Article

Mission sites as indigenous heritage in southern Vanuatu

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Journal of Social Archaeology

0(0) 1–26

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DOI: 10.1177/1469605314568251

jsa.sagepub.com

Abstract

Christian missions are often characterized as a physical expression of Western colonial power, institutions that were resisted by indigenous people in various ways. In Vanuatu, while there was indeed dramatic resistance to mission incursion, the success of Christianity in many places (for not everyone converted) developed from a series of complex entanglements between indigenous Melanesians and Christian missionaries. This is apparent in oral traditions and in the physical remains relating to mission encounters. Indigenous ni-Vanuatu see the archaeological remains of mission sites as an integral part of their heritage, rather than as relics of a foreign colonial past. This tendency relates to other aspects of missionary heritage as well, including museum collections and sacred texts. The historical archaeology of missions in Vanuatu and beyond can be best understood through the lens of colonial entanglement, destabilizing categorical oppositions such as colonizer–colonized, foreign–indigenous, and power–resistance.

Keywords

historical archaeology, Vanuatu, missions, heritage, churches, colonialism

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Introduction

For many people, the word “Melanesia” conjures up images of exotic islands with active volcanoes, lush jungles, and wild, half-naked natives who engage or recently engaged in cannibalism, black magic, and bizarre rituals. Even in the 21st century, so-called explorers have made mistaken claims of finding “never before contacted” tribes throughout the region, perpetuating myths and sensationalizing but simultaneously trivializing the lives of Melanesians (e.g., Williamson, 2004). This is despite clear evidence for thousands of years of cross-cultural contact in the region, and European contacts since the mid-1500s. One of the major problems with the representation of indigenous peoples in Western media is the idea that these “primitive” cultures are somehow outside of time or “without history” (Wolf, 1982), stuck with unchanging traditions, and lacking the progress that has been made in the West since the Industrial Revolution. Historical archaeology has a potentially important role to play in undermining this powerful contemporary myth, which continues to be used as an ideological prop for neocolonial projects of various sorts. Materials from Christian mission sites on the islands of Erromango, Tanna, and Aneityum in Vanuatu’s southern province of TAFEA provide a useful case in point. Standing at the intersection of heathenism and Christianity, indigeneity and modernity, colonialism and *kastom*, these sites show that Melanesians, rather than living in some kind of timeless primitive state, have always been adaptive, dynamic, and creative in dealing with various forms of cultural contact over a period that spans three millennia or more (see Spriggs, 1997; Terrell, 1998).

The historical anthropology of Christianity has at times been a tense subject, which nevertheless has produced profound insights into the entanglement of colonial missionaries, indigenous people, and religious belief. The tension stems from the perceived opposition of agnostic, secular, rational ethnographers seeking to document indigenous cultures against the faith-driven missionaries seeking to transform them. Missionaries were often the first long-term settlers among the exotic peoples whom anthropologists initially took as their subject matter. They were the first to learn local languages and to write them down. In many cases, they wrote early ethnological treatises (examples from the southern New Hebrides include Gray, 1892; Inglis, 1854; Watt, 1895), or were involved in sending ethnographic data to turn-of-the-century “armchair” anthropologists. While missionary sensitivity to and tolerance of indigenous cultures varied widely, they all shared the same project of eventual transformation of religious beliefs at minimum. At the other extreme in some cases, missionaries sought religious conversion accompanied by wholesale cultural replacement of indigenous forms with colonial ones. Critical reading of published and unpublished missionary texts, however, has uncovered the value of these sources for understanding culture change during the colonial era. Historical anthropology of mission sources has helped to reveal the differences between the ideal or professed forms of conversion, and the actual ways that indigenous peoples engaged with Christianity, as well as evidence for everyday life and

interactions in mission space (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff, 1986; Douglas, 2001; Jolly and Macintyre, 1989; Keane, 2007; Peel, 1995; Robbins, 2014).

What has emerged is something of a consensus that Christian conversion in colonial settings was not simply a matter of the imposition of beliefs through a monolithic Western “power”. Rather, Christianity was interpreted in myriad ways in local settings. It was debated, avoided, resisted, remixed, used, and transformed within local communities. At the same time, the ideals of Christian domesticity as experienced by Protestant missionary families especially were challenged by the realities of everyday life in remote stations. Related to this was the gendering of labor relations in exotic settings, which missionaries and especially mission wives often found profoundly disturbing (for Melanesian examples, see Jolly, 1992; Langmore, 1989). The material basis for the domestic and gendered aspects of mission encounters is particularly relevant here, as it is in the material domain that archaeological evidence becomes salient to the debate (e.g., Flexner, 2013; Spriggs, 1985, 1993). Beyond the domestic sphere, though, the heritage of mission encounters and the dynamics of indigenous conversion can also be explored through the materiality of ritual objects. This goes for putatively “Christian” objects, such as sacred books and church architecture, as well as for indigenous ritual objects, such as sacred stones that often wound up in Western museums through the collecting activities of missionaries. What the historical archaeology of mission heritage shows is the deep entanglement of people, things, and ideas in Christian colonial settings. Far from being a marker of “inauthentic” native culture shaped by colonialism (a deeply flawed way of understanding colonialism anyway, see Flexner, 2014a), Christianity was and remains an integral part of the identities of Melanesian people, a dynamic that was shaped in many ways by the exchange of objects between missionaries and islanders.

Kastom and Christianity in Vanuatu

Vanuatu is a nation comprising 86 islands, inhabited by about 235,000 people who speak over 100 distinct languages. The group was first given the colonial name of the New Hebrides by James Cook in 1774, which stuck until independence in 1980. Below, we will use the name New Hebrides when discussing the colonial period, and Vanuatu in reference to the present. The term ni-Vanuatu refers to the country’s indigenous Melanesian inhabitants. The remarkable linguistic diversity of these islands is matched by diversity of cultural practices, which is nonetheless tied together by certain common elements, notably agricultural productivity based on a suite of Oceanic crops, including yams, taro, bananas, and sugarcane, and the drinking of kava, an intoxicating beverage made from the root of the *Piper methysticum* plant (Siméoni and Lebot, 2014). Vanuatu is home to a great variety of indigenous rituals, from the striking *nagol* or land dive of Pentecost Island, to the John Frum cargo cult of Tanna (e.g., Jolly, 1994; Lindstrom, 1993; Tabani, 2010). Upon achieving independence, the national government of Vanuatu made *kastom*, or traditional indigenous practices, a central aspect of national identity

(though the politics of this are complex and contested, see e.g., Forsyth, 2009; Lindstrom, 1982). Simultaneously, the most recent census in 2009 reports that at least 86% of the small country's population (roughly 235,000), of which the vast majority are indigenous ni-Vanuatu, are Christians of one kind or another (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009: 25; for comparison, the United States comes in at 76% Christian, U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Australia at 61%, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; and the United Kingdom at 59%, Office of National Statistics, 2013).

If the landscapes of national capitals are spatial reflections of power relations (e.g., Leone, 2005: 83–110), then Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, makes an important point, as the Parliament building is flanked on one side by the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (Cultural Centre) and National Council of Chiefs—both on higher ground—and nearby are the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu. High ground is associated with power and sacredness in Pacific cultures, and the order in terms of elevation goes in this case: Council of Chiefs, Cultural Centre, Parliament, Church. People in Vanuatu thus seem to embrace traditional life along with Christianity. In our fieldwork experiences, we have found that people will unironically express their sincere Christian faith, and then invite visitors for a traditionally prepared shell of kava, or for the lucky researcher in some villages, show off the magic stones that make the yams and breadfruit grow. Further, despite a century and a half of missionary presence and the recent incursion of various nongovernmental organizations, many ni-Vanuatu still see supernatural causes at work in instances of illness or death (see below). In many cases, indigenous cosmologies and mythical figures have been entangled in complex syncretic traditions in relation to the Christian God, as has been found for the trickster figure Tagaro on Raga (North Pentecost; see Taylor, 2010). Far from being a recent development, these systems of parallel belief appear to be the result of a long historical trajectory beginning in the late 1830s and 1840s when the first missionaries arrived in the New Hebrides (Flexner, 2013; Miller, 1978, 1981).

The southern islands of TAFEA province in Vanuatu are Tanna, Aneityum, Futuna, Erromango, and Aniwa (Figure 1). These islands are related by language, exchange networks, supernatural beliefs, notably the cult of “Mwatiktiki,” chiefly organization, and agricultural exchange rituals (e.g. Guiart, 1956; Humphreys, 1926; Spriggs, 1986; Spriggs and Wickler, 1989). Aniwa and Futuna stand out as Polynesian outliers, but nonetheless show local influences, especially from Tanna (see Capell, 1958). Land divisions are called local variants of the word “canoe” on Tanna (*niko*), Erromango (*lo*), and Aneityum (*nelcau*). There is of course variability within the region as well. Each island has its own forms of ritual practice, objects, and supernatural beings, such as the Tannese *toka*, an annual island-wide dance (e.g., Bonnemaïson, 1994: 148–150; Guiart, 1956: 24–25), and the Erromangan *nevsem* peacekeeping ceremony (Naupa, 2011: 24–26). The earliest mission encounters in the New Hebrides were centred in the southern islands, especially Aneityum that served as the stronghold of the Presbyterian mission from the 1840s onward (see below).

Figure 1. Islands of TAFEA province, Vanuatu, including the locations of recently surveyed and excavated mission stations.

A seminal event in the history of Christianity in the New Hebrides occurred in 1839, when John Williams and James Harris were murdered on a beach at Dillon's Bay, on Erromango. Williams and Harris were unaware of a taboo blocking white people from the island, put in place after a local chief's sons were murdered by an Australian-based trader. After insisting on proceeding inland in the hopes of meeting a chief (and thus inadvertently breaking this taboo), Williams and Harris were pursued by local warriors and killed with clubs while attempting to escape back to the mission ship. Their bodies were then divided up and apparently ritually eaten by local chiefs (e.g., Robertson, 1902: 51–54; for an archaeological perspective, see Flexner, 2014b). This event shocked those associated with churches and missions throughout the world. The deaths of Williams and Harris became symbolic of a perceived dire need for mission work in an area where people were believed to live in a constant state of fear, warfare, cannibalism, black magic, and death (e.g., American Sunday School Union, 1844; Copeland, 1878). The Presbyterian Church took up the call to “bring light to the dark isles” of the New Hebrides. The deaths of additional missionaries on Erromango, as well as the hostility of Tannese people toward missionaries, rather than discouraging mission work, seemed if anything to inspire yet more missionary fervor (Gordon, 1863; Miller, 1978; Robertson, 1902).

Until the 1870s, Aneityum was basically the only island in the New Hebrides to have a successful long-term mission station, with John Geddie residing on the island from 1848 (Patterson, 1882). Elsewhere, the work of conversion was slow going and hard fought (e.g. Adams, 1984). In addition to direct, and at times violent, confrontations, indigenous people attempted to undermine mission work by either blocking the settlement of missionaries (Paton, 1903) or giving missionaries land that was thought to be uninhabitable because it was poisoned or inhabited by dangerous spirits, as happened to John G. Paton on Aniwa and the Watts at Port Resolution, Tanna (Paton, 1907; Watt, 1896; see below for an example from Aneityum). In any case, the eventual success of Presbyterian missionaries in the New Hebrides was not exactly a sudden triumph of the Gospels. Rather, conversion followed from dogged persistence on the part of the missionaries, including Polynesian teachers from Samoa and Rarotonga (e.g., Liua'ana, 1996). Indigenous agency was central to these interactions as local people ultimately decided whether the road would be opened for missionaries to arrive, and large-scale conversion often only occurred at the behest of local chiefs, as with Lomai and Iavis on west Tanna (Paton, 1903). Further, indigenous Melanesian teachers would join the cause from early on, especially the Aneityumese under Geddie (e.g., Miller, 1978: 37).

Other early missionaries in the New Hebrides came from the Anglican Melanesian Mission, which made an annual circuit around Melanesia, bringing promising youths to a mission school to learn literacy, with a heavy emphasis on scripture, Western-style agriculture, and other “useful arts.” The school was initially located at Mission Bay, near Auckland, New Zealand, but was later moved closer to the equator at St. Barnabas College on Norfolk Island, since the New Zealand climate was found to be too cold for Melanesian constitutions

(Armstrong, 1900; Hilliard, 1978; Ross, 1983). The Anglican and Presbyterian missions often worked together, agreeing to spread their work among the islands while sharing information as well as resources in pursuit of a perceived higher cause (Miller, 1978: 145). In contrast, the missionary activities of the Catholic Church usually met with marked disapproval from the entrenched Protestant missionaries, as these sectarian rivalries paralleled the Anglo-French imperial rivalry in the Pacific. Needless to say, this did not deter Catholic missionaries from settling in the New Hebrides (Bonnemaison, 1994: 53, 67–77). Despite widespread conversion to Christianity early in the 20th century, mission activity continues through the present in Vanuatu, most recently among contemporary Evangelical churches, notably American sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, continuing the struggle over finding converts for the “right” kind of Christianity.

Primary sources for the New Hebrides Missions

Missionaries left behind a variety of documentary sources, from heroic narratives in books meant to inspire charitable donations for the mission, to private correspondence offering a more constrained and arguably more realistic perspective on missionary experiences, to documents of land sales by native peoples for mission premises, to photographs and lantern slides, which are preserved in libraries and archives. These have provided the primary sources used in the majority of histories of Christianity in the New Hebrides. Besides biographical accounts (e.g. Paton, 1903, 1907; Patterson, 1882; Robertson, 1902; Watt, 1896), missionaries sometimes wrote detailed ethnological accounts of their experiences in the islands (e.g., Inglis, 1854; Watt, 1895). While a rich source of information on the topic, written sources must be read with a critical eye, remembering the specific historical and political circumstances in which they were produced. This is especially true of the published missionary biographies and autobiographies, which were often hagiographic accounts of the great deeds done in the name of spreading the Gospel in the face of heathenism among populations of violent, unpredictable natives.

In addition to written accounts, missionaries often collected native objects as “curiosities,” which are preserved in museum collections (Lawson, 1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2005; Smith, 1997, 2005). Ironically, museum collections housed outside of Vanuatu have provided one of the best sources of information on local material culture from the mission era, as many indigenous objects made of organic material do not usually preserve archaeologically. The collections of the National Museum of Vanuatu in Port Vila, while significant, hold very few 19th-century objects compared to museums abroad. Missionaries may have collected these things as traces of what they believed to be a “disappearing” native culture. Today, we recognize that *kastom* remains strong in Vanuatu, but museum artifacts often provide rare examples of traditional items that can fill in some important parts of the story of mission encounters in Vanuatu. In addition, part of ongoing research involves reconnecting these objects with their source communities, which bolsters

the interpretation of objects in collections, and reconnects local people with important components of their heritage, now housed in collections around the world. Archives and museum collections relating to the early mission period in Vanuatu are concentrated primarily in Scotland and areas with significant Scottish Presbyterian populations, notably Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Table 1).

While a systematic analysis of Flexner's museum research in various collections is forthcoming, a few diagnostic object types are worth noting briefly here. First, the majority of objects collected appear to relate to warfare, primarily arrows but also including bows, spears, and clubs of various types, presumably reflecting the missionaries' interest in representing their potential converts as "warlike" in nature. The arrows from southern Vanuatu have a distinctive form, being shaped of unfletched cane or reed with a thin plant fiber cord wrapped around the base and a hardwood point embedded in the other side. The points range from plain and conical, to square in cross-section with a triangular point, to complex,

Table 1. Principal archives and museum collections related to New Hebrides Missions.

Collection	Country
Australian Museum	Australia
National Library of Australia	Australia
State Library of New South Wales	Australia
Atlantic Theological Seminary	Canada
New Brunswick Museum	Canada
Nova Scotia Archives	Canada
Nova Scotia Museum	Canada
Redpath Museum	Canada
Royal Ontario Museum	Canada
Auckland Museum	New Zealand
Hocken Library, The University of Otago	New Zealand
Knox College Archives of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand	New Zealand
Otago Museum	New Zealand
Western Pacific Archives, the University of Auckland	New Zealand
Aberdeen University	Scotland
Glasgow Museum	Scotland
Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow	Scotland
National Library of Scotland	Scotland
National Museum of Scotland	Scotland
Perth Museum and Art Gallery	Scotland
Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (Cultural Centre)/Nasonal Akaev (National Archive)	Vanuatu

featuring the square cross-section triangular point with small barbs running the length of the point on the vertical axes of the square section. Flexner has identified examples of Erromangan clubs in a number of collections, specifically the *netnivri*, *novwan*, and *telughomti* noted in early 20th-century ethnographic account of the island (Humphreys, 1926: 163–164). The *telughomti*, or star-shaped club, is described as the “chef d’oeuvre” of Erromangan men’s craft. If this is true, the corresponding material for Erromangan women is *nemasitse*, tapa or bark cloth (*nemas* means “cloth” and *itse* means “beaten” or “pounded” in Erromangan; Lawson, 2001: 76). The best examples of this are to be found in Canadian collections, primarily the Redpath Museum and the Nova Scotia Museum. Barkcloth pounders (*neko* in Erromangan; Lawson, 2001: 76) are a related object of great importance, and the best collection of these is probably that at the Nova Scotia Museum, though there are several other collections that hold one or more *neko*.

There are also objects that relate more specifically to supernatural and ritual activities, in some cases probably sent home by the missionaries as a way of nullifying their power through distance and loss of context. Perhaps in some cases these stones were offered to the missionaries by their owners as a sign of their friendship or sincere conversion. A number of examples of Erromangan *navela*, stone money, occur in museum collections, which were a crucial exchange object on that island, especially at the chiefly level (Humphreys, 1926: 171–172). There are also various sacred stones from Aneityum and Tanna, including a “death stone” held in the Otago Museum that may relate to the activities of *Nuruker*, Tannese sorcerers who were greatly feared for their black magic. Such stones were used by *Nuruker* to cause illness or death through contact with objects relating to the body, especially food scraps. A different class of stones, called *navuetinuh* or *narak* could be used to cause rain and crop growth (Bonnemaison, 1994: 172–178; Guiart, 1956: 69–72; Humphreys, 1926: 71–73). In one of the attempts at mission settlement on Tanna in the late 1850s, missionaries identified the *Nuruker* as the enemy to be defeated, in attempting to drive out the black magic with the light of the Gospel. Ironically, in explaining to the Tannese that only the Christian God caused illness, the missionaries wound up identified as sorcerers themselves, resulting in violent backlash following epidemics and natural disasters, and the eventual collapse of the mission in 1862, when the Patons and Mathesons were forced to flee for their lives to Aneityum (Adams, 1984).

Following the idea that mission heritage also fits into the broader category of *kastom*, local people have expressed great interest in rediscovering early translations of scripture into various local languages. Historically, local people often believed that Christian missionaries worshipped the Bible as an object, rather than the words inside of it, a theological mistake that the missionaries would have found disturbing (see Keane, 2007). The 1881 printing of *Acts of Apostles* in the Kwamera language of south Tanna from the printing press run by William Watt on Tanna is one such text, and there are others held in libraries in Australia and New Zealand. As will be seen in the cases below, interest in objects is not so much about recovering a lost history valued for its temporal distance, but about

reconnecting living traditions with the ways of the ancestors. This includes practices the missionaries attempted to eliminate as examples of heathenism, even by living ni-Vanuatu who identify as Christians.

Field research on archaeological sites in Vanuatu has provided a critical line of evidence about early encounters between missionaries and Melanesians for comparison with archival and museum sources (Flexner, 2013). As archaeologists (among others) have been pointing out for a long time now, the written record is prone to all kinds of biases, intentional and otherwise. While we recognize that archaeological remains are not exactly an objective source of historical truth, being subject to other kinds of interpretive and preservation bias (though archaeologists have sophisticated methods and theories to help us understand these), they do provide a critical source of information about literate societies, especially when we are interested in understanding people who appear only marginally in written sources. Ultimately, historical archaeology is at its best when archaeologists work back and forth across multiple lines of evidence to construct critical narratives about colonialism as it was experienced by living people in the past (e.g., Beaudry, 1988; Flexner, 2014a; Gosden, 2004; Hall, 2000; Murray, 2004; Orser, 1996, 2010). This is the approach we use for understanding mission heritage from the New Hebrides.

Vanuatu is home to a rich variety of sites and features related to mission activity, from the stone ruins of church and house sites, to petroglyphs documenting indigenous reckonings of colonial encounters (Figure 2). Archaeologists are only beginning to explore these sites, though initial insights have been fascinating (see below; Flexner, 2013, 2014c; Spriggs, 1985, 2007). Local oral histories also record many details of events not otherwise written down, and have been an important part of fieldwork endeavors alongside more standard mapping, excavation, and artifact analysis (Flexner, 2014b). Indigenous social memory is replete with valuable information about mission history, especially the roles of local chiefs who were often important church elders as more and more of the population converted. Indigenous people are keenly interested in preserving these oral histories as well as the physical remains of mission sites. Flexner's current project on Tanna and Erromango was initiated at the invitation of local people because of a concern that this knowledge and these sites were in danger of being lost. Research led by Spriggs and Bedford on Aneityum is part of an ongoing, long-term collaboration between archaeologists and local people on that island over a period spanning nearly 40 years. The preservation of mission heritage in Vanuatu is primarily an indigenous concern, as colonial sites associated with church history are seen as an integral part of local life through the present.

Sacred landscapes and social memories

One of the valuable insights of current research on mission archaeology in Vanuatu has been the deep connection between social memories of particular events and places on the landscape (this has also been noted for Vanuatu's precontact

Figure 2. Archaeological remains relating to mission encounters in Vanuatu: (a) Stone ruins of a mission house, Potnuma, Erromango; (b) Prefabricated church, Lenakel, Tanna; (c) Stone mound from a native village, Kwamera, Tanna; (d) Petroglyph field said to have been created by an early native convert, Port Narvin, Erromango.

archaeology, see Garanger, 1972, 1996; Wilson, 1999). At Dillon's Bay, on western Erromango, local informants mark the martyrdom of certain missionaries (see above) with prominent environmental features. Particular trees and rock formations are used in recounting the story of John Williams and James Harris' ill-fated day on the island. George and Ellen Gordon, who died martyrs' deaths at Dillon's Bay in 1861, are similarly memorialized, notably on a stone said to preserve George's bloody footprint as he was fleeing his assailants, apparently a reference to Matthew 16:18, "...on this rock I will build my church." Port Narvin, on eastern Erromango, was the site of the island's last missionary martyr, James Gordon, in 1872. An upright stone near the mission house (Figure 2(a)) is said to mark the spot where James Gordon's blood pooled after he was killed. Nearby, a petroglyph field consisting of linear arrangements of small pecked cupules records the story of SouSou, an early convert to the church who often defended his faith with a club (Figure 2(d)). Each cupule is said to record one of SouSou's battles. To the north of James Gordon's house, his murderer Nerimpau was said to have been killed by Novolu, one of the local converts. The tree where Nerimpau's body was hung after this revenge killing is *tabu* to this day, polluted because it touched the body of someone who committed an evil act. To touch the tree causes illness and death, materializing the mixture of tragic early church history with indigenous beliefs regarding pollution and black magic.

Notwithstanding the interesting material relating to particular dramatic events, archaeological remains generally speak more to the dynamics of everyday life. One of the most promising sites for understanding indigenous life during the mission period consists of a set of stone enclosures at a place called Kwaraka, in south Tanna just northeast of the settlement of Kwamera. Local informants remember these remains as the village of a chief named Yeni Iarisi, who lived there during the middle of the 19th century (Figure 3). Iarisi is said to have traveled to Aneityum before the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries on Tanna, following an old *kastom* "road" connecting the two islands by sea. There, Iarisi met John Geddie, the Aneityum missionary, or one of his Aneityumese teachers, and after some discussion, Iarisi decided to bring the Gospel back to south Tanna. Notably, missionary accounts suggest Iarisi was motivated more by the possibility of material wealth than by a sincere spiritual interest in Christianity (Gordon, 1863: 127–128). The specific location of Iarisi's settlement was Kwaraka. Eventually, because of friction within the village relating to the new beliefs, the converts built a small, separate living enclosure at a place called New Kwaraka or Anuikaraka. Anuikaraka is also the location where the first Samoan teachers landed on Tanna (Miller, 1978: 37). The core settlement at Kwaraka and Anuikaraka consists of stone mounds, enclosures, and walls, including the canoe mound where Iarisi's canoe *Paru* was kept when not at sea (Figure 2(c)). During survey, local informants pointed out some important *kastom* sites in the area dating to Iarisi's time, including sacred stones relating to the local "yam god" Nokwenuk and a stone related to women's rituals. Work on Kwaraka and New Kwaraka is ongoing, and will doubtless provide valuable information about the indigenous experience of conversion without

continuous European missionary presence. As an initial interpretation, this place and the associated oral traditions reflect a continuing refrain in the story of conversion in the New Hebrides: what we are seeing is an indigenization of Christianity, rather than the other way around.

Turning to the mission stations themselves, a variety of patterns emerge that reinforce the impression that indigenous people incorporated Christianity into their lives on their own terms (Flexner, 2013). Here, we will explore church architecture specifically, and the ways that it might have been interpreted and inhabited by indigenous people in the New Hebrides. Churches took on a variety of forms across the New Hebrides, often starting as simple structures of native thatch that served the purpose of church, warehouse, and sleeping quarters into which

Figure 3. Map of Kwaraka, a Tannese village inhabited during an early period of missionary contacts.

missionaries moved (e.g., Paton, 1907: 129; Robertson, 1902: 251; Watt, 1896: 75). When time and resources were available in promising mission fields, churches were often constructed of lime mortar or imported timber. A similar pattern of worship, moving from open air spaces, to temporary structures, to more permanent church buildings has been observed for nonconformist “home missions” in Great Britain (Petts, 2011).

Adjustments of missionary practice frequently had to be made to accommodate local beliefs, especially in the early stages of missionization. John Geddie on Aneityum recounted an initially positive reception of his settlement there turning menacing without any apparent reason. Upon enquiry, he found out that he had been sold a piece of land to build his first small church on because it was a sacred ground and so of little use to its proprietor. But his construction on it had angered the local sacred men, not least because the fence which the missionary had built around it was blocking one of the paths to the sea of some local spirits (*natmass*) who resided on the hill behind the mission premises. The missionary agreed to remove his fence and peace was restored between the parties, with a local “man who rules the seas” presenting Geddie with some taro to close the deal (quoted in Patterson, 1882: 186). As Patterson observed: “...where the demand is founded on their ideas of right, even though blended with superstitious notions, it is in every way proper to yield to them” (Patterson, 1882: 187). In this case, the initiative in shaping the landscape was certainly with the local people and their spirits rather than the missionary and his God. The spirit path in question is still pointed out today by knowledgeable Aneityumese.

At Anelcauhat on Aneityum, the first permanent mission station in the New Hebrides, John Geddie eventually built a monumental stone and lime mortar church, measuring roughly 30 m by 12.5 m, which was opened in April 1860 after an 18-month construction period. It would have been one of the largest masonry structures in all of Melanesia at the time (Figure 4). Indeed Geddie rather grandly compared it to the “King’s Church” (Kawaihao) in Honolulu, Hawaii. There are two entrances on the western wall, possibly one at the front for Geddie and any other clergy and their families, and one at the back for the local congregation, though this has yet to be determined with certainty. Along the north and south walls are three arched windows, and on the east wall were seven window openings, which appear to have been rectangular. The windows were brought from Sydney, paid for with 60 logs cut in the bush by the local population (Patterson, 1882: 431). Missionary John Geddie wrote, “The amount of labour expended on it can hardly be conceived by persons at home, where every facility for such an undertaking is enjoyed. The stones were all carried by the natives, and some of them were so large that it required sixty men to move them to their destination. They were quarried near the building, otherwise we would not have undertaken the work” (quoted in Patterson, 1882: 431).

An earlier manifestation of the church in 1852 was a wattle and lime plaster construction, just over half the size of the 1860 version but incorporating large wooden beams transported from 2 to 3 miles away. Patterson writes, “The bringing

Figure 4. Corner of the imposing ruins of the lime mortar church at Anelcauhat, Aneityum, which would have been one of the largest buildings in Melanesia at the time it was built.

of the large beams was a scene of excitement. Poles were thrust under them, to which a number of men were appointed, and at a given signal, the whole was lifted shoulder high, a chief standing on top of it, and then, with others blowing conchs, and the women and children making various noisy demonstrations, the whole moved forward” (Patterson, 1882: 343; Figure 5). These examples amply demonstrate that although the missionary directed the work, it was the local people who built the churches and other structures, usually with tremendous effort involving much of the population. It is no wonder that ni-Vanuatu feel a sense of ownership of the remains of these mission sites. The church at Anelcauhat was built in the most stable and oldest mission station in the New Hebrides, which was established in 1848 and served regularly as a headquarters and retreat for the missionaries (Miller, 1981: 3–12; Patterson, 1882). This structure and Geddie’s stone and mortar house, constructed in 1852–1853 and also still standing to roof height (Patterson, 1882: 345), are very important sites for Vanuatu’s mission heritage. The recent discovery of c.3000-year-old Lapita pottery on the mission grounds makes Anelcauhat one of the most significant archaeological locations in southern Vanuatu.

West Tanna, in contrast to Aneityum, was not settled permanently by missionaries until the late 1890s, and then only once local chiefs agreed to their presence.

NATIVES OF ANELCAUHAT CARRYING TIMBER TO BUILD A CHURCH.

Figure 5. Moving the large beams for the 1852 Anelcauhat Church (from Murray 1874: 99).

Documentary (Paton, 1903) and oral sources indicate that the acceptance of missionaries was seen as a way to end the endemic warfare that was causing major social upheaval at the time, partly due to the introduction of firearms. Eventually, a permanent mission presence was established at Lenakel, west Tanna, growing to include a large prefabricated church built from a kit imported from Australia, a “model village” at Isini (a local orthography of Sydney, from where the church originated), and a hospital (Miller, 1986). The growing power of the Presbyterian church eventually resulted in abuses, notably the occasionally violent repression of traditional dances and kava drinking both by European missionaries and indigenous church elders. These abuses were likely in large part responsible for the solidification of an oppositional *kastom* movement that sought to return Tannese to their traditional ways of life, and possibly also the establishment of the John Frum “cargo cult” (Bonnemaison, 1994: 201–219; see also Lindstrom, 1993: 81–83). Of course, there are also those whose ancestors avoided any real involvement with the mission as much as possible in the first place, maintaining *kastom* the whole time in parallel to these surrounding transformations of tradition.

Nonetheless, a substantial church building was erected in Lenakel, and its standing remains are deeply significant for many, perhaps most Tannese today, as well as people from throughout TAFEA (Flexner et al., 2012). Following patterns of indigenous labor being integral to church-building projects, local people, led by the chiefs Iavis, Lomai, and Titonga, shifted between 3500 and 4000 cubic meters of earth to cut a terrace into the hillside on which the Lenakel church was built (see Flexner, 2014b). The currently standing church at Lenakel on west Tanna is a prefabricated timber structure from the Sydney firm Saxton Binns, and was built

Figure 6. The prefabricated timber church at Lenakel, dating to 1912.

in 1912 (Figures 1b and 6). It partly incorporates and overlies the foundation of two earlier churches on the site, including a T-shaped structure built in 1904 that was destroyed by a cyclone on Good Friday in 1910. During construction, the frame of the new church was once more destroyed by a cyclone, and evidence of damaged top plates repurposed as vertical supports in the attic may reflect this. The structure incorporates materials and techniques from throughout the British Empire, including a corrugated metal roof and door locks from England. Timbers were sourced from Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe. At the same time, the Lenakel church was constructed almost entirely with native labor. Tannese church elders organized and led much of the building work, including production of lime mortar for the foundation. The building is a nexus of global and local forces from this period of mission history (Flexner et al., in press).

Ironically, after standing for over 100 years, the Lenakel church is once more threatened by the seasonal storms that move through the western Pacific every year. A combination of termite damage and neglect has greatly weakened the structure. Out of concern for the condition of the building, a group of local chiefs began searching for people who might be able to help preserve the 1912 church in Lenakel, beginning with archaeologists, who have documented the site

in great detail between 2011 and 2013 (Flexner et al., in press). This site is extremely significant for local people. It was still in use in 2000, at which point the floor became so damaged as to be unusable. Thus, many local people have active memories of the church, in addition to oral histories dating to the mission period. The 1912 church was the site of regular services as well as major holidays and other events, including important political events, such as the debates over independence on Tanna in the 1970s, sometimes bringing people not only from around the island, but throughout TAFEA province.

One fascinating detail that emerged from talking to local people is that while this church structure follows a western plan, it was inhabited in distinctly indigenous ways. Within the cruciform structure, adult men sat in the north transept, adult women in the nave to the east, and children and young mothers in the south transept according to local gendered spatial practices (as opposed to the more typical Western pattern of nuclear families sitting in their own pews), with the sanctuary occupying the western end of the church. This pattern of having a “men’s side” and “women’s side” to Christian church buildings is consistent through the present, and can be observed during Sunday services throughout Vanuatu. Again, this story shows the strength of combining local oral histories with archaeology, as we can learn something about the ritualized use of space as Melanesian people-shaped Christian practices to fit local gender norms. Missionaries were deeply concerned about the “degraded” position of women in the New Hebrides, especially their centrality in carrying out manual labor, which was considered unwomanly (e.g., Jolly, 1992). In some ways, the missionaries were able to alter certain patterns of gendered behavior, in the long run stamping out infanticide and widow strangulation and in some ways rendering women more “domestic” (though this is complicated, see Douglas, 2001: 47; Jolly, 1992; Spriggs, 1993). However, certain kinds of gendered behavior remain consistent through the present, and the separation of genders in the sacred spaces of Christian churches remains a Melanesian challenge to Western domestic ideals.

Conclusions: Mission sites as indigenous heritage

Archaeologists often talk about mission sites as an expression of imperial ambition, outposts on the edges of Empire that represent the incursion of European power into the colonial world (e.g., Lightfoot, 2005; Walthall and Benchley, 1987). This was certainly often the case, especially where indigenous people were used as laborers for larger mission operations. In the Pacific, the contours of sect and empire often intersected, as seen in Anglo-French rivalries played out through Catholic and Protestant mission activities (see above; for a similar example from Hawaii, see Daws, 1968: 94–96, 102–103). Protestant missionaries believed that the transformation of religious beliefs was to be accompanied by external changes in everyday habits, dress, and material culture, among other things, to more “civilized” forms, which were exemplified by the missionaries themselves (Lydon, 2009; Middleton, 2008; Smith, 2014). Missionaries in the New Hebrides probably did at

times see the transformation of indigenous people into better potential colonial subjects as part of their work, though this was a complicated dynamic (Flexner, 2013, 2014c). We suggest that Christianity was indigenized in the New Hebrides by Melanesian islanders as much as natives were converted by missionaries. Local people throughout the New Hebrides appear to have determined when, where, and how missionaries were able to settle, and conversion largely followed indigenous power structures through the authority of the chiefs. Sissons (2014) has noted similar patterns of adapting Christianity to indigenous ritual *habitus*, a process he terms “rituopraxis,” in Polynesia.

Christianity in the New Hebrides was adapted according to local habits and preferences, and some of the aspects of “civilization” on offer from the missionaries, such as wage labor and a consumer mindset, were much less enthusiastically adopted than the religious beliefs themselves. Nor is the story of religious change in the New Hebrides a triumph of the Gospels that resulted in the near-universal conversion of ni-Vanuatu today. Indigenous supernatural beliefs, practices, and relationships continue to persist alongside the new religion, and there is an ongoing interest in maintaining and even reviving many aspects of *kastom*. Simultaneously, there are many signs that historically and at present, Melanesian Christians were and are sincere in their expressions of belief. The copresence of these phenomena is troubling to an old anthropological paradigm that separated “authentic” traditional islanders from the “colonized” Christian converts. However, in light of a more critically aware historical anthropology of Christianity, this makes perfect sense, as in many cases indigenous people converted while simultaneously holding on to their beliefs more or less overtly. Thus, Christian conversion in Melanesia was not a matter of “out with the old, in with the new,” but “in with the new and the old.”

The way that indigenous people in Vanuatu think of mission heritage is a legacy of this dynamic. Indigenous interest in the tangible and intangible forms of mission “heritage” in Vanuatu is not so much about the kinds of Western concerns focusing on preservation or conservation of a precious resource from a past we can never revisit. Rather, for the islander communities on Tanna, Erromango and Aneityum, heritage is about connecting living generations with material from a past that has never completely gone. As Lindstrom (2011: 146) notes about Tannese time reckoning in the Nafé language of the Kwamera area, “the word for the day after tomorrow (*neis*) is the same as the word for the day before yesterday, and the word for indefinite future (*kwumweisin*) is the same for the indefinite past.” The “historicity” (see Ballard, 2014) of these materials within their Melanesian context, that is, their performative or evocative aspects in relation to the past, destabilizes the boundary between present and past that heritage creates and then seeks to bridge.

Walking around southern Vanuatu’s mission landscapes with local people, we commonly encounter places where living people find sudden and immediate connections with the people and events that happened in the “*taem blong bifo*” (Bislama, or Vanuatu pidgin for “the past”). Perhaps for Aneityumese,

Erromangans, and Tannese, there is no inviolable boundary between past and present, only an extant (if not completely known) whole to which these and other archaeological and historical materials can contribute. This is where translation of *kastom* needs to go beyond simply “traditional culture.” *Kastom* does not come from a static past where tradition lives, separated from the colonial or post-colonial present and future. If we take *kastom* as always evolving, emerging, and present, itself a historical entity, it makes perfect sense that ni-Vanuatu would blend Christian and “heathen” places, objects, and practices in their understanding of heritage.

For ni-Vanuatu living in TAFEA today, mission sites *are* indigenous heritage, a pattern that has also been noted for some Aboriginal groups in Australia (McNiven and Russell, 2005: 226–227). Local people are actively working to preserve mission sites not because they represent the heritage of outsiders, but because they are places that preserve the memories of indigenous people and materialize their own considerable involvement in church history. These memories include both those who avoided or directly opposed the church, and those local elders who were central to its success. Of course, globalization is part of this story, but it is interpreted primarily according to local frames of reference. Ni-Vanuatu do not necessarily make an opposition between Christianity and *kastom*, though there is surely debate about this. Many ni-Vanuatu see the former as an integral part of the latter, since indigenous people actively chose Christianity during the colonial period. This is a useful challenge to essentialist models for heritage that assume there is a division between “indigenous” and “colonial” sites (see also Flexner, 2014a; Lydon and Burns, 2010). In Vanuatu, these are not separate categories, but two sides of the same coin.

In looking to the future, this integration of colonial and indigenous heritage is identified by ni-Vanuatu as absolutely crucial to the plausibility of success and sustainability for their island cultures. This is something we observe in working with local communities to document the material aspects of their past deemed particularly relevant (and not just in Vanuatu, see Spriggs, 1997: 286–291). That said, it is not up to us as foreign academic researchers to speak for ni-Vanuatu about the best ways to use their heritage for future generations. Rather, heritage work in Vanuatu will continue to thrive with partnerships between those of us who know the techniques of archaeological research and those who inhabit *kastom*, facilitated through the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. Increasingly, our ni-Vanuatu colleagues lead the way in archaeology and cultural research, though that is another story that will continue to be told in the coming decades. Ultimately, this working back-and-forth across cultural boundaries while also blurring or undermining them may be the greatest strength of historical anthropology. Mission encounters provide a particularly rich field because of the relief they cast upon cultural differences, while also highlighting the entanglements formed through cultural interactions during an early period of globalization in Island Melanesia.

Acknowledgments

We are ever grateful to the local fieldworkers of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and the ni-Vanuatu communities where we do our fieldwork. Particular thanks go to fieldworkers Jerry Taki, Samson Ieru, Jimmy Kuautonga, Joel Iau, the late Philip Tepahae and Frank Inhat, and ni-Vanuatu archaeologists Richard Shing and Edson Willie. We express our sincerest thanks to the communities of Dillon's Bay and Port Narvin on Erromango; Lenakel, Waisisi, Kwamera, Kwaraka, Irumien, and Port Resolution on Tanna, and Anelcauhat on Aneityum, where the Nasukaea Council of Chiefs is particularly thanked. We are also thankful to our colleagues Stuart Bedford, Martin Jones, and student volunteers who worked with us on Tanna, Erromango, and Aneityum. Three anonymous reviewers provided useful feedback for expanding and revising this paper.

Funding

Flexner's research was supported by Lenfest Grants from Washington and Lee University, and is currently supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DE 130101703). The research on Aneityum by Stuart Bedford and Spriggs is funded by the Australia-Pacific Science Foundation (APSF13-3) for the project "Lapita to Liturgy."

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