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– ARTICLE –

A Typology of Erasure: the involvement of evangelical missionaries in the generative spiritscapes of Torres Strait and southern central New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Agents of the London Missionary Society sought radical change in the worlds of Torres Strait Islanders and communities in southern central New Guinea. As they had elsewhere in Oceania, LMS agents buried, burned or collected powerful objects, destroyed cultural sites and introduced new cosmic beings. Clearly, the act of erasure was violent and destabilising. But the act was also generative of new expressive spiritscape and cosmic dialogues. In this sense, missionary interventions held unintended consequences. This paper examines mission texts, ethnographies and oral histories to chart missionary interventions in Torres Strait and adjacent areas in southern central New Guinea. I do so in an attempt to clarify the grammar and form of these early mission encounters to (1) understand the effect of material interventions in local peoples' spiritscapes, (2) consider agency in the evangelical encounter, and (3) draw attention to the materiality of this process.

Keywords: Torres Strait, London Missionary Society, Erasure, Spiritscapes, Papuan Mission

> *Belief in this ceremony has survived the teaching of Christianity. On the occasion of my first visit, in 1889, rain was scarce, although it was the rainy season, and during the absence of the white missionaries, some Zagareb le made rain with marked success. Sagori and Gi required rain for their gardens and made it in the usual fashion. The Daureb le did not want any as they wished to go fishing, and a little trouble arose. Gasu and Pugari who were then deacons, stopped the rain by taking out the doiom. The white missionaries returned in the spell of fine weather that followed.*
> (Recollections of Alfred C. Haddon [1935: 38])

INTRODUCTION

Angela Middleton's contribution to mission archaeology looms large for scholars working in the Pacific region. Her work on the materiality of class, gender, domesticity and agency in New Zealand missions helped define the parameters and scope of mission archaeology in the Pacific (e.g. Middleton 2007, 2008, 2010). Her comparative work on the New Zealand-style 'household missions' with some eastern Australian 'institutional' examples are among the few archaeological studies to consider Christian missions in a geographical sense (Middleton 2010, 2018; but see Birmingham and Wilson 2010; Flexner 2014a; Flexner et al. 2015; Lydon and Ash 2010). Middleton's (2003) study on the characterisation of the Te Puna mission in northern New Zealand as a 'landscape of offence and retribution' relative to such Protestant notions and to Māori concepts of *utu*, *mana* and *tapu* helped to redefine the ways in which researchers conceptualised the complex materialities and ontologies of mission-based entanglements. Generally-speaking her work underlined the force of local agencies in shaping such encounters and the dialogic nature of interaction and negotiation between Māori and Pakeha during the early nineteenth century.

This paper draws on themes of local agencies and complex discursive spaces developed in Middleton's work to examine the workings of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Torres Strait and southern central New Guinea in the late nineteenth century (Figure 1). The paper focuses in particular on a major *material* aspect of conversion or of religious commitment that defined many such approaches to Christianisation in Oceania: that is, the destruction, sacrifice or sacrilege of Indigenous cultural places, objects and spiritscapes (see King 2011). For obvious reasons, most archaeological studies investigating the *process* of conversion or the religious expressions of peoples typically focus on the affective qualities of material culture and built form of missions (e.g. Ash *et al.* 2008, 2010; Flexner 2014b; Lydon 2009; Middleton 2009; Morrison *et al.* 2015; see Lydon and

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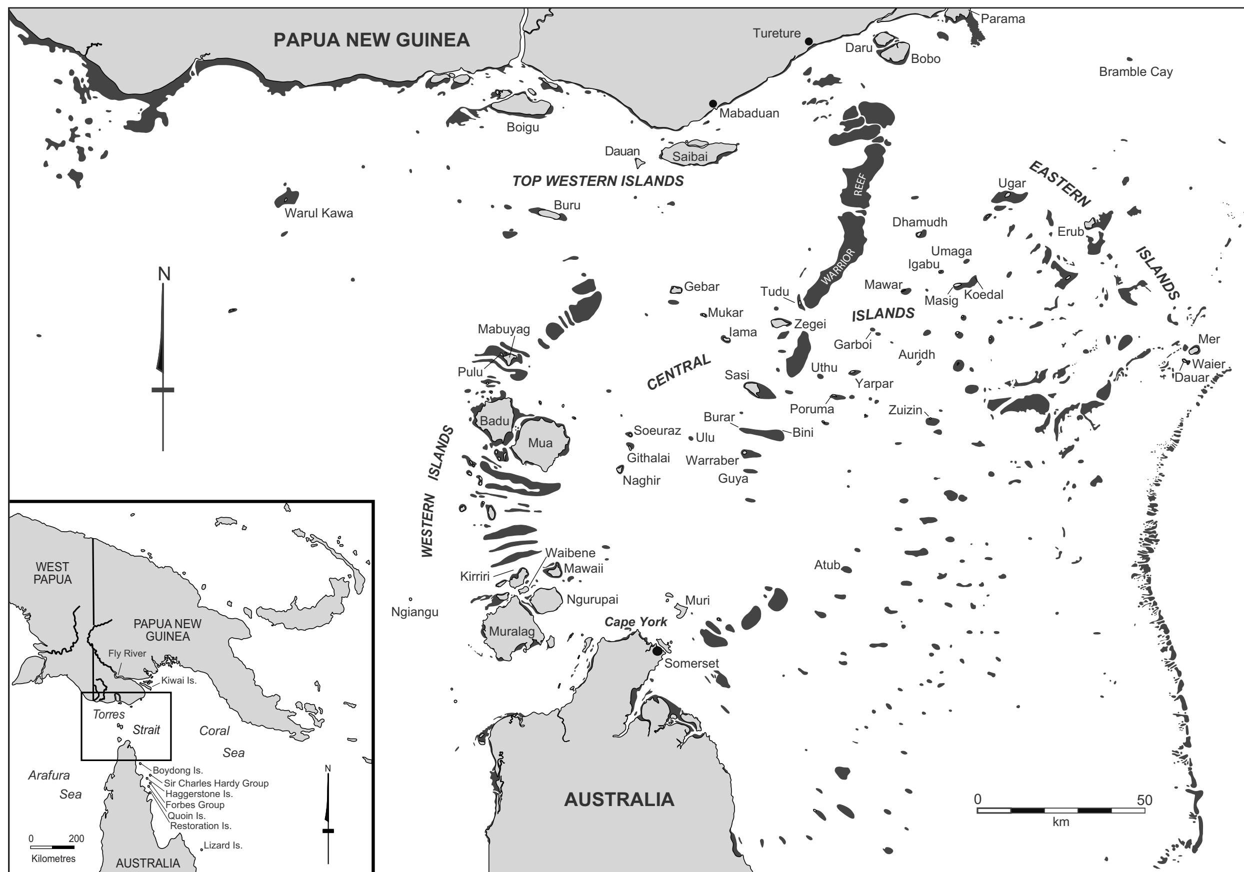

Figure 1. Map of Torres Strait showing location of sites mentioned in text (Map credit: Ian McNiven).

Ash 2010) and the inclusion of new Christian forms within Indigenous social landscapes (e.g. Ash & David 2008; Flexner *et al.* 2016; Middleton 2003). Relatively few such studies, however, focus on the articulations and interactions between Christian and non-Christian spiritual beliefs in a direct sense (e.g. spiritscapes; but see David *et al.* 2008). This may be because the silencing of Indigenous things within mission settings so often involves the material erasure of powerful things (e.g. via burial, fire, collection etc.; but see Bedford *et al.* 2020 for an archaeological example). It may also be so because Indigenous Christianity and beliefs are phenomena rarely addressed in the archaeological literature (but see Flexner 2016).

Informed by Douglas' (1999, 2001) notion that missionary writings from the field are complex, experiential and shaped by the agencies of local people, this paper cross-reads missionary and ethnographic texts to emphasise the *dialogic* processes that shaped spiritual encounters in Torres Strait and in adjacent areas along the southern central New Guinea coast (the Trans-Fly and Fly River Delta areas) during the latter part of the nineteenth century.[2] The first part of the paper examines this issue via descriptions of erasure in the writings of Revd Samuel McFarlane (1875–1876, 1888) regarding his journey up the Fly River and infamous interactions with Fly River communities. I focus in particular on McFarlane's uncanny slips that both deny and reify the reality of the so-called 'heathen beliefs', revealing multiple intellectual and material dialogues on the 'Papuan frontier'. The second part of the paper draws on the numerous descriptions of the erasure of places and objects in Torres Strait that are found in the writings of the renowned anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon (1901, 1904, 1908, 1935). Haddon's interest in 'salvage anthropology' and his circumspection of LMS influence on the so-called 'traditional' lives of Torres Strait Islanders is an important counterpoint to the LMS records (see McNiven and Hitchcock 2016). These writings also reveal something the key role of objects in shaping this new religious expression.

MISSION TEXTS & LMS MISSIONARY ENCOUNTERS IN THE PAPUAN MISSION

The LMS were one of the evangelical organisations to emerge on the crest of the religious revivals sweeping Eu-

2 This region nominally falls under the western parts of the LMS' 'Papuan Mission' though practically-speaking the Papuan Mission was an administrative entity scaffolded to the networks and social relations linking Indigenous societies in the region during the late nineteenth century.

rope and northern America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and whose activities helped occasion the extraordinary adoption of Christianity among Oceanic societies (Garrett 1982; Lovett 1899; Stock 1899). From an organisational perspective, the mission was divided into regional missions, including the Papuan Mission (Lovett 1899; Goodall 1954; Prendergast 1968; see also Mullins 1995) and structured along class, gender and 'race' lines. As Johnston (2003: 17) notes:

> Missionaries were acutely aware of class relations, both between themselves and their native populations, between mission communities and the surrounding white society, and between evangelical 'workers' in the field and the home society. They sought to consolidate and codify new, local social structures.

The British missionaries, the 'godly mechanicks' (see Woolmington 1985: 51), were often from working class backgrounds with a trade (e.g. bricklayers, boatbuilders etc.; see Prendergast 1968). They, and often their families, established key mission stations. A few, such as Revd Samuel McFarlane, the head of the Papuan Mission, also established and took oversight over training institutes for 'native teachers' (hereafter 'teachers') (see Wetherell 2002). These institutes were key to the mission (e.g. Xepenehe [Chepenehe], Lifou, New Caledonia, and Mer in Eastern Torres Strait, see Figure 2). These complex multicultural environments would provide hundreds of personnel for the LMS mission in Oceania. The Papuan Mission was established on the 1st July 1871, initially in Torres Strait and then expanding north and east to the New Guinea mainland (McFarlane 1871; see Barker 1996; Langmore 1989; Prendergast 1968).

The sorts of knowledge (textual, material etc.) collected by missionaries were clearly central to the production of western knowledge about the region. Missionaries addressed the major learned societies in Britain (e.g. McFarlane 1875–76, 1888), produced much of the early ethnographic literature for the region, and consulted and exchanged notes with leading anthropologists and geographers (see Barker 1992: 146ff). Objects were displayed in the LMS museum in London and sold for display at the great European museums (Philp 1998, 2015; Wingfield 2017). Missionary leaflets, journals and books – such as McFarlane's (1888) *Among the Cannibals of New Guinea* and Revds James Chalmers and William Wyatt Gill's (1885)

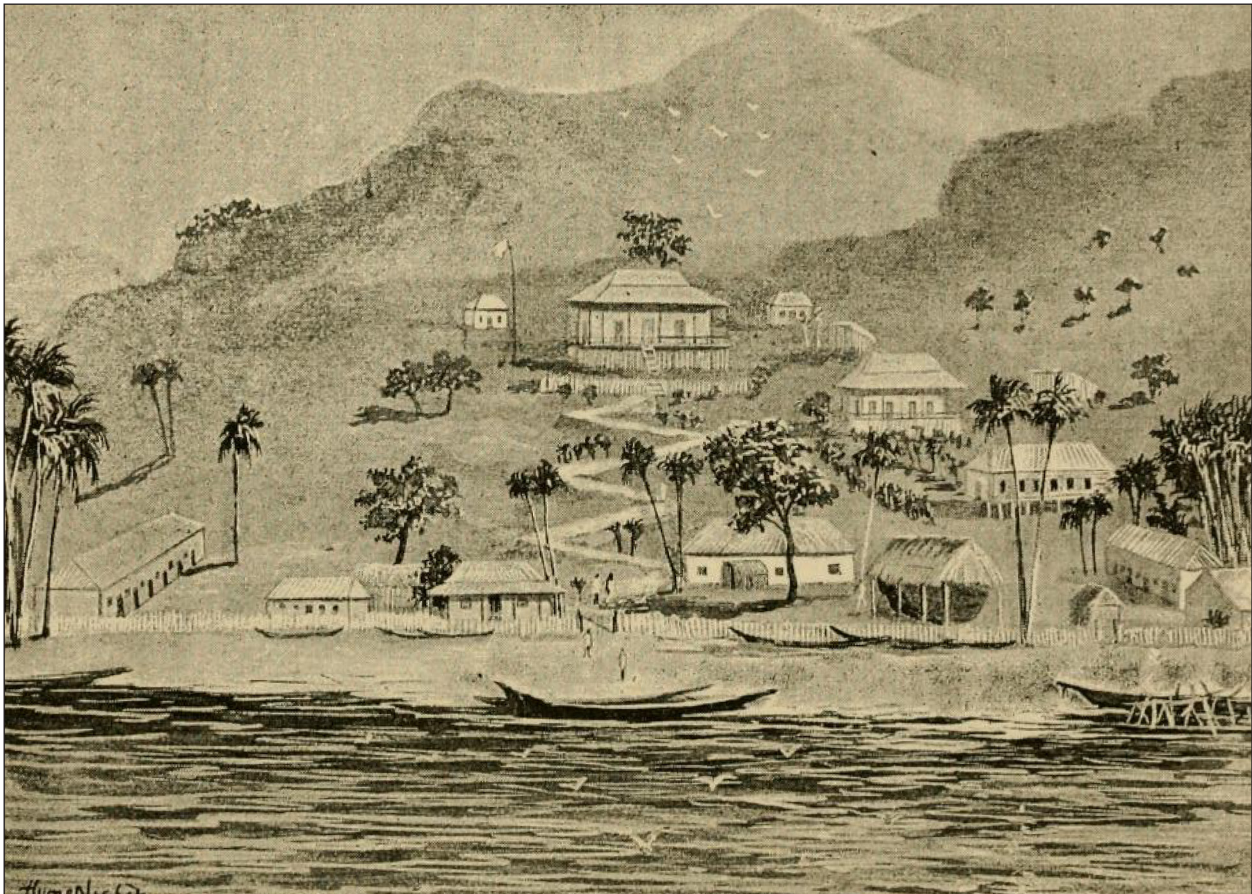

Figure 2. LMS mission station on Mer (a.k.a. Murray Island) (illustrated by Hume Nisbett, published in McFarlane 1888: 89).

Work and Adventure in New Guinea: 1877 to 1885 – major sources of funds for the organisation (Johnston 2003), formed part of the founding suite of British literature of New Guinea and northern Australia. In this sense, missionary texts were representations of worlds never visited by their audience. Their texts were travelogues and 'time-machines': their writings simultaneously opening and closing these imagined worlds to an outside audience with an illustrated leaflet or carefully rearranged diary entry.

The self-referential trope of the *savage* is of course significant to understanding missionary interventions in Torres Strait and southern coastal New Guinea ritual worlds and ceremonial sites for several reasons. The construction of cannibals and skull-hunters of the 'great dark savage isle' was key for McFarlane in particular as head of the Papuan mission.

Firstly, on an immediate level, the trope helped to communicate the need for evangelical intervention in Torres Strait and New Guinea to supporters within the organisation in England, partly to secure ongoing financial support for the impoverished yet expanding mission. The trope also helped to justify the importance of mission for Empire, specifically as a tool for pacification and the opening of lands for commerce and science (e.g. McFarlane 1888). The terrible lands of the 'perfidious heathens' would also reinforce the value of LMS linguistic knowledge and maritime network linking much of southern coastal New Guinea and Torres Strait for explorers, researchers and, later (to some degree) administrators. Indeed, the LMS held the critical infrastructure–mission stations, steamers, sea routes through the maze of coral reefs and linguists–for British colonisation. It was probably for these reasons that McFarlane, in addition to the offense to his sensibilities, 'removed' the human skulls and jawbones from high Goemulgaw ceremonial centres (Goemulgau, the people of the islands and seas centred around Mabuyag and Pulu in Western Torres Strait; see Haddon, 1904: 305; Thomas, 1885: 238) and deposited them instead with the Natural History Museum (McNiven *et al.* 2009: 294; Philp 2015; see also McNiven 2018 for a discussion of the broader context).

Secondly, whereas the perfidious 'skull-hunter' was the dominant symbol structuring how the Papuan Mission communicated its agenda to a broader audience during the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is conceivable that to the socially-isolated Europeans the image was to be a reality of sorts. Put another way, in their self-referential writings, the tautology of the primitive was made real. It was a framework that would see the British missionaries imaginatively insert themselves and their technologies into the cosmic world of the imagined primitive.

In a revealing paper delivered on his behalf to the Royal Geographical Society (McFarlane 1875/1876) and recounted again later in his popular book (1888), McFarlane outlines his December 1875 journey up the Fly River on the southern central New Guinea coast in the missionary steamer, the *Ellengowan*. McFarlane had been apparently forewarned by the hydrographer and the then midshipman of the HMS *Fly* (the river's namesake and the ship to discover the river for Europeans some three decades earlier) Capt. Frederick Evans' 'firm conviction that it would require two of her majesty's gunboats to open up that river' (McFarlane 1888: 67–68). McFarlane organised the trip accordingly, assembling a large multicultural crew of specialists for the journey. Aboard was the renowned Italian naturalist Luigi D'Albertis, who wrote his own account of the voyage (D'Albertis 1881), a crew of four 'South Sea Islanders' in addition to Captain Runcey and engineer Mr Smithurst (a 'good shot'), linguists and cultural specialists Maino and Aute (senior men from Katau [Mawatta] and Turituri [Tureture] familiar with communities in the Fly River delta region), and Henry Chester, the English Police Magistrate from Somerset. McFarlane failed to mention in his account to the RGS that Chester also brought along six 'troopers, armed with Sniders [rifles]' (D'Albertis 1881: 4); presumably these were Aboriginal troopers stationed at the government outpost at Cape York on the Australian mainland.

The *Ellengowan* was a small iron clinker hull steamship that was capable in the dangerous tidal currents and reefs of Torres Strait as well as the large river deltas in the alluvial flatlands of southern central New Guinea (Figure 3). Much of the journey, particularly in the highly populated river delta, was characterised by fear. At times, the vessel was armoured with large sheets of metal attached to the top of the gunwales. Several conflicts with local peoples from river villages were recorded (some numbering upwards of two to three hundred men), there were instances of looting (including the theft of 14 skulls from a long house) and curious cycles of conflict and trade that the mission party could not fathom (see McNiven 1998, 2001 for discussion of the complexities of interaction and trade in the region). Indeed the mission texts are generally silent on the perspectives of local peoples–people's agency typically cast in terms of cowardice, fear and treachery. By the same token, McFarlane's justification for proceeding, couched in the ideology of the primitive, would have been similarly unfathomable to local peoples. He (1876: 256) wrote:

> They had to learn the superiority of European weapons, and the folly of attempting to capture European vessels; and we felt it would be decidedly to their advantage to learn the lesson from the deck of a missionary vessel, where we hoped to teach it without loss of life.

For the occupants aboard the LMS steamer, this was a journey into the unknown, without practical frame of reference. At certain points along their journey, they sought to approximate divine wrath and to effect a numinous outcome onto a primitive world. In this fluid and partly imagined world, European technologies–the steamer and weapons–could be thrust into the 'heathen cosmos'. Their

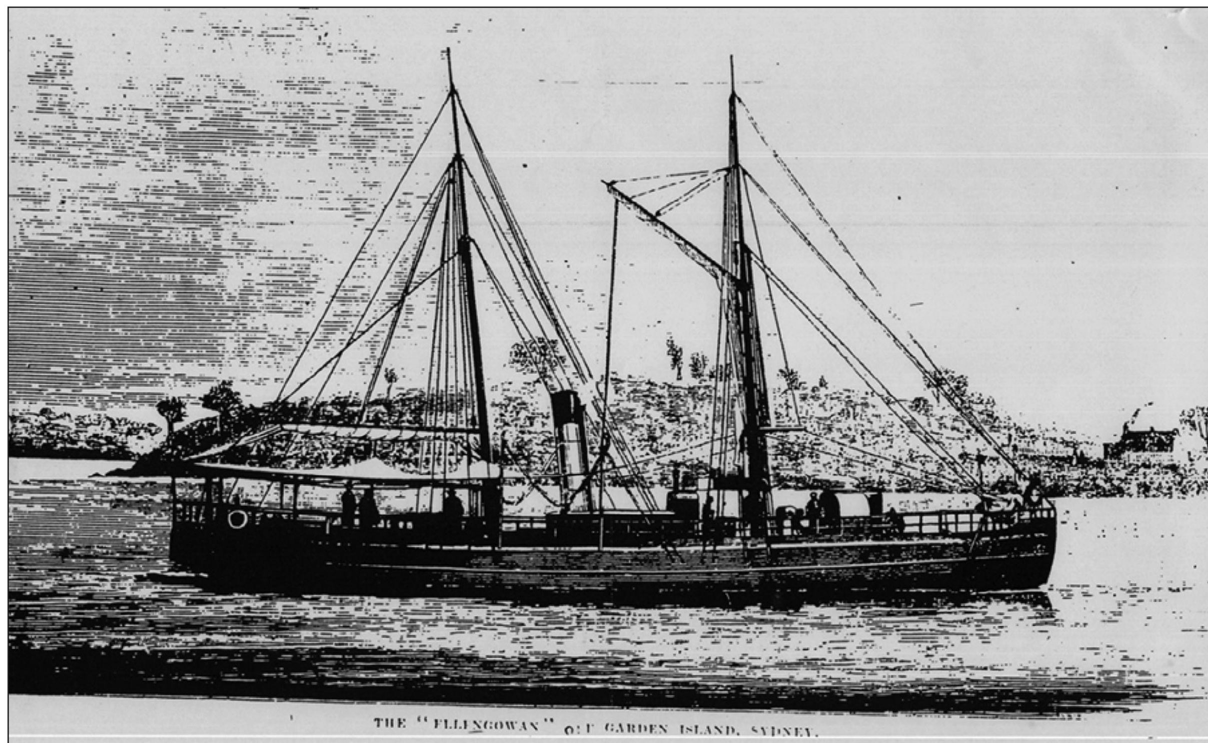

Figure 3. Illustration of the LMS steamer, *Ellengowan* (Source: Illustrated Sydney News 1874).

armaments projected as instruments of supernatural terror, impressing change on what the missionaries believed to be the radically transforming cosmos of the heathen. On one occasion, as the *Ellengowan* limped downstream with a broken drive shaft, followed by a small fleet of canoes from one of the unnamed river villages. Fearing a reprisal attack for an earlier encounter when going upstream, the crew dropped an explosive with a long fuse into the water behind them. McFarlane (1875/1876: 262) observed, it was:

> … effective. They [those in the canoe] felt the shock and saw the water bubbling around them, and appeared utterly bewildered. Those standing in the canoes dropped as if they had been shot, and none of them ventured to pull another stroke towards us; perhaps they feared being blown into the air, or engulfed in the sea!

In another conflict, an armed crew from the *Ellengowan* pursued six large war canoes of up to 150 men, capturing one vessel. McFarlane (1875/1876: 258) explained somewhat furtively,

> …. Mr. Chester [the Police Magistrate] took some of the crew with him in our large boat and followed them, driving them on to the mainland, and capturing one of their canoes, which we cut up for fuel [for the mission steamer Ellengowan] as a punishment for their unprovoked attack.

D'Albertis (1881: 25) offered a more visceral account of the encounter:

> Mr Chester descended with his troops into the boat, and followed the natives, who made in terror for the right-hand shore, and, having reached it, abandoned arms and canoes, and fled into the forest. Mr. Chester, as a trophy of victory, towed one of the deserted canoes to the "Ellangowan" [sic] and it was then broken up for fuel for the engine. This canoe was made of a large tree trunk, neatly hollowed, without a paddle, and was about sixty feet long.

Without historical sources, one can only imagine how this deeply disturbing encounter was perceived by local people: an armed iron-clad missionary steamer, its gunwales fortified with sheets of corrugated iron, 'consuming' a highly elaborate and socially-powerful war canoe. Parsimony suggests that the symbolic actions of the mission band was not an insignificant act for the communities of specialist canoe builders in the mouth of the Fly River: the preeminent centre for the manufacture of the river- and sea-going canoes southern central New Guinea and Torres Strait (see Lawrence 2010; McNiven 2015). The LMS missionary Rev. Edward Baxter Riley (1925: 110) observed the elaborate ritual responsibilities involved in the selection and preparation of the hulls. Indeed, the pioneering anthropologist Gunnar Landtman (1927: 209–211) describes

the 'sympathetic connection between the tree and the canoe-builder' and records the elaborate method by which canoes could be 'woken up'.

ERASURE IN TORRES STRAIT

The LMS practiced an evangelical form of Christianity that rejected that which it considered 'heathen' and the 'idolatry of the primitive'. The approach that was applied in the Papuan Mission from 1871 onwards, to some degree, was an approached refined and translocated from earlier LMS activities in Polynesia. The erasure of non-Christian cultural sites and 'dumb idols' was an important step in the preparation of the soul; the destruction of idols a demonstration of an individual's realisation of being under conviction and their preparation to accept Christianity (e.g. Williams 1839; see also Hooper 2006; King 2011). In Torres Strait, McFarlane (1888: 86–87) rejoiced in the conversion of members of the Dauan and Saibai communities, the key 'stepping stones' to the southern central coast of New Guinea in his original plans for the Papuan Mission–they at last 'yielded to better influences, burnt their idols, and assured me that they had embraced Christianity'. Sharp wrote (1993: 100–101):

> For the London Missionary Society evangelists, the 'living God' was a terrible power manifest in Divine Wrath. The 'Light' brought to the Islanders was the light to enlighten the Gentiles. In the missionaries' view, their arrival heralded the erasing of the old ways of 'heathen darkness'. The sacred emblems of that 'darkness', the masks and divinatory skulls, the sacred places and shrines, were destroyed at the instigation of the missionaries. In 1872 the first missionaries came to Mer; they were Mataika and his wife Siau from the Loyalty Islands. The Meriam took the missionaries to *au* kop, the sacred ground of Malo at Las, and the missionaries burned *pelak,* the sacred house and they banned their sacred dances. Some objects were spared or hidden like Tomog zogo, a divinatory shrine at Mer, consisting of a collection of stones, on each of which was a giant helmet shell representing a dwelling place, village or district at Mer.

By the late 1870s, significant cultural sites such as headhouses and *kod* sites (men's houses) were destroyed by Pacific Islander teachers and pearlers (Fraser 1960: 26), and teachers had been 'instructed to destroy the *kooda* [or *kod*] and deliberately built their first grass churches on these sites' (Shnukal 2004: 333; see also Ash 2014; McNiven and Hitchcock 2016). The LMS records do not provide a significant amount of detail regarding the degree of the missionary intervention in Torres Strait Islander spiritscapes. In fact, much of the available information describing LMS erasure of Torres Strait places and objects is available in the volumes of Alfred C. Haddon's *Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*. Of course, it was not only missionaries involved in such processes. Haddon was driven by a form of 'salvage anthropology' and criticized the degree of intervention by colonial authorities into the 'traditional' life of Torres Strait Islanders (1901: 171). But as McNiven and Hitchcock (2016: 162) alert us, there is a profound irony to such a critical stance of missionary interventions on the ritual landscapes of Torres Strait Islander peoples. They observed, 'many outsiders, particularly anthropologists and museum curators, associated these dramatic social and cultural transformations with cultural loss and a concomitant need to record, collect, and archive 'traditional' cultural information and objects under the guise of "salvage anthropology"'.

LMS agents filled in a number of important caves. Notably, the cave of Awgadhalkula on the sacred island of Pulu that could, 'hardly be termed a cave now that the missionaries have filled it up to within a foot or two of the overhanging rock; while the sacred emblems and skulls that it formerly contained have been removed or burnt with kerosene' (Haddon 1904: 368). It is possible that Haddon may have embellished the degree of missionary intervention at Augudalkula. Archaeological inspection of this important place in recent years indicates that the site was probably not filled in (see McNiven *et al.* 2009).

Moreover, the *kod* on the sacred islet of Pulu was destroyed (Haddon 1904: 5), McFarlane destroyed the *kod* at either Bau or Goemu on Mabuyag (Haddon 1904: 306) and on Massig (Lawrie 1970: 244) and skulls associated with the *kod* on Waraber were buried (Lawrie 1970: 267). The shrine at Sigai (aka Sigay) was destroyed on Masig in the 1870s (Haddon 1935: 93) and/or Iama (Haddon 1904: 174, 1935: 92, 394; cited in Fuary 1991: 97–98). The *zogo* shrine at Kesgar on Dauar was destroyed by Pacific Islanders of the *Woodlark* (Haddon 1935: 140, 325, 391; 1908: 190). A *zogo* site was dismantled (and rebuilt) on Ugar (Teske 1987: 22–23) and the Tomog Zogo on Mer was burnt by the Pacific Islander teacher Josiah (Haddon 1908: 265–266; Sharp 1993: 100–101). The famous Bomai and Malu masks were destroyed on Erub (Haddon 1908: 289). In an interesting story of divine birth from Saibai (Haddon 1904: 23):

> Saibai god from Sumaiut – a stone given birth to by a virgin of Sumaiut, the moon being the father. Its power was first tried upon Kiwai and proved successful. It was stolen from Sumaiut by some Saibai men and given up to the teacher in 1882.

In the 1920s, the Anglican Priest, W.H. MacFarlane went to inspect a turtle magic cave at the beach Bomeo (Bumeau) on Erub but could not access it because it had been blocked up many years before during the LMS mission years. He was told it 'contained skulls and many other relics, including, so far as he could gather, an old pair either of spectacles or marine glasses' (Haddon 1935: 199;

see McNiven and Hitchcock 2016:161–2 for a discussion of these and other examples of the destruction of Torres Strait cultural sites by LMS agents).

RELEASE, OR THE RITUAL OF THE CIVILISING PROCESS

The classic missionary act of erasure–the obliteration of sites and objects from the corporate world–as well as its corollary–the superimposition of Christian structures–formed a cornerstone of the LMS approach to Islander landscapes and conversion. But there was a conceptual slippage in this material discourse. As McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison (2004:40) argue in an important paper on the contested cultural landscapes in Gudang country in northern Cape York adjacent to Torres Strait, the appropriations and mimicry of Indigenous icons and images are part of a deep history of erasing 'traces of Aboriginal land ownership and Aboriginal people's presence in the landscape'. They continue, '[t]he mimicry and assumption of the characteristics of Indigenous spirit powers by Missionaries for the Christian God formed an important tool in the 'missionisation' of Cape York and the Torres Strait'.

The process of erasing–or what Michael Taussig instructively called the 'ritual of the civilising process' (1993:18)–was a physical and cosmological engagement with what was being erased. Such objects or places were imbued with a quality that forced a creative and appropriate response. It is in this sense then that erasure can be understood as a process, rather than as a state. The destruction of non-Christian ritual or transcendental objects by the LMS teachers and missionaries required a ritualised engagement with the object befitting its spiritual or transcendental qualities. Many of these processes were developed and experimented with elsewhere in the Pacific (Bedford *et al.* 2020; see King 2011). Thus we find Lifou Islander and later Samoan LMS teachers burning objects and places with kerosene, collecting and redepositing objects, integrating them into church structures, burying them, or sending them to museums.

The biographies of many of the Torres Strait Islander places and objects did not simply end with erasure. Rather, these objects and places were 'instrumental' in that they continued to elicit emotions, confound and capture their audiences. Taussig's (1993) work on erasure is important here. Drawing on anthropologist Stephanie Kane's work with the Emberá in Central America, Taussig recites the burning of an Emberá shaman's curing batons by evangelical missionaries. The curing batons underwent a ritual and public fragmentation, a physical conversion into ashes that symbolically paralleled the dismantling of the Emberá peoples' non-Christian cultural beliefs; a familiar evangelical story of conversion. But, through obliteration, the numinous forces contained within the physical form were released and disembodied, and became free to run wild and terrify the Emberá. Hence Taussig's (1993:18) next question:

> But what of the pestilent and uncontrollable spirit gringos thereby released, dancing wildly through the flames? Where will their power, the power of magical mimesis reemerge?

The anthropologist Jeremy Beckett, himself influenced by Taussig's earlier work on mimicry (1984), pre-empted Taussig's questions (1987:95):

> In the past they [Torres Strait Islanders] had unceremoniously thrown away a skull that lacked power; now they 'threw away' the old religion, allowing the missionaries to destroy or take away many of the fetishes. But the spiritual essences that animated the fetishes were not thereby destroyed, they had simply 'gone away'. Thus it was said that when the missionaries burned the Malu headdress on Murray, onlookers heard a sudden shriek and 'something flew up into the air and disappeared'. Similarly when a schoolteacher took the old god Waiat from his hiding place on Waier island there was a storm.

The release of spiritual forces into the seascape following the ritual erasing of powerful objects is often expressed in weather. Following the destruction of sacred relics of the culture hero Kwoiam housed in Augudalkula, the sacred cave of Pulu in western Torres Strait (Haddon 1904:368–369):

> All the sacred relics of Kwoiam were burned at the instigation of Hakin, a Lifu teacher, at the time when the Rev. S. MacFarlane was on Murray Island. The Mamoose gave his consent to their destruction, but only a South Sea man, Charley Mare, dared destroy the various *augud*; he burnt them on the spot. The natives say that when the Mission party started for home the water was quite smooth, there being no wind whatever. As their boat rounded Sipungur point, on their return, a sudden gust of wind made the boat [possibly the *Ellengowan*] heel over and nearly capsize, and that same night Charley's body swelled up, and he was sick for a fortnight.

Although objects may have been 'ritually killed off' (Grinsell 1961), or disembodied, their locations (and often the remnants of the desecrated objects) and the disembodied spirits continued (and continue) to play an agentive role in Torres Strait spiritscapes. Chapman (2000:5) argues that 'the creation of objects contains within it an aspect of personhood which endures as long as the object remains inalienable', and this inalienability continues where numinous forces remain embedded in place despite the fragmentation of objects.

ERASURE AND THE CHURCH: A SLIPPAGE

Torres Strait Islanders were occasionally complicit in surrendering objects or the locations of sites to teachers. In some cases sites were kept hidden such as the Mokeis Zogo on Mer until later collection. Haddon (1935: 143–144) wrote:

> Mr Davies informs me that the *mokeis zogo* consisted of heads of rats carved out of lava, over which was placed a great heap of stones surmounted by a number of clam shells, and situated on a projecting point of rock just above high-water mark (he does not say where). The *zogo* had not been officially worked since the coming of the missionaries (1871), when some Lifu teachers had overthrown the clam shells. When Davies heard of the *zogo*, he asked whether the *mokeis* were still there and was told that no one had dared to remove the stones and that he might do so if he cared to risk it. Davies went to the place, took off the stones and came upon a number of painted stones and then to four *mokeis*; he lifted them out and asked the sergeant to put them on the ground, but no one dared touch them, so a basket was fetched.

In others, such as in the case of Pulu, the *kod* itself could not be destroyed without the consent of the council. It is this complex relationship acted out in the object world which produced an alternative, and not always consistent, colonial discourse that provides a means to approach the differing and 'enmeshed intentions' of European missionaries, Pacific Islander teachers and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

During the LMS years in Torres Strait nothing was ever as it seemed. On the one hand, colonial agents instigated a policy of erasure and attempted to annihilate a rich cultural topography. And yet, the same agents also engaged in a spatial and cosmological dialogue with local communities.

A slippage emerged between LMS discourse on Light (present) and Dark (past), and its expression within the social world. Whereas the logic of the mission implicated Pacific Islander teachers as colonial agents in erasing Torres Strait Islander cultural sites, the process of erasure itself reveals a secondary narrative. Erasure was a ritually-charged colonial engagement with the cosmologies of Torres Strait Islander peoples. Pacific Islander teachers practiced an Indigenised form of evangelical Christianity, which, ironically, tolerated (in part) a syncretic incorporation of non-Christian beliefs and practices. D'Albertis (1881: 8) recalls from his 1876 journey up the Fly that while at Dauan the LMS teachers referred to the 'Devil's House' – a turtle shrine with the skulls of two highly regarded turtle hunters. He wrote:

> It is strange that, notwithstanding that these native have more or less embraced the faith of Christ, they still adhere to their superstitions, and that the teachers, far from extirpating these superstitions, are even brought, to a certain extent, to believe in their efficacy.

If not syncretic as such, these were ritually fluid spaces. Haddon (1908: 225) noted that:

> The Samoan teacher of that time [on Mer] was a great believer in *maid* [Torres Strait magic] and wanted the *maid le* [sorcerer] to be apprehended and sent to prison on Thursday Island. The insistence with which he made these demands did not tend to lessen the natives' belief in the power of *maid*.

Once again the boundaries are blurred. Some elements of Torres Strait 'magic', such as healing, garden and hunting magic–vital aspects in the day-to-day vitality of a community–were tolerated to a point. Without diminishing the violent and destructive subtext to missionary engagements during this time, Pacific Islanders–skilled seafarers with broadly comparable experiences of missionisation–articulated closely with Torres Strait Islander social structures and cultural practices, and arguably shared experience of operating at between and with the intersections of Christianity and Islander belief systems (see Mullins & Wetherell 1994).

While most Torres Strait Islanders had converted to Christianity by the time he returned to Torres Strait in 1898, Haddon (1904: 353) noted that:

> There was, and still is, throughout the Western Islands a belief in a class of powerful beings, or bogeys, termed *dogai,* who generally were on the look out to do mischief, but who were easily outwitted and often killed; some however were good.

Indeed a feature of Torres Strait Christianity had been that it was (and is) not irreconcilable with traditional beliefs. Haddon (1904: 323) relates the following story about the opening of the Mabuyag church:

> Peter of Mabuiag informed us that there were still several *maidelaig* in Murray and Darnley Islands, as, for example, those old men who had lost all their teeth, which was said to be due to their having eaten human corpses; some young Miriam men also are credited with being sorcerers. When the Mabuiag church was opened in 1897 a certain Murray Island *maidelaig,* whom we strongly suspect was no other than our friend Ulai, wanted to kill a Mabuiag man, 'but *God* turned the *maid* against themselves', and a young Murray Islander died and was buried in a small island to windward of Mabuiag.

In a further blurring of these not-so-distinct spiritual orders, the government teacher John Bruce described to Haddon how the church and ecclesiastical positions were strategically included with local cosmologies on Mer (Haddon 1935: 38):

> We have still some very powerful *doiams* [rainmaking place; or *doiom*] left on the island. The church was injured last year by a thunderstorm raised it is said by Wali. Enoka was first suspected but denied his ability to make such a storm, he says he does not make thunder and lightning to spoil things, he only makes good rain to make men's gardens grow and he added '*Ka nole zoqo meta dedkoi* (I not sacred house spoil) I am a *ekalesia* (church person)'. So that they had to fall back on Wali as he was not *ekalesia* and he had been angry with Fenau (the Samoan missionary) about something. They have now made Wali an *ekalesia* to protect the building from further damage.

CONCLUSION

Missionary agents, indeed most outsiders, are too often held separate from the numinous forces that they sought to engage (*sensu* Douglas 2001). On the one hand, clearly missionisation had a profound effect upon the material worlds of local people. The various processes of erasure of many non-Christian objects and places clearly had and has had a profound impact on the cultural landscapes of most communities in the region. According to the logic of nineteenth century evangelical mission, these changes were tied to the not-entirely-coherent missionary polemics on humanity, progress and the preparation of the soul.

And yet, and while more work is needed (but see, for e.g., Beckett 2014; Lawrence 1998, 2004; Shnukal 2015; Wetherell 1993), the style of Christianity to develop in the western reaches of the Papuan Mission during this time seems to have coalesced around a common understanding of the immanence of the numinous in the material world. This shared understanding shaped how LMS agents and local peoples strategically negotiated spiritscapes and ancestral beings. Indeed, these were 'worlds' where a missionary steamer could be seen to affect a new techno-cosmological order through the strategic use of dynamite *and* where the destruction of a Goemulgaw site unleashed a force of such magnitude as to nearly capsize the mission boat. From such perspectives, then, the logics of erasure for the new religious communities forming at this time was multi-vocal, negotiated, and experimental. The results of which were unintended, often dangerous, and ultimately generative.

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