

# Leadership *in Absentia*: Negotiating Distance in Centralized Solomon Islands

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines a tension at the heart of national leadership in Solomon Islands today: a conviction that national leaders need to spend more time in rural environments to better represent rural interests, needs and values, while having to be in town to access the individuals and organizations that, essentially, make them national leaders in the first place. Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in urban Honiara and the rural Lau Lagoon, Malaita, we are especially interested in how this tension shapes rural perceptions of the legitimacy of chiefs as national leaders. Given that development projects can only be negotiated in Honiara, where the required state institutions, international (N)GOs and major businesses are based, rural residents feel compelled to send their most important village leaders, especially clan chiefs, to town. However, the longer these leaders are away from their homes, the more they seem distracted by urban 'luxuries' and the less they appear committed to their rural homes. In particular, villagers complain about their chiefs' contributions to exchange relations. Villages, thus, find themselves in a double-bind that exaggerates a broader 'crisis of leadership' alongside an urban-rural divide which challenges the promise of chiefly leadership as solution to antipolitical sentiments and a centralized state.*

Keywords: leadership, chiefs, centralization, rural, urban, Solomon Islands.

## INTRODUCTION

I am thinking of running in the 2018 National Election, perhaps in 2022. But first, I have to go live at home [in rural Malaita] for a year or two. I have forgotten what it means to live at home.

The 2014 National Election had just come to a close and Ann and I<sup>1</sup> were talking politics over a coffee at Panatina Plaza, an indoor shopping center on the eastern border of Honiara, Solomon Islands capital. Born and raised in a small village in Malaita Province, Ann had spent most of her adult life in Honiara, where she had been able to rise to a managerial position in the financial sector. We had met *via* Forum Solomon Islands – International (FSII). In 2014/15, it was Solomon Islands' most prominent special interest Facebook group and a registered civil society organization with the aim 'to expose government corruption and hold the Solomon Islands government to account' (Finau et al. 2014:5). Ann

actively participated in FSII and similar online and offline groups to transform what she described as a 'broken' political system that suffers, from her perspective, from a 'crisis of leadership' that has become especially acute for rural Solomon Islanders.

Our politicians do not care about rural communities. They are elected by them, but really they just care about themselves and enjoy life in Honiara. We need new leaders who truly lead to serve [Solomon Islands national motto] and who understand home.

Ann hoped to be one of these new leaders and was, therefore, considering quitting her well-paying job to return to her ancestral home. This would mean trading in her wooden house with ceiling fans and running water for a leaf house powered by a small solar home system and using communal water sources. Instead of urban income and store goods she would depend on the everyday demands of a self-provisioning lifestyle. This is how Ann assessed her situation:

I do not know how welcome I will be back home. I often say no when my rural relatives ask for help, when they want help with school fees or when they want to stay with me in town. I have worked hard for everything I have. I would not have it if I had not learnt to say 'no' and to stop sharing everything... [laughing] to be honest, I also do not know if I remember how to garden and if I can live without Facebook.<sup>2</sup>... There is also no way my teenage children will come with me. There are no good schools for them and they do not even speak the [local] language.

Ann was torn. She wanted to be the kind of leader that she is confident Solomon Islands needs, a leader who is well connected to, understands and respects the rural areas, which are still home to about 80 percent of Solomon Islands population. However, she was uncertain if her long absence from her ancestral home and her refusal to fully participate in local systems of exchange may not mean that she had lost her 'passport' (McDougall 2017), her right to return home where she would need to access the help of others. She was also not sure if she really wanted to give up on the comfortable urban life that she had become accustomed to, including being with her children whom she had not prepared for village life. Plus,

if I want to win, I need people to sponsor my campaign. It costs a lot of money. I need to be in Honiara to find sponsors. Really there is only time to go back home during the campaign. I just don't know how I can do it, how I can be at home and in Honiara.

Ann seemed to be tethered to her urban life, because of her family commitments, personal lifestyle preferences but also because of the demands of the political system in which she operates. The need to invest large resources to maintain extensive exchange relations limited her ability to realize her vision for a 'good' leader, who truly understands rural needs, interests and values.

This article interrogates this tension:<sup>3</sup> the conviction that rural Solomon Islands requires better national leaders who are familiar with, and committed to, rural environments because they actually live there, but also a desire and need to be in Honiara, which promises what many perceive to be a better lifestyle as well as the necessary access to the individuals and organizations that, in essence, make national leaders. Our goal is to show how this rural-urban tension shapes perceptions of legitimate national leadership in Solomon Islands today, with national leaders being defined as those individuals - often, MPs, higher ranking

bureaucrats and chiefs - who can assume key roles in negotiating with 'foreign' or 'external' actors or institutions, such as the Solomon Islands state which remains alien to many rural residents (see Hobbis 2016), capitalist business ventures and development-aid organizations. We explore how Solomon Islanders, who spend most of their time in rural environments and who do not consider themselves and are not viewed by others as prominent national leaders, are related to those national leaders who are needed to represent their interests to 'external' actors and institutions in urban areas.

We focus on chiefs<sup>4</sup> as they are often presented as a possible solution to rural-urban disconnects, as 'mediators between the traditional and the modern—a structural position with strategic advantages for local leadership' (White 2007:1; see also Kwa'ioloa and Burt 2012). We tease out how rural residents experience the positioning of chiefs as national leaders and demonstrate that, because chiefs as national leaders also need to spend significant amounts of time in town, rural residents have started questioning chiefs' roles as *their* leaders, as those who are, first and foremost, committed to village needs, interests and values. Absent chiefs too often fail to adequately contribute to the exchange relations that define village leaders, such as contributing to village feasts. They are accused of being too easily seduced by the immoral lifestyles of towns. In other words, our research suggests that strengthening the role of chiefs within national governance structures does not necessarily solve problems with state-based governance in Solomon Islands. This dilemma will continue until the problem of distance is resolved, until rural residents can gain confidence that their increasing urban-based national leaders are also their rural leaders.

#### A RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON NATIONAL LEADERS

By focusing on the perspectives of those rural residents who have no or little claim to national leadership positions, our analysis builds on but also deviates from previous research on leadership in Solomon Islands and Oceania more broadly. Previous research challenges simplified perceptions of these national leaders as 'bad' in comparison to the 'good' people (e.g. see Corbett 2015; Larmour 2012); and it challenges stereotyped perceptions of politicians as 'suffering from a capacity deficit' (Corbett and Wood 2013:320). At the same time, many existing studies have prioritized the voices of national leaders, especially politicians and chiefs. They have commonly emphasized the dilemmas that national leaders struggle to reconcile as their positions involve the intersection of 'Pacific' and 'Western' systems of leadership, administration and governance, which articulate the rural-urban tensions that Ann described above (e.g. see Corbett and Wood 2013; Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996; Kwa'ioloa and Burt 2012; McKeown 2015; Patterson 2002; Tucker Sade 2019; White and Lindstrom 1997). For example, drawing on his ethnography, LiPuma' (1997:49) outlines the case of a high ranking bureaucrat in Papua New Guinea who temporarily returns home 'to be a warrior in an "intertribal dispute"' despite his desire for the state to solve the conflict. In the context of Solomon Islands, Kwa'ioloa and Burt (2012) also recognize this tension while suggesting, without going into any details however, that chiefs are able to overcome this disconnect and that chiefs, therefore, should assume a more formal role in the Solomon Islands state. They argue that chiefs, unlike MPs, personify rural, ancestral values and note that chiefs need to stay closely connected to their ancestral homes, even when they spend extended periods in town.

We have to maintain our connections with our 'brothers' at home so that even if my son arrives they will say, 'Oh, it's Lawrence Laugere, he's the firstborn son of

Kwa'ioloa and when Kwa'ioloa died he became senior of our land' (Kwa'ioloa and Burt 2012:135-136)

We aim to better understand how rural residents view these proclaimed commitments of their town-based national leaders, especially chiefs. We agree that 'the term "chief" is often an English language catchall for various leadership positions, including those that may have been created as a result of the introduction of the conceptual category' (Tucker Sade 2019:200) and it has, just like the notion of 'leadership,' been conceptually 'inherently fraught with ambiguity, contradiction and contestation over behaviour, position, legitimacy and indigenous notions of power' (Patterson 2002:127). Yet, in Solomon Islands, as elsewhere in Melanesia, 'chiefs' and those who are locally identified as such are 'potent symbols—symbols of the indigenous and the traditional in contrast with the foreign and the modern' (White 1997:231). Chiefs often play central roles in the everyday governance of rural areas, especially as mediators in conflict resolution. They are also increasingly significant in national debates as custodians of ancestral lands (Allen et al. 2013; Kwa'ioloa and Burt 2012; Tucker Sade 2019; White 1997).

Crucially, just like the position of chiefs is being perpetually re-envisioned in attempts to better connect indigenous values with Western governance systems (e.g. see Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996; Tabani 2019), so are also all individual claims to any leadership position being continuously reassessed.<sup>5</sup> As Mark Mosko argues in a broader discussion of chiefly positions in Melanesia, even hereditary succession 'requires satisfactory performance of a long-sustained and wide-ranging series of interpersonal transactions and exchanges' (2012:162–163). In other words, a son may not inherit a chiefly title if his contributions to exchange relations do not match those of an uncle or even cousin. This means that no claim to leadership can ever be considered truly permanent. Instead, claims to leadership are essentially linked to individuals' willingness and ability to truly 'lead' and, thus, 'serve' their homes, often through active and extensive participation in exchange relations such as the provision of pigs for feasts (Burt 1994; Dalsgaard 2013; Hobbis 2016; Mosko 2012).

Accordingly, we ask further: How do prolonged absences from rural environments shape villagers' perceptions of their national leaders, especially their chiefs as custodians of ancestral, rural lands? To what extent do rural residents consider the absences of their chiefly leaders legitimate? In particular, to what extent do rural residents consider absent chiefs' participation in exchange relations sufficient to maintain their status? If they fail to participate adequately in exchange relations, as Ann fears may be the case for her, can such leaders maintain their roles as representatives of rural environments?

We answer these questions based on twelve months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in 2014/2015 and follow-up visits in 2018 by Stephanie and 2019 by Geoffrey. With a focus on the approximately 12,000 Lau-speakers, we spent a total of five months in Lau settlements in and around urban Honiara and eight months in the rural Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province, based out of Gwou'ulu village. Our primary goals were to uncover *everyday* lifeworlds involving the Solomon Islands state and village-town relations and so our methodological approach was centered on participant observation. While working in gardens, paddling in dug out canoes to bush markets, or taking a bus to town, we learnt about everyday life both through the practices that we participated in and the conversations that they generated. In other words, rather than primarily participating in political events and stimulating conversations about topics such as the election, chiefs, schools or other areas of immediate concern to our research, we gathered data on these topics when they emerged as relevant in our interlocutors' lives, both in what they did and what they said. We only organized semi-structured, follow-up interviews when a particular topic had clearly emerged as a

significant point of concern as was, for example, the case with the 2014 National Election during the campaign and immediately after it.

Finally, most of the people we interacted with were local non-elites, who worked as temporary labourers in low-paying, or irregular, jobs in Honiara or as 'home-boys,' fisherfolk and subsistence gardeners in rural areas. Most of these respondents were unlikely to ever assume any national leadership, and did not hold any substantial leadership position in their villages or even immediate families. Most were members of church groups such as the Anglican Mother's Union, but not their local leaders. Some were the nephews, second cousins or in-laws of chiefs but never close enough to make a reasonable claim to this position themselves. Their participation in local exchange relations was focused on maintaining everyday belonging, without any substantive ambitions to rise to any explicitly recognized leadership position within their kin or social networks beyond being perhaps the head of a nuclear household. We did engage in conversations with urban and rural elites such as Ann, as well as chiefs, bureaucrats, development workers, priests, church and school leaders, but these complemented rather than dominated our data collection.

### SOLOMON ISLANDS CENTRALIZED STATE

While comparatively little attention has been paid to how village-town relations shape rural residents' perception of their leaders, researchers and policymakers alike have broadly acknowledged that political centralization has contributed to divisions between rural and urban areas (*e.g.* see Allen et al. 2013; Allen and Dinnen 2016; Bennet 2002; McDougall 2014a; Premdas and Steeves 1985). For example, in their analysis of Solomon Islands as a postcolonial 'experiment in decentralization,' published seven years after Solomon Islands gained independence from the United Kingdom, Premdas and Steeves (1985) argue that the independent Solomon Islands state could only gain the necessary legitimacy if 'at a minimum... responsibility [is transferred] to units of government at the periphery. "Returning power to the people" would literally mean bringing government closer to the people' (1985:2) and, in particular, to rural residents who had been purposely excluded from colonial decision-making.

In response to anticolonial movements, especially the Malaitan Maasina Rule (see Akin 2013) and in preparation for independence, British colonial administrators had put in place some reforms aimed at decentralizing state governance (Allen et al. 2013; Premdas and Steeves 1985). They established Local Councils (later Area Councils) and Native Courts (later Local Courts) with Solomon Islanders as members. Responsible for issuing business licences and for collecting taxes, Local Councils had been designed as 'a form of local government that would, at once, be larger in scale than the typical small communities in which the people lived to permit viability and yet to be intimate enough to impact trust to groups that had habitually distrusted and fought each other' (Premdas and Steeves 1985:38–39; see also Akin 2013; Allen and Dinnen 2016). Native Courts were also tasked with recognizing local practices of conflict resolution and decision. They had to deal with criminal, civil and 'customary' cases and were led by headmen appointed by the colonial administration to assist British district commissioners and their officers (Akin 2013; Premdas and Steeves 1985).

Much went wrong with these early decentralization efforts. Headmen often abused their power while councils and courts were frequently critiqued for their unreliability and selective application of customary laws (Akin 1999, 2013; Premdas and Steeves 1985). Malaitans regularly criticised Native Courts set up by British authorities because they only acknowledged the legitimacy of compensation claims for theft and would not deal with

compensation demands after a murder (Akin 1999). Many councils and courts met irregularly and suffered from a lack of leadership because, among other issues, the positions were insufficiently rewarded with money and/or prestige (Premdas and Steeves 1985). Simultaneously, all major significant decision-making was still deferred to British administrators who were, after World War II, primarily based in the new capital, Honiara. These administrators allocated most government funds and services to where they lived, for example, in 1968, 44 percent of all government expenditures was spent in Honiara (Herlihy 1981:202).

Independence did not solve the problem of growing centralization. On the contrary, since then Solomon Islands has witnessed a further withdrawal of state-based governance from rural areas. Premdas and Steeves (1985) suggest that Solomon Islands burgeoning elite, themselves based in Honiara, feared that decentralization would tear the new country apart. It would also mean a loss of power and privileges for themselves. Just like their previous colonial administrators, these elites enjoyed Honiara's luxuries and 'the more [it] had to offer, the less the administration decentralized' (Bennet 2002:6). Things became worse in the 1990s, when structural adjustment programmes led to a reduction in the size of Solomon Islands public service and effectively abolished state-based rural governance (Allen et al. 2013; Allen and Dinnen 2016; McDougall 2014a). In 1998, Area Councils and Local Courts 'were dismissed and the raft of community bylaws administered at this level disappeared overnight' (Allen et al. 2013:10). They disappeared to such a degree that during our fieldwork most of our respondents under the age of 35 had not even heard of these institutions.

This dismantling of local government contributed to growing tensions and civil unrest that plagued primarily Honiara and Guadalcanal between 1998 and 2003. It underpinned demands from both militias, the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force, for a strengthening of decentralization mechanisms as a pre-requisite for any lasting peace (Allen and Dinnen 2016; Moore 2004). Accordingly, the Townsville Peace Agreement, signed in 2000, contained a clause providing for a constitutional review aimed at increasing provincial powers vis-à-vis those of the central governments. However, the quest for decentralization took a backseat when an Australia-led military and civil assistance mission (RAMSI) arrived in the country in 2003 (Allen and Dinnen 2016). Rather than decentralization, RAMSI prioritized measures focused on strengthening Solomon Islands existing system, in other words, its centralized government and public administration (Allen and Dinnen 2016).

This perpetual failure to decentralize is also visible in national government efforts to circumvent provincial governments as a possible avenue for expanding decentralization (Nanau 1998; Phillips 2020). While, as Melanie Phillips suggests, provincial governments often have a comparatively good understanding of local needs '[responding] to community issues with highly localised, highly negotiated solutions' (2020:2), they are regularly unable to afford such solutions. This is especially true for resource poor provinces who are unable to collect substantial taxes on, *e.g.* logging ventures; and these provinces largely depend on annual grants from the national government.<sup>6</sup> These grants were, however, reduced as cost-cutting measures during the Tensions (McDougall 2014a) and following broader reforms that aimed to bypass provincial authorities (Nanau 1998). Rather than channelling development funding through provincial actors, individual MPs have been tasked with implementing projects within their respective constituencies through discretionary funds, or so-called Constituency Development Funds (CDFs). CDFs have become a core area of government spending, with, for example, in 2015, 'MP allocations from the development and recurrent budgets [amounting] to some SBD426m, equivalent to just over 12 per cent of total budgeted expenditure ... or SBD8.5m (USD1m) per MP' (Batley 2015:1).

Debra McDougall (2014a) has argued and many Lau agree, CDFs have failed to facilitate an easier, decentralized distribution of government funds as was often claimed.<sup>7</sup> This was partly because in practice they require villagers to travel to town to request these funds. MPs are supposed to appoint a Constituency Development Officer (CDOs) who is based in the constituency and manages the distribution of funds. Yet, our respondents could not think of a single CDO who actually resided in a village rather than in Honiara. No one, so we were told repeatedly, enforces CDO's residency requirements. CDFs have, thus, become just another mechanism of the urban, centralized state.

With government and its spending remaining concentrated in Honiara, the infrastructural gap between the rural and urban has been perpetually increasing. Only about 6 percent of the country outside Honiara is connected to an electrical grid and of the mere 126 kilometers of sealed roads in the country, most are in and around the capital (World Bank 2018a, 2018b). Though there has been an overall expansion of health and educational services into rural Solomon Islands during the postcolonial period (Allen and Dinnen 2016), Solomon Islanders still need to travel to Honiara to access several core services (Hobbis 2016). In 2016, 73 out of a mere 86 medical doctors across the country were based at Honiara's National Referral Hospital (Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2016) and the same hospital is also home to the only X-ray machine in the country.

To those who can afford it, Honiara continues to offer access to luxuries that are not easily available elsewhere as they depend on cash incomes that are often only attainable in urban centers that offer employment opportunities, be it in the bureaucracy or as store clerk. These luxuries range from the shopping center where Ann and Stephanie were enjoying freshly brewed coffees to access to basic processed foods and goods such as 20kg bags of rice and mobile phones. Other pleasures can be found at the various high end hotels with their pools, bars and air-conditioned, serviced apartments. These hotels are often frequented by Solomon Islands political elites and individual hotels are even associated with particular political factions, playing a central role in forming governments in the aftermath of national elections (Steeves 2011). The exclusive pleasure zones provided by the hotels contribute to the alienation of MPs from the rural life style of their voters and serve to create a national leadership *in absentia*.

## URBAN VILLAGE LEADERS

Many of our respondents, villagers and urbanites, often hesitated to describe their MPs as *their* national leaders. In none of our conversations did respondents express any confidence that their MPs would, in the foreseeable future, become national leaders who are committed to rural environments. Here is how respondent, Mary, discussed with Stephanie her challenges in identifying a good candidate to vote for in the 2014 National Election:

Our MP came to Gwou'ulu only once, during the last campaign. He had no interest in us before. He has no interest in us now. If we want to talk to him, we have to go to Honiara. But he does not know us. We go to him, he does not see us... Every candidate promises that they listen to us. They lie. When they become MP they forget us... No good candidate has lived here.

Mary went on to note how she liked one candidate who had long lived in a neighbouring village. However, this candidate did not have any funds for his campaign and could therefore, according to Mary, not win. He would not be able to visit all villages during the campaign as he did not have the funds to rent a flatbed truck and so had to walk from

village to village with only a handful of supporters. Accordingly, though Mary, along with many others liked the candidate's rural embeddedness, they did not end up voting for him. This is partly because, as we have noted elsewhere (Hobbis and Hobbis 2017), elected officials are assumed to help those who have previously voted for them, with a candidate's campaign managers compiling lists of their supporters for any post-election distribution of electoral 'perks.' Because of the local candidate's lack of campaign funds, many worried about his ability to keep his promises.

Accordingly, and echoing Ann's concerns about the availability of funding for rural candidates, this rural candidate lost by a large margin to several other candidates who had been living and working in town and whose campaigns were funded by urban interests. National Elections were regarded as an opportunity to select another *urban* MP, but not a true leader of their ancestral home. 'MPs are not our true leaders. He is not our leader,' Mary said simply when I asked about her perception of the newly elected MP. 'He will not think about us.' Mary went on to say that if she and other villagers wanted to be heard, they needed to rely on their chiefs and send them to town. Villagers recognize their chiefs more readily as *their* national leaders, even though these leaders have to be based in Honiara as well. This leads chiefs to struggle to maintain villagers' trust in their own personal commitment to village needs, interests and values. As Marge put it:

We send our chiefs to town. We do not have many chiefs in Gwou'ulu because they are in Honiara for us. They talk to the government for us. They straighten out land disputes. They bring development for us.

Given the power and resources of an existing centralized state and its urbanized MPs, villages dispatch local leaders to Honiara to serve as *their* intermediaries, and in doing so extend the 'problem' with 'leadership in absentia' beyond that of just MPs. Villages lose their clan chiefs who are custodians of clan lands— with approximately 87 percent of Solomon Islands lands being customarily owned. The chiefs are tasked with bridging the distance between the villages and the state so as to locate, negotiate and secure 'development opportunities,' which can range from smaller projects through Constituency Development Funds to larger-scale projects such as, in the case of our primary field site, a tuna cannery, sea port, airport and township (the Suava Bay Development Project).

### **Negotiating development in town**

Though the Suava Bay Development Project is by no means uncontested (Hobbis 2016), most Lau people believe an attempt should be made to realize a version of this project to curb their dependence on migratory labour for cash. To push the project forward, a cluster of villages in the northern Lau Lagoon and Suava Bay area needs to solve their land disputes and formally determine which clan owns, and is thus entitled to, royalties from which plot of land. Multiple court proceedings are ongoing to this end. All of them have been taking place in Honiara courts. The clans involved also find themselves in ongoing negotiations with Solomon Islands Government to obtain necessary funds and permits such as business licenses for potential operators of the tuna cannery. These negotiations occur exclusively in town. Villagers also need their leaders in town to locate and convince interested businesses that could operate the cannery and adjacent facilities such as the port. The Lau we spoke with, thus, broadly agreed that if their clans want to maintain a voice in these negotiations, their most significant clan leaders, clan chiefs but often also their brothers, uncles and older sons, all of whom are able to lay some claim to land titles, *need* to be in Honiara. Any time that these national leaders are in their home villages, so we were told, might result in a

missed opportunity. They should visit home only to facilitate negotiations by, for example, collecting additional genealogies that may be required to register any customary land (see Foukona 2007).

The need to be in town for processing administrative requirements is exacerbated by what is sometimes called the ‘come back tomorrow system’. The 2016 Solomon Islands Public Sector Satisfaction Survey identified this as one of Solomon Islanders’ main frustration with local bureaucracy (Povey et al. 2016). A trip to, for example, the land registry office will often end early with visitors being told to ‘come back tomorrow,’ sometimes accompanied by additional utterances, such as ‘we have not yet been able to process your request’ or ‘we only need the Minister’s signature, but he is currently out of the country’ (see also Kwa’ioloa and Burt 2012). Persistence, showing up over and over again, is often the only way to maintain any hope for successfully negotiating any initiative that requires government support irrespective of its scale and importance.

Many projects suffer from ‘deaths by tomorrows.’ Projects die because ‘coming back tomorrow’ is no longer possible or what an applicant comes back to has fundamentally changed. For instance, an application process will often have to start anew when: 1) cabinet is reshuffled and a different MP has to be lobbied to move a project to the next stage; or 2) a responsible leader is called back to the village to help mediate a conflict, and, thus, stays away from town for too long so the respective project is ‘forgotten’ by relevant state agencies and their personnel. Given the cost and danger of a potential ‘death by tomorrows,’ several Lau noted that they were uncertain if they should ask clan chiefs based in town for help with managing village affairs. This is the case even though those who can lay claim to the role of clan chief are often deemed the most likely to most reliably and legitimately intervene in conflicts. In other words, rural residents perpetually have to ask themselves if they should risk a ‘death by tomorrow’ for their urban projects by calling an urban leader home.

When we asked if mobile phones could not ameliorate some of these concerns, by allowing engagement with state representatives from the village or by providing advice on village affairs from town, our respondents generally answered with a disappointed ‘no.’ Calling state services was seen by many as more unreliable than going in person (Hobbis 2018). Respondents who tried this option were told to ‘call back tomorrow’ or, most of the time, they did not reach anyone in the first place. Official government numbers are regularly out of service, because of technical difficulties or, as one telecommunication executive told Geoffrey, because the person who is supposed to answer has gotten fed up with the many calls and has simply unplugged the line. In comparison, participating in village affairs from town is easier. Clan chiefs were often called when conflicts in the village could not be solved without them. They would also call their village kin to check if any significant event had occurred that may require their attention. However, as Geoffrey notes elsewhere (Hobbis 2020), not everyone is convinced that conflicts can or should be mediated across a distance, *via* phones. By not living in the village, absent mediators could not ensure that their advice was faithfully followed. Perhaps more significantly, they were said to be removed from the necessary understanding of both the small events and broader context that may inform a particular conflict.

Some respondents expressed concern about the extent to which their absent national leaders actually remain committed to the morals that make them leaders and that was the reason why they would be called for help in the first place. Many asked if their absent leaders were still ‘good’ or able to understand their community or if they instead were focused on enjoying their urban lifestyle.

## URBAN SEDUCTIONS AND DISTRACTED LEADERS

Reflecting broader concerns about village-town relations in Melanesia (Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017), our village-based respondents were continuously worried about the moral consequences of living in town for anyone, but especially, their national leaders (see also Hobbis 2019). They were concerned their leaders may be corrupted by urban pleasures such as alcohol, laziness and sexually promiscuous behaviour (*e.g.* see also Donner 2002; Jourdan 1995; Maggio 2016). In 2010, the church village committee of Gwou'ulu had banned the open consumption of alcohol and had strongly urged any villager heading to Honiara not to indulge in 'sinful' drinking. However, many respondents, including members of the church committee, freely admitted that they do not follow such recommendations when in town. Instead, they enjoyed drinking, frequently to excess, and spoke of their seeking urban freedoms from village constraints.

Christine Jourdan describes these freedoms when discussing why young men and women are drawn to urban lifestyles:

[For example,] some young girls marvel at the freedom they experience at being able to wander around with their peers, and at being able to talk to the boys without facing the reprimands of their wantok [members of their language group]. They relish being spared the back-breaking work in the... fields that would have filled their days had they stayed in the village.... Boys and girls, will tell how easy life is in Honiara and how much they rest when they come to town... More [so]... what [they] are avoiding is... the control that their kin and members of older generations have over the young ones: control over work... control over wealth through a system of reciprocal obligations, etc. (1995:210–211)

Our observations complement Jourdan's and extend them to include members of the 'older generations.' As reflected in the actions of the church committee, many, irrespective of their responsibilities in town, can be seduced by these freedoms, even when they can hardly afford urban luxuries and waste money urgently needed for school fees or food on them. We were told national leaders and specifically chiefs were exposed to corrupting influences in town, not because they had more personal funds but because state representatives sometimes sought to distract chiefs from their mission. Rather than simply telling chiefs to 'come back tomorrow,' CDOs especially might invite chiefs for drinks, for example to the Cowboy's Grill, one of the most infamous hotel-associated bars and restaurants in town. As one respondent put it:

Our chiefs like to drink and CDOs pay for it... Our chiefs forget about us. They drink and they find O2s. They no longer want to come back.

'O2s' refer to second 'wives,' extramarital affairs but occasionally also cases of polygamy wherein leaders do not divorce their village-based wives but still marry and have a family with a second, urban wife. Many respondents saw this as immoral. Extramarital affairs can often lead to violent altercations, that may result in death or demands for monetary compensation which, if not followed suit, can lead to the burning down of houses or the destruction of other property (see also Allen et al. 2013). The moral issue of polygamy is more ambiguous. Among the Lau, it was traditionally a common practice. Leaders especially would marry multiple women to demonstrate and cement their claim to leadership. Today, however, with Christianity dominating across the Lau Lagoon, many interlocutors

rejected polygamy as an immoral practice and as one reason why individuals could lose their claim to leadership.

The problem is that while leaders *in* village settings can be held accountable for sexual transgressions, those in town cannot. For example, in Gwou'ulu, a village-based chief who took a second wife lost his position and was banished to live at the outskirts of the village with his second wife. His first wife, and the children from this marriage, were allowed to stay in their centrally-located house. In comparison, villagers have little recourse to similar punishments for their urban, national leaders, especially if it can mean losing out on a desired project. The case of Gwou'ulu primary school is exemplary. During our fieldwork, the school was often described as one of the best in North Malaita. This success was attributed to the headmaster, but also to Gwou'ulu villagers' primary contact in the Ministry of Education, Harry, a higher-ranking, yet polygamist bureaucrat. Harry had taken a second wife after his first did not bear him any children. Several of our respondents expressed sympathies for Harry's desire to have children, however, they also agreed that he should have divorced his first wife. After all, so they affirmed, polygamy is a 'sinful' practice. Harry's decision to 'live in sin' led some villagers to question his commitment to making decisions that were both moral and in the best interest of the village. Gwou'ulu was awash with discussions about what to do about his case. There was no ready alternative who could replace him, or as one person commented: 'We cannot do anything. Without Harry our school is in trouble, the future of our children. We cannot do anything.'

Many villagers worry that their national leaders and especially their chiefs are increasingly making town their primary residence, focus and source of belonging. Like Ann, many Gwou'ulu leaders have not returned from urban areas or they merely visit their rural homes after long periods of absence. Several urban clan chiefs even have children who have not lived at all in rural environments and thus have little personal knowledge of their ancestral lands of which their fathers are custodians. The same is true for many bureaucrats, who have settled permanently in town, just like Ann, and who do not teach the vernacular language to their children (see also Jourdan 2008). Some, especially bureaucrats, have converted to different Christian denominations and have turned away from village churches, which are a primary source of social cohesion and moral guidance in multi-clan villages (see also Hobbis 2019; Maggio 2016).

For many of our rural respondents, this reorientation away from their village roots raises complex questions of succession and rootedness. Who should assume the position next of being clan chief? Should it be an urban son who is often better schooled, more literate and well-versed in the bureaucratic knowledge necessary to expedite negotiations with state and business officials (see also McKeown 2015)? He may have little understanding of everyday village life, clan obligations and local land titles. He may even belong to a different Church. Perhaps it should be a cousin or uncle from the village who is more familiar with rural life, needs, interests and values. Yet he will need to spend time in town and may, consequently, be even more susceptible to its seductions while less capable in negotiating with the urban state. Some of these concerns were expressed by one Lau man:

We do not know what we should do. Our leaders are not good. We do not know their children and when their children arrive here they do not know how to fish, how to garden, they do not know our land.

#### LEADING WITHOUT GIVING?

Perpetual absence also seems to affect national leaders' willingness to participate in the exchange relations that lie at the heart of social reproduction across Melanesia and that are

the foundation for claims to legitimate local leadership (see Burt 1994; Dalsgaard 2013; Stewart and Strathern 1998). Many respondents complained that urban leaders inadequately contributed any resources to village affairs. Occasionally they may send a bag of rice to village-based family members or give some shell money to relatives as part, for example, of bridewealth exchanges. However, they gave little more than others and not according to their perceived status. Their gifts merely affirmed their belonging to a particular family but do not necessarily consolidate their claim to leadership within the broader kin networks that comprise their multi-clan, multi-family villages. Many commented on the increasing unwillingness of national leaders to provide adequate resources for village feasts. These acts of communal eating are meant to include every resident of a village or a cluster of villagers rather than just the narrower more kin-centric feasts of baptisms, weddings or funerals.

Research across Melanesia has identified the organization of feasts as a significant ritualized communicative activity (*e.g.* see Kahn 1986; Lemonnier 1990; Maranda 2010). Feasts lie at the heart of ritual cycles, warfare and the making (or unmaking) of social networks. Feasts can express and consolidate solidarity and create social cohesion as much as they can be about conflict and exclusion. The food that is shared (or not) in the Melanesian context especially pork is central to notions of belonging and for demonstrating claim to leadership. As Walter Ivens notes for the Lau, ‘the chiefs in Lau are... responsible for the carrying out of the big feasts, and these feasts are the most important things that occur in the social life of the communities as a whole’ (1930:87; see also Maranda 2010).

A feast is, above all, successful if its leaders can ensure that: anyone who wants to attend the feast can (*e.g.* by providing resources for travel fares); no one leaves the feast hungry; and everyone has access to the same food. To achieve this, leaders need to be able to provide the necessary food, if not personally then by convincing others to make adequate contributions. A leader who is able to do so cements their claims to leadership while unsuccessful feasts raise questions about a given leaders’ capacity or willingness to truly lead, serve and organise. Village feasts shape how rural residents perceive the legitimacy of their national leaders as leaders of *Gwou’ulu*.

The most significant feast during our fieldwork was organized as part of villagers’ efforts to realize the Suava Bay Development Project. Clan leaders organized this feast in collaboration with Solomon Islands Government (SIG). Between 15 and 25 pigs, and according to some maybe 50 pigs, were slaughtered. The exact numbers are unclear as individual clans sought to inflate the number of pigs they contributed to demonstrate their superiority. Individual clans prepared the foods for the feast separately, such as swamp taro, cassava pudding and fish. However, all the food was later equally divided across all the tables set up for the feast, including the leaders’ table. Though research participants described the feast as successful, they also noted that this did not mean their national leaders had truly demonstrated their commitment to their ancestral homes.

‘Our leaders only think about us when it helps them,’ Jen explained as she was watching the events unfold from the sideline. ‘Do you remember our Saints Day feast? Our cousins from other villages were there. Our chiefs did not come. They gave us no food, no pig.’ Jen was not the only one who made this comparison. Several respondents thought their absent chiefs had only contributed the necessary resources and time to the reconciliation feast because they personally had something to gain from its success. As intended, that feast had, at least temporarily, ended the land disputes surrounding the cannery project, and these national leaders could expect to benefit from subsequent royalties from the cannery. For some this explained why the same national leaders had not contributed to other important village feasts such as the Saints Day feast. In addition, some respondents believed the overarching significance of the reconciliation feast, with its inclusion of multiple villages and clans and the SIG as co-organizer, meant that even more pigs and other resources should

have been made available for attendees. More specifically, urban chiefs should have been able to persuade the SIG to contribute more to the feast.

SIG had given a 'mere' SBD50,000. For many this was not enough.

We need a lot of taro, cassava, and fish. We need petrol and some dance groups need new clothing. The government did not help us with this.

SIG funds were largely used to buy the pigs for the event, but they were not enough to cover all other adjacent costs. Especially problematic were travel fares. Urban leaders and other urban relatives had to make the trip to North Malaita for the reconciliation event. Clan members from other parts of Malaita also needed to attend. If a 'branch' of a clan was not participating, this could reignite rivalry and land disputes and nullify the efforts of the feast. The costs associated with bringing everyone to North Malaita were substantial. One group alone, based in Atoifi in Central East Malaita, needed at least SBD6000 worth in petrol to make the trip by boat. Every return trip to Honiara cost around SBD500 for ferries and flat-bed trucks. The problem was all the funds that urban leaders had been able to raise had already been spent and so individuals and groups had to raise their own funds. During the feast, some sold betel nut to participants to ensure their passage home.

Despite its successes, the reconciliation feast failed to instil sufficient confidence in villagers that their leaders - notably clan chiefs and MPs - cared sufficiently for them. Chiefs and closely-related bureaucrats were unable to persuade the local MP or other SIG representatives to adequately sponsor the reconciliation event. Further, reaffirming the MP's distance from his constituency, he did not even attend the feast, even though he had supported villagers when negotiating with the SIG for the cannery and related permits. Urban leaders were unable to leave no doubt that the goal of the feast was truly achieved. Other mishaps (see Hobbis 2016) further contributed to the feast not achieving its goal, which meant that eventually the land disputes continued. For many, this failure reaffirmed their broader disillusionment with their absent national leaders. It once again raised the question of how rural residents can ensure their national leaders do, truly, remain *their* leaders, leaders of their ancestral lands, even when they are primarily in town. Here urban life and the requirements of a bureaucratic urban state deepen national leaders' alienation from their homes.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NATIONAL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

When we talked to absent national leaders, especially chiefs, they often expressed exhaustion about their relatives' demands. Just like Ann, they struggled every day with balancing their urban and rural lives, with having to say no to what many described as excessive demands for contributions to anything ranging from school fees to village feasts. They were also distraught with what they considered unreasonable expectations from their rural kin about what they could actually achieve in town. They explained, for example, that the SBD and SIG contribution to the reconciliation feast was a true success, and that their need to return, sit and stand in muggy, crowded office receptions was anything but 'luxurious' urban living. They expressed exhaustion about having to negotiate the seductions of urban living. Even those national leaders with second, urban families often freely admitted their 'sinfulness'. Some noted that they had turned away from their Anglican roots because other Christian denominations in town provided more guidance on how to negotiate urban temptations (see also Maggio 2016). Many commented how they wished to return to their homes, at least for some time, to withdraw temporarily from these urban seductions. These urban

leaders then explained how they were unable to return because their relatives also demanded they continue to negotiate with SIG and other urban organizations.

Many urban leaders acknowledged, just like Ann, that their rural relatives were right to expect more gifts from them. They admitted they needed to share to maintain their 'passports' to return home and that they needed to share extensively if they wanted to remain recognized as leaders upon their returns (see also Dalsgaard 2013). In discussing their struggles with urban immoralities, they agreed with their village kin that urban life often distracted them from their commitments to their ancestral homes. These urban national leaders recognized their prolonged absences created distances between them and their rural kin that weakened their claims to leadership and that undermined their ability to truly represent rural interests, needs and value. These urban leaders concurred that leadership in Solomon Islands is in 'crisis' which had been exacerbated by processes of centralization that required important individuals to negotiate with 'foreign' and other 'external' actors, and so had to be absent from their rural homes.

None of our respondents could suggest a solution. They also agreed that integrating chiefs into the formal political process would also not solve the problem. One clan chief, Matt, supported the idea of formal recognition for chiefs, because it meant he would receive some monetary compensation for all the hours he had spent 'coming back tomorrow.' Though Matt also noted:

everything will remain the same. We still need to be in Honiara. We still have to solve land disputes. We still need money from the government. We still need to find business partners. We have to be in Honiara.

In other words, Matt could not see how a more formal recognition of his status as chief would change anything about the process that he, and rural communities, had to follow to obtain permits, to formalize land ownership, and more broadly to facilitate development initiatives for their rural homes.

Matt was in his late 60s and he remembered the era of Area Councils and Local Courts. He strongly supported a return to such institutions since he believed they had brought some stability to rural areas due to their commitment to conflict resolution and the comparatively strong role that chiefs like himself had played in them. However, Matt also pointed out that these local government mechanisms were largely focused on justice. They were not responsible for bringing development projects to rural areas and they usually failed to resolve those land conflicts that were associated with development projects. 'We always had to go to the High Court in Honiara.' Most important decisions have always been made in Honiara, and it there that rural residents need to travel to make their voices heard. From Matt's perspective this was unlikely to change anytime in the future, even if more 'local' leaders like himself were integrated into the formal political process.

As research across Melanesia has shown, consolidating the position of chiefs, or even more broadly of 'local leaders' within state-based systems of government and governance is fraught with problems (*e.g.* see Allen et al. 2013; Patterson 2002; Tabani 2019; White 2007; White and Lindstrom 1997). A frequently noted concern is that codification of chiefly roles essentially contradicts the flexibility and diversity of Melanesian leadership systems and its subsequent ability to adapt to the needs of 'modernity' (*e.g.* see Tabani 2019; White 2007). Simultaneously, research has shown how this very 'modernity' has unraveled localized moral economies that were the basis for claims to leadership (*e.g.* see Allen et al. 2013; Patterson 2002). Allen et al. (2013), for example, note how especially when development projects such as logging are concerned, chiefs struggle to maintain their legitimacy. In those contexts, their actions are seen as largely self-interested, not much different from Gwou'ulu

villagers' critiques of their leaders' contributions to the reconciliation feast. Our paper adds to this latter concern calling for more attention to how leadership is negotiated on a village-town continuum (see Hobbis 2019)— a process whereby rural lifeworlds are intimately entangled and increasingly dominated by urban environments. Only then, we contend, is it possible to develop a better understanding of, and possible responses to, Solomon Islands 'crisis of leadership' that encompasses national leaders such as MPs as much as more locally embedded ones, in particular clan chiefs.

## ENDNOTES

1. Written from Stephanie's perspective.
2. At the time of our conversation, Ann's village did not have mobile phone reception.
3. Ann also commented that her gender was the primary obstacle to her succeeding as a leader in Solomon Islands (see also *e.g.* Baker 2018). In this paper, we do not engage in depth with gender since we did not observe any significant gendered transformations of leadership as a result of the problem of distance. Our observations differ from those of Debra McDougall who found that in response to centralization rural leadership positions in Ranongga, Western Province, have become so devalued that female chiefs have emerged alongside the inclusion of women in clan committees. She found 'a chieftainship that has been "domesticated"... focused primarily on maintaining amicable relationships within kin groups *rather than engaging with powerful foreigners*... [which] is still mostly reserved for men" (2014b:205; our emphasis).
4. While definitions of 'chiefs' are perpetually contested, our own is flexible and driven by whom our interlocutors identified as such at any given point (see also Tucker Sade 2019).
5. For a detailed discussion of this reassessment and the historical and contemporary role of chiefs and other leaders among the Lau see Hobbis (2016:201–208).
6. Aid money is rarely distributed to the provinces, with, for instance, Malaita merely receiving approximately AUS\$500,000 from foreign countries in 2018. In this context, it is difficult to predict the exceptional 2020 commitment of AUD\$35 million in financial aid to Malaita from the United States. It is speculated to be a response to Malaita's rejection of Solomon Islands diplomatic shift from Taiwan to China (Wasuka and Bahmani 2020).
7. For a more detailed discussion of the various challenges CDFs face see Batley (2015).

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