

“That Isn’t Really a Pig”: Spirit Traditions in the Southern Cook Islands

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I don’t know if it’s true but—one night I was riding my motorbike on the rise by Te ‘Utu o Apera. (You know, the one where the ‘utu [Barringtonia] trees are by the Kingans’ place at Tupapa.) Suddenly, there was a big pig right in front of me. The bike hit it and I fell off. The head lamp was broken. When I got up I couldn’t see the pig.

Next day I told some people who live around there. They said, “You saw it. That isn’t really a pig, it’s usually a cow.” They meant it was a *tūpāpaku*. There are plenty of stories about things have have happened at that place. When Stewart Kingan began to build his house there, people said it was a bad place to stay. Nothing happened to him.

But my brother-in-law also ran into two small pigs one night at the place where they say that thing goes.

(M.S., Rarotonga, 4/13/76)

The aim of this short paper is to propose the “ghost story” or “spirit account” as a particularly lively, continuously creative area of the Cook Islands’ oral tradition that would repay more detailed study along a number of different lines. The data presented here as an introduction to the topic are in no way comprehensive. They represent information distilled from approximately fifty accounts, from full stories to fragmentary comments given in both English and Cook Island Maori. These accounts, from some thirty different informants, were mainly gathered during anthropological fieldwork on other topics in 1976-77, some during a briefer visit in 1983. The data were collected on the islands of Rarotonga and Mangaia, though informants also included residents from other islands of the Cook group, such as Aitutaki, Atiu, and Mauke.

Folklore studies are now in the age of the “urban legend.” The responsiveness of oral tradition to social and cultural change in the modern world has become a key area of concern. In the Pacific context, Maranda (1978) could write a decade ago of Lau riddles of modernization, arguing the use of a traditional oral form as a tool for dealing with new external pressures. Yet we still have much to learn about the patterns of continuity and adaptation within the traditions of the region. I would argue that in the Cook Islands, and very probably elsewhere in the Pacific, accounts of spirit

contacts and activities are a particularly fruitful area for the examination of such patterns.¹ The account with which I opened (from an Aitutakian of long residence on Rarotonga) suggests as much. It is firmly located in the realities of current Rarotongan life, yet draws upon the forms and content of older narratives of explanation to give an alternative perspective on the road accident. The complexity of the relation between continuity and adaptation is shown in the forms attributed to the spirit (*tūpāpaku*). The idea of spirits in animal form is deeply rooted in Polynesian culture history, yet the notion of a cow as a suitable spirit vehicle is clearly one that can only have developed since the introduction of such animals in the last century. Traditional story and new experience have constantly embraced each other. A necessary starting point for any consideration of spirit narratives must be the term *tūpāpaku* itself as well as some of the historical background to its current usage.

The Nature of *Tūpāpaku*

Tūpāpaku, as represented in the oral traditions of the Cook Islands, are spiritual beings or forces similar though not identical to the ghosts of Europe. As recently pointed out by Baddeley (1985:130), writing of Rarotonga, *tūpāpaku* can be located within a three-part division of the universe. They are the *aronga o te pō*, “the company of the world of night or darkness,” as opposed to the living people of *te ao nei*, “this world,” or the inhabitants of *te ao ra*, “that world”—God, angels, *vaerua tangata*, “the souls of the dead.” But the boundaries between these worlds are not absolute and can be crossed.

A number of my informants, in fact, identified *tūpāpaku* with *vaerua tangata* in the sense of the detachable human spirit, the part which is released when the life-force is gone. *Tūpāpaku* also has the possible meaning of a dead person, a corpse. Wandering spirits were featured in pre-Christian traditions, the ultimate destination for most being the underworld of *te pō*. The nineteenth-century missionary ethnographer William Wyatt Gill writes (1890:345, 1876:156):

At Mangaia the spirits of those who ignobly died “on a pillow” wandered about disconsolately over the rocks near the margin of the sea until the day appointed by their leader comes (once a year).

Many months might elapse ere the projected departure of the ghost took

¹ Anthropological treatments of spirit beliefs and their transformations in Polynesia include the extensive material on Tikopia provided by Firth (1970). Goodman’s (1971) study of *aitu* beliefs in Samoa provides interesting comparisons.

place. This weary interval was spent in dances and revisiting their former homes, where the living dwell affectionately remembered by the dead. At night fall they would wander amongst the trees and plantations nearest to these dwellings, sometimes venturing to peep inside. As a rule these ghosts were well disposed towards their own living relatives; but often became vindictive if a pet child was ill-treated by a stepmother or other relatives etc.

Eventually the spirits would depart from known *reinga*, spirit leaping-places. Such leaping-places also existed on other islands. Even after this departure some spirit intrusions from the underworld were possible.

The establishment of Christianity from the 1820s onward saw the emergence of new views of death and the afterlife, but these did not eradicate the idea of wandering spirits. Historically, the mission churches showed suspicion of local spirit beliefs, often condemning them, particularly in relation to the consultation of *ta'unga*, the medical/spirit experts. First among the mission-inspired Laws of Rarotonga of 1879 was a ban on the consultation of "sorcerers" to discover the cause of sickness or find a thief. A similar restriction was part of Mangaia's statutes until 1899. The churches clearly viewed such spirit contacts as reflections, or even a continuation of pre-Christian beliefs and practices in which ritual experts sought contact with the *atua*, the divinities/spiritual forces of the Polynesian religious tradition.

The *atua* have fallen before one and one-half centuries of Christianity. *Te Atua* is now the One God of the Bible. Stories concerning the old *atua* are mostly rooted in the past and classed as *tuatua ta'ito*, "accounts of former times." Yet, as I will suggest, there are continuities to be seen between these older traditions and recent "ghost" narratives. In a few cases there is even a continuity of personnel. The lesser Rarotongan *atua* Ta'akura has not been entirely consigned to the past. One Mangaian informant recalled a tradition that Ta'akura had appeared on Mangaia, in the form of a chicken, at the end of the last century. Her presence was linked with that of a "Frenchman" having connections with the Tinomana chiefly family of Rarotonga.² But there are far more recent accounts of encounters with "the red-headed woman" from Rarotonga itself, meetings with Ta'akura being said to occur in the Muri area of the eastern portion of the island. For instance, a Mangaian youth attending the Cook Islands Constitution Celebrations of 1974 is reported to have claimed a sighting of a beautiful red-haired woman in that area, seen when returning to his lodgings at night. It seems that Ta'akura is now regarded as a *tūpāpaku*. It is possible that other minor *atua* have been redefined as *tūpāpaku*, blocking further inquiry into their nature and limiting incom-patibilities with Christianity.

² There are recorded myths which link Ta'akura, the Tinomana family, Rarotonga, and Mangaia. See, for instance, Tara'are 1919:188, 201-2. The "Frenchman" may have been a Belgian who was resident on Mangaia in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

As Baddeley (1985:131) notes for Rarotonga, most of those who give recognition to spirits of the dead do not see a real contradiction with strong Christian belief. While there is still some formal condemnation from the churches, spirit traditions cannot now generally be seen as a threat to their teachings. There is a fair degree of tolerance with acknowledgment of some deviation from the ideals of belief. In the words of a Mangaian pastor, “As good Christians we should not believe in ghosts. But in the body we do.” In fact, declared attitudes to accounts of spirit action vary from general acceptance of literal truth to extreme skepticism. The pattern and extent of spirit belief represents a study in itself. Here I confine myself largely to the content of spirit account, yet the urge to use the word “accounts” rather than “stories” is a reflection of the extent to which many are expressions of experience.

There is, however, a range of *tūpāpaku* accounts, from the more formal and elaborate “ghost story” to fragmentary references to particular personal experiences which have been interpreted in terms of a *tūpāpaku* presence. The different levels feed upon each other. Because I am here interested in content rather than form, I will draw no firm distinctions. The Cook Islands “ghost story” is certainly a study in itself, and from my limited evidence may well be an important route for imported elements into the complex of spirit accounts. But the character of that complex is very much connected with the interrelation of story and experience. It is important not to identify oral tradition simply with the more formal “performances.” Even the most skeptical in the Cook Islands’ population are more or less aware of a body of ideas and conventions which are the basis for *tūpāpaku* narratives. My purpose in the rest of this paper is to outline some of these elements, and in so doing draw attention to some evidence of both continuity and adaptation in the narrative tradition.

The Elements of a *Tūpāpaku* Account

Visible Forms

A feature of recent Cook Islands spirit narratives is the considerable range of forms which the beings or forces concerned can adopt. In this they are consistent with the widely distributed and older Polynesian assumptions about the ability of spiritual forces to manifest themselves materially—assumptions which underlay the anthropological use of the possibly misleading label “totemism” in relation to Polynesian spirit

beliefs.³ This noted, it must be said that in some *tūpāpaku* accounts the spirits concerned are not seen at all, their presence being made evident in other ways, which are considered in the following sections. Further, a large proportion of narratives refer to *tūpāpaku* in human shape, from shadowy forms to complete likenesses of kin or friends. At the more formal end of the spectrum of accounts, there are stories of ghosts mistaken for living people. For instance, there is a tale from Rarotonga of a phantom card-player who is eventually revealed and reduced to dust by morning light.⁴ When *tūpāpaku* are described as appearing in dreams, it is normally in a form which is, if not completely recognizable, at least identifiably human.

However, as the opening example suggests, animal forms feature prominently. That they are part of a long-standing tradition is confirmed in the writings of Gill: “The spirits of the dead are fabled to have assumed, temporarily, and for a specific purpose, the form of an insect, bird, fish, or cloud” (1890:347). He contrasts this situation with the more permanent relationship between certain animal species and the gods, as, for instance, on Mangaia the *atua* Turanga was said to habitually take on the form of a gecko. However, whatever the nature of the spirits involved, an important function of the animal counterparts is that of communication. They are the media for supernatural messages. Often they are described as ‘*akairo*, “signs/omens.” *Tūpāpaku* can be represented as temporarily resident within a real creature, or as simply adopting the semblance of an animal.

For example, large green crickets (Tettigoniidae), both visually and audially striking, and intermittently appearing in houses, have widespread spirit associations in the Southern Cooks. While for older Mangaians these associations are negative (they are *manu tari maki*, “animals that carry sickness”), elsewhere there seems to be greater ambivalence. The crickets are spoken of as a form for either protective or harmful spirit presences, as positive sign (Davis 1952:190) or spying enemy. They are quite often referred to in stories of *ta‘unga*, the traditional medical and spirit experts. A Rarotongan informant recounted how a *ta‘unga* from Atiu had provided

³ The idea of Polynesian totemism was clarified and refined by Firth 1930-31. He insists that Tikopian totemism can only be understood in relation to the general system of spirit beliefs. Spirit, totem (a form adopted by the spirit), and social group are the three corners of a triple relationship. Handy (1968) has argued that Hawaiian concepts concerning the embodiment of spirits in natural species and other objects should not be regarded as true totemism since they lack an emphasis upon the relation between the “totem” and a social category.

⁴ Levy (1973:161) has pointed out that besides Biblical demonology, films such as *Dracula* have fed into Tahitian spirit belief. Equally, modern Cook Islands spirit narratives have fed on several decades of cinema and, in the last decade, video. Tales such as that of the phantom card player may well reflect this phenomenon.

him with two protective cricket spirits who were addressed by the names of Old Testament prophets and whose distinctive sounds could be heard even when traveling by car.

Formerly there were extensive connections between *atua* and bird species. Some more restricted links between *tūpāpaku* and birds remain. In Mangaia and Rarotonga the *manu tūpāpaku*, “ghost birds,” are *,poa* and *rākoa*, sea birds of the shearwater and petrel group (Procellariidae). They are nocturnally active and are noted for making disturbingly human cries — two factors which are significant in their spirit associations. Narratives concerning the *manu tūpāpaku* usually involve the deaths of chiefs, pastors, family heads, or other prominent figures. There are unusual patterns of behavior on the part of the birds, which foretell such events by flying around a village or family lands. A kingfisher species, *ngotare*, performs a similar function in Atiuan accounts.

Of particular interest is the appearance of introduced domesticates as spirit forms within *tūpāpaku* accounts. At the opening of the nineteenth century Mangaia apparently had no domesticated mammals, while pigs and dogs were found elsewhere in the Southern Cooks. Spirit narratives now encompass not only dogs and pigs but cows, horses, goats, and cats. On Mangaia the white sow of Araoa, a large pig followed by many piglets, is one of the most familiar of *tūpāpaku*, while there are stories of spirit horses seen galloping, as no real horse could, along the reef. On Rarotonga, tales of spirits in the form of cows were not restricted to the stories of the Te ‘Utu o Apera area, which have already been referred to, but included some relating to the chiefly burial ground at Taputapuatea, and some concerning manifestations at a notorious accident black-spot near the international airport. From Atiu there are accounts of a spirit known as Iravaru, which is encountered near a tomb at the Ngatitiaka chiefly palace and is able to assume a variety of animal forms, principally those of cow, cat, or dog.⁵

That introduced species came to be so readily and completely incorporated is an indicator of the flexibility of the oral tradition. The possibility of a spirit-animal link was well established, and remarkable new creatures may have initially lent themselves to identification with supernatural forces. Missionary accounts (Gill 1876:91) suggest that the first pigs to be brought to Mangaia were for a time treated as manifestations of *atua*. Once the domesticates were established, identification with human owners may have helped to make them a particularly suitable form for ghosts. Apparently, in mid-nineteenth-century Mangaia a man’s domestic animals were killed on his death (77).

Generalizing and simplifying, I would suggest that there are two

⁵ See, for example, Tangatapoto 1984:156, which refers to a black dog form.

common, broad patterns of behavioral comparison involved in animal-spirit accounts.

1) Wandering spirit detached from social world of the living—> Approaches human beings to communicate

Wild animal (insect, bird)—>Approaches human beings/enters houses

2) Human spirit—>Normally leaves dwelling at death

Domesticated animals strongly associated with human beings —> Seen unexpectedly (at night, behaving unusually) away from normal living areas

In both cases there is a sense of being “out of place,” whether this involves an “outside” to “inside” or “inside” to “outside” movement. In addition, narratives suggest that domestic animals such as dogs are able to perceive *tūpāpaku* on occasions when human beings cannot, but that like human beings they are susceptible to spirit possession, such possession being revealed through erratic behavior. So domestic animals in their more usual settings may be presented as spirit-connected by virtue of such temporary indwelling, whereas those seen elsewhere are usually presented as a form assumed by a *tūpāpaku* rather than as a real creature which is occupied by a spirit.

The tradition of ghostly lights found elsewhere in Polynesia—for example in Tonga (Collocott 1923) or Hawaii (Luomala 1983)—is also well represented in the Cooks. These can be the static luminescent glow known as *pura* or moving lights seen either in the sea or on land (sometimes referred to simply as *turama*, a general term for that which gives off light). Even in the sea, such lights are often described as being like a flame. Mangaian narratives include accounts of rows of moving lights on the hills of the interior. These are the *aitu*, a term clearly cognate with the general spirit category *aitu* of Samoa, though in Mangaia apparently restricted to the one visible form of spirit activity.

Sounds

One night, when I was about thirteen, I heard the *ka'ara*. It was like people coming near, like a procession, beating drums. I woke up my mother. It was a loud noise, but she couldn't hear it. This time it was a sign — to do with a meeting of the *kopu tangata* (family/kin group) to say who would have a special title. That meeting was in our house.

(G.P., Rarotonga, 5/6/76)

In *tūpāpaku* accounts what is heard may be of equal importance to, if

not more important than, what is seen. There are clear parallels with the importance of sound in the sports of ghost processions in Hawaii which have been recently discussed by Luomala (1983). Indeed, there are Cook Islands accounts relating to similar ghostly processions which are identifiable mainly by their sound. This phenomenon is usually spoken of as the *tīni*, the “band” or “company,” or as the *tangi ka‘ara*, “sound of the drum.” Accounts more usually tell of individuals who at night, in out-of-the-way places, hear the sounds of a moving group of people talking, singing, and playing music. This is normally interpreted as a band of *tūpāpaku* moving between villages or other sites of significance to them. There are echoes here of the groups of undeparted spirits discussed by Gill, and of the wider Polynesian traditions of socially organized spirit groups.

Generally, ghost accounts attribute a whole range of unusual or unexpected noises to *tūpāpaku*. These range from sounds of weeping to otherwise inexplicable knockings around the house. As suggested above, the link between some animals and the spirit world seems to relate, in part at least, to the noises they can produce. The most extreme case of this phenomenon is that of the *vāvā* in Mangaia. One informant in his seventies, asked what a *vāvā* was, said simply, “‘*E tangi, ‘e tūpāpaku*,” (“It is a sound, it is a *tūpāpaku*”). This sound, described locally as *tikerere tao tao*, a repeated, piercing metallic chirping often heard overhead, is in fact made by a small yellow cricket. Some, while recognizing the cricket *vāvā*, still maintain a link with spirit activity. *Vāvā* sounds are reported from places where no cricket is apparent nor would be expected, even from canoes fishing at sea. While the precise spirit associations have been revised to fit current conditions, the role of the *vāvā* offers one of the clearest examples of continuity in spirit traditions. Gill, writing in the last century of men killed in battle, states (1876:162):

A species of cricket rarely seen but whose voice is heard at night plaintively chirping “kere-kerere-tao-tao,” was believed to be the voice of these warrior spirits sorrowfully calling to their friends. Hence the proverb, “The spirit-cricket is chirping” (Kua tangi te vava).

Further, an unpublished Mangaian text collected by Gill (n.d.) tells us that the chirping of the *vāvā* was formerly associated with communications from the god Tane. As suggested earlier, accounts which refer to deliberate *tūpāpaku* approaches to humans often include the notion of a message to be passed on. Accounts of spirit activity merge with those of signs and omens. It can be argued that where these involve spirit/animal connections, the choice of an animal species is related to its behavior, particularly its ability to establish communication. Animals which from time to time seem to approach human beings and then call attention to themselves through the noises they make have been prominent among those with spirit associations

(Clerk 1981:357-62).

Bodily Sensations

The presence of *tūpāpaku* is also linked with a range of bodily sensations. Several accounts refer to temperature changes. Ghostly presence can be associated with feelings of cold, and also with areas of unnaturally warm air. '*Uru vanavana*, the standing of the hair on end, may be referred to as part of the sense of unease experienced by an individual coming into contact with spirits. But some contacts are described as more violent. In particular there is the experience described as being squeezed or pressed, *ta'omi'ia*, or squatted on or brooded over, *pārai'ia*. This is usually said to occur when an individual is lying down to sleep. It involves the sense of a force pressing down on the body, preventing movement or outcry and making breathing difficult. There are clear parallels with the accounts of spirit (*tupapa'u*) assaults recorded by Levy (1973:394-98) among Tahitians and which he describes as being hypnoid hallucinations. Whatever their psychological origins, the description of events appears to be shaped by the oral tradition common within central eastern Polynesia. It is, nevertheless, very difficult to be certain whether close parallels in spirit traditions within the Society Islands and the Southern Cooks are part of an older shared heritage or developed through contacts, so extensive were those from the mid-nineteenth century on.⁶

According to some Manganian informants, the ability to fight spirits that have come in dreams can be affected by the side on which an individual sleeps. Sleeping on the left side is better for this purpose. There are other suggestions of a connection between the left side and spirit activity. One account emphasized that in order to perceive its actions correctly, a *tūpāpaku* should be watched with the left eye. Less serious cases of spirit pressing may be presented as a sign from ancestors. A Manganian informant described such an experience where the pressing had been preceded by images of his late mother and grandmother. The stories that tell of more active and dangerous physical encounters with spirits lead towards those that concern spirit possession and *tūpāpaku* as a cause of

⁶ Tahiti was the major center of trade in the eastern Pacific with which Cook Islanders had frequent dealings. The Manganian people even purchased land there as a permanent base for Manganian residents. The potential influence of such contact is suggested by the framing of Federal Ordinance 30 in 1910 to counter a practice believed to have been introduced to Mangaia from Tahiti. This involved the digging up and burning of corpses to prevent spirit attack (*Cook and Other Islands, Continuation of Parliamentary Papers*, New Zealand, 1910).

sickness. Again, the spirit contact may be presented in terms of communication, though in the case of such aggression the message is generally one of extreme displeasure rather than of warning.

Smells

A few accounts also made reference to smells suggesting the presence of spirits. For instance, a Maukean informant resident on Mangaia proposed a distinctive sweet mustiness as a sign of recent ghost activity. This *'aunga rīko* he described as quite different from the *'aunga piro*, the stench associated with physical decay. Two Mangaian informants spoke of the smell of *pua* (*Fragraea*) blossom around the house as a possible sign of the approach of a spirit. Apparently neither of them was aware of the role of the *pua* in the earlier belief system as a route for spirits to the underworld (Te Rangi Hiroa 1934:198-99).

Spirits and Time

Spirits are presented as approaching humans for communication when events in the human world provide a reason for doing so. But accounts often suggest another factor which conditions spirit activity. *Tūpāpaku* are seen as things of the night, yet also perhaps of particular nights. The pattern of spirit actions is linked with the *arapō*, the “paths of the nights” of the traditional lunar calendar. Few Cook Islanders could now provide a full listing of the *arapō*, the named nights of the lunar month. Nevertheless, particular pieces of knowledge connected with the lunar calendar are still used in activities such as planting, fishing, and crab collecting, and the links between specific nights and spirit appearances are sufficiently strong in some minds for the term *arapō* to be applied to both.⁷

Three nights strongly linked with ghosts are those with the name *Rakau*, usually said to be the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth after the new moon, when the moon is beginning to wane. In Atiuan tradition, according to Vainerere Tangatapoto, the first of these, *Rakau ta'i*, is a night “when the spirits arise to reenact their past and remind us that they are still there” (1984:155). According to a listing of *arapō* published in the Cook Island journal *Torea Katorika* the subsequent nights are:

⁷ An example of this tradition expressed in modern Cook Islands literature can be found in Marjorie Crocombe's short story “The Healer” (1980).

19 Rakau roto — Po ika kore. Maata te turuma⁸ i roto i te tai.
 20 Rakau akaoti — Kua aere te turuma ki runga i te maunga.

19 *Rakau roto* — Night of no fish. Many apparitions in the sea.
 20 *Rakau akaoti* — The spirits go inland to the hills/mountains.
 (Rickman 1931)

These descriptions suggest something of the way in which time, place, and event come together in *tūpāpaku* narratives. Many speak of recurrent appearances of particular *tūpāpaku* on particular *arapō* at particular locations. Some older Mangaiaans applied the term *mokoiro* to spirits that are highly consistent in form and in time and place of appearance.

Spirits and Place

Spirits are especially associated with places of burial, including formerly the burial site of the placenta (the *īpukarea*—a term also implying “ancestral land”). Old ritual sites, the *marae*, have powerful associations, as may “places where blood has been shed,” as one man described the old battle grounds of Mangaia. Since death occurs in the sea, it is to be expected that the sea also holds spirits of the dead.⁹ Current patterns and traditions of burial vary somewhat between islands. Tombs within a house compound are a common sight on Rarotonga. But on Mangaia the pre-Christian tradition of burial was in the caves and chasms of its coralline plateau, while burials alongside dwellings were later forbidden by an Island Ordinance. So, barring churchyards, burial has been largely outside or on the outskirts of villages. It is not, then, surprising that in Mangaian narratives particularly, *tūpāpaku* are not primarily creatures of human habitation, although they are drawn back to them at night by their feelings for the living or for a specific purpose. The encounters described may be in villages, but many are in lonelier and wilder places. This is, of course, significant in relation to the animal/spirit linkage.

Specific associations with death may vary considerably in their historical depth. The *tūpāpaku* accounts relating to the Black Rock (Tuoro) area of northwestern Rarotonga reflect both the traditional role of

⁸ *Turuma* is an alternative term for ghosts or spirits, though not nearly as commonly used as *tūpāpaku*.

⁹ Tangatapoto (1984:155) suggests that in Atiuan narratives the dead of the sea, identifiable by their fishy smell, may emerge to join the spirits of the land. Tales recorded on Mangaia refer to spirits emerging from fresh water. But, despite a few confusions, these appear to relate not to *tūpāpaku* but to a category of mythical beings, the *momokē*. Unlike *tūpāpaku* narratives, tales of the pale-skinned, fair-haired, slime-covered *momokē* seem closer to the legendary past than to personal experience.

the heights at Black Rock as a *reinga*, a leaping-place for spirits of the dead, and the presence of the hospital in recent decades. Former Cook Islands Premier Dr. Tom Davis has suggested that initial use of the Black Rock sanatorium was discouraged by the older associations (Davis 1952:56-57). At the same time there were, apparently, fears concerning the ambulance as a potential ghost location (101), reflecting its current association with sickness and death. In 1976 there were still tales of ambulance doors mysteriously swinging open near Black Rock to deposit corpses on the road.

Sites of recurrent misfortune also became a focus for *tūpāpaku* narratives. The road-accident black-spot near the Meteorological Station at the west end of Rarotonga International Airport is a prime case. The importance of the explanatory function in many of the less formal spirit accounts becomes very clear here. Where there is a degree of uncertainty as to the more material causes, the presence of a spirit pathway, or of a *tūpāpaku* cow that drivers swerve to avoid, is invoked to account for the repeated pattern of disaster. To an extent, the stories linking *tūpāpaku* and accidents form a continuum with those suggesting links with sickness. Clearly the former have a better chance of being localized, but specific *maki tūpāpaku*, “spirit sicknesses,” can be related to interference with places or objects of strong interest to ancestral spirits—to which some *tapu* might still be held to apply:

There was an engineer from New Zealand. He used a bulldozer to make the road at Arai te Tonga (the site of an old *koutu nui*, a chiefly court). He moved stones at another *marae* too. The *maori* workers wouldn't use the bulldozer at Arai te Tonga. He drove it himself and shifted some stones. Not long after that he got ill. His jaw was twisted and his eyes bulged. He had to go back to New Zealand. Later he came back to Rarotonga, but his jaw wasn't quite straight. The *maori* people said that this was because he had interfered with *marae*.

My wife doesn't like me moving stones on one of the plots I work. It is from her family. I tell her her ancestors won't hurt me for feeding her.

(M.S., Rarotonga, 5/18/76)

More tentatively, I would suggest as a possible area for consideration links between spirit accounts and land boundaries. Particularly in Rarotonga, I was impressed by the number of times that specific boundaries were referred to in locating *tūpāpaku* events. This is, of course, in part a reflection of the general importance of such boundaries in establishing location. But land and its boundaries carry an emotional charge which has probably been increased rather than lessened through the operations of the Land Court.¹⁰ Ancestral rights and interests are of

¹⁰ Mangaia has always resisted the Land Court, using its *aronga mana*, a body of chiefly titleholders, as a forum for land dispute.

central importance. An informant speaking of the death omen provided by the “ghost bird” *rākoa* said that it flew the boundaries of the land belonging to the person who would die—the correct ones, not those established by the Land Court! It is interesting to note that two of the most storied *tūpāpaku* sites, Black Rock and Te ‘Utu o Apera, lie at major district boundaries. Subject to more systematic collection and study, I would suggest that a dramatic underwriting of boundaries may be one of the functions that spirit narratives fulfill in the Southern Cook Islands.

Actions of and Reactions to Spirits

There is a story about the shore near here (Araoa). A man came back from fishing, at night, you know. He got a fire to cook some fish. When he looks up, there are faces of little white pigs around him. This was before Andy Nola brought the *puaka tea* (white pigs) here. He knew they were *tūpāpaku*. He was scared. It was the fire which kept them away. When it went down the pigs got closer. He was really scared. He put on some wood, but soon there was no more, only his canoe. He was so scared of what would happen if those pigs came to him he started to cut up his canoe. He burned it, bit by bit. Lucky for him, when the sun came he still had one bit left.

(N.T., Mangaia, 8/24/76)

Tūpāpaku are potentially dangerous. Tales tell of fear of death, disease, and misfortune through spirit contact and spirit displeasure, although in many the specific threat is left vague. In stories of nocturnal encounters, avoidance or concealment is usually presented as the safest course for the observer. Harm may not be deliberate on the part of the spirit. One Mangaian account tells how a *ta‘unga* diagnosed the twisted neck of a young, part-European boy as due to a chance meeting with the spirit of an old fisherman. The spirit, simply curious at seeing a *papa‘a* (European), had touched him, causing the condition. On the other hand, some spirits, perhaps especially those of the young, are presented as malicious; they may engage in *kanga*, mischievous, injurious play. Many accounts do, however, rest on the assumption of more pointed spirit activity.

Much of this activity could loosely be labeled as “protective”—of places, objects, people, custom. The relations described between human beings and *tūpāpaku* then depend on whether the persons concerned are part of “the protected” or constitute a threat to it. A number of tales relate to spirits which are specifically *tiaki*, “guardians” of particular sites of significance. Certain of the old burial and depository caves of Mangaia are foci for accounts of protective spirits, such as the lizard-form guardian of Piri te umeume. Right of presence by virtue of family connection plays a part in a number of stories. What is protected for the family, the *kopu*

tangata, may be a source of danger to strangers/non-kin. Attitudes then reflect relationship to the spirit concerned. Tales of *tūpāpaku* guardians underline continuities with the historical past of the caves and *marae* and also make assertions about particular family associations to land.

Individuals can have personal protectors, as in the case of the spirit crickets referred to above, while stories concerning *ta'unga* frequently ascribe to them the ability to consult or make use of spirits. The late *ta'unga* of Mangaia, Paia, was described as having three named *tūpāpaku* as helpers. In addition, parental or ancestral spirits, in their protective function, are presented as providing care and support for their families. As omen creatures they provide information about events to happen in the family:

One night I and my wife heard a horse outside the house, eating banana leaves, making noises. In the morning we couldn't see anything. The banana leaves were all fine. We knew it was a sign that somebody in the family was going to die. That was right.

(P.A., Mangaia, 12/16/76)

Yet family spirits can also be described as threatening in circumstances where they are interpreted as expressing disapproval of the actions of the living. Divisions within the kin group are sometimes presented as inspiring *tūpāpaku* intervention. Reflecting on stories heard on Rarotonga relating to spirit concern in disputes over family land and titles, it is tempting to suggest that, initially at least, the tensions of relatively rapid social change may create an environment suited to the generation of new spirit accounts. The use of spirit concepts in relation to informal social control has often been discussed with respect to other societies of Polynesia (e.g., Hogbin 1934, Shore 1978).

The Users of *Tūpāpaku* Narratives

Although a number of the accounts of *tūpāpaku* related to me were prefixed “Old people used to say. . .,” it became clear that knowledge of the spirit traditions is very widespread, bridging age and gender. They can feature in children’s games and pastimes. On Mangaia in 1983, an eight-year-old girl was able to demonstrate the weaving out of plantain (*Plataginaceae*) stems of a conical structure known as *tamaru tūpāpaku*, literally a “shelter for spirits,” although she insisted it was really more of a seat (the same term is applied to some fungi). She also explained her fears of walking alone through the village at night in terms of what she had heard of *tūpāpaku* activity. Spirit narratives are part of the world of many children, with implications for their control. Equally, young men in their teens and early twenties often proved to be enthusiastic tellers of ghost

tales, providing both simple entertainment and the thrill of the uncanny in their own nocturnal activities.

In the wider community, as I have suggested, for some people *tūpāpaku* accounts remain one explanatory option for events seemingly out of the ordinary, while such stories can also be used to dramatize what is valued, whether in terms of social relationships, proprietary rights, or historical associations. Others would insist that as objects of belief, the *tūpāpaku* are “going.” However true that may be, a knowledge of the elements of spirit accounts is still very much present, and many accounts are of the present.

Conclusion

The “ghost” narratives of the Cooks have not as yet been given the same degree of attention as historical and legendary tales. From the collections of Mangaian stories made by the Culture Division of the Cook Islands Government, as it existed in the 1970s, accounts of *tūpāpaku* were notably lacking. This is an understandable situation, for a number of reasons. The focus of such collecting was on gleaning information from those most knowledgeable in tradition, the *tumu kōrero*, to ensure preservation for the future. It was selective, concentrating upon that which “experts” could provide. Ghost tales are not, in general, part of such specialist knowledge, even if *tumu kōrero* might be able to enlarge upon the details of particular traditions. *Tūpāpaku* accounts have, then, not fallen so readily into the framework of “official culture” as some other forms of story, almost by virtue of their number and continuing vitality. But it is the scope of their distribution and their interaction with experience which makes them such a potentially interesting area of study. They have never been separated from the life of the community as a whole. They have adapted consistently to new circumstances, incorporating new experience, yet maintaining a continuity with traditions of great antiquity. They then invite detailed consideration in tandem with study of social and cultural transformations in the Southern Cook Islands.

Perhaps, as Sahlins (1987) has recently suggested, our firmly drawn contrasts between continuity and change, cultural structure, and historical processes are in themselves misleading. His view of an event as a *relation* between a happening and a structure is potentially very relevant to an understanding of oral tradition. The telling of a traditional narrative is an act of cultural reproduction. But as Sahlins would argue, “every reproduction of culture is an alteration, insofar as in action, the categories by which a present world is orchestrated pick up some novel empirical content” (144). The idea of a dialogue between received categories and

perceived contexts is one to which many interested in oral tradition will readily respond. Narrated events may reflect “real world” happenings while at the same time the narrative provides frameworks through which happenings are constituted as meaningful events. To explore such a dialogue fully requires the kind of holistic approach to oral narrative proposed by Bauman (1986), tying together narrated events, text, and performance. It is through performance in a given context that the categories implied by a particular narrative are brought most clearly into the realm of action. There they are realized by specific individuals with specific experiences and interests and are made available to the audience to be assimilated to their own experiences and interests. If we are to appreciate the complex processes at work in the meeting of story and experience, the various aspects of performance cannot be omitted from consideration. An understanding of the nature and development of Cook Islands spirit accounts would then require detailed study going far beyond the introductory remarks on their content and social setting offered in this paper. But this storytelling tradition lends itself to the exploration of the relations between experience and narrative. The potential rewards of its study are considerable.¹¹

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