

**MANAGING DIFFERENCE:
KINSHIP, EXCHANGE AND URBAN BOUNDARIES
IN HONIARA, SOLOMON ISLANDS.**



by
Cato Berg

Thesis submitted for the degree of cand. polit.
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Bergen, Norway
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Frontpage:

A pen and ink drawing by an eight year old boy from Kwar'ae. He lived in a small village in an adjacent valley a few minutes walk from where I was staying. He had never been in his home island of Malaita but heard stories of Kwar'ae *kastom* retold by his relatives in town. This drawing is a figurative expression of his perception of the central elements in Kwar'ae *kastom*. Some of the central themes are the panpiper in the lower right corner with stylised islands as a background and the drummer on top. It furthermore depicts animals such as the eagles, the crocodile, the opossum, the centipede, snakes, the frigate bird and dolphins. When he heard I was doing research on *kastom* he gave me this drawing and made me promise I would show people in other places Kwar'ae *kastom*.

To Dr. Ronald Ziru and Dr. Edvard Hviding.

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Preface

This thesis describes the lives of some urban residents in a small town in Oceania. It deals with practices which continues to shape contemporary town life and concerns of urban residents in Honiara, capital of Solomon Islands. This case study was made possible through my participation in and sharing of the lives of some of the islanders who find themselves entangled in these issues. I consider myself fortunate to have done fieldwork in this part of the world and not least due to the people I met and lived with during my stay. I am heavily indebted to them all.

My Solomon family at Pakoe Lodge took me into their own and supported me through sickness and health. My heartfelt thanks goes to Nancy Ziru, Calvin Naiwaulevu Ziru, Terence Simon, Ronald Ziru jr., Melissa Tepora, Leilani June, Salote Jan-Allana, Angelish Nose, Alili Bangara and Khalili Vilia. Edwin Ali Ziru, David Sokaika, David Livingstone Ziru and Ronald Ma'aene became my good friends and taught me valuable lessons about town life. Raelyn, Kaipua, Catalaena and Brick took me with on some wonderful walkabouts. I am also grateful for the friendships with others in town and then especially Edward Suri, Joseph Nona, Roscoe Gina Zingihite, Billy Gina, Raisinga Gina, John Wickham, Allan Sokaika, Sanders Tuhamano, Dyell Tena Tengemoana, Stanley Taugenga, Lence Talo and Eddy Puia. Others who deserve special attention are David Toli, John Vandike, Kenneth Roga, Gordon Young, Ronald Bei Talasasa, John Wesley Talasasa jr., Matthew Kwaboalachi, John Toromage, Moses Saeni, Milton Job, David Naqu, Simeon Iputu, David Toli, John Giri, and Tenson Tahua. The families of Peter Paulsen and Erik Andersen shared their hospitality and opened their homes for me on several occasions.

I am also grateful to the Government of Solomon Islands and the Ministry of Education for granting me a research permit. Research Officer Audrey Rusa greatly assisted me in this process. Countless others helped me throughout fieldwork. None mentioned, none forgotten. *Tangio tumas olketa lo Honiara ana oketa Solomon foa kipim mi gut tumas.*

Research in Honiara was made possible by generous grants from the Norwegian Research Council and L. Meltzers foundation.

I am also grateful to my family in Norway for their continuing love and care. Kirsti Berg, Arne Erik Berg, Oddvar Berg, Bjørnar Berg, Rosmari Berg and Randi Holmen have all stood by me during my years as a student and I sincerely thank you all. I was also fortunate to

spend some of the best years of my life with Turid Misje to whom I will always be grateful beyond words.

Christine Jourdan at the Department of Anthropology, University of Quebec, made valuable suggestions regarding my choice of research focus and also contributed to my understanding of urban life in Honiara. So did Jari Kupianen at the Department of Anthropology, University of Helsinki, whom I shared the field with. I was also fortunate to meet fellow Norwegians in the field who have become my good friends. Rolf Scott and Trygve Tollefsen from Bergen gave me an opportunity to meet some of my own far away from my *ples*. Peter Crawford and Tim Bayliss-Smith provided lasting companionship and crucial advice both in the field and thereafter and also read and commented upon earlier drafts of this thesis. It goes without saying that I take full responsibility for all shortcomings and errors.

I am also thankful for the help and support of the staff and my fellow students at the Department of Social Anthropology in Bergen. It has been a privilege to spend almost all my years as a student with a few of them. Particular thanks goes to Roar Hansen, Kristina Tau Strand Vestbø, Tone Sissener, Benedicte Solheim and Merete Espelid. Beyond anthropology Lill Wegner Thomassen, Kenneth Berge and Rune Løvnæseth have been the best of friends. Two special people to me are Lars Edvin Gjelstad and Marianne J. Ekeberg who also contributed with helpful hints and suggestions regarding this thesis. Knut Mikjel Rio and Annelin Eriksen share my passion for this part of the world and have also made valuable comments regarding the final draft.

Two people have made contributions to this thesis but each in their own way. Dr. Ronald Ziru at Pakoe Lodge more than anyone else in Honiara made my fieldwork possible. He was the best friend anyone can have and also assisted me all the way through the research process. He took me into his own family and cared for me as one of his own. My fieldwork would have been far less rewarding without his help.

Dr. Edvard Hviding at the department of Social Anthropology in Bergen has guided me through this project for more years than I care to remember. He initially proposed Honiara for my fieldwork and has always been there to support my work and also to gently push me through the process of writing up. This thesis would not have been possible without his advice and continuing counselling in the past years.

To show my sincere gratitude and as an acknowledgement of the co-work needed both in the field and in the process of writing up I have dedicated this thesis to these two people.

This thesis explores the relations among kinship, exchange and ethnic distinctions in a town. It also deals with metaphors and violence. My overall argument is that aspects of present day sociality must be seen as emerging from a dynamic triad of *kastom*, ethnic distinctions and violence.

Chapter one serves as an introduction into contemporary town life and the wider ethnographic context. I introduce the main agents and describe how sociality may be understood to be shaped as dynamic interconnections among three different categories. It is in this respect I discuss the implications of the concept of *kastom* as fundamental for boundary creation in town. I also briefly comment on my research procedure in town.

Chapter two describes the genesis and uses of a novel metaphor in Solomon Pijin. The metaphor of *hospaep* speaks of boundaries and differences but also of changing notions regarding exchange, reciprocity and kinship. I pay particular attention to the creation of transethnic fields of meanings and how this field is related to other structures in town.

Chapter three also follows the lead of kinship, ethnic boundaries and exchanges but situates these themes in the context of land transactions in the vicinity of the capital. I describe the concerns of residents in relation to the future and the manners in which people go about to purchase land for themselves and their children.

Chapter four gives an in-depth analysis of current Pijin kinship terms. I describe terms and concepts which are presently used in town and some of the difficulties and conflicts people encounter in their usages of these terms.

Chapter five analyses contemporary bride price exchanges in town with particular emphasis on interethnic marriages. I seek to establish the meanings between a certain category of objects known as shell money and describe how they attain meanings in novel contexts.

Chapter six serves to expand the argument from the preceding chapter on shell money, but now contextualises these items through an analysis of compensation practices in town. It deals both with internal conceptualisations and external representations of practices and objects. It is also a description of how certain Malaitan practices which are regarded as particular potent are incorporated by other groups. I also deal with the phenomena of interethnic violence in town and describe far-reaching implications of these practices both in town and in the overall national context. This chapter also serves to sum up my general argument on the constitution of present sociality in town.

Prologue

The happy isles with a passion for difference

I will never forget the first time I set my eyes upon the Pacific Ocean and the famed "islands of King Solomon". It was as if I had returned to the beginning of time itself. Countless pristine islands lay scattered upon deep blue sea intermingled with shallow reefs and lagoons. To arrive here from a harsh and cold winter in Norway was to me pure bliss. But I came back to the real world soon enough. It turned out I had arrived in Honiara in the aftermath of an urban riot in January 1996. For a few days there had been harsh fighting in the streets between Islanders from different parts of Solomon Islands. When I first began to query people regarding reasons they would always refer to the events as caused by "others" and that "they" had only been innocent bystanders. It was cast as a showdown between "Polynesians" and "Malaitans" and both parties accused each other of having started the whole mess. This was my vantage point into this for me unfamiliar urban world. Honiara was not to be a springboard into some rural hinterlands. I had come to seek an understanding of the town and its residents.

Solomon Islands is portrayed as "the happy isles" in tourist commercials throughout the Pacific and the rest of this world. It is also referred to as a country "lost in time". These commercials do not mirror some of the contemporary changes and continuities I witnessed in town life. This was above all eclipsed in the riots shortly prior to my arrival. Solomon Islanders may have a lot to be "happy" about in contrast with other parts of the world but they are certainly not "lost in time". Changes in town sociality is intertwined with external agencies far beyond the reach of Islanders. But people also continue to direct the pattern of these changes themselves. It is in this respect that Honiara is conceptualised as and through "difference". It is an image and a structure which stands out in contrast to rural areas even in the immediate vicinity of town. It is a point of reference which gains an ever increasing importance for Islanders no matter whether they live in town or in the islands. The scale of mobility between town and provinces is breathtaking when compared to the relatively small population in the archipelago. What people encounter in town are not only buildings and streets which immediately stand out from village compounds back home. They meet people of whom they have only heard tales and rumours. The ascribed social and cultural diversity is to them immense. In town they must learn to deal with ascribed diversity and difference. It is the ways

in which they interpret and manage this difference and build their images of "others" I profess to describe in this thesis.

After a few days I took up residence in a small resthouse not far from downtown Honiara. It was on a ridge above town itself situated in lush green surroundings with narrow valleys below cut out by frequent torrents and with the ocean as a backdrop. The neighbourhood appeared quiet and pleasant and for me it was a fortunate break. The guests here were from literally all parts of Solomon Islands. I initially found the social diversity among my fellow residents bewildering. I had to learn the ways of "others" and to proceed in the same manner as they themselves do when they come to town. Like them I had my own expectations concerning people and town life. This was immediately brought home to me when I met my first "Kwaio". He struck me with awe because of the almost mythical position they had in my imagination through the works of Roger Keesing. The lodge was also a temporary home to "Polynesians" and other "Malaitans" but they seemed to get along quite well. I found them to interact peacefully enough and no one seemed too eager to discuss the riot which had ended only last week. Everything seemed quite idyllic. It took me a while to see and interpret the subtle manners in which distinctiveness was managed and construed. There were no further rioting in town during my fieldwork but on the other hand not everything was as idyllic as I imagined during the first weeks either.

A wise man or woman once said that "truth is never obvious and always somewhere in the middle". It is fitting for the way in which I experienced encounters and events in town. I have thus sought to balance both my own and Islanders opinion of town life throughout this thesis as being interlocked somewhere between "the Happy Isles" and "the Riot". I believe these are the two opposites between which they maintain their presences and presents in town. They must handle diversity and difference and learn to be ascribed as different themselves. It is a two-faced and oppositional process. Urban residents live their lives somewhere between resonance and dissonance without ever totally giving in to either of them. They also see their presents through their insistence on the past. In this part of the world change seemingly only comes about through continuity. But with continuity comes also change. This is the paradox I explore throughout this thesis.

Conventions

Notes on Pijin

I used Solomon Pijin as my methodological language throughout fieldwork. It is a language with a vocabulary mostly derived from English and Australian English. It is the most common language of communication in town and especially in multilingual encounters. It is related to both Bislama in Vanuatu and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, but with some differences in vocabulary and syntax. Although the vocabulary may strike one as relatively poor when contrasted with other languages (about 5000 words and increasing compared to about 800 000 in English) terms are fundamentally polysemous and ambiguous. Words must always be related to the context of the speech act and also the speakers involved. The polysemy of terms ensures a wide degree of connotations in speech events. Syntax mostly follow Eastern Austronesian (formerly Eastern Oceanic) languages (Keesing 1988) but with slight variations because of linguistic differences within the archipelago. The variances are even greater in intonation which makes it difficult to make a set standard regarding pronunciation of terms. Polynesian speakers pronounce words differently than for instance speakers from Marovo and Malaita.

There are very few up to date dictionaries dealing with Solomon Pijin. I have largely followed conventional spelling of terms and expressions throughout this thesis except in those instances my linguistic data did not match standards provided by Solomon College of Higher Education (SICHE) or the US Peace Corps.

For instance, I found that young members of the urban speech community pronounced the word *blo'* ("belong") with a glottal stop and as such differently from elder uses who tended to use *bilon* or *bilongi*. Young speakers would also use *lo* ("from") instead of *long*. Elderly speakers frequently insert vowels among all consonants in this manner.

Pijin words are pronounced as they are written. Voiced stops are prenasalised so *tabu* becomes *tambu*. Vowels are usually pronounced as in Italian, which I believe is common for most Austronesian groups in the archipelago (cf. Hviding 1996a, Keesing 1982) and as far as I could assess Papuan speakers from Vella Lavella.

All Pijin terms throughout this text and also terms from other languages are in italics.

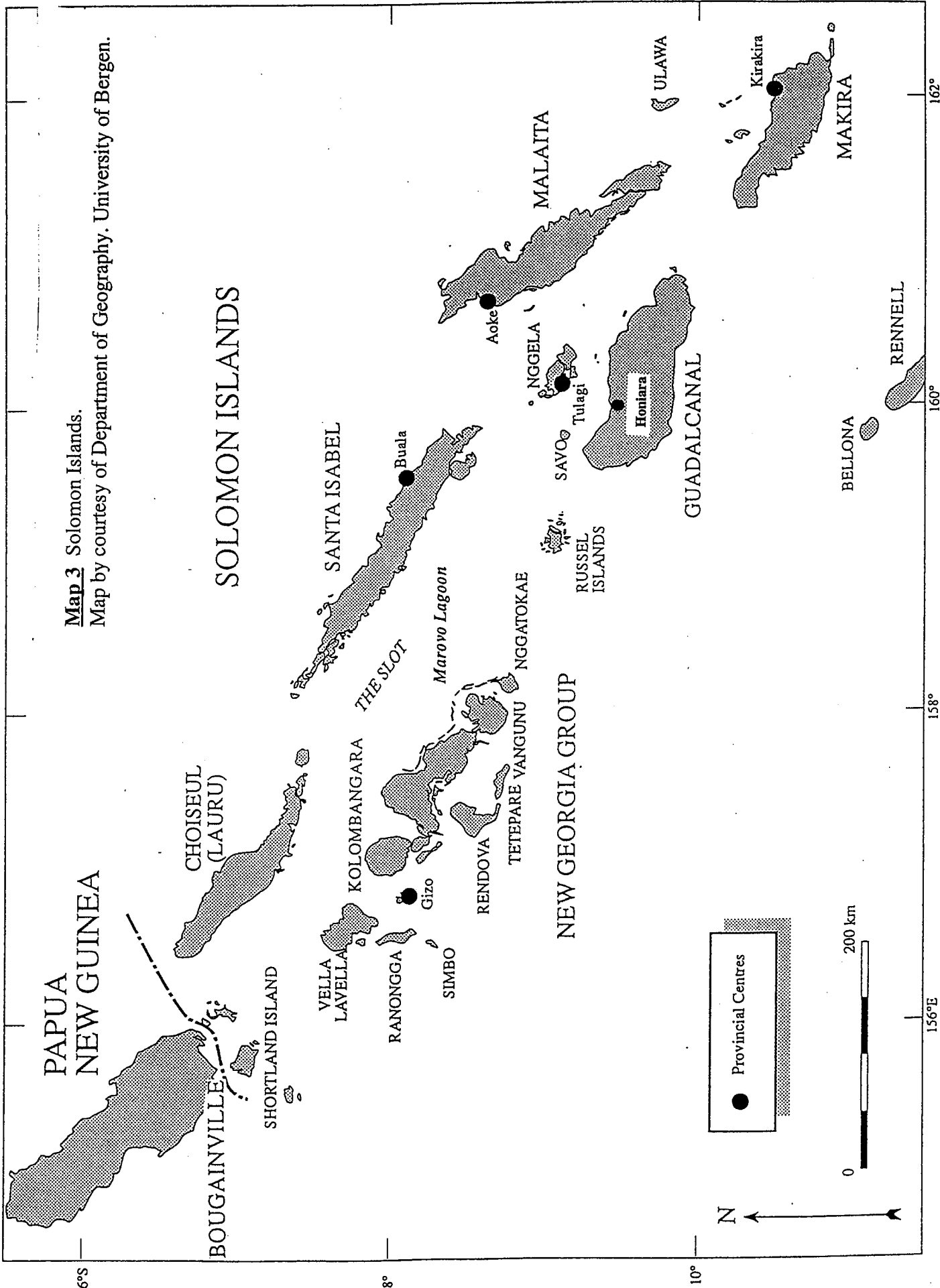
Exchange rate

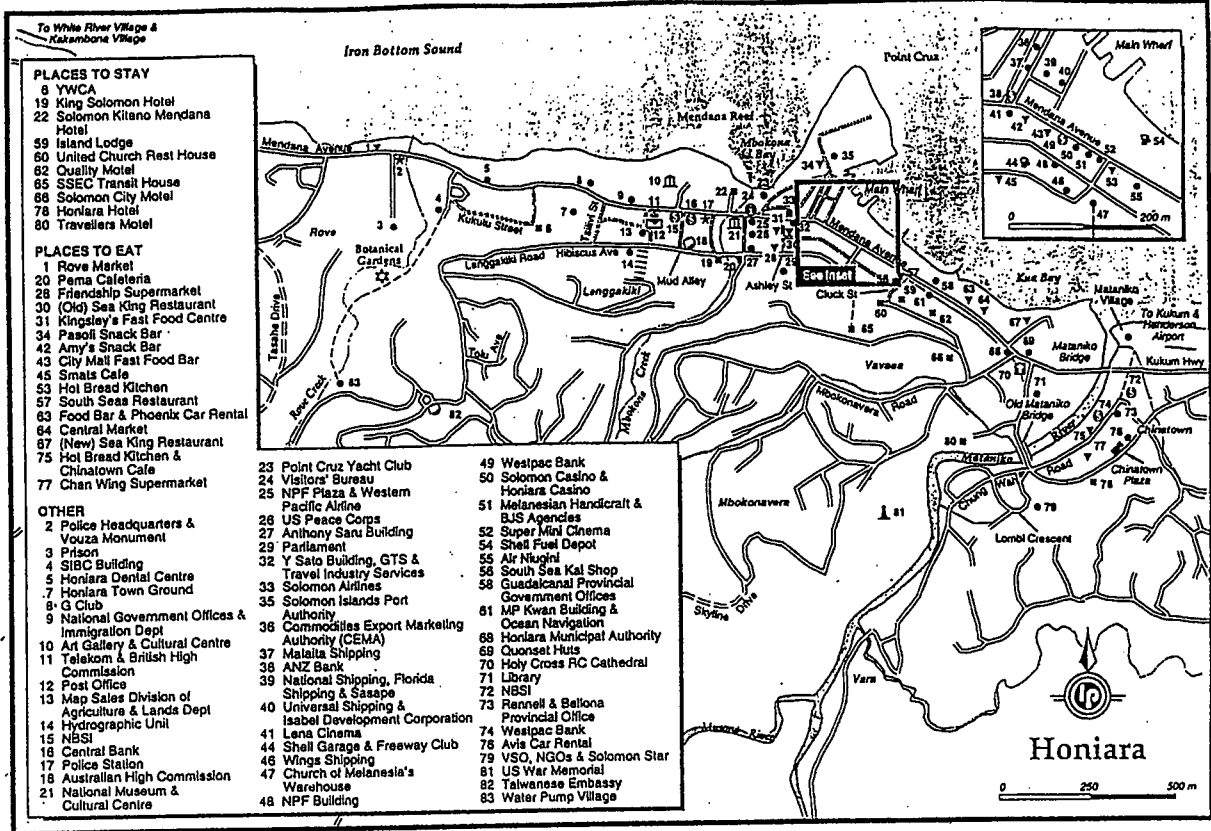
National currency is Solomon Dollar, referred to in this thesis as SD. It is contrasted with US Dollar in this thesis, which is abbreviated with USD.

The exchange rate in 1996 was approximately:

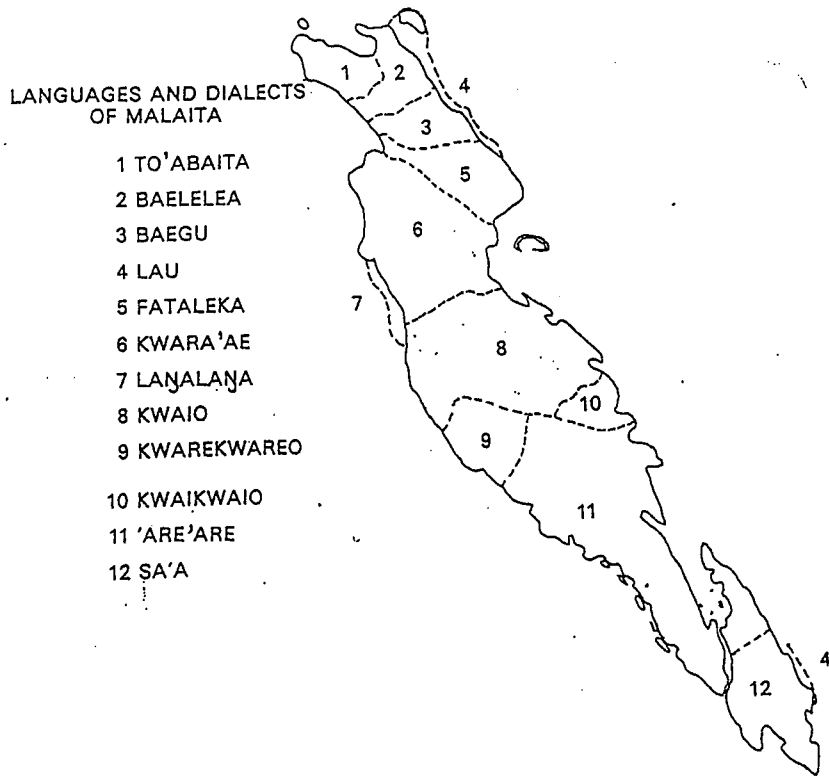
1 SD = 0.20 USD

1 USD = 5 SD





Map 2. The central parts of Honiara.
From Harcombe 1997.



Map 3 Ethnolinguistic units in Malaita.
From Keesing 1982a.

CHAPTER ONE

PRACTICES OF DIFFERENCE

"It seems to me that if Melanesian ethnographers are to contribute at all to emerging debates in the discipline, they will have to move away from the study of self-contained groups to the cultural production and reproduction of more complex social formations in town".

Phillibert JM, Social change in Vanuatu, in Social change in the Pacific, Robillard
"Western Peoples have no monopoly on practises of cultural encompassment, nor are they playing with amateurs in the game of "constructing the other".

Marshall Sahlins, Goodbye to Tristes Tropes: Ethnography
in the Context of Modern World History.

This thesis aims to describe two interrelated modes of social organisation in a contemporary Melanesian town¹. The context of my study is a group of islands which has supplied theoretical concepts and ethnographic descriptions on the seminal importance on kinship and exchange as the basic foundation of human organisation for almost a century now (cf. Strathern 1988). Rivers (1914), doyen and founder of kinship studies in British anthropology did research in Solomon Islands. The genealogy goes through him to Firth (1966(1963), 1967) who pioneered a sociological study of kinship among Tikopia in Temotu Province. Noted kinship theorist Scheffler (1965) used a similar approach in his fieldwork in Choiseul which focused on kinship as social structure and process. These seminal studies all concentrated on the fundamental value of kinship as a basic mode of social organisation. More recently Keesing's (1982a, 1992) studies of Kwaio in Malaita were important and widely acclaimed contributions within the overall debate on "culture" and "symbols" in anthropology (cf. Borofsky 1994).

These authors all contributed to our understanding of the seemingly immense degree of cultural and linguistic diversity both within Solomon Islands and throughout Melanesia (cf. Laycock 1982, Keesing 1982). This region circumscribes a quarter of all the languages known to man (Keesing 1982). Solomon Islands alone has some sixty to eighty-five distinct languages and an additional fifty dialectical variants dispersed throughout a population of 400 000 (Keesing 1988). The largest language group is Kwara'ae in Malaita with approximately 25 000 speakers, while some speech communities in Temotu Province only number a handful of people (Grimes 1996). But what

¹ I follow anthropological convention by using the term "Melanesian" in this manner. I acknowledge the problematical status of this term because this study aims to describe relations among "Melanesians" and "Polynesians". "Melanesia" has been used for some time now to delineate a geographical area, but also to speak of the people who reside there, disregarding the fact that not all see themselves as "Melanesians". The use of the term "Melanesia" has recently been contested for these same reasons (cf. Carrier 1992, Keesing 1982, Thomas 1989)

has been described to a lesser degree is how this diversity is not only recognised but also codified and categorised by the Islanders themselves. This is where my focus of analysis begins.

This thesis represents a break with conventional research procedure in this region. I question some basic assumptions of "kinship" and "cultural diversity" and will hence argue that diversity as seen in Honiara is a matter of ascription and interpretation and not given facts. By taking this lead I not only question some common "facts" regarding difference and diversity in this context, but also some basic assumptions within anthropology at large regarding the present state of cultural differentiation throughout the world (cf. Friedman 1994, Hannerz 1992). This is directly founded in my experience of fieldwork which took place in an urban setting where people from all these different groups meet and mingle. I found the basic content of discussions and conflicts in town to be modes of "kinship" and "cultural practices". I will describe how these classic themes are reproduced in a novel context through a study of kinship and the uses of diversity. What I intend to convey are people's own notions of kinship, exchanges and differentiating boundaries.

My aim is to explore the reproduction of dichotomised identities as practices of difference. By proceeding through this focus I seek to enhance both interethnic and transethnic aspects of social encounters in Honiara. This fieldwork was performed through a study of three different social units. Sociality in town is constructed through a relational dialectic among three distinct groups. My fieldwork consisted in exploring relations within and among this triad. I will argue that a continuing process of differentiation and reproduction of diversity in town takes place through interaction and exchanges and that these distinctions are not static or given.

What I seek to describe is how certain practices are formative of contemporary sociality in town. This may for now be referred to as the creation of symbolic boundaries in town. I further wish to draw on contemporary approaches in the description of social life as mediated by signs in a dialectic between structure and practice. Certain practices shape the structure of the social and cultural fabric of Honiara and cannot as such be ignored by town residents no matter their ascribed identities. Hence, I argue that Malaitan modes of sociality actively engage other ethnolinguistic groups which is most dramatically seen in their encounters with people with an ascribed "Polynesian" identity. These scenarios revolve on recurrent urban violence. But interaction among Malaitans and "others" have also produced what may be termed as a shared transethnic field of practice and sign manipulation. This is particularly evident in my treatment of urban exchange practices and the construction of a novel metaphor in Pijin. These points will be further clarified below. I will now introduce the main agents in town life.

"Malaitan" refers to the island of Malaita (see map 1). The various groups in Malaita have been studied extensively by Keesing (1971, 1982a, 1992), Burt (1994), Hogbin (1958, 1969), De Coppet (1994) and Belshaw (1950). They have all pointed out general similarities regarding practices and cultural ideas in this island, where "traditions" are mostly variations upon each other (cf. Hogbin 1958, Keesing 1982a, 1988, Miller 1980).

"Western" refers to the Western Province. Noted anthropologists in the Western Province include Scheffler for Choiseul and Rendova (1963, 1965, 1971, 1972) and Hviding in Marovo lagoon (1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, n.d.1, n.d.2, n.d. 3). Scheffler's (1965) descriptions of Choiseul reveal the flexibility of kin structure and individual choices of membership and residence. Hviding's (1996a) study of Marovo also describes the fluid composition of local kin groups in relation to resource management in Marovo lagoon.

"Rennell" and "Bellona" are terms used for people from two Polynesian islands South of Guadalcanal. Rennell and Bellona has been the site of a series of studies conducted by a team from the University of Copenhagen, namely Elbert (1975) Elbert and Monberg (1965), Monberg (1966) and Kuschel (1988). The anthropologists who have worked in these islands have been more attuned to the past lives of the Polynesian islanders. Their collaborated work does more to draw a picture of what life was like in Bellona and Rennell before the advent of the British Protectorate and emulation of Christianity.

The two former groups are what is commonly referred to as "Melanesian" in terms of language and cultural forms. Rennell and Bellona on the other hand is "Polynesian". We have then at one level a contrast between two "Melanesian" groups and one "Polynesian" group and at another level three distinct units. This is the basis for an analysis of resonance and dissonance in relation to sociality and interethnic practices.

We presently have only a handful of descriptions which deals with urban social settings both in Honiara (cf. Frazer 1985, Jourdan 1995, 1996, Keesing n.d. 4, n.d. 5), and other towns in Melanesia. These studies have mostly concentrated on intra-group relations in town. My focus somewhat decenters this construction of the urban setting. I did my fieldwork in town through an explicit focus on how people from all these broadly defined "groups" handle sociality both among themselves and how they interact in an urban context.

I rely on past and present comparative ethnography from Solomon Islands in my analysis of town practices. This both serves to contextualise my own analysis and broaden the ethnographic scope. It establishes links with the rural hinterlands and reveals the "structure of conjunction" (Sahlins 1983(1981) in relation to past ethnography and present rural realities. I follow Kuper's

proposal then (1994): "The postmodernist critique has made us relatively uneasy about our procedures, but some of the most suggestive recent essays in reevaluation proceed by the persuasive critique and reanalysis of ethnographic data, not just ethnographies" (Kuper 1994:117).

The ethnographic context both of town and Solomon Islands and beyond will be further explored below. But for now I wish to give a brief introduction into town life and town modes of living. These will also serve as a general background for my introduction of important ethnographic and theoretical themes further below.

"Honiara" as trope: Laef lo taon

Honiara is the capital of Solomon Islands, an archipelago consisting of a double chain of islands stretching roughly from West to East. The capital itself is situated on Guadalcanal one of the largest and most heavily populated islands. The nation is divided into six island provinces, supervised through Provincial Administrations. The electoral system is a national adaption of the "Westminster" model of Parliament. Due to its economic importance to the nation Honiara is administered separately².

The resident population of Honiara amounts to about 50 000 which is 12,5% of the countrys total population (approximately 400 000 in 1997)³. We find a steady stream of short term migrants and visitors teeming in from the districts either to visit relatives or to find work or just with an interest to see the town for themselves. If you go to the wharf or Henderson Airfield you will at any time encounter people fresh in town set on discovering the town for themselves. The ascribed cultural variation among migrants is immense. Not all will be accustomed to the social codexes that circumscribe town life and some not even to the common language of communication, namely Solomon Pijin. People will learn language and social norms as they find their way through town both in a physical and cultural sense and learn to interact with others. What they must grapple with is social and cultural diversity.

Migration both to Honiara, and within Solomon Islands at large is distinct from other comparative nation states throughtout the Pacific area: "If one single feature distinguishes Solomon Island migration from that in other countries in the region for which analysis is possible, it is the high proportion of moves of a very recent origin (United Nations report 1982:60). The search for

² For those with a particular interest in the history and contemporary position of Honiara I have supplied an appendix which deals with these issues.

³ I acknowledge the problematical status of the term "resident" since the population is constantly fluctuating due to migration, seasonal variation and public holidays, but I use the term to include those who reside more or less permanently within the boundaries of Honiara.

