

Mai, the Other Beyond the Exotic Stranger

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To date, the story of Mai has been told largely in ways that illuminate what the Age of Enlightenment made of the peoples of Oceania. But there is another story, that of Mai as he figures in the records of voyagers and histories preserved by Maohi over successive generations. That history, briefly sketched here, suggests that we would do well to see that while Mai may have entranced the European imagination, he was not its captive. He had his own dreams.

Noble Savage, philosopher, lover, clown—Mai was all these things and more to the patrician Britons amongst whom he lived. The story of his adventures with British patrician society is entangled within the play of the European imagination in the Age of Enlightenment. It is imbricated in the construability of the Maohi peoples of the Society Islands as exotic beings, whose life-ways and customs were more natural, virtuous, and pleasurable than those of Europe. In obvious and subtle ways, the presence of Mai challenged the received wisdom of the eighteenth century about the individual and society.

The story of Mai is also the story of the proud eldest son of a *manabune* or landowning dynasty on the island of Raiatea.¹ An embittered political refugee, Mai fed

polite London society's hunger for the exotic, but he did so knowingly, strategically, with a view to returning to his homeland to regain the land and power he believed were rightly his.²

In European eyes, the Indigenous world of Mai may have seemed exotic, but in one critical respect it was no different to Europe: Maohi polities in the Society Islands were equally dynamic, equally subject to change. When, in 1767, Samuel Wallis arrived at Tahiti aboard HMS *Dolphin*, the Society Islands had then experienced religious and political upheavals as long-lasting and as dramatic in their consequences as those determining the histories of the three kingdoms of the British Isles, from the outbreak of civil war in the 1640s until the revolution of 1688.

By the time of Wallis' arrival, the cult of the war god Oro had become well established on Tahiti and the neighbouring isle of Moorea.³ Originating on the westerly island of Raiatea, the cult probably gained its earliest Tahitian converts during the reign of the paramount Raiatean chief, Tamatoa II, some time between 1650 and 1700.⁴ Oro worship subsequently became a potent force in the politics of the easterly islands of the Society Islands after the conquest of Raiatea and Tahaa by the Hau Fa'nau, the most powerful

tribal polity of the island of Borabora. This invasion probably occurred some time in the early 1760s, as one episode in a lengthy history of inter-dynastic warfare.⁵

Oro continued to be worshipped at the great Taputapuatea *marae* at Opoa on Raiatea, but the power of the district's sacred chief and priests was greatly reduced. According to tradition, the god's sacred image and red feather girdle were brought to Tahiti, and a centre of religious knowledge established shortly afterwards at Haapape, by an Opoan priest-chiefess, Toa-te-manava.⁶

The rise of the Oro cult on Tahiti was intimately connected with dynastic ambitions which arose in the

wake of changes in political fortune and new alliances which were formed after the triumph of the Hau Fa'naui. On the Leeward and Windward islands, strategic marriages took place between leading chiefly families. Dynasties sought to legitimate their titles through consecrating familial alliances before Oro. Strong links were maintained between the spiritual centre at Haapape and Opoa on Raiatea.⁷

Oro worshippers placed great faith in prophecy. As William Ellis, the early nineteenth-century missionary and ethnographer, was to remark of the great Taputapuatea *marae*: it was the birthplace of the war god, and among 'the most celebrated oracles of the people'.⁸



William Byrne, engraver (1743–1805), after John Webber (1752–1793), *The Body of Tee, a Chief, as Preserved after Death, in Otabeiite* London: 1784, engraving; plate mark 26 x 40.5 cm

One important prophecy in circulation prior to the upheavals on Raiatea concerned the destruction of an ancient Tamanu tree, which grew inside the precincts of the Taptapuatea *marae*. One version of the prophecy spoke of the coming of a whirlwind that would leave only the bare and broken trunk. Another foretold its felling by enemy warriors.⁹ These elements of the prophecy were interpreted by chiefly worshippers of Oro as having been fulfilled by the events on Raiatea.

However, there was more to the prophecy: it also predicted that the destruction of the tree would be accompanied by the appearance of glorious offspring of the god Te Tumu and Atea, his daughter-wife, strangers who would appear in a canoe without an outrigger. There are some indications that what was believed to be heralded were the embodiment in human form of Tane, god of all beautiful things.¹⁰

These prophetic utterances may have had mundane origins, in early encounters with European vessels. In 1722 three ships commanded by Jacob Roggeveen, the Dutch navigator, had entered the Tuamoto atolls, one of which was wrecked on the windward side of the atoll of Takapoto. Five men deserted and may have repaired the vessel well enough to reach the island of Anna. Iron cannon were still visible on Takapoto in the 1830s. John Byron, who reached the Tuamoto atolls in June 1765, landed at Takaroa, and found the carved head of a Dutch long-boat's rudder, hammered iron and well-worn tools. He later wrote that the inhabitants seemed 'prodigiously fond of iron'.¹¹

In time, the news of these encounters reached Tahiti, and in view of this it is tempting to speculate whether the introduction of iron was connected with the pre-eminence in subsequent Maohi prophesying given to Tane, the god-protector of men with special knowledge—such as seafarers and canoe builders.

Further, there is the intriguing question of how the prophecies may have influenced Maohi responses to subsequent European arrivals, with their wondrous canoes and worked iron.¹²

Suggestions can only be tentative, but journals such as those kept by James Cook and Joseph Banks on the *Endeavour* voyage of 1768–1771 suggest that Maohi actively sought to account for and engage with these strangers in terms of their own cosmology and prophetic traditions.

The determination of Mai to journey to England can likewise be understood in the context of the



Henry Stubble (fl.1785–1791), [*Portrait of Samuel Wallis*] c.1785
watercolour and pencil, oval image, 13.6 x 11 cm



John Webber (1752–1793), *A Chief of the Sandwich Islands* 1787
oil on canvas; 147.3 x 114.4 cm

politico-religious changes which arose from the Hau Fa'naui of Borabora's conquest of Raiatea.

Mai was from Raiatea. His father had been dispossessed and may have been killed in the struggle with the Hau Fa'naui. Mai, for all his deference and willingness to oblige the curiosity of polite English society, was determined to return to Raiatea. He sought to gain power through his friendship with the Europeans, thus to regain his ancestral birthright.

Mai boarded the *Adventure* soon after Cook's second expedition anchored off Huahine in September 1773, and quickly made it clear that he intended to sail to the voyagers' homeland. Tobias Furneaux, captain of the *Adventure*, was keen that Mai should visit England. Cook, before long, had his doubts.

During the time that *Resolution* and *Adventure* lay off Huahine, Cook met with several groups of *manabune* for whom dynastic war had meant loss of land and power, who implored Cook to help them overthrow their Borabora overlords. Others, however, had profited from change: Ori, guardian of Teri'itaria, the young *ari'i maro una*, or pre-eminent titleholder, on the island of Huahine, quickly came to hear of these meetings and was rowed out to Cook. He stressed that peace on Huahine was secured only by the alliance he had forged with Puni the most powerful titleholder on Borabora, by virtue of his lineage and purification of his title by the god Oro.¹³

Cook had no wish to be drawn into local rivalries, and he directed his anger against Mai, whom he came to regard as 'dark, ugly and a downright blackguard'.¹⁴ He would not have Mai travel to England and use his 'friendship' with the voyagers to provoke war on his return. But admiralty regulations and the informal but strictly observed codes of behaviour amongst naval

officers, meant that Cook could not stop Furneaux, as captain of the *Adventure*, leaving the islands with Mai.

Mai was to return to the Society Islands with Cook's third expedition, which sailed in June 1776. His time amongst the quality of England had not softened his desire for revenge on the Boraboreans and repossession of his ancestral land. As James King, the second lieutenant on the *Resolution*, recalled, Mai, 'would never listen to any other mode of settling than that of violent possession of his father's land'.¹⁵

On the voyage homewards Mai did all that he could to persuade Cook to take him to Raiatea, with the Europeans supplying the force to secure his ancestral land. Cook, however, was determined to avoid any chance of war with the Hau Fa'naui and their allies.

By the time Cook arrived, peace on Huahine hung by a thread. Ori had been deposed as guardian of Teri'itari and had fled to Raiatea, where he enjoyed the protection of Puni. The regency had been assumed by Tehaapapa, a high-ranking priestess descended from rival dynasties on Tahiti and Huahine, Moorea.¹⁶

Cook soon learnt of the fall of Ori, and saw his best option was to settle Mai on Huahine, and so met with the island's *ari'i* (principal chiefs), secured Mai a dwelling and land, and sought through an elaborate series of ceremonies, in which Cook wore dress uniform and Mai wore a helmet and breastplate of armour adorned with six red feather plumes from the sacred frigate bird, to make clear that the Europeans would protect his new property.¹⁷ This was much less than Mai had planned for, but it was now the only way he could secure at least some power, and so keep alive his scheme to repossess his lands on Raiatea.

After Cook's departure, Mai exploited his friendship with the great navigator to ally himself with Moohono, a Huahine *ari'i* or possibly high priest of Oro, whose

daughter was the wife of Mato, the father of Teri'itaria. Moohono is said to have prepared over a long period of time for war, placing a *rabui* (restriction) on the gathering or exchange of food, and assembling a large war fleet. At length battle took place near Hooroto, a small island on the outer reefs off the coast of Taha'a. Moohono and most of the Huahinian chiefs with whom he was allied were killed, as were

many Boraborean *ari'i*. This disastrous battle also consolidated the rule of Puni, the great Borabora titleholder.¹⁸

Tradition suggests that Mai had a major role in the conflict, supplying several muskets he had been given by Cook. He is said to have survived the battle, only to die, possibly of disease, some time late in 1779, the same year as Cook himself.¹⁹



Francis Jukes (1746–1812), after John Cleveley (c.1745–1786)
View of Huabeine, One of the Society Islands in the South Seas
London: Thomas Martyn, 26 May 1787, aquatint; sheet 51 x 66.5 cm

NOTES

- ¹ The nature of manahune status in Maohi society is discussed at length by Douglas Oliver, *Ancient Tahiti*, vol. 2 (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), pp. 750–753, 765–769.
- ² William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches during a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Seas*. Vol. 2. London: Fisher, Son & Jackson, 1829, p. 91.
- ³ Alain Babadzan explores the Oro cult in depth in his *Les Dépouilles des Dieux. Essai sur la Religion Tahitienne à l'Époque de la Découverte*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1993, pp. 221–334.
- ⁴ Oliver, op. cit., pp. 1047–48.
- ⁵ In August 1774, Daniel Solander told two of his correspondents of having learnt from Mai that the conquest had occurred 'about 12 years ago'. John Cawte Beaglehole (ed.), *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure, 1772–1775*. (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1961) p. 949.
- ⁵ H.A.H. Driessen, 'Outriggerless Canoes and Glorious Beings: Pre-contact Prophecies in the Society Islands', *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 17, 1982: 4–5.
- ⁷ Colin Newbury (ed.), *The History of the Tahitian Mission, 1799–1830*. Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1961, pp. xxxvi–ii.
- ⁸ Ellis, op. cit., p. 234.
- ⁹ Driessen, op. cit., pp. 6–7.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 11–13.
- ¹¹ Byron, cited in Driessen, *ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹² On this point see Driessen, *ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
- ¹³ Beaglehole, op. cit., p. 221.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 428.
- ¹⁵ Beaglehole, op. cit., part 2, pp. 1386–87.
- ¹⁶ Hank Driessen, *Opoan connexions: An exploration of the early post-contact history of the Leewards Islands*. BA Honours thesis, La Trobe University, 1977, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Beaglehole, op. cit., part 1, pp. 233–234.
- ¹⁸ Driessen, op. cit., pp. 22–24.
- ¹⁹ William Bligh, *The Mutiny on Board HMS Bounty*. New York: Airmont, 1965, p. 92.



Captain Wallis Attacked in the Dolphin by the Otabitians
casein and paint on canvas attached to a wooden frame; 184 x 219.2 cm
Courtesy of the Australian National Maritime Museum