Expanding the Tanna Mission, 1868–1920

The dissolution of the Tanna Mission in 1862 had been a catastrophe for the Presbyterian Church. To make matters worse, John G. Paton convinced the British Navy to become involved in the mission, arguing (incorrectly, in hindsight) that he and his fellow missionaries had ‘legally’ purchased land in south Tanna, and were attacked without provocation by the Tannese. Sailing with the HMS *Curacoa* under Captain Wiseman in 1865, Paton presented his complaints to people in the Port Resolution area, demanding that the responsible parties be delivered for justice. He also presented a fine of £1,000, an incredibly large sum for most people in the 1860s, and patently ridiculous as far as the Tannese were concerned. In response to indigenous rejection of Paton’s claims, the crew of the *Curacoa* bombarded the island with the aim of destroying as many houses and gardens as they could (Adams 1984: 151–161; Brenchley 1873).

While only four Tannese died in the attack, this event did little to ingratiate the Presbyterian Church to the islanders, nor indeed to European observers. In the decade following this event, Tannese people fell into a pattern of avoiding foreigners as dangerous, or attempting to use them in the context of local chiefly disputes (Adams 1984: 168–181). An attempt to reinvigorate the Port Resolution Mission under Rev. Neilson, a Scottish missionary married to one of John Geddie’s daughters, was attempted in 1868 (Miller 1981: 37). The endeavour ended when it became clear that ‘Like his predecessors, Neilson had become more and more enmeshed in the intricate web of intrigue and rivalry which constituted Tannese political life’ (Adams 1984: 179).

In 1869, the Watts were settled at Kwamera, where they would have more success. At this point, the Presbyterians still had not been able to establish a mission station north of Port Resolution.

The 1870s saw something of a turning point for the Presbyterian Mission. On Erromango, the first long-term mission was established in 1872, and lasted through the early 1900s (see Chapter 2). Apparent progress on Tanna shifted from promising starts and sudden failures to slow and steady in the closing decades of the 19th century (Miller 1986: 246–425). New stations were opened on the east coast of the island (Waisisi) and the west (Lenakel). This progress correlated with increasing investment in mission infrastructure, in the form of larger mission houses, and more functionally distinct buildings in mission stations. In part this reflects new maritime technologies, not least regular steam ships connecting major ports in Oceania (Steel 2011). By the early 1900s, the Presbyterian Church was shipping entire buildings to the New Hebrides (Flexner et al. 2015), and establishing ‘model villages’ for its growing numbers of converts.

At the same time, *kastom* continued to provide the structure for life on Tanna. Attempts to drive out what were perceived as the ‘dangerous’ elements of *kastom*, which, depending on the missionary could range from *narak* (black magic) to kava drinking and dancing, resulted in the establishment of Christian courts to enforce a Presbyterian ‘Tanna Law’, which reached its height from 1905–1925 (Bonnemaison 1994: 201–211). Far from purifying Tanna of its ‘heathen'
practices, this experiment with church policing of native practices only entrenched *kastom* in parts of the island. In others, it was driven underground, as people performed Christianity on the surface while maintaining *kastom* on a deeper level. Unease in the later part of the 20th century, from the ‘cargo cult’ of John Frum to the violence of the independence era, relates in part to the dialectics created in attempts to cleanse Tanna of its *kastom* (Bonnemaison 1994: Guiart 1956; Lindstrom 1993). Yet aside from a few telling, dramatic events, the resilience of *kastom* on Tanna was its everyday basis, as the patterns of the *imwarim*, *toka*, *nao*, and so on adapted and continue through the present in the face of ongoing incursion of missionaries, capitalists, and other European interlopers.

**The Watts at Kwamera**

William and Agnes Watt were Scottish missionaries who were brought to the New Hebrides under the aegis of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. They settled at Kwamera in 1869 (Figure 3.4). Among the positive signs, the Watts obtained a printing press from the Glasgow Foundry Boys in 1873, and began printing religious books in local language (Miller 1981: 38–39; Watt 1896: 150). Examples of original texts from this period survive in the present, and have important local significance, reflecting the incorporation of mission artefacts into local conceptions of heritage (see Chapter 5; Flexner and Spring 2015). The Watts won the first baptised Tannese converts on 4 October 1881, as two men, four women, and three children took the sacrament (Bonnemaison 1994: 198; Guiart 1956: 123). Agnes Watt died in 1894, after 25 years on the island (Lindstrom 2013; Watt 1896: 36–46). William Watt remarried, and remained on Tanna until 1910 when he retired to Australia after a long career (Miller 1981: 39).

**Watt Mission Site**

The Watts were active across south Tanna, and had a significant station in Port Resolution as well as at Kwamera. Like many other missionaries of the era, they itinerated between the different stations. Significantly, both Port Resolution and Kwamera featured multiple functionally distinct buildings, including a main house, church, printing house, storage buildings, and other outbuildings. I will focus on the Kwamera station here, as that is where the majority of archaeological fieldwork on the Watts’ Mission sites took place. As mentioned above (see Chapter 3), the Port Resolution Mission is currently underneath the Port Resolution Yacht Club. There is potential for subsurface archaeology at the site, but at this point no excavation work has been done in the Port Resolution area. As will be seen below, the location of the Watt Mission in the contemporary village of Kwamera has likewise caused the archaeological landscape to be impacted significantly by recent activities.

Shortly after arriving at Kwamera, Agnes Watt spent extensive time describing the new mission house to her family in Scotland. This letter provides a valuable description, as well as insights into what was materially significant about the house from a missionary perspective:

> At present we have two rooms. The parlour is 19x14 ft., and has two windows, and the bedroom is 15x14 ft., also with two windows. We have no ceiling; the room is open to the rigging, which makes it nice and airy. Now, suppose you were landing here, you would see a nice house enclosed by a pretty reed fence. Coming inside that, you walk up a nice gravel walk to five snow-white steps. Ascend these and you come to our verandah with its white painted floor and a low reed railing painted green. The outside of the house is pure white, and the doors and windows are painted bright green […] The door opens against the middle wall; and on this wall I have our largest mirror for the use of the natives, and also some coloured pictures which amuse them much. To the left is the harmonium, which also interests them greatly; and a chest, which serves as an ottoman, is under the window. Against the gable wall stands the iron sofa bed, and over it hangs the barometer.
Against the back wall stands a meat-safe, another ottoman is set under the window and a home-made chiffonier; above these hangs the clock, and on it I have some books and two kerosene lamps. In the middle of the floor stand two tables put together; and when a well cooked dinner, of chicken soup, yam, and native cabbage, with a nice plum pudding [sic], plenty of bananas, and a cup of tea with rich goat's milk, is laid out on a pure white table cloth, we are not to be pitied. I have no carpet, as so many natives come in, and I think a clean floor fresher. My bedroom is laid with mats [presumably local mats of woven dried pandanus leaf], the walls whitewashed, and the doors and windows painted light green. We have in it a wardrobe, military secretaire, and an arm-chair. On the walls are photographs of our loved ones and the R. P. [Glasgow Boys' Foundry Reformed Presbyterian?] students. Our bed is made of banana leaves with feather pillows. As there is no ceiling, I have put up four posts on the bedstead to hold up a calico roof and mosquito netting (Watt 1896: 83–84).

Note the emphasis on the 'pure white' elements of the house, from the whitewashed walls to the tablecloth. Lime mortar and whitewash at Kwamera, as elsewhere in the Pacific (Mills 2009), was an important marker of difference, contrasting missionary housing against that of the Tannese. The great variety of furniture in the house is also notable, especially as that would not normally preserve archaeologically. The inclusion of a clock is significant as it shows the introduction of a Western means of keeping time, in contrast to the way time was marked under kastom (Bonnemaison 1994: 56; Lindstrom 2011). Further, the presence of a barometer in the house reflects the global spread of scientific instruments, and the growing interest in meteorological phenomena at this point.

Eventually, the Watt Mission complex would grow to include a timber church, attached to the house by a covered hall-way, and a number of outbuildings at the rear. These likely included a printing house for the press that arrived in 1874, and possibly other buildings such as storage shed, cookhouse, and chicken coop. Photographic evidence for the complex is extensive, including an overhead photo taken from the hillside behind the house, which shows not only the outbuildings, but also formal garden in the yard of the complex (Figure 4.1). There is a church bell hanging outside of the mission ruins, though this is remembered locally not as coming from the Watt Mission, but from one of the Aneityum Mission churches. This may in fact represent ongoing exchange of culturally significant objects between the two islands (see Chapter 3).

Outside of the immediate area of the house, there was also a winch for the mission boat landing, which was cleared away during construction of a football field (see Figure 3.4). There is a more recent church building to the southwest of the Watt Mission, and in front of this building there is a massive *Tridacna* (giant clam) shell. The shell is over 60cm in diameter, and is remembered locally as being used alternately as a baptismal font, and a bathtub for the Watt's young children. On the south side of the mission there are two graves, one of which is marked by a plain concrete slab. The other bears a marble headstone, now broken, which reads, 'In Memory of WILLIAM ALEXANDER SECOND SON OF THE REV W. GRAY WHO DIED 1st JULY 1886 AGED 9 MONTHS'. The stream Mimretam forms the southern boundary of mission land, and is significantly also the neteta boundary for Umairarekarmene. There is a set of mortar steps next to a spring that flows into the stream, which also dates to the mission period.
Archaeological testing at the Watt Mission was aimed at determining the extent of evidence related to 19th-century activity. We excavated a series of test units ranging from 1x1m to 2x2m across the site (Figure 4.2). As on Erromango, there is a marked increase in house size and complexity in this later mission house. The mission house remains consist of a scatter of stones, some of which retain their original mortar, particularly around the front steps. The site has been extensively robbed of stone, and also bears the scars of recent construction activities, most recently a stage built on the house foundations in 2013 for a Presbyterian Church celebration. To compare with excavations at the Robertson House at Dillon’s Bay, Erromango (see Chapter 2), a 2x2m test unit (TU1) was placed alongside the front step of the building. In contrast to Robertson House, excavation of this unit revealed that the foundations of Watt House were in fact quite shallow, extending no more than 25–30cm below the current ground surface (Figure 4.3). Stratigraphy included layers relating to the ‘nice gravel walk’ noted above, overlying a mixed sandy deposit with cobble and boulder-sized beach rock inclusions. There was some evidence for post-depositional disturbance of these deposits, including a large animal burrow that was found to be still hollow upon excavation.
Figure 4.2 Plan of the Watt Mission area, showing test unit locations.
Source: James Flexner
At the base of the excavations, we encountered a single human burial, with the skeleton lying on its back (sex could not be identified as the pelvis was not preserved), at about 50cm below the surface (Figure 4.4). A piece of coconut shell was collected just next to the right femur, which was among the best-preserved (and hence least likely to have been disturbed) bones of the skeleton. This sample was radiocarbon dated, and suggests that the burial dates to the 11th or 12th century (Appendix D). There were no preserved grave goods, though the burial was marked with limestone cobbles, and discoloured sediment found along with the limestone suggests there may have been some kind of bundles associated with the markers. This finding is above all interesting because it indicates that the Watts may have been settled on *tabu* ground (Flexner and Willie 2015). As noted previously, the spirits of the dead (*ierehma*) could cause illness or even death (see Chapter 3; Bonnemaison 1994: 179). While the burial may not have been remembered for a named individual in the mission period, it is reasonable to conclude that the area where the Watts built their house was probably at least associated with *ierehma*. When the Watts’ young son perished, or indeed *misi pran* (a term of endearment used locally for Agnes, literally ‘missionary woman’; see Lindstrom 2013) herself, Tannese people may have understood the illness and eventual death in such a way.
Excavations elsewhere around the Watt Mission site were significantly impacted by recent activities. Specifically, local people remember the area being bulldozed extensively in the late 1990s. There is a large debris pile towards the southeast of the site behind the modern church, which may have been created by this event. Excavation of a 1x1m unit in another mound to the southwest (TU7 in Figure 4.2) indicated that the area was intentionally built up, as the unit stratigraphy consisted of a thin topsoil layer overlying two rocky fill layers, with dark greyish brown sandy loam overlying black loam (Figure 4.5). The top layer contained some glass artefacts and contemporary material, including plastic. The upper rocky fill contained charcoal and faunal material, as well as a few flakes of olive bottle glass. Only charcoal was found in the lower rocky fill. While much more extensive testing would be needed, it would be worthwhile to examine whether this mound represents a contact-era feature of some sort, perhaps relating to indigenous activities, analogous to the mound features at Kwaraka and Anuikaraka (see Chapter 3).

The remaining test units (TU2, 3, 4, 5, 6) were excavated behind the Watts’ main building. TU2 was a 2x2m unit that contained primarily 20th-century material, including a mortar dump, probably relating to construction of the adjacent modern church (Figure 4.6). Local people claimed to have found large amounts of clay smoking pipes, buttons, bottle glass, and ceramics in the area while constructing the current church on the site. All of these artefacts were apparently lost shortly after they were removed from the ground. Almost none of these were present in TU2. It is thus unfortunately possible that the main rubbish dump from the Watts is located under the modern church building.
Four 1x1m units were placed to test the area containing the garden and outbuildings based on photographic evidence (Figure 4.7). All of these units were to some degree disturbed by activities taking place decades after the missionary period, through to the present. There were intact layers underlying the topsoil that related to the Watt Mission, with recovered artefacts including a metal button and fragments comprising approximately half of a writing slate in TU3 (Figure 4.8). In TU4, the stratigraphy was cut by multiple postholes, which contained plastic and other contemporary materials. More extensive excavations would be necessary to understand what kind
of structure these relate to. The unit that offers the highest potential for mission era structural remains is TU5, which featured a linear arrangement of stones in the center of the unit. These could be wall footings, or garden path alignments. The stratigraphic sequence of TU6 consisted of a series of rocky layers with small amounts of glass and metal artefacts, which appear to be mostly 20th century in age. As always, more extensive excavations would be revealing. These test units offer a sense of the variable stratigraphy, as well as the extent of disturbance in this area of the site.

**Figure 4.7 Stratigraphic profiles, TU3/4/5/6, Watt Mission.**

Source: James Flexner
The artefact assemblage from the Watt Mission site reflects the ongoing modern activities in the area. The main Presbyterian Church in Kwamera is still on the site, and the area serves as a meeting place for various kinds of community activities for the village. Approximately 95 per cent of the identified nails were of the round wire type (N=107 out of 112 total). While a portion of these was likely used during the later stages of the Watts’ time in Kwamera, artefacts certainly continued to accumulate after the missionaries left. The glass artefact assemblage is composed primarily of window glass (81.6 per cent of the assemblage by count, N=208 of 255 total glass artefacts). The remaining shards are mostly colourless bottles and other vessels, none of which could be definitively attributed to the mission period. Only eight ceramic sherds were recovered, and almost all are 20th century in age, with the possible exception of a single stoneware vessel, probably an ink jar, from TU1 (Figure 4.9). In a way, the lack of mission-period artefacts at the Watt Mission site should not be completely surprising. As noted above, the most promising area has been heavily disturbed by modern construction activities. When William Watt and his second wife Jessie Paterson retired to Australia in 1910, they probably would have taken most of their belongings with them. This is a pronounced difference from the earlier mission sites, where sudden, catastrophic abandonment contributed to the richness of mission period artefact assemblages.
William Gray at Waisisi

The expanding global network of Presbyterianism in the closing decades of the 1800s is reflected in a wider geographic area of origin, and international support for mission work. From the 1880s onwards, the Australian Church was increasingly involved in New Hebrides mission work, just as Australia became increasingly entangled in New Hebrides colonial politics. William Gray and his wife Elizabeth came from the Presbyterian Church of South Australia. Arriving at Waisisi (Figure 3.1) in 1881, the Grays had some success at gaining converts, though interest in the church waxed and waned. There was an outbreak of war in 1891–1892, accompanied by the usual association of the mission with narak (sorcery). However, when the Grays left in 1894, they had managed to create a small congregation at Waisisi and opened the way for further mission work on east Tanna under the subsequent tenure of Rev. MacMillan (Miller 1986: 260–263, 274–282). Overall, this period in the 1880s–1890s represents the major era of geographic expansion for mission work on Tanna, encapsulated in local social memories that suggest Waisisi be remembered as ‘way is easy’, as the Grays’ successes arguably opened the way for the church in west and north Tanna.

Around Waisisi

Archaeological fieldwork in and around Waisisi was very brief, involving only one full day of survey. Fieldwork did successfully document various features relating to the Grays’ Mission, and other features of local historical significance (Figure 4.10). Along the coast in the northeast of the area there is an old kava-drinking ground called ‘Naburi’, which was used for fishing magic, among other things. Inland from this along an intermittent stream is an old tabu stone called...
'Temitonga' (literally 'white man'), which is said to commemorate one of the Europeans killed in the area, though the name of the individual is not remembered. Further west along the shore is an old stone altar where the dead were displayed before burial at sea, called 'Lamatetengi'. Nearby are two features relating to the Shipimanwawa war, 'Nitela' and 'Manuaua'. An old banyan (nabanga in Bislama) tree marks the tabu site of 'Netanu', which is associated with the consumption of turtles. Eating the head of the turtle was a special chiefly prerogative (Guiart 1956: 108).

Source: James Flexner
The Grays did not move into an empty landscape, nor was their presence on the island seen as politically neutral. Gray was in fact remarkably sensitive to, and interested in, local culture. He even produced a short ethnological treatise based on his observations during his time on Tanna (Gray 1892). When Gray arrived at Waisisi, he was welcomed at ‘Kwalep’, a coastal kava-drinking ground (Figure 3.2), by the chief Iopot, who made the missionary tabu in order to protect him. Immediately behind Kwalep is the dangerous tabu place ‘Ulin’, the shadow of which could cause illness and death. The early mission era at Waisisi from 1882–1894 was also a period of the dangerous ‘stolen wars’ on Tanna (Bonnemaison 1994: 165–166). There is some reason to question the extent of gun violence as documented in missionary accounts, as overemphasising the state of ‘constant warfare’ was a useful ideological trope to gain support for mission work (Adams 1984: 35–36). However, it does appear that at least some Tannese people were tired of the fighting and in part saw the presence of missionaries as a mitigating factor against ongoing warfare.

The Shipimanwawa war is an important episode in the history of the White Sands region, of which Waisisi is a part. It relates to the last major open conflict between the two traditional ‘moieties’, Koyometa and Numrukuen (see Chapter 3; Guiart 1956: 90–94). Numrukuen, the senior moiety associated with strong sorcery was identified with the merchant ship (‘Shipi’), where people used their cleverness to produce goods and held positions with multiple powers. Koyometa, the ‘younger brother’ of the moieties, was composed of aggressive warriors and thus identified as the man-of-war (‘manwawa’), which contained a strict order and only had one function. Numrukuen/Shipi were the victors in this war. However, the victory was an incomplete one, and the situation was aggravated by the introduction of firearms to the island and the meddling of foreign missionaries and government officials. The conclusion of fighting was characterised as a ‘stolen war’, where a peace acceptable to all parties was not reached. The tension produced by such conflict continued to structure violent events on Tanna into the 20th century (Bonnemaison 1994: 152–156, 168–169, 199–200; Guiart 1956: 92).

At Waisisi, there are several features that commemorate this conflict. Along the coast in the western part of the bay at Waisisi there is a large rock overhang named ‘Uelel’, remembered as a place used to ambush enemy combatants during times of war. West of Uelel was the kava-drinking ground ‘Noanpai’, which was used to gather forces during times of war, and is associated with Nalpini Asim, a strong war leader. Noanpai’s primary links were to the hamlets of Lapiahu and Naknasses. Closer to the coast downhill from the contemporary village of Waisisi, which is also the location of the old mission grounds, are the locations of two trees planted to mark the ending of the Shipimanwawa war in the area (Figure 4.10). At ‘Nitela’ there is a massive old natapoa (Bislama; Terminalia catappa) tree that was planted by Shipi (Numrukuen) to commemorate their victory (Figure 4.11). Roughly 80m away is the location where Manuawa (Koyometa) planted their tree to mark the peace, though this tree has been washed away during a cyclone because of its location next to an intermittent stream.
Bonnemaison (1994: 155) highlighted the unfinished nature of the Shipimanwawa conflict, suggesting that ongoing fighting on the island stemmed at least in part from the unstable order created by the victors. In contrast in Waisisi, some emphasis is placed on the resolution of the conflict via the planting of natapoa trees by the two sides. In part this may reflect the timing of fieldwork. When Bonnemaison was on Tanna in the 1980s, the wounds of violent events in the independence era may still have been quite sore for many. In contrast, after 36 years of independence, people on Tanna today may seek to emphasise unity and peace on their island. Simultaneously, the memory of peaceful resolution presented by Nitela and Manauaua may reflect the dominant Numrukuen version of events, masking underlying tensions still simmering below the surface. That the tree planted by Manauaua was wiped out in a cyclone may well be interpreted in magico-historical terms as part of the social memory of this conflict. The two trees were located by the sea, but Shipi has been strong, standing up through all the tropical storms of the last century or more, while Manauaua was blown away.

Gray Mission

After their acceptance at Waisisi, the Grays settled in up the hill from Kwalep on a series of terraces cut into the steep coastal slope. Gray assiduously documented the mission land claim in Waisisi, even providing a scale plan of the areas the mission had purchased (Figure 4.12), which is in contrast to earlier, vague and generally inappropriate land claims (Flexner 2015; Van Trease 1987). For the year 1883, Gray notes in his diary (Gray 1884):
Last December our new church was completed. It is made entirely of native material, 33 ft X 20. I have valued it at £ 8.6.0. This was a gift of the worshipping people. They were assisted to a considerable extent by all our native helps. A return present was made to the workers, chiefly of clothing, and food [sic.] 'This with food for a feast at the opening of the church I value at a little over three £ 3. The Sunday Schools of the Presbyterian Church of South Australia have sent us a bell. The manual labour bestowed on our premises during the last ten months both by myself and our natives has been heavy and intensive. Two houses for native helps, a large house to be used as workshop, wash-house, and store-room for timber and empty cases, a goat / house and yard, and a large new boat-house, have been built of native material. The heaviest part of the work in these cases fell to the natives. They also bore the toil of making a quantity of lime and various other works for the improvement of our premises. I had my share of work in completing and improving the Mission house and kitchen.

In 1884, he added:

During the week we completed the giving the storm rigging of our house. Four wire ropes, about 42 in. thick [?] are passed right over the house cross-wise. Both ends of each rope is fixed to posts set firmly in the ground. At one end of each rope there is a roller to tighten as required. These will be removed when the season is over. The front verandah, which will be much exposed to a hurricane should it come, has special permanent fixings. These we put on also, and gave the whole roof an overhauling. After completing the storm rigging, which we did on Friday, I made an excursion under the floor of our house to secure some tottering posts. The joists are so near the ground that one can only move by dragging oneself along the ground. The net work of cobwebs, quantity of fine dust, and the difficulty of using tools made this a very unpleasant work. I think what I have done this time will be permanent.

Again we can see the increasing investment and elaboration of mission infrastructure, and particularly adaptations towards making the mission buildings more stormproof.

Figure 4.12 Detail of a land survey plan by William Gray of mission land in Waisisi.
Source: Image courtesy of Vanuatu National Archives (Land Record 29 S.I.4).
Archaeological work on the mission sites, and indeed any sites in the Waisisi area is made difficult by the enormous amounts of volcanic ash dumped on the area by Yasur. Nevertheless, we were able to document the surface remains relating to the mission. The original path from the sea near Kwalep to the mission house and church is still in place, and a mortar, stone, and brick stair is partly preserved in the northern part of the site (Figure 4.13). The mission house footing is represented by a line of stones, underlying a currently inhabited house, while the church is similarly only present as a remnant foundation on a clear terrace towards the south of the site. From the church, local people have curated the bronze bell, which bears an inscription that reads: ‘MADE BY J WARNER & SONS FOR F. LASSETTER & C° LIMITED SYDNEY NSW’. Compared with the earlier bells, which were primarily from Scotland, this shows the shift in economic orientation towards Australasia. Kept in association with the bell are two massive *Triton* shell trumpets that had also been used to call people to worship (Figure 4.14). The grave of the Grays’ daughter Irene is present and kept protected by local stewards. The wall of a goat pen, possibly the one described in Gray’s diary, is still present towards the south (Figure 4.15).

No excavations were carried out at Waisisi, and again the large amount of volcanic ash dumped there annually would make any such work a serious challenge.

**Figure 4.13 Mission steps, Waisisi.**

*Source: James Flexner*
Figure 4.14 Mission bell (top) and *Triton* shell trumpets (bottom), Waisisi.

Source: James Flexner
Figure 4.15 Goat pen, Waisisi.
Source: James Flexner
Lenakel: The Ultimate Mission

West Tanna was one of the last areas on Tanna to undergo missionisation, and the latest mission site examined for this research project. The chiefs Lomai, Titonga, and Iavis invited Frank Paton (son of John G. Paton) to settle in the area in 1896. The younger Paton spent six years working on west Tanna (Miller 1986: 285–303; Paton 1903). According to contemporary local memories, the decision to invite the missionaries was, as at Waisisi, at least in part taken as a measure to reduce the risk of warfare in the area. Even when the missionaries were settled, there was some fighting. Mission supporters were attacked, resulting in the death of Numanian, one of the early converts (Miller 1986: 296–297). A likely cause can be found in a later testimony that suggests the area where the missionaries settled was disputed territory. A chief named Ichnain attempted to claim that the land had belonged to his people, and had recently been taken in warfare by Lomai and Iavis when the missionaries arrived. Asked to adjudicate on the matter, the missionaries naturally took the side of their loyal converts (Vanuatu National Archives Land Record S.I.22 25–26).

Paton and his colleagues settled among the Louweniu ‘tribe’, in the area of Lenakel. As elsewhere on Tanna, the missionaries began the work of conversion as a material process. The initial house of worship built at Lenakel was a small structure of local materials. The following year a more substantial structure was built, measuring 45x25 feet (15x8m). The opening of that church was attended by a handful of recent converts (Paton 1903: 19–21, 30, 98). By 1898 church attendance spiked with several hundred people coming to services (Miller 1986: 286). When Frank Paton left Tanna in 1902, owing to ill health, he had laid the groundwork for church expansion in Lenakel (Paton 1903). A few concrete pylons may mark the location of the early church. The grave of Lomai, who was instrumental to bringing Christianity to Lenakel, is nearby. When Lomai died in December 1916 the Lenakel Church was a massive operation, but it was appropriate that he was buried near the initial church that he had championed (Figure 4.16).

Paton was succeeded at Lenakel by Dr J. Campbell Nicholson in 1903. Working alongside fellow missionaries Watt and Macmillan, Nicholson spent 14 years on the island, and was at least partly responsible for major investments in mission infrastructure, specifically in Lenakel and more broadly on Tanna (Miller 1986: 348–406). Here we will focus on the spatial layout of the Lenakel Mission (Figure 4.17), and its global and local resonances. A prefabricated church that remained standing in the area until Cyclone Pam in 2015 perhaps best encapsulates the immense networks of material that the Presbyterian Mission in the New Hebrides could draw upon (Flexner et al. 2015, 2016a).
Figure 4.16 Grave of Lomai, Lenakel.
Source: James Flexner
In April 1912, a newly built prefabricated church was opened at Lenakel (Miller 1986: 388; simply 'the 1912 Church' below). Just under a century later, the building was the subject of intensive archaeological documentation, and is now one of the most thoroughly recorded buildings in Melanesia (Flexner et al. 2015). This building was the third one to stand on the site. It rested on a massive terrace cut into the hill slope in the area (Figure 4.18). Under the direction of Lomai, Titonga, and Iavis, local labourers removed over 3,500m$^3$ of earth using hand tools and...
baskets (Flexner 2014c: 18–20). Archaeological investigation of the footings at the site revealed that the church building evolved from a small rectangular structure, to a T-shaped building, and finally the cruciform plan of the 1912 Church, which incorporated the footings of the earlier buildings (Figure 4.19; Flexner et al. 2015: 269–271).
The 1912 Church was built from a prefabricated kit produced by the Sydney firm Saxton & Binns (later Saxton Island Homes). A 1920 catalogue suggests the building is a top of the line ‘Peter’ model (Rodman 2001: 131–133). Detailed examination of the church fittings, including the doors, lancet windows, altar rails, and some mouldings shows they match closely those offered in the 1910 *Saxton & Binns Illustrated Catalogue* (Saxton & Binns 1910). There is also ample evidence for local modification of the building. In the attic space, there are vertical supports for the ridge beam that are broken unevenly on the ends, and bear mortis holes (Figure 4.20). These beams appear to be top plates that were repurposed as roof supports. It is likely that they were
damaged in January 1912, when during construction of the church a cyclone blew down the mostly erected building frame (John G. Paton Mission Fund 1912 Vol. 77: 13). This disaster resulted in the carpenter redesigning the roofline of the church, replacing gabled ends with hipped gablets. This was in part presumably to save on timber, but also apparently resulted in the building being more cyclone-proof. Other design modifications include a replacement of some of the glass lancet windows on the nave and transepts with swing shutters, which would have allowed for better ventilation, while also able to be shut quickly in a sudden storm (Flexner et al. 2015: 278–279).

Figure 4.20 Repurposed top-plate used as a roof support pillar, Lenakel church.
Source: Martin J. Jones
The 1912 Church was built in a Gothic style, with angled buttresses on the corners and arched lancet windows, though the modifications noted above also incorporated some ‘Arts and Crafts’ elements into the design (Figure 4.21). The church plan is cruciform, consisting of a nave and transepts, with a sanctuary on the end of the church facing the sea. The vestry is located to the right of the sanctuary if looking from the nave, and the pulpit also juts from the right side of the raised sanctuary. Significantly, the church is not oriented to cardinal directions, but to the local landscape, with the most sacred space facing the Pacific Ocean. These directions would have been more important in terms of Tannese forms of spatial orientation. One result of this is that the main entrance of the nave is somewhat awkwardly placed very close to the vertical cut made into the terrace on which the church sits. Further, local people indicated that unlike the Victorian Protestant norm of church attendees sitting in nuclear family groups, the sacred space of the church was divided by gender and age, with men sitting in the nave, married women in one transept, and unmarried women and older children in the other transept. This pattern of segregating church space by gender remains standard in rural areas of Vanuatu today.

Figure 4.21 Detailed plan and elevation of the Lenakel church.
Source: James Flexner
While the 1912 Church was adapted closely to the local context, the building fabric itself reflects the global reach of capitalism during the early 20th century. Metal locks from H&T Vaughan (Wolverhampton) and corrugated roofing iron from Lysaght Orb (Bristol) reflect continued dominance of British industry in the early 20th century. Analysis of building timbers revealed wood harvested in North America, Australia, Europe, and probably New Zealand for different elements. These would have been shipped to the Saxton & Binns factory at Pyrmont, Sydney, where they would have been cut and finished, and then shipped throughout the Pacific. Different kits bore stencilled ‘despatch marks’ to make sure the right kit went to the right island. Several of the piles under the sanctuary, floor joists, and roof beams bear the stencil ‘JCN TANNA’ (JCN for J. Campbell Nicholson). Other marks include ‘P’ on the piles, and numbers around the doors and lancet windows, which would have guided the construction process when the kit arrived at its destination (Flexner et al. 2015: 273–278; Flexner et al. 2016a).

The 1912 Church encapsulates the entanglement between global and local forces in a period when missionary networks had an unprecedented material reach. On the one side, the church incorporates materials from throughout the entirety of the British Empire. On the other, the building was adapted to the local climate and local social ritual habits. The opening of the church was timed with the annual harvest:

As it was time for our Harvest Thanksgiving the natives decorated the Church, and the bright colours of crotons and fruits, and the green of palms, potted in casks and cases, hid the bare unlined walls and unceiled roof. The people made strenuous efforts. Each person, young and old, brought a yam or taro, and each village brought its share of the decorations (John G. Paton Mission Fund 1912 Vol. 78: 7).

Graffiti on the 1912 Church shows that this important event continued to be marked as recently as 2000, the year that the building was ritually closed as its condition had degraded until it was no longer usable.

The site of the 1912 Church remains an important part of community identity in Lenakel. This is true despite the fact that the building was completely destroyed in the 280km/h winds of Cyclone Pam in March 2015 (Flexner et al. 2016a). For the Melanesian people who continue to include this site within the pantheon of sacred, tabu places, the percentage of ‘original’ fabric so important in Western heritage is less important than the living memories associated with the site. Some of the relics from the building, such as the church bell, are being curated by local people. At the same time, the local communities on West Tanna continue to discuss at their kava-drinking places the possibility of ‘rebuilding’ a church at this historically and culturally important place, reflecting the integration of mission sites into indigenous kastom (Flexner and Spriggs 2015). Such a project may take place in the future if the material and funding can be arranged, but it is a matter of speculation at this point.

The Globalised Mission on West Tanna

The 1912 Church was a focal point in a much wider mission landscape in Lenakel. As the Lenakel Mission grew, they established a ‘model village’ in the area, called ‘Isini’ (a local orthography of ‘Sydney’, the source of so much mission cargo; see Miller 1986: 361–362). The place was originally called ‘Numpwanaken’, which in the Lenakel area language means ‘forehead’. It was both a place from which to look out (and indeed overlooks the harbour at Lenakel) and an important meeting place for the surrounding communities (‘forehead’ can be used to mean ‘front’, ‘place of leadership’ in Bislama). It remained so for Tannese Presbyterian converts throughout the 20th century.

To the south of the church there was a mission school. The remains of the early 20th-century school, if any survive, are buried in the contemporary schoolyard. To the north of the school, and east of the 1912 Church there is a concrete slab from a milking shed, which apparently remained
in use within living memory. Continuing north, there was a cluster of mission features, including a dairy, bread oven, and later in the 20th century, a garage for maintaining the mission’s vehicles. Road-building was a major undertaking for the Tanna Mission, as improved communication and ability to move materials was seen as essential to the Presbyterian Church’s success (Miller 1986: 253–254). To the west of this cluster of features is the location of Dr Nicholson’s house, now represented by a concrete, stone, and brick footing (Figure 4.22). The water tank support, entrance steps, and vertical concrete supports from the basement remain on the surface. Continuing west from here, there is a prefabricated ‘Sisters’ House’, which was inhabited by the women who worked in the hospital and school through the middle of the 20th century (Figure 4.23).

Figure 4.22 Nicholson House plan, Lenakel.
Source: James Flexner

Figure 4.23 ‘Nun’s’ house, Lenakel.
Source: Martin J. Jones
Lenakel was the location of Tanna’s first hospital. A commemorative plaque at the current hospital notes that there has been a hospital at Lenakel from 1903, and that in 1905 an operating room was opened by an Irishman named William Marshall. The foundation of the main hospital structure dating to 1911 (Miller 1986: 92) is still visible along with the separate foundations of the hospital’s food storage pantry, and the tuberculosis ward (Figure 4.24). Across the street to the south of these features is a concrete slab that was the foundation of the hospital’s maternity ward. Apparently uphill from this area was a series of grass huts with dirt floors containing the leprosy ward, but no remains were visible on the surface. Medical services were yet another of the important material benefits that the Presbyterian Church offered to the New Hebrides (Miller 1986). Early in the church, medical attention could be as much of a hindrance as anything else, as it further served to cast the missionaries as *Tupunas* (sorcerers; see Chapter 3). By the early 1900s, though, germ theory began to become widely accepted in the medical world and the
technology and infrastructure improved (Risse 1999). Results improved on a scientific basis, while increasingly successful missionary healing practices continued to improve their standing in the New Hebrides from a spiritual perspective.

### Village Life in Kwaraka after the Mission Period

The history of mission work on Tanna is more than simply a story of expansion, improvement, and native conversion to Christianity. Colonial religious change did not so much resolve as mask the tensions present on Tanna during the time of missionary settlement. The overextension of church power, allied with an increasingly effective colonial government, during the time of 'Tanna Law' led to consolidation of a countermovement in which *kastom* became entrenched. Elsewhere on the island, people took on the trappings of Christianity through material and ritual practices (wearing trousers, attending Sunday worship), while maintaining *kastom* at a deeper level (Bonnemaison 1994; Guiart 1956). Probably the most dramatic outcome of these unresolved contradictions are the various 'cargo cults' that emerged on Tanna. Most famous of all is the 'John Frum' movement, whose followers continue to paint themselves and march in mock military formation, to the delight of contemporary tourists (Lindstrom 1993; Tabani 2010).

But what of life elsewhere on Tanna? Here again we can turn to the archaeological landscape at Kwaraka (see Chapter 3) to understand long-term patterns of everyday life on the island. Excavations at Kwaraka were extremely limited, as the area was only accessible in 2013, when most of the time was spent mapping and digging shovel test pits around the site (Flexner 2014c: 12–18; Flexner et al. 2016c). There are two round, stone-lined mounds to the southwest of the canoe mound where *Paru* was kept in Iarisi’s time (Figure 4.25). These bear superficial resemblance to contact-era house mounds from Samoa (Green and Davidson, eds 1974), which is compelling considering the presence of Samoan missionaries on Tanna (Liua’ana 1996). Whether this connection is real, however, is a matter for future research. According to local sources, the mounds were built to raise living spaces above the surrounding coastal plain, which becomes quite muddy during the annual rainy season.

On one of these mounds (M4 in Figure 3.5), a 1x1m test unit (TU1) was excavated to understand the interior construction deposits and recover any artefacts associated with construction and inhabitation of the mound. The excavation revealed a relatively simple sequence (Figure 4.26), with a shallow topsoil layer overlying an undifferentiated fill layer of earth and volcanic cobbles. This overlay the subsoil upon which the mound was constructed. The fill deposit was about 70cm deep. Thus the mound was constructed by heaping earth and stones in a circle, which were then covered in more earth that was levelled off, and the outside of the circle was lined with waterworn volcanic cobbles and boulders.

Artefacts recovered from the M4 excavation were primarily 20th century in age. The evidence generally relates to habitation of this mound long after the missionaries had left south Tanna. Considering the limited extent of the excavations, however, further research could find more evidence relating to the 19th century. In general, the artefacts came from the topsoil layer and the upper 30cm of the construction fill. The finds included a lead rifle bullet, a glass syringe, and most surprisingly, a glass lightbulb with a metal filament. The lightbulb is surprising because, before the availability of cheap solar panels, there was no reliable electricity on south Tanna. It is certainly possible that people used a diesel generator, or perhaps the lightbulb was simply a foreign ‘curiosity’ for its owner or a memento of a trip abroad. There was a small quantity of charcoal and burned coconut shell (5.1g total) in the lowest layer, along with two pieces of unidentified mammal bone, which date to an earlier period.
Abutting this mound to the southeast is a rectangular stone alignment that was thought to be a house footing (H1 in Figure 4.25). A 1x1m test unit (TU2) was excavated in the northeast corner of the structure. The excavation revealed a layer of rounded gravel that is interpreted as part of the interior stone paving of the house, as well as a series of small postholes (Figure 4.27). Excavation of this layer, and a ‘drip line’ feature within the unit recovered artefacts dating to after the 1950s. This included two blue plastic pen caps, and the torso of a toy plastic soldier figurine. What was found appears to be a traditionally constructed Tannese house, which would have consisted of a triangular cross-section wooden frame in which the slope of the roofline reached basically to the ground, covered in thatch. The artefacts in the house, however, indicate it was probably built in the 1950s or 1960s, and indeed this area was inhabited within living memory. It is notable that the recovered artefacts consist of children’s toys and writing implements. As Ni-Vanuatu continue to engage with capitalism in the 21st century, most people work primarily to earn money to cover their children’s school fees, and to offer them a few luxuries (candy, toys, and sporting equipment). It is a selective approach to the cash economy, which is a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, the traditional subsistence and exchange economy, though this is rapidly changing.
These excavations are relevant to the patterns of life on Tanna that persisted across the 20th century, through the period of most intensive colonialism on the island, the struggles for independence and stability in the 1970s and early 1980s, and on into the present. The gardens were and are powered by magic stones, which are still used throughout the island, including in former mission stations. Houses continue to be constructed using traditional materials and techniques, though supplemented with iron nails and other introduced materials. Increasingly, people strive to build ‘haos blong bloks’ (cement and cinderblock houses) as a projection of wealth, though with the devastation wrought by Cyclone Pam in March 2015, alongside ongoing worries about climate change, there is a renewed interest in the more resilient and sustainable traditional architecture (Coiffier 1988: 141–151). Everyday life both in communities that held tight to kastom, and among those that converted, continues to be structured by the everyday rituals of afternoon kava at the imwarim, cycles of agricultural practice, and the annual exchanges and dances. On Tanna, kastom provides the framework on which the trappings of modernity are occasionally hung.