



## Fieldwork with Bob: "The first man to dive all night"

Bob Johannes was a respectful and respected scholar and humanist with a profound disregard for disciplinary boundaries. He was a dear colleague to people representing many knowledges, whether local or academic. And so Bob will also be fondly remembered and missed by people of countless Pacific Island villages, with whom he spent intense hours, days, nights and weeks on beaches, in canoes, on reefs, underwater, and in conversation in hurricane lamp light under leaf roofs. Bob's interests in the inhabitants of sea and reef dovetailed with those of so many Pacific Islanders, and in his gentle but insistent explanations of the scientific greatness of local knowledge he boosted intergenerational pride in the value of that knowledge, more often than not capped by his lectures in a village meeting hall or church about pragmatic and locally understandable forms of marine conservation, building on what people of the village already knew. Bob's long-term efforts as a marine biologist towards enabling Pacific Island fisheries managers and scholars to further carry on the kind of work that he developed — we might well say founded — is an example to follow.

This small personal memoir of Bob in the field is based on work he and I, as marine biologist and social anthropologist (but with overlapping agendas), did together with fishermen of Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands in 1987. I hope to be able to invoke and celebrate some of Bob's unique qualities as fieldworker, friend and fellow fisherman — qualities that transcended cultural and linguistic boundaries too. Let me pay my initial respects by establishing that I would never have arrived in Marovo Lagoon had it not been for Bob. Having first been made aware of sea tenure issues in the Pacific by Bob's influential early papers, I wrote to him in early 1985 to test out some ideas I had for fieldwork in Micronesia. Bob wrote a long reply, starting out by saying that he had a hunch that more fertile and less well-plowed fields might be found in the Solomon Islands. Bob put me in touch with Graham Baines, then developing what was in the mid-eighties a novelty: a community-based project for coastal zone management, with Solomon Islands, and Marovo Lagoon specifically, as pilot site. Through this generous assistance I was able to start 18 months of fieldwork from April 1986, affiliated to the project developed by Graham in the great lagoon of Marovo, following requests made by chiefs, Area Council, and other local people of political influence.

I kept up correspondence with Bob as I worked and travelled the seas and reefs of Marovo Lagoon with the men and women who depend on this fabulously rich marine environment. It became clear that the Marovo people's knowledge of such things as lunar spawning cycles of reef fishes is of extraordinary scope and detail; and Graham Baines worked out an arrangement whereby the Commonwealth Science Council (the sponsors of the "Marovo Lagoon Resource Management Project") would fund a brief visit by Bob to Marovo. Bob's visit was duly timed to coincide with "the rising of the serranids" in certain places during the last quarter of the moon, a phenomenon reported in great detail throughout the diving-oriented villages of Marovo. On 6 May 1987, at the moon's first quarter, I met Bob as he climbed off the Twin Otter flight from Honiara. We boarded my motorized canoe for a quick orientation around central parts of Marovo Lagoon, including the deep dropoffs along the ocean-facing shores of the magnificent forested barrier reef islands. A torrential downpour forced us to seek shelter in a fishermen's shed on the reef, and while it rained we set the agenda for the next three weeks, giving emphasis to grouper spawning, mullet migrations and the general Marovo repertoire of lunar cycles in reef fish aggregations. The "Marovo Project" had a network throughout many villages, and advance requests for a visit by Bob had been made by important persons who deemed themselves or their village to be representative of a particular fishing-related expertise. These requests were duly incorporated into the itinerary planning, working from my established home base in the village of Chea, famous for its underwater spearfishermen.

The next three weeks developed into a whirlpool of fish talk, as Bob dived headlong into my existing network of elderly master fishermen and younger active divers and net fishers across Marovo. Those petrol-spending weeks indeed turned out to be an essential experience of intensive cross-cultural interpretation of uninterrupted conversation between giants in the field of tropical reef fish knowledge — questions and responses flowing both ways.

As conversations about creatures of sea and reef developed on sun-scorched seashores, in canoes on fishing grounds, and in houses at night, Bob and the local experts cultivated innumerable topics of mutual interest. Lunar spawning cycles of two dozen fishes were examined in detail, as was a repertoire of 14 types of fish aggregation. Remembering Palau habits, Bob initiated Marovo fishermen into a non-Marovo form of "tour ration": pieces of freshly caught fish quickly marinated in the diving mask with lime. From 8 to 18 May I accompanied Bob to half a dozen villages scattered along most of the 100 kilometres of Marovo Lagoon. I left him for a few days in the northern parts of the lagoon (home of specialists on mullet, barracuda, dugong and green turtle) in the care of Vincent Vaguni and Frank Riqeo, two of the local coordinators of the "Marovo Project". After that excursion Bob returned to home base in Chea with good

material for the anthropologist too; he had picked up a mysterious ogre tale about "The Great Eater", and he had made insightful observations at a village wedding (noting especially the staggering numbers of pre-marital relationships implied by the pastor for both bride and groom). But above all he had connected to a tradition of mullet knowledge and capture, which he saw as perhaps an unparalleled opportunity to increase the scientific understanding of this important tropical food fish.

The 18 May "cut-off date" for lagoon wanderings was a result of thorough planning by all involved. From that day, Bob's work in Marovo followed from day to day the famous and imminent rise of serranids in the Charopoana Passage. Of particular interest was a coral trout initially thought by Bob to be *Plectropomus leopardus*, which he soon discovered was the slightly different *Plectropomus areolatus*. A team (hereafter The Team) was formed to pursue this quest. Ilo, a renowned spearfisherman from Chea's neighbour village Sasaghana, was hired as Bob's specimen shooter and counterpart in underwater work, and my fieldwork partner Harold Jimuru, took overall responsibility for Team logistics using his own fibreglass canoe and my outboard motor. The Marovo divers had been much impressed with Bob's free-diving abilities, never having seen a white man go so deep and — important to them — move so effortlessly about the dropoff. But Bob had tested, and expressed profound distrust of, the long but rickety homemade spearguns of Marovo's divers, so the daily need for fresh (and eminently edible) specimens for checking gonads and so forth was met by Ilo, who had a reputation for being able to shoot any underwater creature on request.

In a report to the 6<sup>th</sup> International Coral Reef Symposium, Bob summed up his methodology as follows: "The study began on May 19, 1987, eight days before the new moon. Each morning for ten days I swam a transect the length of Charopoana Passage . . . over water depths of 4 to 10 m along the entire channel slope on the south side, counting all the *P. areolatus* I could see." While The Team also kept a parallel watch in the deep passage of Mogo further north, early morning trips were made to Bob's Charopoana transect every day from 19 to 26 May. For the first five days, only small numbers of the selected coral trout were seen; specimens were shot (sometimes with Ilo waving off intrusive grey reef sharks) but there was little evidence of anything special developing, until (again, as predicted by Marovo experts) things intensified on 24 May, with a large aggregation present, in which Bob observed telltale patterns in the state of and association between male and female fish. As the moon was about to disappear, Bob, Ilo, and Harold engaged in a joint quest where enthusiasm, expertise, and epistemology converged.

"On May 26, the eve of the new moon, I observed the twilight and nocturnal behaviour of the fish . . . The fish were checked by diving with an underwater light throughout the night. None were active between 1845 h, May 26 and 0605 h, May 27, at which time, before sunrise on the day of the new moon, they began to emerge from their sleeping places." This condensed quote from the Coral Reef Symposium paper says nothing about the status achieved by Bob Johannes during those twelve hours. Bob remains known in Marovo as "The First Man To Dive All Night".

During the late afternoon of 26 May, Bob had become rather tense; it was as if a climax of research performance and discovery was drawing near. He wanted to be left alone through the night in the biggest fibreglass canoe of the village, anchored in 10 m depth at the outermost point of his transect in Charopoana Passage, with water and a few baked sweet potatoes for refreshment. From this vantage location he intended to dive with torchlight exactly every hour to check the development of the fish aggregation. He declined any offer of personal assistance, not to say company. We all decided that at least he needed some good food to take him through such a harrowing night, and I obtained a good-sized freshly cooked coconut crab for him.

Ronter Amos, the owner of the big canoe, took a silent Bob out to anchor before dusk and then paddled away in a small dugout they had taken in tow. The night's Team set up camp and lit a fire on the beach some 500 m further down the passage, across from the small diving resort at Uipi. The Team's logistics manager, Harold, decided that, since "Bobby" was so mad as to insist on a full night of hourly dives alone in the shark-infested passage, we must maintain "security". We took turns wading out to a point on the fringing reef from which the big canoe could be seen riding at anchor in the starlit passage, and a succession of "guards" saw that Bob did emerge from his uncomfortable rest every hour to disappear, light in hand, into the sea before reappearing after a while. It was concluded, especially after Ronter made a spot check for resident sharks, "Bobby's study is going well."

Then a new and direct threat to "Bobby's study" appeared on the scene. At 0300 the engine of a tuna catcherboat was heard from far down the lagoon. Their onboard wells teeming with recently netted live baitfish, these fast vessels usually left the Marovo Lagoon for offshore fishing grounds around this time every night. In the Marovo Lagoon of the 1980s, catcherboats of the Solomon Taiyo joint-venture company were notorious for speeding through the Charopoana Passage, which is why the Uipi Resort avoided having boats moored at night by its wharf. Canoe owner Ronter's prophecy was simple: "Bob's going to be caught by the waves, break loose and slam ashore! End of study too!" Ronter and I paddled out to Bob

to warn him, not a little worried about disturbing his scholarly peace of mind. We put the case to a drowsy Bob, suggesting that the canoe should be moved to safe waters until the catcherboat had passed. Bob reacted instantly: "There's no way, absolutely no way, that I'm going to leave my diving transect now! Let that tuna boat come! I don't care! I'm in the middle of something great here, don't you see? Now, will you guys just let me be!" Who could argue against Bob in such a mood. Who, indeed, can argue against such dedicated scientific quest. We shrugged, Ronter gave Bob some advice on how to start the unreliable old outboard motor, and we paddled back to camp.

All good powers were with Bob on that still, dark night in Charopoana Passage. Soon the engine noise tapered off as the tuna catcherboat left the lagoon through the southern entrance instead. At 0600 I paddled out to Bob to check the state of the night's affairs. The First Man To Dive All Night was no longer morose, but beaming with satisfaction, just emerging from the night's final hourly dive, having reached some tentative but sound conclusions. The rest of the story — including how Bob's exact and rigorous observations during the 10-day "rising of serranids" connected to his discussions with Chea's fishermen immediately after his all-night diving feat — is reported in Bob's paper for the 6<sup>th</sup> International Coral Reef Symposium.

Two days later, Bob took leave of us and Marovo Lagoon, carrying a selection of the renowned Marovo woodcarvings home to Hobart. But that was not the end of friendships and joint projects. Having developed a joint passion for passages after weeks of working in the deep passages that connect Marovo Lagoon with the ocean, Bob and I often discussed via letters, during visits by me to Hobart, and by him to Bergen, and later via email, how we ought to do a properly holistic analysis of the multiple significances — ecological and biodiversity, oceanographic, cultural, social, nutritional and so forth — of such strange and magnificent places as the deep passages where serranids rise. Alas, that was never to be.

Bob's reputation in Marovo as The First Man to Dive All Night was alive and well in 1996 during my fieldwork there. And indeed, Bob was to return to the passages where his Marovo fame was made. As his engagement in the consequences of the live reef fish trade grew, he returned to the Solomons in 1997. This led to several more visits, and in 1998 Bob returned to Chea village in connection with a study of what the live reef fish trade would mean for, quite specifically, the serranid aggregations in Charopoana Passage. When Bob reported to me via email on his 1998 meeting with Harold and other members of The Team of 1987, and as he passed on messages and regards to me from them, time and space seemed to evaporate.

I'd like to think of Bob as still having a wonderful presence right out there in the passages where he dived all through the night. I know the Marovo people will think of him in that way. Thank you, Bob. *Leana uka pa mua tinavete va susua mamu ko valeana hoi*, they say in Marovo Lagoon. Thank you for taking everyone along in all your leading work. Thank you for the examples you set.

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