

A Region in Transition

Politics and Power in the Pacific Island Countries

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Self-confidence and a New Self-understanding as Opportunities and Challenges for the Future Development of Pacific Island Countries

Hermann Mückler

Abstract: *This article focuses on concepts of self-understanding and traditional modes of orientation of the Pacific Islanders in a fast changing world. Some Pacific Island populations face the increased problem of predicted and already visible loss of land. The traditional role of the sea as a territory itself is sketched for its use to create a new understanding about the land-sea relationship and its impact on statehood. It peaks in the question 'Tuvalu or not Tuvalu?' Also the significance of 'kastom' and 'wantok' are highlighted regarding their capacity as concepts to create identity and provide orientation in a challenging globalized world.*

Keywords: tradition, revival of tradition, identity, the sea, loss of land, climate change, kastom, wantok

During the annual conference of the New Zealand Studies Association (NZSA) at the Norwegian Maritime Museum and the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo in June 2014, the keynote speaker, New Zealand anthropologist Dame Ann Salmond, addressed old and new meanings of the sea as space and place of orientation and identification for the Pacific islanders. She mentioned this in the light of the changing ecological and climatic conditions in Oceania, which increasingly lead to uninhabitable island. Thus, the future of Pacific Islanders will be characterized by unprecedented and existential challenges, and survival strategies need to be found for coping with these challenges in an environment under threat. The loss of land in the form of island territory will have serious consequences for the understanding and the localization of the islanders themselves with it and in it. Salmond said that a 'loss of territory' might not necessarily be accompanied by a 'loss of identity'. Rather, it is important to define the identity creating spatial frameworks in new ways. One option could be, that Pacific Islanders build on forms of traditional self-understanding and focus on perspectives that were decisive for the Pacific Islanders for centuries and which might today await their reactivation or re-discovery.

"Why can not the sea be a territory?" asked Salmond, facing the imminent loss of islands due to rising sea levels (Salmond 2014). The fact that in the current international legal understanding the loss of land directly leads to a loss of sovereignty, and the question of whether there can exist, for example, a nation of Kiribati even when there is in fact no longer the territory of this state existing, provides challenges for the relevant discussions in international politics, the Law of the Sea institutions and of international law. The imminent emergence of the term 'climate refugees' or 'environmental refugees', a term that is not recognized so far by the international bodies (although one precedent recently occurred in New Zealand, where a family of

Tuvalu successfully sought asylum on grounds of environmental causes) will dominate future negotiations about strategies and practical policy for dealing with such cases. It culminated in the pithy slogan 'To valu or not Tu valu, that is the Question' regarding the future Tuvalu has to face. The visibility of the issue begins to slowly open up to a broader audience; but discussions about the handling and possible adaptations of regulatory mechanisms are still held mainly behind closed doors. The question is, whether the internationally recognized and through colonialism spread western-occidental concept of a 'mare nullius', which means the general availability and usability of the sea for everybody (excluding those regulations which relate to the direct and indirect coastal area, the so-called foreshore and the seabed), is conflicting and opposing with traditional understandings of the role, function and importance of the sea for the Pacific islanders. In other words: for the inhabitants of Oceania, the sea has always been much more than just a hurdle that had to be overcome in order to get from island to island.

In Europe, the over the centuries slowly growing understanding and importance of the sea, preceded by many a continental oriented centuries in European history, has determined the legal concepts for dealing with this element, which after all, covers by far the greatest part of the globe. The ownership and control of land, therefore, had priority for a long time and was dominant in order to justify claims of power, even when Europe reached for the overseas territories and gained the sea as a transportation route of growing importance. Finally, in the context of geopolitical conceptions, the role of the sea was defined in a way that favoured European needs and ignored other potentially existing concepts. For instance, 'classic' geopolitical experts like Alfred Thayer Mahan - who found recognition in the geopolitical analyses of the 19th century focusing on US-American interests - showed interest in the sea, but for the sake of creating concepts providing free and unlimited access

to land territory, which means controlling the sea in order to control land. Based on the understanding of the importance of land, the Western definition of statehood, originally developed by George Jelinek and his three-element theory as constituent feature, was based on territory, a (state) people, and a state authority. Although this was later enriched with several other elements, an essential basic feature is still recognized: the fact that there must be a land on which a state manifests itself (see Crawford 2007; Katz 2010). If this condition is not applicable, there cannot be any statehood, and therefore no ‘citizens’; statelessness would result.

However, if one is open-minded for a different understanding as a basis for interpreting the role and importance of the sea, including traditional relationships with the Pacific Ocean which have grown over centuries, the situation could be different. The Pacific Islanders (and I here leave aside the highlanders of Papua New Guinea) have had and partly still have an understanding which gives much greater notion to the sea as a central element of identity. This means the sea is an integral part of an environmentally based self-understanding and therefore an inherent part of the orientation and movement in space. The Islands of Oceania were not just isolated, as they are often portrayed in the Western worlds ‘island jokes’, viewed as an endpoint for dropout fantasies and as inescapable whereabouts for castaways. Rather, they were network nodes in a dense network of trade, barter, tribute, marriage and religious relations. The islands embodied, figuratively speaking, oases and bases, and the sea provided the roads on which the inhabitants of Oceania were able to move between the different network nodes – their places of interest. All this was accompanied by a very sophisticated, specialized and customized technology. The possibilities and opportunities for getting and remaining in contact by using the sea as a road were used intensively, as it is evident if we look at the complex maritime technology as well as the precise

knowledge of oceanic navigation of the Pacific islanders. Hegemonic aspirations, claims to power and mutual boundaries marked the political sphere in Oceania in the pre-colonial era. In the centre of Oceania, for example, between the island groups of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga – and thus over relatively large distances – rivalries and struggles took place over centuries that led to Tonga's temporary rule over Samoa and the eastern part of Fiji. Trade relations evolved over centuries and dissolved a locally limited availability of resources through exchange and distribution over large distances. Trade goods such as pottery products, hardwood, textiles and shells, to merely name a few, were traded from Melanesia and West-Polynesia (Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa) to Central- and East-Polynesia (Marquesas and Tuamotus). An entire historical epoch marked by a specific and identifiable style of clay pottery, the so-called Lapita-period, was spread from Melanesia via the triangle Fiji, Samoa, Tonga to the Central-Polynesian islands and beyond; this period and its main barter goods figure as a typical and easily comprehensible example of the range and therefore the mobility of the Pacific residents over long distances (see Mückler 2009:31ff).

Let us create a vision: Following such historical facts dealing with the ocean in the framework of international and constitutional law, law of the sea negotiations could be different – and lead to different conclusions and results, if one starts from the existing concepts. Thus it could be that statehood manifests even without the presence of "land". With a historically verifiable close relationship and intensive use of the sea as a habitat for mobility and residence of marine-oriented peoples, the sea – the ocean as such – could be interpreted as a habitat for Pacific Islanders. It could be defined as 'their' territory and specific rights of sovereignty could be derived which then must be respected internationally. "We have to reimagine the nature of the state" proclaimed Roy Smith, an expert on International Development of the British

Trent University, in his keynote speech at the conference in Oslo (Smith 2014). And Ann Salmond added on the following day that “*we have to re-evaluate and redefine the law of the sea, (...) revision of the framework is only possible in a pan-oceanic way, it should recast our imagination of the sea*” (Salmond 2014). In this sense ‘reimagination of the State’ is equivalent to Benedict Andersons concept of ‘Imagined Communities’ (Anderson 1991). Since the modern nation-state can be seen as such an imagined community, a re-evaluation and an appreciation of the marine space – in an admittedly unrealistic equality between land and sea as territory – lead to a reassessment of the fate of the thus affected island populations. In this case, however, relevant initiatives of existing and over a long period of time established historical modes of (self-)understanding of Pacific Islands populations as well as traditional relationships between man and the sea have to be made more visible and transparent. Here, the re-reflection on their own cultural traditions might not have only a folkloric function, but can create a basis for tangible existence and ultimately securing changes in international Law of the Sea. Salmond rightly observes that these things can only be achieved in close cooperation of all Pacific Island nations and peoples and she is aware of the expected resistance of many continentally oriented nations. Nevertheless, a unified action of the Pacific island countries and a reasonable reflection about their own cultural traditions that grant the sea a central position in the thinking and actions of people, could initiate a global shift in thinking about the relationship between man and the sea. This would mean a splitting up of those regulations that have been adopted in 1982 by signing the Law of the Sea Convention, which provided the most comprehensive global determination of rights and opportunities with respect to the use of the oceans. By some commentators the re-evaluation of the ‘mare nullius’ concept is placed in a row with the ‘Mabo case’, that legendary legal dispute in Australia, which led to a

reassessment of the colonial understanding of a 'terra nullius' and the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait islanders ownership of land based on proven traditional use (see Gray 1997; Mulrennan/Scott 2000; Balint 2005; Perera 2009).

The background of an increased devotion to this issue is not only due to the time pressure, fed by the increasing timeliness and thereby increasing urgency to act, but also the fact that the United Nations declared in 2014 the 'International Year of Small Island Developing States' to stimulate raising awareness about the concerns of the fragile and sometimes threatened islands and island states. The so-called Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have in the advocacy of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) an ad hoc lobby and negotiating voice, which helps the small island states and low-lying coastal countries in the international arena, particularly at the United Nations and its sub-organizations. The strategies to raise awareness for the concerns of island nations, thereby differ significantly (see Hasenkamp in this volume). In relation to sea level rise and its causes, individual island states are blaming developed countries for not acting properly and demand a commitment for the island states and their problems. There are discussions going on about ways to absorb already visible effects of the creeping disaster and about strategies to deal with future developments. Two storylines can be distinguished concerning the central Pacific: the Government of Tuvalu currently favours a policy of downsizing and partial trivialization of climate-related and oceanographic evidence that points to a change, and calls for an involvement of the 'rich' industrialized countries in the search for solutions regarding the challenges ahead, while the government of Kiribati has a politician in the person of the president Aote Tong, now acting on his third term, who announced on international stage: *"Let me make the point that whatever is agreed within the United States today, with China, it will not have a bearing on our future,*

because already, it's too late for us. And so we are that canary. But hopefully, that experience will send a very strong message that we might be on the front line today, but others will be on the front line next – and the next and the next” (Tong 2014). Tong relies on an intensive examination of the impending problems in his own country. He discusses options and possibilities, how the island population of Kiribati could deal with the challenges. This includes the idea of relocation of parts or the entire population from the exterior to the central islands and from the islands to continental countries of the Pacific Rim – provided the latter agree to mass immigration from i-Kiribati, as the local people call themselves. Tuvalu in turn still hopes that less drastic measures might be needed and hopes to benefit from support of the large CO²-polluters, the industrialized countries. Evidently the two pursued strategies are mitigation on one side versus adaptation and handling on the other.

Many issues are raised and discussed for the first time. What does it mean for such affected countries in terms of international law, if a mainstay of what international law represents – namely the territory – disappears? Will these countries cease to exist? What will happen especially to the EEZs, the exclusive economic zones of the island states, when the islands have vanished? These are measured exactly in a 200 nautical mile radius around the islands, and are important because of their fish stocks and the proven or suspected seabed mineral resources. If they disappear, are these areas then going to become international waters? Which conflicts over the control and distribution of that booty will emerge and by which powers? Even if a long-term total depopulation of the region will not take place, the future of the affected islands seems to be largely determined by the major external powers operating in the region.

The writer, anthropologist and artist Epeli Hau'ofa, born in Papua New Guinea who lived in Fiji until his death in 2009, had stressed regional identity

creating similarities between the island nations in his programmatic essay 'Our Sea of Islands' (Hau'ofa 1993). In his opinion, the special geographical and topographical conditions faced by all islanders play a crucial role. He stressed the sea as a unifying element just as the common formative experience of outside influence like colonialism, the Christian mission and hegemonic claims of outside powers who imposed various limitations to the islanders sovereignty. Hau'ofa's article has been published in response to doubts about the existence of a regional identity. It was not about a nonreflective return to passed on and/or lost traditions, but rather he looked ahead. Hau'ofa called upon – in the metaphorical and real sense – the ability to overcome barriers, and to use the freedom to counteract interpretations that had been imposed from the outside on the societies of Oceania, and get rid of them. Every individual person should demonstrate its personal responsibility and initiative for action, so Hau'ofa, and not rely on politicians and government institutions. To deal with some necessary changes maybe only general directional changes, new strategies and completely different approaches can open new doors that have yet to be found. Hau'ofa explains that to meet the challenges of the future also means to incorporate new aspects in a way that they fuse with approved programs, and something new is created from it. The Solomon Islands lawyer Transform Aqorau also argued for this direction and appealed to his compatriots to recognize the potentials of the future. "As we stand at the beginning of the 21st century, we have an opportunity to do things differently, to learn from the mistakes of the past, and to chart a course for a bright and hopeful future" (Aqorau 2006:239). Another question is whether one can apply the term 'revival of tradition' considering the example outlined above about an altered understanding of the element of the sea and thereby potentially seeing it as a model for a new pacific self-understanding. The term 'revival of tradition' has been used in the past fifteen years as a collective

term for all custom-based concepts and for building on traditional responses to grievances against and shortcomings of public systems in the Pacific island countries in general, but especially in Melanesia. The fact is that in recent decades the reference to real and fictional traditions has experienced a renaissance, that has grown steadily since independence and which has increased with the time since the discharge from the colonial yoke.

The relatively short period of transition from foreign rule to sovereignty in many parts of Oceania in the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s must be viewed in the context of chronologically preceding and subsequent developments. The euphoria and the expectations at the time of change in the newly independent island states have been great. This was particularly the case in those countries which had a solid base of resources and hence could hope for a steady income cash flow for investment in infrastructure. This was the case, for example, in Papua New Guinea, and gave rise to high expectations in the years before and after 1975. *“There was a political consensus in the clear demarcation from the colonial modernization through the takeover of the state apparatus and the economy by locals and the reduction of foreign dependence. Central monetary and fiscal policy measures were taken such as the establishment of the Kina, the national currency that was stable in its performance for a period of two decades. The National Development Strategy, published in 1976, envisaged a development process that should avoid major social disparities and maintain the hitherto largely intact social fabric”* (Seib 2007:2). The agriculture of Papua New Guinea then was assigned developmental priority. A few large mining projects of transnational corporations should serve to finance the efforts. Increasing environmental issues with these mines, and also the inefficiency of public institutions, economic stagnation and a high level of violence within the society, prevented a successful ‘take off’-phase of this rich island state per se. The same situation occurred in

the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu, the former New Hebrides. They were all confronted with the fundamental challenge of ethnic, linguistic and religious heterogeneity – summarized as cultural diversity – and the lack of awareness about togetherness in a nation-state that had no historical precursors from pre-colonial times. This required exertion to guarantee economic social peace and prosperity. The identification with the new, young nation state, which consists usually of many former autonomously organized islands and island groups, was and is for the people, especially the larger Melanesian countries, a hurdle and the source of many conflicts of interests and distribution. A variety of particularisms are the result of the historically grown and not yet overcome fragmentation of states. Disappointment and a lack of faith into the problem-solving capacities of national governments and bureaucracies replaced the euphoria of the early years. The particular interests of the politicians resulted in the majority of countries, especially in Melanesia, in escalating corruption, nepotism, collusion and nepotism.

The difficulties of island nations to create a national identity in broad sectors of the population and thus identification with the respective nation-states, led at the latest at the end of the 1980s to disillusion and a search for a way out. These also included the return to traditional forms of political representation, but also the promotion of regional cooperation to establish identity through the articulation of regional similarities on the inside and the development of visibility on the international stage to the outside. Challenges, identity crises and a redefinition of the self-understanding of the islanders are the defining elements, which are now of relevance in the Pacific island nations. All peoples of Oceania are gradually affected by these aspects although possibly in different ways.

Presumably, the question of identity is in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century – besides environmental problems – the biggest challenge for

the designing capacities of the islanders. Migration from the home islands, and the long-term and often permanent change of residence to Pacific Rim territories in the course of labour migration change the bindings of the former islanders to their original home. Such reduced populations will – on some of the more remote islands – fall back into isolation due to unprofitable transport and travel routes; therefore especially on some Polynesian and Micronesian islands a permanent settlement or a resettlement is up for discussion. It can be predicted that at the end of the 21st century, more islands, particularly in Micronesia and Polynesia, will be inhabited than now. The peripheral location and the involvement of the islands in the globally neoliberal organized market with simultaneous existence of immutable adverse factors such as too long transport routes to potential markets, reduce optimistic forecasts drastically. In fact, all small states could not survive without foreign help. This finding, reflected in the acronym MIRAB (see Tisdell and Bertram in this volume) – migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy –, shows the fundamental dilemma of the island states of Oceania: by themselves and insisting on self-sufficiency the island states cannot survive. The vital linkages of labour migration, money remittances and long-term international development aid mean in turn external influence and a partial give-up of self-determination. By tendency, the external influence will not be reduced, but is going to shift. China's involvement in the islands will increase in those places, where Australian and New Zealand or generally Western investment and development aid was linked to democratic political demands of 'good governance' and where the island states do not want to bow to such restrictions that are perceived as patronizing.

The best example regarding this aspect is the island nation of Fiji, which was since 2006 isolated by Australia and New Zealand and treated as a pariah country. Fijis transitional Prime Minister Commodore Voreque Bainimarama

has emancipated most clearly in the years 2006-2014 from Australian and New Zealand interference in Fijian affairs. The conditions of dependence changed after Bainimarama's seizure of power that was a result of a coup in 2006 and wiped away a corrupt, racist and unconstitutionally acting government. Australia and New Zealand immediately imposed massive sanctions against Fiji and pursued a strategy of isolation of the island nation (about recent political developments in Fiji see Schieder 2012). Australia tried to force Bainimarama to return as soon as possible to a democratic western style political system through the announcement of elections, but with regard to the specific situation in Fiji the Fijian politician refused to do so. He pointed out that he first had to solve the basic structural problems of the country before working out a new constitution, which could act as a basis for general elections that he scheduled for September 2014. At the beginning the economic situation in Fiji deteriorated dramatically, because Australian tourists, which are an important source of revenue for Fiji, and Australian investment came to a halt. In spite of this and contrary to the opinions of many political observers, Bainimarama succeeded in providing inward stability, easing the fragile ethnic situation between Fijians of indigenous Melanesian-Polynesian ancestry and Indo-Fijians of Indian descent, and – if only with limited success – he even succeeded in his fight against corruption and mismanagement. The military always has been and still has a strong position in Fiji and soldiers find high recognition in the population, especially on the side of the indigenous Fijians. The return to local traditions, a 'revival of traditions', was visible in two directions: on the one hand, the soldiers of the Fijian army were regarded as a direct extension of the historical role of the Fijians, and considered as skilful and admired warriors, to draw a direct continuity line from famous 'old times' to a present that generates proudness. On the other hand, institutionalized traditions have been overturned and discredited as 'invented

traditions', such as the existence of a Great Council of Chiefs, an assembly of the chiefs, which – implemented by the British colonial power as an instrument of colonial 'indirect rule' – was deemed unnecessary by the transitional government. It is beyond doubt that all this served to maintain Bainimarama's power, and it emphasizes that when analysing traditions one must pay attention on which groups with what sort of intentions claim interpretational sovereignty over certain traditional practices in order to pursue their own interests; in other words: an instrumentalization of tradition in the sense of traditionalist practices (Mückler 2012:141ff).

Within a few years, Bainimarama had been able to increase Fiji's prestige at the international level through active participation in several international organizations. He even obtained the chair in some institutions and committed himself to the Pacific micro-states, instead of only acting on a regional level. Due to the suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Fiji no longer saw itself bound to the agreements made in that institution. In 2010, Fiji caused a stir with the 'Engaging the Pacific'-Meeting (and two more meetings of this kind followed since) and received benevolent consent by the other Pacific island countries. Some of them interpreted these events as counter-events to the Australian-dominated PIF annual meetings. After the Fijian elections in September 2014 and by now acknowledging Bainimarama as a democratically legitimated prime minister, Fiji was invited to rejoin the PIF. But Bainimarama refused by criticising Australia's and New Zealand's substantial influence in this institution. Fiji only will agree to rejoin the institution if Australia and New Zealand leave the PIF. Although this is very unlikely to happen, it shows the new self-confidence that Fiji exercises. In 2011, Fiji succeeded to host the annual meeting of the inter-regional governmental organization *Melanesian Spearhead Group* in the Fijian capital Suva, where many Melanesian island States expressed their deep sympathy for Fiji. The

Polynesian counterpart which was founded in 2011, the *Polynesian Leaders Group*, then invited Fiji in the same year to become a member and thus also supported the Fijian interests. All these activities were not pronounced but indirectly directed against Australia's attitude on Fiji.

The merger of the Pacific island countries at the United Nations to the group of Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS), which replaced the previous informal agreements on the level of the PIF, was finally a visible sign that Fiji as the most influential islands country in the region is still willing to go ahead for the benefit of all other Pacific island States; Fiji successfully did and does follow this strategy. Within the regional groups at the United Nations Fiji inspired and successfully implemented that the regional group, which also subsumes all the small island countries, has been renamed from 'Asia Group' into 'Asia and the Pacific Group of Small Islands Developing States' (short: 'Asia-Pacific Group'). It is obvious that such actions cause the goodwill of the neighbours. Fiji's candidacy for the UN Security Council in 2011 was finally 'the icing on the cake'. It is unusual that a small country of this size requests to be included in the Security Council of the United Nations – as Oliver Hasenkamp noted and critically questioned in an excellent analysis about Fijian policy (see Hasenkamp 2012:5-10). Even if later, Fiji tactically withdrew its realistically hopeless candidate status, this step caused a stir not only regionally and internationally, but also made clear that Fiji's new self-confidence could be a model for actions of other small states, not least in the Pacific. The latest coup was that since the beginning of October 2012, Fiji – based on its nomination by the Asia-Pacific Group of the United Nations – led the board of the influential 'Group of 77', consisting of 77 developing countries plus China. Thus Fiji left behind any form of isolation imposed by Australia and New Zealand. Although some persons rightly criticize the foreign policy executed by Bainimarama for a diversion from

domestic politics and accuse him of megalomania, the tactic worked: Fiji broke out of the prescribed solitary confinement primarily imposed by Australia and New Zealand and is now more active and visible than ever before (see Hasenkamp 2012; see also Hasenkamp and Ratuva in this volume). Fiji frankly questioned (and questions) Australia's hegemonic role in the region, which is observed by other micro and small Pacific Islands states with malicious joy. Many Pacific Island countries, with Papua New Guinea leading the way, explicitly appreciated Fiji's approach. Sir Michael Somare, prime minister of Papua New Guinea until 2012, expressed several times his sympathy for Fiji and his critique of Australia in various regional media.

The opening of several new embassies in Fiji shows that the island nation moves forward. Rather, Australia manoeuvred itself with its policy towards Fiji into a regional political impasse, and therefore has been even reprimanded by the United States. The Americans pursue a different strategy and inaugurated in 2012 their biggest new embassy in Oceania in Fiji's capital Suva. The new US-ambassador to Fiji immediately paid a visit to Fiji's prime minister Bainimarama after his arrival in Suva in 2011; a step which the Australian and New Zealand ambassadors had avoided since 2006 (Mückler 2013:105-107). The Fijian government knew how to call China into the play as new donor and therefore fuelled Australian fears of increasing Asian and especially Chinese influence in the Pacific Island region. Thus, Fiji acts vicariously as a representative of a growing Chinese influence in the region, which is accepted by the island states and observed with suspicion by the traditional partners such as Australia, New Zealand, the European Union and the United States. Fiji's action proves that small island states have space to move and that they can pursue unusual and unorthodox ways, which can cause regional power shifts and ultimately can eventually lead to geopolitical consequences.

In Fiji's wake, the self-confidence of other island states was rising against external influences, and own strengths grew in the context of self-discovery.

The future of the Pacific Islands societies probably will be a sensitive symbiosis of Western and proven traditional ideas. Not everything that is old automatically has to be good; not every tradition or traditional practise actually is one and for some people, the question arises whether and how it should be continued or adapted in order to meet the present needs of the populations. It might be noted that the instrumentalization of tradition in the sense of traditionalism with the lack of independent control mechanisms may also be counterproductive for the successful development of the island states. Usurped interpretations must be scrutinized self-critically by the affected members of the respective societies. In Melanesian societies, the term 'kastom' played and plays a decisive role. The two Australian anthropologists Robert Tonkinson and Roger Keesing already dealt in the early 1980s with 'kastom' and its relevant use (Keesing/Tonkinson 1982). Since then, the concept of 'kastom' has been used to describe cultural self-representations of the inhabitants of Oceania by themselves at all levels of society. It serves the residents as an identifier for various forms of self-representation against a foreign group. With this form of self-representation mainly Melanesians affirm their own distinct identity or, conversely, they try – for example in the context of the inclusion of Christianity – to distance themselves from it (Jebens 2007:144-145). The anthropologist Holger Jebens has examined the meaning of 'kastom' in the context of anthropological external- and self-perception and outlined the relevant research on and about 'kastom' – a word derived from the Melanesian pidgin word for 'custom'. This includes in a narrow sense the works of Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey White (1994), in which traditional Melanesian concepts of culture and the corresponding 'cultural policies' are discussed. In this instance, it makes a difference whether the

resulting patterns of interpretation come from 'above', for instance from a ruling elite or leaders who claim these competences for themselves, or from the 'bottom' of individuals or groups in the context of self-assertion, the need for manifestation and/or as a strategy of differentiation.

Especially in the Melanesian island states, the attachment to the own local group is still much closer than to the state and its institutions; the latter are often perceived as relatively abstract, distant and complex. Since the range of the modern state is limited in most island nations and its services, especially in peripheral areas, are therefore insufficient, the reputation and the loyalty of the citizens and local leaders to the state is usually lower than against the obligations to the own group. An example from Papua New Guinea may illustrate this. The so-called 'wantok'-system, a concept of social reciprocity and loyalty, shows this clearly. The Tok Pisin term 'wantok' ('one talk') signifies a person who 'speaks' the same ethnicity, values, norms and language, and a similar socialized person as a brother or a sister is thus emotionally close. The people I share a language with, I am obliged to help. They are close to me and for this very reason they accept social obligation for me. The 'wantok' system can thus be seen as a Melanesian social security insurance as it implies reciprocity, and therefore creates a social network for an individual which gives him security, but is also demanding. A Papuan is doing really well if his tribe, clan or extended family – the 'wantok' – feels well. Such an 'embedded' Papuan must do everything to maintain the harmony among all the 'wantoks'. In the traditional context, this system so far has worked well, but in a modern world it collides with other obligations and liabilities to which people are increasingly subjected. So-called 'wantoks' can come into serious and to them almost insoluble conflicts of conscience, as an example illustrates: A Papuan, employed in a store as a shopkeeper might not be able to sell the products to a customer who is at the same time a 'wantok' to him.

On the one hand, the request of the 'wantok' to give him the products without payment and on the other hand, the need as a shopkeeper to ask to pay the bill can cause significant troubles for the person being torn between the modern concept of market-,oriented sanctity of contracts and his duties as a 'wantok'. Modern contracts, market-based trust policies in terms of contract compliance, accounting rules and governmental laws lose their prime importance or do not develop any meaning at all and might be in such cases of lower priority. This dichotomy creates fundamental problems, wherever a modern world relies on the compliance of a contract.

Therefore, today 'wantok' is decreasingly interpreted by outsiders with its positive connotation as a social bond structure, but increasingly with its negative effect as an obstacle that penetrates all levels of society within the meaning of favouritism, which culminates in the political level as nepotism. As an example can be mentioned the practice of awarding government office jobs and other advantages in the public sector to 'wantoks'. Here, the key aspect is status, not achievement. For this reason, the people's confidence in their representatives and generally in the democratic system in Papua New Guinea is low (see Gelu 2003). The political-bureaucratic sphere in Papua New Guinea is interwoven with lifeworld practices that are based on the power of social interrelationships. The dominant meaning of 'wantok' could be reduced only if there were social safety nets that can unfold similar logistical functions. Since this will not be the case in the foreseeable future, the 'wantok' system will continue to have its significance and function – and thus remain important for the indigenous population. If one asks locals, they see this concept quite positive and as an essential system that is integrative and functional in its use as a cushion and as a distribution system in a society that otherwise hardly receives state-imposed social security measurements. This has been confirmed by Anastasia Sai from the Department of Papua New

Guinea Studies and International Relations of the Divine Word University in Madang, who spoke about these aspects in 2014 at the University of Vienna (Sai 2014). The conclusion is that the traditional concepts that are known and proven, must continue to exist, as there is no alternative in sight.

Therefore, seen from an outside position, the value and importance of traditions and traditional practices for the future development in the Pacific island states is, considered ambivalent. Those who arrogate interpretation in this regard – at all political levels – in fact reinterpret: they select, systematize and create ideological systems in which heterogeneous cultural traditions are transformed, in the ideal case to form a homogeneous national ideology. The purpose of these practices is part of a process of identity-finding, envisaged to create a national solidarity. Therefore, continuity is used to draw legitimacy from the past for the present. These are processes that are still far from coming to a final end. The previously mentioned discussion about the traditional importance of the sea for the inhabitants of Oceania shows that observance of traditional self-understanding can also have an avant-garde aspect. Here, a re-evaluation and modification of traditional ways of Pacific Islanders could be an inspiration for an altered view at a global level.

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