

MALAITA ISLAND LANDSCAPE

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The contrast between the low atolls of Micronesia and the rugged mountainous islands of the Solomons is immense (Fig.6). Malaita is 120 miles long by over 20 miles in breadth, and elevations of two to four thousand feet are typical along the crests of its northwest-southeast trending ridges (Fig.8). Downfolds of the rocks are reflected in somewhat lower elevations in the Fauambu and Takataka Synclines, part of the latter forming Maramasike Passage between the island of the same name and Malaita. More subdued terrain develops on the interior areas of volcanic rocks, but the surrounding limestones and chalks are crumpled into folds and dissected into jagged ridges following the strike of the folds. Limited areas of coastal plain are developed on alluvial outwash or raised coral reefs.

Few climate records exist in this area, but the luxuriant growth of tropical rainforest covering almost the entire island is ample evidence of rainfall well over 100 inches. Much of the precipitation quickly disappears below the surface in porous limestone areas, however, and stream beds are said to be choked with boulders and even dry except immediately following heavy rains.

It is evident that a large, well-watered island such as Malaita could be expected to support many times the population of the sparse atolls far to the north - and indeed it does. On the other hand crude population density is misleading in an area of rugged and at times barren terrain, particularly when edaphic conditions also may be unfavorable to agriculture. An obvious first requirement toward appreciating the true potentiality of Malaita for support of its inhabitants and for an understanding of

its present and potential problems of land tenure lies in an accurate measurement of the extent, distribution, and quality of arable land.

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