



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

CHIEFLY POWER IN SOUTHERN VANUATU

CHIEF PHILIP TEPAHAE

According to the custom of Aneityum a person or a member of a chief's family cannot declare himself a chief. Unless a man fulfils the qualities described below, the people will not trust him and he cannot become a true chief. The conditions are as follows:

- according to the custom of Aneityum a chief is not a wealthy man or a rich man; rather he is a poor man;
- you must be a reserved person so that you do not create too many problems for your people or for your family;
- you must not be selfish because you must share with your people and your family;
- you must not be greedy because if any presents of food should accrue to you as chief you must share them with your people and your family;
- you must not be quick to anger because if any problems arise you will not be able to take action quickly;
- you must be a man who is prepared to listen and evaluate because if a person advises, you must heed his advice;
- you must be respectful of other people because in this way you will be able to respect the important men of your community and your people;

- you must not be given to talking too much because if you are you will not be capable of taking decisions in your area and you will confuse the community leaders and your people;
- you must not be proud because if you are a proud man and you are overbearing because of the name of the chief you will not be able to work well in your area to assist your people.

These are the attributes which a person must have in order to become a chief.

A chief cannot assume power if he alone states that he has become a chief and has no administration within his area, because there will be nobody to work and support him so that his power and regulations are respected.

Today chiefs do not have power over Vanuatu or individual islands simply because a man or a person decides to declare himself a chief, or if only one or two families support him. Such a person is ignorant of the work to be performed by a chief and of the rules and regulations of a chief. Such a person may also be poorly educated or will be subject to political campaigning and be frightened by such activities. And some people think that today politics is better than customary life or traditional life, but they forget that politics

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is subject to change any time. But custom has never changed from the time of our ancestors until today.

THE TIMES OF OUR ANCESTORS

According to the custom of Aneityum a chief has power over a large area which has a large population. The chief is like an umbrella for the population but every man or family under the chief has their own rights to land. The chief has a special piece of land assigned to him as chief, but he rules over a large area in his duties as chief. A large area such as that encompassed by the chief is divided into different sections. Within each section are the chief's 'big men', and below them is the general population.

These 'big men' direct work in one of the chief's areas and they control the administration of that area. The chief alone has no power, but he together with his 'big men' run the administration and assist the chief. An important point is that they all respect one another, which means that the chief has full power over everything, for example rules and regulations and anything else (but obviously in consultation). When a piece of information reaches the chief he cannot take any decision alone, but rather he must call together his 'big men' to discuss the question. And the same rule applies to the chief's 'big men'—they must discuss the matter first of all to ensure that decisions are correct and that traditional life proceeds in a satisfactory manner.

WHEN THE MISSIONARIES BROUGHT CHRISTIANITY

The missionaries did not respect to the chiefs because they perceived that the chief generated his power from the 'big men' of each section and so they just used the chief to gain access to each area. And the missionary used the chief's 'big men' by making them Elders and Deacons and persuaded them to give their allegiance to the church, thereby isolating the chief. The missionary encouraged his church members and

sometimes he declared that some Elders were chiefs as well as some Deacons. Thus the power of customary life was reduced.

This leads to the situation in every island around Vanuatu today where many people say that their ancestor was a chief before. Some such claims are true but some are not true. Perhaps they were just the 'big men' of the chief. It was the missionaries who started this problem concerning chieftainship.

Also, the missionaries said to the Elders and the Deacons and the people that customary life was a wrong way of living. However, the missionaries did not make it clear to them so that they could realise properly which part of customary life was bad and which part was good. This caused people to begin to lose respect so that the custom chief and his 'big men' who ran his customary administration were not held in the same high esteem.

And then there were traders who came to buy sandalwood and barter things such as axes and knives, etc. This caused the people to abandon thoughts of staying home on the island to assist the chief and old people and women and they thought that it would be a good thing to go and work for Europeans. The result of this was that some went and worked for other people and some went and worked on ships. They no longer thought about the traditional life and culture of each island of Vanuatu. Also, when a chief lost power and he did not sit in judgement on people, the missionary was invited to come and adjudicate in times of trouble. This meant that people lost respect and lost their culture. And when our young ancestors went overseas and came back after working on ships, the old people had already died and much traditional information was already lost. And so the proper customary life and regulations and laws and oral traditions were lost. However, they did not worry about gaining this knowledge.



WHEN EDUCATION CAME TO ANEITVUM

When a person or his family sent a child to school they did not just think about putting him in school. Perhaps there was one of their old men who was still alive. However, he had already lost his customary knowledge because of the church and traders and education was only one cause of confusion in terms of customary life and rules within any given area.

Another point in this respect too is that perhaps an old person was almost on the point of death while the child was still at school. Then oral traditions would die with the old man. And another point—perhaps the old man was knowledgeable about customary life but was afraid to reveal this because of fear of the church.

This child may have become an adult and as far as his thoughts are concerned, he no longer thinks about customary life but rather he thinks about the knowledge that he has in his own head and also about his desire to earn lots of money.

In addition, if the father of this child was already deceased, this child would not have knowledge of customary life. Rather, he would be capable of making up his own customs at school! Perhaps a child would come back from school and, while the oral tradition may still have been alive and well, when he saw that the local people were not well educated or not as well educated as him, then he might think 'Oh, I will deceive these people and they will never know the difference'.

THE PERIOD OF COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

During this period the chiefly administration was diminished—it was no longer systematic. Many island chiefs no longer worked and some worked but were frightened of the government because the police and the prison system meant that the government put District Agents in some provinces who travelled all over the islands and appointed Assessors, which meant that the chief was at a lower level. The Assessor was higher than the chief.

Also, some chiefs tried to exercise their power but some people followed the law of the government and said that the chief is wrong and reported him to the District Agent who put the chief in jail, which meant that the chief had really lost his power.

On the other hand, when a person became educated and joined the police and came back to his island, sometimes a chief would hold a meeting and these people would go and sit and listen to the chief and say 'Oh, that's not right!', and sometimes they would challenge the chief and cause the chief to be frightened and to invite them to chair the meeting. These people would say then that law and education was different altogether from custom. This would make many people trust the government administrators and no longer trust the chief or custom.

THE PERIOD OF POLITICS

In 1978 and 1979 the V.P. struggled for independence following customary ways. On 30 July 1980, Vanuatu achieved independence and established a government which was led by the V.P. and it created a Constitution which says that March 5 is Chiefs Day to mark the fact that chiefs have taken back their powers and land has returned to its customary owners. But in the Constitution the government never made it clear that custom was restored. The chief must renew the work of customary administration according to the custom of individual islands. The Constitution never made this clear to the people of Vanuatu because independence was a new thing to people of Vanuatu at that time, a time when they were overjoyed. They never thought about custom, they only thought about independence. If the Constitution made it clear then perhaps the population of Vanuatu would help the chiefs to restore custom.

Now, in my personal opinion, I believe I know why the government didn't make it clear in the Constitution. Perhaps it believed that custom exists for chiefs to know and the government to forget. This means that politics is

the fourth confusing element within custom, where customary life is already in danger. Another view which I hold is why didn't the government make a clear statement about custom in the Constitution? Didn't it recognise the problem, or did it recognise the problem but was afraid, or was it just politics?

But, in my opinion, custom is not in conflict with government. I know that if the Constitution makes a clear statement then custom can be a considerable help to government and empower it further.

Another aspect of politics—there are too many politicians who create many parties, which means that the government is just playing politics, and it is only the Ministers who are exercising their knowledge and filling their pockets to leave their supporters to suffer.

Another point, some of the Ministers do know about custom and some just mouth words about custom. Some of them know about custom concerning rain or sun or how to poison people. This is all right but where is the customary administration of custom and where is customary life? When Ministers don't know these things they just play at politics because within custom there is shame and respect and honour. If these things are absent from customary houses, such institutions as chiefs or rules and laws cannot exist on any island.

Further, during political campaigns politicians never give a thought about chiefs and they don't want to know about the rules of the chiefs because the politicians only ask the chief about gaining the allegiance of his custom house (*nakamal*) but they don't worry at all about the chief's administration within his own area. So, politics really reduces the power of the chief and also of the custom and culture of Vanuatu.

When chiefs cannot perform their customary work like this it means that many chiefs follow the road of politics and they no longer follow the straight road of custom. But it is true that there is a political side to custom. However, this is used outside its local area and never inside. It is clear that the chief does not use politics inside his area

but if a chief should use it, how would the chiefly administration be conducted within an area?

Finally, chiefs listen too much to politicians and are not interested in trying to discover what custom is about. Young boys and girls don't know about custom and are not taught about it because the old people too don't know about custom.

PERSONAL COMMENTS

In my opinion, I believe that if the Vanuatu government is really a government for Vanuatu it must examine the Constitution of Vanuatu and insert some additional articles to assist in strengthening custom according to the custom of each island and to renew the administrative functions of chiefs within each island of Vanuatu.

The other side of this is that the government should work as the government and that custom should work as custom. In this way custom will help government and government will help custom. And chiefs must remember and take heed that custom is the province of chiefs and not of politics. Politics is the province of the Vanuatu government but not of custom.

Furthermore, today in Vanuatu a situation exists which is unsatisfactory because it is only politics which controls everything with a consequence that chiefs are no longer able to control their island and their people.

In addition, when it is only the government with power, it sets up its own island councils. This is good, but one result is that it is strongly in opposition to custom and reduces the rights of the chief's 'big men' and within the councils there is too much politics, with the result that the people are unhappy.

When the government created Provinces it was the same story. There is too much politics associated with them. Under this system the role of the chief is just to talk about local problems. This is a fact, but at the time of our grandfathers chiefs were chosen to look after the complete welfare of the community.

If the chiefs and the government perform



their work well, and the National Council of Chiefs strictly adheres to customary ways, then only one or two political parties would be needed to run the government of Vanuatu efficiently.

THE FAILINGS OF THE CHIEFS

- Chiefs do not perform the correct duties of a chief in accordance with custom.
- Chiefs are frightened of people with education and tend to neglect or forget custom.
- Chiefs follow the line of politicians too much and are frightened of them.
- Chiefs use politics within their own meetings.
- Chiefs do not advise their people about custom.
- Chiefs fail to warn their people about dirty politics.
- Some chiefs simply go through the motions of being a chief but are ignorant as to the direction to take.
- Some chiefs do not co-operate well with their own people.
- Some of the chiefs' 'big men' are political commissars.
- Some chiefs place their trust only in the police.
- Importantly, chiefs have lost true custom through education.
- The people of Vanuatu believe that a person who is well educated should be the chief and that he is quite superior.

PERSONAL COMMENTS FROM A CUSTOMARY POINT OF VIEW

Because of the failures of chiefs, the only way is to add further articles to the Constitution regarding customary life so as to encourage chiefs throughout the islands to make a study of customary life in their area together with rules and regulations according to custom.

In my view, according to custom it is very difficult for a chief and his 'big men' and the elders

to just talk about custom, with a result that every aspect of customary life may be restored because from the time Christianity was introduced until today all the old people throughout Vanuatu no longer live according to strict customary rules but rather they live a mixture of custom, church, education, politics and money.

In addition, it is also very difficult for chiefs and elders to revive customary life. It is very difficult for church and community leaders and families and parents and primary school teachers and kindergarten school teachers to talk about custom and revive it.

In my opinion and in my belief the only way forward is to add some articles to the Constitution concerning custom in order to give more power to the chiefs throughout the islands of Vanuatu so that they may hark back to the customary life which our grandfathers lived by, in addition to the administrative work of chiefs in each area in Vanuatu.

And if one manages to get back to a correct customary life, everyone will be in agreement. Under such a system they will call a big meeting or a public meeting of the community and church leaders and family leaders and parents so that the chief and his 'big men' may advise the people concerning the correct way of living a customary life on their island. And then they can go back to the places or villages from which they come and give their young people the instructions which the chief and his 'big men' gave them.

In my opinion, if it is not too difficult for things to be done as I have suggested, then customary life and the administrative work of the chiefs can be quickly revived since the community discusses customary life in order to advance the life of the community. And the church should talk about the good aspects of customary life so as to help it improve, because the church too is not free of politics.

And families also should talk about custom within their own ranks so as to help themselves to build good and strong families so as to build up a good community to help the chief.

Further, parents can teach their children

about the ways of respecting and honouring other people so as to ensure that there is respect once more for the chief so as to re-establish the administrative work of chiefs throughout Vanuatu.

Teachers also can teach the children in the classroom about the European way and also about custom, so that children will understand and see clearly that custom too is good, not just the European way. All this so that children will think about custom when they go to university or when they obtain degrees.

Another aspect of this is that when children are not taught about custom, respect and honour by their parents then families will not be harmonious. When families are in this situation it follows that communities will be in the same situation, and when communities are in this situation it also means that the administrative work of the chief will be equally poor and that the chief will no longer have the power to carry out all of his work. This means that politics can assume the work of chiefs throughout Vanuatu.

As well, when parents fail to teach their children in this way and families fail to teach their children about custom, it means that when children don't receive any customary advice from their family or parents, in the classroom it becomes clear that children learn a different kind of custom throughout their lives and also when they pass their exams to enter university and get their degrees and return to Vanuatu. What can the chief say when such a person enters politics and begins to make his campaign since many men and women will believe everything he says because he has a degree? This is because they have not benefited from the advice and instruction of their parents and families about customary life.

It is my contention that custom cannot return to the domain of the chief since he has no empowerment because education and politics are too powerful and ride roughshod over the customary life and culture of Vanuatu, if the chief is not surrounded by people who support a customary way of life.

The reason for this is that every ni-Vanuatu is

educated without the benefit of customary life. Today every man and woman is motivated by money, he is not motivated by customary life. Another aspect of this is that politicians campaign and say that 'if you vote for me I will do this or that and you will have full employment to earn money to pay for school fees and clothes and medicine and food'. Politics drives many men and women to support politics and leave the chief just sitting in the ashes because in their opinion custom is a waste of time. However, when politics has gone, in the same way men and women will disappear. When a politician wins his seat through the support of the people, every political speech is just a dream, and supporters will lose once more as they have before. This leads people to become angry with the chief, but they fail to realise that the cause of all this was that they have forgotten the beginnings of this process.

Another aspect of this, too, is that the community alone cannot restore customary power. True, the community can restore some customs, but this will be through the interest of only one community not of the whole island or all of Vanuatu. How can one community stand up against the tide when parents don't teach their children about customary life? This will mean simply that families do not have a good foundation so that they can co-operate and establish a good strong community in a single area under a single chief.

Kindergarten and primary school teachers cannot teach about customary life in the classroom in such a way as to restore custom. If a teacher teaches children about customary life in the classroom this is good, but children live with their parents and families. They will go home to their parents and families and life with them will be different from the life that the teacher has taught about. And this just means that the child will be confused and that the teacher is just wasting their time teaching about customary life in the classroom.

And I think that if custom is to come back in such a way that the chiefs will have power again,



it depends on parents, families, communities, teachers, chiefs and the government.

All of these must stand together and make a stand so that customary life can be restored quickly and there can be good government in Vanuatu.

In my opinion, we should include the government in these considerations for two reasons:

- In order to add some articles to the Constitution, the government must try to look back through history at the customary administrative work which the chief performs within his own area.
- Because some customary punishments are easy and some are a little bit difficult, and some customs are good while some are bad.

The government must provide balance in cases like this if the chief needs it, or if some chiefs make mistakes or are over-bearing.

This is all I have to say and if my impressions are not correct please correct me.

I cannot discuss how to elect a chief because this information is contained in 'the constitution' of Aneityum (which I have written). We can refer to it if required.

This is all I have to say. Thank you very much.