

***“We gather to reconcile – No longer captives of the past”*: Murder, missionaries and reconciliation**

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History of the Pacific Islands collections

The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia is particularly well known for its scholarship, publications and exhibitions relating to the collection of objects made by the First Nations peoples of British Columbia, Canada. Lesser known is the fact that the museum also holds significant collections from around the world, particularly the Pacific. In fact, the Museum of Anthropology was founded on a donation of about 1500 Pacific Islands' objects collected between 1898 and ca. 1923 by Frank Burnett, Canadian writer and traveller. The collection remained in Burnett's curio room until 1927 when it was donated to the university and at long last the decision was made to highlight the founding collection of Pacific objects collected by Frank Burnett

Changing tides

It wasn't until 1976 when the museum moved to a new building that some of the Pacific Islands' collection was made accessible to the public.¹ The objects were organized in an open storage system, along with the rest of the worldwide collections, and grouped according to type and geo-cultural distribution. However, there were no exhibitions about the Pacific Islands' collection, no public events or education programs. In 1997 the museum celebrated its 50th anniversary and at long last the decision was made to highlight the founding collection of Pacific objects collected by Frank Burnett

This resulted in the temporary exhibition *Pasifika – Island Journeys* (June 2003 – March 2004). The exhibition was well received by visitors, but perhaps more importantly the research associated with its implementation served as a catalyst for new partnerships with cultural centres, museums, scholars and artists in the Pacific. Connections were also made with the local communities of Pacific Islanders, many of whom did not know there was a Pacific Islands collection at MOA, and the descendants of Frank Burnett who were extremely keen to contribute to the re-knowing of their ancestor.

In *Pasifika – Island Journeys* the objects collected by Burnett were removed from storage, cleaned and displayed in their own right. They were also identified and named where possible by Pacific Islanders and scholars working in the Pacific. Photographs and contemporary narratives, including poetry served as counterpoints to narratives derived from Burnett's writings.² For the first time since they had been collected the objects were, where possible, re-attached to their names and displayed in an environment that honored their agency.³ Members of the Pacific Islands' community officiated at the opening and Laurence Foanaota, then president of the Pacific Islands Museums Association, formally opened the exhibition.

Relationships forged during the planning of this exhibition have continued and have culminated in a number of projects. These have included the signing of Memoranda of Understanding between the Museum of Anthropology at UBC and the Fiji National Museum, and the Pacific Islands Museums Association. These outline the protocols to be used when discussing such events as artist exchanges, workshops, internships, lecture series, as well as those relating to the exchanging of knowledge about traditional copyright, tangible and intangible heritage, concepts of ownership and other topics. Over the years MOA staff has travelled to the Pacific to conduct workshops on design, curatorship, care and handling, visitor studies and so on. They have also participated in seminars and conferences, worked with artists and cooperatives, and discussed mutual areas of interest. Pacific Islanders have also travelled to MOA and worked

alongside staff as interns, designers and photographers, as scholars in residence, as co-organizers of exhibits, as lecturers and as esteemed guests at exhibition openings. Today the Pacific Islands collection is re-installed in the new Multiversity Galleries and much of its organization is the direct result of the collaborative work that has been achieved over the past fifteen years.

The story of a reconciliation

All this sounds very straight forward when written so simply, but anybody who has worked in a collaborative framework knows that the steps are often very small and usually very slow. Each step has many stories embedded therein; some disappointing, some challenging, some gratifying and occasionally life changing. The following is one such story:

*Here, in this place, by some strange alchemy
We gather to reconcile
To offer some understanding
And to receive it, too
For what was done
Did merely an error compound
Concealing truths immensely profound
(David Williams, November 18, 2009)*

This is the first verse of a poem written by David Williams on November 18, 2009, two days before he attended a reconciliation ceremony on Erromango. His journey from Canada began four years ago when I received a phone call from Daisy Williams, wife of Michael Williams, another descendant of the reverend John Williams (1796–1839), a missionary who was killed on the shores of Erromango in 1839.⁴ She had called because she was looking for a home for five artifacts that once belonged to John Williams. These proved to be a beautiful new Caledonian bird's head club, an Austral Islands whisk, a Fijian club inlaid with ivory, a finely crafted fish hook, and a well carved Maori flute. They became some of the oldest Pacific Islands' objects to be found in a Canadian collection, which in the museum world holds some caché, but were also objects that belonged to a time when colonial and evangelical expansion across the Pacific was beginning to ramp up. This is what interested me. John Williams was an English missionary who voyaged to the Pacific in 1817, accompanied by his wife Mary. He travelled throughout the islands and atolls of Polynesia establishing missionary posts and training converts. He wrote books about his travels and quite carefully described the cultures he encountered. He also amassed a collection of artifacts, some of which can be seen in the 1838 painting *The Rev. John Williams on board ship with native implements, in the South Sea Islands*.

These native implements served as tangible evidence of the places and cultures he had visited and perhaps converted, as do those donated by Michael and Daisy Williams. There is much discussion (pro and con) around the idea of whether or not objects have agency. Do they contain within them the stories associated with their history and, if we think they do, can they serve as active agents in contemporary research endeavours which seek to understand and articulate the relationship between inanimate objects and the construction of systems of meaning? I thought less about how these objects might enrich knowledge about the past but rather how they might influence the present and, by extension, the shape of the future. Their very existence and the need to document them was sufficient to raise interest in how the story of John Williams was perceived by his descendants and by the descendants of those responsible for his death. Would they be interested in meeting and what form would this meeting take? I wondered whether such things happened on Vanuatu and whether it might be appropriate to think about such a thing between the descendents of the reverend John Williams and the descendents of those who killed him.

I mentioned the idea to Michael Williams and he expressed some interest and directed me to another member of the family, UK based Charles Milner Williams, who had extensively studied the Williams' history and was extremely interested in the possibility of a meeting. I had also read about "sorry" ceremonies in and around the Pacific and wondered whether they would provide the format for the meeting. They usually took the form either of colonizers apologizing for past abuse of indigenous peoples or indigenous people apologizing for killing colonizers, usually missionaries.⁵ Subsequent discussions with Ralph Regenvanu, a colleague of many years and currently Director of the Vanuatu National Cultural Council, resulted in the proposal that members of the Williams family express their willingness to come to Vanuatu by writing to the church leaders and council of chiefs. If agreement was reached then the family would be invited to attend a reconciliation, not a "sorry" ceremony. Regenvanu thought the ceremony was needed very much, as many of the people on Erromango felt the island had been under a "curse" that could be lifted once reconciliation was achieved. He also explained that "saying sorry is part of it, but all reconciliation ceremonies require something from each side – there's always that element of exchange."⁶ He recommended that the something from the Williams family be three plaques for the Presbyterian churches in Erromango and Port Vila, and for the gravesite in Erromango.⁷

Once the invitation was received from the council of churches, along with the specification that the ceremony be held on the 170th anniversary of the death of John Williams, other members of the Williams family were located and on November 13th the first of seventeen descendants of the reverend John Williams arrived from Canada in Port Vila. They were the great-great-grandson David Williams and his wife Pat Swift. They were met, as were all the rest of the family, by Chief Daniel Dan of Dillon's Bay in Erromango along with representatives of the Erromango community in Port Vila.⁸ Other Canadian members of the family plus those from Africa and England arrived during the following few days. Other arrivals included film crews from British Columbia, the BBC in England, and the UBC Museum of Anthropology.⁹ Although interest had been expressed by others to attend the event, no invitations were issued beyond the family, the people of Erromango and the communicators.¹⁰

All those who attended the events will serve as witnesses and bear the responsibility of telling the story so that it will not be forgotten. Their stories will be personalized, embellished, edited and will change over time – such is the way of history. This is a synopsis of my story as it was recorded in my journal, and it is both descriptive and emotive. In time I will contemplate, analyze and attempt to be truly objective about the events I was privileged to witness.

Two small planes ferried the families from Port Vila to Dillon's Bay. Groups of five or six were picked up by the only truck on the island and driven along the precipitous route to the village.¹¹ Due to mishaps with the truck the timing of the event was delayed from 11.00 am to 3.00 pm. As the family arrived they were met by villagers and shown a hut that was beautifully decorated with new island cloths and flowers. On the table were jugs of fruit juice and several biscuits. It was cool so we sat down and waited for the truck to be repaired. A young girl, Anna Narvu, was assigned to make sure everybody was comfortable. The village square was decorated with fronds, flowers and balloons, and a stage was set up at one end complete with a sound system. We were shown our sleeping quarters in the church. About fourteen mattresses were lined up on either side, covered with coloured cloths and decorated with fragionpanis. The floor was covered in large woven mats. All these furnishings were gathered from families all over the island. Family elders were housed with village families.

When everybody had arrived we were taken into the local guesthouse to change into island clothes: green flowered dresses and shirts all made by women in the village of identical material that identified us as visitors. People were slowly gathering, sitting around the edge, music played on the loudspeaker, pews were brought from the church and positioned to the right of the stage, and benches for various dignitaries were placed at the front edge.¹² People were wearing their "go to church" clothes and dignitaries were wearing white shirts and black pants. A

printed program was handed out which outlined the events. Pastor George Aki and Pastor Kalsakau Urtalo started with prayers and then there was a hymn sung – specially written for the occasion. By this time there were a couple of hundred people sitting around the square. The family was seated on pews brought from the church and dignitaries were seated on long benches.¹³

After the opening prayer women walked across the square with leaf garlands which they placed on each member of the Williams family and on all other dignitaries. Prayers, a sermon in Bislama and the singing of hymns followed. Speeches were given by Ralph Regenvanu, Chief William Mete, and members of the Williams family. The first was delivered by John David Williams (head of the family), who greeted everybody in Botswana language and talked about respect between peoples. David Williams recited a poem he had written two days before (partially cited at the beginning of this paper), Michael Williams presented a plaque for the church, Charles Milner Williams spoke eloquently and retold the story of his ancestor's arrival on Erromango, and Dorie Williams presented a bible signed by all the family for the church. Once the speeches were over Pastor Aki announced that, to mark this important event, Dillon's Bay would now be known as Williams Bay. During the final speech it was announced that we were also recognizing the death of the reverend George Gordon, who was killed, along with his family, on Erromango in 1861. Art Holbrook, one of the B.C. film crew, acted as the family representative.

At this point there followed a theatrical event. Everybody moved from the square down to the shore, where we saw some men get into a boat out in the bay opposite the village where the ferry was moored. They came ashore and two men clearly dressed to represent John Williams and James Harris came ashore and walked to the village, where they were received aggressively by warriors. Unfortunately for John Williams he did not know that shortly before his arrival some sandalwood traders had come ashore and attacked and killed five natives. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As the story unfolded the warriors became more aggressive and John Williams moved closer holding his bible up high. He stepped over a line drawn in the sand, interpreted as an aggressive act that enraged the warriors and they charged at him and clubbed him but he ran towards the sea where he was caught and axed to death, as was James Harris. The warriors then carried the bodies up to the village square, where they laid them out – covered in blood. This was all very dramatic and as both missionaries laid motionless on the ground a group of villagers gathered around the bodies and sang the John Williams hymn while a narrator continued the story. Some of the singers were clearly moved by the event, some were even crying.

Three groups then gathered and this was the time for reconciliation. Three warriors re-enacted the story of the 1861 killing of the Canadian missionary Reverend George Gordon and his family. After the murder the three warriors sank to their knees and cried for forgiveness. The Williams family was nonplussed and clearly did not know how to react. Then three members stepped forward and pulled them to their feet and hugged them – it seemed the appropriate thing to do. There was a silence and then people began to clap. The first and second group then moved forward and quietly shook the hands of every Williams family member. Finally it was the turn of the descendants of the killers of John Williams. This time two warriors stepped forward and started to wail and cry and throw themselves at the feet of the Williams family. Then the entire group moved forward, dropped to their knees and began crying and sobbing and saying “sorry,” seemingly inconsolable. Tears began flowing everywhere. Then Charles Williams stepped forward and said, “Please, please stop... on behalf of the Williams family, I forgive you.” All the family spontaneously stepped forward and walked into the group, pulled people to their feet, hugging them and asking them to stop crying. I turned to Ralph and he said, “They did the right thing.”

The final gesture of this very long day occurred when a family stepped forward and according to old custom they gave their seven-year-old daughter to the Williams – a life for a life. Her name is Jaylene; she was dressed in white with garlands around her head and she was clearly

scared. Michael and Charles, who had been forewarned, stepped forward to accept the responsibility for her but also to hand her back to her family for safekeeping.¹⁴ Now the Williams family has a very tangible reason to continue their relationship with the village and a duty to ensure the girl is given all the opportunities that will help her grow into a “big woman.” Overall, the day’s events were emotionally exhausting, and well summed up by the words of Charles Milner Williams: “I thought I would be dispassionate after 170 years but the raw emotion, the genuine contrition, the heart-rending sorrow has been hugely moving.”

Food and feasting followed; the village women made laplap – a mixture of bananas, pork, chicken, mango, taro all cooked on hot stones and covered in leaves. David Williams was asked to uncover the stones in the presence of the communicators who were lined up around the pit. This included Pastor Ewen, Reverend Allen, Ralph Regenvanu and I. Once the pit was uncovered Ralph made a gesture with his hands, as though he were washing them, and said to me, “Our hands are now clean of the responsibility we had carried.” It was not a noisy feast, many conversations, moved between groups of people exchanging names and relationships.

The next morning we were ferried across the bay, and we walked up a pathway towards the monuments dedicated to the Gordon family and John Williams. The gravesite had been carefully prepared and the John Williams headstone was flat with his name and death date scratched on top. A choir was standing around the grave and they sang the John Williams song and then a village elder welcomed the Williams family, David responded and Dorie laid the plaque on the grave. On the way to view the John Williams headstone the Reverend Bernard, of Williams Bay, pointed out the place where it is believed John Williams met his end and where he was buried. The grave, he said, was washed out to sea many years ago. It is generally believed that Williams was the victim of cannibalism, but not everybody is ready to accept this, so we have a grave that is no longer there, and it is believed his remains were retrieved and buried in Samoa, and he has a grave in Avarua in the Cook Islands. Cannibalism is one of the most misunderstood of cultural practices. It was the killing, not the eating, of John Williams that was the reason for the reconciliation ceremony. Regenvanu explained: “Cannibalism, contrary to what a lot of people think, was traditionally a very ritualistic and sacred practice.” Regardless, there remains the danger of this event being misunderstood and trivialized by the media. The UK newspaper the *Daily Mail* ran the headline “Sorry we ate your great-great grandpa: Island cannibals apologise for killing missionary 170 years ago.”¹⁵ *The Telegraph* headline read: “Tribe apologises for eating British missionary.” The event was documented by three videographers, and the web-based article promoting the BBC version of events was titled “Island holds reconciliation over cannibalism.”¹⁶

For those on Erromango the reconciliation ceremony resulted in the lifting of the “curse,” if there was one. The reason for any bad luck or misfortune has been dispelled. The descendants of John Williams are invited to continue their new relationship with the village.¹⁷ They have accepted the specific responsibility for the well-being and future education of the child Jaylene. Now begins a new phase in the lives of the villagers of the newly named Williams Bay and the Williams family. After the euphoria evaporates the lingering questions might be, “Can they sustain the relationship and how will it develop? The future promises to be complex; all concerned have much to learn about each other, yet a year later, the will is still there. This part of the story ends with the final verse of David Williams’ poem:

*So accept our presence as our gift
Less than that we receive from you
For now the circle is complete
Ole ghosts may sleep at last
We are friends united by our history – our destiny
No longer captives of the past.
David Williams (November 19, 2009)*

Notes

¹ Objects that are considered culturally sensitive are stored separately, as are textiles and other fibre-based objects that are vulnerable to high-level lighting.

² Research was carried out in Kiribati, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands and Papua New Guinea in 1998, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa in 2000, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Australia in 2001, Vanuatu, Fiji, Australia and Torres Strait in 2002.

³ Mali Voi advised me to use the pisin name for the objects from Papua New Guinea, where there are more than 800 hundred languages recorded.

⁴ Erromango is one of the islands that comprise the Republic of Vanuatu.

⁵ Sorry ceremonies were held in Australia in 2008 when the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologized to the “Stolen Generation” of aboriginal children and earlier, in 2001, in Fiji, when the population of Nubutautau gathered to say sorry for the 1867 death (and cannibalism) of the reverend Thomas Baker.

⁶ Interview with BBC’s Briony Leyland, November 2009.

⁷ The UBC Museum of Anthropology organized the bronze plaque for the gravesite and Michael Williams organized the granite and framed plaques for the churches.

⁸ Lini-Napuati Lora, November 19, 2009. “Families of Reverend John Williams return after 170 years,” *Daily Post*, Vanuatu.

⁹ Film crew from B.C.: Art Holbrook and Peter Campbell; from BBC: Briony Leyland; from UBC Museum of Anthropology: Ken Mayer.

¹⁰ “Communicators” was the word used to describe those involved with the overall task of making sure the event happened according to correct protocol. They included Ralph Regenvanu, Anna Naupu, Carol Mayer, Vanuatu council of churches.

¹¹ Dillon’s Bay was named after Peter Dillon, Irish Sandalwood trader, who traded in the area from 1825–1865.

¹² The Prime Minister paid for a boat to bring people of Erromango from Port Vila, specifically to attend this event.

¹³ On the journey from the plane to the village, Jennifer Williams had broken her leg in two places and fortunately John Havens, doctor, and Paul Havens, paramedic, were able to set her leg in plaster of paris located in the village’s small clinic. John Havens is the husband of Dorie, great-great-granddaughter of John Williams.

¹⁴ She was also given the name Mary, after John Williams’ wife.

¹⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1233952/Sorry-ate-great-great-grandpa-Island-cannibals-apologise-killing-missionary-170-years-ago.html#ixzz0Z9O3mzT1>

¹⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/hampshire/8398126.stm

¹⁷ The family is discussing contributing to the clinic and school. Paul Havens, great-great-great-grandson, and paramedic, is considering returning to work in the clinic for a few months. Other possibilities are also being discussed.