

## **Big picture, myopic gaze: histories of the Solomons' crisis.**

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### **Abstract**

The paper reviews two recent histories of the political upheavals in Solomon Islands. Both give clear accounts of the apparently unstoppable descent into mismanagement and corruption that culminated in the landing of a 2000-strong Australian-led Pacific intervention force in July 2003. Clive Moore's account invites discussion in terms of influential antecedents such as the tradition of endemic fighting, Christianity, and resources—or the lack of them. Jon Fraenkel adopts a more political perspective, discussing 'hot potatoes' such as the 'purity' of kastom, and the simplistic opposition of 'indigenous' and 'introduced'. In terms of hopeful elements of Solomons' society, Moore's account is assessed more favourably. Both writers are cautiously optimistic about the future, though both are thought to have downplayed the nation's over-reliance on 'rescue' by outside donors, rather than pulling itself up by its own bootstraps as it were. The role of electronic communications, as 'information hub' and as future historical source, is canvassed, as also is the space for more personal, 'lived experience' histories by Solomon Islanders.

### **Keywords**

contemporary history; custom/kastom; electronic communications; historiography; Solomon Islands

*THE MANIPULATION OF CUSTOM: from uprising to intervention in the Solomon Islands*, Jon Fraenkel, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004. 262pp., tables, figs, maps, bib refs, index. ISBN 0-86473-487-5 (pbk) NZ\$34.95

*Happy Isles in Crisis: The historical causes for a failing state in Solomon Islands, 1998–2004*, Clive Moore, Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University, Canberra, 2004. xii + 265pp., tables, maps, bib refs, index. ISBN 0-7315-3709-2 AU\$35.00

Not judging a book by its cover is a cautionary approach for any reader. Nonetheless, both these books have intriguing covers and titles, inviting us to read on. Jon Fraenkel's book, so its title indicates, is about how the manipulation of custom produced suffering for many innocent people and bankrupted the state of Solomon Islands. In the centre of the cover picture stands a commander of the Malaitan Eagle Forces receiving customary valuables from two Langalanga leaders in late 2002. The strands of shell valuables given as compensation are draped around the neck of the commander while he and his decorators look ahead self-consciously at the camera. Behind them, we can glimpse a black-and-white photograph on the wall of the Honiara Council Offices of a young Duke of Edinburgh and we can imagine that, out of range of the camera, Queen Elizabeth II would also survey the scene with royal detachment. So the connection with Solomons' British colonial rule—here in this book and in Moore's book—remains background to events that seem essentially Melanesian. This picture captures an attempt to settle a conflict, not between the two major protagonists in the so-called civil war between Guadalcanal and Malaita militias, but between two Malaitan groups, signalling that the Malaitan bloc was not without its fractures and feuds. And all this happened inside the heart of the Council Offices on land that the north Guadalcanal people still see as theirs and not the state's. Literally, in a flash this photograph has captured several important threads of events braided together in Fraenkel's study.

Moore's cover and title represent Solomons as the 'Happy Isles'. This echoes not only part of the identification of the national radio station—Radio Happy Isles—but also the title of a book by Dick Horton, a pre-war administrator and wartime coastwatcher. Moore also echoes that earlier

book's concluding paragraphs as Horton considered the fate of the Solomons following the destruction wreaked by a far more savage conflict. Horton compared the Solomons to the Happy Isles that aged Ulysses sought, and believed the effects of World War Two would soon heal (Horton 1965:188–90, citing Alfred Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*). Moore's cover presents a peaceful scene of people gliding about their business in a canoe on a calm lagoon, some women sheltering under gaily-coloured umbrellas. Overlying this idyllic image is a photograph of Malaitan women in customary dress stacking guns on the ground, at a gun-collecting ceremony in Auki, after the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands had taken control in mid-2003. This congruence of book and title suggests that there is hope for Solomons after its 'civil' war, just as there proved to be after the war with Japan.

The covers of these two books also reveal another congruity that their contents reinforce: though addressing the state of Solomon Islands, both are Malaita and Guadalcanal centred. This is not necessarily a fault but the reader needs to be conscious that the writers' gaze is mainly at the geographic and national centre and does not reflect the history of the entire archipelago. In spite of what the protagonists in this conflict might have thought, neither totally nor singularly are Guadalcanal and Malaita synonymous with Solomon Islands as a cluster of societies or a state. Certainly, other parts and other groups in the country enter and exit the narratives, but as bit players, not major actors. What we do learn concentrates more on the violent, and less on everyday issues, such as the impact of the return of many people to places like Te Motu when conflict was at its height in Honiara.

Both writers produced their histories of the political upheavals very soon after the events, so there was little time for that reflection and recollection in 'tranquillity' dreamed of by all academics. Consequently, some disjunction and hiatus are to be expected. The writers nonetheless have each produced a lucid account that will help us to get closer to understanding why a prime minister was ousted and then the 'liberation' occurred during the years 1998–2003. Jon Fraenkel's book appeared in late 2004 and Clive Moore's, in spite of the publication date, in May 2005, following a recall because of problems with the index and several typographical errors, some of which survive.

Englishman Jon Fraenkel is a political scientist at the University of the

South Pacific who specialises in economic issues, mainly in Fiji. This is his first major publication on Solomon Islands. Clive Moore, an Australian, is an historian who started research in Solomons in 1976 on the nineteenth century Queensland labour trade. He is currently writing a history of Malaita. For all that, Fraenkel gives the reader far more background history of Solomons for the period before independence than does Moore. One almost gets the impression that the history of the early period of insider–outsider relations and the colonial era are so well known to Moore that he is impatient to pass over it and get to the discussion of the immediate events leading up to the ‘coup’ of June 2000 and the aftermath. On the other hand and no less ironic, historian Moore is a little more expansive in his analysis of the economy in the post-colonial period than is Fraenkel. Nor does disciplinary porosity stop there: Moore uses the social science conventions of referencing while Fraenkel uses the usual end noting of the historian.

Clive Moore adopts the S-bend approach: after a brief overview of the ‘Solomon Islands crisis’, he takes the ‘coup’ of June 2000 as his starting point and in subsequent chapters he returns to the preceding events from c. 1893 when the British declared a Protectorate, through to recent times in 2003–2004. Chapter one opens with an elegant description of Honiara and the region of northern Guadalcanal where much of the conflict between the militias of the Guadalcanal protagonists (Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, later known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement) and the Malaitans (the Malaita Eagle Force) occurred.

The events are sketched clearly. June 2000 saw the legally elected prime minister, the Malaitan Bartholomew Ulufa’alu, forced to resign by the Malaitan militia, whose spokesperson was the lawyer, Andrew Nori. A new prime minister, Mannaseh Sogavare, could not remedy this small state’s terminal maladies—maladies, as Moore and Fraenkel both show, that Ulufa’alu had started to address, antagonising those profiting by earlier misgovernment and corruption. Under Sogavare, the economy deteriorated along with personal security of people on Guadalcanal and, in spite of various foreign envoys and local negotiations, the situation did not improve with a newly elected government under the less-than-reputable Allan Kemakeza. As the lawlessness continued and the government’s coffers were bled dry by criminal

mismanagement, bloated 'compensation' payments, careless granting of duty exemptions, and the unwillingness of donor bodies to pour yet more money into the irresponsible government, there was no other path except to call for assistance from neighbouring countries. Australia, long refusing involvement, finally led a Pacific intervention force of over 2000. Mirroring their own former saviours, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) landed on 24 July 2003 at Red Beach, Guadalcanal, where the US forces had come ashore 61 years before to confront the obdurate Japanese enemy. RAMSI not only received a rapturous reception from the people, but also faced no resistance from the former militias and criminal gangs that had so terrorised the island. It put down the militias, collected stolen police firearms, rounded up criminals, restored order, and began the thankless, plodding work of encouraging effective governance.

Moore goes on to discuss the background to this in greater detail. At times a little staccato in flow and verging on bare chronicle, generally he provides a lively narrative, espousing no particular analytical framework other than the central opposition of the two protagonists, Malaita and Guadalcanal. His starting period is vague with a discussion of the society, war, peace and compensation for wrongs. What emerges is a set of societies that are portrayed as not easily provoked to aggression, but given the contemporaneous nature of his sources here, this could be just as easily an outcome of Christianity as of the pre-Christian mores. Although he touches on warfare in pre- and early colonial times, his treatment fails to reveal just how endemic fighting and raiding had been. Life in the old days could be very precarious, especially for women. Partly for this reason, people often embraced the incoming Christianity as a rationale for the cessation of fighting, a shield to avoid the wrath of the 'pacifying' colonial power, or an alternative path to power in a changing world where fighting, raids, and the taking of heads and captives could no longer bring spiritual and secular potency. What needs to be kept in mind is that much of the local history of such fighting and raiding has never been forgotten. Stoke up the embers of ancient hurts and the fires of grievance can soon ignite. Both Moore and Fraenkel point out that in late 2002, as the seemingly endless supplies of stolen goods and derailed compensation monies dried up, the militias and local thugs turned in on themselves and their neighbours, but

neither writer highlights parallels with older patterns of feuding and divisions. While elsewhere, some now-independent indigenous societies represent the colonial period as a mere interlude, a small hiatus in their histories, these authors tend to see it as far more of a determining factor, giving less weight to some continuities, such as local warfare, and more to others, such as valorisation of custom/*Kastom* and big-man patronage.

Moore seems convinced, along with many Malaitans, that Malaita has been deliberately left undeveloped by the colonial and independent governments (but then people in Isabel and Te Motu provinces would say the same of their places!). Many would argue that this is not the case, as heavily populated Malaita may be people-rich but is resource-poor. In fact Moore, although he discusses the labour trade to Queensland and Fiji and later to plantations within the British Protectorate, fails to mention that Malaita contributed about two-thirds of these thousands of labourers—not because they gaily left a plenteous island for the sheer adventure, but because they were a ‘hungry’, if hard-working, people. Moreover, over recent decades several attempts at various forms of ‘development’ have foundered on quarrels about land ownership and who was to benefit. Even something as basic as the colonial government’s attempts to get the road across the north of the island faced stiff opposition (Gina 2003:93–6). But perception determines action. Readers soon understand that in terms of skills most Malaitans see themselves as pivotal contributors to the nation while their home island was left to languish, a view not shared by most Guadalcanal people, who perceive migrant Malaitans, especially more recent arrivals, as usurping and arrogant intruders, without due respect for their hosts.

The so-called ‘ethnic tension’ reached a critical stage in 1998 when the Guadalcanal militia began its attacks on Malaitan settlers on the Guadalcanal north coast, culminating in the expulsion of over 20,000 by the end of 1999. Moore initially couches the crisis of c. 1998–2003 in ‘long antecedents’ back to the colonial period under Britain and to the period from 1978, the year of independence (p. 25). Yet ten pages later, he says that ‘the civil war and political disturbances of the 1990s and the coup’ have their roots in ‘the 1940s and 1950s when Malaitans worked for the US Army around Honiara, then stayed on’. (They, with other Solomon Islanders, worked mainly for the US Joint

Services and were all repatriated to their home islands.) Most Malaitans remained on their own island during the Maasina Movement years of the late 1940s. It was the 1950s and early 1960s that saw the influx of Malaitans begin in earnest, just as Weather Coast men from the Guadalcanal south coast too came to work on construction in the new capital. And had Moore read Colin Allan's memoirs, he would have known that much of north-eastern Guadalcanal at this time was worried about Malaitans' migratory proclivities (BSIP 1971:100; Allan 1989:79, 85–9). Moore's attribution of causes and their loci in a time period may simply be the old categorisation of proximate and ultimate antecedents, but he is much more focused on the post-war period, especially the years from 1978, than on the pre-colonial and colonial eras.

Several issues contributed to antipathy between Guadalcanal people and settler Malaitans, based on competition for lands, jobs, political power and education, as well as demands for honouring of their respective customs and contributions to the commonwealth. Moore sees the explosion of attacks on Malaitans triggered in the first instance by the sometime Premier of the province, Ezekiel Alebua, after meetings with various other Guadalcanal leaders, many his relatives, from early 1998 (pp. 105–12). Fraenkel is more sceptical about the leading figures at such meetings but accepts that on Alebua's agenda as early as March 1998 was the expulsion of the Malaitans. Like Moore, he states that in November 1998 Alebua became the central figure in voicing the 'bona fide' demands of the north Guadalcanal people for compensation from the national government for the use of their lands and for historic murders of their people by Malaitans over the previous twenty-five years (pp. 44–8, 64).

With his base in political studies Fraenkel gives a similar account of the events but in several respects he sees these within a broader political context. He considers sidelined and disgruntled members of the political elite, including Nori and Alebua, as provocateurs who played on the feelings of grievance among young men on both sides to achieve their own political and financial goals. The problem was that in the end they could not control these firebrands. Nori had his offices torched in November 2000 and has since apologised for his role in the coup in early 2002—though he does not seem moved to reimburse his hefty 'fee' for his 'legal' services to the MEF. Harold Keke and

Joe Sangu shot their relative Alebua in June 2001, supposedly in revenge for attacks on their hide-outs when Alebua was premier of Guadalcanal and for his failing to pass on to the island's victims the huge compensation payments of \$2.5 million from central government.

Unless totally sociopathic, most people rationalise their actions in seeking moral justification or authority in the law, the mores, customs, or spiritual values. So Fraenkel argues that in the events of 1998–2003 and sometimes earlier, groups of individuals used the concept of custom/*Kastom* as a cultural construction to justify their actions and in many cases to undermine the state, or at least the government that seemingly embodied the state. This focus or thesis is most articulated in the final chapter, 'The manipulative design of custom', but it is only in the last couple of pages that he begins to come to grips with this, in spite of the thematic emphasis suggested by the book's title. Much of the chapter is a discussion of whether Solomon Islands was a 'failed' or 'properly functioning state'; while Moore's book speaks of the rapid shrinkage of the state's authority in terms of a 'failing' state. At what point 'failure' occurs is splitting hairs. By 1998 there was an ever-accelerating decline in state authority and governance. Outsiders may have seen some of the state structures as still existing even in mid-2003, but structure implies function, and function implies action. To the men and women in the streets and villages, if the state cannot act to guard them from raiders from across the Bougainville strait, pay its accounts, control its police, or protect its citizenry from the depredations of their fellows then most, especially the victims, would consider the state to have 'failed'.

This aside, Fraenkel's analysis is penetrating for he recognises, as Roger Keesing pointed out over a decade ago to the fury of some Pacific Islands' activists, that there is no 'pure' or 'traditional' custom/*Kastom* but continually evolving ones (Keesing 1989; Trask 1991; Keesing 1991). Fraenkel is also critical of the simplistic opposition of 'indigenous' and 'introduced', even though Solomon Islanders as well as outsiders employ these categories to explain current conflicts and dilemmas. Certainly, putting some kind of 'introduced' Westminster system on an indigenous Melanesian foundation was a poor fit but the British architects, in as much as they thought about it, hardly would have envisaged an eternally static system—they were old hands

at the game of decolonisation, after all. As Fraenkel points out, the people soon moulded the system to suit themselves or at least allowed their politicians to do this (p. 43). We need to remember that the so-called Westminster system, even with limited male suffrage, took a long time to become a two-party system in the UK, and in New Zealand has changed dramatically under Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting. In other words, older 'Western' Westminster systems are dynamic and changing and we would expect no less in Solomons. Fraenkel rightly reminds readers that the elements of a Westminster system were quickly indigenised in Solomons, but this is hardly novel to those who know something of the Pacific; this was evident, for example, in nineteenth century Tonga with its constitutional monarchy and in more recent times in independent (Western) Samoa from 1962. Unlike these relatively successful but still changing political systems the indigenisation of political practices based on the big-men, patronage systems, and shifting alliances in Solomons has not been an especially successful development in recent years, if happiness and security of the greatest number are gauges. At its most blatant, the custom of compensation became simply a gloss for extortion, because government and those with other power bases, with increasing frequency from the late 1990s, captured and manipulated this once honourable but locally variable practice to feather their own nests while depriving the victims of any consolation. Both Fraenkel and Moore provide many sorry examples of these extortionate practices.

Fraenkel's caveat about the slippery referents and clines of meaning of terms such as 'introduced' and 'tradition' should alert us to other words that roll off the journalist's tongue but are now embedded in representations of recent events in Solomons. To describe the conflict between the factions in these books and other publications, terms such as 'coup', 'civil war', 'ethnic tension', the 'troubles' are recruited. Yet they are redolent with meanings from other places and other peoples. 'Coup' is a short form of the French term that had passed into English, *coup d'état*—the violent or illegal seizure of power. Yet when the MEF and front man Nori forced Ulufa'alu to resign, they did not install themselves in power. So it was not quite a coup. Was the conflict a 'civil war'? Certainly not on the scale and brutality of Somalia or Kosovo. Much of the Solomons' population beyond the immediate centre did all it could to

stay out of it. 'Ethnic tension' comes dripping with blood from the Balkan situation; it would be harder to make fine distinctions regarding ethnicity—a politically correct term for 'race'—in Solomons, especially between such close neighbours as Guadalcanal and Malaita.<sup>1</sup> Even the term 'troubles' originates from the conflicts in Ireland, which have a very deep history, tangling religion and British imperial dispossession, on a scale that would make Britain's tenure of Solomons a benign sleep-over. Somehow the fit of such words is not perfect; scale and mayhem perhaps are the main criteria. Such terms have become the shorthand not only of journalists and political commentators, but also of Solomon Islanders speaking in English. Such words can distort reality, rather than describe it. But like most people, Solomon Islanders do not reckon themselves especially blessed because their crisis was not as big or as bad as Kosovo. Relativities are luxury for those outside the terror. To involved Solomon Islanders, protected from any major conflict since World War Two, the events portrayed in these accounts were terrifying and disordering. One wonders what words they used in their own dozens of languages to express their experience of these times.

We get hints of their fears in Fraenkel's book. Gleaned from the Remand Briefs in the Honiara Magistrate's Court of January 2004, his sobering account of the cruelties inflicted on the Weather Coast village of Marasa makes sad reading to anyone who has visited this once peaceful place; how much more so for the poor people who suffered and died. His skilful use of the 1999 census material to show the number of displaced persons is stark proof of the demographic impact of the fighting and the fear (pp. 55–7). Few possible sources have escaped him, though doggedness with his human sources has sometimes disturbed their equanimity.

Moore also discusses the demographic transfer and the Marasa incident but lacks the precision of Fraenkel. Moore's geography of Guadalcanal fails at times and he consistently places the expatriate-owned resort of Tavanipupu (in the 'Are'are enclave of Marau Sound) to the west in the heartland of the Weather Coast at Avu Avu. Having sat on the beach there, I can attest that Avu Avu is no resort. He is muddled about the familial relationships between Sangu, Keke and George Gray. Keke is the younger brother of Joseph Sangu. George Gray, moreover, is their nephew, the son of their eldest sister (pers.

comm., Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 1 August 2005). At times, too, Moore's apparent great haste to get his thoughts in print detracts from more considered discussion of the implications of the events he describes.

Fraenkel's finely produced book has its share of infelicities. That there were 'boat-loads' of Malaitans leaving Tangarere on the south-west Guadalcanal coast will be news to Guadalcanal people (p. 54).<sup>2</sup> Both Fraenkel and Moore show how some Bougainvilleans, formerly sheltered in Solomons as refugees, became as violent as any of the Solomon Islands militias, terrorising people in the Western Province. Although Fraenkel recognises the influence of Bougainville in the secessionist sentiment in the Western District at the time of Solomons' independence, he does not take into account the long-term influence of refugee Bougainvillean fighters' resistance to the 'redskins' of Papua New Guineans since about 1989 on the thinking and attitudes of the Guadalcanal people towards the Malaitans on their island.

It is of greater significance, however, that Fraenkel's analysis downplays several powerful and hopeful elements of Solomons' society: Christianity, the Civil Society Network and communications. Of course he is aware of them and makes brief mentions. In regard to Christianity he notes in chapter two that the growth of various missions 'criss-crossed the already elaborate ethno-linguistic mosaic of the islands with division based on Christian affiliations'. But he does not interrogate the way many upcoming young men in the early twentieth century used the missions as a validating springboard for influence and he does not see that the missions, through their teachings and educational establishments, were the crucial means to uniting many disparate peoples. The Methodists, for example, in the former Western District melded the factions of much of the region into a large self-identifying bloc that still endures.

More apposite is the recent role of individual Christian religious orders. The peacemaking of the Catholic and Melanesian Church Sisters is barely mentioned though the self-effacing and heroic work of the Melanesian Brotherhood (Tasiu) is acknowledged. In April 2003, Keke and his henchmen slaughtered seven Brothers who journeyed to the Weather Coast to mediate. Unnamed in both the books, they were: Nathaniel Sado, Francis Tofi, Alfred Hilly, Ini Ini Partabatu, Patterson Gatu, Brother Tony, and Papua New Guinean Robin Lindsay.<sup>3</sup> Christians will call these men martyrs. That is how

they will be remembered in Solomons, long after the memory of the likes of Keke, Alebua, and Nori fades. Some of these quiet heroes are being acknowledged more widely. In July 2005, three Solomons women who worked to protect life during the conflict were among those who were nominated for the the Nobel Peace Prize: Sister Kathleen Kapei from the Sisters of the Church of Melanesia, Sister May Ceciliana of the Sisters of the Catholic Church along with Appolonia Bola Talo from Guadalcanal Provincial Council of Women.<sup>4</sup> Fraenkel also might have made more of the stunning co-operation of the Christian churches in the SI Christian Association's efforts to mediate and to work for peace and preservation of life.

Because he better understands the significance of the spiritual dimension in the lives of Solomon Islanders, Clive Moore tells the story of these groups and their role with sensitivity and links them specifically with the Civil Society Network. Moore's emphasis on Civil Society Network (see pp. 144, 152–6, 194–6) is significant, just as the work of its members was, while Jon Fraenkel barely identifies it (p. 173).

As Moore tells us, the Civil Society Network was involved in setting up the People First Network (PFNet) funded by the United Nations Development Programme in 2001. Electronic communications feature in these histories in two ways: first, as 'an information hub' the People First Network connected people in Honiara with those in the provinces and beyond to the entire world. Inexpensive internet 'cafes' were set up at 26 rural stations (p. 155). Rural people came to rely on the net more than the old 'coconut wireless' that distorted stories and fed the Melanesian rumour machine. I expect that once cheap cell phones become available and linked to such a network—and this will come—those who feed off the poor will never be quite so able to hoodwink their less-educated country people.

These histories would not exist without the Internet. Fraenkel's 'field-work' in Solomons was brief; Moore could draw on his more extensive knowledge of Honiara and Malaita spread over some years. Both writers acknowledge that the Internet provided much of their information for recent times. Besides the PFNet, there were several sites where a vast amount of information could be found. Many of the news media have put material out on the Net, as have neighbouring governments, such as several reports done

for the Australian government. Solomon Islanders also had their own conversations via the net. The newsletter, *Isatabu Tavuli*, lived for ten issues in 2000 as platform for the IFM, with statements of policy, reaction to government statements, and reports from the field. *The Horizon* appeared mid-year for a few issues and, written by Andrew Nori, was more formal and legal in its presentation of MEF goals and activity. Although both newsletters were distributed electronically, *Isatabu Tavuli* had a wider audience and reach.<sup>5</sup> The *Iu-Mi-Nao* site started in 1999 was a great source of information and debate. Some Solomon Islanders, however, became ambivalent about this and felt academic interest had aspects of the voyeur when homing in on some very sensitive issues. They quietly slipped off that net and set up their own sites that required a 'password' to enter. Wise people, for academics must not only use their sources but also respect them. These various Internet sites were for Solomon Islanders, especially those away from home. They often reveal the trauma and pain they suffered along with their home people. They speak of experience, action, and reaction; all significant for these people, making them part of a lived history.

More worrying for the future historians who will want to revisit these events with new sets of questions is that much of the Internet archive is ephemeral and is periodically wiped off servers. One assumes these two writers and other assiduous Solomons' watchers in universities hold hard copies of much of this material. Herein is a challenge for them and for all of us interested in history. Is there a repository that can keep copies of this now copious material? Both the National Library of Australia and the National Library of New Zealand have some Internet material on the Pacific, but it is not comprehensive. Putting such material on disc has risks as the technology changes with astonishing speed. In the past we all have been well served by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PAMBU), based in the Australian National University, Canberra. For almost thirty years, thousands of pages of often-fragile manuscripts around the Pacific have been microfilmed and distributed to libraries that contribute to the considerable cost of running such an operation. There is talk of a Pacific Resources Centre at the Australian National University (pers. comm., Ewan Maidment 22 July 2005). Will it or PAMBU take up the cause of preserving a far more transient set of sources?

Transient as they are, they can be accessed say from Canberra or Calcutta and quickly transferred to files that the technical experts can preserve in a more enduring form—and at comparatively low cost. This is a project for the Pacific peoples and for scholars to champion.

With considerable courage, both Clive Moore and Jon Fraenkel have taken a risk in publishing, so soon after the events, their accounts, with their inevitable errors and even misconceptions. Haste is not the companion of good history writing. Still, we have much to thank them for—giving us two accessible general pictures of the recent and complex crisis in Solomons and showing us that semi-contemporary history will be written from some new sources in the future. Their engagement does not end there. Fraenkel suggests a way forward for nation building in Solomons that will involve another manipulation of custom. Moore prescribes closer scrutiny and change in elements that have emerged either as issues, such as land tenure, or as players, such as the Civil Society Network. Whether one calls it manipulation or change, these writers believe Solomon Islanders will have to try another path based on what the events of the immediate past have shown them. Both are cautiously optimistic about the future. But what both minimise is that Solomons has for decades done comparatively well by being a mendicant and weak state, squandering its own limited resources such as timber and fish—because always, always a rescuer donor or country with security issues, simple humanitarian concern, or votes to buy in international fora, picks up the tab for bad government, reinforcing the system to remain much the same as before. Perhaps security-conscious Australia should have left the country to find its own solutions the hard way. Already some Solomon Islanders are beginning to ‘expect’ from Australia a complete RAMSI-led economic revolution, instead of pressuring their leaders, especially politicians, to do the hard graft of running a state effectively and to work with RAMSI (Roughan 2005; Brown 2005). RAMSI at best can only provide a favourable context but Solomon Islanders will have to write the text themselves to achieve an enduring peace and nation.

As Solomon Islanders read these two books they will find several annoying, but hopefully only minor, errors of fact. They are likely to be far more exercised regarding the interpretations of actions and implications—or the lack of them. Events in the Western Solomons, as Fraenkel acknowledges,

do not get as much attention as some would like and much of the micro-histories on Malaita and the Weather Coast remain unknown to outsiders. We hear little from the 80 per cent of the population in villages; we do not even hear the voices of militia leaders like Keke and Jeremy Rua. In one of the biggest journalistic scoops of the year, New Zealand's TV3 journalist, Mike McRoberts, interviewed Keke on the Weather Coast. Both authors missed this valuable exchange as a source.<sup>6</sup>

There is an inevitable gulf between those who know about, and those who know by living experience. One has head knowledge; the other, heart knowledge. Both are valid, but these two histories largely fall into the first category, though the Internet conversations of Solomon Islanders provided suggestive ways towards the second. The several tragedies and dilemmas of individuals and village communities are not so well conveyed in these histories. While they paint the bigger picture of the nation state they paradoxically foreground the politics of two island groups. There is little room for much else. We look forward to Solomon Islanders giving us other more personal, if perhaps sadder, histories of these troubled times in the many islands of their homeland.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the ethnicity question, see Kabutaulaka 2000:5–7.

<sup>2</sup> In fact there was only the Garo family with Malaitan connections, originally through the female line. They left in 1999 (pers. comm., Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 3 August 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Brother Richard Carter's message about the Melanesian Brothers. <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/35/25/acns3548>, accessed 21 July 2005; ABC, 'The Religion Report: 21 July 2004-Melanesian Brotherhood murders', <http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl>, accessed 17 August 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Solomon Islands Broadcasting Service, 8 July 2005, <http://www.sibconline.com.sb/main.asp?offset>, accessed 28 July 2005.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Murray Chapman for this information on the newsletters.

<sup>6</sup> See TV3, 'Warlord' 60 Minutes Programme, 4 August 2004.

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