Objects of Expert Knowledge: On Time and the Materialities of Conversion to Christianity in the Southern New Hebrides

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Abstract: In 1848 Presbyterian missionaries John and Charlotte Geddie travelled 20,000 miles to Aneityum, an island in the New Hebrides archipelago (now Vanuatu), in the southwest Pacific, where they established the first "successful" Christian mission in island Melanesia. Through evangelical desire, expert knowledge and ambitious projects, the Geddies along with converts, Samoan "teachers" and Scottish missionaries, transformed everyday and ritual practices within a surprisingly short period. I draw attention to the materiality of conversion to argue that "becoming" Christian was connected to knowing and "doing things" evident in how objects made and remade the temporalities of the sacred and mundane. Such fraught material enactments made visible the divergent and overlapping temporal commitments to conversion at work in Aneityum.

Keywords: time, Vanuatu, expertise, conversion, Christianity, materiality

Résumé : En 1848, les missionnaires presbytériens John et Charlotte Geddie ont fait le voyage jusqu'à Aneityum, une île de l'archipel des Nouvelles-Hébrides (aujourd'hui Vanuatu), dans le Pacifique sud-ouest, où ils ont établi la première mission chrétienne qui a « réussi » sur une île en Mélanésie ». À travers leur désir d'évangélisation, leur savoir expert, et l'ambition de leurs projets, les Geddie, avec les premiers convertis et les missionnaires samoans et écossais, ont transformé les pratiques quotidiennes et rituelles en un laps de temps étonnamment court. J'attire l'attention sur le caractère substanciel de la conversion pour montrer que le « devenir » chrétien était associé à savoir « faire des choses », ce qui transparait dans la manière dont les objects fabriquent et refabriquent les temporalités du sacré et du quotidien. Les représentations matérielles ont rendu visibles les engagements pédagogiques, cosmologiques, et temporels divergents au sein des pratiques de conversion qui se produisaient à Aneityum.

Mots-clés : temps, Vanuatu, expertise, conversion, christianisme, matérialité

In a letter dated 8 November 1859 to a member of his first congregation in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, John Geddie describes the activities of the Presbyterian mission he established in Aneityum, an island in southern New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). The letter, written just a decade after his arrival in Aneityum, notes:

> there are over 50 schools in operation attended by persons of both sexes and every age.... We have lately completed the translation of the New Testament.... The Natives are at present employed in building a new stone church. Some of the larger stones required 60 men to carry them. This has been a great undertaking.[1]

Reported to accommodate up to 1,000 people, the church would become one of the largest in the southern hemisphere. These extraordinary activities marked the rapid conversion to Christianity in Aneityum. Even more remarkable is that the Aneityumese were simultaneously negotiating the demands of the sandalwood trade, its violence and new technologies. Still more remarkable is that the ambitious projects of conversion were undertaken as the islanders endured epidemics from exogenous causes that were exacting tragic tolls on people and their knowledge. During Geddie's tenure, more than half of the population died as islanders came to terms with spiritual and material upheavals. Geddie's letter highlights aspects of temporality and expert knowledge thus underlining that becoming Christian entailed "doing" material things or "undertakings." Expertise, evident in the letter, is, according to E. Summerson Carr, "inherently interactional, invoking the participation of objects, producers and consumers of knowledge and inescapably ideologically implicated in the evolving hierarchies of value" (2010:17). Carr's conceptualization of expertise is a useful way in which to consider Geddie's project of conversion, for expertise

"is also fundamentally a process of becoming" (Carr 2010:19).

Conversion to Christianity in Melanesia has been the subject of significant ethnographic analyses driven, in no small part, by Barker's (1990, 1992) insistence that Christianity is a cultural phenomenon that demands an anti-essentialist framing. While the introduction of Christianity in Melanesia unfolded in different ways, the relationship between indigenous and Christian temporalities and knowledge are often foregrounded. There has been a tendency to move between an emphasis on continuity and discontinuity in understanding the complex processes of conversion to Christianity and colonialism in the Pacific Islands. Anthropologists, Joel Robbins (2007) contends, have been attached to a temporal framework that privileges continuities underplaying the ruptures with the past that are central to conversion. In her early analysis of conversion to Christianity in Aneityum, Bronwen Douglas argues that it entailed a dialectic of "reciprocal processes of incorporation and transformation of new concepts and rituals in terms of local cosmology and cultural assumptions" (1989:11). In his ethnographic work in northern Vanuatu, John Taylor (2010:423) crafted the term "crossing" to convey "the simultaneous convergence and contradictions among indigenous and exogenous religious paradigms that have guided the transformative dialogues of religious colonialism." The idea that conversion is a complex and ongoing process is evident in Michael Scott's (2005:102) ethnographic work in the Solomon Islands, where he argues islanders continuously "engage and re-engage with Christianity" and its "multiple interlocking macro and micro Christian logics." This perspective suggests that conversion is not comprised of a singular cultural logic; rather, becoming Christian is a fraught ontological project in which temporalities and knowledge are continuously reworked.

Temporalities, according to Munn "are lived or apprehended concretely via the various meaningful connectivities, among persons, objects, and space continually being made in and through the everyday world" (1992:116). In this article, I am interested in the ways in which objects help to "apprehend" the "connectivities" that are made and remade in the context of conversion. I was alerted to the power of objects connected to conversion while visiting Aneityum in 2008, where I had discussed Geddie's mission with James and John, two elderly deacons in the Presbyterian Church. Just before leaving Aneityum, they showed me John Geddie's eyeglasses, which they explained, had been in the possession of islanders since his departure from the island in 1872. The eyeglasses conjure the technologies of reading and writing connected to new sources of authoritative knowledge encompassed by the introduction of the Bible that, as Anna Johnston argues, has its own "conflicted temporality" (2001:34). The eyeglasses suggest the social life of an object (Appadurai 1988) and its various trajectories and valuations. They also underline the temporal relationships between Geddie and the descendants of the early converts. Missionaries were attentive to indigenous objects which they collected, preserved and sent back to their countries. However, objects connected to religious rites and beliefs regarded as idols in the new Christian contexts were frequently destroyed or discarded (Colley 2003; Lawson 1994, 2005; Manning and Meneley 2008).

Objects, both mundane and sacred, focus attention on the "messy materiality of things" connected to cosmological worlds (Manning and Meneley 2008:287). Geddie's letter points to the materiality of conversion to Christianity by way of schools, the work of Bible translation and the heavy stones that were converted into the large church that made Christianity manifest and material. These objects make visible the pedagogical, cosmological and temporal commitments that were at the heart of becoming Christian in Aneityum. The materiality of conversion in Aneityum is underlined by Douglas who states that "sacred ground was rendered mundane, foods previously prohibited were ingested safely and sacred stones thrown away" (1989:20). By drawing on the technology of introduced cloth in Tahiti and Samoa, Nicholas Thomas described how it "made the conversion to Christianity visible as a feature of people's behaviour and domestic life" (1999:6). Special clothes dedicated to the Sabbath marked profound changes in reckoning time (Bolton 2003; Jolly 1991; Thomas 1999:6). Objects may be seen as bridges between "incompatible systems" (Thomas 1991:206) where time and knowledge are given to shifting meanings and practices. Objects mediate across contexts and the "material qualities of objects can be mobilized dynamically to reposition objects rhetorically as contested grounds between different fields of meaning" (Manning and Meneley 2008: 288). Attending to objects "makes matter matter" in cosmological worlds and underlines that objects do not passively await meaning but are intertwined with practices of knowing, doing and becoming (Barad 2008:130).

Here, I explore how objects and expert knowledge illuminate the temporal dislocations and the "connectivities" of conversion to Christianity in Aneityum. In *Entangled Objects* (1991), Thomas has discussed the ways in which seemingly passive objects introduced to Pacific Island societies are "recontextualized." He later extended his argument by demonstrating how "things"

also "actively constitute new social contexts" (1999:18). Introduced objects have the capacity to preserve "a prior order" and to "create a novel one" (Thomas 1999:18), affirming their capacities to produce cultural continuities and discontinuities with the past. Time, knowledge and objects are central to conversion that "literally refers to the act of turning a thing into something else" (Jolly 1996:231). Aneityumese sacred stones that made visible their cosmologies and connections to ancestors were "thrown away," while new stones were sanctified in an extravagant church. The Bible, translated word by word, circulated as an enchanted object among converts. Its circulation was made possible by the sale of arrowroot, which was converted from an ordinary plant. Arrowroot acquired new material-spiritual qualities, facilitating the circulation of thousands of Aneityumese Bibles that materialized new cosmological commitments to Christianity. Attending to these objects allows us to understand how knowledge and time are enmeshed in particular, material ways creating or affirming cosmologies and ontologies. Expert knowledge coincided with new temporal economies where objects constituted social contexts for enactments of the sacred and mundane.

I begin by introducing Geddie, the evangelist and clockmaker, and his acquisition of expert knowledge of the Aneityumese cosmology and its materiality. It is important to contextualize the ways in which he both privileged and disparaged indigenous knowledge and its objects. The changes already underway before the Geddies' arrival in 1848, including the introduction of new objects, technologies and pathologies are noted. A discussion of the *naroko*, a ritual centred on competitive feasting, offers insight into Aneityumese conceptions of time and how its cessation reallocated time enabling a new productive regime for the projects and objects of conversion. Finally, I discuss the translation of the Bible and the construction of the stone church as such "undertakings" suggest how material objects connect "prior" and "novel" orders. Through my consideration of the temporal lives of these objects, I show how conversion encompasses continuities and discontinuities.

Clockmaker and Evangelist: Christian Expert Knowledge and Practices

Early attempts at Christian conversion in southern New Hebrides had ended in the violent death of John Williams from the London Missionary Society (LMS) on the shores of Erromango, an island located near Aneityum. The legendary missionary of the South Seas, Williams was clubbed to death while attempting to extend his mission to the southern islands of New Hebrides. His death was a galvanizing moment for the young John Geddie, a newly ordained Presbyterian minister serving in Prince Edward Island. Geddie had grown up in Nova Scotia reading LMS reports of heathenism and evangelical triumphs. Haunted by William's death and drawn by resistance to Christianity, Geddie spent seven years in Prince Edward Island travelling to his rural congregations in snow, sleet and sun proclaiming the need to launch an overseas Presbyterian mission. He eventually persuaded his Prince Edward Island congregations and the Maritime Presbyterian Synod that, despite their lack of funds and their own marginalized colonial status, they could initiate and support a foreign mission. His persuasive effort and relentless advocacy were effective and, by 1848, John Geddie, together with his wife, Charlotte, and children had travelled 20,000 miles to Aneityum and set about establishing "the first successfully missionized island in Melanesia" (Linnekin 1997; Spriggs 1985:24). Geddie's bold effort to establish a Presbyterian mission in Aneityum attracted missionaries to the southern New Hebrides from Scotland (Proctor 1999), Nova Scotia as well as two brothers from Prince Edward Island who also died violently in Erromango during Geddie's tenure in the Pacific.

John Geddie was not one of the "godly mechanics" (Gunson 1978:32), those earliest of missionaries sent to the South Pacific selected on the basis of faith and practical skills, both of which they were expected to pass on to Pacific Islanders. Geddie was a trained and practicing church minister; however, he was also the son of a clockmaker from Scotland who had immigrated to Nova Scotia. Geddie was himself an accomplished clockmaker having worked with his father as a youth (Patterson 1946:14). Well versed in the mechanics of time, he recalibrated notions of time and its rhythm in Aneityum by introducing new measures of time tied to teleological practices of progress (Dening 1980). Drawing on the expert knowledge of John Williams, Geddie set out to reconfigure calendars, the cyclical experience of time and to challenge the chiefly and ancestral authority that underwrote the making of time in Aneityum. Indeed, Williams had long identified the link between refashioning temporalities and "raising up" the "heathen" through material projects (Dening 1980; Johnston 2001:34; Munn 1992). Before leaving colonial Canada, Geddie had taken time to learn new skills, such as printing and medicine, considered crucial to "raising up" the Aneityumese. En route to Aneityum, the Geddies stopped in Hawai'i, Samoa and New Zealand, where they learned about LMS mission practices and techniques of translation. Samoan teachers had been placed in Aneityum by the LMS around the time of William's death, and they were

essential to Geddie's mission. Their geopolitical knowledge of the island facilitated the rapid establishment of evangelical outposts throughout the island (Spriggs 1985:26). John and Jessie Inglis from Scotland joined the Mission in 1852, and they were instrumental in the "undertakings" of conversion.

Europeans in search of sandalwood arrived in the 1830s, but sustained influence only began in the early 1840s. After a regional sandalwood and trading depot was established in 1844, Aneityum became a frequent port of call for sandalwood traders and whalers (Spriggs 1985:25). The sandalwood trade, which ended in the mid-1860s, was followed by a demand for plantation labourers in Australia and other Pacific regions. When Geddie arrived in 1848, the metal axes introduced by the sandalwood trade had replaced stone tools for food cultivation, freeing male labour for work at the sandalwood depot in exchange for food and cloth. Women's sexual services were also exchanged for material goods (Spriggs 1985:33). The trade with foreigners primarily involved those inhabitants of Anelcauhat where Geddie set up his mission and where he soon came to blows with the traders. The missionaries' "desire to raise islanders to 'moral and useful lives,' inevitably clashed with the desire of most Europeans to find pleasure and profit in islander bodies and resources" (Barker 2008:101).

Epidemics

The epidemics that followed foreign incursions resulted in enormous losses in Aneityum and many other Pacific Islands (Douglas 1989, 1994). In Aneityum there had been epidemics in the 1830s and in 1842, causing considerable mortality. Estimates of the population in the 1830s vary but, according to Spriggs, it was between 4,600 and 5,800 (1985:25). Epidemics continued to kill islanders and, according to Norma McArthur (1978), the population was halved between 1848 and 1867, a period that spanned most of Geddie's stay in Aneityum. He reported that the 1861 measles epidemic killed one-third of the population and all but "suspended" Church work (Geddie 1861b:246). Ten years earlier, the 1851 epidemic was considered a turning point for the mission, precipitating the conversion of villagers who had strongly opposed the mission (Douglas 1989). It appeared that converts under the care of the mission were benefitting from the mission's medical knowledge. There was increasing demand for medicine from those who had earlier identified Christianity as the source of such terrible illnesses (Douglas 1989; Spriggs 1985:35). Medicine positioned missionaries as ritual specialists (Lawson 1994:72; Spriggs 1985:33). The epidemics not only eroded the efficacy of local knowledge but also inflated the potential value of the Geddies' medical knowledge and authority. The deaths, due to epidemics, did not just affect individuals and clans in devastating ways but also resulted in the loss of knowledge that perished with its owners before it was transmitted. According to Thomas (2012), the population losses due to epidemics were political and not simply demographic. Knowledge connected to agricultural, maritime, medical, artistic and cosmological domains was decimated. Drawing on the experience of Marquesas, Thomas argues that it was "not just the passing of individual chiefs but more or less the end to ritual and social life, of everything they had created and struggled for" (2012:23). The catastrophic epidemics also represented enormous losses in Aneityum and forced new understandings of such events that undermined the efficacy of indigenous healing and its cosmological basis. This may well have facilitated the rapid conversion to Christianity (Douglas 1989, 1994). However, Lindstrom (2011:143) has argued that, "expectations of historical transformation ... are not necessarily exogenous" in places such as Aneityum. The epidemics along with the advent of traders and missionaries represented such a historical transformation.

Sacred Stones: Objects of Knowledge and Temporalities

While much expert knowledge was being eroded through epidemics, Geddie was acquiring knowledge about the spiritual and material world of the Aneityumese. It was an exercise considered essential to the establishment of missions in many places (Gardner 2006:296; Taylor 2010:430). Keenly interested in understanding the islanders he was dedicated to changing, Geddie quickly recognized that religion and its enactments of faith in Aneityum were woven into the practices of daily life and were, as Talal Asad has argued, "inseparable from the particularities of the temporal world and the traditions that inhabit it" (2001:139). Geddie's journal entries suggest that he was compelled to learn and to respect the system of laws (*itap*) that linked humans and ancestral spirits (*natmass*). In the early days of establishing the mission, Geddie in his journal (Miller 1975:53)[2] describes his practice of "itinerating" or walking around preaching the message of Christianity to those whom he met by chance. It was during these times that Geddie would inadvertently interrupt the activities of chiefs and ritual specialists or violate the restrictions set by itap. His transgressions resulted in insults and these public displays of Geddie's ignorance jeopardized his capacity to assert his expertise and authority. He was issued warnings about his transgressions, including cutting down coconut trees that were reserved for the

upcoming *nakaro*, an important ritual; taking coral from the reef to make lime for his building which disturbed the natmass; and closing the roads to natmass (Miller 1975:35–36). Natmass, as Douglas explained, were ancestral spirits of chiefs, which could and did intervene autonomously in human affairs and might reward or punish human actions" (1989:16). In Aneityum, natmass were approached through rituals, but their actions were unpredictable and could be precipitated by transgressive human activities (Douglas 1989). The *natimarid* or hereditary chiefs were also unsafe "if natmass wrath was incurred through the breaking of restrictions considered to be itap" (Gardner 2006:302). Understanding the nature of itap and the action of natmass became essential to all aspects of mission endeavours, including translation of the Bible and its production and circulation.

Reports from several generations of missionaries, including Geddie, described "the destruction of idols and documented [missionary] successes in creating a void then filled with their own structures and institutions" (Colley 2003:406; Lawson 1994:78, 2005). During my 2008 visit to Aneityum, James described how Geddie demobilized the *kastom* (custom) stones, integral to the Aneityumese cosmological system. James further explained: "The stone for pigs, the stone for taro, and the stone for yam and on and on were all gone." Geddie recognized the power of the ancestral spirits and sacred stones. The regenerative capacity of stones was affiliated with the production and reproduction of the essentials of daily life. Geddie noted that there is "one said to be a maker of pigs, another of fish, another of coconuts, another of taro, another of bananas. As nearly as I can learn, every division of the island has its *natmasses* of this class" (Patterson 1882:128). Geddie's efforts to eliminate the use of sacred stones and other ritual objects were so successful that he could not find a single "idol" to bring home to Maritime Canada in 1865 (Lawson 1994:78). Stones linked humans to sacred power in material ways that, as discussed below, reshaped new temporal narratives.

Recalibrating Aneityumese Temporalities

Chiefly and ancestral authority and knowledge were enacted in narrations of myth and ritual performances that underwrote the making and marking of time in Aneityum. Efforts to recalibrate the organization of time were central to the reordering of social and political life anchored by cosmological beliefs. Greg Dening observed that Christian missions did so by "making seven days in a week and one of them a sabbath, making mealtimes in a day, making work-time and leisure-time, making sacred time and profane time laid out time in a line, as it were" (1980:264). The introduction of the sabbath in Aneityum, for example, was accompanied by a set pattern wherein islanders, as Geddie noted in his journal, were summoned to the 8:30 morning church service by the beating of a piece of hollowed out log, and later a bell. During the service, Geddie preached for 30 minutes, followed by a sabbath school. In the afternoon, at 4:00, a divine service was held and included another short sermon, short addresses given by "natives" followed by a "family devotion" (Miller 1975:75–76). Dening (1980:264) argues that the new sense of time shaped by evangelical Christianity was tethered to a notion of progress and represented "a break-out from the present. A notion of progress called for a self and social discipline informed by an image of the future." Geddie's mission also recalibrated time through its measured attachment to projects such as Bible translation (which was translated one chapter per week), its printing, arrowroot production and church building, all of which were material, spiritual and temporal. These projects and the objects that defined them, along with new knowledge practices, reconfigured but did not replace indigenous time. Drawing on his work in the Solomon Islands, Geoffrey White has argued that the "locally produced histories" of Solomon Islanders are "reflexive," privileging ancestors and communities (1991:9). In this context the "hegemony of the mission rhetoric" and its practices are "incomplete" (White 1991:9).

Aneityumese temporalities embedded in the nakaro ritual were dynamic and material. On the nearby island of Tanna, time is "centered" (Lindstrom 2011), rather than measured, taking account of nights, moons, yams and, with Christianity, prayers. Lunar months are marked by practical and cosmological associations to food production, consumption and exchange. Time, in important ways, is materialized through food. Charting lunar time, according to Alfred Gell, "means attending to life in an organized, structured way" and keeping "track of time is part of keeping up with events" (1999:251–252). In Aneityum the nakaro was a cyclical exchange ritual where large quantities of food were given and received by chiefs. It was a central feature of social and political life and, as Spriggs argued, it provided a time and space where Aneityumese social organization, the position of chiefs and relationships to ancestors were made visible (1985:32). The central role of the chiefs in the nakaro involved the appropriation and circulation of surplus food production in their own areas and its redistribution across these boundaries. The quantity of food commanded by a particular chief could indicate that he was, for example, especially knowledgeable or favoured by ancestral spirits (1985:32).

Natmass, involved in every action and phenomenon on the island, were the "power behind the success of crops" (Gardner 2006:302).

While regularizing everyday life and separating the sacred and mundane were important, it was even more important to remove "the cyclical time of rituals in which a legendary past was re-enacted to legitimate and prolong the present" (Dening 1980:264). Drawing on Alfred Gell's (1992:314) insight that temporal cycles such as the nakaro are better conceptualized as "lineal spirals of progressive time," Lindstrom notes "one never swings back around to the same moment twice" (2011:143). The indigenous system of time "pretends to eternal stasis and continual social reproduction while at another level history may rewrite eternity" (2011:150). The contrast between linear and cyclical time does not adequately capture the differences between Aneityumese and Christian practices of time. The nakaro was instrumental in the "making" and "remaking" of time. It demonstrated how natmass and mortals were "enmeshed through reciprocity in a relationship" with porous boundaries (Gardner 2006:302). Food, a key object of sociality and propitiation in Oceana, was at the core of the nakora, linking production and consumption to sacred power.

Geddie depicted the nakaro exchange as a wasteful and exploitative endeavour rather than a complex temporal enactment of knowledge and power linking islanders to ancestral spirits (natmass). Geddie, quoted in Spriggs, further explained in 1852 "that as the importance of a chief is judged by the quantity of food collected on such occasions, the common people are most heavily taxed in order to support his dignity" (Spriggs 1985:28). Paul, a young man from Aneityum whom I interviewed, explained that the Presbyterian mission was so intent on ending the elaborate food exchanges and chiefly displays of power and knowledge because "the missionaries needed to end such kastoms for they were time-consuming and the missionaries wanted the time of the Aneityumese. Feasting was a waste of time." Time, as Paul suggests, was diverted to new undertakings such as the production of arrowroot. LMS missionaries in Polynesia had taught converts to make arrowroot from the readily available "potato-like tuber" (Miller 1981:153). There was an international market for the arrowroot, considered an excellent food for invalids, and it had a variety of uses both in Europe and the Pacific. Christian converts produced countless tons of arrowroot throughout the island Pacific.[3] In Aneityum, Jessie Inglis learned to make arrowroot from a Rarotongan teacher and his wife, Tutan (Paton 1907). She then introduced the idea of using arrowroot as a source of income for the mission in Aneityum. Arrowroot exports covered the entire and considerable costs of printing the translated Bibles and a range of other texts needed for church and schools. The arrowroot, which was of superior quality, was sold through missionary networks in Australia and Scotland (Paton 1907:126). The new object of arrowroot transited from the mundane into a thing "too sacred to be used for daily food" and "was set apart as the Lord's portion" (Paton 1907:126). Arrowroot separated from the everyday was instrumental in creating novel contexts for enactments of the sacred.

The cessation of competitive food exchanges also freed women's time heretofore absorbed by the production and processing of ceremonial food and pigs for feasting. There was, then, competition for women's time with the establishment of the mission. Charlotte Geddie had started a school for women and recognized that feasts prevented women from attending school (Spriggs 1985:32). Margaret Jolly (1991) has described the way in which women's time and knowledge were reoriented through schools for women that targeted domestic practices associated with food production for ritual events and familial relationships. Missionaries, according to Jolly (1991:36), redirected women's energies away from work outside the home to work within it and from raising food and ceremonial crops to raising Christian families. For the Presbyterian mission, the new domestic domain became "that place where difference must be inclined toward time in certain ways" (Patel 2000:59). Women who were taught to read, for example, could organize the household into "the proper temporality" (Patel 2000:59). Gender was a crucial site for remaking time in Aneityum and for the process of conversion to Christianity in New Hebrides (Douglas 1999; Eriksen 2008; Jolly 1991). The conversion of women in Aneityum, according to Douglas, "provided the perfect before and after scenarios depicting the power of Christianity" (1999:13). This temporal framing made visible the contrast of the brutality of the "heathen" past that had been indexed by the condition of women. From the mission's viewpoint, women who were among the earliest converts, received Christianity "as the means of their deliverance from temporal and spiritual degradation and misery" (Douglas 1999:113; Jolly 1991).[4]

Temporalities of Expert Texts and their Objects

When the 2,000 leather-bound copies of the Aneityumese New Testament arrived from England where they had been printed, Reverend John Inglis (1864:261) writes, "we lost no time in letting the natives have access to the Testaments; upwards of a thousand copies are already in their hands and they are reading them with great

interest." Putting Bibles into the hands of Aneityumese was a laborious process that entailed the translation of "nearly a million words" (Inglis 1877:280). A full translation of the New Testament was made available in 1860, produced from the mission's own small printing press, and three years later the entire New Testament had been revised to meet the stringent standards of the British and Foreign Bible Society (Gardner 2006). The Bible could not have been translated without indigenous scholars (Gardner 2006; Taylor 2010:431). The printing of the Bible entailed a journey from Aneityum to England where Reverend Inglis and Willamu, an Aneityumese scholar, assiduously checked the translation en route (Gardner 2006:301). Its printing in England, as noted, was made possible by income from arrowroot. Writing down the language for the first time enabled conversion by localizing the text (Johnston 2001:17), making it available to everyone to hold, which was undoubtedly, a larger number than those who could read it. The Bible, with its authoritative presence accessible through reading, allowed "the radical individualism of the Protestants," who were dependent upon the "immediate relationship between the individual and God" (Johnston 2001:24). However, the materialization of the Aneityumese Bible, as an individually owned object of faith, comprised a series of collective commitments of time and expert knowledge.

Geddie's printing press, which locally produced the first copies of the complete New Testament, was fundamental to the pedagogical and religious mandates attached to conversion. Since 1816, printing presses had been affiliated with evangelical efforts in the Pacific region (Gunson 1978; Johnston 2001). The Geddies carried a printing press to Aneityum and quickly produced an alphabet, and within six weeks he was able to preach a rudimentary sermon in the Aneityumese language. Believing that objects such as print materials were essential to the mission's success, Geddie produced elementary school books, scripture portions and hymns before undertaking the full translation of the Bible. The work of bookmaking is evident in a letter written in 1853 by Charlotte Geddie, in which she describes being interrupted by "Mr. G [who] has just come in from the printing and says that two of our boys have already struck off 900 copies of the second edition of the Catechism.... You can have no idea of the demand there is for books" (Geddie 1908:30). John Geddie noted that in Aneityum, books that had formerly been objects of fear were increasingly regarded as enchanted objects that protected people from harm (Lawson 1994:78).

The proliferation of texts was accompanied by the simultaneous teaching of all the islanders to read, a project that engaged Samoan teachers, missionaries and Aneityumese catechists (Gardner 2006:296). Young women were also engaged in teaching as well as learning (Douglas 1999). Within a very short time, a network of schools and churches throughout the island (Spriggs 1985) were provided books from Geddie's printing operation such that, as John Inglis states, "no scholar was more than a mile from a school" (Gardner 2006:300). Books in the local language make visible the process of becoming Christian and the complex technologies of translation that encompassed both competing and convergent readings of the sacred and mundane. The schools scattered throughout the island acted as nodes in the networks that comprised conversion.

Anna Johnston argues that the texts—only enabled by the material presence of books—"could produce social change" and transform notions of indigenous time (2001:24). The Bible, according to Johnston, authored a kind of "doubled discursive time" that signified the modern dissemination of the Bible while, at the same time, affirmed its universal and eternal status (2001:17). The introduction of the Bible also "opens up a doubled place for the text—a place in Imperial British culture and a place in indigenous culture" (2001:17). Among the missionaries, the translation of the Bible into Aneityumese also prompted new insights into their own as well as indigenous beliefs. Translations of the Bible into indigenous languages represent "the discursive (if not fully cosmo-ontological) inevitable crossing" (Taylor 2010:434) between the Christian and indigenous understandings of sacred categories and power. In her close reading of the translation of the Bible in Aneityum, Gardner also contends that "both missionary and local cosmologies and cultural assumptions were challenged and changed through the on-going dialogues between missionaries and Islanders" (2006:302).[5] The translation of the Bible demanded a deep knowledge of Aneityumese cosmology and an acknowledgement of the complexity of Aneityumese languages (Gardner 2006:296).

The epidemics that swept through the island also ensured that death was the subject of both "contest and negotiation between missionary and indigenous understandings of scared power" (Jolly 1996:24). Such discussions were central to the translation and the search "for understandings that would convey both the same and different meanings" (Gardner 2006:303). Debates between missionaries and islanders showed "respective understandings of sacred power overlapped in crucial areas" (Taylor 2010:434). This perspective, which attends to similarities as well as differences, complicates Anna Johnston's contention that the Bible created a rupture with the past by introducing the break that enables cultural and temporal transformations in indigenous cultures (2001:34).

Immersion in the project of translation and conversion was so thorough that the Geddies often expressed concern that their facility in English was diminishing. And even more interestingly, as Charlotte Geddie states, "native words" were considered "more expressive than English" (1908:30). The missionaries who had first translated the word *itap* as "forbidden" came to understand it as "sacred" and used itap as the title for the Old and New Testaments (Gardner 2006:302). The discursive and material qualities of the objects of conversion are evident in Charlotte Geddie's letter and in the translation and printing of biblical texts. The Bible or itap that took the form of leather-bound books suggests the "connectivities" and materialities of conversion in Aneityum.

Converting Stones and Temporalities

Translating and printing the Bible and establishing a system of schools were enormous tasks but so too were the 18 months of hard labour dedicated to building the stone church. Geddie noted (Patterson 1882:402) that such activities "occupy the minds of people to such an extent that they have neither the time nor inclination for feasting and other usages common in the days of heathenism." Time allocated to new objects of Christianity meant that, by 1859, the church in Aneityum was paying for itself without support from overseas funding. However, the church and the schools, signifying the success of conversion, were centres of deadly contagions fuelling the epidemics among islanders, who did not have immunity to the newly introduced diseases (Gardner 2006:299).

The large church built stone b-stone suggests how islanders "used things to change contexts" (Thomas 1999:19). The location of the new stone church was a practical decision based on proximity to large stones, rather than a consideration of sacred spaces and spirits in Aneityum. Geddie was clearly confident that he no longer needed to consider indigenous sacred power or the action of the natmass. Geddie describes the building of the church as follows:

> To natives who have been accustomed only to build small grass houses, it has been a great undertaking. The amount of labour expended on it can hardly be conceived by persons at home where every facility for such an undertaking is enjoyed. The stones were all carried by the natives, and some of them were so large that it required 60 men to remove them to their destination. The stones were so large they were quarried near the building, otherwise we could not have undertaken it. [1861a:40]

The heavy stones sanctified in the large new church made tangible new enactments of sacred power. In addition to quarrying the stones, islanders cut down large trees in the interior and carried them for miles to make the beams for the church. According to one account, hundreds of people carried the main beam on their shoulders and "Chief Nohoat stood on the log, with his plumes in his hair, and the best ornaments on his arms. Natives headed the procession blowing conches" (Steel 1880:102). The church was constructed without using any nails, held together by local technologies and expert knowledge. It was also intricately ornamented with decorative figures painted with various colours from dyes made with roots and "a million yards of fine plaiting" (Johnston 1861:74). Food was central to marking the opening of the new church. There was "a large collection of food which was cooked and distributed among the people of the different villages ... according to their usual custom" (Geddie 1861a:41).

While condemning the extravagance and wastefulness of competitive exchanges of food in the naroko ritual, Geddie also embarked on a taxing and competitive project of church-building. He declared, "With the exception of the King's church at Honolulu, Sandwich Islands, I have not seen any equal to it in the islands which I have visited" (Geddie 1861a:40). Competition was also extended to the hard-won Bibles, as the new "Bibles like all other books were distributed by merit: we have given them to the best readers first and only to those who can read tolerably well; we make them prizes to be contended for, but prizes which every one may obtain" (Inglis 1864:261). The arrowroot, too, was noted for its superior quality. The objects of conversion embodied a competitive spirit that resonated within the Aneityumese context, displaying the "overlapping" of exogenous and indigenous valuations of sacred and mundane.

Conclusion

I have explored how objects such as stones, books and food materialized temporalities and expert knowledge in the context of the Presbyterian mission in Aneityum in the mid-19th century. Attention to objects emphasizes the materiality of conversion to Christianity that links becoming, doing and knowing. Following objects complicates the understanding of conversion by defying static conceptions of indigenous time and querying the irretrievable loss or inevitable gains at stake in becoming Christian. Discussions of conversion to Christianity often hinge on the separation of spirit and matter, the sacred and mundane, the mind and body, the past and present. These oppositions are themselves "artefactual" (Manning and Meneley 2008:291), concealing the fragmentation of knowledge and the ephemeral nature of its expertise.

Objects such as leather-bound Bibles were essential to Aneityumese strategies of conversion, offering a hands-on context for enchantment or re-enchantment. The Bibles were distributed as a "prize" that all could obtain, and the production of thousands of Bibles (and the enormous church) sidestepped the tragedy of death and depopulation, where the numbers of Bibles could conceivably exceed the numbers of Aneityumese. Death was a sombre marker of time and epidemics were part of the new temporal regimes introduced by traders in search of whales, sandalwood and labour, as well as missionaries in search of converts. Epidemics in Aneityum eroded the expert knowledge that anchored indigenous temporal frameworks and undermined the efficacy of indigenous deities and rituals. While intent on challenging the chiefly institution of natimarid and ending rituals that enacted sacred power and its temporalities, Geddie was compelled to recognize the power of indigenous cosmologies and to understand how objects connected material and spiritual realms. I have discussed the notion that Aneityumese time was atemporal or "timelessly" reproduced through myth and ritual, in contrast to modern Christian time depicted as transformative and dynamic. "Expectations of historical transformation," as Lindstrom (2011:143) reminds us, are integral to indigenous temporalities. Attending to similarity and difference are essential to understanding "the structural dialectics of history" (Douglas 1989; Taylor 2010:423). While Geddie recalibrated time in Aneityum by measuring and organizing it in new ways and banning rituals such as the nakaro, the mission project was also the object of temporal, discursive and material reconfigurations.

Approaching Aneityum by boat in 2008, I saw the traces of the first Presbyterian mission: the landscape shelters the ruins of the stone church, some rusted metal near the beach, possibly the printing press and the foundation of the missionary's house. Geddie's church built stone by stone has now been replaced by a more modest Church. In 1861, while an epidemic raged, the newly completed church was deliberately set afire: only the stone walls remained (Geddie 1861b:246). The fire, in Geddie's view, represented the collusion of a small group of "natives" and sandalwood traders who opposed the mission (1861b:247). The fire was soon followed by a hurricane, leading Geddie to remark, "The church was not taken from us without a reason. Perhaps we have been devoting too much attention to externals" (1861b:248).

The church has been transmuted into impressive and haunting ruins where saplings erupt through the remaining stonewalls. Another generation of children plays in the ruins of the church that their ancestors built. In contrast to the ruins, Geddie's eyeglasses, safeguarded by islanders since his departure, are a more intimate object of conversion that renders time and expert knowledge tactile and personal. They, like the stone ruins, point to the complex history between Geddie's Christian mission and Aneityumese islanders and between the temporalities of past and present.

While Geddie was intent on the temporal transformation of the Aneityumese, he was himself bound by the past and haunted by his missionary ancestors. Geddie drew on the expertise of missionary John Williams, who emphasized that conversion to Christianity was yoked to "material undertakings." Geddie's expert knowledge was also tempered by experience in the art of persuasion acquired in Prince Edward Island along with the powerful insight that expert knowledge materialized in objects is essential to recalibrating temporalities.

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Notes

1 I was told about this letter to John Lockerby by his descendant Earl Lockerby. There are also several letters from Charlotte Geddie to Mrs. Lockerby, one of which is referred to later in this article.

2 R. S. Miller's book is a collection of John Geddie's journal entries from his years in Aneityum.

3 Arrow root, (*tacca leontopelaloides*) "was a pan-pacific cultigen," locally known as *tacca*, island arrowroot, Polynesian arrowroot, Tahiti arrowroot or Fiji arrowroot (Spennemann 1994:215). The plants were self-propagating and easily grown. J. G. Miller describes arrowroot "as a new and easy source of cash" to pay for the costly production of print materials at a time when there were no other readily available cash crops to pay for mission activities (1981:153). The production of arrowroot predated the introduction of copra, and cotton had proven difficult to establish as a cash crop (Miller 1981). Arrowroot preparation was a time-consuming process (Spennemann 1994:215). It was grated, washed several times, dried and sifted through a "long and careful process" (Miller 1981:153).

4 Douglas argues that, in contrast to depictions of women's conversion in Aneityum, men's "embrace" of Christianity was represented as an engaged process that considered

indigenous and Christian cosmologies and debated the nature of local and foreign spirits (1999:118). Eriksen (2008), who has considered gender differences in the Presbyterian Church in North Ambrym, Vanuatu, states that gender is fundamental to understanding Christianity and change. In North Ambrym, she argues, there is a contrast between male personified forms and female communal forms of structure. The Presbyterian Church builds on the communal principle, and the church "comes to stand for social wholes" (2008:158).

5 Margaret Jolly (1996:24) cautions that the tropes of conversation, debates and dialogue used to characterize conversion can obscure the power inequities embedded in conversion between males and females and between indigenous islanders and foreign missionaries.

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