Evangelists as Ethnographers among the ‘Heathen’ Cannibals: Ta‘unga and Maretu of Rarotonga and the Sherbroan Wilberforce

Cartoonists of the early twentieth century routinely poked fun at missionaries by picturing them being cooked in an enormous pot while their savage tormentors dance round the fire. In fact, documented encounters between missionaries and cannibals are extremely rare, even rarer substantiated accounts of cannibalism as a cultural practice. Mission journals contributed to the caricature of their agents as frontline warriors in the campaign for the suppression of savage customs by featuring lurid articles on distasteful or revolting rituals. Ethnographic writing by missionaries generally served a dual purpose of advancing knowledge and stirring up supporters to speed the work of civilization through Christianization. Discussions of cannibalism are of exceptional interest when penned by indigenous evangelists writing of their own or closely related societies. This chapter examines ethnographic writing on cannibalism produced in the Pacific and West Africa.

Ta‘unga (1818–1896) and Maretu (1802–1880) of Rarotonga in the South Pacific lived in a pre- or proto-colonial situation.¹ They had encountered missionaries over an extended period of time, as well as traders and other Europeans who found their way to the South Pacific, but they had not been subjected to formal colonization. R.G. and Marjorie Crocombe, who translated and edited Ta‘unga’s writings, point out that during his lifetime societies in the western Pacific experienced major changes due to the impact of two influences. Moving from Tahiti westwards ‘was the increasingly confident army of militant Christianity of which Ta‘unga was one small advance party of reconnaissance scouts’ who prepared the ground for missionaries from Europe. From the coast of Australia ‘there were simultaneously moving east the vanguards of commerce, equally confident of success as they developed the trading potentialities of the various island groups, exchanging the products of England’s industrial revolution for salt pork, sandalwood, beche-de-mer and any other island products from which profit might be made.’² The lives, work and writings

¹ The birth dates of neither man can be unambiguously verified.
of Maretu and Ta'unga were deeply influenced by their own indigenous societies, Christianity and the moral and cultural expectations of foreign missionaries, but they did not experience the racism and disempowering impact of a colonised society.

Much of their writing concerns their day-by-day lives, the obstacles they faced and the triumphs they achieved as evangelists. The Crocombes tracked down Ta'unga’s writings over a number of years. They include letters to Ta’unga’s missionary mentor, Charles Pitman, and a journal which he kept during three years spent evangelising in New Caledonia. Marjorie Crocombe also translated, edited and annotated a manuscript by Maretu, Cannibals and Converts. Radical change in the Cook Islands, which he wrote as an old man beginning in 1871 when he was 69 years old. This includes an account of cannibalism written in 1873 presumably addressed to a missionary, possibly William Wyatt Gill or James Chalmers. Both Ta’unga and Maretu included in their writings material which could be classed as ethnographic. They rank among the earliest written descriptions of these societies. These men were also used as sources of information by missionary ethnographers including George Turner, whose book, Nineteen Years in Polynesia: Missionary Life, Travels and Researches in the Islands of the Pacific draws very directly from Ta’unga and can be compared with Ta’unga’s own presentation of the same material.

The main focus of the Raratongans’ ethnographic writing is cannibalism and the circumstances in which it occurred. Both accounts were written with a missionary readership in mind and therefore pandered to a European Christian preoccupation with the evils of cannibalism among the barbarian heathen.

Maretu was born about 1802 in Ngatangiia village on Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. Christianity came to the island through a Tahitian evangelist in 1823; Maretu and his father were among the earliest converts. Charles Pitman, a London Missionary Society missionary, arrived in 1827 and counted father and son among his staunch supporters. Pitman became very attached to Maretu, wishing to keep him as a personal assistant, and only very reluctantly allowed him to branch out on his own missionary work. When Pitman left Ngatangiia in 1855 Maretu was appointed his successor.

Maretu writes about cannibalism as it existed in his own society before Christianization. His treatment is dispassionate, perhaps because he witnessed