A Note on Spelling Malaitan Words

I should say at the outset that I am linguistically ill-equipped to write a book about an island with a dozen distinct languages. Ten years ago, as part of preparations for the *Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia, 1893–1978*, and for this book, I began to try to develop a set of standard spellings for Solomon Islands words. It was far from the first attempt, and it is a perpetual challenge. Useful gazetteers of geographic terms exist from colonial times, although they tend not to use glottal stops and indicate sounds in different ways, for example by doubling letters, turning a ‘b’ into an ‘mb’, turning a ‘d’ into ‘nd’, or using a ‘q’ to begin a word that today would begin with a ‘kw’. I soon realised that there was no standard way, and even anthropologists and linguists have sometimes changed their recording methods. A prime example is the name of Malaita’s northern language group: I chose to use Toaba`ita, although it is also written as To`ambaita or Toabaita or To`abaita.

Deciding to try to spell words phonetically as they were used in particular language areas, I contacted several Malaitan academics, foreign anthropologists and linguists who had lived and worked in the various Malaitan-language areas, asking their advice on local variations. The word ‘Malaita’ is a problem in itself: strictly speaking it should be Mala. There are academics who insist on using the Mala`ita form, but I regard that battle as long lost. ‘Malaita’ is now too well established to consider anything else. The word that has caused me the most heartache is the name of the provincial headquarters: is it `Aoke or Auki? The modern usage is Auki, but the name comes from nearby `Aoke Island in Langalanga Lagoon, and anyway, the site of `Aoke/Auki was originally called Rarasu. I have held out for `Aoke. I have standardised some things, for instance, the spelling of fataabu, aofia and ramo, three main leadership roles. I doubt that any reader would put up with me using ramo, namo and lamo, all standard versions of the same word in different Malaitan languages.
My anthropologist colleague David Akin suggests that two things are crucial: (a) being consistent in how you spell a particular name; and (b) consistency in orthography. His advice, which I have taken, is that if I write ‘bina’ (which is pronounced with an initial ‘m’ sound, like all ‘b’s’ in Malaitan languages), I should not then write Mbasikana, or Maana’omba somewhere else. Likewise, ‘d’ does not need an ‘n’ written in front of it because all ‘d’ sounds automatically have an ‘n’ sound in front of them. To write ‘nd’ (or ‘mb’) is simply to add an unnecessary letter. Solomon Islanders are aware of this sound, although outsiders may be more comfortable with the ‘nd’ or ‘mb’ rendering.

Another basic rule Akin suggested is that a glottal stop can never be next to a consonant, either before or after, since such sounds do not occur in Malaitan languages. That is, the glottal stop is itself a consonant and consonants are always separated by vowels. (When one sees English consonant pairs such as ‘kw’, ‘gw’, ‘mw’ or ‘ng’ in the rendering of Malaitan words, they represent single consonant sounds in Malaitan languages.) Many of the misspellings of words with glottal stops in them (including leaving initial glottal stops out) happened because Europeans could not hear glottal stops (particularly initial ones) and so left them out or sometimes just stuck them in willy-nilly. They taught Solomon Islanders the same mistaken spellings. Some Solomon Islanders use no glottal stops in their texts, and many others miswrite glottal stops because they have never been taught how to write them properly, even if they are otherwise literate. Sometimes they insert them where they do not belong in an effort to make up for glottal stops that Europeans have always left out. Solomon Islanders and foreigners alike often add glottal stops in between what is really a long vowel: they turn the word ‘laalaa’ into ‘la`ala`a’ because these seem good places to put glottal stops. The Solomon Islands educational system in the past placed little value on local languages, and people were simply trying to find their way on their own. Sadly, the same applies today. The glottal stops are difficult and sometimes subtle. Nonetheless, they can make a big difference in meanings. For example, in most Malaitan languages uru means a harbour (and also means to wade, as in water). Uru is now the name of a harbour in east Kwaio, but ‘uru’ pronounced with an initial glottal stop in the local language there means ‘vagina’. Akin tells me that a timeless source of jokes remains when national radio service messages tell people they will be picked up by a canoe at ‘Vagina Harbour’.
The following is Akin’s short pronunciation guide to Malaitan and Solomon Islands Pijin words (slightly modified from Akin 2013a, xvii):

- **a** pronounced as in ‘mama’;
- **b** pronounced mb, as in ‘timber’;
- **d** pronounced nd, as in ‘candy’;
- **e** pronounced as in ‘egg’;
- **g** pronounced ng as in ‘mango’;
- **i** is pronounced like e in ‘me’;
- **o** pronounced as in ‘go’;
- **u** pronounced as in ‘true’.

A glottal stop (‘) is a consonant and treated as the last letter of the alphabet. In an index, words with glottal stops at their beginning come last. Doubled vowels are pronounced as lengthened and accented (e.g., Maasina Rule).

Many Malaitan names have English origins—Dio (Joe), Falage (Frank), Biri (Billy), Tome or Tomu (Tom), Sale (Charlie) etc. These can be spelt phonetically by Malaitan pronunciations. These personal names vary by area (following consonant and other language shifts). If a person adopted a particular spelling, that is followed here.

I have attempted to standardise geographic terms, but largely I have left personal names as I found them, with a few exceptions where the spelling has wandered too far. Like Akin, if a Malaitan adopted a certain spelling of their personal name, even if it is phonetically incorrect, then that is the spelling I use. Jonathan Fifi`i is a good example. In Kwaio, his surname should be Fifii`i, but he never spelt it that way.

For some personal and place names we only have spellings used by government officers in documents, which are often wrong or inconsistent. I have been able to correct many but not all of these, and no doubt some remain misspelled. Quotations maintain original spellings. Solomon Islands Pijin pronunciations vary on Malaita and in the Solomons, typically by local language conventions. Thus there are no universally ‘correct’ phonetic spellings of Pijin English words, and I generally follow pronunciations I am most familiar with, from central Malaita.