

A Blend of Good Governance in Pacific Culture¹

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*'Be careful how you think;
your life is shaped by your thoughts'*
Proverb 4:23 *Good News Bible*

Abstract

This paper proposes that the hybridisation or blending of South Pacific culture with good governance practices will empower our efforts to continue to sustain our culture. The five broad areas underpinning the grand theories of development addressed here are those on good governance; market economy, structures, functions and pre-conditions; traditional authority of the subsistence economy; adaptation, blending or reinventing a hybrid of good governance; and the all-encompassing unique Pacific environment that sustained a quality of life for millennia. The paper aims to rekindle interest in a discourse that has been lying dormant for some years, i.e. the importance of our own knowledge base and its relationship with good governance. The paper argues for a blend of local governance with colonial structures as the ideal model of good governance for us.

Introduction

In the book *Culture Matters*, Harrison & Huntington (2000) wrote: '...if culture includes everything, it explains nothing. Hence we define culture in purely subjective terms as the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in society' (2000: xv). This is a useful definition of culture. However, some assumptions and preliminary statements must be made in support of the views that underpin this paper, as we ponder the implications of the Proverb of

the latest *Good News Bible* written for our time: 'Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts'. The focus of this is on a set of basic parameters about our own conceptualisation of our existence; our own knowledge base. This matter is interesting in itself for those who determine 'what ought to be' in our island states. The paper contends that the structures that we already have will, if adjusted correctly or realistically, assure transparency, sustainability, participation, equal opportunity, responsiveness, efficiency, and equity. This is assumed from the fact that the starting point for human beings is to process information and gain more knowledge from what they already have and are familiar with. We work from our known world to the unknown. New coded information is difficult to understand in any situation, unless the time is taken to learn to process or connect information and, with the help of those in the know, to gain appropriate knowledge and skills. With acquired knowledge and skills Pacific Islanders could be empowered to craft better ways of providing services and producing goods. This is already being done by the islanders as pilots, doctors, scientists, academics, lawyers, teachers, rugby players, boxers, etc.

Good governance demands that there be proper adjustments of given structures to delivering services, so that they may better address needs in individual households in villages and settlements in urban/rural areas. While a paradigm shift is now accelerating from the totally subsistence mindset of our traditional societies to a hybridised legal-rational model, such a process of hybridisation should strengthen the same traditional structure that Pacific Islanders wish to maintain in the changing market world advocated under the label of globalisation. Now is a borderless world largely, if not exclusively, crafted by high priests of neo-classical economics hosted by the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). These organisations are the world's new Trinity, whose dynamics are shaken and moved by technology and tycoons like Bill Gates, who once said: '[i]f the 1980s were about qualities and the 1990s were about re-engineering, then the 2000s will be about velocity ... [a]bout how information access will alter the lifestyle of consumers and their expectation of business' (Gates 1999: xv). This is a far cry from the *life-world* and the *social capital* of the Pacific, to which cosmopolitan dwellers retreat to for leisure and reflect on their own existence. The demand for this activity makes the Pacific a provider of a service that is restorative, therapeutic and desirable. Jeremy Seabrook correctly identified this: 'To understand the meaning of "sustainable"- a much-abused word - in the present world we should look not to the think-tanks of Western economists but at people who have survived

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in cultures which are a direct expression of the ecological niche that shelters them' (2003: 45). Seabrook's reference is to people like us in the Pacific. Seabrook further argues that the 'strongest resistance against the global economy comes from indigenous peoples, whose lives have depended directly – often for millennia – upon the resource base of their local environment' (2003: 45). Pacific peoples have been ignored when the West expresses our 'special interests' in terms of our vulnerabilities, resource constraints, distance from markets, and our fragmentation.

Since the Pacific island countries became independent - between 1962 (Samoa) and 1980 (Vanuatu) - we have been afflicted with those who determine 'what ought to be', as opposed to working with our local leaders or the grassroots and our Pacific life-world. The PIDP's Director Sitiveni Halapua flagged this point when he stated: 'It appears that never before were so many development plans prepared in such a relatively short period as in the Pacific island countries and perhaps never before have so many been abandoned or ignored so soon' (*USPBeat* 2003: 5). The fact is that too many inappropriate and untested ideas were introduced. It is now common knowledge that even the World Bank 'has been left to cast about for new sources of legitimacy and political support' (Pincus and Winters 2002: vii) because of failures. The World Bank's record of failure to reduce poverty is emblematic of the lack of quality of mind and analysis.

That our culture is marked by *equity and equal opportunity*, had neither been recognised nor celebrated for this reason. Samoa, for example, is emerging to be recognised by the Asian Development Bank as a well-governed Island State, after forty-two years of independence. But if we accept this, we cannot deny the contribution of the traditions and culture of *Fa'a Samoa* in that success. Needless to say that Samoa sees its culture as a capital/asset or social capital.

In essence we learn that governance is to do with the distribution and proper management of resources. Given the problem of poverty, for instance, there is absolutely no doubt that we need those who understand the necessary work to see that the appropriate mechanisms for offering employment through small businesses, agriculture and marine harvests are in position. But unqualified political appointees are a major handicap, about which many of our countries are silent. This holds back our development enormously. The availability of work in the areas mentioned would lead to a reduction in unemployment. Contribution to economic growth and political stability would be considerable as a 'flow-on effect'. The lack of employment, needless to say, leads to poverty and social dis-

integration, because the life-world of the Pacific people has, since independence, been treated with disrespect by too many of our own.² Those who say that it is part of growing up console us. Samoa's sustained growth in recent years appears to validate this assertion because it has come of age at 42 being the first country to become independent.

Against this backdrop, let us look at good governance. As the first step, we examine what the Asian Development Bank and others say about the concept to us in the Pacific.

Good Governance – development

The Asian Development Bank defines governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development (King 2003: 2). Four mutually reinforcing dimensions define the acceptable manner: accountability, participation, predictability and transparency. ADB's medium-term plan, *Agenda and Action 2000–2004*, aimed to elevate governance issues to the top of the Asia–Pacific development agenda. But there are criticisms of the ADB's 'governance' policy. Chinese officials, for example, say that the word 'governance', is 'too political'. China prefers 'development management' (Larmour, 1998: 5).

The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) links good governance with participatory development, democratisation and economic liberalisation (Takasugi, 1997: 3). But as Larmour (1998) pointed out, policy discourse on the term has run ahead of academic theorisation.

In the case of the Pacific, I see governance to have a component of equity³ first and foremost, as well as accountability, participation, predictability and transparency as laid down in the ADB definition. While we can get bogged down on academic differences, what is important to note is that 'Good Governance' has been equated with development. Indeed the WB definition specifies that governance is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a 'country's economic and social resources for development' (as cited in Larmour 1998). According to

² The population is considered mainly as a source of electoral support, to be bought with schemes if necessary. Sitiveni Halapua put it thus: 'One may say that the lifespan of a particular national development plan is closely associated with the duration of a respective government in power' (*USPBeat*, 2003: 05).

³ I include equity because Pacific people in rural and urban areas must learn that equity refers to work ethics. If you work you get remunerated. If you do not work on the job, then you must not expect remuneration. In this sense land-owning units will invest their funds and use them when appropriate.

Larmour, the World Bank introduced the term only after it identified ‘a crisis of governance’ in Africa in 1989 (1998: 1). This evasive language – ‘a crisis of governance’ – was forced on the World Bank by its Articles of Agreement, which explicitly prohibits the institution from interfering in a country’s internal political affairs. Good governance was a polite way of raising awkward issues of corruption, incompetence and abuse of power.

Historically, the usage of the term goes back to 1912. Governor Huey Long of Louisiana referred to good government (Larmour, 1998: 3). But theories associated with ‘good governance’ came from institutional and neo-classical economics, company law, political science and economic sociology.

The proponents of ‘Good Governance’ carry the message that without it development cannot be sustainable. But one often sees that ‘governance’ is used interchangeably with ‘government’, making it vague in meaning, especially when lumped together with all those properties of good governance that have been raised. Fiji’s Minister of Finance, in his 2003 Budget Speech stated: ‘good governance is about being fully accountable to the people in an honest and transparent manner. Government has, therefore, seen the need to adequately resource our public institutions that serve to scrutinise the activities of Government and its impact on the public’. He went on to say that Government was putting more funds into the Auditor-General and Ombudsman’s offices. Funds were also expended on the review of the Fijian Administration, done by Pricewaterhouse Coopers. The report was reviewed by Government, which appointed another review team to review the first report. The Minister also reported the establishment of the Fijian Trust Fund, to which it allocated \$20 million, which the trust invested on behalf of ethnic Fijians. While most Fijians would accept the investment on their behalf, some will question the ethics of investing \$3 million in the Fijian Holdings Limited (2004 Budget), a private company, from this fund. This certainly is not an example of good governance.

Our challenge today is to make governance meaningful at the micro level. In this respect one has to begin with good governance at the level of local institutions, which are understood by the majority. In the case of Fiji there are municipalities, the Fijian Administration, and the Advisory Council for non-ethnic Fijians. These institutions need to be strengthened. The same must be done for other South Pacific island states. It is at this level that good governance will consolidate the efforts of development through agriculture, business and marine harvests to improve education, health and living standards.

Market Economy, Structures, Functions and Development

The significance of independence relates to improving the living standards of individual households. But independence is being continuously nullified by the macro views of those in authority, as they make policies and lay in place infrastructure with expensive and spectacular projects, without linkages with the local environment.⁴ Most of the infrastructure has failed to improve the conditions of rural lives, with the consequence that the tide of rural to urban migration continues. Internal and international migration not only upsets the traditional societies, but they cause a significant number of households at the micro level to be reduced to live in squalor. In Fiji it is estimated that 50–60% of the population is either close to or below the poverty line. The poor, as defined by the institutions of the West, are increasing in number, largely as the pace of the destruction of the local ecological niche by forces of globalization has not been matched by the creation of the good things promised by the same forces of globalisation. We can not move away from globalisation, nor can we move with it at its own pace. We stand at a crossroad. The only way is to take the best of both worlds. This is the core of blending in good governance.

The structure and functions of governance is still heavily dominated by a bureaucratic system that was defined by the work of Max Weber almost a century ago. Embedded in that structural construct are Adam Smith’s division of labour, specialisation and the fragmentation of work. The evolution of these structures and functions is still a wonder, and even a mystery to our Pacific people. In Fiji, despite the ever-continuing statements from the government praising good governance, we continue to see scandal after scandal. The collapse of the National Bank of Fiji under doubtful debts of over \$F220m or 8 % of Fiji’s GDP; the fruit-less \$F65m Commodity Development Framework for agricultural development; and the \$F16m Ministry of Agriculture scam of 2000–01 are just some of the well-known examples. The Auditor-General’s reports continue to expand in size on cases of corruption and more generally bad governance, almost at the same rate as the flow of the mantras of good governance from the policy makers.

What could have been, is a matter of speculation only. But consider the loss of over \$300m in the three scams listed above. If the sum was

⁴ Good examples of this are the Uluisaivou Beef Cattle Corporation (mid-1970s) and Yalavou Beef Cattle Project (late 1970s), both multimillion dollar foreign aid-funded projects, which failed miserably.

made available for small business development, at an average of \$100,000 each some 3,000 small businesses would have been created. This would have resulted in further job creation. The ripple effect would have been enormous. But this is wishful thinking because it is common knowledge that those who decide 'what ought to be' – the policy makers and the leaders -- are swayed more by narrow political considerations than by the tenets of good governance.

While modern good governance has been proposed within the framework of a market economy, evidences to date show that without a strong willed regulation of the markets, markets in the developing world tend to fail, largely on account of greed, corruption and that very essence of free enterprise – self-interest. Pacific cultures, on the other hand, look down upon self-interest.

Traditional Authority, Subsistence Economy, and Development

In Fiji traditional authority is often seen as being encompassed in the *Fijian Affairs Act*, the Ministry of Fijian Affairs, and the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB). But since the mid-1980's, concerns have been raised on whether the legislation and the institutions have improved the welfare of those living under traditional authority. A review of the structure and functions of the Ministry was commissioned by the Great Council of Chiefs. The review, carried out under the leadership of an international accounting firm, was presented to government three years ago. Subsequently, a group of indigenous Fijians, selected by the FAB with the blessings of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), was tasked to review the review report. A report was published; some have proposed that given the sensitivities, the new review needs to be reviewed again.

The evidence is that the GCC, the FAB, and other traditional authorities, take a long time in decision-making. This is because they aim not for majority decision-making, but consensus. But within the globalised era, it is becoming increasingly difficult for ethnic Fijians to agree to anything (or get consensus). What is rational and legal in the traditional setting is not necessarily what is rational and legal in the market economy. The great majority of Fijians are oblivious of the two different worlds, hence the looseness of decision-making, responsibility, accountability, transparency, and, of course, equity.

While rationality and legality are institutional and documented, our coup leaders who led the unexposed indigenes, relied on the romanticised myths and legends from their grannies. Many of these were passed down as evidences many decades earlier, recorded as oral traditions in the codi-

fication of land and fisheries legislation (from 1880s to 1940). But the work is incomplete. Much of Fiji's Western areas (beginning at Deuba but not including the rest of the Province of Serua), and moving on to Nadroga (with the exception of Malomalo and Vatulele) and on to Ba, have no *Tukutuku Raraba* (Official Record of Origin) aligned with land and fishing ground ownership. The consequence is that there often arise conflicts that become the fodder for the media.

My observations over the last 30 years lead me to the conclusion that in development terms, chiefs must look at themselves and their participation at the local level, i.e., where they belong, rather than at the macro level of the GCC and government. Chiefs must consult their own people and involve them through participatory decision-making. But this is easier said than done. It needs a special quality of mind and knowledge. The system as it is right now appears to be cast in concrete and is used by some with limited understanding of the dynamics of societies. Worse still are some who refer to the Biblical vernacular translation of certain sections of the Bible to justify rent seeking, nepotism or corruption. This behavioural pattern was conspicuous in the aftermath of the coups, in what over a century ago the sociologist Emile Durkheim called anomie or normlessness; the absence of social control. Robert Merton (1949) later revealed how anomie may be a source of social innovation as well as a locus of social problems.

The inevitable transition from a communalistic society to an individualistic market culture, imposes or initiates a cognitive transformation. This may be argued to cause anomie or the normlessness that may occur when one has to choose between tradition and modernity, resulting, for example, in coups in Fiji. In the process we witness change, the emergence of new norms through hybridised or invented traditions and ultra right groups demanding preservation of the status quo. This view has been assumed in numerous treatises but not really given the attention it deserves. It holds the key to understanding the work that has to be done to stabilise Pacific islands' governance.

Given the view of historicism and its rational composure and assertion of divergent academic, theoretical, or political views, the Pacific life-world becomes an important study in itself, to be undertaken by indigenous people themselves. Their work should produce the information that might be used to determine 'what ought to be', derived from their life-world and social capital. This is preferable to having our needs determined by those who claim to have the means to tell us what 'ought to be' in the Pacific merely because they have the necessary consultancy, though what they say tends to interest political leaders who are eager to

show their people that they have access to international expertise, thereby paving the way to the parliament.

Way back in 1994, Australia's then Minister of Pacific Island Affairs, Gordon Bilney proposed: 'Island countries may need to ask themselves . . . whether some old social and economic habits and attitudes might need to be adapted, or even abandoned, if positive beneficial change is to be secured and longer term social and economic aspirations met' (cited in Larmour, 1998: 36). All of that 'longer term social and economic aspirations', of course, assumes good governance that ignores the Pacific life-world and in turn assumes a system or a model assuming the market economy of globalisation but not the pre-conditions necessary for the functioning of the market economy⁵. Minister Bilney, like many others, mentioned that change was needed, but casually disregarded the pre-conditions of the market economy, which is vital to good governance.

We have addressed the pre-conditions with aspects of the present institutional set-up versus the life-world in Fiji. While we have the knowledge, what appears to be missing is what Wah Sing, a successful Suva businessman called, the pathway, which consists of the details and steps to take in a business activity, including the likely conditions that will arise and the possible responses to them to obtain a desired result. Communication, management techniques, documentation and recording are part of the demands of this pathway. Guiding interested people to learn to carry out financial and market activities properly through hands-on experiences may achieve this. This relates to traditional authority where ethnic Fijians are always apologetic for everything they do and in the process rely on someone to demonstrate and supervise them closely. Basically, this translates to being led by the hand. This is also evident with the majority of our students at university, a mindset that in my view accounts for much of our failures. The pathway in Wah Sing's view lies with the details rather than the form.

Too many of us in the Pacific see only the form. This is argued, perhaps erroneously, to be traditional. Much of what we do nowadays follows traditional forms but adds marked economic details, from traditions for birth, initiation, marriage and death to religion. These in themselves are part of the subsistence mindset of former times that are part of our socialisation. This mindset needs to change. One way to do this is through education. Another is through business. The very nature of business will

⁵ Nathan Keyfitz and Robert Dorfman provide a list of 14 institutional and cultural requirements for the operation of effective private markets. Todaro (2000: 642) provides a useful summary of these requirements.

help Pacific people modify their habits and take the best of their traditions to fit into development in a spectacular and impressive way.

A case study of a small business that I have documented as an Action Researcher for the last twenty-three years has shown this (Qalo, 1997). The small business was in difficulty because of the cumulative effects of the coups, the army mutiny, bad debt, court cases and the ensuing depressed building market. In the process the small business, which used to employ thirty people, shrank to employ fifteen; the number has now grown back to twenty workers. Family members involved in the business improved their living standards and sent their children to universities, seeing them take professional jobs, develop a farm, own houses and so on. Being the only indigenous business in that sector and with the improvement in the building sector the Fiji Development Bank rescheduled loans and lifted their performance. The policy of Affirmative Action, or the Indigenous Fijian Blue Print, lifted their hopes, leading them to put a proposal to Government. To date, four and half years after its submission, there has been no favourable response.

As more extended families around the Pacific move from the traditional subsistence mindset to the hybridisation process with the market economy, good governance should facilitate their development, if careful attention is given to locating that element of trust and the ingredients of the pathway mentioned. Business, as well as education, is increasingly becoming the driving force to the development of an appreciation of good governance, as business people demand predictability, transparency, accountability, participation and equity.

Adaptation: Revisiting a Model of Development

The concept of adaptation/hybridisation had not been researched adequately. Some attention, however, is beginning to be given to this (Huffer and Qalo 2004). Adaptation and the consequent hybridisation are processes that the grassroots of the Pacific have engaged in and will engage in perpetually because it falls into their life-world. Ever since contact with the outside world, adaptation/hybridisation has been ongoing. Obvious examples include education, language, religion, sports, dress, food, music, etc. It will continue because we live in a hybridising world that will modify traditions, producing a culture that will be sensitive to globalisation but that will also be shaped by globalisation. While some might think that this is all intellectually simplistic, it is not so when we engage it politically, socially, economically, managerially and operationally in the process of governance in an ethnically diverse population. The

context enables tradition and culture to be shaped by it.

Let me explain with an example. Embracing our culture and building houses of relatively exorbitant prices of over \$50,000 in villages around Fiji is now common. I estimate that there would be no fewer than 10,000 houses of this price around the country. Total investment, therefore, stands at \$500m or half a billion dollars. Because these houses are on communal land, they lose all financial/market value. Leaving aside depreciation – which, at 5%, would amount to approximately \$25m annually – the investment is of no use to a commercial bank if the houseowner were to try to use it as collateral. It is clear, therefore, that constructing expensive homes in villages is market-wise non-rational, especially when one's life savings is poured into a house in the village where its potential dollar value is unacceptable to banks as collateral. The logic of capital informs us that a steady flow of investment return will enable someone eventually to build in the village if the funds were initially invested in urban areas on similar homes for rental. But we continue to defy this and construct our first homes in the villages. We did not start as, and continue not to be, diehard capitalists. Capitalism should not be viewed as a credo or set of beliefs. Much more important are matters of equity, equal opportunity, accountability, participation, transparency and predictability. But if both came simultaneously – the house in the village and the collateral – it would place us in a better position.

Thus, it is not too difficult to understand that adaptations or hybridisation must take place to ensure better returns on investment and better quality of life. The structure of the *koro* or village, *tikina* or district and *yasana* or province is interesting to revisit. Good governance in this model is very much determined by good leadership, if we are to realise the values of traditions and those assumed in the market economy.

It seems to me that good leadership in the Pacific is still very much based on charismatic authority. Politicians complicate the issue with promises or statements that mean something else to the untrained ears and minds of the voters. A good leader will see that the legal-rational authority is adopted and strictly used. In essence it means that the councils make decisions only after carefully examining the agenda in discussions, possibly with involvement of experts. Some might argue that this is already happening. If so, it is only in form and not in the details that would ensure proper examination and better results. The case of the National Bank of Fiji and the failure of various Ministries and government departments on the scale of financial accountability testifies to this fact. However, leadership is vital in this model, as it is in any other model. Those who use the

model only for political reasons are self-centred and insensitive to the growing material and mental poverty.

What has never been stated earlier – except for a tangential reference in Peter France's book, the *Charter of Land* – is that the homogeneous romanticised villager has been, for long, an individualistic being. Fijians only become communal in rituals, as is the case in any other society. While Fijians are communal only on occasions of traditions, by and large they are, and have been, individualistic, in my assessment. The remittances that our people send from overseas show clearly the evidences of individualism – as remittances are sent directly and quietly, to close relatives only. But in rituals and in their public life, the villager is a communal being. A village fundraising – for example, to construct a new church, or to contribute to a scholarship fund – would receive funds from the remittance sent by relatives. The remittance, therefore, also serve a communal purpose. Remittances in Fiji have increased steadily, from approximately \$100m in 2001 to \$232m in 2003 and \$400m in 2005. An increasing segment of this is because of individual ties of the foreign earner to the recipient. It is this reality that must be examined, to harness the positives and to turn it into the dynamics of our culture.

Good leadership, using the rational-legal authority, will allow adaptation/hybridisation that will enable the island structures to develop its owners. Such processes of hybridisation will be unique as each society inputs what is judged valuable in their life-world.

The repulsive impact of the three coups in Fiji shook our governance to its foundations. What gave confidence, however, was the surety provided by our traditional governance model that prevented a civil war on each of these three occasions. It is fortunate that our forefathers built enough traditions into our hybridised institutions to give them stability when attacked by the nefarious forces of ignorance or camouflaged greed. In this sense the hybrid or blended model of governance in the Pacific is unique. The evolution of the traditional structures with fine-tuning through adjustments that have been mentioned will make it more efficient and sustainable. In this way our unique Pacific Governance Culture will be passed on to the future for more adjustments and fine-tuning to suit their time.

Conclusion

This paper marks a process of searching for a 'Good Governance Culture' for Fiji and the Pacific. It is built on the foundation of what is on the ground and is known to the people. What is on the ground at the mi-

cro level has become part of the life-world of the Pacific people with its social capital that they regard as their natural environment from which grew their traditions. It has sheltered them for millennia. They imbibe what is best for them from the greater world outside at local level, simultaneously fighting off threats of rendering their institutions and culture impotent. As such our culture and traditions are assets we guard jealously for they remind us of our identity and existence that have been sustainable for millennia until other thoughts came to dominate ours. We take them in naively or grudgingly over the years. Now we have the benefit and wisdom of hindsight to blend what is left of our sustainable existence to reinvent and evolve a more realistic culture of good governance.

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