Re-Defining the Role of Tribal Leadership in the Contemporary Governance Systems of Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

Many former European colonies adopted Western leadership models and governance systems after becoming independent, believing that these systems were appropriate to facilitate social and economic development and promote good governance in their countries. This paper argues that the Western leadership systems (i.e. based on the adopted Western governance structures, models and institutions) at the local level are undermining the authority and influence of tribal leaders. Western leadership systems can result in a lack of influential leadership in community mobilisation efforts, community involvement and participation in the development process.

The paper suggests that there is a need to identify an appropriate local level governance structure that incorporates indigenous leadership and social structures, which would enable tribal leaders and the people to be more actively involved in the development process. The involvement of tribal leaders would provide influential leadership at the village and community level in the development process, something that is frequently lacking in the current local level governance systems in Papua New Guinea.
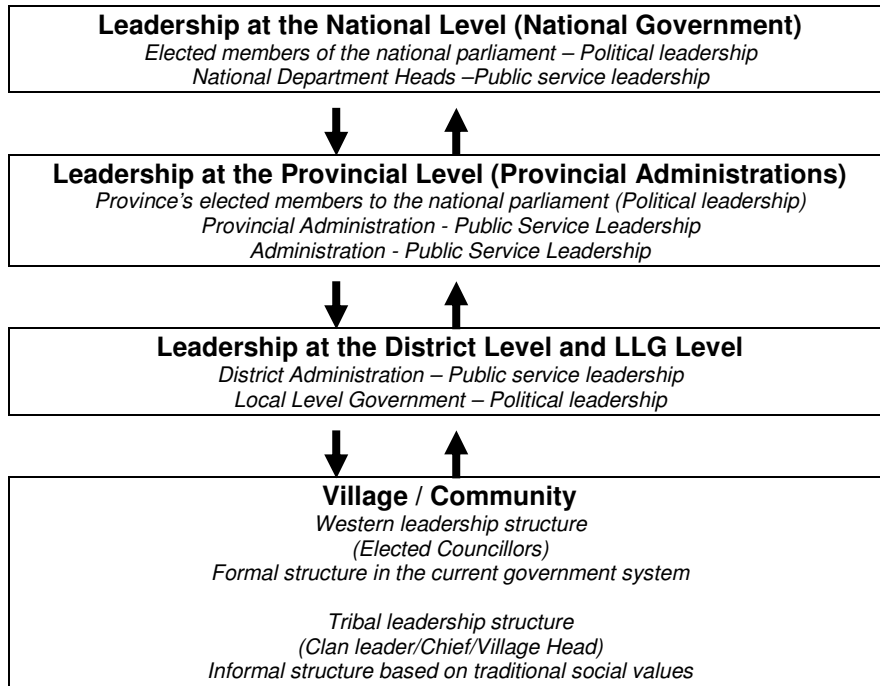
Introduction

Papua New Guinea, a former colony of Australia, adopted a Western leadership model and governance system after becoming an independent nation in 1975. However, the current governance system based on this model is not enhancing stable leadership at the local level thus resulting in a lack of effective development in the districts and villages. It is argued that such problems could be the result of adopting a Western governance system (which is foreign in nature) in Papua New where people's culture, way of life and their views and perceptions of leadership are very different.

Current leadership literature does not clarify the relationship between the adopted Western leadership and the local tribal leadership systems in the contemporary governance systems in Papua New Guinea. Therefore such relationships are not clearly understood in the development process.

Figure 1 illustrates the current governance structure in PNG.

Figure 1. Leadership structure in the current governance systems in PNG

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│    Leadership at the National Level (National Government) │
│    Elected members of the national parliament – Political │
│                       leadership                          │
│    National Department Heads –Public service leadership   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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│  Leadership at the Provincial Level (Provincial           │
│                   Administrations)                        │
│  Province's elected members to the national parliament    │
│               (Political leadership)                      │
│    Provincial Administration - Public Service Leadership  │
│        Administration - Public Service Leadership         │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                       ↓ ↑
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│      Leadership at the District Level and LLG Level       │
│    District Administration – Public service leadership    │
│      Local Level Government – Political leadership         │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                       ↓ ↑
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                  Village / Community                      │
│              Western leadership structure                 │
│                 (Elected Councillors)                     │
│      Formal structure in the current government system    │
│                                                           │
│              Tribal leadership structure                  │
│            (Clan leader/Chief/Village Head)               │
│    Informal structure based on traditional social values  │
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Ambang, 2006

Overview of leadership and governance in Papua New Guinea

In leadership, governance and development literature, it is stressed that stable leadership is essential for good governance and long-term development incentives (Bass, 1985; Turner, 1991; Kotter, 1999). Generations of PNG leaders have come and gone, but there appears to be little improvement to the deteriorating social and economic developments in PNG particularly in the rural sector. Lack of development in PNG is claimed to be the result of unstable and bad leadership (Dorney, 1990, Lamour, 1998)

The issue of stable leadership and governance has always been of particular concern in PNG. Foreign development partners have raised the concern about unstable leadership and its impact on investor confidence. This includes major aid donors like Australia (AusAid), the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the European Union (EU). Thus a major challenge for PNG is to achieve a reputation of good governance to facilitate effective development and improved living standards. This can be achieved if stable and good leadership is maintained at all levels of goverance. In an effort to improve governance systems, the government of PNG started introducing public service reform in the 1990s (Turner, 2003; Lamour, 1998).

The concept of leadership

Leadership is defined in various ways and claimed to be one of the key driving forces for improving governance systems (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 1998). Leadership is described as a 'social influence process', whereby one person is able, over time, to maintain greater control over others as the prerequisite tasks are carried out (Yukl, 1994). Leadership usually involves the concerted modification of behaviour and competencies of other members of an organisation in facilitating the group achievement of preferred goals (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1996).

Leadership is also defined as giving direction in times of change, inspiring others, building team work and values and providing an example for others to follow. It requires personal qualities, values, knowledge and skills (Bass, 1990; Yukl; 1998). Leadership efficiency and effectiveness is variously measured in terms of organisational outcomes (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987), a group's commitment to goals (House, 1996), the followers' satisfaction and the leader's status (Bass, 1985).

An understanding of common leadership theories is essential when one is trying to understand leadership styles and characteristics in a cross-cultural context. The theories that explain common leadership characteristics across cultures are *traits, behavioural, contingency and social exchange theories.*

Trait theories

The world has been greatly influenced by some eminent individuals such as Alexander the Great, Mao Se Tung, Ghandi, Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela. The study of leadership began as a search for those personality characteristics possessed by great leaders, i.e. what unique qualities differentiated these leaders from their followers? Physical characteristics, aspects of personality and aptitudes, were areas that were studied as part of leadership traits. The early studies on traits assumed that there was a definite set of characteristics that made a leader – whatever the situation. However, these so-called 'great-man theories' of the early 1900s failed to stand up to scientific testing because of their consistent inability to identify traits necessary and sufficient for leadership success across cultures (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985).

Behavioural theories

Deficiency in trait theories turned researchers' attention to the study of specific behaviours that leaders exhibit – i.e. what leaders do and how they behave (especially towards followers). Thus leadership studies then moved from a focus on a leader (i.e. a person's personality) to leadership (behaviour) and this became the dominant way of approaching leadership within organisations in the 1950s and early 1960s. Different patterns of behaviour were grouped together and labelled as styles (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985).

The four main styles identified were:

1. *Concern for task.* Here, leaders emphasise the achievement of concrete objectives. They look for high levels of productivity, and ways to organise people and activities in order to meet those objectives.

2. *Concern for people.* Here, leaders achieve their goals by meeting the needs of their followers: needs, interests, problems, etc, to motivate them to improve performance.

3. *Directive leadership.* Here, leaders take decisions for others and expect followers or subordinates to follow instructions.

4. *Participative leadership.* Here, leaders try to share decision-making with others.

Contingency theories

Contingency theories were developed in order to reconcile differences among the findings of behavioural approaches to leadership. The most widely researched contingency leadership model is Fiedler's contingency theory. Feidler's model (1967) is based on situational theory that emphasises the relationship between leader characteristics and the situation. The basic idea presented in this model is that a situation moderates the relationship between a leader's style and effectiveness. Fiedler (1967) believed that leadership effectiveness depends on both the leader's personality and the situation. Certain leaders are effective in one situation but not in others.

Social exchange theories

There are many different theories based on social exchange. Most forms of social interaction are based on an exchange of benefits or favours, either material, psychological or both. Often it is through a variety of social exchanges that an individual emerges as the leader of a group (Blau, 1964; and Bass, 1990).

Leadership in the cross-cultural context

The world consists of different races, cultures and regions. Therefore, understanding leadership can be complex, particularly in a cross-cultural context where different views, opinions and perspectives are expressed. While leadership is studied extensively within the management literature, it is not a well researched concept in a developing country such as PNG. Most of the research on leadership has been conducted in Western countries (Yukl, 1998; and Dorfman, 2003) and it can be misleading to apply those findings to a very different cultural context.

Cross-cultural psychological, sociological and anthropological research show that many cultures do not share European values. Based on the common understanding that variation in values, culture, attributes, beliefs and behaviours exists across cultures with geographical variations, it is likely that

the meaning and importance of leadership also varies across cultures (Parry, 2001).

While the phenomenon of leadership is widely considered to be universal across cultures, the way in which it operates is usually viewed as culturally specific (Lord & Maha, 1991). Cross-cultural research emphasizes that different cultural groups have different conceptions of leadership. Each culture has its own distinct set of values, mindsets, habits, and priorities (Parry, 2001; Dorfman et al. 1997). Cultural differences influence the conceptions people have of an ideal leader and cultural image defines what is required for an individual to be perceived as a leader by followers. Lord and Maha (1991) argue that culture plays a significant role in the content of leadership prototypes.

In Papua New Guinea, the nature of leadership is linked with the local culture and social structures. This implies that its people might have different views and perspectives to people of European descent on what makes good leadership and how their governance systems should work to meet their development needs. Despite this, PNG has adopted a Western system of government with its inherent leadership roles. However, there is little understanding of the relations between European and indigenous leadership systems and their impact on leadership, governance and the development process.

The types of leadership and governance systems in PNG

Generally, there are two different types of leadership systems in PNG. They are Western leadership and indigenous or tribal leadership. The *Western leadership system* in the context of this paper refers to the governance structures, rules and formalities of electing or appointing leaders based on European values. The *indigenous leadership system* (tribal leadership) in the context of this study refers to the village governance systems based on indigenous people's culture and social structures. Indigenous people are descendants of the original or pre-colonial inhabitants of Papua New Guinea (i.e. the Melanesian people).

The formal governance systems in contemporary PNG (see earlier figure) are based on Western leadership and governance structures, which the country adopted after becoming independent in 1975. In the contemporary governance systems in PNG, political leadership status at the local level is maintained by the elected councillors, who are voted by people through a formal election.

Elected councillors are agents of the government at the local level. On the other hand, tribal leadership is also maintained by the people with some degree of influence on local politics and decision making on development issues. Tribal leadership is part of the local culture and based on local values and social structures. Tribal leaders are agents of the local social structures (Strathern & Godelier, 1991).

It appears that Western leadership and tribal leadership both co-exist in the contemporary governance systems at the local level, however, tribal leadership

is regarded as informal because it is not included in PNG's formal governance systems (Ambang, 2006).

Tribal (Indigenous) leadership systems in PNG

Types of tribal leadership systems
Generally, there are two types of indigenous leadership systems among segmentary societies in the South Pacific: clan leadership in Melanesia and chief leadership in Polynesia (Strathern & Godelier, 1991). A segmentary society is described by Sahlins (1976) as a form of social organisation with extended social relations among kinship groups. Social relations in a segmentary society are relatively egalitarian, although there are tribal leaders who speak for the group or who organise group activities.

In PNG (a Melanesian society) indigenous leadership in segmentary societies is commonly based on clan leadership, except for a few areas in the New Guinea Islands and Papua regions which have a chief leadership system similar to the Polynesian leadership structure. Clan leadership is achieved by a member of a community through demonstrations, achievements, and ownership of resources (i.e. one of the clan leaders or an influential member of the community can become a leader of the tribe or village). With the chief system, leadership is inherited (i.e. only the members of the chief family will become the leader of a tribe or village.

Clan leadership

The clan leadership system consists of clan leaders taking a leadership role within their specific clan groups. Clan leaders represent various units or subsections of a tribe. A village or a tribe is made up of clan groups. In some areas, clan leaders form leadership of a tribe or a village while in other areas one dominant or influential figure within the clan group emerges as a leader of a tribe or village (Godelier, 1977).

The literature on Melanesian social structures refers to an influential figure (a leader) in a community as a 'big man' (Strathern & Godelier, 1991). A big man can lose power if he does not perform to the expectation of the people (i.e. when people do not turn to him or treat him as a leader). When a big man does not have moral and physical support, he loses leadership status. This can easily happen because when there is competition, people turn to other influential figures to provide leadership (Strathern & Godelier, 1991).

Figure 2 illustrates a tribal leadership structure based on the clan system under the leadership of a tribal chief or 'big-man'. However, it may not reflect some communities in PNG because indigenous leadership systems vary across regions (i.e. clan systems, chief systems and others in between these two). Since the clan system is based on the concept of 'big-man' leadership, it is important to examine the big man theory in this context.

Figure 2. Social structure of a tribal leadership clan system in PNG

Tribal Leadership
Big Man

| Clan group | Clan group | Clan group |
| Clan Leader | Clan Leader | Clan Leader |

| Family group | Family group | Family group |

Extended social relations
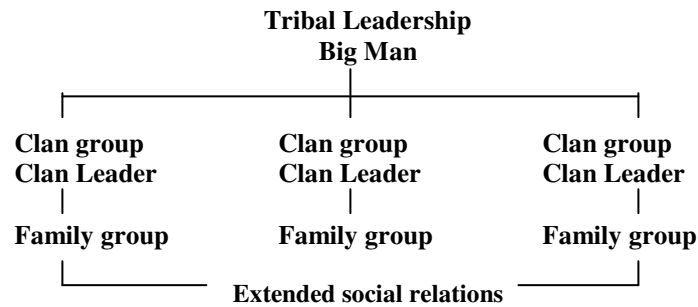
Heider, 1991

Implications of not including tribal (indigenous) leadership in the current governance systems at the local level in PNG

Research (Ambang 2006) found that not including tribal leadership in contemporary government systems at the district level impacted on development and traditional leadership roles in a number of ways. These included:
• Ineffectiveness of LLG in the development process
• Ethnic differences and unequal distribution of goods and services
• Ethnic differences causing leadership instability
• Development of a hand-out mentality; not self reliance
• Compensation demands that hindered development
• Ineffective communication
• Insufficient community participation in development
• Decline in valuing traditional leadership
• Decline in a clan leader's authority and influence.

Ambang's study concluded that non-involvement of tribal leadership in the contemporary governance systems at the local level is a barrier to development and good governance at the local level. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Impact on social and economic development at the local level in PNG
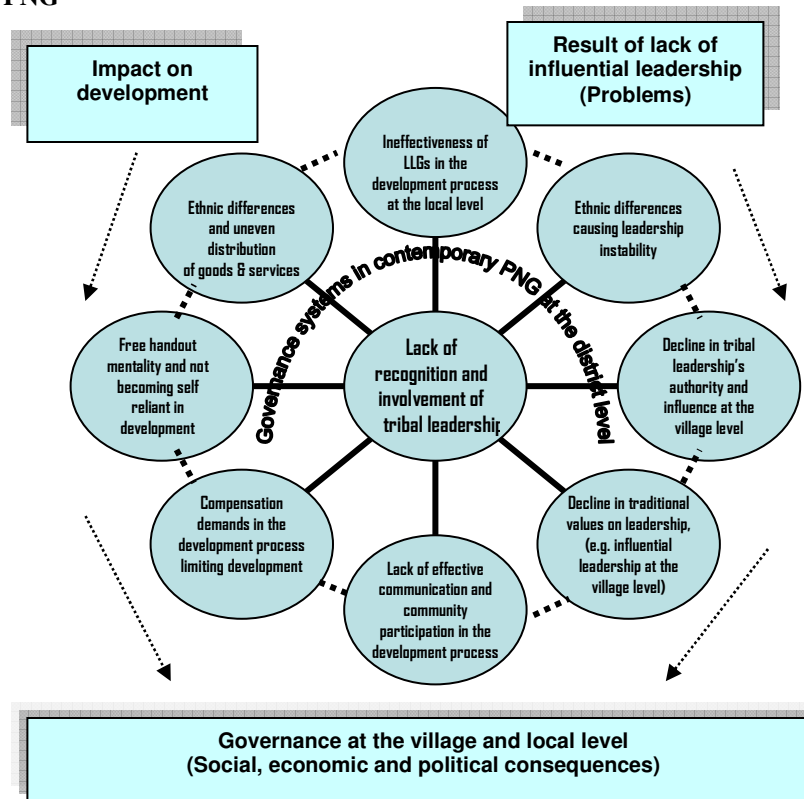
Significance of leadership in the development process

Effective leadership in Local Level Governments (LLGs) is important for development since they are closer to the people and can more easily deliver services to the people. However, LLGs are not performing to expectations so this raises a serious question about the current structure of the LLG system. The primary problems identified with the current LLG systems are a lack of resources and influential leadership to mobilise the community in the development process. Tribal leaders could fill this gap to facilitate the effective development of their communities at this level (Ambang, 2006). LLG should accommodate village governance systems through which tribal leaders could become actively involved in the governance processes of their communities.

To be effective, leadership styles across cultures need to be consistent with the dominant cultural values of the country. Studies (Parry, 2001; Dorfman et al., 1997; Bass, 1990) confirm this hypothesis. Cultural differences influence the conceptions people have of an ideal leader and cultural image defines what is required for an individual to be perceived as a leader by followers. According to Parry (2001) and Dorfman et al. (1997) cultural settings must be taken into

account in every society to determine the leadership and local governance systems. They must correspond well with local values so that people can effectively become involved and participate in governance systems. Lord and Maha (1991) argue that culture plays a significant role in the content of leadership prototypes.

Leadership in the modern governance systems and institutions has been unstable and failed to facilitate effective development to meet the needs of the people (Ambang, 2006). Studies from a colonialist context also claim that the leadership and management problems currently experienced in some former colonies are related to the colonial legacy. For example, Ada (1979) argues that in many former colonies, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, where cultural values are still dominant in everyday societal life and decision making, inherited Western government structures often cause tensions with indigenous social administrative structures. Loomba (1996) argues that poor governance and leadership instability in these countries is a symptom of a colonial legacy. Therefore in PNG there is a need to re-think the appropriate LLG leadership systems.

According to Schoeffel (2003) indigenous leadership systems (village governance) are another form of local level governance systems and still being practiced in other societies. In Melanesian societies such as PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, indigenous leadership and governance systems have been formally sidelined in the modern government. Unlike the indigenous mono-cultural Pacific nations in Polynesia, tribal leadership in PNG generally has been incorporated, in a modified form, into systems of national government (Paeniu, 1995). These indigenous leadership structures are based around two important elements of social structure – *the tribe and the clan groups that form the tribe*. Local leadership at the village level in PNG always links with the tribe and clan groups it is associated with and is the source of power and authority for indigenous village leaders.

Even though the new Organic Law on provincial government and local level government (1995) decentralises political and administrative power to the local level and assumes that traditional leadership at the village level will emerge, this is not happening. The main reason is that in many areas, traditional leadership has disintegrated and power and authority has been taken over by leaders at the national, provincial and LLG level due to the lack of recognition and involvement of traditional leaders. When leadership at the local level is taken over by leaders in the higher governance systems, indigenous leadership systems fail to take a stand in current governance systems. What needs to be done is the process of revival.

The existing provincial and local government system does devolve more political and administrative power to the local level governments, so it is timely to consider aspects of indigenous leadership and incorporate these into current governance systems at the village and LLG level. Giving recognition to and involving influential figures at the local level would enhance stability and facilitate the effective participation of local people in the development process.

Currently, the disintegration of the indigenous leadership system and non-recognition or respect of cultural values creates confusion and frustration amongst village people in many areas in PNG, particularly among village leaders. Indigenous leadership based on traditional values is the identity of PNG's unique culture (Ambang, 2006). It is important that these values are researched further to develop a local governance system that is appropriate to the local situation.

The experiences of tribal leadership in Bougainville

Bougainville during the crisis

The withdrawal of government services and the collapse of formal political structures during the ten years of conflict on Bougainville (i.e. between the PNG government and BRA rebels) created a vacuum of authority which was filled by clan elders (or village chiefs). Village councils of elders or chiefs became the effective form of government in Bougainville and played a major role in organizing communities and subsequently in responding to initiatives for reconciliation and reconstruction (May, 2004). The council of chiefs system is now emerging and gaining recognition in the modern governance systems in the province. The Area Chief Council (ACC) and the clan chief council have participated effectively in the restoration of peace on the island. The Bougainville experience shows that indigenous leadership systems are capable of playing a role in the development process of villages and communities in the contemporary governance systems of PNG.

Conclusion

The philosophy of the 'Melanesian Way' was strongly reflected in the report of the Constitution Planning Committee (CPC), which provides the basis for PNG's independence constitution (1974). In the final report section titled '*Papua New Guinea Ways*', it endorses 'those practices of participation, of consultation, and consensus and sacrifice for the common good' which are attributed to traditional societies. These principles were subsequently written into PNG's constitution, notably in the preamble, which acknowledges the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of the local people and includes a statement of national goals and directives, and principles that specify proposals on equality and participation and Papua New Guinean ways. The constitution states that one of its goals is to achieve development through the use of PNG forms of social, political and economic organisation.

This paper highlights that non-involvement of tribal leadership in the formal governance systems at the local level in PNG is creating a barrier to effective development. Western leadership models at the local level is degrading the authority and influence of tribal leaders, traditional values and failing to maintain influential leadership in the development process. If the government wants people's involvement and participation in the development process, it is important that tribal leaders have to be included in local level government structures. Tribal leaders are influential people and their involvement would

provide the leadership that is currently lacking at the local level. Therefore there is a need to re-think the appropriate Local Level Government leadership structure in PNG.

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