

Roviana women in traditional fishing

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Introduction

One of the nine islands of the Solomons, the island of New Georgia, is home to the Roviana people. It is one of the main islands in the Western Province.

The Roviana people were noted for their widespread head hunting raids and their **Tomokoy** (black war canoes). The head hunting raids ceased early this century. Now the Roviana people are peaceful and serene, still practising many of their traditions and living a mainly subsistence lifestyle of gardening and fishing.

In many Solomon Islands communities, a major part of regular fishing is done by women. In the Roviana communities, traditional fishing management has a system of variable division of labour between women and men. This division of labour and fisheries is complementary and allows an extensive utilisation of marine resources. The Roviana women (children, adolescents, adults and old women) traditionally glean from the beaches, rocky shores, reefs, mangrove areas, streams and rivers and dive in shallow lagoon waters. They gather varieties of salt water molluscs, crustaceans, seaweed, fish and fresh-water molluscs. The fishing activities, done on a daily basis, provided their families a regular supply of the much-needed **baso** (protein in Roviana) to complement the carbohydrate diet.

Women's work

The most skilled part of the Roviana women's fishing is locating the fish. For example, **kapehe** (mud crab) burrow into the mud leaving only their eyes protruding above the surface by which they can be located; or the **osanga** (black-spotted emperor) burrow into the sand leaving only part of the fins sticking out. In some cases other senses are used. For example, to locate **deo** (a species of clam) in the murky waters of the mangrove, the hands and feet are used to feel for the hard shells.

While keen and alert senses are used to locate many of these target species, it can take nimble dexterity to catch them. For example, clumsiness while attempting to catch a **roqa** (a species of crab) can lead to loss of the crab or loss of a finger. The **osanga** (usually found burrowed into the sand with its fins sticking out) is caught using only one hand, this reduces the chance of startling the fish. The hand is lowered into the water with the thumb and

forefinger extended, the fish is slowly approached from the front or from the side (if the fish is approached from the rear, there is danger of being injured by the protruded fin). When close enough, the thumb and forefinger are quickly pushed into the fish's eyes. Thus rendering it blind. Therefore, if the fish is not caught on the first attempt it can still be easily chased and caught.

Species that are 'cemented' onto rocks are hit off with a rock. For example in order to loosen the **nakolo** (a species of bivalve) which is firmly attached to the rock by its base, it is hit at the base, because hitting the shell from anywhere else can smash it and spoil the flesh. **Kuravaho** (a species of clam), which is cemented firmly on the mangrove roots, is prised off at the base by jamming with a sharp pointed mangrove stick between the shell and the root. Species that cling loosely on rocks, dead logs and mangrove roots by suction can be plucked off by hand. For example, **sise** and **popu** (two species of snails similar to the green snail) have to be picked quickly at the base to break the suction. If an attempt is made to pluck the **sise** and **popu** from the top, or they are plucked too slowly they will not come off easily. The **sise** and **popu** react to touch by strengthening their grip on the rock.

Some species found in the waist-deep water must be dived for. **Ununusu** (a species of clam) is an example. The gatherer dives into the water (with eyes open of course) and picks hands full of **ununusu** and puts them in a basket that is placed beneath the water at a central point. The basket of **ununusu** is lifted into the canoe once enough is collected.

Kuluma and **koro** (fish species) when found in shallow reef pools are chased into holes in the rocks where they can get caught easily. Once the fish is in the hole the gatherer has to wait a few minutes to allow the fish to settle, then carefully push one hand in the hole (so as not to startle the fish). When close enough it is grabbed quickly by the tail. The **hohobulu** (a species of giant clam) is picked up carefully with two hands (lifting from the base) and gathered on nearby reefs and kept as 'clam farm' until required for eating. It is usually collected when the day is calm and the water is clear. (It is easily seen during this time.)

Weather variation

Most of the molluscs, crustaceans, and seaweed are gathered all year around. However, the Roviana

women gather certain molluscs and crustaceans at particular times of the year depending on the weather and tides. At the beginning of the year (January, February and March), in the cycloning period, the women hunt and collect **roqa** in the mangrove areas. It is plentiful in the night. In the Roviana vernacular it is called '**gitani rane bonghe**' (food for stormy weather).

In the rainy periods the women gather **sise** as they are plentiful at that time. The **sise** clings onto rocks along the rocky shores, dead logs along the beaches and the mangrove roots. At low tides in the night the women gather **sise**, **popu** and **tatadu** (chiton). They use dry coconut leaves tied together as torches.

In the middle of the year, during the dry season (June-July) the tide is low during the days. Women, children, and even men glean the dry reef tops for all sorts of molluscs, crustaceans, and fish. In the mangrove areas, **ropi**, **deo** and **kuravahe** (species of clams) are plentiful. During this time most of the diet consists of these foods. For a few days either side of the full moon, **kapehe** are plentiful and can be readily collected. During high tide, **ununusu** are plentiful. Women dive for them.

At certain low tide periods in the year, a species called **haqamuqe** (species of algae) releases substances from its body into the lagoon water. The substance discolours the water (greenish when only a few **haqamuqe** are around, and reddish when there are a lot), and as a result the women do not collect **deo**, **rik kosiri**, **sakaputi** (species of bivalves), or clams. These foods taste bitter, and through trial and error the Roviana people have found that people get very sick (i.e. headache, feeling lethargic, vomiting, and diarrhoea) if they eat these foods during this time. It is an irregular occurrence and only affects the collecting for a short period.

During the last few decades there have been many changes in men's fishing practice with the introduction of new equipment and techniques and increased mobility with the use of outboard motors. Some of the changes are due to fishing being commercialised. This 'modernization' of men's fishing has not greatly affected the women's fishing practices.

However, this 'modernization' has indirectly affected the fishing activities of the Roviana women in that the women are now also involved in fishing activities that used to be carried out only by men: fishing with a line from the canoe, diving, netting, and spearing fish.

The most notable change to the Roviana women's

fishing is that it is now more efficient and therefore requires less time, the reasons being that they use steel knives, picks, crowbars, modern torches, diving goggles another modern tools. For example, a large quantity of flesh can be prised off in a short time using a steel butter knife; picks can be used to hit off a desired amount of **nakolo** in no time at all; a bag of **popu** can be collected in the night within an hour using bright modern torches; and with the clear view gained by the use of diving goggles, collecting **ununusu** becomes a very easy task and a basket can be filled very quickly.

Because more can be collected in a shorter time and with less effort, there has been a tendency in some areas to over-exploit the resources. In some parts of Roviana (Munda, and parts of Vona Vona especially) **gulumu** (a species of giant clam), **nakolo** and **ununusu** are slowly being depleted, as a result of women using modern technology to gather their food.

With the recent development of clam and seaweed farms in some parts of Roviana, women, who are the traditional exploiters of these resources are not involved. It involves only the men. So it appears that the women's knowledge of this resource has not been given any recognition.

Conclusion

Over a long period of time the Roviana women have developed a traditional scientific system which classifies molluscs, crustaceans, fish and seaweed species, describing not only their habitat and behavior, but also the weather and tidal cycles that affect the relative abundance of these different species.

Also, it is interesting to note that although the women's fishing may be considered as 'just collecting shells, not involving interesting technology' (Haque & Tietze, 1988) and having little economic significance, their regular supply of protein to the family diet significantly contributes to the nutritional status of their families.

