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## Indigenous Governance in Melanesia

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## **Executive summary**

### Indigenous Governance

When considering indigenous governance in Melanesia, it is important to realize that the concept of ‘(good) governance’, like ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’, stems from Western ideas about state institutions.

### The Melanesian Context: Sources of (In)stability

- Small scale. The small scale of Melanesian polities and the oral nature of communication shapes local political organisation.
- Diverse. The diversity of Melanesian polities means that identity is grounded in localized practices (“custom”). These ties or “wantok” identities can be seen as difficult to reconcile with Western ideas of good governance, but they also provide a high degree of stability in local communities.
- Rural. Melanesian states are mainly rural in character, and maintain a level of self-sufficiency that can provide stability in times of crisis.
- Egalitarian. Most Melanesian societies are egalitarian in character, with few clearly determined hierarchies.
- Christian. Most of Melanesia is Christian. Melanesian churches have successfully established overarching structures that link dispersed communities, but now face new pressures of division.

### Crises and Custom

There has long been a large distance between the state and local communities in Melanesia. Recent crises of the state have brought this issue to the foreground, and have accentuated the role of traditional leaders.

### Taking the “Local” Seriously

Many external observers describe instability in Melanesia as fueled by inter-ethnic animosities that require stronger central state institutions in order to manage conflict. However, from a local perspective, the empowering of local governance is seen as more important. Traditional leaders or “chiefs” are seen as mediators between the traditional and the modern—a structural position with strategic advantages for local governance, but also susceptible to new forms of exploitation.

### Modes of Indigenous Leadership

- Indigenous leadership entails the building of a reputation over time, through exchange practices and/or activity in business, church and government. The ability to speak as a landowner is a core feature of traditional leadership, and is strongly connected to knowledge about land that is passed on within families and descent lines.
- The egalitarian character of Melanesia society means that decision-making processes are ideally highly participatory.
- The desire to resolve land disputes, which have become more prevalent with the onset of resource extraction, has been an important motivation behind efforts to institutionalize traditional leadership. The private, oral nature of knowledge about

land has led to a number of innovative approaches to land disputes in the form of courts, panels and tribunals.

- The oral basis of indigenous knowledge brings a degree of ambiguity to traditional modes of conflict resolution. There are serious questions about the extent to which traditional oral practices can articulate with bureaucracy and its record-keeping requirements.

#### Levels of Governance

Local governance practices articulate with governmental institutions at different levels eg. village, province, and nation.

- At the most local level, common descent usually determines landowner groups, with traditional leaders representing group interests.
- At the level of a village or district, the term “chief” may be used to designate leaders of larger groups.
- At the level of island or region, government and church institutions often influence traditional leadership, as in new forms of “paramount chief” in some areas.

#### Dilemmas of Decentralization

The record of efforts at decentralization from central to local levels provides few success stories, suggesting that the re-inventing of central governance structures at local levels will not solve problems of local governance.

#### Politics of Tradition

Debates about traditional leadership raise important questions about the empowerment of women and youth. There are concerns that the rhetoric of traditional leadership can be used against the expansion of women’s roles in local and national politics.

#### Risks and Rewards of Formalization

Formalization of traditional leadership could create new kinds of leaders whose legitimacy and authenticity may be questioned by local communities, especially where such leadership is based on appointment rather than personal reputation. In the Solomon Islands, the empowerment of traditional leaders is widely supported, at the same time as people express concerns about the abuse of power.

## **Introduction**

This paper is written at the invitation of the SSGM project to offer a policy-relevant discussion of “customary modes of governance, their functional relevance to ‘modern’ forms of government, and their potential to assist in improving governance more generally in Solomon Islands and elsewhere...”<sup>1</sup> The paper draws upon the author’s research on the island of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands, and attempts to generalize wherever possible to other locales in Melanesia. The perspective put forward is most relevant for the kinds of local political systems found in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and island regions of Papua New Guinea.

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 to connect central government with local communities.

What is missing are studies that focus on points of intersection between local cultural practices and institutions of the state. Despite a century of response and adaptation to state power, we know little about the ways customary practices actually interface 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 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from discussion in a one-day workshop convened by David Hegarty and the SSGM project in October 2005. Participants in that meeting, included Manuhua Bacham, John Connell, Sinclair Dinnen, Greg Ellis, Jon Fraenkel, Elise Huffer, Margaret Jolly, Joe Kanekane, Peter Larmour, Abby Mcleod, Michael Morgan, Jacquelin Plummer, Anthony Regan, Ian Scales, Orovu Sepoe, Morgan Tuimaleali’ifano, and Iris Wielders. I thank all of them for their contributions, especially Iris Wielders for her diligent notes of those discussions.

or is used as a political tool, it often references practices that have local value. To dismiss them is to overlook some of the most basic causes of disconnection between governmental institutions and local realities.

This paper's discussion of customary governance is concerned with underlying issues and assumptions rather than specific policy recommendations. The paper begins with a short overview of some of the social and demographic features of island Melanesia that set the stage for discussions of local governance. It then identifies points of interface between indigenous political practices and institutions of modern government, informed by recent attempts to recognize and empower traditional leaders.

### **Indigenous Governance**

Anthropologists are famous for suggesting that some key term or concept doesn't exist in the cultures they study. As trite as it may seem, it is useful to remind ourselves that the concept of "governance" is also imported with the machinery of Western government. Applying models honed in postindustrial societies in rural Melanesia is replete with unexamined assumptions that can undercut the best-laid plans.

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 emerged in efforts to explain the failure of the first waves 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 concepts of "transparency" and "accountability," has its 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 "translate" in the worlds of indigenous political culture.

Recognizing that we should be suspicious of any *binary* 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. It is these kinds of problem that have given rise to new programs such as the Indigenous Community Governance project of the ANU or the Centre for Indigenous Governance and Development at Massey University, New Zealand.

### **The Melanesian Context: Sources of (In)Stability**

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. Micro-polities. 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).

b. Diversity. 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.

c. 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.

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 over half a century. 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.

### **Crisis 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. 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.

While the discourse of “failing” and “failed” states may be new, the local view of *gavman* (government) as a distant presence with uncertain relevance for everyday life is not new in rural Melanesia. 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.

- The more dramatic crises of the state in recent years have accentuated the role of traditional leaders as significant public figures.

In Bougainville and Solomon Islands especially, political conflicts have evoked attempts to create new institutions of traditional leadership. 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. In Bougainville, the crisis of legitimacy led to efforts to build councils of elders as customary forms of authority in local governance.

### **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.

A difference in perspective. 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 about strengthening the institutions of the (central) state.

- 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.

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 traditional and modern spheres of activity. 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.

### **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 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. 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.

- The ability to speak as a landowner and regulate land use in the interest of landowning groups is a core feature of traditional leadership.

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. 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 re-inventing 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 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 focused on proposals to introduce some form of federalism to replace provinces with states. Discussion of these proposals 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 the questions

- 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?

## **Recommendations**

### More attention for indigenous local practices

Attention to indigenous cultural practices is overdue in development policymaking. Yet bringing in the culture question in a serious way is going to be a messy affair that will raise as many questions as it answers.

### No one-size-fits-all

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 investment in local knowledge and the ability to adapt general models to local circumstances.

### Valuing the local

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 on the institutions of centralized government misses the importance of existing cultural resources and risks reproducing problems that contributed to past conflicts.

### Orality and governance

One of the sharpest 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.

### Who is a chief?

The term “chief” and its Pidgin analogs have been around 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 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 hierarchical.

### Strengthening connections

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.

### Local and national articulations

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.

### Strategic role for provincial governments

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.

### Lateral links

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.

### Urban – rural flows

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 often remain actively involved in home communities and play a significant economic and political role beyond their numbers. At present, it is the small number of elites elected to national positions who are most active in forging links between center and periphery. There are obvious benefits to be gained from more direct involvement of a broader range of the urban population, including those involved in church and nongovernmental organizations.

### Church / state cooperation

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>.)

Further research

There is a need for more research that focuses on the points of intersection between local cultural practices and state institutions.

### **Suggested Reading**

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