The ‘unchanged’ place: Lifescapes of Cook Island historic churches

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Abstract

The coral stone churches of the Cook Islands have entangled indigenous and foreign beliefs, social practice and place-making since their instigation in the mid-19th century. This paper argues that despite sometimes major physical modifications, these church places may be perceived by local people as essentially ‘unchanged’, enduring as the living work of ancestors.

Based on research undertaken on Rarotonga in 2014, the paper explores key drivers of change that have shaped the physical fabric of the island’s five historical churches. It examines their temporal and intangible aspects, finding that it is these qualities that hold most heritage significance to associated people. However, they are also intimately linked with physical form and place, with both essential to, and reliant on, the other.

What does conservation look like in this context, where there is no expert, when decisions are centred on inlaying meaning through community process, rather than end product? It is suggested that a cultural landscape perspective may usefully inform conservation thinking, with potential to blur boundaries between transitory and permanent, present realities and ancestral pasts, space and time. It is through these very processes of (re)contestation and (re)contextualisation that churches are sustained in a Pacific milieu.

Introduction

Rarotonga’s first churches were constructed in the early 1800s through the work of the London Missionary Society (LMS), who extended into the Cook Islands from Tahiti (Breward 2001: 26-31; Gunson 1978: 219, 222). Six Christian villages were progressively established on Rarotonga with early wooden churches superseded by coral stone structures from the 1840s (Henry 2002: 93-104).

These built forms were not merely physical manifestations of foreign encroachment into the islands. They entangled indigenous and foreign beliefs and architecture in a transformation and transposition of existing cultural practices formerly based in marae (a dedicated area of ground, delineated by stones, used in the pre-Christian era for religious purposes and now for title investiture ceremonies and other rituals). Society was reshaped, with church places, including church, graveyard, school and ‘orometua (pastoral) residence, becoming the ‘new marae’. Now under the Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC, formerly LMS congregations), this context still profoundly affects the ways in which church places are understood, culturally valued and conserved.
This paper uses the Matavera church as a case study to explore the ways in which church places have been altered. While physical fabric has been extensively modified over time, cyclical patterns of use endure such that church members can consider the place ‘unchanged’. However, church membership is changing and diminishing. This gives rise to questions of custodianship: to whom are these historic churches significant, and who should have a say in their management? Collaborative approaches grounded in cultural landscape perspectives are explored as a way to sustain churches’ cultural meaning in a changing milieu.

Research approach

The findings of this paper are drawn from qualitative research centred on fieldwork on Rarotonga in August 2014, which sought to investigate the cultural heritage significance of the island’s five historical Cook Islands Christian Churches (CICCs). The investigation was framed by New Zealand Māori and Pasifika scholarship that aims to decolonise research approaches by grounding inquiries in reciprocity and respect, acknowledging knowledge ownership and advancing the cultural aspirations of participants (see for example Clery 2014; Fairbairn-Dunlop and Coxon 2014; Ferris-Leary 2013; Smith 2012; Kana and Tamatea 2003; Vaioleti 2003; Hereniko 2000).

Research included physical investigation of Rarotonga’s historical church places, focusing on the Matavera church in the Takitumu vaka (literally meaning canoe, ‘vaka’ describes the three geo-political tribal districts of Rarotonga) as a case study, and twenty semi-structured interviews with local people, including Church members and non-members. These methods enabled research to be directly shaped by participants and places themselves (Charmaz 2006: 2-10). Findings therefore centre on the churches as cultural landscapes; living places of relationship and action, places that are grounded both in contemporary Rarotongan reality and in an indelible ancestral past.

Figure 1: Map of Rarotonga showing vaka and tapere land divisions and the location of CICC churches. The Matavera case study is marked (Wikipedia 2008; overlay by the author).
Historical context

Rarotonga’s first churches were established under the auspices of the London Missionary Society (LMS), an evangelical, Congregationalist-based organisation that had been founded in 1795. Their evangelistic efforts were initially met with disdain in their first mission field of Tahiti. However, this changed as a prominent chief, Pomare II, began to use Christianity as a way of advancing his power. Having learnt the importance of working within existing tribal structures, the LMS was able to effect rapid change in the Cook Islands through the pioneering work of Tahitian and Cook Islands converts. Christianity was swiftly adopted through the island group, arriving in Rarotonga in 1823 (Breward 2001: 26-31; Gunson 1978: 18, 219, 222).

The Matavera church is a case study of Rarotonga’s societal reshaping in the 19th century. Traditionally known as Rangiatea, Matavera is located in the northern end of the Takitumu vaka, and its church was the last to be constructed in that district. The Ngatangiia church to the south had been the centre of Christian activity in Takitumu since the 1820s, and had initially been strongly opposed by the mata’iapo (sub-tribe leaders) of the Matavera and Titikaveka tapere (sub-districts). However, on conversion, political rivalry led these leaders to seek a church on their own land. The Titikaveka church was established in the mid-1830s, encouraging the mata’iapo of Matavera to also demand their independence. This was reluctantly endorsed by the LMS in 1849 to assuage escalating tensions between Ngatangiia and Matavera groups (Campbell 2002: 234; Gray 1975: 402-408).

The Matavera church therefore emerged as a tangible reassertion of the mana (authority; prestige) of Matavera’s mata’iapo within their land. Originally constructed in plastered timber and sited on the Ara Metua (‘ancient path’) road, the church and village were relocated to the Christian-established Ara Tapu (‘sacred path’) coastal road in the late 1850s. It was here that the still-extant stone church was completed in 1864. Instigated, designed and directed by the Matavera ekalesia (a group of people comprising the Church organisation, directly connected to the church’s land through ancestral land ownership links) itself with little intervention by outside parties (Krause March 15 1862; Krause January 1864), the resulting building had an unusual and particularly monumental architectural form. Built in coral rubble stone mortared with coral lime, the walls were up to three metres thick at base and set out as a series of buttressed tiers, with a double-line fenestration arrangement and an intricately-constructed timber roof structure.

Figure 2: The Matavera church in 1904. The building had been completed in 1864 (Wragge 1906: 131; image credited to G. R. Crummer).
The mass and detailing of the building served more purposes than simply being a hurricane-resilient structure.\(^1\) It was a visual statement of the mana and independence of its mata’iapō, creating an enduring Christian monument and embedding the claim of its people to their ancestral land. Regardless of modifications over time, this grounding continues to define CICC church places across the group by intrinsically linking churches to land and to ancestral continuity.

**Shifting permanence**

As with Rarotonga’s other CICC church sites, the Matavera church has been significantly altered since the 1860s. Its massive walls remain but have been substantially lowered, causing the loss of a gallery and upper windows (compare Figure 2 and Figure 3). Its interior has been heavily altered and various extensions have been made to the exterior. Ancillary buildings including the Sunday school and ‘orometua residence have been demolished and built anew. The site has been transformed with graves grassed over, trees cut down and boundary walls altered.

These works are reasonably consistent with patterns of change to CICC churches across the Cook Islands, as generations of users have maintained, repaired, altered, adapted and demolished built fabric to accommodate shifting patterns of perceived need. This analysis discusses physical changes that have been undertaken on the Matavera CICC since its initial construction, under three identified themes: pragmatism, beautification, and modernisation.

**Pragmatism**

Pragmatism and an improvisatory approach to church modifications and maintenance was repeatedly emphasised in field research discussions. With some exceptions, pragmatism, characterised by minimal design or planning, expedient workmanship, easily-accessible resources and simplicity of ongoing maintenance, was seen as the central framework for decision-making. This is consistent with broader analyses of Polynesian architecture being built by ‘feel’, where construction work is reliant on intensive participation of community members rather than working drawings (Müller 2011; ‘Ilaiu 2007: 20; McKay and Walmsley 2005: 64); where architectural outcomes are lifescapes that includes lived experiences and collective events as much as built forms.

Expedient solutions have sometimes been contentious. In the case of the Matavera church, it was noted by interviewees that mata’iapō opposed the decision by Church leaders to demolish the top two metres of the church’s walls in c.1944 following hurricane damage, calling instead for repair. Controversies like this highlight relational complexities in the evolved position of the Church in

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*Figure 3: The Matavera church in 2014 (photo by the author, 2014).*
Rarotongan society. As the new marae, churches are not only indigenised but indigenous, their fabric a tangible and inviolable inheritance from ancestors. Simultaneously, practical considerations of on-going use take precedence over debatably ‘deeper’ considerations of heritage value and traditional authority, with church places emerging as living places of occupation and action. It is notable that this position also reflects the Church’s Congregationalist roots, where buildings were deliberately modest and practical (Gunson 1974: 185; Fiddes 1961: 42-48, 61, 62). The duality of these aspects has enabled church architecture to continue to recontextualise its foreign origin, and reform traditional practices in on-going expressions of pragmatic continuity.

**Beautification**

‘Beautification’ was a term commonly applied in field research conversations regarding church place modifications, particularly to building surrounds. This was a key reason given for a major intervention in 1979, which involved covering the graves of the Matavera church’s southern churchyard with a raised lawn.

Beautification objectives resonate with long-standing Western visions of the Pacific as islands of paradise, the garden of Eden (Austin 2001: 15), and were woven into the early LMS emphasis on the Church as a civilising, as well as redemptive, force (Thomas 1991: 152; Gunson 1978: 36). Missionaries stationed in Rarotonga reported regularly on the state of construction and landscaping as evidence of a community’s level of sincerity regarding Christian conversion (Buzacott 1836; Williams 1830). As well as highlighting the existence of these manifestations, there was a strong emphasis on their picturesque qualities, as Europeans far from their birthplace sought to form idealised recreations of home (Brook 2003).

While European nostalgia was one influence of church appearance, culturally-defined notions of beautification were deeply established in pre-Christian Cook Islands. Indigenous precedents of landscape design would have been relatively straightforward for local people to translate into Christian spaces due to material parallels in perceptions of beauty and spatial hierarchy, meaning that multiple strands of foreign and indigenous purpose conceived the aesthetic of church places and their surrounding villages. These meanings have been re-woven in each successive generation of Cook Islanders such that beauty continues to equate to smooth, clean and tidy – a white building against a green lawn.

*Figure 4: Matavera church’s southern lawn. It is interesting to note that seven headstones were moved to the edge of the central path and a row of bushes planted when the graves were grassed over. This creates a visual appearance that seems deliberately reminiscent both of tribal leaders’ seating stones in marae and box-hedged English gardens (photo by the author, 2014).*
Modernisation

The need for ‘modernisation’ was a third key driver of change noted in field research. This is evident in the Matavera church’s regularly whitewashed exterior and heavily modified interior, which now features a white-tiled floor, white aluminium joinery and flat white ceiling with fluorescent tube lighting. Internal walls have been progressively straightened, smoothed and painted with white acrylic paint, concealing original detail. While interviewees confirmed that the ‘white look’ was a missionary introduction, it was also acknowledged that this is a locally sustained approach. Some suggested that ready adoption of the ‘new’ was a central characteristic of Cook Islanders’ approach to life, and others observed that overseas influences were a strong director of change.

The architectural academic Jeanette Budgett made similar observations regarding modifications to church buildings on the island of Mangaia. While the original whitewash of churches can be conceptually linked with Christian purification theology and Cook Islands sacred white bark cloth (S. Treadwell 2016; George 2012; Budgett 2004), Budgett suggests that the ‘blanking out’ of detail and colour is a contemporary ‘aesthetic preoccupation with the white surfaces of minimalism’ (Budgett 2006: 47-49).

Budgett’s analysis aligns with other scholarship that suggests that Cook Islanders continue to look to their former colonisers for architectural representation as part of broader global patterns of Western cultural export to the developing world (J. Treadwell 2006: 562; Lockwood 2004: 6). It is notable that material loss in CICC churches has concentrated in those elements most rich in pre-European traditions of architectural form (Budgett 2006: 48). The white walls remain, but intricately carved, patterned, coloured and weathered wood, fibres and thatching have been lost to flat ceilings, white tiles and prefabricated metal. Does this threaten to destabilise the bicultural origin of these spaces, reshaping them into a form of acculturation?

Charmaine ‘Ilaiu’s 2007 Master of Architecture thesis provides insight here. In examining contemporary adaptations of Tongan fale (houses), ‘Ilaiu suggests that contemporary change emanates from within indigenous cultural paradigms. This occurs through the Tongan practice of ‘inasi (architectural appropriation) that affirms individual and collective prestige (‘Ilaiu 2009; ‘Ilaiu 2007: 89-105). Following ‘Ilaiu’s discussion, I suggest that Western imports have not resulted

Figure 5: Matavera church interior (photo by the author, 2014).
in architectural acculturation in Cook Islands churches. Rather, forms and materials are variously appropriated, customised and creolised in new expressions of mana (Lockwood 2004: 7).

This analysis highlights the current reality of CICC churches as heavily modified places, with each being ‘a series of incarnations rather than one building’ (McKay and Walmsley 2003: 95); an ever-shifting cultural landscape rather than a discrete architectural form. It demonstrates how changes made have been variously influenced by aspects of pre-Christian, foreign and indigenised fusions of cultural expression, enabling meanings and values to be contested, contextualised and renewed through continued everyday use.

Enduring ephemeral

When asked to share their views on physical modifications to CICC church places, it was notable that interviewees, particularly church members, often did not recall any changes or did not consider them worth mentioning. An interpretation of this can be that built form is a mere backdrop for human actions and interactions (Kecskemeti 2012: 10, 11, 86; Jackson 1995: 24, 25; Hummon 1992: 268). However, perceptions of church places as ‘unchanged’ may also link to deeper Polynesian understandings of ancestry and time (Refiti 2009; Campbell 2006) where past, present and future are not separate moments but are dynamically enmeshed, such that a person is their ancestors, a place is its past. In this context, alterations appear incidental in the broader scheme of not only maintaining identity-creating social practices, but in the very idea of ‘place’ as a static notion. It blurs artificial distinctions between social, historical and architectural significance by compressing and enfolding the past into the present, perpetually inscribing and re-inscribing both on the land.

Interviewees instead emphasised the temporal and intangible aspects of churches in discussions of memories, place change and cultural identity. These aspects are now explored, including cloth coverings and floral decorations, and the perpetuation of oral traditions.

Cloth coverings

Cloth coverings are neither indigenously originated nor unique to Cook Islands expressions of Christianity. However, in the context of the CICC, it is suggested that material layering entwines broader theological symbolism of holiness with pre-Christian manifestations of mana. The anthropologist Jeffrey Sissons describes how, during Christianity’s earliest years on Rarotonga, elaborate and ritually-defined processes of constructing ‘are atua (god houses) were translated to new ‘are pure, the churches, as tribal allegiances shifted to the new religion. Church posts and rafters were symbolically wrapped with bark cloth in accordance with pre-Christian wrapping of kī‘īkī (wooden god figures) in a process that Sissons argues symbolically imbued churches with mana (Sissons 2007: 51-57; see also Kaeppler 2008: 33, 93, 94).

Early traditions of bark cloth wrapping are no longer apparent in Rarotonga’s CICCs. However, Christian and pre-Christian heritages continue to be blended and recontested through practices of covering, layering and wrapping. This is apparent in the overlay of pulpits, sacrament tables, reading daises and ‘orometua seats with mass-manufactured foreign linenry, as well as in grave headstone unveiling ceremonies, where multiple layers of white cloths and tīvaevae (hand-made applique quilts) are ritually lain and removed.

Floral decorations

Floral decorations are also not unique to Cook Islands Christian tradition. However, their vibrant colour and scent and use as personal adornment in the form of ‘ei (floral garlands and headaddresses) suggest indigenous meanings evolved within an otherwise whitened built form. The use of white was deeply entrenched in the LMS’s Protestant Reformation heritage, its non-colour physically manifesting a transformative Christian presence on a brightly coloured ‘heathen’ state (S. Treadwell 2016; George 2012; S. Treadwell 2000). White was liberally applied to buildings and people alike in a clear delineation of good from evil (S. Treadwell 2016: 374). This remains evident in churches’ permanent fabric, with walls being persistently cleaned, weeded and re-whitened. However, the temporal fabric of churches allows for a different colouring of religious expression. The island’s vivid colours and odours infiltrate church interiors

The explicit impermanence of cloth coverings and floral decorations also implies significance in cyclical practices of renewal rather than in the items themselves. Mutability is an intrinsic part of the architecture of the Pacific, where processes of manufacture or performance teach younger generations and cement community relationships (Kaeppler 2008: 33; McKay and Walmsley 2005: 64). I suggest that these same factors pervade the recurring preparation and presentation of church decoration. The tasks of removing, washing and re-laying coverings and replacing floral arrangements are embedded both in Christian doctrines of continued spiritual renewal and in pre-Christian rituals of re-dressing the sacred, and act to ceremonially bind community hierarchies and relationships.

**Oral traditions**

Oral traditions sustained by the Church were commonly cited by interviewees as an important aspect of their sense of place and cultural identity. These focus around the singing of imene tuki (Cook Islands hymns) and the use of Māori (used here to refer to Cook Island Māori rather than New Zealand Māori) in Church contexts.

Imene tuki were composed from Christianity’s earliest days in the Cook Islands, with imported Tahitian Christian worship and local pe’e (chants) fusing to establish a grounding for subsequent English litany (Gilson and Crocombe 1980: 21; Rere 1976: 9). While LMS missionaries had a strong hand in early lyrics, vocal expression largely evolved locally, with imene tuki becoming an important part of Christianity’s indigenisation. They remain a contemporary living heritage as a mode of worship and an oral learning tradition, with the CICC being the hub of their perpetuation (Breward 2001: 53, 54; confirmed by interviewees).

Another significant teaching role maintained by the Church is continued speaking of Māori, with the CICC being the only religious institution using Māori as its main language. Unlike imene tuki, which were largely seen as a positive and crucial cultural heritage by interviewees, attitudes regarding the use of Māori in preaching and teaching were more ambivalent, with tension between retaining tradition and remaining relevant. Some interviewees expressed both views, alluding to the complexity of nurturing cultural constancy while allowing for contemporary change.

Regardless of perceptions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it has been through the shifting performance and practice of imene tuki and Māori language over almost two centuries that CICC churches have acted as repositories for and conduits of language and cultural narratives, thus playing a part in individual and corporate identity.

A key finding from the above analysis suggests that it is the temporal and intangible heritage of CICC church places that hold the most enduring meaning and significance to people associated with them. This research supports academic analyses suggesting that heritage places can be tangible manifestations of identity and history (McDowell 2008: 40), but more than this, it suggests that church places are a basis of individual and communal identity formation and continuity (Taha 2013: 15). In this context, physical churches not only are intrinsically imbued with, but also underpin, intangible values of ancestral continuity and collective memory. This implies a more complex and symbiotic relationship between people and place than simply that of place being created and sustained by human actions. Rather, places facilitate actions that foster memory and identity, with both essential to, and reliant on, the other.

A second key finding is that people-place connections here have some specifically Polynesian aspects that are unrelated to individuals’ personal membership or attendance at a particular church. In particular, interviewees placed emphasis on the importance of the land churches are sited upon; land as moenga, ‘our mat’ – lain and lived upon, a defining centre of self and collective. The enwoven reality of past, present and future mean that churches represent the living work of ancestors embedded on this land, significant not only to those still actively involved in a particular ekalesia but to increasingly diasporic and heterogeneous Cook Islands communities.
Conservation thinking

How then, to consider conservation in this context? Contemporary conservation theory, conscious of its Eurocentric past, has sought to centralise multivocality and human rights in the international arena (Winter 2014; Chirikure and Pwiti 2008: 481). ‘Negotiatory conservation’ is called for (Viñas 2005: 209, original emphasis), an adaptive approach that seeks to balance interests and respond sensitively to specific needs and circumstances (González-Longo 2012: 76; Orbaşlı 2008: 64; Sully 2007: 41; Viñas 2005: 203, 212).

Regardless of their case-specific flexibility, these discussions are still framed by a Western model of conservation that takes for granted the involvement of heritage practitioners, who play a key role in directing, facilitating and negotiating good heritage outcomes. This can overlook the reality that this role does not exist in the overwhelming majority of historic place projects in the Cook Islands. Questions of whether locals are being genuinely engaged in conservation works are beside the point in this context. Locals themselves are the instigators, decision-makers, undertakers and recipients of all processes of change.

This is obviously not unique to the Cook Islands. It is in fact a continuation of ways in which humanity has addressed its cultural fabric for millennia, contrasting markedly with the professionalisation of conservation emerging from Renaissance Europe. Resource management occurs in the Pacific through customary land tenure and decision-making systems that prioritise processes of consensus over end product. This approach is reflected in modifications to CICC church places that have occurred in Rarotonga over time.

However, field research findings suggest that alterations made by Church congregations can be controversial in Rarotonga. Eschewal of ‘foreign’ conservation mechanisms on one hand, and local people’s frustrations in the face of unsupported change on the other, bring into sharp relief fundamental questions of custodianship: to whom are historic churches significant, and who should have a say in their management?

The importance of individual congregations retaining fundamental decision-making authority as the fund-providers and land owners was emphasised by most interviewees regardless of personal membership. However, enabling other groups to have a voice was also variously raised, including tribal leaders who originally gifted the Church its land, the government, local Rarotongans who are not CICC members, and expatriate Cook Islanders. These discussions allude to the ways in which CICC churches, like marae, are entangled with understandings of ancestry, mana and cultural identity, one of many strands of indigenous heritage embedded on the land. This may mean that they continue to have cultural value for increasingly diasporic Cook Islands communities.

This is particularly relevant in light of Rarotonga’s diminishing CICC congregations. Migration exacerbates increasing religious heterogeneity, with some 85% of Cook Islanders now living permanently overseas (Crocombe and Crocombe 2003: 334). A significant proportion of financial provision for CICC building projects comes from these expatriates, as pre-Christian understandings of reciprocity have been translated into remittances (Budgett 2006: 49; Crocombe 1990: 56). However, views regarding the rights and responsibilities of foreign-based Cook Islanders to their island homeland are diverging as new generations, largely born and raised in separate nations, reassess these relationships (Triandis 2001: 908-912; Altrocchi and Altrocchi 1995: 237-238; confirmed by interviewees). How these people variously participate in tribal, Church and other community decision-making may potentially be a significant shaper of historic church places’ conservation and sustainment.

Heritage practitioners celebrate living heritage in theory, recognising that it is in ongoing active use that historical buildings are best conserved. However, when uses and users themselves threaten architectural fabric, it is easy to revert to Western precepts of ‘authentic’ preservation, prioritising product over process, physicality over intangibility. Collaborative approaches grounded in cultural landscape perspectives may help to bridge the gap between Western and Polynesian approaches to conservation as it applies to church places. This perspective explores strands of transitory and permanent heritage as entwined rather than dichotomous, as dynamic
processes rather than static products, constructions in time as well as space. It may be these very tensions that reinforce the churches’ cultural meaning, contested and renewable; an ever-evolving, and unchanged, lifescape.

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Endnote

1 The hurricane of March 1846 had a severe impact both physically and psychologically on Rarotongan residents, and an aim of coral stone constructions was to withstand them (Gray 1975, pp. 393-403; Gill 1871/2001, pp. 41-43; Lovett 1899/1972, p. 352).