

‘Na Vanuagu’

Epistemology and Personhood in Tathimboko,¹ Guadalcanal

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Abstract

This chapter provides a brief overview of the fundamental underpinnings of concepts such as identity, personhood and epistemology in the northern part of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. The study area is commonly referred to as *Tathimboko*, defined by the speakers of the *Lengo* language and adjacent locales who speak *Lengo* and another language. *Na vanuagu*, roughly translated in English as ‘my home/place’, is weightier than the contemporary meaning of an individual’s home or place. Indeed, it is the foundation of personhood, identity, knowledge and relationship with one’s surroundings. It is also the expression of relationships between individual persons, families, kin groups, clans, tribes, neighbouring communities and islands. *Na vanuagu* is a reality that determines whether an individual is a close relative, a distant relative, an associate, an adopted person, a co-opted person, an outsider, a foreigner, a host or a guest. It is the basis of knowledge in *Tathimboko*. It defines and delineates aspects of personhood and includes notions of rights, privileges, duties, responsibilities and social status in both private and public

¹ *Tathimboko*, meaning Western Sea in the local dialect, is the correct name and spelling of the area, often mistakenly referred to in government documents, maps and by outsiders as *Tasimboko* or sometimes *Tadhimboko*.

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domains. Personhood in *Tathimboko* is primarily understood in a communal context, although there is also an individual aspect to it. It is usually associated with social relations, communal living, family, kinship ties, practices, rights and privileges. Since this chapter concentrates on a regional Guadalcanal, a number of concepts in the local vernacular, with their 'equivalent or approximate' English translations, are singled out and discussed. This chapter's contribution is to provide an overview of what constitutes knowledge in *Tathimboko* and how this may situate an understanding of personhood in this particular society's worldview.

Introduction

Deliberations on epistemology and personhood are bound to be complex and expansive. This chapter intends to look selectively at specific aspects of knowledge and personhood peculiar to the *Tathimboko* region of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. It begins with a theoretical review of personhood to pave the way for describing and explaining the notion of *na vanuagu*, the central focus of this chapter. To avoid generalising about Guadalcanal and the wider Solomon Islands, a clear demarcation of the area called *Tathimboko* is made, comprising *Lengo* speakers and the specific geographical area within which the discussion is situated. The chapter outlines the concept of *na vanuagu* with the help of a diagram. It then takes on the broader discussion of epistemology, particularly the issue of what is regarded as knowledge, and why, in *Tathimboko*. Given the communal disposition surrounding personhood in this particular context, the chapter devotes time to interrogate the fundamentals of identity and relationship in *Tathimboko*. In so doing, it necessarily includes a discussion of the principles of rights, duties and privileges entrenched in interpersonal relationships of *Lengo* persons. Moreover, a discussion of the notion and knowledge of belonging in *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal is also entertained.

Na vanuagu encompasses place, space, environment, livelihoods, interpersonal relationships, art forms, protocols, practices, duties, rights and privileges that culminate in local and customary land tenure in *Tathimboko*. As such, the discussion of personhood in this chapter cannot be detached from individual persons' relationships with each other, their relationship with land knowledge of their roots and ancestral routes, and sets of values defined by society. In the *Tathimboko* worldview, persons are born to and for the land (*vutha tinomie na pari mana iologho*), and through the matrilineal connection with the mother as the incontestable parent (*iitina*), relationships and belongingness interlace (Nanau, 2014). It is hoped that with this brief discussion of *na vanuagu*, misperceptions, conflicts and delusions about development and modernisation projects in the northern part of the island of Guadalcanal are put into perspective. This may also help in simplifying the

multifaceted connections associated with personhood, especially relational personhood and other related concepts in broader Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands and other Melanesian contexts.

Personhood Explained

Before embarking on a discussion of 'personhood' and epistemology in *Tathimboko*, it is essential to have some background understanding of the origins of the concept itself and its meaning. The term 'person' comes from the Latin word *persona*, traceable to the mask used in Greek drama. From that historical base, 'persona' in current usage refers to 'second identities which people adopt for behaviour in given contexts' (SCSLI, 2014). Mauss (1938) explained that the concept of personhood originated and slowly developed over many centuries and through numerous vicissitudes, so that even today it is still imprecise, delicate, fragile, a concept requiring further elaboration (cited in Budja, 2012, 138). Others argue that to be a person involves participating in a system of social practices. Ikäheimo and Laitinen (2007) maintain that such participation 'involves not only the capacity to follow rules or norms constitutive of such practices (or understanding), but also the capacity to take evaluative distance from, and thus to challenge and develop further the system of practices (or reason)' (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2007, 14). The following related concepts must be clearly explained for the purposes of understanding the discussions that follow: person, individual, 'dividual' and 'primology'.

The first distinction to make is that between the notions of individual and person. This may sound bizarre in normal day-to-day language, but a distinction has to be made. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) claims that all human beings in society are comprised of two essences: an individual as well as a person. He explains that '[a]s an individual [s/he] is a biological organism ... as a person [s/he] is a complex of social relationships' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, 194). It is also said that '... persons are typically thought of as being self-conscious, as having self-concern, second-order desires, moral conscience, first-person perspectives or other epistemic and practical, conscious or unconscious ways of relating to their attitudes, emotions and actions, and to themselves as their subjects' (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2007, 10). Citing Mauss' work on this particular topic, Budja clarifies that by 'individual' Mauss was making reference to 'the unstructured biological and psychological human being', whereas his reference to the person 'is embedded in social organisations and cultural institutions, and relates to positions, statuses, rights, duties, virtues and traits through which societies organise the lives of their members' (Budja, 2012, 138). Ikäheimo and Laitinen succinctly conclude that 'personhood, as a complex or composite topic, can be helpfully

approached by focusing on the special kinds of relations persons have to each other, as well as to themselves' (2007, 10).

This brings us to our second point needing clarification – the facets of personhood identified as individuality and 'dividuality'. Individuality deals with 'self-respect' or, more specifically, 'recognition respect' for oneself as a person with dignity and moral status as a rational agent. Ikäheimo and Laitinen explain that the forms through which 'recognition self-respect' are pursued are as follows: '... the first is a view of oneself as someone entitled to being regarded and treated by others with respect, and the second concerns one's own regard and treatment of oneself as a moral and rational agent (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2007, 13). According to Fortes, persons are 'kept aware of who they are and where they fit into society by criteria of age, sex, and descent, and by other indices of status, through acting in accordance with these norms' (Fortes, 1987, 282).

Quoting Chris Fowler, Frow and Clemens (2013) stress that personhood is attained and maintained through relationships with other people, things, places, animals and the spiritual features of the cosmos. Fowler further argues that 'people are composed of social relations with other people to the extent that they owe parts of themselves to others' (as cited in Frow & Clemens, 2013, 11). The latter is what is regarded as 'dividuality'. Others refer to these aspects of personhood as the 'self-relationality' and 'interpersonal relationality' of persons who, as Budja puts it (2012), are intertwined. Budja explains that 'only beings that have some such self-relations can stand as moral subjects or agents in interpersonal relations to others: you cannot establish a mutual moral relationship with a creature that has no reflexive relationship to its desires or intentions but, as it were, acts on them automatically' (2012, 11).

Charles Cooley earlier used the metaphor of the 'mirror' or 'looking glass'³ to describe personhood:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it (1902, 185).

Personhood in this sense is premised on two fundamental notions. First, self-consciousness involves one's continuous monitoring of self from the point of

view of others. Second, there is the role of the individual in interpreting the perceived responses of others, which then gives rise to real and intensely powerful emotions such as shame or pride (Reitzes, 1980, 632; Scheff, 2005, 147).

For this particular study, it is important to acknowledge the understanding of personhood in Melanesia as elaborated in the works of Marilyn Strathern. In her seminal works on Papua New Guinea, Strathern (1988) identified the 'sociocentric' Melanesian dividual and partible personhoods as alternatives to 'egocentric' Western indivisible, individual personhoods. Similarly, Budja explains that in Melanesia, 'each person is a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons. The person can be considered a dividual being, as a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons' (Budja, 2012, 142). Strathern argues that Melanesian persons are

... as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm. This premise is particularly significant for the attention given to images of relations contained within the maternal body (1988, 13).

In her work, Strathern reveals something intensely important for understanding personhood and epistemology in *Tahimboko* and Guadalupe. When describing the gathering of clans in ceremonies, she argues that in such ceremonies, the clan is a dividual person, since '... the bringing together of many persons is just like the bringing together of one' (Strathern, 1988, 15). Fowler supports this by stating that 'clan and person have parallel compositions and conditions of personhood' (2004, 28). Personhood in this context is therefore two sides of the same coin, with a permeable configuration and texture. This permeability makes it possible for Melanesian persons 'to continuously move between being one person with many relations (dividual), and being presented as one of a pair in a relationship (partible)' (Fowler, 2004, 28). Here, 'the condition of multiple constitutions, the person composed of diverse relations, also makes the person a partible entity: a person can dispose of parts, or act as a part. Thus "women" move in marrying as parts of clans; thus "men" circulate objectified parts of themselves among themselves' (Strathern, 1988, 324-325).

As in any other culture, then, individual and dividual facets of personhood synchronise in *Tahimboko* society (LiPuma, 2000, 131). As Budja succinctly states, '... personhood emerges from a constant process of reconciliation of one with the other, and it is a misunderstanding to assume either that the social emerges out of individual action or that the individual ever completely

³ Cooley first coined the phrase *The Looking Glass Self* to describe the 'I' in common speech in *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902, 183-185).

disappears by virtue of indigenous forms of relational totalization' (2011: 149).

Finally, there is the importance of the concept of trinitology⁴ in making sense of personhood in *Tahimboko*. The concept of the Christian Holy Trinity, expounded by Augustine and many other theologians in earlier times and more recently by scholars such as Siklósi István (2013), fits well with the Melanesian understanding of personhood, especially in the *na vanuagu* setting. Without attempting a philosophical and theological discussion of the Holy Trinity, the concept of trinitology has relevance for the current discussion because the individual, the collective society and the intra/inter *wanok* relationships, including connections to land and place/surroundings (Nanau, 2014), comprise a single whole. Discussing the Augustinian understanding of trinitology widely accepted in Christianity, István explains

According to Augustine we can assert Trinity in a singular number, because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit constitute one unity, the Holy Trinity itself. God's essence is the same as His being; in other cases[s] we should assert three divine essences and three gods, but God is one, He is one essence and three divine persons (persona). The reason why Trinity is not three substances but three persons is that earlier Augustine has used the term of substance in a meaning of essence and he wanted to avoid the confusion of terms. Person in this meaning is such entity which can be separated by its own quality from other beings, but it does not have [its] own essential existence (2013, 4).

The introduction of Christianity and colonial administration, together with their corresponding worldviews, had a huge influence on indigenous communities in the Solomon Islands, including *Tahimboko*. For instance, Christianity, and later the colonial administration under the British Protectorate, promoted the 'circular trinity'⁵ of mind, body and spirit, institutionally reflected with schools representing the mind, the hospital (health) representing the body, and churches representing the spirit (LiPuma, 2000, 284). It is important to stress for our purposes that, although it may be

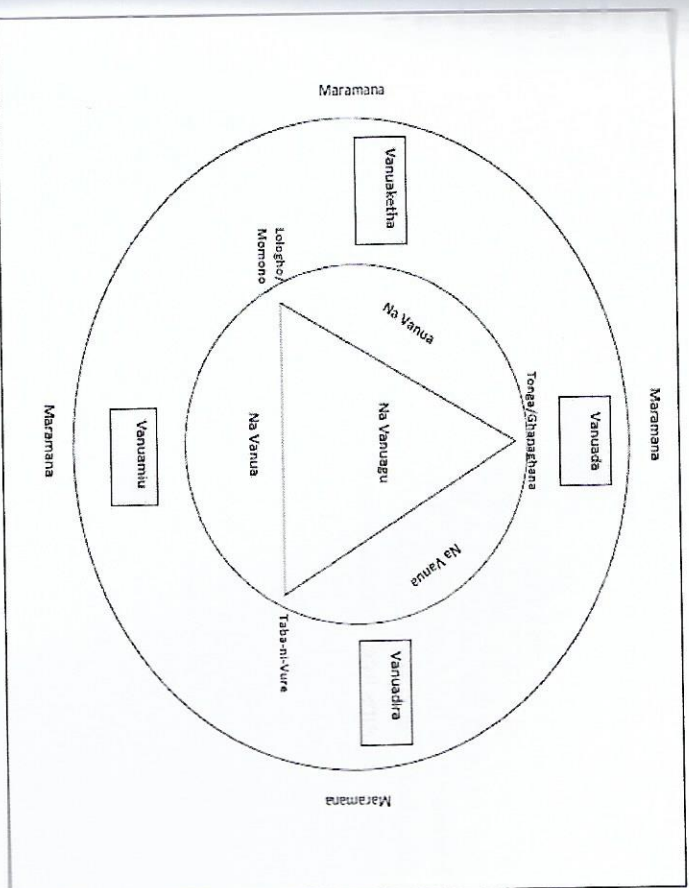
⁴ 'Trinitology' refers to the Christian theological concept of the Holy Trinity, especially reflected in the earlier work by Augustine on the 'Trinity of Love'. The basic interpretation is the union of three 'persons' in one Godhead: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

⁵ LiPuma referred to the mind, body and spirit (trinitology) discussion in PNG as a 'circular trinity' but it can easily be seen as 'triangular' in nature. The shift in institutionalising 'trinitology' is positive in its own right. However, when it is transplanted to Melanesia, it displaces and in some instances erases other important values and sources of knowledge and livelihood.

different from the modern expression of trinitology, a corresponding understanding can be made under the *na vanuagu* web of relationships.

The concepts of *tonga/ghanghanda/wanga* (mind/thinking/spirit) associated with the individual person's thoughts, 'ways' and behaviours, *lologho/momono/linthidu* (land/place and property/livelihood); and *taba-ni-vure* (relatives/relationships/connections) comprise the totality of *na vanuagu*. A fundamental point is that *na vanuagu* is also a 'triangular trinity' defined by *tonga*, *lologho* and *taba-ni-vure*. Similar to what LiPuma described as the worldview of the *Maring* people in Papua New Guinea (PNG), these concepts 'began in the premise that mind, body, and spirit are fused in the first instance' (2000, 284). The close linkage or fusion of a person's *tonga/ghanghana* (mind) with *lologho/momono* (culture, surroundings, property, land, livelihood, environment) and *taba-ni-vure* (people, clan members, relatives, relationships) describes the trine connection of personhood in the *na vanuagu* epistemology. Figure 11.1 below depicts personhood in the *Tahimboko* worldview: *na vanuagu*.

Figure 11.1: *Na Vanuagu* Worldview (drawn by Maria Uitoga Labu-Nanau, 2016)



One of the connections that may be overlooked in personhood discussion is the connection between individual, dividual and environment (Frow & Clemens, 2013, 10). This has to be taken into account if one is to present a complete picture of personhood in the *na vanuagu* context. As Brightman et al. point out, '[t]his relationship is at the heart of indigenous understandings of personhood; here, persons are defined in relation to their social and physical environments, and not in isolation or in abstract' (2010, 355). The authors elaborate that change and transformation in contemporary indigenous societies should be understood in the context wherein '... personhood and environment are linked by constant processes of interaction at the level of being and identity, as well as at the level of material production. Change is often largely understood through processes of appropriation and expropriation, accompanied by population movements and put into effect by political action' (2010, 361-362). We will now delve into the specific features of *Tathimboko* personhood – *na vanuagu*.

Na vanuagu i Tathimboko

Na vanuagu is an existence that embraces belonging to a place and space (encompassing social, cultural, religious, political and economic space), social relationships, practices, privileges, rights and responsibilities. It is the basis of personhood for the people of *Tathimboko* and the *Lengo* speakers of Guadalcanal. *Lengo* is the region of the north and northeast of the island of Guadalcanal, including parts of the modern constituency of East Central Guadalcanal who speak the *Lengo* language. The indigenous settlers occupied the region along the eastern coast of the Lungga River to the region of the Rere River in the *AolaLungu* country, including *Ghaobata*, *Tathimboko*, *Paripao* and the highlands of *Kolosulu*, *Komukama*, *Geza*, *Gimobua* and *Gheghede* and surrounding areas. Figure 11.2 below is a map indicating all language groups and regions in Guadalcanal.

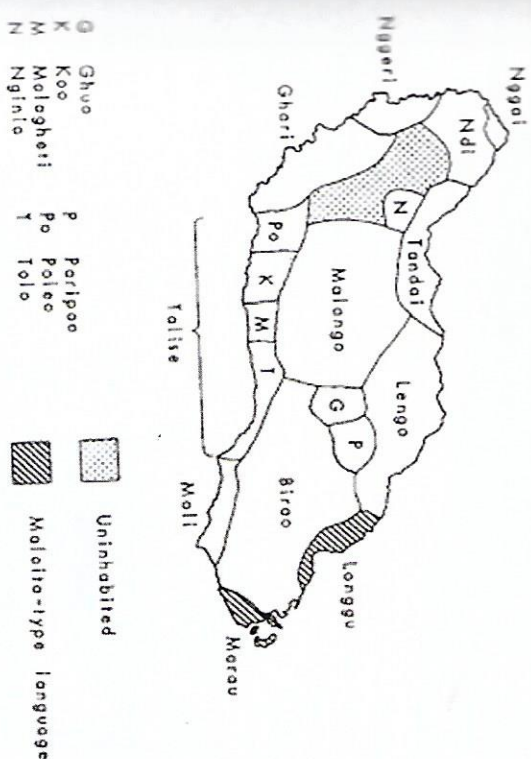


Figure 11.2: Major Language Regions⁶ in Guadalcanal (source: Chapman, 1970, based on Hackman, 1968)

Lengo is the area that my discussion broadly covers. However, to ensure that the discussion is manageable, I am going to restrict my explanations to the region that I am most familiar with and where I grew up. This is the area bordered by the Ngai and Moga rivers. Figure 11.3 below indicates the specific area covered by the discussion in this chapter. It is the *Tathimboko* Ward in the current North East Guadalcanal electoral constituency.

⁶ The areas indicated as uninhabited may have now been partially occupied because of population growth and the inward expansion of logging activities and settlements.

important to note that, like any other Pacific island society, *Tathimboko* is a society that cherishes oral tradition. As such, knowledge is acknowledged and validated if it is passed down from earlier generations. Knowledge in this sense includes historical and genealogical accounts, especially about the person's origins and ancestral routes (and roots) that explain where one finds oneself as a person in the present time.

Knowledge (epistemology) of origin and the movement of a particular *kema* (tribe) and *manata* (clan) through historical genealogy are often kept and transmitted by 'selected' elders, who also pass this knowledge on to members of the *manata*. Such stories are verified by comparing them with other stories kept and told by neighbouring *manata* and *kema*, particularly those who share land boundaries with one's *manata*. The practice of sharing information and verifying another *manata's* account is called *thaitu* (cooperation). The authenticity of such knowledge is higher if told by respected elders in the group and verified with accounts by leaders of other groups. More importantly, when accounts are related to issues like land ownership, they have to be verified by evidence such as *ravunikere* (sacificial ground, altar), *kudi* (burial ground), *peo* (*manata* repository, where family skulls are preserved), and so forth (Hogbin, 1964; Chapman, 1970). Without these verifiable evidences to support a particular *kema* or *manata* account, the information that is passed on may not be accepted as knowledge. Such verifiable evidences about the information on a *manata* are therefore directly connected to individual personhood (LiPuna, 2000).

In the *Tathimboko* culture, knowledge is also closely tied to gender differentiation and consolidation. Individual personhood is often not easy to separate from relational personhood as it is group based (communal), as in many other Melanesian societies. The trinitological connection of the *na vamwagu* concept to land, society and the individual (see Figure 11.1) indicates that relational personhood is more appropriate in the *Tathimboko* context. Knowledge and the person's right to life, livelihood and an identity may not be detached from his or her group's overall rights. Under the structure of the *kema*, intra-group knowledge and skills are shared firstly with the maternal cousins, before the paternal cousins. *Tathimboko*, like the whole of Guadalcanal, is a matrilineal society with group knowledge, skills, practices and primary rights to land channeled through the maternal connection. Since the biological mother of a person cannot be questioned (until the recent introduction of test tube babies!), knowledge and a person's rights are channeled through the matrilineal connection, the basis of *kema* and *manata*. As such, the position of women and girls in society is elevated because they ensure that the identity, livelihood and property of persons who are members of the *kema* and *manata* are maintained and extended. Males have the task of ensuring that they safeguard and protect the interests of individual members, the group's interests in society, and land belonging to the *kema* and *manata*.

ensuring a sustainable relationship with other *kema* and *manata*. Personhood is therefore mostly connected to one's knowledge of his or her role and obligation towards the common good in society. Such knowledge by individuals is considered important and unquestionable in *Tathimboko*.

It should be pointed out that in *Tathimboko* there is also knowledge that is closely attached to individuals. This is knowledge that is factual, abstract and cannot be changed. It is objective, real knowledge appreciated and treasured by *Tathimboko* people. It is closely linked to numbers and measurements, using one's body as a ruler. This is especially useful in house construction, involving depths, lengths, circumference, height and so forth. Although there are common names for the measurements using the 'body ruler', the actual sizes are peculiar to the individuals who do the measurements. For instance, if a person is constructing a house, s/he would normally use measurements such as *turi* (foot length, heel to toe); *nirive* (finger width); *ghoto* (fathom; fingertip to fingertip, arms outstretched), *abulima* (width of five extended fingers), *kido* (half finger, fingertip to middle of second joint), and so forth.

Likewise, there are terms associated with different things occurring in groups of ten, or as collectives. For instance: *pingu* (ten coconuts); *kua* (ten eggs); *voghara* (ten eels); *pannga* (ten fish or birds), and so forth. When references are made to bundles of things, they are called *ivogho*; bunches of fruits are called *vungu*; and joints in thatched roof houses are known as *tughu*. The point to note here is that knowledge in the *Tathimboko* context can be both objective and subjective. The examples of measurements using the body ruler in day-to-day calculations, or references to things in groups of tens, or other groupings highlighted above point to objective knowledge, although the actual length, width and so forth is contingent on the size of the individual body used as the ruler.⁸ At the same time, there is respect for subjective knowledge that is verifiable, as in the case of genealogical stories kept by each *kema*, explained above. *Tathimboko* society therefore appreciates and understands reality as stemming from both objective and subjective knowledge.

Identity, Rights, Duties and Privileges

I have attempted to explain that personhood is tied to social relations in the context of *na vamwagu*. Conventional understandings of personhood promoted by Western culture and capitalism view the person as a 'self-enclosed agent' (LiPuna, 2000, 128). Personhood in *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal more generally, while acknowledging and recognising aspects of individual

⁸ These local methods of measurement could be attributed to a bigger field of *Leongo* ethno-mathematics indigenous to the people of *Leongo*.

personhood, embraces the triline connection demonstrated in Figure 11.1. It describes the *na vanuagu* worldview in which individual personhood is often superseded by relational personhood. This is also the case in many parts of Papua New Guinea (LiPuna, 2000; Robbins & Wardlaw, 2005). Rights, duties, access and identity are given to individuals because they are identified with a group through the mother. These rights can be taken away from the person if the norms and values set out by society or one's *kema* and *mamata* are not followed. As George Carlin famously exclaimed in the context of America, '... rights aren't rights if someone can take 'em away. They're privileges. That's all we've ever had in this country, a bill of temporary privileges' (as cited in Whitehead, 2017, 1). The fundamental rights of persons are respected through collective identities that are linked to the individual as a member of a *kema* and *mamata*.

One's membership in a *kema* and *mamata* gives that person the right to access, use of and livelihood from the land and resources belonging to the group. As a person, the fact that one is born into a family with relatives, both maternal and paternal, is an assurance of a person's rights and sustenance. These rights of the individual are premised on the person's affiliation and blood attachments to a group in the form of *kema* and *mamata*. Even in a situation where a person's mother is not from the area, the connections with paternal cousins, and even the process of adoption by a *kema* or *mamata*, ensure that person's right to life and sustenance. In this sense, personhood in *Tathimboko* is very much defined and safeguarded by being born into a certain group in the context of *na vanuagu*.

This is where local epistemology informing people's roots and genealogical origins becomes critical to understanding personhood. A person's rights to lay claim to and use the land to meet basic needs is directly linked to verifiable genealogical records passed down through oral tradition, as described earlier. In *Tathimboko*, two foundational concepts for interrelational personhood are *vinivae* (original settlement) and *ghatumbu*⁹ (a person's original gardening area). Indeed, *ghatumbu* and *vinivae* are securities or guarantees for personal survival and sustenance. A person's status, rights and privileges are enshrined in one's demonstration of his or her *vinivae* and/or *ghatumbu*, together with membership in a *kema* and *mamata*. Verifiable oral traditions, especially those related to genealogical origins supported by evidence of *peo* and *ravunikeru*, described earlier, are fundamental to personhood in this context.

Vinivae and *ghatumbu* are so critical that they may determine one's right to dwell and fend for oneself in a particular locality. This is not to be confused with the notion of land ownership. Even if a *kema* or *mamata* is not the group

owner of a piece of land, the rights over a *vinivae* and *ghatumbu* are entrenched rights that are respected in *Tathimboko* (Nanau, 2014). This was so until recent confusions over the meaning of land ownership that have accompanied capitalist thinking and economy, a subject of another research. Personal status, goodwill and acts of caring and reciprocity stemmed from these connections. One often wonders why in *Tathimboko* the act of caring and reciprocity is demonstrated through feasts and hospitality towards guests and visitors, and yet there is no local word for 'thank you'. The closest term to 'thank you' is *doku*, literally meaning okay or good. Is that because of ingratitude or the sign of an uncivilised society that needs civilising? Francis Bugotu, a *Tathimboko* person, penned this explanation to summarise the whole epistemological basis of relational personhood in *Tathimboko*:

Europeans are shocked to learn that we have no words for "thank you," no greetings such as "Good morning" or "Good night." This is not a sign of an ungrateful culture. Gratefulness, sharing and giving are a way of life, accepted and practiced almost unconsciously by all. When I give, I have the satisfaction of giving in a continuation of friendly relations. I wouldn't expect a verbal "thank you" because thankfulness is seen in deeds rather than in words. An individual who finds it hard to give and part with his possessions would need to be reassured with verbal "thank yous." A society that takes pleasure in giving and receiving needn't invent a word for thankfulness (Bugotu, 1968, 68).

Similar understandings were described in LiPuna's (2000) work with the Maring people, and Hemer's (2013) work with the Lihitians of Papua New Guinea. In his discussion of gift-giving and its meanings, LiPuna explained that 'every request for a gift can be seen as the maintenance of a social relation, repayment for a gift given previously, or as an extortion based on power, such as the power to harm through sorcery and magic' (LiPuna, 2000, 140). Identity, rights and duties are therefore important factors in understanding relationships, which are ultimately linked to personhood. Hemer identified three types of relationships, consisting of 'kinship and marriage, of ties to place, and of nurturance – [which] constituted a household' (Hemer, 2013, 65). Narokobi succinctly summarised this complex web of relationships by noting that 'in traditional Melanesian societies, personal wealth was always held in trust for the family, the clan and the village. Collective ownership imposes trusteeship whereas individual ownership necessitates personal liberty to dispose of that property at the will of the individuals' (Narokobi, 1983, 9–10). At the core of personhood is collective ownership of land, sharing, and reciprocity as a way of life, with very limited space for the individual person.

⁹ Some parts of *Lengo* and *Tathimboko* use the term *kanuba* rather than *ghatumbu* when referring to secondary gardening areas. See Lasaga (1968).

Personhood, Belonging and Relationships

At the core of *Tathimboko* society lie two important and related concepts that are connected to personhood: *kukuni* (respect) and *kikiniina* (reverence). *Kukuni* is more respect for others and their properties. *Kikiniina* has to do with reverence, bordering on fear, because of one's respect for other persons. These two concepts of *kukuni* and *kikiniina* ensure that *na vanua* functions as normal. The rights of a person to life, land and other privileges are enshrined in the *kikiniina* and *kukuni* that exist between individuals, within groups, and between groups such as *kema* and *manata*. *Kukuni* and *kikiniina* towards individuals and between individuals and groups stem from verifiable and proven genealogical accounts that clearly show why people settled where they are and where they go about doing their day-to-day livelihood activities.¹⁰

From that vantage point, the rights and privileges of people living in a place may not necessarily be equal, despite the fact that there is respect for individuals' need to live and subsist. The level of *kikiniina* and *kukuni* rendered to a particular person or to a *manata* and a *kema* is linked to whether that individual who is a member of a *manata* and a *kema* has authentic and verified genealogical accounts that prove their claims to ownership of *ghatumba* and *vunivae*. It should be noted that a particular *manata's* *vunivae*, *ghatuba* or *pai* (land) is usually common knowledge, and people respect and revere this information. In real *Tathimboko* *kastom*, even if a different *kema* or *manata* owns the land, the *ghatumba* and *vunivae* status of an area is always respected. Even members of the landowning *manata* will seek permission from the owners of the *ghatumba* before collecting, for example, building materials from that particular area of the land. This is the major distinction between land ownership promoted by modern laws and the understanding of land ownership in *Tathimboko*, Guadalcanal, and generally throughout Melanesia.

This leads to another point, namely, the relationship between the *pukupari* (landowner/host) and the *lavithage* (the adopted or guests). Obviously, the relationships in this context are not equal, despite fundamental respect for all persons' right to live and subsist, with proper permission from the *pukupari* or those who own *ghatumba*. It is sometimes seen in *Tathimboko* and other parts of Guadalcanal that individuals or groups who are disadvantaged, or who have come from outside the 'region', have resettled in the area for a multiplicity of reasons. In such situations, leaders of *manata* and *kema* may adopt such

individuals or groups into their own fold. Such *lavithage* (adoptions) come after serious consideration and protocols are satisfied by the adoptees. Such groups of people will be given areas that will then become their *ghatumba*, but although they are now members of the adopted *manata*, their identity will always be that of a *lavithage*.¹¹

In recent times, the people of *Tathimboko* have realised that this practice of adoption and providing for the needs of *lavithage* has resulted in many misconceptions. It should be noted that not all *lavithage* are the result of misfortune. Some *lavithage* are a result of *tapu vithami* (friendly relations), whereby mutual respect and reciprocity as good friends have built up over a period of time. The original act of compassion to accommodate the needs of individuals or groups of needy people or close friends to settle and make a living have raised a few difficulties in contemporary times. The ideal situation is when the *lavithage* (guest) appreciates the space offered by the *pukupari* (host/landowner) and respects that space, and the status and identity of the host.

'Na atha mana vavatu': Names and Naming

Na atha (the name) and *vavatu* (naming) carry the records of personal and group histories, genealogies and significant events that are important to *kema* and *manata*. People and place names define who you are, who you are related to, and what happened to you and your group in history. In other words, naming defines one's personhood. Names and naming were not carelessly done in *Tathimboko* in the past, as they are linked to identities of individuals, families, *manata* and *kema*. Unfortunately, the importance of the naming of people and places has been seriously disrupted by the Christian naming of individuals that erased the histories and genealogies associated with naming in the oral tradition of *Tathimboko* and *Lengo* speakers. Likewise, colonialism and new methods of mapping and labelling that have accompanied urbanisation, and the resulting informal settlements, have distorted and in many cases erased the names of places that are at the heart of relational personhood in *Tathimboko*.

Let me put this discussion into perspective. In pure indigenous *Tathimboko* societies, names of people and places are of great significance. Each *manata* or *kema* has names that have been passed down to members of the *manata* and their cousins from generation to generation. The names are

¹⁰ Deterioration in the levels of *kukuni* and *kikiniina* will result in a deteriorating livelihood and weak security over land and resources. The two practices have a positive correlation with livelihoods, access to resources, and other aspects of *na vaniaga*.

¹¹ Others, particularly outsiders, misconstrue such adoption practices to mean that the adopted are accorded the same rights of ownership as members of the landowning *manata*. Although they are incorporated as 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders', their identity remains that of a *lavithage* with measured rights. The space the adopted persons use is regulated by *kukuni* and *kikiniina*.

associated with specific *mamata* and *kema* and their group members, or those who have some blood connections with them. More importantly, the names of places and people carry living records of a *kema*, *mamata* or *tamandae* (nuclear family). This is similar to what has been written about the significance of names at the individual level in the Kanak societies of New Caledonia. As Leblie (2005) explains in the case of the Kanaks, in order to define the person, the first important thing is his or her personal name and his spirit. She further notes the importance of '... his surname which is also a place name and which informs about his lineage; his ancestors and totemic representations; his uncles; his language; and so on. All these make him "well sitting" as they say' (Leblie, 2005, 275).

Take, for instance, a particular name – *Bunguita* – for a particular *lathi mamata* in the *Tahimboko* area. There would be individuals with that particular name in that particular *mamata*. The only people from different *kema* and *mamata* who would have that same name would be the children of the sons or daughters of a *Bunguita*. These would be members of a different *kema* but closely related to the *lathi mamata*, bearing in mind that *Tahimboko* and Guadalcanal is a matrilineal society. Even if a daughter of the *mamata* is married to someone in another island, the names of her children would include some names originating from her *mamata* back in *Tahimboko*. The name will make it easier for her offspring to locate their relatives in *Tahimboko* when they grow up, and if they decide to go back to settle with their maternal uncles and aunts. Some names are linked to the places from whence ancestors came, while other names are related to events such as fights, family rows, acts of destruction and similar events. There are names such as *Lema* (warned/scolded), *Sikua* (evicted), *Ngelca* (despised/hated), and so forth, that are common throughout *Lengo*.

Unfortunately, such an integral and critical aspect of personhood is disappearing in *Tahimboko*. This is because of the introduction of English and Christian names that parents give their children during baptisms or registrations. While some communities try as much as possible to keep a local name following the name of their father, some now use an English first name and the English first name of the father as their surname (e.g., Brian James, Peter Jackson, and Simon Peter). Modern Christian names contribute to the distortion of a whole system of knowledge by changing names of places and the way children are given English names. This foreign naming of places and people has quickly eroded a critical aspect of personhood and therefore the history of individual *tamandae*, *kema* and *mamata* in *Tahimboko*.

Because the individual is attached to a *kema* or a *mamata*, his or her group identity is often made manifest through the name he or she has been given. The good or bad reputation of the *mamata* is also the responsibility of the person carrying the name. Similar to the experiences of the Kanaks, names carry with them 'an attitude of social respect, discretion and humility' (Leblie,

2005, 276). One's rights and privileges are determined by the reputation and identity of one's group. The same is true for the nuclear family and its links to the *mamata* and the *kema*. While individual personhood is important, the identity, status, rights and privileges of a person are directly linked to social relations. People and place names are part and parcel of identity and personhood, as they determine one's belongingness and whether one is an insider or an outsider.

Na vanuagu is the totality of a person, encompassing land/place, society/culture and *kema/mamata*. A person without a clear indication of place (where they come from), with no tribal or clan affiliations and no cultural or societal values that dictate his or her behavior, is not considered complete at all in the *Tahimboko* context and worldview. It is for this reason that those regarded as *seka* (people expelled from their original places and clans), or those who for some other reason have resettled in another place, are often adopted (*lavithaghe*) to make them complete and offer them an identity in their new place. Such *lavithaghe* will remain part of their adopted *mamata*, *kema* and *vanua* (place).

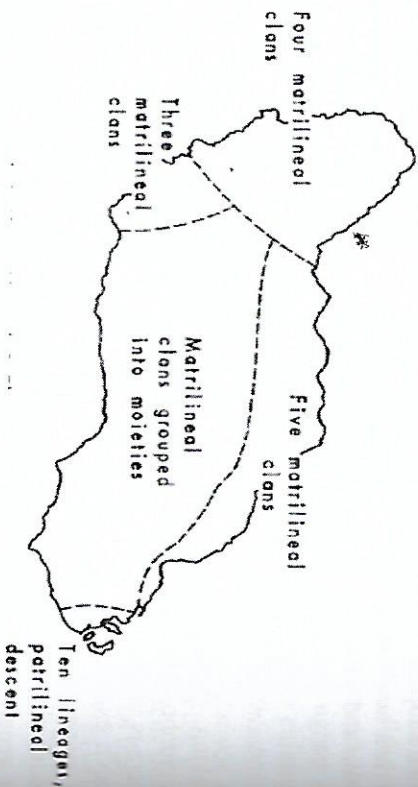
Epistemological and Personhood Challenges

Taking these basic understandings of *Tahimboko* epistemology and personhood into the current development context, it is easy to understand why there is increasing conflict and antagonism. *Tahimboko* has been a region of much exposure to both missionary and colonial activities, as well as current prominent development projects. With their genealogical and *kema* and *mamata* connections with other parts of Guadalcanal, the analyses that follow could be generalised for Guadalcanal. It should be pointed out that throughout the island of Guadalcanal there are five identified *kema* and many *mamata* in *Tahimboko*. Murray Chapman (1970), citing Hoggbin (1964), Allan (1957) and Hackman (1968), simplified the social structure of the whole of Guadalcanal. They found that in the *Lengo* (*Tahimboko*), *Tadai* and *Longgu* regions of Guadalcanal, five matrilineal *kema* were present. Four *kema* were identified for the *Ndi*, *Nggai* and *Nggeri* regions; three in the *Ghari* region; and matrilineal *kema* grouped into moieties in the *Malango*, *Birao*, *Tofo*, *Malagheti*, *Moli*, *Koo* and *Poleo* regions of Guadalcanal. Only in the eastern tip of the island in Marau were there found ten *kema* of patrilineal descent (because of the genealogical origins of their ancestors from Malaita) (Chapman, 1970, 31).

Guadalcanal tradition has it that all the matrilineal *kema* on Guadalcanal can be traced to two original *kema*, commonly referred to as *Garavu* and *Mamaki* (*Kemasule* and *Kemakiki*) (CELDAPG, 2010). Because of this, a Guadalcanal person who is a member of a *kema* or adopted into a *mamata* can

be linked to either the *Kemasile* or the *Kemakiki*. A person's rights, identity and privileges are centred in their affiliation to the *kema* and the *mamata*. Marriage between members of the same *kema* (*sio*) is not permitted by tradition because of the implications for land rights and the identity of children born out of that marriage. Given this social structure and organisation of the Guadalcanal society, the movement of people within the island and acts of adoption (*lavihaghe*) are possible, because of the ease of tracing *kema* to a corresponding *kema* from whence the guests originally came. Figure 11.4 below shows the social organisation and demarcations on the island of Guadalcanal.

Figure 11.4: Kema Arrangements in Guadalcanal. Source: Chapman (1970), based mostly on Hogbin (1938)



Problems for *Tathimboko* people became visible when these core social values were compromised with pressure from foreign and modern ideas, especially changes to local notions of personhood. What used to be a person who was closely identified with the *mamata* is now an individual with individual rights and identities distinct from those of the *mamata* and *kema* – a change also highlighted by Herner (2013) among the Lihirians of Papua New Guinea. Moreover, that person is now able to buy land as an individual and own it as personal property with a monetary value, rather than as a group *lologho* (property and identity). There is confusion and contradiction in the interaction between Western notions of personhood that emphasise individual rights and privileges and the *Tathimboko* worldview in which a person is part of a collective whole – *na kema mana mamata* (the tribe and clan) – in the context of *na vanuagu*.

Taking this further, the current ability of people to move, migrate and resettle in other places, and their rights as individual ‘citizens’ to do so

complicates the *Tathimboko* understanding of personhood. What we had in the past were movements that ranged from circulation (*lela; oleole*) to resettlement (*ughivveru; ughuvuvana*), as clearly demonstrated by Chapman (1970) in his doctoral thesis on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. At that time, *kema* and *mamata* connections were strong and the practice of *tapa vilivoni* (friendly relations) between and within *kema* and *mamata* was common. In contemporary *Tathimboko*, because of the efficiency and pressures of modern transport, freedom of movement as citizens, and the ability to purchase land and resettle in another place, coupled with a Western understanding of personhood and associated freedoms and privileges, the foundations of *na vanuagu* are shaken. The modern capitalist system centred in the power of the cash economy has collided head-on with indigenous social values in the area. Individuals have the right to purchase and own land in any part of the country or island, a notion contradictory to the idea of *lavihaghe* (adoption into a *mamata*) in *Tathimboko*.

What has happened since changes were introduced by missionaries, the colonial government, modern education and the postcolonial state is that the concept of *na vanuagu* has been misconstrued. Local *Tathimboko* ways of knowing and views on personhood have literally clashed with this foreign worldview as the result of contact with the outside world. Indeed, this is one of the forces that fanned the flames of the inter-*wantok* tensions on Guadalcanal between 1998 and 2003. These contradictions, coupled with the pressures of urbanisation and rapid mobility brought about by freedoms under the national constitution, gave way to civil strife in the Solomon Islands. The fact that people from other islands in the country are free to move from island to island, buy land as a commodity, and resettle on land rather than being adopted as part of a *kema* or *mamata* has given rise to many problems.

The modern state and its laws see personhood in the form of citizens as equal individuals who are free to live where they are able to rent or purchase land and resettle.¹² In contrast, the *Tathimboko* worldview of personhood is social, with an emphasis on group identity and values, including rights and privileges as hosts and guests in a particular locality. Coupled with differences in ways of knowing, relationships and issues related to land purchased by companies and individuals, and the benefits going to trustees or individuals, the 1998–2003 inter-*wantok* conflict known colloquially as ‘the tension’ erupted. Some people were quick to refer to greed, ethnicity, group hatred and political overtones to explain the Guadalcanal ‘tension’. Little or no thought was ever given to the clash between *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal

¹² The modern nation state has more regard for individual personhood than relational personhood, as its laws particularly safeguard individual freedoms. This is further compounded by the Christian religious ethos that favours individual salvation over collective salvation. Together, these create a web of confusion that arguably undermines the *Tathimboko* epistemology and worldview.

epistemology, and personhood more generally, and the understandings of the same concepts promoted by the modern economic state. Fully appreciating how persons are defined and how knowledge is regarded as valid and reliable in the *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal context, like other contexts in the country, would go a long way towards ensuring peaceful co-existence in a diverse society like the Solomon Islands.

Concluding Remarks

Many of the contemporary issues facing the people of *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal stem from contradictions between their indigenous worldviews, laws, values and ways of understanding personhood and those emanating from other contexts. For example, the 1998–2003 inter-wantok 'tension' in the Solomon Islands was a negative consequence of a misunderstanding of local virtues pertaining to personhood, identity and relationships. Of course, as expressed throughout this chapter, and through the experiences of other Melanesian communities (Strathern, 1988; LiPuma, 2000; Hemer, 2013), both individual and relational personhoods exist in *Tathimboko*. Nevertheless, dividualism, the relational person or collectivism remains the deeper understanding of personhood in the *na vanuagu* context. An individual is seen through the deeds, values, reputation and privileges of the *kema* or *mamata*.

The *Tathimboko* understanding of personhood is further boosted by the values promoted by Christianity. As recorded in the experiences of other Melanesian communities, Christianity promoted the ideals of community living, oneness and social relationships. Hemer states succinctly that 'Christianity promoted love ... as core to families and social relationships. These key values promote the ideals of relational conduct ..., ideals that fit well with relational personhood as the root metaphor of Melanesian sociality' (Hemer, 2013, 287). The problem, however, is that Melanesian sociality is restricted to given contexts and is defined by whether one is a guest, host, friend or enemy of the *kema* and *mamata*.

Having highlighted the prominence of dividualism and interrelational personhood, it is also useful to acknowledge the existence of individual personhood in *Tathimboko*. Individualism can be seen in instances where an individual is expelled from the *kema* and *mamata* because of actions or behaviours that do not satisfy the values of the group. For instance, in days gone by, a person living a 'bad life' (*tu thaghatu*), with no perceived expectation of changing, could be expelled (*nea seka ded*) from the group and sent to fend for himself/herself away from the place of residence. From that time onwards, that individual or family was no longer part of the original *kema* and, if adopted by other *mamata* or *kema* in a distant place, they adopted that new identity and become part of another group. Another extreme example

of individual personhood is seen in the person of the sorcerer (LiPuma, 1988, 145) – in *Tathimboko* and Guadalcanal, the 'vele'¹³ man' (Wright, 1940). This person operates in his or her own world, is very secretive, and his calculations are all kept to himself. The vele man is the personification of individualism, and exists alongside relational personhood in *Tathimboko*.

This chapter has sought to provide an overview of *Tathimboko* personhood and epistemology. It does not claim to provide an in-depth analysis of the *Tathimboko* worldview. Individual personhood exists but the society accommodates this as the totality of individuals' relationships with each other and with the land and surroundings. *Na vanuagu* can be appropriated as the basis for understanding personhood and epistemology in *Tathimboko* and possibly in the Guadalcanal people's worldview. Further research is needed to elaborate on these epistemological worldviews and how they have impacted what is happening in the Solomon Islands. Unless the differences are clearly identified and acknowledged, unity and development in *Tathimboko*, Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands generally may continue to be an elusive dream.

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¹³ A vele man uses magical powers and ingredients from a small bag that he carries around to kill others. In the Solomon Islands, vele magic only exists on Guadalcanal (Wright, 1940). Nevertheless, the more persuasive influence of Christianity is one that supports dividualism demonstrated through community living and social relationships.

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