

Foreword

Mining communities are the subject of a rich tradition of ethnographic study. As the major industry and employer in any region where they are located, mining operations provide a physical, social and economic focal point for the anthropologist. Approaches to the subject have varied greatly. From June Nash's (1993) study of a Bolivian mining community, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, to Michael Taussig's polemical and literary reflections on capitalism, greed and exploitation in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980) and *My Cocaine Museum* (2004), there has been close scrutiny of the complex inter-relationships between mines, their owners (whether individuals or corporations), and the people who live around them or work in them.

The search for mineral wealth has long been associated with colonisation, economic exploitation and economic transformation. In contemporary Papua New Guinea, large-scale mining has become the most significant export industry, generating income for government and for the people whose lands are affected. Extractive industry is now viewed as the main means of economic development. Controversies over the environmental degradation and social disruptions generated by mining operations have hardly dampened the enthusiasm for mining. International companies continue to explore and take out leases, the government continues to facilitate their activities, and in most places local people welcome the associated prospect of 'development'. Lihir has been no exception.

My own association with Lihirians and the Lihir gold mine began just before the construction phase, in 1995. At that time the excitement was almost palpable, as people contemplated the wealth that they were sure would be generated by the project. Over the following nine years I worked as a consultant, monitoring the social changes that occurred and recording the local responses to environmental change and degradation. As I observed many of the dramatic confrontations and the innovative strategies that Lihirians adopted in their dealings with the mining company, I often wished that I could find a graduate student who would be able to engage with these changes in the sort of concerted, day-to-day, ethnographic research that is characteristic of our discipline. Nick Bainton became that ethnographer.

Participant observation has had a bad press over the last two decades – decried as oxymoronic, partial and ideologically suspect – but it has survived this intellectual buffeting. This book is testament to its continued strength as a methodology, and to the ways that direct observation of events, conversations

with a variety of people, and reflection upon change over time enriches interpretative endeavours. The author's participation — in the training for 'Personal Viability', in feast preparations, and in the everyday lives of the villagers with whom he lived — generates insights and descriptions that are unavailable to a casual observer.

The book is a revised version of a doctoral thesis. It incorporates archival and historical research, and engages with debates about the ways that contemporary Melanesians construct models of their identity and culture as they embrace modernity. It tells a story of the complicated making of the 'roads' that Lihirians have taken as they strive to reach their 'destiny'. It also reveals the tensions generated, within the local community and between Lihirians and others, as they struggle to gain control over the processes of change and the wealth generated by the mine.

The social and economic changes ushered in by the mining project on Lihir have been profound. They are readily observable. When I first arrived, I was struck by the relative poverty of people there. Many children still went naked, women's clothing was usually a drab length of cloth, houses were invariably made of bush materials, and there was a meagre strip of dirt road linking a few villages. The airstrip was tiny and involved the rather tricky piloting manoeuvre of landing a small plane on an uphill slope. Now there is an airport that regularly ferries hundreds of workers to and from the island; children wear shorts and sneakers, or frilly dresses from the large Filipino-owned supermarket. Where there was an overgrown and abandoned plantation there is now a township. A well-equipped modern hospital serves the local community as well as the mining company's employees.

But as Nick Bainton demonstrates in this study, the material changes have brought with them new distinctions, new inequalities, and conflicts that were previously absent. The abundance of introduced goods, the enthusiastic embrace of modernity, and associated power struggles do not mean that customs have been abandoned or that Lihirians have 'lost' their cultural traditions, their sense of their uniqueness, or their dreams of the future. Custom, like everything else on Lihir, has been transformed. This book documents and analyses the complex interactions between local people, migrants, foreign workers and mine managers, and the ways that new values associated with a monetary economy are established. It stands as a fine contribution to the anthropology of mining communities.

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References

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