"What Will You Do with Our Stories?" Truth and Reconciliation in the Solomon Islands

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The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was the first TRC in the Pacific Islands. Its goals and activities – truth-seeking, reconciliation and the production of a report with a narrative of the conflict that focused on human rights violations – reflect the normative values of global transitional justice discourses. In this paper I draw on interviews with former staff of the TRC and my own experiences of working for the TRC to explore the implications of importing international transitional justice mechanisms into the local Solomon Islands context, and to draw attention to the cultural limitations of truth-telling. I argue that in order for peacebuilding tools to be effective in Solomon Islands, a strong commitment to, and understanding of, local context is required; transitional justice mechanisms must resonate with local understandings and practices of conflict resolution and peacemaking. The TRC has the potential to play a positive role in building peace in Solomon Islands if it is viewed as a component of an ongoing *process.* Truth and memory alone will not bring about justice, reconciliation or peace; the memories and truths that are collected and produced by the TRC ought to be used for future action, addressing ongoing injustices and grievances.

In February 2012, the five-volume final report of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was presented to Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo. He congratulated the Commission on the completion of its mandate, saying that "it marks the closure of an important chapter to a long process of reconciliation and truth seeking" (Island Sun 2012). Thirteen months after receiving the report, Lilo had not yet tabled it in parliament or released it to the public, as required by Section 17 of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2008*.[1] Instead he defied repeated calls for the report's release and announced a further six-month delay. Referring to the report's "sensitivity", he argued: "we do not want to rush into releasing the report because we want to handle the issues in a responsible way" (Rakai 2013). In April 2013, Terry Brown, a retired Anglican bishop, Canadian national, long-time Solomon Islands resident and editor of the report, released an electronic copy to the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), the churches' peak body which had instigated the establishment of a TRC in 2000, as well as to social and mainstream media in Solomon Islands, to international newspapers and radio stations, and to a network of researchers. An electronic copy of the report (Ata et al. 2012) also became available on the internet. Brown was highly critical of the government's inaction:

> It is not good enough to forgive the perpetrators and forget the victims, which seems to be the approach of the government. The report has not even been shared with the Ministry of National Reconciliation, Unity and Peace, which would have the primary responsibility for implementing it.

> (cited in Callick 2013)

The final report concluded over two years of research, exhumations, investigations and truth-seeking by the TRC. Along with recommendations for the Solomon Islands government about how best to address the legacy of the conflict which lasted from 1998 to 2003 (locally referred to as "the Tensions"), it includes detailed information about the antecedents of the conflict, its course, and the various parties engaged in it. The report also provides an analysis of human rights abuses, including murder, abduction, illegal detention, torture, sexual violence, property violation and forced displacement, and lists the names of two hundred people whose violent deaths were attributed to the Tensions. It draws on over 2,300 statements collected from across the country, and testimonies by victims, ex-combatants, politicians and other leaders given at eleven public and 102 closed hearings. The Commission also considered numerous submissions, a review of the relevant media coverage, academic literature and government documents and policies.

The literature on the recent Solomon Islands conflict focuses largely on the history, parties and events of the Tensions and the subsequent regional peace-keeping mission (Moore 2004; Fraenkel 2004; Allen and Dinnen 2010; Allen 2013). While various UN agencies and NGOs have produced reports on development and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands more generally (for example, UNICEF 2005; Oxfam 2006; UNDP 2004), and researchers have analysed women's roles in the conflict and in peacebuilding (Pollard 2000; Paina 2000; Leslie and Boso 2003; Webber and Johnson 2008; Monson 2013), there is relatively little analysis of the peace process and the TRC (but see Braithwaite et al. 2010; Maebuta and Spence 2009; Jeffery 2013; Harris Rimmer 2010).

This paper illustrates the complexities of implementing a TRC in a Melanesian context and contributes to the burgeoning discourse on peacebuilding and transitional justice in Solomon Islands. In heeding the call of many scholars working on issues of transitional justice to produce scholarship that is context specific, I have relied on two sets of

data to inform my analysis and argument: First, I draw on my experiences, observations and reflections while working for the Solomon Islands TRC for one year, in 2011–2012, as a research officer assisting with the research on women's experiences of the conflict and human rights abuses for the final report. Second, I draw on interviews with TRC staff and stakeholders.[2] Many of the interviewees were implementing TRC processes at the village and community level. As "translators" of human rights research and truth-seeking, they mediated between global ideas of human rights and local sociocultural understandings (Merry 2006) and therefore experienced the problems and challenges of the TRC first-hand.

The Tensions in Solomon Islands are symptomatic of a global trend since the end of the Cold War, namely, that conflicts occur increasingly within rather than between states. In many instances the relationships between the protagonists are intimate and complex. They share the same geographical territory, and are often linked through marriage and other social and economic ties. It is therefore often not feasible to separate warring parties by drawing boundaries (Assefa 2001, 339). In these circumstances, conventional conflict management strategies are inadequate and transitional justice mechanisms, including truth commissions, offer a seemingly attractive alternative. To date, there have been over forty truth commissions globally. In many cases, earlier commissions have served as templates for later iterations with the result that a set of international, globalised norms have developed around their implementation. The commissions have been driven by a number of premises: that the process of recovering the truth will result in psychological healing, that there is no justice without truth, and that without knowledge of the past human rights violations will recur (Chirwa 1997, 479). As I argue in this paper, however, the links between truth and reconciliation on the one side and justice on the other can be tenuous, particularly when these concepts have a different meaning in the cultural setting in which the truth commission operates.

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2   Interviews were conducted in English, Pijin, or a combination of both. All translations by the author. Interviewees included statement takers, data entry staff, researchers, exhumations officers, office managers, administrative officers, Commissioners, as well as United Nations and NGO personnel who worked closely with the TRC. All interviews cited in this paper were conducted in 2012 in Honiara.

This paper discusses the friction caused by importing global ideas into local contexts, and explores the cultural limitations of truth-telling. It argues that in a Melanesian context the effectiveness of a TRC depends on whether or not it can work within local cultural practices of memory, truth, justice and reconciliation. While I contend that many elements of TRCs are incongruent with a Melanesian post-conflict context, I conclude that a TRC *can* play a positive role for building peace in Solomon Islands. To do so, it must respect local culture and *kastom,* and be viewed and operated as an ongoing *process,* where memory and truth are used for future action to address enduring injustices and grievances. These include the grievances that were the root causes of the conflict, and those that were its consequences.

1. The Historical and Cultural Context

Solomon Islands consists of almost one thousand islands in the southwest Pacific. Like that of neighbouring Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, the population of Solomon Islands is predominantly Melanesian. The country is ethnically and linguistically diverse: its population of just over half a million speak around eighty languages. However, Solomon Islanders share Pijin as a lingua franca. They live across nine provinces and the capital Honiara. Approximately 85 per cent of the population reside in rural areas on customary-owned land (Allen and Dinnen 2010, 303).

The Solomon Islands became a British Protectorate in 1893, and the dual processes of colonisation and missionary work saw government, capitalism and Christianity spread across the islands, although with uneven rates of penetration and influence (Allen and Dinnen 2010, 303). While colonial boundaries have defined the Solomon Islands as a nation-state, personal identities and communal ties have remained strongest within local kinship groups, as argued by Moore:

> [T]he provinces are no more "natural" to the islands than the unity imposed by the British as a protectorate in the 1890s – the "nation" is thus a collection of villages, descent groups and language groups, all of which have thoroughly local agendas.
>
> (Moore 2004, 158)

Today the state is peripheral to the lives of most Solomon Islanders, who practice subsistence agriculture and live in rural areas (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 13). Christianity, in contrast, has had a significant unifying impact.

The social norms and local-level systems governing conflict and reconciliation in Solomon Islands are rooted in culture, Christianity and *kastom.* A recent World Bank report for the Justice Delivered Locally project found that in local-level disputes, the *kastom* system was "by far the most commonly invoked" (Allen et al. 2013, 34). *Kastom* is a Pijin term (derived from the English "custom") that is widely used across the Solomon Islands. The term has no definition in Solomon Islands legislation and its meaning is highly subjective, as it has "taken on specific historical, political and place-based meanings" (Allen et al. 2013, 6). Broadly defined, *kastom* encompasses indigenous ideologies, relationship to and management of land, moral frameworks, dispute management, gender relations and social organisation (White 1993, 492). These ideologies and activities serve to empower indigenous traditions and practices, both within communities and vis-à-vis the state and Western institutions (Akin 2004, 300). Although often associated with the past or tradition, *kastom* is fluid and evolving, existing alongside and in interplay with formal state structures and Christianity (Brown 2008, 190; Allen et al. 2013, 34).

In Melanesia, *kastom* and community practices, entwined in social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual dimensions, play a major role in establishing boundaries for socially destructive behaviour and underpin patterns of collective identity and order (Brown 2008, 202). Clive Moore observes that: "Solomon Islanders recognise complex symbolic links between human relationships, lands, gardens, music, dance, everyday thoughts, speech, their ancestors, and now Christianity, but this cosmological balance is fragile and rather like living comfortably in the vortex of a cyclone" (2004, 216). While confrontation is usually avoided, when it does occur, "there needs to be a final ceremonial compensation and forgiveness to re-establish societal equilibrium" (219). This idea was often emphasised by my interviewees; one TRC research officer told me:

> The understanding of people in the village, if they say reconcili-
> ation, there will be two parties, and there will be a symbolic
> exchange of maybe goods and money. Which symbolises that
> you're sorry and things like that. Not necessarily repaying
> everything […] It symbolises understanding that a problem has
> happened, and we forget it. It should be addressed. And then,
> don't do it again […] If there's any problem next time, it will
> mean it's a different problem.

These reconciliation processes usually include an exchange of traditional items of wealth, such as shell money or feather money, pigs and taro, as well as currency. Local understandings of reconciliation are centred around this primarily inter-personal, inter-familial and inter-communal process focused on restoring relationships.

2. The Tensions

Although often referred to as an "ethnic conflict" or "ethnic tensions", the 1998–2003 Solomon Islands conflict has its roots in socio-economic, development and land matters rather than in an intractable divide between the groups involved (Kabutaulaka 2002, 4; Maebuta and Spence 2009, 7). The Tensions were primarily a conflict between militant groups representing people from the two largest and most populous islands, Guadalcanal and Malaita. The development of Guadalcanal and migration to the island, along with the move of the capital from the island of Tulagi to Honiara on Guadalcanal after the Second World War, fostered resentment amongst the people of Guadalcanal who came to view Malaitans as disrespectful guests on their land (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 18–19). As grievances went unaddressed, resentment grew.

In 1998, a group of Guadalcanal men formed the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, later called the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), and began to evict and harass Malaitan settlers in rural parts of the island (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 23). Another militant group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), retaliated. With the assistance of Malaitans in the police force, the MEF on 5 June 2000 captured the main police armoury and forced a change of government. Thousands of Malaitans who lived in rural Guadalcanal fled to Honiara or Malaita, and many indigenous Guadalcanal people fled the Malaitan-dominated capital to safety in their home villages. Thousands of settlers from

other islands who were resident in Honiara or Guadalcanal returned temporarily to their respective home provinces. In October 2000, representatives of the warring groups signed the Townsville Peace Agreement. However a prominent IFM leader, Harold Keke, boycotted the Townsville meeting. He and his supporters formed the Guadalcanal Liberation Front, and continued to exert violent control over the remote Weathercoast of Guadalcanal. The police, aided by some ex-MEF and ex-IFM militants, tried to capture Keke and his men, but in the process also terrorised local villagers.

During the five-year conflict, the country as a whole was affected and particular hot spots saw an escalation of crime, violence, mass displacement, heightened insecurity and the proliferation of high-powered weapons. Almost 10 per cent of the country's population, most of them from rural Guadalcanal and Honiara, were displaced as a result of the violence. Government-run essential services were severely disrupted or ceased altogether as the economy collapsed (Allen 2006, 310). A 2005 assessment by the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF found that "it is difficult to overstate the psychosocial impact of this trauma on the people of Solomon Islands", and that the experience of trauma was not confined to immediate victims or displaced people, but extended to Solomon Islanders throughout the country who experienced a severe undermining of their sense of personal security and their confidence in the future (2005, 19).

The unprecedented level of violence, the proliferation of high-powered weapons and the widespread participation in conflict in the affected areas provided a challenge to local conflict management and reconciliation practices. The government attempted to draw on *kastom* in its effort to bring about reconciliation, but these attempts did not garner community support or ownership, or resemble traditional customary practices "wherein the symbolic rather than the material aspect is of tantamount importance" (Pollard and Wale 2004, 589). Within an hour of a government-funded public reconciliation feast in Honiara in 1999, during which leaders dressed in traditional outfits exchanged shell money and pigs, new violence reportedly broke out on the Guadalcanal plains (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). A

government-funded system of compensation almost bankrupted the state, with millions paid for fraudulent claims and bribes for disarmament (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 47).

In July 2003, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) arrived in Honiara at the invitation of the Solomon Islands government. Supported by the Pacific Islands Forum, RAMSI was mandated to restore law and order in a mission called Operation Helpem Fren. The mission centred on three core pillars for recovery: machinery of government, economic governance, and law and justice. The mission's efforts to restore law and order included the removal of weapons, criminal prosecutions, institutional strengthening and capacity-building. Substantial resources and support for the "tension trials" resulted in a significant number of arrests and prosecutions, which made the case of the Solomon Islands unusual in comparison with other post-conflict contexts (Jeffrey 2013, 11). Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen question if RAMSI's "haste to arrest, prosecute, liberalise and state-build" allowed sufficient space for indigenous methods of peace-making (2010, 323). While RAMSI has been heralded as a successful regional intervention, it did not facilitate reconciliation, and many of the root causes of the conflict remained.

3. The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission

A TRC was first proposed in 2000, at the height of the Tensions, by the SICA Peace Committee, which saw it as a potential means to "build national unity" through truth-telling, reconciliation, and justice or amnesty processes (SICA 2002, 6). At the time, SICA considered a TRC to be a possible means to halt the ongoing violence and hostilities. Although SICA conducted initial research and consultations to gauge community perceptions of a TRC, with the arrival of RAMSI and its law and order agenda, momentum for a TRC stalled. Without the backing of RAMSI, reconciliation was "crowded off" the policy agenda (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 81).

A change of government in 2006 saw reconciliation put on the policy agenda, and priority given to instruments designed to rebuild peace in the country. In 2008, parliament passed the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act,*

and in 2009 the Commission was officially launched by Desmond Tutu. When the TRC officially began its operations in 2010, RAMSI had been present in the country for over six years. With the tension trials mostly complete, the TRC was uniquely geared towards nation-building rather than accountability (Harris Rimmer 2010, 2); in fact, according to the Act, the Commission was not intended to affect criminal proceedings (articles 7 and 20), but its object was "to promote national unity and reconciliation" (article 5.1). Sofia Macher, the Commission's deputy chair, explained in 2009 that the TRC was above all to facilitate a "consensual collective memory" of the past (cited in Hayner 2011, 71).

Initial planning documents of the Solomon Islands TRC stressed the importance of reflecting the country's "unique situation" (MNURP 2008, 13) and of "looking into developing sensitivities to traditional and grassroots practices and build these to achieve meaningful post-conflict reconstruction that is sustainable" (14). While public consultations in anticipation of the TRC received a positive response, these were conducted in 2002–2003, prior to and just after RAMSI's arrival, while the conflict was continuing and the parties to the conflict had not yet been disarmed. The format of the TRC was not widely debated, and once it was officially introduced, its establishment and implementation were rushed. With the benefit of hindsight, there are many modifications that could have been made to its design to adapt it to local conditions. For example, the very act of asking about the conflict was largely incongruent with local kastom, as a statement taker explained to me:

> Actually, statement taking contradicts some of our culture in Solomon Islands […] Here, what you find is that anything in the past from a long time ago, people like to forget and don't want to talk about it. They'll say, "Oh, it's finished". In the area I worked in, I found that the statement takers always came across a challenge where the people say "what are you doing with what we tell you?" Because it's part of their tradition and culture where if you would like to talk about something which they have forgotten you have to put in place something. Traditionally you would use pigs or money, we call it a *chupu* [a form of compensation in Guadalcanal]. You must do that before you ask questions from a long time ago. So it's really contradicting our people, to go and dig and talk about something that's already past.

Indeed, while there was local demand for the TRC, the truth commission model reflected an approach to reconciliation that is incongruent with Solomon Islands cultures. The TRC was initiated locally and implemented through an act of parliament. The overwhelming majority of the staff were Solomon Islanders. Yet the transitional justice discourse from which the idea of a TRC emerged was foreign to the country. The Commission was mostly funded by international and regional organisations, namely the European Union, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Australian and New Zealand governments' foreign aid agencies, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). The organisational structure and reporting systems of the TRC reflected Western forms of governance. Its agenda was underpinned by Christian and external notions of peace and reconciliation, with little more than a token commitment to *kastom* and indigenous reconciliation practices.

4. Reconciliation in Local Context

In Solomon Islands *kastom,* reconciliation refers to a process whereby the ongoing ramifications of conflict, such as retribution or payback, are extinguished so that relationships can be restored. Reconciliation and compensation are inseparable when brokering peace, as compensation is aimed at stopping the conflict to allow reconciliation to occur (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). The payment of compensation is not an admission of guilt, nor a monetary compensation equivalent to the loss or damage done, but an acknowledgment that the aggrieved party was wronged. The person who provides the compensation may not be the wrongdoer, but could be a representative (such as a father, uncle or chief) who can help rectify the situation for the aggrieved party. Often the aggrieved party will provide something in return to indicate acceptance and reconciliation, and the gifts will be distributed within the family and community to signify a resolution.

After a matter has been dealt with in this way, the wrong usually cannot be spoken of again publicly, nor can it be used to justify any retribution or payback. While reconciliation induces public silence about the matter, this does not mean it has been forgiven or forgotten, nor that justice (as understood locally) has been neglected. It is a pragmatic approach that allows those involved in the conflict to move on, and facilitates the "restoration of balance in order to ensure the sustainability of the society" (Ginty 2008, 148). The parties involved might not necessarily become friends, but they are once more able to co-exist peacefully.[3]

In a local context where the term "reconciliation" refers to fairly specific processes of exchange, its use in the title of the TRC suggested to Solomon Islanders that the Commission would facilitate compensation or reconciliation processes as understood locally. Statement takers and TRC researchers frequently mentioned how communities were unaware and suspicious of the TRC's purpose, aims and mandate. In impromptu community meetings hosted on arrival of the statement takers, a common question asked was: "What will you do with our stories?" One statement taker told me:

> The men ask lots of questions. What are you [the TRC] going to do after this? What is the government going to do for us? It's no good if you come and waste our time to take our stories and then you all benefit from what we've given you.

Although the TRC acted independently from the government, many Solomon Islanders perceived it as an arm of the state – which had been a party to the conflict. They felt they had been wronged by the state and were therefore entitled to compensation from the state. Many villagers expressed anger and frustration at statement takers, because they supposedly made money from collecting stories of suffering. One TRC researcher told me how one chief said to him angrily: "You, the government pays you. Us, the government doesn't pay us." One interviewee said that the state was only interested in people's lives outside of

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3 I would like to thank Bishop Terry Brown for a stimulating discussion about reconciliation and compensation.

Honiara when it wanted to extract something, be it resources, knowledge or, in this case, stories.

In order to encourage Solomon Islanders to participate in the truth-seeking activities, staff explained that the TRC would compile a final report, including recommendations for future policy and reforms, and provide it to the government. Many Solomon Islanders would not have participated in the process if they had not thought that by giving statements to the TRC they were contributing to an exchange, and that they would therefore in turn be the beneficiaries of government policies that addressed the issues raised in their stories of conflict and suffering. Arguably, the legislation that created the basis for the TRC provided for such an exchange.[4]

5. Cultural Limitations of Truth-telling

Truth-telling and truth-seeking are increasingly viewed as essential components of contemporary peacebuilding. However, whether the reliance on both components is justified is a matter of debate (Mendeloff 2004; Tepperman 2002). David Mendeloff considers the range of claims for peacebuilding made by advocates of truth-telling and concludes that they "rest far more on faith than on sound logic or empirical evidence" (2004, 356). Truth-seeking is often represented as vital for peacebuilding, through the metaphor of cleaning a wound to allow it to heal and avoid infection (Hayner 2011, 145), however "it remains unclear how significant it is" (Mendeloff 2004, 356). At the official opening of the Solomon Islands TRC, Desmond Tutu said: "to achieve lasting peace requires courage […] what you are doing is opening old wounds and applying a new potent medicine that would heal the wound" (Solomon Times 2010). The Chair of the TRC, Father Sam Ata, echoed this sentiment many times, saying for example, "definitely it will open old wounds, it's good to deal with those old wounds and get them healed" (Australia Network News 2010). While the imagery is effective and the deal promising, the relationship between truth-telling and

peacebuilding is elusive: the assumptions underlying the purported benefits of truth-seeking may not hold in a Melanesian context.

On the positive side, many interviewees agreed that documentation of the truth was a worthwhile outcome of the TRC. While there was no widespread policy of secrecy or suppression of information during the Tensions, the history of the conflict is not widely known. This is due to a range of factors, including the Solomon Islands' ethnic diversity, the isolation of some of the most affected communities, the fear instilled in many victims, and cultural practices of shame and silence that may prohibit the disclosure of crimes such as sexual violence. There remains widespread confusion about how and why the conflict started, and about its root causes. Although documenting the historical narrative was considered a constructive outcome, the potential benefit it offers depends on both how the information is sourced and how it is utilised.

In contrast to this positive view of truth-seeking, statement takers frequently considered truth-telling incompatible with local *kastom*. One statement taker from Guadalcanal likened statement taking to *asimabulu*, a vernacular term that refers to talking about serious matters from the past (such as death), or literally, digging up rotten and smelly things, and implied that *kastom* must be followed if this is to be done sensitively and appropriately:

> So if you want to do this *asimabulu*, you must do "red money" [shell money of traditional value often used in *kastom* and as compensation] to revive the case. For the TRC, in Guadalcanal, this is what we are doing – we are doing *asimabulu*. And people are only willing to participate because they are looking forward to the reparation [from the government].
>
> (Interview with TRC statement taker)

Opening the wound, or digging up the past, without respecting cultural protocols risks causing offence and disturbing the tentative peace that has been achieved thus far.

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4 According to Article 16 of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2008,* a report must be submitted to the prime minister once the Commission has made recommendations concerning the measures needed to achieve its object "of providing an impartial historical record, preventing the repetition of the violations or abuses suffered, addressing impunity, responding to the needs of victims and promoting healing and reconciliation." Article 17 stipulates that upon receiving the report, the prime minister must table it in parliament and that it must be made available to the public. The Act obliges the government to implement the report's recommendations "as far as practicable".

It is important that culture is respected, *kastom* is followed, and the truth is used as a means to an end, to secure reconciliation or to provide evidence in support of the TRC's recommendations. There is little value in truth as an end in itself for the purpose of reconciliation.

Silence and testimony both carry risks in post-conflict contexts (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 14). In post-conflict Solomon Islands, villagers often chose to avoid confrontation, maintain relationships, and ensure security and safety. Women often chose to remain silent for cultural and pragmatic reasons. Writing about women and the South African TRC, Fiona Ross explains how such silence can be a sign of courage:

> In contexts in which women are often blamed for the harm they experience, especially when that harm is sexual, it ought not be surprising that many would prefer not to speak, or find themselves unable to do so, particularly when doing so incriminates not just another individual, but a set of cultural assumptions and the social forms that they shape. It takes courage both to speak of harms done and to be silent in their face and aftermath.

> (Ross 2010, 81)

This sentiment was also echoed in the joint women's submission to the Solomon Islands TRC: "[F]or women, sometimes their silence is louder, stronger, and safer than anything they say out loud because of the risks involved in telling their stories" (Fangalasuu et al. 2011, 13). In Solomon Islands, strong cultural taboos limit women's ability to discuss rape or sexual experiences. Doing so would contravene cultural practices and risk further violence, shame or other repercussions. The women's submission suggests that "truth-telling often separates families, communities, and individuals. This is why so often truth is strategically concealed" (Fangalasuu et al. 2011, 13). The cultural impetus for choosing silence is heightened by the very tangible issue of physical safety and security. A report on truth commissions by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) suggests that statement taking be designed to allow victims to recount their experiences in a supportive and safe environment (2006, 17). In small and highly networked societies, such as Solomon Islands, where anonymity is virtually impossible, villages are very public spaces, and ensuring privacy and a

"supportive and safe environment" is extremely difficult. For example, along the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, a hot spot of the conflict, villages are densely populated with houses built close to one another. Efforts to ensure privacy involved finding a private verandah or similar location, and talking in hushed tones. Even so, community members could easily identify who had spoken to the TRC.

Proponents of truth-telling draw on Western psychotherapeutic models to suggest that TRCs are cathartic for participants: "[S]imply giving victims and witnesses a chance to tell their stories to an official commission […] can help them regain their dignity and begin to recover" (Hayner 2011, 146). As Priscilla Hayner points out, truth commissions offer victims not long-term therapy but a one-time opportunity to tell their story (2011, 147); this is a starkly different process from that involving a therapist and patient (Mendeloff 2004, 363–65). Not only are formal therapy and testifying different processes, but arguably neither is cathartic in Melanesia. The model of cathartic truth-telling is embedded in Western culture, shaped by principles of psychotherapy. Fiona Ross highlights its limitations, arguing in the South African context that "it is not necessarily a universal or transhistorical model and does not take account of the diversity of ways in which experience is articulated or otherwise made known and addressed" (2010, 82). In Solomon Islands, many statement takers encountered resistance to the cathartic understanding of truth-telling; as one noted: "This idea that people can tell their stories and then they feel free […] I think in Melanesian culture, that doesn't really work. Unless there is some kind of compensation. Most people did not want to give their statement."

The TRC attempted to provide psychological support to those who testified at public hearings. It paid for their accommodation in Honiara for up to a month to prepare for, and debrief from, testifying, and provided a counselling service. Ongoing support was not offered, however, and counselling was only available to those who testified at public hearings. While the effort to offer counselling in a country with almost no psychological services was commendable, it was premised on a foreign understanding of psychosocial support. In Solomon Islands, formal

psychological counselling may not be culturally appropriate. Instead, as in many societies globally, the ideal source of support may be community organisations, churches, traditional healers, or extended family and friends (Hayner 2011, 157).

In Solomon Islands, personal and political spheres are intertwined, and many TRC staff members and stakeholders expressed concern that their personal reputations had been damaged. One statement taker told me:

> In the community where I come from, they say the TRC is a failure, and that those of us who worked at the TRC are con men. Even now when I come across people who I met during statement taking, they ask me, "When will something happen?" And I don't know what to tell them […] So when I get called a con man, I don't feel good. But it's beyond my capacity. So if I meet a boss of the TRC on the street, I try and ask them about the progress of the TRC. And they say that the report has been submitted to parliament and they don't know what will happen now.

Many were embarrassed or hesitant to revisit villages where they had collected testimonies for the TRC. Statement takers talked about the personal responsibility they felt towards those who provided statements in the understanding that the government would consider the final report and act on its recommendations.

6. Realising the Potential of the Solomon Islands TRC

Local memory practices and culturally embedded practices of managing conflict and wrong-doings are entrenched in community life and *kastom*. The Tensions, however, provided a new challenge to dispute management, justice mechanisms and peacebuilding practices. There were some successful, localised efforts to build peace, for example by Women for Peace (Pollard 2000; Paina 2000) and local church organisations such as the Melanesian Brotherhood (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 23–29). However, attempts to formalise traditional reconciliation were corrupted and manipulated because the indigenous approach to managing conflict was inverted: compensation was offered as an incentive for peace rather than a genuine exchange for reconciliation (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). This led to a monetisation of the reconciliation process and fraudulent claims to, and corruption of, compensation payments (Fraenkel 2004).

Some ideas which underpin the common TRC model fit well with Melanesian cultures. These include conducting a process dedicated to reconciliation, bringing people together to share stories, and promoting healing and restoration of balance in communities. Other ideas, particularly the cathartic value of truth-telling, are not compatible, and are potentially detrimental to the goals of peacebuilding. A TRC is capable of facilitating reconciliation both at the national and the local level. At the national level, the provision of testimony in exchange for the implementation of government recommendations potentially accords with a Melanesian style of conflict management whereby symbolic restitution is made in recognition of harm suffered. Depending on how the government responds to the final report, this may still happen. At the local level, the most important context for reconciliation in Solomon Islands is individuals, families and communities. Ceremonies between political leaders or chiefs will not restore the inter-personal relationships between those who harmed each other during the conflict. On the other hand, providing spaces for victims, ex-militants, and others involved in conflict to talk about or document their experiences, and bringing people together under the banner of reconciliation, has enormous potential benefits in the Solomon Islands context.

The TRC's use of the term "reconciliation" required clarification. Who were the intended beneficiaries of the proposed reconciliation, and who was to be reconciled? In Melanesia, reconciliation refers to an inter-personal process between individuals, families or communities involved in a dispute. The Solomon Islands TRC, however, did not initiate or host processes of inter-personal reconciliation between those involved in disputes, although in the minds of many Solomon Islanders who worked for the TRC, this was how reconciliation should have occurred. One senior TRC staff member told me:

> The TRC never came up with a plan on how they could establish a process of reconciliation […] In my view it would be based on what exists here. *Kastom* reconciliation, some ideas from there, and also the church. You could bring the two together and work something out from both.

Talking about past conflict or matters that have been reconciled is generally taboo unless it is accompanied by

certain social protocols or *kastom*. Therefore the strength of a TRC in Solomon Islands as a tool for peacebuilding on a national level does not lie in cathartic story-telling, furnishing a historical narrative of the conflict or documenting human rights abuses, but rather in the potential for sanctioning discussions under the banner of reconciliation on an inter-personal level, and the linkages with action and justice that the final report potentially offers at a national level. From the outset, those advocating for a TRC were aware that recommendations alone were not enough:

> From the experiences of other transitional societies, it is critical to the long term success of the peace process that the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission be mandatory on the government for implementation.

> (SICA 2002, 4)

In Solomon Islands, reconciliation entails a commitment to action, process and symbolic restitution for the victim and their family and community. Action usually encompasses a combination of meetings, talks, feasts and the exchange of compensation. This local conception of reconciliation offers potential space for instruments such as truth commissions; as one TRC manager put it: "Truth-telling can be beneficial in certain circumstances. It can initiate a process maybe, but it depends much more on what comes after."

7. Conclusion

Memory and justice practices in Solomon Islands do not allow for a sharp line to be drawn between the past and the future in the name of transitional justice or nation-building. Local memory and justice practices are instead a process of ongoing, culturally embedded memes, which may include the state, the churches or *kastom,* to satisfy the needs of all participants in the conflict. Once each rift has been healed, it earns silence; although not forgotten, the wrongdoing is not to be used to justify further retribution or payback.

With a broad and ambitious mandate to "promote national unity and reconciliation", and a title that gestured towards both truth and reconciliation without defining either, the Solomon Islands TRC began with expectations that could never be met. Yet if, as James McAdams posits, TRCs and

transitional justice are viewed as "a *process* in which the outcome is uncertain but the undertaking is valued in itself" (2011, 312), then there is potential for peacebuilding. While sharing stories, memory and truth are key components of truth commissions and reconciliation, "healing depends to a significant extent on how we respond to those stories" (Charles Villa-Vicencio, cited in Andrews 2003, 47).

The official acknowledgement of the final report and a government commitment to implementing the TRC's recommendations were integral to the public's participation and its effectiveness as a peacebuilding tool. Justice and memory practices involve "reconstructing the world of the living" (Kent 2011, 444). The TRC's programs were an opportunity for those affected by the conflict to exhibit the presence of the past in the present, and lobby for reparation and recognition of the effects of ongoing injustices.

The TRC was a means through which the government could fulfil its obligations as party to an exchange, acknowledge the stories shared with the Commission, and offer compensation to restore the pre-conflict balance in the communities. Compensation, in this regard, could take the form of reparations as recommended in the final report, exhumations, memorials, rehabilitation or institutional reforms. Not releasing the report or enacting its recommendations risks dishonouring those who have participated in the process, many of whom already feel that they suffered an injustice at the hands of the state during the conflict.

When truth commissions and transitional justice are operated as local, open-ended, indigenous processes, rather than geared towards a specific outcome, they can be congruent with Melanesian beliefs. As a process-oriented mechanism, the TRC would be judged not on whether it achieves truth or reconciliation, but whether it can create the space for this to occur in a way that is organic to the context – a dynamic, modern Pacific society with cultural traditions that involve Christianity and *kastom* as well as institutions of the state. Otherwise, the search for truth and justice will be far less satisfying than people hope and the seductive discourse of transitional justice will serve only to raise impossible expectations.

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