

*Thunder in 'Opoa*

How can we grasp the Pacific visions that shaped these first, strange encounters? If one looks at those extraordinary images of the earth taken from outer space, Tahiti appears as a speck of land, set in the midst of the world's largest ocean. Around it swirls the Pacific, a vast expanse of water covering more than a third of the earth's surface. In the origin stories in Tahiti there is a sense of cosmic loneliness, of floating adrift in the void. According to the priests in the old schools of learning, when the world began there was only one god, Ta'aroa, alone, with no parents, in utter darkness:

Ta'aroa was his name  
 He stood in the void  
 No land, no sky  
 No sea, no men  
 Ta'aroa called, but nothing replied to him  
 And alone existing he changed himself into the universe  
 His pivots and axes  
 His rocks and bases  
 Ta'aroa is the sand  
 That is how he himself is called  
 Ta'aroa is brightness, the day or intelligence  
 Ta'aroa is the centre, is in everything, the principle of all  
 Ta'aroa is the seed, the propagator  
 Ta'aroa is the basis or the foundation  
 Ta'aroa is the incorruptible  
 Ta'aroa is the strength  
 Who creates the earth of the universe  
 Which is only the body or shell of Ta'aroa  
 He is the source of life for all things.<sup>1</sup>

Alone in the abyss, the feathered god lay in his shell. One day he came out and stood there, calling, but no one answered. Ta'aroa went back into his shell and stayed there for a long time, and when he came out again he changed one part of his body into Rumia, the multi-layered dome of the sky, above the world that was now forming.<sup>2</sup> Other parts he transformed into Tetumu, the Rock of Foundation (an *ata* – shadow or incarnation – of his own phallus), and the Earth, Papa-fenua. Ta'aroa looked down at the Earth and said, 'Here are Ta'aroa's genitals. Cast your eyes upon my Tumu. Stand up and gaze upon them. Insert them.'<sup>3</sup> He came down to Papa, entering the earth in a valley at 'Opoa in Havai'i (now Ra'iatea), one of the most sacred places in the Society Islands. Where his foot struck the ground, a *marae* named Vaeara'i (separate the sky) was later built. When he entered the earth, there was thunder at 'Opoa.<sup>4</sup>

Now Ta'aroa created Tu, the god of artisans, and Atea (Space) who bore him a son named Tane, the god of peace and beauty. When Ta'aroa shook his red and yellow feathers, some of these fell on the Earth and became trees and plants; and when he created other gods they found themselves trapped in the darkness between Earth and Sky, chafing at their captivity. Cramped and frustrated, they tried to separate Earth and Sky, attacking the great octopus that held them tightly together (another *ata* or incarnation of Ta'aroa), first with incantations and then by chopping its tentacles, but they clung to each other so tightly that every effort was futile. It was only when the god Tane propped up the dome of the sky on star pillars, thrusting Earth and Sky apart, that light entered the world, creating Te Ao, the realm of people. Water rushed in, rocks formed, forests sprang up and the skies grew, and the octopus's tentacles fell into the sea and became Tupua'i in the Austral Islands. Tane set the ten heavens in order and went to live in the highest sky, where the Milky Way or Te Vairoa-o-Tane (the living water of Tane) flowed. A great blue shark (also an *ata* of Ta'aroa) swam in the Water of Life, and over it flew red birds, the messengers of Tane.<sup>5</sup> Atea slept with another god and gave birth to the shooting stars, the moon, the sun, comets and constellations; and as the star gods were born, they sailed across the sky in their voyaging canoes, and new stars were created.<sup>6</sup>

After Tane had set up the ten domed skies, each above the last, Ta'aroa changed himself into land, the homeland Havai'i – his backbone became the mountain ridges, his ribs the slopes, and his flesh the soil. Next he changed himself into the first god-house, with his backbone as its ridge-pole and his ribs as its supports; and finally into the first sacred canoe with his backbone as the keel, floating on the water.<sup>7</sup> In each district Ta'aroa made a mountain, a cape and a *marae* or stone temple, and set a star above

it, ordering the universe.<sup>8</sup> After his union with Papa, the Earth, she bore Hina, a Janus-headed goddess who beat bark cloth for the gods and later flew to the moon; and later Ta'aroa slept incestuously with Hina, his *ata* (or incarnation), on this occasion being a breadfruit branch that hung above her, and she bore the great god 'Oro.<sup>9</sup>

'Oro was the god of fertility and war, controlling the main portals between the Po, the dark void inhabited by gods and spirits, and the Ao, the bright world of people. After his birth, his father Ta'aroa looked around and saw that although the Po, the realm of the gods, was now full of life, the Ao, the realm of people, was still empty. He conjured up Ti'i, the first man, and Ti'i slept with Hina, the moon goddess, and the world of light began to fill with human beings who brought with them trouble, mockery and wisdom. These children of Ti'i and Hina became the leading family in the Society Islands, wearers of the red and yellow feather girdles of high chiefs, descended from the gods in darkness.<sup>10</sup>

Although Hawai'i, the birthplace of land, gods and people, had been created, the great ocean in which it floated was still largely empty. Other islands now began to form. First the islands of Borabora and Ra'iatea emerged,<sup>11</sup> and eventually the island of Tahiti took shape when a section of Ra'iatea turned into a shark that swam off to the south-east, leaving the small islands of Me'eti'a and Te Ti'aroa as droppings in its wake. At the time of early contact Tahitians spoke of their island as a great fish, with its head at Tai'arapu ('disturbed sea', from the way the fish thrashed about in the ocean) in the south; its left pectoral fin in the east at Hitia'a (where Bougainville landed); its right pectoral fin in the west at Papara; and its tail at the north-west point of the island in Fa'a'a. The shark kept swimming in the sea until the god Tafa'i, the red-headed grandson of Hina, struck it with his sacred axe, creating the Taravao isthmus that divides the island into Tahiti-nui, its large northern part, and Tahiti-iti, the smaller southern peninsula.<sup>12</sup> Afterwards the sea god Ruahatu swam round the island, cutting passages through the reefs and placing the stones for the coastal *marae* or stone temples as portals between the Po, the world of the gods and darkness, and the Ao, the everyday world of people and light, so that people could communicate with their ancestors.<sup>13</sup> When he arrived at Papara, Ruahatu carved a passage through the reef and placed the stones for a great *marae* named Mahaiatea, which he dedicated to Ta'aroa.<sup>14</sup>

In this vast, watery world, many of the founding ancestors were voyagers and explorers. First Tane, the god of peace and beauty, sailed through the skies in his canoe, putting them in order, while the demi-gods Maui and Ru sailed around the earth, raising islands out of the ocean. After cutting the sinews of the fish, Tahiti, Tafa'i navigated his sacred canoe

the 'Rainbow' around the archipelago, pulling the islets of Te Ti'aroa and the Tuamotu up out of the water; while the trickster god Hiro, the god of thieves, built the first *pahi* (a long-distance canoe with high planked sides) and set off in search of feathers for the first *maro 'ura* (red feather girdle), discovering many islands.<sup>15</sup> These ancestors were revered as gods, and navigation became a sacred pursuit in the islands. Their feats were celebrated in voyaging chants passed down through the generations, like Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and Virgil's the *Aeneid*.<sup>16</sup>

Like Odysseus, Tafa'i visited many exotic locations. These included the land of the dead, guarded by Uhi, a blind old woman. Although Uhi tried to catch Tafa'i with her magical hook he escaped, and impressed by his cunning, she promised to help him rescue his father if he restored her sight. He did this by throwing two unripe coconuts into her eye sockets, and as a reward she gave him her two daughters to sleep with – Venus, the evening star (Te 'uraiopena) and Venus, the morning star (Te 'uraiti'ahotu, also known as Tau'ura-nui). Tau'ura-nui was kind to Tafa'i, showing him where his father Hema was trapped in the underworld, huddled in a cave filled with excrement. Hema was naked and blind, and his eyes had been taken to light the house where Ta'aroa's daughters were weaving their fine mats. After rescuing his father, Tafa'i retrieved Hema's eyes, tricking Ta'aroa's daughters into handing them over.<sup>17</sup> In Tahiti, Tafa'i's adventures in the land of the dead were greatly celebrated, especially during the rituals of mourning and those to install a new *ari'i rahi* or high chief on the island.

And as in ancient Greece, the time of the gods in Tahiti ran directly into the time of people. The high chiefs were the lineal descendants of the gods, and from the first settlement of the island to the first arrival of Europeans, the genealogical experts reckoned forty generations of high chiefs in Tahiti.<sup>18</sup> These *ari'i rahi* were the 'living faces' of the gods in the everyday world of light, and in their presence men and women stripped to the waist. They 'flew' or were carried on the shoulders of men; and were spoken of as gods themselves – their houses were called the Clouds of Heaven, their voices Thunder, their torches Lightning, and their sacred canoes the 'Rainbow' after Tafa'i's sacred vessel.<sup>19</sup>

In the spectacular landscapes of the Society Islands with their high, sharp-edged mountains and deep caves and valleys, at the time of first European arrival the gods were still present. At Ra'iatea, for instance, the great Foundation Rock Tumu-nui stood in darkness in the extinct crater of Te Mehani'ura, where the entrance to Te Po or the realm of the gods was located,<sup>20</sup> while Rohutu-no'ano'a, the perfumed, flowering paradise for chiefs and *'arioi*, floated above the great volcano.<sup>21</sup> On the mountain

plateau, a cliff called the Stone of Life led to Rohutu-no'ano'a.<sup>22</sup> The area around the sacred site at Cape Matahira-i-te-ra'i in 'Opoa, where *marae* Taputapuatea now stands, is still known as Te Po, because in this place the gods are in residence. The first of the high chiefs built a *marae* or stone temple there, bringing order out of chaos, and dedicated it to Ta'aroa. At each *marae*, Te Po (the world of darkness, death and the gods) entered Te Ao (the world of light, life and people), and a star stood above the *marae*, fixing it in the cosmos.

For many generations the chiefs on the island were devoted to Tane, the god of peace and beauty who presided over an era of harmony which people later remembered with nostalgia. In the generations before the first Europeans arrived, however, the worship of 'Oro spread across the archipelago, bringing with it fighting and human sacrifices. The sacrifices were dedicated to him in his role as the god of war, while his worship as the god of fertility featured sexually explicit displays and dancing. 'Oro's descendant, the trickster god Hiro, built a *marae* at Cape Matahira-i-te-ra'i in 'Opoa in honour of the god of life and death, naming it Taputapuatea or 'Sacrifices from afar'.<sup>23</sup> At this *marae*, a drum named Ta'imoana was made, which boomed out ominously each time a human sacrifice was offered.<sup>24</sup> Near the beach Hiro erected Te Papatea-o-Ru'ea, the white rock of investiture where his descendants, the paramount chiefs of Ra'iatea, were invested with the *maro 'ura* (red feather girdle). The image of the god for this *marae* – fashioned from fine sennit, shaped like a man about three feet high and covered with red and yellow feathers – also wore a red feather girdle, and thus it was known as 'Oro-marō-'ura ('Oro of the red feather girdle, the insignia of high chiefs in the Society Islands).<sup>25</sup>

During this period, *marae* became fearful places. They were dark, shaded by groves of sacred trees – the *tamanu*, *miro* and especially the *aito* or casuarina.<sup>26</sup> People spoke of these places as the jawbones of the gods, biting the spirits who passed into the dark underworld where they were consumed by the gods; while the stone uprights on their pavements were called their *nihō* or teeth. Vai'otaha *marae* on Borabora, for instance, with its yellow feather girdle, was spoken of as the upper jawbone of the god; Mata'ire'a *marae* on Huahine with its black feather girdle was his lower jawbone; while Taputapuatea *marae* on Ra'iatea with its red feather girdle was his throat, swallowing spirits into the darkness.<sup>27</sup> As the high priests of Tahiti and Mo'orea explained to an early missionary, John Orsmond, these sacred places were treated with utmost reverence and awe:

*Marae* were the sanctity and glory of the land, they were the pride of the people of these islands. A place of dread and of great silence was the *marae*. A person's

errand must be to pray there, but for no other purpose. When people approached a place where stood a *marae*, they gave it a wide berth, they lowered their clothes from their shoulders down to their waists, and carried low their burdens in their hands, until they got out of sight of it.

Terrible were the *marae* of the royal line; their ancestral and national *marae*! They were places of stupendous silence, terrifying and awe-inspiring; places of pain to the priest, to the owners, and to all the people. It was dark and shadowy among the great trees of those *marae*; and the most sacred of all was the *miro* that was the sanctifier. That was the basis of the ordinances; It was the basis of royalty; It awakened the gods; It fixed the red feather girdle of the high chiefs.<sup>28</sup>

As the cult of 'Oro spread, Taputapuatea became the centre of a far-flung voyaging network. When they set out on a journey, 'Oro's followers swore an oath not to turn back before reaching their destination.<sup>29</sup> In their sacred canoes, they carried images of the god and stones from Taputapuatea throughout the Society Islands, south to the Cook Islands (where the voyaging ancestor Tangi'ia built a *marae* called Taputapuatea, upon which the paramount chief was invested with a *maro kura* or red feather girdle);<sup>30</sup> and east to the Australs, where other *marae* called Taputapuatea were established. It seems that the followers of 'Oro also travelled to more distant islands, because there are places called Taputapuatea in New Zealand and Kapukapuakea in Hawai'i.<sup>31</sup> An alliance called Ti'ahauatea was forged between the followers of 'Oro, dividing these far-flung islands between those of Te Aouri (the world of darkness) to the east of Ra'iatea, where the ocean was called Moana-a-Marama (the Sea of the Moon) and those of Te Aotea (the world of light) to the west, where the sea was called Moanaurifa (the rank-smelling Sea).<sup>32</sup> As they used to chant:

<i>Na nia Te Ao Uri</i>	The dark land above
<i>Na raro Te Ao Tea</i>	The light land below
<i>E to roa te manu e</i>	Surrounded by birds
<i>E hi'o i te hiti o te ra.</i>	At the flash of sunrise. <sup>33</sup>

Priests from these islands periodically gathered at Taputapuatea in Ra'iatea, bearing offerings to 'Oro.<sup>34</sup> According to an early European visitor to the island:

[To Taputapuatea] human victims, ready slain, were sent to be offered on the altar of Oro, the god of war, whose principal image was worshipped here . . . Opoa was also the residence of the kings of this island, who, besides the

prerogatives of royalty, enjoyed divine honors, and were in fact living idols among the dead ones, being deified at the time of their accession to political supremacy here. These sovereigns (who always took the name of Tamatoa) were wont to receive presents from the kings and chiefs of adjacent and distant islands, whose gods were also considered tributary to the Oro of Raiatea.<sup>35</sup>

Among the followers of 'Oro were the *'arioi*, a society of orators, priests, navigators, travelling performers, warriors and famed lovers. These men and women were dedicated to 'Oro, each grade having its distinctive tattoos and special garments.<sup>36</sup> Like the god, the *'arioi* had power over life and death, and they were greatly venerated. According to the missionary John Orsmond, who collected accounts from former *'arioi* during the early nineteenth century: 'The *'arioi* were a company of fine bodied people, and separate . . . Let not the ceremony of the *'arioi* be defiled. They were adorned with scented oil, flowers, scarlet dyed cloth. Their bed places must not be trodden on. They were sacred.'<sup>37</sup> Each district in Tahiti had its own *'arioi* lodge carrying the title of its head *'arioi* (the *avae parae* or 'black leg'), an impressive individual who wore a red loincloth (and was thus sometimes referred to as the *'arioi maro 'ura*), and had legs tattooed from thigh to heel. During *'arioi* ceremonies the 'black legs' sat in state on a high stool or platform, receiving and distributing lavish gifts of cloth and pigs and watching the dances and skits of their junior colleagues. According to Orsmond, there were both male and female *'arioi* lodges in the Society Islands, each with their own 'black leg'.<sup>38</sup> And although the *'arioi* were privileged, they were forbidden to have children – unless their babies were killed at birth, they lost their sacred status.

While their own fertility was thus constrained, the dances, skits and songs of the younger *'arioi* were often intensely erotic, galvanising the power of the gods to enhance the fertility of plants, animals and people.<sup>39</sup> Some of the *'arioi* were dancers, musicians, singers, actors or artists who tattooed or painted on bark cloth; while others were navigators, chiefs, priests and specialists in ancestral lore. Although their rituals were often stately and dignified, their skits and mimes could be hilarious, ridiculing those in power. Only good-looking men and women could become *'arioi*, and most of them were high-born. They wore elegant bark-cloth garments decorated with colours and patterns, wore garlands of flowers, and oiled their bodies and hair with scented oil; and if they coveted the fine bark cloth that someone else was wearing, they simply took it. When groups of *'arioi* (or *mareva*) travelled on their journeys,<sup>40</sup> they were showered with gifts and feasts, but still they seized bark-cloth garments, pigs, fruit, vegetables and other objects for their pleasure. They played a crucial role in

all life-cycle rituals, particularly those for high-ranking people – at birth, marriage and funerals. In welcoming an important visitor to a district, a young female *'arioi* with a large quantity of bark cloth wound around her body walked towards the guest and slowly twirled around, unwinding the bark cloth until she stood there nude, laying the bark cloth as a gift before him.

When the *'arioi* sailed on their expeditions, a fleet of canoes with flying feather streamers and small circular sails at the tops of their masts gathered



*Young 'arioi girl presents bark-cloth*

under 'Oro's protection. Before setting off they carried out rituals, sacrificing pigs, plantains and other fruits to the gods. At sea they were led by the sacred canoe carrying 'Oro's image, and gifts for the gods and high chiefs of the islands they intended to visit. Another canoe carried a temporary *marae* for 'Oro's two brothers, 'Oro-tetefa and Uru-tetefa, the gods of the 'arioi society.<sup>41</sup> Upon approaching an island the 'arioi performers, decked with flowers, feathers and perfumed bark-cloth garments, sang and danced on the canoe platforms, led by a senior 'arioi. The missionary Ellis gave a vivid description of the arrival of an 'arioi flotilla:

[They] advanced towards the land, with their streamers floating in the wind, their drums and flutes sounding, and the Areois, attended by their chief, who acted as their prompter, appeared on a stage erected for the purpose, with their wild distortions of person, antic gestures, painted bodies, and vociferated songs, mingling with the sound of the drum and the flute, the dashing of the sea, and the rolling and breaking of the surf . . . the whole . . . presented a ludicrous imposing spectacle.<sup>42</sup>

On this occasion the fleet had come to honour 'Oro-i-te-te'amo'e, 'Oro the god of fertility and life, and they were greeted with joy and merriment. When the 'arioi travelled en masse to the ceremonies at Taputapuatea to honour 'Oro-taua, 'Oro the god of war, however, the atmosphere was sombre and frightening. Their canoes, paddled by naked men, carried the priests and images of their gods. Sacred drums and shell trumpets lay under the platforms in the bows, and pairs of dead men and fish (including cavally fish, sharks and turtles) on the stages as offerings for 'Oro. When the canoes beached by the *marae*, wailing conch trumpets sounded, and the heads and genitals of their most high-ranking victims were tightly bound with the multi-coloured plaited sennit of the god, destroying the *mana* (ancestral power) and fertility of their lineages and districts.<sup>43</sup> Some of these corpses were hung up in the sacred trees, while others were used as canoe rollers. When the great drums boomed, announcing the offering of human sacrifices to 'Oro, the people in the district were filled with dread, hushing their children, silencing their animals and putting out the fires. There was thunder in 'Opoa.<sup>44</sup>

The great *marae* of Taputapuatea still stands on Cape Matahira-i-te-ra'i on the beach at 'Opoa, opposite the sacred pass known as Te Ava-mo'a. Around the *marae*, a sandy flat known as Te Po (the realm of the gods) is bordered by the sea to the north, a mountain inland to the east, and a small hill to the south, brought there from Mo'orea by ancestral power.

The site is dominated by the ruins of the main *ahu* or stone platform – a narrow rectangular edifice of tumbled rocks one hundred and forty feet long faced by huge upright slabs, with shrubs and a large tree growing on it. In front of the *ahu* stand a few low uprights at which the chiefs used to kneel, to which their genealogies were tied. Most of the sacred trees that once shaded *marae* Taputapuatea have been chopped down and it now stands in bright daylight, no longer linked to the world of the gods (the Po) by darkness. Te Papa-ua-mea-o-Ru'ea, the white rock of investiture where the high chiefs of the Tamatoa lineage were once hailed, still stands by the sea at Hauviri, the family *marae* of the Tamatoa by the beach; and the western boundary of Te Po, the district around the *marae*, is marked by a stone known as Tu'ia.<sup>45</sup> As the black leg 'arioi from 'Opoa used to chant, proclaiming the landmarks of their district:

The mountain above at 'Opoa is Te A'e-tapu  
 The assembly ground is Mata-ti'i-tahua-roa  
 The seaward point is Mata-hira-i-te-ra'i  
 The sacred pool is Vaitiare  
 The marae is Taputapuatea, the home of 'Oro  
 The harbour outside is Te Ava Mo'a  
 The high chief is Tamatoa  
 The 'arioi houses are Na-nu'u, Fare-'ohe, Fare-mei'a and Tairoiro  
 The chief 'arioi is Te-ra-manini.<sup>46</sup>

Today there are new signs of life at Taputapuatea; and navigators from far-flung islands are arriving there again, retracing the star paths of their ancestors. At Manaha, a small stone shrine where 'Oro's *fare atua* (god-house) once stood, shell necklaces have been draped over a fan-shaped stone upright, and anchor stones and rocks brought by navigators from distant islands are scattered before it. Platforms for sacrificial offerings have been rebuilt and piled with heaps of yams and bananas, while a small stone god daubed with red ochre stands at a shrine at the foot of the main *ahu*.

In 2007 a group from New Zealand, Hawai'i, the Cook Islands and Australia, invited by Na Papa e Va'u, a group of 'Opoa people dedicated to protecting this sacred *marae*, visited Taputapuatea. Romy Tavaeari'i, the main orator, welcomed our party; and there were workshops and celebrations, including a visit by the French Minister for Overseas Territories who stood on its stone pavement, garlanded with flowers, promising French government support for placing Taputapuatea on the World Heritage List. Later a group of 'Opoa people escorted their visitors along the coast to

Fa'aroa Bay, where voyaging canoes were once built; and out to the sacred pass, Te Ava-mo'a, where dolphins played around our boat. Afterwards, Romy recited the names of various parts of the *marae*, telling stories about them. Taputapuatea is still a place of great power, echoing with memories of the high priests in their red loincloths and towering feathered helmets, the royal chiefs with their red feather girdles, the thundering drums and conch-shell trumpets, and the sacrifices dedicated to 'Oro.