Paper prepared for the Euroacademia International Conference
Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Zagreb, 18 – 20 April 2013

This paper is a draft
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The Solomon Islands 'ethnic' conflict – considering the Malaitan and Gwale identities

The relationships between individuals, and the categories used to differentiate individuals from one another are central to the rationale for the outbreak of violence. There is overall agreement within academic literature the label 'ethnic conflict' was too broad and totalizing to fully explain the parameters of the conflict, however there is no doubt identity politics had a significant role to play in both the outbreak of violence and the continued segregation affecting Honiara. The exploration of the concept ethnicity within a Melanesian context is given added complexity as it centralizes cultural or linguistic markers, assuming a euro –centric framework where the markers are understood. Frequently however, ethnicity is a contested and muddled term and essentially highly driven by social context. With the increase in movement away from ancestral homes in search of employment and opportunity identity markers have grown in importance within Solomon Islands, as such this paper reflects upon the importance of identity politics within Solomon Islands, isolating the Malaitan identity. The argument concentrates upon the relevance of the term ethnicity, as used in relation to the labels Gwale and Malaitan. The aim of this paper is to raise relevant issues pertaining to the use of ethnicity within a Melanesian context, providing a discussion of the historical inclinations towards locally based identity and the problems with wholesale use of 'ethnicity' to explain Malaitan identity in Solomon Islands. Overall, this paper seeks to fill a gap within literature to discuss whether the social facts of Malaitan identity align with recent attempts at a universal definition of ethnicity.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Conflict, Identity, Solomon Islands, Pacific.

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Historically, mankind has clung to binary thinking to explain oppositional forces within nature. This process of identification is to a certain extent mirrored in the formation, and definition of identities within situations of weakened or poor governance. The political usage of oppositional identities has a chequered history within contexts of tensions and war, the possibility of binary classification and associated dichotomies causing identity based conflict is witnessed within the internal conflict of Solomon Islands. The conflict was labelled within certain international media sources[1] as an ethnic based conflict between Malaitans and Gwale, this is an oversimplification of the conflict, however it lingers within discussions of the conflict.

The relationships between individuals, and the categories used to differentiate individuals from one another are central to the rationale for the outbreak of violence. There is overall agreement within academic literature the label 'ethnic conflict' was too broad and totalizing to fully explain the parameters of the conflict, however there is no doubt identity politics had a significant role to play in both the outbreak of violence and the continued segregation affecting Honiara. The exploration of the concept ethnicity within a Melanesian context is given added complexity as it centralizes cultural or linguistic markers, assuming a euro –centric framework where the markers are understood. Frequently however, ethnicity is a contested and muddled term and essentially highly driven by social context. With the increase in movement away from ancestral homes in search of employment and opportunity identity markers have grown in importance within Solomon Islands, as such this paper reflects upon the importance of identity politics within Solomon Islands, isolating the Malaitan identity. The argument concentrates upon the relevance of the term ethnicity, as used in relation to the labels Gwale and Malaitan. The aim of this paper is to raise relevant issues pertaining to the use of ethnicity within a Melanesian context, providing a discussion of the historical inclinations towards locally based identity and the problems with wholesale use of 'ethnicity' to explain Malaitan identity in Solomon Islands. Overall, this paper seeks to fill a gap within literature to discuss whether the social facts of Malaitan identity align with recent attempts at a universal definition of ethnicity.

The structure of this paper will be split into three sections; firstly it will briefly discuss the historical background of Solomon Islands, paying particular attention to the historical construction of identity and the arbitrary construction of regions within the colonial period. This will be followed by a consideration of the evolution of identity with an emphasis upon the progression to island - based identities in the era of globalization. Within this process the argument will discuss the problems of applying a universal definition of ethnicity to the case study of Malaitan identity within Solomon Islands. The final section will examine whether Malaitan identity could be categorized as an ethnicity, with a common homeland, common history and common descent, or whether the Malaitan identity exists beyond the parameters of a universal definition of ethnicity.

Historical background of Solomon Islands.

In a geographical sense Solomon Islands is located to the north of Australia, within the South Pacific, neighbored on the west by Bougainville and Papua New Guinea, and to the east by Vanuatu. In a cultural context, Solomon Islands exist within the region of Melanesia. It is difficult to generalize in regards to the cultural particulars of any region, Melanesia is no exception to this rule. It has been stated Melanesia is perhaps better explained by comparison and by expressing what it does not possess or exhibit (Rowley, 1965: 32 -33). Lawson suggests Melanesia is a hybrid term referencing it partly as a geographic sub- region of the Pacific, and partly a cultural referent with roots in French explorers linking people with black skin (2013: 2). Literally translated it means 'black islands', for this reason many contemporary scholars are reticent to use the term, however without an alternative its use tends to continue. The differences between the three identities Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian are noticeable, however as Campbell states around the edges there is some blurring (2010: 305 – 06). In

short, the extensive cultural diversity of the region makes classification according to cultural similarities complex.

The large scale use of the term Melanesian, in the contemporary period, has evolved into a positive term for those encapsulated by the regional boundaries, however this paper argues the use of convenient constructs to explain complex social structures has continued with the labeling of 'Malaitans' as an ethnicity. At times these labels are useful to describe a particular context and possibly for lack of a better explanatory term, scholars continue to use them within common vernacular. This paper does not attempt to investigate all of the issues relevant to Malaitan identity, rather it seeks to raise pertinent issues as to the use or misuse of the term ethnicity in relation to 'Malaitans'.

To explore this issue it is imperative to situate the discussion within the socio – economic circumstances of the period. The violence, nicknamed locally as 'the tensions', erupted within Solomon Islands in 1998 and continued until 2003 with the intervention of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). The conflict has variously been described as being caused by state failure (Fraenkel, 2004), the interaction of strong traditional cultural structures of authority and weaker modern institutions resulting in continued poor governance (Wainwright, 2003), failure of the government to address developmental needs of Guadalcanal province (Kabutaulaka, 2001) and by international media sources as widely related to ethnic struggles.[2]

The violence of the conflict was based upon the actions of two militia groups invoking as their rationale, the rights of Guadalcanal and Malaitan citizens. The Isatabu Freedom Movement (Gwale) and Malaitan Eagle Forces (Malaitan),centered predominantly in Honiara and its immediate surrounds. An issue that remains relatively unquestioned is whether the identities expressed and represented by the militias are ethnicities or just groups aligned along similar social and political circumstances. One indigenous Solomon Islander commentator, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka stated it was difficult for Malaitans to form a group united by a common identity as there were a wide array of languages and traditional rivalries (2001: 5). Definitions of ethnicity emphasize the centrality of common history, specifically citing common language as a unifying factor. Due to the primacy placed upon this criterion we will now move to a closer examination of the historical context of the identity known as 'Malaitan'.

Origins of a Malaitan identity.

The term 'Malaitan' has a relatively short history, linked to the gradual movement away from linguistic and village based identity linkages and towards an island – based association. The dominant narrative concerning the movement to island-based identity highlights the movement towards a cash-based economy, and a dramatic increase European presence following the beginning of the colonial administrative period. Arguably the most dramatic impacts felt by European presence within Solomon Islands were from the colonial administration, most importantly the carving up of the islands into administrative provinces.

Following the processes of decolonization within the Pacific, there has been extensive criticism of the role of colonial administrations in the divisions of territory within their protectorates. One such criticism is the arbitrary division of territory in the name of effective and easier administration (Michael, 2012;Pillon and Sodter, 1991). The arbitrary nature of these divisions have had many flow – on effects, cultural diversity of pre – colonial Solomon Islands effectively made it so drawing a straight line anywhere within the territory would bisect something of importance, so the division completed by the British administration inevitably divided and joined areas of cultural or linguistic variance. In the case of Malaita, the boundaries of for the province of Malaita administratively tied the islands of Ontong Java, Sikaiana, Maramasike (sometimes called South Malaita) and Malaita. This was despite traditional rivalries, trade connections and customary cultural differences. One such instance is the tying of Sikaiana to Malaita, upon consulting a map, the islands of Ontong Java and Sikaianaare so geographically distant from Malaita and Maramasike they are only occasionally shown upon images of the Malaitan province.[3] As this separation was not based upon local community ties, historic connections continue between areas not linked through administrative divisions, for instance Connell demonstrates trade links between Malaita and Bougainville (1977). These two areas exist as separate entities both in terms of administrative provinces and states, with Bougainville now a sovereign state. In contrast,many villages ofSolomon Islands saw minimal impact upon their daily lives from colonial with subsistence living retained for a considerable period and traditional custom retained until, in some cases long after (Keesing, 1982), the large scale importation of Christianity and European goods.

A watershed moment for identity formation within the district of Malaita occurred with the movement of the battles of World War II to the shores of Solomon Islands. Although the colony was heavily impacted by bloody battles, it was attitudes and mentalities of the American soldiers that would most affect the identity of indigenous nationals. During WWII many Solomon Islanders assisted the

Allies, following the war three of these men formed the best known Solomon Islands anti –colonial movement, The Maasina Movement (1945 – 50) or Marching Ruru. The purpose of this movement was to reinvigorate traditions, perceived to have diminished in the face of colonialism and the spread of Christianity (Laracy, 1983). The movement spread to other islands resulting in the Maasina Movement, however it ended in a violent colonial suppression when the movement appeared to assert too much independence from the colonial authorities. The collective memory of this movement continues to link Solomon Islanders, with a strong sense of brotherhood lingering to unite. For Malaita, this movement began here and there is a legacy of continued resonance with its main goal of the need for maintaining tradition and customs. Further, many agitators against RAMSI were of Malaitan heritage including the backers of Former PM Mannaseh Sogavare believed to have been involved in inciting the 2006 riots (Dodd, 2006) and longtime critic of RAMSI.

Beyond the anti-authority legacy of the Maasina Movement, the interior of Malaita and the coastal regions have been documented as having very different historical trajectories with the *bush* and *solowata* (saltwater) people adopting different tactics throughout history to the adoption of Christianity and the flow of modern trade goods (Fraenkel, 2004: 24). The customary leaders from the interior region of Malaita policed the movement of trade goods by labourers back into the villages, maintained bride-price payments long after coastal settlements had substantially altered or removed the practice. The continued retention of kastoms abandoned elsewhere by certain pockets such as the central mountain district of Kwaio, as documented by Keesing (1967), demonstrates a vastly different history within the province of Malaita. Whatever the reason, a legacy of tradition and importance of kastom has been maintained within these interior areas, even when the coastal areas of the island adopted Christianity and modernized. The historical differences, just within the island of Malaita would make the categorization and classification of a Malaitan ethnicity difficult as it lacks a unified common historical trajectory.

Within discussions of identity in Solomon Islands it is impossible to bypass the relevance of land, it is innately linked both to income and opportunity. Problematically, land rights are bound up within complex processes of customary inheritance and have posed problems both for local development and relations between citizens, especially within Honiara.Potentially the key argument for the animosity between Guadalcanal people and Malaitans, is thesignificant trend towards migration of Malaitans to Guadalcanal,and the associated land problems intermarriage between women (with matrilineal land inheritance rights) and Malaitan migrants. As land customarily progresses through the female line in Guadalcanal, women are born with inherit rights to a parcel of customarily owned land.

The rationale for migration by Malaitan citizens to Guadalcanal is all related to opportunity.The Malaitan administrative provinceprovides minimal access to arable land,as such limited opportunity to produce any substantial income. Bennett argues the island of Malaita was cursed with 'island based deprivation' (1987: xvii). Essentially, the island of Malaita has minimal natural resource deposits, hence has not got the same opportunity for development as other resource rich provinces, but has the highest population, creating an imbalance in available opportunity.Whereas, Guadalcanal has large reserves of arable land and natural resource deposits, and due to the centralized nature of Solomon Islands, the majority of public service employment. As such, to attain paid employment and maintain family commitments it has become common tomigrate to Guadalcanal.

The phenomenon of travelling for employment is not specific to Malaita, with large numbers of migrants from many other islands, nor Solomon Islands for that manner with migration based on employment growing more prevalent with increased levels of globalization (Castles and Miller, 2003). However, in terms of identity formation, migration has historical linkages for Malaitans with the practices of blackbirding.

'Blackbirding'was used by cane plantation owners within Australia and Fiji between 1842 and 1904. Blackbirding involved the forced removal of local indigenous populations from both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to work in conditions as legally close to indentured slavery as was permitted. The region of Malaita most impacted by blackbirding, with the majority of extracted labourers originating from Malaita, as such Malaitan families became tolerant of travelling to other areas to procure employment. Following the cessation of blackbirding, it became acceptable within families for male relatives to travel to other areas for employment,with many Malaitans selling their labour on Guadalcanal as part of the coconut plantations (Allen, 2009). The necessity of travel became unavoidable with the gradual movement from subsistence cropping to a cash- based economy in the 1970s and 1980s (Moore, 2007). This process of migration effectively relegates Malaitans to a marginalised class within Solomon Islands, viewed in opposition to those with land rights linked to their birth right or homeland. Allen argues Malaitans have been viewed in a type of class consciousness mentality, as 'have – not's (Allen, 2009: 4). This identity stands in direct opposition to many individuals linked to Guadalcanal lineages which, due to their inherited land rights, effectively control

the use of natural resources upon which Malaitans are reliant for employment. Hence, Gwales represent the 'haves'.

When viewed in relation to the overall political economy, the effective result of the increased male Malaitan population on Guadalcanal has been increased levels of intermarriage with Guadalcanal females. Intermarriage between Gwale 'locals' and Malaitan settlers had occurred, historically for some time, with trading linkages dating back to pre – missionary times and kinship ties credited as the facilitating link for the movement of missionaries into Malaita (O'Brien, 1995). As a result of the traditional processes of matrilineal land inheritance practiced on Guadalcanal, many new Malaitan settlers have received access to ancestral customarily owned land parcels. This inheritance has, over time, caused a deep - seated resentment between Guadalcanal and new Malaitan settlers. There are of course, many other issues which further complicate this process including the understanding within Honiara that many Malaitans have prospered in business and government at the expense of Gwales (potentially related to the complex web of kinship obligations), along with the length of time a settler must have been on Guadalcanal and part of kinship relationships to be considered 'local'.[4]So, what does this mean for the formation of identity?

Is Malaitan an *ethnicity?*
Within academic literature there is a multitude of methods, factors and approaches available for considerations of ethnicity from primordealism, constructivism, instrumentalism which are generally grouped together as the quantoid approach, or the interpretivist approach advocated by Hall, Wallerstein and Balibar. The problem with many of these approaches within non – theory centred contexts is they tend to relegate the actual case studies to secondary importance, this comes despite the ethnicity being socially constructed and highly context specific. Beyond this, the language utilised by proponents is often excessively complicated for those beyond the academic community to understand, and at times far removed from the average vocabulary. Within the field of political science, a central point is ensuring clarity as the audience often extends beyond academic circles to policy makers and lay persons.

With this anathema in mind, I have chosen to adopt the framework of Green, whom generates three main characteristics to differentiate between an ethnicity and an identity; common homeland, common descent and common history (2005: 10). Green attempts to move beyond dichotomization of ethnicity according to whether it fits the quantoid or intepretivist approaches, extending upon the ordinary language approach presented by Fearon and Laitin (2000)attempting to provide the characteristics essential for ethnicity. Green argued against Fearon and Laitin'scentrality of conceptual autonomy, stating many groups relied upon comparison with the identity of another to form identity boundaries. As such, conceptual autonomy was unlikely to correlate with common usage (2006: 9). This is important for this paper as it is through a comparative basis the Malaitan identity is formed, most specifically in relation to that of the Gwale label during and following the conflict. Hesubstitudes conceptual autonomywiththe principle of common homeland (2005: 24), this swap complicates an analysis of Malaitan identity as it questions the boundaries of a Malaitan common homeland.

The core problem for applying this theory to Malaitan identity is, 'Malaita' exists both as an administrative province and an island. If the identity extends to the entire province of Malaita its boundariesswell to include Sikaiana and Ontong Java. The island of Sikaiana becomes definitionally problematic in defining the identity. Sikaiana, is an island within the Malaita province, however its traditions are not Melanesian. Its traditions of chiefdom and inherited authority, align with Polynesian custom, as opposed to the Melanesian traditions of the larger island of Malaita. Sikaiana exists, as Campbell states at the boundaries of Melanesia (2010), both blurring the boundaries of Melanesia and further complicating the question of whether Malaitan could accurately be described as an ethnicity. If the boundaries extend to the entire province this distinguishing factor may invalidate the potential for a Malaitan ethnicity. The counter argument to the inclusion of these islands within the boundaries of the larger Malaitan identity is they rarely feature in discussions of Malaitans within the conflict, and are often omitted from maps of the region due to their remoteness from the remainder of the province. When local Honiara citizens were questioned in fieldwork in 2011 concerning the boundaries of the term 'Malaitan', there appeared to be quite some grey area as to where citizens existed if they were not from the actual island Malaita. Equally, there were problems in determining the length of time one must live in Honiara, after migrating from Malaita to be considered a Gwale.As is suggested from the strength of kinship ties, the question is determined on an individual basis by combining history and activity within relations of kinship.

Another complicating factor in determinations of common homeland is whether the theory itself refers to a nation – state or a particular region. Given many ethnic groupings,such as the Assyrians, find themselves in circumstances where they are effectively stateless, it would seem logical

to infer the theory would refer to a region over a nation- state. In defining the notion of a common homeland, Green cites the homeland must be that of the group by virtue of events or persons of earlier generations referring specifically to the need to distinguish between a place of origin innately linked to the identity and a homeland (2005: 24). This principle could be of central importance in the Malaitan case study as the centrality of collective memory tends to isolate specific local areas and regions within the larger island of Malaita. The micro-level significance of location intensifies the importance of homeland , with the place of origin centralized as the island of Malaita. Effectively, if the island itself is understood as the boundary, the potential for Malaitan to be accurately described as an ethnicity is possible.

Within the Malaitan case study, the second and third principles of common descent and common history appear fairly straightforward to establish. As previously stated, common history in modern times is concreted through collective memories of the Maasina Movement, experiences of the blackbirding practices, along with common traditions through the prominent Melanesian *big man* system. (Again, this depends upon the boundaries of the homeland being confined to the larger island of Malaita). Of course the practices of anti-modernisation that seemed to be practiced within the bush people of interior Malaita present an area where history is inconsistent, although recollection appears the same of the experience.

The principle of common descent could be established by the common lineages back to the larger island of Malaita, however to isolate the kinship system to blood relations is to oversimplify the relational links. Green does not thoroughly describe common descent, however Regmi suggests descent does not necessarily require a common racial origin, rather can be based upon common cultural beliefs, practices, religion and language (2003: 3).The significance of common descent is appropriate when discussing Melanesia as kinship ties extend beyond the biological level, and are arguably key to understanding the social relations. In fact, it is through the diversity of language, and the historical differences of the interior Malaitan *bush* people that may representthe key determinant to negative the commonality of Malaitan identity.The counterargument is custom and tradition have and will continue to evolve over time and ethnicity is socially contextual, so it is quite possible the situation presented within Honiara produced a unifying factor for Malaitan residents than is evident purely from considerations of historical linkages.

Without clear parameters for determining a common homeland and the ability to construe the boundaries of the identity grouping, the universal definition of ethnicity is flawed. Although the case study of Malaitan identity represents a limited cross section it demonstrates a potential area of concern for the application of Green's theory. The Malaitan identity needs to be considered in light of the social circumstances, along with the possibility it was not an ethnicity formed along island lines, but potentially a social construction formed by Gwales as a response to 'alien' peoples taking what, according to customary practice, did not belong to them. Thisscramble for oppotunity only became an issue following the increasing scarcity of opportunity following the downward slip represented by the end of logging in Guadalcanal. There appears to be more to support this theory of an 'us vs them', than a pan- Malaitan ethnicity formed despite the extreme variances in language and traditional hostilities.

Conclusions

Human society has long witnessed and experienced oppositional behaviours relating to common sources of tension, at times this has resulted in the formation of grudges and ancient hostilities. Within the last decade conflict studies, has risen to prominence as scholars increasingly seek answers to premeditate and fend off the eruptions of conflicts. An area receiving minimal attention within political science is the question of to whether all of the so – called 'ethnicities' should actually be referred to using this particular term. The term itself holds many connotations both positive and negative, revolving around social factors of interaction bonding a particular group of individuals. I believe it is essential to discuss and consider whether current frameworks for analysis within peace-building, in particular, are useful or applicable in various contexts. When discussing the period of conflict in Solomon Islands between 1998- 2003, there were many international journalists who labelled the conflict 'ethnically based', in the years following the conflict this approach has been shown to be both shallow and lacking inany in-depth explanation of the conflict.

With this approach in mind, this paper discussed the Malaitan identity both from a historical and contemporary perspective. This discussion questioned the relevance of the term ethnicity to discussions of Malaitan identity. Although it is difficult to thoroughly evaluate such a broad proposal within the constraints of this paper, the analysis generated a number of issues when Green's principles of ethnicity were applied to the Malaitan case study. The main issue was whether Malaitans truly had a common homeland, if homeland is understood to be a region, rather than a nation – state they could be said to have a common homeland. However, application of the concept encounters issues when one

attempts to set boundaries for the common homeland, as Green does not provide any recourse for establishing the boundaries of the term. In fact, Green is quite vague concerning the appropriate limits for his principle of common homeland in any real application to specific identity groups. Definition of the exterior of an ethnicity is essential, as without ascertaining the outer realm conflict could arise as to whether certain members are truly within the group or alternately forcibly excluded.

A secondary issue that developed in relation to the application of Green's revised ordinary language conceptualization of ethnicity, to the Malaitan case study was a common history. There are many elements of historical fact that Malaitans share including the *big men* system, collective memory of the practice of blackbirding, and the continued significance of traditional practices. Additionally, the historical differences between coastal and interior regions of Malaita provide alternate responses throughout history and altered trajectories. However, as has been pointed out, throughout history custom and tradition continue to evolve with context, and as ethnicity is context driven the contemporary unification of Malaitan settlers against the threats of Gwale violence make a compelling argument for a common ethnicity.These shared legacies are, of course, dependent upon Malaitan identity being confined to the larger island of Malaita and not the administrative province as dictated by the colonial administration. If indeed the Malaitan identity, as constructed within communities surrounding Honiara, is limited to the larger island of Malaita's residents there is a shared history. If the identity is simply those migrants that come from the province there are outlier islands such as Sikaiana and Ontong Java, practising customary practices outside of Melanesian tradition. The inclusion of these citizens could invalidate any claims of a Malaitan ethnicity.

The results of this discussion indicate further explanation and theoretical work is necessary to establish the exact limitations of the Malaitan identity, including the role of the citizens of Sikaiana and Ontong Java withinlarger Malaitan identity structures. Further, it is hoped this paper expands the interaction of communication studies and political studies within the larger field of post conflict reconstruction studies, as through considering both the cultural and political impact of structural changes the best benefits will be achieved for the entire population.

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Biography.

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Currently she is completing her PhD at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Her thesis considers the dual issues of mandate and intervention, as utilized within the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. Key themes explored within the thesis include state and peace-building, state theory, identity politics, development and security.
Whilst finishing her thesis she also teaches at the University of Wollongong within the School of History and Politics, areas where she has taught include International Studies, Political Theory, Globalisation and various history subjects.
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[1] See Honolulu Advertiser, 1999. "Civil War Threatens Solomon Islands", 20 June 1999; BBC, 2000. "Ethnic tension behind Solomons coup", 7th June 2000.
[2] See Honolulu Advertiser, 1999. "Civil War Threatens Solomon Islands", 20 June 1999; BBC, 2000. "Ethnic tension behind Solomons coup", 7th June 2000.
[3] This geographic proximity will be further discussed later in reference to homogeneity and potential points of cultural difference within the larger administrative province of Malaita.
[4] See Kabutaulaka, T. 2001. 'Beyond Ethnicity: The political economy of the Guadalcanal crisis in Solomon Islands', Working Paper 01/1, State Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Australian National University, Canberra.