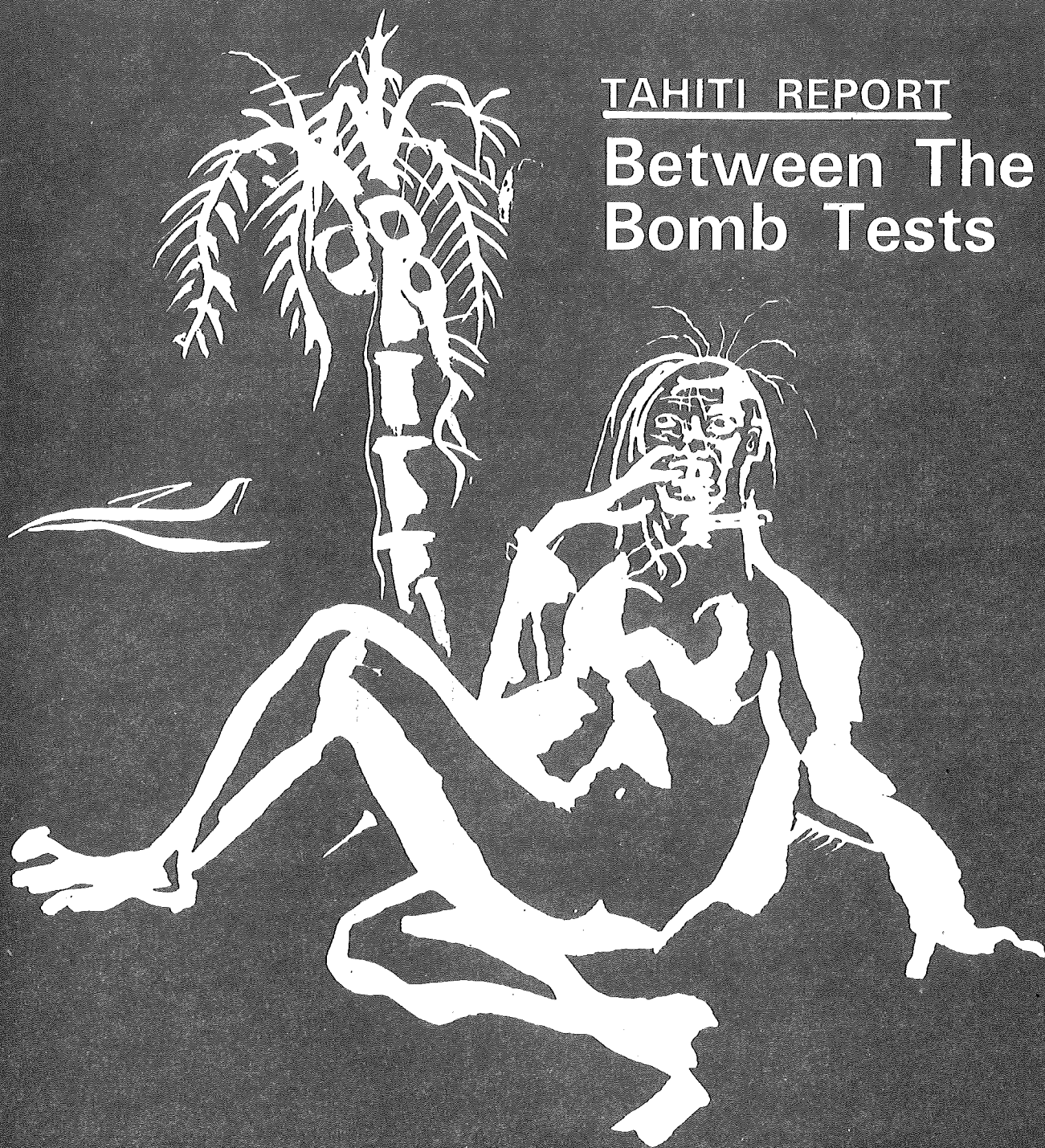


TAHITI REPORT

Between The Bomb Tests





A-Bombs Among The Tahitians

by ELSIE LOCKE

IN SEPTEMBER, 1966, General Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Republic, stood on Tahitian soil face to face with the brown-skinned people who are constitutionally part of France. Faithful to the tradition of Fletcher Christian of the *Bounty* and of Marlon Brando whose acting role as Fletcher Christian led to the purchase of his own sea-girt retreat, de Gaulle pronounced the Society Islands "the only Paradise left in the world".

From among the listeners rose the chief of the small vanilla island of Tahaa. "If this is Paradise, why are you bringing bombs to it? Bombs have no place in Paradise."

The General carefully explained that everything would be taken care of, and that no danger or harm would come to anybody. The chief parried this.

"If there is no danger or harm, why do you not explode your bombs in Paris, on the banks of the Seine?"

The gendarmes rushed forward, and hustled the awkward questioner away.

No doubt the President was aware that in the referendum of 1958, which altered the French Constitution and confirmed his personal dominance, he went near to losing French Polynesia altogether. At this time, only Guinea in West Africa returned a majority for "No"; and for this lapse it was promptly thrown out of the French family. But French Polynesia had a strong movement for autonomy, and its "No" vote was the next highest: 35.8 per cent in a heavy poll. The negative would almost certainly have been carried if freedom to travel had been granted the leading advocate for independence, Pouvanaa a Oopa. He was confined to Tahiti itself, while the Governor, after boasting that he would reduce Pouvanaa like a needle squeezed in his hand, travelled by fast ship over the connecting sea to persuade the remote Islanders that the only choice was "Yes".

Only In Theory

At this time there was a Territorial Assembly of 34, including some appointed members, almost equally divided between those who wanted autonomy within the French Commonwealth, and those who felt that so small a country must be dependent upon French control. (The total population is above 84,000.) But only in theory have the Polynesians become equal citizens of France. Wage discrimination gives a French teacher or gendarme double the wage of his Tahitian colleague. Polynesian culture and values are not those of Frenchmen, either.

When the patriots, headed by Pouvanaa a Oopa as Premier, publicly referred to breaking away as a republic and attempted to overcome some of the financial problems by a new tax on incomes, the commercial community revolted. After two days of civil disorder the Governor took charge, and installed a coalition which included the pro-French leader Alfred Poroi. He waited till the referendum was concluded—and then suspended the Administrative Council. This meant that he was now in sole command, without the consent of Pouvanaa or the other Ministers.

Disorders again followed and a plot to burn up the town was "discovered". The whole affair had all the trappings of the classic frame-up. "Molotov cocktails" were thrown, and the police claimed to have found incriminating materials by raiding Pouvanaa's home. The list would be comical if it were less tragic. It included four carbines and a pistol, some underwater spear guns, an American flag and a pile of stones suitable for throwing. On such evidence Pouvanaa was convicted of arson and thrown into a French prison. The formula was varied slightly for the equivalent independence movement in New Caledonia. The leader in this other territory, Maurice Lenormand, came to his prison on a charge of sabotage.

Forbidden To Return

Pouvanaa was released in 1965 but forbidden to return to the Islands. Spiritually he is always there, a symbol of the desire for autonomy, venerated for the wisdom acquired in his seventy-three years. His presence is felt all the more, because of another very realistic presence—the atom bomb.

In 1963, Pouvanaa's political party and another one were banned because petitions were circulated in protest against the "invasion" of Tahiti by French forces in preparation for nuclear testing. The people resented their islands being penalised for their smallness and remoteness, now that the Algerians had written off the use of the Sahara. They did not consider that the French nuclear policy was for them to decide; but the use of their own islands was definitely their concern.

Pouvanaa had been Deputy representing Polynesia in the French Parliament. His place was taken by John Teariki who was succeeded in 1966 by Francis Sanford. Both are anti-bomb and pro-autonomy men, and acknowledge Pouvanaa as the leader with whom they consult. The pro-French stalwart, from whose lips the phrase "Mere Patrie" (Mother France) comes with monotonous regularity, is Senator Alfred Poroi. But his 24-year term as Mayor of Tahiti ended two years ago with his defeat by the anti-bomb candidate Georges Pambrun, and at the 1967 general elections his following in the

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Territorial Assembly was reduced to three.

During de Gaulle's 1966 visit, John Teariki delivered a masterly declaration which included the following passages:

"There is, in this country, a deep unease which is growing day by day. It is caused by a policy which the Fifth Republic has followed since its birth—a policy which is marked by so many attacks on our common liberties, so many threats to our future, so many turns of the screw tightening the vice of military colonialism on us.

"Looking at it over the passage of time, it seems clear that this policy has been conceived and followed with the principal objective of ensuring that your Government has the free use of our territory for its nuclear tests. Our future, physical and social, economic and political, has, since then, been dominated by the needs of your atomic programme . . .

Atomic Gang

"But things go much deeper. I believe this economic anarchy—which the Government has done nothing to temper—is being wittingly exploited to establish in this sector, as in others, the domination of the C.E.P. in Polynesia. (Centre d'Experimentation du Pacifique, the organization responsible for the nuclear test programme.) Likewise, our crushing budgetary problems have been adroitly manipulated to increase the power of the State over the local administrative services, leading irresistably towards the disappearance of our last territorial freedom.

"With the situation ripening nicely, the last act begins . . .

"The creation of this thing and its presence here among us, without the Polynesians having been consulted in any way, although their health and that of their descendants was at stake, constitutes a serious violation of the contract which binds us to France and of the rights which the Charter of the United Nations recognizes we have . . .

"But I cannot, Mr President, prevent myself from speaking to you, in the name of the people of this territory, of the bitterness, of the sadness we feel at seeing France, fortress of the Rights of Man and home of Pasteur, brought to disgrace by such an undertaking and become a party to what Jean Rostand has called the 'Atomic Gang'.

"It is all the more regrettable since you have just delivered a very fine speech at Phnom Penh, which was worthy of the great years of London and Brazzaville. . . . Having condemned the American intervention, you appealed to the Government of the United States to revert to its

historic role as defender of liberty so that, by renouncing force as a means of imposing its will on Vietnam, it might recover its true prestige in the eyes of the whole world . . .

"And I offer you this humble prayer:

"Could you, Mr President, apply to French Polynesia the fine principles which you tendered at Phnom Penh to our American friends, and re-embark your troops, your bombs and your aircraft?

"Then later on, those of our people who suffer from leukemia and cancer would not be able to accuse you of being responsible for their sickness.

"Then, our descendants would not be able to reproach you for the birth of mutants and deformed children.

"Then, the friendship of the people of South America for France would not be sullied by the shadow of your atomic clouds.

"Then, you would set the world an example, worthy of France. . . . Then Polynesia, with one voice, would be proud and happy to be French and, as in the first days of Free France, we should again become, all of us here, your best and most faithful friends."

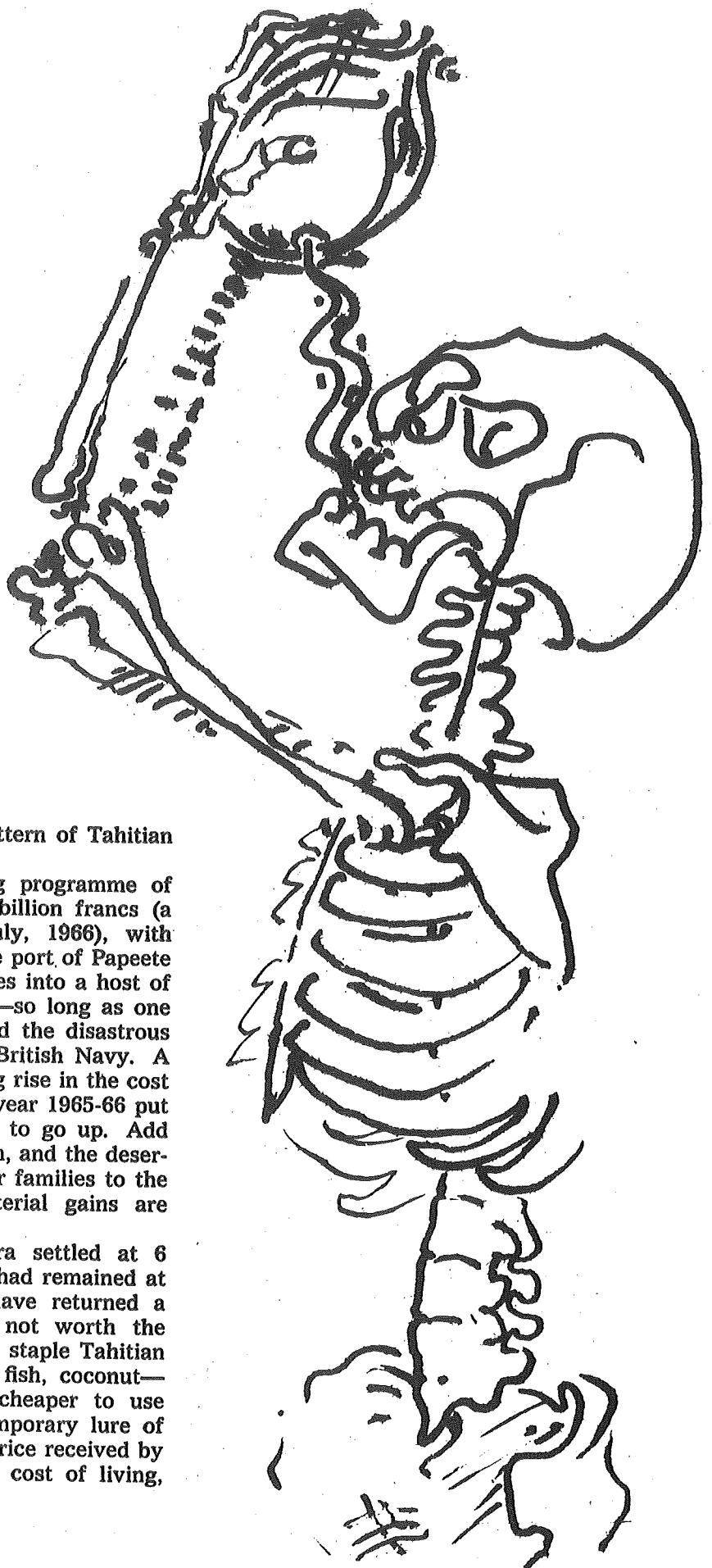
(Translation from the *Journal of Pacific History*, Australian National University, Vol. 2, 1967.)

Over the last two years, the municipal and general elections have given emphatic support to this current in French Polynesian opinion. Albert Poroï lost his 24-year position as Mayor of Tahiti; and the parties of Francis Sanford and John Teariki, with an agreement to co-operate, won a majority in the Territorial Assembly.

Needs And Resources

Governor Sicurani opened this Assembly with the concession that France would again allow a Ministerial form of Government, as it did before the arrest of Pouvanaa. In a long speech he insisted that more than this was hardly possible, when the economy depended so largely upon financial aid from France, and when the needs of the Islands were advancing faster than their resources. As deftly as any New Zealand politician wooing his electors, he promised every kind of material benefit, from roads and airstrips to agricultural and technical colleges and hospitals, not forgetting a sports stadium and an Olympic pool.

Unfortunately for this dazzling picture, promises of construction had to contend with the visible reality of destruction. Up to 20,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Force de Frappe were in occupation. Some day, no doubt, these teams would go and leave the islands in peace; but in the meantime were the islands to be ruined, hardly worth having?



The bomb has torn the old pattern of Tahitian life in several ways.

Materially it has meant a big programme of "development" costing above 4 billion francs (a *Financial Times* estimate of July, 1966), with 52 million francs expended on the port of Papeete alone. At first sight this translates into a host of job opportunities at good wages—so long as one forgets the example of Malta and the disastrous result of the withdrawal of the British Navy. A second look reveals the staggering rise in the cost of living. Official figures for the year 1965-66 put it at 16 per cent, and continuing to go up. Add to this a drastic decline in tourism, and the desertion of the land as men took their families to the work sites—and even the material gains are brought into doubt.

The producer's price for copra settled at 6 francs 16 cents a pound. If food had remained at the old price, 6 francs would have returned a living; but now the copra was not worth the trouble of the harvesting. All the staple Tahitian foods—taro, breadfruit, bananas, fish, coconut—went up, until it was actually cheaper to use tinned corned beef. Both the temporary lure of well-paid labouring, and the low price received by growers in relation to their own cost of living,

combined for the ruin of the islands' agriculture.

The social, housing and health problems associated with the rush to the town have been aggravated by the presence of thousands of military men, and the damage that garrisons always bring to the local family life. On top of all this is the nagging worry of the bomb tests and the release of radioactivity.

Such matters are surrounded by hush-hush and many prohibitions. The press is censored: every publication must pass first through the Governor's hands. Meetings of a critical nature are not permitted. However, the Tahitians are not an ignorant people; they are well aware of the accidents that happened at Bikini and at Rongelap when the Americans were testing there. They watched with apprehension as the atolls of Hao, Tureia, Fangataufa and Mururoa, all extremely beautiful, were converted into bases for the tests and their observation. The map shows many other islands clustering close about them.

The first atomic devices were small and little harm was done. Then the scale began steadily to mount. A professional man who went on a tour of duty to Mururoa last year returned with a broken-hearted report.

"I can't go back there any more. No green trees, hardly anything growing, fish poisoned, signs everywhere saying 'Keep Away'. The labourers wear protective clothing and are tested every day: all the food they eat, all the water they drink must be brought from outside. They're told not to step into the lagoon lest they disturb the radioactivity in the sand—and this to men who've walked and swum and fished in the water all of their lives! They're forbidden to drink the coconut milk. But the coconuts look the same as they always did. What harm could there possibly be? It is hot, they drink, and they come home with their skin dried up and breaking into a strange rash. Everywhere I see them with their hair falling out, hardly any hair left sometimes. Who knows where it will end?"

To an Islander, fish is the staff of life. When all seafoods are banned on the atoll of Hao, some 270 miles from the test centre at Mururoa, the alarm spreads. When residents of Papeete fall ill after eating the familiar schnapper, the alarm is heightened. The markets of Papeete are supplied from far-flung areas, although the testing-grounds are excluded. Yet the newspapers and radio reported that some three thousand people were poisoned by fish in the year 1967.

Bad Fish

Bad fish, of course, can occur at any time, regardless of radioactivity; but surely not in such numbers as this. Neither did it escape notice that

sick people were taken not to the ordinary hospital but to the military hospital, under close observation. A case was even reported from Maupiti, on the fringe of the Society Group over 900 miles from Mururoa. Frenchmen believed to be suffering from radiation effects were flown back to France, where the Curie Foundation has excellent facilities for the observation and treatment of atomic diseases.

Beautiful Mururoa is a dead atoll, Fangataufa is scarred, and many Tahitians fear that their homeland has become "une terre maudite", a cursed place. Soon will come the H-bomb tests with their much more serious possibilities.

Therefore the movement for autonomy goes ahead, intertwined with the resistance to the bomb. When autonomy for Djibouti (French Somaliland) went smoothly through the French Parliament, Deputy Francis Sanford was encour-



aged to ask if the same would now be granted to French Polynesia. The "knock-back" was so complete that he resigned from the Independent Republican Party to which he was attached, thus depriving de Gaulle's government of its absolute majority, which swung on a single vote. To underline his disgust, he also resigned his post as Fourth Secretary of Defence.

This year, three other members of the Territorial Assembly joined Deputy Sanford in France for an audience with M. Pierre Billotte, Minister for Overseas Territories. A similar delegation came from New Caledonia. The answer was a blunt "No", and indeed it was reported that the French authorities sent 300 paratroopers to New Caledonia in case of emergency—there being no need, of course, to add to the forces already in Tahiti.

Undeterred, the Island representatives began a round of all the political party leaders and the response was encouraging. What will emerge out of the present unsettled state of France is still obscure; but back in Polynesia, a fresh defeat in municipal by-elections has been dealt out to pro-French Albert Poroi and his few supporters.

There is one further scene in this drama which should touch the heart of New Zealand.

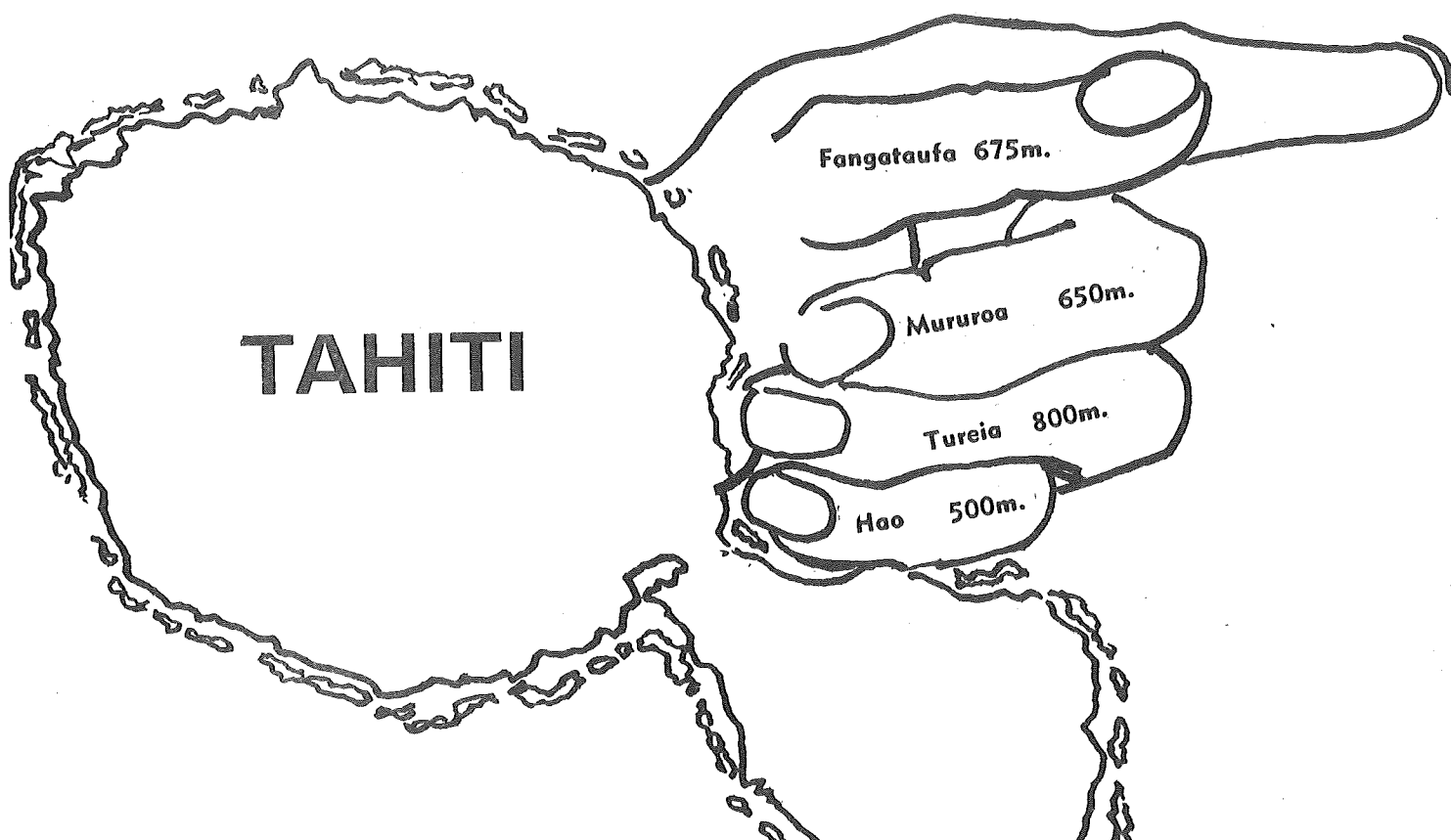
In January, Sanford moved a resolution in the Territorial Assembly which was carried 17-7 with 3 abstentions, asking for a six-man international

commission to check radioactive pollution and fallout. Specifically, the request was for three named French scientists known to be opposed to nuclear testing, and three others to be chosen from the United States, Japan and New Zealand.

In its time of need, one Polynesian nation has sent out a clear call to another. The centre of the great triangle, Hawaiki of old tradition, calls to the landing-place of the great fleet, Ao-tea-roa; the heart of Polynesia calls to its frame.

It is known that we already have scientists monitoring the fall-out in Samoa, the Cook Islands and Pitcairn; that our Government has signed the Test-ban Treaty, and protested against the French testing programme; that we alone from the South Pacific are members of the United Nations. If the Tahitians take the last course open to them and appeal to the United Nations, who can speak for them? Who else but New Zealand?

As things now stand, this appeal for a six-man commission could only be transmitted legally through France, where it would meet the usual obstacles and never reach us formally. Nevertheless, New Zealanders should know of this call to us from our Polynesian kinsmen. We who acknowledge, in general, the human right of every people to live as they would choose, are thrown a challenge by this particular case so near to our own doorsteps. Can we respond with our understanding and our support?



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