2. Historical background to the conflict

When human beings first arrived on the Solomon Islands of the south-west Pacific some 29 000 years ago, one large island joined the islands of Bougainville to the western islands of the Solomons, with some other large islands sitting to the south and east. As ice melted in subsequent millennia, the Solomon Islands physically fragmented into 900 islands and atolls that are now home to 500 000 people. Most of them still live in some 4000 village communities or hamlets. Cultural diversity was increased by Austronesian migrations to the Solomons from the north-west three or four millennia ago. Later Austronesian invasions swept backwards as Polynesian migrations from the south and east. The nation today is 94 per cent Melanesian and 4 per cent Polynesian (a majority on a number of the islands), with significant Chinese, European and Gilbert Islander (Micronesian) minorities. Racial differences are great—from the pitch-black people of the Western Province who are related to neighbours in Bougainville to much lighter-skinned Melanesians and Polynesians in the east. At least 64 living languages of many dialects are spoken in Solomon Islands (Tryon and Hackman 1983). Pidjin (English) is the widely spoken lingua franca. Solomon Islands, like Melanesia in general, is an extreme case of ethnic fractionalisation. Melanesia accounts for about one-thousandth (certainly less than two-thousandths) of the world's population, but one-quarter of its language stock (Fraenkel 2004a:20).

The state today is still not central to most of the day-to-day existence of the overwhelming majority of the population, who live in villages distant from towns. Most villagers continue to draw most of their needs for food, water, security, recovery from natural and human disasters and recreation from village, church and kinship-based social systems that are little buttressed by national and international markets or by state taxation and state service provision. Vulnerable villagers do not go without food and shelter for the want of state welfare. The systems that still care for them predate the state; few villagers fall through gaps in those systems of provision compared with the numbers that fall through gaps in Western state-based welfare systems. While there are urbanisation dynamics that are making all this less true, there have also been since the 1980s, and earlier, settlement dispersal dynamics whereby families start up new hamlets when villages become so large as to make access to gardens a challenge (Hviding 1996:77).

The focus of this book is on problems of violence and how institutions of land disputation, forestry, gender and many others were involved in its spread. As

we diagnose all these problems, there is a tendency to lose sight of the basic strengths of a society. At various points in our text, we attempt to arrest the social problem narrative to take stock of various peacebuilding strengths that are also in play. In most villages most of the time, the experience of villagers is overwhelmingly one of egalitarian inclusion rather than exclusion (White 2007). Villagers enjoy multidimensional opportunities for participation in village cultural life, religious life, social life and political decision making. Finally, we indulge one sweeping observation of the extraordinary *joie de vivre*, especially among children of course, that is so much more palpable as one walks around Solomon Islands villages compared with wandering around towns in the West. There is a collaborative sociability of Solomon Islands villages and hamlets that is palpable most of the time.

Figure 2.1 Children of Chief Moro's village in the resource-poor Weather Coast region of Solomon Islands, August 2005

Photo: David Jones

Yet because of the diversity of Solomon Islands cultures, general statements about them are hazardous. Even within a single locale, Edvard Hviding's (1996:xiv) ethnography of Marovo Lagoon, which is organised around the trope of 'flow', evinces a 'strong element of fluidity in the ways that social life is organized in Marovo [New Georgia]'. For Hviding, this flow is partly about the continuous movement of the sea and of people on it in archipelagic societies. Roger Keesing

(1992:vii) cautions about oversimplification as an inevitable risk in writing long books about the inland Kwaio of Malaita, given their 'flexibly adaptive cultural tradition' (see also White 2007:2). Hviding's (1996) ethnography shows that much of the dynamism in Solomons society is driven by opening up new networks of inter-island travel that connect one set of interactions between coastal people and the 'bush' people of the interior of one island to those interactions on another island. The conflicts that are the topic of this book are very much about social change driven by such inter-island and coastal–interior interaction. The glimpses we give in this text of their inadequately documented complexity and flux are very partial.

Our methodological dilemma in writing a book like this is that one comes to realise that one knows enough about the diversity of Solomon Islands societies to see that one-size-fits-all policies will play very differently at different places and times. Yet one does not know enough about even one point in Solomons space-time to understand what would amount to successful mediation of peacebuilding efforts in that one context, let alone the others scattered across time among these 900 islands. Still, glimpses of diversity help us grasp the disparate character of local mediation of peacebuilding efforts that an international intervention might enable. Methodological humility requires us not to pretend that we are capable of summarising for the reader the nature of the diversity of Solomons social systems across time. Instead, our text is about giving enough glimpses of war making and peacebuilding at key points in Solomons space and time to inform an understanding of factors that have contributed to peace and war and to critique extant theories of peacebuilding in a way that leads to constructive alternatives. According to our approach, those alternatives must be grounded in greater methodological humility than current peacebuilding practice.

The first key moments in time on which we focus are that Solomon Islands became a British Protectorate in 1893 and gained independence in 1978. While Solomon Islands was never one of Britain's strategically prioritised colonies, in World War II it actually did become strategically important. Few places on Earth are more remote from the West and few places have been more attractive to anthropologists because of how culturally different Melanesian gift economies are from the West and from one another. Yet, like Bougainville, Solomon Islands today is far more consistently and committedly Christian than the population of any Western society. Christian traditions of forgiveness and their blending with indigenous practices of reconciliation have proved useful in transcending outbreaks of warfare that have been exacerbated by other centrifugal impulses of the global political economy. Christianity has been the one impact of globalisation on the Solomons that has been unifying. We will see that other global forces interacted with local schisms in the Solomons in ways that increased disintegration and inter-island and inter-communal violence. For

all nations, a unified national identity is a historically recent accomplishment. Even in 1870, a decade after today's great power, the United States, had a massive civil war, the great power of that time, France, was a 'nation' where most country dwellers still did not consider themselves members of the French nation (Weber 1976). Nation building remains a continuing process, even in countries where national identity appears relatively well established. In 2009, there are nevertheless few countries that have travelled less distance down the road towards forging a unified national identity than Solomon Islands (Dinnen 2007a; Jourdan 1995b).

The first widespread contacts with Europeans were with whalers. These were the first of a sequence of disintegrative contacts with global forces. At the same time, we will see that there were integrative, pacifying contacts as well, starting with the church, and most recently with an international peacekeeping intervention. Commercially ruthless whaling by the early nineteenth century had decimated Atlantic stocks, attracting whalers finally to the far reaches of the south-west Pacific. The most valued things the whalers traded to Solomon Islanders were steel axes; the most valued trades in return were of women (Bennett 1987:30). Slavery seems to have long existed in many Solomon Islands societies. Women captured in warfare had been used as, among other things, prostitutes. When the demand for sex work from slaves increased—as it did from the whalers—we can speculate that this might have motivated increased warfare in hope of capturing more slaves. When traders started selling guns to both sides in such conflicts, the warfare could have become more bloody (Bennett 1987:43, 55, 81–2). Whether warfare, and the lives lost in it, increased significantly as a result, we know not. We do know that venereal diseases did increase, though this decimation was controlled in places like the New Georgia Group of islands, where the practice was to kill women infected by the whalers (Bennett 1987:70).

The prized axes that the whalers, and later the trading posts, sold to Melanesians have been estimated by rather credible early ethnography to have increased male productivity by more than one-third (Salisbury 1962:109–10, 220). Compared with the stone adzes they replaced, steel blades could more quickly clear grounds for planting, fell trees, hew canoes and construct houses and even shell money. This was an economy in which increased productivity did not expand accumulation of goods but rather was transformed into increased status (as by big-men giving gifts). Status was also acquired by ceremonial activity and headhunting. These activities did increase as a result of the reduced time required for subsistence cultivation enabled by steel (Fraenkel 2004a:22). Men not tempted to use their newly acquired spare time for headhunting

nevertheless had to use it to defend against headhunting, pre-empt and avenge it. The globalisation of commercial whaling and of trading diasporas in its wake was the first European impact that motivated new wars in the Solomons.

Between 1870 and 1910, about 30 000 Solomon Islanders, mostly Malaitans, were taken, sometimes voluntarily, often not, to work as 'indentured labourers' on plantations in Queensland, but also in Fiji and other destinations (Corris 1973). The most cherished things returnees from Queensland and Fiji brought were muskets to strengthen their group's position in inter-communal conflicts. Communal divisions were opened up by indigenous 'passage masters' who in effect were entrepreneurs of slave entrapment. While we will see that the plantation economy led to pacification of inter-communal conflict, the plantations themselves were violent places, as Judith Bennett's (1993) research shows. Violence against masters and overseers who inflicted beatings was a common form of resistance by plantation workers—violence that Bennett interprets in the frame of James C. Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak'. These can be read as nascent forms of resistance to those in authority who control the money, the state and organised violence—resistance from below that becomes more organised and political in later periods of Solomons history.

The Australian colonies pressured Britain to annex Solomon Islands because of concern about Germany's presence and intentions in the region. A new global trade reality—increasing copra prices—also made the Solomons an attractive site for English investment, channelled through Australian trading firms such as Burns Philp, in a plantation economy. Pacification of what Fraenkel (2004a) called the headhunting era was necessary for security of this investment. A combination of the guns of the colonial administration and the sermons of missionaries preaching apology and forgiveness as an alternative to blood feud was promulgated with vigour and effectiveness in ending the headhunting era before the outbreak of World War II. It had ended 50 years earlier in parts of Guadalcanal and New Georgia. War canoes were smashed and guns surrendered to the colonial authorities.

Two great cataclysms of the mid-twentieth century decimated that peaceful side of the promise of the plantation era. The first was the depression that pushed copra prices down to 7 per cent of their 1926 peak by 1935 (Fraenkel 2004a:29). The second was savage fighting between Japanese and American imperial armies that destroyed plantation infrastructure, making it mostly uneconomic to re-establish after the war. This unusually intensive affliction of northern *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond 1997) in the 1940s, especially in Guadalcanal, uprooted communities, disrupted subsistence agriculture and introduced epidemics, thereby contracting the Solomons' population as well as its economy. Collapse of the plantation economy is one major reason for the underdevelopment that saw Solomon Islands ranked 128 out of 177 countries on the United Nations'

Human Development Index in the late 2000s even after some years of impressive post-conflict growth. Nevertheless, between 1960 and 1965, copra still provided an average of 88 per cent of Solomon Islands' exports (Fraenkel 2004a:32) and most paid workers remained Malaitan plantation labourers.

In the 1970s, timber and fish were catching up to copra in importance as exports. In the 1980s, fish became the dominant export; in the 1990s, timber became dominant. This history of extreme underdevelopment and exploitation, by both foreigners and Solomon Islanders from other ethnic groups, was a root cause of the armed conflict that started in 1998. Another was a new wave of natural resource plunder in recent decades by Malaysian, Taiwanese and Korean timber multinationals. Mostly this involved zero value adding to the felled timber in the Solomons, soil erosion and decimation of environments and village livelihoods. Most decisively, corrupt payments by competing logging interests split open pre-existing political cleavages in Solomons society, as well as creating new ones, contributing to the armed violence we now describe. Large numbers of indigenous beneficiaries of logging—concentrated in elites, but not exclusively elites—supported unsustainable logging that gave away so much of the future of the nation to foreigners at bargain prices.

There are few contexts more remote than the Solomons from where we perceive the forces of global political economy to be dominant. Yet here we still find global capitalist dynamics pillaging environments and livelihoods, contributing to poverty, disintegration and warfare. And we see international institutions ranging from the church to the United Nations supporting peacebuilding efforts as well.

Roots of tension between Malaita and Guadalcanal

World War II attracted many Malaitans, whose agricultural land was overpopulated, to move to Guadalcanal to work for the US military; many stayed and more followed in the post-war decades. Subsequent British colonial policy increased incentives to stay by concentrating infrastructure investment where the export investment opportunities were—mainly Guadalcanal, but also Western Province. Malaita, by far the most populous province, was neglected by all forms of private and public investment, sometimes because of the obstacles Malaitan landowners put in the way of investors. So, increasing numbers of hardworking Malaitans moved to the opportunities in Honiara and environs (Guadalcanal), as well as to commercial nodes such as Gizo (Western Province). The problem was not only slow development, but resentment over uneven development. The people of Guadalcanal came to view Malaitans as

disrespectful guests on their land. One of the Guadalcanal militia commanders, George Gray, explained the importance of this disrespect as a grievance that led to violence:

> The most important issue that inspired me to join the Guadalcanal militancy was what I perceived as the disrespect that settlers (especially Malaitans) had towards our people and our land. Since independence our people have been murdered, our cultural sites desecrated, our land settled without permission and our people have been treated as second class citizens in the capital city, which is located on our island. I had seen these things since I was a kid and they offended me. (Gray 2002, quoted in Fraenkel 2004a:50)

When marriage occurred between mostly patrilineal Malaitans and mostly matrilineal Guales (people of Guadalcanal), the result was a marriage in which a claim to land was inherited either through both partners or through neither. The latter is particularly likely to engender a sense of disenfranchisement and structural grievance. But also when patrilineal Malaitans[1] married women from matrilineal societies, indigenes often resented this as marriage to obtain their land. Guadalcanal male leaders were often tempted to take money for the 'sale' of land to Malaitan settlers. These were often deals for short-term gain for these men; the land was usually in no sense owned by them as individuals but was owned by a matrilineage of which the female leaders were the custodians.

> [M]any Guadalcanal people (predominantly males) from areas around Honiara were selling customary land to those from other provinces, even though Guadalcanal is a matrilineal society where females are regarded as the custodians of land. Many individuals were selling land without consulting other members of their line (*laen*, tribe), often causing arguments among landowners. What is important to note here is that many of those who purchased land did so legitimately either through customary procedures or through legal means. The sale of land has, over the years, been resented by a younger generation of Guadalcanal people who view the act as a sale of their 'birth right'. (Kabutaulaka 2001:15)

This was a source of profound cultural misunderstanding. When Guale militants started evicting Malaitans from Guadalcanal, Malaitans sometimes viewed this as uncompensated eviction from lands they had paid to share, while the militants saw it as termination of invitations to the Malaitans to be guests on their land. Young people rebelled against elders who took money for land that they did not own in any continuing sense because in much of Solomon Islands people do not own land, but rather the land owns people who are there to take care of it

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1   Many parts of Malaita are actually cognatic with patriliny dominating.

(Moore 2007:189). Because Malaitans were believed to have been disrespectful guests, they had forfeited their right to stay. There were common cultural misunderstandings—for example, when Malaitans demanded compensation payment for seemingly innocent flirtation with Malaitan girls, for stepping over the legs of Malaitan women or for swearing. This fed into ethnic caricatures by one group of the other: Malaitans were violent and aggressive; Guales were lazy and unproductive (Allen 2007:186).

In Matthew Allen's (2007:130) interviews with Guadalcanal militants, it became clear that unfair treatment in employment and educational opportunities was another of the grievances that justified their violence. Allen found motives for Guale militancy to be varied, but to cluster into two groups: 'development equity' and 'cultural respect'.

The conflict and its stages

The Solomon Islands conflict from 1998 to 2003 is at the bottom end of armed conflicts in terms of people killed. Robert Muggah (2004:5) of the respected Small Arms Survey of the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva concluded that the conflict resulted in the intentional deaths of 150–200 people and 430–60 non-fatal small arms-related injuries. A common underestimate of the number killed is 100. This number could have resulted from the work of the Missing Persons Committee of mid-1998 on which Archbishop Adrian Smith played a prominent role. It named 100 people who were known to be missing well before the end of 1998. But there were also large numbers of people known to have been killed (and not on this list of 100 missing). And far larger numbers of people were probably killed after the work of the Missing Persons Committee was complete. In the early stages of the conflict, there was political pressure to downplay the number of Malaitans killed in an effort to contain the risk of a Malaitan counterattack. So probably the estimate of 200 we have coded for this conflict is too low; Archbishop Smith thinks it is less than half a realistic estimate.

This was a conflict that was a source of regional instability precisely in the period when the political settlement to the war in neighbouring Bougainville was being negotiated. The violence triggered one of the longer international peacekeeping missions the world has seen—in its eighth year at the time of writing with no exit imminent—as well as one of the most substantial in terms of personnel and resources deployed in proportion to the size of the country. We conclude that without this intervention, a much larger death toll could have occurred.

There were two major stages to the conflict. The first was an indigenous uprising initially among young men from the impoverished Weather Coast region of Guadalcanal, with the active involvement of political leaders such as Guadalcanal Premier, Ezekiel Alebua. This was the insurgency of the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), previously called the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army. Its leaders had the objective of driving settlers from Malaita off the island of Guadalcanal. Late in 1999, the second phase began with the creation of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), initially to defend Malaitan interests against the Guale rebels—something the government of Bart Ulufa'alu appeared to be incapable of doing. In a joint operation with the Malaitan-dominated paramilitary wing of the Royal Solomon Islands Police, the MEF effectively staged a coup that resulted in the coerced resignation of the incumbent prime minister on 5 June 2000. The IFM, with the notable exception of Harold Keke and his followers, and the MEF signed a peace treaty in Townsville, Australia, in October 2000. But most arms were not surrendered and the two militias splintered into a variety of armed criminal groups who indulged in banditry, intimidation and payback against a backdrop of growing impunity facilitated by the effective collapse of the police force.

Figure 2.2 MEF commander Jimmy Rasta Lusibaea (centre) and other MEF members

Photo: Courtesy of David Hegarty

The militias bankrupted the state and left citizens in Honiara, the Weather Coast and in a small number of other pockets of conflict feeling no more secure from violence after the Townsville treaty than they had been before. Led by Australia, the Pacific Islands Forum finally yielded to pleas from the prime minister and the Parliament of Solomon Islands to send in troops to disarm the marauding militias. Peaceful conditions consolidated as soon as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) arrived. RAMSI quickly evolved into an ambitious statebuilding intervention, though hardly one targeted on the diagnosed drivers of the conflict. In Chapter 3, we describe step by step the unfolding of the fighting.