

FLOWERS IN THE WALL
Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Melanesia
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ISBN 978-1-55238-955-3

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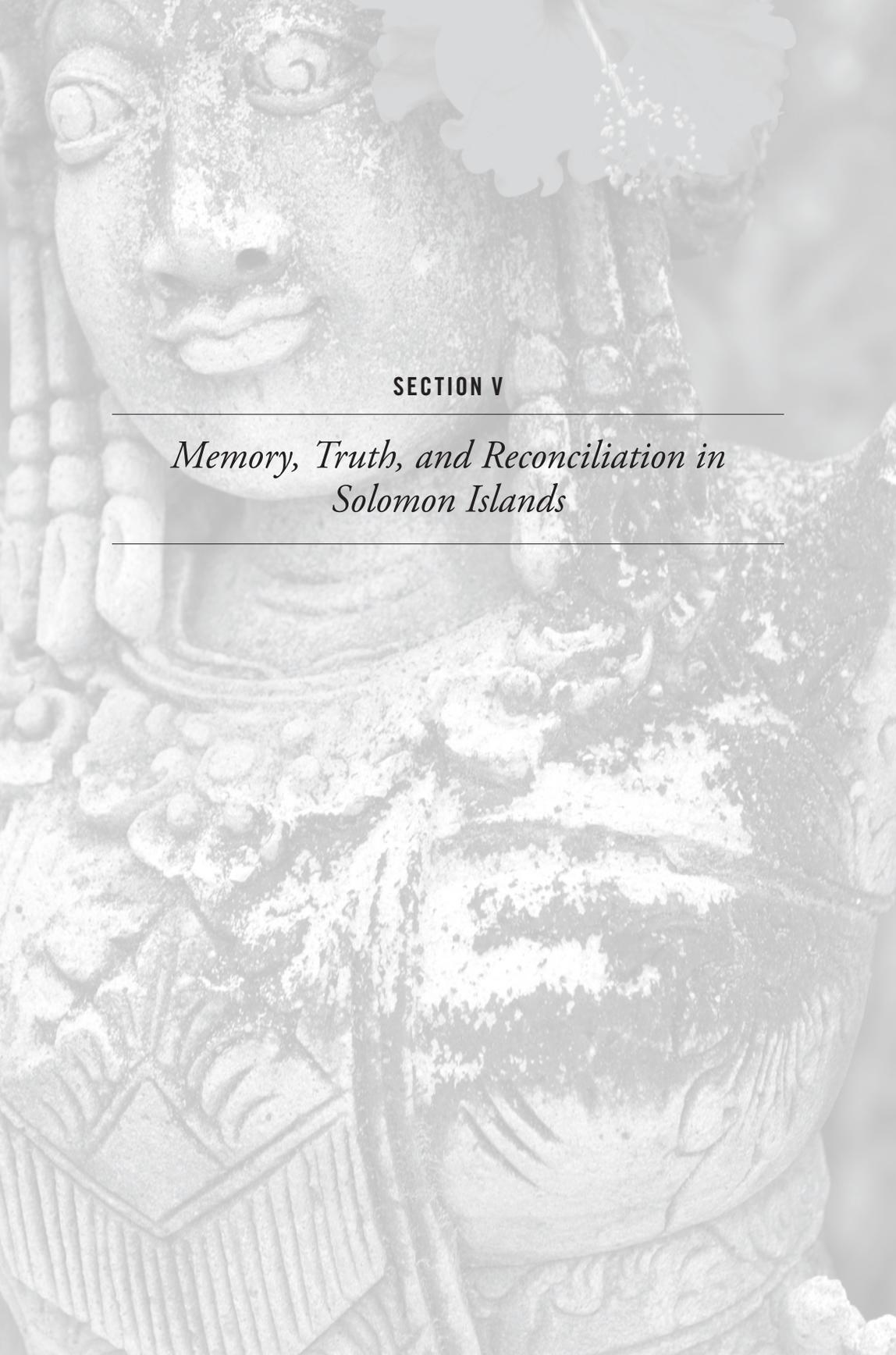
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SECTION V

*Memory, Truth, and Reconciliation in
Solomon Islands*

Memory, Truth, and Reconciliation in Solomon Islands

If a truth commission reports and the government tries to keep its findings secret, does its work still have value? That is what happened in Solomon Islands. In bringing truths to light and in carrying out its work, we argue that it does.

Where the problem in Tanah Papua has been lack of a truth commission and any dialogue between the two sides of the conflict, the problem in Solomon Islands is different. A truth commission formed in the wake of conflict. It researched the conflict, and then reported on what had happened and what might be done in the future. To date, it is the only truth commission to be held in Melanesia. But the government declined to publish its report or act upon its recommendations.

The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SITRC) used South Africa's TRC as its model. Founded by an act of parliament in 2008, it held public and closed hearings and carried out a number of interviews from 2009 to 2011, then presented its report in 2012. The SITRC was mandated to investigate the causes of "the tensions" between Malaitan and Guadalcanal militia groups and the role of those groups, the government, and external actors in human rights violations, as well as to contribute to victim healing through testimonies. The SITRC aimed to include Indigenous *kastom* (custom) and gender, and included a special focus on violations of the rights of children. It identified major violations of human rights under the headings of killings, illegal detentions, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violations, property violations, and the forced displacement of people.

The SITRC produced an impressive five-volume report with careful documentation of the conflict and human rights violations, followed by a series of careful recommendations touching on everything from memorialization to land tenure to the justice system. That report is in the public domain only because its editor, Bishop Terry Brown, published it online. Brown's account of the conflict, the commission, and his own role forms chapter 18 of this book.

Unlike Timor-Leste, there is no truth commission follow-up institution or NGO dedicated to carrying out the report's legacy. However, Solomon Islands does have an active civil society, much of it linked to church and women's groups. In a heavily Christian country, the Solomon Islands

Christian Association (SICA) was the prime mover in proposing and pushing for a truth commission. To this local push was added the international presence of the South African TRC commissioner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The commission itself combined the local and the international in its mixed make-up (three Solomon Islanders and two international members) and in its operating methods. It tried to make more space for women, for instance, as SITRC officer Betty Lina Gigisi recounts in chapter 19.

In these aspects, the SITRC may have broken ground. Solomon Islands is a small country, and it was governed by Britain until 1978. Its diverse peoples fall into the Melanesian islands, which span from Indonesian-ruled Tanah Papua to Fiji, and also include Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Kanaky (French-ruled New Caledonia)—four independent countries and two territories still under outside rule. All six have some form of membership in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum. While Solomon Islands is not the only one to experience conflict, it did suffer a relatively short but extremely violent conflict around the turn of the century.

Ethnicity was one cause of what local people call “the tensions.” Economic factors also played a role. While few outsiders could locate Solomon Islands on a map, some might recall the island of Guadalcanal as a Second World War battleground, one of the turning points at which the Japanese military advance was turned back. The major airfield of Guadalcanal became the site of the Solomons capital, Honiara, which attracted migrants from neighbouring Malaita Island. Economic change was unsettling the previous balance. In the 1990s, the increasing presence in much of Guadalcanal of migrants from Malaita led to conflicts over land ownership that turned violent as both groups formed militias. One of these militia groups even managed to topple the national government. A peace agreement was signed in Australia but conflict continued until the arrival of an Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003. After ten years, RAMSI became a police training mission only, and its mandate ended in 2017.

Yet the causes of the conflict went unaddressed, leading to civil-society calls for a truth commission. Church voices were especially prominent in this push. This mobilizing phase led to a 2008 parliamentary mandate that formed the SITRC. The commission then carried out its work. But the government’s failure to publish or debate the report led to a state-sponsored

forgetting. Most truth commissions report with ceremony and fanfare, and then hope for governments to act on their recommendations. The SITRC report, by contrast, vanished into a void. There has been almost no “socialization” since the report’s completion. The reasons for this remain cloudy, but the next chapter starts to look for an explanation and an assessment of the SITRC’s work.

