Solomon Islands: Colonisation and the complexity of nationhood

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Abstract
To many people, 'Solomon Islands' is little more than a name attached to a group of islands on a map, a place often associated with unrest and internal strife. That these islands are perceived as a totality, as a bounded entity, relates to the fact that they are identified by a single name and the fact that this name is now associated with a political entity, a nation state. Whether these islands can be said to represent a social entity is a rather different matter, one that is critical to our understanding of both the people who inhabit these islands and the political processes that have played a part in shaping their sense of identity. In this paper, I attempt to unravel some of the complexities of nationhood and identity in contemporary Solomon Islands society with reference to three readily identifiable metaphors: *island, betel nut* and *wantok* which were first used with reference to Solomon Islands by Bishop Brown (2003).

Introduction
In the light of recent events in the Solomon Islands, this paper sets out to demonstrate that contemporary Solomon Islands society could be better understood through the broad framework of the following metaphors: *island, betel nut* and *wantok,* metaphors that were first used with reference to the Solomon Islands by Bishop Brown (2003). Critical to the perspective adopted here is the notion of 'wantok', literally meaning in Pidgin English 'one talk' (someone with whom you share the same language). *Wantok* is used in Solomon Islands as a marker of social identity in two different ways. *Within* the islands, it is commonly used by people of the same cultural and linguistic background to refer to one another. In this context, it is an identity marker referring to people from the same geographical area, region, island or even province. *Outside* Solomon Islands, Solomon Islanders use the word *wantok* to greet one another or to refer to fellow Solomon Islanders generally or, indeed, to refer more widely to people from the Pidgin speaking Melanesian countries (including Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea). The word *wantok* therefore serves an important purpose as a marker of collective identity both at the individual and group levels. However, at the institutional and nation-wide level *wantok* identity could be complemented by the metaphor of the *betel nut*. That is, the outer wrapping (the betel nut husk) is the state or Constitution, and the inner core (the kernel) is *kastom*, the customs and practices of the people. Visitors to the Solomons know that Solomon Islanders often chew a mixture of betel nut, lime (made from burnt coral), and areca leaf (commonly known as *lif*), the last two providing additional flavour. Here, following Bishop Brown (2003), the lime and the *lif* are taken as symbols of the role of the church. In seeking to understand Solomon Islands society today, it is important to take account of the inner core (*kastom*), the husk (state/Constitution) and the lime and *lif* (the church), all of which are important aspects of *wantok* or Solomon Islander identity.

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What is symbolised in these metaphors is something that is absent from the Solomon Islands 'story' that was passed on to generations of school pupils in the past. Attending primary school in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was taught in social studies that the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña was the first person to discover these islands. He it was who named them after the biblical King Solomon. The main thoroughfare of the central business district (CBD) of the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara, is called *Mendana Avenue*. The once premier hotel of the CBD is called *Mendana Hotel*. Honiara's CBD itself is often referred to also as Point Cruz after one of Mendaña's Spanish galleons. Certainly, then, there are many reminders of Mendaña in the Solomons. However, Mendaña was by no means the first person to discover these islands. Soon after political independence, we began to teach our young people that Mendaña was certainly a first, the first foreign 'tourist'. The first people to discover these islands were the indigenous peoples themselves. That this self-evident truth needs to be emphasised demonstrates the important role that naming can play in historical and political awareness. Naming is, in fact, a critical aspect of that process of misrepresentation of history that has so often typified the process of colonisation.

To many people, Solomon Islands is little more than a name attached to a group of islands on a map, a name associated with a green, blue and gold flag with five stars, a National Anthem with sentimental lyrics (*God Bless Our Solomon Islands, From Shore to Shore*),[1] a legal Constitution, a Coat of Arms featuring native creatures and symbols and bearing the slogan *To Lead Is To Serve*, and its own Passport (a small green book stamped throughout with reminders that it is the property of the Solomon Islands Government). That these islands are perceived as a totality, as a bounded entity, relates to the fact that they are identified by a single name and the fact that this name is now associated with a political entity, a nation state. Whether these islands can be said to represent a social entity is a rather different matter, one that is critical to our understanding of the people who inhabit these islands, the political processes that have played a part in shaping their sense of identity, and the conflict that flares up from time to time.

Islands in a sea of islands

Solomon Islands, as the name indicates, is an island country. From a geographical point of view, this implies both location and spatial orientation. In terms of location, Solomon Islands lies in the wider South Pacific Islands or Oceania region, and sub-regionally in Melanesia. It is a tropical country, sharing a number of important characteristics with the other South Pacific Island states or countries. From a political perspective, the Oceania region is often said to be made up of small, scattered, isolated communities with open economies which are vulnerable to the vagaries of global political and economic factors. With reference to British occupation of the Solomons, Judith Bennett (1987, p. xix), has noted the extent of this vulnerability:

> Once the islands officially became a British possession, there was . . . a kind of inevitability about how the administration would finance itself, given the apparent abundance of land and labour. These developments were largely beyond the control of the fragmented peoples of the Solomons, but soon involved them largely in the world economy. On such a wide stage they could play only the most insignificant role.

The current vulnerability of Oceania is evident. Even so, it is possible to conceptualise Oceania in a different way – as a series of islands constituting a single entity (metaphorically an 'island').[2] The smallness, remoteness, and vulnerability of each of the politico-social 'islands' can be seen as being potentially offset by the fact that each of these 'islands' is part of a bigger 'island', potentially a formidable force, but currently, like the smaller politico-social 'islands' from which it is constituted, lacking the necessary unity and power to have any significant impact on the inequalities, the injustices and the disparagement that currently typify development and development discourse on the world stage (Hau'ofa, 1993a & b; 2000).

Solomon Islands as a political entity

As a political entity, Solomon Islands is located between 5 and 13 degrees south longitude, and 155.5 and 170.5 degrees east latitude. In the context of the South Pacific islands, it is one of the major island groups of Melanesia, larger than both Vanuatu and New Caledonia in terms of population and land mass, and, before independence, apart from Fiji, the largest of Britain's tropical dependencies in Oceania. The Solomon Islands group is a scattered island archipelago extending over 60,000 sq. km of sea and is oriented from the northwest to the southeast. It consists of six large, mountainous continental islands - 1,400 km from one extremity to the other and with a total land mass of 29, 785 sq km with hundreds of little islands and islets. The six major islands of the Solomons are Choiseul (also known as Lauru), New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita and San Cristobal (also known as Makira). These six islands also constitute six of the nine provinces that make up the provincial government system in Solomon Islands. The major islands are largely volcanic in origin, although Ontong Java (or Lord Howe) in the north and Sikaiana (Stewart Island in the northeast) are both coral atolls, while Rennell Island (in the south), which is home to Lake Tenggano, is a raised coral atoll. Of the six major islands, Guadalcanal is the largest, with a total land area of approximately 5,650 sq km. It is also the site of the country's national capital, Honiara.

Solomon Islands is the second largest country in the South Pacific region in terms of total land mass (after Papua New Guinea) and is third overall in terms of population, with approximately 500,000 people (after both PNG, with approximately 5 million, and Fiji, with approximately 900,000 people). On the whole, the islands of the Solomons are well watered by rivers and streams and many of the islands are overlaid by marine sediments and fringed coral reefs surrounded by lagoons. Two of the famous lagoons in the Solomons are also featured in anthropological studies, Marovo Lagoon by Edvard Hviding (1996) and Langalanga Lagoon by Pei-yi Guo (2001). Langalanga lagoon, or rather the people of Langalanga, near Auki in Malaita, are famous in the Solomons for their shell-money and ship building industries. Marovo Lagoon is being considered as a possible World Heritage site by UNESCO.

Societal overview

The current political and socio-cultural structure of Solomon Islands is related to its historical evolution. Although Solomon Islands as an entity came into existence only at the time of political independence, that is, on 7 July 1978, its roots are based on earlier migration and settlement patterns. In Melanesia generally, the indigenous foundation of contemporary society is widely known as *kastom*. The early migration and settlement of the indigenous people of the islands was followed in the 16th and 17th centuries by sporadic European contact. This contact took place initially through

seafaring explorations, followed by trading expeditions and later intense missionary activity. In the case of Solomon Islands, that historical wave of European adventure and travel into the south seas led to the declaration of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (B.S.I.P.) which involved direct political and administrative control by Britain. Solomon Islands became, in terms of modern political discourse, a protectorate of the British Isles, formerly a British colony or outpost (for more detail, see for example, Judith Bennett, 1987; Hugh Laracy, 1989).

Early settlers

Linguistic and archaeological understanding of the pre-historic period of the islands now known as Solomon Islands is limited although it is generally believed that the central Solomons were occupied by hunters and gatherers about 10,000 years before the present (B.P.) and that these hunter gatherers were later overrun by Neolithic peoples (who spoke a variety of languages belonging to the widely spread Oceania branch of the Austronesian language family) about 4,000 B.P. (Boutilier, 1981, p.265). These newcomers, who must have had a high level of marine technology which enabled them to cross the open seas between the islands, appear to have been agriculturalists who planted taro and domesticated chickens, dogs, and pigs. Archaeological fieldwork indicates that the island cultures enjoyed a remarkable degree of continuity over time (Rukia, 1989, pp. 3-13). In many important respects, contemporary Solomon Islands society reflects earlier patterns of indigenous society. For example, it is widely accepted that about 80% of contemporary Solomon Islanders continue to live in rural locations on the numerous islands of the Solomons. Wherever the ancestors of the present indigenous population of the Solomon Islands originated, and whatever their reasons for migrating to these islands, these settlers and their descendants adapted over time to their new environment and developed their own *kastoms* before the arrival of European explorers.

European exploration

In terms of written historical records, the first Europeans to visit the Solomon Islands were Spaniards who, under the command of Alvaro de Mendaña, set out from Peru in South America and landed on the east coast of Santa Isabel (Estrella Bay) in February 1568 (Boutilier, 1981, p.265). Mendaña then sailed through the central Solomons, skirmished with the islanders in an attempt to secure food, and eventually retired to Peru, believing, that the islands were rich in gold. In fact, what was often mistaken for gold at the time was one of three minerals – pyrite, chalcopyrite or weathered biotite mica: "The discovery of the fool's gold, exaggerated by sailor's talk, led to the islands being officially described as the Isles of Solomon in 1574" (p. 265). In a second expedition to the 'Isles of Solomon' in 1595, Mendaña established a settlement at Graciosa Bay on Santa Cruz, traditionally called Nendo. When he died, the remnants of the expedition departed for the Philippines although a small party of Spaniards did reach and settle in Makira. Later, other European explorers, including, in 1643, the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman visited the islands. In the late eighteenth century, a number of European explorers also visited the islands. These included Carteret (1767), Bougainville (1768), Surville, Comte de Laperouse (1788), Shortland (1788), and Ball (1792). It was, however, not until 1838 that a French navigator, d'Urville, confirmed that these were in fact the same islands that had been referred to by Mendaña as Islands of Solomon (Boutilier, 1981, p. 265).

These early European explorers had no immediate significant impact upon the lives of the islanders, although they did prepare the way for other Europeans, some of whom recorded their impressions of life in these and other islands or supplied information that was later used by others (see, for example, Charles Woodford, 1890; R.H. Codrington, 1891; Charles Fox, 1924; Walter Ivens, 1927; Cyril S. Belshaw, 1945 and 1954; Harold Scheffler, 1965; Ian Hogbin, 1969, and Judith Bennett, 1987). Boutilier (1981, p. 265) provides a brief description based on such sources:

> The Melanesian societies which the European explorers encountered were highly fragmented linguistically and geographically. Broadly speaking, the islanders were interior-dwelling, up-country, swidden agriculturalists (later known as 'bush people') or coastal-dwelling fisher folk (known as 'saltwater people'). In kinship terms, they might be matrilineal or patrilineal depending on the island or part of the island where they lived. Most of the Solomon Islanders lived in small villages or hamlets seldom exceeding two hundred people. Their wood carving, canoe making, and other crafts were highly developed and artistic. They indulged in fairly constant interclan warfare of a largely ritualistic, honour-readjusting variety on a small scale, though fairly large head-hunting raids did take place in and from the New Georgia archipelago until early in the twentieth century. The islanders inhabited a world of ghosts, spirits, sorcery, and magic and many of their activities involved the propitiation of spirits or the enactment of appropriate rituals.

All of these characteristics, whether or not they would be universally recognised by more recent travellers, have had some influence on contemporary Solomon Islands society. Indeed, recent ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands between Guadalcanal and Malaitan ethnic militant groups reinforces some of these observations.

From the earliest period of European exploration, these islands were associated with King Solomon of the Old Testament whose wealth and wisdom were thought to have originated in some mysterious place, the Isles of Solomon. This association had an immediate and lasting effect. European travellers continued to explore the islands, seeking that mythological island paradise, that distant place that would eventually reveal its treasures, providing them with untold wealth and influence. When it failed to do so, the islands became the victim of a new and dangerous mythology. They came to be seen as the opposite of that mysterious place of wealth and wisdom sought so assiduously by European adventurers. They came to be associated with abject poverty and ignorance, and it is this mythology, as fanciful as the earlier one, that fed so readily into mainstream development discourse. In opposition to the wealth, the influence and the success of the European continent, the islands of Oceania, including Solomon Islands, came to be seen in almost wholly negative terms, the islanders themselves being cast not as victims of European expansionism, but as lazy incompetents with what is often referred to as a 'dependency mentality' who consistently failed to take advantage of the opportunities that European expansionism was held to accord to them.

Whalers and traders

Contact between Europeans and Solomon Islanders was fleeting prior to 1870. However, following the early European explorers, traders (mainly *beche-de-mer* fishers, and sandalwood cutters and whalers who brought goods such as fishhooks,

calico, and axes) began to visit these islands. The lives of the Neolithic agriculturalists of the islands were dramatically transformed both by introduced diseases and by the iron implements brought by these visitors (Siikala, 1982). They were now able to clear the jungles, prepare gardens and wage war more efficiently than before. Furthermore, as Bennett (1987, p. xix) observes:

> Almost from initial contact [with Europeans] a dependency was created because Solomon Islanders wanted and soon needed Western goods. In the trading period this dependency did not imply any real loss of autonomy. However, when the continuing search for Western goods meant that some Islanders became a significant component of the Pacific labour pool, their incorporation into some colonial framework was virtually inevitable.

The initial encounters between Europeans and islanders were fraught with cultural misunderstanding which frequently led to murder and reprisals. However, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, thousands of Solomon Islanders (principally from Malaita) were recruited to work as labourers on the sugarcane estates in Queensland and the coconut plantations in Fiji, a process that gradually led to acculturation (Corris 1973; Wawn 1973). In fact, the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC), one of the predominant Christian denominations in the Solomon Islands today, was initially established in the sugar estates in Queensland, Australia. In this area, the work of Moore (1993) provides an indispensable backdrop.

Missionary activities

European interest in the islands was minimal until the mid-19th century when missionaries began to take an interest in the islands.[3, 4] After this initial interest, missionary activity remained dormant until later in the nineteenth century. The later missionary visits included Anglicans (1852), Roman Catholics (1898), Methodists (1902), the South Sea Evangelical Mission (now the South Sea Evangelical Church) (1904), and Seventh-Day Adventists (1914). These missionaries encouraged the movement of people from the bush to the coast, modified traditional cultures and customs, and further divided Solomon Islands society by adding a religious dimension, and also, importantly, provided all formal education and most of the health services prior to World War II (Boutilier, 1981, pp. 265-266).

The impact of missionary activity is evident in the fact that 95% of Solomon Islanders now profess to be Christian. In spite of their differences, the missionaries were generally imbued with the firm belief that their role was to change peoples' lives for the better. This paternalistic outlook informed both their institutions and their practices. Indeed, one could argue that missionary activity represented the beginning of a type of dependency that was perpetuated by the colonial government (Nabalarua, 1988). In the light of ongoing resistance to this dependency, it seems paradoxical that reference should so often be made to what is commonly described as a 'dependency mentality' among Pacific Islanders.

Colonial history and political independence

Colonization: British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP)

The declaration of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) was a colonial move by Britain to thwart the French who were already in the New Hebrides (now

Vanuatu) next door. This was merely part of the global process of empire building begun by the British in parts of Africa and Asia. From this perspective, the formation of a Solomon Islands society was the result of direct intervention by a foreign country in another society. The administrative intervention and initiative by Britain was greatly assisted by the work of missionaries, but the basic fact remains that Solomon Islands was 'born' out of foreign interests and foreign intervention.

One other critical activity that was to bring another important dimension to the lives of the islanders was labour recruitment or 'blackbirding'. In the 1870s, when missionary activity was just beginning to make inroads into Solomon Islands society, labour recruiters also arrived in the islands seeking labour for the plantations in Fiji, Queensland, and occasionally New Caledonia and Samoa. It has been estimated that some 19,000 Islanders altogether were taken to Queensland and more than 10,000 to Fiji (Douglas & Douglas, 1994, p. 605). Abuses committed by labour recruiters, also known as 'blackbirders', frequently led to the murder of innocent people, particularly in the early days. Two prominent Europeans lost their lives because of this practice. One was Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, second Bishop of Melanesia, clubbed to death at Nukapu Reef Islands in 1871; the other was Commodore Goodenough of HMS *Pearl* who died from a poison arrow wound sustained in Carlisle Bay, Santa Cruz, in 1875. It was partly the deaths of these prominent individuals (as well as the 'evils' of the labour trade more generally) that prompted Britain to declare a protectorate over the southern Solomon Islands (Guadalcanal, Savo, Malaita, San Cristobal and New Georgia) in 1893. Later additions were made over the years and by 1900 the rest of the islands had become what was then called the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (B.S.I.P).

When a British protectorate was established, there were no more than about fifty European traders resident in the islands. Twelve years later, in 1905, there was a move to open up the country commercially. The British Government invited private businesses to invest in the new territory and the managers and officials of *Levers Pacific Plantation Ltd.* visited. They liked what they saw and immediately acquired land on a large scale. Coconut plantations began almost immediately and by 1940 the company had more then 8000 hectares under cultivation. Two other companies acquired interest in the Solomons in the early 20th Century: *Burns Philp & Co. Ltd* of Sydney, and the *Malayta Company*. The latter sold out to *W.R. Carpenter & Co. Ltd* in the 1930s. On the whole, however, economic development progressed sluggishly before World War II. Overseas companies were initially engaged only in plantation development, largely involving coconuts for copra exports. This concentration on plantation agriculture led to an uneven distribution of development activity and employment opportunities (which were concentrated in certain areas, and on some islands, especially those with good natural harbours where ships could easily collect the copra). The corollary of plantation development was head tax which was imposed on locals by the colonial government. This forced people, especially young men, to move from their villages to other islands to find work to pay for the head tax. In this way, cheap labour for the plantation was assured. The beginnings of uneven and distorted development in Solomon Islands were, therefore, already in evidence. As Bennett (1987) has noted, what we see here is the beginning of the erosion of the autonomy and independence of indigenous Solomon Islanders.

One can only speculate on what might have happened in the islands, or the world generally for that matter, had the Second World War not happened. As it was, most of the planters and traders in the Solomons group were evacuated to Australia after the Japanese entered the war in 1942. Solomon Islands played a crucial role in World War II, the major turning point of the Pacific campaign being a fiercely fought battle between the allied forces and the Japanese Imperial navy off Savo Island, near Guadalcanal, in August 1942. Indeed, from May 1942, when the Battle of the Coral Sea was fought, until December 1943, the Solomons were almost constantly a scene of battle. Eventually, in February 1943, the Japanese army withdrew from Guadalcanal. By December 1943, the allied forces were in command of the northern Solomons.

When civil administration resumed, the British authorities found that Tulagi, the former capital, an islet off Ngella/Florida Islands, had been destroyed completely during the war. It was therefore decided to relocate the capital to Honiara on the north coast of Guadalcanal where it is today. This was the site of an important campaign against the Japanese during the war and an important US military base. Moreover, the site was only 16km west of Henderson Field (now Solomon Islands international airport), a major wartime air field, built by the Japanese but named by the Americans after one of their own fighter pilots who had died in the Guadalcanal campaign. Point Cruz, the major port area in Honiara today, is also said to be the place where Mendaña and his ships anchored during their first visit to the Solomons, and Holy Cross, where the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Honiara now sits at the top of a small hill, is where Mendaña and his men are said to have placed a cross in honour of the Spanish monarch and of their own achievement.

Anti colonial-rule protest and Maasina Ruru

After the war, especially between 1946 and 1950, a good deal of official attention was devoted to a native movement known as *Maasina ruru* (Marching Rule) (see Keesing (1978; 1982; 1992); Laracy (1983)). Begun in Malaita, this movement spread to some of the nearby islands, including Ulawa Island. *Maasina ruru* was an entirely indigenous protest movement against colonial rule although it was imbued with a religious cargo-cult orientation (Worsley, 1968). Detecting its anti-British or anti-colonial ideals, the administration had many of the leaders gaoled in late 1948, crushing a sullen defiance of government authority and weakening considerably the movement itself. This protest movement was at the forefront of British administration thinking when the decision to grant independence to the Solomon Islands was taken. There were other indigenous protest movements, including one that centred on the followers of Silas Eto (Holy Mana) who broke away from the Methodist Church to form the Christian Fellowship Church in 1959-60. This breakaway movement was, it has been suggested, as much a symbolic rejection of colonial rule as was the *Maasina ruru* movement. On Guadalcanal, another notable protest movement was the *Moro movement* which centred on Makaruka, located on the southern part or weather coast of Guadalcanal (Davenport & Coker, 1967). Moro's followers were dissatisfied with colonial rule during the 1960s and wanted to return to the old ways of custom and self-sufficiency. Another Guadalcanal-based protest movement was the *Custom Company* referred to as also as 'The Society for the Development of native Races-western Guadalcanal' which was led by Matthew Belamatanga (Bennett, 1987).

What these protest movements demonstrated was a dislike for, and rejection of, British colonial rule. The war had taught the locals some important lessons. The American soldiers, in the experience of the islanders, did not discriminate in the way that the British colonial administrators did. Solomon Islanders who helped out in the war effort as coast-watchers or carriers observed that black soldiers fought alongside their fellow white Americans against the Japanese. Even long after the end of the war, Americans were viewed favourably amongst Solomon Islanders. The British colonial administrators, on the other hand, were perceived very poorly by the islanders, one significant aspect of this being the willingness with which they accepted evacuation to Australia during the war. During times of peace, the British administrators often adopted an aggressive stance towards the islanders; at the outset of war, however, they fled (Gina, 2003, especially *Chapter 8*, pp. 159-184).

In response to local protest, and having been weakened considerably by World War II, Britain began to make changes in the system of government, changes that were evident from the end of the war through to the early 1970s. After that, Britain moved rapidly towards granting political independence. Thus, for example, when civil administration resumed after the war, an advisory council, originally established in 1921, was re-established. In 1960, however, that advisory council was replaced by a legislative council and an executive council. In 1970, under a new constitution, a new single government council replaced both the legislative council and the executive council. The new single government council sat for the first time in July 1971. In April 1974, a new constitution was adopted. In mid-1975, the name Solomon Islands was officially adopted in place of British Solomon Islands Protectorate. On 2 January 1976, Solomon Islands became an internally self-governing state. Political independence followed on 7th July 1978. Initially, the transition from colonial rule to political independence was relatively peaceful, although the abrupt departure of the British, together with inadequate preparation for independence, helped to create the circumstances that led to the upheavals of 1998 and the ethnic conflict of 1998–2003.[5] These events are critical to an understanding of social and economic development in Solomon Islands after independence. Alasia (1997, pp. 3-4) sums up some of the apparent contradictions as follows:

> From 1893 to 1945, the colonial administration did nothing to encourage Solomon Islanders to participate in the affairs of the country. Generally, Solomon islanders were relegated to being passive subjects of colonial rule. Their opinions were not sought and their wishes ignored. They were subject to a government not responsive to their wishes. In addition, the colonial government laid the basis for a centralised government and it did so at the cost of ignoring, and in some instances challenging, traditional leadership systems by appointing headmen from amongst those sympathetic to their . . . cause, rather than those held in high regard by the communities involved. . . . This gave rise to the emergence of a new group of leaders who were often not recognised in the traditional context and, in most cases, did not have the support of the entire community. . . . [Thus the] manner in which the colonial administration carried out its affairs led to the displacement of Solomon Islanders from the political process – they were not participants, but rather, passive subjects answering to the needs and demands of the colonial institution.

Alasia (1997, p. 4) insists that such deliberate disregard for, and mistreatment of, Solomon Islanders by the British colonial administration "caused many Solomon Islanders to resent the government and rebel against its authority".

Post-World War II: Towards decolonisation

It is important, in attempting to understand exactly how and why Solomon Islands gained political independence, to take into account the effect of World War II. Following the war, Britain was involved in major reconstruction at home. Furthermore, the infrastructure of Solomon Islands (limited as it was) had been subjected to extensive damage during the war. In addition, the war had had a huge impact on the attitudes and perceptions of indigenous Solomon Islanders in relation to the British colonial administrators. Formal protest combined with anti-colonial movements of various kinds had become commonplace. All of this indicated to the British that they could no longer take their colonial rule over the islanders for granted. The process of decolonisation began, a process that was completed in 1978 when Solomon Islands became an independent nation.

Solomon Islands, *kastom* and the question of nationhood and national identity

By world standards, Solomon Islands is a relatively young nation which has not yet had time to put in place the institutions and practices that are required to establish and sustain stability. It is, furthermore, a nation which is the outcome of global and historical processes of European imperialism and colonialism. It is only when these two things are clearly understood that the nature of contemporary Solomon Islands society can be appreciated.

For any society, the past is both a point of reference and of departure; it is the source of a sense of origin and of identity and belonging; it is fundamental to positioning. In other words, the past defines the present and the present in turn defines the future. Memory and remembering play an important part in that sense of movement, action and continuity that characterises human societies. In Oceania, traditional cultures encode recollections of the past in song, dance, art and craft, naming and story-telling, all of which contribute to their histories as do, for example, historical documents, such as, in the case of the Solomon Islands, the Constitution.

The Solomon Islands Constitution represents a political definition of Solomon Islands rather than a social or cultural one. To understand Solomon Islands, it is necessary to understand its diversity, the variety of its peoples, its lands and its customs. This variety is not evident when the 'nation' is constitutionally (read politically) defined in terms of institutional structures, powers and procedures. Nor is *kastom*, the traditional practices that inform the lives of the people, evident in the apparently uniform legal system. Underlying the appearance of uniformity that accompanies nationhood is the diversity that is evidenced in the different languages, ethnicities and cultural practices of the peoples.

The point here is that Solomon Islands society, as defined constitutionally, is a recent development, the imposition of an externally defined unity. The indigenous people of the islands that now constitute a single political entity had no choice but to accede to the principles which underpin the Constitution and Constitutional Law. Thus, although political independence was generally peaceful in the initial stages, it was not without controversy. In Gizo, a protest led by Peter Salaka of the Short Islands and

other prominent individuals from the western Solomons during independence day called for the Western part of the Solomons nearest to Bougainville and PNG to secede from the rest of the country (Gina, 2003, especially *Chapter 9*, pp. 187-99). In fact, as Kabutaulaka (1999) has observed, the people of Guadalcanal also resisted, calling for a federal system of government at the time of independence.

Written constitutions, including that of Solomon Islands, are products of their own times and places and are underpinned by the values and principles of those to whose tradition they belong. They do not necessarily sit comfortably with the values and attitudes of traditional societies where *kastom* is a significant factor in the daily lives of the people. Issues relating to development and reform in the Solomons cannot be fully understood unless this is taken into account.

Tarcisus Kabutaulaka, an academic from Guadalcanal, has argued that the underlying causes of ethnic conflict in the Solomons relate, in large measure, to three major factors: land, disrespect and social issues/unemployment (Kabutaulaka, 1999). These are the types of issue that inevitably occupy every rural community in Solomon Islands today. What this suggests is that ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands is really a '*kastom* row' played out in a modern setting and amplified by the media. In this context, Andrew Nori (2002), a lawyer from Malaita, has argued that changing the system of government from a provincial to a federal one would not necessarily address the development issues which are said to have contributed to ethnic conflict. He argues that much of what can be done, what needs to be done to ensure that development activities impact positively on rural communities, is already embodied within existing laws, in particular the *Provincial Government Act 1981* (amended, repealed and reinstated up to *1997*). Even so, the previous government under the leadership of Sir Allan Kemakeza was keen to press on with plans to change to a federal system, believing that this is what the majority of Solomon Islanders want (John Tuhaika n.d.).

Overall, whilst the Government and other interested parties have tried to work within the framework of the Constitution, the militants (both Isatabu Freedom Movement and Malaita Eagle Force) have appeared to be operating within the framework of the differing *kastoms* of Guadalcanal and Malaita. In this sense, ethnic conflict can be seen as part of a 'crisis of legitimacy', one that is underpinned by the belief of the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita that their own particular *kastom*-based ideologies should be reflected in the Constitution. In that the legitimacy of existing state and national institutional structures is under scrutiny, so also is the present form of governance.

The outbreak of violence following the 2006 general election and the changing face of RAMSI

Until comparatively recently, RAMSI appeared to have been largely effective in restoring law and order and in assisting in ensuring economic recovery in the Solomon Islands. Recent events have, however, cast some doubt both on its role and on its effectiveness.

At the invitation of the then Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Hon Sir Allan Kemakeza, a Commonwealth Observer Group was set up "to observe relevant aspects of the organization and conduct of the elections . . . to consider the various factors

impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the results of the elections reflect the will of the people" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006, p. 6). The report of that group, submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, makes the following observation about cultural and linguistic diversity in Solomon Islands (pp. 9-10):

> The cultural and linguistic diversity within the Solomon Islands is compounded by perceptions of differences between costal dwellers and those that dwell in the highlands. This has led to the *wantok* ("one talk") system where individuals only trust members of their own cultural group. The *wantok* system has become a form of social security and identity and translates into political loyalty limited to members of the same group.
>
> The cultural diversity of the Solomon Islands is also reflected in the existence of around 80 indigenous languages in addition to Pijin and English, which are the official working languages of the government.

The report also notes (p. 11) that "[party] organization and discipline remains weak and highly flexible, exacerbated by the *wantok* and 'Big Man' traditions, which place emphasis on clan and family loyalties". With specific reference to the 2006 general election, it is observed that there were "widespread allegations and controversy over money from local businesses and foreign interests financing some candidates' campaigns" (p.17), that "thirteen political parties contested the elections, some political parties claiming the same candidates" (p. 19) and that "many . . . individuals and groups . . . claimed that . . . candidates engaged in vote-buying both through cash payments and the dispensing of material largesse" (p. 25). In view of subsequent events, the observation that the election of Prime Minister by secret ballot was associated with a "high level of suspicion and distrust" (p. 35) is particularly noteworthy.

On 18 April 2006, Synder Rini was elected Prime Minister. Mr Rini is a member of a group of members of parliament called the *Association of Independent Members of Parliament* (AIM). The president of that group is local naturalised Chinese business tycoon, Sir Thomas Chan. Mr Rini's election as Prime Minister led to widespread anger not only because of his links with Chinese business interests, but also because of his association with the outgoing Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza (who narrowly retained his parliamentary seat while his People's Alliance Party lost 11 of its 20 seats). This anger sparked riots in Honiara amidst allegations that money from Chinese businesses had supported the election of Mr Rini. Part of Honiara was razed and looted, Chinese-owned property being the main target. On 20 April, RAMSI forces were bolstered by 30 police officers and 78 troops from New Zealand and 200 troops from Australia. On 26 April, eight days after his election as Prime Minister and just before he was about to face a vote of no confidence, Mr Rini resigned. On 24 May, the Solomon Islands parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare, a former civil servant who had served as Prime Minister from June 2000 to December 2001, as Prime Minister by 28 votes to 22. Mr Sogavare had originally aligned himself with opposition members of parliament when it had become clear that government coalition numbers had been drastically reduced. However, when he was initially not chosen as Prime Minister, he deserted the opposition, attempting to build a following

among members of parliament from Guadalcanal. Failing to gain sufficient support, he again changed direction, supporting Mr Rini in the second round of voting and accepting as reward the commerce and trade portfolio. However, then realizing the extent of opposition to Mr Rini, he changed direction once more, offering to support the opposition in return for a guarantee that he would be their candidate should there be a vacancy in the position of prime minister. The opposition, two of whose members had been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the riots, provided the required guarantee. At that point, facing a vote of no confidence, Mr Rini resigned as Prime Minister.

Connections have been made between the 2006 riots in Honiara and the social unrest of 1998–2003 that led to the deployment of RAMSI. However, as Kabutaulaka (2006) has observed, "what happened in Honiara . . . cannot be explained in terms of . . . social unrest alone. In fact, it had little to do with . . . social unrest and more with what people perceived as the corruption of the democratic process". Furthermore, it seems that RAMSI must itself bear some responsibility for the riots. When, following the election of Mr Rini as Prime Minister, an angry crowd converged on the parliament building, RAMSI officers overrode the authority of the Speaker, Sir Peter Kenilorea, opening fire on the crowd with tear gas and thus, it has been alleged, actually provoking the rioting (Socialist Equity Party (Australia), 2006). In this context, it is interesting to note that Bishop Terry Brown, who initially supported RAMSI, made the following observation in an article in the *Solomon Star* newspaper on 18 January 2006 (cited by Doug Lorimer, 2006, ¶10):

> There is a major disparity between RAMSI's rhetoric of staying for ten to 15 years in the Solomons, bringing peace and prosperity, and the reality of re-emerging violence, increasing poverty and unemployment, high school fees, a downward-spiralling economy, higher inflation and lower incomes, declining medical services, ongoing corruption in government ministries, lack of planning and implementation of how Solomon Islanders will competently run all parts of their own government, crumbling infrastructure, millions and millions of RAMSI funds spent on Australians with the money going back to Australia with minimum cash benefit for Solomon Islanders, continued centralizing of everything in Honiara, etc.

In spite of the fact that the decision by RAMSI officers to fire tear gas into the crowd of objectors may have actually played a part in the initiation of the riots in Honiara, and in spite of the type of reservation expressed by Bishop Terry Brown, it was noted in a press release by the Rt Hon Winston Peters (22 May 2006), New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs, that "he [Winston Peters] and his Australian counterpart, Alexander Downer, [had] held joint discussions in Honiara with the new Prime Minister, Hon Manasseh Sogavare, and members of his government". It was also noted, without qualification, that "[recent] events following the general election have shown the continued need for RAMSI's presence, which is widely supported by the Solomon Islands people".

It is clear that the 1996 riots in Honiara were a reaction against what the people saw as government corruption and control by foreign powers. Even so, the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group on the 2006 general election, whilst critical of many aspects of the election process, does not, even in its background statements, make any

negative comments about the role of RAMSI. In view of this, it seems reasonable to infer that there is general, if unstated, acknowledgment that part of RAMSI's role is to maintain order by supporting whatever group succeeds in gaining power, irrespective of popular support (or lack of it). Unrest in Solomon Islands is as much, if not more, about corruption and foreign intervention and control as it is about internal strife among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Even so, the issue of difference and diversity, an issue that can be summed up with reference to *kastom* (Naitoro, 2000), needs to be addressed if Solomon Islands society is to reach a position of equilibrium.

Kastom and constitutional law

Kastom is based on values and principles that play an important part in the lives of ordinary people in the Solomons.[6] Thus, for example, whereas constitutional law, with its emphasis on corrective institutions and custodial practices, adopts a clinical approach based on rehabilitation, *kastom*, with its emphasis on compensation processes, embodies the concept of restitution, involving mending or restoring social and cultural/kin relationships. For Solomon Islanders, the issue of whether one form of justice (rehabilitation) is more legitimate than another (socially-based restitution) is a critical one, particularly as there are those whose personal interests are best served by exploiting the apparent lacunae between the two (see for example, J. Fraenkel 2004). If not attended to, this issue may have serious implications for the future of Solomon Islands society, post-RAMSI. The fact that the ideals of the Constitution may be foreign to traditional ways of thinking and behaving does not mean that Solomon Islanders will not adapt themselves to the values and principles that underlie it. However, they are much less likely to do so if the *kastoms* that are familiar to rural dwellers in particular are not taken into account. Thus, for example, although many of the alleged offenders have been apprehended by the police and have served time in prison (Constitutional Law), Guadalcanal Islanders maintain that the alleged murder of some of their kinsfolk by Malaitans in the recent past has not been compensated (*Kastom*). This is a classic example of the apparent contradiction between Constitutional Law and *kastom* in the Solomon Islands (Nori, 2001), one that needs to be addressed urgently by Solomon Islands legal practitioners and custodians.

Betel nut and *wantok*: Towards understanding the complexity of Solomon Islands society

The betel nut metaphor provides a way of understanding Solomon Islands society. The betel nut husk (state/ Constitution) and inner core (*kastom*) have been introduced. What remains to introduce is the *lime* and *lif* (the role of the Church). Bishop Terry Brown (2003) has observed that:

> The three institutions of Solomon Islands life are the traditional culture ('custom'), the church and the civil state, listing them in the order in which they reached the Solomons. Over the past century, the first two have been strong, the third weak. This is still the case.

In the context of what could be seen as a crisis of legitimacy, the role of the Church needs to be considered. In this context, it is important to note that the vast majority of Solomon Islanders profess to be Christian. The Church, therefore, can and does play a significant role in peoples' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, constitutional law

and *kastom* (traditional practices). It is the third critical component of the social and political brew.

Conclusion

Different uses of the word '*wantok*' (see above) sum up differing perspectives on contemporary Solomon Islands society. Although it can be used to signal a type of collective identity or national consciousness, the word '*wantok*' is also used with reference to those clan-based family groupings which characterise traditional islands society. Most contemporary Solomon Islanders come from clan-based family groupings on the islands themselves but many do not. There are, for example, the i-Kiribati who came to Solomon Islands from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (now Kiribati and Tuvalu respectively) before independence; there are the descendants of Hong Kong Chinese who have made Solomon Islands their home; there are, residing mainly in urban areas (especially Honiara), peoples from other areas of the Pacific.

When the varying conceptions of *wantok* are added to the components of the betel nut (state apparatus, *kastom* and church), and when we further add the concept of 'reciprocity' which runs through islands society (in both a positive and negative sense), what emerges is a concoction with a very distinctive flavour. Unless Solomon Islands nationhood can be conceptualised in a way that fully accommodates all of the different ingredients, there will be continuing danger that the pot will boil over. These dangers will not be averted by attempts by outsiders to shore up a political system which is clearly not meeting the needs and aspirations of the people.

Endnotes

1. The national anthem of the Solomon Islands was, in fact, composed by a Solomon Islands National, Panapasa Balekana, who had originally come from Fiji.

2. There is, of course, a certain irony involved in my use of the 'island' metaphor here in view of the way in which it has sometimes been used with reference to Britain.

3. Much of the later missionary activity in the Solomons was via Australia (there was a British settlement in Sydney from 1788). However, Leslie Fugui (1989, p. 84) notes that the "first clergymen to visit Solomon Islands were two Catholic priests of the Franciscan order who came with the Spanish explorer Mendaña". They celebrated mass at Santa Isabel on 9th February 1568. A second Spanish expedition (1595) also carried priests, although the missionaries had little impact on Solomon Islanders at that time.

4. The first real missionary attempt at Christianising the islanders involved a number of priests and lay brothers of the French Marist order who, under the direction of Bishop Jean-Baptiste Epalle, landed on the south coast of San Cristobal in December 1845. From Makira, they went on to Thousand Ships Bay in Santa Isabel. Although Bishop Epalle was killed within only a few days of arrival in Santa Isabel, the remaining Marist Fathers returned to Makira. There, following the murder of three other members of the order and the death from malaria of another, the effort was abandoned (Douglas & Douglas, 1994, p. 604). Dr Charles Fox (1924), who studied Makira from an anthropological perspective, claimed that cannibalism was practised on the island but there is nothing to show that any of the three murdered missionaries may have ended up in someone's (earth) oven.

5. It is also fundamental to an understanding of the outbreak of violence that followed the April 2006 general election.

6. I remember, in particular, being told about a woman from an Island in the Solomons who continually referred to her three young daughters as potential 'stoa' (literally, store or shop).

That is, she was anticipating the future when her daughters would fetch a handsome 'bride-price'. This sort of anecdotal evidence indicates the significance of *kastom*.

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