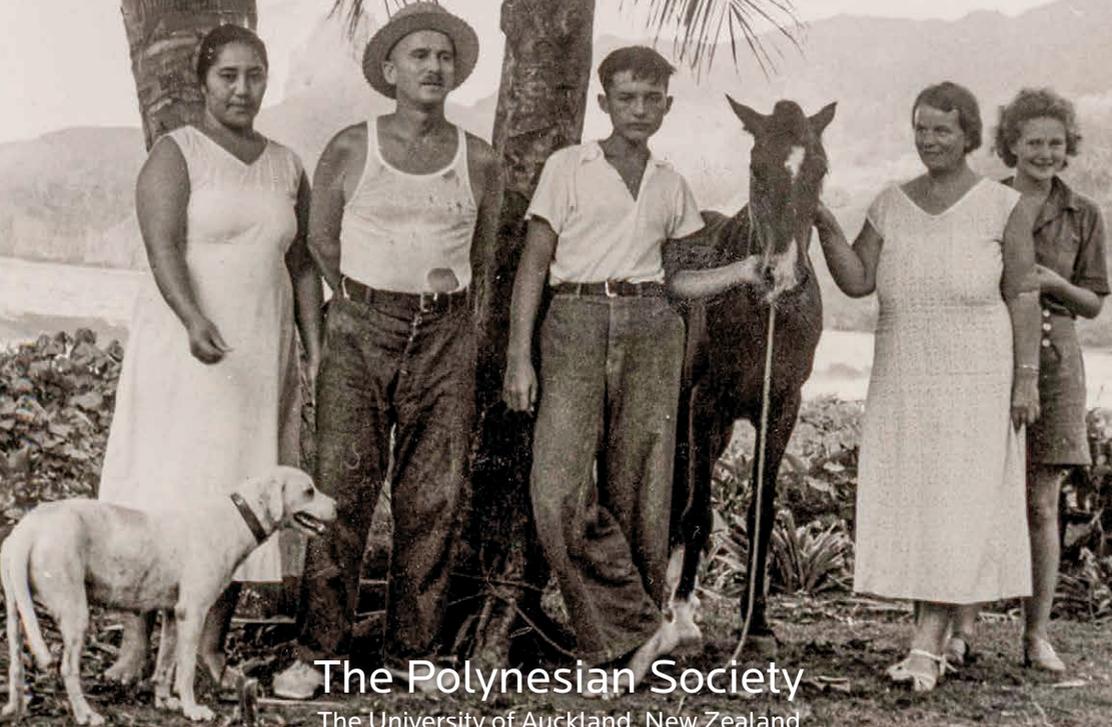


# waka kuaka

The Journal of the Polynesian Society

VOLUME 132 No. 3, SEPTEMBER 2023



The Polynesian Society  
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

---

## REVIEWS

---

SAURA, Bruno: *A Fish Named Tahiti: Myths and Power in Ancient Polynesia (Tahiti, Ra'iātea, Hawai'i, Aotearoa New Zealand)*. Translated by Lorenz Gonschor. Puna'auia: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme du Pacifique, 2021. 306 pp., ack., biblio., concl., orthog. style, trans. note. US\$20.00 (softcover).

TERAVA KA'ANAPU CASEY  
*University of Hawai'i at Mānoa*

*A Fish Named Tahiti: Myths and Power in Ancient Polynesia*, by Bruno Saura, centres on the origin story of Tahiti, with a young maiden named Terehe who lived at Opoa, Ra'iātea, long ago. In the story, she made the mistake of swimming in a river near her home during a time deemed sacred for religious ceremonies by/for the gods. Offended by the transgression, the gods drowned Terehe and allowed a giant eel to come and devour her body. Terehe's grandmother Mou'aha'a witnessed all that transpired after she went looking for Terehe and traced her to the river, just in time to see the eel consume her. But the story of Terehe does not end there. Terehe's spirit in turn possessed the eel, which thrashed about, grew to wondrous size and formed into a great fish of the land. It was so big that it was said that the head was at Opoa and the tail extended far out to 'Uporu (Taha'a). Burying itself deep in the earth, Terehe, now a giant eel-fish, rooted herself in the land and took control of part of the island, becoming what we now call Tahiti. Turahunui, artisan of the god Ta'aroa, was the only one to take pity on Terehe after what happened to her. He guided Tahiti eastward and it swam away as the great fish that settled where it now rests in the sea.

Saura argues that over time, the various interpretations of Tahiti's origin story as a great fish that broke away from Ra'iātea are analogies for the political domination by the Leeward Islands, specifically Ra'iātea, over Tahiti, as he looks to challenge the supremacy of Ra'iātea as the ancient and mythological homeland of Hawai'i/Hawaiki. Furthermore, the interpretations of Terehe's story created competing interpretations that not only romanticised Ra'iātea as the original homeland but also positioned Tahiti as commoner and therefore inferior. Saura points to theologian Turo a Raapoto's analysis of Terehe's story, where Tahiti was destined to "never have a strong identity outside of a relationship with another entity", and that "Tahiti would fundamentally be a fish, a prey" (p. 143). Through Raapoto, Terehe's story explains the political domination of Tahiti by others, a reasoning for French annexation that perhaps to Raapoto seemed inevitable.

Saura also addresses the value of engaging oral traditions. He argues that the way chants, songs and stories were sought after, recorded, printed and circulated in Mā'ohi Nui (French Polynesia's archipelagos) and beyond is not benign. When these stories were first collected, they reflected certain values of the society at that time as a living memory. When they were finally published and disseminated, often far from Tahiti, they also took on the values of editors, publishers, institutions and others who had motivations such as producing salvage ethnographies and authentic original stories. These are very different ways of engaging memory, and the distance in time and space involved in preserving oral traditions are historical challenges that Saura uses to discuss the difficulties in unravelling what these stories revealed about the past, present and future. Historicising the different layers of analysis for the texts themselves, as well as the stories in those texts, reveals how oral traditions were deployed to privilege certain historical narratives over others. The politicisation of oral traditions has real stakes in claims of power and authority both then and now, where the various interpretations of Terehe's story over time have influenced our understanding of Tahiti as it exists relationally to its neighbours.

By problematising and politicising E.S. Handy's, Te Rangihiroa's, Jean-Marius Raapoto's and Turo a Raapoto's (and others') interpretations of the story, Saura moves the focus from Tahiti's complicated relationship with Ra'iātea to an ancient rivalry between Ra'iātea and Borabora. In doing this, Saura decentres Ra'iātea as the ancient mythological homeland Hawaiki/Havai'i. He provides compelling evidence for a stronger argument that Borabora should be considered the birthplace of the region's most ancient sacred marae, Vai'otaha, as well as of the place of origin for the 'Oro religion and 'arioi sect, chiefly lineages and the chiefly symbols of the *maro 'ura* and *maro tea* feather girdles, which challenges the religious and political authority of the Taputapuātea marae in Ra'iātea.

Additionally, to build his own interpretations of Terehe's story, Saura includes long-standing academic practices rooted in Tahiti's reo Tahiti linguistic circles of debate, suggestion and comparison around the multiple meanings of words and appropriate usages of each, as well as their synonyms, and whether abbreviated words were used to imply another meaning. The deep comparative analysis work he does to bring together different versions and perspectives of the Tahiti origin story, even contrasting their timeline of events, and then examining how those events shaped our understanding of Tahiti over time, are effective methodologies for engaging oral traditions from Mā'ohi Nui.