

The background of the cover is a photograph of an ancient stone structure. In the center, there is a rectangular doorway. Above the doorway, a stone relief depicts a standing figure, possibly a deity or a historical figure, wearing a long, patterned garment. The stone is weathered and has some reddish-brown staining. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall scene is outdoors, with some greenery visible through the doorway.

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RELIGIOUS RUPTURE AND REVIVAL IN THE PACIFIC

REJECTING AND REMEMBERING ANCESTORS: A CHRISTIAN CENTENARY IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT: Conversion narratives all around Oceania focus on heroic ancestors who transformed their own societies. These local heroes are often both the missionary and a local chief who welcomed him ashore. Yet, these narratives require anti-heroes as well as heroes, the warriors or priests who resisted the gospel message. This paper focuses on a 2016 celebration of 100 years of Christianity in the Kubokota region of Ranongga Island in the Western Solomon Islands. Kubokota's conversion story centres on the return of a young local man named Paleo who had left years earlier for the Methodist mission headquarters. Senior men opposed his return, but a chiefly woman named Takavoja welcomed this "lost son" home and supported his work. Over weeks of preparation for the centenary celebration, people of Kubokota struggled to overcome the divisions of ordinary life and embody the spirit of Christian cooperation. They also struggled to remember their own ancestors. The task was most complex for descendants of a man remembered for opposing the missionaries and mocking Christian ritual. I argue that some of the representational struggles of the centenary celebration arose because colonial violence has been forgotten.

Keywords: Christianity, Solomon Islands, religious conversion, historical memory, indigenous religion, missionisation

On 4 February 2016, I joined nearly a thousand people near the shore of Pienuna, one of the oldest coastal settlements of the region of Kubokota on the northeastern coast of Ranongga Island in the Western Province of Solomon Islands (Fig. 1). Before a four-hour worship service commemorating a century of Christianity, we were witnessing a dramatic reenactment of the arrival of the first missionary. All Kubokota people know the story. When a ship anchored off the Kubokota coast one day, an old man, Noso, paddled with a young man, Betijama—known by his nickname, Paleo¹—and another youth, Tetebule, to the ship, intending to sell their copra. When they learned that it was not a trader's ship but a mission ship, young Paleo decided to climb aboard and travel to the Methodist mission station in Roviana Lagoon some 100 km to the southeast. His relatives thought that he was gone forever. Years passed. Finally, on 4 February 1916, newly baptised James Paleo returned

from Roviana to evangelise his Kubokota relatives. Senior men confronted the mission party and tried to prevent Paleo from coming ashore, but a chiefly woman intervened to welcome home this lost son.

Commemorations like this one are common throughout Island Melanesia and have been well documented by anthropologists (Dureau 2001, 2012; Errington and Gewertz 1994; Gewertz and Errington 1993; White 1991; Young 1997). As Michael Young (1997) observed in his analysis of European “missionary heroes” who arrived in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu decades before young Paleo returned to Kubokota, Christian and national imaginaries are entwined in these commemorations (see also Errington and Gewertz 1994). In comparison to some such celebrations, the Kubokota centenary was a parochial affair: the key players were from Kubokota and the identities articulated were highly localised. This centenary may, therefore, be more representative of the histories of similar settlements all over the region where local people or other Pacific Islanders, not Europeans, were the primary agents of Christianisation.

Oceanic narratives of Christian conversion often echo racialised European discourses in narrating a one-way movement from darkness to light and from savagery to civilisation. On another level, though, they replay more ancient scenarios, dramas in which people of the place confront arriving strangers, decide whether they are friend or foe, then violently repel them or warmly welcome them.² Moreover, commemorations of the break with ancestral tradition have themselves become traditions. In Kubokota, reenactments of Paleo’s arrival were well established by the 1950s, which means that now three generations have taken part in commemorations, which provide a sense of continuity even if the meaning of the performance has changed quite dramatically (see Errington and Gewertz 1994). In his masterful historical ethnography of Santa Isabel in Solomon Islands, Geoff White (1991) explores how and why ritualised performances of the conversion of the first Christian chief prove so productive for people to reflect on their past and produce collective identities. Sometimes the movement is from violence to peace, darkness to light, or savagery to civilisation, with local people embracing what seem like racist caricatures of their ancestors. At other times, for example when a Christian bishop is installed as a customary priest (White 2013), the ritual movement is in the other direction, confounding any analysis that would see the values or symbols of custom and Christianity as fundamentally incompatible rather than being held in constant tension with one another.

In recent discussions of Oceanic historicities, Chris Ballard (2014) calls our attention to aspects of the past essential in the lived experiences of Oceania but rarely accounted for in academic representations—the sounds, smells,

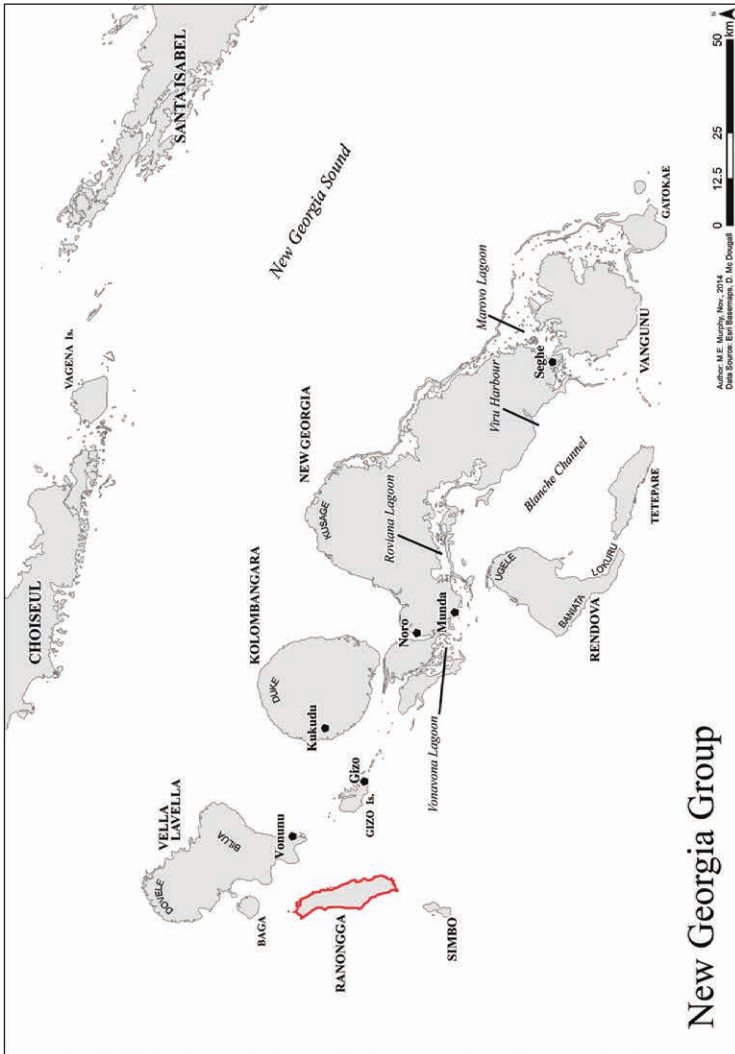


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Ranongga Island in the New Georgia Group of the Western Solomons.

sight and touch of persons, places and events; the apparent collapse of time when a tale is told in the place where it unfolded generations or centuries ago. Oceanic historicities, he suggests, are grounded in the landscape: “The sheer density of names for the land and for people can be overwhelming for an outsider, but the forms of knowledge from which they are drawn are the archives of vernacular Pacific history” (Ballard 2014: 105). The material landscape mapping people onto place is cross-cut by genealogy, perhaps the most pervasive theme in the indigenous histories of the region (Ballard 2018; Salesa 2014).

In this essay, I approach the Kubokota centenary as an enactment of vernacular history and local historical consciousness. It memorialises an encounter between indigenous and exogenous ways of being, but Europeans are mostly absent—it focuses entirely on local ancestors. My use of “ancestor” follows Kubokota use of the term *tite* ‘grandparents’: the term refers to the parents of one’s parents (including collateral relatives) as well those of all preceding generations. Sometimes more distant generations are called *tite pa moa* ‘grandparents from before’, but the term *tite* bridges the divide between the pre-Christian distant past and the Christian recent past. The events commemorated in Pienuna are not captured in any texts in European-generated archives. Textual accounts do exist: the first generation of mission-educated men wrote down this story and other accounts of the early days of the mission along with genealogy and other important information in humble exercise books, which are now closely guarded by their children and grandchildren. The primary expression of this vernacular history, however, is through oral storytelling and, above all, dramatic performances like the one I witnessed in February 2016. In these performances, the story is enacted in song, speech and movement, with laughter and tears, on the very ground where these events took place. Descendants take on the roles of their ancestors. The story of the coming of the church has become a reference point for people contemplating what they value and why they continue to invest energy in the exhausting work of community-building. The interpenetration of this story and the lives of Kubokota people is what makes it both powerful and, as I will show, contentious.

The “arrival of the gospel” in Kubokota is a mythic charter for the contemporary socio-political order. As I have discussed elsewhere (McDougall 2016: 34–63), the establishment of Christian churches was one component of a profound transformation of territorial relations in the early twentieth century. Driven as much by commerce as by Christianity, people moved from inland hamlets to the coast and from defensible outposts on Ranongga’s treacherous west coast to more accessible settlements on the east coast. The church became the new ritual centre of these new coastal communities, and Christianity provided ideological grounds for colonial pacification: no one is

an enemy because everyone is a child of the same transcendent God. Yet old rivalries took new forms in this era: the arrival of the Seventh-day Adventist mission on the heels of the Methodists established new sociopolitical fault lines. By the end of the twentieth century, established church communities were losing members to a plethora of alternative denominations (McDougall 2013). These schisms were theological, social and geographic (new churches were established in hamlets at some distance from the main settlement). Thus, reaffirming the solidarity of the established church-centred community through the 2016 centenary was both urgent and challenging.

The story of conversion is also the story of a single family (Fig. 2). James Paleo's father, Padaqeto, was the *bangara* 'chief' at Pienuna who was responsible for the last great war raids on neighbouring islands sometime around 1900. Takavoja was Padaqeto's sister (thus Paleo's classificatory mother). Padaqeto died sometime during Paleo's absence. Lineage identity and chieftainship is passed matrilineally in Ranongga, so Takavoja's son, Jirubangara, succeeded his uncle. His installation ceremony had just concluded when Paleo returned in February 1916. Sagobabata was the brother of Padaqeto and Takavoja. Remembered as both warrior and priest, he was among those who most vehemently resisted Paleo's attempt to bring Christianity to Kubokota. In line with other celebrations which foreground not only the missionary but also the local chief credited with accepting the gospel message, centenary organisers treated both Paleo and the chiefly woman Takavoja as heroes of this story. While chiefly women throughout Oceania seem to have played important roles in seeking to protect missionaries,³ the Kubokota story is unusual insofar as a woman played a central, not supporting, role in the drama. The official centenary theme was "the victorious arrival of the Gospel through a mother's love" and work groups were organised around Paleo and Takavoja. As the preparations for the Kubokota centenary progressed, this focus on "mother" and "son" became problematic because it called uncomfortable attention to Sagobabata, forcing his descendants to come to terms with their grandfather's opposition to the faith that they now take as the source of truth and morality.

Narratives of conversion in Oceania focus on local heroes, but they also create antiheroes. Thus, in Santa Isabel, depictions of heroic indigenous pastors and Christian chiefs were set off by parodies of the senseless violence and ignorance of pre-conversion ancestors (White 1991: 141–43). Such parodies are a standard feature of conversion dramas. They underscore the transformative power of Christianity, illustrate the vast distance between a violent past and a peaceful present, and often erase the violent colonial power that made missionisation possible (Dureau 2001; Errington and Gewertz 1994; Gewertz and Errington 1993; Young 1997). The foes of Christianity are often generic figures, but sometimes particular ancestors are remembered

for resisting, or even killing, missionaries. For example, in 2009 people of Erromango in Vanuatu undertook a large reconciliation ceremony to atone for the murder of missionaries in the nineteenth century, crimes that were thought to have cursed both the local community and the nation as a whole (Eriksen 2014; Mayer *et al.* 2013). Conversion narratives affirm the inherited power of local chiefs to welcome strangers ashore, but they are far more ambivalent about warriors who sought to prevent enemies from arriving or priests who sought to maintain relationships with ancestors.

The challenge of representing Sagobabata's opposition to Paleo was but one of many sources of conflict in the preparations for the centenary event. Other challenges emerge in any large-scale event that seeks to build a state of solidarity from fractured groups and strong-willed individuals. To make matters even more difficult, long-standing tensions around landownership and leadership had emerged in particularly pernicious form in the lead-up to the centenary as some of the families involved had begun negotiating with timber companies for the right to harvest the tiny patches of hardwood forest on this small, steep island. These factors made it difficult to stage the ceremony.

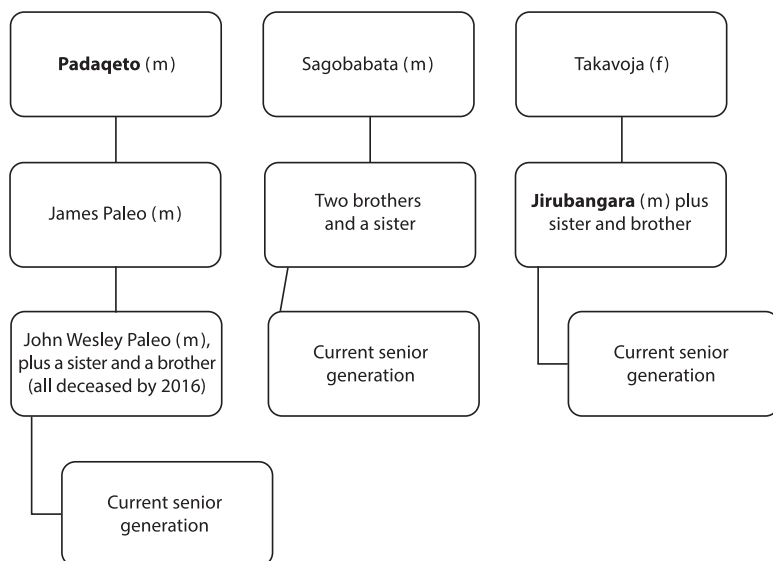


Figure 2. Descendants of Padaqeto, Sagobabata and Takavoja (village chiefs in bold type).

The story of Paleo's arrival was the first story I was told when I began my PhD research 20 years ago. The night I arrived in Pienuna, John Wesley Paleo came to the house where I was staying, which happened to be just metres from the site where his father, James, had come ashore in 1916. Each February that I have resided in Pienuna (1999, 2001, 2007), I have watched dramatic reenactments of these events. In early 2015, members of the planning committee asked me for my records and narrative of Paleo's arrival (McDougall 2016: 94–95, 100–108), which I shared with them—only to hear much of it read verbatim during the Bishop's address!⁴ I took part in the centenary as an invited guest and a member of the community who contributed time and money to the staging of the event. In my role as an anthropologist, I interviewed many people about why they felt this event was so important. I also worked with David Frances Tafoa, an evangelical pastor and filmmaker, in video-recording interviews and events in the celebration.⁵ From the outsider–insider perspective of someone with a long-standing commitment to the flourishing of this place and its people, I have struggled with the task of writing about conflicts behind an event intended to display solidarity.

For my friends in Pienuna, manifesting collectivity—the state of being united—is critically important for their sense of connection to one another, to the land of their ancestors and to God. The centenary is a ritual that seeks to set up what Victor Turner called “a symbiotic interpenetration of individual and society” (1974: 56). When this sense of wholeness is achieved in ritual, it “can be carried over into secular life for a while and help to mitigate or assuage some of the abrasiveness of social conflicts rooted in conflicts of material interests or discrepancies in the ordering of social relations”, but the process “only works where there is already a high level of *communitas* in the society that performs the ritual” (p. 56). Because a failed ritual is thus testament to a disunited and disordered state of being, the stakes are high. In lifting the curtain on some of the behind-the-scenes struggles of this celebration, my intention is not to discredit the public presentation of unity. Instead, I hope that when future generations reflect nostalgically on the way their grandparents were able to cooperate, an account like this one may help them understand how much work, skill and effort their parents and grandparents put into the production of “community” for this event.

REMEMBERING CONVERSION, FORGETTING COLONIALISM

Why is remembering conversion so important for so many Pacific Islanders, who now comprise the most thoroughly Christian region on earth (Tomlinson and McDougall 2013: 1–2)? Is the ongoing racialisation of Christianity as White or European one of the lasting legacies of nineteenth-century imperialism? When can Islanders “forget conversion” (Gow 2006) and

just be Christian, rather than constantly disavowing then reengaging with ancestors? To answer these questions about remembrance, we must start with what is forgotten—forgotten in European archives and forgotten in localised commemorations.

I have never found a trace of James Paleo, Kubokota's missionary hero, in the annals of the Methodist mission or any other archival source. His father, Padaqeto, however, does appear. Nearly a decade after the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was formally established in 1893, deputy commissioner Arthur W. Mahaffy in the Western District undertook a swift, ruthless and effective campaign to end long-distance warfare. On 10 June 1901, Mahaffy used a confiscated war canoe to raid Kubokota as punishment for a Kubokota raid on Choiseul undertaken with Vella Lavella allies. Graham Officer, a curator of the Museum of Victoria, accompanied Mahaffy and wrote about the events. Arriving in the early morning to an abandoned village, they destroyed two large war canoes and several smaller canoes, damaged gardens and cut and burned coconut trees. Officer stole an ornamented skull from the shrine near the beach. Later, Padaqeto (spelled "Panangatta" in Officer's diary) travelled to Gizo to plead for the return of this ornamented skull, the remains of his father. Officer refused, hid the head, and shipped it to Melbourne (Lawrence 2014: 229; Richards 2012). It was no wonder Padaqeto's brother, Sagobabata, was enraged to see the mission boat reappear not many years later: the so-called ship people were stealing both ancestors and children from Kubokota.⁶

More surprising than the absence of the indigenous missionary in the colonial archive is the absence of this colonial violence in vernacular histories of Ranongga. It was not entirely forgotten. In 1999, I interviewed an elderly man about how the village of Obobulu was founded, and he told me of how families from Pienuna fled southward following the burning of Pienuna's canoe house. But no one ever spontaneously told me this story, nor was it ever mentioned in the context of any anniversary of the founding of the church. Nor do the conversion narratives focus on the dramatic transformations that had occurred long before Paleo's birth: encounters with European whalers and traders had brought devastating epidemics, and the adoption of steel tools and guns intensified long-standing practices of interisland warfare (Bennett 1987: 35; Jackson 1975; White 1983; Zelenietz 1983). As is the case in so many narratives of conversion in Island Melanesia (Dureau 2001; Young 1997), this early ambivalent encounter with Europeans is erased. Temporal sequencings are reversed, with Christianity remembered as the cause of peace—not following in the wake of violent campaigns through which colonial governments subjugated local polities.

Rather than remembering the forcible destruction of the old ways by British imperialism, the first generation of converts reenacted this revolution as a moral transformation that they had chosen themselves. Local people are

the heroes, not victims, of these histories. They celebrate the role that they themselves—that is, their ancestors—played in history. Arguably, in the very act of destroying old gods and installing a new one, they were also following old ritual patterns pervasive throughout Polynesia (Sissons 2014, this issue) and perhaps further to the west as well. Amnesia about colonial violence made narratives of Christianisation more dramatic and compelling, but it also erased the motive for local resistance to Christianity. Men like Sagobabata are portrayed as benighted and backward, not understandably outraged by crimes committed against them, their land, their ancestors and their children.

Temporal rupture is not absent in indigenous myth and tradition in Oceania, but it has an even more prominent place in the Christian tradition that converts embraced. Rupture is not the only temporal dynamic in the faith—the Christian liturgy, for example, collapses cosmic patterns onto the life of Christ, evoking a cyclical time that cross-cuts the linear time of revelation (see Swann 2019)—yet it is hard to deny that a move from old to new is embedded in the texts and traditions of the global faith. This does not, of course, mean that people really do abandon their pasts; arguably, the constant emphasis on the need to reject old ways keeps attention focused on the past in a way that might not happen in a faith less adamant about radical change. Writing of centuries-old Bolivian Catholicism, Olivia Harris observed that “for most human populations, respect for their ancestors operates as a powerful metaphor of continuity between past and present”, and Christianity invariably undermines that metaphor (2006: 72). Yet, in the case she examines, the Christian division of past and present was overlaid onto an Andean spatial structure, with foreigners mediating engagements with the God of the outer and upper world and Indians controlling the powers of the autochthonous spirits of the inner and lower world (p. 64). Ancestral powers were relocated, not eradicated. This is not merely a feature of Catholicism, a tradition known for incorporating rather than rejecting aspects of indigenous tradition. Even in vehemently past-rejecting forms of evangelical Protestant Christianity, ancestors are rarely abandoned, and are instead encompassed within the Christian universe, often reappearing as Satanic forces to be battled through spiritual warfare (Jorgensen 2005; Macdonald 2019; Meyer 1998).

Recent work in the anthropology of Christianity (including articles in this collection) are attending more closely to the different temporalities and approaches to indigenous pasts within different historical churches. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when missions moved into the western Pacific Islands, mission societies from established churches emphasised liturgy, tradition and community, while more evangelical societies emphasised revelation, biblical literalism and individual faith. These tensions played out in the historic missions of Solomon Islands. The influential Anglican Melanesian mission, for example, sought to harmonise indigenous

tradition and Christianity. John Coleridge Patteson, the first bishop of Melanesia, dreamt of “evangelizing Melanesia through a Melanesian agency” and “had an upper-class English distaste for the dramatizing of conversion stories to drum up popular support” (Hilliard 1993: 336–37). Ethnographic studies of Melanesian Anglican communities suggest that tradition has endured in contemporary indigenous ethnotheologies seeking to probe the relationship between Christian and local mythology and ritual (Barker 2014; Kolshus 2007; Scott 2005, 2007; Taylor 2010; White 1991; Whiteley 2015). In contrast, evangelical missions like the Wesleyan Methodist mission had no hesitation in evoking the depraved practices of the “savages”—cannibalism, wife strangling, sacrifices—to emphasise the miraculous effects of Christian conversion (Darch 2009: 31, 80). Methodist missionaries in Western Solomon Islands narrated the path of local converts from darkness to light and savagery to civilisation, often conflating Christianity, commerce and Anglo-European culture (for an example, see Nicholson 1923). It is this tradition that is refracted—but not exactly replicated—in the commemoration at Pienuna.

WORKING FOR ANCESTORS, WORKING FOR COMMUNITY

By memorialising conversion, Kubokota people were remembering their own ancestors. In interviews, the grandchildren of James Paleo continually expressed their dedication to the preparations and to the church as a whole—they were the fruit of the seed that their grandfather planted. One of the men who worked tirelessly on building projects for the centenary, Morris Vaevo, told me and Frances Tafoa that he was trying to emulate his grandfather, Kubokota’s second pastor-teacher, a Vella Lavella man named Boazi Nunukujuku who married Paleo’s sister and who is remembered for building the area’s first large church (Bensley 1932). Boazi did not tell people to work—he just worked and inspired others to join him. All of the men and women we approached for interviews were eager to tell of a grandfather who had chosen to attend the new mission school and embrace the new way of life.

Despite the deep commitment of many villagers to celebrate both Christianity and their ancestors’ legacy, by the time my family and I arrived in Pienuna village just after New Year’s Day in 2016, many were beginning to panic about the lack of progress. There was a great deal to be done in a few weeks: constructing a memorial monument and buildings for the centenary activities; planning and practising church services, dramas, choir competitions, dancing, marching and other events for the three-day celebration; drafting text and printing the programme for the service; preparing to serve food three times daily; planning a large concluding communal feast; purchasing furniture; weeding and beautifying village grounds; arranging flowers; and myriad other smaller tasks. Another two weeks passed and at least three all-day meetings were held before the work of preparations got underway in

earnest. Over and over, and with increasing urgency, village pastor Geoffrey Pinau and other leaders of the centenary committee urged the community: *ta makarai* ‘let’s [work] together’!

Centenary celebrations had rippled through the region for a decade and a half before 2016. They followed the temporal sequence and spatial path from the headquarters in Roviana Lagoon where Australian Rev. John F. Goldie established the mission headquarters in 1902 (Carter 2014; Ziru 2016). The Seventh-day Adventist mission, founded in nearby Marovo Lagoon by Australian missionary George F. Jones in 1914, celebrated its centenary with a massive gathering of some 5,000 people (Diisango 2014; *Solomon Star News* 2014). The 2010s were a time of similar celebrations for other historic mission churches all around the Solomons (Anglican, Catholic and South Seas Evangelical Church) (Frances 2014; Piringi 2014). Most of these celebrations narrate the transition from darkness to light, and most involve dramatisation of the missionary arrival. Explicit narration is not the only representation of the effects of the arrival of Christianity. Gatherings themselves are a tangible manifestation of Christian commitment to unity, harmony and large-scale collaboration. Throughout the region, success in any undertaking is seen to require a state in which every member of the community “is one” in heart and mind. This ability to work as one is simultaneously associated with the good ways of the ancestors and the core values of Christianity (Barker 2007; Smith 1994).

Such high expectations are often unfulfilled. In 2017, the wife of a United Church minister told me that in all of the celebrations she had attended, none of the communities were truly prepared: church buildings were unfinished, disputes were unresolved, food supplies were inadequate. Among the most difficult celebration was the region’s first: the 2002 commemoration of the arrival of the Methodist mission in Roviana occurred during a period of economic and political collapse associated with the Tensions (1998–2003) in Solomon Islands. The United Church was unable to muster the resources, so the commemoration was supported by the Christian Fellowship Church, a movement that broke away from the original Methodist mission in the 1950s (Hviding 2011: 76, 84–85). Centenary events thus prompt not only celebration but also lamentation about the inability of people today to work together to pull off these large demonstrations of hospitality (see Tomlinson 2009).

In the months leading up to the Kubokota centenary, everyone agreed that nothing significant would be accomplished until everyone in the community was reconciled with one another. Disputes arising from contested land boundaries, sexual transgressions, gossip, accusations of misuse of community funds and even dog bites would have to be resolved. Over the years, a semi-formalised chief’s committee had managed such conflicts with more or less skill and efficiency (McDougall 2014, 2015). Dispute resolution

was particularly challenging in early 2016 because important leaders were on opposite sides of a dispute about a logging project commencing on land on Ranongga's northwestern coast. In late January, a centenary Peace and Reconciliation Committee was established with the indefatigable Hazel Paleo Havea as chairwoman. She brought disputants together, talked them through their conflicts, used small sums of money borrowed from her brother-in-law's canteen to pay "compensation" and led them in prayer. As a granddaughter of the first missionary, James Paleo, Hazel was concerned not only with the everyday disputes but also with long-term denominational schisms. She visited Jehovah's Witnesses and Wesleyan Methodists to encourage them to join together to celebrate the arrival of Christianity, not just the arrival of the United Church.

One of the most vexing conflicts concerned the placement of the monument that would mark the arrival of the gospel—a clear indication of how important the landscape is in this history. James Paleo is said to have arrived at "the chief's shore", which was the landing place for large canoes and the site of an important ancestral shrine. This shore area had been utterly transformed by a 2007 earthquake that lifted the entire island of Ranongga metres out of the sea (McDougall *et al.* 2008). In 2016, a family whose house had been destroyed by the earthquake had nearly completed a new dwelling just on the edge of this old beach, now some 50 metres inland from the water's edge. Although they had permission from the village chief to build on that land, they faced resentment from others who felt the land should remain public. As the centenary neared, a rumour that this family objected to having the monument close to their house stoked these resentments. The village pastor and others undertook a great deal of behind-the-scenes negotiation to orchestrate a public reconciliation between the opposed parties before ground was broken. Only after that dispute was solved did a team of stone carvers begin the arduous process of cutting a large piece of river stone, carrying it back to the village, sanding it, engraving it and erecting the cement and wood monument that would encase it. It was completed just in time, with the paint still tacky when it was dedicated at dawn on 4 February (Fig. 3).

Some of the struggles in the weeks of centenary preparations resulted from decisions taken in 2015 about how the work should be organised. At that time, the superintendent minister for the Ranongga Circuit of the United Church decided that the community should be divided into two sides: the side of the missionary James Paleo and the side of Lillian Takavoja who welcomed him ashore. He assigned Paleo's side the task of rebuilding a dining hall for guests and assigned Takavoja's side the task of building a new speaker's pavilion. Each side would fundraise throughout the year for these specific projects and for the general fund of the centenary committee, which would cover all other costs. The superintendent minister's division of the community was not, in itself, unusual. During Christmas and New Year's holidays, the community



Figure 3. The centenary monument.

is often divided into zones named after different countries, for example. Each year, the United Church organises hamlets into numbered zones which are then assigned weekly responsibility for morning devotion, floral arrangements for Sunday service, feeding visiting preachers and other duties. Because hamlets are composed of close relatives, this “zone” organisation taps into existing patterns of cooperative work. But zones generally are larger than small family hamlets, so they draw together neighbours who are not closely related. These organisational zones are ephemeral; they are created for specific goals and dissolved when the goal is achieved. They are not part of inherited structures of descent and they are not constitutive of personal or group identity. They serve to foster conviviality and cooperation across families rather than affirming distinctive identities.

The centenary division of the community into Paleo’s and Takavoja’s side was problematic because these were real ancestors. Moreover, Takavoja was Paleo’s father’s sister: these close cognatic kin were positioned on competing sides rather than working together. Even more worryingly, it was never clear how people who were not directly descended from Paleo or Takavoja were

supposed to contribute to the centenary preparations. As the centenary neared, families began to define themselves around some of the ancestors who had been excluded from the Paleo/Takavoja structure. The first to do so were descendants of Takavoja's brother Sagobabata, who decided to build a canoe house just below the monument on the old shoreline. Other families followed, establishing descent groups focused on the first generation of young men to join Paleo's school, many of whom became pastor-teachers themselves. The proliferation of groups based on cognatic kinship meant that husbands and wives found themselves pulled in different directions, wanting to contribute to both their own and their spouses' groups. Financial dealings were even more difficult than they usually are in community projects. The treasurer for the central centenary committee found it nearly impossible to extract funds promised by each of the family groups. Suspicions about whether funds were going to the central community or the more "private" family projects abounded. As the task of representing ancestors overshadowed the task of celebrating the conversion of the community as a whole, groups began to plan centenary-eve "parties" (this English word was used). One party was held well past midnight on 3 February, after final preparations and evening entertainment for visiting guests. With so much food and money invested in family parties, the main communal feast after the centenary worship service was not as lavish as many had hoped it might be.

Unsurprisingly, Sagobabata's descendants were most troubled by the decision to organise the event around Paleo and Takavoja. One friend of mine, herself an important leader of women's fellowship in the United Church, objected to the way that Takavoja was treated as a hero of the story of the gospel arrival equal to Paleo. "Why don't we just celebrate the gospel bearer, Paleo?" she asked in exacerbation. "Mother's love, mother's love—Takavoja just did what any mother would do. It had nothing to do with faith." If Takavoja is celebrated for welcoming Paleo, Sagobabata is the ancestor remembered for resisting him.

DRAMATISING ANCESTRAL ACTION

Getting the story of the arrival of the gospel correct was a preoccupation of many Kubokota people in the weeks leading to the centenary. The official narrative would appear in the centenary programme to be handed out to visitors, be retold in the service and be reenacted on the shore. Several people produced exercise books containing accounts written by their fathers and grandfathers, each with slightly different details, which had implications for the shape of the celebration and the identities of families and villages involved.

One example of contestation concerned Paleo's spatial path back home from Roviana. He began on the Methodist mission ship with Rev. John F. Goldie. When the launch had engine trouble, Goldie landed at a European-run plantation south of Pienuna and sent Paleo with other Islander missionaries

northward to Pienuna in a smaller dingy. Everyone agreed that before arriving at Pienuna, the small mission party landed at Obobulu village, where Paleo visited his mother. During planning meetings, some of Paleo's descendants who are living in Obobulu insisted that Paleo held a short worship service there, thus planting the faith first at Obobulu. For this reason, they argued, the dramatic reenactment ought to begin in Obobulu before moving onto Pienuna. Obobulu committee members lost the argument, and the fact that the dramatic reenactment began in Pienuna rather than Obobulu remained a source of resentment years after the event. What might be to an outsider a minor detail of little importance is absolutely critical for those involved, in this case setting consequential relationships of precedence among villages.

Another point of discussion was Paleo's decision to climb aboard the mission ship. How did he know what the crew and Rev. Goldie were saying? They spoke Roviana, a language that people of Ranongga learned primarily after joining the Methodist mission. Some men who had travelled widely might know Roviana, but Paleo was just a young man. Did the ship's crew and Goldie communicate in signs and gestures rather than words? Did Paleo know what he was doing by boarding the ship—was he actively choosing the gospel of Jesus Christ? Or, was he just eager for adventure? It was decided that the crew and Goldie would speak Roviana, but also mime the actions of buying copra, reading and praying to show that Paleo knew what he was getting into.

As I've already suggested, the most ambivalent element of the performance was the depiction of old men's resistance to Christianity. This tradition of reenactment has changed over time (see Errington and Gewertz 1994: 107). Reenactments in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were staged by Simion Panakera, one of the first local youths to follow the path of James Paleo to the Methodist mission headquarters. Panakera's dramas lingered on the crude and ignorant responses of the old priests and chiefs to Paleo's efforts and were remembered as hilarious. Those I witnessed in the late 1990s and early 2000s were staged by John Wesley Paleo, James Paleo's son. He did not linger on the ongoing resistance of the old men to Paleo. Several men tasked with staging the drama in 2016 wanted to return to what they saw as a more accurate version of history, not this more recently sanitised story. It was important, they said, to display the ancestral ways that had been changed with Christianity.

In 2016, as in annual commemorations, James Paleo's grandchildren played central roles in orchestrating the drama, and many of the actors were closely related to their characters. Hazel Paleo Havea, Paleo's granddaughter, narrated the action in Kubokota and Pijin. Her elder sister, Grace Nose Sasapitu, played the role of Takavoja, whose performance was so moving that many observers wept along with her as she cried for her lost son. Their younger brother, Costas Paleo, played the role of his grandfather, the missionary James Paleo. Their

elder brother, Dickson Paleo, played Sagela, one of the ancestral priests who opposed James Paleo's arrival. Pienuna village pastor Geoffrey Pinau played Sagobabata, his wife's great-grandfather. Derek Alekera Jirubangara played the role of his grandfather, Jirubangara. Local people also took the role of Australian and Solomon Islander missionaries. Pastor Michael Bensley of New Bare village (himself named after a New Zealand missionary, A.A. Bensley, posted to Vella Lavella in the 1930s) played both Australian Rev. John F. Goldie, who enticed Paleo aboard the mission ship, and Vella Lavella missionary Makapivo, who accompanied him on his journey home. Rev. Manrose Tulumae, grandson of Sagobabata, played the role of Australian Rev. R.C. Nicholson, who was stationed on Vella Lavella through World War II and eventually baptised Sagobabata and Sagela.

The drama opened with the arrival of the missionary. Sagobabata and his companion, Sagela, were tending a shrine, looking anxiously to sea. At the water's edge, old man Noso, Paleo and Tetebule paddled out to a ship that appeared from behind the point. Crew members and Rev. Goldie persuaded Paleo to climb aboard the ship, and then they quickly departed. Old man Noso hurried back to shore and reported the disappearance of Paleo, saying he had been stolen by *tio vaka* 'ship people', the people with white skin. Takavoja wailed for her child, tears streaking down her face.

The next scene was set years later. It included what Geoff White identifies as the performative sequence of commemorations in Isabel: approach, resistance, acceptance (White 1991: 256; see also Young 1997). Sagobabata swung a shell ring in a divination ritual, then announced that evil was arriving. The ship reappeared, and he and Sagela ordered children to run and hide. They rushed to the arriving boat, brandishing their axes, as three men calmly disembarked. All three were dressed in the shirt, tie and Fijian-style men's skirts that were common dress for indigenous male converts in the colonial era. Enraged, these warrior priests leaped at them: "Who do you think you are? Go away! You come to steal children! You land, you die! Go, go back! I will take your heads, right now, today!" Takavoja stood up and slowly walked toward the shore, keening, "My child, my child! Betijama, Paleo! More than ten years ago you left Pienuna and only now you have returned. My child, my child!" As she approached, Sagobabata and Sagela turned their attention to her, furious at her interference. She stopped still, raised her arm, and announced, "I am the chiefly woman of Pienuna. I give permission for my child to come ashore." She resumed her wailing cry and embraced Paleo. "Oh, my child, my child, Betijama, Paleo. You were lost, we said, but today you've come back" (Fig. 4).

After the confrontation on the shore, the tone of the performance shifted and Sagobabata and Sagela took on the role of clowns. Paleo's attempts at evangelism were continually disrupted by Sagobabata and Sagela's antics. When James said "Jesu Karisito", Sagela and Sagobabata yelled "*sisu*", a



Figure 4. Takavoja greeting Paleo; film still by Dave Tafoa.

local word for a type of yam. As the missionaries bowed their heads in prayer, Sagobabata continued to guffaw at the idea they were praying to a yam, while Sagela jumped up to poke his axe a few inches from one of the missionaries' faces. Paleo tried teaching a song, "Buloqu sage la" ("My Heart Rises" in Roviana, the language of the mission). After the first stanza, Sagobabata poked Sagela: "Ha! They're talking about you!" Sagela was violently enraged at the misuse of his name. James tried to explain the meaning of the song, but Sagela was only calmed when James pulled a bundle of tobacco from his box and handed it to Sagela. James gave them cloth, a steel-headed axe and then a machete, explaining that they would need to clear the forest to build a church and school. When James led the small party in prayer, Sagobabata and Sagela did not bow their heads, but stuck their bottoms in the air in the direction of James's bowed head in what is a customary form of insult. James's prayer could be heard above the peals of laughter from the watching crowd.

The drama moved quickly to the conclusion. The narrator explained that even Sagobabata and Sagela became Christian. Rev. R.C. Nicholson arrived to cover the now subdued Sagobabata and Sagela with white cloth. Raising his hands, Nicholson launched into a short fiery English and Solomon Islands Pijin prayer. The narrator read the names of the first young men who attended James Paleo's school, who travelled to mission headquarters in Roviana

and who served as pastor-teachers; then she named the first generation of young women who attended Paleo's school. Takavoja and Jirubangara led the way up to the church. Midway through the service, red wreaths were laid by descendants of Paleo and Takavoja in their memory. Chief Luke Irapio, a grandson of Sagobabata, presented the bishop with a *bakia*, the fossilised shell rings used for transactions in land and people. It was compensation and atonement for his grandfather's opposition to Christianity.

Ending the drama with the conversion of Sagobabata seems to redeem him. Yet Sagobabata's life as a Christian was short. Before he was baptised, he took leave of his ancestors, who apparently told him he could go over to the church for nine days before they would take him back. Nine days after his baptism, Sagobabata fell ill and died. One of Sagobabata's granddaughters, Zinia Narongo, had taken the lead in organising the descendant group. In the weeks before the centenary, she had compiled a list of the hundreds of grandchildren of Sagobabata who had become pastors or taken up work for the church or the government. In an interview, she told me that she and her cousins were remembering not their grandfather's resistance to Christianity but the fact that he did turn to Christianity before his death. "Those nine days are the legacy we carry," she told me. Of all people at Pienuna in 1916, Sagobabata was the most committed to defending the old way of life. His decision to become Christian involved the biggest sacrifice. He was, according to Zinia, the first born-again Christian, the first true convert.

* * *

Celebrations of conversion are always about the present as well as the past. To quote White (1991) again, they create "identity through history". As John Taylor observed in his study of how people of North Pentecost in Vanuatu have made sense of the Christian "stranger god": "The historicizing of myth and mythologizing of history does not occur in a structural vacuum but emerges in the midst of the relational fabrication of personal and group identities" (2010: 442). Given that relationships and identities are always fraught, it is hardly a surprise that the centenary in Kubokota was a time of contestation as well as celebration.

The centenary marks a temporal rupture. Sagobabata and Sagela's antics in the drama hinted at ways of being in the world that have been eradicated: a heightened sense of the power of naming, a bawdy sense of humour, a refusal to close one's eyes. These performances and other recollections that Kubokota people shared at the time of the centenary serve as reminders of how much of Christianity is taken for granted. One story was repeated several times. James Paleo was going to lead a service in Obobulu and he came across two

old women gathering *ngali* (canarium almonds). “That is forbidden,” he told them, “no work on Sunday!” The next week, they were again gathering nuts, and he again chastised them. “Wow, what a lot of Sundays there are,” one exclaimed in bewilderment. Time and space were soon to be transformed so that the structure of the Christian week became the structure of daily life.

The dramatic performance on 4 February was effective, but uncomfortable. Errington and Gewertz (1994) suggest that East New Britain people in the early 1990s could laugh at the stupidity of their ancestors because they were sure of their own modern success. In 2016, no one was feeling particularly confident in either Christian unity or modern success. People were despondent about the simmering land disputes; even those involved with the logging company had low expectations about positive benefits. They knew logging had devastated communities and environments in neighbouring areas for decades, but no local actors felt they could avoid what seemed inevitable. The Kubokota church community had been religiously fragmented for decades with the rise of new forms of the faith. Yet these broader tensions might have remained in the background if it were not for the choice to organise the preparations around particular ancestors—not just the missionary Paleo, but also Takavoja. This personalised the drama, making it more difficult for the descendants of Sagobabata to come to terms with their grandfather’s legacy.

The return of Paleo is remembered as a “universe-defining moment” (Goldsmith, this issue). Yet it is clear that by the time that young Paleo ventured across the sea to the mission station, his world had already been radically transformed through encounters with the ship people. The story of colonial violence inflicted upon the generation of Paleo’s father has no place in commemorations of conversion, in the stories told to children and visitors, or in any of the exercise books I’ve seen. As is the case for much of Island Melanesia, the arrival of Christianity functions here as a “first contact” story, eliding earlier encounters with Europeans (Dureau 2001; Young 1997). Forgetting colonialism and remembering conversion serves to highlight local people’s agency in transforming their own lives. Historical disruption is remembered as moral transformation, a rejection rather than a defeat of ancestral ways. They did not choose to abdicate political authority to imperial powers, but some did actively embrace the foreign god that these Europeans had brought with them. At the same time, if Kubokota people were to remember the violence of colonialism, it would reframe Sagobabata’s angry response to the mission. Instead, imperial subjugation is ignored, and the violence of the tumultuous times is displaced onto a local ancestor, whose descendants struggle with his legacy.

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NOTES

1. *Paleo* is the name of a small fish, which apparently young Betijama once played with. Nicknaming is quite common in Ranongga, and original names often fall out of use or are forgotten.
2. This scenario was the central theme of my ethnohistorical study of Ranongga, in which stories of Christianisation in Kubokota and two other regions on the island feature prominently (McDougall 2016: 91–123).
3. White (1991: 39) recounts a case in which a chiefly woman intervened to protect an indigenous evangelist; Kolshus and Hovdhaugen (2010) discuss the possibility that Nukapu women may have sought to protect John Coleridge Patteson, who was killed there in 1871.
4. My account’s emphasis on Takavoja’s unusual role may have encouraged the church leadership to frame the centenary as they did, though I suspect that an emerging emphasis on gender equity within the United Church and other donor-influenced organisations in Solomon Islands was a more important factor in this depiction.
5. Tafoa used our footage to produce a film (2016) about Paleo as a mission hero, bearing out Michael Young’s (1997: 130) prescient speculation that independent Melanesian programmers would be likely to take up stories of missionary heroes in film productions.
6. Against explanations that see violence against missionaries as misplaced retribution for offenses committed in the labour trade, Thorgeir Kolshus and Even Hovdhaugen (2010) highlight the similarity of motives and modus operandi of Anglican missionaries and traders—both sought to remove local youths. Although the Methodist mission did not share the Anglican model of removing youths for centralised training overseas, the Kubokota example shows that removal was also an important part of the evangelism strategy in this region.

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