Colonising with Christianity?
The Case of George Brown, Missionary Photographer

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John Davis is credited with the earliest commercial photographs made in Samoa, a series of *cartes de visite* dating from the mid-1870s. Davis's image *Outrigger canoe at the mouth of the Falefa River* presents Samoa as the buying public had come to expect. It is a picture of paradise far removed from the crowded, developed, and polluted cities of Europe. This image of Samoa is consistent with Blanton's argument: that colonial photography in Samoa saw a constant reiteration of established marketable themes that bore little relation to changes in Samoan cultures.[1] In the early 1890s, around the time that *Outrigger canoe* was photographed, Davis was Apia's postmaster, a position requiring regular contact with overseas shipping and certainly conducive to the sale of prints and postcards. Davis was evidently in touch with international trends in picturing island cultures and this image reflects his knowledge of consumer demand for images of island paradises. Likewise, Davis's portraits of Samoan people meet market demands for the exotic, drawing focus on costume and props. In a series of images discussed by Nordstrom, Davis employs an Oriental rug as a backdrop for a study of three girls making kava.[2] The rug, as Nordstrom suggests, is no doubt intended to suggest the sensuality of the harem, and combines incongruously with the Samoan mat they are sitting on and the traditional bowl and cup which they display.[3]

Reverend George Brown's photographs differ markedly from the images produced by commercial photographers in Samoa. The photograph *Native Minister's Family* is typical of George Brown's representation of the indigene. The photograph portrays a family group of children obviously converted to Christianity from the indication of the title. The emphasis on children is significant. Brown's photograph *Samoan Children* pictures a larger group of children who have not had the same experience of conversion as the native minister's family. Instead these children are pictured as they 'naturally are', that is, without any obvious signs of evangelical effort. Schools were a major viewing arena for missionary photographs and children enjoy looking at pictures of children, but it is also within the spirit of the genre to perceive Samoans as the 'little brown

1. Casey Blanton, ed, *Picturing Paradise: Colonial Photography of Samoa 1875 to 1925*, Daytona Beach Community College, Daytona, 1995, p 5.

2. Alison Nordstrom, 'Early Photography in Samoa', *History of Photography*, no 15, 1991, p 277.

3. Ibid.

John Davis, *Outrigger canoe at the mouth of the Falefa River*, 1893, reproduced in *USA Today*, July 1996, p 72.

brothers' of missionary exhortations. Reverend Lawes, speaking of the Papuans to an audience in Melbourne, pleaded, 'I ask you to accept them as fellow-subjects and fellow men. Don't talk about them as 'niggers' or 'black-fellows' but … let them be treated as men, weak, ignorant and

childish, but still members of the human family'.[4] Children were more easily represented than adults as naturally innocent, powerless and – significantly – redeemable, that is, capable of training and improvement. In each of these images Samoan children are not associated with the wildness and savagery of heathenism. There is no distance and specimen-type isolation in these portraits as found in travel books. The somewhat stiff nature of the subjects may contribute to a sense of formality, but is more likely a reflection of the technical limitations of early images. Nordstrom records that, even with the new dry plate technology, exposure time was uncomfortably long and required the restraints of motionlessness.[5] All of the subjects face the camera; they are not confrontational but direct, honest, and intelligent. Here Samoans are pictured as not radically strange but prospective Christians, mutable and on the threshold of Christian society rather than absolutely remote from civilisation. As opposed to other photography of the period, evangelical representation is concerned with the mutability rather than the fixity of indigenous character. The artefacts that are represented, for example the fan and the costume of the minister's daughters, are given as evidence of native industriousness rather than symbols of a savage lifestyle.

Nicholas Thomas explains that the distinctiveness of evangelical colonialism does not come from the terms and metaphors taken in isolation but from the narrative in which these tropes have specific meaning.[6] The example here is children, and Brown has invoked a

4. Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua, 1874–1914*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1989, p 128.

5. Nordstrom, 'Early Photography in Samoa', op cit, p 272.

6. Nicholas Thomas, 'Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy and History in Early Twentieth Century Evangelical Propaganda', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no 34, 1992, pp 366–89.

Reverend George Brown, *Native Minister's Family*, 1898, gelatin silver photograph, 8.2 cm × 10.6 cm, George Brown Collection, The Australian Museum, Sydney.

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Reverend George Brown, *Samoan Children*, *c* 1875–1903, gelatin silver photograph, 7.9 cm × 9.2 cm, George Brown Collection, The Australian Museum Sydney.

parental metaphor. Missionary work employed and enacted the notions of a quasi-familial hierarchy in a far more thorough way than any other colonial project. Generally there is a great emphasis on schooling and more on the creation of social order. Here it is as if these children are being socialised for the first time.

In *Native Minister's Family* there is a very strong sense that these children are being schooled according to English standards. This is evident in their position as part of a native minister's family, in their disciplined response to the photographer's demands, in their anglicised attire. What is 'true' in their lives is Western; by extension, what is authoritative is Western. Being schooled according to English standards implies that the children are being taught about the British Empire, English history and English literature. Many writers on cultural studies see education as a major medium for cultural invasion. Alan Bishop urges us not to overlook mathematics in the culturally constructed Western education programmes.[7] Bishop argues that mathematical ideas, like any other ideas, are humanly constructed. They have a cultural history. Counting and conceptions of space differ anthropologically. Thus all cultures have generated mathematical ideas, just as all cultures have generated language, religion, morals, customs, and kinship systems. Bishop states:

In my view it is thoroughly appropriate to identify 'western mathematics', since it was western culture, and more specifically western European culture, which played such a powerful role in achieving the goals of imperialism.[8]
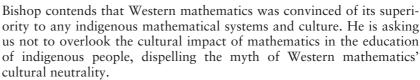
7. Alan Bishop, 'Western Mathematics: The secret weapon of cultural imperialism', in Bill Ashcroft et al, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp 71–6.

8. Ibid, p 73.

Bishop contends that Western mathematics was convinced of its superiority to any indigenous mathematical systems and culture. He is asking us not to overlook the cultural impact of mathematics in the education of indigenous people, dispelling the myth of Western mathematics' cultural neutrality.

Michel Foucault writes of the authority of colonial presence where:

> The true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true, it being understood also that it is not a matter of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.[9]

In civilising processes, the English book becomes 'the truth', it becomes an emblem of what is right and correct and therefore brings authority to what is Western in colonial settings. Homi Bhabha takes these ideas further in 'Signs Taken for Wonders'.[10] Bhabha speaks of the Bible in the sense that it was a metaphor for imposing the English language onto island people. The book became a signifier of colonial desire and discipline. The power of the English book, however, can only be felt in a circumstance of cultural difference.

> What is 'English' in these discourses of colonial power cannot be represented as plenitude or a 'full' presence; it is determined by its belatedness. As a signifier of authority, the English book acquires its meaning after the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity.[11]

The English book, therefore, can only assert an authority after an engagement with a different, apparently inferior culture. Bhabha continues: 'Paradoxically … such an image can neither be "original" by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it – nor "identical" by virtue of the difference that defines it.'[12] Consequently, according to Bhabha, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.

In *Native Minister's Family* this ambivalence can be strongly felt. The children are responding to an English authority, this response most keenly felt in the shepherd's attire of the small boy. The reader can quite safely assume that she/he is being educated and socialised according to English standards. The children's decent behaviour, obeying the photographer's request for a pose, contributes to the sense that they have been exposed to an English civilising process. Indeed their relative ease with the camera, the straightforward and confident gaze of each sitter towards Brown, connotes their familiarity with Western technology. The authority of England is, however, undermined by the native difference of these children. The traditional dress of the children, the island surrounds, even the black skin of the children challenges the authority of the English civilising process.

To be sustainable, the missionary project could not escape a commitment to assimilation and the fundamental unity of humanity. Brown's aim was to incorporate the Samoan into a familial relation with the civilised European. However, as Nicholas Thomas points out, missionaries were no exception in the colonial project of 'knowing' the Other, thereby distinguishing the native from the civilised European.[13]

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, Peregrine Books, Great Britian, 1979, p 132.

10. Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', in Bill Ashcroft et al, op cit, pp 29 – 35.

11. Ibid, p 29.

12. Ibid.

13. Nicholas Thomas, 'Colonial Conversions', op cit, p 367.

Missionary photography, therefore, is centred on an ambivalence, to borrow Bhabha's phrase, as anxious as it is assertive.[14] The caption, *Native Minister's Family*, the composition and the general cleanliness and quiet behaviour of the children are all factors contributing to a sense of 'sameness' with the metropolitan, Christian audience for whom the image was intended. The reclining girl, the lush tropical setting, the fan and the mat pictured signify 'difference' from that audience. The 'sameness' and 'difference' of the subjects compete within the image and reflect the ambivalence behind its production.

This photograph contrasts with the images produced by Davis, Tattersall, and Andrew. Its 'difference' is the product of different motivating forces behind the image production. Brown was not interested in representing essential difference between the European and the Samoan. Missionary photographers like George Brown cannot be lumped into a general category of colonial photography without appreciating the distinct motivation behind their image production. Unlike other colonial photographers, Protestant missionaries interpreted their subject through religious lenses, coloured by their commitment to conversion. The ambivalence of the Samoan stereotype is the result of Brown's 'polarity of intention', which was compounded by contemporary debate on the benefits of Anglicising indigenous people.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the social benefits of modernity were being strongly questioned. Industrialisation and urbanisation in Europe were perceived by many as the cause of religious and moral decline. Capitalist society with its emphasis on self-interest and material success was seen as inconsistent with the Christian message. The British social theorist R H Tawney informed a missionary audience that, 'you cannot at once preach the religion of Christianity and practice the religion of material success, which is the creed of a great part of the Western world and is true competitor of Christianity for the allegiance of mankind'.[15] Brian Stanley has noted that in Britain, by the 1890s, 'almost all branches of the Christian Church had developed a keen social conscience which left Christians only too aware of the moral evil embedded in the fabric of national life'.[16] Consequently, 'some missionaries were now more hesitant about reproducing in their converts cultural patterns which might inhabit their evangelistic effectiveness'.[17]

The debate on Anglicisation spread to the Pacific where there was little consensus on how to 'raise' indigenous people, that is to Christianise or 'civilise' them. Unfortunately there is no record of where Brown stood in these debates, although given their predominance in missionary thinking it is without doubt that he was aware of them. In the Pacific, the Melanesian Mission led by Bishop Tozer believed in divorcing Christianity from its Western context and integrating it with village life. The Anglican missionaries in New Guinea were not convinced of the superiority of the Europeans and did not want 'a parody of European or Australian civilisation'.[18] On the other hand, Samuel Marsden in the Pacific chose to first 'civilise' rather than Christianise indigenous people.[19] In the Pacific, we can find varying degrees of tolerance towards indigenous cultures but there were aspects of traditional social organisation that all the missionaries remained opposed to. Many of these related to marriage and sexual mores. Then again, while Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists all debarred polygamists from Church

14. Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', op cit, p 30.

15. R H Tawney, 'The Bearing of Christianity on Social and Industrial Questions', *International Council of Missionaries*, no 5, 1928, p 165.

16. Brian Stanley, 'Nineteenth Century Liberation Theology: Nonconformist Missionaries and Imperialism', *Baptist Quarterly*, no 32, 1987, p 5.

17. Ibid.

18. Langmore, *Missionary Lives*, op cit, p 123.

19. Ibid, p 122.

membership, the intensity of their general opposition to polygamy varied. The attitude of Anglican missionaries was fairly relaxed. Methodists were less yielding, opposing it from the early days when Samuel Fellows 'bashed polygamy' with vigour.[20] In the Sacred Heart Mission, Catholic opposition towards polygamy was even more thoroughgoing. The important point is that the response by European and Australian missionaries to Pacific people ranged along several different spectra, from condemnation to admiration, from incomprehension to understanding, from intolerance to acceptance, and from reticence to aggressive interference. The times at which the missionaries arrived also played an important part in their approach to Pacific cultures. Those that arrived in the years before the First World War came to people who had already experienced three decades of the restraining influence of mission and government. Ben Butcher, describing his own interest in Papuan culture, cast his imagination back to the experiences of the pioneers and concluded: 'It is not surprising that early missionaries, coming up against the cruelty and bestiality associated with primitive religion, saw nothing good in it'.[21] Moreover, as Diane Langmore points out, even in identical experiences, individual missionaries brought with them attitudes derived from their social background, their religious formation, and their own personality: clearly their reactions would rarely be identical.[22] The socioeconomic background of the missionaries also tended to mould their responses. For example, the Anglican missions in the Pacific comprised well-educated members of the upper middle class and exhibited, on most issues other than sexual licence, a greater broadmindedness, flexibility, and tolerance that were very probably derived in part from their education and experience.

Missionary ambivalence towards Westernisation should not be seen as a wholesale rejection of this culture. Their ambivalence, however, does bring into question the relationship between the missionary enterprise and cultural imperialism. The doubts and insecurities of an ambivalent position seriously hinder the workings of purposeful cultural imperialism. How does one culture override another when the governing culture is itself fragmented, self-doubting, and uncertain?

The doubts regarding the benefits of Westernisation were felt in a context of dispute between missionary societies in the field. In 1839, the Australian Wesleyan Mission in Samoa was abandoned by the express and repeated orders of the Parent Society in London. In 1857, Reverend M Dyson was appointed by the Australasian Conference to recommence work in Samoa, in response to the many petitions which had been received, and also to the urgent request of the people made to Reverend John Thomas who visited them in 1855. Three years later a General Secretary joined Dyson in 1860, and this mission has since then been continued. Earlier abandonment was a consequence of disputes between the Wesleyan mission and the London Missionary Society in Samoa.[23] George Brown discusses the disputes between the missionary societies in Samoa. In his journal he writes: 'The different sects which have taken root in Samoa abundantly prove that it was not possible for any one branch of the Church of Christ to unite the whole people.'[24] According to Brown, the greatest hindrance to the spread of Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, and Seventh Day Adventism in Samoa during the nineteenth century was the existence of other evangelical

20. Ibid, p 124.

21. Ibid, p 130.

22. Ibid.

23. J Garrett, 'The Conflict Between the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodists in mid-19th Century Samoa', *Journal of Pacific History*, no 9, 1974, pp 65–80.

24. George Brown, *Pioneer Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, Methodist Missionary Society of Australia, Sydney, 1904, p 115.

societies in the islands. The societies were essentially working against one another.

> The controversy, which is now, I repeat happily ended, was to us who were in the field at any one time a very painful one, but the position which I took up was that I was sent to Samoa by the Conference to take charge of our people in that group. And that it was my duty to be loyal servant to the Conference; and this I am thankful to say, I was able to do without lessening in any degree the hearty and sincere personal friendship, which existed between the missionaries of the sister society and ourselves.[25]

Alongside evangelical disputes, nineteenth-century Samoa saw world powers competing for military and economic dominance. By the end of the century, German, British, and American hostilities in the islands had led to a series of civil wars between Samoans loyal to various opposing chiefs supported by the differing European factions. The First World War stole the focus from Samoa and the then German colony was ceded to New Zealand. Alison Nordstrom observes that the disappearance of Samoa from the public mind is reflected in the illustrations of the *National Geographic*.[26] Of the six articles on Samoa published between 1898 and 1985, Nordstrom observes that three appeared before 1919, during the height of Western political interest in Polynesia.[27]

Brown addresses the important political changes taking place in Samoa in his autobiography. He writes: 'By an agreement between the Powers concerned, the principal islands were placed under the direct control of Germany, and the two smaller groups of Tutuila and Manua were allotted to America.'[28] For Brown, this change wherein a firm and settled Government was established would stop the ever-recurring tribal wars which for many years past 'caused such great suffering to the people themselves, and have hindered the development and prosperity of the country'.[29]

> The establishment of German rule has not in any way affected injuriously our own amongst the natives. The people are granted absolute freedom of worship, and our Missionaries receive the cordial support of both Governments in their efforts to promote the educational and spiritual interests both of the foreign residents and the Samoan.[30]

On the establishment of German rule, it was felt that a German Methodist Missionary should be obtained, if possible, in order to facilitate the transaction of necessary business with the Government, and to assist in any plans for the advancement and welfare of the people.[31] Application was made to the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany, and Bishop McCabe appointed the Reverend G C Beutenmüller to the position, placing him under the absolute direction of the New South Wales Conference and the Board of Missions, whilst he worked as a missionary in Samoa. Brown writes that 'Mr Beutenmüller was most kindly received by the Government and by the German residents on his arrival in Samoan, and he now ministers to them regularly in the German Church in Apia in addition to his ordinary work amongst the natives and half-caste population.'[32]

Given the unstable administration of Samoa during the time Brown spent in the islands, and his own ambivalence towards anglicising the Samoan people, where can we place Brown in the relationship between
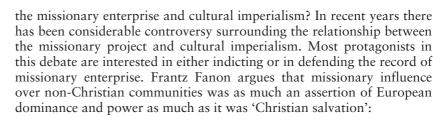
25. Ibid, p 116.

26. Alison Nordstrom, 'Wood Nymphs and Patriots: Depictions of Samoa in National Geographic', *Visual Sociology*, no 7, 1992, pp 49–59.

27. Ibid.

28. Brown, *Pioneer, Missionary and Explorer*, op cit, p 115.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. There is a wealth of material on these negotiations in government papers at the Public Record Office, London; and the Archives of the International Missionary Council and Council of British Missionary Societies, Geneva.

32. Ibid, p 116.

the missionary enterprise and cultural imperialism? In recent years there has been considerable controversy surrounding the relationship between the missionary project and cultural imperialism. Most protagonists in this debate are interested in either indicting or in defending the record of missionary enterprise. Frantz Fanon argues that missionary influence over non-Christian communities was as much an assertion of European dominance and power as much as it was 'Christian salvation':

> The triumphant *communiqués* from the mission are in fact a source of information concerning the implantation of foreign influences in the core of the colonised people…. The church is the white peoples' church, the foreigners' church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, the master of the oppressor.[33]

Fanon views the missionary encounter with indigenous societies as a case of one culture's domination of a weaker host culture. Bhabha tends towards this rationale and argues that representatives of Western Christianity claimed their religion emanated from the Word of God (Christ, the Bible) and that they were the *only* means to salvation. According to Bhabha, indigenous religions were regarded as idolatrous, devilish, at best preparatory to the superior revelations of Christianity.[34]

Other writers are breaking out from this dichotomatic posture and are describing more complex encounters of cultural exchange between the missionary enterprise and indigenous societies. Nicholas Thomas, writing on the complexities of the cultural encounter, challenges the preoccupation of anthropology with cultural difference by stressing the shared history of colonial entanglement.[35] More recently, Thomas draws on postcolonial theory and literary analysis to demonstrate how cultures of the Pacific Islands have dealt with colonist ventures, modernity, and the debate over the recuperation of histories and tradition.[36] The texts share a common perspective; the missionary encounter with indigenous societies is read in terms of cultural exchange, alteration, and concession.

In the case of George Brown in Samoa, cultural concessions were being made on both sides throughout the colonising process. Samoan culture was not set in stone before the arrival of European missionaries. Peter Bellwood points out that Samoan systems of government and authority were indeed very flexible and subject to the will of a large cross-section of society.[37] Bellwood suggests that it is because of the Samoans' emphasis on achievement rather than political life that they have survived through the period of colonisation as one of the proudest, most populous, and most vigorous societies in Polynesia.[38] Conversely, on his arrival in Samoa, George Brown was unable to set the terms of his discussions with local people and had first to approach the chiefs of each tribe. In such circumstances, the transmission of a 'colonial discourse' is hard to imagine. Any 'imperial culture' that George Brown may have represented was itself fragmented by divisions and disputes between competing missionary societies in Samoa during the late nineteenth century.

The fusion of ideas that occurred during George Brown's stay in the islands produced a complexity of influences, which is at odds with the simplicities of 'cultural imperialism'. His case suggests that any attempt to link missionary activity with cultural imperialism in the late nineteenth century must take into account the complex scenes of negotiation that lie behind cultural encounters.

33. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove, New York, 1996, p 2.

34. Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', op cit, p 29.

35. Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA, 1991.

36. Nicholas Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories of Oceanic Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1995.

37. Peter Bellwood, *The Polynesians: Prehistory of an Island People*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987, p 73.

38. Ibid, p 74.