Original Article

Islands of Warfare:
A Historical Anthropological Study of the Early Colonial Period in Malaita, Solomon Islands

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The early colonial period in Malaita, Solomon Islands, between the 1870s and 1920s, was a time of intensified intergroup warfare (omea). The Asi or Lau of north Malaita, who have been known to dwell on “artificial islands,” refer to this period as the “time of omea.” Walter G. Ivens, an Anglican missionary who visited north Malaita in 1927, referred to the Asi islands as “fortified islands” surrounded with stone or log walls, highlighting the historical relationship between the islands and warfare. This paper examines the complex relationship between the Asi islands and the early colonial history of Malaita.

Warfare in Melanesian Anthropology

Warfare has long been an important subject of Melanesian anthropology. The colonialization of Melanesia occurred relatively late, allowing anthropologists to document continuing warfare in
many parts of the region. Warfare has been discussed as a marked example of the dynamic and fluid character of Melanesian social structure, and this is the case with Asi warfare and its connection with migration.

Iroi’s Narrative

The original impetus for this paper arose from a conversation with Iroi (a pseudonym), a former island-dwelling Asi man in his late 50s. Early in the fieldwork, Iroi appeared to be a quiet and unremarkable member of the local community. However, as the research progressed, I became aware of a rumor, secretly shared by certain people, that Iroi was the “true landowner” of the place that was claimed by a “landowning clan” renowned for its arrogance and aggression. One day, in a private conversation, Iroi told me a surprising story related to this rumor. According to Iroi, his paternal grandfather belonged to the original landowning clan, but one night, when his grandfather was a young boy, the clan was attacked and massacred by another clan, which then usurped the position of the landowning group. Iroi’s grandfather was the sole male survivor of this massacre (omea), and was adopted by the attackers. However, such an adoption was against the ancestral rule of the Asi, and this taboo violation has been the cause of the series of disasters (deaths, madness, and so on) that had befallen Iroi’s family. Finally, Iroi related this history of omea to his family’s island, which, he said, had been built by his grandfather as a refuge from his problem-ridden kin relations.

Rather than seeing this as Iroi’s personal invention, this story of a massacre should be interpreted based on certain historical experience and consciousness of the Asi. Indeed, historical documents unanimously testify to the intensification of warfare in Malaita in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is highly plausible that such
a massacre took place in the Asi area during this period. Furthermore, Iroi’s narrative suggests a connection between intergroup fighting and island construction in the early 20th century.

Early Colonial Period in Malaita

The early colonial period, or the “time of *omea*,” in Malaita was also a time of intensified construction of artificial islands. A visitor in the 1900s mentioned only “20 or so” islands, while a missionary in the 1920s recorded 35, and there are more than 90 in the area today. Based on fieldwork insights, it is estimated that most islands were constructed after the beginning of continuous European contact in the 1870s. This intensification can be explained by several historical factors including the introduction of iron tools. European contact in the form of “Labor Trade” between the late 19th century and early 20th century also introduced a large quantity of firearms to Malaita, and this intensified the activity of “*ramo*” (warrior-leaders). Since the mid-1910s, the colonial government focused its effort on the “pacification” of Malaita, and by the late 1920s, fighting activities had generally ceased. Today, the Asi refer to this period of pacification as the time “when the law came”.

Precolonial Warfare in Malaita

An important characteristic of traditional warfare in Malaita was its close association with migration. In fact, many Asi ancestral narratives depict the dynamic movement of people and the reconstruction of their relationships to place. *Ramo* fighters are the central protagonists in these narratives. Such migration through warfare stands in a stark contrast to the rigid patrilineality which appears to have been the dominant principle of social organization among the Asi. In Asi narratives, in contrast, the fighting (*omea*) of
Islands of Warfare

The dynamic character of warfare is also intimately related to Asi artificial islands. These islands and warfare were connected through their embodiment of lateral social dynamics that went beyond patrilineal clanship and land ownership. During earlier research I conducted in the region, I found that residency on the Asi islands did not follow the norm of patrilineality but was established based on heterogeneous social relations that included marriage and fighting. In some cases, the connection between an island and warfare was so explicit that one could call the Asi islands “machines for warfare.”

Today, the Asi recognize that the social mobility embodied by warfare and islands ended with the arrival of “law” (i.e., the colonial government). In this sense, the Asi islands today are simultaneously the embodiment of past social mobility and its termination.

“New” Islands

Historical research has found that many of the Asi islands were formed during the “time of omea,” and this historical connection between islands and warfare is sometimes acknowledged by the Asi themselves. However, the Asi association between their islands and the history of warfare is much more ambiguous. In fact, the Asi often refer to the islands as “new islands,” built after the time of warfare, and say that these islands “have nothing to do with omea.” In this way, the Asi seem to temporally distance themselves from the history of warfare. The reason for the existence of such historical consciousness in the face of contrary historical evidence has not, until now, been
fully understood.

History That They “Cannot Talk About”

The most obvious reason for this conflict between historical consciousness and historical evidence is that the custom of warfare is simply too “savage” for today’s Christianized Asi to acknowledge as part of their near and remembered past. But there are also more culturally specific reasons.

First, among Christianized Asi, “kastom” or matters related to pre-Christian ancestors and their customs tend to be regarded as taboo. Pre-Christian and early colonial warfare is a part of kastom, and for most Asi, it is something that they “don’t know well” and that they are not supposed to speak about. In this sense, it is understandable that the Asi tend to relegate the history of warfare to an unremembered past.

Second, in contemporary Malaita, the Asi are regarded, and regard themselves, as “new settlers.” This explains why most of their islands are referred to as “new islands.” Postcolonial politics in Malaita has given rise to an essentialist ideology concerning the relationship between land and people (in this case, patrilineal clans), and this ideology exaggerates the principle of precedence (i.e., the first settlers own the land). This ideology relegates the Asi to an inferior position, because they admit that they have always migrated and that they are relatively recent settlers on their islands. If the Asi are “new migrants” and their islands are “new settlements,” their history must be short and, by that logic, it does not stretch back to the “time of omea.”

Third, the history of intensified warfare in the early colonial period is a history that is difficult for Asi to recall. It was a period of extreme social confusion and fluidity, making it difficult for the details to be handed down to the present generation. Iroi, who can tell part of, but
cannot prove, what happened to his grandfather, is a typical case of this predicament of historical memory loss. It is a predicament shared by many Asi, who say that they “don’t know” the details of the “time of omea.” This alienation from historical knowledge explains why the Asi commonly distance themselves from the history of warfare.

History of Warfare Today

This opaque history of early colonial warfare is attaining renewed attention within the Asi resettlement movement. Driven by a sense of imminent land shortages in coastal areas, many Asi have embarked on the search for ancestral land in inland Malaita, where they hope that they can claim a superior land right. The search for ancestral land includes the collection of ancestral traditions about migration and warfare. It is as if the history of warfare is being reactivated in the present, having been half-forgotten and the subject of taboo for all too long.