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Oli Aenaguri'ai:

An ethnography of socio-ecological relations and
contemporary change in Baelelea, Solomon
Islands.

A thesis
submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
at
The University of Waikato
by
James Kwaimani Faiiau



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Abstract

This thesis presents a story circumnavigating the social and ecological relations and contemporary changes in Baelelea inland villages on Malaita in the Solomon Islands. The undertaken anthropological and ethnographic study draws on both traditional and contemporary lifeworld of the Baelelea people living in Alafana. The thesis delves explicitly into the human lived experiences, subsistence ways, traditional knowledge, and beliefs that underscore their Indigenous ways of being and knowing. I positioned the research to investigate the socio-ecological dynamics and to gain grounded understanding of Baelelea cultural frameworks, including environmental epistemology, livelihood practices, religious orientation to the environment, oral traditions and spiritual beliefs, and conceptualisation of livelihood sustainability and natural resource management in the face of encroaching externalities of christianity, colonialism and capitalism or globalisation.

The studied community of Alafana is small with disbursed population constituting of distinct clan and family groups, all are Baelelea speakers (but with historical and cultural link to other language groups in North Malaita). My ethnographic fieldwork and informants, by disaggregation included few of the remaining elders who converted from the traditional Baelelea religion of *akalo* (ancestors) to Christianity. Many others constituted first and second-generation born Christians. In Alafana and West Baelelea villages generally apart from conversion from traditional religion to Christianity, the biggest culture change is that people's lifeworld and livelihood have shifted from subsistence systems of reliance on land and the forest to a mixed economy of increasing dependence on cash. A cultural rupture many described as moving from the cultural notion of 'to make a living' to that of 'to make money'. In response and to counter the impending globalised system and social-culture, and ecological changes, informants conceptualised about returning to the basic life of sustainable social living and ecological productivity expressed in the metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* –translated 'return to the tree root'. The metaphor as used in the thesis depicts Baelelea's conception of connectedness and offers an anthropological perspective and deep conversations on the revitalisation of traditional knowledge and interconnectedness with the environment as represented in myths and oral traditions. A metaphorical tree root from Baelelea perspective represents the local ontological perspective, which I propose can contribute to better understanding the cultural landscape and multidisciplinary research approaches in interweaving indigenous knowledge with science in sustainable agriculture systems and natural resources management.

Dedication

To Festus Faiiau (Maka) my late father His invaluable stories and wisdom shared in this thesis are priceless gifts to the world.

&

To Joz (Jehozedak) Faiiau my late son ...His short 10 days with us in 2017 left an indelible mark in our hearts forever.

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To God be the glory!

THESIS PART ONE:

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis presents a story circumnavigating the social and ecological relations through mediums of myths, traditional beliefs and lived experiences and contemporary changes as experienced by the inland Baelelea¹ clan and villagers on Malaita in the Solomon Islands. The thesis delves explicitly into the intersection between culture and ecological change regarding subsistence lifeways, cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and the cosmology of the Baelelea people and their lifeworld. As experienced in Malaita, the imposition of the powerful external forces of colonisation, missionisation, and capitalism has had impactful imprints on Indigenous way of being and knowing, resulting in people lamenting the loss of worthy traditions, *kastom*, traditional knowledge and autonomy (Akin, 1993; Akin, 2013; Frazer, 1981; Keesing, 1968). This undertaken research explores some of these dynamics and external influence being internalised by Baelelea villagers in terms of the subsistence economy and fostered relations with the environment.

This thesis is a culmination of six months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken on Malaita between January and July 2021. A further twelve months of prolonged stay on Malaita provided the benefit of additional community visits and research engagement before returning to resume at the University of Waikato at the beginning of July 2022. The thesis also drew on prior knowledge and lived experience from my childhood upbringing in the village and several years of rural community work engagement in the rural region of North Malaita, including the Baelelea communities where my research fieldwork took place. As such, I have the benefit of approaching the undertaken research as an insider-outsider researcher and positioning the undertaken PhD research project as a scholarly journey back to my roots. The noble aim is to scientifically study and ethnographically document the lifeworld and stories of the people and culture to which I belong. The research is framed as an ethnography, utilising methodological frameworks that include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and conversations framed as *Tok stori*. The methods selected explicitly as they allowed flexibility, mutually engaging conversation and insightful observation to gain a rigorous

¹ *Baelelea* also spelled *Mbaelelea* with a consonant ‘M’ sound in strict linguistic convention. In the thesis I opted to use *Baelelea*, the common version used by locals and in cited literature/government reports.

understanding of the cultural dimensions of what and how Baelelea people living at Alafana engage with their surrounding natural landscape.

Research motivations.

As mentioned above, this research is a scholarly return to my roots. The motivation to undertake the PhD research project is deeply rooted in my childhood upbringing and experience as a Baelelea elite, the first in my tribe to gain a university degree qualification. A journey that I did not pursue on my own, but one that which I gained personal motivations, narratives and stories from my people and place that which collectively we shared a common identity and belonging. Having worked for a few years as a community development facilitator and social researcher in North Malaita, and my childhood upbringing in the village in Baelelea, motivated me to undertake this ethnographic study, the first to have come out of Baelelea and by an Indigenous Baelelean.

I was born a rural boy in the highland village of Alelengana in west Baelelea, where I spent the first ten years of my childhood upbringing. Although I spent the latter part of my childhood and youth away from the village due to my education and work, I had regular trips back to the village during holidays, which were not adequate to learn and master the culture of the place and people. An experience I feel forged social and cultural disconnections. The occasional visits during Christmas holidays only provided limited opportunities to immerse oneself in the local community setting and gain knowledge to be fully grounded in the village culture. I worked as a Constituency Development Officer from 2007 to 2010, implementing the Solomon Islands government's 'Bottom-Up Approach' policy through the Ministry of Rural Development (Wiltshire & Batley, 2018). Later, I worked as the Knowledge Action Researcher/Social Research Analyst from 2013 to 2016 with the international research organisation WorldFish Center on Aquatic Agriculture System program in targeted fisheries and agriculture-dependent communities in North Malaita (Jan van der Ploeg et al., 2016). More recently, I have worked as Malaita Area Program Manager for World Vision International in Auki Area Program Office. My lived experience and government and NGO development focus and persistent challenges in rural North Malaita and Solomon Islands communities underscore motivation to undertake this PhD project.

This thesis case study delves into the dynamics of social-ecological relations, subsistence economy, social lifeways and how people conceptualise new ideas and community-based or people-centred development models. As a Baelelea, it is my scholarly commitment and effort to amplify Indigenous Baelelea voices and perceptions by drawing on local experiences and stories that otherwise remain suppressed and marginalised by forces of capitalism and modernisation. In undertaking this research driven with passion and rigour, I am committed to gaining insight and understanding of the contemporary experiences and stories that otherwise contribute to the body of knowledge and global environmental issues, seeking localised solutions (IPBES, 2019). According to the IPBES Report, Indigenous peoples are often on the margins of economic development, although traditionally they owned, managed, used, or occupied a quarter of the global land area, many of which continue to face immense socio-ecological pressure due to the deterioration of nature and loss of local livelihoods. Fair to say and noted that Indigenous people offer perspectives that otherwise often overlooked. Indigenous people, their roles, and knowledge are critically important to understanding and addressing the global targets and policy scenarios, for example, as stipulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ibid), which otherwise, as was pointed out in the IPBES Report (2019) would be unachievable on current trajectories and conventional approach.

Research significance and contributions.

Indigenous communities are faced with the task of reclaiming their own Indigenous knowledge and ethical systems, which have been marginalized and exoticized in academic settings. It is important for them to establish their rightful place within the global knowledge economy (Sanga & Reynolds, 2022, p. 5).

This thesis hopes to contribute to the growing body of literature on Malaita specifically and Melanesia or Pacific Indigenous scholarship generally. The thesis supports the scholarly endeavour of Indigenous scholars and people in reclaiming their Indigenous knowledge and contributing to the global knowledge economy, as attributed by Sanga & Reynolds (2022). Malaita, as the populous ethnic group in Solomon Islands, remains an important and fantastic culture and people for anthropological study on contemporary changes forged by anthropogenic and climate impacts (Bird et.al, 2022; Minter et. al, 2019). The intersection

between different agencies and the lived experiences of Indigenous people, like Baelelea confronting globalisation, capitalism, and climate change, tells compelling stories and case studies that need attention from researchers, policy makers and other significant actors. From a literature review of past anthropological research on Malaita on subjects of cultures, history, colonialism, missionisation and capitalism, Baelelea is an interesting omission. Past anthropological work on Malaita (Hobin, 1939; Frazer, 1981; Evans, 1930; Miranda, 1960; Ross, 1960; Russel, 1960; Keesing, 1970; Burt, 1990; Gegeo, 1994; Sanga, 2000; Hobbis, 2017) as listed in table below (Figure 1) showed primary ethnographic field sites in northern Malaita. Baelelea, for some reason, as Keesing (1970) noted four decades ago, remains relatively less studied and known anthropologically.’

Language groups	Studies
To’abaita	Ian Hogbin (1939) Ian Frazer (170)
Lau	Walter Evans (1930) Pierre Miranda (1960), Hundleby (2017)
Baegu	Harold Ross (1960)
Fataleka	Tom Russell (1950)
Kwaio	Roger Keesing (1970), David Akin (1980)
Kwara’ae	Ben Burt (1990), David Gegeo (1990)
Guala’ala	Kabini Sanga (1990)

Figure 1: Field sites of past ethnographic studies in northern Malaita.

This PhD research project is an attempt and academic commitment to bridge the knowledge gap and bring some in-depth understanding and contribution to knowledge from the perspective and stories of Baelelea people. Their Indigenous ways of being and knowing as a society and people forged relationship and reimagination about culture and lifeways in the face of contemporary forces brought by forces of capitalism and globalisation. The ethnographic study for an Indigenous Baelelea scholar myself I am hopeful to contribute in small ways to bodies of knowledge and global concerns. This is affirming to what Gibson-Graham (2014) described that “[f]or ethnographers today, not task is more important than to make a small fact speak to large concerns” (p. 147). As first piece of work from Baelelea, through small has break new grounds in collating and contributing Baelelea perspectives and stories to the body of knowledge and development experiences that otherwise speaks to dilemma that Indigenous

people and communities in Solomon Islands, the Pacific and Indigenous people globally confront and seeking local solution as alternatives (IPBES, 2019).

I have undertaken this research being informed and guided by the primary tasks of anthropologists which is to describe and amplify the cultures including oral traditions and histories of Indigenous people within a particular landscape (Brush, 2011). And this study provides deep understanding and appreciate for Baelelea, but more so the Malaita and Indigenous Pacific people, bolstering the proposition of Sanga & Reynolds (2022) about reclaiming indigenous knowledge and ethical systems and establishing their rightful places within a global knowledge economy and getting their voice heard (p. 5). Even more so for and by an Indigenous Baelelea-Malaita scholar undertaking this research on the people and clan to describe and bring about local perspectives and stories that contribute to the body of knowledge in multidisciplinary fields. The thesis hopes to contribute to multidisciplinary studies and establish basis and fostering development which is context-based and incorporates indigenous knowledge (Hamilton et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2016; Walter & Hamilton, 2014). This is relevant for ongoing research and policy discussion on community-based development and ecosystem-based management at national and sub-national levels that are aligned with global strategies and commitments (IPBES, 2019).

This thesis contributes to the growing research and debates on decolonizing research in the Pacific or Oceania. As Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, writes and argued that Indigenous people have been oppressed by Western social theory far too long. This unequal power relationships often exists between researchers and Indigenous peoples in ways Indigenous individuals and groups are often the subjects of research and made exotic in the process. She further asserts that “[r]esearch of this nature on Indigenous peoples is still justified by the ends rather than the means, particularly if the Indigenous peoples concerned can still be positioned as ignorant and undeveloped (savages)” (p. 27). For her and growing community of Pacific Indigenous scholar, the development of theory, both by Indigenous scholars and all scholars based on indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, underscores the call for decolonising research methodology. This provides the path to a truly decolonised profession by the interweaving of multiple theoretical traditions in ways that do justice to the complexity of people’s global lives.

Similarly, Pacific research has to be grounded on indigenous philosophical traditions and ideologies seriously and uncovering the nature of ongoing dispossession, according to

Sanga and Reynolds (2022). More recently, a scholarly collective has begun to articulate what anthropology done by indigenous scholars of the Pacific can contribute to the field (Gegeo, 2001; Ratuva, 2010; Regenvanu, 2010; Sanga & Reynolds, 2022; Teaiwa, 2020; Teaiwa, 2006; Tengan et al., 2010; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). In undertaking this research, I attempted and situated research focus and contributions to support ongoing and growing commitment to decolonising Pacific research methodologies and scholarship by Indigenous scholars. For example, in the Pacific, as Gegeo (2022) points out, whilst progress has been made on the political front, the “epistemic decolonisation project” remains undone, and that is one which Pacific Indigenous scholars must pursue because unless we write our own stories from our own perspective, outsiders will continually misrepresent us and our worldview. Indigenous Pacific ways of being, seeing and knowing are holistic and complex (Gegeo, 2022; Hau’ofa, 1993, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). This PhD research project aims to contribute new perspectives to informing multi-disciplinary studies, policy development and discussion and indigenous scholarship from scholars of indigenous background.

Research focus and questions.

As introduced in the earlier section, the overarching aim of the thesis is to investigate the dynamics of social-ecological relations and contemporary changes on Malaita through the Baelelea inland community of Alafana confronting myriads of external influences of capitalism, colonialism and christianity. More specifically, the research seeks to gain insight into the cultural and social frameworks through which inland Baelelea people perceive and relate to their landscape: their environmental epistemology, their subsistence livelihoods, their religious orientation to the environment, including sacred oral traditions and spiritual beliefs; and lastly, how they conceptualise livelihood sustainability and natural resource management.

From the broad research focus, a set of research questions are being asked, which include: (1) How do the Baelelea inland people in Alafana perceive and interact with the environment? (2) How do people forge active social and cultural relationships with land and the environment? (3) What forms of subsistence activities the people engage in, and the traditional beliefs, myths and practices shaping their subsistence systems and lifeways? (4) What cultural landscape features of importance to people relate and recollect in the local narratives? (5) What cosmological beliefs and spirituality have people observed or have

changed? (6) What environmental conditions and salient transformations do people experience in the inland communities in Alafana and Baelelea? And (7) how do people perceive and conceptualise social and ecological relations amidst encroaching contemporary changes and challenges?

Theorising ontologies of interconnectedness

The theory of interconnectedness of the social and the natural world has long debates by scholars on the notion of human's relationship with non-human other beings (Salmon, Brown & Verschuuren, 2019). In western scholarship, the theory of the interconnectedness can be traced back to the work of Alexander Von Humboldt's (1769-1859) who conceived and popularise "nature as a global force" and the "earth as one great living organism" interwoven and interconnected through "the web of life" (Brown & Verschuuren, 2019). The theory underscored the focus of this research to investigate Baelelea worldview and ontologies of forged social-ecological relationship through mediums of myth, traditional ecological knowledge and traditional agriculture practices. The dichotomization of western science and Indigenous knowledge has extensive debate in the literature and relevancy of the latter's validity. For Indigenous non-western societies, as Brown and Verschuuren (2019) stated the notion of interconnectedness as underscored in "human-nature relationships remains relevant in today's Anthropocene. As further elaborated in the quoted below:

For us, nature and culture are not separate or even linked domains, but rather they are mutually constituted nature and human culture have always evolved one with the other in ways that are so intertwined as to be impossible to meaningfully disassociate... Hence, our preference is for the term *naturecultures*, which recognizes the entangled or mutually constituted quality of the environment. In addition, we acknowledge and respect the diverse ontologies used by indigenous and local communities across the globe to express worldviews and—where possible and appropriate—the preference for using local terms and phrases that express their own understanding of the interconnectedness of humans/nature (p. 10).

As quoted above the conception and view as expressed in social-ecological by Indigenous societies differ from the dominant western theories. The dominant western theories always viewed nature as a separate entity as grounded in theories of environmental realism,

environmental idealism and environmental instrumentalism. Critiques have argued these theories are essentially Eurocentric and ignore or misrepresent and undermine non-western societies perspective and culturally embedded relations with the nature (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). It undermined the Indigenous societies traditional knowledge systems and practices, which has evolved and passed down through thousands of years, that rooted on the notion that people conceived and considered themselves as integral part of the ecosystem. Indigenous people as many argued developed different cultural frameworks and ways of seeing the world (Sepie, 2017;(Salmón, 2000).

I drew on the work of Indigenous Pacific scholars, in particular renowned anthropologist and Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) to bring grounded understanding holistic Indigenous worldview. In the famous Essay *Our Sea of Islands*, Hau'ofa disputed the notion of smallness as being colonialist and undermined the connectivity and cosmology of Pacific people, read and understood through myths and legends as quoted:

[I]f we look at the myths, legends and oral traditions, and the cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it will become evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its re-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions. Islanders today still relish exaggerating things out of all proportions” (Hau'ofa, 1994).

As cited above, Hau'ofa (1994) argument illustrate the holistic worldview of Indigenous Pacific grounded on myth and cosmological or spiritual connections and orientation to nature and non-human others, including spirits. I am informed and apply the view as it speaks to Baelelea cosmology and fostered relations with the natural and spirit world as interconnected and affects what happens in the physical realm. As expressed in myth, Baelelea ancestors and spirits of the dead relatives traversed the land and sea and not between land and sea as when speaking geography. This is best explained and understood through myths and human connections through totemic animals such, for example shark and mountain snake that for Baelelea is symbolic and embodied the same ancestor but choose to manifest in different form in particular geographical environment. This supports the Indigenous people view and relationship which

nature and spirits are part of cultural landscape and semiotic relationships (Forman, 1995; Kohn, 2013; Pungetti, 2013) and not distinct. Cosmologically, the ocean and land are interconnected and considered as ‘the earth as opposed to the sky’ through complexly interconnected ecosystem and human relationship and orientation to non-human others, including spirits of dead ancestors embodied in certain landscape features and totemic animal and plants.

Framing this research from a cultural landscape perspective further supports the theory of interconnectedness of the social and environment as part of an ecosystem. Cultural landscape, as Pungetti (2013) defines ‘consisting of the physical as well as cultural resources, the local perceptions and identity, environmental management practices, and socioeconomic and political systems’ (p. 55-56). Tim Ingold (2011) further describes the landscape as “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them to the past and the environment” (p.193), which is contrasted with a narrative and ideological definition of landscape. Ingold further states that landscape is not identical to what we might otherwise call the environment, but perhaps not easy to distinguish landscape and environment, for “[t]he environment is no more ‘nature’ than is the landscape a symbolic construct” (*ibid*). Conceptually and metaphorically, Emma Gilberthorpe (2009) noted from her study of the Fasu people of Papua New Guinea :

The connection between individual and landscape is realised through a number of trajectories, most evidently through the conceptualisation of a core, representing rooted identity, and of arteries leading out from the core, representing extended ties and extended identity. Every clan is rooted to the area they inhabit through association with a clan name and a clan totem (p.127).

Similarly, Aswani and Vaccaro’s (2008) study of the Roviana Lagoon coastal landscape and seascape in Western Province, Solomon Islands noted that:

The correlation of ecological structure and social use of a landscape is not just a descriptive endeavour. It is a fundamental step toward understanding human-environmental relations and developing integrative base resource maps for planning marine and terrestrial conservation (2008, p. 325).

From this development perspectives, as has been pointed out the need for a careful study and understanding of the landscape as to underscore critical designing informed and effective conservation policies (Liu & Taylor, 2002; Skjeggedal & Clemetsen, 2018). And provides a culturally grounded context for understanding patterns of interaction between ecology and

humans as (Scoones, 1999) described in the notion of “new ecology” focusing on “people in places,” using, in particular, historical analysis as a way of explaining environmental change across time and space’ (p. 496).

The research is positioned to gain insight into the social ecological relations through the lens of cultural landscape and ecology perspective in seeking to understand and describe how the Baelelea people's perception of and relations with and knowledge underscore subsistence livelihood practices and land-based resource management actions. In the Pacific Islands, several studies have highlighted the negative anthropogenic impacts on island biodiversity or ecosystems and undermined the culture and traditional resource management practices (Thaman, 2002). As Fischer (2018) further points out concerning forest landscape and social-ecological system, “Many of the most pressing threats to forests today require management on large spatial and temporal scales...The landscape has been recognised as one of the most suitable spatial units for managing forests and other ecological systems” (p.138), including traditional knowledge.

Environmental concerns, Traditional ecological knowledge

The 18th century marked the beginning of the present Anthropocene epoch of immense and unprecedented changes and transformations to the environment by humans, sparked by the industrial and agricultural revolutions that started in Europe (Ellis, 2013; Haraway, 2015). The industrial and agricultural revolution was further accompanied by advancements in western science and technology, and the capitalist market economy, driven by extractive industries of unparalleled impact on society and natural environments (Ellis, 2013; Haraway, 2015; Korten, 2010). In the present epoch of the Anthropocene, as Haraway (2013) writes, we have seen “immense irreversible destruction is really in a train, not only for the 11 billion or so people who will be on earth near the end of the 21st century but for myriads of other critters too.... The edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller. Ask any refugee of any species” (p. 161). Although different societies may have varied scales of experiences and responses, the resultant global impacts and degradation or loss of biodiversity and culture are greatly felt by Indigenous societies.

In the recent decades rise of the neoliberal “marketisation of the environment” in the name of ‘protecting’ non-human species has resulted in experienced displacement and

disruption of resource users (McCormack, 2012). For example, as McCormack (2012) notes that in most cases, this impacts negatively on indigenous minority groups as experienced by Aotearoa New Zealand Māori groups in the East Cape contestation over their traditional fishing rights and similarly, ethnic minority mountain tribal groups in Vietnam and Laos who were forced off their sacred forest (Tuan & Barber, 2013). In the Pacific and particularly Melanesia, a region endowed with rich biodiversity and cultures, the imminent threats to the natural environment and society primarily resulted from exploitative developments, namely commercial logging (Minter et al., 2018; Minter & van der Ploeg, 2023), mining (Macintyre & Foale, 2007) and monoculture oil palm (Chao, 2022) and coconut plantation agriculture, all in the pursuit of economic development (Foale et al., 2016; Gilberthorpe, 2013; Manner et al., 2013; Spann, 2018). The Indigenous people and societies, such as those in Melanesia and Malaita that I researched, their livelihoods and culture are interconnected with nature and the ecosystem. So much as that any experienced environmental damage and loss are not loss of biodiversity and animal species and forest, but the livelihoods, culture and spiritual connections people had with an environment and species that, in most cases, Indigenous people often culturally considered as kin.

Deforestation, biodiversity loss and sustainability are critical issues and concerns for the health and well-being of the earth and indigenous societies who traditionally own, manage and are dependent on about a quarter of the global land area and resources (IPBES Report, 2019). According to a report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), Indigenous peoples and local communities are under increasing pressure. About seventy-two percent of local indicators developed and used by Indigenous peoples and local Communities do show the deterioration of nature that underpins local livelihoods. It also pointed out that the areas of the world projected to experience significant adverse effects from global changes in climate, biodiversity, ecosystem functions, and nature's contributions to people are also areas in which large concentrations of Indigenous Peoples and many of the world's poorest communities reside. The regional and global scenarios and gaps, for example, the lack of explicit consideration of the views, perspectives and rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities and their knowledge and understanding of large regions and ecosystems and the desired future development pathways. The report highlighted the need for recognition of the knowledge, innovations, practices, institutions and values of Indigenous peoples and local communities. In doing so, provide inclusive participation in

environmental governance, leading to enhanced quality of life, as well as nature conservation, restoration, and sustainable use (IPBES Report, 2019, p. 5).

A pressing call about rethinking “local solutions” involves the emphasis on indigenous knowledge in policy, academic debates, and interventions. Pacific countries, including the Solomon Islands, have, through community-based conservation initiatives and research over the years, contributed to significant learning and emphasis on local systems and knowledge (Fischer, 2018; Guo, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2019; Pollard et al., 2015; Simon et al., 2016; Spann, 2018; Walter & Hamilton, 2014). However, Walter and Hamilton (2014) noted that the challenge often lies in aligning international conservation values with those of indigenous communities and the mismatch between biodiversity conservation, local culture, and interconnected environmental and spiritual values. Walter and Hamilton (2014) emphasise the holistic and cultural landscape approach as the ethical and organisational foundation of the conservation program that involves the construction of a conceptual model that reflects indigenous perceptions. This would include incorporating cultural, ideational, and spiritual values alongside other ecosystem services and underpins the conservation activities, priorities, and organisational structure of our programs’ (p. 1).

The rise and recognition of the roles of traditional ecological knowledge, although contested, are thought of as relevant and underscore co-management strategies to save our planet and environmental resources (Dove, 2006; Johannes, 1978). Indigenous people offer alternative knowledge and perspectives based on their own locality-developed practices as Berkes et al. (2000) noted.

[T]here exists a diversity of local or traditional practices for ecosystem management. These include multiple species management, resource rotation, succession management, landscape patchiness management, and other ways of responding to and managing pulses and ecological surprises. Social mechanisms behind these traditional practices include a number of adaptations for the generation, accumulation, and transmission of knowledge; the use of local institutions to provide leaders/stewards and rules for social regulation; mechanisms for cultural internalization of traditional practices; and the development of appropriate world views and cultural values. Some traditional knowledge and management systems were characterized by the use of local ecological knowledge to interpret and respond to feedback from the environment to guide the direction of resource management. These traditional systems had certain similarities to

adaptive management with its emphasis on feedback learning, and its treatment of uncertainty and unpredictability intrinsic to all ecosystems” (Berkes et al., 2000, p. 1251)

In the Pacific region, there exists a mismatch and gap in fostering indigenous perspectives and knowledge in community-based conservation and development initiatives. For example, much of the development undertaken framed as “win-win” economic benefits is often problematic, as Foale et al. (2016) argue is because:

people who are embedded in a capitalist system, which allows engagement with nature as an abstract entity. Their western education has given them a scientific/evolutionary-based worldview, which attributes intrinsic value to all species (and particular arrangements of species, e.g. rainforests and coral reefs), irrespective of economic value or ecosystem function (p.11).

Similarly, Emma Gilberthorpe (2013), from her work on the mining industry in Papua New Guinea, noted that “Sustainable development and resource extraction are designed with explicitly opposed objectives in mind. Whilst resource extraction is governed by a largely externalised competitive model of industrialisation, where economic returns serve the interests of foreign stakeholders above and beyond localised ecological and human environments, ‘sustainable development’ is a bedfellow of ‘globalisation’ with implicit long-term economic growth objectives.” (pp. 468-469). She went on to point out that ‘sustainable development’ by its very nature opposed the long-term attributes of extractive development, and moreover, the “Indigenous populations with diverse historical and cultural configurations accommodate market peculiarities in line with their own social, economic, and political idioms. The individualistic/fragmentary nature of a market economy is not always compatible with the principles of interrelationality and reproduction of social networks (which do not equate to parallel conceptions of ‘communality’) associated with subsistence-based economic systems” (p. 469)

Indian activist and ecologist Vandana Shiva (2012) argues that intensive and monoculture farming practices erode both biodiversity and cultural diversity and breed what she described as “a monoculture of the mind” (p. 12). As such it therefore makes local alternative knowledge systems disappear by destroying the possible conditions required for alternatives to exist and destroys diverse local meanings. Shiva states that in local knowledge systems, there is no artificially imposed separation between ‘resources’: “the forest and the

field are in ecological continuum” and that local agriculture is modelled on forest ecology and supply of food (p. 14). In contrast, the supposedly ‘scientific’ system segregates forestry from agriculture. Forestry is reduced or commoditised into timber and is no longer connected to food. “Knowledge-giving systems which have emerged from the food-giving capacities of the forest are therefore eclipsed and finally destroyed, both through neglect and aggression” (ibid). Shiva uses the examples of ‘scientific management’ based on narrow commercial interests and enforced through legislation in India to illustrate her arguments on the destruction of diverse knowledge systems (2012, p. 18).

Shiva (2005) has also spoken out against corporate globalisation and the spread of processed food, for example, which destroys grassroots democracy through “new enclosures of the commons” which are based on violence. She is also particularly critical of the concept of ‘ownership’ of life and the rhetoric of ‘ownership society’, which she describes as ‘anti-life’. From this perspective, living things have no intrinsic value and no integrity. She further describes the movement against corporate globalisation as one toward ‘Earth Democracy’, the fate of which concerns the well-being of all living beings on Earth. And “from vicious cycles of violence in which suicidal cultures, suicidal economies and the politics of suicide feed on each other to virtuous cycles of creative nonviolence in which living cultures nourish living democracies and living economies (sharing resources equitably to create meaningful livelihoods” (Shiva, 2005, p. 5).

In his critical economic theory of corporate control, David Korten (2010) suggests re-organising of principles for healthy living systems, including dynamic self-organisation into inclusive, self-reliant communities of place, balancing individual and community needs, practising frugality and reciprocity, rewarding cooperation, optimising the sustainable use of energy and matter, managing permeable boundaries, cultivating diversity, and sharing knowledge (Korten, 2010, p. 147). Korten further argues that the economy should support healthy societal and environmental functions rather than exponential economic growth motivated by profit. He also points out that the greatest barrier to healthy economic transformation is a flawed cultural story that misinforms our understanding of humanity and thus limits our possibilities. And that “Just as fabricated stories are an instrument of social control, so authentic stories are an instrument of liberation” (p. 252). Authentic stories, as Korten (2010) conceptualised, are characterised by their service towards social and environmental justice and by their potential to liberate people from the chains of a dominant

discourse that supports a destructive economic system. In the Pacific context, Kabutaulaka (2020) noted:

We live in an ocean of stories. There is the story of Maui pulling the islands out of the ocean. There are thousands of stories inscribed onto landscapes, oceanscapes, and on the bodies and names of our peoples. Stories are powerful and foundational to our existence (p. 47).

Kabutaulaka's (2020) assertion of re-storying 'economic development,' he emphasises "exploring alternative ways of organising societies", consolidation on Korten's (2010) argument. This was also observed by Gegeo (2001) from a Kwara'ae indigenous epistemology on economic development with observation that in Kwara'ae and, indeed Solomon Islands, many development challenges are often "brought about by poorly planned and culturally ill-conceived developments" (p. 492). These developments have often had negative impacts on the indigenous societies' culture, ways of living and knowing. Thus fostered a sustained distorted understanding and moulded relationship with the natural world and with the ancestors. Either from an indigenous perspective, as by Kabutaulaka and Gegeo and from ecological observation, the dynamic of economic development often the case is often misrepresented and fails to inform many of the development and conservation initiatives, as most are largely driven by funders or people with the money and dictated by western evolutionary worldview (Foale et al., 2016; Randy, 2002).

Minimising the harm to the environment and indigenous cultures from extractive and exploitative capitalist projects is a key concern for anthropologists, conservation practitioners and indigenous populations alike (Gilberthorpe, 2013; Walter & Hamilton, 2014). From the conservationists, the thrust of the concern is about protecting biodiversity and endemic species threatened by commercial logging and intensification of agriculture practices and systems (Foale et al., 2016; Randy, 2002) and enhancing community-based conservation management grounded on traditional ecological knowledge (Foale et al., 2016; Hviding, 1996; Johannes, 1998). In Solomon Islands and on highly populated islands as Malaita, where significant proportion of the population continue to live in inland communities, though lack access and less directly experienced major extractive industries like mining, the global impacts of climate change and environmental changes are continually being experienced when it comes to crops and unpredictable weather changes. In undertaking this research, I hope to not only contribute to the ethnographic and anthropological knowledge of the less well-known Malaita inland

communities but also to contribute positively to the improvement of governmental policy surrounding the use and management of tribal or customary land.

Methodology & methods

I have undertaken this research as an ethnography, which is defined as a study of “people's behaviour in naturally occurring, cultural setting” and primarily focus on the description and interpretation of cultural behaviours (Madden, 2017; Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576). The methodology in consideration satisfies my developed research aim and questions of investigating and describing the lifeworld, perspectives, and contemporary changes in the Baelelea inland community of Alafana on Malaita. Moreover, as Watson-Gegeo (1988) noted, “The ethnographer’s goal is to provide a description and an interpretive-explanatory account of what people do in a setting” (p. 676), which in the case of my research, the villagers in Alafana on Malaita. The ‘characterisation of ethnography’ as Watson-Gegeo (1988) further stated that although generally includes most other forms and methods, the ethnographic work of describing and interpreting the social and cultural ways of people remains the primary research concern.

Framing my PhD research as an ethnography also resonates with the quest to decolonise research frameworks by developing those grounded in indigenous culture and epistemologies (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021; Xiiem et al., 2019). In ethnographic research, researcher immersion into the local culture and prolonged stay in the research locality is predominantly the approach in cultural anthropology that is also increasingly employed across multidisciplinary studies and diverse social-cultural settings (Madden, 2010). Being an insider myself, with some background knowledge and relationships with the studied community and people, the duration of six months of intense fieldwork was considered adequate. The further twelve months I remained on Malaita provided time and opportunities for follow-up interviews and participation in community events and church programs, which benefited and consolidated research data in terms of captured stories and events.

In the fieldwork research, I used mixed methods of participant observations, semi-structured interviews and conversations framed as *tok stori* (Sanga et al., 2018). This mixed methods approach allows the generation of ethnographic data from multiple sources rather than relying on a single method and sources (Madden, 2010). In an oral culture, as in Baelelea, my use of *tok stori* has suited the context and ongoing and flexible engagement with research

participants and the studied population. The methodology *tok stori*, as Sanga et al. (2018) defined that.

[is] a form of discursive group communication, is an everyday occurrence in Melanesia. As a habitual activity, those who practice may not examine its parameters or dwell on its significance. To an observer, however, its significance is indicated by its ubiquity and flexibility; its parameters shift to suit the needs of Melanesian life (p.12).



Figure 2: Research *tok stori* with key informants in the community (June 2021)²

Research fieldwork I employed *tok stori* and engaged in countless conversations. *Tok stori* offer a distinctively different approach from the structured and formalised methodologies such as surveys and structured interviews. The *tok stori* is mutually informal, flexible and not restricted to a set place and time and happens in no particular order (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018;

² The pictures, otherwise stated, are taken by the author.

Sanga et al., 2018). Culturally, it mutually reinforces values such as *ofufua* (togetherness) and *kwaimania* (friendship and love) suited to the oral cultural context of Baelelea (Faiau, 2013 p. 57). As insider and researcher, this undertaken research has the benefit of my clear connections and familiarity with the local geography and community. This allowed for ease to settle and engage in ongoing conversations and many follow-up discussions and interactions with important research informants. Whilst engaging in multiple conversation and participant-observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen participants comprising ten adult males (including tribal elders), four adult females and two male youths as key informants. During my stay in the village although I had regular conversations with elders because they were the ones present most times in the village and with whom I accessed most of the stories and views. The interviews focused on the participants' life stories framed around the key questions of contemporary social and ecological changes.

During my fieldwork, I also passionately participated in cultural activities and chores such as food preparation, church service programs, tribal meetings, marriage event in the village and two funeral services, one of which was for my late father who passed on four months before I return to resume at Waikato University in July 2022. It was from participating in the community happenings that I observed the lifeworld of Baelelea inland communities and engage in asking questions and had insightful conversations. This approach works well in societies that value learning through practical experiences. Accompanying families on garden trips and taro harvests provided further opportunity to inquire about their crops, gardening knowledge and skills, and experiences as farmers and changes.

In the community, thanks to digital devices (my phone) the best multiple-use device in my fieldwork for purpose of communication, capturing pictures and voice recording during participant interviews (besides my audio recorder). The experience of carrying a notebook and pen around in the rural village at times would be intimidating and disruptive and impressed disconnected connotation. In the village for couple of times I overhead heard comment, "Oh, the one with the book or camera is coming", from villagers even close relative who took it as a joke. But as researcher I was culturally sensitive, and the good part of my engagement were without a notebook except with key informants. I left my notebook at my accommodation and only used it, when necessary, at the end of the day. Having spent prolong period in the village the villagers often commented and asked, "Oh, you haven't gone back to New Zealand for school yet" knowing fully I supposed to only spend short stay in the village. As a matter of fact, this opened an opportunity for a conversation. My usual response was, "My school is not in

New Zealand. My schooling is here” to imply I am on research. This often yield positive response and impression on locals that lead to captured opportunity to explain my research and local knowledge and stories I was collating that certainly piqued their curiosity and led to insightful conversations.

Fieldwork preparation and return to University of Waikato.

I will narrate fieldwork preparation and return at Waikato to resume to provide context and approach of my scholarly journey and experience. It took about eight months from August 2019 to March 2020 when I had my PhD research proposal confirmed and Ethics Committee approval. Having completed and confirmed my research proposal by a panel consisted of academic from The University of Waikato Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Science (DALPSS) a further Ethics approval by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee on behalf of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa New Zealand (ASAANZ) was granted through a Letter of Approval (FS2020-07) dated March 2nd, 2019 as attached (Appendix 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic, national border closure, and overseas research and conference travel curfew for University of Waikato staff and student researchers has resulted in eight months delay which resulted in readjusting of research plan and writing schedules. When the first repatriation flight from New Zealand back to the Solomon Islands was arranged it was already eight months which I had to travel with the whole family, departing Auckland on the 12th of December 2020 on Solomon Airlines flight from Auckland direct to Honiara. In Honiara, a further fourteen days in the quarantine centres under strict COVID-19 regulation was an unimagined experience. Having discharged from the quarantine centre at Henderson, we transferred and boarded the boat to Auki and stayed two days in Auki at our family home before heading to North Malaita for Christmas and to reconnect to the community all squeezed together for the long-term research engagements. The intended six months research fieldwork, I will further describe in Chapter Two commenced from January to June 2021. The prolonged international border closure had resulted in a further twelve months stay on Malaita and to save my scholarship funding I had to seek for withdrawal of study. While in the Solomon Islands and on Malaita the political riot in November 2021 resulted in looting and burning of Honiara’s Chinatown, apart from COVID-19 lock down was a major disruption and security concern. As PhD researcher email update to the University through my supervisors was way to inform of

my safety. Nevertheless, the prolonged stay on Malaita as mentioned earlier provided opportunity and time for additional research engagements through visits back to the village and participation in national events.

This is not to mention several setbacks experienced as insider-outsider researcher. This includes the loss of audio-recorded research data including photographs due to the loss of my phone and a faulty laptop. Several handwritten field notes were misplaced which resulted in stressful and terrifying experiences. Personal loss of important relatives, including my father, a key informant and contributor to my PhD researcher. These encountered unfortunate situations were not just lost of data and people but personal confidence to continue the remaining and significant part of my scholarly journey. I was determined and pressed on with duty and commitment to people whose voice and contributions transpire and represented in the study.

Although out connecting and ongoing engagement with established Solomon Islands scholars through virtually *Tok Stori* Community of Mentors and emerging scholars and the Malaita Thought leaders through Zoom and chatroom. In this way I was able to engage externally with like-minded nationals and individuals with similar academic research interests.



Figure 3: Me with Chief Maekolo with taro gift on the way to the coast and back to NZ (June 2022)

As a Solomon Islands national and Baelelea 'insider-outsider' the local cultural context and expectations are rather familiar. My research fieldwork engagement I carried out with cultural awareness and exercising care and sensitivity towards research participants to ensure their voices were truly represented and lived up. In Honiara I had the courtesy to call and communicate with the Solomon Islands government's Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) through the Research Division focal point to inform her of my research engagement on Malaita. The same with Malaita Provincial Government, where I made courtesy on the Premier's Office and Policy Advisory Research Unit (PARU). At the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) had the opportunity to visit and connected with director of Research Programme and former colleague academics. This resulted in the opportunity to participate and present a paper at the inaugural International Conference on Solomon Islands Tok Stori, from 22 - 23 June 2022 co-hosted by SINU, University of the South Pacific, and the Victoria University of Wellington. As mentioned earlier the virtual monthly Zoom meetings and *tok stori* with Solomon Islands intellectuals and mentors proved valuable for mutual sharing and networking. I narrate this experience to provide attributed personal experiences both positive and challenges for record and to inform readers.



Figure 4: Back at my University of Waikato office (July 2022)

Data Analysis

Back at the University of Waikato as I settled into my work office, the immediate task is data transcribing and analysis. Due to technical issues experienced in the field, the next six months is all spent on transcribing about eighty per cent of the audio interviews. The audio-recorded interviews and stories mostly in Baelelea I translated and typed into English scripts according to individual informants or observed phenomena. As in the case of social research, data analysis involves the process of “coding” to reconstruct new ideas and establish theoretical understanding (O’Leary, 2010, p. 226). In my case, I organised emerging ideas according to the themes of my research questions and identified if each question was satisfied or whether there were some gaps. Where there were gaps, follow-up conversations with key participants in the village through video calls and text message was proved helpful. Thanks to the borderless mobile telecommunication directly with villagers back in Alafana from my room in my

Hamilton home and office. Although I was introduced to data analysis software programs like NVivo earlier in my research, I organised the findings according to set themes and sub-themes under respective chapters in my thesis outline.

Thesis organisation

This thesis consists of eight chapters which is organised into three parts as follows: Thesis Part One consists of Chapters One to Four. Thesis Part Two of Chapters Five and Six, and Thesis Part Three of Chapters Seven and Eight. The Chapters are further detailed below:

Thesis Part ONE

Chapter One: This introductory chapter introduces the research focus and questions. The second section entails the theoretical and methodological framework, methods, and thesis organisation.

Chapter Two: The background and description of the research site, beginning with an overview of the Solomon Islands and Malaita, and the conditions of research as to my arrival in the village and my fieldwork research engagement on Malaita.

Chapter Three: The Baelelea culture and social organisation. The chapter describes the traditional clan system, sub-dialect groupings and traditional roles that underscore the clan-based social-cultural relations.

Chapter Four: Baelelea ontologies and worldview. The chapters delve into multifaceted aspects of Baelelea worldview that include myths, oral traditions and interaction as part of the ‘living system’ and cosmological beliefs about spirits that are embodied in cultural totems and traditional rituals.

Thesis Part TWO

Chapter Five: Ecological changes. As with any indigenous and subsistence-based society, people rely on the land and ecosystem for livelihood and cultural continuity. Anthropogenic

influences perpetuated by capitalism through cash crops and monoculture coconut plantations have given rise to ecological change and transformations.

Chapter Six: Cultural Change and Influences. This chapter describes contemporary culture and lifestyle changes perpetuated by powerful external agencies such as Christianity, colonisation, and capitalism, which brought new cultures and ways (*biranga*), subsistence systems, and lifestyles.

Thesis Part THREE

Chapter Seven: *Oli aenaguri'ai* – ‘Return to the tree stump’ or root. The chapter, using a Baelelea metaphor or idiom, explores and describes the dynamics of social and ecological relations and development. In exploring the dynamics of cultural change and capitalist influence, how people theorise and forge new understandings and theories about community and sustainable development.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion. The chapter provides a concise overview and summary of the key discussions in the preceding chapters. It also highlights positions and prospects for further research and interventions.

Chapter Two: Research Locality

Introduction

This chapter describes the research locality and reflects on fieldwork experiences to provide cultural context and understanding of the people and geography. As stated in Chapter One, this undertaken ethnographic research is meticulously positioned and approached as a scholarly journey back to my roots – place and people, we share common culture and ancestry, myself being a Baelelean and an academic. This ‘insider-outsider’ researcher positionality allows me the benefit and prospect of investigating and scientifically documenting stories and views from people’s lived experiences and stories. Being an insider has helped facilitate engagement but also necessitated meticulous care to accurately describe the unknown and people’s experiences and knowledge practices, thereby contributing to a body of knowledge. The first section provides an overview of the Solomon Islands, situating my ethnographic research in a national context. The following section narrates my journey, returning to the village as an ‘insider-outsider’ ethnographer and settling in. This section describes the practical conditions of my fieldwork, including my arrival, research engagement and visits, my living situation, and interactions with the communities and people, as well as how I collected my ethnographic data. This detailed account of the fieldwork conditions provides a realistic view of the research process.

Solomon Islands and the research site

The modern-day Solomon Islands is geographically located east of New Guinea and Bougainville to the northeast and west of Vanuatu in the western Pacific sub-region known today as Melanesia. The Solomon Islands is an archipelago comprising more than 900 islands, consisting of six larger islands: Choiseul, New Georgia, Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita, and Makira. The large and high raised islands are volcanic, and hundreds of smaller islands and atolls, which formed what is often described as the ‘double chain of islands’ (Pollard et al., 2015).

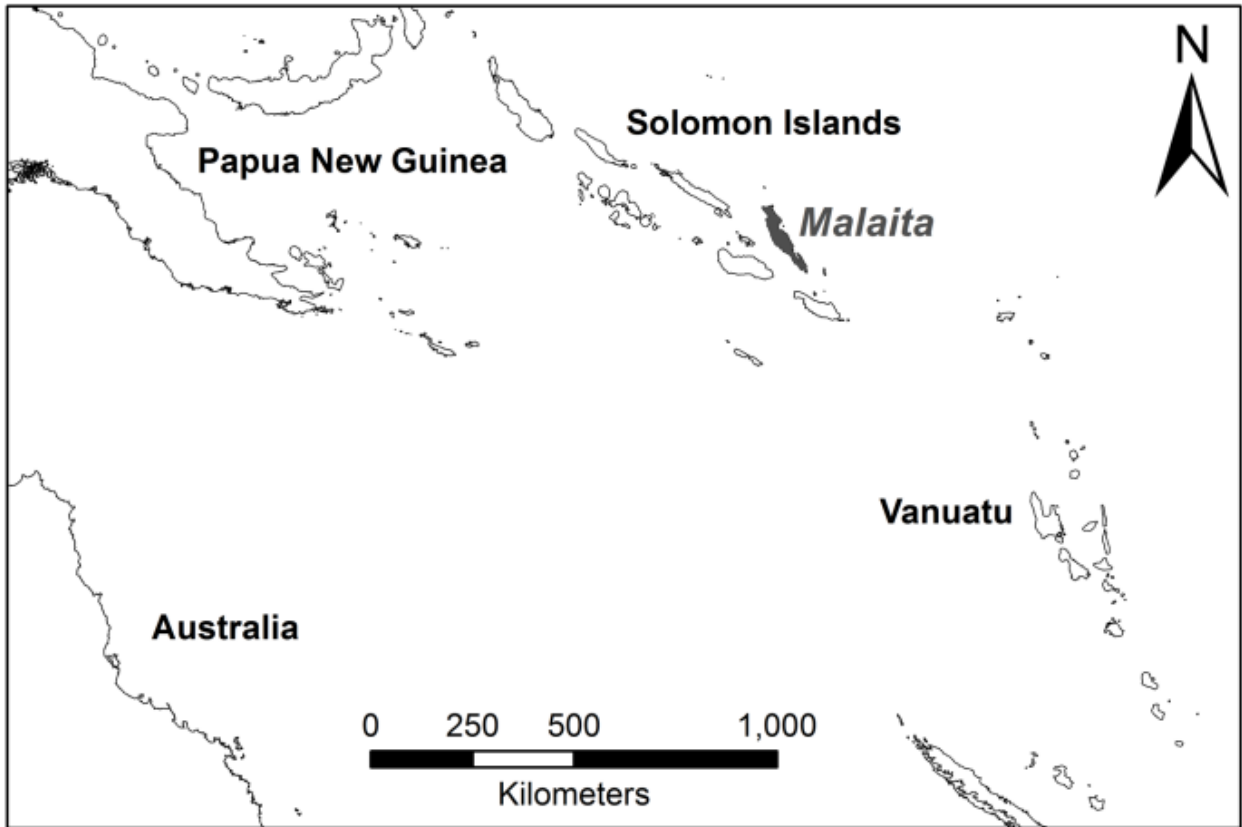


Figure 5: Map of Western Pacific, Solomon Islands and Malaita.³

The Solomon Islands' total land mass is about 28,000 square kilometres, spreading across an extensive maritime boundary of 720,000 square kilometres (Bennett, 1987). The cultural groupings of Solomon Islands are divided into a diverse mix of Melanesian, constituting ninety-five percent. The remaining five percent make up Polynesian, Micronesian, and mixed-race of Chinese and European parentage (Bennett, 1987; Boso et al., 2018). English is the official language of business and education, but Solomon Islands *Pijin* (local lingua franca) is the most spoken language across the islands.⁴ These geographic and demographic data provide background information on the research locality and cultural groupings in the Solomon Islands, as Figure 6 on page 26 provides detailed statistics.

³ Source: Pollard, et al 2015

⁴ Solomon *Pijin*, like *Tok Pisin* in Papua New Guinea and *Bislama* in Vanuatu are blends of local languages with the language of colonists, in particular English but also German that developed during the colonial years as a form of trans-cultural language that today remains a significant medium of communication as a national language.

Province	Land Area (km ²)**	Total Population			Population Density		
		1999	2009*	2019/p	1999	2009*	2019/p
Solomon Islands	30,407.3	409,042	551,525	721,455	13	18	24
Choiseul	3,837.3	20,008	26,372	30,619	5	7	8
Western	7,509.0	62,739	76,649	94,209	8	10	13
Isabel	4,136.2	20,421	26,158	30,399	5	6	7
Central	615.3	21,577	26,051	30,326	35	42	49
Rennell-Bellona	670.7	2,377	3,041	4,091	4	5	6
Guadalcanal*	5,336.3	60,275	106,023	154,150	11	20	29
Malaita*	4,224.7	122,620	152,307	173,347	29	36	41
Makira-Ulawa	3,187.7	31,006	40,419	52,006	10	13	16
Temotu	868.4	18,912	21,362	22,132	22	25	25
Honiara*	21.9	49,107	73,143	130,176	2,244	3,343	5,950

Figure 6: Land area and population of Solomon Islands according to provinces.⁵

In the literature, the Solomon Islands is often described as a ‘nation of villages’ (Roughan, 2011). This is basically because about 85% of the population resides in, or is concentrated to the rural villages and islands compared to the 15% residing in Honiara city and the urban provincial towns (Boso et al., 2018, p. 11). This rural-urban divide is also reflected in the fact that about 87% of the land and natural resources are in the rural and islands and held under customary or tribal ownership by clan groups. About 13% of land comes under what is termed ‘alienated’ or ‘crown land’, administered by the government (Boso et al., 2018, p. 11; Foukona, 2007). The synergy of the rural versus urban divide characterises the culture and subsistence economy that rural villages and islands mostly engage in, which is agriculture and fisheries. Honiara and urban towns then become the centre of government and business (Frazer, 1993; Gegeo, 1998; Spann, 2018). Even in rural areas people increasingly engage in mixed economic activities like ranching animals, selling surplus garden produce and fish catch, small-scale coconut and cocoa plantations, and other small enterprises. In recent decades, commercial logging has become significant contributor to the economy with deleterious impacts on society and environment (Kabutaulaka, 2000; Minter et al., 2018). Population pressure and climate change are added challenges facing Solomon Islands (Foale et al., 2016; Randy, 2002).

⁵ National Population Census Report 2019 recorded the population of Malaita about 173,347 which is 30% of the national population. Large populations of Malaitans are found on the outskirts of Honiara city, on Guadalcanal and other islands many married and settled permanently thus making distinct settlements.

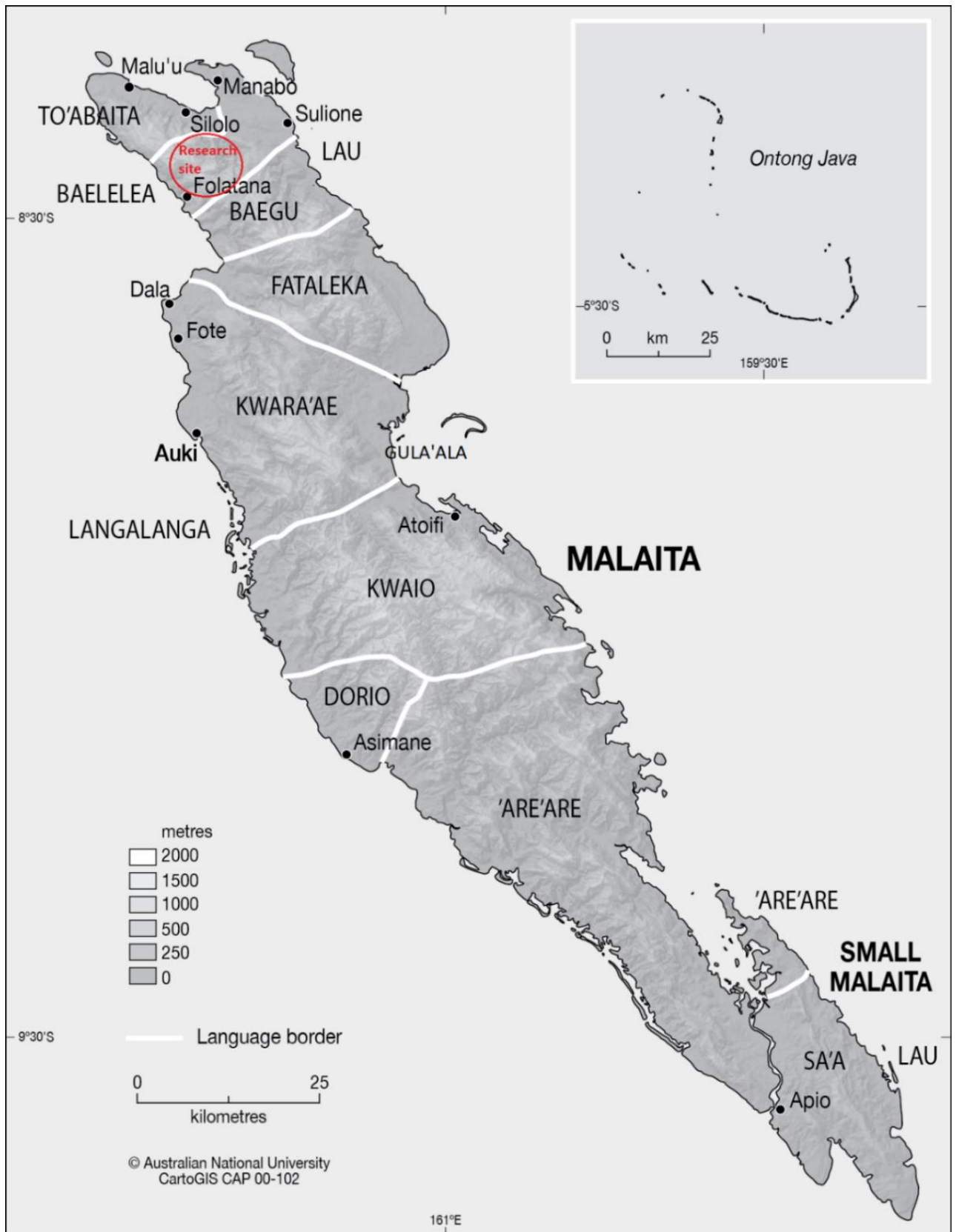


Figure 7: Map of Malaita language groups (research site circled in red)⁶

⁶ Source: Australian National University, CartoGIS, accessed 30/10/2023
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/00-102_Malaita_languages.png

The island province of Malaita by far the most populated with about 173,347 people accounting for more than a quarter of Solomon Islands population (SI National Population Census, 2019). As such, issues development challenges facing Malaita included spiralling population increase and sustainable use of natural resources seriously encroached on by commercial logging activities prevalent in certain parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands. In parts of Malaita that has experience with logging operations in recent years has greatly undermine rural community subsistence livelihoods and the ecosystem (Minter et al., 2018; Minter & van der Ploeg, 2023; Thaman, 2002).

The island province of Malaita is home to twelve language groups including Baelelea as indicated in the map in Figure 7. Geographically and culturally Malaita is further grouped into two generic groups: the inland bush people (*toa i tolo*) and the sea or saltwater people (*toa i asi*). The sea or coastal groups like the Lau speakers of Northeast Malaita, the Langalanga people of Central Malaita, Guala'ala people of East Malaita and Lau speakers of Walade and Fanalei in South Malaita live on small offshore islands with their unique maritime culture (Sanga, 2021, p. 18). The *tolo* or bush people like Baelelea mostly occupy the mountain territories and live in scattered and isolated homesteads and hamlets in territories and mountains tribally claimed through common ancestors (Burt, 1994a; Ross, 1973). Since arrival of Christianity and over the last one hundred years the inland tribes migrated to live in near coastal Christian villages more exposed and accessible to modern amenities and services such health and schools (Burt, 1994b; Cochrane, 1969).

Auki is Malaita's provincial town located in the central Kwara'ae which serves as the administrative capital and the central hub for business and social services, like clinics and government ministries. Malaita Province is further divided into five administrative regions: North Malaita, East Malaita, Central Malaita, South Malaita and Malaita Outer Islands, where essential government extension services such as health clinics are located and accessed by the rural populations. Malaita Province is further divided into fourteen electoral constituencies where members of parliament (MPs)⁷ are elected as parliamentary representatives and further divided into thirty-three provincial wards, where the provincial assembly (MPA) is the representative. All are elected on four-year terms in the national parliament and the provincial assembly.

⁷ Malaita constituencies: Aoke/Langalanga, Central Kwara'ae, West Kwara'ae, Fataleka, Lau/Baelelea, North Malaita, Baegu/Asifola, East Malaita, East Kwaio, East Are 'are, West Are 'are, West Kwaio, South Malaita, and Malaita Outer Islands

Alafana, the research community

The primary research community of Alafana is located within the provincial ward of Madalua/Folotana in Lau/Baelelea constituency (see map in Figure 7). Alafana was intentionally selected as primary research community due to personal and tribal connection to the place and people. As mentioned in Chapter One of personal scholarly journey back to my roots and people understand both the motivation and significance of this study, being the first to be conducted in Baelelea, and by Indigenous Baelelean. Tribally, I am from the local clan called Usuilangi on my paternal ancestry line. On my maternal side, I am from Fani'ili and Ai'nigaule in the To'abaita region through my mother. This tight tribal and familial connections imposed on me the duty to scholarly research and seek insights from people which I belonged. Thus, in this section, I will delve into providing personal stories and accounts that reflect and interwoven between me as person and family and tribal space and relation.

My parents married under strict religious traditions and 'ways' of *akalo* (ancestor) as often described to me before being converted to Christianity sometime in the year 1967. According to family history my parent together with collectives of uncles and dependents under the household of Kanafalu, my grandfather abandoned their mountain hamlet and traditional religious commitment and migrated to start a new Christian village at Alelengana. I was born in the latter half of 1970s, as a first-generation Christian and spent the first ten years of childhood upbringing in Alelengana with two younger siblings. Sometime in mid-1986 my parents were asked and responded to serve as SSEC missionary to Western Solomon (now Western Province) for a period of ten years. This critical ten years of teenage I was disconnected from Baelelea culturally as I also become exposure to a world outside of Baelelea and that which introduction to schooling provided. Occasional visits and experience of what Baelelea inland village during few week's holidays in a place I called 'home' provide limited engagement and exposure to grounded knowledge and practicalities of Baelelea lifeworld. This research is my scholarly journey of self-exploration and discovery of my own self and documenting dynamic changes that imposed on people's lifeworld including theorisation of change and navigating between modernity and Baelelea world.

Arriving and reconnecting with people



Figure 8: Travelling on on a flatbed (Pick-up) truck to North Malaita (January 2021).

It was Wednesday afternoon of December 23, 2020. I and family have finally arrived in Alafana in the village of Alelengana, in the West Baelelea bush. The companion included my wife and four children and two other family members who joined from Auki as everyone excitedly journeyed together to spend Christmas in the village. The village kin were expecting us, an extra special one too considering the family we have travelled all the way from New Zealand after two years absence. At Auki we boarded a pick-up or flatbed truck or flatbed Isuzu Truck (the standard mode of public transport on rural Malaita roads) at 10 o'clock in the morning and took us two hours to a drop-off point at coast. And a further two hours by foot through the rough terrain and muddy path to finally reach Alelengana village from the main road. Alelengana was a historic inland village with over 50 years existence and a typical 'bush' village currently home to six households with over fifty people, including children. My last visit to the village was in early 2019 before coming to New Zealand and in July 2019 to commence the PhD program at the University of Waikato's Anthropology Programme. This sections I narrate a scholarly journey to a metropolitan university and back to the village a researcher with family dependents moved with me to explore and seek to establish connection and understanding of different lifeways and worlds.



Figure 9: Kitchen belong to Diake' out host in Alelengana (December 2020)

Alelengana was the place of my childhood upbringing and a home which my kids affectionally refer to as our "*home lo tolo*", in Solomon Islands pidgin meaning 'home in the mountain'. I narrate personal observation of moment of our arrival back in the village to emphasis social and family relations and identity. As said above, the village kin anticipated our arrival, having learned we arrived in Honiara two weeks prior from Niusilana (New Zealand) or *fanobaita*, Baelelea word meaning 'big place' or metropolitan country. At the entrance to the compound leading to the kitchen, the first welcome note were two strings of flowers hanging between two sticks. Upon enquiry it was announced that Jessie, the ten-year-old daughter of Diake and Luisa's intentioned weaved and displayed the flowers as welcome treat. As Junior, my son and entered between the sticks and flowers, Jessie laughed cheerfully pointing to the flowers and exclaimed: "Didiu,⁸ this is to welcome you." "Wow, Jessy, what a nice welcome! Thank you!" was my immediate response with appreciation. As the family settled to rest, the village senior elder or *ulunao* (elder brother)⁹ who also served as paramount chief to the tribe named Maekolo Manatana who lived about five hundred meters away arrived. He anticipated and having learned we had arrived; he came purposely to greet us. As he made his way up the stairs to the kitchen we were sitting, he started by addressing:

⁸ *Didiu* for Junior James, my six years old son.

⁹ *Ulunao* is the word for 'elder brother' or cousin. Maekolo here is my immediate cousin brother and tribal leader who head our tribe as 'paramount chief' of Usuilangi clan.

Oh, Didiu, my son, you have arrived. Welcome home! I have come to welcome and give thanks in prayer. You have finally arrived home from Niusilana. We heard about the two weeks you were in quarantine in Honiara, the big sick, coronavirus, and the many people who have died in the big countries. Niusilana, I think not many people died, and you are all OK. Indeed, God has kept you all safe. Our prayers have been answered, for we have always prayed for you.

In the address by the senior elder few important address and cultural protocol can be unpacked and situate to relationality based on place and family. In Baelelea, a cousin son is also son to close uncles. There is no word for cousin, neither a word for uncle. People either define son-uncle relations as ‘son and other sons’ or next line of ‘son’ and the same for ‘maka (father) and ta maka (other father) in relations. So, by addressing Junior as ‘son’ by chief Maekolo appropriate Baelelea social relationality respect and protocol. It was a humbled but warm reception and welcome by close kin and respected village elder Maekolo's presence and welcome beside my father. Secondly in addressing my six years old son Didiu also reflects the cultural protocol of respect and inclusivity. The chief address my son, instead of me, culturally depicts deep sense of respect to me as another *wane baita* (adult male and leader). It would be deemed disrespectful and demeaning or considered a taboo to call the name of a brother or sister or parents and elders. The prayer that followed, the elder also prayed and thanked God, as he puts it, “for keeping the clouds in place”, referring to safe flight and arrival in Honiara and Malaita from New Zealand.

Immediate conversation that followed soon shifted to new introduction to the family and village. One-year-old baby Eliana Barafa was an immediate attraction to the close kin as the trip was her maiden trip to the Solomon Islands and Malaita and the village. She was welcomed with such delight by village kin and thankfully arrived at her *‘tolo* home’ for the first time and get to connect to the kin and the place of her ancestors. Also, in the prayer by the elder there was some made special mention of her: “We welcome our new baby; she is now a baby of the place. Grant her from crying and sickness.” The kindreds were so elated that one of them was born in New Zealand that her aunties started affectionately referring to her as “baby Niusilana” and queried her citizenship and identity, whether she was still a baby of Solomon Islands and a baby of Malaita. In the days that followed, baby Eliana did not ‘cry’ but was assimilated into the local culture and the environment of her *tolo* home of Alelengana, like everyone else.

Furthermore, as reflected in a followed conversation connection to place is also carried through a given or name one bears. In the course of the conversation, Maekolo and *Maka* Faiau queried about the *kastom* name of baby Eliana. I told them, baby Eliana's middle name is Barafa, duly registered in the birth registry of the government in New Zealand. The immediate quick response was: "Oh, the big matriarch of Buroki" again qualification that Eliana and the family we are connected to the tribal land on which Alelengana or Alafana collective of villages are situated. Back in New Zealand when Eliana was given birth at the Waikato Hospital I thoughtfully and divisively inscribed as the name on her birth registry because of the fact my two eldest daughters' middle names were all from my maternal side of the family. In Baelelea, naming is culturally significant for the survival of family and clan history, and during my many conversations elders dismayed when kids in the village were given all kinds of name or carry same names as 'Rose or Magaret' as one informants put it, "Margaret, 1, 2, 3 and all are Margarets, surprising as though we don't have names to give the children." There are more to the dynamics of names and naming of children which hinges on Christianity and globalisation and popular culture. Here I relate this to connection of place and finding my roots to place and people we share common ancestry and history that this thesis aims to document and depicts multiple aspects of culture and contemporary social-ecological changes.

Didiu has arrived, kata is a must.

It was the second day after of our arrival and settling in the village, which happened to be also Christmas Eve. In the morning, Uncle Diake (as my children passionately refer) announced: "Because Didiu arrived, today kata is a must" as he announced his few tasks for the day. Diake went about his tasks for the rest of the day, urgent matters really because it was Christmas Eve and harvesting taro to make kata as announced is top priority for him and his wife Luisa. Traditionally in Baelelea, *kata* (mashed taro pudding with dried *ngali* nut kernel) is purposely only for special occasions. And Uncle Diake as announced has double objectives of marking Christmas and importantly to welcome Didiu home. *Kata* as traditional dish must not be consumed with fish an important complement in all consideration and taste. While in Auki I was requested to buy fish, knowing fully in anticipation of *kata* but otherwise meal with taro and fish in the bush are equally tasty as fish and *kata*. To show commitment and cultural protocol of arriving back in the village, apart rice and store goods I bought two large size tuna to the coast of SBD\$200 dollars (approx. NZ\$40) and carried with us to the bush.

The fish serve important contribution towards the evening dinner Uncle Diake announced. In my Baelelea encounters prior and during fieldwork I have since how culturally significant and pleasure locals enjoy fish and *kata* meal that any absence of either, people often less impressed and consider the food as being ‘spoilt’ and ‘tasteless’ and reflecting not the way of culture. At countless occasions, I enjoyed seeing how delightful people exclaimed over their meal of *kata* and fish. During the Christmas Eve meal, Mike (young man) in the house said, “*Diana ubana neri*” meaning “this was perfect and perfect”. Diake responded with a joke “*langi do e taa, kaliafu ana aena game ura gaga lio ne diana*” to everyone’s laughter (translated, ‘no, this is no good, time-wasting and wondering to watch a Christmas game with an empty stomach is good’). Diake was teasing the villagers spending the whole Christmas week at the organised Christmas game down the coast. Still others would describe the combination of fish as *wane asi* (‘man from the sea’ for fish) and fish *wane tolo* (‘man from the bush’ for *kata* or taro) coming perfectly together as one enjoy his/her meal of fish and *kata*. I further have observed people lick their greasy fingers and smile showing satisfaction for a tasty meal for *kata* and fish.



Figure 10: Traditional *kata* dish preparation by Diake our host (Dec. 2020)

In Baelelea as in Pacific cultures foods serve cultural importance of relation building and preserving traditional knowledge. In making *kata*, as mentioned earlier fish always complement as form of protein. In the absence of fish, other protein foods such as opossums and freshwater eels are necessary complements. But fish, often described as *wane i asi* (man from the sea) and *kata* depicts this expressed and interconnected synergy between the two cultures and people of *asi* (Lau) and the *tolo* (Baelelea) going back generations. I have observed and heard time and time again people complained and express dislike eating fish with potato or rice in the village which increasingly common. Dissatisfied villagers often complained and described eating fish or *kata* with rice as "*fanga neri si uria to do*," meaning 'the food is meaningless or tasteless'. This has become the experiences now families in the village the staple foods are potato and rice. In inland villages as Alafana, supply of fish could at the weekly market down the coast or from Auki. Traditionally and for important occasions, people place orders from Lau people in northeast Malaita.



Figure 11: Fish and taro preparation for *kata* by Chief Maekolo and wife (June 2022)

Alelengana village

This section I will narrate the historic and present make of Alelengana, also known as Antioch (a biblical name given to a newly established Christian village in the early 1970s) the oldest village settlement of Alafana. Alelengana was established sometime in 1967. Prior to 1967 isolated attempts were made to establish Christian villages inland, for example, one by a Usuilangi lad named Suiga, an Anglican convert, but failed due to strong resistance from the inland pagan population.¹⁰ Christian villages and Church centres all located along the coast such as Kokorotoa-Madalua, Folotana and Falau as satellite villages to Fo'ondo, the main SSEC mission centre along the Northwest Malaita coast.¹¹ Alelengana become an important village which converts from inland clan groups, principally Usuilangi, Oteabu, and Takibakwa-Athaurana relocated to in the early 1970s before some moved to the coast and others established separate villages within the territory. According to Maka Faiau, in a recorded conversation provided background to the history and internal movements over the years.

It was in 1967 that we moved down to start Alelengana. It has been more than 50 years since we broke out from the hands of *akalo* to Christianity. I already married and was home with my father in the bush for about two years when this huge cyclone of 1966 happened. The cyclone was one of the biggest and destroyed most places in North Malaita, and I remember our mountain village of Autharii was destroyed, and the houses flattened to the ground. The cyclone, I think, was a miracle because it was during the cyclone that *kokowane* (grandfather) became convinced that it was about time we broke from *akalo* for good and came down to *lotu*. The last place we lived was Autharii, up on the mountain that we can see towards Faeniwata. Alelengana was the first Christian settlement. Prior to Alelengana, there were isolated attempts to establish a Christian community inland, but they vacated because the territory was not free from

¹⁰ According to informants detest and resistance by pagans of Christianity and church in the mountain bush was said to be the 'noisy wooden drum' (*ho*) every morning and evening. The heathen then the echo of *ho* by Christian villages at the coast was emblematic of triumph by a powerful god and system. I was told of one incident a heathen man of Usuilangi clan from the bush at night went down to a Christian village at the coast and stole a *ho* belonging to the Church. In the morning when the pastor came to beat the *ho* to call everyone for prayers, he discovered that someone had removed it. Few days later, they were told the drum was taken by a mountain heathen man and was in the mountain. The Christians announced and prayed for the return of the drum and 'change' (conversion) of the individual. The individual did not convert before he died, but the drum was returned by a relative sometime later.

¹¹ Fo'ondo SSEM village was established around 1904 by renowned local Queensland Kanaka Mission convert Peter Ambu'ofa with his early local converts that became an important mission outpost along the Northwest Malaita coast.

the hands of *akalo*, and people were only attracted to the coast. The establishment of Alelengana in 1967 and thereafter I see as a huge breakthrough, and many of the local elders came to pray and also prayed over the rivers and forest. Now things are free, and you cannot encounter them; the spirits were cast out. The Christian villages like Faeniwata and Masilana were formed later in the 1970s.

I was the first to move down here to clear the place for the garden and map out where to make houses, following a request by *kokowane* Kanafalu, who died in 1969 and was buried in Alelengana graveyard. The old village site and around here are all densely forested. The huge forest we cleared for gardens were some of the biggest trees around here..... Taro was very good because of the virgin and fertile soil. Today it is all *alisisiu* (old garden sites) with secondary forest. When the small church building was constructed, we received local missionaries and *tisa* regularly. Some stayed for months, but Tolainao and Wane'asia spent a long time with us in the bush. The land was good, with a lot of garden food. During those times, the visiting missionaries and other people loved the place and described Alelengana as a place of blessing and special. I remember people came with *tafuliae* shells to exchange for taro and pig—the rest we harvested and gifted to relatives and used on church programs.....

This place is special and our foundation because it was *kokowane* (grandfather) Kanafalu who decided that we move here and establish the church at Alelengana. If for any other reason, we could have moved down to the coast or anywhere long ago. As *wanenifoa* and considering his age, he chose Alelengana and disfavoured moving and settling down on the coast. I see it as the will of God that we settled here, for this place is a historical and foundational place for our family. That is why we have lived here for more than 50 years now. Many of our relatives come and go, but the place remained foundational and impossible to abandon. On Buroki land, many generations have passed, and today, we live a secure life and feed on the land, and there is no one to dispute us. It was through maternal connection, five generations back, that we strongly connected to Buroki; otherwise, our foot on this land is shallow.

I believe we are rooted and permanent here because, one, *gwaungaia ana fera da alafana* (head of Buroki land gave consent), and two, *God ka alafana* (God also gave consent), we should live here. I have the conviction that *kokowane* had the vision. Me and my elder brother implemented the vision and church in Alelengana. The growth

and development of this place is up to the next generation. However, 50-plus years is a long history. In the past, under *akalo*, we were always on the move. We hardly stayed in one place because of various reasons. We moved places on the will of *akalo* (ancestors), our god in those days. *Kokowane* Kanafalu, as *arai-ni-foa*, was very sensitive and wilfully lived for the *akalo*. So much so that any strange cry of a bird or a nightmare, the next day, he would tell us, “Oh, we got to abandon this place; the *akalo* are displeased and warn us to leave, something might happen.” We lived permanently in this village when we came down to *lotu* and established Alelengana.

In the narrated account by *Maka* Faiau, it was the conversion of Kanafalu, the last priest of Usuilangi-Faudidiana clan which marked an important break and “closing of an era of *akalo* and the beginning of an era of Christianity”. It was important to associate this important conversion and breakthrough in establishment of this permanent inland village to spiritual revival movement in the last 1960s and into the 1970s (Macdonald, 2021). This remarkable movement of inland bush people to Christianity locals describe as *Tolo na Malaita sifo na Sukulu*, translated as “The mountain people of Malaita have been fully Christianised”. According to the account above and other account, I was being told the natural events, in particular “the first cyclone” played part. Furthermore, as a matter of speculation, health of the ageing tribal priest Kanafalu also had a strong bearing on undercurrent which led to his and family dependents conversion to Christianity. From informants, the tribal priest also did not want to leave his family undecided about the future, considering encroaching powerful influence of *lotu* and declining power of traditions and ancestral religion. According to informants, this was not a light decision considering he was the last tribal priest. In any case, abandoning *akalo* hastily can bear consequences on a person and his family even if they escaped to Christianity. The selection of Alelengana is strategic as it “birthed new light” and brought Christianity into what was once described as “dark and rough” territory in the eyes of outsiders. Uncle Jeremiah Au, also known as Uncle Diro, provided a further personal account during a conversation, as quoted below.

I was away from home in Western Solomons that year in 1967 when I received the news that *maka nau* (my father) gave up *kastom* and came down to *lotu*. I was sad because I was away from home and my father. But I also realised since my *maka*, as important *wane ni foa*, have converted to Christianity from the religion of *akalo*, we are now all Christians. I returned in 1968 and found Alelengana, the new Christian village, was lively and full of people. It was very impressive and truly reflected a village of

Christians. Families from other clan groups came and settled at Alelengana for *lotu*. Lukasi, Saomarakwa, and their extended families became part of the new Christian community. I was impressed but sad that *maka* Kanafalu converted to Christianity, and I was not there with him. But I thought now that *maka* has joined Christianity, we are all Christians now.

It was not coincidental to get immediate affiliation to the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) before then also called the South Sea Evangelical Mission (SSEM) with historical root to Queensland Kanaka Mission. It was the first to establish in the region and therefore has a dominant presence in Baelelea and Malaita (Macdonald, 2021). In the nearby villages at the coast like Folotana and Madalua by 1960s/1970s already have well established SSEC congregations and local leaders play leading roles at the SSEC Fo'ondo District level. Worth mentioning are renowned local pioneer missionaries' early engagement and pastoral work in Alelengana in the 1970s. Men like the late David Tolainao and late Lemuel Manatana, amongst others, were from the Usuilangi clan and close cousins of Kanafalu, the converted tribal priest. As leading local SSEC missionaries and tribal folks, they served diligently and were responsible for mission work in helping the new convert, especially since the last tribal priest and an important relative had become Christian.

According to informants, the name Antioch the late David Tolainao gave the biblical name for the church community, a religious practice evident in North Malaita by rival mission groups, namely SSEC and Anglican (Ross, 1978b, p. 1). The SSEM communities, for example, adopted biblical names of places like Antioch, Jordan, Macedonia, Asia, and Mt Moriah. The Anglican communities, on the other hand, adopted biblical characters, like St John, St Andrew, and St. Matheus, with exceptions such as the Laodicea Anglican local church. Apart from the SSEC and Anglican with a relatively longer presence on Malaita and Baelelea, there are relatively newly introduced and smaller congregations of the Seven Day Adventist (SDA), Jehovah's Witnesses and Assemblies of God that gained root in the 1960s and 1970s in West Baelelea according to local informants. As were the cases over the years, former members of the mainline churches SSEC and Anglican brought the new sects or changed affiliation due to doctrinal issues and family disputes, as Hogbin (1939) and others reported in North Malaita (Frazer, 1981; Hogbin, 1969). In some cases, as I will explain later in the chapter, families moved to new locations within the territory and were thus obligated to start new local church congregations.

The period of the 1970s marked a significant shift and zeal in local evangelisation as witnessed in Baelelea. The 1970s was the period of the revival, which saw the conversion of the last inland tribal groups to Christianity (Griffiths, 1977; Macdonald, 2019; Timmer, 2023, pp. 59-62) . That can be explained in the establishment of inland villages like Alelengana, Faeniwata and Masilana, which in prior decades was a challenge, but now people sparked by the revival and local evangelisation zeal to fully Christianise the last of the relatives as well as territory under the control of Church. The newly established Christian villages further gained a reputation and attraction when the mountain prayer movement, another offshoot of the revival proliferated in North Malaita (Michael, 2007). The conversion of traditional priests like Kanafalu in the 1960s and later Wiliam Heriheri and Auto in the early 1970s marked a dynamic and historic transition in the West Baelelea inland territory. The locals described this overwhelming movement as *tolona Malaita sifo na sukulu*, translated as ‘mountains of Malaita have fallen to a new religion’, as the last of the inland mountain tribes were fully converted to Christianity. I will further elaborate in Chapter Six on the resultant cultural change.

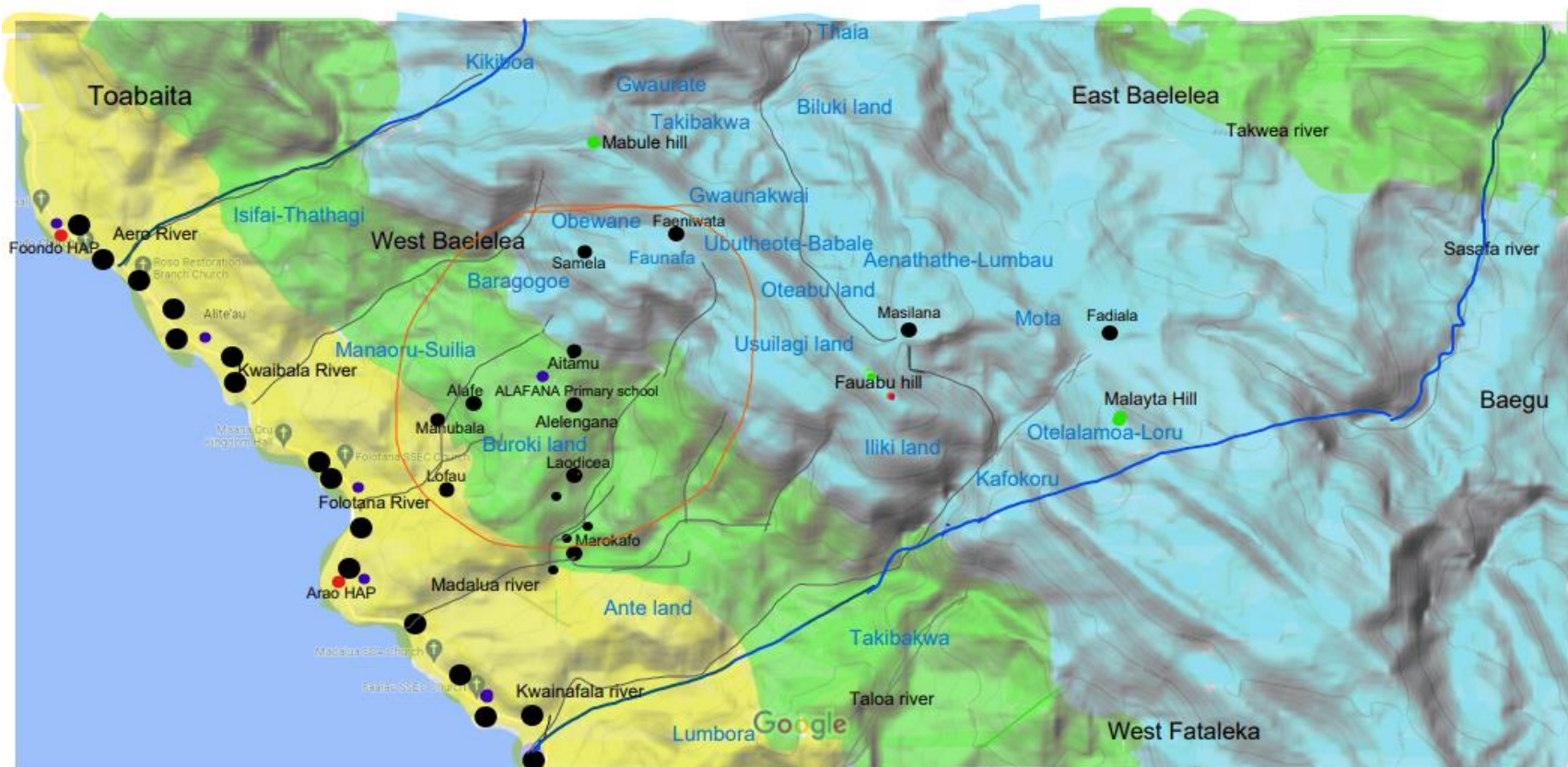


Figure 12: Alelengana villagers posed for picture after church service (2011)¹²

¹² A retrieved photo from personal collection. I am at the back with stripe shirt.

Alelengana, as the first Christian village, was depopulated but remained a permanent site with a permanent church building (Figure 12). The corrugated iron and timber structure has transformed over the years from a thatched house church in the 1970s to its current form. Since the 1980s, there have been significant changes in Alelengana and the surrounding villages. Beside the church, which was the first permanent building in the village, households have started to build their own permanent houses. The village has seen essential modern development in the form of a water supply since 2010, benefiting Alelengana and nearby villages within the Alafana cluster as well as the primary school. My siblings and I left the village partly due to the challenges in accessing primary education in the 1980s to access schooling. The establishment of Alafana Primary in 2000 provided children from Alelengana and the neighbouring villages with access to education. Before the now-functional Alafana Primary School, an attempt was made to establish a village school in Faeniwata in the 1980s, but unfortunately, it did not receive support from the responsible government ministry. The kindergarten at Faeniwata also operated for only two years as a community self-initiated and supported village school. Although the population of Alelengana has decreased as families moved out to start new settlements, they are still part of what I define as the research locality or cluster. The map in Figure 13 shows the local area collectively known as West Baelelea, with the Alafana cluster indicated by the circle encompassing the villages and primary school. In the next section, I will describe the villages in terms of their history and geography to provide further context to the locality of my ethnographic fieldwork.

Map of West Baelelea



- | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------|
| ● Interior (la tolo) | ● Village | ● Health Aidpost | ● School |
| ● Midsection (sifole or habasi) | ● Telekom tower | | |
| ● Coast (fao asi or fafoamali) | Obewane - Tribal land | | |
| — Language boundary | ● Hill or mountain | | |
| — River | | | |

Map data ©2022 1 km

Source: Google Map with modification

Figure 13: Map of West Baelelea (Alafana research locality encircled).

Alafana community cluster description

Alafana is a community cluster of eight inland villages, including Alelengana, Alafe, Aitamu, Samela, Faeniwata, Manubala, Laodicea and Lofau, all located on the ridges and inland between three to eight kilometres from the sea. Alafana associated villages their setting and sizes are typical of Malaita inland bush hamlets and settlements consisting of few closely related families (Cochrane, 1969; Hogbin, 1969; Ross, 1973). The exception is that the villagers are Christians and sites are more permanent defined by permanent church house and family houses made of milled timbers and iron roofing. The combined population of the Alafana community at the time of fieldwork in 2021 was estimated at 300 plus people, including children, which is about ten percent of the population of Madalua/Folotana provincial ward according to the national census projection, stood at 3200 people in 2022 (SINSO, 2022).¹³ The population of Alafana could be more, considering people from the areas who have moved for work and education and residing in Honiara and other urban centres such as Auki. It is common in Honiara outskirts communities like Burns Creek and Sun Valley near the Henderson International Airport and Papaho in Central Honiara to find Baelelea families not included in statistics but have family or parent houses in the village.

Name of Village	Clan group	Church affiliation	No. of HHDs	Male (18+yrs)	Female (18+yrs)	Youth (>18yrs)	Resident Popn.	Away Popn.
Alelengana	Usuilangi	SSEC	6	14	14	17	45	20
Alafe	Oteabu	SSEC	12	16	15	26	57	15
Aitamu	Biluki	SSEC	1		1		1	6
Samela	Usuilangi	SSEC	1	1	1		2	8
Faeniwata	Faunafa	SSEC	3	2	4	4	10	11
Manubala	Usuilangi Oteabu	AOG SSEC	7	11	18	25	54	20
Lofau	Usuilangi	ACOM ¹	5	9	15	15	39	5
Laodicea	Usuilangi	ACOM	10	22	31	40	93	5
Total Population			45	75	99	127	301	88

Figure 14: Alafana community demographic profile.¹⁴

¹³ West Baelelea population according to 2009 National Census recorded 2,749 (growth rate of 1.3%). In 2021 was estimated at 3200 people. The combined population for west and east Baelelea in 2021 is estimated to be about 14,370 people based on SINSO data

<https://www.statistics.gov.sb/statistics/demographic-statistics/census>

¹⁴ Source: Primary data from fieldwork in 2021. HHS for 'households'

The name Alafana also denotes and adopted by the local primary school that according to informants the name was created by the elders of the community, which defines a particular vision and identity. I have interviewed a couple of elders but below is an account by a community elder and *Maka* Faiau,¹⁵ described to me the vision of Alafana, which they have created.

Alafana is a vision we created. I remember we prayed about a name for the school that represents our unity and common vision in one of our community meetings. Multiple names were suggested. I can recall this young man, Mickson, was playing with the main villages' first letters and coming up with the name ALAFANA on a piece of paper. The name sounded right as we wanted a name to start with the letter 'A,' to mean first or something we started. We all agreed on the name and adopted the school's name, reflecting our collective agreement and vision. It was a vision and name given by God, that was my firm conviction and belief. Going back in history, firstly, we came to settle on Buroki land in 'agreement' with tribal landowners. Secondly, we established a church on Buroki on 'agreement.' Thirdly, we established a school in 'agreement' with the landowners and education authority. The tribal owners of the land, the people and communities, the education board, and God all *alafana* (agreed) and consented that we live and do things on the land.

Today, I have observed some carelessness and failure by our community and people. Some people do not uphold the community vision and work together.

In Baelelea the word '*alafana*' carries multiple meanings. As narrated above, *alafana* means agreement or consensus, as often implied in '*ku alafana*,' translated to 'I fully agreed' or 'I consented.' Secondly, the word also means a portrait or replica of something people speak highly of or desire. Thus, from discussions and investigations there are rich conversation about the scope and dimensions of '*alafana*' reflecting a rich theorisation and ontological discussion about developments. For example, from conversations, Afalana residents theorise about what they consider as an ideal community (*afalana to'a*), rich spirituality (*alafana foa*), ideal education system (*alafana sukulu*), ideal development (*alafana development*) and ideal home or environment (*alafana fano*). Such rich conversations suggest resistance to encroaching contemporary changes. I interviewed Suita, a community leader now residing in Kaibia, a settlement on the outskirts of Honiara. He recollected that sometime in 2002, during a

¹⁵ The word *Maka*, in Baelelea means father but equally used for uncle or elder and senior male relations of family.

community meeting, the name Alafana was proposed. He gave his full consent because, according to one legend in Buroki, one of the two boys who survived the devastating ocean wave and flood was named Afalana'iu. The history, therefore, confirmed the adoption of the name Alafana for the community school.

I narrate this account concerning the formulation of the name and vision of Alafana as it depicts epistemic theorisation that results in creating new knowledge based on local context and histories as Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001) noted about Kwara'ae epistemology. For the people of Alafana, irrespective of living in small family villages, the name and vision represent a common identity and belonging to a particular locality, distinct from their relatives down the coast, more accessible to the coastal road. In the next section, I will describe the makeup of the Alafana cluster to provide further cultural context, geography, and histories of settlement and Christianity in the locality.

Faeniwata village

Faeniwata, also known as Gwefunitolo is the furthest inland village of the Alafana cluster. The village is the second oldest inland Christian settlement established in 1974 after Alelengana which received families from several clan including Usuilangi, Faunafa-Obewane, Babale, and Mota. In the 1970s it grew into an important settlement populated by new converts and relatives who decided to move back inland from the coast and part of the new settlement and congregation. The leading figures were often called *ono wane* (six elders) namely Obed Otofalu and Festus Faiau from Usuilangi clan; Shemuel Gwaikona and Jemuel Jimi from Babale clan; William Heriheri also from Usuilangi clan, and Joram Auto from Faunafa-Obewane clan. These six elders were considered the leaders and pioneers for leading role in founding the church at Faeniwata, in the heart of Baelelea highlands. Their unity and collaborative effort were well founded and unbreakable, according to interviewed surviving elders like *Maka* Faiau and Pastor Rex Auto. This bond and commitment make Faeniwata stood out as model spiritual community founded by unschooled men who said to “only operate by faith and prayer.” Also affiliated to Faeniwata at its early days were other elders from Mota clan. Tribal elders like Ofai, Ladota, and Shem Baelata who later moved to establish Masilana village in 1975 further inland from Faeniwata towards East Baelelea.

Faeniwata was established after Alelengana further inland which according to informants demonstrated a spiritual breakthrough in mountain territory once considered “dark and rough country” for its historical past. As mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, this considered spiritual breakthrough’ and extension of church community inland beginning with Alelengana, Faeniwata and Masilana in the 1970s can be attributed to the experienced spiritual revival on Malaita amongst the SSEC communities (Macdonald, 2019). Leading spiritual leader and missionary at Faeniwata was man named Kabasi Kidibotho - local SSEC evangelist. He gave the name Faeniwata (local word for ‘Fine Water’), which according to informants was said to have been “received in a form of revelation after much praying and seeking the Lord.” The name Faeniwata (Fine Water) I was told, signified “peace and transformation of a once dark and rough territory in Baelelea.” Literal establishment of Christian villages, one after the other in the period of the 1970s and 1980s was a breakthrough and victory over the power of *akalo* as church and christianity has spread and planted in the inland bush. During fieldwork, I interviewed John, a local pastor who was a youth in the 1970s. He provided account on extraordinary acts he described as a “miracle and the power of God at work when Faeniwata first established” when they moved to be part of newly established Christian village.

Faeniwata was founded in 1974, and Masilana a year later in 1975. We relocated from the coast and first resided at Faeniwata for some time; later, we moved to start Masilana, where that prayer and vision showed to Aunty Pisi.... The site where the church is located is a *kulaabu* (taboo) it was only after much prayer that the place was cleared and inhabitable. Behind is *kulaabu*, a sacred creek, and I could recall the elders praying over the place, and a miracle happened. Youths, we were told not to get close to the prayer warriors; otherwise, *akalo* would violently attack or inflict incurable sickness. A miracle happened, a few days later, a large three-meter-long snake was found dead further down from the creek. That showed the power of God, dispelling the powers of *akalo*, the devil. It was a miracle, and from then on, the elders declared we could drink and eat shellfish and prawns from the Kwaibala River that the sacred creek fed into without fear of being inflicted with incurable ulcers that were culturally long associated with the river.

As captured in the account by John according to his observation, the described ‘spiritual breakthrough’ mentioned above, was common experiences during the spiritual revival movement on Malaita. There were reported accounts of casting out evil spirits and spiritual cleansing of taboo sites believed to be inhabited by *akalo* or ghosts (Griffiths, 1977; Macdonald,

2021b).¹⁶ Faeniwata and Masilana as new villages has over the years attracted prayer teams from the coast and externally when out of the spiritual revival in the 970s further lead establishment of prayer mountains (Macdonald, 2021b; Michael, 2007). Naturally Faeniwata and Masilana located close to mountains namely Fau'abu and Fauna'iki were turned into mountain prayer park or centres. There has been ongoing effort by locals to translate the mountains into International Prayer Centre, a vision promoted by former SSEC Reverend the late Michael Maeliau, recorded in his book: *The deep-sea canoe movement: an account of the prayer movement in the Pacific islands over the last twenty years* (2007) and related publications.¹⁷ There are much to write on this, which is not the subject of this thesis. Provided here is to describe forces lead to establishment of Christian community in Baelelea inland bush, namely Faeniwata.



Figure 15: Faeniwata village boys playing afternoon soccer (April 2021)

¹⁶ The 1970s was the period of the revival on Malaita well documented in missionary and anthropologist [Griffiths 1977 Macdonald 2021]. As a child growing up in the village and being an SSEC adherent myself I am a witness to some of experiences during the revival in the later years of the 1980s to early 1990s like night long prayers and singing and speaking in tongues by elderly women. Youth rallies and congregations flocked to prayer mountains and cast out ancestral spirits from possessed individuals and areas that were occupied by 'akalo' ('satanic spirits')

¹⁷ Publications both in books and audio can be reference to the vision and movement propagated by Rev Michael Maeliau and passionate followers in north Malaita, that anthropologist Jaap Timmer has written several articles about the APA Movement

Over the years and at the time of my fieldwork, Faeniwata has significantly reduced in population and left with two households with a resident population of ten people. I stayed for a week in the company of Pastor Rex Auto'o with his wife Nathalyn and two children. The families used to reside at Faeniwata have moved to form new settlements, some to the coast and Honiara for diverse reasons. For example, my elder/cousin Maekolo Manatana, the chief and his family dependents got relocated to Alelengana in the 1990s. Faeniwata, then became depopulated but quiet and peaceful with remarkable history of local missionisation. Faeniwata, however, remained part of my childhood upbringing, having attended introduced kindergarten for a time in the 1980s. This memory flashed across my mind as I watched two boys of the village boys played soccer (Figure 15) the evenings I spent in Faeniwata during my field visit in 2021. As also reflected in picture of boys playing soccer, depicts impacts of globalisation through sport of soccer that inland village kids got to enjoy away from traditional village games. As is typical of inland communities, population growth and change always result either extension or formation of new villages and homestead external of the main village(s).

Alafana village

Alafe village, situated on a raised slope and about 1.5 KM from Alelengana and 3 KM from the coast would be considered extension of Alelengana. The resident population at time of fieldwork was just over 50 people from 12 households. Recently, villagers have relocated and reside at place called Manubala about 500 meters away towards the coast. Alafe village was situated at an elevation of about 200 meters above the sea level and offers a scenery view of the northwest Malaita coast. And on clear days you could have clear view of Ramos Island (also called Anogwau, or spirit land) and Isabel. During my fieldwork, I stayed with cousin Demesi Iro at his stilt house (*biu*) situated towards a reserved native forest and slope at one end of the village. Demesi and his brothers are from the Oteabu-Funiakwa clan but connected to villagers Alelengana through maternal ancestry bloodline (*futaa ni keni*). As we enjoyed the evening breeze, Demesi shared with me the historical background of Alafana and connection to Buroki land.

In 2000 we moved here and established Alafe. Before late *Maka Lusiasi* passed away he communicated with his two cousins at Alelengana of the idea to establish a separate village because the family is growing big. *Maka Lusiasi* then recommended we relocate

this place...This place was just an old settlement occupied by two forefathers few generations back. A small family commotion over suspected *arua* (witchcraft) case This resulted in one of the brothers to leave and stay with his in laws in East Baelelea. It is my great-grandfather moved to live with his Usuilangi cousins. That was reason *Maka* Lusiasi Lukasi and Dio opted to be buried in Alelengana. It was about four generations that we lived with our maternal Usuilangi relatives, particularly Faudidiana sub-clan. When we moved to start a village in this place in 2000, series of prayers and spiritual clearance we ensured carried out to make this place habitable and free from curses. Because in *kastom*, what happened in history remained connected to the place, and if not cut through by prayer, the implications would manifest somehow like serious sickness or death. Recently part of the community had moved down and resettled in Manubala and 'Fama' because of their properties like coconut and cocoa plantations.

This place is all part of Buroki. We claim no right over it; we only came to settle here because it was an old settlement by our forefathers five generations back. My brothers and I are connected to Buroki through my paternal grandmother Saufakwa, who descended from one of the Bakwa sons of Nafe at A'afu. A piece of land belonging to her descendants is located further up the slope from A'afu that we have our hands on. The Oteabu clan also connects to Buroki from an earlier maternal ancestor [name withheld] and the only daughter of Nafe and the sister of the eight 'Bakwa.' Our ancestors settled on Buroki more than any clan groups reflected in multiple abandoned Buroki settlements for a long time. There is no piece of land given to the tribe. However, a piece of land said to be gifted as *finisi* (bounty) to our *akalo* is on Manaoru for avenging the death of Ailiau, a notorious Buroki *ramo* (warrior). The *finisi* was first given to Ailiau as a *finisi* for killing Taloniau of [.....] a present-day Fo'ondo. The village of Folutana today is situated on that *finisi* gifted to Ailiau, and later, Bakwaniau transferred to his nephew [name withhold]. I only tell the story to provide the context to our connection and settlement on Buroki land.

As mentioned above, Alafe villagers were predominantly of Oteabu clan, who according to informant migrated and settled on Buroki land for many generations. Oteabu, the clan's principal ancestor land was located further in the mountain beyond Faeniwata. Interestingly according to accessed version of oral history (*unu*) and genealogy (*talisibara*) the ancestor of the Oteabu clan is traced thirty generations back to Siale in the central Kwara'ae region. This

only but one version, there are other competing claims and versions, a common dilemma with regards to land issues and oral histories on Malaita (Burt, 1994a), as elsewhere in Melanesia. However, informants like Cousin Iro provided a conclusion according because most of the inland migrations can be traced to Kwara'ae and Kwaio where first earliest landing on Malaita believed to have occurred. Cousin Iro also reconnects and provide account why Oteabu and Usuilangi sub-groups like Funiakwa and Faudidiana come to settle on Buroki land through the matrilineal ancestries which villagers continued to maintain kinship relation based on *futaa* (blood relations) and intermarriages. The bloodlines were made strong and interconnected through marriage as reflected in the phrase: “*taraina kulu futaa e kwairokasi na,*” (translated “today blood relations have become complexly interconnected). Tribal intermarriage within and with neighbouring clans and families underscore the right to settlement and access to land as I will explain later in Chapter 3. The clan and families making up Alafana and, more so, West Baelelea including relatives through traced to certain male lines intermarriage and social relations has become tight and descendants trace and connect to multiple clan groups through maternal ancestors.

Family Homesteads

What I define as homestead is settlement with one household or family. At least in Alafana their villages or abandon settlement fits this category. Samela, Adaliua and Aitamu which form integral part of Alafana made up of single households and strictly hardly called a village or community. They are, however, permanent village site with important structures like a church house and family dwelling made of modern materials (copper and cement) which are lacking in some populated inland villages. Samela is located about two kilometres from Faeniwata and the home of John Olofi and his late wife. It was established sometime in 2006 after the couple relocated from Faeniwata. All together Samala homestead was comprised of ten houses, which include one permanent family house, three semi-permanent buildings as 'Samela Prayer Centre' (Figure 16). I visited twice in 2021 and many times in the past because John is a cousin and *ulunao* (elder brother) beside Maekolo. John is a living library of clan genealogies, family history, and *kastom* and elder son of Tofilu, a pagan *wane into* of Usuilangi clan who resisted all attempts of conversion to Christianity until his passing in 2004. As a youth John was exposed Honiara and the popular global culture that earned him the nickname OO7, after his iconic movie character James Bond, which he often called without offence.



Figure 16: Me and cousins John and Alabeni at Samela in Baelelea bush (April 2021)

Another inland homestead is Adaliua, located about two kilometres from Faeniwata with a permanent church and a widow as the sole resident at the time of my fieldwork. I went passed Adaliua on my way to Masilana and remembered I visited once when the church building was dedicated sometimes in 2001. The only resident at the time of my fieldwork whom I relate to as an aunty, and during the conversation, she said that she was a proud custodian of the church house and Usuilangi, our tribal land, because the brother (my uncle) had moved to Honiara with his family. The relatives all favour living along the coastal road.

Aitamu is located between Faeniwata and Alelengana. It was centrally located along the mountain footpath connecting the coast and bush, as such I passed three times during research fieldwork trips in 2021 and 2022 on my way to the interior mountain bush. The lone resident of the place was a spinster named Katrin who takes care of permanent house and properties belonged to her brother Suiti who now resides in Honiara. Aitamu, for some years in late 1980s was a village of several families. But later the families abandoned and relocated to Alelengana and Alafe leaving Aitamu virtually empty. As in any case the sporadic spread and choice of residence happened for diverse reasons, that nowadays include lack of access or the need for modern education and employment in Honiara the main attractions and reason for

people leaving rural village for Honiara and urban centres (Cochrane, 1969; Frazer, 1981). This has been equally experienced in Alafana.

Similarly, internal movement and establishment of separate family settlements has also been an observed part of the social and demographic dynamics in Alafana as where on Malaita. It was observed that culturally, people moved location after three to four generations due to social factors, such as population increase, family disputes, access to new water sources and fertile garden areas (Cochrane, 1969). From informants' accounts and my knowledge, these factors underscored the sporadic spread of family villages within the locality. Over the years, movement of families has become more common because as informant expressed 'the population of a particular family has increased'; thus, it is necessary to establish a separate village settlement, as Demesi Iro reported about Alafe which originally part of Alelengana. Also as observed with establishment of permanent villages, few families and individuals chose to remain in the old village, thus maintaining some degree of permanency like Aitamu and Adaliua. As also observed in the foreseeable future, the established separate villages may split further or will expand and as populate continue to increase they will merge again into large villages around important establishment like school which growing population wish to access. Further, development and services like water supply has already connected three villages and the community school from a common source. In mountain communities as Alafana, the issue and access to fertile agriculture land are also important consideration. Land and agriculture, I will discuss in the later chapters: Chapter Five and Chapter Six.

Laodicea: 'New Village'/Settlement

The recently established settlement in the Alafana cluster is Laodicea, also called New Village or simply 'Settlement.' As the name suggests, the village was established about ten years back in 2013, which compared to other village was a new settlement located about one and a half kilometres from Alelengana and less than a kilometre from Marokafo. The Laodicea villagers are close kin of Alelengana villagers, but by denominational affiliation are Anglican and a satellite local church of Marokafo Anglican Community. In 2021 and 2022, during my research fieldwork I had frequent visits and prolonged stay with relatives in Laodicea and accommodated at the church rest house located at the centre of the village.



Figure 17: Laodicea children posed for camera (June 2022)¹⁸

During research engagement I had lengthy conversation with two elderly people of the village. The couple, *Kokokeni* Takarii and *Maka* Firinao in the 1980s resided in Alelengana but have moved locations until finally settled in Laodicea. Other informants include cousins and village Catechist George Limai who together with Henry Konai I interviewed on perspectives

¹⁸ Consent guaranteed by both parents.

on culture, social change and leadership roles. Laodicea's population is little over 100 people, including children at time of fieldwork. It was a typical inland village with family dwellings informally scattered on the ridge with only four family/household homes in village main compound near the church and the rest house. As typical of inland villages, family houses located within shouting distance are considered natural part of the main village as observed here where family houses located towards Madalua River and Marokafo village.

Marokafo & Masilana village

I have the benefit of visiting two important inland villages in West Baelelea during my fieldwork, that because of the significant population, geography and religious affiliation are considered less part of Alafana cluster. The village of Marokafo and Masilana are two important inland villages with relatively bigger populations and located somewhat on the periphery of Alafana cluster. Nevertheless, the villagers have close tribal connections to the people making up Alafana community. The village of Masilana was located further inland from Faeniwata in the interior mountain bush (*la tolo*) towards East Baelelea and would take four hours by foot from the coast to reach. Marokafo on the other land is located about a kilometre from Laodicea and two and half kilometres from the coast. Marokafo was situated on the plateau at the intersection between two rivers named Madalua and Kwaiano, hence the name Marokafo, meaning 'eye of two rivers.' The village Marokafo has about two hundred plus people, including children according to estimate and by religious affiliation the villagers are Anglican but tribally belonged to the Usuilangi sub-clan, Rarae. I have travelled passed the village many occasions before because the people are close kin and one of the footpaths to the bush runs through the village connecting Laodicea and Alelengana and the coast. During fieldwork I have the benefited of visiting the village and observed the Church's annual Saint Day program in June of 2021. It was during the visit that I observed fusion of culture and church when it comes of communal feasts and cultural entertainment that followed the main Church prayer. I also interviewed and have conversation about certain aspects about the history of the place, name of the Church and aspects of weather (rain) which locals often associate or coincide with event at Marokafo. Interestingly, I gathered two contradictory perspectives, one was said to do with name of the village and the river (*kafo*) and the other associated with Saint John adopted by the Anglican religious community. As elder Eric stated, "John the Baptist, was a man of water", thus rain is a spiritual blessing.



Figure 18: Marokafo Saint John the Baptist Church program (June 2021)

Further in the highland is the village of Masilana I briefly mentioned as associate village of Faeniwata. The inland village of Masilana predominantly made up of people from the same tribal group of Mota, also called Haeseni. Masilana, as a christian village was established sometime in 1975 following Faeniwata. According to informant as mentioned in the earlier section, Masilana village for its history and population gained population as central SSEC community in the highlands of Baelelea bush beside Faeniwata. At the time of fieldwork, the village population was said to be over one hundred people, with about 60% are said to be living in Honiara and Auki for work and education. I have visited the village countless before, but after a long time, properly ten years I have the benefit of visiting the village again during my research fieldwork in 2021. I stayed with my cousin Maeta and interviewed late Uncle Shem Baelata and the villagers on aspects of agricultural practices, traditional knowledge and observed change of the ecology and social systems. Interestingly, climatic conditions and changes have affected remote mountain communities, as reported though at different rate, but social and ecological changes as one informant described “no one will escape, its coming and already we felt in here with regards to crops we plant and ecosystem generally. As I will delve into detail in Chapter Five and Six, important to understand ecological and social loss impacted by changes. Culturally, the people have converted to Christianity and relocated to the coast but in the 1970s have decided to relocate back inland and established Masilana.



Figure 19: Me and Cousin Maeta, Masilana village (April 2021)

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the decade of the 1960s and 1970s proved pivotal for historic and social-cultural changes as experienced and being told by informants. It was during the decades that significant number of pagan families within West Baelelea inland territories abandoned the traditional religion of *akalo* (ancestors) and resulted in establishment of permanent Christian settlements in near coastal areas. The SSEC villages like Alelengana, Faeniwata, and Masilana and Marokafo for a small group of Anglican converts are important inland receiving settlements for new converts. With exception of Masilana and Marokafo that over the years maintained large populations, other villages like Alelengana and Faeniwata the villages have experienced depopulation due to factors as explained earlier with the evolution of conceptual community of Alafana, a cluster of seven villages with significantly small family population. One would also explain, as stated earlier Marokafo and Masilana have larger population because the villagers are mostly of a single clan or family group and affiliated to the same Christian denomination. However, aspects of culture and ecological factors, for example scarcity of agriculture land and dried rivers are important push and break factors to decline of inland villages as observed to be true for Alafana as other inland settlements and population.



Figure 20: Modern family house in Masilana village, Baelelea bush (April 2021)



Figure 21: Traditional house in Samela, Baelelea bush (March 2022)

As for Alelengana and Faeniwata, though residents belonged to the same denomination, the families were from multiple clan groups. It is, therefore, natural for the villages to split into smaller villages and extended communities, as perfectly described by Alafana. This perhaps

reflects the local dynamics of settlement patterns and movement within the locality as traditionally and culturally in Malaita (Cochrane, 1969; Ross, 1973). As narrated earlier and pointed out in other literature on Malaita, the church over the years, has become a stabilising factor that has championed numerous changes (Pollard, 2006). I will deliberate more on this in Chapter Six on social and cultural change. But as reflected in the dynamics of village settlements and the population of the studied community, people remained in the same village unified by the same clan and denominational affiliation. Otherwise, families relocated to a new site and established new prayer centres and a new village community. In this section, I have described the social and cultural context and dynamics relational to the studied locality and population in terms of local historic accounts and observations by locals based on lived experiences and salient transformations. In the next section I will describe the ecology and subsistence systems and activities prevalent in the studied locality of Alafana or West Baelelea generally.

The ecological zones and geography

In this section, I will describe the geography and ecology of the locality in relation to Malaita conception and definition of the inland territorial or ecological zones. This is to better understand the context and types of cultural and livelihood activities pertinent to the locality of my ethnographic study and island ecology of Malaita generally. Ross (1973) study of the neighbouring Baegu clan, pointed out that generally “people are classified as bush and saltwater based on the ecological zones they exploit” (p. 75). And as he explained that although “this is only a generalisation as there is some overlap, but each has a monopoly over the extreme part of the continuum” (p. 75). There is even more overlapping as societies and people become more interconnected and exposed to new ways and means of accessing livelihoods in a more mixed-economic context. However, both culturally and geographically the Baelelea people are always regarded as ‘people from the bush’ (*toa i tolo*) who interacted with and depended upon the bush environment for cultural sustenance since the time of their ancestors (Hundleby, 2017, p. 86). From the local knowledge and understanding the island environment of Malaita is divided into three generic ecological zones defined in relation to *asi*, meaning ‘the sea or ocean’, and *tolo*, meaning ‘the mountain.’ The locally defined ecological zones or categories are represented in Figure 22 and further described below.

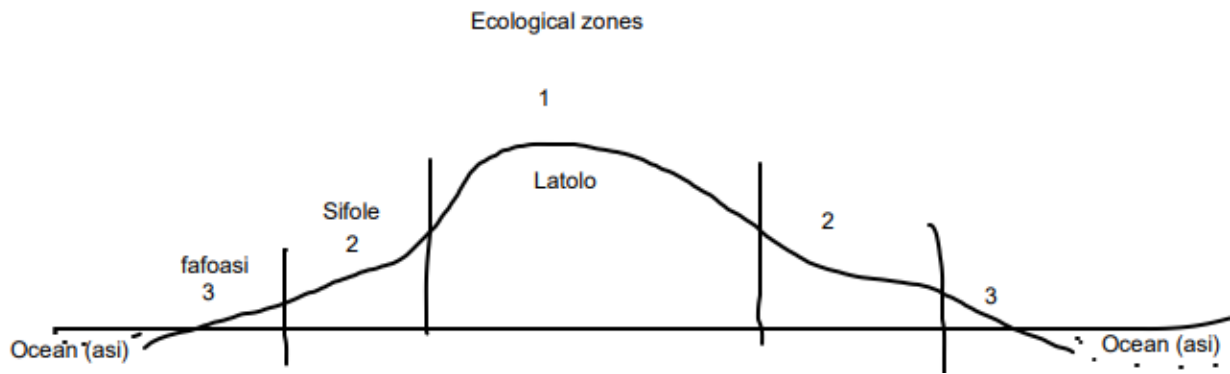


Figure 22: Cross-sectional diagram of three ecological zones.¹⁹

The Baelelea conception and definition of land geographically revolved around the mountain, as zenith or centre going downward. As depicted in Figure 22, Baelelea categorise land under three zones. This include *latolo* (the mountain interior) which in the context of the studied locality covers the territorial area above 400 meters altitude and to the top of the mountain. As common on high raise volcanic islands in Solomon Islands, the interior mountain areas comprised the cloud forest with dense carpeting of mosses, lichens, and liverworts (Pollard, et al., 2015). Native palms such as *bo'fau* (*Trachycarpus fortune* palm) are also common in the interior mountain territories of Baelelea. High-raised islands, like Malaita the mountain ecology has rich biological diversity but increasingly under threat from human activities and destructive commercial logging causing loss of endemic species (Pollard et al., 2015). In the interior mountain the atmospheric temperature during the day ranges from 18 to 28 degrees Celsius and fall to 15 degrees on cold nights. Alafana villages of Faeniwata, Samela, and Masilana are interior mountain villages and, therefore, simultaneously referred to as *vilisi latolo*, or villages in the bush.

The middle section areas or slope in Baelelea, locals described *sifole* or alternatively *abasi* – refers to the ngali nut forests and related cultural activities that define the territorial zone. In the studied locality the middle section was located below 400 meters but 200 metres above sea level and the common forests includes hardwood trees such as banyan, ngali nut (or Canarium nut as mentioned above), Indo-Malayan hardwoods, and native bamboo. Across Malaita and Solomon Islands, the rich forests within this zone were heavily logged by commercial logging companies. Logging of native hardwood forest species has posed significant threat to the native forest ecology, biodiversity, and cultural heritage (Pollard et al.,

¹⁹ Source: Authors construction based on local knowledge from informants

2015). In the studied locality and West Baelelea generally there was little experience with commercial logging. The anthropogenic threats that resulted in significant deforestation was due to the intensification of land use and clearance to accommodate smallholder monoculture coconut and cocoa plantations had over the years. As reported, this was the main driver of deforestation and biodiversity loss in West Baelelea in near coastal areas. In recent decades establishment of inland permanent villages accompanied by increasing population has pressured land resources, especially forests and bamboo for local timber as informants pointed out. I will delve in these ecological dynamics and loss in Chapter Five.

A near coastal zone (*fafoasi*) is the area from the high water mark up to about one to two kilometres inland according to the topography of the area studied. The ridges within the near coastal zone raised to about 200 meters above sea level. Alternative name to *fafoasi* as is *sula'amali*, meaning 'stripe along the seashore,' and *sula roti*, meaning 'along the road', in referring to the coastal road built in the 1960s that runs and access by coastal communities and population. Ascribed terminologies here defined a salient change and expressed perspective of a reformed landscape and cultural feature that has become more dominant. A notable ecological change and transformation of the coastal and near coastal landscape in West Baelelea primarily accompanied by introduction and establishment of monoculture coconut plantations, now a dominant landscape feature. The introduction and establishment of modern facilities like road, schools and clinics centralised and accessible at the coastal village gave coastal populations advantage over their inland cousins. The historic contact and access to modern facilitates and lifeways now redefined the characteristics and culture of *fafoasi*, social relations and identity that I will delve into discussing in Chapter Five and Six.

The ecological zones are delineated according to cultural understandings of the types of forest foods and activities that typically occur in a particular zone and contemporary changes and developments like roads. Introduction of christianity and mixed economic activities in many ways continue to transform and reframe local narrative and perspectives that culturally is attested to a particular zone. There are certainly overlaps, but generally people define an ecology according to cultural underpinnings, traditional knowledge, and subsistence systems of a particular zone (Ross, 1978). Baelelea people as *toa i tolo*, culturally depended on the bush environment for making a living and sustenance. That has changed and as increasingly coastal communities engaged in cash crops, namely coconut and cocoa and inland populations increasing engaged in some form of cash income generation activities. In Alafana as reported families ensure produce surplus garden produce to sell for cash income beside cocoa farming.

Subsistence livelihoods and activities

People in Alafana engaged in subsistence agriculture-based activities and livelihoods like gardening. Gardening is by families or households and form important source of economic and cultural mainstay for Baelelea historically and today. Inland bush village, on a typical day, gardening occupies the morning part of the day and in the afternoon is spend on food gatherings and forest hunting for men. From observation and prior knowledge, Alafana for generations people depended on and harvested local delicacies beside food from gardens. Local delicious, *futo* (opossum) was considered a prized food, *thakwalo* (bat or ‘flying fox’), *ulau* (freshwater frog), and *dolo* (freshwater eel) traditionally are important source of protein for the bush people. As observed many times, at end of the day a successful hunter would return in the evening with a bag containing *futoo* or *dolo* all wrapped in leaves and another parcel forest ferns. Alafana elders, Budunga and Maekolo were renowned local hunters with unmatched skills and knowledge and success. They are called "*wane ana mamana*" meaning "person gifted spiritually". The same would also be said of a skilled fisherman, local called ‘*wane ana mamana la amali*', person gifted spiritually in fishing. Either a hunter or fisher man, in Baelelea the belief and claim that degree of successfulness in fishing or hunting was inherited from his father or ancestors, either on paternal or maternal ancestry line.

During the fieldwork there is mix reaction concerning decline of forest foods. Many informants in Alafana revealed the forest have become bare and empty of the prized local delicacies due to the deforestation of traditional hunting spots and exploitative harvesting. I will deliberate on this more in Chapters Five and Six. Fish as pointed in the earlier section is an occasional food and an important complement to traditional dish. In Baelelea generally people barter at the weekly coastal markets or from Lau people. Barter trade has long existed for generations between inland bush Baelelea people and the coastal Saltwater people or Lau. Nowadays, because of frequent transport between North Malaita and Auki, people also get protein food like fish from Auki.

In Alafana family gardens, people cultivate varieties of taro and yam, as traditional crops in Baelelea as well as varieties of sweet potatoes and cassava and vegetables in their gardens. The traditional practices of shifting cultivations people still practice, but the issue of intensive land use and deforestation are issues of considerable impacts on the ecology as I will detail in Chapter Five and Chapter Six respectively. In the next paragraphs I will describe and discuss

dynamics of garden crops, both traditional and introduced crops varieties villagers in Alafana increasingly plant and dependent on economic and livelihoods sustainability.



Figure 23: Family Garden, Alelengana village (January 2022).

Taro locals called *alo* and yam (*kai*) are traditionally cultivated crops of cultural importance and are highly valued with associated with local body of knowledge as contained in local myths and traditions of clans in Baelelea and Malaita (Akin, 1993). From informants the experienced decline of native taro and yam species was very concerning and many related to impacts of climate change but also the decline of long-held cultural knowledge and traditions of taro. As such, increasingly family are becoming more reliant on the stable root crop namely sweet potato or kumara that locals also termed *kai rogi*, meaning ‘creeping yam’ in Baelelea and Baegu (Ross, 1977). The sweet potatoes, its origin in Pacific and Malaita are attributed to various sources (Iese, 2018; Ross, 1977). In North Malaita, according to Ross (1977), sweet potato was introduced in the late 1800s from Norfolk and New Zealand by Anglican-trained young Malaita men. They on their return they brought with them the sweet potato and started cultivating it in Anglican mission settlements such as Saa in South Malaita and Ngongorefou in Lau/Asifolae of Northeast Malaita.

Potato was an introduced or crop which local describes as *fanga kafi fula* (crop which just arrived) or culturally a non-native crop, people conceived as ‘secondary crop’ and crop

“belonged to the woman” as many in Alafana often described it. Over the years for cultural and ecological reasons as experience in Alafana and West Baelelea generally showed sweet potato has increasingly become popularly cultivated crop and comes in different varieties. Introduction and cultivation of different varieties also comes with set of characteristics that locals easily attracted and adopted. For example, one of the recently introduced potato variety was called *trimanisi* (three months) because of its short period of three months to harvest. This gave preference over other potato varieties and the traditional crops: taro and yam which takes up to six or eight months to harvest. Potato people increasingly cultivated as it was considered an easy crop for it is more adaptable or non-seasonal, high-yielding, nutritious, durable, and pathogen-resistant (Akimichi, 1978; Ross, 1977).

Besides root crops, the families and individuals in Alafana cultivate various other crops, including cassava, banana, pawpaw, sugarcane, fruit trees, and varieties of vegetables that added important sources of subsistence livelihoods and economic income from sell of surplus at the local coastal markets. Imported or processed foods families and people in Alafana sourced from Auki and available in family operated canteens in the village and at the coast. In Alafana at least four households trade essential items, including rice (weighed in a cup for SBD \$5/cup), noodles, tinned tuna, salt, and sugar - the most basic household items in the village. From observation and conducted assessment individual household or family in Alafana consumed rice at least three days a week on average and depends on different period of the year. For example, around December and January months in the village, because of the Christmas and New Year holidays locals in Alafana reported to have consumed high amount of rice, which some considered a “must-have addition to the local food.” I will elaborate on this dynamic in Chapter Six. In Alafana as in West Baelelea generally from observations and informants, people's lives and subsistence economic system of self-reliant are becoming mix and increasingly influenced by 'cash' that influenced agriculture and production of surplus to sell for cash income. In search of cash, the men are forced to seek wage employment in Honiara as well as locals seek and engaged in some form of waged labour in the community. Village labor like cleaning someone's coconut or cocoa plantation, transporting timber, or building someone's house that culturally people used to work for food are now being compensate by cash payment. Increasingly, people have increasingly exposed to and entangled in capitalist ways. A key argument of my thesis is that agriculture production for the market and consumption of imported foods and goods has disoriented social and ecological relations.

Monoculture coconut plantations are not common inland because of the soil and high altitude. But few families in Alafana have own patches of coconut and cocoa in nearby coastal areas that increasingly people engaged and harvest for local sell of processed beans. As experienced a repeated and intensive cultivation has transformed ridges and inland areas into agricultural fields, leading to significant changes in the landscape. In the interior mountains near Faeniwata and Masilana, the gardens are sparsely scattered, but informants are also concerned that soon, the dynamic of the mountain landscape will be transformed. The inland villagers of Faeniwata and Masilana today remain the source and suppliers of quality highland taro and vegetables often sold at the local markets and in Auki and occasionally to Honiara.

Ngali nut culture and livelihood

In this section, I will describe an important tree crop of livelihood and economic significance on and for Malaita, including the people living in Alafana that for generation have engaged in. The Canarium nut or *ngali* nut (or simply *ngali*) for the people of Baelelea and Alafana is significant crop that I can relate to from own experience and the culture I was told embedded in the *ngali* nut and taro culture of Malaita. I have background experience and participate as child and during many visits back to the village. In Malaita, the *ngali* nut is an integral aspect of the taro tradition (Akin, 1993). unfortunately, according to informants in Alafana, as the taro described earlier, the *ngali* nut has seen reduced involvement due to a reduced number of trees and people engaged away from the traditional *ngali* activities. Nevertheless, Alafana being located inland, *ngali* nut groves remained part of the forest ecology, and in small scale, *ngali* nut festivity is still organised during the annual nut season that starts in June to late September.

In and around Alelengana, the village I grew up in the 1980s and stayed during my fieldwork has some of the reserved *ngali* groves or trees in the territory. The trees some are planted by the ancestors and gifted to clan descendants that locals in Alelengana claimed as ‘family property’. During *ngali* season and associated festivities in Baelelea are culturally significant time of the year, so much so the local calendar revolves or is defined in terms of the *ngali* season. In Baelelea, a year is defined *ngali*. For example, *fe ngali* meaning one year, *rofe ngali* means two years and so forth as way of counting the years. From observation and told by informants, inland communities and territories like Alafana in West Baelelea are still fortunate to access some of the remaining *ngali* nut groves. Many of the tribally owned plantations have been deforested and so harvest *ngali* is on the decline. There is also the fact that young people

today in the village lack training and acquire the essential skills like *ra'ngali* (climbing nut trees) and *uingali* (cracking nuts) because they are attracted to social and economic other interests. As a kid growing up in the village, I was fortunate to have participated in and observed organised nut seasons during my many visits, including the recent one in 2022, during my fieldwork (see Figure 23). The festive event in the bush is called *ui'ngalia*, or simply *ui'a*, meaning 'cracking of the nut' that attracted the communal participation of kin and, at times, invited parties from another village or clan renowned specialists in cracking or pounding nut.

The preparation often starts with putting up *o'oba* (makeshift bush hut) and to be followed by climbing and harvesting the nut trees of the plantation. A group of competent climbers would harvest using a *lolobi*, a specially prepared bamboo stick with balance and skill to break the nuts. As observed, people also used iron tools like knives. Some climbed with knives and harvested the nuts by cutting branches, which also was said to be prone to the trees but also an easy and lazy way to harvest the nut trees. The task of collecting and stacking the harvested nuts was mostly done by women and girls (and at times supported by the boys and other men) and assembled in heaps according to each tree in a built *o'oba*. The initial preparation and climbing of the nuts would take days, depending on the number of trees and available labour, to get the *o'oba* ready for a scheduled day for *ui'ngalia*, which people always looked forward to. This would be the 'big day' that attended kin from the nearby villages and visitors. People are invited or heard about it and want to reciprocate goodwill to attend and participate because that will also repay when their turn comes around. Perhaps food is a major attraction that people often joked about, saying, "Let's go to eat good food at the hosted nut-cracking" to their laughter. As always, ensuring the spiritual safety of the participants and the occasion is considered the responsibility of the host group or family. This is particularly true in relation to the notion that harvesting nuts would attract *akalo kwasi* (wild forest ghosts), which necessitates some form of rituals and 'spiritual clearance'. Today Christian pastors and priests would normally pray and declare the season open. Before conversion to christianity, special nut rituals would be performed by traditional priests each year to *fa waluda* (make it open and clear) to ensure harvesting and festivity is *thalathala*, smooth and light work. It is also to ensure no misfortunate or unnecessary delay or experiences with the weather because if any unwelcome incident happens, it would always be viewed with suspicion and feels defeating for the organising group and leader.



Figure 24: *Ngali* nut harvesting in Alelengana (pic: Jones Otafalu, 2017)

The organising party must ensure that preparation is well coordinated and smooth. Any unforeseen delay and the task being considered heavy because of few cracking specialists or torrential rain could be demoralising and a cause for concern. In the case that heaps of nuts cannot be finished, the leader would announce that youths of his household would crack the remaining nuts the next day and clean up the mess. At all costs, any unnecessary delay is to be avoided; otherwise, the harvested fruits would rot and smell, resulting in an undesirable experience of cracking soft and smelly fruits. Prior tasks like harvesting and stacking harvested nuts in the *o'oba* may last several days or a week. Should unforeseen circumstances be encountered, the blame falls on the organiser's credibility and lack of planning. There is also a spiritual element, as in such situations, there is always a belief that someone with *mantedo rorodoa* (dark motives) would be responsible.

The food and feasting that follow are referred to as *usu'i'ida*, meaning 'paying of sweat' or 'wiping of sweat' to compensate for labour and to close the day. Culturally, the women are responsible for sharing the soup and rice, whilst a responsible male, with the assistance of a couple of boys, is responsible for dividing the *kata* and allocating individual food shares wrapped in leaves. They start by calling the men, followed by the boys, and later women and girls. This depicts a division of labour and political hierarchy that is still evident today in Baelelea during events like *ui'ngali* or communal feasts, and I observed this countless times. Today it is increasingly common for food like rice, tinned fish (tuna), and corn beef to be

included, but otherwise, fish, taro and *kata* are the *kastom* food during *uingali* as observed above during one of the communal nut seasons near Alelengana in 2020. By the time the food is ready, the responsible men would shout, “ok, *usu’i’ida* time,” translated “ok, it is time to dry off sweat’ which continued to be echoed by women folks - a symbolic way of saying the food is ready. As a protocol, the male caterer would start by calling out names of senior male folks and the youths who were positioned close to the food by impressing them with “Here it is, make your stomach strong to cultivate your competence in years to come”, that perhaps carry a little tease but also acts as a motivation for youths to better their skills.

Summary

In this chapter, I have described the cultural, geographical and ecological setting of Alafana, the locality of my research grounded on anthropological fieldwork as well as personal recollection and prior knowledge and understanding. The people of Alafana’s subsistence ways and lifestyle for years, were dependent on the land and forest but have now increasingly faced contemporary social and ecological changes influenced by introduction and influences of powerful forces of Christianity, colonialism, and capitalism. Influential roles by Christian missionaries have taken place over the decades has resulted in the formation of new Christian villages, initially at the coast but later inland. This was reflected in establishment of permanent Christian villages inland which attracted people of multiple tribal groups to live together under the umbrella of the church. As elsewhere on Malaita and Solomon Islands, powerful institution such as the Church and perhaps capitalism and globalisation remained significant catalyst for social and cultural change and transformation that I will describe further in Chapters Five and Six under Section Two. The reconstructed lifeworld of the Baelelea people, including the establishment of permanent church buildings, now reflects this new rootedness in the Christian religion, in contrast to the traditional religion of *akalo*, the ancestors, and *kastom*, which were elements of a more mobile, fluid existence. The people of Alafana have been introduced to new ideas and development, including establishing a primary school, among other meaningful efforts towards change and transformation. Alafana reflects a vision for an ideal and meaningful change that is relative to the local context and rooted in oral history and knowledge. In the next chapter, I will describe aspects of Baelelea culture and society to provide further insights and background for subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three: Culture and Social Organization

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the culture, social organisation, and traditional roles making up Baelelea society. The people and culture region also called Baelelea described earlier in Chapter Two is in the northern part of Malaita within a provincial administration region called North Malaita. This chapter narrows the focus on what constitute Indigenous Baelelea culture traditional beliefs as one important people and language group on Malaita. This Chapter aims to establish understanding and appreciation of Baelelea way of being, doing and knowing. The chapter is organised in four sections. The first section describes the Baelelea cultural, and language sub-groupings or local dialects in Baelelea. The second section describes social organisation or clan structure, and concepts of leadership based on traditional religious orderings and gender roles and boundaries. The follow-up section describes the traditional roles and specialists defined by culture and traditional practical knowledge and skills. The last section describes the traditional economy and conception of wealth as a basis to understanding the intersection between traditions and culture change.

People, language, dialects

Baelelea (or Mbaelelea, with a consonant ‘m’ sound) refers to the people as well as a culture region on Malaita as shown by map in Figure 7 in Chapter Two. In this thesis I purposefully opted to use Baelelea instead of “Mbaelelea” to avoid language inconveniences. This was also in consultation with Baelelea elders and academics and common usage in government reports and writings from the conventional linguistic conventional use of glottal stops in indigenous languages. This undertaken study was anthropology leaning than a linguistic study, hence not a strict requirement. This section, I will describe the local groupings, or sub-dialects and cultural groups making up Baelelea to provide further in-depth understanding. As stated in the previous chapter, the Baelelea for cultural and geographical consideration are always refers to as ‘*wane tolo*’, ‘man from the mountain or similarly ‘*toa i tolo*’, meaning ‘people from the

mountain or bush. In the thesis I adopt the term "tolo" interchangeably to mean mountain and bush but strictly 'tolo' refers to 'mountain or 'higher and dry ground from the water. The Baelelea people are 'toa i tolo' because of distinct practice of cultures and livelihood system primarily dependent on the bush environment. As stated in Chapter One, the Baelelea people, traditionally our culture and economy revolve around taro and *ngali* nuts, whereas the coastal Lau people their culture and traditional wealth revolve around the ocean and marine ecosystem. Understanding these traditional commodities is important to understand the culture and wealth of the Baelelea people in orientation to the bush and mountain or settled territory. As shown on the shaded map below (Figure 25) are the territorial and sub-groups making up the Baelelea people in North Malaita.

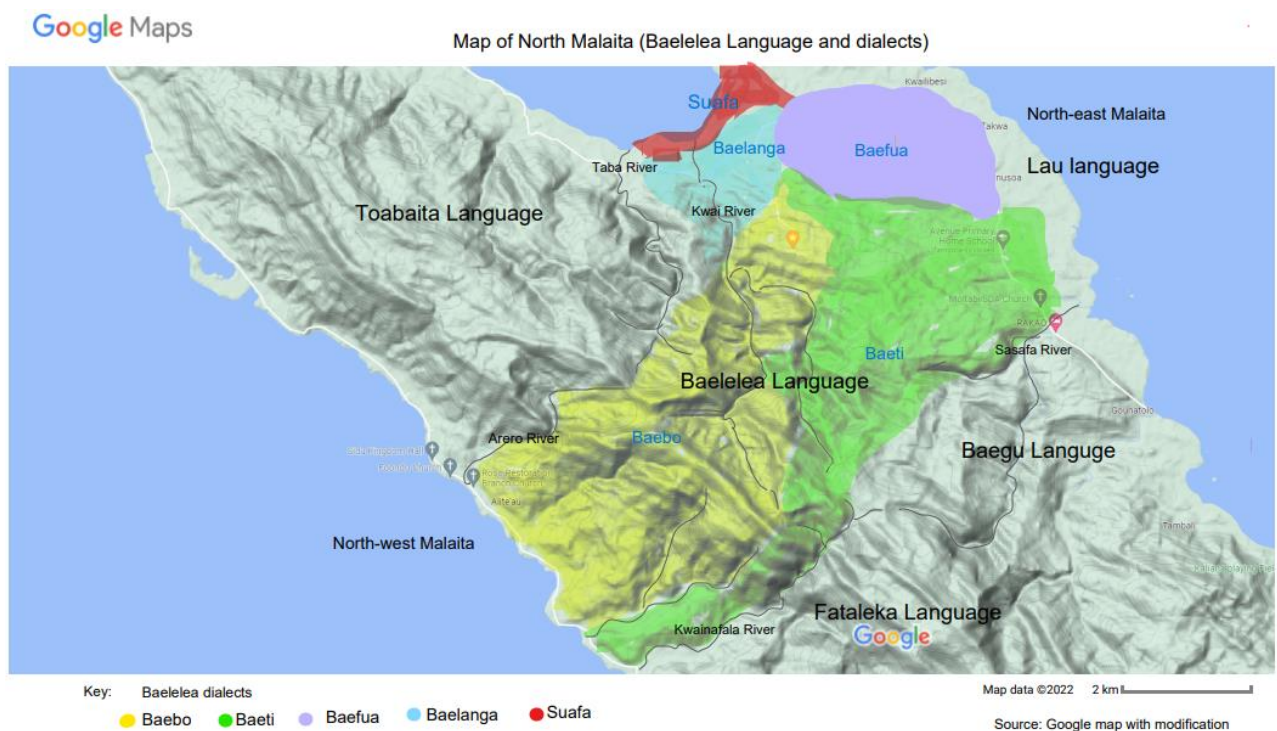


Figure 25: Territorial map of Baelelea language and dialects.

It is important to draw understanding of the culture and characteristic of the Baelelea people by unpacking the meaning of the name Baelelea. By definition, the name Baelelea made up of two worlds: *bae* means 'to speak', and *lea* or *lelea* means 'to go', 'move' or make quick action. Accordingly, the name inhabited cultural traits of the people and tribes of Baelelea specifically and/or North Malaita generally as to others on Malaita. Having explored the neighbouring To'abaita, alternative name is Bae'lae, which also defines as 'to speak and go.' Further east the Baegu and Fataleka tribe generally considered to have emulated or described to have the

distinct cultural attribute. The *toa i tolo* culture group, were said to be serious ‘talkers’ and people of action to their coastal neighbours, the Lau people are master fishermen and more socialise whose economies depends on the ocean. The expressed synergy of *tolo* and *asi*, as explained in earlier in Chapter One, distinguishes the distinct culture and environment each people groups primarily exploited for example forest hunting for inland people and ocean fishing for the coastal Lau people. Interesting although distinct, the establish social networks through established barter and cultural exchanges are mutually interdependent and sustained social relations and understanding. For instance, social connections through common clan ancestors and marriage often connect the two groups and linguistic group on Malaita (Hundleby, 2017, pp. 86-89; Maranda, 2001, p. 97).

The culture and language region of Baelelea are known locally to constitute five local sub-groups or dialects with identified linguistic variations. The sub-groups are Baebo, Baetii, Bae’langa, Bae’fua, and Suafa as shown by the shaded areas on the map in Figure 25. The Suafa people and speakers do occupied the Suafa peninsula and on Basakana, an offshore island near Maluu in the To’abaita district. The Suafa speakers’ locals referred to as *toa i suu*, meaning ‘people in the bay’ and culturally orient more to the Lau people occupying the offshore inlets in Northeast Malaita. The Suafa dialect is a blend of Baelelea, Lau, and To’abaita that distinctively identifiable as well as other cultural marks like the facial sun tattoo common to Lau but a taboo to inland Baelelea tribes. The Suafa language reflected fusion of culture and language over tens of generations of living and interaction with the Lau people. According to informants, the Suafa group constitute six clan groups, many of which trace ‘blood’ and ancestry lineage to inland clan or *totolia* (main ancestry line) and *sifokali* (split or branching) from principal *biu* (house) such as Mota’ilagi, Marodo, and Takibakwa. I was told the ancestors of the present day Suafa people migrated from inland Baelelea for fishing and first settled on Faka island and then spread around the Suafa Bay. Movements and settlement due to marriage further forced broaden and strengthened social relations and some moved to the neighbouring To’abaita as settled at Afufu and on Basakana near Maluu.²⁰

The next sub-group is the Bae’fua and Bae’langa which occupied the densely populated plains in East Baelelea bordering the Lau people along the coast. The Baefua and Bae’langa speakers have historical and linguistic connections to Baegu and Fataleka where

²⁰ Ian Hogbin (1939, p. 72) recounted in his book the rivalry between Irombaua of Suu and Suinao of Ainigaule in the To’abaita district. The two ramo and feast givers engaged in competitive displays of feasts (*maoma*) and villainous activities that defined their dominance in the region during their day.

families traced and claim origin and land as far as Ataa and Auluta in East Kwara'ae. The Bae'langa and Baefua speakers distinctively use words like *naogu* to mean 'no' and *langa'ana* to mean 'lost' or 'disappeared', which differs from the Baelelea word *langi*, for 'no', as in *langi bo*, a strong affirmative 'no' in everyday speech. For the local these linguistic variations are obvious and identifiable as well as connected to tribal group of origin and intermix with the coastal Lau cousins as compared to the Baelelea bush.

The dominant interior Baelelea group include the Baebo and Baetii speakers. The Baebo speakers occupied and spread over an extensive inland territory from West Baelelea extending inland across the island to the east as indicated by shaded territories in the map on Figure 25. Linguistic variations are identifiable using certain vowels and slang, for example, the Baetii speakers use 'ti' for 'who' and 'what' and that differs from the Baebo use of 'tai' (who) and 'tae' (what) in communication. Baebo speakers are dominant population-wise in West Baelelea, whereas Baetii speakers dominate in the mountain villages, along the Kwainafala River and Faalau and Tarsis villages that border with West Fataleka, and in East Baelelea. Dialects are also identified among local clan groups. For example, Baetii is the dominant dialect amongst the Mota, Otelalamoa-Loru, and Kafokuru clans in West Baelelea. At the same time, Baebo is more common amongst the Usuilangi, Oteabu, and Takibakwa clans and villages. The next important layer of social grouping in Baelelea is the clan which defined based on 'blood' or family relations traced to common ancestry and history which is subject of the next section.

Biu wane: The clan and social organisation

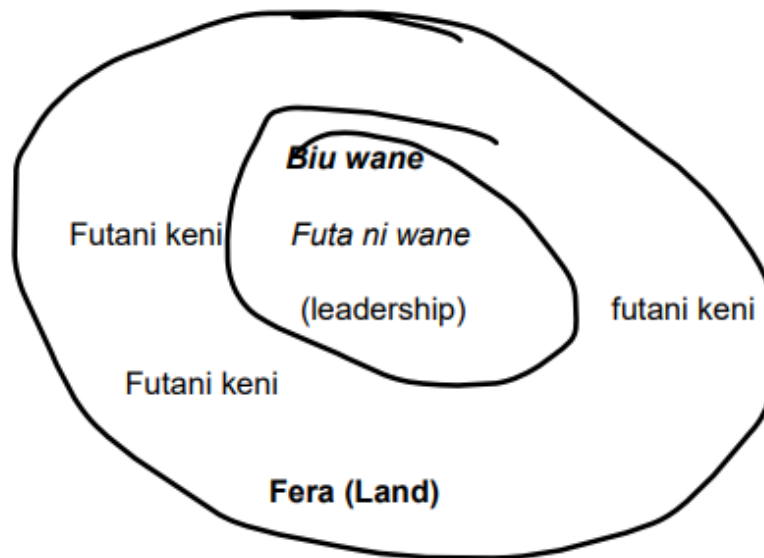


Figure 26: Illustration of clan social structure based on *futaa* (blood relations).

In Baelelea ontology of social-ecological relations, clan and land relations is foundational in social relations and identity in tribal setting and affiliation even today. People claim identity and belongingness to a particular clan called *biu wane*, translated ‘house man’, which culturally defines both a group and land connection. My research did not establish and document the number of tribes or clans making up Baelelea, which is often fluid, as well is not the focus of this thesis. Illustrated in Figure 26 is Baelelea's conception of a clan (*biu wane*) in a circular formation. In the Baelelea clan, social organisation and relations as illustrated in the diagram constitute the inner and outer layers. The inner layer, conceived as the male blood line (*futa ni wane*) occupies the centre of the social setting, whilst the female blood line (*futaa ni keni*) forms the outer layer, which are metaphorically conceived to provide important social ‘cover’ or wall of protection for a *biu wane*. In a cultural setting where social relations and diplomacy are important *futa ni keni* are the bridge and important alliance to the external tribal groups.

In a patrilineal society as in Baelelea the head of the clan and land are always the senior male of the *futaa ni wane*. The senior male or *gwaugaia ana fera*, translated ‘head of the clan and land’ (Gegeo, 1998), which comes with elaborated social responsibilities as expressed in metaphors with rich meanings. The head ensures the centre or core group (*futaa ni wane*) provides that space and leadership that accommodates both the cognatic and agnatic relatives as a house does. Similarly, in expressed metaphor, Baelelea always speak and describe their paternal clan relatives as *toa ae fe kai*, meaning ‘people at the bottom of the yam’. This conception speaks and reinforces social-ecological values and principles associated with social

responsibilities and leadership as expected of the inner or core group within the communal setting. Their maternal or female blood lines (*futaa ni keni*), on the contrary are the *fe babasi*, braces or sticks providing the needed support to the yam. In a similar context as the brace sticks support the house to maximum strength. In the absence of the male groups, which in Baelelea can be explained as due to the male ancestor of a particular land were all killed in past tribal conflicts, a senior leader of the maternal group of secondary connection to the land assumed leadership and deputises as guardian of the tribal, which many of the known tribal land in Baelelea are known.

In Baelelea, a notable qualification and foundation of a *biu wane* is the leader's high level of competency and proficiency in the genealogy and tracing of names of ancestors and kin relations (Hogbin, 1969). Knowledge of family genealogy forms the basis for clan relations and historical identity of the clan claim over tribal land. Today, written genealogy books are compiled and kept as significant property of the clan that would detail common ancestors, land boundaries, names and histories of old settlements. In Baelelea, as mentioned earlier, as tribal groups in North Malaita, cultural connections and rights of access and settlement on common ancestral land, both agnatic and cognatic groups have cultural and inalienable rights (Frazer, 1981; Hogbin, 1969; Ross, 1973). Ross (1978), from his work in the neighbouring Baegu, explained that:

social organisation invokes both agnatic and cognatic ideologies. Patrilineal clans claim residential title to land, sacrifice to the ancestors, and perform ritual obligations for one another; yet usufruct rights are inherited cognatically, and a local descent group may as properly be a stem kindred as a patrilineage (p. 120).

Kinship relations and access to tribal or ancestor land both the agnatic and cognatic have rights of use for gardening and settlement (Ross, 1978). The paternal and maternal relations constitutively complete house, to speak metaphorically that both lines trace genealogy to a common shrine and male ancestor. A clan's founding settlement or shrine called *thathafalia*, meaning 'foundation' that sub-clans and families *sipa* (split from) and *sifokali* (branching or offshoots) of the main *biu* or *totolia* (principal house and ancestor). In Baelelea, like elsewhere in Malaita, multiple clans and tracing of clan and family genealogies back to a particular principal settlement and site of arrival (*taraa*) and *sifokali* (mountain shrine). According to my research informants, clans in Baelelea traced historical connections principal *taraa*, landing passage on Malaita's coast (Burt, 2018; Burt & Kwa'oloa, 1992). Contained in myths and oral

accounts of Baelelea clans pointed to their common ancestors landing along the Malaita coast from a distant land before heading inland to occupy the mountain territories. In the northwest Malaita coast, principal landing passage included Siubongi in the West Fataleka and Sufau further away along the West Kwara'ae coast. In West Baelelea, dominant clans like Usuilangi have claimed connection to Sufau via Abarafii connection. In the later section, I will delve into discussion of this historical aspect.

A kinship claims and relations can be complexly intertwined with factors of history and marriage. But knowledge to trace and establish social relations can be powerful means of social organisation and build alliance between *futaa ni keni* or '*futaa*' as previously stated. There is an expressed notion in Baelelea that "a clan is powerful and complete by its *futaa*" the maternal cousins in social networks and organisation. A male bloodline only traced and maintain identity to a single land discovered but multiple connections and clans through the maternal ancestors. Alafana residents are an exact case in point that according to people settled through rights of use and settlement on Buroki land from to form Alafana community. As discussed in Chapter Two, the villagers in Alafana settled on Buroki; many are through *futaa ni keni*, female bloodline or maternal descent that gave them the customary right of access and settlement. Research informant and Alafe elder Demesi Iro, for example, shared with me his story and connection and settlement on Buroki.

We connect to Buroki through a female bloodline.... More than once. Me and my immediate brothers connect through our paternal grandmother.... Then, through the big Oteabu clan, through a female ancestor [name withheld], the only daughter of Nafe. She married our *akalo* ... (name withheld), and they begot a son (name withheld). According to oral history, his uncle *burasia* (baptised), the son with *akalo ni omea* (warrior spirit) of Buroki, believed to be *ramoa* (warrior spirit) originating from Gwauna'asi. The Oteabu clan lived on Buroki and in more settlement sites than any clan groups, but we were not given any piece of land on Buroki. We were told to live on Buroki and enjoy things on the land, that was what happened till today.

The maternal descent rights of access and settlement would often be further consolidated when a marked piece of land is specifically gifted or traded that the group over generations claimed property rights (Ross, 1978, p. 120). Strictly, tribal land remained a property of the clan and continually passed on to the succeeding generations, as well as, at times, being divided among brothers. A piece of land gifted to a particular female ancestor as explained above; hence her

descendants would claim special rights of ‘ownership’ as *si falea* (special gift). This often, however, results in contentious issues, which is reflected in some disputes should the main clan dishonour the special ‘right of ownership’ or the receiver lay a bogus territorial claim beyond what was initially gifted. Traditionally, in Baelelea, both the agnatic and cognatic inheritance rights are considered inalienable because of blood and spiritual connections traced to a common ancestor. I will deliberate on this in Chapter Four on the Baelelea perspective and relations with the land. As for the Baelelea people, the common saying that underscores social relation is: “Blood is thicker than anything and runs deep” and forms a common social-cultural bond further rooted in claimed ancestral land. In Baelelea, culturally, people also speak of “*ta wane si oe usi oe*”, meaning ‘no one should put a stick or bar you from the land’ when you know your ancestral and land connection and define rights to settle and part of the territory which, both the male and female descendants claimed connection.

Biu and Ai’nunufi concepts of leadership.

In this section, I will describe Baelelea's ontology of leaders and leadership as depicted in metaphors. As explained earlier, people conceived the social unit of clan and family group as *biu* (house), for which the term *biu wane* is used to describe the patrilineal society. A senior and important leader is considered *ai’nunufi*, meaning a ‘shade tree’, which I will deliberate on later in Chapter Seven. Similarly, people respectively referred to a senior male leader as *arai biu*, meaning ‘senior man leader or head of the house’, to symbolically refer to the status and authority of the leader and clan. It is notable in recent times with the decline of this traditional *biu* structure and culturally competent leaders, people lamented and described the salient societal change as *biu e sui*, meaning ‘culture of the *biu* finished’ or simultaneously *biu e gwau*, meaning ‘the house is empty.’ I have encountered rich conversation on this dynamic shift and expressed leadership in many ways associated with *biu* as a foundation of a clan and contemporary leadership orientations.

I narrate a personal account based on observation and expressed sentiments during the death of my father, the last elder of the village. In February 2022, after a short illness following a decade-long health condition of urarthritis and ageing, Maka Faiau passed on, leaving a huge gap. As the most senior elder, he was referred to as the last *maka* (father) of the family and the last surviving son of Kanafalu, the last tribal priest who converted to Christianity in 1967 and authorised founding of Christina village at Alelengana, I described in Chapter Two. My late

father was bedridden for a couple of weeks, and I was responsible the whole time provided needed nursing care in the village. Following his passing and little absence the relatives repeatedly referred to the *biu* being ‘empty’ and ‘finished’ in referring to my late father as the last of his generation who even being a devoted Christian maintained the status and authority attached to a *biu* as in Baelelea tradition. The words of consolation and wisdom shared by the elders as they lament the loss of *maka mamana* (true father) and *arai ana biu* (elder of the house) and *ainunufi* (shade tree) that provided protection and wisdom. As observed the atmosphere truly filled with grief as people console and comfort each other. Amongst the sharing was this word by *Maka Manuga*, 75-year-old uncle and cousin of my late father who narrated the trajectory as I quote below:

Today, my elder, our *maka*, has passed on. He was the last *maka* in our community and of his generation; another had passed on in 2015. Both were our leaders and men of peace and final authority. As a family, we live in different villages and homes.....some on the coast, some by the river down the valley. But Alelengana is the central place because this is where our *biu* and *maka* have been ever since we came down from heathen to Christianity. Most of us, *maka* of my generation, are just names. We are lacking in words and leadership that would truly unite our tribe and community. A question did arise: Will the *biu* left by our father and the legacy of unity finish with him, or is it something that we should continue to uphold? Nowadays, the *maka* of today do not have a *biu*, they live with their wives and kids in their houses. Then how can I come to visit and converse and spend the night with you as has been our way of *biranga* (culture)? *Faiau*, though we are brothers was like a *maka* to me, too, growing up together and seeking his advice and wisdom. I lived with him both in the past life of *kastom*, and when we became Christian, he always built and had a *biu* as part of his home. That he invites people to come speaks of a true leader because of his *biu*.

As expressed in the quoted statement, the deceased father was considered the last of the elders due to seniority, but also, having participated in Baelelea traditions and observance of ancestors’ religion before converting to christianity. Many like *Maka Manuga* viewed the demise of the last important and knowledgeable generation on *kastom*. I will further elaborate in Chapter Six on culture change in Baelelea, a *biu* symbolises authority, unity, and leadership of high respect. During my fieldwork, the people interviewed expressed concerns over the demise or non-existence of *biu* in most villages in Baelelea today and attributed it to the culture

and ways brought by christianity. This demise and loss depict the loss of old traditional order and institutions by a new set of social order that, according to Keesing (1968), also accompanied the colonial pacification and criminalisation of Malaita's warriors and bounty killers. Some of the leading Malaita traditional leaders reestablished themselves as part of the colonial local village governance structure as appointed headmen or chiefs responsible for a defined local area and village. In this way, Keesing (1968) pointed out empowered the introduced systems of the colonial authority while the traditional clan structures and systems that had been in place for generations became disempowered. From my research, similar views are expressed that leaders become self-centred or individualistic and 'money-minded' instead of being trustworthy and collective.

The people I interviewed, like Maka Baelata and Maka Manuga, expressed concern that the changes in the villages have undermined values and concepts which constitute traditional leadership. In Baelelea, the people speak in metaphors and imagery to construe and imagine leadership and social relations, either positive or negative imagery. A tree metaphor is often used to describe the different aspects and qualities of a true leader, depicting indigenous philosophies and definitions of leaders in Melanesia and Malaita (Sanga, 2013, 2020).

In Baelelea, as explained elsewhere in the thesis, representing a leader and people metaphorically as a tree speaks of rootedness to the land and the common ancestors from whom people draw wisdom and sustenance. Often people would describe the first ancestors as the roots; the trunk depicts the generations that came before us; the branches are our families, and each bloodline branch spreads out to connect to the leaves – our people that are alive and breathing today. Important elements of knowledge may also be represented using the tree metaphor. Our roots are our *kastom*: cultural beliefs entwined with our ancestry that anchor us into the land. The trunk is also our *kastom* knowledge, including our histories, oral stories, and songs. The trunk helps us to stand strong within our environment and is one with the tree branches. The branches represent our relationships and connections to each other within our society. In the Baelelea context, it is impossible to separate notions of family, ancestry, the land, knowledge, and all that is life. Family, ancestors, land, *kastom*, knowledge (histories, stories, music), living and being are the same. It is necessary to understand that each is a part of the other and that each is fundamental to the other to understand what it is to be Baelelea. The tree is not only symbolic of its physical aspects, but also emotional and spiritual aspects about leadership and good governance. A leader, as *ainunufi*, meaning a shed tree ontologically provides ethical space and protection to his people and social group. An ethical leader unifies,

and people are attracted to for wisdom and solace, because of the space and atmosphere created and the knowledge of *kastom* and qualities wielded and demonstrated.

It is important to understand that colonial and missionary structures had replaced not only the institutional structures but also people's conceptual understanding of and relations with community leaders. In today's community setting the church priests and pastors are the dominant religious and spiritual authorities in the village and appointed village chiefs are the civic leaders and authority in the village that often consists of multiple clans and family groups. Such dynamics and schemes, Keesing (1968) observed, can be 'problematic' as in the case of the Kwaio cultural setting (p. 277), like in Baelelea often, the village-appointed chiefs preside over village communities poorly and fit with the clan-based social organization. Keesing further describes that:

Social organization and the pattern of "lines" and "chiefs" is far from precise. Some individuals and descent groups do not fit into this scheme at all or are included inconsistently. Thus, it is impossible to construct an agreed list of what line each person in the area belongs to and who is the chief of each. There has been a tendency... for feast-giving "big men" to be replaced as "chiefs" by younger men more sophisticated in European ways (from plantation experience) and more eager to divert their energies to committee projects (Keesing, 1968, p. 279).

From my research, many people showed concern about how present leaders are appointed and perform communal roles. Many pointed out to me that selecting leaders based solely on categories like being educated and knowledgeable about the government systems often superseded consideration and understanding of *kastom*. Leaders wield power and position through the accumulation of wealth, and how much money, and often, their houses are less visited and accommodating. This defeats the notion of a leader as defined culturally as *ai'nunufi* and *biu*, which accommodates men and other leaders. Leaders defined as *ai'nunufi* also attract *mana* and wisdom that nature and excise balanced leadership that people I have spoken with expressed as absent or displaced, which can be attributed to colonial and mission-imposed structures (Martin, 2022). For example, the elders interviewed, like Uncle Baelata of Masilana, asserted that "true leaders" are those who uphold *kastom* and are considerate and inclusive.

Defined leadership qualities as *ai'nunufi* also inhabits the character of *wane gwaungai*, the head and *wane kwaitalai*, one who finds the way and leads by example. Thus, appointing

and voting leaders, according to informants like Maka Baelata, defeats the traditional way of assuming leadership in Baelelea based on performance and knowledge passed on from elders and has little to do with education and training in schools, which is more about information and the world. Living in the village in Baelelea, I often heard the village folks describe some of their "village chiefs" as "corrupt chiefs" and religious leaders as "fake pastors," meaning they lack certain cultural qualities and expectations in *kastom* as well as in Christian values. For example, some leaders are accused of being money-minded, self-centred, and obsessed with private interests over the collective interest and well-being of the clan and Christian community.

The traditional religion of ancestors

In this section, I delve into aspects of Baelelea traditional religion and beliefs that underscore people's culture and lifeways. Traditionally, the Malaita clan functionally operates as a theocratic unit with a tribal priest as the principal leader who was tasked to officiate religious rituals and prayer to *akalo* (Sanga, 2023). The traditional religious system revolved and gave homage to *akalo*, ancestor ghosts or spirits, and respective clans or sub-clan have a senior male leader assumed the important functional role as *wane ni foa* or *arai ni foa*. The other functional leaders like *wane inoto*, the civic or economic leader would be the one responsible for organising of the feast, whilst *wane ramo*, the warrior leaders provided security for the clan in support of *wane ni foa* when announcing important *maoma abu*, sacred mortuary feast. The tripartite structure was common across Malaita, especially the central and northern parts of the island (Keesing, 1985; Russell, 1950). Traditionally the *arai ni foa* (senior traditional priest) was thought of as holding the sacred power of the clan in terms of the spiritual and economic wellbeing of his clan and people as well as proclaimed victory in tribal wars as in the past. Arrival of Christianity and missionisation of most Malaita over the last century as the case of Baelelea it resulted in conversion and abandoning the traditional religion of ancestors. Functionally, the people now speak of *wane ni foa* to mean a Christian clergy, like 'Mama' (local title for Anglican priests) and local church pastor for SSEC and SDA congregation. Below I attempt to explain Baelelea traditional religious practice from stories by informants and elders who themselves participated and familiar with the religion of ancestors before converting to Christianity.

The Indigenous Malaita ethical system mostly is derived from religious practices and values that underscore the concept of *abu* or *abua*, to means ‘holiness’ and *taki*, ‘law’ or code of conduct (Burt, 1998). Tribes as *kastom* collectives and as contemporary communities are organised through complex sets of *taki* and *biranga* (culture and ways) which underscore ethical social conduct and relations. For example, *taki* or moral codes and ethical systems on social behaviour and respect. Malaita society has clear dispositions and seeks to influence its members to behave accordingly. Tribal groups in Malaita have specific character traits for resolving moral dilemmas and cultivating virtue. Today, the traditional ethical system is either considered obsolete and undermined or merged with Western or universal moral values and Christian biblical values (Keesing, 1968). Since each tribal unit is enmeshed with its religious system, there is a high level of integration between the socioeconomic, political, ethical, and religious worlds, which overlap into a single whole. Consequently, being good or bad and doing well or doing ill has the potential to affect the survival or death of the tribe. Morality is directly linked to belief systems and breaking certain *taki* or *biranga* of *kastom*, for example, crossing under the cloth line used by females of a particular home. These are not just human and physical but spiritual, and metaphysical as well, as informants like Maekolo explained to me.

Traditionally, the priest would perform *foa’ a* (prayer) by reciting the genealogy of the family/clan, starting from the living and going backwards. He would recite the names of all the dead ancestors until he reached the founding or principal ancestor of the shrine of origin. Traditionally, the founding ancestor was considered the most sacred and warranted no direct mention of the ancestor’s name, even by the officiating priest, for it was a strict cultural taboo. This is to avoid any unfortunate consequences, and habitually the tribal priest would only refer to the founding ancestor as *thado matha do*, meaning ‘to whom and to who’ or ‘you and you, our ancestor’ in the process of reciting the genealogy. Similarly, a priest would address sacred ancestors by naming the sacred house (*biu* or shrine) instead of directly mentioning the name. The most sacred *akalo* is described as *akalo desi ania foa tana*, meaning the ‘ancestor they do not eat or share food with.’ An animal, for example, a piglet, is offered to him and burned completely on the altar. As one of the elders interviewed recounts comparing traditional religion and Christianity:

It was a complex process with strict conditions, the Baelelea traditional religion. Compared to Christianity, people have freedom before the Lord, only one God who is the source of everything, and each one prayed to anything in his name. In Baelelea

traditionally we have many gods, one for rain, another for yam, another for fertility and so forth (Maekolo, 70 years old)

A senior clan priest called *arai ni foa* (the word *arai* referred to a matured and grey-haired male in contrast with the *wane* word for man). As Maekolo recounted, an officiating traditional priest must not commit an error, for example, muddling the names of ancestors, which would incur an ancestral curse resulting in sickness or even death and, therefore, a high level of care and competence was dependent. A *wane ni foa* must be proficient in memorising all the names of his ancestors and accurately execute religious functions as demanded of a *wane ni foa'a*. According to research informants, in the past, countless misfortune and deaths resulted from the misconduct of a clan's *wane ni foa*. A pig sacrifice, according to my informants, was like connecting the souls of the living with the clan ancestors to invoke spiritual powers and 'goodness' (*diana 'a*) onto the living. Today recounting the name of clan *wane ni foa* and *fuli era* (shrine) are invaluable foundations of a *biu wane*. It is incorrect in most cases to define a family group that has split off as a separate *biu wane*; rather, they are described as part of the main house.

Apart from pig sacrifice (*nare botho*), rituals such as *narea*, burning or baking of food in a fire area were used for specific family requests. The ritual involving pig sacrifice was more complicated and primarily involved *wane ni foa*, whereas the latter could be done without a traditional priest. For instance, *mamana ana thare welaa* (spiritual power of fertility), *narea ula aludoa* (good crop) and *fanga* (food) would be initiated by a family. Rarely involving pigs, instead, local foods such as opossums, wildfowl, freshwater eels, prawns (*denge*) and fish (*thakwari*) are often used in such small rituals. The roasted food was eaten at the site (*foforaa*) where a particular ancestor was buried or a *matale* (sacred materials) was buried. The places often marked by a boulder, cave, or tree stump (*guri 'ai*) of spiritual significance known to the people of the clan. Strictly speaking, a pig sacrifice is performed by a male priest to a particular male ancestor. A spiritual ritual for fertility can be officiated with and without a male and is often offered to a particular female ancestor that embodies *mamana*. Seventy-year-old Maekolo who was familiar with the rituals prior to converting to Christianity, recounted his experiences. According to Maekolo, one experience involved *narea*, whilst another was an emotional encounter with a particular stone in which the *mamana* is embodied. Both involved ancestral spirits responsible for fertility:

In the past people *nare* in a cave in the forest at Kilui towards the Madalua River Gorge for *mamana* and *wela* (fertility) and good crop..... I remembered as a youth I accompanied *kokowane* (grandfather) once to perform our *narea*. On the way I wandered in the bush and killed opossum as if they were gifted to us...one after another, until I was told to stop, we had enough. It was something like 10 opossums for our *narea*. The ancestor must have been happy and approved our petition before we even offered one. For we are connected to her through blood, and we are also connected to the land; thus, provisions are met.

Interviewed elders in Alafana, like Maekolo, participated in traditional religious activities intertwined with the land and ancestor's spirits. Today, such religious practices are being demonised as "ways and worship of *akalo*" but many like Maekolo have firsthand experience. Trapping forest animals and roasting (*bii*) and warming (*fa aako*) of the spirits and *foforaa* are processes Maekolo explained to me. As was the practice, the roasted food was eaten by the people present, and only the bone and debris were placed in the fire and burned to ashes. As a traditional belief, it is the *thasu* (smoke) and *momoko* (scent) emitted from *bii* (oven) and fire that charm and connect the ancestor spirit(s) to the living who were present and made the petition.

Maekolo recollected another experience and belief associated with a stone named Ro'iu, meaning 'twins' situated in a tribal land that today remains an important cultural feature of spiritual significance. It was a held belief that the stone is an embodiment of *mamana an thare wela* (spirit of fertility responsible for 'twins' and multiple births). Maekolo quipped about the stone and his story many times with his village kin. "Yeah, you can joke about it, but I walked over Ro'iu. Thereafter I have my fraternal twins." Another male relative could ask: "How many times did you have to walk over, or what if you cross more than twice, one may end up having more twins?" and everyone burst into laughter. Maekolo could tell his personal experience and explanation. There may be those who tried their luck, but nothing happened, and some might do it for fun without effect. But that was it, they are our traditional beliefs that have been part of us since our ancestors arrived and lived on the land of Malaita. Maekolo participated in the culture and religion devoted to their ancestors that has now been transformed by Christian dogmas and contemporary changes. I will discuss this further in Chapters Five and Six.

Gender Boundaries and Roles

In Baelelea traditional setting, there are clear social and gender roles and boundaries clearly defined and established by certain *taki* and taboos. This applied in the social and cultural contexts, for example the home, garden and the access and use of certain parts of the river guided by certain cultural norms and protocols. As in the case of accessing the river, the men and boys would always according to *kastom* access the upper section of the river for bathing, whilst the ladies the lower section of the river or wash in the small streams. Interesting to note that certain cultural values which, according to Baelelea's beliefs and taboos, determined such orientation and learning according to the cultural norms from childhood upbringing and cultural education. A boy in their childhood would sleep with his mother and the girls until at five or six years of age, when he would be told to move and sleep with his father and the males in the *biu*. The family house would be occupied by the girls and their mother. Today, this has changed, and increasingly the family or household shares or sleeps in the same family house, with boys occupying one room and girls another, and their parents in their rooms. Boys would accommodate male visitors in their rooms, and likewise, girls would accommodate female visitors in their rooms. Increasingly, the 'living room' would be used as an additional space for youths and visitors as a sleeping space.

Today a clear division of gender boundaries are also be seen and reflected in seating arrangements in the rural village churches where men and boys sit separately from women and girls (Pollard, 2006) and occupy separate parts of the house. These clear gender spaces and roles as Pollard (2006) explained from her research in Are'Are in southern Malaita are important to understand in the ethical and leadership space and context. It is also best understood and explained in the traditional cultural setting. For example, when walking along the footpath, the male often leads the way or walking behind but maintains distance from the female. The logical and cultural explanation to keep ideal distances was for security purposes, as the tribal ambush was often common, and male folks were understood to ensure their female folks were protected. In the garden, as explained elsewhere in the thesis, men do the tough tasks whilst female folks do tasks like weeding and food gathering.

Daily roles and responsibilities were divided by gender, although exceptions are becoming more common, especially when personal circumstances require it. For instance, it is now more acceptable for men to help with preparing meals, for example, the scraping of coconut or looking after the fire, whilst women attend to other tasks like cleaning the house or

compound. Before, men cooked their food in the *biu*, while women did all the cooking for the family in the common kitchen. Hunting is mostly done by men, while women gather forest ferns. Men are typically responsible for heavier tasks such as house building and maintenance, physically demanding lifting, digging in the garden, and tree-felling. Women can also be proficient in these tasks. Young boys and girls are taught how to use knives and safely handle machetes and axes as soon as they are physically able. By the ages of eight to ten, they can competently perform daily household tasks. They learn about all aspects of Baelelea's daily living by following their parents and elders and about community hierarchies and power over time.

Traditional leaders and roles

Apart from the traditional priest (*wane ni foa*) as described earlier, other important leaders in the traditional social structure included *wane ramo*, a warrior leader, and *wane inoto*, an economic or civic leader. Together with the priest, they reflected a 'troika system' unique in Melanesia (Hogbin, 1936; Keesing, 1985; Russell, 1950). The traditional leadership functions and roles could be performed by different individuals, although in some instances, the same person could fulfil the functional roles at different times as necessary. The term "big man", translated in Baelelea as *wane baita*, means 'adult male person' or seniority in status due to marriage or age, and is not necessarily a functional role assumed by anyone in society. This is distinct from *wane daraa*, which refers to a young man, or *kala wane*, which refers to small and energetic youths.

Again, going back to a religious leader or *wane ni foa*, translated as a 'man who prays or sacrifices big' on behalf of the family and clan and *wane inoto* for its important spiritual role are often accorded the status of *aofia*, a person with wisdom and *mana* that the family and clan always listened to and seek guidance. *Wane inoto*, translated as 'the man of importance,' performed the role of secular and economic leader responsible for organising communal feasts. He assumed the status of greatness based on his performance and self-acclaimed power and status as a man of importance and *aofia*. The warrior leader or *ramo* was considered *wane ni fonotoi*, a man who protects as a policeman, but also a cunning person called *wane mala usu*, a schemer and troublemaker. Culturally, he was often less considered to perform religious duties because of his notorious character and the 'stains of blood' on his hand (*abuna lalamoa*). According to Russel (1950), a *ramo* occupied the bottom of the social strata, which is not

necessarily true because, as I understood and according to my informants, both Fataleka and Baelelea have shared functions and are equally important. It is just that religious functions and rituals demand strict conditions and abstain from familial and civic life in the long course of preparation and diligent execution. Therefore, leadership roles may be distinct but are extraordinary instances where the same person combines and performs these qualities (Moore, 2017, p. 32) but may have to fulfil certain conditions and preparations.

Traditionally Baelelea women do not performed key leadership roles as tribal head of the land or priest. Strictly tribal land and clan headship were male domain where the head or 'gwaungai' primarily occupied by a senior male and should the paternal descendant of the clan ceased due tribal wars or death; the eldest son of a closest maternal ancestor would claim some degree of leadership over the clan and land. But senior women often possess significant power and knowledge of the clan or family that give her high regard and respect defined by strict taboos and knowledge. For example, culturally a person with special authority and status defined by knowledge and powerful status was called *taniota*, a person described as peace maker and guardian of special knowledge. This prestigious figure can be either a senior male like *arai* or female and mother figure as *kokokeni* (grandmother). According to my informant, *Maka Diro*, he defines *taniota* in contrast with *arai ni foa* as quoted below:

In our *kastom*, *arai nifoa* was the one who communicates and makes peace with *akalo* through pig sacrifice and spiritual duties. A *taniota* can be a senior male or old lady of high regard and respect, everyone listened and obeyed his/her voice because it can bring peace or curse. In times of conflict, any senior female of the family or clan could shout at the top of her voice or rip of her cloth and the conflict would stop, because everyone thinks highly and respects her, she is our *taniota*, senior women. There were many oral accounts of this in our Usuilangi clan.

As Keesing (1968) observed and wrote about transformation of traditional leadership in Kwaio, he sheds light on the impacts of colonial pacification on traditional structures that results in distortion and neglect. The traditional structures had disintegrated and most Malaita *ramo* pacified and their activities criminalised. At the same time traditional leaders, many had their powerful influence and positions transformed and institutionalised on positions such as chiefs, delegates, pastors, and mission teachers who gained respect and power due to their association with colonial powers and missionaries, as well as acquiring education. Despite these changes,

traditional values and principles of clan leadership remained significant in organising and holding the group and community together.

The specialists

Traditional roles and functions possessed by skilled individuals and specialists are highly valued in society and often people reliant and called upon (*kwathatana*). For purpose of understanding social relations and functions that defined a clan and family group I will describe the specialists with distinct roles that may be social and spiritual in nature. In the village individuals are often assigned or asked to perform the social and cultural roles from time to time which they are expert, such as organising and sharing food during feasts, harvesting *ngali* nuts, hunting and cure of illness. In and during communal feast, recognised and decorated specialists are *wane ni toli*, a skilled or expert who organise and allocate food share of food during feasts with support of an assistant or group of boys.

Other specialists include *wane sili*, a talented storyteller and chant reciter, *wane ni thaungai*, a craftsman and builder and *wane ni matoo*, a traditionalist or diviner (often serve as a traditional priest and healer) also referred to as *kastom* doctor. The roles of chant reciting and storytelling or *ainimae* in Baelelea remained highly valued and celebrated. These roles are mostly performed by talented *wane sili* and *wane ni ainimae*, who are mostly men. Traditionally, the women would perform *sili* (songs and chants) and *rurua* (rhyme or lullaby), but male chanter would perform *ainimae* oral accounts and stories of the past ancestors and supernatural beings.

A traditional healer or *kastom* doctor for his presumed service often called *wane gura* or *wane kwai adomi*, translated ‘man with help.’ As a skilled traditional practitioner, he or she possessed a specialize knowledge of diagnosing and treating common health issues as well as illness attributed to have caused by magic or witchcraft. As most would claim the acquired skills and knowledge were passed down from experienced practitioners or gifted to them through dreams also claimed from *kokomaeki* (dead grandfathers). During the many research field trip back to the village in 2022 personally had the opportunity to interview Uncle Pita, a 70-year-old local herbalist or *kastom* doctor who suddenly became a local hero for his verbal juice treatment for experience flu during the COVID-19 outbreak. Uncle Pita, while I was still in New Zealand in 2020 revealed he had discovered herbal treatment for the coronavirus and

asked if he can send sample for testing in medical lab. During our conversation Uncle Pita revealed an angel appeared to him in a dream, not once but on three separate nights in 2020 and revealed to him the plant and instruction on the process and administration of remedy for the coronavirus.

In month of January and February of 2021, when COVID-19 had reported outbreak on Malaita and in the village in West Baelelea, Uncle Pita became an instant local hero and sought after specialist. It became obvious that locals sought after Pita's herbal juice treatment for experienced unusual cough and fever instead of the promoted COVID-19 vaccination available at most of the rural clinics and hospital in Auki. Traditional herbal treatments normally performed by specialist or gifted men like Uncle Pita or some diseases, by women, depending on the type and nature of the experienced sickness. A gifted woman specialist would treat body and stomach health conditions, while a male specialist would cure health conditions related to magic, such as *vele* (deadly magic associated with fire) and *arua* (witchcraft), which is common in Baelelea, even among the Christian population.

In Baelelea, traditionally as in other Melanesian societies, such as the Oksapmin of Papua New Guinea, sickness or death in the everyday world is often attributed to witchcraft (Macdonald, 2013, p. 73). As such, the services of a *wane gura* or *wane kwaiadomi* are sought-after to attend to a sick patient such as a girl possessed by magic spell. From my experience in the village and during the fieldwork in 2021/22 I have witnessed on multiple occasions the practical involvement of a traditional healer of young girls said to be possessed by *arua*, a common feminine witchcraft. Symptomatically, the victim (girl) would start experiencing stomach pain, vomiting, and later violent body movement or shortness of breath and body weakness, all of which are said to be signs and symptoms of *arua*. The engaged traditional doctor would start by treating the victim by applying oil on her head and stomach. Next, he would light a piece of wood and place it close to her nostrils, asking her to inhale the smoke for about half a minute. It was believed that by applying the oil and the smoke would dispel the *arua* and resuscitate the victim. As the *kastom* doctor made assurance to the victim and onlookers if it was truly *arua* or ordinary sickness, she is cleared and would be getting well. He also advised her to wait for half an hour to an hour to see improvement. If the condition does not improve, it may require hospitalisation and medical attention. In engaging the *kastom* doctor away from his home and as an act of good will, the victim's family would give a token of money, which upon receiving he would assure giving his tenth (money offering) to the Church to thank God for his gift and blessing which conflicts traditions and Christianity, only

comprised by pronunciation of “we are now Christian this is a gift from God” (*kastom doctor*) as I have observed and heard countless times.

In contemporary Baelelea, young people are heavily influenced by Christian dogmas, hymnal singing, and contemporary music and movies that have transformed the cultural landscape. I have recorded a few baby napping chants and rhymes by my aunty *Kokokeni Takarii*, a storyteller and reputable aunty close kin called her *sifi keni*, female chief and wittily described as *oki ne rowane*, meaning ‘this bone lady’, because of her lean body structure but with a big and commanding voice. She was born and grew up in a traditional Baelelea cultural setting; Takarii had a strong personal view on *kastom* and was very critical of the changes and new ways people brought in and displayed by youths and professed Christians in the community. The historical influence of the church and ‘development’ has resulted in the displacement and dispossession of certain cultures and traditions, including songs and stories. During our conversation, *Kokokeni Takarii* refreshed her memory and skills, reciting a few chants she could remember. But she also lamented the loss of many of the old *sili*, and *ainimae* because young people lack any interest and knowledge holders mostly have passed without passing or inherited by the new generation. Similarly, the youths and people have reformatted and modernise some of the old songs and music that they regularly sung in churches and on occasions of marriage, that she thinks lack originality and the authentic cultural elements, because people treat as christian song or secular music.

The culture of food and feasting requires people of skill and experience to organise and distribute the food proportionally in a way that is satisfactory to everyone. An expert or delegated person for this role is called *wane ni toli*, a male food organiser responsible for allocating and distributing the food during traditional feasts in the past or today at church organised events and marriages that people equally described as *maoma* or *adedoa*, the traditional feast (as in Figure 3.1). During my childhood upbringing in Baelelea and fieldwork in 2021/22 I overheard conversation and strict conditions established about ‘sharing of food’ (*tolu*) as an honours task that demanded proficiency and trustworthiness to avoid complaint people being missed out. One would warn, “Do not let this man or that woman get involved. Their hands have holes. See the basket, hanging on the side, one hand on the food, other hand dips some food into the basket” as they collectively gossip about a particular member of their family and community. A retired specialist would render advice: “Young people, this is your time; be responsible and alert and help share the food. But ensure to manage everything well, that is our food. Also, ensure no one is missed out”. And point out “See all our relatives who

arrived and those who might be absent, and that we need to allocate them their share. Also, hold your taste; when you perform the work, it's not good to see one hand on working and another on the mouth". Such conversations on food sharing emphasised the art of food sharing and being responsible. This equally applied during small or big festive occasions, such as nowadays at the annual church Saint Day or marriage that people contributed and expected to enjoy the occasion and food. It is even more important as parts of social connection, cultural training and relationship building; hence elders will ensure the young men get involved and learned to be proficient or specialists.

Traditionally, in organising communal feasts and gatherings the men played leading roles and were responsible for allocating and distributing the food. The women folks on the other hand were reduced to do support roles, like today gather leaves for *motu* (oven) or do their own *motu* in their kitchen whilst men do the big *motu* outside for pork and taro. Nowadays, the nature and boundary has changed, and food or community feast activities has become more collective, except for certain tasks and food that are still considered to be men's primary responsibility. For instance, butchering and allocating pork and food like *kata* are considered the tasks primarily performed by men, that I was involved in several times as a novice *wane ni toli* in the village (Figure 27).



Figure 27: Assisting in sharing food at family event in Alelengana (May 2022)

The senior and competent women, with the assistance of apprentice young girls, would be allocated to be responsible for preparing and sharing foods such as potatoes, rice, and vegetable soup. These are tasks and food which men hardly take any responsibility for during communal feasts and gatherings as often witnessed in West Baelelea, even today. As shown in Figure 26 I was involved in cutting *kata* pudding into cubes with a young man as my assistant, while a woman sorted the cooked potato and vegetable soup in the background. When the allocation of *kata* and fish was all sorted, then food like potato and rice would complement; otherwise, the usual announcement would be, “Whoever wants vegetable soup and rice, just come around; we’ll not distribute into individual shares.” This again signifies the value of traditional foods and the tasks that accompany them. And that sharing individual food shares (*moringa*) of *kata* and fish to a person is a way of according to cultural honour and respect. In such a way, even a boy growing up would learn the importance of being a man, for being called out and having a distinct share, nowadays, a plate of food.



Figure 28: *Motu* (stone oven) food preparation in Alelengana (March 2022)

On large communal feasts, as nowadays, during church programs and marriages, it is common practice to write down the names and relevant details of attendees on paper to keep track of and manage the food contributions and allocation. I observed multiple times during several church events where a book was used to list the names of attendees and contributions. This also reflected a combination of two systems to improve efficiency and reduce mistakes. I was at a particular church opening in 2015 in the village when there was a delay of more than two hours in the food allocation that got some people impatient, and elders frustrated. One elder was annoyed with the group of young leaders who organised the food allocation and vented his frustration: “Hey, why do you keep touching the food for hours?”. It was also discovered later that some important guests and relatives got their names missed from the written list. Retracted to his seat on the ground, the elder reminisced about how proficient they were without paper and pen and blamed the book for causing confusion and problems. The observed scenarios are not uncommon, as I have observed and been told by others. It demonstrates the contrast between the two systems and the fusion or merging of traditional and contemporary knowledge systems, as often seen during and in the cultural space of communal feasts and food distribution. As often emphasised by elders and my informants, like *Maka Faiau* and *Kokokeni Takarii*, the required traditional skills and knowledge are the basis of being competent in a cultural setting,

the acquired contemporary skills and knowledge, like ‘paperwork’ and pen are tools to aid cultural tasks and skills, that must not be solely relied on.

The term *wane ni thaungai* translated to mean ‘man who makes’ things are skilled craft makers in the community. Such individuals are highly regarded in the community for their craftsmanship and building skills. The possessed skills can be acquired from his father or elders and important practical skills but also as important traditional and cultural knowledge of the ancestors. In the community, a skilled young man in house construction and crafts is a respected member of society and is said to be worthy of marriage. Conversely, a mature and married man who lacks essential house construction skills would often be ridiculed by his male folks and accused as ‘good wanders’ from home during his youth and only interested in girls, which is why he lacked the necessary skills even to put up his own house. Living in the village, during my fieldwork in 2022, I heard a wife gossip about her husband, saying that he cannot provide and build a proper home and yet wants to have many children, which got other ladies to tease her and themselves about the situation. The traditional builders and skilled craftsmen, like Gideon or Gidi, are skilled in carving wooden handles for axes, *tiu* (traditional food bowl), *hoo* (slit drum), and other artefacts. The lazy and unskilled men in the village are referred to as *atona wane* or a ‘useless man’.



Figure 29: Baelelea artefacts- *hoo* (slit drum) and *ita* (bandanas leaves basket)

The mat weaving art and skill according to informants were mostly introduced to Baelelea from other islands. According to informants, the Baelelea people learned mat and baskets weaving from other islands and people from the western Solomons and Guadalcanal through exposure on the coconut plantations before World War II and in the 1950s and 1960s. Like other aspects of culture, the traditional arts and crafts making in Baelelea also merged with new ideas and skills, as shown in Figure 29 (right – a finished product *ita*, basket made of coconut leaves

which is a typical Polynesian design produced and gifted to me by aunty Mugarodo). It was a gift that I reciprocated with twenty Solomon Islands dollars, an equivalent to five New Zealand dollars. Figure 30 is informant and skilled weaver, Ednaliko, the big matron of Alelengana village.



Figure 30: Ednaliko, research informant weaving basket (January 2022)

In Baelelea traditionally and nowadays political leaders and specialists hold significant positions within the clan and community social and cultural setting. The traditional, I mean the tribal or clan setting, whereas the modern settings has seen reorientation of social structures along church and introduced political settings like provincial wards, constituencies and structures that include role of chiefs and christian religious leaders replacing the traditional functional roles and leaders. As I will elaborate in Chapter Six, in Baelelea the villagers lament the decline of some of the important structures and are increasingly concerned about the impact of new ideas and structures on their way of life and longstanding knowledge passed down through generations. Inland communities like Alafana, people are no longer isolated and become aware that as more development takes place and people becoming exposed, the traditional social structures would increasingly be challenged and transformed. Coastal settlements face even greater transformation due to their frequent interaction with the outside world through access to the public road for example. In the next section, I will delve into aspects of the traditional economy.

Traditional economy

Inland villages, subsistence agriculture and the forest are the foundation for cultural survival and economy that people reliant on for many generations. Alafana inland population the land and the forest have intrinsic economic and livelihood values for cultural survival, or the cultural notion of ‘making a living’. In Kwa’ioloa & Burt (2001) work on Kwara’ae also noted that conceptually and practically “understanding of their land and environment” carry this “practical consideration for making a living”, rooted on inseparable and interconnected intrinsic social and economic value. Kwa’ioloa & Burt (2001) further explained from Kwara’ae perspective that:

Forest is for living to be good. It makes the land moist for crops to be large as waters to flow for drinking, it is trees with fruit for eating, also for wild greens and wild animal-protein. Forest is also for things for building houses such as wood and vine and leaf. Forest is also there for trees for saving life, for curing illnesses. It is also for staying in the shade, especially at rest-sites and homes.

Forest is for man’s living, but it is also there for birds to nest in the trees, and cuscus and bats to give birth in hollows in the tree. Also, for clusters of *fari*-orchids and *takale’ole’o*-fern to be there for cuscus to live in and give birth in, and for clusters of bula-vine to grow on trees. Even lizards like to live in dense forests to eat the leaves in the wilderness. Forest is also for creeping things and hoppers, and things which have tubers (Kwa’ioloa & Burt, 2001, p. 16).

As illustrated by Kwara’ae perspective quoted above, land and forest ecosystems are crucial for the survival and well-being of humans and the environment. According to Baelelea informants in Alafana for generations, the land provides essential forest timber and bush material resources for cultural survival and economic. As inland bush people, they expressed having a unique lifestyle passed down for generations and spanning thousands of years of co-existence as an integral part of the bush ecosystem. Forest foods like opossums, freshwater eels, wild yams, and vegetables have always been in great abundance, but of serious decline due to social factors like unsustainable harvest and intense forest clearance for gardening. Apart from forest foods, cultivation of domestic crops, namely local taro, potato, banana, leafy vegetables, and raising of pigs and chickens, are the villagers’ important sources of livelihood and income.

Inland villagers' typical daily routine is culturally divided into gardening in the morning and food gathering in the afternoon. It is considered cultural for the couple to spend the day on gardening in the morning and the afternoon doing separate activities. It is normal that after mid-day the male folk would cease from hard tasks in the garden and shifted to lighter or considered leisure like clearing a section of the bush to extend the garden or *kokocho kwailiu*, a ventured into the nearby forest hunting local delicacies such river prawn, forest ferns or a big luck opossum a prized complimentary protein for dinner. The lady would gather garden food and first to get home and prepare *motu* (oven) and soup for dinner. Inland villagers, the day naturally ends at lean hour, locals described as *thato e urugegwau*, 'when the sun is leaning down' or about three o'clock in the afternoon. And that also goes along with the cultural reading, which, according to traditional cultural practice and knowledge, the day starts at three o'clock in the morning when insects and people awake and get organised or alerted for what the day will bring.

Today, as observed and from informants, the social and economic activities people engage in daily have changed and are more diverse. The villagers, as one informant pointed out, are more relaxed and spend the whole day in their garden, and there are others who spend the whole day just in the bush hunting as leisure and not to put food on the ground. The locals I have spoken with described them as 'lazy people' who hardly put their hands on the ground on gardening. One elder was equally concerned that "day in, day out they just wander in the bush, and ended up *toforao*, stealing from other people's crops and property in the bush, such as *tobina*, planted bush yam, and *edu* gardens." In recent years, weekend hunting trips on Saturday have become regular as part of food preparation for Sunday church meals, to be consumed while people take their sabbath rest. This is perhaps a dynamic shift because of the new ways brought by Christianity in Baelelea that fosters more regular harvest of local forest foods. I will delve more into this in Chapters Six and Seven.

Garden tasks and roles are culturally defined and determined by crop types and the nature of tasks as explained earlier in this Chapter. The cultural tasks of cultivation of taro like *kilu*, planting taro stock was traditionally and primarily the role performed by men as dictated by the tradition of taro and strict gender division of labour. The women folks would do general clearing and preparing of the garden plot and burning of the tree roots and rubbish. Nowadays, as informants have reported to me, at times their women folks, especially spouses and mother

figures²¹ were requested to help *kilu* the taro suckers in the absence of the men or were required to help because the task was heavy and cannot be done by a single person. At the same time, women also established and planted their separate taro gardens or intercropped taro with other crops such as potato and vegetable garden. This is very common nowadays as observed in Alafana and in near coastal areas.

Mixed cropping, whereby a few taro crops are cultivated amongst other crops is increasingly practised nowadays by women, meaning their role has become more diverse. However generally, men performed more heavier tasks like *kasi*, felling of big forests, *gelu ai*, rolling of chopped logs into position, and *thakali*, building of wooden barricades around the garden to keep out stray pigs and people. There is a culture around this that I will explain in Chapters Six and Eight. Women often perform lighter, but equally significant tasks like *thalo*, clearing of the plot of deposited rubbish around larger *guri ai*, where the rubbish is burned, a task called *oho* ('put fire') around *guri'ai*, ('tree stump') to kill the roots and prepare the soil for planting of taro crop. In a traditional slash-and-burn subsistence cultivation system, the fire was said to help prepare the soil and provide natural organic fertiliser deposits around the *guri ai*, where the first crop was normally cultivated.

Because of the distinct and observed cultural conditions and *kastom* of taro, the crop occupied a separate garden or plot from the rest of the crops, a tradition that also has a scientific and ecological basis and values. In Baelelea, a specially reserved and fertile land area for taro is *gano fili*, long cultivated and preserved since the times of the forefathers and ancestors. Planted taro crops take between six to eight months and yam up to ten months to harvest, whereas sweet potato and cassava take less time, thus becoming popular and staple food for families in Alafana as well as across Malaita (Ross, 1977; Spann, 2018). It has also been revealed that the changes have resulted in certain social behaviours; for instance, Taka, a female relative and mother of six children, told me:

It is becoming a concern; the man in my house is not helping me with any garden work. He said planting potatoes and cassava is a women's crop and job and not for men. But you should stop eating potatoes and cassava in the evening. That I see as a mere excuse, especially by men like the one in my house (we all laughed)

²¹ Respected female relatives are often referred to as *gaa ana toa*, the 'mother of the home'. They could be a respected aunty or an in-law everyone respected as 'e *thaitomana abula lae sula birangana alo bia fanga*', she abided and observed held traditions related to taro or good crop generally.

The experience described by Taka like several others in Alafana I was told is typical of the contemporary changes that define traditional roles and attitude towards what people contribute to the welfare of the household. The women folks would attend to the gardening roles, whilst men tend to look for ways to earn cash income through waged labour. The traditional means of wealth such as taro is a significant food crop for making *kata* and as a source of *mamanaa*, meaning ‘acclaimed wealth’ and tradeable commodity by inland *tolo* people with their coastal people neighbours. Nowadays this also includes the sale of taro produce in Auki and Honiara markets.

In Baelelea, clans and groups of people have their version on acclaimed *mamanaa ana alo*, or ‘wealth from taro’ beside domesticated pigs and *bi ngali* (bamboo of dried nut kernels) as source of traditional wealth and status of *wane inoto* (important economic leader) and *initoa biu wane* (traditional wealth of a particular clan or family group). In Malaita and Baelelea, traditional is measured and celebrated in distribution as in the case of food as during feast and important occasion. From this culturally grounded perspective, Hogbin (1969) wrote in his volume *Experiments in civilization: the effects of European culture on a native community of the Solomon Islands*:

Wealth is enhanced not by accumulating possessions to use them one’s self, but by giving them away. Every event of importance in a person’s life, such as the death of his parents, or the marriage of his children, or the offering of a sacrifice to ancestors, is celebrated by a feast. The more feasts a man gives, and the more lavish he is in the provision of food, the greater is his prestige (p.61).

In Baelelea as in To’abaita, traditional wealth is culturally defined and economised around food for example the larger one’s garden and lavishly one puts on a feast, the wealthier he is. Local commodities like pigs, taro, *bingali*, and *kata* and how ‘open’ and inclusive the distribution to closed kin and neighbours elevates status of power and *wane inoto*. Additionally, traditional wealth would be demonstrated through acquisition of tradeable commodities and currencies like *tafuliae*, threaded strings of shell discs made by the people from Langalanga, and *lifoia*, porpoise teeth made by the people from Lau in northeast Malaita and Walade in south Malaita. These, apart from food are principal and treasured local currency in the ‘barter’ system common across Malaita (Cooper, 1972, p. 61; Hogbin, 1969; Ross, 1978a, p. 124). Modernity does not displace local currency and trade entirely and the traditional wealth and commodities

like taro and *tafuliae*, in the local communities, people engage in trade through direct barter, either without cash or partially with cash as I have observed many times. Traditional wealth display also crossed boundaries that also included during church organised programs and events, like dedication of a new church house or ordination of a local church priest that traditional wealth played a significant part. In social events such as marriage and payment of bride price, traditional culture and wealth remained important, although issues of bride price always have an uncompromising stance by fundamentalists groups like the SSEC and SDA (Cochrane, 1969; Frazer, 1981; Hilliard, 1969). The imported food such as rice, tinned tuna, and corned beef, are increasingly coveted luxury goods of value in payment of the bride price and consumed in large quantity during communal and church events, that also like taro, reflected wealth in terms of food but more so ‘cash wealth’ in contemporary context.

The people of Baelelea have historically developed a distinctive culture and lifestyle oriented to living and depending on land and forest ecosystems for cultural and economic survival. This is distinct from the culture and lifestyle of the Saltwater *asi* people of Lau Lagoon and Langalanga (Cooper, 1972; Guo, 2003). For generations, bartering agricultural and forest produce for fish and shell money from Saltwater (*asi*) people of Lau (Hobbis, 2017; Maranda, 2001) and Langalanga has been the means of economic and cultural relations that existed between the two groups for generations and which continued to be valued even today, although there is now the significant influence of cash money exchanges instead of traditional commodities (Maranda, 2001; Ross, 1978). As observed by people living in Alafana and West Baelelea coastal communities, socio-economically and in terms of their lifestyles, they are increasingly influenced by a motivation to ‘make money’, including converting their agriculture crops and labour in exchange for cash, the primary currency of exchange and payment. This is depicted by the common expression, “nothing is free nowadays”, meaning wage payment. I will delve into this more in detail in Chapters Six and Seven on contemporary ecological and cultural changes.

Summary

In this chapter and the previous (Chapter Two), I have described how the villagers living in Alafana and West Baelelea including elders were converted to Christianity, but most are first and second-generation Christians, born either from Christian parents or grandparents. They live inland on tribal territories and land in a close kinship social setting. Like most communities

and people in North Malaita their subsistence lifestyle and perceptions increasingly reflected contemporary changes and ideologies based on individualism and the motivation of cash wealth and 'making money'. The people I interviewed had vivid recollections, and some had participated in the 'old ways' of *kastom* and traditional culture that has since been abandoned through conversion to Christianity and exposure to modernity. Traditional clan and land structures remained important aspects and institutions that consolidate common identity and empower land and communal leadership, but these have also been altered, undermined and otherwise weakened.

Chapter Four: Baelelea ontologies and worldview

Introduction

This chapter addresses the question of how the Baelelea people perceive and forge active social ecological relations and cultural understanding and orientation to the land and nature. The narrated findings in this chapter respond to the questions and describe the indigenous ontologies and how Baelelea people view the world. The Baelelea cosmology and social-ecological relations are culturally grounded in aspects such as myth and oral histories that foster relations and orientation towards nature and the environment. Myths and oral histories may not just be a set of historical accounts of the past but also stories that are represented in deeply held local narratives, knowledge and interaction with nature and non-human other beings. The chapter is organised in three sections. The first section describes the Baelelea cosmologies and view of the world through an indigenous lens. The second section describes the Baelelea conception of land and fostered cultural and spiritual connections through mediums of myth and oral histories, totems, and landscape features. The final section describes land-based subsistence systems and traditional beliefs and practices.

Baelelea ontologies and worldview

In this section, I describe Baelelea cosmology. It is interesting to note that the Baelelea people's conception of the world is complexly interconnected, as informed by mythology and oral history, shaping how people forged relations with non-human other beings. As noted in Chapter One, I draw from Indigenous Pacific scholars' perspectives to provide insights into Baelelea cosmologies and expressed social-ecological relationships through elements of myths, oral histories, and traditional beliefs. Pacific renowned anthropologist Hau'ofa's (1993) argued that the Indigenous Pacific people do not conceive the world in a microscopic but epic proportion defined by cosmological understanding and relationship. Although the Baelelea people as described in earlier chapter as tolo, mountain people with cultural orientations and livelihoods are more towards the land than the ocean, this is not the same as in cosmological terms and understanding of the world in its totality and/or holistic breath. In Baelelea cosmology, people

imagined relationship as interconnected with non-human others, which, according to informants, includes the spirits of dead ancestors and powerful supernatural forces contained and narrated through myths and beliefs.

Indigenous Baelelea worldview and cosmological beliefs represent a different reality from the predominant Westernised worldview that dichotomises between society and nature and science on the one hand and, on the other hand, other forms of knowledge of Indigenous peoples, rooted in myths, oral histories and beliefs as superstitious (Hau'ofa, 1994; Sepie, 2017). From the perspective of my Baelelea informants, it supports Sepi's (2017) assertion that, contrary to the Western compartmentalised worldview, Indigenous people's worldview defined in myths and oral traditions fundamentally depicts a different reality and interpretation of the world. The Baelelea people's social realities and perceptions are deeply embedded in myths and the interplay with powerful spiritual beings. For example, as I will elaborate in later sections, tribal knowledge of the land and plants and animals is for the Baelelea people are important connector of history and clan identity and clan over tribal land. The Baelelea people, culturally, everything revolves around the clan or family, as represented in Figure 31. The clan or family as a basic unit is further connected and consolidated by layers of social relations, cultural knowledge, beliefs, values, myths, and kastom, all rooted in the land and that collectively constitute society or the community.

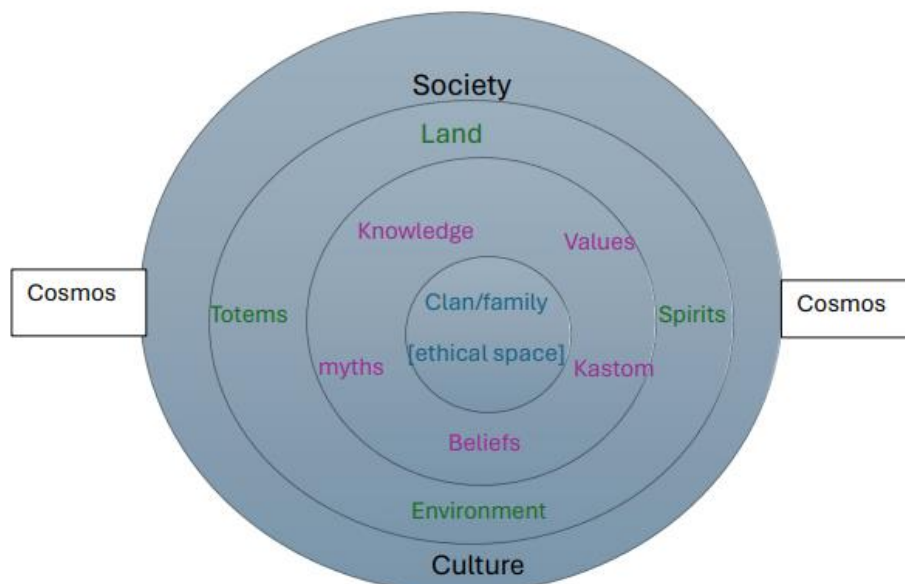


Figure 31: Illustration of Baelelea worldview²²

²² Source: Author's reconstruction based on local knowledge by informants and literature

It is also interesting to note that Baelelea's conception and understanding of the world and social-ecological relations are connected to a cultural daily time clock. People read and give meaning to certain environmental signals to determine time and compass direction. A Baelelea defined cosmological and cultural orientation and understanding of the universe is exemplified in Figure 32 below.

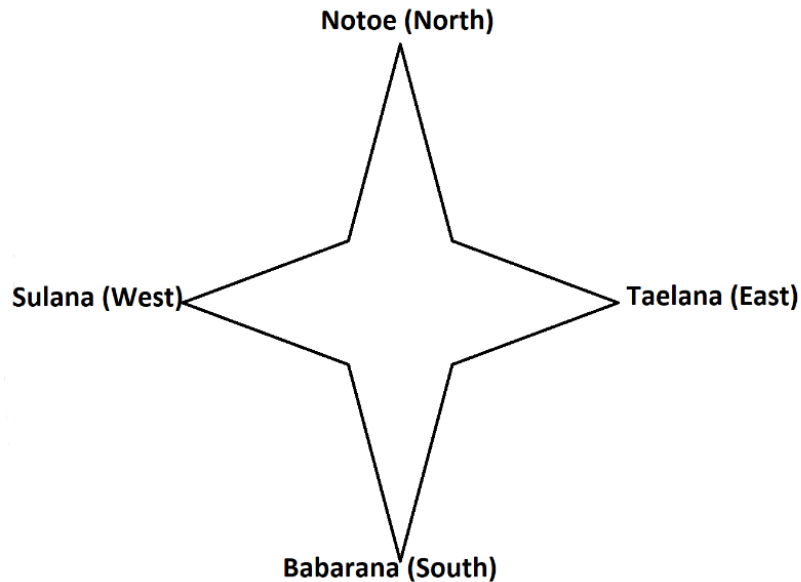


Figure 32: The compass direction (*Maka Faiau*, February 2021)

Figure 32 is a reproduced compass from information collated from elders, including Maka Faiau. As inland bush people, their knowledge of time and direction is largely informed by observing movement and characteristics of the sun and environmental features, and the displayed behaviour of certain animals and insects. In reading of the campus, the northern direction is *notoe*, meaning 'the side up or direction above'. The westerly direction is *sulana*, meaning 'sinking of the sun' or where the sun sets. The easterly direction is *taelana*, meaning where the sun rises or is coming from. And the southerly direction is *babarana*, meaning 'the check or rib' of the sun. Traditional knowledge as reading of campus directions and time the result of deep observation and understanding of the sun and the universe. For Baelelea people, it is not the entity, but the personified characteristics observed that provide a new meaning and understanding of social-ecological interconnectedness.

Baelelea defined time or hour of the day as *simanga*, meaning a moment a thing or event happens. *Simanga*, or a moment when something happened, can be a temporal occurrence or a frequently observed reality, for example, when people normally go to bed or awaken in

the morning. It also goes to explain when ecological features and animal behaviours exhibit known characteristics as defined in Figure 33. Traditionally, in Baelelea, a typical daily cultural routine begins at three o'clock in the morning and ends at three o'clock in the afternoon. Interesting to note in Baelelea, people have this knowledge, cultural activities and understanding of nature as reflected in the reproduced 24-hour daily clock from local knowledge collated from interviewed Baelelea elders during my fieldwork.

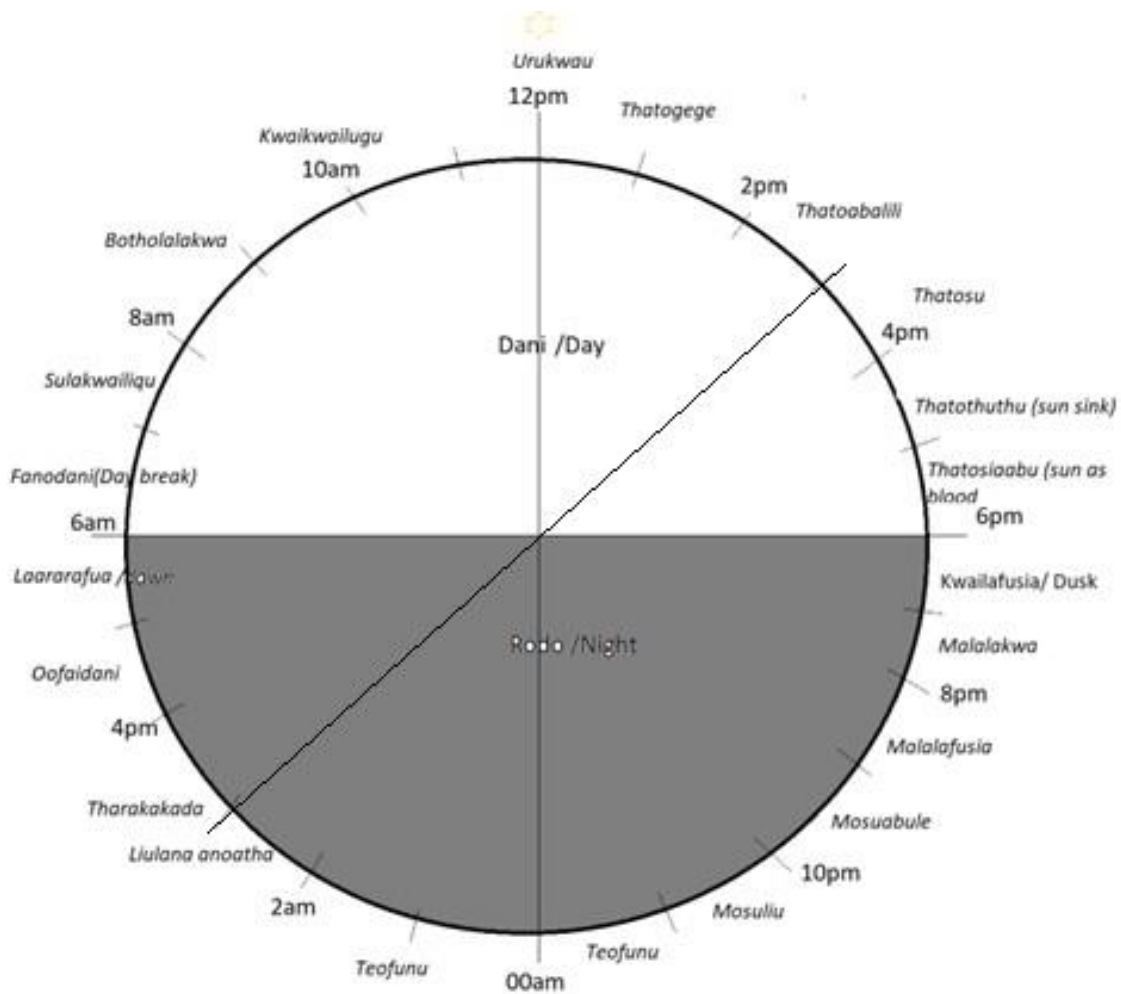


Figure 33: Description of the daily clock in Baelelea (Maka Faiau, Feb. 2021)

As represented in Figure 33, in Baelelea, their daily clock is divided into eighteen *simanga*, nearly as equal to the 24-hour clock. As stated earlier early hours of the morning, between 3 to 4 am, is *tharakakada*, which is explained as when people are awakened and light the fire to warm the house and the body out of bed. Interesting to understand also it is also around this time that certain flying insects are said to be awakened by the frequent movement of ghosts that forced them to make morning beat sounds.

The period between 4 to 5 am is called *o'ofaidani*. This is the hour before dawn, that in the past was known for *akalo* (ancestor ghost) to have overpowered a person, often the *wane ni foa* (traditional priest) or one of the elders in the *biu* (men's house) and utter spirit messages. It was also the normal hour for tribal raids on a particular *biu* or hamlet, normally by rival groups. Importantly, the couple of the house prepare food in readiness to leave for the garden or market down the coast. The hour between 5 and 6, just before dawn, is called *larafurafua*, when the couple usually left the house for their taro garden to avoid social disruption by villagers. Between 6 and 7 is called *fanodani*, when couples should be already along the forest footpath or already in the garden. Further periods are called *sulakwailiqu* is between 7 to 9 am when the leaves are soft and unfold. *Botholalakwa* is between 9 to 10 am when domesticated pigs are sleepy and lazy. *Kwaikwailugu* is between 10 to 11 am when the leaves are dry and folded. *Thatourukwau* is midday when one steps on his head and shadow. *Thatogege* is after midday when the sun is leaning downward. *Thatoabalili* is about 3 pm when the sun is halfway down, and people head home from the garden and traditionally marks the end of the day. *Thatosuu* is between 4 to 5 pm when the sun is diving into the sea. *Thatothuthu* is when the sun has sunk in the sea and equally, *thatosinaabu* (the sun is consumed in the blood). *Thaulafi* is the evening dusk between 6 to 7 pm, and one can still recognise a person from a distance. *Malakwakwa* is between 7 to 8 pm when a person is hardly recognised from a distance. *Malalafusia*, is between 8 to 9 pm when a person is hard to recognise at a short distance. *Mosuabule* is about 9 pm when the body is sleepy, and kids are already in bed. *Mosuliu* is after 10 pm when people are fast asleep. And *teofunu* is when people are fast asleep, 'as if they were dead'.

In the Baelelea world, as depicted in Figure 31, the land and environment are an inseparable layer that makes up a culture or society. Land and environment as knitted ecological systems, Kwa'ioloa and Burt (2001) define as the necessary building blocks for making a living. Furthermore, essentially, it is what connects the living with the spirits of their dead ancestors through cultural beliefs, knowledge, practices, and values. From informants in Alafana, there are several experiences of people having strange encounters in the bush that many attributed to the presence of ancestor ghosts. For example, in the form of a crying insect, a weird odour or feelings when walking near a particular forest associated with a *biu abut* (shine) or *kula abu* (taboo). From the people interviewed in Alafana, like Maekolo and *Kokokeni* Takarii, they consider such instinctual and spiritual experiences as 'natural, meaning 'normal and reality' that often happens because the living and dead ancestors are integrally part

of the same ecosystem or community of beings. I will delve further into myths and cosmological beliefs in later sections. In the next section, I will begin a discussion of Baelelea's definition and understanding of land to clarify social-ecological relations in terms of cultural orientation to land and as an integral part of the landscape.

Gaano Gaa kolu – Land our mother.

In my ethnographic fieldwork, a question was asked to participants about their perceptions and understanding about land. It is interesting to note that the immediate and ardent answer was that most perceived “*gaano na gaakolu*”, meaning ‘land is our mother’, a perception common in land and gender, and peacebuilding studies in Solomon Islands and Melanesia (Hermkens, 2013; Monson, 2023; Pollard, 2000b). The Baelelea ontology and perception of land as mother support the entrenched cultural and emotional connection. Indigenous people conceived of land as the sacred mother (Berkes, 2012) as well as the guardian of knowledge and the teacher in the home (Pollard, 2000a). In the following paragraph, I delve into the discussion of Baelelea's conception of land as *gaa* (mother) and the fostered relations it entailed, either conceptually or pragmatically.

Land or ground (*graon* in Solomon Islands Pijin) in Baelelea is called *gaano*, etymologically a combination of two distinct words. The word *gaa* is the Baelelea literal word for mother, and *ano* is the word for ground or what is below our feet. Therefore, combining the two words, it becomes *gaano*, which by strict definition refers to ‘the mother below’ and is the foundation for understanding social relations and cultural survival (Pollard, 2000a). As expressed by informants when asked, the response is “*gaano na gaakolu*”, translated as the mother below is our common mother as guardian of certain traditional knowledge. It is also common for people to alternatively speak of, or about, the ‘motherland’ when referring to the tribal land or common island that the people culturally and ethnically identify with (Gegeo, 2001; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). This culturally speaks of cultural identity, rootedness to the land and people and the worldview, that Gegeo (2001) also elaborated based on Kwara’ae conception of “place” and indigeneity in the more globalised world. In Baelelea, the word *fano* (also *fanua*, or *hanua*, *whenua*, *vanua*, as in other Austronesian cultures) means a place or an island, for example, Guadalcanal and Isabel. *Fano* or *fanua* in the Baelelea context would also mean a country and metropolitan place like New Zealand, which the people further

distinguished and described as *fano aeasi*, meaning ‘place beyond the seas or overseas’ and *fano baita*, large land mass or metropolitan country.

The Baelelea people further conceptualise land as *do mauri*, meaning ‘that which is living and active.’ This conception supports Burt (1994a) definition that according to Kwara’ae, “land is the whole natural resource base, the foundation of their material and cultural existence” (p. 317), integrating with the spirit world and the cosmic order. This conception incorporates the cultural beliefs that ghosts of dead ancestors are living and active members of the same cosmic order and are connected as an integral part of the land. That in certain ways and times, Baelelea believed the ancestor ghost revealed itself and was thought to be responsible for the fertility of the land and the supernatural force behind natural occurrences and certain social realities (Burt, 1994a; Jacka, 2001; Ross, 1973). Traditionally, the notion of *gaano* as *gaakolu* (land our mother) is embedded in the culture and *kastom*, and therefore sacred because of the ancestors who discovered and traversed the land and died and were buried on the land. The ancestors are considered permanently part of the land, as one informant puts it, “The ancestors are true landowners, because they are in the land. For us, the living, we only take care of their property” (Uncle Diro, 16 April 2022). Land embodies powerful spirits and is, therefore, sacred, as *Maka Faiau* explains.

In Baelelea, *kastom* and knowledge, land is like a mother from which we are born and *susu* (breastfeed). In my understanding, those who die are truly in the land; we can say they are the landowners. The living live on the land... In *Kastom* land is considered like our mother and is *abu* (sacred). Land is not just the soil, but everything. The rivers, trees, stones, and animals are *abu* too. This is because they sustain us and embodied gifts from the ancestors who discovered the land and used things on the land... The land is *abu* because if we do not see it that way, people do not respect land and resources on the land nowadays.

The Baelelea conception of land *do mauri*, supports the notion of earth as “one great living organism” and a “powerful global force” (Brown & Verschuuren, 2019, p. 1; Mickey et al., 2020). The divergence is that for the Baelelea, *do mauri* encompasses the spirits and spiritual activities as the “driving force” behind the natural occurrences and experiences, for example the belief connected to the fertility or infertility of the land and crop, that Ross (1973) also found out exist amongst inland bush Baegu tribes in North Malaita. A strange encounter, for example, sensing a weird odour when walking past a sacred forest or sighting a bush snake,

people would be seen as the manifestation and presence of *do mauri*, which inhabited the forest. This perception depicts the cultural understanding of deep consciousness and relations with land and other non-human species which exist even amongst, and in Christian communities in Baelelea as well as in Kwara'ae as Burt (1994, p. 53) also noted in his work. Ancestor ghosts variously manifest in myths, oral histories, totems, and landscape features.

Myths or *kastom* stories.

I turn to discussing myths and oral traditions that Baelelea called *ainimae*, elaborated stories and historical accounts that according to Telban (2019) “intrinsically related to what transpires in the landscape” (p. 488). In Melanesia as Telban (2019) further notes, myths are concerned with powerful ancestral figures and therefore sacred, as well as encoding secret knowledge of a particular clan. In fostering social-ecological relations, myths and oral history as for Melanesia, Telban and others refer to and my research supports these interconnected relations and held perspectives and worldviews of Indigenous people. As for the people of Baelelea living in Alafana, elders and informants like Maekolo and Demes Irofalu revealed that the tribal territory of Buroki, where my research community of Alafana is located, has rich oral accounts (*ainimae*) associated and embodied with many of the landscape features and totems that are the symbolic medium through which the stories are passed and told. In this section I have included the two *ainimae* of Buroki about the ocean wave-flood or what could be a tsunami today and mystic lawyer cane plant, which illustrates complex interplay of humans with plants and spiritual forces as recorded in myth that today remain part of the cultural landscape and local narrative. Below is a condensed version of the myths of the ocean wave and mystic lawyer cane plant.

The legend of a mystic eel called Melakwasi and the ocean flood on Buroki land in West Baelelea provided a historic account and interplay of the natural and supernatural world. Today the physical features like a hollow ground pit called Male Melakwasi (hole of Melakwasi) located five hundred meters from Alelengana, relics and deep trenches are said to be physical imprints of the flood. The ancient settlements of Gegesuki and Sirifene located a few hundred meters from the pit were according to my informants the first human settlement in the territory. During the research fieldwork in 2021, Maekolo a local elder of Alelengana provided a refreshed version with further contributions from Demesi Irofalu of Alafe Village.

According to the legend of Melakwasi and the ocean wave the two historical sites of Gegesuki and Sirifene were the first settlements the first people arrived in Buroki and settled. As the people settled, they cleared the nearby forest for garden at where Alelengana village is now and cultivate varieties of crops. As crops near harvest, they discovered that a mysterious being poached into the garden and ate up the crops. Serious searches were conducted to ascertain any possible human or animal footprints without a possible determination. What was discovered instead was a strange trail of slippery foam stacked to the nearby bush and people wondered what that might be. After several occurrence the men planned a surveillance mission at night to spy and possibility apprehend the culprit. In the middle of the night, the men in hiding saw a giant eel intrude into the garden from his secret hideout in the nearby bush and start to feed on the crops. The men attacked and killed the monster black eel and retracted back to the settlement on the hill to announce the kill. The men mobilised the villagers to prepare a huge *motu*, ground oven and roasted their prey. In the morning, they distributed the roasted meat to everyone, including visitors from a nearby settlement.

It so happened two boys, visitors from a nearby settlement were present, and for some reason were given the bony head of the eel, which is considered ‘low-grade meat’ as their share. The two boys, one was named Alafana’iu and another Iu’aofia were happy to receive their share of food anyway. According to the story, one was tempted to have a taste, but another proposed they take the meat home and eat it with their roasted taro as *adamia* (supplement). They agreed and took off with the bony head wrapped in leaves neatly placed in one boys *sukele* (local basket). Along the way home, the bony head in the basket spoke: “Hey, please do not eat me. You two carry me up to the top of the mountain you see from here and throw me over the cliff. Then you two are to remain on the mountain for eight days. By the eighth day, something will happen on the horizon coming towards you. Do not be afraid; I promise, you will be safe.” Very terrified but brave enough, the two boys followed the words of the mysterious eel and found their way up to the top of the mountain, to a hill called Ue and did as they were told. There the boys waited, and exactly on the eighth day (*kwalu fe thato*), they saw a dark cloud form and rise on the horizon headed towards them. The ocean wave rose high into the heavens and retracted just at the edge of the cliff and washed everything in the entire territory including inhabitants of the settlements below who killed and feasted on the meat of the giant eel Melakwasi. Alafana’iu and Iu’aofia were the sole

survivors. They later married from nearby territories, and their descendants resettled in Buroki, one at A'afu and another at Ambu'baita, according to oral history.

Another renowned myth of Buroki is about the mystical young cane plant of A'afu. According to oral history A'afu was founded by descendants of Alafana'iu and Ui 'aofia who survived the flood. But as always, there are competing versions and claims which are difficult to verify. For research interest, A'afu like Gegesuki and Sirifene, remains an important historic site and landscape. Maekolo Manatana narrated a fresh version of the story of the mystical young cane plant associated with A'afu during my fieldwork, though I had heard the tale several times in the past. The story narrates a human connection with the spirits through a *matale*, a sacred object which, according to the tale, was an old cane belt of one of the *ramo*, warriors of Buroki.

It so happened that the people of A'afu were all out working in their gardens. Towards midday a shout was heard from the direction of their hamlet calling them to harvest as much food and hurry home, someone was waiting. Expecting a relative of importance, they harvested food and hurried home, foregoing undone garden tasks. When they arrived home, the village was as empty and silent as they had left it in the morning. There were no footprints either along the footpaths or in the village, which left everyone puzzled. Again, another day, everybody was getting out in the garden, leaving the village empty. Toward midday, they heard the same voice urging them to return home with food; someone was waiting. Again, they harvested as much as they could and hurried home expecting a visitor. Arriving back in the village there was no trace or sign of any visitor, and they started speculating that it must be a ghost trying to fool them. We need to find out, the men said and devised a plan. The next day, the villagers were out in the garden, and one of the men hid under a *kaufa* (local umbrella-mat) in the *biu* (men's house) to spy for who and what fooled them.

The village was empty and silent and nearing midday the man who hid in *biu* heard a strange rattling noise from the back of the house and started to wonder but carefully observed. It was the old cane belt, a sacred *matale* of Ailiau that fell to the ground and rolled out of the house and into the open and sprung onto the *sulufou* (built stone wall) and gave a long shout for the villagers to return home with food, someone was waiting. After several calls, the cane belt sprung into position at the back of the *biu*, and the man observed everything. The villagers arrived and were told that the *matale*, old cane belt at the back of the *biu* fooled them. The men decided, "ok, let us eliminate this nonsense.

Remove it from here and place outside on the *sulufou*, otherwise it will fool us again.” The following day, they saw a young cane plant sprout from the old and dried cane plant and wonder but carefully observed. Day after day, it grew into a tall and towering plant, with a needle pointing into the sky without a single brace or support. This is strange. The men were mystified but did not do anything; otherwise, death might befall them. The giant cane reached into the heavens and began to lean wayward towards the sea as people were mystified even more.

At a sea cave at a place called Gwalusigaera, lived a notorious *kokala* (octopus) renowned through the northwest Malaita coast as a serial killing monster for killing countless people, including renowned *ramo*. Anyone who passed along the coast or attempted to kill the monster octopus was his easy prey. It was pronounced humanly impossible to kill the octopus because it possessed supernatural power according to countless people, including renowned *ramo* in the territory. It so happened that the cane plant reached the edge of the octopus’s hideout, turned into human body, and his shadow cast over the cave. The notorious *kokala*, quickly attacked with his killer tentacles. The cane plant countered with his razor-sharp nails clutched into the flesh of the octopus and fought for half a day, damaging the fortified sea cave of the monster. The cane plant finally killed the monster octopus and sprung back inland to his home at A’afu, about five kilometres with the body of the octopus. Back at A’afu, the villagers were mystified but celebrated the killing of the feared killer octopus and beat drums to make an announcement. A traditional feast was put up, and the meat of the octopus was roasted and distributed to neighbouring people in the territory. Also, bounties put up by clans in the territories that their men the octopus killed were gifted to the people of A’afu as traditional wealth and possessions.

The villagers in Alafana, like Maekolo related to me that the land features like the sea cave at Gwalusigaera are visible evidence of the tale. A hill beyond A’afu named Ue was also said to be associated with the tale and the densely populated cane plants in the nearby forest are believed to be associated with the tale recounted above. And for a long time, the people in the territory and descendants connected to Buroki considered the cane plant as a sacred plant and that any strange encounter was a *fafaboa*, spirit warning of an event of misfortune or death. For example, seeing a strange growth of a cane plant needlepointing in the sky on top of the forest are always read as signalling death, either believed to likely result from a magic spell or murder.

Oral histories of clan origin and associated beliefs

Oral history to the people of Malaita and Baelelea was considered a rich depository of clan knowledge on land and relationship. From my finding, an excellent genealogist is a sought-after person who can trace family genealogy going back twenty to thirty generations and to the first Malaita ancestor, for example who was most believed to have come by *baru* (canoe) and landed on a particular passage (*tara'a*) on Malaita (Burt, 1994). The oral history connected to a man named Bilitigao (or Beltigao) who landed at Suufau on the west Kwara'ae coast has multiple versions (Burt, 1994b). It was from Suufau his sons moved to occupy the inland territories. The first-born son according to one source settled at Siale in the Kwara'ae bush where some Kwara'ae clans traced common ancestry. Another son moved inland and occupied a territory called Abarafi in the West Fataleka region which a couple of Baelelea clans, including Usuilangi trace common origin through Makunitoa, a renowned *ramo* of mischievous character. He migrated from Abarafi travelling north and ultimately discovered and occupied this new territory which has become known today as Usuilangi.

I narrate this oral history with the consent of my elders and as an insider to demonstrate the intersection of historicity, cosmological beliefs and 'divine guidance' that remain in local narratives and the retelling of oral history. I queried my informants about how the ancestors came to discover and settle in Usuilangi. There are two main contrasting versions and many others, he told me. Some said it was a pig that led Makunitoa and his wife from Abarafi all the way to discover Usuilangi, which I questioned, "How can a pig lead you? I was doubtful. I heard it was a *basikwakwa*, magic bow which served as a pointer to Usuilangi for Makunitoa and his wife when they left Abarafi." Despite contrasting accounts, elements of traditional beliefs on the guidance of 'spirits (i.e. ancestor ghosts or powerful beings) exist in many of the historical narratives of the arrival on Malaita. Accounts include sea voyages and of new inland territories being discovered and gifted to the clans because of divine will, not by accident.

In narrating the story of Usuilangi, we go further back to a claim that the clan descended from one of the sons of the Malaita ancestor who was at Suufau. As Maekolo pointed out from his historical knowledge: "In times past, the islands of Guadalcanal, Gela and Isabel were closely linked, only cut off by a short distance of waters compared to today. That allowed our ancestors to traverse a short distance of water, but more so, it was by divine guidance that they arrived in Malaita. The stars and celestial beings guided them all the way." Maekolo also

claimed that accompanying the ancestor Bilitigao was an important passenger, Korokoro, a black crow traditional to Malaita that some called ‘spirit bird.’ Korokoro charted the voyage from a faraway place and passed big, attractive islands like Isabel and Guadalcanal. However, it was on Malaita that Korokoro landed and remained, and the ancestor sailed no further. According to Maekolo, the Korokoro bird is a common Malaita bird, but for the Usuilangi clan, the *baekwa asi* (shark) and *vali* (stingray) were the important totemic animals that also protected the people from predators and storms on the long sea voyage until they reached the shores of Malaita at Suufau. They have remained in our waters ever since.

These two totems traditionally embodied our ancestors of several clans, including Usuilangi, associated with Abarafi and Suufau. The shark (*baekwa asi*) is the male ancestor, the stingray (*vali*) is the female ancestor and guardian of the sea, and the bird Korokoro is a messenger and guardian of celestial space. Occasionally there were reported encounters and sightings at sea by local fishermen from the area during fishing trips that locals considered *fafaboa*, spirit messaging of approval or misfortune waiting to happen. I had a conversation with a Usuilangi elder, and he recounted that during a tribal reconciliation program, strangely, two *baekwa asi* (sharks) floated past in the shallow waters. Those who had convened read this as, “Oh, the ancestors show delight and approval of the gathering.” I narrate this to exemplify traditional beliefs tied to oral history and cultural totems that culturally shape social orientation and relations with nature. Based on narrated accounts of male and female ancestors embodied in sharks and stingrays and the sacredness of the waterways and rivers, using the waters as a latrine or for bathing by a menstruating woman is considered pollution and desecration. They are the home and territory that the ancestors traverse and are therefore taboo. For people who are culturally conscious it is considered protocol when traversing a taboo area or encountering a shark at sea that may arouse any strange feeling and fear, to communicate to them: “*Kalimi ki bona*” (‘it is us your kin) or “*kamili tatha*” (‘it is us who are passing through’). It is believed that speaking to the totems will deter unfortunate experience, because they would be alerted, and know you are one of his blood relatives. This according to my informants, around the northwest coast for generations no one has lost his life at sea or waterways by shark or crocodile attacks.

In Baelelea, as in Kwara’ae, people hold the view that “Humans and ghosts were members of a single society, and the human and spiritual dimensions of their world cannot be understood except in relation to one another” (Burt, 1994, p.51). A ghost is called *anoedo* (wind, soul, or spirits) and inhabits the forest, or certain spots in the forest. A particular piece of bush

or dark forest, bush stream, and bamboo woody areas are considered natural habitats for forest ghosts. I was told locals had countless encounters with ghosts, many believed are *anona* or dead ancestors or relatives visiting them because they are one of them. At times people had encountered *akalo kwasi* (wild ghosts) and a man named Rex reported to me he encountered a 'wild ghost' one night along a mountain footpath passing near a sacred site. The wild ghost he described stood about thirty meters tall so that his head reached above the forest canopy. *Akalo*, the ancestral ghosts are referred to as *anoedo*, meaning breath or wind of a dead person and culturally are considered as spiritual messengers and guardians. *Anoedo*, as 'living spirits' manifest in multiple ways called *fafaboa* such as the sound of crying insects, the appearance and strange behaviour of certain animals, strange dreams, or feelings of being aroused when walking near a sacred forest. A person would also say that they have been possessed by his or her ancestor's ghost, an experience called *akalo taelia*, meaning an ancestor's ghost had overpowered them. In such ways, a person is said to connect to their ancestors, because the person or close group is living together and maintaining a certain *kastom* and *tabu* that attract the visit and presence of their ancestors. Otherwise, people also said, "we are their blood, it is natural for them to *sule* (follow) and visit us." Informants explained, ghosts inhabit and are always present in places they consider 'home' in the *biu abu* or Anogwau island.²³ The culturally inclined and sensitive person would read and interpret certain emotions and psychological impressions as indicative of the presence of *anoedo* even today amongst Christians. The usual impression would be *wane tala* or *wane fula*, meaning "someone gone by" or "someone has arrived" in referring to sensing the presence of *anoedo*, believed to be one of the dead relatives. I will recount my experience to provide a grounded understanding of Baelelea's cosmological beliefs associated with ghosts.

I spent a day and the night with Uncle Diro at his place down the northwest coast near Arao. It was time to sleep, and I joined uncle Diro and his son Maekolo, squeezing ourselves in his canteen closet between boxes of canteen goods and belongings. The fume of *safusafu* (local tobacco) and poor ventilation was unbearable for any non-smoker. Uncle Diro realised my discomfort, got up out of bed and spent the rest of the night outside in the small veranda facing the main road. I was also awakened and got to join him for the rest of the morning part of the day and got to question him on many issues and his life stories even more as we endured the morning breeze. I checked on my wristwatch; it was 3.00 AM and communicated to Uncle Diro the hour of the night, to which he replied: "Yes, I know, did you hear the insects?" I said,

²³ Spirit island many people in north Malaita believed as the island home of their dead ancestors.

yes, I can hear the cry of flies or insects moving about on the other side of the road. What about it? “It was *anoedo* going past” and he went on to explain to me:

According to past traditional beliefs, 3:00 AM is when *anoedo* roam about the place. Nowadays, because of Christian belief, people do not believe and understand such things, and which causes the reaction of insects such as we heard. Spirits are real, and the Bible does talk about them, too. As a youth, I grew up with my elders in the old ways and familiar with our traditional beliefs. I was very sensitive to what goes on around us. *Anoedo* are moving about the land, they are our people who died long ago and are harmless. Since I moved here, I can sense the spiritual environment of this place. I can discern and feel what moves around at night and what people bring and try to spoil others with, they are never hidden. Those who just went past are just ‘people of place’, nothing unusual, they are some of the ancestors of the place. If it were someone different, we could have a different feeling and atmosphere, too.

As one may have expected, I had no strange feelings or fear, except for the natural breeze on my flesh and a breath of fresh air after a few hours of suffocating from the smell of *safusafu* circulating in the room we were sleeping in. Maybe it was my ignorance of ghosts and the fact that there were three of us there that dispelled any fear. After about ten minutes, the crying insects suddenly came to a stop, and the place returned to dead silence. Uncle Diro explained that *anoedo* is like the wind and it always moves. The insects that hang and sleep on the trees, like humans, can sense ghosts too, which results in them making that resounding cry. I proposed to Uncle Diro that the ghosts must have passed, and so the insects must have returned to peaceful sleep. Uncle Diro’s claim of 3:00 AM, the hour ghosts roam the place, further corroborates the Baelelea definition and understanding of the time of the day and reports that “dusk and at night, (are) when ghosts are most active” (Burt, 1994, p. 53). Another time when ghosts also roam is *kwailafusia* or *kada keke bau*, dusk, when insects are said to be retiring to sleep and make resounding cries signalling nightfall, usually between six to seven o’clock in the evening.

I reflect on this when recollecting an experience from growing up in the village in the 1980s, because it was funny to me. I frequently accompanied my parents to our family taro garden on the hills and to yam and edu gardens at a place called Alokwalu in the Madalua Gorge. Family gardens were also located at Abubaita towards the coast, and the only way home was through the forest footpath during the later hours of the afternoon, around four and five

o'clock. As we finished work and returned home, it was a habit of my mother to call out our names to come out of any possible hiding places in the bush. I vividly remember Mum calling our names, especially my younger siblings, about four and six years old then, and I have translated a few lines below.

Dima kuu, Diake kuuu..... lea mai koro oli na, oko to mai kwauta ai, oko to mai kobata ai, oko to mai fara ta kokomuta, farata isifura, sula ta kafo, aeta fi ogi, lea main kolu oli nao, fano e rondo na (Baelelea version)

Dima and Diake (my sister and brother), kuu...uuuu! Please come, let us go home now, wherever you are. You may be on top of a forest; come down, let us go home. You may be at the bottom of a big tree. You may be under a big bush. Or you may be beside a rotten log or along the bush streams amidst the bamboos. Please come, let us go home. The night has come and befalls us. (My translation).

It is a commonly held belief in Baelelea that exposing children to the forest could make them susceptible to *anoedo* and have an unwanted encounter. As often explained, *anoedo* may cast a shadow over (*tarafia*) or hear and conceal or take the voice (*rongo ka ngalia*). If that happens, it will often result in the child developing symptoms like *mosu tonatona* (bad sleep), *aako* (fever), *rake fii* (indigestion) and the possible explanation was *akalo kwasi* (wild and unfriendly ghost) has cast a shadow over resulting being sick. Thus, as a way of culture, the calling of a child's name by the mother exerts care and takes charge. It was also explained that calling the name will compel the ghost, which may accidentally cast a spell or taken to surrender *lingana* (voice or echo) and *nununa* (shadow or image) of the innocent child back to his mother and home. The ghosts, as informants explained to me, are beings and do have ears to listen and most respond to human requests.

A culturally informed and caring mother will always perform the simple calling out of the name of her child or children, especially those below ten years of age who are seen as being very vulnerable to ghosts. During the day or even before they wander off to their 'forest garden' the mother would warn saying "Do not wander off in the bush. Always stay in the clear place in our garden that I can see you." Also, parents would warn: "Do not shout when we are in the garden and along the bush track. Otherwise, bad people will hear us and send magic to spoil our day and garden crops. Also, and seriously, the forest ghost will hear you and steal your voice and you will get sick. We go to the garden to work, no unnecessary shouting along the way and in the garden." Such advice is also given by senior males and parents to youths going

out hunting or harvesting ngali nut in the forest. Being careless by making too much noise, shouting, and playing in the forest may lead to sudden intervention by a forest ghost causing *arunga*, an accident by falling from a tree. It would result in an unsuccessful hunting experience because the *anoedo* or ghost in the forest withheld hunting success for recklessness and discourteous social conduct. The narrated accounts exemplify the Baelelea cosmological beliefs tied to certain ecological and spiritual dimensions. The next section delves into the aspect of *fafaboa*, spirits messaging.

Fafaboa, spirits messaging

In Baelelea, as my finding shows people still hold the belief that dreams are form of *fafaboa*, spirit messaging believed to be from “dead relatives who may offer the special powers or warnings of unforeseen events” (Burt, 1994b, p. 53). Dreams for the Baelelea people are interpreted in diverse ways and in different contexts, for example a dream could tell the root of a person’s poor health or his garden that requires special care and attention of a *kastom* doctor. This belief persists amongst Baelelea Christian communities as I have observed during fieldwork and many times before. In the case a member of the family has a prolonged ill health and is suspected as the attack of witchcraft, the family would seek the help of *wane kwaiadoni* (‘man of help’ or *kastom* doctor). When attending the sick, as witnessed a couple of times in the village, the first question the *kastom* doctor or *wane kwaiadoni* would ask the patient is: “Did you had any unusual dream” or “Have you dreamed of any person, a cat, dog or frog?” In most cases the dream would involve girls or old ladies which the patient would report being given a plate of food that was infested with flies or was stale. The traditional healer would explain: “That was the food *arua* (lady witch) who fed you with her contaminated food. Good that you dreamed her. I will help to vomit the *arua* food from your stomach”.

There is another reported case a patient was said to have dreamt an old lady, which the *kastom* doctor explains: “You have seen the person that fed you with *arua*, but you resisted that is why she made you sick”. Other times people dreamt and saw “cat or frog” that in Baelelea is believed to be associated with *arua* magic. A young boy Deme arrived at my house in Auki with a body rash that developed into an ulcer. I was told that this was after he dreamt that a dog was chasing and biting his leg. A few days later he experienced itching on his body. Now it was getting worse, and he had to be referred to hospital for medical attention after

attempts by *kastom* doctors or herbalists. In a further story Deme was infected with *akolo Gualekana*, a magic spell from Guadalcanal called *Dogi* that is associated with *fele* - deadly magic common on Guadalcanal. *Kastom* doctors believed that once the victim dreamed of the root cause of his/her sickness it became curable, but it also depends on the nature of the sickness, as one *kastom* doctor explained. Some sickness is natural, others are not; they are blamed on magic and witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Macdonald, 2013, pp. 70-74). One possible way to ascertain the root cause and nature of witchcraft related illness is through dreams by the patient or a relative, otherwise according to *kastom* doctors, it would be impossible to diagnose the sickness. I often heard people amazed and commented about dreams in relations to sickness as a form of 'traditional x-ray'. In Baelelea, this is all culturally grounded and situated within the space of cosmological beliefs and interventions as reflected in the narrative and dealings of the *kastom* doctors that underscored social phenomena such as sickness.

In Baelelea, a dream also foretells what is about to happen, for example death of a relative. I relate a particular encounter during an Easter weekend in 2022 which the family all spent in the village. The rain was heavy and non-stop the whole night until early the next day. My wife was awakened and reported to me she had "a bad dream." She told me she saw a corpse in the middle of a thatch house where people cried and mourned in a scene very much like in the village. By daybreak, we all hurried to the kitchen for preparation of breakfast and to get some warmth from the fire. Ednaliko, the big matron of the village braved the morning rain with *kaufe* (local umbrella) over her head rushed to break the news that a sister-in-law Eeda at Samela near Faeniwata in the bush had passed away. And she further assumed: "That was why it rained the whole night; this rain was a *fafaboa* by her of her death." Sandy, my wife recollected and related the 'bad dream' which Ednaliko asserted, "yes that was it, another *fafaboa*". According to Ednaliko a dream is "natural" because it revealed realities. In the conversation that followed she explained: "Sandy, you know you dreamed of the sister in-law, it was a kind of farewell, because unlike us, we visited her many times. You were away and did not get the chance to visit. It was her sending you *fafaboa*." In Baelelea today, traditional beliefs still exist amongst Christians like Ednaliko. I often questioned its validity, but some of my personal experiences made me, as an indigenous Baelelea myself, view that such encounters and stories are a part of what anthropologists describe as the 'lifeworld' and that includes mythology.

Bird crying and messaging.

In Baelelea cosmology people always read sounds and cry of certain bird or insects as spirit messages connected with the weather or death of a relative. As Feld (2012) noted for many indigenous societies, such as the Kaluli in Melanesia, bird cries and sounds are a medium of establishing relations and feeling for birds as it helps people to understand the world and nature better and by creating meanings by listening and interpreting certain sounds and cries of birds. I recount an encounter doing my fieldwork in 2021 to illustrate intersection between cosmological beliefs and interpretations of certain realities that still exist in and amongst the Baelelea people. It was during a Saturday afternoon *tok stori* with cousins Rex and Maekolo. It was a sabbath day rest for them and I had the privilege to be in their company for a lengthy *tok stori* session. Diake, another villager was returning from garden and seeing the three of us he called in to join the conversation in the open-unwalled thatch kitchen of Maekolo.

Suddenly, a little bird whistled *withu' withu' withu'* as it flew passed overhead in the kitchen and onto the lawn. As it encircled the kitchen and made its *withu withu* cry in the clear sky. Maekolo said: "Hey did you hear the bird is calling for the rain! Please do take your rain and go away to the mountains. We do not want rain here." We all agreed, yes, the past few days has been raining a lot. I curiously asked Maekolo about the bird and he explained: "The little bird is called *Sufudani*. *Sufu* means to dive or swim and *dani* means rain. You see the bird is so happy to see the clouds in the mountain and is calling for the rain to come." Looking up over the hill, more dark clouds were forming, and it started raining in the mountains. Although that afternoon, the rain did not reach the ridge we were on. On the adjacent ridge we could see rain falling and head down towards the coast.

As the conversation continued, Diake cut in with a comment about another bird. "The crazy bird *Korokoro* the last few nights behaved oddly and making unusual noises. Very irritating and disturbing indeed." Very noticeable as we all agreed and confirmed. It was never like that the previous nights and weeks, Diake alluded. Maekolo picked up and told of his experience: "True, I find it was strange too. The other night it was very annoying it came very close and sit on the *ngali* nut tree at the entrance and made his infuriating cry several times. I got up during the night and shouted and threw couple of stone at the bird on the tree. It was very strange and certainly we will hear sad news today or tomorrow. The bird is foretelling that something will happen, like a death of a relative. I cannot tell who of our close relatives is currently sick or in Kilifi hospital to at home." Maekolo asserted. Late that afternoon a text

message came on my cell phone that a relative named Frederic down the coast had just passed away. The news was communicated to villagers, including Maekolo, who can only affirm our conversation earlier on and the behaviour of the *Korokoro* bird the last few nights: “That was it. I wondered why the Korokoro behaved the way it did the last few nights.” I asked further questions concerning the Korokoro bird and Baelelea cultural beliefs and traditions. From this experience amongst others, the Baelelea cosmology and traditional beliefs work wonders in fostering relations either historically through tracing origins as a totemic bird but also in relation to natural phenomena like rain and storm.

Kula abu: Taboo

As part of the landscape there are multiple cultural features, many are scared such as tribal shrines or old graves marked by undisturbed forest. In Baelelea, a *kula abu* or ‘taboo place’ common referred in Melanesia societies is culturally restricted place, could be a forest, a bush stream, and small pools or creeks (Macdonald, 2013, p. 74; Bonnemaïson 1994: 113; Kahn, 1990). It could be a site a person, in the past committed suicide by hanging (*lio*) by a rope, or it could be a place a mother while giving birth while in *bisi* (delivery hut), or where murder took place in the past. Inhabited by such adverse history, people considered a 'ghost place' or no man's land. Human interference often has implications, for example one would succumb incurable sickness such as ulcers, dysentery and death.

Today, impacts of monoculture coconut plantations and intensive gardening people reported known *kula abu* have all cleared and ‘destroyed’ or reduced to a small patch of bush instead of dense forest. People also perceived that *kula abu* has unnecessary occupation of the land. My elderly informants, *kula abu* remained a dangerous and feared with some experienced consequences on human wellbeing. Elderly informants like Maka Faiau and Kokokeni Takarii recounted stories of people trespassing and gather food within certain *kula abu* and cleared forest for gardens resulted attracted whooping cough and unexpected death. For example, this cousin developed lipoedema after he cleared a renowned *kula abu*, that eventually claimed his life. Another person attracted *fuu mango* (chronic cough) trespassing a *kula abu*. As I have highlighted in Chapter One, any reclaiming of a piece of land near a *kula abu* for gardening settlement, as the case of Faeniwata in the 1970s would always require spiritual rituals. Nowadays, prayer administered by Christian priests and pastors. From informants, mixed views and reactions persist. Some people viewed *kula abu* as unnecessary prohibition of land

for domestic needs and need clearance of or displacement of fear of ghosts associated with a particular land feature or place.

I was in the village during fieldwork. My brother Diake was returning from the garden and told onlookers: “I just cleared the forest and put fire to the bush in the *kula abu* to dislodge the ‘bloody useless’ ghost from inhabiting the place.” The male folks laughed and agreed: “Good, get her to go find somewhere else in the forest”, referring to a particular ghost of a lady who in the past hanged herself and for generations associated with this patch of forest about five hundred metres from our house at Alelengana. On the contrary there have been others with critical perspective like *Kokokeni* Takarii who pointed out to me that she could not believe nowadays people have no sense of ‘fear’ for taboos in destroying some of the *kula abu*. It is even worse she told me that parents feed their children with food gathered from the culturally restricted taboo sites like bush ferns planted crops. “In our traditional *kastom* these are strictly considered an unhealthy habit and taboo” as she pointed and assumed: “That could be the reason many of the children nowadays are not growing healthy and strong. Almost every week, I notice mothers taking their babies to the clinic, I wonder why!” Whatever the cause of the underlying health issues, desecration of cultural taboos in Baelelea world, even amongst Christians, carries social implications. *Kula ‘abu* or sacred place untouched areas of forest which may act as important refuges for forest species and cultural knowledge essential elements in community conservation (Pollard et al., 2015) that I will delve into in Chapter Seven. The next section explores social-economic considerations and interdependence with land as building blocks of “making a living” within a balanced relationship with nature and the environment.

Subsistence system, traditional beliefs, and practices

In Baelelea the conception of land or ground as *gaano gaakolu* entails both cultural and spiritual dimensions as discussed earlier in the chapter, moreover the economic and livelihood considerations and wellbeing. In a subsistence-based society and community such as Alafana, the land, as defined repeatedly by my informants, is likened to a mother (*gaa*) because it is from her that people feed and sustain themselves and the generation before them. This perception underscores the definition of land as “the root of indigenous survival...in terms of social security, food security, cultural reproduction” (Anderson, 2012, p. 1) and alternatively

‘land (is) for making a living’ (Kwa’ioloa & Burt, 2001, p. 10). From my conversations with villagers in Baelelea, like Obed Luiakana, 57 years old and local Catechist, quoted below.

I learned from my elders as a boy that the land is our mother because the land feeds us, and we depend on it for survival. We drink from the rivers, and the land keeps us alive, active, able to reproduce and increase. Land makes what we become as people; without land, there are no people, no culture and no relationships, nothing. In my experience as a subsistence farmer, I have always lived in deep respect and learning about the land, because the land is my source of livelihood, and that supports my family. Other people observe and apply cultural rites to make their crops grow well. I did not practice, nor apply magic or anything to my crops. What I experienced is, it was about love for what you do, for example, the crop you put on the ground and the management of the land. In my view, if the land is good and you have good *mana* towards the land and your crop, all will be good; my life will be enriched. Because land, as our mother, understands you and has an emotional connection. That is my view and understanding about land and living interaction in terms of subsistence activities.

Like Obed, tribal elder Maekolo described land as being like a ‘true living person’, our mother. Land feeds people and enriches our lives like a true mother that people should respect. He elaborately described, as quoted:

Land is like a real person. We keep it, it feeds us, we neglect it, it neglects us too. I see this view and relationship as true in both *kastom* and according to the Bible teachings. In the creation story, we humans are made from the dirt from the ground. In both ways, we have deep emotional attachment to land as our mother.

I always say to relatives here in the bush, we are lucky we *susu* (suck milk) fresh from our mother, from the clean and crystalised streams of the mountain. Many of the streams in the bush, like Alokwalu it breaks forth from a rock, so refreshing and crystal clear. You would hard be pressed to tell where the water comes from, but I know it’s from the bosom of the earth, our mother. Every time I go to the coast, or Auki Town I always fill my bottle of water from our streams here in the bush. I dislike the taste of lifeless water stored in tanks and collected from dirty streams; it’s very tasteless, and I’m unsure about the condition of the water source.

According to another interviewed elder, Maka Faiau, also described the land as being like a living person that speaks and manifests itself in countless ways through natural happenings and signs.

Land like a person speaks in multiple ways. For example, when the land does not yield good harvests, or when a stream is flooded or dried, it means the land is telling us something. When we have a particular tree in the bush that has tender leaves or changes colour, we know that the land is speaking of new seasons or *ngali* nut harvest is near and ready. People of my age and in *kastom*, that was our school and how we came to learn and gain knowledge by observing and following the instructions of elders and our mothers about nature and language of the land and the environment. Today, kids learn about these things through books and at school. For us, the bush is our school and classroom.

This perspective resonates with Kohn (2013); a proportion of non-human forms also think in semiotic, signs and meaning, that for Baelelea as *Maka* Faiau referred to above as informed traditional knowledge about the natural world. I also interviewed another Baelelea elder, Duia of Marokafo village who viewed land as being everything.

Land is general. Knowledge about the different soil types making up a particular land and area is important. Some soil types are red, some are black and a mixture of sand and gravel like around here at Marokafo and Madalua river basin. We are in the *sifole* territorial zone midway between the coastal and interior bush and the soil are not that favourable for taro, but the soil condition is suited for *edu*, giant taro and *kai*, yam. *Ganofili*, select land areas for taro are located further up the hill and mountain from here, that since our forefathers we have been cultivating for taro, as part of our cultural obligation for many organised *maoma*, traditional feasts and source of our wealth. I worked with my father and elders in the past and gained so much local knowledge, and the name and history of these land areas for taro and some of the cultural practices associated with it. As we were told, no other crops must spoil the selected land areas for taro. Today, the present generation are less careful and considerate when selecting and clearing land for the family garden. As a result, they have cleared and spoiled the reserved best areas for taro by planting other crops. People, we need to take care of the land and seek to appreciate knowledge to guide what one does on the land. That is how we enrich and sustain our livelihood and best gain what we grow or put on the land.

Nowadays people think about themselves, but it is the land we feed from. People complain the land is not fertile any longer or the crop no longer produce yield. My answer is people, we unsustainably use the land, and we complained, blame ourselves.

In Baelelea land is the building block for making a living that people have depended on for generations and today. Materials such as forest timber, bush vines, and bamboo have been exploited by people for generations for cultural survival and today as a means of cash income. According to informants in Alafana, a reason that keeps them living inland, rather than relocating permanently to the coast, is to access local materials and fertile garden land for their crops. As one informant told me “On the coast I feel lost and insecure. It is hard work to find timber to build and make a living.” From observation during fieldwork and prior knowledge, the relatives living in villages at the coast would request those living inland to harvest bundles of sticks, bamboo, and bush materials to be brought down to their coastal relatives in exchange for cash and goods like a packet of rice and few tins of tuna to compensate their labour. Sometimes women would exchange garden food for imported and processed foods. In recent decades, capitalist influences and motivations have compelled individuals to become obsessed with “making money” away from the primary objective of “making a living”, a concept that I will discuss in detail in Chapters Five and Six.

Horticulture has been a primary source of subsistence livelihoods for inland mountain people of northern Malaita, including Baelelea (Ross, 1973, 1977). The native taro (*alo fili*), and yam are traditional crops of cultural significance that since the 1930s in Malaita have experienced decline due to multiple factors, mostly associated with *alo mae* (taro leaf blight) but also abandoning of the taro rituals (Akin, 1993; Russell, 1950, Frazer 1973).²⁴ Traditionally in Baelelea, the system of gardening is bush fallow, where people shift between different locations within the territory and abandon old sites for a few years. In this way, the fertility of the soil is maintained. Regenerating forest on the fallow land keeps the condition suitable for the cultivation of taro and yam. The *alo fili* is cultivated largely in the interior mountain areas and is a year-round crop, especially when the soil is good, and the crop is well

²⁴ BSIP 4/S108/pts. III&IV/pt. 3, DO Malu`u Tom Russell “Report on Tour of To`abaita, North Malaita,” 23 Sept. 1949: “Diseases of taro were reported in one instance but are apparently well known; the symptoms accurately described diseases equivalent in Roviana *huzuru*, a form of dry-rot, and *nikuniku* in which the leaves are attacked by an aphid.”

managed from a disease infection perspective. Yam is more common in lowland areas and along riverbanks because they are vulnerable to *thalo* (lightning or thunder) and *asi a'ako* (heat of the sea or wind). Different taro varieties and yams are adaptable to certain areas, elevations, and seasons. Traditionally, people relocate or shift between different homesteads, from *latolo* to *abasi* during the season of *ngali* nut and which is followed by the cultivation of yam before families retreat to the mountain to be preoccupied with highland taro. The permanent relocation to near coastal areas also forced a shift from the primary focus on taro to diverse economic activities, which include preoccupation with coconut and cocoa for families with plantations and in other root crops and vegetables as a means of livelihood and cash earning. I will discuss this further in Chapter Five on contemporary ecological changes.

Mamana ana alo: Taro traditional wealth

For the inland Baelelea people, apart from sourced material valuables like shell money, taro is a defining aspect of traditional wealth and prestige (Ross, 1973, pp. 77-82). In many ways, a leader and family are recognised as *wane inoto* (man of importance) or *toa inoto* (people of status) traditionally by the extent of their taro garden. This is in addition to the number of pigs one raised, and the amount of *ngali* nut bamboo the family assembled, considering *ngali* nut is an integral part of the taro tradition in many Malaita cultures (Akin, 1993). As Hogbin (1969) noted for the neighbouring To'abaita, in Baelelea, taro wealth as a true measure of traditional wealth was not about accumulation, but the distribution of food as demonstrated in traditional feast (*maoma*) and during events such as marriage and nowadays church programs. The more lavish the feasts a leader and his group puts together, the greater is their prestige (p.61). In the present day Baelelea, although the context of traditional feasting has changed from a *maoma* put up for *akalo* (ancestors) to community feasts organised to celebrate church events where families assembled foods and distribute them to villagers and visitors, that many described as *maoma sukulu*, meaning feast organised to mark Christian events.

The norm of distribution or sharing for people I interviewed in Alafana is that it culturally attracts and maintains *mamana*, 'inherited wealth' gifted down from a particular common ancestor. This is reflected in multiple ways, for example a good crop harvest, an experienced hunter and fisherman, who often people considered as inherited and attracted to a particular clan and household. Any misconduct and misfortunate people would consider as

manifestation of *mamana* being withheld from him, that needs soul-searching. Today Christians in Baelelea substitute this to mean God of the Bible. A social action of distribution and sharing of food facilitates the maintenance of social relations. By sharing of food as in a feast or with kin according to informants is cultural value to ensure *mamana* is sustained or constantly attracted to one's garden, household, and wealth. This cosmological belief amongst Baelelea informants underscores the belief that fertility of the land is culturally embedded in the history of the land and ancestors who remain part of the land (Ross, 1973, p. 230). Even amongst my Baelelea Christian informants many still claim and trace the clan genealogy to which ancestors, in most case maternal ancestor, the inherited taro wealth was said to be originated from, for example, for the Usuilangi-Faudidiana sub-clan which I belong, our taro wealth originated from a maternal ancestor from Kwaunakwai land. That today people speak of their rediscovered wealth, either measured in terms of unmatched taro garden or entrepreneurial success as '*do i biu kera ubo mi,*' meaning 'wealth traditional of the house originated from their ancestors.

I narrate my fieldwork observation of a family event that depicts, the perspective that persists amongst the villagers in Alafana, around taro wealth. The taro displayed in the picture below on Figure 34 during my fieldwork attract rich conversation about taro and traditional wealth associated with the clan. The scene and occasion often presented important conversations and excitement as people inclined to sharing stories as he or she displays or witnesses the assembling of taro and a way to motivate and consolidate group bond. In delivering one's garden crop contribution, the person would state: "See the fruit of my crop" or simultaneously another would say "See the fruit of that piece of land I cleared and trialled" and started conversing about the history of the piece of land. It could be a piece of land once cultivated by the ancestors or could be an area he experimented with, as it was never cultivated in recorded memory and relatively less known for quality taro, in which case any fine harvest would assume that the *mamana* was still attracted to him.



Figure 34: Family *tok stori* about taro harvest (March 2022).

It was the week after Easter of 2022, and I was in the village for a family event. Relatives from the coast, like Uncle Jeremiah and others, were also in attendance. My brother Diake, the host, harvested what he said was the last reserved taro from his garden. Most of the taro from the garden had been harvested during Christmas and the new year and then traded with relatives from the coast for their Christmas programs. In the picture, Dima is on the far left and Uncle Jeremiah Diro is standing next to a hut, both admiring the assembled taro. Dima exclaimed:

Maka (father, pointing to Uncle Diro), look at this incredible assembled taro harvest by your son Diake. This is a big thing; none of us will match him. That *mamana* of taro belonged to those before has attracted to him..... I feel insignificant for a poor person like me. I am speechless! A poor lady person like me taro has disappeared from me long ago, nowhere to be found. Diake, *mamana* of taro, is truly attracted to him. See this!

Uncle Jeremiah retorted:

There is nothing to question. I can affirm that we have a long tradition of taro. My son had followed rightly in the footsteps of those before us. Taro has long resided within our *biu* and family. Today, people are only lazy and careless about our *mamana*, which

is why it has not come to us and manifest in many of us. This harvest is from only one person's garden. What if ten able men like my son put their hands on the ground? I have no doubt our *mamana* will restore to us in great abundance.

The conversation between Sister Dima and Uncle Jeremiah highlighted the local narrative that connects land, taro, and the *mamana*. This narrative is deeply rooted in the past and is believed to have originated from the ancestors. People still base their stories on a specific land area that is suitable for taro cultivation, and they rely on cultural knowledge and management practices to ensure good crop health and productivity. As Uncle Diro mentioned, *mamana* from the ancestors are akin to land deposits. It requires putting one's hands to the ground to reconnect to wealth passed down from the ancestors, culturally viewed as deposited in the land, which is often considered subjective. In contemporary Baelelea, this is considered the first and most difficult step because people are drawn to different things, such as cash, going to Honiara, or leisure activities. Therefore, it is culturally and ecologically important to maintain the tradition of taro cultivation and to be selective about where it is grown. Otherwise, there is a risk of attracting *alo mae* and other infectious diseases, which are considered a curse on the crop, *mamana*, and overall well-being.

Summary

In this chapter, I have described the Baelelea cosmologies and worldview contextualized in myths and oral traditions. The perception of land as "gaa kolu," our mother, defines land as sacred and inalienable to the Baelelea people. Ancestral ghosts are viewed as living spirits of the land, historically believed to be responsible for the fertility of the land and cultivated crops. Baelelea people, especially older generations, interpret mediums such as dreams, as feelings aroused when walking in the forest or at night, and strange behaviour of animals and plants as *fafaboa*, spiritual signs and messages from their ancestors or supernatural beings. These experiences are considered "natural" by the Baelelea people, defining them as factual and real encounters and interactions with nature and the environment. The spiritual 'earth mother' or motherland is viewed as the basic building block of "making a living," underpinning subsistence economic lifeways and livelihoods of the Baelelea people for cultural survival and well-being, including the well-being of the environment and nature's ecosystem.

THESIS PART TWO

Chapter Five: Contemporary Environmental Change

Introduction

This chapter describes the environmental changes and salient transformations based on ethnographic fieldwork and my knowledge of the locality of Alafana and West Baelelea. The way of life for inland communities and people's cultural activities, including subsistence agriculture and food gathering practices, had undergone a rapid transformation as people are increasingly engaged in and have internalised capitalist ways and ideologies. Although informants pointed to local experiences related to environmental degradation and loss, people are also acutely aware of the global contemporary change and anthropogenic impacts on the earth's natural system. Locally, heightened intensification of swidden agriculture production in Alafana and West Baelelea results from population increases and resultant social pressure on land but is exacerbated by economic motivations and capitalist market production. In West Baelelea, as elsewhere in Malaita, the people's subsistence system is solely reliant on the forest, and agriculture has shifted to a mixed economic system based on production for export and profit-making through the introduced monoculture agriculture system and planting of cash crops. As will be deliberated on in this chapter, these changes in the agricultural system and intensification of land use, the bottom line is capitalist profit or, as is locally described, to 'make money'. The consequential results include deforestation, loss of biodiversity, loss of authentic livelihood systems and cultural loss. There have been attempts by local NGOs and groups to promote what is called 'Kastom Garden' or 'bushman farming' by incorporating traditional knowledge and reviving traditional crops that otherwise are in decline due to multiple contemporary factors.

In the first section, I provide a general overview of contemporary ecological changes and challenges in Baelelea based on local observations and perspectives. In the later sections, I present documented examples of introduced capitalist schemes/developments with consequential ecological changes and transformation.

Forest ecosystems change and transformation

I happened to meet and engage in a lengthy conversation with Edanala, a 60-year-old mother and cousin, during a rather unfortunate passing and funeral of a relative on Easter Saturday of April 2022. Edanala lived on the other side of the island, but hearing about a sick relative, she had come to share emotional support and comfort, being an immediate kin and cousin of John, whose wife had just passed away. I related to Edanala as a distant cousin and had known her as a ‘big sister’ since my childhood. She was a very intelligent and passionate lady who was full of stories. But as a widow, she described herself as poor and *inomae* (state of extreme poverty, social grief and despair). During the conversation, she went on to pose questions that captivated my intelligence and research interest. Quoted below in Baelelea with my English translation is picked part of the conversation:

iiiiiee Demesi tara i na, ku lio kwarikia, gaano, tolo, ai ma fano e inomae. Dooki sui la gaano da inomae ka dekwewa manogu asiana, kwa liodia asi manga oroki. Uta fasi daka oli daka to lau sula tolana fano mai / Ma tai ka gonia.

Ku baita mai / kwa mariti kwa lea to mai bali fu/ kwa rikia bali ne bia bali fu mili to aia, fano e bobola sui bo. Gaano, tolo, ai ma kafo ma doki sui ka ade kolu ka diana/ Taraina fano e tatala bia kolu ka fula toana afetaia baita. Si manga oro ku to ana soe lae / Tae ne ade kamili imole / Ni fai lulana afetai / Uta fasi doki ka olitai lau.

Nau kwesi sukulu mala kamulu / Soe la nau bana sula do na ku rikia ka fii la mangoku fe thato oroki. Kamulu toa liotoo muka farono kolu ana tae / Uta fasi fano oli ta too lau sula tolana. Sula si manga ki sulu kwau lea sula tala ma kwau rao sula tolo ne, magoku dekwe kwa agi baku tenau.

Fano si to na sula tolana mai / Fanoki sui e tatala baita asana sula bona imole ka abulata mada ka ade fasia na kolu ka rikia an la gaano mone ka tatala ma creation ka taa. (Ms Edanala, personal conversation, April 16, 2022)

English translation:

Iiiiiiee James today as I look around and am sad to see the land, forest, and creation like humans they too are *inomae* (state of hopelessness and destitution). The things on the land that we always depend on to sustain our life are *inomae*. This breaks my heart. At time I reduce to tears and sorrow thinking of them and our earth. How will land and ‘things’ be restored to life, and who will restore them?

I was born and lived here, grew into adulthood, married, and went to live on the other side of the island. What I observe is that everywhere, the same. There are a lot of changes on the land, the forest that used to undisturbed and inhabited by local foods,

and rivers that we always depend on for water and food. Today, I see we experience big, big changes and crises. Many times, I question myself. What has become of us people? Where will we find solutions to give hope and restore land and our lives?

I am only an uneducated and poor lady. These questions troubled me when I was considering and seeing the environmental changes. You educated people, know better and should tell us how and the solutions. Many times, walking alone on the bush paths and working in my garden, I cried because the environment and land are *inomae* and suffer like us humans.

The world is no longer what it is because people are becoming ignorant of their actions and living in relationship to the land. This we see is reflected in the land and the situation of our land, which is hopeless and destitute.

Edanala may describe herself as ‘a poor’ and a struggling widow with no formal schooling and education, but the thoughts and story shared depict deep consciousness and insight about the environment and contemporary changes. The description of land as *inomae*, a social condition, transcended the elementary definition and understanding in the cultural context. Her posed recollection and consciousness about land and ‘things’ are underscored and grounded in the notion of interconnectedness as defined in Chapter Four, which, for indigenous people, viewed human and nature as part of the same ecosystem and the “earth as one great living organism” (Brown & Verschuuren, 2019, p. 1). The well-being and deaths of non-human species can be linked to human social worlds (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010).

In contemporary Baelelea society and communities, including Alafana people, face multiple interconnected social-cultural and environmental issues. These include high population increase and social pressures on land and the forest ecosystem that people have depended on since the times of their ancestors. The issue of climate change and impacts on the ecosystem and livelihoods, as Edanala, amongst others, have expressed, has implications on the natural ecosystem and subsistence livelihood systems (Bird et al., 2022; Gough et al., 2010; Spann, 2018). The conversations with villagers in Alafana, as well as those on the coast, have revealed that people have come to realise and experience what they expressed simply as *fano e tatala*, meaning ‘the place and world has changed’. These people pointed primarily to global climate change as evident by the impact on their inland food system and ecology, as well the social and cultural as way of life, which, according to Edanala, is in a state of *inomae*. In summation, people often spoke of *afetaia baita*, meaning ‘big crisis or problem’ of adverse impacts on the environment, livelihoods and cultural ways. For example, the experienced unpredictable weather patterns, ‘disappearance’ (or decline) of local forest delicious such as

opossum and pigeon bird. The health of the planted crops and poor garden yields, many pointed to as faced realities in the inland bush communities of Faeniwata and Masilana in West Baelelea.

Near coastal communities, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss are caused by deforestation due to the clearing of arable areas to accommodate monoculture coconut and cocoa cultivation that was pursued intensively in Malaita in the decades of the 1960s (Bayliss-Smith et al., 2003; Minter et al., 2018; Thaman, 2002). The resultant impact was the permanent occupation of coconut plantations and open garden fields, locally called *raraa*, which reflected a transformed landscape driven by capitalist profit-making and export markets. Also, as other informants have pointed out, the decline and loss of local delicacies such as opossums, important forest food, and soil infertility define a state of the land as being *inomae* or poor and deprived ecologically and culturally. From my research, Edanala's story and perspective are not isolated, as other conversations and encounters with individuals and groups have raised similar sentiments of ecological loss and threats by human activities and climate change on subsistence livelihood systems.

The Baelelea conception of land, as discussed in Chapter Four, is embedded in the notion of *gaano gaakolu*, land our mother and *do mauri* (living or active) and *abu*, translated as holy (Burt, 1994). Anthropogenic activities that degrade its natural endowment and spiritual condition amount to making the land *inomae*, taking 'life away' and causing desecration. The forest, the local streams and rivers have been an integral part of their livelihood and cultural well-being and are necessary for making a living. However, according to informants, the rich ecosystems and forest foods are in decline and at the threshold of being lost altogether. The forests provide natural habitats for animals and local delicacies like opossums, and streams for freshwater eels and prawns, which the Baelelea people have depended on as a source of protein for many generations. As observed and reported, the bush streams and rivers have become dry, and the water ecosystem has been impaired because of inconsiderate gardening and deforestation of areas close to the rivers. The use of insecticides as a method to catch and kill freshwater prawns has been reported as having detrimental effects on water and aquatic delicacies, according to informants; in the past, people did not have access to chemicals, and people adhered to *kastom* and taboos that forbade desecration and indiscriminate harvesting of local delicacies from the forest and rivers.

The arable and flat land near the coast is dominantly occupied by coconut and cocoa plantations owned by families. In the following sections, I present findings on the impact of monoculture smallholder coconut plantations on the social and ecological landscape.

Bariki – coconut plantation, a new landscape

The term *bariki* is a colloquial term associated with the long history of the copra industry in the Solomon Islands (Bennet, 2018) when referring to coconut plantations. In North Malaita, coconut plantations are owned by respective families and individuals. The history of coconut or copra can be traced to the colonial British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) and heavy investment in the industry to accommodate returning labourers from Fiji and Queensland, but also to absorb local labour to work in plantations to pay the colonial government-imposed tax (Bennett, 2021; Bennett, 2018). The Second World War of 1942 devastated the copra industry and BSIP economy. Most of the white coconut plantation owners had abandoned their businesses. Also, at the brink of the nationalist movement, the Maasina Ruru demanded better pay and economic decentralisation by advocating for the planting of village-based smallholder coconut plantations (Akin, 2013). From the 1960s and 1970s onwards in West Baelelea, as elsewhere in Malaita, families have been passionately involved in planting coconut plantations that permanently occupied the coastal arable land (Bennett, 1995; Cochrane, 1969). The introduction of monocultural agriculture through indiscriminate deforestation and clearance of the coastal forest resulted in biodiversity and cultural loss, as observed in West Baelelea, and is common in the Solomon Islands and Pacific Islands due to the adoption of new and intensive agriculture systems (Thaman, 2002).

In this section, I present the story of Uncle Sale, a respected community elder of Folotana Village. I had the privilege of sharing stories and company with him during the December 2021 Christmas Community Games at Arao. Many called Uncle Sale by his nickname Sale Bulu, meaning ‘Sale Black’, because of his distinctive dark skin, contrasted with the predominantly brown and fair skin of most Baelelea people. However, I respectfully called him *Maka* Sale, for he is my father’s cousin and senior or *maka* of our tribe. Uncle Sale told me he was born a Christian and estimated his age to be 87 years in 2021, going by the events he recounted that paralleled his birth. He estimated he was about nine years old when the War happened on Guadalcanal in 1942. Uncle Sale’s parents were amongst the first

converts to Christianity sometime in the mid-1920s when they abandoned the 'old way' and the mountain to move down to the coast and settle at Manaoru, the first Christian settlement in West Baelelea. Later, the villagers moved to Auaue and Folutana. In 1930, Fiukwai relocated from Auaue to establish Arao, the second Christian settlement. Folutana and Madalua were later establishments, according to Uncle Sale. According to Uncle Sale, the two powerful forces that *lafu* (pull by force) people from the mountains to the coast are *sukulu* (church or christianity) and coconut. As he recollects:

Two things forced us to move to settle on the coast from living in the mountains: the church and the coconut. It was the coconut that forced many of my generation *kali asi* (wander to other islands) and work as labourers as copra cutters in the *bariki* on Guadalcanal, Isabel, Western and the Shortlands. Around here, all these lands down the coast going inland were planted, and now *bariki* everywhere. I was involved as a boy and over the years.

Alakwa nau (my son), the whole area we see around here is fertile land. *Mamana ana fanga* (inherited gift and wealth of food) taro was very good and plentiful to harvest and eat (pointing to the Arao soccer field, recently excavated area for extension of Arao community clinic, and nearby areas occupied by coconut).

The whole area to the coastline and the ridges above were once *kwene dudu* (huge and densely forested area). I assisted my father and my elders to clear *kwene*, dense forest to plant taro and later coconut. Taro was good because the land was fertile and rich, like in *tolo* (inland and mountain areas). Immeasurable harvest, one would imagine. Later, we planted coconuts, which we see today. All the land around here is absorbed by *bariki* along the coast and further up the ridges. Planting of coconut only stopped on the ridges because they proved unsuitable; otherwise, *bariki* will continue to extend inland.

I am old enough to see the many changes in our area since Christianity arrived in our part of Baelelea. Inland residents come down to join us and participate in church; many get involved in planting coconuts.

I observe a few of you, my sons, who are more fortunate to attend school and go overseas than us. Many do not wander much to other islands and places besides Honiara.... Youths of my age in the 1960s wandered a lot even more than some youths today, to other islands like Isabel, Guadalcanal, Western, Choiseul and

Shortland Islands. I set foot on these islands, accompanying my senior men to work in the coconut plantations. The pay was not good. I remember I received a monthly wage of two pounds (equivalent to 4 dollars), which was the value in those days. I can reflect with regret that we wasted our time and energy. Some of my brothers even married women from other islands and established their homes and families. They stayed on for life, *toa da dola na fasi kolu* (the lost people from us). It is hard to return to Malaita, like my brother and your uncle, who married and stayed all his life in Choiseul. Another is the big family now settled near Gizo in the Western Solomon. Coconut took them away from us to other islands and places, never to return to Malaita and Baelelea. At times, their children would come for a visit, or one would probably meet them in Honiara, *kera toa I westen na bia Choisel ki na* (they permanently belong to Western and Choiseul). I was lucky to have returned because my father sent a strong word for me. My ageing mother and father were sick, and as an elder son, I am obligated. I returned home to Malaita and Baelelea sometime in the late 1960s. Since then, I have never wandered back to *aeasi*, not even for wage employment in Honiara, like others. All because of two things. First, upon my return, my parents prearranged a girl and ‘tied me in marriage’. Second, I became a committed Christian and involved with the local church, supporting my elders. I later served as a local pastor for many years until the youthful people got it off my shoulders.

From Uncle Sale’s narrative, the church and the coconut were the notable pull factors for migration to the coast and exposure to modernity. The inland people moved to the coast to establish permanent village settlements and coconut plantations, which, in previous decades, attracted and forced people to move beyond the shores of Malaita to other islands and, historically, to Fiji and Queensland, Australia (Bennett, 2021; Moore, 2017). The dynamic shift in the post-Second World War, as mentioned above, due to the colonial government's response to new political and economic climates and contestation by the nationalist Maasina Ruru movement had forced the introduction of coconut and cocoa subsidies and loan schemes to align the village agriculture sector with commercial production and export markets (Frazer, 1993, p. 2). In the 1960s and 1970s, whilst some resumed work in commercial coconut plantations on Guadalcanal, Western Solomon, and Russel in the Central Islands, many passionately engaged in the planting of coconuts during the period locals described as ‘coconut rush’ years, as Uncle Sale described above, resulting in clearance of much of the coastal land today now occupied by family-owned plantations.

Locally, as Uncle Sale narrated and reported in other studies, monoculture coconut plantations have had multiple impacts on the cultural landscape and ecology (Bennett, 2021; Cochrane, 1969). As Uncle Sale recounts, many found romance and married in the home islands where they settled, and their children live today. Like Uncle Sale, many are considered as ‘people who are lost’. That can also be said of the labour trade in Melanesia, that many Malaita men either died or never returned to their people and land. In West Baelelea, as in Malaita, those that have coconut plantations engaged in new forms of economic and livelihood activity, but many more migrated to Honiara and Guadalcanal because, as many have reported, “they could not make money living in the Malaita bush” (Cochrane, 1969, *ibid*, 336) that over the decades Honiara has become the epicentre of business and employment.

Although the family coconut plantations in West Baelelea are small in scale compared to the large commercial plantation establishments, their impacts on the local ecology are notable, if not regrettable, considering the loss of biodiversity and culture. As Haraway (2015) stated: ‘the anthropogenic process that includes agriculture has from the start the greatest planetary terraformers (and reformers)’ (p.159). From my research, I can explain that in Baelelea, the transformation of the native forests, including *ngali* nut plantations, as mentioned in Chapter Two, had widespread implications on the ecology and culture. The transformation of the physical landscape to give way to monoculture coconut plantations and intensive gardening has forced incalculable degradation of the native ecosystems and subsistence land-based livelihoods that formed integral parts of the cultural landscape and history of the territory, as mentioned in Chapter Three.



Figure 35: Transformed landscape occupied by coconut in West Baelelea (January 2022)

The ‘coconut rush’ of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in success in terms of established plantations and the economic profit derived. However, many have caused both ecological and economic setbacks. The pictures in Figure 35 show unproductive coconut plantations occupying the ridge above Arao about one-half kilometre inland today. The setbacks to coconut plantations, as experienced in West Baelelea and Malaita, have revealed the issue of the adoption of cash crops such as coconut, rice, and Teak trees. These are often problematic because the crops are foreign to the local ecosystem and culture. Also, because at that time the people lacked the know-how, skills and knowledge, the impact on the environment was catastrophic.

Bariki and copra activities are associated with coastal communities, but economic and ecological impacts are extensive. For example, historically, the families living in Alafana have been involved in planting some of the *bariki* on the coast. Informants like *Kokokeni* Takarii told me she had worked for free because one of her *maka* (mean uncle) gathered everyone to help clear the land and plant. Because copra sales and market prices are determined by the global market price beyond local control, people have mixed reactions as a means of sustainable income and livelihood. When there is a sudden dive in the market price of copra and high associated costs of production and transport it leads to extreme volatility and a huge frustration for smallholder rural copra producers, resulting in plantations being left unattended, an observed reality in the Solomon Islands (Young & Pelomo, 2014).

In this section, I have discussed examples of the impact of a monoculture coconut plantation on the ecology and cultural landscape that is not unique to West Baelelea. According to observations and stories, the transformative impacts on the ecosystem, culture, and economy are based on subsistence systems and dependence on sustainable use of the forest and land are recounted as regrettable losses. There are also issues of moving from economic wealth based on local crops; for example, taro to coconut has alternated dynamics of the local wealth. It also altered the notion of ‘making a living’ as it has been the new capitalistic motivation to ‘make money’, meaning making a profit and accumulating cash wealth. In the next section, I will describe contemporary ecological changes due to intensive land use in the near coastal areas, but I fear it will get worse due to social factors like population pressure and climate change.

Raraa: Open field garden system

The swidden or shifting cultivation has been the traditional agriculture system and practice of the Baelelea people for many years. An area was cleared, cultivated, and then shifted to a new site while the old site was left to fallow and regenerate. Today, due to the intensification of land use, repetitive planting of the same area has transformed the landscape into *raraa*, an open garden field of repetitive use or short fallow. The features of the *raraa* landscape would constitute grassland and scrub, and a few fruit trees left purposely to provide a shed. My conversation with Obed Luiakana, a father of five children and local Anglican Catechist, who wants to describe himself as a full-time villager and subsistence farmer. He described that the evolution of *raraa* in most cases was due to people repeatedly planting in the same place again and again, that many of the known garden sites on the ridges in the locality are liken *gwau na mai fu sula asi*, meaning “coral rocks on the seashore or the reefs.” This is a subtle description of *raraa*, a common feature observed in West Baelelea, especially near coastal areas, because, as mentioned earlier, the arable land on the coast has been occupied permanently by coconut and cocoa plantations, but also because of population density in the area, as also reported for North Malaita (Spann, 2018). Alternative terms people use for *raraa* are open garden fields, airfields, and *faama* (meaning farm) for intensification of agriculture and land use that, in West Baelelea, like many of the islands in the Solomon Islands responsible for forest loss in the last 40 to 60 years (Bayliss-Smith et al., 2003).

As mentioned above, the coastal arable land is occupied by coconut or intensive land use that further degrades soil nutrients. As Obed also pointed out, the “degradation of the land and soil is due also to lack of respect and people about the land and no management system of using the land”, a subject I will elaborate on in Chapter Six. As Obed further points out, “From my observation, often during long periods of drought, that is when many consider ‘good time’ to clear the land through fire.” As is familiar with people nowadays, “People do this with little or no consideration for the vegetation and that soil is getting poorer. The traditional slash-and-burn agriculture system and practice is about control and management, not reckless burning of the bush as is common nowadays.” From traditional knowledge, rivers and vegetation are part of the land, “our mother”, and therefore, there is culturally appropriate knowledge and systems of clearing and managing the land. As such, it is taken care of like a person because it is considered our ‘earth mother’ that we depend on and survive on for life and sustenance. The transformation of the rich arable land and territories into *raraa*, Obed prescribes, is “like

making our mother naked and humiliated” or, using the words of Edanala, in a deep state of being *inomae*, destitute and helpless.



Figure 36: *Raraa* – open field garden intensification in near-coastal area (January 2022)

As shown in the picture in Figure 36 is open field area intensively cultivated called *raraa* I visited during my fieldwork tours where villages cultivate sweet potato, cassava, and varieties of other crops, as people described are more adaptable to soil mixed conditions and require less labour (Ross, 1977; Spann, 2018). Besides sweet potato and cassava, people plant new crops like peanuts and watermelon, using new farming methods and composting to improve soil conditions. Local terms such as *rao olia*, *garu tesikula*, ‘dig-and-plant, then dig-and-plant’ describe systematic agriculture change and practices. Although crops like sweet potato, cassava, and *edu* are resistant crops and attract economic value, intense cultivation has had implications for the land and food security, as reported for populated regions on Malaita (Ross, 1977, 1978a; Spann, 2018) as people also cultivate to produce a surplus for cash income.

As people’s livelihoods have become increasingly dependent on cash, they have engaged in copra or planting root crops and vegetables like melon to earn cash. Sustaining family livelihoods and ‘making money’ serve as motivations. Another elder explained: “When we come to settle here, the key motivation to clear land is for coconut and to plant a crop, the surplus which is marketed for cash income.” As Tania Li (2014) explained, the insidious way capitalist relations take hold in local places would draw attention to the capitalist relations introduced with coconut plantations and the unique and diverse way these played out locally. For example, capitalist relations emphasise individualism and profit-making. The introduction of coconuts, in which ownership is more family and private, and money derived from them accumulates into the family’s private wealth. There are pushbacks because established coconut

plantations, as in the case of West Baelelea, are planted on tribal land owned by the clan and not private family land, which is a contentious issue.

The drive to make money is not unusual, and money has been part of many societies across time and space. The interest here is the necessity of money, particularly as people negotiate engaging with capitalism while maintaining traditional/subsistence ways of life (McCormack, 2012). What has become common, as Frazer (1993) pointed is how this motivation/necessity to make money has tied up with global capitalist relations of production, export market and the inequality that ensues, in terms of sustained livelihood options and implications on the environment and culture. In the next section, I present the proliferation of planting a particular local crop as an important cash crop.

Edu: giant taro of economic importance.

The ‘giant’ taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*) is called *edu* in Baelelea and, in recent decades, has increasingly become an important crop of economic value that families pursue cultivation in extensive gardens and quantity. The locals I interviewed have mixed reactions to the popularity of *edu*, and strangely, as others have pointed out, the implications on ecology and culture are also a concern. The heightened involvement has also displaced other food crops of cultural importance, namely taro. It has proven to be ecologically resilient and less reliant on external factors. Traditionally, *edu* is considered *faga kada ute aru*, food for the rainy time or standby food, and people resort to it during low taro crop, cyclone, and rainy seasons. Normally, people would plant *edu* in small quantities and specific areas, for example, around a rotten stump; *totoli*, residue from landslides; and *tafu*, household composts that can be easily accessed and harvested when required. Also, *edu* takes two years or more to mature, unlike taro and sweet potato; thus, people generally spend little effort and labour. For example, one informant states: “*Edu* is a crop that we plant and generally forget about it to grow at its own pace and time. We are less reliant on it as a staple food daily.”

The cultural and ecological factors underscore increased *edu* cultivation, as I was told, including less labour involved and local market demand. People plant *edu* in extensive gardens (*asilelea*) because of the less labour involved in planting and maintenance and resilience to climatic change facing subsistence communities, including North Malaita (Bird et al., 2022). Today, in community feasts and events like marriage and church programs, *edu* complements

taro and potato as important root crops. Local demand and economic profit motivate local growers to plant *edu*, and the harvest is sold to people on the coast. Today, it is common to find families and people harvesting ‘baby’ or immature *edu* crop, a practice locals describe as ‘*anigorua*’, eating of baby crop, that also applies to *edu* and other crops. In the following paragraphs, I describe the perception of Baelelea people regarding the local crop and, consequently, ecological issues, including forest degradation, as people cleared new and larger areas to plant *edu*.

The increasingly cultivated crop, *edu* or ‘giant taro’. As the informants in Alafana distinguished the ‘giant taro’ as the name implies, giant taro or taro from the forest.²⁵ The people, although they have a clear distinction between *edu kwasi* (wild variety) and *edu fera* (edible and domesticated variety), the general description of *edu* as food from the forest or giant’s food is to distinguish between the mainstay cultural or ‘true taro’ and *edu* as food from the wild or traditional, not a staple but seasonal or reserve food. In many encounters and conversations with locals in Alafana, people would joke and invite me for a meal by mentioning that “*fanga oh bona*”, meaning ‘giant’s food is what we have.’ Similarly, another would describe “*fanga la gaano bona*”, meaning ‘food from the forest is what we have’ in referring to *edu*, which is fast becoming an important economic and livelihood crop in the village. This depicts the local perception people have of *edu* and its cultural importance. For example, Bedi Takarii, *kokokeni*, my elderly aunt, resented the fact that people and families nowadays are increasingly cultivating and depending on *edu* as a staple food crop, which she viewed as very unusual and has negative implications on culturally important local taro. She also resents that *edu* is steadily replacing *alo inoto*, the native taro of choice and cultural significance passed down from our ancestors. I suppose the planting and reliance on *edu*, as a crop of livelihood and social significance, is not necessarily a bad thing; rather, as most storied accounts, the rapid clearance and level of deforestation in many of the newly established sites for *edu* gardens underpins their primary concern. My documented conversation with a group of Alelengana villagers exposed further insight and context to *edu* and ecological concerns.

As part of a conversation with a group of villagers, I share a dream of massive deforestation of a local taboo site in the territory. As discussed in Chapter Four, dreams

²⁵ In fact, there is wild *edu* (*do kwasi*) and edible *edu* species (*do fera*) that people cultivate. There are stories of people mistakenly harvesting and bringing home wild *edu kwasi* either because of its growth and mixed up with the cultivated crop harvested in their old garden. A scratching or uncomfortable irritation of *edu* is another characteristic people termed and associated *edu* as wild or giant’s food.

underpin Baelelea's ontology and cosmological beliefs. In the dream, I saw the forest in and around A'afu, a principal sacred shrine on the hill, within sight of Alelengana, which was extensively cleared for what looks like a *bariki*, a coconut plantation. I posed and wondered why a *bariki* in the mountain territory at more than 600-metre altitude was unsuited for a coconut crop. Moreover, the dark forest and side are long feared as the *biu abu* (graves) of *akalo mae*, long feared and observed as a restricted taboo where dead ancestors were buried. A person states: "Those from the village down the ridge clear the bush for *edu* and ball cabbage". I hold my fear that a possible attack from the *akalo* is imminent because their sacred home was destroyed and desecrated. Then I woke from sleep only to realise it was a nightmare. Maekolo, the community elder, picks up to comment:

Your dream just revealed what has been happening in and around the area; we can see from here. The foothills lead towards the gorge, all cleared and planted with large gardens of *edu*. I said good on them. They have the energy to plant food for their families' consumption and income. But it is sad to see the vast forests cut and left to rot on the ground. Now, we have started to wander far for timber. I can imagine the future.

Then Edna, Maekolo's wife, cuts in with her story:

Our cousins from the nearby settlement, *nga asilelea* ('open field like the ocean', meaning huge garden). Sam and Suna, their *edu nga'asilelea* (huge garden). Good, that is the source of their family's income and money. But the *kwene* (dense forest or jungle) all finished and planted with *edu* gardens. The areas in Kilui are all finished. The remaining forests are the ones we can see, but the rest are cut and rotted to the ground.

Increased planting of *edu*, as experience shows, brings to question the issue of new farming practices and deforestation. New and large areas, including *kwene*, densely forested areas, were cleared to make way for the planting of *edu*, which contributed to the degradation of native forests and biodiversity loss. For example, *Maka* Faiau, an Alelengana elder, during the conversation revealed that:

People have 'finished' the area down the hill. I can tell from the smoke from the area and the noise of trees falling daily.... The territory has never been gardened before during our time, or that I was told. At least during our time, the forest leading to

kwataragoa (river gorge) was reserved for hunting. Today, people have no second thoughts about where to cultivate and the forests.

Good, they make extensive *edu* gardens to feed *rurukale* (many children) and *todado* (income), but people need to considerate and concentrate to proper garden areas. To destroy and indiscriminately clear forested areas for gardens, as people did to the many forested areas for coconut in the last few years, we need to learn from it now. The Madalua River Gorge is the last reserve area. Also, people needed to garden where they were supposed to, not on land and near *gwe biu* (burial sites) belonging to people of the land. Many of us live on this land from goodwill. We have benefited much from Buroki since the days of our forefathers. Further down along the Madalua River, the river is getting small and dry, all because all the forests were cut, and land cleared for huge gardens and coconuts.

Maekolo, 75 years old tribal elder, continues:

The place you refer to is all finished I passed the place a few times recently and was surprised to see level land clearance and felling to once undisturbed forests. The huge *Akwa* and *Vata* trees axed to the ground and spoiled. That is the work of *edu* and *seleni* (cash). Nowadays, I am very concerned about the value of our forest resources. Sometimes, we can be ignorant and careless, but other times, we should be wise and do things purposefully. The economic value of one tree is millions of dollars. In our communities, we wandered far into the forest to cut timber for our houses. In the future years, the younger generations will find it hard. People should practice responsible farming that does not damage the land and forest. Also, we have lived here on this land for many generations, since the time of our ancestors, and we benefited from Buroki land. Therefore, we need to care for the resources on the land in that way. The heads of this land, I say, are very kind to us. We must show them respect by not destroying forests and things on the land.

As described above, *edu* crops have become an important source of subsistence livelihoods and cash income from selling harvest crops at the local market. Traditionally, *edu* was considered a 'forest crop', but today, people intensively cultivate it because, unlike taro and yam, it is adaptable and considered an easy crop to cultivate and vastly popular at community-organised feasts in the place of taro. In Alafana, the people are more concerned about the extensive

clearance of forested areas and environmental threats associated with farming extensive gardens of *edu*. This is reflected in shared views that *edu* like coconut, cocoa, and nowadays kava are important cash crops. However, consideration should not solely be about ‘making money’, but sustainable and manageable gardening practices and that reserved forests located, for example, close to the streams, should never be cleared for gardening and money.

The giant taro or *edu* is adaptable to varied climatic conditions. As recent experiences show, even in the interior bush, it has grown so well that people from the bush that I have spoken with expressed is not usual. Informants have observed and conveyed to me that *edu* was common to the coastal area, but recently, in the interior bush like Faeniwata and Masilana, planting of *edu* has had good results. Informants from Masilana like Cousin Maeta and Faeniwata elder Rex Auto revealed that in recent years, accompanying ecological change people in the highland communities increasingly plant *edu*, which in the past was only familiar to *sifole* and coastal areas. Cousin Maeta, a 55-year-old male highland subsistence farmer, recounts his experience and observation during our conversation:

Today, *la tolo* (mountain bush) is experiencing big changes.... The crops that used to grow well up here are no longer growing well. Moreover, crops that never grew well here before are now growing well. A fine example is *edu*, which is common in coastal areas, but they are growing well today. In the past, if you planted them in the bush, they gave only a couple of leaves, and that was it. The leaves wilt and die. The growth in the bush is good and fast, and the taste and smell are very inviting, too. I thought to myself that the world had changed and was getting the opposite. I have noticed that the environment, trees, and weather patterns are unpredictable.

The focus here is on ecological changes that, as recounted by informants like Maeta and others, are based on the observed vegetation and crops and their perception of the world. It could also be pointed out that assumptions by locals of the ‘world has changed and is getting opposite’ exemplify the broader cosmological and metaphysical understandings interwoven with ecological change and degradation that fit within evangelical/Pentecostal eschatology and ideas of the end times (Macdonald, 2021b) This is particularly true considering the people of Alafana, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, are evangelical Christians. Historical exposure and experience in the revival in the 1970s still have a bearing on people’s beliefs on the end times, which are aligned with global issues that continue to inform and shape local narratives.

From observation of the level of deforestation and ‘drying up’ of some bush streams and rivers, informants like Edanala and Maekolo, quoted earlier, have pointed to the consequential impacts of upland gardening that have intensified more than before. However, by scale less severe than in near coastal areas as described earlier, most places have turned into *raraa*. Environmental issues of deforestation, soil erosion and polluted rivers resulting from farming of steep and forest islands are issues of global concern and in the Pacific, especially Melanesia countries (Wenger et al., 2018). In Malaita inland communities such as Alafana, although *edu* as a new cash crop does not occupy the land permanently as coconut and cocoa do, large forest areas often close to rivers like Madalua and Kwaibala, as reported by locals, have equal ecological impacts and destruction. I was informed by research participants that rivers like “Madalua are getting dried and lifeless”, meaning living organisms in the river are either unsustainably harvested or finished due to monoculture coconut plantations and *edu* farming in the headwater areas. The *edu* crop, unlike taro and yam, took two years or more to harvest, which locals considered as the first stage of transforming the landscape into *raraa*, thus supporting similar experience and argument that slash-and-burn cultivation “although potentially sustainable, was increasingly seen as the first stage in a more permanent clearance of forest” (Bayliss-Smith et al., 2003, p. 346). In the next section, I will describe contemporary ecological changes to agroforest ecology, the local fruit tree of cultural and livelihood significance and the introduction of trees of economic value and impact on the ecology and landscape.

Teak a ‘million-dollar tree’.

I mentioned in Chapter Two that *ngali* nut is an important tree of cultural and traditional economic value in Baelelea society. Today in as observed and being told, many of the *ngali* nut plantations have, over the years, been deforested. This was deliberately done to clear the land to establish coconut plantations as evident with extensive transformed landscape occupied by coconut owned by families. Kokokeni Takari recounted to me that the place called Ngalilumu on the coast was a large *ngali* plantation but cleared in the 1960s to make way for the coconut plantations. Today, local informants like Kokokeni Takarii have raised concern that introduction of monoculture coconut and cash has prevented many from common usage and ownership of the land and common properties on the land, including the ecological damage caused on the land and rivers.

I was part of a group conversation when villagers in Alelengana raised the issue of deforestation of *ngali* nut to clear the land for coconut plantations, as mentioned above, but also for local timber and the construction of canoes, as trees for timber have become scarce. One of the men points out to us, saying: “Today, if you want *ngali* or *kata* (mashed taro and *ngali* pudding), harvest them from the walls of your houses or harvest them from because our *ngali* nut trees are floating at sea.” He was referring to what is considered a tragedy of cutting down most of the *ngali* nut trees as an easy source of local timber. And logs are used to make dug-out canoes used by local fishermen. The deforestation and decline of the *ngali* nut and other native trees of cultural and livelihood importance are considered a tragedy. It was also pointed out that the decline in the population of local birds, *bola or kuru kuru* (pigeon) and *futoo* (opossums) that in the past were abundant is attributed to the deforestation of native fruit trees, particularly the *ngali* nut tree. The experienced ecological threats imposed by anthropogenic activities mentioned above, from the clearing of land for monoculture coconut plantation and heightened cultivation of *edu*, depict the contemporary ecological and cultural changes perpetuated by capitalist agriculture, which globally and in the Pacific is a cause of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss (Bennett, 2021; Haraway, 2015; Thaman, 2002). The following section is concerned with an introduced teak tree, which, like coconut, is intended for the export market.

West Baelelea local tree growers, like growers elsewhere in Malaita and in the Solomon Islands, the introduction of teak as part of the government rural reforestation program, the major attraction is making money, in millions, through the export market (Vigulu et al., 2017). The decade of the 2000s is locally known as the period of the ‘teak rush’ because of heightened local interests in teak tree growing, which also attracted involvement by people in Alafana to aggressively pursue the planting of teak. The teak, as the tree is of high-quality timber and high economic value on the export market in Solomon Islands, “drove such a wild engagement” (Vigulu et al., 2017, p. 135). In West Baelelea, the teak growers, mostly men, have become too fantasised and propagated messages that the teak was a “million-dollar” tree. The heightened interest and wild engagement resulted in tree growers clearing and cutting down coconut and cocoa trees to plant teak plantations instead. Others integrated teak with coconut plantations, but many others cleared new areas where teak was planted in new plantations.



Figure 37: Cocoa and teak plantation in Alelengana (January 2022)

The introduction and cultivation of teak as a new cash plant of high economic value, according to informants, has had a great rush and fanfare involvement and effects on the environment. The teak attracted forged an imagination and narrative of ‘economic wealth’ that further exposed people’s vulnerability to capitalism. For example, it was common for some people to imagine and spread tales saying that overseas millionaires backed teak trees and schemes. The scheme was sponsored by millionaires who were responsible for the supply of seedlings and the government's introduction of teak in the Solomon Islands. After five years of planting, competing overseas buyers will come to appraise the teak plantations, and by ten years, the trees will be harvested, and local tree owners will be instant millionaires. In such a way, the teak heightened involvement and imagination of million-dollar profits carries a ‘false economy’ and elements of cargo cult mentality that I argued only depict a new ‘form of dispossession forged by capitalism’ (Harvey, 2017; West, 2016) both ideologically and heightened local engagement in introduced capitalist projects tailored towards export markets.

In the past, and during fieldwork in 2021, I heard people share their frustration and disgruntlement with the teak tree. The teak is found to be very invasive and has strange characteristics. For example, like many others, agitated big matron Ednaliko shared her thoughts about the tree with us. In the locality, several people have planted teak, including Jon, the son of Ednaliko, who planted and owned two patches of several hundred trees located about five hundred metres from the village. According to Ednaliko:

Teak trees spoiled and occupied our land. I see it with the teak Jon planted; they occupy our garden space and suck up and eat all the ‘good things’ (i.e., nutrients), leaving the soil dry and poor. I was against teak when they first planted. But they keep ignoring me and telling me: ‘This tree is money; after five years, we will be millionaires. Overseas millionaires will come to buy off our trees in millions.’ Now, it is more than 20 years, but the trees are still standing, there is no buyer to buy them, and some have died. They are ‘spoiling our good land areas and soil. I have seen some swampy areas where the teak is planted; the whole swamp and wetland just dried up. Teak is a useless tree to us; its leaves are just big, like an umbrella for no good use. I see where they grow; all other trees and weeds never have a chance of survival. That is why Teak spoiled our land and a bad tree.

The stories of the teak trees, like the coconut plantations, have notable impacts on the ecosystem. This, according to local research findings, is attributed to the fast growth and high absorption of nitrogen by its roots (Vigulu et al., 2017, p. 140). In Baelelea, locals described the teak as a “selfish tree” because, as experience has shown, where the teak is planted, its fast growth and absorption of nutrients outcompete, displace, and deprive the native plant species. The broad teak leaves and canopy also deprived the undergrowth of much-needed sunlight and, therefore, truly altered the ecosystem. Teak, unlike *ngali* and the native fruit trees that attract birds and insects to flock to, feed and nest. The Teak tree is strangely disconnected from humans, the native trees, birds, and animals, bringing new dynamics of thoughts and dispossession, as mentioned above. The teak tree has become an important tree for local timber and firewood, as I have observed over the years and during my fieldwork in Alafana. It would positively serve the same function that local native trees have for generations. I understand that milling and market arrangements for teak timber are being pursued. In Alafana, as Ednaliko perceived, teak has occupied garden sites and best it is milled for local timber instead of *ngali*, our tree of cultural and economic importance, as explained elsewhere in the thesis.

Summary

In the chapter, I have discussed the contemporary ecological changes imposed by capitalist schemes, starting with the coconut and cocoa in the 1960s and the recent introduction of the teak trees and heightened cultivation of local crops to mitigate food security issues and as a critical means of cash-earning. The narrated cases and examples are not unique to Alafana and West Baelelea but to Malaita and global issues of concern for the loss of biodiversity and cultures. In West Baelelea, the people have increasingly been exposed to and engaged in new capitalist projects that often drive wild engagement, resulting in uncontrolled alteration and disturbance of the native ecosystem in the pursuit of imagined financial projects. According to many informants, the quest to ‘make money’ should be superseded by the notion of ‘making a living’ and consciousness about the environment and sustainable living. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the socio-cultural dynamics of capitalism, colonial history and globalisation on the culture and indigenous way of life.

Chapter Six: Societal Changes

Introduction

The primary focus of the chapter is culture change and social transformation in West Baelelea and the focal research locality of Alafana. This chapter describes the research participants' description and perspective of social-cultural changes on cultural values and local knowledge of land and agriculture farming practices due to the intrusion of capitalist ideologies and motivations. The historical contact and influences of myriads of forces including christianity, colonialism, and capitalism, have forced new ways and cultures that people in Alafana now adopt in their belief systems and livelihood systems. The chapter is organised in four sections. The first section describes the types of changes that people perceive in general. The second section describes the changes in cultural values concerning the environment. The third section describes the dynamics around agriculture knowledge and practices. The last section describes the lifestyle changes and perceptions of locals related to processed and imported foods and the implications for local village diet and culture.

Biranga falu: new culture and ways

Culture is not static but dynamic and changes, forged by externally and internally generated forces and factors. Whilst internally generated changes may be gradual, the externally generated or even imposed changes can be considerable and transformative, having lasting impacts on society and the environment (Sillitoe, 2000, p. 3). In contemporary Baelelea society, the externally generated and introduced cultural change and lifestyles are collectively described as *biranga falu*, meaning new culture and lifestyles considered the opposite of *biranga* or *kastom*. Informants pointed to multiple external agencies, including colonisation, missionisation, and capitalism, as discussed in Chapter Five, as the major drivers of social and cultural changes. From stories by informants and observation, there have been positive changes, for example, modern education and services. At the same time, my informants described the negative impacts these external forces had on the local culture and the environment. These included changes that resulted in loss of cultural knowledge, for example, and loss of forest

food systems, medicinal plants, and historical or spiritual connection people have with a particular forest grove. According to my research, this underscores the significance of the cultural and environmental losses, invoking a sense of concern.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, in societies like Baelelea, kinship and clan-based relations defined social connections to land and the clan. As people become engaged in capitalist and new forms of economic systems, they become more individualistic and profit-oriented, thereby undermining and eroding kinship values, social structure and traditional ways of life that people defined as *biranga* or *kastom*. The people collectively refer to the indigenous ways and values as *biranga kolu*, which means 'our culture and ways', or *biranga i nao mai*, 'the culture and ways passed down from our ancestors.' These traditional cultural values include held norms and values, kinship and land relations, traditional knowledge and skills, ethics, and respect for others and the environment. Christianity and colonialism (Akin, 1993; Akin, 2013; Burt, 1994b) and new technologies, for example, the mobile phone and the internet, have influenced and shaped the social and cultural lives of people, as observed. I mentioned mobile phone, which, according to informants and from observation has had a profound impact and transformation of the communicative landscape and, more so, the social and lifestyles of rural villagers in the studied community by youths spending time on the phone than gardening, as Hobbis (2017) also pointed out in his research in north Malaita's Lau coastal communities on social behaviours and moral issues.

In Baelelea, the people have labelled changes associated introduction and influence of christianity described as '*biranga sukulu*' or '*biranga lotu*'. Additionally, there is the concept of '*biranga araikwao*', which refers to the culture and ways of the 'white man' or westernisation (specifically European influence, as the term '*biranga waku*' is used to describe Chinese influence in matters related to money and business). Another term is '*biranga aeasi*', which denotes culture and lifeways common in other islands. These include those introduced, for example, during labour trade recruitment to overseas and on other islands and nowadays in urban environments like Honiara. These definitions of social and cultural change often overlap. To facilitate clear discussion, in the following sections, this text will focus on the three concepts of '*biranga sukulu*', '*biranga araikwao*', and '*biranga aeasi*'.

Biranga sukulu: Ways of Christians

Since the arrival of christianity and missionisation on Malaita, the resultant impact and proliferation of church communities have had the most significant influence on society and culture, apart from the colonial administration (Hilliard, 1969; Hogbin, 1969; Moore, 2017). In Baelelea, the SSEC is a popular and dominant presence in the communities, being the first mission to gain a foothold on Malaita, followed by the Anglican Melanesian Mission (Hilliard, 1969, 1974). The SSEC has its roots in the Queensland sugarcane labour trade and attributed success on the island of Malaita by local labour returnees, amongst them Peter Ambu'ofa (Hilliard, 1969; Moore, 2017). Similarly, the Anglican Melanesian Mission trained Malaita boys on Norfolk Island, and their return to Malaita established Anglican mission centres around the island (Moore, 2017; Ross, 1978b). Although there was rivalry and competition between the missions for converts and dominance (Ross, 1978b), there also existed co-existence and understanding as reflected in the case of Malu'u (a dominant SSEM settlement) and its nearby Anglican community (Hilliard, 1969; Hogbin, 1969). This is very much because the converts were close relatives or from the same clan, as also reflected in Alafana, despite families affiliated to different denominations, on the level of clan and family ties, they remained as part of the community.

The provision of basic literacy and bible reading classes, disguised as 'schools ', in central Christian centres was a significant factor in attracting young men (and later girls) to these missions (Hogbin, 1969, p. 178). In Malaita's northwest coast, Fo'ondo served as a major SSEM centre with a 'school' that catered to the nearby Christian villages, including those in West Baelelea. Modern institutions like education, namely primary and secondary schools, like the church today in Baelelea, are well-established institutions in villages that include inland localities like Alafana that ensure children access modern education. Schools, however, today, are mostly administered by the government.

The West Baelelea inland territory, now known as Alafana, was one of the last areas to be missionised as late as the 1970s. From then on, the Church's conquest was complete, with its presence established both on the coast and in the inland bush through Christian villages like Alelengana, Faeniwata, and Masilana for SSEC and Marokafo for the Anglican Melanesian Mission. This profound cultural shift, brought about by Christianity, was described by locals as '*sukulu e fula na ka sifolongana na tolona Malaita*, meaning 'the church has arrived and

brought down the mountains of Malaita'. This refers to the total conversion of mountain tribes to Christianity and their migration to the coastal Christian villages. The exceptions to this coastal migration are the villagers in Alelengana and Faeniwata. These converts chose to establish permanent Christian villages in the bush, which, over the years, have had a transformative impact on the cultural landscape and ways, according to informants. For instance, during my fieldwork, Alelengana elder *Maka* Faiau recounted the history of Alelengana village.

It has been 50-plus years since we came from the hands of *akalo* (ancestor ghost) to Christianity to establish Alelengana, and we have lived here since. It was a long time and about three generations ago. During our heathen days, we moved places after a few years. We did not live in one place that long for various reasons. We moved places on the will of *akalo*. My father, as *wane ni foa* (traditional priest), was very sensitive to the will of *akalo*. Any strange experience like a crying bird, a dream, or death, he would announce, "Oh, we need to vacate this place. The *akalo* is displeased with this place" When we abandoned the mountain, we moved to settle in Alelengana. This place has become a permanent home. I see it as the will of God and his divine calling that we come to live here. The people who are head of the land also permitted us to live here. That is why I say our living is more founded. Even though relatives come and go and there was some social breakdown over the years, we hardly abandoned this place for good. Because Alelengana is the spiritual foundation and historic place as the first Christian settlement in the bush before Faeniwata, Masilana, and other Christian settlements. The local pioneer missionaries served here and offered many important prayers that made this place permanent.



Figure 38: Faeniwata SSEC Church in Baelelea bush (April 2021)

As reflected in the above quote and from observation in Alafana, the transformation has been that, apart from abandoning traditional religion, people have discovered and found a more permanent footing and new cultural identity in the church. This is defined in terms of a permanent village site and a permanent church building, as depicted by the picture in Figure 38. Many of my informants also expressed that it is the way for Christians to join fellow believers living together in the same villages as opposed to isolated inland family hamlets. The permanency of the village and structure also reflects the material transformation that accompanied the cultural change and the new economic obligation to build a permanent church house with imported modern materials. Often, people committed time and resources to build the church house before anything else, considering that spiritual foundation as fundamental, as Maka Faiau alluded to above.

In Alafana, although the people are living and dependent on their ancestral land, much has changed culturally. As Burt (1994b) writes about Kwara'ae abandoning the source of traditional wealth (*mamana*) associated with the taro tradition, similarly in Alafana, the conversion of people to Christianity has forced new ways and values that have seen the traditions lost. This is because it was thought that moral codes and cultural values are said to be associated with the old religion of the ancestors (Burt, 1994b; Robbins, 2004). Also, in the neighbouring To'abaita, Hogbin (1969) writes that "The chief disadvantage of Christianity found in Malaita is that it gives no real substitute for the old festivals, and more particularly,

that it has no bearing on native economic activities” (p. 227). The biggest observed cultural change and transformation is with the Church programs and events that have become part of the lifeworld of the villagers. Evening and morning prayers and Sunday Service have become the order of a Christian village that families and individuals are expected to attend to show the way of biranga *sukulu*. To fail, by way of non-attendance or living a life of a backslider, someone who draws back from committed involvement in the church. This could be like going back to smoking or involved in bride-price which is against SSEC doctrine and agreement set based on ‘free marriage’ or minimum standard of *three tafuliae* (Hilliard, 1969) that today the church strictly upholds. Active participation in church prayers and programs is an expectation of being a Christian and living in a Christian community.

Organised church religious programs and events also forged a new cultural meaning and expressions in contemporary Baelelea. For example, organised church programs and feasts which often locals’ contrast or describe as *maoma* (traditional feast as in the past) or as *maoma sukulu*, meaning Christian feasts. The villagers in Alafana celebrate with feasts on the universally marked days in the Christian calendar such as Easter and Christmas, which are often incorporated with village events like marriage and dedication of a household's newly completed permanent house. Also, as observed over the years and during my fieldwork, the important day for the villages nowadays is Saints Day (as for the Anglican communities) or Church Memorial Day (for the SSEC communities). The local church Saint Day or Memorial Day is often a commemoration day marked when the village's local church building was consecrated. The villagers would do advance preparation to host the church’s important day calendar attended by neighbouring villages and invited clergy of the church, such as local priests and pastors. During the occasion, local history of founding fathers and the first church building would form the narrative shared as part of the service to reinforce their beliefs and their place in the community of believers.



Figure 39: Marokafo Saint John the Baptist Anglican Church program (June 2021)

In a Christian community, spiritual commitment to one's church includes attendance at prayer sessions or meetings daily or weekly programs. Families often hold regular prayer sessions in their homes with close family members. This defines *biranga sukulu*, and non-adherence would be considered *oliburi* (going back to the world or past life, to mean backsliding), which is a spiritual concern for clergy and church elders. Different church congregations, including those from other denominations, would often attend religious programs, as witnessed during Saint Day at Marokafo village in June 2021. The introduced religious rules and codes of social conduct, for example, food, dressing and music, as well as ritual behaviours and etiquette such as marriage, death, and religious events, vary across different church denominations groups. In Baelelea, as elsewhere in Malaita and Solomon Islands, the degree to which different denominational groups affect *kastom* varied and generally, religious presence and control exercised over the community and individual behaviours and in leadership and development (Pollard, 2006; Scheyvens, 2003) are substantial and more popular than the presence of government.

Another point that needs underscoring is that in the local context and across the different denominations, *biranga sukulu* is not uniform. The human values and principles of love, kindness, peace, respect, joy, and patience are biblically defined as "fruit of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23); they are well defined as underscoring *biranga sukulu* or *biranga lotu*.

However, denominational groups show different stances in regard to *kastom* and cultural ways and activities. For instance, the popular and fundamentalist SSEC and SDA primarily take a more radical stance on cultural activities, including bride price and betelnut chewing (Cochrane, 1969; Hilliard, 1969). This also reflects in the prohibition of local delicacies like opossums, freshwater eel, and pork by SDA adherents as it is not *biranga sukulu* to eat such food. Unlike in SSEC and SDA communities, the Anglican communities have some degree of tolerance to aspects of cultures, including traditional dances and the use of cultural artefacts and symbols in decorations and utilities.

The issue and culture of bride price, however, remained a contentious issue even amongst people of the same denomination, namely SSEC, as in the past (Frazer, 1981; Hogbin, 1969) and today as being informed. From my research, informants recounted the early converts who joined SSEC later switched denominational affiliation to join the Anglicans because of the strict conditions on marriage and the condemnation of bride price. The mission's hardline stand on bride price payment is viewed as going against the long-held cultural tradition of bride wealth. The subject of bride price is outside the scope of this thesis, and it is only highlighted here to illustrate cultural change and as an ongoing social and cultural issue in the West Baelelea communities. The locals often, at times, generalise and interchangeably use *biranga sukulu* and *biranga aeasi*- culture and ways overseas, meaning as though the same phenomena. In the next section, I will elaborate on the latter.

Biranga aeasi: Culture and Lifeways Overseas

Biranga aeasi has drowned our ways and culture. See the tall boys just laze around the community with music boxes and mobile phones in their hands and a funny haircut (*Maka Faiau*, May 2021)

In the village, what is considered foreign ways or lifestyle is defined as *biranga aeasi*, that supposedly undermines and replaces the way of culture and *kastom*. For example, as observed, even in rural villages, the girls wear shorts and boys' saggy pants. This copied lifestyle, according to informants, is strange in the village and ways or fashion common in urban environments like Honiara and seen on social media. The copied social behaviours are condemned as they are against and undermine the acceptable village lifestyle. It is also worth noting that in contemporary village environments like in Alafana, what is considered

acceptable norms and moral values are a mixture of culture and Christian standard cultural codes. An example is decent dressing for girls, which in an SSEC village, it is expected that girls wear a long dress, and people define this as *kastom*. In contemplating culture change and internalisation of foreign ways, one of the informants commented: “*biranga aeasi e lulagi kolu,*” which is translated to mean 'the overseas lifestyle has drowned our local ways' or to put it another way, the introduced and adopted is overwhelming and undermining the local culture.

The exposure to the urban environment of Honiara and also through social media and the internet has had significant social and cultural implications. Hobbis (2017) stated that the impacts of mobile phone telecommunication in Malaita rural communities have both temporal and spatial implications on the social and moral behaviours of locals. People have become connected to the outside world, at the same time less connected and have lost interest in traditional means of communication and face-to-face relationships. In Alafana, from observation and stories by informants, the mobile phone has taken up time as people are becoming attached to their phones as a means of entertainment, thus significantly reducing time to engage in gardening activities, for example. Talking to my aunt, Kokokeni Takarii, she raised the concern that today, “people just watch and play all kinds of games on the phone. Even when kids are hungry, they will say, “Wait, your food is not ready. Their hands were too engaged with the phone instead of the pot.” Lifestyle change, according to informants, reflects contemporary culture change, the people speak of as time and the world has changed.

In the rural communities in Baelelea, such as Alafana, people view youths as lazy or too focused on leisure instead of engaging in subsistence agriculture, which is an essential cultural activity in the village. Many locals complain that the younger generation is not willing to work the land and prefers to live in towns and cities, where they can earn wages and salaries. This trend is seen as the result of capitalism, which encourages people to pursue money over sustenance. Some youths are willing to work for cash to buy imported food, especially rice. The interviewed elders and youths both agreed that rice is "easy food", and with money, one can buy rice. In the village, however, it is expected that everyone contributes to the garden work, hunting, and fishing for family consumption. Furthermore, parents often reprimand their children, reminding them not to be lazy and to depend on others for free food. In contrast to Honiara, where people become unemployed, in the village, no one should be unemployed unless people do not want to put their hands to the ground and work for their food and money.

Biranga araikwao: ways of white man

Besides what is defined as *biranga aeasi* is the term *biranga araikwao*, meaning ‘ways and lifestyle of ‘whiteman’, meaning European or a westernised lifestyle (Bashkow, 2017; Jacka, 2007). The term *araikwao* can be traced to have its roots in the early contact with white Europeans in the coconut plantations and the Melanesian labour trade. This came with recruited Melanesians being epitomised as black, hence the scheme ‘black birding’ (Moore, 2017). Later the white missionaries and colonial administrators brought the culture and lifestyle locals described as *biranga araikwao*. In the recent decades, *biranga araikwao*, which includes the language (e.g. English or pidgin locals exposed to) at schools and in the Honiara and urban centres like Auki that contrasts and conflicts with what people define as *biranga* or *kastom*. Generally, for the villagers in West Baelelea and my informants in Alafana, *biranga araikwao* relates to the lifestyle that is dictated by cash and labouring for a cash wage. For the informants in Alafana, like Diake and Rex quoted in Chapter Seven, although cash is now critical in the mixed-economic system today, people still see a difference between working for a wage and planting one’s garden and crop and selling to earn cash income.

Often, the villagers would describe to me that with *biranga araikwao*, there is no free food. Everything is money: you pay for water and the toilet, plus toilet paper to use. This contrasts with what they see in the village, where people cultivate the land for free and where fresh water from the streams is piped to the village. Making a profit and being successful in a small business undertaking in the village is often described by people as “*e araikwao nao ne*” or ‘*e waku na ne*’, which people took as a light joke meaning ‘He’s like a Whiteman or Chinese businessman now’. Those who operate wholesale and retail businesses in Honiara and Auki are thought to be very strict and diligent with money. It has become common that young people are less willing to offer their labour unless they are promised a financial reward. At times when the next of kin asked for assistance, for example, to help clear the land for a garden or repair a leaky roof, someone may immediately inquire about payment or excuse themselves for being too busy. This shift towards a cash-based system has affected the community's traditional values, as Gidi, a community elder, recounted.

Today, new ways and ways of *araikwao* have overtaken us, forcing many to become lazy working in their garden; they just want to labour for someone to earn a wage. Youths today, if any task that they can earn quick money, they will be willing and

always alert to do, but to make their garden or help their parents, it is almost an impossibility to get their hands dirty. Many more frequent Honiara only to become '*masta liu*,²⁶

Money and labour wages, are define ways of *araikwao* associated with urban life and the main attraction to urban centres and the city like Honiara which become the centre for business and government administration followed the Second World War (Frazer, 1981). Prior to that Malaita's earlier contact and engagement was in the plantation labour, initially to Fiji and Queensland but also to other islands where white European own and manage coconut plantations (Akin, 2013; Moore, 2017). After the war, as mentioned in Chapter Five the coconut plantation industries were severely impacted and there was also a shift to village smallholder coconut plantation schemes that become popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Honiara, a thriving town also absorbed the skilled and unskilled labour and had attraction to youths for education and employment. An opportunity that attracted some of the interviewed informants like Maekolo, Diro and my father who in the 1980s worked as stevedore at the Honiara Port and prior to that in the 1960s he worked in coconut plantations on Isabel and Bilua in the Western Province. Many more in Baelelea and Malaita were drawn to working in coconut plantations on other islands in the Western province, Island province, and Russell in the Central Islands province prior to independence in the 1970s and therefore after in the 1980s and early 1990s. Today, Honiara is the single major urban attraction as government and business are centralised thus causing major rural-urban push factor despite experiencing high unemployment and social issues (Hooper, 2021). The rural villages on Malaita, from my knowledge are left mostly with elderly and children population.

I narrate this to provide the context and exposure from which *biranga araikwao* or *biranga aeasi* people expose and adopted historically and today in Baelelea. In the next section, I describe cultural changes with respect and orientation to the environment based on the local perspective.

²⁶ *Masta liu* is a term used or associated with unemployed youths on Honiara Streets. Although the arguments presented in work by Jourdan (1995) suggest that Masta Liu is a negative term applied to young people due to their inability to gain employment, and linger on the streets, the opinion of young people would suggest the term itself does provide them with some sense of something different. Generally, people use it to describe being without a permanent paid job.

Disrespect shown towards the environment.

What I see today that is different in the young people, compared to those of us growing up in those days under strict knowledge and ways taught by our fathers and older people is that many lack respect and knowledge of *kastom* and the ways of our ancestors. I grew up with my *maka* (father), who begot me, and other *maka* (uncles or elders) in the 'bush'; they taught us ways we constantly learn and live by. They taught us that when you walk along the track, keep your hand to yourself. Do not cut the trees along the path and the bush for no good reason. Today, I see that the shade trees along the bush track are carelessly axed down or bear huge scars caused by people who passed by. Trees along the path provide necessary shade and protect the ground from eroding. Many have stood for generations. Today, the inland mountain tracks have no tree protection from the sun and rain. The paths were muddy as soil eroded and overgrown by grass.

The bush is the same. Parents would warn us to be careful and only accompany elders on hunting trips.... Kids are not supposed to wander in the bush by themselves. Today, youths do not fear anything and wander by themselves in the bush. What they do is very uncontrolled and degrading to the land and bush. Some days, I heard trees axed and fall to the ground for no apparent reason. Just a pure spoiling and destruction of the forest. That is their new way of hunting or setting fire to the bush. There is no control and respect of many traditional hunting grounds and bush streams. Even worse is the use of chemicals to trap and kill prawns and life in the streams and rivers. For us, our *maka* always reminded us to manage ourselves by managing what we do on the land, and you will eat in dignity. These days people do anything without asking or listening to good advice. Their disrespect and no care attitude; maybe they think they know everything better than us (Faeniwata community elder, 60 years old, Betaofa, April 2021).

The perspective by Betaofa highlights growing concern about people lacking consciousness and understanding about the environment and the values culturally attached and defined by interconnectedness as mentioned in Chapter Four. This is partly because, as Betaofa pointed out the children nowadays spend less time in the company of their parents in the gardens, as many spend more time and days attending school and leisure activities. A similar phenomenon was noted by Hviding (1996) in the Marovo communities in Western Province. In that case it was the loss of traditional fishing knowledge by young people, largely attributed to the many

years young people spent in schools, away from home and away from the opportunity to participate in practical skills. As explained in Chapter Four, in Baelelea cosmology, the land is embodied as the 'earth mother' because it provides essential local building materials and food to improve lives (Kwa'ioloa & Burt, 2001).

Rather than adhering to traditional cultural values and a society that respects nature, modern culture has introduced new lifestyles resulting in what elders I have interviewed described as *to ruru*, meaning 'living a mixed and deplorable life.' In Alafana, children often engage in activities like river spearfishing or gathering food in the forest at the finish of their school days. Whilst it is good to engage in such forest hunting experiences, not being accompanied by parents and adults, many I have interviewed like the big matron Ednaliko find concerning. In her frustration over what she observed some kids doing after school, Ednaliko voiced her complaints during a stopover on her way to her house.

Very bad what some kids done along the path today when returning from school. I cannot tell them by name because I didn't see any of them. Coming past bush track to the school, some kids played and cut all the young bamboo along the path. Very bad and careless kids. I wonder if the parents taught them or the teachers at school. Someone needs to tell the teachers to warn the school children to stop; those resources are for our use, and bamboo is dangerous; otherwise, it will cut them.

Today, according to my informants, traditional knowledge about the environment has been lost because young people, beside those attending schools socialise around different activities. For example, sports that are less connected to traditional chores like gardening and hunting that are closely connected to the environment and where traditional knowledge can be taught and practised. As highlighted in Chapter Five, those that participate in hunting and food gathering of local delicacies from the forest and rivers are exploitative as I was informed and that made the elders concerned. It was a concern going forward with regards to the traditional knowledge, about the environment and *ainimae* or *kastom* stories. Maekolo, the Alelengana elder, like other informants shared concerned of about loss of oral historical and environmental knowledge.

This land we live on is very rich with oral history and stories of the past. Only a few people like us keep the stories alive. When we die, it is finished. Not many are interested in knowing and asking about the name of this hill, valley, plant, and animal and their different purposes. Everything on the land, rivers, groves, and stone, have their stories,

not recorded in books but in people's memory. Maybe I should come and teach 'culture' and the different uses of plants in the schools. But that is not enough; the simple approach is to go out in the bush and see, touch, and learn. That way, it will live in one's memory for life.

Maekolo and my aunt Kokokeni Takarii, whom I have quoted elsewhere in the thesis, are considered traditional knowledge keepers. In discussing cultural change, my aunt Takarii laments the loss of many aspects of essential cultural knowledge, including the culture of respect for nature, which she attributes to the influence of Christianity in forging new ideas and relations. She pointed out that the new ideas and relations displaced our traditional wealth associated with taro (i.e., *mamana ana alo*) and fish (*mamanu ana ia*) that underscore our clan's traditional wealth. For instance, *mamanu ana ia*, a spiritually gifted spirit power associated with fish, is historically associated with Siubongi, from which her maternal great-grandparent descended. However, *mamamu* has been displaced today, because according to her, "*sukulu ne na gaa*," meaning 'the church had spoiled it.' I asked how and why, and she replied: "Because the Anglican priest has prayed and freed the place. Since then, the school of fish that was always attracted to and remained in the waterways of Siubongi has gone. Also, the Taeloa bridge crossing was a cultural desecration of the river. In the past, no lady was allowed to cross and wash in the river. Today the many people and trucks have crossed the bridge with all kinds of people. And besides that, women, including menstruating ladies, have washed and polluted the river." This is a desecration of *kastom* and ethnical relations with the river.

The shared account by Kokokeni Takarii led to the next point that, as she also pointed out today, our children only learned about bible stories and history about faraway places. But lack any interest and understanding of the stories and history of the land and place they relate to. This could be a possible cause of losing knowledge and connection to the land and rivers. Baelelea people are consistently critical of social and cultural behaviour changes because people believe that the erratic behaviour and lack of respect today is born from their lack of interest and knowledge of *biranga*, which includes ecological and historical knowledge, for example, *kastom* story and chant. Aunty Takarii insists that "Our traditional stories carried important moral lessons and meaning and speak of certain values of respect and connection to place and land by our clan." In our conversation, she asked me: "Why you so interested in the traditional stories that youths today lack interest in and consider not factual and obsolete?" As reflected in the conversation and shared perspective, Aunty Takarii was of the view that the oral histories and legends carry some important moral lessons, but today people learned about

Bible stories and people in places far away, not our stories” (we smiled). My aunt was a converted Anglican, and as her stories and views reflected her background understanding and upbringing in the traditional Baelelea culture before converting to Christianity.

“Too many selfish ideas.”

I use the idiom ‘too many selfish ideas’ by informants to exemplify the proliferation of individualism in a close-knit society such as Baelelea, which informants had experienced as undermining their culture and ways of living. Maka Faiau, an elder, expressed that “today, too many individual ideas and people follow their selfish ideas”, which he said undermined respect for elders and the unit of the group. He described, for example, how “people, when wanting to make gardens and clear areas, they just do what they want without asking elders or the people responsible. They harvest ngali nuts and fruit trees belonging to other people. The land and certain planted properties have a father.... I see today, everyone is like a boss and landowner, not good.” (personal interview, May 2021). Maka Shem Baelata, at a different time, echoed the same view: “People today have many ideas, and I suppose the ideas are good and for collective benefit. But most ideas are for self-interest and only bring division. People need to think again about themselves (Maka Shem Baelata, Masilana elder, personal interview, April 2021).

I relate further here the conversation with Cousin Maeta and Maka Shem, further illustrating what many informants meant by ‘Today people have too many ideas’ to imply individualism and profit-making motives that have undermined social relations and cultural values. I spent the day in the company of my uncle, Maka Shem Baelata, since I arrived in the morning in Masilana. About 4:30 pm, my cousin Maeta arrived. He has spent the two days in a neighbouring village attending a funeral. As he sits to rest, he starts recounting the funeral happenings and personal frustration with a particular relative for what he described as ‘unusual practice’ in *maea i sukulu* (death of a Christian).

The funeral all went smoothly because it was the death of a Christian believer. ...But a thing I observed as *biranga falu* (new way) and probably not right in our Christian context is *fasui mae* (feast to end the mourning). I think this is not proper in our Christian context. In the past, maybe, I do not know.... Today, some people only want to take advantage of their name and economic gain.

Then Uncle Shem interrupted, “What happened?” as he was curious and listened with interest. Maeta further revealed what he considered ‘unusual.’

The same person, your cousin Selo (not his real name), was a real frustration and a conman. Yesterday, the family discussed and concluded that because it was *maea sukulu* (death of a Christian), then after the burial, everyone was free to go home and do whatever we are all busy with, schools, work and programs. The last two nights and day we spent together are enough. All is finished and no *fasui maea* feasting. Selo went behind our back and organised *edu* and a pig; strangely, he asked Sonny (not his real name), son of the deceased, for SBD\$1000 for the pig, which he had already organised. Without hesitation, Sonny gave the money, and Selo left for his home at night. In the morning, he arrived with the pig and a few *edu* for a feast, his idea. Most people had gone back to the coast and Auki.

What was frustrating was that he acted alone and defeated what we had already agreed. Now they are preparing food for *fasui maea*, and everyone left, and I excused them oh I go home because I have a sick man at home to attend to, and if I am feeling well, I might return at night.... What is strange is that your cousin disregarded what had already been collectively decided and forced his selfish idea. I was thinking maybe because he just wanted money to be paid for what appears to be his pig. To me, this is absurd during occasions such as death for someone to devise a scheme just to advance money. Suppose it’s an event such as a marriage, then it’s okay. Also, if he cared and wanted to organize a feast, it is something we can collectively discuss and agree on and not one man’s making. We can all contribute and source through contribution for free and not outright payment of \$1000, which should be spent on other costs.

Uncle Shem intercepted again:

That is what I see of people nowadays. People have all kinds of ideas. Man follows his own idea, and it is hard to listen and share ideas as always, our *biranga*. It surprises me if that is what aspiring leaders show. It's just not right during occasions like the death of a family member to capitalise and market your private properties for profit. I can tell that it is not his first time, and many people nowadays have their ideas and profit-making. People and aspiring leaders need to learn and live by good example, let others do not see the downside of one’s character, like one’s selfish ideas.

Maeta picked up:

We are pretty sure pig and *edu* are his. It was a crafted scheme to get money from his selfish proposal. He avoided talking to others because he knew nobody would support his idea. It surprises me that people have the guts to develop such ideas at such a time. I cannot understand.

As illustrated here, in West Baelelea rural communities, the view people had is that individualist and capitalist relations have undermined social values and power dynamics that underpin family and clan relations. A change, Tania Murray Li (2014) points out from her research in Sulawesi, Indonesia, that the emergence of capitalist relations is motivated by competition and profit, mostly in societies once based on a subsistence system and kinship as in the case of inland tribal communities in Baelelea that I have researched. Also worth mention, money has become the medium of exchange and to show appreciation, which can be exemplified in Sonny, son of the deceased by giving money as a means of exchange but could be also shown as appreciation to his relative for his garden crop and pig, which to be explained as an arrangement between two individuals outside of the group consensus. It is therefore not entirely a selfish idea but an arrangement between two people, which involves local food and cash payment. The contestation here is not the divergent perspectives, the loss of culture because of the interplay of elements and influences of christianity and capitalism as illustrated in the recounted account and many other experiences being told.

Feasts certainly play a significant part in Christian communities as explained earlier, but are restricted and remodelled around the church, and not during a funeral as *fasui maea*, especially by the fundamentalist SSEC communities. Any display of such a feast would be considered an activity of the traditional religion of the ancestors, where the dead person is said to be given a feast. This again undermines the social bond and culture that unifies people, such as during the celebration of marriage and collective grief over the loss of a kin, as in death and during funerals. In times of need and grief, for example, the true kin pull together to support and care for the aggrieved, based on a principle called *thu'u* (cover). And therefore, to act alone for said selfish interests is often frowned upon, as it goes against the principles of consensus and reciprocity that define *biranga*. However, the changing dynamic of social and economic relations in Baelelea means that personal favour and profit tend to be prioritised over cultural principles of *thu'u* according to *biranga*. The contract between individualism and community, from my research, is often defined and measured in terms of wealth connected to the land, in

which case, though belonging to an individual household, others will respect and always refer to it as *aludoa kolu*, “our garden or crops”. This is because they are always owned by the household. According to *biranga*, the household will always contribute and share with others, as during feasts. Living in the village, I have seen and encountered villagers refuse cash in direct exchange for local food, by some of us who do not have a garden in the village, because to them, it defeats the culture of sharing that involves food. They will be too happy to accept food such as rice or goods like a piece of cloth, because culturally locals regard it as a ‘gift’, while money is considered not a ‘gift’ but is conceived as to buy a purchase, which defeats the cultural definition of exchange.

Major commercial operations like logging contracts, rural developments such as building of community schools and clinics, and rural constituency roads development in Solomon Islands, if not done properly, often drive people into conflict, either between the entrusted leaders and the community or amongst tribal groups (Ha'apio & Ha'apio, 2018; Wairiu, 2006). Shiva (1995, p. 9) noted that conflict between local knowledge and global capitalism occurs on various levels that include forced dislocation and disappearance of local knowledge. As for the Baelelea people, local knowledge about land and kinship is the foundation of culture and interactions with the environment. When people lose that knowledge and stories, they lose their connection and rooted identity to a place (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Kabutaulaka, 2020, p. 47). Indeed, in this age of capitalist economic market, in Solomon Islands and Melanesia, for example, although people may still have tribal connections and claim ownership of land, it is the rich biodiversity and culture that are undermined and lost (Anderson, 2011; Li, 2014). As explained in previous chapters, in particular Chapter Three, the nonexistence of *biu* that provides spaces for grooming leaders and impacting knowledge, my informants lamented. This has, as many expressed regrets, created an institutional gap and space that regrettably results in lack of leadership training and grooming in the local culture and knowledge.

Agriculture & Economic Considerations

As explained in Chapter Two, the people of Alafana subsist on the land and forest as a means of livelihood and to meet economic demands. Today, culturally and economically, whilst subsistence remains a critical means of survival, increasingly people are more dependent on the global market for imported goods. Elsewhere in Malaita, as in West Kwara'ae communities,

as Gegeo (1998) wrote, “lives are increasingly dependent on the global mode of production (factory-made foods and other goods imported from overseas) rather than on their skills to provide for themselves” (p. 292). This has led to a decline in the production of native crops like taro and yam, in part due to new taro diseases, but also, as many informants point out, is due to the loss of traditional knowledge and climate change. Additionally, farmers are now growing more resilient crops like potatoes and cassava, which are easier to cultivate and maintain.

In West Baelelea, according to informants, many of the native taro varieties are no longer planted. The taro varieties cultivated today are mainly introduced species, and some carry strange names and characteristics. For example, one of the common taro varieties planted today by farmers in Alafana was called *akalo momole*²⁷, meaning ‘ancestor with scratching effect’ on the body and throat, which is considered a low-grade taro variety but widely planted because it proved to be more resilient to taro diseases and any soil conditions. Another taro variety commonly planted by villagers in West Baelelea is *alokwara’ae*, a taro from Kwara’ae and the central Malaita region. Another is called *agrikalsa* (Agriculture), a taro variety introduced and promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and local NGOs²⁸ to rural villagers in North Malaita and West Baelelea to curb food security problems and climate change issues (Bird et al., 2022; Spann, 2018). The exotic taro varieties, from informants’ stories, lack the authentic taste and aromatic quality. Also, as the new taro varies according to taro farmers I interviewed, because of the relatively shorter period between planting and harvest, a land area is regularly cleared and planted compared to native varieties that require longer fallow and generation.

The loss of many aspects of culture and traditions is closely associated with the impacts of colonisation and missionisation. For example, as Akin (1993) writes, from the Kwaio District, it was documented that the sudden decline of the Malaita taro traditions in the decades of the 1930s into the 1950s was cultural. The local Kwaio tribes alleged the decline of taro was caused by ancestral anger that followed the killing of Colonial District Officer Mr Belo in 1927

²⁷ *Akalo* (word for spirit of dead ancestor) is a substitution for taro, which culturally has its root and history in the ancestors who are believed to have discovered and domesticate taro. In conceiving and naming taro in this way represent Baelelea cosmology and spiritual significance of taro.

²⁸ In rural Malaitan regions and communities like in Baelelea, local NGOs including Kastom Garden Association (KGA) in partnership with international donors and the government Ministry of Agriculture, through food security program introduced new crop varieties, hence taro species “*agrikalsa*” as it is called in Baelelea is one of the varieties people plant nowadays in Alafana from my observation and as documented in studies (see Spann, 2018; Bird et al., 2022)

and the punitive expedition that saw grave desecration of sacred taboos and taro gardens by colonial police officers (Akin, 1993; Akin, 2013; Keesing & Corris, 1980).

In West Baelelea from accounts gathered from research informants, the decline of native taro happened around the same decades of the 1930s to the 1950s and started when large groups of inland clans converted to Christianity and relocated from the inland mountains, abandoning more fertile land for taro as certain high-quality native taro can only be cultivated and thrive in certain areas. Abandoning the inland bush meant abandoning the culture and traditions which underscore the clan *mana* or *mamana*, for example, attested to the traditions of taro that the missionaries and converts demonised as belonging to ‘dead ancestors’ (Burt, 1994b). Informants, both elders and young men interviewed, regretted and attested to this historic loss of traditional taro wealth being an impact of Christianity which forced the abandonment of a cultural inheritance. Others like Maekolo and uncle Diro shared the perspective that *mamana ana alo* are gifts from God manifested in the ancestors, because they lived a life of *abu* (holiness) while today people are *aburongo* (ignorant and careless). It is therefore assumed by informants like Maekolo and Diro that as Christian and indigenous people restoring aspect of culture, such as values and knowledge are necessary to restore wealth of taro, which is a gifted spiritual inheritance.

I narrate a conversation and story here, by an informant and female knowledge holder in my clan. *Kokokeni* Takarii, as quoted elsewhere in the thesis, admitted in her account and knowledge that traditional wealth and the abundance of taro was once a defining culture of our clan, and the sudden decline and disappearance is something regrettable:

Taro was culturally identified with our clan. I am surprised how it got lost just when we became Christian. I was told that part of the *mamana*, a man named Otofalu, took it with him, and when he died in western Solomon, it was lost altogether with him. More recently, his namesake Obed I suspected prayed and hid a unique stone that embodied our taro wealth when we abandoned the bush to come down for *Lotu* (church). I suspect he must have secretly buried it somewhere in one of the sites in the mountain or somewhere. I was cross because it belonged to our clan, but they did that without anyone knowing. This was an essential aspect of our clan tradition and heritage.

Maka Faiau recounts a similar transitional change in taro culture and personal experience:

The abundance of taro was something renowned and associated with our clan. In the past generations, since the time of the ancestors and forefathers. Our sub-clan was gifted with *manana* of taro.... taro harvest and hosted feast lavish and unmatched. A tree that I think remains standing today was called *mole alo* (tens of thousands of taros), following one organised *maoma* of display of tens of thousands taro and one hundred *tafuliae* in display during the feasts. What I saw was my father before we converted to Christianity; I have seen in small part. He did not make extensive gardens, but the size of his taro was as big as a medium-sized pot nowadays. The native varieties are finished and lost. The taro today is of many different varieties, not as good and big as those I grew up to know. In my day, we planted but not as their time that *talage alo* (one hundred taro), it would require ten strong ladies to carry. Today, one hundred taros, only one or two ladies will carry because taro tubers are small.

As mentioned earlier, for the Baelelea informants like Maka Faiau, the loss of the native species is regrettable. This was equally reflected in the size of taro people's harvests compared with the more intensive gardening nowadays. It is more than that the native taro comes with this influential culture of feasting and unifying the family through sharing food and a display of wealth. Traditional knowledge about the taro crop and the land ontologically defines and underscores human ethical and spiritual values and deep consciousness as part of nature and the environment.

Taro is an important food in Malaita. It has many traditions and conditions. The main ones are obvious, but many strict conditions of taro are equally important. For example, eating cold food (or leftover) in the morning, as many do nowadays before heading to the taro garden, is a strict taboo in the tradition of taro. When one stays with his wife, it is taboo, so don't go to the taro garden. Traditionally, people wake up before daybreak and head to the garden to plant taro. Do not go to the taro garden at daybreak. You must not eat a large fish and go to the taro garden. In the garden, when planting, keep your back to the sea and face the mountain. When you harvest and cut off the stock from the tuber, keep the face of the stock to the bush; do not face it to the sea. When planting, do not mention *asi* (sea). Just refer to it as a large river or body of water. The sea is a *tabu*, and it causes *alo mae* (taro blight).

A taro planting stick is considered *tabu*. No one apart from the garden owner should touch or use it. Women are strictly forbidden to touch it. When the planting is finished, it is normally hidden by covering it under a pile of rubbish or under the *thakali* (barricade around the garden). At no other time should one unnecessarily enter a taro garden. The barricade around the garden is also a *tabu* and normally there are one or two entrances. This is now different, as people just make a garden without building a barricade around it (Maekolo, July 2021).

Another community elder, 70-year-old Duia of Marokafo village, further points out the importance of traditional ecological knowledge and the dynamics around taro cultivation and subsistence farming generally in Baelelea today.

We take care of the land and use certain knowledge on where the land is suited and what types of soil are best for growing taro and other crops. Land is general, but important to know that land has different soil types, some are red, black and a mixture of sand like around here. Here in the *sifole*, midway between the coastal and interior bush the soil is not that good for cultivation of taro, but very good for *edu* giant taro and yam. The best land areas for taro are located further up the hill and mountain from here. We know from local knowledge, the name of the land area and those that were cultivated in the past.

They clear anywhere to grow taro, potato, or any other crops. The land area for taro is strictly for taro, and you will hardly plant any other crops on it. The land area for potatoes you cannot plant taro. This is important because how certain crops use up the soil or how soil supports a particular crop is different. Also, this is to keep away diseases that might attach taro or cause potato to rot or not have good tubers. Today, people have a poor understanding. You will see all their gardens, they plant taro, yam, potato, sugarcane, all in one garden.

The pressure to earn cash to meet other obligations is a pressing issue. People plant crops for cash. That is the reality of this time and generation. However, that is ok, if people see the importance of land in terms of their livelihoods and *manana* (wealth) and manage their activities and the environment well, there is no major concern and problem, because time has changed.

I am truly against big developments like logging or selling our land and native resources to big companies. The experience I saw in other parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands, I

do not want to see on our land in my lifetime, or after I am gone, and my children and future generations to be deprived of their land and the benefits they get from the land.

From the livelihood system-based primary on traditional crops such as taro and yam, the times and culture have changed and shifted to dependence on more mixed economic systems with the introduction of new crop varieties for income generation. People regret the loss of native taro species with its associated rich traditions and knowledge and use this as an example of a desire to foster a renewed understanding and appreciation for culture and more sustainable livelihood systems.

“Eating chemical”.

I use the idiom “eating chemical” as it is often used by locals in Alafana to depict their perspective on imported and processed food. Amidst the culture change in lifestyle is the change in the local diet as households and villagers develop a preference for imported and processed foods over garden food. Many are concerned about and critical of the imported rice, but there are also other foods like instant noodles, which villagers have started to describe as ‘chemical’ and associated with health concerns. In the village, one would hear residents referring to white rice as "chemical" and expressing concerns about its impact on health. Ednaliko shared that she stopped eating rice a few years ago and advocates healthy eating by consuming locally grown garden foods. However, she struggles to resist it when she is hungry or visiting relatives who only serve rice as a meal. Unfortunately, her children also prefer rice, losing their taste for other foods. Ednaliko avoids noodles because they resemble earthworms and snakes, and the likeness makes her feel sick. She believes that processed foods are all "chemicals" and that a healthy lifestyle requires eating locally grown garden foods.

Rice has become an increasingly important supplementary and luxury food in the village, as well as a local garden food. Although consumption of imported foods in rural locations is described as “negligible in remote locations where there is very limited cash income, to moderately high where there is pressure on garden land and cash incomes are moderately high” (Bourke et al., 2006, p. 22). More rice is usually consumed during occasions such as traditional feasts, weddings, and church events to fill shortfalls in the supply of local food. In some of the remotest areas that also have regular cyclones and continuous impacts of climate change on food crops, like in Malaita Outer Islands, rice is the primary source of food,

and is mostly supplied by the government's national disaster departments (Baete, 2012; Bourke et al., 2006). The assumption that the consumption of rice is negligible in rural areas is partly incorrect. I was told numerous times by informants that families spend their last savings or ask relatives in Honiara to send a bag of rice because food gardens are not ready, or as contributions during deaths and funerals in the village.

It was also ironic being told that at times, a villager would sell freshly produced garden root crops at the local market to make enough cash to buy a bag of rice, pressured by the family's liking for rice. This illustrates a cultural change and preference for rice over nutritious root crops. Sharing stories along this line of thought, one evening, one of the guys shared a story about a fisherman who sold his fresh fish catch only to buy a tin of tuna and a packet of rice from a nearby canteen. The story caught us laughing, and we had a serious discussion about imported food and local food, as to which is best and healthier.

Informants like Ednaliko revealed that in Alafana, many youths have become less interested in making gardens or supporting their parents, instead preferring to work for wages only to spend them on luxury items and rice. Some viewed rice as a symbol of affluence associated with white men. Although people see the health benefits of local garden foods, there is a recognised trade-off in terms of the labour and effort put into gardening for a similar return. A common phrase is '*oko i'ida neri*', meaning 'one must sweat and get one's hands dirty to eat fresh food from the ground. In West Baelelea communities, as described elsewhere in the thesis, this shift and change reflect a broader societal shift, where capitalist relations and consumerism have influenced social behaviour and perspectives.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the cultural changes in Alafana and West Baelelea communities brought on by external forces such as Christianity, colonialism, and capitalist relations. As described in the chapter, the people perceive and express that contemporary changes have undermined certain aspects of their traditional way of life. The contemporary changes, whether classified as *biranga sukulu*, *biranga araikwao*, or *biranga aeasi*, all represent new ways and lifestyles that locals see as conflicting with their traditional customs, many of which have deep roots in their traditions and customs. Capitalist relations have also introduced new ideologies, such as individualism and relationships based on monetary

transactions or profit-making. This has led to the devaluation of indigenous values and relationships based on kinship and reciprocity, as illustrated in the stories documented in this chapter. The land and resources are now seen more as commodities for economic gain, emphasising the concept of "making money" over the traditional notion of "making a living," which underpins the Baelelea ontology of social and ecological interconnectedness.

THESIS PART THREE

Chapter Seven: *Oli Aenaguri'ai*- Return to the tree root.

Introduction

This chapter describes how the Baelelea people conceptualise social-ecological relationships and development through metaphors and imageries. The metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai*, translated to mean "return to the tree base or root, " is how locals frame and conceptualise social-ecological connectedness and indigenous ontology. Indigenous people's use of metaphors and imageries shows deep cultural relations and understanding of otherwise intertwined and complex social and ecological dynamics and worldviews. In delving into metaphors, I will first discuss the concept of *ai* (tree) in Baelelea ontology and traditional knowledge. I then turn to the tree metaphor to exemplify indigenous epistemology and theorising about social and ecological interconnectedness and development.

Oli Aenaguri'ai: A metaphor theorising interconnectedness.

Metaphors are cultural constructs that "create mental images by connecting the familiar with the less familiar" (Cornett, 2011, p. 99). According to Jensen (2006), "it is through metaphors that people express an understanding of an unfamiliar or complex concept. Metaphors, therefore, are integral to human discourse, although people are often unaware of their use in communications. Much has been written about conceptual metaphors. For example, Kovecses (2010) has identified (1) the common source-domains of metaphors as human body, health and illness, animals, plants and buildings, (2) the common targets as emotions, morality, politics, communication and religion, (3) the common direction of metaphors going from concrete to abstract, and (4), the three broad types of metaphors to be structural, ontological, and orientational. Exploring the metaphors of *oli aenaguri'ai* is more about ontological and orientational understanding of human-ecological relationship connected to land and other non-human species through Baelelea's indigenous lens and epistemologies.

The use of metaphors has proliferated in multidisciplinary studies, including social science and environmental studies (Carpenter et al., 2001). The notable advantages of using metaphors, particularly in research, are that they are well-documented and have brought new knowledge and perspectives. For example, according to Johansson-Fua et al. (2012), ‘metaphors provide a vivid, compact and expressive way to convey complex information. Likewise, Elliot (1984) noted “metaphors can stimulate imagination, arouse feeling and prompt action and change” (p. 45). And in qualitative research, the use of metaphors provides an opportunity to examine phenomena from a unique and creative perspective (Carpenter, 2008, p. 274)As mentioned earlier, the tree root metaphor is used to dissect complex and interconnected ontologies of social-ecological relations.

As stated in Chapter Four, Baelelea people have a holistic view of the world and that humans are an integral part of nature connected through a complex web of social-ecological relations. Culturally and conceptually, from my research, the social and ecological relations are forged by people’s preconceived beliefs and orientation towards cultural features and totems, in the forms of animals, plants and the sacred forest. Metaphors and imageries are cultural constructs used to describe ‘indigenous philosophy, spirituality and expressed knowledge of the world’ (Hau’ofa, 1994; Sanga, 2013, 2020). The ‘tree root’ explored in this chapter is a conceptualisation of indigeneity explained as being rooted to land and culture, and the set of values defined as *kastom* (custom) or *biranga* (cultural ways). The tree metaphor exemplifies a powerful representation of traditional knowledge and ancient wisdom as Teaheniu depicts a Koke/Haoro-Cranium Nut Tree as a pedagogy and philosophy in her Solomon Islands’ Kolombangara society: Teaheniu writes:

The primary roots represent the wisdom, and smaller roots are the principles. The main branches of the nut tree represent the key cultural pedagogies, and the main trunk represents the child. From these cultural pedagogies, the strands and learning outcomes will be developed. The smaller branches represent the strands, and the fruits represent teaching dispositions and values (Teaheniu, 2019, p. 122).

Teaheniu’s description of the cranium nut tree, from a similar cultural contrast, the Baelelea conceived and viewed the world as socially and ecologically interconnected in the metaphoric script of the tree, more so the tree root (*guri’ ai*). In Baelelea ontology, a tree depicts familial relations and kinship not represented as a single unit, but as a functional unit denoting the whole set of relatives, including the ancestors (Hogbin, 1969, p. 42). This also underscores the

Baelelea concept of family and kinship that people always thought to include the spirits of the dead ancestors and living beings are one and the same, just that they exist in different material forms (Burt, 2018; Hundleby, 2017, p. 105).

For Baelelea people, the metaphoric tree represents not just the physical attributes and functions and the environment it engages with – the land it is anchored to, but everything surrounding it, and humans and non-human others that find shelter and protection. It describes essential knowledge, the *kastom* and cultural beliefs intertwined with their ancestry and the land. The trunk represents the held *kastom* and traditional knowledge, including our histories and traditions, expressed in myriad forms, including oral stories and songs. The trunk connects other social groups to the main root and land. This includes *futaa ni keni* (matrilineal kin and relatives) and *futaa ni wane* (patrilineal line), their rooted identity and connection to the land and defines role and place in society. For example, *futaa ni keni*, as maternal cousins have customary rights to the land and perform the social function as *babasi*, supporting or deputising roles to *futaa ni wane* (male group) who serve as head of the *biu wane* (clan) I described in Chapter Three.

As defined in Chapter Three, a leader with augmented social attributes and spiritual qualities is perceived as *ai'nunufi* (the shade tree) that provides space and protection. This is further in terms of the functional roles and status as *wane inoto* and *afio*, all rooted in personal and spiritual attributes that, according to informants, like Kokokeni Takarii and Maka Baelata, are alleged to need to root or anchor community leadership. The forged one-sided consideration of electing or appointing leaders based on education often forged an environment of mistrust and calling leaders demeaning names like 'con chiefs' or 'cowboy pastors' because of mistrust of the people and leaders' failure to uphold matters of common interests and lack in traditional knowledge. The term *ai'nunufi*, in other words, is *wane gwaugaia ana fera*, a senior male who is the head of house and land. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1992) defined in the context of Kwara'ae. In a close-knit family and societal setting as in Baelelea, the group leader as *ai'nunufi* is an exemplary character both in deeds and words of wisdom that provides a strong footing for the family and attracts others to you as a leader.

In the traditional Baelelea setting, a leader is also defined by his *bi'u* (or *mbi'u*), his house. A *biu* served an important function as a space for interaction and imparting of cultural knowledge from the elders to young men. Practical knowledge and stories, such as gardening and historical knowledge about the clan and family genealogies and social relations, are

communicated and learned by associating with *biu* and elders (Hogbin, 1939, p. 36). The demise and absence of *bi'u* in a Baelelea village today is something my informants, both male and female, lamented for loss and attributed to leadership that was less founded on culture and therefore less connected to people. This, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is a consequence of missionisation and conversion because, to Christian missionaries, *bi'u* was considered an institution and tradition connected to ancestor religion and, therefore, must be abandoned. However, from the informants' perspective, appropriating the concept of *oli aena guri ai* is about restoring traditional leadership qualities and structures that connect and provide space for meaningful interaction and governance. In Baelelea, the metaphoric *biu* and as Sanga (2023) explained in the concept of *labu* (a fortified sanctuary)²⁹ carries a similar meaning in terms of a secured and sacred space. For indigenous people, such as Malaita intellectuals, I subscribe to the rethinking or as Sanga (2023) describes, of “re-imagine [our] communities for the future” (p. 148), supposedly based on cultural constructs and imagination. From this culturally grounded understanding of societal traditional settings and social relations, indigenous leadership attributes and traditional knowledge would harness the value gained from education and competence. In the next section, I delve into the perception of tree roots as sacred and ecological spaces of significance.

Oli Aenaguri'ai: The root as sacred and ecological space of significance.

In Baelelea ontology, the root (*aenaguri'ai*) has rich conceptual and practical construction. The root is a sacred and ecological space of cultural significance rooted in traditional religious and agricultural practice. The space around the root (*aenaguri'ai*) is a marked space or repository of history, and an archive of sacred items (*matale*) of religious significance. A *matale* would be a special stone, piece of cloth, ornament or bone of a dead ancestor. Archiving of sacred items at the root, either in the forest or beside the *biu* in the village, makes the place sacred like a shrine (*biu abu*). Due to the conversion to christianity, strict religious rituals were abandoned. In the past, *wane ni foa* (traditional priest) performed certain religious rituals and prayers around the stump where sacred items were archived.

²⁹ Sanga (2023) using the metaphor script LABU a sanctuary or a fort-like 'village of refuge' for visitors and residents that the islet of Ngnongosila in East Malaita was known for in pre-Christian Malaita.

As a child growing up in the Baelelea bush in the 1980s, elders would caution specific cultural protocols, taboos, and ethics associated with *bi'u* and expected social norms and conduct. Usually, an elder would forewarn, “Lest any of you breach taboos of another *bi'u*, that will result in people asking you for compensation. A stump near a *bi'u* or at the back is not ordinary. The sacred materials of the *bi'u* are buried there. Do not tamper or desecrate; you might be asked to pay compensation.” Although the people in Alafana have all converted to Christianity and abandoned their traditional rituals and strict observations of material stuff associated with dead ancestors, the informed knowledge about cultural taboos is being passed down. It underscores *biranga* (ways of culture) and ethical values in Baelelea's ways of doing and being.

In the slash and burn gardening system common in Baelelea and still practised in Alafana, around the stump is ecologically a rich and fertile spot, with deposits of organic nutrients best for planting taro and yam. Taro farmers in Alafana I interviewed considered a ‘culture of taro’ when a garden plot is cleared and ready, the first place a set of taro or yam stocks are ‘put to the group’ (planted) around *mana fuli'era* (burned tree root) before planting the entire garden plot. In Alafana, individuals interviewed pointed out that a ‘new system’ *rao kwai* (translated as ‘work cold’ or just a slash-and-plant, a shift from traditional ‘slash-and-burn before planting), many started to adopt, but with mixed success. This new practice of ‘*rao kwari*’ or ‘slash-and-plant as one informant explained, “the crop yield was good, but the taste was not good, especially taro was soft like potato”. Many informants considered it to be foreign and disapproved because of the poor quality of the taro, especially the poor taste and lack of authentic smell, as many have reported. Many people interviewed still favoured traditional practices in cultivating taro. However, they considered it hard to keep up with the culture and traditional knowledge to ensure quality yields with good taste. Fire ash and charcoal around the burned root are added as a natural fertiliser. After it is left for usually a day, the plot is planted, and as practice, the farmer plants around the root, also described as *mana fuli era*, a fireplace around the root. I interviewed Gideon Betaofa, also called Gidi, who shared insights into his experience and practices as a highland taro farmer.

Cultivating taro is different and has its conditions and requires very fertile soil and a place, not like potatoes. You can plant anywhere, and in the grassland, people normally replant the same place after you harvest. Taro, especially our *alo fili* in the bush, passed down from past generations, is selective and accustomed to the old practice. The new style that some started to do, like *rao kwari*, where people clear and plant the area

simultaneously, is not favourable to our highland variety. In planting, as has been the practice, I first plant around the burned root and the head of the garden at the built barricade and work my way to cover the plot to the bottom. That has been the culture and practice of taro that I still apply today, especially in the bush with our native taro varieties. I understand others are different, and the introduced new varieties have different practices and grow well anywhere, like potatoes. But I am talking about the highland taro variety that our ancestors planted, which is common to mountain areas.

Harvesting is done the opposite way. People first harvest, starting from the bottom end of the garden and moving upward. Harvesting from the head or middle of the taro plot is considered improper, according to the tradition of taro. One would start by pulling the taro from the lower corner of the garden, the side you last planted. The considered king taro around the *guri'ai* or below the *thakali* would be the last to be harvested, often on another day, often for special occasions. They are considered the king taro of the garden, and proper special treatment is given to ensure health, and a good harvest is sustained. The special place within the plot where the harvested taro is cleaned is called *fio*, and proper organisation and strict conditions are also attached. This is also important because all the rubbish is to be neatly covered to avoid attracting fungus and diseases.

The sketched graphs in Figures 40 and 41 illustrate planting taro. As stated above, the planting starts from the key spots around the burned stump. Figure 40 illustrates the standard culture process when harvesting, beginning at the plot's bottom end. Informants described that it is culturally proper to start from the lower section of the taro plot and move upward before moving to the head and centre of the garden. In Baelelea, cultural education and learning about the traditions and principles of taro are important, to maintain health and a good harvest. To do otherwise would be considered harvesting in an abusive manner or theft, having no regard for the planted taro crop and 'gardening culture' (*biranga na ola*).

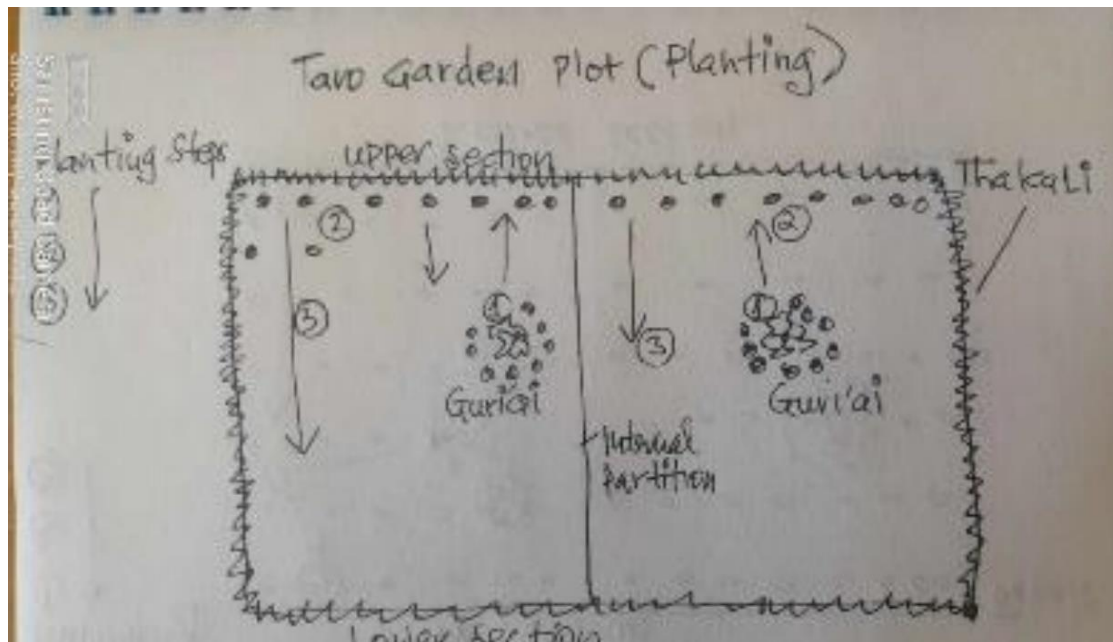


Figure 40: Illustration of planting taro start at the root or head of the plot and rest of the plot.

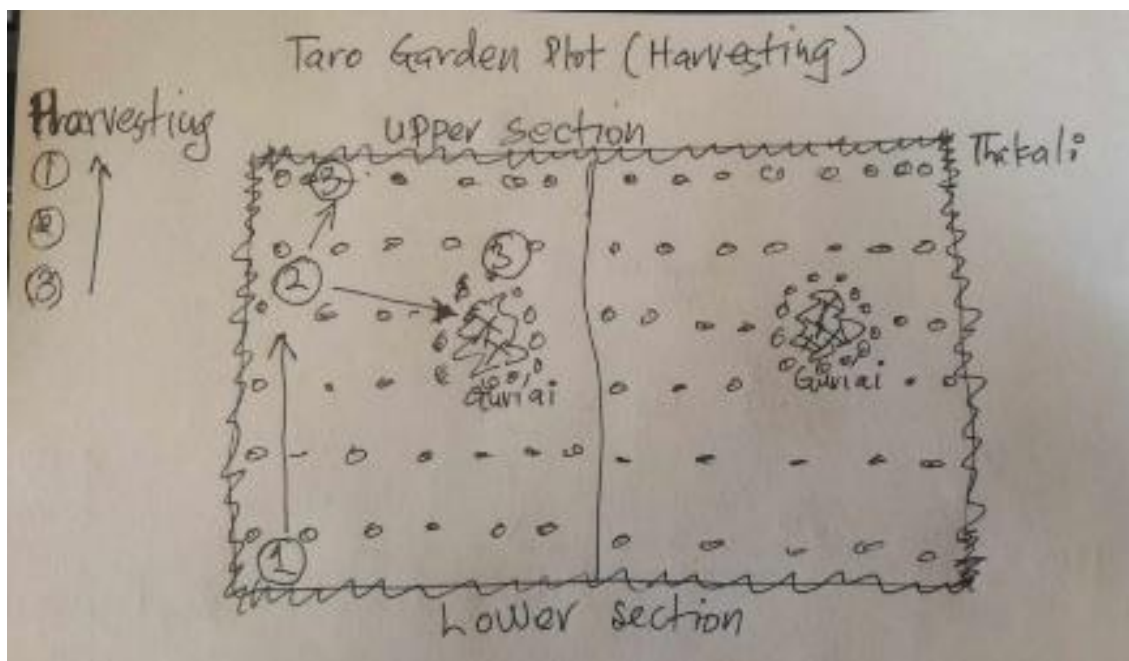


Figure 41: Illustration of harvesting taro starting at lower section to the head of the garden.

In an interview, Gid explained the many traditions of highland taro. In planting, the principal place to start is around the tree root or stump and *fara thakali* because, conceptually, people considered it as the head of the garden (*gwauna'ola*) and the lower section of the foot (*aena*) of the garden. The planting starts at the head of the garden and finishes at the bottom. Harvesting is the opposite; it begins at the bottom section of the garden and moves to the head

of the garden. Growing up in Baelelea, I often hear a responsible head (i.e. father or parent) cautioning: “*ade toto oko thafali lafu gwauna ola nena*” (translated ‘least you start pulling taro from the head of the garden’). This is considered a cultural practice in harvesting taro; otherwise, it could be considered inconsiderate of the taro culture and may result in poor crops the following season. In keeping the taro culture, the taro farmers believed that the health of the garden and the quality of the taro would be ensured. As mentioned earlier and reflected in the sketch diagram, *aena guri’ai* and *fara thakali* are key spaces where the first taro is planted to expect a good harvest that is often considered *aena hola* (‘foot of the garden’). The common belief and expression I heard countless times is that “*fufu gwula lana ola e ni aena guri’ai la hola ne*’ (meaning ‘weight of the garden is around the root’) that further depicts the ecological and cultural significance of *aena guri’ai* in the Baelelea world, encompassing the traditional subsistence agriculture system. Further traditional knowledge and practical skills, as informants highlighted the importance of *fio* (cleaning place), *lisi* (cutting of taro suckers) and *lali* (taro suckers and shoots) are best managed for planting and to ensure healthy crops and sustainability of the culture and the ecology of the soil and environment.

Enhancing basic life of social-ecological sustainability and economic production.

In conceptualising going back to the root, there is an emphasis on basic livelihoods and reliance on local food crops and sustainable agriculture. I present two conversations to exemplify the local conception of what people meant by going back to basic ways of livelihood and the agricultural economy. It was about nine o’clock Monday morning; the family had finished breakfast and engaged rather leisurely in telling stories and laughing to ‘shorten the day’, which is commonly described in the village. The family reminisces about the beautiful day, expects sunshine, and is still in the Christmas holiday mood. Brother Diake, our village host, interrupted with a joke: “*Iuka, waela amulu enena, Christmas kosi ania, lali bae teo a dura ana*” (translated “Yah, you are laughing, we do not eat Christmas.....taro suckers to be planted are left rotting”) as everyone burst into laughter. “That is true, I agree with you, my boy”, the 90-year-old *kokowane* (grandfather) nodded in agreement. Diake picked up and continued:

You, people, talked much about *aena guri ai*; for me, that is my project every day...
aena guri’ai, we eat and survive. If no garden means no food....and all the happy faces

will turn ugly because they are hungry (everyone laughing). I hate seeing lazy people waste time sleeping and expect food to come to them. Sometimes, in this village, you hear couples' row or a big shout in the next house from here because someone is hungry, or a row because rice is finished. Garden and food from the soil we eat but *oko iida neri* (you must sweat). In the village, we must work to eat...those with education and got a job, fine your job is like your garden. Us with little or no education, land is where our food and money come from.... I learned my lesson; I spent over ten years in Honiara and returned home with nothing. The money earned was spent carelessly, but now, as a farmer, I earn a small income that sustains and is spent on supporting important occasions like church and marriage contributions.... In the village, my money comes from taro and *Savusavu* (local tobacco). I started planting betelnuts, kava, and other things. *Savusavu*, I can say, is easier money and fits lazy people than taro, and you harvest after three months. I encourage those of us who smoke to plant *savusavu*, but they are too lazy to put anything on the ground, they are only good at asking for a dried leave to smoke. Should you have a little job for the money, that is what they jump at and spend it on *Savusavu*, those who smoke. Crazy!



Figure 42: Taro cultivated around *guri'ai* (tree root) Alelengana (June 2022)

It was Wednesday, a communal workday at Alafana Primary School, and I joined the community. During a break, I shared a moment with a group of men for *tok stori* and sheltered from the sun under a shade tree in the school compound. During an hour-long conversation, Rex, an eloquent storyteller, lectured (often locals use and describe a good storyteller full of ideas) to the group, which was mostly young married men and two youths. Rex, like Diake, is a taro farmer, besides being a full-time pastor.

I am inspired by young people who do things to improve our families and earn income from the land we access. That is the way of our ancestors and fathers before us. Going to Honiara for wage employment is good, but many find no work and are caught up in the town's social problems. I say it is a waste of precious time and energy. For people with education and paper, you are good at them and can earn an income to sustain yourself. For those with little or no education, *aena guri ai* is our project. I have encouraged some young men to do kava farming, taro, and maybe other good crops. As a young man, I never once worked in Honiara, not because I lacked a good education but because I engaged in the Church and community. All I survive and earn is from the land, taro, and local vegetable marketing. Many young men work in Honiara and spend all they earn there, and there is no tangible thing in the village. I encourage us not to be fooled by money opportunities in Honiara; they may never come. I used to farm taro and did marketing in Honiara, and from a single trip, I earned 5000 to 6000 dollars as pure cash after deductions for transport and living expenses in Honiara. I make two to three trips a year; now, I only garden for food because of age and other commitments.

I encourage our inland bush community to put our hands on the ground, and you will not go wrong meeting family livelihoods and economic needs. Today, there are many campaigns on organic foods and diseases that many people die from eating processed, unhealthy food. I say the answer is going back to planting and eating local food. I always encourage communities and young people, raising awareness and preaching about returning to our land and organic agriculture practices.... I am 67, but my shape and size are the same. I think I am fit and healthier than many.

As reflected in the stories by Diake and Rex above, the notion of indigeneity and local response to global issues. The global economic crisis and its implications for Pacific societies (McCormack & Barclay, 2013; Ratuva, 2010, p. 41) including high consumption of processed

and imported food, high incidence of non-communicable disease, and food security issues related to climate change and, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Farrell et al., 2023; Scheyvens et al., 2023). In Alafana, although people are relatively isolated from the major commercial activities and urban environment, there is an acute awareness of the global economic crisis and its impacts. Informants expressed concerns about 'copied lifestyles' and imported foods, and family access to these foods has cultural implications on 'fresh garden foods' and family wellbeing. For example, preference and dependence have forced new social behaviour and diet, as explained in the previous chapter. To mitigate or reserve this means to emphasise passionate engagement in agriculture and consumption behaviour of local crops, and further foster local economic resilience and self-reliance (Ratuva, 2010; Scheyvens et al., 2023).

In Baelelea, as discussed in Chapter Five, the introduction of cash crops to engage the villagers in economic development is all geared towards the export market, as in the case of coconut, cocoa, and teak tree planting. Families have either reduced efforts and time spent in gardening or relegated gardening to women whilst men sought ways and means to engage in cash labour, either more effort and time spent in cocoa plantations or migrated to Honiara seeking wage employment. Increasingly, as also mentioned in the previous chapters, families also scale up garden production to produce a surplus to sell at the local markets. The issue of putting your hand on the ground, meaning gardening, although considered an important cash obligation, has become essentially necessary. The increasing staple food rice can be substituted with local root crops, like taro and potato, because, as people say, they are healthier because they come directly from the ground. Introduced foods, like rice, on the other hand, as one informant questioned, "Who knows, how rice was processed, in case they added some chemicals with it and exported to us because it was their business." This raises the question of authenticity and local production versus imported foods and the capitalist market.

As informants like Diake and Rex alluded to above, the issue is also with local economic production tied to the problem of indigeneity and sovereignty that intersect with imagined secure and sustainable livelihood. Accordingly, reconnecting to the authentic ways and system of economic production, sustainable utilisations, and maintenance of culturally endowed local land resources and agriculture for food security and production. In the Pacific, for example, as Anderson (2011) suggests, many Western economic growth strategies could be potentially damaging rather than supportive of rural livelihood-dominated developing countries. He indicated that the growth strategies always favour formal economies and private

businesses, particularly export industries, while devaluing and often displacing more traditional hybrid livelihoods that combine formal, informal, and subsistence economies. Strategies focused on growth notoriously exclude environmental benefits and costs in their analyses. In contrast, traditional economic activities are often centred on sustaining the resource base and, therefore, are more often based on sustainability (Anderson, 2011).

Enhancing deep consciousness and respect for the environment

Baelelea ana kastom. Do ki sui e abu.... Wane e abu. Fera e abu. Ole e abu. Gano e abu. Kafo e abu. Sula tale e abu. Si fanga ko ania e abu. Tolakolu e abu. Fanga lakoro ka abu. Abua do si ni ana akalo neri. E ni ana biranga imoli fasi kolu ka abula o'olo la fera ma diana la ka to bi kolu (Maekolo, 25 January 2021).

Baelelea, in *kastom*, everything is holy...Man is holy. House is holy. Garden is holy. Land is holy. River is holy. Footpath is holy. Food is holy. The way we live is holy. Everything is holy. Holiness is not about dead ancestors but about us and respectful living. In this way, *mamana* (wealth/goodness) will attract and remain with us (English translation).

As defined above, the Baelelea ontology and consciousness about the environment are grounded on *abu* (holiness) and foster care and respect for what constitutes an ecosystem and society. In Baelelea, according to informants as highlighted in Chapter Six, although the land remained communal under the tribe's jurisdiction, individual actions were often said to disrespect the land, a resource of cultural and livelihood dependence. This showed a lack of consciousness and culturally grounded understanding of land as *gaakolu*, the common mother from which is the foundation of society's material and immaterial existence. Pressured by the quest to make money, as explained elsewhere in the thesis, forged a distorted relationship with land and the commoditisation of land as resources for people's exploitation and economic development (Burt, 1994a; Gegeo, 1998)

Introduced development and mixed economic system have fostered a new perception and relations that are less rooted and *too mamalana*, 'living anyhow' as people describe in Baelelea. This way of living was attributed to a forged change through powerful forces of colonisation, missionisation and the capitalist system, which altered and undermined people's

rooted ways of living as a community and with the environment. As Gegeo (1998) pointed out, for villagers in West Kwara'ae, the most significant change is that people shifted from a subsistence agriculture economy of self-reliance to a mixed economic system and lifestyle dictated by money and capitalist profit making. The implications, as Gegeo (1998) further describes, are that people are said to move from *tua lalifua'anga* (living in rootedness) and *tua inotoa'anga* (living in dignity) to *tua malafaka'anga* (living in imitation of the life brought by ships or westernisation (p. 290).

My theory of 'living in rootedness' is deeply embedded in social-ecological relations and consciousness. In Baelelea, the people contextualise living in rootedness and dignity in four ways. First is '*to ambu*', which is 'living in holiness' as a way of life or stage of being that may include 'emotional attachments and ethical consideration' of others and the environment (Townsend, 2018 p. 104). Second is '*to mamana*', which means living in the truth. Third is '*to o'olo*', meaning 'living in righteousness', and '*to ofu*', meaning 'living in unity' or solidarity as family and people defined by cultural aspects such as common land, ancestry, religion, and ethical commitments.

The ways of living are defined by cultural understanding and consciousness of the environment, cultural values, and ethical relations humans have with the environment and non-human other species. Informants like Ednaliko and Gidi, highlighted in Chapter Six, raised issues of Alafana School kids and village youths only learning about school subjects but lacking a sense of respect and cultural knowledge and environment that elders often complained "young people today did not consider anything holy that resulted in lack of care and fear to observe anything", speaking about social misbehaviour but also lack of informed understanding and respect for the environment and land (*gaano*), the 'earth mother.' Faced by contemporary changes, informants expressed the views entailed in *oli aenaguri'ai* as about learning and incorporating the teaching of such values and ways of living to revive the culture and consciousness about the environment.

From my research, I would concur with other studies that in the Pacific and the Solomon Islands, the modernisation development model only entails economic development progress but fails to or undermines the cultural and social capital as integral aspects of society and the environment (Burt, 1994a; Foale, 2006; Ratuva, 2010). In theorising and enhancing inclusive and sustainable development, it is imperative to frame around the notion that development targets economic production and export but also safeguards culture and natural

resources. However, in Melanesian society and communities, as others have argued, it can be highly political as it privileges a particular epistemology and associated practices (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2002; Jacka, 2007). For example, the dimensions of Melanesian culture that emphasise sharing, obligation, and reciprocity, along with extended networks of kinship groupings, are devalued and considered “obstacles” to development (Ratuva, 2010). In West Baelelea, the introduction of cash crops started with coconut and cocoa in the form of smallholder plantations in the 1960s and, over the years, has resulted in deforestation and intensive land use (Cochrane, 1969; Spann, 2018).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Baelelea worldview encompasses humans as part of nature. Everything has its functional importance, and many others embody spirit beings and clan history, for example, a particular stream, cave, and forest grove. As I have explained in the earlier chapters, the Baelelea conception of truth and righteousness also underscores social and environmental relations. As described in Chapter Five, the ecological damage and loss of the forests in the locality resulted in not only an experienced loss of rich biodiversity and forest food systems but also a deep spiritual and cultural connection, history and traditional knowledge of bush hunting and food gathering to a mixed economic system and agricultural production.

Enhancing the total well-being of people and the environment.

The metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* further implies enhancing and improving human well-being and that of the environment. I relate the local perspectives by drawing on a conversation with Ednaliko, the ‘big matron’ as the villagers described her in many stories, and the wife of the village elder, Maekolo.

Today, we are in the tough times that the Bible talks and forewarns about, and our safe place is God, and to go back to eating from the land. Processed and introduced food like rice and noodles are ‘chemical’ because machines make them, and we do not know where and how they are made. They are the food that causes ‘sugar’ (meaning diabetes) and all kinds of sickness and causes shorter lives. I have stopped eating rice for a few years now. Noodles, I never eat, for they looked like little white snakes or worms. It makes me sick, too, the smell of noodles when people mix in their cabbage soup..... Food produced from the land is fresh and healthy. You harvest food and cook it fresh

and eat it, compared to dead food, because they were made in factories many months and even years ago and sold to us by the Chinese people.

I raised 12 kids, and all I fed them was local food. I breastfed them before they left the *susu* (breast milk)—no tin milk or rice and noodles. Today, I see some young parents feed their kids with noodles and sweet biscuits, yes, because they have lots of money to spend on ‘store food’, and more so, many consider store food as expensive or ‘high-level’ food, they are not, but unhealthy food. Worse, we are teaching the children that local food produced from the garden is ‘low’ or local level’ food and kids have started to regard it as ‘poor food’ or late sixty foods... This is a wrong mentality and a way to encourage a healthy lifestyle and food. Nevertheless, yes, to eat healthy, *oko i’ida* (must sweat or work hard) and put your hand on the ground.I always encourage the families that live in town to at least have their garden or engage someone to make and manage a small garden in the village for you that can support you and your kids. Today, different kinds of sick have arrived in the Solomon Islands, like the ‘corona’, they have all related to food and living a town lifestyle. In the village, people live on the land and have diverse sources of livelihood that sustain our lives for many generations. Our ancestors before us ate from the land and depended on forests for medicine and food that sustained them to live healthy and for longer years than we do today.

We must go back to the land, plant our own food, and eat from what is freshly pulled from the land today, not food harvested and kept in tins and bags that I say are dead food. People talked about *oli aena guri’ai* and organic food, but little is put to the land, only an empty message. The message, ‘no one shall be poor’ can only be true when we see land and *fasi do la* (planting things on the ground). In the village, other sick can infect us, but we are safe. We can lock down for how long but still survive because we have the garden and land to feed and survive from, as the world and people face all kinds of crises, such as the coronavirus and some hunger.

Interesting to note from interactions with locals like Ednaliko that many have raised concerns about increasing consumption of processed and imported food in the mountain communities. Rice, particularly in rural communities, is considered a luxury food that households spend hard-earned income on, but it also has implications for the well-being and culture. Although local garden foods, as mentioned in Chapter Two, are heavily relied on in Alafana as elsewhere in Solomon Islands, imported foods such as rice and noodles received mixed reactions and

perspectives from people. In the village, awareness of health concerns popularised the term ‘chemical’ for rice (and supposedly noodles), as discovered from conversations and stories from the villagers. For example, walking around the village, one would hear villagers commenting: “Only chemical that we have for today”, or similarly, another would ask: “Any chemical for lunch, the stomach is empty?” when referring to rice. I asked Ednaliko and several others when I heard they had abstained from eating rice. Ednaliko confirmed she stopped eating rice and noodles because of the awareness that rice and imported ‘stored’ foods are high in sugar and processed in factories with machines and chemicals that are unsafe for human health and cause diseases in the Solomon Islands. To counter this, many advocate for *oli aenaguri’ ai*, going back to the land to grow local food is the way out, Rex and Diake stated. The concept of returning to the land and environmentally friendly agriculture in North Malaita, local groups such as the Kastom Garden Association and Bushman Farming Network (Kastom Garden Association, 2012; Spann, 2018), are advocating and facilitating agriculture training and introducing climate-resilient crops to mitigate ecological issues and food security.

It is a food and health issue as much as a cultural issue, as many view it. A cultural issue, as mentioned in Chapter Six, because increasingly, locals are attracted to imported and processed foods as ‘easy food’, and many consider gardening as *oko iida neri*, meaning ‘you must sweat and get your hands on the ground. Although the villagers in Alafana give funny terms to describe imported food as ‘chemical and ‘dead foods’, they are ‘easy food’ and can be sourced from the village canteens, and with cash, one would purchase a bag or packet of rice with noodles and tins of tuna, for example. In many families’ homes, rice has become a staple food, bringing about the discussion around culture and well-being, as highlighted above. The health and well-being of the environment are also important considerations as they are closely tied to human well-being and society generally. As discussed in Chapter Six, locals described the land as *inomae*, a condition of being poor and destitute, requiring care and better management, or restoring the ecosystem through local knowledge and cultural practices. Using metaphors, such as *oli aena guri’ ai*, is not only about enhancing livelihoods and economic well-being of society and people but also understanding deep-seated conditions of a particular ecosystem and revitalisation of scarce natural resources of human dependence, such as forest foods and rivers that are integral with subsistence systems of the inland agriculture-dependent communities.

Rethinking Development as context-based and multi-faceted.

Oli aena guri ai is about returning to the land and developing from there..... People stay in the village and make sustainable improvements to their lives (Jones, personal conversation, 12/06/21).

Community development, or any development, is about people and *ofufua* (togetherness or unity). Alafana School is a created vision rooted in *ofufua*.... We started *ofufua* in Faeniwata and started a school but failed because people broke the unity we built. Alafana School and the community need to maintain *ofufua* to progress our development vision (Maka Faiau, interview, 12/2/21). Endogenous

Local narrative and perspectives about developments entailed the concept of return to the root as expressed in the metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* grounded on local context and indigenous modes of production. As Jones, a secondary school teacher, and Maka Faiau described the metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* imply a land-based and localised or collective development thinking. It is also important to understand also that as explained in the previous chapter about rethinking of community development grounded and expressed in conceptual name *Alafana*. The underpinning aspects are the cultural and spiritual wellbeing, and participatory democracy, which incorporates the 'endogenous process of collective participation' (Chambers, 1988). The concept of *oli aenaguri'ai* and imagined *alafana*, ideal community and state of wellbeing supports post-development thinking as proponents advocated about creatively engaging and enhancing local potentials and institutions about alternative development models (Gibson-Graham, 2014; Ratuva, 2010; Regenvanu, 2010).

As narrated in Chapter Two, the formulation and adoption of the name Alafana represent the eight inland villages' shared vision and unified identity in appropriating *ofufua* (united effort or togetherness) based on kinship and common beliefs away from individualistic and capitalist exploitation, which has consistently undermined society's values of family and kinship. In multiple ways and conceptualisations, the people have theorised in rich tandem about *alafana sukulu*, an ideal or model education. In facilitating community education facilities like the Alafana School, according to informants, these facilities should reflect and provide education that accommodates society's cultural and spiritual values. This was reflected in local narratives in Alafana School's motto: "Loving God, Loving Education", reflecting people's spirituality and religious values. Locals also define *alafana toaa*, an ideal or model

community that encompasses cultural and spiritual values, economic needs, and sustainable community well-being. As Jones described above, the underlying notion of development condenses in the concept that “people stay at home and collectively engage in community development programs and activities”, for example, subsistence agriculture and projects that ensure community participation and ownership.

From the perspectives of local informants, development should be imagined and defined beyond the parameters of economic development. This would include intangible assets such as social capital, for example, cultural values and traditional and social relations that ‘glue’ or bond the community together and build solidarity (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). This indigenous perspective resonates with the UN definition of development as being multi-faceted and encompasses the culture, ecosystem, traditional knowledge, and beliefs of Indigenous people and society (IPBES, 2019). The well-being of Indigenous society is inseparable from the well-being of the environment and non-human other species of cultural and spiritual significance, as discussed in Chapter Four, which defines social and ecological interconnectedness. According to my research findings, cultural aspects, spiritual rituals, and prayers are considered ‘basic human needs’, meaning things that people do not live without to sustain their way of life and livelihoods. The research finding supports Ife and Tesoriero’s (2006) community-based alternative development in the age of globalisation into multifaceted dimensions, including economic, social, political, environmental, personal, spiritual, and cultural. From research, I propose that the Baelelea in theorising *oil aenaguri’ai* is about enhancing all aspects to address and sustain all aspects of society, rather than economic growth and the modernisation model of development dictated by a capitalist and westernised worldview. It was also revealed by other studies, for example, the recent work of Scheyvens et al. (2023) in the Pacific, that the strength and resilience of Indigenous societies and their traditional skills combined with cultural systems, social capital and access to customary land to ensure that their well-being is maintained despite significant decreases in household income” (p. 111). I would also argue that a Baelelea perspective expressed in the *oli aenaguri’ai* metaphor amplifies the emphasis and rethinking of going back to basics and the value of traditional economy in times of economic shock, but also to revitalise the culture and total well-being as other Indigenous Pacific scholars have pointed out (Kabutaulaka, 2020; Ratuva, 2010; Regenvanu, 2010).

The people of Alafana imagined a context-based and inclusive development that incorporates economic goals and agriculture livelihoods (farming) activities that are more sustainable and do not compromise cultural values, local knowledge, and the well-being of

people and the environment on which they depend. Reforestation, as described in Chapter Five, encourages rural communities' participation in replanting trees; many informants suggest that it should involve the planting of local tree species that restore the native forests and soil, then exotic tree species, like teak, that locals complained about causing the soil to become poorer and a harmfully dominant tree species over the native trees. This conception of development is also represented in other research on Indigenous communities, like Tuan and Barber (2013)³⁰ Noted from undertaken research with the indigenous minority mountain tribes in Vietnam advocating for more locally viable and ecologically sustainable projects of economic and social development that are appropriate to their local conditions and where local people can decide democratically how and what they produce, out of concern for the well-being of themselves and their environment.

In contextualising sustainable agriculture and development, from my research, people theorise about cultural values and principles like *go'nia*, meaning to 'nurture and care', as for an infant or something delicate, which I may argue defines culturally grounded resources management concepts and practices. My informants also describe contemporary experiences that undermined their subsistence system as *anikorua*, to eat it in infancy; *anifunua*, to eat without replanting or investing; and *animaelia*, meaning 'eat something to death' without spare that describes the social behaviours of many today regarding livelihood and business undertakings.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, ecological changes, and Chapter Six, culture change, in Baelelea, the people today are exposed to and participate in a mixed economy and lifeways dictated by cash exchange. The rural taro farmers interviewed expressed that people wrestled with the idea of community-based agriculture production based on taro and local crops to engage in the capitalist market, but at the same time, they practised their traditional knowledge and maintained connections to the land. On the contrary, as highlighted in earlier chapters, cash crops like cocoa and coconut are viewed by people as disempowering, displacing the native ecosystem and cultures. Its economic productivity depends on the export market prices, thus causing issues of livelihood insecurity and creating economic wealth disparity between individuals or families who own plantations and those who do not have plantations.

The emphasis on the importance of traditional economy (also known as subsistence economy, custom economy) provides an alternative to unsustainable orthodox macro-

³⁰ SEE SPREI Publications on livelihoods sovereignty and community development.

economic strategies for growth and development, resonates with Regenvanu (2010) on Vanuatu concept of traditional economy defined and pursued in terms of land, the culture and local resilience (Anderson & Lee, 2010.; Ratuva, 2010). This would require new ways of integrating the cash economy and political institutions to work sustainably within communal structures and resource ownership. McCormack and Barclay (2013) noted that “While heuristically it is useful to contrast capitalist and non-capitalist social systems, in practice once societies come into the orbit of capitalism people adapt elements of capitalism to suit their aims” and local context. For Alafana, the people theorise and gradually foster new and innovative ideas to meaningful and sustainably engage in the cash economy without compromising the traditional economy based on agriculture and the sustainable use of land-based resources. This is because, as highlighted in Chapter Five, the pressure of engaging in mono-culture coconut and cocoa has negative implications on the biodiversity and cultural landscape.

Rethinking power dynamics and sovereignty.

The metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* can further be defined as a politicised rhetoric of resistance to globalised lifestyle and exploitative capitalism, manifested concurrently through experienced climate change, health and wellbeing issues. This is often reflected in grassroots movements and contestation in the name of ‘sovereignty and local control of cultural, livelihood, and environmental resources. In this section, I narrate a community-organised protest at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic that exposed multiple issues of resistance and contestation against what people considered a global influence. I was in Auki, the provincial capital, in February of 2022 when the Solomon Islands reported the outbreak of COVID-19 cases in Honiara and provincial towns, including Auki, which led to the government announcing stringent lockdown measures.

In West Baelelea, the people organised a ten-kilometre road community march that concluded with a rally at Aaro sports field. This was in defiance of strict COVID-19 orders by the government. The protests highlighted multiple issues, including resistance to COVID-19 vaccination and control that many rural villagers in Baelelea see as systematic control and fear. I did not attend but watched shared video clips and pictures on Facebook (Figures 43 and 44) and later made a follow-up phone call and had conversations regarding the protest march. I also learned the Police and the Prime Minister’s Office were alerted and enquired with people

on the ground about what happened, in breach of a nationwide lockdown and prohibition of any public rally, let alone a public march of several hundred people. In the phone conversation, Suiti, the youth leader, provided an engaging narrative:

In the protest march, we are not protesting any government. What we do is we are protesting to the man above (meaning God) to keep us safe in our small jurisdiction. In the eyes of the world and the Solomon Islands, we are small, but we are sovereign people living in our small jurisdiction. We pray to God to spare us from the coronavirus crisis that has killed powerful countries and governments around the world. Here in West Baelelea is very small, just families and community, and we are vulnerable to all kinds of issues that come from the outside world. So least people mistaken us for the protest, we are not against any law because we live in our sovereign territory in the village and all we want is protection from sick, political and economic hardship that the world faces.



Figure 43: A community March in West Baelelea (J. Otofalu, 2022)



Figure 44: Crowd convened at Arao field with banners and Malaita flag (J. Otofalu 2022).

Apart from COVID-19-related messages and fears experienced globally and, in the Pacific, for example, in Papua New Guinea, which pointed to breed abundant fear centred not vaccine hesitancy but “full-blown opposition” (Macdonald, 2021a, p. 2), which is equally true for Solomon Islands. For my research interest, the undercurrents captivated in the protest entail issue of sovereignty and resistance long embedded in Malaita local narrative and history traced to popular movements, for example, the Massina Ruru in the decades of the 1950s (Akin, 2013) and such witnessed in recent past and the community march in February of 2022. The contestation is something communities and individuals like Ednaliko for example cannot distinguish as separate from other issues of capitalism, globalisation and imported foods and systems that according to her, undermined local foods and culture and compromised healthy lifestyles, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. For Baelelea, the contestation and struggle between what I described in Chapter Six as *biranga* based on indigenous ways and culture and *biranga aeasi*, the introduced ways and cultures overseas, including capitalist ways and interests, are obvious and ongoing.

In summary, as discussed above, my research findings support a mode of development that incorporates local ways and modes of production “rather than being driven by alienating objective processes beyond human control, is driven by the knowledge-based conscious regulation of those objective processes so that they can be aligned with human emancipation and the flourishing of human wellbeing” as Baber (2023) has pointed out. In my theory of *oli aenaguri'ai* can also be viewed and defined as a politicised rhetoric of resistance to the negative

impacts of exploitative capitalist projects (e.g. logging of native forest resources), unquestionable consumption of processed foods (which are often not very healthy, e.g. white rice, noodle, etc.), western materialism and individualism. The contemporary changes encroach on people's ways of life and land brought significant challenges to 'sovereignty' and communal or clan-based structures that define and shape social and ecological relations.

Summary

In the chapter, I have discussed and shown how metaphors can foster connectedness, care, and deep consciousness about the environment and development. Using the metaphor *oli aenaguri'ai* exemplifies Baelelea's ontology of intertwined and complex social and ecological interconnectedness by fostering a deeper understanding of culture, traditional ecological knowledge, consciousness, and respect for the environment. As discussed in the chapter, the metaphor of *oli aenaguri'ai* depicts Baelelea's conceptualising of development that enhances total well-being without compromising the environment and culturally-spiritually embedded values and qualities. In other words, it is a community-based development that is defined beyond just economics but creatively refocuses on and utilises capital resources and talents. Without such a shift and failure to invest in the village community and locally relevant sustainable livelihoods, there is a recipe for social unrest and wastage of resources when it comes to government. The people of the nation-state of Solomon Islands have learned enough hard lessons from history and contemporary occurrences. Therefore, it is time for serious rethinking and redrawing of a development model that ensures rural people creatively take the initiative to mobilise and organise as the epicentre of development.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In my thesis, I have focused on presenting a comprehensive and accurate account of the Baelelea ontologies of social-ecological relationships and how contemporary changes have impacted them. I have used the tree metaphor that emerged from this analysis to explore the rethinking of economic development in the rural villages of the Solomon Islands, drawing from my study of the Baelelea inland community of Alafana on Malaita. My research findings also contribute to multidisciplinary studies of the culture and people of Malaita, particularly Baelelea, North Malaita. Lastly, I have aimed to draw general conclusions about social and ecological change dynamics influenced by colonialism, missionisation, and capitalism. Here, I review my findings in the context of the themes outlined in my introduction.

The main idea I have pursued throughout this thesis is how the Baelelea inland villagers on Malaita have conceived of and fostered social and ecological relationships amidst society's exposure to contemporary changes. Their encounters with new ways (*biranga falu*) have shifted the balance of social and ecological relations. Historical and contemporary changes brought about by colonisation, missionisation and capitalism undermined the culture and traditional beliefs based on a spiritual connection with nature and the environment. My informants in Alafana used the medium of myths and metaphors to elaborate on context-based indigeneity rooted in total well-being. In merging Baelelea indigenous perspectives with narratives about contemporary changes, my Baelelea informants have constructed an ideological and cosmological singularity within a context of extensive social and ecological change. They have posited a foundational identity and rootedness to place and culture that can underpin meaningful future development.

Looking back

As outlined in Chapter One, this thesis's overarching aim was to investigate the dynamics of social-ecological relations and contemporary changes in the Baelelea inland community of Alafana, as they had been forged by the intrusion and influence of colonialism, missionisation, and capitalism on Baelelea society and people. More specifically, the research sought to gain insight into the cultural and social frameworks through which inland Baelelea people perceive

and relate with their landscape: their environmental epistemology; their subsistence livelihoods, their religious orientation to the environment, including sacred oral traditions and spiritual beliefs; and, lastly, how they conceptualise livelihood sustainability and natural resource management as they are drawn increasingly into exploitative capitalist spheres of influence and globalised systems and ideologies.

In framing the above broad research focus, the following research questions were asked and addressed in the thesis: How do the Baelelea people living in Alafana perceive and interact with the environment? How do people forge active social and cultural relationships with land and the environment? What subsistence activities do the people engage in, and what traditional beliefs and practices underpin their subsistence systems and lifeways? What traditional knowledge and cultural values influence subsistence systems and lifeways? What are the cultural landscape features of importance to people? What cosmological beliefs and spirituality have people observed or have changed? What environmental conditions and salient transformations do people experience in the inland communities in Alafana and Baelelea? How do people perceive and conceptualise social and ecological relations amidst encroaching contemporary changes and challenges?

Here, I will provide an overarching summary of the research aim under broad themes that emerged from addressing these research questions. I drew on prior experiences and knowledge being an insider to the research and a few examples are included in Chapter Two, but the primary focus is about telling my informants' stories and experiences. Although I started with a broader interest in social and ecological changes, I was fascinated by the richness of cultural knowledge stored and transmitted through myths and oral history, which informed and shaped multifaceted aspects of Baelelea's worldview and interaction with the environment and other non-human beings. I felt a tremendous sense of privilege being engaged in the research and hearing the rich perspectives and powerful stories, and the fascination they stirred broadened and shaped this research outcome.

My initial aim was also to capture a broad range of views and perspectives of different groups of people, including young people. Engaging in the field, however, the focus was more on the perspectives and stories of older men and women, and I recognise that this is reflected in the research findings. In the field, my engagement and focus were drawn towards describing traditional knowledge in the medium of myths and oral histories. The elders that I interviewed and of which many of their stories and perspectives are documented in the thesis were amongst

the last generation who have had experiences of, and had practised, the abandoned traditional religion of the ancestors before being converted to Christianity in the late 1960s and 1970s. Another feature of Alafana, as described in Chapter Two, is that it is a territory that is geographically and culturally situated between two worlds. The mountain bush, which people depict as the territory associated with the past, and coastal villages which locals associate with modernity. It felt important therefore, that I capture the stories and lived experience of Baelelea elders to inform the present and future aspirations and development trajectories of the Baelelea people.

From my research experience, I discovered many value-based links between the indigenous Baelelea perspective and dynamic social and ecological changes including contradictions and contestation between the capitalist relations and indigeneity or the local ways and culture. From observations and stories, informants have narrated their experiences of contemporary social and ecological changes. While many of these would be considered specific to the local context, it is evident that they are extensions of anthropogenic interference with nature and the environment, including the contemporary global issue of climate change. It has also been pointed out by informants that, like the Malaita-wide experience, the cultural and ecological changes and transformations they have experienced can be attributed to the influence of colonialism, missionisation and capitalism, which I will expand on in the following sections.

Baelelea ontologies of interconnectedness

In Chapter One, I outlined indigenous ontologies of the interconnectedness of humans with nature and non-human other species in Baelelea. My findings of the Baelelea ontologies of interconnectedness were discussed in Chapter Four, and these resonate with Hau'ofa's (1993) description of an Indigenous Pacific perspective in that the Baelelea conceives of an environment that includes not only land and the plants and animals that inhabit it but also as a place that is populated with spiritual forces. This suggests a similarity to Hau'ofa's (1993) interpretation; they do not see the world in microscopic proportions but rather in epic proportions exemplified by myths and oral histories that entwine nature with the supernatural world. What has also become clear from my informants in Alafana in particular, is that although they have abandoned the traditional religion and rituals of the ancestors and joined Christian

churches, indigenous perspectives and cosmological beliefs still exist. They are expressed in cultural practices, and in relations to life experiences and phenomena. Examples of traditional beliefs include the presence and manifestation of ancestor ghosts through dreams, crying insects at certain times of the day, and birds singing, all of which were highlighted in Chapter Four. The observed and shared perspective of the Baelelea people informants depict this holistic view of the world to include spirits that are present as part of nature represented in powerful historic narratives and aligning with social phenomena. This is a conception of the world bigger than the physical space on which they dwell, including the cosmological beliefs and fostered social relations with the environment and non-human other beings.

Also, as discussed in Chapter Four, local narratives are represented in the cultural domains of oral history, myth, and totems associated with a particular tribal land. It is through these mediums that people foster and validate the cultural connections to the land and the common ancestor. My research findings and thesis support Berkes statement in relation to Indigenous people:

...ecological aspects of tradition cannot be divorced from the social and spiritual. Stories and legends are part of culture and indigenous knowledge because they signify meaning. Such meaning and values are rooted in the land and closely related to a “sense of place” body of knowledge, practice, and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment (Berkes, 2008, p. 6).

For Baelelea, indigenous knowledge and relationships with nature are wrapped in countless metaphors and imaginaries. In Chapter Four, the perception of land as *gaakolu* (our mother) resonates with the concept of humans and non-human other beings, including totemic plants and animals, who are viewed as kin and members of an “earth community”. My research findings based on myths and oral histories support Salmon’s (2000) concept of kincentric ecology developed in relation to the perception of the Raramuri people in Mexico that humans and non-human other species are kin and members of an extended ecological family and traced from the same ancestry and origin. Such perceptions underscore a deep consciousness and awareness of the social and natural world, and human dependence on nature’s resource as that from a mother. In the case of my research this includes the ancestor spirits that my informants view as permanent members of the clan land and as living descendants.

Connectedness is further illustrated by *gaano gaakolu* which is embedded with the notion of spiritual connection to the ancestors. In Chapter Three I explore the foreign notion of landownership (Burt, 1994a). From my research, should land be defined in terms of ownership, then according to my informants, the ancestors would be the true landowners. This conception of land underscores the notion of land as sacred, both from the embodiment of land as *gaakolu* (common earth mother) and ‘ownership’ of the land by ancestors who are buried in the land and so permanently inhabit it and are present as part of the land. The ghosts of ancestors traverse the land as spiritual guardians. This Baelelea cosmological belief in the ongoing activities of ancestor ghosts, as narrated about encountered incident when the telecommunication tower was being built supports Jacka’s (2001) documented beliefs and perspectives of the Ipiili people of Porgera Valley in the west-central highlands of Papua New Guinea on the interface of land and development setbacks, people believed to be caused by enraged ancestor spirits.

As discussed in Chapter Four the Baelelea conception of land as *gaano gaakolu*, meaning ‘mother below is our mother’ is further conceived based on livelihood support and sustenance. This definition underscores the notion of land as “the whole natural resource base, the foundation of their material and cultural existence” (Burt, 1994, p. 317) which as pointed out earlier for Baelelea, includes the spirit world and cosmology. As mentioned above the Baelelea believe that dead ancestors were actively present and an integral part of the land and, according to my research, this extends to the fertility of the land and practices around traditional crops. People still associate certain culture and traditions of taro as inheritance passed down from the ancestors defined in terms of *mamana ana alo* (spiritual gifted wealth of taro). According to local narrative the inherited *mamana* is said to be traced back to a particular ancestor or *biu-wane*, the clan or family group. My research found that this belief also applied to fertility of the land as Harold Ross (1973) revealed about the Baegu inland tribes. It is underscoring the Baelelea conception of land as common earth mother and the subsequent association with the ancestors, thus making land sacred, inalienable and the foundation of cultural existence. This further underscore the cultural understanding of land as basis for ‘making a living’ providing not only food and other natural resources but also enhancing social capitals of living together in dignity with each other and the environment. As discussed in Chapter Five, because of capitalist influence and motivation, viewed ‘making money’ over the cultural concept of making a living which depicts commoditisation and extractive undertaking on the land which undermined land as embodiment of mother and property of the ancestors.

Furthermore, my research findings supports Gilberthorpe (2009) findings of the Fasu people of Papua New Guinea that asserted “The connection between individual and landscape is realised through a number of trajectories” (p. 127). One of which is as Gilberthorpe (2009) further state is “through the conceptualisation of a core, representing rooted identity, and of arteries leading out from the core, representing extended ties and extended identity. Every clan is rooted to the area they inhabit through association with a clan name and a clan totem” (p.127). As depicted in my research, and discussed in Chapter Seven, the use of tree metaphor enlightened this forged living relations and engagement with nature, humans being an integral part of nature and the landscape. In using the metaphor of a tree and its roots, reflects how my Baelelea informants conceptualise and situate interconnected relations and rootedness to the clan and land to which they culturally identify through common ancestry and history. Using metaphors, they incorporate elements of myths and beliefs into cultural knowledge that forms the basis of local narratives, identity and social relations that are orientated towards environmental features. Social connections, as illustrated in Chapter Three, kinship ties and identity by *futaa* or blood line and connections. For example, *futaa ni keni*, are considered extension or support group to the core group or *biu wane or futaa ni wane* who are considered the head of the clan. Both connected to a common male ancestor and particular territory and have somewhat equal access and rights of settlement and identity to a land of their ancestor.

Conscious and continuous engagement with nature.

One of the questions addressed in the thesis is about how people forge active social and cultural relationships with the land and environment. In several ways I have presented findings that illustrate Baelelea's consciousness and continuous engagement with the environment through subsistence activities and through beliefs. As mentioned earlier and in Chapter Four, Baelelea people viewed nature, including the spirit world, as *do mauri*, that which is living and active. The social-ecological interaction is, therefore, a two-way flow of energy and information. What happens in the social realm affects nature and vice versa. What happens in the natural and spirit world affects social phenomena and human experiences. The Baelelea world is exemplified in the medium of dreams, reading of the natural time clock and the different seasons, and crying birds and insects, which convey special messages and information.

My research has shown that it is through this deep consciousness and continuous engagement with nature that relations are nurtured beyond just a material and economic

engagement with the natural world. From my findings and background knowledge of the Baelelea world, I have found that people are conscious of the environment in a way that, for example, particular crying insects or birds carry a certain cultural construction and interpretation, supporting Steven Field's (2012) observation that the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea feelings about birds are a complex and multilayered cultural configuration that intersects with other areas of thought and actions (p. 44). It is through continuous engagement and consciousness about nature and the environment that people create new meanings and relations of their world. For example, as described in Chapter Four, the simple ritual of calling of a child's name by the mother at the end of the day as the family returns home from the garden was consciousness engagement with nature and to ensure health and wellbeing of her child. This example reinforces relationality with the forest and an understanding there are physical, social, and spiritual boundaries within the same ecosystem.

Four ways of living for the people of Baelelea were defined in Chapter Seven: *To'ambu* (living in holiness), *to'mamana* (living in the truth), *to'o'olo* (living in righteousness) and *to'ofu* (living in unity) all of which anchor the conception of living in rootedness and dignity. The ways of living illustrated in Figure 45 overlay the diagram of the Baelelea worldview presented in Chapter 4.

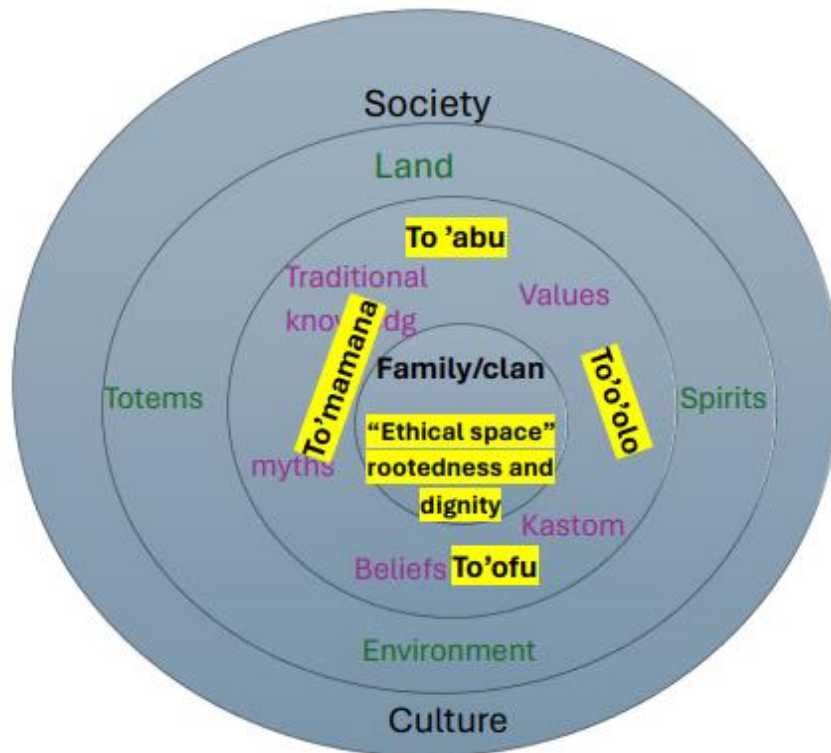


Figure 45: Baelelea worldview illustrate ways of living and connectedess.

As represented in Figure 45, in Baelelea the culturally grounded ways of living are informed by and rooted in beliefs, cultural knowledge, and values. Whilst the exposition of define cultural variables are deep and complex and not easily summarised so simply, nevertheless my findings underscore what Gegeo (1998) defined as “living in rootedness” and “living in dignity” and the notion of ‘good life’ from a Kwara’ae epistemology. That in my theory and from Baelelea perspective, people further define the notion ‘rootedness’, dignity and ‘good life’ based on the ‘four ways of living’ as stated above. I could also further theorise that as it has been and by combining deep consciousness of and a continuous engagement with nature that according to my informants to include consciousness of their ancestors, that people have been able to cultivate a profound sense of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness with the world around them. More so, from a holistic approach this has fostered a deeper understanding of human (person-to-person) and non-human (person-to-nature) relationships in the universe, leading to greater well-being, fulfilment, and ecological awareness (Berkes, 2008; Kabutaulaka, 2022). These research findings, similar to those reported elsewhere for Indigenous societies, depict an interconnected and deep “sense of place” that, in Baelelea ontologies, means that ecological aspects of tradition cannot be divorced from the social and spirits of the ancestors, which defined sacredness and hold values rooted in the land as (Berkes, 2008, p.6).

Despite these, my informants also lamented the progressive loss of such knowledge by the younger generations, as shown by examples presented in Chapter Six, due to less time spent on village subsistence activities and chores. For much traditional knowledge remains in living memory and practice, as for the elders interviewed. To ensure inclusive and sustainable development in Baelelea and elsewhere in Malaita and Solomon Islands, I support the view by Kabutaulaka (2022) presented broadly in the context of the Pacific; he noted that “Development should also include person-to-nature relationships where there is recognition of the natural environment’s personhood and its role in the wellbeing of human being (p. 51). As I have narrated in Chapter Four regarding the place and role of myths and totems, Kabutaulaka (2022) further adds, “Most Pacific Island societies have totems that connect tribes or clans to animals and plants, and stories that connect them to rivers, lakes, ocean, and so forth. These relations dictate how we relate to and treat the natural environment.” (p. 51). My research informed and supported this perspective that for Indigenous people, totems, myths, and oral history remain underscore and foster interconnected social and ecological relationships. More should be documented and conserved to inspire cultural awareness of the environment and rethinking of

development that is anchored on Indigenous peoples' values and knowledge, contributing to enhancing total well-being.

Going back to “basic life” and agroecology

My research has illuminated many dimensions of the Baelelea engagement with capitalism, often misrepresented or overlooked by researchers because the focus has been on large-scale commercial development activities, for example, logging and mining, which had severe environmental and cultural impacts on society (Gilberthorpe, 2009; Minter et al., 2018). The impact of intensification of land use fostered initially by monoculture coconut plantations and other cash crops over the years has slowly but steadily transformed the ecosystem (Bayliss-Smith et al., 2003). In Chapter Five, I describe how the trends resulted in the systemic and consistent transformation of arable land into coconut plantations, intensive land use, and rarea. This forced people to seek alternative forms of livelihood and drove them towards wage labour and cash income.

Like most rural Malaita communities, Alafana faces multiple changes and challenges to their indigenous “way of life” and environment due to the increasing influence of the modern cash economy. Gegeo (2001) points out for the nearby Kwara'ae that many changes have been “brought about by poorly planned and culturally ill-conceived developments” (p. 492) that negatively impacted indigenous societies' culture and natural biodiversity. Protecting the indigenous landscape from such insidious influences has become a mutual concern of anthropologists, conservation practitioners and indigenous populations alike (Brown & Verschuuren, 2019; Walter & Hamilton, 2014). And in most cases, as Colin Filer (Filer, 2018) points out, the local resistance to ecologically damaging activities occurs only after the environment is damaged, while at the beginning most people are highly enthusiastic for the benefits they expect to receive.

In my research, monoculture coconut plantations that the people pursued with optimism in the 1960s and 1970s as mentioned in Chapter Five has resulted in degradation and permanent transformation of near coastal arable land and ecosystem that that many I spoke with later lament. As Colin Filer (2017) from large mines and development dilemma in Papua New Guinea that fuelled local resistance to ecologically destructive activities in effect that has also been seen in relation to logging in Solomon Islands (Minter et al., 2018)

I would said that in rethinking development from an indigenous and culturally grounded perspective, is about protecting cultural resources and values attached to biodiversity that are threatened by human induced activities and exploitative development (see Randy, 2002; Simon et al., 2016). As people increasingly engaged in capitalist economy, people also need to create ethical and social awareness of spiritual values and wellbeing of the environment that equally results in enhancing the livelihood and wellbeing of rural communities and people. Traditional knowledge systems and values attached with forest and river management systems for example could form the basis for community-based development and sustainable resource management, applicable in coastal marine ecosystem as well as forest and land based management system (Simon et al., 2016) as destruction of either system have interconnected implications.

Gilberthorpe (2009) noted “When isolated indigenous populations are faced with global intrusions, they are forced in one way or another to act on deep-seated indigenous knowledge to make sense of things” (p.122). Faced with capitalist intrusions and alienating impacts of globalisation on the culture and environment, as elaborated in Chapter Seven, locals engage in conversation and theorising about development which is context-based, and that is about improving the total wellbeing of people and the environment and incorporates traditional knowledge. Rural infrastructure development, for example the telecommunication tower described in Chapter Five that has become a new symbol of dominance by outside powerful force with cultural and ecological implications. The powerful influence of mobile phones and the dominant tower structure project a new trans communicative magic that intruded, transformed, and forged a new behaviour local described as *akalo baebae*, translated ‘a taking magic’ which immensely reoriented and added new dynamics to the cultural landscape.

The focus on the relationships between local traditional knowledge and the landscape are now recognised as being vital to sustainable development outcomes and have become increasingly important to agroecosystem science in developing nations (Wezel and Jauneau 2011). Nevertheless, according to my research, this requires more attention and better management in Baelelea. Deforestation and loss of ecosystem services and resources has resulted in a loss of cultural knowledge, and traditional subsistence systems as key elements that connect people to the land and history. Using metaphors such as *Oli aena guri ai*, can guide and inform. *Oli aena guri ai* is not only about enhancing livelihoods and economic well-being of society and people but also about understanding the deep-seated conditions of a particular ecosystem and revitalisation of scarce natural resources on which humans depend. This includes the forest foods and rivers that remain integral to the subsistence systems that inland

Baelelea tribes and communities like Alafana since time immemorable depends on and envisioned sustainable use and management.

This brings me to the next point about framing the thinking and development through the cultural landscape lens. Pungetti (2013) noted that cultural landscape consists of the physical and cultural resources, local perceptions and identity, environmental management practices, and socioeconomic and political systems (see Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 2008). It from this perspective that Berkes et al. (2000) argue that indigenous groups offer alternative knowledge and perspectives for ecosystem management. These include multiple species management, resource rotation, succession management, landscape patchiness management, and other ways of responding to and managing pulses and ecological surprises. As Berkes et al. (2000) further note that social mechanisms behind these traditional practices and the use of local institutions to provide leaders/stewards and rules for social regulation and cultural internalization of traditional practices based on indigenous world views and cultural values (p.1251). This from my research includes oral histories, myths, and beliefs as important connectors to the environment.

The careful study and understanding of landscape ecology is critical for designing effective conservation policies (Liu & Taylor, 2002; Skjeggedal & Clemetsen, 2018). Aswani and Vaccaro (2008) have argued that “The correlation of ecological structure and social use of a landscape is not just a descriptive endeavour. It is a fundamental step toward understanding human–environmental relations and developing integrative base resource maps for planning marine and terrestrial conservation” (2008, p. 325). As described in Chapters Five the diverse forest landscapes have been lost to Baelelea through clearing and planting for plantations and through intensification of agriculture. A process that continues and drive local motivation and engagement in the capitalist economy through planting of cash crops for the export market. Although biodiversity and environment caused by large scale commercial undertaking experienced in parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands (Frazer, 1997; Minter et al., 2018; Minter & van der Ploeg, 2023). From research the steady deformation caused by intensive gardening practice in populated regions such as in North Malaita is concerning. Also, informants have learned from what happened and need to take proactive (not reactive measures) to ensure sustainable land use and forest management.

In looking toward to a more sustainable future my Baelelea informants are informed and positive about posing questions and theorising about approaches and concepts such as

drawn in the metaphor *oli aena guri ai* – return to the tree root. In this way an emphasis on indigenous knowledge that incorporates myths and oral traditions, cultural values and environmental ethics can inform sustainable management and conservation in a meaningful way for the people of Baelelea. From the above conception and cultural landscape approach, indigenous resource guardians and users can negotiate and complement scientific ecological frameworks in and through created space where different worldviews can come together. Such approaches are emerging elsewhere from co-governance efforts for example as described for management of freshwater and marine environments by indigenous groups in Canada as an ‘ethical space’ (Ermine, 2007) and in New Zealand as a Waka Taurua framework (Maxwell et al., 2020). In doing so such an approach attributes intrinsic cultural value to the environmental resources over and beyond the ecosystem function.

Implications for development

In Pacific countries, including Solomon Islands, research on local livelihood systems and traditional ecological knowledge is extensive and an underlying focus of many community-based conservation and development initiatives (Barber, 2022; Fischer, 2018; Guo, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2019; Pollard et al., 2015; Simon et al., 2016; Spann, 2018; Walter & Hamilton, 2014). This is perhaps in alignment with global sustainable development goals and the emphasis on integration of indigenous knowledge as local solutions of global environmental problems. The challenges, however, as Walter & Hamilton (2014) noted, are about the “alignment of international conservation values with those of the Indigenous communities whose cooperation and support are vital” (p. 1). This is because, for indigenous people, as repeatedly pointed out by interviewed elders in Alafana, environmental degradation represents not merely the loss of biological species, but also the loss of culture, stories, and spiritual connections. As narrated by my informants and described in Chapter Four, environment features including birds, insects, and animals both in the sea and land that even amongst Christian populations, people still hold this traditional view as embodiments of ancestral spirits. This is tied to the belief that unless the ancestors permit the killing of animals, for example, sharks would be considered a violation of a cultural taboo.

In Chapter Six, Edanala described land and things on land as "inomae," a social condition of destitution and misery, which depicts Baelelea ontologies of the interconnection of humans with nature. Based on my research, I support approaches like those suggested by

ecologists Walter and Hamilton (2014), who proposed adopting a "cultural landscape approach as the ethical and organizational foundation of the conservation program" (p. 1). This approach involves constructing a conceptual model of the environment that reflects indigenous perceptions of the landscape. The model incorporates cultural, ideational, and spiritual values, along with other ecosystem services, and forms the basis for the conservation activities, priorities, and organizational structure of our programs (p. 1).

Whilst Walter and Hamilton (2014) were solely focussed on conservation programs, I posit that this applies to development more broadly, especially economic development. Economic development is directly concerned with indigenous and tribal groups in contexts such as in Solomon Islands, where many people still live on the land and for generations have been endowed by sustainably subsisting on the land. There is a need to seriously rethink development that is relevant and sustainable (Kabutaulaka, 2020). This is what David Gegeo (1998) refers to as development that is anchored in indigenous knowledge and indigenous understandings of the 'good life'. It is not about looking backwards. Rather, it is about creatively harnessing our people's experiences and values to build a better future in relation to their lived environment, which the people have been on for dependent generations.

The Indian activist and ecologist Vandana Shiva (2012) argued that local knowledge systems are disappearing and being colonized by dominant Western knowledge and the globalizing system. This argument, in the case of my research, is described in Chapter Five. As my research has shown, in Solomon Islands and Baelelea, monoculture coconut plantations support Shiva's (2012) argument that intensive corporate farming practices create unsustainable biological monocultures, which erode both biodiversity and cultural diversity. Hence the dominant scientific paradigm "breeds a monoculture of the mind" (Shina, 2012, p. 12). It makes local alternative knowledge systems disappear by destroying the possible conditions required for alternatives to exist. It does this through its 'superior' exclusivity and through a violent process of reductionism which destroys diverse local meanings. Shiva states that in local knowledge systems, there is no artificially imposed separation between 'resources': "The forest and the field are in an ecological continuum". Local agriculture is therefore modelled both on forest ecology and food supply (Shina, 2012, p. 14). This is reflected in today's mixed economic activities and livelihoods, as described in Chapters Five and Six. With respect to the loss of local knowledge systems, my informants were also alarmed by an increasing dependence on imported foods, especially rice, which many Solomon locals

considered easy food. Some of this concern comes from an awareness of the connection to health and wellbeing, but also that it undermines local garden food and agriculture knowledge.

Considering economic development from the sustainable agriculture perspective, what is required is an agricultural policy that takes as its starting point the idea that the resources available to most village communities for their needs are only finite and at risk of being seriously depleted if the current trajectory of development continues as it is now (Spann, 2018). The global experience is that if the commercialisation of natural resources, including extractive logging or intensive corporate farming practices, continues at the present rate, there is no guarantee that agriculture will continue to support all those people who are going to expect to be supported by it in the future (Haraway, 2015). It might be argued that the transformations of agriculture globally have led to the displacement and dispossession of the rural population, which is inevitable if there is going to be long-term capitalist economic growth. Historical experiences show that this is what happens with the development of this political-economic model of farming. In Solomon Islands, from my research and as others have suggested, there is a need to rethink and model an economics that does not exploit local natural and cultural resources but enhances community-based and sustainable production that does not alienate traditional crops such as taro with the rich cultural knowledge and traditions it entailed.

The rhetoric of community development, to mean economic development, is not altogether new, as pointed out in Chapter Five that in many small economies like Solomon Islands it was through the introduction of cash crops, namely coconut, cocoa, and Teak trees. The focus of such development that focused on the export market and the entailed assumption of trickle-down benefits in Solomon Islands as defined in its development policy has far more informed capitalism and modernisation theory (Frazer, 1993; Gegeo, 1998; Roughan, 2011; Spann, 2018). Instead, as Roughan (2011) noted the focus should not be dominated by attractive policies and big economic developments and “the big ‘D’ word!” but rather “on the Basic Life”. I align this thinking to what my informants were articulating when talking about *oli aena guri ai* as a possible alternative approach grounded on local connections and modes of production. Specific to agriculture, the Solomon Islands has over the last six decades invested in village agriculture-based economic development following the agenda set by the State and has been subordinated to national economic goals (Frazer, 1993; Spann, 2018). This is also true for reforestation, as highlighted in Chapter Five on the Teak reforestation scheme.

From modernisation economic development models, it was assumed that the pursuit of these goals would also bring benefits to local communities. National and local interests would coincide. That is now in doubt (Kabutaulaka, 2020; Spann, 2018) as exemplified in several agriculture schemes which target export markets, that people are drawn to one after the other, only to realise stringent barriers established by a system controlled by global market forces and restrictions. Maximising the production from village resources in the short term is now seriously jeopardizing the chances of being able to depend on these resources in the long term. From this perspective, national and local interests are not only incompatible, but they are also in conflict, as my findings about the Teak Tree highlighted in Chapter Six when high expectations of economic returns did not materialise. Similar conflicting stories are being told by rural farmers about other cash crops and tree planting (Bourke et al., 2006; Versteeg et al., 2017).

I postulate that what is required now is a readjustment of both national thinking and local thinking in keeping long-term local interests alive. Kabutaulaka (2020) for example pointed out that Pacific Islands, *talanoa/tok* stori should be forums for the discussion of “alternative ways of organising societies...[and] re-thinking ‘economic development’ and exploring new agendas, values, goals, process, and trajectories that are appropriate and affordable.” (p. 50). In the organization and practice of village agriculture, this would give priority to the satisfaction of basic needs on a sustainable basis. This would not necessarily mean returning to a subsistence economy without any market production. What it would mean is maintaining mixed production in ways appropriate to local circumstances and the satisfaction of local needs.

In situating my argument on the metaphoric expression *oli aena guri ai*, my findings support the emerging conversation such as pointed out by Kabutaulaka, amongst other Pacific Indigenous scholars about re-thinking ‘economic development’ (Ratuva, 2010; Regenvanu, 2010; Roughan, 2011). For example, in Vanuatu, Regenvanu (2010) emphasises the traditional economy in building resilience of indigenous communities. Similarly Ratuva’s (2010) argument of returning to the basics in terms of incorporating both formal and informal social protection systems to mitigate social and economic risks in the Pacific. As discussed in my thesis, this means incorporating social and ecological values and ethics that not only promote consciousness and create new vision and knowledge that underscore sustainable production, security and improved well-being of people and the environment.

Final comments

The trajectories and commitment to research the Baelelea inland communities and people on Malaita have not come with any ease, and some of my expectations and outcomes are not what I would have hoped for. There have been setbacks and shifts in my research due to experienced delays including the COVID pandemic, and I have identified some research gaps. One of these is a representation of other groups' voices and perspectives, for example, young people, with which to contrast the stories and perspectives of elders and adult informants. I mentioned this as a gap and potential area for future research to document and contrast the varying perspectives of people groups, who will be important agents of change in Baelelea and Malaita.

As for this research, as I hope to have shown in this thesis, the Baelelea, as reflected by the people of Alafana, are an intelligent, resilient, creative, and pragmatic group of people. Being faced with powerful influences of miss-ionisation, colonisation and capitalist intrusion, and despite losing rich traditions and rituals associated with the ancestors and tribal land, informants situated perspectives and beliefs contained in myths, oral history and social (or 'blood') relations to a common ancestor and clan remained relevant and significant. There is, however, expressed concern about losing such orally passed knowledge because, as is equally experienced, people are attracted to new ways. Indeed, their adept negotiation and management of the situation within which they found themselves by theorising and organising new ideas and visions, some of which materialised, forging development undertaking in Alafana that is more inclusive and hopeful. The challenge that confronted them, like that which Indigenous people of the world over have faced, resulted in a transformation of the landscape, but more so the culture and traditions that fostered balanced relations with the environment.

Baelelea cosmology, ontology, and knowledge, in short, the foundation and essence of their material and immaterial culture and lifeways as an ethnic group, were abruptly undermined by the missionaries and conversion. Not only were they led to believe that many aspects of their traditional culture were wrong, but they were urged to adopt new ways, replacing the old ways. Colonial intrusion through capitalist projects, wage labour recruitment and monoculture coconut plantations altered both the culture and native landscape. Because of this proselytization, much of the basic architecture of the indigenous religion was destroyed forever as Christianity came to occupy a prominent position in local life. But, while this meant that the sacred rituals and institutions that had hitherto underpinned their lives were never to be seen again, many local traditions and beliefs remained. The focus of the Baelelea has been

towards negotiating and integrating economic development and culture, pursuing this task through reciprocal transformation, that is, by making the Baelelea ways and modern ways complement each other. In the future, maintaining this may mean cultural education and teachings of moral values and ethics as part of the local school curriculum, or community cultural education and ongoing research supporting land-based environmental management and agroecology.

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Appendix 1: Ethical letter of approval

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

James Kwaimani Faiau
Dr Fraser MacDonald

2 March 2020

FS2020-07

Dear James,

Thank you for submitting your revised application to the D-ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. We are pleased to be able to give approval for your project, and wish you every success in your research.

Please continue to liaise closely with your supervisor, and to consult this committee again, should your proposed research change significantly.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Cooper'.

Dr Nathan John Cooper
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences

Appendix 2: Select Stories & Scripts

Scripts/tributes to my father, *Maka* Faiau

Maka Faiau is an important contributor to the thesis and generally my education journey generally. This piece carry some of his shared story and views as a gift to readers. It also narrates my positionality with my people and particularly with my father, now that through this thesis interested people and readers out there are privy to the stories that otherwise shared only within the secrecy of the *biu* (house) belonged to my clan. A *biu* (or *beu*) belonged to my father when he passed away in 2022, it leaves the impression on many of us that *biu e sui* or *biu e kwau na*, meaning “house of the last surviving leader of his generation has finished or empty.”

In Baelelea cultural context, *biu* is the welcome and entry point into the society. Any important visitor or person of worth is welcome into the *biu* and to see the head of the *biu*, otherwise a common saying in Baelelea “*tala bae loko, tatha amu*”, meaning: “road is there, you can pass to where you are heading”. As a local elite and researcher, my father’s *biu* served as my first entry point and my accommodation in the village. It paid off because during my research stay with flow of rich conversations from countless relatives and people who visited and passed through to see my father, who because of his health conditions confined to his *biu*, 24/7. And funny though, one of his jokes was “*Nau ku fula ana kula baku thaofa ura fanga bia kwa thaofa ura wane*” (I have reached a point I am hungry for food and hungry for man) as a way of telling his confinement reached a point he tastes for food and people with stories. I may not bring good stories, but the presence and days and night spent with him was full of shared stories and recalled memories (and prayers sometime middle of the night and early morning at 3 o’clock) many of which are audio recorded. As an indigenous Baelelean I was also heeded to the principle that the *biu* and stories (*unu*) of the father is foundational or baseline before attempting to understand the culture (*biranga*) and stories (*unu*) of another *biu* or clan. This principle is accompanied by the caution that people of another *biu* might only fool you, because of one’s ignorance and lack of base knowledge of your *biu*. This is only a condensed about my late father.

My father was a converted and committed Christian. He was married a pagan and got converted after two years of marriage. He, under the instruction of his father (tribal priest Kanafalu) was the first to move to start clearing the site where Alelengana is today, in 1966/7. For two years (1974-1975) he attended ‘Kakara SSEC Bible School’ (basic bible literacy class) from no form of education, expect few years of exposure and labor in the coconut plantations on Isabel and Bilua, in Western Province. He was, however, a very industrious, serious thinker and visionary leader and father as I came to understand him. I was born when he was over 40 years already in 1976 and after ten years of marriage. From his limited bible training in Kakara he served his local congregation at Alelengana and Faeniwata as SSEC pastor, until 1986 when he was asked to serve as missionary to Western Province, serving in three newly established SSEC local church for period of ten years. He retired and lived in the village and pioneered community development initiatives like Alafana Primary School and Water supply.

Being a convert from traditional religion of *akalo* and the old traditions he lived out many of them even as christian and missionary. A *biu*, he repeated told is a way of culture and must not be lost. *Biu* draws people to you, he said and *biu* make you a man, otherwise you are only

a boy billeted in someone's house or confined to your family home and that deter important visitors (men) not dare visit you.

It is unbecoming of me as one elite Baelelea to accommodate my father in my ground kitchen when he visited and stayed with me in Auki from September 2021 to January 2022 for medical and as he said "wanted to visit Auki for last time after ten years" due to confinement in the bush in Alelengana. Since my house in Auki was a two story, he could not manage stairs and protested living in a room on the ground floor. I remembered talking to another visiting elders: "my brother, I am man of prayer and *kastom*. I am happy to make my room in the kitchen. My *kokoos* (grandies) make a place for me in the brick room downstairs. But I said, no. I respect you, I won't live underneath the house." He returned to the village in January 2022 and on 14th February we lost him at the tender age of 95 years. I was beside him in his *biu*, when he called every *kokoos* together and uttered the words "I love all" and had a peaceful sleep and never got back to us. In the village, my father's presence and his *biu*, relatives (we all) conceived and speak of "we have a *thu'ua* (cover or protection) and *ainunufi* (shade tree).

My father's elder sibling Obed Otafalu died in 2015 and was buried at Faeniwata. Their middle sibling died as teenager from accident when he fell from a ngali-nut tree. My mother Mothenarii, also called Daminia was from To'abaita and the daughter of Keteau (of Fani'ili) and Muga'barafa (of Ainigaule) – the daughter of Suinao – a tribal leader/*wane inoto* in To'abaita.³¹

"We connected to Buroki land through our maternal ancestor, Barafa going back 5 generations. She was the daughter of Sufata of Manaio, who married our great-great grandfather Oto'afu as his third wife. Through intermarriage our family have other connections to Buroki, but through Barafa it was direct and recent. It was through Barafa, we have tight connection and clan rights to this piece of land, Manaio on Buroki. We also have rights given to us to access and harvest *ngali* plantations around here that we continued to enjoy today. Land properties like fruit trees, like ngali plantations were surrendered to us, as rewards for deed performed by or ancestors, and there are also ngali plantations by ancestor(s) that they continue to harvest and claim ownership over, again within Manaio piece of land on Buroki.

Kokowane Kanafalu decided that we moved here and establish this community. I see it was the will of God. That is why we have lived here more than 50 years now.....

I lived by this advice passed through my forefathers and recently my father that Buroki land, you do not claim anything on it, you only have the right to use and appropriate resources on the land for your survival and that of your children. The land belongs to people. But our connection is strong through blood and *adediana lae*." (Maka Faiiau, 2021)

Perspective on land:

In 'kastom' *gano ga'a kolu* ("land our mother). That is how view and relate to land, and things on the land. I can see a big difference with people today, they do not understand when I say land is our mother. This was what we were taught and brought up in, land is like our mother and is *ambu* (holy). Land includes everything, not just the soil. But the rivers, trees, stone, and creatures, they are all *ambu* because they

³¹ See Ian Hogbin (1939, p.72) account on a feast hosted by Suinao, *wane inoto* of Ainigaule in Tobaita. Suinao's traditional rival was Suu *wane into* Irobau who got the honor during the feast by Suinao's laying the obligation to be equally generous with 1000 taro and 5 pigs.

making *kwato* (planting stick), you don't just make *kwato* from any tree. There are people that believed to have *si akalo ni kilu* (particular spirit for healthy taro), that I don't know. What I know and practice is the conditions (*biranga*) related to the land and the crop that I am cultivating. Taro and any other traditional crops, keeping the conditions determine healthy growth and fruitful harvest.

Obed's perspective on verbs:

Only one kastom medicine I know for treatment of *fule* (sprling) health condition common in kids. Giving kastom medicine, like anything works on conditions and sensitivity of the giver. When one gives and the sick person is casted of disease, we said *wane abana e diana* (hand of the giver is good) or *wane unununa e diana* (image and sensitivity is good). There are people that *abada e a'ako* (their 'hand is chilly') and *nunuda ta'a* (has bad image) and body lack sensitivity to decern the environment. For example, there are different types of people, one can sense and tell the presence and spell of *akalo* (spirits) and *arua* (feminine witchcraft); another person will not sense anything. In kastom, they said the person has *nonina e diana* (body is alive) and can sense the environment. Another person is seen as *nonina e kenila* (have body of a women (weak person and can hardly sense or decern things).

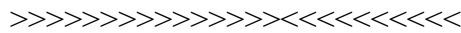
Obed's livelihoods and observed changes:

I live on land to support my family all my life. I finished school in Form 2 and lived all my life in the village. Beside food gardening, I planted betelnut, cocoa and coconut. They are my main sources of cash income. I do not concentrate on any one particular crop, but I cultivate practically everything in my garden, from taro, potato, cassava, yam, and vegetable in my garden. There are crops that I cultivate in separate plots, many in the same garden, but different plots.

I own small cocoa and coconut that I relay on for cash income, but one thing I realised is they do occupy the land and kill of any chance for other crops to use up the land. In my coconut plantation, I tried to grow *edu* (giant taro), *fudi* (banana), and fruit trees in between, but not a garden. In my plantation, I do mix cropping of coconut, cocoa and betelnut and it works well as beetle palm and coconut provide shade for my cocoa trees.

...A lot of changes with our young people, but generally everyone's attitude to land. The understanding and knowledge about land that we learned from *maka* (fathers) and *kokoki* (forefathers) is fast disappearing or not practiced and valued by the new generation. For me I learned from older people, my stepparents since my father died without me seeing him that land and what the land produces are our wealth. I lived with this understanding and always believe and applied certain passed on knowledge and it helped me a lot and I benefit working and living on the land. I did not make much money by working on the land, but I never go hungry or lack the basics of life in the villages. There is a saying in kastom '*o beta gano, gano ka beta oe*' (care for the land, she will take care of you). Nowadays, most younger people I doubt they understand this and have this mindset, because what I observed is that young people did not care for the land and our forest resources. Whenever where is drought, they set

fire and burn the bushes and chop down trees that they supposed not to do. The rivers and streams around here are becoming lifeless because ignorant people applied certain chemicals and pesticide, such as from mosquito nets to kill prawns and eels. In past our kastom is strong and everything is considered ambu, when elders say 'gano ne e ambu' (this land is holy) it became code of law, and everyone lived and observed it strictly.



Informant: Elder/Maka Duia (24 June 2021)

Duia is an elder of Marokafo with 20 kids. He was the big man, polygamist, and leader in organizing community feasts and programs. I had a conversation with him where he tells his personal story and perspective on land and the environment as a subsistence farmer.

I was born and grew in heathen and participated in the kastom feasts and activities as a young boy. Later my father decided that we abandoned heathenism for *Lotu*. We moved down from our home in the *tolo* mountain region and came down to lotu and became part of a small SSEM establishment about a kilometer on the hill from here. Later we relocate and settled here at Marokafo. It was during this time that my father decided we converted to Anglican Church, instead of SSEM. The reason I understand largely due to the fact that SSEM prohibit members from receiving of pride-price. The Anglican is little more accommodative of the local culture, including pride price.

Perspective on Land:

Land is our life and where we eat from. As people we live and depend on land for almost everything. We take care of the land and use certain knowledge on where the land is suited and/or what types of soil is best for growing of taro and other crops. Land is general, but important to know land have different soil type, some are red, black and mixture of sand like around here. Here in the *sifole* midway between the coastal and interior bush the soil is not that good for cultivation of taro, but very good for edu giant taro and yam. The best land areas for taro located further up the hill and mountain from here. We know from local knowledge, the name of the land area and those that were cultivated in the past.

Today the understanding of land and traditional knowledge on traditional farming technics is fast disappearing. The younger generation are less connected to the land. They just clear anywhere to grow taro, potato, or any other crops. In our time land areas area strictly allocated for each crow. Land area for taro, is strictly for taro and you will hardly plant anything other crops on it. The land area for potato you cannot plant taro. This is important because how certain crops use up the soil or how soil supports a particular crop is different. Also, this is to keep away diseases that might attach taro or cause potato to rot or not having good tubers. Today, people have poor

Appendix 3: Pictures



Assembling of taro (*oku alo*) contributions in heaps (Pictures 2010 during Usuilangi-Faudidiana Family program in Alelengana).



Biu (male house) at Samela in Baelelea bush (March 2022)



Informant and elder Gidi Betaofa of Faeniwata, Baelelea bush (May 2021)



Fau inia (Stone with writings) in Baelelea bush near Masilana (May 2021)



Masilana in Baelelea bush overlooking Oteabu, Kwainakwai, Takibakwa and Biluki tribal land towards Suu (Suafa Bay)



Mountain rain and fog over taro garden in Baelelea bush (March 2021).



Luma (family house in the foreground), *ooba* (oven shed on the left) and *fulau* (silt family house on the right). At background is *biu* (men's house) Fauforae homestead May 2021).



At Samela village *aena mae* funeral in Baelelea Bush (March 2022)



I posed with my elders in West Baelelea bush at Samela centre (March 2021).



Informant and elder Budunga harvesting *fali*, forest fern delicacy (June 2022)



Informant and aunty/*kokokeni* Bedi Takarii with granddaughter (June 2022)



Me, daughter Rhona, my aunty/*kokokeni* Lina (March 2022)



Me, my baby Eliana, her mom during many of our trips back to Alafana in Baelelea bush. Mountain ridge in the background is our Usuilangi tribal land. Faeniwata village located towards the left and Masilana village further behind the ridge (March 2022).