Visions and Realities

Stories from the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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Abstract

This thesis presents an in-depth qualitative case study of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – the first truth commission in the Pacific. Proposed by civil society and church networks during the Solomon Islands conflict, known locally as 'the tensions', the TRC was initially envisaged as a means to prompt reconciliation and build peace during the crisis. Several years later, after the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the restoration of law and order, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2008* was passed in parliament and the TRC was established with a mandate to 'promote national unity and reconciliation'. In February 2012, the TRC's final report was handed to the prime minister. Despite being widely read by Solomon Islanders and others worldwide after being unofficially leaked in early 2013, it has yet to be tabled in parliament or officially released.

Truth commissions are an increasingly common tool in the post-conflict peacebuilding 'toolkit'. They are supported by the United Nations and have been implemented in a range of contexts around the globe, on the premise that truth about the past will lead to reconciliation and peace. Yet the core premise and lengthy list of assumed benefits of truth commissions are hotly contested. It is widely agreed amongst scholars, policy makers and practitioners that greater empirical research is needed to understand how truth commissions are adopted, negotiated, contested and transformed in the range of cultural contexts in which they are implemented.

This thesis draws on interviews with former staff and stakeholders of the TRC, and my own personal experiences of working for the commission, to explore the visions and realities of the Solomon Islands TRC. It draws attention to the challenges of translating and pursuing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' and describes the practical challenges and everyday realities of implementing a TRC in the Solomon Islands. It argues that in order for peacebuilding tools to be effective in Solomon Islands, a strong commitment to, and understanding of, local context is required.

While the Solomon Islands TRC was instigated locally, it was hardly an indigenous institution. Its civil society beginnings offered potential for the imported institution to be

‘hybridised’; however, it became a government responsibility and was continually influenced and guided by external sources. While the Solomon Islands TRC adequately replicated the structure and operation of a truth commission based on a globalised and placeless theory of ‘best practice’ in transitional justice, the lack of appropriate contextualisation resulted in an institution that did not fulfil its ambitious mandate nor function as a successful peacebuilding tool.

The experiences and reflections of the Solomon Islands TRC have much to offer to other countries in the region that consider implementing a truth commission. This research demonstrates that the Solomon Islands TRC had potential to positively contribute towards peacebuilding. To do so, however, it needed to respect and work with local cultures and *kastoms*, and be viewed and operated as an ongoing *process*, whereby stories collected and ‘truth’ documented would be used to address enduring injustices and grievances in order to build a sustainable peace.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature

4/5/2015

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Signature of Candidate Date

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Signature of Supervisor Date

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who suffered, endured, and survived the 1998–2003 conflict in Solomon Islands.

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Publications by the candidate relevant to this thesis

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Vella, L. 2014b. “Translating Transitional Justice: The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” *SSGM Discussion Paper* 2014/2. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Australian National University.

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Acronyms

AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
AVI	Australian Volunteers International
AVID	Australian Volunteers for International Development
CAVR	*Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação* (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation) [Timor Leste]
CSN	Civil Society Network [Solomon Islands]
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DNURP	Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace [Solomon Islands]
GLF	Guadalcanal Liberation Front
GRA	Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
IFM	Isatabu Freedom Movement
IPMT	International Peace Monitoring Team
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
ISF	International Support Facility
MEF	Malaita Eagle Force
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development [Solomon Islands]
MNURP	Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace [Solomon Islands]
MWYCA	Ministry for Women, Youth and Children's Affairs [Solomon Islands]

NPC	National Peace Council [Solomon Islands]
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OBM	Outboard Motorised [Canoe]
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PIF EPG	Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group
PMC	Peace Monitoring Council
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RSIPF	Royal Solomon Islands Police Force
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PPF	Participating Police Force
SBD	Solomon Bokolo Dollar
TPA	Townsville Peace Agreement
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
TRRG	Truth and Reconciliation Reference Group
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNE	University of New England
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
YCA	Youth Challenge Australia