

Oceanic Diplomacy: *Popo* and *Supu* Diplomacy in the Modern State of Solomon Islands

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In Brief 2021/28

DOI: [10.25911/GDEA-MS11](https://doi.org/10.25911/GDEA-MS11)

This In Brief is part of a miniseries on Oceanic diplomacy introduced in In Brief 2021/23. This paper looks at the longstanding and effective diplomatic system that has existed between Guadalcanal tribes, clans and individuals that we might call the *popo* and *supu*¹ system. At its core are food exchanges, feasting and presentation of valuables through crafted *popo* (a wooden bowl filled and decorated with cooked food) or *supu* (a heap of uncooked food and live pigs) with reciprocal protocols that maintain friendly relations, solve disputes and strengthen or create new allies. While the *popo* and *supu* system continues to play a significant role in managing relations between people across Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands state has also adopted elements of the system in its efforts to resolve conflicts within the state as well as in its external diplomatic rituals.

Supu diplomacy is practised throughout Guadalcanal, although the *popo* option is mostly used in the Lengo region of Guadalcanal. Lengo covers north, north-east and part of eastern central Guadalcanal. It is a centre of change and a cultural crossroad on the island. Lengo has five *kema* (tribes) falling into two principal categories: *kema sule* (big tribe) and *kema pile/kiki* (small tribe). The five *kema* are Ghaobata, Lathi, Nekama, Thimbo and Thongo. Below the *kema* are *mamata* (clans), which are the owners of land, property or rights over certain areas in Lengo, not individuals. Women determine *kema* and *mamata* membership because Guadalcanal is predominantly matrilineal. How one relates to and behaves towards another person depends on one's kin connections.

Guadalcanal diplomacy is premised on two foundational creeds: *kukuni* (respect) and *kininima* (reverence) that ensure peaceful coexistence, compassion and relationships (Nanau 2017). *Popo* and *supu* are two variations of presenting food and valuables epitomising a complex mix of underlying principles, values and relational affiliations founded on *kukuni* and *kininima*. A *popo* and *supu* together with other valuables are outward signs of deeper societal ideals involving the *mamata*, *kema* or *vanua* (wider community). These occasions are highly inclusive, involving men, women, youth and children.

In Lengo, *supu* is for lower-order and urgent events (such as compensation for swearing) while *popo* is a higher-order ceremony that takes time to prepare. There are events where both *popo* and *supu* are required, especially when reconciling highly charged disputes resulting in injury or death. On such occasions, these are presented together with *rongo vatu* (shell currency) and modern legal tender. The Guadalcanal worldview is that 'what goes around, comes around' so it is imperative to support others in the community by contributing food, pigs and money to *popo* and *supu* when the need arises.

Feasts, reciprocity and exchange of food produce and valuables are the fundamental basis for diplomacy, leadership, power, influence, social order and control. *Popo* and *supu* play key roles in negotiations, arbitration, compensation and reconciliation. While *popo* and *supu* can be a manifestation of power, status, fame, humility and celebration, they can also be expressions of remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is not just the individual offender or victim that is victimised or offended but their entire family and *mamata*. The threats, shame, humiliation, hardship, pain and guilt affect members of both sides. When not resolved through *popo* or *supu*, *levu-ni-mate* (enmity) remains and could result in paybacks, further acts of humiliation and, in extreme cases, *sura* (raids/tribal war). Problems are solved and people make amends through *popo* and *supu* exchanges that herald normalcy and legitimise peace. Reconciliation in the spirit of *popo* and *supu* is to mend intra- and interpersonal relationships broken because of the neglect of *kukuni* and *kininima*.

While this form of Oceanic diplomacy is alive in Guadalcanal, the modern state of Solomon Islands is increasingly calling on it to resolve differences between groups, commemorate important events, build new relationships and reinvigorate existing ones, as highlighted in the following examples:

- **National welcome ceremonies:** In 2019 when the heir to the British throne, [Prince Charles](#), visited Solomon Islands, he was presented a *supu* in welcome. Likewise, in 2018 at the opening of the [6th Melanesian Arts Festival](#), participants from PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, East

Timor, Australia and Taiwan were presented a *supu* to welcome and accept them.

- **Commencement of national projects:** *Popo* and *supu* are used to build relationships between stakeholders to respect agreements and ensure completion of projects as was the case with the construction of the Mberande Bridge. A ceremony presenting *popo* was funded by the state and exchanged in the presence of national and provincial government representatives, construction managers and Asian Development Bank officials in late June 2016. The state adopted the same system when opening Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Ltd, the Gold Ridge mine, the undersea cable landing, and the Tina River hydropower project, signalling thanks to landowners and seeking their further support for the respective projects.
- **Admission of wrong and reconciliation:** Modern state institutions have also used *popo* and *supu* to reconcile conflicting parties, especially where lives and properties were destroyed. Years after a period of civil unrest known as ‘the Tensions’ (1998–2003), the state reconciled with members of the Marasa community on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. The perpetrators revealed their remorse and sought forgiveness by presenting *supu* while the victims also presented *supu* to accept the apology (Brigg et al. 2015). Such occasions are always two-way exchanges, as any party not reciprocating may be deemed disingenuous.
- **The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)** also used *supu* to successfully appease a situation where a soldier shot and killed a local leader during a community fight (Allen et al. 2013:40). Presenting a *supu* (*chupu*) signifying *titi ulu* (absolving one’s head) to the family of the deceased, then RAMSI special coordinator Graeme Wilson stated, ‘I assure you all of our sincere and heartfelt condolence on this [sad occasion](#)’.

The *popo* and *supu* diplomatic system involves exchanges and contributions by kin and members of the larger community so parties must be identifiable and willing participants for it to be successful, especially in situations of reconciliation and compensation. A failed attempt at such a reconciliation ceremony can be seen in the one organised by the national government and Guadalcanal and Malaita Provinces at the beginning of the Tensions in 1998–99 (Braithwaite, et al. 2010; Kabutaulaka 2001:16). The militants, or who they purported to represent, were never part of the ceremony; nor were they clearly identified or willing to reconcile. In such a situation, using Oceanic diplomacy is meaningless and bound to fail. *Popo* and *supu* are acts of goodwill between people and communities and must therefore not be feigned to short-circuit genuine protocols.

Conclusion

When used genuinely with complete understanding, this Oceanic diplomacy becomes useful for the state. It is, however, important to value the spirit of this system before emulating it in state affairs. *Popo* and *supu* diplomacy is used to ensure order and maintenance of relationships in a closely knitted society. It emphasises respect, even in situations where badly broken relationships require restoration. It is an Oceanic diplomatic practice that has withstood the test of time and is impacting modern diplomacy in Solomon Islands. It would be useful to examine whether there are lessons from *popo* and *supu* diplomacy that regional diplomats and governments could adopt to address contemporary disputes and challenges in the region.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. *Supu* is pronounced as *chupu* or *tsupu* in other parts of Guadalcanal.

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