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3.8 *Wantoks and kastom* (Solomon Islands, Melanesia)
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The *wantok* system in the Solomon Islands, and the Melanesian countries more broadly, strongly links to the practices of group identity and belonging, reciprocity, and caring for one's relatives. It is a term used to express patterns of relationships that link people in families, tribes, islands, provinces, nationality and even more superficially at greater Melanesian sub-regional aggregates. Various aspects of the *wantok* system are called different names by distinct language groups in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Nevertheless, the word *wantok* originates from the English words 'one talk', which literally means in Melanesian pidgin (*Tok Pisin*, *Pijin* and *Bislama*), speakers of the same language.

Wantok is an identity perception at the macro level and a social capital concept at the micro and family levels, especially in rural communities. It signifies a setting demanding cooperation, caring and reciprocal support, and a shared attachment to locality. It consists of a web of relationships, norms and codes of behaviour (*kastom*) that maintains group security and stability and distinguishes one group from another (Nanau 2011). Renzio (1999: 19) defined the *wantok* system as

the set of relationships (or a set of obligations) between individuals characterised 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.

Wantok and *kastom* are attributes of Melanesian societies that both unite groups of people with a sense of identity and rhetorical common objectives but also distinguish them from others.

To appreciate the practice of *wantokism*, it is necessary to comprehend how local communities organise themselves and how *kastom*

and cultures are employed in intra-groups and inter group relationships. A very good way of perceiving the *wantok* network is as a picture of many small boxes in a bigger box where the bigger picture does not necessarily depict the status and condition of the smaller components, which 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 social change. At the local level, a *wantok* connotes affective, moral relationships and claims to certain resource rights such as those over land, gardening areas and fishing grounds. *Wantoks* in this category determine one's rights to existence and support and depend on the group to which the person belongs and affiliations of that person's blood family. Narokobi (1980) argues that *wantok* gives a new meaning to the word community. It is common to regard people under a particular 'clan leader' (*bigman*, Sahlins 1963) as *wantoks* at the local level.

The smaller distinct *wantok* groups normally trace their origins to common ancestors. The common ancestral connection is the basic building block of what researchers now call a local *wantok* unit. A person's claim to a piece of land is usually determined by his or her ancestral connections with the land concerned. Ascription to a common ancestor thus brings claims to land and properties of the *wantok* group, and it also requires group cooperation, often cemented by the act of reciprocity. Reciprocity plays an important part in maintaining cordial relationship within *wantok* groups at the basic level. This could be in the form of food produce, the making of shelters, vegetable gardens, hunting and fishing catches, bride-prize (dowry) payments and land settlements. Giving and receiving are two sides of the reciprocity coin in Melanesia.

The 'spirit of the gift' entrenched in *wantok* is more of a 'you scratch my back and I scratch yours' understanding. Bugotu (1968: 68) succinctly described it:

Gratefulness, 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.

One person gives and does not receive payment, although (s)he knows that his/her giving will be returned when (s)he needs the support of his/her *wantok* members. Giving and reciprocating goods and services

(physical work) is a way of caring and uniting, especially through festivities such as 'feasts, gift exchanges, dances, and … ceremonies celebrated to mark stages in the growth of individuals, their births, deaths and marriages' (Belshaw 1947: 5).

Apart from these *kastoms* developing goodwill and cooperation, there are also instances where divisions and competitions occur that drive *wantok* groups apart. In both intra- and inter-*wantok* relationships, respect expressed through reciprocal gestures of goodwill 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. Accordingly, successive governments of the Solomon Islands since independence in 1978 were conscious of this and 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 and *wantok* lines (Nanau 2016). LiPuma and Meltzoff (1990) 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 and Meltzoff 1990: 83). More directly, Kabutaulaka (1998: 33) explained that the post-colonial nation-state of the Solomon Islands exercises authority over boundaries carved during the colonial era.

The further one uses *wantok* away from the local towards the national, the greater the system changes from being a subsistence and livelihood buffer, to one of exploitation and corruption. This explains the identity and allegiance predicament demonstrated by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIP) during the 1998–2003 ethnic crises. Police officers who were supposed to be impartial took sides instead of protecting all citizens. Arms that were supposed to be used for the protection of citizens were used against them. A good number of Guadalcanal and Malaita Police officers 'ignored their national duties and affiliated themselves with militant fighters from their *wantok* groups (SIG 2001). This was due to the strength of *wantok* affiliations over national considerations. The existence of very strong internal bonds among and between *wantok* groups nationally affects efforts towards a united and stable Solomon Islands.

The above discussions on *wantok* and *kastom* also convey an unequal system that supports the interests of certain individuals. This is more pronounced in relation to the formal state. In the modern government setting, 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 meritocracy. Cockayne (2004)

explained that *wantoks* could use their positions of influence to protect their own, as when police officers block or frustrate investigations involving close relatives (Cockayne 2004: 20). Appeals to *kastom* could be the scapegoat for letting a *wantok* member off the hook. Others argue that because it promotes the traditionally noble act of reciprocity, politics is currently being administered poorly because of tribal, ethnic and clan loyalties (Rynkiewich 2000). Those who progress through the government hierarchies thanks to the *wantok* system have usurped the space for meritocracy.

In urban areas, at the personal and household level, a commitment to the *wantok* attributes of caring, sharing and looking out for others' needs is increasingly difficult because city life engages with the cash economy on a daily basis. *The Solomon Times Online* newsletter (2008) highlighted the negative effects of unemployed families relying on other *wantoks* in Honiara for their children's school fees, food and other needs. A 'frustrated' person who experienced the demands of such

Figure 3.8.1 *Wantok* groups contributing and reciprocating the earlier assistance and generosity of other *wantok* groups in local Guadalcanal community, Solomon Islands. Taken in Tathimboko, District of Guadalcanal.

Source: Author. © William Nanau.

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a network while trying to make ends meet for his family made the following statements on the negative impact of *wantoks* in Honiara; 'I think the system is making us very poor, and we will continue to be poor if we encourage it' (*Solomon Times Online* 2008).

The concepts of *wantok* and *kastom* are important for understanding informal networks in the Solomon Islands and Melanesia more broadly. The history of the 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 a reciprocal redistributive buffer to that of exploitation and political expediency the further one moves away from the village. Despite the changes brought about by colonisation and now globalisation, *wantok* identities and *kastom* are maintained and continue to be the norms of operation at the village level. Cultural *wantok* concepts and attributes such as *kastom* influence other aspects of development, particularly those related to opportunities, security, stability and access to government resources. It is the 'invisible hand' in livelihoods, governance and development in the Solomon Islands and Melanesia more generally.