Encountering Chiefs in (a Search for) the State

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Abstract: Since Pacific islands began achieving independence in the 1960s, the fate of traditional politics amid the adoption of Western governance systems and global economic integration has attracted anthropological attention. Four decades on, while some version of Western liberal democratic statehood is commonplace, customary institutions and ideologies remain salient in the fabric of many Pacific island societies. Rather than spelling their demise, introducing foreign political orders has, in places, brought about a revival and reimagining of traditions in reaction to the experiences of decolonisation and global politico-economic incorporation. In Solomon Islands, at independence, the constitution acknowledged the importance of customary practices and leadership in shaping the country's path forward. However, there has been minimal formalisation within modern politics, prompting the question: What is the relationship between chiefs and the state in Solomon Islands? Chiefs, more often, are seen as guardians of custom, concerned with matters outside the realm of modern statehood or, in some cases, in opposition to it. This characterisation, however, hinges on particular conceptualisations of the state, thereby excluding other interpretations of modern political organisation including the roles that traditional political forms play in constituting relations referred to as the state.

Keywords: chiefs, state, politics, governance, Solomon Islands, tradition, modernity

Résumé : Depuis le début du processus d'accession à l'indépendance des îles du Pacifique dans les années 1960, les anthropologues se sont intéressés au sort de la politique traditionnelle dans un contexte d'adoption des systèmes de gouvernance occidentaux et d'intégration économique mondiale. Quatre décennies plus tard, bien qu'une certaine forme d'État démocratique libéral occidental se soit banalisée, les institutions et idéologies coutumières demeurent prégnantes dans le tissu de nombreuses sociétés insulaires du Pacifique. Plutôt que d'annoncer leur disparition, l'introduction d'ordres politiques étrangers a par endroits conduit au renouveau et à la réinvention des traditions, en réaction aux expériences de décolonisation et d'intégration politico-économique mondiale. Aux Îles Salomon, la Constitution rédigée au moment de l'indépendance a reconnu l'importance des pratiques et de l'autorité coutumières pour l'orientation future du pays. Or, celles-ci ont été peu formalisées au sein de la politique moderne, ce qui soulève la question suivante : quelle est la relation entre les chefs et l'État aux Îles Salomon ? Le plus souvent, les chefs sont considérés comme des gardiens de la coutume concernés par des questions situées hors du champ de l'État moderne ou, dans certains cas, opposées à celui-ci. Cette caractérisation repose néanmoins sur une conceptualisation particulière de l'État, ce qui exclut d'autres façons d'interpréter l'organisation politique moderne, y compris les rôles joués par les formes politiques traditionnelles dans la formation de relations connues sous le nom d'État.

Mots-clés : Chefs, État, politique, gouvernance, Îles Solomon, tradition, modernité

While my research on Solomon Islands state has focused primarily on politicians and some government officials, I found that I was also encountering[1] chiefs in interesting and somewhat unexpected ways. It is important to explain from the outset that in Solomon Islands, as in many parts of the formerly colonised world, the term "chief" is often an English language catchall for various leadership positions, including those that may have been created as a result of the introduction of the conceptual category. Much has been written on these leadership types,[2] and there are numerous customary leadership roles[3] in Solomon Islands. However, I focused on the category of "chief" itself as employed by local actors in relation to other categories, including the state. I have presented the chiefs in the terms in which they described[4] themselves. The point was that by listening to how they defined, employed, or imagined their positions, it was possible to explore the various ways in which local (and situational) conceptualisations of "chief," "state," "tradition" and "modernity" were interacting. It is in these interactions that we can see some of the relations of power that act to constitute the contemporary Solomon Islands state.

Similarly to McDougall's (2015) findings in Western Province, where she encountered neotraditional institutions maintaining social order as the administrative functions of the state withdrew in the crisis years, I was encountering chiefs taking on roles typically maintained by the officials of the state. Chiefs, rather than

being the "premodern relics" they are often character-ised as, were interacting with, enacting, and in some cases constituting aspects of the Solomon Islands state (Lindstrom and White 1997, 3). As McDougall (2015) explains, rather than their representing a "resilient" traditional institution, thinly veiled by the imposition of the modern state, the entangled relationship between custom, colonial history, and the state has shaped the contemporary sociopolitical reality. McDougall (2015, 471–472) cites Oppermann's (2015) argument that little attention has been paid to how the administration of the state, although mostly absent, has "colonised the life worlds of ordinary villagers in Melanesia," leading them to enact the relations and functions of the state in their own communities.

In line with these conclusions, this section examines how chiefs[5] figure in the contemporary political field of Solomon Islands and how those ethnographic encoun-ters might provide a way to conceptualise the state, not as a universalised Western ideal, but as situated sets of relations. These sociopolitical relations are continu-ously "constructed through the cultural imagination and everyday practice of ordinary people" (Yang 2005, 489) within a place, while at the same time they are influenced by historical and ongoing political, economic and social incorporations within the international state system. As White (2013, 174) explains, understanding the "articula-tions" between *kastom*, church, state and international institutions and how local actors "regularly traverse those wider zones in pursuing their own interests" pro-vides a more nuanced view of the historical trajectory and contemporary reality. By viewing the category of the modern as being as culturally contingent as the category of the traditional, we can ground discussions of the state in historical contexts, which helps to unmask the relations of power that often underlie the discourses of "modern politics," "formal governance" and "failed state." In this way, instead of viewing "chief" as a tem-porally bounded category synonymous with "tradition," we can examine how the various incarnations of chief are employed and negotiated on the ground in everyday relations of power and how they more broadly articulate with other relations constituting the state.

A Brief Introduction to Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands archipelago is the second largest independent country within Melanesia, made up of 922 islands, 60 of which are inhabited. The islands are separated into provinces that are further divided into tribal-dialect regions – for example, Malaita is split into more than ten distinct groups, including the Kwara'ae and the Kwaio. Within each of these regions exist

smaller village groups usually based on kinship relations or religious affiliations. The current population of over half a million people is composed of roughly 80 different ethnolinguistic groups, with a macroethnic composition of over 90 percent Melanesian and a small proportion of Polynesians indigenous to Temotu and Rennell and Bellona Provinces. The most populous province is Malaita, with over 100,000 inhabitants, while the smallest province is Rennell and Bellona, with just over 3000. The capital city, Honiara, is located on Guadalcanal and has a population of over 60,000 people, making it the largest city and, in fact, the only truly urban area in Solomon Islands. The majority of the population live in rural areas and continue to practice subsistence farming and fishing, relying on small, often quite distant, regional centres[6] for connection to larger economic opportunities.

The colonial history of Solomon Islands began when, giving in to pressures from New Zealand and Australia, the British finally declared the islands a protectorate in 1893. In comparison with South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other Pacific islands, the colonisation was rel-atively benign,[7] as the British believed there was little to gain from this colonial holding and the threat of malaria was greater in Solomon Islands than in other parts of the Pacific (Bennett 1987; Jourdan 1995). Probably the most marked impacts of colonisation, which actually began years before formal incorporation, were the forced collectivisation of disparate cultural and linguistic groups within one politically constituted community and the large-scale inter-island economic migration that followed the arrival of European companies in the nineteenth century. Both factors contributed to the destabilisation of the country post-independence as Solomon Islanders, seeking to divorce their own identities from that of their colonisers while at the same trying to integrate their futures with that of the global political economy, often looked to tradition for guidance (Bennett 2002).[8] In the culturally and linguistically diverse Solomon Islands, this often meant highlighting differences. In some cases, the search for identity gave rise to disputes as descen-dants of traditional landowners sought economic gain by reclaiming their land from long-time settlers from other areas (see Allen 2012; 2013). While this movement toward self-determination and identification brought the factitious nature of the country to the forefront, it also had the impact of attracting discussion and legislative interest among indigenous political actors in the role tra-ditional forms of leadership might play in the postcolonial state (Moore 2010; White 2007).

Although there was significant interest in develop-ing a postcolonial government that more appropriately reflected the cultural norms in Solomon Islands, at

independence the country adopted the system of their colonisers – a Westminster parliamentary democracy. This form of government, based on a system of opposition and alliances, arguably did not provide the representation or participation in the political process that characterised the Solomon Islands or, more broadly, Melanesian customs (see Kabutaulaka 2008; Moore 2010). Instead, this system engendered new grounds for disputes as emerging opportunities to access wealth pitted one cultural and/or kinship group against another. This added to mounting tensions relating to uneven economic development and employment, along with resentments seeded in colonial times over land use and settlement. The country reached the boiling point in 1998, when violence broke out on Guadalcanal.[9] Indigenous Guale, mainly from rural parts of the island, began forcibly removing long-time Malaitan residents from settlements just outside of Honiara, causing Malaitans to seek refuge in town. Guale people residing in town, fearing retribution, fled town, along with many other Solomon Islanders, returning to rural areas away from the fighting. Conflicts occurred in many parts of the country but were, for the most part, situated on Guadalcanal. As the tensions continued, Australia and other Pacific Islands countries, including Fiji and New Zealand, sought to find a solution.

Ultimately, after numerous attempts at peace failed, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervened and ended the conflicts in 2003. These events, both the Tensions and the subsequent intervention, are complicated sociopolitical issues for Solomon Islands and the region as a whole and continue to be grounds for discussion and debate.[10] It was during this time that there was a proliferation of discourse on the failed state in Solomon Islands and there were evaluations of state-building and peacemaking strategies. While some of this material was problematic,[11] much of the research done was valuable not only in providing explanations for the myriad issues inciting the conflicts, but also in highlighting solutions and strategies for the future. In the years since peace was achieved, a range of different efforts have been made to overcome the damage done, reconcile, and clear a path forward. Although the government, foreign NGOs and RAMSI have contributed significantly to that effort, much of the peace was achieved through grassroots efforts supported by religious institutions and women's organisations, as well as customary peacemaking practices organised by local chiefs. It was in talking to various chiefs about their experiences during the civil conflict that I first began to see the roles that chiefs were playing in the modern Solomon Islands state.

Contemporary Chiefs

In the nearly four decades since Solomon Islands were granted independence on 7 July 1978, adopting the Westminster parliamentary and provincial system from the British, traditional political institutions and values have remained salient in the fabric of Solomon Islands society and cultures. Rather than disappearing as relics of the past, chiefs have figured into pre- and post-independence discussions regarding local power and autonomy (Lindstrom and White 1997). In some cases, as in the Maasina Rule[12] movement, chiefs were seen as a force of opposition, a counter discourse in the struggle against colonial and foreign power (Keesing 1994). For example, a meeting held in Auki, Malaita in 1978 established 180 chiefly positions to act as upholders of custom in face of modernisation. In the case of Isabel Province, detailed by Geoffrey White (1997), in the years following independence attempts were made to incorporate chiefs formally within the Provincial Assembly in the form of a Council of Chiefs. Rather than acting counter to religious institutions and modern governance structures, this association aimed to secure a public and empowered platform for "matters of traditional and custom" ("Council of Chiefs" resolution cited in White 1997, 241). White (2013) also details how the intertwining of traditional leadership and Christianity has long acted to empower these positions, even though they remained outside the sphere of influence in government. While attempts to gain influence in local governance have been less successful, White (2013) describes the infusion of "bureaucratic rationality" in a chief blessing ceremony in 2004 that sought the "holy trinity" of influence – *kastom*, church and government. Isabel Province, however, has proven seemingly unique in its movement toward the formal incorporation of chiefs within the government system. In fact, the most formalised positions chiefs have acquired in the government system of the Solomon Islands relate to land tenure and use.

In 1985, the Local Courts Act appointed chiefs to the role of magistrates in land disputes, acknowledging their vital role in determining rightful landowners and also in resolving problems among villagers. Performance of this role is quite common, given that every person identifying as a customary chief that I interviewed had participated in a land case. These cases took place at the village level, where they would mediate among landowners and help to determine the rightful landowner, and/or at the level of the courts where chiefs would act as witnesses or advisors. Given that upward of 85% of the land in Solomon Islands is still customarily owned, chiefs are frequently[13] called upon for their extensive genealogical knowledge,

which can be used to support a legally binding decision. While chiefs remain vital in this process, recent moves have been made to bypass or exclude customary knowledge as villagers seeking individual profit are motivated to hire lawyers to challenge the legitimacy of conclusions of ownership based on chiefly knowledge of genealogy. In some cases, the challenges are legitimate, given that local leaders have been known to interpret land rights in ways that are self-benefitting or simply bypass community consultation altogether. It is not currently clear what role chiefs will continue to play with regard to land in Solomon Islands as the relative value of their contribution is challenged by desires for Western material wealth and the commodification and codification of customary land rights.[14]

While there have been and remain very few formal roles for chiefs in government, they are often included in important conversations and proceedings. Chiefs, for example, play an important advisory role in provincial government meetings that take place in Honiara. Chiefs represent the concerns of their communities and consult with provincial members regarding issues such as rural development projects and government accountability. Chiefs have also featured in the process of constitutional reform, offering insight pertaining to the adoption of a federal constitution in Solomon Islands. They are also, often necessarily, included in discussion of development, since, as previously stated, they typically have knowledge of land use and ownership considerations and in some cases can act as mediators between the local population and outside interests. Chiefs, for example, have been consulted on large-scale economic projects, including the development and management of Gold Ridge Mine and the Tina River Hydro Development Project.

In most cases, however, chiefs are categorised as guardians of *kastom*,[15] those who should be concerning themselves with matters that are outside the realm of the modern state or, in some cases, in opposition to it. As White (1997, 231) states, "chiefs today are everywhere potent symbols – symbols of the indigenous and the traditional in contrast with the foreign and the modern. To talk of chiefs is to talk of 'custom.' " While this accurately reflects how chiefs are perceived, including by chiefs themselves, this characterisation of separate spheres of tradition and modernity may overlook the ways in which custom shapes the range of relations constituting Solomon Islands state as an internal political institution and the roles that chiefs play in these institutions, values and practices. As White (2013, 173) explains, rather than seeing *kastom*, church and state as "bounded institutions," paying attention to the ways in which interactions enable pragmatic solutions gives a clearer sense of how these institutions shape the modern political sphere. During a recent interview with a member of Parliament, for example, the honourable member stated that he believed chiefs were important for maintaining certain traditional values, but when I asked if they should play a role in governance, he laughed. I asked why he laughed and he said, "many chiefs know nothing about the government … they know about the village, culture, kastom, and settling arguments – compensation." When the conversation turned back to his own experiences in government, I was surprised when he said two of the top concerns of politicians in Solomon Islands were reciprocity (materially providing for their voters) and green leaf (referring to being poisoned or killed by local sorcery). In this way, it seems that contemporary customary practices feature largely in the politics of the country and, according to the MP's own assessment of the purview of chiefs, they appear well-placed to offer advice on such matters.

Encountering Chiefs

I was visiting a coastal village located on one of the more rural islands in the Solomon Islands, one without roads or electrification except in a small regional hub. The village relied on transport ships for access to other islands and to provide supplies, but travel to other villages was done on foot or by canoe. There were a small church and school along with a few household canteens selling basic necessities such as laundry soap, navy biscuits, Pall Malls, cooking oil, and, if the time was right, Sol Brew. The village was clean, friendly and well organised, according to the residents, with most gardens located inland at various places known to each family. At the time I was there, 2012, the mobile phone tower was not reliable except in certain places, and so you knew when someone had a phone call because they would be standing in that spot. Most adults and older adolescents had been to Honiara, with some splitting their time between the village and town. Since work is often hard to come by in town and life is expensive there, most people return to the village, where it is possible to live a materially simple existence, even if the customs are seemingly more restrictive and privacy harder to come by.

There had been some noise the night before, but relative to the blaring speakers, revelatory spakamastas,[16] reluctant feast pigs and prowling dog packs that characterise a predawn weekend morning in Honiara, it was barely enough to cause me to stir. When I awoke, however, I became aware of the seriousness of the events that had transpired overnight. An intoxicated young man, around 18 years old, had attempted to steal items from his own family's house, becoming belligerent when

he could not locate what he wanted and causing significant damage to the property. He had also threatened intervening family members with physical violence. In the morning, the local chiefs and adults held a meeting to discuss what should be done to remedy the problem. While the discussion of compensation and public reconciliation was not unexpected, I was surprised to learn that the chiefs were deciding how and when to contact the police.

What police? The closest police post was in the regional hub, which was a fair distance by boat. When my house was robbed in Honiara, it took the police ten hours to come, and they only came after many phone calls insisting on their presence. When a serious lead presented itself to us, the police said that if we wanted them to investigate it we would need to drive them ourselves or pay for a taxi, since they did not have transport. We ended up setting up a sting operation ourselves, catching one of the culprits and delivering him to the policeman, who had arrived on scene by taxi. The police released him the following day, while awaiting trial, whereon he promptly skipped town. About a month later, we got word that he had stolen and crashed a car in Western Province. The police caught him there, but he escaped while they were processing him by running out of the station – the officers being too heavyset to run after him. Needless to say, I had enough trouble trying to get the police to provide assistance in Honiara; I wondered how they would manage all the way out here. When I inquired about this, they told me that the police have a boat that seems to work, but they rarely have enough petrol (gas) to reach the village and almost never come. Then why call them, I thought.

In the past, chiefs, along with village elders and family members, would have dealt with this situation on their own, weighing the severity of the offence against the value of a means of compensation and, in certain cases, against other forms of punishment (see Fifi'i 1989). To this day, chiefs continue the practice of maintaining peace and order in their villages through compensation and reconciliation, with every chief across the Islands I met recollecting the countless times they carried out this task (see also McDougall 2015). So what did it mean that the local chiefs in this rural village were seeking to involve the police, who were unlikely even to show up, in a matter seemingly easily resolved in-house? On one hand, there have been challenges to chiefly authority to maintain order, but more often, whether formally or informally agreed on, chiefs remain an important source of leadership and problem-solving, especially at the village level (Lindstrom and White 1997). Along those lines, no one reported being concerned that the police

would accuse them of acting outside their authority, but they did wonder what the correct approach would be. It seemed more the case that these chiefs were orienting themselves toward a larger project – "Solomon Islands" – viewing their roles as village leaders as one in a line of steps relating to order, peace and justice. Even in this village, with a long tradition of chiefs, rather than placing themselves at the top of the hierarchy, these chiefs were, in part, deferring to the idea of the state as a central locus of power. Calling the police even when they were unlikely to come and even when people reported being concerned that they might actually come demonstrated a belief in being part of another order of things. This also may have been an attempt to articulate their own power with that of the formal government sphere, giving greater weight to their decisions rather than disempowering them (see also White 2013).

The orientation of the chiefs toward a greater whole or centre of organisation promoted the idea that a state existed, not only in the chiefs' minds, but, in turn, in the minds of everyday Solomon Islanders, some of whom rarely encounter what are considered the formal institutions and actors of the state. So, even if the police remained absent, the fact that the chiefs sought to contact them helped to incorporate the village within the state and the state within the village. It manifested a sense of "the right way" or formal/legal manner in which to do something and the role of the chiefs in facilitating that process, thereby enacting the state through relations, even if the police never came.

According to White (1997, 233), "chiefs have historically been regarded as mediators of power, knowledge, and identity. In this mediating position, ideas about chiefs are inherently a source of innovation and incorporation." Chiefs have often been the first line of defence in a village, deciding who can enter, and so the role of mediator between the imposed practices and ideas and local customs is fitting. Ultimately the chiefs resolved the problem, and in many cases, when they do come, the police throughout Solomon Islands will rely upon the chiefs to help sort out local matters or at least advise on what happened and how to proceed. Chiefs, by operating as mediators, thus become part of the project of the state, promoting the idea of the state through their orientation toward it, but also incorporating indigenous modes of peace and justice within the formal criminal justice system in Solomon Islands. While the latter point should be recognised as a means of local agency, at the same time, the role of "chief" itself and how traditional practices and knowledge can serve the population are being enveloped, codified, and homogenised within the scope of the state (see Keesing 1982; 1992; White 1997; White and Lindstrom 1997).

Rural village chiefs have begun to orient themselves to the project of the state by incorporating the police in local matters, even when they are unlikely to appear. Another example of the role of chiefs in matters of peace and order can be seen in the emergence of the position of community chief. The sociopolitical model of "chief" as local guardian has been revived in nontraditional[17] communities, especially in urban neighborhoods, in order to provide order and important social services. Typically prompted by the community to lead, so-called "community chiefs" – who are not considered hereditary or customary by the entire population – play an important role in Solomon Islands society and in constituting the state. These community leadership positions emerged either because government services such as policing were not being provided or were inadequate, or were developed in tandem with government agencies because the local population felt they could relate more to this system.

In some places, religious organisations promoted the creation of a community chief to bring peace and order to a community in ways that had not necessarily been achieved by church leaders. In other places, land disputes have been known to prevent community members from agreeing to elect a customary landowner as chief. In one case I was acquainted with, the village in a rural area elected a neutral (non-landowning) elder as chief in a fashion similar to that for the community chiefs I encountered in urban areas. I asked why they needed a chief at all and they responded by saying that they needed someone to organise the village, to maintain order, and to represent the village to visitors and other communities. A chief, they said, tied them together as a community, which was interesting, given the intensity of land disputes in this particular locale. This coherence as a community, in this case, seemed to matter less as an inward reality, given that the chief had no real power to assert[18] over the village, since he owned no land, than as an outward expression of being a community among communities. The coherence provided by the chief acted as an assurance of their recognition by and participation within a larger set of relations. Thus, these chiefs provide a real or perceived sense of community, which in turn can provide order in complex and/or tenuous social arrangements

The success of this position can be demonstrated by the example of an elder who is a community chief in White River. This area of Honiara was long known for violence, alcohol abuse and crime, and the police in the area were largely ineffective. Once this elder was elected as community chief, he was able to bring peace and order to the area, because as he explained, "I knew the people, they weren't my wantoks, but they respected me because I listened to them." Rather than simply leading alone, he also chose a team[19] of community leaders[20] that looked after the specific concerns of different demographics such as youth and women. Along with the chief, these leaders recreated, but also re-envisioned, the web of social support that can be found in rural villages, providing a sense of belonging while also holding members of the community accountable for their actions. Now, as the chief proudly told me, this area of Honiara is safe and one can walk around at night without concern. As well, he stated that counter to the reports that continually characterise Solomon Islands as a country crippled by ethnic tensions, their neighbourhood had shown otherwise. Made up of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, this area had become a community through the revival and reimagining of the chiefly model in urban Honiara. The importance of chiefs to communities has not gone unnoticed, as the Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force recently organised a conference titled "Empowering the Chiefs Roles." The Commissioner stated that he believed "exercising the chiefs' power will serve to build respectful communities" (Toito'ona 2015).

Although certain state institutions such as police, schools and clinics are becoming more widespread throughout the country, quite often they are absent, understaffed, or run by nongovernmental organisations such as churches. In many cases, tasks assigned to these institutions are often organised by the chiefs, who either provide the services themselves[21] or act as liaisons for the provincial and national government. In other words, chiefs are fulfilling the promise of the state that people have come to expect since colonial incorporation. For example, a customary chief located not far outside the Honiara city boundary recounted to me how he had set up a medical clinic during the Tension years when most government-run social services had ceased. He said that his people were frightened to travel into the city for medical treatment and so he petitioned the government for support. When the government failed to act, he took it upon himself to build a clinic and fostered an agreement with the government and a nongovernmental organisation to supply and staff the building. Interestingly, the people in his village were skeptical of his plans, given that they had, as he explained, become accustomed to the state administration providing these services. Recognising his duty as leader to provide for and protect his people, he readily took on this task, even amid the naysaying, to fulfill the promises of the state. This pragmatic approach to a problem, blending what he defined as customary knowledge and moral guidance with modern human services provision, is an important

way in which Solomon Islands maintained social function amid disaster.

McDougall (2015) explores a similar situation arising from the Tensions in which, as the formal state administration in Honiara collapsed, rural villages maintained stability through locally situated and customarily grounded frameworks. Her ethnographic research on the Pienuna Chiefs' Committee in Ranongga, Western Province, demonstrated the "tenacity" of local leaders (McDougall 2015, 456). These local actors, whose positions had emerged as a result of the expansion of the state administration during the colonial period, were able to function even as the central government and state infrastructure declined. Similarly, when an earthquake and tsunami devastated the Western Province in 2007, villages that had chiefs were better able to cope with the devastation and organise the process of rebuilding (Ride and Bretherton 2011). Research on community resilience following the tsunami found that while these institutions were often bypassed by international agencies, "customary governance (involving chiefs and elders) and ways of handling crises were seen as most likely to uphold peace in a time of tension" (Ride and Bretherton 2011, 109). These examples demonstrate how customarily ordained and/or recognised chiefs have been able to constitute the state as a provider of social welfare through appropriating and fulfilling associated roles. Social welfare, however, was nothing new for them, given that, according to a customary chief I interviewed, it is the primary focus of chiefs.

What was particularly interesting, given that these community services corresponded to chiefly duties, was that the chiefs did not seem to want to say they "replaced" the government officials, but rather that they fulfilled the officials' roles and thus deserved to be compensated. The state, in other words, did not disappear through the failure of the government, nor did chiefs revert to the past wherein they organised the well-being of the community as a function of their status; rather, the chiefs believed themselves to be and effectively became a part of the state. They enacted the state as much as any other official, in terms of both their incorporation within the state administration model of indirect rule promoted by colonisation and their fulfilment of state services when the state administrative capacity weakened and withdrew from rural areas more recently. This is further supported by the fact that every chief I have interviewed over the years has expressed frustration over his or her continual exclusion from the formal political sphere, either in terms of recognition through the creation of formal positions or through compensation for the work they do that clearly furthers the project of the state. They do not see themselves, therefore, as acting solely as traditional leaders of the past, as they are often characterised, but rather as part of a larger political project called the Solomon Islands state. This echoes McDougall's (2015) conclusions that rather than disappearing in favour of more seemingly more resilient customary institutions, state institutions and functions have become deeply ingrained in the sociopolitical fabric of the country, intertwining with tradition to form a contemporary landscape shaped by both local and global influences (see also White 2013).

Chiefs and the State

As my research into the state in Solomon Islands progressed, I continued to encounter chiefs along the way. While chiefs were not often situated in positions of significant power, they featured largely in the everyday Solomon Islands, but also at important intersections between local, national and global issues. This supported the conclusion that, even in the face of the apparently homogenising forces associated with global politico-economic integration, chiefs have maintained and even redefined their relevance in the fabric of society. This finding, decades after White's (1997) experience that in the years post-independence there continued to be significant discourse on chiefs, raised the question: Why hasn't there been more incorporation of chiefs (or at least customary practices) within the modern government system in the Solomon Islands? Why do chiefs seem to remain "beneath the state" (Baines 2014)? The answers to this question are complex in that they are grounded in an intertwining web of tangible relations surrounding power, money and reputation within Solomon Islands, as well as the global project of decolonisation and development, and also in how we conceptualise the state. This conceptual problem relates to how we think about traditional and modern politics, with "traditional" typically meaning indigenous political systems and "modern" meaning some form of "the Western imagination of the state" (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 10).

Domestic explanations for the apparent exclusion of chiefs from more substantial positions of power in the modern governance structure may come from both top-down and bottom-up pressures present in the contemporary Solomon Islands. The top-down pressure emerges from how political power is achieved and maintained in many cultures throughout Solomon Islands. The personalised and highly transitory nature of power,[22] which requires forming and maintaining reciprocal relationships with individuals – including having the means to do so – makes achieving and holding on to power difficult in Solomon Islands society. This can be seen in

the high turnover rate among politicians, with very few individuals ever winning more than one term in office (see Corbett and Wood 2013). The precariousness of power, in combination with the general dissatisfaction and disengagement with politicians in the country, means that anyone, including chiefs, who might challenge one's access to power is necessarily a threat. This could be seen during the Tensions, when, according to Michael Kwa'ioloa and Ben Burt (2012), chiefs were sometimes marginalised during the peace-building processes. This marginalisation occurred as politicians, some of whom were also implicated in inciting the conflict, sought to gain notoriety and credit for ending the violence and providing compensation to the people (Kwa'ioloa and Burt 2012). They saw taking on the role typically belonging to chiefs as a means of ensuring their political survival in the next term. Interestingly, however, this had the unintended consequence of also maintaining the salience of chiefly roles and responsibilities in society, regardless of who was fulfilling them.

Politicians are not the only party interested in minimising the power of chiefs, as educated and financially successful elites have characterised chiefs as being irrelevant or obstructive to economic progress and development. In the increasingly technical and business-dominated economy of the country, concerns over custom and land tenure (typically concerns of everyday people represented by the chief) are often seen as impediments to "progress." Elites, like politicians, do appear to favour chiefs as cultural icons, but rarely as empowered and included leaders. When speaking of chiefs, they often focus on their "traditional" knowledge rather than their community building and strengthening abilities, their roles as service providers, and so forth. The idea promoted by elites that cultures of Solomon Islands are somehow artifacts to be preserved rather than a relevant "modern" reality keeps chiefs from achieving formal legitimacy – as Larmour (1997) argues, they are victims of a new ideology. While in some sense the practice among elites of seeking chiefly titles empowers all chiefs by reaffirming chiefship as a desirable position, it may also demonstrate how elites are able to mobilise aspects of their own culture in new ways, as in the emergence of paramount chiefs in areas where they had not existed.

From the bottom up, the formal recognition of chiefs is threatened by the increased access to wealth and promises of development (and the individualisation of that access) made possible through direct transactions with MPs, businessmen and foreign investors. Chiefs are no longer necessarily consulted to serve as mediators between local populations, especially in rural areas, and the interested parties. For example, in an area of Solomon Islands known for logging, a chief I interviewed lamented the relationship that had been formed between the MP and younger men in the village who signed an agreement allowing exclusive logging. This MP intentionally bypassed the chief, who was more highly educated, and convinced the mostly illiterate young men to sign away their rights with what have proven to be false promises. This is a common narrative throughout the country and may also result from another threat to the recognition of chiefs – as Baines (2014) argues, the combination of "inadequate cultural education" and an increased influence of Western popular culture. The desire for Western consumer goods has been driven by widespread access to communication technologies, ease of travel to regional and urban centres, and the influence of expatriates, wealthy part-time resident half-castes, and the jet-setting Solomon Island elites. This desire has fueled the ability of predatory MPs, businessmen and foreign investors to, in some cases, take advantage of rural landowners seeking the material benefits of a Western lifestyle.

The influence of Western values has also diminished the reputation of chiefs, as some chiefs themselves have been driven by personal desires to behave in ways that seem to delegitimise their own status. People expressed their frustration daily with certain chiefs who, for example, touted both customary and Christian behaviour and yet were known to consume large amounts of alcohol and participate in extramarital affairs. In one case, while seeking out a particular hereditary chief, I was told by his community members that I would not be able to find him because his wife lived there and he was currently with his girlfriend. While this behaviour has caused problems for chiefs, more serious challenges to the legitimacy of chiefs have come from using their positions of power for self-serving purposes. Since chiefs often both are prominent landowners and have significant knowledge of land tenure in their areas, they have been known to sell logging, mining and land development rights to outside investors without consulting their communities. According to local informants, a large swath of their coastal land was recently leased by their chief to foreign investors to develop without the approval of the whole community. Probably the most conspicuous situation of this type occurred in the area occupied by Gold Ridge Mine, where a popular and somewhat folkloric narrative thrives about a chief who negotiated a contract that benefitted him and then, when the mine was abandoned, lost his source of influence and income. In these cases, chiefs became the subject of intense gossip, which on one hand delegitimised the position of chief, but on the other also kept "chief" as a powerful discourse in Solomon Islands society.

The other major factor limiting chiefs ascending to positions of power within the government relate to the global phenomenon of decolonisation and socioeconomic integration. The result of this push toward decolonisation and development in the twentieth century, as Larmour (1997, 276) explained, is that "centralised bureaucratic states have become the preeminent form of political organisation," with the Western liberal democratic state system becoming the hegemonic model regime. The impact of Western hegemony and the imposition of Western state institutions and economic structures has been twofold: through decolonisation and development, Western ideas and forms of political organisation have become the global norm, including the language of "good governance" such as representation, transparency, accountability, individualism and so forth (Larmour 1998; 2000; 2005). This pressure to adopt the state form promoted through decolonisation, development, economic incentives, legitimacy and recognition, facilitated in large part by the creation of the United Nations, has led to an apparent trend of political homogeneity (Aretxaga 2003). This homogenisation of the language of politics,[23] social organisation and economics provides the appearance of uniformity, while the ideas – the universalised Western position – that undergird the dominant language establish the "yardsticks used to measure the 'goodness' of a particular government" (Poluha and Rosendahl 2002, 1).

The problem has been, however, that by privileging the Western regime as the ideal and presupposing that similarly classified state systems share an affinity in their functional, structural and symbolic characteristics, the cultural construction of the state is overlooked or, as is more often the case, leads to the conclusion of dysfunction – real or perceived state failure (see Hill 2005; Tucker Sade 2017). The assumption was that failed states were not functioning in the way that was expected, either because of technical misunderstandings that could be solved by sending in highly paid Western consultants to fix the mechanism of governance or because of the blatantly ethnocentric explanation that these states were hopeless failures because of the local population's inherent backwardness and inability to grasp the functioning of the system. This, in turn, overlooks the ways in which, for example, localities have innovated and pragmatically acculturated foreign systems to fit their own contemporary realities (Tucker Sade 2017).

The second impact of this global project of incorporation is the increasing recognition that the Western liberal democratic state system was not the technological universal of governance, easily applied to any context in combination with economic liberalisation (Larmour 2005). As Lindstrom and White (1997) emphasise, the promises of the grand narrative of modernisation never really panned out. While similar in name, often in practice or in context, like any other component of culture, these ideas take on different meanings, applications and forms; as Bayart (1991, 53) notes, these states are embedded within specific cultural and historical contexts and thus have been "subject to multiple acts of re-appropriation." In this sense, the "modern" states are not replacements for "traditional" forms of sociopolitical organisation, but rather often rely upon preexisting modes of organisation in their constitution and everyday functions. Moreover, this opened the door to viewing state-making as an ongoing process[24] wherein local political structures and leadership models have acculturated aspects of the Western state to serve the needs of the people on the ground (see also White 2013). In that same vein, even the variable meanings of the title "chief" can illustrate how traditional categories have been employed to access the power and wealth of contemporary institutions. Paying attention to the "tenaciousness" of local actors, as McDougall (2015) calls for, enables us to see site-specific pragmatism, instead of static "resilience," of indigenous models in the face of global political economic incorporation.

Overall, significant attention has been paid to what has not worked – which still uses the Western liberal democratic state as a metric. This has prevented a focus on the interesting ways the state has been constituted and is continually negotiated in diverse cultural, social and temporal contexts. Rather than a technological solution or a wholesale cultural shift toward Western values, to understand the processes and effects of incorporation as a state requires an understanding of its form and function within a particular area. According to Sharma and Gupta (2006, 11), this entails paying "careful attention to the cultural construction of the state – that is, how people perceive the state, how their understandings are shaped by their particular locations … and how the state manifests itself in their lives."[25] This leads us to bypass the problematic presupposition that we know what the state is on the basis of hegemonic universalised models – which do not necessarily even exist in the West – and ask what the state is in a particular context. It is at this intersection that we can better understand how the state in the Solomon Islands is constituted, mobilised and experienced through the complex and everyday interactions of local, regional, global, contemporary and historical forces.

By viewing the category of "modern" as being as culturally contingent as the category of "traditional," we can ground discussions of the state in historical contexts, which helps to unmask the relations of power[26] that often underlie the discourses of "modern politics," "formal

governance" and "failed state." Rather than excluding relations, institutions and actors, in this case chiefs, on the basis of being "traditional" (and imagining them as being homogenous and bounded), research on politics as an on-the-ground process approaches them as culturally and historically contingent phenomena. In other words, it is more insightful to consider the ways politics function in a particular place at a particular time, as opposed to, for example, taking "chief" to mean chief as it might have in the past or "the state" to mean the Western liberal democratic ideal, which in itself serves to further its power. Although chiefs play important roles in Solomon Islands society, there are also concrete counterexamples challenging any overly simplistic conclusions about politics and the position of chiefs therein. This enables us to highlight the complex relations that constitute the nature of the reality called the state – not simply as a replacement for local modes of political organisation or as a rejection of introduced models. Rather than focusing on what does not work on the basis of what an ideal model expects, we should be asking the question – What does X look like "on the ground"? After all, what is the positive referent of "failed state"? If the Western liberal democratic state has failed, what has succeeded in its place?

Conclusion

Chiefs in the contemporary Solomon Islands continue to play an important role not only in maintaining some of the cultural practices threatened by the homogenising forces of the global political economy, but also in helping to shape a political reality that is seemingly more contextually appropriate and culturally relevant. The conceptual category of chief provides an avenue for accessing power through articulation with other categories such as church and government (see White 2013). This is not to say that Solomon Islands is somehow "stuck" in the past, but rather that the notion that the Western liberal democratic state is a technical universal of governance easily applied to all countries of the world is itself a problematic and idealistic assumption. While the state form may be the dominant mode of organisation, the function and meaning are better understood as a historically contingent, in situ process of sense-making where local culture and customs play an important role in constituting the state, all of which are sets of relations capable of renegotiation. As well, the modern state is not simply a thin veil laid over durable customary practices, but rather has transformed the sociopolitical landscape, leading the state form to appear in village structures even when the administration of the state is markedly absent (see Oppermann 2015). Thus, this process is clearly not a one-way street of localising imposed systems, given that the

state form itself is a cultural artifact and its imposition is tied up with the colonial and neocolonial experience. However, by assuming that local appropriations of the state and associated systems of governance that diverge from their Western models are simply technical misapplications or hybridisations necessarily places non-Western countries in subordinate positions and devalues cultures not conforming to dominant patterns. This is in no way meant as saying that the problems facing contemporary failed states are simply a matter of definition, but rather that it is necessary to complicate the approach taken to understanding these situations and, possibly, to the actions meant to remedy them.

Notes

1 The findings in this paper are based on ethnographic research conducted in Solomon Islands from 2011 to 2013 and in 2015.

2 See, for example, Allen (1984), Keesing (1985), Lindstrom (1981 and 1984), and Sahlins (1963).

3 The reification and marginalisation of the role "chief" during the colonial and postcolonial period has meant that the positions subsumed within this category are often in need of reaffirmation as they find their place among *kastom*, church and the state (see White 2013).

4 I recognise that this may also be limited by the fact that we spoke in Pijin rather than indigenous languages, but none of my informants expressed concern over defining themselves as "chiefs" and none of them described themselves as "big men."

5 For a more comprehensive view of chiefs in various parts of Solomon Islands one might consider Berg (2008), Keesing (1968), Kwa'ioloa and Burt (2012), and White (1997).

6 For example, Auki on Malaita or Gizo in the Western Province.

7 This is not to say that colonisation did not have an impact on Solomon Islands. For example see Dureau 1998, Keesing and Corris 1980, and Keesing 1992.

8 See also Feinberg (1990); Fraenkel (2004); Jourdan (1995).

9 For an in-depth discussion of the crisis see Allen and Dinnen (2010); Kabutaulaka (2001; 2002; 2004); Moore (2004).

10 For an in-depth discussion see Allen and Dinnen (2010); Aqorau (2008); Braithwaite et al. (2010); Connell (2006); Dinnen (2002; 2007; 2008); Dinnen and Firth (2008); Fraenkel (2004); McDougall (2004); Moore (2004).

11 See, for example, Fukuyama (2008), and then Brigg's (2009) thoughtful response

12 This movement, led by Chief Aliki Nono'ohimae, began in 1945 in Are'are, Malaita shortly after the end of World War II. Leaders demanded devolution of power from the capital to the village level, recognition and respect for traditional systems, and better services and opportunities provided to rural villages. See Keesing (1992) for more details. See also Keesing (1994; 1997).

13 Although, as I describe later, this is changing as the economy becomes more globally integrated.

14 See Hviding (1993; 2003, 2015); Kabutaulaka (1998).

15 This also places *kastom* as something outside the modern state apparatus. In some ways this makes sense, in that *kastom* was codified as the ideology of a counter-colonial anti-state movement that sought to delegitimise the state administration both in colonial and postcolonial times (see Akin 1999). On the other hand, movements – most notably the Maasina Movement – adopted a statelike structure to withstand the imposition and undermine the foreign-developed administration. In this way, it too could be seen as informing the state in Solomon Islands as much as the imposed ideology.

16 A Solomon Islands Pijin term meaning one who drinks a lot of alcohol.

17 By this I am referring to communities that are not necessarily organised around kinship or wantok relations. This typically relates to neighborhoods in regional centres and urban areas.

18 He could reprimand the children and, in some cases, negotiate compensation. I asked if he was a big man and there was some hesitation. This man did not have much in the way of material wealth. He was always referred to as "chief."

19 While space does not allow for a detailed discussion of this here, it is interesting how the transfer of particular types of bureaucracy from Western governance models to everyday life occurs in the Solomon Islands.

20 By "leaders" I mean that they are considered role models, deserving of respect, and in a position to influence the actions of others through organisation and mentorship. Just as with community chiefs and big men, they would not have coercive power, but rather would act as a support and guide.

21 As was the case with the teacher chief I met from the Polynesian Solomon Islands. He was a hereditary chief, but also fulfilled the role of teacher and organised a school for his community.

22 See Alasia (1989; 1997); Morgan (2005); Steeves (1996); Wood (2014).

23 See Michelutti (2007).

24 As Hansen and Steputtat (2001, 5) point out, "modern forms of the state are in a continuous process of construction". See also Tucker Sade (2017).

25 See also Gupta (2006 [1995]); Gupta and Sharma (2006).

26 See Trouillot (2001).

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