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**SINCE THE 'ETHNIC TENSION':  
PROPHECY AND POLITICAL PROCESS IN SOUTHEAST  
SOLOMON ISLANDS**

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## **Abstract**

Since the civil conflict known as the ‘ethnic tension’ disrupted Solomon Islands between 1998 and 2003, many people on Makira have taken a renewed interest in and have creatively elaborated a variety of traditions and ideas about their island. These traditions and ideas include: rumours that Makira contains a secret and preternaturally powerful subterranean army base, claims that this ‘underground army’ owes its extraordinary capacities to the dwarf-like *kakamora* of local folklore who are said to be the original inhabitants of the island, speculations that the deceased former Prime Minister Solomon S. Mamaloni (1943-2000) is still alive and readying the army to lead Makira to statehood and prosperity, and prophecies that this will inaugurate the end times in accordance with a divine plan. Based on anthropological and archival research conducted in 1992-93, 2003, and 2006, this talk will examine the history of these ideas and their impact on local political campaigns and government reform initiatives on Makira.

## **Introduction: the ‘Tension’ in and as ethnogenesis**

First, let me orient you to the nation-state of Solomon Islands, the geo-political context I will be talking about in this lecture. As many of you know, Solomon Islands is a former British Protectorate that gained independence in 1978. The Solomons archipelago lies northeast of Australia and shares its northern border with Papua New Guinea. Since 1992 I have been conducting ethnographic field research on the island of Makira – the southern-most large island in the archipelago. Makira is now part of what is known as Makira/Ulawa Province, with a total population between forty and forty-one thousand (at the last census in 2009), and a provincial centre located on the north coast at Kirakira. I have worked primarily in the linguistically-defined area called Arosi at the northwest end of the island, but also in Kirakira and in the national capital, Honiara, on the neighbouring island of Guadalcanal. Today, the religion of Makira is Christianity in a variety of forms. In Arosi, villages on the north coast have been predominantly Anglican since the nineteenth century, while villages on the west and south coasts have adhered mainly to the South Sea Evangelical Church (formerly

Mission) since roughly the 1920s. A small minority of villages have adopted Seventh-day Adventism.

Between 1998 and 2003, Solomon Islands was administratively disabled and socially fractured by a civil conflict now commonly referred to as ‘the Tension’. At the heart of this crisis were long-standing disputes between people on the island of Guadalcanal who see themselves as customary land owners and people they see as usurpers – in particular, economic migrants from the island of Malaita. These disputes escalated from simmering hostilities and occasional violence to armed clashes, mainly in and around Honiara. The chief combatants to emerge were Guadalcanal militias bent on expelling Malaitans from their island and Malaitan militias seeking control of Honiara and national government in the name of self-defence and the good of the country. In 2003 the Australian government coordinated an international intervention known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in an effort to stabilize what it saw as a ‘failed state’ vulnerable to terrorist infiltration. This mission, known by the acronym RAMSI, remains an ongoing support, in partnership with the Solomon Islands government, although it is currently in a transition phase preparing for withdrawal.<sup>1</sup>

My research has contributed to understandings of how this conflict both arose within and has further promoted the formation of ethnic identities and micro-nationalisms in Solomon Islands. The conflict was not caused by primordial ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ animosities – although some popular media presented it in those terms at the time. Rather, it was a recent development in the long colonial – and now post-

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<sup>1</sup> To date, major works on the Tension and the RAMSI intervention, include, M. G. Allen, *Greed and Grievance: Ex-Militants’ Perspectives on the Conflict in Solomon Islands, 1998-2003* (Honolulu 2013); S. Dinnen and S. Firth (eds), *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra 2008); J. Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands* (Canberra 2004); C. R. Moore, *Happy Isles in Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in Solomon Islands, 1998-2004* (Canberra 2004).

colonial – production of regional and insular-scale social, political, and cultural identities.

Solomon Islands, like many island groups in the Pacific, comprises a rich plurality of small-scale communities with distinctive languages and local customs. According to oral traditions and the earliest ethnographic accounts, in pre-colonial times these communities were not isomorphic with any of the large islands, but engaged in networks of exchange, trade, and conflict that linked parts of some islands with parts of others and created multi-island constellations.

Since the mid nineteenth century, however, missionary and ecclesiastical rationalizations of space, colonial administrative divisions, and post-independence provincial organization have all tended to reify particular islands and island groups. Additionally, early ethnological attempts to classify the inhabitants of each island in terms of somatic and psychological types have intersected with Islanders' own perceptions of differences among themselves to produce current island- and region-specific stereotypes. The attitudes expressed, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by European labour recruiters and missionaries have also fostered a gendered typology according to which the people of Malaita are masculinized as big, strong, warlike, and competitive, while the people of other islands are feminized as small, weak, timid, and indolent.<sup>2</sup>

This is to say that the processes which have led up to and which continue to shape the present Solomon Islands nation-state have been precipitating the newly ethnicized geo-political units that the nation-state now strives to unite. Almost inevitably, therefore, the project of unification has, from its pre-independence

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<sup>2</sup> M. W. Scott, 'The Matter of Makira: Colonialism, Competition, and the Production of Gendered Peoples in Contemporary Solomon Islands and Medieval Britain', *History and Anthropology*, 23:1 (2012), 115-148; see also, T. T. Kabutaulaka, 'Beyond Ethnicity: The Political Economy of the Guadalcanal Crisis in Solomon Islands', State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Discussion Paper 01/1, Australian National University, Canberra.

inception, generated counter-projects of micro-nationalism that have taken forms such as regional autonomy movements, secessionist threats, and, most recently, so-called ‘ethnic tension’.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the ways in which the Tension of 1998 to 2003 contributed to these processes for the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita are readily perceptible. During the crisis, for example, the militias that emerged came to represent – both to themselves and one another – these two islands as wholes and their populations as distinct socio-cultural entities. This was reflected in and promoted by the names they chose for themselves. Most prominent among these were the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, the Isatabu Freedom Movement (Isatabu being a local name for Guadalcanal), the Malaita Eagle Force, and the Guadalcanal Liberation Front. It is widely acknowledged that the crisis was multi-causal and impinged on people in many parts of the country. Yet, owing in part to the prominence of these militias, in the retrospective imaginations of many Solomon Islanders and international commentators alike, the Tension is now thought of as having been chiefly a conflict between Malaitans as a category and Guales – to employ the relatively new ethnonym for the people of Guadalcanal.

Perhaps less evident, however, are the ways in which the Tension has similarly contributed to the already incipient formation of other insular and regional identities in places, and among people, not directly involved in the conflict. When, in June of 2000, members of the Malaita Eagle Force and the Royal Solomon Islands Police took control of Honiara and forced the resignation of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa‘alu, five out of the nine existing provinces, including Makira/Ulawa, distanced themselves from central government by demanding greater autonomy or

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. Dureau, ‘Decreed affinities: Nationhood and the Western Solomon Islands’, *Journal of Pacific History* 33:2 (1998), 197-220.

independence. In response, subsequent national governments have sought to contain such initiatives by expediting previously proposed plans to implement a federal system with various forms of devolved and neo-traditional government. Despite these efforts, in several provinces, aspirations for independence have remained strong, well after the disruption of the Tension.

Accordingly, the aim of my lecture is to give an anthropologist's account of how these processes of what social scientists call ethnogenesis – the formation of ethnic identities – have been developing among the Solomon Islanders I know best, the Arosi of Makira. Since the height of the Tension, people in Arosi have been drawing on elements of their ancestral traditions, Christianity, and recent historical events to collectively conceptualize what they refer to as *bahai nai ano*, 'the underground'. Throughout Arosi this phrase immediately connotes the idea that, inside Makira, there is a secret high-tech urban-military complex that is home to a preternaturally powerful underground army. As I will show, this idea of the underground army has become, for some Arosi and other Makirans as well, a powerful icon of Makira and an expression of hopes for the fulfilment of a special regional, global, or even cosmic Makiran destiny. The figure of the underground has come to the fore both as a result of and as a stimulus to new Arosi experiences and understandings of what it means to be Makiran. As an image of the hope that Makira – and Makirans – are endowed with intrinsic but hidden power, the underground is furthermore informing the ways in which some people are participating in political processes and seeking to reconfigure the nation-state.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also, M. W. Scott, 'The Makiran Underground Army: *Kastom* Mysticism and Ontology Politics in Southeast Solomon Islands', in E. Hviding and K. M. Rio (eds), *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific* (Wantage 2011), 195-222; idem, 'Matter of Makira'; idem, "'Heaven on Earth" or Satan's "Base" in the Pacific?: Internal Christian Politics in the Dialogic Construction of the Makiran Underground Army', in M. Tomlinson and D. McDougall (eds), *Christian Politics in Oceania* (Oxford 2013), 49-77.

Just last year, political scientist Matthew G. Allen published an important new book on the Tension, entitled *Greed and Grievance*, based on interviews with ex-militants. In this monograph, Allen rejects the notion, advanced by the media, think tanks, and some academics, that the young men who joined the opposing militant groups were driven primarily by greed and criminality. Without denying these factors, he argues that the motives of the militants can be understood only with reference to, what he terms, ‘particular cultural-political-ecological-historical nexuses’.<sup>5</sup> Unpacking what he means by this, Allen explains that the men he interviewed understood their involvement in the conflict in terms of their ‘conceptions of history and the places of their respective “peoples” in the historical processes of colonization, development, and nation building’.<sup>6</sup>

Anthropologists, such as myself, likewise seek to attend to the many interrelated aspects of the contexts we study, but we regard it as our special remit to shed light on the socio-cultural element within such complex nexuses. By means of the ethnographic method – that is, months of sustained residence with a research population, during which we learn the local language, participate in people’s daily lives, and attempt to understand the guiding assumptions that inform their actions – we seek to bring nuance and depth to analyses of broader social phenomena, like the Tension. This is what I hope my account of the post-Tension efflorescence of stories about the Makiran underground will do – add nuance and depth to an understanding of the Tension as itself part of the even broader phenomenon of ethnogenesis in Solomon Islands today.

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<sup>5</sup> Allen, *Greed and Grievance*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

### **What Arosi are saying about the Makiran underground**

With this framework in view, I turn now to a fuller exposition of the kinds of things people say about the underground. I begin with an example of how talk about the underground mirrors the way in which some people expect the army itself to behave: talk about it tends to emerge during times of uncertainty or transition, but recedes back underground during periods of relative regularity. Thus, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August in 2007, the following newsbrief appeared in the *Solomon Times Online* with the headline: ‘Kirakira Residents Awaiting “Mystery Army”’.

It has been reported that the residents of Kira Kira town have been waiting, for the past few days, for the appearance of a platoon believed to be a secret army trained in the jungles of Makira by specialized Western military personnels. ... The source from Kira Kira stated that the belief of a secret provincial army has been actively promoted by senior citizens of the provincial town, including Provincial Assembly Members ... Makira Ulawa Province has been, over the past few years, calling for independence from the rest of Solomon Islands. It is still unclear whether this idea of a secret army has anything to do with its desire to secede ... [R]esidents are eagerly anticipating the arrival of the secret platoon, which is said to be on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August. The 17<sup>th</sup> of August is also the Province’s ‘Chief’s Empowerment Day’.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, there is a parallelism between such talk about a ‘mystery army’ on Makira and the formation, during the Tension, of militant groups identified with specific islands. But, it would be an oversimplification, I think, to reduce ideas about

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<sup>7</sup> R. Sao, ‘Kira Kira residents awaiting “mystery army”’, *Solomon Times Online*, 4 Aug. 2007. Available at <http://www.solomontimes.com/news.aspx?nwID=477> (accessed 4 Aug. 2007).



‘a secret provincial army’ on Makira to either a collective wish or a strategic ruse that Makira too harbours its own militia, equal to or greater than those involved in the violence on Guadalcanal.

The idea that Makira is the site of a secret subterranean domain draws on models older than groups like the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force. In its fully militarised form, this figure of the notion that a prodigious power somehow inheres within the island seems to have originated in the context of Maasina Rule, also known as Marching Rule. This was a post-World War II social and political movement prevalent in the central and southeast Solomons between 1946 and 1952. On Makira, Maasina Rule had entailed rumours that Americans fighting in the Pacific had hollowed out the core of Makira and constructed an underground ‘town’ stocked with an abundance of manufactured goods. These Americans, according to some Arosi accounts, were not foreigners but the descendants of Makiran women taken away by Euro-American explorers and labour traders in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. During Maasina Rule, some Arosi had hoped that these American kinsmen would emerge from the underground ‘town’ and assist Islanders to end British rule and achieve development and prosperity.<sup>8</sup>

When I first conducted field work in Arosi in the early 1990s, most people had dismissed these older rumours of an underground ‘town’ as having been misguided. I was surprised, therefore, when I returned in 2003 to find many people eager to discuss fresh rumours of what they termed a ‘security’ force stationed in a cavern beneath Makira. Alleged evidence of its activities included: nightly sorties over Makira made by small low-flying aircraft between 1999 and 2002; glimpses in the bush and at cliffs

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<sup>8</sup> For a recent study of Maasina Rule on Malaita, see D. W. Akin, *Colonialism, Maasina Rule, and the Origins of Malaitan Kastom* (Honolulu 2013); for an account of the movement on Makira, see M. W. Scott, *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands* (Durham, NC 2007), 105-129.

above coastal caves of both white and unknown black people in military uniforms; eerie lights coming from offshore and under the sea; passing submarines – some camouflaged as large marine animals – and a mysterious ship bearing the word ‘Motherland’ that seemed to be keeping the island under surveillance.

All of these phenomena were furthermore said to seem to come and go from the area known as Rohu at the northwest end of Makira. Geologically, this area of coastline is characterized by an extensive uplifted and flat-topped limestone escarpment with seaward facing terraces. The plateau and faces of these reefal cliffs are pitted with numerous sinkholes, crevices, and caverns, and there are several gracefully arched sea-level marine grottos. Owing, in part, to these striking features, this area has acquired a local reputation as an extraordinary place. A kind of contemporary folklore has it that some people, when approaching this coastline from Guadalcanal, have seen what looks like a city shining along the shore, while others, passing by in boats, have peered inside coastal caves and seen trucks criss-crossing the illuminated roadways of a subterranean urban complex.

With a view to collecting further data about these ideas, I secured funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and returned to Solomon Islands in 2006 for seven months of village-based fieldwork and two months of urban and archival research.<sup>9</sup> For this funded project, I lived and worked with many rural people engaged primarily in subsistence gardening, but also village-based entrepreneurs, politicians, civil servants, police, business leaders, teachers, university students, clergy, and members of religious orders. What I accumulated is a wealth of diversely positioned – sometimes detailed, sometimes sketchy; sometimes deeply serious,

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<sup>9</sup> M. W. Scott, ‘The Strong Island: Myth Making and Ethnogenesis in a Pacific Nation-State’, ESRC Large Grant RES-000-23-1170.

sometimes humorous; sometimes convinced, sometimes sceptical; but most often just plain perplexed – questions, stories, and speculations about the Makiran underground.

Based on interviews, informal conversations, passing remarks, and jokes I shared with numerous Arosi men, women, and children, I want now to highlight seven key ideas that I found to be consistently connected with the notion of the underground.

One: the first idea is that the underground army works in league with dwarf-like creatures known as *kakamora*. Arosi folktales and purported eyewitness testimonies describe *kakamora* as small, hairy quasi-humans. Said to be the original inhabitants of the island, *kakamora* reputedly live in caves and sinkholes, possess incredible physical strength and keen senses, and enjoy all-knowing wisdom. Some traditional narratives suggest a link between *kakamora* and the preservation of the material integrity of Makira. In one account they prop up the western end of the island when it is about to sink; in another they construct a sea wall to prevent inundation. Brought into relationship with renewed rumours about an underground world, however, these folklore motifs appear to be undergoing transformation. Now it is said that the *kakamora* have taught the underground army how to make advanced superhuman technology and have endowed the army with their marvellous attributes, such as omniscience, the ability to move instantaneously from one place to another, and the power of invisibility.<sup>10</sup>

Two: the underground army itself is chiefly composed of white Americans, but some people with whom I worked suggested that there might also be whites from elsewhere, and also Solomon Islanders. It should be noted that army personnel are conceptualized as fully alive human beings; they are not thought of as ancestral or

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<sup>10</sup> M. W. Scott, 'Collecting Makira: *Kakamora* Stones, Shrine Stones, and the Grounds for Things in Arosi', in B. Burt and L. Bolton (eds), *The Things We Value: Culture and History in Solomon Islands* (Canon Pyon 2014) 68-79.

other kinds of spirits, although they are closely associated with the *kakamora*. Exactly who the white people in the underground might be, and how they came to be in control of the extraordinary powers and valuable resources thought to lie hidden in the island is a question Arosi debate in their own minds. Some appeal to the theory, dating back to Maasina Rule, that the underground Americans are the returned descendants of Makiran women and are, therefore, true Makirans. Others speculate that the underground whites have become ‘Makiranzed’, as one man put it, through their association with the *kakamora*.

Three: the *kakamora* and the army practice and preserve an ancient original Makiran language and custom. In social life above ground, however, the original Makiran language and custom have become corrupted by a history of what is often termed ‘mixing’ with people from elsewhere.

Four: despite this ‘mixing’, the moral force of this original custom is still evident in the essential qualities of true Makirans. True Makirans are said to be inherently quiet, gentle, and generous, but endowed with a deep inner fortitude that will show out – perhaps in uncanny ways – if others try to abuse them.

Five: in accordance with a divine plan, the underground army is working covertly to aggravate ethnic tension, break up the Solomon Islands nation-state, and lead Makira to regional dominance and independence, founded on the restoration of the ancient custom of the *kakamora*. When this happens, wealth and development will follow.

Six: messages hidden in the Bible, encrypted in traditional Arosi narratives, and inscribed in the landscape in the form of symbolic rocks and coral formations predict that Makira will take centre stage, not only in future regional political transformations, but also in the end times. According to these messages, the army

will establish Makira as the site of a millennial ‘paradise regained’ prior to the final divine resolution of history.

And, finally, seven: another idea integral to the lore of the underground concerns Solomon Mamaloni, the Arosi-born three-times Solomon Islands Prime Minister, who died in January 2000. Many people discuss and debate rumours that Mamaloni is still alive and working with the underground. During his years in government, some people say, Mamaloni diverted weapons and money to the underground and is now waiting to lead the army out to establish Makiran autonomy.

In retrospect, I ought not to have been surprised by these reframings of the idea of the underground. In many respects, they make perfect Arosi sense as responses to the Tension. As onlookers to the events of 1998 to 2003, my Makiran consultants have tended to sympathise with Guadalcanal land claimants and to stereotype Malaitans negatively as inherently aggressive. With the disruption of central government services and the breakdown of law and order that occurred during the Tension, many Arosi experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability to the kinds of encroachments and depredations they believed Malaitans were perpetrating nearby on Guadalcanal and might soon bring to Makira. In this context, the old idea of an American-built underground realm acquired new relevance and appeal as a security force, the purpose of which is to protect Makira from precisely this type of threat.

But the Maasina Rule era rumour of a modern American ‘town’ flourishing inside the island is not the only figure of power in the land informing current elaborations of the Makiran underground army. Equally important are Arosi assumptions about ancestral powers and their relationship to matrilineal land. Although they are Christians, many Arosi continue to regard these powers as moral agents enshrined in the land who will defend the persons and privileges of their

descendants vis-à-vis strangers in their matrilineal territory. Even in the early 1990s some people described these ancestral presences to me in military or para-military terms, explaining that they operate like radar systems or immigration officers to police their territories and protect their descendants from potentially usurping or violating encroachments.<sup>11</sup> Now, since the time of the Tension, it is as if some Arosi are re-imagining the underground ‘town’ of Maasina Rule and its inhabitants as analogous to these powers, but at the scale of the island as a whole rather than a specific lineage territory.

### **The Makiran underground in politics**

As a compelling figure of Makira – and of Makirans themselves – as the bearers of hidden power and destiny, the underground has also been playing a role in people’s engagements with democratic processes. Data I collected about political campaigns, at both the national and provincial levels, were consonant with the claim, quoted earlier, that in 2007, Provincial Assembly Members actively promoted ‘belief’ in a ‘secret army’. I found in my research that some candidates and their supporters – and also some elected officials – were seeking to influence politics in ways that indexed the idea of the underground army.

In April 2000, the West Makira constituency, which is nearly coterminous with Arosi, held a parliamentary by-election to replace Solomon Mamaloni, following his death. In 2003, my Arosi hosts recalled that during this by-election – and again in the December 2001 general election – one particular candidate had been closely associated with the underground army. Although this candidate did not refer overtly to the underground in his campaign speeches, various claims about his connections to

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the ongoing importance of burial shrines and other pre-Christian sacred sites, see Scott, *The Severed Snake*, xxv-xxxii, 163-199.

it circulated widely. Some of his supporters had, for example, likened Mamaloni and the candidate to the biblical figures of Moses and Joshua. The supporters had suggested that, just as Joshua had followed Moses, the candidate would follow Mamaloni and bring Makira out of the crisis of the Tension, which they cast as a period of bondage under Malaitans equivalent to the bondage of Israel in Egypt. If elected the candidate would lead Makira into peaceful prosperity as a Promised Land. Concerning Mamaloni, they said that, while he was in office he had smuggled money and weapons to the underground as a ‘preparation’ for the defence of Makira against Malaitans and as a foundation for development. They intimated, furthermore, that Mamaloni is not really dead but sits enthroned as ‘King Solomon’ at the head of the underground army. They implied that, as Mamaloni’s successor, their candidate would garner the stored wealth of the ‘preparation’ and establish ‘Makira State’ as the ‘Motherland’ from which blessings would flow to the whole Solomons archipelago.

This candidate won the 2000 by-election, but failed to retain his seat in 2001. He then went on to secure election to the Makira/Ulawa Provincial Assembly. In this forum he became one of the main architects of a scheme for the creation and coordination of a complex range of village, ward, and provincial councils, authorities, and programmes – all designed to allow local communities to revive traditional forms of leadership and customary practice. The Chiefs’ Empowerment Day, referred to in the *Solomon Times Online* newsbrief was, in fact, the celebratory inauguration of this parliament-approved scheme.

It was not surprising, therefore, that this newsbrief prompted critical claims – posted to an online platform – that this same politician had been foremost among those Provincial Assembly members said to be promoting ‘belief’ in a secret army. Like many Makirans and other Solomon Islanders, these online critics were eager to

discredit, not only this politician, but the whole notion of the Makiran underground army as delusional, backwards, and unhelpful to the people of Makira in their aspirations for political empowerment and self-determination. Yet, these debunkers notwithstanding, I have found that political innovations – especially those calling for any kind of custom revival or increased regional autonomy – are, for Arosi, always potentially associable with the figure of the underground army. Such innovations can raise speculations that those advocating them are informed by ideas about the underground, or that the army – whether recognized by the authors of such innovations or not – is the hidden cause behind them.

I was resident in Arosi for the national election in April 2006 and discovered that the candidate formerly likened to Joshua was not the only politician associated with rumours of the underground. Additionally, I also found that some voters were reading the platforms of other candidates in terms of their own speculations regarding the underground. But these speculations were not widely discussed. Moreover, they tended to be couched in terms of allegorical correspondences between a given candidate and elements of custom stories or significant Makiran landmarks – such as the caves, cliffs, and rocks at Rohu, which are thought to be linked to the underground. In particular, candidates who campaigned strongly on a platform of custom revitalization were subject to decodings as agents who would – perhaps unwittingly – work to advance the day when the original custom of Makira preserved by the army and the *kakamora* would be resurgent.

Similarly, as the *Solomon Times Online* report indicates, in the run-up to the Chiefs' Empowerment Day, some people engaged intensively with, and contemplated what was, for them, the real possibility that the simple act of installing traditional leaders could summon forth the agents of the underground. The logic behind these



hopes seems to be analogous to that governing some forms of biblical messianism. Just as some messianic hopes involve claims that the messiah will come only after human beings have actively prepared the way by returning to strict observance of God's law, some Makirans seem to regard the raising of custom, especially the empowerment of chiefs, to be the necessary precondition for the epiphany of the army. For these Makirans, the seemingly secular political agendas of devolution, constitutional reform, and legal recognition of customary forms are the incremental realization of a sacred history.

Worryingly, however, a few Arosi suggested to me that these transitions will not be easy. In 2006, one man was quite explicit that he envisages the army coming out in the near future to enforce a return to true Makiran ways, purged of alien influences. There will be what he called 'a little war' within Makira itself aimed at eliminating – not foreign people, he insisted – but foreign ways as the necessary foundation for proper development. He furthermore interpreted various political innovations – such as the then proposed empowerment of neo-traditional chiefs – as signs that these events were beginning to unfold. Another man's vision was even less irenic. He looked for the underground to stage what he called an 'all-out war' against outsiders who might seek to grab land and impose their ways on Makira. He confided that he planned to run for parliament in order to strengthen the position of Makira in the region.

There is no doubt that some people's expectations about the underground are divisive, even apocalyptic. And, it is important to remain aware of this, given that the fears and resentments that caused the Tension at the close of the last century are not easily overcome. In closing, I would like to suggest, however, that the legends of the Makiran underground have positive value and may come to constitute a durable

heritage and medium of expression for Arosi and other Makirans. I would argue that, as a dynamic and fascinating body of oral tradition, accounts of the underground are serving Makirans as something akin to what Prof. Anthony D. Smith, a noted political historian, has described as the ‘cultural resources that provide sacred foundations for the sense of national identity’.<sup>12</sup>

I have found that Arosi do not need to believe in the underground in order to find it meaningful and affirming. The efflorescence of talk and mood of wonder about the underground is producing an object for aesthetic contemplation, a vehicle for affective experience – something like a collective work of art. In my published work, I have called this phenomenon the Matter of Makira, comparing it to what has become known as the Matter of Britain, the famous stories of King Arthur.<sup>13</sup> As an aesthetic production, this Matter of Makira has the power to inspire Makirans to a variety of identity-based projects. For some, it has begun to endow Makira with a special ineffable mystique in which they feel they participate in a privileged way. Some even feel compelled to share this story about themselves with the wider world and contemplate how it might attract visitors from abroad. Among my Arosi hosts there were clearly those who hoped that I might be the vanguard of such a tourist influx and enthusiastically acted as my tour guides on the trail of the pleurably elusive underground.

When I travelled around Arosi I was shown marvellous things. Here is where the chief of the *kakamora* sat down – see his impression on the stone; here is the entrance to a *kakamora* cave; here are the limestone cliffs on which underground personnel are sometimes spotted. Several Arosi gave variant enumerations of what they termed ‘the seven wonders of Makira’. These included an undersea freshwater

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<sup>12</sup> A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford 2003), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, ‘Matter of Makira’.

spring, several distinctive coral formations associated with traditional stories, and the coastal caves at Rohu – all interpreted as prophetic landmarks revealing that the end times will begin in Arosi. I took several boat rides around the northwest end of the island to see some of these formations and to photograph the caves at Rohu – the alleged portals to the underground from which army personnel and submarines are said secretly to come and go. These places are the Tintagel, the Glastonbury, the Stonehenge of Makira – places Arosi see as filled with a mystery they would like to invite others to come and explore.

At the same time, as an object of fun and entertainment, the image of the underground is becoming for some – especially the young – an affectionately ownable trope for Makira. In this regard, it is like the related image of the *kakamora*, which enjoys popularity as the mascot of the Makiran football team.

There are also signs that the idea of the underground has the potential to serve as a resource on which Makirans can draw to claim a voice in setting priorities for their region. In support of this finding I would point to an example drawn from the growing Makiran conservationist movement. Intensive logging is having a dramatic physical and social impact on Makira, and villagers in several areas are responding by forming grass-roots NGOs and articulating environmentalist agendas with reference to Makira as a unique natural entity that it is their right and responsibility to safeguard. This movement affords some confirmation of the hypothesis that – apart from any question of its actual existence – the idea of the underground is imaginatively available for the advancement of Makiran identity. To rally others to the cause of sustainable development of the Rohu plateau, the Arosi West Development Coordination Council opened a 28 March 2007 posting to the website of the Makira Conservation Community Foundation with the following preamble:

Rohu, blessed with various Makira historical tradition and a richness of cultural heritage and stories of legends... the likes of the kakamora, the legendary underground world, mysterious military activities, stories of the island's past engraved on rock so our future generations remember... will only come alive again by conservation mechanisms and tourism development.<sup>14</sup>

The underground, in sum, has begun to render Makira and Makiranness representable, championable, and even – as the authors of this plea plainly hope – marketable to the world.

### **Postlude**

As a postlude I want to anticipate the question: how do things stand today with the underground? It has now been some years since I was in Arosi, no doubt things have moved on or gone back underground, as it were. But I do not think these stories are likely to go away soon; after all, they have already been developing since the Second World War. Occasionally friends in the Solomons send me word of new things they've heard, new details that suggest the stories are still proliferating. In March 2012 I received an email from one friend who said he had fallen into conversation with someone in Honiara who reported that a friend of his had actually visited the underground and seen banks of computers with *kakamora* hard at work at them. My correspondent also relayed that a Makiran party to this conversation added that some people were saying that the Youth Cultural and Music Festival held in December

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<sup>14</sup> Arosi West Development Coordination Council, 'Rohu, Land of the Kakamora must be Conserved', 28 March 2007. Formerly available at [http://www.myspace.com/mccf\\_makira/blog/246500578](http://www.myspace.com/mccf_makira/blog/246500578) (accessed 17 Aug. 2007).

2011 at Kirakira had been organized by the underground. So it appears that people are still looking for signs that the underground is working to revitalize Makiran traditions.

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