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0521401720 - Identity through History: Living Stories in a Solomon Islands Society

Geoffrey M. White

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For people who live in communities transformed by powerful outside forces, narrative accounts of culture contact and change create identity through the idiom of shared history. How may we understand the potent social, emotional and political meanings of such accounts for those who tell them? How and why do some narratives acquire a kind of mythic status as they are told and retold in a variety of contexts and genres?

*Identity through history* takes up these questions in an ethnography of identity formation on the island of Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands. The people of Santa Isabel are heirs to one of the great stories of socio-religious transformation in the Pacific Islands region. Victimized by raiding headhunters in the nineteenth century, the entire population embraced Christianity around the turn of the century. This epic storyline is repeated often in narratives of conversion creating images of a shared past that enliven and personify understandings of self and community.

But just as history is never finished, neither is identity. It is continually refashioned as people make cultural meaning out of shifting social and political circumstances. Geoffrey White offers an approach to the cultural dynamics of self-construction that is at once synchronic and diachronic. He examines local histories as discourses of contemporary identity, while locating emergent identities within the longer perspective of one hundred years of colonial experience. The approach makes innovative use of recent work in psychological and historical anthropology to illuminate concepts of person and history that emerge in peoples' ongoing attempts to define and direct their lives.

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# IDENTITY THROUGH HISTORY

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*Living stories in a Solomon Islands  
society*

GEOFFREY M. WHITE

*Institute of Culture and Communication*

*East–West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii*



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*For Nancy and Michael*

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## Preface

Books are journeys. But unlike more ordinary forms of travel, points of departure and arrival are often not so easily fixed. One starting place for the present work can be located in December 1974 when I first went to the Solomon Islands to undertake research on the island of Santa Isabel for a doctoral degree in cultural anthropology. After spending a year and a half in the Solomons, I returned to write up my work in a dissertation titled “Big Men and Church Men: social images in Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands” (1978, University of California, San Diego). Despite many unexpected turns and twists, I managed in the dissertation to carry through with my initial plan to examine shared images of important or prestigious people, suggesting that such images are a kind of focal point for changes taking place in society.

However, with the benefit of hindsight and subsequent periods of research on Santa Isabel (in 1984, 1987 and 1988), I became increasingly dissatisfied with that work. One reason for the dissatisfaction was the sense that I had somehow not done justice to the wonderful stories that people tell about their society and about the past, especially as personified in ancestors and other historic figures. This book is an attempt to give those stories their due, while still probing for the cultural threads that hold history and identity together. In taking this tack, it has become resoundingly clear that it is in large measure through such stories, both small and large, personal and collective, that Santa Isabel people do much of the “identity work” which I had started out to investigate in the first place.

Placing narrative texts and practices at the centerpiece of this study, rather than at the margins as a source of statements about “oral history” or “precontact culture,” serves to highlight the constructed character of culture and identity as constantly remade in the course of everyday life. To reiterate what has become a familiar refrain in contemporary anthropology, culture and identity are neither homogenous nor static, but emerge in

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social contexts where multiple realities contend for a hearing. The questions which guide this study, then, are not to find “the culture” or to give a definitive portrait of Santa Isabel identity, but rather to explore those processes – both conceptual and social – that make identity and history out of experience.

Of course, this book is itself a story – a kind of story of stories – that ultimately conspires with its subject to produce a coherent (and authoritative) narrative of cultural history. There is a certain inevitability about this. Focusing upon stories that are repeated often adds yet further repetition, expanding their field of circulation. And, translating and publishing oral narratives in written form not only extends their range of circulation (now finding a place on dusty shelves in foreign libraries), but adds to their local prestige and fixity. It is here that interpretive caution is urged. While I am deliberately focusing upon dominant forms of collective representation in Santa Isabel, this volume is inevitably shaped by my own identity, by the historical moment in which I have done fieldwork, by the nature of my relations with people discussed, and by the obvious limits of my knowledge of local language and culture.

First of all, this text both benefits and suffers from being written by an outsider to Isabel society. Since I first began work there in 1975, several Santa Isabel writers have produced their own published commentaries about local culture and history – commentaries that figure significantly in the pages to follow (e.g., Lagusu 1986; Naramana 1987; Vilasa 1986; Zeva 1983; and cf. Bogesi 1948). These writings are an important development in local modes of self-representation (heralding new practices which, combined with the advent of audio and video recording for similar purposes, are affecting the nature of modern identity-making). In many ways these local works are complementary to the present volume, with descriptive and documentary aims that differ from this book’s more analytic and comparative objectives. Nonetheless, the work presented here has benefited greatly from information and perspectives garnered from the work of authors who are part of Isabel society and who draw upon a wealth of local knowledge and intuition. In the spirit of reciprocity, I hope that this volume will provide a resource for these scholars and others interested in examining their own society and history from new perspectives.

Secondly, I have no doubt that a female ethnographer would spend more time talking with women than I have, would uncover and emphasize dimensions of Isabel society that are missed or only glimpsed here. I am acutely aware of this limitation, and only hope that some of the gaps and distortions in this study will emerge with enough clarity to stimulate further research on issues related to gender and women’s lives in Santa Isabel.

As a final qualifying note, a word about islands. It is all too easy to

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produce images of “culture” or “community” as bounded units, especially when writing about island societies where geography offers spatial boundaries that frequently do become a basis for group definition. In one sense, this is a book about Santa Isabel society. But most of the cultural material derives from only one of four language groups (Cheke Holo or A’ara) that inhabit the island, and, within that area, from one specific subregion (Maringe). I have hedged on this issue in the title for this volume by referring to “a Solomon Islands society,” but even such a singular notion as that tends to reify the fluid nature of cultural identity. One of the arguments made in this book is that a sense of island identity, of Isabelness, is historically emergent and subject to the forces that interconnect Santa Isabel villages with wider arenas of meaning and power. The geocultural focus of this book may be visualized as a series of permeable concentric circles, with the center focused on a few villages in the Maringe area of Santa Isabel, and people, ideas and material flowing back and forth through island, national and international spheres of activity. The significance of this traffic for the subject of this book – making identity through history – can hardly be overemphasized. With a new satellite dish just introduced into the island’s provincial center providing telephone and facsimile service to villagers who can afford them, and with numerous entrepreneurs now running village video showings, the emergence of new histories and new identities is assured.

## Acknowledgments

This study is based on fieldwork on the island of Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands begun during sixteen months in 1975 and 1976, and continued during shorter two-month visits in 1984, 1987 and 1988. During most of the first period of fieldwork my wife, Nancy Montgomery, shared the experience and assisted immeasurably with the tasks of living and learning. At that time we lived in the village of Vavarenitu on the eastern side of the Maringe coast. We focused our work in the villages within daily walking distance of Vavarenitu, but also traveled occasionally by boat or canoe to other parts of the island. During subsequent visits I (and, on one occasion, we – including son Michael) have resided primarily in Buala village, at the center of the Maringe area. There is simply no way adequately to thank our friends and acquaintances in those areas who have consistently welcomed us into their homes and villages, showing kindness through our on-again off-again associations.

Although it is difficult to single out individuals, Eric and Vivian Anderson, Fr. Dudley Bale, Fr. John Bale, Willie Betu, Eric and Edith Ehamana, Florence Gasetei, Griffin and Grace Hebala, Nathaniel Hebala, Kamnis Kame, Henry Kelimana, David Kera, Francis Kokhonigita, George Kolton, Timothy Lehema, Josepa Lokutadi, Lionel Longa, Dennis Lulei, Bafet Luvu, David Nagadi, Richard Naramana, Bishop Ellison Pogo, Hugo Pulomana, Patteson Radukana, Charles Thegna Pado, Thomas Tugamana, retired Bishop Dudley Tuti, Forest Voko and Brown Zalamana have all given special support.

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Intellectual debts accumulated in the planning and execution of this study amount to a genealogy too complex to enumerate adequately. I have gained valuable historical information through conversation and correspondence with David Akin, the Rev. Richard Fallowes, David Hilliard, Kim Jackson and Hugh Laracy, among others. Numerous members of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego provided ideas, advice and inspiration during the initial stages of this work, especially Roy D'Andrade, Fred Bailey, Donald Tuzin, and Theodore Schwartz, who first introduced me to Melanesia and the rites fieldwork.

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## Orthography

The language with which this study is concerned is spoken in both the Maringe and Hograno regions of Santa Isabel. The name of the language is a matter of some variation. Whereas it is most often referred to as “Maringe language” or “Hograno language” in these regions, names for the language as a whole include “A’ara” and “Cheke Holo” (literally, “bush language”). Following local preferences, the latter usage is adopted in this volume.

In a recently completed dictionary of Cheke Holo, I outline two different orthographies: one that is most commonly in use by Cheke Holo speakers today, and another that does not call for diacritic marks so that it can be more easily rendered on a typewriter (White, Kokhonigita and Pulomana 1988: xi). It is the latter form that I use here, with the exception of personal names for which local spellings are retained. I do not make any strong claims of phonemic exhaustiveness for the orthography outlined below.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the language’s sounds for an English speaker is its extensive use of aspirated/unaspirated distinctions. The English consonants /l/, /r/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /t/ and /k/ all have both aspirated and unaspirated realizations, as do the velar affricate “ɣ” (written /gh/), the velar nasal “ŋ” (written /ng/) and the nasal palatal as in the Italian “campagna” (written /gn/). Aspiration is indicated by an “h,” either following (/ph/, /kh/, /th/) or preceding (/hl/, /hr/, /hm/, /hn/, /hgh/, /hng/, /hgn/) the relevant consonant. The phonemic repertoire also includes /h/, /b/, /v/, /d/, /f/, /s/, /ch/ and a glottal stop /ʔ/. The palatal sounds /j/ and /z/ appear to be in free variation, with /z/ being replaced by /j/ in the idiolects of younger speakers. There are five vowels: /i/ as in “eat,” /e/ as in “egg,” /a/ as in the first a of “banana,” /o/ as in “open” and /u/ as in “new.”