



Culture and Confidence in the Solomon Islands

by *Barbara Riley*

Barbara Riley worked as a CUSO volunteer in the Solomon Islands from 1987 to 1991. As the Cultural Affairs Advisor for Western Province, she, in her own words, has “been fortunate to develop and carry out a cultural preservation and education programme focused on villagers” in Western Province. She found all her work immensely enjoyable with the *Kastom Bilong Mere* (women’s traditional culture) workshops as the highlight of her four year's work. What follows is an account of one of those workshops.

Dolores pressed the “play” button, then laughed in embarrassment and pride as she heard herself singing a traditional song in her own language, Varisi. Last year 250 women in Solomon Islands’ Western Province shared Dolores’ pleasure in hearing their recorded voices during eleven *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops organised by the province’s Cultural Affairs Office with the financial assistance of the Canada Fund.

These workshops differed from villagers’ usual experience of cultural preservation. In the past, overseas researchers determined what was recorded and, by inference, what was of value; material so collected was seldom returned to the village. More recently, Pacific islands states, conscious of their unique traditions, have established their own cultural programmes. Western Province’s Cultural Affairs Office, one example of a programme which exists for the benefit of villagers, ensures that preservation and dissemination go hand-in-hand.

Kastom Bilong Mere involved women as full participants in a unique cultural programme:

- ◆ encouraging women to preserve their oral traditions;
- ◆ emphasizing women’s knowledge and abilities and thereby bolstering their self-confidence;
- ◆ enabling women to examine social change as a precondition for thinking about their future.

These aims reflected those of the Cultural Affairs Office which encourage an appreciation of traditional culture as an affirmation of identity and pride.

Kastom Bilong Mere highlighted women, their knowledge and skills. Traditionally excluded from contact with outsiders or any public role, Solomon Islands women are still shy in front of men or “Europeans”. Because the workshops were restricted to women, and because each one was conducted entirely in the local

vernacular language, women were able to participate fully and freely. By all reports the use of vernacular language was the most important factor in making the participants feel that the workshop belonged to them. Local language ensured the participation of the *olos*, the elder women, whose knowledge of traditions made them the experts and teachers of the younger women.

Other features of the programme worked to break down shyness. Participants were paired off at the beginning and had to introduce their partners to the rest of us. At breaks we played games and did easy physical fitness exercises together. Women were invited to bring traditional objects and talk about them, and to demonstrate traditional skills. The highlight of one workshop was a graphic demonstration of customary birthing with the assistance of another woman. The shrieks of laughter must have echoed across to the next village.

*For the women,
traditional culture
affirms their identity.*

To discuss change the women divided into small groups and they reported back to each other: how was life different from when they were children? Were these changes for the better or not? Most frequently mentioned was the lack of respect now shown - by the young for the old, by women and girls for men and boys, by villagers for the chief, and by the chief for his position and responsibility to lead the community.

Another significant change was a decrease in sharing. In the past people were willing to help - in the garden, with house building, with transportation. Now they are likely to demand payment. The women had no clear answer as to whether these were negative or positive changes. Seeing advantages and disadvantages

on both sides made them realise the significance of conscious choice in determining a community's future.

The main part of the workshop - recording oral traditions - was completely in the hands of the participants. Once they had learned how to operate a cassette recorder - a hilarious exercise - each group was free to produce its own recordings. The women chose traditional songs and stories, recollections of the Second World War, customary medicines, childbirth and marriage practices, games and feats, autobiography. They also decided whether the material was restricted or could be broadcast on the twice weekly Cultural Affairs Programme.

The workshops also offered the opportunity for women to be active in front of the host community - by taking part in or organising daily church services, by performing traditional dances and games, and by singing and speech-making at the final feast and closing ceremony.

On the last morning the women evaluated the workshop. As Solomon Islanders do not easily or openly offer criticism, the questions were simply, "What was good about the workshop?", "How can we make it better next time?" Most often praised were the opportunity to learn about the past from each other, the learning of new skills (operating a cassette recorder, signing one's name - a major accomplishment for some *olos*), and the fellowship of meeting with women from different churches. Next time? Get more women involved!

Each participant was presented with a certificate at the closing ceremony - a mark of achievement and a time of recognition by the community. Tears and cries of "come back again", marked our separation, all of us enriched by the enthusiasm, learning and sharing.

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