

PRIMORDIAL POLITICS? POLITICAL PARTIES AND TRADITION IN MELANESIA

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Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the role of cultural tradition in political parties in the Pacific. Specifically, it explores how 'tradition' is deployed as an organising and mobilising schema, how it is transformed into a political ideology and how traditional institutions and leadership systems are used to facilitate party interests. The chapter argues that tradition plays a significant role in shaping the form and dynamics of political parties in the Pacific, with parties embracing tradition as an instrument of mobilisation and legitimisation. As a consequence political parties also become agents of political and cultural transformation and reproduction.

Political parties are relatively recent innovations in Pacific Island polities and are still in various stages of formation and transition. There are presently about 57 political parties registered throughout the Pacific that follow various organisational and political ideals, and many more social organisations that seek political power but which fail to fulfil the respective requirements of party registration.¹ At one end of the continuum are those political parties (as in the case of Fiji) that are established and institutionalised with a structure and ideological framework. At the other extreme are political groups held together loosely under various labels by individuals or self-centred political interests. Party names are often symbolic of the party's identity, interests or principles, but sometimes they might be largely rhetorical (such as when they incorporate 'democratic', 'unity', 'people's', 'national', 'alliance'), chosen to articulate certain broadly recognised principles. This is true of many political parties in PNG (United Democratic Party), Fiji (National Alliance Party), Solomon Islands (Peoples Alliance Party) and Vanuatu

(Melanesian Progressive Party). In between the two extremes are groupings that encompass varying degrees of coherence in organisation and principle. Increasingly, ideological parties have emerged in urban areas — Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG each have Labour Party — but most political parties in the Pacific Islands represent specific local, tribal or ethnic interests.

Globally, the major forces in the spawning of political parties were the waves of decolonisation that swept the globe from the 1940s to the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Empire and demise of one-party Marxist regimes in the 1990s. Most political parties in the Pacific emerged after independence. While colonial hegemony was highly centralised under the colonial state, independence saw a period of transition towards more local control and democratisation. The new mode of post-colonial leadership was organised around political parties and signalled a new era of democratisation, while also manifesting the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

In this chapter, I define the term ‘tradition’ rather loosely to refer to practices, values, institutions and belief systems that were inherited from the past. This notion of “past” is quite complex because history consists of a continuity of events that are constantly changed, reshaped and redirected by internal forces (such as warfare and political struggle) or external forces (such as globalisation). In Pacific states, as in other post-colonial states, what is usually considered ‘tradition’ is a combination of surviving pre-colonial practices, colonially reshaped institutions and practices and even some new post-colonial values repackaged as ‘traditional’.²

I use the words ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ here not in a dichotomous sense but as dynamic concepts with highly adaptive and interchangeable characteristics. For instance, tradition does not necessarily imply only primordial features but can be reinvented, repackaged and rearticulated as something to suit emerging circumstances. On the other hand, modernity is not a fixed state since it embodies a range of characteristics, some of which are ‘old’ and some of which are ‘new’. Within the dynamics of cultural transformation tradition and modernity not only define each other, they oscillate between each other to the extent that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

This chapter is divided into four main parts. The first provides an overview of political parties in the Pacific and the basic principles on which they operate. This is important to gauge the extent to which political parties use various modes of traditional organisation such as kinship for purposes of mobilisation and legitimisation. Secondly, it provides a broad framework within which we can understand the dynamic and utilitarian nature of tradition and how it is deployed readily as an instrument of politics. Thirdly, it discusses some of the dynamic relationships between political parties and tradition and how one uses and modifies the other; and, lastly, the chapter looks briefly at the continuing dilemma between tradition and democracy as a ‘foreign flower’.

Political parties in the Pacific: an overview

It is difficult to make generalisations about political parties in the Pacific because of their diversity. At one extreme are political parties with cohesive organisations and coherent ideologies and at the other are those that are much looser and less coherent. The oldest

political parties in the Pacific were formed in the 1950s and '60s, although there have been political protest groups in existence since the 1800s. The average life expectancy of political parties in the Pacific is relatively short. In the case of the Solomon Islands, some political parties emerge in a few days and disappear, some live for a month or two and, if lucky, some might exist for more than one year. There is usually a proliferation of parties during the elections and many die out after that.

Although there are a lot of differences between political parties in the Pacific, there are also similarities that are worth generalising. First, many are small and elitist in nature, without mass party membership as in many Western liberal democracies or even socialist regimes. Often the leaders of parties are also the only members. Secondly, many political parties are very unstable and often break up into different parts as a result of power struggles, differences of opinion or defections to greener pastures. Thirdly, many lack coherent political ideologies and are driven by specific local interests rather than the national interest. Hence, many parties are held together by kinship ties or networks of patronage, making them more accountable to the local community than to a national constituency. This makes political parties organisations that are embedded in community rather than national institutions. Fifthly, tradition is used as a mobilising and legitimising tool; and, lastly, churches exert a strong influence in the party membership and leadership (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 represents political parties registered officially under their country's respective electoral laws, irrespective of their representation in parliament. It shows that some states, especially the Melanesian ones, have significantly larger numbers of political parties than the smaller Micronesian and Polynesian states. The only Polynesian states with formal political parties are Sāmoa and Cook Islands. A large number of states, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Tonga, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Niue, Palau and Nauru, do not have political parties, while Marshall Islands has only one. For these states, elections revolve around personalities, kinship and loose associations of individuals rather than formally constituted parties.³

In recent years, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have witnessed a proliferation of political parties before national elections. Small political parties that fail to win elections tend to dissipate quickly, although they might resurrect themselves using the same name and form to contest future national elections.

Many political parties articulate socioeconomic and political issues as platforms for their debates; however, the principles on which they exist and mobilize support and membership are still strongly linked to kinship and local loyalty. Some parties do not even articulate national issues since their focus is largely local. There is a complex interaction between issues of personality, kinship, tribal-regional loyalty and ethnicity. Ideological differences in terms of adherence to standard political principles as in Western liberal democracies or in terms of religious or cultural ideologies rarely exist.⁴ In Fiji, these ideological differences find expression through the platforms of the major parties. For example, some Fijian political parties are based on conservative nationalist principles (such as the Matanitu Vanua), with others being more moderate and multiracial (such as the Fiji Democratic Party). The Fiji Labour Party (FLP), which was founded in 1985 on social democratic principles, later evolved into an ethnic party (for Indo-

Table 2.1: Number of Pacific Island Political Parties and their Political Principles as at October 2004.

Country	No. of political parties	Major principles of party organisation, support and membership
Cook Islands	3	Kinship, business connections, locality, religion
Fiji	11	Ethnicity, political ideology, regional loyalty, religion
Kiribati	2	Personality, kinship, religion
Marshall Islands	1	Personality, kinship
Federated States of Micronesia	0	–
Nauru	0	–
Niue	0	–
Palau	0	–
Papua New Guinea	24	Personality, kinship, regional/tribal loyalty, religion
Sāmoa	7	Personality, kinship, religion, locality
Solomon Islands*	2	Personality, kinship, regional/tribal loyalty, religion
Tokelau	0	–
Tonga**	1	Democratic Participation of commoners in the affairs of state
Tuvalu	0	–
Vanuatu	7	Personality, kinship, regional/tribal loyalty, language
Total	57	

*In the Solomon Islands, although there are two major political parties, there are numerous groupings and parties that comprise these.

**The Human Rights and Democracy movement in Tonga is technically not a political party, although it campaigns for elections and fights for issues just like normal political parties.

Fijians) after the leading leftist intellectuals quit the party in response to Mahendra Chaudhry's autocratic and conservative style of leadership.

Issues of personality, kinship and regional-tribal loyalty are closely associated with cultural traditions. In fact, these are some of the social mechanisms within which tradition is defined, articulated and reproduced. The fact that they feature prominently in the dynamics of political party formation and function shows the significance of tradition in the political process. Before we discuss the relationship between political parties and tradition, we need to consider the broader issues relating to tradition and politics.

Contextualising political parties: the politics of tradition debate

Political parties in Melanesia engage in a dynamic process of identity creation. On one hand is the appeal to tradition and on the other is the accommodation of modernity. To understand the relationship between political parties and tradition it is important to contextualise our analysis within the broader debate relating to politics and tradition and how this informs our empirical study.

The dynamic relationship between tradition and politics often involves reinventing certain assumed primordial aspects to serve practical purposes in given situations, usually for the benefit of dominant groups, political parties or elites. The notion of ‘inventing tradition’, especially in relation to the encapsulation of presumed past practices to exert new identities, has been the subject of analysis by people such as Hobsbawm and Ranger.⁵ Others, such as Shils, Clifford, Keesing and Lawson, have explored the theoretical issues of representing and evoking traditional identity using new norms in post-colonial societies.⁶

Keesing described the trend in the Pacific thus:

Across the Pacific, from Hawai’i to New Zealand, in New Caledonia, Aboriginal Australia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, Pacific peoples are creating pasts, myths of ancestral ways of life that serve as powerful political symbols. In the rhetoric of post-colonial nationalism (and sometimes separatism) and the struggle of indigenous Fourth World peoples, now minorities in their own homelands, visions of the past are being created and evoked.⁷

The links between ‘creating pasts, myths of ancestral ways of life’ and ‘political symbols’ is part of a complex historical process emanating from contact between Europeans and indigenous people. Some of these were defensive reactions to colonialism and cultural encroachment while some were to facilitate change. For instance, recreation and articulation of ‘new’ identity by Aboriginal Australians or New Zealand Maori were part of resistance to colonial dispossession as well as adaptation to the new society. The same could be said of the Tahitian and Kanaky colonial situation, where political resistance meant creating new identities to consolidate an anti-colonial front. However constructed, these identities provided an important ideological reference framework with which they could redefine their position in the changing world.

The politics of resistance involves invoking traditional identities, whether based on assumed primordial links or recently created discourses, which act as powerful political symbols. In the case of Fiji, tradition as a basis for identity construction has in the past been used for the purpose of colonial resistance (as in the case of the semi-religious Luveniwai Movement) and, more recently has been deployed to maintain chiefly authority and communal hegemony and as an ethnic leverage against Indo-Fijians.⁸

Keesing’s basic argument is that there is a fundamental contradiction in the process of political and traditional identity creation in the Pacific in the sense that ‘the temporary discourse of cultural identity derives from Western discourses’.⁹ In other words, many things that have been presented as being authentically traditional have often been based on colonial practices and discourses and have been accepted as immemorial. France makes the same observation about the land-ownership system in Fiji, arguing that what is now assumed to be the traditional Fijian landowning system was in fact a codified system recommended by a colonial Lands Commission in the early 1900s.¹⁰

In her study of the political systems of Fiji, Tonga and Sāmoa, Lawson observed two interrelated processes taking place with respect to traditionalism and cultural revival.¹¹ The first pertains to the transformation of the notion of tradition into a political

ideology and how this is deployed by political elites to serve specific purposes. The second deals with constructing a dichotomy as a way of invoking an oppositional image and providing justification for the ideology of traditionalism. An example is the use of the term 'Pacific Way' in the Pacific to mobilise opinion against what are seen to be 'Western' or 'foreign' ways.

The terms 'Melanesian Way' or '*wantokism*' have also been coined to serve the same political purpose. This refers to attempts to rediscover some primordial cultural or *kastom* (custom) links between the people of 'Melanesian' background as the means of political and cultural unity.¹² In a country as large as PNG, with more than 820 languages,¹³ the notion of *wantok* would have various levels of contextualisation. At one level, it would refer to identification according to the same language and at another level it might refer to identification in relation to the same province or region.

Institutionalisation and deployment of tradition can take place in two forms. First, it might be used as an anti-foreigner ideology, as studies in Africa have shown.¹⁴ To some extent, this has also been true in the Pacific, where appeal to traditional culture has been a reference point for anti-foreign articulations such as 'democracy is a foreign flower'.¹⁵ Secondly, tradition can be deployed as a means of reinforcing the political status and power of traditional and 'modern' elites and political parties. The deployment of tradition as a legitimising tool in politics takes place in 'Western' and 'non-Western' societies. It has been observed that the preoccupation with genealogy by the European ruling classes was a way of legitimising their contemporary dominance and perpetual exclusion and subordination of the lower class. For example, Melman argues that various desirable aspects of the Anglo-Saxon traditions have been fabricated to maintain exclusivity of membership for the group.¹⁶

In Fiji, the development of tradition for political ends has always been linked to conservative and racial politics. Political practices and institutions, considered by many Fijians to be immemorial, were colonial constructions — formally codified and universalised practices deemed appropriate to colonial rule. For example, the Great Council of Chiefs and Fiji's land-ownership system were created as institutions of colonial dominance, but came to be thought of as 'traditional' over time. These were imbued with divine authority thus strengthening their normative force and authenticity. In this sense, elite indigenous interests dovetailed with British colonial agendas.

The close (and often inseparable) links between the church and the indigenous Fijian socio-cultural system and traditional hierarchy provided the framework for the unquestioned divinity and reification of tradition. Local practices that served the purposes of the local elites and colonial states were codified and became timeless tradition to be observed. Hobsbawm and Ranger summarised this tendency thus:

Codified tradition inevitably hardened in a way that disadvantaged the vested interests in possession at the time of its codification. Codified and reified custom was manipulated by such vested interests as a means of asserting or increasing control ... Paramount chiefs and ruling aristocracies ... appealed to 'traditions' in order to maintain or extend their control over the subjects.¹⁷

During the post-colonial period in the Pacific, political parties became important vehicles for local political rule as well as for redefining and reproducing tradition whether codified or practised. This was especially so since many Pacific political parties emerged from community organisations and were spawned by the new era of decolonisation and self-expression. Their survival and legitimacy depended on how well they used and articulated tradition, whether invented or authentic. The importance of the distinction between authenticity and invented tradition deteriorated in the minds of political leaders because the issue was no longer to do with understanding and analysing the contents and dynamics of tradition but how tradition could be used for practical political purposes. Tradition thus became a political ideology in itself, which was subject to modification and manipulation by political parties. We examine this in more detail next.

Political parties and tradition: the dialectical relationship

Pacific political parties engage dialectically with tradition in various ways. These include political parties transforming traditional values into political party ideology and using them to mobilise support; traditional socio-cultural networks and kinship systems can be invoked to extend and consolidate influence; traditional modes of leadership can be used to consolidate support and legitimacy; and political parties often use revival of tradition as a party policy to win acceptance by the community. These processes often have a two-way dynamic between political parties and community: the political parties might make use of the community for purposes of mobilisation and legitimacy and likewise the community (or various sections of the community for that matter) might make use of political parties to serve their own interests. As the epitome of political organisation and articulation of political issues, political parties represent the link between the political community (defined narrowly here as politicians and the State political hierarchy) and the civil society at large. In the Pacific, this takes place in a complex way because of the influence of tradition through kinship, regional and tribal loyalty.

Traditional values as political party ideology

Traditional values have often been used as a basis for creating political ideology to invoke a sense of continuity, immemoriality and mythology to ensure political legitimisation and a sense of permanence. Political ideology is defined here in a general sociological sense to refer to a body of values and ideals, which is used as the basis for political action.¹⁸

This has especially been the case in Melanesian societies, where the use of traditional cosmology, whether in its symbolic or practical forms, by political parties to bolster ideological appeal is common practice. Because of its mystical nature, traditional cosmology can be translated easily into political ideology. The will of the ancestors and the power of the land can be invoked to maximum effect by political parties to project themselves as the anointed ones. Parties in the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu use local traditional cosmological discourses as their basis for consolidating legitimacy. Moreover, the dynamics of politics is often based on a reciprocal relationship where politicians are supposed to provide something tangible for the people in return for votes.

To consolidate their local popularity and legitimacy, politicians invoke traditional cosmological discourses. Ancestral spirits are often called on in ceremonies for their intervention to make a politician win an election and thus bring prosperity to his community. An election loss is sometimes blamed on sorcery by opponents. The use of sorcery is an effective political tool for ‘weakening’ and defeating adversaries in elections. Traditional symbols with deep cosmological significance might be used as party symbols. A case in point is the use of whale tooth (*tabua*), a symbol of peace and wealth, by the Fijian National Party (FNP).

One of the common tendencies is to invoke the traditional cosmological order to provide spiritual and psychological appeal. In Fiji, the Alliance Party, which ruled Fiji for 13 years before being ousted in a general election in 1987 by the FLP, used the appeal to the mythical *mana* of the *vanua* effectively as a means of mobilising support among indigenous Fijians. The notion of *vanua* in Fijian communal thinking exists at three levels. The first refers to land as an entity for subsistence living; the second to the totality of socio-cultural relationships and individual roles within these; and the third to the cosmological dimension — the ancestral and spiritual worlds.

As the only Fijian political party in the first seven years after independence, the Alliance Party had the monopoly over the appeal to Fijian cosmology. The political logic was that Fijians were bound by their *vanua* and therefore their political loyalty should be directed to the Alliance Party as the ancestrally ordained *soqosoqo vakapolitiki ni vanua* (party of the *vanua*). Those who did not support the *soqosoqo vakapolitiki ni vanua* were exhibiting un-Fijian characteristics and would be punished by the jealous ancestors. While this synergy between tradition and ideology was taking place at one level, the Alliance Party was articulating a multiracialist discourse at another in order to appeal to other ethnic groups and win national and international legitimacy.

Other Fijian political parties subsequently used the same cosmological appeal, provoking competition over who was the legitimate guardian of the Fijian cosmology. Winning the election was a way of exerting one’s claim. Sometimes, debates about economic and political issues between Fijian political parties would degenerate into competition about who best represented the *vanua* and Fijian-ness and thus who best represented the Fijian cosmology. This was most evident in the formation of the Kudru na Vanua (Grumble of the Land) Party, headed by a defrocked Catholic priest, which has failed ever to win a parliamentary seat. The leader claimed that his party was the only one to have the blessing of the ancestral spirits of Fiji and that he was a *kalou vu* (ancestral god), who in cosmological ranking was higher than everyone else in Fiji, including the high chiefs.

In Vanuatu, political party issues revolve largely around the notion of land. Land is the embodiment of culture and tradition, the link to ancestral cosmology. The name Vanuatu literally means ‘our land’ and the ruling party after independence, the Vanua’aku Party (party of ‘our land’), adopted a policy that supported ownership of land ‘according to custom’ and the ‘reservation and protection of important *tambu* [taboo] places’.¹⁹ Indeed, such policies are common reference points in Vanuatu’s political culture. Perhaps the most prominent party advocating the protection of *tambu* places is the Jon Frum Party, which started as a cargo-cult type movement in 1940, but which

remains a powerful political force on the island of Tanna. In these instances, *kastom* represented a remedial strategy to Western advance. Indeed, one of Vanuatu's most prominent *kastom* groups, Nagriamel, advanced the theory that returning to *kastom* was the best way to protect community land from encroaching European ranchers. Their policy perhaps summarised what most Vanuatu political parties believe: 'Land is the basis, the essence of everything. Restore KUSTOM.'²⁰

Use of traditional socio-cultural and kinship networks

Throughout Melanesia, parties usually consist of loose associations of individuals and groups whose political orientations are locally based, with community-oriented land policies being prominent in party platforms. Thus, utilising kinship systems is a common political strategy for political mobilisation by parties and candidates. These systems constitute an important mechanism for reproducing traditional culture in the Pacific. Kinship is the major means for socialisation and cultural reproduction and ensures the survival of a community. Kinship is a system and a process and has complex links to land and to the cosmological world of the ancestors.

Kinship is often a powerful centripetal force around which political party loyalty revolves. Because many politicians have localised interests, kinship is a means by which they can access the community to carry out campaigns and also the means whereby the local communities demand 'payback' in terms of money and services. This is where the dilemma between kinship responsibility and public accountability becomes obvious. For the politician, using public money to satisfy his or her kinspeople's wishes could be labelled 'corruption'; on the other hand, being seen not to be giving generously to his or her people would be political suicide.

There are two types of kinship: biological kinship and social kinship. Biological kinship is where there are identifiable blood ties. Social kinship has to do with links that are based on claims to common origin, history or experiences. Blood ties also have social obligations and relationships to make them legitimate and social kinship is sometimes assumed to also involve primordial relations with common biological origins at some point in the past. In Melanesia, the notion of *wantok* represents biological and social kinship existing at different levels. There are circles of *wantoks* starting at the nuclear family and extending outwards. The external boundary extends as far as one can identify (in many cases assume) a common feature of identification. Thus, the external boundary could be just a nuclear family or extended family, a tribe, a region, a town, a country or even all speakers of Melanesian pidgin.

Political party mobilisation usually takes place at the most immediate boundary, usually at the nuclear family, extended family and tribal levels. This is not only because of the closeness of the social links and the existence of the traditional obligations that bind people together, but because closer kinship groups are considered the most politically trustworthy. Close kinspeople tend to see the political success and associated privileges of their relatives as their own.

For political parties in Melanesia, the use of kinship provides the easiest, cheapest and most effective way of mobilisation, extending influence and winning legitimacy.

Over the years, many political parties in Fiji had developed extensive links and networks based on kinship. The Alliance Party used these networks extremely successfully after independence in 1970. Whole families were recruited by relatives to join the party and all the leading Alliance politicians in the 1970s, namely Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (the Prime Minister), Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau (Deputy Prime Minister and later Governor-General and President), Ratu Sir George Cakobau (former Governor-General), were all related by blood. There were lower levels of chiefs who were also related to these 'big three'. The hierarchy reached down to the village level where various levels of kinship were linked together through their links to the Alliance Party. The Alliance Party was not only 'the' Fijian party — it was also 'the' family party. Any member of the family who did not vote for or support the Alliance was considered a *dau vakau nona* — a political 'deviant'.

A number of political parties that were formed in the 1980s and 1990s used kinship in subtle and obvious ways. For instance, a number of parties, such as the Party of National Unity, Tako Lavo and the Bai kei Viti (literally, fortress of Fiji), both formed in the 1990s, revolved around tribal and kinship linkages. The Matanitu Vanua, formed by supporters of coup-maker George Speight, had a significant kinship base in the Tailevu Province.

Traditional leadership and political legitimacy

Closely associated with the use of kinship is the use of traditional leadership. Notions of 'traditional' leadership in the Pacific have evolved in various ways over the years, some reinvented and some retaining certain aspects that were presumably pre-colonial in nature. By and large, the two most significant determinants of 'traditional' leadership are inheritance and achievement. On the 'hereditary' extreme is Tonga, where monarchical or noble status is purely through birth, while on the other 'achievement' extreme are some Melanesian communities that do not have chiefs as such but 'big men', who gain social prestige through the accumulation of cultural capital such as leadership skills, personal and social wealth. In between these two extremes, however, are shades of hereditary and achievement and often a coexistence of these two modes of traditional leadership.

In Fiji, there is a complex interplay between hereditary and achieved leadership. Through their Native Policy, the British restructured the chiefly system to facilitate indirect rule. The previously isolated chiefdoms were centralised under the Fijian Administration. New chiefly titles were created and made to fit into the new hierarchy. The inherited and highly stratified system of leadership that was prevalent mostly in the eastern parts of Fiji was universalised as traditional, although many parts of Fiji possessed more egalitarian Melanesian modes of leadership. Today, because of the complex interplay between the inheritance and achievement leadership modes and the lack of clear guidelines regarding inheritance, there is constant competition for chiefly positions. Given the complexity of what now constitutes traditional leadership after recent reconceptualisation and restructuring, this chapter will define it specifically in terms of localised modes of leadership in community settings such as villages and clans, which are recognised as 'traditional' by the communities concerned.

Political parties in Melanesia have used traditional leadership as a means of mobilisation and legitimisation. Often traditional leaders have deliberately been made party leaders, leaders of local party branches, campaign managers and party stalwarts, or election candidates, as a way of consolidating party discipline and authority as well as to project images of respectability and coherence to the public.

In Fiji, Mara, the first leader of the Alliance Party and first Prime Minister, had three very high chiefly titles as well as having read economics at the London School of Economics and being an MA graduate from Oxford. In his lifetime, he was awarded two knighthoods and a host of other decorations, including honorary doctorates and fellowships from universities around the world. Mara's standing as a regional and Commonwealth statesman no doubt contributed to his heightened *mana*. His case was a classic example of a situation of synthesis between inheritance and achievement, but still needs to be put in proper historical context. For instance, Mara's education was driven largely by the colonial policy of deliberately educating chiefs to prepare them for future leadership. He was no doubt a brilliant scholar — being chosen from the rank of potential Fijian chiefs — but he was also advantaged by the 'accident of birth'.²¹

The political organisation and structure of the Alliance Party revolved around Mara's skilful political strategising, as well as his chiefly *mana*.²² Interestingly, his closest friends were Indo-Fijian businessmen and politicians, not Fijians, because Fijians were restricted by socio-cultural protocol compared with Indo-Fijians, who were not bounded by the traditional Fijian hierarchy.

In Vanuatu, chiefly titles are either hereditary or achieved. Both are linked to party politics in dynamic ways. For instance, one's chiefly background could provide an important fulcrum for political party leadership. The first leader of the Vanua'aku Party and first Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Father Walter Lini, was a hereditary chief (from the maternal and paternal sides) from the island of Pentecost, with the bestowed title of *Molbwango*. His chiefly status boosted his political career.²³

Some, such as the controversial politician, Barak Sope, managed to accumulate a number of traditional titles as a result of their national political status. In turn, they used the socio-cultural status of these titles to mobilise political support. This is also the case in the Solomon Islands and PNG, where national political status is gained largely through one's success in politics. Later, this success is often used to build up 'traditional' status within the community. Consequently, this newfound status is later used to reinforce national political status further. A consequence of this is the development of a mutually reinforcing relationship between traditional status and political party interest.

To ensure acceptance by the community, it is common in Melanesia to use traditional chiefs as a medium for party campaigns at the local level. In cases where traditional leadership is hereditary it is usually easy to identify who the chiefs are, but in cases where there is open competition for chiefly positions, there are competing claims that can cause conflict. In such cases, links with political parties might provoke further tension. Political parties are usually wary of individuals who make arbitrary claims to the 'big man' title since they might turn out to be political liabilities.

There are, however, times when chiefs are not used directly as instruments for political mobilisation within a local community. This is because of sensitivity about potential

tension due to allegations of political bias, with some chiefs wary of losing their traditional status in the event of conflict. In these circumstances, political parties rope in relatives of chiefs (usually through the secret blessing of chiefs) as tactical manoeuvres to avoid any publicly visible connection that might prove politically fatal for the chief.²⁴

Tradition as party policy

Tradition is often the subject of political campaigns. This involves tradition or particular interpretations of it being used as a subject of debate by political parties in order to legitimate their projects and policies. In Fiji, PNG, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, almost all indigenous political parties refer to preservation of tradition as one of their aims. Although it is usually somewhat unclear how this is to be done, the political purpose is apparent — the ideological undertones sound positive and are comforting to voters who feel that tradition and cultural identity are synonymous and need protection.

Most Melanesian political parties have not really articulated the ‘tradition as policy’ argument nor put in place practical frameworks to preserve culture.²⁵ In Fiji, tradition has often been invoked as a means of ‘saving’ Fijian culture and a tool of ethnic mobilisation to arouse fear of Indian domination, and in Solomon Islands and PNG it has been a utilitarian tool for party unity and attracting votes. Perhaps the only country where this has happened successfully is Vanuatu, where, in the early days of independence, the policies of the Vanua’aku Party attempted to unite the country through preservation of traditional culture. This found expression in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC). The VCC was formed before independence but was nurtured and given inspiration by a succession of ruling parties.²⁶

In Fiji, traditional institutions that are meant to protect Fijian culture, such as the Fijian Affairs Board, Native Land Trust Board and Ministry of Fijian Affairs, are theoretically outside the ambit of party politics. Nevertheless, over the years all the major Fijian political parties, such as the Alliance Party, Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) and the currently ruling Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SDL), have used these institutions to serve their political ends. Moreover, because Fijian tradition is assumed to be alive and well through these institutions it is not deemed necessary to do anything further to revive it.

The dilemma of party identity: ‘foreign flower’ versus tradition

As we have seen, most indigenous political parties in Melanesia use tradition extensively to consolidate their identity. So while political parties are at one level organisational manifestations of modern democracy, they have also been ‘traditionalised’, often as a reflection of sentimental opposition to foreign influence. In countries such as Fiji, the notion of democracy as a ‘foreign flower’ has been part of the nationalist vocabulary since the military coups in 1987. In other Melanesian societies, there is sometimes an inherent disdain of the ‘foreign’ and love for the traditional. The flawed logic behind this is that democracy has destroyed traditional institutions and thus democratic ideals and influences need to be minimised in favour of retaining traditional systems.

This presents an interesting set of contradictions. Much of what is being referred to here as traditional is in fact quite recent in origin and is often a product of the colonial era. Furthermore, in many cases, those who articulate for the anti-foreigner and pro-tradition stance are some of the greatest beneficiaries of modern education and modern life. Theirs becomes an ideological construction to look for scapegoats (often foreigners) as well as a mobilising tool for local political support, especially from more conservative members of the electorate.

This was particularly evident in Fiji, where the utility of the concept of 'the foreign flower' grew in parallel with the waning fortunes of the Alliance Party. Invoking tradition was used as an anti-Indian rallying call by supporters of the Alliance Party, which lost the 1987 election to the FLP, a month before the May coup.²⁷ The rhetoric was that the foreign flower benefited only foreigners and undermined the political aspirations of the indigenous people. While the Alliance Party was winning elections between 1965 (when Fijians were first allowed to vote) and 1987, the foreign flower concept was never heard of. Indeed, it was only after the Alliance lost the election that democracy came to be demonised.

Because of their dynamic roles, political parties will continue to face the dilemma of multiple identities — being a vanguard of tradition one minute and an agent of modernisation the next. This process of identity flux continues to define the ideological and political characteristics of Pacific political parties.

Conclusion

Tradition still plays an important role in the broader dynamics and configuration of politics in the Pacific. Articulations of tradition by politicians are reinvented to suit particular circumstances and interests, just as politics can be used to reinforce certain traditional modes of organisation. Political parties need to be understood in the context of this broad schema.

The relationship between political parties and tradition can be understood in four key ways. First, tradition can be used as the basis for formulating political ideology as a means of mobilisation and legitimisation. In this way, political parties invoke traditional socio-cultural mythology and cosmology to provide convincing arguments based on ancestral and divine intervention. Second, the use of socio-cultural and kinship structures and linkages expands party influence and consolidates community support. One's own kinspeople provide visible avenues for electoral support. Traditional socio-cultural systems based on reciprocity also come into play in a dynamic and functional way. Third, the tendency of traditional leaders to become party leaders, candidates for election or party stalwarts involved in community party organisation is commonplace. Last, there is the use of tradition as a policy framework in itself; that is, the preservation of tradition as a policy for cementing community support.

Political parties in Melanesia range from very loose associations of individuals and groups to more organisationally coherent groups. Some are relatively stable while others are constituted opportunistically to contest national elections. While what qualifies for a political party is generally determined by the respective laws of the Pacific Island

countries, their operation on the ground is guided by broader political and socio-cultural forces. Tradition constitutes one of those forces and will continue to be a defining factor for Melanesian political parties for years to come. Tradition is embedded in people's communal psyche and, as such, becomes a powerful political force for mobilisation and legitimisation. Its utilitarian characteristics make it readily deployable by political parties for various purposes — all the more so because tradition is highly adaptable and subject to constant transformation.

Footnotes

- 1 See chapters on political parties in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Sāmoa, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Nauru, Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia by Steven Ratuva in Alan J. Day and Henry W. Degenhardt (eds) 2004, *Political Parties of the World*. London: John Harper Publications. There are now more than 2,550 political parties across the globe. See Day. 2004. 'Introduction.' In Day and Degenhardt (eds), *ibid.* p. vii.
- 2 See Lawson, Stephanie. 1997. *Cultural Tradition and Identity Politics: Some Implications for Democratic Governance in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Publishers.
- 3 See Ratuva, 2004, *op. cit.*
- 4 It must be stated here that ideological differences between political parties are decreasing the world over. For instance, the differences between the once left-wing British Labour Party and the conservative Tory Party are no longer as obvious as before.
- 5 See Hobsbawn, E. and T. Rangers (eds). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 6 See Shils, E. 1981. *Tradition*. London: Faber and Faber; Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnology, Literature and Art*. Cambridge (Mass): University of Hawai'i Press; Keesing, R. 1989. 'Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific.' In *Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 1, pp. 19–42; and Lawson, Stephanie. 1996. *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- 7 Keesing, *ibid.* p. 19. See also Keesing, Roger and Robert Tonkinson (eds). 1982. *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia. Special Issue Mankind*, Vol. 13, No. 4.
- 8 See Ratuva, Steven. 1999. 'Ethnic Politics, Communalism and Affirmative Action in Fiji: A Critical and Comparative Study.' PhD Thesis, University of Sussex.
- 9 Keesing, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 10 See France, Peter. 1969. *The Charter of the Land: Custom and Colonization in Fiji*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- 11 Lawson, 1996, *op. cit.*
- 12 Narokobi, Bernard. 1983. *The Melanesian Way*. Port Moresby: Institute of Pacific Studies.
- 13 *The Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, published by SIL Inc., lists 823 living languages for PNG. See http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Papua+New+Guinea
- 14 See Hobsbawm and Ranger, *op. cit.*
- 15 The term was first used after the coups of 1987 as the tide of Fijian ethno-nationalism swept Fiji. One of the most vocal nationalist politicians, Finau Tabukaucoro, first introduced the term in a public speech in Suva in May 1987. See also Larmour, Peter. 2005. *Foreign Flowers: institutional transfer and good governance in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- 16 See Melman, B. 1991. 'Claiming the Nation's Past: The Invention of an Anglo-Saxon Tradition.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 26, No. 31. pp. 575–95.
- 17 Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 254.

- 18 See Day, op. cit. For most of the modern political discourse, especially in the 20th century, political parties in western states were identified in relation to either 'left', 'right' or 'centre' and variants in between ('centre-left', etc.). There are also those with non-secular ideology, based on religion and other mythical beliefs.
- 19 Lini, Walter. 1980. *Beyond Pandemonium: From the New Hebrides to Vanuatu*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies. p. 32.
- 20 Ibid., p. 47.
- 21 For details of Mara's political ideology and vision, see Mara, Kamisese. 1997. *Pacific Way*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- 22 See Ratuva, 1999, op. cit.
- 23 Personal communication with Jeanette Bolenga (Walter Lini's sister), Electoral Fellow, University of the South Pacific (December 17, 2004).
- 24 Personal communication with Jeanette Bolenga (December 19, 2004).
- 25 See Lindstrom, Lamont and Geoffrey White (eds). 1994. *Culture, Kastom, Tradition: Developing Cultural Policy in Melanesia*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific. pp. 67, 85.
- 26 See Roe, D., R. Regenvanu, F. Wadra and N. Araho. 1994. 'Working with Cultural Landscapes in Melanesia: Some Problems and Approaches in the Formulation of Cultural Policies.' In L. Lindstrom and G. M. White (eds), *Culture, Kastom, Tradition: Developing Cultural Policy in Melanesia*, Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific. pp. 115–30.
- 27 Ratuva, Steven. 2004. *Storm in Paradise: The 1987 Military Coup* Uppsala: Life and Peace Institute.