

# Wantokism and state building in Solomon Islands: a response to Fukuyama

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Francis Fukuyama's (2008:23(3):1–17) article on post-conflict and development challenges facing Solomon Islands is pessimistic about the available options and future prospects for state building. This pessimism leads him to suggest, principally, a long-term, élite-led nation-building effort and shared sovereignty with the international community. Fukuyama invites others to contribute alternative ways of thinking about the policy suggestions he raises. This article takes up Fukuyama's invitation by foregrounding discussion of *wantokism*—an influential kinship-derived system of obligation and support operating throughout Solomon Islands—which Fukuyama also addresses in his article.

In the first part of this article, I argue that Fukuyama misunderstands *wantokism* by viewing it narrowly and negatively. His account of segmentary societies misses the importance of crosscutting ties linking individual selves and groups from the interpersonal to national and international levels in Solomon Islands and the wider region. Fukuyama also views *wantokism* through a more or less explicit liberal developmentalist frame, which places all cultures and societies on a spectrum moving towards an ideal represented by the West. This contributes to his misrecognition of

*wantokism*, and leads him to overvalue Western liberal democracy. In addition, Fukuyama's developmentalism requires him to be an advocate of institutions that have their origins in war and colonial violence and do not resonate culturally in Solomon Islands.

The second part of this article demonstrates that alternatives to Fukuyama's suggestions become available through a more nuanced understanding of Melanesian social organisation and a less overtly developmentalist frame. In particular, it advances the innovative possibility of drawing on *wantokism* as a culturally recognised and valuable resource for addressing the current challenges faced by Solomon Islands. To do so, I illustrate the potential advantages of drawing on *wantokism* in relation to some of the key challenges Fukuyama raises. I demonstrate that *wantokism* can be mobilised to facilitate emergent (rather than arbitrary or imposed) national identity and nation building. Second, and by way of responding to likely objections, I show that *wantokism* does not only or necessarily drive corruption. Rather, the connections facilitated by *wantokism* can be linked with checks and balances in Melanesian social organisation that can in turn be used to work against corruption. Finally, I briefly

consider a particular challenge raised by Fukuyama—the administration of the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF)—to show that drawing on *wantokism* and traditional governance at the local level could be a way of ensuring accountable administration of such funds and boosting the development of community-driven mechanisms to hold members of parliament and others to account.

This article is critical of Fukuyama's understanding of *wantokism* and his policy suggestions. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that his frank and open identification and discussion of important issues have no doubt reached a wide audience. For that we should be appreciative. This article aims to expand on Fukuyama, but it cannot make claim to be fully comprehensive—either in terms of a critical response to Fukuyama's article or in analysing the issues facing Solomon Islands. It is also the case that combining strong criticism and innovative proposals in one article risks shortfalls. These risks are perhaps magnified when writing about others' social and political systems. Fukuyama and I, despite the strong differences I identify here, are *wantoks* of a type—we share the language of the academy and there are inevitable limitations to what we can say about Solomon Islands. For now, I can live with the fact that I am writing about rather than with Solomon Islanders. I hope that others, however, and particularly Solomon Islanders, will join the discussion to expand on the analysis and debate introduced in Fukuyama's article and this response.

### Framing *wantokism* and Solomon Islanders

Fukuyama's rendering of *wantokism* structures his article. We can gain an understanding of his treatment of this

kinship-derived social institution in the opening paragraph. The first sentence tells us that '[v]irtually all developed-country visitors to Melanesia have to confront the *wantok* system, which to many seems like a unique and exotic cultural practice, and a huge obstacle to the country's modernisation' (Fukuyama 2008:1). Fukuyama immediately puts us on an antagonistic footing. We industrial-country folk, burdened as we are with carriage of development and progress, are clearly facing a problem. We are not encountering or experiencing or coming to know the *wantok* system, and we are certainly not dealing with something benign. Rather, *wantokism* is affronting, and must be confronted.

Here Fukuyama reproduces the populist understandings and prejudices of many expatriates and visitors by framing a central local social institution as a 'problem'. We might forgive him this opening to the extent that his view is shared by others, and because it also points to real difficulties in contemporary governance. We then quickly learn, however, that *wantokism* is to be dealt with summarily rather than in a considered way: 'It is indeed an obstacle, but it is hardly unique or exotic in human history' (Fukuyama 2008:1). The locals cannot put a foot right: *wantokism* is trouble, and any claim to uniqueness dissipates under the scientific and universalising gaze of the anthropologist.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the disrespectful posture towards a key local institution, Fukuyama's summary treatment of *wantokism* places severe constraints on his analysis. *Wantokism* is not 'simply the local version of what anthropologists call a segmentary lineage' (Fukuyama 2008:1), and contrary to what Fukuyama suggests, *wantokism* is a modern rather than tribal or traditional institution. I will elaborate these points shortly.

The second important theme introduced in Fukuyama's opening paragraph is a

familiar (albeit often invisible for being *too* familiar) developmentalist conceptualisation of the world's peoples. In this understanding, countries become positioned in a schema with Western countries serving as representatives of the most advanced social, political and economic state—a position to which other countries should aspire. Fukuyama (2008:1) writes that '[s]egmentary societies...were superseded at a fairly early point by more modern forms of political organisation not based on kinship'. In this schema, humanity is placed on a linear time scale wherein Melanesian-style societies are to be naturally surpassed and in which modernity and kinship-based systems are antithetical. We might agree with Fukuyama (2008:1) that kin-based societies in Europe 'could not meet the challenges of large-scale social integration in a region characterised by persistent warfare and expanding trade'. It is noteworthy, however, that, again, kin-based societies fare badly—it is *they* who do not meet a challenge while phenomena of 'persistent warfare and expanding trade' are treated neutrally. The developmentalist schema prevails; it seems that we cannot identify persistent warfare as a problem if it forms an important—albeit regrettable—part of the European progress narrative.

Much of Fukuyama's article lends itself to this type of critical reading, but there is no need to labour the point. The forgoing analysis of Fukuyama's opening paragraph suffices to tell us that Fukuyama approaches *wantokism* as a problem, and that the framing of the problem is reinforced by placing Solomon Islands and its people within a developmentalist schema that values the West positively while devaluing local institutions. Within this frame there is no need to ask questions about why the system Solomon Islanders inherited at the time of independence in 1978 has not managed to facilitate or support good relationships

among people. Certainly, there is no option to ask if something might be amiss with introduced systems or to consider the complex fusion and interaction of local and exogenous governance. Rather, it is clear that there is something wrong with Solomon Islanders and their cultural institutions. Moving beyond this narrow and negative view requires showing how Fukuyama misunderstands *wantokism*.

### Textbook segmentary society versus lived *wantokism*

Fukuyama builds his analysis of *wantokism* through a rudimentary understanding of historical anthropology that has all segmentary societies sharing the same characteristics. According to Fukuyama (2008:2), such societies are organised through kinship, and particularly through 'exclusive, non-overlapping descent groups'. This interpretation allows an analysis that is both parsimonious and familiar for many readers because it aligns with dominant European understandings of selfhood and social and political life. If small-scale groups are exclusive and non-overlapping, they can be readily mapped onto the Western understanding of individuals as separate centres of cognitive and emotional action (Geertz 1979:229). Conceiving of kinship groups as exclusive and self-sufficient allows analysts to smuggle in and reproduce a version of the Hobbesian problem, where others are always a threat and/or potential enemy.

The Hobbesian framework, though, does not travel well. Along with many other Pacific islanders, Melanesian people tend to operate with a version of selfhood much less bounded and separate than that prevalent among Westerners. Individuals tend to be susceptible to—and bound with—each other. White and Watson-Gegeo

(1990:8) note that 'concepts of person in Pacific cultures tend to be highly relational, with notions of relatedness elaborated in a great variety of ways in social life'. Moreover, Melanesian understandings of group identity and relations are consistent with understandings of personal identity (Harrison 2007:67).

The much-noted diversity of Melanesian cultures, then, arises out of relatedness rather than—as is commonly thought—the assumed isolation of tribal groups from each other and the wider world. Longstanding contact among peoples, including through exchange and trade in ideas and cultural forms, allowed groups to articulate their differences and maintain connections such that individuals and groups 'could have rights in, and affiliations to, several cultural identities at once' (Harrison 2007:70). Within this system, both cultural difference and cultural sameness deserve to be 'conceived in an imagery of transactional networks and lines of transmission rather than of discrete and bounded entities' (Harrison 2007:70–1). Melanesian groups have developed a 'sharedness' and sameness *among themselves*, even though it is developed through processes of group differentiation.

This is not to say that Melanesian social relations were or are inherently peaceful. The pre-colonial (or pre-missionary) era was not a time of peace. As Harrison's (2007) analysis shows, however, pre-colonial feuding and warfare were not associated with differences in tribal identity or culture per se. Rather, conflict arose out of a fear of sameness, manifesting, for instance, in violent conflict over the appropriation of cultural symbols. And even amid violence, foreignness and relationality were valued. In pre-colonial times, enemies were often dehumanised and treated badly, but it was also the case that 'many war captives were adopted into their host societies and treated as kin' (McDougall and Kere forthcoming).

It is important not to overstate the difference between Western (individualist) and Melanesian (relational) selfhood. Solomon Islanders cannot be described simply as 'collectivist'<sup>2</sup> and it is probably the case that tension between relationality and individuality is central to the lived experience of most people (Harrison 2007:66). Nonetheless, it is also the case that Melanesian understandings of personal and group identity foreground linkages and relationships (Harrison 2007:67). These understandings of individual and group identities have come under pressure due to the introduction of Western models of personhood and political organisation through colonialism, development and globalisation,<sup>3</sup> but they are far from displaced or eradicated.

Recent work by Michael Scott (2000) and Debra McDougall (2000, 2005) shows that Solomon Islanders maintain in their social relations a subtle balance between autochthony articulated through lineage groups and complex entwinement with others outside these groups for the purposes of marriage, trade and so forth. Maintaining this balance can include people obfuscating, downplaying or remaining silent about their lineages and hence claims to autochthony (Scott 2000). It can also include public rhetoric overtly denying the importance of social boundaries (McDougall 2005:94).

More fundamentally, Scott and McDougall document a cosmological imperative to enter into a positive relationship with the foreign or other. Within Solomon Islands social organisation, then, there is no ontological imperative to keep others out or to see them as a threat or enemy. To the contrary, much of the history of interaction across difference in the areas now known as Solomon Islands is characterised by establishing and transacting exchanges across difference (Harrison 2007:75). The separateness or boundedness

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that Fukuyama extrapolates from his understanding of descent group simply does not apply in Solomon Islands.

The conflict events of the recent past cannot be read directly off the forgoing broad account of social order and earlier conflict, but key characteristics of the 1998–2003 conflict—particularly the relatively low levels of battle deaths and extent of civilian displacement—are closely related to social organisation. Brutal atrocities were committed, but people also escaped or mitigated violence through crosscutting ties among militants and civilians. People and property were regularly protected through crosscutting kinship ties formed through networks of intermarriage or simply through long-standing associations and friendships across difference. It is also crucial to point out that relationships formed through the churches (entirely overlooked in Fukuyama's article) were consistently used to work for peace. My Solomon Islands' contacts place great value on these social bonds. While they are deeply saddened and troubled by the 1998–2003 conflict, they are also keenly aware of the important role relationships across difference and traditional and church institutions played in mitigating so-called 'ethnic' conflict. In the post-conflict period, these same institutions were used to initiate reconciliation processes independent of state or other outside support.

The centrality of relationality in Melanesian social worlds deeply undercuts Fukuyama's assertion about the exclusivity and separateness of descent groups to the point that his understanding of *wantokism* cannot hold. Most groups have likely never conceived themselves as exclusive. Moreover, Solomon Islanders tend to be far more multicultural and cosmopolitan—and put far greater value on difference and on working together across difference—than is suggested by Fukuyama's reading of *wantokism*. It is true that anthropologists

did experiment with the segmentary model drawn from African contexts, but following an article by Barnes (1962) there has been general agreement that the fluidity of Melanesian cultures rules out any direct transfer (Sillitoe 1998:141). For the same reason, it is not possible, *contra* Fukuyama's suggestions throughout his article, to gain insight into Solomon Islands' situation by drawing on what has occurred in African settings (Fraenkel 2004).

Melanesian social order is perhaps not of a type readily recognisable or easily assimilated to mainstream Western social science underpinned by rational actor assumptions or driven by simple comparative analysis. As Solomon Islanders and development and peacebuilding professionals grapple with contemporary challenges, however, it is incumbent on us to improve our understanding of *wantokism* and related social institutions.

The lived experience and social interactions facilitated by *wantokism* in Solomon Islands suggest, *contra* Fukuyama, an institution that is in fact quite expansive. Indeed, *wantokism* is not closely tied to a descent group. Nor is it—as Fukuyama implies—an atavistic institution. Rather, we can better define *wantokism* as a system of generalised obligations and supports that permeates contemporary Melanesian social and political life. The system in Solomon Islands is closely related to kinship relationships, but it is a modern phenomenon that emerged in the colonial era as people were drawn into plantation and administration work. *Wantokism* (*wantok* = literally 'one talk') arose as different tribes with shared language found commonality and provided support to each other in new settings, at least in part in juxtaposition to colonial overseers. This experience was repeated among shared language groups through the development of Solomon Islands *pijin*.

*Wantokism* can refer to those who share kinship ties but also includes, on larger scales, those who share the same language, are from the same area, from the same island and the same region of the world. So, in a village context, one's *wantoks* are direct kin, but as one moves further away from local contexts one's pool of *wantoks* expands. In the capital, Honiara, one's *wantoks* can include those from one's home village or the surrounding tribal grouping/s. In the broader Pacific and in international settings, all Melanesians—particularly those from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji—become one's *wantoks*. In other words, pre-colonial Melanesian understandings of relationality have shifted with social and political change.

*Wantokism* does not imply the separation among groups that Fukuyama claims. His application of the idea of the exclusive and separate descent to describe *wantokism* in Solomon Islands is overwhelmed by the great variety of crosscutting ties that reflects the interdependence of individual selves and groups from the interpersonal to international level. This has important implications for political organisation, including possibilities for state building.

### ***Wantokism* and political organisation**

We can agree with Fukuyama (2008:2) that kin-based societies often 'tend to be egalitarian and non-hierarchical'. At face value, many might find this appealing; but in Fukuyama's (2008:2) misunderstanding of *wantoks* as exclusive and underdeveloped, they can come together only through 'temporary alliances of lineages, clans, or tribes for purposes of defence or aggression'; they cannot underpin 'collective action at any large scale' (p.10). The forgoing discussion shows, however, that contact among groups was and is continuing rather

than sporadic, and that there is a larger form of organisation at play in Solomon Islands. This form of organisation, which we might loosely term networked rather than hierarchical, might not readily lend itself to the type of collective action that Fukuyama views as necessary for the dominant version of a modern nation-state, but it is clearly *some* form of collective action—it must be for Fukuyama (and others) to be able to write about it. The issue at play here, then, relates to different forms of organisation, the value we attach to them and the accompanying possibilities for contemporary nation and state building.

For Fukuyama (2008:2), larger-scale organisation is valued only in a particular form: 'The fact that there is no sovereign enforcer of rules means that justice has to be compensatory and negotiated on a case-by-case basis by kin groups.' Sovereignty is central. In devaluing dispersed and more informal forms of governance, Fukuyama follows a familiar European pattern of identifying indigenous peoples as lacking in the institutions necessary for civilised life, while identifying Western systems—systems with very hierarchical and institutionalised command-obedience power relations—as the only valid forms of political organisation.

We need not, though, automatically interpret the absence of centralised governance as a lack. In a famous collection of essays, Pierre Clastres (2007) suggests that an absence of hierarchical command-obedience relations is not a shortfall or an accident. Rather, Clastres (2007:44, 45) argued that the South American Indian societies he studied 'had a very early premonition that power's transcendence conceals a mortal risk for the group' and that as a result they created a 'means for neutralizing the virulence of political authority'. The values associated with such practices (participatory democratic decision making and checking

the centralisation of power, for instance) are not dissimilar to those advanced in Western societies—indeed, to those values that inform liberal democracy. Westerners, however, often misrecognise other societies by viewing them as underdeveloped within a developmentalist schema and by placing undue emphasis on the formal institutions of governance. As Bozeman (1960:7) notes, European ‘overemphasis on the political and constitutional aspects of their social development have disregarded many sources of cultural strength’.

In this light, we can reassess Fukuyama’s (2008:2) claim that kinship-based societies have ‘certain critical weaknesses’—most notably an ‘inability to achieve collective action at a large scale for extended periods of time’. In the narrow confines of a Hobbesian world, Melanesian forms of political organisation indeed appear weak to the extent that they can be overwhelmed—although not displaced—by larger and more hierarchically structured political forms. From a broader perspective, however, in which we explore and deliberate the possibilities of different forms of political organisation, we might find more possibilities in *wantokism*.

To be open to such possibilities, it is crucial that we do not draw simple distinctions between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ institutions. Indigenous and introduced governance are thoroughly entwined in Solomon Islands. While some make much of descriptions of the introduced Westminster system as an ill-fitting garment, this should be tempered by an understanding that there has also been a great deal of blending of the two systems. The problems of poor governance that Fukuyama and others tend to lay at the door of *wantokism* emerge only to the extent to which individuals or groups are inserted at key points within social and political systems that are organised on a hierarchical basis—an apical basis in the

case of the introduced governance system in Solomon Islands. In other words, corruption is facilitated through ‘modern’ as much as ‘traditional’ systems, and the real challenge is how to bring appropriate resources to bear for effective governance in this hybrid scheme.

### Dilemmas of post-conflict state building

Fukuyama fears that negative rather than positive forces might displace *wantokism* as part of the development process. He can anticipate ‘new and highly dysfunctional forms of social organisation like urban gangs and warlord armies’ (although this seems an overly pessimistic outlook, unjustifiably drawn, again, from other contexts) and struggles to see how modern institutions can displace *wantokism* (Fukuyama 2008:3). This apparently leads him to accept that *wantokism* must be supplemented rather than replaced by modern institutions (Fukuyama 2008:4–5), but because he views *wantokism* as able to be an effective form of social capital only at the local level, this leaves the serious business of state to Western institutions. Here Fukuyama (2008:5–6) again runs into problems because ideas to reform the State—such as legislating to encourage party loyalty by politicians and swamping the bureaucracy with modernised cohorts of public servants—do not seem to offer much hope to him. In these circumstances, he is ‘at a loss to understand how the country will ever overcome the divisions that led to the 1999–2003 violence’ (Fukuyama 2008:9).

This apparent lack of options—the most explicit dilemma Fukuyama (2008:9–10) faces in his analysis and one perhaps shared by senior figures in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)—leads him to argue that a political élite needs to develop a sense of national identity to

overcome *wantokism*. Because this is a long-term venture, however, which is yet to begin, Fukuyama's second key suggestion is shared sovereignty with the international community.

To better consider these suggestions, it is useful to identify a second and more implicit dilemma Fukuyama points to—this time linked to questions of developmentalism, violence and liberalism. Fukuyama (2008:4) reminds us that '[p]eople in the developed West conveniently forget the degree to which their own institutions were shaped and made possible by violence and conflict in earlier historical periods'. This violence includes 'coercion and deceit against indigenous holders of customary land rights' (p.4). Fukuyama seems somewhat caught here. He appears to be suggesting that such violence and deceit are not defensible in the current time, but he is clearly a strong advocate of the institutions that result from such violence. At times, he does not shrink away from the violent processes that have delivered these institutions to us. He (2008:3) tells us that 'the driving force behind Europe's transition to ever-larger political structures was the need to organise for war'. It seems that for Fukuyama war is normalised or valued positively within a developmentalist schema as a driving force in generating our current forms of political organisation.

The recognition of the role of violence in the generation of modern institutions does not temper Fukuyama's enthusiasm for imposed national identity development (a process that is often elite-driven, arbitrary [p.25] and very violent) and sovereignty—a key institutional vehicle for bringing about violence and coercion on a grand scale in recent centuries. Here we have to face difficult questions about the export of liberalism through international interventions. It is impossible to say simply that modern liberalism, once established, is

a benign force. The mobilisation of violent force in the name of the democratic peace in the past decade or so—particularly with respect to Iraq—has demonstrated too strongly the perversity of this contradiction. More fundamentally, and as Barry Hindess (2001) shows, liberal views of freedom are predicated on developmental understandings in which individuals and populations are often judged as not (or not yet) ready or suitable for freedom. The upshot is that '[l]iberty and domination are joined in liberal thought like two sides of a single coin: the value of one may appear on the face, but the figure of the other is firmly stamped on the reverse' (Hindess 2001:94).

These are vexing questions for policy-makers. How illiberal can liberal interventions become before they lose the claims to legitimacy (including with their own populations) on which they rely in order to intervene? Of course, we should not expect that Fukuyama can solve this dilemma alone. What is particularly interesting about Fukuyama's sidestepping of these issues, however, is the limitation it reveals—through his standing as someone of exemplary liberal developmentalist credentials and commitments—in the broader mainstream and liberal approach to post-conflict state building. From within this frame, it is unsurprising that Fukuyama proposes shared sovereignty. It is also the case, however, that this proposal is strikingly predictable and unimaginative—and is precisely a way of not facing the challenges we currently face. The idea of shared sovereignty is a way of *not* thinking about engagement with another society. Indeed, it is a way of throwing our hands in the air and giving up on state building.

Rather than embracing this non-solution, it is important that we respond to the current situation in Solomon Islands with innovation through engagement. In this spirit, I want to reach beyond Fukuyama's dominant frame

of liberal developmentalism to expand the possible options under consideration. To do so I propose thinking of *wantokism* as a potential resource rather than an obstacle or limited form of social support.

### ***Wantokism* as a resource**

To begin to think of the possibilities of *wantokism*, it is necessary to extend our thinking about *wantokism* beyond the level of loyalties and support. While these are the most concrete behavioural expressions of *wantokism*, it is connections—the key characteristic of networks—that enable these behaviours. It is through connections that *wantokism* provides social support and establishes group identities. There is, however, no reason why the quality of connecting that is offered by the *wantok* system might not be turned—given sufficient support in response to contemporary circumstances and needs—to other tasks. As already noted, *wantokism* has already proven malleable by altering its scale of application across tribal, national and—to a certain extent—international levels.

One of the areas in which *wantokism* might serve as a resource is precisely in one of Fukuyama's identified deficit areas: national identity. *Wantokism* is recognised nationally as a valuable institution for sustaining connections for a range of purposes. Indeed, it might be the only meaningful cultural tie. Furthermore, several decades of marriage across tribal and island groups in modern Solomon Islands has generated a dense countrywide web of relationships. The idea of drawing on such a web of relationships is likely to have widespread appeal and relevance, and would mobilise large numbers of individuals. The informal networked style of organisation suggested by *wantokism*, circulating through the cultural imaginary, is precisely the type

of bonding agent required for developing a national identity and driving nation building.

A second way in which *wantokism* could be a valuable resource is as an institution for facilitating good governance. Critics will, of course, immediately point out that loyalty and support behaviours, particularly among the political class, facilitate corruption and have no place in contemporary governance. The opportunity to draw on *wantokism* to facilitate or cover for one's corrupt practices is, however, facilitated through the institutions of government. An export licence can be signed for cash, for instance, only by an official or minister occupying a senior post within a hierarchical system. It is somewhat disingenuous, then, to lay the problem of corruption wholly at the door of *wantokism*. Rather, corruption and problems of governance arise within a modern hybrid system. To single out *wantokism* for negative treatment and to attempt to overcome it with modern liberal institutions and practices is not viable and unhelpful. Of course, the opportunities for corruption presented by formal institutions and the hierarchical organisation of governance also cannot be practically removed. There is a need, then, to explore how *wantokism* might be turned into a resource.

Fortunately, loyalty and support behaviours do not totalise the characteristics of *wantok* networks. Two of the key characteristics of networks such as the *wantok* system—closely associated with the way they facilitate connection and relationality—are their openness and anti-hierarchical tendencies. By facilitating interaction, exchange and the flow of information and knowledge, networks generate checks and balances. By way of illustration, Melanesian 'big-men'—innovative and charismatic leaders (usually men; only sometimes women) who translate modernisation and capitalism to villagers (Zimmer-Tamakoshi

1997:107)—operate within a social system, which means that they rely on others more than is usually assumed and are unable to extract as much personal gain as is sometimes expected. These individuals attain influence by helping others achieve their goals, but in the process their efforts to extract advantage for themselves are often frustrated by ‘leveling mechanisms such as accusations of sorcery’ (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1997:108). The big-man’s abilities and capacities can be realised only in a social network—and this same network also polices behaviour.

So while it might not be wholly possible (or even desirable) to separate the connections offered through *wantokism* from expectations of loyalty and support behaviour, *wantokism* can generate checks and balances on undue concentrations of resources and power. Some Solomon Islanders tell me that the inclusion of *wantoks* from different ethnic groupings within a work or project team provides a useful counter to corruption. In other words, *wantoks* might keep each other in check rather than covering for each other when *wantokism* is mobilised for a common goal. This signals that *wantokism* can be a useful way of promoting good governance, particularly in pursuit of an important common goal such as nation building. In other words, *wantokism* might be mobilised against corrupt practices by opening up to it, rather than attempting to close it down. Where a closed *wantok* network can provide a way of hiding one’s bad practices, a more open network—such as that which could be promoted actively through *wantok* nationalism—could provide mechanisms for transparency and accountability.

Here it is important to note that Solomon Islanders are not blind to the problems of corruption and poor governance. Many are deeply frustrated about these issues and are willing to do something about it if—and perhaps in many cases only

if—they have a culturally appropriate and sanctioned way of doing so. Facilitating a *wantok* nationalism—building on a shared understanding of a need for improved governance (a ‘*wantoks* against corruption’ campaign, for example)—might just be an effective jujitsu move on contemporary corruption in Solomon Islands. Beyond nation building, then, there are possibilities for reversing current prejudices about *wantokism* to deploy it for contemporary good governance.

A final and concrete way of illustrating the possibilities for *wantokism* as a resource for good governance in Solomon Islands relates to the challenges around the RCDF discussed by Fukuyama. Through this mechanism, members of parliament distribute funds directly to their constituents. To deal with the problems of transparency and accountability around these funds, Fukuyama turns directly to the leverage that the donor community might exert. He (2008:7) asks, ‘[S]ince so much of the demand for RCD funds appears to be driven by constituents’ need for school fees, might it not be possible for the donors collectively to suggest a simultaneous elimination of school fees *and* reduction or elimination of RCD funds, using the latter to pay for the former?’

Such a solution has certain obvious merits for education, and there is much to be said for better government provision of basic services to rural Solomon Islands populations. This is, however, also a blunt and centralist instrument that bypasses a rich opportunity for local political participation and empowerment that would have spin-off benefits for building grassroots-driven political accountability. An alternative suggestion, then, would be—as part of a national *wantokism* political participation and decentralisation initiative—to involve and facilitate local constituents to develop and propose a transparent and

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community-accountable decision-making process for the distribution of the RCDF. Non-governmental organisations (such as the Solomon Islands Development Trust, among others) have the expertise to pilot such a process. This approach would empower village-level communities (which are widely acknowledged to be the heart of Solomon Islands) and boost the development of community-driven mechanisms to hold members of parliament and others to account. Such an initiative would need to be pursued alongside improved provision of basic services such as education, but facilitating local participation through *wantokism* would provide a way of recognising, supporting and building on acknowledged local-level community strengths in Solomon Islands.

The idea of drawing on *wantokism* for nation building and good governance is no doubt provocative and likely to attract objections. Some will say that *wantokism* will simply be hijacked, leading to yet poorer governance. This neglects, however, the fact that *wantokism* is already mobilised for negative ends. The challenge for generating good governance lies in finding a way of getting among relations between people and groups to facilitate behaviour. External mechanisms and values cannot do this, but *wantokism* might be able to. It is true, of course, that *wantokism* cannot guarantee better governance, but it does offer a vehicle for mobilising it.

Some urban-dwelling Solomon Islanders in paid employment will object to the idea of drawing on *wantokism* because they can find themselves harassed by *wantoks* constantly demanding *bagraes* (a bag/s of rice), money or other favours. It is understandable that people are frustrated about this type of imposition. Others, however, will point out that such behaviour is a manipulation of *wantokism* (and a corruption and breakdown of it) for individualistic purposes. It is also

the case that the provision of cash and cash-goods is usually strongly reciprocated when urban dwellers visit or return to rural areas.

Other potential Solomon Islander objectors might include some members of the national élite—especially those educated overseas in schools of business and economics—who assert Western-style possessive individualism to differentiate themselves from the grassroots and to generate personal cultural capital in a modernising world (Martin 2007). As with complaints from those pressured by their *wantoks*, however, these tend to be instances of negativism rather than a wholesale or thoroughgoing rejection of *wantokism*.

It is important to note that to draw on *wantokism* does not imply a throwback to tribalism, a hands-off approach to the challenges of governance or acceptance of inappropriate behaviour defended or facilitated through *wantokism*. The *wantok* system is already a hybrid. It has been continually reworked in changing circumstances such that the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ are thoroughly blended. There is no requirement, then, for those outsiders working with Solomon Islanders to accept the ‘traditional’ straightforwardly in the name of cultural appropriateness. This tendency—sometimes exhibited by progressive white folk as penance for the colonial sins of their forebears—can create a no-go zone that forecloses on exchange and dialogue. A more respectful process is likely to include careful and close engagement across cultural difference to explore implications for contemporary governance (Brigg and Muller 2009). We need to challenge each other and our behaviour carefully and respectfully. This should extend to challenging corrupt and otherwise inappropriate behaviour facilitated through *wantokism*. (This is necessarily a two-way process. Solomon Islanders quietly point out that the

spouses, friends and contacts of expatriate advisors regularly take up new posts in Solomon Islands aid and development efforts. The double standard is obvious: when Westerners engage in such practices it is 'networking', yet when Solomon Islanders behave similarly it is 'corruption'.)

While current policy prescriptions for good governance tend to attempt to reproduce Western systems and the accompanying values, and to suppress or eradicate *wantokism*, I have suggested that consideration be given to reversing this pattern to seek out possibilities drawn from local and indigenous cultural forms and social organisation. Part of this reversal requires us to begin to think of possibilities arising from networks for emergent types of checks and balances rather than mechanical forms that operate through hierarchy and administration. *Wantokism* can be turned to positive ends. It cannot guarantee particular outcomes and working with it requires imagination and a commitment to challenge—at least to some extent—the dominant assumptions of liberal developmentalism. Doing so, however, opens options for drawing on powerful local cultural resources to help address the challenges currently faced by Solomon Islands.

## Conclusions

There is little doubt that Fukuyama's article has brought issues of state building in Solomon Islands to a broad audience. The foundation for his article is, however, an inadequate understanding of Solomon Islands' *wantokism*. Fukuyama views *wantokism* as separating rather than connecting groups, and he does so through a developmentalist frame that devalues non-Western cultures. This leads him to miss the value of *wantokism* as a key Solomon Islands institution.

In response to Fukuyama, this article argues that we should expand our purview beyond conventional liberal developmentalism to draw on *wantokism* as a valuable resource. In particular, I have shown that *wantokism* can facilitate nation building and the development of national identity, and that the checks and balances internal to kinship-derived Melanesian social organisation can be mobilised against corruption and for good governance. These suggestions have the benefit of working with an entrenched and valued social institution that builds and sustains relationships among individuals and groups.

Drawing on *wantokism* in the present does not involve a return to a purer cultural past or a radical departure from the broadly liberal democratic governance system in place in Solomon Islands. Introduced or 'Western' and local or 'traditional' governance systems are already fused and entwined to the point where it is impossible and naïve to talk about separation. In these circumstances, *wantokism* can be mobilised to challenge and limit corruption and poor governance. Solomon Islanders are frustrated about poor governance, but the pervasiveness of liberal developmentalism has tended to mean that those working against corruption have been called to work against their own forms of social organisation or to relegate them to a quaint but outmoded form of social support. There are other possibilities. *Wantokism* offers a culturally recognised and valuable medium for dealing with the challenges of state and nation building currently faced by Solomon Islands.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The anthropologist is no less a figure than the 'great British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard' (Fukuyama 2008:1). The unevenness of this formulation cannot escape mention: the scholarship of a single white man is celebrated alongside the dismissal of an important social institution for several hundred thousand people—several million when we take *wantokism* as a social feature of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji.
- <sup>2</sup> For shortfalls of the individualism–collectivism distinction, see Brigg (2008:29–30).
- <sup>3</sup> See Harrison (2007:77–80) and the special issue of *Anthropological Forum* introduced by Sykes (2007).

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## Acknowledgments

I particularly want to thank Duran Angiki, Jodie Curth and Debra McDougall for helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft. Thanks also to Manuhua Barcham, Wren Chadwick, Rebecca Duffy, Nicole George and Oliver Richmond. I take full responsibility for the text.