

Disfala Iut Grup hem Blong Mi: the Potential for Economic, Personal and Socio-Relational Empowerment in Urban Youth Groups, Solomon Islands

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Cultural Anthropology) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2010

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-70961-0
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ISBN: 978-0-494-70961-0

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Abstract

Disfala Iut Grup hem Blong Mi: the Potential for Economic, Personal and Relational Empowerment in Urban Youth Groups, Solomon Islands

Ariane Guay-Jadah

This thesis, entitled *Disfala Iut Grup hem Blong Mi: the Potential for Economic, Personal and Relational Empowerment in Urban Youth Groups, Solomon Islands*, is an exploration of the particularities of youth experience. Specifically, it addresses the struggles of young people in a challenging urban environment and how youth group membership can help alleviate socioeconomic and emotional hardships. As an excluded demographic majority, youths in Honiara are relegated to the margins of society. While aware of the lack of social channels promoting youth empowerment, young individuals are resilient, trying to find ways to better their situations.

Urban youth associations, whether faith-based or community organizations, can be platforms for socioeconomic, personal and relational development. They are flawed and oftentimes ill-equipped to cater to the empowerment projects of all young people. However, they are singular institutions which offer networks of people, resources, activities and information otherwise inaccessible to many youths. Young people in Honiara are living in a rapidly shifting space, where they often have conflicting identities, aspirations, and realities to manage. It is hoped that this thesis will shed some light on the ideas and practices of youths in an urban Pacific milieu, and on the ways in which they can empower themselves via youth group membership.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, this thesis is dedicated to my dear friend and ally, Laurent Pauzé-Dupuis, whose death prompted me to question myself, my surroundings and inevitably, to take the unbeaten path(s). He is the reason my thesis exists. I hope to honour him, his enthusiasm for learning, and his belief that there was nothing we could not do with our lives.

I am grateful for my parents' continuous support, as well as the life choices they made, for they influenced my decision to take on this unique project.

To my different families of all stripes – kin, friends and graduate colleagues – those who encouraged me and helped me keep my sense of humour along the way: I thank you all.

This thesis would not have been possible without the gracious help and collaboration of Jennifer Wate, Terry Brown, Mary Jionisi, Regina Gatu, Audrey Baenisia, Amaziah Rubo, Eddie Ho'asihata, Agnes None, Micheal Tahiseu, Charlyn Sikwa'ae, Milton Phillips, Elsy and Diana, Jayzon Ray Jr., Luke Memua, Norman Hamarasi, May Nonie, Justin L., Samuel M., Fr. Herman Tique, Georgiana Sogote'e, Yvonne Ono, Annie Neitagi, Esther, May and Jhared Baku, Janet and Judith, James Taefanabo, Charles Fox and all the young people who participated in youth meetings, forums and activities in Honiara. I sincerely hope that this thesis does justice to your current struggles and aspirations for the future.

Special thanks to: my SIDT colleagues, and founder Dr. John Roughan, all of whom made me feel most welcome in their organization; and the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education Under-secretary, Timothy Ngele, for granting my research permit.

I am thankful beyond words for my adoptive family in Honiara, for their warmth and hospitality – especially Sr. Susan and Xandra Miguel Lorenzo – as well as for the Fifi' family for welcoming into their home.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my mentor, Dr. Christine Jourdan, who put me on a plane knowing that I could go to the Pacific on my own and undertake months of fieldwork when I did not. For her constant support, kindness and assistance before, during and after the writing process, I am forever grateful.

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List of abbreviations

CYP: Commonwealth Youth Programme

HTC: Honiara Town Council

MWYCA: Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs

NGOs: Non-governmental organizations

NYP: National Youth Policy

RAMSI: Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands

SDB: Solomon Islands Dollars

SIDT: Solomon Islands Development Trust

USP: University of South Pacific

Introduction

We cannot afford to ignore our exclusion because what is involved here is our very survival.

Epeli Hau'ofa, The Ocean in Us, 1998:119

The topic at hand is the lived experiences of young urban Solomon Islanders who are growing up in an exceptionally difficult era, branded by years of ethnically fuelled civil strife and violence; increasing levels of poverty, abuses and health risks; dwindling employment opportunities; and pervasive social fragmentation. As noted by Mitchell, “[n]ew urban dynamics and rapidly expanding towns are central to understanding contemporary youth cultural practices” (n.d.(c):10). My interest lies in exploring the particularities of urban youth group membership in Honiara, Solomon Islands’ capital. Are there benefits to being a member of an urban youth association in an environment characterized by structural poverty, ethnic inequalities, conflicting ideologies, socioeconomic marginalization and relational failings? *Is empowerment, understood here in economic and socio-personal terms, a potential by-product of youth group membership in Honiara?* It is my aim throughout this thesis to explore if and to what extent youth associations provide young Solomon Islanders with the resources to become empowered.

As processes of socio-cultural creolization (Jourdan 1995a), urban identities and realities are relatively contemporary in Honiara. However, the spread of inequalities and disadvantages has been institutionalized since its formation after the WWII. Marginalization is widespread in the capital and several groups (based on gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) can testify to its effects. Young people in Honiara are unique because they are an excluded majority (see de Certeau 1984) in the sense

that they have demographic and cultural clout, yet are socially and economically oppressed. Young people are living with the remnants of a Bigman social system which values elders at the expense of the youth. In town, they are also experiencing economic turmoil, political corruption, material destitution and subsequently, are feeling hopeless and aimless (Jourdan 2008). Above all, young urbanites are most often powerless in their society.

Social organizations geared towards these young people are a medium through which the tight grip of exclusion and oppression can be lessened. Based on my fieldwork in Honiara in the summer of 2009, I reckon that urban youth groups are platforms from which young Solomon Islanders can become empowered on different levels, be it personal, relational or socio-economic. It should be noted that youth groups are not a saviour-in-disguise mechanism, with an agenda to emancipate all young Solomon Islanders. They are often ineffective and poorly managed, with limited sway over deeply rooted social and relational inequalities. Nevertheless, as a possibility for young people “to move forward” (Rubo, Interview 4; 28:15), youth associations are one of the few alternatives young urbanites have to empower themselves.

The way in which I seek to present my work parallels what has been argued by Kirin Narayan: “that it is the *people* and not theoretical puppets who populate our texts” (1993:36). At the expense of sounding like an anthropological cliché, I wish to give my collaborators the chance to be heard; to have their voices resonate from scholarly pages. Geertz’s proclamation that cultural analysis is inherently flawed (1973) – in that it will always be to some extent incomplete – will also

inform this thesis. My intent is to offer center stage to my collaborators, their knowledge, stories and practices, all the while safeguarding the interpretive decree that defines cultural anthropology as imbued with subjectivities.

Chapter 1 is ethnographic; it describes the historical specificity as well as economic makeup of the young, diverse nation that is Solomon Islands, with a particular focus on Honiara, the site of my fieldwork. An emphasis on social relations, notably the *wantok* system – an amorphous entity formed by “fellow speakers of the same language, defined very often as fictive kin” (Jourdan, 1996:43) – and the Bigman enterprise are delved into in detail. Furthermore, I explore the consequences of *tensons*, a “political and ethnic crisis” (Jourdan 2008) which destabilized Solomon Islands from 1999 to 2002, whose violent repercussions are still felt in the lives of youths today (2009). The following chapter reveals the distinctive character of youth, and the extent to which urban youths are marginalized. This is where I present the young people I collaborated with, their backgrounds and affiliations, aspirations and frustrations. A focus on the youths, their profiles and stories, as well as the youth-oriented organizations they belong to complete chapter 2.

Chapter 3 is subdivided into categories centred on my methodology and the data collected during my fieldwork. I explain the questionnaire process, semi-structured interviews, focus group, participant-observation, photographs and local documentation which make up my collected material. This chapter mentions the rapport-building, interpersonal experiences and negotiations which accompanied said methodological processes. The core of my data is undoubtedly the interviews;

from youth coordinators and officials within organizations to youth leaders and councillors to youth members themselves.

Chapter 4 is a theoretical section focused on youth and empowerment, and how these concepts translate into the Pacific milieu that is Honiara. The theoretical framing of my thesis is interpretative, building on the work of Geertz (1973). In the search for meaning, when an anthropologist constructs an interpretation based on interpretation in a circular fashion, the written works that emanate from the research are often “fictions” (Geertz, 1973:15). However, there are elements within anthropological discourse which can be deciphered. Using a qualitative approach, my aim is to assess what my collaborators discussed and experienced, and present their stories as subjective yet relevant pieces of an anthropological puzzle. From a wider interpretative basis to narrower conceptualizations, I focus on youth and empowerment ideologies (Kabeer), as well as *everyday practice* (de Certeau) *social capital* and *practical kinship* (Bourdieu). I contend that some of these concepts have various definitions throughout the social sciences, but my goal is to apply them to this specific research in such a way as to make sense of youth group empowerment, or lack thereof.

Chapter 5 concerns the complexities of economic empowerment. It focuses on the daily challenges young urbanites face in Honiara, with a particular emphasis on the most pressing social ill: unemployment. Through participants’ narratives, it is hoped that light can be shed on how young people struggle with economic hardships and how youth groups can help alleviate such burdens by offering networks of people, programs and opportunities which can be beneficial to

members. I wish to explore how access and knowledge of certain individuals and organizations are means for youths to become economically empowered (through volunteering, paid labour, long-term involvement, etc.). Lastly, chapter 6 centres on the more personal and relational dimensions of empowerment provided by youth associations. I concentrate on how youth groups shape their members in terms of boosting self-esteem and “having a voice”. Through spatial practices (de Certeau 1984) and stories of collaborators, I intend on demonstrating the effects of youth group membership on an individual level. The socio-relational dynamics are also explored in this chapter, to highlight if emotional support and kin surrogacy are provided. Through my interpretive lens, achieving personal and emotional well-being is synonymous with being a stronger, more empowered individual in a context of exclusion and marginalization.

The purpose of this thesis is to make sense of my “constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973: 9). I hope that this can be done to shuffle the dialogue on youths and their experiences in Honiara, creating an awareness of their specific struggles. It is my contention that although youth and empowerment lie on contested conceptual grounds, some meaning can be traced along the words and practices of young urban Solomon Islanders. By interpreting their collective membership in youth-oriented organizations, it is my goal to explore the potentialities for and limits of various forms of empowerment, while recognizing that “[e]thnographers, like historians, do not write on a blank page” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:20) and that infinite interpretations are part and parcel of anthropological inquiry.

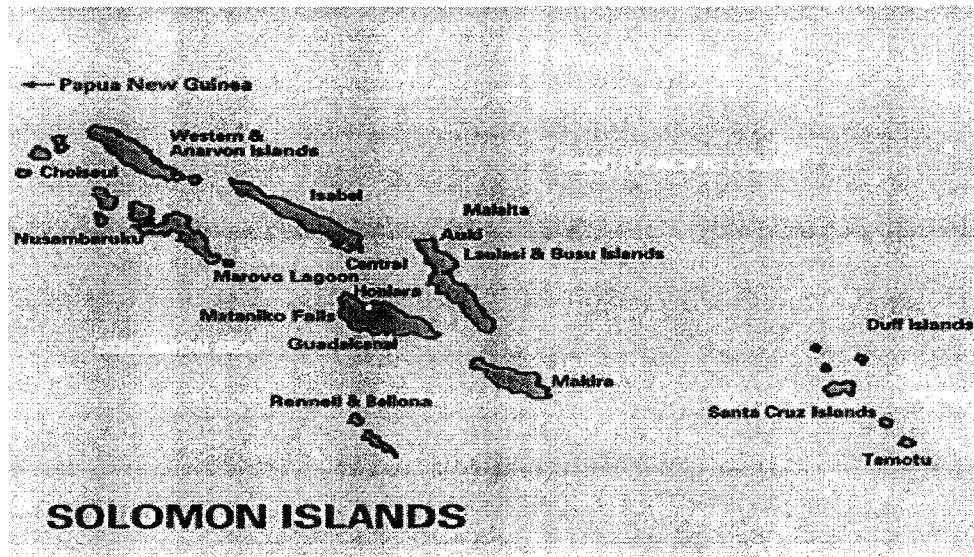
Chapter I- Situating the field: Honiara as ethnographic landscape

1.1. Historical overview: from country to capital

The Solomon Islands comprise six large islands (Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, San Cristobal, Malaita and Guadalcanal) covering most of its 28,000 square kilometres of land. Dispersed in the Pacific Ocean, it neighbours Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The islands sit directly across from Australia, more specifically within the ‘ring of fire’ – the meeting place of the Pacific and Indo-Australian geological plates. The Solomon Islands has over 900 atolls, and the country is divided into nine provinces: Choiseul, Western, Central, Rennell and Bellona, Isabel, Makira, Temotu, Malaita and Guadalcanal. The islands are geologically diverse and offer various types of topography. Guadalcanal, the island serving as the ethnographic milieu, is characterized predominantly by rugged mountains, kunai grass and coconut plantations (Moore 2004).

The process of naming the Solomon Islands was sparked by a quest for riches: Spanish cartographers and explorers hoped to find a source of gold in these Pacific islands on par with that found in King Solomon’s mines. In 1568, Spanish explorer Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira arrived on the shores of Santa Isabel, hence ‘discovering’ Solomon Islands for European courts. It was not until 1768 that a second wave of European expansionism took place, bringing in the imperial ‘discovery’ of Bougainville, Carteret and Surville. Hau‘ofa argues that prior to the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific, indigenous cultures “were truly oceanic in the sense that the sea barrier shielded us for millennia from the great cultural influences that raged through continental land masses” (1998:125). The migratory and

exploratory patterns of indigenous peoples can be traced archaeologically in the distinctive tools of the prehistoric Lapita people. The remnants of Lapita pottery are artefacts which demonstrate that around 2000-1300 B.C. its producers were rapidly colonizing parts of New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. These people were mobile seafarers who drew on coastal resources throughout Polynesia and Melanesia, leaving their technological contributions in different regions (Bennett, 1987). Historically, Solomon Islanders separated themselves into a duality related to their geographic positioning: “saltwater” people, those living on the coast, relying on their capabilities as fishermen and swimmers, were dichotomized against “bush” people from inland settlements (Foanoata 1989), who were horticulturalists with extensive knowledge of the inland environment (Bennett, 1987). Maintaining gardens was (and remains) an essential component of the Solomon Islands lifestyle; it informs the cultural identities (Ivens 1927) and subsistence patterns of the people. Similar to how gardens in Port Vila, Vanuatu, can counterbalance the effects of unemployment because it increases consumable and sellable foodstuff for families (Mitchell, n.d. (b)), gardens are important economic markers in Honiara as well. In pre-contact times, the main root crop was taro, soon followed by yams. Nowadays, sweet potato has become a main food crop and an important alimentary item in Solomon Islanders’ diet, but is progressively being replaced by (imported) white rice.



Map 1.1: Solomon Islands.

Although historically, the islands were not isolated from one another, interisland interaction occurred rarely, most often in times of warfare, trade or celebration. Coastal communities were predominant in trade networks due to their geographic advantage. They traded fish, coconuts, shells, and foreign goods with inland people, from whom they received pigs, vegetables and specialized products such as string bags (Bennett, 1987). Modes of reciprocal exchange in Solomon Islands were explored in Hviding's research, which focused on the exchange of clams in Marovo lagoon, Western Province (Naitoro 1999). Another item historically exchanged and traded between Solomon Islanders was the human head, as headhunting was a significant enterprise for certain islanders during inter-factional conflicts and confrontations. The fact that exchanged goods were always

in circulation, leading to little or no accumulation, reflects egalitarian principles found in Melanesian societies¹.

Solomon Islands became a British Protectorate in 1893, serving mainly as an administrative base. With pacification in 1920, traditional leaders, such as Bigmen, lost substantial power, legitimacy and wealth. Through new laws, the government replaced chiefly associations; it impeded their productive and ceremonial activities, effectively undermining the bases of their power (Bennett 1987). Other historical events arose that would shape this particular landscape, especially the Second World War. In 1942, the Japanese army built an airbase on Guadalcanal, where part of the island served as a background to the hostilities between Japanese and American combatants. After the war, the British authorities transferred the capital from Tulagi, in the Florida Islands, to Honiara (situated on Guadalcanal's northeast coast). The new capital was established on the remnants of an American military base, and materialized into a town where Melanesians toiled as domestic servants and manual labourers (Jourdan, 1995a). As noted by Frazer (1981), Honiara was a European enclave at its beginning. It has since become an increasingly diverse socio-cultural, economic and political space. The capital is manifold – as it exists as an “image”, a “social form” as well as a “physical structure” (Berg, 2000) – and is governed as an independent province in and of itself, separated from Guadalcanal province.

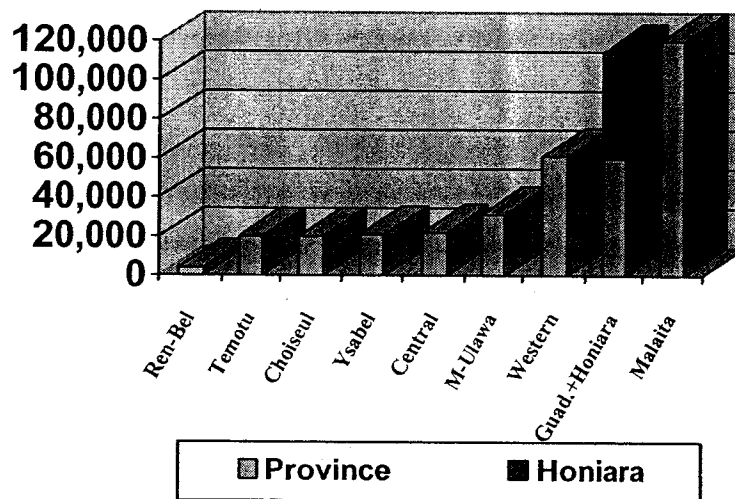
¹ Another example of reciprocal exchange amongst Melanesian islanders was the Kula ring of Papua New Guinea, in which shell ornaments would be circularly and inter-tribally exchanged as a transactional commodity aimed at maintaining diplomatic relations with other island communities (Malinowski 1922).

The process of Independence occurred progressively, at a time when the British administration had been severely damaged by World War II and by the local resistance movement, *Maasina Rule*, which had “brought unprecedentedly large numbers of Solomon Islanders together for a common purpose (...) [that is] to secure their own interests and to assert their identity” (Laracy, 1983:6-7). The country was granted Independence on July 7th 1978. However the complexities of this transition should be situated within the context of independence being “handed on a platter to culturally diverse colonial subjects not at all sure whether they wanted it” (Jourdan, 1995a:135). As a multiplex conglomerate of peoples, islands, cultures and languages, the country itself has never been nor is it at present a so-called uniform or unified state.

Today, the country holds a population composed largely of Melanesians (94%), with Polynesians (4%), Micronesians (1.5%), Europeans (0.8%) and Chinese (0.3%) in the minority. In total, Solomon Islands’ population is estimated at approximately 533,000 inhabitants, with 85,498 residents in the capital city, as of the year 2006 (Solomon Islands National Statistics). Although Melanesians represent a statistical majority and could suggest ethnic homogeneity, there is a high level of diversity within the Melanesian population stemming from a multitude of island identities, affiliations, kin patterns and languages. Frazer (1981) asserts that Honiara’s population is based on migratory flows, which continuously augments its ethnic diversity. The bulk of the country’s population is rural. Yet the capital, and subsequent urbanization process, has had significant impacts throughout the geographically dispersed state. The movement of Solomon Islanders throughout the

archipelago to and from its urban centre is unique in comparison to neighbouring Pacific countries because of the “high proportion of moves of very recent origin” (United Nations Report, 1982:60) to the city – which have only intensified in the last thirty years. Urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon, as the country has little to no industrial or urban history. Thus, the influx of people to Honiara coupled with its long-term residents – as an ethnically, socially and linguistically mixed assemblage – is generating the first localized urban culture (see Jourdan 1985; Berg 2000; Angeli 2008).

Table 1.1: Solomon Islands population distribution by province as of 2002



Source: Solomon Islands Government, 2002 (UNICEF 2005)

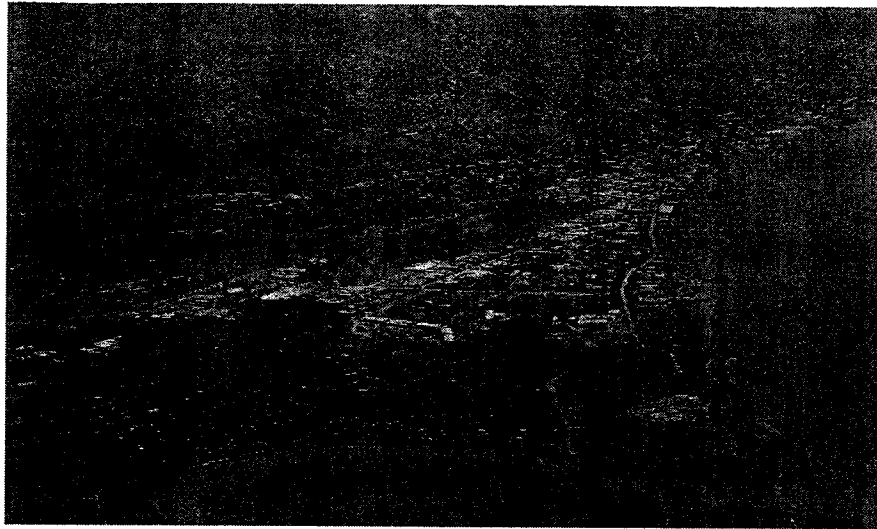


Photo 1.1: Areal view of Honiara. Source: A. Guay-Jadah, August 200

As with all public spaces, Honiara is an experienced space (Frazer 1982) undergoing rapid changes. It is also representative of the peoples and customs that populate the country at large, since town life is inextricably linked to the village. The linguistic diversity found within the country – 91 local dialects and languages (Jourdan 2008), added to English and the *lingua franca Pijin* – is amplified in an urban context. When it first emerged, *Pijin* was the “communication cement” (Jourdan 1995a:139) that facilitated interactions between plantation workers, plantation owners and the British administration. With time, it became the “de facto national language of the country” (Jourdan, 1995a: 139) due to interisland migration, education, urbanization and women’s increased usage of it. Although English is the official language of Solomon Islands and closely tied to socioeconomic mobility, *Pijin* supersedes it in terms of cultural relevance, identity politics and linguistic diversity, especially in Honiara. This echoes the findings of Epstein, which suggest that “heterogeneity of population, with its accompanying diversity of custom and culture as well as wide differences in economic, political,

and educational status, provides the kind of polyglot setting in which one expects to find the emergence of “pidgin” and “creolized” languages” (1959:236).

Ethnic plurality is heightened in Honiara, while ethnicity takes on new meanings to be negotiated within an ever-expanding realm of shifting identities. Jourdan maintains that ethnic and linguistic diversity “contribute to the atomisation of a country into local identities focused on the *Pijin* concept of *hom* (place of origin) [which] (...) still organizes much of people’s sense of consciousness and identity” (2008:12). In its early years, residences in Honiara were racially segregated, due in part to governmental policies (Frazer 1981). Today, Honiara remains somewhat residentially divided along ethnic lines². The capital has emerged as a stage for duelling and/or interconnected identities due to the sheer magnitude of human diversity it has attracted over the years. It merges dimensions of *kastom* (customary practices rooted in village life), religious indoctrination, popular culture, colonial ideologies and relations, as well as discourses, politics and economics stemming from the world system (Jourdan 1995b). At the same time, it is a space where Solomon Islanders can disassociate themselves from *kastom*-related constraints, thus allowing for more cultural freedoms (Jourdan 1995b). Such processes are complex in terms of both presence and ancestry, as “town residents are ambivalent both in relation to their own lives in town and towards their point of origin” (Berg, 2000:16). Furthermore, the (re)negotiation of urban identity occurs within a context of both affirmation and forgetting: “part of becoming a successful

² The term “ethnic” is used here to differentiate between European, Asian, Polynesian and Melanesian inhabitants living in Honiara, populations which are generally isolated from each other (notably Europeans living in gated compounds in the hills and Asians living in and south of Chinatown). It is not used to distinguish between Melanesian ethnicities, which are residentially intermixed in the city.

urbanite in Honiara is precisely being able to negotiate otherness, for oneself and for the other, for groups and individuals alike, and then to ignore it” (Jourdan, 1995a:40).

In this urban environment, as elsewhere throughout the world, the traditional/modern binary opposition is by no means fixed; elements of each permeate and influence the other. A relevant example of this can be found in the all-encompassing presence of religion in Solomon Islands. As a predominantly Christian nation (see Fugui and Butu 1989; Jourdan 1995a/2008; Stritecky 2001; McDougall 2009), Solomon Islands has a history of intricate connections between Christianity, *kastom* and education, as well as with colonial, political and ideological hegemony (Keesing 1982). Christianity is continuously adapted to new environments and agendas, and today “[n]ational churches under indigenous leadership have replaced most of the older missions” (Barker, 1990:1) – evidenced in the human composition of Honiara’s religious establishments. Although increased interest in other religions (such as Islam, Buddhism or Baha’i) is often seen as a threat to dominant Christian ideologies and national identity, 98% of Solomon Islanders identify themselves as Christians (McDougall 2009).

In Honiara, the larger denominations have their “own distinctive customs and teachings about Christianity (...) [which] create a new tribalism” (Fugui and Butu, 1989:73) in the urban context. Even though churches are “an intrinsic part of Pacific village life” (McMurray, 2006:338) and the rural clergy tend to reinforce the most conservative cultural values in that setting, they are primary institutions in the city as well, where they underpin every facet of social life (Frazer 1981; Jourdan

1995a; Berg 2000). In sum, Honiara is at its core a young urban space where Solomon Islanders are fuelled by specific desires and expectations; where a unique social theatre unfolds in processes of creolization (Jourdan 1995a), negotiation and adaptation of identities, languages and belief systems.

1.2. Political and economic realities

Several governments have succeeded each other since Independence (1978), as the “lack of an ideological base to the political party system” (Moore, 2004:42) has promoted a revolving door of arriving-and-returning charismatic politicians and parliamentarians. As a British Protectorate for 85 years, the country’s legislative foundation is the Westminster system. Solomon Islands is now part of the Commonwealth. British rules of law and politics have therefore historically been intertwined with locally produced and reproduced political leadership in Solomon Islands. Tribal power relations have become inseparable from political frameworks imposed by Western forces, and such a mix has resulted in a complex political arena with various actors and codes.

One significant figure in pre-contact Melanesian politics is the Bigman, whose power and legitimacy resides in his capacity to gain prestige, authority and influence through charismatic presence and control of balanced reciprocity. The success of a Bigman is reflected in his supporters, their location, numbers and relational tie to him (kin-based, affinal and non-kin). Furthermore, the labour input/output of a Bigman’s wife or wives are markers of his power. Historically, such leaders have been able to accumulate wealth (through network exchanges, strategic gift giving, and yielded resources) yet have had to make generous

offerings as well as share commodities and foodstuffs with supporters. As noted by Foster (1993) – following the work of Godelier – the big-man enterprise is transactional and competitive, based on kinship and economic principles. Bigmen regulate internal affairs, which parallels their responsibilities to oversee external affairs surrounding trade, war and inter-tribal alliances. They are important public figures dependent on exchange, reputation and resources, as well as on the ability to conduct feasts – which in turn become platforms for demonstrating their *mana*, that “invisible aura of an individual” (Moore, 2004:29).

As demonstrated in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, “bigmanisation is the process toward a more entrepreneurial, competitive, democratic and persuasive mode of power from earlier and more diverse forms associated with violence and ritual” (Liep, 1996:122). The same is true of Solomon Islands today: Bigmen continue to have a significant impact on political life throughout the country, and particularly in Honiara. It is important to acknowledge however that big-man leadership is neither uniform nor total throughout Solomon Islands; there are differences between the assumed egalitarianism of such systems and the seaboard/island societies with ranked hierarchies headed by chiefs that surround them (Strathern 1991). In its contemporary form, big-man politics have penetrated the vaster dimensions of the country’s political structure; throughout the government body, Bigmen (or their descendents) have often reached positions of institutionalized power. Such affiliations subsequently influence contemporary politics. As noted by Moore, “modern politicians utilise both the Bigman and

chiefly systems, accepting many of the same obligations to distribute wealth, which can be both personal assets or government funds” (2004:35).

The initial obligations of wealth redistribution and reciprocity are not diminished here; rather they are amplified to national levels, leaving those individuals who do not have relations with current politicians and/or Bigmen excluded from processes of power acquisition and distribution. Although Bigwomen have emerged in Solomon Islands and exercise power within their kin and village bases, they are the exception rather than the rule. Despite variations in this model of leadership, large-scale discrimination based on age and gender occurs, as the great majority of leaders are men of a certain age. A socio-political system widely based on the exclusion of women and young men hence influences everyday life, civil society, government policies and socioeconomics. In sum, big-man politics which have governed village life for centuries in Solomon Islands have traversed into the urban realm, influencing contemporary politics and the life course of Honiara’s inhabitants.

In terms of economics, trade and investment within and outside the borders of Solomon Islands occur mainly with Australia and New Zealand, as well as with Japan and Taiwan. Local commodities produced in Solomon Islands include copra, cocoa, rice, palm oil, with rich exploitation milieus in logging and fishing (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office). But the production of these goods has often been plagued by poor management, excessive exploitation, institutionalized corruption and economic downturns. The country’s export-based economy is critically under-

developed. In the capital, poverty has become a fact of life (Jourdan 2008) where a historically subsistence-driven society has been replaced by a cash economy.

After my fieldwork in the summer of 2009, it would be a valid observation to say that historically-rooted economic disparities along ethnic or racial lines (Jourdan 1995b) are still prevalent in Honiara. Residents of European, Australian and New Zealander descent are generally transient; they occupy government positions, work for non-governmental agencies or trading companies with ties to their respective homelands³. Owners of shops, restaurants and hotels in town are predominantly of Asian origin, while Melanesian Solomon Islanders work for generally meagre wages within these sectors. Since Independence, the country's economic growth has been inconsistent (UNICEF 2008). At present, it is the government that provides the largest pool of formal employment, presiding over an economy which is heavily dependent on exports and world commodities prices (Moore 2004). The economic models that preceded Independence did not change significantly after its arrival, added to decades of corruption, personalized wealth distribution, mismanagement of funds and poorly exploited resources, as well as external factors – all of which has insured Solomon Islands' place as one of the world's poorest countries in terms of per capita incomes (UNICEF 2008).

The impact of deep-rooted poverty is felt on a variety of levels. Although economic disintegration throughout the nation has been mitigated by the fact that 84% of the population is rural and often economically self-sufficient due to subsistence farming/gardening (Moore 2004), poverty is widespread. Economic and

³ It is important to note that such occupations are circumstantial outcomes of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which was implemented in 2003, and that before this period residents of European descent were increasingly scarce in Honiara.

material poverty – measured in the capacity to pay for education, access to health facilities and the status of women (UNICEF 2005) – influence and constrain the lives of countless Solomon Islanders, especially those having to adapt to the cost of living in the capital. Honiara is experiencing population pressures that have led to failing infrastructure, higher costs of living and rapidly increasing unemployment on a large-scale, afflicting a significant portion of its residents (Jourdan 2008). It is the urban population’s most marginalized individuals (women, children and youth) who are the ones who bear the brunt of their country’s economic burdens (UNICEF 2005). Commonalities exist in the lived reality of poor urbanites across the world, as “urban dwellers have to pay for everything, with few opportunities to secure, outside of the market, such essential goods and services as access to water, sanitation, rent for housing, transport and health care” (Mitlin, 2005:5); trends which are decipherable in today’s urbanizing Honiara. Hence, inter-correlations between the impacts of Solomon Islands’ political structure and those stemming from its economic failings have rendered its citizens increasingly vulnerable, excluded and marginalized.

1.3 Tensions and their effects (1998-2004)

It is imperative to discuss the ‘ethnic’ tensions which violently disturbed the lives of Solomon Islanders of all stripes, and especially that of young people. The underlying causes of the civil conflicts which plagued Solomon Islands from 1998 to 2004 – and in a more centralized manner on Guadalcanal, which became a war zone (Moore 2004) and where young people experienced the brunt of the hostilities – were not the ones projected in the local/regional media. The *tensions* – as they are

commonly referred to in *Pijin* – were not simply ethnically fuelled strife, with island-based factions trying to overthrow one another, but a substantial “power struggle caused by uneven development” (UNICEF, 2005:3).

Ethnicity was a relevant factor in the arousal of frictions between *Guale* (short for *Gualekanal*, local rendering of Guadalcanal) and Malaitans (Malaita) which destabilized the nation. The term *ethnic tensions* became a catchphrase to describe the conflicts, despite the fact that the situation was more complex and multifaceted, concerning historically rooted socioeconomic, political and geographical issues (Moore 2004). The roots of the crisis were geopolitical and economic more so than ethnic, as population distribution disparities as well as inequalities in resource redistribution and economic development among the provinces had reinforced schisms between *Guale* and Malaitans (UNICEF 2005). Rapid urbanization and urban drift set in motion an increase in development (on multiple levels) in Honiara, often at the expense of the other islands and provinces, where living conditions as well as access to schools, health centres, transportation and communication are generally lower (UNICEF 2005).

As mentioned earlier, the capital maintains a high population density and diversity, with a linguistic and socio-cultural multiplicity unmatched when compared to its village or town counterparts (such as Auki or Gizo). Despite its location on Guadalcanal, the capital’s population is approximately 50% Malaitan, many of whom maintain strong connections and allegiances to their home island. While *Guale* have a matrilineal kinship and land inheritance system, Malaitans preserve a cognatic structure which traces kinship through both male and female

lines, albeit with a male bias towards land inheritance. Conflicting interpretations of land rights became a root cause in the widespread dissatisfaction that sparked the *tensons*. Numerous Malaitans on Guadalcanal – and more specifically in Honiara – had lived on their adoptive island for decades, some married *Guale* men or women, as well as went through customary and government processes to obtain land (Moore 2004). In sum, inequalities in development, resource allocation, land ownership and labour allotments made for a potent mix, reaching a boiling point in early 1998.

What ensued was a period characterized by “insecurity, theft, physical violence, extortion of goods and money, breakdown of ‘traditional’ values of sexual propriety and antisocial behaviour” (Jourdan, 2008:17-18). Residents were intimidated by “general lawlessness and violence” (McDougall, 2009:481) and saw their mobility severely curtailed; instances of rape increased; children and young adults were denied access to schools and university as establishments closed periodically; commercial outlets were shut down or burned to the ground; civil servants went months without pay as the government weakened; population displacement altered the residential landscape of Guadalcanal as inhabitants returned to their home island or were forced into squatter settlements. Nearly 10,000 Malaitans were forced to return to their home island, a great majority of who were young people who had been exposed to the *tensons*’ repercussions on education, security and households. The conflicts significantly reduced the country’s cash flow, restricting income-generating activities such as trading and selling produce as disruptions in gardening patterns ensured that residents who did not have savings or cash reserves had no access to foodstuffs (UNICEF 2005).

Honiara carried most of the burden of the *tensons'* civil unrest, economic disruption and sporadic violence between islanders. As with the effects of poverty, it was children, women and youth who suffered on a larger scale, as health services were halted, education facilities closed down and domestic violence and sexual assaults augmented. Without schools to go to, markets to work in, salaries to be made, and with violence(s) erupting on a daily basis – both on the streets and in the home – *tensons*-era youths suffered massively. Yet despite the fact that young people were severely affected by the ongoing conflicts, a significant proportion of active insurgents comprised young men between the ages of 17 and 29 (Moore 2004). While political or ethnic alliances oriented their decision to participate and signalled which side they would fight for, a considerable factor that motivated their actions was an essence previously unknown to them: power. As noted by Jourdan, some young men found “the excitement and the power that was now in their hands” alluring (2008:18) – one reason among many why the peace and reconciliation process proved a difficult undertaking.

During the crisis, the Solomon Islands government requested on several occasions the assistance of neighbouring Pacific countries to protect law and order, with the goal of restoring and maintaining peace on a national level. In late July 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was created and its contingent arrived in Honiara: a task force of 2,250 individuals primarily consisting of Australian army personnel with a few cohorts from Fiji, Nauru, Tonga, Cook Islands and Papua New Guinea (Moore 2004). Two years after its implementation, the RAMSI intervention was generally perceived by Solomon

Islanders as having succeeded in restoring law and order, as thousands of weapons were surrendered and the majority of militia leaders ceased hostilities (UNICEF 2005). While the benefits of the RAMSI presence in Solomon Islands have been felt, and peace seemingly restored, negative repercussions have nonetheless materialized, such as the militarization of the Guadalcanal landscape, inflated commodity prices and skyrocketing real estate prices which have forced locals out of their homes. Although the interventionist measures taken on by RAMSI are undoubtedly important to Solomon Islanders, there are new types of inequalities which have emerged. RAMSI is still active in Guadalcanal to this day.

After the *tensons* period, civil unrest resurfaced once again in Honiara. After the contested election of Hon. Snyder Rini as Solomon Islands Prime Minister on April 18th 2006, civilians threw rocks at ministerial vehicles, leading to the looting of markets in the Point Cruz shopping area and the burning of businesses in Chinatown (Moore 2004). The Honiara riots lasted two days, causing much damage and insecurity within the city. The government itself recognized the causes of the civil strife as the following: governmental failure to address development in Honiara settlements, an ineffective constitutional setting, poor governance and inadequate policing. The government-led commission of inquiry into the riots suggests that: “there is a medium-level risk that rioting will reoccur unless Government addresses its internal efficiencies and treats policing and social conditions in Honiara as serious matters of national security” (2009:3).

In sum, the socioeconomic, geographical, developmental, ethnic and cultural divisions and inequalities generated over the years have infused all spheres of

Solomon Islands life, generating violent manifestations of dissatisfaction.

Mitchell's definition of urban Pacific life reflects what is continuously transforming

Honiara today:

In the hyper-modernity of the Pacific there is a pastiche of images, themes and directives gleaned from action videos, tourists, tax havens; transnationalism; Christian fundamentalism; reggae music; the pan-epidemic of AIDS; new and old technologies; neoliberal economic agendas, the militarization of the region; discourses of good governance and the Rights of Children which all index the discourses and practices of "globalism".

(n.d. (c):3)

With this brief background into the historical, political, socioeconomic and violent particularities which have shaped the recent history Solomon Islands, and more specifically that of Honiara, my aim is to contextualize the field and the time of my research. In situating the terrain, what was then and now, the researcher sets the stage for what's to come in the following chapters: the reasons behind studying young urban people; the youths I worked with; the ways in which they are excluded, and the means they have (or do not have) to alleviate their powerlessness.

Chapter 2: The particularities of youth in Honiara

After a short ethnographic contextualization, one might ask: *Why study youths in these circumstances?* I would have to propose Mitchell's argument as a starting point:

Youth is an important site in which to engage with debates in the region and within the academy. Considerations for youth raise questions concerning the nature of personhood and agency; the nature of cultural change and continuity; the nature of local-global intersections and modernities and the relationships between wage and gift economies that inform subjectivity and sociality.

(n.d.(c):2)

Young citizens of Solomon Islands have grown up in a climate of violence, corruption, educational and professional failings as well as disintegrating social networks. Here, youths are the majority, yet they remain marginal despite their numbers. As noted by de Certeau, “[m]arginality is no longer limited to minority groups but is rather massive and pervasive” (1984:479), which is applicable to young people in Honiara today. As a marginalized majority, they are rendered powerless in a system that constrains them due to their age or their gender, and which neglects to offer them alternatives or means to channel their frustrations. My thesis asks how youths in this context can find a certain measure of self-worth, social capital, relational benefits and economic opportunities through youth group membership.

2.1. Sociality and youth in Honiara

Social organization in Solomon Islands is largely familial, kin-based and influenced by processes of bigmanisation. Likewise, *wantok* links are one of the foundational principles of inter-relational ties. A *Pijin* word derived from English,

wantok literally means ‘one’ and ‘talk’ (Jourdan 2008) and defines those who share the same ethno-linguistic group as well as common region of origin. Semantically the term has expanded to include people of the same nationality, neighbourhood or group of friends (Jourdan 2008). In contemporary usage, *wantok* encompasses various identities depending on a given socio-cultural context, but is still primarily linked to peoples who share common ethno-linguistic and regional background. As noted by Foanaota, the “essence of social identity is still the relationship with one’s relatives and *wantoks*” (1989:71).

In an urban setting, all of the social implications and mutual responsibilities which stem from *wantok* association are intensified, weighing heavily on ever-expanding households⁴. While “a typical Honiara household usually comprises a nuclear family plus a few kinsmen/kinwomen on either side of the family” (Jourdan, 1995:214), it is young family/kin members who rely on their *wantoks* for food, lodging and assistance in Honiara which put an extra financial strain on urban families. Similar to youths in Vanuatu, where overcrowded settlements push young people (especially men) into the public sphere (Mitchell 2004), youths in Honiara are highly visible. Young urbanites – although they benefit from customary reciprocal generosity – often live in overcrowded housing with scarce resources and find themselves propelled into the public domain, where they cultivate their presence in the urban imagination (Jourdan 1995b).

The Solomon Islands population is young: 68.9% of its inhabitants are below the age of 29, while 40% are under the age of 14 (Mitchell, n.d.(c):5).

⁴ An average household size in 1999 was 6.3 (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office), and one may assume that such a number has only increased in the last 10 years.

Honiara is even more so, with 71.6% of its residents 29 years of age or younger (Jourdan 2008). According to the National Youth Policy (NYP 2000), youth is a category that encompasses unmarried individuals between the ages of 14 and 29. However, present-day Solomon Islanders maintain ambivalence towards defining youth. This is largely due to its status as an imported social construct based on Western conceptualizations of adolescence. Ambivalence towards youth in Honiara can be attributable to “irresolvable tensions running counter to a person’s expectation and (...) experience in town life” (Knot, 2009:95). Youth is traditionally understood in social rather than chronological terms, usually referring to unmarried young people (Jourdan 2008). Married people in this age range are expected to take on adult responsibilities (such as being financially independent and having children of their own) and are not usually considered youth. By contrast, individuals who are in their thirties and remain unmarried (regardless of whether they have children) can also be labelled youths in Solomon Islands.

The impact of Christianity on youth experiences should be highlighted in this “Christian country” (Fugui and Butu, 1989:73). In Honiara, as in rural areas, religion is a crucial feature in society and most youths are associated with a church denomination (NYP 2000), usually of Christian faith. With long histories of organizing youth groups and youth-oriented activities, Christian Churches have significantly moulded the lives of young Solomon Islanders, thus greatly informing their socio-cultural, moral and relational expectations.

Young Pacific urbanites’ identity is multiplex and multi-sited, and differs from one youth to another, as there are major differences between young people in

terms of their educational level, family dynamics, island(s) of origin, and religion affiliations (Mitchell n.d. (b)). An urban landscape, such as Honiara, offers youths a site where various self-identifications converge, adapt to one another and take on new forms. While clan affiliation and regional lineage are the groundwork from which their identity is assembled, urban culture – informed by cultural and economic world systems (Jourdan 1995a) – also influences who they are and believe themselves to be. Accordingly, youth identity in the capital is continuously engaged in dialogic negotiations between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, since contemporary Pacific countries are sites for emerging identities and ethnicities to override traditional ones (Keesing 1996). The conceptualization of youth as an ambivalent process, as well as the complexities of youth identity in Honiara, will be examined in further detail in chapter 4.

2.2. Issues faced by young people

Although youths have a degree of liberty in self-identification processes, they nonetheless struggle with social inequalities propagated by structural and institutionalized constraints. For example, if one focuses on education (which is not compulsory or universal in Solomon Islands) it becomes clear that not all young people have equal access to basic schooling. Even so, those who have the chance to have their educations paid for often become victims of the education system itself. They are “pushed out” (NYP 2000) of schools due to limited resources and faculty, faltering infrastructure and reduced space. In 2000, it was estimated that the number of pushed out students (generally through standardized testing) was approximately 60,000 (NYP 2000) – while the literacy rate in Solomon Islands stood at 22% that

same year (Jourdan 2008). Furthermore, what awaits students who have not been ousted from the education system is uncertain, since a very small proportion of high school graduates find paid work after their studies (NYP 2000). As with other sectors with impacts on young people, “[e]ducation has let them down” (Jourdan, 1995b:210). This is the first time in the history of the Pacific that so many young people have been exposed to education and prepared for employment, while there is no concrete wage sector to speak of (Mitchell, n.d.(b)). Thus, youths in Honiara are relegated to a professional no-man’s land; struggling between an education system that ignores or rejects them and a grim post-education environment defined by unemployment.

Added to the failures of the education system are social, economic and political challenges which young urbanites are confronted with. Not only is lack of access to education and paid labour major concerns for young people, there is also over-population, family breakdowns and a myriad of other social problems, such as violence, depression and substance abuse (Jourdan 2008). Youths in Honiara face many challenges that push them towards the outskirts of society, while they are also denied decision-making capabilities within their families (Jourdan 1995a). The NYP (2000) presents a summary list of the principal issues faced by young Solomon Islanders: individual, familial, cultural and religious conflicts; inadequate education system; lack of employment opportunities; crime and juvenile delinquency; substance abuse; sexual and mental health problems; lack of self-esteem, boredom and idleness. Although they are demographically important and an ever-expanding group, youths are oftentimes neglected and forgotten within the

family as well as in the wider social sphere, where “their political voice is negligible” (Jourdan, 1996:16) and devalued.

In Honiara, the massive influx of youths coupled with the meagre resources available to them, as well as increasing rates of violence, crime and drug/alcohol addiction ensure that these urbanites are facing the aforementioned challenges in greater numbers and intensity. They are, like their peers in Port Vila, caught “at the center of compelling demographic developments in the Pacific, including population growth, urbanization and new kinds of mobilities” (Mitchell, n.d. (c):4). Correspondingly, a rising youth population has amplified the *Masta Liu* phenomenon which expanded throughout the 1990s and 2000s. *Masta Liu* comprise young unemployed men (many of whom come from Malaita searching for work and entertainment) who, once confronted by Honiara’s lack of general opportunities, spend their days wandering about town in large groups. The numerous challenges faced by urban youths are explored in greater detail in chapter 5.

2.3. The symbolic importance of youth in Honiara

Although young people have been relegated to the margins of urban economic life, some use “cultural agency as a means to find one’s urban identity and social space” (Jourdan, 1995:203). To find one’s place in Honiara, to find a balance between social and economic realities and one’s position as a young, disenfranchised individual can be achieved through resilience⁵.

Youths are highly visible, central figures in the city’s cultural landscape and correspondingly, are an informal authority on popular culture and how it informs

⁵ In this thesis, resilience will be interpreted from a constructionist perspective proposed by Ungar; resilience as a process of negotiations within a “relationship[s] between risk and protective factors (...) [which] are chaotic, complex, relative and contextual” (2004:344).

the urban imagination (Jourdan 1995b:205; see also Durham 2000). Young people are generating a hybrid, modern culture while “impos[ing] their own creative stamp on the Western phenomena with which they are bombarded” (Jourdan 1995a:142). Despite the hardships, they are individuals with “symbolic capital, (...) in the form of prestige and renown” (Bourdieu, 1977:179) linked to the ways they influence and shift popular culture. They have considerable clout on the collective consciousness of urbanites, as they are “present in several minds” (Nemedi, 1995:42; Durkheim 1982). The symbolic significance of youths as cultural agents and negotiators is illustrated in the work of Jourdan (1995b), who states that it is young people who influence the ways creolized cultures change in Honiara. She suggests that:

Young people have the cultural edge over the adults who, for the most part, are still enmeshed in village-related meanings and social activities, and for whom the world of the village remains the frame of reference for many symbolic and practical activities in town (...) [young people] are thus ‘free’ to initiate changes, or to carry further the cultural transformations that have been initiated by their parents.

(1995b:212)

In Honiara, youths are symbolically strong, and demonstrate resiliency as cultural actors. As noted by de Certeau, the “tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, (...) lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (1984: xvii). When young people in the capital navigate their cultural selves through an urban environment that largely excludes them, actively “putting new meanings into old shells” (Jourdan, 1995b:205), putting their imprint on popular culture, they are practicing some measure of power. Mitchell argues that in Port Vila, young people are “astute cultural critics and emerging political actors

who are forging new subjectivities in an increasingly global world” (n.d. (b):18), a reality manifested in Honiara as well. Although the socioeconomic, political and familial arenas in the capital tend to leave young people dislocated and disempowered, popular culture is symbolically theirs to mould and govern on their own terms. As cultural agents shaping the social landscape, young urbanites possess a level of power, however symbolic and impracticable it may be.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the symbolic significance of youth is limited. As argued by Wulff (1995), urban youths have complex modern identities to forge, caught between webs of tradition and globalization, consumption and development. According to her, young people “have some room to negotiate a youth culture of their own, mostly expressed in public practice such as clothing, music, videos, or slang” (1995:10), yet she maintains that anthropologists must acknowledge that youths’ choices are constrained.

Young people in Honiara are culturally important beings, but their agency is restricted by inequalities in socioeconomic, political, relational spheres. Because they are sites of youth cultural production and reproduction, intertwined with elements of popular culture, youth groups are a vital component to many young people’s positive self-identification and development. Urban youth associations highlight the ways in which young people wish to fashion themselves as individuals, as respected, knowledgeable and self-confident members of a society, as cultural actors in their own right. In direct as well as indirect ways, youth groups can help their members sustain themselves financially, promote their cultural selves and create strong relational bonds. As ambassadors of social change, multiple

identities and popular culture engaged in processes of negotiation, urban youths, through youth associations, have an outlet with which to face their exclusion(s) in inventive ways.



Photo 2.2: Young attendees of a youth-enacted play about local politics. International Youth Day, August 12th 2009, Honiara. Photo: A. Guay-Jadah

2.4. Interviewee profiles

The youths who participated in interviews were between the ages of 17 to 34 years old. They were affiliated with either one of the churches (Anglican/Church of Melanesia or Catholic/Holy Cross Parish) where I would attend youth meetings and services or with the community-based organizations I associated and volunteered with, Honiara Town Council Youth Division (HTC) and Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT). The selection criterion was not strict; the main standard being that the participant needed to be considered a youth recently or currently involved in a youth group in Honiara.

It was also significant for me to have an equal proportion of girls and boys, in order to decipher perspectives that might diverge along gender-constructed lines. Most of the youths volunteered to be interviewed after my attendance at a service or

through a friend of a previous participant, therefore due to interactions based on pre-established entrée and trust, i.e. the snowball effect. Although there was no rigorous selection process, patterns began to emerge amidst the assumed diversity of participants. It was challenging to find young people who were solely active in non-religious youth groups, as the pervasiveness of Christianity in Solomon Islands has monopolized early affiliations of youths with peer groups. A smaller portion of interview participants (4 out of the 14 – hence 29% of the total) come from communal organizations, and have generally already been, or still are, a member of a faith-based youth group. All of my interviewees are involved in their youth groups, churches, schools and communities; have many friends in different social spheres, and are for the most part hopeful for the future. They aspire to be teachers, nurses, doctors, pilots, social workers and agricultural specialists, among other professions. Yet they are also brutally aware of the socioeconomic, relational and political realities of town life.

Table 2.1: Young interviewee profile distribution

Membership(s)	Religious youth groups	Community youth groups	Both types of groups
Youth leaders/members	3 (Catholic; Anglican)	2 (HTC; traditional dance youth group)	---
Youth members	7 (Catholic; Anglican)	1 (Jackson Ridge Community Group)	1 (HTC; Anglican)

Table 2.2: Youth groups linked to young interviewees

Associations	Activities	Partnerships	Key person
Holy Cross Youth Council (Catholic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formation of first youth council - Organizing pilgrimage to Ruasura (December 2009) - Prayer meetings, services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No government funding - No interreligious partnerships 	Michael Tahiseu (Youth Coordinator)
Church of Melanesia Youth Desk (Anglican)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weekly music rehearsals - Weekly youth-oriented services - Interdenominational rallies 	- Liaise with NGOs (local and international) and SI government	Milton Phillips (Youth Coordinator)
Honiara Town Council Youth Division	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HTC Youth Policy - Monthly group visits - Annual youth forums, art festivals and sports competitions 	- Liaise with NGOs (local and international and SI government)	Audrey Baenisia (Head of Youth Division)

Source: *Youth and Mental Health in Solomon Islands: A Situational Analysis* (2008) and author's discussions with key persons (2009).

My participants are generally from the Honiaran middle-class— as described by Gooberman-Hill (1999). As noted by Angeli, in her study of linguistics among USP⁶ students, being middle-class in Honiara is a contextual experience, and “[m]ost (if not all) middle-class families struggle to make ends meet” (2008:34). Social class in Honiara, as in other parts of Melanesia, is interpretable in terms of *practice* more so than in terms of ideology (Gooberman-Hill 1999; Angeli 2008) and therefore, is observable in the lifestyles and consumption patterns of its constituents. In person, I could tell that my collaborators were from a more comfortable social class, exemplified by their dress, accessories, consumer items

⁶ University of South Pacific, Honiara.

and mastery of English, as well as through their life stories (by their family background, parents' employment, interisland travelling, etc.). Jourdan maintains that "[y]outh belonging to the middle class feel just as marginalized and hopeless as the urban poor, albeit in different ways" (2008:32). Although they maintain a relatively privileged social position in comparison to other youths in Honiara, my participants are nonetheless wrestling with the realities of a limited economy and fragmented sociality. Furthermore, another common characteristic of my collaborators was their place of origin. While a minority were born and grew up in Honiara, most participants were migrants from other provinces and had made their way to the capital in recent years, proof of "rapid urban growth and the incessant movement of young people between the town and villages" (Mitchell, n.d. (b):2) throughout this archipelago.

Oftentimes, faith-based youth group members demonstrated a dichotomized vision of what constitutes 'good' vs. 'bad' behaviours and practices for themselves or their peers. One would imagine such distinctions are informed by their Christian socialization, the cultural significance of *kastom* as well as the interconnections between both spheres (Tonkinson 1982). The amalgamation of religious and traditionalist ideologies throughout Solomon Islands history has produced oppositional binaries in terms of morality (Stritecky 2001). Keesing asserts that "[t]he contemporary uses of *kastom* as ideology are in part a counter to the historic uses of Christianity as invasive ideology" (Keesing, 1982:300) in Melanesia. Yet *kastom* and Christianity are intertwined ideological processes that reinforce one

another; structures that have influenced the ways Solomon Islanders interpret, adhere to or neglect moral codes.

In Solomon Islands, as in numerous developing Christian nations which have experienced decolonization, dichotomized demarcations of what is right and wrong (Linnekin 1990) are common. Similar to the ways youths in Port Vila are negotiators of new dimensions of sociality and *kastom* (Mitchell 2004), young people in Honiara are also cultural shapers, influencing spheres of morality, modernity, Christianity and *kastom*. What is perceived *tambu* or acceptable, can vary since “[k]astom is an apt and powerful symbol precisely because it can mean (almost) all things to all people” (Keesing, 1982:297) but moral scripts are a force to be reckoned with in Solomon Islands (Stritecky 2001). My young collaborators from religious youth groups would link bad or wrong ways to going to clubs; dancing and dressing provocatively; socializing with the opposite sex (particularly for women); having sexual relations; chewing betel-nut; drinking beer and *kwaso*⁷ or smoking marijuana. Many of them did not want to be associated with or mistaken for *Masta liu*. To be an idle wanderer, a *flâneur*, a social being on the outskirts of the school, community hall, church or household environments, engaging in ‘deviant’ behaviours such as drinking, smoking, having sexual relations, dancing provocatively, etc. was generally perceived negatively by interviewees. It is not my intention to categorize most of my young interviewees as staunch church-going conservatives abiding Christian and *kastom* mores. Since “cultural and ethnic mixtures are particularly obvious among young people in urban areas” (Wulff,

⁷ *Kwaso* is the latest substance to appear on the Honiara scene; it dates back to the *tenson* period. It is a home-made, distilled alcohol that is increasingly accessible in town, and that has a very high alcohol content (Jourdan 2008).

1995:63), my collaborators reflect particular traditionalist views and attitudes and are not necessarily representative of the wider youth community. It is important to consider these particularities when it comes to participants labelling certain behaviours bad or wrong in their narratives, especially when describing young people's means of dealing with everyday challenges.

Members of community youth associations tended to come from more tolerant, liberal backgrounds, as they exuded a greater *laissez-faire* attitude towards social behaviour and expectations related to young people. They were less prone to upholding the rigidity of church tenets and preserving strict opposite-sex dictates historically rooted in *kastom*. They had no trouble pinpointing the challenges faced by and the managing strategies of young people, yet they were more tolerant of attitudes and actions deemed by their more religious peers as wrong. These collaborators seemed more embracing of popular culture, as a complex mixture of locally and globally generated symbols which have filled young urbanites' imagination (Jourdan 1995a). In general, and perhaps due to their greater community-based peer socialization, youths from secular groups demonstrated a greater leniency towards "spectacular or deviant youth activities" (Hodkinson, 2007:13) criticized by church group members.

In conclusion, my interviewees are young individuals with specific aspirations, who are active in urban youth collectives, informed by the complex amalgam of Christian ethics, *kastom* rules and social expectations found in Solomon Islands. They are members of Honiara's middle-class, hence are representative of a particular segment of the town's young population. It is

imperative to keep this profile in mind in the following chapters in order to appreciate the context of my collaborators' opinions and recognize their views on morality and practice.

Chapter 3: Methodological approaches

In order to substantiate an academic argument within anthropological and ethnographical circles, methodology needs to be addressed. From my day of arrival in Honiara on May 3rd 2009, observations began, as one adapts one's senses, perceptions, expectations, physical and emotional responses to a new environment. The more concrete, research-based observations materialized within the first month of fieldwork, with questionnaires, interviews and more pronounced collaboration and participation occurring in the following months. This chapter focuses on my methodological approaches to studying young people's empowerment through the lens of urban youth group membership.

One of my research goals is to allow the oftentimes voiceless youths to express their discontent, fears, hopes and projects in such a way as to neither appear paternalistic, orientalist (Said 1978), nor hyper-theoretical, using paradigms that can effectively alienate collaborators as well as audience. As suggested by Scheper-Hughes, "there is still a role for the ethnographer-writer in giving voice, as best she can, to those who have been silenced" while ethnographic acts, such as "seeing, listening, touching, recording, (...) are the work of recognition" (1992:28). It is my intention to include my collaborators in such a way as to reflect Field's intellectual desire to provide writing that honours social and individual empowerment, while acknowledging the "collaborative intimacy" (2008:47) that wove through my fieldwork. At the crux of my thesis are the people who shared their time and energies to speak with me, allowed me to attend meetings and services, hence to be a part of their lives, if only for a brief period. Anthropological knowledge is, after all, a dialogic process (Scheper-Hughes 1992) based on interactions, negotiations

and interpretations between various individuals, whether anthropologist, collaborator or audience, and I hope my work respects that ethos.

3.1. Participant-observation and questionnaires

My methodological approach comprises four intertwined anthropological models of data collection: participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and one focus group⁸. The particularities of observational research are complex as (already fluid) boundaries meant to delineate identities, settings and associations are continuously blurred. During my research, participant-observation was undertaken in churches, youth halls, religious establishments, community spaces and family homes. Such sites offer a convergence of various identities and connections. Likewise, variances occur across the participant-observation spectrum, as researchers cannot take on both roles in equal terms throughout their fieldwork. As noted by Bailey (2007), there are four types of methods anthropologists can choose: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer and complete participant (see also Junker 1960; Gold 1969). Since I decided to participate only minimally in the events I attended – so as to not take up too much space as an already unfamiliar, perhaps intimidating, presence – my level of involvement would fit the *participant as observer* model. After receiving my research permit (authorized by the Ministry of Education), I began this part of my ethnographic fieldwork. Generally, I observed people and their behaviours at events; presented myself and socialized in a friendly manner; took part in certain

⁸ The focus group proved inefficient in terms of gathering substantial data: the group comprised 7 young men in their teens who, for various reasons (shyness, disinterest, being uncomfortable interacting with a white female anthropologist, etc.), did not divulge much information during the interview. Therefore, the content of the focus group will not be used here.

activities. But when asked to contribute actively (e.g. in a brainstorming workshop specific to the daily challenges faced by youths in Honiara), I politely refused, opting for non-interference, hoping that the exchange of ideas materializing before my eyes would continue without too much of my influence.

Although an ethnographer's presence is never without some level of impact, my goal was to minimize it through quiet observation, keeping the "observer's paradox" (McMahon 1994) in mind. Therefore, the observational component of my fieldwork outweighed the obvious participatory portion. During public events and meetings, I would take photographs and film video sequences when possible. I used a notepad on site but only sporadically, jotting down a few comments or important information to later return to my rented room in central Honiara to type up in detail what had just happened. I tried to keep in mind that "'doing' and 'writing' should not be seen as separate and distinct activities, but as dialectically related and interdependent activities" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995:15). My method became an amalgamation of structured and unstructured observations, complimented by writing and captured moments via photographs and recordings.

Participant-observation was undertaken from May to August 2009, in conditions of both conspicuous planning and serendipity. Meetings and activities that occurred on a recurring basis were sought out through my networks of associates, which grew into a pool of contacts. Meetings included weekly youth-centred music group rehearsals (Church of Melanesia), youth council meetings (Catholic Mission), and nightly youth services (Church of Melanesia) which took place in various locations in Honiara. In contrast, recorded moments that happened

spontaneously took place in community-based areas of youth planning and activities. Writing field notes as the “very first act of textualizing” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995:16) during such happenings became a fluid activity which helped me situate events in a larger context. Here is an excerpt from a planned attendance at a youth service:

Around 6:30 pm, in the half-lit pale blue hallway of the Protestant Church (All Saints, Honiara), I explained to a young man in his late teens named Norman the premises and methods of my research, and even attempted communicating in Pijin. He laughed at my efforts, not mockingly but in a bashful and surprised way. When enough people were gathered below the steps of the church where we stood, in a open space with only a roof and columns, several youths began to practice playing their instruments and singing in the middle of a bright yellow room. Six young males were jamming together, under the supervision of two older instructors, and under the watchful eyes of many youths in attendance, mostly young girls, who waited for the music séance to commence. In front of colourful decorations in the background displaying a “Welcome All Saints” banner, the youths played guitars, drums, keyboards, as they looked towards one another every so often, smiling and seemingly encouraging each other under the bright, harsh lights hanging over them. Those in attendance clapped their hands enthusiastically and sang wholeheartedly. This was their space, and they had the freedom to express themselves amongst their peers, friends, neighbours, etc. There was lightness to their interactions – reflections of play and carefree impulses to just be alive in the moment, and be witnesses to their God’s word in song.

Field Notes, May 28th 2009

During these events, my presence as a researcher interested in young people and youth groups was acknowledged to various degrees. Whether in the presence of other Western individuals, or as the only white Westerner in a large gathering of local youths, the aim of my observations was made clear either by my collaborators or myself. Reactions to my project were generally positive and enthusiastic, as the people I interacted with saw great promise and potential in studying youths. There was much dynamism surrounding my attendance and several youths actively came forth wanting to take part in my research.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, the widespread usage of *Pijin* limited my understanding of what was verbally communicated. Since I had not yet reached a linguistic competence to communicate or understand adequately in the early stages (May-June 2009), elements were undeniably lost in translation. I did not venture into the interview process until the last month (mid July-mid August 2009) because only in that period did I feel as though I had acquired the necessary linguistic skills. Despite early challenges, I conducted a survey on the evening of July 4th 2009 (during Solomon Islands Independence Day weekend) with the assistance of a NGO co-worker. Throughout my fieldwork, I volunteered two days a week at the Solomon Islands Development Trust, SIDT (the largest local NGO in Solomon Islands) to help with editing for their quarterly magazine, entitled *LINK*. While there, important ties were made with various peoples. A planned SIDT workshop in the province of Malaita, in a rural village, took me outside of Honiara for the first time since my arrival. I decided to use the Malaita experience to start my collaborative work in the form of questionnaires, with the kind assistance of SIDT colleagues. Once there, I would engage with local youths home for the (national) holiday, away from their habitual residence in Honiara, and have them answer the questionnaire, which had been edited by my colleagues.

We resided in Namoluluga for a proposal-writing workshop with local villagers and inhabitants from neighbouring villages. Towards the end of the first day of the NGO-funded workshop, one of my collaborators explained my research in *Pijin* and asked that if any (habitually urban) youths were interested in filling out a questionnaire, they join me after dinner in the village *kindi hoas* (primary school

hut). A few timid figures approached the large table we had set up for them, with many more curious *pikininis* (children) clamouring around the communal space. There, in the neon light of the village hut, 6 young men and women answered the questionnaire. A contemporary reality I was aware of through academic texts became apparent: *Pijin* is more of a spoken dialect than a formalized, written language (Jourdan 1995b). Although the youths had the document, ethics protocol and questions explained to them in *Pijin* by my SIDT counterpart (originally from Western Province), their shared body language signified confusion. The questions varied between biographical information to perceptions about challenges facing young people in Honiara. Since there was a pool of young people in the village to draw from on my 2-day sojourn, I thought the Malaita experience to be a constructive starting point for my collaborative fieldwork, while the questions asked served as a template for future interviews.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

As noted by Bailey (2007), researchers who employ an interpretive approach generally use a semi-structured or unstructured interview format. Correspondingly, I carried out semi-structured interviews. They were scheduled ahead of time; lasted an expected amount of time (ranging between 35 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes); and were undertaken in an open-ended approach with predetermined questions asked depending on the flow of the interview itself. The first interviews were more tentative, resulting in more rigid and formal interactions. However, with time and practice, the interviews became more of a dialogue, which allowed for the flow to take unexpected courses.

The majority of interview participants (14 in total) were young people living in Honiara involved in youth groups to various degrees. Along with their peers who participated in the questionnaire, my data comprises views of 20 young people altogether. Added to this are the opinions and interpretations of 8 adults, all of whom have worked with youths and youth groups on either communal or faith-based levels. The adults who partook in interviews were members and representatives of the Anglican Church, Catholic Church, SIDT, HTC and the MWYCA. The selection process for the adult participants was more calculated than that of young participants, since I had formal meetings with the older interviewees beforehand. It was deemed necessary to have the thoughts of older individuals, from various backgrounds, complement those of young people seeing as it is “especially important to collect data from respondents who occupy different social locations or are likely to have divergent views” (Bailey, 2007:77) in a triangulation process. Interviewing adults working with youths offered alternate or parallel pockets of knowledge to young people’s narratives. Moreover, although much of my methodology was undertaken in *Pijin* in such a way as to respect the linguistic background of collaborators, for reasons linked to efficiency and as to not capitalize on the exoticism of linguistic difference, my data will be presented in English.

My aim in terms of methodology was to include the narratives of collaborators of all stripes in such a way as to let them express themselves, through their own voices instead of through anthropological conversion (Bailey 2007). I incorporated quotes from semi-structured interviews with the aim of maintaining a balance between narrative and theory, with neither overpowering the other. It is my

aim to espouse Fabian's contention that "the subject as speaker, as author, as authority is always present" (2001:12) in ethnographic text.

3.3. Local events and documentation

I arrived on site with a pre-established research proposal and hypothesis that eventually came undone when the social phenomenon in question (i.e. Honiara street children experiencing the effects of urban poverty) was not widespread enough to be studied on a short-term basis. It became apparent that the scope of my initial ethnographic project would be technically limited (Stocking 1983) by my timeframe and on-site complications. After a month of numerous consultations with youth workers and coordinators, a new research topic materialized. I had not planned to study youth groups and their empowering effects on young urbanites, and so was unaware of upcoming youth-oriented events in Honiara. Due to the timing and new orientation of my fieldwork, they were serendipitously incorporated into my methodology. Moreover, local documentation centered on youth groups occasionally ended up in my hands owing to accidental encounters with youth representatives or to a chance newspaper purchase on a given day. Serendipity certainly played an important role in shaping the course and content of my research.

Locally-produced documentation (both formal and informal) inform my thesis. The HTC Youth Policy (2006) is a document authored and financed by the municipality and is meant to highlight the lived realities of young people in Solomon Islands. It is not a legal charter by any means nor has it been implemented on any level (local, regional or national). It is simply a synthesis of issues and challenges facing youths in a particular urban environment. In an unprecedented

fashion, Honiara sponsored the HTC Policy Review Forum in June 2009 at the CYP Center, situated on the outskirts of Honiara. The forum brought young people, youth coordinators and government representatives together in a three-day workshop aimed at modifying and ratifying said municipal guidelines. Not only was this the first time the policy was being reviewed, but the fact that youths themselves were consulted for its re-examination made the event all the more unique. The Review Forum took place from June 22nd to 24th, with a total of 56 youths coming in from various parts of Honiara by bus or car (transportation fees were paid by the organizing committee) to discuss, brainstorm and participate in various activities. As one organizer mentioned, this was the first time that the city council was taking a participatory approach to reviewing any type of policy (Fox 2009). Seeing as “consultation and participatory research to identify community needs brings additional benefits by raising awareness of needs and increasing motivation” (UNICEF, 2005: 49-50), incorporating youths into the re-examination process is an advantageous practice. At the end of the forum, youths were asked to present their own game plan to address the challenges faced by young people in Honiara – an “open market” themed production that was attended by government officials, stakeholders and NGO representatives.



Photo 3.1: Young female participants enjoying the creative corner, an initiative organized by a youth leader. HTC Youth Policy Review, Day 1, Honiara. Source: A. Guay-Jadah, August 2009.

Another example of an unplanned, youth-centred event was International Youth Day, which took place on August 12th in Honiara. An annual day of celebration, the 2009 event – entitled *Sustainability: Our challenge, Our Future* – was organized by the MWYCA, HTC Youth Division, CYP and various international NGOs such as Oxfam. The event was accentuated by the presence of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, M. Kamalesh Sharma. As the first keynote addresser, the Secretary General announced to the crowd of young people:

You are nation-builders, in a very literal sense, of the world. And our (...) responsibility is not only to recognize it and pass on this faith in you, the younger people, but also to look at all the problems, that may be economic in nature or of any other nature, pertaining to health and your skills, which you need in order to take on your responsibilities.

Field Notes, August 2009

International Youth Day became a space of multi-sited interactions, where music, dance, theatre and stories took place. This was an occasion for young people to express their identities, expectations and disappointments openly and publicly. As the third keynote addresser, a HTC youth leader (Mary Jionisi) took the occasion to orient her speech towards criticism of institutional failings:

Too often, governments, inter-governmental organizations, including the Commonwealth Secretariat, offer excuses not to involve and support young people (...) [you say]: "There is no money", "There is no time to engage in a proper process", "Experience is required". Even when these excuses may be true, they are often unjustifiable.

Field Notes, August 2009

In skits organized by local high school youths, young actors played out an election process replete with corruption, big-man politics and large-scale consequences on the country's future. However, by the time the skits were presented, all of the most powerful and prominent politicians and attendees had already left the event, thus unaware of such an unexpectedly aware and critical youth discourse.

Each of the events mentioned above was covered by the local news media, notably the *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers. Locally produced and consumed documentation such as the widely read and popular *Solomon Star* became vital sources of knowledge for me in the field. Newspapers informed me of past and upcoming events and the organizations propelling them into action. Here is an excerpt of the International Youth Day coverage from the pages of the *Solomon Star*:

The Minister of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs (MWYC), Johnson Koli added that his ministry will try to build bridges with other stakeholders to ensure the rights of young people are protected. He said although young people play [an] important role in the country, there had been minimal

recognition. The ministry, he said, understands that investing in youths is a major country's investment.

“Honiara youth marks International Youth Day”, 13th of August, 2009, p.10

With newspapers gathered and conserved from the field, I intend to complement the data provided by collaborators. In doing so, it is hoped that a wider perspective may enter the present dialogue, as newspaper content is generated for public consumption and opinion.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

As previously mentioned, individual interviews (19) as well as two multiple interviews (2) were conducted towards the end of my fieldwork. The last month (August) of ethnographic research was certainly the most frenzied period, when the majority of my data was collected. The interviews were recorded – with the informed consent of collaborators – and the young participants were compensated with a monetary sum of 20SDB upon completion of the interview. The financial compensation was not offered in order to commercialize the exchange of knowledge, nor as an incentive for participation, but rather as an act of recognition towards marginalized youths who shared their time and energy for the advancement of my project. Also, it entails an acknowledgement of power differentials at play between anthropologist and collaborator, between discrepancies in social and political capital. There is no denying the inequality in status and capital (of various kinds) due to my position vis-à-vis that of my young participants. In a difficult socio-economic milieu, and in a cultural climate of reciprocity, I thought that the youths would gain from the financial offering both economically and personally.

The majority of data – other than the interviews – was collected on event sites as well as in church and community halls. The interviews took place in the house where I resided in central Honiara from June to August 2009. I gave collaborators my address and we set a time at the convenience of the interviewee. In this relaxed environment, we would socialize in *Pijin* as they were offered refreshments and food before starting the discussion. I conducted other interviews at SIDT headquarters in Chinatown, the Church of Melanesia head office, the Seafarer's building, a downtown cyber-café, the Holy Cross administrative office, MWYCA offices and HTC's Multi-purpose Hall location, in order to adapt to the schedules and workplaces of my participants. All interviews except for one were carried out in *Pijin*, as one informant preferred to speak in English, his mother tongue.

The interview topics differed with regards to the participant's age and status: youths and adults were given a different set of interrelated questions, much of which derived from the questionnaire exercise. Young collaborators were asked similar questions pertaining to:

- Background information (youths) and experiences with youths (adults)
- Educational/employment realities and aspirations (youths)
- Contemporary challenges for youths in Honiara; alternatives (or lack thereof)
- Youth group membership, position, roles and activities (youths)
- Perception of youth group benefits: access to resources, knowledge, etc.
- Negativity/conflicts related to youth groups
- Relational, emotional, social, economic and political power/capital associated with or provided by youth groups

The interviews were revisited shortly after they took place. Their content was (semi) transcribed, indexed and revisited within the months following my return from the field (September 2009). In terms of analysis, certain affirmations from the interview pool of data were compared with observations and discourse which took place in meetings, speeches and forum activities.

To conclude, the material I have discussed is the backbone of my thesis. My time in the field was punctuated by moments of realization that anthropology consists of a wide variety of elements simultaneously, the majority of which will not trickle down to these pages. Scheper-Hughes asserts that “all facts are necessarily selected and interpreted from the moment we decide to count one thing and ignore another, or attend this ritual but not another, so that anthropological understanding is necessarily partial” (1992:23). I acknowledge that my research endeavour is but a small, subjective glimpse into a wider set of complexities. As suggested by Fabian, “there is enough energy and imagination left in ethnography” (2001: Preface) in its contemporary form, which I would hope is reflected in this thesis.

Chapter 4: Theoretical and topical paradigms

If this chapter was to have a theme, it would be *ambiguity*: the ambiguities linked to conceptualizing youth, power and empowerment. I propose my interpretation of these topics, how they apply to the Honiaran context, as well as the theoretical ideas that my thesis will espouse. Geertz's (1973) interpretational model frames my entire analysis, though I generally do not make specific reference to his work. This seemed a natural choice because an interpretive perspective recognizes the inherent subjectivities of ethnography, while allowing for the researcher to give her collaborators space to express themselves in their own words. It is a theoretical instrument aimed at making "available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record" of what has been said (1973:30). While Geertz is used in a comprehensive manner, the concepts and models put forth by Kabeer (1999), Bourdieu (1977) and de Certeau (1984) are applied in more specific detail. Their respective paradigms are relatable to my data, in that they help assess the potentials and limits of youth group empowerment through specific notions of capital, kinship, practice and empowerment.

4.1. Categorizations of youth

Youth as a category has expanded over the years throughout the world, in part because of prolonged education, unemployment and demographic booms (Wulff 1995; Durham 2000; Bucholtz 2002; Halleröd and Westberg 2006). This is applicable to urban youths in Solomon Islands. The (re)conceptualization and categorization of youth are processes in constant motion, adapting to conditions on the ground. In the legendary ethnography on youth mores and kinship practices that

is *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Margaret Mead acknowledged the diversity in youth (here conceptualized as adolescence). Before future generations of anthropologists did, Mead asked whether youth and youth culture are in fact multidimensional and contextual constructs (Erikson and Murphy 2001). Early (as well as recent) anthropological inquiries into youth tended to label it a stage towards adulthood, a liminal space. As noted by Amit-Talai (1995) youth have continuously been perceived as budding adults rather than full individuals in and of themselves; a life course phase incomplete and in transition towards something more definitive. Thus, youth were ignored as producers and agents of culture in their own right (Wulff 1995; Hodgkinson 2002). However, there has been a shift in youth studies: recognizing young people as agentic individuals, cultural negotiators who have a distinct voice, free from theories of delinquency, liminality or quasi-adulthood (Hannerz 1992; Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995).

Drawing on the work of Fornäs, Deicke (2007) asserts that young individuals are too different in their desires, perspectives and practices to be understood as a homogeneous whole. As is the case with many broad sociological concepts, youth is a contested, vague construct which hold multiple and at times, contradictory meanings (Durham 2000; Bennett 2002). As a “context-renewing and context-creating sign” (Bucholtz, 2002:528), it is a symbolically loaded term. Similar to the ways in which the term ‘women’ is problematic – in terms of its various meanings and realities related to class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual preference, etc. (Razavi and Miller 1995) – in female empowerment literature, youth is a conceptual minefield. Nonetheless, there are commonalities in

defining youth: it has been described as a relational phenomenon (Durham 2000; McDougall 2008) that is culturally constructed (Mead 1928; Durham 2000; Bucholtz 2002) and promotes multiple identities (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Halleröd and Westberg 2006).

As Solomon Islands' demographic majority, young people originate from different cultural, religious and educational backgrounds, socioeconomic class, and so on. When discussing youths and the groups they belong to, and using "youths" as a referential category, my intent is not to use a blanket terminology undermining the complex diversity on the ground. There is much room for interpretation of how youth is defined and experienced. In Solomon Islands, the National Youth Policy's definition of a young person – upheld by the HTC's own youth policy (2006) – acknowledges its definitional ambiguity:

This policy defines youth as young women and men in the 14-29 years age bracket. These are school and out of school age young people who are in transition from childhood to adulthood, experiencing physical, mental, social and spiritual changes in their life circumstances and thus, who need attention and guidance from each other, parents, communities and the nation as a whole.

It is recognised, however, that there is not one universally acceptable definition of youth (...) this policy will be flexible to accommodate women and men less than 14 years and over 29 years who may go through similar circumstances.

(2000:2)

Societal scripts inform Solomon Islands' official definition of youth, establishing marriage as a social marker of adulthood (National Youth Policy 2000) regardless of whether or not an individual is still within the 14-29 age range. Unwed thirty-something Solomon Islanders are often considered or consider themselves youth. From my interactions with participants, I concluded that reproduction does not bear

as much weight as marriage in terms of social indicators of age group. Some collaborators were unmarried women in their thirties with young children who perceived themselves as still being youth and were active within their youth group(s).

The young people (20 in total) whose narratives are interpreted here are between the ages of 17 and 34 years old. While there are a few exceptions, most are unwed, without children and are students. They live with their families and/or *wantoks* and generally, are active members in their communities and although they are most often middle-class, they seek to better their own (as well as their family's) financial situation. My young collaborators are active shapers of their worlds, and are representative of the lives and aspirations of numerous youths in Honiara. In this thesis, I argue that they are “shifters” of the cultural landscape (Durham 2000); they “make society” similar to the ways young male participants in cultural clubs in Guinea-Bissau make theirs (Gable, 2000:196). Urban youths in Honiara, like those in Dakar (Sheld 2008), can be described as “increasingly entrepreneurial individuals who see themselves as global actors, urban citizens, cosmopolitans” (2008:233). For the purposes of this thesis, I wish to employ youth as a category in contextualized form, including my young collaborators, while remaining mindful of the definitional complexity of youth.

4.2. Identifying the ambiguities of empowerment

The concept of power (or rather lack thereof) is central to my thesis. Although the term has become increasingly popular in anthropology (D'Andrade 1999), there is little consensus in the social sciences as to what power actually *is*, as

it remains a widely contested concept (Rowlands 1997). If one espouses the Foucaultian tradition, power is a relational phenomenon:

Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action (...) A power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.

(1982: 219-220)

Power, as described by Foucault (1982), is manifested through action and competing bodies. As suggested by Durham, youths "were created through the exercise of power and claims to knowledge of elders" (2000:115), hence their category exists as a social repercussion of unequal power dynamics. Young people are therefore largely enmeshed in processes of power differentials.

Bearing this in mind, what can be said of empowerment? A common thread within the literature on empowerment movements is the notion that empowerment is also a puzzling concept. One recurring theme in empowerment literature is the argument that the confusion surrounding the concept is linked to its foundational tie to power (Rowlands, 1997). Kabeer maintains that empowerment is a contentious and ambiguous term, one that is imbued with "fuzziness" (1999: 2), due to its interdependence with power. She suggests that because of its multiple meanings and symbolisms, empowerment becomes a definitional labyrinth (see also Batliwala 2007). Razavi and Miller (1995) employ the work of Young (1993) to argue that empowerment is not simply about excluded peoples gaining power, but about those with power giving it up, therefore implying a hegemonic tug-of-war. To

acknowledge power and empowerment is to acknowledge subjectivities and ambiguities.

In the context of my thesis, becoming empowered involves acquiring tools to fight social and political alienation, economic marginalization and relational breakdowns. To have agency – formulated as the ability to make choices and be resilient when faced with challenging circumstances (Ungar 2004) – in an environment where macro forces such as capitalism and globalization generate desires and expectations while simultaneously decreasing opportunities for work, marginalizing people on a large scale (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). In Honiara (as elsewhere in the world), the rise of youth groups and organizations aimed at protecting and ameliorating the lives of young individuals is symptomatic of a critical need for young people to find a space where they are valued, respected and able to thrive on various levels, be it socioeconomic, personal or interpersonal. Mitchell (2004) asserts that the urban Pacific is seeing rapidly growing consumption as well as the exclusion of youths from paid employment. She maintains that such contradictory patterns must be considered when trying to understand the realities and practices of young people. Similarly, youth group participation in Honiara should be understood within the difficult socioeconomic conditions young people are facing. Being active in a youth association does not automatically equate empowerment; power is not given simply by virtue of participation or affiliation. Power is far too abstract and complex to be exchanged in a simple transactional procedure. Thus, youth groups do not actually *give* their members power, rather they enable the attainment of power through indirect

channels. The potential for empowerment will be explored in greater depth in chapters 5 and 6.

4.3. Conceptual means to identifying empowerment

4.3.1 Kabeer's model of empowerment

Although the fuzziness associated with empowerment complicates the process of defining it, there are models in the literature on empowerment initiatives to demystify the concept. As noted by Kabeer (1999), empowerment is, at its very core, change:

[P]rocesses of empowerment entail change at different levels and in different dimensions: change can occur at the level of the individual, in their "inner" sense of self or in their access to material resources; it can occur in relationships within the family and the household; or it can reflect alteration in position in the wider hierarchies of the economy and state."

(1999: 10)

The model for measuring empowerment proposed by Kabeer rests on three principal elements which are interdependent: *resources* (as pre-conditions), *agency* (as process) and *achievements* (as outcomes). Although I employ this model in chapter 5 (economic empowerment), not all three components were obvious to the same extent for all youths involved in my project. Despite this apparent shortcoming, Kabeer's conceptual model is applicable to youth groups in Honiara because it mirrors the philosophy of the youth associations I worked with. The conditions for empowerment as suggested by this model are part and parcel of youth group ideology, as they seek to strengthen young people by giving them the means (resources) to be resilient and resourceful (agency), in order to better their current situations (achievements). In reality, large-scale structural constraints and setbacks curtail efforts to put such a philosophy into practice. Moreover, the short

duration and limited scope of my fieldwork hindered long-term examination of all the elements of the model she proposes. Here I am focusing most specifically on resources, but approach the other two in a somewhat more limited fashion. It is my contention that Kabeer's model of assessing empowerment is valid and suitable to the context of my research because it corresponds to what youth associations want to give their members, even if they often fail to do so.

From my discussions with young people, youth leaders and community coordinators, it became apparent that my collaborators saw empowerment as confusing; a term that carries different connotations for different people. Empowerment was perceived at times as awareness, knowledge, self-confidence, access, internal support as well as organizational power. Through youth associations, interviewees felt that they had increased access to knowledge, resources and economic opportunities as well as became better positioned to develop social skills, positive self-identification and meaningful relationships than non-member youths. According to one informant, in Honiara "youth groups act as a medium of change" (Tahiseu, 2009: 47:02). To become empowered is transformative (Batliwala 2007), a balancing out of power differentials within existing ideologies, resources and institutions. Through the dialectic process of competing forces seeking power, excluded individuals and groups are aspiring to alter their lived realities. There is an interconnectedness between empowerment and changing oppressive social structures, whether it relates to young people or any other marginalized grouping of individuals. Although these are flawed, empowerment initiatives (exemplified here as youth associations) have the potential

to bring about change and lift individuals out of personal, relational and socioeconomic hardship(s). In sum, empowerment is a contested concept caught at the intersection between ideology and practice. It has been fashioned out of the ever conflicting concept of power and thus, its meaning(s) are wrought with ambiguity.

4.3.2. Bourdieu, *social capital* and *practical kinship*

For the purpose of my research, youth groups and the connections they offer will be interpreted as potential for the possible accumulation of social capital, and subsequently linked to empowerment. As suggested by Bourdieu, social capital entails:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership of a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

(1997:51)

Similar to the ways college fraternities in North-America and social rallies in France are “necessary to the development of the social possibilities of the individual” (Deakins, 1941:260), youth associations and their membership allow for the possible attainment of power on social and economic levels in the long term. Without the youth group, without combined efforts at organizing themselves towards various goals and interests, without networks of people to call on for assistance, young people in Honiara would be ever more marginalized and impoverished. In the urban context, socially excluded youths can, by means of active membership in youth associations and the networks which stem from it,

generate social capital that could enable them to ultimately become empowered. Whether all of them actually do so is another matter.

Another useful framework for my research is what Bourdieu labels practical kinship, which he defines as “a particular case of the utilization of *connections* (...) [a] strategy, directed towards the satisfaction of the practical interests of an individual or group of individuals” (1977:34-35). I would argue that practical kinship – as constantly renewed, maintained and acted forms of association (Bourdieu 1977:37) – equates the type of relationships that are at play within the youth groups I worked with. The practical interests being met by members are of a social and relational order, as in some cases, young people act as surrogate kin to one another, benefitting each other on an emotional and relational level. Youth empowerment through the lens of Bourdieu’s social capital and practical kinships will be examined in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5.

4.3.3. De Certeau’s *everyday practice* and *marginalized majority*

Michel de Certeau’s philosophical and sociological focus on the everyday, the practices and stories that shape it and how *the marginality of a majority* applies to the context of my thesis are also relevant conceptualizations. As a demographically strong group excluded and silenced (de Certeau 1984), youths in Honiara represent a social conundrum. As a disempowered majority, they outnumber their elders in numbers as well as in terms of influence on the collective consciousness, as popular and symbolic cultural actors (Jourdan 1995b; Durham 2000). Yet the elders still claim the upper hand in power relations. Young Solomon

Islanders will conceivably inherit a weakened nation that has excluded them for most of their public lives.

However, urban youths could, with the proper resources and organization, contest their silenced majority status and enter the political and socioeconomic arenas as full citizens in their own right. By participating in forums, volunteering and working for or through the associations they are members of, young people can fight economic marginalization and possibly become financially empowered. By regularly taking part in the activities and social events that youth associations organize, youths are actively participating in processes of self-knowing and generating feelings of self-worth. The everyday rituals of talking with group peers and friends, sharing and cultivating emotional intimacy, are also practices that foster relational development. Thus, the everyday practices of youth group membership, de Certeau's concepts and on-the-ground realities, will be amalgamated to highlight how young people's actions can potentially fight exclusion.

Chapter 5: Narratives on economic empowerment: challenges & strategies

The primary problem young people in Honiara are facing today is economic exclusion. Before delving into the specifics of economic empowerment via youth groups, it is imperative to highlight how young people in Honiara are disempowered in order to understand the bigger picture. I explore the violent exclusion of young people from economic systems, while acknowledging the ways in which they are countering their marginalization(s) in the urban Pacific (Mitchell, n.d. (c)). Specifically I discuss the economic challenges young residents encounter in Honiara, where youth as a period “signified by unemployment, economic hardship, uncertainty about the future and insecurity about one’s ability to handle the situation” (Halleröd and Westberg, 2006:83) is a common reality. This will be the starting point for understanding if and how youth groups are tools to countering economic hardships.

5.1. Daily challenges: the disempowering effects of unemployment

During interviews, I asked my young informants to describe the daily challenges they face in town, as well as the ways in which they (or their peers) adapt. The most pressing problem they identified was unemployment; a recurrent topic of discussion time and again in my interactions with all types of urbanites in the capital. Unemployment in the 21st century is a widespread reality throughout the world, to which the Pacific is not immune. It hits young people especially hard because they are “particularly sensitive to transformations in the economy as their activities, prospects, and ambitions are dislocated and redirected” (Durham, 2000: 114) more so than adults. Similar to how their Vanuatu counterparts are treated in

the city, youths in Honiara who do not work are heavily criticized. However, such attitudes fail to recognize the fact that there are “not enough jobs available to keep pace with population growth” (Mitchell, 2004:361). As noted in the National Youth Policy (2000), unemployment in Solomon Islands is a national crisis, one that affects young people above all other age demographics. It is estimated that there are only 1000 new employment opportunities per year in the country, therefore a total of 4000 youths are excluded from wage labour annually (NYP 2000).

Table 5.1: Unemployment rate in Solomon Islands

<u>Indicators</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2005/2006</u>
Unemployment rate (general)	15.2%	N/A
Unemployment rate for 15 to 19 year-olds	59.2%	75%
Unemployment rate for 20 to 24 year-olds	59.2%	49%

Source: Jourdan 2008

The unemployment phenomenon is by no means recent or restricted to young people – as evidenced in Frazer’s (1981) study of Solomon Islands migration patterns. He describes the early 1960s as a time when scarce job opportunities and demographic fluctuations were already part of the urban landscape. In post-war Honiara, male plantation workers in transit in the capital would meet other male migrants, all of whom were “struggling to survive” (Jourdan, 1995b:206). Indigenous Solomon Islanders were an especially transient urban workforce due to

their position at the periphery (Wallerstein 1976) of the country's economic system. Such a position was propelled by Protectorate-era laws which sought to defend and protect European commercial interests (Frazer 1981). With Independence, Melanesians gained access to jobs in both formal and informal sectors on a larger scale, but this progression did not keep up with population growth and urban migration booms. Unemployment has always been a reality in Honiara for many people. The complexities of unemployment and underemployment, wage-labour and labour migration have long been part of the capital's history and landscape. Such particularities thus shape current socioeconomic circumstances.

The vast majority of my collaborators, both youths and adults, identified urban unemployment as the main obstacle to young people's development. Unemployment is a social problem that needs to be addressed because the longer it lasts, the more it hampers youths' economic life in the long-term (Halleröd and Westberg 2006). Janet, a 22 year-old woman from Malaita, wrote about her distress at living in Honiara: *Mi faendem had stap lo Honiara, hemi had, bikos laef hemi had witem no \$* (I find living in Honiara difficult, it's hard because life there is hard without any money) (Questionnaire/June 2009). During the HTC Youth Policy Review Forum (June 2009), the participatory approach employed for the policy's re-examination process allowed young people to publicly identify problems they were dealing with on an everyday basis. At the top of their lists was unemployment, which was often seen as the root cause of all their problems. A case in point is May, a 21 year-old female, recently graduated, who hopes to work as a social worker with youths and in community development. She is a youth leader in different HTC

programs and a member of the Jackson Ridge (an inner suburb of Honiara) community youth group. She is responsible for coordinating various activities and events within each community-based association. May understands unemployment to be the true instigator of all other social issues plaguing young people. Despite her relative optimism for a brighter future for young people (for herself and her peers) she insisted on the negative effects of unemployment:

The high number of unemployment is causing all other kinds of social issues for young people in Honiara.

(May Nonie, Interview 16; 20:45)

Similarly, in a youth-centered study which took place in 2007 in the capital, young individuals identified lack of employment as the central constraint to their development and well-being (Jourdan 2008). They highlighted what they perceived as the general causes of their country's high unemployment: lack of family support, poverty and lack of education (many young people stop studying because they can no longer afford school fees), *wantok* business, political corruption and overpopulation (Jourdan 2008). From youth insight into the causal factors of unemployment, it can be deduced that there is no single cause for them, but rather an amalgamation of several contributing factors.

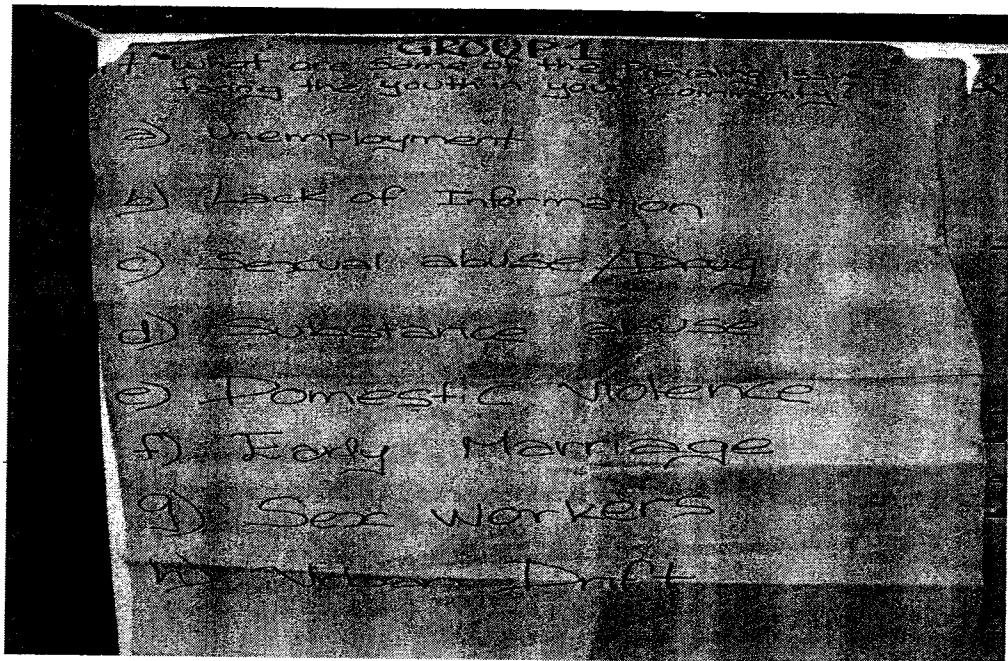


Photo 5.1: Issues facing young people in Honiara, as presented by youths at HTC Youth Review Forum workshop. Photo: A.Guay-Jadah, June 22nd 2009

The *Young People's Project* undertaken in Port Vila, Vanuatu, established that despite the fact that most youths wanted to work, opportunities for paid labour were in short supply (Mitchell 2004). The final report highlighted the daily challenges faced by young urbanites: finding work, money, food and a place to sleep (Mitchell, 2004). Agnes, a 28 year-old I interviewed, stated:

Yeah, I find it [living in Honiara] hard. Like if I don't a job, I'll find it a bit hard, without money to pay for food. But inside the garden, oh, I work the garden for food when I'm willing. But if I'm lazy then I won't get food either. So it's a little bit hard [life in town]...

(Interview 6; 13:11)

During the Honiara forum, a mix of secondary problems were also addressed, such as lack of information, education and vocational training; teen pregnancy and early marriage; drug and alcohol abuse; sexual and domestic violence; prostitution and

HIV/AIDS; suicide and urban drift (HTC Youth Forum 2009). This parallels the findings of Jourdan's (2008) research on young people living in town, which confirms poverty, unemployment, educational failings, substance abuse, family disintegration as well as overpopulation as the primary social ills impairing youth development. Interviews, forum activities and past research in Pacific island capitals all point towards similar patterns in terms of the wide-ranging problems plaguing youths today.

5.2. Responses to challenges

When time came to identify the ways in which young people cope with these issues, collaborators generally expressed pessimism. Several young interviewees saw their peers adopting defeatist attitudes, relying heavily on entertainment and improper social interactions, as well as cyclical instances of idleness, substance abuse and criminal activities. Other responses were evidenced in people's rising frustrations towards government officials, community leaders and family members in their interviews. Moreover, the growing rate of depression, mental illness and suicide among young people in Solomon Islands (Jourdan 2008) is also indicative of the ways in which youths respond to difficulties. Similar to de Certeau's immigrant worker, youths' "inferior access to information, financial means, and compensations of all kinds elicits an increased deviousness, fantasy, or laughter" provoking *strategic deployments*, specific ways of handling situations, on the part of the practitioner (1984: xvii). Strategic deployments can be contextualized here as the ways in which youths manage difficult circumstances, regardless of whether such tactics are viewed positively or negatively. One interviewee, a youth leader in

his twenties within a faith-based group, suggested that youths are not really coping at all since they do not have the means to:

So far, what I see is that youths have too many problems. Youths don't know how to cope with these issues because they don't have the ways to do so.

(Eddie Ho'asihata, Interview 5; 42:12)

Whereas May, a young woman involved in community groups, as both member and leader, was more ambivalent about coping strategies:

Unemployment is the biggest issue, yeah? So I think young people are coping with the situation, but they won't be able to really cope unless the government gives some strategies for overcoming this issue. If not, young people will find life too hard.

(Nonie, Interview 16; 21:32)

Despite the grim portrait of youth realities in Honiara, some informants tried to put a positive spin on what can be done in order to surmount difficulties and structural constraints. Interviewees suggested attending workshops, vocational training and mutual aid amongst youths as constructive strategies. They pinpointed active church participation and youth group membership as ways of dealing with their everyday struggles, because these organizations give them hope, resources and activities to calm worried minds. Positive coping strategies highlighted by interviewees focused on keeping young individuals engaged and motivated.

A 21 year-old female USP⁹ student and former youth group member made it clear:

It would be good to hold workshops and entertain young people, making them come together as a group to help each other. I think a program like... any

⁹ University of South Pacific, Honiara.

activity where young people are interested in is good because it will make them busy, that way they won't go out and drink.

(Charlyn Sikwa'ae, Interview 8; 1:17:13)

Certain participants were adamant about the responsibility for fighting exclusion and marginalization resting on the shoulders of youths themselves, because the social, political and economic systems they live in are not conducive to their development. If they wait for the government or community leaders to assist them, the wait may be endless. Allusions to action and accountability indicates certain collaborators' perception of young people as agents in their own life course, resilient, taking part in "negotiations between [themselves] and their environments for the resources to define themselves" (Ungar, 2004: 342) in difficult conditions. Young people are not to be victimized, they have agentive capabilities and many go about bettering their situations on their own.

To this effect, an adult I interviewed revealed:

I mean there are escapes; I mean young people can go home. People do go home. There are opportunities to go (...) So I mean young people do have a sense of self-preservation, they know that they can't just be young people walking the streets their whole lives. So people do change, they do make decisions to try to get further education at training centers or they decide to try to find some capital somewhere in certain projects. But they may as well be right, the bomb¹⁰ has already exploded at least once.

(Terry Brown, Interview 3; 10:04)

While some informants were inclined to say that youths should take charge of their own life courses and face their hardships in an individual capacity, others recognized the government's duty towards them. The Solomon Islands government,

¹⁰ The "bomb" the participant is referring to in this segment is the Honiara Chinatown riots (2006) previously mentioned in Chapter 1.

in the form of its MWYCA, launched its Youth Division in 2007 (*LINK*, Issue 55 July/August 2007:10). Since this time, it is believed that not much has been done to actually help the country's young population. Interviewees did not shy away from being critical of the government. Many collaborators echoed Mary's testimony on the government:

I would say it's not what I expected. There's so much they need to do. Like, I would like to see the government put youth agendas as one of their, um, the top priorities. I would say that the government has done its part because now there's a youth ministry (...) But for the time being, in my opinion, not enough [has been done] yet.

(Interview 2; 19:08)

Interviewees frequently blamed inefficient initiatives like the National Youth Policy (2000) for not being applicable in practice or up-to-date with current realities. This frustration is symptomatic of how youths in the postcolonial Pacific – who grew up powerless on society's margins, watching economic transformations, government corruption and rapid social and political changes pull their worlds apart (Mitchell, n.d (b)) – are now left alienated by their respective governments. The National Youth Policy summarizes the rights of young people as follows (2000:11):

- a) The freedom of expression and association in cultural, religious, social, political activities.
- b) Right of equal protection of the law and protection from discrimination, exploitation, violence or any other abuse.
- c) Right of access to education, employment, vocational training, health care, legal services and sports and recreational facilities.
- d) Right to healthy, supportive and stable family surroundings, good paternal care and community guidance.
- e) Access to participation in decision-making processes on issues affecting young people.
- f) Right to decent and dignified existence.
- g) Right to safe and clean environment.
- h) Right to the share of the country's natural resources.

- i) Right to enjoy youth and be adequately equipped to confidently enter adulthood with positive outlooks.

The gap between identifying the rights of youths and ensuring that their rights are respected is wide. According to participants, there is a dire need for greater awareness, resources and collective action in order to actually recognize young people's basic rights. Dissatisfaction with government-led initiatives was also found in adult narratives, such as in that of a government representative for the MWYCA¹¹:

We are not doing enough (...) Because maybe we do International Youth Day and that's one of the events and then, young people go back to where they were before. So it's an event that becomes meaningful to them in the present, but after it's over, the young people will always be M. Smith (...) so nothing changes much for him or for her.

(Luke Memua, Interview 14; 13:05)

This mirrors the sentiment expressed by the director of the HTC Youth Division, who also discussed the country's failings:

The government says it's making changes (...) But the question is, is this really addressing the real issues affecting youths or are these just plans from the youth offices? So I don't think that we are really doing anything for the real youth problems.

(Audrey Baeania, Interview 9; 14:38)

In this context of government inefficiencies and limitations, youths can be seen as left to their own devices. Despite the tendency of participants to blame or criticize the government, there was still room for optimism. Some interviewees, young ones especially, recommended opening a dialogue surrounding mutual aid and responsibility with the government. May suggested that the chance for youth

¹¹ Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs, Solomon Islands Government.

support rests on interrelations between herself and her peers and the Solomon Islands government:

What I think is that the government is doing its part, and it's important for young people to support the government in its actions. We should do something; we cannot rely on the government to do this for us, on the government to do that for us. Us young people must find ways to build ourselves, help ourselves and the government before the government can see us through.

(May Nonie, Interview 16; 21:57)

In sum, there are various struggles afflicting young people in Honiara today, most significant among them unemployment. Solomon Islands is one of the poorest, underdeveloped countries in the world (UNICEF 2005) and so, lack of employment is pervasive. Young people in the capital are left with a crippled economy, one in which most of them cannot participate. My collaborators were vocal about their socioeconomic marginalization, and more or less pessimistic about the ways in which they and their peers are managing. They have identified the government's failure to concretely address youth struggles, yet some of them are also confident in the collective agency of youths. Having addressed the main obstacles to youth development, their coping strategies and frustrations, it is time to explore how urban youth groups can empower their members on economic levels.

5.3. Narratives on economic empowerment

As noted in chapter 3, a contested and ambiguous concept like empowerment holds multiple meanings, and one does not become empowered by merely being part of a given organization. Situating empowerment within the parameters of my research, I understand it as a process of levelling off political and economic disenfranchisement, as well as reducing social and emotional fractures.

Since urban-based unemployment is generally perceived as the biggest challenge young people are facing, conditioning all other (subsequent) struggles, it is important to decipher how youth associations can be instrumental in countering it.

Several collaborators acknowledged that involvement in youth groups offered opportunities for volunteering, formal employment, and/or long-term career involvement within the organizations themselves. Others, in contrast, stressed how the youth group could be counter-productive to this effect. Certain participants asserted that the energies dedicated to the group took over more practical endeavours, such as actively searching for employment, studying or contributing to household work. Nevertheless, the majority of collaborators saw membership as a tool in increasing one's chances for economic benefits. Some participants such as Mary, whose status in the youth group evolved from member to employee, have life courses that exemplify the direct benefits groups can offer some young people.

I met Mary Jionisi the first day I visited the HTC Youth Division at the Multipurpose Hall, on the outskirts of Chinatown, in early June 2009. As its name indicates, the building serves as a ceremonial hall, basketball court, gym, social centre and dance hall. It has limited facilities and resources, has gone into disrepair with its infrastructure neglected over the years. Mary greeted me at the youth desk and explained the principles and inner workings of the municipal organization. At the HTC Youth Policy Review Forum later that month, we met again as she was one of the main organizers of the event. There, she bridged the gap between the adult body and the young people themselves. She introduced me to other youths and coordinators on site, which facilitated interactions with future research

collaborators. After these interchanges, I asked Mary if she would be interested in being interviewed and she gladly obliged.

Originally from the island of Malaita, Mary is a 24 year-old woman who moved to Honiara along with her family when she was a child. She attended high school and graduated in the capital. Self-described as a shy and introverted child and teenager, she suggested that it was her involvement in youth groups (both within HTC and her congregation, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Kukum, a district of Honiara) that helped push her out of her shell, making her more assertive and confident. She was an active member of the city youth association from the age of 18 onwards, participating in activities such as sports, rallies and excursions, and was eventually made youth leader. She labels her current position *youth development officer* for municipal organizations. Hence, as a young person herself, she works alongside youths and adults, and was, at the time, organizing young women's workshops (at the CYP¹²) on a weekly basis. When asked to discuss the benefits of urban youth group membership, she declared:

Personally, you get recognized if you're active. Yeah, you'd get recognized and get access to opportunities, whether it be training, education, programs, projects and all that (...) There are opportunities that the youth group gives young people who are involved. You would have access to information on recent developments, in youth development, in Honiara, nationally and overseas. We would get the opportunity to attend different conferences whether it be local, national or international. (...) And that would lead to, as long as you are in the volunteering category inside the youth organization or the Youth Division, it would show your potential and your skills and that could lead to formal employment.

(Interview 2; 43:14)

¹² Commonwealth Youth Programme centre.

Mary's observations reflect her own trajectory from a youth group member to paid coordinator, and those of her young colleagues as well. As there are limited positions within organizations (whether secular or faith-based) in Honiara to begin with, only those who maintain a level of active involvement, over a given period of time, can conceivably expect to find formal employment within their ranks. Towards the end of the interview, I finished with a more open-ended topic, asking her what the youth group(s) had provided her throughout her years of participation. She told me that her experiences with youth associations had heightened her sense of leadership and conflict resolution skills, and that it had helped her avoid the pitfalls of poverty because she was able to work for a wage for the city:

The youth group also helped me get formal employment, because of my experiences working with young people. It's supporting evidence that if I can interact and manage young people, and that I can do something within the formal sector.

(Interview 2, 01:18:48)

When I asked another youth, a young high school student by the name of Justin, if youth groups offer some economic opportunities, he asserted:

When you go for an interview, when people are interviewing you, they look at what kind of person you are. They look at your attitude, your background... Are you a good man or not? So there are benefits to when you look for a job.

(Interview 18; 43:21)

This resonates with the narratives of adults working with youths, who acknowledge that membership demonstrates young people's reliability and responsibility. One adult mentioned having written several reference letters for young members he'd worked with over the years, which advanced their chances for gaining formal employment (Terry Brown, Interview 3; 1935). When Mary was recounting the

ways in which youth group membership benefitted her, she explained that (albeit through her Kukum Church collective) it had helped her grow spiritually, and had “brought [her] closer to [her] god”. She did not however work her way towards higher ranks within her religious youth group, as she was already busy with her community-based work. But there are possibilities for economic gain as well as upward mobility within faith-based institutions as well. As observed at a Friday evening youth service which I attended at the All Saints parish (Anglican), in the heart of Honiara:

Fred came to the podium and said a prayer, followed by Hugo who took the mike once again. He explained the Sunday activities that would take place outside of the city for the youths and asked if anyone needing work wanted to partake in any money-generating activities on Sunday, without specifying what those activities would entail. Two young men to our right raised their hands immediately. This reminded me that youth groups are a means of gaining access to certain things/opportunities that would otherwise not be available to young people. In this case, it was employment and although it was temporary, it provided two youths with the possibilities of income and resources that would be unattainable in a different setting.

Author's Field Notes/June 5th 2009

The life course of Michael illustrates socioeconomic mobility in faith-based youth associations. While I was conducting my research, Michael worked as the newly appointed youth coordinator of the Holy Cross (Catholic) parish in town. His position was provisional, and he had not, at the time, worked extensively with young people under his new title. As a 28 year-old born in Malaita Province, Michael has spent half of his life in Honiara and had been involved with the Holy Cross youth group since the age of 13, the year he left high school. In July and August, I attended the first Holy Cross youth council meetings, which he presided over with the assistance of three active church youth leaders. Considering the

Solomon Islands official definition of youth, Michael no longer fits into the category because he is married. He mentioned that he was recently wed, and that it is a prerequisite for attaining his current occupation. When I asked him if that no longer made him an official “youth”, he mentioned that he still matched the chronological definition of a young person, albeit not the social one. In his own eyes though, Michael considered himself a youth still, despite being married. When asked about his history, he acknowledged that previous experience within the church youth group, as a member and leader, had enabled him to find employment as an administrator within the Catholic institution. Moreover, it would be safe to deduce that he was financially capable of marrying and maintaining a familial lifestyle due to the prospect of employment security.

A: Do you think youth groups offer economic opportunities for young people?

M: Yes. As far as I can see, because when young people aren't members, then they're just like everyone else, in one box, yeah. But then when you become a member, [youths] are able to go on the side of the economy.

A: And personally, did youth group participation help you get a job with Holy Cross?

M: Yes. Because participation with youths comes through and when it comes through, it can help... not just with Holy Cross, but also it helped me, it's given me support, in doing my work.

(Interview 7; 29:52)

The vast majority of collaborators drew parallels between active membership, social mobility and economic opportunity. In practice, the road most often travelled by active members is that of volunteerism. Volunteering can lead to paid work although, frequently, such instances of labour are informal, short-term

and unpaid/underpaid in youth groups. Volunteering, in spite of having small-scale to no economic benefits, is highly valued and even hoped for by participants. It allows young people to develop social, professional and interpersonal skills they would not have the chance to otherwise. As demonstrated in 21 year-old Yvonne's testimony:

Youths are recognized when working with a group. That way, you get opportunities to go higher or go further (...) I think it's very important. When you join a youth group, because part of being a volunteer is, everything you do in the group, is about volunteering. So any time you go out and volunteer for them, you are doing something, and you are making a difference, that's what I think. And that's the best part.

(Yvonne Ono, Interview 21; 42:53)

When asked about youth group membership providing economic advantages and the possibility of volunteering, an energetic 21 year-old woman exclaimed:

It's helped me. Through my participation, I've come to volunteer with Honiara City Council Youth Division and yeah, it's helped, it's true that in that way, I think it can provide a little bit of financial benefits for young people.

(May Nonie, Interview 16; 27:19)

Although Mary and Michael, and a few others, have life stories of volunteerism and subsequent employment within the echelons of urban youth groups, they are more of an exception than the rule. For one or two success stories in terms of socioeconomic mobility and employment, the number of young people who fall through the cracks, never acquiring the means to accomplish anything remotely close to what these collaborators have is undoubtedly high. Economic empowerment provided by youth associations achieved is limited; it is not something every member enjoys or benefits from. Employment security is a rare

commodity within youth groups, one that is generally reserved for the most senior and active members. Despite the lack of opportunities for all, most collaborators saw youth membership as an asset when looking for work, because it provides connections and networks otherwise inaccessible, as well as proves a young person's commitment and reliability to prospective employers.

5.4. Bourdieu's *social capital* and Kabeer's model of empowerment

Youth associations can be utilized in instrumental ways to promote socioeconomic changes. They provide resources (when actively engaged with) which can become economic springboards for their members. Being exposed and having access to, albeit to different extents depending on the young person in question, such resources can initiate processes of economic empowerment.

5.4.1. Intergroup relations as social capital

Youth groups are means of generating social capital, as "memberships, network ties, and social relations that can serve to enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status" (Ebaugh and Curry, 2000:190). Bourdieu's distinction between various types of capitals, whether branches of symbolic (social, cultural, scientific, etc.) or economic, is important to consider when reflecting on the ways youth group membership allows for the enhancement of social capital. For Bourdieu, economic capital is transparent in its instrumentalism, while "forms of symbolic capital (...) in their distinctive ways, deny and suppress their instrumentalism by proclaiming themselves to be disinterested and of intrinsic worth" (Moore, 2008:103). In other words, all forms of

capital are, whether represented as such or not, motivated by self-interest and bettering the individual or group concerned.

For Bourdieu, social capital is manifested through networks of relationships and recognition; group membership provides its members with various forms of status and acknowledgement (Bourdieu, 1997:51), thus a means of gaining power. To generate social capital is neither an altruistic nor a socially neutral endeavour; at its base are subtle calculations at play in order to better an individual or groups of people. Noting that youth culture is often perceived or experienced as subculture, Brill (2007) employs Thornton's theory of *subcultural capital* in her study of youth gender dynamics in Goth cultures. For Thornton, subcultural capital "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (Thornton, 1995:11) and is utilized to differentiate between values, ideologies and statuses of various youth groups. Here, the concept of subcultural capital can be applied to the case of youth associations in Honiara, the social and professional ties that are made between members themselves as well as between members, leaders, coordinators and directors. Furthermore, youth groups provide moral clout, giving their members a distinct advantage when applying for a job in the city. By nurturing these circles of contacts and networks, familiarity and awareness, young people can generate some form of social capital that will help them in the future in terms of accessing volunteering or employment opportunities, hence conferring status and potential economic gains.

5.4.2. Kabeer's measurement of empowerment

In the empowerment measurement model proposed by Kabeer (UNRISD 1999) to study female empowerment initiatives, there are three necessary dimensions for social change as empowerment to occur: *resources* (human, social and material) as pre-conditions; *agency* as process; and, *achievements* as outcome (1999:2). According to Kabeer, all three “moments” are important in empowering an individual or collective on a long-term basis. I contend that the activities, networks and information which stem from active youth group membership are resources for young people to fight economic disenfranchisement. Material resources (e.g. musical instruments, computers, sports equipment, etc.) as well as social and human resources are within reach of youth group members due to their position and participation, the people they meet, and the possibility for upward mobility. Kabeer asserts that resources are often equated with access, as if merely having access to a given resource implies empowerment. According to her, this is problematic within the social sciences, as she maintains that there is a:

[W]idespread tendency in the empowerment literature to talk about “access to resources” in a generic way, as if evoking a particular resource in relation to [excluded people] automatically specifies their relationship to the resource in question, and hence to the choices it makes possible. In reality, however, resources are removed from choice; they are a measure of *potential* rather than *actualized* choice.

(1999:14)

My aim is not to equate access to resources with empowerment in order to substantiate my argument. As previously noted, being a participant of a given youth association does not automatically imply economic empowerment. I do not suggest that access to tools (material or social) is the answer to the riddle. But, actively

partaking in an association is to come into contact with various resources (although not direct economic resources) that can eventually, if cultivated and maintained, lead to increased chances for economic gain stemming from possible employment. Access to youth group resources, if such assets are employed in an instrumental way, can lead to economic empowerment: to volunteer in different activities; to acquire experience in participating in rallies, workshops and presentations; to build rapport and networks with people, to have knowledge of certain events and programs is to instigate that potential. Kabeer (1999) argues that resources are about the *potential* for rather than the *actualization* of change. I suggest that strategic use of available resources can bring about transformations in power dynamics, to the advantage of the young person involved.

In Kabeer's model, resources are the first step in the process of empowerment followed by agency and achievements. The conceptualization of agency as *decision-making capabilities* (Kabeer 1999) does not translate into the context of my research because I did not examine this type of agency in my collaborators' stories or actions. Certainly, young members have agency; they are actively shaping their life course and promoting positive developments by participating in youth associations. And the networks they cultivate in such organizations heighten their agentive capabilities. Yet I did not focus specifically on their decision-making potential stemming from long-term involvement in youth groups. Although I could not detect much decision-making capacities in all the youths I worked with (the context of interviews did not lend itself to youths exhibiting such qualities), Honiara youth associations are based on the philosophy

of Kabeer's model. These youth groups are geared towards each phase of the proposed empowerment model in that they are organized towards providing their members with the appropriate resources (material, informational, social) to promote specific agency and achievements in the long-term.

To fully decipher the model's final stage, the resulting achievement dimension of empowerment – understood as positive “outcomes (...) in terms of control” (Kabeer, 1999:23) – would necessitate a longitudinal study. This being said, young people via youth groups did achieve leadership and organizational aptitudes, people's skills, heightened senses of responsibility, maturity and/or morality, etc. These personal transformations are, although not directly economic, practical and technical achievements that are indirectly linked to potential economic empowerment.

In studying youth associations, my approach was based more on the promise of resources (exemplified by contacts, networks, experience, activities and materials), because it is what my fieldwork allowed. Kabeer maintains that the: “translation of resources and opportunities into the kinds of functioning achievements that would signal empowerment (...) is likely to be closely influenced by the possibilities for transformation on the ground” (1999:47). Accordingly, the philosophy behind youth groups in the capital is often hindered by a general lack of practicability, constrained by realities and inequalities. Nonetheless, the ability to use resources related to youth associations is tantamount to provoking change (and possibly triggering particular agency and achievements), moving towards economic benefits as opposed to sitting still, impaired by unemployment.

5.5. Conclusion

In sum, economic empowerment through youth group membership is not a given. It is clear that the potential young members have for countering unemployment (and its related challenges) is restricted and contextual, and if effective, may only benefit a minority of young people in the short term. It takes more than mere access to certain resources to triumph over deep-rooted poverty, structural inequalities and institutionalized exclusion: it takes instrumental use of those resources. Yet, urban youth associations offer hope, with their prospective “transformative significance” (Kabeer, 1999:10). They offer the possibility to take resources and make them work to one’s advantage, as Mary and Michael have. Although a flawed and limited way of generating economic benefits, the youth group in Honiara is one of the few platforms young urbanites have to potentially become economically empowered.

Chapter 6: Exploring personal and relational empowerment: being heard, being supported

As somewhat of a socio-cultural time capsule, my thesis – the people it represents, the personal and relational dimensions of empowerment it is meant to reflect – will be public, debatable and (one hopes) an instrument in promoting dialogue and the movement of ideas. This chapter is dedicated to the personal and relational benefits of urban youth groups and how their ties and activities, the participatory practices involved, can conceivably ameliorate young people’s well-being, making them stronger in a town where “friendships and cooperation have blossomed across unexpected boundaries of all types” (Stritecky, 2001: 5). The use of conceptual tools proposed by Bourdieu and de Certeau will inform this chapter, alongside Geertz’s framing.

Considering one’s self (and being considered) young for an elongated period of time (Schade-Poulsen 1995; Durham 2000; Bucholtz 2002) means that *youth* becomes a significant part of one’s life and identity. Identities are malleable processes; they are continuously shifting as people “move through life cycles or through cultural landscapes” (Liechty, 1995:167). As a result, young people in Honiara may have a multiplicity of self-identifications throughout their youth. Here I wish to focus on the role of youth group membership in enabling young Honiarans to acquire and maintain a positive relationship with the self on a micro level, as well as create strong relational bonds on a macro level. In short, my goal is to explore the possibilities for personal and socio-emotional change in young members.

6.1. Having a voice in the crowd

Organized social space can allow the habitually voiceless to be heard. As noted by Caputo, the “social spaces of difference are important because they are constituted by the presence and activity of people whose voices continue to be silenced (...) [people] who occupy subordinate positions of power” (1995:19). In this context, the space of difference in question is the youth group, whereas the silenced voices are those of the young people involved. The emotional and symbolic significance of being heard when life outside the group does not usually lend itself to such freedoms – where young people are disenchanted by their realities (Mitchell, n.d. (b)) – can be a powerful incentive for participation. This echoes Mary’s testimony on her own personal experiences within youth associations:

A: What does inclusion/participation in a youth group provide young people on a personal level?

(...) He or she feels like whatever they're saying, he or she is being listened to; their concerns and thoughts valued by others.

A: Personally, what has the youth group given you?

Plenty, plenty, plenty...I would say that, first of all, first and foremost, it's boosted my self-esteem. When I was in high school, I used to be this shy person. I would hardly talk with people I didn't know. But since I joined the youth group, the more interactions I have with young people, the more it's pushing me forward in my leadership potential. And now, I can speak freely in front of thousands of people.

(Jionisi, Interview 2; 37:30/01:16:20)

28-year old Agnes highlighted the strengthening effect of youth groups on the self, and on people's lives throughout society. When I asked her if youth associations are important for her own self-identity, she remarked:

Yeah, for the need to know who I am, and to know who we are too. So we work together [to know ourselves].

(None, Interview 6; 1:05:08)

According to young interviewees, self-confidence and self-respect, as well as freedom of expression, association and mobility are the most common personal advantages of youth group participation. As noted by an adult volunteer working with a religious youth association, "self-esteem is not taught in school" (Sogote'e, Interview 20; 24:28). The boost in self-esteem coupled with the importance of being heard, and being comfortable while being listened to, was most often described by female youths. This is indicative of young women in Solomon Islands being historically excluded from public speech, debates and/or politics. While young men are also silenced, young women are all the more at a disadvantage because they are situated in a male-centric, big-man system. Oftentimes, during the workshops and meetings I attended, coordinators (of both sexes) made repeated attempts at including female youths in public discussions in order to balance out the predominance of young male voices.

As brought forth by a young woman in her early twenties:

When I participate, it means a lot because at least every time I participate, I learn something new (...) in turn, it's given me confidence for public speaking too. I've spoken before but not in front of very large crowds no, so now I have confidence to talk (...) I think it [youth group] moulded me a lot

to become a new person because if I didn't actively join this group, then I would be the same old me, someone who couldn't come out and speak.

(May Ono, Interview 21, 36:51)

Male interviewees generally associated youth group-related personal benefits with practical gains, e.g. becoming a better musician, artist or athlete. One young participant stated that what he had gained was the development of his musical skills (Jayzon Junior, Interview 13; 13:11). Some male collaborators denoted a greater understanding of their spiritual selves and strengthened relationship to their god as means of personal empowerment (Eddie Ho'asihata; Interview 5, 26:22). Other men highlighted their experiences within art or sport activities, and how that had improved them. Although these transformations are understood by my informants as personally beneficial and empowering, emphasis on the inner self was less pronounced. It is my contention that youth associations have a deeper impact on young women's self-identity (and on how society views them) than they have on their male counterparts.

Notions of social and cultural propriety were more enforced in interview dialogue about young women's activities than in those of young men. Female participation (which on a personal basis could provide higher self-esteem and motivation for being in the public eye) could on a macro level be a form of social surveillance. It ensures that young women do not spend their time dancing or drinking in clubs, smoking on the street, socializing with the opposite sex or other behaviours deemed inappropriate. Collaborators of all ages were generally enthusiastic about having young women active *inside* organizations rather than

outside them. As evidenced in the statement of a woman who heads a cultural dance youth group in the White River suburb of Honiara:

The parents of the youths, they come, appreciating what I do for their children, for boys and especially girls. Because now girls enjoy going out to clubs but when they join the youth group, they're too busy, busy concentrated on whatever the group is doing.

(Annie Neitagi; Interview 22, 34:40)

Urban youth associations are contradictory spaces. They can control young women, reinforcing gender scripts about being a 'good girl' in both public and private spheres – bearing in mind that space is not dichotomous but rather a “continuum of locations ranging from acceptable to unacceptable places” (Kabeer, 1999:20). At the same time, youth groups offer young women some degree of freedom with regards to androcentric *kastom*. Amalgamated with Christian ideology, *kastom* imposes codes of social and sexual propriety on women more so than on men. As in Port Vila, Vanuatu, the movement of young women in Honiara is by and large more heavily controlled by family members, elders and Bigmen, despite young females “challenging the incontestable maleness of urban space” (Mitchell, 2004:367). Varner (2007) suggests that youth cultures have the potential to create a liberating, empowering space for its participants. Similar to the ways that young female *Masta Liu* are amazed by the freedom to *wokaboat* (walk about town) with friends and interact with boys without being chastised by their family members or *wantoks* (Jourdan 1995b), young women in youth associations can enjoy heightened freedom, somewhat removed from strict gender mores.

Agnes, a youth council president and youth leader at the service of the Holy Cross parish (Catholic), emphasized the transformative quality of her group, asserting that it had made her “a new person” (None, Interview 6, 37:27) and increased her confidence, knowledge and skills. Such a perspective was reiterated by May, another young woman who explained how youth group participation had provided her with higher self-esteem and self-motivation (Nonie, Interview 16, 14:18). James, a young man who – with years of circular migration between Honiara and Malaita – had been a member of several youth associations in town and described the recognition he received from his peers. He wrote: “they respect[ed] me as youth leader” (Questionnaire/June 2009). Recognition and mutual respect would lead to increased feelings of self-worth and validation. As explained by May Baku, “[t]he youth group gave me more power, e.g. respect, cooperation and honesty” (Questionnaire/June 2009).

The adults I spoke with also identified the transformative quality of youth associations. When asked about the personal benefits of youth group membership, Jennifer, who has worked extensively with youths as a local NGO employee and has teenage children of her own, remarked the following:

I think one thing is that they have a voice. Young people traditionally, young people aren't Bigman so they can't do the talking. But when you involve young people in any activities and you ask for them to participate, you give them a chance to say out loud what they're thinking rather than somebody else talking on their behalf (...) Being able to voice out your concerns, you feel like you are part of a group, and you have a feeling of ownership of the activities you are part of. At the same time, you are boosting your morale being a member of a group because whatever changes you see, changes happen because of your participation (...) I think they have freedom there too (...) For the first time, my son went for a youth group activity far away on Guadalcanal [island], even though I was reluctant to let him go, he told me he was independent now. He came back with all these good stories; they

did a lot of discussions about youth issues; one organization came to talk about drugs, about self-respect, so I see that this has helped him a lot.

(Wate, Interview 1.1; 32:10)

A governmental representative I interviewed likened urban youth groups to channels for self-exploration: a unique space for the conditioning of youth personalities and growing self-awareness (Memua, Interview 14, 51:27). As noted by Varner, “[y]outh spaces (...) allow for the expression, testing and development of identity for young people at a time when their identity is very much in flux” (2007:163) which is applicable to the social space of urban youth associations.

Another mentioned benefit was an increased sense of freedom. Various freedoms (of expression, of movement and of association, for example) were identified as positive outcomes that would probably not be available to young people were they not members. Eddie, an established youth leader for the Church of Melanesia, discussed how youth groups promote freedom of expression and mobility (Ho’asihata, Interview 5; 47:28). His tutor, a clergy member who has spent decades working with young people, also stressed freedom of association and interaction (especially with regards to institutionalized gender codes) as well as freedom of speech (to speak out against social injustice, government failings, corruption, etc.)(Terry Brown, Interview 3; 01:38:17).

In sum, actively participating in an urban youth association can generate positive personal changes, whether increased self-confidence, peer recognition, physical or musical abilities, various freedoms, etc. The transformative character seems to have a greater impact on the lives of young female members, in terms of empowering the inner self. Young male participants are personally affected more in

terms of practical changes. Although the gender dynamics at play in Solomon Islands are too complex and particularized for the scope of this thesis, my intention was to briefly demonstrate how youth group membership affects people differently based on gender constructs. Considering that positive change occurs on different levels of personal development, the ways in which youth associations transform their members is not strictly bound to gender politics.

6.2. “An escape from social problems”

Young interviewees unanimously declared themselves certain that their groups are a way to avoid social problems (identified mainly as poverty, crime, substance abuse, low self-esteem, etc.) in Honiara; as a means of sidestepping “the fringes of delinquency” (Jourdan, 1995b:213). In a town where fights and conflicts occur on a weekly basis (Berg, 2000), youth associations are seen by participants as helping young people avoid behaviours deemed socially deviant. By taking part in their respective activities during the strategic time allotted to them (strategic because they would be held on evenings and weekends), young people could steer their energies away from hazardous behaviours such as consuming alcohol or drugs, wandering the streets, going to clubs, getting into altercations, etc. towards more productive endeavours, like participating in music sessions, bible study, youth committees and so on. Active involvement ensures that youths are less inclined to spend their time wandering about town, “killing time” (Mitchell 2004). The idle wanderer, most often moving from one place to another or sitting around in a group, has become part and parcel of Honiara’s social make-up (Frazer 1981; Jourdan 1995b). With an increasingly young demographic, it is youths who are filling up the

streets with nowhere particular to go. Hence, by being in a youth group and taking part in its regular, scheduled activities, young urbanites are less predisposed to delinquency and idleness in the “practiced place” (de Certeau, 1990:117).

As stated by a woman in her early thirties, her group helped “keep [her] away from bad things” (Vamily, Interview 11-12; 42:20). Such a stance was repeated by respondents time and again, such as one 19 year-old scout leader who stated that his youth collective “pulled [him] out of social problems” (Hamarasi, Interview 15; 27:40). This was echoed by other young women, such as Janet: “[y]es, the youth group has helped me to runaway from these problems here (poverty, violence, abuse)” (Questionnaire/June 2009); and Yvonne: youth groups are an “avenue to runaway from social problems” (Ono, Interview 21; 34:40). Aside from evading certain behaviours and activities such as abusing drugs (Jayzon Ray, Interview 13; 18:36), the youth group was recognized as a channel for ethical and moral guidelines. One participant maintained that “[y]outh groups, when you make interesting activities, the young people start to runaway from violence, activities like that” (Agnes None, Interview 16; 33:00).

The way in which collaborators saw youth group membership as a means of escaping social ills often hinted at a physical avoidance (“pulled me”; “keeping me”; “to runaway from”) in such a way as to humanize the association, rendering it familiar, as if it was an influential kin or *wantok* in and of itself. As suggested in his study of organizational humanizing cultures, Melé asserts that said collectives promote “not only respect, but also an effective attitude of *care* and *services* for persons around one (...) respecting personal growth and (...) fostering it” (2003:6).

Such descriptions present the group as a humanized as well as humanizing institution– a body of people, activities and ideas– assisting young people in their life course, ensuring that they do not deviate from what is socially expected of them or what they personally expect of themselves. Youth group participation helps young people negotiate social expectations pressed upon them in their role “as a canvas on which society projects its hopes and fears” (Deicke, 2007:93; Fornäs 1995) adds pressure to their existing struggles. Therefore, youth associations can be interpreted as functioning as exaggerated, macro versions of the friend, *wantok* or family member (or all of them combined) looking out for the young person’s well-being and keeping him/her away from social pitfalls.

6.3. Limits of self-empowerment

It is important to note here that although youth associations are perceived as signifiers and instigators of positive change, so-called deviant behaviours and activities can develop *within* youth groups. One young man in his late teens acknowledged that “[s]ome youth groups help me to escape from problems, but some youth [groups] also forced me to fall in problems” (Jack Baku, Questionnaire/June 2009). In the same vein, a young woman studying at USP found that community youth groups were much more likely to promote what she labelled ‘bad’ activities as opposed to faith-based youth groups that promote ‘good’ activities (Charlyn Sykwa’ae, Interview 8; 01:07:57). There is also the belief that organizations, whether secular or religious, can lead to misinformation and indirectly encourage dangerous behaviours amongst its members. An adult interviewee argued that youth associations can sometimes spread erroneous information about sexual relations and health risks (Terry Brown, Interview 3;

01:16:10). Other identified harmful outcomes were the creation of intergroup tensions and conflicts (Michael Tahiseu, Interview 7; 32:02/Fr. Herman Tique, Interview 19; 32:05); teenage pregnancies (Mary Jionisi, Interview 2; 51:29) and increasing alcohol abuse (May Nonie, Interview 16; 31:10). Although these trends run counter to the personal development and positive socialization discussed beforehand, the same collaborators highlighted how more often than not, the youth group is a safe environment where young urbanites can develop positive attitudes towards the self. The counter effects of youth group membership ties into the notion that self-empowerment related to youth associations is limited.

Economic empowerment resulting from youth group activity is restricted (chapter 5), and self-empowerment is also partial. Borrowing from Freire (1993), *consientização* – a process of recognizing one’s oppression and acting, either individually or collectively, to change it (Butler 2009) – can be limited in practice. While the youth group is a space in which young people exert a level of personal freedom often unknown to them in other circles, freedom of expression is nonetheless shaped by the external as well as internal dynamics of the group, such as its spatial emplacement. As noted by Varner in his study of a youth-organized music cooperative in Pittsburgh, USA, space for youth gatherings is generally controlled by adults, and “its activities tend to sanitize youth expression even as they encourage it” (2007:160). An example of a regulated youth environment can most easily be observed in faith-based institutions, where the Church itself becomes a site for several group activities, ceremonies and general socialization. The space is often informed by religious tales of morality and ethics (promoted by adult

preachers and pastors) intertwined with youth-centered issues. Hence, the level of freedom of expression or association is influenced by a group's structure, organization and emplacement, which can in some instances lead to censorship.

Two female informants echoed each other in asserting that there is more openness in discussing personal and social issues within community youth groups as opposed to faith-based collectives (May Nonie, Interview 16; 11:13/Yvonne Ono, Interview 21; 31:03). A government representative, himself having worked within the Church of Melanesia Youth Division, stated in his interview that there is more room for freedom of expression for young members in non-faith-based youth groups (Luke Memua, Interview 14; 45:15). Such interpretations reflect a pattern I observed in interviews and interactions with my participants: community youth group members were far more expressive, non-censored and critical of society and politics than their religious peers. It became clear to me that what my informants were asserting about freedom of expression was in fact an observable reality. Geertz proposes gaining "a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which [informants] enact their lives" (2000:16) in order to advance an understanding of what is being expressed. I socialized with several youths in faith-based associations as well as community-organized groups during various events and could ascertain the variances in terms of personal assertiveness and freedom of speech. To have lived with some of them, socialized with many of them throughout my fieldwork, I was to a certain extent able to gain that working familiarity.

In closing, urban youth associations are platforms for expression; spaces for its members to be heard, interact amongst peers, grow in self-confidence and self-

knowing. It is a place to call their own where they have new (albeit somewhat controlled) freedoms. Personal changes, such as stronger, enriched, empowered (Kabeer 1999; Batliwala 2007) are felt. These groups enable young urbanites to promote their cultural selves, making them increasingly visible and valorized members of their communities, ambassadors of 'good' social change. Mitchell (n.d.(b)) argues that, in today's globalizing world, developing nations with young and urbanizing populations generate particular spaces, filled with variations, subjectivities and innovations. Honiara's youth groups can be seen as an extension of this argument, in that they offer a distinct environment for young people to express themselves, have their voices heard and socialize in positive, self-empowering ways.

6.4. The potential for relational empowerment

Moving from micro to a more macro dimension, here I address socio-relational empowerment, represented as emotional benefits endowed by youth group relationships; the ties of practical kinship (Bourdieu 1977), mutual support, kin surrogacy and how said practiced (de Certeau 1984) ties provide young people new strengths. It is necessary to emphasize the socio-affective qualities of membership when the social fabric and familial relations are dissolving in Solomon Islands, and particularly in Honiara.

In her study of high school friendships amongst Quebec youths, Amit-Talai (1995) argues that youth sociability is based on different behaviours, whether they are accommodation or confrontation or something in between, and that said sociability is a fluid process. Friendships and social networks, created during the

debated period of youth (Durham 2000; Bucholtz 2002), are interactional sites of emotional attachment and disjuncture, pockets of emotional boundary-blurring. In an interview, discussing the emotional attachments that come with youth associations, one collaborator declared: “there will be conflict (...) there’s both emotional support, there’s conflict, there’s reconciliation” (Terry Brown, Interview 3; 01:26:29). So I explore the socio-emotional bonds and attitudes – the “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) – which occur within youth groups, and how practical kinship empowers a marginalized majority (de Certeau 1984).

6.5. Youth groups as providing socio-emotional support

Kinship ties, *wantok* affiliations, ethnic backgrounds and the economy are central features which determine social relationships in Solomon Islands (Foanaota 1989; Jourdan 1995a). Their centrality is heightened in the urban context, where competing identities and networks are continuously negotiated. The value attributed to others – to one’s family, one’s circle of *wantoks* or friends, one’s people back *hom* – cannot be stressed enough. In Malaita, one expression for friend is *ruana nau* which means “second me” (Maranda and Philibert, 2001), a highly personalized conceptualization of friendship which is applicable to relationships throughout Solomon Islands. It has been argued that personhood in Melanesia is constructed through relationships of exchange and kinship (Mitchell, n.d. (c)), thus the other (or others) is of primary importance.

The social and relational dimensions of Solomon Islanders’ lives are not lost on the youth, whose multi-sited agency “traverse the intimacies of family, the power of lineages and the policies of states” (Mitchell, n.d.(c):1), effectively

transecting different types of relationships. The social and emotional vacancies left by difficult, strenuous *wantok* or family relations (Jourdan 2008) concern young people especially, as they are on the weaker end of age-based power relations and looking to create meaningful social ties just like everyone else. And so, I ask if the friendships and relationships which stem from youth groups strengthen participants emotionally and if so, to what extent. During interviews with young people, this topic was perceivably the most enjoyable and lively one, perhaps this is because relationships are so central to human identity and life course. When the world outside the group is wrought with hardships, having a cluster of friends inside it becomes a source of comfort. Each young collaborator mentioned how he or she had several friends in their youth group, and how this was an attractive feature of their respective associations. Friendships were often seen as an asset pulling new members in (through the recruitment by a friend or acquaintance) as well as an incentive for staying in a group.

Youth is “relational” (Mitchell, n.d. (c):6) and as such, is largely negotiated inside pockets of sociability. Although youth does not need the other or others to be manifested, it is a social category informed by relationships of all kind. For my young participants, emotional and relational betterment was conceivably an immediate advantage of being a member. Unlike the economic dimensions of empowerment, transformations which can take more time to materialize, interpersonal ties and their benefits were being experienced and enjoyed in the present. Encouraged, championed and cared for, young people seem to be more

satisfied in terms of their relational well-being in comparison to economic security or even personal development.

From interviews and questionnaires, I tabulated the responses to whether urban youth associations provide emotional support for their members or not. The results demonstrate that young informants were (once again) far more positive and enthusiastic than their adult counterparts. Since young people are the central focus of this research and since they were generally already benefitting from intergroup attachment and relational well-being, becoming relationally empowered, it would be safe to say that their stories bear greater analytical weight than that of the adult collaborators.

Table 6.1: Results on intergroup emotional support

Emotional support through youth groups	Affirmative	Depends on context (social relations)	Negative
Youths	17	1	1
Adults	1	3	1

Source: Field Notes, 2009

It is necessary to explore what emotional support entails in this context in order to grasp what young urbanites are benefitting from. Through their lived experiences and everyday practices in the semi-public sphere (de Certeau 1984) of the youth halls, community centres and church gatherings, young people are learning to confide in one another; offering assistance, guidance and expressing

themselves in ways not necessarily allowed or accepted in the household, classroom or on the streets. As demonstrated in Amit-Talai's case study (1995), during high school students' free time more intimate disclosures were made as friends divulge sensitive information that they would not necessarily share during school-based interactions. This echoes an adult participant who described the youth group as an alternate space for young people to nurture intimacy Terry Brown, Interview 3; 01:21:21). One young collaborator discussed how talking and sharing created confidence between group members (Junior, Interview 13; 13:26), while another highlighted how support for her was mutual encouragements and the sharing of ideas (Neitagi, Interview 22; 24:13); practices that demonstrate peer-to-peer support on an intimate, socio-emotional level. Jhared, a young man from Malaita, wrote: *When I feel sorry sometimes, my group mates come to me and share with me, encouraging words to help and comfort me* (Baku, Questionnaire/July 2009). During youth forums and meetings, the social bonds between young people were often noticeable in their demeanour, their body language and speech reflecting an intimacy between individuals, a sense of hassle-free familiarity that comes with close friendships.

6.5.1 Examples of emotional support

In her analysis of gossip and power relations at play during meetings in rural Papua New Guinea, Brison (1992) asserts that talk reflects as well as creates social relations. Through the sharing of emotions, histories, experiences, and even daily happenings, youth group members are solidifying relationships; creating bonds of mutual attachment and assistance with their peers, friends and/or partners.

Communicating personal stories becomes an act of strengthening relations that in turn contribute to the emotional well-being of participants. Through the practices of sharing and subsequent bonding, as “utilizations of everyday rituals” (de Certeau, 1984: vx), members of youth associations are cultivating a *bricolage* of social relations that can come to their aid, if need be. As demonstrated in 19 year-old Charlyn’s interview, the rapport built through sharing with group peers was crucial for her to weather trying times.

A: When you feel sad or unhappy, does the youth group provide some comfort?

C: Of course, when I feel downhearted, when I worry, the youth group – especially when I was in Form 6, when I joined the youth. When my mother was sick, she stayed far away on the Weather Coast, I would be downhearted and worry for my mum and the youths were very comforting. Comforting me in prayer, encouraging me, saying “Don’t worry, your mum will be good, don’t worry!” so during that time, I really found the youth very good for me. When you face a problem, they will help you overcome it, they will comfort you good. (...)

She had malaria plus pneumonia. So when I heard, I was very worried. So I didn’t know who would support me (...) I didn’t know who to share my sadness with, so I came back to the youth. I think my youth members, I think they’re the best. So I came back to the youth, fortunately most were there. They encouraged me, comforted me, took me to Church for prayer, together, they were behind me (...)

Then I heard the news that my mum was okay, so I decided that youth is one good organization that I should be involved in.

(Charlyn Sikwa’ae, Interview 8; 53:08/55:14)

This story echoes those of other youths (double interview participants), who benefitted from intergroup support during grieving periods caused by relational or familial losses:

Elsy: I remember once upon a time, everything came down in my own private life. My relationship fell apart, and my friends inside the group...

Because the elders, they did not stand by me, or encourage or comfort me, even though I went really down. It wasn't easy for me. But I stood up. They (youth group members) really uplifted me, encouraged me. So that was 7 years ago and today, I still enjoy support inside the youth group.

Diana: *Same for me. One time, when I joined a group, it was a sad time because my mommy had died. Yeah, I went home and youth members, they wrote me letters to encourage me. So yeah, it was nice. Because if they didn't encourage me, my life would start to... I would not feel like coming back to my regular life, it's different. So they encouraged me, prayed for me. So then I came back.*

(Interview 11; 37:40/38:30)

As much as participants were adamant about the emotional bonds and mutual support that stem from youth group membership, some were more cautious, associating support for more practical exchanges, or even declaring that support was not present at all. For example, Eddie, a youth leader in the Church of Melanesia St-Albans parish, understood support not on emotional terms but rather on practicable terms. For him, intergroup support is manifested when the youth group is able to organize itself to offer transportation, *kaekae* (food), and other services to its members (Ho'asihata, Interview 5; 28:35), instead of interpersonal relations. Another youth leader, a young woman volunteering for the Catholic Holy Cross parish by the name of Agnes, stated that emotional support, while it does exist, is not a constant characteristic of urban youth associations (None, Interview 6; 29:08/59:59). Norman, an 18 year-old youth who participated in youth group meetings throughout my fieldwork and in a cultural presentation in his Boy Scout uniform on International Youth Day, affirmed that he only had one friend (a girl) in his association with whom he confided in and sought an emotional relationship

with. He did not agree that youth groups offer socio-relational empowerment (Hamarasi, Interview 15; 21:15).

It would have been interesting to go in-depth and explore why these youths did not experience relationships with other members as emotionally beneficial. Looking back on it now, I would presume that since these young participants were all heavily involved in their religious associations, and quite spiritual individuals (as evidenced in their discourse throughout their interviews), that they did not necessarily need to look towards other youth group members for emotional assistance or guidance. This would reflect MacIntyre's (2004) argument on the relational primacy of religion and how it satisfies needs usually met by family or friends. Adult collaborators were generally more guarded about the possibilities for emotional support and comfort. Most of them asserted that emotional alliances and mutual counselling were present within groups, but only to a certain extent (Wate Interview 1.2.; 15:06/ Brown, Interview 3; 01:21:21/ Baenisia, Interview 9; 54:35) or not at all (Rubo, Interview 4; 23:36).

6.6. Youth group as "a second family, for modern life"

Similar to the ways in which religion can be "related to kinship surrogacy" (MacIntyre, 2004:655), youth culture(s) can generate group bonding and/or person-to-person alliances found in kin-based interpersonal relationships. As suggested by Jourdan (1995a) in her analysis of Solomon Islands national consciousness, kinship is still a primary tool in maintaining social relationships throughout the archipelago, while "wider cultural marketplaces" (1995a:144) like Honiara are spaces that generate new meanings, symbols, ties and identities. Berg highlights the complexity

and pervasiveness of urban kinship relations when he asserts that in the capital, kinship shapes sociality yet it does not exist “in itself and for itself” (2000:116). Kinship, although an incredibly important socio-cultural signifier throughout Solomon Islands, is a highly malleable, contextual type of affiliation, particularly in the urban environment with its complex mix of affiliations and attachments.

While the family “is still the principal social building block” (Foanaota, 1989:71) for relationships in Solomon Islands, kin groups in town can branch out and include more people, if we accept a looser definition of kinship, interpreted as both *fictive* and *practical*. Honiara youth associations generate fictive kin patterns, which are relationships not based on blood or marriage ties but rather on friendships and/or belief systems which reproduce support and responsibilities found in the family. Fictive kinships are “systems [that] bind people to one another emotionally and socially” (Ebaugh and Curry, 2000:201). Members experience each other in ways that reflect kin relations, and in some instances, the group can even in time become a kinship surrogate. One young man, a member of Holy Cross parish, revealed:

If I worry about school or my parents' problems, I can come to a group meeting and discuss it. I can tell them what's bothering me. We can sit down and discuss, so it helps me. So then I come back to normal (...) It's like a second family, because many things that we talk about, we don't tell our parents. So I see it as a second family, for modern life.

(Justin, Interview 18; 58:57)

One male teenager, whose immediate family is still living on his *hom aelan* (West Kwara'ae, Malaita) and who therefore is living with his *wantoks* in Honiara, talked about his youth group friends:

Yeah, they're my second family (...) We talk, we're happy together, we forget about our worries.

(Jayzon Jr., Interview 13; 23:05)

Bourdieu contrasts official kinship with practical kinship by comparing the former – “collective ritual, subjectless practice, amenable to performance by agents interchangeable because collectively mandated” (1977:35) – to the latter, understood as strategic, constantly practiced relationships which benefit the individual as well as the collective. Socio-relational bonds which emanate from the youth group are practical kinship ties since they are constantly developed and maintained to the (emotional) advantage of young participants. Young people, in Honiara as elsewhere, are relationally defined and thus, much energy is dedicated to the cultivation of friendships and relationships. Official kinship is embedded in historical and familial frames of reference; if they are not constantly upheld they can become “theoretical relationships, like abandoned roads on an old map” (Bourdieu, 1977:38), whereas neglected practical kinship ties leave behind no trace on said map. Practical kinship must be actively, continuously maintained (Bourdieu 1977) through everyday operations (de Certeau 1984) for fear of being erased. Interpersonal relations are communal rather than individual experiences; they are not bound to a single, person-to-person interaction (Bourdieu 1977). In his treatise on kinship patterns, Lévi-Strauss suggests that:

No relationship can be arbitrarily isolated from all other relationships. It is likewise impossible to remain on this or that side of the world of relationships. The social environment should not be conceived of as an empty framework within which beings and things can be linked, or simply juxtaposed. It is inseparable from the things which people it.

(1969:483)

The indivisibility of kinship ties (whether fictive, practical or official) is discernable in youth associations, where different roles and responsibilities make for different emotional responses. Annie, a 32 year-old single mother, group coordinator and former member, asserted (from her leadership position):

Like when you come in the group, you look around, you know the people, you know them. You can tell "this one needs encouragement". So you go around, go with them, talk with them. So you tell your friend your story (...) They you're happy, you join the group again. If you just keep to yourself, it'll cause you problems, you'll have worries, worries. Everyone will wonder "why is that person worried?" It affects you.

When asked about the kin surrogacy that comes with youth associations, and how she personally benefitted from it, she said:

The way I see it (...) You have a family when you go into the youth [group]. It's the same. So if you join in any group, they become your family. Whatever you do at home, is good at home. You go to the group, you do the same (...) it's a second family.

(Neitagi, Interview 22; 24:33/26:22)

Yvonne also alluded to how different relationships are part of interwoven worlds, inseparable one from the other, in her discussion of how youth associations have become a familiar, supportive space of deep bonds:

If I feel down or anything like that, then I go there [youth group] and meet with my friends and share whatever feelings I have. It helps me out. (...) Like in your family, the mother is somebody you feel close to and whatever thing you experience, you always tell your mother. But then, for one thing, because I'm a girl, so when I talk to my mother, I feel more comfortable. But when my daddy is there, there are some things I don't feel comfortable telling him (...) So when I join the youth group, it was like having some of my family [members] there.

(Yvonne Ono, Interview 20; 38:43)

6.7. Conclusion

Like in any relational domain, where support systems and emotional attachments materialize, there are bound to be conflicts. In interviews, there were indications that the “microstructures of power” (Thornton, 1995:163) found in all types of social groups are also at play in youth associations. Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, indifference and disregard, aversions and hostilities, are undoubtedly found in youth groups. Collaborators did mention how conflicts and negativity are sometimes manifested in group relations. But by far, the personal and emotional well-being of young people was the most significant outcome of membership. Although self-awareness, self-esteem, pride, happiness are difficult phenomena to measure, collaborators presented their own experiences as ways of demonstrating the positive dimensions of youth group participation. Self-empowerment through having one’s voice heard in the crowd, as a means of escaping social pitfalls, as growing in self-knowing. The benefits of interpersonal relationships in terms of everyday rituals (de Certeau 1984) of socio-emotional support and practical kinship ties are also conducive to a heightened sense of self. The bonds found in youth associations are a means of countering the relational and familial disintegration happening in the wider social sphere. Through relationships with members, friends, partners, young people are empowering themselves, finding the emotional tools necessary to lead more fulfilled lives.

Conclusion

Social and cultural realities are not standardized, uniform happenings and consequently, anthropological knowledge produced in the field and reproduced in academia cannot expect to be anything but partial, tentative and debatable (Bakker 1992). What I have attempted to demonstrate are the particularities of youth group membership, the connections and resources which emanate from it, and the ways in which they can potentially alleviate existing struggles for young urbanites. Young people in Honiara are growing up in a complex social environment which promotes conflicting identities as both marginalized majority and popular culture mediators. As cultural shapers of the urban imagination, they are a visible and influential group. Yet in socioeconomic and interpersonal domains, the opposite is true, triggering various obstacles to their general well-being. Similar to the ways that North-American fraternities are created by their members “out of their enthusiasm and need for fellowship with others of like temperament and tastes” (Deakins, 1941:263), youth associations in Honiara answer the specific needs of their diverse community of members.

Chapter 1 was ethnographic, historically and politically oriented in order to situate the particular time and place of my fieldwork, and the space in which young people are presently evolving. The second chapter was more concentrated on youths themselves, their challenges, their symbolic importance as well as the profile of my participants. Chapters 3 and 4 focused on the methodological and theoretical components of my research, and how certain concepts apply to the empowerment potential of youth associations. Chapter 5 highlighted the current issues facing

young people in Honiara today; examining how unemployment leads to many other problems, and the ways in which youths are managing all of their challenges. In sum, chapter 5 pinpointed the benefits of youth group membership in terms of indirect economic empowerment. The final chapter was dedicated to finding out how youth associations offer a space for members to be heard as well as supported, thus generating sentiments of positive self-worth and relational attachments in a society that constraints both the personal and emotional well-being of young people.

In conclusion, are youths economically, personally and relationally empowered through their group membership in Honiara? As previous chapters reveal, the empowering effects of association are limited, highly contextual and contestable. Possibilities for economic advancement are constricted by very real structural constraints on the ground; institutional and governmental failures have left young people ill-equipped to face their challenges. Many feel abandoned, excluded from, and disenchanted with the society they are growing up in. However, despite their limitations, there is hope in youth groups. They offer possibilities for volunteering, working and networking within their organizations. The experience, resources, contacts and knowledge gained through being an active member enhanced chances of socioeconomic mobility outside them as well. This was demonstrated in the life course of certain young collaborators. While their life paths are atypical when compared to the majority of members, they are emblems of the potential that exists.

Through youth associations, young people can promote themselves; boost their self-esteem and self-awareness; be heard for the first time in their lives; escape the harshness of urban life; create meaningful relations and support systems which can develop into family surrogacy. As with the limited possibilities for economic betterment, there are ambiguities and limitations to self-empowerment and socio-relational empowerment as well. But the point I want to stress is that despite all the weaknesses of urban youth groups, they are nonetheless contributing to the empowerment of certain young people. They are socially recognized and respected spaces for youths to grow, learn, create ties and fight their exclusion. When Michael tells me that indeed, these associations “provide empowerment for youths” (Tahiseu, Interview 7; 37:37), I accept his comments as true because he has seen it, experienced it and interprets it as such. Young people in Honiara are agentive, vibrant, compelling individuals who are trying to carve their place in a society that largely excludes them. They are negotiators of urban realities and imagined potentialities, and for those who actively participate in youth groups, the road to economic and emotional empowerment is slightly less hazardous – and less lonely.

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