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World War II in the Solomons: Its Impact on Society, Politics, and World View

David Welchman Gegeo

The war . . . was very intense. Evenings, mornings and nights we were dumbfounded by everything that was happening. Guns and bombs were constantly exploding. . . . We lived in constant fear.

Isaac Gafu

[You] would see blue flames from the bombs dropped and shells fired. Day and night was just like that. And our ships at sea would also fire bullets like rain. Hey, I really don't know how to describe it.

George Maelalo

These two quotations--one from Isaac Gafu, who served in the Solomon Islands Labour Corps on Guadalcanal, and the other from George Maelalo, who was one of the first Solomon Islanders to be trained in the defense force--dramatize the impact of World War II experiences on the Islanders who were directly involved in it.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of the war on Solomon Islands society, politics, and world view. First, I will introduce the Solomon Islands and briefly outline major events in the war there. Next, I will examine how the war affected Islanders, both those who were directly involved as soldiers, scouts, and members of the Labour Corps and those left behind in villages. Then I will discuss the influence of the war on political and social changes that occurred in the Solomons in the late 1940s. Finally, I will examine recent events in the Solomons to show the kind of long-term impact that the war had on Islanders' views of Americans.

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The information I am presenting comes from in-depth interviews with twenty-seven World War II veterans from Kwara'ae on the island of Malaita, whose oral histories I recorded in 1984 and 1987. Their stories are supplemented by several years' fieldwork carried out by myself and Karen Watson-Gegeo, as well as my own recollections as a Kwara'ae man who grew up listening to World War II stories told by veterans living in my community.

The Solomon Islands and World War II

Other than the plantation experience, most Solomon Islanders knew little about the outside world prior to World War II, and their experiences with Europeans were largely limited to the British, Australians, and New Zealanders who were coconut plantation owners, missionaries, teachers, or colonial officers. Given the colonial situation, relationships between Islanders and these Europeans in general were distant and demarcated by clear lines of authority.

Many Islanders heard rumors about World War II when it began in Europe in 1939, but they paid little attention to it because it seemed remote and unlikely to affect them. Even when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i in 1941, Islanders regarded the conflict as the white people's war, just as in their own traditional warfare system two tribes could war with each other without affecting other tribes. Moreover, at the time, little information about the war actually got to most Islanders because there was as yet little access to radio broadcasts.

Solomon Islanders were therefore very surprised when rumors about the Japanese advance on the Solomons were confirmed by the Japanese bombing of Gavutu, Nggela, on 22 January 1942. They saw their British rulers retreat as the Japanese rapidly took Nggela and then occupied Guadalcanal in May. During the ensuing months, before the Americans landed on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 and gradually retook the island, most of the 800 Solomon Islanders involved in the Solomon Islands Defence Force worked as policemen, scouts and coastwatchers. A few were also trained as soldiers and later fought in the Solomons and in Bougainville.

After the American invasion of Guadalcanal the British established the Solomon Islands Labour Corps in November 1942 and began recruiting Islanders to build airfields and roads, load and unload supplies and materiel from ships, and clear fields to set up camps. The majority of Islanders involved in the war actually served in the Labour Corps, on one-year contracts. (See recollections by Jonathan Fifi'i in chapter 4 about his experiences as the leader of a Labour Corps section from Kwaio, and Lamont Lindstrom's discussion of the Vanuatu Labour Corps.)

The Labour Corps was essential to the Allied war effort because it freed American soldiers to concentrate on fighting and therefore played a major role in victory over the Japanese. At its peak membership in 1944 the Solomon Islands Labour Corps had over 3700 recruits. Recruiting was especially high from Malaita, where British officials actually argued over how many men they could extract without devastating the local subsistence economy.

Immediate Impact of War Experiences on Islanders

The immediate impact of the war on Solomon Islanders included the shock of what was involved in modern warfare between nation states; a sudden, new perception of relationships with outsiders, especially with regard to "race"; and the social dislocation of communities when men went off to participate in the war in large numbers.

Isaac Gafu and George Maelalo's descriptions of their fear and shock are typical of recollections by those who experienced the war firsthand as scouts, soldiers, or members of the Labour Corps. They had signed up with little knowledge of what they were getting into. They associated signing up for the war with signing up to go to the plantations--a chance for travel, adventure, and to make a little money. They did not realize that their own cultural conception of war was very different from the reality of war as fought by modern nation-states, which involves masses of soldiers; complex technology, equipment, and supplies; ships, airplanes, bombs, and machine guns; mass killing; and fighting over long distances and large land areas.

Not only did all of these characteristics of a world war shock Solomon Islanders, but they were amazed also that contending armies appeared to want to completely destroy each other. For the Kwara'ae, who were overwhelmed by seeing battlefields covered with dead bodies (too many even to bury), the high casualty rate of modern warfare left the deepest impression. This impression is reflected in the Kwara'ae name for World War II, *mae doe* 'big death'.

A second important experience during the war had to do with Islanders' relationships with white Europeans. For the first time Solomon Islanders began to distinguish among kinds of white people. Whereas the British continued the strict lines separating Islanders from their colonial masters, Americans treated Solomon Islanders with warmth and generosity. (See chapter 6, in which Hugh Laracy talks about a notorious case of animosity between a Solomon Islander and a British officer.) Islanders were struck by the huge amount of food and other supplies Americans brought with them. They were also struck by the willingness of Americans to share with Islanders,

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even to the extent of passing around a single cigarette. As Gafu recalled, "they came with their cargo and you ate until you could not eat anymore so you threw the food away.... [The] Americans said, 'Let's eat while we're all still alive and together. Because when the Japanese come, some of us may be killed. And then, even if we get together to eat again, it won't be the same'" (paraphrased). The unity Solomon Islanders felt with Americans is reflected in this statement. Together with its emphasis on sharing food, these relations could seem almost sacred to the Kwara'ae, for they represented a sharing even to the grave--"blood sharing," as it would be expressed among Kwara'ae warriors (Fox 1962, 125).

The sense Islanders had that Americans treated them as equals was reinforced by the seeming equality that black American soldiers enjoyed with white soldiers--they wore the same clothes, ate the same food, received the same pay, and lived in the same tents. In fact, out of these experiences, Islanders developed a "mythic schema" about Americans in which Americans were depicted as enjoying unlimited wealth and racial equality. Americans were seen as proud, courageous, and strong. Moreover, the idea that the Solomon Islands could become independent was introduced to many Islanders by Americans during the war. In particular, Islanders felt a kinship with Americans because America, too, had been a colony of the British and had won its independence through a revolutionary war.

Meanwhile back home in the villages on Malaita the people who had been left behind when large numbers of men were recruited into the defense force and Labour Corps struggled with major social dislocation. In traditional times, before men went off to fight a tribal war, everyone would meet to discuss who would fill leadership roles and what other arrangements needed to be made to ensure the safety and continuity of village life. Such preplanning was possible because tribal animosities built up over years, and people could anticipate when hostilities were likely to break out. But recruitment for World War II happened suddenly and unexpectedly, and people were confused about what was really happening or what the implications were for village life.

In the early months of 1942, the British began ordering all coastal villages on Malaita to be abandoned and Islanders to flee into the interior as the Japanese advanced. People still talk about how women pulled their sleeping children from bed and fled into the forest with them, and how the men spent the rest of the night laboring to erect shelters in mosquito-infested swampy areas, using the dim light from burning dried bamboo and coconut leaves. For many months people were forced to live in the bush without fires at night because of the fear that the Japanese would locate their settlements.

The Japanese did destroy some buildings on Malaita, but they never launched an invasion or occupied the island. Yet Malaita people experienced the terror of war, even if from a distance. They saw planes being shot down at night in the channel between Guadalcanal and Malaita, they heard the pounding of guns during the invasion of Guadalcanal by the Americans, and lived in fear of invasion themselves.

In terms of local social organization, status relationships in the villages were disrupted, families were separated, people worried about their villages being looted, and domestic animals broke out of their pens and ran wild. With so many men absent, women became more active in village leadership, taking on new roles (see chapter 11 by Suzanne Falgout for similar effects on Pohnpei). In fact a group of women from villages in West Kwara'ae marched to the government headquarters to demand that the Kwara'ae men who had been recruited for war service be returned to Malaita.

The overall immediate impact of the war on Solomon Islanders was a shattering of old beliefs about cosmology, that is, how the world works. The outside world--previously far away and little known--suddenly was seen to be connected to them in a drastic way. Two gigantic, technologically sophisticated armies had appeared from nowhere to fight a war not on their own home grounds, but in the Solomons where Islanders were not even a party to the dispute (Zoleveke 1988). Moreover, Islanders came to a much more profound understanding that there are different kinds of people in the world, but especially, different kinds of white people.

Impact of World War II: The Postwar Period

One of the primary social and political outcomes of World War II was the rise of Maasina Rule, a Malaita movement to restructure traditional society and gain political independence from England (see Laracy 1983). *Maasina*, a word from the 'Are'Are language of Malaita, means "brotherhood." Jonathan Fifi'i, who was a Maasina Rule head chief for Kwaio district, talks about the movement in chapter 4. He also discusses his experiences in his chapter in the book *The Big Death: Solomon Islanders Remember World War II* (White et al. 1988).

To briefly summarize the movement, Maasina Rule was both a revitalization movement and an independence movement. The revitalization aspects involved the restructuring of traditional cosmology and the reestablishment of a Solomon Islands worldview, updated to incorporate Islanders' experiences with the outside world, through education, and during the war. It reestablished a traditional chiefdom system for Malaita, rebuilt

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fortifications destroyed by the missionaries, and developed religious ideas that synthesized Christianity with traditional beliefs.

As an independence movement Maasina Rule was concerned with getting rid of the foreign colonial government and establishing self-rule. Some commentators have seen Maasina Rule as a cargo cult because as the movement progressed, a segment of members came to believe that if movement rules were followed the Americans would return and give Islanders masses of material goods. Salana Ga'a, one of the movement leaders for Kwara'ae, believes that the cargo idea was used by the British to undermine the legitimate aims of the movement.

Hugh Laracy argues that "although Maasina Rule was sparked by World War II its roots can be traced far into the past. . . . There is no reason to suppose that Solomon Islanders have ever been less conscious of their worth than have any other people. Indeed . . . the historical record clearly attests their abundant readiness to defend both themselves and that which they considered to be theirs" (1983, 7). What Islanders' World War II experiences did was to intensify and legitimate their sense of identity, and their right to take charge of their own political destiny. They no longer saw the British as infallible, they were more conscious than ever of the capricious nature of colonial rule, and the Americans had legitimized their feelings that they should be independent and in control of their own country.

An important result of World War II was that many island men returned home more experienced in dealing with outsiders, more fluent in English, and with more insight about how to oppose British rule. Many of the men who served in various capacities in the war, such as Jonathan Fifi'i, became leaders of, or active participants in, Maasina Rule. The British were able to suppress the Maasina Rule movement by force, arresting and imprisoning the leaders. Eventually, with continuing pressure from Islanders and continuing economic problems of their own, the British agreed to the islands becoming independent, which was realized in 1978.

Long-term Effects of the War on Islanders' Attitudes Toward Americans

Among Islanders who experienced the war directly, some viewed their experiences negatively and others positively. For some the war was a traumatic experience, but for others war brought new ideas and, through movements like Maasina Rule, helped forge the beginnings of a national identity.

Much could be said about the long-term effects of the war, but I will focus on Islanders' attitudes toward Americans. Islanders who served in the war returned home to their villages to tell and retell their experiences to their

children and grandchildren. A major theme in the stories they told and in the oral histories we collected was the mythic schema they had formed about Americans as generous, egalitarian, wealthy, audacious, and rescuers of the Solomon Islands.

What has happened to this mythic schema since the war? Solomon Islanders like myself, who were born and grew up after the war, learned through the older generation's World War II stories to respect and admire Americans. The first doubt cast on this view occurred in 1968 when the Americans were successful in landing men on the moon as part of their space exploration program. The general feeling among rural Solomon Islanders about this exploit was that Americans were tampering with nature. Although Solomon Islanders saw the moon flight as further evidence of American audacity and technological superiority--similar to what they had witnessed in World War II--they couldn't understand what America had to gain from it, and they feared the moon and the atmosphere might be polluted or damaged by it.

The second incident casting doubt on the mythic schema was the Vietnam War. Solomon Island villagers questioned why such a large power like the United States would invade such a small, poor country. People equated Vietnam with the Solomons and talked of how if a superpower invaded the Solomon Islands to take it over, the outcome was certainly obvious. Again they asked, what has America to gain from this?

The third issue casting doubt on the mythic schema of Americans has been the growing consciousness among all Solomon Islanders of the dangers of nuclear testing and nuclear war. Older Islanders who remember the bombs of World War II talk of how, if nuclear bombs are bigger and more destructive, then whole islands would be blown out of the sea in a nuclear war. Islanders find it amazing that Americans, who they had previously seen as saviors and as protective of Islanders' rights, would be promoting nuclear development. As one villager commented to me, "You don't even have to be educated to see the stupidity in it."

Nevertheless, the landing on the moon, the Vietnam War, and the possibility of nuclear war seem remote to most villagers. But in 1984 an event occurred in the seas just offshore that brought the reality of contemporary American interests into conflict with the mythic schema developed about Americans in World War II. This event happened in 1984 when the American tuna fishing vessel, the *Jeanette Diana*, was caught fishing within the two-hundred-mile zone of the Solomons, a violation of international law. The Solomon Islands' only small patrol boat chased the *Jeanette Diana*, fired over its bow, and brought it back to port a prisoner.

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In court the ship's captain denied violating international law, but the court ordered heavy fines levied against the captain and also ordered the ship seized and sold. The Reagan administration threatened to boycott all tuna from the Solomon Islands and to take other measures. Eventually the dispute was resolved when the United States repurchased the ship at a price lower than its market value, and the Solomons government reduced fines.

The *Jeanette Diana* episode came as a shock to Solomon Islanders. First, they were dismayed that Americans would willfully violate international law and fish in Solomons waters, given that tuna is one of the country's few natural resources. Second, they were elated by the audacity of the Solomons patrol boat crew, which took on and arrested a very large and technologically sophisticated ship. The deceptive testimony of the captain in court and the reaction of the Reagan administration--all of which was detailed in the local media--shocked Islanders and puzzled them. Again, what had America, with all its wealth and power, to gain by taking advantage of a small country like the Solomons? Were Americans no longer friends to Solomon Islanders?

For the younger generation these events and a growing consciousness of world politics have weakened greatly the mythic schema about Americans passed on to them by World War II veterans. Even in the villages people over the past ten years have begun to reassess the long-held image of Americans as people to look up to, realizing that, like everyone else, Americans have strengths and weaknesses.

In contrast with the *Jeanette Diana* incident, the events following the devastation of Cyclone Namu in 1986 renewed villagers' faith in Americans, at least on Malaita and Guadalcanal. Immediately after the cyclone devastated many areas on these two islands, the US Navy sent construction battalion units (Seabees) to deliver food and supplies, repair roads and rebuild bridges, dig ditches to drain flood waters, and reconstruct buildings leveled by floods and wind. Their activities and their behavior received wide coverage in the newspapers and on the radio. Once again Americans were seen as coming to rescue Solomon Islanders, this time from a natural disaster. Many elements of what the Seabees did and how they behaved fit the mythic schema developed in World War II, including displaying physical strength and speed in work; treating Islanders in an egalitarian way; sharing food, clothing, and tobacco; and criticizing their officers behind their back. Story after story told to me and my wife in 1987 about the Seabees' involvement reflect these elements. As for the older men who had served in World War II, they said "That's just the way those Joes behaved in the war."

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