

Dissertation Précis for  
**Making The Ipili Feasible: Imagining Global and Local Actors at  
The Porgera Gold Mine, Enga Province, Papua New Guinea**

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**Introduction: The Ethnographic Situation**

*(for bibliographic references, please consult the dissertation)*

This dissertation is about the relationship between the Porgera gold mine and the Ipili-speaking people on whose land the mine is located. In 1939 the Ipili were one of the last major ethnic groups to be contacted by the Australian administration of what was then the Trust Territory of New Guinea. Gold was discovered on that initial patrol, and just fifty years later the third largest gold mine in the world opened in the valley. Thus Porgerans have gone from a world without metal or textiles to one in which trucks carrying literally hundreds of tons of rock operate nonstop in a huge open pit that was once their mountain. Since its establishment in 1964, the Porgera government station has been transformed from a remote airstrip to a bustling 'wild west' boom-town with – if the census can be believed -- roughly 20,000 inhabitants. The valley's past is littered with spectacular industrial accidents, large scale civil unrest, and one particularly well-remembered beheading. While many would expect the intersection of a world-class gold mine and a relatively naïve indigenous people to result in a 'fatal impact' (Moorehead 1966), in fact the Ipili have been very successful at extracting concessions from the mine and government. In fact, senior management of the mine consider that they, rather than the Ipili, ought to be sympathetically considered as the victims in this scenario, since their billion dollar investment is held hostage by an ethnic group that can, by blocking a road or downing a power line, halt their operations altogether. In sum, Porgera fulfills every stereotype of Papua New Guineans living

'10,000 years in a lifetime' (Kiki 1968) or going 'from stone to steel' (Salisbury 1962) or 'from the stone age to the jet age' (Biersack 1992).

In this dissertation I argue that an understanding of the relationship between the mine and the Ipili provides a genuine contribution to the ethnography of postcolonial highlands Papua New Guinea. Porgera is also of interest at a broader level for the way in which it helps us understand current contemporary debates in anthropology. This dissertation thus aims to contribute to scholarly discussions of indigenous identity, land tenure and common property, the mediation of social groups by particular people, and governance and weak states. Understanding how Ipili identity circulates, how action is coordinated across time and space, and how Papua New Guinea's colonial past affects its post-colonial present, I will argue, helps clarify several issues regarding the construction of 'globality' and 'locality'.

The Porgera goldmine is located in Porgera district, Enga province, Papua New Guinea. In 1992 – its second year of production - it produced 1,485,077 ounces of gold, making it the third most productive gold mine on the planet and the most productive outside of South Africa (Banks 1997:121). In 2000 – the ethnographic present of this study -- the mine produced 910,434 ounces of gold from 106,520,077 tons of ore milled (Placer Dome Asia Pacific 2001:1). The mine is owned by the Porgera Joint Venture (PJV), an unincorporated joint venture which is not publicly traded. Equity partners included Placer Dome Inc. (50%) and Goldfields Limited (25%) (international mining companies), Orogen Minerals (20%) (which holds the state's equity in the project); and Yuwai No. 65 Limited (5%) (which holds equity for the provincial government and Porgera landowners) (Placer Dome Asia Pacific 2001:1). As these numbers suggest, the key player in the PJV is Placer Dome Asia Pacific, a subsidiary of Placer Dome Inc., a Vancouver-based mining transnational that specializes in gold mining. Although employees of the Porgera Joint Venture wear PJV uniforms, the management and operation of the mine is essentially done

by Placer.

In 2000 the PJV employed 1,972 people, 1,724 of whom were citizens of Papua New Guinea and 248 of whom were expatriates. Roughly half of the employees (1,000) are drawn from points of hire within Porgera itself, 200 from Enga province, and 400 from other areas of Papua New Guinea, and 250 were expats. The result is a multiethnic, if stratified, workforce. Senior management (including the mine manager) and highly specialized technical positions are held by a sprinkling of expats. Most mid-level positions that require education and expertise are filled with Papua New Guineans from outside of Enga – typically people with experience working in other mines in the country. Finally, the bulk of the staff who operate equipment, provide custodial services, and so forth are hired in Porgera.

Mining in the third world often evokes memories of Sebastiao Salgado's haunting photos of sulfur mining in Indonesia and gold rushes in Brazil: primitive, dangerous conditions, and stark portraits of third-worlders whose lives have been shaped by the backbreaking labor of mining (Salgado 1993). Porgera has absolutely nothing in common with this picture. The Porgera gold mine is an enormous, technologically sophisticated, highly mechanized open cut operation. The Porgera gold mine is an enormously complex operation that has carved out for itself an enclave in an extremely remote area of Papua New Guinea. Its two 'lifelines' – the power line and the road, must be opened or the mine begins losing money at a catastrophic rate. If either the road was closed or the power line cut down, the mine's work would grind to a halt and the large enclave of employees working and living there would be in danger. Mine management estimates that keeping the lights on in Porgera – maintaining power and housing employees – without keeping the mine in production costs US\$1,000,000 dollars a day.

The people known collectively to the scholarly literature as 'the Ipili' (book length monographs include Banks 1997, Biersack 1980, Filer 1999, Golub 2001, Jacka 2003, Jackson

and Banks 2001) are possessed of an identity that is as nebulous as it is important. Linguistically and culturally, the Ipili are part of the much wider ethnic galaxy which includes the Huli (to the south) and Enga (to the west), both of which are larger in population than the Ipili by an order of magnitude or more (for regional overviews see Biersack 1995 and Wiessner and Tumu 1998). Ipili are thus a 'hinge' or 'intermediate' group wedged between the two much larger groups on either side of them. Like their neighbors, they formerly lived in dispersed homesteads and practiced mounded sweet potato agriculture. Their kinship system resembles that of the Huli described by Glasse (1968) and the Garia described by Lawrence (1984), in that it is cognatic. Anyone with a single Ipili grandparent has a good claim to affiliate with the cognatic stock with which that grandparent is affiliated as long as they demonstrate some sort of solidarity with other members of the stock through work and consociation. As in other areas in Papua New Guinea, affines and nonconsanguines are often incorporated into local groups which are theoretically based on descent (Langness 1964). It is tempting, but inaccurate, to portray the Ipili, Enga, and Huli as distinct ethnicities with clear and bright boundaries between them. The term 'Enga' and 'Ipili,' for instance, are neologisms that resulted from contact with Australians and are not indigenous ethnonyms. Huli have a folk theory that the groups surrounding them are descendants, albeit degraded and inferior ones, of ancestral Huli stock, and Engans recognize neighboring groups such as the Ipili as related by ancestral clan ties. Finally, one of the most striking traits of Ipili social organization is its attempts to adopt and co-opt powerful outsiders into its communities. To be sure, there are certainly distinctions between the Ipili and their neighbors. But these distinctions are more one of degree than absolute difference. The ease and fluidity of migration and ethnic affiliation in this area of highland is clearly evinced in the population figures given above. Ipili identity, then, is not clearly externally bounded.

Just as the stereotypes of mud-smearred miners emerging from a rough-hewn pit fail to

capture the sophistication of the Porgera mine's engineering, preconceptions of the Ipili as ecologically noble savages (Buege 1996) trampled and degraded by global capitalism do not capture the complexity of Porgera's politics. The Porgera mine came online in the late 1980s shortly after the closure of the Bougainville copper mine. The loss of revenue from Bougainville left a massive hole in the government's budget, and Porgera was quickly seized upon as a solution. At the same time, the failure of the Papua New Guinea Defense Force and police to keep Bougainville open demonstrated that the government lacked the capacity to force a mine on local populations. These two factors created a moment of opportunity which the Ipili – who are nothing if not ready to negotiate -- seized and became one of the most active and successful fourth world people in the world today in terms of pressing claims against the state and transnational capitalism. Indeed, so thorough-going are Ipili attempts to extract benefits from the mine that Timothy Andambo, a Porgeran mining engineer, has described the tangle of trust funds, equity companies, and committees that manage the Ipili's numerous investments as “social technology to extract rent from the Porgera lode” (Andambo 2002). The relationship between the mine and the government is regulated by a Mining Development Contract, while the relationship between the mine and the Ipili is based on three foundational documents: the Relocation Agreement, the Compensation Agreement, and the 'Porgera Agreements'. All of these documents, signed in the late 1980s, form a charter which regulates how life should be carried out in Porgera today.

### **The Central Theoretical Problem**

A central problem of the dissertation is this: how is the mine kept open, and what conditions permit it to operate? It is tempting to image two sets of conditions. On the one hand there is 'pure' logistics: Lying at the back of the machines that dig rock out of the mountain and shovel it into dump trucks is an enormous network dedicated to moving materiel into place so that the mine can operate. On the other hand there is what we might want to call the 'semiotic' work of

making a mine – the creation and maintenance of the complex set of financial, legal, moral, and epistemological understandings that must be brought into place for a single bar of poured in Porgera to be turned into a positive mark on Placer's balance sheet.

But mining, like cannibalism, “is always symbolic, even when it is 'real'” (Sahlins 1983:). It is important to realize that both the semiotic and technical aspects of mining are flip sides of the same coin. As the “pragmatic-poetic turn” of contemporary linguistic anthropology (the term is from Silverstein 2004:623; other prominent statements regarding this turn might be found in Silverstein and Urban 1996 and Baumann and Briggs 1990) has demonstrated, all human interaction requires the deployment of a shared set of sociocultural concepts in order to ensure that interaction coheres to create “a coherent, intersubjectively accomplished interactional text, the interpersonal achievement of a 'doing' of something” (Silverstein 1998:270). This is true even of perilinguistic interactions such as the act of operating machinery in Porgera's open pit. The fundamental subject of this study is, then, the circulation of texts – both artifactual and non – which make mining possible. Thus my study focuses on 'globalization' not in the sense of 'exceeding or crossing international boundaries' but rather in the sense of the coordination of action across an extended sector of space and time – literally the organization of action across the face of the globe involving people who have not shared face-to-face contact.

'Feasibility' is the word the mining industry uses to describe a prospective ore body that will cost less to mine than its product will fetch on the market. Just as the gold in a mountain requires refining if it is to take a form suitable for circulation in national and international financial markets, so too the identities of Ipili people had to be refined and transformed in order to circulate in the national and international circuits of law, policy, and ideas that accompany and buttress transnational capitalism. Making 'the Ipili' feasible is thus one species of that much larger process of the 'construction of locality' or 'the creation of indigeneity' that has been the

subject of a good deal of recent anthropological literature (Marcus 1989, Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, Conklin and Graham 1995, Li 2000, Povinelli 2002, Carneiro da Cunha and Almeida 2001). Thus 'the Ipili' needed to be imagined as 'local actors' with whom global forces could interact. While legal and ethical requirements created a situation in which the mine and government needed an 'Ipili' partner, the facts of life on the ground in Porgera necessitated that the Ipili be made feasible in a second, much more concrete way: the Ipili needed to be made physically docile if the mine was going to function. Facilities such as workers' camps did not only need to be legally zoned and built, they needed to be *defended*. At a basic level, the mine is in danger of being physically over-run and destroyed by the Ipili if they are not placated.

Finally, a third and more fascinating form of feasibility has arisen from the conjunction of these representational and pacificatory requirements. For the the semiotic requirements of national actors mixed with the nature of life in the valley to make 'the Ipili' feasible political actors at the national level. The closing of Bougainville copper mine during the period immediately preceding the creation of the Porgera gold mine left the government desperate for money while simultaneously demonstrating their inability to use their military to coerce local land owners into accepting a mine. The Ipili were in the right place at the right time, and were not afraid to seize the opportunity. Today Ipili continue to use their position to effect change at a national level.

The concept of imagining local actors will seem familiar to many readers -- after all, this sort of discussion is common in the literature on identity in globalized circumstances. But the concept of imagining *global* actors may be less intuitive. Entities such as governments and large international corporations, on the other hand, recruit people to roles routinely and people act on their behalf constantly. When France signs an agreement with Russia, for instance, we never

doubt what has happened despite the fact that neither of these entities, strictly speaking, has hands. I argue that Porgera's fraught situation provides a particular opportunity for us to understand how 'global' actors become taken for granted as 'collective subjects' (Sahlins 2004) and represented. Classically 'weak' states such as Papua New Guinea provide us an opportunity to see the work that goes on to make the state appear as a concrete entity because they work hard, and usually fail, to do so. Placer Dome's presence in Porgera provides a local point of articulation with a 'global' organization that allows us to examine exactly how this grafting appears. Finally, the Ipili themselves have lived through unique historic circumstances that make them particularly cynical when approaching issues of representation and power. All three of these actors, then, provide us an opportunity for us to examine what makes global identities stick to local people.

My approach is thus very different from that of James C. Scott's work *Seeing Like a State* (1998). In the dissertation, I argue that Scott's gaze is as myopic as that of the regimes he criticizes. His vision of the nature of governance in the high-modernist mode gives too much credit to the state itself. While Scott disaggregates what he considers pathological and inaccurate State representations of local peoples, he does not examine the work that has gone into making 'the State' legible to him. The question of *who* concretely is producing the planning reports or conducting poorly-run censuses never arises. By assuming the ontological existence of the state in the same way that 'the State' assumes the ontological existence of local groups Scott's account fails to provide any account of the network of civil servants and politicians who make and implement policy in practice. On the other hand I, like Patchen Markell (2004) insist that 'the state' or 'global capitalism' is "both a participant in and an artifact of" the political process -- a "structural effect" of this internal differentiation of collective life; but this does not mean that the state is an illusion, for this structural effect has real consequences... which is why the notion of the state as a fundamentally distinct, always-already-sovereign thing appeals to us in the first

place."

It is not just that the status of The State as an actor must be problematized. In addition, we must see that what Scott calls 'simplifications' are in fact part of a wider semiotic process of the creation and circulation of texts that his model cannot account for. As Tanya Murray Li has pointed out in the case of community based natural resource management schemes in Indonesia, "the 'state simplifications' embodied in the new forest law do not in fact simplify, nor do they necessarily prevail, rather they open up new arena within which state-society relations can be reworked" (Li 2002:276). It is not merely the case that states make simplifications. As we shall see, Ipili are not the least local attempts to control the physical and social world use strategies of 'legibility' and 'control' themselves. The question then shifts not so much from 'getting the simplifications of indigenous people right' to examining strategies of subsumption of both 'global' and 'local' actors under more general categories. "Politics," as Silverstein and Urban put it, is "the struggle to entextualize authoritatively" (1996:11). At stake in Porgera, then, is a sense of how individual people come to be seen as representatives of collective subjects and understand their role in that process through the circulation of texts about their identity. Understanding the process of representation or mediation of larger collective groups is key to understanding the way that action is coordinated at a large scale.

Hobbes, drawing on precedents from antiquity, spoke of this as "personating": "to act, or represent himselfe, or an other; and he that acteth another is said to bear his person, or act in his name" (Hobbes 1991:112). Thus individual actors became 'the state' by virtue of their personation of Leviathan. On the other hand, in the context of his study of the beginning of British rule in Burma, Furnivall points out that the personation of global actors such as the British empire is a contingent one. In his account - a sort of Fawlty Towers (Cleese and Booth 2001) version of colonialism - the local population not only refuses to 'buy in' to the existence of 'Empire', but the colonial officials struggling to keep order have precious little capacity to

enforce it. Thus the colonial agents struggling to produce official documentation of their governance to London even as they are ineffective on the ground could be said to be engaging in an act not of personation, but *impersonation*. Like the representatives of the state and company in Porgera, they struggled to maintain some semblance of order in both their 'practical' administration of their territory as well as their personation of a big actor. Indeed (and this is the point) the two acts of personation and 'practical' action are not discrete activities but different sides of the same coin.

These 'big actors' become most powerful when they become Leviathans of the sort discussed by Callon and Latour. They have famously argued that the power and existence of 'macro-actors' comes from their ability to 'translate' "all the negotiations intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force" and use them to present themselves as 'macro-actors' (Latour and Callon 1980:279). The fact that the network of actors involved "conceals its associations" gives is 'potency' (Latour 1983:213) to act and, as Latour says, to put things in 'black boxes'. "A black box," they write, "contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects – the broader the construction one can raise" (Callon and Latour 1981: 285). We need not embrace Callon and Latour's ontological agnosticism – a mixture of Serres's denial of metanarrative and Garfinkel's ethnomethodological indifference -- in order to appreciate their more general point.

Thus 'collective subjects' are made to appear (or 'purified') through the mediating instrument of the people who represent them. Thus are 'the Ipili,' 'the State' (or 'the Company') is an abstract entity which is always represented -- 'mediated' – by particular people in particular places. Institutions always subsume particular actors within a more general role. Globalization is global but always happens in a particular place. This is how particular actors come to represent

or 'mediate' global actors. They become, as Peirce might put it, 'local tokens of global types'. At issue in Porgera, then, is the question of how individuals can become efficacious – how they and others come to see them as representatives of larger entities.

In the dissertation I argue that life in Porgera is (somewhat tragically) stuck between two different ways of coordinating action. For while 'the mine' depends on one way of imagining actors, 'the Ipili' use a very different one, and much of the action in the valley can be explained as a result of this conflict. Keeping the mine open involves managing very carefully the interaction between two different styles. What is at issue is not merely the subsumption of a particular person under a general identity, but the way that that identity is embedded in a wider cultural structure that enables individuals to affect change at a large level through their action. This has been posed as a series of questions about the “structural-cum-symbolic amplification of minor differences” and thus how “small-scale, interpersonal or factional disputes are turned into large-scale struggles between nations, kingdoms, or their totalized like” (Sahlins 2004b:5). In other words, the way that “micro-actors” structure “macro-history” (Sahlins 2004a, 2004b).

Levi-Strauss famously attempted to undo stereotypes of 'primitive' society by insisting these societies had complex aesthetics and social organization. To this end he replaced the distinction of 'primitive' and 'civilized' with that of 'hot' and 'cold' societies. “Our Western societies,” he writes, “are made for change; it is the principle of their structure and of their organization.” (1983: 321) Incorporating change, they thus undergo progress – they are 'hot'. 'Primitive' societies, on the other hand, “which we might define as 'cold' because their internal environment borders on the zero of historical temperature, are distinguished by the limited number of their people and their mechanical mode of functioning” (1983: 29). They seek to “annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium and continuity” and thus avoid change in order to continuously replicate a positively-valued past memorialized in myth

and ritual.

Given Levi-Strauss's discussion, you might expect transnational corporations – the very epitome of global capitalism's restless modernity -- to be hot and Papua New Guinea highlanders – the classic 'savage slot' (Trouillot 1991) societies -- to be cold. However on further consideration we can see that exactly the reverse is the case. This is the key to understanding both the Mine and the Ipili's two distinct ways of creating (or not) 'structural relays' which 'amplify' the authority of ability of individuals to coordinate action across huge swaths of space and time.

But in fact it is the very 'coolness' of the mine's organization that allows it to function so successfully and at such a large level. It is a hierarchical organization with standard operating procedures which are designed to keep the mine open and running as efficiently as possible. In fact, not surprisingly, it fits Weber's ideal type of a bureaucratic enterprise in which there is an office hierarchy, management is based upon written files (which define 'standard operating procedure') and the employees distinguish (ideal-typically at least) between their official role and their private life (Weber 1968: 956-957). At the top of these hierarchies are the small elites whose decisions will change standard operating procedure – 'senior management'. Like Sahlins's Polynesian chiefs, these people form an essentially hot core at the top (or, depending on one's spatial metaphors, center) of the bureaucracy which takes the form of a 'reality management pool' (Murphy 1991:) which decides what shall be done and then ensures that others implement their orders. Their task is complicated by the fact of having to deal with the Ipili themselves.

Like many highlands groups, Ipili combine a keen egalitarianism with a dislike of boredom. Like the Nebilyer people described by Merlan and Rumsey (1991), the Ipili have a strong sense “of both the unverifiability and importance of what others' intentions and motives really are”

(1991:225) as well as the potential meaning of significant physical objects (*kokoli* in Ipili). The result is “a common dimension in orientation both to persons and events: the possibility of concealed significance” (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:228). This “revelatory quality of thing” (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:228) means that events are “invested with the expectation of potential revelation” (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:228):

“The relative openedness of possible meaningfulness leaves ever more to be experienced and discovered, possibly even the terms in which new kinds of meanings might make sense... It is a more rapacious desire to experience and explore the novelty for what this might make manifest... difference can be experienced as the uncovering of new, heretofore covert possibilities.” 231

Thus while Levi-Strauss considered “the avid need for change characteristic of our own civilization” (1991:1966:236) in the case of Porgera we see it to be a characteristic of the Ipili rather than the mine. “Indigenous emphasis and interest interest is *not* focused upon the conformity of action to structural 'types', but upon 'event' as that which may offer the possibility for revelation of meaningfulness and exploration of the difference this makes.” (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:239).

In sum, life in Porgera revolves around two conflicting structures of agency. On the one hand, we have the method of coordinating action as carried out by the mine. This is essentially the bureaucratic system outlined by Weber. A 'standard operating procedure' is created to guide the routinization of subordinates, while policy is made by an elite at the top of the chain of organization. On the other we have the performative society of the Ipili, which is anarchic and egalitarian. The result is a constant process of 'fire-fighting' – Ipili continue to attempt to disrupt the mine's operations for their own advantage. Thus mine representatives often spent their time attempting to patch things up before they unravel completely.

## **The Chapters**

In **the first chapter** of this dissertation I examine the theoretical issues discussed above. In **the second chapter** I have focus on a densely ethnographic analysis of one particular moment in

the relationship between the mine and the Ipili: negotiations for a new wastedump on Ipili land within the special mining lease. The ethnographic realization of the dissertation's theoretical problematic are explored. We see the way in which the personal backgrounds of the negotiators on both sides of the table clearly affected their ability to effectively represent their respective institutions. The mine's stalled attempt to create a much-needed drainage tunnel while the negotiations are underway demonstrates the way that Ipili disruptions can affect the mine, and the way that a single portal carved in stone can come under scrutiny in the highest levels of government. Actors such as 'the landowners' or 'the state', while often actors in a general sense have also just as often proven to be complex entities composed of multiple actors with diverse interests.

In **the third chapter** I discuss the history of the Porgera valley from its discovery by whites to the beginning of the construction of the Porgera gold mine, a period stretching roughly fifty years from 1938 to 1990. My goal is to explain the origin of the agreements, contracts, and studies that structured the negotiations that I examined in the previous chapter. How did these forms emerge out of the government's discovery and pacification of the Porgera valley? I also explore the background of the personal networks that have grown up around Porgera. In the previous chapter we met a number of individuals, all with long-term connections to the valley -- where these people came from, and what their history together was previous to Yakatabari.

We see that governance in Porgera has involved a tension between the authority of individuals on the ground and the mandated power of institutions which have attempted – often unsuccessfully – tried to establish control over life in the valley. A detailed examination of Porgera's history paints a very different picture of how the Porgera gold mine came into being. I argue that this is evidence that Scott's idea of 'legibility' has a certain *prima facie* validity when events are examined at a distance but that when one examines the history of Porgera in detail,

however, narratives of the state as a single coherent actor and observer grow problematic. The interplay of representative and represented institution is much more complex than Scott's vision of the modernist state allows.

The history of Porgera is about both knowing the valley and managing life in it. Despite official attempts to know and control the valley, the group of people most successful in getting things done there were often those involved with mining but removed from official state institutions – first the Medici of the Highlands of the fifties, and their children who composed the ‘Porgeran High Society’ of the eighties and nineties. The interaction of local efficacy and distant authority was complex, but it is clear that the history of Porgera has consistently been one where the unproblematic assumption of an entity known as 'the State' gives way to a richer and more fulfilling analysis of the nature of the representation of abstract institutions on the ground by their representatives.

'The state' cannot be assumed simply to 'see' and as we have briefly seen here (and shall see in future chapters) to judge records of Ipili lifeways by reference to their ‘accuracy’ is to miss the way in which official representation is part of a complex process in which groups and institutions are created by the act of eliciting information about them. Thus the state and its laws did not regiment life in the valley. Instead, the partially successful attempts of larger, institutional actors to be regiment life in the valley created new idioms of landownership and rights which were actively appropriated by a wide variety of actors. Thus it is not merely 'the state' which makes 'simplifications', rather a wide variety of actors attempt to create and manipulate authoritative accounts (of both themselves and others). The continuing existence of these forms and their relevance to life in the valley today underscore the genealogical nature of this chapter and emphasize its role in the larger work as both a history of the valley and an inventory of the rhetorical strategies that make up the textual patrimony deployed in the Yakatabari negotiations

in the previous chapter.

In **the fourth chapter** I turn away from institutional history to provide an analysis of the wider cultural context within which the representatives of these institutions found themselves situated and how they became so emotionally committed to their respective projects. It is tempting to assume that an analysis of the negotiations might stop with a description of the institutions and how they articulated with governmental structures and economic markets. However, James Weiner notes of the literature on indigenous people and resource extraction in the Asia-Pacific, “from an anthropological perspective, these studies leave largely unexamined and unanalyzed the nature of the knowledge systems and the culturally distinct epistemological and discursive processes *within* indigenous societies in this context” (Weiner 2001:1a). Even the New Institutional Economics, the area of economics that has made the largest strides towards a coherent concept of culture, continues to understand “myths, dogmas, and ideologies” as little more than “half-baked ideas” which prevent people from accurately discerning the most efficient means of achieving their ends (Denzau and North 1994:3 – for more on the behavioral assumptions of New Institutional Economics see Hogarth and Reddy 1985, North 1990:17-26, and North 2005). And yet as Sahlins and Weber noted long ago, actors pursue culturally-defined ends using culturally-defined means. For this reason a truly anthropological account – indeed, a *full* account – of the Yakatabari negotiations must describe not only the social fields within which the Yakatabari negotiators acted, it must explain the rationality – the *cultural* rationality -- of that action. It is just this ability to make intelligible the intersection of personal project and general cultural structure, the cultural determination of both means and ends, which North considers so difficult to achieve, and which anthropology can provide.

An account of the cultural background of the actors involved is also necessary because it is extremely easy to comprehend events in Porgera from a 'commonsense' view. The story of

Yakatabari accords well with the standard average European's 'native cosmology' which sees “need and greed as the basis of all sociability” (Sahlins 2000c:533). Indeed, many people familiar with Porgera simply write off the acts of Ipili elites as based on unremitting greed, and explain the activities of Ipili people as simply a result of a 'cargo cult mentality' (see Jones and MacGavin 2001 for one such approach in political science) or pathologies induced by rapid social change.

However, it is important that this contextualizing move be symmetric. It is not enough to assume that we must contextualize the cultural imperatives of the Ipili but can explain away the biographies and personal histories representatives of big actors by reference to the relentlessly 'modernist' character of the colonial state and its agents who produced “patrols and reports [which] constituted part of a highly ordered and ordering process of intrusion, appraisal, and control” (Gewertz and Errington 2005:33). As we have seen in the last chapter, this is certainly the way government representatives wanted to come across on paper. However, the unproblematic personation of colonial institutions in the field was never a sure thing. In order to understand the culture of the community affairs officers involved in Yakatabari we have to take account of the cultural logic by which they saw their role as negotiators an extension of their previous history in Papua New Guinea. The chapter argues, then, that while being incredibly cynical will get you far in understanding life in Porgera, the culture concept will get you farther. It explains and describe the different viewpoints that the Yakatabari negotiators brought to the table using as my theme the central idea of 'postcolonial redemption'.

By 'postcolonial redemption' I refer to the way in which the Yakatabari negotiations – and, by extension, the mine's presence in the valley more generally – has been seen by both Ipili and white alike as a chance to make good on the undelivered promises of Papua New Guinea's transition to independence in 1975 following the decline of provincial government in the mid-

1980s (for a readable overview see Dorney 2000:238-262), the government in the 1990s (Dorney 2000:73-101), and law and order more generally (Dinnen 2002). Ipili see the mine as a chance to achieve the wealth and affluence which they have been expecting since millennial movements in the early contact period promised an end to poverty and illness. Indeed, the mine's arrival fits in with deeply held Ipili notions which focus on the attainment of fertility and health and an Ipili historical consciousness which sees history in a constant state of entropic decline punctuated by bouts of rejuvenation which theoretically could, but in practice never seem to, breaking this cycle and establish an unending utopic state. In Porgera, the end of Porgera's colonial tutelage and the arrival of the mine signaled the latest stage of an ever-escalating but never-satisfying flow of wealth and health that began with contact with whites. For Ipili then, postcolonial redemption involves realizing the promises implicit in the arrival of whites and their material culture, and achieving that redemption means coming to grips with white material culture and mores.

For the men – for they are almost entirely men – who were hired by the company to negotiate with the Ipili, postcolonial redemption had a different but related meaning. They were men who had worked for years in Papua New Guinea, the majority of them as kiaps. While it is true that some of them have profited financially from their time in Papua New Guinea, but their experience of the country extends further than self-interest. These were men who gave years of their lives – often their best years – to the country of Papua New Guinea. For them independence and the country's subsequent decline meant the destruction, decay, and breakdown of the institutions and infrastructure that they had spent years building as part of their own attempt to help Papua New Guineans live better lives. After years in Papua New Guinea, many returned to Australia only to find it a foreign country. For them, postcolonial redemption meant returning to Papua New Guinea to continue their former work in a new mold – as community relations officers. It was their attempt to continue to help a country that had spurned them.

Thus on the one hand we have the Ipili, who saw the world in terms of people driven by occult, appetitive forces who felt they were dealing with people who had continued to deny them the satisfaction they deserved of receiving what they considered the full value of the gold in their mountain. On the other side we had a group of men who said what they meant and meant what they said who felt they were forced to deal with a group of mongrels whose culture was not up to not only their standards, but the standards of most highlanders. For both, the offers made at the table at Yakatabari were not just about a Porgera's future, but Papua New Guinea's past. The ironic fact of life in postcolonial Papua New Guinea is that each side saw perhaps a bit too clearly into the negative side of the other even as they missed other important aspects of their existence which might have allowed them to humanize their interlocutors. The problem, in other words, was not that they did not understand each other, but that they understood each other *too well* and, simultaneously, too partially.

This discussion of the history of Ipili and Kiaps answers several questions raised by the analysis of the Yakatbari negotiation. However, it leads to further issues as well -- what is the nature of Ipili sociality as practiced on the ground in Porgera, and how does practice that literally occurs 'in the village' interface with official representations of Porgerans? What, in other words, is the relation between the grassroots Ipili and the mine? What are Ipili communities actually like on the ground? I take up this question in **the fifth chapter**.

In 1996 the Porgera Social Monitoring Program - an in-house report written for the Porgera Joint Venture as part of its attempts to be a good neighbor to the valley – noted many things with alarm. The breakdown of law and order, inequality in the distribution of money within the valley, the shortage of arable land within the Special Mining Lease, and many other factors were addressed. The first item covered in the report, however, was the government administration in Porgera. “The quality of government services in Porgera continued to decline in 1996,” noted the report (PSMP 1997:5). Even more glumly, it pointed out that

It is hard to imagine how government services could get worse. Not only was there inadequate funding for the designated tasks of the various divisions, but budgeted funds (including salaries) did not get to the district in a timely fashion and sometimes not at all. Senior staff were continuously going to Wabag [the provincial capital] in an attempt to obtain budgeted funds. Transport was also a critical problem. At one point 6 of the 8 district vehicles were off the road and unserviceable. There was a lack of houses for staff for the existing positions and a lack of maintenance on houses which did exist. As if this were not enough there were no typewriters, computers, fax machines, telephones... even paper and pens. (PSMP 1997:5)

But even more remarkable for the purposes of this chapter is that the exact status of Porgera *as an administrative unit* was itself unclear. This absence of definitive information about one of the most basic facts regarding Porgera's place in Papua New Guinea's government is indicative of two facts that are central to the concerns of this final chapter of the dissertation. First, the inability to delineate Porgera's political boundaries indicates the haphazard and tenuous grip on Porgera's local realities that the cosmopolitan elite in Port Moresby had. Second, this inability of the government to provide district boundaries indicates the extent to which the government itself was a tenuous and haphazard phenomenon.

In this chapter I examine life in Porgera and how 'being Ipili' occurs in very different ways in different contexts. Overall, the attempt is not to contrast one or more of these arenas as 'accurate' and the others as 'inaccurate'. Instead, I have attempted to make an argument about how narratives of identity and kinship are told and retold as their institutional contexts changed. 'Landowners' exist in Porgera today as a group whose existence has been elicited by Porgera's wider institutional context. Ipili social organization's emphasis on affiliation via residence does

not map well to the descent-based criteria used by the mine and government, a fact that is compensated for by the incoherence of mine and government mechanisms of subsuming individual people under the title of 'landowner'.

To a certain extent, this is not often noticed in the valley, or particularly minded. The unruliness of institutions such as preferential hiring, royalty payments, and standards for receiving relocation housing demonstrate that 'landowner' identity is only tenuously related to 'landowner' identity, however much this may be the idiom in which the delivery of these benefits may be articulated. For those at a remove from the valley, however, these identities often harden into stereotypical form in a way that has concrete implications.

The **final chapter of the dissertation** steps back from the immediate context of government representation in Porgera and examine the larger issue of how 'the Ipili' are perceived in places outside of the valley, and in particular how they are perceived by the national elite who dwell, more or less, in Port Moresby. In this chapter I approach the circulation of knowledge of land owners across the country. I argue that there is a fundamental contradiction at work in the way that local people cope with resource developments and how the national elite thinks they do – or imagines they ought. Ipili – and other land owning groups – are themselves innovative in their relations with the mine and readily cope in novel ways with new circumstances. In distinction to this, metropolitans and the policies they make are fixated on a view of land owners as timeless and unchanging and see the act of registering the 'true customary landowners' as simply one translating coherent agreements on the ground into legal policy and property regimes. Getting, as it were, the 'state simplifications' right.

The attempts of national elites to discover 'the true landowners' rests on a sort of optical metaphor by which their task as representatives of institutions is simply to accurately discern the 'local' state of affairs. In doing so, they imagine themselves to be the conduits through which

global and national currents of finance and power flow. As such they are separate and distinct from the ‘local’ communities that they observe. But this is hardly the case. Indeed, it is the semiotic bad faith of national elites – their tendency to see themselves as observers, rather than participants, in the formulation of indigenous identity – that allows them to imagine themselves as separate from the ‘local scene’ at mines and hence as ‘global’ agents, personators of big actors. They imagine themselves at a remove, observing local politics, when in fact local politics consists of nothing else but the activity elicited by their observation.

Here I argue that, *pace* the government of Papua New Guinea, the process of land registration is not a simple exercise of ‘translating’ a set rights out of an indigenous context and into a western legal framework. Identifying landowners and registering land includes a moment of novelty or newness inherent in the translation process itself. And while a ‘translation’ view of land registration sees this ‘contamination’ or ‘corruption’ of ‘authentic’ Papua New Guinean culture as pathological, I argue that this moment of novelty and innovation provided an opportunity to develop institutions that are more capable of bearing the stress and strain that a mine puts on life in the place where it is located. Thus I argue for the value of *novelty* in the registration process and the *ambiguity* of ‘customary’ land regimes. In many areas of the country, myths about land, precedents for its disposal and transfer, systems of kinship, leadership, and public speech (all of which we might gloss as something like ‘custom’) do *not* operate to create “a system of social control operated in accordance with norms of disinterestedness and predictability” (Posner 1995:20) (something that we can gloss more or less as ‘the rule of law’). In other words, it is just as well that land registration involves a moment of novelty, since even if it did not, Papua New Guinean ways of dealing in land would be *an insufficient method of describing ‘who’ owned ‘what’ anyway*. The cultural patrimony of Papua New Guinean societies, I argue, is not an unchanged and unchangeable body of ideas which unproblematically regiments local society in accordance with its ‘custom’. In a world where the community is an

achievement and not something taken-for-granted, who owns which land may be a function of the need to integrate the community, rather than a situation where the distribution of land and the settlement of land disputes is a function of the routinized functioning of an integrated community.

Novelty in land registration is not only inevitable, it might not necessarily be such a bad thing, since a stable social context for resource development does *not* necessarily follow from the accurate act of translation of the content of land beliefs. The fact that there is always an element of creativity in translation and that this fact does not make translation illegitimate, bad, or corrupt. Recognition of this fact, I argue, is not only very Melanesian, it is also very modern.

### **Conclusion**

In the age of industrialization, Marx once remarked that workers came to the market with only their hides to offer, and received the expecting hiding. In the age of globalization, grassroots Papua New Guineans come to Port Moresby with only their identities, but find corporate and government interests are less willing than Moneybags to do the needful. In fact, grassroots Papua New Guineans are innovative thinkers with a traditional culture ready to handle new regimes of land tenure while analysts like Hughes, confused as to the nature of Melanesian sociality, remain under the mystifying influence of tradition – or at least, how they imagine tradition. Ironically enough, the supposedly modern forces of globalization seek out ancient and unchanging custom, while grassroots Papua New Guineans seek to “generate normativity out of themselves” (Habermas 1989) in a distinctively modern way.

Given the argument of this dissertation, who belongs in the savage slot? The transnational mining companies who search for an uncorrupted past, or the grassroots Papua New Guineans busily bending their security circles to accommodate new circumstances? Which of the two exhibit Levi-Strauss’s “obstinate fidelity to a past conceived as a timeless model,” and operate in a mindset in which “antiquity and continuance are the foundations of legitimacy”? (1967:236)

As far as the mining industry is concerned, Papua New Guineans are not just hot, they are too hot to handle, and industry's attempt to cool them down takes the form of legal documents. Levi-Strauss once called myths 'machines for stopping time', but the 'machines for stopping time' in contemporary Papua New Guinea are agency agreements, Land Group Incorporation Acts, Memorandums of Understanding, and consultancy reports. What people in industry and the government see as 'finding the *real* landowners' seems to grass roots Papua New Guineans as an arbitrary exercise in which one group of people are given priority as 'landowners' while other people with similar ties to a place are left to languish. Land registration imposes an arbitrary and final division between the haves and have-nots in a situation where compromise and a diffuseness of entitlement were common place. Meanwhile, the government and industry pursue an illusory 'truth' about land ownership which is both unambiguous and complete, only to be denied again and again by the situation on the ground. When faced with this situation they push on, convinced that the problem lies not with their preconceptions about their project, but in the 'corrupt' nature of the particular landowners they encounter, and banking that over the ranges lie a group with a pure and untouched traditional culture. Given the fact that many of these groups, like the Ipili, had a social organization in which they exercised their agency through multiple ties, it is not surprising that they should continue to act in the same agentive way that they always have in the new, globalized contexts of resource development.

While some in Port Moresby think land registration is about Papua New Guinea's past, rural Papua New Guineans realize it is about the country's future. One must pay close attention to the contents of traditional land belief, but mining introduces a moment of novelty that cannot be eradicated. A narrow focus on accurately translating the content of traditional land beliefs must be supplemented by a more encompassing consideration of the social context that will be created and the processes of translation that will create it. Translating the content of traditional land beliefs is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a stable social context. Just as the gold

in a mountain requires refining if it is to take a form suitable for circulation in national and international financial markets, so too the identities of landowners must be refined and transformed – on their *own* terms, and in their *own* ways - if these identities are to circulate in the national and international circuits of law, policy, and ideas that accompany and buttress transnational capitalism.

But lest I end this precis with the sort of self-congratulatory denouncement of global capital that too often becomes anthropology's knee-jerk response to having to share the Fourth World with other interlopers from the First, I'd also like close by noting that Papua New Guineans are much further along the road to understanding how 'globalization' works than most anthropologists. Where we see a dizzying flow of transnational entities and fractal, hybrid postmodern geographies, they see a single person. Could it be we have something to learn from them rather than the other way around? 'Landowners' ability to sniff out the small knot of people behind stories of globalization is an incisive analytic move from which anthropologists who study globalization could learn.