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STATEMENT BY MR SAKIAS TAMEO, ACTING HIGH COMMISSIONER AT THE LAUNCHING OF THE BOOK "KASTOM, PRPOERTY AND IDEOLOGY: Land Transformation in Melanesia " at the Australian National University on 12 May 2017

Thank you Moderator, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to join the High Commissioner of Vanuatu, His Excellency Mr Kalfau Kaloris, and Counsellor of the Solomon Islands High Commission, Mrs Helen Beck on this occasion to launch the book on "*Kastom, Property and Ideology: Land Transformation in Melanesia*."

As Acting High Commissioner at my Mission, I was preoccupied with other issues until a few days ago to read 5/6 chapters of the book that talks about landownership and related issues in PNG and I was asking "*what does this book launching on Kastom, Property and Ideology: Land Transformation in Melanesia got to do with my diplomatic work here in Canberra?*"

But after much thought, I decided to accept the invitation for number of reasons:

Firstly, I said, perhaps as a landowner myself, I should share my perspectives and that of my society in terms of landownership in Enga Province in the Highlands of PNG.

Secondly, as a Diplomatic I am preoccupied with my diplomatic work in terms of PNG/Australia bilateral relations and I have no idea about landownership systems and landownership issues in PNG society.

Therefore, I thought, this event provides an opportunity for me to hear from the experts, in the likes of my former Lecturer-Dr Collin Filler, of the complex land issues that faces PNG and also in other Melanesian countries, namely Vanuatu and Solomon Islands.

Thirdly, you cannot have a country without land nor can you have a society without land. This is I think *The Important Reason* for me to attend this event.

Finally, as an agriculture-based society where over 95 per cent of the land are in the hands of customary landowners that we need for the development of our country, it is very important for me to understand land issues and landownership issues in PNG.

Mr Moderator,

As a diplomat, I come from a Department that does not deal with land or landownership issues. It is an issue that falls in the domain of other Ministries and Departments.

I therefore did not have much knowledge about the customary landownership systems and landownership issues facing PNG and this book launching event enabled me to read relevant Chapters that increased my knowledge of the complex land issues facing PNG.

Mr Moderator,

As we read and talk about landownership issues in PNG, let us keep in mind of the following as background to appreciate the complexities of the issues in PNG.

PNG is no place like other, it is one of the most complex places on Earth, with the inhabitants speaking over 650 different languages, 250 cultures, and thousands of ethnic tribes.

We have matrilineal societies where the mothers/women have authorities of over landownership rights, patrilineal societies where the authorities are vested with the men folks. We have free and egalitarian societies (Enga/Highlands) and we have chiefly systems in the coastal areas.

Given the diversity of the country, the concept of landownership understandably differs from one place to another, from one region to another, and from one cultural group to another.

It is also important to note that than 5 per cent (5%) of the land in the country are under freehold title or state leases. The rest of the land in PNG (over 95 per cent) are customary owned.

Mr Moderator,

The complexities PNG faces in terms of its development is dependent on how people view landownership and their relationship to land.

It is nicely captured in Chapter 5 on Informal Land Markets in PNG and I quote, "***most people in PNG, as in other parts of the Pacific, hold an intense attachment to land. Land is at the heart of economic life, cultural and spiritual beliefs,***

and as an individual and group's sense of social identity and belonging. This link to social and cultural identity underpins the common view among landowners that land is inalienable."

May I further add that land ownership further means power and authority and it is also seen as a wealth from both customary and modern societal contexts.

Mr Moderator,

The concept that land is inalienable is demonstrated by the landowners of Wewak Town, Madang RD Tuna Cannery and also site for proposed Marine Economic Zone in Madang Province.

These are lands possessed/alienated from the landowners by the German colonial administration and also the Catholic Church. But the traditional landowners are seeking their legitimacy to ownership and to participate and benefit from economic activities.

The case studies also reveal complexities of identifying the real land owners. This is not only for Wewak Town and Madang but it is also a general ongoing issue for other large scale investment projects in the context of sharing of royalties and benefits from resource developments in PNG.

Mr Moderator, another issue that is also captured in the same Chapter is the informal land markets in PNG. This involved customary landowners selling land to migrants to towns and cities as well as in areas of large scale agricultural and other economic activities. Migrants and outsiders are buying land from landowners and it raises complex ongoing social and economic development issues between landowners and outsiders/migrants.

This is an issue that requires serious attention as often we have confrontations between the two factions. There has been many instances of calls for the eviction of settlers and others have advocated for the introduction of the Vagrancy Act.

Mr Moderator, my final remarks pertains to the controversial SABL and the complex land grabbing schemes in the country.

With more than 95 per cent of the land being customary land owned by thousands of families, clans, tribes etc, we needed to free-up the customary lands and make it available for the economic development of the country.

In 1979, PNG came up with what was known as a lease-lease back scheme, where the customary landowner groups could lease some of their land to the Government, which could then create a formal title over it and lease it back to the landowners that can be issued as a security for a bank loan or as the basis for granting a sublease to a third party for some developmental purposes.

With the appropriate laws, we put in place the relevant Government Departments and Agencies to manage the system that will allow for customary landowners to free-up their land and participate in a modern economy.

In 1997, the Government came up with an innovative approach called the Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABL) scheme.

However, this important initiative of the Government was sabotaged by a network of people that abused the titling, registration and other processes to illegally acquire massive customary land from the people. Such people include the Oil Palm Developers, Agro-forestry projects, the land development group to name a few.

I also note the important role International NGO and others have been doing to stop the illegal land grab that was going on in the country which culminated in the setting up of a Commission of Inquiry.

This is an issue that will not go away from PNG, it will be there for a long time to come until and unless we eventually decide to follow our own laws, follow due processes, ensure transparency, good governance and develop a credible system that work wells for the benefit of the country.

With these few remarks, I will stop here but I wish to acknowledge the different writers for your valuable contributions by way of the various chapters and congratulate you all for the launching of this important book ***Kastom, Property and Ideology: Land Transformation in Melanesia.***

May I also encourage the writers to revisit the issues that you have written on and write more on those issues and other development issues/challenges facing our country.

Thank you.