

Program 2: Colonial Legacies

Last century, Pacific nations were ruled by one or more colonial powers that introduced new systems of government, religion and language. Today, most have achieved political independence, but the impact of colonialism on land, labour and economy still lingers. So how are chiefs, churches and communities tackling the legacies of the past?

VETUNA: Hello, I'm Pearson Vetuna. This is 'Time to Talk', a series of programs on governance in the Pacific. Today, 'Colonial Legacies'.

The 19th Century was a time of imperial rivalry. Britain, France, Germany and Holland, along with North America, were all expanding their empires in the Pacific. They followed the traders, the blackbirders and the missionaries. By the end of the 19th Century, most of the Pacific was carved up. So what long-term impact did colonisation have on Pacific communities?

UNASA LEULU FELISE VA'A: I think on top of the list is really the land question. Many of the villages are now trying to claim back the lands which were taken over by the Europeans before independence, especially in the 19th century.

VETUNA: Samoan anthropologist, Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a.

UNASA LEULU FELISE VA'A: The Samoan districts are now trying to claim it either by hook or by crook. They're settling on these lands illegally and in some cases they're challenging the government in court. And there are instances where they have stopped the airport for instance, stopped the hydro project at 'Alipata and it took a lot of negotiating skill on the part of the government. So that's the land, it's still there, it's still a hot issue you know, about who owns the land. Most of it's freehold land and the court will just find out who is the legal owner. But the people sometimes say well yeah, it was taken from us under false pretences or the government promised to return, to give us back some of this land or sell it back to us. And it's all being contested. You know, the people are not sitting down now and the Samoans many of them are getting better educated and they're challenging some of these decisions, and even if the land is legally the governments, they're going to say well, it may be yours but we want some of it back.

VETUNA: European settlers brought with them values in relation to land which were at odds with traditional notions of land ownership and use.

Ratu Isireli Vuibau is from Fiji.

RATU ISIRELI VUIBAU: Even before colonisation came here we had a set rule on the ownership of land and this was part of our culture. It was a chiefly system that had been set up by our ancestors whom I called the discoverers of this country. And the land ownership was very clear, we had a

system whereby the tribe they collectively owned the resources of this country. But colonialism came in and it distorted a lot of rules regarding the ownership of our resources. And I think that was the beginning of a kind of political upheaval that is now existing in the country today.

VETUNA: So why is land so important? And what special relationship do Pacific Islanders have with their land? Matthew Wale is from Solomon Islands.

MATTHEW WALE: Of course you know there are no such things as individual landowners in Melanesia. Land is always owned by the tribe. Obviously in Melanesia the tribe comes out of the land, that's the concept. The land is the mother and therefore you treat it with a lot of respect. And therefore the chief traditionally and his elders always had to account directly for their use, their custody. It's a trust relationship for the resources out of the land, and the tribe always had the right to ask the question. So obviously at that level there is a much more direct relationship between the land and its land based resources and the tribe.

RUTH LILOQULA: In the Solomon Islands you look at it is 80 per cent of the land, in fact maybe 88 per cent or 90 is customarily owned. And yet the formal systems make a decision about something that they don't own, the people own without consultation.

VETUNA: Ruth Liloqula from Choiseul Province in the Solomon Islands.

RUTH LILOQULA: It's making decisions outside of the traditional system on properties that rightly and truly should be going through the traditional system that has cost us a lot of trouble and conflict. We already have a legal system, a traditional legal system that governs land ownership, land transfer, land acquisition, all of these sort of things and they're all going towards strengthening the linkages between people, relationships, not the other way round that we are now doing. And it's not a bad way. But if we can start from there and as things evolve, we agree to the changes that are evolving in order to keep up with change we might get somewhere. At the moment it's the imposition of one people's culture. What I am saying here is have an overall umbrella legislation that would empower the people in each of the islands.

VETUNA: Land issues are emotionally charged and land is central to many of the conflicts in the region today. Take Bougainville for instance. Chief Mark Naboeng is from the Leitana Council of Elders.

CHIEF MARK NABOENG: I think it's something that we cannot take away from the people of Bougainville as a whole, and I think in Papua New Guinea also land is not something that people can allow other people to do whatever they like with. We can see that the main cause of this problem was because of the land in Panguna. And it also applies to all communities. Each clan is responsible to look after their lands and no other clans can take it from them.

VETUNA: This is 'Time to Talk' on Radio Australia - today looking at colonial legacies.

ARCHBISHOP BRIAN BARNES: I think, by and large, Christianity has been a unifying factor and people say and it's true that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country because the vast majority of the people call themselves Christian.

VETUNA: Port Moresby's Catholic Archbishop Brian Barnes.

ARCHBISHOP BRIAN BARNES: They take on a system of values, moral values, principles that they should be living by. In fact Papua New Guineans live also by their traditional values very much and the system of religion which existed before and now too, animism, is held in conjunction with Christian beliefs. It's a process of taking on something new and relinquishing something old and make a judgement on whether this which they had accepted and which was generally held in traditional communities is good or not according to Christian beliefs and values.

VETUNA: But custom and Christianity didn't always co-exist happily. Jacob Simet from the National Cultural Commission in Papua New Guinea.

JACOB SIMET: The Catholic [Church] at one stage they were dead set against members of their congregation participating in traditional ways of living, particularly in terms of feasting. They had a policy of excommunication where you ban somebody from going to Church altogether. The Methodists as far as I know also had policies against people participating mainly in relation to what they saw as worship traditional types of activities which kind of bordered on religion. Like for instance the area where I come from and in New Ireland also and some of the areas along the Momase where you have the Tubuan which is a masked figure which is seen as a god in a way. People were banned from participating in those kind of activities. But I understand now the Catholics have embraced culture quite a lot. In their order of worship they have brought in a lot of symbolism, traditional Papua New Guinea symbolism to the Church.

VETUNA: Christianity strongly discouraged some traditional practices. However, polygamy, disapproved by mainline churches, still occurs today. But Archbishop Barnes says it is now being questioned by large sections of the community.

ARCHBISHOP BRIAN BARNES: In theory yes, polygamy was out as far as a Christian was concerned. But in practice many important people, politicians for example, believed that because they were big men they had the right to take on a second or third or fourth or more wives. And so even though they call themselves Christian they didn't in practice accept this Christian value of monogamous marriage. And the women especially are saying polygamy should be outlawed. It is allowed at the moment, people are allowed by law and custom to take more than one wife, but it's changing.

JACOB SIMET: People see the churches as the things they offer are good, and I think what if you may call it a laissez-faire kind of attitude is in that you can still have, I think it's the Catholic Church, the Church has probably got it right in that you can still have your traditional cultures when there's a possibility you blend the two. And I think that's the way Papua New Guineans want to live, they

want to be able to live the way they want to live in terms of a new ideology in terms of religion, they would like to participate in it fully and they know how to blend the two.

Traditional music

FATHER JOSEPH TAKARO: So we use traditional drums and some instruments again which is traditional. We try to inculcate, we try to make the service give meaning to the people that there. We can worship God with all our environment surrounding us. They are more helpful to give strong meaning of who God is and what God is.

VETUNA: Father Joseph Takaro from Tagabe Anglican Church in Vanuatu with his parish choir.

Pacific communities embraced Christianity. Christian values are enshrined in many Island nations' constitutions. But it was the churches, through their missionaries, who were the first to upset the traditional power structures. Solomon Islands Catholic Archbishop Adrian Smith.

ARCHBISHOP ADRIAN SMITH: The traditional leadership was a leadership that worked in a society that was homogenous in itself with little outside influences. Now today our society is becoming much more a mixed society so the role of the chief is becoming somewhat confused and also it's a bit upset by other forms of leadership which have developed. For example, the role of the village church leader has in some way upset the role of the traditional chief. The role of the teacher has come in and that's another role that has upset the authority of the chief. The role of the police, they can walk into a village now and they can speak about the law and the chief is not any longer as it were in charge of that. The role of the politician, national level, he walks in and he's another leader. The role of the provincial politician, he walks in and he's another elected leader. So the clarity as to who is the leader is no longer so easy to identify. And so traditional leadership which played a very important role in society has really been rocked.

VETUNA: As Archbishop Smith says, traditional leadership was further disrupted by new systems of government brought in by the various colonial powers.

In Polynesia, for instance, the Samoans found themselves split - initially between the Americans and the Germans. What then became Western Samoa was later administered by New Zealand. Each colonial power brought in their own ideas of democracy.

Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a again.

UNASA LEULU FELISE VA'A: The German Government as you know was a colonial and patriarchal system and when they came here the centre of the government was the Tsar, he was the king and he was like a kind of a monarchy and all the Samoans were supposed to acknowledge him as their king. And so it's very much a patriarchal system and dependant on patronage of the governor and of the people in power. Whereas the Samoan system was based on respect for the chiefs, the power of the chiefs, patriarchal in a sense too, but of a different sort. Now when you come to New

Zealand their role was really a military administration. They were trying to introduce notions of Western democracy like freedom but unfortunately this clashed with Samoan or traditional notions of service by the young people for their matai. Very early on the first 20 years they were very well meaning but their ideas and proposals were very impractical. For instance they wanted to divide the land up and give each untitled person five acres of land, but the Samoan traditional system doesn't work that way. It works on a system where the young people serve the chiefs and when the chiefs die these young people take over as chiefs. So you upset the traditional system and therefore you're likely to cause opposition, which was what happened.

VETUNA: This gave birth to the Mau Movement, a resistance force dedicated to preserve Samoan culture and a driving force for Western Samoa's independence.

On the other hand, Fiji's colonial power, Great Britain, set up a system which used traditional power structures. A separate administration was put in place for the native Fijians.

Alumita Duratolo from the University of the South Pacific.

ALUMITA DURATOLO: One of the first institutions that was set up was the provincial system, the demarcation of the whole of Fiji into various provinces, and then the setting up of the native administration, at the apex of which was the Native Council at that time which is now the Great Council of Chiefs. And after that they also drew up district boundaries and then we had the village boundaries. And then they appointed people to work in the native administration. Those were some of the first things they did.

VETUNA: The British were also responsible for bringing in indentured labourers from India to work in the sugar industry. By the year 1900, over 20,000 Indians were working in Fijian plantations. They were later joined by free settlers from India. As a result, Fiji inherited a complex multi-racial society.

Tomasi Vakatora, one of the commissioners who reviewed Fiji's Constitution in the wake of the 1987 coups.

TOMASI VAKATORA: Well see, the two communities had two different systems. The Indians were more or less individual people, they settle and their lives revolve around the family. Whereas the Fijians live as a community, for a start they live in the villages where everybody else are related in some sort of way. And I think the district administrators or the administration in those days, the colonial government liked to leave it like that and administer through those systems. When it comes to Fijians they rather do it through the community or the communal way. And with the Indians they do it with individualism in their minds.

VETUNA: Vanuatu's colonial legacy is also very complex. The islands were colonised by both the British and the French. Pastor Paiaporu from Santo says this unique situation has left long-lasting divisions in the country.

PASTOR PAIAPORU: They left behind the language that create in us a political division. And even the educational division. And even some of us are ni-Vanuatu but our characteristic are English or French. We are a brown people but we seem to be somewhere up there in Europe because of the language. Those of us who were educated in English schools when we meet together we talk Bislama. But those of our families and friends they school in French school, they will not speak Bislama - they will speak French. So when you talk about that type of influence of the two colonial powers, they do not leave us only a government administrative part but also the language, because the language carries the ideology and the behaviour within the language.

VETUNA: Next week - 'Independence and Nation Building'.

'Time to Talk' is produced by Radio Australia with the support of AusAID. You can meet our production team on the website at abc.net.au/timetotalk. I'm Pearson Vetuna - bye for now.

Program Participants:

- Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a, a Samoan anthropologist and Senior Lecturer at the National University of Samoa
- Ratu Isireli Vuibau, a former Government Minister from Fiji
- Matthew Wale, member of the Solomon Islands Christian Association.
- Ruth Liloqula from Choiseul Province in the Solomon Islands and a senior public servant
- Chief Mark Naboeng, Leitana Council of Elders in Buka
- Archbishop Brian Barnes, Catholic Church in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea
- Dr. Jacob Simet, National Cultural Commission in Papua New Guinea
- Father Joseph Takaro, Tagabe Anglican Church, Vanuatu
- Archbishop Adrian Smith, Catholic Church in the Solomon Islands
- Alumita Duratolo, lecturer in the History / Politics Department at University of the South Pacific in Suva
- Tomasi Vakatora, member of the 1995 Reeves Commission which reviewed Fiji's Constitution
- Pastor Paiaporu Antfalo, Presbyterian Church in Santo, Vanuatu