

## Reviews

***The Manipulation of Custom: from uprising to intervention in the Solomon Islands***

Jon Fraenkel, 2005, Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, 262pp, ISBN 1 74076 149 9

Recent events in Solomon Islands provide fertile material for contemporary historians. The 1998 uprising by the local Isatabu people on Guadalcanal against their Malaitan fellow residents sparked an escalating tit-for-tat conflict between rival ethnic militias which led to the near-total collapse of state authority in the late 1990s. This descent into low-intensity civil war, along with the subsequent overthrow of the elected government in June 2000 by Malaitan rebels, and the eventual intervention by Australian-led forces, makes the Solomon Islands conflict one of the most important episodes in the increasingly turbulent politics of the post-colonial Pacific.

This is the second book on the Solomon Islands conflict to appear in the past year. Like Clive Moore's *Happy Isles in Crisis*, the *Manipulation of Custom* is essentially a work of contemporary history, tracing the evolution of the conflict from the pre-colonial period to the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention of 2003. Relying mostly on secondary sources, it begins by documenting the history of Solomon Islands in the twentieth century, its economic and political development, and the long record of inter-island migration and settlement between Malaitan settlers and their local Guadalcanese counterparts. Following a largely chronological structure, these early chapters chart both the development of the Solomon Islands state, and the alternating periods of both coexistence and tension which have characterised relations between the two groups.

The core of the book focuses on the period of outright armed conflict that began in 1998, with the first mobilisation of Isatabu militias, marking the end of these familiar dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and the start of organised violence. The subsequent eviction of thousands of Malaitan migrants from Guadalcanal prompted an inevitable Malaitan counter-mobilisation, amply assisted by the Malaitan-dominated police force, which provided the source of many of the high-powered weapons used in the conflict. As Fraenkel documents, both sides drew upon the floating, undereducated and mostly unemployed *Masta Liu* youth of contemporary Solomons society to form the basis of their stage armies, the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Forces.

Attacks by one group on the other led inevitably to counter-attacks and other forms of retribution, often aimed at non-combatants. In accordance with the demands of custom, peace talks were then held, and compensation payments distributed for injuries suffered, both real and imagined (including even verbal slights directed at rival chiefs). These fuelled increasingly outrageous subsequent demands for compensation—demands which quickly escalated from traditional forms of redress to blatant attempts to secure cash payments from the Solomon Islands government.

By 2001, with thousands of people displaced but only perhaps 100 dead, the state kitty was essentially empty. Most government services had ceased to function. Compensation payouts, mostly to local politicians, comprised one-fifth of all government spending. Revenues had collapsed, as taxes failed to be collected and import remissions were granted to all comers. Local politicians turned to foreign sources to maintain the flow of funds. In a process that reflects particularly poorly on all involved, Taiwan came to the rescue, offering

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a \$25 million loan to fund compensation commitments. This disappeared almost immediately into the pockets of the politicians. In 2002, the country hit rock bottom: with no funds left to distribute, the conflict changed from a guerrilla war to a kind of pervasive criminality. The state, it is safe to say, had failed.

One of the main themes to emerge from Fraenkel's account of this sorry saga is the recurrent, cyclical aspect of the conflict's evolution. Reading the detailed description of the way one short-lived local peace deal after another was convened for the purposes of distributing such 'customary' compensation, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the conflict was itself increasingly fuelled by this perverse peace dividend. In essence, the Solomon Islands state became a giant piggy-bank to be ransacked for increasingly exorbitant payouts to politicians and their supporters, serving only to propagate further conflict. Before long, compensation had become extortion, fuelled by the inability of the country's bureaucracy to reign in the apparently boundless greed and short-sightedness of its political élite. The state began to eat itself.

The circuit-breaker in this downward spiral was the Australia-led military intervention of 2003 restoring basic law and order and may yet succeed in rebuilding the apparatus of the Solomon Islands state. The book concludes with an account of the change in Australian policy that presaged the RAMSI intervention. Here it is less successful, as the author moves from providing episodic accounts of the conflict to opining on the merits or otherwise of Australian foreign policy. Berating what he sees as 'that ignorance of the socio-political situation in the Pacific Islands that pervades Canberra's corridors of power', Fraenkel tilts at a range of windmills: think-tanks, policy-wonks, academics who use African analogies, even

'offensive' depictions of the Pacific as Australia's 'backyard'. This sometimes self-indulgent critique is an unnecessary distraction from the book's main theme.

Overall, this is a good work of historical narrative, and one that I would recommend to anyone searching for a solid account of the Solomon Islands conflict and its aftermath. It is a well-researched, well-argued and well-written piece of contemporary history. What it does not do is answer the deeper question of what caused the Solomon Islands conflict to occur in the first place. After all, the basic factors advanced to explain the conflict—ethnic differences, a rent-seeking political culture, customary demands for compensation and venal political leaders—have long been present both in Solomon Islands itself, and indeed in Melanesia as a whole. As such, they cannot present a satisfactory account of why the conflict occurred in the manner, time and place that it did there, but not elsewhere. Those seeking to understand the deeper, structural roots of the conflict must therefore keep searching.

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***South Pacific Futures: Oceania toward 2050***

Anthony Van Fossen, 2005, The Foundation for Development Cooperation, Brisbane, 160pp, ISBN 0958672865

In *South Pacific Futures*, Van Fossen groups theorists about the long-term future of the South Pacific into five categories. 'Globalists' take into account world economic trends and either conclude that the South Pacific will conform to these trends and become modestly prosperous, or claim that it will fail to take advantage of globalisation and 'fall into a doomsday nightmare of overpopulation, poverty, and social breakdown'. 'Oceanians'