

Chapter Five

From Agency to Agents: Forging Landowner Identities in Porgera

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And this, for me, is the heart of the drama: I'm intensely aware you see that people are wrong to think of themselves as just one person. Each one of us is lots and lots of people. Any number, because of all the countless possibilities of being that exist within us. The person you are with me is quite different from the person you are with somebody else. But we go on thinking we're exactly the same person for everybody, the person we think we are in our own mind and in everything we do. But this isn't the case at all! It comes home to us best when by some ghastly mischance we are caught out in an untypical act. We suddenly find we are sort of dangling from a hook! I mean we can see that the act isn't 'us', our whole self isn't in it. And it would be a savage injustice to judge us on that act alone, never to let us off the hook, to hold us on to it, chain us up for our life on the strength of it for all to see, as if that one action summed up our whole existence! So now do you see how treacherous this girl is being? She caught me out in an unrecognisable situation, in a place where for her I should never have been and doing something which in her eyes I should not have been able to do; and now she insists on seeing this undreamed-of contingency as my reality, identifying me with a single fleeting shaming moment of my life (Pirandello 1995).

In Luigi Pirandello's 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the characters in a nineteenth-century story of family conflict are cast out of their creator's imagination and wander in search of an author who will allow them to complete the telling of their story. The bourgeois melodrama they embodied was exactly the sort of play that Pirandello was reacting against, but the deeply reflexive theatre that resulted when the family conversed with directors, actors, and each other about the nature of artistic production is a supreme example of Pirandello's modernist art. In this space of meta-theatre he could explore the thematics which 'tormented' him:

The delusion of reciprocal understanding hopelessly based on the hollow abstraction of words; the multiple nature of every human personality, given all the possible ways of being inherent in each one of us; and finally the tragic built-in conflict between ever-moving, ever-changing life, and the immutability of form (Pirandello 1995: xvi).¹

In this chapter I would like to explore Pirandello's thematics in an arena far removed from the Italy of his day. I will examine identity and landownership at the Porgera gold mine in Enga Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and what lessons we might learn from it regarding registration schemes in Melanesia and, more broadly, 'indigenous identity' in general.

In PNG today it is a matter of settled legal and popular opinion that indigenous groups have special claims to the ownership of customary land (Rynkiewicz 2001; Curtin et al. 2003; Weiner and Glaskin, this volume). This entitlement is both firm and abstract: firm in the sense that customary land is owned by customary groups, but abstract because the criteria for membership in landowning groups are often ambiguous. In cases of land registration for resource development, the boundaries of the land and the ethnonym of the collectivity said to 'own' it are often quite clear. What is controversial is who, in any given situation, gets to be a member of a landowning group. The dilemma of aspiring landowners is similar, then, to that of the characters in Pirandello's play — both seek to be acknowledged by the director (here, the state) and, in doing so, get their turn on stage as a real character in PNG's national drama.

In the past, policy makers and theorists have applied an optical metaphor to customary land registration. On this account, local identities pre-exist state interest in them, and identifying the members of a customary group can be done simply by 'viewing' 'customary' or 'traditional' or 'group' tenure (these are considered synonymous) and translating these arrangements into Western legal form. This is the approach, for instance, which underpins James Scott's (1998) work *Seeing Like A State*, in which the state's pathological misrecognition of pre-existing grass-roots life leads to technocratic tragedies which, he suggests, could be overcome through accurate discernment of conditions on the ground whose shape and form pre-exist its gaze. While his neoliberalism is politically orthogonal to Scott's leftist populism, Hernando de Soto (2000) agrees with Scott that the failure of Third World countries to 'escape the bell jar' of economic stagnation and partake of First World economic prosperity can be traced to the government's inability to recognise people's grass-roots economic activity and the stable 'extralegal social contracts' they generate. A mixture of these approaches has informed policy work on land registration in PNG. Policy makers such as Tony Power and Jim Fingleton combine Scott's fear of disempowerment

¹ I acknowledge that the translation used here, by Felicity Firth, takes some liberties with Pirandello that others do not. However, for the purposes of this chapter I find it to be the most evocative.

through the individuation of tenure with de Soto's enthusiasm for grass-roots entrepreneurship in a vision of 'Melanesian capitalism' inspired by Third-Worldism (Power 1996; Fingleton 2005; Chappell 2005; Golub 2006: 385–406).² In this instance, as in many others, registering customary landowners relies first on clear discernment of local situations and second on an accurate translation of them out of the realm of custom and into the realm of law. This 'viewing and cataloging' approach assumes that there *are* such things as customary groups. Such an assumption, as Pirandello might put it, hangs indigenous peoples upon a hook by fixating on only one aspect of what we shall see is a many-sided identity.

By now there is a large literature on what we might call the 'poetics of indigeneity' in Southeast Asia (Li 2000), Amazonia (Carneiro da Cunha and Almeida 2000), Australia (Povinelli 2002), and Native North America (Nadasdy 2003) which strongly suggests that indigenous identities are not pre-existing and 'found' intact by Western legal regimes, but are complexly shaped by Western law's elicitation of them (Weiner 2006). This shift from 'viewing' to 'eliciting' is partially due to an increasingly rich body of ethnographic data about both pre-contact social organisation and the land registration process itself. But it is also due to wider developments in political philosophy and socio-cultural theory. In political philosophy authors such as Patchen Markell (2003) have drawn on an Arendtian re-reading of Hegel to argue, contra earlier works on recognition (for example, Taylor 1992), that 'identity can only be reliably known in retrospect' (Markell 2003: 14) as the '*results* of action and speech in public' (ibid: 13). As a result, Markell suggests it is inappropriate to speak of the 'recognition' of pre-existing identities and prefers instead a 'politics of acknowledgment' in which we pay attention to the mutual constitution of actors in moments of recognition. This means that we should not only examine the making of landowner identities, but also the concession of authoritativeness to certain disciplines (such as anthropology) and of wisdom (or the lack of it) to the small group of expatriates who have been so influential in the history of land policy in PNG.

In addition, advances in political science have converged with the development of a more 'poetic and pragmatic' turn in anthropology (Ortner 1984; Sansom 1985; Silverstein and Urban 1995; Wedeen 2003; Silverstein 2004).³ This approach focuses less on a 'museological' description of the cultural inventory of distinct groups, and more on a 'semiotic praxology' (Silverstein 2003) in which 'we now worry about how the image of *a* language or *a* culture

² For critiques of this position, see Weiner (this volume).

³ Processual accounts of indigenous identity have a long history in anthropology and certain aspects of Western social thought more generally. I mention the 'poetic-pragmatic' approach not to emphasise its novelty, but simply because it represents a particularly recent and coherent (and, to my mind, fruitful) body of work.

are themselves constituted as meaningful realities within the scheme of normative subjectivity of a population' (ibid: 116) such that 'cultures' are seen as an

emergent phenomenon of sociocultural process, unstable and sociohistorically contingent as they are themselves invoked by 'the natives' [indigenous or otherwise] as a contributory part — a moment — of a dialectical process of politicoeconomically and historically specific meaning making' (ibid: 115).

In other words, both policy scientists and Pirandello increasingly see indigenous peoples (and everyone else) as living 'ever-moving, ever-changing' lives which are hung on the hook of the 'immutable form' of corporate land registration.

Local forms of sociality in PNG seem particularly suited to this method of analysis due to their tendency to lack clear corporate groups (Barnes 1962; Wagner 1974). Indeed, a focus on the lack of a clear demarcation of the identity of landowners of resource-rich areas of PNG is notable. At Tolukuma (Golub 2006: 399–402), Hides (ibid: 394–7), Mount Kare (Filer 1998: 161–6), Frieda (Jorgensen 2001), and Kutubu (Weiner 2001), politicking over who gets to be a landowner has prevented compensation from resource developments from reaching local people, and in some cases it has halted resource development altogether. A museological approach to viewing and registering supposedly static customary groups must explain this dynamism away as a 'corruption' of a state of pre-existing purity.

But in fact many fine 'pragmatic-poetic' ethnographies of PNG have been produced (Lederman 1986; Merlan and Rumsey 1991). Indeed, some of the most fruitful work produced by Melanesianists involves not merely describing Melanesian approaches to sociality, but adopting them as useful theoretical constructs — the concept of the 'elicitation' of landowner identities being a prime example. Despite the fact that these approaches explain, rather than explain away, the failure of museological approaches to registration, there has been little uptake of this work by policy scientists. In PNG, as in Australia, anthropologists continue to attempt to disabuse the policy community of their notions of static corporate groups existing 'from time immemorial' without reverting to analytically crude notions savagery, 'Africanisation', barbarism, 'instability', dysfunction, and so forth. The question then becomes: How, concretely, can one understand the translation of landowner identities into Western legal forms in a poetic-pragmatic mode rather than an optical and museological one? How do we capture the fact that indigenous cultures innovate and change over time, and that much of this change is elicited by an entity such as the state which demands that the object of its gaze remain static? The concept of the 'invention' of tradition, despite its attempted re-workings by many authors (Otto and Pedersen 2005), continues to carry the critical sting that its original framers (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) meant to deploy against British imperialist

pretensions. As a result it is not only disempowering to indigenous people (Briggs 1996) but, more importantly, its use of the term 'invention' does a poor job of conceptualising the relationship between practice and structure that has been so fruitfully illuminated by the pragmatic-poetic turn in analysis.

More promising seems an approach which sees custom as a '*modality of action* rather than persistence of the concrete and material substance' (Merlan 1995: 164). Like Markell, Merlan and Sansom suggest focusing on the process, rather than the content, of translation, and echoing Markell, urge us to see this process as one of the reflexive, mutual constitution of indigenous group and state (see also Merlan 2006). In this chapter I will focus on the creation of an official schedule of the Ipili owners of the Porgera gold mine in Enga Province, PNG. This involved the translation of customary forms of sociality into a legal system of corporate clans. I will describe this not as a process of 'invention' but one of 'forging', and I will argue that the trope best used to understand Ipili flexibility and willingness to innovate is not 'instability' or 'barbarism' but 'modernity.' The larger import of this example, I argue, is that modernity might profitably be used as a trope to describe the phenomenon of indigenous accommodation to land registration schemes more generally.

I use 'modernity' in the sense of a distinctive mode of historical consciousness. It is, as Habermas put it, a 'reflective treatment of traditions that have lost their quasi-natural status' (1987: 2). Modernity 'cannot and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*' (ibid: 7). The modern world is thus 'distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new' (ibid: 6). Seeing modernity as an openness to the new allows us to develop an account which 'dissociates modernity from its modern European origins and stylises it into a spatio-temporally neutral model' which might be applied to a variety of groups (ibid).

In addition to Habermas, I also draw on Sahlins' recent (1992, 2000a, 2000b) writing on *developman*, which has also been an inspiration for much of the recent literature on 'local' or 'alternate' modernities. I diverge from these approaches because I feel that they treat modernity museologically, as a process in which individual items move are either removed from, or incorporated into, an inventory of cultural traits.⁴ Bruce Knauft, for instance, defines modernity as 'images and institutions associated with Western-style progress and development in a contemporary world' (2002: 18), while the contributors to a recent volume on *Modernities in Melanesia* (Robbins and Wardlow 2005) focus on modernity as being identical with Christianity, humiliation, and so forth.

⁴ An example of removal would be the secularisation of Europe, while an example of incorporation would be the adoption of Christianity by Pacific Islanders.

To me the true insight of Sahlins' work is that 'tradition' is a distinctive mode of appropriating novelty — a process rather than an inventory to be preserved.

[It] is not the dead hand of the past. On the contrary, 'tradition' is precisely the way people always cope with circumstances not of their doing and beyond their control, whether acts of nature or of other peoples. Hence tradition has changed in the past, and, by encompassing the goods and relations of the market in its own terms, it would continue to do so (Sahlins 2000a: 21).

Sahlins' understanding of tradition allows us to understand how the creation of landowner identities in the context of land registration can be understood as both 'modern' and 'traditional' when examined from the viewpoint of process.

Finally, I will argue that Ipili identities were 'forged', taking my cue from Daniel Miller's use of the term in his ethnography of modernity in Trinidad.

In the first place forged is intended to connote the process by which intractable materials are, in the forge, turned into something new, useful, solid and fine. But the term forged is also a verb pertaining to the act of forging as an act of faking (Miller 1994: 321).

Miller's wonderful evocation of the ambiguity of this word here captures the way in which Ipili seized the moment of novelty introduced by mining and attempted to remake themselves in light of the mine's elicitation of their identity in a way that was both 'modern' and 'customary'. It is to this regime of identification that I now turn.

Porgera's 'Seven-Clan System'

The Ipili are an ethnic group located in the Porgera 'district' in the far west of Enga Province in the highlands of PNG (Biersack 1980).⁵ Since contact with the Australian Administration in the late 1930s, Porgera's gold deposits have been central to Ipili history as well as to the wider fate of PNG as an independent nation. PNG relies on taxes and royalties from extractive industry for a substantial proportion of its budget (Banks 2001), and the Porgera gold mine, operated by the Vancouver-based transnational Placer Dome,⁶ became a major source of revenues in 1992 (its second year of production), when it produced 1,485,077 ounces of gold, making it the third most productive gold mine in the world (Jackson and Banks 2002). The Porgera mine continues to be a national priority today, even as it matures.

⁵ The Porgera 'district' is now officially part of the larger Porgera-Lagaip District, which includes a much larger population speaking the Enga language. Speakers of the Ipili language numbered around 5,000 in 1980, but the current population is hard to calculate because of the more recent wave of immigration and intermarriage.

⁶ Placer Dome was recently taken over by another Canadian company, Barrick Gold.

The Porgera mine is unusual not just because of the size of its operations, but because of the impact that it has had on the valley where it is located (Banks 1997; Filer 1999; Golub 2001, 2006; Jacka 2003). While people outside the valley often damage the road and power supply into Porgera, and migrants threaten the valley's stability (Patterson 2006), the mine does not have the landowner identification problems faced by other resource developments. Although Porgera is ridden with conflict, social inequity, civil unrest, and a fair amount of resentment for the company, there has been little or no questioning regarding who the 'real landowners' of Porgera are. A 'successful registration' of landowners is one of the reasons for Porgera's success relative to other mines. How, then, did this registration occur?

Throughout the 1980s Placer Dome compensated individual Ipili on a case-by-case basis for land damaged by exploration work. However, in the late 1980s, when Porgera proved to be a feasible site for a mine, Placer Dome was obliged to convert its existing exploration licence into a Special Mining Lease. Under the *Mining Act*, it is the National Government which has the power to issue such a lease, but in order for the lease to be issued the company must sign a compensation agreement with the customary landowners. As it turned out, the mine also required land on which Ipili people were currently living, and an agreement specifying where and how they were to be relocated also became necessary. Finally, for complex political reasons, Ipili landowners, the Provincial Government and the National Government also signed agreements with each other specifying their duties and obligations to each other after the lease was issued. In sum, in order for the mine to open it was necessary that the government and company negotiate, not just with Ipili people, but with 'the Ipili' as a collectivity.

Negotiations with all of the 3,000 or so inhabitants of the future mining lease were obviously impractical, and so government officials used a mechanism of agency described in PNG's *Land Act* whereby Ipili people chose 'agents' to represent them in negotiations. This produced a pool of 300 or so agents, a group composed essentially of the most prominent persons from each of the extended households in the Special Mining Lease area. This number was still too large, however, and so these agents delegated their agency to a set of 23 'agents of agents' or 'super agents'. These people formed the Landowner Negotiating Committee, and it was they who provided legitimate consent to the creation of a mine by putting their signatures (or thumb-prints) on official agreements with the company and the government.

This structure of delegation matches the segmented lineage system which the Porgera Land Study found to be present in Ipili custom. According to this study, land in Porgera is owned by seven landowning clans. Each clan is composed of one or more 'sub-clans.' There were found to be a total of 23

sub-clans within the Special Mining Lease. These sub-clans are themselves composed of a number of 'house lines' (an English gloss of the Tok Pisin *haus lain*) which took the form of extended families. Land was similarly divided: extended families live on individual plots which are parts of larger named territories which are owned by sub-clans, which are themselves part of even larger named units which are owned by clans (GoPNG 1987a).

The result was a happy coincidence — the social structure of the Ipili 'discovered' by outsiders fitted very neatly into a hierarchical Western model of organisation. Thus the land study and system of delegation in Porgera represents a clear example of a museological method of landowner registration, because this Western organisational system is congruent with the segmentary lineage system of Ipili clans. Each level of social segmentation has its own representative who delegates power to the agent representing a higher-level segment of the clan until one reaches the 23 'apical' negotiators of the Landowner Negotiating Committee. This committee speaks for all 23 clans and thus the entire ethnic group.

At first glance, then, the success of Porgera's land registration regime seems to be an example that could be used to bolster a 'view and translate' approach to registration. However, a close analysis of the land study and the meetings that produced it will demonstrate that the seven-clan system was forged in the course of the events of the late 1980s. The seven-clan system is not 'untrue' to Ipili sociality because Ipili ways of being, like Pirandello's characters, have several potential ways of appearing. What made Porgera's system of land registration resilient, I will argue, is that Ipili had the choice of how they were to be apprehended. But before I explain how Ipili identity was 'hung upon a hook' in the late 1980s, we must first examine the many-sided nature of Ipili sociality.

Ipili Sociality

An examination of Ipili sociality, both within Porgera and in relation to people outside the valley, quickly indicates that the seven-clan system that exists in Porgera today was *not* — as a 'view and translate' approach would have it — a method of social organisation which pre-existed the mine and the government's views of Ipili. I will discuss first the difficulties in identifying 'the Ipili' as a discrete ethnic group in the wider Enga/Southern Highlands region. Then I will discuss the difficulty of understanding sociality within the valley as being composed of clans.

First, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the idea of discrete, clearly bounded ethnic groups was not common to the wider region in which the Ipili lived (Biersack 1995). The focus of Ipili local organisation was on regional embeddedness and connections with — rather than divisions between —

different areas of settlement. Like those of their neighbours, the Huli and the Enga, Ipili genealogies run deep, typically beyond ten generations, and terminate with an eponymous apical ancestor. These genealogies frequently trace the migration of ancestors across the region, leaving genealogically connected communities dotted across the landscape. These mythological accounts of ancestral movement seem to correspond, at least in Enga, to actual prehistoric migrations of clans from one area to another (Wiessner and Tumu 1998: 119–55). The result is what might be called ‘clan diasporas’ — a network of related groups which spread across the Southern Highlands and Enga provinces and which cut across the ethnic boundaries of what are today considered to be the three distinct ethnic groups of the ‘Huli’, ‘Enga’ and ‘Ipili.’ In the past, these ties were used to facilitate long-distance trading (Mangi 1988), to gain access to valuable resources like salt springs (Wiessner and Tumu 1998), and to request hospitality when ecological hardship such as drought or frost meant temporary migration from one’s home (Wohlt 1978). Today Papua New Guineans continue to use these ties to conduct business along the Highlands Highway, to find hosts at areas near mines and hydrocarbon projects where work is plentiful, and to travel safely through areas where tribal fighting occurs.

Thus ethnicity in this area is based on grades or continua of cultural difference in a population criss-crossed by flows of people. It is for this reason that Burton argues that the existence of these clan diasporas

throws into question whether the Ipili people even ‘exist’ in the same way as, say, Motuans or Hageners do ... They begin to look far more like the local representatives of regionally dispersed ‘genealogical groups’, lumped together under one name only because they live in one place as neighbours. (Burton 1999: 284).

Porgerans are and were, as Aletta Biersack (1995: 7) puts it, ‘centered not on themselves as geographical isolates but on culturally diverse fields in which their mythology, trade routes, and marriage practices embedded them’. As a result, ‘syncretism is not just an artifact of colonialism; syncretism is *the ordinary state of affairs* ... Ipili peoples have always been *cosmopolitan*’ (ibid: 6). Of course, it is undoubtedly the case that there are coherent and culturally specific practices which characterise people who live in Porgera as being distinctive from their neighbours and entitle them to be considered customary owners of the land surrounding the Porgera mine. But it is important to note that these differences were not sufficiently clear-cut that they could easily be used as a ready-made charter by a government to exclude people from membership in resource-rich groups. So while it is tempting, as Burton (1999: 284) puts it, ‘to uncover as many of them as possible and map them out’, clan diasporas lack precision beyond the mythical level, and even mythological associations were unclear and subject to confusion. Thus Wohlt (1978: 42) recounts that while everyone

'know[s] the gist of the myth', in fact, 'if one asks a dozen informants over [the] age of 40 the particulars of genealogical connection ... one gets a dozen different versions'. He concludes that 'beyond the unity maintained through oral tradition and the ceremonies described above, relationships among tribal members entail little else than hospitality, and that only in need' (ibid: 54). In sum, what we see is a situation in which individuals justified long-distance travel with reference to genealogical relationships which were enduring but whose meaning was ambiguous. In other words, this was a system in which people had agency to construe the connection between them given a culturally specific form of connection which nevertheless under-determined the exact nature of the relationship between them.

But perhaps these genealogies are the basis of a corporate, descent-based system of clans in Porgera? Not according to John Burton, who argues that 'we can abandon any pretence at trying to fit the Porgeran lines of descent to the orthodox clan model. *In fact, there are no corporate groups we can call "clans" in Porgera*' (Burton 1992: 138). Most researchers agree with him — the Ipili are overwhelmingly described in the literature as 'cognatic' (Biersack 1980, 1995; Jacka 2003). Models of Ipili sociality as clan-based run into several problems.⁷

The first problem with the clan model of Ipili social organisation is that the Ipili do not have a word for 'clan' in the sense of a corporate group defined by descent. It is true that the term 'clan' is often used to gloss the Ipili word *yame*. But *yame* simply means 'group of people' or 'organisation', and has no connotation of descent, consanguinity, or kinship whatsoever. Ipili use the term indiscriminately to refer to Security Guards, descendants of Tuanda, and Lutherans.⁸ If anything, *yame* simply means the centre, reason, or principle around which coalitions of people coalesce, a perception of likeness or commonalty among a group of persons. Even in cases where it does refer to cognatic stocks (the technical term for what are often called 'clans' in Porgera),⁹ association with such a stock is not exclusive in Porgera, and these stocks do not in and of themselves form the basis for exchange or collective action. Ipili consider themselves to have a 'portfolio' of eight stocks to choose from — one from each of their grandparents. They demonstrate their relationship to these stocks by reciting *malu* (genealogies) that connect them to the apical ancestor after whom the stock is named.

Not only is stock affiliation non-exclusive, it is telling that Ipili do not consider it a virtue to identify strongly with only one of them. Individual Ipili strategies of social placement focus on the interstitial spaces between groups,

⁷ A complete account of Ipili sociality would require a discussion of descent, affinity, and the role of non-kin-based friendships. Here I focus only on the role of descent in Ipili sociality.

⁸ The 'eight *tata* system' reported by Jacka (2003: 107–10) for Tipinini does not appear in the Special Mining Lease area.

⁹ 'Stock' here has technical sense used in the literature on cognatic kinship (Freeman 1961).

using multiple affiliations to be ‘in the middle’ of things — to be ‘at the border’ as Biersack (1980) describes it. The ideal politician is a *tombene akali* — a ‘middle man’ (and it is typically a man) who works the interface between two groups and is thus to the Ipili ‘at the center of the action’, even though in Western terms we would consider him marginal to both. Thus, when mining executives doubt indigenous people’s claims to being ‘real landowners’, they are mistaking their own ideologies of lineal purity for those of the Ipili. For instance, it was occasionally said by mine employees that a group of people descended from a prominent alluvial miner were ‘not really Maipangi’ because their father was originally from Enga and was related to the Maipangi ‘clan’ in Porgera through an embarrassingly tenuous set of connections. When I tried this out on one of my informants he looked surprised and remarked that if anyone was Maipangi it was these people, since they had no other groups to claim affiliation with. As far as he was concerned those people were Maipangi because they had used their agency to activate and maintain ties to that stock-cum-residential group, and this singular affiliation was thus seen as an unfortunate impoverishment of a potentially much richer and wider set of relationships rather than a positively valued ‘pure’ and exclusive group membership.

We can agree, then, with Sturzenhofecker when she writes of the nearby Duna that ‘what is articulated in *malu* genealogies is a principle not of group recruitment but of individual entitlement’ (1993: 79–80). In Porgera, as in Wohlt’s Yumbisa:

The cognatic nature of groups in practice is the product of the interaction of a 'vertical' agnatic ideology and 'horizontal' ideologies concerning cognation, affinity, and, particularly, exchange, as these are played out against limitations and emergent opportunities in the existing physical and social environment (Wohlt 1995: 215).

Vertical, descent-based relations often come to be used to label coalitions of people mobilised through collateral or other means.

As Burton (1992) has pointed out, despite having an ideology of lineage, Ipili social organisation resembles that of the Garia as described by Lawrence (1984), although they lack the Garia attachment to territory described by Leach (2004). When viewed in this light, Porgeran kinship is less a matter of corporate groups than of a large mesh of egocentric personal networks. An individual’s ‘security circle’ is composed of ‘persons with whom he has safe relationships and towards whom he should observe stringent rules governing marriage, diet, and political obligation’ (Lawrence 1984: 28), of which consanguineal ties are merely a part. This realisation helps to clarify the meaning of the term *yame*. ‘Daniel *yame*’, for instance, does not refer merely to the descendants of Daniel; it refers to all those people whose mutual affinity is a result of his presence in their social networks. So while you can refer to Pulumaini *yame* to mean ‘everyone whose apical

ancestor is Pulumaini’, you can also use it to mean ‘those five people who use a common tie to Pulumaini as an excuse to go out drinking on Thursdays’, even though the five people in question do not include all of Pulumaini’s descendants.

For Ipili, finding and mobilising these connections is thus an art, and Ipili are networkers not only in a social-structural sense, but also in the more prosaic sense of the term: they are inveterately social, always on the lookout for new allies and potential ways to expand who they know and where they know them. Ipili enjoy discussing the twists and turns of their *malu* and those of prominent people in the valley in the same way that Americans dwell on the statistical minutiae of professional baseball players. In both regional movement and local sociality, then, the situation in Porgera was one of entrepreneurial agency.

Forging Landowners: the Porgera Land Study

We can see now that the seven-clan system that exists in Porgera today is only tenuously related to the sociality that existed prior to the arrival of mining in the valley. The question then becomes how the entrepreneurial agency of Ipili network building was transformed into the segmentary descent groups of the seven-clan system. How, in other words, did the mine’s interest in the Ipili elicit this transformation on their part? A full answer to this question would have to take into account the long history of medium- and small-scale gold mining in Porgera which served as a crucial backdrop for the creation of large-scale mining in the 1980s. Here I will focus on one key moment in this process — the period from late 1985 to 1989. This period begins with the official decision to create an authoritative list of ‘who the Porgera gold mine landowners are’ and ends with the signature, on their behalf, of the Porgera Agreements by their 23 authorised agents.

In 1983, exploratory work at Porgera uncovered a zone of particularly rich ore, and the following year an ultra high-grade area within this zone was discovered. This work, as well as developments in metallurgy and financing, made the creation of a large-scale gold mine in Porgera seem increasingly likely (Jackson and Banks 2002: 119–38). Much was still unknown about how, concretely, the mine would be created, financed, and regulated. The late 1980s were spent attempting to clarify how these issues were to be dealt with. One of these clarificatory projects was the Porgera Land Study.

In order for a mining lease to be issued, the owners of the land in question had to be identified and compensated. To this end, on 26 September 1985, the Secretary of the Department of Enga issued an order for public servants to begin a land study to generate a list of customary landholders. The PNG Department of Minerals and Energy created a position of ‘Porgera Coordinator’ with responsibility for liaising with all relevant ministries regarding the mine. John Reid, a former *kiap* (government official), was appointed to this position. He in

turn oversaw a group of Papua New Guinean *kiaps* who conducted censuses of the area. Their guideline for conducting the land study was a thin photocopied booklet produced by a senior public servant in the national department. This specified that they were to record the names of adult men as 'landowners', and that each of these men could be associated with one and only one clan.

By December 1986, the land study had collected 15,000 names of Ipili in their schedule of ownership. This was an astonishing feat considering the fact that, by their own estimate, there were only 3,000 Ipili living in the valley at this time. The land team was flummoxed: areas of two or three hectares were being claimed as the customary land of more people than could ever live on the land or, in the case of very small plots, even physically stand there. It appears that individual Ipili were responding to questions by being maximally inclusive and listing their entire kindred.

Both Ipili and government representatives were unhappy with this state of affairs. At a meeting held in December 1986, government officers complained that people were registering themselves multiple times on multiple plots of land, and suggested that Ipili 'select one or two members of a family to represent them in other Landownerships [sic] in the other clans/sub-clans'.¹⁰ For instance, even if a man was married to a woman in another group, his claims to that group's land (through his affinal status) would be represented by his father-in-law or wife. This proved completely unacceptable to Ipili, who saw this as a radical reduction in their portfolio of relationships. As one man put it, 'Porgera people have Landownership Rights in more than one clan. Therefore we want all our names to be enrolled or registered in all the clans that we own Lands'. Another ominously noted that 'if any names are excluded, there will be troubles'.

Eventually a proposal was put to the meeting by Kurubu Ipara, a Porgeran who had previously worked as a *kiap* and was at that time working for the mine's exploration team. He suggested a solution that would 'make it easy on the *kiaps*'. Instead of proceeding by visiting a piece of land and eliciting the names of all the people associated with it, the land study would instead proceed on a 'clan by clan' basis. The result would be a series of seven 'schedules of owners' that would be attached to the land study. This would allow the government to retain the idea that there was a set of distinct 'clans' which owned land. However, each individual Ipili would be allowed to list themselves in as many of these 'clans' as they considered themselves to be part of. This would allow Ipili to retain the inclusivity that they desired. Indeed, in some ways it was *more* inclusive than previous practice, since Ipili could now be fully 'in' clans to which they had previously only a potential and possibly tenuous claim.

¹⁰ This quotation and the following account are taken from the minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 1986, held in the Porgera SML Landowners Association Folder in the Porgera District Archives.

John Reid, who was at the meeting, objected that a count done in this way no longer tracked the actual population of the Special Mining Lease and would result in the sort of thing that the meeting has originally been established to avoid: a list of 10,000 people that described an actual population of 3,000. Ipili assured him that redundancies would not over-inflate the list because 'in the previous investigation we have included all our *wantoks* (people who speak the same language) who are living outside Porgera and therefore the population increased. Now we are cutting it down or restricted to landowners living within the Porgera valley'. The Ipili present at the meeting suggested that, in exchange for the government's recognising multiple 'clan' affiliation, they would limit claims to membership — out-marrying women, their husbands, and their children could be included on the list, but all other affines would not be entitled to membership in landowning 'clans'. As a result of this agreement the cognatic stocks which had previously been an important part of Ipili sociality now became 'clans' and these became the sole form of sociality recognised as appropriate for true 'landownerhood'.

As a canonical account, the social organisation of the seven landowning clans composed of 23 sub-clans has shaped life in Porgera for roughly two decades. It exists as a taken-for-granted fact about the valley. The original land study is not only rarely consulted; it is quite difficult to find. Close examination of the original document, however, reveals the traces of the more unruly arena of entrepreneurial agency which, on paper, it replaced.

For example, in the case of the Waiwa 'clan', the schedule of owners lists *two* sub-clans — Waiwa Yaliape and Waiwa Lunda (GoPNG 1987c). This in itself is not a surprise, as the Lunda are a large group who are associated with a piece of ground known as Upalika, whose members include several prominent Porgerans and the wife of one of the key coordinators of the land study. The Lunda are not, however, the 'owners' of any land within the Special Mining Lease; Upalika lies outside it. It is not clear, then, why they ought to be included on a list of owners or have an agent who signed the Porgera Agreements of 1989, as the agents for Waiwa Lunda did. Furthermore, it is not clear who actually ought to be agent for Waiwa Lunda — the agent for Waiwa Lunda listed in the land study is William Gaupe, but the agent who signed the Porgera agreements is listed as Pospo Karapis (Derkley 1989). Did Gaupe delegate his authority to Pospo? There is certainly no record of that fact, and during the time that I knew him William certainly did not make any such claim.

A similar situation pertains with regards to the Tuanda. The Tuanda are divided into two 'sub-clans', Ulupa and Yapala, which are represented by two agents, Sole Taro and Ambi Kipu (GoPNG 1987b). One of the Porgera Agreements, however, lists Aiyope Yawane as the signatory for Yapala rather than Sole Taro, and to confuse matters even more, the 'signature' on the document is a

thumbprint with the word ‘Sole T.’ written over it (Derkley 1989). This is unusual, since Sole is proud of his education and is one of few agents who could sign his own name.¹¹ In the agency delegation document authorising Sole as agent for the Tuanda (as well as in other documents), he uses a florid and elaborate signature (GoPNG 1987b).

Furthermore, there is no coherent account of the segmentation of the Tuanda. The terms ‘Ulupa’ and ‘Yapala’ do not appear in the ‘sub-clan’ entry on the top of each page of the schedule of owners of Tuanda. Instead we have ‘Kareya’ and then a series of what are presumed to be sub-subclans in parenthesis — Kareya (Aiyengi), Kareya (Amini) and so forth — as well as a handful of other names. Most tellingly, the sub-clan ‘Marinaka (Lio)’ is included, and its ‘address’ is listed as ‘c/o Catholic Mission Kasap, Yangiyangi Village, Mulitaka Patrol Post — Lagaip District’. ‘The Marinaka’ are in fact part of the larger clan diaspora of which the Tuanda are also a part. They come from Mulitaka, an area east of Porgera which is today considered ethnically ‘Engan’ rather than ‘Ipili’. The schedule lists 94 Marinakas: 87 in Laiagam (the township near Mulitaka), and seven people who live in Porgera proper, including one Marinaka man, his wife, and three children. In other words, the schedule of owners purports to list a segmented series of sub-clans, but embedded within it is a specific form of regional sociality — a small group of Engans from Marinaka had moved to Apalaka on the basis of their diasporic ties to Tuanda, recorded themselves as landowners, and then enumerated their kin in Mulitaka as landowners too. Given the agentive nature of kinship in this region, it is not surprising that these people are included in the schedule of owners — as we have seen, the Waiwa Lunda are included on the schedule of owners as well as in the land study itself, despite the fact that (like the Marinaka) they have no land within the Special Mining Lease. But given the imperatives of the system of agency, it is no surprise that no Marinaka agent was appointed and that the Marinaka do not appear as one of the sub-clans in the land study or the Porgera Agreements. Between the compilation of the schedule of owners and the completion of the land study they had lost their status as landowners — a point that the Marinakans living in Porgera during my fieldwork have not forgotten.

Examples of this sort could be given in many of the other clans.¹² In closing I will consider only one of these — the land study’s attempted segmentation of the Pulumaini. Some individuals living on Pulumaini lands did not feel comfortable with the idea of agents at the ‘sub-clan’ level and instead opted for a more granular level of representation, but others made a different choice. The result was a mix of different-sized groups and delegations of agency which

¹¹ The agreement between the National Government and the Porgera Landowners includes nine signatures and 21 thumbprints, and I am interpreting ‘signature’ as ‘any mark made with a writing utensil’.

¹² For instance, two sub-clans of Anga are listed in the land study (GoPNG 1987a), but only one is listed in the agreements (Derkley 1989).

simply could not be subsumed under a lineage model. In the agreement between the National Government and the Porgera Landowners, there are six Pulumaini 'clans' — Ambo-Wagia, Ambo-Amu, Ambo-Endewe, Ambo-Gai, Ambo-Paramba, and Ambo-Yuga (Derkley 1989). Based on these names, each of these groups appears to be a subset of a larger 'Ambo' group. In the agreement between the Porgera Landowners and Enga Province, there are only five sub-clans, none of which are subordinate to Ambo. The clan groups Amu, Endewe, Gai, Paramba, and Yuga are listed, and one of these, Amu, has been added at the bottom of the document in pen (Derkley 1989). Neither of these two agreements match the land study itself, which lists the Pulumaini as being composed of Ambo-Wagia, Ambo-Amu, Tokome, 'Pulumaini Sub-clan Yamawe' (with the word 'Ambo' pencilled in between 'Pulumaini' and 'Sub-clan'), Ambo-Napali, Ambo-Endeme, Ambo-Gai, Yamili-Wapini, 'Pulumaini Sub-clan — Paramba' (with the word 'Yamili' written in pencil between 'Pulumaini' and 'Sub-clan'), Pariwana, and Yunga (GoPNG 1987a). In other words, these documents have never presented a coherent model of the Pulumaini as a clan.

Discussion and Conclusion

Advocates of a 'view and translate' approach might examine the material I have presented here and conclude from it simply that the Porgera Land Study was itself flawed, and that a less sloppy approach would have revealed the coherent corporate groups they expected. After even this brief presentation, however, I think it is clear that the incoherence of the land study and other works from this period are not the result of myopia, but rather of a process through which corporate entities like 'clans' creatively emerged in response to the land study's elicitation of them. We have seen that the land study was indeed 'forged' — it is neither a direct translation of a pristine, timeless Ipili social structure, nor a travesty in which Ipili culture was misapprehended. The land study in Porgera was instead a creative augmentation of Ipili social organisation according to government requirements and Ipili predilections.

We see reflected in the land study not the lineages or segments of a clan with exclusive membership, but a world of malleable corporate identities that took shape around a few prominent 'middle-men' or *tombene akali*. They reflect the fact that everyone 'on the ground' in Porgera knew who had to sign to make an agreement feasible that would protect the mine and allow it to operate. The situation was like that which Evans-Pritchard (1940) describes in *The Nuer*, and even more like that which Pirandello (1995) creates in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* — not 23 sub-clans in search of an agent but 23 agents in search of a sub-clan. Like Pirandello's cast, marooned on stage with no author to valorise or direct their action, the *tombene akali* used their agency to become 'agents' through the forging of a newly corporate collective subjectivity that valorised their actions as its representatives. The remarkable reflexivity exhibited in these

meetings — ‘our custom is X, so we will agree to Y’ — reveals an openness to the new and willingness to generate new normative frameworks which is, I have argued, quite modern. Porgera was successful because the people involved in the land registration process used the past less as a blueprint which dictated future behavior, and more as a resource in creatively coping with what was going to come. In the course of the land study, Ipili peoples managed to be both modern and traditional.

The land study was meant to be a document which settled once and for all who was and was not entitled to be considered a ‘landowner’ and an ‘agent’ in Porgera. What actually happened, however, was that the land charter became the raw material for a creative semiotics of landownership which enabled a wide variety of claims to be made, just as in the pre-colonial system already described. The result is what I have called ‘bounded arenas’ for contests of Ipili identity (Golub 2006). Interested parties range from Porgerans seeking to use their grass-roots security circles to become recognised and hence powerful agents to Australian mine representatives who strategically label claims of landowner identity true or false in order to widen or contract the field of the mine’s legitimate interlocutors. What exists in Porgera today is not a system of agents which replaced a system of agency, but a repertoire of agents and clans within which Ipili continue to exercise their agency. This environment is flexible in that it constrains the forms in which claims to identity must be articulated but does not determine the success of any particular claim. The land study was forged in the sense that it solidified a fluid and — in Levi-Strauss’s (1966) sense — ‘hot’ mass of sociality into a durable system of agents which provided a social context stable enough to host a gold mine. Thus, ironically, even though the land study got the sociology of Porgera wrong, in the end it allowed an Ipili mode of sociality to continue, albeit in transformed circumstances.

Many indigenous people who seek recognition from settler-dominated governments often feel like the son in Pirandello’s play, who says that ‘it isn’t possible to live in front of a mirror which not only freezes us with the image of ourselves, but throws our likeness back at us with a horrible grimace’. Ipili were lucky enough to undertake the registration process at a time when they themselves would decide what sort of reflection they would cast in the looking glass of official policy.

Any politician who has ever had to hammer out the details of a piece of legislation might well find that metaphors of forging come naturally to them. It would seem unnatural, however, for us to say that Australia’s 1993 *Native Title Act* was ‘invented’ by the Australian Parliament since, as a quintessentially modern institution, liberal democracy generates new decisions on the basis of consensus formation arrived at through a deliberative process which responds to new situations with legislation which (ideally) expresses the will of its

constituents. In this chapter I have suggested that we ought to understand indigenous communities in similar terms. Indigenous traditions are no more 'invented' than are parliamentary laws, and for the same reason. Ipili responses to the Porgera gold mine are, I have argued, just as novel as newly passed laws, and yet just as acceptably a product of their culture as laws are. In both cases, I have argued that this is because of a distinct process, adherence to which constitutes genuineness, rather than because of some specific content. Modernity is a mode of response to temporality rather than a set of things to confront.

For this reason I would go even further. For Europeans and members of their settler colonies, the act of forging oneself and one's society can be unsettling. To a certain extent, James Clifford's concern with the predicament of culture in 'a truly global space of cultural connections and dissolutions' where 'local authenticities meet and merge in transient ... settings' (1998: 4) is merely one of the many concerns that Europeans have had in the face of a world where the authority of the past cannot be taken for granted. But this is 'our' problem, not 'theirs'. As Marilyn Strathern has noted:

Melanesians have never needed salvage ethnography. Their vision of the world had no problem with how parts fit together. There were no bits and pieces that had to be put back together again, for the sake of a culture restore, a society to conceptualize. Saved Clifford's predicament, I doubt nostalgia for either culture or society figures in their present cosmopolitanism (1992: 99).

Indeed, I would argue that Melanesians are even more modern — more willing to attend to novelty and avoid stereotypic reproduction — than are European organisations and bureaucracies for whom stereotypic reproduction is a condition of existence.

[T]he relative open-endedness of possible meaningfulness leaves ever more to be experienced and discovered ... [and hence a] rapacious desire to experience and explore the novelty for what this might make manifest about possible difference ... [an] uncovering of new, heretofore covert possibilities' (Merlan and Rumsey 1991: 231).

We might hear in highlanders' 'expectation of the potential revelation' of objects echoes of Baudelaire's (1972: 402) painter of modern life who aims 'to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distill the eternal from the transitory'. This is a view of highlanders who are not 'alternately' or 'heterodoxically' modern (Knauff 2002), but simply 'modern'.

This image of the Melanesian-as-dandy may strike some as an overly-optimistic portrayal of the situation in Melanesia today, so it is important to note that the trope of modernity need not be merely celebratory. Indeed, as Colin Filer (1998) has pointed out, this level of Levi-Straussian 'heat' can lead to a fluidity of social

relations that ‘menaces’ a resource industry predicated on the bureaucratic, stereotypical reproduction of action necessary to keep large resource extraction projects up and running. My point here is that we can understand this openness to innovation as a disposition to action which can have a variety of outcomes. Just because ‘menace’ is all about fluidity does not mean that all fluidity is menacing.

The Porgera case thus suggests that we should examine the way indigenous claims and Western legal forms are mutually constituted, and suggests that we direct our attention to the process of that constitution in which elaborating tradition (as much as legislation) is a reflexive process. As Merlan (2006: 101) points out, ‘the notion of the “mutual constitution” that reflexivity implies has long been one of the strongest potential alternatives to the concept of temporally deep continuity as the source of difference’. If this is the case, then we might in closing return to Patchen Markell’s ‘politics of acknowledgment’ — a sense that justice requires that ‘each of us bear our share of the burden and risk involved in the undertaking, open-ended, and sometimes maddeningly and sometimes joyously surprising activity of living and acting with people’ (Markell 2003: 7) rather than indulge in a comfortable assumption of ‘sovereign invulnerability to the open-endedness and contingency of the future we share with others’ (ibid: 15). For the final step of recognising the contingent nature of ‘their’ identity means a symmetrical recognition that ‘we’ do not know who we are until after the fact — and that ‘they’ may be the ones to tell us.

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