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## POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

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ulture and corruption in  
the Pacific Islands:  
Some conceptual issues  
and findings from studies  
of National Integrity  
Systems

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### **Abstract**

Ideas about 'culture' are often used to explain, or excuse, corruption. Willingness to talk, or silence, about corruption are also cultural phenomena. Social scientists often talk about corruption in different ways from policy makers and public opinion. The paper compares how 'culture' has been conceptualised in reports on 'National Integrity Systems' in 14 Pacific Island states. It identifies a number of common themes and issues in the relationship between culture and corruption including the question of gifts versus bribes, nepotism, the role of churches and the media. The paper finds differences between elite and popular opinion about corruption, and links between suspicions of corruption and ethnic divisions. It concludes with consideration of the impact of different understandings to anti-corruption practice.

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Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands:  
Some Conceptual Issues and Findings from Studies of National Integrity Systems

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This paper is about the use of the concept of 'culture' to explain corruption in the Pacific Islands, using material from Transparency International surveys of National Integrity Systems in 12 countries in the region. Ideas about culture have been influential in understanding, and justifying, politics in the region. There is also increasing official talk about corruption. A President in of Vanuatu warned that 'corruption seems to be gaining ground in the highest ranks of our leadership'. A PNG Prime Minister once - perhaps ironically- tried to explain a payment to an MP by saying 'corruption is part of our culture' (Pacific Islands Monthly June 1992: 12). A successor warned that corruption was becoming 'systemic and systematic'.

There may be several reasons for the growing talk about corruption. There may be an increase in acts of corruption. There may be reduced tolerance of it. It may have become easier to measure, and so talk about. Or there just may be more willingness to talk openly about what had hitherto been an 'open secret'. Talk, language, and rules and what is said and unsaid are cultural phenomena. Talk about 'corruption' can proceed, or not, quite independently of the amount and type of corrupt activity. Indeed this disjunction between talk and behaviour is aggravated by the secrecy in which corruption typically takes place. We really don't know how much goes on – and our suspicions can be equally criticised as excessive, or naïve. It may be the tip of the iceberg. It may also be that there is more talk than activity.

Willingness to talk about corruption has also been influenced by the waning of the doctrine of 'cultural relativism': the idea that different cultures needed to be understood in their own terms, and should not be judged by the standards of others. Cultural relativism was, until recently, dominant in discussions about corruption in developing countries. What looks like 'corruption' to Westerners, it was argued, is acceptable as familial obligations in other cultures. This kind of relativism is now less prevalent in international institutions. Transparency International, the NGO which brought 'corruption' onto the agenda of international organisations is hostile to what it calls the 'myth of culture' (Transparency International 2000: 8). Diplomatic silence about corruption has given way to moralising talk.

'Culture' has been a defining idea in the history of Anthropology (Kuper 2001). However some anthropologists today seem slightly embarrassed by the term. Meanwhile it has become pervasive in the social sciences, and in the burgeoning field of 'cultural studies'. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argues that statements about 'cultural differences' sometimes draw conclusions in the same way that ideas about 'race' used to in the West (1995: 156-7). Ideas about essential and self-evident differences between groups of people, and 'their' cultures are still widespread in the Pacific region, as in Australia. Culture is now often thought of as a source of personal identity, and authenticity. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai links new understandings of 'culture' to processes of globalisation, pointing to the way differences are used to mobilise group identity, like 'ethnicity' (1996: 11-16).

The political scientist Samuel Huntington argues that 'culture matters' but that defining it too broadly as 'way of life' ends up explaining nothing. By contrast he advocates a narrower, subjective definition of culture as 'values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society' (2000: xv). A subjective definition keeps open the possibility that some people may be more attached to a particular culture than others.

### Research on Culture and Corruption

Johann Lambsdorff, the inventor of TI's influential Corruption Perceptions Index has reviewed empirical research on cultural determinants of corruption (Lambsdorff 1999). It

is of several kinds. In a survey of 33 countries Porta et al find that trust has a significant negative impact on corruption. The same survey also found some correlation between membership of a hierarchical religion (Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim) and corruption. Protestantism also seems to be negatively correlated with corruption.

Hofstede's ideas about culture have been influential in Management Studies. His notion of 'power distance' refers to people's expectation that power in society will be distributed unevenly, and has been found to have a positive correlation with corruption. The percentage of women in the workforce and positions of responsibility is negatively correlated with corruption.

Lambsdorff concludes his review:

Culture can only explain a certain fraction of the level of corruption and there remains sufficient room for improvements of a country's integrity. Moreover cultural attitudes can also be a reflection of the organizational patterns that led to their formation (1999: 2)

Lambsdorff was reviewing quantitative work. There is also a newer strand of qualitative work on corruption by sociologists and anthropologists. They have been particularly interested in popular and informal understandings of corruption, and differences between law and popular opinion about counts as corruption and whether it matters. Alena Ledeneva, the sociologist writing about the former Soviet Union (1998), analysed a system of low level exchanges of favours (*blat*) by which people worked around bureaucratic difficulties, and mobilised relatives and acquaintances to 'get by'. Elizabeth Harrison (2004) relates corruption to exercise of official discretion by field officers in Africa, while Akhil Gupta (2005) looks sympathetically at the role of middlemen between clients and bureaucrats in India.

So culture can mean quite different things. Social scientists now tend to see it as something fluid, adaptable, to be adopted or discarded for strategic purposes. Officials promoting development often see it as a lumpish, frustrating obstacle to their well-intended purposes. And popular opinion often sees it as something fixed, unequivocal,

and given. Here I want to treat the differences between understandings of corruption as an object of research, rather than a preamble or impediment.

I am interested in how and why some activity that is regarded as corrupt by one group may not be regarded as such by another; how academic understandings can differ from those of policy makers, and public opinion; how the law may differ from public opinion; and how such differences may impact on anti-corruption activity.

This paper tries to answer these questions by looking at how ‘culture’ was understood by the authors of the NIS studies, and people in the countries they reported on. It identifies a number of themes running through the reports, such as gifts, nepotism, the role of the media and popular culture, and goes on to draw some conclusions for anti-corruption activity.

### Corruption in Pacific Studies

The empirical focus of the paper is on the island states of South Pacific. The region includes a variety of jurisdictions and political traditions (See Map 1). It shares some common internal attributes (scale, culture, and history) which may facilitate or inhibit particular forms of corruption or suspicions it. The median population is less than 100,000 (Table 1). The region is conventionally divided into three major ‘culture areas’: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia (Map 2). It was colonized in the late nineteenth century, and only one country – Tonga – managed to avoid colonial rule. Eight countries became independent between 1962 and 1980 (Table 1). It is often argued that laws introduced by colonial rule with are not compatible with local traditions.

Among Pacific Islands scholars there has been uneasiness about the new talk about corruption by aid donors like Australia, or the World Bank. On the one hand these scholars have been concerned about stigmatization and failure to respect local ideas and circumstances. On the other hand they feel contempt for self-seeking politicians.

A founder of ‘Pacific Studies’, Ron Crocombe devotes a new chapter in the latest edition of his survey of the region to ‘Corruption’. He provides a hair-raising series of examples of abuse of office by senior officials and politicians. He links the rapid growth in

corruption to the exploitation of natural resources in the region, aggravated by a decay in the institutions, such as audit offices, meant to check official corruption.

Mark Findlay's work on law and corruption in the Pacific emphasises its discursive aspect, describing how local leaders manage to distort interpretations of their corrupt activity as appropriate to traditional leaders, and beyond the reach of law or regulation (1999: 81-93).

Elise Huffer has recently argued that 'no satisfactory framework for analyzing corruption in the Pacific context has been developed' (2005: 122). So she argues that we need to 'find out how people of all sections of society define and understand corruption, and how they think it can be dealt with' (ibid: 123). Such research would be part of a broader project to identify what she and Ropate Qalo call Pacific Political Ethics. However some evidence of popular attitudes is already available in the reports of National Integrity Systems in the region, carried out for Transparency International, and is described below.

#### National Integrity Systems Surveys in the Pacific Islands

Transparency International's most famous product is its 'Corruption Perceptions Index' which ranks countries according to how corrupt they are perceived to be. The perceptions are those of local and foreign businessmen, academics and journalists interviewed for surveys of business climate or political risk. TI's index collates, compares and ranks their finding about corruption. Only one Pacific Island country is included in this ranking – PNG, 104<sup>th</sup> - because few surveys have been done of the others. It is often noted that TI's index only refers to perceptions, though its architect Johan Lambsdorff argues that the perceptions data correlates well with objective measures, when these are available. In any case perceptions, like talk, have an autonomous authority, whether or not they are true. Investors decide whether or not to invest, and citizens decide whether or not to trust governments at least partly on the basis of perceptions, and what is said about them in the media.

TI's 'National Integrity systems' surveys are more direct, but they focus on the country's anti-corruption architecture, rather than levels of corruption as such. The idea is that a

country's integrity (the opposite of corruption) is upheld by a number of 'pillars', such as the legislature, the executive, oversight agencies and so on. Notably, culture does not feature as a pillar. Pillars may be present, but fail to work. The questionnaire TI has devised asks repeatedly 'but what happens in practice'. It deals mainly with formal government institutions.

TI groups in Fiji and PNG commissioned surveys of NIS in their countries. I was commissioned by TI Australia to coordinate a study of 12 other small states. Manu Barcham and I used TI's standard questionnaire, but added in questions about culture and traditional organisations, and about corruption in the private sectors and NGOs (Larmour and Barcham in press). However we made no attempt to define what we meant by culture, preferring to leave that up to the researchers, and the people they talked to.

The researchers for the Fiji and PNG reports had selected by local TI groups – two PNG academics, and a Fiji consultancy firm (Mellam and Aloia 2003, Singh and Dakunivosa 2001) We selected researchers for the other 12 NIS studies after calling for expressions of interest on the web. The final tally, including Fiji and PNG, consisted of foreign academics familiar with the country (Tonga, Palau, Marshall Islands, FSM), local academics and students (PNG, Samoa, Kiribati, Solomon Islands), local former officials (Nauru, Tuvalu, Niue), local consultancy firms (Fiji, Cook Islands) and a foreign but locally based consultant (Vanuatu).

Here we look at how the used ideas about culture, and what they found. Some of the differences must have to do with the different positions and backgrounds of their authors. The local authors tended to be harsher critics of their governments. Others had to do with differences between countries and regions. I am interested in what people say and think about corruption, not least because this will shape what they try to do about it.

The NIS surveys form the middle tier of three levels of 'talk' about corruption. The first level is the academic discourse, in which ideas about culture spread between disciplines, wax and wane, and are deployed by different writers in different ways. The second level is the policy oriented discourse of the NIS reports, which draw on social scientific and everyday understandings, and are oriented to 'doing something about it'. Often they are impatient of definitions. The third is the talk they report on: how people in the particular



countries talk, or don't talk, about corruption, and what it means to them. Beyond these three levels of talk are actual acts – payments of money, offers of jobs and contracts – but these are often invisible, and their meaning is shaped by the language people use to describe them to each other, and report them to others. Court cases in Kiribati for example have shown how particular acts – election candidates handing tobacco to chiefs – can in some contexts be corrupt - and in other contexts innocent (Larmour 1997).

### Culture in NIS Surveys

Each of the reports makes some general points about culture and corruption. Even the surveys of Fiji and PNG, done in an earlier round which did not specifically ask about culture, discussed it. The authors' discussions typically express tension, contradiction or dilemma around the relationship. The Solomon Islands report remarked that in some circumstances 'impartial treatment might be regarded as culturally unacceptable', even 'an insult' (Roughan 2004: 9). The Fiji report talks of the 'cultural dilemma', in which 'the official role of public servants are interwoven with and often compromised by their traditional obligations' (Fiji 2001: 9). Both the Tonga and Vanuatu reports use the phrase 'hide behind the culture' (Cain and Jowitt 2004, James and Tufui 2004: 5). The PNG report finds 'certain aspects of the culture which seem to be more compatible with corruption' (for example big man practices of distributing wealth), but is quick to say 'this does not mean that PNG has a corrupt culture' (Mellam and Aloï 2003 8). In a similar way the Samoa report says 'Although Samoan culture does not necessarily teach corrupt behaviour, the propensity to use public resources and misuse entrusted power have sometimes been associated with the pressure to contribute to cultural functions' (So'o et al 2004: 5).

Two reports use the positive phrase 'caring and sharing' to describe the local culture (Nauru, PNG). The Fiji report also talks about 'the friendly and forgiving nature and extreme tolerance inherent in the culture'. The FSM report found reluctance to criticise others, and willingness to ignore transgressions. Similarly Paluan culture valued indirectness, making confrontation over corruption difficult. The Tuvalu report listed important values: reciprocity, status, gift giving, family ties, community. Kiribati culture was characterised as egalitarian. In Cook Islands, by contrast there was a predisposition to

obey superiors. Marshall Islands culture was described as being overridden by ‘American ideologies and materialism’ (Pollock 2004: 12).

There were differences reported within countries. The report on PNG pointed to its cultural diversity, and noted, for example two provincial exceptions to its statement that traditional leadership had little impact (these were in Milne Bay and New Ireland.) The report on FSM also found strong cultural differences between states, and different levels of corruption between them.

Four of the reports offer the ‘smallness’ as an explanation for these cultural characteristics (Samoa, Palau, Tuvalu). Smallness led to ‘lack of anonymity’ (James and Tufui 2004: 43), the prominence of particular personalities (Taafaki 2004), and the fact that people were ‘bound to be related’ (So’o al 2004:12).

The reports also use culture in two more specific senses. First, culture was seen as something attached to particular institutions, for example a ‘civil service culture’. Second it was seen as something pervasive and entrenched, such as ‘culture of permissiveness’ in Solomon Islands or a ‘culture of welfare’ in Marshall Islands. The Fiji report quotes the Ombudsman’s remark about a ‘culture of silence’ that inhibits complaints (Singh and Dakunivosa 2001: 21). Culture was also a professional role for the ‘cultural officer’ in Kiribati.

### Corruption talk

Most researchers recognise the difficulties around defining corruption, and there is a huge literature on definitions (Kurer 2005). Most people are opposed to ‘corruption’, though they often differ on what they regard as instances of it. Steve Sampson (2005) points out that there are no ‘pro-corruption forces’, arguing against the critics. Concern with corruption inevitably raises questions about its opposite, the naturally sound political system (Philp 1997). Thus the World Bank’s campaign against corruption is the obverse of its campaign for a more liberal political order. Similarly, Elise Huffer (above) argued that corruption in the Pacific could only be understood if its opposite, indigenous perceptions of good governance, were first understood (2005: 128).

The word 'corruption' in English also carries a strong sense of decline. So some talk of it presupposes a golden age. In the Pacific Islands, for example, there is talk of the 'corruption' of traditional cultures, and a loss of standards once upheld in the past. Thus chiefs today are said to behave more badly because of the influence of Western culture institutions or opportunities. Or PNG officials today are thought to behave more corruptly than their colonial predecessors.

Crocombe saw cultural factors silencing open talk about corruption

Few will publicly denounce or prosecute those who are corrupt, for exposing others is seen as mean in close-knit societies, and dangerous, for no one is safe from reciprocal accusations. Retribution may strike the accuser or his relatives or associates. Moreover, the obligation to help one's kin is deep, so corruption is tolerated even when not approved. (2001: 516)

Concern about corruption in the South Pacific predates the explosion of interest in the 1990s. At the time of independence in the 1970s there was concern about the rise of 'businessmen politicians' and several Melanesian constitutions provide for commissions to enforce codes of ethics on politicians. These commissions have produced a series of reports that provide a unique source of data on political corruption and fuelled talk about corruption.

None of the reports could find an exact translation for the word 'corruption' in local languages. In Kiribati for example there were several words with proximate meanings but people used the phrase *te corruption*. In Tonga the closest word was *angakovi*, referring to unkindness. In Marshall Islands the opposite was *kien jimwe inmoi* which translated as uprightness.

There were differences in the salience and scope of corruption. The report on Vanuatu found 'very little outcry' about it (Cain and Jowitt 2004). In Nauru, by contrast issues of governance and corruption were 'widely talked about' (Kun and Togomae, 2004). There people defined corruption very broadly to include 'leaders who do not go to church and who party and travel overseas frequently'. Similarly in Solomon Islands 'street talk' the word *korapt* was often applied to 'personal as well as official indiscretions' (early

publicity for the leadership code in PNG showed cartoons of politicians dancing with their girlfriends as well as receiving cash in envelopes). Salience and scope seemed to be the most extreme in Solomon Islands where systematic corruption, growing out of the forest industry, had led to what the report called ‘insidious tolerance’ in which every official was assumed to be corrupt, and yet it was assumed nothing could be done about it (Roughan 2004).

### Gifts versus Bribes

Proponents of cultural relativism often point to the way gifts may be mistaken for bribes. In its criticism of the use of culture as an ‘excuse’, Transparency International quotes one of its founding fathers, now President of Nigeria:

In the African conception of appreciation and hospitality, the gift is usually a token. It is not demanded. The value is usually in the spirit rather than in the material worth. It is usually done in the open, and never in secret. Where it is excessive it becomes an embarrassment and it is returned (Transparency International: 2000: 9)

The authors of the Samoa report describe how the country’s Prime Minister talked to them in a similar vein, arguing that the difference between a gift and bribe was ‘95% commonsense’, referring to a bottle of whiskey as an example of the former, and a payment of 3,000 tala as an example of the latter (So’o 2004: 10). Both leaders rather miss the point – the existence of socially sanctioned public gifts that are more than token and symbolic, yet not condemned as bribes.

Sometimes ‘gifts’ amount to what TI calls ‘petty’ - as distinct from ‘grand’ - corruption. The NISPAC studies found petty corruption in only four countries, though it may be growing. The PNG report noted the existence of small payments made to ‘to speed up enquiries and service delivery’ (Mellam and Alois 2003: 15). The use of belittling euphemisms - “Six packs” (of beer) or “bus fares” - suggested ethical uneasiness. The Fiji report found what it called ‘kickbacks’ being demanded in all sorts of licensing – passports, work permits, drivers licences. In Samoa the giving of small gifts to government employees for services rendered was ‘quite normal’. In Tonga even senior

officials had to dig into their own pockets to pay junior officials to get them to do their allotted jobs (James and Tufui 2004).

Many of the reports discuss gifts in election campaigns where candidates offer, and voters seek favours. In Kiribati gifts of tobacco are expected by visitors. Indeed public service regulations require them. However the high court found such gifts by resident candidates to be inappropriate.

In Samoa, politicians are expected to provide gifts of 'food money and school fees' to voters. They also pay fine mats and money. In Niue candidates make 'donations' (Talagi 2004). More generally, in Marshall Islands, 'chiefs and elites are expected to offer services and gifts when available' (Pollock 2004). Minister also give gifts between elections, for example when a minister visits an outer island in Tuvalu, local people might offer a feast and expect one of their pet projects to be funded in return.

These gifts are hardly token, spiritual or undemanded in Obanasanjo's sense. They are often be felt excessive, by the politician who has to make them. And there are no examples in the reports of gifts deemed so excessive that they are returned by the recipient. The gifts are also transparent, felt to be legitimate and sometimes quite legal. In Fiji gifts to voters and chiefs are 'an integral part of election campaigns', and in Nauru a 'legitimate part of the electoral system' (Kun and Togomae 2004). They may involve traditional items – like the fine mats in Samoa but also non traditional ones, like 'fairy lights, stereo and small car' (Pollock 2004) in the example from Marshall Islands.

Gift giving also spreads beyond government. The Tonga report worries about public ceremonies of 'free gifting' to churches. The Tuvalu report worries competition between villages over the size of gifts to retiring church ministers.

### Nepotism

In PNG and Solomon Islands in the 1970s there was great concern that 'wantokism' would displace the merit principle in appointment and promotion to the civil service. They meant a predisposition to favour kin, or people from the same language group (one-talk) in situations where bureaucratic impersonality should apply.

In Vanuatu people used family members or kin as go betweens in their dealings with bureaucracy. In Tonga relatives were often called upon to facilitate transactions with government. And in a kind of high, institutionalised, nepotism members of the royal family occupy key niches in the economy.

The reports on PNG and Vanuatu were concerned about the appointment and promotion of friends, relatives and political allies. However in the PNG report, and others, two arguments sometimes seemed to get conflated. The first was whether politicians or bureaucrats should determine government policy. Bureaucrats preferred ministers to set general directions, and leave implementation to them. Ministers liked to get involved in the detail. The second was whether ministers or officials were using their position for personal, family or political gain. Greater ministerial control over policy and implementation is not necessarily corrupt. But political and (as we shall see below) popular pressures on politicians may make them use their control of policy and implementation for political or personal purposes. Officials do not face reelection, but may also come under pressure from relatives or people from their home island or area.

### Cultural Institutions

We asked the researchers to look at traditional institutions and churches and their role in NIS. In the Pacific Islands there are a number of constitutionally recognised traditional institutions, and many persist without recognition. Sometimes they are called 'neo traditional' to reflect the way that has been reconstructed by colonial rule. Traditional institutions were not found everywhere. In PNG traditional leaders were only said to be influential in two regions. They were not influential in Kosrae in the FSM. They did not exist on Niue, where power rests with 'grey hairs'. Generally the reports did not find traditional leadership to be a focus of corruption, not least because traditional institutions had little access to funds.

Christian churches and beliefs, though introduced, are now widely regarded as traditional. In Tonga, the report found churches had taken over some of the functions and symbols of chiefs and nobles who had now left to live in town, or overseas. In Solomon Islands Christianity had become one of the few ideas held in common by an otherwise divided

country. Churches – and, in Fiji, mosques - often had strong views against ‘corruption’. The Fiji Council of Churches viewed the level of corruption in the country with ‘grave concern’, while the Muslim League found corruption very prevalent.

The Tonga report expressed concern about the high level of ‘free gifting’ to churches, and the Tuvalu report worried that villages were competing with each other in the level of gifts offered to retiring church ministers.

Insofar as they collected money from members, or grants from abroad, they were vulnerable to corruption themselves. In Kiribati, embezzlement by church officials often went unpunished, and Samoan church expenditure was often unaccounted for.

#### Corruption as an effect of the media

The media have a symbiotic relationship with corruption. There is a heroic tradition of investigative reporting, but media more routinely depend on official reporting (and judicious leaks). Corruption shades into scandal. The media are not simply an imperfect lens through which to view corruption but they actively shape and depend on it. When journalists take bribes, or editors shape copy to favour powerful interests, or advertisers, the media may themselves be part of it.

In PNG ‘most people know of corruption through the media’ (Mellam and Alois 2003:5). In Palau a talk back radio host, Alfonso Diaz has been outspoken, while the president wrote a column in the newspaper (Schuster 2004).

The Vanuatu report finds stories about corruption causing trouble for the media; an assault on a publisher; a deportation; and a threat of intimidation producing self-censorship. In Tonga the government tried to change the constitution to allow it to ban an Auckland based Tongan newspaper. Self censorship had taken place in Solomon Islands, because of ties between media and elite (Roughan 2004).

### Corruption in popular culture

While most of the reports equated culture with tradition, the Vanuatu report pointed to modern as well as traditional culture, and the Solomon Islands report to the growing influence (and perceived social problem) of young people. Cultural Studies has been particularly concerned with urban, popular, migrant and youth culture, as opposed to the high culture of elites, or the traditional culture of chiefs and villages. The relationship between elite and popular opinion is in issue for corruption in several ways.

The troublesome distinction between ‘petty’ and ‘grand’ corruption is one between elites and ordinary people. TI’s style is deliberately elitist. It works through coalition building, seminars and quiet lobbying, rather than demonstrations in the street. There is a good example of this elitism in a passing remark in the PNG report. Mellam and Aloï found the popular agitation surrounding the Sandline affair in PNG ‘based on misinformation and lacking in rationalism’ (2003: 40). The people were ‘misled’.

‘The people’ are typically cast as the innocent victims of corruption, but they may also be participants, and beneficiaries. Crocombe argued.

People do not approve of corruption in principle, nor generally in practice, unless they benefit from it. Even then they may condone it, or rationalize it on other terms, rather than approve of it (2001: 516).

Politicians often have a more jaundiced view of the people. The PNG MP Dame Carol Kidu wrote recently to a PNG newspaper defending colleagues under scrutiny by the ombudsman for expenditures in their constituencies. She described the pressures that MPs come under from constituents

Because aspects of the bureaucratic machinery are dysfunctional people who should be going to the bureaucracy instead go to the politician for water, roads, clinics, school fees and endless needs that should not be seen as MPs functions. Some people are desperate and some are demanding, threatening and aggressive (my staff have sometimes faced weapons and even rape threats)



There is a popular perception that politicians become rich. But how many ex-politicians (or serving politicians) are rich? Many are struggling to survive because their businesses were destroyed by politics or they gave away most of what they earned as a politician – not as bribes but because they feel a Melanesian obligation and compassion for the situation many people are in. (*The National* 7/03/06)<sup>1</sup>

For Vanuatu, the authors found the term corruption was too ‘out there’ abstract and not internalised. Ordinary people saw corruption, and concern about it as irrelevant to their everyday life. Ordinary people who received bribes are not ‘corrupt’. People only got angry when their own money was seen to be involved, as in the rioting that followed revelations of corruption in the National Provident Fund. The attitudes in Solomon Islands were quite the opposite. Every official act was assumed to be motivated by corruption, and everyone is convinced that nothing can be done about it.

Corruption is often characterised as a crime of the powerful, but it also resonates with all sorts of popular scams gambling and get-rich-quick schemes. The Solomons report mentions ‘fraudulent schemes’. These have been rife in the region, with varying degrees of legality and sanction by regulators, ranging from chain letters to the pyramid investment scheme, U Visitract, in which the widely respected PNG ombudsman was found to be personally involved (he resigned).

It is often hard to draw the line between these popular schemes, dubious projects ministers get attracted to, and national get-rich-quick schemes that get domestic legal sanction, like tax havens in Vanuatu, Cook Islands or Nauru or phone sex lines in Tuvalu.

Mark Findlay (1996: 86) describes a letter of credit scam in Vanuatu (which has also been tried in Cook Islands). A Minister and senior officials signed ‘letters of credit’ that were supposed to be traded for someone’s profit – whose exactly was unclear - on international money markets. In her report on the scam the Vanuatu ombudsman was forced to draw another thin line between ‘offshore finance’ and ‘money laundering’. She was worried that the scam would affect the reputation of Vanuatu’s offshore finance centre so the country become known as a money laundering centre (ibid: 88).

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<sup>1</sup> I’m grateful to Bill Standish for bringing this to my attention

Other fine or obscured lines between the personal, ministerial, and governmental are described in the Samoa and Tuvalu reports. The Samoa report describes a 'racket' in which passport officers were suspended after a Chinese man was detained after trying to enter the country on a Samoan passport. Then it seemed that the sale was at least partly official – the Samoa Observer reported an advertisement in a Hong Kong paper advertising Samoan passports, saying that 70% of the proceeds would go to the government, and 30% to an agent (So'o 2004: 13). The government – ie ministers - steadfastly denied the allegations. The Tuvalu report describes in detail senior officials' attempts to market its internet domain suffix 'tv', and reflects suspicion that the officials stood to gain personally as well as for the treasury.

#### Corruption in cross- cultural situations

Suspensions and accusations of corruption occur along all kinds of social frontiers, and mark differences between 'us' and 'them'. Evers and Mehmet (1994) proposed (for South East Asia) that accusations of corruption arose in a distinct division of labour between 'trading minorities' (eg Chinese) and indigenous cultures, which valued caring and sharing, redistribution and honour over profit. The latter faced a 'traders dilemma' – how to prosper economically, while preserving respected subsistence-based traditions. The answer to the dilemma, say Evers and Shrader, was the partnership with ethically suspect traders, who 'did the dirty work'. Similar divisions of labour seem to have been taking place in relations between Chinese, Vietnamese and other Asian minorities and indigenous leaders in many parts of the Pacific (Sir Julius Chan in PNG, Ah Koy in Fiji, MP Kwan in Solomon Islands, Dinh Van Thanh in Vanuatu). Similarly, the ideological contrast between competitive Indo-Fijians and 'caring and sharing' indigenous Fijians is often belied by business alliances between them. In these cross-cultural circumstances, corruption is interpreted broadly as an undignified pursuit of profit, best carried out at arms length through ethically (and ethnically) distinct intermediaries.

The Cook Islands report refers to dubious foreigners – New Zealanders in this case - with financial connections to politicians, who protected them from scrutiny by the immigration department. The Solomon Islands report connects the arrival of Asian logging companies

with a sharp increase in the level of corruption, while the Marshall Islands report blames 'Asian business procedures' for increases in corruption in, particularly, the fishing industry.

Another form of corruption linked to multiculturalism is programs of 'affirmative action' designed to lift up indigenous people, but which often become a focus for individualised corruption. The Fiji report refers to the National Bank of Fiji scandal, in which losses were attributed to bad loans made on the basis of indigenous ethnicity, and worries that malpractice has been 'legalised' in affirmative action policies.

### Impact on Anti Corruption Activity

There is also growing anti corruption industry of training courses and consultancies supported by aid donors funding anti corruption campaigns. Its approach is influenced by the research of Robert Klitgaard (1988) who saw corruption as the combined effect of government monopolies, excessive official discretion and low accountability. The idea of organisational culture, coming from Management Studies has become part of the way officials talk about corruption. Induction routines, informal expectations, and the examples set by leaders are seen to undermine formal organisational commitments to preventing corruption

Differences between academic, official and popular conceptions and valuations of corruption, often embedded in the language used to describe it, suggests there is great room for misunderstanding, irritation, and poor targeting of anti corruption campaigns.

Corruption has been identified as a key issue in the Australia's overseas aid Program. Noting that 'Poor leadership and corruption plague many of our partner countries' the Foreign Ministers 2005 statement to parliament on the aid program promised 'to expand our assistance in political governance to enhance the integrity and transparency of decision makers and to build the internal demand for accountable government' (Downer 2005).

As part of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands' (RAMSI) Australian officials are helping with prosecutions of corrupt politicians and police officers.

The Australian Federal Police have a South Pacific office, concerned with the drug trade and other security issues. Australia is a member of the Financial Action Task Force against money laundering, and sponsoring increased accountability through the Pacific Islands Forum

The reports on Fiji and Cook Islands suggested that donor sponsored programs of public sector reform, which involved delegating appointments from an independent public service commission to heads of departments had increased opportunities for nepotism. Similar concerns were expressed in the PNG and SI reports. Reforms promoted by donors might be increasing corruption risks.

Most of the authors make the commonsense distinction between tradition and modernity. Proponents of reform suggest that tradition and culture will somehow be opposed to the National Integrity System and good governance. Two of reports neatly subvert this easy binary. Samoa posited a ‘traditional integrity system’ (So’o 2004). And the Vanuatu described how TI was training chiefs.

The good governance literature assumes that popular opinion is opposed to corruption, and is available as a resource to be mobilized by NGOs in campaigns against it. Certainly, there is popular grumbling about ‘corruption’, and anger against elites can be easily mobilised. However, popular opinion often seems in two minds – against corruption, but in favour of politicians who provide local or personal events or of timber companies who promise development. The PNG MP Dame Carol Kidu argues for what she calls a ‘Peoples Code’ in addition to a Leadership Code.

Map 1 Political Jurisdictions



Map 2 Culture areas

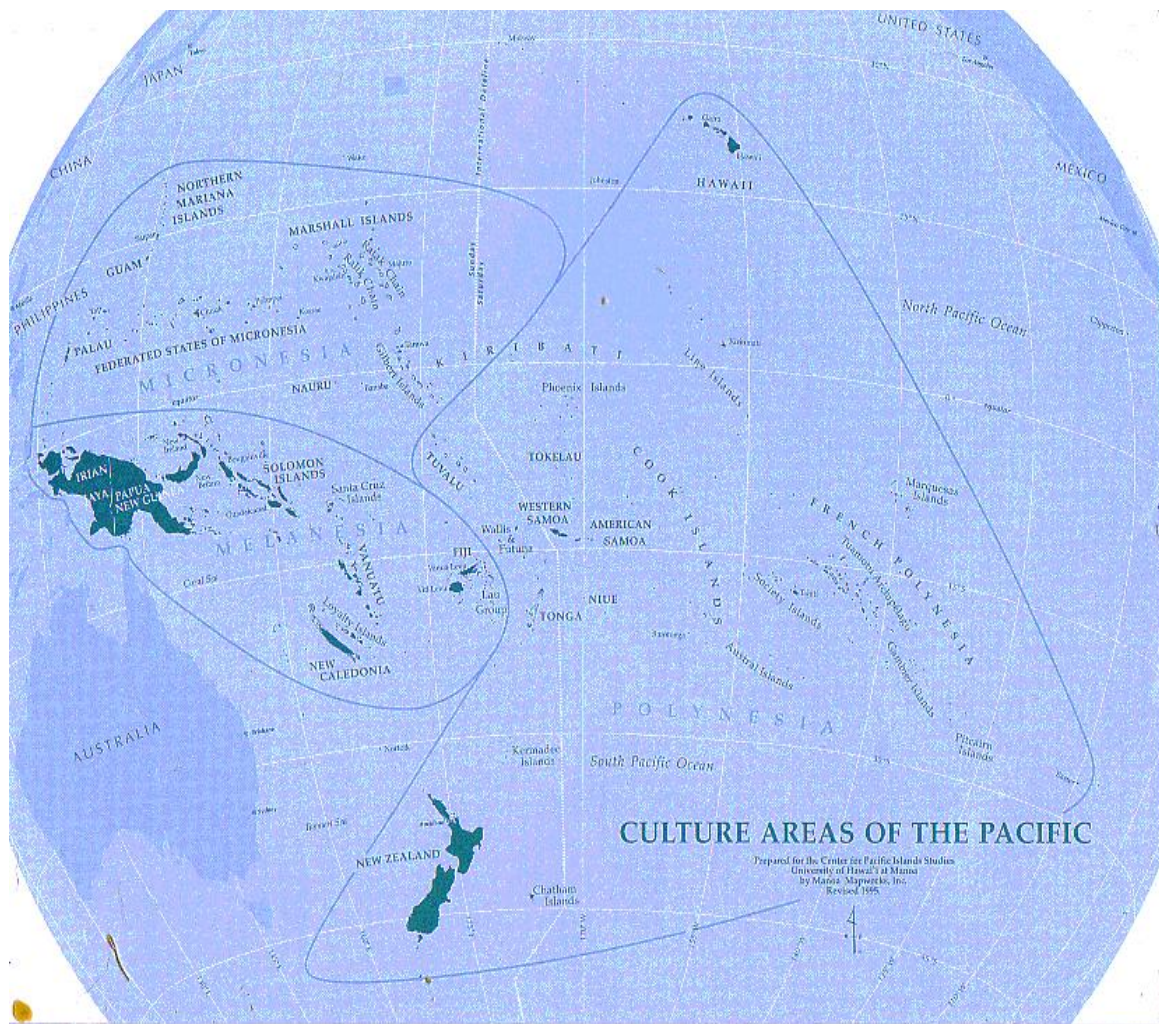


Table 1  
Population and Political Status

	Population ( mid year 2004 estimate)	Political Status
<u>Melanesia</u>		
Fiji Islands	836,000	Independent 1970
Papua New Guinea	5,695,300	Independent 1975
Solomon Islands	460,000	Independent 1979
Vanuatu	215,000	Independent 1980
<u>Micronesia</u>		
Federated states of Micronesia	112,700	Free association with USA
Kiribati	93,100	Independent 1979
Marshall islands	55,400	Free association with USA
Nauru	10,100	Independent 1968
Palau	20,700	Free association with USA
<u>Polynesia</u>		
Cook Islands	14,000	Free association with New Zealand
Niue	1,600	Free association with New Zealand
Samoa	182,700	Independent 1962
Tonga	98,300	Never colonised
Tuvalu	9,600	Independent 1978

Source: South Pacific Commission

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