

BEYOND ETHNICITY: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE GUADALCANAL CRISIS IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

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Solomon Islands has suffered tremendously from the two-year-old crisis in Guadalcanal, the largest island in the archipelago. The war which started as a result of an attempt by some indigenous Guadalcanal to displace a rapidly growing immigrant population (mostly Malaitans) on their island has now become a national crisis. It threatens national unity and further weakens the capacity of the state to address development issues. So far, most of the discussions on the crisis have highlighted ethnicity as a major factor causing the crisis. This paper argues that the crisis was, in fact triggered by successive governments' poor policies, a flawed political system, poor leadership and other socio-economic development issues that have not been addressed.

Introduction: Perceptions and Strategies

In March 2000 I went home to Solomon Islands. By then the crisis on the island of Guadalcanal was tense. In reaction to an uprising by Guadalcanal militants, a group claiming to represent Malaitans had organised itself and began making sporadic attacks on villages around the national capital, Honiara. Because I am from Guadalcanal, Honiara was not the safest place to be. I decided to go to the Guadalcanal Plains.

It was late afternoon when we approached a check point. The sun was beginning to crawl down behind the gently waving fronds of the oil palm trees. Apart from the rattling of our vehicle's engine, there was an eerie silence that canvassed the oil palm plantation around us—an elusive peace.

We had been driving for about 30 minutes east of Honiara, into the heartland of the Guadalcanal militants: the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) as they called themselves. This was one of the organisations at the centre of the two-year-old crisis on Guadalcanal, the largest island of the Solomon Islands.

It was in this oil palm plantation abandoned by the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited (SIPL) that the IFM's "eastern troop" (as they referred to themselves) have made their headquarters.

As we approached the check point, men armed mostly with home-made rifles appeared from both sides of the road. But, when they recognised our vehicle the gate was opened and a ragged-looking young man—most probably in his twenties—dressed in an old camouflage pair of trousers and shirt and carrying a pump-action shot gun waved us in. On his head was an old World War II US Marine helmet.

In the past two years many things have happened here. The oil palm trees were mute witnesses to many horrifying events. In February 2000, for instance, an officer of the Royal Solomon Islands Police, Scriven Ngatu, was killed during a shootout with members of the IFM about 200 metres from where our vehicle came to a halt. But, there are many more untold stories of people going missing, most probably killed, families displaced and a country unable to deal with the

enormous impact of the crisis.

So far, the public media, government officials and commentators on the crisis have taken the easiest choice and explained the events of the past two years as simply a result of ethnic differences between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita. The argument is that there is something primordial about the hatred between the peoples of these two islands.

This was a lazy shorthand explanation that divorces the crisis from contemporary socio-economic contexts. While ethnicity, as an issue, should not be completely disregarded, there is also a need to situate the crisis within broader socio-economic and political developments in Solomon Islands and beyond. The crisis could, in other words, be understood as the consequence of processes of change, rather than as merely the result of "hatred" between the peoples of two islands. There is a need to explore beyond ethnicity and look at the poor policies of successive governments, weak and ineffective structures and systems of government, poorly planned large-scale resource developments, the inequitable distribution of development benefits and the need for institutional and constitutional changes. Ethnicity was simply the arena through which the conflict manifested itself in overt forms; it was the avenue through which frustrations were expressed.

Alone, the ethnic discourse is too simplistic and cannot comprehensively explain the causes of the conflict, nor contribute effectively to its resolution. It does not add up, for instance, to simply say that people naturally hate each other because they belong to different ethnic groups. Furthermore, to argue that there is a "naturalness" about the tensions between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita is to de-politicise and de-historicise the causes of the crisis.

This paper challenges the essentialist views of the crisis and proposes a maxian, structuralist, and political economic perspective. The paper is divided into three parts and attempts to answer questions such as; how did ethnicity become a prominent issue?, who constructed and perpetuated the ethnic discourse?, what are the underlying causes of the crisis?, why have past attempts at conflict resolution failed?

First, the paper provides a brief background to the current crisis in Guadalcanal. This is an outline of the events beginning from late 1998.

Secondly, it discusses the construction of ethnic discourses on the crisis by exploring the role of institutions such as the media, state, churches and schools. In particular, it examines how they construct public knowledge and set the agendas of discussion about the crisis. There is also a discussion here of how past academic discourses - especially anthropological and historical writings - have contributed to the construction of stereotypes about ethnicity that are later taken on board and compounded by the media and state.

Thirdly, the paper discusses the socio-economic and political developments in Solomon Islands that have contributed to the crisis. This involves an examination of broader socio-economic issues that are regarded as underlying causes of the crisis.

Fourthly, there is an outline of the attempts at conflict resolution and critically discusses why they have failed to bring an immediate end to overt confrontations and a lasting solution to the crisis.

The Crisis: a brief background

Beginning from of 1996 a group of young Guadalcanal men, disgruntled with successive governments' failure to address developmental issues and the demands of the Province, plus the presence of settlers from other islands (especially Malaitans) on their island began collecting arms: licensed rifles around the island, old second World War rifles and ammunition and

home-made guns.

In November 1998, a group of indigenous Guadalcanal men attacked Malaita settlements in northwest Guadalcanal, destroyed properties and chased the settlers. Although it is unclear if there was a connection, the above events occurred following remarks made by the Premier for Guadalcanal Province, Ezekiel Alebua, during a ceremony marking the handing over to the province of alienated land in the Lunga area, east of Honiara. In his speech, the Premier demanded (amongst other things);

- that settlers from other islands must respect their Guadalcanal hosts,
- rent be paid to the province for the utilisation of Honiara as the national capital,
- and compensation for Guadalcanal people murdered in Honiara.

Within months, the violence escalated and in December 1998 a Guadalcanal youth, Ishmael Pada, was shot by police at Bungana Island in the neighbouring Ngela group. More Guadalcanal men joined an armed group referred to by the media and government officials as "militants". A number of names were used to refer to them: the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), the Isatabu Freedom Fighters (IFF), and more recently, the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). By June 1999 the tensions had escalated to a stage where at least 50 people had been killed and more than 20,000 (from all provinces, although mostly from Malaita) were forced out of settlements in Guadalcanal, especially in areas around Honiara.

The government first played down the crisis. Many state officials referred to the tension as a result of the work of a "few" disgruntled people. The Minister of State, Alfred Sasako, for example, was reported as saying that, "so far as I gather, there are actually two and at the most three very small groups of perhaps a total of 50 people. Some of those arrested on arms charges were disgruntled former police officers. Most other trouble makers appear to be young people who do not take it seriously, but who want a bit of fun and adventure" (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, June 1999: 25).

Throughout 1999 there were continuous confrontations between the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the IFM. By April 2000 about thirteen IFM members had been killed by the police. The movement quickly attracted supporters from all over the island and an organisational structure was established to regulate the work of the militants. Although this has not functioned efficiently and there are dynamics within Guadalcanal, the general feeling throughout the island is that of agreement with the IFM.

By the beginning of 2000 a group claiming to represent displaced Malaitans was formed and called itself the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). This group's concerns centre around demands for compensation of properties damaged and destroyed by the IFM, the killings of Malaitans and the protection of Malaitan interests in Honiara.

Since the group's formation they have made incursions into Guadalcanal villages around Honiara and killed a number of people, including women and children. A number of MEF members have also been killed by the IFM, although this has never been publicly acknowledged. By February 2000, confrontations between the IFM and MEF had escalated, and in a number of shootouts in areas around Honiara, an unspecified number of militants were killed. But, the militant in the crisis became complex when in April 2000 it was revealed that another militant organisation, the Malaita Seagull Force (MSF), had been established. It was alleged (especially by the parliamentary opposition) that this group was closely linked to the prime minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, and established for the purposes of destroying the MEF. This has, however, been refuted by the Prime Minister and on 14 May 2000 a committee was

established following the Auld Peace Talks to investigate the existence of the MSF.

In the first eighteen months, about thirteen IFM members have been killed by the police. This, however, has served as an incentive for more Guadalcanal men to join the militants, taking the crisis far away from any hopes for resolution. The confrontation between the two major groups, the IFM and MEF has also resulted in the death of an unspecified number of people from both sides.

On June 5, 2000 the MEF, joined by Malaita elements within the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) took over the state armoury at the police headquarters in Rove, staged a coup and forced prime minister Ulufa'alu to resign. A new government under the prime ministership of Manasseh Sogavare was subsequently elected under duress. In the months that followed there was intense fighting between the IFM and MEF. From various accounts it is estimated that since the crisis started in late 1998 at least 100 from both sides have been killed. This, however, has not been independently verified.

The Crisis and Ethnic Representations

In the past two years anyone exposed to the Guadalcanal crisis would have heard of it being referred to in ways that suggested ethnicity as the most important underlying issue. Public knowledge of the crisis, both locally and internationally, was dominated by discussions of the "ethnic tension" between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita.

Implicit in these discussions is the argument that the ethnic discourse is both historically imperative and has a "naturalness" about it; that the crisis has a primordial origin that could be found in ethnic differences between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita. As a way of explaining the causes of the tension, proponents of the ethnicity thesis - the essentialists - point to the fact that the Solomon Islands nation-state is a colonial construction with diverse cultures and ethnic groups, many of whom have been - both prior to and after the colonial era - rivals in activities such as trade and war.

Such an argument, however, ignores the fact that Solomon Islanders have lived, traded, befriended, intermarried, worked, worshipped and studied together for many years both prior to and after the colonial era. These extensive interactions point to the fact that ethnicity alone is insufficient as either an origin or antecedent for the crisis. While it may be a source of identification and social mobilisation for those involved in the crisis, it is insufficient as the primary factor explaining the crisis.

In relation to the crisis in Guadalcanal, the term ethnicity has been used loosely. There was no specific meaning attached to it and it seems that central to its usage was the attempt to mobilise people from an island or province by making them "believe" they are of common descent, however linguistically or culturally distant they may have been. Ethnicity, as Fenton (2000: 24) states, refers "to the way in which social and cultural difference, language and ancestry combine as a dimension of social action and social organisation, and form a socially reproduced system of classification". It is the social mobilisation of ethnic ties and the social significance of ancestry, language and culture. Fenton (2000: 24) goes on to state that "we may speak of ethnic groups - identifiable groups whose "actual" or "claimed" shared ethnic attributes mark them off within a social system. But we should not think of these groups concretely; they are not discrete, permanent or fixed."

In relation to the crisis in Guadalcanal, the notion of constructing a homogenous ethnic identity - even where there was initially none - is significant to understanding the fluidity of the groups involved and the weakness of using ethnicity as a means for explaining the crisis. To a certain extent the perceived homogeneity of the two main groups involved - Guadalcanal and Malaita - was created during the crisis and functioned only when there was the perception of a common

enemy: those from the other island. However, when that common enemy ceases to exist then the reason for social mobilisation also collapses.

The IFM, for instance, forged a common ethnic identity through the name "Isatabu"; - supposedly the name for Guadalcanal prior to European contact. Social mobilisation, therefore, was based on the fact that the people involved belong to the same island. Furthermore, there were attempts to create martyrdom for those involved, and justify as well as legitimise their participation in the crisis. An IFM leader states that "If I die in this war, not a single drop of my blood will be spilled on the soil of another island. It will simply spill on my mother, Isatabu" (*Isatabu Tavuli*, Vol.1, No.3, 2 March, 2000). But, not long after the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) in October 2000, differences emerged between IFM members, especially between those from Tasimauri (the Weather Coast) and those from the northern side of the island (Tasimboko). The reason for social mobilisation was no longer as strong as it was during the heights of the crisis.

For Malaitans, the task of constructing a single ethnic identity was much more difficult given their diverse language groups and intense traditional rivalries. There was, therefore, a need to create a perception that Malaitans were the exclusive target and victims of the Guadalcanal uprising - an argument which ignored victims from other islands. Such a perception gave legitimacy for mobilising Malaitans. To overcome this, some Malaitans have tried to create the idea that the commonality of Malaitans is both primordial and divinely ordained. Their participation in the war was, therefore, both a historical destiny and religious duty. An undated document titled *Malaita Perspective* - distributed during the heights of the crisis - argues that "the people of Malaita are the descendants of the seven tribes of Jacob" - the lost tribe of Israel (*Malaita Perspective*, undated: 3).

This was obviously a desperate attempt to construct a common ethnic identity where there was none. In spite of this, the existence of various groups within the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) (throughout the crisis) was a manifestation of deep divisions between Malaitans and the difficulties of constructing a homogenous Malaitan identity. The fighting between Malaitans - including the burning of MEF Spokesperson, Andrew Nori's, office - was a further demonstration of fragility of and temporariness of Malaitan ethnic mobilisation.

To understand how and why ethnicity became prominent, it is necessary to explore the role of public institutions in constructing and perpetuating ethnic discourse. Two such institutions that played an important role in promoting the ethnic discourse are the media and the state. The media's role as the "gatekeeper" of information on the crisis is significant because it is responsible for informing and setting the agendas of public discussion. The state, on the other hand, develops policies that influence public and individual reactions and opinions. Through the school system, for instance, the state determines what people know and through the statements and actions of its representatives, it influences people's perceptions.

The Media

The local media in Solomon Islands is relatively undeveloped. The print media is dominated by the *Solomon Star* and *Solomon Voice*. These two publish six and three days a week respectively. They are both privately owned and Honiara-based with little coverage of rural areas where a majority of Solomon Islanders live. There are other newspapers and newsletters with a much smaller circulation and some are published on an irregular basis while others have a very short life span. Non-government organisations (NGOs) such as the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) have their own newsletters and often use mediums such as comics to try and reach a wider readership.

There are three radio broadcasters in the country. The first is the government-owned Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) which has a nation-wide coverage and broadcasts in

English and *pijin* (pidgin). It also broadcasts Radio Australia (ABC) (in Melbourne) programmes such as *World and Pacific News* and *Pacific Beat*. SIBC also operates the *Wantok FM* which broadcasts mostly music. The second is *Paoa FM*, owned jointly by *Communications Fiji Ltd.* and *Solomon Star Ltd.* It broadcasts almost exclusively in English and concentrates on areas around Honiara. Its focus is on music and attracts younger listeners. The third radio station is *Zed FM* which is owned by an expatriate business man.

There is no local television company. Many people around the Honiara area, however, can catch *Australia TV* which is beamed locally by the *Solomon Islands Telekom*. The programmes are exclusively Australian - *Channel Nine*.

During the heights of the crisis on Guadalcanal - June 1999, and June to October 2000 - there was a reasonable amount of coverage by the international media, especially those from Australia and New Zealand. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) set up an internet website (<http://www.abc.net.au/solomons/>) to keep people updated with events in the Solomons and provide an avenue for discussion. Apart from the Australian and New Zealand media, other international media organisations such as the BBC provided some coverage as well.

Local media coverage was, as expected, extensive. Both the print and radio media provided news coverage and commentaries on the events.

Generally, both the local and international media reported on the crisis predominantly as an "ethnic tension". They pushed the ethnic line to the forefront and in the process often ignored the historical, socio-economic, and political contexts from which the crisis developed. Ethnicity was used as a kind of a lazy shorthand explanation of the crisis by reporters who, generally, had little understanding of the issues involved. Because journalists were pressed by the news room requirements to get the product out as quickly as possible, many never researched enough to enable them to have a broad and deeper understanding of the issues. Many of the international reporters have little knowledge about Solomon Islands in general and more specifically the issues that underlie the crisis. They had no local partners and rarely read and travelled widely in the country before producing a news piece. Most of them "parachuted" into the country around June and July of 1999 when the crisis was at its heights and many people - mostly Malaitans - were fleeing from areas around the capital Honiara. Apart from the few local freelance journalists^[1], none of those reporting for international media organisations was Solomon Islands-based. Some of the international reporters had never been to the Solomons prior to the crisis. Despite this, they were expected to go in and within hours produce news that would subsequently "inform" the international public about the crisis. Many were, in other words, ignorant "gatekeepers" of information.

An SBS *Date Line* team, for example, in June of 1999 put together a programme which was centred exclusively on Honiara. They interviewed a few people (all Malaitans), the prime minister (who was also Malaitan), and had shots of the people struggling to get on to crowded boats plus other shots of a seemingly chaotic Honiara. That served their purpose: it showed Malaitans as victims, therefore, pushing the ethnic line of the crisis; a particular ethnic group has been victimised. There were no shots of or interviews with Solomon Islanders from other island groups such as the Western Solomons, Santa Cruz, the Reef Islands, etc. (and even Guadalcanal people) who had also fled from areas around Honiara at the same time. Many of the people fleeing were largely from squatter settlements on Honiara's periphery, settlements large enough to be small towns, and not exclusively populated by Malaitan people. The complexity of the identities of the people involved were never explored.

Michael Field, a New Zealand freelance journalist, found what he wanted in the words of Gray George, a member of the IFM, who described Malaitans in a derogatory manner (*The Age*, 22 June, 2000). That was then splashed in Australian and regional tabloids and magazines

implicitly as a representation of the Guadalcanal view. No one questioned its accuracy, nor explored the fact that most Guadalcanal people did not subscribe to that view. To push the ethnic line further, in the cover story for the *Pacific Islands Monthly* (July 1999) Field stated that two Solomon Island leaders—the Guadalcanal Provincial Premier and a former prime minister, Rt. Hon. Ezekiel Alebua, and the late Solomon Mamaloni, then Leader of the Opposition—had played an "ethnic card" in the crisis. He never elaborated, however, on what was that "ethnic card" or how it was played. He never dwelled on the substance of the demands put forward by the Guadalcanal Province, the significance of Malaitan grievances, and the involvement of other Solomon Islanders beyond these two islands.

Sweeping statements about ethnicity were carried by international tabloids in news magazines, on radio, and through TV headlines: "Behind the Ethnic Tension and Trouble Over Honiara: Malaitans dominate jobs, business, industry" (*Islands Business*, February 1999); "Cooling of Anger on Guadalcanal: But some Malaitans Head for Home" (*Islands Business*, June 1999); "Solomon's Ethnic Violence: Malaitans Flee" (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, July 1999).

The Australian media, in particular, pushed the ethnic interpretation to the fore. That is not surprising given that for a long time the Australian public, academic and official government knowledge of Melanesia was generally dominated by ideas of nation-states on the verge of disintegrating because of ethnic diversity and corrupt political leadership (see, for example, Nelson, 1974; AUSTEO *Document*, 1998). Australians' experiences in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, contributed towards setting the ethnic agenda and conceptions of a collapsing nation-state in Melanesia. It was, therefore, easy and convenient for Australian journalists, in general, to follow the ethnic line of thought.

There were of course exceptions, often among local journalists or those with local ties, although these were few and far between. Mary-Louise O'Callaghan of *The Australian*, for example, left her piece until August of 1999 when the media euphoria on the Guadalcanal crisis had subsided a little. In her first piece she traced the origins of the crisis in the colonial era and the rise of earlier resistance movements. Furthermore, she placed the crisis within a historical, political and socio-economic context of the pre- and post-independence Solomon Islands. In another article she explored the role of the state in Solomon Islands, stating that, "since the British granted independence in 1978, the state has been little more than a benign, if inefficient, presence in the lives of most Solomon Islanders, bordering, if anything on irrelevance for the fewer than 500,000 people scattered throughout the south Pacific archipelago that stretches between Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu" (*The Weekend Australian*, February 5-6, 2000: 27). Mary-Louise was able to do this because of her indepth knowledge of the country. She is married to a Solomon Islander and has lived there for extended periods of time and interacted with many Solomon Islanders.

While international journalists were pushing the narrow ethnic line, their local Solomon Islands counterparts were not doing very differently. Both the print and radio media in Solomon Islands pushed the Guadalcanal-against-Malaita thesis and never attempted to explain the crisis in any indepth manner. Furthermore, in the last eighteen months of the crisis, not a single Solomon Islander journalist had interviewed a Guadalcanal militant. Hence, the local media's production of public knowledge about the crisis in general and more specifically, the "militant"—his thoughts, feelings, opinions, aspirations, etc.—was Honiara-based and biased. The media, in other words, was constructing knowledge—public information—about a group of people they had never met or spoken with. One could, therefore, conclude that media construction of public knowledge about disgruntled peoples (especially those from Guadalcanal and Malaita) was based predominantly on hearsay and rumours.

Furthermore, most of the local journalists were Honiara-based and worked under circumstances

handle the situation.

Certain terms used by state officials quickly became prominent in both the official and public discussions. These included terms such as "militants", "criminals" and descriptions such as "increased criminal activities", the "militant" group as "vague, ill-defined, philosophy-free groups given to lawlessness" (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, July 1999: 24). There were no other words that could be used to provide a much more elaborate and substantive description of the people involved and the activities they are engaged in. While to "outsiders" the group might have seemed ill-defined, the IFM members had a fairly good idea of what they were doing and why. A Guadalcanal man was reported to have said; "We are all in this fight together, we are all militants, but this violence we do not accept. Some injustice has been done to our people going back to colonial days and we think some restitution needs to be done" (*Islands Business*, December 1999: 24). Different members might have their own reasons for being involved, but whatever that reason might have been, most members have thought through their reasons.

The use of terms such as "militants", "criminals", etc. pushes discussions away from the initial socio-economic and political, the impact is to neutralise them and subsequently to make them secondary to the overriding claim of group tensions based on primordial ethnicity. The following sections outline some of the stereotypes that emerged and were used to reinforce the dismissive actions of the government and the language of the media, before attempting to place the crisis within a socio-economic and political perspective.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes, both a reiteration of old ones and the production of new ones, were used as a way of legitimising the ethnic discourse. Most were directed towards the construction of a Malaita as opposed to a Guadalcanal identity. Little attempt was made to deconstruct the stereotypes and explore the complexities, overlaps and interactions between these two, apparently counterposed or oppositional identities.

The *Islands Business* (February 1999: 18), for example, described Malaitans as "energetic, business-minded, tough and once fiercely war-like." In June 1999 the same magazine described Malaitans as "particularly industrious people with sharp business acumen . . . competitive in a society in which people from other islands tend to be less so" (*Islands Business*, June 1999: 9). Such descriptions are often placed in contrast to Guadalcanal people who are often described as lazy, not business-minded, uncompetitive, - in fact, any attributes seen as opposite to the Malaitan. The Fijian Commander of the International Police Monitoring Group in the Solomons, Savenaca Tuivanga, in an interview with *The Sunday Times* (March 12, 2000:11) of Fiji stated that "the Guadalcanal people [have] to work equally harder like the Malaitans. They have to send their children to school." Obviously within a few months, Tuivanga had caught the "stereotype bug" that was influencing public knowledge about the crisis. Implicit in that statement is the idea that Guadalcanal people are less hardworking and not formally well educated.

None of these stereotypical generalisations, however, have been subjected to detailed analysis or factual examination. There are no statistics to show, for example, that Malaitans are more hardworking or industrious than Guadalcanal people, vice versa, or any other set of Islanders in the Solomons. There were no acknowledgements, for example, of the fact that Guadalcanal people, just like their counterparts from Malaita and other parts of Solomon Islands, have participated in significant ways in both the public and private sector. For example, some of the country's highest public offices were once (or are still being) filled by Guadalcanal people: Governor General (Sir Badley Devesi), Prime Minister (Rt. Hon. Ezekiel Alebua), Chief Justice (Sir John Muria), Speaker to the National Parliament (Waeta Ben, Paul Tovua). Guadalcanal people have also occupied prominent positions in the Public Service and have made their

contribution among professionals such as lawyers, doctors, teachers and preachers.

In terms of industriousness and business innovation, it is worthwhile noting that as long ago as the 1960s the first and largest locally-owned coconut and cocoa plantations in the Solomon Islands were planted on Guadalcanal; respectively by the Moro Movement at Makaruka, on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, and by the Mbirao people of Alualu under the leadership of Petero Chem in the 1970s (Davenport and Coker 1967). Guadalcanal people have also participated in the private sector; the transport businesses and the Aruligo Fibreglass company are examples of such participation. In these businesses they succeeded and failed in similar ways to other Solomon Islanders, but the Malaita/Guadalcanal stereotypes often ignore these complexities.

Despite the ways in which both local and international media accepted, even elaborated these mythologies, they have their origins beyond both the media industry and the current crisis on Guadalcanal. The process of constructing knowledge about Solomon Islanders had for a long time, been dominated by academic discourses. Western anthropologists and historians have contributed in the construction of knowledge about Solomon Islands and its people. These constructions are then imparted locally and internationally through formal education; the schooling curricula to which the reporters were exposed undoubtedly would have something to do with their entrenched stereotypes about Solomon Islanders from different islands. Let us explore two examples here: (i) the idea of Malaitans as more hardworking/industrious, and (ii) more aggressive than other Solomon Islanders.

First, let us examine the notion of Malaitans being more hardworking and industrious. The origins of this could be traced to the labour recruiting days when Solomon Islanders were taken to work in plantations overseas, especially the sugar cane plantations in Fiji and Queensland, and around the country. There were more Malaitans recruited, not necessarily because they were more industrious or hardworking. Rather, it was because they had a bigger and more accessible labour force - Malaita's population in the late 1800s was much bigger than other islands. Malaitan labourers were more accessible to labour recruiters because of passage-masters who assisted recruiters by recruiting their *wantoks* in exchange for fees in the form of cash and goods. Although passage-masters were found throughout Solomon Islands, they were much more aggressive on Malaita. Even as late as the 1920s, for example, passage-masters were still active on many parts of Malaita. Bennett (1987: 163) notes that "at anchorages such as Kwari'ekwa and Maa were men like Funiloge and Jonah Alisifiona, who earned cash and goods by acting as go-betweens for recruiters and recruits, just as many had done in the labor trade days". By the 1930s, even with the decline in the importance of passage-masters there was still an "increasing use of well-known north coast saltwater Malaitans such as Sali (Charlie) Kamai and Jo Velakona as full-time assistants on recruiting vessels . . ." (Bennett 1987: 164).

Furthermore, from 1921 to 1923 the colonial government introduced a head tax of 1 pound a year on all able-bodied Solomon Islander males between sixteen and sixty years of age. Bennett (1987: 151) notes that men in poor areas were compelled to seek work on plantations for a time because of the introduction of laws to fix wages in the employers' favour at the same time as a head tax. For Malaitans, because of the absence of large plantations on Malaita, many of them had to travel to other islands. Bennett (1987: 189) notes that "the plantation sector drew surplus labor away from the villages, as the fact that about 10 percent of the entire population of Malaita and about seven percent of that of Guadalcanal were working away from home during the period from about 1914 to 1939 attests". Bennett (1987: 189) notes that,

In the Malaita sample, except for catechists and pastors, all the men old enough to have had pre-war employment had worked on plantation-related activities. Almost a third had been away for eight or more years, a quarter for four to seven years, and

another quarter for two to three years. . . . Few men did not return home at the end of each contract, and most stayed at least a few months before going away again.

This illustrates that there were more Malaitans in plantations, not necessarily because they were more hardworking and industrious, but because they needed plantation-related work as a source of income. Their counterparts in the Western Solomons, on the other hand, were able to sell products to plantation owners or workers and were involved in local copra production.

Secondly, the myth of Malaitan aggressiveness needs to be examined as well. There is a tendency both prior to and during the crisis to describe Malaitans as more aggressive or "fiercely war-like" than other Solomon Islanders. In this discussion, there is a tendency to assume that aggressiveness is attributable only to Malaitans. This is simplistic and denies the fact that all Solomon Islanders were capable of and had in the past committed acts of aggression. In 1850, for example, the people of Gao in Santa Isabel raided Basakana Island (north Malaita) (Ivens 1930: 186). Furthermore, for years prior to and even after European contact warriors from New Georgia raided other islands in the group on head-hunting expeditions. They went as far as "Santa Isabel, Choiseul, and even the Russell Islands and Guadalcanal" (Bennett 1987: 113). In fact, throughout history there are numerous examples of aggression by Solomon Islanders other than Malaitans.

Why is it that today they have not been regarded as aggressive? Why is that aggressiveness today, is attributed almost exclusively to Malaitans, and, to a certain extent, celebrated by some of them? These questions could be answered by looking at recent academic and media constructions of the aggressive Malaitan.

Indeed, the notion of Malaita aggressiveness is a recent phenomenon. It came to the fore partly as a result of the 1927 Kwaio killing of Australian tax collector William Bell and the subsequent anthropological and historical writings which gave vivid descriptions of the incident (see Keesing and Corris 1980). The incident was later introduced in the secondary school curriculum as an important event in the country's history. Hence, it made its way into public knowledge and became accepted as a characteristic of being Malaitan. There was no mention in the school curricula of other incidents elsewhere in the country. For example, there was no mention of the killing of a party of Solomon Islander police officers in the bush (Suta) area of Guadalcanal by a man called Bili Talaolia in 1927, a few months before the Bell Killing. There was no book, let alone a detailed academic discussion of this incident. Bennett gave the incident one line: "In 1927, as an outcome of resentment toward poorly supervised police and the often harsh enforcement of the tax collector, some Mbirao bushman of Guadalcanal murdered a police patrol" (Bennett 1987: 211). However, because the police patrol was made up of Solomon Islanders, the incident did not attract the kind of reprisal from Britain and Australia as did the Kwaio incident. Furthermore, the Guadalcanal incident also did not attract the same degree of Western anthropological and historical curiosity interest as the events in Kwaio. It did not make it into the formal school curricula. The number of people killed was not even mentioned.

On the contrary, the Kwaio incident received widespread and persistent media, academic and state publication. Thus, giving birth to, perpetuating and reiterating the myth that aggressiveness is an attribute that is exclusively Malaitan.

Over the years, some Malaitans came to accept the stereotypes about them as being more aggressive than other Solomon Islanders and, in turn, act that way—become as aggressive as their stereotype described them. When confronting others they use terms such as, "*iu no save mi man long Kwaio?*" (Don't you know, I am a man from Kwaio?). This phrase is used to instill fear as though there is something that should naturally be feared about a Kwaio man and as though aggressiveness is a characteristic monopolised by the Kwaio of Malaita. Other Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, accept the stereotype of being more passive and act in a passive

way while suppressing their aggressive nature. This, in a way, legitimises, or at least makes it seem right for Malaitans to claim dominance in the country.

Some Malaitans have attempted to both reiterate and legitimise this myth by claiming a Biblical origin of their aggressive characteristic. The *Malaita Perspectives* document, for example, states that "In order to identify the tribes in Malaita, see the blessings that Jacob pronounced on each of his sons (Gen 49:3-15, Deut 33:7-21)". These blessings have provided the sons of Jacob with characteristics which include, aggressiveness, pride, violence, conqueror, scatteredness and cruelty (*Malaita Perspective*, undated: 3).

As strange as this document may sound, it was written by a prominent Malaitan who is a Reverend in one of the dominant Christian denominations in Malaita. More importantly, its contents are believed by many Malaitans. The important thing to note for our purposes here is that it was written in an attempt to construct a particular characteristic for Malaitans. It went on to say that Malaitans are "unique" by quoting Exodus 33:16. What the author obviously did not realise was that the characteristics described above and attributed to the seven sons of Jacob are complex and could be found in any individual or societies any where in the world.

I have discussed the above, not to celebrate aggressiveness or to say that a certain group is more or less aggressive than another. Rather, this is merely to illustrate how some stereotypes were constructed and subsequently accepted by society, hence reiterating ethnic divisions.

But, let me shift away from the above and explore some of the issues that I see as important in understanding the crisis.

The Socio-Economic and Political Issues

The Solomon Islands was declared a British protectorate in 1893 partly in response to the French expansion into the neighbouring New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and the Germans into New Guinea. In declaring a protectorate the British were constructing a nation-state out of one of the world's most diverse group of islands: at present, the Solomons has a population of about 450,000 people who speak over eighty-seven languages.

At independence on 7 July 1978, Solomon Islanders were faced with the daunting task of forging a national sentiment out of the fragments of their diverse societies. The enormity of the task became clear when, at the eve of independence, the Western Solomons—one of the natural resource rich regions of the archipelago—threatened to breakaway and either form its own nation-state or join the neighbouring island of Bougainville which was, at that time, also demanding secession from Papua New Guinea. The Western Breakaway Movement was due partly to the administration's failure to meet demands for a system of government that would enable the masses to participate in decision-making and give them more power to determine the development of their natural resources and benefit from its outcomes (see Premdas, *et al* 1984).

The difficulty of forging a national consciousness was recognised by the country's pioneer leaders. A former prime minister, the late Solomon Mamaloni, once described the Solomons as a "nation conceived but never born" (Mamaloni 1992: 14). Writing to commemorate the tenth independence anniversary, Mamaloni stated that "Solomon Islands or the Solomon Islands Community has never been a nation and will never be a nation and will never become one" (Mamaloni 1992: 10). Christian Jourdan, an anthropologist, also acknowledges that national-consciousness is a new phenomenon:

... an urban-based elite, in government and administrative circles, is trying to promote a nationalist sentiment in the country. This projection of identity creates tensions between the so-called nation builders—those who want to promote the

ideology of the nation—and the nation builders—those who will be caught up in the nationbuilding process, willingly or not, but whose participation in, acceptance of, and, ideally, identification with the values of the budding nation will be essential to the legitimacy of the national enterprise (Jourdan 1995: 134).

But, despite this, Jourdan argues that amongst the younger generation of Solomon Islanders, especially in the urban areas, there is a new sense of national consciousness in the making. She identifies three factors: (i) the education system; (ii) Pijin as a common language; and (iii) popular culture—as the "stepping stones" toward a national consciousness; elements that are crucial in conveying to citizens of Solomon Islands a sense of shared values and expectations, out of which a sense of common purpose in the future develops (Jourdan 1995: 134).

That may be true. But, for many Solomon Islanders, national consciousness is often only skin deep: peel that off and you have a person with allegiances to a particular "*wantok*" or ethnic group.

But, the relative weakness of national consciousness itself does not provide an adequate explanation for the Guadalcanal crisis; it does not tell us why there are violent tensions between groups of people who have been interacting with each other for more than a hundred years. Indeed, it would be naive to conclude that the tensions in Guadalcanal have arisen simply because of ethnic differences and the weaknesses of nationalism.

Apart from issues of nationalism, the British left behind a group of islands largely undeveloped and an economy dependent almost entirely on the exploitation of natural resources by foreign multinational companies. Infrastructural development was concentrated around Honiara, the national capital, located on the northern coast of Guadalcanal and built out of the remains of a former World War II US Air Force base.

Honiara was also where most of the formal employment opportunities are concentrated. Statistics collected from 1971 to 1981 have indicated that the distribution of employment opportunities between provinces did not correlate with the distribution of population. Thus, the provinces of Santa Isabel, Makira/Ulawa, Temotu and Malaita accounted for 49% of the country's population but only 15% of formal sector employment; this difference was especially true of Malaita with 31% of the national population and only 7% of the employment. What is even more significant is that this imbalance was worsening: in that decade (1971-1981) formal sector employment in those provinces scarcely increased. Moreover, in 1981 when overall employment increased, the level of employment in both Malaita and Santa Isabel fell. Thus, the provinces that were already better provided with job opportunities, and generally have higher levels of development, have experienced the most growth. In terms of job opportunities the regional disparities since independence have worsened; one of the results has been the greater migration to the employment centres (Connell 1983: 12).

Consequently, between 1978 and 1986 Malaita and Temotu provinces had a considerably higher proportion of people who moved out than moved in. This was in contrast to Guadalcanal province which was receiving a far greater percentage of movers than it sent. On the other hand, places such as Western, Isabel, Central and Makira/Ulawa provinces as well as Honiara had an approximately balanced proportion of people moving in or out (Chapman 1992: 82). This had important implications for population movement.

Apart from migration, by the time of independence the country's domestic income generation was dependent almost entirely on agricultural development and the large-scale exploitation of natural resources: the oil palm plantation, copra, fisheries, and more recently, logging. The issue of natural resource development and the distribution of benefits accruing from it became a contentious issue in the decades after independence. Mamaloni in 1992 states that, "our natural resources are rapidly being depleted, not for the welfare of those who own them but to finance a

government system that is far remote from the masses". Ironically, much of the rapid exploitation of the country's forestry resources by Asian multinational companies took place in the 1980s and 1990s when Mamaloni was Prime Minister for an extended period of time.

The oil palm plantation in the Guadalcanal plains attracted workers and their families and relatives from all over the country. Established in the 1970s, the plantation is owned by the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited (SIPL). While the acquisition of 1,478 hectares of land took place in 1971, it was not until about three years later that the company began operations after customary land boundaries and trustees were included in the agreement. For the indigenous landowners, the benefit from the plantation was marginal. They own only two per cent share in SIPL. This compares to 68 per cent shares by the British-registered Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) and 30 per cent by the Solomon Islands Government. In addition to shares in the company, landowners receive annually, SI\$100 per hectare as land rental and SI\$500 per hectare as premium.

Despite persistent efforts by landowning groups to increase their benefits, the government and CDC have in the past years, not responded positively. Instead, more land was acquired over the years.

In 1997 when the Bartholomew Ulufa'alu-led government came to power, it proposed that as part of privatisation under the restructural adjustment program, the government was going to sell 20 per cent of its 30 per cent share to CDC. The remaining 10 per cent of government shares would be sold to Solomon Islanders but managed by the Investment Corporation of Solomon Islands (ICSI), the national government's investment agency. The Guadalcanal Provincial government, however, demanded that instead of selling its 20 per cent share in SIPL to CDC, the national government give it to the Guadalcanal Provincial government.^[2] But, pressed by the need for quick finance—prior to the crisis SIPL was contributing to 20% of the country's \$585 million GDP—the Ulufa'alu government did not respond positively to this request.

Apart from such large-scale resource developments, many Guadalcanal people (predominantly males) from areas around Honiara were selling customary land to those from other provinces. This is despite the fact that Guadalcanal is a matrilineal society where females are regarded as the custodians of land. Furthermore, many individuals were selling land without consulting other members of their *laen* (tribe). This often caused arguments amongst landowners. What is important to note here is that many of those who purchased land did so legitimately either through customary procedures or through legal means. The sale of land has, over the years, been resented by a younger generation of Guadalcanal people who view the act as a sale of their "birth right". Most members of the *laen*, especially women and the younger people, rarely benefit from such a sale of customary land. Many land disputes emerged within landowning groups and between them and the new "owners" of land. It is, therefore, not surprising that members of the IFM have adopted as their motto the words; "Land is Our Mother, Land is Our life, Land is Our Future" (*Isatabu Tavuli*, vol.1, no.3, 2 March, 2000: 4).

Land has become an important issue of discussion with the Guadalcanal Province demanding a review of the *Land and Titles Act*, 50 per cent in all revenue collected by government from investments on Guadalcanal, rent for Honiara being established on Guadalcanal, proper acquisition of Honiara's offshore area and the return of all alienated land. Furthermore, Andrew Te'e, one of the leaders of the IFM had expressed his attachments to the land in Guadalcanal in a series of three articles entitled "Land is Sacred to Me" in the *Isatabu Tavuli* (2 March, 2000):

... there is a trend occurring world wide where many indigenous and original owners of land have been forced to shift away from 'living' life, to just simply 'surviving' it. This shift occurs when the original owners of land are marginalised in the name of 'development' for the benefit of the nation-state. The shift is caused by government

policies and legislation as well as the actions of huge corporate industries that do not respect the land and those who originally belong to it.

But the issues of land and natural resource development are not confined to Guadalcanal and the oil palm plantation. They are found throughout Solomon Islands. In the Russell Islands in the Central Islands Province, for example, the acquisition of land and the development of coconut plantations in the late 1800s by the Levers Pacific Ltd.—another British-registered company—also contributed towards confrontations between the state and civil society. The dispute over the land on Pavuvu Island emerged when Marving Brothers Timber Ltd., a Malaysian-registered logging company began logging the island in 1985. Prior to that, the Levers Pacific Timber, a subsidiary of the same company was involved in another violent confrontation in 1981 with landowners at Enoghae in North New Georgia. The issues became especially pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s when industries such as logging became prominent; this saw collaboration between the state officials and multinational (mostly Asian) logging companies (see Bennett 2000).

It was also during this period that the country's deteriorating economic situation saw the government accumulate debts well over its ability to repay. By the end of 1997, for example, the government had accumulated SI\$1.2 billion in debt, more than double its 1998 budget (Central Bank of Solomon Islands 1998). This was due partly to poor management practices such as uncontrolled spending and non-collection of revenue. For example, millions of dollars in potential government revenue was foregone through tax remissions on log exports: it was \$109 million from 1995 to 1997 (Asian Development Bank 1998).

The period also witnessed substantial fraud and theft by public servants and huge amounts of money were given to members of parliament through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). In many cases the CDF money was used as "handout" to gain and retain the political loyalty of people who, as a result, became more dependent than before. Consequently, a majority of the country's population suffered; a few became very rich at the expense of nation-wide development. Another issue that aroused major discussions at the time of independence was the system of government. There were concerns that the provincial system of government was expensive and ineffective. These discussions, among other things, hinge on issues of power over the development of natural resources, the benefits from it and the desire to participate directly in decision-making processes.

Many people proposed that a federal (state) system of government would be most appropriate for Solomon Islands. The assumption was that federalism would cater for the devolution of power and the equitable distribution of development benefits. This was one of the issues raised by proponents of the Western Breakaway Movement. In the report of the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) set up to reconsider the 1978 constitution, one of the major recommendations was the establishment of a federal system of government (Mamaloni 1988). That, however, was ignored by successive governments and most of the Committee's recommendations were never implemented.

There were other issues raised by the 1987 CRC report. One of the most important related to the freedom of movement and settlement. Although the Solomon Islands Constitution guarantees every person the "freedom of movement . . . [which] . . . means the right to move freely throughout Solomon Islands, the right to reside in any part of Solomon Islands . . ." the CRC report contained many expressions of the need to control the movement and settlement of people in Solomon Islands (Mamaloni 1988). On Guadalcanal issues of migration and settlement were compounded because of the rapid growth of Honiara and the expansion of squatter settlements in areas around Honiara. The people of Guadalcanal had long been concerned with the migration of other Solomon Islanders to their island. In February 1954, for

instance, when touring as Special Lands Commissioner in northeast Guadalcanal, Colin Allan noted in his diary that "the worst fear the Tasimboko people have is in regard to the immigration of Malaita people" (as quoted in Chapman 1992: 94). Much later, in 1987, a man from Oa Village on southeast Guadalcanal expressed similar sentiments when presenting to a Constitution Review Committee: "Freedom of movement should not include the freedom to settle in another language area without permission of customary land owners, or without respect for culture and customs of those who reside in that language area" (Mamaloni 1988: 496).

Ten years after independence, the people of Guadalcanal could no longer contain their frustration. In 1988 Guadalcanal people went on a demonstration after the multiple murders at Mt. Austin behind Honiara, and demanded, amongst other things, the establishment of a federal system of government and that "immediate steps be taken to reduce the pressure of internal migration."^[3] Increasingly in the late 1980s and 1990s Honiara became a town which manifested the country's national problems. In 1989, for example, there was a riot in Honiara after confrontations between Malaita youths and those from Rennell and Bellona. Police records indicate that most of those involved in the rioting were unemployed youth.

Another 1990s phenomenon which goes a long way in explaining the Guadalcanal crisis was the Bougainville migration due to its ten-year war for independence from Papua New Guinea. Upwards of 9,000 Bougainvilleans fled to the Solomons with a vast majority of them settling in Guadalcanal for long periods of time. This huge migration of displaced people took place during most of the 1990s. Only recently have the majority of them begun to return to their own country. While residing in Solomon Islands for medical treatment, safety for their families and to enjoy a bit of peace, they must have shared with the Guadalcanal people (and others) how they (the Bougainvilleans) had driven the hated "redskins" (PNG Highlanders) off their island. Bougainvilleans had also taken on one of the world's largest and richest mining companies (Panguna Copper Mine) and completely routed them off their land, rejecting the mine and all it represented.

But, the highlight of the 1990s was the 1997 national election. For the first time in the country's electoral history, voters dismissed more than half of the sitting parliamentarians and elected two Chinese business men. It was the first time in four national elections that people had dismissed so many of their highest elected officers. The former government which had been in power for more than seven years was soundly defeated. The election results sent a strong message to politicians that people would no longer accept "business as usual." They were demanding change, and quickly.

The Search for Peace

Since early 1999, a number of attempts have been made to bring an end to the crisis. These processes involved attempts to address the underlying issues of the crisis and to deal with the demands of the various parties.

First, a *kastom* (custom) feast ceremony was held in Honiara on 23 May 1999. The purpose of the feast was to bring together the Big Men from Guadalcanal and Malaita to reconcile their differences. While the feast, as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation, was well intended and customarily appropriate, it did not include those actually involved in perpetrating violence. Furthermore, it did not address the underlying causes of the tensions. Hence, while the feast could have been organised as a starting point for dialogue, it would have been naive to expect the feast to resolve the crisis.

Apart from the feast, three major peace meetings have been sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Australian Government. The first was the Honiara Peace Accord which was brokered by the Commonwealth Secretariat's special envoy, Fiji's former Prime Minister, Major General Sitiveni Rabuka. This Accord was signed on June 28, 1999 and acknowledges that

successive governments since independence have ignored many issues raised in the demand by the Guadalcanal people. It then made a commitment to address these issues, especially those relating to land. In effect, the Honiara Peace Accord provided a starting point for the process of conflict resolution.

The second was the Panatina Agreement signed on 12 August 1999. This restated the commitment to implement the Honiara Peace Accord, recognising it "as the framework for a lasting solution to the problems of ethnic unrest in Guadalcanal." Apart from this, the only major focus of this document was: (i) the role of the Royal Solomon Islands police and the need for an emphasis on community policing; (ii) the need for militants to lay down arms; and (iii) the need to disband "illegal organisations." But, again the Guadalcanal militants were not a signatory to this document. It was signed by Major General Sitiveni Rabuka, the Commonwealth Special Envoy, Hon. Robin Meseputu, Minister for Police and National Security, Hon. Patteson Oti, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Rt. Hon. Ezekiel Alebua, Premier for Guadalcanal Province, and Mr. Morton Siriheti, Deputy Commissioner of Police.

The third was the Buala Peace Conference held at Buala, the provincial capital of Isabel Province. This conference, however, was affected because the Malaita Provincial delegation and none of the militant groups attended. Their lack of attendance was due to the fact that they demanded the government lift the declaration of illegality placed on the organisation and that there was no set agenda to the meeting. The Malaita Provincial Government delegation did not attend because of threats from the MEF. Only the Central Government delegation led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Patteson Oti and the Guadalcanal delegation led by Premier Alebua and some church representatives attended. Although some important issues were discussed and decisions made, nothing substantial came out of it.

Because of the non attendance of the MEF and the Malaita Provincial Government to the Buala talks another talk was held at Auki, the Malaita provincial capital in the following week. Out of this the government proposed to lift the declaration of illegality placed on the militant groups and subsequently did so on 15 May 2000. This was to enable the groups to attend future talks without the fear of being reprimanded. The government, however, made the offer on the condition that the militant groups be prepared to give up their arms.

If anything positive is going to come out of that talk, all the parties involved in the crisis must be represented and the underlying socio-economic and political issues must be addressed.

Another attempt to bring about peace was through the international Police Peace Monitoring Group. Following the signing of the Honiara Peace Accord and the Panatina Agreement, an international Police Peace Monitoring Group comprising of 50 police officers from neighbouring Vanuatu and Fiji were deployed on Guadalcanal on 1 November 1999. Part of their role is to monitor the enforcement of the issues highlighted in the two documents and to collect arms from militants. That task is complicated by the fact that, for many of the militants (IFM in particular), arms—guns in particular—have become their source of power and status. There is a need to give them a "reason" to give up their arms. There is, in other words, a need to engage the militants in an alternative and more positive exercise that will give them the status and power. Without that, the exercise of "handing over weapons" is unlikely to succeed.

While the above attempts to resolve the tensions are acknowledged, there are a number of problems that will constrain their success. First, it is obvious that the militants are, in the above approaches, not part of the peace process. Rather, they are regarded as its target. Related to this is the limited attempt to understand the militants and assist them come to terms with and rationalize their actions and its consequences. But, more generally, while both the Honiara Peace Accord and the Panatina Agreement acknowledge the need to make people become part of the process, so far, in practical terms, there have been no obvious signs of that happening.

This is partly due to the absence of coherent and systematically planned programs to enable that to occur. While the government may be committed to making policy and structural changes at the national level, there is no program at the local community level to collect information necessary for policy-making, help people understand the processes towards reconciliation and facilitate them to become part of it.

On August 2, 2000 a cease-fire agreement was signed between the MEF and the IFM. Although it was violated in less than 24 hours after the signing, it did provide the basis for further dialogue. In October 2000, after five days of peace talks at the Queensland city of Townsville an agreement was signed. The Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) managed to stop overt violence between the two warring parties. Although peace—in the true sense of the word—is yet to be achieved, the TPA provides the platform for a national discussion in the future.

Conclusion

In our search to resolve the Solomon Islands crisis there is a need to look beyond ethnicity as the only cause of the crisis. We must explore the socio-economic and political issues underlying the issues raised by the various actors in the crisis.

In a way, there is legitimacy in many of the issues raised by Malaitans, Guadalcanal and others who are involved. Ethnicity has become an avenue through which peoples' frustrations become manifested. We must go beyond that. There is a need to shift away from the narrow legalistic approach to conflict resolution to a method that would be more inclusive—a restorative justice type of approach.

So far, the attempts at conflict resolution have not directly addressed the issues mentioned above. They are all short term and emphasise the need to stop overt violence. Although that is also important, there is a need for conflict resolution strategies to address broader socio-economic and political issues.

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[1] There were a few local freelance journalists such as Sam Seke, Dorothy Wickham, George Atkin and Duran Angiki who were reporting directly to or doing stringers for a number of international media organisations. They had a relatively better understanding of the issues underlying the crisis compared with their overseas counterparts.

[2] Guadalcanal Province, 1999. *Demand of the Fona Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal*.

[3] Petition by the Indigenous People of Guadalcanal, 1988.

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