Chinese ghosts are hungry for good smells and the living placate them with sandalwood smoke. Drug trafficking was the harbinger of today's global system and, in the 1830s, one small Vanuatu girl was swept into this international trade in heady substances. The British, who had become hooked on caffeinated tea, had to purchase this in China. But Chinese tea traders scorned tawdry British manufactures. Instead they demanded silver and gold coin or bullion, although they would accept sandalwood and, later, shipments of opium. Sandalwood loggers briskly chopped away at Pacific forests, stripping the wood from Hawai‘i, and then Fiji for export to China. In 1825, one trader who called at Port Resolution noticed a man wearing a sandalwood ornament. When asked its origin, he pointed north toward Erromango Island. Traders during the late 1820s raced to the southern New Hebrides, seeking wood on Aneityum, Tanna, and especially Erromango. They ferried boatloads of Polynesians into the region to cut and carry the wood, paying them mostly in tobacco. This triangular trade of caffeine, nicotine, sandalwood and then opium swept four island children into its whirlwind. It dropped one, Elau, a six-year old girl, back down to earth in Plymouth, England.

In 1829, George Bennett, a twenty-five-year-old and freshly credentialed doctor and a new Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, embarked on the sailing ship Sophia heading to New South Wales. Bennett, who would later in Australia make a distinguished career as a physician and natural scientist, and the honorary secretary of Sydney’s Australian Museum, was cagey when writing about that voyage. Sophia, in fact, was a convict transport. Beneath its decks the ship carried 192 Irish prisoners sentenced to penal transportation to Australia. Sophia with her convicts reached Sydney in the midst of the sandalwood rush. Sydney’s waterfront buzzed with news that the southern New Hebrides boasted of virgin stands of the wood. Fortunes might be made if these could be exploited. Sydney trader Samuel Henry, born on Tahiti where his father William was a London Missionary Society preacher, chartered Sophia to find and load up sandalwood.
Convict transports were ideal in that Polynesian island woodcutters, hired on the cheap, could fill those emptied convict berths. Captain Thomas Elley and crew, including the ship’s surgeon Bennett, set to sea heading for the aromatic forests of Tanna and Erromango.

Sandalwood trees grow to about ten meters tall, typically in mountainous regions. Aromatic oils are best in trees that are at least thirty years old. Harvesters like to dig these out whole instead of chopping them down, in that the marketable, long-lasting oils saturate roots as well as the trunks and branches. Prospectors had little luck trading for wood at Port Resolution, or down on Anéityum Island. On Erromango, however, they found thick sandalwood stands. Erromangans themselves, however, were hardly interested to climb mountains, uproot trees, and muscle wood down to the seashore. Standard offers of tobacco, knives, cloth, and other trade goods failed to induce them to work. Moreover, incoming flows of foreign goods, including guns, and raging epidemics of unfamiliar disease, had unsettled island political alliances and people hesitated to leave their home territories.

Sophia in search of cheap labor, sailed first to the east to load up crews of Polynesian loggers. These Islanders, already hooked on nicotine, would work for twists of tobacco soaked in molasses. In August 1829, Sophia landed ninety-five Tongan loggers on Erromango. The ship was loaded with a cargo of sandalwood already harvested by a previous party of woodcutters and headed north to Hawai‘i to market the wood. Sailing south to the New Hebrides, Sophia raced against a small fleet of competitors. These included the ship of a company of British investors, and two ships belonging to high chief Boki, governor of O‘ahu. Chief Boki, and his flagship Kamehameha, sank at sea along the way to Erromango. Hawaiian forests had already been denuded of the wood and, rapacious for cash, Boki sought to secure a new sandalwood source. He brought along his private militia, planning to conquer Erromango for the Kingdom of Hawai‘i.

On the way back to Erromango, Sophia stopped again in Rotuma to load another 213 woodcutters. When the ship again reached Erromango in March 1830, the island was overrun with bickering logging crews, including 179 Hawaiians, 313 Rotumans, and 113 Tongans. Erromangans themselves were riled by this invasion although some hoped to convince the logging parties to help them smite inland rivals, or at least lend them a few guns. Many were sick, too. The foreign ships had brought ashore a raging dysentery that rapidly went epidemic. This sandalwooding turmoil, nine years later, would trigger missionaries Williams and Harris’ fatal reception at Dillons Bay—first spit upon and then killed. Faced with island chaos, trader Henry and Sophia’s Captain Elley decided to cut their
losses. They loaded up the crew of Polynesian loggers with whatever sandalwood was already gathered and sailed away to land at Rotuma and Tonga. *Sophia* then turned west back into the New Hebrides, calling at Port Resolution, before circumnavigating home to Britain via Manila and Singapore.

When *Sophia* sailed from Erromango with the woodcutters, four island children followed them onboard. A Tongan party, camped somewhere along the southern shore of Cook’s Bay, south of Traitors Head, claimed to have rescued these three boys and one girl from their Erromangan neighbors. They were, so they said, convinced that the children were war captives, soon to be killed and eaten. This may be. Nineteenth-century missionaries, sandalwood traders, and even Polynesian woodcutters all firmly believed in New Hebrides cannibalism. As on Tanna, though, people lovingly nurture, foster, and freely adopt children. They don’t eat them. Families may adopt a child to take the place of someone killed, in war or otherwise, and it is possible that people had this in mind. They, it seemed, were deeply anxious to retrieve the captured children, but the Tongans refused to give them back, not even for the most valuable presents they could offer.”

Bennett guessed that Elau, the girl, was about six years old. The three boys were around six, seven, and nine. Only one of the boys comes down to us named, as Mungo. This was a jokey nickname the British liked to give black men and boys, after a character in *The Padlock*, a popular, long-running 1768 London opera that featured white actors in blackface. Elau, though, was an Erromangan name. Bennett came to call her Sophia Elau after his convict transport and sandalwooding ship.

When *Sophia* offloaded its woodcutters at Rotuma, Captain Elley planned to dump the four Erromangan children on that island, too. The three boys went ashore but Elau lingered behind, playing with the ship’s monkey, when a sudden brisk wind blew up. *Sophia* previously had to be winched off a Rotuman reef and Elley wanted no more problems. He briskly weighed anchor and away *Sophia* sailed with Elau still on board. *Sophia* first made land, however, back in the New Hebrides, at Port Resolution. Why didn’t the ship detour the fifty miles north to Cook’s Bay and bring Elau home? *Sophia* paused only at Port Resolution for several days to resupply. Tannese mothers, coming onboard, immediately took pity on Elau. They brought their own children to play with her, along with gift baskets of yam and sugarcane. One old woman took charge of Elau, staying by her side on the poop deck, feeding her until *Sophia* weighed anchor for Manila.

Young George Bennett, “under whose special care the child had been placed,” was keen to make his name as a collector of exotic specimens. He already had
pickled in a large jar a “pearly” nautilus, fished up along the western coast of Erromango. When Sophia reached Singapore, he purchased a gibbon that he named Ungka. Bennett also must have guessed that an exotic South Seas child could inflame the interest of London’s natural scientists and, perhaps, even its high society. When Sophia blew away from Rotuma, thus, “arrangements were made with the commander to take [Elau] to England.” Sailing out from Port Resolution, Elau could clearly see her Erromangan home receding on the northern horizon. She landed, instead, in Britain.

London offered popular stages where the exotic and the newly colonized could be exhibited. Elau joined a growing procession of world travelers who found a way to that city, willingly or not. James Cook, before landing on Tanna, invited Omai (Mai), a young Polynesian from Huahine, onto his expedition’s second ship. Omai disembarked in London on Adventure to great acclaim. He met George III and Queen Charlotte. Joshua Reynolds painted his portrait. He inspired a stage play. He toured great houses with Joseph Banks, his scientific patron, demonstrating to sundry lords and ladies the Oceanic art of earth oven cookery. Other Islanders followed his lead, including Prince Lee Boo of Palau in 1784. Governor Boki and his wife Liliha, too, along with King Kamehameha II (Liholiho) and his half-sister Queen Kamāmalu, visited London in 1824, just a few years before Boki’s botched invasion of sandalwooded Erromango. Cook would bring Omai home to Huahine on his third and final Pacific voyage. Liholiho, Kamāmalu, and Lee Boo were less lucky. All died of measles or smallpox after a few months breathing London’s fetid atmosphere.

Elau, Bennett would have known, would be the first native visitor from Cook’s New Hebrides. He promoted her arrival there as a scientific opportunity, just as he publicized his pearly nautilus and his gibbon. Elau wasn’t Vanuatu’s first trans-Pacific voyager, however. Two centuries earlier, in 1606, Portuguese navigator Pedro Fernandes de Queirós anchored in Espiritu Santo’s Big Bay where he kidnapped three young boys. At least one of these, Queirós’ missionary priests baptized him Pablo, came ashore in Acapulco. Pablo, who looked to be about eight years old, would die in Mexico six months later, in May 1607. Elau’s travels, though, outdistanced Pablo’s. She left the Pacific behind, sailed across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, and up the coasts of Africa and Europe to London.

Bennett, as natural scientist and collector, recorded Elau’s travels in a curious mix of paternalistic and scientific styles. He could be cool, even detached. While Sophia was still at sea, Bennett measured his child specimen. Elau was three feet, four inches tall; the length of her sternum was four-and-a-half inches; the
length from the ensiform cartilage of the sternum to the crest of the pubis was ten-and-a-half inches; the breadth of the thorax was four-and-a-half inches; and so forth. But Bennett also could be affectionate, even fatherly, especially after he purchased Ungka the gibbon in Singapore whose bodily proportions, like Elau’s, he also measured. Bennett was particularly amused by Elau’s love of Ungka, the animal with his long arm round her neck, lovingly eating biscuit together. She would lead him about by his long arms, like an elder leading a younger child; and it was the height of the grotesque to witness him running round the capstan, pursued by, or pursuing the child. . . . Not unfrequently, a string being tied to his leg, the child would amuse herself by dragging the patient animal about the deck.¹

Home in England in spring 1831, Bennett gave his pickled, pearly nautilus to the Royal College of Surgeons. The young Richard Owen, who later would become a celebrated natural scientist inventing the word “dinosaur,” dissected this. He reported on the poor thing’s guts in a surprisingly popular and well-received *Memoir on the Pearly Nautilus*. In these years just before Charles Darwin’s celebrated voyage on the *Beagle*, the nautilus featured as one of the first living fossils, and Owen’s nautilus dissection boosted Bennett’s own fame as its collector.

Ungka regrettably died when *Sophia* was in sight of the English coast. Bennett, while still at sea, busily dissected the gibbon’s corpse later giving its intestines and various innards to the Royal College. He saved the skin and skeleton, though, and had the animal “properly stuffed and preserved in its natural erect attitude.” He donated the newly taxidermied Ungka “to one of the glass cases of the British Museum, where he was eventually deposited.”² Ungka, too, attracted much attention, not as a living fossil but as another missing link in the early years of budding evolutionary imagination.

And Elau, was she a missing link, too? A young cannibal savage from the lowest rungs of human evolution? Bennett introduced the girl to scientific society at a *conversazione* convened at the Royal Institute. The gathered scholars peered and poked and “examined the child’s head, which they pronounced remarkably well formed and the brain quite up to the average.” Elau, Bennett wrote,

although it was the first time that she had ever entered a large room splendidly lighted and filled with company, she did not for a moment manifest the slightest shyness or fear, but left me and mingled with the crowd, and permitted all of those who were attracted by her novel appearance to speak to her, was very affable with them, and would then walk about the room
inspecting the exhibits, some of which were from her native island. When placed on the table by Professor [Michael] Faraday for the inspection of the ethnologists who were present, she was also fearless, and appeared to be highly amused at the interest she excited.²

Bennett also showed Elau off at society parties hosted by writers, playwrights, actors, and artists. Several of these latter drew her portrait including Frederick Tatham, friend and eventual executor of the romantic poet and his fellow artist William Blake. Tatham published a lithograph of Elau’s portrait “drawn from life,” captioned “The Young Cannibal” (figure 4). This, dubiously, claimed that she wore a necklace of human teeth.

Bennett proposed further scientific experimentation with Elau. Could she, he wondered, be schooled? Might a savage be civilized? Elau, child of cannibals, “cannot fail of exciting much interest amongst those who engage in hypotheses in regard to the question whether savages are capable of mental improvement and civilisation.” Elau “was like a new creation, upon which all were anxious to try the effects of civilisation and education.”³ These were no idle questions in the 1830s, in both Britain and America. Few children except from the wealthiest families received any elementary education at all, apart from occasional Sunday schooling, and there was grave doubt whether public money would be well-spent educating poor and working class youth. But Bennett had many Quaker friends, in Plymouth and in London, and he was influenced by their liberal proposals to establish a system of state-supported primary schools. If Elau could be civilized, then so might the young denizens of London’s slums.

In pursuit of his project, Bennett brought Elau to Plymouth, his hometown, where he left her with his older sister Caroline. Caroline improved Elau’s English. Already she had picked up Pacific Nautical Pidgin English, ancestor to Vanuatu’s Bislama, from sandalwood cutters and from island sailors, the crew on the Sophia. Elau next learned to read. She entertained guests with her dancing. Caroline also taught Elau needlework and the Christian virtues. She also drew Elau’s portrait. In this, doe-eyed and slightly smiling, Elau looks out into her new world.

Bennett, before Caroline’s refining efforts might be fully proved, once again sailed away. Just about a year after leaving Elau in Plymouth, in May 1832, he disappeared again for New South Wales. Before departing, he promised Elau that one day he would take her home. Bennett wrote little of this paternal abandonment, although he praised Elau’s affectionate disposition, her considerable intellectual powers, and her gentle patience. His Plymouth friend, the Quaker author Anna Marie Hall, who wrote up Elau’s story for the Juvenile Forget-Me-Not, an
early children’s annual, revealed a bit more. Elau didn’t want Bennett to leave her, and she didn’t want to return to Erromango, either. She suffered “great grief” and regret when Bennett abandoned her.

School

Nowadays, of course, schooling is unavoidable, mandatory even, if children are to make a life within pitiless global systems. Young cannibals, so they be, are everywhere. We are far beyond Bennett’s rudimentary experiment to turn savage into sophisticate. Children today absolutely must be schooled into adulthood. Elementary education systems spread in the 1840s, in Europe as in America. Missionaries, too, who arrived and stuck on Tanna in the late 1860s, established
their own schools to teach reading, writing, and some arithmetic in amongst religious lessons. A century later, the Condominium colonial government also recognized the benefits, and accepted the duty, of educating at least some island children. The British administration fitfully supported many former mission schools, and the French by the 1970s were busy building their own system in hopes of cultivating young cadres of French speakers less committed to national independence or to English.

Most Tannese children make it through at least a few years of elementary education—attending junior and then senior primary schools. In the late 1970s, Samaria’s weekdays were cleared of most of its children. The younger ones every morning wandered down the ridge trail to attend Iquaramanu Junior Primary School on the valley floor, in Nepraineteta, the “Body of the Canoe.” A few walked the longer road to the free French school at Iamanuapen. Their older siblings disappeared Sundays evenings and only reappeared late Friday afternoons, boarding during the week at the English or French senior primary schools at White Sands, too far away for daily treks. Fathers, every dusk, gloomily contemplated their unprocessed kava roots, forced to chew and mix these themselves—their sons, helpful dogsbodies, far away at school. Most children, though, returned home for good after six years tutelage. There were in the 1970s no high schools on Tanna. Very few scholars, from Samaria or elsewhere, aced qualifying exams or had families who could scrape together the school fees required to pass into secondary school.

As did Elau, Tanna’s school kids struggle with challenges of learning to speak, read, and write English or French, languages alien to most of their parents. Schools still offer the same smatterings of arithmetic, exercise and dance, and snippets of moral education as Caroline taught Elau. Children come to school knowing some Bislama, and they quickly soak up more of this during recesses from classwork, even though they, and their teachers, until recently were firmly commanded not to use Vanuatu’s lingua franca. English or French workbooks, drawing, and much rote repetition fill dusty, thatched classrooms. Back home in Samaria, though, few children speak much English or French. Parents choose to hedge their educational bets. They send some children to English schools and some to French, so siblings speak Nafe with one another with occasional playful bouts of Bislama.

Independent Vanuatu’s Ministry of Education has struggled to combine the colonial British and French systems. Students today may attend several new high schools on Tanna. Others go to church schools and seminaries. Some, like my friend Pita’s youngest son Reuben, matriculated at the national Teachers College
in Port Vila to become teachers themselves. Young village women earn a pit-
tance as *kinda* (kindergarten) schoolmams, offering a rudimentary preschool 
program. Peace Corps recruits and other youthful metropolitans volunteer their 
pedagogic services. But educational plans for suitable technological, agricultural, 
or hospitality/tourism training (Elau’s needlework), for culturally appropriate 
pedagogy and curricula, even for teaching in the vernaculars, have come and 
gone. Mission and colonial roots still nourish much of today’s educational sub-
stance and practice.

Like Bennett’s pedagogic anticipations for Elau, island parents nonetheless 
are increasingly anxious that their children succeed in school. With the collapse 
of copra markets and the dilapidation of Tanna’s coconut plantations, how is 
one anymore to make a living? New flows of tourists help and entrepreneurs 
by the score have thrown up bungalows, enticing visitor cash. Some of the very 
farsighted have purchased gallon containers of sandalwood cuttings hoping, in 
30 or so more years, to harvest that fragrant wood for which the Chinese 
still pay big money. A good government job with a fortnightly paycheck, or one 
in a Port Vila bank, hotel, or store, offers another sort of future. But these jobs 
demand winning papers—qualifications and diplomas. Fewer than half of island 
children make it into high school. And fewer still study in regional universities. 
When they do, education at all levels costs money that many families do not 
have. Although the government has eliminated most tuition and school fee pay-
ments, parents constantly are on the hook for donations and subscriptions that 
deresourced schools desperately need. Schools, too, are sharks. Parents of 
secondary school students struggle exceedingly to scrape together regular tuition 
and room and board fees. Lucky that local group members and extended family 
are obligated to try to contribute. I chip in, too, when I can.

A generation ago, families with a smart and lucky child who was selected to 
attend secondary school sent one or two additional children up to Port Vila to 
scratch up any sort of job to help pay their sibling’s school fees. In recent years, 
entire families migrate to Vila’s fringe of urban settlements, seeking money and 
to enroll their children in urban schools. They hope these will provide a clearer 
road to success than do schools back home on the island.

**Where Are You Going?**

Elau’s education in Plymouth comprised Christian ethics and courtesies. On 
Tanna, a century or so ago, mission schooling and travels abroad encouraged 
persons to bend their customary greetings to fit a novel etiquette. They began
to salute one another with wishes of “good morning,” (ramasan ianepnepen, it is good, in morning), “good sunlight,” and “good twilight.” The traditional and still usual greeting is ikuwaku? (where are you going?). People on the move command endless interest. What’s their project? Where’s the hurry? All want to know the geoposition of everyone, always. Those who move in secret, in darkness, provoke deep suspicion; up to no good, they well may be. The polite response to “where are you going?” is to tell.

Should someone drop off the grid, nerves fray. My neighbor Natu once managed miraculously to disappear entirely for three days. No one knew where she had gone. Natu was in her late twenties, still unmarried, overworked, and a bit grumpy. I figured she needed some personal respite. Solitude, however, is hardly imaginable on Tanna, and the neighborhood instead feared the worse of her disappearance. People rushed to the grave of her grandmother, dead some few months earlier, and poked it full of holes. In these holes, they poured infusions of leaves while honking frantically on triton shell trumpets. Grandma’s spirit, perhaps, was lonely on the other side, in the other world, and she might have returned to snatch up some younger company. No one, except me, was much surprised when Natu wandered back home to say that she had been pulled away by a spirit. She was up the mountain when the spirit figure took her by the arm and led her higher toward lofty Mount Meren. The Great Spirit Karupenumun, maybe, since this indeed is his mountain aerie. Natu titillated her audience, huddled closely about, admitting that she had even cooked dinner for him. Cook for a spirit, everyone knows, and one also has sex with him.

Where are you going? Travel is good so long as you can be tracked. Travel brings wisdom; it offers gravitas; and it boosts prestige. The Tannese are profoundly anchored to their home grounds by their personal names and by the bones of their ancestors, yet they much appreciate stepping out into the world when opportunity permits. In Elau’s day, a few already had joined the crews of passing whaling and sandalwood ships. Beginning in the 1860s and throughout the rest of that century, thousands of men and numerous women left Tanna to work on sugarcane plantations and other colonial enterprises in Australia. Hundreds more shipped off to Fiji and Samoa. From 1942 to 1946, during the Pacific War, nearly every able-bodied man journeyed to Efate Island to labor there at freshly constructed US military bases.

Elau was the first of these world travelers and she went farther than most. Island travel today is largely circumscribed by Vanuatu’s boundaries. My old research colleague James Gwero once catalogued the few roads that lead abroad: sports, the church, and education. Most Tannese only manage to travel as far
as Port Vila’s settlements. Unlike Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, or Micronesia, Vanuatu’s colonial history left open few doors to go farther. A small number of ni-Vanuatu have migrated to Norway, France, Vermont, and Oregon, mostly by marrying Peace Corps volunteers or other overseas visitors. Only in recent years do Islanders once again travel abroad to New Zealand or Australia to take up temporary agricultural employment. “Apple,” people call this, in that most are set to work picking New Zealand’s annual apple, pear, and kiwi harvests, pruning grape vines, or working in fruit-packing houses. The experience abroad and the banked cash are worth it. Travelers return home with pockets of money that they invest in family projects. The host governments are careful, too, that no temp worker disappears or overstays. Should someone die, in Port Vila or abroad, friends and family strive to pool funds to airfreight the body back to Tanna. People happily may wander; not so their spirits who the island calls home.

Elau did not come home. She died of intestinal tuberculosis, ten years old, on 6 June 1834. Her spirit haunts Plymouth still. Bennett had recently returned, the month before, from his second trip to New South Wales. If he reunited with Elau before her final, deadly toil, he failed to note this. He did, however, quickly arrange for his surgeon friend Peter Bellamy to autopsy her cadaver. And, as with his likewise dead specimen Ungka the gibbon, he coolly reported the clinical results of this at the same time as he memorialized Elau’s gentle, loving character. Plymouth newspapers published her obituary. A week after she died, Vicar John Mathew of Saint Andrew’s Church conducted a funeral. Whether Bennett attended this, he never said.

In 1834, Saint Andrew’s original burying ground was crowded and Elau was laid to rest in a subsidiary graveyard in nearby Westwell Street. This, too, was closed in 1879 and scraps of its disinterred bodies and retrievable headstones were moved to a larger cemetery away from Plymouth’s city center. Tombstone inscriptions, those still readable, were recorded but none was found that honored Elau. In 1941, Nazi bombers blew Saint Andrews Church and Westwell Street into smithereens. After the war, the church was rebuilt and a new civic center was erected over the old cemetery grounds.

I traveled once myself, seeking remains of Bennett’s specimens. London’s Royal College of Surgeons is there, in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Richard Owen’s dissection of the pearly nautilus left enough of its corpse, and the living fossil’s pickled body is on display in the college’s Hunterian Museum. Ungka the gibbon, possible missing link, no longer beguiles visitors to the British Museum. He has been demoted from glass display case to backroom shelving where his withered, moth-eaten and tattered skin sleeps in darkness. In coastal Plymouth, Saint
Andrews Church is rebuilt. But Caroline Bennett’s house on Cobourg Street, where young cannibal Sophia Elau was schooled into an English childhood, has vanished, its site an empty lot. I walked around to the civic center building under which Elau once was buried. I spat on the sidewalk.

Notes


Further Readings

*Sandalwood Trade*


*Boki of Hawai‘i*


*Sophia Elau*
