

ONCE YOU SAW THEM, NOW YOU DON'T

The Disappearance of Cook Island Traditional Craft Production

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Introduction

The introduction of Christianity in the third decade of the 19th Century, plus the effects of the colonial administrations of Great Britain and New Zealand, had a dire effect on the maintenance of many traditional practices in the Cook Islands. In the 1820s, numerous residents of the southern group of islands, after converting to Christianity became iconoclasts. They destroyed carved representations of their local divinities or handed them over to Tahitian evangelists and to the missionary John Williams. The production of *tapa*^[1] cloth for religious purposes by priests also ended in the 1820s. Later, by the mid 1920s, the making of *tapa* by women for household use, for dance costumes and for ritual exchanges, had almost disappeared, and by the 1950s, the production of decorated pandanus straw mats had virtually ceased. These later disappearances were partly due to the availability of modern, manufactured goods, including imported cloth, but were also due to the diminishing of a formalised gifting and exchange system comparable to that which is still in existence in Tonga, in the western South Pacific.

An Appropriation History

The repatriation of at least some historical artefacts from overseas museum collections is greatly desired by curators of national museums of formerly colonised nations in the South Pacific. So far, the repatriation of artefacts has not occurred in the Cook Islands. The display in the National Museum in Rarotonga (opened in 1992) largely consists of reproductions of statues of gods (*akua*) and other items from the past. The originals of many of the religious artefacts were collected by Protestant missionaries in the 1820s and sent to Great Britain in order to be put on display to show the fallacious beliefs of the 'heathen' to the supporters of the London Missionary Society. Local people destroyed other artefacts as a demonstration of their repudiation of their ancestral beliefs.

In a bowdlerised version of the story of the disappearance of the artefacts, the art historian Anthony Meyer terms the people's religious conversion and consequent iconoclasm as "one of humanity's greatest cultural catastrophes" (1995:521). He does not ascribe agency to the Cook Islanders at all, but depicts them as iconoclastic puppets of the missionary John Williams. However, as elsewhere in the Pacific, not all indigenous artefacts had been captured or destroyed by the representatives of Christian churches. Many had been obtained as gifts or through trade by people such as Captain James Cook when he made landfall at the southern Cook Islands of Mangaia and Atiu during his first exploratory voyage in March, 1777 (Kaepler, 1997, 1978; Phelps, 1976).

Cook Islanders, and other Pacific peoples, continued to give away or sell artefacts made in pre-contact times to foreign visitors, including sailors in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The result was the scattering of such artefacts throughout Europe in public and private collections (Kaepler, 1975, Phelps, 1976). The precise provenance and the name of the maker of these artefacts are not usually known.

In the 20th Century, many of the artefacts ended up in second-hand shops in Great Britain following the breaking up of peoples' personal collections, or when the curators of provincial museums decided that exotic artefacts were not essential to their collections. Phelps (1976:13) reported that his grandfather, James Hooper, was able to add to his extensive collection in 1967 when there was a sale in Torquay of artefacts "brought back by Captain Cook".

From the 1920s through to the 1940s, the New Zealand anthropologist, Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter H Buck) recorded the final home of many Cook Island artefacts.^[2] In addition to the material in the British Museum, he located representations of gods in museums in Cambridge, Oxford, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Brest, Dunedin, Auckland and in his own institution, the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. He also recorded the location of many domestic vessels and tools, as well as pandanus, straw mats and items of clothing made from *tapa*.

During the past 180 years, the carved representations of the gods of the Cook Islanders, as with the religious artefacts of many other indigenous peoples, have ceased to be designated as 'idols' or as 'fetishes'. Instead, they have been fetishised by collectors and by academic writers on art. Such artefacts, first classified as 'Curiosities' then gradually became elevated by Western connoisseurs as 'art', initially as 'primitive art', then 'Oceanic' or 'Pacific Art' (see Kaepler, 1997). Their classification as 'art' in Western terms is the subject of an on-going debate (Errington, 1998). However, it was not just the religious images and examples of pre-contact artefacts that were lost to the people of the islands. In the case of the Cook Islands, the skills of making some crafts using natural products and which are still seen elsewhere in the Pacific, were also lost.

The Making of a Missionary Collection

In 1825, the English missionary John Williams briefly visited the island of Aitutaki in the southern Cook Islands. He had left two Tahitian 'teachers'/evangelists, Papeiha and

Vahapata, on the island two years previously. Initially, Papeiha and Vahapata's mission had not been very successful. However, prior to Williams' visit there had been a notable breakthrough in the resistance of the local people to the acceptance of a new set of deities. That year, a high chief (*ariki*) of the island, became angry when he decided that his family's tutelary deities had failed him. He had asked the deities to heal a daughter who was seriously ill. His prayers had apparently gone unheard and the girl died (Williams, 1837:69-70). The *ariki* then asked his son to burn the wooden building which housed the images of the gods and which was located on the family *marae*.^[3] But the son was prevented from doing so by other worshippers. Nevertheless, the lack of response from the chief's gods influenced many people to bring their district's god images to the evangelists and declare their commitment to the new religion 'of Jehovah' (Williams, 1837:72). Papeiha, one of the Tahitian teacher-evangelists convened a meeting and proposed:

First, That all the maraes in the island should be burned, and that all the remaining idols should be brought to him, in order that he might forward them to us [Williams] at Raiatea [in the Society Islands, the Pacific headquarters of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.)] that we, with our people, might also rejoice in the triumphs of the word. (Williams, 1837:73)

The 'idols' collected by Williams were a total of 31 small wooden statues and "god staffs" (Hiroa, 1939:68). In exchange, the people were given "a few copies of the gospels and elementary books" (Williams, 1837:73). The impulsive abandonment and the gifting of the images subsequently occurred in the mid 1820s on the southern Cook Islands of Mangaia, Atiu and Rarotonga.

William Gill, who was a missionary in the Cook Islands for 33 years, described how the thirteen gods revered by the people on Mangaia lost their authority and powers. The century-old carved wooden images of these gods, which had been made by an artisan named Rori, were kept in a "god house" (Gill 1894:172). Having converted to Christianity through the teachings of two Tahitian missionaries, Davida and Tiare, who had been left on Mangaia in 1824, a senior chief, Numangatini, decided it was inconsistent to maintain Christian beliefs while permitting the continued existence of the god house and the images. He and some other senior men ordered the images of the gods to be taken to Davida:

To the horror of the heathen, but to the great joy of the Christian party, the whole thirteen were carried in triumphal procession to the house of Davida, by the sea. The wrappings [made of white tapa cloth] were thrown away, and for the first time since they were carved by Rori they were exposed to the vulgar gaze. (Gill, 1894:333-334)

According to Kaeppler (1997:84), what Williams and other missionaries did not realise was that the stripping of the *tapa* wrappings from the god images desanctified them. Their divine power was kept contained in the image by the regularly renewed dressing of the images by priests who made the particularly thick *tapa* cloth. What the chiefs did not realise was that the stripping and demystifying of the gods also meant the loss of not

only their own spiritual powers,^[4] but also some loss of their social powers: that is, their *mana*^[5] was considerably diminished.

The Mangaian images, together with the images from Aitutaki collected by John Williams, were taken to Williams' ship which had fortuitously (in the view of the missionary) recently arrived at the island. These artefacts were not destroyed but were taken in triumph to Raiatea in the Society Islands. The artefacts were then shipped to London to be displayed in the London Missionary Society Museum. The LMS collection of Cook Island artefacts was eventually transferred to the British Museum in 1890 (Hiroa, 1944:310). However, a number of the god images collected by Williams do not seem to have still been in the collection when it was moved to the British Museum.

The Acceptance of Christianity

The remarkable aspect of the introduction of Christianity to the island groups of Polynesia was the apparent alacrity with which the new religion was accepted, after brief periods of resistance. There have been a variety of explanations for this. Certainly, the influence and commands of chiefs caused people to 'follow the leader' and adopt the new religion. A similar pattern occurred in Tonga under the leadership of the then high chief (later the first King), Tautafa'ahau, in the 1850s (Williams, 1837:317).

One possibility as to why the conversion to Christianity was so swift was due to the somewhat distant relationship of people to most of the local deities. There was a pantheon of deities who were linked to aspects of nature and the seasons, and who were revered to lesser or greater extents, in Western and in Eastern Polynesia.^[6] In most island groups, these deities were known by their particular qualities and natures, as well as by their myths of origin, rather than by regular exposure of their iconic representations. Many of the lesser divinities were chiefly ancestors who had been elevated to god status (Hiroa, 1939:64). Polynesians took a pragmatic view of the usefulness of some of the divinities who were not members of the original creative pantheons. Ancestral gods were discarded if they seemed to the devotees to have lost their effectiveness:

The Polynesian families created their household gods and then under the guidance of the priesthood, the gods created the Polynesians. . . . The priests composed a theology [and a cosmology], but the textile was so interwoven with the threads of society that it was doomed to decay on contact with Western civilisation. (Hiroa, 1939:63)

The experience of meeting people with ideas, practices and goods from places beyond the islands was also a strong influence. The schools set up by the missionaries gave many individuals access to a Western-style education and therefore new job opportunities and consequently some local social advancement.

While regretting the effects of missionisation on local creativity, and "the wrecking of the native arts and crafts" (1939:92), Te Rangi Hiroa took a somewhat cynical view of the conversion story in the Cook Islands, and in Polynesia generally. He declared that as

“material benefit was associated with the new religion and, if such benefits could be obtained more readily by adopting that religion, why not adopt it?” (1939:64). Forced occupational changes occurred because of the defeat of the old religion. The production by the priests of Mangaia (and elsewhere) of *tapa* for the wrapping of the images also became redundant, even though women continued to make a lighter form of *tapa* for clothing and for other household uses.

The speedy introduction by the proprietors of trade stores of Western manufactured goods, such as iron axe heads, iron nails and manufactured cotton cloth, seems to have largely completed what the missionaries began (cf. Hiroa, 1944:493ff). Williams (1837:582-583) proudly pointed out the linkage between missionisation and the expansion of British commercial interests. He had earlier discussed the way in which women in the Cook Islands, once they had become Christians, began to wear European-style clothing (and therefore had to buy imported cloth). Williams then says: “Thus, wherever the missionary goes, new channels are cut for the streams of commerce” (1837:583).

Tapa and Mat Manufacture

As in Tonga and Fiji, lengths of plain and of decorated *tapa* cloth were exchanged on important occasions in the Cook Islands (Hammond, 1986). However, the production of *tapa* was quickly displaced by the introduction in the 19th Century of the arts of embroidery and appliqué on imported cloth by women missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic (cf. Hiroa, 1939:92; Hammond, 1986; Rongokea, 2001:9). This art, used in the production of quilts (*tivaevae*), is now seen as a ‘traditional’ women’s craft. The items are most usually produced by individual women or groups of women for gifting to their family members, church pastors or other dignitaries, but are also produced in small numbers for sale.

The loss of a religious rationale for the production of *tapa*, and the eventual elimination of *tapa* as clothing and as gift items, does not entirely explain the loss of *tapa* production, and the almost disappearance of mat production by Cook Island women. The making of large quantities of the base materials, and then their development into the end products, requires sustained labour. Cook Island women appear to have preferred to use the time and creativity in the production of *tivaevae*. Te Rangi Hiroa (1927:80) found that in the mid 1920s some women on Aitutaki knew how *tapa* (known locally as *pahoa*) was manufactured, but “little” was still being made (1927:76). What *tapa* was made, was “used as a bedspread after childbirth” (1927:76).

Further, Te Rangi Hiroa reports that “though the women knew a good deal about cloth-beating, the finer points about dye patterns had evidently not been passed on to the present generation of old women” (1927:79). Plaited pandanus straw mats were still being made at the time of his visit. Today, the production of decorated pandanus straw mats has virtually disappeared in the Cook Islands, although a few women still produce undecorated plaited floor mats. This is in significant contrast to the manufacture of these items in Tonga, and to a lesser extent in Samoa. In both of those island groups, mats are used everyday in households as floor coverings, and are also an important part

of gifting and exchange. Finely woven mats edged with red feathers (*'ie Toga* in Samoa, *kie Tonga* in Tonga) are highly prized. They are worn as long overskirts by Tongans on special occasions. Shorter versions, known as *ta'ovala*, are worn daily in Tonga by many men and women, and are mandatory for schoolchildren. In Samoa, *'ie Toga* are important gift items at weddings and funerals.

The making, exchanging and gifting of *ngatu* and of mats is intrinsically linked to Tongan identity (Cowling, 1990; Small, 1997), whether at home or in migrant communities. Mats and decorated *tapa* cloth (*ngatu*) are used in Tonga to decorate pavilions at feasts for the King and other members of the Tongan royal family. *Ngatu* is used to wrap the bodies of the dead prior to their interment. Great lengths of the cloth are worn by the bride and group during wedding rituals. The migrant communities in Australia, New Zealand and the US, depend on the availability of women in Tonga to produce both *ngatu* and of mats to use in celebrations and on other occasions.

The first King of Tonga, Tupou I, banned the making of *tapa* in 1877. This ban was rescinded almost immediately following the intervention of a Wesleyan missionary (Campbell, 2001:122). The substitution of imported cloth for *tapa* in gift exchanges would have been neither symbolically or economically satisfactory. Chiefly women owned the *kupesi*, the pattern boards used to decorate the *tapa* which was made by commoner women at the instruction of the chiefly women. The chiefly women lost their design monopoly when the late Queen Salote encouraged instruction in *kupesi* and *tapa* making in schools in the 1940s. Queen Salote also founded the Langa Fonua ae Fefine Tonga, a women's development group, with branches in the villages. The members were encouraged to produce traditional crafts, both for exchanges and for sale to tourists.

A major reason for the survival of traditional women's crafts in Tonga today compared to the Cook Islands is related to the status of the chiefs. In both island groups, the religious role of the chiefs (and of the priests of the old religion) was superseded. In the Cook Islands, the British, and later New Zealand, colonial rulers formally recognised the status of the Cook Island hereditary chiefs (*ariki*), both male and female. However, the chief's role in governance was limited, due to the deliberate policy by the New Zealand administration of undermining their role in relation to land distribution and local rule-making (Thompson, 1994:73-74). Mostly, the chiefs were sidelined into an officially constituted House of Chiefs.

Tonga was not formally colonised by a European power, and under the Constitution of 1875 the titles of over thirty chiefs (*hou 'eiki*, 'nobles'), including the highest chief, the King, were formalised. Almost three-quarters of the members of the nobility automatically (or by election among themselves) are members of the Tongan Parliament. Elaborate public rituals which formally acknowledge the right of accession to a noble title are still maintained. The wearing and gifting of decorated *tapa* and of family mats are an important element of these title-taking ceremonies.

The forms of education in each island group were also important. The Tongan language was used in schools in the 19th and 20th Centuries, while the speaking of Cook Island

Maori in schools was discouraged by colonial government fiat in the 20th Century. As I have previously noted, Tongan women's crafts were taught in schools, particularly that of *tapa* and mat-making. Both crafts are still intrinsically linked to the maintenance of cultural traditions. Many of these traditions have increased in content, rather than diminished, as the people took on what were originally chiefly, rather than commoner, traditions.

Another important aspect is that the populations were (and are) much smaller in the Cook Islands than in Tonga. From the 1950s onwards, Cook Islanders have emigrated in significant numbers to New Zealand and, more recently, to Australia and to the US. Young women were recruited to work in New Zealand factories, particularly in clothing manufacturing. This means that many of the members of two generations of women were not even exposed to, or trained in, mat-making or quilt-making.

Although there has been significant out-migration from Tonga, the population still numbers over 100,000, while the total resident population of the Cook Islands is about 14,000. In Tonga, the local economy is substantially subsidised by remittances from migrants and so many women are able to be solely engaged in craft work. Others produce and sell the raw materials, beaten *tapa* and dyes, enabling women who are working outside the home to still get together with others on Saturdays and produce lengths of *ngatu*.

Conclusion

Christianity is a vitally important aspect of Cook Islander and Tongan identity. This is reflected in a vigorous church life and in musical performance traditions, including church music. In both societies, dance is important, although the form of dance seen in the Cook Islands today would have had the Reverends Williams and Gill fulminating.

What of the god images? Tonga has very few examples of pre-contact artefacts to display in the small museum in the National Centre on Tongatapu (built with Japanese Government aid). Like those of the Cook Islands, Tongan artefacts are scattered around the world, in museums in Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand. It is doubtful whether most of the local Cook Islander population would agitate for the return of the god images to the museum on Rarotonga. That history and tradition has been superseded in so many ways. The artefacts are now part of the history of European exploration, when 'curiosities' beguiled gentlemen in past centuries. Today, the artefacts' main value, in the view of Cook Islanders, would be for teaching local histories and as tourist attractions.

What happened in Polynesia, if we are to believe the missionaries, and the accounts of some early believers, was the result of a spontaneous rejection by people of the commemoration of deities in wood and stone. Romantic Europeans, and academic art specialists, such as Meyer, deplore the effects of the incursions of Europeans into the Pacific, not least the introduction of Christianity. But those incursions, some violent, some not, are now part of our mutual histories. We must recognise too that local people had minds of their own, and exercised agency. They made life-changing choices and,

like all human beings, did not have much idea of what kind of effect those choices would have. How island people will maintain aspects of their cultures in the 21st Century will depend on so many factors, including the impact of modernisation, local education emphases, increased tourism, the Greenhouse effect, the continuation of both out-migration, as well as the return of some people to the islands.

Endnotes

[1] *Tapa* is the generic name used in the Pacific for the cloth made from bast (ie the inner bark) of saplings of the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), a tree taken from Southeast Asia by the ancestors of the Polynesian peoples several thousands of years ago. In some Pacific islands cloth was also made from the inner bark of the breadfruit (*Artocarpus incisus*), the banyan (*Ficus Indica*) and coastal hibiscus trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*). The narrow bark strips are soaked and then beaten for many hours until they are approximately 18 inches wide. The strips are then felted together to make cloth of varying thicknesses. This craft is still practiced in parts of Papua New Guinea, in Vanuatu and in Samoa, but the largest decorated pieces are made in Fiji (*masi*) and in Tonga (*ngatu*).

[2] Peter Buck (1880-1951) was a New Zealand Maori anthropologist who used both his European father's family name and his Maori name on the title pages of his many published writings. Both names appear in library catalogue listings worldwide. The Maori 'renaissance' of culture, with a concurrent emphasis on the importance of Maori names in relation to identity, had not occurred when he was writing in the first five decades of the 20th Century. I have used the full Maori name in my discussion of his work, following the usage of other scholars in contemporary New Zealand and the preference of members of his *iwi* (tribe) in Taranaki.

[3] Small wooden buildings to house images were located on a stone platform at one end of a pebble-covered area (known as a *marae*). *Marae* were fenced with slabs of stone.

[4] Gill (1894:315) reported that each of the chiefs on Mangaia had the responsibility of preventing the influence of malevolent spirits as well as being "ex-officio high priests of Rongo".

[5] *Mana* (spiritual power) is a Polynesia-wide concept. Chiefs received their *mana*, and the consequent state of *tapu* through primogeniture. It was believed that these qualities were passed down because of the divine origin of their lineage's founding ancestor.

[6] Kirch (1984:38) notes that in all of the Polynesian island groups:

The harvest had to be offered to the gods to ensure the necessary seasonal winds and rain. In many cases the chief was seen as responsible for the maintenance of this fertility. He was expected to fulfil certain ritual duties to ensure success in fishing, victory in war and rain and winds to assist the growing of crops.

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