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Destruction of the 1912 Lenakel Church (Tanna, Vanuatu) in Cyclone Pam, and Thoughts for the Future of the Site

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Abstract We report on the destruction of the 1912 Tanna Church by tropical Cyclone Pam, which struck Vanuatu on the 13th March 2015. This building was a very significant prefabricated timber structure that had been archaeologically recorded in great detail. Detailed documentation mitigates to some extent the loss of the physical structure, especially when considered alongside the community's interests in the intangible values of the site. Returning to the site after the building's destruction allowed us to record some new details, and to discuss future heritage plans with representatives from local communities.

Keywords Heritage · Natural disaster · Vanuatu

Destruction of the Site

In a recent issue of *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, we published a detailed account of archaeological research on a prefabricated timber church on Tanna

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Island, Vanuatu (Flexner et al. 2015). The church, located in Lenakel, west Tanna, was constructed in 1912 from a kit produced by the Sydney firm Saxton and Binns. It was a rare surviving example of this kind of architecture. At the time we noted, "If conservation of the building's fabric is not carried out very soon, Vanuatu will lose a significant piece of its heritage" (Flexner et al. 2015, p. 283). Often the archaeological recording of standing buildings is reported and the buildings are later damaged or destroyed, either because of natural processes or in the face of development. In the case of the 1912 Lenakel Church, it is with great regret that we report the building was completely destroyed during Tropical Cyclone Pam (Fig. 1). Pam was a category five storm, which struck the islands of southern Vanuatu on 13 March, 2015. The storm caused widespread damage to Tanna especially. The 1912 Lenakel Church had suffered a partial roof collapse after heavy rains in February, and in its already weakened state did not survive sustained winds of up to 280 km/h.

This unfortunate event raises an important question in terms of the heritage management of this site: with the building destroyed, what (if anything) can be done here? We were lucky to document the site in as much detail as we did before it was destroyed. Beyond what is already published (Flexner et al. 2015), we have detailed plans of the building from the footings to the roof timbers, as well as exterior and interior elevation drawings. There is an immense photographic record, as well as samples of mortar, wood, nails, and glass. Although the building was destroyed, detailed archaeological documentation would allow for a reasonably precise replication of its original form. Future building work could use materials and methods that closely follow the original,

Fig. 1 The 1912 Lenakel Church after Cyclone Pam. The dotted line represents the approximate outline of the church footings. Note how the structure was blown to the south by the strong northerly winds of the cyclone, which reached 280 km/hr

although the extent to which this is desirable is worthy of debate. For example, with hindsight it is easy to question the wisdom of using untreated non-durable timbers and non-galvanized fixings in an environment where moisture and termites are ubiquitous. Furthermore, some of the timbers used to build the church such as California redwood and Kauri are now very difficult to obtain. Clearly, the question of whether the Church should be rebuilt, and if so whether it should try to remain true in all respects to the original, is a complex one requiring careful thought and widespread consultation especially with local communities on Tanna.

New Details

Jones and Flexner returned to Tanna in July 2015 to survey the extent of the damage to the 1912 Lenakel Church, and to record any new details that might have been revealed by the destruction of the church. Ironically, the destruction wrought by Cyclone Pam allowed us access to certain portions of the building that were previously either difficult or impossible to observe, for example areas that had been covered by intact cladding, or elements such as the bell turret on top of the roof. Initial survey had revealed stencilled dispatch marks on a number of elements of the structure, including piles under the sanctuary, floor joists, and floorboards (Flexner et al. 2015: 276). No such marks were recorded in the original survey of the roof structure, but we can now confirm that the roof timbers, including rafters and ceiling joists were also marked with "JCN TANNA". The marks simply hadn't been visible on the darker wood used in the roof timbers, with stencilling located in poorly lit, inaccessible corners of the roof structure (Fig. 2). Additional assembly marks were found on lancet windows that had previously been hidden by glass panes ("4", "6", "8", further to the previously identified "5", stamped into the timber frames). A number ("2") was also found on the leaf of one of the doors, on the face nearest the frame on which a corresponding number (also "2") had been earlier recorded. We were able to document additional details about the construction method used for the corner buttresses of the building. Well-preserved framing nails that

Fig. 2 Previously unseen dispatch marks, such as this were accessible after the building's destruction. Note also the hammer marks where the nails were driven into this roof rafter

were exposed during the collapse were of mechanically-produced, rhomboidal-headed wire type, found elsewhere in Australasia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Varman and Robert 1987; Jones 2012, p. 30). All of this adds to our technical knowledge of the way that the 1912 Lenakel Church was fabricated and constructed.

Perhaps more intriguingly, we had noted in our initial survey the presence of marine shells in the corner intersections of the nave and transepts (Flexner et al. 2015, p. 282). Upon returning to the church, more of the footings were exposed, and in the north-western corner of the north transept, on the seaward side closest to the vestry and the pulpit, we found a concentration of at least 25 sea-snail (*Nerita* spp.) shells within a roughly 1m x 1m area (Fig. 3). There were additional marine shells and coral pieces along the north wall of the nave as well. The concentration of marine shells in this corner suggests intentional deposition. The shells show no signs of breakage or burning, which would be expected if the shells were left over from the local lime mortar production process, and their location inside the church suggests this is not the case anyway. We interpret this deposit as a ritual offering, perhaps associated with consecration of the church building. The shells were then sealed under the floorboards, which remained mostly intact in this area until the cyclone, resulting in their good preservation.

Thoughts for the Future

Collaborators on Tanna have noted the importance of the chiefly title *Nikiatu*, which refers to the strut that connects the outrigger to the main hull of the canoe in the language of west Tanna. If Tanna is the canoe (or canoes; Bonnemaison 1994), the outrigger is seen as the outside world. This has been a metaphor that has structured the ongoing work on Tanna, in which local people bridge the connections to foreign researchers in order to share knowledge in a collaborative environment. People on Tanna remain positive about the possibility of "rebuilding the church" at Lenakel. From

Fig. 3 A concentration of at least 25 shells of *Nerita* spp., a marine and estuary-dwelling shell, were found in the NW corner of the N Transept (additional shells may be present beyond the ones collected from the surface). This is interpreted as a ritual deposit

a western perspective, the fabric of the 1912 structure is almost completely lost, though the footings remain relatively intact, and certain elements of the building fabric, such as the church bell (Fig. 4), are being curated by local people in the community. Some of the more intact timbers will also potentially be preserved, though at this time there is no secure structure in Lenakel to house them. At a meeting with west Tanna chiefs, we were told that after the cyclone discussions about a future church building project on the site had passed through the network of local *imwayim* (kava drinking grounds). Even if the physical structure is mostly gone, the affective relationships of Tannese people with *ples* (place; Bonnemaison 1994, pp. 320–326) mean that the hill on which the 1912 church was built, which was significantly modified by Tannese labour during the construction process (Flexner et al. 2015, pp. 270–271), will remain a part of the network of significant sites on the landscape. Whatever is built on the site in the future, it will maintain the sense of place and connections to people and history on the island. For Tannese people, the physical structure may have been secondary to the people, memories, and ancestors to which it was connected. Heritage significance on the site remains more connected to the "intangible" realm (Smith and Akagawa 2011) above and beyond the historical materiality of the "original" fabric of the 1912 church building itself.

This observation fits with Lindstrom's (1996, 2011) observations about art and social memory on Tanna. Art on Tanna is said to be less about durable physical objects than it is about performance (dance, speech, song) and impermanent space (gardens, dancing grounds). Further, Tannese conceptions of time revolve around some degree of a sense of "return", as Tannese languages use the same words for distant past and far future, though there is also a sense of historical progress and rupture. For the 1912 Lenakel Church, we might ask whether the physical preservation of the structure for over a century was, to some extent, epiphenomenal in Tannese perspective. In many ways, the church site is treated like any other site in the pantheon of *kastom* places on Tanna, another example of the ways in which colonial heritage has been indigenized in Vanuatu (Flexner and Spriggs 2015). *Imwayim*, the traditional cathedral-like spaces of

Fig. 4 The church bell, recovered after the destruction of the church building and currently being curated locally in Lenakel. Parts of the original fabric such as this could be incorporated into future building projects on the site

cleared ground surrounded by massive banyan trees, can be abandoned, become overgrown, and later be cleared and renewed through the practices of kava drinking and dancing. The same process of abandonment and renewal is necessary for the ongoing productivity of Tannese garden sites. The physical condition of the site can decay, but it can always be brought back to life as long as the memories of the place survive. For archaeologists such as us, buildings like the 1912 Lenakel Church are significant for what they can tell us about processes of industrialization and globalization, and thus we were interested in conservation of the physical structure. For the Melanesian community with which we work, it appears that the tangible building is less important than the social relationships it represents, and thus it can be rebuilt in the process of renewing networks of people, ancestors, memories, and spirits all contained in the enduring medium of place.

In this case, then, the destruction of the church building does not negate the possibility of a positive community heritage outcome. That said, colonial heritage is rapidly disappearing in Melanesia in the face of natural disasters, slower processes of decay, and most alarmingly in urban areas where capitalist development is rapidly accelerating. The recent loss of yet another century-old timber structure in the region, reported above, highlights the need for at least basic inventory survey of historic buildings in Melanesian countries. Preliminary surveys of colonial architecture have been carried out in Vanuatu, especially in the main urban centres (e.g. Rodman 2001), but much more work remains to be done. Funding, environmental conditions, and logistics are all major challenges. One way of addressing these challenges lies in the development of partnerships between academics, heritage practitioners, national heritage organisations such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and Vanuatu Cultural and Historical Sites Survey, and local communities. Collaborative projects including the one discussed here do need to take into account a variety of values and perspectives on heritage significance and appropriate interventions. However, the importance of intangible values should not be seen as precluding a need to conserve physical structures that contain a wealth of information that will otherwise be lost in the coming decades. Indeed, close collaboration with local communities while significant structures remain in good condition is the best way to ensure their long-term conservation.

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