

# TREASURED ISLANDS

Eleanor Rimoldi

(Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand)

## Introduction

This paper is based on fieldwork on Buka-Bougainville, which now has the status of an ‘autonomous region’ of Papua New Guinea, located around 1000 kilometres from Port Moresby, and on Waiheke Island which is 17 kilometres from downtown Auckland, New Zealand. Bougainville and Waiheke, with their very different histories and cultures, are nevertheless perceived by others as ‘treasure islands’ and they perceive themselves as being so different from their associated political entities as to desire either separate treatment, or full independence. I want to consider the effects of social/cultural strategies that seek to secure island identity while remaining dependent in one way or another on the ‘outside world’. Although islands are valued in many different ways, the means for their survival in the contemporary world may well depend on a universal means of exchange—money. It is the process of globalisation and standardisation of financial transactions through technology that may, in a seeming contradiction, allow for individuation and localisation, while remaining connected to the world at large.

Geographically, islands are generally defined in relation to their size, being surrounded by water, and their distance from a mainland. But the perception of what makes an island an island also follows from political, economic and cultural mapping. The Buka islanders, where I carried out fieldwork from 1975 to 1979 (Rimoldi and Rimoldi, 1992) and again in 2000, often referred to the much larger island across Buka Passage (about a ten-minute trip by canoe) as ‘Big Buka’ and themselves as ‘Little Buka’ or just ‘Buka’. However, on maps of Bougainville, Buka appears alone at the northern tip of the larger island. Overall, the population of Bougainville is about 154,000 (Buka about 35,000 of that) with a land area of about 9300 square kilometres. Maps of the region show a line drawn across the Solomons chain. That is an artificial distinction—an artefact of the colonial division of Pacific territories. Bougainvilleans recognise Solomon islanders as kin (both are largely matrilineal societies) in spite of local variations in custom and language. The Solomon Islands gained full independence from Great Britain in 1978. Bougainville, which had been a protectorate of the United Nations administered by Australia, was included in PNG when it became independent in 1975, in spite of repeated objections carried to the United Nations, and a brief insurrection in the same year when a temporary compromise solution was reached. Bougainville was granted special provincial powers which ultimately were given to

other tribal areas in the country. However, full independence remained an issue for Bougainvilleans.

Waiheke lies inside the waters of the Hauraki Gulf in the port of Auckland. It is 25 kilometres long and 20 kilometres at the widest point. The island, with its 96 miles of coastline, was more or less ignored by outside administrators, and in 1945 its 835 residents rejected a merger with Auckland City. In 1970, the Waiheke County Council was established, but by 1989 a national government “shake-up in local government . . . led to amalgamation with Auckland City [and] a subsequent call for de-amalgamation failed to restore its independence” (Picard, 2005:49). Auckland City is seen as the ‘mainland’ which exacts taxes and regulations that many Waihekeans feel should not apply to them. In spite of no real ethnic difference from that of the rest of New Zealand, they see the island as different in its values and way of life from the big city whose spires are just barely visible on a clear day. The improvement in the ferry service over the last two decades has cut travel time in half and encouraged new settlement that seemed to the long-time locals to change their world overnight—‘old time Waiheke’ was being taken over by middle-class and wealthy newcomers. From a population of about 3500 in 1978, there are now about 8000 permanent residents. Over 1000 daily commuters are prepared to travel 40 minutes by ferry twice a day from the island to work in Auckland city. As one of these commuters, I am amused that colleagues in the city find this colourful and wonder how we can survive the ‘rigorous’ commute over sometimes stormy seas, even though the delays and dangers of Auckland’s motorways are legendary.

## Treasure

Two newspaper reports that recently caught my attention were both headlined ‘Treasure Island’. One referred to Bougainville and its gold and copper deposits, and the other referred to Waiheke Island in the *New Zealand Herald* ‘Real Estate’ section. Many, if not most, of the residents of these two islands are alarmed at the effects of such perceptions of treasure on the quality of life that they value on the island they call home. On Waiheke, it is ironic that even those people who rush to buy increasingly valuable land and build expensive houses to replace more traditional simple cottages soon adopt the identity of a ‘local’ and join the struggle against further development of the island. One effect of this is a rise in rates that threatens to drive less well-off ‘old-time’ Waihekeans off the island and has generated a renewed cry for ‘secession’ from Auckland City Council jurisdiction.

Bougainville is a minefield of treasure. As a rich source of copper and gold, it helped to support the economic base for an independent Papua New Guinea. It is a relatively small island that became a focus for global economic and political interests supported by the World Bank and the United Nations. In 1969, villagers tried to stop bulldozers from preparing the way for the Panguna copper mine with a human chain—to no avail. In 1988, matters came to a head over disputes related to royalties and pollution. Francis Ona and his supporters closed down the mine. After a 10-year war, and extended period of negotiation and reconciliation that resulted in quasi-autonomy for Bougainville, the mine is still closed. Ona remained in his stronghold at Panguna until his death early in

2005. But now there are whispers in the new Bougainville government about re-opening the mine to support the ‘autonomy’ Bougainville fought for, which now requires an economic base to survive and prove its viability and prepare itself for the promised referendum on full independence at some point in the future—probably decades away, if ever.

The relationship between economics and identity is not always simple, nor is it a straight forward proposition to locate the evidence to support a theory that links values to island identity, even when islanders themselves make such a claim. Island dependency and resistance in relation to ‘mainland’ economic/political jurisdiction creates internal conflicts, mediating between the force of entropy and the perception of distance. Such contradictions create a dialectic, and one effect of this can be to reinforce the experience of a common, treasured ‘island culture’ clinging to a limited but valuable landmass—a treasure that must be protected.

## Value

In relation to Bougainville, I have not had the sense that the desire for independence from Papua New Guinea is felt as part of an island identity per se. Whereas on Waiheke, I think many residents identify strongly as islanders, and what they share is the island rather than longstanding ties of kinship and communal ownership of land. I think of Waiheke as an island of strangers who articulate a common identity most strongly when united against Auckland City. Bougainville identity is an expression of historical and contemporary social/cultural values, and a way of life which exists “in the minds of people in a web of social relations” (Graeber 2001:9) based on centuries of political/economic practices that allowed for a successful adaptation to their environment. Bougainville is still deeply influenced by the practices and values based on matrilineal inheritance of chiefly status and rights to land.

Francis Ona, leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, chose to isolate himself and his followers from the peace process in order to make the point that they were already independent, and by all accounts, his community used the land and traditional knowledge along with innovative application of Western knowledge and technology (some was scavenged from the mine site) to support that independence. The settlement, near Panguna, is called Mekamui, but it also became known as the ‘no-go zone’ by peacekeepers, Ausaid, and even the new Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG). Negotiations with Mekamui are diplomatic in nature. Ona’s death early in 2005 has made the future of his settlement uncertain.

Ona’s retreat into a more self-contained, traditional, cooperative community has been compared to other social movements in Melanesia, including the Hahalis Welfare Society on Buka. The latter comparison, made by some of Ona’s followers themselves, was the topic of some debate in the Hahalis community in 2000, where there was both interest and suspicion surrounding these claims. Both Ona’s Mekamui and the Hahalis Welfare Society withdrew and turned inward in order to use the power of customary knowledge to regain some control over the process of economic and social change resulting from colonisation in its many forms. At the same time, there are many

differences between these two movements—a topic too complex to fully explore here. It is the process of withdrawal as a strategy that I wish to emphasise.

Every now and then some Waiheke islanders also call for an independent Waiheke. Many Waihekeans think of the sea as a virtual ‘moat’ around their way of life and want to maintain it. They do not want a bridge or a tunnel to be built at some point where the mainland comes closest to Waiheke. The small Maori community, depleted historically by tribal wars and European confiscation, is represented by the very open multicultural Piritahi Marae. While one might expect that they would be more entitled than settler Waihekeans to claim the island as their own, they seem more inclined to invite the rest of the community in to share in what the *marae* has to offer. This contrasts with some of the more strident debates among the settlers as to who is a real ‘local’ or genuine Waihekean.

Sometimes it seems that the ways in which Waihekeans work to maintain their borders amounts to a kind of social sabotage. In the summer, Waiheke is a major holiday destination and the population can nearly double from the usual 8000 permanent residents. Some residents take advantage of this by renting out their homes to tourists and holiday makers at a high rate, thus less well-off Waihekeans can recover some of the cost of annual council rates while staying with friends or relatives over the summer. There were complaints this year that visitors could not find space in the public camping grounds because so many Waiheke residents had moved out of their houses to rent them to visitors, and then pitched a tent for a few dollars at the camping ground. Islanders devise many evasive tactics to profit from visitors while avoiding excessive disruption to their own stated values of community, privacy and a relaxed life-style. Waihekeans talk about wanting to pull up the drawbridge when the tourist season arrives. However, this tendency towards entropy is constrained by a need for the income tourism delivers. The ferry service that links Waiheke to Auckland City depends on the tourist season, and a fall in visitors means a rise in ticket prices for locals. Daily commuters have begun to wonder if they can still afford to live on the island and work in the city. Increases in the cost of transportation and a huge rise in rates (reflecting the value of the real estate) threaten to undermine the balance between dependency and resistance that has become part of the identity of Waiheke islanders and kept entropy at bay. I use ‘entropy’ here in the Greek sense of ‘entropē’ or a turning toward, or in the case of islands, a turning inward rather than outward. As a scientific metaphor, it might be more appropriately used to describe the measure of the amount of energy unavailable for work in a thermodynamic system. Entropy keeps increasing and available energy diminishing in a closed system. A truly ‘closed system’ is, however, difficult to imagine in a social system, and thus I use the term entropy as an analogy.

The establishment of a community in a more remote corner of Waiheke reflects this entropic tendency—forming a communal eco-village of fifteen families established some ten years ago. Financial arrangements are central to the values of the group. They are all shareholders in a 170 hectare property where they can find their own balance between isolation and the benefits of a face-to-face consensus style ‘self-governing’ way of life and connection with the ‘outside’. Some of the residents work in the city,

while some on the island, and others just subsist on their piece of property. Islands within islands.

Recently, a Waiheke woman who had been in the retail business on Waiheke for 34 years initiated a Waiheke credit card which is available only for Waiheke residents and accepted at Waiheke shops. It is a kind of geographic loyalty card and works towards the kind of exchange circuits that localise identity and are specifically not available to outsiders, yet makes use of global technological advances such as debit machines and computer technology. It is also the case that moving off the island may not always cut you off from all kinds of credit in the community. It partly depends on your 'island identity', and whether or not that is in sufficient credit to warrant overlooking geographic dislocation. Although this initiative represents a connection with the wider world through technology and the consumption of off-shore goods, there is at the same time an entrenchment of the local through the localisation of debt. There is also potential for entropy if earnings as well as purchases become overwhelmingly local.

## Money

Keith Hart has proposed that money, in combination with technology and globalisation, offers humanity a unique circumstance in which to develop a more equal and just world. In order to move beyond the present inequality in wealth and power which he sees as the real threat to democracy, Hart says "[s]omething has to give; but our intellectual task today is to envisage a revolution that is universal, not just limited to individual states" (2000:64):

*The meaning of money is thus what each of us makes of it. It is a symbol of our relationship, as an individual person, to the community (hitherto more often singular than plural) to which we belong. This relationship may be conceived of as a durable ground on which to stand, anchoring identity in a collective memory whose concrete symbol is money. Or it may be viewed as the outcome of a more creative process in which we generate the personal credit linking us to society. This latter outlook, however, requires us to abandon the notion that society rests on anything more solid than the transient exchanges we participate in. And that is a step few people at present are prepared to take, preferring to receive the money they live by, rather than make it. (Hart, 2000:263)*

The 'monetization' of traditional cultures has usually been treated as a process of subversion, undermining the integrity of ways of life that were hitherto resistant to insidious commerce. Hart contrasts the use of money in Western economies with what he calls 'indigenous' societies around the world that:

*Take Western money in their stride, turning it to their own social purposes rather than bending themselves to its supposedly impersonal logic . . . there are two circuits of social life one, the everyday, is short-term, individuated and materialistic; the other, the social, is long-term, collective and idealized, even spiritual. The expediency of market transactions falls into the first category, and all societies seek to subordinate them to the logic of social reproduction in the long run. For some reason . . . money has*

*acquired in Western economies a social force all of its own, whereas the rest of the world retains the ability to keep it in its place. (Hart, 2000:270-271)*

There are many examples of indigenous inventiveness in relation to money including those social/political/economic movements sometimes referred to as ‘cargo cults’ that were seen by various colonial administrations in the Pacific region as a threat to their rule and the establishment of a state controlled economy. One such movement, Maasina Rulu in the Solomon Islands, was harshly suppressed by the British:

*So many were in jail that the labour-intensive economy of farming and fishing became practically unsustainable back home. To get their young men back from the prison camps on Guadalcanal, the Malaitans agreed to stop Maasina Rulu and drop their demands for self-rule and higher wages. “We could have done great things [recalled one old chief] but the British stopped us because we ignored them and were a threat to their rule. So we came back here and ignored them until they gave us independence in 1978”. (McDonald 2003:56)*

Some indigenous societies retain traditional objects of value as a medium of exchange, as in the East New Britain island province of PNG. The provincial government has legislated for the use of traditional currency, *tabu*, in the formal sector, effectively recognising a dual currency system in the province. This enabled people to “transform their traditional wealth into modern PNG currency. Conversely, Tolais who need shell money for their customary obligations or settling disputes could exchange PNG currency for *tabu*” (The National, 2002).

Economic movements, or experiments, that seem to emerge from and contribute to island identity potentially share a direction towards greater equality, independence and flexibility in relation to economic exchange. Innovation and flexibility is almost certainly the only way that small island cultures will be able to survive and generate some form of economy of scale. Whether or not small islands are resource rich as in Bougainville’s copper and gold, or Waiheke Island’s real estate, they will remain attractive to major powers as strategic territories. The implications of their struggles for some sort of self-determination are basic lessons in the relation between self and society.

It would be difficult in this day and age to deny that “[e]xclusion from the economy quite simply means potential exclusion from society as a whole” (Godelier, 2004:8). However, it is in the nature of that economy and the means of exchange that human beings are able to discover treasure and determine its value.

## Conclusion: Subaltern Value

*Subalternity as a value . . . is a form of consciousness about human relationships. Subalternity as the radical questioning of the received doctrine of the elite is not something that only politically subordinated people can do. It is a value that intellectuals can appropriate for themselves if they so desire; for the radical humanist intellectual, subalternity is the supreme value. (Gregory, 1997:310-311)*

The position of small island cultures in a globalising world is inevitably subaltern and the strategies they use to survive may well depend on finding a unique, creative way to protect as well as generate treasure that is valued, and has value—generating cultural and material energy against the force of entropy. Anthropologists have known for a long time that ‘the economy’ of any given society is not necessarily based on money or commerce as we know it. And as compelling as Hart’s argument may be, we must also consider alternatives. Maurice Godelier, the eminent economic anthropologist draws our attention to this in his essay “What Mauss Did Not Say”:

*In an era in which the idea that “everything is for sale” . . . is rapidly gaining worldwide credence, it is urgent that historians and anthropologists begin to re-examine the place of non-commercial relations in market societies and to seek to determine whether there are realities essential to the life of societies that lie beyond the market and will continue to do so. (Godelier, 2004:8)*

Focusing on two such different islands is like comparing apples with oranges, but that is what we need to do in order to abolish the notion that the difference between them is essential or that Melanesian islanders are somehow outside of history when in fact they are contemporaries. Yet, for Bougainville-Buka, and for Waiheke, their own perception of the ‘difference’ that justifies some form of self-determination may be influenced by the nature of their island geography, but ultimately will depend on what they value and to what extent they can protect their treasure without destroying it in the process.

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