

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Mediating “ways of life”

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This comment has its origins in two events, separated by distance and utterly different in origin and impact, yet still linked by a common theme. This is also a partial continuation of the conversation started by Martin Svatos in the preceding entry: <http://kluwermediationblog.com/2015/11/22/je-suis-paris-do-the-mediators-have-right-to-be-xenophobic/>

One event, front and centre in our media and in the lives of many who were immediately impacted, was the terrorist attack on the cafés, restaurants, and concert hall in Paris. The other – seemingly completely unrelated – was an interview with the President of the Republic of Kiribati, Anote Tong, filmed in the Solomon Islands [[http://www.ted.com/talks/anote\\_tong\\_my\\_country\\_will\\_be\\_underwater\\_soon\\_unless\\_we\\_work\\_together?utm\\_campaign=ios-share&utm\\_medium=social&source=email&utm\\_source=email](http://www.ted.com/talks/anote_tong_my_country_will_be_underwater_soon_unless_we_work_together?utm_campaign=ios-share&utm_medium=social&source=email&utm_source=email)]. The concern, which has seen President Tong take the stage at various international climate change meetings, as he will again in Paris in early December, was the fact that it is more than likely that his nation will simply vanish under the waves in the next generation or two.

I’m not going to attempt to add to the analysis of and reflection either on the global security issues brought to the fore by the Paris and other assaults, nor on the climate change science – and the reality of the rising tide for his and other Pacific Island nations – underpinning President Tong’s interview. What I do want to extract from both of these completely different events is a common concern: the protection and preservation of ‘ways of life’.

In the wake of the IS attacks on Paris, one familiar analysis of what was at stake was that these were not only ghastly assaults at the heart of the city, they were also seen as motivated by an ideologically-driven revulsion for what Paris – indeed, France, or, even more widely, “the West” – represents by way of culture, life, art, and values. Equally, the political, editorial and popular response has been to see that it is not merely the lives of citizens and material culture under attack but, more personally, the ways in which we choose to live. That same popular response, in the week after the attacks, has been to find ways both to mark the loss and grief and to affirm – also as an act of defiance – the social and individual preferences of that way of life.

There is, as expressed by President Tong, and by leaders of other island nations facing the similar threat of submersion and disappearance, a comparable concern: there is an immediate, very real threat that their countries will vanish under the waves; but the existential threat is as to what will happen to not only the “nation” as an entity in international law but also to the “people” if, as

seems likely, migration to neighbouring states becomes imperative. President Tong is, of course, aware that this existential and cultural loss is already under way, and is a familiar feature of patterns of Pacific Island migration, in which second and third generations have a more tenuous hold on their cultures of origin. This loss becomes exacerbated if, in the next couple of decades, the migration is accelerated and – more tragically – there’s no “home” in any real sense with which to maintain a connection.

So, the common issue in these two stories is precisely the one articulated by leaders and citizens in each case: what’s at stake is not only tangible loss, but also the less obvious but nevertheless shared loss of ways of life. This is not new and it is a concern that bodies such as Cultural Survival [<http://www.culturalsurvival.org>] have been working on for some time. It’s also a question that comes up in the growing awareness of language loss – that is, the very real prospect that, by the end of this century, possibly only half of the current 7000 languages will remain [<http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/>]. The practical loss is the language itself; the existential loss is in the stories, cultures and ways of life the will also vanish.

In an earlier blog [<http://kluwermediationblog.com/2015/07/29/more-questions-for-mediators/>], John Sturrock also challenged us as mediators to imagine some of those larger questions about equity and distribution, about the state and fate of capitalism, about the prospects for survival and other potentially grand but gloomy topics. The point I take from his challenge, and that I extract from these two examples is that these are clear articulations of “ways of life” concerns. There are, in a sense, two conversations going on – and mediators will recognise this: at one level, there is the “presenting concern”, the ostensible agenda on the table; and at another level, there is a story, a concern that is not always articulated, sometimes cannot be articulated as even those at the heart of the story don’t really see what’s at stake; this is, drawing parallels with other fields of conflict, a question of identity.

A third example may extend this line of thinking: the last few decades of negotiations between governments and indigenous peoples (or first nations) concerning the protection of tribal lands, the return of – or compensation for – confiscated lands, the protection of indigenous languages and so on, has been a story of sometimes parallel negotiations and mutual incomprehension in which one party (the government) assumes that the negotiation is about a tangible agenda for which solutions (usually fiscal) are possible; and the other party sees the negotiation as being about who they are and who they still wish to be. Happily, I think the experience of these negotiations has brought the parties closer to a common understanding of how to have those conversations.

The challenge that President Tong struggles with is to have the rest of the world hear not only the fiscal and commercial – or even the scientific – arguments about climate change and rising tides, but also to hear the very real prospect that “a people”, as a way of living, will vanish. He also noted, with some irony, that those refusing to hear this – in the interests of protecting jobs and industries – were also, in their own way, protecting ways of life.

The point of all this? Two things, I think: first, at a micro level, it’s always possible that, beneath the surface of the apparent agenda, one or more of our parties is in fact not saying something about their preferences about how they choose to live; and, at a macro level, there is – as John Sturrock suggests – a potential for mediation, for dialogue, about those questions which (with due deference to their origins in the cafés of Paris) we can only see as existential. [It shouldn’t come as a surprise that, at Cambridge University, there is now a Centre for the Study of Existential Risk: <http://cser.org>]

The other risk, of course, as Martin points out, is that this protection of ways of life can turn xenophobic, and it didn't take long for the conversation to turn towards the closing of borders and the more insular and exclusive demands for protection of "us" against an ill-defined external threat. The parallel risk, too, is that we tend to assume – under that external threat – that our identities are more coherent than is in fact the case. As Mark Kingwell say in *The World We Want: Restoring Citizenship in a Fractured Age*, [Rowman & Littlefield, 2000] "It is only when we are constantly told that we must create a unified identity out of the shored-up fragments of diverse experiences and materials that we see how fractured our identities really are." [163]

But this too forms part of the conversations – even the mediations – of which we must be a part.

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