

The Solomon Islands in the South Pacific  
(Lots of Life in One Place) by Fizz Harwood

These Polynesian people live in and around the Roviana lagoons. These are high islands with dense climax rain forest. It's rainy, rains about 200 inches a year or more. It's very very hot, right on the equator. There are little villages of 200-400 people along the coast, maybe every 8,10,14 miles. Out in front are the reeds, so you're going through reef systems. I had a dugout canoe, called the Shining On, 28 feet long with a Johnson 9hp engine. These villages were part of the Christian Fellowship church, which was an indigenous spiritual movement that started in 1959. I was there in 1963, 64. These villages were organized in this church and there was a fellow by the name of Holy Mama, who was the head of this. He was a charismatic leader. This movement started, and people went into trance – in the beginning, they went into trance for day and weeks at a time. They didn't know what was happening in this world, they were in the other world. They neglected their villages, they didn't eat, they just were going in this trance. By the time I got there, this has calmed down quite a bit, although there was still trance happening in the various villages I had seen. The extraordinary thing about this spiritual movement, this religious movement, was that people beforehand had been very lethargic, very depressed. In 1918, some anthropologist had been there and they were so decimated from measles, influenza that they thought there would be none of these people left by 1950. They were just a decimated population, but they had come back. They were still profoundly disorganized, and defeated, and had lost all hope for life.

This movement started up and they got re-energized, rebuilt their villages, and they walked out of the Methodist mission and started their own church. They started their own educational system, they started all new gardens, they started copper plantations. With the money they collectively made, they paid their taxes to the British government (it's a British Protectorate). It's called a revitalization movement, going from a defeated people to this very energetic setup.

I am going to talk about their economic system, which is such a contrast to ours. To all extents and purposed it is a part of their traditional, pre-contact setup. With the introduction of the cash economy, it's been modified to some extent. It's not that different from other indigenous economic systems. What I think is important to stress is that these systems are not giveaway or gift system. They are enlightened self-interest. They are not giving away with the expectation of constantly giving and never receiving. It's a whole system of exchange, but is almost the reverse of our economy. To my way of thinking, or maybe it's just self-evident that these sorts of economic arrangements are better for the lands, better for people's mental health, physical wellbeing, and for the social body altogether. The idea is that you always try to give more than something is worth. It sounds peculiar, but what you're trying to do by paying more than something is worth is to show your strength and power. So everyone is always trying to give more than things are worth to have more prestige, to rise up in the social order. What it means is, if you're always giving more than something is worth, no one can be poor. Because where the prestige is, is where things are not. The material things are prestige is not. So it's always the good of life flowing away from prestige, rather than in our setup where they're flowing towards prestige. And being accumulated.

However, there is something that these people are accumulating. The scarce good is not material wealth but social relations. What the system is after, of what the game is about, is to exchange material possessions for social relations. A wealthy person in their eyes as a lot of connections, has a very dense web, is very woven into all kinds of networks, and far flung, into many villages. And who has very few things. The person is giving in order to have people to give to. The idea is to always to have someone one-down on you in the exchange. So I want a lot of people indebted to me, so I will give you things so then you're in debt to me and then you will pay me back at some point. This is how the system works.

In the Christian Fellowship Church, what happened is the money came into the islands and was part of this despair, this anomaly, this sense of loss, of groundlessness, of floating, and nothing happening. They attribute it in part to money. When the church got going, they said that among member of the church there was to be no money exchanged. With money what happens is everything becomes a commodity and the system doesn't work very well. They thought it was very foolish, or immoral almost, that we had supermarkets, or any kind of market where you would go in and there would be a price you would pay and you'd pay it to the person in the front at the counter and then you'd walk out. So why bother, because you haven't made any connection with that person behind the counter. There's been no wealth created in terms of relationship. What you'd want to do is pay him or her a little bit more and then they would owe you some on the other side. Why you saw them next you would have a relationship. That's the idea. They were always trying to get people into a relationship. It works in this culture. You can do it. For instance, if you go out to dinner, you pick up the bill, you say, next time we go it's your turn. That means there's going to be a next turn. You feel obligated... Say you give a party, and everybody comes - I don't think anymore, but in my parents' generation, if you went to somebody's party, you in turn were obliged to give a party. Relationships are always slightly unequal, you always were one up or one-down to every other person. They was always a connection of inequality. It wasn't cut, like if I pay you the \$10 the book is worth, that's the end of our transaction. And in fact in our culture, we're always trying cut the connections by paying out debts and separating. Evening it out so that we have obligations - we shouldn't have obligations. But there, you see, that was very important. Another reason why this would work is the way the food worked there was that one person was very apt to get a large amount of food at infrequent intervals, like they'd go fishing. The guys in the canoe would go out fishing, find a school of fish and get enormous amounts of fish. They'd take it back to the village, but this is high tropics, on the equator, and those fish are not going to last more than 8 hours. What are you going to do with 80 pounds of fish? Give it away. You give it away to all the people, so they're one down to you, so when the other people get fish, it will come back around. And the same when you go to gather nuts in the forest, somebody's going to hit the big nut tree, and come back with a lot, and the other people will have looked for nut trees and they won't have found one so then they'll give it away. Without refrigeration or any way to keep food, that's your best insurance, is to give away. That happens in many many cultures. In cultures that have big game, some guys are successful in the hunt, they bring the animal back and very often according to kinship the parts of the animal will be given up. So that your mother's brother always gets the heart and the left hind leg, and your mother's brothers get the right hind leg, and these people get this, and that. So it's portioned out. What you're doing, you can't bank. They only thing you can bank is social relations. What you're building is societal security rather than material security. That serves them very well.

What is very funny is that when I was there, the Holly Mama, the head of the church, in this areas of the Solomon, was using church money to buy coconut groves from this Australian guy. The Australian guy was asking 7 or 8 thousand dollars, Holly Mama was paying him 10 or 12. The Holly Mama as buying a speed boat and again he was paying more than the asking price. The gringos thought he was crazy. When the two cultures came together, it didn't work. It only worked within the Christian Fellowship Church. However it

did impress the guy with the coconut groves and the guy with the speed boat. They had enormous respect for Holly Mama and for the church. These were Europeans and they looked down on the locals – they were very short, had kinky hair, and were very very black. They were the extreme of otherness in terms of appearance. They'd been written off. When these gestures were made, it did turn the tables, it wasn't all one way. Another thing that happened that was very funny was when I left the islands they had a big gathering for me on the island next to the airfield and lot of people came to this gathering. Holy Mama came down the aisle – I was sitting at the top end of this gathering – Holly Mama came in the door at the far end and he walked up to me and he opened this bag and he poured dollars onto the table in front of me and he said, this is your payment. From the Christian Fellowship Church, for doing this study. This is for food and drink on your way home. Not many anthropologists get paid by the people. The idea was that this was to link me to the church in the years to come, that I would never forget them, I was one down to them.

Did they really see it as one down?

They were really, I think, quite clear about this. This wasn't altruism. It was more like patronage, where people in power give away jobs, or turkey at thanksgiving in order to attract followers. Or attract a community around them, or to bring more prestige to their village, to their people, to their situation. The enlightened self-interest. It was given with great flourish, "I have all of this, please.... This is what I can provide," In such situations the physical needs are well distributed. If there was scarcity it was every body.

The spiritual part of it.....A missionary had been there and translated the bible into Roviana which was their language. And they had also put together a dictionary. These were the only written texts I had. I was learning Roviana from these dictionaries and bibles which is very common across the world, that the missionaries are the first people to write down the languages. In these writings the missionaries were always talking about "tomasa" which was the Roviana word they used to translate god when it appeared in the bible. So I was learning from these texts and there was a lot about tomasa in all this. One night I was sitting with a lot of the elders and I asked them what is this tomasa? Oh we're so glad you asked. Here's what tomasa is: tomasa (t'nomina, or t'nomasi) is, for instance, in the ocean when there is a big school of fish, that's tomasa. Or on a tree when there are many many butterflies that gather, that's tomasa. Or when there're a lot of people gathered for a feast, that's tomasa. So tomasa means a lot of life in one place. That is their idea of divinity or spirit. Abundance. The idea in these villages is to attract a lot of life. So when two people are going to get married, they're usually from different villages, each village vies to have the couple come and live in their village. This idea of attracting life is also this idea of giving. You give away food in order to increase life. Or you make feasts in order to increase liveliness. Or you have gathering.... That's what makes you feel good. When you go along the coast in the canoes – nobody walks inland much, if you want to get from one place to another you go by canoes. These villages are TINY in this vast vast rain canopy and this giant volcano going forever. You feel two inches high. So you feel like you want to have your people around you, this liveliness, in your ambiance, where people are happy and gay and healthy and there a lot of children and a lot of fish and a lot of potatoes. The idea of displaying food is a big deal. Abundance. It's that feeling. Here in the US when I go to a store where all the apples are piled up, and all the oranges, and all the greens, and it's all beautiful, I feel just wonderful. It's that sense that there's so much. People are light-hearted. In that atmosphere, the witch craft doesn't happen. And bad things don't happen. It's protection, it's building up this cone of power, the life force. You're trying in your economic sphere, by giving things away, to make connections to that you're connected in with lots of liveliness. That will protect you,

keep you happy and keep you from harm, and keep you from want and keep you from whatever. The notion of hoarding something of being wealthy because you have a lot of money in the bank is not what they're about. They would think that's nuts. You haven't made any interconnections. Like they say, "all my relations". If you are the sum of your relations, that's what your job is in life, to maximize your relationships. Then you're a wealthy person who has a lot to give and then you're worthy of respect. That's what they're about. It's not that different from other societies other than western. We are really the weird people. We have this idea that accumulating money is wealth. That just doesn't work; this is not a gift situation. You are not giving away because you're altruistic. You're giving away because you want to be respected. You want to live in a place that's full of life, full of things happening. It's enlightened self-interest, or group interest. It's like you're a team, your village is your team. The odd part of this is headhunting – these people are headhunters. You want to take heads, but you want to take them across water because the personality can't travel across water. But the energy can. What you're trying to collect in your village is life force, and a head, a skull, will do that. Not as good as real people, but every little bit helps. It is called mana. Life energy you try to attract to yourself, to your group, to your kinship group. Whatever you have you will trade in order to maximize that.

At my mother's assisted living place where there are all these elderly people, they're not poor people, but they can't use their money to get what they need. They are in a barter economy. They are linked in a system where they have to take care of one another. It's in their best interest to take care of one another. My mother can drive, so she takes people to the market and takes them out to lunch and does that with the expectation that having been in that situation they will reciprocate down the way. She doesn't know what they're going to do, but they should do something. Or they will feel friendly toward her, companionable towards her, so they will want to, because she's done something nice for them and they will feel like doing something for her. So they're all into this in a way you don't see in the rest of society, really. You see it in politics a lot, in patronage, all of that it's not about money but whatever those people are up to, it's about power, influence, something... I don't understand it but it's not about money. They serve, for instance, on the city council... why? For social reasons, not material.

Anything that shortens the gap... Say for instance, if you buy your stuff direct from the farmer rather than from the supermarket, when those links become very short between producer and consumer, a relationship develops over and above the monetary exchange. Any way you can shorten those links. That's why a bioregional economy is so important above and beyond just the monetary and economic, because it builds relationships. I think in times of scarcity that comes about naturally. Or in times of danger, or in times of dislocation, the social relationships come the fore, as something people are working on, to acquire, to energize their relational nets. Not just for survival, but even a bit of scarcity will do that. I don't think there's any way to legislate it, or change the economic system... I think something like LETS system, the monetary, alternative currencies, are great because it keeps the money at the local level, and it does create relationships. I think farmers' markets, CSAs, currencies, women's loan banks (that we haven't brought into our culture that we could). I started this thing called community connections loan fund at the First National Bank in Santa Fe, where if you put money there it has to stay in the local economy, it can't go out. There's a program up on Boulder and some other cities: Buy Local, where the people who are in this association put a sign in their window that they're part of this local business bureau. They bond together, buy insurance together, other stuff they need in large quantities. Permaculture loan fund (at the Permaculture Credit Union) is another one. These little regional things we can do are where it's at. The key is making relations. To think about, talk

about, teach about ways to turn money into relations. We know that the Social Security is not going to hold up; the monetary system is not going to hold up. What everyone needs to be doing now is to strengthen their social ties so they have reliance. Many of us don't have families nearby; we're going to depend on one another. It's in our best interest to start this kind of relational banking instead of ... take your money out of the bank and make your web. That's your true social security. People could begin to think about their social security accounts. Challenge people to sit down and really think, for their retirements, what is their social security account? Rather than their bank account. Do that kind of accounting. It would change people's view radically. Have little packets that people could fill out, see how dense their networks are, and if they're not very dense, how you can convert your financial assets into social assets. It's not really about changing where the money is, it's not about thinking about the money, it's about thinking about relationships. They you have community building, that richness of life that people are really hungry for, but they don't know how to convert money into relationships.