Menacing the Mine: Double Asymmetry and Mutual Incomprehension in Lihir

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In September 2012, Newcrest Mining Limited, the operator of the massive Lihir gold mine in Papua New Guinea (PNG), reached a settlement with the local landowning communities over a set of issues concerning their compensation and benefits sharing agreement and the process for reviewing these commitments. Towards the end of the previous month, the customary landowners of the mine lease areas had placed taboo markers made from the leaves of a ginger root plant—known locally as gorgor—on numerous locations across the mine and the processing plant, bringing operations to a sudden halt. Their specific grievances were set against a backlog of impacts related to the mine and mounting frustrations over the failure of the benefits package to counter these unruly forms of change. This peculiar form of protest forced the mine to close for several days and created the conditions for landowners to negotiate their demands on their terms successfully. The unusual expression of the dispute grabbed the attention of local and international media outlets, as journalists tried to understand how a traditional taboo marker could be used to shut a large-scale mine, while market analysts speculated on the potential impact that this event would have on the share price of Newcrest, which had only acquired the mine as their flagship operation.
in 2010. This was not the first time that Lihirians had invoked the *gorgor* to disrupt the mine, but it did result in one of the largest forced payments in the history of the operation.

Several days after this settlement was signed, a large crowd of people gathered in Putput village, one of two communities relocated in 1995 to make way for the mine. The group included members of the landowning community, representatives of the local-level government, company personnel and political leaders from New Ireland Province, who were involved in the formal review of the compensation and benefits sharing agreement that was then underway. The crowd had assembled around a men’s house enclosure, which belonged to one of the matrilineal clan groups who claim customary ownership of land within the mining lease, to commence the ceremonial feasting activities that followed the removal of the *gorgor* and signalled an end to the latest dispute with the company. The feast was an opportunity to reaffirm a sense of unity among the landowners and to remind the company and the government of their obligations to the Lihirian community.

As proceedings began, the former Chairman of the Lihir Mining Area Landowners Association, Mark Soipang, stood in front of the crowd and, speaking into a microphone that carried his voice across the hamlet setting, reminded the community that the power of the *gorgor* rested upon their collective unity. He then appealed to the landowners to maintain their customs of cooperation, which would help them to secure future social and economic development from the mine. This Lihirian capacity for unity was rhetorically contrasted with an imagined fragmentation of highland New Guinea societies that would, for example, prevent them from working in a similar unified way to force the closure of a mine on their own land. The *gorgor* was cast as a morally superior way of registering issues, compared to the barbaric practices to which some other Papua New Guineans supposedly resort. Building on this sense of Lihirian cultural and moral exceptionalism, Soipang triumphantly declared:

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1 The exploration program and feasibility studies for the Lihir project were conducted by a joint venture between Rio Tinto and Nuigini Mining Limited. Under the terms of the original project approvals, the Lihir project was transferred to a new Papua New Guinean company—Lihir Gold Limited (LGL). As the parent company, Rio Tinto established the Lihir Management Company to develop and operate the mine on behalf of LGL. In 2005, Rio Tinto divested its interests in Lihir, allowing the Lihir operation to become owned and operated by LGL, until a merger occurred in 2010 with Newcrest Mining Limited.
Now Newcrest knows the power of the gorgor. The power of the landowners can stop this project without any fighting. When we use the gorgor the whole plant site and all other work activities will stop. This is true power, and now they realise. This is great power, and now they have received the message. Since Newcrest took over the project it has taken them until now to realise that the landowners can exercise their power without resorting to violence and they can stop this project at any time. Now they realise you have power, so they will no longer be able to play with you. This kind of mindset will help us in the agreements review.

Soipang’s strident statements were met with nods of approval from the assembled landowners. His speech then shifted to the details of the settlement they had recently obtained. This included, among other things, various concessions from the company to provide more funding to support landowner participation in the agreements review process and the administration of the association, commitments to complete the agreements review process in a timely manner and an unprecedented payment of PGK 40 million that the landowners association claimed was outstanding under the terms of the existing compensation and benefits agreement.²

This dispute pivoted on a combination of specific and widespread grievances that the landowners association used to mobilise a moment of mass collective action. It was also illustrative of a longer pattern of engagement between the company and the community—the company has consistently acknowledged this form of protest to avoid the kinds of violent confrontations witnessed at other mining projects. As one Australian journalist reported at the time, landowner stoppages are just one of the ‘hazards’ of doing business in PNG and, in the case of Lihir, ‘it’s happened before, and I am sure it will happen again’ (Zappone, 2012). Indeed, it did. Over the years that followed, the customary landowners of the mine lease areas resorted to the use of the gorgor to force the hand of the company and the state on a range of interrelated issues. While these

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² This PGK 40 million payment has been an ongoing source of community dispute and the subject of much public debate, largely due to the inability of the landowners association to demonstrate how it has used this money to benefit the community. The Lihir Agreements Review process began in 2012 and, at the time of writing this chapter, it was still underway, due to the inability of the parties to reach an agreement over the size, content and structure of the new package and persistent divisions within the Lihirian community that have led to a crisis of representation. For a description of the Lihir agreements, known as the Integrated Benefits Package agreement, and the first agreement re-negotiation process from 2000 to 2007, see Bainton (2010).
sorts of ‘community risks’ may form part and parcel of resource extraction in a country such as PNG, this tells us very little about why these kinds of conflicts occur so frequently or their underlying causes.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how this particular form of protest has taken root in Lihir—how it has become the means through which the people of Lihir seek to assert their own sense of justice and affirm their ongoing power over the land. Although this practice bears some resemblance to other well-documented ‘landowner tactics’, such as roadblocks and simple brute force, the consistent use of this method deserves further scrutiny. This practice is not a ‘weapon of the weak’, in the sense conveyed by James Scott (1985). It is not a hidden form of resistance or insubordination, but rather an act of open defiance that contests any attempt by the company or the state to exercise exclusive authority over Lihirian lives and land. To be sure, most Lihirians recognise the ‘limited authority’ of the company to operate the mine (within the constraints of national laws and local agreements and the obligations these entail). However, when the company is seen to behave as though it holds a ‘singular authority’ that privileges corporate interests over local welfare—when community rights and entitlements are not upheld—this violates a local vision of justice and a confrontation will occur. To avoid reducing the history of landowner protests to an abbreviated economistic picture—a series of spasmodic responses to the political economy of resource extraction—we require a more explicit way of contextualising these events. I propose that the persistence of the gorgor can be understood as a version of Karl Polanyi’s ‘double movement’, in which the authority of the company to extract and develop the natural resources contained in Lihir is continually challenged by the reassertion of customary land rights. The company and state seek to put a clear price on land (and the resources it contains) and attempt in good faith to negotiate what that price might be in terms of compensation, royalties and other benefits. Landowners often eagerly accept these payments, but not the terms on which they are made, and continue to assert rights over land that cannot be bought and sold on a market. Although this struggle partly arises from the uneven development and entrenched inequality generated by the mine, and the failure of the company and the state to enact certain obligations, the underlying reasons can be identified in the different ways that the company and the community understand their relationship and their common inability to reconcile these differences. The net result is a doubly asymmetrical relationship that is reinforced by a form of mutual incomprehension and a pervasive sense of moral indignation.
Indignant Landowners and the Double Movement

When Polanyi set out to develop his idea of the double movement, he aimed to show how market societies are constituted by two opposing movements. As different groups have attempted to expand the scope and influence of self-regulating markets, protective counter-movements have emerged to insulate society from these destructive market forces. What we now understand as capitalism is the product of both forms of movement. Polanyi’s primary objective was to expose the idea of the self-regulating market as a purely utopian vision—to show how the market economy has been built upon a fictitious foundation that necessitates the constant intervention of the state. This argument rests upon his well-known account of ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’ commodities. If commodities are defined as ‘things’ that are ‘produced’ for sale on the market, then labour, land and money—the core components of industrial mining—must count as ‘false’ commodities, since labour and land are nothing more than human activity and subdivided nature and money is merely a token of one’s purchasing power (Polanyi, 2001, p. 75). Quite simply, these ‘things’ were not originally produced for sale on a market. Therefore, the markets of these three things are inherently unstable—Polanyi suggested that, since the power of the state is required to maintain the stable supply and demand of these ‘commodities’, such power could also be used to counter their harmful impacts on society and the environment.

He insisted that it was morally wrong to treat nature and human beings as objects whose price will be determined entirely by the market and that such a concept violates their inherent sacredness. In the case of land, a double movement emerges as different social actors resist the enclosure, commodification and destruction of the natural environment (as they fight for the very foundations of life itself). These sorts of movements have a long history in countries such as PNG, where people commonly claim a special attachment to the environment and regularly reject the idea that land is merely a commodity—as the common refrain proclaims, ‘land is life’. This belief is one aspect of the double movement in Lihir, whereby landowners assert a bundle of perceived and legal rights arising from their relationship to the land. Polanyi’s approach has the added merit of decoupling these contests from narrowly defined class-based interests, which allows us to identify a broader ensemble of social actors involved in these struggles. Throughout PNG, these processes of encroachment and
commodification have also contributed to the emergence of a particular kind of modern political identity that sustains a broader double movement of immovable property rights across the nation (Ballard, 1997; Filer, 2014).

Many years ago, Colin Filer described how an ‘ideology of landownership’ had begun to emerge in postcolonial PNG (1997). He claimed that there was a sense in which Papua New Guineans had only recently become ‘landowners’, although most of the population has maintained customary ownership of their land since the pre-colonial era. The contemporary concept of the ‘customary landowner’ can be traced to various activities in the colonial era that sought to demarcate traditional land tenure patterns and boundaries. These initiatives helped birth notions of ‘traditional culture’ and ‘customary law’—expressed through the neo-Melanesian term *kastom*—which was, for the most part, conceptually opposed to ideas of ‘the law’, ‘the government’ or ‘business’ as separate domains of activity, even if they remained entangled in practice (Filer, 2006; Foster, 1995). Postcolonial legislation recognised the legal status of customary landowners and confirmed the requirement to pay compensation for damages or loss of land held under customary forms of ownership; in the context of large-scale mining, this can be understood as a form of ‘ground rent’ accruing to these owners. These processes also had the effect of creating a kind of collective status and a sense of opposition between this novel entity and external forces—for example, between ‘landowners’ and outsiders wanting to gain access to their lands, or between ideas of ‘custom’ and the prospect of ‘development’ (Filer, 1997, p. 163).

As the resources boom began in PNG in the 1980s, the term *landona* (or landowner) soon entered the lexicon of the national lingua franca (Tok Pisin), which completed the conceptual separation of ‘the landowners’ from ‘their land’, even where it might be commonly assumed that this kind of separation cannot be achieved in practice (Filer, 1997, p. 164). Filer argued that adherents to this ideology generally hold that ‘development’, which the state has singularly failed to deliver, will be obtained through the compensation and benefits provided by extractive companies in return for access to the land and natural resources that are held under various forms of customary tenure. Following a long history of political and economic marginalisation, and more than three decades of engagement with exploration companies and large-scale mining activities, this ideology has gained a firm grip on the entire Lihirian population and thoroughly determines their ideas of development and their interpretation...
of events (Bainton, 2010). When Lihirians make claims on the company, and when they use the *gorgor* to assert their rights, this can be understood as the performance of this ideology or the dramatisation of the double movement and the social relations of resource compensation.

Around the same time, Filer also argued that there is no real moral message or purpose to the multitude of ways in which Melanesian landowners ‘menace’ the mining industry (Filer, 1998, p. 166). This might well appear to be the case at the aggregate level because the convolution of social and political interests and geographical complexities often makes life very difficult for the industry; however, this does not mean that we should assume there is no moral basis to individual actions or forms of collective protest. Even when the stated objectives underpinning community protests appear incoherent, more often than not, landowners are motivated by a distinct belief that some form of fairness, justice or a sense of what ‘ought’ to occur, has been violated. These sentiments may be influenced by the feeling of entitlement that this ideology of landownership tends to foster, but in most cases, the injustices and impacts are experienced in material ways. In Lihir, these are rarely baseless claims, even when they appear to be overt forms of rent-seeking behaviour.

To understand how this sense of moral outrage motivates the double movement in Lihir, we can turn to E. P. Thompson’s (1971) work on the moral economy of the rioting crowd in eighteenth-century England. Thompson helps us to understand how ordinary people make their suffering visible and force those in power to respond. However, his original concern was also to demonstrate that the riot was, really, epiphenomenal.

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3 The idea of the moral economy has a long genealogy that can be traced to the work of medieval scholars (Owen, 2009). The concept was most famously elaborated in the second half of the twentieth century by the social historian E. P. Thompson and later popularised by James C. Scott, when he adopted the term in his study on early–twentieth century peasant rebellions in South-East Asia (Scott, 1976). As Thompson would later write in his reflections on the theory of the moral economy, this idea has taken off in multiple amorphous directions; and since then, scholars have been discovering moral economies everywhere (Thompson, 1971). This is partly due to the popular tendency to focus on values rather than obligations—where the term is used to describe certain economic activities and the social relations and values that inform them, rather than the obligations that emerge through certain transactions. Further, the term has come to serve as a convenient slogan for any kind of economic activity ostensibly opposed to the self-serving materialism that supposedly underpins modern market-based societies or neoliberalism in general. Moral economy has become a symbol to be invoked, rather than a substantial concept. Nevertheless, just as Thompson sought to rescue the poor stockinger and other obsolete artisans from the condescension of posterity, several scholars have also attempted to rescue Thompson's original meaning in the idea of the moral economy and to correct the muddled state of the concept (e.g. Carrier, 2018; Edelman, 2005; Götz, 2015; see also Cox; Gewertz & Errington; Zimmer-Tamakoshi, this volume).
He wanted to show that historians had been placing the analytical punctuation mark in the wrong spot—after the riotous eruption—which, in turn, obscured their understanding of the reasons why crowds gathered and acted as they did. Thompson built his idea of the moral economy upon three foundational elements: a focus on the economic interactions between incipient class groups and the obligations that arise through transactions over time, the customs and rituals that shape these interactions and the idea of a ‘legitimising notion’ that motivates and justifies collective action. It is not my intention to make a case for a ‘moral economy of extraction’ in Lihir. But by drawing attention to the moral content of ‘extractive ethics’, we may better understand what makes Lihirians so angry and what is likely to generate an explosive situation. That is, if we are going to understand why the gorgor has become so thoroughly grounded as a form of protest, we would do well to place this punctuation mark at the trigger point, at the point of offence, rather than after the resulting explosion. Therefore, we might say that one particular feature of this double movement is the mutual reinforcement of the ideology of landownership and a pervasive feeling of enragement. Notwithstanding the fact that some demands are simply cunning claims, my objective is to rescue the sense of indignation that frequently justifies or ‘legitimates’ the claims that landowners make on the company, the state and fellow community members and how this leads to specific forms of political action.

In the following section, I sketch the development context that provides the material basis for the double movement in Lihir. I then describe the traditional beliefs and protocols surrounding the use of the gorgor and customary ways of dealing with conflict and the innovative ways that Lihirians adapted this customary practice to suit a new industrial context. This is followed by an overview of the form and content of the specific issues that typically trigger the use of the gorgor and successive attempts to reform the so-called ‘abuse’ of this customary practice. By way of conclusion, I provide an extended discussion on the source of mutual of incomprehension between the company and the community, the limits of the double movement and the prospects for a less antagonistic future.
In 1995, after a prolonged period of negotiations, Lihirian leaders reached an agreement with the state and the developer of the mine and signed a compensation and benefits sharing agreement known as the ‘Integrated Benefits Package’ (or the ‘IBP agreement’). This bundled package included the compensation and relocation agreements between the company and the community, the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the community and the three tiers of government and the company’s environmental monitoring and management plan. The state was inclined to regard this agreement as the successful outcome of the recently established Development Forum process, which entailed a set of tripartite discussions between the national government, the New Ireland Provincial government and the project area landowners to secure their joint endorsement for the terms of the project and to spell out the distribution of the costs and benefits, and roles and responsibilities arising from the development of the mine (Filer, 1995). The IBP agreement contained a substantial set of commitments for royalty and compensation payments, equity in the mine, preferential employment and business contracts and community development projects and services for the ‘affected-area communities’. Therefore, the state was probably also inclined to regard this as the manifestation of its own ‘preferred area policy’, which generally holds that the people living closest to new mines should receive the greatest access to the social and economic benefits generated by these projects.

From the vantage point of some corners of the community, the IBP agreement represented the outcome of their own supernatural powers, previously conceived and exercised in the form of various sociopolitical (or millenarian) movements that arose in the late colonial era and that forecast the transformation of Lihir into a type of Arcadian ‘city’ (Bainton, 2008; cf. Main, this volume). From this perspective, the landowners have always been in little doubt regarding the ownership of the mine and the wealth that it would generate. This perhaps also explains the belief among some community leaders that compensation is a ‘process of providing a permanent substitute for the losses and impacts associated with the development of the mine’, and their very genuine concern about the prospect of being ‘passive observers on their own land’ (Lihir Mining Area Landowners Association, 1994). These ideas and fears were first presented in the form of a memorandum to the PNG Law Reform Commission.
The landowners drafted this memorandum during the final stages of the Development Forum process, to explain the details of their position paper on the matter of compensation for social and environmental impacts. The final structure of the IBP agreement reflected their own version of the ‘compensation principle’, which the landowners had expressed as a kind of compensation formula, whereby ‘Compensation = Destruction + Development + Security + Rehabilitation’. From their perspective, this encompassed the full range of payments and provisions that would offset the losses they would suffer and reflected their desire to control the development of their resources. In other words, this formed an expression of their expectation that mining would provide the springboard to propel Lihirians into a desired development future.

Following the 1995 signing of the IBP agreement, a ‘special mining lease’ was issued for the development of the mine and processing facilities on the main island of Aniolam, which required the relocation of Putput and Kapit villages. By 1997, construction was complete, and gold production was underway. An additional ‘lease for mining purposes’ was also set in place on land close to Londolovit, Kunaie and Zuen villages, to house the development of a mining camp, a residential town site and business centre and an airstrip and other infrastructure to service the operation. These five villages were classified as ‘affected-area’ communities, which seemed to imply that the rest of Lihir was somehow ‘non-affected’. This distinction was the basis of a new socioeconomic hierarchy that has since persisted. However, not all affected-area communities are ‘equal’. Just as some communities are more affected than others, some have also benefited more. In short, mining has generated profound intra-Lihirian inequalities.

For example, the relocations of Putput and Kapit villages have resulted in two entirely different outcomes. The relocation of Putput was relatively successful—the community relocated to their own land outside the mine lease area, the new village looks like a model Melanesian suburb, and the villagers have access to economic opportunities and services (even if they remain highly dependent upon the company and have become deeply fractured as a group). They also wield a greater degree of power and influence because they own critical parcels of land within the mining lease. On the other hand, the Kapit community have experienced numerous forms of ongoing

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4 For a more detailed description of this compensation formula, see Filer (1997, p. 160) and Bainton and Macintyre (forthcoming).
depredation since 1995, as successive attempts to physically relocate this community off the mining lease and re-establish the security of land tenure and livelihoods have failed, due to insufficient planning and resourcing for the process (Hemer, 2016). Unlike Putput, the Kapit community did not own sufficient land outside the lease to which they could relocate as a group. The community was to be scattered around Lihir over 12 different relocation sites; these were selected on the basis that individual households had some claim to land or close links to relatives living in those areas. This strategy has been unsuccessful; consequently, the Kapit community has been torn apart, and many households have experienced chronic immiseration, despite the vast amounts of wealth generated by the mining economy. Further, as I demonstrate below, the effects of these development failures have generated a deep sense of moral outrage.

Within years of signing the 1995 IBP agreement, it was also evident that many Lihirians rejected the view that this agreement satisfactorily balanced the adverse social, economic and environmental impacts of the project; further, people from the ‘non-affected’ villages argued that they were also affected. The company may have ideally regarded the fulfilment of the agreement as a settlement of debts in ways that are endorsed by the state. But for many Lihirians, the continued presence of the company and the persistent absence of the state, along with mounting frustrations over the flawed implementation of the agreement, create the conditions for the ongoing re-negotiation of mining benefits and wealth redistribution. And as the opening scene attests, as more issues and impacts become entangled over time, it is likely that no amount of compensation will ever suffice. In this environment, the gorgor is a primary means to assert a local vision of justice.

Changes and Innovations in the Use of a Traditional Taboo Marker

Traditional taboo markers, such as the gorgor, are commonly found throughout the Pacific. They are used for a variety of closely related purposes, such as signalling property ownership or restricting access to particular areas or resources. These taboo markers are often considered to be highly potent, and they may be used with forms of magic or sorcery, with the intention that individuals who breach these taboos will be afflicted by illness or even death. Different materials are used in different cultural settings, including
coconut fronds, ferns or ginger and cordyline plant (tangent) leaves. Lihirians use the twisted leaves of the white flower variety of the ginger plant (Zingerberaceae) as a taboo marker (Figure 1). Although Lihirians and company employees more commonly use the Tok Pisin term gorgor, in the Lir language this taboo marker is termed galgal or golgal (depending upon the dialect), and these are also the names for the ginger plant itself. Lihirians use the gorgor in a range of quotidian ways to prevent people from accessing resources or demarcate spatial restrictions. It is also used to warn people of potential peril, including the pollution or dangerous power associated with death and ritual practices. In daily contexts, it is common to see the gorgor tied to fruit trees (e.g. coconut or betel nut stands), marking them as off limits. Essentially, the primary meaning implied by the gorgor is ‘keep off’ or ‘no trespassing’. As explained by some Lihirians, a landowner cannot guard all their resources all the time; so there exists a need to signpost their ownership. As it was once explained in a Lihirian briefing paper to the company, the gorgor means the same as ‘The Seventh Commandment: Thou shalt not steal’ (Kabariu, 1998).

Lihirians place a strong emphasis upon demonstrating respect to maintain unity and harmony; consequently, they will often resort to indirect methods to address their grievances and conflicts. Although the qualities of leadership have changed over time, as new pathways to status and influence have emerged, and as contemporary circumstances demand a broader set of leadership skills (Bainton, 2008), there remains a general expectation for leaders to personify qualities of restraint and dignity. In this context, the gorgor plays an important role as a less confrontational and non-violent way of signalling the need to resolve an issue.

Traditionally, the gorgor was highly respected because people believed it to be imbued with certain supernatural powers. For example, after a person has died, Lihirians will place a gorgor on the garden of the deceased during the mourning period. Relatives are restricted from harvesting garden produce, as a sign of respect. Some Lihirians claim that, in the past, people who ‘broke the rules’ would develop visible signs of illness and infection (symptoms that would now be regarded as a case of yaws). By the late 1990s, it was evident that some of these restrictions had already broken down. Some people admitted that, rather than let good produce go to waste, they might harvest the yams of their deceased relatives. With the increased availability of penicillin to treat yaws, it is likely that some people concluded that the gorgor was no longer as potent as before. These changes may also relate to the general erosion of traditional forms of social control.
Figure 1: Gorgor at Kapit village (2011).
Source: Photo by Nick Bainton.
Most importantly, the gorgor is used to signal a dispute over the use or ownership of land and other resources. When it is used in this way, the gorgor conveys an important message about leadership status and the right to assert ownership over resources. In the past, senior male leaders exerted greater control over the ownership and use of land within their clans and lineage groups. When leaders use the gorgor to assert their rights, it is not simply a present claim made manifest, but also a statement about past transactions and anticipation of future claims. It marks their knowledge of the history of ownership surrounding the resources under question and their claim on future use. As an indirect way of signalling an issue, the gorgor also plays an important function in the maintenance of relationships. Here, the purpose of the gorgor is best characterised by the Lihirian term tupakie, which can mean ‘order’ or ‘to stop a dispute’. In Lihirian terms, the gorgor is an extension or ‘part’ of the person who places it—the embodiment of property rights. This means that when someone ignores or cuts a gorgor, when they deliberately rip it off, this is akin to ‘cutting’ the owner of the gorgor—a direct assault upon their status and authority and an overt act of disrespect. In the past, the assumed potency of the gorgor generally prevented these kinds of acts. These sorts of breaches required the payment of shell money and pigs and the hosting of a small feast. In this context, the relational logic of personhood and property is brought to the fore, as property rights are experienced as a type of social relation.

As the opening scene in Putput village shows, certain customary protocols surround the removal of a gorgor, particularly when it marks a dispute over resources. The ‘owner’ of the gorgor is required to host a small feast once the gorgor is removed and the dispute is settled. This serves two purposes. It establishes or reconfirms the legitimacy of the owner of the resource, as they have killed a pig ‘on top’ of this resource—their authority and leadership is manifest in their capacity to mobilise the resources to host this feast. Ideally, the feast also reconciles the two parties and restores a certain degree of social harmony. The pig is not regarded as compensation, but rather as an ameliorative gift and a demonstration of power.

One of the earliest incidences of Lihirians using the gorgor to signal an issue with the company occurred in 1989, when the exploration company damaged the sacred Ailaya rock during the construction of the road around the Luise Harbour where the mine is located (Bainton, Ballard & Gillespie, 2012). This moment of innovation paved the way for future practices. In her annual social impact assessment reports to the company,
Martha Macintyre documented a growing pattern of discontentment and escalating claims against the company, as people from the affected-area villages sought new ways of gaining access to mine-related wealth during the early years of the operation. Following the first rush of compensation money, after the lease areas were cleared and construction had commenced, but before the mine was fully operational, she noted several occasions in which people had 'blocked access or threatened to do so as a strategy for gaining further benefits, or in order to make a complaint' (Macintyre, 1997, p. 19). Macintyre recalled a definite sense of ambiguity surrounding these early protests. Landowners were not entirely sure how the company would respond to the gorgor or whether white people were susceptible to its power. At this point in time, Lihirians clearly understood the gorgor as more than just a sign; much debate ensued as to whether it was appropriate to use the gorgor in this way and what consequences might arise. But when the company stopped work and responded to their complaints, any doubts surrounding its efficacy in this new industrial context were soon removed. If some landowners were surprised that it had 'actually worked', others quickly understood their newfound power and, with this novel realisation, the gorgor was soon transformed into a potent political sign.

In the second year of gold production, a large group from Putput village entered the mine and the processing plant and placed gorgors on the plant site and the mine entrance. The group threatened violence and demanded that the mine be shut down due to outstanding compensation payments and noncompliance with the terms of the compensation and benefits agreement. Mine equipment was shut down, and plant equipment was maintained on limited capacity while a solution was negotiated over the next few days. In her advice to the company, Macintyre wrote that this particular dispute highlighted the difference in the relationship between the company and affected-area communities, as compared with other villagers around Lihir: ‘it shows that these villagers are volatile in their responses and willing to take direct action in pursuit of their interests’ (Macintyre, 1998, p. 8). Their demands related to disturbances to village life from mining operations (from noise, dust and light pollution from the mine at night) and the failure to construct a vegetation buffer zone between the mine and Putput village. The negotiations demonstrated that the demand was essentially one for more monetary compensation rather than a response to intolerable disturbance, since the leaders did not want immediate practical resolution, but rather more ‘rent’. These demands were somewhat undermined (although not retracted) when the same community leaders demanded street lighting for security reasons.
When Macintyre spoke with people from the non-affected villages about these demands, some people dismissed them, cynically, as ‘proof’ of landowner greed. These discussions also revealed underlying hostilities towards the affected-area villages, who were seen as having benefited disproportionately. People from Putput were viewed as being particularly ‘opportunistic and wasteful’ (Macintyre, 1998, p. 8). Some people interpreted these demands for more compensation as a sign that the Putput community had already misspent previous payments on beer and other consumables and were now dependent upon compensation as a source of income. Others were more ambivalent, suggesting that no quantity of money could really compensate for the permanent loss of land, which justified their demands. Women from Putput community expressed their concerns about the need for practical solutions to mining impacts and also stressed their need for cash, complaining that other people did not realise how difficult it was to now be dependent upon store-bought food.

In the first year of the new millennium, a large group of villagers from Malie Island (the closest outer island to the main island where the mine was built) stormed the company’s community relations office in the public town site and placed gorgors on the office door. Community relations staff were essentially held hostage to force negotiations. Angered by the sediment plume from the mine that had washed onto their reefs and affected their marine environment, the villagers demanded recognition as an affected-area community and access to the compensation and benefits that this status entailed. This was one of many environmental claims that arose during the early years of the project; as people witnessed changes to their natural environment these became a source of general anxiety. Although some of these changes could be linked directly to the operation of the mine, others were not; however, this signalled a growing awareness and politicisation of environmental issues (Macintyre & Foale, 2004).

These early disputes captured the newly established tensions in Lihir. Some people were now more engaged in the cash economy or had more access to ‘development’, but were also reliant upon the mine for continuing access to cash and modern lifestyles, whereas others looked on with resentment. These conflicts demonstrated that compensation demands would only increase with time and that people would seek novel ways of expanding the basis for compensation from the company. More importantly, these disputes signalled that some Lihirians were beginning to regard environmental impacts as a ‘resource’, particularly people from outside the affected areas who could not appeal to landowner status as a form of leverage.
In most cases, the company responded to community issues and demands, investigating claims and paying some form of compensation. If these responses reflected the capacity of Rio Tinto (as the owner of the mine) to absorb some lessons from its experiences in Bougainville, where a local rebellion forced the permanent closure of the Panguna copper mine (Regan, 2017), they also served to reaffirm villagers’ views that they were right and that this constituted a successful ploy for gaining money. Meanwhile, the scientific reports investigating environmental claims had little effect on local ecological knowledge and were often dismissed as a kind of corporate smokescreen designed to obfuscate the issue (Macintyre & Foale, 2000, p. 49). Within the first five years of the mining operation, it had become obvious to everyone that this was the most effective means for raising issues and leveraging outcomes. By 2001, Macintyre had observed that there was now a ‘greater propensity to threaten gorgors or mine closure as an “opening gambit” in any argument or expression of discontent. This was not necessarily reflected in an increase in the number of gorgors actually put up, but was noticeable in discussions with villagers whenever they spoke about impact issues’ (Macintyre & Foale, 2001, pp. 4–5). The strength of these threats derived from the customary expectation that, once a gorgor has been placed, the area is then off limits and work should cease immediately and the fear among company managers of a violent uprising if the gorgor was ignored.

Consistent Contentions

Since the early years of the operation, landowner grievances have remained reasonably stable in form. The specific issues have changed over time, in response to the initial development of the mine, subsequent expansions and land acquisitions, further environmental impacts, competition over new economic opportunities, shifting political divisions and alliances or changes to the content and governance arrangements of the IBP agreement. However, for the most part, the typology of grievances has remained consistent—these mostly relate to the unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens of extraction. These inequalities have a temporal and spatial dimension because some impacts are more contained to specific communities or locations (while others are more widespread) and because others may be experienced at specific moments in time (while others endure over much longer periods). This point is amply illustrated in the difference between the relocations of Putput and Kapit villages.
Other common grievances relate to frustrations around the non-fulfilment or delayed implementation of obligations in the IBP agreement, including infrastructure projects, service delivery and community development programs or specific compensation payments. These issues are compounded by the failure of the government to fulfil its duties under the terms of the MOA and the historical failure of the company to fully resolve outstanding grievances, some of which have developed into complex multi-layered ‘legacy issues’ that can now be understood as cumulative impacts. Many landowners maintain the belief that the company has not adequately compensated them for the permanent alteration of their land and the wider environmental effects of the operation. The broader community has often argued that all Lihirians have experienced these impacts in one way or another, not just the affected-area communities; and, therefore, they should all receive some form of compensation. In this environment, it is often very difficult to untangle one set of issues from another. The overall experience has reinforced the feeling that ‘the mine’ has failed to deliver the expected forms of development.

As the mining operation has expanded, there has been an increase in economic opportunities or ‘commercial participation’ through employment or contracts to provide services to the mine. Most landowners maintain high expectations to access these business contracts, which many regard as a form of compensation for the loss of land, or a form of rent for the activities occurring on their land. These expectations derive from Lihirian ideas about what it means to be a landowner, which are expressed idiomatically through the regular demand ‘my land, my work’ (Bainton & Macintyre, 2013). Whereas the wider community, with less access to mining-related benefits, often press for more contracting opportunities, landowners typically demand first priority on the basis that they have experienced the brunt of the impacts and made the greatest sacrifice—a position somewhat reinforced by the state’s preferred area policy. Consequently, local competition over access to business contracts has become a source of acrimonious conflict and a daily point of contention with the company, because only some people are able to establish businesses and only some businesses are successful.
Dispossessed and Sidelined

These constant conflicts and controversies have generated a deeply felt sense of indignation and injustice across the broader Lihirian community and, particularly, among the landowners. The feelings of humiliation and resentment that are created by these issues find expression in multiple ways, including occasional violent outbursts at company staff and destructive forms of sabotage or ‘negative agency’ (Wardlow, 2006; also Main, this volume) directed at fellow community members. Specific issues that arise at particular moments in time may trigger confrontations with the company, prompting individuals to invoke the gorgor and threaten operations. But these are not simply irregular responses to regular impacts. These moments of protest are grounded in a growing sense of collective outrage over the wider state of affairs and individual feelings of desperation.

In their many letters to the company and in countless public forums, Lihirians have accused the company and the state of reducing them to mere ‘beggars’ or ‘spectators’ on their own land, confirming their earlier fears about simply ‘observing’ rather than ‘participating’ in the development of their resources. As the company has expanded its operations and increased gold production, many Lihirians feel that someone else is reaping the fruits of their land, while they continue to be consumed by their own internal differences. Company managers and state representatives would probably agree that Lihirians have been (wilfully) divided, to their own detriment. However, they would probably also make the case that Lihirians are involved in a range of major commercial ventures that support the mine, and they would just as likely cite annual expenditure under the terms of the IBP agreement and the company’s commitment to local education, training and employment opportunities as a form of ‘proof’ that Lihirians are fully participating in the development game. These kinds of claims make little impact upon community sentiment, not least of all because they fail to acknowledge who controls the flow of benefits; and many Lihirians would respond that the company has played a game of ‘divide and rule’ that has prevented them from realising their development aspirations on their own land. Even if some Lihirians have benefited significantly from the mine (at the expense of others), for the vast majority, this has been an extended experience of frustrated development, because the anticipated levels of social and economic change have simply not materialised.
When Lihirians describe themselves as ‘spectators on our own land’, this is one specific aspect of the ideology of landownership. This common turn of phrase represents a particular kind of subjectivity that accompanies large-scale mining; it also reflects a definite sense of loss and the feeling that someone else is benefiting from ‘their birthright’. Lihirian leaders may have willingly signed up to this mining project in the hope of a better future; however, few Lihirians accept the persistent conditions of structural inequality that it has produced. In everyday terms, this sense of dispossession pivots on the basic feeling that someone has taken something away from them—whether it be their land, their home or their justified entitlement to meaningful development—regardless of any legal agreements that may have been signed. For the Kapit community, this is a kind of double dispossession. Not only have they given up their land for the mine (which they believe has erased their cultural identity), but they have also failed to benefit from this unequal exchange in the same way as the Putput community and those elites or ‘big shots’ who have somehow captured the various benefit streams that should have flowed their way. They feel that they have been robbed of the opportunity to convert their relocation into a lasting form of development. The fact that the company and other Lihirians have gained from their specific loss has produced a special kind of bitterness. As a young Kapit leader once explained to me, ‘Nick, you have to understand, it’s like another man has taken your wife and children and he is the one sleeping with your wife and raising your children’. This kind of scenario is more or less what Karl Marx had in mind when he developed his theory of ‘original’ or ‘primitive’ accumulation or what David Harvey (2005) now calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’.

These structures of dispossession also entail a deeply affective component, as lamentations for past connections to place inform local responses to the mine and related inequalities. These sentiments are manifest in a kind of existential distress—or what Glenn Albrecht and his collaborators (2007) have termed ‘solastalgia’—which may be understood as a psychological response to the death of place. In 2016, this type of sorrow was on full display during the ceremonial events that marked the restoration of the old Kapit village in the special mining lease area as part of an agreed obligation to preserve some of their original hamlets, graves and ceremonial grounds. A senior female leader from Kapit named Theresia Giar composed the following song with an accompanying female dance. The women wept as they performed in front of the assembled crowd.
If these feelings of sadness, resentment and indignation are the price that some people have paid for development in Lihir, these emotions are also a source of motivation that drives the double movement. In the case of Kapit, this sense of loss and outrage has underpinned their rational demands for development (including the fulfilment of basic relocation obligations) and fuelled the many times that they have invoked the gorgor to resist the presence of the company on their ancestral land and to press for better outcomes. Although some moments of protest may be aimed at capturing more concessions, these moments and movements almost always register dissatisfaction with the existing terms of engagement and reassert an attachment to land.

**Mineras Interruptus**

Over the years, Lihirians have used the gorgor no less than 60 times to interrupt some aspect of the mining operation. On at least 12 of these occasions, this has resulted in the total shutdown of the mine, lasting from less than one day to more than one week. The frequency with which Lihirians threaten to use the gorgor is, of course, much higher. Almost every year since mining has begun, there has been some form of partial or total disruption to operations due to landowner grievances. Not all
these events have received media coverage, or been reported in annual company reports or market notifications; however, every time the gorgor is used in this way, it generates considerable public attention in Lihir and consumes a great deal of energy and resources within the company as staff rush to respond and re-coordinate their operations. Although we may find comparable levels of disruption at other extractive projects, there is often more variety in the chosen methods (see Figure 2 and Video 1 for an example of the use of the gorgor).

These patterns of (partial) disruption are closely related to customary land tenure arrangements in the mining lease areas. The leases are divided into some 140 numbered ‘blocks’ that roughly correspond to the customary boundaries of the different parcels of land owned by different lineages and clans. Some of these blocks are larger than others, and some are more ‘valuable’ than others—for example, the blocks that contain the processing plant and administration offices or the mining pit are more important for daily operations. The ability to leverage the company is contingent upon the patterns of land ownership; a ‘non-landowner’ has no customary right to use the gorgor on the mine, whereas landowners can only assert their rights on their own lease area blocks. In this way, contemporary economic and political inequalities roughly map against the customary geography underpinning the mining lease areas.

Figure 2: Gorgor on mine lease area gates (2012).

Source: Photo by Nick Bainton.
Most of the time, issues are raised by individuals and their immediate lineage, which can restrict the effect or impact of the gorgor, depending upon which lease area blocks they own. When issues are raised at a broader community level, the different clans (or ‘block owners’) must agree on a collective plan of action. Lihirian society has undergone a steady process of atomisation; therefore, it now requires much more effort to mobilise different lineages and factions, even within the same clan or village, many of whom now have competing interests and agendas.

For the most part, the company has ‘respected’ the gorgor as a cultural practice and has not intentionally removed a gorgor before negotiations have begun. Company managers have generally recognised that the gorgor has prevented the kind of physical violence found at other resource extraction projects around the region. But as Macintyre has previously observed, in practice, this tends to further validate the use of the gorgor as a legitimate way of gaining political traction and a means for expressing landowner status. Even when issues are not resolved to the satisfaction of the community, this typically has the same effect.

In 2015, the national regulator of the industry, the Mineral Resources Authority, instructed the police force to remove the gorgors that had been placed on the mine during one particular moment of protest that involved the landowning community and their association. The actions of the state only served to strengthen local antipathy towards the company—widely thought to have requested the state to intervene in the dispute—and further politicised the gorgor as a cultural institution that symbolised the rights and autonomy of the community vis-à-vis the state. This was also the first time in the history of the mine that a gorgor had been ‘ignored’ and removed before the issue was resolved, which only strengthened the determination of the landowners and deepened their sense of indignation.

From a community perspective, using the gorgor in this way can function as a pressure release valve. As tensions rise over specific issues and the pressure for direct action increases within the community, this public act of resistance can have a cathartic effect. Having reasserted their status as landowners, drawn attention to the issue and reminded the company and the state of their obligations (perceived, contractual or otherwise)—defining the terms of engagement—the leaders are then able to begin resolving matters. However, these constitute highly stressful moments in the life of the community. Leaders come under immense pressure to maintain control of events and to achieve favourable outcomes to
justify their actions. Factions may threaten to negotiate side deals with the company or the government or seek to sabotage events for their own personal gain. While some observers might rejoice in these cases of counter-movement, these moments weigh heavily upon the community, which serves to highlight the importance of the customary feast once issues have been ‘resolved’.

In acting out this ideology, Lihirians have also created a form of hegemony. Lihirians have managed to liberate a key symbol of male authority, which has been scaled up and loaded with new meaning to enable it to perform much heavier work in an industrial context. In doing so, Lihirians have literally and metaphorically transferred power from the ‘ground’ or the ‘base’ to the ‘top’ of the hierarchical structure that is occupied by the company and the state. This power is then transferred back ‘down’, in the form of a dominant Lihirian ideology, as company managers and state representatives reinforce a certain pattern of behaviour through their mutual acceptance (at least momentarily in practice) of these terms of engagement. A form of cultural ascendancy is then evidenced in the language that is sometimes used by company staff to describe these events—such as ‘code red’, a ‘big gorgor’ or a ‘major gorgor’. This, in turn, animates the gorgor and suggests a certain fetishisation—it is the gorgor that has closed the mine rather than the landowners who placed it. Although some Lihirians might interpret this as proof that some company managers have come to understand the gorgor as more than just a sign, most Lihirians would regard this as evidence of their ability to influence the company or to penetrate corporate consciousness. As Lihirians have come to use the gorgor in more militaristic ways—as a direct assault upon the company—they have instilled a constant fear of ‘mineras interruptus’ or operational disruption (Owen, 2016). A transferal of power occurs as the gorgor—a symbol of leadership and property ownership—has come to dominate the thoughts of senior leaders in the company and the state, forcing them to accept Lihirian ideas about the relationship between resource ownership and development. In these moments, Lihirians have managed to thoroughly menace the mine.
Reforming Custom

Many Lihirians are concerned about the apparent abuse of this customary practice. These concerns stem from the belief that there are times when the *gorgor* has been used in inappropriate ways, without a genuine reason, appropriate authority or regard for the customary protocols for removal. Some Lihirians have even argued that the *gorgor* should not be used in a modern industrial setting, that it belongs ‘in the village’ (along with other customary practices) and that quarantining custom is the most effective way to maintain ‘traditional authenticity’.

Lihirians are also highly critical of people who use the *gorgor* when they are drunk; however, many concede that it has become common for people to get drunk to precipitate arguments that they would otherwise be too ashamed to raise (due to the prevailing emphasis upon showing respect) and that men, in particular, will get drunk to gather the courage to confront the company directly. These changes are directly mirrored in everyday village contexts. Placing a *gorgor* when drunk is considered to be antithetical to the calm assuredness expected of leaders and also unnecessary, if there is a genuine cause. Similar arguments are made against the practice of placing the *gorgor* on the mine by stealth during the night.

Many Lihirians find it problematic when institutions such as the local-level government or the landowners association use the *gorgor* in their battles against each other, but less so when they use the *gorgor* against the company. When these institutions use the *gorgor*, they will rely upon their members with customary ownership rights over the location in question to place the taboo. However, for some observers, the *gorgor* is thought to be the preserve of the owners of a resource, rather than a representative or corporate body. From the perspective of the company, when the landowners association mobilises landowners to place a *gorgor* on the mine, the association appears to be using the community to fight its own institutional battles. From the perspective of the association, this is a false distinction, because its leadership and legitimacy are derived from the same community. These moments also draw attention to the emerging crisis of representation in Lihir, because not all Lihirians support the association—and this is a point that the company has often sought to convey.
The *gorgor* has sometimes been used by drunken youths to signal intergenerational struggles with maternal uncles over the inheritance of land and mine-related wealth. The *gorgor* has frequently been used to escalate relatively minor issues that might otherwise be resolved in less contentious ways, which often highlights greater, underlying sociopolitical fault lines. Non-Lihirian labourers have also appropriated the *gorgor* on some occasions to signal industrial disputes with the company. In 2011, drunken landowners from Kapit village attempted to place a *gorgor* around the neck of an expatriate manager from the company as a sign of their frustration over specific relocation impacts. Taken as a whole, these kinds of practices are considered by many Lihirians as a perversion of tradition, but in some ways, they might also be interpreted as the inevitable outcome of the liberation of symbols.

Notwithstanding these local critiques, most Lihirians vehemently maintain their right to use the *gorgor* to signal an issue with the company, as long as people follow the proper customary laws, expressed locally as ‘*ol i mas bihainim ol kastom lo*’. What this actually means, in practice, has been the subject of intense debate and numerous initiatives designed to formalise the use of the *gorgor*. These concerns about the *gorgor* form part of a much broader set of concerns that originated during the colonial period about the preservation of traditional values and practices, or *kastom*, in the face of rapid social change (Bainton, 2008). At various times, the landowners association and the local-level government have tried to codify the use of the *gorgor*. This has precedents in their previous attempts to codify local land rules to help reduce disputes generated by the mine (Kabariu, 1998) and in their ongoing efforts to document customary feasting protocols to ‘strengthen’ and ‘preserve’ Lihirian culture (Bainton, 2010; Bainton & MacIntyre, 2016).

In 2008, the landowners association developed the first of several policies for regulating the use of the *gorgor*. This was not the first time Lihirians had produced a set of *gorgor* ‘rules’; however, it was the most significant attempt to integrate the *gorgor* into more formalised dispute-handling processes with the company. The policy contained a set of procedures and ‘customary penalties’ for deviation. This included the requirement to ‘register intent’ to place a *gorgor* and the establishment of a ‘dispute resolution committee’ who would then decide whether cases are ‘genuine’ or not. This was intended to provide some steps to slow the *gorgor* reflex. The idea was to create a kind of *gorgor* circuit breaker that would facilitate more ‘peaceful’ and orderly dispute resolution processes. Many
Lihirians highlighted the irony of this proposition, arguing that the *gorgor* is their peaceful solution. These efforts to control landowner practices ultimately foundered, much like other Lihirian attempts to codify customary activities.

At the time, and in the absence of an alternative dispute-handling mechanism, this policy was somewhat supported by the company and it influenced how some managers responded to *gorgor* events. For example, when threats were made against the company, managers might ask whether the aggrieved party had complied with ‘their own policy’ and whether the resulting *gorgor* should be considered ‘legitimate’ and observed; at the very least, this had the effect of buying some more time in the negotiation process. The company has never formally supported the use of the *gorgor* on its operations, and it certainly could not legally endorse a policy that effectively sanctions landowners to disrupt the mine.

From the perspective of the community, the place of the *gorgor* in company–community dispute resolution processes has never really been satisfactorily resolved. Suggestions have been made in different forums to allow the *gorgor* to be used in a purely symbolic way to raise an issue—but without actually disrupting operations—or to create a dedicated ‘*gorgor* zone’ in which it might be used. Lihirians have rejected both suggestions for the obvious reason that it removes the power of the *gorgor* and because a dedicated *zone* would logically be restricted to the customary owners of that area. These incongruities highlight the incompatibility between the *gorgor* as a cultural institution and conventional company-driven dispute-handling mechanisms, because the *gorgor* is not merely a means for signalling an issue, but also specifically entails the performance of power and identity.

The company has found itself caught between its stated support for Lihirian customs and traditions—as part of its corporate social responsibility policies—and an industrial ethic that demands uninterrupted operational output and adherence to the law. These tensions are mirrored at the level of the state, between the constitutional commitment to acknowledge ‘worthy customs’ and the terms of the Mining Act that deem any community disruption to mining operations to be illegal. If there was any ambiguity in the state’s position, this was resolved in 2014, when the managing director of the Mineral Resources Authority (MRA) issued a public notice in Lihir clarifying the legal status of the *gorgor* (which was then put to good effect in 2015). The notice acknowledged the *gorgor* as a traditional
practice that ‘has a time and a place’ and stated that, should the invoking of the gorgor obstruct the execution of the company’s rights under the Mining Act, this would amount to a punishable offence. The issuing of this public notice may have strengthened the resolve of the company to hold the line against the ‘illegal’ use of the gorgor, but for most Lihirians, it has done little to change their belief in their inalienable customary right to protest in this way.

Development Failure and Corporate Social Confusion

Lihirians have made use of a variety of means to publicly air their grievances regarding the impacts and inequities generated by the mine, including rallies and avoidance strategies, media campaigns and public notices and social media debates and position papers directed at the company. However, on their own, these tactics generally gain limited traction. On the other hand, the gorgor has become a deeply grounded and proven form of protest, which reflects the centrality of land as both the source of many struggles and the source of sovereignty underpinning these collective actions.

The continual complaint about being spectators on their own land serves to emphasise the failures or inconsistencies of the corporate ideology of development, as much as it also reflects a certain idealisation inherent in the Lihirian ideology of landownership. This repeated reference to the role of spectators also suggests that we could conceptualise the double movement in Lihir as a kind of football match between the company and the community. If we follow this line of thought, the question becomes whether the gorgor is a kind of (political) football, a goal scored by the community, a linesman’s flag, a referee’s whistle or even a pitch invasion by the spectators. As we have seen, it may represent different things on different occasions. If the gorgor represents a referee’s whistle, it could signal a stoppage in ‘play’ (and possibly a penalty, as witnessed in Putput village) or a half-time or full-time mark in a particular match (or dispute). If the gorgor serves as a referee’s whistle, the community also plays the role of referee as they attempt to interpret, and even make up, the rules of the game that is being played. Further, as they have directed the field of play (and set the ‘rules of the gorgor’), this has been one particular way to demonstrate their superiority over the company.
Therefore, if the spectators are fed up with being spectators, the question is whether they want to be players or referees or rule-makers instead (or whether they just want to mount a pitch invasion). This also raises a troublesome question concerning the role of Lihirian labourers working for the company and whether they are permitted to take part in this game, or whether they too must spectate from the sidelines. If this is the case, there is no reason to assume that they will consistently support either side and, in practice, many have hedged their bets. The state has periodically abdicated its role as referee, even if the MRA has stationed an officer in Lihir to adjudicate disputes. At different junctures, both sides have surely suspected certain actors of covertly transferring to the other team, even while the state has maintained some responsibility for the entire league to ensure the sport endures. However, as the games continue, and the rules are adapted to suit increasingly complex circumstances, it becomes ever more difficult to determine the difference between a point scored and a home goal because minor victories often produce lasting legacies and inadvertent consequences for both sides. The ground upon which this unholy match is being played might be one of many locations for some greater battle between the forces of industrial greed and ‘collectivist’ counter-movements, but it also represents the prize that will be awarded to the victor in a very specific contest. Consequently, access to land within the lease areas has become a zero-sum game—the company argues that it has already paid for exclusive occupancy, while the community continually forces the company to renegotiate its access to this bounded arena.

This analogy, like all analogies, is liable to break down at some point; however, it does help to highlight the different motivations and entanglements between the different social actors within this space, the complex ways that Lihirians have responded to the inequalities and dispossession of extraction and the assorted ways that the gorgor has been used and understood. To simplify this situation, we might say that Lihirian acts of protest are deliberate attempts to remove any form of wealth and power that makes them feel inferior or dependent in their relationship with the company (Filer, 1997, p. 182). If this is the case, it is very unlikely that the company will ever be able to settle upon a ‘fair trade’ that balances out the benefits and burdens of extraction to the satisfaction of the entire community—the agreements review process may well continue in one form or another for the life of the mine, as a perpetual manifestation of this double movement. More precisely, if Lihirian demands are really about wrestling control of the processes of developing their natural resources,
it seems that some Lihirians are less interested in trying to balance out this necessarily asymmetrical relationship—even while they actively try to redirect the flow of wealth—than in demonstrating that a foreign company is powerless on their land. This is certainly one inference we can make from the hostile ways in which some landowners invoke the gorgor.

At the outset, I suggested that the fundamental reasons for this stalemate can be found in the different ways that Lihirians and the company regard their relationship. As Filer notes in his chapter of this volume, we commonly find that most senior (male) landowners throughout PNG tend to view themselves as being in a landlord–tenant relationship with mining companies, whereas most (expatriate) mining company managers prefer to see themselves in a patron–client relationship with these same community leaders. This is the source of a persistent double asymmetry. In Lihir, some of these managers also tend to see themselves as the heralds of modernity and the benevolent benefactors of economic development through the employment opportunities, training, business contracts or community development programs that the company can provide under their direction. Although these magnanimous acts are sometimes subject to the whims of individual managers, or the conditions within the benefits package, they are also presented as evidence of the company’s commitment to the values of corporate social responsibility.

The leaders of the landowners association would rather see themselves as the vanguards of a cultural and socioeconomic movement that will harness the wealth from the mine to achieve their idea of development on their own terms—what an earlier generation of leaders called the ‘Lihir society reform’ program and the current generation now call the ‘Lihir Destiny’ vision (Bainton, 2010). These positions are premised upon rather different ideas of development, and this is one source of the state of mutual incomprehension between the company and the community. If the company is convinced that successful operations are good for the Lihirian population (because more corporate profits will supposedly create more opportunities to invest in Lihir), it seems that most Lihirians have concluded that this looks too much like a trickle-down theory of development or a form of ‘drip-feeding’ that is likely to benefit the company before it benefits the community. This corporate ideology of development constitutes an affront to Lihirian ideas of land ownership and their role as ‘landlords’ and exacerbates their sense of subordination and indignation.
A second reinforcing reason for this condition of confusion can be found in the particular brand of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to which the company subscribes. For some managers, the very notion of CSR is perplexing for reasons other than the belief that it represents a set of global policy constraints on their primary commitment to shareholder-capitalism. The first reason is the double asymmetry itself, where company managers struggle to reconcile their dual roles as both patrons and clients. The second reason is the fact that, in the Lihir context, CSR commitments are partially mandated by the state’s preferred area policy that had become a feature of the nation’s mineral policy landscape by the time the Lihir IBP agreement had been signed in 1995. In practice, this policy effectively creates a set of concentric rings or ‘zones of entitlement’ around each major mining project, starting with the innermost ring, which is occupied by the customary landowners of the mining lease areas, followed by the project area people, the residents of the region, and the outermost ring, which is occupied by the population or government of the nation as a whole (see Filer, this volume). If this policy was originally a response to the threat of succession from the province that hosted the ill-fated Panguna mine, where the landowners argued that they most certainly did not receive any preferential treatment, this commitment was not framed in the international language of CSR, because this policy was developed before the notion of CSR had begun to permeate the discourse of the mining industry in the 1990s (Dashwood, 2012; Filer, Burton & Banks, 2008).

In 1998, when Rio Tinto was still the owner of the Lihir gold mine, and when the lessons from Panguna were still fresh, the World Bank was leading an initiative to assess the extent to which the world’s largest mining and petroleum companies were committed to the emerging principles of CSR. The World Bank had asked Rio Tinto, in addition to several of their peers, to indicate which of their own operations might be taken as an example of good practice in terms of managing social and environmental issues. Rio Tinto duly nominated the Lihir operation as its own best example of CSR in practice (Filer et al., 2008). Although the decision to nominate Lihir appeared to contradict the findings of the early social impact monitoring reports, part of the reason for this decision may have been due to a belief within the company that the significant size and scope of the recently settled IBP agreement should be matched by a corresponding degree of community support for the project.5

5 As Filer, Banks and Burton observed, it was probably also due to the pre-existing relationship between Lihir Gold Limited and the World Bank, since the project’s risk insurance was covered by the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (Filer et al., 2008, p. 167).
This declaration happened to coincide with a set of proclamations from the chairman of the board about the need to shift from a ‘cost culture’ to a ‘value culture’, supposedly expressed in a commitment to the idea of the ‘triple bottom line’. Shortly afterwards, Rio Tinto came to the conclusion that no degree of patronage dispensed to the Lihir community would actually secure its ‘social licence to operate’—this is presumably one reason why Rio Tinto then decided in 2005 to divest itself of all interests in Lihir. It is entirely possible that Newcrest will reach the same conclusion, even if its rhetorical commitments to CSR are now framed by its subscription to various international norms and standards as a newly admitted member of the International Council of Mining and Metals. It remains to be seen whether these events will translate into substantially different outcomes on the ground or whether they will simply reinforce the state of incomprehension.

The point of this brief excursion is to highlight the fact that each successive operator of the Lihir gold mine has reverted to a ‘cost culture’ every time they have encountered ‘hard times’, whichever way this may be defined during different historical periods. Even if the overall quantum of compensation and social and economic benefits has increased, much of which exists as legal obligations under the terms of the IBP agreement, there is always room to devise strategies to essentially shrink the size of the preferred area and, therefore, the number of clients who need patronage of one form or another. This may arrive in the form of fewer resources to implement existing obligations and services, or less discretionary spending on so-called CSR programs or simply tighter contract management procedures for landowner companies, which may result in smaller profit margins. The company may publicly claim that these initiatives are justified to create new efficiencies or to address program failures and, thus, to enhance the positive effect of future activities. Even if these shrinking schemes seem to be consistent with the same ‘network-cutting’ strategies of those ‘big shots’ who aim to keep their wealth contained to the inner zone of entitlement (Bainton, 2009; Martin, 2013), these same landowners will invariably argue that these strategies still constitute a symbolic violation of the original IBP agreement. This is the source of immense frustration within the community and the cause of ongoing bewilderment for all.

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6 The ‘triple bottom line’ represents an attempt to broaden the ‘bottom line’ from a primary concern with profits to include environmental and social considerations in the operation of a business.
Colin Filer once suggested to me that this state of affairs could be represented as a kind of formula whereby: the ideology of landownerships + CSR= double asymmetry + mutual incomprehension. I am inclined to call this ‘Filer’s formula for development failure’, because it seems to explain the terminal outcomes experienced in Lihir and the unlikeliness of ever finding an acceptable solution to the development puzzle. This also helps to explain why the original compensation formula proposed by the landowners association has not produced the sorts of outcomes they had once envisioned.

We might then ask where this leaves Thompson’s concept of the moral economy. There is, at least, one important difference between Thompson’s eighteenth-century England and contemporary Melanesia. The social and economic transitions that Thompson described played out over approximately a hundred years or more. This meant, among other things, that a moral economy had formed through the history of transactions between different groups based upon a system of mutuality. In some circumstances, the crowd was supported by the authorities as they threatened or actually rioted against perceived violations of customary norms and entitlements. The authorities were sometimes prisoners of the people and were complicit in these riots and the validation of local legitimising notions. There is very little evidence of this kind of shared understanding between the different groups who are present in Melanesian ‘mining arenas’ (Bainton & Owen, 2019), much less so in Lihir. In other words, the community is not responding to the violation of a pre-existing social contract by creating an ideologically serviceable past to defend the norms and practices of an earlier order—although there are definite parallels to be found in the degree of restraint that accompanies the use of the gorgor and the distributive actions of Thompson’s rioting crowd. Rather, from a community perspective, it is the company who is mystified about the real social order of extraction; the community must, therefore, set the company straight, to defend their interests. The very act of transferring power from the ground and creating a form of cultural hegemony forces some degree of mutual understanding or ‘custom in common’, as Thompson might have it. The net result of this is to make the company and the state prisoners of the people—if only for a limited moment in time—and to create the conditions in which their moral failings can be comprehended, to produce the desired outcome based upon a Lihirian understanding of development.
By way of conclusion, it is worth considering the limits of this kind of protest by indignant crowds. From the preceding discussion, it is evident that Lihirians are not able to act in the way that Polanyi imagined that a state could, to limit the injustices that accompany the commodification of labour, land and money. In asserting their non-commodifiable rights to land, some Lihirians have successfully extracted money and benefits; however, some have been extraordinarily excluded. Even if local leaders genuinely want to ensure just outcomes for all Lihirians, they do not have the scale to achieve this outcome, and one result of their gorgōr activism has been greater inequality in Lihir. In the absence of the state and effective governance, these re-assertions of highly localised sovereignty have not slowed or halted the broader processes of dispossession that form part of capitalism more broadly. Lihirian landowners cannot tame the market—they can merely menace it.

The question then becomes whether Lihir can transcend this double movement or whether Lihir is doomed to remain firmly in its grip. In their work on ‘extractive relations’, my colleagues John Owen and Deanna Kemp have argued that the only practical solution to address this constant state of ‘trading in powers’ is for the global mining industry to internalise the social, environmental and human rights costs or ‘externalities’ that it creates (Owen & Kemp, 2017). Among other things, this would require companies to adopt a strategy of ‘shared authority’ with the custodians of the natural resources they seek to access and exploit. Companies will minimally need to internalise a set of ‘countervailing powers’, in the form of a new communities architecture or enhanced CSR management capabilities that can moderate the industrial ethic that motivates the industry. Until such time, large-scale mining will remain a harm industry that produces both slow and structural violence and inescapable conflict. This kind of corporate reformation might just decrease some of the destructive impacts of mining capitalism and reduce some of the reasons for moral outrage. Such reformation might even go some of the way towards creating the sorts of global institutional forms that Polanyi had in mind, to support a new social and economic paradigm. But in the end, some critics would probably respond that such initiatives only tinker at the edges of capitalist expansion, just as some Lihirians would argue that there is no acceptable form of shared authority. So long as a foreign company is operating on their land, it will be impossible to escape this doubly asymmetrical relationship and the corresponding state of mutual incomprehension, which will only compel some people towards further
acts of resistance until the mine is eventually closed. The lesson to be gained from the closure of the Misima gold mine in the nation’s south-eastern corner suggests that, at this point, these levelling acts will be redirected with even greater vigour towards fellow Lihirians until all traces of this mine-derived wealth and inequality are removed. Perhaps only then will the double movement come to an end, or it may just assume another form, as Lihirians are further subsumed within the global system. It then remains to be seen if they will lose their ideologies and desires but retain their customary practices.

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