

# Contested rainforests, NGOs, and projects of desire in Solomon Islands

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## The East and the West in Melanesia

I shall discuss some recent events of global encounter in the Melanesian South Pacific (Fig. 1). More specifically, I have as my ethnographic focus the Marovo Lagoon of the Solomon Islands, an area where I have been engaged in anthropological fieldwork over several years since 1986. I concentrate in this essay on encounters and engagements – situated in time and space – involving representatives of what we might initially term “the West” (mainly conservation-focused NGOs and ecology-oriented tourists), “the East” (mainly Asian agents of transnational capitalism), and “the Rest” (a Melanesian group conventionally referred to as “the Marovo people”). Interestingly, in the South Pacific of today, the East engages intensely with the Rest, while the West has taken on a definitely diminished role compared with the state of affairs in colonial times in entities such as the “British Solomon Islands Protectorate”.

In this essay, particular attention is given to an important arena for international biodiversity conservation: what may be termed “alternative uses of the tropical rainforest” – specifically, the ways in which these alternatives are promoted and manifested by a varied range of agents active locally around the Marovo Lagoon. The examples I am going to give and the discussion I am going to develop should be

seen as representative for wider patterns in the island nations of the South Pacific, and also in other parts of the world that are deemed “out-of-the-way” but where many forms of exogenous activities and foreign agents are at work locally. I shall concentrate on relationships developing through the 1990s between subsistence-oriented Melanesian villagers and some rather disparate types of foreign visitors, and on situations of contested interest involving land-holding kin groups (whose members are interested in maintaining and developing a

broad range of conditions for ostensibly “simple” village life), Western conservationists (interested in saving the notable biodiversity of the Marovo Lagoon), and Asian logging companies (interested in the rich untapped timber resources of the high volcanic islands that border the lagoon).

An argument will emerge that these “post-colonial” encounters and situations, taking place in

a globalised Melanesia towards the very end of the twentieth century, are characterised by much mutual uncertainty – sometimes indeed unawareness – about the moral and political agendas of the “other party”. However, such lack of shared understanding does not inhibit apparent collaboration between the local and the global – in some cases even within frameworks of modern-style “development projects” wherein a multitude of apparently conflicting desires held by the different parties seem to reach

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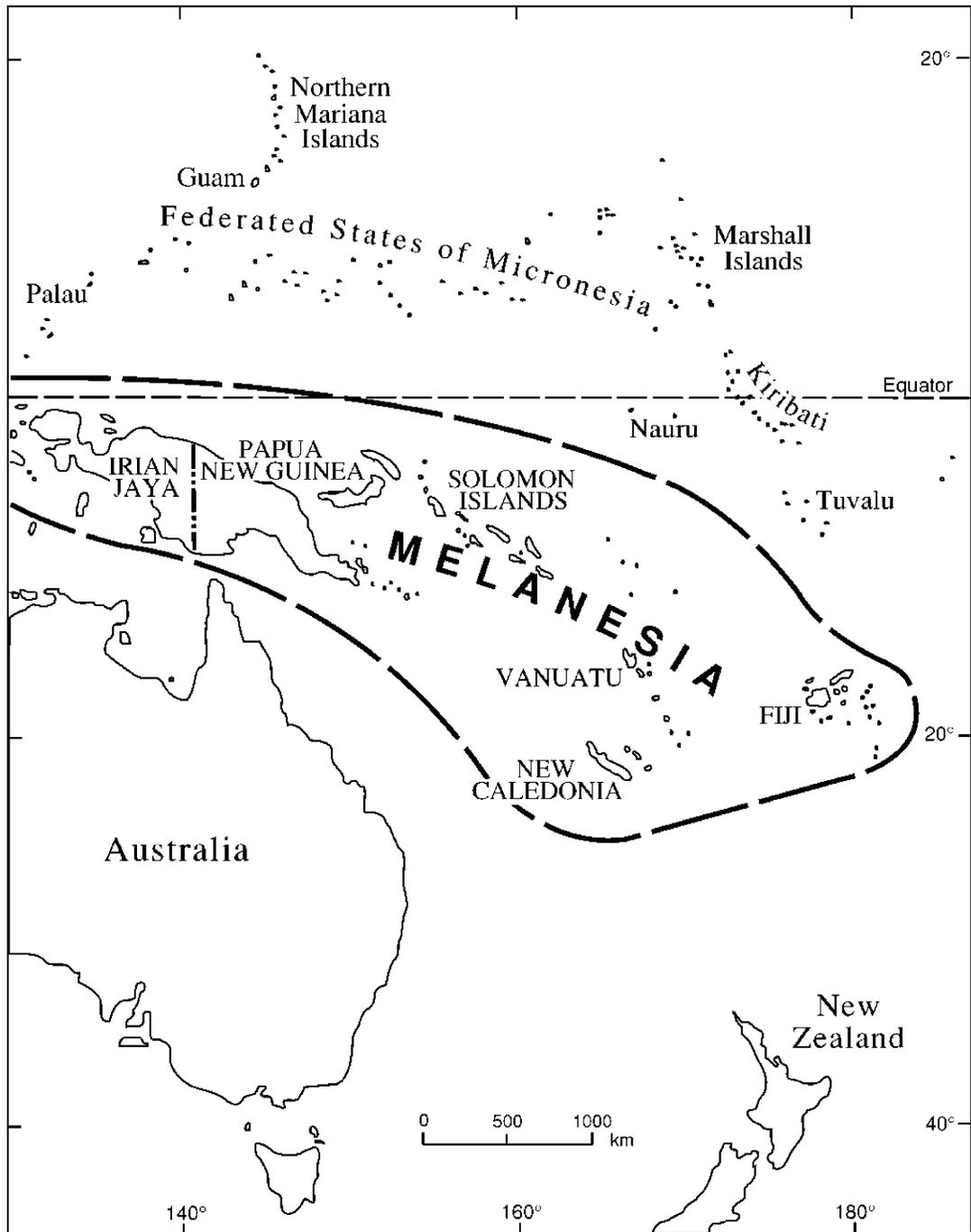


FIGURE 1. The Melanesian South Pacific.

subjective fulfilment. Let me direct our attention towards an important role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Melanesia – a region of classic anthropological fame for its diversity of “cargo cults” and exchange systems of wide inter-island scope, and a region where relationships with worlds beyond the local have indeed been constitutive of cultural history (Knauff 1998; Lindstrom 1993; Malinowski 1922; Worsley 1957). Through the 1990s, the Melanesian nations of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu have experienced an unprecedented level of engagement and investment from European, North American, and Australian-New Zealand NGOs; a situation probably unparalleled in the “developing” world when one considers the small populations and generally low international profile (media-wise, politically and strategically) of these Pacific Island nations. These fields of dense activity largely unfold and evolve beyond the reach of inherently weak nation states.

From my own observations and those of colleagues working elsewhere in the region, it is interesting to note how the present-day lives of Melanesian villagers and townspeople (particularly the former) may be drawn into an apparently recent form of organisation, subsumable under the concept of “project” and involving the joint participation of a specifically defined community and a foreign, or foreign-inspired, NGO. Invariably, these present-day “projects” focus on issues of a typically moral nature drawn from late-modern Western conceptions (but extended to imply global validity), representing a critical view of modernist “development” paradigms. They are projects focused most notably on “sustainable development”, “women and development”, and “community-based development”. Some of these imported moral concerns and their implications, such as egalitarian representativity in village meetings (meaning, from the NGO side, that ordinary women and men must have as much say as chiefs) and community focus (implying that there be, in a village, correspondence between residential and land-holding groups) run counter to indigenous notions of hierarchy, leadership, land tenure, and kinship structure. I shall have more to say on these complications later; first some comments on relevant South Pacific contexts of regional history and global political economy.

## Global history in the Pacific

The South Pacific, in geopolitical terms often labelled Oceania while also being the South Seas of Western romanticism, has been an important source of European wonder about exotic peoples, ranging from noble savages to wild cannibals (Smith 1985). In fact, this was the last region of the world to be “discovered”, as it were, by European explorers. The age of Pacific discovery saw many an encounter on board European ships and on Pacific island beaches; encounters where the local people were often not the most surprised. They had always seen strangers sailing from beyond the horizon and did not always attribute to “first contact” the same significance as Captain Cook and his European contemporaries (Thomas 1991).

Following these early events the South Pacific was globalised through the 1800s as pioneers of global capitalism descended on the scattered islands in search of sandalwood, guano, copra, unskilled labour for sugar plantations in the new colony of Australia, and in general a better way of life, since they themselves were often the victims of industrial revolution and other transformations in Europe. This initial phase of global capitalism in the Pacific culminated by the mid-nineteenth century, as Hawaii and Fiji had been transformed by large-scale sugar producing, as dwellers on even the tiniest remote island had begun producing copra by sun-drying their perennial surplus of coconuts, and as intense rivalry developed between European imperial powers over the countless small lands spread across the ocean (Firth 2000).

For evident reasons, that part of the Pacific called Melanesia played a major role in colonial adventures, and this region also represents the patterns of considerable complexity in postcolonial times. The islands of Melanesia are large and forested with low population densities, and into the present have remained important targets for multinational resource hunters – the only difference being that these hunters today are mainly Asian, no longer European, in origin. Melanesia is composed of several independent states (Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji) and two relatively large dependencies (New Caledonia held by France, and West Papua under Indonesian control). A fourth of the world’s languages are spoken in the region – among less

than eight million inhabitants. Vanuatu, with 200,000 people and 110 languages, is often spoken of as the most culturally diverse country in the world. There is also diversity in Melanesia's engagements in the globalisation arena in recent decades. The region's postcolonial nations and remaining dependencies have seen some striking developments in terms of the effects of flows from and connections with wider worlds, Western and Eastern. New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea have provided resources and sites for some of the largest gold, copper, and nickel mines in the world; Vanuatu has emerged as an international tax haven; and the rainforests and seas of Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea have provided some of the world's last resources for large-scale incursions by logging and tuna fishing companies mainly of Asian origin.

In the Melanesian nations, most land and inshore seas are held under customary law, and local provincial administrations and customary resource owners represented by chiefs and middlemen have a final say in whether or not to allow large-scale resource extraction to take place. Simultaneously Melanesia has developed into a last frontier of the Western adventure traveller segment, and an important stage for the performance of NGOs in the fields of conservation and sustainable development. Throughout the decades since independence, Melanesian governments have fallen and been toppled, and class struggle and inter-ethnic strife have intensified; most recently in May and June 2000 with coups in both Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

Let me return to the Solomon Islands, a Commonwealth country independent only since 1978, with a current population of about 450,000, speaking some 80 different languages. Despite having the richest natural resources and lowest population density in all of the Pacific (Papua New Guinea excepted), Solomon Islands was, in 2003, a state in deep trouble, viewed in pessimistic terms by sometime supporters such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the EU, and nearly bankrupt. The state's finances are saved only by periodical financial contributions from Taiwan, in return for which the Solomon supports Taiwan in relation to the United Nations and other political fora. Land disputes and class struggles escalating during 2000 and 2001 into near civil war have brought this resource-rich nation to its knees.

This sad story is not one of fatal impact to Solomon Islanders generally. In the thousands of villages around the archipelago men, women and children still go about their daily lives with a firm base in the subsistence economy, supporting rather fulfilling family existences through shifting agriculture, fishing and hunting and gathering in rainforest and on coral reefs. All inshore seas and most land in Solomon Islands are held communally under unwritten customary law, the legitimacy of which is enshrined in the constitution. Thus, a noteworthy economic buffer derives from ownership by each Solomon Islands household, by virtue of inherited social group membership, of its own considerable means of production. This makes for local sustenance in times of national infrastructural decline.

## Compressed globalisation

Decades before the nation started its downwards slide, multinational corporations began appearing on the scene, hungry for the Solomon Islands' large stocks of standing rainforest timber, valuable migratory tuna fisheries, and undeveloped gold deposits (which some prospecting indicates may rival any of the world's gold producing countries). In their intense forays in the provinces, these corporate agents have not spent much time negotiating with the weak national government. Far from it: the peculiar legislative set-up of Solomon Islands dictates that any foreign company must negotiate directly with the local owners of the resources desired. And so, in the 1990s and into the present time, a process of highly compressed globalisation has unfolded on the village shores of the Solomons.

Let me explain: by "compressed" I mean that the density, in space and time, of these local-global connections is striking. From a view of events during the 1990s in Solomon Islands involving villagers not just with multinational logging, fishing and mining companies, but also with conservationists, tourists, and other agents of the wider world, it may be said that very much happened very quickly, activating wide-ranging global connections and systems; yet with surprisingly few participants on the ground (see Hviding & Bayliss-Smith 2000). In such postcolonial situations, political truths

and other colonial facts have been transformed and twisted into a state of confusing uncertainty as to what is happening. Such uncertainty is distributed among the whole range of actors in the encounters of compressed globalisation, and characterises indigenous and foreign participation alike. But from one perspective, the indigenous peoples whose environments and resources are at stake have the privilege of defining important aspects of the situation. In patterns reflected elsewhere in Melanesia, as often as not it is the representatives of foreign companies and NGOs who do not clearly understand what is happening (Filer 1997; Hviding 1993, 1998).

Yet the companies do tend to get the timber and the fish (if not minerals), while the resource-owning “traditional” communities are transformed, on the one hand, into a condition of internal dispute among all and conspicuous consumption by some, and on the other, into potentially powerful institutions with ever-increasing competence in dealing with agents of wider economic and political worlds, from foundations in strengthened local culture. These are twisted and often unexpected turns of globalisation. Thus it may be pointed out here that globalisation need not imply a process of homogenisation, cultural or otherwise. Whether, in our *fin-de-siècle* debates and those following us into the twenty-first century, we talk about the increased global flows of capital, commodities, media, advertising, or communication more generally, the fact that we may observe something being exported into these global flows does not enable us to predict or understand what happens at the many different local receiving ends. I emphasise this also to dispel the notion that remote places and peoples such as those of Solomon Islands are by any necessity victims of one-sided pressure from global forces of political economy. Nor are they necessarily willing and eager participants in biodiversity rescue operations pursued by conservation-oriented NGOs or government agencies.

## NGOs in Melanesian modernity: the rise of “projects”

The heavy involvement of international NGOs in modern Melanesia, commented on above,

might be said to constitute a distinct sector amounting to what in other kinds of state formations would be referred to as “civil society”. In a wider perspective, the present-day Melanesian situation also exemplifies a distinct regional pattern of indigenous conceptual codification of sectors of social practice and local human existence. A typical indigenous repertoire of distinct though interrelated “sectors” is shown in Solomon Islands. Basically, the speakers of any one language are considered to share a specific variant of *kastom*: a concept grounded in Melanesian Pidgin and referring to a community regarded as, and regarding itself as, living by a distinct set of traditions and moralities and ways of contemporary practice.

Melanesian *kastom* and its intercultural dynamics have been studied extensively by anthropologists working in the linguistically and culturally diverse nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (Foster 1997; White & Lindstrom 1993). However, the remaining repertoire of present-day “sectors” as referred to above has received much less attention. Briefly, in Solomon Islands, *kastom* today coexists through juxtaposition and connection with the other Pidgin-based concepts of *lotu* (church and Christianity), *gavuna* or *gavman* (government [especially administrative and legislative influences on rural activity]), *bisnis* ([any form of] local business venture), *kabani* ([usually foreign] larger capitalist enterprise), *divelopman* ([usually indigenous] enterprises converting local resources reliably into cash) and – with reference to the preceding discussion – the most recent sector of *porojek* (“project” [NGO-initiated activity with rural involvement and usually rural hosts]). *Porojek* is somewhat unique in this repertoire in that it may incorporate elements of the other “sectors”, moreover in that it is regarded as distinct from *divelopman* by being fundamentally exogenous, initiated by NGO presence.

Despite its claim to precedence, the local existential foundation of *kastom* is only very rarely, if at all, regarded as being totally incompatible with any of these additional sectors. Local Christianity and rural manifestations of government, business, and foreign capitalism are all subject to increasing influence from what is regarded as locally appropriate – and today’s efflorescence of “projects” has its

very foundation (and rhetorical loyalty) in an accommodation, however uneasy, of the local as represented by *kastom*. The rural life-worlds of present-day Melanesians are indeed recognised locally as being not just engaged in, but more fundamentally constituted by, activities of an exogenous nature.

Whereas the level of conceptual codification of such “sectors” varies, the overall picture is mirrored in other independent Pacific nations further east through Melanesia and Polynesia, such as Fiji, Tonga and Samoa – and related phenomena are being documented from other, largely “out-of-the-way” places in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. What is particularly interesting is that today’s efflorescence of NGO-initiated “projects” in Melanesia connects to a strong colonial presence of Christian missions – the NGOs and “civil society” of yesteryear – and that the projects are manifested on the ground in recognisable Melanesian and wider Pacific organisational forms that build on material accumulation, expansion of relations, and reciprocal logics of give-and-take. At the same time “projects” may exemplify new patterns of consumption, resource management and income generation. In this sense “projects” in the three modern Melanesian countries mentioned are, rhetorically speaking, as much part of Melanesian *kastom* as of Melanesian modernity – and the exchange patterns they activate collapse any simple distinction between, for example, gifts and commodities.

The modern Melanesian Pidgin concept of *porojek*, although terminologically connected to English “project”, is only superficially similar to its counterpart. Although conceptually different from *kastom* (as well as from *gavuna*, *lotu*, *bisnis*, *kabani*, and even *divelopman*), any specific *porojek* may to some degree identify with, or (to the detriment of morally convinced NGO protagonists) be identified with, government, church, and small- or large-scale business, local or even foreign. Yet there are indications that NGO representatives and their local hosts (“projects” are typically dependent on a base in one or more rural villages) may thrive in apparent collaboration although the motivations and agendas for their respective involvements may be different – even to the degree of ontological incompatibility, such as when a

conservationist NGO aims to develop “community-based biodiversity conservation” precisely by ignoring, or alternatively overriding, existing forms of local-level leadership and their cosmological foundations. These tensions and ensuing forms of collaboration may be seen as a way in which the “local” engages creatively with and consistently modifies the “global”, a process which – again – strongly echoes the history of missionisation in Oceania.

## Foreign desires in Marovo Lagoon. I. The eco-tourists

In my long-term association with the people of Marovo Lagoon – a population of 11,000 or so inhabiting the shores of a great and ecologically unique coral reef lagoon at New Georgia in the Western Solomon Islands (Fig. 2) – I have been struck by their creative, and by and large successful, attempts to grab and hold on to control over situations where non-local agents are afoot locally and may be expected to try to undermine their autonomy, based in customary law, with respect to the multitude of tropical raw materials that have at different times been desired and thirsted for by foreign newcomers and old-timers alike. I have elsewhere analysed in detail how the people of Marovo Lagoon, no doubt like many other island and seashore dwellers in the South Pacific and elsewhere, have managed, through many generations, to deal efficiently with a multitude of strange people, ideas, and objects that reach their coasts from across the horizon. As island dwellers in a region the cultural history of which is founded above all on migrations and inter-island systems of exchange and warfare, the Marovo people have been used to making sense quickly of any range of more or less unexpected arrivals on the beach (Hviding 1996).

Today, a far greater variety of representatives of the West arrive in Solomon Islands and Marovo Lagoon than was the case in colonial times, when the repertoire of Europeans – so-called “Men from Ships” – was limited to district officers, planters and traders, missionaries, and a rare adventurer or two. Included in the repertoire of foreign persons spread out over the Solomon Islands right before the June 2000

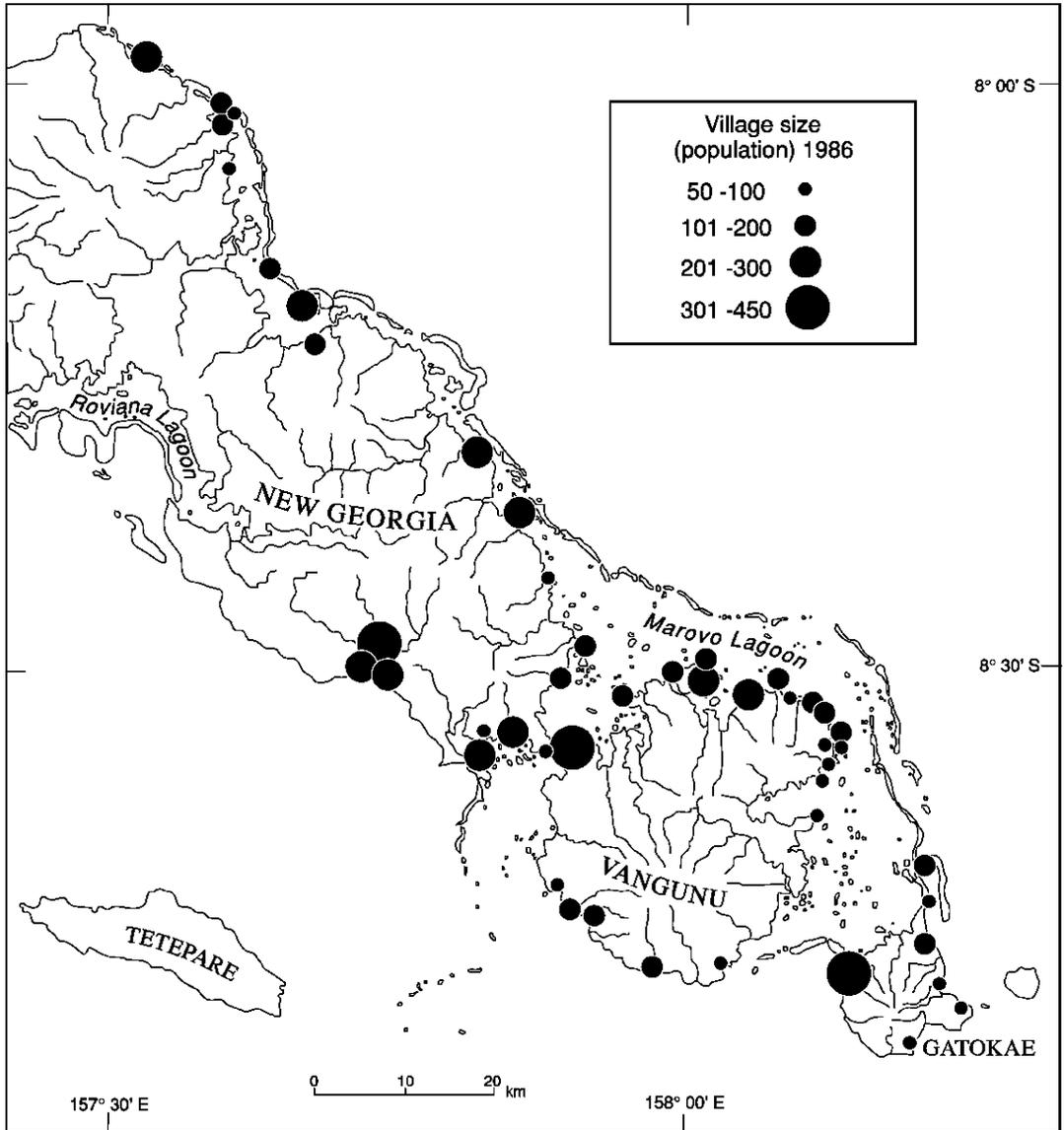


FIGURE 2. Marovo Lagoon, showing major settlement patterns.

coup and its violent aftermath were, among others – apart from bankers, diplomats, and consultants in the capital Honiara – business entrepreneurs of every variety; officials and technical workers of logging companies (usually not “European” but generalised “Chinese” – i.e., from somewhere in Asia except Japan); Australian geologists and gold miners; tourists

ranging from Second World War veterans from the USA (and some Japanese ones, too) to German neo-hippies; volunteers from the US Peace Corps and the British VSO; as well as other grassroots-oriented development workers; nature conservationists and other NGO activists; new charismatic evangelists; documentary film teams; and a few anthropologists.



Hiking in the rainforest of Stirling Island (Solomon Island). Wolfgang Kaehler/CORBIS

Throughout the 1990s, all these types of foreign visitors fanned out among the countless islands of the Solomons, meeting in the process with some of the speakers of all those different local languages. In the process, quite a few of these representatives of the West also met others of their kind, yet without being prepared to meet with the ultramodern Eastern agents of today's fast and rough exploitation of the resources of seas, reefs, and rainforests: South-East and East Asian timber and fishing companies, the representatives of which are uninterested in talking with Western idealists whose desires for rainforest and reefs revolve around quite different concerns. These recent encounters involving the West, the East, and Melanesia appear above all to be nature-focused – whether the foreigners are corporate officials who work hard to gain national, provincial, and local permits to fell and export the trees of the rainforest, tourism entrepreneurs who wish to run small exclusive resorts for well-heeled divers, or NGOs on a

mission to set up “community-based” projects for “sustainable development” or “biodiversity conservation”.

Let me first provide some glimpses of ecotourism, Solomon Islands style, since this “sector” in the Marovo Lagoon has seemed to be the one with the most local involvement, while also being partly funded in latter years through the “community-based projects” of organisations such as the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the New Zealand government. More than 150 years after enterprising trading captains had their first non-touristic sojourns, and were surprised that the natives were not surprised at meeting them, Solomon Islands became increasingly marketed for off-the-beaten-track adventure tourists who wish to immerse themselves in the nature of rainforest and coral reefs and as an added bonus get an exciting glimpse of tribal villages. In official, rather non-sensational tourist publications, parts of the Solomons – such as the Marovo Lagoon – have been presented as the

ultimate, pristine tropical paradise. Yet official advertising has also kept insisting that the struggling nation of Solomon Islands is in fact “ISLANDS LOST IN TIME”. A most unfitting label during a decade in which the largest export earners of the nation were round logs, valuable minerals and canned tuna, when militias from the main islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita were in escalating armed conflict; and a fatefully inappropriate designation from June 2000 when the country was thrown into disarray by a military coup and the subsequent collapse of infrastructure and the economy (including, predictably, a virtual disappearance of tourism). By 2003, the designation of the Solomons as “Islands Lost in Time” was still in use on the web site of an Australian travel agency specialising in adventure ([www.hideawayholidays.com.au](http://www.hideawayholidays.com.au)) – more unfitting than ever given that the web site also contained “Travel warnings to the Solomon Islands” owing to recent events, summed up in the following terse message from the Australian government: “Australians are advised to defer all holiday travel to the Solomon Islands”.

On another web site ([www.uepi.com](http://www.uepi.com)), run by Tropical Paradise Pty. of Queensland, a small, upmarket, Australian-operated diving resort long established in the Marovo Lagoon offers a selection of “cultural activities”, in addition to prime diving on pristine reefs with the world’s highest marine biodiversity. While everyday village life in Marovo, like elsewhere in the Solomons and beyond, revolves around the routine activities of food gathering on land and sea, church-going, evening meals and conversation on local issues, none of this is predominant among the cultural activities offered to tourists. We are informed that “... as the canoe takes you up this ancient river one can easily see it as a spiritual experience, entering into a river jungle, virtually untouched by destructive hands”. Furthermore, “This is a trip for the adventurous who don’t mind getting their feet wet”. Also on offer on a more exuberant, earlier version of the Uepi Resort web site were “... traditional story tellers, fierce warriors and custom drums ...”, and in one particular location “... the approach to [the village] is reminiscent of *African Queen* and the Paramount Chief will greet you. The charm of this experience depends upon your input as the chief’s wisdom and knowledge are far reaching, needing only the stimulus of your

particular interests.” Although the tone of the Uepi Resort web site as of 2003 has attained a more sober quality, the promise of authentic eco-tourism with access to unique tribal ways of life still predominates, and the messages are echoed on the web sites of several other, more recently established eco-tourism “lodges” around the lagoon – a number of which are funded by foreign conservation organisations.

It is noteworthy that many of the “cultural trips” offered to guests at the Uepi Resort over the years have been designed largely by the villagers themselves according to only vaguely expressed notions about what tourists like to see and do. Throughout the villages of Marovo Lagoon there are quite a few people with good education and considerable experience of non-local worlds; they may be retired schoolteachers, headmasters, public servants or businessmen, or men and women who have travelled abroad in connection with employment or volunteer work for church, miscellaneous organisations (including NGOs), and government. Such people control most tourism-related situations on behalf of their village communities (often representing more traditionally oriented chiefs with whom they may be confused by tourists), they extract fees for every tourist visiting (or, as they say, reminiscent of certain precolonial practices, “per head”), and they are careful to send the visiting Europeans home to the resort before dusk so as to keep them away from malarial mosquitoes, young unmarried romantics, and the peaceful evening meals of the village. Furthermore, set fees are collected per tourist dive by the communities that own the reefs in question, and for guided walks in the forest that often include visits to pre-Christian burial sites and sacrificial shrines. This general framework for receiving resort tourists and fulfilling their desires, yet keeping them separated from the everyday ongoings of village life, has been developed in Marovo Lagoon over several decades of involvement with the Uepi Resort, and has become the general prescribed way of “integrating” resort visitors into the local scene.

While resort tourists are thus treated in a rather well-organised manner locally, things are less clearly defined when it comes to itinerant low-key backpacking adventurers. Certainly, backpackers are Ship Men (including Women) too, but they hardly act like Ship Men should.

Throughout the New Georgia islands, beliefs have long persisted among people not strongly involved in tourism that visiting backpackers (unlike resort tourists) belong to a large international company called World Traveller, whose business documents are Lonely Planet Guides. They tend to turn up in villages quite unexpectedly, having disembarked from the inter-island ferry (with guidebook in hand), and when asked what is their work there and then (a perennial question for any arrival in the New Georgian world of islands and maritime travel) they usually say that they are world travellers – with little money. Since “contact persons” listed for different villages in Lonely Planet guidebooks tend not to be present (they may be away on business, entrepreneurial as they are, or they may simply be non-existent since the names given in the book are so misspelled as to be locally unknown), such travellers are usually handed over by the chief to the village teacher or to special persons with a particular command of English and of faraway worlds and the capacity to keep the visitors under control.

Hospitality shown to those arriving on the beach, however unexpectedly, is a general prerequisite of New Georgian sociality, and the old option of killing such people has not been valid for most of the last century. Indeed, as stated convincingly in the more detailed treatment of the Marovo Lagoon in the latest edition of the Lonely Planet Guide, “there should be somewhere to stay” (Honan & Harcombe 1997: 167) even in those villages where a dedicated “tourist lodge” for “ecotourists” has not yet been built. After being provided with accommodation these visitors tend to be steered into a rather predictable (for the locals, that is) and standardised adventure package usually involving bland food just “local” enough to be perceived by the tourists as real village food, fixed rounds of sightseeing to sites of headhunting or Second World War interest, stories of heathen warfare and cannibalism, bush walks, and fishing trips. In general, “world travellers” are advised to donate a stipulated sum to the village church, and to travel on by the next passing ferry.

However much they would like to, these freelance tourists are usually advised not to roam freely around the lagoon in borrowed canoes, with reference to facts such as the unfriendliness

of the people “up there” or “down there”, that strong winds are blowing, or that one should not swim without local company since there are many hungry sharks and saltwater crocodiles around. This rather precisely echoes the ways in which chiefs of prominent coastal communities around New Georgia monopolised contact with European traders and ship masters a hundred years ago or more; by insisting that their close neighbours just along the coast were not to be trusted (cf. Cheyne 1971: 305; for a more comprehensive discussion and interpretation of past and present encounters see Hviding 1998).

For today’s backpacker tourists, the road from Paradise to Heart of Darkness may thus sometimes appear to be rather short, and not all “world travellers” let themselves be “tricked” by villagers’ consistent “handling strategy”. In several recent reports on the internet (see Hviding 1998: 39–41 for a notable example), people in various locations around the Solomons – not least in the ultimate Paradise of Marovo Lagoon – are described as cunning, manipulating folks guided by greed, Christian fundamentalism, land disputes between kinsmen, rampant commercialism expressed not least by the eager collection of fees, and an overall lack of respect for the beauty of nature. What was intended to be culturally sensitive, nature-based ecotourism thus attains a potential for generating racist stereotypes of the Other whose social actions and moral behaviour do not meet the standards required from the “tribal” inhabitants of acceptable playgrounds for Euro-American adventure-seekers. Instead the potential playground becomes a place where very few understandings converge.

## **Foreign desires in Marovo Lagoon. II. Contesting the rainforest**

Let us turn to another type of significant meeting in modern Melanesia, this time with a focus on contestations over conserving – or cutting down – the rain forest. In Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, both of which had until recently large untapped forestry resources, this line of conflict has dominated local and national politics throughout the 1990s (Barlow & Winduo 1997). From an anthropological perspective,

the degree of uncertainty and the perceived complexity in these encounters between so-called “natives-in-nature” (who own the forest), “neo-Western” conservationists (who want to save the forest) and Eastern capitalist logging companies are conspicuous in terms of the scale of involved relations and the range of points of view presented.

Some of the actors in this modern field of rainforest desire in the Solomon Islands, the Asian logging companies, are quite predictable also for local people in their immediate thirst for untapped resources and in their frankly expressed willingness to pay in cash for the access to such commodities. The companies are dealt with accordingly and are either chased away, or allowed to fell trees in exchange for what are seen locally as huge amounts of cash (in some cases, though, having paid the cash they still have not been given a go-ahead to start logging, since the cash transaction has generated further conflict over the communally held forest). For today’s Solomon Islanders, it is other foreigners who are more remarkable and exotic – not least Australian, American, and European representatives of conservation organisations such as Greenpeace, WWF, and various new green arms of the long-established Christian churches. “Don’t cut down trees in the rainforest”, this brand new type of Westerner came along and said, promoting a vaguely formulated usefulness of untouched rainforest, such as having American, Australian, and European “ecotourists” come and pay villagers for the privilege of walking in it.

For Solomon Islanders like the Marovo people, the rainforest, with its “objectively” observable steaming lushness and fertility and its “subjectively” defined social agency, is also an opponent to human projects. In order to maintain a clearing as an intensive agroforestry system of root crops, leafy greens, and fruit trees, its makers and owners have to engage in a continuous fight against creeping and climbing vines which encroach from the surrounding bush with astonishing speed. People’s ability to achieve a state of *mana* (“efficacy”, often spiritually backed) for a well-growing garden swidden stands in a fundamental conflict to the powers of growth in the “wild” forest. Yet, although the lush green rainforest with its incredible biodiversity is local people’s immediate competitor for

agricultural space, they are also quick to point out how important it is to manage shifting agriculture in a continuous rotation so that the forest regenerates. In practical everyday life, the forest is to be maintained also for its role as a repository – a landscape text – of old burial sites and other ritually important places that legitimate the land rights of present generations.

Contrary to what is thought and said by conservationists, there was actually very little primary (“virgin”) rainforest left on the large forest-covered islands of the Solomons, even before the great logging boom of the 1990s (Bayliss-Smith, Hviding, & Whitmore 2003). Through hundreds of years, many generations of mobile swidden agriculturalists have felled large and small trees and burned their remains to make ash-enriched clearings for temporary gardens. Well before the vulnerable exposed soil is exhausted they have moved on to another location, while the abandoned clearing quite soon regrows. After fifty years, what was once a clearing under cultivation has trees of the same size and height (and often the same species) as the ones originally there. Meanwhile people have planted particularly useful trees that provide fruit, medicine, building materials, and much more. In this way most rainforests of Solomon Islands have been transformed by many generations into human-influenced ecosystems of mature secondary forest with a conspicuous presence of directly useful trees (see Hviding 1995; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith 2000). This is how the forest is viewed by villagers, and this underlies their argument (voiced in response to conservationists’ calls to leave the forest standing in a “pristine state”) that trees have to be felled if the forest is to be of any use to the people living there.

On another level, for Marovo people their forest is not “nature” to which they stand in a hierarchical relation of dominance. Like many similar peoples they do not even have a word for “nature” in their language (Hviding 1996; Strathern 1980). Granted, the forest is in many ways their opponent – but they also do their best to take care of it so that it continues to be useful for their own ends. The long-term relationship between people and forest implies that the latter, on the whole, is more like the “cultural landscape” of the former – but this relationship is invisible to many uninitiated observers who see

in the rainforest only “nature” and biological diversity. From one point of view, shifting agriculture is destructive; it leads to a different kind of biodiversity at a lower level. From another point of view, it is precisely the cyclical rhythms of shifting agriculture that maintain forest and soil as an ecosystem and cultural landscape under continuous transformation and in a multi-faceted relationship to the people who live and work there.

### **The complexity of community-based conservation projects**

While the Marovo people continue to grow their gardens of root crops, leafy greens, and fruit trees and to further develop their highly transformed and most useful secondary forest, the enormous, only slightly modified areas of rainforest further inland from the village shores have been a recent arena for non-local interests. While the East logs these areas, the West attempts to protect them. Those who are neither East nor West (but who continue to own the forest) engage in the Eastern and Western projects in various ways, alternatively by allowing logging (mostly of a more selective and less destructive type than, for example, in Indonesia or the Amazon) or by joining initiatives towards “community-based” conservation projects.

It is interesting to note that the immediate response from one of the first villages in Marovo Lagoon to being invited by the WWF to join a “community-based conservation programme” (in the early 1990s) was a request to supply the community with some chainsaws, complete with fuel, oil and spare parts, so that people could fell their own trees and make planks (for a new church building) more efficiently. This, it was stated, would spare people from a lot of hard work in their everyday lives, and would give the men more time to help the women. The WWF response was that the organisation could not fund the purchase and use of chainsaws. It was unthinkable and involved chains of conservation-related reasoning of an unmentionable character, from an ecological perspective. The invited village responded by stating, through the secretary of the Marovo Area Council, that if so

the WWF might just as well remove itself from Marovo Lagoon altogether, and quickly. It was not long before the Marovo efforts of the WWF programme for “community-based conservation in Melanesia” was modified to accommodate the use of chainsaws for certain local purposes deemed “sustainable”; indeed, the felling and processing (by chainsaw) of trees by landowners evolved into a mainstay of a shaky “eco-timber” sector funded by a diversity of NGOs including churches (Hviding & Bayliss-Smith 2000).

This process intensified, and in the Marovo Lagoon of 1999 there was a continuous tug-of-war in which the WWF, Greenpeace, the New Zealand government and others worked hard, though competitively and in heterogeneous ways, to secure future protection for the lagoon and its surrounding lands as a “natural treasure”, preferably (as emphasised particularly in the New Zealand involvement) through entering the Marovo Lagoon on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites (see Hviding & Bayliss-Smith 2000: chapter 12). Meanwhile they also worked hard to maintain good relations with the local people who actually are the owners of the potential World Heritage Site. But in the villages, it was often argued that these organisations, although allowed to operate by the Solomon Islands government, were pursuing their own projects and goals, not necessarily compatible with local priorities and perceptions. Insightful Marovo politicians wryly commented to me how conservationists (who have to coexist, however uneasily, with logging companies) depend on good deals with villagers. Only then, they surmised, through being able to refer to well-functioning locally anchored projects, will NGOs (and even directly government-funded work such as that carried out by the New Zealanders) get funded from one year to another, and only then will well-paid foreign conservation consultants be able to continue to thrive. Villagers for their part have tended to accept the presence of conservationist organisations that supply outboard motors (and even a chainsaw or two), finance village-owned lodges for ecotourists, and so forth.

These projects of collaboration between Western conservationists (dependent for their organisational existence on access to tropical landscapes deemed to be in need of conserva-

tion) and Solomon Islands villagers (owning and using those landscapes as a condition for continued local living) involve shared understandings only about the barest minimum of criteria and procedures, in a context where local and global agendas for the rainforest may seem basically incompatible. From a certain perspective, activities like NGO-operated conservation workshops and associated programmes of resource management plans and ecotourism are connected to a global morality that also includes Western awareness of the non-Western “Others”, in some respects also embracing an appreciation as a global object of value of the Others’ knowledge as well as of their natural environment. From a more local, Melanesian perspective interesting elements of reciprocity are involved: by being allowed to “use” the villages the NGOs are able to secure their existence, in return for a supply of sought-after material goods to the villages. Contemporary NGO-run “community projects” fall into a more general picture of Melanesian cargo cults, in that the appropriation of one, or preferably several, projects (or *porojek*, as they are referred to in local languages and Solomon Islands Pidgin) is a goal of high priority for the modern village chief. Chiefs with ambitions of power may strive towards securing a *porojek* for their own people by allowing an NGO to enlist the village as one of their “communities” of collaboration in sustainable development. Obtaining a *porojek* and keeping it in the village gives an open channel for fulfilling local desires through the flow of money, goods, and services.

So money flows in to the projects and to the villages, where conservation workshops for the promotion of the relevant global morality have become commonplace events in the (self-) selected “communities”. Such complicated entanglements in the world’s remote corners are not unique to Melanesia, as demonstrated for example by Stephanie Kane’s *The Phantom Gringo Boat* – reporting from the Darién forest of Panama, a backwater where the lives and conceptualisations of Emberá Indians include shamans, commando soldiers, Manuel Noriega, cocaine smugglers, rainforest protectors, and many, many more (Kane 1994), and by Anna Tsing’s *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* from the remote mountains of Borneo where logging, military patrols, modern contraceptives, mutual accusations of head-

hunting, and a diverse set of other phenomena lead an untidy coexistence (Tsing 1993).

On the ground, in places like Marovo, it may be seen over and over again how local people refuse to constitute a pure ecologically noble alternative towards which Western desire – whether among eco-tourists in search of authenticity or NGOs fighting for biodiversity – may be directed. When conservationists and ecotourists get to realise what these specific tribal people are all about, it appears to them to be greed, utilitarianism, and similar disappointing features that stand out. Yet there is a long line of continuity in these present-day disagreements. Following the pattern of many Melanesians through colonial history, the Marovo people refuse to be controlled: a chief who has gained the status of reliable Greenpeace supporter may suddenly sell timber felling rights in the ancestral forest of his kin group to a greedy company from Malaysia. In doing so, he follows well-understood local strategies of maintaining and exercising autonomy over conditions for the desired quality of contemporary village life. Simply put, Paradise is not Paradise after all, the people are not spiritual noble savages but shrewd and civilised entrepreneurs, and tribal authenticity and natural biodiversity may not be saved after all – neither from global capitalism nor from the greed of local people. At least, so it may appear according to the predicaments of Western conservationists in today’s Melanesia, a region whose inhabitants have rarely had problems in finding locally adequate approaches to new people and new projects.

As shown by these glimpses of recent local history in the South Pacific, the champions of international biodiversity conservation are not necessarily the agents whose messages have the strongest resonance among the villagers still in control of the resources that constitute biodiversity. If the exploitation of the resources of tropical rainforest and coral reefs – in situations like the Melanesian one where they are held by the indigenous people themselves – is to be steered towards sustainable levels rather than into large-scale extraction by transnational companies, it is of vital importance that resource owners are presented with alternative paths to income and local infrastructure development. To this end new approaches are needed for those who aspire towards collaborating with local

resource owners, building less on imported generalisations and blueprint planning of how things are supposed to be. The global (i.e., the idealist morality and natural science of NGOs) needs to appreciate and assimilate the local (i.e., the lifestyle-motivated concerns and indigenous knowledge of villagers), rather than the other way around (Hviding 2003). This, then, would also involve stronger recognition by NGOs of the high level of local-level competence building that results from endless encounters and engagements with an accelerating multitude of foreign desires and agendas.

The “projects of desire” exemplified by the recent developments in the Marovo Lagoon of Solomon Islands represent this level of preparedness and competence among the village people who depend on the environments that constitute the biodiversity championed

by NGOs. In places like Solomon Islands, where kinship-based groups own and control lands and reefs with a grounding in ancestral title handed over through the generations, these groups are indigenous organisations in their own right, and may provide a unique basis from which to build collaborative efforts that conserve and develop both nature’s biodiversity and local people’s conditions for the lives they desire. Recent developments where Solomon Islanders, steeped in the organisational frameworks of indigenous landholding groups, have gained leadership positions in a number of conservationist NGOs operating in the country bode well for the future and provide for a more meaningful convergence of local and global concerns in the efforts to make biodiversity conservation compatible with local aspirations for a better life.

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