

## The people of the artificial island of Foueda, Lau Lagoon, Malaita, Solomon Islands: Traditional fishing methods, fisheries management and the roles of men and women in fishing

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### Introduction

Fishing has long been part of the lives of the people of Foueda, an artificial island in the Lau Lagoon, Malaita, Solomon Islands. Like neighbouring villages, fish caught are for family consumption or to barter for vegetables and crops with the people of the main island Malaita. These crops include taro, yam, and bananas, which flourish on Malaita. Bartering and food exchange bring closer kinship ties between the people living on artificial islands and those living on the main island of Malaita.

The artificial island of Foueda is located on the barrier reef of the Lau Lagoon (Fig. 1). The reef is almost like a vegetable garden and to manage the reef resources, certain management regimes have been implemented. These deal with the rate of harvesting of the fisheries resources. The different sections of the reef, which can cover several kilometres, are protected by different tribes in the village. Most fishing is done near the shore, though occasionally some men will venture offshore to catch fish such as tuna and other pelagic species. Fishing is classified as a man's occupation on Foueda. Women tend to collect shellfish for the evening meal.

Foueda village is located on the artificial island of Foueda, Malaita, Solomon Islands (Fig. 1). It is built on a barrier reef about one mile from land. The history of the artificial islands in the Lau lagoon is described briefly by Molea and Vuki (2008) and goes back to the ancient days of gathering and hunting. People migrated from the main island of Malaita to the artificial island because it was easier for them to see and fight any attacking enemies. Foueda village has about 60 houses and a population of about 300 people.

About 70% of the village's young people move to Honiara either to find jobs in town or to live with relatives while attending school. This means that most people living in the village are 35 to 70 years old. Children who are too young to attend school or those attending the nearby primary school (2 miles

away) also live on the island. The young people only return home at the end of the year to spend their Christmas holidays with their families.

The village is organised into several very distinct areas. There are separate common areas for men and women, and these are separated by a stone wall. There is also a common area for both men and women. In this paper, we describe the traditional fishing methods utilised by the people of Foueda Island. We also briefly describe the gender roles in fishing and the traditional fisheries management.

### Fishing methods

Most fishing activities are done on the reef flat at high tide or in the lagoon. But occasionally people go out into deeper waters to fish for tuna, dolphins or other pelagic fish. Some common fishing techniques used by the people of Foueda are spear fishing, rope fishing, kite fishing, fish poisoning, netting and night diving.

#### *Spear fishing*

This is one of the most common methods of fishing. Spears are made by attaching sharpened stainless steel rods attached to a suitable bamboo or a piece of rounded palm wood. When using this method, a fisher dives and searches for fish under rocks, spearing any that come out. Sometimes a fisher will paddle a canoe into the lagoon and throw the spear at a school of fish. Rarely will a skilled fisher miss a school of fish. This method of fishing is also used to catch rock lobster at the edge of a reef on moonlit nights.

#### *Rope fishing*

The target species for this fishing method is rabbit fish. A long rope made from bush materials is pulled sideways by two people across the water. During the process, the vibrations made by the rope scare the fish, causing them to lay flat on the reef substratum. The rest of the fishermen can then wade behind the rope and spear the fish.

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**Figure 1.** The artificial island of Foueda, in the Lau Lagoon, on the northeast coast of Malaita, Solomon Islands (Source: <http://earth.google.com>).

### ***Kite fishing***

This method of fishing uses the principles of trolling. The largest fish caught using this method are the garfish and barracuda. A kite is made from sago palm leaves. Attached to the edge of the kite is a string made of braided bush strings or from modern nylon strings. At the end of the string is a lure made of spider web with no hooks attached to it. The kite is then flown by paddling across the water.

The spider web lure drags on the water's surface and when the fish see it they attack it. Their teeth stick to the wet, sticky spider web. The fisher knows a fish is caught when the line is tight and the kite falls into the water.

### ***Fish poisoning***

Although several different types of plants are used to poison fish, the most commonly one is *uka*, *Derris derris*. This plant has a dark green colour and is usually found in coastal areas or swamps. The leaves are pounded with sand and are often wrapped in bark cloth and placed under rocks where fish are hiding. Once the fish have taken in the poison, they float to the surface and the fisher can pick them up.

### ***Netting***

Before the introduction of modern fishing methods, nets were made from braided tree trunk fibres. These types of nets are mainly used as surrounding nets. The floats are usually made of wood and cowrie shells. When a fisher sees a school of fish, the net is lowered to surround the fish. The two sides of the

net are pulled to close it and the net is finally pulled up into the canoe. There are special canoes made specifically for net fishing.

Modern gillnets are used now instead of ropes. These are much stronger and easier to work with. Modern gillnets also last longer, require less maintenance, are more effective in catching fish. In addition, fishing with them requires fewer people than fishing with traditional nets.

### ***Night diving***

Night diving in Foueda is found to be the easiest and most efficient method of fishing. The introduction of waterproof battery-powered torches has really helped night divers. Fishers dive with a torch and search for sleeping fish, spearing them and throwing them inside the canoe. Although several cases of pneumonia have been associated with night diving, it is the easiest way of catching fish and for most fishers its efficiency outweighs the risk.

### ***Roles of men and women in fishing***

The residents of Foueda see fishing as a man's occupation. Traditionally, fishing is seen as a secret art, which is associated with religious rituals. The fishing gear, canoes and fishermen need to be blessed before they can venture out on a fishing trip. Women are not allowed to carry out the kinds of fishing that men do and are not allowed to touch men's fishing gear. The taboo is associated with the belief that if women touch the gear the fisherman will not have good catches.

Women do still have a role in fishing, although their role is very distinct from men's. At low tide women glean edible shellfish, crabs and octopus from the reefs. They also collect shells to sell them to shell collectors in Honiara. Sometimes they even find golden cowry, which is then sold at a very high price to shell collectors.

Traditionally, women's fishing was very distinct from men's fishing, but with the arrival of missionaries and Christian teachings, women are now able to fish with men. Women can also use trolling and hand-line gear, as well as gillnets, as these are available in the shops.

### **Traditional fisheries management**

The barrier reef, which covers about 10 square kilometres, is owned by different people in the village. The different tribes own different sections of the reef, the boundaries of which are marked by rocks, lagoon passages or deep pools. In order to manage the reef sustainably and to provide food security for the people, past generations put in place regulations governing the utilisation of reefs.

From mid-July to September, a deeper area of the barrier reef is banned to all fishers. It is said that a killer shark often visits this area and can kill people, although the story could also be a way to ensure that people respect the fishing ban.

If there is going to be a feast, the owners of the different reef sections usually ban fishing in their areas. The ban may begin 5–6 months before the feast, to ensure that there will be fish when the feast takes place. Fishers are occasionally caught night diving at these areas, and are either warned not to re-offend or are made to pay compensation. During the taboo period, people fish in the lagoon and offshore.

The different tribes also have totems that are sea creatures such as sharks, giant clams, sting-rays and moray eels. The totem of the people of Foueda is the octopus. The Foueda people believe that octopus was a favourite food of their ancestors, who were brave warriors and gained victory over their enemies. It is believed that when these ancestors died they turned into octopuses. Octopuses have special protection on Foueda reefs, and because of these ancient beliefs the people will not eat octopus. Because of these restrictions, there is an abundance of octopus on reefs around the artificial island of Foueda.

The owners of reefs on Foueda have ultimate authority over the reef and its surrounding waters. The owners decide who may fish in the area and what types of fishing gear and methods may be used. When people fish in the area with nets, the owners of the reef sections check the nets to ensure that the fishers only catch enough for themselves. If the owner of the reef finds that a fisher has caught too many fish, the owner will lift the bottom of the net to free the fish trapped in it.

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