

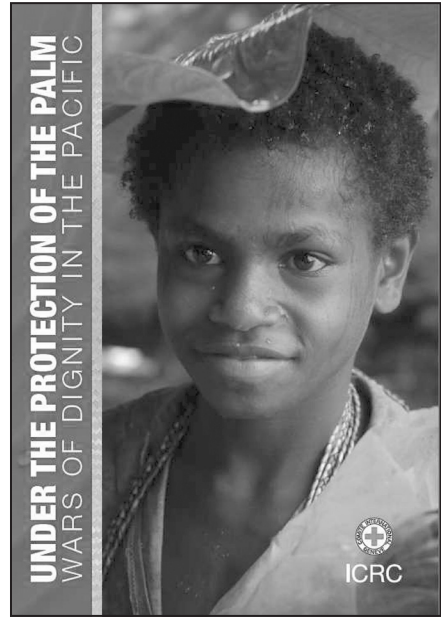
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Insights into traditional Pacific warfare ‘rules’

Under the Protection of the Palm: Wars of Dignity in the Pacific. Suva: Regional Delegation in the Pacific, International Committee of the Red Cross. 2009, 56 pp. No ISBN.

THE decade-long civil war in Bougainville, sporadic warfare in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands, and human rights violations during four coups and deaths in custody in the wake of a military barracks mutiny have demonstrated the need for a wider Pacific understanding of international humanitarian law (IHL).

But there is a particular challenge facing the region: How to make the well-established modern legal norms relevant and connected to traditional culture? The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has recog-



nised and addressed this question by publishing a book examining IHL in a Pacific context. And it has looked to the past to address the future.

Writing in the foreword to *Under the Protection of the Palm*, Dr Langi Kavaliku, a former Pro Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific and ex-Deputy Prime Minister of Tonga, refers to the ‘Pacific Way’—a contested concept based on ‘accepting differences’ and seeking unity—as being one of the region’s greatest assets:

Pacific societies, like all societies, have over centuries developed norms of behaviour and rituals for trying to avoid conflict and settle disputes peacefully. Across the Pacific there

are many traditions dealing with human rights and communal rights. (p. 4)

Ironically, Dr Kavaliku died a year before the publication of this book, but his message was one aimed at Pacific people leading ‘free and worthwhile lives in partnership with the rest of humanity’ (p. 5).

To produce this book, the ICRC assigned a group of nine law students from USP to research traditional warfare practices in the Pacific and ‘possible similarities’ with contemporary principles of humanitarian law. The researchers found that many practices during armed conflict in the Pacific ‘constituted clear limitations imposed on warfare’. They also confirmed that these practices—well established before contact with European cultures—showed some direct correlations with modern laws regulating war.

The book’s researchers, coordinated by Dr Helen Durham, note:

This result confirms observations made under the auspices of the ICRC in other cultures, including the Arab and Islamic traditions, and customs in Indonesia and Somalia. This point importantly confirms that the concept of rules regulating behaviour in conflict is neither new nor a Western notion. (p. 7)

But the editors are quick to dismiss any suggestion that traditional war-

fare in the Pacific ‘fully corresponded’ with existing notions of IHL. But they also point out that examples highlighting traditional norms requiring restraint during armed conflict strengthen the universality of the principle that ‘even wars have limits’.

Under the Protection of the Palm is organised into three chapters—Causes and Types of Conflict (such as power and control of land, retribution and redress, and typology), Protected Persons and Objects, and The Practice of Warfare. The appendices include a comparative grid making connections between traditional Pacific warfare and IHL. The table makes it clear principles contained in the modern codification of IHL are not foreign concepts in the Pacific:

In drawing connections between traditional practices and contemporary IHL, inconsistencies can also be found. The rape of female captives, starvation—also widely used by armies worldwide throughout history—and cannibalism all fly in the face of concepts underpinning IHL.

Caution must therefore be taken not to overstate the correlations between traditional practices and contemporary rules of IHL. (p. 40)

In Samoa, for example, traditionally the main motive for tribal warfare was to acquire sovereignty over

land. War also related to a power struggle between rival districts and their leading chiefs, such as when no agreement could be reached on the successor of a royal title.

Attention was also paid to omens, which had the effect of encouraging or precluding war: the squealing of rats or sneezing during a march were portents of ill fortune in battle (p. 8). In Fiji, the great pre-European power bases were in Lau and Eastern Fiji, Verata, Rewa, Bau and Cakaudrove. These tribal strongholds seized wide political and economic influence and engaged in constant warfare against each other to expand their power around the traditional chiefly confederacies—Burebasaga, Kubuna and Tovata.

In the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, when a person or group suffered or believed it had suffered an infringement of a right, a conflict often arose. Once a warrior had been killed or wounded—‘especially if he does not belong to the image of the arrow’s stem’—his kinsmen seek revenge, or ‘payback’ (p. 9). Disputes or reprisals could simmer over many years and escalate into open war. An example given in the book:

One series of reported attacks started with the abduction of a woman. In return, a party of warriors shot another woman. Parties to the conflict

increased as allies were drawn in, suffering losses of their own and making themselves targets for revenge. This precipitated a war that raged for many months. (p. 9)

Explained the editors, while war in the PNG Highlands was seen as a male activity, women were regarded as the ‘inspiration for wars’. Many different types of traditional conflict existed in the Pacific, including inter-tribal invasion and conquest, conflict within a tribe, headhunting, raids and skirmishes for purposes such as stalking and killing in order to earn blood money.

But raiding was perhaps the most common type of battle – and the level of violence was proportionate to the grievance suffered. Clansmen would refrain from carrying lethal weapons—axes, bow-and-arrows and spears—into ‘domestic affrays’. Instead, they would use whatever was to hand.

The scale and intensity of combat also influenced what is described in modern times as the ‘rules of engagement’.

In Tuvalu, to kill women and children was considered a ‘shameful thing to do’. It was strongly believed that a man must only attack another man of equal strength—an adult could not, for example, fight a 15-year-old boy: ‘To do so was considered a

disgrace that tainted one's family line permanently' (p. 15).

This important book based on insider research is a legacy of Dr Kavaliku's vision and provides a balance to the more extreme and violent anecdotes 'disproportionately represented' in Pacific anthropological literature and missionary accounts published at the time of first contact.

It is useful for journalists engaged in conflict reporting but there is still a need for a text analysing modern conflicts such as Bougainville and the Solomon Islands drawing on international humanitarian law.

Another challenge for the ICRC perhaps?

Copy available online at:
www.icrc.org/eng/wars-of-dignity-pacific

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The Pacific Media Centre (Te Amokura) is the only media research and community resource centre of its kind in Aotearoa/New Zealand and has a strategic focus on Māori, Pasifika and diversity media and community development. It was established by AUT University's Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies in 2007, having evolved from a cluster of research and community collaborations within the School of Communication Studies.

PMC activities include:

- International book and research publication
- Publication of the peer-reviewed *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal
- Publication of *Pacific Media Centre Online* as a media resource and postgraduate outlet
- Publication of *Pacific Media Watch*, a regional media monitoring service
- Journalism and media research opportunities
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