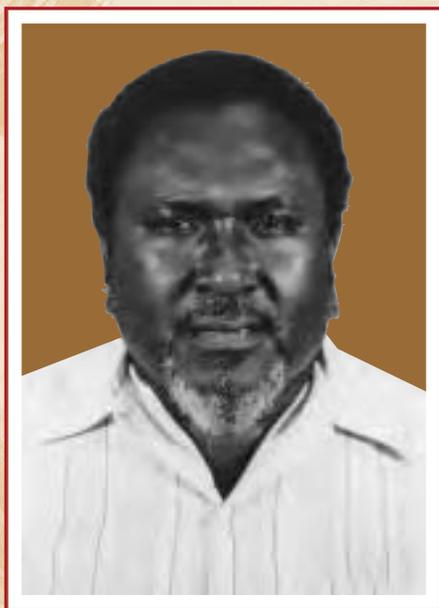


JOURNEYS IN A SMALL CANOE

The life and times of a Solomon Islander



LLOYD MAEPEZA GINA

Edited by Judith A. Bennett with Khyla J. Russell

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To my dear wife Olive, my children and grandchildren, and the young people of Solomon Islands. And to my long-deceased mother and father also. How I wish they were alive to read this book.

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Preface

Writing one's own life is not a simple task. There are always ideas flowing in from all sides. When thoughts unfold they demand to be said, yet there are reservations, too! In other words, writing is controlling the unfolding of thoughts in a sequence, but taking care not to let your readers fall by the wayside out of boredom. This was my first concern before I set to writing. Once the writing starts, it continues, like setting off into a wide sea of interesting and sometimes unexpected challenges, but then facing the difficulty of maintaining progress. Once over this part, the beginning, I had to be patient with the long process that was to follow. The journey was longer than I expected, but it has been an interesting one.

The urge to write something of my own life, how it progressed as I grew up! My various experiences up to adulthood had been bubbling within me way back in 1978, the same year as our country's independence. But I did nothing after that. I had never written a thing at all, though I had collected various information like parliamentary writings, journals and names of various expatriate personnel in the Government. In 1985 I was very conscious that I would one day put work into some serious writing. In 1987 I sounded out my intention with a friend of mine, Dr Ron Crocombe, who met up with me in Honiara. He pointed out to me that the Speaker of the Fiji Parliament, the Hon Tomasi Vakatora, had written his autobiography and had been published. He impressed on me that I could do the same,

but could cover wider experiences of my earlier life. There was the early Methodist establishment and my childhood days at Munda and elsewhere in the islands. There were also the memories of World War II. Much later, I had my firsthand experiences working in the colonial administration, leading to this country attaining its independence. The times after independence have been interesting too.

When he reminded me of these, I was so stirred up with determination to get on with the writing of a book. I felt, however, that my friend Dr R. Crocombe was a very busy man himself. I avoided bothering him with extra work. I, however, benefited from his wise advice, his indications to areas to tap for funding assistance, like in New Zealand and Australia, or a contact with Professor Asesela Ravuvu of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. Dr Asesela posted me Tom Vakatora's autobiography. Vakatora was my former Fiji Speaker colleague and I really admired his book.

In April 1990, at a time when I thought about sitting down to write at my wife Olive's home at Pazaju on Vella Lavella Island, a consultant for Shedden Agribusiness Pty Ltd of South Melbourne, Australia, asked me to join his team of consultants. Their task was to carry out a study of the Allardyce forest land on Isabel Island at the request of the Isabel Province. The Solomon Islands Government had given to the Australian Development Aid Bureau, which was funding this project, my name as a contact for the Australian consultants. So I met with the leader of the group, Mr Bob MacKillop. I helped him mostly on the social aspects of the communities that would naturally move in to populate the Allardyce area when it became a centre of future development activities. Kia village and its neighbouring villages would be the first of the many communities around Isabel Island to be attracted to participate in projects on the Allardyce land. So our social study was concentrated on the men and especially the women of Kia village. Bob MacKillop and I then developed

an agreement that he, on his return to Australia, would make contact with those close to possible funding assistance for my writing of an autobiography, such as the Department of Pacific and Asian History at The Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. I left that part with him.

After he had returned to Australia, he wrote to me that he had made contact with someone and informed me to expect a letter of inquiry soon. In January 1992, I finally received a letter — 'Mr Bob MacKillop wrote me a letter regarding your interest in writing your life history'. This came from a woman lecturer in history at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. And she was none other than the historian who had already published a book, *Wealth of the Solomons* (Honolulu, 1987), as a result of her great interest in the history of the Solomons — Dr Judith Bennett. Judith, in this way, had come into my world. I could now begin to achieve my hope, to write these recollections of experiences and thoughts of my life.

Fortunately, for this kind of project, Judith happened to be the Inaugural Senior Visiting Fellow at the College of Higher Education in Honiara. Having known of her presence there, I willingly travelled to Honiara to have a meeting with her. At that meeting, I asked her if she could assist me in writing my autobiography. She agreed most willingly which was very kind of her. So on her next visit, she and her friend, Khyla Russell, came to my home, Pazaju on Vella Lavella Island, and spent two weeks talking with me, my wife Olive and some members of my family. We talked of my personal family histories, which I've written down, and continued the rest of the time taping my recollections of public service days in the British Protectorate and my years as the first Speaker of the Parliament of Solomons at independence. As they left to return to New Zealand I entrusted to Judith the various documents which I had started to write plus others related to my life.

Judith was widely known in administrative circles in the Central District, at Honiara. I knew of the research visit of

a group of two geographer professors with some students from the East-West Centre of the University of Hawaii back in the early 1970s. I was then AAO (or Assistant District Officer as the people have known me) of Central District based in Honiara. I didn't meet any member of the group, but, well after that time, in the home of a friend, I happened to watch a documentary film made during the visit of that group, on their visiting of Chief Moro's village at Makaruka, Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. It had been a huge occasion when a big crowd of Chief Moro's adherents gathered and some important cultural events took place there. It culminated in a feast and mass dancing around a heap of pigs ready for slaughtering and mounds of garden crops — taros, yams, panas and potatoes and local cabbages and vegetables. To follow the custom of that event, everyone was asked to dress in cultural fashion, thus all expatriate visitors had to be attired in the *kabilato* garment (a dress called 'masi' or 'tapa' in Fiji and Tonga). And what took my attention most was a white female who danced around with her local female counterparts and who, like them, wore a *kabilato* garment around her hips and another covering her breasts. It aroused anxiety in us Solomon Islanders at that time as we hardly could dictate to a white woman what she should wear. But to comply with special cultural norms such women are at liberty to choose to follow suit by the invitation of the local women. The white menfolk were a hilarious lot! Likewise they all wore *kabilato* on their hips and only bare chests and hanging bellies at top. A chap among us watching said that the white lady was Judith Bennett. So, if that was true, I had seen Judith for the first time in that documentary film. The first time I met Judith personally was at Kira Kira where I was the Government Agent of the Eastern District. Judith was travelling along the Arosi localities on Makira Island and she ended up at the Eastern District headquarters at Kira Kira, where we met.

In 1993 the funding for getting together with Judith and Khyla to continue writing was still a problem, despite my having solicited their enthusiasm. They already had started transcribing the tapes back in Dunedin, New Zealand. Unfortunately some of the tapes were old ones which we taped over and they had not recorded properly, so my recollections on these needed to be done all over again. I therefore expressed to Judith my desire to redo this part and to begin the long process of answering the many questions formulating in Judith's mind related to the other material. She had thought the same, too, and was anxious to discuss the structure and organisation of the manuscript. And so we planned for me to visit New Zealand for two months, preferably in late 1994, so as to avoid the worst of the winter there.

While I applied for the Australian South Pacific Cultures Fund through the Australian High Commissioner's Honiara office, Judith also submitted her application to the Macmillan Brown Centre at Canterbury University, Christchurch, New Zealand, for support. The Australian funding was approved, so was that from the Macmillan Brown Centre.

In writing this autobiography, I see the benefits as follows:

- Solomon Islands does not have much writing by Solomon Islanders, especially for the young to read, and this book may be of interest because it is set in our islands and discusses things of concern to us.
- I see my life as a part of Solomon Islands history, as I have lived through the changes from the colonial period to independence. We should be aware that half of the population of this country is fifteen years and under and these young people know little about what life was like during the colonial days.
- I believe people outside Solomon Islands may also be interested in the life experiences and views of a Solomon Islander who has played a part in his

country's history. Judith, for one is no exception, she is very interested in the Solomons and its history. I have asked her to help me arrange the book and draw out of me the information and ideas I have.

In the course of writing this book, I had my share of discouragement. When in Christchurch, a long-time friend outside New Zealand passed a message to me that Judith would treat me only as a university student and would even pressure me to write a book for her which in fact belonged to me. Secondly, it was said that her securing funding from the Macmillan Brown Centre was really to her advantage for the writing of a book on forest history of Solomon Islands.

Concerning this apparent white blackmail, we talked the matter over quite intensely. I found it to have no truth and, as things turned out, it proved just to the contrary. We shared the same firm commitment to the goal. Later in Honiara, in 1998, I was informed by a close friend that most editors of books try to delay publication until the owner or writer passed away so that the editor would get all the benefits of praises and commendations for the book. But similarly I saw through this as an outright blackmailing tactic from someone who had intended, but failed, to start to write a book himself.

The trust I have in Judith and Khyla remained tantamount in this book project. With effort and persistence, we overcame all difficulties and finished the long journey of book-writing. I hope the reader will find the book as interesting to read as it was for me to write.

Lloyd Maepeza Gina
Pazaju, Vella Lavella
Solomon Islands

Editor's preface

This began a long time ago. Sir Lloyd Maepeza Gina discussed writing his life story with Bob MacKillop who contacted me. Like many things to do with my work in Solomons history, this project was not planned and not sought after, as I had other work to do. Once I met Maepeza in 1992, however, the canoe was in the water, but neither of us thought the journey would take so long.

Maepeza and I think we met much earlier in 1977, when I was on my way to Heuru in Makira to do some oral history relating to pre-war plantations and trade. He is right when he says in this book about being known as the 'black DC' (government agent), because that is what someone called him before I met him very briefly at Kira Kira, the district headquarters. I also knew his late brother, John (everybody knew John or, more correctly, John knew everybody!), and later met his father, Belshazar, in Roviana. The Gina family, it seems, had ways of popping up in my life. About 1991, in Warrington, Otago I was at a dinner and mentioned the Solomons; one of the dinner guests, an old gentleman, recalled Belshazar's visits on Methodist deputation work to New Zealand before World War II. Now, Belshazar's granddaughter and Maepeza's daughter, Mariga, is studying landscaping at Lincoln University near Christchurch, following the path of her elder sister, L'Amour, who did university studies in New Zealand, too. More recently, in October 2001, I met Maepeza's son Lloyd in Canberra where he went with his Australian wife

after fleeing Honiara during the civil war and coup of 1999–2000. How the world has turned!

I agreed to take on this work because I believe that Solomon Islanders need to know about their own, a conviction that Maepeza shares. In the first flush of independence in 1978 and the years that followed, there has been a loss of memory of the complexity of the colonial experience. Some want to forget it, some know very little about it, and some want to blame it for everything that has gone awry since 1978. My interest has been in those who lived their lives as colonised people and how they trod the path from colonisation into regained, but transformed, sovereignty and independence.

The logistics of the task have sometimes been formidable. It started off easily enough, but only after one of those 'all's well that ends well' transitions in the Solomons. Delayed with shipping in Vanikoro in mid-1992, I sent a message to Maepeza to say I could not make our appointed meeting at Barakoma, Vella Lavella. The message got as far as Honiara and was lost. When eventually we got to Gizo, by prior arrangement we went across to Choiseul to meet Rev Lesley Boseto at Mboemboe. On our return to Gizo after a day at sea in an open motorboat, we looked forward to a shower and a rest at the Gizo Hotel. That was not to be because Maepeza knew we were in town and was all ready to take us to Vella. Another journey for us all, but in a large canoe! After a hot bath, a meal and a rest, we had regained our wits. Khyla Russell and I spent the next two weeks at Pazaju taping Maepeza's recollections and stories and enjoying the hospitality of his family.

All went well until we had used our dozens of tapes. We re-used old tapes only to find later that some of the new material was inaudible. Much later, I was to ask Maepeza to write an account of this lost material. In doing the tapes, sometimes Maepeza would just start talking about something; other times we would ask questions. When questions arose from

what Maepeza said, often we were off on a tangential story, but still a significant one. There was no grand order of events, except that we focused on childhood first. We moved in and out of *Tok Pijen* (Pidgin) and English; so much of this sounded better in *Pijen* than English. I am sure it would have been even better if it could have been written in Roviana, Maepeza's first language, one of about 85 languages of the Solomons. Once the transcription began, how we wrestled with language when the structures of Roviana ordered things differently to the conventions of that rich, but agglomerated language, English! Maepeza and I were bemused by its strange demands. Consider the question, 'John, haven't you washed that dirty hat of yours, since I have growled at you this morning?' As Maepeza said to me, the literal, correct meaning to the Solomon Islander in answering this question is, 'Yes' (which is wrong in English). The Solomon Islander answers 'Yes' because the questioner gave him the leading statement of 'have you not washed'. To him it is right to say, to satisfy the questioner, right on the spot, 'Yes, I have not washed it!' Another thing that I noticed was Maepeza's tendency to use the passive voice. I think this may be a pattern in Roviana of putting others and other forces in the forefront. It is really a sign of respect for others and of humility. But I leave this to the linguists to determine.

Although Maepeza's story has a unique value for Solomon Islanders, I believe it has universal aspects that people outside the Solomons will find of interest, hence the choice of English, rather than *Tok Pijen*. Even that choice was fraught. The Solomons has a dialect of English, just as America and New Zealand have. *Tok Pijen* influences English in Solomons and vice versa and the English language is continually being created. The Solomons dialect is a lively one and has less standardisation pressure on it than in countries where the population is literate in English. Literacy rates in Solomons are only about 20–30 per cent in any language. We had many discussions right to the end about the use of a word or phrase

— we both knew what it meant, but always I had to ask, will a speaker of English in Africa, Australia or the US know what this means? At the same time, as editor I have tried to keep the sense of what was said and the quality of expression. Anyone who has heard Maepeza telling a story will know that gesture, facial expression and countless little inflections often convey far more than the actual words. It has been my task to attempt to retain much of that meaning. (The post-modernists will have ample to deconstruct in this text!)

Our project received a great boost in 1994 when the Macmillan Brown Centre, University of Canterbury, in Christchurch assisted Maepeza's visit to New Zealand where we worked on the first transcriptions of the tapes. I had been there for several months working on a book manuscript on Solomons forests — later published as *Pacific Forest: A History of Resource Control and Contest in Solomon Islands, c. 1800-1997* (Cambridge and Leiden, 2000) — when Maepeza arrived. Khyla's contribution at this stage was very significant, as she had transcribed in longhand much of the original recordings. She worked closely with Maepeza, clarifying meanings, sequences and always asking for more detail. After Maepeza returned to the Solomons and I to my teaching at the University of Otago, our work on the manuscript became more sporadic. I assigned revised materials to a chapter structure then would send two or three chapters up to the Solomons for Maepeza to vet. He would often reorder material, correct mistakes and sometimes elaborate with a few more typed pages. This process went on with three to four drafts, but with frequent long intervals when neither he nor I were able to get back to the work. I had teaching, marking and other research to attend to and he, I believe, had family matters, business and projects commissioned by the Government. Our times of work rarely could be synchronised. Our only contact was by mail — no emails and wonderful attachments to speed off a chapter in a matter of seconds!