



Tarevalata 'Kastom' Conserved Area Chivoko, Lauru Island, Solomon Islands



A resident of Chivoko navigates past an islet near Cape Alexander on his 8-hour journey to Taro, the provincial capital

Results of a grassroots discussion reported by Dao Nguyen¹ and Jimmy Kereseka²

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Executive summary

The Tarevalata people call their traditional lands and coastal reefs by the same name as the clan, Tarevalata. In fact, the clan is named after the land. Situated on the northeastern shelf of Lauru Island (Choiseul) in the Solomon Islands, the Tarevalata lands are bordered by neighbouring clans with similar ownership of their traditional lands.

Lauru, and indeed most of the Solomon Islands, as other islands in Melanesia, is a patchwork of traditional territories and customary lands. The boundaries of clan and tribal lands shift regularly, as marriages, conflicts and compensation claims are settled through exchanges of land and resources. The Tarevalata lands are one example of this mosaic of customary tenure. However, the Tarevalata are a unique example in the context of the change and circumstances facing the Solomon Islands in the 21st Century. The Tarevalata lands, their 'kastom' area, has been under increasing threat from external interests, beyond the common claims of their neighbours. The Tarevalata lands are primed with rare and valuable hardwood timber species, and the gentle slopes and lowland hills are the perfect environment for commercial logging. Since 2003, the Tarevalata have faced numerous attempts by logging operations to access their territory.

With assistance from the Lauru Land Conference of Tribal Communities (a Lauru based organization that supports indigenous rights) and other external supporters, the Tarevalata have been able to resist the logging interests through high-court rulings in favour of their land rights. Where loggers have trespassed they have been ejected physically and their equipment confiscated. But for how long?

The Tarevalata invited discussion over a period of three days in April 2008, which included a community meeting and a number of interviews, as well as a boundary walk of the Tarevalata forest. This report documents the Tarevalata views and opinions of their 'kastom' land and resources, and expresses some of their ideas and aspirations for the future.

Introduction – a grassroots discussion

The Tarevalata people entirely reside in the coastal community of Chivoko village. They warmly welcomed their guests for a discussion on their 'Community Conserved Area' (CCA) on 28th April 2008. Locally, the community recognize their whole territory as a conservation area, and the land is named as the people, Tarevalata. The meeting formed part of the schedule of a visit to Chivoko by representatives of the Laurus Land Conference of Tribal Communities (LLCTC). The LLCTC is an organization based on Laurus Island (a.k.a. Choiseul) that represents the rights and interests of the many Laurus tribal communities, locally called '*Kastom*' rights. The LLCTC helps represent the interests of Laurus communities within the wider context of the Laurus Provincial Government in Taro, through to the High Courts in the Capital, Honiara. The LLCTC, formed in 1981, have maintained a strong relationship with communities such as the Tarevalata of Chivoko, for whom they have twice successfully bought legal and financial aid to bear to defend the local community land-rights and tenure against claims from commercial logging interests, and from neighboring communities acting under logging contracts. Twice the LLCTC have secured High-court rulings in favor of the Tarevalata right to full *kastom* tenure of their lands, reefs and natural resources.

The Tarevalata people, represented by Chief Kiplin Lato and Elder Eagan Velokaiga, set aside time to discuss the Tarevalata CCA as part of the LLCTC meeting held that evening at the Chivoko community gathering hall. Over 100 villagers attended including many women and children, and the majority of them remained and contributed right until the end (the meeting lasted over three hours). With lively discussion and input from many corners of the community, a very lively local picture was painted of the Tarevalata efforts to determine the future of their land and resources through means both *kastom* and modern. The meeting was conducted in Solomon Islands Pidgin, with more detailed explanations given in the Tavula language and in local dialect of the same. The following day, the guests were invited to visit the ancestral forests and view both natural and cultural sites.

Background – The Chivoko land and people and 'Kastom'

The Chivoko village and land belong to the Tarevalata Tribe. The village has been situated on the current site since about 1945. Prior to that time, the Tarevalata lived in the limestone hills about 2 hours inland from the coast, in Tarevalata Village. That old settlement is now abandoned but the site is still an important cultural site for the Tarevalata people. The ancestral chiefs are interred there, and it is the site of the current 'Dolo' or burial casket for all the chiefs from Chivoko. There are '*Tabu*' areas (ie with restricted use and access) of forest as well as communal forest gardens nearby. The Tarevalata lands are a mosaic of tabu and regulated parcels of forest and forest gardens, which in total make up the terrestrial part of the 'Community Conservation Area' under discussion. These are ingrained into local custom and storytelling and everyone knows about each Tabu site and its character and history. The Tarevalata hills are also riddled with caves of a highly significant historical and cultural value to the Tribe. It is these caves that provided emergency escape and refuge for the villagers in times of attack during the headhunting days of the pre- and early colonial era.

Chivoko is a coastal village surrounded by tall and dense mangroves and tidal mudflats. The village numbers some 320 people of which about half are under 12 years of age. The majority of the houses

are built in the traditional manner with hardwood timber (mostly from *kwa* and *vasa* trees), palm frond and pandanus twine and other materials. Beyond the Chivoko shores stretches a sheltered lagoon protected by a large, diverse and vibrant fringing reef. The marine environment supports an abundance



Kiplin's sketch of Tabu areas within the Tarevalat CCA

of fish and resources for the community. There is no road linking Chivoko and access to and from the community is from the sea, along the coast, by boat. Taro, the provincial capital, is about 2 hours by motorboat, or one day by canoe, depending on the weather. Although not a traditionally 'coastal' people, the Tarevalata are blessed with both a rich marine area and a productive forest landscape. Indeed, under *kastom* law, the Tarevalata claim the inshore lagoon and reef system as well as the forest and upland hills within their traditional domains. The total area of the Tarevalata territory is approximately 8,000 hectares.

The biodiversity of Lauru Island is of global significance. The Chivoko reef and lagoon systems are at the epicenter of the 'Coral Triangle' – the global source of coral reef biodiversity - there are over 500 species of corals recorded in the Lauru waters, more than in the whole Great Barrier Reef system of Australia, and double that of most islands in the Caribbean. The Tarevalata forests are teeming with wildlife – especially butterflies, snails, amphibians, reptiles, bats and birds – of note were the flocks of



Chivoko bay

brightly-coloured Blyth's hornbills (*Aceros Plicatus*). Endemism is extraordinarily high. Dozens of species of orchid can be found in the karst crags of Lauru. As similar lowland forest systems of the Solomon Islands, and across the Pacific, succumb to logging and degradation, the forests of the Tarevalata stand out as one of the last pockets of representative habitat remaining in Melanesia. The local knowledge of the forest and its bounty is incredible – there is a use (dietary, medicinal, cultural) for almost every plant and animal that was described to the guests on the forest walk following the CCA meeting.

The discussion reported:

The Community and Conservation

- The Tarevalata *kastom* lands have been defined by the tribe for generations. Each chief has added to the depth of tabus and changes in management of the land, marking their own rule on the land and the *kastom* governance, reacting to the issues of the day. The lowest ebb in the *kastom* make-up was during the height of the headhunting days, where the Tarevalata suffered severely and eked out an insecure existence inland, in the hills. Recently, the move to the coast has redefined a lot of *kastom* but the current chief is keen to remain true to the traditions and sites of the Tarevalata ancestral, inland domains. However, an additional layer to *kastom* has gained prominence, and fits a modern protected area definition – the Chivoko marine protected area (MPA). This has been integrated into *kastom*, but some of the management prescriptions are proving difficult to maintain. Outside support from The Nature Conservancy has helped run discussions and workshops. They also provide some training and resources for marine management, and helped network Chivoko with neighboring marine areas in Lauru and beyond. Several external teams visit and conduct surveys and talk to the village about marine conservation. Traditionally the Tarevalata are mountain people but the MPA fits well with the evolving *kastom* arrangement for the coast and the reefs. The MPA is really an extension of *kastom* management for the tribe's traditional territories.
- Everyone in the community knows the boundaries of the Tarevalata *kastom* area, from the streams to the hills, to the reef edge. However, the community have been made to properly define these boundaries into official records, to counter claims by the neighboring tribes and by the logging

companies that they have a right to Tarevalata land. There are now maps in the court that define their land. According to the Tarevalata, this is not really sustainable, as the boundaries shift over time. For example, if the tribe earn compensation for a dispute with the Takevacho neighbours, they may settle that through a land trade, extending the Tarevalata *kastom* area. *Kastom* law would recognise this transaction and the ceremonies, but the court would not and it would be



Tarevalata village

difficult for the officials to keep changing it every time someone gets married or brings a dispute. So this has some impact already and may do so in the future. However, it is a small trade-off to gain external recognition for the community lands.

- Community decisions are made by the Tarevalata chief (currently Mr. Kiplin Lato, who assumed the mantle last year). However, the chief cannot just do what he wants, there are rules and formal ways to follow. There is also a council of elders who can veto the chief and also put forward motions in the interests of the people, as long as there is good *kastom* reason for them to be followed. There are set ceremonies during the year that include councils to decide different issues, and to celebrate marriages and other events. The church is also a good focal point for meetings and discussion, although the minister is from Chivoko and under the chief and *kastom* system.
- Most of the communities along the coast also have MPAs. They also follow *kastom* tribal management of their lands. However, either side of Chivoko, the logging companies have been allowed to extract all the timber. It is really devastating. In Taro, the provincial capital, there are also some MPAs.

Value, effectiveness, sustainability

- The Chivoko lands are stable and likely to remain with the people for generations to come. There is plenty of land and as long as no dynamic changes occur, such as clear fell logging, it should be able to support more people and more forest gardens for more generations. The community are looking at ways to gain more cash and commercial benefit from the forest and reef, so that collectively they can use it for modern costs such as schooling, boats and fuel, and other equipment.
- The tabus are strong and the *kastom* way is upheld well by the community. Chief Kiplin and the elders have shown fortitude and



Returning from the gardens collecting foof for the day

wisdom in opting out of the Choiseul logging contracts. The Tarevalata lands are well cared for and productive.

- There are many wild animals in the forests, and so many types of tree and plant. There are no species that have declined or disappeared that anyone can think of. In fact there are more wild pigs now, so hunting is good and can be enjoyed more frequently by the village boys. The hornbills are more frequent also, maybe because of the loss of neighbouring forest areas. About ten years ago, a team from a university in the United Kingdom came here to study the bats in the caves and hills, they reported that there are many rare species in Chivoko. The forest is abundant in species that are used for boat construction, housing and other infrastructure needs. There are several tabu areas where harvesting is restricted, and other areas where trees are assigned to different families and for specific events. Overall this means the community always has enough timber resources for our standard needs. They are now exploring ways to supplement income through trading timber – but on their own terms and based on *kastom* regulations. They will not allow commercial logging companies to work the Chivoko forests. There are so many other uses for the forests, streams and caves in the *kastom* lands.
- Tenure security is the most crucial component to maintain the *kastom* land and the tabus and regulations that the Tarevalata have in place. Their right to their lands has been challenged several times, but they have been supported to claim their rights. Furthermore, the chief has a lot of responsibility to uphold the ideals and traditions and to sensibly guide the community in their use of our lands. The elders must work with the chief too. Previously, the chief and elders were at odds over the logging rights issue, but the consensus was with the elders. Recently, a community member residing in Honiara – not a recognised representative of the Tarevalata by the *kastom* system – signed Chivoko onto a logging permit without the knowledge of the community. They then faced a court and legal struggle to remove their lands from the logging concession, which, without the support of the Lauru Land Conference, would have been very complex and may have resulted in conflict. Already a Korean logging crew were apprehended on Tarevalata lands by the tribe and were physically ejected, and their bulldozer was confiscated and destroyed. However, the company claimed that there was a legal agreement. These are the tricks that the logging interests will use, and this is a great threat to the *kastom* territory. For their marine protected area, there are few threats or issues, although the harvest of *beche-de-mer* was too great and these are now rare on the reef. However, they have more than enough fish.



Logging barge in the region

Threats and needs

- The greatest threat to the Tarevalata forests and lands and way of life is from logging ventures. There are at least 15 licensed operators on Choiseul Island. The Tarevalata have one of the last stands of accessible timber-rich forest in the whole country. Their neighbour tribe to the North, the Takevacho, has lost the entire tract of forest along the bordering river. It is now choked with run-off and sediment. The logging companies pay a one-off fee for access. They do not take all types of trees but to access the desired timber they destroy all growth, carve out slopes, leave mud and tracks everywhere and burn much of what remains. Then they are gone and then the money is gone too. The money can cause much conflict as if it is not distributed properly. The logging companies and their allies are the greatest challenge at present.

- Without the Lauru Land Conference the community would not be talking today about their forests and lands, they would be talking about what was once there, but now destroyed. The support of this organization has not always been fully recognized but it is now accepted that they have helped very much. Currently, through the Lauru Land Conference, the Tarevalata have a project to support their own development of their forests on their terms and according to *kastom* rules. LLCTC are helping to bring training, lend equipment, and make connections with responsible buyers of small-scale timber shipments that match the community capacity and criteria that the community should follow for sustainability. The Nature Conservancy has also helped us with trainings, equipment and discussion, especially to strengthen and benefit more from the marine side of *kastom* territory. Together with support from these organizations the Tarevalata can safeguard and develop their lands and resources.

Formal recognition

- The Tarevalata manage their reefs and forests – their *kastom* lands - according to *kastom* law and practices. As such, the Tarevalata ‘Community Conservation Area’ should be defined as the whole Tarevalata *kastom*. *Kastom* refers to the bundle of institutions and tenure arrangements that conserve a way of life hand in hand with the natural environment and its intrinsic biodiversity value. *Kastom* is both a noun or an adjective that can be used to describe something local, homegrown or traditional. *Kastom* methods exist for fishing, gardening, building a house, and so forth. *Kastom* refers to the way in which



The village faces of the Tarevalata

violations of traditional laws are settled, such as compensation payments to resolve land disputes. In the context of Chivoko society where time and cash have a relatively low significance, the *kastom* ways are paramount. The *kastom* methods are *good* methods. The Tarevalata lands are defined and managed by *kastom*. However, where *kastom* is infringed by outside forces, where *kastom* is challenged by title deeds and legal writ, where *kastom* is not recognized, the people of Chivoko have little recourse to resist. Without the LLCTC and other guardians, who are able to defend Lauru *kastom* in the realms of legislation, policy and finance, the Tarevalata and other tribes’ *kastom* way of life will continue to be beset, undermined and eroded.

- The Tarevalata land, and therefore the right to manage and uphold *kastom* law, is legally defined and registered by the Government. The Tarevalata are the landowner. The marine protected area is established under a legal contract with the Provincial Government, which outlines the management measures defined by the Tarevalata and is merely a formality.
- However, the Tarevalata would like the Government to recognise and support their conservation actions, especially if it helps gain support and premium prices for forest and marine products that are harvested in a sustainable manner. For example, the tribe want to register future forestry activities as ‘eco-forestry’ to attract responsible buyers and traders.
- The Government should find ways to better support communities to uphold *kastom* law and provide essential equipment and services – such as an ice-machine in Taro (the island capital) – but also training and networking opportunities between communities.

Networking

- “One of the most useful lessons that we have received in our struggle, internally, to resist going with the logging companies has been the terrible experiences of other tribes here on Choiseul Island, but also from Ghizo and Morovo Lagoon in Western Province. Some of this information was passed through our MPA meetings which is helped by the Nature Conservancy. There is a Solomon Islands Network of MPAs but we have not really attended the meetings or become involved. We would like to though. Networks are useful but they would have to come to us, we cannot travel so easily even to Taro, which can take all day. At present, no-one in the village has a motorboat. So for a network to be useful, they would have to visit us regularly.” *Kiplin Lato, Tarevalata Chief*
- The Lauru Land Conference representative, Jimmy Kereseka, is interested to link Chivoko village and other similar communities with the CCA network. LLCTC are establishing a website and would like to make connections and see how they can mobilize information to the benefit of their client communities.

In conclusion

The Tarevalata experience with their community conservation area is related to the maintenance of *kastom* traditions in a rapidly changing world. The establishment of their locally-managed marine area MPA, borrowing largely from external practice, methods and motivations, is a positive example of how the community can assimilate change into their society. The major challenge in this first arena, for the Tarevalata, is their lack of historical connection with their marine resources, and how to practically manage them in a sustainable manner. However, the greatest challenge is in the upkeep of the *kastom* institutions that govern the management of their traditional territory, and the defence of these lands against powerful logging interests, within a vacuous political set-up that only partially serves the interests of its communities. The Tarevalata have a distinct advantage compared to other communities – they have clearly defined, and legally recognized, high-court defined physical boundaries. With the support of a



Tarevalata forest

community support group, the LLCTC, this has been achieved, and they have allies in the administrative centres in Taro and Honiara who can fight their corner. Without the LLCTC, there would have been an uphill battle to secure boundaries. Without the defined boundaries, the community would have succumbed to conflict and loss of rights and territory to the logging interests - the intricate *Kastom* tapestry would have unraveled into frayed threads.

So what does the future hold? The Tarevalata want to mobilize and make the best of partnerships with LLCTC and external agencies, but on their terms. National networks exist for community interests and especially for CCA's, such as the Solomon Islands Network of Locally Managed Marine Areas (SILMMA). Project support has been provided by LLCTC. Through support and access to other experiences and opportunities, the Tarevalata *kastom* can be strengthened yet adapted to face modern challenges. It would be a shining example for other beleaguered communities in the Solomon Islands whose forests are under severe threat from commercial logging, and as such, the fabric of traditional *kastom* tenure and resource management regimes is at risk.

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Annex 1: Format for the preliminary database of CCA sites being tested for UNEP/WCMC

Basic data

Site Name (in local language and in English)	Chivoko Village, Tarevalata Tribal Community
Country (include State and Province)	Lauru (Choiseul) Province, Solomon Islands
Area encompassed by the CCA (specify unit of measurement).	Approx. 8,000 hectares
GIS Coordinates (if available)	
Whether it includes sea areas (Yes or no)	Yes
Whether it includes freshwater (Yes or no)	Yes
Marine (Y or N)	Yes, and terrestrial
Concerned community (name and approx. number of persons)	Tarevalata, 320 people
Is the community considering itself an indigenous people? (Please note Yes or No; if yes note which people)	Yes, Indigenous to Lauru Island
Is the community considering itself a minority? (Please note Yes or No, if yes on the basis of what, e.g. religion, ethnicity)	Yes, ethnic minority
Is the community permanently settled? (Please note Yes or No; if the community is mobile, does it have a customary transhumance territory?)	Yes
Is the community local per capita income inferior, basically the same or superior to national value? (please note how confident you are about the information)	The local income per capita is inferior to the national average (ADB 2006)
Is the CCA recognised as a protected area by governmental agencies? (Yes or no; if yes, how? If no, is it otherwise recognized?) If yes, legal document? Establishment date?	It is not recognised as a protected area, however, the community have full tenure over the entire area, and legally apply local management regulations for the area
Conflicts with land tenure, natural resource use?	Yes, with neighbouring communities to some extent and with commercial logging interests more broadly.
What is the main management objective (e.g. livelihood, cultural, spiritual...)	Subsistence and culture
By definition, a CCA fulfils a management objective. To which IUCN management category ³ do you consider it would best fit (this does not imply that the management objective is consciously pursued by the concerned community, but that it is actually achieved)	Category V – managed landscape and seascape.

Additional qualitative information

Main ecosystem type	Lagoon reef and coastal habitat; lowland forest on karst limestone hills
Description of biodiversity & resources (ecosystems, species, functions) conserved by the CCA	The biodiversity of Lauru Island is of global significance. The Chivoko reef and lagoon systems are at the epicenter of the 'Coral Triangle' – the global source of coral reef biodiversity - there are

³ Please see http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascat/pascatrev_info3.pdf

	over 500 species of corals recorded in the Luru waters. The Tarevalata forests are high in endemism, especially butterflies, snails, amphibians, reptiles, bats and birds, orchids. As similar lowland forest systems of the Solomon Islands, and across the Pacific, succumb to logging and degradation, the forests of the Tarevalata stand out as one of the last pockets of representative habitat remaining in Melanesia. The local knowledge of the forest products (dietary, medicinal, cultural) is very high.
Description of local ethnic groups and languages spoken	The Tarevalata people. Language is Tarevalata, a dialect of Tavula. Solomon Islands pidgin is widely understood; some English also.
Broad historical context of the CCA	Traditional land of the Tarevalata. Specific MPA regulations more recently adopted, since 2004.
Governance structure for the CCA (who takes management decisions, how?)	Chief and advisory Elders, but based on community consensus and traditional institutions
Length of time the governance model has been in place	Traditional system, long-term
Land and resource ownership in the CCA	Community common property regime
Type of land use in the CCA	Managed forest and reef with zoned Tabus and regulated areas for culture and cultivation / harvest
Existence of written or oral management plans and specific rules for the use of natural resources in the CCA	Oral
Map and zoning of the CCA (please attach if available and relevant,)	Sketch maps included in photographs.
Relevant pictures with captions (please attach if available)	Attached
Major threats to biodiversity and/or the CCA governance system	Commercial logging
Local CCA-relevant features, stories, names, rules and practices	The Tarevalata main settlement was, until 3 generations ago, in the hills in a limestone valley riddled with caves. Secret cave passages and a network of tunnels were used as a security and defence mechanism against the headhunters of the past era. Women and Children would flee whilst the men warriors would use the system to outflank and surprise invaders. The old village is near the site of the tribal <i>Dolo</i> – a stone urn used to contain the bones of deceased Chiefs. The whole area is <i>Tabu</i> and characterised by old growth forest.

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References⁴

Govan H., Tawake A. and Tabunakawai K. 2006. *Community-based marine resource management in the South Pacific*. PARKS, Volume 16. No 1. Community Conserved Areas.

⁴ Please use the same format of the references in: <http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Publications/TILCEPA/guidelinesindigenouspeople.pdf>