

Chiefs, Church and Change

Nukiki Village, Solomon Islands

1991 – 2012

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Topics

- Custom, governance and Westminster
 - Nukiki 1991 – Nukiki 2012
 - Chiefs and church
 - Governance and change

Custom, governance and Westminster

- 2002 – 2008 VSA Solomon Islands programme
- Capacity building – provincial governments
- Skilled volunteers – legal advisers, accountants, business managers, etc
- Work alongside local staff

- Became clear, Westminster parliamentary system not well understood
- Nor did it sit comfortably with customary forms of governance
- Was adversarial, emphasis on individual
- Rather than on collective identity – tends to characterise kin group societies

- Examine - whether another form of governance could function – one more aligned to Solomon Islands way of doing things
- Possibly hybrid political orders – situations where customary and western forms of governance merge
- Examine village governance - and relationship with provincial government
- Location - Nukiki village, Choiseul Province (there 1991)

Nukiki 1991



- Medium sized subsistence village - 408 people
- Spread over 10 small hamlets
- Scattered along coast - between coconut groves and dense forest

Gardens



- Forest provided main livelihood – subsistence (explain)
- Primary school
- But few children made it to secondary school
- Prospects for any employment outside village – limited
- Logging was occurring nearby – but villagers against it then

Nukiki 2012



- By 2012 Nukiki – changed
- Choiseul - became separate province late 1991
- Administration based on Taro Island - 8km from Nukiki

Taro – provincial headquarters



- Increasingly urban provincial centre - having significant effect on Nukiki
- It provided work for villagers, some of whom commuted daily
- Cash economy was becoming more important
- With easy access to services – villagers becoming less self-reliant
- A level of dependency was developing

Family size



- Population - more than doubled – 910 people
- The 10 hamlets coalesced into 5 main settlements
- Permanent houses had begun to outnumber leaf houses

Permanent house



- Density of housing - greater
- Corrugated iron roofs, water tanks, solar lighting, generators, electric lights, dvd players and cell phones were now common
- Subsistence gardening still provided most household food
- Suitable garden land - now in short supply
- Due to increasing population

Logging - Mbirambira



- Logging - now underway
- Provided significant input of cash
- Some used for infrastructure – school buildings, teachers' houses, clinic
- Balance divided up amongst all villagers
- Logging was creating tension in village
- Allegations - inequitable distribution of logging royalties by Chief and Trustees

Talaevondo Stream 1991



- Sea-level rise - also a major concern
- Streams had provided freshwater in 1991
- By 2012 - saline, jeopardising freshwater supplies

Village governance - chiefs and church

- Three main tribes of 1991 still remained
- Each tribe had its own chief
- Patrilineal - chiefly status inherited, but custom sufficiently flexible
- Chief responsible – land + welfare of tribe

Chief - Siropodoko tribe



- Within each tribe were various clans – family, descent or kin groups
- Each have own leader - or chief

Chief – Sarekana clan



- Some maintained - crisis of leadership in Choiseul
- Respect for chief - declining
- Intermarriage between tribes and outsiders - diluting tribal loyalties and allegiance to chiefs
- Older chiefs often uneducated – less respect for his decisions (if bad)
- Inequitable distribution of logging royalties – loss of respect

Pastor - Nukiki United Church



- Church - increasingly dominant role in village governance
- Especially in large, multiple tribe villages – e.g. Nukiki
- Village governance strong – works well
- But - largely church-focussed
- Church well respected, but not well-equipped to deal with changes occurring
- Nor its primary function

Governance summarised

- Village governance
- Examples of political hybridity do exist
- Main form – between chiefs (custom) and church
- Both complement each other

- At provincial level – hybridity also exists in application of law
- Both western and customary law applied
- Boundary between two - matter of discretion, and personal preference
- Here forms of complementarity, substitution, and even incompatibility exist

- Villagers - see provincial government as service provider
- Not very interested in policies
- Provincial ward member – main link between provincial government and village
- Strength of link depends on provincial member

- If new Federal Constitution adopted
- Scope for forms of political hybridity at provincial level may increase
- Luru Land Conference of Tribal Communities – considerable work on tribal genealogies, tribal land boundaries, codifying custom
- Useful - formation of Choiseul State constitution

- Customary practices – oral - inherent flexibility
- Tend to resist written codification
- Basis for traditional authority different - personal rather than institutional
- Based on knowledge, skill, reputation

- If formalise status of chiefs - create new kind of chief
- Not respected – not 'real' chief - appointed - like government official
- Legislating custom may diminish its authority
- Make subsidiary to western law

- Hard to predict what will happen
- Choiseul leaders - unified in their support for the new Federal Constitution
- My guess is a new political order will evolve if Choiseul becomes a state
- And custom will have a greater place in local politics

- But whatever form – will be very much shaped by Christianity
- It is this discourse between Christianity and custom that underpins Choiseul society today