



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

# State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

## TRADITION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

### 'I FUTA HELU

Customs or cultural traditions may be defined as those forms of behaviour (activities, beliefs, values) which change so slowly that they give the impression of not changing at all, and are so because they are promoted throughout society. The complete set of such forms of behaviour for a given social group or whole society is the culture of that group or society.

Traditions or customs are those ways of doing things which work in a particular geographic or social environment—they promote a society's interests and facilitate the achievement of common goals. Some customs travel but many do not: cultural traditions may cease to work in their own society, or be rejected by former adherents if there have been radical changes in locality or conditions. More often than not, however, people continue to activate old customs even when these customs have long ceased to be fulfil a social function in homes or in a new setting.

There are two types of cultural tradition. The first is those that promote the general welfare of the group or community as a whole such as sharing and cooperation. These 'benign' customs are nearly strategies for survival in resource-poor environments, as in the words of a proverb: *Me'a si'i, femolimoli'i; me'a lahi, takitaha kai'* (food in scarcity you must always share; in abundance, though, you need not care). As

society expands in terms of membership, space and structure, things become more complex and a new category of traditional practices begins to emerge.

These constitute our second class of customs and values and their function is to maintain or consolidate the power of the ruling élite. An example of this are political cultural traditions such as the *kava* ceremony which shows through the positioning of the participants how power is distributed (and should remain so) in a community, and how food and other resources should be shared or distributed. In the *kava* ceremony, while the beverage is being prepared, food in the form of cooked pork, sugar cane, or ripe bananas, is also distributed. But only the participating chiefs and their ceremonial attendants get a share, with the largest portion going to the highest-ranking chief, and so on. The commoners, who do all the work on such occasions, get very little or miss out altogether. Such rituals are object lessons or social theatre aimed at showing precisely where power lies.

These two types of customs and values exist in all societies which have attained a certain level of complexity. The particular customs or traditions may vary from society to society due mainly to differences in environment and evolutionary history. Taken together, they are simply ways in which particular communities

can smoothly function in particular environments. They start as required tasks and required constraints necessary for the survival of the community. However, as society becomes increasingly complex, conflicting demands clash more brutally in the social arena. The 'winning' demands become subsequently known as rights (rights are demands which can be made good). Cultural traditions may have the social force of law, though they are not technically legal. But law in the judicial or Benthamite sense is contingent on there being a recognised set of natural rights in the first place.

Let me finish off this section by mentioning, following V.S. Naipaul and Edward Said, what is called universal culture. Universal culture and universal values, as their names imply, are not peculiar to any one community or society but are the property of everyone and every community. Universal culture is a recent development in universal history, and became more defined as humankind's moral nature became more understood. It is a set of values designed to vouchsafe human survival not merely in a specific environment but as a passenger on Spaceship Earth. This characteristic of universal culture comes out most clearly in the meaning of the latest addition to this universal set of values human rights, which is not the rights of an individual vis-à-vis his/her tribe, or the individual versus the nation-state, but the rights of a new kind of individual, the global individual. Universal culture has been largely defined by the great moral and political philosophers of the West as well as the great world religions. Like a mighty river, it has been fed by many tributaries. In the moral field, its most characteristic values are justice, tolerance and human rights; in the intellectual field, truth and objectivity; and in the artistic realm, beauty and permanence.

### **GOOD GOVERNANCE**

Governance is now understood as the overall sociopolitical order that results from the

interaction of a number of official and non-official actors (Larmour 1996a). The literature on governance (Williamson and Ouchi 1981, Kooiman and Van Vliet 1993, Young 1994) typically analyses the multiple forms of order that arise in different market situations, and within intergroup dealings in a given political framework. The World Bank (1993) stresses an order arising out from proper management of a country's economic and social resources and advises states to be 'market-friendly' but not leave the field altogether. Kooiman and Van Vliet (1993) state that governance is a structure or order that grows out of the interactions of 'a multiplicity of governing and each-other-influencing actors' (quoted in Larmour 1996a:2). Research at the Australian National University's National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) has identified three meanings of governance: governance as capacity, as democracy, and as coordination (Larmour 1996a).

The concept of governance is a relatively new introduction into development research and related studies and can still provoke surprise in those who are used to the idea that representative government or democracy covers what governance is now said to signify. But the idea of governance goes beyond the concept of democracy and encompasses another layer of representation on top of (representative) government. A common justification for the appropriateness of the governance model in Melanesia is that Melanesia has what are termed 'weak states'. These are states which are organisationally weak, functionally ineffective and ethically suspect according to some societal values, but nevertheless internationally recognised (Larmour 1996a).

If the governance model is to be used to tackle the problem of Melanesia's 'weak states', we have to ensure that

- the democratic foundation of the state in Melanesia is not thereby weakened
- gross duplication in efforts and resource expenditure does not occur, for wastage would weaken the economic base of these island countries



- it does not lead to a more chaotic situation in Melanesia than is currently the case.

There is another side to the whole issue. One of the reasons for opting for democratic and modern forms of governments in Melanesia and Polynesia was to avoid perpetuating traditional polities which gave no primacy to universal customs or values like justice and human rights. The introduction of governance in the sense explained may provide an opening for such illiberal polities to have a field day again. When international agencies such as the World Bank and USAID made 'governance' a central feature of their development assistance policies, good governance was largely equated with democratic practices, including transparency of policymaking and administration. The more recent policy-related research at the NCDS has argued that good governance in the Pacific region should encompass 'democracy and coordination as well as capacity' (Larmour 1996a). But democracy in the region primarily means universal franchise and related powers and in general democracy has come, in modern times, to emphasise rights more than justice in the sense of fairness in the distribution of social goods and power. I propose that we adapt the given definition of governance so that the requirement of justice is explicit. It shall then read as follows: governance is a just, free, social order emerging from the interplay of state and non-state actors.

This re-definition of governance involves further responsibility. Communities must not only exhibit socioeconomic security but also social justice regarding all issues that matter in the life of people. So to Ostrom's 'design principles' as listed by Larmour (1996a:5), I would add a principle of fair share which should apply not only to resource but also to 'non-resource' issues.

What is the role of the state in this model? Possibly the most important function of the state is the administration of justice. Apart from 'defence' in Adam Smith's 'three functions of the sovereign', the other two (policing and the

construction of beneficial public works) can be regarded as aspects of this most important of state functions. Here 'administration of justice' is taken broadly to mean the creation and maintenance of the social context for equal and unprejudiced access to all social goods—wealth, opportunity, self-respect, and power. The state thus emerges as the leading actor among all involved in governance, and therefore has a special status. It is this function which gives the state its moral authority rather than Weber's 'legitimate use of violence'.

## CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND GOVERNANCE

Traditional customs have to be used to promote social cohesion, economic security and justice for good governance. 'Political' values or customs are riddled with elements of oppression and injustice, while humanitarian customs have the potential for exploitation and opportunism. If the former can be effectively modified and the latter protected against abuse, they would be ideal for the purposes of governance since they would fit the social grain of island cultures better.

However there are problems with using traditional customs. Political customs and ideals, for example, are the handiwork of the chiefly classes everywhere in Melanesia and Polynesia who will fight to maintain them in their 'pure' form. Yet even in this area changes can and have been introduced by the 'lower orders' of society. An example of these changes in Tonga relates to that symbol *par excellence* of Tongan culture, the abovementioned *kava* ceremony. Commoner classes have, over time, standardised an informal *kava* party which includes no chiefs. The positioning of the participants then has no significance, and the whole aim is to freely and openly discuss topical issues and indeed any subject under the sun. This informal *kava* is the most effective vehicle for political discourse in Tonga today. Often *fono* (*kava* food) is equitably distributed during the session in contrast with traditional practice.

## ANOTHER TRIANGULAR MODEL

I am inspired to present a triangular model of governance of my own following Larmour's use of Polanyi's forms of integration (Larmour 1996b). My version derives from ideas that have been around for sometime (especially Rimoldi 1996). While Larmour's model has the virtue of being applicable not only on the macro but also on the micro level, my model is to be applied to society as a whole only.

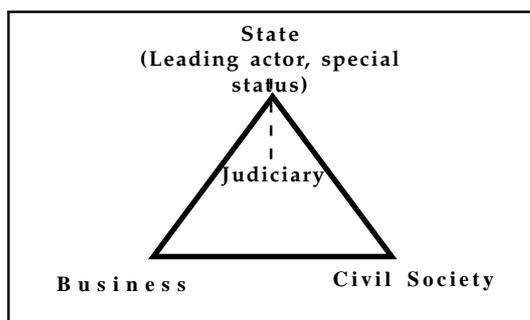


Figure 1 A model of governance

In this scenario, the judiciary is given some kind of primacy for although the judiciary is part of the democratic state it is special in that

- (a) it is not democratically constituted since its membership is strictly based on a special type of competence
- (b) it is one, if not the, most important of state instruments in the administration of justice
- (c) it interprets and defines the nature and limits of state power, and, in that sense is an institution to which the state defers in a way it does not to other institutions.

Business, in this model, includes only those that materially influence public policy. Civil society includes small business persons, farmers, the clergy, teachers and others not regarded as having a formal function in the state. It also includes the educated élite (academics, students, scholars) who are the life and soul of civil society.

The first general point I wish to make in relation to this model is that it seems to me that most discussion of civil society *vis-à-vis* the state in the past had paid only lip-service to the

interests of civil society. This erosion of civil society's role has intensified by the new economic orthodoxy that requires everyone to cooperate in the strengthening of the private sector. If this succeeds, civil society in the Pacific islands countries will experience a further weakening. It could kill it altogether. In developed countries, where the private sector's has been dominant for some time, civil society is at least propped up by a self-conscious, critical, and militant educated élite, and by socioeconomic and legal structures designed to ensure that the interests of the civil society are cared for. But in Melanesia and Polynesia these institutions are either still very undeveloped or not properly implemented. At the same time, economic development is proceeding apace, accompanied by the vigorous growth of the business sector which is further aided by open-door policies fostering extreme corruption in high places and elsewhere. The future of civil society in Melanesia and Polynesia is bleak indeed. And this is not helped by the vocational, skills-based type of education promoted by the main institutions of the Pacific islands, the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of the South Pacific. Vocational training is not going to provide educated élites with the critical apparatus needed for rejuvenating civil society to stand up for its rights *vis-à-vis* big business and a heavy-handed state.

The same kind of policies are being implemented in Australia by the present Liberal government, and it has signalled a time of suffering for civil society. There has not been much of a reaction from the academic arm of the civil society. It seems to me that the educated élite in Australia has lost its vitality and sense of social mission. Not only will Australian civil society suffer, but the islands' educated elites will take the situation here as a model.

The second point is that I come from a country which, in modern times, has never had a civil society worth speaking of. It has always been very weak or non-existent. This has been largely due to the special relationship between



the state and culture in Tonga: Tonga is the state, Tonga is the culture—our culture is the nation. This is in sharp contrast to the West where the state exists independently of culture (or cultures). The case of the former Yugoslavia comes to mind, but closer to home we have Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands with their multiple cultures, which tend to balance each other out. In the case of Fiji two (or possibly more) cultures—Fijian and Indian—coexist. But the present government seems to be trying to bring the state closer to one (Fijian culture), while distancing the state from the other (Indian culture). So Fiji is partly like Tonga and partly like Papua New Guinea.

Political centralisation, in fact, has been stronger in Tonga than anywhere else in the Pacific. This is opposite of what is happening in Bougainville where people are trying to set up a state along the lines of traditional chiefdoms. There is no direct influence of culture on the state as is the case with Tonga where the state is at the people's doorsteps, and the central government is informed by culture. This has never been the case in Papua New Guinea where the state can be said to be 'strange' to the people. (Incidentally, in pre-communist China, though Imperial rule was really horrific at times, there was centralised power but no centralised ideology. However, in Mao's China and Lenin's Russia there were both centralised power and a centralised ideology. The ideology in both these cases was not part of traditional culture but introduced political doctrines.) This situation, then, where state and culture (or power and ideology) come together is inimical to the development of a dynamic civil society. And this is a signal to us to be always cautious in our handling of culture and customs in relation to both governance and government.

The Tongan case is related to the fact that Tonga was never formally colonised. It was, therefore, easy—and now seems to be the natural tendency—for the state in Tonga to harness culture for its own ends. It seems now that the trend is for Pacific island states, as they increasingly become conscious of selfhood and

independence, to go in the same direction as Tonga in assimilating culture and transforming it into state ideology.

If we want a more balanced kind of governance, then, we must see civil society as equally significant and indispensable in the sociopolitical scheme, just as the state and business are. We must evaluate state policies in terms of their potential impact on civil society. We must always bear in mind that a viable civil society is the logical and natural counterweight for the state–business relationship and that civil society must always be given leeway to perform this balancing act. Alternatively, this composite sector, unlike the monolithic state and business sectors, has a watchdog role. A vibrant civil society provides criticism, opposition and protest whenever state policy or business influence threaten the rights of citizens, most importantly the right of equal access to social goods. Just as the state is the leading actor in our governance model and has a special status as administrator of justice, so the intellectual as critic and watchdog has a special role to play in civil society.

## REFERENCES

- Ambrose, D. 1996. *A Coup That Failed? Recent political events in Vanuatu*. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 96/3, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Helu, 'I.F. 1995. Civil Society, public lecture, 'Atenisi University (unpublished).
- 1982. Tongan traditional values and introduced morality, seminar paper, Pacific Island Students Union, University of Auckland, (unpublished).
- Kooiman, J. and M. Van Vliet, 1993. 'Governance and public management', in K. Eliassen and J. Kooiman (eds), *Managing Public Organizations: lessons from contemporary European experience*, Sage, London:58–72.
- Larmour, P., 1996a. *Research on Governance in Weak States in Melanesia*, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 96/1, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- 1996b. *Models of Governance and Development Administration*, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 96/2, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Pond, W. 1997. Comments on Rimoldi 1997, (Unpublished).
- Rimoldi, 1997. The State and Civil Society, 'Atenisi ex-students Conference, Auckland University, January 1997, (unpublished).
- Williamson, O. and W. Ouchi, 1981. 'The markets and heirarchies perspective: origins, implications, prospects', in A. Van de Ven and W.F. Joyce, eds, *Assessing Organizational Design and Performance*, Wiley, New York.
- World Bank, 1993. *Governance: the World Bank's experience*, World Bank, Washington DC.
- Young, O., 1994. *International Governance: protecting the environment in a stateless society*,