

# Customary marine tenure and contemporary resource management in Solomon Islands

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**Abstract.** Much has been claimed about the positive benefits of the customary marine tenure (CMT) system in the South Pacific and its implications for resource management. In Solomon Islands the premise of effective community-based resource management (CBRM) as a contemporary management tool, rests to a great degree on CMT, but does CMT still provide a sufficiently strong foundation to support this premise? This research examined the social and environmental characteristics of a rural Solomon Islands coastal community that had expressed a desire to implement CBRM. The research addressed the questions; what socio-cultural factors are related to CMT regimes and do these factors hinder or enhance the capability of the community to employ or maintain these regimes? Using primarily qualitative methodologies the study focused on how marine resources are perceived and valued by different members of the community. Liangai village is an example of one of many in Solomon Islands that have experienced a collapse in their traditional marine resource management systems. Most people in the village have lost their respect for their traditional leaders and instead church leaders have more influence in their daily lives and can be influential in village decision making. Findings suggest that in communities where a common agreement on CMT no longer exists there is a significant challenge to stakeholders in attaining the goal of sustainably managed coastal marine resources through community based approaches. This challenge needs to be accounted for on a case by case basis as part of CBRM facilitation processes.

**Key words:** Traditional Management, Customary Marine Tenure, Solomon Islands, CBRM.

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## Introduction

Many of the small island countries in the South Pacific have established values and traditions around the use of marine resources. Of particular interest is the marine tenure system, sometimes known as “customary rights”. It is customary law that dictates that most near-shore areas, including reefs, are usually owned by clans or larger communal groups, and are therefore not open access fisheries (Hviding 1989). Customary marine tenure (CMT) operates under a diversity of different rules and practices in various island societies, but the fundamental characteristics of CMT systems include defined geographical areas, controlled access, self-monitoring, and the enforcement of rules and regulations by local people and their traditional leaders (Asafu-Adjaye 2000; Aswani 2005; Cinner et al. 2005; Foster and Poggie Jr 1993; Hviding 1998; Hviding and Baine 1996; Lam 1998; Ruddle 1998b).

Community property rights usually extend to the outer most edge of the reefs and typically the customary owner/user group has the right to exclude outsiders (Hviding 1998). Traditional management

mechanisms have evolved over time and generally involve restrictions from harvesting certain species or at certain areas.

According to Lam (1998), the concept of fisheries management in the South Pacific Islands was well known and was practiced extensively, however researchers in Solomon Islands have also challenged the assumption that CMT is used for regulatory purposes (Aswani, 1997, 1998; Foale 1998; Ruttan, 1998). Nevertheless, the CMT system represents a form of management at the community level. In CMT as used here, “customary” refers to a system that emerges from firm traditional roots, constitutes part of what is often termed “customary law”, and which has continuous links with local history as it adapts to changing contemporary circumstances; “marine” refers to the system as dealing with reefs, lagoons, coasts, and open sea and including islands and islets contained in this overall sea space; and “tenure” refers to a social process of interacting activities concerning control over territory and access to resources. Asafu-Adjaye (2000) further explained that CMT is distinct because it consists of unwritten rules that ensure local

environmental knowledge is embedded in the culture to manage access to the fishing area and the stocks of the resources. In the South Pacific islands, and particularly in the Melanesian countries, CMT forms part of the framework that regulates social and political relationships and defines cultural identities. This study investigated the socio-cultural factors related to CMT regimes in one rural village in Solomon Islands (see fig 1). It explored the beliefs and motivations behind local marine management by examining the rules and regulations of controlled access, self-monitoring and adherence to norms through communal moral authority within the system.

### Material and Methods

Liangai village is geographically located in the Dovele district east of Iriqila village on the northern tip of the island of Vella la Vella (fig 2). Vella la Vella is an island of some 647km<sup>2</sup>, located in Western Province, Solomon Islands.

The district of Dovele comprises three main villages; Boro, Liangai and Suantali, and two smaller settlements with a total population of approximately 1400 people. This study is focused on the village and people of Liangai Village.

The reef boundaries of Dovele stretch from Mede on the eastern side of the village of Iriqila to the exposed intertidal reef of Katasalado, off the village of Boro (fig 2). The coral reefs are mainly fringing and intermittent with sporadic mangrove patches along the coast. Dovele and the adjoining Jorio region of Vella Lavella on the western end of Iriqila encompass a large area of extended fringing reefs.

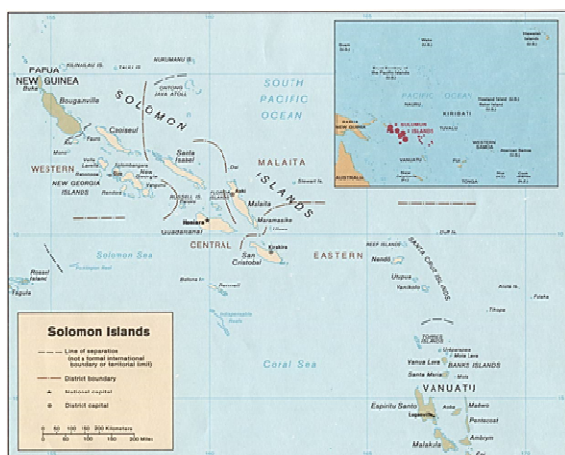


Figure 1: Map of Solomon Islands

This study used the constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Burr 2003) to comprehend the meaning of how members of a social group define their current situations. It focused on the community and was

concerned with how individuals construct and make sense of their environment. The purpose of this research was to understand the social and environmental mechanisms that influence a community's willingness to participate in conservation and their ability to engage in marine resource management. The qualitative data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), participant observations (PO) and informal narrative interactive story telling.

### Results

Most of the land and reefs in Liangai are customary owned, which means that they are looked after by lines of descendants that began from the first clearing of primary forest and subsequent settlement of the land. The land tenure was determined by membership in a matrilineal tribe called *Toutou*. The leader of the *Toutou* was called the *Lekasa*, a term that is not widely used today. The Vella la Vella custom dictated that marriage was to be exogamous to the *Toutou*, which had implications for land allocations. More subordinate families sometimes made claims to land by marriage to the dominant *Toutou*. Past (and present day) restrictions within the tenure system applied mostly to gardening and plantation land while restrictions on hunting and the use of the reefs were not governed by the same control.

The importance of coastal and marine areas to Liangai people, cultures and economies cannot be overstated. They are the focus of social and customary systems, and subsistence and cash economies. Land, sea and people are traditionally viewed as being connected as a system. Land is central to culture, identity and survival and as such is highly valued in the village and integrally related to all aspects of daily life. Land and sea resources were not only a source of food, but also a source of income and wealth.

A person's affiliation to a tribe is very important because that can link him or her to their land, culture and social grouping. Tribes attach great importance to their traditional values, morals and institutions. In tribal areas, resources are mostly owned by the community as a whole. Hence, the decisions on the use of available local resources are normally made by the community and not by the individuals.

Owning more land guaranteed a sense of security for the tribes and individual members. Rules for allowing access to these resources were commonly found to be highly structured for land, and less structured for marine resources. The marine ownership boundaries were clearly defined in the past but nowadays, there is considerable overlap in claims

of ownership causing a lot of dissention and conflicting opinion within and between the tribes.

Respondents among the older women and men held common views on how resources are used today and how they were used in the past with some very minor distinctions according to the different uses of reefs and land for cash livelihoods (e.g. trochus, copra and timber milling). In the past resources were entirely used for subsistence and while this remains their primary use (e.g. building houses, food for families, carving paddles and axe handles, weaving baskets, and medicine) they are also used for cash income (e.g. milled timber for construction, bêche-de-mer, food and carving for selling at markets, and copra milling).

The older people conveyed stories of how in the past there were strong rules and restrictions (tambu areas) on the timing of harvest and quantity of resources that could be used. Participants described how planning processes still exist for gardens managed by women, however there is little perceived planning, or structure around how other natural resources are managed or harvested. There were consistent claims that resources were decreasing due to increased exploitation to meet subsistence and commercial demands.

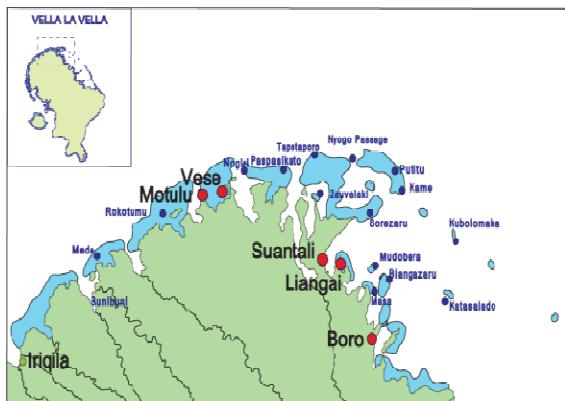


Figure 2: Map of Liangai village and the Dovele region..

The modern governance and power systems that emerged, largely from foreign values and practices, along with the cash economy, have changed the way people view communalism— which was the basis of traditional governance and decision-making.

One elderly informant reflected on the situation:

*“In the past the chief sat in the middle and everyone sat around him; everyone respected the decision he made. Now it changes, the politicians and elites have more power than the chief. We have many more people making decisions and it damages the chiefly system”.*

Reflecting on the past, an elderly woman commented on the influence of different stakeholders

in today’s decisions, many of whom are outside the chiefly system:

*“Decisions made about our natural resources are different from in the past. Many people are now involved in influencing decisions for land and forest. This includes people with money from logging, middle men and the politicians. The mere (women) are only consulted by the husband, but the big decisions are made by these big people”.*

A man commented:

*“In the past chiefs, elders, tribal leaders and landowners jointly worked together to make decisions. There were no big disagreements or disputes as there are today now when people are desperate to invite investors or new projects for community”.*

A further difference to traditional leadership that was observed is the great respect that is rendered to church leaders. When the villagers were instructed by the church leaders to do something for the church or in the name of the church, every villager would attend, except for those with genuine reasons. The church now plays a very important role in village decision-making.

According to one key informant in the village:

*“Many of our cultural activities and norms began to alter due to internal and external influences such as Christianity, the modern system of government, modern education, and economic development. Christian principles were embraced by the villagers, causing them to do away with their cultural traditions that were contradicting Christianity”.*

The church activities cover several hours each day in Liangai and includes women’s clubs, youth and social, cultural, and economic activities. Considerable amounts of money are spent on church contributions, with most going towards the activities and administration affairs. People sacrifice a considerable amount of their time undertaking church activities, from simply cleaning the surroundings of the church building to actually spending time outside raising money to meet church targets. Today, Christianity is pervasive in the community.

## Discussion

Present day communities are affected by many outside factors that did not exist when traditional management systems were evolving. These factors bring management challenges for which traditional arrangements were not designed to cope and thus many have severely destabilising effects on the performance of traditional systems (Ruddle 1998; Veitayaki 1997). Stemming from modernization and colonization, socioeconomic factors such as entry into the cash economy; increasing capacity for resource exploitation though improved gear technology;

changing social; political and demographic circumstances; and weakened chiefly power and respect for custom, religion and western education, all serve to put pressure on or undermine traditional systems of management (Aswani 2005; Gibson and Koontz 1998; Johannes 1998; 2002; Ruddle 1996; 1998; Veitayaki 1997).

Tradition is linked and associated with a specific notion over a period of time, and therefore changes over time. This suggests that CBRM systems if properly adapted and sanctioned, can be the basis of suitable management arrangements. The question remains as to whether CBRM can be introduced in places where external influences and internal changes in mutual understanding within and between community members have suppressed the traditional system. In Liangai for example, the traditional system based on cooperation for the good of the community was being replaced by commercial forces and competition to benefit the individual. The subsistence-based, locally governed economy was being converted to a cash-based economy controlled by the market demand. The introduction of technology and more efficient fishing gear, further accelerating the shift from subsistence to profit-based economies follows trends in other small Pacific Island countries (Ruddle 1998).

Customary uses of natural resources are structured through a multifaceted system of institutions and traditional practices which, in the past, have ensured social equity, enforced social norms through social pressure, shared value systems and defined notions of property and territoriality, as well as defining roles for men and women in the village or community.

In Liangai, while the local governance regime may help to manage natural resources in a sustainable way, there are potential drawbacks that can be identified from community experience with imposed institutional arrangements. These drawbacks are characterized by the disproportionate appropriation of benefits and the exclusion of weak actors. As a result, social inequalities among resource users are deepened and environmental destruction is aggravated.

Although Liangai village is made up of families who are closely related they are not unified as a whole. Study findings suggest that the people retain a lingering vision of a small, integrated community but have failed to grasp how their differences as a community have affected their resource management outcomes. The absence of a common agreement on CMT is likely to present a significant challenge to the community in attaining the goal of sustainably managed coastal marine resources through community based approaches without first addressing these governance issues.

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