SAMOAN STEREOTYPES AND REVEREND GEORGE BROWN'S PORTRAITS

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This paper will argue that the nineteenth century Samoan photographs by Reverend George Brown reveal the missionary agenda to represent universal humanity in the image of the islander. At the same time however, the photographs display an aspiration towards objectivity. The ethnographic character of Brown's photographic portraiture is the direct influence of contemporary science. This paper will suggest that the tropes of the exotic are invoked in Brown's portraits as he attempts to make sense of a subject that was new and often bewildering. The analysis will reveal that the ethnographic influence of Brown's Samoan portraits coexists with the humanist message of the images, in constant contention.

Brown's portraits *Two Warriors* (figure 1) and *Four Girls in a Garden* (figure 4) were photographed in 1898 in Lefaga and Atua respectively. Both of these images attest to a complex process of ambivalence in the construction of a Samoan portrait. The photographs evidence the influence of ethnography on Brown's work, they reference the tropes of the exotic Other, and most of all they illustrate Brown's genuine struggle to reconcile similarity and difference in the image of the Samoan.

Two Warriors pictures Samoan men dressed as they would be for battle. In his text *Melanesians and Polynesians* (1910), Brown explains that Samoan warfare saw no regular leaders and no regularly enlisted warriors, all adult males were supposed to take part without any reserve. The warriors had no special training beforehand except at club contests at the public games. The warriors pictured here are wearing the Malo, a small strip of fabric passing between the legs with a girdle of leaves. They are both wearing a tuinga, a headdress of false brown hair. The warriors are holding the principle weapon in Samoan battle, clubs, the other common weapon was the spear. Typically, and as pictured here, the club was about three feet in length and was made of a red, close grained hardwood, and was ornamented with carving. The

FIGURE 1. Reverend George Brown, Two Warriors, 1898. Gelatin silver photograph (16.5cm x 12cm). George Brown Collection, The Australian Museum, Sydney.

handle had a sinnet wound tightly round it, so that it might not slip in hand.[1] The photograph relates to others in the collection of Brown's Samoan portraits like *Action Dance*, 1898, *Chiefs and Rulers*, 1898, *Two Men*, 1898, and *Woman with Club and Tuiga*, 1898,[2] with its emphasis on warfare, one of the greatest threats to Christianity and as such a focus of missionary attention.

Two Warriors employs the typical poses devised by early ethnologists to compare the physical characteristics of racial types. The image is similar to Alfred Burton's photograph *A Fijian*, c. 1884, and a photograph of a Fijian warrior by an unknown photographer of the late

nineteenth century (figures 2 and 3). Anthropological photography featured native subjects in frontal portraits assuming symmetrical poses and in some cases with a profile view. A clinical and posed composition smothers any sense of spontaneity. The formal and static character of the portrait pictures the men as anthropological types. The caption contributes to the sense of isolation in the image by identifying the subjects' 'type', rather than individual names. Brown's image, like Burton's is clearly influenced by anthropological theory.

Virginia-Lee Webb[3] points out that George Brown had a great deal of contact with ethnographers and his journals and letterboxes contain references to, and correspondence from, Edward B. Tylor (1832-1919), James G. Frazer (1854-1941) and A. C. Haddon (1855-1940). Given this contact with ethnologists and knowledge of Darwinism, the question arises: did his familiarity with science make Brown more sceptical of the idea of 'Samoan equality' than other missionaries? Any answer to this question must be speculative as Brown refrains from making his views on this aspect of ethnology very clear. On the one hand, *Melanesians and Polynesians* contains observations of an ethnographic rather than religious or Christian character. Brown writes that his intention in the

FIGURE 2. Alfred Burton, *A Fijian*, c.1884. Albumen print (20.2 x 14.1). Collection Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarew.

FIGURE 3. Unknown, *Fijian Warrior*, n.d. Albumen print (19.8 x 14.4). Pictorial Collection, National Library of Australia.

book was to outline, "The principal differences between Polynesian and Melanesian cultures".[4] He continues

> My object has been simply to give some facts which may be useful in the consideration of the history of the peoples amongst whom I have lived; and though I am fully conscious that there is much yet to be said which would require far more space than is available in this work, I am thankful that I have been able to put on record some facts concerning the life-histories of people... which may be of some service to those who are interested in the study of these oceanic races.[5]

His text *Melanesians and Polynesians* (1910) was Brown's effort to provide his scientific contemporaries with useful research. The text is descriptive and largely objective, far removed from the laudatory nature of much missionary rhetoric.

On the other hand, Brown writes of his reluctance to adopt any sure stance in ethnographic debate on the evolution of civilisation. He writes:

> I have no pet theories of my own, and whist I may express my own opinions from time to time, I shall certainly not attempt to force or distort facts with the idea of supporting them. There is no man more dangerous in the consideration of scientific subjects than the man with a fad, except perhaps the man who, when facts fail him, or when they are not sufficiently sensational, can always find in his own imagination an unlimited supply for public consumption. We have had specimens of both these in the South Seas, and I certainly do not intend to add to the number.[6]

Having said that, Brown then followed many earlier writers in seeing Fiji as an evolutionary step higher than the rest of Melanesia: a custom at chiefly installations, marking inheritance of the title through the mother and father differently, showed "that in the advance in Fiji from the old Melanesian descent through the mother to that of descent through the father, the change was made gradually".[7] Despite his contact with ethnographers and familiarity with contemporary science, Brown was not convinced of evolutionary theory nor social Darwinism, but then neither did he view the Samoan people as "equal brothers" to the civilised European.

Brown's ambiguous relationship with contemporary science reflects the ambivalence central to his position of power in Samoa. The balance of power between Brown and the Samoans remained largely unchanged during the decades that he had contact with that culture. Homi Bhabha writes that "[t]he construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference—racial and sexual".[8] Here Brown has artic-

ulated the native difference from the colonising race in *Two Warriors*, that is, the subjects' traditional costume, the warrior pose, the 'jungle' surrounds. Bhabha continues: "[i]t [colonial discourse] is a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization."[9] In keeping with this statement, Brown's photograph, with its specimen-like representation of the Samoan men, encourages the perception of this race as separate and different from the colonising race.

Brown's image resembles Burton's image of *A Fijian* and the *Fijian Warrior*, by an unknown photographer, in its clinical representation of a racial type. However, unlike these photographers, in Brown's particular circumstance racial theory is competing with Christian doctrine. Brown represented the colonising culture, but more specifically, Christianity, which held that all men are equal under the skin. This stereotype of Samoan men does not offer a secure point of identification, as Brown has refrained from moralising in the image of the Samoan warriors. Both Burton's image *A Fijian* and the *Fijian Warrior* subscribe to the 'noble savage' stereotype circulating in colonial rhetoric in the nineteenth century. Unlike these images, Brown does not invest *Two Warriors* with any romantic sentiment. There is instead an appeal to the humanity of the Samoan men, their commonality. It might be argued that the most obvious signifier of the 'everyman' quality of these Samoans are the earthy surrounds and the natural light in the portrait in contrast to the studio setting and light and, consequently, the artifice of the Fijian men.

As an apparatus of power, Brown's photograph of the two warriors turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial and cultural difference. Bhabha states that, "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction".[10] In this particular circumstance, the Other, the Samoan warrior, cannot be explicitly and irrefutably represented as a 'degenerate' type. If the Samoan was to be cast as utterly debased and unworthy of salvation there would be no incentive for the Christian public, who funded Brown's mission, to feel sympathy for them. Brown's position as a Christian missionary required him to seek and present the redeeming features of the Samoan people, a requirement placed not only by the Christian ethic of shared humanity, but also by the practical need for ongoing funding to continue his work. Hence the Samoan warriors are not loathsome perpetrators of evil, not fiercely grotesque

and alien from the civilised society of Europe, but respected subjects as worthy of salvation as their European 'cousins'. In other words, they are human, almost the same, but not quite, to the European.

Brown's image *Four Girls in a Garden* (figure 4) was photographed in 1898 and recalls the common trope of the exotic. The image is representative of a number of photographs in the collection of Brown's Samoan portraits which picture Samoan girls in terms of the exoticist response to the Pacific, for instance, *Group with Two Chief Girls*, 1898, *Group of Girls*, 1898, and *Four Girls Reclining*, 1898.[11] Exoticism is about the allure of difference, the appeal of what is strange and generally beyond the scope of aesthetic or moral convention in European society. Whether it is art, landscape, food or people that are taken to be exotic, the interest is often sensually and sexually charged, in some instances the foreign is feminised and regarded voyeuristically. The photograph *Ver Plant and Samoan Woman* (figure 5) by an unknown colonial photographer illustrates the trope of the exotic in nineteenth century colonial rhetoric. The object of fascination is the woman and she is appreciated only so far as she matches or seems to respond to the desire of the traveller. The exoticist attitude fixes upon the esoteric and creates mythological scenes of far away places that bear little relation to lived reality.[12]

Margaret Jolly points out that in many exorcised images of Polynesia the beauty and languidness of the women is associated with the beauty of nature.[13] This association is seen in *Four Girls in a Garden* and *Ver Plant and Samoan Woman*. Jolly refers to the stories and photographs of Tahitian women produced by Beatrice Grimshaw in the late 19th century as sites in which this association is at its strongest. Jolly argues that the association between women and waterfalls or the lushness of local vegetation is a constant trope in Grimshaw's prose. When describing Rarotonga, Grimshaw writes of the "drooping veil of leafage fine as a mermaid's hair" and "that lovely ironwood, a tree with leaves like maiden's locks, and the voice of a mermaid's song in its whispering boughs".[14] Brown's image and *Ver Plant and Samoan Woman* both subscribe to this trope through their explicit associations of Samoan women with the natural 'leafage' and 'foliage' of the islands.

To some extent Brown's images of *Four Girls in a Garden* recalls this image of exoticism circulating in popular literature. The reclining posture of the girls, their lush surrounds, their nakedness, particularly the bare breasts of the reclining girls in the foreground recalls the exoticist perception of the Pacific Islands. Here Brown is representing

FIGURE 4. Reverend George Brown, Four Girls in a Garden, 1898. Gelatin silver photograph (16.5cm x 12cm). George Brown Collection, The Australian Museum, Sydney.

the lure of difference, the appeal of strangeness, what differs from the aesthetic and moral norms of European society. Brown has fixed upon what is picturesque and esoteric. The image of the four girls reclining in the garden is sexually charged and feminised. They are localised in the tropics by exotic foliage. The surroundings of the girls is evocative, there is a dreamy softness of focus to the background that creates a changeless world of tropical languid lifestyles, unrelated to modern Europe.

On the other hand, unlike tourists' and travellers' representations of Polynesian women, Brown's image falls short of overt, explicit reference to sexual freedom. The image contains a sense of innocence absent from the more sexually charged and explicit commercial photographs. The exact signifier of this innocence is difficult to identify. Perhaps it is the use of soft focus in the background, which creates an illusionary atmosphere and lessens the shock of sexual confrontation. Perhaps it is the foliage, which acts as a barrier for the girls, an obstacle between the photographer/viewer and the subject. The contradiction in the image reflects what Bhabha has called "polarities of intentionality".[15] Like *Two Warriors*, this photograph of the four girls is premised on competing desires, specific to Brown's role as a missionary in the islands.

FIGURE 5. Unknown, Ver Plant and Samoan Woman, n.d. Albumen print (20 x 14.5), Pictorial Collection, National Library of Australia.

To signify the difference of the subjects from the Victorian audience, Brown has referenced exotic imagery. To signify the sameness of the subjects to the colonial public, Brown has defended the girls' modesty, protected their availability and fought for their morality. These competing messages in the image reflect Brown's intentions, to create a stereotype of the Samoan replete with cultural difference yet sharing a common humanity with the European. The polarity of Brown's intention result from his unique position as a Christian agent is the islands.

Anne Maxwell points out that the identity produced in colonial photography was based on the projection of cultural and racial essences and adds that colonial photography was in the business of confirming and reproducing the racial theories and stereotypes.[16] George Brown has fixed on the image aggressive male warrior and the 'Polynesian Belle' to describe the identity of the Samoan people. He is confirming what came to be the best known of pre-existing stereotypes. What lies behind these images is not reality, but as John Tagg argues, it is "reference", that is,

> a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representation, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action which function as everyday know-how, 'practical ideology', norms within and through which people live their relation to the world.[17]

In terms of confirming pre-existing stereotypes, Brown's photographs function in a similar way as those produced by John W. Lindt, a nineteenth century Australian photographer. Lindt produced photographs of Aborigines during a time when his contemporaries had seen pictures of tribal Aborigines only in printed books where an engraver or a lithographer had made a secondary interpretation after an artist's sketch. Consequently, Lindt's photographs had 'immediacy' and 'realism'. Shar Jones points out that "Lindt believed that he was documenting Aboriginal life without idealising it, and his 19th century audience agreed with him".[18] The images however are carefully constructed compilations of 'native life' as interpreted through the eyes of a European. In the studio, Lindt was able to control and manipulate an artificial setting for his sitters and, as Jones reveals, "take great care in the selection of representative subjects".[19]

Stereotypical images such as *Two Warriors* and *Four Girls in a Garden* call upon a whole corpus of knowledge, as Tagg describes it, a social knowledge and he calls upon this knowledge through the mechanism of connotation, through an 'economy of signs'. Tagg holds that every

text, including the photographic text, is an activity of production of meaning, which is carried on within a certain regime of sense.[20] Brown's portraits form part of a set of dominant ideological forms used to describe the Pacific. He is creating an illusion of the Pacific, as Tagg would describe it, for the bourgeois society back home. In *Two Warriors* and *Four Girls in a Garden* Brown is subscribing to the popular notions of the exotic Other circulating at the turn of the century in European society. The signs Brown employs to invoke those notions are the warrior pose and costume of the men and indeed their very blackness, and the reclining pose of the girls, their costume, their bare breasts. These signifiers in the photographs form part of a 'universalised mode of representation' in which signs like those employed by Brown form part of what Tagg has termed a 'regime of sense'.[21]

In *Two Warriors* and *Four Girls in a Garden*, the harsh criticism of other European observers is abandoned. This is a significant absence considering the racial theories that abounded at the time. During this period, Lord Milner was arguing that the white man must rule because he is elevated by many, many steps above the black man; steps which it will take the latter centuries to climb, and which it is quite possible that the vast bulk of the black population may never be able to climb at all.[22]

Nicholas Thomas distinguishes between the differing perspectives of different colonisers in the civilising process.[23] Thomas suggests that attitudes towards race were largely affected by the coloniser's background and purpose in the Pacific. Missionaries had their own agendas and the ambivalence of Brown's photography arises from his particular set of circumstances as a missionary in Samoa.

Brown's lack of adjudication is a manifestation of his belief, as a Christian leader, in the 'one blood' of all men. At the heart of the debate about human origins, as far as ethnologists and their missionary colleagues were concerned, lay the question of human unity. The story of Noah's sons gave shape to some missionary descriptions of differences between eastern and western Pacific Islanders and legitimised their peoples as equal before God. The crucial scriptural reference was Acts 17; 26 where Paul told the Athenians that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth". Details about racial characteristics were secondary to God's creation of a single pair of humans from whom all others descended, and from whom all inherited both the fall from grace and the need for salvation. The fundamental premise of missionaries' efforts was an ethic of potential human equality in Christendom.

Thus it might be argued that George Brown's struggle to create a stereotype of the Samoan people has at its base both a belief in 'one blood' and realisation of and desire to convey that 'otherness'. Homi Bhabha argues that the stereotype requires for its signification a repetition of difference from the norm. To take this idea further, Bhabha argues that the stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really in discourse be proved. In Brown's images of the two warriors and the four girls in a garden there is a struggle to reconcile the Samoan's native difference, something which is anxiously repeated, with what is already known, their shared humanity with the European.

In its appeal to common humanity, Brown's stereotype facilitates the teaching of Christianity to native people. If the Samoans were to be represented as debased perpetrators of evil, unworthy of salvation, there was no reason for the European audience, who funded Christian missions, to feel sympathy for them. Thus, that very aspect of the stereotype, which prevents it from becoming a cultural identity, the appeal to the humanity of the Samoan, facilitates the projection of Christian values onto the society. It is through denying colonial sovereignty, denying the superiority of the colonial race, which, in this particular set of circumstances, permits colonial intervention and the exercise of power. Brown's stereotype is then an 'impossible' object. As Bhabha succinctly puts it, "the recognition and disavowal of difference is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction". In other words, Brown was attempting to construct an image of difference based in pure origin, undifferentiated humanity. In this sense the Samoan stereotype meets the demands of Brown's discourse. The subverting 'split' between sameness and difference is recoupable within a strategy of missionary control. The 'difference' of the native subject can be completely and continuously recouped by appeal to their commonality.

Ambivalence is a function of style as well as subject matter. Returning to Lindt's studio photographs, the stylistic qualities of the images reflect Lindt's polarities of intention, that is, to create an image of an Aborigine similar to but different from the European. In the studio, Lindt was able to control the light and composition of his photographs very successfully. The studio lighting of the Aboriginal subjects relates to the classic European image, creating the artificial glow of a

civilised environment. Compared to the harsh heightened light of the Australian landscape, this setting is 'accessible' to a European observer. On the other hand the lighting of the image serves to accentuate the colour and texture of the Aborigines' skin, enhancing their primary difference from the white audience.

Likewise the formal characteristics of Brown's photography oscillate between sameness and difference from the intended audience. There is no record of Brown's approach to his photography, whether he intentionally modelled himself on a particular photographer or school of photography. In both *Two Warriors* and *Four Girls in a Garden*, the figures dominate the setting, they are accessible to the viewer. Both scenes are composed into aesthetically pleasing images, symmetrical, balanced and appealing to the European sense of order. The subjects are pictured outdoors, as are the vast bulk of Brown's photographs, which means that Brown could not manipulate the light, but the settings, the rugged landscape for the warriors, the lush 'garden' for the girls, have obviously been carefully selected. In both images, the subjects are in closely directed focus, making them accessible to the viewer; the aspect is striking in the image of the girls where they contrast with the soft focus of the background. While the focus on the subjects and the shallow depth of field allows the viewer access, at the same time it creates a distance between the viewer and the subject. That is to say, while the European viewer is invited into the image, the subjects are presented in a somewhat isolated, specimen type way like those of ethnographic photographs. Likewise, while the compositions of the images relate to European aesthetics, the natural light poses difference, it is rudimentary and primitive. These stylistic qualities heighten the presence of sameness and difference between the native subjects and the European viewer.

Ambivalence is central to Brown's image of the Samoan subject. It is a result of Brown's struggle to reconcile scientific theories of race and evolution with the fundamental Christian tenant of universal humanity. Consequently Brown's Samoan portraits resist singular interpretation. Recognition of Brown's ambivalence in his approach to the civilising process is the necessary basis for interpretations of his photography.

NOTES

1 George Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians: Their life histories described and compared* (New York, Benjamin Blom Inc., 1910), p.165.

2 Catalogue numbers v.6058, v.6123, v.6155, and v.6165 respectively in the Australian Museum collection.

3 Virginia-Lee Webb, "Missionary Photographers in the Pacific Islands: Divine Light", *History of Photography*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1997), pp. 12-22

4 Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians*, p. 426.

5 Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians*, p. 437.

6 Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians*, p. 6.

7 Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians*, p. 40.

8 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 67.

9 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 67.

10 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 70.

11 Catalogue numbers v.6089, v.6093, and v.6094 respectively in the Australian Museum collection.

13 A. Stephen (ed.), *Pirating the Pacific: Images of Travel, Trade and Tourism* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 1993).

14 Margaret Jolly and L Mandersohn (eds), *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

15 Cited in Jolly, *Sites of Desire*, p.103.

16 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 72.

17 Maxwell, A., *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of Native People and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

18 Tagg, J., *The Burden of Representation* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 100.

19 Shar Jones, *Lindt, Master Photographer* (Victoria: Published by C O'Neil Ross on Behalf of the Library Council of Victoria, 1985), p. 27.

20 Jones, Lindt, p. 27.

21 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, p. 98.

22 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, p.101.

23 Cited in C. Headlam (ed.), *The Milner Papers, South Africa 1899–1905* (London: Cassell, 1933), p.467.

24 N. Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Princeton University Press, 1994).

25 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.81.