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War Remains The Culture of Preservation in the Southwest Pacific

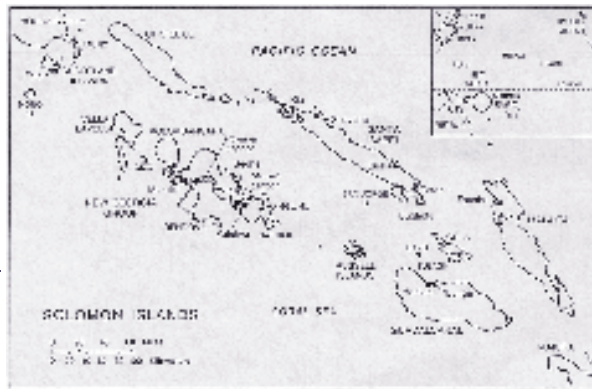
The Solomon Islands.

Like the fast-growing forest that has covered over island battle sites, memories of World War II in the Pacific are rapidly being overtaken by the busy activities of contemporary development. And yet the war continues to be regarded as a major turning point in the histories of island societies, just as relics of war still protrude from the sands and jungles of islands with names such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Saipan. How is the war being remembered in the Pacific Islands today? And what are some of the policies and practices being brought to bear on the conservation of these memories?

The impact of the war on island peoples and ecologies was especially dramatic in the Pacific where the magnitude of war was heightened against the backdrop of the mostly small, isolated, and rural islands where it was fought. The sense of drama surrounding people's wartime experience can still be heard in the hushed tones with which islanders speak of the sudden appearance of fleets of warships off their islands and the subsequent transformation of tranquil plantations into sprawling bases with roads, airstrips, docks, and all the accoutrements of small cities.

The capital of the Solomon Islands (Honiara, a port town of about 35,000 people) is itself an artifact of war, located where it is because the Japanese decided to build an airstrip there in 1942 and the Allies decided to capture it, thus begin-

Guadalcanal. Skyline Ridge Memorial, looking toward Savo Island.



ning their offensive in the Pacific. Today the airport, named Henderson Field after an American flyer killed in the battle of Midway, is the country's one international airport. War memory is inscribed in the hills, valleys, and rivers surrounding the airport, where names such as Bloody Ridge reflect the savage fighting that took place there as the Japanese attempted to retake the airfield over the course of six months in 1942 and 1943.

On top of this geography of war, one now finds another layer of memory in the form of plaques, monuments, and memorials placed at significant points as public reminders of the events that once made the Solomon Islands the center of world attention. The international visitor arriving by air in the Solomon Islands today is not long in the country before encountering reminders of World War II. Immediately upon exiting the small air terminal, he or she faces three memorial obelisks dedicated by U.S. Marine veterans in 1982. Just down the road, at the base of the original control tower, another monument and bronze plaque were installed by American veterans in 1992 during the 50th anniversary of the Guadalcanal landings.

Just as the war and its relics were the products of foreign powers, so too are these reminders of war the products of foreign ways of remembering. The Pacific war was, after all, a war between the Allies and Japan, fought over the terrain of colonized societies. The monuments and plaques that memorialize it have been installed by veterans and governments wishing to commemorate the sacrifices of their citizen-combatants, often with reference to the role of natives in supporting the war effort. But what are the meanings of the war for indigenous Solomon Islanders? And what, for them, would be the purpose(s) of preserving them? Answers to these questions are complex, entangled in the political realities of new nations attempting to articulate their own identities and histories, while at the same time attracting investment and tourism from former colonizing powers.

In a speech to a conference convened in 1987 to review Solomon Islands perspectives on

the war, Sir Gideon Zoleveke, a prominent Solomon Islander with wartime experience, declared, "The war was not our war." (Laracy and White, 1988). But such sentiments have emerged only ambiguously in the period following independence. Indigenous remembrances of the war, particularly as an object of *national* memory, are still easily buried by the elaborate practices with which former colonial powers produce their memories. Five years after Zoleveke gave his speech, he was a guest of honor and keynote speaker at 50th anniversary ceremonies commemorating the war as a common victory of the Allies over Japan; and three years after that he was a special guest of Australia at ceremonies held to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the war.

Contemporary approaches to the cultivation of World War II artifacts and memories belie an underlying tension between the dominant memories of the warring powers and the largely unwritten local histories that frequently express meanings quite different from the heroic narratives of loyalty and sacrifice characteristic of European and American war histories (White et al., 1988). These tensions are evident in the ways in which Solomon Islanders have cultivated war memories in forms appropriate to the museum-going, memorial-making practices of foreign veterans and tourists. In this brief essay I discuss two examples: the most well-known local "war museum" begun by a citizen-entrepreneur on Guadalcanal, and the official activities organized to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Guadalcanal in 1992.

Build a Museum and They Will Come

About 12 miles down the coastal road headed west from Honiara, beyond the point where the pavement ends, stands a rusting sign announcing the Vilu War Museum. There a dirt road turns off and runs underneath the tall palm trees of a coconut plantation, leading to a grassy compound fenced in by a wall of Marsden matting—the steel grating used to construct World War II airstrips throughout the Pacific. This is Fred Kona's museum.

In 1969, when the Solomon Islands was still a colony of England, the British Chief Secretary, Tom Russell, advised Fred Kona that he should begin gathering war relics for the purpose of making a museum. Fred Kona was a native member of the government, but did not know what a

museum was. He liked to say that he only knew how to make copra (then the Solomons major agricultural export). But he knew there were plenty of war relics in the bush and in the sea, and he knew that foreign companies had been active in salvaging them.

So, over the course of the next five years, Fred Kona organized his relatives and neighbors to work at dragging, carrying, and trucking an assortment of guns, helmets, mortars, cannon, and crashed planes to a central site—Vilu—where a space was cleared to receive them. By 1975, he had assembled an impressive collection of war relics, built a small thatched house for the smaller items, and installed three flagpoles. On October 2, 1975, Fred Kona inaugurated his museum with a feast that was attended by ambassadors from the United States and Japan, as well as representatives of the British Solomon Islands government.

Just as inspiration for the site had come from British, American, and Japanese interests in memorializing the war, so the museum proved to be a magnet for returning veterans of both sides. Fred Kona had, indeed, assembled an impressive array of World War II objects. Spread around the perimeter of the compound, one could find the twisted and perforated relics of such famous vintage aircraft as a P-38 Lightning, Grumman F-4-F Wildcat, and a Marine Corsair. Consistent with the non-literate roots of this museum, it had none of the signage typical of Western history museums. Instead, visitors to the Vilu War Museum could usually expect a personal narration, at least about the larger objects such as planes and cannon, from Fred Kona or one of his assistants. The Vilu curators would readily regale their visitors with stories about the planes, about where they had been found, and about their final moments. In some cases, these stories linked up with accounts that had been added by returning veterans, including

Grumman F-4-F Wildcat, Vilu War Museum.



some of those who had actually piloted the craft on display.

During the post-war years, Japanese and Allied veterans alike have continued to return to Guadalcanal on pilgrimages to revisit sites of suffering, tragedy, and sacrifice. For these visitors, Fred Kona became a kind of celebrity, developing his English along with an extroverted persona to greet and welcome foreigners from all over the world to his museum. In recognition of his work in preserving and honoring memories of those who died in the Guadalcanal conflict, the Japanese government invited him to Japan where he was given an honorary award for his efforts.

Thus, Fred Kona's Vilu War Museum became something more than a museum. It also became a memorial. In 1982, on the 40th anniversary of Guadalcanal, Japanese veterans installed a small stone memorial on the grounds of the museum. The memorial bears an inscription to the "tens of thousands of young men who fell in battle" and a wish that such events never be repeated. American veterans subsequently installed a commemorative marker alongside it, giving a physical locus to the memorial function of the memorial ground.

Fred Kona, who died in 1994, was quite explicit about the purpose of his museum. Speaking to me, an American, in 1984 he emphasized the museum's significance as a tribute to American sacrifices: "To remember how the United States people sacrificed themselves and we have peace in our country, and also Australia, New Zealand, England, and Solomon Islands. That's why I made the museum. To remember that. Next thing is to preserve,

to keep the history...." The fact that the Solomon Islands is added at the end of Fred Kona's list reflects the fact that foreign veterans and tourists were the primary audience for the museum—people who were usually happy to pay a small entrance donation to Fred Kona or one of his helpers, who always seemed to materialize out of nowhere when a car would pull up by the compound. Fred Kona embodied his museum's spirit of

public, international relations. While this personal presence was well received by his foreign visitors eager to find living links to their own past experience, the lack of any public or governmental role in managing the museum casts some doubt on whether it will survive beyond his death.

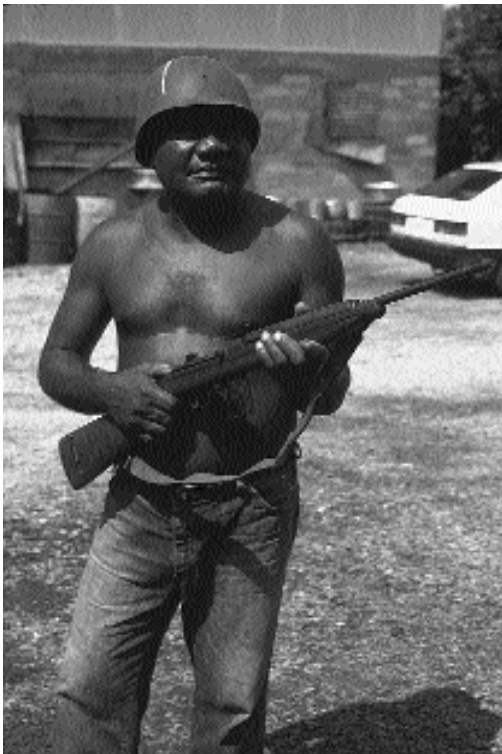
Despite the efforts of local entrepreneurs such as Fred Kona, there are no national museums or exhibits devoted to World War II in the Solomon Islands. Although the small Tourist Authority office in Honiara features posters and maps displaying war themes, there are no sites, parks, or exhibits of war history sponsored or supported by national institutions. The reasons for this are both economic and cultural. In a country where the very relevance of museums is constantly under question, and where the national museum is chronically underfunded, there has been little opportunity or support for new projects. Most of the international assistance for developing tourist resources has focused on presenting aspects of pre-European cultural traditions, not historical subjects such as the war. Proposals to create a war museum or to expand the national museum to include World War II exhibits have come mainly from foreign businesses interested in salvaging and exporting World War II aircraft. So far none of these proposals have materialized.

Recognizing these interests of foreign collectors, however, the government passed a War Relics Act in the 1980s with the intention of prohibiting the export of war materiel and limiting profiteering by outside interests. The major difficulty with the Act has been enforcement. Except for the installation of an x-ray machine in the national airport to detect foolish attempts to transport World War II munitions on board jet aircraft, the Act is largely unnoticed. In a few cases, local provincial governments have taken responsibility by setting up cultural offices that monitor the trade in artifacts. The Western Province, which passed its own cultural policy and created a Cultural Affairs Office to administer it (see Lindstrom and White, 1994), was so successful in confiscating war relics (usually from recreational divers) that it faced a storage problem. For the most part, however, the vast array of war artifacts remain outside any organized efforts at public interpretation or conservation.

A Political Economy of Memory

Despite the lack of sustained national projects aimed at developing the war's cultural resources, the government has responded to foreigners' interests in war memory, especially for purposes of promoting tourism. Seeing an opportunity to capitalize on the international attention aroused by the 50th anniversary of the battle for Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands government

Fred Kona with gifts from American friends. Courtesy East-West Center. Photo by the author.



designated 1992 as the Year of Tourism in Solomon Islands and allocated a budget of \$100,000 to support local planning for commemorative events.

The potential for the Guadalcanal anniversary to attract worldwide attention was anticipated by many entrepreneurs in the business of producing historical materials for popular audiences. Thus, the same team that mounted an expedition to find and photograph the *Titanic* organized a similar project, using advanced underwater technology, to locate and film many of the sunken warships that gave the waters off Guadalcanal the name Iron Bottom Sound. Sponsored by *National Geographic* and other investors, this project produced a made-for-television documentary film introduced by former U.S. President George Bush and a glossy coffee-table photograph book (Ballard, 1993). Except for occasional obligatory references to the role of native coastwatchers, there is little in this kind of technology-centered, history-as-spectacle approach that speaks to the experiences and concerns of Solomon Islanders.

Despite the creation of a Solomon Islands planning committee, the agenda for the 50th anniversary events was largely set by the former Allies, even resulting in the exclusion of the Japanese, who contribute more international aid and investment in the Solomon Islands than the United States. The U.S. World War II 50th Anniversary Committee (a Department of Defense program based in the Pentagon) organized an entire Task Force, called "Operation Remembrance," to undertake an island-hopping campaign for the purpose of supporting American veterans groups and military units participating in official ceremonies throughout the region (White, 1995). On Guadalcanal, the centerpiece of the 50th anniversary commemoration, was the dedication of an impressive monument consisting of a walled compound with large marble panels telling the story of the Guadalcanal campaign. Perched on top of Skyline Ridge overlooking the major battlegrounds, the monument was conceived as a counter-measure to an imposing Japanese "Peace Memorial" that had been installed in 1983 on a neighboring ridge overlooking the capital. Funded by the U.S. Battle Monument Commission and by donations from American veterans, the monument cost about US\$500,000. The scale of plans for the monument and dedication ceremonies did raise some local eyebrows. A former Prime Minister, writing under a pseudonym in a national newspaper, asserted:

What possible benefits do we, as a country get out of the War Memorial?

This simply reinforces local peoples' sense of inferiority.

The idea to build the monument, its design, the money and the technology all belong to foreigners....

And yet again, at the height of Skyline Ridge we have yet to witness another battle between USA and Japan.

Do we need them to do that yet again in our own soils?....

I think that apart from the praise given to our people for their services during the war years, the Americans and British need to consider some forms of compensations to our local people....

I think we have already had enough of USA vs Japan during the last war.

(Solomon Star, April 28, 1989, p. 7).

These complaints about the foreign-dominated process of commemorating the war points to both cultural and economic problems that beset the development of indigenous forms of public history and conservation. The dilemma for national planners is that sites of war memory developed for the purposes of tourism inevitably speak to foreign audiences interested in objects, people, and places that fit within their own conceptions of history. How can island nations struggling to develop tourism economies that will appeal to overseas interests also build cultural and educational projects that have meaning and value for an indigenous, national public?

To date, most of the initiatives and financing for preserving and/or commemorating island war memories have come from the metropolitan powers. Papua New Guinea, the largest and most wealthy island nation, is the only country to have created a national war museum. But even here national expenditures amount to only a small fraction of what the United States, for example, has invested in its efforts to recover the remains of air crews lost in Papua New Guinea's mountains and jungles, where more planes disappeared in World War II than in any theater of war before or since. The cost of the Skyline Ridge Memorial in Guadalcanal would have paid the entire budget of the Solomon Islands National Museum for several decades. But the disparity in efforts to preserve and commemorate war memory are more than economic. The economy of memory here is undergirded by more basic questions about the meaning and relevance of "preservation," particularly preservation of World War II memories.

Looking Forward

As Chapman notes in his introduction to this collection, many in the Pacific Islands region view issues of culture and cultural preservation in a distinctly different light than is typical in the United States and the more developed nations of Asia. While there are vast differences among the soci-

eties of the Pacific, the region is noted for the substantial continuity of rural lifestyles rooted in gardening and other subsistence practices. This is particularly the case in the Southwest Pacific, where about 80% of the populations of the larger island nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu live subsistence lifestyles. The historical significance of the war in peoples' lives is primarily that which is expressed in songs, stories, and ceremonial practices enacted in village settings. In the rural Pacific, where literacy is only slowly making inroads, history is largely oral history. Translating these histories into relevant forms in books, films, museum displays, and so forth, requires sensitivity to the different ways in which history itself acquires relevance for peoples' lives.

Pacific Islanders have asserted repeatedly that they are less interested in preserving artifacts than in protecting and promoting indigenous culture, which in most areas remains vital, despite decades of colonial history. Attitudes toward the role of museums—a concept that still has relatively little currency for most Islanders—reflect broader differences in Western and indigenous philosophies of culture. In much of the island region, there is no “culture of preservation,” at least as preservation is professionalized and institutionalized in Western societies. Except for the expatriate community and tourist visitors, there is no museum-going public that brings kids to public places on the weekend for educational experience viewing unusual exhibits.

This, of course, is not to say that there is no appreciation of such experiences. Island cultures typically have elaborate means for recalling the past (White, 1991), and most communities today are more increasingly interested in matters of traditional culture and history. But local modes of connecting to the past are embedded in oral and performative practices that make the past personally relevant and socially significant for those doing the remembering. Thus, when people who remember World War II tell their stories, they frequently do so by focusing on personal connections they developed with the foreigners who flooded through their islands. In many cases, objects such as U.S.-issue knives, plates, or helmets, acquired as gifts from the military foreigners years ago, have been carefully preserved—tucked away in storage trunks, to be displayed only when the occasion merits (such as the visit of an American traveler decades later). Like many objects in island cultures, these “souvenirs” represent objects of exchange that acquire meaning as tokens of relationships formed with outsiders, and the stories that tell about them.

The public management of historical resources is further complicated by the politics of knowledge that usually regards stories about the past as protected by local copyrights. Only the owners of stories have rights to tell them—rights that are often unrecognized by literacy-centered ideas about intellectual property. Thus, when a national committee of Solomon Islanders began meeting to discuss the organization of an international conference on the oral history of World War II, the first issue raised concerned control over the recording and distribution of stories that would surface in such a conference.

One of the challenges of developing indigenous approaches to war memory as public culture, especially as public *national* culture, will be to find ways to represent personal and local histories such that they obtain relevance and meaning for broader audiences. Efforts to do this will inevitably grapple with the dominant tastes and conventions of the international “market” for war memories and memorabilia. Whether new approaches to cultural management can resolve some of these tensions will be the “trick” of cultural development in the Pacific for some years to come.

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