

# Solomon Islands

## Cultural and Social Considerations

(Information provided courtesy of Christopher Chevalier)

### Religion

- Churches have a strong impact on the way people think in the Solomon Islands.
- Churches play a very strong role in communal life, especially in rural areas. In Solomon Islands, for instance, virtually every village has a church building and prayer or church services can be held once or twice a day.
- An increasing number of evangelical churches are springing up.
- Christian concepts are often invoked in political discourse, even at national level (usual to start a meeting with a prayer) – churches influential in politics.
- Churches run and staff health clinics and hospitals and play an active role in education.
- People are active in church activities and will make relatively substantial financial contributions to the church (often at great personal sacrifice).
- Churches are vehicles for social mobilization.
- Despite the strong influence of the church, magic and witchcraft is still strong and widely feared. (Even the most devout Christians still interpret Christian teachings through their own cultural circumstances, which may strike outsiders as inconsistent with their own interpretations of Christianity).
- While a diversity of religions are tolerated, atheism is not easily understood.

### Kastom and cultural values

- Kastom - Denotes culture and tradition – as distinct from the ‘whiteman way’.
- Kastom includes matters related to social and cultural relationships based on the fundamental constructs of land and bloodlines (including kinship, clan, line, residence and language [wantok – one talk] – critical to the way the country functions.
- Cultural traditions are continuously in interaction with each other and modern ways.
- The different demands of *kastom* and modernity create an underlying tension that outsiders need to heed and understand (eg demands on a person due to funeral arrangements, etc.)
- There is cultural diversity both within and between provinces (e.g. Bride price)

### Land

- Centre of life – most valued heritage of the whole community – saturated with spiritual, historical and political significance.
- Provides links with ancestors and spirits.
- Source of power (economic and political).
- Absolute ownership of land resides with the village or clan – land cannot be bought or sold like other marketable commodities – if an outsider pays for land, the payment can only be for the use of the land rather than bestowing permanent ownership.
- Land disputes regarding ownership – common. (eg in large scale resource development such as logging and mining)

## **Family - kin**

- Extended family (kinship unit) is the relationship based on culturally recognized connections between parents and children, extending to siblings and through parents to more distant relatives.
- Definition of a relative – different to the way Australians define it – eg uncles and aunts have similar authority and responsibilities for children as parents. Not uncommon for the closest adult to admonish a child for a certain misdemeanour (unlike in Australia where this role is mostly left to parents).
- Strong kinship ties cut across and supersede responsibilities of government, public service, and other modern structures.
- Associated family responsibilities and obligations – may appear to our western eyes as ‘nepotism’ – requests and expectations of kin can rarely be denied, creating demands on those in employment and power that lead to misappropriation and corruption, particularly by politicians and government ministers.

## **Big-men and Chiefs**

- The *Big-man* is a mode of leadership characteristic of Melanesia – whereby a leader commands a following by accumulating and distributing wealth, creating a network of allegiances and obligations that can extend far beyond the village or island.
- Other techniques for gaining *Big-man* status include conciliation, compromise, persuasion, inspiration, and bargaining to threats and sheer brute force.

## **National identity – introduced concept**

- Very recent introduced concept – people do not think of themselves as Solomon Islanders – “We are a country of villages or islands”. They associate more with their village or island.

## **Reciprocity**

- Giving something away always creates an obligation.
- Wealth is not accumulated for its own sake but for giving away, thereby creating obligation.
- People can be surrounded by a complex web of obligations that are invisible to outsiders – these obligations from previous exchanges can create conflict of interest when dealing with responsibilities, assets, and time management.

## **Compensation**

- Used to settle grievances and resolve conflict – elaborate ceremonies, negotiations and transfer of wealth.
- Can lead to ‘payback’.
- Compensation increasingly monetised and the current practice is to ask for more than the true value of the situation.

## **Tabu**

- Sacred – forbidden – many tabus associated with relations between cousins and in-laws, with bodily wastes, blood, etc.
- Vary from place to place – when you go to a new place, familiarize yourself with local practices – find out the “do’s” and “don’ts” and the “go” and “no go” areas.
- For example it is tabu in Solomon Islands to walk over a fallen tree trunk where a woman is sitting or walk under clotheslines with women’s clothes in villages; also important to hang out your underwear discreetly.

- Don't walk across people's legs – very disrespectful and in some places is believed to cause illness.
- Thighs are tabu (females in shorts are frowned upon).
- Don't show lots of flesh even when swimming.
- Don't stare or look too closely at people washing (seen as coveting).
- Avoid slang/swearing

### **Gender**

- Male and female roles are closely proscribed.
- Public displays of affection between men and women are rare and frowned upon.
- Affection and touching between same sexes is common.
- Homosexuality used to occur within some cultural rituals and plantation life but nowadays is not publicly acknowledged or accepted.
- Women – heavy workload.
- Domestic violence – has been publicly acknowledged as a key concern for women.

### **Pacific time**

- Time is more about relationships between people and groups than measurable units recorded by the clock.
- Pace of life is slower – should not be interpreted as laziness or stupidity.
- Try not to get uptight about people being late for meetings but remember people will expect you to be on time.

### **Personalised bureaucracy**

- Private matters and considerations intrude into public lives.
- Few secrets and rumours spread fast – coconut radio.
- Educated people - much in common and many personal links.
- Dangerous to interfere in matters between public servants or politicians.
- Village is still the real world – exerts strong influence on the bureaucracy.
- 12,000 years of village based culture is far more deeply entrenched than 120 years of colonial rule.

### **Status and sources of power**

- Status ascribed in the village carries over into the public service.
- Communalistic values predominate although individualism is increasingly evident.
- Complicated and extensive kinship systems complicate hierarchical relationships and provide civil society with close access to public servants.
- Important to respect the range of power dynamics that come into play and to consider the implications for your role as an outsider - (bypassing hierarchical structures may be seen as inappropriate).
- Cultural lag, where traditional ways of being and doing have not been adapted to modern practices (e.g., extractive resource use, which affects more than one generation)

### **Avoiding confrontation and reaching consensus**

- Many Pacific islanders like to avoid confrontation.
- They find it difficult to say “no”, to contradict, or to convey bad news – avoiding conflict can be achieved by telling the listener what they think they want to hear.

**Shame**

- Avoiding shame and not losing face is very important.
- This has important implications – such as not criticising people in front of others; letting situations continue no matter what the effects are until there is some way out without shaming someone. The result is that criminal activities go unpunished; lack of regular evaluation; politicians and public officials get away with serious offences with little or no punishment, etc.

**Personal initiative**

- The group is more highly valued than the individual and personal initiative has no great value unless it helps acquire status.
- Original ideas are often obstructed or dismissed as attempts to acquire power or status.
- Jealousy is common.
- There is lack of reward for initiative when promotion depends often on connections and kinship.
- The fear of making mistakes leads to the fear of taking initiatives.
- Lack of self-confidence is common, especially when confronted by outsiders.
- People feel confidence in a group rather than as individuals.

**Access to information**

- Oral rather than written is the preferred medium.
- As in many societies, people keep information to themselves because it provides tactical advantage, power and control.
- Training is often undertaken more for reasons of acquiring awareness, status and prestige rather than implementing what is learned.
- There may be reasons for a colleague not passing on information from training courses. Do not assume that what has been taught has really been understood.

**Personal contact**

- Personal contact and follow up is very important. Don't assume that things and agreements from community meetings will be automatically passed on.

**Privacy**

- Because the communal extended family is the foundation of Melanesian society, the concepts of privacy are very different from western ones.
  - Be especially careful in your interactions with the opposite sex and maintain a certain reserve and space so you do not appear suggestive. Men should be particularly careful in dealing with women. An innocent exchange may not appear as such and punitive measures may be taken against a woman who appears to be behaving inappropriately.
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