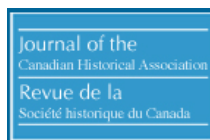


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## Christianity, masculinity and authority in the life of George Sarawia

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

George Sarawia was ordained in 1873 as the first Melanesian Anglican priest. This article presents preliminary research findings concerning the various constructs of masculinity deployed by Sarawia, his indigenous community, and the mission. A high-ranking member of the indigenous men's society, and part of an extended family, Sarawia integrated Christian concepts of brotherhood and fatherhood with controversial results. Some of his fellow missionaries accused him of leading his people more as an indigenous big-man than as a priest. The article contends that the career of George Sarawia revealed a negotiation, rather than an imposition, of masculinities reflecting indigenous as well as western priorities.

# Christianity, masculinity and authority in the life of George Sarawia\*

JANE SAMSON

## Abstract

*George Sarawia was ordained in 1873 as the first Melanesian Anglican priest. This article presents preliminary research findings concerning the various constructs of masculinity deployed by Sarawia, his indigenous community, and the mission. A high-ranking member of the indigenous men's society, and part of an extended family, Sarawia integrated Christian concepts of brotherhood and fatherhood with controversial results. Some of his fellow missionaries accused him of leading his people more as an indigenous big-man than as a priest. The article contends that the career of George Sarawia revealed a negotiation, rather than an imposition, of masculinities reflecting indigenous as well as western priorities.*

## Résumé

*George Sarawia, ordonné en 1873, a été le premier prêtre anglican de Mélanésie. Cet article présente des résultats de recherche préliminaires sur les divers concepts de virilité élaborés par Sarawia, sa communauté indigène et sa mission. Membre de haut rang de la société masculine indigène et membre d'une famille élargie, Sarawia a intégré dans son ministère les concepts chrétiens de fraternité et de paternité, mais avec des résultats controversés. Il s'est d'ailleurs fait accuser par certains confrères missionnaires d'encadrer ses paroissiens davantage comme un aîné indigène que comme un prêtre. L'étude de la carrière de George Sarawia révèle en fait sa volonté non pas d'imposer des notions de masculinité mais de chercher des compromis reflétant les priorités indigènes tout autant qu'occidentales.*

A peculiar debate took place one day in 1902 on the southwest Pacific island of Mota. At the mission house, standing on drop-cloths amid the smell of

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\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2009 Canadian Historical Association conference in Ottawa. I am grateful to panel organizer Adele Perry for the opportunity to expand it for publication, and to two anonymous referees for helping me to improve it.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

fresh paint, the Rev. Walter Durrad and Miss Florence Coombe, both of the Melanesian Mission, attempted to turn Bishop Cecil Wood to their way of thinking about the *suqe* (men's society) of the Banks Islands.<sup>1</sup> Coombe argued in favour of allowing the *suqe* to continue among Melanesian Christians, but Durrad argued against it.<sup>2</sup> The bishop reserved judgment until he could determine what had gone so badly wrong at the village where the world's first Melanesian priest, George Sarawia, had presided over a declining flock.

Sarawia had been ordained to priesthood in 1873; this early date reflected the Melanesian Mission's emphasis on indigenous-led Christianization. It is well known that indigenous teachers and pastors led the expansion of Christianity in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in Africa and the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Most work on gender and missions is focused on women, either female missionaries, indigenous women, or both.<sup>4</sup> The richness of this work should have inspired a corresponding interest in masculinity and missions, but "Here we have a real problem," wrote Niel Gunson in the pioneering days of Pacific historiography.<sup>5</sup> The problem has persisted with regard to the

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- 1 There were (and are) many such societies in the western Pacific. Nineteenth-century accounts of this one vary the spelling; *suqe* and *sukwe* being the most common. Codrington's preference for *suqe* was shared by other members of the Melanesian Mission and continues to be the standard rendering in anthropological literature. For example, see Frantisek Lichtenberk, "Leadership in Proto-Oceanic Society: Linguistic Evidence," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 95, no. 3 (1986): 341–56.
  - 2 Detailed studies of the work of Durrad and Coombe, like most members of the Melanesian Mission, have yet to be written. Basic details on education and dates of service can be found in David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen. A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849–1942* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 298–9.
  - 3 For general context, see Kenelm Burridge, *In The Way: a study of Christian missionary endeavours* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991); Peter Williams, *The Ideal of the Self-Governing Church: A Study in Victorian Missionary Strategy* (Lieden: Brill, 1990); and Peggy Brock, "New Christians as evangelists" in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Africanists have led the way in highlighting the role of indigenous teachers and clergy. For a retrospective of African scholarship, see Terence Ranger, "Christianity and the First Peoples: Some Second Thoughts" in *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change*, ed. Peggy Brock (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Work on the Pacific world's indigenous missionaries is comparatively scarce, but inter alia, see Ron and Marjorie Crocombe, eds. *Polynesian Missions in Melanesia* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1982); Peggy Brock, "Setting the Record Straight: New Christians and Mission Christianity" in *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change*, 107–28; and Lange Raeburn, *Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in Nineteenth Century Pacific Islands Christianity* (Canberra: Pandanus Books in association with Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, 2005).
  - 4 Margaret Jolly's work has been foundational in the Pacific context; see her "'To Save the Girls for Better and Brighter Lives': Presbyterian missions and women in the south of Vanuatu, 1848–1870," *Journal of Pacific History* 26, no. 1: 27–48; and *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu* (Reading, UK: Harwood, 1994).
  - 5 Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: evangelical missionaries in the South Seas 1797–1860* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), 155.

study of Pacific masculinities generally, prompting Margaret Jolly to edit a special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific* in order to explore the “dialogue between the masculine scripts”<sup>6</sup> which took place when indigenous masculinities interacted with outside forces. She invites a consideration of how “Indigenous masculinities have been formed in relation to, as much as resistance against, hegemonic foreign models; and through such histories, hybrid hegemonies have emerged.”<sup>7</sup> Implicit here, and in most recent scholarship on gender and masculinity, is the assumption that gender is socially constructed. This is a fruitful and sophisticated approach, but unfortunately the papers in Jolly’s collection are typical (in the context of Pacific historiography) in their neglect of religion. As John Gascoigne and Hilary Carey have pointed out in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Religious History*, “there remains a tendency to relegate religion below political and economic features”; if religion is considered at all, it is often dismissed as a western colonial imposition, despite the fact that “much of the missionary work was actually performed by often unsung members of the indigenous population.”<sup>8</sup> Given the ongoing importance of Christianity in much of the Pacific world, the relationship between indigenous masculinities and religion is surely a crucial one. This paper will explore a number of gendered terms and relationships in order to reveal the complexity of the “dialogue between the masculine scripts” in the life and ministry of George Sarawia, the Melanesian Mission’s first indigenous priest.<sup>9</sup>

The Melanesian Mission developed in the wake of Britain’s colonization of New Zealand. Following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by British and Maori leaders in 1840, a clerical error gave the first Anglican bishop of the new

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6 Margaret Jolly, “Moving Masculinities: Memories and Bodies Across Oceania,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1.

7 Ibid., 3. Two recent dissertations in Canada have opened up the debate in that context: Derek Whitehouse-Strong, “‘Because I Happen to be a native clergyman’: The impact of race, ethnicity, status, and gender on native agents of the Church Missionary Society in the nineteenth-century Canadian North-West,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 2004); and Justin Tolly Bradford, “Remaking Indigenaity: Indigenous Missionaries in the British Empire, 1820–1875,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 2009).

8 Hilary Carey, “Religion and the ‘Evil Empire’,” *Journal of Religious History* 2, no. 32 (2008): 187; and John Gascoigne, “Introduction: Religion and Empire, an Historiographical Perspective,” *ibid.*, 171.

9 These findings are preliminary. Although I have researched extensively in Pacific mission archives, I have only begun to explore Sarawia’s life. The Melanesian Mission archives are notoriously patchy and scattered; it lacks the large runs of manuscript letters and journals found, say, in the Church Missionary Society records. Correspondence often survives only in mission newsletters or in other contemporary, published sources. These challenges should not deter research into the lives of indigenous missionaries; on the contrary, we should use whatever records we can to pursue this important topic regardless of the lack of substantial, traditional archival materials.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

colony a much larger diocese than was intended. Bishop George Selwyn eagerly took advantage of the situation, making his first visit to the western islands of Melanesia in 1857.<sup>10</sup> A momentous meeting took place at the island of Mota between a young George Sarawia and Rev. John Coleridge Patteson, a member of Bishop Selwyn's staff who later became the first Bishop of Melanesia.<sup>11</sup> Both men were gifted linguists and, perched in the stern of the mission ship, Patteson asked Sarawia for the names of various places, people, and objects, and wrote down his answers. This was Patteson's first encounter with a native Mota-speaker and Sarawia's first brave venture aboard a European vessel.<sup>12</sup> There was no doubt that at this early stage it was Sarawia who was the teacher and Patteson the pupil.

White men proved to be more intelligent than Sarawia had expected, and he eventually agreed to travel to New Zealand to attend the mission school at Kohimarama, not least because he was interested in acquiring European goods.<sup>13</sup> Once there, however, a mutual education project began, with Patteson teaching Christian history and doctrine, and Sarawia teaching Patteson about his people's language and culture.<sup>14</sup> Patteson's cousin and biographer, Charlotte Mary Yonge, noted the contributions made by Sarawia and other early Mota students at the school where they were Patteson's "masters in the language, of which he as yet scarcely knew anything, but which he afterwards found the most serviceable of all these various dialects."<sup>15</sup> A sense of indebtedness to his student-teachers is found throughout Patteson's writings. He never

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10 The standard history of the Melanesian Mission remains Hilliard's *God's Gentlemen*.

11 Selwyn created the Melanesian Mission as a missionary diocese, and consecrated Patteson as its first bishop in 1861. He led the mission until his death at the hands of Nukapu Islanders in 1871. See W. H. Fremantle, "Patteson, John Coleridge (1827–1871)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, rev. David Hilliard, eds. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/article/21580>>, (viewed 1 February 2010); and David Hilliard, "Patteson, John Coleridge 1827–1871," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, <<http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>>, (viewed 1 February 2010). After his death, Patteson became one of the most famous missionary heroes of the Victorian era; see John Gutch, *Martyr of the islands; the life and death of John Coleridge Patteson* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971).

12 George Sarawia, *They Came to my Island* (Siota, Solomon Islands: St. Peter's College, 1968), ii. The printed version is extremely scarce and no manuscript version of this autobiography has yet come to light; a section of the typed final draft can be found among some papers of Codrington's in Australian Joint Copying Project, reel M804, "Sarawia, George."

13 *Ibid.*, 8.

14 *Ibid.*, 10.

15 Charlotte Mary Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson, Missionary Bishop of the Melanesian Islands*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), 224. Yonge received numerous letters from Patteson which she transcribes in this published work; in many cases the letters apparently survive nowhere else, making this a crucial primary source for any study of Sarawia's life and ministry.

had time to write up most of his ethnological research, explaining to the distinguished European philologist Max Müller that his commitment to racial equality in the running of the mission school meant that much of his time was taken up with nursing the sick and other daily chores. He refused to employ servants and shunned the institutionalized brutality he had experienced as a boy at Eton College: “no one counts any work degrading” at the mission, he told Müller, “and still less does any one quâ white consider himself entitled to fag a Melanesian.”<sup>16</sup>

After Patteson’s murder in 1871, Robert Codrington became head of the mission and one of the most celebrated missionary anthropologists of his day.<sup>17</sup> Oxford-educated and a virtuoso linguist, he ran the mission school at Norfolk Island from 1867 to 1887 and made occasional expeditions of his own to the western Pacific islands, particularly those of the Solomon and Banks group that were at the heart of the mission’s sphere of operations. Among the results were two major monographs, a range of scholarly articles, and a process of intellectual networking that allowed him to bring Oxford to the islands, and the islands to Oxford. Like Patteson, Codrington relied heavily on Sarawia’s knowledge and social networks to pursue his researches.<sup>18</sup>

This situation raises questions about the relationship between race and faith in Sarawia’s own identity and in the ways that he was perceived by his mentors and colleagues at the mission. In her work on indigenous mission teachers in the Canadian northwest, Winona Wheeler has discerned a process of “impression management” by which indigenous men reassured their superiors of their fitness for mission work.<sup>19</sup> For Patteson, Sarawia’s trustworthiness was of prime importance. Writing to Bishop Henry Harper, the Primate of New Zealand and Bishop of Christchurch, Patteson described Sarawia’s ordination as deacon in 1868, calling him “the first (I hope) of a goodly bank of Melanesian clergymen.” Ordained at the same service was “a very good young

16 Ibid., vol. 2, 123.

17 Codrington lacks entries in both the current British and New Zealand dictionaries of national biography, perhaps because (at his own wish) he was never ordained Bishop. See Hilliard, *God’s Gentlemen*, 79, and Allan K. Davidson, “The Legacy of Robert Henry Codrington,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27, no. 4 (2003): 171–6. He does have entries in some anthropological dictionaries, for example, David Lonergan, “Codrington, Robert Henry,” in *International Dictionary of Anthropologists*, ed. Christopher Winters (New York: Garland, 1991), 116–17; and Gérard Gaillard, *The Routledge Dictionary of Anthropologists*, trans. Peter James Bowman (London: Routledge, 2004), 30.

18 For example, Robert Codrington, *The Melanesians. Studies in their Anthropology and Folk-Lore* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891), v–vi.

19 Winona Wheeler, “The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851–1884,” in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 247–9.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

fellow, Bice of St. Augustine's College." Charles Bice was an Englishman fresh from the Anglican theological college in Canterbury, but he and Sarawia were both ordained in the Mota language; indeed, the entire service was conducted in Mota.<sup>20</sup> Fluent though Patteson was by now (and Bice had been making good progress since his arrival from England), it was therefore Sarawia who was master of the language of the service. Patteson felt obliged to explain that although "He is not the cleverest of our Melanesians," he was "the most trustworthy perhaps," which came from "a steadiness of character — a soundness of judgment, and a real hearty desire to live well & teach well," which had "long made us all feel a great esteem for him."<sup>21</sup> Expectations were therefore high. Patteson's frequent references to trust, character and judgment show us a man determined to overlook race, culture, and education as primary features of Sarawia's ordained identity. They also indicate, however, the perceived need to defend the decision to ordain a Melanesian man. Tension was at the heart of even the most tender of Patteson's praises.

After being ordained, Sarawia returned to Mota to run his own mission station. On a visit in 1875, Codrington reported numerous baptisms and a chapel that was "altogether too small, in fact if the Christian people all come to prayers on Sunday, they can't half of them get in I am sure."<sup>22</sup> An elderly man who had once opposed the mission had become one of its first converts, naming one of his sons after Codrington's brother William. A new schoolhouse had been built to accommodate another Christian community at Navgoe (also on Mota). Sarawia's mission was thriving to the point that Codrington found the very numerous baptisms on Mota "surprisingly so to me" even though he did not "think George is hasty in baptizing."<sup>23</sup>

Sarawia's mission village on Mota was a purpose-built creation. As a student Sarawia had been very impressed by the orderly life of a mission community centred around its chapel and school. Wishing to create such a community for himself, he discussed the idea with the other Mota men and boys at the mission school before approaching the Bishop with his plan.<sup>24</sup> "The idea," Patteson wrote "would be to have everything native fashion but improved, so as to be clearly suitable for the wants of the people sufficiently civilized. All that a Christian finds helpful and expedient we ought to have, but to adopt English notions and habits would defeat my object."<sup>25</sup> Movement from "the idea" (Sarawia's idea) to "my object" shows Patteson taking control of the pro-

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20 Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL), Miscellaneous Papers, MS 2797, f. 53, J.C. Patteson to Henry Harper, 24 December, 1868.

21 Ibid.

22 Melanesian Mission, *The Island Voyage* (Ludlow: Edward J. Partridge, 1876), 8.

23 Ibid.

24 Gutch, *Martyr of the Islands*, 179.

25 Quoted in *ibid.*

ject; Patteson also insisted that the mission purchase land for the new village, over-ruling the wishes of Mota families who had wished to donate their property. Apparently, however, “everyone was happy with the purchase price of hatchets, pigs, and so on.”<sup>26</sup>

Patteson’s role should not be overstated. Powerful Mota families had wished to donate land to the mission, indicating an interest in patronage. Thwarted in some respects by Patteson’s wishes, Sarawia and his allies turned the tables, consciously or otherwise, on the usual relationship of European master and indigenous pupil. Once a pupil, Sarawia was now master of his own community. His choice of name is very interesting: did he name his new village “Kohimarama” to underline affection and deference for his old school community, or his desire to lead a new incarnation of it, this time as the priest in charge? It was probably a bit of both. The word is Maori — the indigenous New Zealand name — so the ultimate origin of the word was itself indigenous, although not Melanesian.

Purpose-built mission villages were usually founded by European missionaries, as in the Metlakahtlah community established on the northwest coast of North America by the evangelical Anglican missionary William Duncan. Adele Perry writes of Metlakahtlah that it

was the England Duncan was dispossessed from, yearned for, and, in no small part, concocted. It was, as Comaroff and Comaroff phrase it, a “neat fusion of three idealized worlds” — the rational capitalist age, the idyllic countryside, and the sovereign “Empire of God” where ‘temporal affairs remained securely under divine authority.’<sup>27</sup>

The situation was more complex, however, when a mission community was founded by an indigenous leader whose idealized worlds were not necessarily derived from European models. Tolly Bradford’s study of the Anglican Cree priest Henry Budd’s village at The Pas in the Canadian northwest raises useful questions about Sarawia’s mission village.<sup>28</sup> Budd recruited community elders (“principal Indians”) to lead services in his absence, reinforcing their already-high status.<sup>29</sup> Sarawia’s relatives were prominent at Kohimarama and its satellite communities: his deacon Robert Pantutun was the brother of his daughter-in-law; Sarawia’s brother Bat led one of the satellite schools founded by the mission. This was a methodology congenial to the European missionaries as well. The Melanesian Mission, like the Universities Mission to Central

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Adele Perry, “The Autocracy of Love and the Legitimacy of Empire: Intimacy, Power and Scandal in Nineteenth-Century Metlakahtlah,” *Gender & History*, 16, no. 2 (2004): 265.

<sup>28</sup> Bradford, *Remaking Indigeneity*, 198–201.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 205.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

Africa, was a decidedly upper-class venture, and its members were from an England still steeped in aristocratic nepotism.<sup>30</sup>

Later on, a new form of village government would be introduced by Sarawia and his colleagues, not least because indigenous male power networks, such as the *suke*, had been disrupted by the mission. While there is no doubt that contact with Europeans influenced Sarawia's conception of the ideal village, it should not be assumed that nothing remained of Melanesian priorities. Melanesian society was already organized around agrarian villages and leading families before Europeans arrived; Melanesians had their own idealisms and yearnings to accommodate.

In the villages of the Banks Islands and elsewhere in the region, missionaries had observed that exclusive, graded societies of various sorts dominated the lives and status of men.<sup>31</sup> One of the most important of these was the *suke*, with its multiple ranks, initiations and ceremonies. To move up the ranks required money and goods; to acquire those, a complicated financial system developed to enable men to borrow what they needed to achieve and maintain status. More junior men would be indebted to them in turn, permitting money and goods to circulate.

Elaborate ceremonies surrounded the achievement of each new rank, and at the highest levels the entire village might be drawn in to the celebrations. Women, girls, and uninitiated boys were excluded from most *suke* ceremonies, and always from the men's house (*gamal*) where the initiates met around cooking fires carefully separated by rank. The highest-ranking man was usually the

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30 In her work on the role of class in Congregational missions, Susan Thorne has noted the possibilities for upward mobility among working and middle-class missionaries because of their preference for working with indigenous élites. See Susan Thorne, *Congregational missions and the making of an imperial culture in nineteenth-century England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). In the case of the Melanesian Mission, however, the methodology of working with élites was maintained despite the high social status of its European members, suggesting that the desire for upward social mobility should not be overestimated in mission historiography.

31 Melanesia is one of anthropology's most popular and enduring fields of study and the literature on Melanesian social organization is vast. Missionaries were the first ethnographers of men's societies in the early contact period, but there is no space here for a comparison of their work with that of the later professional anthropologists. For a useful introduction to the field, see Bruce M. Knauff, *From primitive to postcolonial in Melanesia and anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). My summary of the Melanesian Mission's views of the *suke* comes primarily from Codrington's work, especially *The Melanesians and "Religious Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia," Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 10 (1881): 261–316. In this seminal article, Codrington warns his readers that the *suke* had no religious character, but he included a discussion of it because it shed light on the accumulation of *mana*, and *mana* was at the foundation of Melanesia spirituality. My intent is not to claim that missionary observations were objectively correct, but instead to show the ethnographic baseline from which accusations against Sarawia were made.

“chief” or “king” whom visiting Europeans identified as the leader of the village. What Europeans often did not understand, however, was that big-man status was not hereditary or even life-long; it was dependent on a man’s ability to maintain prestige through various means including high rank in the *suqe*. Declining prestige invited rivalry and replacement.

The relationship between *suqe* rank and ordained Christian ministry must now be considered. After Sarawia’s death in 1901, some members of the mission wondered whether his priesthood or his *suqe* rank was responsible for the initial success of the mission under his leadership. These speculations seem to have begun with Mr. H.V. Adams, a layman with the mission, who “in speaking of the great influence of George Sarawia the Mota Priest, used to say he received far more honour for his high place in the Suqe, than for his office as priest .... The missionary sees that where the Suqe is strong, the Church is weak, and where Suqe does not flourish, the people can and do give more attention to the Christian teaching.”<sup>32</sup>

Actually, Patteson’s policy (continued under Codrington’s leadership) refused to recognize rivalry between indigenous and Christian institutions *per se*. Patteson was strikingly reflexive on this subject, writing to his cousin Charlotte that “We are so far removed from [Melanesians] in matters not at all necessarily connected with Christianity, that unless we can denationalize ourselves and eliminate all that belongs to us as English, and not as Christians, we cannot be to them what a well-instructed fellow-countryman may be.”<sup>33</sup> In Patteson’s opinion, Sarawia’s status in his own community gave strength to his mission. “He is nearer to them. They understand him. He brings the teaching to them in a practical and intelligible form.”<sup>34</sup> Later, in his diary, he recorded his reasons for deciding to ordain Sarawia as a deacon. Having been “for nine years my pupil and for the last three or four my friend and helper,” Sarawia was not only appropriately educated and conscientious, but “he has long held a recognised position with all here and in New Zealand, and for the last two years the Mota people and the neighbouring islanders have quite regarded him as one whom they recognise as their leader and teacher, one of our own race, yet ‘not like us — different, he knows and does what we can’t do and don’t know’.”<sup>35</sup> Patteson was assuming that he understood the nature of Sarawia’s leadership on Mota, but did he?

Young men of high rank were prominent in the Melanesian Mission. Clement Marau, ordained in 1890 and part of a younger generation than Sarawia’s, wrote an extensive autobiography in which he explained the connections. His father Qoqoe, known later as Wetuka, was the local big-man on

32 Walter Durrad, *The Attitude of the Church to the Suqe*, 18.

33 Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, vol. 2, 187.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 211.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

Mota when Patteson first went ashore in 1863. He had three sons. He sent the two older ones, Woqas and Womber, to be educated at the mission school at Kohimarama where they died of fever in 1868. Despite this tragedy, Wetuka sent his only remaining son Marau to the school where he took the baptismal name of one of his dead brothers: Clement.<sup>36</sup> Clement Marau went on to a successful ministry in Solomon Islands, far from the lands of his father, but the point here is the clear connection between men of high rank, their sons, and ordination in the Melanesian Mission. It is certainly fair to ask whether this connection facilitated or hindered mission activities.

Adams' allegation might have been the basis for statements made on this subject by John Garrett, one of the pioneering historians of Pacific Christianity. Speaking of indigenous Anglican clergy in the Banks Islands, Garrett stated, "They sometimes sought to assert themselves as local Big Men, adding to their 'livings' in traditional ways, the gathering in of local wealth as measured by holdings in pigs, produce and women."<sup>37</sup> This statement is undocumented and it is unclear, for example, which clergy collected women to increase their status. Further allegations follow:

Some used pre-Christian secret societies to further their local power. In several prominent cases they concealed what they did from white missionaries who had watched over their advance to the diaconate and priesthood. George Sarawia on the island of Mota in the Banks Group, Clement Marau on the island of Ulawa, and Robert Pantutun, a respected deacon on Mota, were all regarded as signs of hope for the emerging church; all three acknowledged falls from grace, through compromise with secret societies and the offering of ceremonial sacrifices to ancestor spirits; these were familiar methods of gaining status and power. Resort to the old ways was partly attributable to the mission's slowness in delegating authority. Successive white bishops were slow to share their power.<sup>38</sup>

The only documentation provided for these statements is a reference to another of Garrett's books where he declared that

the received version of [Sarawia's] work and stature persisted until 1910, when it was revealed that Sarawia's hold over the people had been in fact due to his having secretly continued to hold the rank of Head Man in the sukwe, a Mota pre-Christian ceremonial society of rank and status intermeshed with traditional amassing of wealth and prestige by spells. The sukwe was officially proscribed by the mission. Sarawia's Christian priestly role, the pleading of

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36 Clement Marau, *Story of a Melanesian Deacon: Clement Marau*, trans. Robert Codrington (London: Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge, 1894), 78.

37 John Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea. Christianity in Oceania to World War II* (Suva and Geneva: University of the South Pacific and the World Council of Churches, 1992), 68.

38 *Ibid.*, 68.

the Supreme Sacrifice, had been neatly tied in with non-christian sources of possessions and power. This sobering information came through deathbed revelations of an Anglican deacon, Robert Pantutun, who had been his assistant.<sup>39</sup>

There are no references at all for this paragraph, so the first task is an investigation of the historical record.

Sarawia himself recalled that, in earlier years, during breaks between trips to the mission school in New Zealand, he had taken part in the traditional activities of ambitious Mota men, including warfare.<sup>40</sup> It is probable that his rise in *suge* rank began during this time. By the time of his ordination as deacon, he might have reached such high rank that he no longer had to prove himself in war. Patteson's journal tell us that the islanders

quite look upon him as free from all the difficulties which attend a man's position as inheriting feuds, animosities, &c. He goes anywhere; when the island may be in a disturbed state, no one would hurt him; he is no partisan in their eyes, a man of other habits and thoughts and character, a teacher of all.<sup>41</sup>

Did Sarawia go anywhere without harm, transcending local conflicts, because he was a Christian man of "other habits" or was the situation more complex than that? Since Patteson himself condoned *suge* membership as compatible with Christianity, would Sarawia's complex identity pose a problem for the mission, or would it be regarded as an advantage?

Garrett has said that the mission's success was due to Sarawia's status in the *suge*, yet contemporary sources usually blame the *suge* for the *decline* of his mission after its initial success. Which is it? There is no reason to doubt Sarawia's high social status, or its connection with the runaway success of his early years in ministry; but it calls into question the original claim made by Adams that "where the *Suge* is strong, the Church is weak"? Patteson's earliest writings about the *suge* and other men's societies show that he regarded them primarily as teaching points:

Of course such a system can be used by us in two ways. I say you have your method of assembling together, and you observe certain customs in so doing; so do we, but yours is an exclusive and selfish system: your secret societies are like our clubs, with their entrance fees, &c. But Christ's society has its sacred rite of admission, and other mysteries too, and it is for all who wish to belong to it. He recognises no distinction of male or female, bond or free.<sup>42</sup>

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39 John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Suva and Geneva: University of the South Pacific and the World Council of Churches, 1982), 186.

40 Sarawia, *They Came to My Island*, 13–14.

41 Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, vol. 2, 211.

42 Ibid., 168.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

The bishop noted the suspicious attitude of older Mota men toward Christianity, declaring that “whatever there may be in their customs incompatible with the great law of Love to God and man must come to naught.” He singled out the bullying of non-initiates as an example: “‘You beat and terrify [them] in order to make them give, that you may get pigs and native money from them’. Such conduct is all wrong, for it you beat or frighten a youth or man, you certainly can’t love him.”<sup>43</sup> Later he concluded that there was an “evil which attends all secret societies, that it tends to produce invidious distinctions and castes. An instinct impels men to form themselves into associations; but then Christ has satisfied that instinct legitimately in the Church.”<sup>44</sup> Later generations of Anglican activists would drive this point home with regard to the invidious distinctions of gender and sexual orientation in church leadership; Patteson’s point was limited to general conditions of membership where, for example, all women and girls were banned from the *suqe* and its meeting places, but were welcomed through baptism into full church membership.

What about Garrett’s claim concerning missionaries like Sarawia who allegedly maintained pre-Christian traditions in the guise of Christian clergy? A warning from John Barker is useful here. An anthropologist who specializes in Melanesian Christianities, Barker has for decades been calling for western scholars to question the standards of authenticity which they have usually applied to religious change. “A narrow conception of cultural authenticity” was combined with “a simplistic conception of Christianity as a missionary imposition.”<sup>45</sup> Barker notes that few scholars “have looked at the actions or interpretations of individuals” in the process of Christianization, declaring, “It would be most interesting to know how indigenous clergy and lay people understand and attempt to live out Christian beliefs.”<sup>46</sup> There are questions of historical chronology as well. Garrett implies that the *suqe* was proscribed by the mission during Sarawia’s lifetime, making his multiple masculine identities seem excitingly transgressive, but debate about *suqe* membership continued into the twentieth century after Sarawia’s death. Only later was it proscribed. Instead of feeling compelled to take a reductive stand on Sarawia’s authenticity — “missionary hero” versus “secret pagan hypocrite” — it is more useful to explore the interplay between different scripts of masculinity in Sarawia’s life. For one thing, a declining population at Sarawia’s mission questions any simplistic equation of *suqe* status with Christian authority.

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 169.

45 John Barker, “Christianity in Western Melanesian Ethnography” in *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*, ed. James G. Carrier (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 145.

46 Ibid., 155.

By the 1890s, Sarawia's model village was in trouble. Bishop Wilson, visiting in 1894, felt that "there is something wrong somewhere. The people attend church badly, and the reasons seem to be — first, the *Suqe*, or village society is strong, Sarawia has been away, and previous to that he had been lame and unable to get about the island."<sup>47</sup> Sarawia's deacon, Robert Pantutun, was "now old and has not the influence with his people that he once had."<sup>48</sup> At his next stop the bishop visited the school led by George Sarawia's brother Bat, noting, "He and his people lack energy." The local *suqe* might be strong, but the influence of Sarawia and his family clearly was not. David Hilliard has concluded that the mission village lacked indigenous grounding: "Patteson's ideal Christian village had been a theological construction, and when put to the test, the romanticism of the original concept was easily exposed."<sup>49</sup>

Later, however, Bishop Henry Montgomery had praised Sarawia "as the most faithful and consistent of all the native clergy," who had "always been the chief influence for good in Mota." Although "his hair is now turning grey; no one who has met him can help calling him 'dear George'." His goodness and consistency appear in all he says and does."<sup>50</sup> Although his personal influence clearly waxed and waned, Sarawia's status, and that of his mission, had more to do with the cycle of *suqe* activity than anything else. This picture is hardly compatible with monolithic judgments about "success" or "failure," or with a dismissal of indigenous priorities and decisions. The mission had been Sarawia's own idea; not Patteson's. No doubt Sarawia had been influenced by stories of other mission villages, but the decision to found and run Kohimarama was his own. Whatever happened there, and why, cannot be reduced to "a theological construct" that was somehow the exclusive property of Patteson and the other European missionaries.

The evidence also suggests a generational dynamic at work in the mission community. Bishop Cecil Wilson had observed, "The younger generation would be glad to see [the *suqe*] stopped altogether, and I hear that men like H. Tagalad and Clement Marau are of the same opinion with them."<sup>51</sup> These young men were the next generation of mission teachers and future clergy. Inter-generational rivalry, in dialogue with western concepts of masculinity introduced by the mission, were enabling younger men to challenge the authority of the old ways. Deacon Robert died during Bishop Wood's visit, and the Bishop called a men's meeting at which he announced a ban on the *suqe*.

47 Wilson, "Bishop Wilson's Journal," *The Southern Cross Log* 1, no. 5 (1895): 2.

48 H.V. Adams, "The Banks Islands," *The Southern Cross Log* (April 1905), 32.

49 Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, 61.

50 H.H. Montgomery and Project Canterbury, *The Light of Melanesia: A Record of Fifty Years' Mission Work in the South Seas* (New York: E.S. Gorham, 1904), <<http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/melanesia/montgomery1904/10.html>>, (viewed 5 October 2009).

51 Wilson, "Bishop Wilson's Journal," 3.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

“Some were well-pleased by this decision,” he reported, “particularly the younger men who see through, and are weary of the nonsense and deception of the old ways .... However, these were quite in a minority, and now had to suffer some persecution from the others.”<sup>52</sup> The Bishop was pleased to see that John Pantutun (Deacon Robert’s eldest son) “carries great weight in the island, and I enlisted his aid.”<sup>53</sup> When the bishop returned to Mota an exorcism of sacred stones was held; men who had found Pantutun persuasive had decided to use church ritual to neutralize the alarming power of these traditional objects. Writing in 1906, Bishop H.H. Montgomery was thoroughly optimistic about Anglicanism in the Banks Islands; including Mota, the island group now featured, “SIX clergy (two white); one hundred and twenty-one teachers; fifty-two schools; three thousand one hundred and forty-six baptized persons. The Rev. George Sarawia was in charge here till 1901.”<sup>54</sup>

The traditional catholic ideal of universal ministry suggested a brotherhood among bishops and the priests and deacons they ordained. Anglicanism had retained this understanding of ordained brotherhood, yet the mission field relentlessly challenged the borderlines of race, class, and gender that tended to constrain it. Sarawia’s race and education had to be explained away by even his most earnest supporters. A single letter — all in his own voice that has come to light so far apart from his autobiography — shows us how Sarawia himself was conscious of “otherness” even as he expressed the depth of his Christian spirituality. Asked by Codrington to write a short essay on confirmation, just after receiving the sacrament himself, Sarawia scribbled down his thoughts in Mota. “Don’t accuse the old gentleman of being a sanctimonious individual who must *speak or write ‘good’*,” declares a note in Codrington’s handwriting; on the back of the note Sarawia had written, “Letter from the Head Cook”: a shared joke about his fondness for coordinating work in the mission’s kitchen. The short note itself, however, is written seriously:

You went back (home) from us, but our hearts have not forgotten you. We have seen the photograph you wrote formerly we gathered in the hall we still think about you, when we [including C.]were still there together. Formerly we didn’t know you [pl.]. The bishop went to see our island and took us here to New Zealand and taught us about the way [customs, law] of God, and then our hearts were enlightened. When we thought about our customs [we realised that] they were bad. And now seven of us have been baptised, six of us confirmed, and one not yet. Bishop Patteson confirmed us. We thought that this was good. We thought about the apostles of old, Peter & John, who laid hands [lit. touched] on the people at Samaria who then received grace when the two

52 Wood, “Endeavour to Purify the Church in the Banks Islands,” *The Southern Cross Log* (April 1911), 151.

53 Ibid., 153.

54 Montgomery and Project Canterbury, *The Light of Melanesia*.

of them put their hands on them. It was good to do thus. Don't forget us. G. Sarawia.<sup>55</sup>

There is much of interest in this remarkable document; for now it is important to highlight the connection that Sarawia is making with two of the founding apostles of Christianity. There is clear evidence here of a catholic sacramental theology: confirmation, conveyed by the laying on of hands by a bishop, imparts a connection through the Holy Spirit to the church and to all believers as part of the body of Christ. Sarawia, however, singles out the Samaritan story for reasons relating as much to difference as to sameness. Having committed large portions of scripture to memory, as did most of the mission school's students, he would have been very familiar with the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>56</sup> It was the story of the early church and its missionary movement outside Judaism; its first chapter refers to this outward movement: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."<sup>57</sup> This verse links the sacrament of confirmation — the laying on of hands to confirm the presence of the Holy Spirit — directly with missionary expansion. Samaritans were technically Jews, but their distinctive practices and distance from Jerusalem frequently called their orthodoxy into question during the time of Jesus and the first apostles. Jesus' own ministry had scandalized many when he extended it to Samaritans, especially when he spoke directly with a Samaritan women. The eighth chapter of Acts tells how the early apostles, from their headquarters in Jerusalem, heard that some Samaritans had become Christians. Peter and John travelled to Samaria and "when they were come down, [they] prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost."<sup>58</sup> The point here is that Sarawia was using scripture to script a bond of brotherhood that extended back through time, to the early church, while simultaneously drawing attention to barriers of race and culture. Of the many examples of the laying on of hands in Acts, he chose one which combined "brothering" with "othering."

55 There are no other documents in Sarawia's own handwriting that I am aware of. I found this letter (transcribed here) in a small collection of papers on the Melanesian Mission, "Kebale Deposit 8," at the LPL archives. The original letter by Sarawia is included along with a partial interlinear translation (probably by Codrington) and a full translation done in 1991 by the Rt. Rev. Derek Rawcliffe, Bishop of the New Hebrides.

56 He would have known the Mota translation as prepared by Patteson, Codrington, and others with his help. I quote here from the *King James Bible*, Authorized Version, which was the standard English bible of the day.

57 Ibid., Acts 1:8.

58 Ibid., 8:15-17.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

Bishop Patteson struggled with the same tension. Sometimes he spoke of an advantage on Sarawia's side. Describing the "highly artificial" life of westerners and their "troublesome civilisation," he listed all of the items necessary for a western man to travel with limited comfort in Melanesia. However, "My good friend George, who I think is on the whole better dressed than I am, and who has adopted several of our signs of civilisation, finds the food, cooking, and many of the ways of the island natural and congenial."<sup>59</sup> Writing to his cousin Charlotte, he described Sarawia as "an excellent fellow, thoughtful, sensible, and my right hand among the Melanesians for years."<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, he worried about the difference in educational qualifications between the Melanesians he wished to ordain, and their English counterparts:

Again, look at the missionary clergy of old times. No doubt in medieval times so much stress was laid upon the mere perfunctory performance of the ministerial act, as apart from the careful teaching of the meaning and purport of the act, that the medieval missionary is *so far* not a very safe model for us to imitate. But I suppose that multitudes of men did good work who could no more comprehend nor write out the result of lessons that [our students] here are writing out, than our English peasant can comprehend a learned theological treatise. And we must consider the qualifications of one's native clergy in relation to the work that they have to do. They have not to teach theology to educated Christians, but to make known the elements of Gospel truth to ignorant heathen people. If they can state clearly and forcibly the very primary leading fundamental truths of the Gospel, and live as simple-minded humble Christians, that is enough indeed. Perhaps this is as likely to make the Bishop understand my notions on the subject as any more detailed account of the course of instruction.<sup>61</sup> [original emphasis]

Patteson was trying to convince his superior (Bishop George Selwyn of New Zealand) that Sarawia should be treated as a brother ordained; yet his argument relied on comparisons made with earlier periods of time (before the Reformation) or inferior social rank ("our English peasant"). By 1871, worried that there was no priest at Mota to celebrate Eucharist for the growing number of communicants there, he wrote to friends:

I am half disposed to ordain George [a] Priest on my return (D.V.) Yet on the whole I think it may be better to wait till another year. But I am balancing considerations. Should any delay occur from my incapacity to go to Mota, which I don't at all anticipate, it would be a serious thing to leave such a work in the hands of a Deacon ... and I really believe that George, though not learned, is in all essentials quite a fit person to be ordained Priest.<sup>62</sup>

59 Yonge, vol. 2, 162.

60 Ibid., 187.

61 Ibid., 329.

62 Ibid., 364.

Tension between “othering” and “brothering” is seen even more clearly in what is possibly the strangest aspect of this whole story: the fact that the *suqe*’s most virulent critic, H.V. Adams, belonged to that famous men’s society, the Freemasons. Father Walter Durrad recalled that Adams “became an enemy of almost all native ceremonies,” yet “professed to have discovered such close similarities between Freemasonry and the *Suqe* that he would never speak freely about it.”<sup>63</sup> There was a persistent ethnography of “freemasonry” in indigenous Pacific cultures,<sup>64</sup> and Durrad was surprised “that while [Adams] was so enthusiastic a Mason, he was so bitter to the kindred society of the *Suqe*.”<sup>65</sup> This comment prompts a consideration of rival brotherhoods. As a Freemason, Adams clearly wished to create distance between the men’s society he belonged to, and that of the *suqe*, whereas other observers highlighted the apparent universality of such brotherhoods. The Rev. J. Selwyn, for example, described how the men would retreat to their clubhouse for periods of time ranging from ten to 50 days “and the women have to go and stay in another village,” meaning that all church-related activities were brought to a halt. “The men sometimes roam about the woods and make dismal noises which the women-kind are supposed to consider very mysterious. After all it is only a kind of masonry with perhaps as much sense in it — at least to outsiders.”<sup>66</sup> The image of rival men’s societies, proselytizing for converts and condemning (or ridiculing) each other’s organizations certainly sheds new light on the complexity of masculine scripts in Sarawia’s community. Particularly intriguing is Bishop Wood’s induction as a Freemason, under Adams’ influence, after he retired as Bishop of Melanesia.<sup>67</sup> It had been Wood who proved more receptive to Adams’ critique of the *suqe*, overturning the more tolerant policies of previous bishops.

This discussion must now be linked more clearly to the context of European colonialism in the south-west Pacific, taking a broader look at gender relations to glimpse how various masculinities and forms of authority were in dialogue with each other and with a wider world. Male leadership roles were nothing new in Melanesia, but Sarawia and his mission colleagues sought to reconfigure those roles in dialogue with western, Christian understandings. It is worth considering how far to incorporate the critique of scholars studying model villages founded by European missionaries, such as Adele Perry’s study of Metlakatlah where,

63 Durrad, *The Attitude of the Church to the Suqe*, 2.

64 Jane Samson, *Race and Redemption: British Missionary Anthropology in the South Pacific* (forthcoming).

65 Durrad, *The Attitude of the Church to the Suqe*, 2.

66 Journal letter from J. Selwyn, 20 June 1875, printed by the Melanesian Mission in *The Island Voyage, 1875* (Ludlow: Edward J. Partridge, 1876), 38.

67 Durrad, 2.

## CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

Duncan encouraged the Tsimshian to abandon matrilineal, clan-based social organisation and houses in favour of small family units contained and represented by row-houses modelled after those of the British working classes. These efforts to refashion Tsimshian spirituality, economy and gender were all backed by the rule of law, encoded in rules of conduct and enforced by constables, a village council, and, especially after he was appointed Magistrate by the colonial state, Duncan himself.<sup>68</sup>

Catherine Hall's work on missionary villages in the West Indies has also critiqued "a new moral and material world in which Christianity and freedom reigned, where the chief benefactor was the missionary and the very structure of the town embodied his beliefs about the right ordering of the race, the classes, and the sexes."<sup>69</sup> Sarawia's complex status as both indigenous big-man and Christian priest makes it difficult to say whether or not he was the "chief benefactor" because he was a missionary, or because he held high rank in the traditional *suqe*, or both.

These complications also raise questions about the changing status of women on Mota. Mota society was not matrilineal, and the strictly separate worlds of men and women had already generated separate leadership networks. The arrival of female missionaries in the late nineteenth century gives us ethnographic information that could not have been obtained by men, such as the observation by Florence Coombe that women had their own form of the *suqe* and exerted more social influence than male observers realized.<sup>70</sup> They were not merely the passive observers and objects of change among their menfolk:

The women are not quite left out in the cold. They have a sort of *Suqe* of their own, a kind of feeble imitation of their husbands! There is paying of money, and making of feasts, and gaining of rank. A lady may advance to the tattoo stage, or to the wearing of a shell bangle, or, higher still, till she has the felicity of being allowed to improve her face with smudges of red ochre. But I have never heard that there is any secrecy in the women's *Suqe*.<sup>71</sup>

Coombe's sarcasm makes her an unattractive witness, but she raises an interesting point. Did women, especially the wives of clergy, also negotiate and amalgamate various scripts of femininity? The paucity of evidence makes it hard to say, but Sarawia's wife Sarah was clearly an important person in her own right on Mota. Sarawia was already married before his ordination as Deacon, and Sarah, who was frequently ill at home, joined her husband in New Zealand along with two other married couples "and four little maidens to be

68 Perry, "The Autocracy of Love," 265.

69 Cited in *ibid.*

70 Florence Coombe, *Islands of Enchantment*, 81.

71 *Ibid.*

bred up under Mrs. Pritt, girls from twelve to eight years old, of whom Sarah was quite able to take charge.”<sup>72</sup> These were not her own children; just as sons were sent from the islands to the mission school so, it seems, were some daughters. Much work remains to be done on the mission’s women and girls, and on the effect they had on the masculinities being forged there.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on one church and one faith meant that, increasingly, there was only one leadership network: a male one. The exclusion of women from a male-only hierarchy was characteristic of most nineteenth century Christian denominations. Bishop Montgomery recalled an important initiative taken by Sarawia in conjunction with another Anglican priest on Mota:

George Sarawia does not lord it over his people, and therefore it comes to pass that he is sent for to compose quarrels, and is the valued adviser of all. In 1891 the Rev. T.C. Cullwick inaugurated a fresh advance in common, corporate life. On the festival of St. Philip and St. James there was a great meeting at the central place. The day began with a celebration of the Holy Communion, then followed the election of a sort of parliament of head men in each centre, and to this body were delegated powers for the benefit of the community.<sup>73</sup>

In the mission field, the contradiction between this situation and the radicalism of Christian theology was thrown into particularly sharp relief. Missionaries reinforced male authority, distinguishing them from women as religious and political leaders, yet they had criticized the traditional separate cooking, eating, and sleeping arrangements of the *suqe* in Melanesia because “[i]t is antagonistic to the Christian idea that ... family life is the best and highest kind of life.”<sup>74</sup> Eating arrangements had been an early target of criticism even among those who favoured allowing the *suqe* to continue. For critics like Durrad, it was a central obstacle: “The Suqe takes no account of women otherwise than to secure their exclusion. A man and his wife do not share a common meal. This is anti-Christian.”<sup>75</sup> One of the missionaries at Torres Island told Bishop Wilson in 1894 “that the Suqe, very powerful here, forbids men and women ever to eat together; therefore, there could be no communicants in the Torres. [The bishop] therefore announced that he would baptise no one who refused to eat without regard to *Suqe* rules.”<sup>76</sup>

The central question can be put this way: who was the Father of the new community? Was it the local big-man, in conjunction with other high-ranking *suqe* members, or was it the mission priest? By 1924, having inherited Bishop

72 Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, vol. 2, 101.

73 Montgomery and Project Canterbury, *The Light of Melanesia*.

74 Durrad, 18.

75 Ibid.

76 Wilson, “Bishop Wilson’s Journal,” 7.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

Wood's policy of banning the *suqe*, Bishop John Steward wrote of a direct confrontation between the mission and the *suqe* on Mota. "Once the cradle of Melanesian Christianity," Mota was "now one of Satan's strongholds, with its people slaves to the accursed *Suqe*" wrote the bishop. On the northward leg of his island journey that year he had "found signs of renewed life; a church nearly ready to be dedicated, hopes that some candidates for Confirmation might await my return." But on his return journey the *suqe* men had enclosed themselves in the gamal and mission life was at a halt:

I found the church untouched, overgrown with weeds, no services held, for the only faithful teacher was sick, and for weeks his only congregation had been his own family, and all over an indescribable sense of the presence of a triumphant Spirit of Evil. Is it surprising that one's heart is well-nigh broken at times as one hopes and prays, seemingly in vain, for a Father to live among these people?<sup>77</sup>

Sarawia was long dead, but his successor was struggling with the same cyclical pattern. A Christian life structured by daily offices, the importance of Sunday, and the commemoration of holy days was being punctuated by the demands of the *suqe*. The local priest might be called "Father," but he did not have a consistent authority over his flock. The problem had not ended with the death of Sarawia. Later missionaries faced the same difficulties, undermining the argument made by Adams and others that the problem was caused by Sarawia's personal involvement with *suqe*. Whatever his initiation grade may have been, it had not given him sufficient status as Father of the mission; the men continued to withdraw periodically from the Christian calendar and the mission routine. Subsequent missionaries did not have this fatherly authority either, to the frustration of Bishop Steward.

To understand better the mission's attitude toward the separation between different ranks of men, and of men from women and children, it is important to take seriously the theological dilemmas involved. How could the church thrive without full participation in its central celebration, the Eucharist? Bishop Patteson had once written about the Eucharist as having "this simple, but most significant meaning to the primitive convert, of feasting as a child with his brethren and sisters at the Father's Board."<sup>78</sup> It is clear how profoundly he misunderstood Melanesian gender and family relationships: no boy would ever have aspired to sharing his father's cooking fire with his sisters, and no husband would do so with his wife. Ahead of his time, Patteson was working out what

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77 Project Canterbury, "Annual Report of the Melanesian Mission for 1924," transcribed by the Rt Rev. Dr. Terry Brown, Retired Bishop of Malaita <<http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/jmsteward/report1924.html>>, (viewed 4 October, 2009).

78 Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, vol. 2, 169.

would later be known as fulfilment theology, explaining that complacent western Christians failed to understand the radicalism of Eucharist and its universal human efficacy: "To be admitted a member of God's family, and then solemnly at stated times to use this privilege of membership, strengthening the tie, and familiarising oneself more and more with the customs of that heavenly family, this surely is a very great deal of what human instinct, as exhibited in almost universal customs, requires."<sup>79</sup>

Patteson's attitude was typical of the Christian missionary's attempt to build connections across cultures by challenging racial, social, and gender boundaries. It was also typical in its emphasis on divine fatherhood, a male priesthood and hierarchy, and subordinated female roles. These complexities echo Perry's findings in her work on Metlakahtlah; she is rightly critical of monolithic statements about "manliness" or "patriarchy" in feminist scholarship, concluding instead, "The patriarchy of [Duncan's] Mission House, like that of so many domestic households, was based on the overlapping presence of affection and coercion, hatred and admiration, and, at heart, love and violence."<sup>80</sup>

The creativity of the islanders' response to the eventual ban on the *sue* was striking; Mota was not yet under colonial rule, so there were no western legal structures or jurisdictions through which to enforce new gender norms. Instead there is evidence of a thoroughly indigenous response to a problem created by Christianization. Just as men had "eaten up" to the highest ranks of *sue*, by eating only with other men of the same rank, so now they "commenced a course of dinners, each night in a lower room, until they had passed through all the different stages which they had paid so much to surmount, and came out free men."<sup>81</sup> Free, that is, to adopt different social and theological scripts of masculinity. Florence Coombe observed the results, noting that the congregation at Merelava began bringing food for a shared meal following the Sunday service "where men and women sit down together, a thing unknown in Sue times."<sup>82</sup> More to the point, they had just shared the bread and wine of Eucharist. Writing about the mission to Loh in the Torres Islands group, where the *sue* was also found, Ellen Wilson's memoirs tell us of a similar reconfiguration of relationships. Of the four highest-ranking men, only one was willing to "eat down" in order to enter the sacramental life of the church. He had insisted that all of the other *sue* members do so as well, so the process began only after the other three most senior men had died. Then each man descended grade by grade by eating at the cooking fire of men in the rank below "till he

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79 Ibid.

80 Perry, "The Autocracy of Love," 274.

81 Wilson, "Bishop Wilson's Journal," 7.

82 Coombe, *Islands of Enchantment*, 46.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

reaches the space near the door, where the little boys, who have not been initiated, eat. Then a great feast takes place outside with the women.”<sup>83</sup>

At the conclusion of his critical report on Mota, almost as a throw-away detail, Adams wrote, “It is heart-breaking to visit Mota from time to time and to see the enormous death rate there of late years. At present I can only make out 380 people to be living on the island, six years ago when I first commenced my work there amongst them there were upwards of 600 people.”<sup>84</sup> He added, “The Mota teachers are not an energetic company,” but that is hardly to be wondered at if nearly half the population had died in only six years. Introduced disease caused devastation throughout the western Pacific during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Measles caused particularly high morbidity, second only to the impact of the global flu pandemic following World War I. Mortality rates from the flu were higher, but morbidity alone could bring mission work almost to a halt. After his visit in June 1875, Robert Codrington described several thriving Christian communities and a new school. By September, when the Rev. J. Still called at Mota, he found it hard “to judge of the progress made, because all schooling is done away with for the time.”<sup>85</sup> Although mortality rates were fairly low, “things were at a standstill” and Sarawia himself was ill. “As they recover their strength,” Still reported, “it is to be hoped that they will also recover their energy to carry on the school work.”<sup>86</sup> As Adams’ later observations made clear, however, the impact of repeated outbreaks of disease would make even basic activities difficult.

In 1920, Durrad published his account of the *suqe* controversy between himself and Florence Coombe with which this essay began. By that time, Melanesian decision-making was taking place in the context of escalating contact with the outside world. The island groups covered by the Melanesian Mission were now under formal colonial rule. Western capitalism was transforming village economies and societies through the impact of wage labour on distant plantations. Many men had left the islands as indentured labourers:

There is something almost incongruous in an old returned labourer taking up the *Suqe* again .... The people need now to have their attention turned elsewhere if they are to continue to exist. While they are pathetically occupied over the petty details of a *Suqe* “deal”, the white trader is at their doors clamouring for the possession of their land and their wealth.<sup>87</sup>

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83 Ellen Wilson and Project Canterbury, *The Isles That Wait, By A Lady Member of the Melanesian Mission* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1911), <[http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/wilson\\_isles1911/06.html](http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/wilson_isles1911/06.html)>, (viewed 4 October 2009).

84 Adams, *The Banks Islands*, 32.

85 Letter from J. Still, 14 September 1875, printed by the Melanesian Mission in *The Island Voyage*, 42.

86 Ibid.

87 Durrad, *The Attitude of the Church to the Suqe*, 20–1.

Racism and dispossession had joined the generational dynamics explored earlier in this paper. Debates between European missionaries about the desirability or otherwise of the *suge* seemed increasingly irrelevant. Masculine scripts could only be exchanged, combined, or modified if they concerned *men*; in the early days of the mission, both the *suge* and the mission offered routes to status in a context that presumed at least some degree of indigenous male power. In the early twentieth century, however, the humanity of Melanesian men was being diminished by colonialism and scientific racism.

Patteson had worried about racism as early as 1862 during the early days of his island cruises and the mission school in New Zealand. He wrote to a friend that George Sarawia (then his pupil) was “a real companion, with whom I can speak of holy things with a certainty of being understood,” whose intellectual capability was obvious “and whose very face as I teach him is a sufficient guarantee for his earnestness.” However, “that same youth when some strangers ride round from Auckland is to them perhaps only a curious specimen of a woolly haired Papuan; his ears are pierced, his is an interesting savage!” The task was to encourage visitors to encounter the students as human beings, and Patteson reported some success: “in Auckland very many persons have [now] forgotten all about Papuans and woolly hair and black teeth, and think of the deep human feelings and sympathies which belong to us all alike.”<sup>88</sup> The point here is not to claim that the observations of Patteson and others were somehow free of discrimination, especially paternalism, but instead to underline their determination to treat Melanesians as human beings when their humanity was doubted by others.

The Melanesian Mission also introduced a new means of communication for Melanesians: the teaching and use of Mota among islands featuring dozens of indigenous languages. Tolly Bradford’s work on Henry Budd has shown how Budd used Cree to solidify and distinguish his community from others, emphasising the importance of Cree over English wherever possible.<sup>89</sup> The ministry of Sarawia and others was in some ways very different: there was no indigenous language as widespread as Cree before the coming of the mission, and the British missionaries themselves insisted on Mota, rejecting periodic calls to introduce English. It may not have been intended as a political act, but the mission’s promotion of Mota provided mission-educated islanders with an indigenous lingua franca. The trans-village, inter-island networks made possible by Christianization, through the promotion of a common language, were of enormous significance in creating new bonds between men as religious and political leaders in Melanesia. The very concept of “Melanesia” and

88 LPL, Keble Dep. 8/5, J.C. Patteson to unknown recipient (addressee blacked out), 11 November 1862.

89 Bradford, *Remaking Indigeneity*, 211–12.

CHRISTIANITY, MASCULINITY AND AUTHORITY  
IN THE LIFE OF GEORGE SARAWIA

"Melanesians" had been invented through the impact of the western world; especially by Patteson's decision to choose Mota as the mission's lingua franca. "The scholars from all the different islands fraternise excellently well," he noted in his journal for 1869, "in many cases the older and more advanced have their regular chums, by private arrangement among themselves, whom they help, and to whose islands they are quite prepared to be sent, if I think fit so to arrange; and I really do believe that from the Banks Islands we may send out missionaries to many of the Melanesian islands, as from Samoa and Rarotonga they have gone out to the islands of the Eastern Pacific."<sup>90</sup> There is no doubt that the effect of this policy on other Melanesian languages was deliberate.

Reflecting on Patteson's choice of Mota as the language of the mission, Codrington recalled that he "saw so clearly the great advantage, on the one hand, of throwing together in every possible way the boys from all the islands, which was much helped by the use of one language, and, on the other hand, the natural tendency of a group of boys from one island or neighbourhood to keep separate, and of the teacher of a particular set to keep them separate with himself, that, without saying much about it, he discouraged the printing of other languages besides Mota, and in other ways kept them rather in the background."<sup>91</sup> The benefits were considerable, however, both for indigenous Mota-speakers and for the mission: "With regard to Mota, be it recorded to its honour, the people have always been ready to go out in the true missionary spirit as teachers to other islands. At the present time there are thirteen Mota teachers engaged in other islands, some of them as far away as the Solomons."<sup>92</sup>

Hilary Carey has challenged historians to address, "The means by which the British churches peopled and pastured the churches they seeded," a topic which "still awaits an historian."<sup>93</sup> More work is currently available than she realised, but she is right to identify non-western Christianity and its leadership as a strikingly neglected topic in western scholarship. Melanesian masculinities shaped and were shaped by the challenges they faced in the age of empire. At the conclusion of his book on the suqe controversy, Durrad reflected, "It is impossible to put a permanent dividing line between those who Suqe and those who do not .... We should let the two sides merge into one another."<sup>94</sup>

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90 Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, vol. 2, 231.

91 Ibid., 178–88.

92 Montgomery and Project Canterbury, *The Light of Melanesia*.

93 Carey, "Religion and the Evil Empire," 191–2.

94 Durrad, *The Attitude of the Church to the Suqe*, 21.

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