

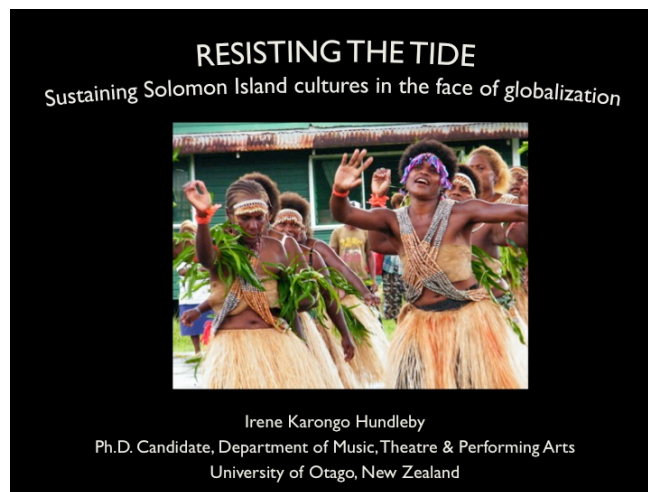
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Resisting the tide: Sustaining Solomon Island cultures in the face of globalisation.

Over the last century, global tides have increasingly influenced Solomon Island daily life, for better and for worse. In the post-2003 ‘tension’ rebuild, many new foreign projects have been proposed and introduced. While some projects are legitimately focused on enhancing the lives of Solomon Islanders, others are focused on outcomes that exploit rather than benefit local communities. These global tides have caused significant concerns around cultural loss and erosion in Malaita, an area I call home. As in other areas of Solomon Islands, Malaitan traditions, cultures, languages and arts are endangered. The window of opportunity for sustainability is dwindling as today’s culture-bearers are aging. Our community leaders ask that project organizers heed the concerns of Solomon Islanders, and align their objectives with those of Solomon Island communities. This is a call to collaboratively address social problems; reconnect communities with their family histories, traditions and arts; and work towards a stronger, more resilient Solomon Islands that is economically, socially and culturally sustainable.

Resisting the tide: Sustaining Solomon Island cultures in the face of globalisation

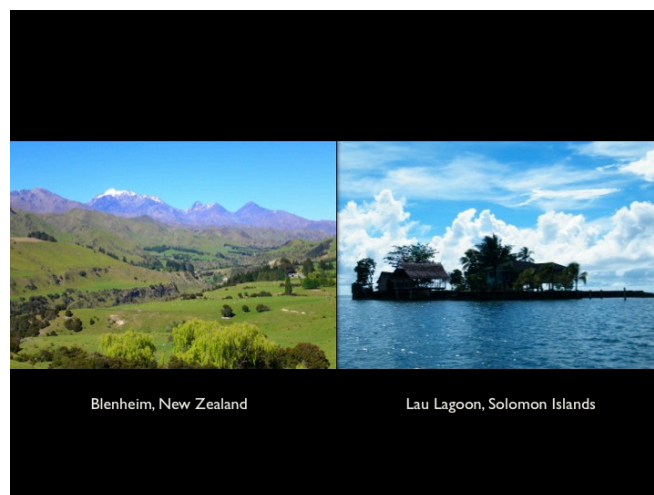
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[Audio – Ala Alafu 1:02]

Today, the ALA ALAFU welcomes you who are here with me, welcomes my ancestors, and loved ones that have passed... Today we come together to share our stories of Malaitan life, culture and music. Thank you for sharing with us.

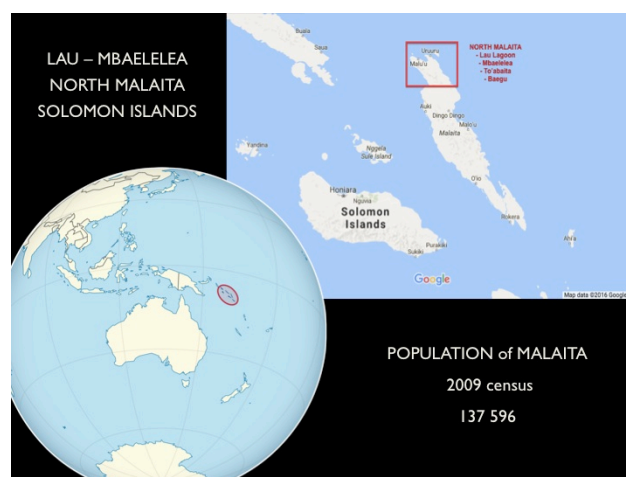
First a little introduction. I am Irene Karongo Hundleby. I was born into two worlds: each with its own particular knowledge system and ways of being, thinking and doing.



My mother was born on an artificial island in tropical North Malaita, Solomon Islands; my father was born before World War II in a small country town, Blenheim, New Zealand. My parents created for us a bicultural space where the ideas of their distinct cultures were allowed to mingle. We learnt to dance in and out of each world with relative ease – though each mode of being, thinking or doing could be in opposition to the other. We learnt to manage the complexities of being bicultural. Today, I speak from this space.

My Project

Three years ago I began studying women's music in the Lau-Mbaelelea region of North Malaita, Solomon Islands. My fieldwork was based upon everyday life as an insider – a Malaitan woman, and as an outsider – a New Zealand academic, currently residing in New Zealand. My work is appropriately informed by my upbringing and Malaitan experiences and the understanding of our histories my elders have imparted to me.



Malaita province has a population of approximately 140 000 people. 90+ languages are spoken across Solomon Islands, including around 12 Malaitan languages. The Lau-Mbaelelea region is in the northern part of Malaita. This place is my tribal homeland.

In the Lau-Mbaelelea region, women's music making remains a fundamental part of everyday life. Women are key culture-bearers who actively transmit *kastom* (cultural) knowledge, values and beliefs via music and oral storytelling. However, over the last twenty years continuation of local *kastom* traditions via music and storytelling has declined. While some families are continuing to transmit their culture using traditional means, in many cases Western style school education has taken the place of traditional learning. Within school curriculums, generalized Solomon Island *kastoms* and history are taught rather than specific local (in this case Lau-Mbaelelea) traditions.¹ To date, Malaitan women's music² has been poorly documented by researchers, and the documented data that does exist is housed in overseas archives, museums and libraries and is therefore inaccessible to most Malaitans. All these factors are threatening the sustainability of Malaitans' intangible cultural heritage.

Historical Background Context

Since making contact with the Western world, Malaitan history has been complex: Initially, Malaitans resisted colonialism, governance and outsider influence – an attitude that would wane over time as our ancestors adopted and rejected elements of introduced cultures, and grappled with foreign philosophies and control. Throughout recent history, we Malaitans have viewed ourselves as fearsome, steadfast, headstrong, circumspect – yet open to opportunities that may benefit our peoples, and fiercely proud of our cultures and our reputation for possessing a *ramo* (warrior) mentality. Consequently, Malaita is often exoticised as being one of the more prominent cultural strongholds within Solomon Islands. We highly value these traits, which are indictative of the physical, emotional and spiritual strength deemed intrinsic to Malaitan identity. This subjective view of being 'Malaitan' is still prominent today, amongst both men and women; and internal cultural pride is a factor that motivates culture-bearers to document and record our histories – myself included.

Over the last century my people have experienced a steady influx of outsiders: colonial and
then government administrators, missionaries, researchers, NGO and aid officers, and in³

more recent years foreign army and policing units as part of the RAMSI peace partnership. Each group has arrived on our soil with their own agenda, with their own ideas on what to change and how to propel that change. Very few arrived with prior knowledge of our cultures, our languages, or our people – though their organisations communicated their own constructed ideas of who we are, what needed changing, what would be documented and what was important for our people. These ideas have historically been based on verbal and written perceptions and experiences of other outsiders, and in many cases exoticised notions of who Melanesians, Solomon Islanders or Malaitans were and are.

While some groups have been legitimately focused on enhancing the lives of Solomon Islanders, others are focused on outcomes that exploit rather than benefit local communities. And while there are some groups that genuinely hold altruistic intentions, the introduction of foreign ideas has also negatively impacted on our communities.

To date, in North Malaita (as in other areas of Solomon Islands) in the minds of local communities, there are so many memories of being exploited, oppressed or subjected to offensive behaviour, that since the coup of 2000, my people have become more and more removed from engagement with outsiders, and many have become extremely suspicious, questioning why foreign people, organisations and governments are interested in their lands, waters and wellbeing. While development is without a doubt ‘word’ of the year, the forward motion of projects are continuously stalled by what is deemed to be a traumatic history. Our story is not specific to only Solomon Islands. Indigenous communities around the world and in our back yard the Pacific are crying out to be heard. We as researchers, government officials, and aid administrators have a responsibility to listen and learn.

I have shared a snippet of our history. However to understand the needs of our people, it is necessary for me to explain a little about who we are, our environment, our thinking and our values. These ways are fundamental to our concepts of self, and integral to the social, emotional and physical health of our communities.

Toa ‘i Tolo – People of the Bush



Mbaelelea people are *toa ‘i tolo* or people of the bush. Mbaelelea lifestyles, expertise and histories are grounded in a bush (forest) environment, where cultivation of the land and use of bush resources are part of everyday life. Our stories and songs relate principally to the lands of the Mbaelelea geographical region.

Toa 'i Asi – People of the Sea

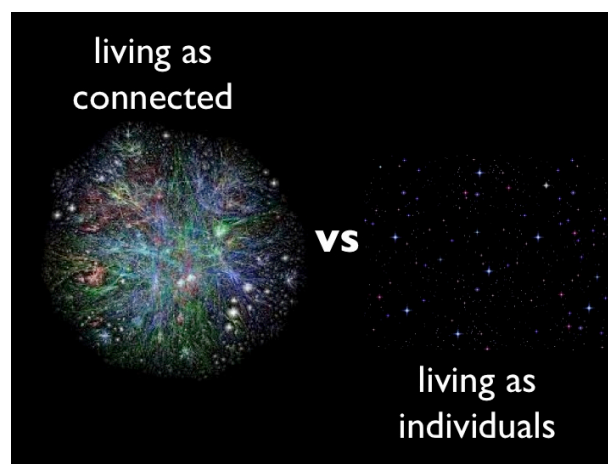


Lau Lagoon people are *toa 'i asi* or people of the sea. Lau Lagoon stretches along the coastline of North Malaita, to include coastal villages, and around 70 artificial islands. These coral rock islands were built by our ancestors. Our songs, stories and histories reflect this type of living and knowledge of our ocean-land environment and island life.

Different Ways of Being

In order to work effectively in Lau-Mbaelelea, I needed to develop ethical methods for fieldwork. I realized I needed to take a good look at the reasons why my local people had felt 'offended' 'looked down upon' and 'less than' through their interactions with researchers and outsiders. These reasons would help me to understand why there was so much resistance towards researchers and other outsiders at home, and give me some idea as to what we could do to change the experiences of Solomon Islanders in the future.

In a nutshell – I arrived at this summary diagram – Solomon Islanders and non-indigenous researchers/visitors have different ways of being.

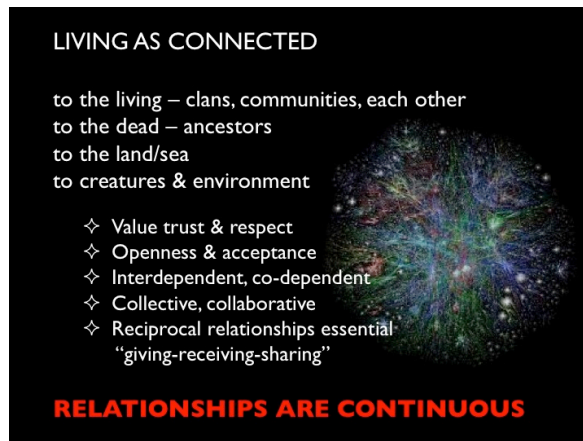


In Solomon Islanders we focus on living as connected people. In the Western world we tend to engage and live as individuals.

When meeting with another Solomon Islander in a Solomon Islands context → we begin to engage from a position of connection.

When we meet, we seek out how we are connected to each other.

If we know the person, we are acutely aware of our how we relate to each other – whether we are related by blood, marriage or geography. From this position we can express shared genealogies, shared histories and shared understandings.



This notion of being connected extends beyond the living, to include the “dead” – our family members that have passed on, our ancestors, and also includes spiritual connections to the land, the sea, creatures and our environment. All relationships are continuous, and last beyond the grave.

Reciprocation

Another important concept for us is the notion of reciprocation. Reciprocation ‘giving-receiving-sharing’ is not as simple as giving as part of good etiquette. We share to ensure our communities are able to survive. And more importantly we give-receive-share to keep our connections and relationships intact. We are communal - we collectively own our lands, our histories, our stories, our songs and our dances. We collectively own our tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Local Concerns

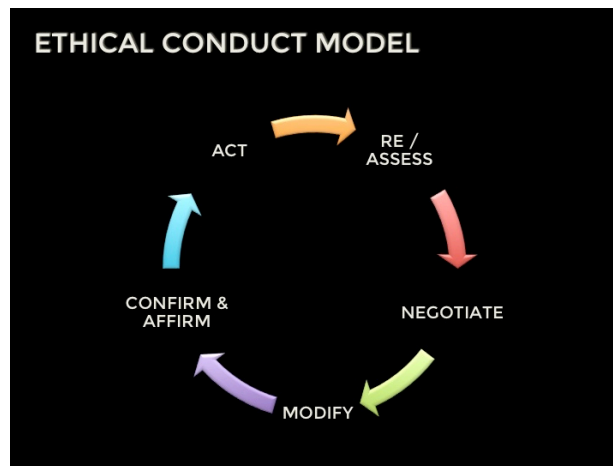
In my time home there are several points that elders and culture-bearers have consistently brought to my attention these prominent concerns. Again, these concerns are echoed in other communities around the Pacific:

- Cultures are deteriorating - Outsider ideas and foreign schooling systems/technology are affecting our identities. There is no local emphasis placed on developing awareness and being proactive about sustaining culture and history in schools or communities. Despite more Solomon Islanders becoming educated, there is still a lack of indigenous perspectives and views in documentation of our history, arts and cultures.
- Development projects are focused on infrastructure and medical/scientific/business improvement without recognising social problems directly related to the deterioration of knowledge/cultures, and the impact of previous development projects on culture and society.
- Some development projects are exploitation projects focused on foreign investment benefits to other countries where the negative impact to local communities vastly outweighs any benefits eg. Logging, mining– exploitation of natural resources such as sea drilling. It is important to note that environmental areas also have spiritual, cultural and historical significance to local peoples –land and oceans are not viewed solely as economic opportunities. Culturally we consider ourselves guardians, caretakers of the environment, land and oceans.
- Generally elders and culture bearers feel that there is a lack of collaboration, negotiation or consultation with local communities; while consultation may be conducted through central government, there is major dislocation between urban and rural areas, where clan land, laws and *kastoms* are still prominent and in effect.

We have two Solomon Islands. There is some cross-over, but for the most part – town and urban areas operate with a more Western outlook, while rural areas operate under local *kastoms* and laws. Simply put these areas are divided by those with infrastructure, using a combination of local and western economic systems, and those who lack infrastructure and are less dependent on western economic systems. While our people are interested in better healthcare, education and standards of living, for the health of our communities and our own survival we cannot sacrifice our environment or our values.

When we are not acknowledged, listened to, consulted or respected: Differences in ways of being can lead to offence and disharmony.

My Ethical Conduct Model



This diagram describes the ethical conduct process I have used in the past and continue to use today in my research study:

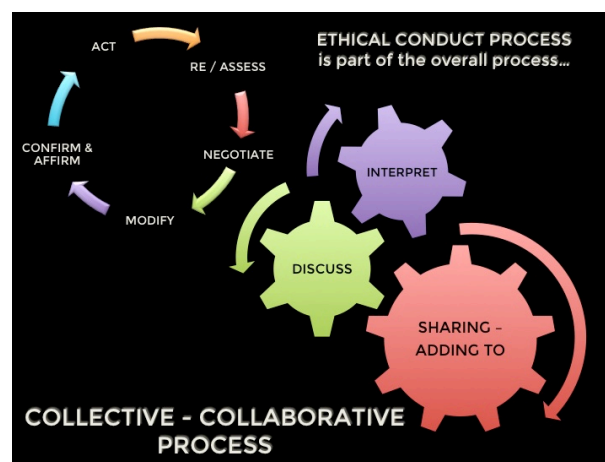
1. ASSESS / RE-ASSESS What are we doing? What are our roles? What is the agreement?
2. NEGOTIATE – What is ok? What is not ok? Boundaries
3. MODIFY Behaviour/action – how are we acting? What behaviours need to be changed?
4. CONFIRM/AFFIRM – boundaries.
5. ACTION – can now go ahead

This process is continuous – reevaluation is part of any action. In order to remain ethical, signed pieces of paper are worthless if rechecking, reevaluation and agreement have not been a continuous part of the action process.

Some questions we may ask ourselves in terms of research and development...

- Is my agenda transparent? Who does it benefit? Does the project consider social welfare and community values?
- Does my project respect the values and traditional knowledge/culture/spiritual concepts and local ways of thinking/being/doing?
- How do I know that it does?
- Am I collaborating with the people it will affect? Or am I/my organisation alone deciding?
- Why is my knowledge of the local peoples and their needs more informed than their own knowledge of themselves and their places? Is it possible to apply my knowledge in a more egalitarian manner?

My Collective-Collaborative Process



The Collective-Collaborative process method became the base-line method I used for my fieldwork interactions within Lau-Baelelea communities.

This process is an organic method based on indigenous Malaitan epistemologies and our collaborative processes where we share, discuss, interpret, add to and discuss issues further.

It is worth noting, that my ethical conduct and consideration model is an organic part of our collective sharing processes in Malaita and common across the Pacific.

Suggestions from Lau-Mbaelelea elders and community members

- Discuss potential projects with our people, in our communities.
- Understand that paper is viewed as a throw back to 'colonizing'. Our process is to discuss as a community, not as individuals. Individuals that sign pieces of paper without engaging in a community negotiation process are creating future conflict for the project co-ordinators and for the community involved.
- Engage our local people in your project – appropriately and thoughtfully. Teach for the future, not for the current moment. Work with communities – be ethically responsible and affect communities in positive ways.
- Think outside of monetary/economic benefits – we are caretakers of our land and our environment – to minimize further conflict, consider the effects of your project on our community lifestyles and our environment.

Why is sustainability of our cultures so important?

- For Malaitans, and many Solomon Island communities, culture encompasses all of our ways of being, thinking and doing.
- Our communities are supportive of one another, interdependent, and hence social welfare is built into the ways that we care for and look out for one another.
- Our community values and ways of thinking, being and doing are passed on through our music, our stories and our arts.

I heard an interesting statistic the other day that 95% of the Solomon Island population are unemployed. This intrigued me, my people work hard every day of the week (a little less on holy days) to sustain living off the land, the ocean, growing vegetables and fishing. Yes in North Malaita, we live rurally, but we are not unemployed, rather we are self-employed. We do not have internally wired electricity, though many of us use solar panels to light our homes at night and to charge our phones. In some villages water is piped from the rivers, in others, family members take turns to retrieve water in buckets and bottles – those in the bush walk to the water, those at sea use canoes. Sewerage systems are mostly non-existent. We have one road in, the same road is used to go out. If the rivers become flooded or bridges are damaged, we are quickly isolated. Our schools are run by dedicated teachers who are often paid very little, who do their best with the very limited resources they have. The closest clinic to my village attends a minimum of 10000 people a year. Most of the time we would be lucky to have panadol available, let alone much needed malaria medications or antibiotics. The ‘ambulance’ ride to the closest hospital is a 6-8 hour truck drive away. Many communities rely on the support of local church organisations. Life is challenging. But it is also enriching. Our cultural values, our histories, our stories, our music and the arts help us to connect to one another and to sustain life together, help us to support one another through our challenges, and ensure that we respect the resources we have that enable us to live.

It is important to understand that Solomon Island ways of being, thinking and doing and community values differ to those from Westernised countries.

Successful projects not only respect and honour these differences, they pro-actively engage with the people within our communities in collaborative and egalitarian ways.

Together we work to nurture, to protect.
Our environment, our land, reefs, nature.
Our histories, languages, songs, stories.
All are connected.
All are one.

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