

DEFINING COMMUNITIES, GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS

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In the Pacific generally communities are territorially-based human groups of varying magnitude and type. The most common are village communities, in which social and cultural ties are at their greatest intensity. Above this level range those of districts, provinces, capped by the national community. In the smaller Pacific island countries, the sense of the national community is well entrenched mostly because communities are fairly homogeneous. In the larger more culturally and ethnically diverse countries, such as those of Melanesia, the sense of the national community is not well established outside the charmed circle of modern elite groups.

Of the three Pacific countries I know fairly well, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga, all have equally strong sense of the local communities, where most cultural activities are preformed. At the district level, especially in Melanesia, festivals, ceremonials and ritual and economic exchanges are conducted among culturally related groups. But beyond this level, the nation as a community is still in the process of formation. In Fiji, village, district and provincial communities have been well established among the indigenous Fijians who today comprise more than half the national population. Ties beyond the village community have been forged through marriage and political alliances. Important cultural festivals and ceremonies focused on chieftainship especially of the paramount chieftainship, help to bind local and distinct communities into larger entity.

In Tonga, because of a long established centralised monarchical system, the sense of the national community is stronger there than any where else in the Pacific. The most important cultural activities are focused on the monarchy, on the maintenance of the national community subjected to monarchism.

Within communities, especially villages, are kin-based groups that specialise in traditional functions and skills. These are the groups through which traditions, apart from basic subsistence economic production done by everyone, are passed down through hereditary lines. In Fiji for example pottery, wood carving, tapa cloth making, building and the like are specialized activities controlled, through traditional intellectual property rights, by kin groups of specialists. Knowledge related to warfare, priesthood, and leadership in village, district and provincial levels are social and cultural departments controlled by the elite kin groups in the community.

The individual as such in all traditional Pacific societies is submerged in the interest of kin-group. The individual's identity and role are derived from membership of the kin-group they belong to. Modernisation is creating a conflict within communities because of its focus on individual rights. In all major activities the intellectual rights belong to groups, not to individuals. For example authorship of oral traditions, music, dance etc, are attributed to groups not to individuals.

The rising importance of the individual in modern Pacific cultures entails the progressive decline in the importance of the groups, and with it erodes so much of cultural heritage.

Since the final years of the twentieth century the University of the South Pacific, owned by twelve island states, has embarked upon a cultural program that aims to develop contemporary cultural creativity leading to the emergence of new artistic and cultural traits that are distinctively modern Oceanic. People involved in this examine and meditate upon their histories, environments, traditions, and their contemporary situations to find inspiration for their creative cultural productivity. We believe that the best way of safeguarding our heritage is not to reproduce them, but to build on them and create new heritage for the future. Existing groups in our societies, helped by local communities, national governments, international organisations such as UNESCO are engaged in the conservation and protection of our cultural heritage. The Oceania Center for Arts and Culture, of the University of the South Pacific, complements these endeavors by creating contemporary forms, movements and sounds that are our new heritage for the future. That heritage reflects not only continuity with the past, but also our contemporary dynamic relationships with the rest of the world today.