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Malaita in Recent Centuries

The hill men move quickly, with a bouncing, springy walk, moving from the hips, while the shore men have a slower movement, a glide, the whole body being carried along with an easy grace. The shore men are slimmer in build, and their stature is a little taller than that of the hill men.

The women of both shore and hill are much shorter than the men, but the average woman of the hills is lighter built than her sister of the shore. I have seen Lau women who were so powerfully built that one could speak of them as being enormous.

—Rev. Walter Ivens, *The Island Builders of the Pacific* (1930)¹

Today, Malaita Island still has only a limited road system consisting of one major road in the north to Lau Lagoon, a second across the central mountains to Atori on the east coast, and a third down the west coast to Su‘u. There are also small feeder roads, but no substantial government roads in west Kwaio or ‘Are’are or on Small Malaita, leaving much of the south with no modern transport network except coastal shipping. There is, however, an extensive network of walking tracks that has been there as long as the people themselves, which, along with canoes, were always the communication network. This chapter attempts to depict old Malaita, the differences between Malaitans who lived inland and those who dwelled along the coast, the complex wealth manufacturing and trading systems that bound Malaitans to neighbouring islands, descent group territories, patterns of leadership and gender divisions. We need to understand what

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¹ Ivens 1930, 31.
Malaitans were like when they first came into contact with Europeans, as preparation for understanding changes that occurred between the 1870s and the 1930s.

Map 2: Malaitan topography, passages, bays and place names.
Source: Courtesy of Vincent Verheyen.
1. MALAITA IN RECENT CENTURIES

Geography

Map 1 (Introduction) shows the position of Solomon Islands within the Pacific Ocean. Map 2 shows the main topographic features on Malaita and the major settlements, mainly around the coast. There are also hundreds of villages scattered throughout the inland areas, although the last century has seen a substantial shift to settlements around the coast.

Malaita is an elongated continental island with a high central spine. The island covers 4,307 square kilometres spread over a land mass 190 kilometres long and 10 to 40 kilometres wide. Its rugged central mountains commonly rise to 1,000 metres. The highest point is Mt Tolobusu in Kwaio at 1,220 metres (4,003 feet). In the north, the central ridge rises to 975 metres (3,200 feet). The interior is dissected by razor-backed ridges and deep valleys that make travelling even short distances an ordeal for most outsiders. I have only been to the central mountains once, in the 1970s when I was in my 20s. I was part of a group of 12 going to sacred Fataleka ancestral shrines that had been closed for many decades. The oldest person in the party was 80 and he puffed along in 10th position, I was a slower 11th and there was always a 12th to make sure I did not fall over. The ridges we traversed were about a metre wide at the top and descended steeply for 300 metres on either side. Occasionally a fallen tree allowed a magnificent view, and rotting trees along the path had to be treaded upon with care since they disintegrated under your feet. Nevertheless, it was one of the most awesome experiences in my life.

The only substantial flat area on Malaita is around the `Aluta River basin on the central east coast, where since 1976 I have lived, cumulatively, for upwards of a year. Malaita is actually two islands separated by the narrow, winding Maramasike Passage, which is no wider than a large river at its western end and then spreads out to become a sheltered, mangrove-shrouded waterway meandering east. The central mountains combine volcanic ridges with limestone-rich karst lands, and are flanked by hilly plateaux, hills and narrow coastal terraces interspersed with valleys and swamps. Most of the coastline is made up of low terraces broken by river valleys, and on the east side high karst plateaus extend to the coast, with often precipitous descents. There are extensive shallow lagoons bound by outer reefs along the northeast (Lau), central west (Langalanga) and southwest (`Are`are) coasts, and Maramasike Passage forms another sheltered haven from harsh seas. The lagoons and the mangroves swarm
with fish. Some sections of the lagoons are lake-like in appearance, while others are long narrow fringing strips, replete with passages to the open sea and patches bare at low tide. There are also small fringing islands and artificial islands. Adjoining areas of the coast, once also part of lagoons, are often swampy, and mangroves abound.

Malaita is a high tropical island with little variation in temperature and humidity throughout the year; the island has a maritime climate with two seasons based on prevailing winds. Daytime temperatures range from 20°C to 33°C. From March to November the trade winds blow from the southeast, making canoe or sailing boat travel along exposed coasts difficult. Around December the winds reverse to come from the northwest until February. This is also the cyclone season, and several travel south through the Coral Sea each year, occasionally devastating islands. Cyclones cause floods and landslides and the force of the winds can cut 10-kilometre-wide tracks through an island, stripping off all vegetation, destroying all building materials and causing famine. Cyclonic damage must always have been one catalyst for migrations. The northwest winds also bring squalls that rake along the exposed east coast. Rainfall is always heavy, although lighter on the coast than in the central mountains; 3,750 mm a year is common on the western coastal plain, while the eastern coast can receive in excess of 7,500 mm annually. The northwest season is slightly drier than when the southeast winds blow. Thousands of rain-fed streams and rivers drain the interior mountains, some navigable by small craft and canoes for several kilometres inland from their tidal reaches. Malaita Province, created in 1978 out of the old Malaita District, also includes small Maana`oba and Basakana islands off the northeast of the main island, Da`i (Gower) Island halfway to Isabel Island, many islets in the lagoons and several contiguous small islands. Remote Ontong Java and Sikaiana atolls are also part of the province, for administrative convenience rather than any strong historic relationship with Malaita.\

Malaita is a beautiful tropical island, from its lagoons and reefs to its high peaks and the gushing, ice-cold rivers that pour down to the coast. The island has good soils and one can imagine the delight of the first settlers in having found such a gem. However, when they first arrived, the Solomon Archipelago looked very different from today.

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2 Great Britain Government 1974b, 3, 4–11.
First Settlement

Modern extended-family descent groups trace their ancestry back as far as 25 to 30 generations. Malaitans are therefore surprised when confronted with archaeological and genetic evidence that suggests they have lived on the island for at least 10,000 years and possibly longer. Telescoping of generations has occurred, and thousands of years have been condensed into mythical ancestral categories. The ‘real’ direct lines of ancestors probably only have reasonable veracity for about 10 generations, typical of exact human memory and oral transmission worldwide.

The scientific proof of this long occupation comes from genetic studies in the Kwaio area and archaeological evidence gathered north of Malaita in the 1980s, on Manus, New Britain and New Ireland in the Bismark Archipelago, and from Buka, where human occupation dates back 29,000 years. During the geological Pleistocene Era—from 1 million years until about 16,000 years ago—sea levels were 60 to 100 metres lower, which made island hopping from the northern islands all the way to the eastern tip of Makira much easier. Today’s Solomon Islands were once joined as one island from Buka down to Isabel and the Gela (Florida) Group. Guadalcanal was close but always separated by a deep sea trench (see Map 3). Malaita was also separate but accessible by raft or canoe. Little archaeological work has been done on the island and we can only conjecture that settlement may date back tens of thousands of years.

We know that about 5,000 to 4,000 years ago ‘Austronesians’ travelled in canoes from the north, originally out of southern China and Taiwan and down through the Southeast Asian Archipelago. They found the earlier Papuan (or non-Austronesian) language speakers already established in the archipelagos off eastern New Guinea. We do not know if these earlier inhabitants had ventured to Malaita, but given the time-depth they could have, since their descendants live nearby on Savo and the Russell Islands. Today’s Malaitan languages are all part of the Malayo-Polynesian Southeast Solomonic (Austronesian) group. The Austronesians carried with them domesticated pigs, dogs and chickens, as well as a range of nut trees and other domesticated plants. Their distinctive dentate-stamped pottery tradition known as ‘Lapita’ may have evolved further when they

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4 Friedlaender 1987; Froehlich 1987.
5 Spriggs 1997, 23–42. Skylark Passage (now Iron Bottom Sound) is deep and has always separated Gela from Guadalcanal.
‘loitered’ for 1,000 years in the Bismarck Archipelago. Although Lapita pottery has been found on Buka and in the New Georgia Group in the north, and south of Malaita in the Santa Cruz and Reef islands, and pottery without the Lapita dentate stamp (probably post-Lapita) has been found on Bellona, New Georgia and Isabel islands, there is no evidence that pottery was ever manufactured on Malaita.6 These early settlers were agriculturalists who also relied on marine resources and the fauna, plus wild plant foods and cultivation, and a set of strategies that enabled them to utilise and occupy the heavily forested island.7 Today, in times of crisis when gardens fail, Malaitans still rely on these wild plants, particularly wild taro and yams, and indigenous fauna still supplement domesticated animals and birds.8

Map 3: Called Greater Bukida by some archaeologists, one long island once stretched from Buka to Isabel, with Guadalcanal almost joined to it, but never Malaita, which was within easy reach but required a sea crossing.

Source: Based on a map by Peter Sheppard, University of Auckland, redrawn by Vincent Verheyen.

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8 Mayr 1931.
These early migrants arrived in small numbers and adapted to their new environment. Probably around 1,000 years ago, Austronesian societies became less involved in long-distance migrations and were more sedentary, leading to development of smaller dialect chains and fixed settlements in various localities. Political ideology became more localised and territory-based and inland economic resources were incorporated into indigenous economies as horticulture became more important to support a growing population. Malaria probably always acted as a limiter on population expansion. The *Plasmodium vivax* parasite only requires around 100 humans to maintain the disease and would have become a population limiter soon after the migrants arrived. The disease itself, and related birth spacing—suggested to have been around four to five years, necessary for the physical and psychological wellbeing of mothers—slowed population increases. If we assume an initial few canoe loads of humans, and perhaps some later similar migrations both from the north and south, the population buildup on Malaita would have been very slow. Initially, Malaitans would have lived in small colonies around the coast, each increasingly localised. Malaria is not transmitted at higher elevations, however, and so was not as important a population limiter as on some other islands because eventually the great majority of Malaitans lived in high inland areas.

Once we discount the longer-term accuracy of Malaitan genealogies, there is little to guide us between the first arrivals and recent centuries. The work of geographer Patrick Nun provides a few Pacific-wide clues. There was a climatic ‘medieval’ warm period from AD 700 to 1250, a time of plenty when long-distance voyaging still flourished. This was followed by rapid cooling and increased precipitation *circa* AD 1250 to 1350, which would have caused a food crisis for coastal inhabitants and societal tensions. There was an even cooler period from AD 1350 to 1800 when there was higher climate variability and a food crisis, further exacerbating tensions and disruptions. Finally, post-AD 1800 a warmer period with reduced climate variability allowed societies to recover, although people’s interactions with foreigners have obscured much of

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9 I have been guided by Takuya Nagaoka’s conclusions from Nusa Roviana in the New Georgia Group (2011, 296).
this recent change. If we follow the scenario sketched here, in recent centuries Malaita was home to prosperous societies capable of supporting substantial populations, most of them inland.\textsuperscript{11}

The first, fleeting contact with Europeans began in the sixteenth century, although there was no substantial interaction until the nineteenth century. All of the early European accounts describe people living in ways not dissimilar to today, with a clear division between people who lived a maritime existence and a larger group living in the mountainous interior.

Malaitan Languages and Territories

For readers to fully understand what follows, I must introduce contemporary Malaitan languages and dialects, as depicted in Map 4, and their political and social dimensions. When talking to Malaitans, conversations inevitably contextualise individuals within their language affiliations or descent group territories. Most Malaitans know their ‘generations’, land rights and any relationships with Malaitans from other areas of the island, but readers should not assume that the ‘shape’ of modern language areas dates back unchanged to some mythical first settlement thousands of years ago. Language areas developed through initial isolation of settlements in various parts of the island and have been continuously reshaped in more recent times. The colonial government used language zones as they understood them as administrative divisions and at times falsely separated groups, sometimes using a river as a marker of the divide. This is the origin of the east coast Fataleka–Kwara’ ae border, which follows the ‘Aluta River at Fokanakafo Bay. The reality is more complex.

There are Malaitan words that describe the two main residential groups: \textit{to’ai tolo}, inland people, and \textit{to’ai asi}, peoples of the coast and lagoons, particularly the artificial islands in the lagoons. Because the spelling of these words differs throughout the island, I have used the equivalent English words instead.

Map 4: Malaita languages and dialects. Guala’ala’a is the language of Kwai and Ngongosila, and is also used for trade along the east coast.

Source: Courtesy of Vincent Verheyen.
Again, the vast majority of Malaitans were inland people, although today many of the inland descent groups, or some members, have left their mountain domains to live in coastal villages, making the divisions less clear than in the past. Anglican missionary Walter Ivens, who lived on or was a constant visitor to Small Malaita between 1895 and 1909, noted that there were virtually no villages on the coast, other than those on artificial islands in the lagoons and transitory populations on the few small offshore islands such as ‘Aioo, Anuta Baita and la’ura on the east coast.\(^{12}\) The coastal people were the first to come into contact with outsiders and they subsequently became the intermediaries in dealings between inland peoples and foreigners. Despite the divisions in places of residence, coastal people were and are closely related to their inland neighbours by kinship, language and exchange systems and regular trade, although, because of their coastal position, their ancestors include more castaways and migrant groups. The people who lived on the artificial islands in the lagoons moved offshore for greater security and access to fishing and to escape malaria-carrying mosquitoes.\(^{13}\) Some had migrated around the coast or from other islands to escape feuds, sorcery, disease or famine. Landless, they built their own islands in the lagoons. Others are descendants of trading partners from neighbouring islands such as Isabel, Makira, Guadalcanal and Gela.

Reports from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate little trust and limited interaction between the inland and coastal people. The latter saw themselves as more sophisticated than their inland ‘country cousins’, who in turn believed that they were morally superior to the more ‘wayward’ coastal people. The crowded artificial islands were a unique environment laboriously constructed in the lagoons, where their inhabitants survived by trading resources of the ocean and the lagoons for the agricultural and other products of the inland people.\(^{14}\) The time-depth of the lagoon settlements is quite short, probably around 600 years, and, based on genealogies, the Lau precede the peoples of Langalanga and ‘Are’are lagoons.\(^{15}\) The open sea abounds with fish, particularly bonito, tuna and mackerel. The lagoons and reefs provide smaller fish, crayfish, crabs, shellfish and \textit{bèche-de-mer}. Fruits from the \textit{Bruguiera} mangrove are processed to make a delectable food called \textit{koa}, and molluscs and bivalves

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12  Ivens 1930, 21.
13  Parsonson 1966; 1968; Chowning 1968.
are standard fare. Porpoises are still caught seasonally, both for food and for their teeth, which are a recognised currency throughout the island. Hawksbill turtles were once plentiful, as were estuarine and saltwater crocodiles.

Canoes of all sizes—from tiny dugouts for children to ocean-going war canoes 20 metres long and capable of holding over 30 men—were the common vehicles of the coastal people, just as in other areas of Solomon Islands. The large canoes were made from planks shaped with adzes and smoothed with hard stones, and laced on the edge with dry creeper fibre, all squeezed into shape by an external frame, the pressure balanced by the internal ribs made from curved mangrove roots and benches wedged across at intervals. The lacing was gradually tightened and the joints caulked with cement made from putty nut flesh that dries hard. The smaller canoes are dugouts, but these can also be as long as 9 metres.16

Figure 1.1: Malaitan plank-built ocean-going canoe from Langalanga Lagoon.
Source: Ivens 1930, 224.

16 Hopkins 1904, 7.
Most people who did not live in the lagoons did not use canoes regularly, although some ‘Are’ are people did, as their lands bordered lagoons on the west coast and were cut through by Maramasike Passage. To’aba’ita people used outrigger and dugout canoes to traverse the sheltered Suu’aba Bay in the far north.\footnote{Ivens 1930, 29; Coombe 1911, 289; Woodford 1909.} The inland people met regularly but guardedly with the coastal people on market days at specified places along the shore. On borders between language groups there was always a blurring of differences, and intermarriage created a maze of kinship links. For instance, the Rakwane people from the mountains of east Fataleka are closely related by marriage to the coastal people at ‘Ataa (and therefore the rest of Lau) and people at Walade on Small Malaita, and also the Baegu, who they claim are partly an out-movement from Fataleka descent groups. The Rakwane and other Fataleka people also have Kwaio and Kwara’ae connections. Similar links occurred all over Malaita.\footnote{Anthropologist Remo Guidieri (1972; 1975a; 1975b; 1976; 1980) worked in Fataleka in the 1970s.}
In 1904, there were around 20 artificial islands in lagoons along the northeast coast, spread between ‘Ataa at the south of Lau Lagoon and Suu’aba Bay in To’aba’ita. Some were as big as half an acre (0.2 hectare). The average artificial island had a population of around 200. When the number of inhabitants became too great then new houses were built on stilts off the edge. If overcrowding continued, a new island was constructed. Shrines for ancestral worship were located on the artificial islands and worship continued in much the same way it did on land.

Coastal people traded their produce with the inland people at beach markets every three or four days, and although there was intermarriage, for the most part they kept themselves separate. The inland people lived in the central mountains or if nearer the shore then high up on coastal mountain slopes. They possessed large territories containing central shrines for ancestral worship and were related each to the other by descent from founding ancestors. Most mountain people could not swim and few felt at home in water environments. Their settlements were always small—four or five houses, usually on ridges. Neighbouring hamlets were really chains of extended families. The hamlet pattern was probably adopted to safeguard against attacks while remaining in easy communication distance, but the small settlements also meant that endemic diseases, such as respiratory problems including tuberculosis, and also leprosy (Hansen’s disease), could be better isolated. This same residential pattern may have mitigated the impact of new diseases carried back by participants in the overseas labour trade. There was always movement: new families moved to new areas; and when there were outbreaks of diseases, infected hamlets were deserted. Great natural disasters such as cyclones, floods and earthquakes could also cause migrations.

As horticulturalists, Solomon Islanders used shifting cultivation methods to farm swamp and dry taro, varieties of yams (mainly one known as pana), recently introduced sweet potatoes or kumara (Ipomoea batatas), bananas, sugarcane and many varieties of green vegetables, particularly Hibiscus manihot. The men cleared patches of primary or secondary forest, and women then planted root crops on the land over one to three years, before

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19 Colocasia esculenta is the main variety; it cannot be stored and must be eaten within three days of picking. It is usually cooked in, or roasted on, hot stones. Cyrtosperma chamissonis (swamp taro) is used mainly in puddings, or as raw grated slices, leaf-wrapped and baked in a stone oven. There are also other varieties: Alocasia macrorrhiza and A. Amorphophallus, which are used in times of crop failure. Yams (Dioscorea alata) and pana (D. esculenta) are cultivated in recently forested loam, and are cooked in similar style to taro. They store well for up to five months. Tedder 1973.
gardens sites were left to regenerate for up to 25 years. The cycle could be shorter—10 to 20 years, dependent on soil fertility and population pressures—and tree crops remained in use over decades. Taro and yam cultivation involved rituals at planting, weeding and harvest times. Taro, in particular, requires specific soil types and frequently moved garden plots, which necessitates control over large areas and suits smaller, less permanent settlements. The labour input was efficient but this method of cultivation needed large land areas—around 3.75 hectares for each person over an average lifetime.20

![Figure 1.3: Maasupa Village, Maro’umasike (Takataka or Deep Bay), east 'Are'are, 1970s.](image)


Villagers also raised pigs for ceremonies and exchange, although overall pork was never a large part of diets. Pigs needed large areas of land, and either the gardens had to be fenced to keep them out or enclosures were built to protect crops and house the animals. The lagoon people kept pigs penned up on their artificial islands. The inland people were primarily vegetarians, consuming root crops, green vegetables and nuts in large amounts to provide sufficient bulk and obtain enough protein, keeping their pigs for consumption at ceremonies and feasts.21

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20 Bennett 1987, 10.
21 Insects are an important source of protein for inland children.
Wild foods, particularly yams, taro and small animals such as possums, bats, flying foxes, arboreal rats, feral pigs, birds (particularly _Ducula_ pigeons and hornbills) and insects supplemented swidden horticulture. People lived off these for short periods if there was a famine due to a cyclone or some other traumatic event. Travellers needed no more than a fire-stick and weapons at their side, relying on wild food for sustenance and building rough shelters in the bush. Through trade, both inland and coastal peoples shared the exploitation of useful cultivated trees, including coconuts, and two species of protein-rich _ngali_ (Canarium) nuts, a favourite seasonal staple, mixed with taro to make puddings. The nuts from betel palms provided a stimulant and recreational drug, and the pith of sago palms was used as food for pigs and as food for humans in emergencies, while the leaves were used as thatch for houses. Breadfruit was also cultivated.

The size of Malaita’s population before contact with the outside world is unknown, although there is enough evidence to say that the island was heavily populated. However, the Malaitan habit of moving residence every few years, and sometimes returning to old village sites, may have skewed the statistics. Foreigner observers equated abandoned sites as signs of population decline, although they only had easy access to the coast and seldom ventured inland. Their estimates are all from long after first contact with the outside world, which we know on other islands introduced new diseases that reduced population levels. The first full government census in 1931 calculated a total of 41,052 Malaitans, as well as another 5,000 either working or domiciled in other parts of the protectorate. There is reason to believe that the census was not an accurate count of the inhabitants of the central mountains. A 5,000 to 10,000 discrepancy would be believable, taking the real population to around 50,000. Descriptions left by the Mendaña expedition of 1568 suggest that Guadalcanal was more heavily populated than Malaita, although the Spanish records are contradictory, and they never went inland. The presence of irrigated taro pond-fields and ‘plantation scale’ _Canarium_ growing/processing in the Visale area on Guadalcanal suggests a substantial population existed about 1,200 to 1,000 years before the present, which presumably traded with surrounding islands. The British

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22 *Canarium indicum* and the ‘wild’ _C. salomonense_.
23 Boutilier 1979, 45.
24 McArthur 1961, 9; SINA, BSIP 14/62, DO Malaita to SG, 6 June 1931.
records of the last 100 years show that Guadalcanal carried less than half the population of its eastern neighbour, Malaita. It is unclear exactly what caused the changes that led to population decline on Guadalcanal while Malaita maintained or perhaps increased its population. Daniel de Coppet and Matthew Spriggs both suggest that depopulation may have begun with diseases introduced by the Spanish, although it is difficult to be sure that oral testimony gathered in the twentieth century is accurate that far back.

Perhaps it is because Malaita was spared most of the predatory raids by head-hunters from the north during the second half of the nineteenth century, and may also have escaped disease epidemics that depopulated islands in closer contact with whalers and traders in the first half of the century. It may also be that men returning from work as indentured labourers in the 1870s did introduce new disease and that a level of immunity had developed by the 1890s, allowing the population to increase again. In more recent times, Malaita and Bougainville have been the most populous of the Solomon Islands. Bougainville is larger than Malaita; although proportional to its geographic size, Malaita seems always to have been more heavily populated. Recent estimates of the precontact population of Vanuatu suggest that its islands (now with a population half that of the Solomons) might once have been home to 700,000. The precontact population of Solomon Islands, recorded as 94,066 on 1931, may once have been in excess of 200,000 and possibly twice or even three times that level. A precontact number of 500,000, close to the present-day population level of 625,000, is entirely plausible and may still be far too low an estimate. Malaita could easily have had a precontact population in excess of 100,000. Demographic issues are addressed throughout this book with conclusions presented in Chapter 10.

26 Amherst and Thomson 1967 [1901] (Guadalcanal) 40, 90, 175–76, 177, 292, 309 (Malaita) 25, 45, 90, 177, 345.
29 Matthew Spriggs conjectures that Vanuatu could once have carried a larger population than Solomon Islands, given its constantly renewing volcanic soils, lower rainfall and lower levels of malaria, plus evidence of major centres of taro irrigation on south Aneityum, northwest Santo and central and south Pentecost and Maewo. The precontact population of Solomon Islands was probably in excess of 200,000 and possibly twice or even three times that level. A figure of 600,000, close to the present-day population level, is entirely plausible. SINA, BSIP 14/40, RM TWE-P to RC CMW, 30 Mar 1911; Huffman 2012; conversation with Matthew Spriggs, The Australian National University, Nov 2012.
Wealth and Trade

Malaita was known throughout the archipelago for its manufacture of wealth items. Before the introduction of European manufactured goods, Malaitan trade was central to the archipelago’s economy. Solomon Islanders use many traditional forms of wealth, made from shells, porpoise and dog teeth, feathers and stone, used for compensation and payments in bride exchanges and mortuary feasts. None of these wealth systems equate exactly with European currency. Each island had its own ‘valuables’, with rarer forms regarded as sacred and kept only by chiefs and priests.30 Government officers learnt to calculate the modern value of tradition wealth and sometimes these items were used to pay fines or taxes, or as good behaviour bonds.

Interisland and intraisland exchange and trade networks allowed raw materials and manufactured goods and foods to circulate. Just as Malaitan cosmology connected the ‘eight isles’ (see below), trade was also networked with Ulawa, Uki (also Uki ni masi), Three Sisters and Makira in the east, and Guadalcanal, Gela, Savo, Russell (also known as Cape Marsh) and Isabel islands in the west and north. Aside from these interisland links, the inland and coastal people traded regularly with each other at the weekly markets and on other occasions. There was a regular trade in adze blades and shells for manufactured wealth items, ornaments and shell-cutting tools, foods such as taro and Canarium nuts, and exchanges of women through marriage.31

Malaita had several types of currency valuables: strings of porpoise teeth and shell valuables, largely produced and controlled by the coastal people, and flying-fox and dogs’ teeth, which are available all over the island. Shell and other body ornaments and special sacred weapons extended the varieties of Malaitan wealth items. Shell and teeth wealth is used for marriage exchanges or other ceremonial occasions and in compensation

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30  Burt and Bolton 2014.
31  Five areas of the Solomon Islands are well known for the manufacture of shell valuables: several parts of Malaita; at Houniho on Makira; at Talise on Guadalcanal’s south coast; on Choiseul; and the Roviana and Marovo lagoons on New Georgia, where arm rings are manufactured from fossilised clam shells. Ross 1970; Green 1976, 13; Bennett 1987, 14; Moore 2013c entry for ‘Material Culture: Forms of Wealth’.
payments, and can be used as apparel to indicate wealth and dignity.\textsuperscript{32} Shell valuables were circulated, used in transactions to create, perpetuate and repair social relationships. Marriages necessitated large exchanges of valuables and food, as did mortuary payments, rewards for services, and compensations for wrongs. As in most Near Oceanic societies, circulation was a more important means for social advancement than was accumulation.

The main form of shell valuables, \textit{bata}, was (and still is) laboriously manufactured by clans in Langalanga Lagoon on the west coast. \textit{Bata} was traded through intermediaries over long distances north as far as Bougainville, New Britain and Manus in Papua New Guinea, and south to the Banks Group in Vanuatu.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Bata} consists of polished sections of red, white and black bivalve mollusc shells interspersed with small beads made from seeds (\textit{fulu} and \textit{kekete}) strung onto pandanus fibre strings of various lengths. The usual form is ten-strings wide and a fathom (1.82 metres or 6 feet) long, separated by wooden or turtle-shell bars and decorated with colourful tassels of \textit{kekete} seeds and, now, pieces of red cloth. In the Langalanga language it is called \textit{akwala`afi}, but this wealth item is more usually known as \textit{tafuli`ae} (the Kwara` ae word).\textsuperscript{34} Smaller pieces were used for lesser transactions and all \textit{bata} could carry magical properties. The \textit{fulu} and \textit{kekete} seeds came from riverine plants, and were usually obtained from the nearby mainland. The most essential and high-value shells, the red \textit{romu}, were found on the reef face about 10 fathoms down. They came mainly from Langalanga, around Tarapaina in Maramasike Passage, Suu`aba Bay and Maana`oba Island in To`aba`ita, Lau Lagoon and Boli Passage, Gela. Another shell, the white \textit{kakadu}, also came from reefs but not from the same depth and was usually purchased from Tarapaina or Boli. The third essential shell, \textit{kurila}, is black, much larger (8 millimetres in diameter) and collected in Langalanga Lagoon or from north Malaita.

Based on observations back to those of Woodford in the early 1900s, Matthew Cooper described seven forms of Langalanga shell valuables. They vary through colour, the size of the shell beads, the level of finish and the number of strings. Although no longer used for day-to-day purchases, since modern drills were introduced \textit{bata} have become almost

\textsuperscript{32} Guo 2004; 2006.
\textsuperscript{33} Bennett 1987, 267 notes that in the 1930s Langalanga shell wealth was being traded to the Shortlands and Bougainville. See also Connell 1977.
\textsuperscript{34} My thanks to Pei-yi Guo for her advice on these terms, Taiwan, January 2015.
ubiquitous in Solomon Islands, essential for bridewealth payments and other ceremonies. Today, short strings are also sold as fashionable necklaces throughout the Western Pacific. The processing—cutting, drilling and polishing—is complex, involved the whole community and was incorporated into religious practices. Elaborate rituals accompanied the diving for shells (for instance, to insure against shark attack), and collection was done in limited seasons to conserve supply. Most of the process was women’s work, although males did the diving, the long-distance trading and the final polishing. Before modern tools, one tafuli`ae is estimated to have taken one woman one month to produce, providing some idea of its relative value. Polygamous households made the division of labour possible, although it is unlikely that women were ever totally dedicated to making bata, since they shared household duties.35

Figure 1.4: Langalanga women using hand drills to make holes in the process of making akwala`afi shell wealth in 1933.
Source: Temple Crocker Expedition.

35 Guo 2014; Kwa’ioloa 2014; Deck 1934; Woodford 1908; Bartle 1952; Cooper 1971; Connell 1977.
Figure 1.5: Langalanga women grinding shells to make *akwala’afi* during a 1998 demonstration of shell wealth manufacture for tourists on Gwaelaga Island.

Figure 1.6: Lobotalau rolls up his *bata* after a mortuary feast for the death of Na’oni’au at ‘Ai’eda in east Kwaio in August 1996.
Source: Photograph by David Akin.
The Kwaio and ‘Are’are manufacture other predominantly white forms of *bata* (which the Kwaio call *kofu*), some of which are longer than *tafuli’ae*. The Lau Lagoon people also have their own, similar forms of shell wealth. The To’aba’ita, Baelele, Baegu, Fataleka and Kwara’ae seem to have relied on trading with their neighbours for their supplies. However, all Malaitan-language groups used short *bata* strings for compensation, for which they often purchased the raw materials from Langalanga. Malaitan shell valuables reached neighbouring Guadalcanal via the ‘Are’are colony at Marau Sound, although Guadalcanal also had its own form of shell wealth.

Valuable items often mix together shell beads and teeth. Porpoises were hunted mainly from around Fauaabu on the northwest coast, Bita’ama and Basakana in the north, Uru in east Kwaio and at Walade on Small Malaita, and there were also porpoise drives in other areas such as Langalanga and Lau Lagoons. People on neighbouring Makira also hunted porpoise for meat and used their teeth for valuables and decoration. There are eight extant species of porpoises, which are actually small, toothed whales and closely related to oceanic dolphins. The teeth were obtained in annual drives that collectively killed thousands of the animals. One or two hundred and sometimes up to 600 porpoises could be killed in one drive, with around 150 usable teeth collected from each animal. The old hunting method continues to be used in some places: stones are hit together underwater to drive the animals to shore (upsetting their soundwave reception), where they bury their heads in the sand or mud, easy targets for people waiting to club them to death. Their teeth are extracted and strung together as currency and ornamentation. In the past, ancestral and later Christian religious rituals accompanied the drives.

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37 Gege 2014.
38 *BSIP News Sheet*, 15 June 1971; Cromar 1935, 204.
Porpoise, flying-fox, possum and dog teeth also were worn as necklaces and collars and were used as currencies. Indigenous dogs were supplemented from the nineteenth century onward with imported dogs. Human teeth were worn in a similar fashion, attached as a fringe to red shell bead bandoleer-style chest ornaments, called `umaaru in Kwaio, or as necklaces, called kolee`uma in Kwaio. However, these ornaments generally had ancestral heirloom significance and so were not circulated in exchange.

On Malaita, exchanges around the coast and beyond were accomplished by the lagoon and artificial island-dwellers, providing them with some control over their inland neighbours, although some of the wealth items were available all over the island. Dog teeth were also used as currency in the Eastern Solomons and on Guadalcanal. In 1896, Marau Sound trader Oscar Svensen estimated that one-quarter of a million dog teeth had passed through his hands since he began trading in the Eastern Solomons and on Guadalcanal in 1890. In the nineteenth century, a trade developed in dogs from Australia and hundreds were imported for their teeth.40

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40 Bathgate 1993, 56; Bennett 1981a; Laracy 2013, 116.
Figure 1.8: Gwali Asi of Sulufou artificial island was an important bigman in Lau Lagoon early in the twentieth century.

Wearing porpoise teeth as befits his status, he suffered from blindness. Missionary Walter Ivens said that this was a common condition caused from glare on the water, though Gwali Asi may also have had cataracts.

Source: Ivens 1930, frontispiece.
As will be discussed in the next chapter, the importance of this wealth item trade was disturbed when the Western Solomons and Makira achieved earlier access to European manufactured items (usually called ‘trade goods’) than did Malaita. The New Georgia and Isabel head-hunters further disrupted trading patterns to the north of Malaita.

Territory and Leadership

Control of wealth was in the hands of leading men in descent groups or larger clusters of descent groups, each with its land and sometimes also sea territories. Describing Malaitan societal and territorial divisions requires I slip between past and present tense. Some characteristics remain the same—in inland areas, particularly in Kwaio, there has been less change—while other areas have now altered considerably. Some of the Kwaio and other, smaller remnants in ‘Are’are, Kwara‘ae, Fataleka and Baegu have never adopted Christianity and prefer to maintain worship of their ancestors. For them, these descriptions require the present tense, but for most Malaitans the description is of the past, although territorial allegiances have survived and old gender divisions have been partly enforced.

Figure 1.9: A large hamlet in central Kwaio, inland from Sinalagu, in `Oloburi Harbour’s watershed. Two men’s houses sit at the upper reaches.

Source: Photograph by David Akin, 1996.
Land on Malaita remains divided into nested, named territories that vary in size, with each territory related to surrounding territories by an ordered relationship through descent from founding ancestors. Up until the late nineteenth century, when outside influences began to alter residential patterns, Malaitans lived in kin-based groups, each related to the other by descent from primary ancestors in an established hierarchy. Each territory contains sacred ancestral shrines where sacrifice of pigs took place. In Fataleka, the shrines were ranked depending on the precedence and importance of the ancestors buried there, although this is not the case in Kwaio (though Kwaio do have primary shrines and secondary, satellite shrines). In prayers and sacrificial ceremonies, priests must recite long lists of ancestors, whereas in today’s Christian communities these lists are often written down to use as proof of heritage and claims in land courts. Even for Christian Malaitans, ancestors remain central to life. The ancestors differ in power and importance; some are from the mythical past, while others are more recent, from a century or more ago. The spirits of dead parents, grandparents and even siblings may receive sacrificial pigs. In major sacrifices, a Kwaio priest gives pigs not just to the shrine’s apical ancestor (or ancestress), but also to the entire line of priestly spirits who sacrificed there before him, through which the group’s connection to the founding ancestor has been maintained. Access to power is through this ancestral hierarchy. In a non-Christian community, everyone understands the power of the spirit world, but only specialist priests have the right to perform rituals to intercede directly with the more important *akalo* (ancestral spirits) and possess the secret knowledge, such as spells, to do so properly. Many people in a given community, including some women, have a deep understanding of their ancestors, and sometimes of the rituals involved. The rituals are performed by groups of men led by the priests.

One of the primary assets of any descent group is their land, which for coastal and lagoon-dwellers extends to their reefs and marine resources. Anthropologist Daniel de Coppet wrote of the views on land of Aliki Nono’oohimae Eerehau, the great twentieth-century ‘Are’are leader. Nono’oohimae explained that it was not that the people owned the land, but rather that the land owned the people:
Land is not only part of the genealogical origin of each living person, land is also intimately related to each succeeding generation, to each male or female descendant, including those living today… Land is clearly not simply soil, but rather an entity fused with the ancestors, under whose joint authority the living are placed.\textsuperscript{41}

Inland descent group territories average 80 to 120 hectares, while coastal territories may include a fringe of the coast, real and artificial islands and surrounding reefs and fishing areas. A shrine was the conceptual centre of the territory, but often outer boundaries are less defined, each merging into its neighbour, marked by natural features such as rivers and rocky outcrops. Shrines also existed on artificial islands, where spatial divisions mirrored those on land. Descent group territories all have names, which apply both to the land and to the people entitled to live there. Land and maritime rights are communal, not individual, shared by all in the corporate group who can trace a line of descent from the putative founding ancestor of the territory. Individuals have ties with numerous descent group territories. Map 5, depicting east Fataleka, shows a migration pattern that is similar elsewhere. Inland clans always claim to be descended from central shrines in the mountains, though there must have been a migration to the centre before the descent to the coast.

Land is more than a physical asset. When Malaitans look at their land they also see the dimension of time: the past exists in the present. To use Roger Keesing’s description of the Kwaio:

The ancestors are not simply remembered; they are ever present. It is they who confer the stream of spiritual energy without which humans cannot succeed, and infuse the efforts of their descendants with power (\textit{mana}) as pigs consecrated in their names root around Kwaio settlements. The ancestors also zealously watch over their descendants to be sure that a rigid and complex set of taboos are carefully observed. Violation brings down ancestral punishment, manifest in sickness, death or misfortune, and only sacrifice of pigs can cleanse the violation and restore the balance of good living.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} Coppet 1985, 81.
\textsuperscript{42} Keesing 1975, 33.
Malaitans can inherit land through cognate descent links to founding ancestors traced through combinations of male and female forebears. All people who can demonstrate such links have some rights to live and cultivate within a territory, but there is a patrilineal bias that gives primary rights to those descended only through male links. Those related to a piece of land through cognatic or matrilineal ties need formal permission from primary owners to use it. Sometimes people with secondary rights, because of long-term residence on the land, and linked to the primary ownership lineages through intermarriage, can become primary residents with the equivalent of primary rights. This occurs particularly where the direct descendants of the original land owners have died out or are weak politically. Before Christianity and modern systems of government,
control of land rested with male primary landowners and was perpetuated through the priestly sacrifices in shrines. Senior male descendants controlled sacrifices to ancestors and the distribution of primary and usufructuary rights to land. Not everyone possesses deep genealogical knowledge, and experts are brought in to testify in land disputes.43

Exercising one’s rights to belong to a descent group is the basis for residential mobility within and between language areas. Individuals may live in several places in a lifetime or even in two simultaneously. Swidden horticulture and the impermanence of leaf, wood and bamboo houses enable this flexibility and mobility. These rights carried responsibilities to propitiate and carry on reciprocal relationships with ancestral spirits. Malaitans do not divide their lives neatly into secular and religious activities. Individuals are part of descent groups within territories that are the physical focus of their cosmological outlook. The descent groups conduct religious festivals (particular mortuary feasts), make sacrifices and share word, food and many other taboos enforced by their shared ancestors,44 to whom they also dedicate their gardens and fishing grounds. Ancestors empower the group in all their undertakings, or withhold their power when they are displeased. In the past, descent group alliances changed as these groups accumulated, controlled or lost wealth, arranged feasts and marriages, and interacted with other kin units in warfare, politics and exchange. Mamana, the Malaitan version of mana (power), resided in leading individuals and descent groups, but could ebb and flow dependent on ability, hard work and ancestral support.

Traditional leadership on Malaita has both secular and religious aspects. Formal positions of power vary but exhibit some central characteristics. Leadership positions in the past were held by influential adult males and generally there was a triumvirate of power best translated in English as priest, chief, and warrior or bounty-hunter.45 Using terms from Kwara`ae (the largest language group), the fataabu (tabu-speakers or priests) represented their descent group in communications with ancestors and other nonhuman spirits. They tended their group’s shrines and offered sacrifices aimed to achieve social and cosmological stability and success.

43 In east Fataleka, for example, ‘strangers’ intermarried with the founding families and began to claim primary rights to land. These were people taken in as refugees in times of war, particularly during the final decades of the nineteenth century, when guns procured through the labour trade were used in regional power struggles.
44 Keesing and Fifi`i 1969.
45 Keesing 1985a; 1997.
They were custodians of knowledge and respected as a conduit to the spirit world. Women, however, could also play a similar role. In Kwara`ae, according to Ben Burt, there are rare examples of women who became priests (*fataabu keni*), usually the wives of male priests, who were responsible for ‘women spirits’ (*akalo keni*). David Akin also provides details of Kwaio women with special relationships with ancestors and ancestresses maintained through shrines of their own.\(^{46}\) The next leadership role is the *aofia* (chief) who sometimes also held hereditary status and maintained social and political cohesion. He encouraged exchange relations and trade with neighbouring descent groups and aggregated and redistributed wealth items. The bigman/chief position required distribution of surpluses, achieved by manipulation of descent group resources, generosity and persuasion.\(^{47}\) The third position was that of *ramo*, the warrior, war-leader, bounty-hunter and assassin. These warriors could be aggressive, often unpredictable and did not necessarily follow orders, although they too were part of maintaining social and cosmological balance. While the chiefs could also be warriors/bounty-hunters, the priests, due to the spiritual delicacy of their position, usually abstained from killing (though they might have been *ramo* when younger, before taking on the priesthood).\(^{48}\)

Political groupings are usually small, with leaders responsible for only around 200 people, although there is considerable regional variation in patterns of leadership. Northern leadership is usually described as achieved in classic Melanesian bigman mode. However, Pierre Maranda described ‘aristocrats’ in Lau and a chiefly system,\(^ {49}\) and in Fataleka and Kwara`ae there are some leaders of high importance. In the centre of Malaita, taking the Kwaio as an example, leadership is much smaller in scale and descent groups are more autonomous, although they are linked by worship and descent from founding ancestors, and exchange relations.\(^ {50}\) South of the Kwaio, the people of southern `Are`are have developed a more rigid and hereditary political system, qualities even more pronounced on

\(^{46}\) Burt 1994, 58; Akin 2003.  
\(^{47}\) Keesing 1968.  
\(^{48}\) *Ibid.*, 66–76; 1982d, 11; Hogbin 1939, 61–81. The spelling of these words varies between language areas. In this book, priest, chief and warrior/bounty-hunter, or *fataabu, aofia* and *ramo*, have been used, and *akalo* is used for ancestors. ‘Bigman’ is used as a generic term when the exact descriptor is not needed or is unclear. Keesing (1978a) provides the portrait of a classic Kwaio bigman via the autobiography of `Elota.  
\(^{49}\) Information from Pierre Maranda, Quebec, 10 Sept 2007.  
\(^{50}\) Keesing 1967; 1978a; 1982c, 78–79.
Small Malaita.51 Other variations occur among the coastal people as each group has made distinctive economic adaptations and specialisations to suit their marine environments. The Lau and Langalanga have a more rigid descent system and observe strict polarisation of the sexes, exacerbated by the small spaces they inhabit on the artificial islands.52

Figure 1.10: A well-built hamlet at `Ai`eda, inland from Sinalagu in Kwaio, at 853 metres (2,800 feet) above sea level.

Clearings are scraped clean for aesthetic and sanitary reasons, and also to demarcate hamlet boundaries beyond which some ancestral taboos are relaxed or ignored. Sturdy fences keep out unwelcome, roaming pigs.

Source: Photograph by David Akin, 2004.

The warrior/bounty-hunter category was the most standard, existing all over Malaita. Roger Keesing, an anthropologist who studied the Kwaio, suggested that because earlier academic writing on Malaitan leadership was produced after the government stopped fighting, there was a tendency to underplay the importance of the role of the warrior. This argument seems to be supported by the clashes between the warriors and various early district officers, some of which took years to resolve.53 Leaders also had to avenge deaths and slights to their descent groups, through

mobilising the *ramo* in the role of hired assassins. Akin argues that the availability of bounty-hunters allowed equalisation between different sized descent groups, since superiority in numbers did not necessarily mean dominance.\(^{54}\)

**Gender Divisions**

![Image of 'Are'are woman wearing traditional jewellery and smoking a pipe, 1969.](image)

*Figure 1.11: 'Are'are woman wearing traditional jewellery and smoking a pipe, 1969.*

*Source: Hugo Zemp Collection, 1969.*

\(^{54}\) Akin 2015.
Learning to be Malaitan begins at birth in the safety, security and intimacy of the immediate family. Very soon, a child realises that they are part of an extended family and that there are no divisions between parents, siblings and the wider family circle. Hamlets are close together and children may wander between them, conscious of belonging to a wider group, aware of relationships with the living and the ancestors who are all around. Coastal children feel at home in the water, and use canoes at a remarkably young age. Education includes proper behaviour, mutual help, maintaining harmony and avoiding displays of anger. Learning is gendered with clearly demarcated male and female roles. Beyond the hamlet or artificial island are strangers, enemies and sorcerers, to be negotiated with care, but also relationships to be cultivated.

Figure 1.12: ‘Are’are woman and child, 1969.
Source: Hugo Zemp Collection, 1969.
Plan 1: Gender divisions in Malaitan houses, villages and canoes, and garden design.
Source: Based on Ross 1973, 84, 179, redrawn by Vincent Verheyen.
Women seldom appear to feature at all in the formal power structure and men will say that they control and speak for women. It is true that women often needed the permission of fathers and husbands before they undertook any important activity. However, social and residential spaces on Malaita were strictly divided between males and females, and power and balance in society cannot be measured solely by designated male political and religious positions. Male–female balances permeate Malaitan cosmology and society and it could be argued that women in some contexts possess superior power, given the fear of and respect for women’s power at a metaphysical level. The deeply imbedded gender balance is indicated by the symmetry in many aspects of Malaitan society, where music structurally mirrors society, myths encapsulate gender patterns, and gardens, houses and villages are structured to duplicate metaphysical beliefs.

Houses, canoes and villages were designed so that their shapes and uses were conducive to the ordering of male–female relationships (see Plan 1). Separated men’s and women’s areas were walled off—literally or symbolically—to ensure that transgression could not occur inadvertently, and men carried special amulets to ward off danger or could quickly access more powerful neutralising agents. Traditionally, when men and women walked through the bush, men went first, and when climbing hills men walked in front so that their heads remained higher than the women’s pelvic areas. Non-Christians still follow these principles, and many Malaitan men, even in modern Honiara, will never walk across a woman’s legs or under a woman, or under clothes line on which women’s clothing is dried. In Lau, depending on the tides, the lagoon switches between ‘male’ and ‘female’: during high tides it belongs to men who fish and on low tides the lagoon belongs to women who collect shellfish. Men and women in the past usually went naked, but after marriage, women wore a pubic apron to signify the importance of their reproduction. Traditionally, menstruation and birth were considered highly dangerous to the rest of the community. On such occasions the women lived apart in a *bisi* (a seclusion area), relying on separate gardens and food preparation for sustenance. The power behind female ‘pollution’ in reproduction, the nurturing of children, women’s wealth, and specific female roles in the economy, is clearly a balancing counterweight to male power. In Lau, for example, the lineage and residence rules are structured to consolidate male authority over women, although women have also developed their own strategies to control marriage patterns so that several women from the same clan will marry into another, creating strength through sisterhood. Women’s power is not weak: it is potent and can at times neutralise even the most powerful male power. 

Malaitans had much stronger controls over sexual activity than, for instance, on neighbouring Makira, where nineteenth-century whalers and traders were able to avail themselves of sexual favours from young women. The strict Malaitan sexual codes were probably one reason Europeans made few contacts with the island during the nineteenth century. There is no formal male initiation on Malaita, and homosexuality is not prominent, although it does, of course, exist, and situational homosexuality seems to have been widespread on colonial plantations.

The Centrality of Religion

Despite regional differences, Malaita has a united cosmology. In some areas, a central characteristic revolves around the number eight. Along with its multiples, eight was the greatest force in Malaitan cosmology, numerology, mathematics, music and dance, everyday thinking and speech, and geographic knowledge. In legends, Malaitans often complete actions eight times, have eight sons, eight genealogical lines or eight territories. In music, the minimal structure is made of a series of two pairs of segments played twice (4 x 2 = 8) to which is added the final formula, making nine units. The extra musical unit locks the others together and assures the totality of the eight segments. Eight represents the greatest force, complete totality: even numbers indicate movement, and uneven numbers motionless states.60 The ‘eight isles’ concept, called Waru Manau in ‘Are’are, has been described by Daniel de Coppet and John Naitoro. The known ‘Are’are world was called the ‘eight isles’: four in the east (Ulawa, Uki, Three Sisters and Makira); and four in the west (Guadalcanal, Gela, Russell and Isabel). Malaita is the ninth part of this universe, bringing totality to the world, assuring stability and plenty. Malaitans also knew of other nearby islands, such as Ontong Java and Sikaiana (Polynesian outlier atolls to the northeast). Occasionally, outrigger canoes from these islands drift ashore on east Malaita, and one Lau clan traces its origins to Ontong Java.61 Islands to the north of Isabel were also known, although less intimately than the ‘eight isles’ world. Similar regional connections exist in the northwest Solomons, although the people there are more routinely interisland in their everyday connections than are Malaitans.62

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60 Daniel de Coppet, personal communication, Paris, 2 Apr 1980; Coppet 1978, 111–26. Similar ‘eight’ imagery is used in Kwara’ae (Burt and Kwa’iola 2001, 10) and in Fataleka, Baegu and Kwaio.
Map 6: The Malaitan 'eight isles' world and the extent of the trading area for Malaitan shell valuables.

Source: Moore 1981a, 45.
Gao in southern Isabel Island has always been the main supply area of ‘ainigao, the black ebony wood north Malaitans used for certain weapons, and trading and raiding voyages have linked north Malaita and Gao over many centuries in the same way that ‘Are’are and Small Malaita link to Makira, Ulawa and Guadalcanal. East Fataleka legend records that long ago many north Malaitan descent groups joined forces to attack the Gao people and avenge killings committed in the Falae district of Malaita. Malaitans in the north were in regular contact with Isabel Island: missionary Walter Ivens was told of major Gao attacks on north Malaita, which he dated to the 1850s or 1860s. In the 1870s and 1880s, Gao people made regular visits to Malaita, bartering their canoes and other commodities for Malaitan shell and porpoise teeth valuables. They raided along the north Malaita coast, just as they in turn were raided by people from New Georgia to their west. Malaitans also traded, intermarried with and raided the inhabitants of the surrounding islands. There was steady canoe traffic from west Malaita to the Gela Group, and to Guadalcanal, especially to the ‘Are’are colony at Marau. Raiding between Makira and Small Malaita has a long history. In 1905, a leader from Malaita’s west coast is said to have refused to join an Anglican mission school until he could avenge the deaths on Makira of 40 of his descent group. In the same year, ‘Ataa men from the southern end of Lau Lagoon joined raids on Makira, presumably linked to their kin at Walade on Small Malaita, and they were also raiding areas of Small Malaita. ‘Are’are people today still make claims to land on Makira and Uki and maintain kin relationships with people on both islands.

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63 Ivens 1930, 186.
Religion was all-pervasive, based on spirit-beings and worship of ancestors, and pan-Pacific concepts like *mana* and *tabu* (*mamana* and *abu* in some Malaitan languages). ‘Are’ are people, for instance, believe that their first ancestors came into an already functioning world with three elements: land, sea and sky. Their religious ideology, which can be extrapolated to indicate wider Malaitan patterns, divides into two concepts: *warato’o* (to hit and create at the same time) and *rioanimae* (common ancestor).66

John Naitoro described his people’s physical, social and cultural world as based on these two concepts. The theory behind *warato’o* is that it has the power to do both good and evil and was responsible for the formation of the sea, land, air, stars and the spirit world. Naitoro described this as the basis of religious reasoning and the way social and cultural norms were legitimated:

*Waratoo* [sic] also refers to the ‘spontaneous’ power or energy vested in the ‘uttered’ sounds of the words associated with the spirits. The belief was that humans could, when in possession of this potent power, carry out actions, by simply ‘willing’ things or events to occur spontaneously. There were conditions to being able to realise this power, the most important of which was complete surrender and obedience to the will of the spirits through respect for the ancestors.67

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66 Coppet 1985, 80.
This power could exert force on either physical or spiritual reality, merely by uttering words, and the key to legitimation was the concept of a common ancestor, *ri'oanimae*, possessing the power of the word and ‘central to the social organisation and religious ritual’. Ri'oanimae was at the head of a group of living descendants and was the ultimate guardian of the land of these descendants. Naitoro went on to describe the essence of *warato'o* as singular, but the common ancestors, as multiple and diverse:

Thus, there was not one common ancestor for all ‘Are’are, but many, the number corresponding to the number of family groups or sub-clans in society at any given time. Because of the large number this meant that there was wide variation in social and cultural norms among different family groups associated with them.

These differences were displayed through different totems, such as crocodiles, sharks and eagles, used by different subclans (*arata*), but common ancestry was the basis of the land tenure system and the allocation of physical resources.

Relationships with ancestors varied from one family to another. Malaitans believed that all good fortune or illness and misfortune had a cause and attempted to placate and manipulate the spirit world to their own benefit. Sorcery was practised, and even today unexpected illness or death is often attributed to malevolent magic. Sorcery fears could act as a limiter on overexploitation by individuals and was thus a levelling social mechanism, ensuring that people cooperated with their kin and neighbouring social units.

David Gegeo, from the Kwara’ae region, has written extensively about Malaitan epistemology, emphasising the importance of *gwaumauri’anga* or ‘life and well-being’, which covers spiritual, psychological and physical needs. The Kwara’ae strive to achieve *gwaumauri’anga*, the ‘good life’. Gegeo describes the changes that have occurred over the last century, from *tua lalifu’anga* (living in rootedness) and *tua ‘inoto’a’anga* (living in dignity) to *tua malafaka’anga* (literally, living in imitation of ways brought by ships, or pseudo-Westernisation). *Falafala* (*kastom*) has

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68 Ibid., 29.
69 Ibid., 30.
been modernised, but it does not necessarily bring gwauma"ri`anga. He lists nine key cultural characteristics to create a good life, in essence not so different from the biblical Ten Commandments:

- alafe`anga ‘kin love, kindness’
- aroaro`anga ‘peace, peacefulness’
- babato`o`anga ‘stability’
- enoeno`anga ‘humility’
- fangale`a`anga ‘sharing’
- kwaigwale`e`anga ‘welcoming, comforting, hospitality’
- kwaima`anga ‘love, kindness, eros’
- kwaisare`e`anga ‘giving without expectation of return’
- mamana`anga ‘truth, honesty and sacred power’

As a central philosophy, gwauma"ri`anga refers to the ideal state of ali`afu`anga (total completeness), where mauri`a (life) and mauri`anga (the process of living) lead to the nine qualities listed above. Gegeo says that to achieve gwauma"ri`anga spiritual, psychological and physical needs must be met.

Why is gwauma"ri`anga so fundamental to Kwara`ae society? The Kwara`ae argue that a person who achieves the state of gwauma"ri`anga is a ngwane ali`afu a ‘complete person’ and ngwae lalifu ‘a rooted person’. A person who has achieved the state of ali`afu`anga ‘completeness’; and lalifu`anga ‘rootedness’ is said to live in or embrace the Kwara`ae nine key cultural values mentioned. Such a person shows fu`usi`inoto`a`anga ‘respect’, is fu`usiinoto`oa ‘respected’ by others, and is said to live in manata fauto`o`anga ‘contentment’. In principle, then, a gwauma"ri person is someone who is the ultimate Kwara`ae gwaunga`i ‘important, respected, dignified, revered person or elder’ who has achieved gwaunga`i`anga ‘headness’.

Respect for the living and the dead cannot be separated, and there is a strong belief in life after death. The spirits of the dead in southern Malaita go to Malapa Island (the place of the dead) in Marau Sound, where they mingle with the dead of the local Guadalcanal people. From Kwaio northward the spirits of the dead are said to go first to Gaomae (Ramos) Island halfway between Malaita and Isabel, before settling on Maumolu Naunitu Island close to the southern end of Isabel. These resting places are an indication of the ancient connections between the peoples of these areas.

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71 Gegeo 2000, 73.
72 Ibid., 74.
73 Ishmael Itea, personal communication, Fataleka, 2 Oct 1976.
Roger Keesing described their ‘categories of religious thought, and their expression in the arrangement of settlements and the patterning of everyday social relations and ritual’ as having ‘a coherent, global, and elegant structure’.\footnote{Keesing 1982d, 4.} Kwaio symbolic schemes have meanings in everyday life and experiences. The main academic scholars of Malaita—Hogbin, Frazer, Maranda, Ross, Guidieri, de Coppet, Naitoro, Gegeo, Burt, Cooper, Guo, Keesing, and Akin—all tell us a great deal about Malaitan religious and cultural systems. There are also points of similarity regarding how Malaitans have conceptualised Christianity, but early missionaries failed to fully recognise the complexity of Malaitan culture and the relationships between wellbeing and ancestral worship. Today’s Malaitan pastors, however, exploit these similarities to advantage.

Indications are that early traders and government officers understood very little about Malaitan cultures. Even the approximate boundaries of the different language divisions seem to have eluded them. David Akin’s \textit{Colonialism, Maasina Rule, and the Origins of Malaitan Kastom} shows clearly how ignorant most district officers and their deputies were concerning Malaitan culture, and how often their seemingly carefully justified decisions were hamfisted attempts to induce change that aggravated and frustrated Malaitans. Sometimes, these local officials had to deal with quite bizarre instructions from bosses in Tulagi or Suva who had no inkling of Malaitan realities, and while some tried to mitigate the impacts of such policies, they had no choice but to follow orders. Some of the early missionaries, particularly those that stayed for long periods—for instance, Ivens, Hopkins, and the Coicaud brothers—were in a position to observe Malaitan culture more closely and better understood their surroundings, but even they sometimes made blinkered interpretations.

There are clearly similarities between all Malaitan societies. Although some readers may interpret this as one basic Malaitan culture that overrides the variations, contemporary Malaitans will always point out local variations in behaviours, which usually relate to the language areas where they hold their primary identity. In the past, people always identified primarily with their specific region, not the whole island. There were always long-distance links, particularly where there had been migrations—the `Ataa (southern Lau Lagoon) links with Walade in east Small Malaita is classic. However, it is undeniable that authority in the south is far more hereditary
and chiefly than in the north, and there were always great differences between language groups and between the inland peoples and those on artificial islands in the lagoons. Malaitans saw themselves split into a dozen or more cultures, with nested identities within those, and it is the circumstances of the unification that occurred between the 1870s and 1930s that interests us here.

Modern Malaita

Malaita Province of today is not the same as Mala of the past. Not only has Malaita changed over the last 150 years, but based on administrative convenience, not cultural histories, Sikaiana and Ontong Java (Polynesian chiefly societies on isolated atolls with limited natural resources) are now incorporated into the province. Early twentieth-century interpretations of language boundaries became administrative divisions and then national political boundaries. Most modern Malaitans have moved their settlements toward the coast and regrouped into large villages, lured by Christianity, health clinics, schools, government services, roads and cash crops marketing. Male and female roles have changed, and circular labour migration created new power hierarchies and cultural motivations. Having said this, there are core Malaitan characteristics that are easily recognised in the modern Solomon Islands. Over the last 100 years of colonial and postcolonial activity, some of these have become more consolidated than they ever were in the nineteenth century. And, as described in the Introduction, there remain many tropes about Malaita and Malaitans. Malaitans are often physically large relative to other Solomon Islanders, and they exhibit concomitant physical strength; they are famously hard workers. Many maintain respect for gender taboos and ancestral power, at a time when Solomon Islanders from some other islands have disregarded these for decades. Although Malaitans are often wrongly stereotyped as unusually violent and aggressive, it is fair to say that many have a characteristically bombastic disposition that, when angered, is better not crossed. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, there are many variations of Malaitan lifestyles, and while some of the behaviours described belong only to the past, a surprising number are still evident today: more fully in a few places, such as with Kwaio who still follow their ancestral religion, and partially in many other areas including urban communities.
Early visiting Europeans, many from Britain or Australia, arrived with a belief in the superiority of their own cultures, exhibited through technology and Christianity. They had little interest in understanding the complexity and richness of island life and typically related to Malaitans only on a superficial level. As Judith Bennett so nicely put it:

> When the white men came in numbers to the Solomon Islands, they little understood the religious values of the Melanesians and so flouted them, through either ignorance or, more often, disregard. Europeans touched or even carried away sacred objects such as offerings at ancestral shrines, bathed in spirit-haunted streams, walked alone at night, and, again and again, broke taboos that Solomon Islanders believed would bring sickness and death in their wake. Sorcerers could vent their magical fury on the white man and see scant result. Not only were the white men able to survive sorcery, but they were able to defeat great warriors who had called on the support of their own ancestors. Consequently, Solomon Islanders began to doubt the wisdom of generations.\(^75\)

The chapters that follow trace changes that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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\(^75\) Bennett 1987, 115.