

## Unit 2: Life in Pre-contact Solomon Islands

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Like many other Pacific Island countries, the Solomons is made up of a number of islands and has a long, unique history. In this chapter, we are going to learn about the history of Solomons. We will learn about the lives of people who lived in the Solomon Islands before the Europeans came and how the Solomon Islanders came to be living in these islands. There will also be some examples of the ways in which Solomon Islanders managed their early living and activities.



*Figure 2.1. Map of Solomon Islands*

### **After reading this chapter you will be able to:**

- Understand how and why early migration and settlement occurred in the Solomon Islands
- Be familiar with early land division and inheritance customs
- Understand traditional trade and education practices
- Understand the social and political organisation of Solomon Island communities
- Know something of traditional religious and cultural practice

## **Early Migration**

A long, long time ago, it is believed that there was a super giant continent on this planet.

It is also believed that about 50,000 years ago, the island of Indonesia, Australia and New Guinea were once joined together. People believe that, during this time the sea level was much lower and the lands were much closer making it easier for the early migrants to move into these islands, towards the Solomon Islands from the direction of South East Asia.

According to this belief, people came for different purposes – they might have been looking for new environments or land for settlement. People could have also got lost while going on a fishing trip or hunting wild animals.

It was believed that the earliest settlement within the islands took place around 4,000 years ago. The first Melanesian settlement is believed to be in the Bismarck Archipelago, closer to New Guinea and then in New Georgia, in the Western Solomons. This Ancient Melanesian settlement later spread to the islands of Choiseul, Shortland, Bougainville, and later Ysabel.

These people are known as Papuan speakers and Austronesian speakers. Descendants of these original settlers drifted to other islands of the Solomons and later towards other Melanesian countries.

<h3><b>How was life in the Solomon Islands before the Arrival of the Europeans?</b></h3>
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## **Early Settlements**

Early settlements within the islands were mainly hamlet or dispersed households often located in the bush and mountains away from the coast. Mountain top settlements were chosen purposely for security and protection from enemies, as head hunting and violence were common. Contact between different families was very rare and settlements were often tribal in nature.

Most of these settlements were influenced by different inheritance systems. For instance, Malaita Island, parts of Temotu, and Western Solomons have settlements based on patrilineal inheritance. This means that birthrights such as properties and wealth were inherited from the Fathers line. The matrilineal system of inheritance (when birthrights are passed down through the Mother's line) was mainly found in Ysabel, some parts of Guadalcanal, and Western Solomons.

Settlements were either based on single kin or multi-kin groups. Relationships between the people and clan systems were the main factors determining where people lived.

## **Social Grouping**

*"I have mentioned that the people do not live in villages but in isolated homesteads. Mountain ridges and streams, however serve to divide the country into small districts, varying in size from a square mile or less to two or three. The residents of each of these areas are marked off from the rest of the community in a variety of ways. Thus they combine under their own leader to carry out all sorts of communal work such as clearing land for new gardens and avenging wrongs committed by outsiders, take a pride in their local traditions, and refer to themselves by the name of the territory they occupy."*

Figure. 2.4. Extract from *Experiments in Civilisation* by Ian Hogbin

## **Population**

During the pre-contact times each community or hamlet often consisted of large families who relied heavily on subsistence farming, everyday hunting and gathering. Work was done on a communal system. They often used shifting cultivation and bush fallowing.

These farming activities and cooperation among community members helped to increase the population but the introduction of new diseases and modern weapons helped to reduce the population as well. The practice of headhunting was common in Malaita and few other islands. It was a result of enemies, using violence to resolve conflict, or rivalries and the breakdown of social norms and obligation in the communities.

## **The inhabitants and their resources**

The inhabitants of the islands entirely depended on their natural environment for their survival. The islands were beautiful and had abundant resources such as rivers, wild animals, vegetation and marine life.

The activities of the inhabitants were restricted to the type and amount of resources available near their settlements. People who settled in the bush mountains learnt and adopted skills such as hunting and subsistence cultivation.

Mountain animals such as wild pigs, opossum, birds and giant lizards were often hunted. The skills involved were very important for their survival. The tools used by the inhabitants for hunting were very simple. People were very skilful in making tools as well. Production was mainly controlled by social and religious customs in their communities.

The social and religious customs in the communities involved feast giving for the dead, birth of a child, making peace between enemy clans, marriage and initiation. Feast giving for the dead was very popular in Malaita. Reciprocal relationships such as the ceremonial exchange of gifts were considered very important in times of marriage.

## Community organisation

Before contact and during the contact period, people had great respect for one another and the roles of men and women were clearly defined.

Food exchanges were very important in times of birth, funeral, marriage, first harvest, peace making, land transaction and obligation to chiefs. In doing so, they believed that food and wealth were fairly distributed and that it had prevented starvation and binds the members to reinforce communalism.

## The ownership of land

In 1500 there was communal ownership of land. That meant that land ownership was mainly bestowed through lines, clans, extended family or other communal groups. On the other hand, making use of the land was an important element of ownership.

Different islands in the Solomons adopted different inheritance systems. Through these inheritance systems, there were no land-less people.

The roles of chiefs and bigmen were very important in the distribution of land and settling of land disputes among the community groups. Hereditary chiefs still had normal control over the lands. In this case, respect for ancestors was an important element. Genealogies were important to determine who owned the land. Traditional religious practices were also associated with the ownership of land.

### Questions and Activities

1. What was the role of food exchange in pre-contact Solomon Islands?
2. What were the main subsistence activities in traditional Solomon Islands society?
3. In what ways was ownership of land determined?
4. How did hereditary chiefs acquire their leadership?

## Roles of Men and Women

*“The organisation of economic life follows very closely the group afforded by the kinship system. Husband and wife with their children work in cooperation to bring in food for the household, tasks being apportioned according to capacity and customary usage. Men and women have each their own particular economic share, the division of labour being along fairly obvious lines. The men, for instance, do all the work with canoes, and so engage in line fishing, set large nets in the lake, and catch flying-fish by torch light at night—a most spectacular proceeding. The women daily search the reef with hand-nets and scoop up all that comes their way, including small fry and crabs. The men build houses, make canoes, bowls, head-rests and other wooden objects, manufacture nets, including those for the use of their women-folk, and do most of the heavy work of breaking up the soil for gardening with digging sticks. The woman plait mats for floor-covering and bedding, beat out the bark cloth strips and squares which is done indifferently by them or*

*by their male relatives. Women, too, keep the water bottles of the household filled and attend to the daily ovens, though here they are generally assisted by the younger men of the family.*

Figure 2.5. Extract from *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* by Raymond Firth, p.21

### Trade in the Longgu Area of Guadalcanal

*“The resources of the area are rich and the natives can easily produce a surplus of pigs, vegetables or tobacco. The first two go to the people of Langalanga, who live on small artificial islands with no room to plant gardens or keep animals. They must get all their food except fish from elsewhere. In return they sell shell money. For some reason they have no interest in the tobacco, but the people of the northern end of San Cristobal want to exchange porpoise teeth for tobacco.*

*The Longgu keep most of the shell money and porpoise teeth they buy, but exchange some for items within Guadalcanal such as dog’s teeth, extra tobacco, carved food, bowls, wicker shields, large sea-going canoes or ornaments made of clam or turtle shell.*

*Trade is based on partnerships of people who not only exchange goods but also provide protection and hospitality for each other. Each householder has at least one partner in each community which they trade with.”*

Figure 2.6. Extract from *A Guadalcanal Society* by Ian Hogbin

### Traditional trading

In 1500, each of the family members developed special skills on how to extract the resources of their land. In some cases, those who owned valuable resources did not have the skills to fully use their resources. This resulted in trading between the community members.

For instance, in Malaita, reciprocal trading often took place between *ta’anitoro* (Are’Are mother tongue meaning “Bush People”) and *ta’ani asi* (coastal dwellers).

This traditional trading relationship has been going for many years, and was not for profit. Its main aim was to bring the people together and promote social relationships.

### **The nature of early education**

All learning was done in an informal way. In this way, everyone in the community had the responsibility of teaching the children, advising them whenever they misbehaved or disrespected a very important cultural norm.

Boys and girls were often advised by the old people not to go around in the night or at late night. Girls especially were often restricted and failure to comply often resulted in severe punishments.

Young children learnt, when the old people (often their grandparents) told them stories around the fireside. Most of the stories were often related to genealogies or how their tribes were originated or just custom stories.

The grown up children learnt well through observation and imitation.

In this informal way of teaching, there was a lot of positive learning, because of individual or group pressure for conformity within the community. Anyone who failed to conform to teaching received punishments, which depended on the nature of the crime committed, such as fighting, running away with a girl, or swearing. Some of these punishments include forcing a rule breaker to stay in isolation, compensation or even death.

The most important understanding about early education in Solomon Islands is that, the learning in the community was based on values and beliefs of the people.

### **The early political units and leadership**

In 1500, most political units were very small and based on a few settlements of a few hundred people. Occasionally, a large political alliance might only be formed for warfare or defence purposes. These were only temporary. In most communities, members recognised and followed a particular leader.

There were two types of leaders, non-hereditary bigmen and hereditary chiefs. In traditional custom, a non-hereditary bigman was a person who inherited their authority or power by their own efforts, that is through gaining and giving away wealth to create alliances, and through assistance in giving feasts. They also had the personalities for leadership. It depended very much on their efforts and the respect of the people.

Hereditary chiefs were leaders who acquired their leadership position through clan or line inheritance. Once the father became too old, he handed down the leadership role to the son. People of this reputation have been well respected and took very good command of the community activities.

## ***Becoming a Bigman***

Although people in Solomon Islands gain prestige or status from possessing wealth, everyone leads a similar kind of life, doing similar work, eating the same kind of food and sleeping on the same kinds of mats. Wealth, therefore, cannot be used directly to benefit those who possess it. A wealthy man may have a bigger house or more wives but otherwise he is not much different from others. Reputation or status is gained, not by keeping more possessions in order to use them yourself, but by giving them away. Every event of importance is celebrated by a feast, for example, the death of parents, marriage of children or offering a sacrifice to the ancestors. The more feasts a man gives, and the more generous he is providing food, the greater is his prestige.

Prestige gained by giving away wealth is the most important thing in becoming a leader.

No one ever rules over more than about 200 people. Although the son of an old leader has some advantages, any ambitious young man can relate him, if he gives away sufficient wealth and wins people's respect by his personal qualities. I shall call these leaders ngwane-inoto, or man of importance.

*Figure 2.7.* Extract from *Experiments in Civilisation* by Ian Hogbin, p. 61-63, 70, 74

### **Questions and Activities**

1. Read the extract in *Figure 2.4*. What were some of the tasks of Tikopian women during the olden days?
2. What were the characteristics of the political units of the Solomon Islands?
3. Read the extract in *Figure 2.7*. How did *Big Men* maintain their authority?

## **Traditional worshipping**

In 1500 traditional religion had been an important activity of the inhabitants. In those days everyone had some beliefs about the supernatural beings of the spiritual world and an explanation for spiritual forces beyond their own understanding. The inhabitants believed in the spirit beings and had respect for and worshipped their ancestors. They also believed in the use of the spiritual forces either for good or evil.

According to the inhabitants these set of beliefs constituted a religion. Most of these traditional religions were concerned with how spiritual forces could help people to be more successful in their every day lives rather than concerned with after life. Also, these traditional religious beliefs were important in other aspects of community living such as land ownership, ceremonies, rituals and maintaining order and peace within the society

## **Arosi Religion**

*“You may see an Arosi man skilled (as we say) in heathen magic, set out to work to make a storm. He takes a very old shell trumpet, handed down through the generations, fills it with water, sets a dracaena leaf in it, and then blows upon the water. Some would call this childish sympathetic magic; he thinks a storm at sea will follow his little storm in a shell. But while he does these acts he is praying to those dead and gone who once owned the shell; it is their manner not his acts, which will bring the storm; he is telling them dramatically what his wish is.”*

Figure 2.8. Extract from *Kakamora* by Charles Fox, p. 62.

## **Arts, crafts and leisure in pre-contact Solomon Islands**

In 1500 most of the arts and crafts were connected with utilitarian things such as canoe or house building, fishing, warfare, carrying things and clothing. In making these things, inhabitants decorated them to show their skills in the community. In doing this, the skilful people had been creative, patient and dedicated to their work. The shell engraving around the panpipe instrument is a good example of this skill. Also, the traditional currency has often been decorated to make it attractive.

Music and dance and some other forms of arts were strongly influenced by traditional religion. Most of the traditional music created was for enjoyment and the words accompanying the music often had deep meanings. The leisure activities often involved older people chatting together after the day's work or catch from fishing or hunting.

In terms of art and crafts, there were no specific or specialised people; however, there were some people who were very good at playing certain instruments. For example, drum beating or panpipe, as in *Are'Are* in Malaita.

### **Questions and Activities**

1. What were the main features of the religious beliefs of pre-contact Solomon Islanders?
2. In pairs, conduct an interview with the older people in the surrounding area, where your school is:
  - (a) to find out about the early religion and early forms of worship people engaged in before the missionaries arrived
  - (b) to absorb the underlying ideas of oral history

In your interview, try and find out about the following key points:

- Ancestors
- Shrines
- Taboo or spiritual places
- Totem
- Rewards and punishments
- The beliefs.

Remember to create a questionnaire for your interview. Your teachers will give the time limit for conducting the interview. When you have finished, you will be asked to report to the class about your findings.