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It's the land, stupid! The moral economy of resource ownership in Papua New Guinea

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The ties that bind

In her novel, *Postcards*, Annie Proulx sets about providing an identity for Loyal Blood, her rural American, Anglo-Saxon protagonist

A sense of his place, his home, flooded him...His blood, urine, feces and semen, the tears, strands of hair, vomit, flakes of skin, his infant and childhood teeth, the clippings of finger and toenails, all the effluvia of his body were in that soil, part of that place. The work of his hands had changed the shape of the land, the weirs in the steep ditch beside the lane, the ditch itself, the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape, for the laborer's vision and strength persists after the labor is done (1994:85–6).

For those of us for whom ties to land consist of casual contacts with small and often infrequently tended suburban gardens, one of the more difficult exercises in imagination is to conceive of the relationship between rural communities and the lands and the resources that they consider theirs. Yet what is doubly interesting about Proulx's attempt to situate Loyal Blood in the landscape is the shallow history and narrow social context of his location in place. There are no appeals to a past which extends beyond his own life, no sense of his embeddedness within a community and its history of engagement with the land, its 'language of memory'. Instead, his voice

finds its ground in a personal stratigraphy, the sediment of his individual labour. For perhaps the majority of people commenting, legislating or advising on land issues in Papua New Guinea—the lettered élite, as it were—the construction of personal identity is at a double remove from that of rural Melanesians: both in its emphasis on the labour or performance of the individual, and in its excision of the latter's deeply sedimented ties, through a community, to a specific landscape.

To observe that rural communities in Melanesia enjoy some 'special' relationship with the land is now an almost dangerously common act of elision, as though rehearsing this well-worn phrase allows that relationship then to be put aside while the main thrust of analysis is pursued elsewhere. But because local communities at most resource projects in the region will stubbornly insist on making repeated reference to this 'special' relationship, I want to take up the question of the relationship between land and identity, and to consider specifically the way in which landownership confers 'voice'—the right to speak and the ability to influence the flow of benefits from the land and its resources.

'Land'—as a shorthand for ties to locality, whether terrestrial or marine—is the basis for membership and nationality for most Melanesians. A claim to land, rather than some abstract notion of citizenship, is how the majority of Melanesians secure a foothold on the political stage and gain the attention of the state. Land is both the prize in the process of resource development and the means of access to the contest between communities, who insist on their birthright and prior occupation, and the state, which asserts its sovereign and constitutional rights to certain elements of the land (Ballard 1996).

The terms for this debate hinge upon what Munro (1996) has described as the 'moral economy' of the state. How do states, and particularly new states such as those in Melanesia, go about identifying and establishing the extent of their authority? The transition from colonialism poses a number of problems for the sovereignty of the state, particularly in its role as 'the final arbiter of property rights...Where massive coercive capacity (or will) is absent and the transformation or regulation of social relations is the goal, the establishment of common ethico-political ground is essential' (Munro 1996:145). If communities constitute themselves through a 'language of memory', then the challenge for the state, as Munro describes it, is to 'insert the presuppositions of state authority into that language and

remoralise the political forms of local authority so as to place the state's institutions at the centre of the community. In a sense, if the village is to be brought within the state, the state must be brought into the village' (Munro 1996:141). The capacity of newly independent states thus rests, to an important degree, on the extent to which the authority of the state is accorded recognition in the village.

What I try to suggest in this chapter is that the problems confronting Melanesian governments in the development of their natural resources have as much to do with issues of legitimacy and national identity as they do with the legal resolution of property issues or the appropriateness of economic models. Where the institutions of the state have little or no presence, material or symbolic, in the village, the ability of the state to insist upon its sovereignty—its voice—is open to challenge. Currently, state sovereignty comes to the fore most obviously in Melanesian societies in the debate over resource ownership and the competing claims founded upon relationships to land. If we are to understand the 'moral calculus of power' (Lonsdale cited in Munro 1996:119) of Melanesian states, we shall need first to describe the links between land and identity that are already present in rural communities and then to appreciate how those links are being refashioned and transformed in the encounter with the state and with resource developers. The chapter concludes with some observations on the practical difficulties of land mobilisation in an atmosphere of limited tolerance for state intervention, and a brief foray into the nature of the debate over the ecological sustainability of resource development in Papua New Guinea.

Land, identity, and land tenure in Papua New Guinea

One of the more widely cited statements about land in Papua New Guinea comes from three Bougainvillean students who wrote in 1974 that

land is our physical life [and] our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world... We have little or no experience of social survival detached from the land. For us to be completely landless is a nightmare which no dollar in the pocket or dollar in the bank will allay; we are a threatened people (Dove, Miriung and Togolo 1974:182).¹

Like the presence of taro or sweet potato in a Highlands meal, no public statement by a Papua New Guinea leader on the issue of

identity is complete without reference to land (Narokobi 1980, 1986; Samana 1988). The basis for this link between land and identity can be considered through reference to the Huli people, of the Haeapugua Basin in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, who have an identity as Huli only through kinship ties to other Huli, and collectively to the landscape of the basin (Ballard 1995).

A sense of the local landscape pervades every aspect of social life in Haeapugua, in clan and personal names, as a subject for speech and song, as the source of materials for clothing and decoration, and in the type and quality of foodstuffs. As elsewhere in Melanesia, this sense of identity-through-place finds expression in the common statement that water from the streams of one's own land is the sweetest—all other streams taste different and this taste is one of the markers of difference that establishes identity. If you were to take the Huli out of Haeapugua, as one group, they would no doubt thrive—as Huli do in all the metropolitan centres of Papua New Guinea. But without access and reference to their land, they would cease to be Huli. Urban Huli remain Huli largely through reference to other Huli, and particularly to those who remain 'in place'. Conceptions of what it is to be a social being are grounded in a specific territory, and the complete relocation of a community would offer no alternative means of reproducing that particular being. This is why it is difficult for rural communities to comprehend the notion of an outright and permanent sale or transfer of title to customary land—the only compelling arguments for such a case in the past have been those of overwhelming military force, or the threat of such force.

Across Papua New Guinea, people in public conversation will deny that wars were traditionally fought over land.² Instead, pigs, women, insults, and deaths are cited as proximate causes for conflicts in which land was temporarily or permanently seized. Yet it is quite obvious, over a longer span of time and with the benefit of hindsight, that many wars were fought precisely over land and resources, and with the specific intention of holding and occupying lands previously belonging to others. In the Haeapugua Basin, where I documented the oral history of ownership of some 3,000 garden blocks on the basin floor (Ballard 1995), what emerged clearly was that, while minor wars served to test and in some cases alter relationships with one's enemies and allies, the major wars periodically reconfigured the social landscape on a massive scale. The largest clan in the basin has systematically routed one neighbour after another, raising its holdings of the rich

swampland margin areas from some 20 per cent in about 1820 to over 70 per cent today. But, in public contexts, people in the Haeapugua basin will vehemently deny that any war is ever fought for land. Thus the clan with the largest holdings at Haeapugua justifies its possession of new land on the grounds of failure to compensate for previous homicides (while refusing all attempts at compensation). If land appears sacrosanct in this way, it reflects a form of respect for one's neighbours, an acknowledgement of the universal nature of ties between land and identity. To covet someone else's land is to threaten to exterminate them, to assume or consume their identity.

Crucially, even where military conquest forces communities off their lands, their claims to that land are never entirely relinquished or extinguished. In about 1890, in one of the wars waged for territory in the Haeapugua basin, the Bogorali clan were dispersed, taking refuge with kin in the other Huli valleys. More than a century later, they still believe that they will ultimately return to their clan land. During the 1980s Bogorali clan members patiently orchestrated marriages in a coordinated attempt to insinuate themselves into the victorious clan, a strategy that was quickly overturned when it was discovered. Today, Bogorali children are still taught the names of streams and other features of a landscape that they have never seen at close quarters. One of their leaders, Hebe Gulugu, expresses the anguish of the dispossessed

The roots [of our clan] are still there, as are some of the branches; I left them there, for some day I will go back. Hubi Ngoari mountain is mine. Padabi river springs from the heart of my fathers. Where the Dere river runs is mine...But now I am living under the arm of another clan and only my words go back there.

However one cares to phrase the nature of this 'special' relationship, there can be little doubt that it is manifest in a particularly resilient form of attachment to land, and that these ties are not seen to diminish swiftly over time. This is probably an accurate observation for most small-scale rural societies in Melanesia with at least some history of residential stability. For the purposes of this chapter, the relevant lesson is that the enduring nature of this form of connection must have significant implications for the long-term practical outcome of any attempt at land reform.

To what extent can traditional systems of land tenure be said to reflect the qualities of this special relationship? A critical observation to be made about rural Melanesian society is that, in an important

sense, there are no discrete sets of principles or forms of behaviour that pertain exclusively to the issue of land tenure. Questions relating to land cannot be dissociated from a host of other social and political structures within a community. Principles of land tenure, carefully elicited and codified by legal anthropologists, can more accurately be described as rhetorical positions deployed in specific political contexts.³ In appealing to different and often contradictory principles of land tenure, or indeed any other aspect of social life, orators in land disputes are simply drawing upon a wide range of cultural norms and precedents as these contribute to their position in a particular debate.

There is a sense of this processual nature of Melanesian land ownership that suffers considerably in the translation to legal code. Nowhere is this more evident than in the role played by recognition and acknowledgement in determining rights to land. Rather than clearcut distinctions between landowners and land users, there is an infinite series of shades of grey between the two. Claims to the ownership of land usually rest on descent from ancestors who are held to have been the first to use the land; but, as a precedent, the sense of rights created through ownership introduces the possibility of multiple claims, as users who are not owners also create rights for themselves and their descendants. Many land disputes revolve around just this form of conundrum; but it is not through the application of hard and fast rules that such disputes are resolved. Rather, those involved in the dispute arrive at solutions that are most likely to receive broad recognition within the community. Recognition derives from a negotiated consensus over the general observance of norms and principles in the dispute process, rather than a rigorous application of those norms in the form of a code.

The ownership of land is thus enmeshed in a web of other forms of relationship. Land cannot be 'just' land. It cannot be thought of as somehow free of its social and cultural contexts, its human load. The case is firming for Peter Sack's proposition that 'land in Papua New Guinea owns the people, instead of the people owning the land' (1974:200). In short, land cannot, under the present conditions of social life in rural Melanesia, be conceived of as a commodity. Much as Eric Wolf has observed, 'Land...is not a commodity in nature; it only becomes such when defined as such by a new cultural system intent on creating a new kind of economics' (1971:277). This is not to suggest that land in Melanesia cannot be commodified, but rather to make the obvious but no less important qualification that the social and cultural changes required to effect this transformation will have to be considerable.

The state and the uncaptured landowner

If, as others suggest in this volume (Duncan and Duncan, Chand and Duncan), commodification of land is the price of engaging with the larger world of capital, how is this transformation to be approached, and what are to be the respective roles of state and community in the process? How have colonial and independent states asserted their rights to land and resources, and what sort of recognition have these assertions received in rural communities? A common observation on the postcolonial state in Papua New Guinea is that it has experienced a series of challenges to its authority as its 'reach' and the supply of services, to the rural hinterland in particular, have declined (Narakobi 1986, Strathern 1993, Standish 1994).

In trying to comprehend the post-independence contraction of the state in Papua New Guinea, the role of state violence—or the threat of such violence—will require more attention than it has perhaps received. Certainly it was the monopoly on firearms that underwrote the success of the colonial administrations in the 'pacification' of the Highlands region from the 1920s on (Kituai 1993, Polier 1995:259). The significance of state coercion during the colonial period is more easily discerned from a post-independence perspective. Indeed, Hank Nelson (1995) has made it clear that anxiety about the deployment of force in an increasingly scrutinised environment was one of the key factors in the accelerated departure of Australian rule. There is no comprehensive overview of the state's internal use of force in Papua New Guinea since 1975, but my impression (gained through experience in the Highlands) is of a continuing but much less strategically guided legacy of state violence, particularly through the instrument of police raids. The colonial government may have been a military force to be negotiated with but, under the conditions of post-Independence Papua New Guinea, the legitimacy of the State's monopoly on the use of violence is very much in question. As Narakobi (1986:6) describes it, 'in very many respects, the number one enemy of the village or the clan is a thing called the Independent State of Papua New Guinea'. This is an attitude that extends to the ownership of land and resources, as Narakobi again makes clear: 'As a Minister of State and the Attorney-General, [I have to say] that the law [on State ownership of minerals] is correct, but as a "native" or as a villager, that [it] is not correct; I will never agree to it' (Ballard 1996:77).

In his 1969 discussion of land alienation during the colonial period, Peter Sack wrote, somewhat ambiguously, that 'the natives still believe their land is not really alienated' (1969:10–11). By the 1990s, any trace of this ambiguity has been extinguished, for the 'natives' now clearly know this for a fact. With just over 1 per cent of the total land area alienated, and the remainder recognised as customary land (Larmour 1991:1), the term 'landowner' in Papua New Guinea connotes an unusual degree of inclusion. Colin Filer (forthcoming) has recently documented the emergence of the 'landowner' as a cultural and political actor in Papua New Guinea. Tracking the incidence of use of the term 'landowner' in the *Post-Courier* newspaper, he proposes that the development of 'landowner' status as 'the principal vehicle of national populism...is a phenomenon which owes a good deal to the mineral prospecting boom of the early 1980s'. Papua New Guineans of the 1990s define themselves as 'landowners' in much the same way that Australians under a Coalition government now find themselves defined as (reluctant) 'taxpayers'. The agencies of definition may differ, but both imply a transformation in the fundamental orientation connoted by the term 'citizen' and a reduction in the role of the state.

The rise of the 'landowner' has been accompanied by a resurgence in references to that 'special' relationship with the land; from a series of 'landowner' letters to the *Post-Courier* daily newspaper which Filer quotes (Filer in press), the following extracts convey a sense of the terms in which this relationship is being expressed⁴

Registration of customary land...will signal the loss of power which is usually derived from the special bond between people and their land. It is this power that brought giant mining companies crawling into the courtroom; this same power legitimises our rights to demand compensation from unscrupulous transnational corporations...(*Post-Courier* 17 July 1995).

We know we are blessed with resources. We are a rich people with what we have—people who know their true connection to the land will understand this (*Post-Courier* 1 August 1995).

Filer and others (Gerritsen 1996, Jackson 1992) have described in some detail the revolution in the relationship between the state and those landowner communities around mining projects during the current minerals boom. A process of political devolution has seen the state increasingly withdraw from its role in the redistribution of resource benefits to the broader nation, turning over ever larger proportions of those benefits to the resource landowner communities

and simultaneously contracting out the provision of services to the resource developers. The most recent example of this form of 'franchise administration' is the decision to transfer responsibility, for those services funded by the Special Support Grant that is received from Ok Tedi Mining Ltd, from the provincial government of Western Province back to the company: a fiscal trajectory which Filer (1996b) neatly describes as 'taxation in reverse'.

Royalty agreements at different mining projects are a useful index of this process of state capitulation in the face of landowner communities unimpressed by claims of sovereign right to resources. The state maintains that it holds sovereign rights to all sub-surface resources, including minerals, and rights to surface access as an 'incident' of that ownership. Peter Donigi (1994) has published a sophisticated challenge to the constitutional basis for this claim, but rebuttals have come more frequently and more bluntly from landowner communities contesting the division of mining benefits. The list of major disputes at mineral projects is familiar to many. At each successive project, the terms have shifted steadily towards the benefit of immediate landowner communities, while eroding the policy resources of the state (Gerritsen 1996). The plans for Ok Tedi included payments to the project area landowners of 5 per cent of the 1.25 per cent royalty rate. At the Porgera, Misima and Kutubu projects, agreements yielding between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of the royalties were negotiated. The Ok Tedi rate was then renegotiated in 1991, settling at 30 per cent of royalties (Jackson 1993). Lihir, where the landowner association chairman, with some perspicuity, describes the State as 'only a concept' (Filer 1996:68), provides the high-water mark in this trend, with the landowners and their Development Authority due to receive up to 50 per cent of an augmented rate of 2 per cent of royalties, and 30 per cent of the Special Support Grant to the provincial government (Filer 1997)—an agreement that has had flow-on benefits for the landowners at other projects, who now also benefit from the 2 per cent rate.

Other critical watersheds in this history of erosion of public respect for the authority of the state in Papua New Guinea include: the rebellion on Bougainville following the closure of the Panguna mine, which continues to pose the most severe challenge to national sovereignty; the Placer share issue, which probably did more to destroy public confidence in the integrity of the national élite than any other single event (Jackson 1994); and the Mt Kare gold-rush, where

the inability of the state to secure either its own interests or those of the resource developers in the face of landowner claims was played out in public on a grand scale.

Largely by default and through an institutional incapacity to enforce its own legislation or implement its own reforms, the state in Papua New Guinea has created an élite resource interest group, comprising the government of the day, resource companies and the resource-rich or 'lucky strike' (Filer 1997) landowner communities. Perhaps the distinction at Ok Tedi between the resource-landowning Wopkaimin and the downstream Yonggom can be extended to envisage a fundamental (but not impermeable) divide between a national resource élite and a 'downstream' majority, where the latter category includes all of those communities without significant or accessible resources to offer. Of course almost all downstream communities are also landowners and this is the basis on which they then attempt to gain a hold on the development truck as it speeds down their highway or river. The settlement of the Ok Tedi suit has accorded a degree of formal recognition to this category of relationship. It is now possible to suggest that the next series of stakeholder clashes will be those entered into by the downstream communities, such as the Duna of Lake Kapiago who perceive pollution by tailings, dumped by the Porgera mine into the Strickland river, to be entering their lakes and rivers through underground channels (Nicole Haley pers. comm.), or the increasingly militant landowners along the Okuk Highway that links the Porgera mine and the Kutubu oilfields to the port of Lae.

Land mobilisation and state capacity

What are the implications of the fragility of this relationship between community and state for the possible success of Papua New Guinea's Land Mobilisation program? The mobilisation of customary land has been a stated goal of successive governments since at least the 1973 report of the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters (Ward 1983). Two interim methods, Tenure Conversion and Lease-Leaseback, have been implemented since then, with limited success. Significantly, Hulme, reviewing the Lease-Leaseback program, observes mildly that any attempt by the PNG Development Bank to assert its legal rights in the event of non-repayment of loans would 'almost certainly result in a civil disturbance. Most landowners believe that they retain their

customary rights...and they do not appreciate the legal implications of the lease-leaseback arrangements' (1983:98). But the recent Land Mobilisation Program (LMP), funded with a loan from the World Bank, has served to bring issues of land to the fore in an unprecedented way. Though the Program has initially only addressed issues relating to the administration of lands that were already alienated, it has been the focus of a heated public debate, culminating in widespread riots and even deaths (*Pacific News Bulletin*, August 1995, 10(8):7). Much of the argument about the current program has been conducted in a near-vacuum of reliable information and I do not intend to rehearse the debate here, or even to consider the social or economic merits of land mobilisation (but see Lakau, and Kalit and Young, this volume).

Here I want to focus on the extent to which the state's authority as the arbiter of social good is acknowledged, and on the practical question of the government's infrastructural capacity to actually implement this sort of reform. In a commentary on the mining sector which has much wider resonance, Richard Jackson has put the following question

Does the government have the legal right, and the capacity to enforce the exercise of that right, to possess its territorial minerals? Only if the answer is yes is it worth answering questions of optimal mode and size of government investment in mineral projects, planning optimal benefits, integrating mining projects into national budgets and infrastructural planning. Clearly if the government's right and ability to hold mineral resources is in doubt, then all these (and many other) issues are academic (1996:107).

On both of the criteria nominated by Jackson—that of the government's right and of its ability to implement land reform—a centrally planned mobilisation program would currently appear to have little hope of success. Two major government pilot projects over the last decade have sought to tackle the issue of customary land registration: the East Sepik Provincial Government's Land Mobilisation Program (Fingleton 1991), and the more informal attempts at land mobilisation in East New Britain Province. For various reasons, neither program has met with much success. To be fair, land mobilisation is not going to be an overnight phenomenon, but the East Sepik initiative has not apparently resulted in the registration of a single block of customary land since the Customary Land Registration legislation came into force in 1987 (Haynes 1995:137), and the efforts of the East New Britain program, after a

tentative beginning, were literally wiped out by the 1994 volcanic eruption (Michael Lowe, pers. comm.). The practical problems posed by a land registration program on a national scale seem insurmountable in the current climate of government/community relations. Kalit and Young (this volume) observe that Land Mobilisation on a national scale has effectively stalled in the aftermath of the 1995 riots, and propose in its stead a wide program of education on land tenure matters. A final irony is that what work is being done on the 'registration' of land claims by rural communities is being funded by the major minerals projects under the Infrastructure Taxation Credit Scheme (Filer 1997), inevitably with their own more limited goals in mind.

In this light, and reflecting my assertions about the embeddedness of land issues within other aspects of rural culture and society, the most attractive propositions for land reform in Papua New Guinea would appear to be those that emphasise a slower, negotiated and more organic process of transformation. Robert Cooter, the most articulate proponent of this position, places his faith in the 'common law process', arguing that the only legislation likely to achieve community recognition is that which emerges through engagement with a living, customary law (Cooter 1991).⁵ The present form of legislative protection of customary ownership, inhibiting direct transactions over land, is inappropriate 'because limitations on customary land transaction should come from customary law itself, not from Parliament. Sales and leases of customary land should be enforceable in the land court to the extent that they conform to customary law, neither more nor less' (Cooter 1991:45). Resources would be most usefully directed not towards a centralised, 'top-down' campaign for land registration, but rather towards improving the capacity of existing village-level institutions, such as the land courts and magistrates. Further support for those institutions that have the most experience with customary law, through a program which facilitated the circulation and open discussion of court findings and accorded greater authority to those findings, would most effectively promote the development and codification of common law. This graduated approach, Cooter argues, would have the additional effect of according partial legal recognition to the daily reality of transactions over land amongst landowners, entirely unmediated by the state.

It would be surprising if this sort of view did not meet with some opposition from the Department of Lands and Physical Planning, but

then the Department has only ever really addressed the tiny fraction of land that is alienated, and there are questions about its capacity to do even that. There does seem to be value in an approach which simultaneously recognises the practical difficulties for national programs of land registration posed by limited government capacity and an 'uncaptured peasantry', and identifies and strengthens those institutions that actually continue to function at a village level—those institutions, in Munro's terms, that have successfully been brought into the village. Though this approach constitutes effective recognition of the fact of village-level autonomy in contemporary Papua New Guinea, the state would retain an important role through guidance and supervision of the common law process on a national scale.

Landowners as an ecological nobility?

Given the emphasis in this chapter on the special relationship between rural communities and the land, it is necessary to conclude with some comments on the implications for resource sustainability of this moral contest between state and community. There seems to be a wilful slip in the logic of some commentators from a perception of rural communities in contest with resource developers and the state to the conclusion that these communities embody an ethic of environmental conservation—that they are somehow intrinsically 'ecologically noble' (Buege 1996). In a recent analysis of the Kutubu oil project, for example, we are told that 'the natural environment and spiritual landscape of the Foe, Fasu and Kikori, where they lived harmoniously for thousands of years, has been transformed without their prior informed consent' and told of 'cultures who have survived for thousands of years without jeopardising their own existence or that of everyone else' (Kennedy 1996:240, 248). Two principal objections can be made to assertions of this kind. As a general observation on rural Melanesian societies, this sense of ecological harmony is unlikely to hold true, either now or in the past (Dwyer 1994, Clarke 1995:58). More seriously, the discourse of ecological resistance fails to appreciate the aspirations and the internal politics of rural communities—the same author writes dismissively of what he describes as the 'fanciful wishes of the local people seeking to be developed' (Kennedy 1996:237).

The assertion of ecological harmony is at odds with the developing consensus that the sustainability of rural Melanesian subsistence systems appears to be a matter of scale, rather than of orientation. The

recent work of ANU's Land Management Project has demonstrated fairly conclusively that many of the agricultural systems in practice have contributed significantly to environmental degradation in the past, and that in their present form and under current rates of population growth, they are inherently unsustainable (Allen 1996). It is a moot point whether land management systems in Papua New Guinea have ever achieved an ecological stability such as the harmony attributed to the relationship between the Foe and Fasu and their landscapes. Certainly, those communities that adopted sweet potato as a staple crop, following its introduction some 300 years ago, have yet to find a balance in their use of the land (Wood 1984, Ballard 1995).

A second objection to this nobilising impulse concerns the romantic tendency to invoke an image of exceptional communal solidarity, to 'sanitise the internal politics of the dominated' (Ortner 1995). This tendency has a number of unfortunate consequences. First, in describing community action in terms of resistance to encroachment, it fails to credit rural communities with the dynamism and capacity for transformation which they so evidently possess. A further consequence of this 'Rousseauian' portrait of ecological nobility is its contribution to the stragetic exoticisation and often deliberate ignorance of the political complexity of communities on the part of resource developers (Weiner 1991:72).

Second, the deliberate equation of social and ecological harmony, which incidentally guarantees the intervention of novel stakeholders professing claims to the land on global ecological grounds, has the effect of identifying the environment as the principal concern of rural communities. This then obscures any understanding of the motivation of individuals and communities, and would read the recent Ok Tedi court case, for example, largely in terms of the ecological impacts and not as a struggle to gain access to services and to economic opportunity.

Finally, the 'ecologically noble' perspective cannot anticipate the aspirations of individuals or communities in terms other than a fall from ecological grace. Alcida Ramos (1994) has described the cycle of adulation and then denigration experienced by representatives of Brazilian Indian communities as they first object to the lack of consultation about use of their land and then enter into negotiation with the forces of 'western seduction'.

This ignorance of the political complexity of rural communities, which in itself bespeaks a fundamental lack of will to hear their 'voice', to engage with their aspirations, is often shared in equal

measure by agents of the state, environmental advocates and resource developers. What is required of each of these parties is closer attention to the ways in which land, and the identities it confers, are deployed as terms in the debate. There is no clear distinction between rhetoric and keenly held belief in references to land, which carry a weight in Melanesian discourse whose changing significance continues to elude an external or urban audience. The title of this chapter derives from the sign that James Cavill, Clinton's election campaign director, had up over his desk in an attempt to keep his eye on the main game, the economy. For anyone following the unfolding debate over the sustainability of resource exploitation in Melanesia, a similar tag suggests itself. For the issue at the heart of the debate over the ownership of resources and the division of resource benefits is—and always will be—the land, stupid.

Notes

The comments of Robin Hide, Janaline Oh, Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy are gratefully acknowledged in the revision of the original text. None of them bears responsibility for the result.

1. The transformative effects of large-scale mining projects on society in Papua New Guinea are witnessed by the contrasting fates of two of the authors: Mel Togolo, who is now Manager of Corporate Affairs for the mining company Placer Niugini, and Theodore Miriung, the Acting Premier of North Solomons Province, who was assassinated in October 1996, in the aftermath of the secessionist rebellion and the expulsion of CRA from the Panguna mine.
2. Thus that most public of statements, Bernard Narokobi's *The Melanesian Way*, must insist that 'Land was something permanent. No one could in those days remove the ground' (1980:112).
3. Merlan and Rumsey (1991) make this point more generally in reference to the rhetorical constitution of social groups amongst communities in the Nebilyer Valley.
4. In fact these letters to the papers are so intriguing, and lend support so readily to his arguments, that it is possible to imagine Filer actually writing many of them.
5. Cooter's position tallies closely with one of the principal conclusions drawn from another major foray into the morass of land issues in New Britain, the Kandrian–Gloucester Integrated Development Project. The conclusion here was that where government lacked the resources and political will to enforce its own provisions, policy on lands and resource issues should be negotiated and incremental (Simpson 1998:55).

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