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Reassessing the death of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson

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THORGEIR KOLSHUS* AND EVEN HOVDHAUGEN

1

THE FIRST BISHOP OF MELANESIA, JOHN COLERIDGE PATTESON OF THE ANGLICAN Melanesian Mission (MM), was killed 20 September 1871 on Nukapu, an islet in what today is the Vaeakau district of the Temotu province of the Solomon Islands. Next to John Williams of the London Missionary Society (LMS), he figures as the most prominent martyr in the Christianisation of the Western Pacific. The stories of his life and death occupy a central position in the popular religious mythology of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and in the history of the Anglican Church.¹

From the outset, Patteson's killing has been interpreted as an act of revenge for the kidnapping of five men from Nukapu by labour recruiters or 'blackbirders' only days before the bishop landed. But we challenge this interpretation. As Bronwen Douglas has argued, colonial texts bear 'a significant cargo of ethnographic inscriptions and indigenous countersigns'² or, in other words, imprints of native agency that can be found between the lines and contextualised by general ethnographic descriptions and current local traditions. So here we combine readings of various mission sources with an analysis of contemporary narratives recorded during linguistic fieldwork on Nukapu and other islands in Temotu.³ We pay special attention to one element that, quite remarkably, has been ignored by scholars in spite of its conspicuous presence in virtually every narrative, past and present, outside the official version: the role played by women, and in particular by Niuvai who, according to current tradition on Nukapu's neighbour Nupani, was the wife of the paramount chief.

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¹David Hilliard, 'The making of an Anglican martyr: Bishop John Coleridge Patteson of Melanesia', in D. Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Oxford 1993), 333–45. David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: a history of the Melanesian Mission 1849–1942* (St Lucia 1978) remains the most comprehensive study of the Melanesian Mission.

²Bronwen Douglas, 'Encounters with the enemy? Academic readings of missionary narratives on Melanesians', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43 (2001), 43.

³Hovdhaugen's fieldworks took place between 1997 and 2005 over 13 months, 11 of which were spent in Temotu Province, with longer stays on Santa Cruz, Pileni, Nifiloli, Fenua Loa, Ngatado and Taumako, and shorter visits to Nukapu, Matemâ and Mgalumu.

Juxtaposing flexible oral narratives and fixed written traditions can be uneasy. Nonetheless, in the absence of thorough ethnographic descriptions more or less synchronous to the events under scrutiny, we follow Douglas in arguing that ethnographic data obtained ‘after the fact’ in certain cases can contextualise and even adjust the exegesis of stories from a distant past. This approach has been applied to the early-17th-century voyages of Quirós,⁴ the expeditions of Captain Cook⁵ and the attack on colonial officials and subsequent punitive expedition to the Kwaio of Malaita in the late 1920s.⁶ In relation to Patteson’s death, this exercise poses particular challenges. William Davenport is the only anthropologist who has conducted long-term fieldwork in the Vaeakau district and Reef Islands, but his ethnographic descriptions⁷ cover only a few aspects of Nukapu’s sociocultural organisation and do not include information that would be particularly useful to our reinterpretation — about norms regulating relations between women and men; the gendered division of labour, particularly in funeral rites; and notions of vengeance and retribution. Hovdhaugen’s two-day visit to Nukapu while conducting linguistic research in the area in 2003 afforded some general impressions but was no systematic ethnographic study. However, on the islands of Tikopia and Anuta to the southeast of the Reef Islands, which, like Nukapu, are counted among the Polynesian Outliers, Raymond Firth and Richard Feinberg have written volumes drawing upon longitudinal fieldwork and, despite considerable ecological differences between Nukapu and the two other islands, they seem to share a common Western Polynesian cultural core.⁸ We have therefore relied on these descriptions, together with general works on Polynesian cosmology and social relations, to adjudicate the status of Hovdhaugen’s experiences and contextualise both current local traditions and various missionary and scholarly accounts, in order to spot the ‘indigenous countersigns’ in accounts of the Patteson affair.⁹

⁴ Miguel Luque and C. Mondragón, ‘Faith, fidelity and fantasy: Don Pedro Fernández de Quirós and the “foundation, government and sustenance” of La Nueva Hierusalem in 1606’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 40 (2005), 133–48.

⁵ Recent contributions include Nicholas Thomas, *Discoveries* (London 2003) and Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog* (London 2003).

⁶ Roger Keesing *et al.*, *Lightning Meets the West Wind: the Malaita massacre* (Melbourne 1980). See also Roger Keesing, *Custom and confrontation* (Chicago 1992).

⁷ William Davenport, ‘Social organization: notes on the Northern Santa Cruz Islands’, *Baessler-Archiv, Neue Folge*, Band XX (1972), 11–95.

⁸ This corpus includes Raymond Firth, *We, the Tikopia* (Boston 1963 [1936]); *idem*, *Social Change in Tikopia* (London 1959), *idem*, *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* (Boston 1967); *idem*, *Rank and Religion in Tikopia* (Boston 1970); Richard Feinberg, *Anuta* (Long Grove, Ill. 2004).

⁹ Bronwen Douglas, ‘In the event: indigenous countersigns and the ethnohistory of voyaging’, in M. Jolly, S. Tcherkézoff and D. Tryon (eds), *Oceanic Encounters* (Canberra 2009), 175–98. Firth, *We, the Tikopia*, ch. 2 points out that Tikopia should not be regarded as a Polynesian cultural survival. Nevertheless, some generalisations can be drawn carefully from a wide range of historical, linguistic, archaeological and ethnographic sources, as evidenced in the work of Patrick V. Kirch *et al.* *Ancestral Polynesia* (Cambridge 2001). For division of labour during funeral rites, see Firth, *We, the Tikopia*, 202, 205–6; *Social Change in Tikopia*, 86–90; *Tikopia Ritual and Belief*, 342–3; and Feinberg, *Anuta*, 140. Firth, *We, the Tikopia* and *idem*, *Primitive Polynesian Economy* (New York 1975 [1938]) offer information on the social and economic relations between men and women. For general information on Polynesian gender ideology related to cosmology and the division of labour,

Hovdhaugen's actually having been to the island, however briefly, is an advantage denied to other non-Mission scholars apart from Davenport. Simply by approaching Nukapu, he experienced one feature that cannot be fully appreciated from historical material only: overcoming the barrier reef surrounding Nukapu is extremely difficult. For the other islands in the Reef group, this is not the case. Nukapu can only be reached in quiet waters and at high tide, a rare combination in this area.¹⁰ This enables us to pose a seemingly trifling question: why would the Mission — or for that matter, the profit-minded labour traders — go through so much trouble for such a small number of potential recruits when greater and much more easily available rewards lay close by? To explain Patteson's killing, here we propose two hypotheses that offer wider-ranging explanations and also account for certain discrepancies in the earlier accounts.

The Mission Men

John Coleridge Patteson was born in London in 1827, studied at Eton and Oxford, was ordained in 1853, and in 1855 responded to the appeal by the Bishop of New Zealand, George Augustus Selwyn, for volunteers to bring the Gospel to the South Pacific. Selwyn's mission strategy was in line with the ideology of Henry Venn, the influential honorary clerical secretary of the Anglican Church Missionary Society:¹¹ the MM should rely on a small number of English clergy to bring Melanesian students to a central school where they would be taught reading, writing and the principles of the Christian Gospel. The students would then be sent home to act as teachers among their own people, thus building a Church from the bottom up, to be overseen by the Bishop during annual visits in the Mission ship. But the programme was no immediate success.¹² Many recruits went only for adventure and to obtain money and European goods: motives very much like those of labour recruits. The climate in Auckland also took its toll, and even after relocating to Norfolk Island in 1867, geographically and climatically closer to the mission field, the MM could not afford to keep contact with all 81 islands within its designated domain.¹³

Nevertheless, Patteson's talent for languages proved a gift for work in the linguistically diverse Melanesian islands. He became fluent in Maori and several Melanesian tongues and conversant in a number of others. In 1861, he became first Bishop of the Missionary Diocese of Melanesia and head of the MM. Although haunted by physical ailments and feelings of inadequacy, he carried on

(footnote continued)

see Alan Howard and Robert Borofsky, 'Social organization', in Alan Howard and Robert Borofsky (eds), *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology* (Honolulu 1989), 47–94, and Bradd Shore, 'Mana and tapu', in *ibid.*, 137–74.

¹⁰The MM usually counted Norfolk Islanders among the crew of the *Southern Cross*. These descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers were very able seamen and familiar with rough landings.

¹¹John H. Darch, *Missionary Imperialists? Missionaries, government and the growth of the British Empire in the tropics, 1860–1885* (Milton Keynes, Colorado Springs and Hyderabad 2009), 8–10.

¹²Hilliard, 'The making of and Anglican martyr', 336–7.

¹³K.R. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall* (Sydney and London 1984), 304–5.

with his work, aimed at gradual evangelisation rather than short-term flaming conversion.

Recruiting proper English gentlemen for the Mission was probably his greatest challenge.¹⁴ When Robert Henry Codrington joined in 1865, who also proved a distinguished linguist and ethnographer, the two men complemented each other. Patteson was a first-class sailor, while Codrington was tormented by seasickness; Patteson could be outspoken and charismatic, while Codrington found extracurricular socialising burdensome; Patteson had too many projects to pay proper attention to more than a few, while Codrington, also with a crushing workload, had a more systematic disposition; Patteson was a visionary liable to depression, while Codrington was a staunch realist whose almost cynical tinge insulated him from most frustrations. The achievements during Patteson's episcopacy were undoubtedly due to their cooperation.

'Blackbirding' in the Mission's Field

Patteson's and Codrington's differences in social and emotional dispositions were reversed on one point, namely the trade in indentured labour. Towards the end of the 1860s, recruiters began casting their eyes on the designated Anglican area in the northern New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands.¹⁵ Patteson expressed concern about the behaviour of certain ships' crews, but perceived some actual or potential benefit to those of his flock who might gain from the trade the opportunity to experience a world different from their own. Patteson therefore encouraged stronger regulation of labour recruitment rather than its total suppression.¹⁶ In contrast, Codrington, like his Presbyterian colleagues in the southern islands of the New Hebrides, branded the ships as 'slavers'.¹⁷ He did not share Patteson's conviction that their prospective Melanesian converts would benefit from seeing the ways of regular Europeans. He thought that such experience made them less inclined to heed missionaries, while returnees were mistrusted by their fellow islanders — quite reasonably, given the labourers' proclivity for bringing back firearms, and also because they were, according to Codrington, contaminated by association: 'The fact is that the low kind of Europeans are a worse lot in every way almost than the ordinary kind of savages.'¹⁸ Much of Codrington's aggravation was probably because the recruiting practices of missionaries and labour traders must have appeared almost identical to Islanders. Both travelled in ships with mostly a white crew; they sought mainly male recruits, although the Mission's preferred age span, nine

¹⁴ See Sarah Harrison Sohmer, "'A Selection of Fundamentals': the intellectual background of the Melanesian Mission of the Church of England, 1850–1914", PhD thesis, University of Hawai'i (Honolulu 1988).

¹⁵ Dorothy Shineberg, *The People Trade* (Honolulu 1999); Darrell Tryon, 'Linguistic encounter and responses in the South Pacific', in M. Jolly, S. Tcherkézoff and D. Tryon, *Oceanic Encounters* (Canberra 2009), 37–55.

¹⁶ Darch, *Missionary Imperialists?*, 60–1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58–9.

¹⁸ R.H. Codrington, letter to brother Tom, 7 Aug. 1871, School of Oriental and African Studies, London (hereinafter SOAS), Mel M 2/1.

to 18, was somewhat below that favoured by blackbirders; and many recruits returned years later with new skills and European goods. On the islands more regularly visited by the Mission's ship *Southern Cross*, most people could probably tell the bishop's ship from the rest, but dissociating the Mission's goals from those of labour traders must have been difficult.

In 1870, when the full thrust of the labour trade was felt in the Solomon Islands, Patteson realised that his hopes for its civilising potential had been quixotic. He joined Codrington and prominent members of the Presbyterian mission to the New Hebrides in their attempts to highlight the disturbing effects of blackbirders and oppose 'kidnapping of Islanders'. He wrote letters to influential acquaintances and in a report printed in the Anglican monthly *Mission Life* shortly before his death, spoke of 'the greatly increased risk to himself and those with him' due to the actions of labour ships.¹⁹ He also sent a memorandum on the trade to the Anglican synod in Dunedin, which was included in the synod report.²⁰ Nevertheless, Patteson remained convinced that it would be futile to seek suppression and instead drew up points for viable regulation.²¹ Such was the political context in which Patteson's death would be interpreted.

PART 1: WRITTEN TRADITIONS

Patteson's Contact with Nukapu prior to 1871

Years after Patteson's death, his cousin, the successful novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge, published a two-volume biography based on quotes from his letters and journals, which is the starting point for all later studies of Patteson.²² According to her, Patteson first visited Nukapu on 12 August 1856 when touring the islands with Bishop Selwyn.²³ Patteson's description of the visit focused on the inhabitants' material culture and language. He gave no reason as to why he visited only tiny Nukapu and no other islands in the area, nor is it clear whether Patteson or anyone else on board the *Southern Cross* went ashore. He observed that the people who paddled to the ship spoke 'a few words of Maori', and their appearance and ornaments resembled those of Santa Cruz, while a brief entry in Bishop Selwyn's journal reads, 'Theft of Mr. Patteson's telescope'.²⁴ In 1857,

¹⁹The report is mentioned in a eulogy by editor J.J. Halcombe, *Mission Life: An Illustrated Magazine of Home and Foreign Church*, III:1 (1872), 14.

²⁰J.C. Patteson, 'South Sea Island Labour Traffic', memorandum, 11 January 1871, addressed to the General Synod of the Church of England, Dunedin, February 1871, transcribed by Right Reverend Dr Terry Brown from *Appendices to the Journals of the New Zealand House of Representatives*, 1871, G-35 and available at <http://anglicanhistory.org/nz/patteson/traffic1871.html> (accessed 1 October 2010).

²¹John Gutch, *Martyr of the Islands* (London 1971), 196–7.

²²C.M. Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, 2 vols (5th edn, London 1875).

²³*Ibid.*, vol. 1, 169.

²⁴Henry Nelson Drummond, *John Coleridge Patteson: an account of his death at Nukapu* (Parkstone, Dorset 1930), 9.

the *Southern Cross* again navigated the Santa Cruz area and on 16 September landed on Nukapu:

160 Nukapu is a small, flat island, situated in a large lagoon enclosed within a coral reef. The inhabitants differ widely in their language and their behaviour, from the natives of the neighbouring islands. We were met, as we waded ashore, by twenty or thirty people, who led us at once to the village where we found the chief and a considerable party assembled. We sat for about a quarter of an hour in the house of the chief,
165 a room of good size made as usual of bamboo and thatched with cocoanut leaves. The people speak a dialect of the New Zealand language, and it was easy to converse with them sufficiently for our present purpose. They possess large sailing-canoes, one of which was about to cross over to Santa Cruz. This island may, by God's blessing, afford us an introduction to that large and populous country, and also to the small
170 islands lying to the north of it. We were remarkably struck by the very gentle orderly manners of the people of Nukapu; there was no confusion or noise among the many people who sat or stood around us, but a heartiness of manner and evident desire to do any thing that was in their power to please their strange visitors.²⁵

This orderly and dignified reception contrasted with the noisy welcome on some
175 of the other Reef Islands and on Santa Cruz, and obviously appealed to Patteson and Bishop Selwyn. It most likely contributed to the Mission's persistence in revisiting Nukapu.²⁶

Several visits followed. In 1859, Patteson again sailed with Selwyn to the islands of Temotu. In a letter from this voyage, Patteson remarks: 'The small
180 reef (Polynesian) islands did not give us so good a reception as last year, though there was no unfriendliness.'²⁷ His mention of a visit 'last year' is not explicitly seconded by other sources, but the *Southern Cross* did reach the Solomon Islands on its 1858 voyage. Patteson attributes the less welcoming atmosphere to a visit by the HMS *Cordelia*, inquiring into the killing of Captain Prout and two of his
185 crew on Vanikoro earlier that year. Then in 1866, Patteson landed on Pileni, not far from Nukapu.²⁸ Whether he also visited Nukapu at that time is uncertain but probable. And in a letter to Selwyn, Patteson described another visit to Nukapu four years later:

190 I went here also into the houses. Here is a quaint place; many things, not altogether idols, but uncanny, and feared by the people. Women danced in my honour, people gave small presents, etc., but *no volunteers*. I could talk with them with sufficient ease; and took my time, lying at my ease on a good mat with cane pillow, Anaiteum fashion. I told them that they had seen on board many little fellows from many islands; that they need not fear to let their children go; that I could not spend time
195 and property in coming every year and giving presents when they were unwilling to listen to what I said, but they only made unreal promises, put boys in the boat merely to take them out again, and so we went away *ἀπρακτοί* [i.e. without results, without taking part in an action].²⁹

²⁵ *Report of the Melanesian Mission for 1858* (no place or date of publication), pages unnumbered.

²⁶ The MM also considered other options. In a journal entry 18 Sep. 1870 (SOAS, Mel M 1/2), Codrington describes the arrival of a large fleet of Tikopia canoes at Mota, and notes: 'This gives an opening again if only we could speak to them for getting through them to the Sta. Cruz people.'

²⁷ Yonge, *Life*, vol. 1, 273.

²⁸ Yonge, *Life*, vol. 2, 137.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 309–10.

Patteson had requested 'little fellows' from Nukapu for the Central School on every visit, annually from 1856 until 1859, probably again in 1866, and certainly in 1870, but never obtained any.

20 September 1871

Yonge's version of Patteson's death fuses three sources: a short account from Edward Wogale, a promising young scholar from Mota island; letters and journal entries written by Rev. Joseph Atkin; and Rev. Charles Brooke's story. Significantly, of these three, only Atkin was actually in the dinghy that brought the bishop to the reef surrounding Nukapu. Brooke, who had remained on board the *Southern Cross*, learned of the events from Atkin and the three others in the boat. Brooke's report was the first and, for several years, the sole account, and would determine the range of later interpretations of the affair. Our italicised paraphrasing of Yonge follows:

When the Southern Cross approached Nukapu on the morning of September 20th, four canoes were seen hovering about the reef. The ship was lingering and Patteson thought that the unusual movements would confuse the people in the canoes and make them afraid to approach. Consequently, at 11.30am he ordered the boat to be lowered and boarded it together with Joseph Atkin, Stephen Taroniara, James Minipa, and John Nonono, informing the ship that he may have to go ashore. After collecting a few items to use as gifts, the dinghy set out towards the canoes. These seemed undecided whether to pull away or not. However, people recognised the Bishop and when he offered to go ashore, they assented. The dinghy sailed to a part of the reef about two miles from the village and two more canoes approached them. The Nukapuans wanted to haul the boat up on the reef since it was low tide and impossible to cross. The Mission men disagreed and then two men proposed to take the Bishop in their canoe. Patteson accepted, having found that entering a canoe disarms suspicion.

After 20 minutes two canoes pulled towards land. In one were the Bishop and the chiefs Moto and Taula, with whom he always had been friendly. The tide was low and the canoes had to be pulled while people waded over the reef. In the meantime the boat drifted with the canoes and there had been some attempts at conversation. Suddenly a man stood up in one of them, shouted, 'Have you anything like this?' and shot an arrow at the boat. He was quickly joined by the men in the other canoes. While aiming they called out, 'This is for the New Zealand man! This is for the Bauro man! This is for the Mota man!'³⁰ The boat returned to the ship with all but one of its crew wounded by arrows. Joseph Atkin, although shot in the shoulder, wanted at once to go back to look for the Bishop. He alone knew how to cross the reef, but they had to wait until the tide was high. At half past four it was possible. Two canoes approached them, but one turned back towards land and set the other adrift. When they came closer they saw the Bishop wrapped in mats. Four canoes advanced towards them, not to attack but to bring the canoe back after the Bishop's body had been transferred to the boat.³¹

³⁰These remarks seem curious, but Codrington, informed by Brooke, provides the context in a widely circulated letter. The men in the canoe had been asking the boatmen about their place of origin, which Codrington links with the cries: "'This for the New Zealand man' Atkin. 'This for the Bauro man' Stephen Taroniara. 'This and this for the Mota men' John and James.' R.H. Codrington, letter to brother Tom, Nov 10 1871, SOAS, Mel M 1/2.

³¹Yonge, *Life*, vol. 2, 382.

The description of the body contains clues as to how and, more importantly, why it was carried out:

240 The wounds were, [*sic*] one evidently given by a club, which had shattered the right
side of the skull at the back, and probably was the first, and had destroyed life
instantly, and almost painlessly; another stroke of some sharp weapon had cloven
the top of the head; the body was also pierced in one place; and there were two arrow
wounds in the legs, but apparently not shot at the living man, but stuck in after the
245 fall, and after he had been stripped, for the clothing was gone, all but the boots
and socks. In the front of the cocoa-nut palm, there were five knots made in the long
leaflets. All this is an almost certain indication that his death was the vengeance
for five of the natives.³²

250 The morning after, the bishop's body was committed to the sea. The burial
service was read by Joseph Atkin, who six days later would die from tetanus.
Stephen Taroniara followed him the next day, also in terrible agony.

After Yonge

255 The bulk of later literature on Bishop Patteson follows Yonge and adds little new
information. But some accounts, obtained by Patteson's successors and other
MM staff, afford additional insights. Although the official version provided an
unequivocal rationalisation of the affair, it is not surprising that Mission
personnel would inquire into the circumstances of this highly charged event and,
given the absence of witnesses to Patteson's actual killing, many details were
wanting.

260 The first of the later published reports was by the Bishop of Tasmania, Henry
Montgomery, from his three months pastoral visitation to the islands in 1892:

265 Let us follow the bishop ashore. We saw him last in the chief's canoe crossing the reef,
and at length landing on the beach. It seems that he went into the house of which I
have spoken, and laid himself down flat on his back, with his head on a Santa Cruz
pillow, and closed his eyes. The place was full of people. Behind him there sat a man
who had in his hand a wooden mallet. With this he struck the bishop on the top of his
head. Death was instantaneous. It is said that he did not even open his eyes. Then in
due time they stripped him of his clothes, except his stockings, dragged him a few
yards at least, and, wrapping him in a mat, they placed him in a canoe.³³

270 Montgomery clearly found this a deliberate murder sanctioned by the
community. His description of what followed is a little more detailed than
Yonge's:

275 Meanwhile on board the *Southern Cross* there was grief and perplexity. At about three
p.m. — not before, for they had to attend to the wounded — Mr. Bongard, the mate
of the vessel, called for volunteers, and took the boat through the reef — for by this
time it was possible — and rowed up and down near the shore looking to see if
there were any signs of the bishop. Mr. Atkin insisted on going back in the boat.

³² Ibid.

³³ H.H. Montgomery, *The Light of Melanesia* (New York 1904), quoted from the web version <http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/melanesia/montgomery1904/index.html> (accessed 1 October 2010), ch. 15, n.p.

280 When they turned round to row back on one of these occasions they saw two canoes
come out from the shore at some distance. A man in one of them seemed to anchor it
with the help of a stone, then he jumped into the other canoe and the men paddled
ashore again. Mr. Bongard made for the anchored canoe, and as they approached it
they knew what was in it by a sight of the striped stockings. They found the body
wrapped in a mat, with a palm branch on it, the fronds being tied into five knots.
285 The top of the head was battered to pieces as if by a blunt instrument. There were
four other wounds, including one which looked like an arrow wound in the palm of
the hand. It is probable this was made after death, for it is the custom for the relatives
of a murdered man to pierce with arrows the body of any one whom they have killed
in revenge.³⁴

Montgomery adds an important detail that emphasises the collective
engagement:

290 As soon as the body had been lifted into the boat there suddenly appeared upon the
beach the whole population of the island, numbering then about a hundred; they
gave a yell, and then vanished again.³⁵

In 1894, Cecil Wilson became Bishop of Melanesia and sailed through his island
see. Passing Nukapu, he mentioned that someone ‘propounded a new theory to
295 account for [Patteson’s] death which did not find acceptance’, without specifying
further.³⁶ To settle the issue, a Nukapu man by the name of Jan was summoned,
who was on board the *Southern Cross* and had been present in the house when
Patteson was killed.

300 ‘I was a child then, the size of one of those boys (pointing to some Florida boys, aged
about 14). A labour-vessel had called at our village and had carried away by force six
or seven men, and had shot one man in the neck so that he died. When the Bishop
landed the Nukapu people said to him he must get back the men who had been
stolen. But a Pileni man, named Tetule, whose father had been stolen away, and who
305 had himself been struck on the head with an axe so that he still smarted from it, said
that the Bishop must die, and he killed him. The Bishop never opened his eyes, but
was struck dead on the spot. The women washed his body, and he was placed on a
canoe and floated out. The boat with Joe Atkin had been fired at before the Bishop
was killed. The man who struck the blow escaped to the mainland of Santa Cruz
310 where he was hunted about by the people until they shot and killed him.’ This was
Jan’s story. Captain Bongard added that when he picked up the body from the canoe
the people ran down to the beach in crowds and sent up a ferocious yell. It seems
then that whilst one man did the act all accepted it for the moment, and on second
thoughts regretted what had been done and drove the murderer away.³⁷

315 Since Captain Bongard had also served as skipper during Montgomery’s
voyage, he was most likely the source for the ‘collective act’ motif in both
Montgomery’s and Wilson’s reports. But Jan’s story raises a point: if the
Nukapuans had asked the bishop to help bring back the abducted men, it would
be senseless to kill him. There are other new elements too. Jan reportedly alleged

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Southern Cross Log*, 1:17 (1896), 7. This most likely refers to resident missionary A.E.C. Forrest’s version,
discussed by Hilliard and mentioned below.

³⁷ Ibid.

320 that the killer Tetule came from Pileni and mentioned that the women washed Patteson's body. One might infer from Wilson's retelling that women also placed his body in the canoe. This is the first official account that alludes to the role of women.

325 In what is the first comprehensive and cautiously critical history of the MM, Armstrong elaborates further upon the women's actions.³⁸ After stating matter-of-factly that Patteson's life had been taken in vengeance for the kidnapping of five men, she refers to 'a great discussion beforehand as to whether he should be slain or not',³⁹ thus taking Bongard's position that the killing was a premeditated and collective decision. She attributes the 'great discussion beforehand' to the women's attempts to save him, adding that they tended his 330 body, laid the palm branch with the five knots on his chest and later towed the canoe with the bishop's body out in the lagoon and cast it adrift for the approaching mission party to retrieve.⁴⁰

335 Henry Drummond, who spent six years as a missionary to the Santa Cruz and Reef Islands, wrote a booklet for the 50th anniversary of Patteson's death. He visited Nukapu several times and on one visit, probably during his tenure on the Reef Islands from 1903–05, sat down with a man who as a boy had been ordered to remain in the men's house with Patteson. This man could be Jan, Bishop Wilson's informant, but Drummond's version mentions the presence of a second boy and differs on some key points from Jan's. The differences between 340 these accounts, written down only ten years apart, might indicate two different sources. In Drummond's opinion, '[The man's] story, supplemented by entries from the journals of those on board, and from the Log of the "Southern Cross", tells us all we shall ever know of the death of the bishop and his companions.'⁴¹ Drummond also mentions the kidnapping of five boys and the opportunity for reparation: 345

While [Patteson] rested, the Chief went to procure food, and told my informant and another boy to sit with the Bishop during his absence.

350 When the Chief returned it was to find his guest lying dead, struck by the hand of a man from the other village on the island. This man, Atule, had come in quietly to the hut and taken his stand behind the Bishop. In his hand was a club, such as the people use to beat out the grass for their mats. With this he struck the Bishop on the head and so, unwittingly, killed his truest friend. Horror-struck, the Chief snatched up his bow and arrows and went in pursuit of the murderer, who had hidden himself in the bush. It was by no command or wish of his that the murder had been done, 355 and we can only conjecture the cause that led to such a sudden breach of friendship. The Bishop had been warmly welcomed: every mark of goodwill had been shown him: my informant assured me again and again that no evil was contemplated. . . . Now it will be remembered that the boat was left lying off the reef, waiting for the turn of the tide with the four men in it; and the canoes, which came up from the shore, would, according to their custom, paddle up and surround it. Quite possibly it 360

³⁸ E.A. Armstrong, *The History of The Melanesian Mission* (London 1900).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 121–2.

⁴¹ Drummond, *John Coleridge Patteson*, 14.

suddenly occurred to some one of these excited natives that here were the five lives they needed, four men in the boat, and the fifth on shore . . .

365 Now much of this must have been clearly visible from the hut; the attack on the four men, and the subsequent commotion. Four lives secured already! — the fatal blow was struck and the complete number gained. All was confusion; yet, in the
370 midst of it, some wrapped the Bishop's body in the mat, on which he had rested, and carried it to one of the canoes on the shore. On his breast was laid a frond of sago palm, tied into five knots, and a woman named Luwani was ordered to take her canoe and tow the other towards the boat, which was now approaching over the lagoon. . . . [T]he murderer, Atule, went in terror of his life, living alone in the bush, dreading the vengeful anger of the Chief.⁴²

375 Drummond's account highlights Patteson's status as innocent victim and the killing as an impulsive act, contrary to Montgomery's and Armstrong's interpretations and Bongard's testimony, but in line with the eyewitness account given to Wilson.

The next line of modification and extension is provided by historian, ethnographer and missionary Charles Fox in his history of the MM and a sermon on Bishop Patteson.⁴³ In addition to Drummond, his sources include newspaper articles and an interview with four schoolboys who were on board the *Southern Cross* when it visited Nukapu. Fox's sermon starts by stressing that all happened due to the slave ships and God's will.⁴⁴ It continues:

385 [Patteson] left the Solomons and sailed to the Reef Islands coming to Nukapu on September 20. Though he did not know it five lads had been seized there by a man who said the Bishop was with him, and carried them off to Fiji. The uncle of one of these, Teadule had made up his mind to kill the first white man who landed. The people did not know this. They were Polynesians and Patteson's friends and their chief and Patteson had exchanged names, a custom of friendship.⁴⁵

Fox emphasises Patteson's foreboding, who that morning had given a lesson on the martyrdom of Stephen. He then expands on Drummond's version:

390 He landed, went into the long canoe and guest house,⁴⁶ while the chief went to bring him food. Only Teadule and a small boy remained and the Bishop lay down on a mat. Teadule came up quietly with a heavy club used for beating out tapa cloth and killed him. Then he fled, pursued by the chief, seized a canoe and fled to Santa Cruz, 30 miles away, where the Santa Cruzians killed him.⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., 14–16.

⁴³ Charles E. Fox, *Lord of the Southern Isles* (London 1958), 25; idem, 'John Coleridge Patteson: a sermon by Canon Charles Elliott Fox on the occasion of the centenary of the consecration of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, February 24, 1961', typescript in Church of Melanesia Provincial Office, transcribed by Right Reverend Dr Terry Brown and available at http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/fox_patteson1961.html (accessed 1 October 2010).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Many sources confuse the two words *holau* 'single men's house' and the Polynesian word for 'canoe shed' (e.g. Tikopian *aforau*).

⁴⁷ Fox, 'John Coleridge Patteson'.

395 Fox next elaborates upon events after the murder, further detailing the role played by Nukapu women:

400 Meanwhile those on shore were startled and horrified by Teandule's act, especially the women who knew and loved Patteson. One of them, Liufai, with her friends, washed the body and prepared it for burial. The men made five wounds on the body and placed on the breast a palm with five fronds knotted, to show that one life has been taken for five of theirs. Then they wrapped it in a mat. They decided to bury the body in their cemetery, two hundred yards along the shore. All was made in a state of excitement and confusion. The body was laid in a canoe and Liufai got into another to tow it to the cemetery. But she saw the boat coming in and cast off.
405 Atkin picked it up. The Bishop was buried at sea.⁴⁸

More expressively than anybody else, Fox stresses the importance of Patteson's death and its consequences:

410 The death of these three [Patteson, Atkin, and Taroaniara] ended the slave trade in its worst form. Patteson's death stirred England, and laws were passed to control the trade. The 'murder' ships sailed no more. Patteson, had he lived, could have done little. His death destroyed it; himself he could not save.⁴⁹

The anthropologist William Davenport offered to tell the story about Bishop Patteson's death. The tale he obtained on Nukapu and Pileni in 1960 'contains some details and discrepancies with other recorded versions'.⁵⁰

415 According to Papue, an old woman who was born on Nukapu but now lives on Pileni, a ship came to Nukapu and lured four men on board. They were Bakapu, Vakau, Tueina, and Veka. As they were being battened below in the hold of the ship, Tueina tried to escape and was shot. His body was dumped into the sea later. The maternal uncle of Tueina was Tetuli⁵¹ of Matema Island, Outer Reef Islands.
420 Later Tetuli was visiting on Nukapu when the *Southern Cross* appeared there in 1871 and Bishop Patteson came ashore. While the Bishop was resting or sleeping in the men's house at Tepia, Tetuli killed him with a mallet used for dispatching sharks, in revenge for the abduction of his nephew. The Bishop's body was taken to the other side of the village at Tepalione⁵² to be buried in a hastily excavated grave (the exact spot is indicated), but the people began to be frightened of what revenge might be
425 taken on them, for already someone was shooting a gun from the *Southern Cross*. They changed their minds, put the body on a small canoe, placed on its chest part of a coconut leaf with knots tied in it as a charm to prevent the Bishop's soul from coming back to haunt them. A woman named Niuvai pushed the canoe out over the reef towards where the *Southern Cross* was waiting. Behind her men with bows let fly with arrows at the dinghy from the *Southern Cross* as it came to receive the canoe with the Bishop's body. A Polynesian-speaking woman named Tutuka came ashore from
430 the *Southern Cross* and set fire to houses in the village.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁰ William Davenport, 'Notes on Santa Cruz voyaging', *Journal of Polynesian Society*, 73 (1964), 141.

⁵¹ Davenport's rendering of words and names from the Vaekau-Taumako language is notoriously inaccurate.

⁵² Davenport must be referring to the part of the village called Paleone, next to Tepia. But the grave Niuvai dug was in Vaiakapiu on the other side of the village.

⁵³ Davenport, 'Notes', 141–2.

435 As Davenport himself pointed out, the storyteller evidently confused the murder with the retaliation from HMS *Rosario* two months later, after the Nukapuans fired at the ship when it came to investigate the affair. The informant also gave a different time for the attack on the dinghy, that is, not before but after the murder. Otherwise, it closely resembles today's Nukapu version, as will be seen below.

440 The first critical scholarly analysis of the Melanesian Mission, including the circumstances surrounding Patteson's death, is Hilliard's, which questioned the link between the reported kidnapping and the Bishop's death. He finds the evidence for the former circumstantial at best, pointing out that 'the popularly accepted explanation . . . had established a life of its own quite independent of empirical evidence.'⁵⁴ So even though Hilliard emphasised in a more recent article that 'it is not an unreasonable theory', given that the recruiting ship *Emma Belle* had been in the Santa Cruz region only days before the Mission ship and stories were circulating about how ships from Fiji had used firearms, wrecked canoes and taken unwilling islanders, inquiries always assumed the salience of the revenge-for-kidnapping motive.⁵⁵ Most later versions supporting the official account were, moreover, relayed through a chain of interpreters, increasing the potential for errors and misunderstandings.

450 Yet, as Hilliard notes, the explanation provided in 1894 by the first missionary to be fluent in a language of the area, A.E.C. Forrest, suggested a different interpretation. Forrest reports that Patteson was killed by a Santa Cruz man who was jealous because Patteson presented the Nukapu chief with gifts that exceeded those given to him, thereby unwittingly disputing established hierarchy.⁵⁶ Forrest's account was immediately dismissed by his fellow missionaries. But even though it does not fully explain the attack on the men in the dinghy, in weighing the evidence, Hilliard finds the 'violation of principles of rank' motive more convincing than that related to the alleged kidnapping.

Spinning the Story

Hilliard's main objection to the revenge theory is that it was 'born not out of investigation into the actions of the Nukapu people themselves, but out of a desire to condemn the activities of labour recruiters'.⁵⁷ Our impressions second Hilliard's verdict. Patteson's fate, albeit a devastating blow to the Mission, provided an opportunity for Codrington to turn public opinion against the labour trade. Charles Brooke, the only European missionary to survive the voyage, assisted in this endeavour. Brooke's version, published in the Anglican periodical *Mission Life*, simulates the telegraphic style of an unedited diary, but was undoubtedly written with a specific audience in mind, retrospectively

⁵⁴ Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, 69.

⁵⁵ Hilliard, 'The making of an Anglican martyr', 341.

⁵⁶ Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, 67–71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

emphasising Patteson's forebodings and the labour traders' destruction of the mission field. During a trying three-week journey back to Norfolk Island, desperately short of water and food, devastated by the bishop's loss and exhausted from nursing the wounded and consoling the dying, Brooke wrote the lines to the editor of *Mission Life* that nailed the killing to the labour trade: 'It is a terrible price to pay for what ought to have been done long ago; but the Bishop's death will at last open people's eyes to the state of exasperation these natives are now in, owing to the violence practiced against them by these labour-seekers.'⁵⁸

On Norfolk Island, Brooke briefed Codrington, who wasted no time in using the incident for the cause. He resolved to go to Queensland and Fiji to rally support for those 'trying to stop the infamous traffic that has ruined our people.'⁵⁹ But already on November 15, as soon as the news had reached Sydney, a large number of people gathered at a meeting presided over by Earl Belmore, the Governor of New South Wales. There his Excellency stressed that a palm branch found on Patteson's body with five knots signified that the bishop had been killed to avenge the murder of five natives.⁶⁰ Interrupted by cheers of approval, the Governor outlined a law that would prevent future abuses by blackbirders.⁶¹ Similar meetings in Melbourne, Hobart and Auckland were accompanied by news reports, fuming editorials and emotional sermons.⁶²

The Case against Blackbirding

Earl Belmore was soon commissioned to investigate allegations against the labour trade. However, during his journey of enquiry to the islands he found no evidence of severe misconduct. Codrington attributed this want of evidence to the lack of able interpreters.⁶³ But Earl Belmore was not the only investigator to find little hard evidence against blackbirders. The notorious recruiter Ross Lewin, for instance, was trailed by two consecutive commanders of the HMS *Rosario*, George Palmer and Albert Markham, both evangelical Christians and admirers of missionary work.⁶⁴ They were highly responsive to accusations against the trade from Codrington's Presbyterian colleagues in the southern New Hebrides, James McNair, Peter Milne and, in particular, John Paton, who testified in his bestselling autobiography: 'My life [. . .] has enabled me also to do battle against

⁵⁸ C.H. Brooke, 'The death of Bishop Patteson', *Mission Life: an illustrated magazine of home and foreign church work*, 3 (1872), 1.

⁵⁹ R.H. Codrington, letter to his aunt (copied and sent to a large number of recipients) 10 Nov. 1871, Rhodes House Library, Oxford (hereinafter RHL), MSS Pac s4.

⁶⁰ 'Bishop Patteson — Public Meeting', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Nov. 1871, available online at <http://newspapers.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/1455447> (accessed 1 October 2010).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Hilliard, 'The making of an Anglican martyr', 339.

⁶³ Codrington, *Journal of Voyage 1872*, entry 16 Aug. 1872, SOAS, Mel M 1/2.

⁶⁴ In a letter to his aunt 22 Feb. 1872, RHL, MSS Pac s4, Codrington comments on HMS *Rosario*'s shelling of Nukapu and mentions that Markham was a 'great friend' of Codrington's younger brother William, a distinguished naval officer who served as Queen Victoria's *aide de camp*. Doug Hunt, 'Hunting the blackbird: Ross Lewin and the Royal Navy', *Journal of Pacific History*, 42 (2007), 37–53.

505 the infernal *Kanaka* or Labour Traffic, one of the most cruel and blood-stained forms of slavery on the face of the earth.⁶⁵ Yet despite their zeal, these commanders too failed to secure incriminating evidence.⁶⁶ The missionaries' poorly substantiated testimonies annoyed the colonial authorities and undermined the credibility of opposition to the labour trade.⁶⁷ Despite undoubted incidents of cajoling, kidnapping, and shocking violence, most labour recruits
510 seemed to sign up without foreign coercion.⁶⁸ To argue that the trade consisted simply of conniving recruiters exploiting uninformed islanders also underestimates the strategic aspect of indigenous agency.⁶⁹ And although Codrington's distaste for the business was to some extent justified, his loathing appears excessive. A sense of betrayal detectable in his letters and diaries is perhaps
515 suggestive. While Codrington's respect for the intellectual capacities of Melanesians was unusual among men of his kind at the time, he evidently felt some upper-class antipathy for Irish, Scots and Antipodean commoners or 'colonial loafers'.⁷⁰ The fact that many of his Melanesian friends abandoned the Mission for such lesser men apparently disheartened and infuriated him.

520 *Counterfactuals?*

But Bishop Patteson's death still provided the MM with the moral supremacy to sway popular opinion against the labour trade. So, in 1877, when the new Bishop John Selwyn, son of the MM's founder, received a version from two Nifiloli castaways at Malaita that weakened the link between kidnapping and Patteson's
525 killing, Codrington's response is of considerable interest. He wrote to his brother:

530 The chief thing learnt was this that it was Santa Cruz people who instigated the Nukapu people to kill the Bishop... [Rev] Comins says that the St^a Cruz told the Nukapu men that now they had the Bishop they must kill him, and that therefore while the Bishop was sitting in the canoe house a Nukapu chief struck the Bp, who jumped up and threw him on the ground. Then a second Nukapu man gave the fatal blow on the Bp's head from behind. [Added over the text]: The present Bp says they shot him, and the crowd shot at him. The women are said to have opposed the

⁶⁵ John G. Paton, *Missionary of the New Hebrides* (11th edn, London 1907), 443. Historian Niel Gunson labels Paton 'an agitator frequently deluded by his own propaganda', quoted in Darch, *Missionary Imperialists?* 59.

⁶⁶ Hunt, 'Hunting the blackbird'.

⁶⁷ Darch, *Missionary Imperialists?*, 53–60.

⁶⁸ Shineberg, *The People Trade*, 37–42. See *ibid.*, 6–8 for a discussion of the difficulties in estimating the rate and degree of voluntarism.

⁶⁹ Cf. Douglas, 'In the event', 184: 'I argue [...] that indigenous demeanours toward newcomers [...] were always strategic — even if I cannot begin to fathom the reasons — and that their textual inscription is yet another enigmatic countersign of indigenous agency.'

⁷⁰ For common attitudes concerning the capacities of Melanesians, see Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus, 'Letters from homes: maintaining global relationships in the Victorian age', in I. Hoëm *et al.* (eds), *Identity Matters*, Kon Tiki Occasional Papers vol. 12 (in press), and George Stocking, *After Tylor: British social anthropology 1888–1951* (London 1996), 37–42. Codrington's quote, from a letter to his aunt, is cited *ibid.*, 37. Codrington is the anonymous author of *Report of the Melanesian Mission from 1st, January 1865, to 9th May 1866* (Auckland 1866) which sceptically treated all colonial and entrepreneurial, i.e. 'non-MM white', undertakings in the islands (*ibid.*, 8–9). It was written just one year after Codrington joined the MM and several years before the labour traders started recruiting in the MM area.

murder, and afterwards to have prepared the body and taken it out in the canoe. Bongard [mate of the Southern Cross] however who saw the canoe paddled out doent [*sic*] believe they were women who did it. No mention had been known by me on writing this to have been made by the Nupani man [the storyteller, who according to Armstrong came from Nifiloli, closer to Nukapu] of the motives of the St^a Cruz people's instigating the murder, nor any allusion to the kidnapping of the Nukapu men a few days before, but there is nothing by any means inconsistent in the two accounts, and the account given [by two Nupani castaways at Ulawa] last year to [missionary] Still is just as well authenticated as this of this year, though this being novel will be jumped at as the whole and true story, and the people on the look out for exculpating the labour trade will say that the story of the kidnapped men has turned out to be untrue. I always was of the opinion that the attack on the boat followed as a consequence of the attack on the Bishop.⁷¹

This report, which as far as we can establish never circulated outside the MM, appears to have lingered in institutional memory.⁷² It may partly account for efforts by MM personnel over the next five decades to obtain a comprehensive and conclusive version of the affair. As for the motive, the story seems to support Hilliard's preferred explanation that it derived from a breach of hierarchical etiquette. But there is one other feature that must be emphasised, which unites this 1877 Reef Islands version with a number of the later accounts. It holds that women played a key role, first by vainly opposing the murder and then by preparing the body for burial and returning it to the Mission crew. This is a very significant point, since during these six years the MM had had no contact with the Santa Cruz area, let alone the Reef Islands proper. The women were in other words part of the local narrative about Patteson, independent of any Christological imagery, figuring Christ's relations with women and their tending His body, that could perhaps have influenced Armstrong's and Fox's accounts.

560

PART 2: LIVING TRADITIONS

The study of orally transmitted culture in Vaeakau and the Reef Islands entails some specific methodological challenges besides those outlined in our introduction. Little attention is paid to stories of origin; people do not keep genealogies; and they rarely have any knowledge of forebears beyond their grandparents.⁷³ In additional, stories of past events frequently blend elements from fairytales and legends.⁷⁴ This makes history flexible and sufficiently vague to serve as a tool for the reallocation of land rights, as has been reported from other Pacific

⁷¹ R.H. Codrington, letter to brother Tom, 6 Nov. 1877, SOAS, Mel M 2/1.

⁷² Somewhat surprisingly Hilliard seems to have overlooked this story when he writes, '[Apart from Forrest's, e]very other version of the event collected by missionaries . . . has confirmed and added further details to what has become the standard account.' Hilliard, 'The making of an Anglican martyr', 342.

⁷³ Åshild Næss and Even Hovdhaugen, 'The history of Polynesian settlement in the Reef and Duff Islands: the linguistic evidence', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 116 (2007), 433–49.

⁷⁴ Even Hovdhaugen and Åshild Næss, *Stories from Vaeakau and Taumako: a lalakhai ma talanga o Vaeakau ma Taumako* (Oslo 2006), 32–43.

island communities.⁷⁵ Moreover, as in virtually every community in the region, the distribution of knowledge is a principle for social stratification. Retrieving information is consequently a sensitive task. Only certain individuals, usually older males of high social standing, have the right to speak on behalf of the community and to determine what may be passed on to outsiders and by whom. As a result, a visiting researcher is not at liberty to decide which types of oral material to collect from whom.

The close connections between the islands in the area, through trade networks, intermarriage and inter-island voyaging, also mean that there are no 'pure' traditions. When Davenport visited Nukapu in 1960, the total number of inhabitants was 62: 34 male and 28 female.⁷⁶ Shortly after 1900, the population on all the Santa Cruz and Reef Islands was severely reduced by an epidemic of dysentery or cholera. Nifiloli was abandoned and the survivors moved to Pileni. Around 1920, Nukapuans faced a famine, and they too resettled on Pileni. After some years, Nukapu was gradually reoccupied, while Nifiloli was resettled about 1940.⁷⁷ The relationship between the three islands is still close, and many people on Nifiloli and Pileni have land rights on Nukapu. Nukapuan traditions concerning Patteson's death are consequently shared Nukapu–Pileni–Nifiloli traditions, and any attempt to isolate a genealogy would be futile. The fact that the islands have been incorporated within the Anglican Church for over a century and regularly exposed to the Church's version of the incident promotes further commonalities — even though, as will be seen, local traditions differ on key points from the account read out each year on Bishop Patteson's Day in every Anglican church on the Reef Islands and throughout Anglican Melanesia. This suggests that there always has been room for parallel histories.

A Nukapu Version

In October 2003, when Hovdhaugen visited Nukapu for two days, he had already worked with Nukapu consultants on Pileni and Nifiloli and collected extensive linguistic material. Because he had been asked to prepare a reader in the Vaekau–Taumako language and to include history of Bishop Patteson's murder and a Tongan attack on Nukapu, Hovdhaugen asked whether someone could tell him about Patteson's death. After some discussion, Henry Leni, around 60 years of age, was chosen to tell the story, which was later transcribed and translated with the help of consultants.⁷⁸ Leni started by emphasising that this is no fairy tale (*lalahai*), but a true story (*tlatlá* or *talanga*), 'a story about an old

⁷⁵ Ward Goodenough, 'A problem in Malayo-Polynesian social organization', *American Anthropologist*, 57 (1955), 71–83. See also Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus, 'Adopting change: relational flexibility as vice and virtue on Mota Island, Vanuatu', *Pacific Studies*, 31 (2008), 58–86.

⁷⁶ Davenport, 'Social organization', 71.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 65–6.

⁷⁸ Hovdhaugen and Næss, *Stories*, 22–7.

man called Bishop Patteson. They killed him here and now I am going to tell you about it.⁷⁹

605 One time long ago a ship came here. When it arrived it brought here an old man working for the church. His name was Coleridge Patteson. And that man was a bishop. And he arrived on a ship that came here. When he arrived he thought that it would be the last time he was here in Nukapu. At that time he was going from island to island, and the old man thought that he should visit us on Nukapu.⁸⁰

610 Leni's story implies that this was not Patteson's first visit to Nukapu and alludes to Patteson's forebodings mentioned repeatedly in missionary sources.

The ship came closer and arrived at this place, at Nukapu. The ship anchored in the channel here, the channel of Nukapu. He went down in the dinghy that brought him ashore. The dinghy brought him ashore somewhere in Tepia, where the single men's house was, which they had built for anybody who arrives so he could go to that single men's house to rest.⁸¹

615 There is no mention of the canoes at sea that first brought the bishop ashore or the firing at people in the dinghy.

620 When he arrived there, the old men there, the people of that area came down and brought him to the single men's house to rest there. They brought him and spread out a mat and prepared everything so he could rest there. And maybe he thought such preparations could indicate that something would happen to him. They brought him and put him to bed, and then they took and covered his eyes with a piece of cloth.⁸²

625 Today chiefs and old men still come to welcome an important guest, follow him to his residence and spread out a mat or two for him. That this procedure gave Patteson further premonitions conforms to the theme of foreboding, but putting him to bed and covering his head does seem odd. However, it might been to guard against mosquitoes and flies.

630 And while he was lying in the single men's house, there was a man from here by the name of Teatule.⁸³ I think he had decided to kill the bishop and he took a club, that is a stick to kill people with. He took it and crept with it to where the bishop's head was, he crept up there and hit him on his face with it so he died where he was lying.⁸⁴

635 One strange aspect to the whole story, and where the sources differ considerably, concerns those present when Patteson was killed. A prominent guest lying alone and unprotected is peculiar.⁸⁵ The chiefs might have had some preparations to oversee, such as cooking or planning ceremonies, but even then

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 23–5.

⁸³ 'Teatule' means 'the scad'.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁵ Bishop Wilson anticipates Hovdhaugen's experience approximately one hundred years later: 'The men were always reading their books, and were never happier than when lying on their backs in my hot little house singing hymns. I found that it was thought rude ever to leave a visitor alone by himself.' *Southern Cross Log*, 20 (1915), 546.

one should expect somebody to stay behind to look after him. Conversely, it would be a much more serious case for the people on Nukapu if he were killed with many people or all the chiefs present.

The old men were gone and he was lying in the single men's house and there was a woman called Niuvai and another called Bekuma.⁸⁶ Perhaps Niuvai had seen [what happened] and had pity on him and thought that she maybe should go and dig a hole to bury the man there. The hole she dug is there in Vaiakapiu.⁸⁷

The village of Nukapu is not particularly large, and one wonders where the chiefs had gone and why. But apparently there were two women who discovered or even observed the crime and took action. Their unseemly presence in the vicinity of the single men's house is a critical puzzle. It could suggest that Niuvai was an unconventional individual.

Vaiakapiu is perhaps 500 metres from the scene of the crime, but Niuvai had to dig the grave on ground belonging to her lineage.

She dug until it was big enough, and brought a piece of timber to pull him on. After she had brought the plank, she put him up there. She took the bishop and rolled him up there. She put him there and prepared to pull him in the sea to bring him and bury him in the grave she had dug there.⁸⁸

Niuvai could not carry him straight to the grave without trespassing on other people's property. To transport him by sea may also have been easier, but neither the place where he was killed nor the grave is next to the sea.

At this point, the traditions meet again. The various mission narratives also report that the dinghy came back and found two canoes in the sea, one carrying Patteson's body:

She pulled him, and those who were on the ship — the dinghy that had brought him, had gone back to the ship — could quite well see how she carried him swimming, and perhaps they understood that it was the bishop that was carried on the timber trunk. The dinghy returned here. When it came, somebody said that they should get the bishop and bring him to the ship. They took him and they gave a small thing to Niuvai to thank her for having pulled the bishop. When they had given it to her, they took the bishop and brought him to the ship.⁸⁹

The gift to Niuvai expresses the Polynesian custom of rewarding those who provide services during a funeral. And here, the story is over as far as Nukapu is concerned:

When they had brought him there, the ship left. The ship left and then I do not know where they brought him from there, because they say that they left him at a reef at the back side of the island.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Niuvai is a Polynesian name: *niu* 'coconut, coconut palm' and *vai* 'water', and is certainly identical to Liuvai in Fox, *Lord of the Southern Isles*. *Bekuma* (or *bekima*) is a basket for carrying a comb, money, etc.

⁸⁷ The hole is still there and clearly visible.

⁸⁸ Hovdhaugen and Næss, *Stories*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

675 After the recording was finished, the narrator asked Hovdhaugen to turn the recorder back on, adding the following short paragraph:

Perhaps they killed that bishop because a ship belonging to them [i.e. the white men] had come here earlier and taken people from here and carried them away so they were lost and never came back.⁹¹

680 *A Nupani Version*

In 2005, Hovdhaugen met Christian Tekilamata from Nupani, now living in the village of Minevi on Santa Cruz. He became Hovdhaugen's main consultant on the Nupani dialect. On one occasion, Christian mentioned that Bekuma, Niuvai's associate, had moved to Nupani where she married and became one
685 of Christian's ancestors. Nupani was at the margins of the old trade network, dealing mainly with Santa Cruz. Hovdhaugen asked Christian to tell what he had heard about the murder. Many months later, Christian sent the story by email to Hovdhaugen. Since he was unfamiliar with this medium, it contains some gaps and errors. The text has therefore been slightly edited.

690 Bishop John Coleridge Patteson was murdered at Tepia village on Nukapu Island in the single men's house. After the Eucharist, the Bishop was led to the house to have a short rest. The killers were not invited but they brought floor and sleeping mats for the bishop to rest on with a piece of wood for a pillow.

695 The Bishop suspected death because he did not allow the members of his party to go with him. When he was told [during a landing on an unknown island] of the Nukapu plan to kill the first white man that sets foot on the island, he accepted it with tears. He said that life and Christianity in Melanesia are not safe from cruel foreigners without a death from the foreign missionaries. The island shook hands with the party and the ship sailed to Nukapu.

700 About 1869, a Blackbirding vessel came to Nukapu. The cruel officers captured five Nukapu Islanders to work as slaves in the Queensland sugar cane plantations. The Islanders then made a promise that the first whiteman ever to set foot on the island would be killed in revenge.

705 A man called Tetule got a three cornered fish club and was waiting for his chance to kill the Bishop. As the Bishop was about to fall asleep, the chief of Tepia (Tupo) went over to Tetule and told him he did not agree with the killing plan, neither did the island's war chiefs. He told him that his two brothers were both captured by white men and the bishop had come in the demanded opportunity.

710 Tetule and his supporters got up and went to Tepia and got into the single men's house where the Bishop was asleep. Tetule lifted his club and gave two blows on the bishop's forehead and he was dead. The chief's wife Niuvai brought the bad news to Tekoko village but she was too late. Blood spilt all over the gravel floor and the Bishop's head was covered in clots of blood.

715 After performing some traditional activities on the body, Niuvai and her husband set about cutting half of an old dugout canoe to take the body of the Bishop to the ship *Southern Cross*. Niuvai swam out with the dead body in the canoe where it was transferred to the ship's dinghy waiting at the passage. Before the ship sailed away,

⁹¹ Ibid.

the crew fired canons ashore to frighten the Islanders from killing chief Tupo and wife.

720 The Melanesian priest onboard reported that the bishop's body was thrown at sea near Tinakula Volcano.⁹²

Christian Tekilamata's story contains some new information. Most interestingly, Niuvai was the wife of the paramount chief; at the last moment, the island community split into two groups, one for and one against the killing, with the
725 paramount chief opposing it; the peace party withdrew to Tekoko, a village part close to Vaiakapiu, where, according to the Nukapu version, the grave was dug and where Niuvai came to tell about the killing. No other sources mention that Niuvai was the chief's wife. But it explains her prominent role in the tragedy. Since Tekilamata is a descendant of Bekuma, Niuvai's close friend, his family
730 tradition apparently includes more information on Niuvai than other sources do.

But there are problems with this version too. Evidently, Tekilamata's story fuses the incidents of September 20 with what happened when HMS *Rosario* arrived two months later. And what about the grave mentioned in Henri Leni's
735 account as well as in those of Fox and Davenport? Let us try to reconstruct what might have happened. Niuvai is either in the house or staying very close to it when Patteson is killed. She walks to Tekoko (about 300–350 metres) where she informs her husband and his group of the killing. She then requests that a grave be dug for him. Customarily, this would be the work of the chief or some men he ordered to do so. But apparently he declined, although he later was willing to
740 decorate the body. Then Niuvai went to make the arrangements, by herself or together with Bekuma, less than 100 metres from Tekoko, probably within sight of her husband and the other leaders. Having finished the digging, she went back for the body, and then her husband and the other members of his group joined her. Around this time, the dinghy reappeared, and they decided to return the
745 body, now prepared for burial, to the crew.

Deciphering Why

The numerous accounts presented here fully agree on certain points while markedly diverging on others. Nonetheless, we are now ready to tackle the puzzle: why was Patteson killed?

750 Earlier, we challenged the kidnapping hypothesis without ruling it out altogether. While this explanation gained a 'life of its own', is present in almost every source, and has become an integral part of the Patteson story, it remains poorly substantiated, and caused many later investigators to ignore a number of questions. Moreover, it reduces potentially multifaceted responses to an alleged
755 offence to a simple tit-for-tat, thus colonising indigenous agency.⁹³ In addition, there is the pragmatic capitalist counterargument: why would a labour ship waste time visiting an island with very few men and a reef that inhibits landing,

⁹² Christian Tekilamata to Even Hovdhaugen, email, 16 Nov. 2005.

⁹³ Cf. Douglas, 'Encounters with the enemy', 52–5.

when more populous and easily approachable islands were available? Hilliard's preferred explanation, that Patteson was killed for unknowingly insulting the hierarchical order by presenting larger gifts to lower-ranking persons, resonates well with regional ethnographic themes. It is also supported in the version obtained by Forrest, the first European missionary to assume permanent residence in the Santa Cruz area. However, this explanation is difficult to corroborate or dispute through the other available sources, and it is therefore on a par with the revenge-for-blackbirding motive, as one among a number of hypotheses.

In our introduction, we pointed out two features ignored by previous authors: the conspicuous presence of the women in accounts derived from local informants, and the MM's peculiar choice of Nukapu. We address the second issue first. It is by no means uncommon for missions to choose small islands as bases for evangelising an area. The MM for instance established its summer school on Mota, one of the smallest of the Banks Islands. But in Vaeakau there are many tiny islands, and Nukapu was far from the obvious choice. Pileni, traditionally the most prestigious island, offers more promise as a stepping stone for the evangelisation of Santa Cruz, while both Matemâ and Nupani had the possible advantage of being more closely connected with Santa Cruz. The difficulty of landing on Nukapu, the low number of potential recruits, and the record of unsuccessful recruiting efforts there would logically discourage further visits. Did the good manners and dignified atmosphere reported from Patteson and Selwyn's first visit really outweigh the prospect of frequently being unable to reach this outpost? Given the MM's constant lack of resources and consequent inclination to pragmatism, we find this highly doubtful.

There are two other considerations that might lead to a complete reassessment. First, even though Teatule is identified as the murderer, most sources suggest that he acted on behalf of either part or whole of the community. When the *Southern Cross* approached, the people were on the alert. Consequently, Teatule appears more as an executioner than a wayward offender. Second, even though the bishop's company was attacked, he was evidently the primary target. And Patteson obviously foresaw the possibility that this could be his final visit to Nukapu. It is noteworthy that the Nukapu and Nupani versions mention nothing of hostilities toward the people in the dinghy.

But what reason could the Nukapuans have for animosity against Patteson, apart from his being white and therefore allegedly considered a suitable object for revenge against blackbirders? The only potential for conflict between the Mission and Nukapu would be the unrelenting appeals for young men to attend the Central School, which the people resisted while cunningly giving the impression that 'next time around...'. The missionaries offered prized gifts and were also known throughout the region to give fair deals in barter. This reputation would not have been lost on the Nukapuans, who were experienced traders. In addition, even though a few European traders cautiously travelled these seas, the barrier reef surrounding Nukapu would most likely dissuade them from landing. Consequently, the Nukapu people welcomed the Mission as a supplier of goods

while the pressure to reciprocate mounted. Demographic concerns were most likely behind their reluctance to grant the bishop his wish. It is unlikely that the island could sustain a population of much more than one hundred people. But given the division of labour according to gender, age and social stratification, the fewest people required to secure social reproduction is probably no less than fifty, which must include a certain number of able-bodied men. Open sea shark fishing for instance, still a key provider of protein, is physically very demanding. A canoe for this purpose requires a crew of four to five men, and several vessels were needed to secure the supply.

One answer to the question why could therefore simply be that Patteson was killed for nagging. Following the visits in 1856, 1857 and possibly in 1858, he mentions that the reception in 1859 was more reluctant, although without ‘unfriendliness’.⁹⁴ According to him, this change in atmosphere was due to the visit from Royal Navy investigators earlier that year. At this point, the people of Nukapu must have realised that the *Southern Cross* did not make their calls primarily to trade, but to take away young men. This posed a threat to the community’s survival. Were the people whom Patteson earlier had credited for their correctness and graceful behaviour, in 1859 sending a subtle message that they would allow no one to leave the island? In that case, they must have interpreted the *Southern Cross*’s absence the following six years as a sign that the message was taken. The probable landing in 1866 was not repeated. But then comes the 1870 visit, during which Patteson loses his patience: ‘I told them that they had seen on board many little fellows from many islands; that they need not fear to let their children go; that I could not spend time and property in coming every year and giving presents when they were unwilling to listen to what I said, but they only made unreal promises, put boys in the boat merely to take them out again.’⁹⁵ This is yet another message from the community, something Patteson apparently appreciates when berating them for their shrewdness and their unwillingness to reciprocate the MM’s generosity. But to the Nukapuans’ astonishment, he still returns the year after. They have communicated ever more distinctly that they have no one to spare, even being ready to relinquish the cherished trade in order to be left alone. Is violence the only language these people understand? Then so be it. The executioner is chosen and is standing by when the chief leaves his guest alone, thus washing his hands of the murder.

This explanation has a number of virtues. It also encompasses the blackbirding theory, without primarily endorsing the ‘revenge-for-kidnapping’ motive: the labour ships started recruiting in the Solomon Islands in 1870, and just one of them calling on Nukapu asking for men would certainly have further fuelled Nukapuan frustration. Killing Patteson would be an unequivocal signal to recruiters for evangelical and manual labour alike. But we would like to present one less immediately evident hypothesis that accounts for even more of

⁹⁴ Yonge, *Life*, vol. 1, 273.

⁹⁵ Yonge, *Life*, vol. 2, 309–10.

845 the unresolved or contradicting elements in the narratives concerning Patteson's death, while not negating the 'retaliation-against-nagging' motive.

The foundation for Polynesian hierarchy is the chief's embodiment of *mana*, sacred powers, and his consequent status as *tapu*, 'restricted', 'set apart', as he is the link between the secular and the divine.⁹⁶ This upholds the cosmological and social order but also makes these orders vulnerable to the counter-principle of *noa*, 'commonness', 'unrestrictedness',⁹⁷ which threatens the promise of fertility and prosperity guaranteed by the ritually untainted person of the chief. From Tikopia, Mota, Santa Isabel and a number of other islands in the region, we know that Anglican bishops very early were attributed chiefly powers by converts and pagans alike, with their *mana* from the Christian god in many cases encompassing that of the Polynesian gods and Melanesian sources of *mana*.⁹⁸ Although the MM had had limited contact with the area, as early as 1857 the people of Taumako called Bishop Selwyn 'Tangaroa', in Western Polynesian cosmology the creator god, while the chief in his turn was referred to as 'Bishop'.⁹⁹ The bishops were received as prominent men and rightful leaders of their seafaring people.

860 That Polynesians were prone to recognise the hierarchical order of high-church Anglicans should surprise no one. But what consequences would this perception of the bishop's person entail? It would limit his ability to interact with the general public and especially women, who were *noa*. Codrington mentions that on Nifiloli in the 1880s, with a culture and social organisation very similar to Nukapu's, 'the separation between [men and women] is complete; [they] are never out together; in the morning, the men go out first and come back, after that the women go out and fetch water, when they return the men go out again'.¹⁰⁰ The long-serving missionary and ethnographer Walter Ivens portrays the situation around 1900 thus: 'At Nifilole [*sic*] the men and women are never together in public, not even in the gardens or in performing any household work, and the absence of capable women teachers in the Reefs has proved a great hindrance [to Mission work].'¹⁰¹ These descriptions of a comparatively rigid separation of the sexes match Hovdhaugen's observations from Nukapu one century later: apart from one female informant, the women were virtually absent during his two days there. It is also supported by the general literature on Polynesian spatial organisation of gender.¹⁰²

875 A male guest on Nukapu is received on the shore and followed to the single men's house, *holau*, to rest and possibly spend the night. He would be

⁹⁶ Shore, 'Mana and Tapu', 144–8.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 150; Kirch *et al.*, *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia*, 240.

⁹⁸ See for instance Firth, *Rank and Religion in Tikopia*, 341–2; Firth, *Social Change*, 279; Geoffrey White, *Identity through history* (Cambridge 1991); Thorgeir S. Kolshus, *We, the Anglicans* (Oslo 2007), ch. 4.

⁹⁹ P. Kirch *et al.*, *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia*, 242; Roslyn Poignant, *Oceanic Mythology* (London 1967); *Report of the Melanesian Mission for 1858*, pages unnumbered.

¹⁰⁰ R.H. Codrington, *The Melanesians* (Oxford 1891), 233.

¹⁰¹ Walter G. Ivens, *Dictionary and grammar of the language of Sa'a and Ulawa, Solomon Islands* (Washington 1918), 246.

¹⁰² Howard and Borofsky, 'Social organization', 78–9.

880 accompanied by men, while boys and young men — never women — would
cater to his needs. But either explicitly or reading between the lines, according to
a number of sources, women were present in the vicinity of the house where
Patteson rested. And after the murder, Niuvai digs the grave and transports
the body, both highly unusual tasks for a woman. Today, women clean and
885 decorate the body and do the singing, wailing and cooking, but the rest is men's
work. This is also the procedure in all Polynesian societies from which we have
ethnographic records. On this occasion, Niuvai and possibly her friend Bekuma
assume the men's responsibility. We hold that Patteson had a special relationship
with the women on Nukapu, and in particular Niuvai who, according to the
890 Nupani narrative, was the wife of the paramount chief. Patteson's long-term
contact with one or a number of women challenged the patriarchal basis of the
society — even to the point where, according to the first Reef Islands version
from 1877, Armstrong's mission history, and also hinted in both contemporary
traditions, one or several women stood up against the leaders' decision to have
895 Patteson killed. Such insubordination must have vindicated the good sense in the
chief's ruling. Patteson's repeated visits undermined the politico-cosmological
equilibrium on the island.

We do not suggest that Patteson's relation with the Nukapu women was of a
carnal nature. Interaction between the *tapu* bishop and the *noa* women posed
900 a considerable dual threat: to the social order, by encouraging voluntary and
possibly egalitarian relations across hierarchical divides; and to the cosmological
order, by bringing two rigidly separated ritual domains into dangerous
proximity. Even if the bishop were not regarded as *tapu*, the uncusomary
contact with women constituted sufficient ground for action to contain such
905 harmful influence. The paramount chief may have had second thoughts at the
last moment, perhaps because of Niuvai's pleading, but could not or would not
save Patteson's life. Niuvai honoured their friendship by digging the grave and
decorating and transporting the body. These were acts of atonement by, to judge
from the 'indigenous countersigns', a remarkable woman, for her inability to save
910 a remarkable man.

ABSTRACT

The killing of the first Bishop of Melanesia, John Coleridge Patteson, in 1871, on tiny Nukapu
island in the Reef Islands of what today is the Temotu Province of Solomon Islands, is a central
event in the mission history of the Western Pacific and continues to be a key narrative within
915 Anglican Melanesia. In the standard explanations, Patteson's killing was retaliation for the alleged
kidnapping of five Nukapu men by labour traders. In the present paper, this interpretation is
questioned. By scrutinising written representations of the event, we endorse the argument that key
personnel of the Melanesian Mission used the incident in a political struggle against the labour
trade. By juxtaposing the various versions from published and archival sources with two
920 contemporary accounts, obtained during recent linguistic fieldwork on Nukapu proper and
elsewhere in Temotu, we identify what Bronwen Douglas has termed 'indigenous countersigns' and
suggest other explanations for the killing.