

# Role of chiefs in

*This is the final column in a series of Advertiser commentaries on contemporary Pacific Island issues.*

Since 1962, eight Pacific Island countries have attained independence, two other former colonies have become associated states of New Zealand with full internal self-rule and another three in Micronesia are on the brink of becoming associated states of the United States, while a fourth will become an American commonwealth. Each has a functioning government cast in modern democratic form.

Nevertheless, practically all of those with traditional leaders have given their chiefs a constitutional place in the new governments. In addition, Tonga, which technically never lost its independence while a British protectorate, has a king whose monarchical powers predate the Tongan constitution and trace back into antiquity.

In all of this lies a potential for discord, as the formalizing of the chiefs in the government institutionalizes a confrontation between the stratification of custom and tradition, on the one hand, and the more egalitarian ways introduced by Western contact.

Over the long run, it represents a lost opportunity to turn traditional authority to better advantage.

**WESTERN SAMOA**, which had been a New Zealand trusteeship, was the first to become a sovereign Pacific Island nation after World War II. Initially, all of the *tama-a-aiga* (Samoa's four paramount chiefs) were accommodated by their holding the highest offices in the new government.

Later, an apparent exception developed in 1976 when Tupuola Efi became prime minister. However, as the son of a deceased *tama-a-aiga*, and aspirant for the same Tamaseses title, he really constituted no challenge to the established pattern.

But in 1982, when Va'ai Kolone was chosen as prime minister, this demonstrated that a "commoner" could indeed hold that high post, and

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was so regarded. Consequently, it is claimed to be no coincidence that upon Va'ai losing his parliamentary seat due to an election contest, the *tama-a-aiga* Head of State quickly named Tupuola Efi again as the prime minister.

After by-elections, Parliament rejected Tupuola and replaced him with another "commoner," significantly reemphasizing that the nation's leadership no longer rested in the hands of Samoa's paramount chiefs.

The new prime minister, Tofilau Eti, who recently visited Hawaii, has even expressed interest in opening up the electoral franchise to all non-matai (title holders). Their voting, as in neighboring American Samoa, would further speed the pace of political change in Western Samoa, not yet a quarter of a century old.

**WHEN ADJACENT** Fiji became independent in 1970, its constitution retained the "government within a government" which had long characterized the former British colony.

Fijians in the countryside live under local chiefs, and structured above them are tiers of regional chiefs and councils. At the apex is a national Great Council of Chiefs. The Council designates eight members of the 22-membered Fijian Senate, and for all practical purposes no amendment to the national laws controlling the administration of Fijian affairs and the use of Fijian lands can pass the Parliament without their consent.

In addition, Fijian *ratu* (chiefs) have continued to occupy many of the top posts in the national government.



# a changing Pacific

There is both strong support for as well as objections raised by Fijians to the continuance of this system.

However, Fiji's indigenous population is exceeded in numbers by the resident Indians, so that major cleavages within the Fijian ranks only redound to their own political disadvantage.

If it were not for this, undoubtedly there would be louder exception taken to the role of the Fijian chiefs in today's government.

**IN MELANESIA**, the Solomon Islands constitution recognizes the traditional leaders of that country. However, the drafters of the 1978 constitution sought to finesse the issue of where they were to be placed in the newly independent government by directing that their accommodation should be linked to decentralization.

Unresolved, it has helped sharpen the difference of views over how to go about making government more democratic by setting up provinces and reassigning to them powers now exercised in Honiara.

Vanuatu's constitution (1980) provides a consultative role to a national council of custom chiefs chosen by regional chief councils. The national council is charged with making recommendations for the preservation and protection of indigenous culture and language. This avenue of approach is designed to minimize conflict.

**NORTH OF** the equator, a trio of associated states has gradually been taking shape in Micronesia: the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau.

The national government of the Federated States has followed a path somewhat comparable to the Solomons in trying to evade the issue. After declaring there to be no legal obstacle to setting up a Council of Chiefs in the federal government, the FSM Constitution places the onus upon the constituent states to involve the chiefs in government.

Both the Marshalls and Palau — which broke from the rest of the Trust Territory in 1978 preparatory to becoming separate associated states of the United States — have directly

brought the traditional leaders into their governments. Today, in two of the states of the FSM, and in the Marshalls and Palau, provision has been made for chiefs to serve on councils with at least advisory powers.

In the Marshalls, the chiefly council in effect can delay legislation by requiring the Nitijela (Parliament) to reconsider a bill. Yap's new constitution gives two chiefly councils in that FSM state absolute veto power over legislation. It is unlikely, however, that this means they are to become a government within a government, as in Fiji.

The Truk state constitution, which yet awaits ratification, establishes a statewide council of chiefs empowered to prevent civil disturbance and protect custom and tradition. In Ponape state, which is now writing its constitution, the traditional leaders have expressed their desire for a chiefly council which can direct both legislature and governor in adopting legislation affecting custom.

**THROUGHOUT THE** Pacific where, traditional leaders are still recognized, they seem to have been the prime movers for securing governmental posts to themselves.

Many have been ill-equipped by education or training to adequately fulfill an active, functional role in modern government.

They would have been better advised, both for the maintenance of the honor and respect which is still their due, and for the betterment of their own peoples, if they had sought to direct their traditional authority toward containing the disruptive anti-social behavior arising out of adopting Western ways. The West has tended to rely ever more heavily upon government to curb and punish such behavior, and it is now evident that government, by itself, cannot do the job.

Custom and tradition in many Pacific areas still remains strong and viable. If adapted by traditional leaders more concerned with their communities than in honor and profit for themselves, here may well lie the answer to problems which are baffling the West.