

北九州市立大学

外国語学部紀要

第 144 号

2017年1月

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北九州市立大学

BULLETIN

FACULTY OF FOREIGN STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

No. 144

January 2017

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THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

Kitakyushu, Japan

Herman Melville's *Omoo*: The Unconvincing Mission¹

Wayne E. Arnold

The successful public reception of *Typee* in 1846 encouraged Herman Melville to write the next section of his journeys through the South Pacific, a novel set in a “dark-temperance mode” (Reynolds 142). The result, however, is a very different type of South Seas novel. Set in the Tahitian Islands, *Omoo* (1847) contains no element of suspense; the cannibals have been converted, the freedoms of the beautiful *Typee* savage, Fayaway, have been replaced by strict morals, and more “civilized” customs have been substituted for almost all the activities in which the natives once participated. In *Omoo*, Melville uses an unnamed narrator whose adventures are not as detailed as Tommo’s are in *Typee*; furthermore, *Omoo* differs in the assumption that the “proportion of sober truthfulness [...] is doubtless greater than in *Typee*” (Arvin 83).² The narrator digresses from a straightforward narrative in order to devote significant time to critiquing the supposed advancements brought about by the missionaries and colonizers. Looking at the current religious and societal position of the Tahitians,

¹ This article is the second of a three part series. It is a revised version of an unpublished chapter from my work, *Melville's Missionaries and the Loss of Culture*.

² Recent scholarship has shown that Melville borrowed scenes from other South Seas “sources in a complicated and highly selective fashion” (Suggs 51), therefore casting doubt on the truthfulness—but not the intent—of the various episodes Melville describes. Elsewhere, Mary Bercau Edwards has explained Melville’s distortion of time frame: “The early chapters of *Omoo* are based on Melville’s time on the *Lucy Ann*, including the bloodless mutiny that occurred aboard that ship. However, since his wanderings on the island of Eimeo (Moorea), supposedly chronicled in the second half of *Omoo*, consumed only about two weeks in late October and early November 1842, Melville had to delve into other books to enrich his narrative” (“Questioning” 32).

the narrator asserts that the natives are in worse condition than when they were considered “savages.”

Omoo is a disjointed narrative that jumps from one scene to another in an attempt to expand on various aspects of the current Tahitian culture. The picturesque qualities led D. H. Lawrence to conclude that, “*Omoo* is a curious book. It has no unity, no purpose, no anything, and yet it is one of the most real, actual books ever written about the South Seas” (208). Lawrence’s praise is not unfounded; Melville’s second book contains detailed information concerning the civilizing processes occurring in Tahiti throughout the sixty years prior to his visit. One of the reasons for the disjointed events could be related to the success of *Typee*; as Edwin Eigner has noted in “The Romantic Unity of Melville’s *Omoo*,” the “narrator has adventures, but they are not compelling; and when he spends more time describing what he sees than what he does, we suspect Melville is merely trying to fill up a book in order that he may cash in on the popularity won by *Typee*” (95–96). However, Eigner believes that “[w]e should be cautious of making such a judgment” (96). Foregoing the element of suspense, in *Omoo* Melville focuses on the living conditions of the Tahitian natives; his efforts can be seen as an attempt “to stand by his graver insights and set about to write a new novel of South Sea adventure, where he renewed his attack on the missions” (Herbert 189). It has also been considered a book in which “Melville regularly targets the seedier, carpet-bagging practices of 19th-century missionaries” (Lorentzen 217). All things considered, the non-narrative of *Omoo*³ allows for a

³ Stephen Matterson has claimed that an additional consideration in the interconnection throughout *Typee* and *Omoo* resides in a consternation “between the desire to remain a visitor to the islands, and the temptation—or possible coercion—of staying” (124), thus highlighting a form of unity in the *Omoo* narrative.

much greater emphasis on the missionary activity in Tahiti, with “a more organic integration of anticolonial polemic” (Suzuki 365).

Due in part to the well-established missionary projects in the Tahitian Islands—Tahiti had been officially declared “Christian” by the British missionaries in 1815 (Gale 360)—Melville believes their work among the natives provides an excellent yardstick to measure the evangelizers’ success: “Indeed, it may now be asserted that the experiment of Christianizing the Tahitians, and improving their social condition by the introduction of foreign customs, has been fully tried. The present generation have grown up under the auspices of their religious instructors” (186). The narrator attempts to find signs of true Christian faith among the Tahitians and evidence of the “advanced” living conditions which the missionaries claim have existed. Continuing where *Typee* ended, *Omo* takes place, claims Alberti, “in an indigenous Pacific culture even more devoured by the absolutist social fictions of Euro-American colonialists than the *Typee*” (344). Yet, the narrator does not find much to support this claim. The current position appears to be worse for the natives; rather than improving their living conditions, they are decreasing in number and being subjugated under the influence of the Westerners. Melville’s critique of the conversion of the natives in *Omo* is even viewed by Anderson as a type of “propagandist document” (309) showing that the natives have actually been destroyed by the introduction of civilization.

After landing in Tahiti, the narrator begins a quest for true native converts to the Christian faith. In all except one case,⁴ the quest is unsuccessful; Melville places great emphasis on this task, not because he “believed nor disbelieved in God” but rather because he “believed in faith” (Mizruchi 93). In undertaking this quest, Melville’s narrator attempts to discover the true state of the natives’

spiritual position; instead, what he discovers is the hypocrisy of the natives and missionaries. The quest theme is common in many of Melville's works. As Milton Stern notes, "Melville takes as a central character the individual who makes a philosophical voyage, which is symbolized by a physical journey. The spiritual voyage is a search for the primitivist's paradisiac world" (10). Since the missionary and colonizing efforts have ensued for an extended period in Tahiti, the paradisiacal world that the narrator might wish to discover has long since vanished. Now, within the "civilized" Tahiti, he must adjust his search in the altered world that the missionary has created. Stephen de Paul has remarked, in "The Documentary Fiction of Melville's *Omoo*: The Crossed Grammars of Acculturation," that this quest is no easy undertaking. *Omoo*'s narrator has wandered into a world where the "mutation of both European and Polynesian social structures presented certain challenges to the young writer seeking to make sense out of the busy, jumbled cultural landscape Tahiti had become" (51–52).⁵ The influx of Western influence continually reduces the Tahitian culture so that the result is the loss of a greater part of the natives' previous freedom. The distinctive boundaries between Christian beliefs and the natives' original culture become unclear; the narrator would argue, however, that there would be obvious

⁴ The narrator's experience on the outer island of Imeeo brings him and Long Ghost into contact with Po-Po, who the narrator concludes is a pillar of the church. Performing regular devotions and prayers, Po-Po and his wife Arfreetee, seemingly shock the narrator with their true faith: "After becoming familiarized with the almost utter destitution of anything like practical piety upon these islands, what I observed in our host's house astonished me much. But whatever others might have been, Po-Po was, in truth, a Christian: The only one, Arfreetee excepted, whom I personally knew to be such, among all the natives of Polynesia" (*Omoo* 275).

⁵ Stephen de Paul also argues that since Tahiti was so jumbled, Melville's narration must also be jumbled, or in another sense, picturesque: "Indeed, the fact that the narrator of *Omoo* goes unnamed signifies the diluting of cultural identity associated with the upheavals of acculturation. The boundaries formerly blocking Polynesian and Western selves off from one another in the Marquesas Islands have become irrevocably blurred in this atmosphere of hybridization" (53).

signs of faith if the missionary claims are founded on any truth.

In his quest, the narrator moves around the island critiquing aspects of the Tahitians' life as it now exists. The result is that "*Omoo* analyzes cultural development by thematizing issues associated with criminal justice [...], topics of naval discipline [...], and practices endorsed by moral reformers (rehabilitation, philanthropy, work, temperance, education)" (Colatrella 100). Much emphasis is given to topics of moral reform; this issue allows Melville's narrator to expand sections of the narrative in an effort to find out the true spiritual state of the natives. In his exploration, the narrator discovers that many natives have learned how to mislead the missionaries by presenting themselves as nominal Christians. He becomes interested in what de Paul calls "the *visibility* of the assimilation of Western culture into the Polynesian world" (61). Melville's opinion is supported by other visitors to Tahiti. Jeremiah Reynolds, who also travelled the South Seas, believed that it was justifiable to question the missionaries' claims: "When we consider the length of time permanent instructors have been located on the island, we cannot but feel that the harvest has not been in proportion to the labors of the husbandman" (qtd. in Strauss 160). Furthermore, the visible attributes that de Paul mentions are a cover for the insincerity many of the natives show toward the Christian belief, and, as the narrator comes to believe, these attributes are not a sign of real faith.

One of the fundamental problems the narrator notices concerning the Tahitians is the loss of control over their environment—not just the physical or political possession of the islands or their personal being, but also the ability to retain a sense of human value and worth in their own native land. Melville's warning in *Omoo* concerns "the ironic exposure of warring Christians and short-lived religious conversion" (Reynolds 49) of the natives. As Colatrella explains,

the “reformed” Polynesians are harmed by their interaction with authorities, suggesting the flawed nature of disciplinary reforms. Tahitians particularly suffer from denationalization as a result of interaction with Europeans and Americans. Missionaries introduce Protestantism and Roman Catholicism to sailors and natives, seeking to eliminate dissipative cultural rituals, and replacing traditional spiritual, social, political and legal systems and native languages of Polynesians with European models. [...]. Living in a liminal state combining features of cultural systems, Tahitians and sailors seek freedom from unjust authority as they attempt to satisfy physical and spiritual needs. (100)

This statement exemplifies how the natives in Tahiti (and as Colatrella would add, sailors such as Melville) found these imposed regulations suffocating to their freedoms. The narrator believes such extreme authority is unwarranted because of the natives' simple nature; indeed, “[h]e deploras brutal, senseless, or excessive discipline as perversions of law and authority that deny human dignity [...]” (Kemper 426). In order to survive, the natives must find ways to break out of these restrictions by appearing to follow the missionaries' laws when in their presence, but when in private they resort to their own choice of lifestyle. Indeed, the narrator laments this need as being something that destroys rather than benefits the natives:

Doubtless, in thus denationalizing the Tahitians, as it were, the missionaries were prompted by a sincere desire for good; but the effect has been lamentable. Supplied with no amusements in place of those forbidden, the Tahitians, who require more recreation than other people, have sunk into a listlessness, or indulge in

sensualities, a hundred times more pernicious than all the games ever celebrated in the Temple of Tane. (Melville 185)

It could be argued, then, that the denationalization of the natives, through removing their traditional activities, has left them without the desire to better themselves. Therefore, in his quest, the narrator is actually confronted with an insincerity created through the introduction of doctrines that force the natives to behave according to standards of Euro-American civilization. The result is a paradox surrounding the positive influence of the missionaries, as Anderson notes, “[t]he very existence of such numerous, severe, and perpetually violated laws against licentiousness of all kinds was in itself, according to Melville, an index of the continual increase of immorality”; in a reaction to these laws, “the hypocrisy and discontent were aggravated by the fact that the missionaries, in the excess of their zeal to stamp out the last trace of heathenism, exercised no discretion in the application of their prohibitory laws” (255–56). Melville’s Tahitians are so restricted that nothing can replace those things now forbidden. They sit around listlessly from day to day, which results in some of them indulging in questionable activities. The narrator’s conclusion is that the missionaries’ original intentions may have been good, but the effects are lamentable.

As the narrator attempts to determine the outcome of the natives’ conversion, he finds the natives’ ambivalent nature very perplexing. He sees young native women who attend and participate in the religious functions of the church; yet, after leaving the sacred partaking of the Eucharist, they quickly become “guilty of some sad derelictions” (179). To find an answer for this behavior, the narrator tries to determine what thoughts the young natives hold concerning the religion in which they allegedly believe; entering into a conversation with a young native woman of his acquaintance, he asks if she belongs to the church:

“Yes, me mickonaree,” was the reply.

But the assertion was at once qualified by certain reservations; so curious, I cannot forbear their relation.

“Mickonaree ena” (church member here), exclaimed she, laying her hand upon her mouth, and a strong emphasis on the adverb. In the same way, and with similar exclamations, she touched her eyes and hands. This done, her whole air changed in an instant; and she gave me to understand, by unmistakable gestures, that in certain other respects she was not exactly a “mickonaree.” (180)⁶

The native's acknowledgement of being a Christian in the head but not in the body is rather telling. It shows the extent of the double standards existing in some of the natives—especially the younger ones; the narrator believes they have become, or have always been, immune to the teaching of the missionaries. They go through the motions of being “*A sad good Christian at the heart—*” but they are clear in the fact that they are “*very heathen in the carnal part*” (180). Melville's inclusion of this event purposefully disputes the missionaries' claims to have positively supplanted the heathens' previous way of life. The removal of all human lusts is certainly not what Melville was expecting to find, but the overwhelming duplicity of certain natives is very clear: they are willing to profess the missionaries' doctrines but not follow through with, or choose to ignore, performing actions expected by Christian faith. This observation by the narrator, however, may result from the much more fundamental element of “lost

⁶ It is interesting to note that the converted natives refer to themselves as “mickonarees,” or missionaries, rather than Christians. This phrase suggests that the natives have simply adopted the terminology of the missionaries rather than realizing what it means to truly be Christians.

in translation.” Mary Bercaw Edwards has correctly observed that,

The islanders seem to have understood fragments of what was being communicated and often recast them in the complex terms of their own cosmological views, believing in their turn that they had understood what was being said. This fundamental dissociation between talk and comprehension, coupled with the vast differences between European and island cultures, created a context in which multiple and often contradictory meanings coexisted. These contradictions resulted in distortion and breakdown of social structures on both sides and crises of identity for some individuals. (Bercaw Edwards, *Cannibal* 101)

Melville, in both *Typee* and *Omoo*, does not appear to give significant credence to the potential of miscommunication in terms of what the missionaries have attempted to convey in the Biblical teachings; nevertheless, it is clear to Melville, that regardless of any misinterpretation, the strict rules applied by the missionaries have had a cultural toll on the daily life of the Tahitians.

Other visitors to the island have related similar situations in the native’s behavior, such as J. A. Moerenhout, in his *Travels to the Islands of The Pacific Ocean*. Reaching Tahiti in 1929, Moerenhout was surprised—and disappointed—not to be greeted by the natives upon the arrival of his ship. Having reached the island on a Sunday, he learns that the natives have been forbidden to travel out to the ships in their canoes on the Sabbath day. Yet, as soon as the “Sabbath” was deemed complete, Moerenhout observed a direct reversal of the Sunday quiet:

I was equally surprised on the same night as this apparent ban of all communication between the Indians and the crews aboard the ships, especially on Sunday, because, scarcely had night arrived

than, despite the cries of the sentinel who was forbidding women to come aboard, such a number came that all the ships were filled with them [...]. [M]ost of them were led by men, their brothers, their lovers, their husbands or their fathers, who offered them to the foreigners. (Moerenhout 108)

Moerenhout goes on to describe that during his initial visit to Tahiti, a length of fourteen months, such scenes became the norm; his disgust with such sexual licentiousness is clear, and that he first witnesses such behavior by the natives on a Sunday only serves to emphasize the failures of the missionaries and the continued corruptions encouraged by the presence of the sailing crews. Indeed, the sailors forged the path down which the missionaries followed, as Caleb Doan has argued, “we can hardly think of these Pacific missions as independent phenomena, unconnected and unrelated to the Atlantic world spatially or historically” (207).

Russian explorer, Otto Von Kotzebue's narrative recorded during the 1820s proved a valuable resource that Melville uses to support the claims of his narrator. Like the narrator, Kotzebue views the hypocrisy of the natives as linked directly to the work of the missionaries. Melville's narrator quotes directly from Kotzebue's *Voyage* to support his own claims. Kotzebue's entire paragraph—borrowed by Melville—expounds on the missionary efforts:

True, genuine Christianity, and a liberal government, might have soon given to this people, endowed by nature with the seeds of every social virtue, a rank among civilized nations. Under such a blessed influence, the arts and sciences would soon have taken root, the intellect of the people would have expanded, and a just estimation of all that is good, beautiful, and eternally true,

would have refined their manners and ennobled their hearts. Europe would soon have admired, perhaps even envied Tahiti: but the religion taught by the Missionaries is not true Christianity, though it may possibly comprehend some of its doctrines, but half understood even by the teachers themselves. That it was established by force, is of itself an evidence against its Christian principle. A religion which consists in the eternal repetition of prescribed prayers, which forbids every innocent pleasure, and cramps or annihilates every mental power, is libel on the Divine Founder of Christianity, the benign Friend of human-kind. It is true, that the religion of the Missionaries has, with a great deal of evil, effected some good. It has abolished heathen superstitions, and an irrational worship, but it has introduced new errors in their stead. It has restrained the vices of theft and incontinence, but it has given birth to bigotry, hypocrisy, and a hatred and contempt of all other modes of faith, which was once foreign to the open and benevolent character of the Tahitian. It has put an end to avowed human sacrifices, but many more human beings have been actually sacrificed to it, than ever were to their heathen gods. (Kotzebue 167–69)

The narrator's search for true faith among the natives is challenging because, as Kotzebue relates, the religion the natives receive only gives them the *functions* of Christianity without building up a solid foundation of faith. In actuality, the natives have abandoned their heathen rites only to become victims of a religious war brought on by the very religion supposed to save them. It is well known that war and sickness are the two primary causes that wiped out the majority of

the natives in Tahiti.⁷ Melville's narrator only briefly mentions the destruction caused by these wars; nevertheless, as in *Typee*, he does give specific attention to the diseases that have greatly decreased the population.

The primary focus of the narrator, however, does not revolve around war or sickness but on the restrictions imposed on the natives by the missionaries. One of the most disturbing developments is the advent of the religious police, or the "kannakippers"; they represent a "most outrageous extension of moral and social authority" on the part of the missionaries (de Paul 63), and a sign of the shallow faith and ambivalence among the natives. The presence of these men causes much disruption in the daily lives of the natives. The very fact that the missionaries have formed such an institution epitomizes the insincerity of the whole religious establishment. These police represent another means by which the missionaries can suppress the natives and directly reduce them to a state of subjugation. The narrator disparages the missionary efforts with the kannakippers because "hypocrisy in matters of religion, so apparent in all Polynesian converts, is most injudiciously nourished in Tahiti, by a zealous and, in many cases, a coercive superintendence over their spiritual well-being" (180). The narrator is appalled by such extreme use of religious authority to suppress "heathen" tendencies. James Baird, in *Ishmael: A Study of the Symbolic Mode of Primitivism*, concludes that Melville is suspicious of the missionary work; for him "the achievement of persuading an agreeable people [...] to give up a traditional symbolism in answer to vague mumblings of peace, where peace and good will were already

⁷ Kotzebue records that the population was once estimated at being over eighty thousand and that at the time of his visit they had been reduced down to a mere eight thousand, resulting in a loss of nine-tenths of the population—at a minimum. He believes, however, that the main cause of this has been from religious wars between the natives which were started in an effort to force the unconverted natives into religious submission. (Kotzebue 169).

known, was an act of sacrilege, suspect in itself of “civilized” evil. This feat of persuasion was a virtual token of the symbolic impoverishment in which the zeal of the missions originated” (99). The overpowering nature of the missionary zeal reveals itself through many of the narrator’s observations. The presence of the kannakippers, acting as the physical embodiment of missionary persuasion, reveals the degree to which the natives are being subjugated by the power of the religious leaders. Such measures of control by the missionaries caused one reviewer of *Omoo* to claim in 1847, “The moderation and forbearance with which [Melville] treats of clerical despotism and evangelical tyranny, cannot fail to produce a deep impression on the minds of all reasonable men” (qtd. in Nara 173).

Authoritative figures as they are, the kannakippers are a bane rather than a blessing for the natives. On Sundays they are seen “armed with a bamboo-cane, driving [their] herd to a spiritual pasture” (Kotzebue 205). While the use of the bamboo-cane may not be specifically designated by the missionaries, it is apparent through this dehumanizing function that the people do not willingly come to church. The kannakippers dehumanize the Tahitians by herding them around as animals. This activity becomes a perverse interpretation of the Shepherd looking after his flock. Instead of guiding their sheep to the pasture, the religious police are referred to as “whippers-in” of the natives. Representing the epitome of control over a religiously repressed culture, the kannakippers are a negative force throughout the Tahitian Islands. Their presence stands as a symbol of the hypocrisy in the island: “[t]his, indeed, is the principal charge which Melville makes against the coercive superintendence of the spiritual well-being of the natives” (Anderson 254). We might surmise that if true Christian faith, brought about by actual conversion, were to exist among more of the Tahitians then the

role of the kannakippers would be needless.

One of the positive changes in the Tahitians is that they no longer practice the heathen activities of warfare and cannibalism. Western ideas of civilization, brought by the new inhabitants on the island, have engendered recognition that “the nationality of the island, [and] its inhabitants are no longer deemed fit subjects for the atrocities practiced upon mere savages” (187). However, while the natives may be secure from outside dangers, they must now face an internal decimation of a large portion of their culture. As Stephen de Paul notes:

The purpose of the missionary program of “denationalizing the Tahitians” was moral improvement. The consequence, Melville notes, was the erosion of a whole society [...]. The disruption of the ritual life of Tahitian man followed from this denationalizing imperative. [...]. The sudden influx of foreign nationals into native society to take up residence there as colonial citizens has created an umbrella of imperial protection which covers—actually masks—the changing realities of Tahiti while at once promoting a false sense of cultural “homogeneity.” While this “new nationality” has removed any threat of further atrocities against the native population, all visible signs point to the fact that the price for this physical security has been the spiritual life of the old native society. (56–57)

The Pacific religious wars that raged in the first part of the nineteenth century are one of the primary reasons for the abandonment of the pagan activities. The rivalries pertained to who would control the spiritual and political power over the commoners. One of the leaders was Pomaree II (1774?-1821), who became king of Tahiti in 1803; he “rose to secular and religious ascendancy by winning in

tribal warfare” (Gale 360). Pomaree II was able to reestablish his family line by turning to and accepting the advice of missionaries who by this time had already spent twenty years in Tahiti (Campbell 75). Pomaree believed that accepting Christianity “seemed like a fair price in exchange for the military assistance of the Europeans” (de Paul 58).⁸ The eventual result was the introduction of the new national identity. Unfortunately, creating a national identity for the Tahitians did not agree with their natural disposition toward simple island life.

A primary reason the narrator believes Christian faith does not abound in the Polynesians is because of the indolent nature of the natives, who do not appear as industrious as the Euro-American inhabitants of the island. William Dillingham, in *An Artist in the Rigging: The Early Work of Herman Melville*, sees industry as “the heart of *Omoo*” (88). As Tommo describes in *Typee*, the original state of the natives is one of peaceful docility, which does not require productivity in order to supply the necessities of life. The narrator of *Omoo*, aware of this disposition, believes that “there is, perhaps, no race upon earth less disposed by nature to the monitions of Christianity than the people of the South Seas” (176–77). Likewise, Dillingham says, “[f]or some of the laziness (and much of the vice) among Tahitians, the narrator blames European intruders, including missionaries, who made the natives give up their old ways for new ones that they could not assimilate” (88). Doctrines that the missionaries have been preaching for the last sixty years are seldom seriously adhered to or applied by many of the natives. Furthermore, dedication to work requires a higher level of effort than the natives seem willing to exert. The colonizing endeavors meet

⁸ Pomaree was struggling to maintain political control in Tahiti; there were many uprisings against his position from other native tribes. Therefore, assistance received from the Europeans helped him overpower his enemies.

with minimal success because, as the narrator would argue, the natives do not apply the religious lessons to their lives. The presumed indolence existing in the Polynesians brings no benefits to the missionaries; likewise, the colonizers suffer since they are not capable of motivating the Tahitians for any extended period of time. Rather than becoming an “advanced” homogeneous civilization, the natives actually move in the opposite direction.

Numerous original Tahitian pastimes had been discarded in previous years and were not replaced by any alternates. The missionaries had strongly encouraged this abandonment, apparently believing that the suppression would help the natives advance toward a Western definition of civilized living:

Many pleasant, and, seemingly, innocent sports and pastimes, are likewise interdicted. In old times, there were several athletic games practiced, such as wrestling, foot-racing, throwing the javelin, and archery. In all these they greatly excelled; and, for some, splendid festivals were instituted. Among their everyday amusements were dancing, tossing the football, kite-flying, flute-playing, and singing traditional ballads; now, all punishable offences; though most of them have been so long in disuse that they are nearly forgotten. (185)

In the removal of these activities, the narrator believes that the natives have lost essential elements for an enjoyable life. There appears to be no justification for the loss of these activities; instead, “[s]ticking to traditional cultural ways appears to be the means of thriving” (Colatrella 113). Yet the natives continue to move further away from their natural disposition by being forced into Western social confines.

However, the claim concerning the removal of these sports is only

partially correct. There were two primary reasons why these games were lost to the Tahitians as pastimes. First, King Pomaree II banned any actions related to pagan practices; therefore, activities associated with pagan festivals were already prohibited by the ruling power in Tahiti. The other reason, as the narrator suggests, is related to missionaries, but also to the colonizing efforts on the island. In his defense of missionary activity in Hawaii, Walter Frear, author of *Anti-Missionary Criticism*, notes that the banned sports activities resulted from the societal advancements of the natives. Using missionary comments on the subject as his sources, Frear points out that the missionaries were not the direct cause of the suppression of these activities:

new interests had been substituted—horses and the white man’s conveniences, luxuries, and vices generally; [...] activities were largely absorbed, first, in war, in which incidentally the musket largely displaced the spear and sling, and then in supplying sandalwood, etc., to the whites, shipping as sailors, and engaging in other occupations. [...]. Doubtless, also, the restrictions, under missionary influences, on gambling and licentiousness, the principal attractions of these sports, contributed indirectly. (14)

Regardless of the events leading to this loss, the natives were left with no recreational replacement of their traditional activities, furthering the denationalization process. The restrictions introduced greatly decreased the enjoyment of the natives’ daily life, as Captain F. W. Beechey describes in his *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Bering Straits* (1832). The converted natives, while they regarded the Bible with “proper respect,” felt that it was associated “with the suppression of their amusements, their dances, singing, and music, [so] they read it with much less good will than if a system had been

introduced which would have tempered religion with cheerfulness, and have instilled happiness into society” (qtd. in Anderson 256). The Western civilizing brings with it only work for the Tahitians; it supplies no source of recreation.

As Melville's narrator points out, the civilizers have not simply left the natives to squander their energies; instead, they have attempted to tap into that energy as a source of labor: “It has been said that the only way to civilize a people is to form in them habits of industry” (191). The industrious newcomers have attempted to establish weaving factories, sugar cane plantations, and agricultural farms. But these are all stemming from a Euro-American culture that had a long history of workers who are accustomed to manual labor.⁹ Many of these ideas derived from the philosophy that the missionary societies had agreed upon; they wanted “a blend of religious and cultural instruction, believing that waged labor, Western marriage, and literacy were important factors in facilitating conversion to Christianity” (Samson 13). Nevertheless, the narrator believes that the natural inclinations of the natives have made the colonizers' labor efforts fruitless: “The fact is, that the mechanical and agricultural employments of the civilized life require a kind of exertion altogether too steady and sustaining to agree with an indolent people like the Polynesians” (193). Dillingham elaborates on this point further, noting, “The narrator is appalled at missionaries not because he believes they are evil but because he thinks most of them are stupid. They should have known when to leave well enough alone. Instead they tried naively to give the islanders a new identity through work—for true Christianity is just as surely

⁹ Robery S. Levine, in “Melville and Americanness: A Problem,” notes that Melville became focused on the idea of “Americanness”, or verging on an “American literary nationalist” (7); it might prove of interest to consider Melville's distinction between the European vs. American impact on the natives in both *Typee* and *Omoo*.

a form of work as physical labor” (89). Additionally, the Reverend William Ellis, in *Narrative of a Tour through Hawaii* (1826), defines the missionaries’ belief that the natives must be converted in order to “advance” their civilization: “*Christianity Alone* supplies the most powerful motives and the most effective machinery for originating and accomplishing the processes of civilization” (qts. in Strauss 157). However, the natives, unwilling or unable to adapt, are left under the imposing forces of missionary powers that, supposing to advance them, has actually brought them to a point where they have nothing culturally valuable in which to invest their energies.

The narrator acknowledges the removal of the pagan systems of idolatry, but he states that it is not necessarily attributable to missionary activity. Rather, it stems from the “civilizing effects of a long and constant intercourse with whites of all nations” (187). However, these “advancements” seem to benefit the foreigners rather than the Tahitians. Questioning the motives behind the conversion of the natives to Christianity, the narrator suggests that it was in order to remove the savage propensities they once held—thereby allowing for a safe environment to develop industries. Throughout *Omoa*, there is a close connection between the missionary efforts and the civilizing of the culture: “The missionaries regularly preached the virtues of ‘industry,’ knowing that trade could create a market for European goods in the islands and encourage the development of British social and labor practices” (Samson 29). There are few stronger motives behind bringing them to a state of Western existence. Again, one of the major setbacks of their so-called advancement arises from the natural state in which the natives once lived and how, by Western standards, they appear exceedingly indolent; therefore, they are deemed incapable of actively participating in culturally different methods of commerce. The narrator supports this claim by drawing

attention to the businesses established in the Hawaiian Islands:

every evidence of civilization among the South Sea Islands directly pertains to foreigners; though the fact of such evidence existing at all is usually urged as a proof of the elevated condition of the natives. Thus, at Honolulu, the capital of the Sandwich Islands, there are fine dwelling-houses, several hotels, and barber-shops, ay, even billiard-rooms; but all these are owned and used, be it observed, by whites. There are tailors, and blacksmiths, and carpenters also; but not one of them is a native. (192–93)

Completely removed from the labor force, the native commoners have been separated from influencing any of the changes brought about in their new culture. The alienated position of the Tahitian then is disenfranchised inhabitant of the islands, who become workers that, “by definition are not only those who are unable to sell anything except their labor, they are also those who are unable to fully represent themselves through the channels and institutions of the dominant culture” (Brantlinger 109). The Tahitians, under the well-established power of the missionaries, have abandoned themselves to their listless and indolent behavior, demonstrating that they are no longer in control of their environment.

Through this exclusion, the natives have gradually come under the rule of the “White man” who arrives with “a kind of Puritan superego,” and “whose errand into the wilderness knows few boundaries and who will go to great lengths indeed to make his point(s)” (Said 295); in Melville’s view, the white man’s point is that the “civilized” native must be completely removed from his previous pagan state in order to be brought up in a proper Euro-American system. Melville rejects this belief. Unable to cope with the changes in their civilization, and forbidden to retain any element of their previous pagan practices, the natives,

who are “[c]alculated for a [particular] state of nature, [...] cannot otherwise long exist” (193). The narrator has serious grounds for this concern. Coming to Tahiti and witnessing native life and its decimation since Cook’s visit, including the current unmotivated spirit of the Tahitians, Melville is not unfounded in this conclusion. As Anderson notes, Melville’s view is that “the Polynesian is no more suited in disposition and talent for Western civilization than he is qualified in attitude and spiritual endowment for the morals and dogmas of the Christian religion” (261). The alterations in both the religious and secular arenas are hindered by the natives’ original disposition toward a more natural environment.

The Western religion has brought on the cessation of the Tahitian’s traditional activities and the missionaries have attempted to replace “pagan” traits with the supposed benefits of Western living. Therefore, the natives are left with nothing to pursue unless it is related to the white man’s culture. Furthermore, the absence of true Christian faith, the narrator would argue, can be seen in the natives’ indolent nature. Through Melville’s narrative it can be seen that the “denationalization of the natives” has only lowered them “to a state of abject servility”; furthermore, “nominal Christianity leads to the unhealthy absence of constructive activity. The prospect of gaining a balanced freedom by overcoming difficulties in the world of work [...] seems an utter impossibility for the Polynesians” (Wenke 253). Melville is not opposed to the Polynesians performing some type of physical activities to benefit their lives; he is not against work—in fact, as seen from his intense focus on the absence of productive labor in the Tahitians, he is adamantly in favor of a strong work ethic. However, as Dillingham argues, he does not believe that the Euro-American perspective of labor need be directly applied to the natives:

The narrator does not hold the Tahitians responsible for their

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physical and spiritual indolence. He would not try to make them into anything other than what they are by nature—a happy, lazy, innocent people—because he assumes that such an attempt would be clearly futile. He is angered by those who refuse to recognize that fact. Blameless though they are, the Tahitians nevertheless disturb him. (Dillingham 89)

This disturbance arises from the disruption of cultural habits that at one time provided them with the right to be “happy, lazy, innocent people”; this change also shows a reminiscence of the natives in the Typee valley. Now, without these preoccupations, what the narrator sees is a culture devoid of value, devoid of human purpose; the natives have lost their means to live in the primitive state they once existed in and they cannot willingly adapt to the constructs of an alternate culture that is completely alien.

The listlessness the narrator sees in the Tahitians drives him to make his strongest argument against the work of the missionaries. Since the efforts to civilize the natives through industry have hopelessly failed, the narrator comes to the conclusion that if true Christian faith existed in them, advancements in their culture should have succeeded: “the Tahitians are less civilized now than formerly. True, their constitutional indolence is excessive; but surely, if the spirit of Christianity is among them, so unchristian a vice ought to be, at least, partially remedied. But the reverse is the fact” (191). The narrator’s quest for signs of true Christian faith in the natives, with the exception of two Tahitians, Po-Po and Arfretee, ultimately ends in failure. The advent of the kannakippers, the continued “loose” sexual mores, and the obvious lack of motivation toward a “civilized” state of existence, represent arguments against the progress of missionary work. Instead of a plethora of instances to support the positive influences of Western

activity and the foundation of true Christian faith, *Omoo* depicts Melville's belief that the natives are heading toward destruction rather than moral and cultural advancement.

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