

## MIGRATION AND URBANIZATION IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

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After the second World War, the South Pacific territories entered a phase of socio-economic transformation. This transformation was brought about by the breakdown of the equilibrium between the cities and the countryside caused by the development of cities.

At the present time, French Polynesia is one of the most urbanized of the South Pacific territories. This urbanization has occurred exclusively on the island of Tahiti, focusing on Papeete, the territory's only city. At the time of the 1971 census, the urban population of Papeete, 65,000 inhabitants, included 82 percent of the population of Tahiti and 55 percent of the population of French Polynesia.

Urban growth has been very rapid. From 1956 to 1971, the urban population increased by 125 percent, or 6 percent per year. The rate of growth was not uniform during this period, but rather increased rapidly after 1962. From 1956 to 1962, the rate of growth was 22 percent or 2.6 percent per year. From 1962 to 1971, the rate of growth was 83.5 percent or 7.9 percent per year. The main streams of urban growth derived from migration from the islands of Polynesia on the one hand and from France on the other. In 1971, 50 percent of the urban population were migrants.

### **The Causes of Urban Growth**

This rapid urban growth has resulted from changes in the economic and social structure brought about by major investments made in the construction of a jet airport and tourist facilities, as well as the massive investments made by the French Government to build port, transport and military facilities in order to make Tahiti the base for the French nuclear testing program. The tourist trade and the creation of the Pacific Experimental Center strained the already fragile foundations of the territory's economy and speeded up

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the population's geographic mobility. These investments have created many jobs in Papeete. As a result, islanders have moved into the urban zone. In addition, both civilian and military personnel have come from France to Papeete and have swelled the urban population. Polynesia's traditional agricultural economy was replaced by a highly moneyed economy. Cash crop exports have been reduced as the production of crops for local consumption increases. The primary sector has declined while the secondary and tertiary sectors have expanded.

Before the establishment of the Pacific Experimental Center, internal migration within Polynesia was "circular," the migrants going back to their own islands after a stay in the city. Migration was linked to activities in the primary sector, agriculture, fishing and mining, and was temporary or seasonal in character. Migrants often came to Papeete but few stayed in the city on a permanent basis.

When the Pacific Experimental Center was set up, the character of migratory movements changed. Many major projects were undertaken in Papeete and in the Tuamotus. Much more manpower was needed than was available in Tahiti. Workers had to be sought in the other islands. Thus, migration was connected to the development of the secondary and tertiary sectors. This mobilization of manpower had a detrimental effect on traditional agricultural activities. People, attracted by salaries and the city life, left the islands and set themselves up in Papeete to enjoy new ways of life. These migrants have become permanent urban residents.

### **Consequences of Migratory Movements**

Because migratory movements were mainly towards Tahiti, which is by far the largest and most populous of the islands, one effect of this migration has been the creation of a demographic disequilibrium in Polynesia. In 1971, Tahiti accounted for 70 percent of the total population of French Polynesia compared to 58 percent in 1956. Other islands have become underpopulated and have lost their productive capacity. Because it is youths and young adults who migrate, old people and children are left behind in the islands. In addition, migration has caused a modification of the ethnic composition of the population. In 1962, six percent of the population was European. The figure is 15 percent now. There have been many inter-ethnic marriages and crossbreeding has increased.

Urban structures have also been modified as a result of recent migration. Urbanization has been effected by spacing homes closer together and by extending the city area outwards. Demographic pressure has forced denser settlement patterns and the use of land not really appropriate for homes. This has resulted in the formation of slums in the valleys and foothills around Papeete. Papeete has exploded under demographic pressure with the formation of an agglomerate structure stretching over 40 kilometers and including seven communes or townships. At the present time, urban growth is not

taking place in Papeete itself, but in the city's outskirts in the form of residential suburbs.

No plans were made to provide for the migrants, which explains the anarchic development of the town. Settlement in town is a function of the price of land or the cost of rent. Those with high incomes, Europeans and Chinese, have no problem and set themselves up on the mountain or by the lagoon shore. The less favored classes, Polynesians, have a harder time finding living space and not all have been able to rent or purchase existing houses or move in with relatives. This has led to the creation of instant slums in the valleys and mountain edges of the coastal flatlands. Migrants rent or borrow land upon which they erect small houses made of scrap materials. What results is social segregation, a social zoning of urban space.

Urban development has also brought about the formation of an urban society and the creation of a proletariat among islanders who formerly were self-employed farmers and fishermen. Now the majority of the Tahitians are wage laborers. Integration into the urban society is very difficult because there is a radical shift from peasant to proletarian ways. There are hard changes required to move from the rural to the urban environment, from a subsistence economy to a consumption oriented, wage economy. The economic environment is different in the city, but the greatest change is in the cultural environment. Migrants have to give up practices connected with Polynesian culture. They have to change their eating habits, type of dwelling, ways of working, having fun, and living. They have to adapt to the styles of Western consumer society. The entry and integration of Polynesians into present day city life is filled with difficulties.

The foundations of urban development are fragile, because the development is the result of an artificial economic evolution. It is based not on the territory's economic possibilities, but on its political connections with France. The Pacific Experimental Center, the expansion of the local administration, and the multiplication of equipment and facilities have created an artificial economy. Now production plays a very small role in Tahitian society. External investments and revenues from tourism and the activities of the French government, both civil and military, keep the economy afloat. At the present time, there is an ever increasing disequilibrium between Papeete and the outer islands, which are producing less and less and consuming more and more. This disequilibrium is the moving force behind migration to Papeete. Under these conditions, future possibilities are disquieting. No one knows how to establish a state of equilibrium between the city and the archipelagoes and slow down the exodus from rural areas.

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