

POLICING IN THE PACIFIC

WHY THE WONTOK SYSTEM OF THE SOLOMONS ENCOURAGES CORRUPTION

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Introduction

Jason Sargent spent 4 months serving in the Solomon Islands in 2003 as part of the (RAMSI) Royal Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, when he was a uniformed member of the Australian Federal Police in the Protective Service section. This paper will examine how policing in the Solomon Islands will always face the reality of corruption due to the tribal system known as the Wontok system of family association and protection

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The Wontok

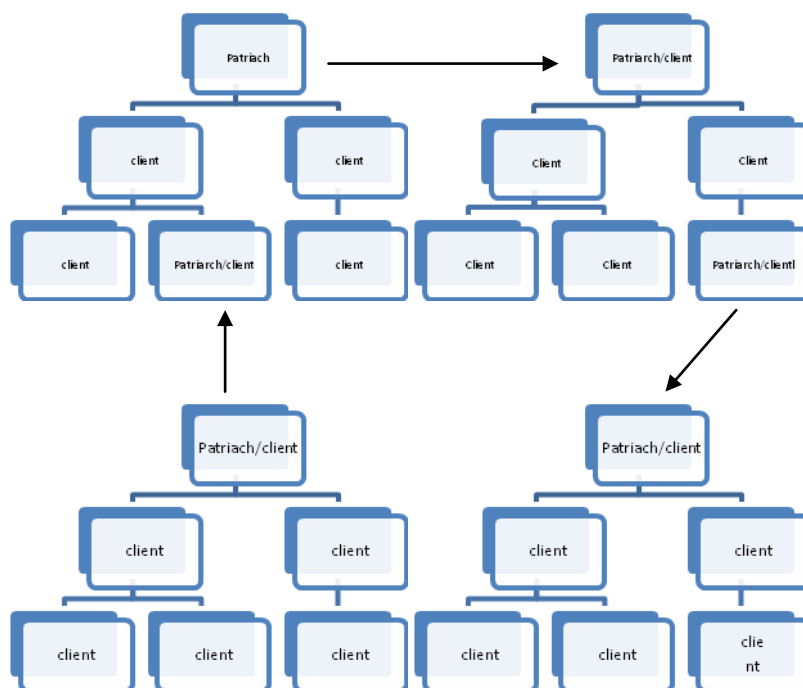
The Wontok system is not in itself a unique system, while the name Wontok is unique to the Solomon Island region and the Papua area, the system and or hierarchical method by which it operates is not.

The Wontok can best be described as a Dependant or Client, of a Client Patron relationship as described by (Albini, J, L. Rogers, R, E. Anderson, J. 1999.). We can identify that the Wontok is a member of a communal group who by their association is afforded a place of status and or privileges in return for compliance to both group and individual obligations, as well as agreeing to abide by an obligation to the head of the Wontok group, or what may also be called the “Head Man” of the Village or the “Patron”.

The Wontok is usually a Wontok for life unless they are disowned by the group and set outside of the network. The system is unique in that it encompasses both cronyism as well as nepotism as members do not have to be blood related, but can still be taken into the protection of a group.

This is observable in the Solomon Wontok system by way of adopted children or long term friends being taken into the group.

The Wontok System



Unique factors of the system

As has been identified, the system operates on a Patron Client system (Albini, J, L. Rogers, R, E. Anderson, J. 1999.) however it is deeper than this alone, the system permeates all levels of the society from the highest office to the simplest role, and the obligation on all members is binding as much on the Client as on the Patron.

Considering this leads us to identify that the system in some aspects may have some factors that are similar to “Stockholm syndrome” (Dawson, L, L, 1998). In the case of Stockholm syndrome the captive comes to identify and sometimes love the captor (Dawson, L, L, 1998). So to, we see that this same type of behaviour has developed in the Solomon Wontok system, both people who are related and not related to the Patriarch will seemingly give their lives for the Patron and agree with any view put across by the Patriarch, in return for rewards and favourable treatment.

This is evident when we look at the case of Harold Kekke the notorious “Rebel leader and Murderer” from the Weather coast of the Solomon Islands. Kekke’s Wontok system utilised mainly non blood relatives, but Wontoks none the less, who in no way challenged or asked as to the validity of their or the groups actions against seemingly innocent people. These Wontoks would have happily given their life for Kekke. They identified and loved Kekke and believed that he was a messenger of God, and that he heard revelations from God. With this knowledge they believed that he could protect them. The reality was that to not ascribe and love him meant certain death and expulsion from the Kekke cult or Wontok group.

Another point to note is that while Clients or Wontoks can be a dependant they can at the same time be a Patron of their own Wontok group, thereby ensuring and facilitating the growth of the tentacles throughout the whole community (Albini, J, L. Rogers, R, E. Anderson, J. 1999).

In some respects this mirrors the behaviour seen in many alternative or cult like organisations such as Kekke’s. Such blind obedience was also observed in the atrocities that were committed during the Civil War in the Solomon Islands. Police officers aligned themselves to a patriarch and ethics (Klening, J. 1999) went out the window, as a result the Police service became a private army committing an array of crimes at the behest of a few patriarchs.

A comparison can also be drawn between the Solomon Wontok system and that described by Balloni, A. Bisi, A, F. Mazzucato, F. Sette, in Viano (1999) where they describe the infiltration of foreign crime groups into the Emilia Romagna region in Italy. Essentially they state that for the Police to infiltrate these groups is nearly impossible because of the ethnic groups that these crime syndicates originate from, those being: Chinese, Russian, Yugoslavian, & Moroccan and that all of these groups operate from a Patron Client obligation system and that many of the groups only accept family members to ensure that the system is kept safe and that no one goes against the system Balloni, A. Bisi, A, F. Mazzucato, F. Sette, in Viano (1999).

The Solomons

At this point it is pertinent to identify some facts about the people of the Solomons and their tribal relationships or lack thereof. The islands themselves are a collective of independent tribes each hailing from individual islands, collectively known as the Solomon Islands. The main island or largest island in the group is Guadalcanal Island where the capital of the Solomons, Honiara, is located, then followed by Malita, Sava and so on.

Originally each Island was its own nation, and the cultural differences are still evident when observing the skin colour, cultural practices, and nuances of members from the different island groups. Originally all they were Head Hunting warring tribes who regularly invaded and warred with each other. It was not until 1568 that the individual island nations were brought together by Spanish navigator Alvaro de Mendana who discovered the islands at that time. He Alvaro united the groups, regardless of their desire to be one nation or not.

Currently the Solomon Islands is a Constitutional Monarchy with the Queen of the Solomon Islands at present Elizabeth II as head of state, the spoken language is Pidgin English with formal English being the second language.

Source: www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/553556/Solomon.../History

Corruption and the Wontok system

The main catalyst of corruption in the Solomon Islands is the Wontok system. This cultural system is also the reason as to why corruption throughout the lives of the Solomon Islanders is not only accepted, but is viewed as the norm and the way of life in this nation.

The depth of corruption however as a result of the Wontok system is unique. Former Politicians, Former senior and junior members of the Police, and many other prominent and general members of the society are serving or have served penal sentences due to their actions or corruption associated with the Wontok system.

When considering Police corruption Goldstein as quoted in Kleining (1999) states that police corruption is best described as: *“the misuse of authority by a police officer in a manner designed to produce personal gain for the officer or for others”*.

In the Wontok system this “gain” is not just for oneself, it is also for the benefit of the Wontok group. This demonstrates how the cycle of corruption cycles within the group between the Patriarchs and the Clients, The Patriarch will require an action or deed be done by a Client, the Client will require the Patriarch to ensure protection, and the benefit to be gained will be distributed and proportionate to the status of the members of the group.

We then have to pose the obvious question: Why can't the system be stopped? The first answer would be that it has to be seen as wrong, or corruption by the community, and not as a normal part of life, prior to it being identified as a practice that is wrong or corrupt.

Secondly the lives of the people in this geographical region, is at, or below the level of a third world country in some or nearly all regards. This like any similar culture who find www.internetjournalofcriminology.com

themselves living well attached to a subsistence life identify and see that what we call corruption as it is dictated by the conditions of their Wontok system, they simply identify as just living or surviving.

The levels of corruption within the Police service of the Solomons therefore certainly increased after the coup and as a result of the civil war. A major catalyst to the increase in corruption was boredom or having nothing to actually do (Kleinig, 1999). If the Police service has essentially been dealt a blow or had literally all authority taken from them, and the populace have utter contempt for them as was the case, then moral, ethics, work ethic and an eagerness to uphold the law die.

As Kleinig stated: “....corruption is primarily a problem of motivation. (1999).

So let us review the factors to this point that have certainly assisted the corruption:

1. The cultural system known as the Wontok system
2. The agreement for protection or to provide protection to others
3. Tribal obligations, Client Patron relationship
4. Loss of any relevance to the public you have sworn to protect
5. A coupé, loss of central Government, no direction forth coming
6. No pay, no money to feed or cloth the Wontok group
7. No work to do, therefore a sense of worthlessness and idleness or boredom
8. Motivation to do the job and uphold the ethical values and rule of law are gone

Result: Corruption at all levels of the policing service

So here we have the factors that are most responsible for the levels of corruption in the Solomons' Police service. I would like to now expand a little of the cultural acceptance factor in relation to its part in the corruption.

Cultural acceptance

Each culture and society has what they identify as cultural norms or practices and behaviours that in their society are socially acceptable and not as seen as outside the norms of cultural acceptance.

The Wontok system is in reality no different. Look at it from a purely tribal perspective, to ensure the survival of the tribe and individuals the system ensures this need, everyone gets fed and taken care of within your own little group and everyone is happy. From this tribal view that is fine, however when the tribal element flows over into mix of Western Government and democratic rule and by causal linkage the Policing and Justice system then problems exist.

If the people of the Solomons had remained purely tribal and had never adopted by want of force the ideal of a Western system of life and society then the Wontok system would have remained not only an integral part of their life and survival system it would have been a beneficial system for them. The reality is however that this did not occur, and they did adopt

such systems that as a result caused a meeting or butting of the heads in relation to the two systems.

Why cessation of the system is nearly impossible

To stop corruption as a result of the Wontok system is in the view of the author impossible, while a reduction in the levels of corruption can be achieved, to wipe out corruption within the Police and Society in general is never going to occur.

Why? Firstly as discussed we have a tribal based nation working with two systems, those being the Traditional Wontok and tribal systems of support, and the Western system of Government and Policing with all of its Ethics and the like. There is a true dichotomy between the two, one that I do not have to state here, as I am sure it is evident to the reader.

Both systems are actively used and encouraged in Solomons society, one because it is the method of policing as laid down by the Government and by extension their adherence to a West Minster system, and the second as it is tradition. While the two are in existence and used at the same time corruption will never be stopped in the police force or the populace of the Solomon Islands.

Where to from here

Change comes slowly to some Island nations and that is not always a bad, in relation to corruption for the Police of the Solomons a multi faceted approach is of potential. Not with the aim of wiping corruption out, but with the aim of reducing it to minor levels of corruption or as what has been identified from a Western Policing perspective as a failure to act rather than “Corruption” (Kleinig. 1999).

So it comes down to it on the one hand accepting that they the Islanders have an obligation under the Wontok system that can never be removed, and on the other hand combining that knowledge with education as to what is an acceptable form of adherence to that system. So that while corruption is not encouraged or given official accent it is understood for its tribal and traditional value and necessity to the people.

A journey that presently has a long way to go.

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