

Dating Tahitian Oral Tradition Texts from Primarily Internal Evidence

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Over 220 Tahitian oral tradition texts, representing about 75,000 words, made their way into print during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the material seems to have originated before contact with Europeans, although a small amount may date to after the introduction of Christianity.

Some of the texts appear to reflect several oral poetic styles of the pre-Contact and pre-literate era. Others are more prose-like. Yet others lie in between, with somewhat modern-sounding language occasionally punctuated by poetic structure. In order to obtain insight into the language, culture, and oral poetry of pre-Contact Tahiti, it would be useful to limit study to earlier texts, thus avoiding material that may represent re-analysis, external influence, or post-Contact stylistic evolution.

Recitation dates are available for about 30% of the texts. A method will be proposed here for determining rough dating for the other 70%. The method will be developed from two types of internal analysis. Once trained on the dated texts, the same method should be applicable to undated texts, as there is nothing in the source material to suggest that date omission was anything other than arbitrary.