

The Tahitians

Mana makes crossing more than a race

By Andy Yamaguchi
Advertiser Staff Writer

Hugh Laughlin, a visitor from Tahiti, walked through downtown Honolulu yesterday afternoon. High-rises, cars, people, noise — his companion asked what he thought of it all.

"Civilization," said Laughlin, his answer seasoned in a French accent. "In Tahiti, the tallest building is 10 stories. And we have only one."

A bus barreled past, tainting pedestrians like a crop duster.

"People work with more electronic things," he said. "People forget what is really the thing."

Canoes are the thing, in the opinion of Laughlin, a Tahitian canoe official and ex-paddler here to aid his countrymen in Sunday's 32nd Molokai Ho'e — the men's Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race.

To a Tahitian, Laughlin said, the Molokai race is more than a sporting event. It is a celebration of the canoe, and of the merciful gods who see them safely across the sea.

"The Tahitians have something a lot of people don't," an awed Ha-



**molokai
ho'e**

waii canoe official said, "and that's their *mana*."

Laughlin, who is of English-French-Tahitian-Marquesan descent, said, "Do you think the Molokai race has become popular because of the people? It has become popular because of the canoe itself.

"Canoe is like a religion. It's a part of our culture, of our heritage. Canoe was used to go fishing, to go to war, to go 5,000 miles.

"My friend had girl problems. One day she said to him, 'You choose the canoe or you choose me.' My friend, he was sick over this for two weeks. He has everything in his canoe. His friends, his life: he helped build that canoe.

"In the end, he chose the canoe. It's a funny story, no? But it is true."

The Tahitians' *mana* helped them win the longest Molokai race ever — a 55.6-mile trip from Kaunakakai to Magic Island in 1976. (The course since has been shortened to 40.8 miles.)

That has been their only victory here, and the last two races have been won by Off Shore, a group of Olympic-caliber kayakers and oars-

men from Newport Beach, Calif.

But there is talk that the Tahitians have put together an "all-star" crew, a la Off Shore, and are serious about winning again.

Laughlin said it is true Tahiti has pooled its paddlers into one team (called Nuutere Ihilani), but that it is by no means an "all-star" crew.

Hurricanes last winter "destroyed all canoes of Maire Nui (another Tahitian club), about 150 canoes," said Laughlin, general secretary of the Federation Francaise de la Pirogue Polynesienne. "People are rebuilding their houses, rebuilding their lives. We have not so much time for paddling.

"For Bastille Day (Tahiti's biggest canoe event), we had only half the usual number of paddlers."

There are many races in Tahiti, but Laughlin called the Molokai race "the biggest outrigger canoe race in the world" because of the strategy involved.

"You have to pick a good course, because of all the currents," he said. "In Tahiti, we don't have to choose our course. The challenge of the Molokai Channel is: today it is calm, tomorrow it is rough, and you don't know where the wind is coming from."

Nuutere Ihilani is not the only out-of-state team among the 40 entries. There will be five crews from California, three from Canada and one from Chicago.



Laughlin