INTRODUCTION

As an anthropological historian rather than a political scientist, my understanding of the constructs “nation”, “state”, their hybrid, “nation state”, and their ideology, “nationalism” is always historicised and draws on recent anthropological theory, as well as specific ethnohistorical research in the new states and remaining colonies of Melanesia. In terms of my work as a fellow in the Australian National University’s State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, this means that I do not regard “state” and “society” as opposed real entities, but as highly general concepts that describe collective human actions. I take “governance” to refer not just to “government”, but to the myriad ways in which people organise themselves, attempt to control each other, and represent what they do in the process.

This paper starts with theory, in the shape of a comparative critique of certain programmatic propositions about the concepts “state”, “nation”, “nation state” and “nationalism”. I then shift to recent work, mainly by anthropologists, on the ambiguities of nation making in the highly diverse settings of postcolonial Melanesia, where “custom”/“tradition” and indigenised Christianity are brought together politically to build national consciousness and cohesion, but also elude national encompassment to fuel longstanding local particularisms and a variety of alternative or “negative” nationalisms. Christianity is doubly resistant to nationalist appropriation, since it has long been seen by Melanesians to offer membership in pan-Pacific and global moral communities transcending the often dubious legitimacy of colonial and national states. In the guise of “the Melanesian Way”, custom arguably has similar region-wide identificatory potential, but in official discourses “the Melanesian Way” is usually also Christian. The paper alludes to, but does not specifically address, the current crises of the nation state in Fiji and Solomon Islands, and concludes with specific reflections on gendered experiences of citizenship in Vanuatu.

THEORETICAL POSITIONS

The theoretical moves sampled have common agendas to de-universalise, historicise and relativise nationalism and the nation state. It is no accident that all were made since the end of the 1970s by political scientists,
anthropologists and historians working outside or on the margins of Europe, while most were produced in specific historical conjunctures at the end of the Cold War. The theorists referred to are Timothy Mitchell, who works on colonialism in Egypt; Benedict Anderson, whose field is Indonesia; Daniel Segal, an ethnographer of postcolonial state formation in Trinidad and Tobago, writing alone and in tandem with Richard Handler, an ethnographer of Quebec separatism; and Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks, historical anthropologists of India. I start with Mitchell's Foucauldian de-reification and historicisation of the modern "state" as being:

a structural effect[... not ... an actual structure, but ... the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist[... of detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society (1991:94-5; see also Abrams 1988:82).

The other half of the reified compound entity "nation state" has been similarly de-objectified, most famously in Anderson's "anthropological" definition of the "nation" as "an imagined political community", with nationalism constituting the content of those imaginings (1991 [1983]:5-6; see also Gellner 1983).

Segal and Handler endorse and extend Anderson's historical constructionism but make valid qualifications and criticisms. They argue that he normalises "contingent features of nationalism" by uncritically accepting "the presuppositions of boundedness and homogeneity embedded in nationalist ideology"; that he unwittingly reads "nationalist realities into the past, as if they had been there all along"; that he writes Eurocentric "social-evolutionary narratives" that privilege "Europe" as the site of a universal history of nationalism; that he "insists in general on the autonomy of nationalism and racism", because he wants to render nationalism "fit to redeem the oppression of colonized peoples" (Segal and Handler 1992:4-8, my emphasis). In contrast, Segal contests "the common sense mythologies" – popular, elite and, increasingly, global, in the shape of dictatorial, coercive international agencies – which take for granted that "the nation" is a human norm", disparage alternative social arrangements as "deviant" or "primitive", and naturalise "the world of humanity as a world of nations", rooted "not in history, but in inherent human tendencies, desires, and needs" (Segal 1988:301, 303).

Segal and Handler's main contribution to the debate is twofold. First, they dislodge the complacent assumption that particular histories of nationalism within an objectified "Europe" are the final stage in a global narrative of universal social evolution. Second, by disclosing the "creole genealogies" of early European nations such as France and England, they go well beyond Anderson's insight that "creole pioneers" invented nationalism with the late eighteenth century emergence of "national consciousnesses" in the Americas (Anderson 1991:xiii, 61, 47-65). Segal and Handler trace intimate historical links "between nationalism and colonialism and between nationalism and race". They seek thereby to particularise nationalism and displace its origins from "the place called 'Europe'" to "globally dispersed colonial relations" (1992:1-2; Handler and Segal 1993:3, 4). This laudable effort "to explain homogeneity and boundedness as historically contingent features [of nationalism]... [constructed] in post-Columbian colonialism" sees Segal and Handler supplant a universalised history of "Europe" with simplistic histories of particular nations – notably "France" writ large to stand for "European":

For the population of a monarchical realm to be imagined as a national "people", the hierarchical differentiation of those persons had to be placed under erasure. Thus, a pre-condition of national identities... was "individual equality".... Geographically, the racialist leveling of the orders of Europe's realms took place first at those realms' colonial margins... [where] an "aristocracy of the skin" prevailed (Segal and Handler 1992:9).

According to this revisionist history, "the racialist leveling of the orders" in the colonies was repatriated to the metropole by a slave-trading bourgeoisie and was fundamentally implicated in France's late eighteenth century "revolution against hierarchy", which transformed the monarchical "realm" into the republican "nation", but restricted the "rights of man" to "the citizen" – a racialised status denied generically to blacks. Segal and Handler allow in a footnote that the concept of "the citizen" was also gendered and denied to women, but they ignore the internal class relations which limited the citizenship of
workers and peasants (1992:10-13). Thus, while it is appropriate to inject race into histories of European nationalism, to ignore the ambiguous interface of race with class and gender in the experience of nationalisms within and beyond Europe makes for seriously partial narratives.

Cohn and Dirks emphasise a further critical “implication of colonialism in the project of the nation state”, that is pertinent to Melanesia today: “not only did empire provide the basis and ground of European domination, [but] it also worked through its own negativities, to reproduce itself after its own demise”. As new nation states sprang phoenix-like from disintegrating colonial orders, “nationalism as response to colonial experience reproduced (though with crucial differences) the European experience” (1988:226, 229). It is an irony and increasingly a tragedy of decolonisation that indigenous nationalisms have been, successively, repressed by colonialism, and then disparaged as shallow, inauthentic or merely ethnic by the universalising ethnocentrism of globalism.

WEAK STATES IN POSTCOLONIAL MELANESIA: NATIONS MADE, UNMADE, REMADE

The very recent colonial genesis of modern Melanesian states – all became independent between 1970 and 1980 – is patently obvious. It is striking in the arbitrariness of national and provincial boundaries and lingua franca. It produced the awkward fit of imposed Westminster models of government with capitalist models of ideal relationships between the individual, the state and civil society – the latter conceived as free associations of autonomous individuals, and thus as fundamentally at odds with what are represented as the organic indigenous socialities of kinship and community (LiPuma 1995:47-8).

Colonialism is also echoed in the global capitalist encompassment of Melanesian states, which ensures their ongoing economic dependence on external aid programs and resource extraction by multinational companies. Only Fiji could plausibly lay historical claim to have been a “natural” geographic and cultural unit – though certainly lacking precocial political unity – but the indigenous Fijian illusion of cultural uniformity is ruptured by twin legacies of colonialism: a multi-ethnic populace, and, less obvious but at least as significant in the current crisis, the “collaborative objectification” of “tradition” by colonial authorities in league with certain chiefs. That process entrenched social hierarchy and lodged postcolonial state and economic power firmly with an eastern Fijian chiefly elite, whose legitimating national narratives are by no means shared by other ethnic Fijians, such as ambitious businessmen, young unemployed men, and western Fijians generally (Rutz 1995; Thomas 1992:221). Thus the fault lines of class and region which fracture Fiji today are, like ethnic division, in part a colonial heritage.

In such settings, nationalist narratives are meant to forge images of shared identity and interests which aim simultaneously to promote internal solidarity, and to mark off the new nation externally, as essentially different from the past coloniser/cum present aid patron and capitalist exploiter (LiPuma 1995:50). Academic scholarship on nationalism in Melanesia has focussed mainly on the postcolonial era, not least because everywhere, apart from Vanuatu, independence was granted by imperial fiat rather than won in anticolonial struggle, and because indigenous anticolonial movements typically took a ritual shape that enabled them to be dismissed as “cargo cults” – as was the Tuka movement in Fiji, Maasina Rule in Solomon Islands, the Paliau movement in Papua New Guinea, Nagriamel in Vanuatu.

There have been two main waves of anthropological scholarship on Melanesian nationalism. It was a theme in the copious “invention of tradition” literature of the 1980s, which was sometimes ironic or sceptical about the authenticity of fabricated national cultures (e.g., Babadzan 1988; Keesing 1989; Lindstrom 1982; Philibert 1986; Tonkinson 1982). Nationalism is central to more recent writing on nation making and national narratives, notably the collections edited by Foster and Otto and Thomas (Foster, ed. 1995; Otto and Thomas, ed. 1997). This work typically emphasises “the tenuous and inchoate character of national cultures” in Melanesia and the invisibility of the nation in many hinterland areas, especially in Papua New Guinea. It sometimes questions the viability or even the necessity of the state, given the “political and economic integrity of local communities”, their self-sufficiency and potential to engage directly with the world market for their limited consumer needs (Clark 1997; Foster 1995:25-6; Jacobsen 1995; Kelly 1995:263-5; Otto and Thomas 1997:1).

The French anthropologists Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim argue that “citizenship” itself
is “the source of the principal arguments over legitimacy” in postcolonial Pacific states, and that the burning question is whether control over land, goods and even people should “remain in the hands of local authorities who fiercely defend their autonomy” or be assumed by “state institutions that favor the national perspective over regional particularities” (1998:381). Increasingly, however, the latent opposition of local and national in Melanesian states is mediated via emergent regional identifications, such as to island, province or ethnic group, which are experienced as homegrown and more responsive to reciprocal obligations than the arbitrary or absent state (e.g., Jorgensen 1996; Nash and Ogan 1990). Jeffrey Clark speculates with respect to Papua New Guinea that “What could appear ... are postmodern nationalisms which are local and regional in terms of ethnicity and membership” and differ “totally” from the nations which emerged historically in Europe and the Americas (1997:70, 80, 89). Such identities are variously rooted in indigenous exchange and ritual relationships, in common colonial histories as indentured labourers or converts, and in claims to shared ethnicity. It is on behalf of assertions to translocal but subnational identity that violent assaults have been made on the integrity of the nation state in Bougainville, Solomon Islands and incipiently in Fiji. The attraction and threat of such identities have seen embattled state authorities adopt “decentralisation” and “local empowerment” as goals and mantras in recent reform programs.

CHRISTIAN CUSTOM AND “THE MELANESIAN WAY”

The content and emphases of particular nationalisms vary widely, depending on the preoccupations of the communities addressed – in broad terms they can be said to comprise historically relevant mixes of criteria such as language, religion, ethnicity, race, culture, history. One of the paradoxes of nationalism in that most kaleidoscopic of regions, Melanesia, is that its staples are everywhere the same: from Papua New Guinea to Fiji, nation makers play particular tunes on the common motifs of custom/tradition and Christianity. Thus, for example, during the independence struggle in Vanuatu the nationalist leadership of the Vanuaku Pati sought to transcend internal divisions and diversity by strategically yoking Christianity to an abstract notion of generally shared indigenous kastom (“custom” in Bislama, the ni-Vanuatu version of Melanesian Pidgin). The founding Prime Minister of Vanuatu, the late Father Walter Lini, proclaimed in his independence address to the nation in 1980: “God and custom must be the sail and the steering-paddle of our canoe” (1980:62). Ellen Facey notes that “the Vanuaku Pati won [the island of] Nguna with its ‘kastom within Christianity’ stance. Nothing else would have supported the local status quo, grounded as it is in the tandem structure of the chiefly system and the Presbyterian church leadership” (1995:209, 217). National political discourses in Vanuatu still frequently conflate custom with Christianity in literal, instrumental terms, as in this recent homily by a party leader who is also a Presbyterian Church elder: “When we do not honour the custom we organised to forgive one another and settle the issue then it means that the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross to forgive our sins is meaningless” (Peter Taurokoto, Trading Post, 21 Mar. 1998).

It was a distinctive feature of decolonisation in Melanesia that in each newly independent nation Christianity was installed by Christian leaders as a traditionalised state religion, and was enshrined along with custom in national constitutions and symbolic trappings as bases for national unity and identity. Thus the preamble to the Papua New Guinea constitution proclaims that “We, the people”:

- united in one nation
- pay homage to the memory of our ancestors, the source of our strength and origin of our combined heritage
- acknowledge the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of our people, which have come down to us from generation to generation
- pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now (Institute of Pacific Studies 1983, II:97).

The Solomon Islands constitution is equally “proud of the wisdom and the worthy customs of our ancestors” and similarly places the new sovereign state “under the guiding hand of God”. The preamble of the constitution of Vanuatu links tradition and Christianity even more explicitly by proclaiming the establishment of a republic “founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles” (Institute of Pacific Studies
1983, II:231, 305). The phrase “worthy customs” itself encodes Christian values, since it refers to indigenous practices deemed acceptable by mainstream Christian Islanders.

Christianity is a key sub-text in idealised pan-Oceanic conceptions of “the Melanesian Way” and “traditional Pacific life” propounded by nationalists and national leaders from Papua New Guinea to New Caledonia and beyond. The term “the Melanesian Way” was coined and popularised by the Papua New Guinean Bernard Narokobi, a committed Catholic (Narokobi 1977, 1980:9, 23; Otto 1997:53-4). Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the late Kanak independence leader in New Caledonia, was a former Catholic priest who remained “strongly attached to his Christian principles”. In his book subtitled the Melanesian Way in English translation, Tjibaou acknowledges the importance of church groups in the renaissance of Kanak custom that he led in the 1970s (Bensa and Wittersheim 1998:374, 387; Tjibaou and Missotte 1978:28-31, 104).

Lini, who was an Anglican priest, argues that “because Jesus upheld justice for all mankind ... the church must play its role in politics”. He draws on an oppositional narrative of national identity in Vanuatu that celebrates “Melanesian communalism” as “broadly compatible” with “the Christian religion”, but denigrates “alien concepts of materialism, individualism, and a narrow, insensitive brand of organised religion” as incompatible with both “traditional values” and Christianity (1980:19; 1982:27). Similarly, Rev. Leslie Boseto, a leading politician and United Church theologian in Solomon Islands, describes “our traditional values” as “what God our creator has already given and established amongst us”. He counterposes the “sharing and caring” ethos of “traditional Pacific life” with the “greed, domination, competition and exploitation” of “the so-called ‘civilised nations’ of the west and the north” (1994:56-9). The polemical antithesis in these formulations is between “Melanesia” and “the West”; it is not between “custom” and “Christianity”, which are represented as in fundamental accord.

In Nguna, as everywhere in Vanuatu and Melanesia generally, custom provides a problematic and ambivalent symbol for national unity and identity: defined as “the way of doing (things) of the Land”, it is “the basis of the Ngune concept of their society, embodying the essential distinctiveness of Ngune society as an integral entity vis-à-vis all others” in Vanuatu (Facey 1995:217-18, my emphasis). In contrast to the divisive potential of custom, by the mid-twentieth century many Papua New Guineans and most ni-Vanuatu, Solomon Islanders and Fijians were active Christians. The churches were and are the main – sometimes the only – providers of formal education in these countries. During much of the colonial era, mission or church groups were the one kind of formal translocal indigenous association permitted by racist colonial authorities, nervous about the spectre of revolt and more concerned for their own status and security than to pave the way for an effective national future. It is hardly surprising that many first-generation Melanesian nationalists and independence leaders were ordained priests or ministers. Even with the recent proliferation of pentecostal and charismatic groups – which are usually hostile to custom – there are far fewer Christian denominations than local versions of custom. This makes indigenous Christianity arguably the key national and transnational symbol throughout Melanesia, especially as in long Christian areas like Nguna and Fiji it is often the case that “Christianity is also regarded as traditional even though its European origin is fully acknowledged” (Facey 1995:218; Rutz 1995).

The status and potency of Christianity as an indigenous religion in Melanesian nations is no longer seriously in question, but much scholarly literature on nationalism in Melanesia nonetheless downplays Christianity and privileges custom, presumably because custom is at once exotic and seemingly more authentic. Thus Robert Foster introduces his edited collection, Nation Making, as follows:

Since independence,... political elites and local intelligentsia in these states have undertaken in earnest the work of producing images and ideal of nationhood. They have generated a steady discourse of custom and tradition that seeks to ground national distinctiveness in definitions of indigenous ancestral ways. Much of this discourse is official discourse. It is inscribed memorably, for example, in the preamble to the constitution of Papua New Guinea [quoted above] (1995:1).

Despite its prominence in every Melanesian constitution, including Papua New Guinea’s, which Foster cites (1995:27), Christianity does not warrant a mention here or elsewhere in his introduction except in his summary of the chapters, though some of his contributors do take indigenous Christianity seriously.
Foster, like many anthropologists, is evidently underwhelmed by the symbolic salience of Christianity, in tandem with custom, in national identities and nationalist ideologies throughout Melanesia. I suggest that they are erasing or not hearing important strands in the content and idioms of indigenous discourses (Douglas at press).

GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY AND "NEGATIVE NATIONALISM"

I remarked above that Christianity has long offered Melanesians membership in a global moral community which transcends the doubtful legitimacy accorded colonial and national states. The term “negative nationalism” is sometimes applied to anticolonial ideologies, as by Cohn and Dirks (1988:229). But it is also used in a novel and more interesting way by Joel Robbins in his ethnography of the Urapmin, a remote Papua New Guinea Highlands group who nonetheless have a “strong sense of transnational connectedness” by virtue of their intense involvement in millennial Christianity, which, in the absence of white missionaries, they have developed “along lines of their own choosing”, “as a local mode of understanding” (1995:214; 1997b:37; 1998:122). Their choices include random but regular injections of foreign dispensationalism which, locally translated, inspires periods of heightened millenarian activity and fuels the “globalizing apocalypticism” of their beliefs – the sense that they are more or less equal participants in a “shared”, global Christian millennialism (1997a:9, 11-12, 14-20; 1997b:40; 1998:106-7).

None of this is all that unusual in modern Melanesia. However, most ethnographic literature depicts national identities as novel, weak, resisted or non-existent in Melanesia, especially in hinterland areas (e.g., Clark 1997; Jacobsen 1995; Kelly 1995; Stewart and Strathern 1998:133-4). Robbins, by contrast, maintains that “Urapmin national identity ... definitely exists”, but is “a source of deep unhappiness”. He argues that when national identity is correlated with other translocal identities, “it becomes clear that one can both hold a national identity and harbor extremely negative views of the nation of which one is a part”. This is “negative nationalism” and is clearly at odds with the normal scholarly equation of national identity with “a positive attachment to the nation” (1998:104, 108, 110) – as in Anderson’s contention that “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1991:7). Urapmin identification with the Papua New Guinea nation and their self-recognition as inescapably Papua New Guinean are based on “their firm belief that the modern world is properly a world of nations”, though it is less a modernist belief than one derived from their reading of the Bible, especially Paul’s letters to apparently “nationally differentiated addressers” (1998:109). Accordingly, Urapmin “harbor no separatist or revolutionary dreams”, despite their chilling conviction that the nation of Papua New Guinea is racially inferior: in Urapmin cosmology, blacks, including themselves, are inferior to whites because they lack self-control. It is their imagined membership in a mostly white global Christian community, and their belief in an apocalyptic narrative, that together offer Urapmin the promise that “with God’s help and their own proper effort”, they can “improve themselves and eventually become the equal of whites” (1998:113, 115). Robbins speculates that, whereas in Urapmin reckoning “Jesus himself is white”, the villainous antichrist of their millennial narrative “represents a version of the modern state and its nation ... in their most intrusive form”, while the evil nation he is expected to establish in the imminent Apocalypse is “an analog of the existing black nation of Papua New Guinea”. Robbins concludes that of the three translocal identities held by the Urapmin – racial identity with other blacks, national identity as Papua New Guineans, and transnational Christian identity – “that of Christian is the most consequential” (1998:114, 117-122).

The stress placed on Christianity in this paper does not reflect my own religious allegiance, since I am agnostic (Robbins is Jewish). Rather it acknowledges the profound significance of Christianity to virtually all Melanesians, for whom religion is not a compartmentalised set of beliefs and rituals but an intimate lived experience and a strategy mobilised pragmatically to achieve private and public ends, including national ones. Every Melanesian I know believes in the practical efficacy of prayer. One Papua New Guinean woman describes “an increasing growth and awareness in the Word of God. More and more women, and more and more church groups are uniting forces. There are more corporate fellowships and prayer meetings, ... imagine how much prayer power can be sent up to heaven at any one time?” (Nadile 1998). For Melanesians the question is not just rhetorical. In 1997 the
election defeat of the incumbent Papua New Guinea government was widely attributed to the intensity and volume of prayer power beamed to heaven during a national ecumenical prayer movement against corruption.

**GENDER, CUSTOM AND NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP**

[As] women in Papua New Guinea, especially in the rural remote areas, we see ourselves first, then the churches and then the nation. We get less as citizens and serve more as Christians and citizens, and get served as women the least (Hopkos 2000).

Those words were written by a Papua New Guinean woman who at the time was president of the Ambunti District Council of Women. They serve as an apt epigraph for the final section of the paper, which reflects on gendered experiences of citizenship in the island of Aneityum in Vanuatu, and in Vanuatu generally.

Aneityum, one of the most remote places in Vanuatu, could be taken as a microcosm of the nation: like the Urapmin, Aneityumese of both sexes do not doubt that their island is part of a nation or question their own status as ni-Vanuatu. But cast in (very recent) historical perspective, the nation of Vanuatu is an artificial collectivity and the oft-maligned origin of the “politics” that are seen as corrosive to more organic socialities. In Aneityum, as in rural areas in Vanuatu generally, the state is present, but as an aggravation and an absence, for men and women alike. It is widely seen as divisive, corrupt and producing few of the benefits expected from payment of taxes and electoral support. In town, too, people acknowledge the state and accept their shared nationality, but even in urban areas national citizenship is relevant for relatively few, mostly men involved in politics and administration. Dorothy Regenvanu, one of only two female Presbyterian pastors in Vanuatu, sees nationalism as weak and island identity paramount. She illustrates her case with anecdotes about how things work in the Paton Memorial Church in Port Vila: “when they elect elders they would say, this elder’s from Malakula, therefore he’ll look after the Malakula people”; “they say for a church roster for cleaning, then the Malakulans will do it today, and next week it’ll be the Paamese” (Dorothy Regenvanu, 4 Aug. 1997). This determined insularity of most ni-Vanuatu men is neither “traditional” nor “national”, but registers an at once expanded and contained modern arena for male practice of custom and identity politics: the island.

Women, by contrast, are largely confined to local and domestic spheres and enjoy few advantages from citizenship: for instance, their constitutional and legal rights to equality and protection against violence are consistently ignored or infringed by representatives of the police and the judiciary (Mason 2000; Vanuatu National Council of Women, Press Release, 8 Feb. 2000). A few women have attained national repute since Independence, generally in women’s affairs but a handful in politics or the bureaucracy (Molisa 1987:19-22). Many of the latter, though, came to prominence during the independence struggle of the 1970s, often in the face of male hostility or disquiet. Their numbers have not swelled noticeably in the last decade, and in some respects have contracted. There has only ever been one female Member of Parliament in Vanuatu. In national elections in March 1998 fewer than ten women stood amongst more than two hundred candidates for fifty-two seats. No woman was elected ([Tari] 1998:61-4; Vanuatu Weekly, 21 Mar. 1998).

I conclude this section with two episodes which dramatise the contingent, ambiguous interrelationships of religion, custom and gender in a modern Melanesian nation. From before Independence, ni-Vanuatu men have opportunistically yoked an insular conception of custom in support of arguments against women’s participation in the public sphere. A Council of Chiefs in north Efate tried to bar the candidature of women in the first national elections on the grounds that it was against local custom. In riposte, a prominent woman mobilised Christian values and a civic rights discourse to argue a very different nexus of gender, custom and national politics, expressing an optimism about the latter which has widely turned to cynicism or resignation:

How absurd to think that what the Efate chiefs decide to be right or wrong in their custom, should be meant to influence [sic] the welfare of the whole national community…. Politics concerns the ways to bring about the good of a country and its citizens. Both men and women being God’s creatures are equal in his sight – they are also citizens of a country with equal basic rights … We have been fighting against colonial injustices up to now and we are now ready to rule our own country…. [To] exclude women
from our national decision making ... is pure injustice (Mildred Sope, Vanuatu Viewpoints, 20 Sep. 1979).

Nearly twenty years later Barak Sope, a government minister soon to be Prime Minister, rehearsed the tactic of extrapolating an interested version of parochial custom into the modern state arena in an effort to delegitimise both the public activities of a woman and the authority of a state agency over his own dubious activities. He demanded the repeal of the Ombudsman Act on the grounds that “its content contradicted the traditional practices in Vanuatu”: the then Ombudsman, a French woman, “was very critical of many male leaders in her reports therefore she had contradicted the principles of the local society”, since “according to the custom of his home island ... men could not be criticised by women” (Radio Vanuatu News, 21 Nov. 1997).

CONCLUSION

In his conclusion to Nation Making (Foster, ed. 1995), John Kelly, an anthropologist of Indians in Fiji, observes:

The history of nationalism shows us ... that it is easier to fashion a narrative that organizes a people, to consolidate it through apparatuses such as rituals and media, and to mobilize it to legitimate a state, or to capture control of one, than it is to realize, thereby, the elusive privileges of citizenship, as they were and are for the predatory [individualistic] “civil societies” of the leading nations (1995:268).

He suggests that the classic processes of nation-making in Western Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – themselves varied and historically contingent – have little in common with late twentieth century nation-making in former colonies on the margins of the global system (1995:266).

This is in line with my early theoretical excursions. Kelly questions the very salience for the Melanesian region of the concept “nation state”: “in the Pacific, ... [states] have clearly focused their regulating on topics of foreign and capitalist interest” (1995:236).

Melanesian states, then, are outward- rather than inward-looking, and typically are seen to ignore or deny the reciprocal obligations that indigenous people expect of social relations. Clark, for instance, suggests that in Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, people see themselves not as citizens but as “followers of the state”, which is “personified as a 'big man', who is bound by the morality and mentality of reciprocity to look after and redistribute resources to his followers”. Yet rather than the personified state returning in services the loyalty and taxes paid by its citizens, throughout Melanesia reciprocity in national settings tends, in spectacular versions of pork-barrelling, to be the domain of individual politicians (Clark 1997:74, 81-2, 86-8; Stewart and Strathern 1998:134). All this means that there has been little kinship of interest or feeling between “the state” and “the [hypothetical] nation”, either at the time of the fashioning of “independent” regimes, or since. It means also that the codifying, disciplining, hegemonic Foucauldian state, as in Mitchell’s image with which I started the paper, is less in evidence in the Pacific than almost anywhere (Kelly 1995:256). It seems clear, furthermore, that the gap between “state” and “nation” in Melanesia is growing, as local communities away from major centres are less and less engaged in state affairs, and as rival centres for “national” commitment grow in confidence and legitimacy – islands like Bougainville and Guadalcanal, provinces like the Solomons’ Western Province, ethnic groups like “the Min” in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, and “the Fijians”.

Segal and Handler propose as an “ideal-typical model” that, “for the last two centuries”, “the nation” has been conceived as “a grouping of persons who are represented as a boundaried whole of like individuals”, and the “nation-state” as “a sovereign territory legitimated as being of and for a ‘nation’” (1992:4). It is arguably the case in Melanesia today that there are “states”, but not “nation states”, and very few “citizens”, in the sense of equal members of a national polity. Not only are more effective and locally meaningful geopolitical arrangements needed to harness and channel the capacities and meet the aspirations of indigenous people, but more apt terms are required to describe them.
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