

Preface

For the reader who hasn't skipped directly to the 'meat' of the argument in this book, I would like to offer a brief caveat about what I know about Vanuatu. The idea is to outline my own 'historicity' (Ballard 2014) within a long-term field research project that is now coming to an end. What consisted of many months of time mapping, walking, discussing, excavating, collecting, analysing, but also inhabiting, sharing meals, laughing, sleeping in and around the ruins of mission stations in Vanuatu will be presented as a *fait accompli*, an 'objective' analysis of archaeological data.

In the pages that follow, I will make assertions about Melanesian people, *kastom*, and indigenous practices. Since excessive reflexivity can become tedious and even distracting in a technical monograph like this one, I want to make this clear at the outset so I don't have to revisit it throughout: I am not Melanesian. My assertions are not based on an authority derived from identity. They are based on my observations from time spent living with Melanesian people in villages on Tanna and Erromango, and respectfully asking many questions, as well as my knowledge of the archaeological record of the places where I've worked. Of course my experiences of living in Vanuatu shape my interpretations of the past on these islands. The daily pattern of archaeological fieldwork (carefully digging through layers of sediment, sieving for finds, mapping, drawing, photographing, noting; the variable rhythms of excitement at finding something new, extreme tedium at finding the same old stuff, or worse, nothing) was matched with the daily patterns of village life (eating yams, drinking kava, speaking Bislama, playing football, sleeping under a thatched roof). At the same time, I have made all possible efforts not to romanticise or unduly project such patterns into the past uncritically. Much of what I am able to say is thanks to the many Melanesian people listed in the Acknowledgements.

Claims to knowledge about Melanesia are also based on a century or more of ethnological observations, first by the missionaries who are one of the foci of this book (e.g. Gray 1892; Inglis 1854; Watt 1895), and later by professional ethnographers of various sorts (Bonnemaison 1994; Guiart 1956; Humphreys 1926; Lindstrom 1990). What follows are not meant to be incontestable, final statements about Tannese and Erromangan *kastom*. This probably wouldn't be possible anyway, and others have noted the ways that knowledge in these islands is contested in various fields, particularly on Tanna (Adams 1987; Lindstrom 1982). I want to make very clear that I am not claiming to have a full insider's knowledge of the cultures discussed in this book, especially in the contemporary context. Ni-Vanuatu reading this book can and should be able to contradict my ideas and interpretations. Likely they will.

Likewise, I will be presenting some ideas about Western people, and particularly the Scottish and Scots-derived missionaries who settled on Erromango and Tanna from the 1850s onwards. Ironically, I can count Scotland among the places of my ancestors, from both sides of my family. But it is just one place in Europe among many that my ancestors came from before emigrating to North America. Thus I don't feel any special ability to comment on British identities from an 'emic' perspective, particularly 'Scottishness'. I don't own a kilt, nor can I play the bagpipes. I do enjoy Single Malt Whisky, and my Scottish middle name (Lindsey) is occasionally materialised in a tie or scarf received from my parents at the holidays. But this is not the basis of my interpretations about missionaries' relationships to British 'civilisation' or Scottishness. Here again, I draw on some of the deeply insightful writings about European culture in social theory (for example, Foucault 1988; Gilbert 2004; Poovey 1995; Weber 2002[1905]). Likewise, Scottishness has its

own rich literature, particularly Scotland as seen from the Lower Provinces of British North America from which so many of the missionaries in the southern New Hebrides originated (e.g. Symonds 2003; Vance 2005, 2011).

What I do have an authoritative sense of are the archaeological data that are presented in this work. If I had to pick a tribe that I represent, it is *archaeologists*. Like other tribes, we don't all agree all the time on the best ways to do our work, in theory, method, or in working with local communities. What follows represents a first attempt to work through some of the big and small questions that arise when studying the historical archaeology of religious change in a Melanesian society, and the historical archaeology of the missionaries who were agents of that change.

Note that I leave the question of religious truth ('Big T Truth', as it was called in my Catholic High School religion classes) to the side in this analysis. Whether God exists, descended to Earth in human form, was crucified and returned to heaven to forgive us our sins is not really a hypothesis that could be tested with this material. Certainly for the missionaries who I write about, these truths were above questioning. The truths of Christian faith led them to travel to the ends of the Earth. Many died trying to bring this knowledge to other people. Christian belief is also true for the descendants of the early Melanesian converts who are equally part of the story. In that context, the truths of Christianity exist alongside the *kastom* truths of magic stones, *tabu* places, and stories that are equally part of the Melanesian cosmos.

The question of belief becomes a thorny one for anthropologists, as our acceptance of local realities in the fields where we do our research sometimes appears to be at odds with the rational, secular humanist project that many of us see ourselves as working at. If we start from a premise of accepting cultural beliefs and experiences as real for the people doing the believing and experiencing ('cultural relativism'), where do we place ourselves in relation to that premise? Are there limits to the extent to which we can place different epistemologies (scientific; Christian; Melanesian) on equal footings? What happens when these epistemologies overlap, as they must for many people (Barker 2012)? In this book, I follow from Fowles' (2013) analysis of this dilemma in attempting to understand Melanesian *kastom* and its relationship with Christianity as it emerged in the 19th century on its own terms (see Chapter 1). The goal is to explain what certain beliefs do or did in terms of patterns of human behaviours, social structure, and cultural evolution. The story is told from the perspective above all of the materials from the era of early Christianity in the New Hebrides. If this book provides a small amount of progress in explaining the evolution of religious beliefs in colonial societies, then it has done its job.

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