

### 3. Understanding Solomon

Writing the life of Solomon Mamaloni, an account of the social organisation, magic and religion of the people of San Cristoval in the Solomon Islands

Christopher Chevalier

The life of Solomon Sunaone Mamaloni – the first Chief Minister and three-time Prime Minister of Solomon Islands – sheds light on the social, cultural, economic, political and historical forces that have shaped that country leading up to and beyond independence. Like other figures discussed in this volume, Mamaloni was a significant actor in some of the most crucial events in his country’s transition up to and beyond independence. His memory remains deeply cherished by many of those whom he led. He was a mercurial yet human leader, with both vices and endearing qualities, who took on the herculean task of attempting to bind a fragmented country, only lightly touched by the institutions and values of the Westminster tradition, into a nation. In the first part of the chapter, I summarise the life, career and legacy of the Solomon Islands’ most significant and controversial politician; in the second part, I reflect on writing his life story and what I have learned in the process.

**Table 2: The life and career of Solomon Mamaloni – a synopsis**

Born 23 January 1943 at Rumahui, Arosi (West Makira)
Brought up in a Maasina Rule stronghold, 1946–50
Attended Church of Melanesia schools 1952–59, King George VI school 1960–63 and Te Aute College, New Zealand 1964–65
Junior public servant 1966–1968, Assistant Clerk to Legislative Council 1968–70
Elected to seat of Makira in 1970, aged 27
Elected first Chief Minister in 1974, aged 31
Resigned from Parliament 1977
Re-elected to Parliament 1980 for the seat of West Makira, which he held for the next 20 years
Prime Minister three times: 1981–84, 1989–93, and 1994–97
Died aged 56 years on 11 January 2000 from end-stage kidney disease

Source: Author’s compilation.

Mamaloni was born during World War II at Rumahui on the west coast of Makira. He had links to South Malaita through his grandmother and to Guadalcanal through his father’s side, connections he used to his political advantage years

later.<sup>1</sup> His grandfather Suharahu had been executed in 1892 by a Royal Navy Australia Station firing squad for the murder of a white trader in 1889.<sup>2</sup> His father, Joash Sunaone, was born nearby in 1911 and his mother, Bethesda Irageni, was born in Rumahui in 1920. Both were teachers with the South Sea Evangelical Mission (SSEM) and opened a SSEM boarding school at Rumahui; they married in 1939 and their first son was born in 1940.

With the arrival of Allied forces on the neighbouring island of Guadalcanal, Islanders fled to the hills and bush, where Mamaloni was born on 21 January 1943 as the Battle of Guadalcanal reached its climax and the Japanese were repulsed. Two more siblings were born in 1945 and 1946 but Mamaloni was raised separately by his grandmother because he had severe yaws.<sup>3</sup> His parents separated around 1945 and both remarried quickly; Mamaloni himself did not realise who his real parents were until he was five or six years old.<sup>4</sup> From 1947 to 1950, Mamaloni lived at Rumahui, which became a collective stronghold under Maasina Rule, the proto-nationalist movement which protested against British colonial rule between 1946 and 1952. Mamaloni was exposed to anti-colonial propaganda and paramilitary rituals, as well as renewed interest in customary ways.<sup>5</sup> When he was six or seven years old, Mamaloni ran away to live with his father, Sunaone, who managed a copra plantation belonging to Frederick Campbell, a former Commandant of the Native Constabulary who became the first District Officer in Makira (or San Cristoval as it was then known) in 1918.

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1 In parliament Mamaloni said, '... in actual fact I am not a Makira man. I am 'Are'are, from South Malaita, I am from the Guadalcanal Weather Coast.' *Proceedings of the Governing Council*, 9th meeting, 3 April 1973, 163.

2 For sources regarding the execution of his grandfather Suharahu see *Records of the WPHC Secretariat 1875–1914*, Series 4, Inwards Correspondence General, 191/89 (in Auckland); and United Kingdom, Royal Navy, Commander-in-Chief, Australian Station, *RNAS 23 Printed Reports of Islands Cases 1888–92* (in Wellington).

3 Mamaloni had secondary yaws – a severe tertiary infection causing sores in his mouth, face, limbs and back. After World War II, it could be cured by a single dose of penicillin, which became available in mass health campaigns from the 1950s onwards.

4 Different family members attribute his parents' divorce to infidelity on both sides. Divorce was surprisingly common and casual among the Arosi, even amongst fundamentalist Christians like the SSEM. Mamaloni was raised by his grandparents and thought they were his real parents until he was five or six years old. While it is tempting to speculate on the psychological impact of this situation, intra-family adoption was and still is common throughout the Pacific.

5 Inspired by American fraternity and frustrated by British colonial arrogance, the Maasina Ruru (MR) movement was started in 1945 by the predominantly Malaitan Solomon Islands Labour Corps. They demanded better pay, political representation, and the revival of local custom and laws. They refused to pay head taxes, provide labour, or take part in censuses. Collective Maasina 'towns' were established, mainly on Malaita but also on Makira, including Rumahui. The threat to British authority led to outlawing of the movement and mass imprisonment but the movement showed remarkable resilience despite such adversity. Prisoners were eventually released in 1950 and long-overdue reforms were introduced in 1952, including Island Councils. These were viewed as a victory by MR supporters. Although MR was regarded as a failure by the authorities, it was to prove very influential in the minds of Independence leaders. See H. Laracy, *Pacific Protest: The Maasina Rule Movement Solomon Islands 1944–52* (Suva 1983); R. Keesing, 'Politico-Religious Movements and Anticolonialism on Malaita: Maasina Rule in Historical Perspective', *Oceania*, Part 1, 18: 4 (1978), 241–61 and Part 2, 18: 5 (1978), 46–73; M. Scott, *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands* (Durham 2007), Chapter 3.

Thanks to his father's career and an Anglican education, Mamaloni was in the right places at the right times. In 1950 Sunaone moved to manage another plantation for Campbell on the north coast. This provided the opportunity for Mamaloni to attend Anglican schools and get a far better education than at SSEM schools, which taught bible studies and literacy. Mamaloni attended Anglican junior and senior primary schools from 1952 to 1959, including Pawa, 'the Eton of the Pacific', where he forged lifelong connections. He then went to the new government secondary school, King George VI on Malaita from 1960 to 1963, where he was educated with a cohort of future leaders, including Peter Kenilorea. Mamaloni was small, fast, and a gifted soccer player. Popular at school as a prankster, orator, and actor, he was a smart but lazy student who failed his 'O' level exams. Nevertheless, he won a scholarship to Te Aute College, another prestigious Anglican school in New Zealand founded in 1854, famous for its tradition of training Maori leaders and restoring self-reliance and cultural pride.<sup>6</sup> He sat for university entrance exams in 1964 and 1965 but failed these too.<sup>7</sup>

Mamaloni entered the colonial administration as an Executive Officer for Central District from 1966 to 1968.<sup>8</sup> His work was criticised by his superiors and he received probationary reports from 1966 to 1967 until his transfer to the Government Secretariat as Assistant Clerk to the Legislative Council in 1968. This was a lucky break because it gave him knowledge of parliamentary procedures, a great advantage when he was elected to the newly established Governing Council in 1970. In Makira, he traded on his father's name and reputation as a Makira Big Man. Sunaone had been elected to the Makira Council in 1955 and was Council President from 1958 to 1962. He was an appointed member of the Advisory Council from 1958 to 1959 and the Legislative Council from 1960 to 1962. These councils were the first opportunities for political representation allowed after the war.

The youngest member of a new 17-member Governing Council, Mamaloni was 'the 31-year-old firebrand ... humble and vain, penetrating and yet blind ... [and] an engaging personality.'<sup>9</sup> Mamaloni described himself as a 'rather young radical politician' and 'a very strong nationalist'.<sup>10</sup> He repeatedly berated the colonial administration and the racism of white officials, especially 'the Africa

6 J. Wehipeihana, *Te Aute College: Koiri 1854–2004, Celebrating 150 years* (Palmerston North 2005).

7 Failing external exams such as 'O' levels and university entrance exams was not uncommon for Maori and Islander students, many of whom struggled and were significantly disadvantaged in written English.

8 Others who passed matriculation and university entrance exams entered the colonial administration at higher levels and became Administrative Officers and District Officers, which gave them competence and experience that Mamaloni lacked. He worked in Central District administration, primarily in Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands, one of the four Districts – Western, Central, Malaita, and Eastern.

9 *Pacific Islands Monthly*, February (1973), 8.

10 'I am a radical politician' and 'strong nationalist', said Mamaloni during two speeches to the first and second meetings of the Governing Council on 20 July and 27 November 1970.

Club'. He spoke fearlessly and provocatively, deploring colonial ignorance and parsimony. In 1973, he was one of only six members re-elected and was catapulted into leadership; and the poacher turned gamekeeper. He formed the People's Progressive Party and became the country's first Chief Minister from 1974 to 1976 when the Legislative Assembly and ministerial system began. In 1975 he led talks in London on the timetable for self-government and independence.

Mamaloni's first administration was undermined by personal hostilities and labour unrest. He reshuffled his Cabinet three times in two years, a hallmark of his administrations. His leadership was tainted by the Letcher Mint scandal in 1975 over plans to mint commemorative coins with his head on one side; he was forced to resign over his *lèse majesté* but was soon reappointed. He led the country to self-government in January 1976, which was greeted by strikes led by Bart Ulufa'alu.<sup>11</sup> Mamaloni was re-elected in West Makira in June 1976 but his reputation was sufficiently damaged that he narrowly lost the ballot for Chief Minister to newcomer Peter Kenilorea and also the poll for Opposition Leader to Ulufa'alu. His star had truly fallen and he resigned his seat in January 1977.

During his absence, Kenilorea led constitutional talks in London, a task that he was temperamentally much better suited to than Mamaloni, who was averse to formality and monarchy. He returned to politics in 1980, winning back his West Makira seat by a landslide but again losing the ballot for Prime Minister to Kenilorea, but he did become Opposition Leader. He used his political cunning and mastery of parliamentary procedure to undermine Kenilorea and took over as Prime Minister in August 1981, promising a radical agenda. His second administration introduced some notable changes, including a provincial government system, a pro-Asia policy, and diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.

Always a trenchant anti-colonialist, he was also critical of Australia and New Zealand in Pacific Forum and Commonwealth meetings. He loathed protocol, red carpet, and 'sugar diplomacy', preferring the relaxed style and brotherhood of the Melanesian Alliance. His independent foreign policy was exemplified when the *Jeanette Diana*, a US purse seiner, was caught fishing illegally and confiscated. The Reagan government imposed an embargo on Solomons goods and Mamaloni showed courage taking on a superpower; the rewards were improved fishing returns and surveillance for Pacific Island countries.

Domestically, Mamaloni pulled levers but very little happened. His hobby-horse was decentralisation but his experimental provincial super-ministries failed. Motivated by hostility towards foreign advisers and the belief that Solomon

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<sup>11</sup> Bart Ulufa'alu was a University of PNG economics graduate and student leader who became the new firebrand of Solomons politics. He was elected in the 1976 elections prior to independence in 1978. He was Mamaloni's Finance Minister (1981–84) and became Prime Minister (1997–2000) until he was deposed in an armed coup. He died from complications of diabetes in 2007 aged 56, the same age as Mamaloni.

Islanders should control their own country, his plans for localising the public service were more successful but the quality and discipline declined significantly. He introduced legislation to allow logging on customary land that opened the door to unsustainable logging and corrupt Asian loggers. Mamaloni again showed poor judgment in pursuing overseas loans from dubious sources that were fortunately stopped by an independent Monetary Authority. Ministerial disloyalty, multiple reshuffles and resignations were again trademarks, moving Mamaloni to say: ‘I do not enjoy being a Prime Minister because there are no funs [sic] in being one ... to clean up someone else’s droppings is not my idea of “a good time”’.<sup>12</sup>

In 1984 he again lost to Kenilorea in the ballot for Prime Minister for a third time; he could now enjoy the luxury of opposition and allow Kenilorea and his successor, Ezekiel Alebua, to struggle with increasingly difficult economic circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Mamaloni pursued his agenda of decentralisation as Chairman of the Constitution Review Committee in 1987 but implemented none of its recommendations when he was in power between 1989 and 1997, more proof that he preferred the talk to the walk.

He won a resounding victory in the 1989 elections but the hubris was short-lived. Many of his Cabinet were directors of logging companies and the government became increasingly reliant on revenue from unsustainable logging, despite pricing rorts. Two more loans scandals were again only averted by the due diligence of the Central Bank. His government was chaotic and shambolic with lax financial discipline and declining public services. The poor behaviour of Mamaloni and his ministers led his own party, the People’s Alliance Party (PAP), to move against him in November 1990 but he acted swiftly to sack five of his ministers and brought in five opposition members, including the prize catch of Sir Peter Kenilorea. Hailed as a masterstroke, the political coup led to further political intrigue and ministerial horse-trading. During the Bougainville civil war of 1989 to 1998, Bougainvillean militants and civilians were allowed to use the Solomon Islands to evade a blockade imposed by Papua New Guinea. Relations between the two countries became very tense, especially after PNG Defence Forces killed Solomon Islander civilians at the border with Bougainville.

Re-elected in Makira in June 1993, Mamaloni lost the poll for Prime Minister by one vote to Francis Billy Hilly, who led a fragile coalition with a reform agenda to restore government finances and control logging. Mamaloni used his customary cunning, charisma and logging funds to lure cabinet members to

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12 ‘Being Prime Minister is no funs’, letter to the *Solomon Star*, 15 March 1984.

13 Kenilorea was forced to step down as Prime Minister in 1986 over alleged misuse of aid funds for his own village after Cyclone Namu. He became Deputy to Ezekiel Alebua who took over as Prime Minister until the 1989 election.

his side. He also started his own company, SOMMA, to log large areas of Arosi with a Malaysian Chinese contractor. Eventually, the Hilly government fell and Mamaloni began his fourth administration in October 1994. His was the loggers' government, removing restrictions and increasing duty exemptions for logging companies. The country slid further downhill due to high inflation, razor-thin foreign reserves, rising corruption and declining services.

Mamaloni became increasingly erratic and reclusive as his health declined. Despite pleas from his family to retire, he retained his seat in the 1997 election but not the leadership. Voters were sick of corruption and declining services and Ulufa'alu, leading a 'Coalition for Change', won the poll for Prime Minister. For the first time since 1980, Mamaloni was neither leader of the government nor the opposition. However, he became Opposition Leader again in 1999 as long-standing tensions between Guadalcanal and Malaita turned to violence and armed struggle. Mamaloni had implicit faith in traditional reconciliation mechanisms and begged the Ulufa'alu government to resolve tensions with compensation as both he and Kenilorea had done in their administrations.

After 30 years of stress, heavy smoking, alcohol and prodigious betel nut chewing, Mamaloni succumbed to kidney disease. Refusing dialysis in Australia, he went home in November 1999, clearly very ill and tired. He spent his last Christmas at home and then returned reluctantly to Honiara for treatment; he died in a public ward at Central Hospital in January 2000, aged only 56.<sup>14</sup> His death shocked the whole nation and saddened even his opponents. Mourned as 'Solo, Father of the Nation', thousands came to his funeral, the largest ever seen in Solomon Islands. Six months later, the Malaita Eagle Force, an armed coup, overthrew Ulufa'alu and the country descended into civil war and chaos. His family lost many assets due to the tensions after 2000 and the SOMMA logging business fell apart due to family infighting.

A common question or opinion is whether Mamaloni could have prevented the coup in 2000 had he lived. He made strenuous efforts, even on his deathbed in hospital, to get Prime Minister Ulufa'alu to use customary compensation to pay for Guadalcanal demands, then only a matter SI\$2 million. Had Ulufa'alu done so, especially earlier, the armed coup may well not have happened. Had Mamaloni been in office, he would certainly have used compensation, as he had done three times in the 1990s. And had he lived to see the armed coup, he would probably

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14 Mamaloni's early death at 56, while not unusual in Solomon Islands, was premature and due to the stress of high office, his unhealthy habits, and refusal to obey doctors and comply with treatment. It is interesting to speculate how Winston Churchill, another small rotund man with prodigious appetites, would be remembered and regarded had he died at the same age. Had Churchill died in 1930, ten years before he became Prime Minister, he would perhaps be remembered as an orator, arrogant maverick, and a repeated failure who presided over the Battle of Gallipoli and the British economy from 1925 to 1929 up to the Great Depression.

have secured the ballot for Prime Minister based on his experience and links to Malaita and Guadalcanal. But Mamaloni was dead and Kenilorea, the only other statesman capable of national unity, was no longer in politics.

Mamaloni soon became part of legend, his memory kept alive by people in Makira who want to retain the prestige and status of their most famous son and spokesman. Rumours started after his death that he was alive and was part of a secret Makira army preparing to save Makira from the threat of Malaita.<sup>15</sup> Mamaloni's legacy was divisive and contested. He was populist and had great charisma so he was much loved on the street. He was admired for his wit, political savvy, his independence and patriotism, and refusing to kowtow to foreigners, especially Europeans and Australians. Despite his jocular style, he took himself and his name very seriously, regarding himself as synonymous with the country. He was both admired and detested for his Machiavellian politics. His dislike of colonialism led him to ignore sound administration, which led to erratic and inept governance. He presided over a rising tide of corruption and destruction from logging. A former High Commissioner to Solomon Islands assessed his contribution thus:

His legacies had a devastating impact ... [they] fostered a climate of corruption that paved the way for criminal groups to hold the country to ransom ... a culture of corruption in the public arena arose and increased.<sup>16</sup>

His detractors were, and still are, many. He was described by a former Member of Parliament as 'grossly corrupt and inept' and by the Australian government in a leaked document as 'an obstacle to responsible government for as long as he is in power.' A former colonial administrator described him as 'a nasty little shit, a wicked man, a shrewd operator, brilliantly manipulative, amoral since day one, a godfather, a shyster'. But many of his old opponents admired him and remained friends. Ulufa'alu described him as 'distinguished and respected', while Sir Peter Kenilorea said: 'Mamaloni did not lose his casual approach. He blended informality with officialdom. He carried no political grudges. He is worthy of regard as a great political leader.'<sup>17</sup>

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15 While conducting fieldwork at Makira, I was often asked whether I thought or knew that Mamaloni was living underground at the western end of Makira. Michael Scott has analysed the motives for these beliefs about Mamaloni in the afterlife. See M. Scott, 'The Makiran Underground Army: Kastom Mysticism and Ontology Politics in Southeast Solomon Islands, in E. Hviding and K. Rio (eds), *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific* (Wantage 2011), Chapter 6.

16 Detractors' quotes were often provided anonymously. The unflattering Australian government assessment was contained in a briefing dossier for Australian delegates at a Pacific Forum meeting in Honiara in 1994. It was picked up by a journalist and circulated, much to the embarrassment of the Australian Government.

17 Kenilorea gave a very touching funeral oration, *Solomon Star*, 18 January 2000.

## Researching and writing the biography

Over the past four years, I have often been asked and have asked myself, 'Why write the life of Mamaloni?' The idea of writing his life first occurred to me in 2005 as a possible PhD topic but it was the publication of Sir Peter Kenilorea's autobiography that spurred me to action.<sup>18</sup> Mamaloni clearly merited a biography and, having sought permission from both sides of his family, I decided to take up the task. Writing this biography is a 'labour of love', not of the man but of his country. I am also motivated by desire to repay a debt to the Solomon Islands for having given me an adopted daughter and more than 20 years of fascinating work, travel and study. A controversial maverick like Mamaloni is a much better subject for biography than a dull worthy one. Mamaloni was a very engaging character whom I knew personally, having played in his cricket team in Honiara in the early 1990s before gout forced him to give up the game. He would stand at mid-off smoking, relaxing from politics – he much preferred a green wicket to a red carpet. Mamaloni was a wily leg spinner who bamboozled batsmen with high flight and bounce on synthetic wickets, an apt metaphor for his political skills. According to Neil Gunson:

Biography can only be an approximation of a life ... Usually a good biographer goes beyond the life and attempts to illustrate the age in which his or her subject lived.<sup>19</sup>

Researching this biography has provided the opportunity to study the fascinating, complex and diverse history of Solomon Islands in the 19th and 20th centuries. I have called the biography *Understanding Solomon* because Mamaloni provides a fascinating prism through which to understand the country and the history of the islands. His origins and life story provide fascinating insights into the historical, sociocultural, economic and political forces that have shaped the country. His upbringing and rise to power is the story of Solomon Islands from a backwater of British colonialism to independent country and, arguably, a failed state.

*Understanding Mamaloni* combines conventional narrative life with social biography, particularly his life up to 1970 when he entered politics. Social biography combines biography with social and world history to understand the lives, especially those of ordinary men and women, for which there are fragmentary or non-existent sources.<sup>20</sup> Prior to 1970, interviews with his

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18 P. Kenilorea and C. Moore, *Tell It As It Is: Autobiography of Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Kenilorea, KBE, PC, Solomon Islands' First Prime Minister* (Taipei 2008).

19 N. Gunson, 'Telling Pacific Lives: From Archetype to Icon', in B. Lal and V. Luker (eds), *Telling Pacific Lives: Prisms of Process* (Canberra 2008), 1.

20 E. Burke, *How to Write a Social Biography*, available online at [www.cwh.ucsc.edu](http://www.cwh.ucsc.edu).

family and peers were the primary source of information, supplemented with secondary sources on Anglican schools from the *Southern Cross Log*, *Melanesian Messenger* (with the assistance of Dr Terry Brown), and the SSEM.<sup>21</sup> The Eastern District annual reports in the Solomon Islands National Archives provide details on Makira going back to 1918. The National Archives in Honiara also contain Mamaloni's public service and confidential files.

The history of Makira is superbly annotated in a Master's thesis, 'An Ethnohistory of Arosi', which documents virtually all written references to Makira from the arrival of Mendana in 1567 to the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> The anthropology of Makira is well described, first by Charles Fox in 1924 and recently by Michael Scott's ethnography of the Arosi (2007).<sup>23</sup> Scott also provides much useful Solomons and Pacific colonial history but particularly useful are Judith Bennett's magisterial *The Wealth of the Solomons* (1987) and *Pacific Forest* (2000).<sup>24</sup> After 1970, Mamaloni appears in the parliamentary records and newspapers, as well as the memories of political colleagues, friends and the public.<sup>25</sup> There are also 10 printed biographies and autobiographies of Solomon Islanders, a number of them contemporaries of Mamaloni, plus three memoirs of former colonial administrators that provide excellent detail and insights into the colonial mentality.<sup>26</sup> Kenilorea's *Tell It As It Is* is particularly relevant because he and Mamaloni were in school, public service and politics together until 1991 when Kenilorea left politics.

I now have great appreciation for archives and archivists. The National Library of Australia and the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau at The Australian National University are treasure troves, with facilities for digital copying. The National Archives in Honiara is sadly neglected but rewarded diligence and provided moments of elation, such as finding Mamaloni's confidential files and reports by the first District Officer, F.M. Campbell, which I copied for his family in Makira.

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21 Church of Melanesia journals such as *Southern Cross Log* and *Melanesian Messenger*, sourced through Rev. Terry Brown, former Bishop of Malaita, and the Solomon Islands National Archives. SSEM history from C. Moore, *Florence Young and the Queensland Kanaka Mission 1886–1906: Beginnings of an Indigenous Pacific Church* (Honiara 2009).

22 S. Sayes, *An Ethnohistory of Arosi, San Cristoval*, MA thesis (Auckland 1976). Sayes' thesis is an excellent source of written materials on Arosi; Sayes was assisting Dr Charles Fox in his final years.

23 Two essential sources on the anthropology of Makira are C. Fox, *The Threshold of the Pacific: an Account of the Social Organization, Magic and Religion of the People of San Cristoval in the Solomon Islands* (New York 1924); and, more recently, M. Scott, *The Severed Snake*, Chapter 3.

24 Two magisterial works are J. Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800–1978*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 3 (Honolulu 1987); and J. Bennett, *Pacific Forest: a History of Resource Control and Contest in the Solomon Islands, c.1800–1997* (Cambridge 2000).

25 Parliamentary sources – Proceedings of Governing Council (1970–74), Legislative Assembly (1974–78), National Parliament (1978 to present), available at the Solomon Islands Parliamentary Library, Honiara.

26 Three very informative memoirs by colonial administrators are T. Russell, *I Have the Honour To Be: a Memoir of a Career Covering Fifty-two Years of Service for British Overseas Territories* (Spennymoor 2003); J. Tedder, *Solomon Island Years: a District Administrator in the Islands 1952–1974* (Stuarts Point 2010); J. Smith, *An Island in the Autumn* (2010).

Perhaps the archival coup was finding the records of Suharahu, Mamaloni's great grandfather, who was executed without trial by a Royal Navy Australian Station firing squad at Rumahui in 1892.<sup>27</sup>

I conducted six months of very enjoyable fieldwork between 2009 and 2011 in Honiara and Makira, Mamaloni's home island, interspersed with internet, library, and archival research in Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. I interviewed nearly 160 people. Supporters, opponents, family and friends have been primary sources of original material, including former Governor-Generals and Prime Ministers, who were excellent and gracious informants, as indeed was almost everyone I interviewed. One former Prime Minister and another Opposition Leader refused to be interviewed, still furious about what Mamaloni had done to the country. There were many anecdotes and stories about Mamaloni, some apocryphal, others embellished, with many examples of his famous wit and informality.

**Table 3: Summary of interviews conducted by Christopher Chevalier (to March 2013)**

Family members	34
Fellow Makirans	24
Friends and school mates	13
Political peers	9
Colleagues and supporters	19
Critics and opponents	23
Neutrals	10
Academics	15
Former administrators	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>

Source: Author's compilation.

## Navigating the hidden tracts

How a biographer finds his or her own way through the deliberately hidden tracts of a private life becomes a challenge that will be recognised by many.<sup>28</sup>

Many informants were happy to provide details about 'Solo' as a private and family man. Mamaloni was always fond of women and related easily to them, especially pretty ones. He had four partners who each bore him three children.

<sup>27</sup> RNAS and WPHC references (see fn 2).

<sup>28</sup> N. Gunson, 'Telling Pacific Lives', xi.

In a highly Christianised country, he attracted much criticism for his messy personal life and revolving-door marriages. There is anecdotal evidence of infidelity and domestic violence, not unusual in marriages throughout the Pacific, particularly among powerful men. But the biography will not intrude too closely on this area of his life, heeding the advice that ‘good biographers should go up to the bedroom door but do not go beyond’.<sup>29</sup>

Interviews provided original and fascinating insights not available from the public record. Not all details could be corroborated or justify publication, including reports of domestic violence and infidelity. This is particularly relevant in a Melanesian compensation culture and one reason that I have given draft chapters to other researchers and key family members for correction of facts and advice. Respondents are often unreliable about dates and events, which is where newspapers and magazines have proved essential, as well as providing detail, commentary, and quotes. Although, as Clive Moore points out, they are unreliable as single historical sources, I have used print media to assemble the factual narrative, a form of bricolage.<sup>30</sup> I have then sequenced the chapters by decades rather than by broad themes, which would have been another possible approach.

**Table 4: Newspapers and magazines relating to the Solomon Islands**

<i>BSIP Newssheet</i> (Government Information Service) – weekly government newspaper (to 1975)
<i>Solomon News Drum</i> (Government Information Service), renamed the <i>Solomon Star</i> in 1982
<i>Kakamora Reporter</i> 1970–75 (private radical paper)
<i>Solomons Toktok</i> 1977, first tabloid (mildly sensationalist paper)
<i>Solomon Star</i> 1982–2000
<i>Island Business</i> 1980–2000
<i>Pacific Islands Monthly</i> 1946–2000

Source: Author’s compilation.

## Learning from biography

‘[H]istory ... should always be tempered by sensitive appreciation of context, contingency and circumstance.’<sup>31</sup>

29 A. Sebba, *That Woman: The Life of Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor* (St Martin’s Griffin 2012).

30 On the unreliability of newspapers, see C. Moore, ‘Biography of a Nation: Compiling a Historical Dictionary of the Solomon Islands’, in B. Lal and V. Luker (eds), *Telling Pacific Lives*, 279–80.

31 N. Gunson, ‘Telling Pacific Lives’, xvii.

Writing the biography has been a journey of learning and understanding about Mamaloni, the Solomons, and also myself. If his life story is a prism on the Solomon Islands, it is inevitably filtered through the lenses of my own experience and attitudes. My research has taught me a more nuanced understanding of colonialism, Christianisation, and commerce. I particularly admire Mamaloni for fighting against racism and colonialism throughout his career. Britain was always a reluctant colonial master in the Pacific, overseeing such a vast area with little commercial value and a great distance from Whitehall. Compared to the French, Germans, and Australians, the British were more subtle and experienced colonialists. Their different impacts and political heritages resulted in the various political systems in Melanesia today.

Solomon Islands politics is highly personalised and individuals appear to be responsible for success and failure when in fact they are only part of larger forces beyond their control. The road to independence is a case in point, with Mamaloni and Kenilorea credited with struggling to bring the country to self-government and independence. But independence was a well-travelled route and, in the words of the last Governor of the Solomon Islands, Sir Colin Allen: 'It is not true that there was a struggle for independence. If there was any struggle, it was on the part of Her Majesty's Government to get them to independence.'<sup>32</sup>

The reverse is also true, that is, that politicians appear to be more responsible for failures than they deserve. For example, the government of Kenilorea and Alebua from 1984 to 1989 had to manage an economy experiencing declining terms of trade, as did most other Pacific countries. This allowed Mamaloni to claim superior economic credentials during his stewardship between 1981 and 1984. Given the performance of his 1989 to 1993 and 1994 to 1997 governments, this is ironic – even laughable. But it also raises the larger question of how much leaders of small countries in a global economic context can be held responsible for the economic fortunes of the country. Mamaloni was only one player in a world where much larger historical and economic forces were operating. Where he can be held personally responsible was in being so erratic, careless and reckless with his own resources and those of the nation. '*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*' (to understand all is to forgive all) is a useful caution when making judgments.

Opinions and judgments can be upturned or moderated by a new fact or piece of the puzzle. One example is Mamaloni's exam failures at King George VI and Te Aute, which I attributed to laziness or inattention to detail, and certainly not

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32 B. Standish, 'The Struggle for Independence', *Melanesian Neighbours: the Politics of PNG, the Solomon Islands and the Republic of Vanuatu*, Basic Paper No. 9, Legislative Research, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, (Canberra 1984), 104.

due to lack of intelligence. However, my visit to New Zealand and interviews with informants who had been to Te Aute College revealed that Maori and Islander students often failed matriculation; they did not sit exams well and were disadvantaged in written English.<sup>33</sup> Details from his exam results and probation reports in the administration reveal that his English was 'only fair'. Moreover, exam results mattered less than they do today with many more graduates and greater competition. What mattered more was that Mamaloni left a prestigious overseas school as an avid reader with a lifelong interest in history and strong confidence in indigenous culture and ownership.

Psychological interpretations are irresistible when trying to understand one's subject. According to Niel Gunson:

Clinical study of the biographical subject enables the historian to understand the workings of the subject's mind and prompts him or her to ask particular questions and look for particular signs. The historian becomes a profiler.<sup>34</sup>

Beneath his benign exterior, Mamaloni was a complex character affected by a number of psychological factors and events. The severe yaws he suffered as a child left him in the care of gentle women and unable to play robustly for several years. He had a difficult relationship with his mother, who did not look after him, and he had an ambivalent attitude to women – relaxed and charming to some but callous and cruel to others. He was very short and displayed aspects of 'short man syndrome'.<sup>35</sup> Like many politicians he suffered from hubris. David Owen has described hubris syndrome as an occupational hazard of leaders. Even before when he was elected to Parliament, he made great play of being synonymous with the wisdom of Solomon and the country itself.<sup>36</sup> In each of his administrations, he overestimated his powers and was damaged by scandal. Ill health also affected his behaviour; he became increasingly fractious, tetchy, and difficult as his medical problems grew.<sup>37</sup>

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33 Noel Vickridge, former headmaster of Te Aute College, interview, 8 March 2013.

34 N. Gunson, 'Telling Pacific Lives', 6.

35 Short men have been found to be most jealous in the presence of powerful, tall, strong and rich potential rivals. Mamaloni displayed traits of short men, such as being prone to bouts of aggression, showing off and keeping a close eye on their wives or girlfriends.

36 David Owen and Jonathan Davidson define hubris syndrome as a personality disorder acquired in high office. It is characterised by excessive confidence, becoming 'impossible' and not listening to others. D. Owen and J. Davidson, 'Hubris Syndrome: an Acquired Personality Disorder? A study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years', *Brain*, Oxford Journals (2009) brain.awp008.full.pdf.

37 David Owen's analysis of leadership in American presidents and British prime ministers also shows how health and decision making are related. D. Owen, *Sickness and Health: Illness in Government and Leadership in the Last 100 Years* (London 2011).

As human beings, we live our lives without knowing how events will actually turn out. But to the biographer, trends and traits become evident in retrospect. As Neil Ascherson writes:

A biographer's classic problem is an acute case of hindsight. It is easy to judge in retrospect and to link events over time. Knowing the end means that many previous episodes can seem to converge towards events ... the omens are easy to pick out.<sup>38</sup>

For example, Mamaloni's disregard for convention led to repeated scandals that seriously undermined his credibility and the integrity of his governments. It is notable that he was never re-elected immediately after each of his terms. His superiors in the colonial administration had noted that he did not do what he was asked to do and did not do his job properly; this neatly and prophetically describes his performance as Prime Minister.

Hopefully, *Understanding Mamaloni* will be well enough researched, have few factual errors, and have interpretations that are well supported. I hope that I will do justice to the life of a man who was the most interesting and significant leader that Solomon Islands has so far produced. Ultimately, the 'best one can do is to be sincere, to gather all the information that is humanly possible and, while enthusiasm lasts, set it down.'<sup>39</sup>

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38 N. Ascherson, 'An Acute Case of Hindsight, a Classic Biographer's Problem', *London Review of Books* (2010), 102.

39 T. Pocock, *Alan Moorhead* (2011), 207.

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