Conclusion: Tropes, *Kastom* and the Modern Solomon Islands

Maleita, unknown as yet, dark with records of savagery and cannibalism, stretches as far as the eye can see backwards and forwards... I have seen some of them on Maleita who seemed not only savage, but wild...

—Bishop Henry H. Montgomery, *The Light of Melanesia* (1896)\(^1\)

Malaitans are fierce. Malaitans are warlike. Malaitans are mysterious. There are points on which all people in the Solomon Islands agreed, especially the Malaitans themselves. It was Malaitans who made the last great stand against colonialism in 1927, when they smashed the skull of a British tax collector and murdered his fourteen assistants. It was Malaitans who controlled the police, who had outwitted and humiliated the Guadalcanal militants, who had the government under their thumb. It was Malaitans who still offered blood sacrifice to the sharks and octopuses that prowled their lagoons. It was Malaitans, or at least a few thousand villagers in the island’s Kwaio highlands, who still refused the Church and the authority of the government.


This concluding chapter briefly describes the direct effect of the Pacific War on Malaita and attempts to consider the tropes that still dominate discourses on the island. Outsiders and other Solomon Islanders have developed some fixed views on how Malaitans behave that have no anchor in reality. Yet, there are intriguing aspects about Malaita that are a challenge to explain. One, of course, is that there are so many individuals of Malaitan descent in Solomon Islands that they cannot fail to dominate the nation. We can unravel the tropes but no one can doubt their dominance. There are also peculiarities about Malaitan Christianity,

\(^1\) Montgomery 1896, 175, 176.
\(^2\) Montgomery 2004, 178.
particularly recent beliefs that some hold about their descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel. These beliefs are more pronounced in north Malaita, though they have also spread to some central areas. This idea probably dates back to the origins of the SSEC in the QKM. My conclusion is that historical circumstances have made Malaita different from other Solomon Islands.

The Pacific War

Evacuation of Tulagi, other administrative centres, plantations and missions began in late December 1941, first the women and children, followed by government and commercial companies’ staff and equipment. On 22 January 1942, Japanese aircraft bombed Gavutu, next to Tulagi, and the first retaliatory shot was fired. The last European civilians were evacuated from Tulagi on SS *Morinda* on 8 February, which although bombed on its voyage managed to escape damage. The Japanese occupied Bougainville in March and landed in the Shortland Islands on 10 April. From January to May 1942, a small Australian force based at Tulagi watched and attempted to harass the Japanese, and the Royal Australian Navy employed local government officers and planters to form a chain of Coastwatchers, who remained behind to monitor the Japanese presence.3 Tulagi was first strafed on 29 January, then Tulagi, Gavutu-Tanambogo and Makambo were bombed intermittently during March and April. After heavy air raids on 1 and 2 May, Tulagi fell on 3 May, and then, starting on 20 June, the Japanese occupied Guadalcanal. In late July they began building an airfield at Lunga and a camp at nearby Kukum, from which they intended to harass Allied shipping in the Pacific and operations in nearby New Guinea.4

In late January, Resident Commissioner William Marchant began to move the government headquarters to `Aoke, taking with him crucial government documents, particularly Secretariat, Lands and Treasury files, which were later sent via Port Vila to Sydney. Marchant travelled back

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4  There is a huge literature on the Second World War in Solomon Islands. Some of it is written purely from an American point of view, and most does not relate to Malaita. The best work including Solomon Islanders is Laracy and White 1988; White, Gegeo, Akin and Watson-Gegeo 1988; White and Lindstrom 1989; Akin 2013a, ch. 4; Lindstrom and White 1990; and Bennett 2009.
and forth to Tulagi and was in constant contact with the Coastwatchers.\(^5\) The Tulagi Masonic Lodge’s paraphernalia was shifted to a village near ‘Aoke. The Anglican bishop packed up the altar silver and relics at Siota and hid them in another Malaitan village. District Officer Charles Bengough was despatched to north Malaita to begin coastwatching duties on 4 April, but was often back in ‘Aoke. Refugees from Gizo, Choiseul and the Shortlands travelled to ‘Aoke in small boats, from where they joined SS *Morinda*, which left for Sydney on 8 February.

Marchant moved his headquarters to Furi`isango (also written as Fulisango) in the hills behind ‘Aoke on 4 May. His core group included DO Bengough, the Tulagi wireless officer T.W. Sexton, H.W. Bullen of the Melanesian Mission who acted as a cypher officer, and the Anglican bishop, followed later by the Catholic bishop. Others came and went with regularity, such as the Coastwatchers and Dr Thomson. This secret government in Malaitan leaf houses lasted for a few months. Bishop Walter Baddeley continued to visit the Anglican hospital at Fuaabu, which was still open, although there were plans to evacuate it to a safe inland village where a secondary dispensary had been prepared. Also with Marchant, but forgotten in war histories, were a group of police and other Malaitans that included Jasper Irofiala of Fo`odo, Salana Ga’a of Areo near ‘Aoke, Ishmael Itea and Eban Funusau (aka Sau) from Fataleka, and Tome Toloasi Teoboo of east Kwaio. They were to become important postwar leaders, all but Itea within the Maasina Rule movement. There was also the ‘Aoke clerk Alec Maena, from the Western Solomons.\(^6\)

In late July, a troop of Japanese soldiers landed on Malaita at Afufu, which moved on to loot the Hospital of the Epiphany’s operating theatre on 28 July, and then on 30 July arrived at the government headquarters at ‘Aoke where they took small items. They also seized some of the Anglicans’ boats. The Japanese maintained a small base 32 kilometres north of Fuaabu until about November. Their arrival caused consternation among the local people and Marchant reported some collaboration.\(^7\) The war did

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\(^5\) The Coastwatchers were prewar planters, officials and missionaries, mainly from Australia and New Zealand, and New Guinean and Solomon Islander scouts, who went into hiding after the Japanese invasion in 1942 and formed a secret communication system to monitor enemy shipping and planes for the Allies. They also rescued Allied personnel who were stranded. There were around 100 Coastwatchers in the South Pacific. Many were stationed in Papua New Guinea and 24 in the Solomon Islands, including two in Bougainville. Their activities were crucial to alerting the Allied forces of approaching Japanese bombing raids.

\(^6\) Marchant 1942–43; Trench 1956; Baddeley 1942.

\(^7\) Marchant 1942–43, 31 July 1942; Baddeley 1942, 5–6.
affect Malaita physically, although only lightly compared with surrounding islands. Malaitans watched hundreds of planes flying overhead, a few sites on Malaita were bombed and warships neared the coast. Fo’odo mission station was bombed by the Japanese on 6 August, killing six people. The only permanent Japanese installation was a lookout and radio post at Cape Astrolabe in the far north, which Americans destroyed on 4 November, guided there by people from Malu`u and Fo’odo. The Americans contemplated the possibility that the Japanese might invade Malaita and briefly sent a seaplane tender to the west mouth of Maramasike Passage on 7 August, but only for two days. That same day, a Catalina seaplane that was anchored in the entrance to Maramasike Passage accidentally hit a reef and remains there still. Another Catalina crashed off `Are`are Lagoon in November 1943, killing six of the 10 crew.

The worst damage was done on Malaita by the Americans. Probably because of a navigational error, on 7 July 1942 American planes bombed Lauasi Island in Langalanga Lagoon, killing 18 people and wounding several others, the war’s worst mistaken Allied bombing in the Solomons. The Americans also inexplicably bombed Gamu in To`aba`ita, a canoe in Uru Harbour in east Kwaio, Fousaari`i and Hauhari`i (Sail Rock) at Small Malaita, Anutu Island and Takataka in `Are`are.8

Several planes ditched around Malaita. One Japanese bomber crashed on Da`i Island after bombing Lunga Point on Guadalcanal. After a fight with American planes, another Japanese plane ditched near the river at `Ataa, and the `Aoke police, led by Corporal Beni Ramo`alafa, were sent over to capture the four survivors.9 A third Japanese plane went down at Malu`u, there is an unidentified plane site at Afoa Village on the east coast of north Malaita, and another American plane lies close to the west coast. One American plane ditched into Sinalagu Harbour in east Kwaio. Once the Americans were in control they erected a beacon on Alite Reef, but not in time to stop a landing barge being wrecked there. There is rumoured to be a Japanese ship sunk in Fokanakafo Bay on the central east coast. One American aviator, George W. Polk, was rescued by Shemuele and taken to Kwai Island in east Kwara`ae. Polk may have been from the plane that ditched at Sinalagu, but Kwaio remember only one survivor, named Allen (or Allan). Another American plane ditched on Small Malaita. SSEM and Malayta Company sites were part of the action.

8 See Fifi`i 1991, 44.
CONCLUSION

There was a New Zealand camp at Baunani and the most permanent substantial installation on Malaita was a Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) radar unit at Cape Astrolabe. One RNZAF plane came down in the mountains near Onepusu on the west coast. The SSEM launch Arosi was bombed and sunk in error by the Americans on 7 August 1942.10

In October 1942, a group of boys from the Melanesian Mission’s Maravovo School in northwest Guadalcanal landed at north Malaita with Mr Rowley. They made their way overland to `Aoke, dodging Japanese troops. Another, larger group followed and the Maravovo School was reestablished at Fiu on the west coast under the charge of a deacon, Henry Maabe.11 While Malaita itself was only on the edge of the war, thousands of Malaitan men were recruited into the Solomon Islands Labour Corps or the Solomon Islands Defence Force.12 The cycle that had begun in 1909 had been broken, although once again Malaitans were asked to travel to other islands as labourers. This time the consequences of their experiences abroad would be very different.13

Malaitan Tropes, Custom and Kastom

This book’s Introduction began with a discussion of Malaitan tropes and how foreigners have often depicted Malaitans as evil, fierce and unpredictable, and even as cannibal head-hunters. Almost always they are described as culturally conservative, holding on to outdated customs. It is fitting to end this conclusion with a nod to modern-day continuations of the same tropes. One example is provided by Charles Montgomery, who toured the Solomons in the early 2000s to retrace the footsteps of his great-grandfather Anglican Bishop of Tasmania Henry Montgomery. The bishop arrived in Solomon Islands on the mission steamer Southern Cross in 1892, and later authored the book The Light of Melanesia. Charles’s book, as indicated in this chapter’s epigraphs, shows that, despite the passing of more than a century, little seems to have altered in the Montgomery family attitudes towards Malaitans. However, it is

11 Baddeley 1942, 6.
12 Laracy 1988b.
13 Chapter 4 in Akin 2013a, 132–63, provides an excellent assessment of the Malaitan war experience and further information about the military events that did take place on Malaita (380–81).
not as if Charles Montgomery was alone in maintaining the trope. Roger Webber, a medical doctor in the BSIP administration, in his 2011 book *Solomoni: Times and Tales from Solomon Islands*, singled out Malaitans as having a ‘reputation for a ferocious and traditional people’. ‘The independence and ferocity of the Malaitan people’, he wrote, ‘is not far below the surface and never more so than when a land dispute occurs’.14

In the same vein, a 2000 history of Solomon Islands, Ian MacNeill’s *Sweet Horizons*, describes Malaita this way:

> The history of Malaita is bloody and its reputation amongst Europeans was fearsome. The world knew it as the most dangerous corner of the British Empire … Parts of it are still thought of as potentially dangerous or at least unfriendly.15

Reading such statements is like stepping back into the 1870s and 1880s—the Malaita tropes are disturbingly alive and well.

Learning about Malaita between the 1870s and the 1930s is of direct relevance to understanding Malaita today. Chains of transmission and interpretations of knowledge stretch across the now more than 140 years since outsiders first began to venture there in significant numbers. Iconic religious figures such as Joseph Wate, who brought Anglicanism to Small Malaita, and Peter Abu`ofa, the founder the QKM in north Malaita, are the stuff of legends. The Bible and particularly Old Testament theology, introduced in the nineteenth century, still pervade religion in modern Malaita, to the extent that the myth of descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel seems real to many. Explanations of Malaitan origins often involve connections to the Lost Tribes and the laws and covenants of the Old Testament are applied. These connections, also made in other Pacific societies, are particularly strong in central and north Malaita.16

The centrality of Peter Abu`ofa, who returned from Queensland in 1894 and died in 1937, still resonates among many SSEC members and in the Remnant Church. The connection with Israel may date back to the time of Abu`ofa. Some QKM-SSEM members fostered the Lost Tribes interpretation. The Remnant Church, established in the 1950s as a breakaway movement from the SSEC, which involved Anglican teaching as well, incorporated aspects of Lost Tribes of Israel beliefs and has

14 Webber 2011, 111, 126.
15 MacNeill 2000, 123.
16 Newland and Brown 2015.
remained strong. In To’aba’ita, the rightful society as envisaged in the book of Isaiah remains a major source of beliefs, and there are claims that an ancient stone temple linked to the Lost Tribes remains in the mountains. The flag of modern Israel hangs in some To’aba’ita churches and in recent years there was a march down to ‘Aoke by Lost Tribes believers. Ancestral forms of worship, because they are often depicted to have their origins in Israel, are also seen as connected to these ancient forms of Christianity. Subsequently, some Kwara`ae maintain similar beliefs and claim primogeniture over other Malaitans based on a grand combination of customary and biblical justifications. This is one-upmanship, claiming a biblical pedigree through descent from the founding inhabitants of Malaita.

As Jaap Timmer concludes:

The reason why some Malaitans adhere to old Jewish rules is that they consider themselves to be a covenant people with an ancestry going back to the biblical kings. Proof of this link with God’s chosen people and an earlier movement of people from the Mediterranean to the Pacific stems from the belief that the Ark of the Covenant lies buried in the mountains of Malaita. When telling the story, people talk in similitudes. Thus, original Malaitan *kastom* (tradition) is viewed as the same as old Jewish forms of worship and specific proscriptions regulating social life.

As outlined in the Introduction, Maasina Rule (1944–52), which shook British control of the protectorate, could not have occurred without the developments that altered Malaita over the preceding decades. The movement was not directly responsible for independence in 1978, which emerged from a long-term desire by the British to rid themselves of their Pacific Island territories, and international pressures for decolonisation. That said, Maasina Rule did give Malaitans and other Solomon Islanders the confidence that they could stand alone. There were echoes of Maasina Rule in the Malaita Eagle Force of the late 1990s and 2000s. Ma’asina Forum, a continuing and successful Malaitan-based political forum and pressure group, also maintains the link.

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19 Timmer 2008, 204.
20 Moore 2013b; Akin 2013a.
21 Moore 2004a, 123–36.
Since the 1940s, Malaitans have also created a unified *kastom*, a Solomons Pijin term that can refer to shared traditions, but also to contemporary ideas and institutions perceived to be grounded in indigenous concepts and principles. Thus *kastom* is not, as is often supposed, synonymous with the English ‘custom’. It is not a version of ‘Melanesian ways’ from before Europeans arrived in the islands. In addition to its usage in everyday language, anthropologists have analysed and debated *kastom*’s meanings. Particularly in its political uses, *kastom* is often closely tied to indigenous means of dispute resolution, or *kastom loa* (law), set in opposition to state or ‘government law’. The word has developed different meanings in different Pacific countries and cultures. In Solomon Islands, relative to Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, the state has made little attempt to harness *kastom* as an ideological tool. David Akin suggests that this is partly because several leading Christian churches have long opposed retention of what they see as ‘customary ways’ (though this is slowly changing), and, more importantly, because on Malaita—the most *kastom*-conscious island—*kastom* has, since the Pacific War, been at the centre of various antigovernment ideologies and movements. *Kastom* is a fluid concept that is used selectively and creatively, and is for many Solomon Islanders a key mechanism for adapting to and channelling modernisation and change.22

Akin concludes that the development of *kastom* as an organised political ideology on Malaita is largely a postwar phenomenon. *Kastom* is often inextricably linked with Christianity and modern politics. While *kastom* is most often presented as authentic and traditional, it underpins local circumstances and rights and interpretations and shifts over time. What, then, were the ingredients that brought Malaitans together, and when and how did that coalescence occur? My answer would be that collective *kastom* began to emerge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Outsiders often give an impression that Malaitans have immutable rules in their religions and secular societies. However, since nineteenth-century labour trade days, Malaitans have been malleable in how they deal with travel and confronting circumstances not found at home. After all, tens of thousands left their island to work overseas and within the protectorate between the 1870s and 1940s. This would not have been possible if they

were incapable of creative cultural experiments. They managed to build a proud and politically shared identity and developed an ability to overcome regional differences.

Since the 1970s, I have been trying to decide in my own mind if Malaita was home to a unique Pacific society or if Malaitans are actually fairly similar to the inhabitants of neighbouring islands. Although there were a dozen language and dialect divisions, they are all cognate and there is an overarching cosmology and way of behaving. This must have aided communications, as did Solomons Pijin. Chapter 1 attempted to describe what Malaita might have been like before any substantial outside influences. The chapters that followed steered forward to the early 1940s. My conclusion is that Malaita is not unique and that Malaitan dominance is a product of historical circumstances.

Another factor has been Malaita's large population. Evidence suggests that the island has long carried a larger population (for its size) than any of the neighbouring islands, including Bougainville. This has put different pressures on land and sea resources than are found on other less populous islands. Perhaps this has produced a more competitive society. It is probably a matter of luck that the Malaitan population has stayed large for at least 500 years, although I have argued here that numbers likely decreased in the nineteenth century.

On many other Pacific Islands, introduced disease decimated populations and reduced political and economic importance. Malaita was excluded from the early whaling and trading ventures, an advantage to its people since they also avoided early large-scale population declines from introduced diseases. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, warfare, raiding, and probably new diseases depopulated large areas in the western and central Solomons. The effect was particularly marked in the New Georgia Group and on Choiseul and Isabel, but raids also affected the Russell Islands, Savo and parts of Guadalcanal. By the second half of the century, decades of head-hunting raids from New Georgia, intertribal fighting and introduced diseases had reduced Isabel's population to just a few thousand. Head-hunting raids from the north never affected Malaita's population numbers to any significant extent.

Malaitans were the major labour force in Queensland and Fiji (1870–1914) and also internally in the Solomons from early in the twentieth century. The external circular labour trade, and also the Anglican Melanesian
Mission’s transportation of students on its ships, constantly introduced new diseases, which must have killed many Solomon Islanders. Epidemics of measles brought in the mid-1870s reduced population in some areas of the Pacific by as much as one-quarter to one-third. Whether measles had the same early affect in the Solomons is unclear. The BSIP archives record many epidemics on Malaita, yet the island maintained the largest population in the protectorate. The only conclusion can be that increases in numbers over time exceeded the declines. The 2009 Census recorded 515,870 Solomon Islanders, 137,596 of whom lived on Malaita, and Honiara had a population of 64,609, half of whom would have been Malaitans, a total of around 170,000 or 32 per cent. The 2016 national population is estimated to be around 620,000 and Honiara is thought to be home to around 100,000. The estimate for the population of Malaita Province has not been revised. If the 2009 proportion is correct, then there must be approaching 200,000 individuals who at least part identify as Malaitan in origin, even if married into other island groups.

Malaitan males steadily engaged in wage labour onwards from the 1870s, to an extent unequalled anywhere else in similar societies in Solomon Islands or Vanuatu. In a 2007 article I argued that the misappropriation of Malaitan labour was one of the historical origins for what Solomon Islanders call the ‘Tension Years’, 1998–2003. My argument is that the root cause of the disturbances during those years was economic not ethnic, related to infrastructural underdevelopment, use of labour, changes exacerbated by the influences of Christianity and government, and shifting power relations. Historically, the main areas of alienated land in Solomon Islands are in Western and Guadalcanal Provinces. The only move to alienate land on Malaita—by the Malayta Company and Fairymead Sugar Company Ltd of the 1900s to the 1930s—was, mercifully, a failure, leaving Malaitans with their customary lands intact. Malaita’s land is just as suitable for development as that of any of the other islands. During the 1950s and 1960s, the BSIP Government surveyed the geology and land use potential of all islands and initiated development plans. The Malaita District Land Use Survey, published in 1974, left no doubt that the island has potential similar to other islands in the nation. The 2001 Provincial Development Profile for Malaita shows similar

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23 Solomon Islands Government 2015, 81.
potential. A key factor is the large population, which leaves no areas empty or lightly populated other than in the mountains of the ‘middle bush’. If all Malaitans were to return to Malaita (as 20,000 did during the Tension Years), there would be even more strain on land resources. The future for the many Malaitans who have become urban citizens of Honiara and the other towns is as wage earners, continuing the century-and-a-half trend. The skills that Malaita males have learnt from working away from home have made them different.

One of the Malaita tropes is that they remained a non-Christian and nonliterate people for longer than other Solomon Islanders. The argument put forward in this book in chapters 3 to 6 is a substantial repudiation of this. Malaitan literacy began in Queensland and Fiji in the 1880s and, along with Christianity, progressed fast, continuing on Malaita once missions were established there, starting in the 1890s and 1900s. Although early conversion was much more complete on islands such as the Gela Group and Isabel, these islands had much smaller populations. It did take a long time for the majority of Malaitans to convert to Christianity and adopt literacy, but these two cultural changes were at the base of the success of communications during Maasina Rule. Many Maasina Rule leaders were members of the SSEM. Timothy George Mahratta, a Maasina Rule leader, had been educated in Queensland and was one of the most Western-educated Solomon Islanders of his day. Literacy enabled Malaitans to circulate a flow of letters all around the island, providing information for Maasina Rule followers.

There was another great change, no different than on other Solomon Islands, although it was harder to achieve on Malaita, was the introduction of the protectorate government. By comparison, the pacification of the feared head-hunters and slavers of the Western Solomons took only five years. On Malaita it took from 1909 into the 1930s to achieve a similar level of control, and even then it remained tenuous. The government’s resources were stretched thin as more areas were opened up, and the 1930s Depression years further limited resources. As well, there was little alienated land and only a small, mainly missionary foreign presence, whereas in the Western Solomons there were many plantations and foreigners. Although not obvious to Malaitans, it was inevitable that the government would eventually win and Malaita’s ramo would have to bow to British authority.

26 Solomon Islands Government 2001b.
While my conclusion is that Malaitans are at core much like other Solomon Islanders and other inhabitants of Near Oceania, there are circumstantial historical differences that explain the unique success of Malaitans. Chapters 2 to 10 charted and analysed the changes that took place between the 1870s and the 1930s. The Introduction and Conclusion serve to remind readers that the discourses around work, religion and the state are fluid and ever-changing. Malaitans are not conservative; they are extremely innovative and flexible, and this strength is a key explanation for their success.

In the Introduction, I noted that *Making Mala* owed much to other scholars, and does not answer all of my questions about Malaitan societies and how they have changed over the many decades covered here. No work by an outsider will ever manage to do this, particularly not one as linguistically ill-equipped as me. However, I am also sceptical that writings by insiders—Malaitans—will be able to provide a full answer.

I am conscious that the colonisation process has been closely linked to the way Western knowledge is depicted as dominant and rational. Although we have come to see perceptions of knowledge as part and parcel of the ways in which we construct history, empiricism and critical analysis are still vital to providing perspectives on change. Regardless of questions that arise about my own scholarship, which is healthy and necessary, I also maintain a faith in my intellectual training and use of analytical skills. Nevertheless, let us hope that the efforts of outsider historians and anthropologists will inspire Malaitans and other Solomon Islanders to take up the challenge to correct our faults. Thankfully, some are beginning to do so even now.