

Understanding 'resource' conflicts in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: *Papua New Guinea, with its heavy dependence on natural resources, limited economic development in the past two decades, poor record of governance and high-profile separatist conflicts such as the Bougainville civil war, appears to be an exemplar of the 'Resource Curse' theory – the notion that natural resources actively undermine economic development. Using a number of examples from a range of scales, this paper argues that what appear to be 'resource' conflicts in Papua New Guinea are actually better conceived as conflicts around identity and social relationships. The very different conceptualisation of natural resources in most Melanesian societies – as elements of the social world as much as any external environmental sphere – means that resources become a conduit for local social and political agendas and tensions to be expressed. The nature of traditional conflict in Melanesian societies is discussed as a guide to the better management and resolution of what appear to be 'resource' conflicts in Papua New Guinea.*

Keywords: *conflict, mining, natural resources, resolution*

Introduction: Actors, resources and conflicts

The literature on natural resources as a source of curses, greed and conflict is voluminous and continues to grow. Papua New Guinea fits neatly into such discussions: it is heavily 'resource-dependent', has suffered from poor economic growth over the past two decades, and has experienced many conflicts in areas around resource developments ranging from family disputes over the distribution of compensation payments through to all-out civil war. Explanations of the links between resources and conflict (see e.g. Ross, 1999; 2003) posit a range of processes such as the effect of natural resource developments on governments, governance and economies, and the political aspirations of resource-rich regions. There is much in these that is recognisable in the Papua New Guinea context. Weak and often corrupt governance, inappropriate economic policies and management practices, and separatist sentiments in resource-rich regions have all fermented conflict around resource developments in Papua New Guinea (see Banks, 2005).

But there is also more to conflicts in Papua New Guinea than can be captured by the above categories. Indeed, there is a deeper strand of issues that may materialise as concerns over governance or separatist movements, but which in fact are more fundamentally configured around central tenets of the affected societies. I will argue that while conflicts in Papua New Guinea have always been, and still are, driven by disputes over resources, they are better understood as conflicts around identity rather than resources. The argument obviously hinges on explaining the link between resources and identity, and the key to this in the Papua New Guinea context is the recognition that resources in the natural environment are not differentiated from social resources in the same way as we in the west do. In other words, resource conflicts are not conflicts over elements of the external environment, but are deeply embedded in the social workings of these different societies. In this sense, and with a Papua New Guinea twist, I am mirroring Richards' (2001) argument that these resource conflicts are a means through which local social and political projects are

articulated, and will not be understood unless attention is paid to the nature of these projects.

In placing resources at the nexus of environment and society, I am clearly invoking many of the concerns of contemporary political ecology (Walker, 2005). Here my focus is on the way in which the dialectic between people and natural resources can generate conflicts within the society, particularly when external actors bring new resources into being. I argue that in Papua New Guinea the strength of social relationships and the integration of society and environment means that untangling the causality of and identifying potential pathways out of 'resource conflicts' requires a thorough understanding of the culturally specific ways in which 'resources' are constructed, contested and ultimately accessed.

Any discussion of control and access to resources in Papua New Guinea requires an introduction to the three major 'players' in the sector: state, community and capital (multinational corporations). A notable absentee from much of what follows is, however, 'the state'. Obviously the intense competition of political office described by Ben Reilly (this volume) attests to its existence. In terms of regulating access by the multinational companies to natural resources (timber, minerals, gas, etc.), the management and enforcement of labour issues (see Imbun, 1999), and the fiscal regime under which taxes and royalties are paid, the state does play a central role, even if efficacy varies across these areas. When it comes to mediating the relationships and conflicts that occur around these resource projects, though, the physical and conceptual role of the state is much less obvious. Project officers from the Department of Mining are few in number, and in the case of every large-scale mining operation, public servants (other than teachers and health workers) are outnumbered by corporate community affairs staff. More fundamental than this is that the legitimacy of the Papua New Guinea state (and hence its ability to mediate conflicts and dispense justice) is low, in large part because of its decreasing capacity to deliver basic services, law and order and 'development' to most of the country, let alone the remote and relatively inaccessible parts where typically the mines are located and where

service provision and state presence has always been minimal.

In this context, multinational miners arrive or operate in an environment where there are heightened expectations of their ability to deliver the exact same services that the state increasingly has difficulty providing. Despite being large and well-resourced, the companies themselves are, in general, reluctant to assume too much of the role or mantle of the state. In part this is a resourcing issue, driven by concern for bottom-lines in the face of seemingly endless demands for services, jobs, contracts and funding. It also reflects, though, a concern with the longer-term prospects of governance in Papua New Guinea if the companies become de facto mini-states, and the long-term sustainability of any infrastructure and services once the mine operation ends. Despite this corporate reluctance, in the last decade the mining companies have become increasingly involved in 'community development' roles, often promoting the newly acquired corporate language of 'sustainability' and 'partnerships'. There is a direct link here with conflict avoidance in the sense that the predominant industry view of the closure of the Bougainville mine in the late 1980s (discussed below) was that a contributing factor was the neglect of community issues by the mining company. As a consequence, there are substantial numbers of employees at the Porgera, Ok Tedi and Lihir mines and the various oil projects charged with 'community relations/development/affairs'.

The final member of the triad of interests is the various communities around the projects. In most respects, they follow the make-up of clans and tribes as outlined in Reilly's (this volume) paper. Their role in these resource developments is heightened by the framework for governance of mineral resources in Papua New Guinea. While the state legally holds mineral and timber rights (and hence is able to provide access to them for the multinationals), 97% of the land of Papua New Guinea is held under customary tenure. The state is empowered to issue leases over land for resource developments, but these require the consent of 'landowning' communities. The communities then hold a strong bargaining position in negotiations over resource developments, and in the

case of the mineral resources this is expressed through the 'Development Forum' held before the issuing of a mining contract by the state. In the Development Forums, communities have agreed to allow access to land in exchange for a suite of benefits – typically infrastructure, jobs, business contracts and compensation, equity in the development and a royalty share. This provides the communities with significant power to control access to natural resources within their territory, an unusual setting in terms of state–community power relations documented elsewhere by political ecologists (Walker, 2005). Although the most obvious forms of conflict around mining projects are framed as corporate – community disputes (usually as variations on David–Goliath type conflicts), and are intensified in the absence of the state, I will argue below that the origins of many of the disputes arise from issues within and across these landowning communities. This clearly requires an understanding of the nature of disputes and dispute resolution processes within these societies.

The remainder of this paper thus opens with a description of the central tenets of conflict in traditional societies in the region. While there is great diversity in the social structures and conflicts in the different societies within Papua New Guinea, there are some common principles that can be identified, particularly among the Highland Papua New Guinea societies. The paper then describes and discusses the key features of three forms of 'resource conflicts' from recent history within Papua New Guinea. The first of these conflicts concerns the violent closure of the Bougainville copper mine in the late 1980s and the ensuing civil war, the most expensive Pacific conflict in terms of human lives since World War II. The second and third forms of 'conflict' concern events around the Porgera gold mine in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The difference between these two types of conflicts is the scale at which they occur: the second at the inter-tribal scale, and the third processes at the intra-tribal, even family level. In the final section, some pathways towards managing resource conflicts are indicated, the key point here being that looking for external solutions without paying attention to local frames of reference is simply engaging in flights of fancy.

Traditional forms of conflict in Papua New Guinea societies

A starting point for any discussion of resource conflicts in Papua New Guinea is the literature on traditional forms of conflict. While there are obviously many differences in terms of the nature and process of conflicts and their resolution across the varied societies in the region, there are some broad generalisations that are widely applicable. First, conflicts in Melanesia are classically strongly embedded in the everyday politics and history of the society. Goldman (2003: 4) writes of Huli disputes, for example, that 'many claims would lay dormant until such time as a strategically significant dispute arose allowing claimants to "activate" past unresolved disputes in a sequenced set of claims. Disputes were always "multiple-claim" affairs. It was never the case that a "conflictless" set of conditions prevailed within any Huli community'. It was rare, then, that a particular dispute or conflict had no 'history' or was unconnected to past events in some way.

A second key characteristic derives from the maxim that conflict in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea was always concerned with women, land or pigs (Yala, 2002; Goldman, 2003). This is short-hand for the recognition that these resources are all deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of social networks, and to notions of individual and group identity within the society. Important in the context of resource conflicts is the way in which non-human elements become incorporated into the social realm. Land (and here we can add a range of other natural resources) are as much elements of the social milieu as they are materials external to the social setting. The classic quote from Bougainville (cited in Dove *et al.*, 1974: 182) encapsulates this neatly:

Land is our life. And is our physical life – food and sustenance. Land is our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact it is our only world.

This is not to overly romanticise the relationship between people and their land (or other resources), but simply to make the point that people's relationship to land is incorporated into their social world. Likewise, the role of the non-material world is important to the function-

ing of these societies. Myths that explain the origin of mineral resources (indigenous versions of Genesis or tectonic plate theory, in other words) link people to particular places and the resources they hold. Spirits linked to these same places hold considerable sway over the decisions and behaviour of individuals. Many are comfortable with the notion of the agency of spirits, even in the heart of these modernist multinational resource developments (see Polier, 1994; Jorgensen, 1998; Rumsey and Weiner, 2001). The social world of an individual, then, frequently includes relationships with non-human and non-material elements that can be as affective of behaviour as relationships with other people. Thus, spirits can be invoked, can cause deaths, and can influence climate, among many other roles, and they are roles that are often as real and as central to the societies as relationships between individuals.

Following from this, and central to the current argument, is that individual and group identity arises from these networks of social relationships. The individual, in other words, is formed from these relationships, including the non-human and non-material elements. The notion of an individual distinct or separate from the context of their society and social relationships is foreign, and indeed frightening to most Melanesians. The relationship between individuals and society is thus distinct from Western conceptions of a hierarchy between individuals and the society they make up. Much has been written of the way in which personhood and identity within Melanesian societies is the outcome of such processes of sociality (for two classic anthropological texts, see Strathern, 1988 and Epstein, 1999). Identity is strongly grounded in webs and networks of social relationships that incorporate elements of the natural environment (resources, for example) as well.

A further dimension relates to the way in which relationships, resources and conflicts are fundamentally shaped by talk in these societies. From the formalised speech of Huli disputes (Goldman, 1983) to the extended public oratory of Nebilyer (Merlan and Rumsey, 1991) and Brison's (1992) discussion of the powerful role of gossip in Melanesian society, it is clear that the oral nature of these communities shapes the processes by which society, resources and iden-

tity are constructed, as well as the structures and processes of conflict and resolution. One of the implications of this is that there is a strong element of fluidity to the processes associated with social relationships and identity. In some (but not all) parts, people have a range of social resources they are able to choose from when involved in construction of group or individual identity. At Porgera, for example, an individual is potentially able to assert membership to all the 'clans' ('lines' is the more appropriate term anthropologically) to which his or her grandparents belonged. In this situation, this obviously leads to a complex web of overlapping, rather than exclusive, claims of 'belonging', which in times of conflict can lead to people choosing from a range of possible courses of action.

A final element of conflict in Melanesia that deserves note in the current context concerns the 'resolution' of conflict. Again there is a huge literature on the topic to which I can only fleetingly refer (see e.g. Strathern, 1992; Regan, 1998; Dinnen, 2003). Three aspects of this are worth noting. One is that, as alluded to in the opening of this section, conflicts are never finally 'resolved'. Just as no current conflict is without 'history' that links the participants in some way, so these same current conflicts are likely to form the background to future conflicts, even when it appears that the parties have 'settled' their differences. The second point is that traditional forms of compensation, the primary means by which conflicts are settled, are essentially focused on restoring balance to the relationship between the parties to the conflict. They are relational, rather than transactional, and in many of the societies compensation in this form was linked into broader networks of exchange, marriage and trade (Strathern, 1993). In this way, compensation was an integral part of maintaining relationships between people and between groups. And finally, those involved in mediating between the parties in these conflicts were almost invariably 'interested' rather than neutral or disinterested parties to the proceedings. This was because it was those with links to all sides in the dispute that had the greatest motivation to resolve the dispute. Extensive social networks, classically the source of resources for traditional exchange and compensation, were of little use to an individual if the bulk of the people in these networks were engaged in conflict.

To summarise, then, traditional forms of conflict were usually focused on resources, but they were not simply 'resource conflicts'. Material resources such as land or pigs were intimately entwined with the workings of the local societies and the pathways to personhood and identity formation. Although conflicts in some areas were driven by resource scarcity, for the most part conflicts and their resolution centred around the creation, maintenance and restoration of networks of social relationships, all of which fed in the construction of individual and group identity. Building on this approach, in the following section I will argue that disputes and conflicts over resource developments are usually not new, and are often simply new expressions of long-standing disputes that relate to much more proximate relationship and identity concerns (cf. Horowitz, 2002; Weiner, 2002: 4).

Inside Papua New Guinea resource conflicts

In the context of these patterns of traditional conflicts, contemporary 'resource conflicts' take on a different light to that supposed in the curses and conflict literature. In this section, three different scales of conflict are examined (regional, inter-group and intra-group), with a view to dissecting the factors that trigger them and those that can ease their resolution. There is an emphasis on those elements of the conflicts that follow the traditional patterns as mapped out above, as the argument here is that there is much continuity between contemporary 'resource conflicts' and traditional forms of conflict in Papua New Guinea. Although the context may be novel, the framing and conduct of conflicts continues to draw on traditional rather than external rationales and understandings.

The legacy of Bougainville Copper's Panguna mine, the large-scale operation that operated between 1972 and 1988, continues to influence contemporary resource developments. Bougainville Copper was closed by violence directed at it from the surrounding population and led to a 10-year civil war with up to 15 000 people dying as a result of the conflict. The mine closure brought a rapid decline in the economy of the country, and sparked a number of structural problems that have continued to plague development progress.

Discussion of the origins of the Bougainville crisis has generated much debate, as is often the case with conflicts of such intensity. There are three broad schools of thought, reviewed by Regan (1998). One of them, a strongly Marxist class-based interpretation of events, has little support in terms of the available evidence. The second and third directly address the role of ethnicity and the role of resource development in sparking the crisis. The debate was neatly articulated in a spirited exchange between the anthropologist Colin Filer and the historian James Griffin in the early 1990s. Filer (1990, 1992) essentially argued that the only difference between Bougainville and the other provinces in Papua New Guinea was the hole in the middle of it. The mine, and the intractable issues of distribution of benefits and the environmental impact on the community that accompanied its development had created conditions which led to the violent rejection of the company and all the problems it had created for the community. Once the rebellion was underway on Bougainville, then demands for secession were added by the original claimants so as to broaden their support base and Filer argued that similar processes could be expected to occur around large-scale mine sites elsewhere in the country. Griffin's (1990) response was to highlight the long-standing and well-documented aspirations of Bougainville for independence, aspirations that pre-dated the mine and Papua New Guinea independence. An ethnicity distinct from the rest of Papua New Guinea was a central basis on which Bougainville argued for independence, and Griffin argued that this was the primary motivation that drove those who initially attacked the mine. My reading, and Regan's (1998), of the conflict is that Filer is essentially right, and the broad province-wide sentiment in support of independence meant that once the conflict had begun, the heavy-handed attempts by the state to quell the violence stood little chance of success. As Li (2000: 151) found in relation to the assertion of indigenous identity in Indonesia, the conflict arose from the conjunction of historical circumstance, 'repertoires of meaning' and 'particular patterns of engagement and struggle', focused both internally and externally. Ethnicity, then, formed the backdrop, but traditional forms and processes of conflict within the community in response to

the mining project were the trigger that allowed secessionist claims to rise to prominence.

At this provincial or regional level, there are numerous examples of another process at work. In a number of parts of Papua New Guinea, the development of a large-scale resource project has significantly reconfigured regional power relationships between ethnic groupings. Such reconfiguration typically leads to claims to a share of specific resources being made by regional groupings excluded from the immediate economic benefits flowing from the resource development. At the Ok Tedi mine, the marginalised and heavily impacted Yonggom people led a lawsuit in Australia against Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd (BHP), then the operator of the mine (Banks and Ballard, 1997). As Dan Jorgensen (2006) and others (myself included, see Banks, 2002) have pointed out, the equally impacted but less marginalised Awin people had little involvement or apparent interest in the lawsuit. The lawsuit, incidentally, has been promoted as an alternative means of resolving resource disputes to the route taken on Bougainville, but even a cursory examination of the two situations reveals marked differences, and the success of the action by the landowners is tempered by the fact that significant elements of the lawsuit are still being contested in the courts more than 10 years after it was first lodged (Kirsch, 2007).

At Porgera, the previously marginalised Ipili people are now at the centre of the national polity and regional power, while the overwhelmingly numerically dominant Enga in the rest of the province have had to seek ways of attracting the attention of the mine owner and the government (largely through attacks on trucks supplying the mine, regional political manoeuvrings and a high level of political rhetoric against the operation). What is particularly interesting here is that even though the rest of Enga do benefit from the mine, there is a strong sense that many would rather see it shut down if their demands are not met because the Ipili would lose more and an Enga-centric sense of relativities will be restored – a negative sum game in effect.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of this regional response to resource development in Papua New Guinea comes from the Huli people of the Southern Highlands Province.

Here, a people who inherently believe that they have a central role in national and even international affairs have found themselves literally surrounded by large resource projects on the territories of what they consider to be marginal people. To the south there are the large Kutubu, Gobe and Moran oil and gas projects, to the north Mt Kare and Porgera gold projects, and a little further west, the Ok Tedi copper/gold mine (the smallish Hides gas project is on the southern extremity of their territory). Despite this central position, Huli are the identified owners of only a small slice of the land of the oil and gas projects, have no recognised claims over the other projects, and receive only indirect, marginal benefits from them. In a response that exemplifies the argument, the Huli have been responsible for the promotion of a separate 'Hela' Province in the Highlands, one that ties together the descendents of a group of original brothers who spread from the Huli heartland and settled in the neighbouring areas that, perhaps not coincidentally, are now home to these world class resource projects. While few in the resource-rich areas lend the notion any support, the Huli have been busy pushing the concept at the national level, and the Hela 'people/tribe' and even 'district' are regularly reported on in the media (see e.g. Wayne, 2002). Most recently, the formation of a Hela Provincial Government was made a precondition by local leaders for the negotiation of new natural gas projects in the area (Anon, 2007). The Huli here are trying to reshape their role in the regional geopolitical balance, and seeking to maintain their self-perceived dominant position as the central people in the region. In another tactic that flows from a similar concern, the powerline from the Hides gasfield to the Porgera project is frequently vandalised by Huli largely as a means of attracting attention to their relative deprivation and lack of services. Attached to one downed power pylon in 2004 was a note expressing regret at the inconvenience caused to the company, but arguing that this was the only means this particular clan had of securing the attention of the government for delivery of services!

The logic of these broad, province or regional resource disputes fits comfortably within traditional conflict patterns. People and communities are seeking to restore or enhance their

relative standing in regional and provincial contexts. It is primarily a relational logic, and is concerned with the relationships between and among regional groups. In part, it is expressed through the construction of relationships, creating or exaggerating connectedness between the 'lucky' few and the rest, with the implication that this connectedness should find concrete expression in traditional forms of distribution and sharing of the resource-derived benefits. On Bougainville, the Filer explanation of the origins of the conflict highlights the local social grounding of the dispute – local frustration at what was considered an unfair internal distribution of benefits, and the impossibility of creating a system of distribution that would be considered fair according to 'custom'.

A second scale of conflict (inter-group) is illustrated by a long-running dispute within the Porgera valley in Enga Province. People living in the Lower Porgera valley have engaged in a variety of actions directed at the mining company, at the landowners of the mining leases, and at the government over the loss of access to the alluvial gold deposits in the lower Porgera river due to the pollution and sedimentation from the mine operation. Actions have included protest marches, letter writing to government ministers and the mining company, the violent disruption of a government hearing relating to the matter, and a dramatic breakout of the local prison by a large group of people arrested over an earlier incident that resulted in two people being killed in a gunfight with armed reserve police. The leader of the formal organisation representing the bulk of those affected downstream was elected to the National Parliament in 1997, but despite this was unable to successfully follow his group's claims through, and lost his seat at the following election.

There are certainly similarities with the regional scale of conflict, in that the redressing of local inequalities plays a significant part (see Biersack, 2006). The lower Porgera valley, with its easy access to alluvial gold, was the centre of the valley's economic life in the colonial period from the 1950s until the 1980s. A number of individuals had become important leaders and businessmen on the basis of their involvement in this activity. The development of the large-scale mine had not only seen their upstream

kinsmen elevated above them economically, but had also directly impacted on their ability to generate an income for themselves from the alluvial gold due to its inundation by sediment from the mine operation. The inequity of the situation has fuelled conflict between the groups (although note that there are people who are located, socially speaking, in both camps) and has generated one of the most sustained campaigns against the mine over its 15-year operating life.

Again, this is one example of many that have occurred around mining projects in Papua New Guinea, with the exclusive status of mining lease landowners, and the tightly prescribed way in which such groups are defined, generating a mix of puzzlement (that they were not included) and resentment from surrounding groups and individuals. The process by which often malleable and complex rules of 'belonging' become simplified lists of 'landowners', and social boundaries become cartographic ones, has been the cause of conflict at all major projects (see e.g. Jorgensen, 1997). Clearly here it is local understandings of belonging and identity which become the sites of contestations – the formal, official 'rules' are relatively simple, but the interpretation and negotiation of these rules by local groups grounded in the norms and values of their social universe are highly unlikely to match these.

The final scale around which 'resource' conflicts revolve is the intra-group level. Here, even more obviously than inter-group and regional scales, traditional forms of logic, means and motivations dominate the development of conflicts. These conflicts can develop within groups over a broad range of issues but many of them revolve, rhetorically at least, around the abuse of 'tradition' and the subsequent stressing of social relationships. As illustrated above for the Bougainville example, distributional issues are often at the core of local disputes. In the Porgeran case (and Filer (1990) has argued the same for the Bougainville situation), the issue is that at the local level tradition was never designed for the distributions of the huge amounts of cash that flow to the affected communities. In this way, the difficulty then is not a lack of benefits, rather that people are not following the traditional norms and conventions of sociality in terms of distribution (a central tenant of identity

formation in the highlands societies) because there is simply no traditional precedent for dealing with such large economic flows. These disputes are interpreted locally in terms of traditional modes of distribution, and the outcomes almost invariably stress the social relationships on which this 'tradition' is based. Filer's work on Bougainville suggests one ultimate outcome of this problem: the breakdown of the norms of the society to such an extent that anger and frustration is both focused internally and projected outwards onto the resource developer and government. Similar incidents, although usually at a much lower level of conflict, are a constant at the other major projects in Papua New Guinea.

Another conflict-generating process at the local level is the impact of in-migration on mine communities (see Banks, 2003). At Porgera, for example, the population living within the Special Mining Lease (SML) boundary has gone from around 2000 in 1990 to close to 9000 within a decade and up to 15 000 (or more) by 2004, with more than half not born in the district. Within the valley as a whole, the population has grown from 5000 at the 1980 Census, to 10 000 in 1990 and 22 000 in 2000 (Banks, 2003). This migration is perhaps the most devastating of all the effects of large-scale mining in Melanesia, largely because of its effects on the core pillar of Melanesian identity: social relationships. Local communities go from being relatively coherent and stable (though let us not pretend peaceful or static) entities where the relationships an individual has with others in the area are well-known, to a situation where locals feel they are in a minority. The most common complaint about the Porgera mine from landowners was that it had brought about a heightened level of fear because of the 'faces we do not know': that is, people they do not have relationships with. The migrants were held responsible for many of the social pathologies associated with large-scale mining: drinking, gambling and prostitution, and implicated in the breakdown of traditional forms of control within the community. One result was large numbers of young men with little to do who could rapidly ramp up the stakes in small disputes leading to large numbers of participants in 'tribal fights', many of who were only tangentially related to the 'tribes' concerned. Local identity itself becomes contested

as being Porgeran is now important because of the potential and actual benefits that flow to 'the Porgeran landowners'. Debates, disputes and conflicts over belonging and membership are frequent in large part because the traditional rules are often loose or vague and hence are being reshaped by the communities (as well as by governments and companies) on the run (see Jorgensen, 1997; Rumsey and Weiner, 2001; Ballard and Banks, 2003). Given what is at stake, it is no surprise that this process of redefining the 'local' can occasionally turn violent.

While the three scales (regional, inter-group and intra-group) have been presented as distinct categories, in reality there is often considerable interplay between them. On Bougainville there are often horrific tales of families split on either side of the war, and indeed there is some evidence that this was a central element of sparking the internal dissent that led to the rebellion. At Porgera, family disputes can escalate to 'tribal' fights, attacks on government and company workers, and ultimately impinge on the mine operation itself.

All these cases point back to some of the basic foundations of conflict in these societies as exemplars of political ecology. Resources and the benefits that flow from them become another element which can be drawn into and deployed within the social world and then become incorporated into the lives of people affected by the resource exploitation. This in a sense reverses the commonly held view that these large resource developments transform the nature and the focus of people's lives. A large mine, for example, enters an area and the obvious conclusion is that local people are suddenly operating in a different frame of reference or new way of thinking: they are leading different lives. Instead, I suggest that the mine or other resource development, and the possibilities and problems that it creates, become captured into the existing society, lives and ways of understanding of the local population.¹ And in these local worlds throughout Papua New Guinea, land, identity and social relationships are still the critical factors.

This is not to say that people are not affected by the developments and that new forms of conflict do not arise. In many ways, conflicts are created precisely because tradition cannot deal with the new questions or issues that come

about with resource developments. Who is a 'real landowner'? How should a large cash compensation payment be distributed? As Filer says, there is no traditional precedent for dealing with such matters, and in the Bougainville case this inability to handle new problems was central to the development of the internal conflict that tore the community apart and overflowed into civil war.

While 'custom' itself often struggles to address these are new challenges and issues, they are interpreted and made 'sense' of in terms of existing world views, and the frustration at the inequities or decisions that are made is generated from within these same world views. Thus, while the issues to be addressed may be novel, the outrage that can lead to conflict is derived from the perspective of the local social universe.

Reducing resource conflicts

Social relationship, identities and land are the things that matter in Melanesia, and to believe that conflicts of any kind, even 'resource' conflicts, can be primarily about anything else is an illusion. With this in mind, in which direction should moves to manage, reduce or avoid these 'resource' conflicts lie? What is proposed below bears little relationship, unsurprisingly, to the solutions proposed by the 'resource curse/conflict' writers (see e.g. Bannon and Collier, 2003). Neither do solutions to these tensions and conflicts lie in the manipulation of democratic structures and processes proposed by the ethno-nationalism literature. In the Papua New Guinea case at least, the issues around resource projects are not just ones of representation and decision-making powers. Instead, an approach grounded in political ecology highlights the socially embedded and constructed nature of resources, and recognises that contests and conflicts are often not about access to scarce resources, but rather grounded in concerns over the power and politics of resource use and control.

In one sense, traditional conflict played a positive role in many of these pre-contact Papua New Guinea communities as they formed a part of the continual process of maintaining and renewing the social relationships that 'made' people and groups. Hence, the war reparations

paid to allies and enemies renewed the relationships between these groups. Some of the large-scale ceremonial wars were central to the processes by which communities interacted with one another, before, during and after the conflict itself (Wiessner and Tumu, 1998). In the contemporary sense, the positives of these resource conflicts are less obvious. They can help to ensure a wider distribution of the economic flows from these developments as they can serve as a reminder to communities, companies and governments of others with claims ('real' or imagined) on the resources being developed. But with the advent of high-powered weapons and many more 'outsiders' involved in the 'tribal fights' around Porgera and elsewhere, the costs – human and otherwise – start to rise rapidly.

Based on the belief that contemporary 'resource' conflicts are really something else (as has been described previously), four thoughts are offered on the management of conflict, its resolution or avoidance.² The first is the need for a thorough understanding of the background and causes of conflicts. Outside observers and many of the participants will offer simplified versions of the events behind conflicts ('he crashed my car'/'he cheated at cards'/'she slept with another man'), but as outlined above there will almost inevitably be more to such conflicts than meets the (outsider's) eye. The social universe of most Papua New Guineans is incredibly complex and confusing for outsiders to come to grips with, and good anthropologists and long-time workers in the community (including church representatives) are some of the few people who really come to terms with the web of relationships that makes up the society. The need for a deeper, anthropological understanding of the conflict is a critical starting point for the settlement or management of these disputes, as Hegarty (2003) makes clear in the case of Bougainville.

A second remark derived from traditional forms of conflicts is that a conflict is never really over: a settlement is the start (or often the re-start) of a process of engagement between the parties, not a one-off event. While this is an obvious statement and one that applies much more broadly, it has a particular resonance in Papua New Guinea because of the complexity and central importance of on-going social rela-

tionships between individuals and groups. Thus, conflicts continue to feed into the process by which relationships are formed, ruptured and reformed. They continue to provide the backdrop to future interactions between various parties. The practical advice that flows from such an observation is that a 'peace-ceremony' is not the end of the process by which conflict is resolved, and ongoing tensions will generally mark the relationship between these parties for a considerable period of time. The nature of the process, in other words, is more important in many respects than any one outcome. This is certainly not specific to the Melanesian setting, but is regularly overlooked by those parties that seek to intervene in such disputes.

The third observation relates to the second and concerns the value of any peace 'broker' maintaining a presence after any formal ceremony to mark the end of a conflict. One of the lessons of the Porgera mine has been that there is no substitute for a physical presence among the various communities as a means of encouraging an on-going dialogue and reducing the potential for conflict. This is underlined by the way in which when the company 'took their eye off' various communities (such as from the late 1990s along the powerline to the Hides gas power plant), the disgruntled members of these communities started destroying parts of the company's operation. As noted earlier, in large part this community anger was directed at the government for its continual neglect of various areas, but as the only effective (and to an extent 'hostage') presence, the company bore the brunt of this frustration. Once a renewed dialogue was established with these communities and grievances worked through, operations were restored. In the same way, the village-based churches in Papua New Guinea are regularly involved in conflict resolution processes, and recent initiatives have promoted locally focused 'restorative justice' programmes (Dinnen, 2003). For outsiders (be they mining companies or regional intervention forces, etc.), the lesson is that on-going management of these conflicts is required beyond a formal and often notional 'resolution'.

A final related consideration concerns the notion of the value of 'independent' peace brokers. The value of the mining company at Porgera as a broker of 'peace' with the communities along its powerline was not its indepen-

dence but conversely its 'interested' nature in the conflict. The communities were effectively seeking an on-going relationship as well as resolution of previous claims, and wanted a resourced partner, not an independent outsider such as the government, to 'settle' the matter. The company's role matches closely the role of the big-men meditators in traditional fights in the highlands, where interested rather than detached parties were more motivated to find a solution and more likely to bring about a settlement. In this sense, an informed, committed and interested party is more used in resolving or managing a conflict rather than an independent, detached and imposed arbitrator (see also Hegarty, 2003).

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Notes

- 1 In the same way that Sahlins (1995: 179–180) argues that 'first contact' encounters in the Pacific are not always understood locally as the dramatic epochal moments anticipated by Western explorers and writers but rather 'in ways consistent with the people's own cosmological schemes – including even the failure to remember the first White men as such, since [to local thinking] they were never men . . . [f]or the first "reality" was embedded in myth and ritual practice: what they already knew about being and the world'.
- 2 The emphasis on traditional conflicts as being focused on maintaining or restoring 'balance' in social (and regional) relationships should not be read here as a call to 'keep social groups in their traditional place' as a mechanism to avoid or resolve conflicts. In the Papua

New Guinea context, the dynamics and construction of social relationships is such that the processes of comparison and evaluation are constantly shifting rather than being grounded in an empirical, testable reality. The power of this approach (which does bear similarities to 'relative deprivation' explanations of conflict) is explanatory and in terms of application, points to a focus on the social context within which resources are created and contested rather than a simple restoration of an imagined status quo.

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