

THE WORDS CAME DOWN

*A Journal — Mbabanga and Simbo,
Solomon Islands, 2008*

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

First edition.

A Note on the Text

This journal covers roughly six weeks in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, from 1 January to 18 February 2008 — a return visit aboard the *Heraclitus*, nine months after the earthquake and tsunami of 2 April 2007. Most of it is set in Mbabanga, a Gilbertese (Kiribati) community resettled from the Phoenix Islands, and in Simbo, a Melanesian island nearby; both were hit hard by the wave.

Contents

Part One — Mbabanga, January 2008

Part Two — Simbo, 27-30 January 2008

Part Three — Mbabanga Again, February 2008

Reflections

A Note on Words

PART ONE

Mbabanga, January 2008

1 January 2008

*The words came down,
Given by the universe.*

We enter the *maneapa*, the community's open meeting house, where memories flood like tears. But this time the sacred space is in jeopardy, under the guns of mass-produced DVDs — unselected, some of them moving images, fast food for the senses, unconscious.

Kids are running around everywhere. Old “young” friends are now married with children — there is no marriage without children. How did you meet? “A volleyball tournament. She came from Wagina with her team, and that was it.”

There was one generator on our last visit. Now many of the families own a small portable generator, mainly used to watch movies. There are no fridges or other appliances to plug in.

Unfortunately this year, because of the recent earthquake and tsunami, the dance and singing competition is not taking place. Two of the villages on the coast were wiped out, without a house remaining. The sea people had to move up into the bush, and are still

living in tents. Used to cooking with seawater, swimming in seawater, they now carry their “blood” back up the hill — a half hour’s walk each way. Many died, mostly children, unaware in their history of any “big wave.” Instead of retreating to the hills, they went out to see the ocean receding.

Most of the funding went into the immediate vicinity of Gizo town, as a showcase that something had happened. The NGOs “took charge.” The bank manager at ANZ put it plainly: “Of course a lot of money came in. But so much was spent on the hotel. The ‘helpers’ would go on picnics on the weekend, get drunk, and so forth — the gas used for entertainment while the outer islands needed help. Of course, they couldn’t trust the locals with money. Their money.”

Gizo looks like nothing happened, but the stories of despair abound. John Goldie, our friend in Simbo, lost his brother — he found him three days later, all bloated up. Stanley, Eddie’s father, was picked up by the wave, lifted into a tree, and watched his canoe flip over, engine underwater. “I am so lucky to be alive.”

Villages we once anchored off in Simbo are gone. Simbo itself is two meters lower now, the coastline changed, the bridge to Nusa Simbo collapsed and not yet rebuilt, the fresh water supply gone. Ranonga rose four meters, changing the whole dynamic of the island — the reef now kisses the sky. Natural harbours

are gone, and transport has become a serious issue for villages that once had easy access to the coastline.

The people of Mbabanga, on the earthquake that came first: “We could hardly stand up, all the houses were shaking. Then we saw the sea retreating — all the shallows were dry, the sea was gone. We all climbed to the hill, and the wave came and washed under our houses. But we are lucky — no one lost their life here.” The village of Titiana is gone now. That is why they are still busy surviving, and why the dance competition had to be cancelled.

So, for our own sake as much as theirs, we reactivate the space with theatre — to become, even for brief moments, actors.

Their dance tradition is an ancient school that teaches by doing. The dances involve the coordination of four centers.

I need a plug-in. The entire village resonates in my spine, rising to activate my body in meaningful gestures, on the beat, with the magical words doing what they do. The seed planted years ago now reaches maturity in the exactitude of the movement that radiates its inner meaning.

Tannang, *baraka*, took over my teaching, begun with Paia in 2000. One of the elders — a man with a special gift for healing bones — has taken me under his wing. More than a

metaphor: the dancing masters hold the frigate bird as the vehicle of their inspiration.

The first song I learned was:

A BAKA MANI BUBUN AM TAEKA
I ONGO NEANA
BE KATEKEI I TABONIBAINA
TE UBA N EITEI
KO RIA RA
KO RIA RA

*The shadows of the words are
falling down,
I hear the floating sound traveling
through the air,
Every word slides at the tip of the
bird's wing,
The wings play the wind, free,
Gone away, fading — it is gone.*

There is no exact translation. The words are ancient, not common to everyday language — multilayered meanings, unfolding as one practices the art of metaphor.

The gestures begin with the showing of the bird's wings, my fingertips. The hands move close to the ear to "hear" the words, gossip-like, and place them on the tip of the wings. Then I take off, flying through the clouds and beyond. The words glide off my fingertips, falling behind, and as I fly, the words still

carry a small echo at first, but fainter and fainter, until they disappear and the flight reaches a state of total freedom.

I used the song to get rid of “noise.”

The dance “competitions” are arenas where the spirit of dancing battles itself. New songs are tested against each of the masters. The songs are always specific to the present moment, no matter how long ago they were composed. The dancer incarnates the specific spirit of a specific dance.

Tannang told me about the dance masters of the past: “They are called *Tengaruru ni Man*. They received their songs in dreams. They held power with sticks and stones. Lift a stick to the sky, and a frigate bird would come down — they would take a feather and use it. In the competitions, a dancer on the opponent’s side would spit blood, a show of power to protect the community. You do not attack a strong magic place. We call them the devils.”

Here, Christianity called all spirits and old gods devils. But what I hear in Tannang is not a value judgment — he respects those spirits, and simply uses the word that was given to him in English to describe the undescribable.

We spent the afternoon talking about the Phoenix Islands, perfecting the gestures of the dance I would perform.

After the song of freedom, I learned the song of the seed and the tree — not any old tree, but a new tree, never seen before.

*E UNIKAKI BA TE KAI AE
REIRAKE IANI KARAWA MANE O
TI NATARARAIA BE KANGA
AO AI TERANA IANGOANA E!
AO AI TERANA IANGOANA O!
AO AI TERANA TERA TEIANGO
AE RIKIRAKE*

The gestures begin with the planting of a seed in one's arm, and the seed explodes into a tree. The tree grows to reach the sky, tall and high. The hand opens; the eyes follow it from the base of the tree upward, to show the new. The hands push like a paddle, pushing away and showing the tree, again and again. Both hands, now empty, come together and are pulled back, twisting toward the heart.

The community was originally from the Phoenix Islands, moved against their will, through treachery, to the Solomon Islands — at that time a British protectorate.

The Phoenix group, and the famous Christmas Island, were the site of nuclear experiments. It was off Christmas Island that the first hydrogen bomb was tested.

“We saw a big bright light in the sky that almost blinded us. Then all the coconut trees

lost their leaves, and the fruit came down. The coconut trees stood like bare masts.”

On our last stop I went with a young reverend to interview an old man. He claims he was ordered to put salt in the wells, to fake the drought that became the official reason everyone was evacuated. Canton was populated with American soldiers, and a huge airfield was built — at first as a refueling station for the transpacific Pan American flights.

Amelia Earhart supposedly crashed on Nikumaroro, one of the islands in the Phoenix group. No one has yet found any remains of her plane.

After use, the Canton base was abandoned, leaving behind a mess of toxic waste and dilapidated buildings. Now only three families live there, on behalf of the Kiribati government, keeping a presence against the fishing fleets of Asia — not that they can do much about it anyway.

After their settlement in the Solomons, the British left. The Solomons are mainly Melanesian, with a couple of Polynesian islands; the Kiribati people are Micronesian. Countless land disputes are now arising — nothing new, land dispute is the norm in Melanesia, a complex affair.

Theirs is an oral culture, and memory must be sharp — it is checked, for it is the “written” record of history. Genealogies are known by

heart, and each person can retrace their ancestors back to the first arrival of the present culture from Samoa.

At around 11:30 we climb ashore, greeted by the singing voices in the church — song after song, until the tick-tock of the clock tells us we have entered a new cycle. The mindset here is one of gratitude for reaching the new year — always a cause for celebration, a marking of time. And what a year: our own tsunami, the exodus from the *Heraclitus*, the challenges of keeping the voyage going. So the light is put out and put back on, to mark the event.

We move to the maneapa. One by one the families arrive, and the elders — and ourselves — are crowned with a garland of frangipani. Then the food starts to arrive: pile upon pile of coconuts, lobster, coconut crabs. Where did they find them? “Some boys are very smart,” Tannang tells me. So here we are, with a feast in front of us. “This is our culture,” I am told.

Now the entertainment comes. Young girls are dancing — goddesses of sensuality, feeding us the best the island has to offer. The dances are amazing, especially Tannang’s daughter Taia, home for the Christmas holidays from her studies in Honiara. Around three in the morning we head back to the *Heraclitus* to find the rest of the crew passed out. The wind starts to pick up, and all attention turns to the elements. The sea swells, the rain pours hard, lightning bolts

strike meters away. A few thatched roofs will fly off tonight. But the holding ground is perfect, and we have enough scope to hold. The crashing thunder deafens the few still awake, and I bail the small boat in one of the heaviest rains I've known — a sense of being alive and wild. The wind finally decreases, but the rain keeps pouring.

OUR PERFORMANCE

It starts with fast-forward images of traffic, city lights, people moving through crowded streets, fast electronic music. Then the stage goes pitch black.

A strange character — a mad-scientist type — arrives with a new pill that will solve all the problems. In a line, a few humans eat the elixir. But something goes wrong, and everyone starts doing their own thing, without coordination. Then everyone collapses.

A Balinese-type god, the god of dreams, enters the stage: *I come from the land of dreams. Step by step, to the beat of your heart, rise to create, together, a vision of hope. Create the vessel that will carry your voices for the stars to see.*

Longing for the freedom of the open ocean, waves upon waves, the sky becomes a screen to see, the wind becomes the road to follow, or avoid. Listen, learn to listen.

The spirit dances around the bodies, and with each beat of the drum, the bodies and

minds move and take the shape of a ship. A chantey, and we sail away.

A hip-hop fisherman type, plastic squid strung around his neck, parades with three dancers, bragging about fish, while a hip-hop song about tuna and king mackerel and trolling plays on. He casts his line, battles forever, and catches only a heap of trash. He leaves the scene: *Walk away from false pretenses, and dead ends, roads that lead nowhere.*

The sail enters the stage as the second refrain of the chantey comes on. Three sailors show their discontent and dream of land. Slides of an island. *Land ho — the smell gives the land away. Land ho, land ho. A gift of a sensual universe, carrying in its spirit the circle of life.*

As the sailors reach the shore, four Polynesian women dance. Our sailors can't believe their eyes, watching with stares of bliss. A garland of flowers is placed on their heads, and each leaves with one of the Polynesian princesses.

Now two divers, slapstick-style, gear up to go diving, bumping into one another before finally plunging in. Behind them, reef scenes appear — a jellyfish dances, a school of fish rattles past. Then they spot a giant clam with a shining, gigantic pearl inside. They battle the clam and succeed in bringing the pearl to the surface. All goes dark but for the light on the pearl, radiating around, casting stars.

The other ship's mates pass the pearl around — first in awe at its majesty, but their hands start to clutch and hoard it. All in good fun, drinking, singing — but the pearl becomes their only focus. Two of the sailors break into a duel, a slapstick kung-fu fight, rolling on the floor; a third jumps in and they all end up knocking each other down. The last sailor, holding the pearl, tenderly but possessively, falls asleep with it in his arms.

Explore where we came from, and beware the greed that kills the earth, and loses the hearts of men.

An old man calls out from his canoe — wrinkled, struggling to walk, it takes him effort to paddle. He sees the pearl and tries to get the attention of the crew, who don't really want to talk to him. But he starts a story:

At first there was only light. The sun fell in love with the moon. But the moon, at first, never wanted to hear about the sun. The sun, sad, left every day, but could never resist staying away too long. At last the moon, after so many eternities, started to feel for the sun. But the sun became too hot, burning all life. So the stars took the heart of the moon and placed it in the ocean, protected in the biggest clam shell that ever lived. The clam shell kept the heart of the moon alive, but hidden away from the sun, so that life could start again.

Now you have stolen the heart of the moon. The sun knows it, and he is heating up again — new floods and bigger storms are rising. All

the stored energy from the sun, in old trees and oil, is now being burned in glory to a heartless world. Please, give the heart of the moon back. Send it to the ocean, to start restoring a balance lost. It is the first step. It is the only step.

Reluctantly, after the old man's plea, the sailors place the pearl back in the sea. Uncertain at first, their spirits begin to lift, feeling lighter, and they sail away into the horizon, singing away the heart they found again in themselves.

The young kids are now getting ready to dance. The box — the wooden drum that keeps the beat — comes out, the voices warm up. Mbabanga is finally calling the spirit of dancing, beating on the box. The gestures are rusty, but the voices and songs carry the night away. First the smallest child stands like a statue, full of being, without moving an inch. Everyone, especially the elders, watches every move, eyes wide open. Onward with the small girls, until the time comes to dance the two dances.

Decorations are tied to my arms; the box and the voices enter my body. The gestures flow, my spine sends the energy to the relevant places, moving attention. I feel full — full from the bottom of my feet to the tips of my fingers.

The spirit is still alive, called tonight to experience wealth — a wealth eaten away by a monster that has started to infiltrate every

mind. Tonight the intentions were pure, knowledge passed on and synchronized, to remember that we can still do, be, and know.

These moments are rare, rarer, almost gone. It takes the will — the wanting to — to start manifesting other possibilities than reaction, no matter how beautiful those reactions can be.

Tonight we feed. A real feast.

4 January 2008

On a canoe, two huge stingrays are getting chopped up. Kiribas went out fishing this morning. Tannang's daughter Taia comes to carry the pieces of stingray to the kitchen.

The kitchen is a busy little hub. Over the fire, five moray eels, deboned, are getting smoked. A big bowl of fresh coconut oil is cooling, to be bottled. Scrapes of bark from a tree are drying, to be mixed with the oil to preserve it. Three types of stove: one for good weather, an oven, and a rough-weather system made from an old diesel drum with compartments for coconut shells. The remains of the oil — a type of dark coconut flour — are eaten. The stingray is now getting boiled.

I inspect the eel house lying on a canoe — a work of art.

While the fire does its work, we have time to play. A strategy game with a board and

cards, moves watched carefully, played with a partner. Kiribas's son shows incredible skill and vision, sticking his tongue out in concentration. He giggles — a sharp intellect. Sipping tea, smoking local tobacco, we exercise our brains.

Time for toddy. I didn't know the practice was still active. The coconut flowers are bound together and cut fresh; a bottle underneath receives the sap, dripping overnight, changed twice daily — once in the early morning, once before nightfall. The key to success is a sharp knife, making a clean scar. I drink a full glass — the last time I drank it was in Tuvalu, years ago. The taste is unique. It can also be used as a transfusion liquid. I've been sick with a nasty flu that clogged my sinuses — I couldn't equalize my ears for almost three weeks. But the toddy is helping me, medicine from the coconut tree.

Meanwhile, I go to say hello to the old man — the last elder who wasn't a young boy when the entire community was moved from the Phoenix Islands to the Solomons.

A game of throwing sticks to tumble coconuts is played to fundraise for the church roof — each player enters for two Solomon dollars. The winner takes a prize of food, and the money goes to the church.

A man, his foot bleeding badly, has just stepped on a broken bottle dumped in the sea. His mother pours a mixture of herbs and coconut oil on the wound.

Rose comes by to say hello, her child in her arms. She's just finished selling the day's catch in town.

I make a round, shuffling the DVDs I brought to the island. Everyone is addicted to movies — a new trend in the world. So I choose meaningful films instead of the classic kung-fu flicks from Hong Kong — a small attempt at historical education.

On the beach, a turtle lies upside down. How could I tell them not to eat it, when I know the real problem is the nets out on the open ocean that cause most of the damage? So I don't utter a word about conservation. Though they rely on the resources of the sea, nothing is wasted. Nothing at all.

10 January 2008

Beyond the Boundaries

Beyond the boundaries of cultures lies truth, regardless who holds the keys. We are all indigenous people of our planet — the indigenous people that came from life itself, without having chosen our place of birth. We cannot live in the past, not yet, unless we invent a time machine. The reality of living moment by moment is real, with a choice of actions that leads into the future.

Simple facts are often ignored simply because they are simple. Crowded in an information age, the memes collide, and the systems implemented by the “media,”

including educational systems, tell us what to think, not how to think. We need to learn how to learn. Authorities on knowledge have been created by compliance with a system. The man thinking outside the box is an oddity. Outside the box, inside a bigger box? Can we live beyond boxes?

The librarian needs to classify his books in categories. The computer is the ultimate organizing machine. My fingers now are typing the words. Each letter, individually, forming words, forming sentences, ideas, transmitting to the outside — even if only to the outside of myself. Does what I have to “say” right now have any value to anyone else? The question is as important as the answer. The question is the start of thinking. The answers themselves need to be questioned.

We have, biologically, been given tools. Blurred and atrophied. Lenses coated with too many filters. The work to clean the lenses is difficult. The view is not always what we wish to see. Once the lenses are cleaner, the mirror shows who we are. The hard part is the honesty to accept what one sees — and only from there can any change occur, if change is willed.

Diversity includes the diversity of viewpoints. Fanatic ethics, fanatic values, fanaticism itself — any “ism,” taken as the one road, leads to nowhereville, a dead end. The idea of an ideal is only valid for oneself. The

idea of many ideals is what makes the world we live in.

16 January 2008

The Reef Is Dead

The reef is dead, and although it almost feels like a mantra at this stage, it is what is happening right now. Resilience is possible after one impact, but the reef — and everything else — is under the machine guns of a world out of balance.

This morning, with Tannang, we went to set two eel traps. (They call them houses — built to attract and call in the eel. The eels are eaten, but transformed into finer energies, with respect.) So we set out into the water to find two big “stones” to place the houses by.

Horror. The reef is gone. The earthquake, ahead of the tsunami, dislodged huge boulders, and the wave simply tumbled everything upside down. The fish, apart from a few parrotfish, are gone. Less than one percent of the reef shows any sign of life — a couple of sea stars, a few feather stars, but the coral is gone, with no sign yet of recruitment.

For two weeks now the rain hasn’t stopped. Three hours of sun, two days ago. Winds come in gusts, followed by heavy rain, followed by gray skies.

And yet, we intentionally pulled our resources together to create a play, and to

raise the energy of the community of Mbabanga. We needed it the most. They are celebrating life — surviving a tsunami. We are struggling to keep our own souls alive.

Climate change is real. Everything is shifting. The realization of the pain and harm and stupid abuse inflicted on our biosphere becomes a heavy burden. None the less, only the removal of doomed mantras is any real solution to a growing malaise in the human psyche.

We have always had enemies — they simply change form. Now a technological, magical monster is in desperate need of taming. We let that beast loose, and it is running too fast to even pretend we can catch it, or run after it — out of our control. And yet we need to put this monster at our service, and not be at the service of the monster.

Easier said than done. Starting now, step by step, with as much consciousness in our actions as we can manage — without hate, nor fate — with courage, and with faith.

Solomon Islands, January 2008

Information gets passed on in meaningful conversations. Con-versation — together.

Sitting on the edge of the water, learning about fishing techniques and the problems the local culture faces. Each place, a new set of circumstances.

Here, many waves have acted on the decline of the diversity and productivity of the local reefs.

In 2000, a bleaching event occurred, brought on by abnormally warm temperatures. Many of the hard corals died.

Then an unstable government, and the ethnic clashes that followed, collapsed the economy. Many could only turn to the sea for cash or subsistence, putting huge pressure on the reef fish of the area. “Everyone was out on a canoe fishing!” And since there was no money for fuel, few could fish out in the open sea for pelagic species.

Then fishing businesses installed fish attraction devices offshore — anchored to the bottom in thousands of meters of depth, nets hung under the water. Small fish seek shelter, bigger fish congregate, and once enough stock has gathered, the net boat comes and scoops the lot. Everything gets taken. The effect is that fish that once cruised close to the islands now stay offshore — too far for local canoes, reachable only by outboard engine. The Gilbertese community, expert fishermen, now fish far offshore. But it’s a gamble, and costly in fuel — it takes one to two hours to reach the grounds, hoping the net boat hasn’t already cleaned the place out. I asked if it was easier now that you knew where the fish were. “No — we used to follow the birds, and knew the migration patterns for the different seasons.

The big fish are very hard to find now. It's a struggle." "But there and then, we get lucky."

In 2007, the biggest damage to the reef was a massive earthquake, which not only broke apart much of the reef but raised the island of Ranonga four meters out of the sea, exposing and killing entire reef systems. A tsunami followed, from the effect of the earthquake.

Snorkeling and diving in different areas, the observations are sad, tragic. Places I once named Nirvana Passage now seem like a desert. The reef top collapsed; huge boulders, shaken loose by the earthquake, rolled down the slopes like rolling stones, destroying the hard coral. Silted by the giant wave, the reef is in a sorry state.

Survival obliges, once again, that the nearby reef gets fished harder than usual.

A fisherman from Titiana comes to sell us lobster. When I refuse to buy the small ones, he comes back only with decent sizes. He paddles two to three hours, fishes for who knows how long. His village was wiped out in the tsunami — more than twenty people died. Because the community had never heard of earthquakes and tsunamis, when the sea receded before the wave, they went out to look. The big wave took them.

But signs of recovery are on the way, with new hard-coral recruits. It will take a long time.

I went out to check the rafter — one of the anchored fish-aggregating rafts — and fish with Tannang and Kiribas, two elders of the Mbabanga Gilbertese community. We left in the middle of the night, without compass or GPS, navigating by the stars first, then, as dawn broke, by distant landmarks, to find the “rafter.” Dolphins came to escort us, and Tannang told me the Gilbertese legend of the dolphins — that they are men who went into the sea.

The net boat had reached four of the eight rafters we could reach. We trolled and caught small yellowfin tuna, and used jigging techniques to reach the deeper fish. Hard work, but one by one we pulled in about ten fish. Then Kiribas decided it was time to try trolling again — no particular sign, apart from possible bad weather on the way. And we started to catch. I tried a lure that never brought in a single fish. Kiribas and Tannang used two rusty hooks with half-beaten plastic squid, and the fish bit. Tannang handed me his line, winking: “Kastom Gilbertese magic.” The fish kept biting. We caught forty fish before heading back. Kiribas drove conservatively, to save fuel. We tried trolling for kingfish on the way in. No luck.

As we reach the village, the kids greet us and start helping clean the fish. I cut one open and eat it raw, sitting in the warm water of the lagoon. “You keep all the fish — put it in your freezer.” The stomach will be eaten; the insides used as bait for smaller fish. I rush the

fish back to the freezer, my face a tight mask from too much sun.

Tannang is also a specialist in moray-eel fishing — he builds elaborate eel houses that he sets on the reef at night. I went with him to watch. It takes him half an hour of scouting before he decides where to drop the house. Meanwhile, I can't help feeling sad at the state of the reef — almost nonexistent. Few fish, hard coral cover under one percent, in an area that was beautiful only a few years ago. The next day, two eels are trapped in the house.

They know the state of the reef better than anyone, because they depend on it — and because they know they are partly responsible for overharvesting species like sea cucumber, for instance.

Nothing is wasted. If the catch isn't sold at market, the fish are salted and dried in the sun, for the bad weather to come. And it takes very bad weather indeed to keep them off the sea.

On the few dives I made, I spotted two white-tip sharks. I used to see many patrolling the reef. Gone. Very few barracuda.

Another technique is night fishing — easier, because the fish are sleeping. But as a result, the parrotfish population is sparse, and the bumphead parrotfish schools are long gone. In deeper water, a few big fish remain, and the smart ones now recognize the lures. Even the fusiliers are few in number.

But around our hull, small bait balls are forming, seeking shelter. Every evening now, and early morning, a few bonito and tuna are hunting. Rainbow runners show up occasionally.

A conservation note: small generators are more efficient than kerosene lamps. Engine fuel efficiency, at optimal speed versus distance covered, is best at half throttle.

We are learning as much as we are teaching. An incredible wealth of knowledge lives inside the bodies that interact daily with the local environment.

The arrogance of part of the environmental movement is that it thinks it holds the answers. There are solutions to problems, but to act as the “guru” is heresy, and downright fraudulent in its claims. Most of the time it’s preaching to the choir — a feel-good factor, patting oneself on the shoulder. Few truly make it “out there,” and I suppose that makes us somehow lucky.

Unfortunately, organizations live at the mercy of funding strategies, and the strategies that work win out over the truth of a given situation. Certain words become better hooks than others, including the classic name-dropping. Exaggeration of achievement. So the expert grant-writer makes the cash — tough luck for the one dropping out into the field for extended periods of time.

It's a shame, because a great deal could be achieved if sincerity and truth prevailed. At least, if not a delusion.

Grants go to travel and to keeping students of the academic system busy, while local communities could use that financial help to be truly effective. The new god of pseudoscience sucks up the money, works on a diploma basis, spreading like a virus even to the remote corners of the planet. A septic tank installed in a crowded village hit by an earthquake will do more good for the reef than another paper on the third larval stage of some species, by some PhD or other. Not that furthering knowledge is useless — but a bit of proportionality would help.

A man with five years of experience in a certain field gets passed over by a fresh diploma with no experience. He can't do the job, but that's the way it is. So rural communities struggle to send their kids to school, only to find them back in the village, having to learn to be farmers and fishermen after all. The basic salary is around 350 Solomon dollars for two weeks — about fifty US dollars. Even an Australian company pays seven US dollars a day. Meanwhile, the education system is still trying to breed a caste of specialists for the world's "development," but nothing here is really developing. You learn to read, but there's no library, no books around. A photographer decides to make a coffee-table book, but no

local will ever get to read how their own lives and land are being presented.

Everyone is getting hooked on movies — the hardest addictive drug around. I go through phases too. Unfortunately, it kills the initiative to sing, dance, and compose anything.

Our young crew, unfortunately, doesn't have the drive to learn from the local community, and go instead to "the resort" or "Fatboys Bar," even when, in a rare conversation after a performance, someone says they want to learn a dance. No one follows up. And it's not for lack of speaking about it — though I've stopped. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. And then again, my own drive to learn should allow me the tolerance to accept the non-seeker as he is. Many of the Western-educated come with preset minds, well trained by nuclear families, educational systems, media, and advertisement brainwashing — a lot of information, of "bites," without the structure to integrate an idea of a total system, and an alarming disconnect between mind and body.

Examples abound. Fresh fish of the highest quality was caught, but most wanted to eat the processed cheese we were trying to save for the voyage. We still have yams from PNG. Eggs for breakfast. I know that by necessity a human is very capable of adapting, but our Western culture — Anglo-American, mainly,

right now — is breeding a bunch of spoiled brats. It's not their fault. Society and cultural conditioning are possibly impossible to break without one's own will as the activator.

None the less, some do break through, at least in brief moments — and others shield themselves with an arrogance that doesn't let anything new in.

Meanwhile, a million stars — some dead, some not — are shining bright, all the same. Do you ever know if a star is already dead?

So — what to do?

PART TWO

Simbo, 27-30 January 2008

On the 2nd of April 2007, an earthquake shook the western province of the Solomon Islands, raising a giant wave — a tsunami — that swept through the region. Simbo took the wave full on, destroying entire coastal villages. Simbo sank two meters; Ranonga, the island opposite, rose about five.

Monday, 27 January 2008

With Stanley, Eddie's father, we prepare his boat — loading fuel, bolting the engine in place. With Lina, Eddie's mother, we run to the store for a few days' supplies. Simion, the family's second-born, is now a teacher in training, forty-seven students in his classroom.

The sea is rough — the shift in the islands' geology has created new currents and wave patterns. We carefully maneuver between building swells, dark clouds in the distance. I ride the whole way to Simbo — a local seamanship training in itself. The swell and current are strong, but they tell their own story of the shifts that occurred.

At the entrance to the passage that leads into the sheltered lagoon of Nusa Simbo, a pod of spinner dolphins rides our bow, escorting us all the way to the shallows. Lina sings a

traditional song to the dolphins while everyone bangs on the hull. The dolphins stay with us.

At the entrance, Stanley tells his story of the tsunami: "I was in the boat, and this huge wave came in. It lifted me up, onto a tree. I held on as the wave kept crashing on the shore. My boat broke in half, the engine flooded. I stayed in that tree. I am lucky to be alive. The bridge broke. The whole island shook."

As we near the bridge, we hear the news: John Tione died Sunday evening. He was the caretaker of the Eomba dance, the one we carried with us around the Pacific. Tomorrow, the body will be buried.

Before reaching shore, we cut the engine and drift in the lagoon. An eagle has just caught a fish, hanging from its claws — it circles, riding the hot air spiraling upward. The birds are singing, the trees rattle in the wind.

Greeted by Ovaline and a horde of kids, we climb the steep limestone-and-tree-root path up to the house. Lina begins to prepare it, and we wait for Clifford to arrive. Stanley Jr. has just left by canoe to paddle to Ranonga; the sea looked rough. He'll return the next day with a load of betel nut, to sell — he went straight to the source, cut out the middleman, using nothing but his own sweat.

Clifford arrives with Tonga, his wife — a beautiful woman, shy to speak, but a real presence.

Staying quiet, listening, sitting down, often in the dim light of kerosene lamps, clears the mind, lets real thoughts surface.

Everyone is asking me: where is Eddie? I don't know. I think, Australia. I thought coming here would give me clues, but no one has heard from him, and none of the emails I sent received a reply.

That night, Lina trades tobacco for megapode eggs, and the flavor hits me — there are places you can call home, and this is one. My mother would cook for me the same way Lina prepares my favorite food.

No generator noise, no aggressive lighting — everything soothes the senses. No stereo blasting. Next door, a young composer refines his tune, catchy island-style beats blending into the night. It fits.

Tuesday, 28 January 2008

Lina's brother comes for a chat — nicknamed Chuck Norris, famous for having "stolen" a wife. Wife number two is none other than the sister of wife number one, who was a bit of a wild one herself. He disappeared into the bush for three months with wife number two, while the first husband searched for him, trying to kill him. He acts it out for us, a

hilarious re-enactment, pretending to fish while sending signals. He's a keen diver, knows the bush like no one else, and sets traps for coconut crabs.

THE MOURNING

Family members arrive, supported by brothers and sisters, to see the body, dressed and lying in a coffin. Crying and crying — tears pouring onto the coffin. As each family member absorbs the loss, the pain floods the room. John Tione had thirteen children, and more than sixty grandchildren.

The priests arrive; all the children, except one daughter living on Isabel, sit around the coffin. After a few words and a song, the lid is brought in, amid a loud, simultaneous chorus of crying and sobbing. As the hammer strikes the nails, one by one, I find myself crying too — overcome, not only by John Tione's death, but by the sorrow and hardship the earthquake and tsunami inflicted on these communities, and beyond that, by the pain of a world full of misery and hardship in so many places. Not a "sad" moment — a moment of realization, a moment of contemplation of death, and of life.

The coffin is dressed; the sons carry it out of the house. In a procession led by a choir of young children, three hundred people march through Nusa Simbo to the church. After the sermon and songs, the procession moves on to the burial ground in the forest, not far from

the Eomba stone, where John passed on the song almost eight years ago.

There will be a feast in four days, when the spirit leaves the grave.

Wednesday, 29 January 2008

Around Simbo

Riruru village, wiped out. Tapurai, and the new settlement. A trail has been carved, muddy, difficult to land a boat on. The forest has been cleared to plant cassava and sweet potato — a lesson in eco-technics of necessity. Houses are beginning to go up, but building material is in short supply. To rebuild a thatched roof is one thing; to rebuild an entire village is another. There is no money, and the relief of a few tarpaulins doesn't go very far.

Kiana's village. The dolphin stone. The dolphin run. More of Lina's home cooking.

Thursday, 30 January 2008

The feast for John Tione. The megapode house. Peter Ben. Mason and the new church. Shark totem.

— The journal breaks off here; these last five subjects were never written up.

PART THREE

Mbabanga Again, February 2008

14 February 2008

3:30 — darkness still prevails. Stars peek through the clouds. The sea is calm. With Zac, we load the boat that Stanley, Eddie's father, has left for us to use while we're in the Solomons — sixty liters of fuel, a crate of fishing gear, a flashlight, water. I'm running my own homemade seamanship program. Tonight we're going fishing.

We pick up Kiribas and Tannang in Mbabanga. Kiribas takes the helm — he knows the waters, navigating once again by the stars. We plan to reach the "rafter" by daybreak. Yesterday I went to the fish market in Gizo, to see the day's catch — big yellowfin, no rainbow runners. I take a few shots of the women selling fish. Kiribas's daughter and Tannang's eldest daughter are among them.

So, in pitch black, we cruise at twenty knots toward the fishing grounds. At daybreak we reach the rafter, and the lines go in. We catch instantly — small yellowfin. For the next hour we pull in forty yellowfin and a rainbow runner, though the big ones have moved on; all the tuna are "small."

My movements are more fluid and precise now, maximizing efficiency — the know-how of

entering the moving center, feeling and sensitivity in the line. Kiribas knows exactly how to place the boat, at the right speed, to catch.

We enter waypoints into the GPS, to plot later on a chart — calculating bearings and distances.

We move on to the next rafter. A mahi-mahi takes the lure, but the line is thin. A good fight, four jumps, and I pull the big fish in.

Mbabanga doesn't run on a chief system, but a council of elders.

— *Remembered from the visit; not written down in the journal itself.*

18 February 2008

Today I met the king of all the eel fish in the sea. I didn't know it was him until the moment I saw him, sitting on the beach of a small island, preparing the eel houses. He builds them beautifully, with precision and exact technique. First he paddles out on his canoe to spear the bait fish for the houses. If he sees an eel, he feeds her. He must keep secret the knots that tie the bait into the house — the eel comes at night, stands before the house, studies the knots, and decides whether or not to go in. Whatever is caught in the night is cleaned by his daughter and smoked over a wood fire.

The king of the eels calls them to the houses. He needs them — this time, to buy a generator for his family. The eels in the sea don't mind. They know the king needs them, and though they will die, they know they would die one day regardless.

But the king must be careful to respect the spirit of the eels. If he doesn't, they can send a great ray to cut the rope of the eel house loose, and destroy it. Once, long ago, a man refused to respect the spirit. As he dove down to check the trap, the eel wouldn't go in — instead, a mighty eel stayed outside and came up to meet him. It bit him in the throat and wrapped itself around his neck. The man died.

When he was a boy, he didn't want to know about dancing — unfortunate, since his father was a dance master. So every time there was a dance practice, he went out fishing in his canoe instead. His father noticed his son's lack of interest.

One day he asked him to carry down a coconut while he cut and collected toddy. The father took a young coconut, cut it open, and poured in three drops of a special coconut oil, speaking words to call the spirit of dance inside. Then he took the two topmost leaves of a very young coconut tree — the ones that shiver in the wind — and stirred the coconut water with them. He told his son the drink would draw all the girls' eyes to him — it would make his sweat smell sweet, and no one

would be able to resist him. So the eager boy drank the magic water.

Next time, the maneapa was full of people practicing the dances. The young “king” decided to go fishing instead, and paddled his canoe toward the reef. He’d caught a couple of fish when he heard the box beating. Suddenly his body felt strange, and he had to turn the canoe around and paddle fast toward the sound. His body shook with every voice, every beat of the box.

Reaching shore, he stashed his catch somewhere safe from the dogs, and entered the maneapa. His father smiled. He sat beside him, not understanding what was happening to him. And he started to dance. He knew he’d been tricked. But the spirit was too strong, and his father had to prepare another, gentler drink to tone it down.

I also met a princess — even though there are no princesses or kings in the village. She was beautiful, one of the “king’s” daughters, respectful of tradition but with an independent mind of her own — a gifted dancer who could drive a man crazy. She lives in the city, and though she plays at finding village life difficult, she secretly loves it. Her older sister, married with five children, is a dance teacher among other things. In the kitchen, the eels she cleaned are smoking over the fire. The fish have just come back. Ruang, the oldest sister, is cooking them for dinner.

Meanwhile, a fundraiser for the church is underway — sticks and coconuts, throw the stick to knock the coconuts over. Most of the village joins in, Pacific music lifting the mood.

Coconut: the king of tropical island trees. A quick meditation on its uses — young nuts for drinking, old ones for coconut milk, the flesh for eating, oil for cooking and the body, flour, toddy, molasses. The leaves become mats, baskets, roofs; the wood, planks and poles. The discarded shells become firewood, charcoal, drinking cups, bailers for canoes, containers. Food for pigs and chickens, dried as copra, an economic resource.

Now the time is ripe for a new dance.

REFLECTIONS

Two undated pieces, written apart from the day-to-day journal, kept here together as reflections.

The Dancers Are Facing Each Other

The dancers are facing each other, each holding their power, projecting out.

The arena plays out the spirits.

The dancer is the actor. Precision of movement, coordination with the music, visualization of the words and their inner meaning, transforming energy into spirited manifestation. There can be no reactions. Consciousness, or death.

The Loss of Community Spirit

The young with the young, the old hidden away. So few get together — no time, no time.

Paranoia of the natural world. Trails with wheelchair access.

Let the kids play. And if they get hurt, well. And if they die? Well.

As man has sought immortality since the first conception of time, so he loses his ability to live. Watching a DVD is safer than going

fishing on the open sea. So we devise life jackets and flares, and, and, and — in case. But at what cost? Proportionality is not considered.

We live in a pampered world, refusing and hiding death. You can't photograph and document the true horrors of war — surgical, clean images, movies making heroes out of murderers.

A man in his office orders the bomb. The robot-trained marine drops it. Children die; toxic waste and fumes deform the generations to come.

I kill your brother, your sister, your son, your daughter. But I've had enough — we're running out of money, and the holidays are coming up. Can we make peace, please? By the way, make sure the contracts are signed for delivery of the black gold. What? You don't agree? Fine — I'll make another trillion-dollar loan to who-knows-who, and kick your backside. I'll kill your wife and grandchildren too, and make sure your land is fucked for a long time to come. What? You still don't agree? You must be out of your minds.

On another note — don't worry about your bullet supply, my brother-in-law owns the company, he can hook you up. But you're wasting your time. My older brother runs the remote-control tanks, planes, and robots. We're training our children to operate them. You should see my friend's son — a real genius at the console. We design the games, and he

comes up with the best strategies. Ruthless little guy. He still thinks he's only playing.

Can you get me a couple of artifacts from the museum? We're going to bomb it anyway, and I need a souvenir. Or — I forgot — I'm trying to get my brother's nephew into the printing business. We struck a deal with a logging company; they screwed a few backward ex-cannibals, and I get cheap wood. The Koran still has the same number of pages, so I can give you the same deal as before, even with ink prices rising. We still have the old blueprint, so — meanwhile, we're revising the Bible all the time. Nobody reads it, but the 2008 edition has added commentary. God is on our side. God bless America, Britain, and Australia. Anyone speaking English might get admitted, with a special permit issued by one of our newly created offices. We keep a few colored people around, to avoid getting harassed — not that we care, but it's a drag, especially when your son wants to take you for a ride in his new BMW. I know it's a German car, but they're so much better. Still, the club is mainly for white English speakers.

I'm working on a prototype harpoon head, ahead of the latest Japanese technology, and a tracking device to spot whales a thousand miles away. I've got some idealistic kid who thinks he's helping science. I can't use it on our own soil, but the japs have the votes now, thanks to the remodeling of the voting methods by insignificant nations like Tuvalu,

enough to start whaling again. We're running out of fish anyway.

We're scooping up the last fish with rafts and FADs — fish attraction devices. But we're losing so much money just to keep a few cans on the supermarket shelf. We've already bought plenty of scientists, trained in our special schools, working on the latest statistics. What would people think if suddenly they couldn't get their tuna mayo? My daughter's favorite quick lunch, after tennis.

We bought a ranch, solar panels and all — self-sufficient. Trained good guard dogs. Keep a few soldiers, but the dogs are so much more reliable, and cheaper. I suggest you do the same. You should be able to make a hefty profit from the relief-aid money, extorted from the goodwill of the naive part of our population. Don't worry, we collect tax on it too.

Oh, and did I tell you — we got Brad Pitt for our latest propaganda film, the rescue of a two-year-old kidnapped by Muslim extremists.

You sure you don't want to sign? Could be so much easier. Then again, I'm making a killing on this one — I'm buying a Pacific island. Not that I'm planning to go there, but my son's started diving, and it might make a nice honeymoon present, once he realizes he'd look better without those call girls around. He can always hide a few there.

Anyway — need to go, time is money, and I've just had Charlie fly me in some barbecue ribs. Six-hour flight. That's classified, by the way — we're testing a new plane. High fuel consumption, but what the heck — a man's got to do what he's got to do, right?

See you, Mohamed. Have a nice day.

A NOTE ON WORDS

From Michel's own notes on the language of the Gilbertese — Kiribati — community of Mbabanga:

anti — gods

anti ma aomata — semi-deified ancestor

aomata — man

kawai — path, or road

boti — clan