

Kin and Gifts: Understanding the Kin-based Politics of Solomon Islands — The Case of East AreAre



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Despite the claim that money and especially Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) disbursement have played a major role in influencing political choices in the Solomon Islands national parliamentary elections (Commonwealth Secretariat 2014:3, 5; Cox 2015; Hague 2012; Haley and Zubrinich 2015; Morgan 2005:4; Wood 2014a), empirical evidence and election data suggest that political alliances in some rural constituencies are based more on kin relationship rather than gift exchanges and RCDF disbursements. Although gifting has attracted a lot of attention in the discussions about politics and elections in the Solomon Islands, it is kin relationship (more than anything else) that forms the basis for political alliances in the constituency politics. In the rural areas where social organisation is kin-based and institutions like the extended family or clan still play an important role in the lives of individuals, it is the social and biological bond between members and their loyalty to these institutions that set the foundation for collective political action and allegiance.

This paper is based on the work I did for my MA thesis and has used (beside election results) data from the fieldwork I carried out in East AreAre, Malaita Province, in 2013. I have also relied on my knowledge of the region, its people and culture to discuss social organisation and its influence on political affiliation and allegiance in the politics of the rural constituency. More generally, I have reinterpreted the correlation between gifting and voting behaviour using a kin-based model. This model advances two arguments that form the core of the paper. First, kin relationship forms the basis for collective political actions and allegiance in rural constituency politics. Secondly, gifting when isolated from kin relationship does not have the significant impact it is often accorded. The kin-based model therefore contends that the

core or base support of any candidate would be his/her kin group and such support could be maintained over successive elections, even without big campaign budgets.

The first part of the paper deals with models that have been used by scholars and researchers to discuss political behaviour in Solomon Islands and the shortfalls associated with using these models to describe the politics of the constituency. I also discuss the kin-based model and its appropriateness for understanding constituency politics in this section. The second part of the paper discusses social organisation and traditional gifting in East AreAre. The last part deals with the implications of kin-based social organisation for constituency politics in East AreAre and Solomon Islands more generally.

Theorising Solomon Islands Constituency Politics

In discussing voting behaviour in Solomon Islands constituency politics, scholars have used cultural, rational or clientelist arguments to explain gifting and political affiliation during elections. Although these approaches have some distinctive features, they also offer intertwining explanations and generally agree on a correlation between benefits/incentives and voting behaviour. These models agree that voters are likely to support candidates who offer benefits and incentives.

Drawn from the field of economics, the 'rational choice theory' views the exchange between candidates and voters as equivalent to an economic activity, where voter decisions are benefit or gain-oriented. Political actors are therefore seen as choosing political relationships (making choices between candidates) that will benefit them the most. As Downs (1957:137) argues: 'Every agent ... undertakes only those actions for which marginal return exceeds mar-



ginal cost’.

In using the rational choice argument to explain gifting and voting behaviour in Solomon Islands, proponents of ‘rational choice’ draw attention to the economic hardships faced by voters (rather than irrational allegiance and mere adherence to cultural norms) as a major factor shaping voter choices and alliances. For instance, Tobias Haque argues that voter behaviour (in Solomon Islands) ‘reflects the broader economic context’ where there is little opportunity to earn money (2012:3). He maintains that voters’ focus on short-term benefits cannot be justified using a cultural explanation or attributing it to irrational loyalty.

Likewise, some scholars have used a clientilist framework to describe the voter tendency to support candidates who provide personal benefits or localised public goods. The clientilist theory derives from a medieval European phenomenon that describes the relationship between landlords and tenants. The theory of clientilism has gained popularity following a renewed interest in clientilist relationships and their impact on western-style public institutions and processes in new democracies (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2002:1; De Sousa 2008:3). Similar clientilist relationships can also be found in contemporary Latin American and Asian countries. In Melanesia, the concept has been widely used to describe voter loyalty supposedly influenced by the ability of candidates to offer personal benefits (and sometimes community goods) to voters. In writing about Solomon Islands politics and elections, Wood (2015:3) says that: ‘voter behaviour in Solomon Islands is strongly clientilist ... in that voter behaviour is based around contingent exchange’. He further argues that it is typical of Solomon Islands voters to support candidates they think will provide personal assistance and local community support during their term in parliament (Wood 2014c). While the clientilist framework also sees voter decisions as rational, this does not necessarily mean that voters make decisions based on maximum offers.

In Melanesia, clientilism is also said to be intertwined with personal relationships/networks thus adding an individualised aspect to voting and political support. Jonathan Hopkin in discussing

clientilism in electoral politics argues that: ‘patrons ... stand for election and their clients vote for them sometimes out of a sense of obligation and attachment’ (2006:3). Voters therefore support individual candidates rather than political parties and, in return, candidates furnish voters with private goods rather than public ones.

Finally, some scholars attribute aspects of the gifting practice and voter behaviour in modern politics to cultural practices assumed to be characteristic of traditional Melanesian leadership and culture (Morgan 2005:5; Wood 13/8/2012). This approach is common where scholars believe that aspects of the learnt culture of a society permeate modern politics and governance structures. De Sousa (2008:7), for instance, argues that: ‘Cultural attitudes shape the normative environment in which clientilist practices take place’.

Supporters of the cultural thesis say that people enter politics not as blank slates but are conditioned by the culture and society in which they grow up. For the supporters of the cultural thesis, the learnt attitudes and values will always transpose to other arenas of life and, in this case, to that of modern politics (Anderson and Tverdova 2003:93; Kweit and Kweit 1981:61).

The core argument of the cultural approach is tied to the traditional Melanesian Bigman phenomenon and its associated reciprocal culture. The model, made popular by Marshal Sahlins (1963), asserts that Melanesian traditional leaders attain authority by distributing wealth to followers, thus earning their loyalty. Likewise, candidates and members of parliament (MPs) are seen as modern Bigmen who maintain followers by giving them gifts and incentives, and in return voters pledge their support. In supporting the cultural argument, Michael Morgan (2005:4) writes that: ‘Most analyses of the state in Melanesia suggest that pre-existing social forms pervade the state at almost every level’. Sinclair Dinnen (2008:57) also says that, in the case of Solomon Islands: ‘Skilful distribution of resources and manipulation of relationship by modern politicians are reminiscent of older Melanesian leadership strategies’. Therefore, for the supporters of the cultural thesis, culture will always influence the way politics is done and the kind of

democracy a country has (Lane and Errson 2005).

Undoing the theories

Although the rational choice argument explains some political relationships in Solomon Islands constituency politics, the theory cannot adequately describe the general behaviour of the voting population of a constituency. A rational approach seems fine when applied to the relationship and exchanges between incumbent MPs or rich candidates and supporters. The rational argument falls short, however, when one considers other strong contenders who are also able to attract large followings without a large budget or access to state resources like constituency development funds. Even more striking, these candidates seem able to maintain their support over two or three elections. Because most candidates get their share of the constituency votes during elections, winners of elections do so on a very low vote count, sometimes receiving less than 20 per cent of the constituency votes (Wood 2015:3). This alludes firstly to a single factor that works in favour of all candidates — those who have a lot to spend during elections and candidates with limited resources. Secondly, it also points to a very fragmented voting population that does not allow political support to converge on only two of the big players (as according to Duverger's Law).

Furthermore, the argument that voters readily support candidates who offer gifts or incentives is not always borne out in reality. Although voters accept gifts from candidates, they do not always pledge allegiance or loyalty to the giver. In writing about politics in Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea, Ketan (2004:343) says: 'The use of cash ... is a major factor in elections, but it must be used cleverly because handouts do not automatically open eyes or win votes.'

Ketan is alluding to the fact that gifts, whether in cash or kind, do not always forge political relationships. The problem has been that the exchange between candidates and voters in modern politics is assumed to work in a similar manner to the Bigman model. In so doing, the acceptance of gifts is often taken to mean political support when indeed a lot of voters who accept gifts from candidates may not reciprocate them at all. For instance, in

the East AreAre constituency election petition case (Ha'apio v Hanaria [2011] SBHC 117; HCSI-CC 343 of 2010 — 7 December 2011), witnesses confirmed that gifts were retrieved from recipients when it was established that they did not vote for the giver (Andrew Hanaria Keniasina). Such incidents challenge the argument that gifts necessarily bring about political loyalty and allegiance, as supported by rational and clientelist approaches.

Of course this is not to suggest that all voters within Solomon Islands constituencies cast their votes based only on a single type of social relationship. As discussed in the next section and illustrated in Figure 1, political choices could also be based on rational decisions, sound policies, religious affiliations or even employment experiences. However, such support is usually small for most candidates and choices based on ideologies are often scarce. Most candidates find it difficult to get votes beyond their home polling booths without strong and influential campaign managers (Hiriasia 2016).

The Kin-based Voting Model

The kin-based model differs from the rational choice, clientelist and cultural approaches in that its focus is not on the correlation between gifting and political behaviour but rather on how kin relationship affects voting behaviour. It draws attention to the use of kin relationship (rather than gifting) as a platform for political cooperation and alliance in constituency politics. The model sees gifting as embedded within kin-based social organisation and kin networking and that, on its own, gifting does not always bring about political loyalty, as often assumed. The kin-based model therefore sees gifting as effective only when practised within a kin-group. As such, when candidates or campaign managers give to non-kin voters, there is no guarantee that they will reciprocate the gift.

In kin-based politics, because the kin group is more (if not the most) important, candidates as well as campaign managers must properly coordinate and mobilise kin groups for political support. Therefore, the core of a candidate's support would be kin-based; whether that of the candidate or campaign manager. This also means that outside of kin groups, the impact of gifting is always uncertain.

In a lot of cases, candidates (especially newcomers) give sparingly in these uncertain zones (non-kin territories) handing out small amounts of money while bigger gifts, such as solar panels or even iron roofing, are reserved for kin members whose loyalty is unquestioned (Hiriasia 2016). In this context, the terms kin bases and support bases¹ are usually synonymous (see the discussion on the AreAre traditional gifting) in that kin bases are also likely to be the major support bases of candidates. See the kin-based voting model below.

those who support policies and religious doctrines and victims of the ‘devil’s night’.² This (third) layer of support usually varies for each candidate and it is quite rare to find support based on ideologies or religious affiliations. Having said that, in a context where most candidates have the backing of kin groups, those who have consistent pockets of supporters beyond kin bases will increase their chances of winning. As is obvious in Figure 2, Michael Ahikau (the runner-up in the 2006 election) maintained a consistent support in polling stations

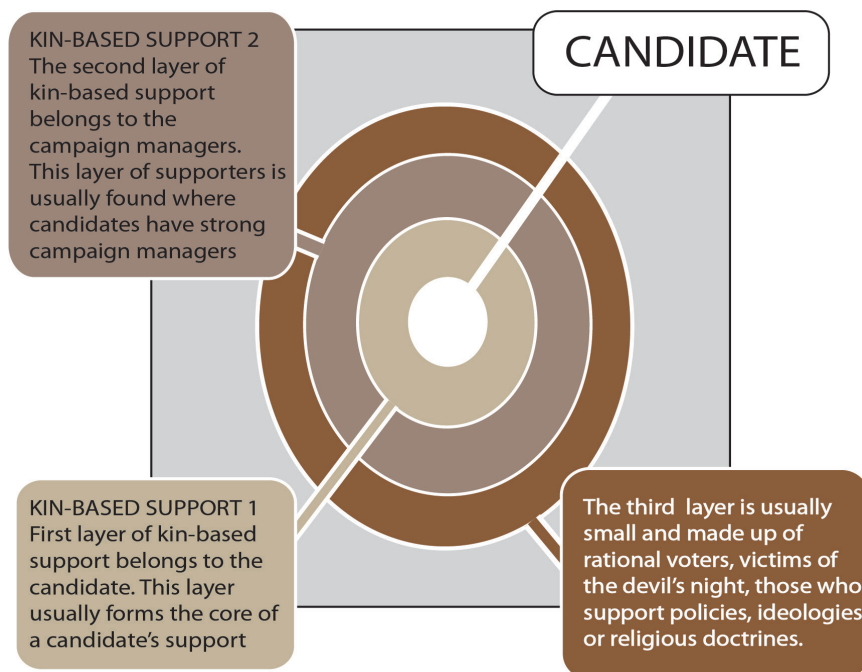


Figure 1: The kin-based voting model.

In the kin-based voting model shown in Figure 1, the core of a candidate's total vote count would be made up of kin votes: those of the candidate and the campaign managers. Although gifting takes place at this level, collective political action is based more on kinship and social ties rather than mere rational decisions. Even when campaign managers duplicate the kin-based support in their own areas (second layer of kin support), voters pledge allegiance to the campaign managers and not so much the candidates. Voters therefore shift support with the allegiance of the campaign managers. The third layer of support comprises rational voters:

beyond his kin base, while Abraham Namokari received little support outside his kin base. The outside support as such varies for each candidate and is at times solely dependent on the work of campaign managers.

Kin Groups and Political Support

The use of kin groups as a political platform is noted elsewhere in Melanesia. For instance, in writing about the case of Western Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, Ketan argues that candidates rely on kin/tribal and individual networks to succeed in elections (2013:4). Kabutaulaka (1998)

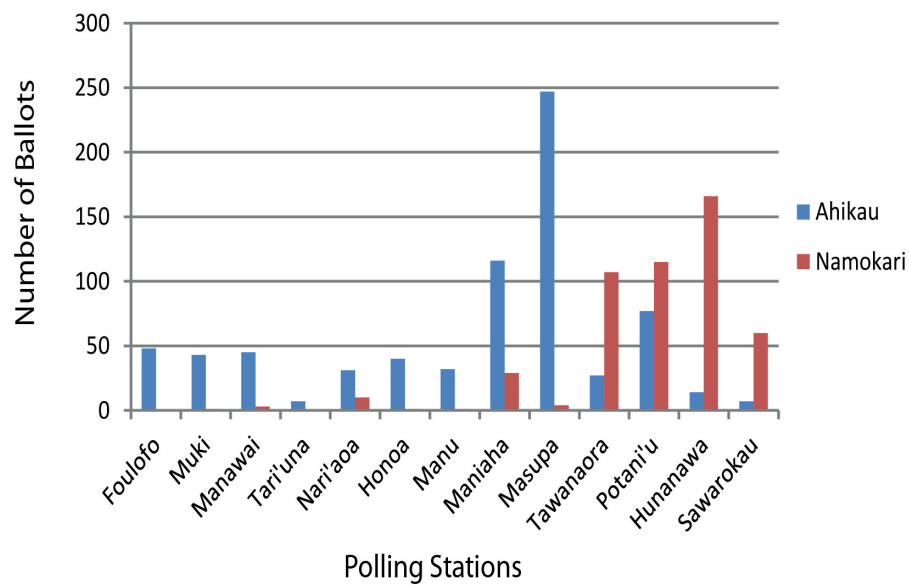


Figure 2: 2006 election results for Michael Ahikau and Abraham Namokari.

also points out in the case of Solomon Islands that political support for a candidate starts with the kin or tribal group before extending to others within a constituency. The kin-based voting is sometimes referred to as ethnic-based³ voting (Wood 2015:3; 2014c).

Because political support is kin-based, it is common for candidates to pick up most of their votes at home polling booths (their villages and kin bases) and little support beyond that. As is obvious in Figure 2, Abraham Namokari who is from Hunanawa received most of his votes at his home polling station and those nearby, where he has kin ties, and very little beyond Tawanaora polling station. Likewise, Michael Ahikau who is from Masupa also picked most of his votes at Masupa and nearby polling stations, as well as at Potani'u where he has maternal ties.

Furthermore, because political support is kin-based, even candidates who do not have access to state resources such as the RCDF can also maintain strong and consistent kin support for over two or three elections (Hiriasia 2016). Conversely, there are numerous examples of incumbent MPs who despite having access to huge resources and especially the RCDF failed to attract significant support beyond their home polling booths. This suggests

that there is a weak correlation at best between political support and incentives or benefits. It is in this regard that I see a kin-based approach as offering a more realistic explanation of the general voting behaviour at the constituency level.

East AreAre Constituency

East AreAre Constituency is important as a case to study for two reasons. First, it is an example of a rural constituency where there is little evidence of the presence of a central or provincial government. Except for schools (most of which are community schools⁴) and a few clinics and aid posts that provide very basic health services to the East AreAre people, there is little on the ground that suggests the work or the presence of a government. Without a strong presence, the government (central and provincial) becomes irrelevant to the lives of the people. As White (2007:4) rightly highlights in the case of Pacific Island states, 'it is arguable that the region's newly independent governments never succeeded in establishing a strong presence in rural communities.'

To a certain extent, this resonates with Almond and Verba's (1963) *parochial culture* where citizens have little awareness of a central government. In their study of political culture across five countries,

Almond and Verba concluded that in a *parochial culture*, citizens are largely unaware of the political system and hence their role in the system. Moreover, in a parochial culture, citizens have few expectations of the government. Similarly, in the case of East AreAre, detachment from the government generally shapes the political culture of the people and how they see and relate to government.

Second, East AreAre constituency is an example of a rural constituency where the lack of government presence results in local institutions and structures asserting themselves in the constituency politics. In AreAre and more generally across Solomon Islands, local groups and institutions have remained an important platform for social organisation and cooperation and play a major role in the everyday life of individuals. White (2007:5), for instance, states that 'local groups are highly valued'. In particular, kin networks have become an important platform for collective social and political action. During elections, kin networks have also been mobilised to support kin candidates. As pointed out by Kabutaulaka (1998:133) concerning political support in the Solomon Islands: 'Political allegiances are based around kinship and tribal group before extending to the wider community. In elections the foundation for political support is kinship and tribal group'.

My research suggests that this observation holds true in East AreAre, where kin groups have been a popular platform for political organisation and remain central to the dynamics of constituency politics. The lessons learnt in using a kin-based approach to understand the dynamics of East AreAre politics can also help explain voting behaviour in Solomon Islands constituency politics more broadly.

AreAre in Post-Independence National Politics

The AreAre region is best known in Solomon Islands political history for the movement called Maasina Ruru (Maasina Rule). Led by Alick Nono'ohimae, Nori and Hoasihau, the movement was a result of continuous local resistance to colonial leadership combined with a new view of colonialism born mainly out of the encounter with American soldiers during World War Two

(Akin 2013:164; Bennett 1987:293). At its core, the objective of the Maasina Ruru movement was to gain autonomy from the British colonial government and, more generally, for Solomon Islanders to form their own government and to apply *kastom*⁵ in their own courts to settle disputes. By the end of 1946, the movement extended beyond Malaita and attracted followers on some of the other major islands (Laracy 1983:22).

In the decades prior to and after independence, AreAre individuals continued to play an active role in the local politics. The most notable were Sir David Kausimae and Sir Peter Kenilorea. The former was elected to the Legislative Council as the South Malaita representative in 1967 and played an active role in the post-independence politics until his retirement in the late 1980s. In the 1976 general election, East AreAre became a separate constituency; Sir Peter Kenilorea became its first member of parliament, having stood unopposed in that general election, going on to become the chief minister that year (Bennett 1987:322). He retained the seat in the 1980 election and continued to hold the seat until his resignation in 1991.

Following Peter Kenilorea's resignation, Edward Huniehu was elected as the new member of parliament in a by-election held that year. Two years later (in 1993), he was re-elected in the national general elections and held office until 1997. In the 1997 election, Dickson Warakohia won the seat, only to be replaced by Edward Huniehu in the 2001 election. He then held onto the constituency seat until his death in 2009. In the 2010 election the seat was won by Andrew Hanaria, although he lost it in a petition in 2012 (Wood 13/8/2012). A by-election was held that year (2012) and the seat was won by Andrew Manepora'a. He was re-elected in the 2014 election.

In the post-independence politics of East AreAre, Kenilorea and Huniehu between them shared 31 years as MPs for the seat while Warakohia, Hanaria and Manepora'a shared the other 9 years. Interestingly, both Kenilorea and Huniehu enjoyed extensive⁶ kin connections across the constituency. Even Dickson Warakohia, who won the seat for a single term in 1997, is a close relative of Peter Kenilorea and had capitalised on the same kin

connections for election victory. His support, however, declined in the 2001 and 2006 elections as kin candidates split the same vote bases in the northern and central polling stations. The election results prior to the 2010 election therefore suggest a strong correlation between extensive kin connection/networks and election success.

It is also important to note that this trend has been changing since the 2010 election and candidates who lack extensive kin connections have been making up for this shortfall by duplicating kin alliances outside their own kin territories through their campaign managers. This was probably because none of the candidates who ran in the 2010 election had the extensive kin networks similar to that of Peter Kenilorea or Edward Huniehu. This has not only added a new dimension to the political competition in East AreAre but has also seen campaign managers taking on a bigger and more important role during elections. Kin relationship, whether the candidates' or campaign managers', is still a very influential factor in East AreAre constituency politics.

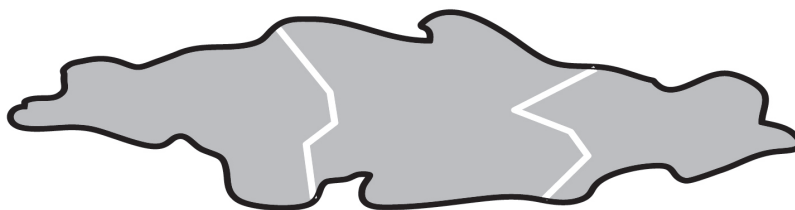
Social Structure and Political Organisation in AreAre

In order to understand political behaviour in East AreAre contemporary politics, it is necessary to look at the individual (*iinoni*) and his/her position within larger social units such as the extended family and clan or tribe. AreAre culture puts emphasis on membership of bigger social units. This relationship is not only important for land and property ownership but also determines alliances for social events such as feasts, marriages, other communal activities and political organisation. In contemporary politics and especially in the politics of the constituency, alliances and political groupings start with the kin group.

Moreover, in AreAre, social organisation is very much tied to the land tenure system which draws a parallel between the concept of the canoe and the land. Thus in AreAre the term used for canoe is *iirora* which is also the same term used for the biggest land unit. The term *arata* literally refers to a section within a canoe, likewise in AreAre land tenure *arata* also refers to sub-divisions within a bigger plot of land.



A cross-sectional view of AreAre traditional canoe known as *iirora*. The *iirora* is subdivided into smaller sections known as *arata*. The same concept is used in the AreAre land tenure system.



This diagram represents the concept of *iirora* as used in AreAre land tenure system. The *iirora* is divided into smaller plots known as *arata*. The *arata* boundaries are either rivers, streams or valleys.

Figure 3: Comparison between the design of a traditional canoe and the land tenure system in AreAre.

Figure 3 demonstrates how the concept of a canoe is applied to the land tenure system in AreAre. The lower diagram represents a plot of land and the lines dividing the *aratas* can be valleys or rivers. *Iirora* in AreAre land tenure can cover quite a large area and the region being mountainous, an *iirora* usually covers a whole mountain range. Valleys, ridges or rivers/streams are used to mark the boundaries between each *arata*. While sometimes the number of *arata* can reach four, most *iirora* have only three. Also, the *aratas* are arranged sequentially and there is an *arata na'ona iirora* (*arata* in front of the canoe) as well as an *arata purina iirora* (*arata* at the back of canoe). The clear demarcation of tribal areas (*arata*) in AreAre means that people only settle or work where they have connections to the land.

Arata also refers to an institution of which those owning an *arata* (a plot of land within the *iirora*) are members. The term can therefore be used interchangeably to refer to a plot of land and the institution that owns and governs it. Although the concept of *arata* translates more closely to the western idea of tribe, it differs to an extent in that it must be used with reference to land ownership. As such, the term *arata* not only refers to a group of related people but also a group of people who own the same plot of land. In AreAre, traditional gifting and social organisation takes place within the *arata*.

Traditional Gifting in AreAre

In AreAre, gifting is known as *waiaraha* or *taurihina*. The term *waiaraha* translates more as 'contribution' than 'gifting' and it shows how AreAre people perceive gifting. *Waiaraha* or *taurihina* (as the practice is known in bride-price payments) are in fact contributions collected from members of the extended family and tribe toward the hosting of a feast, payment of a bride or other communal events. Although kin members are not compelled to *waiara* or to give, the expectation that everyone should participate renders the practice compulsory. Moreover, those who do not actively participate in such events are often ostracised and stand the chance of hosting such events alone. When seen in this light, the concept of *waiaraha* (or gifting) in AreAre is comparable to resource pooling, where

parties put together resources to host an event, solve a problem or address a need.

The purpose of traditional gifting is therefore social and economic rather than political. Even those who do not have political aspirations pool resources to secure the cooperation of the kin group. However, for those with a political agenda, participation within these organised events can prove useful for political cooperation and most candidates utilise their kin connections for political support during elections. It is also important to know that gifting in AreAre occurs mainly within the kin network and when it extends beyond kin boundaries it results from marriage and the relationship is known as *aahorota*. The basis for gifting in AreAre is therefore kin relationship and, in this context, gifting is only warranted by the relationship.

Kin Relationship and its Implications for East AreAre Constituency Politics

Kin relationship is a very dominant feature of East AreAre constituency politics. This is because institutions such as the extended family and kin/tribal groups still play an important role in the lives of individuals. For most, these institutions have become the training ground for social cooperation and collective action. The lessons learnt here will form the basis of what Hague and Harrop refer to as 'basic political loyalties', which they argue are formed in youth (2001:88). According to their *primacy model*, the knowledge acquired and attitude and behaviour developed at younger ages will serve as a framework for interpreting behaviour in adulthood (ibid.). In AreAre, the extended family and kin group is also where social cooperation and collective participation starts for most individuals. In modern politics, this institution forms the basis for political organisation and support (Hirasia 2016).

Kin-based Political Support

In East AreAre constituency politics, a candidate's major support is his/her kin group and this manifests in the way candidates win votes across the constituency. Outside the kin group or *arata* (tribe), the trust and loyalty needed to maintain political loyalty and allegiance is often missing. It is

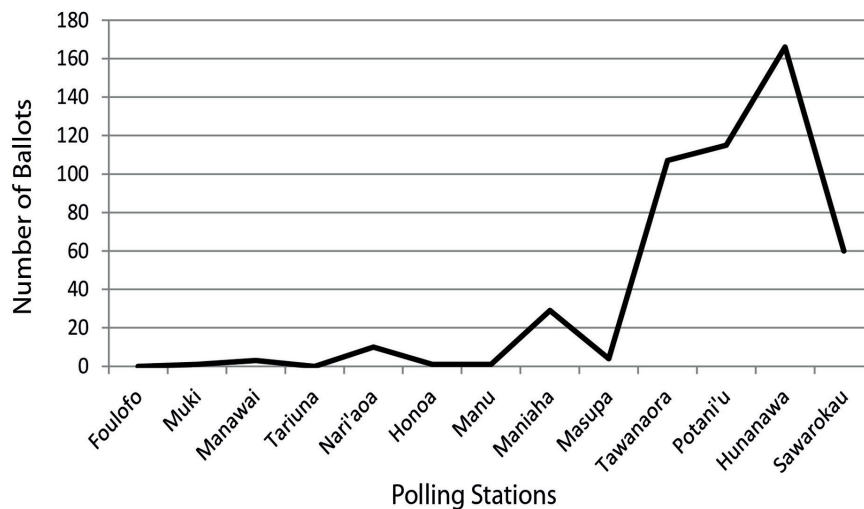


Figure 4: Vote counts per polling station for Abraham Namokari — 2010 elections.

therefore common for candidates to receive most of their votes at home polling booths (kin territories) and very few beyond that. As can be seen in Figure 4, Abraham Namokari who is from Hunanawa village and has kin connections as far as Tawanaora maintained a strong support in the southern polling stations but little beyond Tawanaora.

The pattern of kin-based support is also likely to be duplicated across the constituency, with can-

didates having their kin support around them. A study of the election data from the 2006 and 2010 East AreAre elections shows voting behaviour that confirms the kin-based political support explanation. As Figure 5 demonstrates for the 2006 elections, a candidate would stand out from the rest at particular polling stations and then recede or even disappear in polling stations further from his home booths. This pattern is repeated across the constitu-

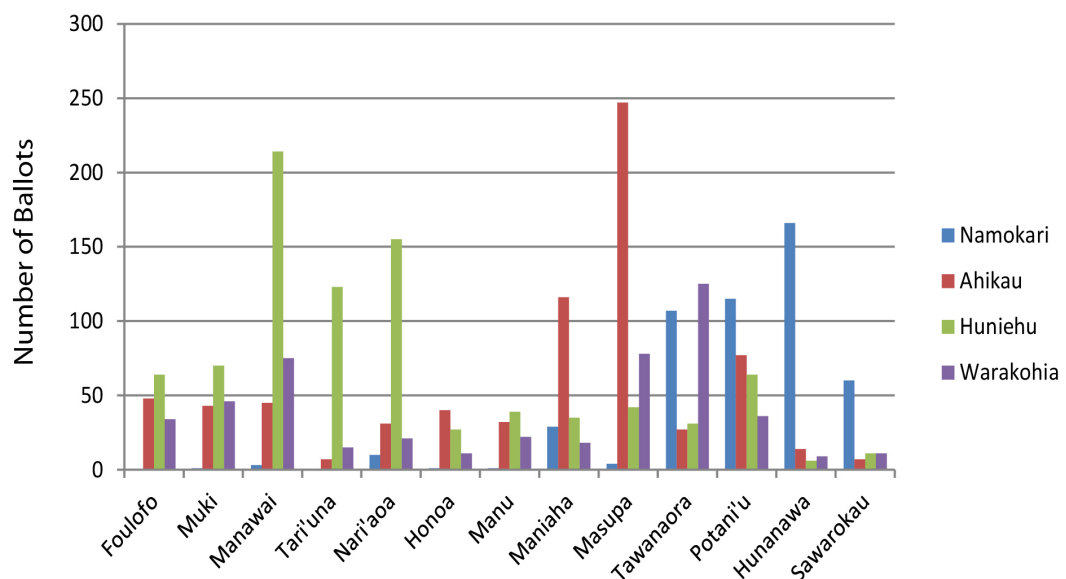


Figure 5: 2006 election results showing the four candidates with the highest number of votes. Note: each candidate won their most votes at home polling booths

ency. A similar voting pattern was also evident in the 2010 election: the inclusion of new candidates in 2010 did not alter the voter pattern evident from the previous result. This is suggestive of an established voting behaviour.

Kin-based Resource Distribution

In kin-based politics, because most candidates rely on kin networks (their own and that of their campaign managers) to get into parliament, in practice this means that voter support and voting patterns themselves have a preponderant influence on resource distribution and financial assistance, rather than vice versa. Resource distribution therefore largely reflects patterns of political support; where only particular parts of the constituency (mainly kin territories) enjoy more resources and funds than others. The kin-based resource distribution is a major feature of the kin-based politics and has been documented elsewhere in Melanesia. In writing about resource distribution by MPs in Western Highlands Province, PNG, Ketan notes that:

Western Highlanders have come to accept that the spoils of office go, first, to the winning candidate and his campaign team, second, to his base vote area and, finally, to peripheral areas. The rationale for this probably lies in a primeval practice among kin-based societies where the successful hunter gets the first bite of the game meat. (Ketan 2013:4)

Ketan alludes to a kin-based resource distribution when he uses the analogy of traditional game-meat sharing to describe the different priorities given to the different factions of voters. Given that politicians 'rely mainly on tribal alliances and personal networks to win elections' (Ketan 2013:4), vote bases would largely be made up of kin/tribal members and hence prioritised for resource distribution. Ketan argues that a small sector of the community is likely to benefit from the resources accessed by winning candidates.

In the case of East AreAre Constituency, kin-based resource distribution was also evident in the allocation of major development projects. For example, the hydropower projects built in East AreAre during the terms that Edward Huniehu

held office (1991, 1993, 2001 and 2006) were concentrated in the northern end of the constituency, his main support base. The first hydropower project was built at Manawai during Mr Huniehu's term from 1991 to 1996 (PGDU 1999:16). Again, three more hydro projects were built at Rae'ao, Nariao'a (the polling station for Rae'ao is also Nariao'a) and Masupa (incomplete) during his terms from 1998 to 2009. Three of the four hydropower projects (the exception being Masupa, home to some of the strong contending candidates) were built in areas where he had strong kin and voter support.

In other projects (carried out under the Project Development Unit — PDU) implemented during Edward Huniehu's term from 1991 to 1996, a total of SBD\$172,754 was invested in Foulofo, Muki, Manawai and Rae'ao (all villages at the northern end of the constituency). Likewise, projects implemented in the northern part of the constituency through the Development Bank of Solomon Islands (DBSI) within the same period, 1991–96, were valued at SBD\$56,500. In contrast, projects implemented under the PDU in the southern part of the constituency (Masupa, Rara) within the same period only amounted to SBD\$28,393 and a single furniture project that was funded at Masupa under the DBSI projects (PGDU 1999).

Most of the projects implemented during Edward Huniehu's term in parliament were therefore concentrated in the northern part of the constituency, where his main support and kin network was. Resource distribution in East AreAre as such is tied to the pattern of political support, where areas with strong voter support (kin bases) are likely to receive the bulk of funding and assistance. Most support bases would also be kin bases.

Impregnable Political Units

Kin-based support proves very difficult to infiltrate. A candidate with strong kin-based support complemented by good campaign managers (who also duplicate the kin-based support) is likely to hold on to the constituency seat for a long time. A case in point was Edward Huniehu who was elected in 1991, lost the seat for one term in 1997, was re-elected in 2001, and continued to win the seat until his death in 2009. Even losing candidates

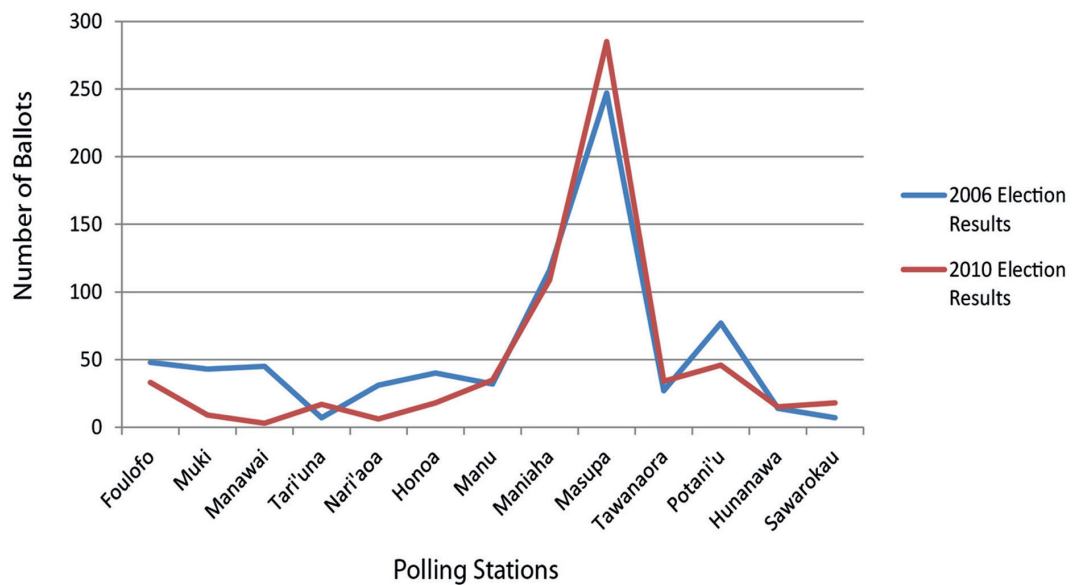


Figure 6: 2006 and 2010 election results for Michael Ahikau.

maintained a strong kin-based support over two or three elections. For instance, Michael Ahikau, who contested strongly from 2001 to 2010, was able to maintain a very consistent level of support over three elections (East AreAre election results 2001–10, Wood 2014b). Although there was no polling station data available for the 2001 election, his overall scores for the period indicated a consistent support base. His polling station results for the 2006 and 2010 elections, graphed in Figure 6, point to a strong kin-based support at his village, Masupa.

The overall indication is that candidates are able to maintain a stable kin following each election and they do this even without intensive gifting or access to state resources. These kin bases are often difficult to infiltrate and could remain so for more than two or three elections. However, past trends have shown that either unsuccessful candidates give up after two or three elections (for example, Abraham Namokari and Michael Ahikau) or their support declines when other kin candidates come in to compete.

Conclusion

While Solomon Islands societies do have a strong gifting tradition, gifting practice is seldom a means on its own to gain political power and authority.

Rather, gifting in this context complements leadership and consolidates relationships between kin members through interaction. It is this aspect of traditional social organisation that is seen to a larger extent in the constituency politics which influences political alliances and voting behaviour during elections.

Voting behaviour in AreAre constituency politics therefore resembles a kin-based alliance, in that kin groups pool their votes around a candidate (who also comes from the same kin group) during elections. These networks of kin-based alliances are important for political support although this does not mean that kin-based votes alone are sufficient to win elections. While candidates go into elections with the backing of their kin groups, those who are able to pick up consistent pockets of votes outside their kin territories have higher chances of winning. Candidates therefore depend on campaign managers and power brokers to duplicate the kin-based alliances in their own territories. As such, the role of campaign managers and power brokers has become increasingly important in recent elections. Also, because the kin-based politics have fostered kin-based resource distribution, non-kin supporters are likely to miss out on resource distribution. This has led to an upsurge in kin-based political rivalry

in the past decade.

Finally, focusing on a single candidate and especially on an incumbent MP when assessing voter behaviour in a constituency can create a distorted view of the overall behaviour of a voting population. Such an approach may fail to consider that gifting is not the only factor influencing voter behaviour and political alliances in a constituency. Likewise, it may also overlook factors affecting the performance of candidates other than the incumbent MPs. This is especially relevant in the case of losing candidates who nevertheless perform strongly in elections and who maintain strong support without large budgets. In this regard, the general voting behaviour in constituencies can only be satisfactorily explained using the kin-based voting model.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

- 1 Except for the urban centres and few alienated lands scattered throughout the country, in Solomon Islands, most of the land areas are tribally owned. This means that tribes have clearly defined territories and people are most likely to settle where they have connections to the land. It is common therefore for people at a polling station or nearby polling stations to be related and to have connections to one or more kin groups within the area. In this context, kin groups are also the support bases of candidates and candidates are likely to receive most votes in kin territories and very little beyond that.
- 2 The victims of the 'devil's night' are usually those who for various reasons are detached from their kin groups or those who do not have kin candidates running. They are often paid over into other camps during the night before the election.
- 3 Although some scholars refer to the kin-based politics of Solomon Islands as ethnic politics (see Wood 2015), I prefer to use the term kin in that it makes a distinction between different tribal groups within a bigger group that shares the same language and culture (e.g. AreAre).
- 4 Community schools are owned by communities although teachers are posted by the provincial or church education authorities and paid by the Solomon Islands Government. The building and maintenance of facilities are the responsibilities of the local community.
- 5 *Kastom* is not synonymous with the English word custom, as often assumed. The term refers mainly to Melanesian ways from before European contact. The term also accommodates ideas and institutions seen as grounded in indigenous concepts and principles.
- 6 'Extensive' in this case means that one has kin connections in the northern, central and the southern part of the constituency.

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