Culture as a Political Function in the Pacific:
Vanuatu and Tonga Compared

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Abstract: This article shows how culture is used politically in Tonga and Vanuatu, which are compared exemplarily for the Pacific. Thereby, the aim is to outline culture as political function to preserve or to create power relations in this region. The article's main hypothesis consists of the assumption that a missing definition of culture is the pre-condition of its flexible use especially in terms of identity politics. This raises the question how culture is being politically exploited in the Pacific. In Melanesian Vanuatu, the state has practically been imposed on the adjacent parallel societies of the Big Men. Culture is used there to create and legitimate a new political unit. By contrast, the state in Polynesian Tonga was – due to its social order – only confronted with a new type of organization that had to be brought in line with the traditional regulatory instruments. The article concludes that indigenous culture is ideologized and constructed as traditionialism in order to meet its target: the maintenance of power in the case of Tonga respectively the establishment of power in the case of Vanuatu.

Key Words: Vanuatu; Tonga; Pacific Island States; Culture; Nation-Building; Traditionalism; Political Power

The Pacific Island States (PIS) are not only counted among the smallest, but also the most recent post-colonial states. The decolonization process commenced in 1962 with the independence of Samoa and has tentatively been concluded with Vanuatu's sovereignty as recently as 1980. In 2018, New Caledonia will hold a referendum on independence from France, the outcome of which - in view of the opulent transfers from Paris - is yet uncertain. Due to their remoteness, these relatively young states have only been colonized late, so that the European influence is still comparatively small while indigenous traditions and customs could be retained.

Having achieved independence, especially the Melanesian PIS faced forms of social organization previously unknown to them. In this context, differences between the sub-regions Melanesia and Polynesia need to be emphasised. While small, egalitarian groups directed by changing leaders (Big Men) emerged in Melanesia, Polynesia had already in pre-European times developed differentiated, hierarchical and different groups of comprehensive social systems.

With the establishment of state-hood, both approaches were reflected in a western modernity. In Melanesia, the state has practically been imposed on the adjacent parallel societies of the Big Men. National identities and awareness often only exist among the western-trained elites, who had also fought for independence. By contrast, the new states in Polynesia were -due to their social order- confronted with a new type of organization that had to be brought in line with the traditional power relations and regulatory instruments. On a more abstract level it can be said that in Melanesia the state is to create a national identity while in Polynesia the national identity was followed by a state (see Larmour 2003:24).

The political problem within such a framework given the social structures in Polynesia was to maintain the status quo in terms of a conservative approach, while in Melanesia something completely new had to be implemented. Both approaches reflect the German discussion of a nation of culture and civilisation ("Kulturnation") in Polynesia versus a nation of will

Official residence of the King of Tonga

("Staatsnation") in Melanesia. Consequently, the standards in the new PIS were different in the respective subregions. To implement these different standards of identity politics, the states used and still use various already existing social cultural functions such as customs and traditions, which will be presented in the following using the examples of Tonga and Vanuatu.

The scientific aim of this paper is to outline culture as political function to preserve or create power relations in the Pacific. This raises the question how exactly culture is being politically exploited in the PIS. For this purpose, the ambivalence with regards to contents of the Tongan democracy movement and the ideology of constructed traditions and customs in Vanuatu will be compared.

Culture and Politics in the PIS

Both approaches highlight differences in the collective identity. In order to use these politically, (not only) the PIS and their political elites avail themselves of cultural functions. It can be hypothesized that culture serves as a function in terms of a support (service) in order to legitimate power. Whether culture is used politically for the preservation of existing regulatory and government patterns or as a legitimation of new mechanisms needs to be ascertained. In doing so, a cybernetic model becomes evident, in which culture creates power and vice versa (see Hauck 2006:188). As a result, culture does not only contribute to the social acceptance and legitimization of the modern PIS, but is even essential for it. In this context, it should not be overlooked that the PIS consists of small states that are above all characterised by a strong social intimacy and personalization (see Holtz 2007:29 f). The de-personalization and streamlining of power as the most important features of a modern state with a differentiated mode of operation is therefore difficult to realize. A necessary rational and definable institutionalization of relations is virtually impossible, so that tensile cultural features provide an explosive political significance.

Cultural functions operate as an instrument of power in the PIS. Customs and traditions are incorporated in the respective constitutions, even though the indigenous Kastom[1] is nowhere bindingly defined. These instruments

Tonga, Vava'u Island: Women weaving baskets for direct sales.

consequently serve as omnipotent principles for decision-making and justification. The political elites are by their origin familiar with the customs and traditions and at the same time well acquainted with the modern western governance. They are capable of utilizing the dualism of traditional and modern times for themselves. The simple formula of indefiniteness is applied here: the less culture is defined, the better it is deployable because of its imprecision.

Preservation of the Status Quo in Tonga

The intended use of cultural functions to maintain power in the Pacific is particularly evident in Polynesia, as the example of Tonga illustrates. Tonga -despite various attempts at modernization- still maintains its feudal system, which in particular secures the power of family rule. Tonga's monarchy is based on a self-conception by divine right. The King is responsible for the state and religious leadership. The origin of the tradition determining the political system is intentionally kept vague to nip any possible doubt as to the royal legitimacy in the bud (see Lawson 1996:81): „Truth is what the chief says, and history is what the highest chief says" (Wood-Ellem 1981:9).

According to the Tongan constitution the king is sacred because of divine legitimacy. He is immensely powerful and restricts the authority of the local leaders. The king provides the aristocracy with power, which is returned with the noble loyalty. The commoners are given land by the aristo-

cracy, which in turn sustains the close relationship between ruler and ruled (see James 1997:57ff).

The appointment of a divinely legitimized ruler politically and socially required a hierarchical order and a centralized political system. Tonga is regarded as highly centralized, consequently local institutions have only a marginal say (see Duncan 2004:6). This centralization is supported by the linguistic unit. The socio-political system is based on three hierarchical classes. Below the king and his family there are the 33 nobles, including their immediate families ("hou'eiki"), and as a supporting base the group of ordinary people ("commoner"). This division has been kept up to now and is also reflected in the political system of the state, which allows for little political change. Tonga's twelve Cabinet members are also members of Parliament, which comprises 30 seats that are allocated by a particular system. The remaining 18 seats are held equally by representatives of the nobility and the people. Hence twelve members of Parliament are legitimized by royal command, nine are elected by the 33 nobles, and only nine members of Parliament are established by general election. The government is not accountable to Parliament, so that the function of Parliament is reduced to the petition of laws. Laws must be countersigned by the king, ensuring the crown as the ultimate arbitration. The election by the people for the people is only possible in the local elections held every three years, since the government has refrained from also

appointing municipal officials centrally (see James 2004:2). In no other political system of the Pacific does the traditional power of the Chiefs emerge as strongly as it does in Tonga (see Fraenkel 2004:4).

Despite an increase in resistance, the existing power structure seems secure. This resistance has been insignificant to date; so far only the relatively few well-educated have raised their voice to protest, while the majority of the "average" people are still too trapped in their traditions to propagate a change (see James 2003:309 ff). The Tongan government is based on two pillars, the first of which is tradition. This ensures that a different political system appears impossible for the majority of Tongans. The second pillar is religion and therefore equally determined by culture. Reforms would question the existing system into, which would imply to doubt God and his order. For many deeply religious Tongans, this is unthinkable. For this reason, even bourgeois reformist parliamentarians are against a complete political transformation. The structures of this royal system are prone to abuse.

In Tonga today there is an obvious increase of corruption in the ruling classes, probably due to the assumption that customs and traditions precede any institutional political affairs (see James/Tufui 2004:5). In the country, there is a Polynesian-style history of misuse of power which is culturally justified but the only purpose of which is personal gain. Although the Tongan public is aware of this and aspires to change, which was demonstrated in the violent protests of autumn 2006, the king as the foundation of the system remains unaffected (see Mückler 2006:188). There is an apparent desire

to change the system, but at the same time to retain the king as pillar of the Tongan identity. The modernization of the state and the ruling system is indeed longed for, ironically though without having to deviate from the Faka Tonga, the „Tongan Way".

Implementation of the New in Vanuatu

Contrary to the use of culture to maintain power, in Melanesia cultural functions are used to legitimize the relatively new organizational state. In order to establish a new centralism of the state in the traditionally decentralized co-existence of the clans, cultural constructions have been created. The goal was to create a national identity beyond the clan borders, which did not exist in this form before the founding of the state. Vanuatu's problem is typical of the Melanesian PIS, illustrated by an example of the Solomon Islands: „Allegiance of Solomon Islanders to the central state was, and remains, less strong than self-identification with separate provinces, islands, regions or wantoks" (Fraenkel 2004b:182). Vanuatu provides a striking paradigm of this problem of Melanesian identity.

Besides the classic juxtaposition of the egalitarian systems of the Big Man, the modern Vanuatu has up to 1980 been administered as a condominium of Britain and France, which enhanced the social fragmentation and heterogeneity even further. This colonial inconsistence has constrained Vanuatu to this day, yet another difficulty being its linguistic diversity. Besides the three official languages English, French and Bislama around 110 different languages are spoken. Vanuatu combines a cultural with a colonial mortgage so that nation-building plays an impor-

tant role.

This is determined particularly by the mostly western-trained elite of the country. This elite connects with indigenous customs and traditions as far as they can be politically utilized. Here, state Kastom takes over the function of producing a collective sense of identity. The initiators of Vanuatu's independence among the first Prime Minister Walter Lini, transformed the concept of Kastom into a national ideology to unite the country. Besides its unifying character, Kastom is also deployed for establishing an elite of power and dependency ratios. Kastom in this sense means nothing more than the constructed self as opposed to the western lifestyle (see Ellis/Parsons 1983:112). Interestingly, the criticism on the western way inherent in Kastom, is especially passed by the western educated elite. They constructed Kastom also for reasons of power politics justifying the ideology of their new state and by that orchestrated a constructed national culture.

The construction of Kastom includes two important features: It finds its greatest advocates among an urban, educated, Christian and acculturated group of people. Consequently the highest authorized officers are the least acquainted with the traditional, rural and pre-Christian customs (see Philibert 1986:3). In addition, reference is repeatedly made to a supposedly positive past before colonization, which is not further defined. Vague information e.g. concerning an alleged former unity are part of the concept, which initially involves the implementation of the cultural tool Kastom as a multipurpose and elastic term. Moreover, it is attempted by means of Kastom to address and win over the Big Men in

Vanuatu, Efate Island: Typical Settlement Structures of the Indigenous Population (Ni-Vanuatu as they call themselves)

Vanuatu, Tanna Island: Women sell their agricultural products on a small market

Source: © Ingrid Schilsky/German Pacific Network.

their role as traditional opinion leaders of a fragmented society. The socio-cultural identities of the Big Man-Systems are therewith enabled to develop a political identity (see Linnekin 1997:414). This type of Kastom can consequentially be described as a state Kastom, "to reduce the various ethnic identities to one national identity by appealing to some hypothetical common tradition" (Babadzan 1988:211).

The artificiality of the Kastom construction is evident at various points. The Christian trained creators of the State Kastom in Vanuatu aimed at a supposedly harmonious pre-Christian past of the unity. The connection between Christianity and pre-Christian traditions is a paradox, but no less effective. The contrast Kastom vs. western culture does not apply to the opposition Kastom vs. Christianity (see Douglas 2000:5). Another example for the artificiality of it is the fact that the actual Kastom was originally used to dissociate oneself from others and not to overcome the boundaries towards becoming a nation (see Tonkinson 1982:302). The elite often meets such criticism with pointing out the unspecified difference between good and bad Kastom. Again the maxim of flexibility is applied here to expand the Kastom and its meaning in any direction.

The quoted pre-European past is before the written word, orally passed-down and often unexplored, which contributes to this elastic imprecision causing problems. Although Kastom is enshrined in the Constitution, it is not futher explained. Disputes over land ownership or acquisition of traditional power positions are not centrally controlled, so that the instrumentalization of culture virtually lends itself to purposes of power politics. The state elite suppresses any protests against clientelism and corruption arising from this instrumentalization with a reference to the naturally not further differentiated Melanesian ideals (see Howard 1983:198).

Kastom also serves party political goals. Lini's formerly dominant Vanuaaku Pati called the so-called Me-lanesian socialism into being, which was used as an election platform. This ideology was derived from traditional values such as communalism and egalitarianism, although the approaches were far from being socialistic. Economic policy was very liberal, the tax level barely perceptible and the level of wages very low. Workers' concerns were ignored by the government with regard to the classlessness in Melanesian socialism. Riots and protests could be settled by reference to the incompatibility between protest and Kastom. This is all the more true as it is considered to be a christianized Kastom: "God never went on strike" (Lini quoted by Howard 1983:198).

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that the two examples mentioned, Tonga and Vanuatu, stand representatively for the PIS regarding their power-political instrumentalization of cultural functions such as customs, traditions or religions. Observers allude to the term „traditionalism" in view of this instrumentalization: „Traditionalism as an ideology emerges at the point where the preservation of a particular social or political practice becomes a matter of political concern, often for an instrumental reason" (Lawson 1997:6). Thus traditionalisms become an apparent ruling element. Indeed, indigenous culture is ideologized and constructed in order to meet its target – the maintenance or establishment of power. Against this background, the Melanesian socialism, which is based on Kastom, is no longer a concept of the culture-bearing people, but rather a concept of the "interests of the national bourgeoisie" (Howard 1983:201).

End-note

1) Melanesian Pidgin, derivated from the English term custom.

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