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Joshua G. Acosta

California State University, Long Beach, joshua.acosta@student.csulb.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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Joshua G. Acosta

California State University, Long Beach

Abstract

In the last three decades of the 18th century, Tahiti was frequented by European travelers, exposing Tahitians to various encounters with western visitors. Driven by exoticist imagination of an idyllic paradise, Western missionaries believed that exotic frontiers required salvation and by 1797, the London Missionary Society had arrived. This paper suggests that despite increasing western interests to influence and convert the islanders, Tahitians nevertheless negotiated their power through the transactions of material objects and appropriated Western goods to their benefit. In this study, the idea of "objectifying power" constitutes how a culture asserts its power through the transaction of material goods upon other peoples. Through the theoretical approach of material culture, analyzing objects transcends the problematic dichotomy between Eurocentric 'modernity' and 'inferior' indigeneity within the early modern world. Therefore, the study of material culture, consumption, and exchange reveals a nuanced discourse about agency and identity. Bartering objects were central to these encounters which posits the question: What changes and continuities did the exchange of objects contribute to the relationship between Westerners and Tahitians? How were power and friendship conveyed? Using 18th-century sources from the National Library of Australia, instructions from the London Missionary Society, illustrations of contact between Europeans and Natives, and accounts from European navigators, this paper seeks to trace three decades of changes and continuities in how material

objects highlight Tahitians as active agents in their engagement with European counterparts and how these transactions reoriented the narrative of European and indigenous power dynamics.

Keywords: Tahiti, Pacific, material culture, world history, agency, early modern

Introduction

In the last three decades of the 18th century, Tahiti, the largest island of French Polynesia in the South Pacific, was frequented by European voyagers seeking to “discover” and return with knowledge of the unknown, exposing islanders to various encounters with western visitors. Starting with the documented voyages of Samuel Wallis, many European expeditions soon followed such as those led by Louis Antoine de Bougainville, James Cook, and William Bligh. Driven by exoticism and the imagination of an idyllic paradise, Western missionaries also embarked for the South Pacific with the conviction that these new frontiers were prime opportunities to spread the Christian faith. Exchanging objects such as food and tools were central to these encounters and thus serve as the focal point of this study. According to Gerritsen and Riello, “[T]hings, then, have value, meanings, and trajectories” (2). Despite being portrayed as desperate and unsuspecting actors seeking to obtain frivolous European goods, Tahitians actively navigated Western curiosities and object exchanges by utilizing their gestures of mutual hospitality to negotiate for material benefit.

In the second voyage of Captain James Cook’s explorations to the South Pacific, William Hodges, an artist accompanying the HMS *Resolution and Adventure*, painted a scene of Matavai Bay, the gateway that bridged the arrival of Europeans with the Tahitians. As successive voyages to the South Pacific arrived in the late 1700s, the European mariners were greeted by crowds of Tahitians curious of their presence. Hodges depicts the scene of the two British vessels anchored

at shore (see fig 1). Interestingly, the artist seems to paint the scene from the perspective of the native onlookers who saw the anchored British ships in the distance.



Figure 1. A painting of the HMS *Resolution* and *Adventure* anchoring at Matavai Bay (Hodges)

This depiction shows a tranquil, yet active scene, giving off a mystical land that was grounded in the complex exchanges that would ensue as successive European visitors converged with the native peoples. The perspective of the viewer does not originate from the bow or observation point from one of the British vessels but rather looks outward to the visitors. This point of view offered by this painting shows these encounters through the lens of the native people. Moreover, the convergence of Europeans and Tahitians along the beaches serve as the major point of analysis.

Historiography

Analyzing material objects highlights Tahitians as active agents in their engagement with European counterparts at the moments of exchange and reveal various implications about notions of power and otherness because it allows us to see how goods influence behavior, progression, and the examination of any given historical phenomenon. Many historians since the early 1990s have contributed to the discourse on how Tahitian-European encounters presented a multifaceted

historical narrative. In the past thirty years, scholars such as Nicholas Thomas, Greg Denning, Jennifer Newell, Anne Salmond, Mary Sheriff, and Vanessa Smith have sought to integrate more evidence of active engagement from indigenous actors. Drawing from the observations of European explorers, these scholars have introduced a perspective that focuses on how Tahitians perceived and responded. Material culture presents a unique approach in examining the relationships between Europeans and their encounters with those that they perceived with otherness because of its ability to shed light on these exchanges, not simply from one point of view, but to give depth to those who received and engaged in these trades.

According to Nicholas Thomas in his work, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, “objects are not what they are made to be but what they have become” (4). Thomas points out how constructed meanings of objects reveal a broader narrative of social life and lived experiences such as what cultures value and what items are important to daily sustenance and sacred rituals. Perceptions of people, culture, and relationships emerge from the transactions and exchanges of objects (Thomas 7). The analysis of objects, the context of their exchange, and the implicit understanding associated with the materials that were traded provide a crucial point of view in Pacific encounters. Thomas employs an anthropological lens to situate the ways cultural meaning is derived from the objects that were desired by both Europeans and indigenous peoples.

The work of Greg Denning and Anne Salmond builds onto the notions of exchange and the various cultural meanings that derived from the exchange of objects. These narratives serve as crucial points in Pacific historical scholarship by invoking the scenes of islanders as primary agents of historical exchange. Denning’s book, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures and Self*, opened the discourse of the beach as a structural historical scene that

contained the initial encounters of European and indigenous peoples. Deriving from the many accounts of the voyagers' journals, the beach, as such, was the place of cross-cultural contact with the islanders as they anchored upon the Pacific islands. When Captain Samuel Wallis reached the shores of Matavai Bay in 1767, he was initially met with hostility and suspicion as his crew recalled scenes of aggression on the part of the Tahitians. Progressively, as other voyagers reached the very same site, Dening portrays the beach as a defined historical structure that serves as a cultural crossroad where relationships were forged and violated. In *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*, Salmond reorients the engagement of these European and Tahitian convergences, drawing on folklore and the mythical and exoticist perceptions of Europeans as they arrived. She explores the world through the lens of these cultures and how they entwined into a scene of cultural exchange. By allocating the intentions and dynamics of the Tahitian society and their expectations of European mariners, she evinces key aspects of the beach and the perceptions of otherness between Europeans arriving on this remote Pacific island and native Tahitians coming to terms with these foreign visitations.

Overall, the accounts traced from the initial arrival of Wallis to the London Missionary Society at the end of the 18th century historicizes the beach as a place of progression. Jennifer Newell in her book, *Trading Nature: Tahitians, Europeans, and Ecological Exchange*, took on the approach of "ecological exchanges" by addressing patterns of material exchanges through the examination of European and Tahitian interactions with the environment. Newell writes that ecological exchange presents an important medium to analyze consumption, value, and the relationships surrounding these factors between the mariners and islanders. The island became a place of commoditization and exploitation. Various animals, produce, tools, weapons, and even people changed hands. Newell thus emphasizes great importance in the politics surrounding

these transactions. In *Intimate Strangers: Friendship, Exchange, and Pacific Encounters*, Vanessa Smith historicizes the relationship of Pacific Islanders and the European voyagers. The repeated sojourns to the Europeans into the South Pacific world are evidence that throughout the various encounters, the Tahitians reacted from rightly defending their home from strangers to becoming “acquainted strangers.” Her work examines how friendship came to be understood, the various cultural implications of gestures, and how Europeans understood the actions of the islanders. When relationships grow strained as a result of distrust or hostility, Smith defines the nuanced reactions of each side, focusing on differentiating between basic trade and exchange to repair relations and regain trust (78). These negotiations attest to the idea that Tahitians exerted agency and contributed to a complex dynamic of power with their European counterparts. The scholarship of the Pacific history presents an interdisciplinary approach necessary to construct the dynamic narratives of cross-cultural exchanges during this period of exploration.

Methodology

Objects provide a medium to analyze power relations and present a multifaceted approach to understanding cultural exchanges. The idea of “objectifying power” constitutes how a culture asserts its power through the transaction of material goods and causes the recipient culture to adopt certain perceptions of status and cultural significance. Moreover, objects become the common language that transcends cultural barriers. They serve to fill the spaces that widen the cultural divide and give meaning to lived experiences as inanimate, voiceless witnesses of historical change. According to Sheriff, “not only did objects move from hand to hand, but in their turn they moved people powerfully, activating a range of emotions and motivating all nature of exchange” (793). Thus, material culture transcends a problematic dichotomy between Eurocentric modernity and inferior indigeneity in the early modern world. The focus on material

culture further elucidates the fluid negotiation of power between European mariners and Pacific Islanders. It is through this lens that this paper seeks to trace the changes and continuities of the transactions of material objects to further illustrate the visible agency of Pacific Islanders and their experiences with European explorers.

The native population of Tahiti are known as the *Mā'ohi*. In this paper, the terms Tahitians and Mā'ohi shall be used interchangeably to refer to the native inhabitants of Tahiti. English Captain Samuel Wallis and French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville were among the most prominent Europeans to have recorded their observations. Their imagination and description of Tahiti emphasized its timeless natural beauty validated the concept of Rousseau's "noble savagery" and popularized imaginary writings about Tahitian life (Matsuda 133). This narrative presented Tahiti as an idyllic paradise poised for Western consumption and desire. According to the crew's accounts, Wallis arrived in Tahiti in 1767 and was met with hostility as Tahitians sailed to his ship and attacked the HMS *Dolphin*. In response, Wallis fired his cannons, destroying parts of the shore to show the power he possessed. This prompted the Tahitians to accommodate their new guests (Matsuda 133).

Exchanging "Trifles"

To further illustrate the role of material exchanges in these encounters, one account shows the importance of western and islander interactions between the 'Queen' of Tahiti, Parea (or Oberea), who showed medicinal remedies to Wallis' ship surgeon. In return, Wallis showed the prowess of English firepower and traded gifts (133). This suggests a beneficial collaboration made by Wallis and Parea, whose exchanges gave the English the means of treating sickness from their extensive time at sea. It also demonstrates the Queen's willingness to receive these western goods in order to benefit for her own authority and for her subjects. An engraving from

1773 by an English illustrator depicts Queen Parea and Captain Wallis in their initial encounter (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. Capt. Samuel Wallis of HMS *Dolphin* being received by the Queen of Otaheite (Hall) She is accompanied by her retinue bearing banana leaves as she is ready to receive Wallis and his crew. The engraving depicts Parea and Wallis in their initial encounter. The leaves in her hand extended out toward her western counterparts are intentionally the centerpiece of the image, showing the centrality of this material exchange as a show of friendship. Thus, the object defines the scene as a primary detail in their encounter.

On the other hand, material exchanges also benefited and reshaped the dynamics of power for Tahitian rulers. Wallis noticeably observes Parea's struggle against political rivals upon his interactions with her (Matsuda 134). This suggests that Parea's hospitable gestures were a conscious effort to obtain British wares and weapons to combat against political rivals. For Parea, forging diplomatic ties with Wallis through the transaction of material goods was an important strategy of political leverage. She presented the famished mariners with pigs, plantains, fine mats, and other items of prestige. With these objects, she saw these as inducements to garner support from the British to reinforce her efforts to install her son, Teri'irere as the next high chief (Salmond 76). These collaborations through the exchange of material culture reveal the consciousness of the Tahitians in using their foreign encounters for

their advancement. According to Matsuda, “The Tahitians had learned from Wallis, and there were no violent incidents; hogs, fruit, and water were exchanged, and islanders and sailors entertained each other both shipboard and in the villages. Sailors’ small valuables and tools disappeared, but no major confrontations developed” (134). There is an evident role that these exchanges shaped a mutual relationship. Medicinal remedies supplied by the Tahitians to seafarers who had long been out at sea and western tools for Tahitian appropriation created a precarious bilateral accord among the two parties. Thus, objects reoriented the ways and places these encounters took shape by serving as a medium in brokering power relations.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville left Nantes, France, in November of 1766 with two ships, the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse*, and arrived in Tahiti in April of 1768. He was met by Tahitians who offered him branches from plantain trees and prolific greetings of the phrase “*taio!*” where they sacrificed a small pig and bananas as a sign of *amitié*, or friendship (Greene 228). The French likewise exchanged what seemed to be objects of little value, typically small miscellaneous accessories such as buttons and beads, but nevertheless entered this transaction in response to the Tahitians. The exchange of food not only symbolizes amiable exchange for the French arriving on the island, but it also points out how conscious the Tahitians were in offering fresh food to Bougainville’s crew after their long journey at sea. However, according to Greene, this exchange cannot simply be condescending French and over-trusting Tahitians (228). French mariners were delighted to receive food after a long journey. Tahitians, on the other hand, were intrigued by items not common to them (229). This shows duality between the two sides, with the materials having significant circumstantial and long-term value.

Despite this duality, Bougainville’s interaction with Tahitians progressively turned toward trading trifles. In essence, the trifles were miscellaneous or frivolous objects that were of

little value to the French crew. Bougainville writes, “Hither the natives from all sides brought fruits, fowls, hogs, fish, and pieces of cloth, which they exchanged for nails, tools, beads, buttons, and numberless other trifles, which were treasures to them” (Bougainville 226). In this excerpt, the French explorer observes his exchanges, recalling how islanders seemed desperate to take useless goods in exchange for foods and nutriment. An anonymous painting presents a depiction of a Tahitian giving Bougainville fruits and centralizes the role of goods (see fig 3). In this dialectic portrayal, it seems that a regal French explorer is seated at the middle as the host Tahitian society is satisfying the seafarers' need for nourishment (National Library of Australia).

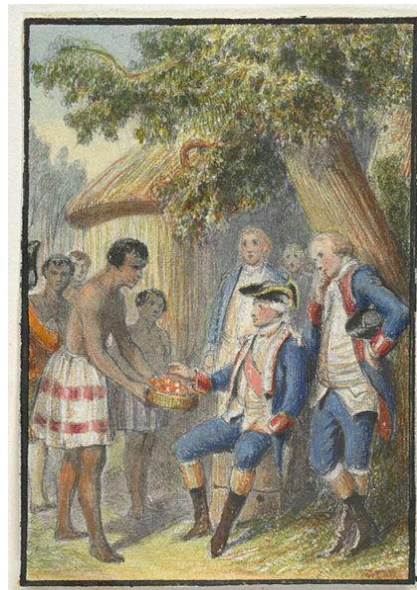


Figure 3. Tahitians Presenting Fruits to Bougainville Attended by His Officer

This depiction, while capturing the exchanges consistent with the view of the European visitors, negates the complex dynamics of exchange and the vital negotiations that were pivotal in forging relationships of trade (Newell 44). In numerous instances, Bougainville lists a litany of commonly bartered items that were proffered by Tahitians in their communication with the European crew. These items were typically fruits, hogs, fish, and other edible commodities that the sailors sought for their nourishment. The exchanges were a large focal point in the

relationship between Europeans and Tahitians. When Tahitians were confronted with these trifles, they found it a fortuitous exchange to obtain the goods that were useful to them. As Newell highlights, Tahitians were conscious of their position in this exchange and utilized the sailors' need for foodstuffs in order to gain from their stay (40). The visitors' needs enabled an opportunity to alter the politics of engagement, objectifying the power as the host society to govern the terms of exchange with which their European visitors would abide by in order to get their nourishment. In this way, material culture serves as the locus to define the agency that Tahitians possessed, quickly acting on utilizing their native produce to obtain foreign commodities such as nails, hatchets, scissors, cloth, and firearms (40). These "trifles" as mentioned by Bougainville transcend their meaning at that moment of exchange, consistent with Thomas' notion that objects are not what they are made to be, but what they have become. In this scene, the trifles of nails and trinkets became a practical commodity for the islanders' tools, labor implements, and to improve their fishing hooks (41). These items extended from their practical uses and added to the creative novelties in Tahitian art. An example to characterize this process was how it affected the *tapa*, a Pacific Island cloth typically made from bark. Tahitian women used scissors solicited from English sailors to make novel designs such as sharp angles and precise edges (d'Alleva 33).

Captain Cook and the Progression of Exchange

In 1768, Captain James Cook aboard the HM Bark *Endeavour*, was commissioned by The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge to embark on a voyage to the South Pacific with a mandate to establish a fort and observatory to witness the movement of the planet Venus on the island of Tahiti and to discover a southern continent, a landmass known today as Australia. Captain Cook's journal during his first voyage (1768-1771) provides a

primary account on the matter. Much like his predecessors who ventured onto Tahiti, Captain Cook was welcomed by the host society. At the beginning of what became one of three missions circumnavigating the globe, Captain Cook stressed a set of rules that he sought to enforce upon those aboard the *Endeavour*. It comprised of five instructions, with three that were most pertinent to the management of material goods: cultivating friendship with the native peoples, appointing specific crew members to be tasked with engaging in commerce with natives, and imposing limitations on when “useful articles” such as iron and cloth could be bartered (Cook 61). Upon his contact with Tahitians, Cook saw the importance of managing his commodities.

One ubiquitous object noted in these encounters were nails. Since the time of Wallis in his arrival in 1767, nails were a form of currency utilized by the mariners and accepted by the Tahitians. This was typically a barter made by the sailors to solicit sex from Mā’ohi women (Salmond 77). In his journal entries, Captain Cook describes how Tahitians, who now have a confident familiarity with European visitors, assigned a system of value within the context of bartering. The trifles of Captain Wallis and Louis Antoine de Bougainville in the two years prior had no longer sufficed. To Cook’s realization, he writes “Thus we see those very People who but 2 years ago prefer’d a spike Nail to an Axe of any Sort, have so far learnt the use of them that they will not part with a Pig of 10 or 12 lbs. weight for anything under a Hatchet, and even those of an interior or small sort are of no great esteem with them, and small Nails such as 10d., 20d., or any under 40d., are of no value at all” (65). The significance of valuing from trifles to more significant demands in European commodities such as axes and even firearms indicates the objectification of power. Since objects dominated the scenes of cross-cultural interaction, the apparent evolution in object values profoundly altered the context of friendship.

New desires reoriented Tahitians from unsuspecting natives desperate for trifles to actors who exerted agency over European sailors seeking feed and nourishment from their island. Captain Cook draws attention to the Mā'ohi's scrutiny on the size of the nails that his crew offered to the islanders. These details reflect a complex dynamic of negotiation that Europeans and Tahitians partook in order to maintain a system of friendship and cooperation. Since it was Cook's mandate to ensure that Point Venus could house their fort and observatory, these material encounters were necessary modes of achieving their mission without garnering the ire of their host society. Cook's commerce with the native islanders attests to how material exchanges normalized their relationship. A process from exchange to transaction began to form as Tahitians began assigning values as previously mentioned. In his journal, Cook recalls that "[For] all sorts of Fruits we purchased with Beads and Nails, not less than 40-penny, for a nail under that size was of no value; but we could not get a Hog above 10 or 12 pounds weight for anything less than a Hatchet" (87). Much like his previous account three months earlier, Cook affirms of a commoditization that has developed, ushering a new progression in the relationship between European mariners and the Tahitians that was directly shaped by material culture.

The value of exchange had developed further by the time William Bligh had arrived to conduct his mission to obtain breadfruit from Tahiti in 1791. From this encounter, European mariners and Tahitians had systematized values and measurements in the commodities that they had bartered. With the precedent of Captain Cook's micromanaging of the ship's supply and bartering parameters with the Tahitians, an emergence of quantity and values were adopted and recorded by the time of Bligh's voyage. Newell describes how "European mariners... had a strictly regularized approach to portioning and trading... This piece of calculation exemplifies the rapid commodification of exotic plants and animals that accompanied Britain's push into the

Pacific” (79). This is evidence that active negotiation took place on the beaches, evolving the site of trifles and curiosity into a scene of dynamic exchange brought on by material desire and necessity. This also attests to how suspicious intimacy was formalized into a kind of marketplace in which European visitors accessed and Tahitians readily conducted business.

Missionaries

Western missionaries were increasingly prominent actors in the South Pacific by the late 18th century. The arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) provides an important focal point in understanding transcultural encounters in Tahiti. Founded by Anglican and Presbyterian clergymen to bring the knowledge of the Gospel to the “heathen” in 1795, the LMS formed in response to the growing number of eager missionaries who saw the “dull respectability” within the Church of England as dissatisfying to their religious vigor (Matsuda 145). Drawing from religious fervor in the wake of the Second Great Awakening and the news of foreign lands from preceding navigations to the South Pacific, the members of the LMS saw their opportunity to proselytize. The LMS saw these mystical and distant islands as an area opportune to expand their interests. In 1796, the first envoy of the LMS boarded the *Duff* en route to Tahiti. Within a year of its inception, the LMS had organized and fundraised this voyage to the other side of the world. This initial journey numbered around thirty missionaries, four of which were ordained clergymen, and the majority being tradesmen and crafters. These individuals were considered “godly mechanics” who embodied virtuous and industrious professions such as carpenters, weavers, and masons who would serve to build up the mission settlement in this little-known island (145).

Emphasis on these professions who accompanied the first voyage of the missionaries sets up their importance as they settled onto Tahiti. As indicated in a later account, the missionaries

found themselves in a place where their works and possessions could be valued and opened as a value for goodwill and partnership. According to two unnamed Swedish men who had settled there prior to the LMS arrival, an earthquake struck the islands a day before the *Duff* had arrived. The missionaries took this natural disaster as a sign of divine affirmation to pursue their work to convert the islanders (Newell 84). Upon their arrival to Tahiti, the missionaries were received by King Pōmare II who gave them a house built by the Pōmares, the ruling family of Tahiti, that was meant to receive British guests (84). These events demonstrate the closeness that the missionaries held to the Tahitian society, feeling compelled to begin their conversion efforts, yet carefully managing their interactions. This indicates that since their arrival, the LMS were reliant on their host society.

In preparation for the missionaries' journey to the South Pacific, the directors of the LMS sent various instructions and directives on how their members were to engage with the islanders. The journal by James Wilson, the captain of the *Duff*, serves as a primary account for their initial journey and arrival. In a letter to Wilson, the directors wrote, "As it is not possible to suggest every contingency, or to provide for it, a great discretionary power must be left with you, and the Missionaries, to act according to existing Circumstances... remembering always that our Object is to form a successful Mission in the Islands" (Newbury 69). Furthermore, in order to attain this goal, it was vital for the missionaries to establish camaraderie with the host society. The directive explicitly stated that in order to accomplish their goal, they must avoid "forcible methods" (69). This detail highlights how important it was for the LMS to use the allure of objects to garner Tahitian cordiality. As such, the directors instructed the missionaries to be mindful of their position and the things they brought with them:

Your Influence, and with such a Ship cannot but be great. You will know on the Spot, after consulting with our Brethren, what dependence may be placed on the professions of the Cheifs [sic]. As your presence will probably produce the best effects, [and] put the highest importance upon our Brethren, it might be in your power to prevail with the Cheifs [sic] to restore what they may have taken from our Brethren, at least the most useful things, such as Tools, unwrought Iron, the forge, making them sensible these would be more useful to themselves in our Care. You will proceed in this matter wisely, but with Dignity, as nothing influences such men equally with the Awe impressed by Superiority, not however leading into forcible methods to accomplish this End (69).

From this excerpt, the directors were always conscious about instructing the missionaries to actively engage in object exchanges. In their words to Wilson, they explicitly emphasized how the missionaries were to use their equipment to their advantage in attracting the admiration of the Tahitian chiefs. By using the tools and technologies they brought with them, the LMS saw that material culture could serve as the gateway for Tahitian rulers to entertain the prospect of working with the missionaries and embracing Christianity. The LMS directors believed that the missionaries could forge robust ties with the local elites by emphasizing the utility of the kinds of tools and technology that they brought.

These factors elucidate a wider consciousness about material culture as it relates to the perceptions of power. For the missionaries, the mentality of using their objects translated into a desired effect to impose their superiority and engage the Tahitians to use and accept their exchanges as a medium to begin the conversion of the islanders to Christianity. On the other hand, Tahitian rulers seized upon European trade, the potential of evangelism, and other western forms of contact to enhance their political expansion (Thomas 106). This narrative illustrates a

broader relationship that the objects that both sides traded served as representations of power. Western missionaries believed in their engagement with Tahitians to show superiority over them, and thereby attract the islanders to embrace their way of life. Missionaries remained careful of their actions, petitioning for multiple audiences with the ruler, Pōmare II, and always distributed selective portions of their cloth and ironwork to the Tahitian ruler. Pōmare saw the missionaries as potential liaisons to other visiting British vessels and accommodated them (Newell 86). As a way to forge these relations so that Tahiti can take advantage of western trade, Pōmare in return “sent them regular gifts of food, lent them his protection, and early in their stay made a ceremonial presentation of the Point Venus district, at which the Swedes translated, saying the missionaries ‘might take what houses, Trees, Fruits, and Hogs [they] thought proper’” (86). Not only did they accept the missionaries, the Tahitians saw their potential to gain more material resources. Rather than seeing the missionaries as invasive proselytizers, the Tahitians saw them as middlemen to European markets and to obtain technologies not common to their homeland (Newell 85). These perceptions present how objectifying power provided a medium to reorient the ways one party approached another. The distance of cultural differences lessens as a result of the material transactions that had transpired.

In one instance, Wilson recalled an audience with Pōmare in which the latter shared a desire to obtain more advanced ships in order to conduct long-distance traveling, recalling, “I told him, that we once were in the same predicament, and knew nothing; but that good men brought the speaking paper into our country, and taught us to understand it, by means of which we learnt to know the true God, to build and conduct ships, and to make axes, knives, scissars [sic], and the various things which he saw we possessed” (Wilson 203). From this recollection, Wilson sought to entice the Mā’ohi ruler by associating Christianity with the knowledge of

making and procuring the items that Tahitians highly desired. This signifies the inseparable tie that material culture played as a medium to negotiate and maneuver through these encounters.

The various perceptions of objects and material culture held by both Tahitians and Westerners formed a nuanced relationship in their encounters in the late 1700s. As Europeans imagined life in Tahiti, they were attracted by the prospects of an idyllic paradise, an untouched natural beauty, and an exotic society that needed the salvific message of the Christian faith. Their arrival to the islands demonstrates the importance of material transactions in their initial contact with Tahitian rulers. According to Newell, “After decades of experiencing the island and writing and reading about their ventures, the British had established relationships with the Tahitians that, of all the locations they visited in the Pacific, were the most consistently workable and lucrative. Setting up a market... bargaining with the Pōmare family could be expected to bring about an agreement to supply provisions” (Newell 195). These exchanges reflect how these relationships culminated into a formalized trade, emphasizing how Tahitians were able to navigate their visitors and how European mariners closely managed their interactions in order to achieve what they needed for their voyages.

The encounters of the LMS highlighted the importance of using objects to materialize power and forge bonds with the islanders. With these narratives, material culture highlights the visibility of both parties, and shows the intentions each group had in engaging with the other. The European evangelists saw their role to cement Christianity and occupy a perpetual space on Tahiti. On the other hand, the Tahitians were not simply reactionary and hostile, nor did the Tahitians find themselves completely displaced by the arrival of the missionaries. Rather, the Pōmare family saw their role as an advantageous agent in using the material offerings and

exchanges with their western counterparts to enhance themselves and benefit from their presence.

Conclusion

Objects show a nuanced narrative of historical change, beginning from the bartering of Bougainville's trifles (small, nails, and beads) into a formalized value system of material mutuality. If the European mariners sought a large hog, for instance, the Mā'ohi expected something that they felt was equally worthy to engage in the barter such as seeking out axes and cloth. The objects that both Tahitians and Westerners exchanged provides a glimpse into the encounters in the early modern Pacific world and illustrates how the flexibility between these transactions created possibilities of expanding friendship, goodwill, and achieving mutual demands to sustain good relations with the other.

The findings of this study can be summarized threefold. Firstly, material culture as a locus of analysis greatly highlights the agency of the Tahitian people in their engagement with the European mariners who visited. Since these relationships were dynamic and fluctuating, the accounts of the European mariners attest to an evolving notion of exchange. This evolution underpins the notion that rather than the Mā'ohi being passive actors from a mythical paradise, there was a careful and complex process of trust, desire, and custom at play. Secondly, the relationships of power were based on a perception of friendship. The greeting of *taio* and the notion of friendship was not a linear reflection of cross-cultural encounter, but a dynamic and fluctuating relationship (Smith 70). The idea of friendship was tested in many ways, built on the assumptions and cultural implications that material exchanges dictated. Thirdly, with the idea of complex friendship in mind, this affirms the original point about transcending the dichotomy of Eurocentric modernity and the inferior indigeneity.

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