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‘This Custom from the Past Is No Good’: Grassroots, ‘Big Shots’ and a Contested Moral Economy in East New Britain

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In the aftermath of the volcanic eruption of 1994, the people of Matupit village in Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) East New Britain Province were offered a resettlement scheme at Sikut—a rainforest location a long distance from Rabaul—where many of them were given agricultural blocks. Many Matupit families have settled at Sikut. More have returned to Matupit, with many families spending time keeping up houses and interests in both locations. The reallocation of land to the Matupi was partly a response to the disaster; however, it was also an opportunity for the provincial government to address the existing problem of overpopulation and land pressure at villages near Rabaul, such as Matupit.

The eruption was clearly a disaster for the population of Matupit, but it was by no means an unqualified disaster. For many of those who had had trouble gaining access to land or finding paid employment in Matupit, if they were willing and able to commit to the move from the peri-urban coast to the virgin rainforest, the 3 hectare blocks at Sikut held out the prospect of an income from cash crops that would have been unimaginable at home. I was struck by the number of occasions on which Matupi described the eruption to me as a ‘blessing from God’; this was because,

by relieving the land pressure at Matupit, it had also taken the sting out of a growing number of increasingly ferocious land disputes that threatened to tear the village apart. It was not only the villagers who tended to see the destruction of their village as an opportunity. Klein (2007) has described how the forced displacement of populations, whether as a result of war or natural disaster, can act as a kind of shock that gives those with the power and desire to restructure local political economies a chance to put their plans into action. The eruption of 1994 acted as just such an opportunity. However, unlike some of the sudden changes imposed in the aftermath of other disasters—for example, the expropriation of Sri Lankan fishing villages to make way for tourist resorts after the South Asian tsunami of 2004 (Klein, 2007)—it is too early to judge the extent to which the changes in East New Britain will have the effect their authors desire.

Figure 5.1: Map of the Gazelle Peninsula

Source: The Australian National University Cartography Department.

Figure 5.2: Map of the Rabaul Area

Source: The Australian National University Cartography Department.

The most obvious way in which the volcano became the pretext for a restructuring of the local political economy was the decision to relocate the provincial capital from Rabaul town to nearby Kokopo. This was justified on safety grounds. Kokopo was said to be less at risk from future volcanic activity than Rabaul. It was also claimed that major donors to the reconstruction process, such as the World Bank, had made the move a precondition of releasing funds, although those who suspected that corruption and political manoeuvring lay behind the decision believed this to be a story made up by some of those with an interest in blocking the reconstruction of Rabaul. Whatever the reason, the move negatively affected villages like Matupit, close to Rabaul, which had already suffered in the eruption. It had effectively wiped out the major local source of jobs and services, and shifted the balance of political and economic influence in the region to Tolai villages in the Kokopo area.

However, in terms of the local political economy, this headline-grabbing dispute was, perhaps, of less fundamental importance than a more silent revolution encouraged by the East New Britain Provincial Government in the eruption's aftermath. Resettlement was used as an opportunity to try to kickstart a revolution in land tenure in the Gazelle Peninsula. There is nothing new in the desire of politicians and administrators to effect the kind of changes pioneered by the East New Britain Provincial Government after the eruption. At both the national and provincial level, customary land-tenure regimes, which involve a large number of overlapping, inalienable rights and obligations, are commonly seen as an impediment to economic development. They are said to act as a disincentive to invest time and money in the land, as an individual's investments can never be secure.

Resettlement and Reconstruction

The eruption and resettlement of Matupit and other Rabaul-area villages provided the provincial government with the perfect opportunity to attempt to develop new land under a new regime in the hope that this would act as a catalyst for a more general shift in land-tenure practices. This was made clear to me in a number of conversations with politicians and senior government officials during my period in East New Britain (February 2002 – February 2004). I will recount one such conversation as an example. This was with Horim Ladi, a Tolai, who was head of the East New Britain Lands Division. I met him one morning in May 2003 at his office in Kokopo. As I sat down, he asked me how much I knew about the government's latest planned land-registration scheme. He described it to me as 'beautiful', and told me that the registration of customary land was essential to the future of East New Britain. When I asked him why registration was so important, his answer was clear and simple: 'What is important is the establishment of ownership, whether it be the individual, the clan, or the incorporated land group'. Customary tenure, as it currently stood, with its tendency to disperse rights across a wide variety of persons and groups, did not establish such ownership. In many respects the ideal might be ownership by an individual person or family; however, if ownership by a clan or land group constituted as a 'collective individual' (e.g. similar to the constitution of a corporation under US commercial law) could be established, with the overlapping claims that complicated ownership or called it into doubt increasingly expunged, the land could be seen as a productive resource that its owners might have

an interest in developing. Ladi accepted the possibility that the PNG national government might be forced to pull out from implementing the land-registration scheme, as they had been on previous occasions, but he insisted that East New Britain would be able to go it alone if that were the case. East New Britain, Ladi asserted, was always at the 'vanguard'.

This was true in respect of both externally imposed changes to land practices and Tolai adaptations of their own customary practice. Whereas 97 per cent of land in PNG is commonly reckoned to still be under customary tenure, around 40 per cent of land in the Tolai Gazelle Peninsula had been alienated by the start of World War I, primarily by foreign plantation managers. The process by which this alienation occurred remains controversial on the Gazelle to this day, and was perhaps the major contributing factor to both the intense land pressure experienced by the Tolai over many decades, and to the rise of the anti-colonial Mataugnan Association in the 1970s.

Local villagers themselves have introduced new practices that have, to use Ladi's words, put East New Britain in the vanguard. In the 1970s, Tolai villagers were among the first to start registering customary transfers of land with legally binding statutory declarations. These customary transfers, known as *kulia*, did not act as a purchase, at least as it would be recognised in a Western legal context. Full ownership rights were never unambiguously alienated, and there was always the possibility for the original landholders to find a way to claim the land back if the other party did not maintain a cordial relationship and exchange of gifts (see Epstein, 1969, p. 132). Such a situation came to be seen as increasingly problematic by many Tolai in the 1960s and 1970s when land was frequently being used for permanent financial investments, such as cash crop trees like coconuts, which might live for 80 years, or for the permanent 'European'-style houses that were increasingly replacing bush-material residences at Matupit and other villages near Rabaul (Epstein, 1969, pp. 147–48). In such circumstances, land transfers that could be terminated at any point, and that were reliant on a relationship of ongoing reciprocal interdependence and exchange—relationships that might break down in acrimony at any point—were more problematic than they might have been at a time when transferred land was used for the production of short-term food gardens or bush-material houses that would need replacing only every four or five years. The practice of registering *kulia* was not a government-driven process. Instead, it was Tolai villagers themselves who increasingly began to use the statutory

declaration as a means of attempting to confirm that rights in land had been unambiguously and finally transferred (Fingleton, 1985, pp. 178, 181–82; Fitzpatrick, 1983, p. 19; Jessep, 1980, pp. 123–24). However, the local government did recognise and encourage the process, keeping records of the statutory declarations and commonly referring to them in the course of land-dispute hearings.

Although the registration of *kulia* had not turned land exchange unambiguously into a completely uncomplicated commodity transaction entailing the total alienation of property rights, it nevertheless made transfers more secure than in previous generations; it also became significantly more difficult for vendor clans to reclaim land if they felt vendees had been remiss in observing their customary obligations. To this extent, Ladi's claim that East New Britain was in the vanguard of change made sense. The province's long history of deep entanglement with global trade and commerce relative to other provinces seemed not only to have left the province's administrators with a pressing desire to reform land tenure, it had also bequeathed them a population that was itself moving in that direction.

It Is Better Because It Is Not Customary

From the perspective of the region's administrators and planners, *kulia* was not the only potentially problematic form of customary land transfer in East New Britain. Of even more pressing concern was the matter of the transfer of land rights between generations on the occasion of the death of the previous resident. Tolai land tenure is commonly described as matrilineal, with prime landholding rights being vested in named matrilineal clans (or *vunatarai*). This means, ideally, that upon a father's death, his widow and children will 'return' to the land of their clan (i.e. the widow's clan, as the children are part of her clan); often the children will be 'returning' to land with which they are unfamiliar. Although tensions between the father's clan and his children regarding the transfer of certain kinds of valuables (in particular, secret ritual or magical knowledge) have a long history (e.g. Martin, 2013, p. 107), the development of these kinds of tensions with regard to land seems to have intensified greatly in the years following World War II, when a combination of the effects of the previous massive land alienation, population explosion and, most crucially, the previously mentioned introduction of permanent investments in land,

led to a rash of the most common variety of land dispute—that is, between a man's children and his nephews and nieces on his mother's side (i.e. his clan 'descendants'), often centred on the children's right to remain on land upon which the father had made permanent investments.

During my fieldwork in East New Britain, I divided my time between the village of Matupit and the resettlement camp at Sikut. The provincial government had made sure that the land at Sikut would not be held by matrilineal extended clans but by named individuals, normally the male head of a nuclear family unit, whose children were expected to be the main inheritors of the block of land. When I arrived at Sikut, one of the phrases I heard repeatedly from those who had committed to make the move was that 'the land at Sikut is better because it is not customary land'. The expectation that their children would be able to hold onto their land and receive the benefit of any investments made on it was the commonly given explanation for this view. Most Sikut residents seemed to be fully in favour of this move by the provincial government; they seemed to think that the perceived reintroduction of 'custom', as had occurred at places like Wudal, would not occur today at Sikut. Indeed, only a small minority believed that this experience would be repeated at Sikut. As one Sikut resident angrily exclaimed to me during the course of one conversation:

Now custom is fading away. What happened at Wudal won't happen here. Sometimes the nephews do just take over. But that can't happen now. You've got no right to come and just grab the land from my family. Why do I have to grow my kids? Why do I have to settle someplace? This custom from the past is no good. Our ground is clan ground, but my ground is my ground automatically. I will never give it to the clan—no way. This kind of thinking is just for the old or the ancestors. Now we've been to school we've got better ideas. If I develop this ground with my children? With my sweat? I'm just going to come and let the nephews kick them off?! No way. Not now! Why should I bother getting married? This kind of thinking is bloody rubbish and bullshit from before ... The nephews won't be able to put demands on the kids just because the father was the same clan. It's different now. The kids will be able to get a bush knife and chase them away! My kids haven't seen a cousin come and help, and if they come and ask, I'll tell them no way. If the nephews take over, the people today see it's no good. You're making the man's family suffer. If I behaved like this on clan land, of course there would be talk, and yes at Wudal it happened, but this generation we've seen it's not good. Because the father raised the children. The father planted the cocoa. It's not the nephews'. It's not the clan's.

Or, as Horim Ladi put it to me during my conversation with him:

The attitude that you see now at Sikut—‘this land is better land because it’s not customary’—is a new development over the past 30 years. It’s a result of all the pressures and problems with land. And the government today would be very strong with any attempts to bring custom back in at Sikut.

Horim Ladi, in common with other senior administrators in East New Britain, saw the establishment of individual property rights in land at resettlement camps such as Sikut both as a good thing in its own right and also as a potential spearhead that, if successful, might make the process of registering customary land easier across the rest of the province. One crucial problem with investing on customary land, whether that land had been transferred by *kulia*, and whether any such transfer had been registered with a statutory declaration, was the lack of clarity as to who the ‘original’ landholder truly was. Even the best registered and least acrimonious *kulia* transaction was potentially liable to a claim 20 years hence from a third party arguing that the vendors had no right to sell the land; that they were not the true landholders; or, perhaps, that their ancestors were children of the clan who had been allowed to stay on the land after a paternal ancestor’s death out of this third party’s generosity, but now they wanted to claim the land back after discovering it had been sold without their knowledge or consent.

The main purpose of land registration (as it was described to me by key players such as Ladi) was to draw a line under this kind of confusion. At the registration process, anyone who disputed the rights of *ownership* of a clan currently *resident* on a piece of land would have to make that objection clear at that point so that it could be legally assessed. After that, so the argument went, they would not be able to make a claim years or decades later, after others had made investments on the land. It was hoped that such a scheme would, at one stroke, remove one of the key disincentives to investment on land. Even if it could be said that such a development would not solve the problem of potential disputes between a man’s children and his nephews after his death, it is easy to see how it could be viewed as a step in that direction. For if registered land strengthened the property claims of a clan over a piece of land, then, perhaps paradoxically, this could be seen as creating the grounds for stronger individual land ownership in the future. That is, if a man could negotiate to purchase land from his own or another clan, then as long as such a ‘purchase’ was strengthened by a statutory declaration, it would

ideally amount to an even stronger property claim, as it was now free of potential third parties disputing ownership in the future. Hence, although land registration did not establish individual ownership, in strengthening group (i.e. the clan as 'collective individual') ownership, it created the preconditions for more successful individual alienation and was seen by many administrators as a desirable step in that direction.

One noticeable aspect of these discussions was the way in which they focused on the quest for a good life, and often seemingly dismissed custom as a barrier to that quest. Thus, the man quoted above argued that custom from the past was 'no good'; he returned to this theme on two more occasions in the course of his exposition. For the likes of Ladi, the way in which traditional matrilineal patterns of land transmission worked against a man's children was not only unfair, it was one of the biggest barriers to economic development in the province. To this extent, regional planners and administrators had a perspective that could be seen as fitting into a wider discourse on the economic disadvantages of customary land-tenure regimes, as seen in both the Pacific literature (e.g. Hughes, 2003) and globally (e.g. De Soto, 2001). It is not my intention to go into the pros and cons of this policy position here beyond the observation that, regardless of its desirability or otherwise, the exponents of a radical, sudden introduction of individual property rights in land in PNG are far greater idealists (in the technical philosophical sense of the term) than any of their opponents. The maintenance of individual property rights in countries such as Australia relies upon the existence of a state with the power to enforce legal norms. However, no such state exists in PNG at present; nor is likely to in the foreseeable future. One can produce as many individual land-title deeds as one likes, but without a state to enforce them they will not have the effect that the decrees of enclosure had in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, despite what some advocates of land-tenure reform imagine. A more apposite historical comparison might be the promises of land and title deeds made by the Marquis de Ray as the basis upon which he convinced Italian subscribers to join his ill-fated expedition to settle New Ireland in the 1880s.

Problems with Custom and Problems with Customary Land

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on how this perspective on the desirability of restructuring customary land tenure ties into a wider discourse of the backward and anti-development nature of customary relations and practices (known locally in Tok Pisin as *kastom*) in East New Britain, and how that discourse of the need to remove custom from governance is simultaneously subverted, at certain points, often by the people who are normally its strongest proponents. *Kastom* is a term that is used to refer to a wide range of activities and things, from land (*graun bilong kastom*) to the rituals (usually centred around ceremonial gift exchange) and day-to-day practices of small-scale sharing. Given its various manifestations, it is often portrayed as a barrier to political and economic development. Why do we elect bad leaders? Because most of us don't choose the best party or person to vote for, voting instead for someone according to whether they are part of our clan or a clan that our clan is related to, as that's our *kastom*. Why do village-based enterprises such as trade stores nearly always collapse? Because people don't respect the business and cripple it with demands for credit that the entrepreneur is forced to accede to, as that's our *kastom*. Why can't people afford to pay their kids' school fees or fix the roof on their house? Because they had to spend what little money they had on *kastom*, such as contributing towards the cost of clan ceremonial gift exchange. Why did I not buy a new water tank when I had the money and knew that I would need more water storage in preparation for the dry season? Because I knew my lazy neighbours and relatives, who have no money, would come and insist on taking all the water and, because of *kastom*, I would not be able to refuse them, so what's the point making the investment?

This kind of discourse is commonly produced by all kinds of people across the Gazelle Peninsula, from impoverished grassroots villagers to successful entrepreneurs and foreign expatriates. As one grassroots villager put it to me on his way out of the polling booth on election day in 2002: 'none of it makes much difference, it's *kastom* that holds us back'. It is worth stressing at this point that all such criticisms of *kastom*, including criticisms of customary land arrangements, share a common basis, namely, criticism of the ways in which overlapping claims and obligations, often based on a shared but disputed history of reciprocal exchange, can be seen as a drain on both resources and individual initiative. Indeed, the case of land is best

seen as an example of this general trend. What is at stake in the attempt to restructure land tenure is ultimately an attempt to restructure the nature of the social relations of those who are linked by the land. This is the case in all attempts to restructure property rights, which, given that property is ultimately the expression of a particular kind of social relationship, are, in the final analysis, always attempts to restructure particular types of social relations. When Horim Ladi and his peers try to restructure customary land tenure, they are simultaneously attempting to restructure the kind of problematic social relations that are often glossed under the term *kastom*: relations of interdependence and mutual obligation that create a particular kind of person who cannot escape those claims. They wish to replace that person with a different kind of person, one who is able to invest and accumulate free from the demands of *kastom*.

As I have detailed elsewhere, this denigration of *kastom* is only half of the story. Most Tolai, from impoverished grassroots villagers to the emerging indigenous elite—often contemptuously referred to as ‘big shots’—have an ambivalent attitude towards *kastom*, denigrating it in the terms mentioned above in some contexts, and praising it in others as the heart of Tolai culture. Indeed, it sits at the base of what many believe makes Papua New Guineans morally superior to whites who can be denigrated for their individual acquisitiveness, for which, in other contexts, they may also be admired.

Unsurprisingly, this negative discourse surrounding *kastom* is particularly common among administrators and planners with an interest in promoting development. Although land is the most common context in which this perspective is advanced, it is also advanced in others, such as by those wishing to promote local entrepreneurship. The example of the trade store that is bankrupted by greedy relatives is often given. Yet, even among this group, who often seem to occupy a social position that might lead them to be the most unambiguously suspicious of *kastom*, their position is often ambiguous, or even contradictory. Rather than a blanket denunciation of *kastom*, their position is more one of wishing to delimit it: to keep it in its place so that it will not infect the sphere of development in which an ethic of individual economic rationality should be paramount. *Kastom* is viewed as being important in promoting cultural identity and a kind of civic consciousness. This desire to wipe out *kastom* and the ethic of reciprocal interdependence that underpins it in some contexts, while preserving and promoting it in others, is, of course, a desire beyond the power of regional

governmental officials to realise. In the final part of this chapter, I aim to briefly outline an example of the wish to delimit *kastom* in the context of resettlement, and suggest why this might be an unrealisable desire.

As we have seen, *kastom* is often presented by Tolai and other residents of East New Britain as the thing that holds PNG back from development. The attempt to re-engineer customary land as individual property should be seen as part of a wider attempt to engineer a new kind of modern 'possessive individual' who would be free from the demands and obligations of *kastom* that hold him or her back. However, at other points, it seems as if there is not enough *kastom* to ensure progress; the same planners and administrators who berate villagers for their backwardness suddenly discover that the Tolai are, in fact, too modern to develop successfully. I will provide an example from a conversation that I had during my fieldwork. As with the conversation with Horim Ladi at the Lands Division, I could have chosen a number of other conversations with other representatives of this segment of East New Britain society who would have made a similar point. This conversation was with two senior officials of the Gazelle Restoration Authority (GRA), the body set up by the PNG national parliament to deal with the reconstruction of the Gazelle after the 1994 eruption. The GRA was controversial in some quarters (e.g. its officials were blamed by Rabaul loyalists for pushing the move to Kokopo) and, on many occasions, its position diverged from that of senior officials in the provincial government who were resentful of its influence. However, the broad policy objectives of restructuring East New Britain's political economy to promote economic development by encouraging individual landholding were shared across the board.

The first official involved in this conversation, James, was from England, but had been married to a Tolai woman for over 20 years and lived in a Tolai village near Kokopo. The second, Timothy, was a Tolai who also lived in the Kokopo area. I had not intended the conversation to be about *kastom*; instead, it was a quite technical and dull interview about the mechanisms by which the PNG Government secured counterpart funding from the World Bank for restoration projects and the competitive tendering process by which contracts for those projects were allocated. It became apparent in the course of the conversation that there was supposed to be a division of labour between the GRA and the provincial government, whereby the GRA would construct the infrastructure in resettled communities such as Sikut, and the provincial government would take over the maintenance. Both men were adamant that it was not the GRA's responsibility to

make sure that the new community buildings, water tanks or so forth were maintained. This explained why the list of completed projects on the report sheet that the GRA had produced to show funders, such as the World Bank, bore no resemblance to my experience of having lived at Sikut for over a year. The completed projects seemed either not to exist or to have fallen into a state of complete disrepair. When I asked what the point was of spending the money to build these projects when the provincial government was either unwilling or incapable of maintaining them, James shrugged his shoulders and repeated that that was not his job. Eventually, after I repeated the question a couple of times, he became slightly exasperated and asked, 'why can't the community look after their own assets? Communities have to learn to look after these assets. No one's going to repair constantly vandalised assets'.

I had heard this kind of complaint from members of the provincial government as well. Local communities were being provided with infrastructure projects; however, they refused to maintain them and, worse, allowed their disaffected youth to vandalise and destroy them. I asked my two informants why they thought that the community was incapable of looking after the assets. Thomas replied that, whereas 15 years previously there had been 'a lot of respect for community assets', since then there had been 'a lot of change within the community'. Some of the problems were the result of large-scale political restructuring, such as the decision by the PNG national government to centralise the collection of VAT revenue, which had left the East New Britain Provincial Government with much less money for maintenance. However, the main problem was vandalism and that, according to my informants, 'begins in the family'. When I asked if the communities' inability to maintain and protect infrastructure assets had come as a surprise to them, they both nodded vigorously. It was clear that they had expected the community to be able to police itself. Timothy explained what he thought had gone wrong:

When the Big Men were there, there would have been respect, and you would be sanctioned if you stepped out of line. What we have now is totally different from 20 to 30 years ago. Now it's a Westernised life. People are struggling for themselves and their families; we don't have the kind of relations that we had before, working together as a community. Today we don't give things freely; we sell ... today it's an individualistic approach. My brothers and my sisters—they don't support me. I have to struggle for my wife and kids.

Later, Timothy went on to describe how the problem was the decline of ‘customary authority’ in the villages, meaning that there was no way of stopping the destruction of community assets. This was a narrative with which I was very familiar from grassroots Tolai villagers at places like Matupit and Sikut. There were no more ‘big men’—of the kind described by ethnographers of the Tolai in the 1960s, such as A. L. Epstein—who lived in the village and had influence over young men by virtue of their position of power in relations of gift-exchange obligation (crucially, a young man in the past would nearly always be reliant on a ‘big man’ to provide the shell wealth or *tabu*) necessary for him to marry and establish his own household. I have detailed these perceptions elsewhere (Martin, 2010); at this point, it is crucial to note that, despite the difference of opinion as to the nature of social changes over the past 40 years, which are common among many Tolai, it is impossible to find anyone who believes that ‘old-style’ village-based ‘big man’ leadership still exists.

Custom as Barrier and Precondition for Development

The point here is that very often *kastom* is portrayed as a barrier to development and modernisation by elites in PNG, yet, on closer examination, their attitude is often far more nuanced and context dependent. In fact, the same grassroots villagers who are condemned for being the slaves of wasteful and de-incentivising *kastom* are simultaneously condemned for not preserving it and for becoming too individualistic. Perhaps it is often forgotten that the kind of Western possessive individualism that so many planners wish to encourage relies on a social context of strong states and civic institutions to flourish. As Polanyi (2001, p. 3) observed many decades ago, free markets are conditional upon certain kinds of state and civic institutions being established if they are to function. In the absence of such social institutions in East New Britain, planners often take the very *kastom* that they denigrate for impeding individualism for granted, as a kind of social framework that will enable that individualism to flourish and be safely regulated. Paradoxically, the perceived abandonment of *kastom* by the grassroots is now seen to stop proper development, as it leads to a kind of antisocial individualism that pulls the whole community down. Rather than making a blanket denunciation of *kastom*, planners and managers want a delimited *kastom*, one that provides the social framework that would allow what they see

as a progressive individualism in some contexts, but that simultaneously does not hinder its development in others. In this hope they are, of course, likely to be frustrated, as these processes are largely beyond their control. This is not just an issue in PNG; it is increasingly an issue for governments and policymakers around the world.

Take the career of Michael Young, who, as well as being probably the most important British sociologist of the twentieth century, can lay claim to being one of the main figures in both the construction, and dismantling, of the post-war British welfare state. In 1945, Young was one of the two co-authors of Labour's manifesto that established the welfare state following Labour's surprise landslide election victory of that year. In 1957, along with Peter Wilmott, he authored one of the most important books in the history of British sociology, *Family and Kinship in East London*. The book applied ethnographic methods of in-depth interviewing and participant observation to demonstrate how extended kinship networks, based on matrifocal extended households several generations deep, were the basis of community cohesion in the working-class East End, contrary to theories that suggested such kinship networks had died out with the industrial revolution. Here we might note (in response to some recent discussions) that there is nothing necessarily geographically Melanesian about the 'Melanesian city', at least not if the kind of sociality Young and Wilmott revealed is taken as one of its defining characteristics. By the time their book was published, Young was already beginning to have doubts about some of the effects of the revolution that he had played such a central role in establishing. At the time, many across the political spectrum had some hope that the new welfare state would enable the brightest and best in these working-class communities to escape their bonds and take up positions in the managerial middle class that was expanding under conditions of the post-war boom. For these leaders, the welfare state and individualised payments were meant to enable the talented to escape and transcend the confines of their communities, which were widely seen as holding them back. However, Young was concerned that this would weaken the fabric of these communities; he coined the now commonplace term 'meritocracy' as a satirical attack upon the idea of a society based upon merit (Young, 1958). If talent was inherited, then 'meritocracy' was as unjust as 'aristocracy'; not only this, it robbed working-class communities of those whose talents and drive held those communities together.

A similar argument is made at Matupit regarding those talented members of the post-independence generation who had to leave the village to take up national roles in politics and business. It is one of the main reasons advanced for the 'death of the big men'. By the end of his life, in the early 2000s, Young had become a strident critic of what the welfare state had become. In the final book to bear his name, *The New East End*, he argued that:

From the mid-1960s onwards the administration of supports and benefits became increasingly freed from community reciprocity and oriented instead towards the needs of individuals. This shift of principles has ... weakened the fabric of working-class communities. (Dench, Gavron & Young, 2006, p. 5)

In the current climate, in which the state wishes to withdraw as far as possible from a duty of care to the poorest and weakest, whether in PNG or the UK, 'community' is all the rage. As Dench, Gavron and Young argue in another part of their book, there will always be winners and losers, and community is a vital safety net for those who fall into the latter category (p. 228). No wonder that senior politicians from both major parties lined up to praise Young's final book, which chimed with this zeitgeist almost perfectly.

The reason I end with this discussion of the nature of welfare payments in East London is because I want to conclude with the following point. From the perspective of government and business elites around the world, the problem with the poor is not, as is often assumed, their backward custom; rather, it is that they simultaneously have too much and too little custom at the wrong points of social life for their betters' liking. For all of its different manifestations, this aspect of the problem of managing the poor's necessary, yet limiting, attachment to networks of reciprocal obligation is neither uniquely a Western nor a Melanesian phenomenon.

Governments may not control these processes but they have a part to play in shaping them. Although moves towards a perceived lessening of customary authority and partial individualisation of land tenure have been ongoing on the Gazelle Peninsula for decades, the eruption provided an opportunity for these planners to accelerate and intensify these processes via the resettlement program—an opportunity that they grasped with both hands. One of the key factors in the decline of customary authority reported by many Tolai is the loss of the control over land once held by 'big men'. Today, young men reportedly just settle on clan land without

getting the permission of clan elders in a manner that is perceived by many as a deliberate provocation. Yet, it is a problem to which there appears to be few answers. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this essay; however, like the tendency for young men today to buy their own bride wealth, or to not bother paying it at all, it is clear that this is another trend that lessens the potential sanctions and control over young people's behaviour. This is a process that has reportedly been going on for years. Yet, the move to individual land tenure (if *kastom* does not reappear at Sikut as a small number of people predict) intensifies that process, further reducing the impact of the ties of obligation of which customary authority was an expression. Although it would be naive to imagine that, if the land at Sikut had been parcelled out on the basis of traditional Tolai matrilineal clan tenure, customary authority would rule at Sikut (the perceived decline of customary authority is a Gazelle-wide phenomenon), the introduction of individual tenure does mark another example of the kinds of changing social relations and obligations that have led to its perceived weakening. In attacking *kastom* in the interests of development in one area of social life, the planners have contributed to wider processes that weaken it more generally, providing an example of the kind of 'unintended consequences' that so often bedevil bureaucratic attempts to remake the people in the planners' image.

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