Tanna Times
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CHAPTER 5

Mary

Elau sailed out of the Pacific. Other young women not many years later sailed into it. Elau traveled to Plymouth, England, to die of tuberculosis. Soon enough, missionaries and other visitors would bring the disease, and Bibles, direct to Elau’s motherland. First to come were traveling Scots.

A century of highland land clearances and the great potato famine of the 1840s propelled thousands to emigrate to lowland cities, or to North America and Australasia. Mary Johnston, in 1837, was born into one such nomadic family that found refuge in Pictou, a lonely immigrant outpost on Nova Scotia. The Johnstons were dissenting Presbyterians. These Covenanters spurned the established Church of Scotland, partly in furious objection to the autocratic rights of rich landowners to appoint their ministers. The nineteenth century’s several great awakenings stirred up new global commitments. Christian revivals propelled fervid evangelical crusades to save dissipated denizens of urban slums and the oblivious heathen of far-flung Pacific Islands. Impassioned young men and women journeyed forth from Scotland. Backwoods Pictou, too, celebrated its similar faith and devotion by contributing its own children to missionary enterprises.

Mary’s uncle John Geddie, her mother’s brother, was one of the first missionaries to settle anywhere in the New Hebrides. He set up shop on Aneityum in 1848. His wife, Mary’s aunt Charlotte, was the first white woman in the New Hebrides. John Williams’ and James Harris’ notorious murders on Erromango attracted passionate Christian attention to the place. A stream of Presbyterian volunteers from Scotland, Nova Scotia, and New Zealand followed the Geddies to the islands, moving into mission outposts on Aneityum, Tanna, and Erromango Islands first established in the 1840s by the London Missionary Society’s Polynesian teachers, or by Geddie’s own Aneityum converts. New Hebrides mission reinforcements swelled from 1857 to 1859 with the arrival of Joseph Copeland, John Paton, John Matheson, Samuel Johnston, and George Gordon, all save Copeland with new wives tagging along. Presbyterian policy favored
couples. Mission wives kept house, shared God’s word with island women, and scrutinized husbandly dealings with these.

Newlywed Mary, after a voyage of seven months via Liverpool, Sydney, Tahiti, Cook Islands, and Samoa, in 1858 stood coughing on Aneityum’s Anelgauhat beach with her tenderfoot, also coughing, missionary husband John Matheson (figure 5). The young couple had set forth from distant Pictou, Nova Scotia, itself optimistically called a “colonial Zion.” One of seven siblings, Mary’s parents put her to work at sixteen, teaching children in one of the new common schools then popping up in the colony. Her spinster years were blustery, at least in her imagination. Her unsettled emotions seesawed back and forth between ecstatic highs and depressive and guilty lows. Mary filled dozens of diary pages lamenting her levity and the number of her sins: “What anger, falsehood, and evil lusts are in me!” Lord, “I am filthy, and vilely degraded by sin; a child of Satan.”1 She promised to give up dancing, and yet she still wickedly danced. She promised devoted, co-dependent love with Lord Jesus if only he would save her from weakness and depravity. Her family and friends, rather, found her perceptive, sweet, cheerful, and petite.

After several years of teaching school, Mary took to her bed during the winter of 1857, debilitated by tuberculosis then endemic in British colonies. She wrote in her diary that the Lord in his great mercy had been pleased to afflict her—sooner dead, sooner transported to blessed heaven. Recovered instead by that spring, she married the also tubercular John Matheson who, with a new missionary license from the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board, only needed to find a wife to be on his way to the mission field. The fatal bacilli probably found him at the Presbyterian Seminary where he had studied since 1850. Not very bright, it seems, John was at least steady, and possessed of “a true Scottish dourness.” This bent him toward saving the heathen abroad. Nova Scotia’s scattered, insignificant, immigrant communities didn’t yet offer much in the way of the urbanely depraved. Despite a “hectic” flush on his cheek, “his heart was among the heathen.”2

Mary and John married in October 1857. She was twenty and he was twenty-five. A month later, they boarded a steamer in Halifax heading for Liverpool and then the South Seas. Busy farewell meetings with family and friends bid them adieu. Doctors before and along the way warned the consumptive couple to hole up and rest, yet they kept on their beeline to the New Hebrides. Perhaps a warm, tropical climate might assuage their condition. They should have known that these islands already were much devastated by European diseases. John and Mary, two tuberculosis vectors, would contribute to the epidemic calamities.
Mary, immediately homesick, initiated a stream of letters she mailed to family and friends. On the way to Sydney, she reported that she was reading fellow Scottish Presbyterian David Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels*, sewing, and tossing off heartfelt poems. One of these, “Emily, or ‘Looking to Jesus,’” celebrated a young mother who watches her only daughter expire in blessed rapture. After a few months pause in Sydney, the Mathesons boarded the LMS’ *John Williams*, which circled South Pacific Islands, dropping off missionaries along the way, before making land at Aneityum in July 1858. Mary reunited happily with Uncle John Geddie and Aunt Charlotte. She also met the Inglises, the other mission
couple on Aneityum, whom she found “thoroughly Scotch.” The natives, though, were “not such a fine race as on some of the other islands, but they seem manageable and affectionate.”3 She much admired local women’s modest dress and, if island language sounded odd, it was pretty. Geddie, when he met his new nephew-in-law, wrote nervously about John’s health. Mary kept up her diary: Oh God, “keep me from secret faults, and all presumptuous sins.” A favorite word “cumberer” marked many of her written prayers and contemplations. She must not be a hindrance, a burden.

Given grave worries about the Mathesons’ condition and the expected arrival of additional missionaries Copeland, Paton, and Johnston, Geddie counseled John and Mary to delay throwing themselves into the work. Everyone boarded John Williams for a tour of mission outposts on Futuna, Aniwa, and Tanna where Geddie had placed trained Aneityumese converts, and Dillons Bay, Erromango, where fellow missionary George Gordon had already settled. The ship called at Port Resolution where the party purchased from “the chief” a land plot once occupied by LMS missionaries George Turner and Henry Nisbet from 1842 to 1843. Geddie preached, in Aneityumese, to a group of seventy or so of the curious.

In late October 1858, despite their colleagues’ worried concerns, Mary and John sailed to Umairarekar passage near the southern tip of Tanna. John Paton and Samuel Johnston, when they arrived, would take over the Port Resolution station about fourteen miles to the north. In 1839, missionary John Williams, before his martyrdom on Erromango, had left three young Samoans, Lalolangi, Mose, and Salamea, behind at Port Resolution to begin Christian instruction at the harbor. The LMS would land another twenty of these teachers from Samoa, Raratonga, and the Cook Islands until the Presbyterians arrived in 1858. More than half of these Polynesian missionaries, some with wives and children, did not survive for long at Port Resolution, their lives cut short by raging epidemics or by angry Tannese who blamed them for bringing unfamiliar diseases to the island.

Islanders during the mission’s first two decades learned Christian beliefs and practices from these Polynesian teachers, and later Presbyterian missionaries built on their work. They left behind one new hamlet place name—Isamoa—where their houses once stood. Subsequent European missionaries borrowed Atua, their Samoan word for “god,” and also gendered seating arrangements during Christian services with men on one side and women and children on the other. In the south, where the Mathesons landed, teachers from Aneityum had likewise attempted to convert people living around Anuikaraka for several
years, and John and Mary brought more Aneityumese converts with them, as
servants, along with salt pork, chickens, goats, and lumber for a 15 x 40-foot
three-room house. Local chief Kati agreed to host them. Living under his wing,
the Christian party and its supplies boosted his prestige, particularly vis-à-vis
his political rival Iaresi.

During the next six months at Umairareker, John built his house, then
a church, and started a fitful Bible school while trying to learn the Nafe lan-
guage. Writing to her brother, Mary showed off some new words: *baran* (*pran,
woman) and *lamar-sin* (*ramasan, it is good*). Concluding the letter, though, she
reported that “three big Tannese” were watching her write, “jabbering among
themselves.” Nafe was still babble. She lent them scissors to trim their beards.
John’s beginning scholars learned the English alphabet although his outland-
ish schoolbooks made them uneasy. Mary, too, began teaching village girls and
women to sew even though she was short of useable material. Young women
popped in to see her once in a while to give her hugs. Too tired for much hard
work, lucky she was “not required to do it.” Those Christian Aneityum Island
servants cleared and swept.

John reported that his church attracted about 150 Tannese who attended Sun-
day services, although these were mostly women and children. Curious, villagers
checked out the missionaries and their novel rituals. At night, John fired up a
magic lantern, projecting scenes from Bible stories, to astonish and captivate his
new neighbors. The Mathesons’ quick celebrity, however, began to wane. Find-
ing Chief Kati increasingly unhelpful, John and Mary tried instead to cozy up
with Iaresi, but he left them behind to cut sandalwood on Erromango.

During John and Mary’s time on Tanna, widespread outbreaks of mysterious
illnesses, new and nasty, baffled the Tannese. Sustained Western contact with
the island began in the 1820s as sandalwooders, whalers, and then missionar-
ies sailed into Port Resolution. Overseas vessels by then were common visitors.
Every new ship carried alien microbes, and some of these escaped ashore to infect
village after village where people lacked immunity to European scourges. People
put two and two together. They connected the newly arrived missionaries with
intensifying waves of illness and death sweeping their villages.

Local suspicion deepened when the missionaries themselves began to die.
Mrs. Paton was the first to perish in early March 1859 after six months at Port
Resolution. Her baby son expired two weeks later. Paton buried both and he
stood sentry over their graves, guarding against sneaky cannibal body snatchers.
Down south at Kwamera, John also was sick. Neighbor villagers, too, sank under
a series of previously unknown ailments. The Mathesons retreated to Aneityum
for rest and a cure. Mary lamented village suspicions: “After Mr. Matheson became ill, many of them left off attending church, and became very distant to us. They are very superstitious, and fancy when they are ill, that some person must have caused their sickness.” These fancies, of course, were entirely accurate.

On Aneityum, Mary and John recovered although slowly. John suffered more. “Large abscesses formed on the back of his head and neck, which for a time affected his brain. He lost his hearing and his memory to a great extent, and probably his other mental powers were affected.” Still, by August of that year, he was agitating to return to Tanna. His mission colleagues sensibly refused his demands and he “became alienated from his brethren.” They sent him instead to a quiet Aneityum outstation where friendly converts could look after him and where “his sickness would not produce the unfavourable impression that it did among the Tannese.” Two young Tannese lived there, too, and John and Mary chased after them for more Nafe language instruction. Mary tended to John. She taught women more sewing. She spent time with her nineteen-year-old cousin Charlotte Geddie. And she wandered the wildly beautiful woods, gathering orchids beneath immense trees covered with creepers and lianas. All the while, she kept a written inventory of her manifold unworthiness, begging God’s divine mercy on an undeserving rebel. Of herself, she did not think “so vile a creature walks the earth.” Mary’s occasional happiness was tinged always with undercurrents of sorrow. Sweet beauty, she wrote, lie beyond her grasp given the stubborn residue of filth, corruption, and vileness that blackened her heart.

In late 1859, most of the Geddie children left the Aneityum mission for a respite in Canada, and the Inglises sailed for England to arrange publication of the translated Bible in Aneityumese, taking along with them island pundit Williamu. With fewer caretakers available, Mary and John left, too, for Dillons Bay, Erromango. Here, they joined fellow Nova Scotians George and Ellen Gordon in their mission house, high on the hill above the harbor. From the Gordon’s house, Mary could look across the island and spy the cloudy peak of Cook’s volcanic Traitors Head, looming over Elau’s native territory. In February, an obliging Erromangan brought in a fleshless skull that he identified as belonging to the unfortunate James Harris who, along with John Williams, had been bashed on the beach below two decades before. Mary didn’t record what they did with this mortal relic. Instead, she fancied that puffy trade wind clouds floating above might carry her thoughts back home to Nova Scotia, to her mother, her dear Ma. She wondered if Pictou had yet experienced the global Christian revival then stirring Evangelicals. Mary prayed God to fill her, too, with the Holy Spirit. John, meanwhile, dosed himself with cod liver oil. He recovered enough energy
to print some school manuals in English and Nafe on Gordon’s hand press. Both Mathesons continued to cough.

Tubercular symptoms can come and go, and John felt healthy enough to agitate once more for a return to Tanna in April 1860. Back at Umairarekar, only a handful of Tannese resumed church going. Most remained hostile, telling Mary that they hated Jehovah and his worship. Their desire for trade goods grew, though. Many men had acquired steel axes. Some had traded pigs for muskets. Already they were addicted to tobacco. John and Mary traded fishhooks, beads, and red cloth for garden food. Men were fond of tying up their hair with strips of the cloth. The Mathesons returned in the middle of Tanna’s yam harvest season, and the crop was abundant enough that year for people to circumcise their sons and arrange other exchange ceremonies. Then, as often today, these culminate in all-night dancing. Mary was no fan of the celebrations suspecting that they were another cause of rampant illness: “They spend a great part of their time in dancing and singing their heathen songs, &c., and many make themselves quite ill with dancing, shouting, &c.” Her village neighbors, nonetheless, honoring island hospitality invited her to come along to one of these fetes, “to see them feasting and dancing.”

Even more villagers, though, died throughout late 1860 and 1861. One promising convert lost his wife (although he permitted her a Christian burial). Aneityumese teacher Nohaot, who had close kin connections to Kwamera, died. His namesake, young son of local chief Namaka, also died in August. Mary bemoaned the deaths of six other children with whom she had played and shared Jesus stories. A “promising young man” died of tuberculosis. Seeking a healthier prospect, John took apart their seaside house. He hired Islanders to drag the framing, roof, and walls up Imoa hill, and rebuilt it there.

Things went from bad to worse with the outbreak of a widespread measles epidemic in November 1860, affecting all the southern islands. Dead bodies became too numerous to bury. Missionaries estimated village death rates as high as 50 percent. The virus for some reason killed more adults in their prime than it did children or the elderly. “The mortality is so great in some places that many persons are left lying here and there on the earth unburaed, or the door of the house is closed and the dead body left to decay with the house.” John blamed a trading ship for bringing measles to Kwamera. But he had volunteered Kapuku, his best pupil, when the traders had requested that he send some local chief onboard to receive the usual token gifts. When Kapuku, soon after this duty, broke out in spots on mission premises, people had even more cause for suspicion. Laid low with measles, a simultaneous upsurge of dysentery carried hundreds more
over the edge of the grave. Few villagers had strength to work their farms. In January 1861, two powerful hurricanes swept through, ravaging the Mathesons’ boathouse and church, and also their house, kitchen, and storehouse all now up on Imoa hill. The wind shifted to the north, blowing in Iasur’s volcanic acidic ash that rained down burning away what tender garden shoots there were.

Mary gloomily admitted that people blamed her for the collected calamities, especially since neither John nor Mary then appeared sick: “They declared that I had smitten them with the measles, in order to be revenged on them for having recently stolen from us with such a high hand.”

Devastated island survivors begged the Mathesons to leave, or at least to shut up about Christianity. They ceased trading food with them. When John visited other southern villages to preach, people drove him away by throwing stones and, when he wouldn’t leave, ran off themselves or shouted, chopped, and banged clubs on trees or old logs to drown out his deadly preaching. Mary, understandably, wrote her brother: “Lately I have had such longing to soar away up amid the peaceful clouds, in other words, to enter that haven of rest.” She wrote to a friend back in Pictou: “I trust that this people will learn that Jehovah is a God not to be trifled with.”

In February 1861, Mary was pregnant. It’s difficult to know if the concatenation of disasters had drawn her closer to John, or how Mary accounted for her condition. Was this God’s gift? Or was it further proof of vileness and degradation? Mary, or some other, later destroyed her diary pages that bared too much.

Measles and dysentery cut through Port Resolution, too. Another Nova Scotian, Samuel Johnston with wife Bessie (Elisabeth), had arrived the previous February to reinforce the widower John Paton. The Johnstons soon fell ill and treated themselves with larger and larger doses of laudanum, tincture of opium. This only stupefied them, and Samuel began to babble in Nafe. He died and Paton buried him, too, in the small but expanding Christian graveyard near the harbor. That May, a party of Erromangans whom Mary once had taken to be friendly and docile, axed George and Ellen Gordon to death at Dillons Bay. At Kwamera, the Mathesons’ coughing grew worse. Mary suffered attacks of asthma and bronchitis. Her belly swollen, she refused leave John alone on Tanna and retreat to Aneityum where her aunt might care for her in the last months of her pregnancy. She continued journaling her self-criticism: “Oh what a hardened wench am I!” She hated both her depressions and her passing delights. Little Minnie, probably a diminutive of Mary, was born on 21 November 1861.

Things boiled to an end in January 1862. This was the rainy season and John’s and Mary’s coughing worsened. Poor little Minnie died on the 17th. Mary’s youthful poetic sensibilities about sweetly dying children may have cut a bit
deeper. John buried the infant on Imoa hill. Kapuku, who had recovered from the measles, felt pity. He gave Matheson twenty of his power stones that controlled fortune in war, the winds, and safety at sea. Up at Port Resolution, people sought to rid themselves of both missionaries and diseases. Paton’s remaining island friends warned him to leave, and on the 20th he fled south to Kwamera to join the Mathesons. But here, too, villagers were desperate and outraged. They burned down John’s thatch-roofed church on Sunday night, 2 February. News of the turmoil reached Aneityum, and Geddie paid a sandalwooder then moored at Aneityum to remove the besieged missionaries and their property from Kwamera. Christian supporters Kapuku and wife Kaiou, along with Iaresi, Viavia, and their families, joined the exodus south to Aneityum. Safer there than to suffer blame for all that illness and death. John, at the last minute, refused to leave. He barricaded himself in his Imoa house. His fellow missionary John Paton, though, threatened to send a letter with the ship to accuse John of virtual murder if he was forced to remain behind on Tanna with the foolish Mathesons.

Mary, in hospice on Anietyum with her uncle and aunt, breathed only a few more weeks. She died on 11 March 1862. Back in Pictou, her mother too was ill. While dying, she refused to leave Mary any last words. Sweet Ma instead expected to find Mary in heaven. John, surprisingly, outlived Mary although not by much. On Aneityum, he continued to struggle with Nafe language with the help of Kapuku, Iaresi, and Viavia. That June, he decided to cut his losses. Seeking more salubrious climate, he sailed south to Mare in the Loyalty Islands. There, although he could barely talk, hardly swallow, and survived on boiled batter pudding, he continued translating Nafe psalms and wrote a school primer. He died in October 1862, a “frail and shattered tabernacle of clay.”

Sickness

Mary and John added tuberculosis to the parade of strange new diseases that marched onto Tanna: pneumonia, measles, whooping cough, influenza, dysentery, cholera, diphtheria, smallpox, gonorrhea, and more. Poky new church buildings (like modern airplanes) might especially have dispersed germs among coughing and sneezing congregants. Epidemics accelerated in the 1830s; but forgotten plagues also may have arrived earlier with Cook, or with several subsequent expeditions that visited Tanna. No one knows how many Tannese were alive when Cook landed in 1774. Expedition scientist Johann Forster then
estimated the island’s population at twenty thousand, but he had to extrapolate from his Port Resolution experience and from what villages and plantations could be seen from sea. Others, later, doubled his guess. By the 1920s, when island depopulation leveled out, fewer than six thousand people lived on the island. Disease killed even more people on Erromango and Aneityum. By 1931, Erromangans numbered only 381, and by 1941 Aneityum’s population had crashed from a possible high of nine thousand to a sparse 186.

When the Mathesons visited the Gordons on Erromango in 1839, Mary noted the scarcity of inhabitants around Dillons Bay. She walked two-and-a-half miles to a hilltop, from which she could see Tanna, without meeting a single person. She failed to ponder the cause of this depopulation, however, concluding merely that the absence of natives was sometimes a trial, but sometimes a great relief.

When I was first on Tanna in the 1970s, parents then were still busy bestowing unused personal names on their children who would thus gain the right to repopulate long-emptied villages and lands. Currently, more than thirty thousand people live on Tanna. Some thousands of others have migrated to Port Vila’s settlements and other parts of Vanuatu. Even with this rebound, population remains scanty in parts of the island.

LMS missionary George Turner, who lasted six months at Port Resolution from 1842 to 1843, learned something about island disease theory. He reported: “Coughs, influenza, dysentery, and some skin diseases, the Tannese attribute to their intercourse with White men, and call them foreign things.” Missionaries found this hard to swallow, although Turner went on:

The opinion there was universal that they had tenfold more of disease and death since they had intercourse with ships than they had before. We thought at first it was prejudice and fault-finding, but the reply of the more honest and thoughtful of the natives invariably was: “It is quite true. Formerly people here never died till they were old, but nowadays there is no end to this influenza, and coughing, and death.”

Neither side yet understood germ theory. The Christians spun stories of God’s will, sinfulness, and uncleanliness to explain all the coughing. Sick Tannese, who infuriated missionaries with their certain knowledge that some men work power stones that cause illness, suspected either Christian maleficence or the displeasure of their own ancestors.

Mission apologists argued that Tanna’s disease-makers projected onto the missionaries equivalent death-dealing powers in order to preserve their own status. But, in His mysterious way, “it pleased Divine Providence again” to visit
Tanna with more sickness and death “which the natives were so apt to connect with Christianity.” They did spot the puzzle: “It is certainly a singular dispensation of Divine Providence that while the natives of this island have such superstitious notions regarding Christianity as causing disease and death hitherto almost every attempt to introduce Christianity among them has been followed by severe epidemics.” God, indeed, works in mysterious ways.

The Patons and the Johnstonst at Port Resolution, and Mary and John at Inoa, were shocked when their ailing island friends blamed them. Only God, they hastened to preach, commands power over life and death. The Tannese could accept this argument, although it did not make it easier to embrace Jehovah. Surely, could not the white missionaries manipulate their god just as they themselves knew how to direct island spiritual powers? The unwell vacillated. Some blamed the missionaries, others blamed neighboring and rival power stone workers who were unhappy and jealous that they hosted missionaries, controlling thus access to foreign largesse. And still others blamed their own neglected yet still watchful ancestors and spirits who were punishing apostasy.

The Mathesons rummaged through their medicine chest. Their mid-nineteenth century concoctions, tincture of opium, ground red deer horn, cod liver oil, vinegar, ammonia, emetics, and the like, were not much help. And only a few of the sick, John noted, “would receive medicine.” Even friendly Uairau, Kapuku’s wife, refused treatment. Mary wrote that they managed only to dose a few babies. Island parents, perhaps, were particularly desperate to revivify their expiring infants and willing to try anything, or maybe they figured better to experiment on children than on oneself. Those who make sickness on Tanna typically also can cure, but who could know if John’s alien concoctions were antidote or some additional poison?

Mary and John were small-town Victorians and thus intimately familiar with death’s domain. Disease and death were ordinary aspects of Nova Scotian life. Death, moreover, was instructive: a testimony to God’s power and human weakness. Two of Mary’s siblings died young. In 1859, she wrote her mother that she was not in the least surprised to learn of so many recent deaths back home in Pictou. Mission commentary sunnily interpreted Samuel Johnston’s sad demise and burial at Port Resolution. This was the Heavenly Father showing the Tannese “how the Christian dies.” There was cheerful anticipation that “his grave in that dark and distant land may speak in louder tones and yield more profitable lessons than even his living voice.” Mary’s own tombstone, when raised over her grave on Aneityum, offered sentiment as morbid as her personality: “For me to live in Christ and to die is gain.” The Tannese accept that the dead indeed do
speak, although they may have received their own sorts of messages from Mary and John’s ghosts. They would likewise reject Christian fatalism. Death is not always gain. Cures exist or can be found.

Islanders have an established therapeutics that include an extensive pharmacopeia: concoctions of leaves, bark, and other materials curers use to treat a variety of conditions. They continue to be disposed to bloodletting. Certain experts set broken limb bones by cutting through flesh to expose the break, manipulating and realigning bones, and then wrapping the broken arm or leg back together in leaves with antibiotic properties. In earlier days, people also tried to identify which person, with which disease stone, might have conjured the disease. With the right payoff, a stone owner might be cajoled to reverse his hex. Everyone knows that those who conjure up a disease are best able to cure this.

Nowadays, passing yachts and two planeloads of tourists land on Tanna most days, eager to experience Iasur’s fires. Some of these visitors, too, come with coughs and snuffles but these no longer lay low the locals. Islanders over the years have developed immunity to global scourges, augmenting their native resistance to endemic malaria and occasional leprosy. The Rockefeller Foundation funded a campaign in the 1920s and 1930s that eliminated yaws, an irksome skin disease. Today’s epidemiologists instead worry about the spread of the modern maladies. To date, the worst of these, HIV/AIDS, has made only minor inroads into Vanuatu, and the coronavirus, as of mid-2020, had not reached the islands thanks to an interruption of international travel. Growing numbers, though, suffer the disorders of modernity including diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and heart disease. Men, almost all of whom avidly smoke homegrown or imported tobacco, suffer chronic asthma and other sorts of troublesome lung conditions.

Distressed and desperate, the Mathesons’ neighbors connected the dots and blamed newcomer Scottish missionaries for making them sick. They sorted disease into two categories, a project that continues today. Some illnesses are kastom. Others stem from foreigners, the Pitoga. Missionary George Turner, at Port Resolution in 1842, recorded the early days of this distinction: “When a person was said to be ill, the next question was “What is the matter?” Is it nahak or a foreign thing?” The Tannese continue to treat island conditions with local cures, and they swallow imported medications for foreign maladies. In years since Mary and John came and went, island men gave up their power stones that can sicken or kill. They repudiate sorcery and they police anyone who thinks to revive nukwei nahak stone practice. Ancestral spirits, not living sorcerers, today shoulder most blame for causing disease. Often, as did my friend Nakutan who was deeply worried about a sick young daughter, they first investigate possible
ancestral displeasure. This potentially saves travel expense and hospital fees for the shallow-pocketed. Kleva, some of whom are women, who communicate with spirits in dreams and otherwise, can deduce a disease’s cause and cure. One such seer advised Nakutan that his dead aunt was punishing him, by way of making his daughter sick, for failing to repay a pig he had borrowed years previously for his wedding celebration. He hastened to do so but, when the child was slow to recover, he found enough money to rent a truck to carry the girl across Tanna to the government hospital.

Most everyone knows how to concoct curative infusions. Nui (water), they call these, or “leaf medicine” in Bislama. I drank a lot of this in 1978 when I caught mononucleosis, although sometimes a healer instead spat a shower of medicine into my face. People specialize in treating particular conditions. My kindly neighbor Kusi once brought me a bottle of murky, green liquid to treat, without great success, my aching lower back. Her bad back medicine is locally famous. Divining disease, and curing this, is one way that women can make a name for themselves.

Women

Disregarding Cook’s deceptive beardless boys whom the Tannese first took to be female, Mary was among the first white woman to come to Tanna. Women at Umairarekar examined her closely as she came ashore. Since “few had ever seen a White woman before” she was “an object of great curiosity.” Mary wrote her mother: “I am considered a perfect wonder, as they have never seen a White female. Many of them are afraid to shake hands and some run away.” Along with their first white woman, the Tannese also saw their first European family. Scottish appreciation of clan and extended family had narrowed to focus on the tighter bonds linking husband, wife, and children. Mission propaganda imagery liked to portray illustrative nuclear families, Pacific versions of hardworking dad, loving mother, and dutiful child. Scottish missionaries, also, were house proud. A house symbolized and encompassed family and it gave women a proper place. The Mathesons, like snails, hauled their house frame along with them from Aneityum to Umairarekar to Imoa. Mission sketches of Tanna showcased reimagined island families and their rudimentary village homes.

Coming from farming or lower middle-class urban trade backgrounds that demanded hard work from men and women alike, missionaries serving abroad aspired to Victorian respectability, even on remotest Tanna. The deep pool of island domestics was one welcome aspect of mission life. These servants came
much cheaper than they did back home in Scotland or Nova Scotia, and they spared missionary wives considerable domestic labor. Mission wives’ time could be given over instead to sewing, embroidery, and other respectable ladylike endeavors. But spreading forth into the world, Presbyterians ran into hardworking women everywhere. The overworked, downtrodden, and abused heathen woman was a common theme in mission propaganda. Donated Sunday pennies would convert dark islands and also there clarify proper gender roles.

On Tanna, missionaries quickly grasped that women and children provide most everyday farm and garden labor in between clearing new fields and harvesting these, when men pitch in. They deeply disapproved of the heathen custom of “widow-strangling” on Aneityum Island, where wives of newly dead chiefs volunteered to join them in the spirit world, fearing that some on Tanna were also adopting the practice. The Tannese and the Scottish alike commended patriarchy as warranted by kastom, by the Bible, or both. Gender relations, however, failed always to simplify into chiefly husband and helpmate wife, or dominant men and submissive women. Missionary wives, for instance, soon found themselves ordering about island men. Whiteness on Tanna trumped masculinity, and Samuel Johnston noted his wife’s novel clout at Port Resolution. Bessie, in an outburst, would sternly order visiting men out of her house, and “Men who have been accustomed to trample upon women scarcely know what to say to a woman usurping such authority. But still she generally manages them.”

During her truncated residence on Tanna, Bessie strummed the overworked woman theme in letters home to Nova Scotia: “If you were here to see the abuse of women, I know your heart would ache for them. They are just slaves to the men—do the hardest of the work, and if they happen to give the slightest offence to them are severely punished and often clubbed to death.” Before her, George Turner who had a better eye for the tenor of Port Resolution marital relations, wrote: “Upon the whole we thought the women better treated at Tanna than they often are among heathen tribes.” And Glaswegian Agnes Watt, who with her missionary husband William replaced the Mathesons at Kwamera in 1869, even applauded judicious husbandly chastisement given their wives’ notably sharp tongues.

Missionary ideals of proper households led them to overlook or misread much of island family life. Houses, yes, but these are mostly for sleeping. People live outdoors in more expansive home grounds that encompass broadly male and female spaces. Men’s lives center on kava-drinking clearings on which, in Mary’s day, they built shelters. Women, girls, and yet uncircumcised boys inhabit villages and hamlets that encircle these kava clearings. Thanks to mission notions
of proper family life, most men nowadays after drinking kava leave the clearing to rejoin their wives and children in family hamlet houses. Despite mission lament about browbeaten women and unfair gendered responsibilities, loving fathers and diligent brothers do a considerable amount of child minding. They prepare fires and cook when necessary. Gender separation continues, however, when wives menstruate. Inquisitive island neighbors may well have wondered at Mary and John’s baffling propinquity. Women once retired to private, menstrual houses outside the village, where they usually also gave birth. Today, although husbands and wives sleep in one house, they distance themselves monthly, and menstruating women quit cooking for their men. Those overworked Tannese women, once a month at least, enjoyed greater domestic leisure than did some of their Scottish sisters.

When Samuel Johnston was dying at Port Resolution, his colleague John Paton sliced open his arms to bleed him. The Tannese would have approved of this Scottish bloodletting therapy. They themselves bleed the sick, but mostly sick men. They share with other Melanesians deep respect for the power of blood, especially menstrual blood. Women, here, are sturdier than men. Female bodies are open, proved by regular bloody menses. Men, rather, are closed, in danger of clogging. One must cut open sick men. Women naturally wash away body taints and pollutants. If they survive childbirth, many women reach ripe old age. Most of my old lady friends from the 1970s outlived their tobacco fiend, smoking husbands by three decades. Women are tough in other ways, too, as mission wife Agnes Watt remarked. If men monopolize the right to speak at public meetings, women who mutter along a meeting’s edge can salt the air with reproach and backchat. Sharped tongued still, some find it most difficult to suffer fools. My strong young friend Sara, for one, married late. The boys in the neighborhood were terrified of her.

Along with kava, men like to monopolize the spirit world, too. But everyone dreams. Some women gain celebrity as seers, as kleva. Others are popular healers. Like Kusi, they inherit pharmacological recipes from mothers and grandmothers, or they discover these in dreams. Lispet of Sulphur Bay until her death was a famous spirit medium and curer. She possessed a direct conversational pipeline to John Frum and his spiritual sons. Leading men didn’t know how to handle her. They tried but failed to marginalize her amplifying power and fame. Agnes Watt, in 1882, wrote of another old woman kleva who, by communicating with her dead husband, enticed the spirits to spill forth knives, tobacco pipes, cotton cloth, beads, and other newfangled goods. The skeptical Agnes and William Watt challenged the woman to extract, spiritually, some item from
their Kwamera house but she refused. Her dead husband’s ghost declined to risk Christian contact. Agnes’ mistrust, here, was surprising as her own superior status, and that of Mary too, depended on her immediate connection and service to the supernatural.

The mission agenda, pushed by ambitious middle-class Victorians, aimed to substitute one island form of patriarchy for another. They imagined hard-working husbands supported by helpful wives who kept proper houses. This project never completely succeeded although gender relations have much transformed since the mid-nineteenth century. Although women, then and now, continue to work hard in their gardens and at other daily tasks, men and circumcised sons gradually abandoned their men’s houses that once were located on kava-drinking grounds, moving to live with wives and children in the surrounding hamlets. Chiefly Christian converts also sloughed off second wives, although polygyny was never common. The missions instructed women in several useful skills, particularly sewing, which remains today a key source of feminine income. Over the years, women’s educational opportunities have improved and several of the young village girls I met in the 1970s subsequently enjoyed successful teaching careers.

Men, though, still monopolize land, and they attempt to control access to the spirits be these Christian or island. Parents, when they can, continue to manage the marriages of both daughters and sons, and daughters suffer greater family pressure to acquiesce to a union. Men, through their names, are more firmly tied to their home ground. Women leave their parents and siblings behind to move to new husbands’ places, sometimes distant. This female mobility, however, can offer opportunity. Men must remain committed to protecting their home ground for their children and grandchildren. Women, who typically leave home villages, thereby escape at least some male supervision. Joining the urban migration flows that amplified after 1980, some like Sivur have abandoned Tanna to find a more independent life in Blacksands, one of Port Vila’s surrounding settlements.

Mary, too, left home for good although she maintained epistolary ties with her family in Pictou. In a letter home to her brother, Mary supposed that some of her sister mission wives could “feel interested in natives without becoming attached to them.” But she herself strove to cultivate deep friendships with island women. The next world, she was sure, would recognize no distinction of color or class. Back at Imoa in late 1860, though, she contemplated a gloomy island future: “Poor Tannese, I fear their days of independence are nearly over. As soon as this island has been opened up by the gospel, probably the White man
will take possession, and the poor natives die out.”

She and John, coughing away, contributed their part to this vision. Only Tannese struggle and hardiness, in the end, proved her prediction incorrect. It was Mary, and John, and little Minnie who died out.

Agnes hiked to the top of Imoa hill when the Watts first arrived at Kwamera in 1869. She was hunting for remnants of the Mathesons who had retreated just seven years before: “We searched in vain for the grave of their infant daughter. . . . They buried her near their house and put a fence round the grave, but already it is unknown. Poor little thing!” Poor things all around. Minnie’s grave vanished faster, even, than Elau’s. The Presbyterians sent missionary reinforcements to replace their dead. Island women and men, too, found other ways to live on. They took up new opportunities. They sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected novel overseas messages. They expanded their traveling. Like Elau and Mary, many hit the road as did bold Soarum, looking down from his mountain village at the Port’s comings and goings.

Notes

2. Patterson, Memoirs, 154.
3. Patterson, Memoirs, 350.
4. Patterson, Memoirs, 356.
5. Patterson, Memoirs, 396.
6. Patterson, Memoirs, 405.
7. Patterson, Memoirs, 406.
8. Patterson, Memoirs, 453.
10. Patterson, Memoirs, 471.
11. Patterson, Memoirs, 477.
14. Patterson, Memoirs, 467.
15. Turner, Samoa, 322.
17. Patterson, Memoirs, 257.
18. Patterson, Memoirs, 261.

Further Readings

Mary Matheson

Polynesian Teachers Stationed at Port Resolution

Missionaries and Disease

Agnes Watt