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## The *Wantok* System as a Socio-economic and Political Network in Melanesia

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### Abstract

Understanding the *wantok* system as a socio-economic and political network in the Western Pacific is critical to understanding Melanesian societies and political behavior in the context of the modern nation-state. The complex web of relationships spawned by the *wantok* system at local, national and sub-regional levels of Melanesia could inform our understanding of events and development in Melanesian states in the contemporary period. This paper will analyze the concepts and historical roots of *wantok* and *kastom* in Melanesia, with particular reference to the Solomon Islands. It will also assess the impact of colonialism in the development of new and artificial *wantok* identities and their (re)construction for political purposes. It concludes with a contextual analysis of *wantok* as an important network in the Solomon Islands emphasizing its central role to people's understanding of social and political stability and instability.

■ **Key words** : *Wantoks*, *Kastom*, *Bigman*, Colonialism, and Melanesian Way

### Introduction

*Wantok* is used in this paper to refer to distinct cultural and resource controlling ideological groupings that connect pre-contact and post colonial periods. It also includes artificial *wantok* political units established by legislative processes like wards, provinces and constituencies. In fact, the term "*wantok*" could mean slightly different things to different people depending on the context and circumstances under which it is

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used. Nevertheless, *wantok* is an important concept associated with networks of distinct tribal, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic groupings in Melanesia. The paper will highlight the history of *wantok* relationships; its frontiers, the relationships between and within *wantok* groups and within *wantoks* groups from an anthropological position. In other words, what holds *wantoks* together and what separates them and may instigate hostility? It should be stressed that the term *wantok* is a recent creation as it was formed with the development of the Melanesian pidgin during the 1800s. However, its moral structure and spirit are integral parts of Melanesian societies since time immemorial

### Describing *wantok* networks and *kastom*

*Wantok* is a term used to express patterns of relationships and networks that link people in families and regional localities and is it also a reference to provincial, national and sub-regional identities. It is an identity concept at the macro level and a social capital concept at the micro and family levels particularly in rural areas. Kabutaulaka (1998, p. 134) likened the *wantok* system to other similar terms in the South Pacific region like *kerekere* in Fiji and *fa'asamoa* in Samoa where they all advocate cooperation between people who speak the same language. A more detailed definition was offered by Renzio who defines the *wantok* system as "... the set of relationships (or a set of obligations) between individuals characterized by some or all of the following: (a) common language (*wantok* = one talk), (b) common kinship group, (c) common geographical area of origin, (d) common social associations or religious groups, and (e) common belief in the principle of mutual reciprocity" (Renzio, 1999, p. 19). The *wantok* system, therefore, signifies a setting demanding a network of cooperation, caring and reciprocal support, and a shared attachment to *kastom* and locality. It consists of a web of relationships, norms and codes of behavior which we will refer to as *kastom* (see below). The following figure depicts the fragmented web and levels of reference in the *wantok* system.

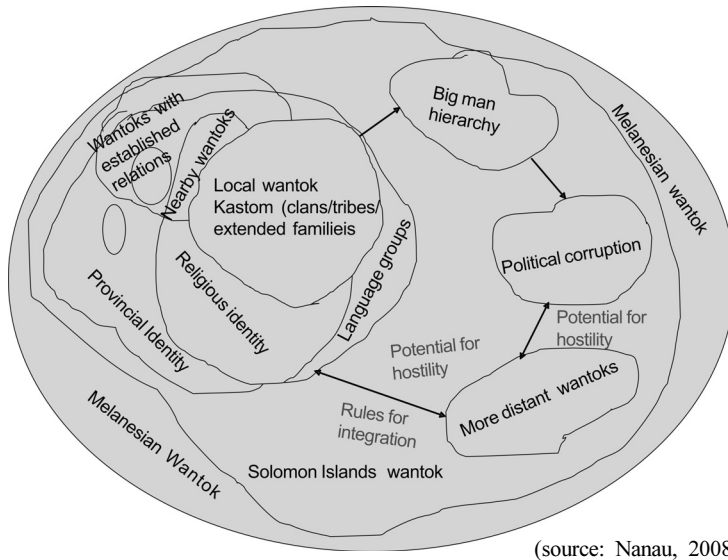


Figure 1: The *Wantok* System

It is necessary at this juncture to highlight a related term, “*kastom*”, that is a set of practices used whenever references are made to the *wantok* system. *Kastom* is also a generic term employed to mean different things and a derivative of the English word “custom”. It is a reference to practices, including indigenous leadership norms, and is locality and *wantok* group specific. The idea of *kastom* was made popular in Melanesia as a response to colonial experiences, particularly after World War II and the transition to independence. Lawson for instance, explained that “...*kastom* has been an important factor in countering the negative images surrounding the worth of colonized people’s and the intrinsic value of their own cultural practices” (Lawson, 1997, p. 108). Keesing also explained that the Solomon Islands Ma’asina Ruru Movement’s references to *kastom* was “...a defense of embattled ancestral custom and local sovereignty ... against the engulfing forces of Westernization and modernity” (Keesing, 1997, p. 260). *Wantok* and *kastom* are aspects of the Melanesian Way ideology (see Narokobi, 1980) that both unites groups of people with a sense of identity and rhetorical common objectives but also separates them from others.

The term *wantok* was coined by plantation laborers after contacts with European planters and establishment of coconut plantations where people from different language groups lived and worked together. It has ultimately become an easy way to label and identify people. The principal point of reference and identification by Melanesians would be in relation to the language spoken. This is fundamental because Papua New Guinea is said to have 800 languages, Solomon Islands 80 Oceanic languages and Vanuatu 108 languages (Terrill, 2003, p. 373). *Toktok* (languages) also determines the specific identity of people who visit or relocate to other places in the eyes and ears of others. It is generally accepted that language diversity is testament to the fragmentation and relatively small size of Melanesian societies in pre-contact era (Whiteman, 1981, p. 76). Ross, for instance, explained that "Malaitans identify themselves by native languages or dialects" (Ross, 1978, p. 164). Pacific anthropologists, linguists and archaeologists use language distinctions to identify settlement patterns. The early settlers of Melanesia for instance, especially in New Guinea, parts of the Bismarck Archipelago, parts of Bougainville and Solomon Islands, were categorized as Papuan speakers. Peoples who arrived later were labeled as Austronesia speakers (Mühlhäusler, et al., 1996, p. 411). In the same spirit, Pacific Islanders use language as an identity to distinguish themselves from other groups, thus an important *wantok* reference.

At the local level, a *wantok* is someone with whom one could identify. It connotes affective, moral relationships and claims to certain resource rights like those over land, gardening areas and fishing grounds. References to groups who have rights and authorities over certain land areas could be referred to as a *wantok* group although it is a very specific aspect of identity. *Wantoks* in this category determine one's rights to existence. One's support depends on the group the individual is a part of or affiliations of that person's blood family. It determines political structures at the local level in societies where the *bigman* system of government exists. It is common to regard people under a particular *bigman* as a *wantok* group or network. As Sahlins explained, a *bigman* in Melanesia is not really a political title but rather "... an acknowledged standing in interpersonal relationships - a 'prince among men' so to speak as opposed to 'The Prince of Danes'"

(Sahlins, 1963, p. 289). Those who live under the leadership of such an elevated person, a successful *bigman*, could be regarded as constituting a *wantok* network in both pre-contact and post-colonial Melanesia. From an anthropological point of view, the “*wantok* system” is a way of organizing a society for subsistence living that ensured the survival of a group of people. It emphasizes reciprocal networks and caring for each others’ needs as and when necessary and ensures the security of members from external forces and threats.

It may be worth noting that *wantok* has been extended as a structural societal reference for the whole Melanesian sub-region of the South Pacific. It is so because of the fact that commencing with European contacts, a lingua franca emerged in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu commonly known as Melanesian pidgin. People from these countries could use their own versions of pidgin (PNG *Tok Pisin*, Vanuatu *Bislama* and Solomon Islands *Pijin*) to communicate across national boundaries, thus forming a certain kind of over-arching *wantok* identity. Populated by people sharing similar cultures, *kastom*, geographic proximity, and experiencing similar development obstacles, it triggered a sense of belonging to a sub-regional group, now known as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG).

This MSG *wantok* network also incorporated the *Kanaks* of New Caledonia, Fiji and West Papua in their now formalized sub-regional political and trading arrangements (PIPP, 2008). Nevertheless, this aspect of *wantokism* will not be discussed further here as the focus is more on the local, and arguably stronger, intra and inter *wantok* relationships as seen from the anthropological literature. It is important simply to note that the term *wantok* can be used at many levels and it has different meanings from these vantage points. *Wantok* is to an extent an overused word that sometimes loses its importance but for this paper, it is a very relevant term and concept for understanding social, economic and political networks and behavior in wider Melanesian contexts.

Commentaries on the *wantok* system are not all rosy as they also convey an unequal system that supports the interests of certain individuals. In relation to the formal state, the *wantok* system is often associated with nepotism and the use of one’s personal connections to secure public service jobs at the expense of equal

opportunity and merit. Cockayne explained that *wantoks* could use their positions of influence to protect their own, as when police officers block or frustrate investigations involving close relatives (2004, p. 20). In this example, appeal to *kastom* could be the scapegoat for letting a *wantok* member off the hook. The network groups created by this complex web of *wantok* relationships could both be negative as well as positive forces in development and livelihood terms.

### **Historical Roots of *Wantoks***

To understand *wantoks* as an essential network, it is necessary to understand how local communities organize themselves and how local *kastoms* are employed in intra and inter group relationships. The pre-colonial *wantok* networks existed to provide defense and control other intruding forces that produced instability and threatened the security of the group. Like many other societies around the world, Melanesians perceived the world where good and evil exist and where the latter is always seeking to overwhelm the former. Combining the totality of *wantoks* as a social network in contemporary Melanesia, four bases on which the network is premised are identified. These are family and tribal ties, reactions to warfare and superstition, the impact of missionary work, and colonial and modern government structures and processes. Let us consider these factors individually.

### **Tribes, Clans and Families**

The primary basis for *wantok* identification like clans and lineages are resilient and respected by Melanesians. One way of perceiving the *wantok* network is to picture many small boxes in a bigger box where the bigger picture does not necessarily depict the status and condition of the smaller components. Likewise, the smaller component may or may not relate to the bigger picture. Distinct *wantok* groups as clans and speakers of the same language present a formidable force for identity continuity and differences even in the face of rapid change. It is these identities that hold the *wantoks* together and apart. The smaller distinct *wantok* groups normally trace their origins to common ancestors.

These are then linked to rights like land ownership and the right to use and access land for basic needs and survival. The common ancestral connection is the basic building block of a local *wantok* unit in a Melanesian society.

A person's claim to a piece/block of land is usually determined by his/her ancestral connections with the area concerned. Ascription to a common ancestor thus brings claims to land and properties of the *wantok* group, and also requires group cooperation often cemented by the act of reciprocity. Reciprocity plays an important part in maintaining the cordial relationship within *wantok* groups at the basic level. This could be in the form of food produce, the making of shelters, hunting and fishing catches, bride price payments and land settlements. Giving and receiving are two sides of the reciprocity coin in Melanesia. The significance of this local level redistribution among *wantoks* is an aspect of *kastom* that unites individuals and families who are related through tribes and clans which are the foundations of the *wantok* system.

### Superstition and Warfare

*Wantok* groups in pre-contact days lived in fear of each other and so they tended to dwell in villages secured from negative supernatural forces and tribal warfare. Supernatural forces like the use of "black magic" and sorcery were said to be practiced then. Wright explained that Melanesian sorcerers "...were a part of the social system and lived under the protection of the chiefs, who used them to uphold authority and execute their will" (Wright, 1940, p. 208). It could be that the threat of using magic and the fear of supernatural interventions may help maintain stability and instill a sense of security in such communities. *Wantok* identity usually attaches itself to the supernatural or references made to "taem bifo" (era of the ancestors).

Anti-colonial movements in the Solomon Islands appealed to supernatural forces and interventions to establish *kastom* (way of life) that people would identify with. Pelise Moro who started the Gaena'alu Movement on Guadalcanal, for example, told of his visionary experience with a bird who turned into a man telling him to form an association for his people to own and exploit

their resources (Davenport & Coker, 1967, p. 141). Likewise, the Ma'asina Ruru Movement on Malaita appealed to *kastom* and a cargo cult explanation to attract followers (Alan, 1951, p. 94; Healy, 1966, p. 202). Lewis-Harris (2006) gave a similar account of Mr. Saun Ati, a Papua New Guinea carver from the Western Iatamul area of Sepik. Ati's carvings were said to be inspired by visions from his clan ancestors who directed him to carve according to their commands.

Ati faced fierce opposition from the wider community because such statements have implication for land ownership and other identities in that area. As Lewis-Harris puts it, "[h]is portrayal of these and other spirits as tied to his ancestors had direct bearing on land rights in the region and the sacred and secret knowledge associated with these rights" (Lewis-Harris, 2006, p. 230). The point is that historical origins of both pre-contact and post-colonial *wantok* groups could be attributed in most instances to supernatural visions and explanations. Such appeals to supernatural origins going back to "taem bifo" gives *wantok* groups the identity they could cling on to and is thus a uniting and stabilizing network.

Apart from internal forces that pose security threats to Melanesian *wantok* groups, there are also external undertakings that involved fighting, raids and tribal warfare. These are normally in response to perceived grievances and wrongs committed by some groups against another. Woodford<sup>1)</sup> reported two different incidents in two different settings in the Solomon Islands during his 1888 voyage. One incident he reported involved a group of men from a coastal Guadalcanal village who raided a mountain village (possibly a payback to some wrongs committed against them) and brought back a prisoner and dead people's limbs and flesh on their return (Woodford, 1888, p. 363). In another recorded incident, a group of several villages from Roviana, in the Western Solomon Islands went headhunting on Ysabel and the Malaita Outer Islands of Lord Howe and Sikaiana and brought back heads and prisoners (Woodford, 1888, p. 361).

These raids and headhunting expeditions have symbolic significance as they were overt ways of maintaining people's identities with their *wantok* groups in pre-colonial Melanesia. At

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1) Woodford later became the first British Resident Commissioner of the Solomon Islands



times, such activities assisted in the identification of leaders. Roscoe argued that being a warrior was important in defining leadership in Papua New Guinea in some instances. He explained "...warriors become leaders by their prowess and bravery in battle: because of their importance to hamlet, clan and village survival, great warriors were lauded, rewarded, and to some degree obeyed" (Roscoe, 2000, p. 90). *Wantok* units and networks were thus important for conquest, retaliations and defense in pre-colonial Melanesian societies.

### Missionaries

Contacts with Europeans, especially missionaries and colonialists, led to the subsequent establishment of bigger villages facilitated by the encouragement of movement of people from mountain communities to coastal areas. Some reasons given for these relocations to bigger coastal villages were for easy control and organization of the new Christian converts, to reinforce conviction and root out heresy, better access to material welfare and shipping, and, to protect the new Christians from the bad influences of pagans in the mountain villages (Ross, 1978, p. 180). Unity for the new Christians was therefore forged with the introduction of new ideologies and structures that made meaningful sense to people. Through time, this form of *wantok* founded on missionaries' work and denominational affiliations become a prominent source of identity and network in Melanesia. It served purposes ranging from employment opportunities, cultural and regional exchanges, and support networks in times of crisis. During the social tensions that brought misery to many Solomon Islanders from 1998-2003, one of the networks that people relied heavily on was the established Christian denominations.

Despite huge divisions brought about by missionary activities and colonial administrators, local group identity through *kastom* and tribal networks continued to be maintained (Keesing, 1967, p. 91-93; Ross, 1978). These cultural identities and understandings were overlaid by new teachings and interactions but the basis of people's connections to their respective more local *wantok* networks remained intact. A sense of suspicion and skep-

ticism continued between *wantok* communities despite the development of bigger settlements and the initial moves by some missionaries to establish more united congregations. This may be a consequence of pre-colonial divisions surviving and new *wantok* identifications brought about by missionaries taking root. The transitions from heathenism to Christianity and the rule of law and education processes were such powerful forces that relative peace and security were fostered for many years between *wantok* groups. Christianity became the basis of *kastom* and the 'Melanesian Way' of thinking (Otto, 1997). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the origins of *wantok* networks are attributable to family connections, language groups, appeals to supernatural visions and *kastom* (era of ancestors), and often forged through and defended with hostility and violence.

### Colonialism and the Nation State

Like Christianization, colonialism also gave rise to other different forms of *wantok* groups and networks. Colonial rule created contemporary political and administrative boundaries amalgamating "distinct communities" into seemingly acceptable convenient groupings of the nation state. Modern political boundaries did not erase the distinct (see Nanau, 2002). However, they created artificial *wantok* identities above local *wantok* differences in perspectives and identities recognized by language and clan groups networks that are useful for political mobilization. While these artificial creations by the nation state are useful administratively, they sometimes encouraged divisiveness and conflict when used by politicians and militant leaders to push for a certain cause.

During the 1998~2003 tensions between Guadalcanal and Malaita warring factions, the *wantok* system created notions of homogeneous ethnic identities in both islands (Kabutaulaka, 2001, p. 4). The charismatic leaders who orchestrated such moves appealed to the collective identities relied upon by early political 'kastom-wantok' groups and more generally, aspects of *wantok* solidarity and reciprocity. Such perceived homogeneity existed only for purposes of social mobilization and it collapsed when the unrest ceased or in the early political *kastom* groups (such as

the Ma'asina Movement) when the colonial government imprisoned its leaders. The important conclusion though is that appeals to *kastom* are effective in developing networks for mobilizing support in a fragmented country, even if only temporarily. Colonialism and the emergence of the nation-state gave way to the creation of new *wantok* identities as well as those that counter the work of colonialism and the nation state.

### ***Wantok* Mutation and Resilience**

Christianization and the emergence of the nation-state gave rise to other artificial forms of *wantoks*. The most prominent ones are Christian denominations, allegiance to provinces of origin and what I would call political 'kastom-wantok' groups. Political 'kastom-wantok' groups refer to the likes of the *Ma'asina Ruru* and the *Gaena'alu Movements* described earlier that appealed to culture and indigenous ways of perceiving things in response to changes brought about by modernization. Leaders of these 'kastom-wantok' groups and movements often convinced followers that they have a common identity and cause. It should be stressed that both *Ma'asina* and *Gaena'alu* movements were born out of frustration with the slow opening of income generating opportunities in their areas.

Despite the overlay of new identities and boundaries created by Christianity, law and governments, the basic distinct communities that comprised the bigger *wantok* communities remained intact and *kastom* was reproduced. In his study of the Baegu people of Malaita, Ross (1978) revealed that kinship obligations and ties transcend the Christian-pagan boundaries. Relatives unite to face opposition when their land is threatened by disputing parties. They all contribute towards things like bride wealth to younger male relatives and enact dances and other "pagan" public festivals alongside Christian feasts (Ross, 1978, p. 180). This was also reported among pagan and Christian relatives in the Kwaio communities of Malaita (Keesing, 1967, p. 92).

In recent years, the system was praised for its strengths in mitigating a looming manmade disaster during the five years of civil strife in the Solomon Islands from 1998-2003. One Solomon Islands Government report lauded the strength of the *wantok* sys-

tem in that it "...has provided the social framework within which they [Solomon Islanders] can cope, and by which the immediate effects on individuals and families have been minimised. Without the *wantok* system, the effects on individual well being would have been as devastating as they have been on the national economy" (SIG, 2004, p. 6). The social framework and oral codes of behavior that guided people's actions in such situations could be regarded as *kastom*. The *wantok* system in this instance is resilient and a useful safety net for people when faced with natural and man-made disasters.

### Understanding Intra- and Inter-*wantok* Relationships

It is important that this paper contextualizes *wantoks* through an understanding of what unites them or keeps them apart. Once again the uniting force between otherwise distinct *wantok* groups could be a historical link of ancestral relationships or relatives cooperating at some distant times in the past. This is especially true for *wantok* groups whose settlements and villages are close to each other. The *Lengo* speakers<sup>2)</sup> of north Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, refer to this communion between different *wantok* groups as "thaidu" (literally meaning working and sharing) in their local dialect. Different *wantok* groups usually move together and subsist on adjacent lands and this in itself allowed for extended networking in spite of varying ancestral origins. In many instances, *thaidu* often results in cross marriages which then consolidate relationships between different *wantok* groups. Working and cultivating the land in proximity to each other and inter-marriages are two crucial bonds that normally hold different *wantok* groups together. A *wantok* group could call for the other's support when needed or when in trouble. Alternatively, one *wantok* group or its *bigman* could mediate in tensions that arise between neighboring groups, thus averting fully blown conflicts. In general terms, what unites *wantoks* at the local level are reciprocal gestures and goodwill. Division and competition on the other hand separate them.

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2) All references to concepts and realities from North Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, are from a Ph.D. fieldwork by the author in 2007 at Tumurora and Obo Obo villages.

## Reciprocity and Goodwill

Reciprocity and goodwill determines the nature of intra- and inter-*wantok* relationships. A 'bigman' for instance would show support for a neighboring *bigman* by participating in the launching of their feast. The real challenge is more distant *wantoks*. As Belshaw pointed out "[n]ative life was rich in festivities. Feasts, gift exchanges, dances, and the offering of sacrifices to propitiate evil spirits were features of ceremonies celebrated to mark stages in the growth of individuals, their births, deaths and marriages" (Belshaw, 1947, p. 5) within *wantoks*. A *bigman* would direct *wantok* members to support other leaders or *wantok* groups with their festivities and significant ceremonies. They normally contributed towards the cause and also established their presence alongside other *wantok* groups in a show of status and cooperation.

For instance, if a *bigman* and his people offer a feast to commemorate say the adoption of a landless group into his tribe, the other would send people to assist with labor, food preparations and maybe pigs. He would also seek the assistance of his own people and accumulate food, pigs and shell money to stage on the day of the actual ceremony. This shows his support and signifies his people's approval of the occasion, in this example, the adoption of the landless group by a nearby *bigman*. Reciprocity and the making of renown is one way of maintaining stability and relationship between *wantok* groups. Indirectly, it can be argued that the need for such ceremonies suggests a potential for conflict.

In the above example of a group adoption, a *wantok* unit that is a migrant community in pre-colonial Melanesia could be adopted by a host tribe or clan in the region they settled in after negotiations and assessment of behavior over long periods of time. It rarely was an immediate action but one that might take decades before formal recognition as adoption may be resisted. This is what is commonly known as *lavi thaghe* (group adoption) in the North Guadalcanal language. In *lavi thaghe*, the landless people are accepted by a particular *wantok* group to be members of their clan and tribe. On acceptance, the adopted *wantoks* are given specific areas on which they and their off spring can cultivate and subsist with the goodwill of their new clan (CELDAPG,

2010, p. 2). Alternatively, and for extra special reasons, a group may be allowed to do what is commonly known as *vuti pari* (literally, uprooting the land) from their hosts.

This is where the land ownership is transferred from the original owners to the new owners, with a transaction symbolized by food, shell money and other valuable transfers. In such instances, the guardians of the land changed but the people from the original *wantok* group who cultivated and survived on that land would continue and it rarely affected their livelihoods. As the Commission affirmed, “[i]f a child is adopted into a tribe, the child becomes a full-blooded member thereof, and a recipient of all entitlements. If a female is adopted, she is entitled to land ownership rights and can pass on those rights to her children” (CELDAPG, 2010, p. 3). This is a system to be distinguished from the land title transfers inherent in the European land tenure context because the rights of others to use that land is maintained. “Land uprooting” does happen but on rare occasions where there is a need to accommodate a dying clan (meaning that the clan will become extinct with the passing of the last remaining members of the clan), landless orphans, or as a trophy for doing something vital to safeguard the interests and livelihoods of the *wantok* group offering the said land. In both the *lavi thaghe* and *vuti pari* processes, *wantok* groups share, reciprocate and show their allegiances to each other and they consolidate and strengthen bonds between these *wantok* groups.

Security and stability is maintained by giving as it is done in the “spirit of the gift”. It is more of a “you scratch my back and I scratch yours” understanding. Bugotu succinctly described it saying, “[g]ratitude, sharing and giving are a way of life, accepted and practiced almost unconsciously by all. When I give, I have the satisfaction of giving in a continuation of friendly relations. I wouldn’t expect a verbal ‘thank you’ [or immediate reciprocation] because thankfulness is seen in deeds rather than in words” (Bugotu, 1968, p. 68). One person gives and does not receive payment although he knows that his giving will be returned when he needs the support of his *wantok* members. The photo below is an example of *wantok* groups giving towards a feast to commemorate the laying of a headstone in Melanesia. Some of the food bowls displayed are reciprocates of previous assistance given in kind in earlier events of significance.



(photo: by author)

Figure 2: Monument Feast at Ngalitavethi Village, North East Guadalcanal

Giving and reciprocating goods and services (manual work) is a way of caring and ensuring unity within the various *wantok* groups. It is possible that the whole ideology of *kastom*, the Pacific or Melanesian Ways, revolves around this expected act of caring, reciprocating, support and respect for each other, care for the physical surrounding and the reverence for supernatural beings (ancestors). As Firth points out, work is an obligation where "...people go and work for other people because they are relatives. Being relatives, they have a moral duty to help" (Firth, 1956, p. 3). This may explain why a wrong committed against a *wantok* member receives support from others in instances where retaliation is warranted, thus escalating tension by involving more people in a dispute.

In this web of giving and supporting each other, there is always a towering individual who is a sign of unity that usually leads the people. He is the key player and is always responsible for the needs of all in his close group. This *bigman* is a sign of unity, security and stability among *wantok* members. The state-

ment by Hogbin summed up the uniting and caring force of this type of person in Melanesian societies: "He [*bigman*] was like a banyan ..., which, though the biggest and tallest in the forest, is still a tree like the rest. But, just because it exceeds all others, the banyan gives support to more lianas and creepers, provides more food for the birds, and gives better protection against sun and rain"(quoted in Sahlins, 1963, p. 290).

The *bigman* system has developed in that way with the most generous and caring being given the most respect and regarded as a person of worth and renown. Trust and reliance are built on this process of reciprocity and caring; thus, security and unity within the group are assured. *Bigman* politics remains a feature of Melanesian societies and it is through such structures and mechanisms that *wantok* unity and goodwill is channeled. The behaviors of Members of Parliament (MPs) when dishing out discretionary funds can be explained in the context of this *bigman* structure.

## Divisions and Competitions

Apart from goodwill and cooperation between *wantok* groups, there are also instances where divisions and competitions occur that drive *wantok* groups apart. One way of showing division is in the display of wealth through the accumulation and show of food, valuables, buildings and pigs. Where a *wantok* group is "rubbished" or degraded by other groups through words or actions, they sometimes react by hosting feasts to display their worth. The challenge is usually for the opposing *wantok* group to match that display. It attempts to exert the impression of being different from an opposing or other *wantok* grouping. As explained earlier, food produce can be used to complement other people's efforts but it could also be used as a show of power, prestige and competition between Melanesian *bigmen* (see Roscoe, 2000). The group with the largest number and size of pigs, food crops and cooked food is usually regarded the most prominent and thus earns respect. This *wantok* and *bigman* characteristic is usually visible during election campaign periods in the affairs of the modern nation state.

Killings and raids on other groups also kept *wantok* groups



apart and also led to the identification of a leader in some instances. The raids and headhunting trips by the Roviana people reported by Woodford in (1888) and (1890) above attests to this inter *wantok* rivalry and warfare. Raids and killings in the past were linked to land disputes, revenge killings for sorcery and cases of adultery. Usually, there are intermediaries who could intervene to negotiate and solve such tensions with the payment of hefty compensations. When all these efforts are exhausted, however, the possibility of raids and revenge killings became highly plausible. Ian Hogbin (1964, p. 52-69) described the raids and killings among the Kaoka speakers of Guadalcanal as often stemming from accusations of sorcery (*vele*) killings, adultery and revenge killings. Sorcery is strongly believed to be prevalent in Melanesian societies with people getting sorcerers to get rid of their enemies through the performance of "black magic".

In his other study of a society in north Malaita, Hogbin (1969) discussed in great detail how crimes were punished there. He stressed that acts of vengeance are often undertaken to avenge wrongs done to one's group. Some of the serious crimes that usually ended up with raids and group warfare were the alleged killing of people with magic spells and sorcery, murders and sexual offences particularly adultery (Hogbin, 1969, p. 82-101). These sometimes portray Melanesian societies as some kind of primitive barbaric groups in anthropologists' accounts. It should be stressed on the contrary that killings and raids were usually carried out as last resorts for putting right wrongs. Following the above line of argument, *wantok* groups have a moral obligation to assist their members even if this assistance includes the use of violence. Revenge killings and raids are ways of displacing other *wantok* groups, acquiring new land areas and generally setting *wantok* groups apart from each other.

In both intra and inter *wantok* relationships, respect expressed through reciprocal gestures of good will and honest dealings by leaders is an acceptable norm. Each *wantok* group is happy when it is respected and its territories not infiltrated by external forces and groups. Could these anthropological accounts of intra and inter *wantok* relationships help us understand current trends in violence and insecurity in Melanesia? The difference though between these accounts and contemporary security issues is the emergence of new and artificial forms of *wantok* identi-

fication in post colonial Melanesia. It may therefore be necessary to highlight the new *wantok* identities brought about by contacts with Europeans, particularly the creation of the nation-state and the complexities of governing in the context of *wantok* networks and relationships. The examples are mostly from Solomon Islands where the author has information.

### **Contextualizing *Wantok* as a Socio-economic and Political Network**

Post-independent Melanesian governments are faced with challenges to govern countries that are made up of distinct *wantok* communities with diverse values and *kastoms*. Successive governments have therefore been preoccupied with combating instability rather than nation building in most of Melanesia. Henderson (2003, p. 227) attributed an absence of a sense of national identity as contributing to political instability in the South Pacific, a negative impact of the colonial creation of artificial boundaries that became current national boundaries. Others felt that the lack of a national identity in culturally and linguistically diverse countries like the Solomon Islands should be a cause for serious concern (LiPuma & Meltzoff, 1990, p. 79). *Wantok* groups at the local levels see themselves as people from a certain island or a certain region of the island defined by the language spoken and *kastom* - the *wantok* element. The basic national uniting force is probably the ability to communicate in a common vernacular. Other national symbols may include the national currency, national anthem and national flag. It could be asserted that the only symbols of any direct value to rural Melanesians are the modern currencies - the Solomon Islands dollar, the PNG Kina and the Vanuatu Vatu.

Anti-colonial and "political *kastom-wantok*" groups', like the *Ma'asina Ruru* and *Gaena'alu Movement*, influences were restricted to specific regions and at best to adjacent islands. The overall trend is that people see themselves according to their language and island groups and rarely as members of a national entity. Successive governments since independence are conscious of this and have often made decisions claiming to be in the interest of national unity and stability by appearing to address national

needs but de facto on provincial lines. Lipuma and Meltzoff claim that “[t]he various Solomon Islands were joined not because they bore any inherent relationship or because their peoples desired to be united, but for reasons foreign and external” (LiPuma & Meltzoff, 1990, p. 83). More directly, Kabutaulaka (1998, p. 33) explained that the nation Solomon Islands did not exist naturally but was constructed by European explorers and colonialists. The post colonial nation-state of Solomon Islands exercises authority over boundaries carved during the colonial era. It is therefore imperative to recognize that different islands regard themselves as different and not related to others in the Solomon group, for example. Such sentiments become prominent when attitudes of certain segments of the country are seen as disruptive and when national wealth distribution is not seen as fair. The threats by the Western Province to secede in 1978 and the Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly’s submissions to national government both in 1988 and 1998 attested to this dominant perception (Premdas, et al., 1984; Nanau, 2008). The *wantok* identity that takes center stage in such political exchanges revolves around the newly created and artificial political *wantok* groups like provinces and constituencies.

Politicians and charismatic leaders normally use these modern *wantok* identities to mobilize political support. Recent experiences showed that land and land based resources usually trigger conflicts. There is a tendency that when resources are extracted, benefits normally go to other *wantok* groups rather than those from whose lands such resources were extracted. This sense of being neglected and exploited for other people’s benefit usually evoke sentiments like those expressed by Western and Guadalcanal provinces mentioned above. Premdas and Steeves pointed out that “... the cost/gain principle was imposed on national elites by the threat of secession by regionalists if extensive local autonomy was not conceded” (1984, p. 47). The establishment of provincial governments as agents of national government was a welcomed move on the surface but deep rooted disagreements on national wealth distribution and provincial contributions to national wealth exist. Liloqula stressed: “[s]ince we became one country, Solomon Islanders have yet to accept each other as one people. The situation has been ongoing but we ignored it in our efforts to remain united, focussing on the good

and positive small things that happen and burying the big issue [of being different] as if it does not exist" (Liloqula & Pollard, 2000, p. 6). Solomon Islanders have taken and utilized the *wantok* system for different purposes at different levels.

The further one uses *wantok* away from the local towards the national the system also changes from being a subsistence and livelihood buffer to one of exploitation and corruption. This explains the identity and allegiance crisis demonstrated by the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) Force during the 1998-2003 ethnic crises. Officers who were supposed to be impartial took sides instead of providing protection for citizens. Arms that were supposed to be used to protect citizens were used against them. A good number of Guadalcanal and Malaita police officers ignored their national duties and affiliated themselves with militants from their *wantok* groups. It is this likelihood to support a fellow *wantok* in times of need that usually gives way to corruption and nepotism - the negative attributes of the *wantok* system often highlighted by commentators. One thing is certain, and that is that the existence of very strong internal bonds among and between *wantok* groups nationally and their effects on the idea of a united and stable Solomon Islands are immense.

The *wantok* system also plays an important role in sustaining livelihoods and maintaining peace and stability at the local level. It is a social structure that emphasizes respect and reciprocity. More importantly, the *wantok* system ensures that the ruthless exploitation of one group of people is checked continuously and avoided. Indeed, the distinct local *wantok* groups ensure that their relatives are assisted economically and socially when the need arises. As such, the extreme disparity of wealth distribution is not really expansive. As noted throughout this paper, it is only when *wantok* is used away from the local level towards the national and sub-regional contexts that it becomes a corrupt and exploitative system.

## Conclusion

The concepts and realities of the *wantok* system and *kastom* are important for an understanding of livelihoods, security and stability in Melanesia. The history of Solomon Islands integration

into the global economy directly links to continuities and changes to the *wantok* system and networks at the local level. The *wantok* groups' attachments to each other and within themselves changes from that of reciprocal redistributive buffer to that of exploitation and political expediency the further one moves away from the village. Despite the changes brought about by missionaries and colonization, *wantok* identities and *kastom* were maintained and continue to be the norms of operation at the village level. These local, cultural *wantok* concepts, attributes and realities influence other aspects of development, particularly those related to security and stability in Melanesia. Unless *wantoks* and the networks and relationships it provides are understood, it may be difficult to appreciate the reasoning behind some decisions made by Melanesian political leaders and contemporary political events that continue to confuse analysts. The *wantok* system is resilient and has evolved over time. It will continue to be influential in Melanesian social, economic and political spheres for many more years to come.

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