



IOTA PRODUCTION PRÉSENTE | PRESENTS

MA'OHĪ NUI

AU CŒUR DE L'OcéAN MON PAYS

IN THE HEART OF THE OCEAN MY COUNTRY LIES

UN FILM DE | A FILM BY ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

PRESSKIT



**« SOMETHING SURVIVES,
SOMETHING TENUOUS, HIDDEN,
ALMOST INVISIBLE,
WHICH RESISTS ERASURE »**

Tahiti, French Polynesia. Between the runway of the International airport and a small mound of earth lies a district called the Flamboyant. Over there, one says "district" as not to say "shantytown". French colonial history and thirty years of nuclear tests have filled these districts with an alienated and tired people. Like the radioactivity that one cannot feel or see, but that persists for hundreds of thousands of years, the contamination of minds has slowly and permanently installed itself. Today the Ma'ohi people are a subordinate people who have forgotten their language, ignored their history and have lost their connection to their land and their relationship to the world.

Yet within this neighbourhood of coloured sheds, something survives, something tenuous, hidden, almost invisible, which resists erasure.

By confronting the Ma'ohi spirit with its history of nuclear tests and its fractured existence, the film shows the face of contemporary colonisation and the vital impetus of a people trying not to forget themselves and who, silently, are seeking the path of independence.



CONTEXT

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Located in the South Pacific, 20.000 kilometres away from Paris, French Polynesia is an overseas territory of the French Republic. It is composed of 118 islands of which only 67 are inhabited. Despite the relative autonomy granted by France, a large number of institutions remain under the supervision of the French State: justice, army, education and health. Nearly 25.000 French expatriates (10% of the population of Polynesia) hold key positions in fields related to state administration or in companies.

Each year, France spends nearly 1.5 billion euros for the maintenance of Polynesia in the whole of France. One should know that Polynesia makes France the 2nd largest territory in the world in terms of oceanic possessions, just after the United States. And thanks to its ultra-marine territories, France is the state present on the largest spectrum of latitudes and the only state in the world bordering 4 oceans. And that the soil of the Pacific, filled with rare earths - extremely precious metals in the fields of high technologies - is for France a promise of future opportunities in terms of exploitation. The strategic and economic stakes are enormous.

In 2013, during one of his short presidential terms, the independence leader Oscar Temaru managed to get French Polynesia back on the United Nations list of territories to be decolonised.

THE NUCLEAR TESTS, 1966-1996

From 1960, tens of thousands of Polynesian workers participated directly in the entire French military program. Many of them were farmers or fishermen. Attracted by the windfall of money poured in by the French state, they became masons, carpenters and labourers on the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa chosen by France to install the nuclear experiment centre. They worked on the construction of the sites, the drilling of wells and the cleaning of the contaminated zones. They were the *men of the bomb*.

However, most workers were unaware of the dangers and the risks of radiation contamination to which they were exposed. It took time, little by little, in spite of the veil of secrecy behind the strategy of the French army, which had assured the population of the safety of the tests, that an awareness of the risks and dangers came to light.

Today in Polynesia, concern is widespread about the consequences of the tests on health and the environment. Feelings of fear and anxiety about the risks are mixed with a great sense of guilt and the feeling that by actively participating in the program, Polynesian workers have become complicit.

The nuclear tests represented a break in Polynesian history, an economic, social and cultural revolution, which caused the breakdown of a people. In these thirty years, Polynesia has moved from a rural economy to a market economy. This is an extremely short period of time that has seen the birth of new consumption habits, a new westernised and urban way of life, new social relations, the exodus of islanders to Tahiti, the abandonment of agricultural activities and fishing for the growing importation of foreign products and, in the long run, impoverishment of the population. Today the Polynesians associate this vast military program with the fear, frustration and humiliation to have been subjected to a form of "nuclear colonialism".

Today, there is also the question of the usefulness of this whole enterprise: the program of nuclear experiments has made Polynesians economically and socially dependent on an activity that most of them now consider to be meaningless.

Nearly two hundred years ago, the arrival of missionaries and forced Christianisation has destroyed a culture that was over a thousand years old. In the 20th century, it is the atom that imposes itself in these distant archipelagos and destroys a way of life and traditional social relations. The victims are not only measured by the number of cancers, leukaemia and malformed children, but also in terms of the outbreak of a society that make the Polynesians say: *"Moruroa not only contaminated our land, but also polluted our minds, our families, our souls"*



INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

THE ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

When one thinks of Polynesia, it comes to mind the images of a possible paradise where time flows, peaceful, on the white sandy beaches bordering lagoons with clear waters; we can see the long leaves of coconut palms in the light breeze, we breathe the heady scents of a lush vegetation, we surrender to the gentle roar of waves crashing on the reef... All these images are there, they are true, they exist and can give the feeling that Polynesia, thanks to its remoteness, is today, with some inviolate places of the Amazonian forest or the Himalayas, one of the rare still preserved places in the world.

My first trip to French Polynesia was in 2011. I was then preparing my previous film "27 times Time". First caught by the wild beauty of the islands, I did not immediately feel the sadness and disillusionment of the people I worked with. It was only by living there with them for several months, and coming back several years in a row, sharing their daily lives, listening to them, watching them, that I gradually began to grasp this feeling of bitterness, or sometimes shame, which inhabited them. All this was especially visible in Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia located on the island of Tahiti.

In absolute contrast with the islands, Papeete is a city like all the other big cities in the world. There are German cars, Italian restaurants, American hotel chains, Chinese stores, Swiss banks, Belgian chocolatiers, Japanese cruise ships, McDonald's and Coca-Cola distributors. Papeete seems to be a capital like any other, swept into the global whirlwind of globalization that has reached into the heart of the world's largest ocean.

But if one day, while walking around, one goes beyond the margins of the small city plan distributed to the tourists. If one takes the small dark paths, the devastated streets where the dust and the sand replace the bitumen, the streets hidden behind abandoned buildings, the streets where garbage is left everywhere, where the iron curtains of abandoned shops are drawn on broken windows, the streets where you are told not to go, if one day one takes these grey streets, one arrives in the *districts*.

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"Districts" is the name given to slums. There, there are no shops, restaurants, hotels or chocolatiers. There, women, children, men and the elderly are gathered in social dwellings or in huddled shacks built in a hurry. There, children running barefoot, clothes left to dry on windows, roofs and railings, adrift young people who roam all day long and drink alcohol at night, just like their parents, long used to waiting and who gather around bingo games to kill time.

In contrast to the postcard images, these districts of Tahiti, where nearly 70% of the population gathered during the nuclear tests, are not something to dream about. Beyond being an inevitable consequence of the rampant globalization, the districts are primarily a stigma of colonization still at work at the beginning of the 21st century. They are the places that colonial history filled with a lacerated people, whose wounds materialise in destructive practices (alcohol, drugs, marital and family violence). It is necessary to take the measure of this despair to understand the modes of resistance that can result from it.

I wanted to see in these districts something other than this physical and psychological degradation. These districts attracted me because it is there that something slowly sets in, which takes the form of a redefinition of identity, an attempt to preserve a way of life and to come together as a people through Ma'ohi values: a link to the land that is deeply constitutive of their being, a link to the ancestors, to their native language and to specific collective and spiritual values.



CINEMATOGRAPHIC APPROACH OF NUCLEAR TESTS

IMAGES, SOUNDS, WORDS

For the first part of the film devoted to the historical evocation of nuclear tests, it is first of all a wounded people that I wished to film, a bruised, disillusioned and forgetful people, an uprooted people absent to itself. To give a visual account of this abandonment, I filmed sleeping bodies, faces with closed eyes that sometimes open up to infinite sadness. I wanted to show the signs of occupation and disappearance of a people through bodies burdened, locked up, prisoners of the frame. I also searched the districts for elements of ruins, frayed tarpaulins, rusty wrecks, dust, shadows, so many evocative elements of destruction.

To accompany these images, a work on the sound that verges on abstraction. In this first part of the film, no sound is synchronous or realistic. The very matter of the sound has been worked out to build an atmosphere from which emanates a distant anguish linked to the memories of nuclear detonations.

In these images and sounds come the words of men and women, each restoring fragments of life from these thirty years of nuclear tests. All their little stories then come together in one single story, the collective narrative of this vast memory - the memory of a people - that hovers above every memory, every question and every dream, that is always there and that keeps repeating itself. What haunts every word, every body and every thing is a form of paralysis imposed on them by colonial history and which restricts all internal movement in its propagation and transmission.



THE DISTRICT OF HOTU AREA

SURVIVING GESTURES, RESISTANCE GESTURES

On the side of the runway of Papeete's International Airport there are huts made of odds and ends. A thin stream of water and rolls of barbed wire separate them from the tarmac of the runway. Nearly 800 people live there doing odd jobs and a bit of fishing every day.

This uninhabitable area is one of the places I have chosen for the film because I saw there the destiny of a people on the margins. This district, like all shantytowns, is a place that has produced its own conditions of survival, words, gestures and social relationships. It appears then as a political place. And it is precisely this political dimension that interested me.

There are no great movements of revolt there, no men in arms, no screaming demonstrations or splinters of violence. What happens there is silent, almost imperceptible. The bodies are in the incessant repetition of gestures that allow survival: daily gestures, words of the Tahitian language, mimicry, attitudes, tattoos, dances, a certain know-how, a certain relationship to the earth, the sky and the sea. In these little survival gestures, there is something austere, monotonous, the gestures of *tiny lives* (to reference the book by Pierre Michon). But these slow, vital gestures, constantly renewed, are the same gestures that their fathers, grandfathers and their ancestors before them, have already repeated.

Survival conditions call for ancestral gestures, "antique" gestures as Pasolini says, the gestures of men and women who have always lived from the sea and the land, who look to the moon to decide on the daily fishing, who can interpret the colours of the lagoon and guide their canoes by reading the nocturnal sky. These gestures go back to the old times; the past there joins the present. And it is precisely this heritage of gestures, rituals and language, revived by the survival conditions, which appear in the film as the only possibility for these men and women of a redefinition of their identity.

**« WHAT MAKES RESISTANCE
IS WHAT SURVIVES IN THEM FROM
THE ESSENCE OF THEIR PEOPLE»**

Because that's where the resistance is. In the organisation and the possibility of a life despite everything, in spite of the deprivation, in spite of the loss of points of reference, in spite of the sensation of being forgotten and of being nothing more worthwhile. What makes resistance is what survives in them from the essence of their people. It is a survival of gestures, language, know-how and their relationship to the land and the world. And it is with these gestures from their own culture that those who live there protest against the domination and alienation of their people. It is their very existence - fragmentary, fleeting and daily - that preserves the Ma'ohi world in its difference and singularity.

The thought of these almost invisible forms of resistance, which I gleaned from the books of Georges Didi-Huberman, deeply nourished my vision of reality and the way I looked at the men and women of this district struggling to survive a few meters away from the international planes that land and take off at every hour of the day and night.

Over the course of the film, the bodies, at first numb and passive, gradually emerge from sleep. There is a form of cinematographic awakening: the frames that enclose the slumbering bodies open gradually; the bodies wake up, move and occupy the frame freely. The characters settle and come alive; we accompany them when they begin to cultivate the arid land of their district. I wanted to film this district as a place from which the Ma'ohi people can recover by relinking with their own way of being in the world. And in this general movement of the film, I wanted to move the spectator from the initial feeling of desolation to a feeling of admiration for the forms of resistance at work in this place. I wanted to show the disappearance and annihilation of a people subjected to colonisation before poetically showing the possibilities of its survival.

And this survival is also embodied later in the film in more dreamlike and metaphorical sequences, such as the life path of the young Tanaoa or the nocturnal journey of the big canoe.



A FICTIONNAL ELEMENT THE CHARACTER OF TANAQA

In contrast to the images of the daily life in the district, I imagined dreamlike sequences, something that would refer to magic, ecstasy and the sacred. Images haunted by the presence of the ancestors who inhabit the places. Real characters transformed into fictional characters. Sometimes fiction is needed to illuminate reality.

Tanaoa is primarily a fictional character that haunts the neighbourhood, the school and the port. He is the figure of the people, of youth, a character in search of his own story. He is like Ulysses who gradually regains his identity by hearing his story from the mouths of others. For him, tattooing plays the role of a rite of passage, a challenge of pain, and the need to be patient. He inscribes on his body the story of his name, his land and his ancestors. He is then ready to leave the district.

In the film there is a moment of rupture that marks a departure, an escape. A canoe leaves; the sea remains empty before the eyes of the ancestor staring off into the distance. A slow movement takes us into a dark, agonizing night, a distant place cluttered with entangled roots and scary trees. There is Tanaoa trying to find his way through this dense and strange forest. He has joined this deserted island, which is the land of his ancestors. Breaking the silence of his wanderings, he suddenly takes to the floor. This speech inscribes him in the real, he becomes a documentary figure representing his people in search of, who dreams of not disappearing.



A VOICE FROM THE PAST THAT SPEAKS IN THE PRESENT THE ANCESTOR

A voice lives in the film from one end to the other. It is the voice of an ancestor who returns among the living. She pronounces her name at the beginning of the film, *Varuaateaiterai*, the distant soul that appears in the sky. The ancestor is incarnated only twice in the film. Her presence remains for the rest of the film, giving the impression that we observe the scenes through her eyes. To give this sensation, a certain number of shots were filmed in slow floating movements, almost unreal, as if in suspension.

Her voice refers to the Ma'ohi people as they recognised themselves in a way of thinking and in cultural references and practices from before the colonization, before the nuclear tests, and as they question today their own identity. Sometimes affirmative, interrogative or reflexive, sometimes provoking or consoling, the voice is in dialogue with characters and situations. If her words confront us with the tragic truth of the Polynesian people - the contamination of the land, the disappearance of the language and the erasure of a particular relationship to the visible and invisible world - they also lead us towards the possibility of reconciliation between the Ma'ohi world and contemporary society.

The text of the voice was written in collaboration with the Tahitian writer and poet Flora Devatine. She is the one who embodies that voice, some passages of which are freely inspired by the texts of two other Tahitian writers, Chantal Spitz and Duro Raapoto.



THE LEGENDS WHEN THE TIME OF MYTHS MEETS REALITY

There are four different speech registers in the film. First of all, the "word of the real" embodied in the voices of the former workers of the nuclear sites and in the testimonies of the characters. Then there is "the word of the ancients" brought back into the present of the film by the voice of the ancestor who weaves the threads of the narration. There are also "genealogical narratives" murmured by a few Tahitian voices on the images of a very long printed genealogy; it is the story of origins, groupings and kinship, it is the story of the reappropriation of an identity through the reappropriation of land. And there are finally, the legends. Transmitted by oral tradition, they convey fragments of stories where possibility meets improbability. The three legends that I have chosen for the film reinforce allegorically a certain seizure of the real.

By evoking the tragic omen of the arrival of the first colonisers, the first legend allows us to see, with the arrival of a gigantic cruise liner into the port of Papeete, a metaphor for invasion. The second legend relates to the presence of ancestors in the sky in the form of stars that guide navigators in the night; the images of sailors crossing the ocean on the big canoe then take on another meaning. And the third legend relates to words spoken for great departures, it prepares for the journey of a people on the possible path to independence.

From the resonance between these small mythical fragments, the testimonies and the voice of the ancestor emerges a global story that I wanted to be both poetic and political.



THE EMBODIED POLITICAL SPEECH

I chose to work with the speech made at the UN in 2013 by the independence leader Oscar Temaru asking for the re-inscription of French Polynesia on the list of non-autonomous territories to be decolonised. Oscar Temaru carries the dream of independence. According to him, the political and ethnic struggle for the recognition of the Ma'ohi people presupposes the recognition of their relationship to the world. He speaks of the need to "re-educate the people" as an essential element to prepare for independence. By "re-educating", he means "re-learning". By reclaiming a culture, a history, a language and knowledge that colonization has tried to eradicate, the Ma'ohi reinvent themselves as a people, they create the conditions for their own future. What survives, he says, does not concern the past, but the future. According to him, it is necessary to integrate these archaic forces into modernity, not to turn the language, gestures and knowledge into folklore, but to ensure that they innervate the present with a new force to build a world that could be an extension of the Ma'ohi people. That's why he encourages young Polynesians to learn to fish and plant, to return to living on the islands from which a new economy, autonomous and sustainable, can be reinvented.

In the film, one character in particular embodies the reality of the return to the land, the utopian independence. It is Sam who, after several years spent in Papeete, chose to return to the land of his ancestors to cultivate it and live there. Throughout his path, he represents a possible future for the Ma'ohi people. There is a double movement in the film: on the one hand, the gestures and choices of those who return to the land embody the dream of independence and, on the other hand, the independence discourse philosophically nourishes these actions.



THE METAPHOR THE JOURNEY OF THE BIG CANOE

The Ma'ohi are a people of the water, a people of travellers that colonisation tried to immobilize. Rather than a border or a barrier, water is for them a link, a path.

Guided by men who trust the swell and the stars to cross the ocean, the big canoe figures in the film as the metaphor of the crossing. These navigators use knowledge of the sky, stars, winds and seas transmitted right up to today. They navigate through the night in search of their identity, but they navigate towards a future that this ancient knowledge will still have to feed.

What is embodied in this metaphor of the crossing is the idea that the Polynesian way of being in the world necessitates being part of the construction of their own identity.

Being Ma'ohi is not only a matter of origins, but also and especially of know-how, knowledge, language and special relationships with others, the land and the sea. These are the foundations of the fight - both political and ethnic - for the recognition of the Ma'ohi people.



THE DANCE, THE SAME WORD

Almost at the end of the film, a long dance sequence is filmed at night in a shipyard. Twenty dancers perform an extract from the show "Racines" written by Jacky Bryant and choreographed by Teraurii Piritua. The text sung in Tahitian evokes the cultural roots. Like the sprawling roots of immemorial trees that bear life, it is in this return to their own roots that the Ma'ohi will find answers to their distress and their thirst for survival. In spite of the rampage, the violence, the annihilation, "something shivers there, a very young root, a budding flower. In the midst of the abyss, life."

Prohibited by the missionary laws - which proscribed music, songs, dances, popular festivals, verbal traditions, tattoos and flowers in the hair - the dance survived clandestinely. Flora Devatine, the narrator, recounts here her own memories when, as a young girl, she had to hide in the bush when she wanted to dance. It was not until the 1970s that dance became synonymous with the transmission of an inheritance and the perpetuation of an identity.

This dance scene - in all its length - seemed to me essential in terms of ethics, aesthetics, politics and anthropology. Because the dance is a resumption of this same word of resistance. Because it is in itself resistance through the reappropriation of steps, choreographies and language. Because in the dance, it is in Tahitian that one expresses oneself, it is in Tahitian that one tells the unveiled history, the ways of doing, the ways of saying, the ways of being. Because the dance is a space of freedom, which allows itself to be seen and heard, a space that the Ma'ohi people succeeded in reclaiming.



MA'OHI NUI, AU COEUR DE L'OCEAN MON PAYS

MA'OHI NUI, IN THE HEART OF THE OCEAN MY COUNTRY LIES

Written and directed by ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

Voice FLORA DEVATINE

Inspired by the texts by Flora Devatine, Chantal Spitz and Duro Raapoto

Original Music HERMAN MARTIN

Image CAROLINE GUIMBAL & ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

Sound recording JEAN-JACQUES QUINET

Editing ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

Sound editing JEAN-JACQUES QUINET & ANNICK GHIJZELINGS

Mixing JEAN-JACQUES QUINET

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