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Creating CBI programs in South Pacific small island states: The question of *nationhood* (Part 2)

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This is the second part of a three-part article series, with the first part to be found [here](#).

IV. The meaning of nationhood in the West

Nationhood demarks the legal status of being a nation, but also includes the question of national identity and independence. Statehood then means the legal status of external recognition as an independent nation at the international law level. Nation- and statehood are to connect nations to a broader legal matrix, such as to the international community of states, as well as to create demarcations toward other nations.

From the idea of the nation state flows the concept of citizenship, with citizenship and nationality often conflated, the former demarking the municipal legal connection between a person and the state matrix, and the latter that relationships' aspect in the international law forum.

Nationhood in the South Pacific, and, consequently, citizenship, are contentious and contested paradigms. This is because some would argue that there is nothing much to discuss: Some of the demarking features of nationalism are drawn from sources which would perhaps not readily self-identify with the nation.

Both concepts usually have no legal need to be inclusive of actual cultural values. Culture may or may not necessarily coincide with nationhood, nor automatically align or translate into nationhood, nationality or citizenship.

Why were nations created in the West? One may of course think of the need to end the 30 years of war in the Peace of Westphalia. The need for state sovereignty emerged allowing for insulation from constant warfare between small estates and realms, against neighbors forming

adversarial alliances and empires to arise. A system of independent states and the concept of nationhood guaranteed the concept of sovereignty to arise, leading to the refraining from interference in each other's domestic affairs through an often fragile equilibrium of power and treaties purporting to respect of power and non-intervention and invasion, especially for territories connected on the continent.

V. South Pacific Nation-building: An incomplete exercise?

In the South Pacific today, arguably, the nation-building process is an incomplete one. To understand the meaning of citizenship here, so it could be hypothesized, reference would need to be made to a wider and perhaps different self-understanding inclusive of times prior to both independence and colonialization, from joint local-regional cultural- identity and heritage. If nationhood is developing, citizenship cannot be fully developed.

Even if a nation officially exists on paper, there may be internal and external processes at work that still materially finalize the exercise of nation-building. For this reason, it can at times become difficult for CBI laws to be viewed as finite and cohesive.

Cultural status, identity, mores or morals may to some extent be expressed through citizenship, but are to a large extent found in other doctrinal paradigms, such as custom. If anything, the nation state is an entity to some extent creating prerequisites for cultural identities, not replacing culture. Culture may in many ways supersede nationhood and with it, nationality and citizenship in terms of importance and acceptance.

It is not clear whether citizenship can develop to include culture or whether other concepts are better suited to manage a deeper understanding of belonging and acceptance.

As we know, especially on the example of CBI, citizenship is a formal legal status, generic, technical and transactional, a mere legal container determining the bordered paradigm, may hold some reference to culture. However, citizenship is, at least in the South Pacific islands and when compared to the West, itself perhaps less cultural or comes with the same meaning as ancient identities and common ties.

Assigned and developing meanings of the term nationhood or citizenship may differ from a conventional understanding. The significance of custom (kastom) and related codifications of tradition for the formation of national identities cannot be overestimated.

The picture of a relatively stable South Pacific on a journey toward general independence and nationhood was shattered in the late 1980s with the Fijian 'coup-culture', as well as with the prolonged conflict in Bougainville, showcasing deep issues of acceptance of governing powers in parts of the community, after all, based on cultural differences.

CBI, however, beneficial for the survival of the very concept of the nation, and at any rate, is making a come-back in the region, incorporating the experience from the early proto-schemes.

It is yet important for CBI sustainability that planners realize that, in essence, it is not clear whether the Western model of nation building has even fully arrived in the South Pacific environment.

Counter-intuitively, perhaps, from the Western perspective, two narratives apply, that of forces and vectors toward nationalization, as well as the narrative of idyllic places with tenuous and inchoate national cultures, emphasizing spheres of indigenous culture that is primarily local not national. Does nationhood necessarily even need to be the goal and destination of a

journey toward self-identity of Pacific cultures? Where countries such as Vanuatu has at times been viewed as the world's [happiest nation](#), this may be stemming from many factors such as well-being, the ecological footprint, including culture, and with the national element not necessarily being self-evident. Nationhood, just as much as citizenship, as is the case in many places, appears subject to individual interpretation, with identity, moral, political and other values readily assigned, and with various meanings beyond the narrow legal strict sense of the terms. Citizenship and nationality are, at law, none of these things, but they can be. While Pacific peoples may thus employ the term of 'nation' in reference and in contrast to other nations' peoples, this may be so without assigning assumptions of loyalty, allegiance, self-identity or civic consciousness to the idea of nation as has usually been the case in the West, at least, for the most part of the nation state paradigm existing. This cultural attitude then necessarily also translates into how citizenship is handled in the region, and it is what makes the region unique in many fascinating ways.

VI. Beyond Nationhood: Pacific Region & Culture

In the South Pacific region, there seems to be little if any initial justification to run things by the state concept and, in consequence, to utilize citizenship as a derivative ordering principle. An interesting question emerges: What if the question of independence from colonial power had never been attached to the concept nationhood, would the South Pacific realms had made a move to nationhood to rely on the state concept or rather return to their established pre-colonial ways of localized decentral power relations? This question may never be answered.

Overall, one may be led to hypothesize that the South Pacific region does seem somewhat lost in translation and the state may not mean as much as it does in the West. If this is indeed the case, the matter of CBI in the region is a somewhat fragile one and may come with tensions that must be understood on their very own specific terms.

While some Pacific Island nations such as Samoa and Tonga may be viewed to having relatively coherent experiences with the concept of nationhood, with the Kingdom of Tonga displaying some traditional euro-centric criteria for nationhood together with political, ethnic and linguistic spheres coinciding, this may not the same for every other place in the Pacific, and certainly not coherently so and at all times.

Even the categories of Mela-, Poly- and Micronesia are not necessarily helpful to describe or delineate the region, are artificial at best and suggest completely different categories of peoples which is, with Australian Archaeologist and Anthropologist [Matthew Spriggs](#) but an anthropological illusion. In any case, due to isolation island culture is not to be explained by diffusion with externalities evidenced in a need for nationhood status but primarily from internal developments: The engine of island evolution is not adaptation to environmental variation in any direct sense, but is internal status rivalry, somewhat insulated from the outside world.

The perspective of the small island in the South Pacific, except for those adjacent to any mainland, is indeed unique and insular. The region, with perhaps the notable exception of Tonga to some extent, was not one of conquest. There was trade, as well as exchange of culture and knowledge, for example, in regards to [plants](#) (such as the paper Mulberry plant).

Are there any meaningful external common denominators in the region? The key to any regional common identity vector could indeed be unearthed from a single source of some joint South Pacific culture, being the one found in the [Lapita site](#) on New Caledonia's Grande Terre,

with its pottery findings functioning as some common cultural denominator of cultural connection and interaction. Austronesian common heritage and has perhaps ultimately derived from the ancient indigenous peoples of Taiwan.

Thus, at any rate, beyond the nation an individual, local-cultural as well as regional approach may be of interest to create a deeper understanding for CBI planning.

VII. Nationhood & the ‘people’

In light of the above, the spheres of nation and culture may hence effectively exist somewhat independently outside and in parallel to one another. The umbrella concept and the narrative of nationhood, including national identity, may lead an existence in reflection but not necessarily congruent to diverse cultural and local self-determinants and self- and group-identity, to matters existing outside nationhood and its particular version of identity.

The concept of nation is not to go anywhere and is here to stay. The question becomes how the concept is to be informed and read. In the alternative, which complementary ordering paradigm could inform holistic CBI planning vis-à-vis the concept of nation, if any? Can such ordering paradigm then assist in a more wholesome understanding of ‘nation’? Unlike nationals or citizens, individuals can also be conceptualized as the ‘people’. Who are the ‘people’ of a place? This could be explained subject to certain denominators and effective bonds (a question different and beyond the 1955 International Court of Justice’s limited circumstantial application of *Nottebohm* with its terminology of a ‘genuine connection’): In the *Western Sahara* case before the International Court of Justice, the Spanish counsel described the Sahwari of the Western Sahara as follows (1975: at 1402):

A Saharan people, with its own well-defined character, made up of autonomous tribes, independent of any external authority [...] this people lived in a fairly well-defined area and had developed an organization and a system of life in common, on the basis of collective self-awareness and mutual solidarity [...] There was thus, according to Spain, a Sahwari people at the time of colonization, coherent and distinct.

Again, this definition is not about nationality or citizenship, and also not one of naturalization, nor are citizenship and naturalization needed for any description of real-life connections and existing people. How does this lens now assist in CBI assumed naturalizations? Arguably, focus for CBI planning is to be less on the perceived ordering power of the nation but could perhaps be one with a stronger focus directly on the people. This may then contribute to the deeper understanding of CBI programs.

End of Part 2 (Part 1 to be found [here](#), and Part 3 to be found [here](#))