In 1984, the African writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o lectured at the University of Auckland in praise of Africa’s linguistic and literary heritage. Any human language, he argued, is the “carrier” of its people’s culture, transmitting to new generations the values which form that people’s sense of identity as a group of human beings living within the world (Ngugi 1986:15-16). Tīmoti Karetu, the inaugural Māori Language Commissioner, made the same point: “Ko te reo te hā o te Māoritanga; ko te reo te poutokomanawa o te Māoritanga” (Karetu 1974:168): ‘The Māori language is the life breath of being Māori; the Māori language is the centre post which supports being Māori’. He added:

Mā te mōhio o te tangata ki te reo e āhei ai ia ki te ako i ngā waiata, i ngā kōrero, i ngā tāonga tuku iho ā rātau mā kua huri ki tua o te ārai. Ki a au nei, ka ngaro ana te reo kua ngaro te Māoritanga. (Karetu 1974:170)

By knowing the language a person is able to acquire the song poetry, stories, and treasures passed down from those who have passed beyond the veil of death. To me, if the language disappears, then so does the essence of being Māori.¹

For Ngugi, colonialism whether by missionaries or governments represented an act of domination, putting at risk not just the land and resources of a colonised people, but their “mental universe”: the way they understood themselves and thought about the world; in short, their unique value system as manifested through the “particularity” of their own language (Ngugi 1986:15-16). Such was the case in Aotearoa New Zealand when the colonial educational system encouraged Māori students to learn English and actively discouraged them from speaking their own tongue, sometimes even forcing them to abandon it through the application of physical punishment. Predictably, the language went into steady decline amongst the younger generations with the result that young Māori increasingly felt kūare (‘ignorant’) about their own language and experienced a psychological state of whakamā (‘shame’) (Karetu 1974:165-68, Te Reo Māori 1986:8-11).

In Mangaia, an island in the southern Cook Islands, the colonising impact of the London Missionary Society upon the “mental universe” of the people was subtler. Its first missionaries were themselves Pacific Islanders who taught
in the Society’s early *lingua franca*, Tahitian, although this language was different to that spoken in Mangaia. From 1839 the people were instructed by Rarotongan missionaries, notably Maretu, who learned to speak in *te tara Mangaia* (‘the Mangaian language’) (W.W. Gill 1984:337). Elements of both the languages of the Society Islands and that of Rarotonga can be found in writings by Mangaians. In a similar fashion, the convert church at Oneroa voiced new ideas and attitudes, but always as part of a larger pre-existing world view. The aim of this paper is to trace the acceptance of these new values through the “particularity” of the people’s language in order to better comprehend the “mental universe” of Mangaia’s early Christian world.

**LETTERS FROM MANGAIA, 1841 TO 1846**

The primary source for this investigation is a small cluster of letters that Mangaians wrote in *te tara Mangaia* to the London Missionary Society between 1841 and 1846. These now form part of a treasury of 19th century Mangaian prose. Unfortunately, many more Mangaian letters to the Society can only be read through the medium of their English translation; the originals have been lost. The impression gained from reading through these papers is that the Society’s London-based officials did not exert themselves to preserve the records produced in their new converts’ tongue. Membership in the universal Christian church did not, it seems, extend to recognising the equality between languages, at least in the metropolitan archives, though the Society’s missionaries laboured in the field to acquire the local language of the people.

These Mangaian letters often draw from passages in the Rarotongan Bible. From 1828 sections of the New Testament starting with the Gospels had been printed in Rarotonga, but the complete New Testament was not available till 1839, followed by the first edition of the whole Bible in 1851 (arriving in the Cook Islands from England in 1852) (Buzacott 1985:178-84, W.W. Gill 1984:346). Because these Mangaian letters have been hidden from public view for so long, I will transcribe the texts here in full, before analysing selected segments of them to elucidate cultural transformations effected by conversion to Christianity. Publishing these letters in full also means that users of *te tara Mangaia* can read the texts for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

**Establishing the Early Christian Community**

The first of these letters was composed in 1841 (Nūmangātini 1841), only some 17 years after the first missionaries, Davida and Ti‘are of Taha‘a in the Society Islands, landed on the western coastline of Mangaia in 1824. They had been ritually incorporated into Mangaian society by the *ariki pā uta* (‘inland high priest’) Nūmangātini, acting for the council of ruling chiefs. The ‘*orometua* (‘missionaries’) began to preach at the site of the first church,
'Aka‘oro, an important marae (‘ritual site’) in the western district of Kei‘ā. Subsequently, the church moved to the coastal region, establishing itself on its present site by the late 1840s. Their new settlement was called Oneroa. While the ruling chiefs of the politically dominant kōpū (‘clan/s’), Ngāti Tāne and Ngāti Mana‘une, allowed these men to dwell upon the island under their protection, the Christian community remained quite small for the first decade. Other kōpū leaders hoped to wrest power from the ruling clans and so retained their own atua. A war in 1828 between the Christian community and a section of Ngāti Vara, a major group of ‘Étene (‘Heathen, non-Christian’) weakened the opposition to the new order, but significant numbers of people remained outside the Christian embrace into the 1840s. The 1841 letter refers to their large number and to the evident strength of their commitment to the old atua when it calls them “tangata mārō” (‘obstinate people’). In 1841 the visiting missionary, William Gill, estimated there remained about 40 such ‘étene families (W. Gill 1841). The missionaries, as well as the Mangaian church, regularly visited these groups and sought by various means to persuade them to convert to the new religion. The last important ‘étene leader, Arikikaka, did not convert until 1865.

By 1839 internal tensions in the Christian community at Oneroa, as well as a desire by some to go and live near their food plantations on the other side of the island, led to the formation of separate communities (e.g., Maretu 1983:116-19). The letter appears to refer to such tensions when describing “te kino” (‘the bad, the evil’) within their community. Evidently, the conflicts remained real and vexatious. In 1841, when the Rarotonga-based missionary William Gill was in Mangaia, the Society formally recognised the existence of three settlements: Oneroa, Tamarua and Ivirua. Despite these various threats and problems, the community in this 1841 letter remained confident enough to offer some of its members for service in ‘étene lands.

E Tama, e te au taeake e te au tua‘ine i Peritani. ‘Ei iā kōtou te meitaki tūmatatini nō te kōreromotu ‘ou nei, ē te au mei kō mai i te Atua iā Iesu Mesia rā i te kimi ‘anga i te ravenga e meitaki e ē te pā ‘enua ki raro ake i teianei rangi ē iā mātou katoa ‘oki. Tē rekareka nei mātou, ko mātou i kite i te ‘evān[g]leria a Iesu Mesia ē tōna mate ‘anga, tērā ‘oki te mea e ma’ata [a]i tō mātou rekareka i te aro’a o te aronga ‘akarongo i Biritani i te kimi ‘anga i te ravenga i kite vave ‘ei mātou i te ingoa o Iesu te ‘akaora nō tā kōtou ture e kite vave ei mātou i te ‘evān[g]leria o te ora mutu kore.
‘E ‘Étene mātou i muatanga i te tae ‘anga mai o te tuatua a te Atua i Mangaia nei, ē kāre mātou i mau i reira kua tākinga kino ‘ia e mātou te tuatua nā te Atua i te tae ‘anga mai o Wiliamu i Mangaia nei i muatanga. ‘E matapō mātou i reira. Kāre ‘oki mātou i kite i reira ē ko te tuatua mou tā te Atua ē teianei rā kua kite mātou ē, ‘e tuatua mou tōna.
The following is an accompanying translation made by William Gill who at this time had a supervisory responsibility for the church on Mangaia (Nūmangātini 1841). He no doubt took this letter from the Mangaian church and forwarded it along with his translation on his return to Rarotonga late in 1841. In a couple of places I have added sections in brackets that Gill did not translate from the Mangaian original.

Friends, Brothers, and Sisters in England; may you have the unnumbered blessing of the new covenant, and the peace from God and Iesu the Messiah for seeking measures by which to bless all lands under heaven; together with us also.

We are now rejoicing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in the knowledge of his death. This is why our present joy is very great because of the compassion of believers in England to us, and in their adopting plans by which we early obtained a knowledge of Jesus the Saviour; and because of your prayers through which we have received our early acquaintance with the Gospel of endless life.
We were Heathens formerly when the word of God came to Mangaia, we did not quickly hold fast the word, but we persecuted it when Wiliamu first came to our land. Then we were blind; we did not know that this was the true message of God; but now we know.

We are now praising God, and praying that you may be assisted in the work which is instrumental in causing this word of God to grow in all lands, and we also have collected the little prosperity of our land to unite with you.

Last year we collected *ka’a* (Native material for ropes) Mr John Williams has taken the *ka’a* to sell for us. This year we have collected arrowroot Net and other small articles of our land, and we have just planted arrowroot for the year now before us. We the Men, the Women, and the Children also. If we had other property in our land we would collect other things; but our land does not resemble yours, for the number and variety of articles. Ours is a land of no real property. [Nor indeed anything of true beauty.]

Brethren we are now compassionating the heathen as you compassionated us. Some of our brethren are greatly desiring to go to Heathen lands to make known the name of Jesus, because they are calling to us [who know of the life] saying, “brethren come over and help us.”

Now brethren pray to God for us that His word may run quickly in our land.

There yet remains much evil both in the Church and out. Great numbers are yet obstinate and will not receive the word of God.

This is the conclusion of our message at this season. May you be saved by the living God.

Nā Nūmangātini, Collects

Nā Taki writes

This is sent to, Tho Wilson Esq who collects together the property of the Missionary Society London, England.

Nūmangātini is the same person who acted as *ariki pā uta* and welcomed the first missionaries in 1824. By this time he had become the *ariki* (*‘king’*), in effect, titular leader of Mangaia’s Christian society. William Gill (1841) refers to him as “the principal Chief of the Island” who was reappointed on 3 September 1841 as the Treasurer of the London Missionary Society Auxiliary in Mangaia. This is the role being referred to in this letter. His task was to collect the goods that church members provided to the Auxiliary as part of their fundraising for the Society. These goods were brought together in one location and then picked up by a visiting trader, in this case John Williams Junior (the son of the missionary John Williams) who transported the items by ship to market (W. Gill 1841). William Gill (1880:105) records a description from his wife, Elizabeth, giving an itemised list of what the people contributed: “Arrowroot, native cloth, thirty-five fathoms of fishing
nets, also twenty-eight ‘kumities,’ or bowls [kumete], two carved axes, twenty-four cocoa-nut cups, and 8s. 6d. in money, the value of these articles amounting to about 17 [pounds].”

While the London Missionary Society saw such fundraising as simply discharging the church members’ obligations to help advance the global mission work, at least some missionaries, e.g., John Williams, believed that commerce “was as much a civilizing agent as the gospel” (Gunson 1978:136-37, 308). Thus the Auxiliary became a device whereby Mangaia’s Christian leaders and people learned to participate in the international market place. For Nūmangātini, the role of treasurer signified the acquisition of a new, more bureaucratic source of authority amongst his people, in addition to his more traditional claims to office. Complementing the elder Nūmangātini was his co-author, Taki, who actually wrote the letter. William Gill (1841) describes him as “an intelligent young Deacon” who served as the Auxiliary’s Secretary. Whereas Nūmangātini represented the established powers on the island whose primacy stemmed from their early support of Christianity, Taki may be seen as one of the new breed of mission-educated community leaders who carried out the necessary bureaucratic transactions required in this new world order.

William Gill’s own reports suggest that this emerging economic system was still experimental (the Auxiliary was only three years old in September 1841). In 1840 the church had collected ka’a (‘strong fibre made from coconut’), which John Williams Junior had then transported to Tahiti to sell on their behalf. However, the results may not have been altogether satisfactory, for Gill thought pia (‘arrowroot’) “the most suitable article” for this system. With some satisfaction he wrote that “the people here have engaged to adopt the Rarotonga plan, and plant [the arrowroot] in classes expressly for the Society” (W. Gill 1841). Thus the Mangaian people, formed into their church school classes, laboured to plant export crops for the Society in addition to meeting their existing requirements to plant for their families and for other customary obligations as determined by their leaders. Requiring the people to do more work reflected well the mission view that without such extra demands, Pacific peoples would fall back into idleness and indolence. For Christians, idle hands had always to be combatted with what they considered useful work (Gunson 1978:272-73). By such means, Mangaian society was integrated into a new international religious and economic system.

Christian Aro’a, Equality and Inequality

Another vernacular letter written only a few weeks later, this time from Rarotonga, demonstrates that the sentiments of Nūmangātini and Taki reflect more widely held understandings of how these new believers in Christianity perceived themselves. This second letter was composed by Setephano, then
a Christian leader at the settlement of Arorangi, who later became Tinomana Setefano Ariki, succeeding his father, Tinomana ‘Enuarurutini, as holder of the high chiefly title of Tinomana Ariki in the Arorangi district in October 1854 (Maretu 1983:129 fn. 46). Setephano wrote this letter at Arorangi on 1 October 1841 (Setephano 1841).

The second biblical passage being referred to is an excerpt from John’s Gospel (1: 5), translated by W. Gill below: “I kakā mai ana te mārama ki te pōiri, kāre rā te pōiri i ‘āriki atu” (Bibilia Tapu 1972:1058). The following is William Gill’s accompanying translation (Setephano 1841).

Our Friend and Brother, to you the Man who writes, this is concerning the growing of the word of God and His church at Arorangi. We are greatly rejoiced while thinking of your compassionate love to the heathen, and the great work which you are doing by your Society. Ours is a land of no property nonetheless we have contributed arrowroot and for the three years now fallen behind us we have assembled at one Place. No ship have come to buy until now. Now Mr Ioane Wiliamu [John Williams Junior] has come and we have given over the property to Him. We were heathens formerly, and did not this good work – but when Wiliamu [John Williams] came and brought our first Teacher which was Papehia, then we found life – and the darkness fled. It was as Paul has written—“We were once darkness” Eph[esians] 5.8 and afterwards as John says—Chap 1.5—“The light shined in the midst of darkness and the darkness comprehended it not”—Then it was that we knew that good was the word of God—then was our Gods abolished—and now we are thinking that this shall be the growing of the word of God in the lands that yet remain; who know not the Salvation and the loving kindness of God.
Both the Mangaian and Rarotongan writers express their awareness of how British Christians, through the London Missionary Society, chose to come to their lands first and convert them to Christianity. The writers describe these as acts of aro’a (‘loving kindness’) or, in Setephano’s words, “aro’a ē te tangi” (‘compassionate love’). Both Nümangätini and Setephano are men of high rank and would most likely have interpreted these as gestures that established a relationship between themselves, their communities, and the Christian churches in Britain. Thus they address their letters to their taeake (‘brother, sister, friend’) and tua’ine (‘sister of man’). The words imply a close and equitable relationship, not one separated by boundaries of rank or race. This perception reflects contemporary mission teaching with its stress on everyone being brothers and sisters in Christ, though the mission historian, Niel Gunson, points out that many white missionaries of the time retained a personal view that their converts remained inferior to them as Europeans (Gunson 1978:200).

These letter writers betray a consciousness of their own inferiority at least in material terms when they describe their lands and people as lacking the wealth or even beautiful objects of Great Britain. The Mangaian church historian, Papa Aratangi (1988:99), identifies a growing “desire for European wealth” in this period, but suggests that it was simply an alternative to the more traditional acquisition of land. Both could give greater power to the possessor because, as he explains, “The desire for material wealth as a means of survival was part of the Mangaian upbringing”. Evidently, European commodities had very early made a big impression on both Rarotongan and Mangaian peoples.

Ora and the New Sense of Community

The writers describe their state of being before the coming of Christianity in highly negative terms: they were matapō (‘blind’) or pōiri (‘in darkness’). The Mangaians were especially conscious that they even ill-treated the first missionaries who had attempted to land in 1823. William Gill (1841) recorded conversations with older Mangaians who “now mourn over their ignorance and sin which led them to ill use the First Native Teachers”. Mamae, an early pastor and tribal historian, also refers to this incident: “‘O ‘Avi te ‘oromedua, käre rā i ‘āriki’ia, ‘ua takinga kino ia” (‘Avi, the ‘orometua, was not welcomed, he was badly treated’) (Reilly 2003:82). By contrast, both letter writers talk of their rekareka (‘feeling great joy or pleasure’) in receiving the new religion.

The joy at becoming part of the Christian faith made the leaders of the new churches eager to demonstrate their own commitment to the “Atua ora” (‘living God’) and his “evāngelia o te ora mutu kore” (‘Gospel of endless life’). Thus Nümangätini and Taki write of helping the British church (“‘ei
tauturu iā kōtou”). This assistance was most tangibly expressed through the fundraising efforts reported on in both letters and by the enthusiastic offers of missionaries to serve in foreign lands.

The Rarotongan missionary, Maretu, then resident on Mangaia, also reports that “tēta’i papaki māpū” (‘a group of young, unmarried youths’) were keen to receive training at Rarotonga (Maretu 1983:128, MS. p.351): “[K]ua tangi rātou ki te ‘Ētene tei kore i te atua mou, kua tae tēta’i papaki o rātou kia ō te ‘Ētene. ‘[B]ecause they felt sorry for the heathens who did not know the true God. Some of them eventually went to work among the heathens’.”

William Gill (1841) selected a half dozen “pious young natives” to take back with him to train in the Institution at Takamoa in Rarotonga so that they might become ‘orometua. These Mangaian youths represent a part of an important social phenomenon observed throughout the Cook Islands that ultimately contributed, in relation to the size of their home communities, the largest number of missionaries for foreign service of any country in the world (Lange 2005:65-66).

When referring to the ‘ētene Pacific people, Nümangätini and Taki describe their own community as “tei kite i te ora” (‘who know of the life’). Setephano writes of his people, “i reira mātou i kite ei i te ora i kore ei te pōiri” (‘then we found life, the darkness ended’). He meant this literally, for his people had been defeated and forced to eke out life in Rarotonga’s mountains until Christianity enabled them to enjoy what his father described in 1833 as “a state of peace and happiness” on the richer coastal lands (Williams 1837:217). Ora refers to a state of being alive and being well. For both early Christian communities the theme of gaining the ora of Christianity is a powerful one. The new atua is called “Atua ora”, while the gospel is one of “ora mutu kore” (‘endless life’). Other Mangaian references demonstrate the importance of this concept in local Christian usage. For example, when John Williams visited the Mangaian chief Maunganui in 1830, the latter provided abundant hospitality: “as a token of his joy, he said[,] at seeing ... ‘the people from a far land who had brought them the word of life’” (Moyle 1984:25). Ora as a concept seems to reflect both the language of Christian conversion with its stress on being reborn to a new life, as well as more traditional values. For example, in pre-Christian Rarotonga the greeting “kia ora” between people from different parts of the island (normally hostile to each other) was a gesture of peace and friendship (Savage 1980:206-7). Other possible reasons for the importance of ora in Mangaia’s Christian community are suggested by Aratangi (1988:72-73). He describes how the early Tahitian missionaries laid stress on the fact that in Christianity anyone who believed in Jesus Christ would enter into a heavenly life after death. As Aratangi points out in pre-Christian Mangaia only warriors and the chiefly elite were promised such a future.
These usages of *ora* suggest that the Christians of Mangaia and Arorangi believed that they had entered on a new life open to all classes, both in this world and the next. Their communities comprised people from various tribal groups who lived with each other in peaceful amity. These new communities remained under the authority of mission-sanctioned leaders (comprising both traditional ones such as Nūmangātini or Setephano, as well as church leaders, like Taki). These self-governing communities claimed a familial relationship with the British Protestant church represented by the London Missionary Society. Through the agency of the Society, these communities were integrated into the Western economic order. At the same time, these communities set themselves apart, both physically and spiritually, from those around them who continued to adhere to the old *atua* and associated ritual practices.

*The Meanings of Building a Church*

In 1845 the Mangaian mission entered a new phase when the London Missionary Society sent the Papa’ā (‘Europeans’), George Gill (brother of William Gill) and his wife Sarah, to serve as a resident missionary team at Oneroa. They now took over the supervision of the Mangaian church from William Gill, and also from Maretu who returned to Rarotonga. George Gill very soon stamped his mark upon the island through a vigorous building programme, including the construction of a coastal road and the shifting of the site of Tamarua village (W. Gill 1856:187-88). The following letter, the first of two, describes one of these early projects, the construction of a new church in Oneroa in 1845 (‘Ekalesia 1846a). One of the notable features of this letter is its use of the traditional Mangaian system of measurement for the church building based on the *paru* (‘fathom, the outstretched arms of a tall man’, i.e., 6 feet or 1.8 metres).

‘E mānga leta teia nā te ‘ekalesia4 i Oneroa i te ’enua rā i Mangaia, tē tātā atu nei kiā kōtou i te au taeake i te ‘ekalesia i Peritane nā, tērā te tuatua. E tama, e te ‘ekalesia, e te au taeake, e te au tua’ine, e te au ‘orometua Sosiete i Peritane nā. ‘Ia ora na kōtou roa rāi iā Iesu Mesia i te ora mou o tō te ao katoa nei. Tē ma’ata nei tō mātou rekareka i te au mea kātoatoa tā kōtou i ‘ōronga mai nei, kōia ‘oki te ‘apinga nō te ‘are o te Atua, kua tae mai ia kiā mātou nei. Kua kite tō mātou mata, i te keke ma’ata, te keke rikiriki, te toki ma’ata, te toki rikiriki, te naero ma’ata, te naero rikiriki, te aronga a’u, ē te au ‘āmara, ē te pange, te pu’ipu’i, ē te au to’i, ē te bua ma’ata; teia anake taua au ‘apinga rā; tēi tō mātou rima; ē kua ‘akatū mātou i te ‘are nō te Atua; ‘e ‘are ma’ata i te toka, 15 te roa, 10 te pararauare, ē 4 paru,5 i te teitei, te patu. Ė kua tapa’ia tōna ingoa, ko Pūnanga. Nō te mea ‘e ingoa tau meitaki, ē kua
kitea i roto i te tuatua nā te Atua. Ė kua 'akakite Gili, tō mātou 'orometa, i te ingoa o tō kōtou 'are bure roa, Barbacan [sic], ē te 'ārite 'anga o tāua ingoa rā i tō mātou reo, ko Pūnanga. Koia rāi te tuatua a Davida: "Ko lehova tōku pūnanga." Kua pērā mātou. Kua rekareka mātou ia Lehova tō tātou pūnanga. Nō reira i ma'ata [a]i tō mātou rekareka i te au mea pakari tā kōtou i 'ōronga mai nei, ē kua rauka te 'are mānea ē te pakari nō mātou, Koia ia, e te au taeake tē tangi atu nei mātou iā kōtou, ko kōtou i tangi mai iā mātou nei. Ė tē ma'ara nei mātou i te aro’a ma’ata o te Atua i te 'aka’ongi 'anga i tō teiane i ao; nō te mea i tangata kē ana tātou i muatangana; ē teiane kua ‘ongi, ē kua riro ‘ei kōpū ‘okota’i, ‘ei ngutu’are ‘okota’i nō te Atua. I tau ei iā tātou kia ‘ākara i te tuatua i tātā’ia e Paulo, i tō Ephesia 2, 13.19, kua pērā katoa i tō Colopene. 1. 20.21.

Ē teiane rā, tē ‘akameitaki nei mātou i te Atua, koia i tono mai i tō tātou taeake, ē tō tātou tua’ine ‘ei āpi’i i iā mātou i tāna tuatua. Ė kua ma’ata tō mātou rekareka iā rāua, nō te mea, kua riro ‘ei taeake tikāi, ‘ei tua ‘ine tikāi, nō mātou; Kua ‘akaruke i tō rāua kōpū tangata tikāi, nō te a’a?, nō te ra’i o tō kōtou aro’a, ē nō tō rāua aro’a iā mātou, ‘Ō mātou i vai pōiri ‘ua, kāre i ‘iti’ia e te mārama; ē teiane, kua mārama nei tā Paulo i tuatua maira, Ephesia, 5. 8.

Ē teiane kia vai rāi te aro’a mou a Iesu, te ‘inangaro o te metua, ē te ‘au o te vaerua meitaki i runga iā kōtou, ē iā mātou, i teiane, i te tuatua ‘ua atu.

The following are the biblical verses mentioned in this letter (Bibilia Tapu 1972:1175, 1177, 1183).

Ephesia, 2: 13:
I teiane rā, ē iā Iesu Mesia nei, ko kōtou ko te aronga i ātea kē i muatangana rā, kua ‘akavaitata’ia mai ia i te toto o te Mesia nei.

Ephesia 2: 19:
Ē teiane kāre atūra kōtou i te tangata kē ē te tuitārere, ‘okota’i rāi ē kōtou ‘oire ē te aronga tapu rā, nō te ngutu‘are ‘oki o te Atua.

Ephesia 5: 8 (part):
I pōiri ana ‘oki kōtou i muatangana rā, i teiane rā, kua mārama kōtou i te Atu.

Kolosa 1: 20:
Ē kia ‘ongi ‘oki iāia te au mea katoa i roto iāia ‘uā‘orāi i te au i rauka i te toto o tōna satauro; ko tō te rangi ē tō te ‘enua nei ‘oki, kia ‘ongi rāi iāia.

Kolosa 1: 21:
Ko kōtou ‘oki, ko tei taka kē i muatangana, ē te ngākau enemi, i te tuatua kikino rā, kua ‘aka’ongi katoa ‘ia e ia i teiane.
George Gill provided the Directors with the accompanying translation (‘Ekalesia 1846a).

This is a letter from the Church at Oneroa in this land, Mangaia, written to you the Brethren of the Church in Britain – This is the word. Brethren of the Church – Brethren & sisters, & Ministers of the Society in Britain – Blessings be upon you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world.

Truly great indeed is our joy on account of all those things which you have sent us; yes, the materials to help us to build the Lord’s house have come to us: our eyes see them with joy. Here are the large saws & the little saws, the large axes & the little axes, the large nails & the little nails, the planes, the hammers, the chisels, the blacksmith’s bellows, & the anvil, & the large hammer. [in the margin George Gill writes: “These articles were purchased at Rarotonga on account of the mission”] and the grindstone. All these things have been in our hands, and we have worked and built a house for the Lord: It is a large house built with stones, the walls are 90 feet long, 61 feet wide, and 24 feet high.

We have designated it by the name “Punanga” because it is a name found in, & is suitable to the word of God; And Mr Gill our teacher has made known to us the name, and the meaning of the name of your chapel which is Barbacan [sic] & the meaning of this in our language is “Punanga” a fort. Truly did David say “The Lord is my fortress” and thus do we rejoice in Jehova [sic] as our fortress. And again therefore do we rejoice in those good and strong things which you have sent us.

Truly, Brethren have you compassionated us, & now we have a beautiful and a strong house, We affectionately thank you for your great love and compassion toward us. We do not forget the great love of our God in reconciling this world to himself, because, formerly we were strangers & enemies; but now we have been reconciled, & have become one family; one household in the Lord. The words that were written by Paul to the Ephesians & to the Colossians are applicable to us: “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. Now therefore ye are no more strangers & foreigners; but fellow citizens with the saints, & of the hous[e]hold of God.” “And you that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works yet now hath he reconciled.”

And now we greatly rejoice and thank God who has sent us our brother & our sister to teach us his word. Great is our joy in them; because they two have become a true brother and a true sister for us. They have left their own land and family; and for what? Because of your love, and because of their love for us, even us who were in darkness and had no light to shine upon us: but now we are enlightened like to the words of Paul 5 of Ephesians 8. “Ye were sometimes darkness but now ye are light in the Lord.”

And now may the grace of Jesus and the love of the Father and the peace of the Holy Spirit remain upon you all & upon us, now & for ever & ever.
One of the biblical verses mentioned in the Mangaian letter was not translated in this text (Holy Bible 1975:139):

Colossians 1: 20:
And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

George Gill provides complementary information regarding the erection of this new church. Preparations had been initiated by the ‘ekalesia (‘church community’) itself when in 1844 they began collecting together the building materials (Maretu 1983:151). When Gill arrived in 1845, he brought with him equipment provided by the British churches. He immediately took charge of the building’s planning and construction (“although the natives do all the work yet they require constant superintendence”) (G. Gill 1845). From the outset, he intended it to resemble the Barbican Chapel, after which it was named. For him, this represented the relationship between “English Christians” and the Mangaian people (G. Gill 1846). The foundation stone was laid in a short ceremony on 27 August 1845 by the ariki, Nūmangātini, and Ata, the kavana (‘governor, chief’) of Kei ‘ā (the district in which Oneroa was situated). Unlike its predecessor, located on the coast, this chapel was built on top of the makatea (‘raised coral formation’) where more than half of Oneroa’s population lived. Unfortunately, the rocks, sand and lime collected for it were on the coast below so that the adults and children in the ‘ekalesia had to carry everything up by narrow, rough tracks to the top of the makatea. The amount of work this required is suggested by Gill’s own description of the building: “The walls are completed from the foundations and 3 ft upwards they are 3 ft, from thence to the elevation 2 feet thick” (G. Gill 1845). Such substantial structures were becoming standard in London Missionary Society stations at this time. For the missionaries, they proved the sincerity of their converts’ faith commitment as well as signalling that the community had attained a level of civilisation appropriate in a Christian society (Gunson 1978:276). The efforts put into the building by the ‘ekalesia suggest they fully accepted the necessary labours as the price of membership in the Society’s family.

Like the 1841 letter, this 1846 text reflects many of the same understandings; for example, the close familial relationship between the ‘ekalesia of Oneroa and Great Britain. The various gestures indicative of these bonds, such as the giving of tools and the arrival of the Papa’ā orometua, were greeted with great joy (e.g., “kua ma’ata tō mātou rekareka”). For the letter writer these were expressions of aro’a. Mangaians were no longer tangata kē (“strangers
& enemies”), but through the act of the ‘ongi (translated as “reconciled”) they became part of the same Christian family (“kōpū ‘okota’i’). Traditionally Mangaians had greeted visitors with a ‘ongi (“exchange of breath by pressing noses”); Elizabeth Gill, for example, mentions her relief when visiting Mangaia that the people shook hands with her rather than “rubbing noses!”, her emphasis, suggesting that the Papa‘ā missionaries discouraged the latter practice in favour of the English custom of greeting another with a shake of the right hand (W. Gill 1880:98-99). The letter’s usage of “‘ongi” (also found in Kolosa/Colossians 1: 20) suggests that, as in Aotearoa, it formed part of the rituals of encounter between tangata kē (or manu ‘iri) and tangata ‘enua (‘people of the land’), bringing them together to form one group. The kōpū was the corporate kin group whose members were related, and usually lived and worked together; an apt description of how the letter writer imagined Mangaia’s relationship with the London Missionary Society. These references show the way particular traditional practices and ideas, translated into the Cook Islands Bible, were then adopted by Mangaia’s church community to express how they understood their relationship with their British brethren and with their English ‘orometua.

The presence of these Papa‘ā ‘orometua on Mangaia was extremely important to the local church. The letter describes the Gills leaving their own kōpū tangata (‘clan, family’) out of a sense of ara’a for the Mangaian people. This gesture of putting aside kin ties and relocating to Mangaia must have confirmed for the tangata ‘enua the depth and extent of the British ‘ekalesia’s commitment to the relationship between the two communities. William Gill, who accompanied his brother and his family to the island, describes the local response to their arrival. At a meeting in 1845 he heard an Oneroa deacon describe their rejoicing on learning that the “teina” (‘younger brother’) of “Miti Gilo” (‘Mr Gill’) was to come to Mangaia (W. Gill 1880:172). On arrival, “we heard the shouts of the joyous people, echoed from the coral rocks which form the back ground of the settlement; ‘Ko te Pai Oromedua teia! Ko nga tavini o te Atua teia! Kua tae mai! Kua tae mai ia!!’ It is the missionary ship! Here are the servants of God! They are come! They are truly come!” (W. Gill 1856:175-76). The ship’s boat and the missionaries in it were carried ashore by a large body of Mangaians as a gesture of welcome.

The building of a stone church was another significant event for the church. Writing of the indigenous Christian community on Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands, the anthropologist, Geoffrey White (1991:115), observes: “churches have an important dual significance as symbols of identity both old and new—a kind of architectural locus of transformation.” We possess some idea of what the previous church building looked like from the descriptions left by William and Elizabeth Gill respectively on their 1841 visit.
The chapel was a lime and wattle building, 130 feet long, 38 feet wide, walls 14 feet high. Looking at it as the entire work of the natives, it was the wonder and admiration of all who visited the island. The numberless rafters of the roof, each neatly coloured with native paint, were supported by 12 or 14 pillars of the finest wood, which were carved in cathedral style. (W. Gill 1856:138)

The chapel is very long and narrow, about 126 feet by 36 feet; the sides are very low, but the roof is lofty; the centre is supported by eighteen large pillars, and other smaller ones, ingeniously carved, which look exceedingly beautiful, and show great industry on the part of the natives (W. Gill 1880:98).

The Mangaian Christian community was understandably very proud of its new building, built out of stone in deliberate emulation of the churches in Rarotonga (W. Gill 1880:172-73). George Gill (1846) too felt much pride in what they created, so much so that he planned to send a model of it to London for “our beloved friends in England”? The ‘ekalesia’s letter describes the chapel as “te ‘are mānea ē te pakari nō mātou” (“we have a beautiful and a strong house”). By contrast, in 1841 Nūmangātini and Taki had remarked of their island: “kāre ‘oki ē ‘apinga mānea tikāi” (“nor indeed (possessing) anything of true beauty”). For Mangaian, this new church seems to have brought them closer to the standard of property possessed by their British Christian brethren. However, there lurks within the description of the new chapel an assumption that what Mangaians had built and designed before, according to their local standards and forms of artwork, did not quite measure up. The pervasive missionary view that their Pacific brethren were inferior and that much of their culture was utterly depraved may well have affected local attitudes (e.g., Gunson 1978:191, 195-99). Such a critical consciousness on the part of Mangaians may have arisen from quite commonplace actions and comments on the part of their missionaries, from George Gill’s domination of the building process to Elizabeth Gill’s preference for shaking hands. It may also have arisen from an awareness that things were different in other islands; for example, the existence of stone churches in Rarotonga, the headquarters of the Cook Islands Mission.

Wealth and Reciprocity

The Oneroa church wrote a second letter to accompany their report on the building of Pūnanga (‘Ekalesia 1846b).

Teia tēta’i nga’i tuatua e te ‘Ekalesia a te Atua ē te aronga tapu ē.
Kiaa [sic] kite kōtou i te tū o te ‘apinga i tō mātou ‘ėnua, ‘e ‘apinga kikino ‘ua, kāre ē pu ‘apinga, kāre i āite mei te ‘apinga i tō kōtou ‘ėnua, te ‘Aulo,
The following translation is by George Gill (‘Ekalesia 1846b).

This is another word from the [sacred] assembly of the Church of God. You know the character of the property of our land, that it is very bad, and of no value; It is not like the property of your land, where you have silver and gold, and brass and iron – this good thing and that good thing. When we saw the character of the property that came to us from your land we greatly wondered and rejoiced.

And now this is our petition; still do you compassionate us and send us some cups for the Lords table. The cup we have is small and it does not hold enough; do you therefore, brethren send us a large cup to hold the wine, and small cups, and plates that we may distribute the wine and the bread.

We are ashamed thus to write because we have nothing to give in payment. For what would be the value of our poor property if we were to send it to you brethren? Compassionate us & our poor property.

The cup [in a marginal note George Gill writes: “Referring to that cup which was sent by Miss Cumming to GG”] which has been sent by our sister greatly delighted us and all the church; and all the men and women in our land. Another larger cup we want because this is small. Let two be given by your brethren.

This is our little word to you brethren. Blessings on you all in the name of the true Mesia our Saviour. Amene. This is the end of our word.

From the Church at Oneroa, Mangaia.
Many of the themes found in previous letters are mentioned here again but if anything with greater force. For example, the church describes the things of Mangaia as “‘apinga kikino ‘ua, kāre e pu‘apinga” (‘just bad things, without value’) in contrast to England’s wealth which they describe as: “te ‘Aulo, te ōario, te veo, tērā ‘apinga meitaki, tērā ‘apinga meitaki” (‘gold, silver, brass, this good thing and that good thing’). Mangaian Christians write as if in awe of what they had heard or observed of the wealth of their Papa‘ā brethren: “kua ūmere ‘ua mātou” (‘we were amazed/astonished’). Such remarks, however, must be read in the context of their important request for further cups and plates for their communion services in their new church, i.e., items that they could only obtain from England. A consciousness of being materially less well endowed than the English church meant that the Mangaian ‘ekalesia experienced a sense of “‘akamā” (‘shame, embarrassment’) about asking for such things since they believed they were not in a position to reciprocate (“tūtaki”) with anything of an appropriate value. Not being able to reciprocate properly clearly weighed heavily upon the minds of the ‘ekalesia and its leaders and explains why this letter more than the others contrasts Mangaia’s poverty with England’s abundant wealth.

Despite such concerns, the Mangaian church remained a confident partner in its dealings with the Society. They ask for the churchware on the basis of their long-standing familial relationship with their British brethren (“e te au taeake”). Such a reciprocal gesture had already been demonstrated by Miss Cummings—“te tua‘ine o Gili tāne” (‘the sister/cousin of Mr Gill’). Her present had impressed the church: “tei reira ‘apinga mānea meitaki” (‘that nice, beautiful article’). Mānea (‘beautiful, attractive, pleasing, nice’) and meitaki (‘good, excellent, agreeable, fine’) here and elsewhere in these letters are commonly used to describe English goods. By contrast, the Mangaian material world is described either as not possessing these qualities, or more bluntly (as in this letter) as “kikino” (‘bad’).

CULTURAL CONTINUITIES AND THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Writing in the early 1930s the New Zealand Māori anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck 1993) described Christianity’s replacement of Mangaia’s indigenous “values” as the imposition of “an inferiority complex”. He explained that “in the process [Mangaians] lost a certain amount of their individuality, self respect, and pride of race” and as a consequence, the people began doubting the value of their old ways and beliefs and spoke of them “in the language of depreciation” (a telling phrase Te Rangi Hiroa isolated from William Gill’s writing) (Buck 1993:46-47). Such depreciation alludes to the colonisation of the mind and a culture’s values described for Africa by Ngugi, and in New
Zealand by many Māori scholars and teachers. The Mangaian letters written to the London Missionary Society in the 1840s confirm that aspects of such a complex of inferiority had already invested the language of Mangaia’s Christian community. For example, the adjectives they used to compare and contrast the material wealth of their own island and that of their English brethren betray these signs at every turn. In such language there is a sense that in material terms the Mangaian ‘ekalesia saw itself as being subordinate to the English world and its representatives, the London Missionary Society and its agents.

A similar deprecation also seems to appear in the letter writers’ descriptions of their pre-Christian state as matapō (mata-pō) and pōiri (pō-iri). These allusions to a darkened or unenlightened state suggest at first glance the values of European Christians. For example, the classic history of Mangaian society since earliest settlement written by a later missionary, William Wyatt Gill, was entitled From Darkness to Light in Polynesia (W.W. Gill 1984). However, evidence from various eastern Oceanic societies points to pō (‘night, dark, spiritworld’) and ao (‘day, light, world’) acting as contrasting metaphorical pairs used throughout traditional narratives to indicate a transition from one state to another (e.g., Siikala 1991:47, 50, 116-17). Savage (1980:30, 257) explains that before Europeans arrived Rarotongans understood the pō as surrounding the ao. The pō referred to the domain of spirits, where the dead went, whereas the ao referred to the human world. Wyatt Gill, who served in Mangaia, admitted that “Christian missionaries” deployed local phrases such as “‘aere ki te pō” (‘go to the night’) and “‘aere ki te ao” (‘go to the day’) in their own teachings so that pō became “hell” and ao “heaven” (W.W. Gill 1876:165). Te Rangi Hiroa observed that Mangaian ‘orometua when using such terms may have sometimes “added something of the foreign European ideas to a native concept” (Buck 1932:15). The anthropologist Christian Clerk, who worked in Mangaia in the 1970s, noted: “The Christian symbolism of light and dark could be seen as a development upon, rather than in conflict with, these indigenous conceptions” (Clerk 1981:532). White’s research in the Solomon Islands suggests that missionary concepts such as darkness/light, hell/heaven were ultimately “assimilated to local frameworks of meaning and modes of understanding” (White 1991:9). Mata-pō and pō-iri are clearly indigenous terms adapted by Pacific Christians to associate their previous state with the realm of the pō from whence they had transitioned to the world (ao) of the Christian atua. Alain Babadzan also reports how the converts of Rurutu consigned all their previous pagan beliefs and practices “to the abject and perilous domain of pō” (Babadzan 1985:187). The Mangaian use of terms associated with pō seems intended more to highlight how they had been changed through their acceptance of a new atua. In this transition their former state had been committed, like the dead, to the pō.
The missionary domination of Mangaia’s language and “mental universe” was never complete. For example, the terms of subordination are confined in these letters to material things. Perhaps more importantly, the ‘ekalesia of Oneroa always retained a diverse set of connections to the pre-Christian world of beliefs and customary practices that Christianity has never really, even today, wholly eclipsed. Aratangi observed that “the Christianization of Mangaian society should be considered as an incorporation of the new religious ideas into the traditional ideas and views of the people” (1988:95). The particular language of the letter writers betrays such associations everywhere, as does the Rarotongan Bible. For example, the London Missionary Society’s decision to convert the people is understood as an act of aro’a, an important indigenous concept found in various Pacific languages and expressive of a sense of kindness or compassion felt by one party for another. Implicit in that term is recognition of the parties’ shared humanity and common values. Similarly, the Oneroa ‘ekalesia felt ‘akamā, a psychological state of shame (a cognate of the New Zealand Māori whakamā), when they could not return a gift of similar or greater value for the one they requested from their British brethren. Such reciprocity is an important cultural value throughout the Pacific; becoming Christian did not absolve a community from maintaining such practices and beliefs. Traditional concepts and their associated cultural values were also retained and adapted for Christian use. The older ideas inherent in the words continued on in this new form. A good example is the usage of terms such as tangata kē, kōpū and ‘ongi/‘aka‘ongi in the Bible and the Mangaian letters. These terms were taken from life by the Bible’s translators, but adapted to carry analogous Christian values, for instance, the pressing of noses in a ‘ongi and the concept of reconciliation.

* * *

The continuation of pre-Christian ideas and values, and their incorporation into the “mental universe” of Oneroa’s Christian community, is an important qualification of Te Rangi Hīroa’s argument concerning Mangaia’s adoption of a new language of deprecation. The Mangaian letters to the London Missionary Society, and related historical evidence, alert us to a far more subtle process of transformation at work within the Oneroa ‘ekalesia. At one level, the community’s letters betray a sense of material inferiority; on another level, this same writing reveals the continuation of deeper cultural values. Associated with this continuity is a confident display of equality in the relationships formed between Mangaian Christians and their British counterparts. Mangaians might be new members of a larger Protestant Christian community but, at least in their own eyes, they were equal and active participants in it. Hence their early
offer of missionaries to bring other Pacific peoples to an appreciation of the *Atua ora*. The evidence for an attitude of inferiority must be restricted to the domain of commodities and property, such as church buildings.

The “particularity” of Mangaia’s language, inherited after all from generations of earlier users of *te tara Mangaia*, reminds us that members of Mangaia’s Christian community, be they Papa’a ‘orometua, or new converts, could not help but employ ideas and values inherited from earlier users of the local language while at the same time articulating new beliefs as part of a shared commitment to the new *Atua* of Christianity. These beliefs might be voiced through transliterations or older words re-used for analogous values. In discussing the early Christianity of Santa Isabel, Geoffrey White described the “substantial continuities of the past in the present, of the old in the new”; specifically, for Santa Isabel Christians, “Their model of transformation was not one of rupture but of reformulation” (White 1991:108). This description can be applied to the processes observed at work in this selection of Mangaian letters to the London Missionary Society. The writers reformulate the values transmitted through the “particularity” of their language from past generations. While demonstrating new attachments to the Christianity and material world represented by the London Missionary Society, the ‘ekalesia retains its diverse associations with the cultural world view imbied from their own parents and ancestors. Nor did this inherited world exist only within the “particularity” of their language. As they travelled around Mangaia members of the Oneroa church could see all about them signs of the achievements of those past generations in the complex of irrigated taro gardens, the numerous terraced house sites and abandoned *marae*, and in local placenames. In this world, where memories of the past and present co-existed, the people of Mangaia’s new church retained their affiliations with the past, while at the same time reformulating their world through the language associated with the new *Atua*, and in the related practices and institutional structures of that new spiritual commitment.

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NOTES

1. Karetu (1974:187) translates Māoritanga as “the essence of being Māori (includes all aspects of Māori life)”.  
3. There is an extensive account of these early encounters and the ill-treatment meted out to the first missionaries in a speech by a deacon of the Oneroa church (possibly Māmāe who was till 1848 a deacon at that settlement). See “Speech of a Deacon of the Native Church, Oneroa, Mangaia, 1 January 1846”, South Seas, Letters, Box 19, folder 4, London Missionary Society/Council for World Mission Archives, London. Microfilm at Hocken Library, Dunedin.  
4. Ekalesia is now spelt ‘ēkāretia, ʻēkāretia or ‘ekareta (Buse with Taringa 1995:98, Shibata 1999:54). In this paper I have opted for ‘ekalesia.  
5. The paru is an ancient measure of length in Mangaia equivalent to a fathom, “the outstretched arms of a tall man”, i.e., six feet or 1.8 metres. Hence four paru is equivalent to 24 feet, the measurement found in the English translation of this letter below. All the measurements in this passage are based on the paru (see W.W. Gill 1876:325, Shibata 1999:204; for the Rarotongan versions of this system see Buse with Taringa 1995:202, 231).  
6. William Gill (1841) gives a slightly different description of the chapel. There it measures “130 ft long by 36 ft wide”. The pillars were “carved in a most ingenious manner; quite in Cathedral Style”. No doubt this was a reference to the indigenous carvings used to adorn these major supporting posts.  
7. Unfortunately, this new chapel was destroyed by a hurricane in March 1846.  
8. Aronga is used here to refer to cups or, more literally, a group of cups. While the dictionaries normally reserve aronga for groups of people, e.g., aronga mana (‘persons of power’), aronga teretere (‘people who travel about’), Savage (1980:46) does give an example applied to a non-human category: aronga-moamoa (‘birds’)—see also Buse with Taringa (1995:77) and Shibata (1999:41).  
9. In modern spelling this would be miriki, compare mereki, which Shibata (1999:140) glosses as ‘plate, dish, saucer’.  

REFERENCES

Abbreviations:  


‘Ekalesia, 1846a. Letter no 1 (and translation) from the ‘ekalesia of Oneroa to the Directors, Oneroa, Mangaia, 2 Januari 1846. SSL, Box 19 folder 4. LMS/CWM. ——1846b. Letter no 2 (and translation) from the ‘ekalesia of Oneroa to the Directors, Oneroa, Mangaia, 2 Januari 1846. SSL, Box 19 folder 4. LMS/CWM.

Gill, George, 1845. Letter from George Gill to Directors, Oneroa, Mangaia, 10 October 1845. SSL, Box 18, folder 5. LMS/CWM. ——1846. Letter from George Gill to Directors, Oneroa, Mangaia, 7 February 1846. SSL, Box 19, folder 4. LMS/CWM.


Nümangätini, 1841. Letter (and translation) from Nümangätini and Taki to the Directors, Mangaia, 14 September 1841. SSL, Box 14 folder 4. LMS/CWM.


Setephano, 1841. Letter (and translation) from Setephano to the Directors, Arorangi, Rarotonga, 1 October 1841. SSL, Box 14 folder 4. LMS/CWM.


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