

## When Cultures Meet: Preserving Oral Traditions in Western Province, Solomon Islands

*Barbara Riley*

### Introduction

At dawn on a Sunday morning in June 1991 Serenah Solomon, carrying her six-week-old baby and accompanied by a young girl, left Zaira village on Vangunu Island in Western Province to travel to the provincial centre of Gizo. Her husband stayed behind to look after their other four children. For eight hours Serenah and the girl trekked through dense rain forest, finally arriving at a village up the coast. Here they rented canoe transport which took them to Patutiva village where they caught the weekly ship to Gizo. They boarded the ship at 2 a.m. Monday and reached Gizo early that afternoon. They had not eaten for over 18 hours, having spent all their money on transportation, and because she was nursing the baby, Serenah felt weak. But she had arrived in time, as planned, to attend a volunteers' workshop organized by Western Province's Cultural Affairs Office.

The Cultural Affairs Office is unique in Solomon Islands. It was established by Western Province Government in 1985 to encourage people to respect and preserve their traditional culture at a time of rapid economic and social change. Programs are developed and carried out with the active participation of the people of Western Province. Only a few of the province's 25 languages have a written form; most traditional knowledge exists in the memories of the old people. The Office's major objective is the preservation of these oral traditions.

This article begins with a brief background to the Solomon Islands before turning to an examination of some of the ethical, cultural, and practical problems encountered in developing a program to preserve Western Province's oral traditions. The problems are described from a single cultural perspective—my own. While Solomon Islanders would recognize the points made, they would interpret many of them differently. Problems demand to be solved or at least coped with in a positive manner. The challenge in Western Province was to satisfy several considerations: adherence to proper oral history standards concerning accuracy,

documentation, and confidentiality, the provincial mandate to preserve and disseminate traditional culture, and the absolute requirement to work within and respect Solomon Islands culture. Since its inception the Cultural Affairs Office has operated on two cultural tracks: working to preserve the oral traditions of Western Province, and dealing with the interaction between Canadian and Solomon Islands cultures. This cultural interchange is evident in much of what follows.

### Solomon Islands and Western Province

Solomon Islands, since 1978 an independent Commonwealth country, stretches across 1600 kilometres of ocean southeast of Papua New Guinea. Six large islands and hundreds of smaller ones comprise the land; the seas around teem with some of the richest tuna fishing grounds in the Pacific. It is a Melanesian country<sup>1</sup> with great cultural diversity—80 languages for 300 000 people. Solomon Islands' oral traditions include origin stories, genealogies, songs, customary knowledge such as the construction of war canoes, reminiscences about the past, and secret spells and prayers used in the pre-Christian past to ensure success in fishing or headhunting raids. Two important categories of oral traditions are "custom" stories and stories about "custom" sites. ("Custom" is a Pijin equivalent for "traditional.") Custom stories recall episodes in the past while stories about sites explain the meaning of shrines, skull burials, deserted villages, battles, or other events significant to family or tribal memory.

The identification of physical sites, through oral tradition, with a particular family, tribe, or event, is an act of crucial importance in a country where 85% of the land and most of the fishing reefs are owned by families or tribes. Only in memory is there a record of whose ancestor gave what rights to which person over a particular area of land or sea as the result of a marriage, military alliance, economic agreement, or other arrangement. Always a contentious issue, the question of rights in land and reefs has been exacerbated by

extraordinary pressure from foreign companies for timber or fishing rights. This has led to incessant disputes over ownership in which genealogies and stories about custom sites are vital evidence.

Social and economic changes are slowly eroding the rich oral traditions of Solomon Islanders. Formal education has changed the form and content of knowledge; the curriculum uses foreign texts and contains little about traditional culture. English is the language of instruction and the country's official language as well. Pijin is the universal lingua franca, spoken by increasing numbers of people in order to bridge their linguistic differences. The vernacular languages, the vehicle for traditional culture, have no recognized status and are being diluted by Pijin and English.

Changing relationships between young and old are also undermining traditional culture. Respect for family or tribal elders is part of Melanesian culture, but the authority of the older generation and respect for the old traditions are being eroded. Formal schooling, the attraction of urban centres with their video theatres, stores, bars, and jobs, and the influence of westernizing media and institutions offer different economic and social values.

Western Province's 60 000 people, who live in small coastal villages on several islands, use 25 vernacular languages. Loss of traditional knowledge is particularly felt in this province where contact with Europeans has been continuous for over a century and where aggressive missionary activity, large-scale resource-based enterprises, and expanding tourism have exerted a strong foreign influence. Other Solomon Islanders consider the province to be more westernized, from the wealth which the province generates through logging and fishing activities by foreign companies to the comparative freedom which Western Province women enjoy from many of the social restraints common to Melanesian culture.

In 1985 Western Province established a Cultural Affairs Office to help villagers preserve their traditional knowledge, and asked CUSO, a Canadian non-governmental development organization, to provide a volunteer to organize the office and develop its programs.<sup>2</sup> A Policy on Culture was approved by Western Provincial Assembly in 1989, and in 1990 the Western Province Preservation of Culture Ordinance became law. This landmark legislation requires a survey of custom sites to be undertaken prior to any development activity, for example, logging, construction, or road-building. In 1988 K. Roga was hired to conduct the site survey program, and in 1990 J. Nige was hired to be responsible for the oral traditions program. On-the-job training continues as they gain experience in cultural programming.

## Preserving Oral Traditions: Ethical, Cultural, and Practical Problems

The first problem in organizing a provincial Cultural Affairs program was the practical one of reaching a population scattered among hundreds of small villages on many islands. Communications and transportation are difficult in Western Province. Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation transmits "service messages" daily, but reception depends on someone in the village having a radio and batteries. Mail is delivered by air to government sub-stations, but onward delivery to villages is sporadic, depending on someone with a canoe heading in the right direction. Replies are equally chancy, frequently handed to someone heading to Gizo by ship or canoe. The note could be lost, the bearer's plans change, or the reply arrive too late to be useful. Travel to villages is also not dependable. The usual mode of public transportation, by canoe or small coastal ship, is irregular. Engine breakdowns, lack of fuel, or missing crew delay the ships; weather and the unavailability of canoes, fuel, outboard motor, or driver make canoe transport a gamble. These circumstances required flexible and advance planning. Enough time had to be allowed for information to be received and responded to. Yet all plans had to be flexible enough to be delayed, shifted to another locale, or cancelled at short notice.

Communicating with Solomon Islanders is complicated by a different attitude to written communications, different body language, and a different concept of time. Letters and notices are not accorded the same importance that we give them; face-to-face, personal contact is what matters. Government officials and businessmen, let alone villagers, do not respond to letters as a matter of course and often react only if they are preceded or followed by a personal visit. Often this meant visiting a village more than once so people had ample time to discuss amongst themselves the implications of recording oral traditions. Many evenings were spent in the light of a kerosene lamp with a crowd of children and adults listening to stories on a cassette recorder, as an example of one aspect of the program. Ironically, a few decades earlier villagers would have been similarly gathered to listen to one of their *olos* instead.

Because Canadians expect and look for an immediate reaction to a proposal, it is easy to find Solomon Islanders' initial responses misleading. They may nod or smile, apparently signifying agreement, but they are just acknowledging, courteously, that they have heard what has been said. Acceptance comes only after lengthy and careful consideration. Once the proposal is accepted, we might easily miss the indication of approval, which could be as understated as the raising of an eyebrow.

"Solomon time" is a concept that Solomon Islanders themselves joke about, but it is also an established fact. To us "Solomon time" means a total disregard for deadlines and confirmed dates and times, but to Solomon Islanders it signifies that time is not the most important consideration in any undertaking. A meeting will start when everyone is present. Canoe transportation to the next village will be available unless the driver decides to go fishing instead. Someone will come to record a story in the evening if he or she is not needed elsewhere at that time. Learning to deal with a different approach to time is a major adjustment for Canadians working in Solomon Islands.

Melanesians have a strong tradition of equality of status. People should not rise above their fellow villagers in material well-being or importance. Because of this, those who worked as volunteers for the Cultural Affairs Office were sometimes the target of jealousy to the point where people were unwilling to cooperate with them. The volunteer had gained status by association with the Cultural Affairs Office and by the supplies and benefits which accrued from that association—paper, cassette recorder, cassettes and batteries, an occasional trip to Gizo to attend a workshop. To allay this problem, we stressed that the work depended upon the community's participation, and that eventually everyone in the village would benefit from the books, broadcasts or other materials generated by the work. This helped smooth relations, as did the assurance that the volunteer would not profit financially from the stories collected from others.

Jealousy extended to the people who were recorded. There were concerns that they were not always the most reliable informants, in either memory or truthfulness, or that they were originally outsiders from another village and hence not the proper people to relate traditional knowledge. Complaints about unreliable informants or wrong information were never raised at the time of recording. A Solomon Islander would not publicly criticize another person. Instead, individuals came afterwards to state their concerns privately. I made it clear that the Cultural Affairs Office could not determine what the definitive version was, and that we were there to record whatever individuals wanted to preserve for future generations. The villagers themselves would know what version was correct.

People frequently raised the issue of financial benefit, a concern deriving from the traditional practice of compensation which in the past ensured the peaceful settlement of such transgressions as stealing, adultery, or war. Compensation remains an accepted method of resolving anti-social acts, but nowadays is more likely to involve the payment of money than an exchange of customary shell valuables. The Office's clear policy was that everything was done on a voluntary basis, for the

benefit of the people themselves. No one was required to be involved in the program, either as an informant or volunteer. No one stood to gain financially from the program. Informants were not paid for their recording or for any authorized use of the information. Village volunteers were not paid nor were those who attended any of the training workshops. The books of oral traditions which we had printed were distributed free of charge, and the illustrators were reimbursed, as were the storytellers, with a free copy. In the event of any commercial interest in the material, permission and use would have to be discussed with the informants or their descendants.

Although the *olos*, the village elders, are held in respect, relations between young and old are sometimes strained. In the past the elders held power in a village; today that is being challenged by a younger generation influenced by life in town and westernized concepts of status. Whatever the motivation, it sometimes found expression over the issue of the transmission of oral traditions. The old complained that they had no intention of telling their stories because the young were not interested, while young people complained that the *olos* did not want to share their knowledge. We did not pressure people to record or pass on their knowledge, but did encourage them to consider what the loss of cultural traditions would mean.

Many Solomon Islanders are ambivalent about traditional knowledge because of attitudes towards their pre-Christian past. For them it is a shameful era, known for its headhunting, wars, skull burials, and worship of spirits at pagan shrines. Until recently some major churches reinforced such attitudes; the destruction of shrines and the sale of traditional sacred objects to foreigners were encouraged or simply disregarded. The opposition of early missionaries to Solomon Islanders' way of life did not stop at pagan worship or headhunting raids. The Islanders' nakedness and traditions such as dancing were equated with pagan savagery, attitudes adopted by Solomon Islands converts. While today's churches, most of which have been nationalized in clergy and organization, recognize the cultural validity of a former way of life and even encourage its expression, the older attitudes still have influence.

Because the churches are such a strong presence in daily life, the Office sought their cooperation, contacting religious authorities for access to village women's church groups and including church leaders in formal ceremonies during workshops and festivals. We emphasized how successfully the ancestors had adapted to their environment, using only "bush materials" for their needs—food, shelter, clothing, transportation, weapons, decorations. We noted that in the past people had waged war but also had a strong tradition of

reconciliation, and systems of law, governance, and education. People recognized that the early missionaries had been mistaken in condemning many aspects of traditional life, and our emphasis on the accomplishments of the past fit Solomon Islands' traditions of respect for their ancestors.

The Cultural Affairs Office's role was that of a facilitator, not a judge, and we were careful to respect each informant's own wishes with regard to his or her information. Sometimes the same story was told in slightly different versions by different speakers; sometimes it was common to more than one language group. It would have been presumptuous on our part to assign value to traditional information. Therefore, we accepted whatever people decided was significant enough to record. The issue of confidentiality was raised by some whose traditional knowledge was secret, known only to themselves or their family. They worried that recording such information would make it available to anyone. We encouraged them to pass their knowledge on to an appropriate member of the family so that it would not be lost, but we also guaranteed confidentiality if they decided to record. Correcting or censoring material was the prerogative of informants. Occasionally people asked to re-record a story so that a more accurate version would be preserved. Occasionally as well informants would change their minds and ask us to erase what had been recorded. We always complied with these requests.

A special effort was made to include women in the recording program as traditionally their role was a private one, occupied with family and household responsibilities. Many village women are active beyond their own households and communities now, in large measure because of church activities. In general, however, women do not speak in mixed groups and are shy in the presence of strangers. To ensure that women also participated in the oral traditions program, I organized a series of eleven "Women's Culture" workshops. Women came from many villages to discuss change, learn how to operate a cassette recorder, and choose their own material to record. Each workshop was conducted in the vernacular language so that the participants would feel at ease with me and would participate fully in the activities.

For many people the most surprising aspect of the province's Cultural Affairs program was that they themselves should decide what to record. Many villagers have met visitors wanting to record traditional stories—sometimes an anthropologist or linguist conducting academic research, in other cases a tourist interested in local customs. People usually asked what we wanted to record, as that had been their experience with others. That the choice was theirs was a novel idea, as was our request that whatever was told or sung should be in the

informant's own language. They were accustomed to using Pijin with outsiders and the vernacular only with others from the same linguistic group. Sometimes we requested a Pijin version so that the information could be understood by everyone, and certainly we recorded in Pijin if that was the informant's preference. Insistence on the vernacular, however, was probably one of the key factors in convincing people that the government's cultural program was their program.

I had my own concerns about preserving oral traditions in non-traditional ways. Messages change from one medium to another and transferring information from an oral to a recorded format set it in a permanent form for the first time. Also, we were isolating bits of cultural material from a larger context and giving those bits a kind of significance simply because they were recorded. Discussing these issues with Solomon Islanders reassured me about our program since they saw clearly that it came down to a choice between recording material, however incomplete, or perhaps losing it entirely, as had already happened to so much traditional knowledge.

I also worried about encouraging people to write down oral traditions in their own language. Of the province's 25 vernacular languages, only ten have a written form and only a few of these are actually used; in some cases a local volunteer created the first ever written form of his or her language. Sometimes this meant that writing was produced by people who were not only not literate in their own language, but whose formal education was limited. We were committed to the active involvement of Solomon Islanders in preserving their culture, but I was concerned that such an informal rendering of a language might create problems. Again, Solomon Islanders were not concerned about this approach, and their view was fully supported by linguists at the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific Studies. One volunteer who created his own language was Lawrence Menesia, a young father who attended a volunteers' workshop in 1986 and returned home to record the *olos* and compile an English-Tepazaka dictionary. For four years he worked at this task in between making copra, gardening, and fishing to help support his family. The dictionary was printed in 1989 and his collection of oral traditions in 1991, by which time some of the old people recorded had died.

A key issue regarding all material collected was the question of who had rights to it. Clearly the Cultural Affairs Office, as an office of Western Province Government, was responsible for the material which the government held. We collected, catalogued, and stored the recordings, and edited them for use in radio broadcasts. We also edited written texts and arranged for printing and distribution of the published books.

Yet, just as clearly, in the most basic sense this material did not belong to the Office or the Government, but to the men and women who had sung or told it. Ownership and access rights raised the question of paying compensation, a traditional means of restitution and a process we had to avoid or else face continuing demands for payments.

These concerns were settled in two ways. First, the Province's Policy on Culture clearly defines the question of ownership and the Province's own role in cultural preservation:

Western Province recognises that Western Province custom and history belong to individuals, families, tribes and communities of Western Province and that the role of Western Province Government is to act as trustee of that custom and history.

A crucial implication of this statement is that people who have deposited material with the Cultural Affairs Office have the right to withdraw that material from the Province's collection if and when they wish.

The Office's rights to hold and use the material are authorized in the Form of Authority, a legal document in which informants give this permission and indicate any restrictions. In a few cases informants simply wanted the Cultural Affairs Office to keep the material safe. Most were willing to have their material broadcast on the radio, printed in books, or otherwise disseminated. Some did specify restrictions—prohibiting broadcast but allowing publication, for example, or permitting broadcast only if the informant is not publicly identified. In a few instances informants specified exactly which family members can have access to the material. The Form of Authority protects the interests of informants as well as Cultural Affairs staff. It is clear who has absolute rights to the material and it is equally clear what permission has been given to the Office. This latter point forestalls any demands for compensation.

The question of using recording traditions as evidence in a court of law was a major issue and one which held the greatest danger for the Cultural Affairs Office. If our work was ever implicated in a case over disputed land, we would lose all credibility with the villagers. People feared that information recorded could be used as evidence against their family or tribe in a land dispute. On the other hand some had expectations that the recording of family genealogies or tribal histories by the government's Cultural Affairs Office gave that information a legitimacy which would stand up in a court of law. People worried that the recording of custom sites would result in the government deciding who had rights to the land or that the stories recorded about the sites would establish legal ownership simply

because a recorded version existed in a government office.

These concerns were ongoing and we made sure to explain our neutrality frequently and thoroughly: the Cultural Affairs Office could not confer legal status on anything, the survey of sites had nothing to do with land ownership, and the Office took no position vis-à-vis land rights. In addition, all books and reports prepared and distributed by the Cultural Affairs Office carry a disclaimer:

No part of this book shall be used as evidence or proof of any fact, matter or thing. The publishers do not accept any liability for any error or misdescription appearing herein. The publishers do not hold out that any matter or thing described herein is correct or true and do not endorse any views or opinions expressed herein.

A similar, less formal disclaimer was also used with radio broadcasts of traditional information after a listener called to complain that a story broadcast on an earlier program was not true. The caller, well known for his endless litigations over land rights, was invited to tell his tribe's story on the radio, but declined. In future broadcasts of potentially controversial material, however, we were careful to announce that the speaker, not the Cultural Affairs Office, was responsible for the information.

Explaining the legalistic Form of Authority, the printed disclaimer in books and reports, and the concept of government trusteeship was a necessary and often lengthy part of every recording session or training workshop. Interestingly, villagers had no trouble understanding the reasons and the need for these documents and policies. They were accustomed to claims for compensation, had participated in or observed endless land disputes, and, most importantly, knew that the oral traditions belonged to them, their families, and their tribes.

## Conclusion

There is no end to problems of cultural preservation and understanding. The need to inform people about the Cultural Affairs program is ongoing as more people become involved, as governments change, and as each project raises different considerations. When the Canadian advisors leave, they will leave behind projects and approaches based on foreign concepts of culture and cultural preservation. These will continue to be modified by Solomon Islanders and Melanesian culture as they have been since the beginning of the program. But the ultimate aim of the Cultural Affairs Office will continue—to validate Solomon Islands custom and

history so that people take pride in their past, become aware of change in their lives, and strengthen their capacity to develop a future of their own making.

The first book of oral traditions which the Cultural Affairs office prepared for publication included several custom stories from Ranongga plus two historical accounts. I had planned to call the book, "Stories and Histories from Ranongga." Boaz, one of the Province's canoe-drivers, asked to borrow the draft copy as it was written in his language. The next day Boaz was delighted

to have read a book in his own language, but was concerned about its mix of true stories and pretend stories. I assured him that people would know the difference. He was still worried. "Look," he said, "this story about a giant is only a pretend one, but this story about how three girls were turned into stone is true—it happened at my village and you can see the stones to this day." I reassured him again. When I sent the book to the printer, however, it was titled simply, "Stories from Ranongga."

## Notes

1. Although this article deals with Melanesian culture, Solomon Islands has small minority populations of Micronesians and Polynesians. The Gilbertese, a Micronesian people who were re-settled by the British government in the 1950s and 1960s in what became the Solomons' Western Province, are now 5% of the province's population. They were fully included in the programs of the Cultural Affairs Office.
2. Three volunteers have held this post: Valerie Harrison (1985–87), Barbara Riley (1987–91), Catherine Cole (1991–).