EMBODYING DIVINITY: THE LIFE OF A‘A

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Every episode in the life story of the wood sculpture known as A‘a adds new layers of meaning to a persona which has developed and been transformed over the course of more than two centuries. Such is the power of this object, at once tranquil and challenging, at once revealing and concealing, that it has inspired, appalled or enchanted all who have come into its presence, and many who have not. It is not easily ignored. Once seen, never forgotten (Figs 1-4).

A‘a began its existence in Rurutu in the Austral Islands, probably some time in the 18th century. From Rurutu it travelled in 1821 to Ra‘iatea in the Society Islands, and thence in 1822 to England, where it now resides in the care of the British Museum in London.\(^2\) It has made visits to Paris (more than once) and to the USA, and in 2008 it will travel again to Paris as part of a Polynesian exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly. By the sheer force of its form, so arresting even to the casual viewer, it has acquired an enduring celebrity which shows no sign of diminishing, as images of front, profile and back, inside and out, adorn articles, catalogues, books and magazines. Clones of A‘a, in the form of painted plaster-cast and bronze replicas, are be found in England, Scotland, France, the USA, New Zealand—and Rurutu.

As is usual with cults of celebrity, the subject of attention remains enigmatic. Stories abound, sometimes conflicting, as to origin, identity, purpose and meaning. A variety of people, including the present author, have projected onto the sculpture names, theories, agency, gender, divinity and portentous importance. It was ever thus with images of gods, of divine beings, of saints and celebrities. In short, A‘a is famous, perhaps the most globally famous of all sculptures from Oceania. Why might this be? What are the qualities which inhere in this image that have led to this pre-eminence? What are the accumulated life-history episodes which have been survived? What dignities and indignities have been endured? This paper explores these questions as an attempt not only to illuminate understandings of A‘a but also to examine the nature of Polynesian ‘god images’ more broadly, and to endeavour to bring the ineffable into sharper focus. It also celebrates (perhaps idealises or idolises) A‘a, not for its celebrity alone but because, despite all the vicissitudes of its existence, it is an enduring embodiment of persons, powers, and possibilities.
Figures 1-4. Casket figure (A‘a), front, profile and back views, with and without detachable panel. Rurutu, Austral Islands; h. 117cm; British Museum, LMS 19. (© The Trustees of The British Museum.)
HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES

Missionary sources

Let the first witness to A‘a be the evangelist Reverend John Williams, not because he is the most important, but because it was in his book Missionary Enterprises (1837) that the earliest eye-witness account of A‘a was widely published. Williams was there when the sculpture was first presented to the Western gaze in the chapel on Ra‘iatea in August 1821. He and his colleague Lancelot Threlkeld were at that time the resident European missionaries. They belonged to the London Missionary Society, which had been founded in London in 1795 as the Missionary Society and which since 1796 had been sending missionaries, with varying degrees of success, to the South Seas and elsewhere. In 1818 it changed its name to the London Missionary Society (hereafter LMS). Its declared aims were not to promote any particular denomination of Protestantism but to propagate the Christian gospel among the heathen, to bring “light” to “darkness”, to save souls. By 1821 a series of mission stations had been established throughout the Society Islands, each manned by one or two missionaries with their wives and children. They were supported in their work by local deacons and teachers, recently converted, whose role was to prove crucial in the eventual conversion to Christianity of island populations in many parts of the Pacific. Chapels had been erected, schools established and printed material distributed, largely from a printing press set up on Mo‘orea in 1817. The costs of the missions were offset by local contributions of processed coconut oil, arrowroot and other products which were shipped back to England to be sold on behalf of the LMS. These offerings were advocated by missionaries and converts alike as an integral part of local religious practice.

In March 1821 there began what was to be, for Williams, a providental series of events, culminating in the conversion to Christianity of the population of Rurutu. This small high island of volcanic and raised coral formation, about 10km long and 6km wide, lies some 560km south of Ra‘iatea. It had been visited by Cook’s Endeavour in 1769, when it was called Hitiroa (transcribed as Oheteroa) by Tupaia, the Ra‘iatean priest/navigator who joined Cook’s expedition in Tahiti. Because of its poor anchorage, European ships did not linger at Rurutu and visits were few, mostly by whalers in the early nineteenth century (Vérin 1969:19-21). Around 1818-19 the island was hit by a devastating epidemic which progressively reduced the population from over 2,000 to a few hundred—a familiar story when island populations were exposed to European diseases. Early in 1821, as Williams narrates (1837:38-43), a man named Au‘ura with his wife and about thirty companions set out on a canoe voyage from Rurutu, touching first at Tubuai, about 100 miles to
the east. On the return voyage stormy weather drove them off course and they made land about three weeks later at Maupiti, some 60 miles northwest of Raʻiaera. From Maupiti they sailed via Borabora to Raʻiaera, arriving on 8 March, where they spent over three months recovering from their ordeal. Auʻura, who was regarded as a man of intelligence by the missionaries, appears to have shown a great deal of interest in the mission, and they in him. This is not the place to discuss the motives for Auʻura’s voyage, the extent to which he will have heard of the Christian mission stations and his keenness to learn to read and write. Missionary sources tend to imply that the Rurutuans only heard of the mission when they arrived at Maupiti, but Europeans have generally over-estimated the isolation of islands and underestimated the speed with which information and people travelled across the Pacific at this period. For instance, in 1822 an American named Robert Robertson was reported to have been living on Rurutu for seven years (Montgomery 1831[I]:493). There can be little doubt that news will have reached Rurutu regularly of the arrival of missionaries in Tahiti in 1797, their subsequent activities, warfare in the Society Islands and the conversions to the new religion of the two most powerful chiefs in the region, Pomare and Tamatoa. In fact Pomare, as a Christian chief, made state visits to neighbouring Tubuai and Raʻivavae in 1819.

Whatever the motives for Auʻura’s voyage and the prevailing socio-political-cosmological situation on Rurutu at the time, one thing is certain. Rurutuans will have known about Raʻiaera and its great temple (marae) Taputapuatea at Opoa, which had been for centuries one of the most important religious sites in the central Pacific. The fact that priests of the new Christian religion had set up their own ‘temple’ on Raʻiaera will have been deemed worthy of notice. A few generations earlier the powerful cult of ‘Oro had spread throughout the Society Islands from Raʻiaera—and now there was a new cult in place. From Auʻura’s perspective, especially in light of Rurutu’s sickness and high death rate, normally attributable to ritual negligence and divine retribution, the new religion would have presented opportunities of no little significance. While others of his party were considered indolent, Auʻura and his wife were reported to be industrious in acquiring the techniques of this new religion. “Auura appeared to be aware of the value of knowledge, and frequently asked such judicious questions on the subjects he heard, as surprised not only the people but the Missionaries themselves” (Missionary Sketches XXIV, 1824:2)

The opportunity to equate sickness with devil worship and salvation with Christianity was not lost on the missionaries, and the interest of Auʻura in Christianity presented an exciting prospect of extending the work of the
mission to an as yet untilled field. The missionaries and Au‘ura clearly found each other mutually useful, as proved the case, because his enthusiasm paved the way for the eventual Christianisation of Rurutu, and several years later he was reported to be the official leader of the Church on the island, with all the associated privileges and status of that post. He is usually referred to as a chief, but this is an imprecise term for anyone with authority or seniority, and we know that Au‘ura did not succeed to the chiefship of Rurutu as a whole. Although only about 30 years of age, he clearly had some authority in depopulated Rurutu, and he was also intellectually predisposed to examine the practices and tenets of the new religion. As we shall see shortly, he personally possessed at least one “idol” which he gave up and sent to England.

The arrival in July 1821 at Ra‘iatea of the brig *Hope*, commanded by Captain John Grimes, provided a way to return the stranded voyagers to Rurutu and also to found a mission there. The initiative to send local deacons to Rurutu appears to have come from Au‘ura, who requested that missionaries accompany him back to the island. Threlkeld and Williams approved this proposal and, in the absence of available Europeans, they called for volunteers. Two Ra‘iatean deacons named Mahamene and Puna agreed to be posted there with their wives. The *Hope* left for Rurutu on 5th July. She was bound for England with a cargo of oil and arrowroot for the LMS, and as she would not return to Ra‘iatea, Threlkeld sent his own boat in tow with a Ra‘iatean crew, and instructions to return to Ra‘iatea “with information as to the events which might take place” (*Missionary Sketches* XXIV, 1824:3). The boat was also probably intended as a means to bring home the two teachers and their wives should they meet with violent opposition. There had also by then been discussion about the capture of “idols”, because in a letter of 2 July 1821 from Williams to the London headquarters, he wrote: “we expect he [Grimes] will bring you a trophy of the Victory of the Cross, viz the Idols of the Rurutu’s, if not we expect they will be returned by our Boat.” In addition, in a letter of 4 July 1821, just before Grimes’s departure, Threlkeld wrote: “the Chief [Au‘ura] promises their Gods to you we recommend [sic] him not to burn them but send them prisoners to the Society.” Here we have explicit references to the missionaries’ desire for gods and idols as evidence of evangelical success.

With respect to idols, it needs to be borne in mind that the extirpation of idolatry was a major preoccupation of the LMS missionaries. They abhorred the practice while at the same time being obsessed by it and by the objects which were the focus of such behaviour. John Williams was said to have “employed the capture of idols to deepen the people’s horror of idolatry” (Campbell 1842:20). The LMS missionary William Ellis did not mince his words about Polynesia:
The system of idolatry, which prevailed among a people separated from the majori-ty of their species by trackless oceans,... presents a most affecting exhibition of imbecility, absurdity, and degradation... The idols of the heathen ... present to our notice all that is adapted to awaken our pity. (Ellis 1829[II]:219, 1831[I]:353-54)

The public destruction of idols had become a feature of early missionary work, but in 1816 a request by the newly-converted Tahitian chief Pomare gave them cause to reconsider this policy of iconoclasm. In handing over a number of “family idols” (Fig. 5) to the missionaries at Mo’orea, Pomare wrote in a letter dated 19 February 1816 (which was regularly cited in LMS publications): “If you think proper, you may burn them all in the fire; or, if you like, send them to your country, for the inspection of the people of Europe, that they may satisfy their curiosity, and know Tahiti’s foolish gods!” (Missionary Sketches III, 1818:3). The missionaries realised that, if preserved, Pomare’s idols would supply welcome material evidence of

Figure 5. The Family Idols of Pomare. Missionary Sketches No. III, 1818.
(Courtesy LMS/Council for World Mission, London.)
their triumph over idolatry. They therefore seized on his second option and sent the idols to England where, with his letter, they featured prominently in the third issue of *Missionary Sketches* in October 1818. As reported in that pamphlet, the appearance of these things in London prompted the LMS to encourage their display for purposes of instructive “contemplation”. The Reverend Ralph Wardlaw, in a sermon entitled *The Contemplation of Heathen Idolatry an Excitement to Missionary Zeal*, proclaimed “the contemplation of heathen idolatries should excite indignant grief for the dishonour done to God—amazement at the weakness and folly of human nature—abhorrence of human impiety, and compassion for human wretchedness.”

In this context, Pomare’s idols took centre stage in the missionary museum which was located at the LMS premises at Austin Friars in London. A catalogue of the museum was published in 1826, in the introduction to which the Directors of the LMS stated that they were exhibiting the “trophies of Christianity” in order to “comply with the wish of the late king of Otaheite” (Anon 1826:iv). Lord Bexley caught the prevailing mood in an address to the Annual Meeting of the LMS on 15 May 1828:

> When we see whole nations relinquishing their ancient forms of worship, and giving up their idols—casting them into the sea, or permitting them to be removed to this country, and exhibited as so many proofs of what they once were and now are, we cannot but recognise the hand of Providence… *(Missionary Sketches XLII, 1828:3)*

Proofs. Yes, proofs were certainly valuable. Bearing in mind the earlier embarrassments of the failed missions to Tonga and the Marquesas Islands, and the general costs of the missionary enterprise, there was pressure to report success and good news. Idols provided not only ideal material proofs of success when reporting to superiors—performance indicators one might say—but they also provided a means of publicising LMS success to subscribers and the general public through illustrated publications and exhibition displays. By the law of unintended consequences, this concern with proofs guaranteed the survival of some remarkable sculptures and objects which are now the focus of attention of a kind unimagined by the missionaries. Of that, more will be said later. Meanwhile, let us return to Ra‘iatea in August 1821, and the anxious wait by Williams and Threlkeld for the return of Threlkeld’s boat from Rurutu. According to Williams’ account:

> [9 August 1821] After an absence of little more than a month, we had the pleasure of seeing the boat return [to Ra‘iatea], laden with the trophies of victory, the gods of the heathen taken in this bloodless war, and won by the power of the Prince of Peace… A meeting was held in our large chapel, to
communicate the delightful intelligence to our people, and to return thanks to God for the success with which he had graciously crowned out first effort to extend the knowledge of his name... In the course of the evening the rejected idols were publicly exhibited from the pulpit. One in particular, Aa, the national god of Rurutu, excited considerable interest; for, in addition to his being bedecked with little gods outside, a door was discovered at his back; on opening which, he was found to be full of small gods; and no less than twenty-four were taken out, one after another, and exhibited to public view. He is said to be the ancestor by whom their island was peopled, and who after death was deified. (Williams 1837:43-44)

Here we have an incontrovertible reference to the subject of this paper, and the name “Aa” is provided. All might therefore seem straightforward, but the issue is immediately complicated by a conflicting account of the same event published in 1831 by James Montgomery in his book about the tour of LMS missions in 1821-29 by the Deputation, comprising Reverend Daniel Tyerman and Mr George Bennet. In this, Montgomery cites extracts from a “Communication by Messrs. Threlkeld and Williams” dated 18 October 1821, which contains the following passage:

On the arrival of the boat with the trophies of victory, a general desire prevailed to see these objects of adoration. Wishing to gratify all, we set apart an evening for the exhibition of the Rurutu idols... [Threlkeld and Williams first address the congregation] ... The several idols were then exposed to view by three of the deacons [locals]. The first was the great national god, Taaroa, which was exhibited by Paumoana. This idol is a rude figure, made of platted sinnet, in the shape of a man, with an opening down the front, through which it was filled with little gods, or the family gods of the old chiefs, the points of spears, old slings, &c., of ancient warriors... Temauri then rose and exhibited Rooteabu, an idol inferior to the former, and made some suitable remarks. Uaeva next exhibited all the family gods, turning them first to one side, and then to the other, inviting every eye to behold them; and remarked on the superiority of this war to all the wars in which they had ever been engaged, ascribing the victory to Jesus, the great conqueror. (Montgomery 1831[I]:507-8)

What is to be made of these discrepancies in description of the principal exhibit in the chapel at Ra’iatea? How could two eye-witness accounts, apparently by the same person, differ to such a marked degree? The Montgomery account is taken from an earlier version published in the Transactions of the Missionary Society for October 1822, pages 242-43. This shows a similar text which is, significantly, not part of the “Communication”, as claimed in Montgomery, but a separate document under the title “Exposure of the Idols of Rurutu at Raiatea”. The authorship of this separate
supplementary text is not given. The original manuscript of the 18 October 1821 Communication in the LMS archives is written in Williams’ hand and there is no mention of the exhibition of Rurutu idols. This supplementary passage must therefore have been added by the compiler of the report in the Transactions for October 1822, but so far it has not been possible to locate the source. The passage is so specific in its content that it cannot simply have been made up by someone in London, and is likely to derive from another of the missionaries who may have been reporting the event on hearsay. The Transactions version includes the following sentence, not included in the Montgomery publication. “It was really laughable to see him take little gods by the dozen out of the great god, and hold them up to public view.” This could imply an eye-witness account, or again, be reported speech. Until the original document is located, if it still exists, the identity of the author will remain unknown. William Ellis, who was not present at the exhibition of the idols, being based on the nearby island of Huahine, may be a candidate. However, he will have had to have sent this account to London before he visited Ra‘iatea with Daniel Tyerman on 29 January 1822, because we know the Rurutu idols were still there and it is barely conceivable that he will not have been shown them and seen that A‘a was not made of sinnet (coconut husk fibre). 7 Whoever wrote the problematic “sinnet” account will have been familiar with a type of image known in the Society Islands as to‘o, a plain or carved wood baton or post, partially or completely wrapped in sinnet cords or folded matting. Some to‘o have anthropomorphic features and can contain within the wrapping small offerings such as feathers, hair and teeth. They can also be made entirely of sinnet (Babadzan 1993, Hooper 2006:177-78, Kaeppler this volume), but no example “in the shape of a man” has survived. 8 In the early 19th century to‘o were mostly associated with the worship of ‘Oro. Whoever wrote the problematic account, perhaps Ellis, may have assumed a to‘o-like form for A‘a before he saw the actual image. Ellis may also be the source of the identification of A‘a as Ta‘aroa because he used this name in his own book, published in 1829. Referring to the frontispiece of Volume II (Fig. 6), he wrote:

The two figures in the centre, No. 1. exhibit a front and profile view of Taaroa, the supreme deity of Polynesia; who is generally regarded [sic] as the creator of the world, and the parent of gods and men. The image from which these views were taken, is nearly four feet high, and twelve or fifteen inches broad, carved out of a solid piece of close, white, durable wood. In addition to the number of images or demigods forming the features of his face, and studding the outside of his body, and which were designed to shew the multitudes of gods that had proceeded from him; his body is hollow, and when taken from the temple, in which for many generations he had been worshipped, a number
of small idols were found in the cavity. They had perhaps been deposited there, to imbibe his supernatural powers, prior to their being removed to a distance, to receive, as his representatives, divine honours. The opening to the cavity was at the back; the whole of which, as shown in the profile view, might be removed. (Ellis 1829[II]:220)⁹

The name Taaroa (Taʻaroa), or cognate forms such as Tangaroa, Tangaloa and Kanaloa, refers to one of the main gods in the pre-Christian Polynesian pantheon, sometimes called “the supreme deity of Polynesia” (Ellis 1829[II]:220, Marck 1996). In the Society Islands he was considered a somewhat remote founding deity, “father” of the prominent god ‘Oro, whose cult was strong in the second half of the 18th century (Henry 1928:120, Moerenhout 1993:224).

For final confirmation of the precise form of the image presented in August 1821 in the Raiʻatea chapel, irrespective of name, we can turn to the January 1824 issue of Missionary Sketches (No. XXIV), which provides clear pictures of the hollow wooden figure, LMS 19, back and front (Fig. 7; note that the engraved images are reversed). It also provides the accompanying text:

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Figure 6. Idols Worshipped by the Inhabitants of the South Sea Islands (Ellis 1829[II]: Frontispiece).
On the 9th of August, little more than a month from the departure of the brig [Hope], with the boat which was to return, in tow, the brethren had the pleasure of perceiving the boat approaching the shore, with the crew who had been appointed to bring her back. But besides the crew, there was on board a number of their discarded idols, among which was a very large one, called Taaroa Upoo Vahu—of which we give an exact representation in the print affixed to this number, which all will allow is sufficiently ugly, and deserving the name of a devil rather than of a god … These idols now form a valuable article in the Missionary Museum, as trophies of the Redeemer’s victories over superstition and idolatry, and presages of that glorious time when the idols, every where, shall be utterly abolished! (Missionary Sketches XXIV, 1824:3)

So, we can be confident that LMS 19 was the main image brought from Rurutu and displayed in the chapel at Ra’iatea. To mitigate some of the confusion in description, it may be that LMS 19 was at the time of presentation bound or wrapped in coir cordage, which was immediately discarded, and that Williams “tidied up” this detail in his published account. There can be little doubt that the image would have been wrapped when in its indigenous context, and the various figure/lugs on the body would have been used for ritual bindings, but we will probably never know if any of these survived the transfer to Ra’iatea.

Figure 7. Representations of Taaroa Upoo Vahu. Missionary Sketches No. XXIV, 1824. (Courtesy LMS/Council for World Mission, London.)
What's in a name?

In the foregoing attempt to find a pathway through apparently contradictory statements, a plausible sequence of events has been established. However, what are we to make of the name or term Aa? What was the name of this image, or, rather, what god did it represent or instantiate? If the Williams’ 1837 reference to Aa was the only one of its kind, one could be forgiven for thinking this might have been an error, a typographical mis-transcription that the author had not corrected, since Aa seems to be a name not associated with any known god. However, there are two further manuscript references to “Aa”. One is in a letter dated 8 July 1822 to the Directors of the LMS, in Threlkeld’s hand:

Mrs Threlkeld & Williams forward two bonnetts taken from the heads of two female natives [of] Raiatea made by themselves and not made with any Idea of being sent—The coffin with all the Gods we have forwarded as well as the Great God Aa from Rurutu in another case excuse haste we are perplexed again with this Captain the boat is coming …

Setting aside the matter of the “coffin”, which may have been the most convenient large box available, we find here a clear reference to the name Aa almost a year after the arrival of the image on Ra‘iatea. A second manuscript reference to Aa appears in a report on the situation at Rurutu written by Threlkeld and Williams on 11 November 1822. In this, a Rurutuan called Tenanae is quoted as saying: “when Auura left this land Aa (the God) commanded that the government should be kept for the young Arii [chief] but that was a bad government”. It seems as though Aa was the name in use amongst those who were best informed. Once the image arrived in England, probably in April 1823, illustrations were prepared of it, with suitably decorous genital covering, for publication in Missionary Sketches XXIV of January 1824. In composing the account of the conversion of Rurutu, the author of that issue presumably drew on the problematic 1822 Transactions, ignoring the “sinnet” reference but retaining the name Taaroa (see citation above). For some reason this was expanded to Taaroa Upoo Vahu, which, as Lavondès explains, is an unusual and unlikely qualifier (1996:316). Thereafter it may well have suited the aims of the LMS to appear to have “captured” Ta‘aroa, the “supreme god of Polynesia”, rather than A‘a, a god of which no-one had ever heard. Perhaps an assumption crept in that so important an idol must represent Ta‘aroa. Maybe the yearning for dramatic success stories inclined certain members of the LMS to want to believe it was Ta‘aroa, against the evidence. Certainly neither Ellis nor Bennet (via Montgomery) was inclined to adjust the Ta‘aroa designation in their publications of 1829 and 1831.
respectively. Conversely, Williams, who must have seen those publications and the January 1824 issue of Missionary Sketches, did not challenge those designations in his own 1837 book but continued with the use of Aa. So much for Aa versus Taaroa. But what does Aa actually mean? What were the circumstances under which Williams might have heard such a name. It should be remembered that the Rurutu idols were brought to Ra’iatea by the Ra’iatean crew of Threlkeld’s boat and no Rurutuans returned with them. Au’ura and the two Ra’iatean teachers sent letters to the missionaries at Ra’iatea, the second of which was translated and included in their “Communication” of 18 October 1821 to the Reverend George Burder in London, but there appears to be no direct reference to the identities of the idols despatched. The problematic 1822 Transactions states that three Ra’iatean deacons, Paumoana, Temauri and Uaeva, took turns to expose the idols to the assembled congregation at Ra’iatea. It is not known if they actually travelled to Rurutu or got their information from the crew of the returning boat. There would appear to have been ample opportunity for misunderstandings of the “Chinese whispers” variety, whereby original information on Rurutu could have been misheard and misreported several times over.

Anne Lavondès devoted several pages of her 1996 article on A’a to an appraisal of the relative linguistic merits of ‘A, A’a or ‘A’a, which, with consonants for the glottal stops, could be cognate with Ha, Aka, Kafa or Kaha, etc. She opts for Kaha because of its associations with coir cords and binding, a characteristic of god images in the region, thus implying Aa is not a proper name but a type or metonymic appellation. She also suggests (1996:318) that Williams might have heard the term Aa from Au’ura in their discussions prior to the latter’s departure for Rurutu, or possibly during a visit to Rurutu, after which he incorporated it into his 1837 book. Both theories are possible because Williams called at Rurutu in early June 1822 en route from New Zealand to Ra’iatea (Prout 1843:163), prior to the reference to Aa in the “despatch” letter of 8 July 1822. He may well have asked Au’ura then about the identity of the remarkable figure he had seen exhibited in Ra’iatea. Nevertheless, there is a further source which Williams could have used: Rurutuans who were left behind on Ra’iatea when Au’ura sailed on the Hope. The published sources do not mention them, but the letter of 8 July 1822 states that on 28 March the Tuscan, Captain Stavers, “kindly afforded a passage to the remaining natives of Rurutu who were left behind here when the Hope sailed”. They could well have provided information about the exhibited idols, though the Rurutuans, apart from Au’ura and his wife, were referred to as “slothful” by the missionaries, so they may not have been considered the best informants.
In any event, speculations of these kinds may have limited utility when we really have no clear idea what name or descriptive term was originally used. I myself have pondered on the possibility of Aa being an incomplete rendition of Ta, as in Ta’aroa, or of the Rurutu word for box or casket, ‘a’ata. This latter suggestion could have some veracity, depending on who might have been supplying the information, because someone for whom the image was still sacred might have been reluctant to name it and preferred to use a descriptive term. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced by any of these hypotheses as to the etymology of Aa. The only plausible evidence that Aa is correct is the reference to it by the Rurutuan Tenanae (quoted above), but this of course is a transcription of reported speech, which could have been adjusted to what was thought to have been said. Whatever the original name or title for this sculpture might have been, it is now a simple fact that Aa, rendered with the likely glottal stop as A‘a, has become the widely known name, with Vérin (1969), Fagg (1977), Babadzan (1985, who uses ‘A’a) and others, including Rurutuans, following Williams’ original lead. A‘a is distinctive and unique, and this probably now suits the people of Rurutu very well, since Ta’aroa hardly features in what we know of Rurutu myth or cosmogony (Vérin 1969:283). A‘a it is.12

Life after the Pacific

After arriving in England, A‘a took its place among the exhibits in the LMS museum at Austin Friars in London, where it was described as “TAAROA UPOO VAHU, one of the chief gods of Rurutu” in the first published catalogue (Anon 1826:22). The LMS offices and museum later moved from Austin Friars to nearby Blomfield Street in Finsbury. The incorporation of a museum in their plans was clearly important, as Missionary Sketches LXXI of October 1835 announced the lease of land and plans for a building with “dry and ample warehouse room, museum”. In a second undated edition of the museum catalogue, most probably published in the mid to late 1850s, A‘a is described as being exhibited in Case A, with information explicitly credited to Ellis and not to Williams:

22. Taaroa Upao [sic] Vahu, from Rurutu, the supreme deity of Polynesia. In addition to the demi-gods that stud the outside, designed to show the many that had proceeded from him, a number of small idols were found in the interior of this deity, deposited there probably to imbibe his supernatural powers, prior to their dispersion as his representatives. (Ellis, vol. ii. page 220.) (Anon n.d.:6-7)
An illustration in the *Illustrated London News* of 25 June 1859 (Fig. 8) gives a panorama of the main room of the museum at Blomfield Street. In the glazed case on the extreme left, presumably Case A, the distinctive head and form of A’a can be seen clearly, next to the famous Rarotongan image with three figures on its chest (LMS 169; Fig. 9), which is also listed in the catalogue as being in Case A (No. 42). It is likely that A’a will have been taken out from time to time for specific missionary displays associated with fund-raising, but the next occasion for which we have evidence of an overseas journey is for exhibition in the “Section des Missions Protestantes Evangéliques” at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867 (Lavondès 1996:329, Vernes 1867: Plate X). On this expedition A’a was accompanied by other mission trophies, including three Tongan images from the Methodist Missionary Society discussed by Roger Neich in this volume.

In 1890 a substantial proportion of the holdings of the LMS Museum were deposited on loan at the British Museum, being finally transferred legally to British Museum ownership in 1911. The negotiations over this transfer of ownership were protracted. Sir Alfred Franks and Charles Hercules Read of the British Museum recognised the great rarity, and fragility, of the Polynesian material in the LMS, and were anxious to preserve it. From an LMS point of view, the cost of maintaining the museum was a strain on their finances,
and so the arrangement with the British Museum offered a solution to the concerns of the two organisations. Nevertheless, it seems that the LMS were reluctant to lose control of their erstwhile trophies, making the negotiations somewhat lengthy and difficult. Typical of this situation is the 1907-8 correspondence relating to the making of moulds and casts of several major Polynesian sculptures, including Aʻa and the Rarotonga figure LMS 169. The LMS were planning a “great Missionary Exhibition” at the Agricultural Hall from 11 June to 11 July 1908, and were desirous of obtaining the loan of “ornaments, Idols, weapons and any other article” from those LMS pieces in the care of the British Museum. The correspondence shows anxiety on the part of Read, who on 26 September 1907 expressed himself:

Figure 9. Standing figure. Rarotonga, Cook Islands; h. 69.8cm; British Museum, LMS 169. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)
loath to do anything that would expose these precious relics to any danger. With regard, therefore, to the chief idols in your collection [the LMS loan material at the British Museum], what I would propose is this. That I should have plaster casts made of them; that these should become your property, so that you might use them as occasion arises at other exhibitions of less importance than the one now in question. If such casts were coloured to correspond with the originals, I do not think that anyone in the exhibition would know that they were not the originals; and thus they would serve the same purpose.

It is likely that Read was concerned not only about the fragility and vulnerability of the idols, but also about the possibility that once returned to the LMS the British Museum might not get them back. Fortunately for him, the LMS acquiesced to his proposal and moulds and casts of the objects were forthwith made by Messrs Bruciani & Co. It is also likely that this episode provided a spur for Read to conclude negotiations for the full legal transfer to the British Museum of the LMS objects loaned in 1890. After the moulds were made, news spread quickly of the potential availability of casts of A‘a. William Brigham of the Bishop Museum in Hawai‘i ordered one during his visit to England in 1912. He told Augustus Hamilton in Wellington, New Zealand, about them, and he ordered one for the Dominion Museum. Other casts were apparently at one time in Chicago and Philadelphia, and we know that Roland Penrose obtained one in 1948, which was displayed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the 1948-49 exhibition 40,000 Years of Modern Art (Archer 1948:7, 50). Pablo Picasso saw this cast at Penrose’s studio in 1950, became enamoured of it, and ordered one. A photo of c. 1960 by Edward Quinn shows Picasso with the cast in the studio at his villa La Californie in Cannes (Rubin 1984:330; Stepan 2006:107, 120). There is some uncertainty as to the current whereabouts of this cast, and indeed whether Picasso had a bronze made from it. It is not in the Musée Picasso in Paris. Penrose’s cast is currently on display in the Penrose gallery at the Dean Gallery in Edinburgh.

We also know that Henry Moore acquired a plaster cast in about 1970, from which he made a bronze that he “felt was so powerful that it was difficult to find the right place in his house to put it” (Moore 1981:18). Moore had seen A‘a on display in the British Museum in the 1920s and 1930s, when he made drawings of a variety of objects whose sculptural properties intrigued him. Of A‘a he later said, “The excitement of this piece comes from its sense of life-force, with all those small figures springing from the parent figure” (Moore 1981:83).

Perhaps the most important cast is the one which is now displayed in a glazed cabinet, along with sporting and other trophies, in the Mairie at Moera‘i on Rurutu (Fig. 10). When Maia Jessop visited Manuia Atapo, Secretary General of the Mairie in February 2004, he brought out the cast
of Aʻa for her to see and told her of plans for a local museum in which the
cast would be a major feature. This cast had been donated to Rurutu by
Hermione Waterfield as a gesture of thanks for hospitality she had received
on the island in 1983.

For the last century or more hardly a major book about Oceanic, Primitive
or Tribal art has neglected to include Aʻa. Until the late 1960s it was exhibited
in the British Museum’s ethnographical gallery at Bloomsbury, and after the
closure of that gallery and the transfer of the Department of Ethnography to
the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens, it was exhibited there and
in exhibitions in Paris (1972) and New York (1984). Since the closure of the
Museum of Mankind in 1997 and the return of the department to Bloomsbury,
Aʻa has been periodically exhibited there and has travelled to Norwich for
exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in 2006.

Figure 10. A cast of Aʻa in the Mairie at Moeraʻi, Rurutu, February 2004.
(Photo: Maia Jessop.)
A‘a always seems to have had a celebrity status among Europeans, but the pendulum has swung from initial feelings of horror to those of admiration, even adulation. It is perhaps ironic that the very thing which the missionaries abhorred, idolatry, appears to have returned with a vengeance in relation to this sculpture. If museums and art galleries are the new cathedrals in European culture, then A‘a takes its place as one of the principal objects of adoration. William Empson even wrote a poem about it, reproduced in William Fagg’s *The Tribal Image* (1977: No. 76), in which he invites the viewer to “grant him reign over the whole building [the British Museum].” Its influence is ongoing. The New Zealand Māori artist George Nuku, arriving as an artist-in-residence at the Sainsbury Centre in May 2006, was physically awed by his first encounter with the original A‘a, seen so often in books. He proceeded to make a sculpture in homage, entitled Nu-Atua (New God), composed of a perspex display case with small figures moulded in perspex on the outside, mimicking the form of the original while symbolising an escape of the “prisoner” from the confines of the display case which he is now obliged to occupy.

The approbation of Modernism, via Moore, Penrose, Picasso and others, has admitted A‘a and its peers to the new cult of high art in global culture. Its value, in every sense, is now astronomic, as it is celebrated as one of mankind’s greatest artistic creations, as a thing of great rarity, wonder and curiosity—in the positive 18th-century meaning of that word. But what do we really know of A‘a? The historical trajectory of its existence since its surrender and capture has now been sketched, but what is it about these modified pieces of wood which has given rise to such strong attitudes and emotions, for and against? What does A‘a embody which makes it so captivating for Polynesians and Europeans alike? To begin to answer these questions we will need to get closer, to examine it, inside and out.

**VOICES FROM RURUTU**

It will have been noticed that the voices of Rurutuans, besides Au’ura, have so far been muted, indeed absent, in this account of the life of A‘a. What did and do Rurutuans say about this sculpture? What might Rurutuan perspectives have been on the events which unfolded in 1821? Muted as they are, these voices can perhaps be coaxed into existence by reference to known Polynesian practice, as a basis for plausible hypotheses. Most importantly, A‘a itself has a voice, because it was Rurutuans who conceived, created and used it some 200 or more years ago. Silent it now may be, but its form speaks volumes. Let us turn first to A‘a as a witness to its own nature and identity.
Form and function

An attempt at a formal analysis of A’a is done with some trepidation, having never had the opportunity to visit Rurutu or discuss its form with Rurutuans. Nevertheless, the attempt will be made, based on my own experience of living with specialist carpenters—canoe builders and bowl carvers—on the island of Kabara in Lau in Eastern Fiji for a period of two and a half years between 1977 and 1990. These Kabaran carpenters were and are men who face the same challenges which confronted those on Rurutu in the 18th century—how to transform the trunk of a tropical tree into a hollowed object which is culturally fit for its purpose? I spent a great deal of time with Kabaran carpenters in the forest and in the village, and in 1978 apprenticed myself to Jioeli Vakarau of Udu village for the purpose of making a four-legged kava bowl. This was a laborious process, as instructive for me as it was by turns frustrating and amusing for my highly-skilled tutor and his children. As a result, I learned something about wood and about adzes, which were doubtless the principal tools (probably with stone rather than metal blades) with which A’a was originally carved.

The complete sculpture of A’a has damage to the lower legs—it is not known if feet or a base were ever present. It stands 117cm high and is 36cm wide across the head, the widest part (Figs 1-4). It is cylindrical in general form, echoing the trunk of the tree from which it was carved. The wood, which is straight-grained and pale brown with darker patches, is suggested by Vérin (1969:283) to be pua (Fagraea berteriana), following a prompt in Henry (1928:60), who stated (referring to the Society Islands): “The wood is light-brown, close-grained, bears a high polish, and is much valued for furniture. The first pua tree was said to have been brought to the earth by the god Tane from his tenth heaven, and so it was held sacred to him, and his image was always made out of its wood.” Sydney Parkinson (1784:41), artist on Cook’s first voyage, noted among the flora of the Society Islands: “E poomattapee [puai matapipi]. The flower of this tree is much admired on account of its sweet scent … The wood is very tough and lasting, and of it they make drums, and thwarts across their canoes.” Pua is a forest tree, often called the “perfume flower tree”, which is found on Rurutu and has scented white flowers and orange/red berries (Grant et al. 1974:35-36). Its trunk can reach one metre in diameter and the wood can be vulnerable to insect and damp damage, evidence of which can be seen on A’a’s right buttock and thigh, and the left arm and hand.19

Among the most striking features of the sculpture is the head, with a chin which is sharply undercut (Fig. 11). In profile the image has the overall appearance of an erect phallus, the buttocks corresponding to the testicles,
and there can be little doubt that this phallic form was created knowingly and intentionally. Edmund Leach (1973:232) discussed A‘a in the context of arguing that Europeans regard such a sculpture as “an outstanding ‘work of art’” because of the “multiple layers of partly overt, partly disguised, expression of phallic ambiguity”. He continued:

The handle of the detachable back also forms a kind of phallus emerging erect from above the buttocks and when viewed from the side the whole figure, with its elongated body and dish-shaped face acquires a very markedly phallic appearance. It is surely the ambiguous redundancy of this male sexual message which first catches our attention and makes us aware, in a barely conscious way, that here is something quite out of the ordinary. (Leach 1973:232-34)

This is one way of reading A‘a’s “voice”, and in some ways Leach gives explicit expression to core elements of other readings of the sculpture, including those by missionaries such as William Ellis, as being “the parent of gods and men”.

Figure 11. Three-quarter view of the upper part of A‘a. (Photo: Steven Hooper, 2006.)
Two other characteristics of the image which have been widely remarked upon are the 30 small figures which are distributed over the surface, and the fact that it is hollow, with a detachable panel at the back carved from a separate piece of wood. With respect to the figures, certain assumptions have been made and repeated about them. As we have seen, William Ellis stated that the figure was “Taaroa, the supreme deity of Polynesia; who is generally regarded as the creator of the world, and the parent of gods and men.” He went on to claim that the figures “were designed to shew the multitudes of gods which had proceeded from him” (Ellis 1829[II]:220). Ellis may have met Rurutuans during his overnight stay on Ra’iatea on 29 January 1822, and he visited Rurutu for two days in the company of Tyerman and Bennet (30 September – 1 October 1822), but there is no evidence that he made enquiries there about A’a. His view that the image shows the creation of “gods and men” was most probably based on his general knowledge of Society Islands’ theogony and the founding, though relatively remote, role which Ta’aroa played in it. His view has, however, been widely repeated, and although it has a certain obvious visual logic it remains an unexamined proposition. The Ta’aroa designation has already been discounted, but what of the creative role?

Before such an examination is attempted, a more recent proposition by Alfred Gell will be considered. Gell, who has interesting perspectives to bring to bear on A’a generally, claims that the small figures are fractals of the main one. He writes (1998:137): “mathematically, it is akin to the type of figure known as a ‘fractal’, a figure which demonstrates the property of self-similarity at different scales of magnification/minification.” However, close inspection of the figures on A’a reveals that, contrary to this statement, few are replications on a smaller scale of the main figure and they exhibit at least two basic forms. These are upright or spread-eagled, with notable variations in posture and form within each type, especially that which forms the “mouth”, which could be regarded as a sub-type of the second form. Some of the upright images could be construed as fractals, and perhaps the most likely candidate for that kind of analysis is the figure which is no longer present—the missing penis. Whether this was removed by a zealous Rurutuan or by a missionary is not known. Some male images, such as the Rarotongan figure LMS 169 (Fig. 9), managed to retain their genitals intact, but A’a has not. From the vestiges which remain, it is possible that an erect figure similar to that at the bottom of the back panel was attached at the shoulders to the broken projection beneath the navel, and at the buttocks to the broken phallus in front of the scrotum. Here a principle of metonymical encompassment could have been in play, with the part standing for the whole, and vice versa. Even if the phallus was represented naturalistically, the same principle would apply because of the dual nature of the image as figure and phallus.
There can be little doubt that a theme of generative procreation was intended to be given material expression in the overall sculpture. In Polynesia, as elsewhere, gods were sources of life and prosperity in the biological and cultural senses. Without divine favour, human endeavours would be fruitless. In central Polynesia, and notably in the Cook and Austral Islands, the use of multiple, often schematic, images on a larger base image was a widespread form of representation, not only on objects which were explicitly god images but also those which were less explicitly so, such as drums, bowls, fly whisk handles and adze handles (Hooper 2006:194-240 passim). In the case of A‘a the figures are not schematic, but, as noted above, carefully and individually rendered in two main styles—the first upright with arms on the chest or abdomen, the second spread-eagled, with bulbous abdomen, and arms and flexed legs stretched out to the sides (Figs 12-14). There are 16 and 14 figures in each style, excluding the putative penis figure and including the figures on the removable panel.

No sexual markers such as genitals or breasts are indicated to support a hypothesis that the two types may represent males and females respectively. However, a comparative study of cognate sculptures from the Austral and Cook Islands—and there is little argument that the people of these groups were closely culturally related—suggests that a sexual distinction may have

Figure 12. Upright figure on the right breast of A‘a. (Photo: Steven Hooper, 2006.)
been intended. The three upright images on the chest of the Rarotongan image, LMS 169, are explicitly male. The same is the case with the Rarotongan so-called staff gods (Hooper 2006:222-24), not only in their overall form but also with respect to the smaller profile figures carved down the shaft, which have naturalistic erect penises. Rarotongan staff gods also have a second type of figure which alternates with the male ones, reminiscent of those on A‘a. These are rendered in low relief on the sides of the main shaft, frontally with arms and legs splayed. However, they are not explicitly marked as to sex. Setting aside the obvious differences between A‘a and the staff gods in overall form, one can begin to see a close compositional relationship. Both are explicitly male figures with two types of smaller figure distributed over their bodies. In addition, and with respect to the splayed figures, if we examine Austral Island drums of the late 18th and early 19th century (Hooper 2006:199-201), the immediate pre-conversion period, we find that splayed figures with outstretched arms have clearly carved pointed breasts. These are usually interpreted as female figures engaged in dancing, which in Polynesia was both an important ritual act and a kind of offering of disciplined energy and labour, often accompanied by drumming.
So it is possible that the figures carved in relief on A‘a’s body are male and female, indicated by their upright and splayed postures respectively. If that is the case, whether these figures are in some senses generic, or whether they were originally intended to represent specific individuals is unclear. If we examine them closely, it can be seen that there are subtle differences in facial features, in arm positions and in leg form. Some figures are carved in such high relief that their arched bodied form lugs. How are these variations to be accounted for? Was the carving of these figures the work of a single carver, or more? The likely process of carving A‘a will be examined shortly in relation to the cavity, but if one master carver was responsible for all the figures, then the differences in rendering them must be attributable to intention rather than chance. If two or more carvers were involved then the subtle differences could be attributed to individual hands creating their own unplanned variations on a figure type, or to the carvers intentionally showing different arm positions, etc. My own subjective view, based on close examination of the formal properties of the figures, is that one carver made the figures on the head and body of A‘a, and another carver made the figures on the hips and knees and the five figures on the back panel. This hypothesis is by no means secure, and one carver could
have had responsibility for all figures, but there are some discrete differences in head and arm form which may indicate two different hands. The “intentional difference” line of argument would imply that the figures represent different individuals, the upright ones possibly ancestors in the male line and the splayed ones ancestors in the female line in the process of giving birth.

Now let us turn to the positional distribution of the figures on the main figure. They appear to have been placed very specifically and, with one exception, in a symmetrical manner that echoes the overall symmetry of the body. Some are positioned to represent important features, such as ears, eyes, nose, mouth, breasts/nipples and, possibly, the penis. Others are placed at articulated points of the body, such as hips and knees, while the positions of the remainder have no obvious relationship to specific corporeal features, though those on the trunk may have been intended to signify internal organs and the one beneath the chin could be a beard. Those on the head show intentionality on the part of the carver to use figures to represent salient features, but the significance of those on the cheeks and upper arms remain unclear (though it should be noted that the Rarotonga figure (Fig. 9) also has figures in low relief on the outside of the arms). The positioning of the five figures on the back panel, all rendered as lugs, will for the present only be noted.

A disruption of symmetry, besides minor differences in arm position, is caused by the placing of a splayed figure on the main figure’s proper left lower abdomen. There are only two ways of accounting for this—it was either intentional or a mistake. It is not disrespectful to speak of mistakes because they happen in carving, and, unlike in the “building-up” techniques of pottery or bronze-work, the “taking-off” techniques of woodwork and stonework are unforgiving of error, and can only be remedied by alteration of plans or resort to attachments. If a careless assistant had adzed off too much of that part of the abdomen to permit an upright figure in high relief, the master may have had to make do with a splayed figure in low relief. I think that, in the present case, this scenario is unlikely, and we are looking at intentional asymmetrical positioning of figure types, but the issue is raised to remind us of something which is often forgotten when contemplating a finished sculpture, that it is just that—a sculpture. It is the result of a process; it is something which was sculpted from a tree trunk by people with varying degrees of skill and ability to concentrate on their work. If a short interlude of speculation will be allowed, within the generally speculative nature of this section, an account will be essayed of the probable sequence of events by which this image was created. This will be by way of introduction to a discussion of the function of the cavity and of the raised figures/lugs.

Steven Hooper
Production and form

Questions are often posed regarding the tools used to make Polynesian sculptures of this kind; stone or metal? Besides the fact that in the pre-metal era not only stone but shell, bone, sharks’ teeth, pigs’ tusks, coral, fish skin and even breadfruit leaves (as a kind of abrasive “sandpaper”) will have been used at various stages, the answer will largely depend on the age of a sculpture. When A’a was made is unknown, but there was knowledge of metal from wrecks of European ships in the Tuamotus before Samuel Wallis, the first European visitor to Tahiti, arrived in 1767 in the *Dolphin*. Whether these early pieces of metal were used for tools or as exotic valuables is not clear, but once the *Dolphin* was followed by Bougainville’s *Boudeuse* (1768), Cook’s *Endeavour* (1769) and a succession of European vessels thereafter, metal was fed in great quantity into the regional system. Nails, plane blades, hoop iron from casks, chisels and axes were all exchanged for local supplies, favours and curios, and even though European ships may not have touched often, if at all, at some islands, metal tools would have quickly found their way by local canoe transport into the hands of specialist carpenters—canoe builders and image makers—who were working in the service of local and regional chiefs. Given that Rurutu was famous for the quality of its wood products (Joseph Banks noted as much in 1769; Beaglehole 1962[1]:333), it would be surprising if metal tools had not found their way quite quickly into the hands of Rurutuan carpenters who were best able to exploit their transformative and technical properties. It should be remembered that to a certain degree the Australs were satellite islands to the major chiefdoms of Tahiti and Ra’iatea, which would have expected periodic offerings of foods and valuable wood products, including canoes and weapons.

The early iron tools will have speeded up felling and the dressing of timber, but would not have been much use for fine detailed work. Nails would have been of great service as burins, especially useful in making holes in the edges of planks for the binding of plank-built canoes. Nevertheless, until the arrival of sharper steel tools in the early 19th century, local materials such as stone, shell and sharks’ teeth would still have been used for finer work. With respect to A’a, it is difficult to say whether metal tools were used in its manufacture because a sharp-edged stone blade leaves a somewhat similar impact mark to hoop-iron and other types of metal supplied by 18th-century European visitors. However, A’a does not have the crispness of finish of, say, the larger Rarotonga staff god heads which are likely to date to the early 19th century. Close examination of the external and internal surfaces of A’a, and of interior angles such as those beneath the chin and around the figures, inclines me to believe that metal was not used, though this is no more than an informed guess. This would make the image likely to pre-date the 1770s. It could be much older.
Irrespective of the nature of the tools used, there can be no doubt that when the tree for A’a was felled, an act of violence in a “wild” domain, propitiatory offerings and prayers would have been made to the gods of the forest. The process of making this image, transforming a wild raw substance into a domesticated cultural object, would have been ritualised, bearing in mind that a Polynesian definition of ritual is formally organised work. The ultimate purpose of the image was to facilitate productive communications between humans and divine forces whose nature was both powerful and unpredictable. It had to be fit for this role and, in Polynesian terms, this meant that all those engaged in its manufacture would have been subject to restrictions, taboos, in relation to their conduct. Any violations would have incurred penalties, usually propitiatory sacrifices, supplied by the offender in the form of a fine as a substitute for the offender’s own person.

Up in the forest, the leader of the carpenters (who played a priest-like mediating and transformative role) would have selected an appropriate tree with a girth sufficient for the task in hand, yet not so great as to require unnecessarily laborious reduction work. Offerings of food and/or kava and prayers having been made, the tree would then have been felled with large adzes mounted in wooden hafts, possibly with the assistance of fire. Once felled, the upper branches would have been dressed off, with one possibly selected for the back panel, and the trunk may have been left in the forest to season for several months. Seasoning of all but the densest woods is necessary to prevent warping and cracking once carving commences, especially for a canoe hull or hollow image such as this. A’a shows no sign of warping and the only cracks are in the lower part of the panel, where a combination of the thinness of the wood and rough handling is likely to have caused the damage, and at the top of the head, where one would expect a crack or two after such a long life in tropical and temperate climates. Once sufficiently seasoned, some preliminary dressing of the trunk would have been done in the forest, basic shaping and hollowing, to reduce weight and bulk to allow convenient transfer without damage from the forest to the place of final carving. This transfer of the log from the “wild” forest to the “domesticated” zone of human settlement would have been accompanied by further ritual procedures in the form of offerings and prayers, and also possibly ritualised celebrations of capture of the kind performed for war and sacrificial victims. The missionaries were probably not the first people to capture A’a.

In a private and tapu (restricted) area set aside for the work of carving, the specialists would have begun their work with smaller adzes, the blades with bevels straight or curved depending on the area to be worked—the latter for concave surfaces. It has been noted that the widest point of A’a is across the head. This is probably because, counter-intuitively, the head would have been
at the lowest part of the trunk, upside down, so to speak, towards the root and source of the tree. It is likely that several carvers would have undertaken the preliminary work of blocking out the main features of the sculpture, as would have been the case with carving a canoe. Adze-work is arduous in the tropics, especially with stone or shell tools. Younger men with less experience would have done the rough work, passing a quite well blocked-out image to the specialist with responsibility for doing the fine carving and finishing work. This would not only have included carving the figures, but also finishing the excavation of the interior to the desired depth, because one clumsy blow with the adze could split the body. Close inspection of the interior of the cavity shows small careful dubbing marks both across and along the grain. As carving progressed, the community would have provided food for the carpenters, to “feed” the important work, and there would have been further rituals at different production stages. This was certainly the case with canoe building in many parts of Polynesia, where periodic feasts were prepared as offerings to the gods and a means of feeding the workers. Once the sculpture was completed to the satisfaction of the head carpenter, it would have been formally handed over to the chief/priest who had commissioned it on behalf of the polity, with reciprocal offerings being provided as a closing gift to the carpenters. Now A’a the wooden box could be prepared for its important work in the context of Rurutuan cultural and religious life. But what was that work? What was it for?

Function and form

We know what the missionaries, and every subsequent commentator, thought it was for. They thought it was to hold small gods. If we refer to John Williams’ original quotation (1837:44) we are reminded that when exposed at Ra’iatea in August 1821, A’a “was found to be full of small gods; and no less than twenty-four were taken out, one after another, and exhibited to public view”. William Ellis, who, it should be remembered, was not an eye-witness, wrote that “a number of small idols were found in the cavity. They had perhaps been deposited there, to imbibe his supernatural powers, prior to their being removed to a distance, to receive, as his representatives, divine honours” (Ellis 1829[II]:220). The problematic account in the 1822 Transactions also mentions that the cavity (in the front of the sinnet image) “was filled with little gods, or the family gods of the old chiefs, the points of spears, old slings, &c., of ancient warriors” (Transactions 1825:242, also Montgomery 1831[I]:508).

Contrary to an erroneous assumption made by some later commentators, none of these sources mention “figures”, but “gods” and “idols”, so it is not clear if any anthropomorphoid figures were inside A’a, since gods/idols can
be a variety of things made of wood, coir, shell or feathers, including spear heads, slings, bundles and even fly whisk handles. The 1821 contents of A’a are not specifically referred to in the 1826 or 1850s LMS catalogues, nor are more than a few objects attributed to Rurutu. It is likely that many of these “small gods” eventually found their way into the personal possession of Williams, Threlkeld and others, including George Bennet, who was an assiduous collector both on his own and on the LMS’s behalf (Jacobs n.d., Woroncow 1981). Those that have survived are now likely to be scattered among collections. Possible candidates with definite Rurutu or Austral Islands’ characteristics (since they did not have to have been made on Rurutu to have ended up in A’a, such were local exchange relationships) are the whisk handle with a single figure terminal in Auckland, previously in the Oldman Collection (Oldman 2004a:5, 6, Cat. No.389; also Hooper 2006:204) and two spear heads previously in the collections of George Bennet and James Hooper, now in the Musée de Tahiti et des Iles (Phelps 1976:153, Nos 659-60).

William Ellis’s conjecture about imbibing supernatural powers was no doubt based on his knowledge of the pa’iatua rites of the Society Islands relating to the god ‘Oro, in which to’o images of wood, coir and feathers were periodically brought from dispersed locations and placed with a principal to’o image as part of a procedure to re-empower and re-consecrate them (see Babadzan 1993:89-141, Ellis 1829[II]:205-6, Gell 1998:109-15, Henry 1928:157 ff., Kaeppler this volume). This would be a quite reasonable hypothesis if in the normal course of events the “small idols” of which he wrote actually belonged inside A’a. But was this the case? Despite the cultural logic of this possibility, I wish to propose the hypothesis that we have all been put off the scent of the real function of A’a because he arrived with the little gods inside, and everyone has since assumed that this was the natural order of things. However, it is perfectly possible that on the journey from Rurutu to Ra’iatea A’a was used as a convenient box to transport a range of items which had been surrendered by the people of Rurutu as signs of their new allegiance to the Christian god. They did not belong in there. Something else did, which was not given up to the missionaries. What is the evidence that this might be the case? It is the size and shape of the cavity.

The deep excavation of the interior of A’a, including not only the body but the large head, would not have been easily or quickly accomplished with the stone, shell, or perhaps blunt metal tools available in the 18th century. The excavation was thorough and precise, producing a capacious cavity in the head and a near-cylindrical cavity in the body. The back panel is likewise carefully and laboriously shaped, especially the upper part which is internally concave and fits the shoulders and the back of the head. When closed by the panel, the head has a near-spherical interior cavity measuring some 240mm
wide, 220mm high and 200mm deep. The greatest width of the aperture at the back of the head is 195mm. Given that a Polynesian sculptor would not do difficult extra work without a purpose, and that an assortment of “small idols” could be accommodated in a cavity of simple shape, the very specific interior volume of A‘a requires a very specific explanation. This can be provided by the hypothesis that the main function of A‘a was to serve as a reliquary for the skull and long bones of a human being.

A male adult human skull, with the jaw disarticulated, measures about 200mm in depth and 170mm in height and width. The aperture and head cavity in A‘a would accordingly have been large enough to receive a skull wrapped in barkcloth. With respect to the body cavity, this is excavated below the level of the buttocks, which again would have been a technically awkward procedure, undertaken intentionally. An adult human femur, the longest bone in the body, measures about 500mm in length, depending on the height of the individual. The interior body cavity, from internal neck line to base, is c.550mm long and c.200mm wide. The average width of the back aperture is 160mm. Again, several long bones wrapped in barkcloth could have been accommodated within the body. This reliquary explanation would seem to be the only one which can account for the very specific internal shape of the cavity, which would have required such skilled and protracted labour to produce.21

However, if the skull and long bones of a deified ancestor were the original contents of A‘a—and these relics could have been several centuries old and have had a succession of A‘a-type sculptures as their repository—what might have been the attitude and actions of the chiefs or priests who were their hereditary custodians? These were uncertain times for all concerned, without the benefit of the hindsight we now possess. A rational solution for the custodians, under pressure, would have been to remove the sacred relics from their container, store them in a safe place, and hand over the casket because, after all, another of those could always be made, whereas the bones of the deified ancestor were irreplaceable. Evidence that such a course of action complies with local Polynesian practice can be supplied with reference to the bones of Pomare, who died on 7 December 1821. On 14 May 1823 Tyerman and Bennet visited the “sepulchre” of Pomare on Tahiti:

On the floor stands the tomb, a stone structure, with a wooden roof, three feet high, but occupying nearly the whole interior area of the house. Herein is deposited the coffin of Pomare, which is of great size; but it is understood that, since interment, the bones of the deceased king have been removed into another box, which is in the keeping of some of the principal chiefs, that, in case of war breaking out at any future time, these relics may not fall into an enemy’s hands. (Montgomery 1831[II]:36-37)
Whether Pomare’s bones had actually been removed does not alter the fact that it was something which might reasonably have been done under prevailing conditions. Ellis (1829[I]:521, 525) also outlines mortuary practices for high-status people in the Society Islands, stating that after the body was preserved for a period of months, the skull was then kept by the family, wrapped in barkcloth, and secured at all costs against capture by enemies who would desecrate it. With respect to the preservation of the bones in A’a, even Christianised Rurutuans might have colluded in this course of action, because veneration for ancestors was never completely suppressed in Christian Polynesia, being transformed and translated into demonstrations of respect more suited to European tastes. The Rurutuans would have been uncertain about the aims and intentions of the conquering Christians, and what they might do to the bones of enemy gods. Who knows? The bones may well have been placed in another wooden box or old canoe hull and secreted in a cave in the mountains. They may be there now. Perhaps A’a never really left Rurutu after all.

Such a sequence of events would not have been out of character with indigenous warfare practices. One of the main tactics in Polynesian warfare was to disrupt an opponents’ ritual cycle of offerings and sacrifices, thus impairing the mutually supportive relationship between them and their gods, and thereby weakening them. This disruption was achieved by destruction of crops and livestock (the wherewithal for food sacrifices) and the desecration of sacred sites and property. Those killed or taken prisoner, together with important ritual objects, could be fed into the winners’ productive sacrificial cycle by being used in public rituals which at once celebrated the power of one’s own gods while humiliating the enemy, and by implication their gods. The exhibition of idols in the chapel at Ra’iatea may not have been an entirely unfamiliar procedure to a Polynesian audience. One of the reasons why so many important Aotearoa/New Zealand Māori carvings have been found in swamps is because they were placed there for safe-keeping when communities were under attack, lest they be taken as trophies of war.

We will never be sure what exactly occurred on Rurutu during July and early August 1821, but the letter from the two Ra’iatean teachers who returned there with Au‘ura (given in translation in the October 1822 Transactions (1825:239-41) and in Montgomery 1831[I]:503-6), together with the accounts of missionaries who later visited Rurutu, focuses on the evangelical activity of Au‘ura and the two teachers and the mounting of a challenge to taboos and local priests. The influence of the returning party aboard the Hope would have been strong. The island population remained in a state of crisis as a result of the epidemic and population collapse. News of the survival of Au‘ura and his party of over 20 relatives may or may not have reached Rurutu before their return in July (they had left Tubuai, which would have been in regular
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touch with Rurutu, in about February). But even if their survival was known, their return would have been a major event, not lessened by the fact it was aboard a prestigious European vessel and accompanied by two “priests” of the new religion, from Ra’iatea no less, the location of the greatest temple in the region and of the powerful (now Christian) chief Tamatoa. The priests and Au‘ura, who with his wife had learned to read, also brought with them books, the word of God. Given that one of the principal responsibilities of gods, in any religious context in human history, is medical—to preserve the health and welfare of supplicants—the effectiveness of local ritual arrangements on Rurutu would have been under pressure. When under stress, the usual action of a given population is to increase sacrifices to existing gods, on the assumption that human misdemeanour and negligence of ritual duties is at the heart of the matter.

In Polynesia, as elsewhere, such increased sacrifices can take the form of intensified religious activity, songs/hymns, prayers and other offerings, including material manifestations of piety and obedience such as feasts and valuable objects. If these ritual actions prove ineffective, and if persuasive alternatives are available, the population is susceptible to conversion to a new cult or religion. This is most likely what took place on Rurutu. The evidence of the effectiveness of Christianity was there for people to see. They would have been hearing about it for a long time, and especially about the recent conversions of Tamatoa of Ra‘iatea and Pomare of Tahiti, the most influential figures in the region, the latter of whom, it will be recalled, paid Ra‘ivavae and Tubuai a state visit as a Christian chief in 1819. The Ra‘iatean teachers would also have relished the opportunity to lord it over Rurutu, a satellite island to the powerful chiefly centres of Ra‘iatea and Tahiti. The stage was set for a seismic shift in local religious allegiances. It was also known that those back on Ra‘iatea were waiting with anticipation for news of the venture, and not just for news. They wanted proofs of success. They wanted idols.

This was made explicit in a letter dated 4 July 1821 to Reverend George Burder at the LMS in London, in which Lancelot Threlkeld wrote that Captain Grimes in the Hope was leaving for Rurutu, and that:

My boat goes with the ship and we have sent 2 natives and their wives who are to teach the Rurutuans & to read we have supplied them with books... the Chief [Au‘ura] promises their Gods to you we recommend [sic] him not to burn them but send them prisoners to the Society... we send a good boat [crew] over to bring my boat back if they will be able to find the way.

In the event, Captain Grimes left Rurutu shortly after dropping his passengers, though not before he had acquired one idol from Au‘ura, who “after many tears consented that the Idol should be secretly taken away which
was done the same evening and delivered to me. Twas merely a small piece of wood covered with cloth in all about the size of a man’s leg & thigh.”22 The other anticipated “prisoners” had to wait to be sent to Ra’iatea in Threlkeld’s boat. After Grimes’s departure, according to the account of the Ra’iatean teachers, a meeting was held to announce the good news of the Gospel and the intention of the Christian party to transgress certain taboos, notably those relating to sacred places and to women eating “hog” and turtle in the company of men. The local priests threatened that divine retribution would befall those who behaved in such a way, and their credibility, and that of the gods they represented, was put to the test the following day. The fact that no deleterious effects were observed in those who had broken the taboos apparently led to the success of the Christian party and the defeat of the heathen priests. These heathen priests will have been the custodians of important ritual paraphernalia, including “idols”, which it seems they were obliged to relinquish. If, as is probable, A’a was the most important ritual object on Rurutu at the time, his existence will have been well known to senior members of the community. In addition, if John Williams’ information that he was “the ancestor by whom their island was peopled, and who after death was deified” can be believed, then this founding ancestor god image will have been both a principal focus of pre-Christian ritual and a principal target of post-Christian iconoclasm. But Au’ura and the others engaged in this war were under instructions not to destroy but to take prisoners, so although marae were reportedly desecrated and some images no doubt destroyed in the initial zeal of conversion, many other objects, including A’a, were preserved for transfer back to Ra’iatea.

If my reading of events has validity, the Ra’iatean crew of Threlkeld’s boat were then faced with an empty A’a and many other idols of various sizes to transport the 560km back to Ra’iatea in a small open boat (it was not a schooner of the kind the missionaries wanted and eventually got). People who sail regularly know all about the effective stowing of cargo, and a perfectly practical solution would have been to stow as many small items inside A’a as could be accommodated.

Such is the “reliquary” hypothesis, and cognate forms from elsewhere in Eastern Polynesia can be adduced as supporting evidence. A number of Hawaiian wooden images have cavities in the head and back suitable for the preservation of human remains (hair, bones, teeth) and other items equivalent to relics, such as feathers and shell, though not for a bone as large as a human skull. It is, however, possible that these cavities were not for memorial items but for the personal leavings (e.g., hair and nail clippings) of sorcery victims.23 Nevertheless, skulls were preserved in Hawai’i, because we know of anthropomorphic coir cord caskets which enclose the skull and long bones of named chiefs. Two examples were once kept in the Bishop Museum in Honolulu (Fig. 15; Hiroa 1957:575-77, Hooper 2006:44, 288). In addition,
in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which was colonised from south-central Polynesia around A.D.1200, there was a tradition of making anthropomorphic wood burial caskets for the deposition of chiefly bones (Fig. 16), including skulls, called *waka tupapaku* or *papa koiwi* (Fox 1983; Hooper 2006:121; Mead 1984: Plates 31-32, 184, 194). From those which survive, and we must always remind ourselves when dealing with Polynesian ritual artefacts that we have a very incomplete corpus, we see that they too are hollowed at the back and have a panel secured with fibre ties. No example with a hollow head appears to exist, but the cognate relationship in terms of function and form between A’a and these caskets is self-evident. Canoe burial was also widely practiced in Polynesia, where the metaphor of the body and the canoe was ubiquitous. The case for A’a as a reliquary seems compelling.

Figure 15. (left): Casket made of plaited coir cord, said to contain the skull and bones of Liloa, a 16th century chief of Hawai‘i Island, h. 88.9cm; stolen from the Bishop Museum in 1994. (Photo: University of Hawaii Committee for the Preservation of Hawaiian Language and Culture. Courtesy Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu.)

Figure 16. (right): Casket figure/burial chest. Aotearoa/New Zealand; h. 93cm; British Museum, 1950, Oc.11,1. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)
Before we turn to some other voices from Rurutu, besides that of A‘a, a few thoughts will be offered on the last remaining feature of the sculpture which has not been discussed, the lugs, composed of 14 arched figures, which are very specifically distributed over the head and body—at the ears, nose, breasts, sides, hips and back panel. Bearing in mind the presence of the six pairs of small holes around the back panel, which are clearly there to secure the panel in place, what is the purpose of these lugs, which again will have required skilled and dedicated labour to produce? (Figs 12-14). From what we know of god images generally from Polynesia, to be complete and consecrated or “active” they needed to be oiled, bound with coir or hair cordage decorated with feathers, teeth or shells, and also wrapped in barkcloth or matting. These arrangements were similar to those pertaining to human beings who were being ritually consecrated or displayed—chiefs and priests—whose bodies were also anointed with scented coconut oil, bound with necklaces, loin cloths, armlets and headaddresses made of coir or hair cordage (also decorated with feathers and pendants of shell, bone or ivory), and clothed in cloaks of painted barkcloth or of matting or netting decorated with feathers. These personages became constructed artefacts, equivalent to and personating or embodying divine beings in the same way as more conventional artefacts. It is barely conceivable that A‘a would not have been treated in the same way. The slightly curious patina, matt in some places, more polished in others, may be the result of ancient oiling, although in the absence of pre-1908 photographs we do not know to what extent the process of making a mould affected the surface texture and colour. The various lugs would therefore have been for ritual bindings, those at the ears and nose probably for securing a headdress or head ornament, those on the chest for securing lateral bindings which also passed through the upper lugs on the back panel. Those on the hips, sides, penis and lower back panel were possibly for an elaborate loin-cloth binding. The maro ‘ura (feathered loincloth) of the Society Islands was an important part of the regalia of divine chiefs (Rose 1978), and it is likely that a similar elaborate garment might have been worn on Rurutu by A‘a, the founding ancestor, and by the paramount chief as his living human embodiment.

The metaphor of cords, ties and bindings is widespread in Polynesia. It is used in speech concerning the importance of kinship relations and of the complementary relationship between chiefs and people, and indeed, between chiefs, people, ancestral gods and sources of life. The metaphor is given material manifestation in the various bindings which tie ritual objects and artefactual persons. In this way, actual and metaphorical bindings are very important in socio-cosmological relationships in Polynesia, and we find these concerns manifested in the form and materials of objects. In the case of A‘a, the cords and other wrappings would have bound the figures to the body of the ancestor god during ritual binding sequences that fixed prayers
and invocations, offerings of life-giving words and breath, into the material focus of ritual attention. The importance of such procedures is emphasised in the paper by Adrienne Kaeppler in this volume.

Possibly connected to wrappings and bindings are the remains of a number of nails at various places on the lower part of Aʻa’s body and another at the top of the detachable panel. Whether these nails were inserted before transfer to the missionaries or after is not known. They appear to be of iron and are of different sizes, and if they had been inserted by the missionaries to secure decorous covering for the genitals one would have expected a series of nails of standard size in regularly spaced positions. It seems more likely that they were placed there on Rurutu some time after the 1760s when nails became widely available in the region as a result of visits by European ships. Successive ritual unwrapping and wrapping of Aʻa might have provided occasions for securing a head ornament and lower body bindings with the newly-acquired and highly valuable nails. Around these feathered cord bindings would have been wrapped sheets of barkcloth. It is perhaps ironic that the discreet coverings (possibly of barkcloth) supplied by the LMS to protect the sensitivities of a European audience (see Figs 6-7), would have been inadequate for Polynesian tastes. If and when Aʻa was exhibited publicly in an indigenous context, its wood body would almost certainly have been hidden from direct gaze. Periodically, it is likely that the bindings and cloth would have been renewed and refreshed during rites of reconsecration. Women would have supplied offerings of bark cloth for this wrapping purpose, since the contributions of both male and female labour were usually necessary to create a complete god image. This reflects the importance in Polynesia of female agency, in practice and metaphorically, in channelling, capturing and controlling divine chiefly power.

It is not clear whether Aʻa came to Raʻiatea with any cord bindings or wrappings. If so, that might help explain the riddle of the “sinnet” image reported in the problematic 1822 Transactions account. It is more likely that Aʻa would have been stripped of its bindings on Rurutu, both as a necessary preliminary to the removal of the relics, and also as a technique for deconsecrating important ritual objects, so that they might be handled without cosmological complications. We know from a contemporary event in Mangaia in the Cook Islands that unwrapping was an act of desecration. The LMS missionary William Wyatt Gill reported that in 1826:

The carved figures of the gods, stored in the god house..., were collected... and carried in procession to the house of Davida [the local Christian deacon], where they were surrendered to him. The bark cloth wrappings were cast away and in this way the gods were desecrated. (Hiroa 1993:17-18)
The Puta Tupuna and memories of A‘a

Pierre Vérin (1969:156-58) and Alain Babadzan (1985) both discuss what they respectively refer to as parau tupuna and puta tupuna ‘knowledge of the ancestors/elders’, which are registers surviving on Rurutu that date from the late 19th century when oral traditions were first written down. Babadzan, reflecting on the issues associated with the transcription of oral traditions and their relationship both to oral tradition and to “history”, makes the following point:

One cannot insist too strongly when viewing the problems posed by the puta tupuna that these texts represent for their owners, as well as for the community, the conservation, the memory of the past. I have spoken about the practical importance that these documents have on the islanders’ lives, but it is also important to underline that they are witnesses (almost the sole witnesses) not only of the history of this island but also of a specific account of the things of the past, an account which is dated and marked by the historical conditions under which it was written. (Babadzan 1985:190)

The story which I have hitherto recounted about the history and identity of A‘a has been drawn from other witnesses, from the missionaries and their associates, and from the body of A‘a itself. This is not the story (or stories) to be found in the puta tupuna. There, A‘a does indeed feature, but in an account of events that combines elements of indigenous myth with introduced Christian and global geographical knowledge. In many of the puta tupuna A‘a appears in the myth of Amaiterai, which for Babadzan (1985:184) “provides an opportunity to witness the grafting, the interpolation, of new themes and preoccupations on to the structure of a traditional myth”. According to this myth, which takes place in the period before the arrival of the missionaries, the hero Amaiterai, on instruction from his father, the king, travels in search of the “God of wisdom” and eventually reaches Britain (Peretane), where he finds his quest to be in fact a Trinity, which are given Rurutuan names. On his return, Amaiterai becomes king and establishes a new cult of the “God of wisdom”, which the people wish to see, so he makes an idol in the image of the god he had seen in Britain. This is A‘a. The various versions of the puta tupuna relate that there are 39 or 37 small figures on A‘a (not 30), and that these represent each of the ancient lineages of Rurutu. A‘a is also said to have contained not 24 gods, but only three, the Trinity encountered in Britain, and that the wood figure is only the outer covering for these divine beings. For Babadzan, the status of A‘a is thus rendered ambiguous since, being only a container, the image is not strictly an idol and, because its contents have strong Christian associations, not strictly pagan. In contemporary Christian
Rurutu, A‘a is regarded with pride as a national emblem, even appearing on tee-shirts, and it has escaped the censure normally associated with idolatry by being reclassified as an agent associated with the introduction of key Christian principles, such as the Holy Trinity. It is perhaps not by chance that its replica is currently housed in the Mairie at Moera‘i in a special glazed cabinet along with other markers of Rurutu achievements (Fig. 10).

For a very long time Rurutuans did not know what happened to A‘a after its departure. They did not have a resident European missionary, and news, if any, of the nature of the LMS museum will have been patchy and confusing. Its memory was sufficiently strong, however, for it to have been incorporated so prominently and specifically into the puta tupuna recorded some 70 or more years later. This is perhaps a measure of the indigenous importance of the image, and lends credence to the information reported by John Williams that it was Rurutu’s “founding ancestor”. It will have contained the bones of a revered ancestor of one of the senior clans, or ‘opi, on Rurutu, possibly that of the victors of the pre-European dynastic war which resulted in a unified polity (Vérin 1969:280).

Nowadays, the people of Rurutu know that the original image is in the British Museum, and British Museum staff have witnessed emotional scenes as Rurutu visitors have stood in the presence of an image which is so powerfully connected to their history and identity. There is indeed a curious symmetry that A‘a now resides in London, the capital of Peretane, the place that according to the puta tupuna inspired his original creation.

GOD IMAGES AS CONTAINERS—WHAT’S IN A BOX?

One of the aims of this paper, stated at the outset, was “to bring the ineffable into sharper focus”. Although this is to some degree an absurd notion, the implication that A‘a is beyond encompassment by words and perceptually unclear holds good. No matter how many words are written, A‘a and its kind will always remain beyond the imagined rational grasp of the commentator because it was never their destiny to be explained, to be disposed of by words, but rather to evoke, to act upon and stimulate those who would encounter them. Beyond, and greater than, the intellectual apprehensions of this image are the emotional, visceral, “spiritual” apprehensions which people have experienced in Rurutu, Ra‘iatea, London, Norwich, or indeed anywhere, either directly or vicariously via replicas or pictorial images. Such is the formal composition of the sculpture that it is not only words which cannot encompass it, but the eye. In terms of visual perception the eye cannot engage both the general and the particular in the same instant. In apprehending the whole, the detail is lost, and in apprehending the detail, as the eye moves
from eyes, ears, mouth, breasts to knees, the whole dissolves. There is a kind of kinetic *trompe l’oeil* in play. It is distracting. It confuses the eye, it puzzles the brain. And this is before, from a European perspective, we know anything about its supposed nature.

As we have seen, such intelligent and visually sensitive people as Edmund Leach and Alfred Gell, who looked upon A’a not with a missionary gaze, have been enchanted. Inherent in the sculpture are dualities and qualities which if comprehended unconsciously are yet apprehended emotionally—the human/phallus switch and the whole/part relationship. Gell (1998:137-39) was intrigued by the connection between the figures outside and the 24 images of gods inside, which he characterised as “an assemblage of homunculi”. As we have seen, he was making a false assumption about the interior gods, which invalidates that particular argument, but his broader propositions about A’a and other idols contained in his stimulating chapter “The Distributed Person” in *Art and Agency* (1998:96-154) repay careful reading, as he rescues idolatry from paganism and places it at the heart of much human religious activity. There he elaborates his thesis that images are “person-like: that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency. In this context, image-worship has a central place, since nowhere are images more obviously treated as human persons than in the context of worship” (Gell 1998:96). Of course, A’a technically does not exist without a human audience to make representations about it—intellectual, emotional, oral, written, pictorial—and to engage with it. This is where meaning resides in all its flexible complexity. In a last foray into verbal representation, while also attempting a Polynesian perspective, some observations will be made about the status of A’a as both a god image and as a box, an empty box, but one which in many respects remains full.

*Metaphorical and metonymic containers*

The status of god images as actual or metaphorical containers of divinity has been of concern to practitioners of religion throughout human history, not just to Rurutuans. Never mind how small the island from which it came, A’a encapsulates and embodies a global human preoccupation with the manner in which powerful forces, outside of, but partially amenable to, human control, can be given material form for the purposes of complementary interactions and exchanges. Such theophanic issues, the means by which gods reveal themselves to humans, have ever been at the heart of religious practice and religious dispute, as the efficacy and acceptability of “graven images” has been debated and discussed, fought over and died for. Images, in addition to ideas, have been a battleground for conflicting cultural representations of the relationship between humans as social encultured beings and those
ultimately unknowable powers or forces which are deemed responsible for life and, in particular, for agency and causation. We have seen how idols were used as strategic pieces in a political-cosmological chess game played out by Polynesians and Europeans alike in early 19th century Polynesia. The Tahitian chief Pomare, the great missionary hero of 1816 for his oft-cited surrender of idols, died unlamented in 1821 when Lancelot Threlkeld, having to face the truth of the sophisticated tactical religiosity of the man, wrote to the LMS on 8 July 1822:

With respect to him I can only say that not one native in this Island [Ra‘iatea], whose conduct is at all consistent with the Gospel, laments his loss, but rather consider it as a merciful interposition of God in removing him, in short his whole aim was to grasp at all the Islands under the pretence of Christianizing them [emphasis mine].

Having the courage of my convictions, the status of A‘a as a reliquary will now be taken as given. A reliquary is a very particular type of god-image because it is an actual as well as a metaphorical container. It is the permanent repository of divine substance, not, as with other images, the temporary repository of divine presence. With respect to the latter, there is ample evidence of negligent, even disrespectful, behaviour towards images when not in use, when not sacralised in the context of important rituals (for example, Neich in this volume for Tonga; Sahlins (1995:271) for Hawai‘i). This can be adduced as evidence of their periodic nature as sacred containers since, along with certain categories of human person, they are bound and wrapped and “decorated” to personate and embody divinity, and on those occasions are, as for Gell’s idols, not “a ‘depiction’ of the god, but the body of the god in artefact form” (Gell 1998:99). For this sort of image, the god can be summoned, coaxed or entreated by offerings to enter the image for the purpose of communication with humans, be this for medical, divinatory, military or other reasons. Once the human/god exchanges are completed, the god retires to a distance and its temporary vessel returns to “normal” mundane life. But images which are reliquaries are different. The ancestral god, in metonymical “relic” form, in which the part (skull, bones, hair, teeth) stands for the whole, does not go away. It remains in the special container that has been fashioned for it according to prevailing cultural styles. In the case of A‘a, this style involved a wood version of the “whole” of which the bones were a durable surviving “part”.26

The negligence of missionaries and zeal of local pastors has meant that we have no ethno-historical sources to help us with an understanding of A‘a’s role and status in Rurutu. If we turn for some assistance to pertinent comparative information from the Society Islands and elsewhere in Eastern
Polynesia, we find that the preservation of the skull and occasionally other bones of chiefs was of great importance. Since the visits of Cook we have numerous reports of post-mortem preservation and exposure of bodies in the Society Islands, and William Ellis recorded how for Tahiti:

The family, district, or royal maraes were the general depositories of the bones of the departed... in times of war, the victors sometimes, not only despoiled the temples of the vanquished, and bore away their idol, but robbed the sacred enclosure of the bones of celebrated individuals. These spoils were appropriated to what the nation considered the lowest degradation, by being converted into chisels or borers, for the builders of canoes and houses, or transformed into fishing-hooks. (Ellis 1829[I]:524-25)

Moerenhout (1993:278) confirms the importance of secondary burial practices for skulls, and that “[s]ometimes, however (and this occurred especially for the chiefs and for the first families), the body well wrapped in cloth, was carried entire into the tombs, where they were sheltered from all affront”. There was clearly a horror of losing control of these important relics and the “affront” or desecration of them by enemies. In the Society Islands we have only sketchy evidence of the existence of special reliquaries for bones, but this does not mean they did not exist. Joseph Banks, in 1769, observed that for a chief “his Scull is preserved and being wrappd up in fine Cloth is plac’d in a kind of case made for that purpose which stands in the marai” (Beaglehole 1962[I]:378). As we have seen, Pomare’s bones were reputed in 1823 to have been “removed into another box”, and his bones, those of a god-chief, could be regarded as equivalent to those which once resided inside A‘a. There were certainly in Tahiti special containers, also marvels of skilled carpentry, for keeping to'o images (which Babadzan (1993:123) considers the equivalent of relics) and other valuables (Hooper 2005, 2006:179, 181; Kaeppler, this volume).

The observations of Moerenhout (1993:222-33) can also help us understand the status of A‘a, since he is explicit about there being in the Society Islands two classes of gods, the major “national” gods (“Atouas”; atua), such as Ta‘aroa and ‘Oro (for the first of whom, being so remote, there were no dedicated marae), and private “family” gods (“Oromatouas”; ‘oromatua), of which the main kind were the “souls or spirits of dead men and women in each family”. This division into major and local gods can be found in the Hawaiian distinction between akua and ‘aumakua, which, although subject to similar underlying ritual procedures, can be categorised as national and local in character. Valeri (1985:30) analyses these two types, characterising the second as being “formed from the dead, that above all they are human ancestors”. Sahlins (1995:171ff., 252-55), in his flensing of the carcase of Obeyesekere’s
Embodying Divinity

Apotheosis of Captain Cook (1992), makes perceptive observations about the relationships between categories of gods, images and persons. If we take a regional perspective, it is likely that on peripheral Rurutu, with its relatively small population, the public cult associated with national gods (such as ‘Oro) was limited, whereas the cult associated with family ancestors (equivalent to ‘oromatua and ‘aumakua) was much more prominent and locally important. This would account for the name A’a being absent from lists of gods elsewhere, since he was Rurutu’s ancestor and not anyone else’s.

A picture emerges for A’a, even if we set aside Williams’ report, of it being the repository of the relics of a historically important ancestral personage, rather than an image of a cosmologically important major deity such as Ta’aroa. Bodily relics of Ta’aroa, a deity characterised by remoteness from daily human concerns, did not exist, and insofar as he was represented it was as a god house (fare atua), a container for relic equivalents of the body of his “son” ‘Oro, objects we know as to’o. A’a belongs to a system in which the actual remains of human bodies (relics), substitute bodies composed of wood, coir and feathers (to’o), and the living bodies of specific human personages (chiefs/priests) are all related in a cosmological economy of equivalence whereby humans can engage with divinity for the purposes of human benefit. To a certain extent, A’a can be regarded as equivalent to the famous Tahitian god house (fare atua) in the British Museum (LMS 120, see Kaeppler this volume, Figs 4, 6), the one a transformation of the other, with A’a containing the human relics of a divine personage connected by actual descent, while the fare atua contained the “artificial” relics of a divine personage connected by putative descent. The one related to a local “family” cult while the other participated in the rituals of a “national” cult, but the underlying pattern of structural and structuring relationships was the same. It is significant that no to’o has ever been found to contain human bones (although some contain sacrificial materials such as hair and teeth). This is because the bones of ‘Oro do not exist, except in wooden form as the core of certain types of to’o.\(^27\)

So, if relics were deified substance appropriate for ritual attention, where does this leave the container in which they are kept? What is the nature of the relationship between the container and the contained? Are the bones A’a or is the box A’a? Does association through physical contact between divine substance and its container lend the latter a permanent sanctity when it is doing its appointed job, and, in addition, does it have a residual sanctity when it has become separated from that which it originally enclosed? Does a reliquary embody divinity only in as far as it em-bodies the relics of a divine personage? When empty, does a reliquary then become equivalent to the type of image which is a metaphorical container, with potential for temporary sanctity, but not sacred as a permanent condition? Is A’a, which
was at one time in contact with the bones of the deified ancestor, a god image or a redundant box, whose only significance is as an object of aesthetic interest? Many questions remain, but we have seen that, for Rurutu people today, A‘a the sculpture seems to have an ambiguous, though celebrated, status as both indigenous and Christian. For Rurutuans of the 1820s, it was ultimately an expendable container, a key token in the strategic management of the unpredictable and traumatic circumstances in which the Rurutu people found themselves, caught between the rock of an epidemic and the hard place of Pomare’s and Tamatoa’s imperial Christianising ambitions. The LMS missionaries imagined they were in control of the evangelical process, but, as in Fiji, Tonga, Hawai‘i, the Cooks Islands and elsewhere, the sophistication of indigenous strategies was way beyond what the missionaries conceived, or were willing to concede.

What is the status of A‘a in relation to other reliquaries? In Christian practice, do the successively larger containers of the relics of St Peter, culminating in St Peter’s itself, have sacred status? The same question can be applied to the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, supposedly containing the remains of St James, or the Temple of the Tooth (of the Buddha) in Kandy, Sri Lanka, or again the five Tang Dynasty reliquary boxes which were made to contain a finger bone of the Buddha (Michaelson 1999:160-62). Does physical contact with divine relics, rather than just proximity to them, confer sanctity? This would appear to be the status of pieces of the True Cross, of the thorns from Jesus’s crown and the Turin Shroud, which become relics and the focus of pilgrimage as a result of physical contact. This would seem to be the condition of A‘a. It was sacralised by physical contact with divine relics and by the technical processes of binding, to control, and wrapping, to conceal, in a verbal and theatrical performance of the kind to which Adrienne Kaeppler refers in her paper in this volume. A‘a was then desacralised—or desecrated—by unwrapping, unbinding and removal of the sacred relics.

And yet, and yet… A‘a has to be more than a sloughed skin, a dépouille. Such extraordinary care was devoted to its form and appearance that it has an enduring importance of its own, not just because of its erstwhile contents. It seems to me, all in all, that there is more to A‘a than meets the eye.

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NOTES

1. Because of the uncertainty, discussed below, associated with the name ‘Aa’ as first published by the Reverend John Williams, the proper transcription of this word is problematic. The English missionaries spoke fluent Tahitian by 1821 (Williams had arrived in the Society Islands in 1817) and they well understood the role of the glottal stop (‘) between or before vowels, though they did not mark it in their writings as linguists do now. Thus Taaroa was given for Ta’aroa, Raiatea for Ra’iatea, etc. The glottal stop in Tahitian, Marquesan, Tongan and some other Polynesian languages, including Rurutuan, is an aspirated sound which, in cognate languages, is pronounced as the consonants k, h, f, n or ng. Williams’ use of the double ‘a’ would have been to stress the distinctiveness of the two vowel sounds as he heard them, so that Aa would more correctly be written in Rurutuan as A’a (Vérin 1969:283), or even ‘A’a (Babadzan 1985). A’a is used here.

2. It carries the registration number LMS 19 at the British Museum. Its dimensions are: 117.0cm high; 36.0cm wide at the widest point (across the head); 30.5cm deep at the head.

3. Official histories of the LMS were written by Ellis (1844) and Lovett (1899). Gunson (1978) and Sivasundaram (2005) have published recent scholarly assessments of the South Seas mission.

4. This man’s name is consistently spelt Aura in the missionary sources. For the reasons given in Note 1, this would be more correctly rendered as Au’ura, the form used by Vérin (1969:206) although Lavondès (1996:315) uses Aura. Au’ura is used here.

5. All references to unpublished letters and manuscript accounts are to original documents held in the Council for World Mission collections at the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London: South Seas/Incoming Correspondence, Box 3B. I am indebted to Maia Jessop, a doctoral student in the Sainsbury Research Unit, for providing me with a synopsis of some of these documents, and to Geoffrey Roper at SOAS for facilitating photocopies of them during the closure of the CWM collections for refurbishment.

6. The Museum opened in 1814, mainly with natural history and ethnographic specimens rather than idols. Sujit Sivasundaram (2005:177-201) has discussed the importance of the LMS Museum, including A’a, in relation to contemporary scientific and religious attitudes towards South Sea Islanders.

7. A letter in the archives of 8 July 1822, written by Threlkeld, reports that Ellis and Tyerman spent the night at Ra’iatea on 29 January 1822 on their way from
Huahine to Borabora to attend the inauguration of a new chapel. The Rurutu idols were still at Ra’iatea because in the same letter Threlkeld mentions that they were exhibited again at the 1822 May annual missionary meeting at Ra’iatea, before being dispatched to England in July of that year. Williams was not present at this second exhibition of idols, yet he incorporated speeches made on that occasion (recorded by Threlkeld in his letter of 8 July 1822) as if they had been made during the August 1821 exhibition (Williams 1837:44-45).

8. The only other reference to such an anthropomorphic image comes from Cook’s first voyage in 1769, when Banks saw a large “figure of a man made of Basket work” (Beaglehole 1962[I]302); see also Cook in Beaglehole (1968:111-12). On Tahiti in 1792, William Bligh saw the body of a human sacrifice contained in an “outer basket”, but its form is not mentioned (Oliver 1988:231).

9. A plate of artefacts published in Lesson (1839[I]: opp.388) shows a profile view of A’a, taken from Ellis’s 1829, Volume II frontispiece. Other objects in the Lesson plate derive from Ellis’s frontispiece, Duperrey’s 1822-25 voyage and the 1818 Missionary Sketches illustrating Pomare’s “family idols”.

10. Thomas Blossom, a carpenter employed by the LMS, probably made the coffin for the “Gods”, since he referred to it in a letter of his own of 5 July 1822 (Sivasundaram 2005:167, 185).

11. In his book-length eulogy to Williams, John Campbell (1842:19) relates the story of the exhibition of idols: “The national god of Rurutu attracted chief notice. The proper name of this monster-idol was Legion; he was the insular god of gods; with gods he was bedecked externally, and with gods he was filled.” It will not be necessary to add Legion to the present discussion.

12. To add to the linguistic mix, Ellis (1829[II]:193) refers to the “shell” of Ta’aroa as “paa” (*pa’a*), and *‘a’apu* is another Tahitian word for shell, being a reduplication of *‘apu*, meaning hollow. To end this discussion on a mischievous note, if the word *‘a’ata*, meaning box, has any relevance, it is possible that Williams was told something like: “This is the box for the bones of our deified ancestor”, which became “This is Box, the deified ancestor.” Later Ellis says, “I’ve never heard of Box, I think it must be Ta’aroa the creator god. Look at all those little figures.”

13. Jill Hasell (2004) of the British Museum delivered a paper on this subject at a conference at the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, in May 2004. I am very grateful to Jill for assistance with examining A’a and other LMS material, and also for supplying copies of correspondence, courtesy of the Department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum, relating to the making of moulds and casts of LMS objects (see below).

14. I remember seeing the bronze in 1982 in the hall of Moore’s house, where it could be viewed from the long sitting room. The plaster cast used for casting the bronze is unpainted and remains at the Henry Moore Foundation in England. Apparently Moore at one time had a second, painted, plaster cast which he gave to Kenneth Clark (information courtesy of Michael Phipps, Henry Moore Foundation). This last may now be at Saltwood Castle in Kent, the Clark family home. Moore (1981:82-85) illustrates a number of close-up details of the figures on A’a.
15. I am grateful to Maia Jessop for this information and for pictures of the cast in its ‘trophy cabinet’ at the Mairie in Moera’i.

16. I am indebted to Hermione Waterfield for providing a written account of the history of this cast in April 2007. In brief, the story is as follows. The mould for A’a still existed in December 1984 when Hermione Waterfield heard about it at the Museum of Mankind’s Christmas party in London. She had visited Rurutu in 1983 and had been so touched by the gracious treatment she received there that, on hearing of the existence of the mould for A’a, she resolved to commission a cast to be made which she could bequeath to the people of the island. She ordered one from the Cast Department at the British Museum, and it was duly made in 1985, delivered to her flat and painted there by a British Museum technician. There it remained until 1989 when her friend the collector Billy McCarty-Cooper, then terminally ill, begged her to let him have it for his house on Oriole Drive in West Hollywood. To this Hermione consented on condition that he specified in his will that the cast should go to Rurutu on his death. McCarty-Cooper died in 1991 and the executors of his estate eventually sent the cast to Rurutu, where it is now kept at the Mairie. In 2004 Manuia Atapo knew it had been donated by a “Mr Cooper”, but why it had been sent he did not know. Copies of Waterfield’s document are now on file at the British Museum and at the Mairie on Rurutu. Around 1986 the Cast Department at the British Museum was closed and the casting of replicas was subcontracted to a company in Birmingham, who acquired the moulds.

17. These are too numerous to cite, but early illustrations appear in Edge-Partington’s *Album* (1890: Plate 20), Ratzel’s *The History of Mankind* (1896[I]:312; as “Tahitian”), Pijoán’s *Historia General del Arte* (1931[I]: fig. 113; as “Tangaroa, dios de los polinesios de Hawai” [!]) and both editions of the British Museum’s *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* (1910: Plate VII, 1925: Plate IX), where it is called “Tangaroa Upao Vahu, the Polynesian sea-god”. A recent brief overview of A’a was written by Julian Harding (1994).

18. See Danielsson et al. (1972: No. 151), Rubin (1984:330-32) and Hooper (2006:194-95) for catalogues of the three loan exhibitions. At the moment of writing, A’a is in the stores of the British Museum, awaiting a further visit to Paris for a second showing of *Pacific Encounters* at the Musée du Quai Branly in 2008, before, it is hoped, being installed in a long-awaited permanent Pacific gallery at the British Museum in Bloomsbury.

19. A wood test, if approved, would resolve the matter of the species from which A’a is made. A less likely alternative is breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*). Many Society Islands’ figures, drums, boxes, seats and headrests are made from a pale to mid-brown wood (Hooper 2006:172-81). This is likely to be *puia* or breadfruit, but because varying degrees of ageing, decay and patination make visual identification difficult, only scientific testing can provide certainty.

21. Anne Lavondès (1996: 320) mentions the possibility that A’a could have acted as a reliquary, but in the context of discussing another object which might have held “plumes, cheveux, dents”, and she makes no mention of bones. Her article came to my notice some time after my original presentation of the reliquary theory at the 2001 William Fagg Memorial lecture.

22. Letter from Grimes at Rurutu, 8 July 1821, to Williams and Threlkeld, which is included in their *Communication* about Rurutu of 18 October 1821. This idol Grimes took to England and its whereabouts are now unknown, though it is possibly the wood object partially wrapped in plaited coir cordage now in Auckland (Oldman Collection No. 425; 57.1cm long; Oldman 2004a:4, 13, No. 425), which if wrapped in barkcloth would be about the right size. If Au‘ura had intended it for Williams, Grimes may have left it in England to await his return. This happened in 1834, and in about 1835 Williams gave at least three objects to the Reverend E.S. Prout, the Oldman/Auckland image among them. Vérin (1969:283) suggests that the “rude figure, made of platted sinnet” in the problematic 1822 *Transactions* could be the Oldman/Auckland image, but this is unlikely.

23. See Hiroa (1957:472-75) and Cox and Davenport (1988: Nos A4, back cavity with holes for securing a cover; A9, back cavity with holes for a cover; A11, head cavity (found with a skull); A13, back cavity; A24, head cavity).

24. Examination with Maia Jessop in August 2006 identified the following nail positions. Lower left shin; lower left calf; right thigh just above knee; lower abdomen between central and proper right figure; lower proper left side to right of figure; lower back to left of cavity edge (these last three line up horizontally); bottom of panel to right of bottom figure; centre top of panel, near the edge.

25. Marshall Sahlins (1981:117) provides an analysis of female agency in chiefly installation rites in Western Polynesia (Lau, Eastern Fiji), incorporating data supplied by the present author (then under the name Phelps). See Hooper (2006:37-42) for a brief review of the importance of male/female complementary relationships in Polynesian ritual life, and the implications of this for understanding the concepts widely known as *mana*, *tapu* and *noa*.

26. This parallels the 15th-century bejewelled silver reliquary for the skull of St Ursula in the Treasury of the Cathedral/Mezquita in Cordoba, in which the skull is enclosed in a head-and-shoulders ‘portrait’ representation of the Saint with hinged cranial lid. An important cross-cultural study, and exhibition, of relics and reliquaries was produced by Yves Le Fur (1999), which includes a reliquary for “another” skull of St Ursula (pp.172-73).

27. If this analysis is valid, such objects as Rarotongan staff gods and Austral Islands’ drums and fly whisks can be viewed as local manifestations of a widespread type of Polynesian ritual artefact known as *to‘o* in Tahiti.