

Unit 29: Together We Stand: The Ma'asina Ruru Movement

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Facts

Location:	Western Pacific Ocean, stretching approximately 1,400 km South East from Papua New Guinea to the North West of Vanuatu
Current Population:	595,693 inhabitants (July 2009 estimate)
Main Language:	Pidgin; English
Date of Independence:	7 July 1998

Glossary

Coercive	Action involving the use of force.
Indenture system	System of employment binding a person to a contract for a given period of time.
Paramount	Most important; supreme.
Revenue	Income of a government from taxation and other sources, used for the payment of public expenses.
Sedition	Rebellion against the government.
Self-determination	A stage on the way to full control of the nation's own affairs (sometimes called self-government)
Solidarity	Feeling of fellowship arising from common struggle, responsibilities or interests.



Figure 29.1. Map of Solomon Islands

After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- describe the events leading to the emergence of the Ma'asina Ruru Movement
- describe the significance of the Movement for the Solomon Islands
- Present a view on the impact of WWII on the Solomon Islands
- Describe how attitudes towards colonialism changed after the war.

Why was the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement important in the history of the Solomon Islands?

One of the key movements in the struggle towards self-determination in the Solomon Islands was *Ma'asina Ruru*. This movement was created by Malaitans on the island of Malaita and gave them a strong voice against the injustices of the colonial rule and the plantation system in the Solomon Islands. This unit looks at the war, and the period after the war, and the impact it had on some Solomon islanders.

Historical Background

The Solomon Islands was a British colony from 1893 to 1978. By 1905, a plantation system had developed in the colony, attracting investors and large companies. Plantations were important to the colony's economy because cash-crops like copra provided most of the Government's **revenue**.

The plantations were based mainly in the Western Solomons, which at that time was sparsely populated. Access to labour was very important for the plantations to succeed. So plantation workers were recruited on **indenture**, or fixed term labour contracts, from communities on other islands such as Malaita.

However, plantation workers were dissatisfied with their colonial 'masters' - the labour recruiters and plantation overseers and managers. The plantation system was seen as oppressive and interfering too much in local village life and on the plantations the working conditions were so harsh that gradually villagers began to resist recruitment.

As the flow of labour to the plantations diminished, the colonial Administration began to use **coercive** tactics to keep the workers in the plantations. For example, an indenture service, with a fixed term of service and fixed wages had been introduced by the Administration. A head tax system was also introduced between 1921 and 1923. This meant that money was collected each year.

Plantation owners and managers were allowed to press legal charges against rebellious labourers. The **indenture system** generally was highly successful because workers were powerless to challenge the colonial Administration.

After the Second World War, the situation of the plantation workers changed considerably. Solomon Islanders had been expected to participate in the war. They served in the British Solomon Islands Defence Force, and the Solomon Islands Labour Corps. These labourers benefited from the presence of American military forces. The American military were fairer in their attitudes towards the islanders and they openly said they were critical of the practices used by the British against workers and villagers. The Second World War was a turning point in attitude for the plantation workers.

What led to the emergence of the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement?

After the Japanese retreated and left the Solomons in 1942, the labourers returned to the plantations. But the situation was different; Solomon Islanders began to resist the colonial Administration.

In 1944, the first physical confrontation between Solomon Islanders and the British Administration took place in Ata'a on North Malaita. In the following year, a number of organised meetings took place on Malaita. The organisers were a group of head chiefs of various districts from the island, including three men - Nori, Alik, Nono 'Ohimae and Timothy George. At these meetings, there was a strong anti-colonial sentiment.

One of their main purposes of these meetings was to improve the lives of the islanders through initiatives such as:

- revenue collection to pay for better housing (rather than the head tax to the British)
- improved agricultural methods; medicine and education
- maintenance of cultural traditions
- a ban on recruitment from coastal Malaita
- increased wages for those working in the plantations.

From these meetings the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement emerged. The word *Ma'asina* means 'brother'; *Ruru* means 'togetherness'. The expression *Ma'asina Ruru* means brotherhood, unity and **solidarity**. Under this banner the Malaitans struggled to regain control of their own lives

What makes the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement unusual is that it was an organised protest, created by a migrant labour force. Most of the war-time labourers had been recruited from Malaita, and for this reason Malaita island became the 'headquarters' of the *Ma'asina Ruru*.

Malaita was divided into nine districts according to language areas. Each district was controlled by a Head Chief. Five of these chiefs were *South Seas Evangelical Mormon (SSEM)* teachers.

The **paramount** leader of the *Ma'asina Ruru* was Nori. He travelled around the Solomon Islands in order to promote the ideals of the Movement. Occasionally, Nori would conduct meetings with the districts' Head Chiefs, as an 'Island-Wide Native Council'. Each of the districts was in turn subdivided into several teams, controlled by a full Chief who worked under the direction of his Head Chief

Solidarity

It was clear that, under the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement, Malaitans began to take more control of their own affairs. For example, in December 1945, the 'First Order for the Island' was issued by Nori and Timothy George. It called for people to boycott work outside Malaita and in the colony's plantations. They argued there was plenty of work to be done in their own areas on Malaita. People then began working on large fortified villages and large gardens on the coastal areas.

By 1947, thousands of people who previously lived in small, scattered hamlets of twenty to forty extended family members had now settled in larger new, well-organised communities.

On 26 December 1946, some 5000 people attended a formal meeting of the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement, held at the Auki Government Station on Malaita. The main issue was low workers' wage. It was pointed out that workers should be paid a minimum monthly wage of 12 shillings, so that young men could leave their villages to earn good money in the plantations. That money would enable them to come home and improve social services such as health and education in their villages.

The purpose of that special meeting was not to confront the colonial Administration. The members of the movement wanted to demonstrate how the plantation experience had created new ideas and ambitions among the islanders. At the same time, they wanted to highlight the unequal distribution of benefits in the colony.

After its first meeting, the Movement spread beyond Malaita to other islands such as Ulawa and Guadalcanal. In Guadalcanal, Jacob Voza gained wide support from the local community to lay the foundations of the Movement. However, it was not possible to take the *Ma'asina Ruru* to places such as Gela, Isabel and Western Solomons because of low number of supporters, and also opposition from church missions of those areas.

Questions and Activities

1. What does '*Ma'asina Ruru*' mean?
2. Where did the Movement originate?
3. Who started the *Mau* movement?
4. Make a list of the initiatives proposed by the leaders of the *Ma'asina Ruru* and their followers to improve the situation of the islanders.
5. Which events indicated that Malaitans were beginning to take control of their lives?
6. What was asked in the First Order of the Island?
7. What was the main issue of the formal meeting of the *Ma'asina Ruru* held in December 1946?
8. Why was a pay rise important to the islanders?
9. Why couldn't the Movement establish itself in places such as Gela, Isabel and Western Solomons?

What were the causes of conflict between the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement and the Colonial Government?

When the British returned to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate to resume the administration, the tension between the *Ma'asina Ruru* and the colonial Government began to escalate.

Two events in early 1947 sparked conflict between *Ma'asina Ruru* and the Government. The first was the arrest of Lorea, Head Chief of the Lau Lagoon area. Although not directly related to the Movement, this incident created anger among the people of Malaita. The second event was the recruitment of labourers by the colonial Government to work in Honiara. This upset the leaders of *Ma'asina Ruru* because it went against their policy of people working in their own districts.

On 17 March 1947, the ten main leaders of the *Ma'asina Ruru* met with the British Resident Commissioner at Auki to announce that they would call for a general strike on 30 June to protest against the Government's recruitment of labourers to work away from their districts.

On 30 June 1947, a gathering of 7,080 people at Auki showed that the *Ma'asina Ruru* was gaining strength. At this meeting, Nori and the Head-Chiefs announced they would not go ahead with the general strike, even though they were still strongly opposed to labour recruitment.

The leaders also drew attention to the need to have their own 'local courts' instead of the Government's native courts. The Resident Commissioner replied that if such courts were established, the people would be breaking the law.

For the next few weeks the struggle for **self-determination** gained momentum in Malaita. People began to act as though they had declared independence from the colonial Government. Local 'Custom courts' were set up everywhere, the colonial Government's instructions were ignored, and other Malaitans who were against the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement was harassed.

Questions and Activities

10. What events sparked the conflict between the *Ma'asina Ruru* and the Government?
11. What happened at the meeting between *Ma'asina Ruru* leaders and the District Commissioner on 30 June 1947?
12. Why did Malaitans feel they were heading towards independence?
13. Make a sentence with three words chosen from the glossary

Why was the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement seen as a threat to the Colonial Administration?

The colonial Government began to realise that *Ma'asina Ruru* was directly challenging their authority. As observed by a Government official of that time:

"The authority of the government is being openly gone against without respect. The supremacy of the established law (European Law) must be demonstrated immediately if the position is not to deteriorate further. Matters have now reached a stage where strong action must be taken if the government is not to be rendered completely powerless".

There was opposition to the Movement. For example, there was opposition within Malaita itself. In some places of the island, *Ma'asina Ruru* was seen as stirring up land disputes. This upset some Catholic missionaries, and eventually led to some outbreaks of local conflict.

Islanders who were loyal to the colonial Government also opposed the *Ma'asina Ruru*. One of them was Maekali, who was the Government Headman at Malu'u under the local British official, Mr Bell; another was Kakalua, who was first appointed by the *Ma'asina Ruru* leaders to be Head Chief for the Lau Lagoon in 1945, but resigned three months later.

After realising that the *Ma'asina Ruru* represented a threat to the Colonial Administration, the Government used a series of measures to stop the Movement. First, a number of 'operations' took place to stop the Movement. 'Operation De Louse', began on 30 August 1947. At dawn, a force of seven officers and fifty Melanesian police arrested *Ma'asina Ruru* leaders and their followers. As a result, two hundred and fifty three men were arrested; twenty seven were tried; eight out of the nine Head Chiefs, including Nori, were given maximum prison terms of six years for **sedition**.

Secondly, in July 1948, 'Operation Jericho' was organised, aiming at cracking down on the fortified villages. In this operation, police parties toured Malaita, ordering the destruction of the fences around the villages. The last of these fences was torn down in April 1949, during 'Operation Orestes'. In just four weeks, a total of 1060 people were sentenced to imprisonment.

These tactics showed the government's power and the inability of *Ma'asina Ruru* leaders on Malaita to enforce the new local regulations they put in place. This meant the colonial Government was successful in putting an end to the *Ma'asina Ruru Movement*. Between the end of 1949 and early 1950, *Ma'asina Ruru* slowly disappeared.

Despite its defeat, the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement remains a positive experience for the Solomon Islanders for the following reasons:

- the leaders inspired local communities to organise themselves in order to struggle for self-determination
- it was a popular movement which united a large number of followers
- it drew the attention of the colonial Government to the needs of the people of Malaita
- it was a sign that self-determination and the end of colonial rule was a long way away, but could be achieved eventually
- it made the British aware that the colonial system of rule could be challenged
- it provided an opportunity for the indigenous people to express themselves politically, that subjects could speak up to "masters"

Questions and Activities

14. Who were the opponents of the *Ma'asina Ruru* Movement?
15. What was the Government's response to counter the Movement?
16. What happened during 'operation Jericho'?
17. When did the Movement end?
18. The *Ma'asina Ruru* proved that Malaitans could challenge the colonial rulers;. Comment on this statement in 100 words.

19. Draw a time line identifying some of the important events that occurred during the time when the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement was active. (Plot the events of the time line in a straight line using the scale of 1 year as 1 cm).
20. Divide the class into three groups to discuss the following themes:
 - (a) What is nationalism? Can *Ma'asina Ruru* be seen as a form of nationalism? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - (b) What is colonialism? Was your country colonised by a colonial power? If yes, how did they treat your ancestors?
 - (c) What is resistance? Would you have supported *Ma'asina Ruru* did? Give reasons for your opinion.
21. Role play exercise: '*The trial of the nine Head Chiefs*'. Nine Head Chiefs were accused of **sedition**, were tried and eventually imprisoned for six years. Organise yourselves into three groups (called A, B and C) to act out a trial of three Head Chiefs. It must be a court scene with characters such as the accused Head Chief; the judge; and witnesses (as many as you like); police guides, and colonial Government officers. Rehearse and present the scene to the rest of the class.