Chapter 1

Introduction

Jonwin’s Story

Jonwin was born in 1978 at a village on the remote and rugged Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, an area known locally as Tasi Mauri (meaning “rough sea”). He described to me how he was raised in a landscape rich with stories and meaning and how his land was, and still is, contoured by sacred sites and ancestral shrines, a tapestry of places of spiritual, cultural, and historical significance. For Jonwin, his story and his identity are inseparable from the narratives of the land and the people who have lived within its myriad spaces. These narratives are not restricted merely to the environs of his village and the surrounding gardening and hunting lands. The stories of people and places stretch far and wide, encompassing vast swaths of the island of Guadalcanal and beyond, and reaching back in time to when the first white men visited the island, killing some of its warriors and stealing some of its gold. For Jonwin, his knowledge of these stories makes this his island. Its land is sacred to him; it is his mother. Likening himself to the malaghai (traditional warriors) of old, Jonwin believes that it is his duty to protect the people and the land of Guadalcanal.

As he was growing up, Jonwin heard many tales of Chief Pelise Moro, who founded, in the late 1950s, a sociopolitical movement that became known as the Moro Movement and is now known as the Gaena’alu Movement. He once visited Moro’s village and heard the old man speak about kastom, development, and the environment.¹ He was,
and continues to be, greatly influenced by Moro’s philosophy, as are many of the thousands of people who live on the Weather Coast and in its mountainous hinterland. Moro spoke to his people about the importance of self-sufficiency and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the land and everything on it. Despite his passing in 2006, Moro’s motto, “Preserve and protect,” lives on. Jonwin also recalls how Moro spoke about the time he had boldly asked for “freedom” from the British colonial administration in the 1960s. Jonwin had heard similar stories about arguments with “the government”—that is, the state in both its colonial and postcolonial forms—over land, resources, and the influx of people from other islands to the northern side of Guadalcanal. He knew that in 1988 the indigenous people of Guadalcanal had asked the national government for “state government” for Guadalcanal.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Jonwin completed only primary school and three years of secondary school before he was “pushed out” of the education system. And like generations of Weather Coast men before him, his best hope for engaging with the cash economy was to leave his home village to go to the north side of the island, Tasi Mate (meaning “dead sea”). There he could find work in the capital, Honiara, or on the oil palm plantations of the fertile northeast plains, or at the many logging camps that were dotted across the northern part of the island. So at the age of sixteen, Jonwin and a couple of his friends decided to go in search of work. It was the trade-winds season, when small-boat travel is difficult and dangerous, and in the absence of a road linking the Weather Coast to the outside world, they walked the steep muddy paths of the mountainous interior to Honiara, a journey of three days.

For several years Jonwin worked in various menial jobs in Honiara, on the plantations, and in the logging camps, occasionally returning to his home village for a stint. What he saw in his travels made him increasingly aware of the relative deprivation and underdevelopment of the Weather Coast and its people. He began to discuss his concerns with some of his friends and relatives, many of whom had similar feelings. Why should the northern side of the island enjoy so much development while the south remained impoverished and neglected? Why wasn’t more of the resource wealth of the island, including that from the Gold Ridge mine, being used to provide much needed infrastructure and government services, not only for the Weather Coast, but for other parts of the island as well? And what about the people from other islands, particularly Malaita, who had settled on the north coast in increasing numbers since World War II? Why should they benefit from the land and resources of Guadalcanal when Weather Coast people did not? Why
should they be allowed to practice and enforce their *kastom* ways while disregarding and disrespecting local *kastom*?

Pondering these questions, Jonwin and his friends became increasingly frustrated. When the national government failed to meet the “Bona Fide Demands” that were put to it by the premier of Guadalcanal in late 1998, these frustrations boiled over. Jonwin and his friends believed that they were left with no choice but to take up arms in order to demonstrate their legitimate grievances to the government and to fight for their rights.

This is their story.

### Justin’s Story

But it is also the story of Justin and his friends.

Justin was born on his ancestral lands in the densely populated To’abaita language area of north Malaita in 1975. Like Jonwin, he was educated only to Form Three—that is, three years of secondary education. And like his countryman from the Weather Coast, he too was forced to leave his home area in order to find paid employment. In some ways Justin regarded going away to work as a rite of passage, an adventurous journey on the path to adulthood. Indeed, temporary labor migration had long been a tradition for men from Malaita, one that stretched back to the overseas labor trade era of the nineteenth century, when thousands of Malaitans went to work on the plantations in Queensland and Fiji. Justin shares with many Malaitans the belief that Malaitans have historically been the workers and builders of Solomon Islands. He believes that this labor migration has been driven by deliberate government neglect of Malaita and the concomitant underdevelopment of the island. Justin believes that Malaitans have had no choice but to sell their labor in foreign lands and that, in the process, they have been exploited by successive waves of outsiders, including, most recently, “the government.”

When he was growing up, Justin heard stories about Maasina Rule, a sociopolitical movement that started to the south, in the ’Are’are language area of Malaita, immediately after World War II but quickly spread to encompass the whole island. The movement united Malaitans against a common enemy in the form of the colonial government. Its followers pressed for a Malaita Council under popularly appointed leadership, for local control over “native courts” adjudicating over locally defined *kastom* law, and for better terms and conditions for Malaitan plantation la-
borers. Justin learned that despite the colonial government’s attempts to suppress Maasina Rule, arresting and imprisoning its leaders and thousands of its followers, the movement eventually forced major concessions from the government, including the establishment of a Malaita Council over which Malaitans had significant control.

Justin has relatives who had been living on Guadalcanal for many years. In the early 1960s one of Justin’s uncles had been invited by a Guale (a person who is indigenous to Guadalcanal) friend, whom his uncle had met in Honiara, to live on a small parcel of the man’s customary land on the fertile plains to the east of Honiara. In return, Justin’s uncle regularly gave the man and the man’s clan a portion of the money he earned selling fresh produce at the market in Honiara. Just before his eighteenth birthday, Justin went to stay with his uncle in the hope of finding some paid work on Guadalcanal. Another uncle, who worked at the Ministry of Works in Honiara, was able to secure Justin a government apprenticeship. Justin became a heavy vehicle driver and machine operator, skills which took him out to Western Province, where he worked for a logging company; back to Malaita, where he built and maintained roads; and, eventually, in the late 1990s, to the Gold Ridge mine in the hills east of Honiara.

Justin and hundreds of other mine employees were driven from the mine site in late 1998 as a consequence of Guale militant activity. He moved down to Honiara—which was rapidly becoming a Malaitan enclave in a sea of anti-Malaitan hostility—where he joined his wife, children, and other family members at their increasingly crowded rental accommodation. The Guale militants, who eventually became known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), had been violently evicting Malaitan settlers from the rural and peri-urban areas east and west of Honiara.

One morning in early 1999, Justin was at White River on the western edge of Honiara when he witnessed a bleak procession of Malaitans—men, women, and children—who had been evicted from villages west of Honiara by Guale militants. He was particularly struck by the sight of a family of three who had been stripped by the militants and were being given clothes by Catholic sisters from the nearby Tanagai Mission. The father of the family told Justin that the militants had forced him to have sexual intercourse with his daughter before one of them put his fingers into the girl’s vagina then pushed them into the man’s face saying, “Smell it, that’s how you Malaitans smell.”

For Justin, this was the final straw. Swearing and sexual assault, not to mention murder, are grave assaults on Malaitan kastom. Justin had determined that it was time to take direct action to defend and
protect Malaitans not only from the Guale militants, but also from an incompetent government and a hamstrung police force. Many other Malaitan men had arrived at the same determination. Justin and other former members of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) believe that through their actions they saved not only “Malaita,” but also Honiara and, in fact, the entire nation. They saved Solomon Islands, just as they, Malaitans, had built it in the first place.

A Different Kind of War Story

Jonwin’s and Justin’s narratives are, in very broad terms, representative of the thirty-nine men—all of whom describe themselves as ex-militants—whose stories are told in this book. My task is to present their voices, to situate them in the historiography and anthropology of Solomon Islands, and to use them to offer some explanations for the causes of the period commonly referred to by Solomon Islanders as “the Ethnic Tension” or simply “the Tension.” My basic objective will be to demonstrate that the men who joined the rival militant groups during the conflict were fighting for “something” and that this something can be properly explained and understood only with reference to particular cultural-political-ecological-historical nexuses.

This book is thus offered as a contribution to our understanding of the recent period of conflict in Solomon Islands. It will present important but hitherto underarticulated perspectives: those of the ex-militants themselves. Government, media, think tanks, and some scholarly portrayals of the men who joined the militant groups during the conflict have tended to emphasize greed and criminality as their main motivating influences. I will demonstrate that while these were indeed salient motives, there were others that were equally, if not more, important. Foremost among these are the ex-militants’ own conceptions of history and the places of their respective “peoples” in the historical processes of colonization, development, and nation building. A central theme for ex-militants on both sides of the conflict is the historical and contemporary relationships between their peoples and the state (expressed as gavman in Solomons Pijin, literally “the government”). Both sides draw upon a rich tradition of resisting the state, particularly its perceived imposition upon kastom law and local sovereignty over land and resources. Both sides also engage with discourses of development, highlighting perceived inequalities in the distribution of primary resource rents, the geographical pattern of development, and the provision of basic govern-
ment services. In contrast to their portrayal as ignorant and criminally inclined followers of “big-men,” we will see that the ex-militants engage in fundamentally political discourses. Understanding these discourses is critical to our understanding of the origins of the conflict.

The ex-militants’ narratives, and the arguments made in relation to them, speak to wider debates about the causes of armed conflict and collective violence in developing countries. What are the respective roles of greed and grievance in these conflicts? What are the relationships between the state, ethnicity, resources, and conflict? What are the most appropriate conceptual and disciplinary lenses to engage in our attempts to explain and understand violent conflict in late-developing postcolonial nations? A useful approach to these questions in the case at hand will be to consider them in terms of three cognate paradigms: “old” political economy, “new” political economy, and political ecology. While all three paradigms offer valuable insights, “new” political economy—manifest in the “resource conflict” theories of political scientists and economists—has recently come to dominate developing-country conflict discourse, perhaps reflecting the broader ascendancy of the disciplines of political science and particularly economics within the social sciences (see Cramer 2002, 2006).

It is not my intention to romanticize the narratives and deeds of the ex-militants by glorifying notions of “warriorhood” or by searching for other absolving culturalist explanations for their behavior. Such explanations are deeply contested among Solomon Islanders themselves, most of whom have been happy to see ex-militants, and also former policemen and politicians, tried and convicted for some of the many violent acts, including those of a sexual nature, that were perpetrated during the conflict. It is important that we acknowledge from the outset that many of the men who participated in the Tension engaged in terrible acts of violence, and it was all too often the innocent who were their victims.

We cannot, however, entirely ignore culturalist perspectives on male violence in Solomon Islands. Violent “crime” is, after all, and as Durkheim (1997) tells us, constituted in and defined by particular social contexts. We must be cognizant of a range of both indigenous and exogenous cultural influences that inform the types of violent behavior employed by men in Solomon Islands and elsewhere in Melanesia. To the extent that I engage in cultural relativism, it is in the pursuit of explanation, understanding, and nuance rather than absolution and exoneration.

The interviews with the thirty-nine ex-militants that are the primary source of original data in this book are supplemented with a range of other materials, including a similar number of interviews with non-
combatants: women, tribal leaders, politicians, and representatives of non-government organizations (NGOs) and the Christian churches. The voices and stories of “ordinary” Solomon Islanders, as well as those of the ex-militants, are also accessed through the voluminous court and police documents associated with the “Tension Trials.” These are the court proceedings against people who committed, and allegedly committed, criminal acts during the conflict. While most of the “high-profile” ex-militants such as Harold Keke and Jimmy “Rasta” Lusibaea have had their cases heard (and in many instances have already served their jail time), the Tension Trials are, at the time of writing, ongoing.

Another important source of information is the significant corpus of literature on the history and anthropology of Solomon Islands, which includes a small, but important, number of sources that cover the recent conflict. The text is also interspersed with observations of the “ethnographic present,” which I made during ten periods of fieldwork in the Solomons between 2004 and 2011, the longest being a stint of nine months in 2005–2006. While each of these sources has its limitations, in concert they provide a powerful polychromatic perspective on the conflict in general and on the motives of the men who joined the militant groups in particular.

**The Conflict in Solomon Islands, 1998–2003**

The scale of the conflict in which hundreds of men like Jonwin and Justin fought was regarded as so minor by international standards that it almost became “a forgotten conflict” (Amnesty International 2000). In reality it brought death, suffering, and hardship to many thousands of Solomon Islanders, and it represents the most traumatic period in the modern history of a country once described as the “Happy Isles.” Although battle-related fatalities were in the hundreds rather than the thousands, almost 10 percent of the country’s population was dislocated as a result of the violence, the provision of basic services ground to a halt (meaning that many people died of normally non-fatal illnesses such as malaria), and the primary commodity-dependent economy collapsed almost entirely. In this manner, the deleterious effects of the conflict, which was mostly played out in the capital, Honiara, and in other parts of the island of Guadalcanal, were felt throughout the country. Many human rights violations were reported and documented during the conflict, including instances of rape, torture, and abduction (Amnesty International 2004).

The temporal focus of the book is primarily upon the Ethnic Ten-
sion, bookended by the start of the Guale uprising in late 1998 and the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) in October 2000. It was during this time that Guale and Malaitan militant groups organized themselves to engage in collective violence. In the case of Guadalcanal, the focus is extended to examine the schism that developed among Guale militants and the subsequent fighting on the Weather Coast. Throughout the book I will also refer to the broader period of the conflict, extended to July 2003, when the Australian-led RAMSI arrived and rapidly succeeded in restoring law and order.

It is important not to overinsulate the pre- and post-TPA periods. The TPA contributed to a diminution of the violence, bringing an end to the open fighting between rival militant groups. However, it also actively contributed to a transformation in the nature of the conflict—a transformation that was already in train before Townsville—that saw it become increasingly characterized by criminality and opportunism. Moreover, on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, police and former members of the IFM were fighting Harold Keke, who had refused to sign the TPA, and his Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF). Fractures also emerged among former MEF militants. There were regular gun battles between rival factions in Honiara, and on parts of Malaita old land disputes were being revisited with guns and “panel beatings” (physical assaults).

The government became increasingly bankrupted by the manipulation of the compensation process, the corruption involved with ex-militants’ demobilization and rehabilitation schemes, the collapse or corruption of state revenue raising, and the direct theft and extortion of state funds (Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2004). A large number of material crimes such as robbery, larceny, and demands with menace were committed during the post-TPA period.

Although the conflict became increasingly criminalized over time, criminal or greed motives alone cannot account for its durability and certainly not its origins. The interview-based data presented in this book demonstrate that ex-militants on both sides of the Tension believed they were fighting for a cause, and it will be seen that the objective history of Solomon Islands lends considerable weight to their narratives of grievance.

**Greed or Grievance?**

Clearly we cannot say that the conflict was driven by either greed, on the one hand, or grievance, on the other. It involved a complex interaction
of these as well as other motives and desires, and the dynamics of the conflict were constantly changing and evolving. However, a number of factors have conspired to give primacy to a greed- and criminality-based interpretation of the motives of the men who joined the militant groups. One is the fact of what came later, after Townsville, when the actions and motives of many ex-militants and police came to bear little resemblance to what they had been originally fighting for. It is this later period of the conflict that has been freshest in the memories of journalists, policy commentators, and academics. Another factor is the nature of contemporaneous local and regional media portrayals of the uprising on Guadalcanal. The media drew upon statements by Solomon Islands public officials, such as the then minister for state Alfred Sasako, to represent the Guale militants either as “criminals” or as young men who were just looking for a “bit of fun and adventure.” Pacific Islands Monthly, for example, described the Guale “militants” as “vague, ill-defined, philosophy-free groups given to lawlessness” (quoted in Kabutaulaka 2001, 9).

A third factor is the influence in the late 1990s and early 2000s of neoclassical economic theories of developing-country conflict that portray rebels and militants as akin to bandits and pirates. The greed of these men, who are assumed to be rational actors, is said to drive civil war as the logic of utility maximization compels them to “predate” upon resource wealth and other such sources of finance that rebellion may afford (Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Grossman 1999). These interpretations are consistent with the wider and more insidious framing of developing-country conflict as a form of malaise, as indicative of an illiberal, aberrant, and unruly “South.” This framing has been described by Cramer (2006) as the liberal interpretation of war (also see Richards 2004).

I hope to unsettle this rendering of the motives of the rank-and-file men who joined the rival militant groups. The greed and criminality interpretation strips these men of both political agency and political consciousness. Thus we are denied the opportunity to understand the socioeconomic and political motives that informed their actions and provided the grounds upon which elites were able to mobilize and channel their agency (see Kabutaulaka 2001). This problem is not restricted to the conflict in Solomon Islands. History shows us that government authorities (as well as journalists and academics) have often denied, misrepresented, or simply failed to comprehend the legitimate political motives of those who engage in collective violence and resistance, instead attributing such movements to the ability of unscrupulous leaders to manipulate ignorant, fanatical, or criminally inclined followers.
We will see that in Solomon Islands this phenomenon has an instructive antecedent in the form of Maasina Rule, a political movement that was centered on Malaita but also spread to neighboring islands, including Guadalcanal, from early 1944 to late 1952 (especially see Akin forthcoming). As was the case with Solomon Islands government officials’ portrayals of the motives of militants during the recent conflict, British colonial officers portrayed, and in many respects genuinely perceived, Maasina Rule’s rank and file as ignorant followers who were manipulated by a “vicious clique” of leaders. This fundamental error of interpretation, which betrayed a basic ignorance of the political consciousness of everyday Malaitans, led the British to believe that arresting Maasina Rule’s leaders would bring the movement to an end. This mistake sparked an island-wide revolt among the movement’s rank and file that lasted for several years.

In this book, I seek to offer an insight into the political views, ideologies, and agendas of the men who joined the militant groups during the Tension. This viewpoint is counterposed against government, media, and some scholarly accounts that have tended to depoliticize the motives and agency of these important conflict actors.

**Ethnic Conflict?**

My colleague Ronald May is fond of saying that ethnicity is a “notoriously slippery concept in Melanesia.” Both Guadalcanal and Malaita are comprised of numerous linguistic and tribal groups, and there are few physical differences between the peoples of the two islands—far fewer than between Bougainvilleans and Papua New Guinea Highlanders, for example. Moreover, it will be seen in chapter 2 that island-wide identities such as “Malaita” and “Guadalcanal” are a relatively recent phenomenon, with their origins in the colonial and early contact periods. For most people in the Solomons, and indeed across Melanesia, primary identities and loyalties continue to reside with what can be variously described as kin groups, clans, and tribes. Identity remains indefatigably local in nature.

For these reasons, it can be useful to visualize ethnicity in Solomon Islands in terms of Anthony Smith’s “concentric circles of allegiance” (1991, 24). A young man’s primary loyalty may usually be to his clan on, say, north Malaita. However, under certain conditions—for example, those that prevailed during the Ethnic Tension—that loyalty may become refocused upon the wider circle of “Malaita” and its “leaders.” It is