Chapter 12

(Re-)Appropriating Trinkets:
How to Civilize Polynesia with a Jack-in-the-Box

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A portable organ, an electrical machine, puppets, fireworks, a suit of armor, a jack-in-a-box...
Those were some of the European gifts that Mai, a Polynesian visitor to England, took back with him to the South Seas. Scrutinized through the lens of their supposed utilitarian and civilizing value, the choice of these objects was immediately ridiculed: what could such frivolous novelty items bring to the primitive Other? Through the case study of Mai and his European possessions, I will explore the circulation of objects between Europe and Polynesia in the late eighteenth century. The interrogation of the problematic place of the curiosity item offers a starting point to the analysis of late-eighteenth-century views on cross-cultural contact and European expansion in new territories. In more precise terms, Mai’s objects, which herald the beginning of nineteenth-century colonial empires, are the tangible crux between commercial and civilizing ideals.

Mai’s experience is closely entwined with Captain James Cook’s three voyages to the South Pacific, revealing the evolution in the British contact with Polynesia from exotic collection to utilitarian imposition. A native of the island of Raiatea, Mai meets the British crew when Cook stops in Polynesia during his first voyage (1768–1771), officially undertaken to observe the transit of Venus across the face of the sun from Tahiti in 1769. The expedition is partly motivated by the collection of flora, fauna, and artifacts, both as curiosity objects and as specimens. Two travelers in particular exemplify this passion: Lord Joseph Banks, an
enthusiast for overseas curiosities, and renowned Swedish botanist Dr. Daniel Carl Solander. During his second voyage (1772–1775), Cook passes again through Polynesia on his way to verify the existence of the hypothetical Great Southern Land. It is then that Mai joins the British expedition and travels to London, where he lives as a valued object of consideration from 1774 to 1776. One of the goals of Cook’s third journey (1776–1779) is to return Mai to his home region: the British settle Mai on the island of Huahine in 1777, along with many European gifts meant to be used as civilizing tools.

The fluid status of these objects in the continuum from frivolous to utilitarian is important in assessing their civilizing value (from a European perspective) both in the fictional and real world. It is possible that their function shifts during the long voyage: once in the land of the Other, in the hands of the Other, objects acquire a role quite different from their original design. If, as noted by Bill Brown, things arise from objects whose function is disrupted and manifest a “changed relation to the human subject,” then the story of Mai’s gifts is indeed “[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things.”1 When given to the Other, European objects become things, reinventing “a particular subject-object relation,”2 not just at an individual level but at a culture-wide level: they redefine Europe’s civilizing mission, preparing the stage for the colonial ideology of the nineteenth century.

**Encountering the Other: People and Objects**

Upon encountering a new land, the European’s initial instinct is to collect; the second is to do science. Underlying both instincts is the drive to establish dominion over the new land—its resources, objects, and people. Silvia Spitta examines Europe’s encounter with the Americas in

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2 Ibid., 4.
the first chapter of her seminal work *Misplaced Objects*, in which she links Europe’s appetite for objects to its underlying quest for power, as expressed by its colonial conquest of the New World. She also shows how the exotic objects displayed in European “cabinets of wonder” evolve from curiosities to be collected to exotic objects that become specimens to be studied.\(^3\) This evolution takes place over two centuries in the American adventure but occurs in the Polynesian encounter in a much shorter time. In the course of just ten years, Captain Cook’s three voyages to the Pacific enact the evolution of imperial takeover of Polynesia from exotic collection to scientific study to utilitarian imposition.

By the time of Cook’s third voyage, the focus has shifted from collecting to giving, from meeting to civilizing. In *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages*, Bernard Smith highlights the parallels between Adam Smith and Cook, showing how the commander of the Resolution becomes the hero of “a nation of shopkeepers.”\(^4\) In Cook’s voyages we witness the beginning of the “spread of a British empire based upon industry and free trade”: “Cook emerges as a Promethean hero who brings metallurgy and its related forms of culture to primit[i]ve man.”\(^5\) Working against the perception of imperialism as exploitation, Cook’s image in British culture serves to refashion imperialism as a civilizing mission that does not pilfer and exploit but instead brings material and cultural progress. However appealing in theory, Europe’s new imperial ideology is not smoothly translated into practice. Objects can shift status during the voyage: in some cases, utilitarian tools are demoted to curiosities, while curiosities are imbued with unexpected utility. Above all, the promoters of commercial

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5 Ibid., 237.
colonialism, placing their faith in the material rather than the human, overlook the role of the Other in the success, or failure, of such enterprise. As Harriet Guest notes in *Empire, Barbarism, and Civilisation*, “[i]t is hard to see Mai, however, as the Smithian agent of commercial colonialism in the sense that Bernard Smith has argued is appropriate for Cook.” In tracing the actual as well as the fictional fate of Mai and his European gifts, it now seems appropriate to examine closely the birth of a new colonial ideology as well as the resistance of both objects and Others to this venture.

**Collecting Curiosities: Mai from the South Seas (1768–1774)**

The first Tahitian encounter between Cook’s party and the islanders is marked by taking—as in collecting—rather than giving, beyond what is strictly necessary for barter. The British perceive Tahiti as a land of bounty, a prelapsarian paradise that provides for its people well beyond their needs. In his journal, Cook writes in July 1769:

> All these articles the Earth almost spontaneously produces or at least they are rais’d with very little labour, in the article of food these people may almost be said to be exempt from the curse of our fore fathers; scarcely can it be said that they earn their bread with the sweet [sic] of their brow, benevolent nature hath not only supply’d them with necessaries but with abundance of superfluities.7

The original Biblical commandment to work (“the curse of our forefathers”) is perceived here as a foundational imperative of Western culture. By the late eighteenth century, it has also become a voracious appetite for possessions, evident in the urge of the members of the Cook

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expedition to collect. The collecting of natural specimens and cultural artifacts is of course part of the official scientific mission of the voyage. It also follows in a long tradition of Europe’s imperialist encounters with other cultures, in particular in the Americas. As Spitta shows in her study of the “cabinets of wonder,” the scientific purpose of such collections should not obscure the two main driving forces behind them. First, these collections betray a desire to control the newly-encountered populations, from whom these artifacts are taken. Second, at a basic level, they reveal a “cumulative, imperialistic, and out-of-control impulse to collect.” The objects acquired are commonly referred to as curiosities, a label that reflects the collector’s non-discriminating impulse to accrue objects that catch his or her fancy. The question of usefulness arises only later, if at all, when the curiosity items are made available to European museums or science academies for study. Their fundamental purpose remains, for quite some time, the collector’s gratification.

A wealthy English dilettante with a passion for natural history and voyages of discovery, Lord Joseph Banks epitomizes the curiosity collector of the newly encountered South Pacific. While on Cook’s first voyage, he spares no expense to collect local curiosities. These curiosities include specimens of plants and insects Banks gathers with scientist Solander, cultural artifacts he buys or trades with local people, and drawings he commissions from the

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8 See the chapter “Misplaced Objects from the Americas and the Emergence of the European Wunderkammern,” in Spitta’s Misplaced Objects, 27-46.

9 Spitta also uses such words as “collecting frenzy,” “full-blown obsession,” and “impulse.” Ibid., 38.


11 In the portrait he paints of Banks after his return to England, Benjamin West considers his subject’s collection as an essential aspect of his identity and surrounds him with the artifacts he brought back from the South Seas. Thomas likens these curiosities to “trophies” in his analysis of the portrait. (See Entangled Objects, 142-3.)
expedition’s draftsman, Sydney Parkinson. Banks’s collection is unabashedly self-centered: the criterion for an object to become a curiosity item is to appeal to the collector. For example, in the journal he keeps during the expedition, Banks describes the dyes used by Polynesians for their clothes, but he catalogues only the ones that are of interest to him: “I shall therefore say no more of these Colours than that they were so indifferent in their qualities that they did not much raise my curiosity to enquire concerning them.” In the description he offers of his curiosity collection, Banks clearly does not aim at providing his readers with a thorough record but at satisfying his own pleasure.

Banks’s ambition as a collector goes beyond the gathering of simple artifacts: what would satisfy him the most is to take an actual man back with him from Tahiti to Britain. Banks plans to take on board a local ari’i (chief) named Tupaia, who has been forced out of his native island of Raiatea by Bora Borans. For his part, Tupaia hopes to secure European support and weaponry to oust the invaders. Faced with Cook’s reluctance to accept Tupaia on board, Banks writes in his journal:

I do not know why I may not keep him [Tupaia] as a curiosity, as well as some of my neighbours do lions and tygers at a larger expence than he will probably ever put me to; the amusement I shall have in his future conversation and the benefit he will be of to this ship … will I think fully repay me.

Banks’s readiness to appropriate another human being as yet another curiosity item may be disturbing, but it reminds us that in his time, the heyday of the slave trade, human beings were kept as objects by other human beings. As Julie Park notes, “[t]he growing institutions of

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13 Ibid., “Manners and Customs of the South Sea Islands,” which is inserted after August 14, 1769.

14 Ibid., entry for July 12, 1769; my emphasis.
prostitution and slavery in the eighteenth century, for example, illustrate most radically how human beings partook of the grammar of trade by becoming commodities themselves.” It is also quite possible that Banks remembers the American Indians who travelled to England in the first part of the century. In this context, the double motive in Banks’s treatment of Tupaia deserves attention: Banks’s “amusement,” his aristocratic enjoyment of the exotic object, is here coupled with the more bourgeois focus on “benefit.”

Tupaia’s story exemplifies the growing concern with utility among the British. After setting sail with the Cook expedition from Tahiti on July 13, 1769, Tupaia quickly learns rudiments of English, providing his hosts with a wealth of information about Maohi customs and geographical features of the region. Unfortunately, Tupaia dies of scurvy during the call at Batavia on November 11, 1770. The experience nevertheless convinces Cook of the benefits of taking local men on board. By the time of his second voyage, no fewer than four Polynesian men will at some point be on board the two British ships. Cook himself is fond of a young Bora Bora man, Hititi, who travels with him all the way to Antarctica but eventually decides against the long trip to Europe. It is Mai who makes the trip to England, having enlisted aboard Captain Tobias Furneaux’s Adventure as an “Able Seaman” during the call at Huahine.

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16 Kate Fullagar situates South Pacific visitors to England in “a tradition of at least fifty years’ standing, where New World peoples found themselves halfway across the globe performing the role of an exemplary type.” For more information, see “‘Savages That Are Come Among Us’: Mai, Bennelong, and British Imperial Culture, 1774–1795,” *The Eighteenth Century* 49:3 (2008), 211.

17 Tupaia is able to locate and name more than 130 islands and to draw a map of some 74 islands.

Polynesia, in 1773. His name is transcribed by the British as O-mai, Omiah, Omy or Omai, and he is also given the Christian name “Jack.” Mai had been close to Tupaia, although unlike him, he belongs to the manahune (commoner) class. However, like Tupaia, he expresses hopes that an alliance with the British could help expel the Bora Borans from Raiatea.

By the time Mai joins the Cook expedition, the British perspective on their Polynesian guests has shifted: instead of being considered curiosities, they are now specimens. At first, Cook is not pleased with the choice of Mai: he thinks Mai “not a proper sample of the inhabitants of these happy isles” and compares him unfavorably to Hititi. According to Cook, Hititi “would have been a good specimen of the Nation in every respect which the man on the Adventure [Mai] is not.” Unlike Banks with Tupaia, Cook is less concerned with his personal amusement than with collective utility. The words “sample” and “specimen” reveal a scientific perspective that considers Mai and Hititi as ethnographical types rather than as individuals. Such transition from curiosity to specimen has been analyzed by Spitta in regard to Europe’s relationship with the Americas: “With the development of natural science, the search for curiosities gave way to

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19 In the Polynesian language, O is a deictic, but late-eighteenth-century European travelers to the region assume it is part of proper nouns. In European accounts of the time, Tahiti is therefore commonly called Otahiti, and Mai, Omai.

20 Diary entry for September 1st, 1774, The Early Diary of Frances Burney, 1768–1778. With a Selection From her Correspondence, and From the Journals of her Sisters Susan and Charlotte Burney, ed. Annie Raine Ellis (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 1:311-2.

21 The social stratification of Tahiti was understood by eighteenth-century Europeans to be composed of the following: tenu (servants), manahune (commoners), and ari'i (chiefs). See Douglas Oliver, Ancient Tahitian Society (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), 2:749-71.

22 Manuscript entry for Saturday, June 4, 1774, which was subsequently “heavily deleted” before publication. Cook’s later opinions of Mai were more favorable. See Cook, The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768–1771, 428n.

23 Ibid.
the search for *specimens*, valued for their potential uses and commercial value.”

The same evolution takes place in the South Seas: from Tupaia, seen by Banks as a curiosity, to Mai, seen by Cook as a specimen. Furthermore, with the word “Nation,” Cook adds a political dimension to the potential value of Mai and Hititi. Cook’s comment frames the utility of Mai and Hititi in terms of foreign policy: the value of the human specimen could either heighten or decrease potential British interest—and consequently Britain’s foothold—in the region.

Upon his arrival in London, where he lives from 1774 to 1776, Mai proves to be indeed an invaluable object to his hosts. First, Mai is a curiosity item: he is patronized by Banks, who introduces him to the British aristocrats, such as Lord Sandwich. He is received by the elite of British society and meets, among others, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, both members of Hesther Thrale’s literary circle. Second, Mai is a scientific specimen: he is “demonstrated” by Solander at dinners of the Royal Society. He is “scientifically” described by Sir John Cullum, a Fellow of the Royal Society, who records his size, complexion, tattoos, gait, “temper,” and other features. Third, Mai is a political entity: as such, he is introduced to King George III within three days of his arrival. As Cook’s previous evaluation of Mai in terms of “Nation” already indicates, the British hope Mai can act as an envoy or consul who would help further their dominion over the Polynesian islands and counter other European nations’

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24 Spitta, *Misplaced Objects*, 44; emphasis in the original.


26 Ibid., 104-5.

27 Ibid., 101.
efforts in the region. In order to present Mai as a potential local liaison through whom political and commercial relations with his native region could be established, his patrons recast him from a commoner (*manahune*) into a chief (*ari‘i*). This is illustrated by the title of William Parry’s 1776 painting of Mai with Banks and Solander, *Sir Joseph Banks with Omai, the Otaheitian Chief, and Doctor Daniel Solander*, as well as by portraits of Mai wearing an ample bark toga, an indication of high social status in Polynesia. Accordingly, his return to Polynesia becomes the official goal of the third voyage of Cook, who on June 5, 1776 receives from the Admiralty the order “to receive Omiah on board the *Resolution* and land him at such one of the South Sea Islands as he may desire.”

In the following month, leading up to the expedition’s departure, Mai’s patrons gather together the large number of material gifts that he is to take to his native Polynesia.

**Returning Mai: Curiosities to the South Seas (1776–1779)**

Preparing to sail for his third voyage to Polynesia and help settle Mai back, Cook reflects in his journal: “In short every method had been taken both during his aboad in England and at his departure to make him convey to his Countrymen the highest opinion of the greatness and generosity of the British Nation.” During Cook’s first and second voyages, the British focused on *taking* both objects and individuals to bring back to Europe. The third voyage,

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28 At the time, Spain, Britain, and France all vie for sovereignty over Tahiti and Polynesia. In the absence of a permanent military settlement, each new expedition takes “official” possession of the region. In 1777, Cook has to re-assert British influence in Polynesia. It is understandable that grooming Mai to become a permanent representative for Britain’s interests in the region appears a worthwhile undertaking for his hosts.

29 Alexander, *Omai, Noble Savage*, 145.

however, is used to *bring*, to “convey” not just “opinion(s)” but also commodities to the South Seas. For Cook, the ideological “greatness” of the British nation is entwined with its material “generosity” and influence. Therefore, when Mai boards the *Resolution* in July 1776, he brings with him a large collection of European objects. A list drawn up by Banks shows two main categories for Mai’s gifts: the useful and the entertaining.\(^{31}\) What was considered useful by the British audience of the time includes the following items: travelling instruments (compass, globe, charts); domestic articles (furniture, hatchets, nails, linnens, beads, dinnerware, silverware, clothes, hats, shoes, ribbons…); objects meant to remind the South Sea islanders of their relations with the British crown (the King and Queen’s pictures, “*Hankerchiefs with Great Britain* printed on them”); remedies for health issues (“Medecines for the Venereal disease”); and, most importantly in Mai’s own view, weaponry (muskets, gunpowder, a coat of mail, a suit of armor). The second category contains entertaining bibelots, such as “Toys of models *sic* horses Coaches wagons Sedan chairs,” an electrifying machine, a hand organ, a jack in the box, fireworks, and “a nine-foot Catherine wheel made specially for him by the Royal Ordnance *sic* at Woolwich, which proved too large for transportation.” A last-minute addition by Granville Sharp, a slavery abolitionist writer, furnishes Mai with “a handsome bible with numerous coloured plates.”\(^{32}\)

These gifts spark an immediate controversy surrounding their utility, a controversy which links their usefulness with civilizing value. While the utilitarian objects in Mai’s trunks are largely ignored, the public seizes on the frivolous curiosity items: since they are designed

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\(^{31}\) Alexander reproduces a two-page list he credits to Banks but does not indicate his source. See Alexander, *Omai, Noble Savage*, 143.

for entertainment and not utility, they are assumed to lack any civilizing value. Around the same time as the *Resolution’s* departure, 33 an anonymous verse pamphlet, *Omiah’s Farewell; Inscribed to the Ladies of London*, takes aim at Mai’s British hosts for failing in their civilizing duty toward him. The authors of the piece “lament that the attention shown this Indian, has not been of the true benevolent sort,” in effect privileging frivolous pleasures over a useful “entertainment of his mind.” 34 In doing so, Mai’s patrons have eschewed their duty towards the uncivilized Other. Their failure can be assessed by looking at the European objects they have given Mai for his return voyage: “OMIAH is now returning to his native isle, fraught by royal order with squibs, crackers, and a various assortment of fireworks, to show to the wild untutored Indian the great superiority of an enlightened Christian prince.” 35 By predicating a hierarchy between the “wild untutored Indian” and the “enlightened Christian prince,” the text also predicates the need for the wild Indian to be tutored. But the sarcasm evident in the contrast between, on the one hand, the grandiose “royal order,” “the great superiority” and, on the other, the ludicrous “squibs,” “crackers” and “fireworks,” undermines “the Christian prince” and deplores that his British hosts have failed to give Mai the material means to become a more productive member of his native society on his return. As a consequence, they have failed in their moral and political mission to influence untutored, that is, potentially colonizable people.

The blame for the choice of frivolous trinkets is not confined to Mai’s hosts. It is also laid on Mai, as the entertaining novelties come to symbolize the supposedly child-like mind of

33 I have been unable to ascertain in which month of 1776 *Omiah’s Farewell* was written, thus I cannot specify whether this pamphlet appeared before or after the *Resolution’s* departure.

34 Anonymous, *Omiah’s Farewell; Inscribed to the Ladies of London* (London: G. Kearsly, 1776), ii.

35 Ibid., iv.
the primitive Other. In the preface to their 1777 account of Cook’s second voyage, the German naturalists Johann Reinhold Forster and Johann Georg Adam Forster present Mai’s gifts as evidence of his supposed immature intellect: “His judgement was in its infant state, and therefore, like a child he coveted almost every thing he saw, and particularly that which had amused him by some expected effect. To gratify his childish inclinations, … he was indulged with a portable organ, an electrical machine, a coat of mail, and suit of armour.” While the Forsters denigrate in passing the British patrons who gratified and indulged Mai’s childish whims instead of educating him, their primary focus is on his perceived primitivism. Their disparagement of Mai implicitly extends to his native culture since the motif of the Other as child-like and the presumed state of infancy of newly-encountered civilizations are common in anthropological and philosophical works of the time.

36 However, as Harriet Guest points out, “most of [these possessions] seem to have been chosen for him [Mai] and not by him.” For the full context, see Harriet Guest, “Omaï’s Things,” in Cook & Omai: The Cult of the South Seas, ed. Michelle Hetherington (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001), 31.


38 An example can be found at the beginning of Denis Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville [A Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage]: “Le Tahitien touche à l'origine du monde, et l’Européen touche à sa vieillesse. L'intervalle qui le sépare de nous est plus grand que la distance de l'enfant qui naît à l'homme décrépit.” [The Tahitian is close to the origin of the world, the European near its old age. The interval that separates him and us is greater than that between the child at birth and the decrepit old man.] See Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, ed. Paul-Edouard Levayer (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1995), 37.
Likewise, in 1789, when Hester Thrale, now Mrs. Piozzi, imagines the fate of Mai’s gifts after his death, it is not just Mai but also his culture that she evaluates: “Two Islands quarrelling for the Possession of a German Organ and Puppet Show—Omai’s best and most valuable Effects as I remember—would make an Excellent Subject for a mock Heroic Poem, and beat La Secchia rapita out of Doors.”

Remembering Mai’s visits to her literary circle when he lived in London, Thrale Piozzi declares: Mai “was no small favourite of mine.” Yet, she demeans him by transposing his story into the realm of the farce and mocking what she assumes to be a primitive value system. The contrast between the actual value of these objects and their worth as perceived by a fictional Mai and his people serves to categorize the Polynesian Other as primitive or savage. Furthermore, this disparity in the value ascribed to objects becomes the standard by which to assess a person’s or a society’s degree of civilization. Thrale Piozzi follows her comment on Mai by a pronouncement on the ongoing revolutionary turmoil in France: “Are the French fighting and squabbling for any thing that will answer better? I question it.”

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39 After the death of her husband, Henry Thrale, in 1781, Hester Thrale married Italian musician Gabriel Piozzi in 1784. She is subsequently referred to as either Hester Piozzi or Hester Thrale Piozzi. Some scholars add her middle name, Lynch: Hester Lynch Thrale or Hester Lynch Piozzi.

40 See the letter to Samuel Lysons dated July 8, 1789 in Hester Lynch Piozzi, The Piozzi Letters 1, 1784–1791 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 298. La Secchia Rapita, traditionally translated as The Rape of the Bucket or The Ravished Bucket, is a seventeenth-century mock-heroic epic poem by Alessandro Tassoni, which narrates a struggle between the cities of Bologna and Modena over possession of a bucket; it influenced Alexander Pope’s own mock-heroic poem, The Rape of the Lock (1714).

41 Lynch Piozzi, The Piozzi Letters 1, 298.

42 Ibid.
themselves to the level of primitive Bolabola\textsuperscript{43} by not being able to judge adequately an object’s actual worth.

Mai’s gifts become a symbol of failure and disappointment rather than crucial instruments in the civilizing enterprise of Polynesia. Indeed, by the time the \textit{Resolution} reaches the Society Islands on August 12, 1777, his British companions are already deploring that Mai squanders his wealth, associates with the wrong people, and fails to ingratiate himself to the local chiefs, therefore undermining his possible status as a political liaison for the British. After Mai is finally settled back on the island of Huahine, the British crew builds Mai a European-style house, with a European-style garden, and gives him a couple of horses, goats, pigs, and poultry. Upon leaving Huahine, Cook writes in his journal of his hopes and apprehensions regarding Mai and his European possessions. Cook places his faith in the objects themselves: “[T]he greatest benifit these islands will receive from Omais travels will be in the Animals that have been left upon them,” which he expects to thrive.\textsuperscript{44} However, he does not expect that Mai “will be able to interduce many of our arts and customs amongst [South Sea islanders] or much improve those they have got.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Mai and His Curiosities: Imagining the Best}

One author, however, responds to Cook’s skepticism by portraying Mai as a successful agent in the material civilizing of Polynesia. In 1790, a French writer dedicates an epic novel to Mai’s fulfillment of his civilizing vision, albeit in fictional form: entitled \textit{Narrations d’Omai},\textsuperscript{46} it follows

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\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{44} Entry for Sunday, November 2, 1777 in \textit{Cook, The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776-1780}, 1:241.
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Mai to Europe and back to Polynesia, which he civilizes thanks to the very objects he brings from his European voyage. Although the novel is published anonymously, we know the author to be the Abbé Guillaume André René Baston, a Church canon in Rouen before the Revolution forces him into exile in 1792. Baston appropriates Mai’s voice as Omai, and the novel purports to be Omai’s autobiography written in the Tahitian language after a successful return of the traveler to his home region. The four-volume novel is divided not into chapters but into twenty-five “Narrations,” each dedicated to a famous person or important character in the story. The first volume is largely based on Cook’s second and third voyages, and follows Omaï from his native Raiatea to England and back to the South Seas. After Cook’s departure, Omaï tackles a vengeance plan against Bora Borans in order to reclaim Raiatea and re-instate its lawful king.

Baston’s novel, however, is much more ambitious than the actual account: the remaining three volumes of the Narrations d’Omaï chronicle the civilizing of the whole Polynesian archipelago thanks to European techniques and objects. Omaï creates a thriving social and political utopia, introducing European-style farming, architecture, and even manufacturing to his native island. The fourth volume sees the apotheosis of Omaï’s enterprise as Polynesia is united into an independent confederation that thwarts a foreign colonization venture and embraces Christianity. The originality of Baston’s novel lies in his creative

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48 I use the name Omai for Baston’s fictional character and Mai for the actual individual.

49 Baston, Narrations d’Omaï, 2:392.
appropriation of Mai’s voice and Mai’s European gifts. Omai’s adventures in the first volume of the novel are taken from actual episodes in Mai’s life as found in the accounts of Cook’s second and third voyages.\(^{50}\) However, Baston’s *Narrations d’Omai* is not a mere repetition of Cook’s accounts but Omai’s response to them. Excerpts from the original accounts are only inserted so that Omai can answer, supplement, and contradict them, eliciting the impression that the novel is Omai’s version of the expeditions. Particularly interesting in this account are Omai’s responses to the European criticism of Mai and his relationship with objects. When his choice of trinkets is derided as the “goûts enfantins” [childish tastes]\(^{51}\) of a primitive mind, Omai retorts that they are tools in a long-term civilizing plan he devised for Polynesia. He admits that his first goal in leaving for Europe was revenge but argues that it evolved into a revolutionary transformation of his home region thanks to the objects he acquired “chez ces peuples féconds en inventions utiles, prodigieuses” [from these people so fertile in useful, remarkable inventions].\(^{52}\) In fact, it is on European objects rather than on European mores or laws (which he often criticizes) that Omai relies. Like a new Prometheus, he boasts that he obtained in the “terres éloignées” [these faraway lands] where he travelled “des secrets précieux, … des richesses inestimables” [precious secrets, … invaluable riches] which will

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\(^{51}\) Baston, *Narrations d’Omai*, 1:47.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 4:255-6.
bring to his fellow Polynesians’ “jouissances sans augmenter [leurs] besoins” [benefits without increasing their needs].

This last proviso to Omai’s praise of material culture—that “benefits” should not be confused with “needs”—complicates the novel’s civilizing message. Omai’s intelligence and resourcefulness may at first indicate that Baston negates the consideration of European civilization as superior to Polynesian primitivism, on which the original criticism of Mai was predicated. However, if Omai is put on an equal footing with the European characters of the novel, this is not the case for his countrymen. Baston does adhere to the view that Polynesian society is in a primitive stage of development and needs to be civilized. For Baston, however, a developed Europe cannot accomplish this mission—or rather its objects and crafts can, but not its people. The French clergyman posits that late eighteenth-century Europe is in an advanced, yet ambivalent stage of development—its progress results in both positive material improvements and negative moral laxity. The civilizing of Polynesia can therefore be carried out neither by a Savage nor by a European but by a Europeanized Savage. A hybrid who belongs both to the state of nature and the state of culture, Omai is uniquely situated to borrow the best of culture and civilize nature without falling victim to the excesses of either.

The first step in Omai’s civilizing plan involves the most patently useful of his possessions—as seen from a European perspective—to revolutionize farming in Polynesia. Omai recognizes the value of the cattle given to him by the Cook expedition and, by the end of the novel, proudly enumerates the European animals he has acclimated to the South Seas conditions: “[c]hevaux, vaches, moutons, chevres, trésor auquel nul autre ne mérite d’être comparé” [horses, cows, sheep, goats, a treasure to which none other deserves to be

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53 Ibid., 4:256, 4:257 (last two quotations).
compared]. In the same vein, one of Omaï’s first civilizing moves is to introduce the plow to his countrymen, by demonstrating its use in a dramatic, theatrical manner. Having convened everyone on the island of Huahine, Omaï lets the crowd wonder at the agricultural objects he has brought back from Britain before making his appearance in awed silence “[v]êtu à la manière des Laboureurs Anglais, ... un fouet à la main, derrière [ses] deux chevaux, convenablement enharnachés” [dressed in the manner of English plowman, ... holding a whip, following [his] two horses, which [he] had properly harnessed]. After a solemn speech extolling the benefits of European agriculture, Omaï makes a furrow with the plow, sows wheat seeds, then closes the furrow with his harrow to enthusiastic acclaim. His admiring public decides to adopt the plow, and Omaï proudly proclaims that “[a]u bout de quelques années, nous sommes devenus des Agriculteurs confirmés” [after a few years, we became expert farmers]. In point of fact, the frontispiece for Baston’s novel (Fig. 12.1) shows a portrait of Mai by William Hodges surmounting a transformed Polynesian landscape. A few palm trees symbolizing the South Seas remain in the background while farming instruments, plowed land, grazing cattle, a vineyard, and a European-style house are foregrounded. The land where Cook had first observed “benevolent nature” supplying food without the need for work is now a site of intense labor, utilitarian concern, and increased productivity.

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54 Ibid., 4:257.
55 Ibid., 1:386-93.
56 Ibid., 1:387.
57 Ibid., 1:393.
58 The original portrait was “drawn from nature” by Hodges on board the Adventure en route to Britain. It was used in Suard’s edition of Voyage dans l’Hémisphère Austral (cited in footnote 50 above), with the title “OMAI, amené en Angleterre par le Cap. ex Furneaux.” In the edition of Baston’s novel, the portrait appears inverted, with Mai now looking to the left.
If with agriculture Omaï introduces an age-old European activity to the South Seas, with metallurgy he initiates a pioneering industry by European standards. Omaï’s enthusiasm for metallurgy reflects the Enlightenment’s craze for iron at the dawn of the industrial revolution. As Baron d’Holbach writes in the article on Iron for Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie: “Si la seule utilité décidait du prix des choses, il est certain que le fer devroit être regardé comme le plus précieux des métaux; il n’y a point de profession, d’art ou de métier dans lesquels on n’en ait un besoin indispensable.” [If utility were the only deciding factor of the value of things, it is certain that iron should be regarded as the most precious of metals; there is no occupation, art, or craft that does not have an indispensable need for it.]59 The discovery of iron and the introduction of metallurgy crown the material development of Polynesia, and Omaï becomes the Promethean hero that Smith saw in Cook. In Baston’s novel, Omaï and not Cook is the one whose “array of virtues make it possible for him to rediscover the Golden Age in the Pacific and to bring to it the values of the Iron Age so long in preparation in Europe.”60

Omaï appropriates not only the technical progress of Europe’s burgeoning industry but also its material values. Just as d’Holbach, who praises iron by assessing its utility, Omaï is


60 Smith, Imagining the Pacific, 237.
an adamant utilitarian. He concedes that the “arts frivoles” [frivolous arts] should be tolerated but argues that “l’homme utile & généreux” [the useful and generous man] has to be favored over entertainers. He manages to make entertainment productive: “Mais, tout en nous divertissant, nous préparâmes la matière de plusieurs travaux utiles. Des jardins furent dessinés, des haies plantées, des morceaux de terre labourés.” [But, while we were amusing ourselves, we prepared the soil for useful labor. Gardens were drawn, hedges planted, pieces of land plowed.] Even the apparently frivolous items that the authors of Omai’s Farewell and Thrale Piozzi had derided are put to productive use. With the firecrackers, Omaï can single-handedly defeat a large Bora Bora boat; with the telescope, he can better protect his island from approaching enemies; with the glass from a prism, he can start a fire.

To those who ridiculed his electrifying machine as the whim of a savage man whose “jugement était encore dans l’enfance” [judgment was still in infancy], Baston’s character replies with his “goût solide & raisonnable” [solid and reasonable taste] for scientific experiments, laying the same claims to the machine as his European counterparts. Omaï educates his compatriots through scientific “démonstrations” [demonstrations] and “expériences” [experiments] about the use of a variety of objects—reading glasses, mirrors, a

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61 Baston, Narrations d’Omaï, 3:42-3.
62 Ibid., 4:70.
63 Ibid., 2:230, 2:8, 2:16.
64 This is a direct response to the Forsters, whose criticism Omaï quotes to better refute it. The French edition of Cook’s second voyage consulted by Baston incorporates excerpts from the Forsters’ account into the official narrative, such as the disparagement of Mai’s “goûts enfantins” [childish tastes] and the statement that his judgment was still in infancy. (Voyage dans l’Hémisphère austral et autour du Monde, 1:419.)
65 Baston, Narrations d’Omaï, 1:47.
66 Ibid., 2:9, 2:10.
microscope, and a prism. The real-life Mai had been frightened by the demonstration of an electrifying machine in England. The fictional Omaï not only masters the use of this object, he also enlists it as a teaching tool. He delights, scares, and educates his fellow Polynesians with the “jeu innocent et terrible” [innocent and fearsome game] of his electrifying machine and its “secousses invisibles & communiquées à deux cents personnes à la fois” [invisible jolts, transmitted to two hundred people at once]. Similarly, after entertaining his audience with the “sons enchanteurs” [enchanting sounds] of his hand-held organ, Omaï opens it up to better demonstrate how it works. Therefore, under Baston’s pen, Omaï’s trinkets truly become civilizing tools. While they retain their original entertaining value, they also acquire a higher worth by virtue of their usefulness. Furthermore, their utility is double: they enable Omaï both to act—effecting immediate, material changes on his environment—and to teach—bringing about long-term, ideological changes in his compatriots.

One bibelot is given a prominent place in the novel: a “lanterne magique” [magical lantern]. Omaï uses it on several occasions to entertain his compatriots and provide them with “quelques lumieres sur les mœurs, les usages & les arts du peuple Anglais & des autres Nations du monde civilisé” [some knowledge about the mores, customs, and arts of the English people and of other nations in the civilized world]. He shows pictures of the kings and queens of England, France, and Spain, of Lord Sandwich and Captain Cook, but also of

67 Ibid., 2:9, 2:10, 2:13, 2:171.

68 See Connaughton, Omai: The Prince Who Never Was, 126, and Alexander, Omai, Noble Savage, 86.

69 Baston, Narrations d’Omai, 2:173.

70 Ibid., 2:172.

71 Ibid., 2:18.

72 Ibid., 2:27.
coquettish women, judges, writers, and dandies. Baston’s novel reverses Mai’s previous objectification in a European setting: in this fictional account, the Europeans become, in turn, the objects of Omaï’s anthropological study. Omaï does not content himself with describing the European characters painted on the lenses, he also criticizes them. Omaï’s fascination with European material prowess is matched by his criticism of European moral decline. One lens is particularly striking: it shows “un Négociant qui fait la traite des Negres” [a merchant who trades Blacks]. Omaï is interrupted before he can comment on the image and has to postpone his presentation of “le monde civilisé” [the civilized people]. We can only speculate on the reason behind this ellipsis: it may be that Baston shied away from a sensitive issue in order to get his novel past the King’s censors. Regardless of the reason, though, it remains that the slave trade is presented as an integral part of civilized society. The juxtaposition of the lens with the phrase “le monde civilisé” implies, however, a moral condemnation of the slave trade, as subtle as this condemnation may be. A quintessentially European object made for entertainment, the magic lantern was an object of ridicule when it was gifted to the savage Other. In Baston’s novel, Omaï uses it to turn the lens back onto the Europeans, who become curiosities themselves and are found to be lacking. Nonetheless, Omaï does not only appropriate European objects, he also improves upon them and finds use in frivolous novelty items. Moreover, he brings morality to the material sphere by educating his compatriots and by inscribing “le secret du fer” [the secret of fire] in the constitution of the Polynesian

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73 Ibid., 2:18 through 2:27.
74 Ibid., 2:27.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 4:291.
archipelago to prevent destructive uses of metallurgy, such as the construction of weapons that plagued Europe’s battlefields.

However, before we conclude that Baston imagines that a truly utopian society can thrive only under the leadership of the Other, we need to take into account the very end of the novel, which sees Omaï fight off a violent Spanish colonial venture and embrace the peaceful message of Christianity. Baston does not lose faith in the superiority of Europe, but he rejects its widespread loose morals and its violent colonial ambitions. Nevertheless, Omaï’s fictional principles are in fact Baston’s real values. They are revealed to be Christian values with the arrival on the archipelago of a Catholic friar at the conclusion of the novel. Far from embodying the self-centered greed that traditionally characterizes colonization, the friar has come to Polynesia not to take from but to give to the Other. Baston chooses to use the verb “conquérir” [to conquer] to describe the missionary’s achievements: “conquérir spirituellement, c’est-à-dire de gagner à sa religion, ceux qu’on se promettoit de subjuguer par l’artifice ou par la force” [to conquer spiritually, which means to win to one’s religion those that we intended to subjugate by ruse or by force]. The verb “conquérir” is here stripped of its usual connotations of violence, as the link to religion aims at redeeming the term’s aggressive overtones and heralds a new type of conquest. Omaï’s transformation of Polynesia is finally achieved only after this spiritual encounter with Christianity. Only now is Polynesia truly civilized. Baston’s novel advocates therefore for a new form of colonialism, given that the author imagines Europe leading the Other with material and spiritual generosity, rather than with violent imposition and exploitation. In other words, in Narrations d’Omaï we witness the birth of the

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77 Ibid., 4:393; emphasis in the original.
dominant ideology in nineteenth-century imperialism—the civilizing mission of the Western world.

No matter how generous Baston’s motives seem to be, his text, *Narrations d’Omai*, reveals that this new colonial ideology is based on the objectification of the Other. By appropriating Mai’s identity and voice, as well as by re-appropriating his possessions, Baston intends to prove not simply the legitimacy of commercial colonialism but also the eagerness with which the Other supposedly requires and expects it. The genocidal consequences of such fiction having been amply documented, it is important to turn now to how reality rebutted Baston’s fantasy through the resistance that Mai and his European possessions exhibited to material colonialism.

**Mai and His Curiosities: Facing Reality**

Journals of British visitors to the Society Islands in the late eighteenth century all chronicle the failure of Mai’s European gifts to bring about much change upon his return to Polynesia. Rather, they emphasize that both the objects chosen for the Other and the Other himself resist the civilizing duty laid out for them. We know that Mai dies of natural causes in early 1780, about thirty months after his return from England, having valued his weapons above all other objects brought back from his voyage abroad. According to one of William Bligh’s journal entries from 1792, “Omai now became of consequence from the possession of three or four Muskets and some Ammunition.” Like Thrale Piozzi before him, Bligh expresses derision for a primitive culture in which “three or four” muskets and “some” ammunition are of such

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78 Bligh was a sailing master on the *Resolution* during Cook’s third voyage. He was also the infamous commander of the *Bounty*, whose crew mutinied on a breadfruit voyage in Polynesia in 1789. His notes on Mai were obtained during a second breadfruit voyage in the region (1791–1793). Entry for Monday, July 9, 1792; William Bligh, *Return to Tahiti: Bligh’s Second Breadfruit Voyage*, ed. Douglas L. Oliver (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 228.
consequence, but Mai—and his muskets—are instrumental in winning a war that Huahine wages against Bora Bora and Raiatea shortly after Cook has left him. James Morrison describes Mai’s success in battle in more detail:

His Arms and the Manner in which he used them made him Great in War, as he bore down all before him, and all who had timely notice fled at his Approach and when accouterd with his Helmet & Breastplate, & Mounted on Horse back they thought it impossible to hurt him, … and Victory always attended him and his Party.  

The image of a formidable Mai “accouterd with his Helmet & Breastplate,” keeping his compatriots in awe of his British weaponry, harks back to an archaic vision of warfare and is a far cry from the dissemination of modern civilization.

Mai’s more useful and more obviously civilizing objects do not fulfill their mission any better: in fact, they resist it. Mai’s garden and cattle, which were meant to teach European-style husbandry to Polynesians, are short-lived. As early as 1788, John Watts writes that he met with Hititi who “confirmed the report of [Mai’s] cattle, &c. having been destroyed.”  

Once again, Morrison provides more detail, relating that Mai’s “Garden was destroyd by the Hogs & Goats” and that “His Horse was killd soon after his landing by a Goat who Gored Him in the

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79 A Boatswain’s mate on board the Bounty, James Morrison lived in Tahiti after the mutiny until he was arrested by British forces in 1791 and brought back to England to be court-martialed. He wrote a detailed account of his life in Tahiti while in prison. He was later pardoned and returned to his naval career. See the journal entry for January 1791 (http://www.fatefulvoyage.com/morrison/morrisonHTahiti2.html; last accessed in January 2012).

80 John Watts first travelled to Polynesia on the Resolution during Cook’s third voyage. He was later a lieutenant on the Lady Perhyn, which carried a hundred female convicts to New South Wales to help found the first Australian colony in 1787. On the return voyage, the Lady Perhyn had to call at Tahiti in July 1788 because of an outbreak of scurvy. Watt’s notes on Mai date from this Tahitian stopover. See the journal entry for July 1788, in Arthur Phillip, The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay, ed. James Johnston Auchmuty (Sydney: Angus and Robertson/Royal Australian Historical Society, 1970), 335.
Belly which they knew no remedy for, and the only revenge he could have was to kill the Goat.\(^{81}\) The confusion and destruction that follow Mai’s return to Huahine with his European gifts is not only at odds with the original utilitarian purpose of the gifts: in an ironical turn of events, the gifts themselves seem to rebel against their civilizing mission, intent on destroying each other instead.

Having lost all usefulness, Mai’s belongings change status: no longer potential colonial tools, they become curiosities. After Mai’s death, his remaining British possessions are distributed among his friends. A chief receives the muskets, although they are “of no use being both disabled”; the rest was “devided and kept in different parts of the Island as Curiositys after His Death.”\(^{82}\) No more use is to be expected from these mere curiosities. In a reversal from the first European-Polynesian encounters analyzed earlier, curiosities are no longer artifacts collected from the South Seas to be displayed in Britain but British items kept as marvels in the South Seas. Their new status indicates that they are neither relevant nor useful to their new owners: just like Banks collected bark cloth not to wear it but to exhibit it, so do Mai’s compatriots hold on to his objects as trophies or souvenirs rather than make use of them.

It is precisely on this distinction between productive implements and superfluous curiosities that Protestant missionary William Ellis founds his critique of Mai and his patrons in the early nineteenth century. In his *Polynesian Researches*, Ellis presents Mai as a *savage* who

\(^{81}\) Morrison’s journal entry for January 1791 (online edition quoted above).

\(^{82}\) Ibid.
derived no benefits from his contact with Britain.\textsuperscript{83} Ellis, however, does not blame Mai as much as his English patrons, whom he holds responsible for the failure of this civilizing encounter. Even Cook, this “distinguished navigator,” is deemed “mistaken in the means he employed” to civilize Mai and his native region.\textsuperscript{84} Like the authors of Omiáh’s Farewell before him, Ellis contrasts the apparent generosity which presided over Mai’s gifts with their utilitarian value, noting that “the greater part of the presents was comparatively useless.”\textsuperscript{85} He repeatedly describes these presents as “mere objects of curiosity,” “trinkets,” or simply “curiosities,” while regretting that:

\begin{quote}
\textit{It does not appear that there was any implement of husbandry, or useful tool, included in the catalogue of his presents, though he landed with a coat of mail, a suit of armour, musket, pistols, cartouch-box, cutlasses, powder, and ball! Besides these, however, he was furnished with a portable organ, an electrical machine, fire-works, and numerous trinkets.}\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

Ellis disapproves of the military apparatus brought by Mai. The curiosity item has no value for him either: an emblem of the idle upper class that flourished in the modern era, it must give way to the utilitarian perspective of the bourgeois and missionary, symbolized by the utilitarian potential of the “implement of husbandry” and “useful tool.”

Although Ellis’s own agenda and position as a missionary lead him to place the blame on his civilized compatriots who should have known better, his narrative also betrays the

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\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 2:373.
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\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. Ellis later adds to this list of \textit{trinkets} “a jack-in-a-box” (Ibid., 2:370).
\end{flushright}
inherent resistance of objects against the purpose originally assigned to them. One object comes to epitomize both the European civilization and the resistance to its proselytism: the Bible. When he surveys what remains of Mai’s British possessions, Ellis writes: “Among the curiosities preserved by the young chief of Tahaa, there was an article I was very glad to see; it was a large quarto English Bible, with numerous coloured engravings, which were the only objects of attraction with the natives.” It is undeniable that the Bible was perceived as the quintessential civilizing object. It epitomizes the ultimate purpose of Europe’s imperial drive, the ideological colonization of the Other’s mind. As the word of God, it should be self-sufficient as a means of enlightenment. Ellis’s discovery, however, elicits mixed feelings: his joy at the sight of the Bible is framed by its status as one of the “curiosities,” whose interest now resides solely in its “numerous coloured engravings.” Through its contact with the Other, the Bible thus loses its authoritative status and becomes nothing but another object. Its divine word is erased to the benefit of the entertaining image.

In an important essay, Homi Bhabha discusses how “the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse.” He focuses on the example of “the holiest of books—the Bible—[which] bearing both the standard of the cross and the standard of empire finds itself strangely dismembered,” before giving the example of another missionary, who was writing from Bengal in 1817:

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87 Ibid., 2:370-1.


89 Ibid., 133.
Still everyone would gladly receive a Bible. And why?—that he may lay it up as a curiosity for a few pice; or use it for waste paper. Such it is well known has been the common fate of these copies of the Bible…. Some have been bartered in the markets, others have been thrown in snuff shops and used as wrapping paper.90

As was noted by Ellis as well, the first step in the downgrading of the value of the European holy book lies in lowering its status to a curiosity item. However, Bhabha’s example goes further in the demotion of the Bible: once it is disassembled, its pages do regain a utilitarian value, but it is of the lowest sort. From divine word to civilizational cornerstone to missionary tool to pretty curiosity to waste paper, the trajectory of the Bible illustrates the fluidity of an object’s value. Baston’s fictional Omaï immediately recognized in the Bible the absolute truth of humanity. In contrast, the Bibles in Ellis’s and Bhabha’s accounts symbolize the relative value of objects to their human context. Because it fails to take this fundamental subject–object relation into account, commercial colonialism is therefore predestined to fail in its peaceful form.

Conclusion

The critics of Mai’s gifts were right: these European artifacts would fail to civilize Polynesia. But their utilitarian rationale was wrong: an object’s civilizing capacity does not correlate with its apparent utility. On the one hand, frivolous gifts may be recast into successful civilizing tools, as Baston shows in his novel Narrations d’Omaï. On the other hand, the most useful items may lose their utility in a new setting and be relegated to the Other’s own cabinet of wonder. Mai’s gifts reveal that the faith in commercial colonialism is predicated on any object having an absolute function, independent of its context. Nonetheless, such premise is false as it ignores

90 Ibid.
the subject–object relation of utility and sees the Other only as a conveniently blank fictional character rather than as a real user. Unable to accept the relative value of their culture’s objects, Europeans blame the primitive Other for the failure of their civilizing mission. Having failed to spread their civilization peacefully through material culture, the Europeans would then turn to forceful imposition, and the ostensibly generous ideology of commercial colonialism would preside over some of the most violent colonial ventures of the nineteenth century.