

# A different kind of voyage: Tony Hughes, 1936-2024

by Christopher Chevalier and Clive Moore

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*We republish this unedited obituary of Tony Hughes as a mark of respect for a person of great integrity who made a considerable contribution to the work of the Development Policy Centre, in addition to his much larger contribution to the development of Solomon Islands and the Pacific more generally.*

Tony Hughes died on Monday 26 February 2024. Born in England in December 1936, he was one of the last of the government officers from the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and spent his life onwards from 1961 mainly in Solomon Islands. He gave up his British citizenship in June 1979 to become a Solomon Islands citizen, the first foreigner to do so. Other than some members of the clergy, no other foreign-born person was as well-known or served the nation longer. He never became a politician, although he probably influenced the history and politics of the nation more than any other foreign-born citizen.

Anthony Vernon (Tony) Hughes was born in Darlaston, near Walsall, a Midlands industrial town in England. He was the son of Henry Norman Hughes (1906-53) and Marjorie Golding (1915-2005) and brother to Arlene Patricia ('Pat') (~1939). During World War II, he and his family survived many bombing raids over the heavily industrialised Midlands. His father, a civil engineer and town surveyor, was in charge of the local civil defence.

Despite austerities, he had a materially secure upbringing and after 1945 the family moved to more pleasant rural surroundings. Hughes described his family as middle-class but not wealthy. His mother came from a family of teachers while his father's family owned a butcher's firm, successful enough to buy his parents a three-storey terraced house as a wedding present. Hughes' father died in 1953 from lung cancer aged only 47, leading Hughes' mother and sister to move to live near his mother's parents on the Isle of Wight while Hughes finished school. The death of his father when Tony was 16 years old left the family much less secure.

Hughes benefited from the post-war boom in secondary education created by the 1944 Education Act, as well as from the expansion of university education in the

1950s. He had the added advantage of attending Queen Mary Grammar School, one of the oldest schools in England, and was head boy in his final year.

He deferred university to enrol in compulsory National Service, serving in the Royal Navy (1955-1957) as a junior officer (midshipman) aboard minesweepers in Malta during the Suez crisis and later in Northern Ireland. Completing his service, he took a summer job as a beach photographer, which helped him acquire useful photographic and social skills.

He studied law at Pembroke College (Oxford University) from 1957 to 1960 and stayed on for a fourth year to complete a Colonial Service training course in administration and anthropology. Despite preparing to work in Africa, Hughes was posted instead to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) in 1961.

Hughes worked as an administrative (district) officer in Malaita (1962-63) and Western districts (1964-65). His duties included working with the Malaita Council, which had been established in 1952 in response to the proto-nationalist Maasina Rule movement.

He married his girlfriend Carol Robson before leaving England, but the marriage did not last and the couple separated in 1966 and divorced in 1970. Their son Robert, born in 1964, tragically died in a motorcycle accident in 1991. Once divorced, he was free to marry Kuria in 1971, daughter of Willie Paia (1909-78) BEM, MBE, the second Solomon Islander to become a clerk in the public service in 1926, a leader during World War II, a long-serving public servant, a Headman in Western District and a member of the BSIP Advisory Council and later the Executive Council.

Some senior officers were racist and unsympathetic to local political aspirations, while others such as Tom Russell, later Chief Secretary, and Tony Hughes were sincere in their efforts to bring Solomon Islands to independence in the best possible shape.

In 1966, Hughes transferred to the BSIP Secretariat in Honiara, where he worked in the Lands Department, becoming Registrar of Titles and later Commissioner of Lands in 1968, and an ex-officio member of the Legislative Council. From 1966 to 1970, Hughes worked in the Lands Department on land tenure and public land administration.

He investigated ways in which customary land tenure in specific areas of Malaita, Western and Guadalcanal districts could be converted to registered title with rights to buy and sell land and grow crops. According to Hughes, much of the work done by the Lands Department in the 1960s failed to take root on land not already alienated due to fundamental disparities in the concepts of individual legal

ownership and collective customary ownership.

During this period, Hughes wrote topical plays and poems about the clash of Indigenous and European cultures, racism and social change. His poems, such as “Song for a Kazukuru Man” and “The Good Servant”, published under the pseudonym Garume Hite in the *Kakamora Reporter*, were sharp social commentaries. He wrote and directed a play, *Stranger at Borokua* (1969), which was also produced for radio. Future prime minister Solomon Mamaloni played a leading role in this and a second play, *This Man: A Story of Melanesia* (1970), written with Hughes’s good friend Francis Bugotu, which was later made into a film.

The stage production of *This Man* brought him together with Kuria Paia. They married in Kiribati in August 1971 before the birth of their first daughter, Zima. The following year they adopted twin girls, Leah and Sarah, born in 1968 to Kuria’s sister, Zinia; their son, Alec, was born in 1980. Returning to Honiara in 1973, Kuria became YWCA General Secretary and was awarded an MBE for her services in 1984.

During the 1970s Tony Hughes rose to become a senior technocrat. After attending a course in 1970 at Bradford University (UK) on project planning in developing countries, he was transferred to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (which became the independent nations of Kiribati in 1979 and Tuvalu in 1978), working as Development Secretary and Financial Secretary, and serving as a member of the Executive Committee and Legislative Committee from 1970 to 1972.

Hughes held a series of senior BSIP government positions leading up to Independence in 1978, including Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs and Local Government (1973-74) and Head of Planning (1974-75), responsible for developing five-year plans and controls on foreign aid and development programs. From 1976 to 1981, he was Secretary for Finance and led negotiations in Honiara and London on financial and institutional arrangements for independence.

Hughes was sacked as permanent secretary in 1981 by his former lead actor and then prime minister, Solomon Mamaloni, who disliked expatriates and was impatient for localisation. Finance minister Bart Ulufa’alu, with whom Hughes got on well, appointed him head of the Solomon Islands Monetary Authority from 1981 to 1982, the precursor to the fledgling country’s Central Bank (CBSI). As governor of CBSI from 1982 to 1993, he played a vital role in maintaining economic discipline domestically and externally. The autonomous status of the bank protected Hughes from several attempts to sack him for insisting that the government comply with financial regulations.

His appointment as Central Bank governor owed much to his good relationship with the finance minister and his experience in finance and planning. At CBSI, he developed his expertise in international finance and development policy, which prepared him for his next career. His professional knowledge, cogent analysis and fluent writing made his reports on economic problems practical and readable.

His third career, as an international consultant, began at the age of 56. In this capacity he wrote numerous reports on economic and development prospects in Pacific island states, as well as a book, *A Different Kind of Voyage: Development and Dependence in the Pacific Islands* (1998/2013). In his book Hughes reviewed political and economic prospects in the Pacific, concluding that orthodox models of competitive global markets made little sense in independent small island-states unable to control the direction, speed and modalities of economic and social change.

His publications include articles and book chapters on land tenure, development policy, government finance and transnational corporations. After the chaos of the Mamaloni governments in the 1990s, Hughes advised the Ulufa'alu government from 1997 on economic reform and negotiations with foreign donors, who supported their efforts, until an armed coup toppled the government in June 2000. He wrote an account of the failed reform process and the history of the social unrest that led to the coup, "Lessons from a False Dawn" (unpublished, 2001).

He was an outspoken opponent of corruption and was the founding chairperson of Transparency Solomon Islands in 2002. A trenchant critic of unsustainable logging, he became a director of a local sustainable forestry company and established a forestry plantation at his homestead in the Vona Vona lagoon, New Georgia.

Hughes always had a clear grasp of bigger macro-economic issues, based on his experience as a development technocrat, CBSI governor and regional consultant. His analysis pointed to a complex web of factors to explain the disappointing economic performance in Pacific island countries, including rapid population growth, export market fluctuations, weak financial and administrative cultures, fiscal and balance of payments crises, increasing corruption and the decay of decentralised services.

He noted the political realities of winning elections and forming coalition government that require deal-making and extracting funds to distribute to kinsmen and key players. According to Hughes, political leaders and public servants had become increasingly tainted by corruption, cronyism, nepotism and hoarding in offshore bank accounts.

In a very active retirement, Tony lived at his homestead in Vona Vona Lagoon, on his wife's land. He conducted over 30 consultancies in a dozen Pacific island countries for a range of regional institutions, including the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the University of the South Pacific and international donors and agencies such as AusAID, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. From 1994 to 1999, he was Regional Economic Adviser in the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Office in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

He was a visiting fellow at the Development Policy Centre, Australian National University from 2013 to 2018, and wrote **several important essays**. He organised and brought together senior development practitioners and bureaucrats in two symposiums, "**What We've Learned about Development in Pacific Island Countries**" (2013) and "**PNG at 40**" (2016).

He declined an OBE in 1980, which he considered insufficient recognition for his contributions over nearly two decades. This may well have cost him the chance of a knighthood in later years, although he was awarded the Cross of Solomon Islands (CSI).

In his final years old age and illness ended his professional work. He continued to live and care for the homestead he and Kuria had established over 30 years, complete with plantation forest, jetties, flower and vegetable gardens, community store, small church, and now, his final resting place. He is survived by Kuria, four children, and many more grandchildren.

Rest in peace Bigman.

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Christopher Chevalier completed his PhD in 2021 at the School of Sociology, ANU. Christopher's research background is in qualitative social research and his current interests are oral history in Solomon Islands and understanding Pacific historiography.

#### **Clive Moore**

Clive Moore is Emeritus Professor in History at the University of Queensland. In 2005 he was awarded a Cross of Solomon Islands for his work on Solomon Islands history.

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