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A History of Solomon Islands

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Geography and Peoples of the Solomon Islands
- **Chapter 2** Early Human Settlement: The Pleistocene Era
- **Chapter 3** Lapita Expansion and Cultural Foundations
- **Chapter 4** Pre-colonial Trade, Warfare, and Society
- **Chapter 5** Monuments and Megaliths: Bao and Nusa Roviana
- **Chapter 6** Polynesian Influence and the Role of Navigation
- **Chapter 7** First European Contact: Mendaña's Voyages
- **Chapter 8** The Spanish Legacy and Early Colonial Encounters
- **Chapter 9** Traders, Whalers, and Missionaries in the 19th Century
- **Chapter 10** Blackbirding and the Labor Trade
- **Chapter 11** Dividing the Islands: German and British Spheres
- **Chapter 12** Foundations of the British Protectorate
- **Chapter 13** Colonial Administration and the Evolution of Governance
- **Chapter 14** Copra, Plantations, and the Colonial Economy
- **Chapter 15** Christianity, Education, and New Social Orders
- **Chapter 16** World War II Reaches the Solomon Islands
- **Chapter 17** The Battles of Guadalcanal and Beyond
- **Chapter 18** Islanders' Experiences of War and its Legacy
- **Chapter 19** Rebuilding After War: Tulagi to Honiara
- **Chapter 20** Maasina Rule and Nation-building Movements
- **Chapter 21** The March to Independence
- **Chapter 22** Early Years of Nationhood and Leadership Changes
- **Chapter 23** Ethnic Tensions and "the Tensions" of the Late 1990s
- **Chapter 24** RAMSI and Paths to Recovery
- **Chapter 25** Solomon Islands in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

The Solomon Islands, a sprawling archipelago of nearly one thousand islands in the heart of the southwestern Pacific, offers one of Oceania's most compelling and complex histories. From its earliest days as a land bridge joined to neighboring islands by ancient seas to its emergence as a modern nation, the story of the Solomon Islands is as diverse and dynamic as the cultures and peoples that have called it home. This book aims to provide a comprehensive examination of that history, tracing continuities and changes over tens of thousands of years—from the first waves of human settlers to the challenges and opportunities faced by the country in the 21st century.

For millennia before the coming of Europeans, the islands nurtured unique societies with rich traditions of navigation, trade, social organization, and monumental architecture. These societies were neither isolated nor monolithic; rather, they traded, migrated, and sometimes clashed across the archipelago, leaving behind a legacy of megalithic shrines, oral traditions, and archaeological treasures. Understanding this deep-rooted indigenous history is crucial, for it shaped the islands' responses to the transformative forces of colonialism and global war.

With the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, the Solomon Islands entered a new phase of global interaction and upheaval. Spanish explorers, driven as much by myth as by ambition, dubbed the islands after a biblical land of gold, igniting centuries of sporadic European contact, trade, missionary activities, and eventually colonization. The imposition of colonial rule in the late 19th century, divided at first between German and British interests, altered the political, economic, and social fabric of the islands, sometimes in ways that resonate powerfully in the present.

Perhaps no event shaped the Solomon Islands as profoundly on the world stage as World War II. As a pivotal battleground between Allied and Japanese forces, the islands witnessed intense campaigns and left indelible marks on both the physical landscape and collective memory. The war stimulated new political consciousness, eventually leading to the rise of popular movements for self-determination and, finally, independence in 1978.

Nationhood, however, brought its own set of opportunities and challenges. The Solomon Islands grappled with issues of political stability, development, and identity, navigating ethnic tensions, economic transformation, and the shifting tides of regional and global politics. In recent years, peacekeeping missions, constitutional debates, and international alliances have all become part of the nation's evolving story.

'A History of Solomon Islands' invites readers to explore this remarkable journey. It is a

story of resilience and adaptation, of ancient inheritance and modern innovation, and above all, of a people continually defining their place in a changing world. Through careful examination of archaeology, oral tradition, colonial records, and contemporary challenges, this book seeks both to illuminate the past and to encourage reflection on the possible futures of this unique Pacific nation.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Geography and Peoples of the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands, a nation woven from hundreds of islands scattered across a vast expanse of the southwestern Pacific, presents a tapestry of dramatic volcanic peaks, low-lying coral atolls, dense rainforests, and shimmering lagoons. Situated in Melanesia, northeast of Australia, this archipelago stretches over nearly 1,000 islands, though far fewer are permanently inhabited. The country's landmass of approximately 28,896 square kilometres is dispersed across an exclusive economic zone covering a considerably larger area of the ocean. This geographic fragmentation has profoundly shaped the history and the incredible diversity of its peoples.

The main islands form a double chain running roughly northwest to southeast. The southern chain includes prominent islands such as Vella Lavella, the New Georgia Islands, Savo, and the largest, Guadalcanal. To the north lie islands like Choiseul, Santa Isabel, and Malaita. These two chains converge around Makira Island, also known as San Cristobal. Further to the east, significantly removed from the main group, lie the Santa Cruz Islands, including Nendö, and even more distant outliers such as Tikopia and Anuta. The distances between these island groups can be substantial, contributing to the historical isolation and unique development of their respective communities.

The landscape across the islands is remarkably varied. Many of the larger islands are characterized by rugged, heavily forested mountain ranges of volcanic origin. These mountains are often dissected by deep, narrow valleys, creating challenging internal terrain. The highest point in the country is Mount Popomanaseu on Guadalcanal, reaching over 2,330 metres (7,644 feet). In contrast, other parts of the archipelago consist of low-lying coral atolls and raised coral reefs, often boasting spectacular beauty but also presenting vulnerabilities to rising sea levels.

The coastal areas of the larger islands are frequently fringed with coconut palms and protected by mangrove forests and coral reefs. While extensive plains are not common on the larger islands, some exist, notably on the northern side of Guadalcanal, and have been historically important for agriculture. This mix of towering volcanic landscapes and flat coastal areas, combined with the surrounding marine environment, dictates much about where people live and how they traditionally interact with their surroundings. The intricate channels and lagoons of areas like the New Georgia Islands province, with its numerous islands, are particularly notable for their beauty and ecological significance.

The climate of the Solomon Islands is tropical oceanic, characterized by heat, humidity, and abundant rainfall throughout the year. Temperatures are generally consistent, seldom rising above 32°C (90°F), and are often moderated by cooling sea breezes. The islands experience two main seasons: a wet season typically from November to April and a drier season from May to October. Rainfall is substantial, averaging between 3,000 and 3,500 mm annually, though some areas like Santa Cruz receive more constant precipitation. While not typically subject to prolonged monsoonal downpours, the wet season can bring heavy rain, and tropical cyclones are a potential, though not frequent, hazard during this period, particularly from December to March.

Beyond the land, the marine environment is an integral part of the Solomon Islands' geography and identity. The islands are surrounded by rich coral reefs and diverse marine ecosystems, home to countless species of fish and coral. The waters include the Solomon Sea and the Coral Sea, connecting the islands to wider Pacific currents. This extensive maritime domain has historically facilitated inter-island travel and trade, while also presenting challenges and opportunities for sustenance and resource management.

Mirroring the geographical fragmentation of the islands is the remarkable diversity of its people. The population, estimated to be over 700,000 as of recent years, is predominantly Melanesian, making up over 90% of the total. However, this broad category encompasses a wide array of distinct cultural and linguistic groups, each with its own traditions and histories. Living primarily on the main island chains, Melanesian communities have developed diverse social structures and customs, often tied closely to their specific island or region.

While the majority are Melanesian, the Solomon Islands are also home to significant minority populations, most notably Polynesians and Micronesians. The Polynesian communities are largely concentrated on the outlying islands and atolls, such as Ontong Java, Bellona, Rennell, Tikopia, and Anuta. These groups maintain strong cultural links to the wider Polynesian Triangle, with distinct languages, navigation skills, and traditions adapted to life on smaller islands and atolls. Micronesian populations, including descendants of Gilbertese people resettled in the mid-20th century, also contribute to the archipelago's demographic mix, primarily residing on islands like Ghizo and Vaghena. Small communities of Chinese and Europeans also reside in the country, particularly in urban centers.

This ethnic diversity is further reflected in the linguistic landscape of the Solomon Islands, which is astonishingly complex for a country of its size. While English is the official language, its fluent speakers constitute a small minority of the population. The primary lingua franca, particularly in urban areas like the capital Honiara, is Solomon Islands Pijin, a creole language that bridges communication between the many

different linguistic groups. However, beneath this common tongue lies a wealth of indigenous languages, with estimates suggesting over 60 to 70 distinct languages spoken across the islands, many with multiple local dialects.

These indigenous languages belong primarily to the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family, a testament to ancient migrations that spread across the Pacific. However, a small number of languages, particularly in the central Solomons, are classified as Papuan, representing an older linguistic layer in the archipelago. The sheer number and variety of these languages, often confined to a single island or even just a few villages, underscore the historical isolation and unique cultural development fostered by the islands' geography.

The capital city, Honiara, is located on the northern coast of Guadalcanal, serving as the administrative and economic hub of the nation. While it is the largest urban centre, the majority of the population continues to live in small, widely dispersed coastal settlements and villages, engaging in subsistence agriculture, fishing, and maintaining strong community and kinship ties. This close connection to the land and sea, and the persistence of traditional ways of life in many areas, remains a fundamental aspect of Solomon Islander identity.

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