

## **“Big Confusion”: The Land Question in Honiara and the History of Land Policy in Solomon Islands**

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Four layers of confusion obfuscate the issue of land in Gilbert Camp. First, residents ignore the intended representative of their residence rights. Second, they are confused regarding the “right” way to access land. Third, they do not know who the “real landowner” is. Fourth, the land boundary has changed continually since the foundation of Honiara. In this article, I try to clarify the confusing issue of land by looking at it from 3 perspectives: (1) The history of land policy in Solomon Islands reveals a long-standing neglect of the indigenous point of view regarding land; (2) Ethnographic approaches illustrate how people react to such a dismissive attitude; and (3) The contemporary preference for patriliney among government officials exemplifies the tendency toward a form of “indigenous essentialism” in which the interests of policymakers and landowners converge. This article demonstrates that the issue of land is a legacy from the past that bears major consequences for the future of Solomon Islands.

*Keywords: Oceania, Solomon Islands, land, “Ethnic Tensions,” internally displaced people (IDP), matrilineal systems, patrilineal systems, boundaries, narrative anthropology*

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*“All these recent changes distorted the knowledge. Land and people are distanced so much that it affects our understanding.”*

James

## 1. Introduction

In Gilbert Camp, an illegal settlement on the outskirts of Honiara, the capital city of Solomon Islands<sup>1</sup> (Maps 1–4), land is an issue of such complexity that it almost invariably results in unanswered questions. This article attempts to clarify this complexity.

The urban area of Honiara occupies a thin strip of land about 15 km long, between 2 settlements known as White River and Burns Creek. The coastal area is low and only extends inland for about 1.6 km of coralline ridges, which are seldom higher than 600 m. Government buildings and businesses occupy the central area of the town, which is dotted with and surrounded by clusters of ever-expanding settlements of migrants. Gilbert Camp, located across the southeastern segment of the Honiara town boundary, is one of these settlements. In the past, the indigenous people of Guadalcanal referred to the area as Tavahalo, which means “stream” and indicates the narrow river separating Gilbert Camp from the adjacent settlement of O’kwala.

Today, a quarter of the settlement lies within the area of competence of the Honiara City Council (HCC), whereas the remaining three-quarters are classified as Customary Land and administered by the Guadalcanal Provincial Government (GPC). The Gilbert Camp toponym dates back to the World War II when the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Labor Corps established their base camp there in 1943 and 1944. Although the contingent was composed of Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) and Ellice Islanders (Tuvaluans), the majority of the soldier-laborers

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<sup>1</sup> The country’s name, as established in the Constitution of Solomon Islands, is “Solomon Islands,” with no definite article.

were from Kiribati. They assisted the Allied Forces during the final part of the conflict, and the area was named after them when they left (O’Brien, 2010).

This was also the first time in which a relatively large number of Solomon Islanders left their home villages and settled in Honiara, a name that was actually a misnomer derived from the Ghari language expression *Naho-ni-ara*. This phrase means “facing the Ara,” i.e., the site where the southeast winds meet the coast (Moore, 2015: 419). There, 680 Solomon Islanders fought until the end of the conflict as members of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force alongside the Americans. About 2,000 Solomon Islanders, the majority of whom came from Malaita, were also enlisted to work in the Solomon Islands Labor Corps. They built roads, airfields, and jetties.

After the end of the World War II and the 1952 proclamation of Honiara as the capital city, people from all parts of the archipelago began migrating there, attracted by the “lights of the city” and the prospect of economic advancement. Again, these people were mostly from Malaita, and this majority is still reflected in Gilbert Camp, where 85% of the current population has Malaitan origins.

Settling on the outskirts of Honiara, these migrants were confronted with numerous challenges. One of the major issues was certainly that of land, which began to be a concern by the end of the 1970s. Regarding this emerging concern, James Nage wrote:

The effective demand for new housing units had been relatively high in [the 1970s]. ... Although one target of the National Development Plan 1975–1979 was to reduce the growth rate to 2 percent by the early 1980s, the provisional results of the 1976 census show no move towards that target. ... As new employment opportunities are created in town, people are attracted to migrate there from rural areas, but other factors, such as the attraction of an urban lifestyle and the expectation of better living conditions certainly play an important role. The number of households increased during the 1970–1976 period by 4.6 percent annually and the number of males by 3.6 percent. (Nage, 1987: 94)

In the years during Honiara’s rapid expansion, labor migrants had to find a place to settle. The cost of renting in town was prohibitive for the vast majority, and the system of subsidized housing put in place by the Solomon Islands Housing Authority benefited only “the wealthiest members of the urban population” (Nage, 1987: 95). Labor migrants, thus,

started to build leaf houses in public areas of the town and on its outskirts. They tended to concentrate in certain zones, following ethno-linguistic affiliation as well as tribal, clannish, and familial ties.

At the beginning of the 1950s, for example, Malaitans from the Lau Lagoon were among the first inhabitants of the Fishing Village at Kukum. Further west, at the outfall of the Matanikau River, people from the Langalanga Lagoon (on the western side of central Malaita) established another village. The area known today as White River, at the westernmost part of the town, was originally a Polynesian settlement, populated by people from Tikopia, Sikaiana, Rennell, and Bellona. Later, people from different parts of Malaita also moved there, probably attracted by the water supply, which was abundant compared to other Malaitan settlements. Today, Malaitan settlements are numerous in the inland part of the town. Kobito, Mamulele, Dukwasi, Ferakuisia, Adailiua, and Matariu were all established by Malaitans—as was Gilbert Camp.

According to my analysis, from the point of view of the settlers, there are 4 layers of confusion that obfuscate the issue of land in Gilbert Camp. I look at these layers of confusion through 3 lenses, although each is lacking in clarity. One lens is that of the history of land policy and administration. A variety of events have taken place over time that make land appear unstable and unpredictable in the eyes of Solomon Islanders, including the initial legislative void, the “wasteland” period, the restitutions that followed within a context altered by major social changes, along with the displacements of the town boundary, the chaos created by what became known as the “Ethnic Tensions,” and the recent registration policies.

Another lens through which to view these layers of confusion is that of ethnography and oral history. For the people of Gilbert Camp, it is not possible to determine whether they hold a right to reside there; if they do, they cannot be sure whether it is valid or not; if it is found to be valid, the terms of the agreement remain ambiguous. As a result, those from whom payment is demanded for their residences are not in a position to know whether they should indeed pay, whether or not those who demand money are entitled to do so, or whether other stakeholders—especially government officials and other “landowners”—will consider that payment valid.

Finally, the lens ground by the convergence of interests between Guadalcanal “landowners” and officials of the national and provincial government provides some insights into their responsibility for the “big confusion.” Yet despite this triangulation of vantage points, my use of these lenses in the following 3 sections does not provide the answers that

the people of Gilbert Camp seek. The best they can hope to do is disentangle some of the factors that make their questions so difficult to answer.

In order to explain the exclusion of certain actors from negotiations over land rights and privileges, the anthropological literature on land in Melanesia has placed a growing emphasis on the breakdown of social relationships (Bainton, 2009; Koczberski and Curry, 2004; Allen, 2012). This emphasis highlighted the emergence of competing narratives of settlement and land ownership, purposefully “storied” to make land claims “legitimate.” Dan Jorgensen has shown how the concept of legitimacy can be used in the Melanesian context to understand contemporary issues, including that of land (Jorgensen, 2000, 2003, 2007). Concerning Guadalcanal, Matthew Allen argued that “a Malaitan settler narrative and a Guadalcanal landowner narrative” have been constructed in order “to establish a morally legitimate claim to property rights and economic opportunities on Guadalcanal” (Allen, 2012: 163).

Allen explored the articulation of these narratives through a review of reports and historiographic sources, complemented by excerpts from original interviews. Although this article also draws on history in the first section, I use a radically ethnographic approach in the second and third sections to depict the competing narratives of settlement and land ownership. While a historical approach is certainly needed to understand the land issue, ethnographic experiences and individual narratives can provide a stark and insightful illustration of how the inhabitants of urban settlements negotiate principles of customary land tenure. These negotiations lead to particular concretions of land values, which eventually result into the raw material with which history, and thereby the future of land in Solomon Islands, will eventually be constructed.

## **2. Brief History of Land in Solomon Islands**

### **2.1 1893–1945: From Protectorate to the World War II**

Before imperial legislation was introduced in Solomon Islands, traders, planters, and speculators acquired land directly from the people who resided on it. Later, in 1893, Britain established a protectorate on the archipelago and the British land policy was progressively enforced. Under the Pacific Order in Council 1893, no other foreign power but the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) had the legal authority to manage resources in Solomon

Islands. The BSIP had the power, but needed to finance its structure because the money allocated by the Crown was insufficient. Thus, Resident Commissioner Charles Woodford allowed foreign companies to purchase areas of territory for their economic activities, and the colonial government itself began to do business with local resources (Foukona, 2007).

All this happened in a sort of legislative void, as the Pacific Order in Council 1893 did not specify how to deal with land cases. The first law governing the alienation of customary land was the Queen's Regulation No. 4 of 1896, which made it possible for non-natives to purchase land for trade and agriculture from Solomon Islanders with approval from the colonial administration.

However, there was an alternative way to obtain land that did not require dealing with indigenous people at all: declaring it to be a sort of no-man's-land. Under the Queen's Regulation No. 3 of 1900, the administration started to alienate areas of customary land with the purpose of generating capital. That was the beginning of a period commonly referred to as that of the "wasteland regulations." The regulation used the expression "waste land" to indicate any land that was not claimed, cultivated, or occupied by any native or non-native (Bennett, 1987: 131), and which the colonial government was "entitled" to take away from the control of Solomon Islanders.

Land that was considered vacant by a European, and classified as "waste land" by the British administration, was not necessarily considered to be so by the indigenous people, though. They might not live on the land, nor cultivate a garden there, but could still value it and consider it to be theirs, i.e., land they had inherited from their ancestors. Apparently, Woodford was never seriously committed to verifying that land was of no use to the indigenous population (Bennett, 1987; Williams, 2011). Indeed, Foukona argued that it was "Woodford's economic aim to generate more revenue for the Protectorate [that] made him favourably disposed to alienation of customary land" (Foukona, 2007: 65). Thus, from the beginning, land dealings in the archipelago took place on the basis of a fundamental disregard for the indigenous point of view. As we shall see, the same kind of disregard continues to cause much of the contemporary confusion as well.

The unsophisticated land policy during the wasteland period resulted in an increased number of land disputes. As a consequence, in 1914 the government decided that no further sale of land to expatriates was permitted, and in 1919 the Philips Commission was organized in order to identify the discrepancies and inequities of land alienation. However, the number of claims increased rapidly over the years, making it very difficult for the commission to administer all the return procedures.

All in all, the initial years of land policy and administration in Solomon Islands can be described with the words of Peter Larmour as years “of continuous review, interspersed with brief periods of implementation that was usually hampered by staff shortages” (Larmour, 1979: 105).

## **2.2 1945–1978: From the End of the World War II to Independence**

When Honiara was officially proclaimed the new capital of the British Protectorate, some land had already been alienated (cf. Oram, 1980; Storey, 2003). Part of the land in west Honiara was purchased from a private company, Mamara Plantation, and another part from people living in Kakabona (west of the town) and Matanikau (in the center) who claimed to be the “landowners.” On the east side, United States Forces had developed an airfield and other infrastructure, whereas the Levers business group and the Catholic Church occupied the adjacent areas (Storey, 2003).

During the 1950s, the Allan Commission started to improve the land policy by distinguishing 3 types of land and their related regulations: alienated land, owned in written title; customary land, customarily owned; and vacant land (Allan, 1957). It is worth noting that the 1961 Land Trust Board found no land to which this last category would apply (cf. Larmour, 1979). Registration of land was encouraged with the Land and Titles Ordinance of 1959. However, administration costs, lack of personnel, and distance between concerned areas hindered the application of these policies.

In the latter days of the Protectorate, customary land was highly valued and strongly defended by Solomon Islanders. The indigenous engagement with the land regulations had influential outcomes in terms of legislation and political achievements. Two years before independence, for instance, the Report of the Select Committee on Lands and Mining recommended that the government had to return all areas it had acquired before 1963 to the descendants of the “original landowners.”

However, far from re-establishing the pre-acquisition situation, the 1960s policies resulted in the opposite outcome. The conditions in which the inheritors were to regain access to their lands were very different from those of the time when that land had been acquired. As immigration rates grew in Honiara, the population tripled between 1959 and 1970, and marriage linkages expanded and became much more complex. Since kinship and land rights are inextricably intertwined, the number of people who could virtually assert their right to a single territory increased dramatically (Bathgate, 1993a: 19, 1993b: 189;

Monson, 2015; cf. Curry and Koczberski, 1999: 135). Reconstructing original landownership rights had thus become extremely problematic.

Oral histories collected by Bathgate among Guale people in northwestern Guadalcanal (Bathgate, 1985) indicate that residential groups in this area had in the past established 3 to 4 settlements in a single generation. Each of these groups was formed with people belonging to 2 *duli* (matrilineages). Marrying within one's own matrilineage was prohibited, as marriage was exogamous (Bathgate, 1993b: 755). As a consequence, land rights circulated within a restricted network made up of people belonging to a single pair of *duli*. But when connubial networks expanded as a consequence of immigration, kinship networks "were no longer reciprocally reinforced within a confined network of 2 cognatically and affinally linked groups" (Monson, 2012: 235). This made the recognition of "original landowners" even more difficult to ascertain.

### **2.3 1978–1998: From Independence to the "Ethnic Tensions"**

The necessity of controlling migration in and around Honiara soon became central to the political debate, as illustrated in the Report of the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee. The view was widespread that migrants, especially of Malaitan origin, had been abusing their right to move freely around the national territory by settling "without the proper consent of the landowners" (Mamaloni, 1987; Chapman, 1992: 94). Still, the recommendations that the committee made to appease anxieties relating to migration, resources, and devolution of power went largely unheard (Monson, 2012; Ghai, 1990; Scales, 2007).

In 1988, a document entitled "Petition by the indigenous people of Guadalcanal" was submitted to the Solomon Islands Government (SIG). The authors accused Malaitans of being the perpetrators of violent offenses against Guale people, and grieved over the use that migrants were making of their land. They blamed the SIG for the unfair distribution of benefits emerging from land development in Honiara, and demanded that Parliament take "immediate steps" to repatriate all "illegal squatters" (Gatu, 2004: 189).

However, the petition represented only one side of the picture: not all migrants had necessarily settled out of bare disrespect for the law, whether it was constitutional or customary. Initially, the first few migrants had been settling on government land under Temporary Occupation License (TOL) (Storey, 2003: 259). Then, when settlements began to spill over from town land onto customary land, incoming migrants negotiated their settlement with the "landowners." Although it is very difficult to obtain reliable information

regarding land agreements between settlers and “landowners,” it seems that these were drawn up and validated with transactions involving cash, as well as customary gift exchanges (Kama, 1979: 152; Fraenkel, 2004: 57). These informal land purchases grew in number because of the increasing monetized value of the land. Coincidentally, it became more and more difficult to ascertain whether these transactions were legitimate or not (Monson, 2011). Often, self-declared landowners took advantage of the situation and struck deals with newcomers for short-term gains without the authority to do so. Zimmer-Tamakoshi observed that “when land has a price” (Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 1997), the identity of particular social groups and/or individuals and their relationships might be emphasized and/or de-emphasised in order to advance claims for the wealth associated with land.

Perhaps this balances the picture of a Malaitan “other” as the single-minded perpetrator of a disrespectful attitude toward Guadalcanal customary laws. Rather than deliberately using the land of the Guales for their own interests, some Malaitans genuinely believed they were acquiring rights to residence and cultivation according to customary and/or constitutional law. That is not to say that all settlers’ motivations and actions can be justified. Indeed, during the 1970s, the provincial government had issued many “notices to leave.” But the government could not take action because it lacked the legal power of eviction.

In any case, the situation boiled down to a *tabula rasa* with what became known as the “Ethnic Tensions.” “Ethnic tensions” is the label commonly used to refer to the set of events that took place in Solomon Islands between 1998 and 2003: some 35,000 non-Guadalcanese (mostly Malaitan) settlers escaped from Guadalcanal under the threat of Guadalcanese paramilitary groups—in particular the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), later renamed the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). Another paramilitary group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), was formed in opposition. The militarization of men and youth constituted the most dangerous threat to the population, and the removal of a legitimate government in 2000 along with the intervention of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2003 are considered to be 2 crucial historical events (Moore, 2004). These events have come to represent a sort of symbolic division between 2 eras in the complicated history of land in Honiara. They marked the end of a confusing situation, characterized by the restitution of land within a context of complexified connubial networks and land ownership rights, only to give way to a more confusing one.

#### **2.4 2003–2012: From the End of the Ethnic Tensions to Fixed-Term Estates**

The Townsville Peace Agreement officially marked the end of the Tensions in October 2000. The Malaitan delegation demanded that Malaitans who had been evicted from Guadalcanal be given employment as reparation. Responding to the request, the Ministry of Agriculture proposed that customary land be made available for an oil palm plantation. The land chosen for this project was in the Auluta Basin, at the eastern end of Malaita. The project was never accomplished; however, this initiative prompted a broader scheme of technical assistance funded by AusAID, the Solomon Islands Institutional Strengthening Land Assistance Project (SIISLAP).

Between 2000 and 2007, SIISLAP helped the Ministry of Land, Housing, and Surveys to set up a scheme aimed at the conversion of TOLs into Fixed-Term Estates (FTEs). Initially, although the project only included a small proportion of settlements in Honiara, about 350 FTEs were offered to settlers, regardless of whether they had previously held their TOL or not. The next step was taken in 2007, with a project entitled “Regularization of Unauthorized Occupied Public Land in Honiara.” The project was based in the contention, ascertained during surveys conducted in 2006, that more than “90% of residents living on public land within Honiara do so without any government approval” (no listed author, 2006). Among them were many Gilbert Camp residents.

Hence in 2012 officials of the Ministry of Land came to Gilbert Camp with the intention to complete the project. At the time, I was living there with a local family as part of my doctoral fieldwork, and I attended the meeting organized by Harold (a pseudonym), the then-Director of Physical Planning at the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Survey (Figure 1). I had been in contact with Harold since the beginning of my fieldwork, as I was attempting to understand how the SIG was dealing with the issue of land ownership in the settlements. I knew he was very determined to clarify the issue of land in Gilbert Camp.

However, at the meeting, members of the Gilbert Camp community expressed confusion, and what Harold had to say did not clear up their doubts. He, in turn, looked rather surprised, even suspicious, of their confusion. In his eyes, they were well aware of what he saw as their wrongdoing and responsibilities, and simply needed to be informed about the required steps to regularize their position. For him, it sufficed to ascertain whether they were living on alienated or customary land in order to know how they needed to proceed. For them, it was not quite so.

Such divergence of views is of critical importance. In a recent article about Honiara, the eminent Solomon Islands historian Clive Moore argued that “authorities must come to terms with the arrival communities and incorporate their hybrid living patterns into their planning,

or face future urban turmoil” (2015: 421). The following 2 sections starkly illustrate that the settlers and the national and provincial authorities are still far from coming to such terms.

Figure 1 around here

### **3. Ethnography and Oral History**

#### **3.1 “I Am Not a Chief, But...”: The Lack of a Representative Spokesperson**

On 17 May 2012, at about 6 p.m., Harold started to explain the current land policy to those who turned up at the meeting. In particular, he wanted to make everyone aware of the importance of paying their TOL, the license that legally authorizes an individual to make use of a piece of alienated and registered land belonging to the SIG. He seemed very confident. The participants, in contrast, appeared rather unprepared to confront him. Although some of them have lived in Honiara for a long time, they were not equipped to negotiate with the Director of Physical Planning at the Ministry of Lands. Furthermore, they lacked a community representative in charge of defending their rights, priorities, and values. Another reason the participants were not equipped to confront their visitor was that they had only been given one day to prepare:

Harold: Yesterday I came here to give notice about the meeting. I am sorry if we only gave you short notice. But for me it is not short notice! Actually, a lot of people come to my office every day and we pass information to them. Before we begin, I would like to meet your chief. Who is your chief? I suppose you have a chief, don't you?

No one responded. People whispered, someone laughed, presumably out of embarrassment, after poking a friend and inciting him to step up and talk. That moment epitomized one of the most problematic aspects of collective life in Gilbert Camp, i.e., that people do not consider themselves to be represented by a chief or a board of representatives. This is part and parcel of a more generalized problem of leadership in the Solomon Islands that Michael Kwa'ioloa discussed in his latest book (Burt [and Kwa'ioloa](#), 2013: 135–162). As

a particular consequence of this problem, no one stood up as a representative during the meeting. Harold, thus, returned to the floor and spoke in an ironic tone:

Harold: There are a lot of chiefs, indeed! Anyway, please choose someone who can pray, so that we can have a prayer together.

[Timidly, Mike stood up and moved to the center of the stage, so to speak.]

Mike: I am not a chief, but our friend here, Harold, asked us to pray, and I want to help. And I want to thank him for coming. We are looking forward to hearing what you have come to tell us. ... You might think that this is not our home, but it is! We are from Malaita, we own land in Malaita, but now we own land in Guadalcanal, too!

The “truth” about land ownership is a subject of current discussion in Gilbert Camp. Some groups claim the right to reside in a given area on the basis of their alleged relationship with an alleged “landowner.” Others uphold their connections with a neighboring group whom they believe has established an equivalent connection. Still others claim a connection with a “landowner” that was established by their ancestors, and which they inherited.

However, these ideas are socially cogent only as long as there is some consensus. During the meeting such consensus was lacking, and thus concepts such as “we” and “own” did not have as much rhetorical power as the discourse of a chief would have had. They were therefore much weaker than the imperative requests advanced by Harold. Thus, even though Mike did present the perspective of his fellow settlers, his points were largely dismissed because he was lacking in the investiture needed to make his claims come across as representative and thus legitimate.

### **3.2 “I Paid Once”: How Can Land be Accessed?**

Harold had his own agenda, laid out in his project calendar. It apparently required that incompatible ideas relating to land must be ignored. He dismissed the points of view of his interlocutors when he perceived that they were not falling within his set of priorities.

Harold: You see these areas? They are called TOL. T stands for Temporary, O stands for Occupation, and L for License. It is like a driving license. Is there anyone here who holds a driving license? Yes? When did you pay for it? Have you paid for it just once, or do you need to pay for it every year?

John: I paid for it once.

Harold: What? No, my understanding of license is that a license is for one year. Every license is for one year. Unless it is a license to marry! That is a lifetime one!

Some laughed. Others remained serious, for as Harold was casting John’s comment as irrelevant to the discussion, he was also dismissing the point of view of many in attendance. Indeed, the issue of one-off payments is of great importance for the people in Gilbert Camp. Indeed, one recurrent subject of discussion is whether payments made to “landowners” and government officials are valid, complete, and definitive, or not. In saying that he only paid once, John was also drawing attention to his perspective about payments in general, and payments for land in particular. In other words, it was as if he was asking: “If I have already paid once, why pay again?”

The validity of land payments in Gilbert Camp is usually discussed in relation to oral accounts about Benjamin Ko’oru’u and Barnabas O’ai. Benjamin Ko’oru’u, it appears, was the first migrant who settled in Gilbert Camp. This occurred at some point between 1949 and 1952. At that time, he was in charge of the Ilu Farm project, which was meant to verify the quality of the ground for agriculture and cattle. The crops that Benjamin was able to produce were repeatedly offered to Barnabas O’ai, one of the chiefs of the Kakau tribe from the Tandai area of northwestern Guadalcanal (Map 5).

It appears that between Barnabas and Benjamin, some agreements were made as a way to regulate the use of the land. Several accounts concur that Benjamin gave some of his produce to Barnabas in exchange for land. Some specify that the offerings were not intended to be a payment for the land. Some say that the food was only a token of appreciation for the generosity that Barnabas was showing in allowing Benjamin to settle and cultivate the land. These, however, are all retrospective statements, and they were made with the awareness of the current interests around land.

Also, people’s opinions concerning the validity of that payment are largely formed by their customary ideas pertaining to accessing land, as well as by their understanding of analogous ideas in Guadalcanal *kastom*, which they see as very similar.

*Falafala ana ano 'i Kwara'ae* (the tradition of land in Kwara'ae, cf. Burt and Kwa'ioloa, 1992) includes prescriptions applying to cases of migration. Apparently, it is possible to acquire primary rights over a piece of land through the gift of shell money and food. Some insist that accessing primary rights was the rationale for Benjamin's gift of food to Barnabas. They insist on this because they believe that their settlement in Gilbert Camp is legitimated by that first transaction. Indeed, they feel that norms pertaining to migration and settlement are essentially identical in Kwara'ae and northwestern Guadalcanal.

In Guadalcanal, a man or a woman who married into a given clan, i.e., a subsection of the matrilineage, can obtain the right to reside on and cultivate the relative land. A person without kinship connections to any clan can also obtain the right to use the land of another group if he or she performs a *chupu*, a traditional ceremony involving a public offering of foodstuff and valuables from one party to another.

Because people in Gilbert Camp recognize similarities between this kind of *chupu* and their own traditional ways of accessing land, and because they believe Benjamin offered a *chupu* to Barnabas, they insist that the current "landowner" should recognize the validity of that first payment, rather than asking for more money. That is what Mike meant when he said, "We are from Malaita...but now we own land in Guadalcanal too!"

According to Allen, "the principles of Guale customary land tenure dictate that people from outside the matrilineal landowning clan can only ever be granted usufructuary rights, even when *chupu* has been paid, and that these rights are not automatically passed on at death" (2012: 169). However, Maetala contended that an outsider can be entitled to pass down these rights if his actions and behaviors are regarded as "good" by the landowning group (Maetala, 2008: 46). It follows that principles of customary land tenure should always be understood in relation to localized negotiations about individual residency patterns. Rather than asserting a land ownership principle, Mike and John were suggesting that Benjamin's *chupu* should be acknowledged, for they fear that otherwise, any new payment could be forgotten too soon or later, and that the people of Gilbert Camp may constantly find themselves being regarded as squatters, and required to pay again and again. It follows that the problem of recognition is crucial. Dismissiveness toward such concerns, in turn, perpetuates insecurity, suspicion, and confusion.

It follows that Harold should have asked why John thought that a one-off payment was enough, and why Mike used the term "own." He might have learned that the reason people in Gilbert Camp do not pay their TOL is that they are not sure whether the original *chupu* is valid. But their point was ignored, and clearly it was not going to be discussed any further.

After failing to address this issue, Harold spoke for a long time about the way TOL payments work, specifying that they are not intended to be one-off payments, and that those who had failed to pay in the past had to pay arrears. That was all he had to say. At that point, Terence raised his hand. His straight arm and rigid body expressed his affliction.

### **3.3 “You Are not the Real Landowner, I Am Afraid”**

Terence was born in Gilbert Camp in the late 1970s. He was raised as an Anglican but turned to Pentecostal Christianity when the first church of the Assemblies of God (AOG) was built in Gilbert Camp. Recently, he left that church and created his own Pentecostal congregation, the second AOG church in Gilbert Camp. He is not considered representative anyhow, but his charismatic character pushed him to step up and speak.

Harold: Someone is raising a hand, yes?

Terence: I need to register my title. I think that everyone here has my same problem, right, my brothers? [...] You talked about your things, but I am confused about this land. [...] I think that if we could tell the story about how that man from Guadalcanal allowed that man from Malaita to settle here [he is referring to Benjamin Ko’oru’u and Barnabas O’ai], I think that we would be able to tell you the truth!

However, concerning what you say about us being required to pay these arrears, I think that the government thinks we are sources [of income]. The government needs our help, but we also need the help of the government! Now, what we know is that the government owns the town land, right? The government owns land up to that point up there. But here it is different. I know, because I was born here. Here you cannot really know the value of the land. If you had told me that the land I want costs 20,000 [Solomon Islands] dollars, then I would know, and would work to buy it. But here, land is different, you cannot really know. So, I am afraid of paying for it. In case I give you 100 dollars, this does not mean that I become the owner! So? It is still a temporary thing, right? I would not be the owner, and I will be afraid!

You, when you get 100 dollars from everyone, you will have 30,000 dollars for you, and then, if you want you can bring us documents that demonstrate that the land is actually owned by some men who have more

money than us! That is our fear. And I am speaking on the behalf of all these people here! What I would like you to do is that you put a price for us to pay, and that we all pay it, so that we know that this is our land. [...] But who owns the land? Who takes the money? What is the price of the land? This is what I wanted to say, my brother! I am afraid to give you 100 dollars, until you find out who the real landowner is.

Harold: Thank you. Although I was born in the 1970s too, I do not know the story of this place. But I will reply in this way: if you want to pay for the land to whomever, you can do it. That is not my business.

Terence's fear is epistemologically reasonable and even historically accurate. As Clive Moore wrote to me, from 1952 on "Gilbert Camp was in a National Park, which meant that no traditional owners had any rights there to negotiate land deals. But there is also some doubt about the full legality of the actual transfer from the Matanikau people to SIG and HCC. I have never found the actual documents, but you can be sure they exist as that was how the British worked: unfair deal perhaps but they always did the paper work" (Moore, personal communication).

After dismissing Terence's concerns as "not his business," Harold moved back to his own project agenda. In contrast to Harold's approach, it is my opinion that in Terence's speech it is possible to identify the third cause of confusion: the elusive identity of the "landowner." Apart from emphasizing, once again, that confusion surrounds land payments, Terence explained that people are afraid of paying the wrong person. That is because they are demanded to make payments by a number of Guadalcanal men who simultaneously claim to be the "landowner."

Valeriano Chualu is one of these men. He is the son of Barnabas O'ai, the chief of the Kakau tribe who negotiated the settlement of the first Malaitan migrant in Gilbert Camp. He is also Chairman of the Tandai Tribal Landowner Association, created to represent the ownership rights of the Tandai people of northwestern Guadalcanal. He regularly interacts with government representatives as well as with people in the urban and peri-urban settlements. He has been working to negotiate an agreement that would give the Tandai people the right to extract rent payment from the settlers.

Then there is Jacob (also a pseudonym). He considers himself the chief of the Matanikau village. As such, he claims he is also entitled to extract rent from the Gilbert Camp settlers. He does not interact with the government; yet he negotiated with numerous settlers for their

access to land in Gilbert Camp. Does this suggest that Jacob has no ownership title? I suspect he belongs to a category of self-declared “landowners” who are currently taking advantage of knowledge imbalances to extort payments from settlers.

In summary, people in Gilbert Camp do not know who they should pay to gain access to land. They are afraid of paying the wrong person, wasting money, and soon having to pay another alleged “landowner,” perhaps the “real” one, or a government official like Harold. Thus, they do not know whether they should pay or not, whether they are interacting with the right person or not, or whether their residence will be questioned again after the money is transferred or not. When one looks at such an unclear situation from their point of view, it becomes rather unsurprising that Terence cried out his “big confusion” (S.I. Pidgin: *bigfala konfius*). The meeting went on in an atmosphere of general bewilderment, until a further source of confusion was raised: that of the town boundary.

### **3.4 “Where Is the Town Boundary?”**

The town boundary is drawn around Honiara for administrative purposes (Map 3). Its position is of crucial importance for the people of Gilbert Camp. The way in which the state regards them, their status as residents or squatters, the identity of their interlocutors, and the process of obtaining rights of residence depend first on whether people reside inside or outside of it.

As mentioned in the introduction, the land that lies within the town boundary marks the legal limit of the authority of the HCC, whereas everything that remains outside it falls under the jurisdiction of the GPG. Without agreement between the 2 sides, the town boundary is a subject of continuous debate. The HCC wants to extend the boundary, because that would provide the SIG with more land for its own purposes. In contrast, the GPG does not want to move the boundary further because it aims to protect the interests of the indigenous population. The consequences of such debate are of utmost importance for the people of Gilbert Camp, and that is why Joses eventually took the stage and asked the following question.

Joses: I want to say something. [...] Can you explain where exactly the boundary lies, so that we can understand if we have to pay the TOL?

Joses is among the first men who came to live in the area. He contributed to building the first Anglican church in Gilbert Camp, where he lived for many years. Now he lives in Malaita, where he runs a small coconut oil company. What lent him the authority to speak was not only his reputation as a businessman, but also his seniority. He probably knew more about the land issue in Gilbert Camp than anyone else did.

Harold: The line of the town boundary passes from that big tree, and cuts across the settlement more or less where the Anglican school is.

That statement was accurate enough (Map 6). At present, the town boundary includes the west bank of the Lunga River, Tuvaruhu, Mt. Austen, and up to White River, in the western part of Honiara. However, the reason Joses asked that question was not simply that he wanted to know where the boundary is *now*. Solomon Islanders who have lived in Honiara long enough to observe the relocations of the town boundary know well that its position is anything but stable.

Initially, the boundary included the Rove area. Then, it moved to include the Lever's area. In the mid-1960s, it was further extended from Kukum out to Burns Creek. In this respect, a Guadalcanal man once declared, "Now tell me, where is the current town boundary? It has expanded more than 10 times from the actual land acquired" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2013: 1084). "More than 10 times" is a hyperbolic statement that gives the measure of this man's frustration, for those displacements have never been in the interest of Solomon Islanders. Similarly, the Gilbert Camp residents perceive the boundary as continuously shifting.

Since the town boundary is perceived to be unstable, confronting the issue of paying for a land title is rather worrisome from the point of view of a Gilbert Camp resident. For instance, Gordon built his house outside the town boundary in the 1970s. Later, he heard that the boundary had moved and his area had been incorporated within the urban belt. He did not pay a "landowner" when he built his house, nor did he pay his TOL later. He is afraid that the town boundary will move *back*. Should that happen, he thinks that his TOL payment would be invalidated, that he would lose his money, and that he would have to pay the "landowner" as well. So he is waiting.

In another example, George affirms that he paid Jacob for his residency at the time his house still laid outside the town boundary, and that he will not pay again now that he resides

within the urban belt. He believes that he is being treated unfairly by the SIG, or, to phrase it in his own words, by “those who keep demanding money from us.”

Cyril, finally, did not know his house was within the town boundary when he mistakenly paid SBD 5,000 dollars to Jacob. As a consequence, he was very depressed after hearing what Harold said.

These stories exemplify the perception that the town boundary is a source of uncertainty, deception, and confusion. Landowners and government officials demand that people in Gilbert Camp pay for residence permits as if the limits and, thus, the nature of the land were objective and stable. Hence, when people confront their requests, they are confused, for their perception of the land is different. A boundary, indeed, is not an objective line indicating the limits of an area. Rather, it is largely a result of perceptions, relationships, and strategies (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

#### **4. Politics: “In Guadalcanal It’s Complicated”**

In addition to the 4 layers of confusion experienced by the people of Gilbert Camp and other settlements in and around Honiara, local “landowners” and government officials create confusion by emphasizing complexities, obfuscating possible solutions, and advancing solutions that are largely beneficial to their own agenda. This becomes evident in at least 2 sets of phenomena.

First, Guadalcanal men are attempting to appropriate landownership rights that in their matrilineal inheritance system are women’s prerogative. Second, government officials design policies that undermine the local matrilineal inheritance system. In so doing, both categories of political actors add one more layer of confusion, as the following case starkly illustrates.

Figure 2 around here

In March 2012, a ceremony and a series of workshops were organized in Honiara to ascertain the boundaries and ownership rights of urban land. During the ceremony, Ministries of the Parliament and other government officials offered a *chupu* to 5 “landowner”

associations to formally invite them to negotiate with the SIG (Figure 2). In the following weeks, 3 workshops took place and the members of the associations were asked to discuss and provide accounts of the geographical origins of their tribes, the history of their migrations, and any other event considered relevant in order to ascertain their ownership rights and boundaries.

During a workshop at the beginning of April, I was surprised to see so many men (more than 100) and so few women (only 3). This was a meeting about land in a matrilineal society, after all. I was aware of the fact that Guadalcanal men are deputed to speak in land matters, whereas women, although they are the actual “landowners,” are not expected to speak. However, I thought, “If they want to find out who the real ‘landowner’ is, they should ask Guale women as well, because they would be more knowledgeable of their own genealogies than their fathers, husbands, and brothers, who were born and raised in another area.” I was not the only one who found this to be somehow incongruous.

No later than 30 minutes after the beginning of the workshop, a group of about 30 women erupted into the hall. They were demonstrating against the male hegemony in the administration of land issues in Guadalcanal and asking to participate in the discussion (Figure 3). In the end, that did not happen. Only one of the demonstrators was allowed to attend. The reason given for that was the lack of seats, which had already been allocated to those who had previously registered.

Figure 3 around here

Arguably, men were trying to appropriate women’s landownership rights for their monetary benefits. The fact that women were demonstrating is but a symptom of a general conflict currently taking place in Honiara. While men negotiate their interests and prerogatives in workshops such as this one, women are organizing to voice the fundamental illegitimacy of such procedures.

This had been anticipated. In 1984, Peter Larmour wrote that in Solomon Islands there was an intrinsic risk that trustees nominated to act on the behalf of a landowning group, such as those who attended the workshops, would “appropriate rights of ownership to themselves” (Larmour, 1984: 8). Years later, Rebecca Monson took a gendered perspective to document how Larmour’s prediction came true in Guadalcanal. She wrote:

[I]t is generally male leaders who speak in land acquisition hearings, and [...] most titles are registered in the names of male leaders. [...] The traditional role of tribal leaders, and the notion that “*women no save tok*” [lit. women cannot speak], has therefore been translated in a manner that limits the role of women within the sphere of the state legal system. (Monson, 2010: 2)

This point explains the apparent contradiction between the claims made by the women who burst into the workshop and those made by the men who claimed to be the “landowners.” However, their attempt to shift from matrilineal to patrilineal land inheritance in Guadalcanal does not result solely from their ambitions. The SIG, and more specifically the land officials who represent it, have a decisive influence in this matter.

When I interviewed James (a pseudonym), who designed the policy for the clarification of land ownership and the definition of land boundaries, he did not conceal his preference for the patrilineal system of land inheritance. He said that it is more straightforward and clear, and also more suitable for the modern regulations of landownership. In so doing, he simplified customary land tenure discursively in a way reminiscent of what Edvard Hviding (1993) has labelled “indigenous essentialism”; and he offered an explanation for his preference that echoes the problems already identified by Hogbin (1965: 10), i.e., the separation between Guadalcanal virilocality, matrilineal descent, and patrilineal corporate action.

As a result of this separation, James said to me, if a woman wants to claim ownership of her land, she has to approach men who are much closer to each other than to her. Alternatively, she can appeal to other women. But they reside elsewhere, because they have married out too. Therefore, there is not much she can do to claim landownership. As a consequence, James (although a Guale man himself) disfavors the Guadalcanal system of matrilineal land inheritance, which he sees as abstruse and problematic compared to the patrilineal system of Malaita:

James: In Guadalcanal it’s complicated, because if a mother is talking to her children about the land, the father will be excluded. If the men talk about a mother’s land, they will exclude her, because she is a member of another tribe. We are not united in a single land, because my land is the land of my

mother, not that of my wife. In order to gain primary rights on land, the brother of the landowner's husband must marry their daughter. This is possible because his brother is from another tribe than that of his wife. [...] In land matters, *women no save tok*. Yes, they own the land, but the men do the talking. Because of the legal implication of representing the land, now men are more and more identified with the owners, and this is why the women were demonstrating inside the workshop.

So, another reason that the issue of landownership in Guadalcanal is so complex lies in policy schemes that allow and even encourage Guadalcanal men to alter the local pattern of land inheritance. The convergence of interests between Guale men and national and provincial policy makers makes the search for the "original landowner" even more difficult. Rather than answering any questions about the land issue, these political actors are adding to the confusion, thereby setting the conditions for future turmoil in Honiara.

## 5. Conclusion

The layers of confusion that I analyze in this article result from a state of flux in land issues that has parallels in other Pacific Islands. In a broad comparison of regional studies, it is possible to identify at least 3 general features: (1) major changes in land tenure are relatively recent; (2) in most cases, these changes took place rather rapidly; and (3) although land has been strongly defended as a marker of cultural distinctiveness within national political debates, in practice the extent to which ancient customary laws, current regulations, and actual practice differ has been generally ignored or reluctantly addressed. At the same time, tenure arrangements that were already complex during pre-colonial and colonial times have been subjected to new forces, among which a major role is played by population pressure, urbanization, and an ever-growing demand for money.

Although it is impossible to access reliable accounts of pre-contact land tenure, reports from the contact and post-contact era can help us to draw a number of broad-brush portraits of land in different Pacific societies immediately before foreign influences began. One of the most common themes is that individual ownership now tends to replace previous forms of collective land tenure (Crocombe, 1987). As far as the case of land in Honiara is concerned, 3 features parallel cases in other Pacific Islands: (1) complexities arising from the attempt to

recognize the “landowners” and their role; (2) ambiguities concerning land boundaries; and (3) the role of the state in making boundaries and “landowners” recognizable according to problematic definitions of land and land tenure systems.

Ambiguities concerning land boundaries are an inherent feature of these processes. As James Leach rightfully wrote, “Boundaries do not exist in space, or between places, unless they are generated as such in purposeful activity” (Leach, 2004: 211). Besides the immediate purposes of a particular legislation, understanding the different perspectives at play may shed light on the crucial issue that Colin Filer has rendered in asking “whether land boundaries are more or less substantial, flexible, or porous than group boundaries” (Filer, 2007: 136). Indeed, complexities arise when an effort is made to determine under what circumstances the claims advanced by groups of “landowners” are valid under a given legal arrangement. Roger Keesing reminds us that invented traditions are common in the Pacific, where they have been used to claim or exercise authority over a particular locale (Keesing, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). This has important implications when the relationships between different land-holding groups have to be ascertained, and even more so when multiple claims are advanced.

Within the process of land registration in Pacific Islands, the role of the state in identifying land-holding groups has been investigated in relation to what James Scott calls “legibility” (Scott, 1998), i.e., the simplification of socio-cultural practices within categories that allow state recording and monitoring as preconditions for systematic intervention. The state acts according to what it considers “legible,” and Solomon Islanders who are interested in controlling land and who understand the expectations of the SIG do their best to fulfill their requirements. But then, the substantiation of land-holding groups and the procedure through which such groups are identified are issues that come into question. Like Roy Wagner, who questioned the widespread belief that social groups, and particularly land-based clans, have any meaning in the New Guinea Highlands (Wagner, 1974), it is reasonable to ask if the same holds for Honiara. From that standpoint, it would not seem arbitrary to see the Tandai Tribal Landowner Association as made up of clans that started to coalesce in any meaningful sense only as soon as the common purpose of “becoming legible” arose. In this particular case, as James admitted, the role of government officials was central in determining the procedure through which the clans will be identified and recognized.

As for the preference for patriliney, this can be inscribed within a tendency that has been recognized in other Pacific countries, such as Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Australian state agents found that unilineal descent better suited their administrative

projects, thereby influencing indigenous conditions for legibility (Sutton, 2003: 140–144). Government agents in PNG have, in many cases, considered patrilineal clans the appropriate bodies for land registration in areas where land group affiliation depended on other principles, and especially matrilineal descent (Hiatt, 1984; Lakau, 1995: 98). “In some places where patrilineal clans did not exist traditionally, the people have ‘invented’ them on the understanding that the government and the developers require them for the purpose of distributing royalties” (Hiatt, 1995: xii). This has been possible thanks to a convergence of interests between landowning groups and government agents that potentially excluded a vast array of people.

If the important modifications that have occurred in the transition to modern state land administration are not recognized, some of the current developments might turn out to be “favourable to a very few, and largely detrimental to many” (Ward and Kingdon, 2007: 64). What this article adds to the literature is the point of view of the inhabitants of a settlement who currently belong to the latter category.

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