Chapter 10

Church and Cultural Foundations of the Polynesian Cultural Center

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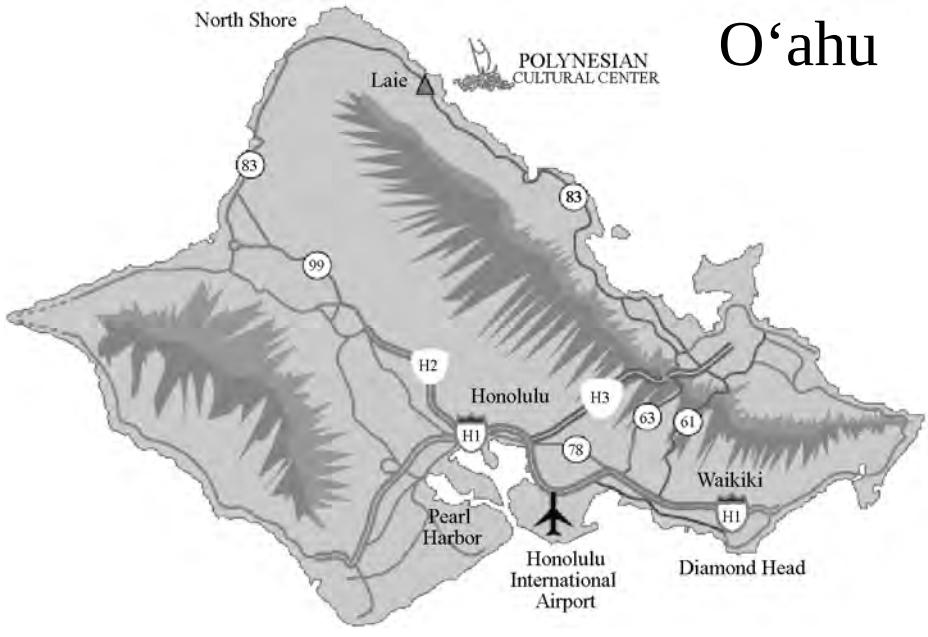
Some twenty-one years ago, a small ritual was conducted early one morning in the Samoan village of the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC). An elderly employee had completed her weaving of an *ie toga* (fine mat). The ivory-colored mat, soft, light, and woven as finely as linen, was carefully unfolded and hung on a *sennit* (plaited coconut fiber) line in the *fale* (house). A prayer of thanksgiving was offered, and the president of the PCC gave a short speech commending the woman and her beautiful work. A small *umu* (oven) was uncovered, and as we sat and ate *ulu* (breadfruit) and *palusami* (a traditional Samoan dish) together, the early morning sunlight glowed golden through its weave as the mat floated lightly on a small breeze. It was a magic hour woven of art, beauty, harmony, and intelligence. It was a cultural achievement crafted over many months by both the hands and heart of an elderly woman—complemented by gracious acknowledgement in the simple Samoan ritual of appreciation for her work. It was *Fa'a Sāmoa*—the Samoan way.

The Church and Polynesian Cultures

It is not possible to discuss the cultural foundations of the PCC without linking them to the arrival of the restored gospel in the Pacific. It was May 11, 1843, when the Prophet Joseph Smith called missionaries to the South Pacific. They reached French Polynesia in 1844, Hawai'i in 1846, New Zealand in 1854, Sāmoa in 1863, Tonga in 1891, Fiji in 1954, and Rapa Nui in 1980. It took 136 years for the gospel to reach all of the cultures currently represented in the PCC, but the gospel began its journey into Polynesia just fourteen years after the Church was organized.

It was Elder Matthew Cowley who, in the early 1950s, first promoted the idea of traditional Polynesian houses, even a village, in Lā'ie. He thought that the unique carved meeting house of the Maori and the thatched houses of the Samoans and Tongans could provide short-term housing for Polynesian Saints coming to the



Hawai‘i Temple, and also provide a cultural village site where students from the Church College of Hawai‘i could work to help pay for their education. His long experience among the Maori people in New Zealand provided him the pattern of traditional dance performances unique to Polynesia as well as the rich and complex traditions of hosting and entertaining visitors. His suggestions resonated with local Hawaiian Church leaders concerned with building a sound financial foundation to the school while supporting Pacific students who come from islands without opportunities for higher education. In this way, the founding vision and idea of the Polynesian Cultural Center clearly began with Elder Cowley.[1]

Cultural Roots in Polynesia

The Church College of Hawai‘i, now Brigham Young University–Hawai‘i, was opened September 26, 1955, and the Polynesian Cultural Center opened on October 12, 1963. For four decades now the PCC has proven the authenticity of its cultural activities by hosting many Pacific Island leaders in the correct ceremonial ways. Some of the leaders who have honored both the Church and the PCC by making official visits include Her Majesty Te Atairangikaahu, queen of New Zealand; Sir James Henare, Maori scholar and government leader; Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, prime minister of Fiji; Their Majesties Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV and Halaevalu Mata‘aho, king and queen of the Kingdom of Tonga; and His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II, head of state of Western Sāmoa.

Of paramount importance during these official visits is the ability of the PCC’s employees to host these leaders in appropriate traditional ways. Great attention is always paid to every step of the ceremonies surrounding these visits. On such occasions the protocol of speech-making, including the appropriate metaphorical references to historical events and poetic sayings, must be, and is, conducted with dignity and integrity in the center’s various *marae* (village commons). In this way such visits validate the center’s mission to “preserve and portray” the cultures it represents and also authenticate its representation of Polynesia at the highest level of traditional knowledge and authority.

Cultural *Taonga* in the PCC

Several categories of cultural *taonga*, or treasures, exist in the PCC. These include material cultural icons such as houses, canoes, fine mats, implements, *tiki* (carvings), and other important items. A second group includes traditional arts and intellectual property, such as genealogies, histories, myths and legends, traditional knowledge, and tribal lore that belong to specific island groups. A third category is made up of the performing arts—dance, song, poetry, and chants—as well as two- and three-dimensional visual arts.

The fourth group of treasures in the PCC is made up of the Polynesian full-time employees themselves. These include the village *kaumatua* (cultural elders) as "living treasures," and six cultural experts who serve on the BYU–Hawai'i Pacific Institute Board of Fellows: Cy Bridges, Inoke Suguturaga, John Muaina, Logo Apelu, Mele Ongoongotau, and Raymond Mariteragi. President Eric Shumway invited these PCC employees and their BYU–Hawai'i colleagues who had Pacific experience to join in scholarly and cultural pursuit to the benefit of both institutions. And the final and most important group of cultural treasures is the PCC's student employees—the future owners of both traditional knowledge and cultural responsibility.

The Fijian *Camakau*

To return to the first group, the cultural icons, an excellent example is "The Axe Chest of the Craftsmen of the Land of Kabara." On March 24, 1986, the prime minister of Fiji and paramount chief of the Lau Islands, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, formally presented a forty-two-foot, traditionally crafted *camakau* (sailing canoe) to the center. In his speech on the occasion, the prime minister noted:

> I feel a great deal of pride as I stand before you today, because this *camakau* is a product of living tradition. . . . Today on most islands, sailing canoes and the art of canoe making exist only in memory. In 1986, the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawai'i wanted to acquire and preserve an authentic Polynesian sailing canoe. The first problem was to find a place where aluminum hulls and outboard motors had not already put an end to the arts of boat making that had been mastered and passed down over many generations. A careful search revealed that on the tiny

Fig. 1. Hula Kahiko during the Canoe Pageant at the Polynesian Cultural Center
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i

Fig. 2. Maori war canoe located in the Polynesian Cultural Center's Maori village
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i

> island of Kabara there lived a people still able to make one of the finest types of sailing canoes ever created. . . . The one you see [here] may be the last of its kind ever constructed, certainly, one of the last.[2]

Now that the work was finished, he said, "craftsmen will return to their garden plots and the villagers to their normal routines, but the making of the canoe has done more than provide income. It has united the villagers in enterprise, in exercise of ancient crafts, and in ceremony in a way reminiscent of earlier times. The canoe and the canoe making art are important links between ancient and modern Polynesia." For these and other reasons, he said, the *matai* (chiefs) of Kabara gave the camakau the title *Kato ni Matau ni Matai Vanua Kabara*, which means "The Axe Chest of the Craftsmen of the Land of Kabara."[3]

The prime minister was not obligated to personally present the *camakau* to the Polynesian Cultural Center. As prime minister he had many other official duties, but, in significant traditional ways and for important cultural reasons, what he did was *Vaka Viti*, the Fijian way. And in that way, his powerful *mana* (spirit, influence) as both political and cultural leader of his nation permeates the *camakau* along with the *mana* inherent in the talent and work of the village people who constructed it. "The Axe Chest of the Craftsmen of the Land of Kabara" is a cultural treasure the center is privileged to preserve and protect for generations to come.

The Maori Meeting House

Another example from the same group of *taonga* is *Te Arohanui o te Iwi Maori* (The Great Love of the Maori People)—a fully carved and traditionally decorated *wharenui* (large meeting house). The leading carver of this beautiful house was Hone Te Kauru, known as "John" Taiapa. He began carving as a young man in 1930. Over the next forty-nine years, he produced fine carvings for more than forty-four meeting houses and canoes located all over New Zealand.[4] It was said of John that while others drew patterns on the wood and then carved, John could look at a *totara* log and see in it the shape and personality of the ancestor he was carving. Except to aid his students in later life, he used no patterns, designs, or drawings. The PCC *wharenui* is imbued with the *mana* of Hone Taiapa's genius and of all those volunteer labor missionaries, volunteer community members, students, faculty, and friends of the Church, whose willing hands and hearts

Fig. 3. Maori warriors perform the welcome ceremony in front of the PCC Maori village *wharenui*. *Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i*

helped complete this treasured house. A footnote to his story is that although John's wife, Mary, was a member of the Church, John was not. He died in 1979.

The carvings in the house are representative of famous historical chiefs and heroes of New Zealand's Maori tribes. Because the PCC house is pan-tribal in its history, every Maori has a right to stand and speak within it. Every time I enter the beautiful *wharenui*, I am impressed with the realization that while up to a million tourists pass through it every year, they usually have no real understanding as to whose presence they are in. Powerful chiefs surround them and, from the vantage point of history and great *mana*, gaze upon them from all four walls. Thus, hosts and visitors exchange gazes in the metaphorical body of *Te Arohanui o te Iwi Maori*. From a Maori point of view, it is as if sacred spaces, sites, and natural places have the ability to stand in both worlds—to exist in a *noa* (common) state while surrounded by the unknowing, nonbelonging—but also signifies sacrosanctity in the presence of the knowing, belonging *tangata whenua* (people of the place) and other Maori.

Many tourists mistakenly believe that the Maori worship these carved genealogical icons of the tribes and culture. The respect Maori afford these *taonga* is rooted in reverence for those people, now dead, who are the ancestors of all Maori. Thus, in every *wharenui* I have ever entered, it is the spiritual presence of these ancestors of the *tangata whenua* who, having lived, still live and thus confirm Maori identity. *Te Arohanui o te Iwi Maori* is imbued with the *mana* both of its craftsmen and of the chiefs and heroes of Aotearoa who reside permanently within it. "The Love of the Maori People" is a cultural treasure, and the center is privileged in its responsibility to preserve and protect it for the generations to come. It is *Tikanga Maori*—the Maori way—to do so.

Queen Sālote's Summer House

The centerpiece of the Tongan village is a beautiful *Fale Fakatu'i*, a replica of Her Majesty Queen Sālote's summer house, the original of which still stands today in Kauvai, Tongatapu. It was Queen Sālote herself who arranged for two artisans to travel to the PCC under her royal patronage to carefully construct this house in the traditional Tongan way. Furthermore, the beauty of this house is made even more significant since it is endowed with the *mana* of its queen. Although it is a smaller-scale replica of the original,

Fig. 4. Easter Islands display at the Polynesian Cultural Center
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i

it is still representative of a royal residence, and the fact that the queen chose to personally arrange for its construction further emphasizes its importance as a cultural treasure. This house represents Tonga, its culture and nationhood, and signifies and enhances the prestige of its beloved queen. It is a royal house that was given to the PCC by the ruling monarch of Polynesia's only kingdom, and the *mana* of the queen herself is replicated in the gift she endowed upon the center. When Queen Sālote passed away in 1965, just two years after the PCC opened, the *mana* of her beautiful gift increased many times over; that is *Faka-Tonga*, the Tongan way.

Other Cultural *Taonga* in the PCC

The *Bure Kalou* (house of God) rises tall above the Fijian village just as such structures dominated the religious life and aspirations of the people anciently. The Chief's house in the Samoan village with its floor of carefully selected and sized river rocks and *pou* (posts of the chiefs) marks both the perimeter of the house and the oral traditions of leadership. And the Maori *waka taua* (war canoes) and the beautiful *koa* canoes of the Hawaiian village are prized for the history imbued in their forms as well as for the beauty of their craftsmanship.

The PCC's most recent acquisition is a remarkable gift of eight outstanding *moai* (stone monuments) from the people of Rapa Nui (Easter Island). These figures, created on site by experienced carvers from Rapa Nui, are treasured artifacts of significant cultural importance. I believe I experience the same emotional response as all Pacific people do when I approach these ancient guardians of Rapa Nui history and culture. It is a magnificent gift to have them in our midst, standing tall and stately, their ancient eyes seeing both the past and future, and their mystery encompassing all of us, like the mystery of discerning the meaning of our birth and existence in the largest ocean on the earth.

Gifts of this magnitude of cultural value are priceless. Even in those cases where money was paid for them, the monetary price was always far less than the cultural worth of the object because of the talent and tribal memory that created it and imbued it with its traditional meaning and *mana*. In other words such gifts represent much more than the eye can see and therefore must be cared for with dignity and respect—not because they are an investment in the global economic sense, but because they bring with them simple generosity, the heart and soul of a people.

Culture in the Details

In the PCC we learn to appreciate each other's culture by paying attention to the unobtrusive but traditional elements of our material treasures—such as the small, pure, white cowrie shells that adorn the Fijian chief's *bure* (house); the traditionally shaped plugs of *koa* that patch the Hawaiian canoes; the *paua* (blue shells) pieces in the eyes of the carvings in the Maori

Fig. 5. Hula performance at a Polynesian Cultural Center lūʻau
Courtesy of BYU–Hawaiʻi

wharenui, which give life to the ancestors; or the same life-giving eyes that were recently placed carefully and with great respect in the faces of the Rapa Nui *moai*.

Her Majesty Queen Halaevalu Mata'aho of Tonga explained the difference between handicrafts, such as "some of our baskets, beads and carvings, which are mainly utilitarian or decorative but which possess no distinct cultural roles," and cultural property, such as "traditional goods that have distinct cultural significance and play distinct cultural roles, and are not replaceable." The latter are at the heart of cultural heritage.[5] The richness of Polynesia's material culture is evident in the beauty of even everyday items such as fishhooks, combs, bowls, baskets, body ornaments, nose flutes, drums, and musical instruments. Virtually every tool is constructed with an artistic eye toward balance and to cultural expectations of beauty and functionality.

Another Example of Culture in the Details

There are details we may easily miss unless we know them and look for them. For instance, the dancer giving himself or herself to the spirit of the performance—such as the experience articulated by BYU–Hawai'i professor 'Inoke Funaki about dancing before His Majesty Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, king of Tonga, on an occasion of the king's visit to Lā'ie. Professor Funaki was one of hundreds of local Tongans who gathered on the entrance lawn of campus to perform for the king that day. He described the emotional and spiritual experience of dancing the *lakalaka* before his king as feeling himself "enter an altered state of consciousness," deeply involved with his Tongan identity.[6] Her Royal Highness Princess Pilolevu agrees with Professor Funaki. Describing the need for *loto* in the spirit of traditional Tongan dance, she explained: "It's how people feel when they are performing and singing. . . . We must have their *loto*. We must own their spirit for the day so that the *lakalaka* can be performed well." She continued: "I think *loto* is a difficult Tongan word to translate into English because it is emotion and it's not quite 'show.'" BYU–Hawai'i president Eric B. Shumway, who was interviewing her on this occasion, translated the term as "inside, heart, center, core, seat of affections," all of which describe a state of being, of feeling, more profound than those of everyday activities—and rooted deep within an individual's cultural identity.[7]

PCC as Guardian of Cultural Treasures

There is a very real difference between the Western and Polynesian concepts of ownership and responsibility. From the Western point of view, a building such as the Maori carved house is a magnificent investment and as such has monetary value attached. It is cleaned and maintained with the view in mind that any deterioration will reduce the value of the investment. From a Polynesian point of view, treasures such as this *wharenui* are valuable beyond money because they are the receptacles of cultural knowledge, history, art, and identity. They function intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally beyond their physicality. Polynesian members of the Church gave of themselves freely to build the PCC—not only in their volunteer labor as they learned the skills of bricklaying and carpentry and plumbing on the job, but also in sharing their cultural knowledge, unveiling their talents in the traditional arts, and bringing their ancestral names to reside in the structures they built.

The role of the PCC in relation to such cultural treasures within its extended *marae* is one of guardianship. The PCC is the protector, or, to use the term in its mission statement, the preserver, of these treasures. There is a marvelous connection here because as the PCC protects such *taonga*, it is caring for them and safeguarding them for future generations of Polynesian youth who will come to Lā'ie for their education at BYU–Hawai'i, and their cultural education and work experience at the PCC. These future children

Fig. 6. Cultural instruction at the PCC
Courtesy of Mark A. Philbrick

of Polynesia are an integral part of the millions of visitors President McKay envisioned that would come "to learn what the significance of this place is."[8] These students, the greatest *taonga* of their homelands, come to the PCC to be nurtured in their cultural heritage.

The Future of Culture in the PCC

In the aftermath of the center's fortieth anniversary in October 2003, Brigham Young University–Hawai'i and the Polynesian Cultural Center have developed the concept of a new, spacious Polynesian Voyaging Village to be located in the PCC and to include a beautiful facility to house both the Iosepa voyaging canoe and the Fijian *camakau*. In addition, the village will include a ceremonial *marae*, a learning amphitheater for students and visitors, amenities for maintenance and student training, and will allow the Iosepa voyaging canoe to be easily transported to the ocean for sailing.

This exciting concept is founded on some facts defining the role of the Iosepa in BYU–Hawai'i's Jonathan Nāpela Center for Hawaiian Language and Cultural Studies; namely, that Iosepa is "a grand symbol for the whole University representing the intellectual and spiritual voyages our students must make as they navigate their way through the world; that Iosepa provides an important connection both with the horizons of our past and the horizons of our future as a university, as a cultural center, and as a covenant people; that Iosepa is imbued with a special *mana* that affects spiritually all people who come into contact with it; and that there is an unmistakable spiritual dimension to its being, its craftsmanship, its beauty, and its utility as a voyaging canoe."[9]

The plan brings the Polynesian Cultural Center and BYU–Hawai'i closer together in a joint

project to preserve and portray the best of Polynesian culture. It fits perfectly within the mission of both institutions. It gives the PCC even greater cultural credibility, and it provides a wonderful showcase for the university's Hawaiian Studies Program.

I am gratified by the respectful and dignified way in which our cultural treasures are being preserved and portrayed in fulfillment of the center's mission. There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that Elder Cowley envisioned the creation of the PCC and its "little Maori house and village" and the "little Tongan village" and the villages of "the Tahitians and Samoans . . . all these islanders of the sea!" And I believe it is all a part of President McKay's vision in which he saw "millions of people" coming to Lāʻie, "seeking to know what this town and its significance are."[10]

In his address in the Sunday session of general conference, April 6, 1952, Elder Cowley spoke to his beloved Pacific peoples:

> To you in the isles of the sea, I say unto you, were it not for you, I would not be standing here this day. To you in New Zealand, and when I speak to you I speak to all those who dwell on those beautiful isles, were it not for you, implanting within my heart as a seventeen-year-old boy your simple faith, your knowledge of God, your demonstration that the veil between God and man can be very, very thin, I wouldn't be standing here today at the hub of Zion, speaking to you way down under, in this capacity. This is not my calling alone, you good Maori people; this is yours.
>
> You in the Hawaiian Islands who have had come to your shores missionaries, one only in his sixteenth year, who later became the leader of this Church, a noble prophet, seer, and revelator: I tell you that on that island of Maui where he and President George Q. Cannon had their great theophanies and experiences, there is a spirit and an atmosphere, which I have felt nowhere else in all the world.
>
> To you in Tahiti, who were the first in the isles of the sea to receive the gospel in this dispensation, my heart goes out. For more than a hundred years you have been listening to this message of regeneration. You have contributed of your tithes and your widow's mite, and not one of you has yet come to a temple of God. You are worthy. God will reward you for your faithfulness and devotion. His principles are eternal, and in his kingdom and his presence, that which you have been denied in this life will be added unto you. Great has been your contribution to the building up of this Church.[11]

The Polynesian Cultural Center's cultural authenticity and prophetic destiny is exemplified in the richness and vitality of its foundation in Polynesian tradition and the restored gospel of Christ. In our personal journeys as Latter-day Saint Polynesians, we discover the power, grace, dignity, and spirituality of our true identities in how we are known to ourselves, others, and the Lord. To be a part of this time and place in this corner of our great ocean home is to be included in the prophecies concerning Lāʻie and its entities. To be privileged to contribute our *taonga*, talents, and time to further fulfillment of the prophetic destiny of our island community is a gift even greater than all the treasures of the earth.

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Notes

1. See Edward LaVaun Clissold, interview by Baden Pere, April 8, 1982, typescript, 7, BYU–Hawaiʻi Archives and Special Collections.

2. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, speech at the Polynesian Cultural Center, March 24, 1986, Pacific Institute file.

3. Mara, speech, Pacific Institute file.

4. In 1960 Taiapa was appointed an MBE, Member of the Order of the British Empire, for his services to Maori Art. Shortly after that, between 1962–63, he worked on these carvings in the Polynesian Cultural Center's meeting house and was present at the opening of the center. Then in 1966 he was appointed the first master carver of the Maori Arts Institute at Whakarewarewa, New Zealand.

5. Queen Halaevalu Mata'aho, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 1992, 269.

6. 'Inoke Funaki, interview, "Kava Kuo Heka" videotape, Kingdom of Tonga, 1999.

7. Princess Sālote Mafile'o Pilolevu Tuita, interview, BYU–Hawai'i, 1999.

8. David O. McKay, dedicatory service, Church College of Hawai'i groundbreaking, February 12, 1955, Law/Wooton Papers, BYU–Hawai'i Archives and Special Collections.

9. Polynesian Cultural Center Voyaging Village proposal.

10. David O. McKay, dedicatory service.

11. Matthew Cowley, *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 31.