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Burning the Gods: Mana, Iconoclasm, and Christianity in Oceania

By Kealani Cook

In October 1861, a front-page engraving titled "Natives of Rarotonga surrendering their National Idols" greeted readers of London's *Journal of Civilization,* a "Record of Geographical Discovery, Colonization, and Missionary Enterprise."[1] The image accompanied an article on British foreign mission work, the first section of which focused on the end of "idolatry," primarily in the Pacific. The engraving portrays a line of Rarotongans waiting to offer up their idols to a seated white missionary couple, he in a suit and top hat, she in yard after yard of white cloth. One man stands before them, crouched in a half bow, hands spread in near prayer to the couple, who look on with a mix of disinterest and superiority. The scene captured in this image is peaceful, tranquil, and, in the distracted glances of some of the Rarotongans waiting in line to present their former gods to the missionaries, almost mundane, Yet the period was one of intense cultural and physical violence as the religions of Far Eastern Oceania collapsed, one after another.[2] In many cases the god images, the *kiʻi* or *tiki,* were not simply abandoned, but destroyed, burned, and desecrated as a signal of their loss of power. The gods were an essential part of political life, and this sacred destruction often resulted in or came out of warfare between those who still maintained the power of the gods and those who did not. Furthermore, the end of the old state religions and the coming of Christianity led to massive cultural upheaval that represented a form of violence.

In the image described above, and in most narratives of the conversion of Oceania, the focus is neither on this violence or on the agency of Native peoples, but rather on the white missionaries vanquishing idolatry through their mere presence and sheer force of will. Of course, such narratives are more wish fulfillment than reality. While white missionaries provided much of the teaching and outside support for early Native churches, it was Indigenous peoples who provided the bulk of the intellectual, physical, and spiritual labor for the conversion of Oceania. They were also the ones who committed the violence—both against one another and against the gods—that marked the fall of the old religions. Particularly among the British, many of the foreign missionaries who provided the earliest accounts of these events gave credit to and recounted the actions of the Oceanians who inspired, executed, and spread the

iconoclasm. For later European and American chroniclers, however, credit for such events often went solely to white missionaries such as the Reverends William Ellis, John Williams, and Hiram Bingham.[3] This white-driven narrative of civilizing the savage Polynesian made for good copy and excellent fundraising, validating the growing European and American sense of racial, cultural, and spiritual authority essential to maintaining and enlarging their overseas empires.

Furthermore, such presentations of the Christianization of Oceania rely upon and support a white supremacist and imperial vision in which Native peoples lack agency or capability for self-rule. Foreign missionaries and the empires they represented, however, are presented not just as agents of change, but as omnipotent destroyers and redesigners of cultures and societies in which they lacked any actual power. Even when used to decry the missionaries as a destructive force, this denial of Indigenous agency still perpetuates colonial logics about the active foreigner and the passive Native.

Furthermore, the failure to acknowledge and examine the role of Islanders in the destruction of the gods neglects one of the most basic questions raised by these iconoclasms, namely why Islanders willingly, even eagerly, overthrew their religious system and desecrated the gods they had worshipped for generations. In some cases the individuals involved had fought in defense of their gods mere days or hours before. The Reverend William Ellis and other British missionaries— the very individuals later generations would credit for such acts—often seemed taken aback and confused by the rapid explosion of religious destruction, falling back only on divine providence, the fickleness of the heathen, and the clear truth of Christianity to explain it.

Anthropologist Jeffrey Sissons has raised similar questions in *The Polynesian Iconoclasm.* Sissons argues, convincingly, that this religious destruction and the accompanying religious construction followed ritual cycles based on the rise and fall of the Pleiades. Mass destruction of the idols occurred during periods of sacrifice, destruction, and the disruption of hierarchy. The building of chapels and other Christian structures occurred during seasons of construction and restoration of the social order. While Islanders' actions in this era reflected their agency and reactions to historical changes, they still modeled their actions after these established seasonal patterns, demonstrating the interplay between historical change, *praxis,* and *habitus.*[4]

This chapter examines the Polynesian iconoclasms through a slightly different set of lenses, both in terms of focus and discipline. While not discounting Sissons's work, it argues that the iconoclasms also provide an opportunity to study Islanders as historical actors who transformed not just their home islands but other islands, island groups, and the region as a whole. Furthermore, it examines this destruction through the lens of continuing struggles over *mana* and political power, building in part off of Lilikala Kameʻeleihiwa's analysis of the role of mana in the dismantling of Hawaiʻi's kapu system in 1819?[5] The chapter examines two interconnected groups of Islanders: the Native missionaries who spread the iconoclasm, and the chiefs and priests who chose between a perceived loss of their own mana or the physical destruction of their gods. Christianity provided the opportunity for sacred destruction, but Native missionaries' news of iconoclasms on other islands provided the motivation for elite participation in this destruction. Faced with a potential loss of perceived mana if others questioned the power of their gods, chiefs and priests chose the burning, destruction, and desecration of those gods as a spectacular and extraordinary display of their mana and thus their authority, power, and influence.

Mana

While there is considerable variation in specific usage, the term *mana* is a means of understanding individual and sometimes collective power, authority, and skill throughout much of Oceania. Roger Keesing argues that it is most commonly used as a stative verb that connotes trueness or effectiveness, either in a metaphysical or material sense. A powerful or effective object or person was mana rather than *had* mana?[6]

In Tahiti, Hawaiʻi, and other closely connected parts of Far Eastern Oceania, Islanders also understood mana as a measure of spiritual power stemming from a connection to the gods through descent, devotion, or gift.[7] Priests, prophets, and other religious figures were individuals of considerable mana, as were chiefs and rulers, whose mana was often tied directly to the gods through genealogy and ritual. The ability of chiefs and priests to declare, uphold, and end *kapu* or *tapu* (ritual prohibitions) displayed their mana while also maintaining and enhancing it. The building of temples and control over religious rituals played a similar purpose. Furthermore, only individuals of sufficient status and mana could care for and interact with specific kiʻi or tiki, their temples, and items such as the feathers and cloth used to cover the

gods. Those of high mana were responsible for caring for the gods, which, in turn, solidified perceptions of their mana.[8]

Mana and connections to the gods were also essential to governance. The ability to trace one's genealogy to the gods, for instance, was an important marker of a rulers mana, as were his or her interactions with the gods. As Keesing argues, however, mana throughout Oceania can also be understood as effectiveness and success. Being intangible in either sense, mana could only be perceived through the effectiveness of an individual's ritual or material efforts. Since success in war, politics, agriculture, and rule depended on one's mana, successful and effective chiefs could be understood as individuals of high mana. Failure called into question a ruler's mana, a catastrophic scenario in societies where chiefs competed for rather than demanded the support of warriors and other followers.

Based on both interpretations of mana, the word and the concept could also be used to explain the nature of those with extraordinary qualities or skills. Highly skilled craftspeople, navigators, medical specialists, and others possessing specialized knowledge would be individuals of mana, particularly since these practitioners frequently intertwined knowledge with rituals of work and prayer. Those who accomplished feats requiring extraordinary luck, skill, or the favor of the gods could also be seen as individuals of mana.

Finally, the concept of mana can be used to understand violence and destruction among chiefs and other elites. In Hawaiʻi, for instance, warfare expressed the mana of the chiefs and their connections to the gods. Symbolic and real acts of violence could be used to challenge a chief's mana. According to nineteenth-century historian Samuel Kamakau, Alapaʻi of Hawaiʻi defeated the Maui ruler Kekaulike. On the retreat north, Kekaulike raided Alapaʻi's lands, killing the common people of Kekaha and, at Kawaihae, toppling coconut trees, which were often associated with male sexual organs and capability. The symbolic violence against the coconut trees—as well as their practical importance in Kawaihae's dry, sweltering heat—remained important details in Kamakau's version written more than a century later. Beyond the practical implications of the raid, this ritual castration allowed Kekaulike to restore his prestige and perceptions of his mana. Simultaneously, it tarnished Alapaʻi's victory, called into question his mana, and forced him to answer with his own military response.[9]

Between 1800 and 1825, mana and political power remained inherently connected throughout much of Far Eastern Oceania. Political power was a key means of displaying and even strengthening perceptions of one's mana, and mana was an absolute requirement for obtaining political power. Particularly in times of war, chiefs seeking to retain their followers' support consistently acted in ways that maintained or increased perceptions of their mana. War required followers and warriors, and few would follow a chief unless they believed he had the mana to bring them victory.

Warrior Chiefs: Pomare II

The wave of iconoclasms, as well as the accompanying wave of mass conversion, began under the rule of Pomare II of Tahiti. When the London Mission Society (LMS) arrived in Tahiti in 1796, the Pomare family welcomed them, and Pomare II and his father, Pomare I, developed particularly close ties with them. However, they had little luck in converting either the king or the Tahitian people. When a civil war forced Pomare II to retreat to Moʻorea in 1808, most of the missionaries either fled the Society Islands entirely or followed Pomare into exile.[10]

Despite Pomare's long association with the missionaries, until his exile he had continued to worship, offer sacrifices to, and care lor his own gods, particularly ʻOro, then the most prominent of the gods in the region. As in many parts of Oceania, gods in the Society Islands lived within different bodies. The most common of these were god images, kiʻi or tiki, which were understood to both *house* the gods and to *he* the gods. Pomare's mana gave him the status needed to maintain, care for, and request the favor of ʻOro. At the same time, his people expected Pomare to perform such actions to retain his power.[11]

Problematically, the gods did not seem to be holding up their end of the bargain. Despite his entreaties to ʻOro, Pomare had not only lost the civil war but was now exiled on Moʻorea. Furthermore, as in other parts of Oceania, disease and disruptions brought by foreigners were eroding religious faith. The British missionaries, meanwhile, not only failed to uphold the tapu demanded in observance of the gods, but they also openly denied the gods' sacredness without repercussion. Such factors must have begun weighing heavily on the exiled Pomare as he grew closer to the missionaries. After professing his desire to become a Christian in 1812, Pomare began to show "his contempt for the idols of his ancestors," but did nothing to directly challenge them. Then came the incident with the turtle.[12]

At some point in either 1812 or 1813, Pomare's men caught a turtle. According to custom, the turtle would be offered first to his god and then to the chief. Pomare, however, ordered his men to bake it in his own compound and to serve it to him directly, with none of it going to the god. Such an act directly challenged the god, and under normal circumstances, this would have resulted in death, either at the hands of the god or of the chiefs and priests who enforced such tapu. With no earthly authority above him, however, only the gods could punish Pomare. As Pomare began to eat the turtle he encouraged others to join him, but no one else partook, waiting anxiously to see if the gods would punish Pomare. After his meal, Pomare slept and awoke the next morning: nothing had happened, and everything changed.[13]

In terms of mana, this was a moment of both potential danger and opportunity for Pomare. As a ruler, much of his authority derived from his mana, specifically the strength of his mana in the eyes of his followers, allies, and enemies. No one would follow a chief of low mana, and if the event called into question Pomare's mana, there was a very real possibility his remaining allies and followers would abandon him. He could ill afford any perceived loss of mana, as his exile from Tahiti and inability to defeat his enemies had already done considerable damage.

The act did not, however, appear to diminish his mana. Eating the turtle and surviving displayed Pomare's mana and, if anything, increased people's estimation of it. His act was a spectacular and daring feat, the sort of thing people could, and indeed did, tell and retell for centuries. Since Pomare lived, either his mana was significant enough that the gods could not act against him, or the gods were false and Pomare was the only chief to challenge them. Either way, the act unquestionably marked Pomare as a man of mana. As he and his followers began the long process of conversion, this mana became associated with the new religion as well.

In 1815 Pati'i, the head priest of the district of Papetoai, came to the missionaries and told them that he would perform an even more spectacular and extraordinary feat—he would burn his gods. He had not yet fully converted to Christianity, but he had become increasingly drawn to Christian teachings. As a priest he was a man of considerable mana, mana that depended upon gods whose power he now doubted. Should he succeed in safely burning the gods this mana would remain, as proven by his act, but it would be separated from the gods and their rapidly dissipating position. The next day Pati'i brought his gods out, stripped them of their sacred coverings, and committed them to the flames. Again, the crowd awaited divine

vengeance. Again, the offender remained safe. Pati'i's gods died in the flames, but his mana did not.[14]

As Sissons notes, this was not the first time a tiki had been destroyed. As part of Pleiades-related seasonal ceremony, tiki might be laid aside, even destroyed. Victors in warfare often destroyed the tiki of the losing side, while sometimes tiki might be sacrificed in times of hunger or sickness. When a god failed to display its own efficacy, it—in the form of the tiki—could be discarded. Typically, however, a new ki'i or tiki would be created and reconsecrated, and the god would live anew.[15] While ongoing European-introduced epidemics and other factors called into question the gods' efficacy, the reaction of the crowd gathered around Pati'i indicates that belief remained relatively firm, at least until the god burned. Furthermore, the priests would not carve and consecrate a new home for the god. Pati'i's god was dead and would remain so.

Others followed Pati'i's lead, burning tiki and despoiling *marae* (temple structures and grounds), all under the protection of Pomare. As the gods burned, even more of Pomare's followers turned to the teachings of the LMS. This group became known as the Bure Atua, those who pray to the Christian God, and they would prove central to Pomare's efforts to reestablish rule over Tahiti. As they grew in numbers, the Bure Atua became more aggressive. Attempting to spread their religion and to display the mana of Pomare and the new god, a party of Bure Atua traveled to Tahiti in 1815. Chief among them was Pomare Vahine. Mission writings identified her as the sister-in-law of Pomare II—which she was—but she was also a spouse of Pomare II as well as being the ruler of Huahine and a powerful chief in her own right.[16] She was a woman of mana. In Pare, which had been the base of Pomare I's power, the Bure Atua performed Christian rituals and actively antagonized the old religion's followers and guardians. Farefau, one of Pomare Vahine's retainers and a leader among the Bure Atua, seized feathers used to cover one of the tiki and threw them into a fire during a confrontation with a priest. I he followers of the gods coordinated a retaliatory ambush to wipe out the converts, but the Bure Atua fled before the attack. Once again, the destroyers of sacred items suffered no lasting earthly or spiritual consequences. Once again, the unanswered destruction of holy objects increased the perceived mana of Pomare and of the Bure Atua.[17]

In 1808, Pomare and his opponents were all followers of 'Oro. By 1815, the long-simmering dispute between Pomare and his enemies on Tahiti had become a war

between religions. As more people challenged the gods, the mana of those chiefs still following them was questioned. Because Pomare was the chief most associated with challenging the gods and with the new religion, his mana seemed to grow steadily. After Tahitian Bure Atua fled to Moʻorea in 1814, they returned in 1815 with Pomare as their protector. In November Pomare's political and religious opponents attacked at the battle of Feʻi Pī. Pomare's forces routed the attackers, but rather than pursuing the vanquished or plundering their districts, Pomare turned his attention to the marae of ʻOro at Tautira. He commanded his men to destroy it and to bring back and desecrate ʻOro. The spectacular nature of his victory, not just against his earthly opponents but against ʻOro as well, once again established Pomare as a man of incredible mana.[18]

According to Reverend Ellis, a period of widespread religious destruction followed Pomares victory, during which many of those defeated and pardoned by Pomare participated with considerable fervor.[19] A few years earlier, Pomare's eating of an unconsecrated turtle had allowed him to preserve his mana while abandoning the gods normally associated with that mana. Now he led the widespread destruction of tiki across Tahiti and the utter collapse of the religious system, which again seemingly increased his mana. Only a man of considerable mana, after all, could conquer not just Tahiti, but its gods as well. By participating in this iconoclasm, Pomare's followers and his former foes signaled their allegiance to Pomare and shared in the cannibalizing of mana through the destruction of the old gods.

The destruction of the Tahitian gods launched a chain of similar events across the Society Islands. On Huahine the primary agent of the iconoclasm was Hautia, the regent under Pomare Vahine. With Pomare as his inspiration, Hautia seized and burned the idols of Huahine, likely in early 1816. When the head priest of ʻOro on Huahine hid the god in a cave, Hautia forced the priest to reveal the god and then committed it to the flames in front of a crowd. He also marched to the temple of Tani to destroy the god there, only to be met by a large armed force of defenders. Before the battle began, however, the defenders surrendered themselves and their god: the former were pardoned, the latter was burned. LMS representatives Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet recorded an interview with one of the defenders, who noted that many of those who had picked up arms to defend Tani hours earlier wholeheartedly participated in the destruction of his marae.[20]

Among Pomare's supporters at both Moʻorea and Tahiti was Tama- toa, the king of Raʻiātea. The island had long been the center of ʻOro worship and was the home of his primary temple at Taputapuātea. In 1815, Tamatoa and his men returned home and recounted events on Tahiti and Moʻorea, particularly the failure of the gods to respond to the desecration and destruction of their idols. Tamatoa followed in the footsteps of Patiʻi and Pomare, seizing and destroying the god ʻOro and desecrating his marae. Allying themselves with the king of nearby Tahaʻa, Tamatoa's enemies mounted a revenge attack. Tamatoa's men defeated the Tahaʻa warriors as they landed, and as with Hautia on Huahine, Tamatoa pardoned the attackers. Soon both parties joined together in the destruction of the marae and tiki of both Raʻiātea and Tahaʻa. Once again, the victors and the defeated collectively salvaged the mana of the gods, but as the extraordinary leader who brought about such a monumental event, Tamatoa gained the most.[21]

Missionaries: Papeiha

The victories of Pomare and his allies led to a wave of Islander missionaries, with many coming from Raʻiātea. Tamatoa received a request for missionaries from the island of Rurutu in 1821 after an epidemic hit the island. He sent two of his people to Rurutu, and several months later the people of Rurutu sent a vessel full of their desecrated and discarded gods. That same year the Reverend John Williams left two Raiatean missionaries, Papeiha and Vahapata, on the atoll of Aitutaki. When Williams returned in 1823, he found that the people of Aitutaki had not only destroyed or desecrated their gods and temples, but a large number had also converted and built a massive chapel under the guidance of Papeiha and another Raiatean missionary. The two had also converted a handful of shipwrecked Rarotongans.[22]

His work on Aitutaki completed, Papeiha left with Reverend Williams to find Rarotonga. A high chief of Aitutaki and the shipwrecked Rarotongans accompanied them, as well as a cargo of unburned Aitutaki gods stored in the hold. When they landed at Atiu in the Cook Islands, the chief of Aitutaki met with "Roma-Tane," likely the holder of the Aituan title Rongomatane, and showed him the gods in the hull. The following day the Aituan chief had made up his mind to destroy his own gods as well.[23]

Based on directions from "Roma-Tane," the party arrived in Rarotonga. Once again Williams departed and Papeiha remained to carry out the work, this time aided by the shipwrecked Rarotongans and a second Raiatean teacher, Tiberio. Soon after their arrival they found a key ally in Tinomana, a Rarotongan chief who had been defeated in battle by another chief named Pa. Tinomana and his people now lived in subjugation, fearful for their lives and futures. Upon hearing of events in the Society Islands and elsewhere in the Cook Islands, Tinomana became interested in the new religion, but refrained from denying or desecrating his gods.[24]

As on Moʻorea, it was not a ruler but a priest who destroyed the first god. After putting his son in the care of Tiberio and Papeiha, the priest brought his god to the missionaries and allowed them to publicly cut it into pieces and burn it. The crowd fled in terror, but soon returned when it was clear there was no immediate danger. Going a step further, the missionaries cooked bananas in the ashes and consumed them. Much to the surprise of the crowd, there was no supernatural retribution for such an act, and many of them soon brought their own gods to be destroyed. Again, these spectacles of destruction and the miraculous *lack* of effect presented those involved, including the banana-eating missionaries, as individuals of incredible mana.[25]

Upon hearing of these events, Tinomana sent for the missionaries and ordered all the gods in his district to be destroyed or handed over to the missionaries. Though there was considerable fear, resistance, and mourning among the population, the lack of supernatural repercussions on Tinomana and the missionaries led to a broad acceptance of his decision and of the new religion. It also placed pressure on his enemy, Pa, who within a week had called for the missionaries to visit him as well. Upon their arrival Pa launched his own campaign of god burning, which spread across the island and encouraged interest in Christian teachings.[26] Robert Bourne, an LMS missionary who visited Rarotonga in 1825, noted massive changes on the island, as did Williams when he and Reverend Pittman arrived in 1827 to take over the mission. A few days into their stay a number of Rarotongans presented the remaining gods to the white LMS missionaries, as represented in the engraving at the beginning of the chapter.[27]

The speed of Rarotonga's conversion stunned many in the region, including LMS missionaries Bourne and Williams. Bourne wrote in 1825:

In the Society Islands, European Missionaries laboured for fifteen long years before the least fruit appeared. But two years ago, Rarotonga was hardly known to exist. . . . The Rarotongans did not know there was such a name as JESUS . . . [and] now I scruple not to say that their attention to the means of grace, their regard to private and family prayer, their diligence and their general behavior, equals, if not excels, whatever has been witnessed at Tahiti and the neighbouring islands. When we look at the means it is the more astonishing. Two Tahitian teachers, not particularly distinguished among their own countrymen for intelligence, have been the instruments in working this wonderful change and that before a single European Missionary had set his foot upon the island.

Williams seemed as surprised as Bourne, quoting the above passage at length in *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Seas.* Their surprise at the success of Papeiha and his colleague seemed to stem from the same lack of understanding of Far Eastern Oceanic religion and culture that had hamstrung early LMS efforts in Tahiti and elsewhere.[28]

Unlike the early LMS missionaries, Papeiha was working within a culture and society similar to his own and into which he had a level of insight far beyond that of the typical foreign missionary. This included simple logistics, such as being able to communicate with speakers of mutually intelligible languages. Yet Papeiha and Tiberio also tapped into an equally powerful body of cultural knowledge, providing insight into how political power operated. In short Papeiha and other Islander missionaries understood the importance of mana and destruction in the early stages of mission work.

While also teaching the new faith, Papeiha spread news of the massive changes in the Society Islands, namely Pomare's role in the destruction of the gods, his successful return to power on Tahiti, and his growing influence over the Society Islands as a whole. According to Williams, when Papeiha first told a large gathering of commoners and chiefs about the miraculous and inconceivable events, the immediate response of the crowd was "surprise and horror." While it would take some time before any real progress would be made with the high-ranking chiefs and priests who would be essential to long-term success, around twenty people were interested enough to attend the first Sabbath-day meeting.[29] Once they convinced a priest to follow Pati‘i’s example and burn the first Rarotongan god, however, things moved rapidly. As elsewhere, this destruction left chiefs facing both a religious and political crisis.

Tinomana's quick response stemmed from his status as a conquered chief; he had the least to lose and the most to gain in such a spectacular gamble. Pa, on the other hand, was a victorious chief and had far more to lose, but once Tinomana had destroyed his own gods, this placed greater pressure on Pa. In the past Tinomana may have lost battles to his fellow man, but now he had publicly defeated and destroyed gods. Within a week Pa followed Tinomana's lead and destroyed his gods as well. Just as the gods had served to maintain, demonstrate, and even elevate the mana of the chiefs who cared for them, they now did the same for the chiefs who destroyed them. Either way chiefs who failed to actively display their mana risked being perceived as having none.

Auna and the Conversion of Hawaiʻi

While Papeiha was carrying Christianity and the iconoclasm into the Cook Islands, other Raiateans were carrying the same ideas north to Hawaiʻi. H. E. Maude has argued that one of them, a chiefly Pomare supporter named Auna, was perhaps the single most important person in introducing Christianity into Hawaiʻi.[30] Many accounts of the conversion of Hawaiʻi, however, push Auna and his Tahitian and Raiatean colleagues to the periphery if acknowledged at all.

The story of Hawaiʻi's conversion often hinges on the alliance between the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and Queen Kaʻahumanu. A favorite wife and adviser of Kamehameha the Great, Kaʻahumanu effectively seized power after his death in 1819, trapping her stepson and coruler Liholiho (Kamehameha II) into destroying the kapu system, demonstrating and strengthening both her political position and her mana. The Hawaiian kapu system, as the traditional political-religious system is often referred to, resembled those in the Society and Cook Islands. In either convincing or coercing the young king to eat with her and his biological mother, Queen Keōpūolani, Kaʻahumanu orchestrated a situation not unlike that of Pomare's eating of the turtle. The royal breaking of a kapu in such a public manner and the lack of a supernatural response led to a breakdown of that religious system. Her main opposition in this was Kekuaokalani, the chosen guardian of Kamehameha I's wargod Kūkaʻilimoku. He rebelled but Kaʻahumanu's troops quickly defeated his small army. The victors destroyed some of Kekuaokalani's temples and gods, but a large number of prominent kiʻi remained unmolested. When the American missionaries arrived in 1820, neither they nor Kaʻahumanu saw much use for one another. Once they realized her power the missionaries began courting

her favor, though with little initial success. Then in April 1822, the *Mermaid* arrived from Tahiti.

Aboard the *Mermaid* were representatives of both the LMS and Society Islands Christianity, namely two Christian teachers named Taua and Auna. The presence of these Society Islanders caused considerable interest among the courts of Kaʻahumanu and Keōpūolani, respectively the most politically and genealogically powerful individuals in the islands. By 1800 the Society Islands, and Tahiti in particular, had earned a special place in the Hawaiian mind. The linguistic and cultural similarities between the two peoples indicated a close relationship, and Hawaiian oral histories often spoke of Kahiki (Tahiti) as the homeland of either the people or of specific chiefly and priestly lines. William Ellis, one of the LMS missionaries, wrote that Kamehameha the Great and Pomare I had even planned marriages among their children, though the death of Pomare and the irregularity of shipping between the two lands derailed the plans.[31]

In addition to the general Hawaiian affinity for Society Islanders, the presence of a specific Society Islander in Hawai'i aided the two missionaries. Much to the surprise of Auna and his wife, her brother Moe met them at the shore and took them to the court of Kaʻahumanu, where he served as an adviser and a clerk. Kaʻahumanu and the rest of her court expressed interest in hearing news of events in Tahiti, particularly whether the actions of Pomare II had resulted in any negative consequences for himself or his line. According to Ellis:

> Every necessary information was cheerfully given, and every inquiry fully answered by Auna and his companions, to the entire satisfaction of the chiefs and people; contradicting entirely the false reports that had been maliciously propagated among them, as to the degraded state of the people of the Society Islands, and especially of the kings and chiefs, who were represented as poor and miserable.

Auna remained with Kaʻahumanu and Taua with Keōpūolani while the rest of the party toured the islands.[32]

Until then, the Americans were relatively unsuccessful with either Kaʻahumanu or Liholiho, Kamehameha II. According to Auna's journal, by May he was accompanying Kaʻahumanu on a voyage to Hawaiʻi Island as her court pastor, holding services for the queen's party and others who wished to join. On June 8 the

queen began demanding specific kiʻi be brought to her for destruction, the first being Kalaipahoa, the feared "poison-god" of Kamehameha the Great. Later that month numerous gods were put aboard ships to send them to Liholiho on Oʻahu. Auna's journal did not explain why the other gods were being sent to Liholiho on Oʻahu, and by whose command, but the timing indicates that it was almost certainly related to Kaʻahumanu's act of burning Kalaipahoa in early June. Claiming that the gods were cursing the men aboard the ships, Kaʻahumanu and her supporters boarded the outgoing vessels, seized more than a hundred gods, and committed them to flame on the shore. Auna wrote in his journal, "I thought of what I had witnessed in Tahiti and Moorea when our idols were thrown into the flames particularly those that were consumed at Papetoai and Patiʻi; and with my heart I praised, Jehovah the true God, that I now saw these people following our example."[33]

Although events in Hawaiʻi differed from those in Tahiti, they followed parallel pathways. As in the southern cases, by ending the kapu system Kaʻahumanu found not only a way to display her own mana through destruction, but also a way to weaken her potential competition, Liholiho and Kekuaokalani. As males trained in priesthood and as the religious heirs of Kamehameha the Great, both lost the opportunity to use the religious system to challenge Kaʻahumanu. As the clear force behind this extraordinary event, Kaʻahumanu displayed for all, and particularly for the other chiefs, her mana, her political acumen, and her control over the kingdom.

Kaʻahumanu initially seemed disinterested in the type of broader iconoclastic destruction seen in Tahiti and elsewhere. Nor did she appear eager to find a new state religion as a replacement for the kapu system, even after the arrival of the American missionaries. Perhaps she saw little need to do either. Unlike Pomare and many of the other chiefs during the iconoclasms in the south, she had no real political or military opposition in Hawaiʻi. The only one whose status rivaled hers was her close ally Keōpūolani, who lacked the political ambitions of her sister queen despite a genealogy that made her a person of incredibly high mana. Auna's arrival and his account of events in the Society Islands, however, not only inspired Kaʻahumanu's pursuit of Christianity as the new state religion, but ignited a new iconoclasm and led to the near complete destruction of the gods. As in the Tahitian case, the destruction of gods, not just a refutation of them, was an essential part of the process. As in the Society and Cook Islands, Islander missionaries spearheaded both religious destruction and conversion to Christianity, and they did so with a speed unmatched by their European

and American counterparts. They were able to do so because they understood mana and politics, and they had a model for conversion that incorporated both.

Iconoclasm and Death on Tabiteauea

In the 1850s, nearly a quarter century after the conversion of Kaʻahumanu, Hawaiians took up foreign mission work for themselves, venturing out to the Marquesas, Carolines, Marshalls, and Kiribati. Between missionaries, their wives, children, and assistants, more than a hundred Native Hawaiians participated in this mission work between 1850 and 1903. The model they used, however, was not that of the Tahitians and Raiateans, impromptu affairs featuring recent converts appealing to shared Oceanic logics. Rather they employed the model of the Americans and the LMS, formal missions shaped around the logics of post-millennial Christianity, capitalism, consumerism, and a nationalist sense of superiority. Unlike the Tahitians and Raiateans of the 1820s, they met with considerably less success. Even in the Marquesas, where the language and culture were most similar to pre-Christian Hawaiʻi, efforts to destroy the old religion and install Christianity moved at a glacial pace and met with little success.[34]

One major exception, however, was on the atoll of Tabiteauea, where the Reverends Kapu and Nalimu succeeded in converting the northern half of the atoll. In doing so they replicated the earlier era of iconoclasm, whipping up a fervor of destruction that resulted in the death of not only all the other gods on the atoll, but several hundred of the atoll's people as well.[35]

Kapu had been trained under the Reverend Titus Coan, a fire-and- brimstone Finneyite revivalist who managed to find his way into the normally staid ABCFM Sandwich Islands mission.[36] Kapu's enthusiastic preaching style earned him a massive following by 1868, when his converts on the north side of Tabiteauea destroyed their religious artifacts and began publicly gathering on formerly forbidden sites. Though no doubt inspired by Kapu, his converts carried out this iconoclasm themselves, and the items destroyed seemed to largely be their own sacred items in which they, or at least a vocal majority, had ceased to believe. The arrival of Nalimu to administer to the southern regions of the island in 1870 further bolstered the Tabiteuea Congregationalist community.[37]

In southern Tabiteuea, however, most of the people practiced the Tioba (Jehovah) religion, a proselytizing, Indigenous religion that borrowed heavily from Christianity.[38] The Tioba followers had little love or patience for the Hawaiian missionaries, and the feeling was mutual. Kapu and Nalimu referred to the Tioba followers as *hulumanu* (bird feathers) in derision of the feathered crosses that the Tioba people carried. They were also potentially referencing the Hulumanu of Kamehameha III, a cadre of followers and companions during his antimission cultural “revolt" some forty years earlier. In 1879 Kapu and Nalimu went south with two thousand of their flock following behind. After trying to force their way into a Tioba meetinghouse to preach, the two were ejected. In retaliation they and their followers returned north, destroying every symbol of the Tioba they found along the way. This desecration, as expected, goaded the Tioba followers into battle, which the northerners won decisively by transgressing traditional non- lethal rules of engagement. This led to another aggressive iconoclasm, in which the northerners under Nalimu and Kapu destroyed more symbols of the Tioba religion.[39]

Unsatisfied with the destruction of these artifacts, however, Kapu and Nalimu soon set in motion a string of events intended to bring about the final destruction of the Tioba religion. Despite briefly preaching peace, the two soon returned to preaching war against the Tiobans. In 1880 they tried to preach in the Tioba areas three times and were ejected each time. Their third effort led the southerners to again gird up for battle, but the northerners were prepared for such an eventuality with newly made and newly purchased weapons. They ambushed the Tioba people at dawn, slaughtering more than six hundred, including men, women, children, the wounded, the fleeing, and those who threw down their weapons. Many of the bodies were piled on the battlefield and burned in an enormous pyre, denying them any form of funerary rites and preventing their families from mourning over their fallen relatives.[40]

Events on Tabiteauea often reflected the same dynamic seen in other parts of the Pacific a half century before—at least on the northern part of the atoll. Kapu and Nalimu’s efforts to create a Christian community on the island required an effort not just to spread Christianity, but also to destroy the gods of Tabiteauea. As in Hawaiʻi, Rarotonga, and Tahiti before it, the orgy of destruction on the northern side of the island both cleared the way for Christianity and signaled the mana of the northern converts. The south, however, was a different manner. Like Christianity the Tioban

religion was monotheistic, following Tioba (Jehovah). Followers worshipped crosses in sacred locations, using rituals not entirely unlike traditional polytheistic practices. The destruction of these crosses, however, did not have the same sort of impact that the destruction of traditional gods tended to have. These crosses were far more a focus of worship than gods in and of themselves. When the Protestants marched south, seizing the Tioban crosses and destroying the sacred spaces, they did little to shake the faith of the Tiobans in their deity. Failing to destroy the Tioban faith by destroying their sacred objects, which had worked quite well throughout the rest of Oceania, they turned instead to destroying the worship of Tioba by destroying his followers.

Far Eastern Oceania experienced numerous changes in the early nineteenth century, but perhaps the most radical changes were religious ones, with the Society, Cook, and Hawaiian Islands going from non-Christian in 1800 to almost entirely Christianized by 1850. The prominent role of Islanders, both as the destroyers of their own gods and as missionaries spreading the destruction of the gods, demonstrates their agency and agility in manipulating and shaping historical change on both a local and regional level. By focusing a message around the destruction of the gods, Islander missionaries led a wave of conversions no Western missionaries were able to match for sheer speed and effectiveness. Their accounts of previous destructions and their own lack of respect for the gods called into question the efficacy of those gods and the mana of those who followed them, particularly mana-dependent elites. At the same time, they tempted these elites with the knowledge that the absolute destruction of the gods, so recently unthinkable, was attainable proof of the potency of their mana. Thus, the gods burned.

Notes

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[1] "Civilizing Results of Christian Missions," *Journal of Civilization,* October 1841, 379. The image is based on a similar image and account of events by George Baxter from the title page of John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands: With Remarks upon the Natural History of the Islands, Origin, Languages, Traditions, and Usages of the Inhabitants* (London: J. Snow, 1837).

[2] "Far Eastern Oceania" refers to the area including the Society, Cook, and Hawaiian Islands. While the Marquesas, Rapa Nui, and other island groups might also be included in this geographic area, the chapter focuses largely on the above-mentioned groups.

[3] See Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises;* William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches, during a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Sea Islands: Including Descriptions of the Natural History and Scenery of the Islands, with Remarks on the History Mythology, Traditions, Government, Arts, Manners, and Customs of the Inhabitants,* vol. 2 (London: Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1830); Hiram Bingham, A *Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands; or The Civil, Religious, and Political History of Those Islands: Comprising a Particular View of the Missionary Operations Connected with the Introduction and Progress of Christianity and Civilization Among the Hawaiian People* (Hartford, Conn.: Hezekiah Huntington, 1847).

[4] *Jeffrey Sissons, The Polynesian Iconoclasm: Religious Revolution and the Seasonality of Power* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

[5] Lilikala Kameʻeleihiwa, *Native Land and Foreign Desires: Pehea Lā E Pono Ai?* (Bishop Museum Press: Honolulu, 1992), 81.

[6] Roger Keesing, "Rethinking 'Mana'," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 40, no. 1 (1984): 137—56.

[7] Keesing, "Rethinking 'Mana'," 152.

[8] Mary Kawena Pukui, E. W. Haertig, and Catherine A. Lee, *Nana I Ke Kumu* (Honolulu: Hui Hānai, 1972), 1:149-53.

[9] Samuel Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaiʻi* (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992), 66.

[10] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:25-32, 81-82, 88.

[11] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:51-52, 65, 77.

[12] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:65, 76, 93.

[13] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:93-94.

[14] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:109-12; Sissons, *Polynesian Iconoclasm*, 37-41. Sissons notes that eyewitness accounts from other LMS missionarries differ from Ellis's account in the number of gods burned. Ellis claimed that Pati'i burned several of his gods, while other, less-detailed accounts claimed he only committed a single god to the flames.

[15] Sissons, *Polynesian Iconoclasm*, 41-42.

[16] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:134. Niel Gunson, "Great Women and Friendship Contract Rites in Pre-Christian Tahiti," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 73, no. 1 (1964): 64.

[17] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:136-40.

[18] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:145-56.

[19] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:258-60.

[20] Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet, *Journal of Voyages and Travels by the Rev. Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet, Esq: Deputed from the London Missionary Society, to Visit Their Various Stations in the South Sea Islands, China, India, &c. between the Years 1821 and 1829* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1832), 1:178—79, and 202—3.

[21] Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, 2:167-8; Williams, *Narrative of Missionarry Enterprises*, 187-91.

[22] Ebenezer Prout, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. John Williams, Missionary to Polynesia* (London: J. Snow, 1846), 43; Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 38, 40-44, 52, 59-62.

[23] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 84-85

[24] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 99-103, 172-73.

[25] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 177-78.

[26] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 178-79, 183.

[27] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Endeavors*, 115-16; Robert Bourne, "Harvey Islands," *Religious Monitor or Evangelical Repository* 3, no. 9 (February 1827): 439-40.

[28] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Endeavors*, 115-17; Bourne, "Harvey Islands," 440.

[29] Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, 171-72.

[30] H. E. Maude, "The Raiatean Chief Auna and the Conversion of Hawaii," *Journal of Pacific History* 8 (1973): 191. The ʻArioi were a religious community dedicated to ʻOro who traveled island to island and led celebrations and rituals dedicated to the god.

[31] William Ellis, *Narrative of a Tour through Hawaii, or Owhyhee; with Remarks on the History, Traditions, Manners, Customs, and Language of the Inhabitants of the Sandwich Island* (London: H. Fisher, Son, and P. Jack- son, 1827), 79.

[32] William Ellis, "Letter from Mr. Ellis," *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 1 (May 1823): 210.

[33] Tyerman and Bennet, *Journal of Voyages and Travels*, 2:91-94.

[34] For more see Nancy Morris, "Hawaiian Missionaries Abroad, 1852- 1909," (PhD thesis, University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, 1987); Kealani Cook, *Return to Kahiki: Native Hawaiians in Oceania* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 32-94.

[35] H. C. Maude and H. E. Maude, "Tioba and the Tabiteauean Religious Wars," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90, no. 3 (September 1981): 311.

[36] Charles Finney was a revivalist preacher in the United States and a major figure in the Second Great Awakening. Many evangelical preachers of the era modeled themselves after his lively and extemporaneous preaching style.

[37] American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, *Missionary Herald* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1870), 66: 197-98.

[38] H. E. and H. C. Maude estimate the Tioba religion to have begun sometime in the 1860s. Maude and Maude, "Tioba and the Tabiteuean Religious Wars," 312.

[39] W. B. Kapu to Bingham, October 30, 1879, Micronesia Collection, Hawaiʻi Mission Children's Society Archive (HMCSA), Honolulu; Maude and Maude, "Tioba and the Tabiteuean Religious Wars," 317-18; Nalimu, "Tapiteauea Church Report, 1877-1878," Micronesia Collection, HMCSA; Henry Nalimu to Bingham, November 10, 1879, Micronesia Collection, HMCSA; Nalimu, "Tapiteauea Church Report, 1878-1879" Micronesia Collection, HMCSA.

[40] Maude and Maude, "Tioba and the Tabiteuean Religious Wars," 323-24.