



FLOWERS IN THE WALL
Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste,
Indonesia, and Melanesia
by David Webster

ISBN 978-1-55238-955-3

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>

Women and Reconciliation in Solomon Islands

BETTY LINA GIGISI

My name is Betty Lina Gigisi, and I'm from Bubutoha village, Malango ward, in Central Guadalcanal Province. There were seven children in my family. My mother and father were all from the same province and were subsistence farmers. Today I am a mother of four children.

My own background working with communities is diverse, but I have maintained a focus on peace and reconciliation, gender equality, and women in leadership and decision making.

Solomon Islands suffered a civil war from 1998 to 2003, fought mostly between militants from Guadalcanal and Malaita who had settled in Honiara and around Guadalcanal Island. Guadalcanal militants wanted their *kastom* (customary) land back and were worried about many Malaitans living there, some of whom were squatters and some of whom had land leases.

The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SITRC) was mandated by an act of parliament in 2008. The commissioners were chosen by a national committee that was chaired by the chief justice and representatives from the government, opposition parties, and other stakeholders. From a list of names proposed by many sectors, five commissioners were chosen, three national and two non-national. They were SITRC chair Father Sam Ata (who died in 2014), Sofia Macher (the deputy chair,

a non-national from Peru), Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (a non-national from Fiji), Caroline Laore, and George Kejoa: three men and two women. The SITRC was launched with a public event opened by the South African TRC commissioner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

After the war, in 2007, a reconciliation ceremony was organized by the Ministry of National Unity, Peace and Reconciliation at Peochakuri village, South Guadalcanal. I was also at the ceremony, not as an official, but as a citizen of that particular constituency and as a gender advocate. Women were not participating in the event, nor were they recognized in the official program. They had no opportunity to express their emotional feelings to their government, as the prime minister was the guest of honour. Women's participation was confined to delivering traditional garlands to the official guests, and, as they were dressed in their traditional costumes, they did so while half naked. My question at the time was: is that the only strength that women have?

I am proud of my culture, but I would like to have a woman representative among the official guests, dressed according to custom. At the ceremony women approached me to see if I could negotiate for a change in the program so that they could have the time and voice to deliver their thoughts. I have a strong belief in the rights of women to have a voice in decision making, especially since most of Solomon Islands follows a matrilineal system of land allocation. Solomon Islands has only three women in parliamentary positions.

I prepared a media statement that highlighted my disappointment in the lack of women's participation in the peace ceremony. The statement came out in the media (via the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation) on 1 January 2008.

The government of the day then offered me a position at the Ministry of National Unity, Peace and Reconciliation. I started there in February 2008 as a senior peace and reconciliation officer. My job was to make sure that women were participating in the peace process. I was involved in assisting the provincial liaison peace and reconciliation officer in organizing reconciliations at both the macro and micro levels.

In 2010 I was employed with the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the assistant exhumation officer. The purpose of the TRC was to "address people's traumatic experiences during the five-year

ethnic conflict on Guadalcanal (1999–2004).” Its goal was to promote national unity and reconciliation.

My specific role in the commission entailed responsibility for the reunification of remains. The exhumation of remains is a process that brings up very painful feelings for all involved. Training for exhumation officers, forensic police officers, and the SITRC commissioners involved understanding the complex and sensitive nature of the exhumation process.

The process involved inviting relatives to a meeting to prepare them to understand and accept the process of exhumation. It was also intended to let them know that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission respected cultural procedures and that the SITRC was enacted in parliament in 2008 with a specific time frame of completion. The SITRC engaged two qualified counsellors to enact the healing process, as relatives receive counselling as part of their healing process.

One of my roles was to map graves in the southern part of Guadalcanal Province, where most of the people were killed and buried. But before and after this grave mapping a cultural procedure must be introduced to calm people’s emotions. Some are mass graves with more than one person in them.

In a village a mother came to express herself emotionally: she wanted her husband’s body returned in full; she got married to him in full, she said, not just to his head alone.

The commission worked with multiple stakeholders, including international experts, forensic police, non-governmental organizations, the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), relatives of victims, and perpetrators. It investigated the cause, details, and effects of the ethnic tensions. It conducted public and closed hearings, gathered statements from individuals who were victims and perpetrators. It also organized research throughout the whole country. It determined that all parties had contributed to the breakdown of law and order, and committed human rights violations (namely killing, abduction, illegal detention, torture, sexual violation, property violations, and other human rights abuses). The SITRC concluded with some very good recommendations in its report, which was submitted to the government.

The SITRC report was tabled by the prime minister on the last day of the parliamentary session, after which parliament was adjourned. But he lost power in the 2010 elections, and the commission’s report has never

been debated in parliament. No reasons were ever given for this failure, but some of the commission's recommendations were partly addressed by the government. For example, progress is being made in constitutional and law reform, land reform, community policy, the early retirement of police officers who were involved in the conflict, and capacity building. There is much more to do, however, both on reconciliation and on the rights of Melanesian women.