

Staging Change: Collectivism in the Cook Islands.

Abstract

Discussions of architecture and performativity swing between the formal, technical and tectonic object to an architecture of ever-broader relationships. The object discussed in this paper, the Cook Islands mission chapel, is both the one limited by strictly technical understandings of durability and resistance to tropical storms (its functional performance was a missionary obsession) and the object of expanded performativity in its political, cultural and social context. Throughout the period of London Missionary Society influence (1821 to the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1891) the intense building activity of churches, schoolhouses and Sunday schools, whilst fulfilling the evangelical ambitions of the London Missionary Society (LMS) enacted different meanings for the people who built and used them. The paper argues that church building constituted performative enactments of collective belonging as the simultaneous disappearance of religious artefacts and *marae* engaged in radical inversions with new mission building.

Key words: Missionary architecture, coral church, Rarotonga, Papeiha, collective building, performative, London Missionary Society,

Image caption: 'And the idols he shall utterly abolish' - Isaiah ii. 18, in John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands*, John Snow, London, 1838, frontispiece

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Introduction

John Williams of the London Missionary Society (LMS) disembarked on Rarotonga on the Sabbath in 1827 to a vast throng of Cook Islanders leaving the morning service. The women in white cloth and bonnets and the men wearing hats of native manufacture were leaving Papeiha's church at Avarua.¹ A few days later Papeiha, the Tahitian LMS teacher, requested the white missionaries take a seat outside his comfortable house and presented them with another remarkable sight.

'We observed a large concourse of people coming towards us bearing heavy burdens. They walked in procession and dropped at our feet fourteen immense idols, the smallest of which was five yards in length. Each of these was composed of a piece of *aito*, or iron wood, about four inches in diameter, carved with rude imitations of the human head at one end and with an obscene figure at the other, wrapped around with native cloth, until it became two or three yards in circumference. Near the wood were red feathers, and a string of small pieces of polished pearl shells, which were said to be the *manava* or soul of the god. Some of these idols were torn to pieces before our eyes: others were reserved to decorate the rafters of the chapel we proposed to erect; and one was kept to be sent to England, which is now in the Missionary Museum.'²

Anthropologist Chris Wingfield points out the fluid and unpredictable exchange of what he calls 'moving objects'; the collection and transportation of Rarotongan staff gods amongst artefacts from other mission fields to LMS museums in London. They formed part of a larger global actor-network of Mission stations, artefacts and museums, collectors, ships, chapels, missionaries and indigenous populations that considerably complicates any simple reading of iconoclasm as practiced by both missionary and Cook Islander. Wingfield explicitly links the two activities of the

missionary. 'If the destruction of 'idols' formed one thrust of the practical missionary work, the construction of chapels formed the other.'³ While Wingfield's primary interest is to explore how the 'missionary exhibitionary complex' influenced British self-conceptions at home, the agency of ritual in relation to indigenous architecture is given new emphasis and provides this paper with a starting point.

Wingfield positions the frequent burning of 'idols' in Pacific missionary fields thus, '...iconoclasm was a performance enacted for an audience that were gathered in one place, a form of destruction and purification but also a demonstration of intent in relation to adopting a new set of practices.'⁴

And in this symbolically and literally emptied performance space, this paper argues, new building practices became the vehicle by which Cook Islanders were to re-order cosmogonic alliances, territories and technologies. Collective work organised by community, consecrating feasts, and buildings in which traditional arts were incorporated, consummated new political and cultural identities. Mission churches enacted 'the performance of identity'⁵ through staged building, material substance and in their performative spatiality and siting.

In Polynesia *tai: uta* or seaward: landward directions structure the physical division of land, the disposition of buildings and marae, and in fact the lexical orientation of the people. Within each *tapere* (district), a radial wedge of land stretching from mountain to sea, the members of a family grouping have access to sea and mountain, both high status zones, which were not only the means of economic survival, but also invested with spiritual and cosmic associations that inhered in the organisation of marae within the *tapere*. When the missionaries arrived on Rarotonga they located their churches on the coast in the high status realm adjacent to the sea and linked them with a circling coastal road. The earlier inland road girdling the island - an ancient ceremonial route, which acted to ritually bind marae in a sanctified landscape - was trumped⁶ yet subsequent church building practices performatively enacted new topographies and sacred contexts, reconciling architecture and landscape.

Papeiha's Monumental Church at Avarua

Prior to the arrival of any English missionaries, the people of Rarotonga abandoned their dispersed pattern of settlement along the coastal plain and moved en masse to Avarua with their Tahitian teachers Papeiha and Tiberio.⁷ The three districts of the island came together and built a church there in 1824.⁸ Maretu the Rarotongan LMS teacher describes how the site is cleared; a feast 'of two hundred pigs and thirty bunches of pandanus'⁹ celebrates the leveling of ground. The clearance anticipates inhabitation. It is a platform for a social gathering and exemplifies what architectural theorist David Leatherbarrow describes as the 'technical and ethical aspects of leveled land.'¹⁰ Leatherbarrow's understanding of architecture; ethical action wedded to form¹¹ recalls nineteenth century architect Gottfried Semper's 'commemorative stage'¹² and Aristotle's formulation of poetry. Merely the development of character, or 'form' in architectural terms, is insufficient without dramatic action, plot or ethical behaviour, to complete the poetic act.

Cook Islanders already understood the ethical dimensions of construction, which were embodied in collective practices and cosmological attendance to the landscape. The square or rectangular marae platform of Cook Island architecture was not only dedicated to ceremonial and religious purposes but *marae*, an intransitive verb in Cook Island Maori, signifies 'bare (of vegetation), cleared, denuded.'¹³ To clear a site is to set a stage for human or godly activity.

John Williams re-iterates the collective nature of the enterprise and the democratizing improvisational participation of each district in the making of Papeiha's church. He records the presence of ancestor figures in the church.

'One of its most striking peculiarities was the presence of many indelicate heathen figures carved on the centre posts. This was accounted for from the circumstance that when built a considerable part of the people were heathens:

and as a portion of the work was allotted to each district, unaccompanied by specific directions as to the precise manner of its performance, the builders thought that the figures with which they decorated the maraes would be equally ornamental in the main pillars of a Christian sanctuary.’¹⁴

The building took three months to build and Maretu tells us of the extensive and time-consuming sennit lashing and ornament, which covered the posts and ridgepoles.¹⁵ Feasting consecrated each stage of the building with every district playing their part.¹⁶ As Judith Butler has said, the performative act both draws its authority from reiterating convention, through the invoking of convention and yet ‘reiterations are never replicas of the same.’¹⁷ The performative action ‘echoes a prior action, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.*’¹⁸ (Emphasis in the original.) Thus the performative act is not merely a performance, nor is it willful. Performativity is about the ‘reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer’.¹⁹

Rarotongan historian Marjorie Crocombe notes in Maretu’s account of the church dimensions that he ‘gives no unit of measure but probably meant arm-spans (about two metres) which was the most common Rarotongan unit of length.’²⁰ These measurements correspond to a startling 200 metres long by 16 metres wide with the ridge at about 14 metres. Great excitement at the prospect of this is recorded by John Williams²¹ and LMS members of the Deputation from the Society, Tyerman and Bennet, record their astonishment too,

‘On the 18th (June 1824) we left Atiu, and stood for the island of Rarotonga... The Christians were erecting a chapel *six hundred feet* in length! And it was nearly half finished when we saw it.’²² (Emphasis in the original)

Historian Ernest Beaglehole, compared it to the biggest cathedral in England, Winchester, which at 550 feet long was still outdone by this first building for worship on Rarotonga and he described Papeiha as a master of the dramatic gesture.²³ It appears that construction stopped at just less than half the proposed scale.²⁴

The Cook Islanders were not unfamiliar with large houses; they built the secular 'are *karioi* (houses of entertainment),²⁵ the most famous of which, in Aitutaki, measured 72 x 34 feet. Notably they added to the prestige or *mana* of the chief who built them. Neither the 'are *karioi* nor the largest marae platforms²⁶ began to approach the scale of the new church built by Papeiha. The incorporation of Cook Island ornamental building practice into a building of such size must have been a compelling sight and a shrewdly persuasive performance. It is indicative of their power that Papeiha and Tiberio, who had married into *ariki* (chiefly) families,²⁷ could command such a labour force. According to archaeologist Matthew Campbell, 'social structure in pre-contact Rarotonga was notably fluid and variable.'²⁸ While *tapu* inheres in all people to a greater or less extent, *mana*, gained performatively through political negotiation, warfare and military alliance, could considerably enhance or detract from the state of *tapu*.²⁹ *Ariki* inherited *mana*, yet as spheres of influence fluctuated their *mana* was subject to change; strategic alliances between *ariki* and missionaries were mutually beneficial.

Papeiha's monumental church gathered the formerly divided people in their thousands³⁰ under a big roof. LMS missionary and ethnographer William Wyatt Gill reflects on this image in which the State was traditionally conceived as 'are or house and conversely the house was informed by the image of the state.

'The under-chiefs everywhere symbolized the lesser rafters; individuals the separate leaves of thatch covering. Yet, by a subtle process of thought the state itself - with its great and lesser chiefs, and its numerous members - was but the visible expression of a spirit-dwelling in the underworld, in which the major and minor divinities did not merely live, but actually constituted it; the major gods being the pillars and main rafters, the minor gods the lesser rafters, &c, &c. The safety of the state consisted in this - that in the spirit-temple in the nether world there should be no schism or rent; for should there be one, divisions will immediately arise in the visible state, i.e., in the councils of the great chiefs; the necessary consequences being war and bloodshed.'³¹

Elaborately lashed posts and roof framing significantly dominate the descriptions of the early churches. Exaggerated scale, as in Papeiha's vision, complete with ancestor figures gave surprising new corporate expression to the body and state of the Cook Island polity and spirit world. Embodied, political and spatial, this was a performative architecture at a time of crucial change.

Performing Identity

Today there is evidence that collective building continues to be a significant actor in a diasporic network of Cook Islanders, remittance funds, islands, buildings and reciprocal practices of collective labour. A diminishing population impacts on all the Cook Islands, yet on Mangaia, for example with a population of less than 1000 in 2004, building projects proliferated in what has been called 'conspicuous construction.'³² Reciprocal sharing of labour, acting in a complex web of social and financial obligation, appears still in the building of community structures that appear to over cater to actual need.³³ Remittances from extended families living overseas are an acknowledged aspect of this reciprocal practice.³⁴ As Cook Island communities spread across the globe, the ties that bind are stretched to maintain networks of social and cultural continuity. The considerable financial cost of this oversupply suggests that collective building, as a privileged activity, acts to bind the wider community into social relations and hierarchies well beyond the geography of the islands.

The ephemeral nature of traditional architecture, made of non-durable thatch and reed, was borne out by Gill who observed that the Cook Islanders named sites and not their buildings.³⁵ This citational and reiterative naming resonates with a more recent project; Ted Nia's 2009 architectural proposal for an '*are korero*, a house of history and learning. This project proposed for the grounds of the Taputapuatea marae at Avarua, explicitly articulates the need for a space of performance for rituals that enact the crucial rites of family identity and genealogy. Nia says. '... the entire project rests upon the tribe's *papa 'anga*.'³⁶ It is this *papa 'anga*, or ancestral genealogy, which unfurls the rights, duties and responsibilities of titleholders (*aronga*

mana) to the land. 'Authenticating and testing *papa 'anga* is a continuing process.'³⁷ With each chiefly investiture, burial, welcome and celebration the *aronga mana no te enua* (the title holders of the land) 'relate blood, land, titles and jurisdiction. Over time relationships have become disassembled, but as Nia says an 'are korero would help to carefully reconstruct relationships.'³⁸

If the space of the 'are korero would allow for the oral and performative re-iteration of relationships, Nia's sculpture of *tupuna* (ancestors) for the house, inscribed with *Te au akairo o toku tupuna* or genealogical patterns and designs, mark the return of mnemonically remembered non-textual genealogies and as he significantly notes, 'At no time since the advent of Christianity and colonization have ancestor figures held such a possible, prominent position.'³⁹

By a spatially performative architecture Nia, not only tends to the past but also, actively projects the present and future.⁴⁰ Drawing, sculpture, weaving and collective performance participate in this re-inscribing of cultural genealogy over the land and Nia contends that *ta'unga* (experts or specialists) could use the art of sennit lashing 'to manifest genealogy – intersecting lines and creating continuity -...'⁴¹ Nia clarifies the purpose of this art, 'The genealogy represented is *tapu*, not the pattern.'⁴² Within the structure of his proposed house, *a'tui anga* (linking or sewing genealogies) occurs at the *pa'u anga* (physical joint of the post and ridge line). In 'sewing genealogies' Nia reminds us of the essentially political nature of the collective.

The Cook Island house was more than just building fabric; it represented the fabric of the body politic, an embodiment of the State and Cosmos in which every individual was present in the leaves of thatch and bound within the larger whole.⁴³ Mission buildings entered this cultural economy as they displaced the older sacred sites and traditional houses of entertainment ('are karioi). Binding was reiterated in topographical and sacred contexts. The 'object' has changed form more than once, relocated and re-territorialised, inverted by missionary arrival, shaped by colonialism and modernity and yet, significantly, continues to mediate the divine and the social

through collective enactment. From the white tapa wrappings of the staff gods to the sennit-lashed timbers of the Christian church and latterly the global paths of the remittance cheque - the expanded field of the architectural object reiteratively and performatively re-enacts identity.

1 John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands*, John Snow, London, 1838, Reprint: Cook Islands Library and Museum Society, Rarotonga 1998, p 30

2 Williams, *Narrative*, p 30

3 Chris Wingfield, 'The Moving Objects of the London Missionary Society: an experiment in symmetrical anthropology'. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012, p 237

4 Wingfield, 'The Moving Objects', p 243

5 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, New York, 1994, p 9

6 Matthew Campbell, 'Ritual landscape in pre-Contact Rarotonga: A Brief reading', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, June 2002, V.111, n.2

7 Sourced from general histories of the Cook Islands: Ernest Beaglehole, *Social Change in the South Pacific: Aitutaki and Rarotonga*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1957, and Richard Gilson, *The Cook Islands 1820-1950*, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, 1980

8 'Notes on The Mission to Rarotonga and The Cook Islands' in *Te Karere*, Koia Oki Te Pepa Society, No 69, May 1908. pp 1-6. Contains information about the siting of this church, 'The chapel, Mr Williams speaks of, was built in 1824 on a piece of land now in the occupation of the Cook Island Company, and of Mr Kohn. On the spot may still be seen the graves of some of the early converts to Christianity.'

9 Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe, *Cannibals and Converts Radical Change in the Cook Islands*, Institute of Pacific Studies University of the South Pacific in association with the Ministry of Education, Rarotonga, 1983, p 63-6 This is an annotated and edited translation of Maretu's account. Maretu was born about 1802 in Ngatangia on Rarotonga. He became the pupil of Charles Pitman at Ngatangia and grew up to be an influential Missionary for the LMS. His biography written late in his life is an important and unique account of a Rarotongan who grew up in pre-contact times and was involved in much early church building in the Cook Islands.

10 David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories, Studies in Landscape and Architecture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, p 115

11 David Leatherbarrow, *The Roots of Architectural Invention, Site, Enclosure, Materials*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp 90-92

12 Marti Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p 21

13 Jasper Buse and Raututu Taringa, *Cook Islands Maori Dictionary*, The Ministry of Education, Government of the Cook Islands et al, Canberra, 1995, p 225

14 Williams, *Narrative*, p 33

15 Crocombe, *Cannibals and Converts*, pp 63-6, 'Thus the site of the church was cleared, timber for the ridgepoles and posts being contributed by each high chief and the *mataiapo* until the whole building was provided for. And when all the ridgepoles had been completed, Ngatangia, under the chiefs of Pa and Kainuku and the *mataiapo*, prepared a feast of seven hundred pigs and forty bunches of pandanus. Then the building was erected. It was one hundred long, and eight wide. The rafters were each three high and the post measured seven high. Within a month the whole building had been completely thatched. It took longer to complete the decorations. The posts and ridge poles were covered with *angata*, while the rafters were decorated with *marama* and *dui*. The *ukurau* and *purupuru*, the *etu* and ridge thatch were decorated with white shells. The people of Titama plastered their side of the walls with mud which was still frothy when they carried it to plaster on to the wooden frames and when it became dry it slid off. They would not listen to Papehia's and Rio's directions to make a mixture of lime and sand, to make it stick, before they plastered it onto the laths. The people later followed these directions until the building was completed. The plastering was completed in one day. Then the timber was cut for the floors and the seats, and they made windows and doors. The floor was laid, and the seats erected. Within three months the church was completed and opened. It was packed with people.'

16 Crocombe, *Cannibals and Converts*, There are many accounts of communal building in which each *tapere* (district) has its prescribed task. p 131& pp 152-3

17 Judith Butler, *Critically Queer, Bodies that Matter*, p 18
<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/JudithButler-CriticallyQueer-1993.pdf>
retrieved 30 January 2015.

18 Butler, 'Critically,' p 19

19 Anne-Marie Fortier, 'Re-membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)' in Vikki Bell, ed, *Performativity and Belonging*, Sage, London, 1999, p 43

20 Crocombe, *Cannibals and Converts*, p 65

21 Williams to Rev.d M. Wilks, 29 January 1825 in 'Notes on The Mission to Rarotonga and The Cook Islands' in *Te Karere*, Koia Oki Te Pepa Society, No 69, May 1908. pp 1-6. 'From Rarotonga our men have brought us the most pleasing news, with ocular demonstration of the triumphs of the mighty Gospel. All idolatry is abolished in this populous island. They have erected a chapel 106 fathoms in length! Perhaps you may say I have made a mistake, but I have not. It is upwards of 600 feet long, and all the people cannot get into it. It is crowded within and without. The messengers brought with them a few idols, but they say a house nearly full is waiting my arrival. Here is a fine field ripe in the fullest sense of the word, white to the harvest! How short a time for accomplishing such great things!'

22 *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, July 1825 p 301
Extracts from a letter of Messrs Tyerman and Bennet; Deputation from the Society to the South Seas Islands &c.; containing a narrative of their voyage from the Islands to

the Colony of New South Wales; dated Sydney Nov 12 1824 addressed to the Secretary.

23 Beaglehole, *Social Change in the South Pacific*, p 21

24 Williams, *Narrative*, p 33 'The building was 250 feet in length and 40 feet wide.'

25 Te Rangi Hiroa, (Sir Peter H. Buck), *The Material Culture of the Cook Islands (Aitutaki)*, Board of Maori Ethnicity Research, New Plymouth, 1927, p 36-37. Hiroa describes 'are karioi as, 'large houses built for the entertainment of the villagers and of visitors. They were usually built to the order of a high chief to add to his own prestige and for the entertainment of his unmarried daughters. In them dancing, singing and all indoor games and amusement took place, and it was the ambition of all to excel in these entertainments.'

26 Peter S. Bellwood, *Archaeological Research in the Cook Islands*, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, 1978, pp 141-161. 'Are vaka or canoe house was 31 metres long by 13 metres wide. Maputu Marae was 35 metres by 11 metres.

27 Raeburn Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous leadership in Nineteenth Century Pacific Islands Christianity*, Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies University of Canterbury, Christchurch & Pandanus Books Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies Australian National University, 2005, p 63

28 Matthew Campbell, 'Ritual landscape in pre-Contact Rarotonga: A Brief reading', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, June 2002, V.111, n.2: p 163. The titles of *ariki*, *mata'apo* and *rangatira* while ranked in order of class are made more complex by the temporal affairs of state and the vertically stratified society of both priestly and chiefly castes. Complicating these relations are the qualities of *Tapu*, 'inherent in all people to greater or lesser degrees, depending upon their status' (p.150) *Mana*, however, was constructed performatively.

29 Gilson, *The Cook Islands*, pp10-12

30 Williams, *Narrative*, p 3. At this time Williams records congregations of four thousand people.

31 W. Wyatt Gill, *Mangaia (Hervey Islands)*, Australian Association of the Advancement of Science Reports, 1892, 2:335 cited in Rod Dixon, 'The Ties that Bind' (unpublished MS), University of the South Pacific, Avarua, 2004, p 3

32 Pers. Comm. with Rod Dixon, 15.10.04 'It's been suggested to me that the people involved in rebuilding the Sunday School are looking for a project to memorialize themselves... - there is inter village rivalry - this overwhelms 'rationality' - a population of less than 1000 with six massive community halls, three churches, three Sunday schools, six baby clinics, etc. etc. - all consuming vast amounts of wealth garnered from overseas communities in NZ and Australia -what someone else refers to as "conspicuous construction."

33 R. Walter, 'Settlement pattern archaeology in the Southern Cook Islands' in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Issue 105, 1996, pp 63-9. Walter notes the way structures of traditional Mitiaro society are overlaid on the modern settlement pattern in the large number of communal structures present within the settlement. 'Despite there being only 200 people on the island there are enough halls to accommodate 10 times this number, since each section of the settlement conceives of a need for a symbolic focus for their own particular group. Thus, the church, scout and community

halls function in a similar way to the *marae* of traditional Mitiaro society, as a ceremonial and symbolic focus , and a means of validating group identity.’ p 95

34 Nabobo–Baba Unaisi, ‘Research and Pacific Indigenous peoples: Silenced pasts and Challenged Futures’ in Tupeni L Baba et al, ed, *Researching Pacific and Indigenous peoples: Issues and Perspectives*, Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Auckland, Auckland, 2004, p 18. ‘Mis-interpreters of “remittance” overlook the fact that homeland relatives reciprocate with goods...maintain ancestral roots and lands for everyone.’

35 Gill, *Mangaia (Hervey Islands)*, p 335. ‘We name our dwellings because they are enduring; they name the site, their huts being so perishable.’

36 Eruera Te Whiti Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero: House of History and Learning’ in Are Marama Nui Working Group, ed. in prep, *Cook Islands Art and Architecture*, Korero Series, University of the South Pacific, Rarotonga, 2015, p 9

37 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p 9

38 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p.19 Significant landholding knowledge held by the titleholders and passed on at transfer of that title included, ‘Kena relate to wider boundaries of Rautao and boundary markers of planting and food gathering lands that stretch from the mountains to the sea and delineate title and tapere lands of the vaka. Kena can relate to natural features of the land that have permanence, such as i’i (*Inocarpus edulus*, Tahitian chestnut, also called mape), a stream, a rocky outcrop on a ridge line, large rocks in situ, or the apex of a mountain from a fixed inland point. This spatial pattern of connectivity is known to all the aronga mana — some more than others.’

39 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p 18

40 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p 10 and p 16 Specifically Nia discusses the changing status of women in relation to traditional gender roles. He notes the Christian missionaries promoted the egalitarian treatment of women.

41 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p 24

42 Nia, ‘ ‘Are korero,’ p 19

43 Gill, *Mangaia*, p 335