

# Mask to Mask

## *Intimate Strangers: Friendship, Exchange and Pacific Encounters*

By Vanessa Smith

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## Reviewed by Paul Turnbull

UNTIL WELL INTO THE MISSIONARY ERA OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, POLYNESIAN Islanders understood themselves, kin and others in relation to the potency of spiritual power (*mana*) they inherited by birth or gained by adoption. Everyday life was characterised by interactions in which expectations and outcomes were determined by implicit acceptance of differences of status owing to unequal flows of *mana* through successive generations of families.

The seven interrelated essays making up this book explore how interactions between (mostly) Tahitians and Europeans from the late 1760s to the turn of the nineteenth century were very often grounded in *taio*, a ritualised bonding in friendship requiring mutual acceptance of various obligations to each other.

It is difficult to say anything confidently about the practice of *taio* prior to the coming of Europeans. It seems clear from a careful reading of surviving genealogical histories of the Society Islands that it served the ambitions of the Islands' ruling clans. What is also clear is that the paramount title-holders of the Matakava region of Tahiti encountered by Wallis and shortly afterwards by Cook, on his first voyage, eagerly sought to bond in *taio* with the leadership of the two expeditions to strengthen their military power amidst great turmoil caused by religious change fuelling dynastic rivalries.

What else we know about the institution near exclusively relates to voyagers and early missionary accounts of Islanders securing *taio* with Europeans. This reportage needs to be mindful of how contingencies prevailing in specific contexts of interaction and exchange may well have influenced what both parties sought from, and could expect of, the relationship. Indeed, we cannot discount the possibility that with the coming of Europeans, *taio* took on new meanings and existential possibilities. Smith is primarily interested, however, in using British, French and Spanish voyagers' first-hand accounts of *taio* as an analytic

lens through which to focus and reflect on how ancient and modern European writings on the complexities of friendship served as cultural resources influencing how voyagers interpreted—often mistrustfully—the motivations of Islanders, while simultaneously warning that their own ambitions in respect of trade and exchange could undercut the genuineness of their efforts to befriend Islanders.

The four essays forming part one of this book explore expressions of friendship and amicable intention as they occurred in the course of encounters between crowds of Islanders and shore parties. Chapter One focuses on the reportage by voyagers of negotiating the crowding that invariably occurred on the beaches where they came ashore, or when commanders felt confident to allow Islanders aboard their ship. Smith argues that with the notable exceptions of the work of Marshall Sahlins and Greg Dening, the ‘Oceanic crowd’ has only interested demographers. The chapter accordingly focuses on how voyagers anxiously sought amidst the bustle, confusion and potential dangers of these beach and shipboard gatherings to gauge the collective mood of islanders. Smith highlights how the resultant diagnoses of crowd temperament were inflected by culturally predetermined expectations of ‘native’ behaviour, the social dynamics between crew and commanders aboard vessels, and the differing experiences of voyagers in getting to the Pacific. Here, and in later chapters, Smith assesses what voyage commanders wrote of their efforts to identify and befriend individuals capable of managing crowds and possessing sufficient authority to help begin the vital business of trading for water and food. She is particularly concerned to show that these group encounters often led to misreadings of intention and sincerity that complicated how subsequent efforts to establish friendship were understood from both sides of the beach. To this end, Smith revisits the most well-known of these group encounters—the death of Cook on the crowded beach of Kealakekai in 1779—contending that what is absent from recent anthropologically-informed interpretations of the motivation for Cook’s slaying is consideration of crowd psychology, and the possibility of his falling victim to the emotional volatility of the Hawaiians crowded on the beach. It is an interesting argument, which is not incommensurate with Sahlins’s emphasis on the ritually grounded behaviour of the Hawaiians implicated in the death of Cook. But it is an argument that could benefit from recent work employing insights from cognitive science to historical crowds than is drawn upon here (the work of Dirk Helbing and Mehdi Moussaid on crowds in normal and disaster situations readily comes to mind).

Chapter Two explores the motivation of Europeans in cultivating friendship with Tahitians, and what Tahitians in turn appear to have required of Europeans with whom they bonded in *taio*. Smith begins by addressing the question of whether—as several scholars have argued—*taio* was a cultural innovation, arising out of the desire of Islanders to secure iron axes, knives and ship nails.

She shows that the journals of early missionaries and James Morrison, the Bounty Mutineer, provide ample evidence that in the Society Islands men of roughly equal age and social standing commonly bonded in *taio* before the coming of Europeans. Indeed, these sources disclose that men joined by *taio* gave each other rights to occupy and enjoy what lands each might possess for as long as they both lived. Morrison further tells us that when a man died without heir, his land and goods were inherited by his friend. What is more, missionary journals show that the Pomare Dynasty's consolidation of power over the entire island of Tahiti owed much to the strategic use of *taio*.

The employment of *taio* to secure and extend ownership of land and power over local communities extended to allowing men rights to sex with their friends' wives, the offspring of these unions serving to strengthen alliances between potentially rival dynasties. Logically enough, high ranking Tahitians enacting *taio* with Europeans often encouraged them to have sex with their wives to strengthen their personal and familial *mana*. And, as Smith shows, the recorded reactions of voyagers to this enticement were often moments of uneasy awareness that they and their friends had ulterior motives in their pursuit of friendship.

While traditionally *taio* was a male cultural practice, it was not exclusively so by the mid-eighteenth century. As Smith explains, for some time prior to the arrival of Europeans, high ranking women had sought and secured *taio* in their own right. Voyagers found that several high ranking women ardently sought their friendship, and did so in circumstances where both parties were conscious of the material and political advantages flowing from their friendship. Such was certainly true of the *taio* that Parea, one such politically ambitious high ranking woman, established with the British voyagers Samuel Wallis and Joseph Banks.

In Chapter Three, Smith draws on classical, eighteenth century and post-modern ideas and arguments about friendship, to show why the cultural resources available to late Enlightenment voyagers and missionaries in Oceania fostered an uneasy consciousness that in cultivating friendship they sought to secure advantageous terms of trade and exchange. Chapter Four is very much a companion piece, in which Smith argues that voyagers' reportage of encountering Tahitian funerary ceremonies shows them to have been ambivalent and uncertain not simply about the genuineness of the emotions expressed by those grieving the dead, but also about the sincerity of their own reactions to these expressions of pain and overwhelming sorrow.

The three remaining chapters making up the second part of the book are concerned with particular friendships between voyagers and Islanders. Chapter Five revisits the histories of those Islanders who sailed with British and French

voyagers from the Society and Palau Islands. Here, Smith suggests that these Polynesians and their chaperones can be construed as fellow travellers, in the sense that their respective ambitions were more inseparable and grounded in intimacy than contemporary opinion and modern scholarship has appreciated. Chapter Six critically appraises the part that friendship played in the *Bounty* Mutiny, taking issue with the engrained tendency of received scholarship to assess the affair in terms of the relative culpability of William Bligh and Fletcher Christian. Smith is particularly concerned here to highlight how Bligh and his crew's experiences of *taio* came to be the touchstone by which the sincerity of word and deed aboard the *Bounty* were judged, especially as tensions rose. In the final chapter, Smith turns to the early years of missionary settlement, the dynamics of friendship as they find expression in the journals of the English missionary William Crook and the beachcomber William Robarts. Here, Smith is concerned to explore how intimacy figured as an essential dimension of Enlightenment ethnography.

This is a book which by its focus on friendship successfully generates new insights into the cross-cultural interactions that occurred in the late eighteenth-century Pacific. It is the work of a talented literary scholar, who draws creatively on a diverse range of authorities from Aristotle to Derrida with a view to teasing out hitherto unappreciated subtleties of meaning in what voyaging and missionary journalists wrote of their encounters, friendships and intimacies with Islanders. It is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of Oceania, and the history of emotions more generally.

**PAUL TURNBULL** is a Professor of History in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland. He has written extensively on the history of racial anatomy and the theft and repatriation of Indigenous Australian Bodily Remains.