

The Custom School and Gender Equality

Robert J. Gregory¹ and Janet E. Gregory²

1. School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

E-mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

2. College of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

E-mail: J.E.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

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ABSTRACT Ethical dilemmas are frequent in cross-cultural work, as anthropologists and others may have values quite divergent from those held by the peoples visited. The "Kastom" people of Tanna, in Vanuatu, believed that their customs and traditions would be better maintained if female children did not attend a school in which English, arithmetic, and customary lore were taught. Alternatives suggested by outsiders were rejected, following discussions. Unanswered questions persist.

Social justice takes many forms in the Pacific region. Some issues are simple, others complex, while still others are unusual. On the island of Tanna in Vanuatu, my wife Janet, and I lived in a "kastom" area for more than a year in the mid 1970's, a place where tradition and the past played a major role in the lives of the villagers (Gregory, 1993). The custom people were renown for their determination to maintain their cultural heritage, a goal with which we felt strong empathy. Most visitors encouraged these people to keep their customs strong, although occasional efforts were made to convert or undermine their beliefs.

One photographer, not long before we arrived, suggested beginning a small school with very limited purposes. He felt, as did the custom people, that it would be valuable to provide an education in speaking and reading English (preferably with an American accent or connection) and instruction in arithmetic so as to calculate or check the calculations involved in the copra trade. Most important of all, the custom people themselves wanted some ways to teach "kastom" to their children and to occasional visitors.

Having helped Americans in Port Vila, the Capitol city during World War II, the "Big Men" were still fascinated by Americans and wanted their children to learn the American version of English, just in case the soldiers returned again.

Belief in the John Frum Cargo Cult remained strong (Gregory et al., 1983). The villagers accordingly asked me to teach their children about arithmetic and English, American style of course, in their new school. I agreed to do so until a regular teacher arrived, as had previously been arranged by the British government. Unsure of what to expect, I found the Tannese too were unsure about arrangements. Truly we had to evolve a way to work on this new educational venture together.

On the initial day, after a brief ceremony conducted by one of the headmen, I found the classroom, rough hewn and ready, filled by about twenty-five or thirty students. All were boys, there were no girls whatsoever. Though I knew full well of male domination in much of Melanesia, and strongly so on the island of Tanna, this degree of segregation had not been anticipated! I proceeded to begin teaching, with a chalkboard, a few writing implements and a great deal of trepidation. The boys listened and behaved extremely well and I rather enjoyed my teacher role by the end of the afternoon. That evening, I talked with Janet about what happened, in particular, my concern at the lack of girls. We resolved to try out best to see that girls were included as well. After all, equally and especially gender equality were part of our heritage, and part of the world-wide move towards education of all children, regardless of gender.

Calling a meeting with the headman was not difficult, but asking why girls were not included was far more complicated. Although other things had been discussed vigorously, even given the decided lack of a mutually comprehensible language, this issue of gender equity was not understood, either by them, or by us in their unique context. We seemed to have mutually exclusive positions.

"But why can't go to school too?" I inquired.

Finally, a compromise of sorts was reached. The "Big Men," leaders of various nearby villages, would assemble a meeting and they would consider the issue. Accordingly school continued for a couple of days until the meeting could be held. Although they did not want Janet present at the gathering to discuss the school, they consented, perhaps given my adamant arguments and her persistent desire to be involved as a professional if not acceptable as a female.

As a result, the issue of gender equality was discussed at an assembly of approximately twenty "Big Men." Speakers argued about different points of view, and a translator took our statements forth to be entered into the discussions. Ideas about gender equality appear to have a long way to go before affecting some Malanesian cultures. Though we were initially hopeful, at the end of the day, the "Big Men" decided firmly that only male children would be allowed to attend school. "Why" we asked again and again?

We listened and learned about their views from the interpreter, for their arguments had some merit and redeeming features, given their situation as they saw it. Not only were we visitors, but we also knew that island had survived for well over 2,000 years - far longer than ours! Accordingly, we listened and learned.

Western Civilization had already had an enormous impact on their society, and would doubtlessly continue to do so. Accordingly, they reasoned that if part of their society and culture were held back from participating in anything Western, their "kastom," their precious custom and way of life, would be more likely to remain strong. If on the other hand, girls attended the school too, they would learn the English language, and absorb new ideas, and perhaps become free to leave. If that were the case, the hold by all members on their unique culture might weaken or even end.

We realized that indeed, the collapse of their culture occur easily enough, with a loss of all

that they treasured. We argued against that position, however, feeling that the distinction between males and females was unfair, and that by teaching proper custom to all, the culture would in fact be strengthened. However, their decision was final and absolute. They told us, essentially, that if we could not comply, we were welcome to leave. Not wanting to depart, we worked out a better approach, in which Janet helped at the school, and at least part of the time, and taught the boys when I did other things. Also, we both tried to translate and teach English words to girls informally. But in accord with our agreement, we did not rock the boat further.

The question that has occurred even after concerns the preservation of custom by sacrificing some of the individual interests of members of a group. In some ways, the concern boils down to the question commonly raised in the United States after World War II, that is, "How can the boys be kept on the farm after they have seen gay 'Paree'?" The "Big Men" elected to preserve their culture by blocking females from access to Western ways. Costly to some of the individuals, and certainly offensive in terms of the values in favour of gender equality, the blockade might actually have been helpful in preserving custom, at least for a time.

Although we, as anthropologists, remained uneasy, we complied with their requirements during fifteen months of fieldwork. Even after, however, we have wondered about the decision, and the outcomes, for individuals, and for the culture. Some questions remain unresolved, and perhaps that is an important but rarely addressed issue in fieldwork.

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