
JAMES L. FLEXNER  
*Australian National University*

Historical anthropology has been a particularly productive field of scholarship in Polynesia. Scholars such as Marshall Sahlins, Roger Green, Greg Dening, Valerio Valeri and Patrick Kirch have made ample use of historical, ethnographic and archaeological evidence from the region to understand the complex relationships between history, structure and agency. Jeffrey Sissons’ new book adds another valuable perspective to this rich tradition in his exploration of the “Polynesian iconoclasm”, a series of religious upheavals that took place on islands across the region beginning with Mo’orea and the Society Islands in 1815, later paralleled in Hawai’i and the southern Cook Islands. Reverberations from these events would inflect religious practice across the 19th century. Central to Sissons’ argument is his introduction of the term “rituopraxis”. Rituopraxis builds on Marshall Sahlins’ concept of mythopraxis but prioritises “the structure of practice over the structure of myth” to understand the behaviour of historical actors (p. 3). For his understanding of practice as it relates to rituopraxis, Sissons draws on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, which has become something of a requisite signifier for anthropologists working to understand the relationship of everyday action and experience to historical change. The near-ubiquity of *habitus* in historical anthropology reflects something of a consensus in the discipline about the importance of everyday dispositions or habits and human agency for understanding sometimes dramatic historical events. Sissons makes a compelling argument that both chiefly and commoner *habitus*, as expressed in everyday action and ritual innovation, was central to the historical events he explores in this book. For Polynesian people, historical change was structured by cosmological beliefs, as well as the everyday dispositions that shaped their actions in relation to mythological and ritual structures.

With the theoretical background in place, Sissons turns to an annual cycle of ritual life which will be familiar to scholars of Polynesia: the seasonal division of time as related to the position of the constellation Pleiades. Sissons describes “Pleiades above” as a time of “communitas”, marked by rites called *matahiti* in Tahitian and *makahiki* in Hawaiian (it is presumed a similar term would have existed for the Cook Islands, but it is not known). Pleiades above was marked as a season of games, dancing, tribute collection and a general relaxation of social *mores*. In contrast, “Pleiades below” saw the re-establishment of hierarchy and the rule of law, and the return of the gods, marked in Tahiti by a rite called *pa’iattua* or god-wrapping, during which the images of ‘Oro and Tane were renewed, and in Hawai’i by the re-opening of the *luakini* or war temples associated with the god Ku. Polynesian societies thus divided their year into two seasons: one of relative egalitarianism and freedom, Pleiades above, and one of hierarchy and strict enforcement of rules, Pleiades below. This cycle was vital to the annual renewal of *mana*, the power of the gods that brought life to Polynesian societies each year.
This structure of annual renewal was not without historical dynamism before the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific. However, historical anthropologists in the region have long acknowledged that European contacts were often associated with major historical events shaped by the mythopraxis or rituopraxis of Polynesian people, what Sahlins termed the “structure of the conjuncture”. Again Sissons acknowledges that he is building on Sahlins’ work when addressing the central historical problem of the book, which concerns the apparent abandonment of indigenous religion in the Society Islands, Hawai‘i and the southern Cook Islands over a relatively short span of decades in the early to mid-1800s, followed by a period of intense church-building. Sissons begins with the island of Mo‘orea, and the would-be king Pomare, where he sees the first of this series of “Polynesian iconoclasm”. Pomare had ambitions of becoming paramount of the Society Islands and Tahiti, and was attempting to use a strategy of alliances with priests who served the god ‘Oro to advance his goals. Eventually, an alliance with the foreign god Jehovah provided an opportunity to succeed where the ‘Oro strategy had not. The outcome was the burning of religious images, and the abandonment of the marae in a series of dramatic ritual challenges to the old order beginning in 1815, a pattern which quickly spread from Mo‘orea to neighbouring Tahiti, Ra’iatea and Huahine. Similar patterns would follow in Hawai‘i, with the breaking of kapu‘i in 1819, and in the southern Cook Islands in 1823. These iconoclasm are interpreted as innovative kinds of Pleiades above rituals, where the old order was being challenged, even overthrown, but still following Polynesian rituopraxis. These iconoclasm were followed by a series of monumental church-building events in these islands, the largest of which was Pomare’s—over 700 feet in length and including 133 windows and 29 doors. Sissons identifies this and other church-building events with the re-establishment of order during Pleiades below. Later challenges and popular resistance to the new order reflected the persistence of Pleiades above as a structuring element of rituopraxis for Polynesians.

Sissons makes a compelling argument for the structuring of historical iconoclasm in Polynesian terms. The historical and ethnographic details of the book are impressive and convincing, especially regarding the arguments made about the relationships between habitus, rituopraxis and historical change. That said: this book can in many ways be seen as providing a framework to be built upon, rather than the last word for understanding religious change in the colonial Pacific. One aspect of this line of research that could be expanded is a more intimate look at the lives of the missionaries who played a supporting role in the dramatic Polynesian iconoclasm. How did missionary habitus work with and shape Polynesian chiefly relationships to the Judeo-Christian God? Examining this would not take away from the centrality of Polynesian rituopraxis in shaping history, but it would enrich our understanding of what may have been close relationships between Polynesian chiefs and European men of God. A second line of research that could be beneficially expanded includes a closer look at the materiality of religious architecture and artefacts in shaping these interactions. Sissons hints at this in this book and his other work, but more engagement with Polynesian archaeology would provide a plethora of information to better understand the material dimensions of rituopraxis diachronically. Surveys of ritual architecture throughout the region can tell us about the longer-term trajectories of transformations of rituopraxis in Polynesia, the variability of temple structures and aspects of ritual behaviour not recorded in historical or ethnographic sources.