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Pilot Fish Rock, or, How to Live Large on a Small Island in Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands

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A Large, Small Island

In this chapter I address a particular question raised in the Introduction, which involves the extent to which islands are not just islands but also nodes in economic, social and political networks. I do this by focussing on a rather small island that has a very central location and position—geographically, historically, politically, economically—in the large lagoon of Marovo in the western Solomon Islands. The island discussed in this chapter is by some definitions small, but in terms of its multitude of relationships and their spatial extent, that small island is big indeed. The Marovo Lagoon itself is famous as a troubled biodiversity hotspot, in which agents of global conservation have competed for attention and influence with multinational logging companies over several decades, and in which some very unique configurations of local politics and economy have developed in response to diverse external cross-pressures (Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2000; Hviding 2003a, 2006, 2011, 2015a; Duke et. al. 2007). What is less well known from this complex and interesting scene of the present is the particular role played by the small island of Tusu Marovo (literally 'Marovo Island') in

the great lagoon's long-term history and political dynamics. It is somewhat notable that on this island neither conservationists nor loggers ever gained substantial footholds, and as for the interests of the latter, Tusu Marovo anyhow has very few trees of commercial value. However, echoing a history of active external engagements, such as enduring interactions with 'Sydney traders' and other European trading vessels that were reported ever since the first nineteenth-century arrivals of ships in the lagoon (Findlay 1877: 773), the people of Tusu Marovo have since the 1980s welcomed a series of collaborative research efforts, some of long duration (Hviding 1996; Duke et. al. 2007). The island has been my own main place of residence throughout several years of fieldwork beginning in 1986 (Hviding 2012). I have been graciously welcomed by the people of Tusu Marovo, who have fed me, housed me, educated me and incorporated me into their social lives. It is from this vantage point that I write, while also referring to published indigenous views of this remarkable island and its history by my close friend and age mate Wilson Liligeto (2006), who researched, wrote and published a book on his own island's history in dialogue with elders, and in conjunction with his career as a senior civil servant.

Tusu Marovo is an entity of several names and several distinct roles, in local and foreign histories. The initial, logical observation is that—as for quite a few other ostensibly small islands in the Pacific—Tusu Marovo is much, much more than its small land mass would indicate. The island is small only in a topographical sense. As with other small islands of its kind, the sociality, economy and history of Tusu Marovo are far bigger than its land. One cannot even attempt to understand the large and complex socio-political scale of Marovo Lagoon without some knowledge of tiny Tusu Marovo. This observation is not confined to Marovo Lagoon; the account I provide here of Tusu Marovo and its place in the world applies to a considerable degree also to the only slightly larger island of Nusa Roviana, located at the far side of New Georgia from Marovo. Nusa Roviana or 'Roviana Island' mirrors Tusu Marovo in being emblematic of a large lagoon area and of a distinctive, linguistically defined district with a history of powerful regional influence (see, for example, Walter and Sheppard 2000, 2017). The significant regional roles of those two equally 'small' islands have their foundations in the fact that in the history of the Marovo and Roviana lagoons it is not the land but the sea that has been—and still is—the scene for mobility, interaction and expansion. Today, the seashores, lagoons, seaways and ocean that were once realms of overseas trading, raiding and headhunting, in and

outwards from the western Solomon Islands, constitute a large-scale field of regional logistics, inter-island marriage and long-term social and political alliances (Hviding 1996, 2014a, 2015b). Throughout these stages of history and transformations of society, polity and economy, the small island of Tusu Marovo has remained big, and everyday life on the island has retained a somewhat large-scale quality.

The Making of Pilot Fish Rock and Tusu Marovo

In his book about Tusu Marovo and its people, indigenous historian Wilson Liligeto (2006: 1) writes of his home:

> Tusu Marovo, or Marovo Island, is a tiny piece of mostly hilly land … Despite the island's small size and very limited arable land, it is in many ways the focal point of the entire Marovo Lagoon region.

In the colonial and mission histories of Marovo Lagoon, Tusu Marovo has the distinction of being the location of the first regular trading spot for European ships and of the first Seventh-Day Adventist church, as well as being the home of the first Bible translators of Marovo.

How did a small island become such a big place? As I have already commented, while much has been written about the Marovo Lagoon as a contested wonder of global biodiversity, its homonymous small island is not well known beyond local appreciations such as Liligeto's. From having lived on Tusu Marovo through most of my total of 43 months of fieldwork in Marovo Lagoon, I shall begin to sketch the long-term trajectories of environment, population and political dynamics on and of the island, thereby to disentangle some connections and complexities of this small volcanic peak that has such a central place in a much larger world. Figure 4.1 shows the location of the island at a central point in the lagoon, facing the raised barrier reef that constitutes its outer boundary.

Figure 4.1: Map of Marovo Lagoon showing districts and a selection of main villages

Source: University of Bergen Cartography.

There was a time when there was no 'Marovo Island'. The characteristic peaked topographic silhouette so visible from afar to anyone travelling the wide central lagoon was known instead as Patu Laiti or 'Pilot Fish Rock'. This triangle-shaped island with sections of narrow outlying land measures not much more than 7 km^2 altogether. It is separated from the large mountainous island of Vangunu by a narrow, mangrove-fringed and shallow but largely navigable channel named Gaio (see Figure 4.2). Yet it is regarded as a totally separate entity from the main island. It falls into the vernacular category of *tusu*, which means 'island' relative to a land mass such as Vangunu, which is classified as *soloso*—a particular Marovo conceptualisation of territorially large-scale dimension that refers to continental islands with tall mountains, or even 'the world'.

Figure 4.2: Tusu Marovo and its associated lagoon and barrier reef from the air, facing due north from above the Vangunu mainland, 2010
Source: Photograph by Edvard Hviding.

This particular position of Tusu Marovo is the source of its original name—it is situated just in front of the 'head' of Vangunu, and is in that regard said to be 'just like the pilot fish that swims just ahead of, and with, the shark'. A diversion into maritime imagery is required at this stage. The close association of pilot fish (the small trevally *Naucrates ductor*) with sharks would seem to be well known in the traditions of tropical coastal peoples and in maritime popular culture but insufficiently studied by marine science. A literature search yields a few not exactly up-to-date published references on aspects of this inter-species symbiotic association, with an emphasis more on sharks than on their small companions (e.g. Hubbs 1951).[1] Interestingly, the Marovo fish taxon of *laiti* is pluralistic and covers several very different fish species, including (1) the free-swimming 'pilot fish' proper, as well as (2) remora sucker-fishes that do not swim ahead of sharks but attach to their bodies and 'hitchhike', and (3) the small cleaner wrasses known for cleaning the mouths of any type of bigger fish on the reef. The conversational context of the usage of the name *laiti* defines which type of fish is the actual point of reference.

1 But see Magnuson and Gooding (1971: 315) for interesting behavioural field observations of pilot fish that 'apparently defend the shark as moving territory'.

Figure 4.3: Morning view from the east of the characteristic peaked silhouette of Tusu Marovo, with the barrier islands of central Marovo Lagoon in the background, 2012

Source: Photograph by Edvard Hviding.

The maritime lifestyle of Marovo people is reflected in extraordinarily rich, empirically based local knowledge of fish and other marine organisms—not simply focussed on how to catch them, but including a wealth of minute detail on relationships among species as observed on the reef and at sea (Johannes and Hviding 2000; Hviding 2005). The diverse imagery of *laiti*—an assemblage of dissimilar fish species—draws on the habit of them all to exist in enduring, symbiotic associations with far bigger, and dangerous, creatures—presumably not unlike the way in which the 'rock' now known as Tusu Marovo stands in proximity to the *soloso* ('mainland world') of Vangunu.

The island is obviously the result of violent volcanic activity and has the look of land that has emerged from an eruption. Parts of its terrain rise very steeply. From the rocky shore of the village of Chea, as well as from the flat tidal beach of the nearby village of Chubikopi, a mere 600 m measured point-to-point along the coast rises up to more than 150 m above sea level (see Figure 4.3). Along the northern, lagoon-facing coast are places where hot sulphur-smelling steam and water at boiling point emerge from fissures and cracks in the beach or at a few metres' depth on the lagoon floor itself. In the lower hills are patches of hot sandy soil where thermal forces

offer hospitable conditions to the burrowing Melanesian scrub fowl or 'megapode' (*Megapodius eremita*), whose eggs hatch not through the effort of the nesting bird but from the warmth of the sand.

The rugged terrain of the island is subsumed in its most spectacular feature, which constitutes its defining topographical index and can be viewed from afar: Toa Marovo, the steep hill that rises sharply from the northeastern side to a summit of more than 150 m. This sharp ridge of the island's summit has twin adjacent peaks, referred to as Toa Gete ('big peak') and Toa Kiki ('small peak'). It effectively separates the island into the two territorial divisions of Kalelupa ('ocean-side', the northern shore) and Kalekogu ('lagoon-side', the eastern and southeastern shores). These two geographical designations also apply to the two subdivisions of the island's primary resident cognatic descent group Butubutu Marovo, following the pervasive New Georgian pattern whereby a *butubutu* and its ancestral territory or *puava*—an assemblage of land, reefs and sea—are mutually constitutive and share a common name (Hviding 1996, 2003b).

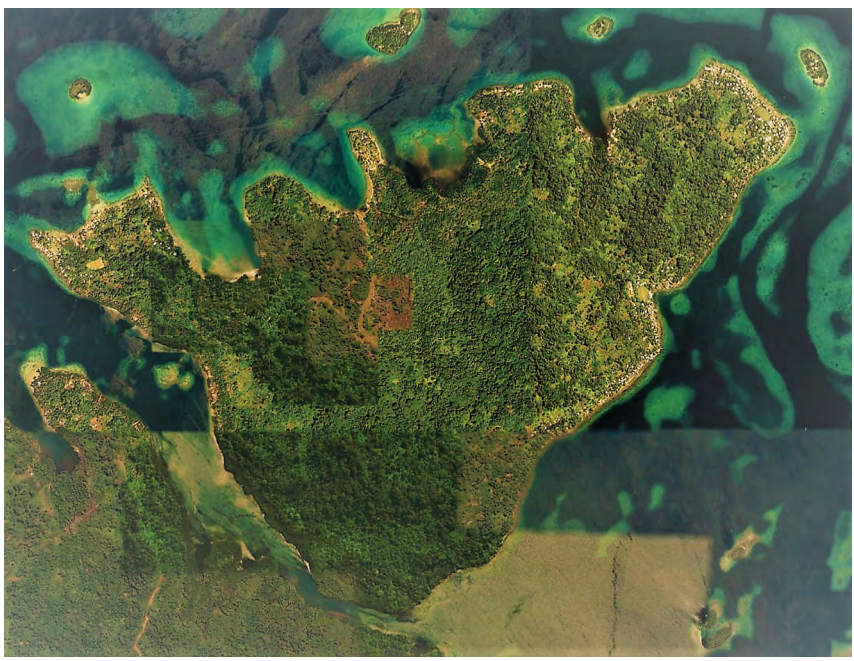

Figure 4.4: Recent aerial view of Tusu Marovo, showing locations of three major villages

Source: Google Earth 2023.

The land of the Butubutu Kalelupa subdivision is densely populated, with two major villages (Sasaghana and Chea) having a total population of more than 800 in 2012, and is under intensive hillside agroforestry. The somewhat larger land of the Butubutu Kalekogu subdivision has one village (Chubikopi), with a population of about 350, and substantial uncultivated secondary forest facing the mainland of Vangunu. Figure 4.4 shows Sasaghana village at the northwestern corner of the island, Chea village at the northeastern corner and Chubikopi village on the southeastern shore. The large primary school at Hinakole, which serves the villages of Chea and Sasaghana, is located on the northern shore, between these two villages.[2] Several small coastal hamlets are located between Chea and Sasagjana.

In agricultural terms, the densely populated Kalelupa land is notable for the extraordinary qualities of its deep, black volcanic soil, which permits continuous cultivation with only minimal periods of fallow. During my first fieldwork on Tusu Marovo in 1986–87, a number of hillside gardens on the north-facing Kalelupa slopes had been under cultivation since they were first established about 1930. The few fallow periods had been so short as to only allow for thickets of easily removable rhizomic gingers to grow. Interspersed with these long-term garden areas are old groves of *Canarium* nut trees, cared for through the generations, and with their white bark highly visible against the dark secondary forest. This is an entirely anthropogenic landscape, transformed over hundreds of years. On the slopes of the Kalekogu area, however, facing the mainland of Vangunu, much less fertile red soils require the normal fallow periods characteristic of Melanesian shifting cultivation, and at no time have the sizeable tracts of forest there been entirely cleared for agriculture. Continued beliefs in malevolent spiritual forces resident in the hills facing the Vangunu mainland make for additional avoidance, and for a forest much less modified by human activity.

Oral Ancient History

To illuminate how Patu Laiti became Tusu Marovo, I now draw on oral traditions of the area and describe some history of place and population from the example of the Kalelupa lands. Genealogies of resident chiefs place the time of permanent settlement by the ancestors of those who live on the island now to about 250–300 years BP, in other words to the early

2 The school's recently cleared food gardens are also visible in this image.

eighteenth century, perhaps around 1720 taking conventional genealogical depth into account. However, on the upper slopes of the Marovo peak is a remarkable collection of large, carved and smoothly shaped basalt stone columns 2–3 m long, found in various stages of completion at a location below the summit called Toa Kia ('stonework peak'). These large stone artefacts are considered locally as a firm indication that 'other people', in no way connected to the cultural history of the present population, lived and worked there in a remote past. No one knows what happened to the producers of those large basalt columns, or who they were. However, it is noted that the stone once used to make them was clearly imported from quarries on northern Vangunu, as demonstrated by a number of unfinished columns still visible in various shallow locations on the nearby lagoon floor. Evidently, the transport of the heavy, roughly cut stone columns was arduous, and it is surmised that those early stone-working inhabitants had no more than flimsy rafts at their disposal. People on today's Tusu Marovo express admiration and wonder at the abilities of ancient 'stone age' people to extract the rock, cut the large pieces into shape, transport them by sea and ultimately haul them up to the high slopes for finishing—and, presumably, for placement in a ceremonially significant structure no longer evident. It seems likely that earthquakes have caused any structured assemblage of the large carved columns to tumble long ago.

Figure 4.5: *Buli Te Lagiti* (Lagiti's petrified throwing clubs), 1996
Source: Photograph by Edvard Hviding.

Story telling about the remote past of Tusu Marovo and its vicinity make much of a giant ogre by the name of Lagiti, who spent much of his time on the island then, although keeping his home over in the mainland Vangunu hills across from the Gaio channel. In these well known tales Lagiti is portrayed as the powerful maker of significant elements of the island's topography, as well as of the entire barrier reef that defines the Marovo Lagoon itself. The large basalt columns seen at Toa Kia are in fact said to be petrified specimens of Lagiti's repertoire of wooden throwing sticks (*hae buli*) (see Figure 4.5). In the past, carefully balanced sticks of hardwood or thick ginger stems, sharpened at each end, were an efficient technology for capturing flying birds and fruit bats. As for the big stone versions up near the Tusu Marovo peak, their size of course corresponded to that of the giant ogre. They are reckoned to have ended up in disorderly fashion in their present locations after a series of unsuccessful attempts by Lagiti to hit a mythical fruit bat named Vekuveku, which was in the habit of flying over the island's summit on its way to the faraway island of Borokua (an extinct crater in the open ocean to the east), to supply lonely settlers there with significant things not found at Borokua, including such essentials as water, *Canarium* nuts and taro (Hviding 1995: 2–25). Lagiti the giant desired those essentials too and threw many of his giant ginger stem sticks at the bat as it flew across the island, but the summit obstructed his view. Lagiti stepped on the Toa Gete to push it aside for a better view, thereby causing the peak's somewhat precarious sideways tilt, as seen today.

As it was, none of the sticks Lagiti threw at Vekuveku ever succeeded in shooting down the bat, and some crashed against the island's hillsides—where they remain in petrified condition at Toa Kia. But there were some non-lethal hits which caused items carried by Vekuveku to drop to the ground. Through those hits and Vekuveku's loss of what was carried, the much-prized *Canarium* nuts now so abundant on the slopes, as well as fresh water which the bat carried in a leaf, arrived at what had until then been an infertile, waterless island, thereby making the place inhabitable for humans and ogres alike. It should be noted, however, that until a major piped freshwater supply from the mainland rivers was established in the early years of the twenty-first century, water on Tusu Marovo remained a precarious resource, limited to a few natural freshwater springs. Despite Lagiti's efforts, water actually emerged on the island only to a very limited degree.

In due course Lagiti moved over from the Vangunu mainland and settled on the island with his wife. She soon complained that the constant noise made by the surf as it crashed onto the ocean-facing shores (later to become Kalelupa lands) disturbed her sleep at night. There was no lagoon then, but Lagiti grabbed hold of the wave-battered beach, as well as the entire northern shores of Vangunu, and dragged and pushed it outwards way into the ocean to block the ocean surf forever in the form of a raised barrier reef (Hviding 1996: 35). So Lagiti became the maker of that huge lagoon that has ever since offered its human inhabitants so many benefits. The petrified skull of his wife can be seen today in the form of a large, strangely shaped volcanic boulder in the tidal zone between the present village of Chea and the old headhunting stronghold of Babata. And so the small, as yet unnamed, island with the steep summit became the vantage point from which Lagiti's miracles of creative agency had generated the conditions for a distinctive way of human life.[3]

The Lagiti stories are about as far as tales of the island's remote past go, although the tales are not so pervasive as to inhibit ongoing local speculations about who the stoneworkers of Toa Kia may have been and where they came from. In any event, those people were long gone when known human settlement started. It is narrated in the traditions of the Kalelupa people that Kelo, the first chief born on the island after his father Tutikavo had migrated from the Podokana district on southern New Georgia with just a few followers and their families, felt sad for being lonely on that thinly populated island they had named Patu Laiti. One day he exclaimed, '*Ie ma rovo nia he kisa*' ('This [place] makes us lonely').[4] Kelo's complaint appears to have become a well-known standard expression and, having heard it, chiefs who visited from Kelo's home districts said, 'If that is so, then from now on the name of your island is Marovo, not Patu Laiti'.

In Kelo's time, it is said that the small number of people resident on the island had no language of their own, but spoke a mixed vernacular based on the language of the Vangunu mainland, with influences from the northern languages of Hoava and Vahole, whose speakers were frequent visitors to

3 I have had the opportunity to discuss this tale with geologists with some knowledge of the Marovo Lagoon, and they have noted that the account of Lagiti's hard work in relocating the seashore to form the raised barrier reef is in fact quite an apt summary of how violent seismic forces of rupture, subsidence and warping across fault lines may have generated the special topography of the lagoon (see also Stoddart 1965).

4 *Ma* is the first person exclusive pronoun that here links to the adjective *rovo*, which refers to a particular condition of experienced social isolation.

the central lagoon. However, following extended contact with visitors from the Kalivarana (Viru Harbour) area of southern New Georgia, where the founding ancestor Tutikavo had connections, the increasing population of the now renamed Tusu Marovo felt a need for a language of their own. Hence, it is recounted how they purchased the Kalivarana language—in other words, obtained the permanent right to speak it. The Tusu Marovo people have since used and refined it over the generations, to the degree that the island today is considered to be the 'true' repository of *jinama Marovo*, ('Marovo language'), although the language is referred to in the Roviana area as *zinama Ulusaghe* (a regional designation), and is still known in its original location as *jinama Kalivarana*.

This account of the sketchy, piecemeal coming-into-being of a Tusu Marovo that was to become a formidable power on an inter-island scale, and of the name 'Marovo' itself, is interesting background for what was to come. The traders who had their first friendly encounters with the people of the island sometime around the mid-nineteenth century appropriated its name to apply to the entire region of the vast lagoon that was gradually discovered and explored by them—a charting process that was later followed up by Royal Navy surveyors (Findlay 1877: 773; Somerville 1897: 360). Once the somewhat humorously invented name of a small island, 'Marovo' then became the designation applied by European navigators to whole of the southeastern part of the New Georgia archipelago that was defined by the lagoon, and that corresponded quite well with the local district name of Ulusaghe (Hviding 1996: 34, 104–6). This exogenous expansion of 'Marovo' must be seen, however, as a reflection of the rather formidable political and military strength that had been built on Tusu Marovo long before the first European traders ventured into the lagoon.

'Eyes That Could See Everywhere'

From Kelo's time as chief, strongholds of warriors with regional power started to develop on the island. War canoes from Tusu Marovo soon ranged far and wide in the seasonal quest for heads, which had a climax during the long periods of calm weather around what are now the months of October and November, between the seasons of dry southeast trade winds and wet monsoons from northwest. Tusu Marovo's warriors became a particular scourge of the people in the Bughotu area of southern Isabel, almost 100 km

across the open sea, and some canoe crews paddled as far as the distant lands of Visale and Talise in what is now Guadalcanal, about 200 km from Marovo. A diversity of oral traditions gives details on this extraordinary, predatory maritime mobility. Journeys to Tete Ulu, the old Marovo name for western Guadalcanal, allowed for convenient stopovers along the way at the uninhabited island of Borokua,[5] in the archipelago referred to in Marovo as Vechala (the Russell Islands), and on the active volcano of Savo Island. The warriors from Marovo Lagoon maintained alliances with both Vechala and Savo. The local world-view of the time has a large-scale, inter-island scope (Hviding 2014a). In the mid-nineteenth-century heydays of headhunting, Tusu Marovo was iconically known for having four hundred warriors in residence (which would indicate a total population then of 2,000 or more) and was by far the strongest settlement of the lagoon and of the old district of Ulusaghe.

Nineteenth-century Tusu Marovo, then, was a formidable regional power, not only through the raids that its 400 warriors (with allies near and far) could accomplish. The island's inhabitants were true 'saltwater' people, possessing as they did very little land and practising only modest agriculture, but controlling the lagoon and seaways and building regional power through maritime mobility, raiding and trading. Labour was extracted as tribute from nearby groups of so-called 'bush people' and from captives taken back alive from overseas raids, and the island was known to produce extraordinary quantities of rings and ornate carvings from fossilised giant clam shell (*Tridacna*), the regional currency and ceremonial objects of old New Georgia. Such slavery-based large-scale production of valuables also took place among Tusu Marovo's close relatives and allies at the Marovo-speaking stronghold of Bili, by the southeastern entrance to the lagoon (Somerville 1897: 364) (see Figure 4.1).

To top it all, the Tusu Marovo people controlled (as they still do today) more than 50 km^2 of lagoon and a 10-km long section of the raised barrier reef, providing for abundant supplies of fish and other marine resources, and in the old days also providing for exclusive ocean entitlements to deep-sea fishing grounds for highly prized tuna. Tuna fishing, to which was added a reported massive breeding of domestic pigs on adjacent lagoon islets (not usual among the 'saltwater people' of the day), and the access through barter and tribute to large quantities of taro cultivated in irrigated pond fields by

5 There was no water on this island because Lagiti had previously stolen it from the mythical fruit bat Vekuveku.

the 'bush people' in the interior of Vangunu, enabled Tusu Marovo and its long-standing resident polity to arrange spectacular feasts to which guests were invited from throughout the New Georgia area (Bayliss-Smith and Hviding 2012). On the little island itself, the expansive groves of *Canarium* nuts and the fertile volcanic soil made for voluminous seasonal production of leaf packets of smoke-dried nuts, a regionally prized commodity then as it still is today.

In its heyday between about 1850 and 1885, Tusu Marovo had the Babata settlement of the Kalelupa group as its central stronghold, with the most powerful chief of the island resident there, several large war canoe houses doubling as halls for feasts and rituals, and the island's most important ceremonial sites nearby. Arranged along the first ridge above the coast, in an easterly direction towards the Marovo peak, were several smaller settlements, each managed by a leading warrior answering to the Babata chief. At the island's northwestern corner, the small peninsula of Olovotu was the location of a smaller stronghold managed by a sub-group of the Kalelupa, with a war canoe house and a small but strong fortified enclosure built on a rocky islet on the nearshore reef flat.[6] At the opposite side of the island, the eastern lagoon-facing coast had a series of settlements and infrastructures of the Kalekogu group, whose people also lived on some lagoon islands directly to the east. It was the Kalelupa and Kalekogu settlements together that could muster the proverbial 'four hundred warriors with club and shield', and that maintained at least four war canoes between them, with the added possibility of hiring more canoes from allies in the lagoon, since 400 warriors could crew much more than Tusu Marovo's own maximum of three or four war canoes (Hviding 2014b: 112). The spatial configuration of the settlements, and the provision of a continuous lookout from the summit, provided for commanding views of the lagoon from the deep passage of Jae to the southwest, through which canoes from the western parts of the New Georgia islands would have to enter, over to the northern ranges of the lagoon, across all major entrances through the barrier reef into the central lagoon, and far to the southeast towards Bili. On a smaller geographical scale, the separation of Tusu Marovo from the mainland by the comparatively shallow Gaio Passage made for easy monitoring against incursions from that side. It was said that from its peak Tusu Marovo had

6 See Somerville (1897: 390–2) for a description of this 'sacred islet'.

'eyes that could see everywhere', and no enemies could approach unseen, whether from the eastern Roviana side, northern New Georgia, Choiseul or Isabel, the southeast lagoon or even from the landward side.

Nowhere else in the eastern parts of New Georgia was there such a force, which was comparable only to the Nusa Roviana stronghold (Walter and Sheppard 2000). The scale of the Tusu Marovo polity reached beyond the island not only through the regular, successful raids of its warriors, but also through the alliance with satellite communities of relatives that had developed, since the early nineteenth century, at the deep barrier reef passage of Bili in the southern lagoon and at the barrier island of Ramata in the northern lagoon (see Figure 4.1). Both developed as enclaves of Marovo-speaking 'saltwater people' in areas dominated by 'bush people'. The Tusu Marovo–Bili–Ramata axis has remained significant into the present time through marriage, the seasonal convergence of all groups on Tusu Marovo for the harvest of *Canarium* nuts and the reaffirmation of kinship, and massive gatherings from near and far for funerals, as we shall see.

Signifying History: Experiencing Tusu Marovo

Oral history and an abundance of remains of stone terraces, fortifications and shrines combine to paint a portrait of what Tusu Marovo would have looked like around 1850. In the once central coastal settlement of Kalelupa at Babata, more than 15 houses were situated on platforms of coral rock in the tidal zone (see Figure 4.6), with ceremonial grounds and elaborate houses for the war canoes on the flat coastal land, shaded by trees. The Babata settlement, where the chief lived, commanded a sweeping view of Marovo Lagoon to the west, north and east. Further up in the lower hills were a significant number of terraced house sites constituting separate hamlets spread out in an east–west direction along the Kalelupa flank of the island. Higher up were fortifications into which women and children (and some warriors for 'security') would be directed from the Babata seashore settlement and the hillside hamlets when there was a danger of attack from enemies, primarily from the western districts of Roviana and Vella Lavella.

Figure 4.6: House on rock foundation in the tidal zone of Babata, Tusu Marovo, early 1890s

Note: Observe the small 'skull house' (or household ancestral shrine), fishing gear and canoe.

Source: Photograph by Lieutenant H.B.T. Somerville, 1894, reproduced with permission of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

From extensive hydrographic and ethnographic surveys over several months between 1893 and 1895, Royal Navy Lieutenant H.B.T. Somerville reported in some detail on the Marovo Lagoon, its places and its people. Under Admiralty orders, the 52-metre sail and steam ship HMS *Penguin* spent ten months of those years around New Georgia, while officers were often stationed for weeks and months in 'tenting parties' ashore near local settlements to survey inshore lagoon waters and reef passages. Somerville accordingly explains how he and his party of a dozen sailors was 'encamped' for some eight months altogether in different parts of the Marovo Lagoon. For Tusu Marovo, he noted how this 'hilly island only slightly detached from the coast in the eastern lagoon … was in old times the most populous and agreeable to trade at of any of the places nearby' (Somerville 1897: 360). Perhaps echoing the earlier navigational information given by Findlay (1877), Somerville (1897: 360) explains how '[f]rom this early communication [the island] has given its name … to all New Georgia on the older charts'. The maps from the survey of the New Georgia group

produced during the HMS *Penguin*'s survey are detailed, and for Tusu Marovo they accurately show the settlements at the time along the northern coast, including, from east to west, Babata, Chochopo, Kinapoda, Mavara and Olovotu, as well as settlements on smaller adjacent lagoon islands.

Much later, from a visit in 1973, district officer James Tedder (1974) published a brief account of 'old village sites on Marovo Island' that gives an indication of the degree to which the Tusu Marovo landscape has remained riddled with indicators of how past generations lived on the island. To elaborate on this, my own notes from a walk of the steep northeastern parts of the island in the company of an elder and story-teller from Chea village (as well as some children, who came along for the excitement) provide the following account of the density and complexity of place on Tusu Marovo in pre-colonial times, as well as of how those layers of meaning persist today.

> As we climb up to Ta Lukutu, above where gardens are, there is a flat area with plenty of black basalt boulders, the soil mixed with stones. This is where a year ago, Risley found the extraordinary carved stone figurine which is reckoned to be associated with the story of Vekuveku. This is one of the few flat expanses of ground on the way up to Toa Marovo, and it was a place of worship in the old days. This is indicated by several old valves of giant clams lying around—they were used as temporary covers for ancestral skulls and to contain ceremonial artefacts. One of the small boys clears away some low shrubs and finds an extraordinarily large giant clam of a metre's length; we lift it, but there is nothing underneath it now, although a skull would have been there at some time. From Ta Lukutu, there is a clear direct view down to the small island of Ghireghire just off the shore, where the bones of ancestral generations are safekept, now covered by dense vegetation. Also, we have a sweeping view of the lagoon, right up to the Kalelupa people's western marine boundary in the Matenana Passage.
>
> We climb further up to Toa Kia, the place of *buli te Lagiti* (Lagiti's throwing sticks). There are four of these long, finely shaped basalt columns here, the largest one is seen on the steep slope below Toa Kia, broken into several pieces. At Toa Kia are many house foundations (*poi vanua*), and on the small expanses of level ground are a number of raised monoliths and *Cordyline* plants indicating ceremonial sites. The red and green *Cordyline* plants have been kept growing by the people until today to mark out the site as *hope* (prohibited, sacred).

We note one large flat stone slab of the type referred to as *langono*; several deep depressions are made into it for use in the manufacture of rings from fossilised clamshell.

As we climb on up the steep path there are many more house foundations, indicating dense settlement up here below Toa Marovo in the old times. These were the settlements of known ancestors, not of the unknown people who made the stone carvings at Toa Kia. Around the finely built stone foundations, the ground is riddled with old shells—*riki, roja, hulumu, nakolo, ropi*—the concentrations amount to middens, indicating how fond they were of bringing up food from the sea to cook it here. We are now right below the peak of Toa Marovo. According to the history of the Kalelupa people, this is where their founding ancestor Tutikavo first settled when he moved to the island with his two wives and a small number of warriors. His son Kelo then settled somewhat further down, and then Kelo's son Ireke started developing what would become the 19th-century coastal stronghold of Tusu Marovo in the tidal zone at Babata. The chiefs and their associates still maintained hill settlements, though, and it was not until the latter half of the 19th century that Babata became the permanent place of residence, following internal conflict and some dispersion of the Kalelupa people.

Approaching Toa Kiki, we come to the place where almost one hundred warriors from Bughotu in Isabel were massacred, after having been enticed up to the fortified hill settlement with promises of food and a feast. They came on a peaceful mission, it is said, and were first welcomed accordingly—according to Tusu Marovo traditions, an eloquent example of the past warfare strategies of the place, which valued deception, treachery, and ambush. Toa Kiki itself is a rugged black volcanic core of just a few m^2 devoid of vegetation, but surrounded by treetops, and can only be reached over a precariously narrow ridge. From here the view is spectacular, over the entire central area of Marovo Lagoon, indeed most of old Ulusaghe—towards Jae and Nono in the southwest, the Kolo mountains of New Georgia island, and the 1100-metre high crater rims of Vangunu. The entire lagoon coast is visible as far east as the Bisuana headland. Any approaching canoe can be seen from here. Right below Toa Kiki there are some house foundations again, but they are very old—it is not known who actually lived up here before Tutikavo came and settled nearby.

The vegetation all along the steep path leading up from the lower hillside gardens has a special character: it is filled with cultivated trees. There is an abundance of *Canarium* nut trees (as over most

of Tusu Marovo), and additional fruit trees, hardwood trees for construction and canoe-building, decorative orchids, and a plethora of medicinal trees and shrubs, everything mixed with fast-growing creepers and climbers to form a rather dense forest of mainly small trees. This vegetation looks, feels, and smells very differently from the far less disturbed forest of the interior lands of the main islands of New Georgia and Vangunu. Apart from the characteristic tall *Canarium* trees with their white bark, which have been cultivated in groves by many generations of the island's inhabitants, the only really large trees here are a number of old banyans, whose tangled masses of trunks and branches hug the steep slopes and in places have invaded the stone structures of olden times.

Climbing a few precarious natural steps up to the Toa Gete we come out in the open, no trees obstructing the extraordinary view across ocean, lagoon, and land from this elevation of about 150 metres. When looking towards the distant barrier reef, the two villages of Chea and Chubikopi are in sight right down below and the terrain appears impossibly steep. During World War II, men of Tusu Marovo maintained a lookout here in cooperation with British coastwatchers to warn of any Japanese intrusion. On Toa Gete, as on several other peaks around the Marovo Lagoon, pyres would be lit as soon as Japanese vessels were sighted, and the message rapidly reached the coastwatcher base at Seghe. But elders say Toa Marovo looked somewhat differently then in the 1940s; there was a small expanse of flat ground on which a leaf shed was constructed to accommodate the lookouts—subsequent earthquakes have collapsed that flat area, so that Toa Gete is now surrounded by sheer cliffs and can only be climbed from one direction.

We leave the twin peaks of Toa Marovo and set off in a different direction towards the old coastal settlement at Babata. Over a series of old agricultural terraces (a precondition for cultivation on these steep slopes) we come to the dense stone structures of the fortified uphill area known as Bara Adoani ('enclosure to hide from view'). This is where women and children would be led when enemy warriors were approaching the island's shores. A rather extensive, quite flat area is contained here by finely built stone walls, some of which remain intact at about 1,5 metres' height. Bara Adoani had two entrances: a gate on the side for women and children, and a very narrow, fortified gate facing the path from below, through which only men are allowed to pass (still today, women do not pass through here, but follow another route down). Under siege, the central gate was guarded by warriors; enemies could only approach the gate one by one and would be killed as they did.

From Bara Adoani there are masses of old stonework in the form of house foundations and agricultural terraces, with a concentration in the area known as Raparapa (although today there are none of the leafy *rapa* trees here). This was a main settlement of the old times, also indicated by the proliferation of *Cordyline* plants which are markers of where people used to live. Here are many large, single *Canarium* nut trees, and very old secondary forest with a dense undergrowth of ferns and quite a few massive hardwood trees. The forest is interspersed with areas of more open vegetation of small trees and dense growth of tall gingers, indicating places of more recent cultivation. Although abandoned as a settlement long ago, Raparapa was in use much longer as a garden site. This is where women and children mostly lived in the old days. Until a permanent settlement developed at Babata, only men would venture down to the seashore, whether to fish, to travel on the lagoon, or to set out on raids in the war canoes that were kept in large elaborate canoe houses just behind the shore, hidden by the dense coastal vegetation. The establishment of Babata, probably from about 1850, changed that for there was no longer any need to hide from view given the sheer strength of the settlement.

At Vaributo, a small hill immediately behind the seashore, the Kalelupa ancestral shrine contains generations of chiefly skulls. We walk down past with hushed voices, reach the *Canarium* nut groves on the narrow coastal shelf, and through the coconut trees along the sandy beach we get a glimpse of the still imposing presence of old Babata. In the tidal zone close to the shore, about fifteen small islets of about equal size, now all overgrown by low mangroves, spread out along the beach for about 100 metres. They visualise a past when each was the stone foundation of a house, with small canoes, drying bark fibre nets and other fishing gears stowed around the buildings.

Piles of coral rock indicate the remains of causeways between house sites and beach. Immediately inland of the beach are remains of low stone walls indicating the location of the large ceremonial house in which war canoes were kept and rituals performed, including those involving skulls obtained through headhunting. On the beach facing two of the larger house foundations is the object most often shown to visiting tourists with the accompaniment of a chilling story: the *ngadoani veala* or 'stone slab for cutting the sacrificial child', where a child captured overseas would be killed and dismembered for subsequent cooking and ritual consumption.

Collapse and Re-Formations

At this stage we may return to the earliest European accounts, preceding the prolonged visits by the Royal Navy in the 1890s. In his navigational directory for the South Pacific, Findlay gives the following account, drawing on other accounts from early trading ships but echoing oral traditions about inter-island travel—and confirming prevailing pan-Marovo views about which local settlements were the most deeply involved in early stages of trade with Europeans, and about the nature of that trade:

> At [the west end of the barrier island of Matiu, in central Marovo] there is a narrow opening or passage where Sydney traders go in and anchor, to trade with the natives of *Repi* and *Marovo*, villages on the main island abreast this … *The Marovo Passage* is about 4 miles off the mainland, and a number of small islets are dotted about among the reefs inside. Though this part of New Georgia is near 100 miles from Malayta, the natives of the two places communicate, making stopping places at Pavuhu [Pavuvu, in the Russell Islands] and Buaraqoi [Borokua]. There appeared to be but few inhabitants. Their canoes were stable, and strongly built. The natives were dark, sturdy looking men, and very active in the water, scrambling and diving in the most energetic manner. They brought off tortoiseshell and the usual ornaments, and were eager for pipes and tobacco.
>
> (Findlay 1877: 773, original emphases; with author annotations in square brackets)

Although Findlay did not quote his source for this information, it must be derived from the early traders ('Sydney' ones and others) who from about 1850 entered the lagoon through the reef entrance referred to by Findlay as the 'Marovo Passage', but known locally as the passage of Lumalihe—a shark-infested, turbulent deep channel with a maze of shallow reefs and sandy islands immediately inside it. Assuming Findlay's account is based on traders' accounts from about 1860 onwards, the village of Repi was just coming into existence after infighting had commenced within the stronghold on Tusu Marovo. Findlay's remark about 'few inhabitants' at the 'villages' of Repi and Marovo is puzzling, given that this is not far from, or perhaps still at, Tusu Marovo's period of climax when 'four hundred [men with] club and shield' could be mustered. It is, of course, possible that on the specific day Findlay's source paid a visit, the men of Tusu Marovo (and the 'renegades' at Repi) had other things to do than to paddle out to approaching ships; they were perhaps elsewhere on an expedition.

Wide-ranging transformations were soon to come. The large-scale political influence of Tusu Marovo was rapidly undermined near the turn of the century, when a combination of indigenous and imperial initiatives to end warfare, raiding and headhunting caused the rapid downfall of the regional economy and the political and ceremonial prominence of Tusu Marovo, as well as of other similar strongholds like Nusa Roviana. Prior to these interventions, a decline of the collective power of Tusu Marovo had set in from about 1885–1890, with a series of internal fights caused by accusations of incest and adultery as well as by mounting dissatisfaction with the Babata settlement's monopoly on contact with early European traders. From his survey work in the Marovo Lagoon in the 1890s, Somerville (1897: 399) reported that the 'once populous island of Marovo' had since 1885 been severely depopulated, but he probably overestimated the role of enemy attack in this process. In fact, several influential war leaders and sub-chiefs had been expelled from Tusu Marovo and had moved with their families and followers to coastal locations on the north coast of Vangunu. In the space of little more than ten years, powerful leaders who were used to owning war canoes and slaves, and managing warriors and overseas expeditions, found themselves without such power bases. Some retreated from view altogether to embark on a new life of shifting cultivation on the unlimited lands offered by in-laws from the district of Bareke, the north- and northeast-facing lagoon shores of the island of Vangunu, from which a number of chiefly women had married leaders at Tusu Marovo.

However, one new opportunity was offered to the downscaled former stronghold of Tusu Marovo: the missionaries. Methodist missionaries gained a foothold in southern Marovo in 1912, having already operated in the Roviana area for ten years. Tusu Marovo, although much weakened and with a precarious power base that included a dependence on good relations with traders and colonial officers, resisted this new presence until they were visited in 1915 by missionaries of the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) Church. Tatagu, the surviving chief and 'last headhunter' who had been forced to abandon the Babata settlement, offered the missionaries land near Olovotu, and that is how the mission village of Sasaghana was founded. With surprising speed, a generation of young men from kin groups throughout the central lagoon—groups that had until not long ago been prominent chiefly lineages and young men who were left with little to do as their old world had collapsed—enrolled in the SDA mission school established on Tusu Marovo. They were there to learn not only the Bible, but also (and this was deemed important by the old people) to learn English—in an indigenous quest for more equal footing with imperial power. Most of the first cohorts

of Melanesian pastors of the SDA mission in the Solomons were from Tusu Marovo, and a new power base had been established for the island. Forty years later, after the Second World War, it was these once young men of Tusu Marovo, most of whom were born around 1900, who travelled to Australia and translated the Bible into Marovo (BSSP 1953). Meanwhile, as if the once-powerful ability of the small island to be efficacious (*mana*) was reconstituted through relations of control over the lagoon, its shores and its islands, a copra-based cash economy was expanded rapidly as new seashores within the realm of Tusu Marovo influence were cleared of forest and mangroves and densely planted with coconuts.

The early success of the Tusu Marovo people in so rapidly harnessing—in fact largely monopolising—the political-economic potential of the education-minded SDA mission led to a disproportionate number of people from the island—at first men, but gradually women as well—ending up with higher education. For a generation this was mainly pastoral training, but from the 1970s onwards a Tusu Marovo elite has been built up from both the Seventh-Day Adventists of Chea and Sasaghana villages on the Kalelupa coast and the Methodists from the Kalekogu village of Chubikopi. This educated elite has come to be mainly resident in the capital of Honiara and the Western Province capital of Gizo, occupied in education, government and business. From headhunting days to post-colonial government and modern-day business, the smallness of the island has never prevented its people from attaining influential positions.

Into the Twenty-First Century

With considerable shrewdness, Tusu Marovo's kin connections to other islands have been revitalised, in some cases even invoking kinship through captives taken on overseas raids many generations ago. In 1987 I witnessed a ceremony in which a man from the Bilua district of Vella Lavella was given a large piece of clamshell to signify his 're-entry' into the *butubutu* in recognition of two young women of his matrilineal group who had been abducted and brought as slaves to Tusu Marovo around 1880. Not unexpectedly, this reactivation of kinship links with Vella Lavella proved valuable because it involved access to large land tracts with timber resources from which logging royalties started to flow. Ultimately, in 2007, it was these logging-derived funds from the Vella Lavella connection that enabled the Kalelupa people of Chea village to build and open the largest church building anywhere in the Marovo region.

Figure 4.7: Part of Chea village, Tusu Marovo, 2012
Source: Photograph by Edvard Hviding.

Meanwhile, the various urban connections and the associated flow of money have seen an increase of rather lavish private houses being built back home, both for holidays and as retirement projects. Most named extended-family hamlets on Tusu Marovo, a collection of which constitutes each village, now commonly includes a diversity of leaf houses and permanent timber-and-iron buildings, as well as a seashore landing and a canoe house sheltering one or more fibreglass boats with large outboard motors (see Figure 4.7). However prestigious the hamlet's buildings and other property may be, the inhabitants are still likely to be engaged on an everyday basis in the subsistence economy of gardening and fishing, perhaps with a small-scale trading store or petrol depot on the side.

Socially speaking, Tusu Marovo does indeed remain the hub described by Wilson Liligeto (2006: 1) as 'the focal point of the entire Marovo Lagoon region'. At every funeral on the island, large numbers of people come from all around the Western Solomons to reaffirm their genealogical connections to the little island whose name still applies not only to itself but to the lagoon, to a political constituency, to an Austronesian language, and to a Melanesian people of about 14,000. In October 1991, the pioneer SDA pastor Kuloburu Liligeto (Wilson's father) died in Chea village at the age of 81. Although any funeral in present-day Marovo takes place only a day

(or at most two days) after death, Pastor Liligeto's funeral saw more than 700 people coming to attend. Their courses by sea, or for some by air from the national or provincial capital, converged on the small island of large life. At the funeral, Chea elder and recognised genealogy expert Billy Kioto spoke to the gathering, invoking some powerful social imagery in characteristically high-level, old-style oratory to an audience with Marovo as the primary or secondary language:

> All of you who are here today and who speak the Marovo language—you are all from this place, and we are all kindred. Tusu Marovo here is where Marovo language comes from, and all those who speak Marovo today have come from this island, whether you are from Gatokae, from Viru, or from Gerasi, or from further away!

Today Tusu Marovo has the three large villages of Chubikopi, Chea and Sasaghana with a combined population of about 1,500 people, as well as a large diaspora in north and south Marovo, in Honiara and in Gizo. Belonging to two church denominations, the people of the island run two large primary schools. Since the 1990s tourist-oriented guesthouses have emerged in all three villages, but since the lagoon area has a rather broad range of resorts, tourism has not really caught on at the village level, and many inhabitants appreciate this fact, given that tourists are often seen as disturbing everyday life. A range of new infrastructure has been developed for Tusu Marovo in the twenty-first century, such as a reliable water supply piped from the mainland to all villages, replacing the unreliable supplies from poor freshwater springs, and a mobile telephone mast on the island of Mahoro opposite Chubikopi village. In 2010, the lofty height of the Toa Gete saw the installation of a government-funded solar-powered satellite dish receiver and wi-fi repeater that have since provided internet access to the schools of the central lagoon area, with spillover to the village people at large. The more recent expansion of mobile telephone services to include 3G coverage from four base stations throughout Marovo Lagoon has made the ownership and usefulness of smartphones very widespread.

Back at its roots of history, Tusu Marovo remains environmentally noteworthy for allowing for long-term continuous cultivation in its widely renowned rich black soil, as well as for having a remarkably intact forest cover, even if this consists of almost entirely domesticated secondary growth greatly enriched through arboriculture over successive generations. As such, the island, apart from its uncultivated southern slopes facing the mainland, is an almost fully anthropogenic environment. In marine terms, its inhabitants

retain territorial control over an area of lagoon and barrier reef nearly ten times the extent of their land. Throughout my years of living on the island, I have been continuously reassured by its inhabitants that they have few worries about the sustainability of their lifestyle. With inexhaustible, fertile soil, the largest and most concentrated stands of valuable *Canarium* nut trees anywhere in the Western Solomons, abundant marine resources and good financial connections to town, business and government, Tusu Marovo with its dense population of about 250 per km^2 of land (not including sea) is indeed emblematic of a wider Melanesian pattern whereby islands that appear small are only small in a topographical sense.

Nevertheless, the largeness of the island is in other respects continuously challenged by political contest and, ironically, by conflicts between its residents and its diaspora. While in 2002 the Tusu Marovo people were able to demonstrate ancient matrilineal kinship to win a court case that gave them control over the financial outcomes of a major logging operation on the island of Vella Lavella far to the west, sharp conflict arose more recently between a small group of urban elite who proposed to log the entire Kalelupa side of the island—*Canarium* nut trees and all—and the residents (as well as other urban elite folk) who saw this as the ultimate folly. As one village spokesman expressed it: 'How can they imagine finding even a single commercially desirable big log here on this little island where every single tree has once been planted by someone?' Ultimately, in 2012, the Kalelupa people—who have established an impressive range of committees with constitutions, and even their own non-governmental organisation for 'sustainable development'—made the unprecedented move of disempowering their chief, a person who had been brought up in town, who had initiated the ill-fated logging proposal, and who, as was emphatically stated, 'cannot even speak the Marovo language properly'. In due course, the Village Committee of the Kalelupa people made the decision to install a new chief recruited from the wider circle of potential hereditary leaders. As it turned out, the non-Marovo-speaking chief suffered from poor health and passed away in 2013, after which a new chief was identified and installed. The new chief had spent part of his adult life in town but had much stronger local grounding, was capable in the vernacular, and was considered to have a good understanding of local needs and ambitions. In a quite unprecedented move, a public decision was also announced on the identity of his future successor. And in case anyone should come forward with objections, this decision already dealt with the genealogical complexities involved in the identification of *tuti bangara* ('the descent line of chiefly potential') (Hviding 1996: 143–6).

Conclusion

Life on the island continues to be large-scale, and few occurrences and phenomena appear to be entirely local. Post-colonial Tusu Marovo is at least as large as its pre-colonial version, and the vulnerability or resilience of its village life and diverse economies are, as in the old days, predicated on and generated from circumstances and relationships far beyond the island itself. In a present and future where relationships between people and place may seem less prescribed than before, the realisation is that the processes of education and migration in view today are not historically unique, but rather reflect truly long-term patterns for Tusu Marovo, in which knowledge and social organisation have always been situated between the endogenous and the exogenous, between expansion and contraction. The relational reach of Tusu Marovo remains large and open-ended. The island's own historian Wilson Liligeto (2006: xxii), whose vantage point is that of the Babata group but whose perspective embraces Tusu Marovo as a whole, may indeed be right in his gentle suggestion that '[o]ther tribes or people can learn from our experiences'.

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This text is taken from *Small Islands in Peril?: Island Size and Island Lives in Melanesia*, edited by Colin Filer, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/SIP.2024.04