

34 Thing

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Missionary Sketches, No. III.

For the Use of the Weekly and Monthly Contributors to the
Missionary Society.

THE FAMILY IDOLS OF POMARE,

Which he relinquished, and sent to the Missionaries at Eimeo, either to be burnt,
or sent to the Society.

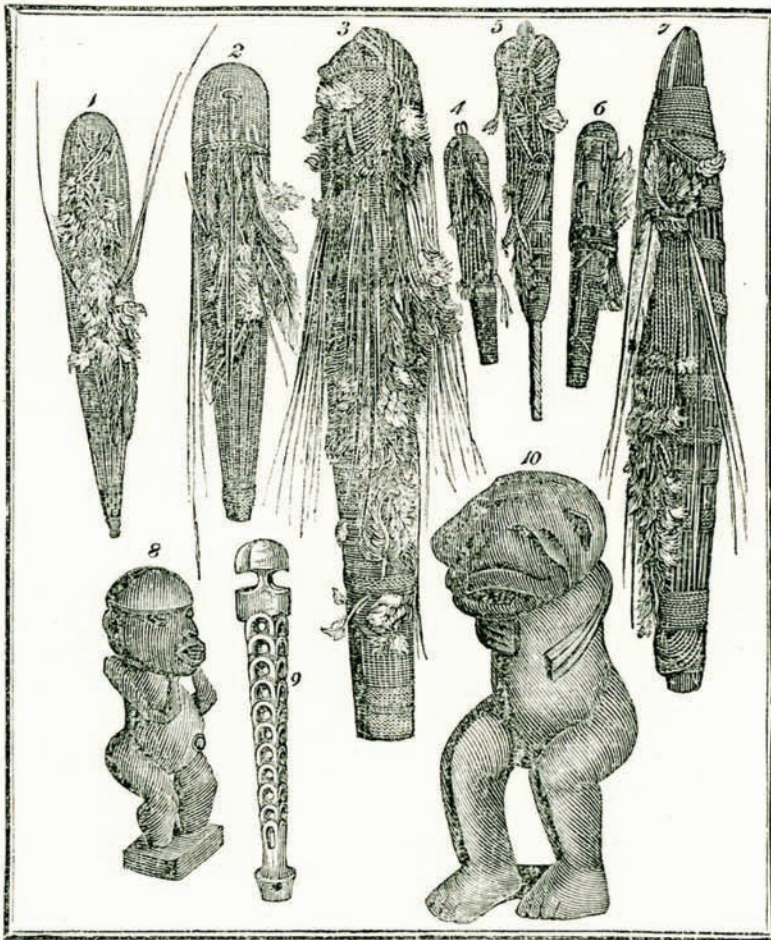


Figure 35 "The Family Idols of Pomare," in *Missionary Sketches*, No. 3 (October 1818).

In many languages, the pronoun for a thing is “it.” An it, or id, signifies some entity other than an I, or ego. “It” often operates grammatically in the passive voice in order to signal, at the same time also conceal, agency. “It was said that you committed the deed.” Someone said it, but who did so is not indicated. As an it, a thing dwells in obscurity. Its identity, its drive and desire, its intention, and its use elude us. Perhaps we even refuse to recognize what it is because it threatens to violate what we hold proper. For this reason, Freud aptly named the suppressed realm of desire “the It” (das Es, translated into English by James Strachey as the Id). In any case, thingness refers to an identity and precise agency that remains hidden. A thing remains ill-defined until we discern what it does, that is, until we grasp its functional relationship to the milieu in which it exists. At that point we are able to apply a name to the thing. In that moment “it” becomes a particular object, an example of an entire class. We say, “this thing is a glove, or a chinchilla, or a tree.” A thing, in other words, is an object waiting to happen if by “object” we mean something that has been identified, that is, something that is an example of a class of objects.

I pick up something from the table. I query what this thing is by examining its texture, weight, and size. I touch it, discern its mass and composition, and I find that the thing reminds me of objects I know. Vaguely, I become aware of this thing’s membership in a class of kindred objects. This awareness grows as I concentrate on the assortment of common features composing the class: size, color, surface qualities, weight, and composition. As I note these characteristics, it becomes clear to me that this thing must be understood as an instance, however unique, of a general type. “What kind of a thing is this?” I ask as I search for the class to which it belongs. Most practically, perhaps, I look for apt comparisons. What does it remind me of? What does it look like? Have I seen this before? One compelling example of likeness becomes a shortcut to identification. The resulting specification of the object reveals that this thing belongs to a set of related artifacts. I know what the thing is when I recognize it, which is to say, when I have determined it is an example of similar sorts of objects.

But such specification does not exhaust the thing, which remains more than its classification. A thing exists independent of the human taxonomies that classify it. Thus, even when we manage to assign a thing to a taxonomy, it may not rest easily there. A thing occupies a specific category impatiently inasmuch as its particularity exceeds the template of specificity. Often, this is because the specifier got it wrong. That happens whenever the desire to see something exceeds the evidence at hand. David Hume described in his “Natural History of Religion” (1757) the

universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to everything that hurts or pleases us. (Hume 1993: 141)

This is a remarkable passage because it reminds us that human consciousness operates with its own rules and interests in making all manner of epistemological claims. Thingness does not depend on us; objecthood does. Objects are intentional things, but may have little to do with what things want or do.

Travelers and missionaries have often demonstrated the truth of this when facing a strange culture’s myriad things. Where their interests are most pitched to draw lines, assert dominance, or subject the other to convenient categories, the visitor’s misattributions are most common. For example, the concept of the fetish was developed to help distinguish “them” from “us.” Their sacred objects are fetishes, the false gods they fashioned from wood or stone, so different from our sacred objects, which are the produce of true religion, our religion, the religion that the true God truly revealed to us (Latour 2010: 1–16).

In this case, a thing is not what seemed to fit the specification, but is something else, whatever falls outside of the erroneous classification. The relationship or likeness that people thought they recognized turns out to be false; at least, it appears that way when someone else proposes another specification or points out where the likeness fails. For example, when British Protestant missionaries encountered the ritual objects surrendered to them by the Polynesians they converted (Figure 35), they did not know precisely what to make of them. The problem was that they did not resemble the idols that Protestants claimed to know about—the figures hewn from wood and stone reported by Hebrew prophets in the Bible. The Polynesian objects were covered with fabric woven from coconut fiber to which were tied feathers and long quills. Some displayed eyes and ears. The Protestants decided they must be idols because the Polynesians greatly

valued them, housing them in their *marae*, or sacred precincts, and treating them with grave ceremonial honor. Driven by their purpose of conversion, the missionaries applied to the objects the category of “idol” since they needed a metric of the venture’s success. Acquiring the Polynesians’ sacred objects meant securing the new faith among them. So the designation of idol stuck, but not very well because these things did not look like any idol they’d ever seen or imagined. The “family idols” of a Tahitian chieftain were reproduced in the October 1818 issue of the *Missionary Register*, where the editor frankly conceded that readers would be disappointed at their appearance (see Figure 35): “The idols themselves . . . bear no resemblance whatever to the human form, and differ from any thing we remember to have seen or read of, which has been used by idolators for the purpose of worship.” The writer missed the familiarity of biblical idols as described by the second commandment, in which the “idols of the heathen” are described as imitating living creatures. But the Tahitian figures “convey no idea whatever of an animated being, and we are totally at a loss to account for their form.” The objects did not look like “idols” because the writer was looking for something else. It was another case of the object and the thing failing to match. What were these objects? Their specificity was in doubt.

A culture comprises a large variety of conceptual, symbolic, aesthetic, and linguistic taxonomies that tell us what kind of an object a thing is. A thing is assigned a place in a taxonomy, and remains there until circumstances require it to be re-assigned to another taxonomy. A thing is an ongoing colloquy between material characteristics, the particularity of desire or need, and a patchwork of epistemological cataloguing. Until the object is placed, it remains a thing, held in abeyance. But things also resist the epistemic spell of objecthood. Objects have a tendency to dissolve when they are dislodged or reclassified, returning to the unfixed state of things. Bill Brown has captured this indeterminate sense in his discussion of “thing” as a designation for something that has lost or refuses to assume a proper designation (Brown 2001: 4–5).

Modernity may be a cultural condition that thrives on indetermination. The modern production of and discourse on art, for example, indulges in the unstable plasticity of thingness. Artists relentlessly dissolve what is revered as art, replacing it with a new conception. A urinal, a stuffed goat, a dead shark becomes a work of art. Art is a category of open identity. The cult of the new urges that every novel or truly original work of art should undermine the conventions of what defined art before it. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, capitalism was likewise a universal solvent, transforming what people thought was enduring into the fluid medium of exchange. “All that is solid melts into the air,” as the *Communist Manifesto* put it. So thingness is an unstable, entropic, mercurial quantum, not

unlike Freud's characterization of the Id as a seething cauldron or chaos, an unsteady sea of libido always threatening to overtake the fragile ego.

Culture enables the recognition of a thing, but can also disable it. The instability of specification is well illustrated by a historical example of objects passing through several successive frameworks of interpretation, showing how objects are culturally constructed from the metamorphosis of things over time. For example, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, missionaries dispatched from London to the South Seas encountered a variety of deities worshipped by means of cult statuary that was installed in lodges or "spirit houses" dedicated to the gods, such as Ta'aroa, the creator god who was widely worshipped among Polynesians. Ta'aroa originally created his home from his body, and the result served as the prototype for all temples. The lodge was therefore regarded as distinctly sacred. The missionaries targeted these lodges and their images for destruction. A special place to appropriate was the marae, a cleared, civic space where ceremonial objects were sometimes kept and where gatherings and feasts were celebrated. Sometimes the missionaries built churches on the marae as a decisive way to appropriate the space for the new religion and bury the old one beneath it (Shaw King 2011: 16, 35–9).

The "idols" were sought out by the missionaries, often to destroy them, but on many occasions to appropriate them for use against the indigenous religion. On the Polynesian island of Raiatea, they hit on a novel idea of gathering them into a church for the purpose of an exhibition, which was intended to demonstrate their subjugation to Christianity. Inhabitants were urged to see these "trophy of victory." In order to gratify their desire "and to fan the Missionary Flame," the missionaries "set apart an evening for the exhibition of . . . Idols." One of the missionaries addressed the native assembly, asserting that "formerly . . . war must have ensued, and blood must have been shed, before the Evil Spirits would have been given up." But their loss now took place "by the power of God alone" ("Renunciation," 1882: 539). The toppling of gods was an event quite familiar to Polynesians because it was a common way of achieving victory over a rival group. This suggests that the act of Christian iconoclasm patterned itself after indigenous practices of triumph marked by symbolic destruction. Certainly, the violence of iconoclasm punctuated the shift from one taxonomy to another for Christians in the South Seas and back home in Britain. A full-page illustration in *Missionary Sketches* (no. 6, July 1819) sensationally portrays the "Destruction of the Idols at Otaheite, pulling down a pagan altar, and building a Christian church." The violence effected a fundamental transposition of the object, subjugating the old conceptual regime to the new. The captive deities

were put to use as exhibited artifacts to demonstrate their inferiority and to deploy them in a new role as scripted by Christianity. Their lodges destroyed, the figures were exhibited within a Christian worship setting and re-cast as demons, minions of Satan, evil spirits that must submit to the authority of Jesus and his church.

At the very time the artifacts were gathered in Polynesia, the London Missionary Society opened a museum in London to exhibit these and many others collected throughout Asia and Africa (Shaw King 2011: 53–67; Seton 2012). Europeans were curious to see them. A catalogue of the Missionary Museum's collection clearly signaled the reigning taxonomy, an ideological gaze trained unwaveringly on its artifacts: "It is hoped that a view of these 'trophies of Christianity' will inspire the spectators with gratitude to God for his great goodness to our native land, in favouring us so abundantly with the means of grace" (*Catalogue* 1841: iv). The Museum existed until 1891, when its holdings were distributed between the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum. An article describing the arrangement pointed out the convenience of the transfer of artifacts to the British Museum, noting "the greater public utility of the collection when in the British Museum, where it can readily be seen and studied by anyone interested," adding that "an ethnographical museum . . . requires constant care for its [objects'] proper preservation, and this it is only likely to obtain where the custody of the specimens is a principal object of the institution" (Read 1891: 139).

The objects collected in the South Seas traveled through at least five discrete cultural registers. Originally, they were cult objects in a spirit house or in the marae. This abode of the god was destroyed by the missionaries in order to transfer the object to the native church sanctuary, where it was christened an "idol," a thing defined as hailing from the abode of Satan. From there it traveled to the Missionary Museum in London, where it metamorphosed into a "trophy of Christianity" and an example of Britain's imperial prestige. By the end of the century, the "trophies" were re-christened as "ethnographic artifacts" when they were relocated to a public institution and a university museum. There they signified the life-world of their people. At present, in the post-colonial era, things like this have been increasingly regarded as the patrimony of their original nations, to which some have urged they be repatriated. These complex biographies of things have been fruitfully studied by anthropologists and art historians (Clifford 1988: 215–51; Davis 1997) and offer a vital field to the study of religious material culture. The press of the unspecifiable undermines the presumptive stability of taxonomies. What we think we know oscillates between the fragile purchase of our categories and the obdurate presence of something strange.

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