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Communion Tokens, Vanuatu

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This metal disc once granted its bearer permission to celebrate Holy Communion, one of the important ritual occasions in the life of a practising Christian. As suggested by its inscription, it is a communion token associated with the island of Efate in Vanuatu, previously the New Hebrides. The reverse reads “Ko mroa ki au”, which in the Efate language means “Think on me”. It is part of the D. L. Edwards communion token collection held by Perth Museum and Art Gallery in Scotland. Produced around 1903 with many others in its likeness, the origins of this particular sacramental ticket can be traced back to 16th century Scotland.

The use of tokens as a means to identify those who have been properly instructed and admitted to the Lord’s Supper is often attributed to Calvin in 16th century Geneva (MacMillan 1999, ii). Token usage quickly spread to other European countries. Their development in Scotland is interwoven with the emerging Presbyterian Church and the Reformation of 1560, although they are recorded as being used before the official date of the Reformation and some even believe they originated in the Roman *medallii* issued for Catholic Mass (Burnet 1960, 62). Tokens were usually metal, but occasionally fashioned of wood. They were presented to baptised individuals by church elders to indicate permission to take Communion. The frequency of Communion for Presbyterians varies but has always been much less than in the Catholic Church or the Church of England, and even today may only occur two to four times a year. A candidate for Communion was expected to be both a practising Christian and educated in the scriptures, the latter being tested through catechism.

During the complex events of the period from the Reformation to 1690, when the Scottish Presbyterian church emerged as the institution it was in the 18th and 19th centuries, communion tokens held significance for Covenanters. Many restrictions were placed on Presbyterians but some Ministers rejected from the church continued to hold secret outdoor Communions. Tokens enabled them to distinguish friend from foe (Burnet 1960, 149). Metal tokens were in common usage until the late 19th century. They were gradually replaced by cards, although some churches used tokens into the 20th century. While not uniquely Scottish, nor restricted to practising Presbyterians, it is certain that Communion tokens

were particularly favoured in Scotland and had a significant role in the country’s Reformed religious life. They became intricately bound with Scottish Presbyterian practice and, as Scots began to settle in other parts of the world, tokens travelled with them.

The first communion token to arrive in Vanuatu actually made its journey there via Canada. This is materially evident in the oval token’s inscription, reading, “Parish of Pictou”, and on the reverse, “Rev’d T. McC. 1810”. Thomas McCulloch was a minister in Pictou, Nova Scotia from 1804 to 1843 (Burzinski 1999, 301). Aberdeenshire-born missionary Reverend John Geddie, who emigrated to Pictou as a young boy, then took a set of these tokens to Vanuatu in 1848. He settled at Anelgauhat on the southwest of the island of Aneityum. His travelling companion, Reverend Powell of the London Missionary Society, only remained there a year. In 1852, Geddie fully established Aneityum’s first Christian church with the baptism of fifteen local people and the celebration of Communion with these new members (Patterson 1882, 323). This was the first Presbyterian Communion in Vanuatu into which newly converted Christians of Vanuatu were admitted. After the challenging experiences of early missionaries in the area, Geddie’s work was highly significant for the Presbyterian Church.

A second metal Communion token of rectangular shape with cut corners is also associated with Aneityum. Its inscription reads, “Aco Nedo Ineicki Par Imiehva Nyak, I Kor. XI. 24”, which translates from the Aneityum language to “do this in remembrance of me”. The reference to the verse of Corinthians from which it comes is commonly represented on Scottish Presbyterian tokens. The reverse reads, “Nakalasia, Aneiteum, 1852”, “Nakalasia” being the Aneityum word for “Christian”. The year may refer to the first admission of church members. The most recent token from Vanuatu, on which this essay is based, is associated with Reverend J. W. MacKenzie, stationed in Erakor on Efate from 1872–1912. It provided a replacement for the initial Pictou token (Burzinski 1999, 301).

The inscriptions on these Communion tokens connect them to Efate and Aneityum. In the published accounts of missionaries stationed on other islands in Vanuatu, there are references to celebrating Communion but little mention of tokens (see Paton 1905; Paton 1911; Leggatt 1896). Whether this is because tokens were not used on other islands or because they were so bound up in the ritual of Communion that they escaped comment is uncertain. An account of tokens was written by Reverend Robert Steel, a minister from Sydney who toured Vanuatu on a mission vessel in 1874. A Communion season at Anelgauhat, Aneityum was regularly held to coincide with the annual gathering of Presbyterian missionaries at the Mission Synod. In describing the distribution of tokens on Friday 12 June prior to the Communion service on Sunday, Steel (1880, 373) writes:

It was rather striking to see the old Scottish custom of pewter tokens at a communion season in the South Sea Islands. Even in Australia there are few congregations that use them. But the missionaries on Aneityum are Presbyterians, and though the people know nothing of the name, and are Christians only, their spiritual guides have led them into the practices that are quite characteristic of Scotland.
Around two hundred people from the island celebrated Communion, with people travelling from inland especially to attend the central church.

It is unclear when Communion token use ceased in Vanuatu. The original tokens brought from Pictou were reportedly sent back to Nova Scotia after being replaced (Burzinski 1999, 301). Reverend James Hay Lawrie of Edinburgh, a missionary on Aneityum from 1879 to 1896, donated two of the 1852 Aneityum tokens to the National Museum of Scotland in 1898, which may suggest those particular tokens were falling out of use by that time. Given the significance of sacramental tickets, it seems unlikely Lawrie would have brought them home if still being circulated. Of course, Lawrie and his wife may have kept the tokens as personal mementoes. A number of Vanuatu tokens are preserved in public and private collections, providing a material reminder of relationships of contact and exchange, but what of the many others produced? In Scotland, old tokens were often melted down in the past so the metal could be reused, or were buried under the church pulpit and forgotten (Burnet 1960, 198). Could this interment have happened in Vanuatu? Current excavation work by the Department of Archaeology at Australian National University, focusing on mission sites in southern Vanuatu, has yet to uncover any Communion tokens but they remain an artefact of interest in ongoing research.