

## International

### *Preserving Culture in the Solomon Islands*

by Catherine C. Cole

*A Canadian museum worker relocates her family to a remote part of the South Pacific.* ateline: Edmonton, June 1990. The letter began, "Answer yes or no, how would you like to be Cultural Affairs Adviser for the Western Province of the Solomon Islands?" Although happily employed, I was tempted by what sounded like a fascinating job. Then after several pages of description, I read, "Just one thing: Don't get pregnant again, because cuso won't place you if you have more than two children." My easy response: "I'd love to but it's too late! I'm expecting number three."

Dateline: Ottawa, September 1990. I was in Ottawa on business and thought it would be interesting to drop into the cuso office to discuss the project. While I was there, they received a fax from the Solomons office of cuso saying, "Three children, no problem!" Before I knew it, my application was being processed.

Dateline: Tambea Resort, Guadal-canal, Solomon Islands, August 1991. Mere days after arriving, we were still overwhelmed by the magnificent scenery, sauna-like temperatures and cultural contrasts. Then my husband was stung by a stingray in a shallow lagoon; I had visions of widowhood and an immediate repatriation to Canada. But my husband survived, and we and our children stayed in the Islands. The stingray was but the first of many challenges during the next two educational and enriching years.

A former British Protectorate, Solomon Islands has been independent since 1978. The country consists of a string of nearly 1,000 islands, many uninhabited, in a remote part of the South Pacific eight degrees south of the equator and east of Papua New Guinea. It has approximately 330,000 inhabitants. The Western Province encompasses dozens of disparate islands and 27 distinct language and cultural groups. A popular tourist destination, the province is rich in natural resources--minerals, timber in the lush rainforests and abundant sea life.

I was the fourth in a series of cultural advisers recruited through cuso for the Western Province. In 1985, the government of the province recognized the need to foster the cultural identity of the people. Meeting that need would entail collecting, preserving, promoting and disseminating information about the area's customs and history, and protecting historical, cultural and archaeological sites. cuso, a Canadian non-governmental agency with a commitment to the preservation of indigenous cultures, was asked to help establish the program and train local staff. The Australian South Pacific Cultures Fund has also provided essential financial support.

From my headquarters in Gizo, capital of the Western Province, I provided assistance and training to Islanders who were recording, preserving and disseminating information about their culture (and during my tenure I was also Head of the Division of Culture, Environment and Tourism). Many of my activities were similar to those of a history or ethnology curator in a Canadian museum. The difference was that I was not making the decisions about what to preserve; rather, I was facilitating others to take responsibility for preserving the aspects of their own culture that they believed were important. Furthermore, I had to adjust some of my professional expectations: there is no provincial museum with four walls; the collections are primarily in remote parts of the jungle; the culture is in a stage of rapid transition. (There *is* a national museum, and we worked closely with officers from that institution.)

Our activities included an archaeological survey program, efforts to prevent the illegal export of cultural property, an oral traditions program, public programming, a provincial cultural centre and museum education kits.

### **Archaeological Survey Program**

The Archaeological Survey Program is strongly supported by government and landowners. (Landowners are the custodians of custom sites, not private owners in the Western sense.) Under the Preservation of Culture Ordinance (1989), cultural, historical and archaeological sites (called custom sites) registered through the Program may be protected from development activities such as logging, mining and road building.

A marked boundary surrounding a site indicates the area to be preserved.

## Nearly 700 sites

Surveys may be undertaken any time at the request of landowners interested in registering their family's genealogy and rights to a given area. If development is imminent, surveys are at the expense of the developer. By law, a survey must be done before any development in order to prevent damage to sites through careless bulldozing, road building or other development activity. Nearly 700 sites have been recorded to date.

Recording is the easy first step; providing protection is far more difficult. Although legislation has been in place for four years and we have actively promoted awareness of its provisions, it has proven difficult to enforce, particularly because the province has been without a lawyer for much of this time. The Cultural Division became involved in legal action against timber companies as a result of site destruction by loggers. Provincial Archaeologist Kenneth Roga and I were asked to determine the monetary value of damaged sites.

Logging is rapidly changing the landscape of the Western Province. Most of the major islands have signed agreements with loggers, and in some instances both the Timber Act and the Preservation of Culture Ordinance have been broken. We often learned about a logging site long after the damage had been done-- one of the problems inherent in working in an isolated area with few transportation or communication links. There is, therefore, an urgency to the work of the Archaeological Survey Program: recording sites, assessing damage to sites and developing community awareness.

## Preventing the illegal export of cultural property

The Preservation of Culture Ordinance also makes it illegal to buy or sell any traditional artifact from the Western Province. A traditional artifact is defined as any object existing for traditional use; it excludes objects made as souvenirs.

Throughout the province, landowners have complained about artifacts being removed from archaeological sites and sold. The artifacts are often stolen by local individuals from sites that are communally owned. Carvers obtain killer whale teeth from custom sites to carve intricate pieces that sell to tourists for \$1,500 to \$2,000. Traditionally, these artifacts were used as symbols of power and authority. *Barava*, *bakiha* (distinctively carved and shaped pieces of fossilized giant clam shell), and other shell valuables are still used traditionally to pay compensation for offences under customary law, to pay brideprice, to denote land ownership and so forth, yet some Islanders are selling them to tourists at marinas, in hotels or on the street. Artifacts taken to Honiara, the country's capital city, are sold openly in gift shops and the market.

Efforts are made to protect not only traditional artifacts but also war relics, such as Japanese and American planes and ships used in the battles of 1942-43. The War Relics Act is national legislation to prevent the export of these relics from the Islands.

Some custom sites are currently being revisited for the first time since the arrival of the missionaries at the beginning of this century. One of the greatest privileges of my position was the opportunity to participate in archaeological surveys of powerful sites that had not been visited in 80 or 90 years. Many of the sites are deep in the jungle and high in the volcanic mountains. Each of the many different types of site holds a specific cultural purpose, such as to control the weather, to locate abundant fishing grounds or to give strength in warfare. Most sites consist of formations of stones and coral that enclose skulls, shell valuables, stone artifacts or other meaningful objects. Sites were abandoned when missionaries told Islanders to cover the sites and not to return. Because of the coverings (on Simbo, for example, corrugated roofing iron was used), many sites are very well preserved; others have been damaged over the years by cyclones, earthquakes, gardeners, vandals or children. Some of our guides still believed in the powers of the sites: at one site I was protected from sickness by a woman who held leaves over my head and spoke to the spirits. I later heard of a child who became sick after visiting that site without being protected first. In another case, the death of a foreign logger was reputed to be the result of damage he had inflicted on a site.

The attraction of tourist money has encouraged some landowners to clear trails and remove the dense cover of vines and bush from the sites to make them more accessible. Unfortunately, this has also led to an increase in thefts. Also, some tourists show little respect for cultural customs and beliefs; they walk in areas where, traditionally, most people would not have been allowed.

We tried to prevent thefts by educating both local people and visitors about the law and by working with

police and customs officers. Discouragingly, there are no national-level efforts to prevent people from purchasing or exporting custom artifacts; it is therefore difficult to prevent the sale of Western Province artifacts that are taken to Honiara.

In one instance, a man came to my home trying to sell a traditional artifact. I attempted to stall him so the police could take some action, but the police were not sure how to handle the situation: a fine could not be extracted from a man who had no money, and keys to the jail had been lost years before; besides, people in jail were often better fed than they were in the villages. After two days of stalling the man, Kenneth Roga and I met him in the market. When Kenneth realized that the man was from his own island, they shared a cigarette. In his quiet manner, Kenneth spoke of the shame the man had brought to his people and ordered him to return to Ranongga on the next canoe.

## Oral Traditions Program

The Oral Traditions Program collects, preserves and disseminates recordings of custom stories, music, genealogies and other types of traditional knowledge in any of the 27 local languages or in Solomon Islands pidgin, depending on the preference of the storyteller. The storytellers have the right to decide whether to allow their story to be made public, either through radio broadcast on the culture program or through publication in a series of custom storybooks. To date, publications include *Reflections of Western Province*, a pictorial history, and books in the Roviana, Varesi, Kumbakota and Hoava languages. Several other publications are now in production.

I encouraged foreign academics, such as anthropologists and botanists, not only to give the provincial archives a copy of their final reports and publications, but also to prepare information in a form that local people could use, such as a slide show, a radio program, tapes for the archives or a storybook.

## Public programming

The Cultural Division organizes and delivers an active community education program. Officers tour villages throughout the province, encouraging people to find out more about their customs and history, to learn from the *olos* (elders) and to continue to practise traditional activities. Annual cultural festivals are held for secondary school students and registered youth groups. We put on a series of women's custom workshops, including one on custom dance. Annual workshops for volunteers offer advice in recording oral traditions or assisting archaeological surveys at the village level. Workshops for villagers describe how to establish grassroots museums or cultural centres. As well as organizing events, we were often asked to judge custom activities such as crafts or dancing at community events.

At the women's custom dance workshop, which took place in a village on Ranongga Island, we were impressed by the interest of the children and younger women. Many of these younger people had never before seen the dances that were wealth from ventures such as logging and tourism; the pressures to conform to their perceptions of Western lifestyles are real.

The Cultural Division's intention is not to cling to the past nor to try to revert to customs and values that were prevalent at the time of Western contact, but to integrate aspects of the two worlds. The Division encourages people--especially the young--to value objects from their own society, to play local music and stories on the radio and to listen to *olos* talking about genealogy, telling traditional legends and describing how to make and use traditional objects and how to perform traditional dances. Renewed cultural pride and knowledge allow Solomon Islanders to make choices that are appropriate for themselves, today and tomorrow.

One day an *olo* from the Shortlands came into my office and asked me how I could help him to preserve his culture. Half his island had been logged. Although his area had been passed by, he and his people still faced disagreeable ramifications. In many ways his question was impossible to answer. Yet in some ways I felt that he was further ahead than many Canadians, who are oblivious to the threats to their culture and unaware of the role museums can play in preserving cultural identity.

Dateline: Edmonton, June 1993. We returned to Canada with an understanding of development issues that would be impossible to gain through books. After living with malaria, corruption, struggles for political independence, the premature deaths of a number of friends and a cost of living far beyond the average worker's wages, my family and I have a deeper appreciation of Canada. Personally, I am more

aware than ever of the role that museums can and should play in educating people about their country...  
past, present and future.

*Catherine C. Cole is a museum consultant based in Edmonton, Alberta. She was the Cultural Affairs Adviser and Head, Division of Culture, Environment and Tourism, Western Province, Solomon Islands, from 1991 to 1993.*