CHRISTIANITY UNDER COLONIALISM

Christianity is a ubiquitous force that shapes everyday life in French Polynesia, or Māòhi Nui, as some proud Māòhi call it. I am not sure if the first Tahitian phrases I learnt were the prayers before meals, or a verse from the Book of Exodus. While many denominations of Christianity exist today, and the trend towards secularization is certainly on the rise, there is often an assumption that everyone universally believes in God. This is why it took me some awkward months in the field before I finally admitted that I am, in fact, not a Christian. Up to that point I had intentionally avoided talking about my religious views for fear of my new friends' reactions. One day I could not bear deceiving them any longer. But after the faithful folk of the Protestant church had welcomed me and treated me as one of their own, how would they react? Would they be surprised? Horrified? Or would they hide any negative response and become gradually distant?

Initially, they seemed startled. After a short pause, they asked me, 'Then what is your religion?' It was then my turn to respond to their questions. I said, 'I believe in fenua (land), and I believe in the spirits.' I told them that I did not believe in God or the Bible, that I had never read the Bible before I came to Māòhi Nui, and that my home country, Japan, had ultimately rejected Western missionaries. My answer made their facial expressions tender. With a gentle smile, one woman responded, 'We were like you before the missionaries came. We didn't have the Bible, but we surely had faith in fenua'. To my pleasant surprise, following this conversation, there was not the slightest change in the way they treated me. This kind of conversation was repeated frequently with different groups of people throughout my fieldwork, until at one point, I no longer hesitated to reveal my non-Christian identity. What truly bonded me with Māòhi Christians was not a shared faith in Christ or even God, but rather a shared awareness that

Christianity is a foreign product and that we are both attempting to understand what it means for us.

In the Māòhi Protestant church (or EPM for Etaretia Porotetani Māòhi/Église Protestante Māòhi) in French Polynesia, Māòhi identity is the centre of what forms their religious discourse and practice. For Māòhi Protestants, it mattered more that I respect their land (fenua) and culture (*peu*) than whether I was a Christian.[1]

The fact that the Bible is foreign to me also seemed to resonate with them despite their lifelong commitment to biblical education. The Bible, while having always been present in their history of Christianity, still exudes a certain exogeneity that does not sit comfortably in their ethno-religious discourse. They have been exploring their unique ethnic religiosity, albeit within the Christian framework that was brought by the missionaries in the nineteenth century.

Throughout my participation in their discourses and practices, I noticed that the negotiation between the strains of missionary Christianity and ethnic particularity could not be simply deemed as 'indigenization' or 'localization'. When they advocated the repatriation of fenua, the Indigenous land, what they meant was the land as a physical agent, the symbol of Indigeneity, and a past when the Māòhi people supposedly communicated with God through fenua. As much as their religious negotiation is a problem of geography, culture and identity, it is also a direction towards a certain past in the Indigenous history. Some parts of the Bible were cited that resonated with local historical events, even while people strived to move away from the scriptures to pursue Christianity as their 'own' religion. Fenua, the central element of the faith, represents not only the Indigenous land but also the solidity of the past ancestry. The proximity that Māòhi Christians felt towards me, then, stems from the historical consciousness that they too had an animistic faith in fenua prior to the introduction of the Bible, now interpreted as the core of their Christian faith. In their attempt to bring back fenua, the land here and now, they also weave a certain past into their present religious manifestations. Christianity, as it stands in Māòhi Nui, is also a project to repatriate a past in the present and create a temporally hybrid future.

The question that I explore in this book is how Christians negotiate their religion as specifically local and ethnic in conversation with temporality – particularly the memory of conversion and colonialism. With many Christians in the Global South having been converted as part of the colonial and missionary ventures of the Global North,

I highlight the relevance of colonial history and realities in the local re-working of this 'imported' religion. In Māòhi Nui, the negotiation of Māòhi Christianity is a site where questions of colonialism, nationalism, identity, resistance and spirituality intertwine. As a congregational Protestant organization with relative freedom of expression, EPM provides a space in which Māòhi people address a variety of colonial issues today, and in doing so, reconstruct their Indigenous history. In this book, I exhibit that Christians self-reflexively negotiate not only the exogenous and local religious elements but also temporalities that are loaded onto them. Their perceptions of the colonial past and their everyday colonial experience reveal how and in what contexts Māòhi people relate their cultural struggles to the wider framework of religion. In the ongoing creation of Maohi Protestantism, we see how certain spatial, temporal and historical concepts entangle and cocreate religion.

Indigenizing Christianity?

EPM is a longstanding Protestant church in Māòhi Nui that boasts over 120,000 members spreading over more than 20 islands. Their journey as a religious organization spans over 200 years, tracing back to the 1797 arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Tahiti. A wave of conversion followed in the early nineteenth century, establishing EPM as the oldest surviving Indigenous socio-religious structure, one that replaced the traditional chiefly system. Throughout its history, Māòhi Protestantism has undergone remarkable transformations in both structure and practice. Particularly since the late 1880s, a growing number of parish communities across the Society Islands and beyond shifted to 'indigenize' the Christian discourses and practices. This movement saw them move away from some of the longstanding missionary traditions, like the long white dresses for women, suits and ties for deacons and pastors, traditional hymns, and biblical stories for children. Instead, they reinterpreted each facet of Christian ritual through an Indigenous lens, weaving their cultural essence into the very fabric of their faith. During the Eucharist, taro and coconut water replace bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. Their theological discourse celebrates their Māòhi identity, and prayer halls adorned with vibrant greenery and flowers reflect the life force their sacred land grants them. (Fer and Malogne-Fer 2000; Malogne-Fer 2007; Saura 2009)

My observations since 2018 in Moorea revealed a further evolution of this 'indigenization' trend. In the parish of Maatea, religion became a collective space for exploring and expressing Indigeneity (*Māòhiraa*) and understanding the Divine through cultural arts. Cultural, linguistic and ecological workshops are hosted at the parish to complement the lack of Indigenous education in the French national school curriculum. Service attendees are spiritually cleansed with a shot glass of *rāau Māòhi* (traditional herbal medicine) at the entrance of the prayer hall. Although the Tahitian Bible translated by the LMS remains a cornerstone of their faith, the land (fenua) of Māòhi Nui now holds equal theological weight. Once a bastion of Western socio-religious systems that supplanted the Indigenous counterpart, Protestantism is now being reconstructed as a distinctly Māòhi cultural manifestation. This shift – from the 'missionary', 'Western' and 'exogenous' to the 'Māòhi', 'local' and 'Indigenous' – has resulted in a hybrid form of Christianity that seeks to integrate what they consider as Indigenous elements into the missionary framework.

My aim in this book is to delve into the motivations and mechanisms driving this shift in Māòhi Protestantism. The process by which Christianity adopts local cultural and religious forms is a commonly recognized phenomenon historically and geographically, being referred to variously as 'indigenization', 'contextualization', 'inculturation', 'vernacularization', 'creolization', 'hybridization' or 'syncretism'. While it holds true to say that all cultures are syncretic to some extent, there are diverse ways in which elements from different cultural traditions are combined, and different ways in which such combinations are perceived and negotiated (Gellner 2007; Stewart and Shaw 1994). Throughout this book, I aim to explore why, 160 years after conversion, Māòhi Christians actively indigenize their faith and how their reconstruction of religion intertwines with that of Indigenous history.

While I am more interested in exploring movements of cultural mixing as a postcolonial reflection and practice, many anthropologists have sought to theorize the emergence of culturally hybrid local Christianity by examining the process of conversion. This primarily involves the encounter and interaction between a local cultural framework and missionary Christianity, with a crucial historical fact that conversion often coincided with significant socio-cultural upheaval caused by Western colonial powers (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Stanley 1990). In response to these radical socio-cultural changes and exposure to the powerful Other, Horton (1971) outlines

a process in which individuals may modify and eventually abandon their 'microcosms' – cultural models involving familiar local spirits in African traditional religions. While people initially seek to interpret new realities through their existing frameworks, if these categories prove inadequate, they may expand or modify them to incorporate the new elements. Sahlins (1985) uses the term 'structure of the conjuncture' to describe cultural transformations that occur when the world no longer conforms to established categories of understanding. In such moments, Sahlins argues, individuals and communities interact with existing cultural categories in a way that could modify these categories to accommodate new circumstances. Christianity, too, should be interpreted within a local cultural logic, possibly resulting in modifications of both the local and Christian frameworks. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Hawaiians' active incorporation and reinterpretation of Christianity within the Polynesian political ritual order involving ruling chiefs and *tabu* system (Kirch and Sahlins 1994). Local agents, as 'the quintessential cultural middlemen' (Peel 2000: 8), creatively reinterpret both missionary and Indigenous ideas in ways that fit the prevailing social and historical circumstances, actively generating a hybrid cultural product of their own making (Fisher 1973; Peel 2000; Sahlins 2012).

In line with Sahlins' structuralist perspective on cultural change and the Hawaiian case of Christian conversion, anthropologist Alain Babadzan (1982) analysed the genesis of local Protestantism in French Polynesia as a response to the cultural encounter between missionary Christianity and the existing religious structure. In the process of Christian conversion, according to Babadzan, both Christian and Indigenous logics were bent in order for them to coexist. Based on his observations of Rurutu islanders' spiritual life, the fundamental distinction of the Polynesian worldview – *ao* (light and ordinary) and *po* (darkness and underworld) – remained, but the actors within these realms were reshuffled. *Po*, the sacred nighttime, was the dark, primeval world where spirits, gods and deceased ancestors reside. On the other hand, *ao* stood for the day and this world of living humans. Ancient gods, previously residing in *po*, were proven ineffective in the face of powerful European technologies (Robineau 1984). They were thus negated by Christianity and replaced in *ao* by the Christian God, who was positioned as good and almighty. Ancestral spirits, however, remained in *po*, though redefined by the missionaries as negative, evil and inferior compared to the Christian God and humans residing in *ao*. Levy (1975), in his accounts from Huahine in the 1960s, also

observed that Christianity occupied the domain of the old 'high' reli-gion, replacing the pre-Christian model of social organization and territorial integration. This, according to Levy, left 'traditional spiritu-alism' intact of the Christian religion, with spirit-related phenomena remaining in *po*, hidden from the surface of *ao*.

The syncretism Babadzan observed was thus not a simple blend-ing of two cultural forces, but rather a 'formation de compromise' (Babadzan 1982: 280) – a compromise between two structural and functional principles. This resulted in both an indigenization of Christianity and a distortion of the fundamental Polynesian world-view. Ancient gods were overshadowed by Christianity, and ancestral spirits became relegated to the background. This type of 'syncretism' that anthropologists observed in Māòhi Nui until the 1980s concerned resolving the clash between the pre-Christian Polynesian worldview and missionary Christianity, or what Babadzan called 'le conflit orig-inal' (ibid.: 278). He noted that the syncretic nature of Polynesian religiosity in Rurutu during the 1970s could not be fully understood through Polynesian perspectives because, in his view, Polynesians had 'forgotten' what previously occupied the place of Christian God.

However, Protestantism in Māòhi Nui took a dramatic turn to 'remember' the pre-Christian religiosity in the late 1980s. By then, they had been Christians for over 140 years, since the British mis-sionaries successfully mass-converted the local population around the 1820s to 1840s.[2] Following such a lengthy period under the guidance of British and then French missionaries, the church's inde-pendence from the French missionary body in 1962 opened a space for significant freedom of expression. Leveraging this congregational freedom, a theological reform primarily led by the charismatic leader Duro Raapoto, ushered in a profound change in Māòhi Protestant theology and practice. Along with the new contextual theology that seeks the Christian *and* Indigenous identity, many Protestants in Tahiti and Moorea started exploring what Christian God replaced or whether it did not replace anything. Conscious of the Bible's mis-sionary origins and emboldened by a blossoming cultural renaissance in Tahiti back then, numerous parishes embraced the reform. This new theology posits Māòhi cultural arts as pathways to the Divine through fenua (land), a sacred medium gifted by God to the Māòhi people. By the 2000s, this trend had permeated many parishes in Tahiti and Moorea, fundamentally altering the theological and mate-rial expressions of Māòhi Protestantism. However, the ultimate Māòhi religiosity that they 'remembered' was not the many deities or the

politico-religious system that once revolved around them, now long replaced by Christianity. Nor did they remember the ancestral spirits wondering around in the darkness of *po*. They remembered their childhood, their distant ancestors living in the righteousness of God, and their deep respect for mother nature.

Although their memories may not hold an accurate historical record of pre-contact religious life, the aim of this organization is not to re-enact pre-Christian religious practices. In fact, much of them were discontinued following conversion, leaving both current Māòhi Christians and archaeological specialists with limited knowledge of pre-contact rituals. For many, the primary source of information for pre-colonial religious practices comes from Teuira Henry's *Ancient Tahiti* (1928), a reconstruction based on Henry's grandfather's account as an early Protestant missionary. Importantly, their contemporary pursuit of Indigenous religiosity within Christianity does not stem chronologically from the pre-conversion religious practices, nor is it built upon any surviving systematic local cultural model.

For instance, the replacement of bread and wine with taro and coconut water among Māòhi Protestants is a relatively recent interpretation of the Eucharist ritual. This modification is deliberate creativity rather than a limitation of their understanding where they can only view the world through their own cultural terms. In fact, they had conducted the Eucharist with bread and wine for over 150 years, after which local theologians decided that local products were better suited to convey the symbolism of the ritual as they are 'more in line with the Māòhi past'. Taro and coconut water, though they had never been used this way, evoke an image of the pre-contact Indigenous religiosity before people had the Bible – or bread and wine. The local replacement is rooted in the land (space) and in the past (time) simultaneously. Without modifying the overall structure of Christian practices, Māòhi Protestants replace elements and ideological discourses that fill in the Christian rituals. Today, there are parishes that accept this 'new' tradition and others who prefer the literal understanding of the Bible and still use bread and wine (See Malogne-Fer 2016; Saura 2009). This example shows that the church provides a scope for considerable negotiation in which people seek to restore and contest the continuity with pre-contact religiosity in the present. In this kind of cultural synthesis, what counts as a 'local culture' is a collective creation of historical memory and simultaneously a subject of disagreement even amongst the local Christians themselves.

How can we understand this kind of religious making, where people consciously reinterpret the past, with internal conflicts and agreements, and incorporate it in the existing religious format? What is at stake transcends the two distinct cultural logics Babadzan identified. The focus shifts from a clash of systems to a reconstructed past, revisited long after initial Western contact and significant acculturation. A structural analysis of change remains valuable in understanding the formation of Māòhi Protestantism, especially its consolidation under British and French missionaries as a traditional religion. Nevertheless, the recent theological development presents a different challenge. In this context, 'the local cultural framework' vis-à-vis the existing form of Christianity (which is, according to Babadzan, already a hybrid product of missionary Christianity and the Polynesian worldview) is not a coherent cultural system to be modified, but rather the reconstruction of a certain time period. It is not simply a local product confined to a specific people or place, but a reimagining of what it could have been, informed by self-reflection on the history of conversion and colonialism. In a (post)colonial world where the boundary between the Indigenous and colonial is becoming ever more obscure (Bhabha 1984), the mechanism of cultural synthesis in Māòhi Protestantism today can be better grasped by looking into people's historical narratives and temporal perceptions, or the 'historical consciousness' (Peel 2016: 535), a knowledge about the past and the present in personal and collective memory.

It is important to note that Māòhi Protestantism is not alone in exploring the past religiosity after a significant rupture in local religious practices. Many strands of Pacific Christianity, in their venture to 'own' Christianity as uniquely Indigenous religion in the history of mass conversion and the following colonization, explore the pre-conversion past in the present construction of religion. For instance, in Scott's (2007) account of Arosi ethno-theology, he observes 'a strong will to deny radical differences between Christianity and objectified formulations of kastom' (ibid.: 303) in the selective process of appropriating Christianity whilst legitimising their pre-contact practices. In Fiji, Wesleyan Christians superimpose an image of Fijian chieftainship on the Last Supper painting, suggesting that Fijian chiefs were Christian in the pre-conversion times (Toren 1988). Likewise, what happens with Indigenous Christianity in Māòhi Nui is not simply a phenomenon of 'indigenizing' or 'localizing' an exogenous cultural product, or people seeing 'how far one can go without ceasing to become a Christian' (Cannell 2006: 26). What is being negotiated in

such a development of Pacific Christianity is not cultures or identities per se but those burdened with temporalities. Locating themselves in time and space, Māòhi Christians attempt to retrieve an Indigenous, proximate, and godly past in the estranged present through their reconstruction of religion.

Christian Temporalities

Beyond being a geographical marker, a symbol of Indigeneity and a mediator of God, fenua also encapsulates a temporal concept. When Māòhi Protestants call for the need to 'reclaim' (*faahoì*) fenua, land transcends spatial reference, merging with temporal markers to evoke continuity with a certain past when Māòhi people supposedly maintained the Indigenous, culturally appropriate connections with the Divine. This preoccupation with the past is a defining characteristic of EPM, offering a crucial lens through which to understand the construction of contemporary Indigenous Christianity for the Māòhi people. What is this specific past that they seek to retrieve in the present? Through what processes is this past actively reconstructed in the present? And how are Indigeneity, place and temporality intertwined in this endeavour? Exploring these questions requires examining how Christianity affects people's temporal and historical perceptions, particularly where they are entangled with colonialism.

One notable argument posits that the introduction of Christianity as a set of cultural values imposed a distinct phenomenological temporal perception upon conversion. Joel Robbins (2004), through his observations of the Urapmin people in Papua New Guinea, demonstrates how conversion to Christianity can reshape converts' temporal cognition. He primarily highlights three key factors that enable the linearization of time amongst Christian converts: Christian doctrinal narratives, the experience of conversion, and colonial humiliation.

Firstly, Christian doctrine inherently promotes a sense of linear progression. The notion of 'dispensationalist time', as Robbins defines it, envisions the world unfolding through distinct periods in which God treats humanity differently. Central to this is the Christian belief in resurrection, promising all believers a physical revival at the final judgment. The concept of the millennium paints a future dramatically separated from the present by a singular event: the arrival of the Messiah. According to Robbins, it is a 'salvational necessity' (Robbins

2007: 10) that Christianity inevitably creates ruptures between the past, the present and the future.

Second, Robbins mentions conversion as a particularly salient experience that separates the past from the present. He claims that conversion is not a slow process on continuity, but rather an event that marks the chronological distinction between 'before' and 'after', and there must be 'a moment of disconnection' (Robbins 2007: 11) in the ways people perceive their life courses. When it comes to their narrative of conversion, the new Urapmin converts tend to articulate a collective history in which they followed their ancestral customs in the past, broken by the moment of conversion to the current state of 'everything having changed'. The Urapmin used to maintain an elaborate system of traditional rituals and taboos, yet it is only after they became Christians, that they quickly and completely abandoned their traditional practices as they are deemed to be 'sinful'. This 'radicalness' in internally accepting Christianity as a secondary and completely new logic, according to Robbins, is a characteristically Christian experience.

Finally, the profound humiliation that the Urapmin endured during colonization further amplified the sense of separation from their past. Colonial officials condemned Urapmin practices as unlawful, while missionaries deemed them immoral, planting seeds of inferiority and shame that drove the Urapmin to drastically abandon their traditional ways. Their sense of cultural significance, deeply intertwined with the old ritual system, was effectively dismantled due to Christian conversion. Finally, the Urapmin held a specific concept of humiliation within their traditional moral framework, which merged with the shame imposed by colonialism. This confluence of colonialism and cultural change deepened the impact of Christian conversion, etching a profound temporal rupture into their collective consciousness (Robbins 2004).

Robbins' emphasis on temporal rupture was intended to provoke discussion and debate within anthropology, rather than offering a definitive explanation for how conversion affects perceptions of time across different cultures (Haynes 2020). Nevertheless, some scholars have challenged the stark focus on rupture, calling for 'a more nuanced appreciation of the process of religious change and conversion' (Chua 2012: 512). These later studies not only acknowledge diverse modes of Christian time that defy 'the ruptural model' but also recognize the culturally specific conditions that enabled a smooth integration between traditional religious systems and Pentecostalism.

Notably, the two factors in creating the separation from the past – dispensationalism and the impact of conversion in personal narratives – were supported by the structural affinity between the Melanesian traditional ritual system and Pentecostalism. For instance, traditional Melanesian religiosity likely provided fertile ground for the adoption of millenarian Christianity. Melanesian rituals, featuring 'climactic ceremonies, often planned months or years in advance, as distinctive and life-changing episodes' (Whitehouse 2006: 304), suggest a cultural affinity with millenarianism's focus on future salvation, as well as the Pentecostal tendency towards drastic life changes and intense efforts to break with a sinful past (Macdonald and Falck 2020; McDougall 2020).

While other cultural backgrounds, such as African and Native American, also exhibit cosmological continuities with Pentecostalism (Anderson 2004; Marshall 2014), this does not seem to be the case for mainline Christian churches in Polynesia. The denominational difference and over a century of temporal distance to conversion means that dispensationalism or conversion as a personal experience is not particularly relevant to Māòhi Protestants' perception of temporality today. In fact, they place significantly less emphasis on God's plan for humanity in different time periods. Whilst God remains almighty, they prioritize cultivating a consistent relationship with the divine through dedicated engagement with fenua, symbolizing the continuity with the ancestral past.

Nevertheless, conversion as a moment of 'rupture' still seems to persist in Māòhi people's historical consciousness. Over 200 years after their conversion to mainline Protestantism, what fuels this enduring perception of rupture in the absence of dramatic Pentecostal conversion or millenarian beliefs? For Māòhi Protestants, conversion is often collectively remembered, not solely as a spiritual transformation, but as a watershed moment marked by Western intervention in their Indigenous lifeways.

As Chapter 1 explores, mass conversion to Protestantism in the Society Islands proved challenging for initial British missionaries, unfolding within a complex political landscape participated by various actors and agendas. While the intricate historical relationship between missionization and colonization deserves its own analysis, contemporary perceptions often view conversion as a pivotal turning point, even laying partial blame for the cultural loss lamented today. This retrospective framing of conversion as a defining break transcends a solely Christian understanding of time; it not only reflects

the profound social changes that accompanied the conversion process but also stems heavily from the ongoing colonial conditions shaping the lives of Māòhi people.

Herein lies the central theme of this book: genesis of Christian temporalities inextricably intertwined with lived colonial experiences today. Despite diverse cultural and historical contexts, Melanesian, Polynesian and numerous other Christian communities in (post)colonial settings share a commonality: the memory of cultural rupture. Western colonialism, concurrently with its Christian conversion agenda, marginalized and demonized pre-contact Indigenous cultures and traditions, leaving a distinct historical scar. What Robbins framed as cultural humiliation, exceeding the impact of millenarism or even conversion as a soteriological break, is a major catalyst in enhancing the rupture of Indigenous cultures experienced broadly among many Christian communities that underwent colonialism.

This colonial humiliation not only created a temporal rupture, dividing the time before and after conversion, but also typically framed the pre-conversion time as a 'dark age', where traditional practices were deemed inferior and barbaric, creating a distinct separation between the 'uncivilized' past and the 'enlightened' Christian present. This sense of cultural humiliation undoubtedly played a role in shaping Māòhi perceptions of their pre-conversion past, which were deemed as an uncivilised domain where unlawful practices such as human sacrifice and cannibalism were prevalent. Missionaries were often seen as saviours who saved the Māòhi from sin and ignorance, guiding them onto the righteous path of being pious Christians. This view of the Indigenous past persisted well into the 1980s and may still be observed in certain demographics today, especially outside of the Protestant church.

These two contrasting temporalities before and after Christian conversion became not only moralized but also ethnically nuanced. Within Melanesian Christian communities, the colonial period holds powerful associations with Whiteness, colonial order and legal legitimacy. This affiliation offers a sense of belonging beyond local confines, linking them to a broader Christian imaginary dominated by developed, White nations. Conversely, the pre-Christian past, as well as the post-independence present, gets cast as inherently Indigenous, burdened by narratives of chaos, moral decay, and a perceived inability to progress (Fukagawa 2021; Robbins 2004).

Similarly, the transformation of the traditional Māòhi duality of *po* and *ao* reveals an aspect of how the pre-conversion past, imbued with

Indigeneity, was stigmatized. Originally, *po*, the realm of darkness, held sacred significance for Māòhi communities as the domain of gods and ancestors. However, missionaries misconstrued it as a negative space inhabited by evil spirits, using this interpretation to portray the islanders' pre-Christian beliefs and practices as sinful and heathen. Conversely, *ao*, traditionally representing the everyday and ordinary, was elevated to the realm of holy and good within the post-conversion Christian framework (Bausch 1978). This effectively moralized a complex cultural understanding of sacred and profane into a stark binary of sinful versus good. In the aftermath of conversion, the pre-conversion era itself became associated with *po*, with the negative connotations the missionaries imposed upon the Indigenous lifeways: darkness equated with evil, ignorance and ungodliness.

After generations of grappling with colonial narratives, Polynesian contextual theologians began dismantling the stark dichotomy that painted the unconverted Indigenous past as ungodly and the Christian present as godly and Western. This morally, temporally and ethnically charged binary was deconstructed through a critical examination of the entanglement between Christian conversion and colonialism. This perspective is rooted in the enduring presence of mainline Christian churches in Polynesia during colonial oppression. Over time, these churches became deeply integrated into the Indigenous life, transforming into spaces for resistance against the dispossession of Indigenous land and the assimilationist policies of colonial governance. In late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century Aotearoa, multiple prophetic movements emerged as a response to further seizure of Indigenous land by the British colonial government. Through local prophets, these movements asserted the power and validity of their pre-Christian customs within the Christian framework. Around the same time in French Polynesia, the Protestant church under the French missionary body (Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, hereafter SMEP) became a distinctively Indigenous, democratic space where they celebrated Indigenous customs through feasts, annual fundraising and *tuaroí* (prolonged biblical debate contest amongst *amuiraa*, sub-parish divisions traced after kinship) (Garrett 1992, 1997).

In French Polynesia, where the Protestant church allowed a space for Indigenous democracy at the bottom of the organization, a growing recognition of the importance of Māòhi culture and identity emerged under the control of SMEP. This culminated in the 1963 independence of the Protestant church, led by President Samuel Raapoto.

Since then, the organization has become increasingly vocal in advocating for Māòhi cultural and political rights. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, they actively defended the Tahitian language, opposed the dispossession of Māòhi land, and spoke out against French nuclear tests on Moruroa island. From the late 1980s onwards, theological leader Duro Raapoto published numerous texts exploring the deep connection between Māòhi identity and fenua, the land, evoking both Indigenous pride and a sense of nostalgia for the past. Given the church's multifaceted history, transitioning from being under missionary control to a base for Indigenous movements, how exactly does it dismantle the moral, ethnic and temporal entanglement imposed at the time of conversion?

The key lies in how both EPM theologians and parishioners frame their perception of the present. They view their current time as deeply troubled and needing urgent positive change. The issues that preoccupy EPM parishioners typically stem from the socio-cultural changes they have witnessed in their lifetime, which they see as ramifications of Western cultural exposure. Their personal experiences do not directly reflect the social upheaval following the British missionization or the early colonial rule by the French but rather the socio-economic shift largely initiated by the installation of the *Centre d'expérimentation du Pacifique* (CEP). Environmental and medical consequences aside, the nuclear testing conducted from 1966 to 1996 radically transformed the economy from one based on colonial agricultural production into one dependent on the operation of the centre and tourism. The increased number of people with regular income accelerated the society's integration into the global capitalist market, with increasing dependence on imported goods and a steady decline in domestic agriculture. By the time the nuclear tests were halted in the 1990s, the society had reached a point of no return from the more self-sustaining economy, and people's lifestyles had also shifted from a community-based structure to a more individualistic one.

This social change also resulted in the imminent loss of intangible cultural heritage, such as Indigenous languages, traditional artisan crafts and cooking methods. With dwindling church attendance, Māòhi Protestants bemoan how people's mentality has become 'Westernized', meaning too stingy, self-centred or individualist to care about the community labour at the parish. They worry about the future of children who disobey their parents and roam the streets at night. They fear the shrinking local agriculture and the consequent decline in their health, sustained by imported, processed foods.

These interconnected issues, in their eyes, constitute a cultural crisis that casts a dark shadow over the present state of Christianity in their community. Amidst this cultural and identarian crisis, and with a growing awareness that their ancestors' Christian conversion served as the initial catalyst for much of the cultural upheaval they witness, they have reached a point to reconsider the long-held dichotomy that stigmatizes the Indigenous past and glorifies the Christian present. 'How do we solve it (*E aha te raveà)?*' is a frequently posed question at discussion groups in the church community, highlighting the problematic nature of the present state of Māòhi society and seeking the solution in the past, where things were supposedly more wholesome.

In contrast to the dystopian present, the past generally, including the pre-conversion past, is actively reclaimed as rightfully Indigenous, no longer a source of shame but a wellspring of godly teachings specific to the Māòhi. While acknowledging morally complex practices like human sacrifice and cannibalism, the emphasis was on reframing the past as essentially good and Christian. However, this 'goodness' has little to do with the sacrality inherent in the traditional concept of *po*, the sacred darkness. Instead, the focus shifted to portraying the past as a time when customs deriving from fenua glorified the one true God. This led to the conceptualization of *faanahoraa tahito* (the ancient cult) as a culturally appropriate religious modality, akin to the Protestant denomination within Christianity. The (post)colonial perspective on Christian conversion and the subsequent colonization thus disrupts the previous association made between temporality, space, religion and ethnicity, and reconfigures them. In this new framework, the past is simultaneously Indigenous, Christian, righteous and geographically anchored in Māòhi Nui.

Motivated by contemporary social struggles and a keen awareness of colonial legacies, Māòhi Protestants no longer view Christian conversion solely as a religious event but as a disruptive fracture in their cultural continuity. Unlike more recently converted communities, mainline Christianity in Polynesia matured to the point where being Christian is deeply intertwined with being Indigenous. This critical reconsideration of contemporary Indigenous religious identity necessitates a re-evaluation of the colonial moral associations attached to pre- and post-Christian times. The development of Christian temporality did not merely demonize what comes before Christianity and create a temporal break. Polynesian contextual Christianity offers a whole new chapter to 'le conflit original' (Babadzan 1982: 278), a

phase in which their theology reorganizes Indigenous history and reenacts a new understanding of their past.

The Place of the Māòhi Protestant Church (EPM) in Oceanic Christianity

Many Pacific Island communities view Christianity as an integral part of their ethnic identity, despite its Western missionary origins. Since the independence of many island nations in the 1960s, Polynesians have increasingly associated themselves with Christian identity and practices. Local institutions play a crucial role in authorizing and negotiating the theology, practices and inner religiosity of local Christian populations (Ryle 2010; Tomlinson 2020; Tomlinson and McDougall 2013). With the majority of islanders being practising Christians, public statements often declare the Indigenous population as essentially Christian. For example, some nations, like Samoa and Tonga, have enacted constitutions that claim their states to be founded on 'traditional Christian principles' (Fer and Malogne-Fer 2009). There has been an ongoing debate over whether Fiji should constitutionally become a 'Christian state', with Samoa officially adopting this status in 2017 (Wyeth 2017). While both Catholics and Protestants have a significant presence in Polynesian communities, local congregational Protestant churches have become powerful agents in shaping a Pacific Christian identity. They have transitioned from being strongholds of European missionaries to authorities for their parishioners. The leadership of many Protestant churches is now firmly in the hands of locals. As these communities become increasingly integrated into the global economy whilst simultaneously strengthening their local identity (Appadurai 1996), Christianity offers a space for local Christians to actively negotiate their identity within the context of missionary and colonial history.

Beyond French Polynesia, theologies of the Pacific Islands contain a tradition of redefining and recontextualising the Bible as rooted in their island homes. With Pacific Theological College in Fiji as the centre of this movement, these theologies urge their leaders and educators to '"talk back" to mainstream theology, gaining critical purchase as theologians situate encounters with people, texts, and divinity within their own life experiences' (Tomlinson 2020: 3). For instance, Samoan eco-theology compares Jesus with a Polynesian chief, or the Lamb of God with a sacrificed pig (Tofaeono 2000).

So much of Samoan theology expresses Samoan culture 'in the deepest possible sense of a quest for an identity meant to be divinely sanctioned and purified' (Tomlinson 2020: 3). Maori Anglicans of Aotearoa seek to 'restructure an originally European church into one that respects Maori cultural forms' (Darragh 2003: 56). An example of this is Atuatanga, the concept that embraces both pre-Christian Maori deities and God of the Bible (Rangiwai 2021).

Among many similarities of Pacific theologies, land is a particularly recurrent motif as a medium to connect the Divine and humans. These theologies tend to emphasize 'connectedness, relationality and inclusivity' (Ryle 2010: 30), undermining 'the Christian dualism of the physical and spiritual by placing the spiritual within the land' (ibid.: 31). It not only exists as a spiritual continuity from the pre-contact past but also as a medium to form ethnic identities in contemporary Pacific societies. In the Solomon Islands, Scott (2007) observes the importance of the local concept *auhenua* (*au* meaning 'person' or 'thing' and *henua* meaning 'land') in Arosi ethno-theology. Here, people consider that prior to missionary intervention, God had established Indigenous matrilineages that inalienably connect people to land. Toren (1988, 2004) points out that Fijians' commitment to Christianity and their land-based concept of tradition (*vakavanua*, literally, according to the land) mutually constitute what it is to be Fijian. Similarly, Ryle (2010) provides various accounts and materials from different Christian denominations in Fiji that demonstrate the centrality of land (*vanua*) in the development of the localized theology. EPM provides a somewhat similar example of land (fenua) being 'rediscovered' as the central theological source in the ethnic identity discourse.

French Polynesia's political status as an overseas collectivity is probably what makes Māòhi Protestantism a peculiar case study among other contextual theological movements in the Pacific. While many Polynesian and Melanesian Island territories gained national independence in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu, French Polynesia remains part of the French Republic today. Since EPM became autonomous from its previous body, the Paris Mission Society, in 1963, the church organization has been entirely run by local pastors, and anticolonial resistance has developed within a part of the church, especially in contrast with the Catholic Church as their colonial counterpart. The autonomy gained by EEPF as a congregational Protestant church was a crucial factor for the indigenization that occurred later, as it allowed communication with

other Pacific contextual theologies and greater freedom of expression for Indigenous actors.

The Māòhi cultural movement itself has been present outside the Protestant church. In Tahiti, a cultural renaissance took place in the 1980s, encompassing diverse domains such as dance, music, tattooing, art and craft, language and more (Kuwahara 2005; Saura 2009; Stevenson 1992). The Pouvanaa Oopa movement, initiated in the 1950s, aimed to institutionalize Polynesian traditions. While many *marae* (pre-Christian stone temples) have been abandoned due to Christianization, a significant project of the movement was the reconstruction of Marae Arahuahu in 1954 (Saura and Gobrait 2013).[3] To preserve and standardize the Tahitian language amidst growing French linguistic influence, the Académie Tahitienne was established in 1972. Heiva, originally known as Tiurai and established as a local celebration of Bastille Day in 1881, was renamed Heiva I Tahiti in 1985. The popular annual event has become a platform for expressing the 'neo-traditional cultural identity' (L. Henry 1999: 214) of today, celebrating various cultural arts like dance, singing and sports.

Within such a climate of Tahitian cultural renaissance, a local intellectual and son of the former president of the church, Duro Raapoto (1948–2014), introduced radical changes to the church's theology and practice. Sharing an interest in Indigenous Māòhi identity with contemporary poet Henri Hiro, Raapoto solidified the foundation of the Māòhi religious and cultural identity widely shared by EPM and Māòhi nationalists today. An eloquent Tahitian writer, he left a number of written works and church publications on Māòhi religiosity. One of the most well-known is *Poroì i te nūnaa māìtihia e te Atua* (The Message to God's Chosen People) (Raapoto 1989). The theological emphasis is placed on Māòhi identity as the sole means to reach God, and the unity between Māòhi and the land is advocated as the spiritual path. This shift has also actively changed the practices of some parishes to more 'traditionally Polynesian', following the ideological amendment. Localised practices include supper prepared with local food, use of coconuts for the Eucharist, and the introduction of Polynesian musical instruments and clothing for the services.

EPM's movement for the revitalization of 'tradition' is a deliberate and conscious process, rather than an organic synthesis of two cultural systems or a structural compromise between two logics (Babadzan 1982). This ethnic movement is unique in that the Indigenous cultural revival occurred within Christianity, often perceived as a Western cultural product introduced by British

missionaries. Instead of eliminating foreign influences in pursuit of a 'pure ethnic culture', the people's quest for *iho Māòhi* (Māòhi essence) views Māòhi Indigeneity within Christianity, and Christianity within their pre-contact Indigeneity. Given the irreversible break from their ancestral religion, Duro Raapoto and the supporters of EPM sought to integrate Indigeneity into the existing religious framework.

The new theology of Duro Raapoto has been extensively analysed by Bruno Saura (1989, 1993, 1998a, 2003, 2004, 2009), a prominent local anthropologist. As a leading scholar of religion and politics in French Polynesia, his publications explore the connections between Duro Raapoto's ethno-nationalist ideology, Polynesian mythology, and the cultural revival movement in Tahiti. Saura's critical examination of contemporary Māòhi cultural expressions is informed by his extensive research on Polynesian mythology and history. While he is a long-time resident of Huahine and Tahiti (currently teaching at the University of French Polynesia), his analysis of EPM and Duro Raapoto's theology is primarily based on literary sources, as he has conducted limited fieldwork.

Malogne-Fer (2016) examines the reception of religious reform aligned with the new theology in the parishes of Moorea. She identifies a conflict between 'two traditions' in religious services: the novel 'traditionalist' approach and the missionary liturgical tradition. Many local Protestants recognize the irony that, despite the former appearing more Polynesian, the latter is 'more traditional' due to its longer history within the church. They refer to this 'new' tradition, seeking religiosity prior to the missionary encounter, as 'renewal' (*faaâpīraa*). Malogne-Fer points out that, in parishes that do not accept this 'renewal', the powerful presence of social and kinship relations functions as the resisting force to the indigenization. However, her account does not fully consider how colonial memory, nostalgia and the decolonizing movements weave into the harmony and conflict between these opposing trends. Whilst acknowledging the diversity within the Indigenous community, this book aims to explore how social changes, colonial experiences and future aspirations in the wider Māòhi society feed into the formation of local Christianity.

Finally, previous studies on EPM pronounced the nationalist, cultural-populist aspect of its theology and scrutinized its discordances with the historically accurate picture of traditional Polynesian religiosity. Anthropologists labelled Duro Raapoto's theology as 'cultural militancy' (Malogne-Fer 2016: 55), 'simplistic ideas that could feed aggressive and revengeful nationalism' (Saura 1989: 12), and

'contemporary nostalgic reinterpretations' (Babadzan 1997, cited in Malogne-Fer 2016: 14). Acknowledging the selective, affective, nostalgic and politically fuelled nature of this movement, I shift the focus from the 'inaccuracies' or 'reinventions' and instead explore the affective root that propels the subtle negotiations of contemporary Indigenous Christianity.

Outline of the Book

This book highlights the role of colonial memory and history in forging Indigenous Christianity as a realm of temporal negotiations. The following outline gathers together the themes that demonstrate this argument. Each chapter tells stories of Māòhi Protestants around a particular theme, such as institution, nostalgia, identity, politics, theology and history. The first chapters focus on providing an overview of contemporary Māòhi society, and in progression, the chapters dive deeper into the mechanism of religious negotiation in correspondence with people's historical consciousness.

Chapter 1 (Institution) provides background information about Église Protestante Māòhi (EPM), the institution where the fieldwork research took place. EPM is the oldest and most Indigenous Christian denomination in French Polynesia, and understanding its history and organizational structure is essential in comprehending the current form of Indigenous Christianity. I first present a brief overview of the two islands, Moorea and Rurutu, and their history of Protestant missionization. I then trace how EPM transitioned from British to French control, eventually achieving independence in 1963. This chapter also introduces a significant turning point in the church's history: Duro Raapoto's theological reform in the late 1980s. Finally, the chapter outlines the organization's administrative structure and kinship units, which contribute to the theological diversity and conflicts explored in the following chapters. In addition to providing necessary background information on the place and people, the chapter illustrates the position of Māòhi Protestantism within wider Polynesian society as the most traditional, community-based, Indigenous Christian denomination. Its history and community-based organization are crucial factors to consider when examining the decolonization of religion at EPM.

Chapter 2 (Nostalgia) explores the Indigenous experiences of social change over the past half-century, which serve as a fundamental

motivation for 'owning' Christianity. As discussed in Chapter 1, EPM is the most authoritative Indigenous church in French Polynesia, now functioning as a space for expressing nostalgic narratives amidst the social changes undermining Māòhi traditional lifestyles. Within EPM, whether in pastors' sermons, lay parishioners' opinions at Bible study meetings, or Sunday School teachings, the idea of 'bringing back the land' frequently arises. Chapter 2 delves into these recurring nostalgic narratives in the parish of Maatea, Moorea, examining the concepts of modernity, capitalism and labour that emerge through longings for the past. By exploring nostalgic narratives rooted in both present dissatisfaction and glorification of the past, I illustrate how Māòhi Christians articulate different temporal categories while grappling with challenging social changes.

Chapter 3 (Identity) focuses on the parish of Avera on the rural and conservative island of Rurutu, where, in contrast to Moorea, the indigenization of religion is vehemently resisted. Through a comparative analysis of the two islands and their respective responses to fenua theology, the chapter explores the temporal aspect of Indigenous identity formation and how it contributes to the emergence of distinct religious expressions. I describe the urban origins of fenua theology and the pan-Polynesian Māòhi identity, which are widely accepted in many Tahiti-Moorea parishes but are viewed as a threat by Rurutu parishes located on the territory's rural periphery. Due to geographical and social disparities, the two islands have experienced different stages of modernization and colonial realities. This has contributed to the emergence of different tempo-spatial identities, and, consequently, differing perceptions of Christianity. Whereas 'indigenized' parishes embrace Māòhi identity and tend to view the rural territorial periphery as their past selves, Rurutu islanders feel exposed to the general modernization trend from Tahiti, which in turn makes them seek to differentiate themselves from their urban counterparts and become protective of their own religious tradition. Building upon the previous chapter, I argue that Indigenous identities are closely intertwined with temporal conceptions within their historical context.

While Chapters 2 and 3 explore the temporal conception as the motivation to indigenize religion (or to resist it), the last three chapters unpack the Indigenous theology in relation to the political landscape and history of Māòhi Nui. Chapter 4 (Politics) explores the church's fight against French nuclear testing on Moruroa island and its consequences. As one of the leading forces against nuclear testing, conducted from 1966 to 1996, EPM has been a significant war horse in

this struggle. The chapter follows the activities of Moruroa e Tatou, an anti-nuclear organization affiliated with EPM, and the preparations for the annual anti-nuclear demonstration on 2 July. Whilst Māòhi theological discourses often focus on the past and present, this chapter explores how Māòhi Protestants navigate their current and future predicaments while grounding themselves in the strength of their ancestral past.

In Chapter 5 (Theology), I discuss the current Māòhi theology by looking specifically at the role and necessity of the Bible in their Christianity. In EPM parishes that have embraced fenua theology, represented by the parish of Maatea, people have actively pursued Māòhi ethnic particularity, leading to a diminished centrality of the Bible. This chapter explores the relationship between the Bible and the land, the core element of fenua theology, and the reasons why many local Christians still consider the Bible indispensable for their religion. The Bible and the land represent two opposing, yet not mutually exclusive, elements that form Māòhi theology. They also represent different locations and temporalities: Ancient Israel and Ancestral Māòhi Nui. Despite the growing popularity of fenua theology, the chapter's examination of the Bible's role reveals that it remains necessary for most EPM members. Discussions on reconciling these two sources highlight both the universal and contextualized aspects of Christianity.

Chapter 6 (History), the final ethnographic chapter of the book, explores how Māòhi Christians reconstruct their linear history and project their perception of history in forms of Christianity. To do so, I analyse the present narratives surrounding the historical memory of conversion to Christianity and the arrival of the LMS on 5 March 1797. Māòhi Protestants consistently refer to this date as a major historical rupture in Indigenous history, symbolically marking their discontinuity from Māòhi ancestral religion. However, the narratives of this event also attempt to surmount this historical rupture by demonstrating certain continuities of Indigeneity throughout their history. The 'True Māòhi Religion' encompasses pre-colonial Indigeneity, British missionary traditions, and resilience to colonialism and its consequent social upheavals. This represents a recollection of their tumultuous history, a history of resistance. The chapter thus brings together different temporalities within Māòhi Christianity, highlighting the active negotiation involved in its formation.

The Linguistic Situation

Māòhi Nui is a plurilingual society, with both French and Indigenous languages (Reo Māòhi) spoken throughout the islands. French is the official administrative language that dominates the population and the most common communication medium. According to the territorial census in 2017, only 22% of the entire populations in French Polynesia spoke Reo Māòhi at home, while the figure soars to 41% for those 70 and above (Institut de la Statistique de Polynésie française 2017). Reo Māòhi entails multiple Polynesian languages spoken throughout the islands of French Polynesia. These include Tahitian (Reo Tahiti) in the Society Islands, Marquesan (Reo Ènana) in the Marquesas archipelago, and unique island languages in the Austral archipelago (Rimatara, Rurutu, Raivavae, Tupuai and Rapa), Paumotu in the Tuamotu archipelago, and others. Besides French, Tahitian is the most broadly recognized variant of Reo Māòhi and the only one currently taught in the official primary school curriculum. However, there have been recent efforts to teach non-Tahitian variants of Reo Māòhi in primary schools where these languages are spoken.

In the territory, which covers 67 inhabited islands, multiple factors determine the extent of French dominance over the Indigenous counterpart. The degree of urbanization is one; the geographical proximity to Tahiti indicates higher levels of formal education and industrialization. Even in geographically remote areas, such as certain islands in the Tuamotus, French dominates daily conversations where migration from Tahiti is prevalent. Age is undoubtedly the most striking factor in deciding linguistic habit. It is increasingly rare to meet children and young adults who speak the Indigenous languages for daily communication, whereas older generations would often sit together and chat in Reo Māòhi. The Indigenous languages, especially non-Tahitian variants, are feared to become extinct if the French linguistic dominance continues or accelerates as the alteration of generations proceeds.

Multiple sociological explanations can account for the rapid decline of Indigenous language speakers in the last half century. The school ban is the most obvious one; at least until 1980, Reo Māòhi was strictly forbidden in the classroom, with corporal punishment as the penalty. The trauma of this forced suppression is still remembered by many elders today. Some recall being sent outside for a run, while others were subjected to physical punishment. One middle-aged man

shared that he was forced to write lines, 'I will not speak Tahitian at school.' This colonial indoctrination in schools undoubtedly instilled negative associations with the language through traumatic experiences. However, most people who underwent this abuse did not lose their ability to speak Tahitian, as they still spoke it with family members at home.

The French nuclear tests aggravated the situation as they caused a drastic transformation of the territory's socio-economic structure. In 1966, CEP began the bomb tests in Moruroa atoll that continued for the next 30 years, which expanded the public sector and withdrew a major workforce from traditional agriculture. Although the stable, high income that CEP provided allured many workers, economic success in society became more tightly associated with proficiency in French. Around this time, many Māòhi parents with limited competence in French deliberately avoided speaking Reo Māòhi at home in hope of aiding their children's material success. Before the 1970s, most Māòhi children spoke only Reo Māòhi in their households despite the language ban at school, which equipped them with fluency in their Indigenous language.

Through Reo Māòhi increasingly lost its instrumental value, Tahitian in particular gradually gained recognition as the heritage language in the post-colonial climate in the 1970s and 1980s. L'Académie Tahitienne (Fare Vānaa) was founded in 1974 to preserve and update the language by standardizing its grammar, vocabulary and writing. Tahitian lessons were introduced in primary schools in 1982, and the University of French Polynesia also introduced a Tahitian diploma in 1990 (Paia and Vernaudon 2002). The Tahitian cultural revival movement that began in the 1980s celebrated Māòhi Indigeneity, which encouraged the use of Tahitian in a variety of media in popular culture, such as music, dance and literature. Today, Tahitian functions as the Indigenous lingua franca of the territory, and its heritage value is more thoroughly communicated. The Indigenous language in Moorea, where I was mostly based during my fieldwork, is also Tahitian.[4]

My communication during the fieldwork was either in French or in Tahitian. For interviews, I chose the language that I would normally speak with the interviewee. This means that the languages chosen roughly reflect the daily linguistic habit of the narrators. Exceptionally, I interviewed some Rurutu people in French as my comprehension of Rurutu language was not sufficient for interviews at the time and my communication with them was thus primarily in

French. As a result, with the exception of Rurutu, the language used for our conversations often reflected the age of the person.

As I have explored elsewhere (Misaki 2023), many young people feel *haamā* (shame, embarrassment) for attempting to speak Tahitian, or failing to do so. This is not only due to the negative colonial associations attached to the language (such as poor, uneducated, unsophisticated) through a century-and-a-half of French domination but also because the increasing French linguistic dominance among the youth created an age-based habit. With their peers exclusively communicating in French, children and young adults do not find appropriate opportunities to practise the language. As the heritage value of Reo Māòhi has increased in recent decades, the shame for failing to own it also evokes shame for practising it, which creates a vicious circle that further reduces opportunities for learning.

It is worth noting that EPM played a significant role in preserving Tahitian throughout its history. Their continuing use of the Tahitian Bible translated by the LMS kept the language alive in the religious sphere, and the only official language for services remains Tahitian today.[5] Needless to say, the Indigenous turn of theology and practice from the 1980s created a space where church leaders preach the imperative need to safeguard the language for the survival of Māòhi culture. The use of Reo Māòhi is not only encouraged in the church community but also reinforced during Sunday school in many parishes where they teach local children Tahitian, starting from the Tahitian reading of the alphabet. A good command of Tahitian was thus necessary for conducting this study, and as I illustrate throughout the volume, Tahitian concepts can navigate us through how people grasp different temporalities in their historical consciousness.

A Note on Methodology: Navigating Positionality through Hospitality

This monograph is based on my time spent in Moorea and Rurutu islands from 2018 to 2020 for the duration of 15 months. I spent my first three months in Rurutu island, after which I was based in the parish of Maatea, Moorea. My commitments at local EPM-related events kept me busy during fieldwork. My regular weekly schedule included the meeting of the Committee of Sunday Schools (Te Tomite Haapiiraa Tapati) on Monday evenings, Bible study sessions on

Wednesday evenings, weekly committee meetings for the Committee of the Youth (Te Tomite Uî Âpī), Sunday services, and Sunday School. There were also more irregular events such as the preparation of meals, inter-island learning workshops, dance and singing rehearsals, pastors' meetings, and missionary visits to local households. In this short time that I spent in the Protestant parish communities trying to navigate my place, I observed my position shifting back and forth between insider and outsider on different levels – households, parishes, islands and ultimately, being there and not there.

Hospitality is a serious business in Polynesian culture. Upon my arrival in Rurutu, Solange, whom I had never met before, greeted me whilst crowning me with many flower garlands.[6] The lush, floral fragrance of the crowns was so overwhelming that I remember very little of the short car ride to her house from the airport. As I got out of the car to greet the rest of the host family members, I saw them decorating an outside table under a tree with leaves and flowers, whilst one of them hastily chased off the black flies that swarmed around a plate of boiled fish. About five children playing on the roadside ran towards me and stared at me curiously. 'We prepared a feast for your arrival', Solange smiled, and every family member, about 10 people, gathered at the table to share the meal. There were bowls of boiled fish, still soaked with the water in which it was cooked, *taro* and *feí* (boiled bananas), and *mitihue* (fermented coconut flesh with crab extract) to add some moisture to the dryness of the cooked fruits.

Solange happily asked me how I found the food and her family's welcome. 'Were you surprised? Impressed?' I nodded and said yes. I was very touched that they had organized a feast for my welcome party, and I was even more moved when all the family members came to the airport to see me off at my departure some weeks later.

The airport was only five minutes' drive from our family home. Every day, I noticed its simple structure with a plain roof and some pillars as we made our daily trips to the shops in Moerai. On the day of my departure, however, going to the airport felt like going to a gallows; I had been dreading parting from my host family ever since I saw them making departure crowns with flowers from their gardens. My fear stemmed partly from the expectation of a sad farewell but also from uncertainty about the occasion. My fear materialized as I approached the family for a final goodbye. Each of them crowned me with a flower or shell garland that they had worn themselves.[7] They also generously gave me local crafts as gifts, including bags, a purse and a hat, all made from dried pandanus leaves. As I embraced each of

them before boarding the plane, we wept uncontrollably. My adoptive mother hugged me tightly, forcing out words: ''Aaitoito, 'aaitoito'.[8] She then touched my face, sobbing and gasping. As intensely special and personal as it felt at this moment, I later realized that this dramatic airport farewell is a common Rurutu ritual for all departing guests, with the exception of tourists, and even for their children returning to school in Tahiti after a holiday at home. It was a moment when my attachment (*mātau*) to the people and their attachment to me were forcibly severed, and it felt like something was terribly wrong. I walked away from the gate towards the aircraft, feeling distressed and adorned with the crowns I had received, resembling a human wreath. Overwhelmed by the intense fragrance of the flowers and the emotional weight of the farewell ritual, I made what felt like a long journey back to Tahiti, burdened by the moist flowers and laminated shells that enveloped my body.

My first experience of Polynesian hospitality in Rurutu was very emotional. However, a less personal yet more extravagant version of hospitality is also commonly seen all around the Polynesian islands. When my Rurutu family hosted a big wedding in which four couples got married, they organized a week-long feast where they served traditional meals with pork (they used all 13 pigs they had received as wedding gifts to feed a thousand people for a week), boiled fish, *ruàu* (a paste made of taro leaves), taro and bananas. After the wedding, they also organized an island truck tour for all their non-Rurutu guests and shuttled countless times to the airport and back to see guests off, crying every time someone left. Although there were at least some 50 to 100 guests from other islands, the hosts never failed to give them flower crowns and local craft products as souvenirs.

Living a life centred around EPM, both in Rurutu and Moorea, what I encountered frequently was *tāmāaraa*, a feast organized either by a parish or one of its *âmuiraa*, often to entertain guests from other parishes or visiting pastors as a gesture of hospitality.[9] As I also elaborate in Chapters 2 and 3, the people in charge of hosting the feasts devote much of their free time and labour, which are necessary to creating a memorable event. An abundance of food and colourful table settings are to be expected, and a speech of gratitude (*haamauruururaa*) by a guest representative is always appreciated. Typically, the labour of food preparation is divided among the participating households, and each household has at least a few large metal trays, similar to those used at hotel breakfast buffets, for serving large groups of people in the community.

Figure 0.1. *Tāmāaraa* for the annual EPM synod in Moorea, Māòhi Nui, 2019. © Mai Misaki

In the parish of Maatea, the food was often prepared in the back area of the kitchen with equipment fit for gastronomy professionals, such as large wok pans, a large refrigerator and freezer, and two large modern *ahimāa* ovens made of concrete. The successful outcome of the hospitable gesture, as well as participation in the labour to represent one's group, whether their parish or their *âmuiraa*, is considered important. This is partly due to the desire to maintain a positive reputation among others, especially guests. Failing to meet certain standards is considered shameful (*haamā*) for the group in charge.

This aspect of hospitality as an expression of generosity and competitiveness has been historically consistent. Robineau (1984) compares his description of the feast held at the inauguration of a *fare âmuiraa* (the meeting house) in Afareaitu, Moorea in 1969, with descriptions of feasts by visiting missionary pastors Vernier in 1867 in Afareaitu and Moreau in 1905 in Tahiti. He identifies striking similarities in the way people organize such feasts and the competitive spirit that ultimately motivates them to engage in the preparations. In Robineau's comparison, the pastor no longer had a say in the matter, as this aspect of the party was under the control of the district head. The parish would suffer significant shame if they appeared to have organized things poorly. The descriptions of parish parties by

foreigners continue to align largely with my observations of *tāmāaraa*, embracing what Robineau calls 'l'ideologie tahitienne du prestige, de la fierté et de la honte [the Tahitian ideology of prestige, honour and shame]' (*ibid.*: 230).

As Robineau also points out, the guest–host boundary shifts depending on the context. For Rurutu weddings, the main hosts (one family) recruit other Rurutu families from different villages and *âmuiraa* to assist with the labour of entertaining their extra-islander guests. Therefore, the Rurutu people involved in the feast preparation and execution were essentially all hosts, while non-Rurutu guests, including myself, were all guests. To facilitate this, the family of the married would re-distribute the enormous amount of gifts they had received from other families to 'pay' for their labour and cooperation until a day or two after the wedding. The boundary of the host–guest relationship was thus drawn between Rurutu and the other islanders, including myself.

In contrast, for *Ôroa Me* (the Festival of May), all three parishes on the island (Avera, Moerai, Hauti) take on the hosting role in turn for the three consecutive weekends.[10] After a long, special service for this fundraising occasion, there is a feast to welcome all who participated in the service. The preparation of this feast involves heavy labour: unpacking, counting and removing thousands of plates and cutlery from storage, washing and drying them, placing them on the tables covered by tablecloths and decorated with leaves and flowers, cooking food for all the participants, and when the guests have sat down for the meal, serving extra portions to fill the empty plates until people stand up and leave. I participated as part of the parish of Avera with my host family, which meant that I took part in hosting the other two parishes during Avera's turn and went to the other two parishes as a guest.

At a *tuaroì*[11] in the evening, after the neighbouring parish Moerai's turn to serve food, one middle-aged woman from Hauti enthusiastically complimented the food that Moerai served in her speech: 'We've really enjoyed the food, haven't we? The pork, *ruàu*, and taro. Thank you, Moerai! Have you enjoyed the food too, new little young girl? You seem to be way too thin still. After we serve you a meal next weekend, you'll gain a little more weight, because we'll serve you octopus. Soaked in its black ink! Mhmm . . . only in Hauti we do that.' She then burst into extremely loud laughter and the rest of the gathering followed. Their laughter incited mine as it felt wrong not to react to what was being said, but I did not

truly comprehend what this statement meant at the time. While appreciating the good performance of hospitality by the parish of Moerai, the woman, representing Hauti, implied that her parish would potentially outdo Moerai's performance. To make it sound less an offence and rather a cheeky joke, she referred to my figure, far smaller than an average Polynesian whether I am fed well or not, as a measure of good hospitality. Compared to the Rurutu wedding that draws the host–guest boundary between islands, what we see here in *Ôroa Me* is competition among parish or village communities. The host–guest positions swap every weekend, and along with the fundraising competitions among the parishes, the host group feels a certain pressure to meet the expected standard, or to be the best out of the three parishes. During my participation in a variety of events in the parishes of Maatea, Moorea and beyond, I experienced a fluctuating and non-straightforward transition from being a guest, an outsider, to being a host, an insider, and then back again to being an outsider. Hospitality is not only a gesture but also a mechanism to draw a boundary between different groups of people and thus situationally determine people's belonging to certain groups. Navigating multiple islands, different parishes, *âmuiraa* and families, my position was sometimes marked and sometimes ambiguous.

In my first encounter with EPM headquarters in Tahiti, they suggested that I join the international group of pastors who were on an annual visit through the Council for World Mission (CWM). EPM is a member of this international Christian organization that grew out of the LMS, along with 31 other member churches. The guests of CWM were from various geographical locations, such as Africa, Europe and East Asia, and the EPM headquarters offered to include me in their sightseeing tour of Moorea.

As soon as we arrived at the quay by ferry, we were greeted by some Moorea islanders with flower and shell crowns. A bus picked us up and took us on a tour of the island, visiting all its parishes. At each parish, we were warmly hosted by loyal parishioners; their combined hospitality throughout the day included a welcome speech by a representative of each parish, a generous buffet of three meals, accompanied by an orchestra with ukuleles and guitars, dance, music and *ôrero* (traditional poetry performance), and many garlands. This demonstration of hospitality, of course, does not come without cost to the parishioners. However, it is done with a certain sense of pride in representing EPM as an organization, and beyond, showing Māòhi people as the folk who know how to treat guests generously.

Figure 0.2. The 2019 annual synod in Moorea, Māòhi Nui, 2019.
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As much as I enjoyed being pampered, I somehow needed to navigate myself from being a mere foreign guest to becoming a regular face in the parish when I moved to Moorea. I attended all events taking place on parish grounds, some of them involving physical labour that was assigned to a particular *âmuiraa*. At first, I did not have full knowledge about who belongs to which *âmuiraa*, and I was willing to do any voluntary work with parishioners as it was a good opportunity for improving my Tahitian and meeting people. Whoever was at work always welcomed me in a friendly manner and greeted me with hugs and kisses. I was never asked to help, which clearly signalled that I did not belong to their group. I volunteered anyway, thinking that my willing participation would eventually consolidate my place in the parish community.

My expectation turned out to be partially right but also partially wrong. The annual EPM synod took place in Moorea in 2019, and as my attendance in the synod discussion was not granted, I decided to participate as a dining hall helper. Moorea has six parishes, and lay parishioners of the respective parishes took turns in preparing and cleaning the dining hall every day for seven days. While making acquaintance with EPM members from other Moorea parishes and other islands, our tasks were to set up the tables and chairs, decorate the dining room with flowers and leaves, bring the food and drinks to the table, and clean up the tables once the guests finished their meal. As much as my help was appreciated by the parish members in charge and the guests attending the meal, it did not grant me a solid membership in any parish or *âmuiraa*, as my role as a host had kept

switching between different Moorea parishes. 'A new foreign girl in Moorea' was the label that my hard work earned me, and although it was still an honourable title to present to all the other islanders, my position in the parish remained somewhat ambiguous. After the synod, whilst staying with a family of *âmuiraa* Nuupure, I kept participating in various hosting roles of multiple *âmuiraa* for many months. It was an effective way to recognize the faces of Maatea, but it also blurred my belonging within the parish community.

Whilst still inhabiting an ambiguous existence between *âmuiraa*, there was one moment of certainty when I simultaneously felt my belonging within my *âmuiraa* and my non-Indigenous status. After some months of my regularly attending parish activities, some deacons of *âmuiraa* Nuupure asked me whether I would like to read a Bible verse for the next service. The youth (*Uì Âpī*) of Nuupure were leading the service, and along with others in their teens and twenties, they thought I could take up the role. I felt a little nervous but also saw it as an opportunity to impress them if I succeeded in this task.

On that Sunday, I went up to the altar in a traditional dress and a flower crown on my head. When they recognized me among the other contributors, I heard the crowd murmuring in excitement and surprise. As I took a deep breath before the first word of my speech, however, they suddenly fell completely silent. Every pair of eyes in the prayer hall was fixed on me. Some of them shone in anxiety, or doubt, and others in excitement. The reason for such an intense gaze was obvious: I was not Māòhi. It was the fundamental and irreconcilable difference that my dedicated participation in the parish could never bridge. The congregation was certainly more attentive to my reading compared to that of the others; some of them nodded every time I finished a sentence and others looked at each other and giggled silently. When I finished my part and smiled at the audience, I heard the crowd sigh, probably in relief on my behalf, and then applaud. I made eye contact with the pastor who sat just behind me, who raised his eyebrows in approval. This was the reaction never to be expected after a regular Māòhi person's speech, and as much as their reactions starkly highlighted my foreign status, it was also the moment when I heard the gates opening beyond their regular friendliness.

My first Sunday reading became a topic of conversation among the village community for about a week. The elders whom I had never personally spoken to approached me and thanked me for learning their language. The Chinese shop owners saw me shopping and

complimented me, although they had not been present at that particular service. Deacons of Nuupure would proudly present me as 'a girl that speaks Reo Māòhi' to those outside of parish. I was flattered, and part of me enjoyed this temporary stardom. It was also around this time when I finally realized that, in taking up that particular role in Bible reading, I was representing the *âmuiraa* of Nuupure to the rest of the congregation. I started to take up similar roles for Sunday services as part of Nuupure and stopped volunteering in other *âmuiraa* or parishes' tasks. My language barrier gradually disappeared and I no longer received sensational attention for my speech in services like I used to. I had finally established my presence within Nuupure, the smallest division of the organization, even though we all knew that my existence in Māòhi Nui was only temporary. For *Ôroa Me* in Moorea, in which all *âmuiraa* compete with each other for fundraising, there was no question about my participation as a member of Nuupure. I was going to wear the *âmuiraa*-designated dress for the event, although the outbreak of Covid-19 cancelled all EPM events including *Ôroa Me*, which was the first time this had happened in the church's long history.

Every person who arrives in a Māòhi community is a guest, and the temporary nature of their existence is enveloped in hospitality: lush and colourful flowers and leaves that enwrap their body, plates filled with taro and *poisson cru*, and powerful voices that sing of the fruits of the earth on a merry tune. Living in Māòhi Nui, however, is to navigate this situational host–guest relationship, in a household, in an *âmuiraa*, in a parish, and on an island. Māòhi people work hard to maintain this custom of hospitality. The tasks individuals perform as 'who' and 'for whom' on a situational basis draw boundaries that fluidly shift between the different layers of group divisions.

As a non-Māòhi person, I also had to manage an extra layer of belonging as a foreigner. This meant that my labour for an *âmuiraa*, a parish or an island was more appreciated and less taken for granted than that of a Māòhi person. The competitive model of prestige and shame also exists within a hosting group, and an individual's contribution to the end result earns a good reputation for them among the other group members. Just as I was working hard to earn my place in a group, the other established members also actively engaged themselves in community labour to secure their own place among their peers. Labour is essentially an expression of love for the community, love for sharing and giving, but also a means to demonstrate the good qualities of a person. This traditional work ethic is fading away with

the ever-increasing monetization of life. However, the basic understanding within EPM still remains that hard work is a virtue.

The fact that my labour was not completely taken for granted, therefore, demonstrated that I still did not belong to them in a more permanent sense. As I received compliments from the older deacons for being *itoito* (hardworking), and as it gradually and certainly secured my place in the community, I had to leave everything that I had established behind. 'When are you going back?' was the most frequent question that was asked of me during my time, and however much effort I put into the community, this question ultimately pinned me down as a foreigner, *te taata rapae*.

The solidity of my ontological existence as a foreigner, however, increased my flexibility as a researcher, as a host and as a guest. In addition to transcending different layers of the host–guest relationships, the ambiguity of my existence also enabled me to transgress certain age and gender norms. Although people usually stick to their age cohort, and then sometimes also to the same gender group within the age cohort, I was relatively free to move around different groups of people that naturally form within an *âmuiraa* or a parish. Judging from my appearance, it would have been most natural for me to sit with a group of young females – teenagers and twenty-somethings. However, I felt more comfortable with people in their forties to sixties, men and women alike, probably because of their maturity and expansive knowledge. A young female sitting and having a conversation with a group of older men is a rare sight to behold in a Māòhi community, but my position as a foreign researcher made it seem somewhat natural. The interviews and ethnographic accounts throughout the book are thus drawn from a diverse range of people within a parish, from an elderly male deacon to a teenage girl.

Putting aside the advantages of being labelled as an outsider for my research, did I want to belong? Have I ever dreamt of the day when I am no longer treated as a foreigner, in an alternative universe in which I decide to settle in the village of Maatea permanently? Perhaps yes. Not because I dare to think that I could ever be Māòhi, but because I learnt the joy of belonging through our shared demonstrations of hospitality: the indescribable feeling when an elderly lady from the other side of the island whispers into my ear that my flower garland is the most beautiful one whilst she kisses my cheeks; when a *tarava* verse is repeated for yet another round with our singing voices growing even louder; and when I appreciate the taste of leftover *fafaru* (raw fish in fermented seawater) with *mitihue* during a

late breakfast with fellow parish members after our guests had left their tables. The affect of hospitality gave me a sense of belonging to a family, an *âmuiraa*, a parish or an island, however temporary. A place where a *hotu pāinu* (drifting fruit) can rest in its long journey away from home.

Notes

1. Throughout the book, I italicize all Tahitian words except 'fenua', for this word appears most frequently.
2. The history of conversion varies significantly amongst island groups in French Polynesia. In Tahiti and Moorea, the leading centre of the Indigenous theological movement, the mass conversion is said to have occurred in the decades following the battle of Feì-Pi in 1815.
3. Although many *marae* have been destroyed and abandoned in French Polynesia, some have been historically reconstructed and maintained. Marae Arahuahu is located in Paea, on Tahiti island.
4. People at EPM prefer to call it Reo Māòhi, as Tahitian literally means Reo Tahiti, the language of Tahiti, when it is spoken in all the Society Islands. In this book, however, for the sake of distinguishing it from other Indigenous languages of French Polynesia, I refer to it as Tahitian.
5. Exceptionally, two parishes in Papeete that cater to French and Hakka (Chinese) speakers. In recent years, some pastors have made efforts to adjust the service languages to the local variants of Reo Māòhi.
6. *Heì*, also called *couronnes* in French, are a garland made of a series of objects strung together in a loop.
7. The crowns and necklaces given as a sign of hospitality are often circulated and rarely kept as a single person's possession. When one is crowned, the crown is kept at home until it is given to someone else. People also transfer flower crowns to others, but this is much less common as flowers wither within a day or two.
8. *Faaitoito* in Tahitian, *àaitoito* in Rurutu, is a commonly used expression for encouragement, cheering and solidarity that can be translated as 'good luck' or 'hang in there' in English.
9. Âmuiraa is a sub-division within an EPM parish, usually based on residence and kinship. I elaborate further on the division and role of âmuiraa in Chapter 1.
10. The description of this event and its role in the island economy is described in detail in Claude Robineau's monograph *Tradition et modernité aux Îles de la Société* (1984).
11. *Tuaroì* are evening meetings for theological discussion. Usually a certain Bible verse is chosen as a discussion point, and deacons from all parishes discuss its meanings and lessons throughout the night. The custom

used to exist in other Protestant-dominated islands, such as Tahiti and Moorea, but it has disappeared due to the decline of EPM members and the considerable commitment of time and resources required to participate in the event.