

## Unit 19: Solomon Islands: The Conservation of Culture in the National Museum and Cultural Centre

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### Facts

Capital:	Honiara
Main islands:	6 large and 20 medium size volcanic islands
Other islands:	898 islands and atolls (347 inhabited)
Outer islands:	Santa Cruz, Ontong Java, Sikaiana, Rennell, Bellona, Vanikolo, Tikopia
Population	510,672 – estimated 2008
Language:	87 local languages, Pidgin and English
Highest Point:	Mt Makarakombura (2 447m)
Independence:	7 July 1978



Figure 19.1. Map of Solomon Islands

This chapter is about the National Museum and Cultural Centre in Honiara, and the way it helps preserve Solomon Islands culture.

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

- discuss the history of the National Museum and Cultural Centre
- understand why museums are important cultural sites
- describe the way the National Museum and Cultural Centre helps create a sense of nationhood

**A cultural site – the National Museum and Cultural Centre**

In the centre of Honiara, just opposite the Visitors Bureau stands a cultural complex known as the National Museum and Cultural Centre.

Inside the Centre are thatched leaf huts representing the types of traditional houses in most provinces in the Solomon Islands (See *Figures 19.3 and 19.4*). An Exhibition Gallery contains some old artefacts no longer produced in the country. There is an open air theatre and a building where all the administrative and technical activities are carried out. All these are in a garden. There is also a canoe house holding full-sized canoes built in the Solomon's.

The museum's function is not well known to many local people. Many think it is irrelevant to them, and very few have been there. Unlike the National Archive or the National Library which contain documents, books and micro-films, the Museum has actual artifacts, old relics and recordings of stories, chants, songs, and dances.

**Culture and change**

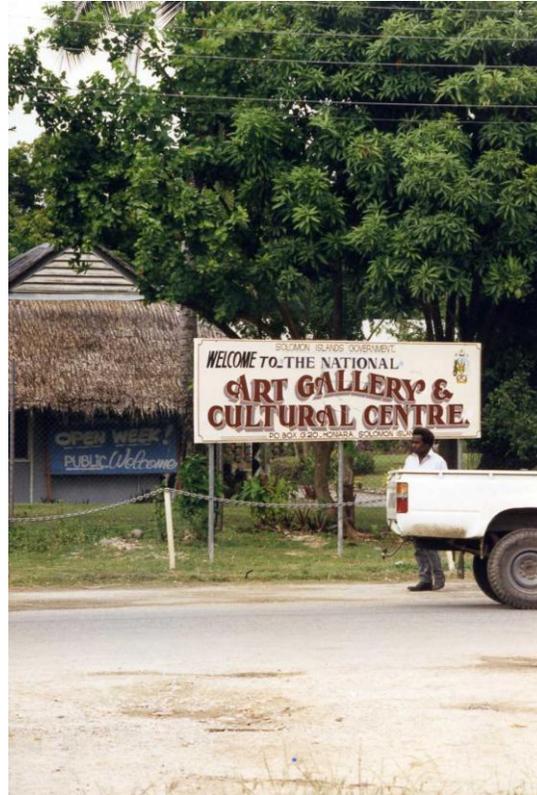
The conservation of culture is not easy to achieve. Our cultures are dynamic and undergoing constant changes. Many aspects of culture are strongly rooted in the distant past, but some have been adopted in recent times because of the influences of other cultures. Changes in culture are the result of the process of borrowing and adopting.

The Solomon Islands were under British rule from 1893 to 1978. In a colony the colonisers' culture was always visible. The influence of the colonial culture was so powerful that indigenous cultures adopted elements of the outsiders' culture. These adopted elements are now part of our tradition. The culture and tradition of today's societies therefore includes aspects that are not indigenous.

In the Solomon Islands, we have many isolated communities. Each has some unique features and some shared aspects common to other Solomon Islanders. These include material and non material things. This culture includes artefacts, tools, technology, ways of preparing food, organising feasts, marriage, making wars and peace, ideas and ways of governing, production and distribution of goods and services. It also includes our ideas about spirits and supernatural forces.

It is always difficult for small states like those in the Pacific to control the process of change in their cultures. The Governor General of the Solomon Islands said in a speech in 1997 that he was worried about the decline of indigenous cultural values and attitudes. He said changes were brought about by modern technology and different value systems. He also said that material and non-material aspects of culture are difficult to preserve through time.

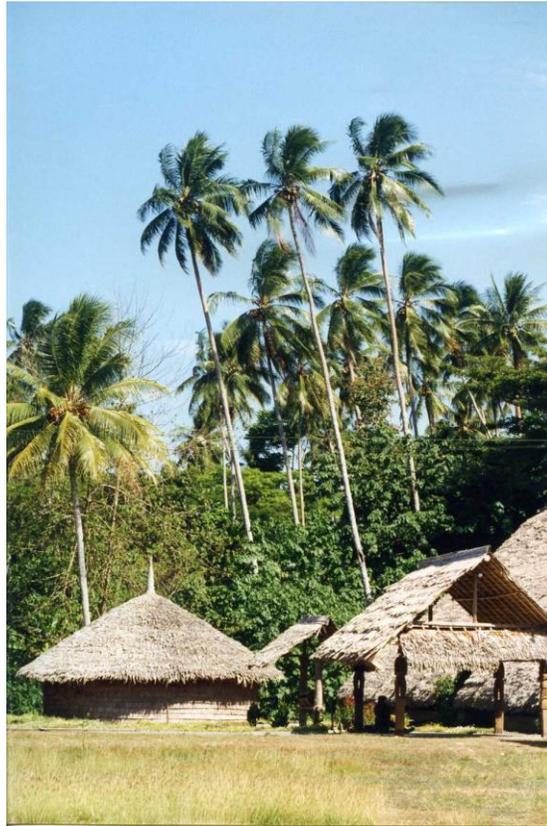
The Solomon Islands is trying to protect its cultures. The National Museum and Cultural Centre in Honiara is responsible for preserving cultural elements that are most in danger of being lost.



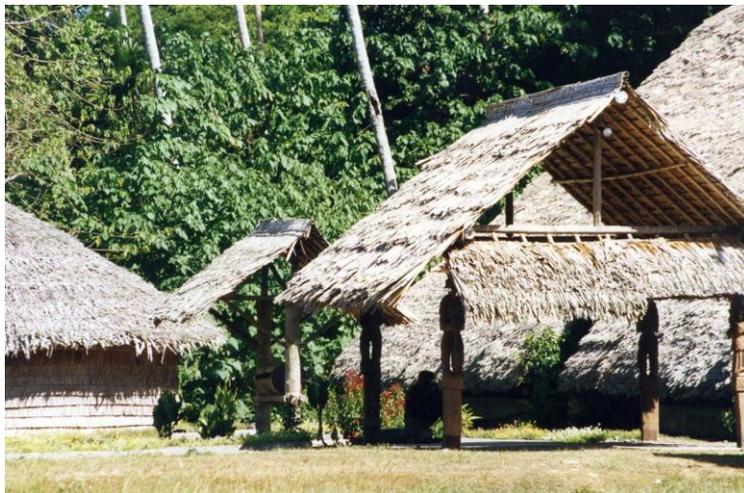
*Figure 19.2. Entrance to the Solomon Islands  
National Art Gallery and Cultural Centre*



*Figure 19.3. Pan Flute Band at the National Art Gallery and Cultural Centre, Honiara. Preserving and practicing traditional culture is part of the Centre's responsibilities.*



*Figure 19.4. Traditional House in Cultural Centre*



*Figure 19.5. Closer view of Traditional House in Cultural Centre*

### **Questions and Activities**

1. List five things you might find in a National Museum and Cultural Centre in Melanesia.
2. Why don't Solomon Islanders understand the role of the Museum?
3. List two material aspects of a culture.
4. List two non-material aspects of a culture.
5. List two aspects of a culture which have changed in recent times.

### **The Museum and Cultural Centre**

In the beginning the national Museum and Cultural Centre was operating because of a few expatriates and one or two locals with an interest in collecting artefacts.

In the 1960s, some items were bought. Gifts that were given to the colonial administrators during visits to villages were collected to form the basis for the museum collection. These items were spread in various government offices in Honiara. As the number of artefacts increased, there was a need to bring them together under one roof for display to the general public.

Because the work of the museum was done by volunteers without colonial government support, the immediate task was to find money to construct a building to house the existing collection. The Gulbenkian Foundation in England provided funding and the first gallery was constructed and opened in mid-1969. It was named the Honiara Museum.

In 1972, the British Solomon Island Protectorate took control of the Honiara Museum and changed it to the Solomon Islands National Museum and Cultural Centre. Despite government control, development was frustrating and slow. Funding from the government was small. Support was largely the work of donor countries at different times including Britain, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Japan.

The museum was staffed in its early stages by untrained volunteers until the arrival of a trained curator from the United Kingdom in 1973. What was needed was an Act of Parliament outlining a comprehensive cultural policy. This would help future governments devise a formal policy paper to expand the development of the museum. In recent years, Japan has played an important role in the work of the museum, especially in the provision of equipment and technical support in the recording of local languages, songs, and stories.

### **Aims of the Museum and Cultural Centre**

When the museum was first established in 1969, its chief aim was to collect items of material culture. Today, its collections and exhibitions also promote knowledge of Solomon Island cultures. The staff also record the nation's languages and traditions in order to encourage the protection of our rich cultural heritage.

Because of changes in our culture in the past, and in recent times, it is not only the preservation of culture that is important. Culture, in order to survive, must be practised and promoted. The National Museum and Cultural Centre does more than just record and collect artefacts. Culture is promoted through displays and exhibitions of dance, song, carving and craft making (see *Figure 19.3*).

The Museum encourages revival and appreciation. Its activities are entertaining and enjoyable for Solomon Islanders and for visitors.

The National Museum and Cultural Centre works with other institutions in many projects. These joint activities include:

- the National Archives, the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation and the Music Department of Osaka University in documenting music, dance and songs in the provinces,
- the University of the South Pacific and other universities and research organisations to produce an encyclopaedia,
- the Territorial Museum in New Caledonia to construct a museum to preserve the *La Perouse* voyage relics,
- the Ministry of Education to produce a Creative Arts syllabus for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools.

The Museum also does promotion work in schools and with the general public through visits and radio programs to raise awareness about Solomon Island Culture.

The National Museum and Cultural Centre is the only national organisation concerned with the collection, documentation, storage, display and study of artefacts on behalf of the people of the Solomon Islands.

In recent years the Museum began recording the “living aspects” of culture. Promotion of living cultures carried on from the past is a critical issue, because cultures now seem to be dominated by Western culture and ideas. During a speech in 1997, Solomon Islands Governor-General, Sir Moses Pitakaka expressed the need for youth to keep alive their Solomon Island cultural values.

### Questions and Activities

6. Make a timeline of the history of the Solomon Museum including the following dates  
1960s  
  
1969  
  
1972  
  
1973
7. List five other organisations the Museum is working with to protect cultures
8. Why do you think the Solomon Museum puts on carving displays?

### The significance of the Museum and Cultural Centre

The importance of the Museum and Cultural Centre should not be underestimated. Although political parties and governments make statements about the importance of cultures, their actions and priorities often do not match their words.

So, full credit must be given to the volunteers who initiated the Solomon Islands National Museum and Cultural Centre in the late 1960s. Their foresight has led to the preservation of Solomon Island Cultures.

The Museum and Cultural Centre plays a significant role in the nation building of the Solomon Islands. Nations identify themselves through a number of features. Each nation has a national flag, a national anthem, a national motto, a national history and most importantly a distinct culture that sets it apart from others. Citizens of a nation celebrate their unity through a common culture.

In the Solomon Islands cultural artefacts from many provinces emphasise our national identity and cultural richness in diversity. Cultural sites are therefore the root of a nation. Without them there is uncertainty about identity and less sense of belonging to the nation.

### **Problems and difficulties**

The problem facing the development of the museum and other cultural sites in the Solomon Islands is lack of priority by the government. There is inadequate financial support for the activities of cultural organisations. This is shown by the absence of a national cultural policy.

The absence of a national cultural policy leads to services on an ad hoc basis, gaps in collections, and unbalanced representation from the different islands and provinces. A National Cultural Policy was submitted to parliament in 1995 but nothing has come of it. This highlights the low priority politicians give to the preservation of cultures.

It is the responsibility of the national government to take a more aggressive role in protecting and preserving the cultural wealth of the Solomon Islands. This can be done through the National Museum and Cultural Centre, which houses cultural resources on behalf of the people of the Solomon Islands. The preservation of cultures is an investment for the future.

### **Reflections**

The National Museum and Cultural Centre still has a long way to go in the preservation of our cultures. It has plans to become an important, if not the most significant storehouse of Solomon Islands cultures. Government support must be directed into training to improve the expertise of the staff of the National Museum and Cultural Centre. Advances in technology and equipment should be exploited in preserving cultures of the country.

Solomon Islanders know the value of their culture. This culture is an important raw material. We cannot depart from our cultures and our histories. For without them, we have no roots.

#### **Questions and Activities**

9. List the full name of your nation's main museum.

10. When did it open?

11. List a special event it holds each year (or has held in the past year).

12. In about 50 words say why a national museum is the 'roots of a nation'.