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Living with land and sea
Solomon Islands
In the Solomon Islands, in the south-west Pacific, relationships with the land and sea are fundamental to people’s lives and identity.

The country is made up of hundreds of small islands spread across 1600 kilometres of ocean. People have lived there for thousands of years and they now speak around 70 languages. The land and sea they inherit from their ancestors is more than their home and livelihood – it defines who they are. This relationship has been changing over the last century as Solomon Islanders become more involved with the wider world.

The east coast of Malaita island, viewed from the sea people's offshore island of Ngongosila, 1979.

Photo: Ben Burt
Object in focus

1 Ancestor figures

This carving from Roviana in the New Georgia islands, western Solomon Islands, represents an important ancestor whose ghost people prayed to for spiritual support.

He holds a fish to show his special powers for fishing. The small stone figure nearby is a turtle-catcher. Figures like these were kept in shrines that commemorated the lives and achievements of generations of local people. As Christians, most Islanders no longer worship the ghosts of their ancestors, but they still respect the landmarks and relics that embody these local histories.

Oc1904,0621.12 figure with fish;
Oc1959,06.24 figure with turtle

A burial shrine in Roviana, 1907.
The two ancestor figures (one in the leaf house) are hung with shell valuables.

Photo: George Rose
Shell valuables

Shell rings are the local money of the western Solomon Islands. Like other shell valuables, they could be worn as ornaments, money or charms. A charm of valuables tied to a stick would be taken on overseas raids to invoke the power of a warrior ancestor.

Clockwise from bottom left:
Oc1904,0621.4 charm stick; Oc1915.32 charm pendant; Oc1904,0621.10 bakiha (part yellow); Oc1915.21 bakiha ovala (single, with figures); Oc1915.29 bakiha ovala (single, with grid); Oc1900,1008.3 bareke (irregular); Oc1910.218 poata (white); Oc1915.27 barava shell plaque. All from New Georgia.

3 Objects displayed here

2 Skull house
This small house from Roviana contained the skull of an important ancestor. Ancestors’ skulls were kept in shrines, with shell valuables used as ornaments, money or charms. The remains of these shrines, scattered throughout the forests and reefs, still mark their descendants’ claims to land and sea.

Oc1894.188
The Reverend Sir Ikan Rove, a spiritual leader of Marovo in the New Georgia islands, posing with a shell valuable on his visit to the British Museum, 2006.

Photo: Ben Burt


Photo: Peter Sheppard
Living with land and sea

Living from the sea

Coastal communities inherit inland reefs and lagoons that are rich in fish and shell, and also fish on the open seas.

The most valued fish are bonito (tuna), which migrate unpredictably in the deep ocean and require special skills to catch. Dolphins are hunted for their meat and for their teeth, which are used as money. In the south-east Solomon Islands ‘sea people’ with little land exchange fish for garden and forest foods produced by their inland neighbours.

Bonito fish for sale at ‘Aoke on Malaita island, 1996.

Photo: Ben Burt
Objects displayed here

4 Fishing
Solomon Islanders made lines and nets from forest fibres and fish hooks from shell and turtleshell, before they had nylon line and steel fish hooks. Some bonito hooks imitate the small fish they eat. Floats for lines to catch flying fish were carved with sea birds and spirits. Floats for ceremonial nets were carved as birds. In Makira island, boys were initiated into the skills and spiritual powers needed for bonito fishing. During their initiation they carried boards carved with images of fish and sea birds.

Bonito hook Oc1882,1110.15

Oc1882,1110.17 fish-hook of coneshell; Oc1882,1110.15; Oc,RHC66; Oc1944,02.558; Oc1944,02.362 hooks with shell lures for bonito, Makira; Oc1980,0307 mackerel hook, Makira; Oc1944,02.371 turtleshell fish hook, Makira; Oc6316 and Oc6317 line floats for flying fish, Ulawa; Oc1937,0415.5 initiation board, Santa Ana, Makira; Oc1944,02.1332 ceremonial net-float, Lau, Malaita; Oc+4901 model bonito, Makira; Oc1959,06.46 fishing net
5 **Sea spirit figures**
The sea is inhabited by ghosts and spirits. The spirit with fish for a head and limbs is a hazard of the deep ocean. The figure belonged in a canoe house shrine. Some ancestors became sharks, like the legendary ghost portrayed in the bone spatula. It was used for taking lime with betel nut, a local stimulant.

Oc1904, 0621.14 sea-spirit, Makira; Oc1940,03.18 shark-man, south Malaita or Ulawa

6 **Skull coffin (top shelf)**
On Makira island, sea people kept the skulls of important ancestors in fish-shaped coffins. They would pray to the ancestors' ghosts. The coffins were kept with ceremonial bonito fish canoes in canoe houses, which also served as shrines.

Oc1904,0621.13 Santa Ana, Makira

7 **Canoe (top shelf)**
This fishing canoe, from Malaita island, is made of planks sewn with vine, sealed with vegetable putty and inlaid with pearlshell. The designs include bonito fish and the frigate birds that guide fishermen to them.

Oc1966.04.1
A canoe house in Makira Island with a ceremonial bonito canoe on the right, early 20th century.

Stereograph card, photographer unknown.

Inside a canoe house shrine at Santa Ana, Makira island, in 1973. The model canoes and fish contain the bones and skulls of important ancestors. Other skulls are kept in split bamboo baskets.

Photo: Mick Pendergrast
Living with land and sea

Living from the land

Most Solomon Islanders live by farming and foraging on their forested lands, raising pigs, and making the things they need from forest materials.

The forest quickly reclaims harvested gardens and, when thatched houses rot, villages are often moved to new clearings. The forest itself provides people with wild foods and raw materials. Local knowledge of these resources is passed down with the land from generation to generation.

Pounding pudding for a feast in Arosi, Makira island, 1993.

Photo: Michael Scott
Food bowls
The staple foods are root crops. For special occasions, they are put in wooden bowls and pounded into pudding with nuts or coconut. On Makira island, men once used small decorated bowls to share pudding with their ancestral ghosts.

Oc1976,11.183 bowl, Kwaio, Malaita; Oc7632 ceremonial bowl, Makira; Oc+4056 feast bowl, Makira (top level)

Tools
Shell tools are still sometimes used for preparing vegetables and scraping coconut flesh. Before manufactured utensils were available, cups and spoons were made from coconut shell. Before razors, men shaved with shell tweezers.

Oc1927,0310.16 shell tweezers, Simbo; Oc1976,11.189 pearlshell vegetable knife, Kwaio, Malaita; Oc1976,11.186b bag for knife; Oc+4897 shell coconut scraper, Makira; Oc+3920 cup, Guadalcanal; Oc+4900 spoon, Ulawa
10 **Nuts**
Nuts are an important seasonal food from the forest. Trees belong to whoever planted them and people harvest the groves planted by their ancestors. The hard shells require careful cracking with special stone hammers and anvils. The kernels can be smoked and packed for trade.

Oc1927,0310.27 nut-hammer;  
Oc+3901 parcel of nuts

11 **Betel nut equipment**
The local stimulant is betel nut (*areca*). It is chewed with pepper leaf and lime. The elderly use a pestle and mortar instead of chewing the hard nuts. Lime used to be kept in decorated flasks.

Oc1954,06.174 lime flask;  
Oc1944,02.1787 spatula for taking lime; Oc1991,08.68 betel mortar;  
Oc1959,06.25 betel pestle

12 **Forest materials**
Strips of forest vine and tree bark are plaited into bags and twisted into strong twine. Before nylon was available this was used to make fishing nets and lines. Woven strips of yellow orchid stem and red-stained coconut cuticle were worn on ornamental combs and ear-sticks, armbands and rattan girdles. A few people still make these today.

Oc2009,2010.1 bag, Malaita;  
Oc1944,02.1687 inlaid comb, Guadalcanal;  
Oc1954,06.192 woven comb, Malaita;  
Oc6427 armband, Makira; Oc1991,08.29 headband; Oc1921,1102.31 ear-sticks, Malaita; Oc6311 girdle, Marau, Guadalcanal
Cracking nuts in a kitchen in Kwara'ae, Malaita island, 1984.

Photo: Ben Burt

Adriel Rofate'e of Kwara'ae, Malaita island, at work on a bark fibre bag, 1979.

Photo: Ben Burt
Living with land and sea

Living from the land

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Left: An old-style war canoe from Isabel island at the capital of the Solomon Islands, Honiara, for Independence Day celebrations, 1988.

Right: A village in the forest of east Kwara’ae, Malaita island, 1983.

Photo: Mike McCoy
Living with land and sea

Wealth from the sea

In the south-east Solomon Islands the local currency is strings of shell beads, mostly made in the Langalanga lagoon of Malaita island. These beads and other shell objects were also worn as valuable ornaments.

Money-beads are made by grinding and drilling pieces of clam shell. They are valued according to the type of shell (red is most valuable) and strung in standard denominations. Shell-money is presented to join families in marriage, to resolve disputes and to seal agreements.

Photo: Ben Burt
Michael Kwa’ioloa of Kwara’ae demonstrating Malaita ornaments, 2006.

Photo: Ben Burt

A large marriage presentation of ten-string shell money at the capital of the Solomon Islands, Honiara, 2009.

Photo: Pei-yi Guo
Irobaoa, a chief from north Malaita island, dressed in valuable ornaments, about 1910. He wears a wealth of dolphin teeth around his neck.

Edge-Partington collection, photographer unknown

Object displayed here

13 **Shell-money**

The largest currency denomination in northern Malaita has ten strings. A headband of dolphin teeth may have a similar value, depending on the number of teeth. To raise enough money for a marriage gift or to compensate for a serious offence, people have to borrow from relatives. These debts bind them together as a community.

Oc1978,07.2 ten-string money; Oc1915.63 eight-string money; Oc1909.80 dolphin teeth strap (all Malaita)
Shell ornaments
The south-east Solomon Islands had their own styles of valuable shell ornaments, worn on public occasions to make people look both attractive and important. They included pins and pendants for the nose, disks for the neck and straps of woven shell-money beads for the arms and waist.

Oc+6379 necklace of shell rings, Ulawa; Oc6426 money-bead belt, Gela; Oc1887,0201.36 and Oc1887,0201.37 money-bead arm straps; Oc1940.03.9 shoal-of-fish nose pendant, south Malaita or Ulawa; oc1976,11.172 woman’s shell disk; OcQ1980.337 shell-disk, Malaita; +4908 shell ear-disk, Makira; Oc+4905 shell pin for end of nose, Ulawa

Drilling holes to make shell-money beads in Langalanga, Malaita, 2008.

Photo: Pei-yi Guo
Living with land and sea

**Linking peoples and islands**

**Solomon Islanders used to travel around the islands by canoe, trading local products and raiding their enemies.**

Europeans introduced Solomon Islanders to the world beyond their islands. In the mid-19th century Europeans came to the Solomon Islands to trade. From the 1870s they recruited Islanders as migrant workers for their plantations in Fiji and Queensland, Australia. Since the early 20th century, Islanders have worked instead for foreign and national businesses in the Solomon Islands.

The prow of a great war canoe, with a protective figurehead, at Roviana, New Georgia islands, 1880s. The man wears a high value shell-money ring, decorated as a pendant.

Photo: Charles Woodford
War canoes
In the western and central Solomon Islands, powerful leaders once raided their neighbours for captives and trophy heads. Their great plank canoes had beautiful shell inlay, protective figureheads and charms. Tomahawks, used with woven shields, were favoured weapons. Many canoes were destroyed by British colonial authorities in the early 1900s to suppress this warfare. Since then they have been revived for regattas.

Oc1929,0713.86 canoe figure-head;
Oc1959,06.23 canoe charm;
Oc1947,12.1 shield

Imported goods
With the arrival of Europeans, Solomon Islanders began to trade and work for imported manufactured goods. Steel tools made farming and building easier, and guns, sticks of tobacco and clothing soon became popular. Imported glass beads were made into colourful ornaments. Today people aspire to permanent houses, cars, computers and mobile phones.

Oc1931,0722.81 Union Jack belt;
Oc1949,05.28 armband;
Oc1944,02.1770 tobacco pipe;
2009,2010.2 stick of tobacco;
Oc1944,02.1299 tomahawk, Makira
Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands on Guadalcanal island, 2008. It is a port of call for shipping from all over the Solomon Islands and beyond.

Photo: Clive Moore

A ship's boat picking up labour recruits on the west coast of Malaita island, 1907.

Photo: George Rose
Changing relationships with land and sea

Solomon Islanders’ lives were transformed during the 20th century as they reluctantly accepted British colonial rule, became Christians and joined the global economy. In 1978 their country became an independent state.

Since the colonial period, plantation agriculture, mining, logging and fisheries have brought new wealth to the Solomon Islands. The desire for commercial development has changed Islanders’ relationships with their environment and threatened the sustainability of their livelihoods, cultures and identities. But Islanders have remained firmly attached to their ancestral heritage.

Father Nelson Safu, an Anglican priest, in his church in Kwara’ae, Malaita island, 1984.

Photo: Ben Burt
17 **Cross and staff**
European missionaries introduced Christianity. As people lost their independence under colonial rule, their faith in the spiritual authority of their ancestors was challenged. They joined the mission churches and made Christianity their own. Some make Christian symbols in local styles – like this bishop’s pastoral staff and pearlshell cross. Although very few still pray to the ghosts of their ancestors, everyone recognises their continuing presence in their lands and seas.

Oc1944,02.1782 cross; Oc1991,08.77 staff

18 **Exporting culture**
European visitors have always bought Solomon Islands artefacts. These carvings from the south-east Solomon Islands are among the ‘curios’ featured in an Anglican mission postcard from about 1910. They may have been made for the export market. Islanders now use their forest hardwoods to make fine woodcarvings, often inlaid with pearlshell, to sell to foreigners. Canoe figureheads from the western Solomon Islands have become especially popular.

2009,2002.1 canoe figurehead, New Georgia; Oc1940,03.19 dog and Oc1940,03.1 human figure, south Malaita or Ulawa
Woodcarvings on sale to tourists at the Solomon Islands’ international airport, 2004.

Photo: Ben Burt

Logs are one of the Solomon Islands' main exports, but logging causes serious environmental damage as shown here in Marova, New Georgia in 2008.

Photo: Andre Vltchek
The man and dog figures in this postcard are exhibited above. The other artefacts shown are in museums around the world.

Portraits above (left to right)

Marlene Aru
Vella Lavella, New Georgia islands, 2009
Photographer Ben Burt

Peter Beata
Gela islands, 2005
Photographer Mike McCoy

Eve Tetahu
Kia, Isabel Island, 2008
Photographer Graham Baines

Father Ben Wate
Sa’a, Malaita island, 2009
Photographer Ben Burt

‘Otomoori
Kwaio, Malaita island, 1996
Photographer David Akin