State Society and Governance in Melanesia

INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE IN MELANESIA

INTRODUCTION

Along with recent widely publicized problems of Melanesian states comes renewed interest in "customary modes of governance." Although talk of custom now flows easily in discussions of political reform in the region, few of these discussions make any serious use of the extensive anthropological literature on the politics of "tradition." The fact that custom now crosses lines of academic and policy discourse raises the question of how such concepts might be useful for policymakers and others looking for practical interventions in the notoriously weak states of the region. With that in mind, this paper offers a brief overview of issues and themes emerging from Melanesian studies that bear on current concerns with "indigenous governance." My strategy for doing so is to discuss a recent case of political innovation in Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands. Drawing on my own research in Santa Isabel, I ask what issues and questions emerging in that locale may be relevant for other local systems in Melanesia.

The challenge of the topic of indigenous governance is that there is both too much and too little already written on the subject. Issues of traditional leadership have long been a topic of research in Melanesia. There is a large literature on "chiefs", "big men", and the various forms of power characteristic of Melanesian communities. There is also a surfeit of writing on the problems of the state in the region, much of it concerned with problems of decentralization or strategies for connecting central government with local communities.

What is missing are studies that focus on points of intersection between local cultural practices and state institutions. Despite a century of response and adaptation to state power, we know little about the ways customary practices actually articulate with government institutions. One of the ongoing puzzles in Solomon Islands, for example, is the fact that traditional leaders, "chiefs," have been a topic of national interest and debate for decades with almost no real political reform that brings them into the machinery of government. The lack of accommodation in this area signals deeper problems in linking

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indigenous practices with the apparatus of the state.

One reason for this apparent gap in policy research is that questions of "culture" or "tradition" are often taken for granted or set aside as hopelessly fuzzy—too vague to inform policymaking. Development workers often wish to skip over abstract talk of "culture" and get down to the serious business of institution building. There are good reasons for this impatience. Both sides of this relationship—custom the one hand and the state on the other—are almost always in flux, shifting from one historical moment to the next. Far from the timeless "tradition" imagined in simpler visions of indigenous societies, the active production and reproduction of models of tradition is as historical as any form of political change.

From another vantage point, dealing with "culture" can be dangerous in that it is often the site for struggles over power. And when the political aspects of tradition are overt, its legitimacy may be suspect. Some observers see contemporary expressions of tradition as tainted with modern elements. Thus when the word "tradition" is placed in quotes it implies some form of less real or authentic tradition. Anthropological debates on these issues however have come around to recognizing that tradition is always a product of adaptation and innovation. Thus, Christian practices in many Melanesian communities today are thoroughly traditional. Whether or not tradition incorporates modern elements or is used as a political tool, it often references practices that are highly valorized as expressions of local identity. To dismiss them is to overlook some of the most basic causes of disconnection between governmental institutions and local realities.

The case of Santa Isabel is useful as a way to tease out problems that arise around issues of local governance in the broader Melanesian region, even in the face of intense local diversity. There is little solid ground upon which to assert strong generalizations about "Melanesia"—a region renowned for its diversity above all else. But the exercise is nonetheless important for the Melanesian states as they pose questions about the interface of localized practices and national institutions. Hence I begin with a brief overview of some of the social and demographic features of island Melanesia that do suggest a framework for some degree of comparability in discussions of governance across local polities. I then offer a capsule look at the somewhat distinctive situation on Santa Isabel, in order to ground subsequent discussion of the significance of local traditional leaders (called "chiefs" in the case of Santa Isabel) for institutions of contemporary governance.

"GOVERNANCE"?

Anthropologists are famous for suggesting that some key term or concept doesn't exist in the cultures they study. And so it is useful to remind ourselves that the concept of "governance," with all of its contemporary associations, is also imported with the machinery of Western government. The term 'governance' is so much a part of common parlance that it is easy to forget that it has a specific history and institutional location. In the Pacific talk of good governance emerges in efforts to explain the failure of the first wave of post-independence aid during the 1980s and 90s. The language of governance derives from the problems of donor agencies concerned to monitor and evaluate the flow of resources across national borders—not from the problems of rural communities.

The term governance, along with its ancillary concepts of "transparency" and "accountability," have their origins in the impulse to transfer the best practices of (Western) bureaucratic administration to developing (nonWestern) states. All of this vocabulary rests on assumptions about bureaucratic rationality and principles of public administration that may or may not have meaning in the worlds of indigenous political culture. Recognizing that we should be suspicious of any rigid separation of the "modern" and the "traditional," it is important not to lose sight of the fact that we are applying concepts that carry ideological baggage (cf., Schoeffel and Turner 2003; Wairiu 2005).

THE MELANESIAN CONTEXT: SOURCES OF (IN)STABILITY

I begin this overview with a short reflection summarizing some of the relevant social and cultural features of Melanesian societies evident in the (mostly anthropological) literature on the region. The discussion is relevant to "independent Melanesia," by which I mean Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (setting aside Fiji due to the exceptional nature of its mixed population and national politics).

Although dauntingly diverse, the independent states of Melanesia share certain commonalities that justify a regional approach to issues of governance. The states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are all resource-rich countries composed of diverse indigenous groups living in rural communities with more-or-less intact subsistence economies and more-or-less egalitarian political systems. To this (oversimplified) list, it is possible to add Christianity, especially for Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. What are the implications of these broad characteristics for discussions of governance?

A. RURAL. Despite increasing rates of urbanization, the Melanesian states are overwhelming rural in character—over 80% of the population in Solomon Islands. While the dispersed, rural character of Melanesia poses difficulties of transportation and communication, it also implies a land base that supports viable subsistence economies. Most rural communities continue to maintain a level of self-sufficiency that has proven important in periods of economic crisis. The misalignment between the rural location of the majority of the population and the urban concentration of state power in central government offices underlies the constant interest in decentralization—a regular theme in Melanesian political debate since independence. Equally important to the rural character of Melanesian life is the increasing importance of "town" and the high rates of urban/rural circulation, linking commercial centers with rural peripheries.

B. SMALL-SCALE. The renowned ethnolinguistic diversity of Melanesian countries is a significant feature of political organization. This is important not only for cultural reasons but for the sheer fact of scale. Given that language groups vary in size from a few hundred to a few thousand people, political and administrative activity at the local level is always to some degree personal--conducted in a small-scale, face-to-face environment where politics are embedded in localized social structures. Given these demographic parameters, village meetings and public gatherings are the usual venue for local political discussion and decision-making. This is consistent with the oral character of indigenous Melanesian politics, where the things said and done in public spaces provide the memory of community life (see below).

C. DIVERSE. The ever-present reality of cultural difference results in heightened awareness of "custom" (traditional culture) as a basis for distinctive identities and local loyalties. Except perhaps for some urban youth, most citizens identify strongly with rural communities where they maintain ties to land and community based on relations of descent, residence, and marriage. These ties, sometimes referenced in Melanesian Pidgin as "wantok" identities, are often cited by urban dwellers as a source of burdensome obligations or intrusions into the operation of businesses and government offices. In a more positive light, these localized identities also provide a highly stable network of social ties that afford a kind of security net as well as networks useful in everyday economic activity.

D. EGALITARIAN. Melanesia is well known for its egalitarian principles. With a few notable exceptions, Melanesian societies do not exhibit marked forms of hierarchy in ranking, inherited titles, chiefly etiquette, and so forth. Although the diversity of the region makes generalization impossible, an important feature of most indigenous communities is adherence to egalitarian values that see power dependent on networks of exchange and personal reputation built up over time. This aspect of social organization is associated with consensus-style decision-making rather than reliance on positions or

authority or elite status. These features are summed up in concept of Melanesian "big man" as a kind of leader who operates in a personal, competitive environment and must continually demonstrate his success in public activities. It is also important to note that the ideal of egalitarian relations does not mean there are no structures of exclusion or subordination—issues that often arise today around the status of women, especially women moving into urban or national spheres of activity.

E. CHRISTIAN. Most of island and coastal Melanesia has been Christian for nearly a century. Recent decades have seen the rise of new evangelical churches and social movements. The importance of Christianity stems from its extensive integration with local cultural practices. Just as traditional religious life assumed that effectiveness in worldly activities is closely bound up with moral and spiritual power, so modern leaders in the church frequently combine forms of spiritual, moral, and political authority. Melanesian churches have been successful in building governance structures linking dispersed populations. Much of the early success in community building came as churches indigenized their own governance. In some instances Christianization has given rise to social movements and indigenous churches such as the Paliau Church in Manus or the Christian Fellowship Church in New Georgia.

Given the profile of Melanesian communities that emerges from these features, what sorts of political change might be expected with independence, as postcolonial political structures unfold? The first is widespread calls for recognizing the importance of traditional practices, of "custom." Second is the push for decentralization, in the form of political reforms that devolve certain powers of centralized government to local communities. Despite repeated attempts, workable modes of decentralized governance have been slow to emerge and in some cases the resulting uncertainty seems only to have made local communities more vulnerable to the pressures of globalization.

CRISES AND CUSTOM

Whereas the Melanesian region is characterized as an area of weak or failing states, it is also the Pacific region with the most robust subsistence economies and intact traditional communities. Not surprisingly, then, recent periods of state failure witnessed a rise of interest in custom and traditional leadership. The more dramatic crises of the state in recent years have called attention to the importance of the role of traditional leaders as public figures. Similar dynamics between states-in-crisis and traditional leadership are evident in many parts of the world, where international interventions seek to recognize traditional modes of authority in rebuilding state structures.

Even though the discourse of "failing" and "failed" states is somewhat new in Melanesia, the local view of gavman (government) as a distant presence with uncertain relevance for everyday life is not. It is arguable that the region's newly independent governments never succeeded in establishing a strong presence in rural communities. By comparison, churches have often enjoyed much greater prestige. The difference is symptomatic of the degree of disconnection between government and rural communities.

It may seem that recent moves to recognize traditional leaders are a predictable response to the inability of the state to maintain a presence in local communities. However, concern with the empowerment of local leaders has been a feature of Melanesian politics from the earliest moments of colonization. Recent crises simply underscore contradictions that have been there all along.

Historically, informal mechanisms of traditional leadership (including church leaders) have provided much of the organizational strength for local governance in Melanesia. With the dissolution of local government structures in parts of PNG and Solomon Islands during the 1980s and 90s, traditional leaders ("chiefs") and churches effectively became the primary means of local governance, providing a degree of integration and stability in uncertain times.

In Bougainville and Solomon Islands especially, political conflicts have evoked attempts to create new institutions of traditional leadership. In Bougainville, a system of local-level government based in large part on customary leadership was established by the Councils of Elders Act of 1996 (Regan 1998). In the Solomons, where the status of chief is not clearly defined, councils of chiefs and paramount chiefs have emerged to speak on behalf of constituencies ranging from whole islands to clusters of villages. During the Bougainville conflict, chiefs provided a locus of stability amidst the competing claims of local authorities, a rebel army, and the Papua New Guinea national government and Defense Force. There the crisis of legitimacy led to efforts to create Councils of Elders as customary forms of authority sanctioned by the structures of local governance (Regan 2002).

TAKING THE LOCAL SERIOUSLY

To ask questions about indigenous governance is to ask questions about cultural fit or compatibility. But as soon one refers to cultural practices in Melanesia, the question arises, 'which cultures?' For a region as diverse as Melanesia, there is little to say about any essential characteristics of traditional governance for the entire region. There is, however, much to say about the importance of taking the local seriously. In a region composed of small-scale rural communities and a patchwork of distinctive language groups, local institutions are highly valued. In this context, seeking regional models of governance runs the risk of reproducing approaches that again privilege the center over the rural periphery.

As Melanesia has gained the reputation of a region of failing states or an "arc of instability," the diversity of the region, evident in its large number of ethnic groups, is often identified as a primary source of instability. Political commentary by academics, policymakers, and journalists often reads conflict from an outside perspective, or from national centers. From this vantage point, conflict seems to flow from lines of difference within national populations. Ethnic pluralism equates with disunity, division and dispute. State-centric interpretations explain the Solomon Islands conflict in terms of inter-"ethnic" animosities let loose by the departure of colonial authorities or the inability of the centralized state to manage or resolve conflict. When seen from this perspective, the most commonly proposed solution is to strengthen central government as a means of holding the forces of disintegration together.

In this respect, the vantage point of (inter)national observers focusing on central government differs from that of citizens concerned with strengthening local leaders and communities. Phrasing the problems of national cohesiveness this way reveals an important difference in perspective between the view from rural locales and the vantage point of the national center. Where policy analysts see "primal" ethnic identities as disintegrating forces that require stronger state institutions to check or mediate their divisive tendencies, members of those communities see them as ancestral homes in need of protection from invasive forces of the global economy or the state. From the local perspective one is likely to hear more about legitimizing or empowering the local than in strengthening the institutions of the (central) state (Bolton 1999).

One of the central figures in these views from the periphery is that of the traditional leader, sometimes called "chief"— someone who mediates or stands between local and national spheres of activity or, as some would have it, traditional and modern (Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996).[1] With the heightened awareness of the importance of indigenous culture ("custom"), many communities in island Melanesia have formed bodies of traditional leaders to work within the state's structures of governance. As these efforts develop, they also expose a great deal of uncertainty about the status of "chiefs" and anxiety about the potential for new forms of exploitation under the guise of tradition (Wittersheim 2002). The argument put forward in this discussion paper is that analyzing and understanding the significance of traditional practices in this borderland between local communities and national institutions requires consideration of

indigenous cultural formations and the ways they have been adapted through colonial (and postcolonial) history. As an example of this, consider one such history of political appropriation and transformation from the island of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands.

SANTA ISABEL: CHIEFS, CHURCH, AND THE STATE THROUGH TIME

One way of describing the political history of Santa Isabel is as a series of episodes that attempt to redefine or readjust relations between local polities and encapsulating systems of power. Looking back at the twentieth century, it is possible to see these episodes as a sequence of interconnected political movements which begin with conversion to Christianity at the turn of the century, followed by efforts to resist the establishment of a colonial office on the island in 1918, a movement for political autonomy in the 1930s, the tumultuous events of World War II, and then a major anti-colonial movement leading finally to national independence in 1978. Following independence, the period of inter-ethnic violence on the island of Guadalcanal known as "the tension" constitutes another such epoch, along with the Australian-led intervention (RAMSI: Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) aimed at re-establishing stability and nation building (Hegarty et al 2004; Kabutaulaka 2005). In each of these moments, local chiefs in Santa Isabel have played an important role in mediating new developments, often themselves embodying issues and problems of the day as the status and significance of "chiefs" come under discussion.

The socio-demographic situation on Isabel is typical of the eastern islands of Melanesia. It is a large, fertile island with a sparsely settled population of about 25,000 residing in villages ranging in size from 50 to a few hundred. There are eight language groups on the island but nearly the entire population (96%) adheres to a single church, the Anglican Church of Melanesia. Isabel communities are relatively egalitarian with different levels of "chief" from the heads of extended families and clans to those who exert influence over the entire island. Chiefly status is obtained through some combination of ancestry and personal accomplishment (blurring the anthropological dichotomy of "big men" and "chiefs" (Sahlins 1963).

Historically traditional leaders received attention from missionaries and government officials who saw them as allies in their own projects and voiced interest in preserving their status and vitality. In the 1880s and 90s missionaries of the Melanesian Mission regarded chiefs as a strategic point of entry for the work of conversion. And, as it turned out, Christian chiefs proved to be important allies in promoting and maintaining the "new" Christian social order in the absence of government. Of particular importance during this era was the emergence of the status of "paramount chief"—a term used to describe the island-wide power acquired by the first powerful traditional leader to convert to Christianity whose on power and influence were magnified as he worked with the church to spread the "new life" throughout the entire island of Santa Isabel.

But once colonial government arrived in the early twentieth century, mission leaders regarded chiefs as a kind of antidote or counterweight to government--regarded as exploitative and subversive of the powerful alliance of chiefs and church leaders. With the arrival of a European district officer and the initiation of plans to collect taxes in 1921, the colonial administration became an increasingly intrusive force in local affairs. Not surprisingly, the Christian chiefs and catechists who already were well established as the dominant religious-political authorities in the island's newly formed Christian villages resisted these developments. They submitted protests to the Resident Commissioner through the offices of the Anglican bishop beseeching him to remove the "White Officer" and his arbitrary laws (White 1991: 188).

During the 1930s Anglican missionary Richard Fallowes encouraged discussion of new forms of empowerment and autonomy for Isabel communities. His efforts culminated in an inter-island movement in 1938 that sought to establish an indigenous "parliament." These efforts generated renewed interest in

the power of "traditional chiefs" as symbols of local autonomy—a theme that emerged again in the postwar Maasina Rule movement that challenged British rule following World War II's disruption of colonial status quo (Keesing 1992).

As Solomon Islanders began preparations for independence, Isabel leaders in both church and government discussed ways to build a new, island-wide framework for traditional governance. The centerpiece for these efforts involved the installation of a Paramount Chief as a kind of governor and the formation of a Council of Chiefs. From the time the first Paramount Chief idea first emerged in the late nineteenth century, the position of Paramount Chief has been an on-again, off-again affair, usually activated by the presence of an extraordinary individual capable of activating claims to island wide power.

In 1970s such an individual appeared in the person of the late Dudley Tuti, first Bishop of Santa Isabel. After he was installed as Paramount Chief in a lavish ceremony in 1975 he described the purpose of reviving traditional leadership and the meaning of the paramount chief position as follows:

> People ask me, 'what is your job as a paramount chief?' But my answer is this. (The) paramount chief is not yet completed. There are other people in every area, in every village who are chiefs in their right. People look up to them. . . . So those (chiefs) got to be recognized first. They are still here, but we are misled by the new election of members in the Council, head people in the districts. But you know them. In the village you know them. In the district you know them. So those people got to be brought back. (Dudley Tuti, 24 December 1975).

Having discussed ideas about the formation of a Council of Chiefs for some years, the Isabel Provincial Assembly finally passed a Resolution in 1984 creating the Isabel Council of Chiefs as an advisory body.

These developments in Santa Isabel were not happening in a vacuum. The mid-1980s were also a time when Parliament began a wide-ranging review of the structures of government, driven by discomfort over the lack of fit between the country's constitutional democracy and customary means for managing resources, allocating power, and resolving conflicts. In the 1980s Parliament undertook a broad-ranging constitutional review guided by several principles, one of which called for "the primacy of custom and indigenous authorities over Western-type institutions". A federal type system was proposed in which "each state would have a council of chiefs that would elect its governor and have advisory as well as executive functions. . ." (Ghai 1990:324).[2] National initiatives to promote roles for chiefs in government during this time included the 1985 amendment to the Local Courts Act, and a Provincial Government Review Committee that consulted widely throughout the country in 1986-1987.

It was in this context that Dudley Tuti retired as bishop to concentrate on his role as paramount chief. In speaking about the roles and functions of chiefs, he often talked about them in much the way they are described in the Provincial Assembly's 1984 resolution: "promoting unity," "taking care of land and custom," "organizing feasts and celebrations," and "promoting the work of church and government". (Tuti, May 16, 1990, tape recording in files of the author). During the 1980s and 1990s Tuti coordinated his efforts with government leaders in Parliament and in the Province to convene meetings of Isabel leaders to address a wide range of development issues. Issues of land (and sea) ownership were at the heart of these discussions—issues that are not only economically important, but speak to the heart of local identities. Although recurrent discussion of these issues in regional meetings often seem to produce few concrete developments, the sheer fact of these meetings, convened to discuss such matters indexed the power of local communities to represent and direct their futures.[3]

The efforts on Santa Isabel to create a Council of Chiefs or, as it is sometime phrased, to "revive" a "system of chiefs," call for a council composed of members from a list of districts (modeled on the map of local government districts). Each of these districts, in turn, has its own House of Chiefs composed of an indeterminate number of local leaders. According to the constitution

of the Isabel Council of Chiefs, each of the district level Houses of Chiefs select two leaders to sit on the Council of Chiefs. Given the demographic scale of Isabel politics, the local Houses of Chiefs, which in some cases have expanded to include upwards to sixty members, constitute a form of representation at the level of localized descent groups and even extended families.

This capsule sketch of the discourse of chiefs in Santa Isabel as it evolved during the twentieth century is essential for understanding current efforts at political reform. For example in 2003 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) launched a project in Santa Isabel aimed at institutional strengthening at the level of provincial and local government. While this initiative, the Isabel Province Development Project (IPDP) was driven in part by the problems of national politics in the Solomons, the stated interest of the UNDP Isabel project was to support traditional leaders and integrate them as much as possible in local government. Reviewing the political history of the island, it is apparent that such efforts have a long history.

CHIEFS, UNDP, AND POLITICAL (RE)FORM TODAY

During the period of violence known as the "tension" (1998-2002), the implosion of centralized government institutions and services led to renewed calls for decentralization and recognition of the power of provincial governments and traditional leaders to regulate their own affairs. In many areas, as in Bougainville to the north, traditional leaders responded to the situation of a failing state by exerting renewed influence in their own communities. In Isabel, with the longstanding efforts of Dudley Tuti as Paramount Chief to build a structure of chiefs councils, the pieces of a localized political structure had been emerging for decades. But that structure has never succeeded in gaining full recognition, neither at the level of the general population, nor in the institutions of government. What accounts for the uncertainty?

Given that the current Paramount Chief was installed nearly thirty years ago, and the Isabel Council of Chiefs (ICC) created in the 1980s, the elements for expanding or regularizing the role of traditional leadership in island governance would seem to be well in place. Yet the role of chiefs in government remains as uncertain as ever. Currently, as this paper is written, news bulletins from the island report ongoing efforts to appoint a new Paramount Chief, leader of the Council of Chiefs. Since there is no clear precedent for such appointments, current leaders in the chiefs' council invoke a combination of tradition and bureaucratic practice to create a process. Whether such a process will be seen as legitimate, with the power to install a paramount chief who speaks with island-wide authority, remains to be seen.

Although numerous leadership meetings in Santa Isabel have produced decisions concerning the role of chiefs, including a proposed constitution for the ICC, few of those proposals have ever been implemented. A report to the Council of Chiefs in 2000 noted that almost none of the chiefs were even aware of the 1984 resolution establishing the Isabel Council of Chiefs ("99.8% of the chiefs do not know or are not aware of the existence of the document and its use." (2.7.4, "Report Two." ICC meeting, Buala, June 2000). In June 2004, with the UNDP project as a catalyst, the Isabel Council of Chiefs convened its first meeting in four years.

Alongside this picture of uncertainty, concern for empowering chiefs is more evident than ever. The advent of the UNDP-supported Isabel Development Project refocused attention on the involvement of traditional leaders in local governance and generated a considerable amount of activity aimed at building institutions of traditional leadership. The project provided a "chiefs desk officer" working at the provincial headquarters, supported meetings to "appoint" chiefs to regional Houses of Chiefs, provided for outside consultation on the state of traditional institutions, and in 2004 sponsored a "chiefs study tour" that sent a delegation of five chiefs to visit Fiji and Vanuatu with the aim of learning firsthand about the way other countries have institutionalized bodies

of traditional leadership within the overall matrices of national government.

The UNDP project also sought to strengthen the longstanding cooperation between the state (provincial government), the church (Church of Melanesia) and chiefs—a tripartite relationship that came to be called the "tripod." The structural fit between institutions of church and state on Santa Isabel—unique for an island its size—has long been a feature of political discourse and now fosters a view of governance as involving three-way cooperation between the church, the state and chiefs. As the latest attempts to institutionalize the Isabel Council of Chiefs have taken shape, the parties to the tripod have tried to regularize their relationship with meetings between the leaders of the three bodies (the provincial premier, diocesan bishop, and paramount chief). In 2005 they also signed an agreement to cooperate in areas of mutual interest, including a trust fund to be administered jointly by all three members of the tripod.

These efforts to empower traditional leaders raise questions about the effects of linking chiefs with government. Attempts to incorporate chiefs in structures of government run the risk of changing the nature of chiefs and the way they are viewed in local communities. What happens to leadership practice when one attempts to formalize the informal? Does legislating custom diminish its indigenous authority? How will government efforts to strengthen the role of chiefs in governance change peoples' views of traditional leadership?

Incorporating chiefs in the framework of government may have the effect of creating a new kind of chief who is more like a government official, based on appointment to a position rather than on a history of involvement with people in local communities. Recent surveys report people making a distinction between "real" chiefs and others who don't command the knowledge and respect that derives from a history of relationship with local groups. For example, from the 2003 consultation on constitutional reform: "Lack of respect for chiefs is result of "new" practice of appointing chiefs in non-traditional ways." (p 24)

A consultation on constitutional reform in Solomon Islands undertaken in 2003 revealed the dilemma facing Isabel chiefs quite clearly. On the one hand, it showed that there is widespread support for empowering chiefs so that they may be more active and effective in local governance. On the other hand, efforts to formalize the status of chiefs through appointments are sometimes seen as a departure from custom that may lead to lack of respect or abuse of power or both. For example: "Concern of the People. . . .They abuse their chiefly status for their own financial gains and pleasure." (Report of Provincial Government Review Committee to the 1999 Isabel Leaders Convention, p. 6).

This conundrum poses the question 'What are the risks for the category of "chief" of incorporating traditional leaders within the frames of the state? Is it possible to do so without changing the meaning of "chief" into a bureaucratic position based more on appointment than indigenous knowledge and reputation?'

The death of Dudley Tuti in 2006 has produced another period of uncertainty, with yet unknown implications for (re)producing the status and power of Paramount Chief and traditional leaders generally. The idea of Paramount Chief emerged again in the 1970s in large measure because of the charisma and personal reputation of Dudley Tuti, former Bishop and ranking leader from the Western part of the island. His installation as Paramount Chief in 1975 did as much to recreate the status of Paramount Chief as the title did to bestow power upon him. In this current historical moment, with calls for federalism and recognition of customary leaders, there is a favorable environment for recognizing a new Paramount Chief. On the other hand, the absence of an individual whose personal biography garners authority across the island suggests that moves to appoint such a person could be an empty gesture. Why this uncertainty? To what extent can lessons from the predicament of Isabel's traditional leaders be generalized to other parts of Melanesia?

MODES OF INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

In line with the generalized portrait of

small-scale egalitarian societies, political power in Melanesia is traditionally personal and local—embedded in relations with land and kin groups. This is the image of the Melanesian "big-man"—a person whose authority derives in some measure from personal reputation. In practice leaders combine both positional and personal factors (such as the sons and nephews of powerful leaders who may gain advantage through inheritance of knowledge and resources).

The scale of politics in Melanesian communities implies that leaders first gain recognition in relation to groups the size of extended families and lineages. They then expand their power through a variety of means such as traditional exchange practices and/or activity in business, church, and government. Historically, involvement in Christian churches has provided an important avenue for developing leadership status that combines practical, spiritual, and moral qualities—a desirable combination in light of indigenous models of leadership that did not separate religious and political authority.

The traditional emphasis on qualities of the person implies that reputation and influence will develop over time as a person participates in community events and activities. Political legitimacy and influence are acquired through successful activity and demonstrated in public events such as feasts, ceremonies, and celebrations. These activities provide occasions for publicly validating leadership status and and building a personal history in the community.

The person-centered style of traditional leadership has several implications for governance. Those who leave the community for education and/or wage labor remove themselves from the local scene for a period of time and thereby diminish their knowledge of place, as well as their own history of involvement. Depending upon their interest and ability to re-engage with local affairs, they may or may not be able to acquire the knowledge and alliances that underwrite leadership status. The effect of this over time has been to produce a new class of leaders whose influence derives in large measure from position and success in the wider cash economy. Such individuals may take on the title of "chief," but lack the usual attributes of "traditional leaders."

In line with the egalitarian character of most societies, political action is highly participatory, worked out in group discussions, village meetings, and public gatherings of all sorts. The scale of Melanesian social organization implies that all adults ideally have a voice in matters of significance to their community (or have a representative who may speak on behalf of their collective interest). Councils of chiefs (or 'elders') formed in districts or wards are usually made up of representatives for every major lineage or extended family.

The most pressing need for traditional leadership today stems from the problem of land disputes—a problem made worse by mining and forestry projects. Land disputes have increased sharply in recent decades and can only be dealt with on the basis of local knowledge and power. As a result, all parties concerned, from court officials to local community members, look to traditional leaders to find ways to resolve them. The ability to speak as a landowner and regulate land use in the interest of landowning groups is a core feature of traditional leadership. In many areas there is strong desire to institutionalize some kind of traditional means for dealing with land disputes in order to facilitate commercial land development.

Land issues have both economic importance as well as symbolic and emotional significance for people who find their identity in the land. Local knowledge of genealogies and local histories underpins management of land and land disputes. This type of knowledge is closely guarded—not part of any public record. While many aspects of genealogy and history are now written down, a great deal of local knowledge is only expressed orally. (As a practical matter, rates of literacy in the region are low (20-30%) and possibly declining.)

Much of the power of traditional leaders is based on knowledge passed on within families and descent lines. The oral basis of knowledge provides a means of protection by restricting who has the power to talk about certain private or tabu subjects. The guarded nature of traditional knowledge, particularly

genealogical knowledge, may clash with the drive to produce a transparent public record of major decisions and commitments.

The fact that knowledge of land histories and genealogies is both oral and guarded poses significant problems for resolving land disputes. The more embedded a person is in the conflict under discussion (through relationships with the disputants) the less eligible he or she is to act as a mediator, as someone not already aligned. These problems have led to the creation of courts, panels, and tribunals made up of respected local leaders who have the personal reputation and generalized local knowledge that lend their decision local legitimacy.

Oral practices allow a degree of ambiguity that can be important in sustaining social relations in the face of local conflicts, such as competing claims to land. A great deal of local knowledge is regulated with rules that make up a system of traditional "copyright"—informal but increasingly the focus for international legal regimes designed to protect indigenous rights.

The primacy of oral discourse for indigenous governance raises a number of practical questions about the compatibility of local political culture and governmental practices that require documentation and codification. To what extent can the mostly oral politics of Melanesian communities articulate with the bureaucratic demands of government agencies that require written record-keeping?

LEVELS OF GOVERNANCE

If customary governance in Melanesia points toward engagement with the local, it becomes necessary to ask, 'How can cultural practices articulate with governmental institutions at different levels of the state, from rural district to province to nation?' There are numerous types of traditional leadership that vary in scope of authority. At the most local level, recognized leaders, including both men and women, act as representatives of families and kin groups who trace common ancestry and share ownership (stewardship) of land and sea. It is this level of identity, established

through common descent, that determines primary rights to land and sea. In most cases it is only leaders of landowning descent groups who are authorized to speak about land.

At this level, traditional leaders are recognized on the basis of their position and activity in the contexts of family, lineage, and clan. As the head of an extended family or lineage, traditional leaders possess valuable group knowledge, represent group interests in exchanges and interactions with others, and frequently act as mediator and peacemaker in dealing with local conflicts. Given the shared interests of members of the same family or descent group, fewer questions arise at this level about the accountability of a leader among his or her constituents. Yet, just as mining and logging projects have divided groups in land ownership disputes, they may create divisions and conflicts within groups if leaders do not distribute royalties paid to them as representatives.

The term "chief" is used widely in island Melanesia to refer to leaders of larger groups at the level of a village or district. The title "paramount chief"—a term that in many cases has modern (colonial) origins—is generally used to designate claims to wider regional or island-wide leadership. Regional influence is established through activities that bring people together across descent groups or residential areas—traditional activities such as large feasts and exchanges, as well as more contemporary engagements in business, church, and state.

A traditional leader's authority to speak on behalf of other landowning groups in his or her area is circumscribed by rules of descent. Whereas cash payments to group representatives may create divisions and rivalry, such practices also provide aspiring leaders with resources through which to expand their influence. Increasingly access to the cash economy is a necessary means to enter into exchange relations and act as a sponsor of feasts, meetings, and other public events that validate leadership status.

As people traverse rural and urban spaces they also move between economic zones shifting between traditional exchange practices and the global cash economy. The cash economy, intent on commodifying land

and culture, tends to produce individualized interests that disconnect people from the checks and balances of collective governance. On the one hand, many communities express frustration with land disputes that block efforts to register land for purposes of economic benefit. On the other hand, the intractability of these problems has worked to protect environmental resources that otherwise could be exploited by elites with access to the institutional machinery of the cash economy.

As much as any single factor, it is the desire to find appropriate ways to resolve land conflicts that has motivated efforts to institutionalize traditional leadership. There is general recognition of the need for indigenous knowledge of custom and history to more effectively inform decisions about land use. These are the problems that generate interest in supporting traditional leaders and incorporating them in the operations of the state, so that they may more effectively apply local practices to problems of land use and resource development.

DILEMMAS OF DECENTRALIZATION

Since the early days of independence, there has been enthusiasm for reforms that devolve power from national capitals to local governments (Larmour and Qalo 1985; Nanau 1998; Scales 2005). For example, national parliaments and courts have for years sought to empower local courts to deal with land disputes properly situated within domains of traditional authority. And the fact that government bodies at the most local level ('wards', 'districts', etc.) never functioned well or fell into disuse, led to efforts to re-create local government, sometimes acknowledging the importance of traditional leaders.

The record of experiments in decentralization has provided few success stories to suggest that creating smaller versions of centralized structures of governance in rural peripheries will solve problems of local governance. The problems encountered by experiments in decentralization have as much to do with the inadequacy of centralized models as with

the difficulties of implementing governance practices in provincial or rural locales. The interest of indigenous communities in local empowerment reflects longstanding frustrations with local/state relations from the earliest days of colonization—frustrations sometimes expressed in proposals for greater recognition of local and traditional leaders who continue to be a presence in rural communities.

The problems of the state in recent years have fuelled interest in constitutional reform aimed at devolving greater power to provincial governments. In Solomon Islands this interest focuses on proposals to introduce some form of federalism to replace provinces with states. Although delayed (if not derailed) in the context of post-conflict nation building, discussion of these proposals has generated a great deal of popular support for greater devolution of powers toward local (provincial) communities.

POLITICS OF TRADITION

There tends to be strong agreement about the value of tradition when discussed in the abstract. In practice, however, talk of "tradition" is often contested—evoking questions about what counts as tradition, about which traditions are of value today, their relevance for new urban situations, and their utility in guiding behavior. For example, there is abundant public debate about the applicability of marriage rules (clan exogamy) and ways to handle moral transgressions, sorcery accusations, and so on. The churches frequently play a primary role in these discussions.

Debates about tradition raise important questions about empowerment based on principles of gender, age, rank, and so forth. In many communities that adhere to matrilineal principles, women act as leaders of descent groups, even if their male kin are more often the group's vocal representatives. Yet the vast majority of political leaders acting as district or regional representatives have been men. Even though many communities acknowledge historical examples of strong women leaders and may even acknowledge that women may

be chiefs, in practice bodies of traditional leaders tend to be almost exclusively male. The relative absence of women called "chiefs" today reflects the general expectation that it is men who act as political leaders in the most public political institutions. Some worry that, in this context, tradition can become a rigid ideology deployed against women interested to take a more active role in local governance.

A recurrent issue noted by women moving into more cosmopolitan spheres of urban life or national politics is the problematic extension of customary practices based in rural contexts to the wider urban political-economic arena. The association of traditional leadership with men may have become more rigid in recent times. This is an area of open discussion in which talk of "tradition" frequently advances ideological claims that exclude women from circles of power. Yet there are signs that, with the support of women's groups in civil society and (inter)national networking, women leaders are gradually gaining ground in attempts to obtain elected office and higher-level appointed positions.

RISKS AND REWARDS OF FORMALIZATION

Efforts to create new kinds of traditional institution such as councils of chiefs raise questions about the effects of formally linking chiefs with government. Attempts to incorporate chiefs in structures of government run the risk of changing the nature of traditional leadership and the way it is viewed in local communities. What happens to leadership practice if the state begins to formalize the informal? Does legislating custom diminish its indigenous authority? How do government efforts to strengthen the role of chiefs change peoples' views of traditional leadership?

Incorporating traditional leaders in the framework of government may have the effect of creating a new kind of leader who is more like a government official, based on appointment rather than personal reputation. Recent surveys about these issues show people making a distinction between "real" traditional leaders and those whose status derives from appointment. Newly bureaucratic structures of

traditional leadership readily evoke questions about authenticity or legitimacy. Witness a headline recently in the Solomon Star, "Savo House of Chiefs Described as Puppet of PM Sir Allan" (Sept 1, 2005).

The consultation on constitutional reform in Solomon Islands undertaken in 2003 revealed the dilemma facing these newly recognized chiefs. On the one hand, there is widespread support for empowering traditional leaders so that they may be more effective in local governance. On the other hand, efforts to objectify the status of chiefs through appointments are sometimes seen as a departure from custom that may lead to lack of respect or abuse of power or both. This conundrum poses several questions, including: 'What are the risks for the category of "chief" of incorporating traditional leaders within the frames of the state?' and 'Is it possible to do so without changing the meaning of "chief" into a bureaucratic position rather than a leader known for his or her indigenous knowledge and ability?'

CONCLUSION

The term "chief" and its Pidgin analogs have been around island and coastal Melanesia for a long time. The term is used flexibly to refer to local leaders of many types. Efforts to formalize traditional leadership in councils of chiefs and the like have the potential to link customary modes of authority with state institutions. They also have the potential to make flexible forms of egalitarian leadership rigid and artificially hierarchical.

Given the diversity of the Melanesian region, it is not possible to build a one-size-fits-all model for customary governance. Devising effective policy requires recognition of the value of local knowledge and the ability to adapt general models to local circumstances. For Melanesia, both demography and history argue for taking the local seriously, despite daunting challenges of diversity. Not only is the majority of the population located in rural communities, but these communities have been a source of stability during recent crises of the state. Focusing only on the institutions of centralized government misses the

importance of existing cultural resources and risks reproducing problems that contributed to past conflicts.

Recognizing the importance of the local does not mean imagining local communities as existing in a bounded rural universe—rather the "local" today is a place of intersecting flows and migrations linking rural/urban as well as local/national/regional forces of all kinds. Despite the predominantly rural character of Melanesia, the emergence of an urban middle class is creating important connections between rural communities and urban centers, especially national capitals. Urban dwellers are often actively involved in home communities and play a significant economic and political roles beyond their numbers. Urban elites elected or appointed to national positions are active everywhere in forging links between center and periphery.

Approaches that simply devolve failed practices from central government to provincial offices are not likely to succeed. More promising strategies focus on the articulation of different levels of governance, strengthening connections between central government, provincial governments, civil society (especially churches) and rural communities. Churches have been active historically in supporting schools, offering social services, and mediating interpersonal disputes. Despite the important role of churches (and nongovernmental organizations) in local affairs, there are few examples of institutionalized cooperation between church and state. Santa Isabel is an exception, with over ninety percent of its residents members of a single church. Isabel leaders are working to create a "Tripod" body for regular consultation between provincial government, church, and the Isabel Council of Chiefs. (For more information on Santa Isabel see White 1997 or: http://pidp.eastwestcenter. org/pidp/its.htm.)

How can local governance meaningfully articulate with the (centralized) state? Setting aside Fiji as a special case, in Melanesia only Vanuatu has institutionalized a national body of chiefs. It has proven difficult to define an advisory role for traditional leaders at the national level that is more than ceremonial (although ceremonial functions are important).

In light of the local context of most traditional leadership, institutionalizing new forms of power at the national level carries as many risks as rewards.

Whatever the risks, emergent bodies of traditional leaders at the provincial and local level are strategically positioned to play an important role in linking national institutions with rural communities. Greater involvement of traditional leaders, church leaders, and others in provincial affairs holds out the possibility of more direct linkages with customary authority, especially concerning matters of land and social conflict. Involving existing networks of traditional leaders may add legitimacy and stability to local governance, while making customary practices more accountable. Recent efforts to create innovative linkages between indigenous leadership and provincial governments offer an opportunity to assess what kinds of formal support make them more effective and, equally, what lead to exploitation and loss of legitimacy. Providing public service support for bodies of indigenous leaders offers one means for empowering traditional leaders and adding greater transparency to their transactions.

There are few lateral channels for communication among local and provincial bodies. Most communication runs top-down and bottom-up between center and periphery, with little opportunity for exchange between provincial governments. The typical model for state-sponsored consultation has been to send fact-finding teams to visit rural sectors and then prepare written reports. These exercises reproduce the hierarchical relationship between central and provincial government.

Finally, one of the most fundamental points of incommensurability between conventions of good governance and indigenous practices is the predominantly oral, face-to-face nature of traditional politics. Although low rates of literacy and the weakness of written documentation are problems for government offices, the oral character of rural life places high value on community involvement, public discussion, and collective decision-making—all elements of a robust public sphere, Melanesian style. There is a need

for creative articulations between state institutions and these essentially oral modes of local governance. As computer and video technology become more widely available, they offer opportunities to develop new approaches to the incorporation of oral practices in the institutions of governance. In short, the grounds for asking, 'what is a chief?' and 'how might political institutions be constructively indigenized?' continue to shift just as they have for over a century of political accommodation.

AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

[1] The concept of "chief" in the Pacific, especially Melanesia, has been a source of considerable confusion. Dating from Marshall Sahlins' classic paper (1963) noting broad differences in the 'ideal types' of political system found in the Melanesian and Polynesian regions, academic usage has avoided reference to "chiefs" in the broadly egalitarian societies of Melanesia. In this paper, I use the term in much the same way it is used locally in the Solomon Islands—to refer to local leaders who garner a degree of authority from a combination of social and economic factors.

[2] Oddly, the language for creating these chief-centered institutions through constitutional reform called for adhering to principles of "chiefly lineage and blood" that are rarely found in any unambiguous way in Solomons communities (Ghai 1990).

[3] Beyond some of these practical observations, lie a number of philosophical points of difference that point toward a different kind of discussion—one that is less concerned with integrating chiefs in government, than re-imagining the institutions of governance so that they more directly incorporate indigenous modes of thought and action. For example, the talanoa process of informal mediation in Fiji is one that defies easy understanding when seen through the lens of pragmatic theories of the state and conflict resolution. As a practice that emphasizes the power of talk rather than specific outcomes, it resists evaluation in terms of utilitarian criteria.

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16

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