



# Sealed with Kava and Betel Nut: Lessons in Oceanic Diplomacy from the Mota Lava Treaty

Anna Naupa

<https://doi.org/10.25911/2SGH-D402>

19 May 2022

This In Brief explores the case study of maritime boundary delineation negotiations between Vanuatu and Solomon Islands in order to provide insights into the role of Oceanic cultural diplomacy in contemporary interstate diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region. It is part of series on Oceanic diplomacy introduced by [In Brief 2021/23](#), which defined it as ‘the distinctive diplomatic practices and principles which come out of the long history and diverse cultures of the Pacific Islands’.

On 7 October 2016, at the end of the inaugural Torba–Temotu Cultural Arts Festival celebrating the neighbouring countries of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, a historical maritime boundary agreement was signed between the two nations after 33 years of negotiations. This significant occasion marked the end of more than a century of the local people living with the legacy of a randomly drawn line on colonial maps. In the wake of ceremonial dances, feasts and customary exchanges, the Mota Lava Treaty – named after the Vanuatu island where the event took place – was signed by the two countries and sealed with the drinking of kava and chewing of betel nut. In his public address, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare said:

I am proud to be a Melanesian. The white man drew imaginary lines [between the islands] ... but we are one people! (*Vanuatu’s First Border Treaty Agreement with Solomon Islands* 2016)

As Diamana (29/10/2016) argued, the Mota Lava Treaty was built on the recognition of long-established cultural connections and practices. This In Brief seeks to distil three emergent key themes that could assist in facilitating culturally inclusive boundary negotiations elsewhere in the region, resulting in greater legitimacy for the decisions reached.

## 1. Cultural and relational exchange are central in Pacific border diplomacy

For Vanuatu and Solomon Islands in 2016, the ultimate sovereign moment of reaching a border agreement was largely based on cultural relationships; the technicalities of the long-standing negotiation were secondary (Diamana 29/10/2016). Despite the

significant resources invested across decades to assist Pacific Island nation-states with demarcating maritime boundaries following the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) III, national officials reportedly found the technical, multilaterally endorsed focus of its baseline surveys of reef points to be based on assumptions of transactional relations and less focused on collaborative negotiation and agreement for Pacific Island neighbours. A senior Vanuatu government negotiator said:

Completing border delineations between Solomons and Vanuatu was an essential part of the ‘unfinished business’ of independence. But it needed to be inclusive of a cultural approach, which the technically bureaucratic UNCLOS process did not really give room for.<sup>1</sup>

UNCLOS III created a multilateral, institutional approach to boundary negotiations that mapped out technically rigorous pathways for negotiating states. Its legal provisions recognised territorial entitlements. Ultimately, however, it was the carving out of space for cultural provisions – provisions that recognised Melanesian bonds – that sealed the Mota Lava Treaty:

The UNCLOS process prioritised the line, but for Vanuatu, the relationship was more important than the line; the line was not to divide, but to bridge our nations. We just needed to sit down and share kava or betel nut and work it out without the experts pulling us back to coordinates and reef points.<sup>2</sup>

Based on this experience, it can be concluded that recognising both the intersection between the technical or bureaucratic state and the value of cultural relational exchange (Diamana 29/10/2016; Peake and Forsyth 2021) are key features of effective Oceanic diplomacy.

## 2. Cultural legitimacy of state diplomatic practice is key to enduring relations

The shared histories, languages and identities of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands negotiators enabled them to negotiate and seal border agreement (Diamana 29/10/2016). In Melanesia, for a diplomatic agreement

to be seen as legitimate, it must meet the norms not only of a multilateral system but also those of the peoples and cultures who will live with the legacy of the border agreement. The requirement of cultural legitimacy is another key feature of Oceanic diplomacy. It suggests that state-led diplomacy has a better chance of success if it embodies the cultural legitimacy inherent in Oceanic diplomacy.

The traditional ceremony that preceded the signing of the Mota Lava Treaty contained various local, culturally symbolic elements designed to assure each party of the authentic intent of the border treaty. First, traditional chiefs (and the church representative) led ceremonial rites adorned with traditional mats, feathers and pig tusks, chanting, dancing and wielding *namele* leaves (a traditional Vanuatu symbol of respect and peacemaking) to gain customary permission from the people of Mota Lava to utilise their land for a state treaty signing. To demonstrate that these actions were not tokenistic, the Torba–Temotu Cultural Arts Festival went on to include a traditional pig-killing ceremony, customary dances and the sharing of traditional *kakae* (food) — kava and betel nut — signalling the value placed on cultural relations. An intent of the 2016 Torba–Temotu Cultural Arts Festival was to show the priority placed on cultural relationships and cooperation in order to pave the way for the bureaucratic signing of the Mota Lava Treaty by the prime ministers of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The traditional ceremony demonstrated the centrality of respect for local customs in establishing sovereign borders. It legitimised the border agreement at both the community and national levels in a manner that resonated with those primarily affected: the Torba–Temotu provincial communities and the governments of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

### 3. Pacific cultural and non-state actors are part of Oceanic diplomacy

The sealing of the Mota Lava Treaty with kava and betel nut would not have been possible without the participation of traditional and church leaders alongside the government bureaucrats, diplomats and technical experts. While the point at which these cultural and non-state actors are brought into a diplomatic process may vary, their involvement enhances the legitimacy of the diplomatic event. At the signing of the Mota Lava Treaty, the joint presence of Anglican Church of Melanesia Bishop Worek, the head of the Vanuatu Christian Council Pastor Moses Obed Tallis (currently president of Vanuatu), the paramount chiefs of Mota Lava and Teamotu Province Chief Jerry Alpie and Chief Patterson Oti, former Vanuatu president Baldwin Lonsdale (also an Anglican priest) and both Prime Minister Sogavare of Solomon Islands and Prime Minister Salwai of Vanuatu sent a clear signal that Oceanic diplomacy extends beyond immediate state bureaucracies and

encompasses traditional and community leaders. Recognition that state actors and diplomats are only one facet of Oceanic diplomacy has practical, administrative implications in small Pacific bureaucracies as well as deep-reaching political implications for recognising shared, multi-actor responsibilities in diplomatic practice. It also reflects the rich heritage of thousands of years of intercultural relationships in our Blue Pacific. Akin to ‘network diplomacy’ (Naupa 2017:913), Oceanic diplomacy engages with wide multi-actor networks beyond state diplomatic channels to effect diplomatic outcomes.

### Conclusion

The Solomons–Vanuatu 2016 maritime boundary agreement process shows how Oceanic diplomacy could be of great value in supporting mutually beneficial boundary negotiations for the remaining unresolved Pacific state maritime boundaries. Programming in the aid-dependent Pacific region can be more effective, impactful and supportive of Oceanic diplomacy. One way to do this is through broadening the technical support roles of regional and multilateral programs by elevating the role Pacific Island cultures play in interstate negotiations. The potential impact of recognising Oceanic diplomacy is considerable, particularly in concert with current efforts to implement the Pacific Island Forum Leaders’ 2021 Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise (Naupa 17/9/2021).

### Author notes

Anna Naupa has served in policy advisory roles at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and United Nations ESCAP and is currently Associate Director — Outreach at the Pacific Fusion Centre.

### Endnotes

1. Sangavulu Tevi 27/10/21. Head of Technical Maritime Negotiations, personal communication.
2. *ibid.*

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