Why religion, race, and gender matter in Pacific politics

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Introduction

Dominant political assumptions and values look universal to those who believe in them, but politics always has local hues. This article addresses a set of intersecting issues—religion, gender, and 'race' or 'ethnicity'—which loom large in politics and governance throughout the Pacific region. These issues are neglected by exclusively political or economic approaches and are often played down in international policy and aid discourses as merely social factors.

Many Pacific states face problems of relevance and legitimacy, especially in Melanesia where states are recent, artificial colonial legacies that have been imposed on assortments of small, highly diverse societies with no overarching indigenous polities. The great diversity of the Pacific region as a whole makes generalisation problematic. However, there are important commonalities and systematic contrasts to be drawn across the so-called 'arc of instability' to Australia's north, the region from East Timor to Fiji, which is the major focus of this paper.

The themes of religion, gender and race necessitate attention to mundane settings and non-crisis situations, as well as to more dramatic situations when violence and conflict seem like norms. Historical and cultural sensitivity is required to unravel complex, varied processes of local appropriations and practice of foreign ideas in diverse contexts of local modernity. I stress that ordinary Melanesians are not 'backward', 'primitive' or 'underdeveloped', but are our modern, relatively deprived contemporaries. Nor are they simply helpless victims of missionisation, colonialism, modernity, globalisation and multinational or elite bastardry, but have actual or potential agency in such situations.

Recognising religion in the Pacific

Why does religion matter in the Pacific region?: because Christianity is neither foreign nor imposed, but an indigenised daily spiritual experience and a powerful ritual practice. Religion and ritual have always been crucial in Pacific societies, and local religious beliefs and practices underpin conversions to Christianity. Pacific Christianities, as everywhere, have a distinctly local cast. Islanders take for granted the efficacy of prayer and mobilise it pragmatically to invoke the power of the Christian god and his earthly agents in support of a wide range of private and public goals, including national ones (Gibbs 1998).

'So what?', may be the response of secular, rationalist Westerners, who discount religious explanations as superstition, and are embarrassed by spirituality, especially the born-again, pentecostal or charismatic Christian variety that is increasingly popular in the Pacific. At best, the critical contributions of Pacific missions and national churches to the provision of education, health and welfare services have seen 'the church' institutionalised in the international good governance agenda as a component of civil society and a reliable conduit for channelling aid.

The academic, policy and aid communities also underrate the ideological importance of Christianity in nation making in Melanesia. Most indigenous candidates for leadership in nascent Melanesian states from the late 1960s were mission-educated, and often ordained, professed Christians. As the four Melanesian states successively attained independence between 1970 and 1980, such leaders helped install Christianity as a traditionalised state or ethnic institution, along with Christianised custom.

In Fiji, Methodism—the denomination of around 80 per cent of indigenous Fijians who comprise just over 50 per cent of the population—is almost completely identified with indigenous tradition, and partly transcends the fault lines of class and region which fracture the ethnic Fijian community. Some Methodist leaders have colluded with ethnic Fijian religious and political fundamentalism by seeking constitutional ratification of Fiji as a Christian state in which taukei (people of the land) exercise paramountcy over non-indigenous communities, especially Indo-Fijians (Balawanilotu 1989, Weir 2000:50–51).

In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, adherence to Christianity is one of few widely shared values, and Christianity is formally enshrined, together with custom, in national constitutions and symbols where they serve as ambiguous bases for national unity and identity. The adjectives 'noble' and 'worthy', when applied to traditions and customs in Melanesian constitutions, themselves encode Christian values, since they refer to indigenous practices deemed acceptable by mainline Christian islanders.[1] In all three countries, Christianity is multidenominational but the mainline churches are relatively ecumenical, whereas custom is place-specific and therefore potentially divisive. Even with the recent proliferation of fundamentalist evangelical or pentecostal groups, which are usually sectarian, politically conservative and hostile to custom, there are far fewer Christian denominations than local versions of custom.

This makes indigenised Christianity arguably the key national symbol in these states, though regional cultural institutions such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre privilege custom. Christianity features largely in nationalist rhetoric but nonetheless resists nationalist appropriation. On the one hand, it is intensely local and parochial; on the other, it has long offered Melanesians membership in global moral communities that transcend the

doubtful legitimacy of colonial and national states.

Though cultural and ideological aspects of the significance of Christianity in Melanesian identities and governance have been largely neglected, the churches have recently been acknowledged as a force for moderation, conflict resolution and reconciliation in political crises (Australian Council for Overseas Aid 2000). While church interventions can often effectively mediate and help reconcile conflicts in Melanesia, recent experience in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea also suggests that goodwill, courage and moral authority can come to grief in the face of undisciplined mobs of violent young men with high-powered weapons.

There are nonetheless signs that Christianity is often seen locally as an antidote to the collapse of internal security that has long plagued parts of Papua New Guinea and, since 1999, has obliterated civic order in the Solomon Islands. The home-grown millenarian God Tri Wan (Holy Trinity) movement in western Enga Province mobilised grassroots Catholic spirituality 'to secure prosperity . . . by ceasing all tribal fighting and introducing an era of peace' (Bieniek and Trompf 2000:124–26).

Invisible citizens: gender and governance in Melanesia

Throughout the Pacific region, Christianity is grounded in local congregations. From the earliest stages of Protestant missionary endeavour, women participated for their own reasons in regular gatherings of women promoted by female missionaries for moral and instructive purposes (Douglas 1999, 2002). Such meetings were prototypes for the local church women's groups, which missions began to establish from the early twentieth century (Forman 1984). Now indigenised, women's fellowship groups are the norm in rural Pacific communities and are often reported to be growing in structural, economic and moral importance, even in men's eyes (Douglas nd). However, the unfashionable conjunction of women with parochial Christianity means that such groups are seriously under-researched, while professional neglect is exacerbated by widespread local male (and even female) contempt for women's political capacities.

Pragmatically, women's groups are neglected because most are tiny, have mundane agendas, use cautious, low-key methods, and espouse a self-effacing ethos of service, voluntarism and self-financing that makes few coherent demands on international aid or attention (Pollard n.d.). Typically, they emphasise home economics and welfare issues in accord with their members' expectations. Women's preoccupation with the mundane can frustrate feminists, especially those involved in aid projects seeking to empower indigenous women, rather than reinforce their apparent domestication.

Yet ostensibly conservative, innocuous bodies like YWCAs and church women's organisations can endorse quite radical social agenda and programs (Scheyvens n.d., Dickson-Waiko n.d.). So, indeed, did similar Christian women's organisations during the first-wave of Euro-American feminism from the mid-nineteenth century (Marshall and Marshall 1990:105–20), though it is important not to see such analogies as literal precedents, or modern indigenous people as located in an earlier phase of a universal evolutionary trajectory. In Melanesia, women's involvement in collective action in the protected space of a village women's fellowship—with possible extensions to district, island, provincial, national or regional caucuses—provides their main opportunity to build solidarity, confidence and leadership or managerial skills that can help loosen hegemonic controls over their bodies and thinking.

It is nonetheless important not to romanticise women's groups and their selfless, consensual ideology or to exaggerate their energy and effectiveness. Working with women, says a Solomon Islands woman with long experience as a national women's affairs bureaucrat, can be exhausting and frustrating. Not only do shyness, inexperience and respect for the widespread Melanesian value of seniority make many women unwilling to speak up or take public responsibility, even in a women's group, but those who do so are often condemned for flouting the equally widespread Melanesian value of egalitarianism, or for failing to redistribute generously to followers in accordance with the fundamental value of reciprocity. Commitment to self-financing on the grounds of group ownership and self-sufficiency limits the resources available for projects, and places a heavy burden on the meagre finances and time of group members, especially leaders, in addition to their onerous gardening, domestic, childcare and marketing responsibilities (Macintyre n.d., Pollard n.d.).

Throughout Melanesia, women are recognised for their critical contributions to local production and for exercising practical and moral authority in the domestic economy, as well as in situations of conflict, fighting, peacemaking and reconciliation, such as in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands (Australian Council for Overseas Aid 2000:28, Douglas 2000, Fugui 2001:554). Yet even the churches are mostly run by men, and across the region women are largely excluded from meaningful participation in political and national arenas and public affairs, except in domains such as women's affairs, health and education. They are excluded by virtue of male prejudice, lack of education and opportunity, and to some extent by choice: notoriously, women rarely vote for female candidates and most women, especially uneducated rural dwellers, agree with men that politics is men's business. Yet if Melanesian women have so far shown a limited disposition to assume wider public responsibilities, that is no justification for the systemic thwarting of those with the desire and the aptitude to do so.

Everywhere in Melanesia, women are the main objects of domestic and sexual violence, which is a serious and growing problem, although experience in multicultural New Caledonia and Fiji suggests that it is not only an indigenous problem (Dussy 2001, Lateef 1990). Violence against women and children and discrimination against women in the practice of justice and policing are properly important concerns of international donors and agencies. Rather less attention, though, is paid to the intractable and systemic problem of the political invisibility and suppression of women (along with young people) in Melanesian states, and

the national waste and injustice that entails. The virtual irrelevance of national citizenship for most Melanesians—for nearly all women and all but the relatively few men who are actively involved in politics and administration—is a less dramatic problem than the regular explosions of violent conflict that have become a defining feature of this region. However, such irrelevance is both a breeding ground and a symptom of the instability and lack of moral credibility that plague national governments across the region.

Historicising race and ethnicity

At least since 1980, the region from East Timor to Fiji has registered in the Australian media and public imagination largely in terms of political violence or civil war. Across the region, the violent collapse of civic order has frequently been represented by insiders and outsiders alike as 'ethnic'. Unlike religion and gender, the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are notably untheorised and under-researched, and their local meanings or appropriateness in Pacific contexts are unclear. Race entered the region as a European scientific category but has also been indigenised, partly in self-defence against colonial racism, but also as it was locally reworked in conjunction with existing indigenous stereotypes about collective bodily and other differences.

There are many so far unanswered questions. What does it mean when a Bougainvillean calls another Papua New Guinean 'Redskin' or is called 'saucepan arse' (black) in return? What does anti-Sepik prejudice mean in Rabaul, anti-Chimbu in Port Moresby, anti-Indian in Fiji, anti-Malaitan in Solomon Islands, or anti-Wallisian amongst Kanak in New Caledonia? Are all or any of these racisms on a par with long-entrenched white demonisation of Africans, or are they more contextual and contingent? Is ethnic merely a euphemism for racial or does it connote fundamental differences in the nature of prejudice in Oceania compared with the West? How do gender and ethnicity intersect given women's reported efforts to mediate via exchanges across warring ethnic communities in Solomon Islands (Liloqula and Pollard 2000)?

What is clear is that the concept of ethnicity is usually more distorting than informative when it is applied to recent crises of state across Melanesia. By essentialising the contending parties, it obscures the immediate or ultimate colonial genesis of all such conflicts, together with the significant internal differences within so-called ethnic groups and the cross-cutting relationships of class, religion, region and gender that discredit simplistic dualistic notions of ethnic homogeneity and opposition (Kabutaulaka 2000, Regan 1999:8–12, Teaiwa 2000).

Seemingly racial ideas are entangled with religion in obscure and, for us, confronting ways with potent implications for the legitimacy and viability of modern Melanesian states. Anthropologists frequently report statements by indigenous people, especially from the Papua New Guinea highlands, categorising themselves as 'black' and as collectively inferior to 'whites' because they lack knowledge or self-control, or because the ancestors and Jesus Christ are held to be white. Local people may attribute the experienced deficiencies of the modern state to such perceived black inadequacies, while Christian millennial expectations often hinge on the promise that Melanesians or their maligned black nation will become equal to whites (for example, Clark 1988:45–47, 1997:73–75, Robbins 1998). It is important, though, not to take such statements literally but to investigate their ambiguities and local resonances, because they are often culturally specific and accompanied by a kind of perverse pride in indigenous masculine wilfulness.

Self-castigation for racial inferiority is a poor basis for nationhood, but such statements, however bizarre to outsiders, also represent a kind of claim to agency, a readiness by people to blame themselves for misfortunes or to take responsibility for failures, regarded as products of their own (reversible) actions and shortcomings (for example, Barker 1996:221–25, Strathern and Stewart 1998, especially 53). This tendency is not just a pathological hangover of guilt for having been colonised, but has widespread indigenous cultural antecedents in the strong, if varied, correlations drawn by Melanesians between religion and morality. Failures were accordingly attributed to spirits offended by improper human behaviour or to incorrect performance of ritual (Douglas 1998:227, Strathern 1979–80:92).

Conclusions

In conclusion, I suggest that a narrow state focus and a universalising, prescriptive political economy are inadequate bases for addressing either the crises of state in Melanesia or the human and social problems and aspirations of Melanesian citizens. Such phenomena as Christian revivalism, male domination and 'ethnic' conflict do not happen out of the blue. Rather, they have complex historical and cultural dimensions that must be grasped if we are to understand the phenomena in question and formulate informed prognoses about their likely sociopolitical implications. The framing and delivery of effective foreign policies and aid and development programs in this region demand cultural sensitivity rather than unreflective universalist presumptions and prescriptions. However, a doctrinaire cultural relativism is not the answer. Rather, Melanesian leaders, administrators and citizens should be encouraged to engage creatively and strategically with global discourses such as democracy, law and justice, and human rights, and to do so in humane, principled and culturally inclusive ways, rejecting fundamentalisms of all kinds.

Note

1. The constitution of Papua New Guinea invokes 'our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now'; that of Solomon Islands brackets 'the worthy customs of our ancestors' with 'the guiding hand of God'; that of Vanuatu refers to a republic 'founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles' (Institute of Pacific Studies 1983, II:97, 231, 305).

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