, such as diced chicken thighs, onions, garlic, oil, and salt and pepper, were added to the dish. This current incarnation, known as *poulet fafa*, even derives its name from both the

French and indigenous ancestry of the country, with *poulet* being the French word for chicken. Cost of the local and new ingredients, however, can make this dish very impractical.

Up until the 1960s, the majority of the country relied on subsistence agriculture, so access to these ingredients was readily available. In 1954, however, Algeria began its eight-year struggle for independence, so France started looking for a new place to test their nuclear weapons, setting their sights on French Polynesia, specifically the islands of Moruroa and Fangataufa in the Tuamotu Archipelago. In 1960, in order to facilitate their weapons testing, they opened the first large-scale airport, L'Aéroport International Tahiti Faa'a. Capable of landing large jets in Faa'a, and located roughly six kilometers from Pape'ete, the airport provided a platform from which to open up mass tourism to Tahiti. With the military presence and the growth of tourism, the surrounding area developed at an unprecedented scale. Locals migrated to the new metropolitan area for work or access to a lively nightlife (Kahn 2011:70), thus diminishing the number of people remaining in rural areas and working on family farms, known locally as *fa'apu*.

By living in the city, free access to the ingredients for dishes, such as *fafa* and *po'e taro*, disappeared. Conversely, purchasing these ingredients became more expensive, considered "luxury items" than meals based around canned imports which are more likely to be government subsidized as essential foodstuffs (Serra Mallol 2007). For an example, three dozen packs of taro leaves cost 500xpf⁶ each, running up to 1,500xpf. The necessary coconut milk is 500xpf, chicken another 600xpf, pork 600xpf, and garlic and onion an additional 100xpf each. Luckily, one can generally find the requisite banana leaves from publically available areas, but the overall price would be 3,400xpf to feed a family of five for one meal. A can of corned beef at 390xpf, on the other hand, along with an onion, maybe some lentils, rice, and a baguette, can feed a larger family for multiple meals at a fraction of the cost.

Additionally, with half of French Polynesia's population living in Pape'ete, even if they could afford the ingredients, they do not have the land or zoning rights to dig an underground oven or burn a fire for an extended period of time due to understandable smoke concerns. A workaround to make *fafa* then is to utilize a baking dish, aluminum foil, and a kitchen oven. But the scent is different, lacking the smoky aroma of banana leaves, coconut husks, and earth, and the taste is dryer, blander. It is like comparing canned coconut milk to fresh; while the two products are basically the same, the former is a poor substitute when you are used to the latter. Conversely, even for those remaining in the countryside with access to some of the local ingredients, the cost and effort is still prohibitive. This leaves the traditional *mā'a tahiti* to be prepared and eaten only at big familial events, such as weddings, where the cost and work is shared. With *mā'a tahiti* no longer functioning as a regular part of Tahitian social life, knowledge of how to build and cook with an *'ahimā'a* has greatly diminished.

Defining and Perpetuating Tradition

How to negotiate modernity while maintaining tradition is a situation that all colonized populations struggle with to some extent or another. James Clifford notes: "As new modes of individualism,

universalism, exchange and communication have restructured bodies, societies, and spaces, the traditions that indeed persist need to be seen as particular combinations of heterogeneous elements, old and new, indigenous and foreign” (2013:61). In this sense, maintaining tradition is not about stagnation, desperately clinging to every artifice of the old ways even when they become impractical, but about finding a balance. As folklorist Henry Glassie once eloquently stated, “Tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (1995:395), so the question then becomes: What aspects need to be carried on in order to maintain continuity between the past, the present, and the future? In the case of *mā’a tahiti*, locals are generally united in the opinion that not only should the core food ingredients be consistent, but also the fire. For Tahitians, *fafa* cooked in the oven is bland; all the ingredients are there, but the scent is missing, that smoky aroma that defines the food. Without the *‘ahimā’a*, it is no longer *mā’a tahiti* -it is no longer fire food.

One of the core ways that Tahitians have thus negotiated modernity in respect to their traditions is to update the cooking process without losing the flame. In contemporary times, the *‘ahimā’a* is dug, then fortified with cinder blocks or cement, and is covered with a metal sheet, layers of felt cloth soaked in water, and a large piece of plywood, the latter materials being used to better seal in the smoke. Porous basalt lava stones and local wood, however, are still used, except a large piece of wood is stuck in the center, and the layers of coconut kindling, wood, and rock are placed around it. The wood spike is then removed, and lighter fluid is added to the center-once the fire is lit, it even resembles a mini-volcano. Additionally, some make use of a metal cage to place the food in so as to more easily pull out the entirety of the finished product in one go, further simplifying the process.

Going back to the *fafa* recipe, other changes are also present in the preparation of the food itself. For instance, a small sheet of aluminum foil is placed on top of the banana leaves and under the taro leaves in order to keep the juice from dripping onto the fire, and rather than strip a branch from the *pūraū* tree, twine is used to tie up the packets of food. In this way, then, the tools of a society in the midst of industrialization are used only up to their ability to facilitate existing practices rather than fully replace them. *Fafa* cooked with these methods still uses the same basic ingredients and has the same smoky taste. Very few families, however, are able to continue making *mā’a tahiti*, due to the aforementioned reasons: the cost and necessary land for the *‘ahimā’a*.

In the small community of Papeari, located 50 kilometers from Pape’ete, near the isthmus of the island, where the large section of Tahiti Nui gives way to the smaller section of Tahiti Iiti, there is a family by the name of Tere. Throughout the community, it is known that the mother and father, Vaihere and Jiri, have an *‘ahimā’a* -a modern one, made with cinderblocks and cement. In each agricultural community in Tahiti, perhaps only three or four of these exist, and everyone knows who the owners are. The Tere family, however, gathers every Saturday afternoon, and they prepare numerous dishes of *mā’a tahiti* to be sold at a roadside stand on Sunday morning. They are rare, however, couched in a fortuitous position. The extended family still owns a small *fa’apu* where they pick the local ingredients, they live next to the lagoon so they have access to a supply of fresh fish, and their parents and grandparents never moved into the city and let the knowledge slip away. They have a

steady stream of customers who visit them every Sunday, the day after payday, but this job really is not done for financial benefit -although this job really is not done for financial benefit.

To prepare the food to be sold on Sunday, Saturday entails a trip to the *fa'apu* to harvest the local ingredients, as well as trips to the grocery store to buy the pork, chicken, and spices, or for materials, such as twine and individual plastic trays. It also involves fishing as well as bottling the necessary seawater to make the *fafaru*, a type of fermented fish product known for its strong odor but loved and acknowledged as an acquired taste by many locals. After all the work to get the ingredients and then cook them, the financial output is not substantive. Ten plates of *fafa* can be prepared, sold at 500xpf each, ten plates of *po'e* also at 500xpf each, and seven of *fafaru* at 600xpf. After subtracting costs, the financial payout per hour of time is minimal, but the family's access to the food remains regular, their children learn and maintain the old process, and the locals can keep remembering the scent and taste of the food, continuing to desire this version, keeping it from being replaced by the kitchen oven. One man, who comes to the stand every Sunday, remarks that this *fafa* tastes exactly the same as his grandmother's did. *Poulet fafa* is a product of both old and new, ancient and modern ingredients and cooking processes, but what defines it remains the same-it maintains continuity. That cultural memory that resonates will keep the fire within the food, defining and delineating the tradition for Tahitians.

Although tourists come in droves to Tahiti and desire to engage in culinary tourism, the tourist gaze of cultural productions is indiscriminate (Urry 1990) and does not distinguish oven baked *fafa* at pan-Polynesian luaus as being any less Tahitian than that made with the '*ahimā'a*'. As folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, "Tourism and hospitality industries design experiences, including culinary ones, within the constraints of the tourist's time, space, and means," as well as desire (2004:xi). In that regard, the day's long process to make *fafa* in the '*ahimā'a*' is inconvenient for most tourists in Tahiti to watch. Additionally, the two versions, oven and flame, are equally new tastes to them, both satisfying most desires for culinary tourism. To have the type of cultural cache to elicit interest from tourists, the '*ahimā'a*' would thus need to have more prominence in the cultural imaginary of the Tahitian tourism industry to justify the time and expenditure, or it would need to appeal to a niche market.

One thing, however, has never changed when eating *mā'a tahiti* -neither forks nor any equivalent are used, just one's fingers (Levy 1973:31). *Fafa*, for instance, is wet, almost gelatinous as it pools around your fingers. Rich or poor, it is the same-you pinch your fingers around the pulp that remains of the taro leaves, ensuring that it is fully saturated with coconut milk, and you lift the dripping morsel to your mouth, to repeat until satiated, licking or sucking on your fingers as you wish. If after your plate is done, and you want but one more taste, pinching a bit from the serving platter has no taboo, or *tapu*, as the Tahitian word is originally pronounced. There is no intermediary between you and the smoke filled taste, and worries about spreading germs have no voice. It is as intimate and communal of a family meal as possible. With the ingredients plucked straight from the land, cooked within the land by a process carried on as far back as cultural memory exists, this is the way Tahiti tastes.



Photo 1: Preparing the Fire (Jiri Tere).



Photo 2: Starting the Fire.



Photo 3: Wilting Banana Leaves (Jiri Tere).



Photo 4: Adding Meat to the Fafa (Vaihere and Jiri Tere).



Photo 5: Adding Lime (Jiri Tere).



Photo 6: Wrapping the Fafa (Vaihere and Jiri Tere).



Photo 7: Wrapped Product (Vaihere and Jiri Tere).



Photo 8: Raking the Stones (Vaihere Tere).



Photo 9: Baking the Product (Vaihere and Jiri Tere).



Photo 10: Selling the Fafa (Vaihere Tere).



Photo 11: Preparing the Fire (Jiri and Kaunui Tere).

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Notes

¹All Tahitian orthography and translations are provided by Vaihere Durietz Tere, a native Tahitian woman.

²This wood is also used for making the local slit log drums, known as *to'ere*, due to its strength and musical resonance.

³Children are often the ones asked to gather these rocks for the family as many find it enjoyable scavenging for them.

³While the specifics of this dish are particular to Tahiti, cognates of it can be found in other Polynesian groupings, such as the Cook Islands *rukau*, Tongan *lū pulu*, Sāmoan *palusami*, and Hawaiian *luau*. While these other dishes often use corned beef as the primary protein, they are similar in that they also combine onion, coconut cream and taro leaves, wrapped in either banana or cordyline leaves, or hibiscus bark and steamed.

⁴While islanders easily incorporated Western foods and preparation practices, they also maintained their traditional form of eating in abundance despite now living a much more sedentary Western lifestyle. This has led to significant health concerns of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure, issues that were relatively unknown pre-contact.

⁵While currency exchanges vary, one French Polynesian Franc-xpf is roughly equal to one American penny.