ABSTRACT
In Tahiti a political and cultural movement has emerged these last years. Members of it express and transmit their claims by the way of new rituals largely filled with pre-Christian references. This movement has become really influential and has today a major role in the definition of cultural heritage, Tahitian identity and ancient spirituality. In this paper we will see the relation between this movement, politicians and churches and also how the members hesitate to define their movement between a return to Polynesian traditions against western modernity or the invention of a Polynesian modernity.

Keywords
French Polynesia; Revitalization; Ritual; grassroots movement; politics of tradition.

INTRODUCTION
Until recently, discussing about the Tahitian identity was the prerogative of the politicians, intellectuals, artists and clergymen who monopolised claims of identity and tradition. Their public speeches often reflect Tahiti’s past as an idealized “golden age”, however the day to day relationship of the people with this past presents a more ambiguous reality, because in this strong Christian society “cultural heritage” often refers to pagan times. Despite the above, a grassroots movement founded in associations and engaged in environmental and identity claims, have tried to revalorize the past and to enhance the status of the ancestors. The members of these associations organize ceremonies, largely filled with pre-Christian references, in the hopes of achieving a collective cultural awakening. These associations have become politically influential and are now playing a major role in cultural life so that they have influenced the political community who tried to determine a new cultural heritage public policy. In this way, the number of cultural manifestations has increased and some of the association’s one became official.

In this context of revitalization this paper tries to investigate how the actors of the cultural life in Tahiti (especially the government, the cultural associations and the churches) reshape the local “stage setting” of patronymy, culture or tradition and try to define Tahitian identity.

New ceremonies for a cultural awakening
Among the cultural associations, Haururu, which means “Together in Peace”, is today the most important and most active one. Haururu was created in 1994 and initially established by Papenoo’s residents, a village located in the North shore of Tahiti, which wanted to advance ecological goal in their district. The association progressively took place in the Papenoo valley, to look after three archaeological sites and to keep an eye on the environmental consequences of the electric company’s activities and its dams. They also built a village in this valley in a place called Fare Hape, which currently accommodate 80 people and where they organize cultural weeks for school groups.

Until 2000, Haururu’s members put on folklore shows yearly to awaken people’s curiosity about past Tahitian civilization. However they have now substituted ceremonies for shows. According to them, ceremonies are more real1 as compared to shows and have true spiritual and sacred aspect. They also explain they do not want to play culture anymore but to live it. The first ceremony they created was a welcome ceremony to receive in the valley important Tahitian or foreign guests, in a cultural protocol.

This ceremony starts on the seashore where participants made an offering to the sea and where some seawater was taken for another offering at the first archaeological site of the valley. Seawater is offered on the front of the marae’s altar (the ancient place of worship) in order to asking ancestors’ permission to enter in the valley. It is accompanied by specific songs and dances created and performed by Haururu’s members, young people of the parish and dance troupes connected with the association. After a traditional lunch a kava ceremony introduced a nati ceremony (nati means “plaiting”). For the association’s members, a kava ceremony signifies a gathering in a strict equality to sanctify a common decision made under the eyes of the ancestors. In this case, the kava ritual sanctified the connections between hosts and guests materialized by the nati ceremony during which few people attached themselves symbolically to the taua tupuna. This “ancestral rope” is an artefact in coco bark plaits representing the octopus - a mythic Polynesian figure. It symbolises relationship between members and the reconciliation with the ancestors. This ceremony presents two major aspects. Firstly, it represents the necessity for cultural associations to stage Tahitian identity and to show the place of the Tahitian culture in Polynesia, its similarities and differences with other archipelagos like Hawaii or New Zealand. It’s a “stage setting” of the ethnicity. Secondly this ceremony converts informal relationships into community formal relationships.

Then, in 2003, the association instituted the celebrations of the Pleiades constellation in order to honour and share

1 The words in italic are informants’ expressions
both astronomic and environmental knowledge of their ancestors with fellow Tahitians. The celebration is performed twice a year, once in November on the first day the Pleiades constellation are visible and again when the Pleiades are removed in a silent ceremony in May. These Unu are wooden carved boards) on the marae, and represent an important part of their personal genealogical research. When an Unu is erected in the Marae, the ceremonial ceremonies in the valley, alongside only three related associations, in order to materialise the return of the gods. A week before the rise of the Pleiades, they erected the Unu (which are wooden carved boards) on the marae, and removed them in a silent ceremony in May. These Unu represent Tāura or ancestral animals regarded as familial guardian spirits or protectors. Looking for their Tāura is an important part of their personal genealogical research. When an Unu is erected in the Marae, the ceremonial participants connected to it recite their genealogy in a traditional way.

How to deal with the past and the ancestors: Culture, Religion and Sorcery

In reality, none of these cultural ceremonies have proven links with any pre-Christian practices. Therefore, even if Haururu’s members are looking for all data about ancient Tahitian society, they proclaim the freedom of interpreting history in order to find their roots and awaken their culture. Haururu’s members justify their right to interpretation for the following reasons: firstly, they consider that the sources aren’t reliable because all historical accounts are European and that Europeans could not truly understand the Tahitian culture. Reading between the lines is deemed necessary. Secondly, they don’t want to copy ancient society’s practices which have no more meaning today otherwise there will be folkloric events. The purpose for them is not to perform the same ritual as before but to find what can be essentially Tahitian, through what is known about ancient society and what is relevant today. Consequently, their quest for identity and cultural authenticity implies and requires reinterpretation. Thirdly, all ancient ceremonies in their views were religious ceremonies while today they perform cultural ones; except in the case of the Matarii celebrations as they said it has always been a cultural ceremony not unlike New Year’s Eve. Members of the cultural associations make this important division between cultural practices and religious ones, because they don’t want to be considered as pagan worshippers. Actually Tahitian society has inherited from the evangelization a negative vision of its past and ancestors and even if today people speak with emphasis about cultural heritage and glorify the ancestors, all practices related to the Pre-Christian society are regarded with suspicion [1]. Members of the association accuse the European missionaries to have put a taboo on the Tahitian culture and make people ashamed about their history. They would like to remove this taboo and consider it as a demonization of the Polynesian culture by the churches. Associations appear in a conflict situation with the Churches but in reality they are ambiguous relations. In fact, the respectability of these associations is due to some pastors of the main protestant church of Tahiti. Without their ascent the development of these associations would be impossible.

Today, few pastors are engaged an internal debate concerning the Tahitianisation of the protestant church. This movement began at the end of the 70’s with the creation of the Commission d’animation théologique which had to formulate a theological consultation about a Polynesian reading of the Bible. Under the proposition of the commission, the Église Evangélique de Polynésie Française began to maintain that culture, especially language, and nature are the major intermediaries between men and God. This is directly inspired by the ideology of Turo Raapo and the theology of the Coconut [2]. This church has claimed against French nuclear tests in the Pacific. The Sunday school for teenagers of this church became a place where local languages and cultures are teaching as well as the Bible, and in 2003 the Église Evangélique de Polynésie Française became the Eglise protestante ma’ohi. The other propositions of the commission about a Polynesian way of being Christian do not have unanimity and were under the decisions of each parish. The pastors and deacons debate about the introduction of ukuleles, drums and dances in the liturgy and about the substitution of wine to coco water. In the same way, the collaborations with cultural associations are local decision. Militant pastors of Tahitian culture are often in confrontation with the deacons of their parish, more conservative and more influential in their own town than pastors who change of place every five years. These pastors found partners in the cultural associations who share with them the conviction that culture is a cure against individualism. From the associations’ view, this collaboration enables the teenagers to learn about culture and environment during trekking and cultural weeks in the valley. From the pastors views it enables them to be more influential in their parish by means of the family bonds between members of the associations and parishioners. Despite of that they do not share the same point of view about cultural ceremonies.

Pastors of the cultural theology consider Tahitian gods are different aspects of God and cultural ceremonies represent a Tahitian way for honouring him. Members of the associations also said that the first step of the identity quest was honouring the memory of the tupuna but in their views, it could not be sufficient. In their perspective, the purpose of these ceremonies is to call and interact with the ancestors. Regarding to their interlocutors, members of associations conceal this antagonism by playing with the polysemic term tupuna, which may refers as well as to ancestors than ancient pagan gods - because of the genealogical link between People and gods – but also to old wise people, last not Christian Tahitians and spirits of the nature or of the island.

Actually, this movement reveals a new relationship with the past in which culture appears as esoteric and the quest for identity is apprehended as an initiation. Indeed, association members and representatives from the ministry of culture, museums, artists, etc. consider that some people are in the culture contrary to the rest of the population. It is not normative, does not lead to hierarchy
in the associations and is not explicitly considered like an initiation. It is a representation based upon the disparities between the state of culture in the present society and the ancient one. The present society is judged in a cultural decline, acculturate - they say - whereas ancestors could live totally in the culture without the restrictions of the churches and western modernity. Rediscovering the Tahitian culture, for the association’s members, is a collective and individual quest with steps as culture cannot be understood easily. In the past people could live freely in the culture without taboo and during the cultural ceremonies people can rediscover this state. The presence of Tahitian ancestors’ spirits - better depositor of the culture than books – make their ceremonies sacred and permit to feel culture. Culture is not a knowledge issue (which is for them the occidental way) but is something that you have to feel with your gut and it appears that ceremonies constitute the appropriate time to feel culture. This experience of feeling culture improves the understanding of people and helps them in their quest of identity. Consequently, Matarii joins the ceremony. During this celebration orators explaining the meaning of each part of the ceremony participate in the ceremony. The ancestors appear to be slow processes. People who seem advanced in their quest - which are not necessary the most influential members - have not to go too fast to be not disconnected from the society. Even if the members, especially the elders, have become progressively more confident with the ancestors, they want to keep ceremonies with different degrees of understanding. Nobody is in the same steps on the path and consequently the common purpose of a global awakening prevails over individual self-realization. Association members know that their practices may be easily misunderstood by people who are not in the culture - they say - and it can compromise their wishes of a cultural awakening. They have to hold a careful public relation about their ceremonies. Consequently, Matarii celebrations are conceived as the showcase of the associations.

Matarii is a public ceremony which takes place on the beach at sunset. All the other ceremonies take place in the valley. People sing and dance in honour of the ancestors. There is also a kava ceremony with some offerings in the sea, and at last a buffet. In some places the local parish joins the ceremony. During this celebration orators explain the meaning of each part of the ceremony demonstrating that the ancestors were not barbarians but had knowledge, wisdom, complex spirituality and a better way of life which was in harmony with their island. Initially, Haururu members hoped to spread the Matarii celebrations to all French Polynesia during the next ten years. Now 5 years after it is staged on eight districts of Tahiti and on four other islands. Moreover, three years ago they succeeded convincing the French Polynesian president to organize an official Matarii’s celebration. Associations are currently really upset by what the independentist government has made with their project.

Cultural ceremonies and intangible cultural heritage policy

After the thirteen years leadership of the autonomist Gaston Flosse, Oscar Temaru became the first independentist president of French Polynesia in May 2004. However the independentists had no time to do the Tau or “Change” as promised as their election was made invalid in October 2004. After a new election was organised, independents won again in March 2005. From 2004 to 2008 an important political crisis affected French Polynesia and there have been seven successive governments. The people expected the changes promised by the independentist party including cultural associations, because they seem more aware of ecological and cultural issues. In fact, during the last twenty years, the independents have adopted an identical speech based on a valorisation of Tahitian ethnicity and culture. Consequently, Oscar Temaru accepted a Haururu’s invitation to come to the valley at Fare Hape for two days of cultural meetings, a few weeks after his re-election. They convinced him that it was unfair that there is no Tahitian day although Christians have Christmas, France has the Heiva, which is the local celebration of the French national day, and the Chinese community has its New Year party. The project was given to the minister of tourism. The first official celebration of Matarii was organised during November 2006, all but two small associations refused to participate in this celebration. Associations explain this refusal with two arguments. Firstly, the government gave the project to a marketing agency, which belongs to the ministry of tourism, Te Heiva Nui which organizes all of the main folkloric and artistic events in Tahiti. The associations blamed the government of changing the nature of this Matarii celebration and turning it into folklore project void of any cultural significance. The fact that government only organised a Matarii nia celebration and not a Matarii raro one demonstrates for them the above. Therefore, an epic entertainment taking place in a theatre is not appropriate as real and meaningful cultural exchanges require intimacy. People must actively participate in celebrations, and should not be mere spectators. Associations consider official celebration like shows without sacred aspect and consequently members fear that their own Matarii celebration was perceived by people as folkloristic performance. Secondly, Te Heiva Nui has chosen a governmental heritage agency to give historical legitimacy to the events. Their researches contradict Haururu’s results. Consequently the official celebrations and the associations’ ceremonies did not take place on the same day. In 2007 and 2008 the successive governments have tried to hear these arguments, and the celebration was less epic, nevertheless criticisms remain. The official way of taking over these ceremonies reveals a different perspective of cultural heritage than the associations’ view. Whereas associations wish for a cultural awakening, independentist governments tested a new heritage policy. Actually, independentists used the Matarii celebrations to replace both the pre-existing Autonomy’s day, which was celebrated by the precedent majority (and now reinstituted) and the Heritage days, a French event. Politicians were looking for traditions to exhibit, as there are no collective practices which consecrated Tahitian identity, like the New Years Eve ceremony for Chinese community. As political claims, traditions called “intangible cultural heritage” show and glorify an immemorial ethnic unity. In this way, in addition to some cultural events, government organized, during the Matarii nia in November 2007 a ceremony to honour Tahiti as earth mother, according to a myth which shows island as a fish. This myth of origin which characterizes each district as a part of the fish anatomy is the only one which represents Tahitian unity. It’s one of the more used myths in identical claiming (like the myth which represents Marquises as a house with an island for
each part) because it can justify an ethnic unity, used today in political and identity speeches. This is also significant in another ceremony organised during the independentist presidency. In March 2006 the government organised “Birth days” during which a human placenta was buried in the garden of the presidential palace. In French Polynesia, placenta burial is a strong tradition but it is a mainly family practice. It represents the link between a child and the earth of his family [3]. Parents plant a tree, and its fruits should feed the child during his lifetime. Furthermore, a secret family name was also given to this tree. Burying an anonymous placenta in a public place is new interpretation of this tradition, which symbolises that Tahiti belongs to all Tahitians (and not to France). For members of cultural associations it seems eccentric to reinterpret an on-going tradition which continues to have both social and spiritual meaning.

The way in which some politicians deal with tradition and culture, is considered by associations’ members as a part of the decline of Tahitian society; decline against which they fight. They believe that French Polynesia requires a new social model, a modern Tahitian way of life and not the ways of the west sociologically represented by the dominant class and the urban life.

Actually, the development of cultural associations can be seen as an alternative politic movement. Indeed the majority of the cultural associations’ members belong to the upper-middle class which appeared thirty years ago [4] and the leaders of these associations are mainly teachers. They are Christians, essentially protestant and they live in the peri-urban area. The peri-urban area is the place where social change was the most visible in the last twenty years and where the traditional community based on family and parish life seems progressively to have disappeared. Protestantism, the main church in Tahiti has become less influential with the strong proselytism of Mormons, Adventists or Jehovah witnesses and the immigration from catholic archipelagos like the Marquesas. Thus families and villages are today more divided than ever. In this social context associations aim to sustain a community life in opposition to which they consider as the modern western individualism.

Down of the valley, in a place which seems to be outside the modernity, associations have created and have kept alive community bonds. This context helps to understand why ceremonies like Kava drinking or the ritual of nati are so important for them. The Kava ceremony means sharing something together and with the ancestors and Nati ceremony materialises members’ bonds. The Culture represents an immemorial identity sharing by all Tahitians whereas religion divides people. Ceremonies represent an attempt to find a Tahitian way to express identity, specificity and membership of Tahitian society in Polynesia as well as a social and political expression of a part of the middle class who tried to create new traditions in order to maintain community life no longer maintained by the Churches. In association views this is the Tahitian way of life which contrasts with the unsuited modern ways.

Consequently, it can be stated in conclusion that Cultural claims have three dimensions in the views of cultural association. It is an initiation quest of identity, a community experience and a social panacea where ceremonies are used for personal development, group communion, public relation and political action. These intentions contrast with the cultural policy of the local government which was engaged in a symbolic nation making process, with claims based on the glorification of Tahitian identity through cultural heritage and with the intern protestant church debate between cultural theology and universal doctrine. But all of them try to transmit their own views of the Tahitian identity by means of a “stage setting” of the culture.

**REFERENCES**