

## Lightning Meets the Light-bulb: *Abu* (*tapu*, sacredness) and transformational leadership in indigenous Solomon Islands

By Kabini Sanga  
[Kabini.Sanga@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:Kabini.Sanga@vuw.ac.nz)  
Victoria University of Wellington  
New Zealand

---

Page | 1

Speaking Notes for the International Leadership Association Conference, 10-12 November, 2009, Prague, Czech Republic.

### **The context**

The context for this presentation is an indigenous Malaita tribal community. Specifically, the tribal community is of villagers on the Island of Malaita, Solomon Islands, in the South Pacific. The villagers live semi-subsistence lifestyles on lands which are communally owned by the tribe. While they are members of the modern state of Solomon Islands, the villagers are minimally impacted on a day-to-day basis by the reach of modern institutions. Instead, the villagers live their lives, based on age-old customs and behaviours, inherited from their ancestors.

For this community, a key leadership unit is the tribe. A tribe comprises people whose lineages are linked to a shared “*beu*” or House of Worship. Generally, tribal members are linked by blood. Members subscribe and commit to the same high priest. They share a principal worship shrine and pay homage to shared ancestral “*gods*”. Within modern times, most Malaita tribes have become Christian, and limit their tribal affirmation to a common heritage.

Within a tribe are a number of clans. Clans trace their lineages to a common paternal ancestor. Clans are the basic units of leadership. This is unlike other contexts where the individual is the basic unit of leadership. In parts of Malaita, for instance, the canoe is a metaphor for clan leadership. Within a canoe framework, a clan comprises Front paddlers, Middle paddlers and Back paddlers, all with complimentary and situational roles.

In a tribal community, leadership refers to the alignment of people, resources, relationships and realities with the aspirations of the community. Individually and communally, clan members highlight the interests of the group ahead of individual ones. As well, clan leadership emphasises a person’s “*being*” often more than one’s skills and or “*doings*”.

### ***Abu/ Tapu* or sacredness**

In indigenous Solomon Islands societies, *abu* (*tapu*, sacredness, holiness etc) is foundational to the survival and healthy functioning of communities. People speak it. People aspire to live by it. Institutions are built on understandings of *abu*. Processes are designed to achieve, sustain and evaluate *abu*. In other words, *abu* permeates indigenous Solomon Islands communities. Yet, *abu* is never featured in the formal conversations about leadership in Solomon Islands.

The general global literature on leadership in cultural settings seems to emphasize the dimensions of power, collectivism, participation, democracy and masculinity. Even here, *abu* and its related spiritual facets are neglected. But in indigenous Solomon Islands, when these variables clash; when significant choices need to be made; *abu* takes precedence. In other words, all other cultural dimensions of leadership easily give way to *abu*. Again, despite this prominence, *abu* seems not to feature in the teachings and curriculum on leadership in modern Solomon Islands.

In this paper, the concept of *abu* is explored through illuminating stories of tribal leadership. In particular, the stories focus on the transformational effects of *abu* on leadership. Useful lessons, ideas and insights, with potential to illuminate understanding of cultural and indigenous leadership, are offered. The paper is based on many years of living in and studying indigenous leadership in Solomon Islands.

### **What is *abu*?**

*Abu* is a state of being, of sacredness or holiness, requiring reference, respect and honour. All units of leadership in indigenous Solomon Islands (individual, clan and tribe) have states of *abu* which must be kept, sustained and or enhanced. The individual is *abu*. Other living organisms are *abu*. The group is *abu*. Relationships are *abu*. Right actions ensure *abu* is achieved. Appropriate use of knowledge sustains *abu*. Achieving and sustaining *abu* is paramount. *Abu* gives and assures a life balance individually and collectively.

### **What makes something *abu*?**

In a Malaita tribal community, something is *abu* on the following grounds:

1. It is central to the survival of a person or community (life & death issue for members),
2. It is a primary source of spiritual power,
3. Its keeping (via reference, respect, honour) ensures a state of physical/spiritual balance,
4. It draws holder/keeper/recipient of *abu* closer to ancestors/gods or God.

### **Philosophical features of *abu***

1. Ontologically- *abu* is socially created, is subjective, spiritual and time-space bound.
2. Axiologically- *abu* is of highest value, hence is of foundational value.
3. *Abu* knowledge is physical (objects, ideas, applications) and spiritual (consecrations).
4. Holders of *abu* or *abu* knowledge are selected or are chosen by gods, based on their receptivity and “fitness” to be guardians of such knowledge.
5. Epistemologically- the nature and extent of *abu* quality, rigour and truth are determined at various levels by humans as well as by ancestral spirit beings (gods).

### **Examples of tensions /conflicts**

In indigenous Malaita, lightning is natural while the light-bulb is introduced, hence, still sits uncomfortably within the tribal context.

1. *Abu* (as lightning) Vs formal institutionalized power (as light-bulb)

Arai is the tribal priest, without formal power in modern Solomon Islands. Yet, the educated and formal institutional members of his tribe give way to his influence over them. The educated ones seek his counsel. The schooled show him respect. The formal institutionalised power holders seek his favour. They permit themselves to be influenced by Arai because he is deemed *abu*. As well, doing so maintains, *abu*. Following an intra-community conflict/ warfare, final settlement is not executed by the Solomon Islands Police or Courts or through politicians. Rather, Arai, as the tribal priest executes the final and binding resolution through a *faa abua* ceremony, thereby restoring *abu* for all concerned.

## 2. *Abu* (as lightning) Vs collectivism (as light-bulb)

In Malaita society, the collective interests of the group are considered important, more so than individuals' preferences. The survival of the group, more revered than individuals' own. Yet, where collective agenda violates *abu*, collectivism gives way to *abu*, even if the group is punished. In this way, *abu* is restored or retained through appropriate *faa abua* (make *abu* again).

For instance, in tribal Malaita, when menstrual blood drops on the floor of a house, the female who is responsible is punished for this so as to protect the family's honour. Yet, if the girl, her mother or adult female do not execute appropriate protective interventions, the family home is burnt down to restore *abu*. In serious violations, an entire village settlement can be abandoned to retain *abu*. A new settlement is then started.

## 3. *Abu* (as lightening) Vs masculinity (as light-bulb)

Basi is a tribal woman. In a paternalistic culture, women generally play behind-the-scenes roles, unlike their male counterparts. The ultimate possible scenario of such a difference of treatment relates to who is normally appointed as *fata'abu* or priest. In a Malaita community, it is men who are *fata'abu* or priests. However, in instances where men are deemed not *abu*, a *abu* woman is 'called' by the gods to be the priest. In this instance, Basi a woman, becomes the tribal priest within a masculine culture by virtue of her *geni abu* (a holy woman).

The examples above point to the importance, indeed the paramount nature of *abu* in indigenous Malaita leadership, yet the present discourses on leadership do not acknowledge this fact. In reality, leadership development programmes and leadership interventions in Solomon Islands marginalize the integrated nature of indigenous leadership, particularly its spiritual dimensions.

### **Implications for transformational leadership**

From a transformational perspective, the following points are noted:

1. *Abu* keeps leaders connected with themselves, their ideals and with their communities. Without such connectedness, leaders cannot hope to effectively transform others and or their communities. Instead, leaders are more likely to be transactional, eventually rendering themselves to more materialistic dimensions and practices of leadership.
2. The leader who is *abu* and who maintains *abu* daily has a cascading effect on his/her community. In times of change, living out *abu* assures people. Living out *abu* also motivates and inspires people. It offers hope. Hence, transparency of ideals and action is shown. A leader shows consistency in word and deed. Without these key ingredients, transformation in leadership is not possible. Without *abu* being displayed, the integrity of a leader cannot translate into transformational change benefiting the community.
3. *Abu* is a matter of the heart. Consequently, a *abu* leader appeals to the hearts of his/her people, thereby connecting with the hearts of his/her people. Heart to hearts connection is uplifting and transformational and appeals to higher order ideals and aspirations. Bringing the heart into the discourse on leadership allows tribal Solomon Islands to legitimize its authenticity of leadership, in a manner which connects leadership with people's hearts; not just with knowledge, skills and competencies.

4. As *abu* is paramount in indigenous Malaita leadership, any aspirations of transformational leadership must embrace *abu*. Framing leadership must embrace *abu*. Designing leadership development programmes must include *abu*. Intervention strategies for transforming leadership must include enhancing *abu* collectively.

#### **Final comments**

Contemporary attentions of leadership largely ignore the spiritual dimensions of leadership. Particularly for indigenous Pacific contexts, this omission is a neglectful. The need is for descriptions of leadership that are balanced in their articulations to embrace the non-material and often local nature of leadership.

At a time when complex leadership demands are facing societies, particularly vulnerable indigenous communities, including those of the Pacific islands region, there are dangers of clutter and digression. As it relates to leadership, cluttering generally results in an unhealthy focus on materialism, up-skilling and knowledge learning at the expense of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of community.

An integrated conceptualization of leadership, embracing *abu*, is needed for indigenous Pacific Islands tribal societies which are also members of modern states.