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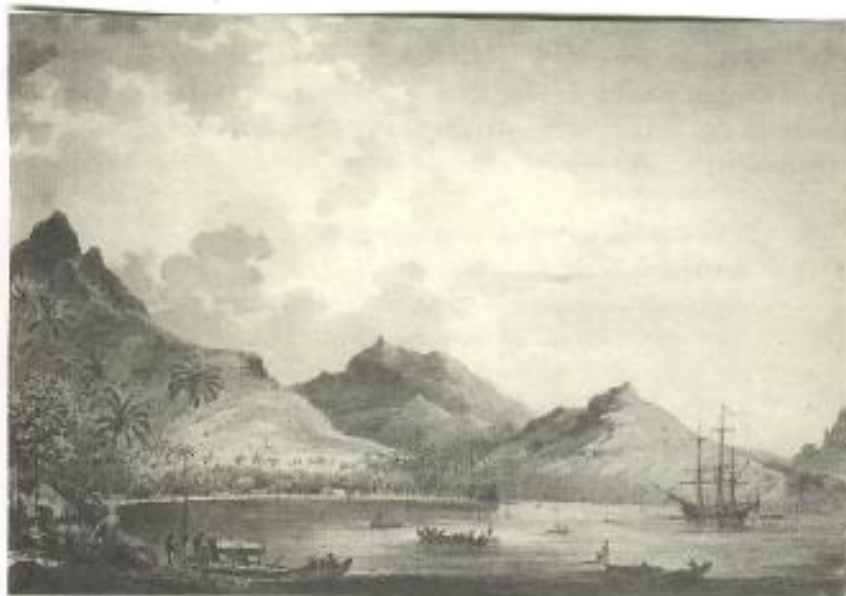
*Aphrodite's
Island*

THE EUROPEAN DISCOVERY OF TAHITI





Mahaiata marae at Papara



Fare Harbour, Huahine

CONCLUSION

The Angel of History

In her paper 'Artefacts of History', Marilyn Strathern remarks of the first meetings between Pacific peoples and Europeans:

It has been something of a surprise for Europeans to realise that their advent in the Pacific was something less than a surprise . . . Their coming had been expected; they were previously known beings "returned" or manifest in new forms.

If the islanders seemed startled and even terrified when they saw the first Europeans, Strathern argues, this was as much as anything amazement at what they had conjured up; at their own power to produce these astonishing apparitions: 'Power they perhaps attributed to particular big men or neighbouring peoples. *Someone* must have produced them.' As she muses, in a world where ancestors can return among the living, summoned by chant or ritual, at any moment the past can spiral back into the present – time is recursive.¹ While in most Western accounts of these meetings, historical agency is assumed to rest with the Europeans and the islanders are depicted as the objects of European action, in the Pacific, the islanders assumed that they themselves had summoned up these spectres.

Indeed, Tupaia, Purea, Tu and their fellow islanders lived in this kind of world. From the time that Vaita had stood on the *marae* at Taputapuatea, wild-eyed and trembling, and prophesied that the 'glorious children of Tetumu' were coming, the people expected that something amazing would happen. The desecration of 'Oro's *marae* by the Borabora warriors had been so shocking that it disrupted the cosmos, breaching the barriers between Te Ao (the everyday world of light) and Te Po (the dark world of ancestors). Something extraordinary would burst through, and according to Vaita, these strange beings would have bodies different from the islanders, although they would also be the children of Tetumu. As for the

After making an extraordinary voyage in the launch, when Bligh reached Batavia he wrote to Sir Joseph Banks, blaming the mutiny squarely on the seductions of the island's women:

It may be asked what could be the cause for such a Revolution. In Answer to which I have only to give a description of Otaheite, which has every allurements both to luxury and ease, and is the Paradise of the World.

The Women are handsome, mild in their Manners and conversation, possessed of great sensibility, and have sufficient delicacy to make them admired and loved. I can only conjecture that [the mutineers] have Ideally assured themselves of a more happy life among the Otaheitans than they could possibly have in England, which joined to some Female connections has most likely been the cause of the Whole business.⁶⁵

And George Hamilton, the surgeon of the *Pandora*, the hell-hole of a ship that was sent to the Pacific to capture the mutineers, wrote after visiting the island in 1791:

This may well be called the Cytheria of the southern hemisphere, not only from the beauty and elegance of the women, but their being so deeply versed in, and so passionately fond of the Eleusinian mysteries,⁶⁶ and what poetic fiction has painted of Eden, or Arcadia, is here realised, where the earth without tillage produces both food and cloathing, the trees loaded with the richest fruit, the carpet of nature spread with the most odiferous flowers, and the fair ones ever willing to fill your arms with love.

It affords a happy instance of contradicting an opinion propagated by philosophers of a less bountiful soil, who maintain that every virtuous or charitable act a man commits, is from selfish or interested views. Here human nature appears in more amiable colours, and the soul of man, free from the gripping hand of want, acts with a liberality and bounty that does honour to his God.⁶⁶

As one can see from these rapturous accounts, after two decades of contact by ships of different European nations – British, French and Spanish – the myth of 'Aphrodite's Island' had triumphantly survived, unscathed by experience.

sign by which they would be recognised, they were coming up in a 'canoe without an outrigger'.

When Captain Wallis's ship the *Dolphin* appeared off the coast of the island, the 'aroi priests went out in their canoes to meet it. Gazing at it from a distance, they thought that it might be a floating island, propelled through the water by ancestral power. Or perhaps it was the canoe without an outrigger that Vaita had predicted. They boarded it and challenged these weird beings, summoning the power of Hiro (the ancestral explorer and god of thieves) and snatching iron and a gilded hat in the process. Later, when muskets flashed and crackled and a warrior fell back dead in his canoe, and cannons smoked and roared in Matavai Bay, knocking down breadfruit trees and killing many people, they were stunned by the power of the strangers. The marines in their scarlet coats, the red and yellow stripes on the side of the *Dolphin* seemed signs that 'Oro was among them, hurling bolts of thunder and lightning in his fury. His *marae* had been desecrated, and the Borabora warriors were still in possession of his sacred island. It is little wonder that the high priest Tupaia and many others thought that the strangers had come to help free Ra'iatea from the Borabora invaders, and restore the *mana* of Taputapuatea.

After the battles in Matavai Bay on the north coast of the island, the high chiefs and priests supposed that they had unleashed something terrible, and tried to propitiate the strangers. They gave them plantain branches (the *ata* or incarnation of human sacrifices), sacred pigs, dogs and bark cloth, and presented them with lovely young women. In Tahiti, everyone knew the story about how 'Oro's sisters had searched the island for a woman beautiful enough to wed their brother, and 'Oro's brothers had turned themselves into pigs and red feathers as a gift to celebrate the marriage. In addition, the islanders were accustomed to strip bare to the waist in the presence of the high chiefs and the gods; and when girls were offered to the *Dolphin*'s sailors, the old men removed their garments in a gesture of homage. The leading 'aroi Porea forged a *taio* or bond friendship with Captain Wallis, encouraging her attendants to sleep with his sailors; and after his departure, a red pennant from the *Dolphin* was stitched into Te Ra'i-puatata, the red feather girdle that her high priest Tupaia had brought with an image of 'Oro from Taputapuatea, summoning the British gods in support of her son Teri'irere. Later, when Bougainville's ships arrived off Hitia'a, again the old people stripped the young women before offering them to the strangers; and when they went ashore, the French officers and the Prince of Nassau were invited to make love with these girls in front of curious spectators (as young 'aroi sometimes did on ceremonial occasions).

Even when the Tahitians began to realise that the Europeans were human, they still regarded them as extraordinary, recruiting their leaders as *taio* and mingling their *varua* or spirits. When Captain Cook arrived on board the *Endeavour*, Parea and her high priest Tupaia, who had recently been defeated in a devastating attack during which the red feather girdle Te Ra'i-puatata and the image of 'Oro were captured, returned to Matavai Bay and renewed their alliance with the British. The aristocratic women began to stay away from the Europeans, however, sending their servants or attendants instead to have sex with the sailors; and only William Monkhouse, the ship's surgeon who had acted as a priest on several occasions, was invited to the most private of the 'aroi gatherings. Even the high-born young botanist Joseph Banks was excluded from these meetings, and when he slept with Parea at her invitation, by his own rueful confession she found the experience disappointing. The Tahitians were fanatical about personal hygiene, frequently changing their garments, bathing in the river several times a day and anointing their bodies with scented oil, whereas eighteenth-century Europeans (even gentlemen) were far from fastidious. During this early period, too, when they arrived on the island many of the sailors were suffering from scurvy, with its symptoms of black, ulcerated limbs, stinking breath and swollen, bleeding gums, and the Tahitian women must have found them repellent. Tupaia forged a bond friendship with Banks, however, giving him an 'aroi tattoo and teaching Captain Cook some 'aroi navigational lore; and when the *Endeavour* sailed from the island, Tupaia sailed with them. The high priest guided this 'canoe without an outrigger' from Huahine straight to Taputapuatea *marae*, thus fulfilling Vaita's prophecy; although he failed to persuade Cook to free his homeland from the Borabora invaders.

The first Spanish ships to arrive at southern Tahiti had Franciscan friars on board, inspired by apostolic zeal, and in striking contrast with the British and French, their crews were strictly forbidden to have sexual relations with local women. The islanders were at first puzzled and then impressed. Although they respected Boenechea, the Spanish commander, when the two Franciscan friars left on the island during his second visit objected to the sexually graphic dances performed by the 'aroi and desecrated the local *marae*, they were incensed and did everything possible to drive them off the island. During the festival at Tautira when the two friars huddled in their mission, surrounded by hordes of 'aroi who exhibited themselves at them, taunting them and calling them obscene names, it became obvious that the Spanish mission was doomed; although Máximo Rodríguez, the young *mestiço* marine who had learned Tahitian and forged close relationships with Tu and Vehiatua, joined in the 'aroi festivities

and was popular among them. When Máximo returned to Lima, he carried with him a sacred carved basalt bowl from 'Utu-'ai-mahurau *marae*, where the red feather girdle Te Ra'i-puatata and the image of 'Oro had been held since the attack on Mahaiatea.

During Captain Cook's third voyage when he returned to Tahiti, bringing Ma'i back from Britain and a cargo of red feathers from Tonga, the famed commander made an extraordinary impression. Ma'i's tales of the powers of King George III, along with the horses, fireworks, jack-in-a-box and other strange objects from 'Peretani' and the heaps of red feathers from Tonga, made the islanders marvel. Once again, high-born women flocked out to the ships, sleeping with the officers for red feathers, although afterwards these men did not see them again. After forging a *taio* relationship with Captain Cook, the young high chief Tu invited him to attend the offering of a human sacrifice at 'Utu-'ai-mahurau *marae*, where Tu wore Te Ra'i-puatata, the red feather girdle from Taputapuatea. Their bond friendship was sealed when Cook gave Tu a portrait of himself painted by John Webber; and Cook and Ma'i went on a rampage across Mo'orea, ostensibly because the people had stolen two goats, but in fact to punish the high chief Mahine for his attacks on Tu and his people.

If Captain Cook was changed by his experiences on the island, however, the fate of Tu and his lineage was utterly transformed. Almost annihilated on occasion, they rebounded with each successive British visit to the island. They came to treat Cook's portrait as an ancestor figure, wrapped in bark cloth and produced only on ritual occasions when his *mana* was required. As other Tahitians have often argued, it was because of the power of the British – Captains Cook, Sever and Bligh, the *Bounty* mutineers, Edwards, Vancouver and the London Missionary Society missionaries who followed them – that the Pomare dynasty gained a lasting pre-eminence on the island.

And as Marilyn Strathern has observed, if one acknowledges the recursive power of time in the Pacific, the narrative changes fundamentally, so that it does 'not look like our history at all'.² In Tahiti, it was as though the ancestors summoned the Europeans to work their will. Te Ra'i-puatata itself, the *maro 'ura* that is at the heart of so much of this history, stands as the sign of these invocations; with its squares of red and yellow feathers stitched to netting and pasted on bark cloth, with human sacrifices made to 'Oro each time that a new section was added. To the original feather girdle that Tupaia had brought from Taputapuatea, the red bunting from the *Dolphin* was stitched for Teri'irere's installation. When Tu was invested with the girdle at 'Utu-'ai-mahurau *marae*, another section was added, and a Union Jack given to him by Captain Cook was carried around the island

as his banner. Later, when his son Pomare II was invested with Te Ra'ipuatata at Taraho'i, the family *marae* of the Pomares, with the help of the *Bounty* mutineers, the red feathers that Lieutenant Watts gave Tu's successor were added to a new section of the *maro 'ura*, along with red hair from Richard Skinner, one of the *Bounty* sailors.

If Tahitian ideas of history and ancestors shape this story, however, so do European mythic projections. In both cases, it is as though the Tahitians and the Europeans sent their visions flashing ahead of them, illuminating events before they could happen. Terra Australis Incognita, the Great Unknown Southern Continent, was the mirage that lured successive European ships into the Pacific, as the monarchs of different nations vied to discover this great land-mass, prophesied by the ancient geographers. In the end, as Captain Cook's ships painstakingly criss-crossed the Pacific, sailing through miles of this illusory continent, Terra Australis was erased from the maps of the world. The dreams of the Enlightenment, too, were potent, with the hope of discovering and naming new species and bringing 'progress' and 'improvement' to unenlightened peoples and places. There were also the musings of the *philosophes* about personal freedom, the corruptions of 'civilisation' and the innocence of a state of nature. In the case of the Spaniards, Manuel de Amat was touched by Enlightenment ideas, although the Spanish voyages were dominated by the missionary project of bringing the Virgin Mary and Christianity from South America to the islands of the Pacific.

For Tahiti, however, perhaps the most powerful of these enchantments was the Golden Age of Antiquity. Every educated European, it seems, who set foot in Tahiti, thought of Arcadia, the Elysian fields, and Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. From Banks to Bougainville and the Forsters, to George Hamilton, the surgeon on board that hell-ship *Pandora*, as they gazed at the tall, powerful chiefs, six feet four inches high in some cases, and the beautiful, bare-breasted girls draped in white bark cloth who were sent out to greet them, they saw Greek and Roman statues and paintings and thought of Homer and Virgil. The image of Hercules on the one hand, and of Aphrodite on the other – that gorgeous, capricious goddess of love – coupled with Enlightenment ideas about sexual freedom in a state of nature, became enduring myths of life on this island. These visions created an illusion of familiarity;³ and neo-Hellenists like Joseph Banks and the Prince of Nassau felt a much closer affinity with the *'arioi* than did the Franciscan friars who accompanied Boenechea to Tahiti, or the London Missionary Society missionaries who later followed them to the island.

At the same time, the ordinary sailors on board the ships had little time

for philosophical musings. After long months at sea, they were hungry for sex – and in Tahiti the girls were gorgeous and freely offered to them. The dreams that these men projected were those of the brothels, the maritime ports and the pleasures of popular festivals; or of courtship and family life back home in Europe (or in Peru, in the case of the Spanish). No doubt it was similar for many of the officers and gentlemen. For Banks, Bougainville and the Prince of Nassau (if not for the Forsters), for example, there were thoughts of masquerades, the 'Hellfire Club' or similar gatherings of men of a libertine inclination, and beguiling nights spent with the 'ladies of pleasure';⁴ while for Captain Cook and the Forsters, there were the embodied habits of Quaker or Lutheran ideals, and in Cook's case, of domestic affection.

In the end, however, the dreams of 'Aphrodite's Island' and bare-breasted Polynesian maidens emerged out of the way that these traditions intermingled. Without the god 'Oro and the *'arioi*, there would have been none of those sexually explicit dances and performances that so captivated and shocked the Europeans. As they gradually realised, adultery was not condoned in early Tahiti (although young people and the high chiefs had considerable sexual freedom, including – at least for men – the liberty to experiment with same-sex relationships); women usually covered their breasts, except when they were in the presence of *ra'a* or ancestral power; and young women and men, who were normally extremely modest, exposed their genitals only in certain kinds of sacred dances and rituals. When they were offered young girls, at first it was because the Europeans were associated with 'Oro himself; and later for their red feathers (used to communicate with the god), muskets and cannons (which thundered and flashed like the god) and iron. Tahitians and Europeans alike sent their ancestral fantasies flashing into the future, shaping how it happened.

As Walter Benjamin once famously wrote in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in a vision curiously evocative of the winged creator god Ta'aroa and Tahiti's post-colonial experience:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again . . .

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history.

His face is turned toward the past . . . The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel

can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁵

In this apocalyptic revelation, one can hear echoes of Vaita's prophecy:

The glorious children of Tetumu
will come and see this forest at Taputapuatea.
Their body is different, our body is different
We are one species only from Tetumu.

And this land will be taken by them
The old rules will be destroyed
And sacred birds of the land and the sea
Will also arrive here, will come and lament
Over that which this lopped tree has to teach
They are coming up on a canoe without an outrigger.⁶

Aphrodite's Island

*The European Discovery
of Tahiti*

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