

SUCCESSION TO LAND IN THE MATRILINEAL CULTURE AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

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Introduction

As Pacific Islanders, land is very much an essence to the way we live our lives. It plays a very significant role in our everyday living. It is our source of pride and heritage; it tells others of who we are, where we come from and where we stand with regards to our social status. As was stated by Gideon Zoleveke in Peter Larmour (Ed), *“Land in the Solomon,”* and quoted by Jennifer Corrin in, *“Customary Land in Solomon Islands: A victim of legal pluralism”*

Land was an ancestral trust committed to the living for the benefit of themselves and generations yet unborn. Land thus was the most valuable heritage of the whole community, and could not be lightly parted with. This is based on the belief that departed ancestors superintended the earthly affairs of their living descendants, protecting them from disasters and ensuring their welfare, but demanding in return strict compliance with time-honoured ethical prescriptions. Reverence for ancestral spirits was a cardinal point of traditional faith and such reverence dictated the preservation of land which the living shared with the dead.¹

This statement by Gideon Zoleveke shows clearly that land is a fundamental aspect in the traditional culture of all indigenous Solomon Islanders.² However, it is bound by a revered belief based on the requirement that it must be preserved for the future generations.³ The South Pacific comprises diverse regions with different cultures and dialects. These cultures also include the different systems of customary land tenure practised by the people of a particular area. With regards to the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the types of land tenure system that are commonly practised are the patrilineal and matrilineal system.⁴ However, this essay will be confined to the matrilineal culture in the context of North Pentecost in Vanuatu and Guadalcanal, San Cristobal and Santa Ana (Makira) in the Solomon Islands. This paper will start by looking at what a matrilineal culture is, the ways in which land is inherited and other collateral issues related to inheritance of land such as:

¹ Jennifer Corrin, Customary land in the Solomon Islands: A victim of legal pluralism.

² Above. N 1.

³ Above. N 1.

⁴ Above. N 1.

- Adoption;
- Illegitimacy;
- The roles of men and women in matrilineal cultures; and
- The changes currently affecting the significance of the matrilineal land tenure system.

What is a matrilineal culture?

A matrilineal culture is one in which property is passed on from one generation to the other through the maternal line.⁵ The term property is used because in some instances it is not only land that passes, but also knowledge, wisdom, and magical powers, which are often regarded as heirlooms of the tribe.⁶ In countries like Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, there are certain areas that are closely associated with the matrilineal culture, from the head-hunting days to this current date.⁷ As opposed to the patrilineal system, where property is passed on through generations via the male line, the matrilineal culture functions through the female line. On the outset, a person who is not familiar with this culture might think that men are totally left out of the picture when it comes to decisions relating to land and ownership. Despite the fact that women are prioritized over men, the matrilineal culture functions in such a way that values the voice of both men and women as opposed to the patrilineal culture, which does not have such a place for women.

Succession to land

Based on the interviews conducted towards compiling this paper and the research done with reference to the work of others who have taken the liberty in doing case studies on Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, I can confidently state that land is inherited through the maternal side of the family in certain areas of these two countries. Given the significance of land succession, I will be giving a comprehensive description on the three matrilineal areas in the Solomon Islands which were already identified earlier as well as North Pentecost in Vanuatu.

General principle The general rule with regards to ownership of land in North Pentecost, Guadalcanal, Isabel, and Santa Ana (Makira) is determined by the genealogical link between those claiming ownership and the original woman settler who first settled on the land in question.⁸ In this context, the female children born to this woman are said to have automatic ownership.⁹ Usually land is passed on through the first daughter who is born to the woman, and the responsibility of land administration and inheritance is placed upon her.¹⁰ Upon

⁵ re Sareai Land LR 681 [1998] SBLC 1; Land Case No 3 of 1993 (7 September 1998)

⁶ Above. N 5.

⁷ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2008), Land and women: the matrilineal factor: the cases of the Republic of Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

⁸ Above. N 7.

⁹ Above. N 7.

¹⁰ Above. N 7.

passing land to the oldest daughter, the woman must also appoint one of her sons or her brother to be in charge of any land related issues.¹¹

If a woman is found to be barren, she will pass the land to her sister. In the case where there is no sister in the family, or where the sister is still very young, the land can be taken care of by her brother until the young sister has fully matured and is capable of taking responsibility over the land in question.¹² Still on the issue of ownership, a woman's primary right to land is said to be inclusive of her tribe.¹³ This means that her brothers also have rights to the land. However, these rights do not extend to their children.¹⁴ The understanding that can be inferred from this is that, when a male child is born to a Guadalcanal, Isabel, Santa Ana, or North Pentecost woman, this male child will be entitled to a primary right of ownership regarding his mother's land. But this does not apply to his children because they are deemed as belonging to another land owning tribe. In this context, the children belong to their mother's tribe and would be entitled to land owning rights through their mother's side.

Guadalcanal

Having identified Guadalcanal as one of the matrilineal areas in the Solomon Islands and the fact that land is inherited through the female line, we will now go further into identifying the two main land owning groups in Guadalcanal that are commonly known as the *Big line* and the *Small line*.¹⁵ Succession of land can only occur under these two main lines.¹⁶ Given the different dialects spoken in the island of Guadalcanal, these lines are referred to through different names. On the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, the *Big line* is commonly referred to as: Garavu; while the *Small line* is commonly known as: *Manukiki*.¹⁷ In East and Central Guadalcanal, people refer to the *Big line* as: *Manukama* while the *Small line* is also referred to as: *Manukiki*.¹⁸

As stated by Jelly Matebasia and Tobit Taravu during a short interview, each line consists of more than one land owning tribe, and under those tribes are clans.¹⁹ Based on this general principle, a man from the *Big line* must not marry any woman from the *Big line*.²⁰ The same applies to a woman. Ever since the head-hunting days, men from the Big line were only allowed to marry women from the Small line or vice versa.²¹ However, despite the strong emphasis that was put in maintaining the traditional rules behind marriage, there are multiple cases where men and women from the same line have gone against the odds in marrying each other.²² As a result of this, areas within the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal have come to form an extra tribe

¹¹ Above. N 7.

¹² Above. N 7.

¹³ Above. N 7.

¹⁴ Above. N 7.

¹⁵ Jelly Matebasia and Tobit Tarava, Guadalcanal. May 9, 2016

¹⁶ Above. N 15.

¹⁷ Above. N 15.

¹⁸ Above. N 15.

¹⁹ Above. N 15

²⁰ Above. N 15.

²¹ Above. N 15.

²² Sikadra Tovosia, Guadalcanal. May 11, 2016

known as the *Koinahao*.²³ The *Koinahao* is the result of men and women from the *Small line* marrying each other.

The issue of succession is very much determined by the union between a man and a woman. When a man from the *Big line* marries a woman from the *Small line*, their children will become part of the *Small line*. The opposite will take place if a man from the *Small line* marries a woman from the *Big line*, where their children would automatically be part of the *Big line*. The membership of a man or a woman under either of these two main lines is greatly influenced by his or her mother seeing that inheritance is channelled through the mother's side.²⁴ From my research, I have found that once a man from the *Big line* marries a woman from the *Small line* or vice versa, the woman will leave her village to go and live with her husband.²⁵ However, the fact that she has left her village to be with her husband does not affect her rights to ownership of the land belonging to her tribe.²⁶

Isabel

With regards to Isabel, which is also known as San Cristobal, there are also two main land owning groups. Based on the fact that there are different dialects spoken on the Island of Isabel, different areas refer to these two groups with different local names.²⁷ Based on the interview I had with one of my classmates who comes from Isabel, I was told that from the area she comes from there are two land owning groups known as *Posagomo* and *Vunagi*.²⁸ However, her explanation was quite different from what was relayed to me from the interviewees from Guadalcanal and North Pentecost whom I interviewed. She stated that these two land owning groups are commonly known as clans and under these two clans are the different existing landowning tribes.²⁹ This explanation was quite hard for me to follow given that all along I have known that clans come under tribes. However, it made more sense when I came across the case of *Kile v Sele - re Sareai Land LR 681 [1998] SBLC 1; Land Case No 3 of 1993 (7 September 1998)*, which was heard in the Isabel Local Court.

The case of *Kile v Sele - re Sareai Land LR 681 [1998] SBLC 1; Land Case No 3 of 1993 (7 September 1998)*, clearly illustrates the way in which land is being inherited in Isabel. Furthermore, it also refers to the two main landowning groups but this time in a different dialect. In this case, the issue of inheritance was clearly stated through a simple illustration. For instance it was stated that if a man marries and has children, his children will not inherit his land.³⁰ It is his sister and children who will inherit the land.³¹ As the custom in Isabel was, an arrangement can be done between the man and his sister for the man's son to marry his

²³ Above. N 22.

²⁴ Jelly Matebasia, Guadalcanal. May 11, 2016.

²⁵ Above. N 25.

²⁶ Above. N 25.

²⁷ Beauty Brightlyn, Isabel. May 25, 2016.

²⁸ Above. N 27.

²⁹ Above. N 27.

³⁰ Above. N 5.

³¹ Above. N 5.

sister's daughter.³² From the biblical perspective, this would be deemed as incest; however, this is one of the traditional ways on maintaining land within the clan.

This illustration depicts the facts of the case in hand, where a chief from the Baheai clan was said to have attempted to maintain land within his clan by making an arrangement with his sister for his son, who belonged to his mother's clan, Sesehu, to marry her daughter.³³ Given that it was a common practice in Isabel, the arrangement was successful and as a result a daughter was born from the said marriage.³⁴ Unfortunately, the daughter died causing the idea intended by the chief to be unsuccessful.³⁵ The land reverted back from the son seeing that he belonged to a different tribe and that he was not entitled to the land belonging to his father.³⁶ From this case, it can be seen that land passes down through the female line and that clans have also tried as much as possible to maintain land within themselves and are faced with the fear of losing land to another clan.

Santa Ana (Makira)

With regards to Santa Ana, and the fact that it is a matrilineal area, the same can be said with regards to inheritance, that is, land is passed down from mother to daughter. Given the very limited sources of information regarding Santa Ana, I was not able to gather much information regarding the land owning groups.

North Pentecost

In North Pentecost, land is also inherited through the female line. As was stated by Mr Bogiri during a guest presentation on the matrilineal culture practiced in North Pentecost in my Pacific Land Tenure class, there are two main landowning tribes namely the *Tabi* and *Bule* tribes.³⁷ The existence of these tribes is very important seeing that they determine a person's right of marriage and access to land.³⁸ When it comes to marriage, custom forbids a man from the Tabi tribe to marry a woman from the same tribe as himself.³⁹ A marriage would only be approved if it is between a man from the Tabi tribe and a woman from the Bule tribe, or vice versa.⁴⁰ Based on this, I have found that once a man from the Tabi tribe marries a woman from the Bule tribe, their children will belong to the Bule tribe seeing that their mother is from the Bule tribe.⁴¹ However, they can still live with their father on the Tabi land that he is living on. In this context, the father is only entitled to a right of use and so are his children.⁴²

Other ways that land can be inherited

³² Above. N 5.

³³ Above. N 5.

³⁴ Above. N 5.

³⁵ Above. N 5.

³⁶ Above. N 5.

³⁷ Bogari, North Pentecost. April 29, 2016

³⁸ Above. N 37.

³⁹ Above. N 37

⁴⁰ Above. N 37.

⁴¹ Above. N 37.

⁴² Above. N 37.

Based on the research carried out by Ruth Maetala on Guadalcanal, Isabal and Santa Ana (Makira), there are other ways in which land can be inherited apart from the common way of maternal succession. An example of this is done through the acceptance of a group of people or a family into a tribe.⁴³ In North Pentecost as was stated by Mr Bogiri, land can be inherited by way of adoption.⁴⁴ However, the adoption he is referring to is not related to that of a young child, but to that of a fully grown woman from another island in Vanuatu or from an overseas country who is married to a man from North Pentecost.⁴⁵ First and foremost, we will be focussing on Solomon Islands before moving on to Vanuatu.

Solomon Islands In the context of Solomon Islands, Ruth Maetala has come to identify a way in which people can inherit land through being accepted into a particular tribe. In such cases, traditional feasts and traditional ⁴⁶shell money are being exchanged along with other valuable goods.⁴⁷ Her research has also shown that there are three types of feasts associated with this kind of inheritance.⁴⁸ The first type of feasting is done to grant a right of access to the people who have been accepted into a tribe purposely for gardening.⁴⁹ Based on such arrangements, men and women are only entitled to a right of use or in other words, a secondary right over land.⁵⁰ The second type of feasting is purposely done for the right of settlement where people are granted the right to build their houses on a given piece of land.⁵¹ However, such rights are only temporary seeing that they are only viewed as a right of use.⁵² As stated by Maetala, this has contributed towards some disagreements between some tribespeople and those who were accepted into their tribe.⁵³ An example she used from an area in Guadalcanal which is known as Tasimboko, is that of a man called Eli.Eli, described how it is becoming more difficult to hold on to the land that was given to him through his father for gardening and settlement.⁵⁴ As the population of Tasimboko increases, original tribespeople are also finding ways to reclaim the areas which were granted to non-tribes for the purpose of gardening and settlement.⁵⁵ Prior to his father's death, a feast was made to ensure that Eli and his siblings were not chased out of the land.⁵⁶ Given that his mother was from another area in Guadalcanal, Eli is looking forward to the day when he can return to his mother's tribal land to escape the continuous tension he is facing in his father's land.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that a traditional ceremony was already made by his father, it has failed to grant him the permanent right to the land.

⁴³ Above. N 7.

⁴⁴ Above. N 7.

⁴⁵ Above. N 37.

⁴⁶ Above. N 7.

⁴⁷ Above. N 7.

⁴⁸ Above. N 7.

⁴⁹ Above. N 7.

⁵⁰ Above. N 7.

⁵¹ Above. N 7.

⁵² Above. N 7.

⁵³ Above. N 7.

⁵⁴ Above. N 7.

⁵⁵ Above. N 7.

⁵⁶ Above. N 7.

⁵⁷ Above. N 7.

As opposed to the context in Guadalcanal where men usually make feasts known as the *Chupu* to ensure that their families are able to live on their land when their time on this earth finally passes, the practice in Isabel is slightly different.⁵⁸ In Isabel, it is the women and their children who are placed with the responsibility of ensuring that they are not chased away from the land belonging to their husbands in the future when they are no longer alive.⁵⁹ In such arrangements, a *Fa gaemu thaego* (traditional food) is presented to the sisters of a man by his wife and children to seek their permission to remain in the land they are currently occupying in the event that the man dies.⁶⁰ In Isabel, Guadalcanal and Santa Ana (Makira) the final say is upon the sisters of a man.⁶¹ If their brother dies, they have all the right to send his wife and children back to the clans they came from.⁶² In some circumstances women remain with their children on the land belonging to their in-laws.⁶³ The third feasting is done for the purpose of adopting a child into a tribe.⁶⁴ Based on the fact that the populations of these three areas are increasing at a very fast rate, the idea of adoption is rarely considered except when it is really necessary.⁶⁵ Furthermore, it was stated that younger generations are not fully aware of the rationale behind the idea of adoption as compared to the past.⁶⁶ Consequently, adoption can only be considered when a woman does not have a daughter but needs one to retain ownership rights.⁶⁷ However, this has to be agreed upon by her husband.⁶⁸ Once an adoption is agreed upon, a traditional ceremony which includes the exchange of traditional food and shell money will take place to see that the child is accorded the same rights as that of a biological child.⁶⁹ In Guadalcanal, this is referred to as a *Sage*⁷⁰ and *Gajulehe* in Maringe, Isabel.⁷¹ The traditional ceremony is done to ensure that the adoption has been accepted by the public opinion.⁷²

Another special right to inheritance of land is sometimes practiced in Santa Ana (Makira). This is where land is granted through the clearing of land⁷³. Nothing of this nature was discovered in Guadalcanal and Isabel, only in Makira. Under this type of inheritance, the bravery of a man or woman who is unafraid to challenge the rights of the people (ancestors) who once owned the unoccupied land is required.⁷⁴ If a man or woman is successful in clearing an identifiable area within the tribal land without being harmed, the land will be automatically given to him or her with the belief that those who have gone before (ancestors) them are in favour of him or

⁵⁸ Above. N 24.

⁵⁹ Above. N 27.

⁶⁰ Above. N 27.

⁶¹ Above. N 7.

⁶² Above. N 7.

⁶³ Above. N 7.

⁶⁴ Above. N 7.

⁶⁵ Above. N 7.

⁶⁶ Above. N 7.

⁶⁷ Above. N 7.

⁶⁸ Above. N 7.

⁶⁹ Above. N 7.

⁷⁰ Above. N 7.

⁷¹ Above. N 7.

⁷² Above. N 7.

⁷³ Above. N 7.

⁷⁴ Above. N 7.

her.⁷⁵ A traditional ceremony where traditional food and shell money are exchanged also takes place to seal the transfer when the land was cleared.⁷⁶ Given that Santa Ana is a matrilineal area, such inheritance would be transferred to the daughters of the man or woman who was granted the right to ownership through clearing.⁷⁷ In the event that matrilineal procedures are being compromised, very little has been said on whether such inheritance can be undone. Consequently, this type of inheritance has posed a number of problems in Santa Ana.⁷⁸

Vanuatu In the context of North Pentecost, a very special type of adoption is carried out.. As was mentioned earlier, this adoption refers to that of a woman from another island in Vanuatu or an overseas country who is married to a man from Pentecost.⁷⁹ Under this arrangement the tribe that does the adoption is the maternal tribe of the man, or in other words, the tribe from which the man's mother comes.⁸⁰ However, this arrangement can only be done subject to consent on the part of the tribe who will be doing the adoption and the man who wishes for his wife to be granted a right of ownership under the said tribe.⁸¹

With regards to whether an adopted child is in a position to inherit land, the general principle is that this is determined by the traditional ceremony that takes place to mark the adoption of the child.⁸² As I have already mentioned, this traditional ceremony includes the exchange of traditional food and shell money to ensure that it has been accepted through the public opinion. Furthermore, it ensures that the child is accorded the same rights as that of a biological child. From this, the question of whether he or she can inherit ownership rights can be answered. Given that he or she has been accorded the same rights as those belonging to a biological child, he or she will automatically be given the right to inherit land.

Illegitimacy

Looking at the issue of illegitimacy, custom in the four areas of study clearly states that a child who is born to a woman outside of marriage automatically becomes part of the woman's tribe.⁸³ This is regardless of whether the woman decides to keep the child or to give it away to someone else to look after.⁸⁴ In most circumstances the child is likely to be kept by the woman's parents.⁸⁵ As stated by my interviewees, there has never been a situation where an illegitimate child is denied from being a part of his or her mother's tribe simply because the mother does not want to raise it.

⁷⁵ Above. N 7.

⁷⁶ Above. N 7.

⁷⁷ Above. N 7.

⁷⁸ Above. N 7.

⁷⁹ Above. N 37.

⁸⁰ Annette Kausiama, North Pentecost. May 9, 2016.

⁸¹ Above. N 80.

⁸² Above. N 80.

⁸³ Above. N 80.

⁸⁴ Above. N 80.

⁸⁵ Above. N 80.

In Isabel, it is part of custom that any child born to a single mother belongs to the tribe.⁸⁶ The same applies to a child born outside his or her mother's marriage seeing that he or she is also accorded the same rights and privileges of his or her half- brothers and sisters.⁸⁷ On that note, it is common in Guadalcanal that an illegitimate child will not be claimed by his or her father, but remains with his or her mother's tribe.⁸⁸ This proves that being illegitimate does not affect one's right to ownership. The same can be said for North Pentecost.

Roles of men and women in matrilineal cultures

i. Women

Women play a very important role in places such as Guadalcanal, Isabel, and Santa Ana (Makira) in Solomon Islands, and North Pentecost in Vanuatu. It is part of their responsibility to ensure that the younger generations are taught the importance of maintaining cultural norms and values.⁸⁹ In matrilineal areas, young boys and men are expected to learn about their ancestral origins from their mothers or grandmothers, usually by word of mouth or oral history.⁹⁰ The significance of this will be covered when we look the role of men in matrilineal areas.

When relaying oral history to their sons, women are tasked with the responsibility of making sure that what they teach would be put into correct practice when it comes to knowledge regarding land and land administration.⁹¹ At the tribal level, women from matrilineal societies are commonly referred to as the "boss"; this was the case in Santa Ana (Makira) based on Ruth Maetala's interview with the people.⁹² The reason behind this as stated by the interviewees, is that women are responsible for the continuation of a tribe.⁹³ However, the continuance of a tribe depends greatly on the birth of female children.⁹⁴ In the case when there are fewer girls born to a tribe, the chances of maintaining ownership of land within a tribe would be very slim.⁹⁵ The role of women at the family level is closely associated with decisions relating to food preparation, the gathering of food crops, domestic chores, and child rearing as well as meeting the needs of their husbands.⁹⁶

At the community level, the responsibility of organising feasts is placed on the women, as well as decisions relating to the church and the peace and unity of the village.⁹⁷ However, the role of women is greatly influenced by the relationship they have with men. An example taken from Maetala's research in Kamau, Guadalcanal, has shown that most women acknowledge

⁸⁶ Above. N 27.

⁸⁷ Above. N 7.

⁸⁸ Above. N 7.

⁸⁹ Above. N 7.

⁹⁰ Above. N 7.

⁹¹ Above. N 7.

⁹² Above. N 7.

⁹³ Above. N 7.

⁹⁴ Above. N 7.

⁹⁵ Above. N 7.

⁹⁶ Above. N 7.

⁹⁷ Above. N 7.

that despite the fact that they are successors to land by birth and have rights that are equal to their brothers, they still feel the need not to override the views of their brothers.⁹⁸ This is because their brothers are entrusted with the traditional role of protecting women, children, and most importantly the land.⁹⁹

In North Pentecost, the role of women plays a very significant part in the day to day running of the communities.¹⁰⁰ On that note, it is said that a woman accumulates respect when people see her husband becoming successful in traditional transactions and other major activities that are highly valued by the people of North Pentecost.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the role performed by both the men and women is performed in such a way that each complements the other.¹⁰² In other words, the role played by women in North Pentecost is also similar to that in Guadalcanal, Isabel and Makira. Despite the fact that land is passed on through the female line, the day to day administrative work and care relating to land remains with the male side of the line.¹⁰³

In principle, they are always consulted to give their views in decisions relating to land, however, the final say remains with the tribal chiefs who mainly comprise of males.¹⁰⁴ In an interview conducted by Anna Naupa with a chief from the Hurilau district, he explained that there are reasons as to why women are being allowed to openly participate in issues relating to land.¹⁰⁵ One of the reasons he gave was the fact that women are being seen as a symbol of peace and unity between the two main tribes of North Pentecost.¹⁰⁶ Given the respect that is shown towards women in North Pentecost the chief continued to state that they do not want to risk putting them in a position that would result in them being addressed in a disrespectful manner, especially in matters relating to land.¹⁰⁷

ii. Men

In matrilineal societies men have always played a very significant role. In the four areas that we have been referring to throughout this essay, men have been proven to play a huge role in negotiating, administering, managing the land, and most important is the fact that they are the custodians of the land, women and children.¹⁰⁸ The role of men in matrilineal societies also explains the reason as to why the matrilineal culture has been chosen to be practised. From the information I have gathered, I came to find that this unique culture is closely linked to the head-hunting days where men would go out to defend their tribes and land, and in some instances, they are killed in combat.¹⁰⁹ Women on the other hand were being spared on many occasions

⁹⁸ Above. N 7.

⁹⁹ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁰ Above. N 7.

¹⁰¹ Above. N 7.

¹⁰² Above. N 7.

¹⁰³ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁴ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁵ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁶ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁷ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁸ Above. N 7.

¹⁰⁹ Above. N 7.

to maintain the link between their tribes and the land they own.¹¹⁰ Their roles as custodians of the land and protectors of women and children is greatly driven by the fact that they are not child bearers, and it is for that reason that they must give their lives to save the land for their women and children.¹¹¹ In Isabel, men are referred to as: *Gajuhele* or dead branches seeing that they cannot guarantee the continuation of a tribe.¹¹²

Despite the fact that men are not seen as child bearers, they are tasked with the toughest roles that are crucial to the maintenance of their tribes. Many are appointed as tribal leaders who are faced with critical decision making with regards to land matters and other matters relating to the day to day activities of the community.¹¹³ In North Pentecost, they are given the responsibility of looking after the land belonging to their sisters, to ensure that the land is kept safe until the day their sisters decide to return home to stay permanently.¹¹⁴ The fact that men are recognized as leaders within matrilineal societies is reason enough to believe that this system is one that values the rights of both men and women.

Changes currently affecting the significance of the matrilineal land tenure system

As more and more women become successful in their careers, the tendency to pay attention to oral history also decreases.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the fact that many women are taking part in formal employment and other money earning activities has also posed serious questions about the future of the system itself.¹¹⁶ Some also lack the knowledge regarding ancestral backgrounds.¹¹⁷ As mothers, many have come to spend so much time on providing for their families and have had no time at all to spare to learn about the significance of the general principles governing their system of land tenure.¹¹⁸ The fact that men are at most times vocal in matters relating to their communities and land has also posed a question as to the superiority of women in matrilineal societies.¹¹⁹ In theory, the matrilineal system functions in such a way that women are the rightful owners of land, while men are only entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the land for them (women). However, from the research carried out on North Pentecost, Isabel, Guadalcanal and Santa Ana (Makira), it seems that men are the final decision makers when it comes to land.¹²⁰

The introduction of Christianity¹²¹ is also another factor that is posing a threat to the four areas we have been discussing throughout the essay. Prior to European contact and Christianity, women in Isabel stood by their men during ancestral worship ceremonies by providing

¹¹⁰ Above. N 7.

¹¹¹ Above. N 7.

¹¹² Above. N 7.

¹¹³ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁴ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁵ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁶ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁷ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁸ Above. N 7.

¹¹⁹ Above. N 7.

¹²⁰ Above. N 7.

¹²¹ Above. N 7.

logistical support.¹²² However, their strong links and governance over their land are now undermined given that their roles were once influenced by the act of ancestral worship which is condemned by the Christian faith currently practised in Isabel.¹²³

With regards to North Pentecost, the challenge that women are faced with is greatly influenced by changing attitudes. Currently, North Pentecost is becoming more and more densely populated.¹²⁴ And just like other areas in Vanuatu, the population is serviced by government facilities, such as schools and medical centres. These facilities were built on customary land subject to the consent of chiefs, landowners, and also the community as a whole.¹²⁵ People believed that such facilities would be beneficial to the community as a whole, which led them into allowing their land to house the schools and medical centres.¹²⁶ However, things changed when the new land laws were introduced in 1980. Under these new laws, all land that accommodated services provided by the government were required to be registered.¹²⁷ This became an issue seeing that the requirement was against the principles of the land tenure system in North Pentecost.¹²⁸ The fact that schools and churches have been collaborating to convince people that traditional values are of less value in the global context is another factor that contributes to the changing attitudes in North Pentecost.¹²⁹ On that note, there is not a single school that has taken the opportunity to insert traditional knowledge into its curriculum, which has resulted in a generation that knows nothing about their traditional back-grounds.¹³⁰ This is also experienced in the other three areas in the Solomon Islands that we have been focusing on. Churches have also played a very huge role in convincing people not to live the way they used to prior to European contact.¹³¹ An example of this is the condemnation of ancestral worship.¹³²

All these reasons have contributed significantly to the changes affecting the matrilineal system, specifically in Guadalcanal, Isabel (San Cristobal), Santa Ana (Makira) in the Solomon Islands and North Pentecost in Vanuatu.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the matrilineal system of land tenure is one that is unique, and very much values the existence of both men and women. The main idea behind this system is based on the fact that women are seen as child bearers and that the continuity of the tribe depends greatly on them. Despite the fact that land is owned by the women, it is the men that have the last say with regards to matters concerning land. Throughout the years, the matrilineal system of land tenure has been faced with challenges that have to some extent threatened the very principles that govern the system. As seen towards the end of this essay, these challenges are related to lack

¹²² Above. N 7.

¹²³ Above. N 7.

¹²⁴ Above. N 7.

¹²⁵ Above. N 7.

¹²⁶ Above. N 7.

¹²⁷ Above. N 7.

¹²⁸ Above. N 7.

¹²⁹ Above. N 7.

¹³⁰ Above. N 7.

¹³¹ Above. N 7.

¹³² Above. N 7.

of traditional, ancestral and custom knowledge. Furthermore, these challenges are also influenced by the participation of women in formal employment and other money earning activities. Currently, there is a significant need for more research to be taken on this particular system of land tenure so that we can keep track of where it is heading and to weigh out the options of how to address the situation if need be. As Pacific Islanders, we are defined by our culture, ancestral origins and our land. Based on these three things, our identity is revealed. A person can only have a sense of belonging if he or she truly understands the ways of those who have gone before them and the importance of maintaining the underlining principles that guided the matrilineal system of land tenure since the earliest days of its existence to this current date. As was always stated by my History lecturers, in order for one to maintain his or her standing in the global context, he or she must be able to define and acknowledge his or her past. With this, it is very important to address the threats that are currently disturbing the harmony that once existed in the matrilineal culture.

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