

# «The time of money»: property and sovereignty as alternative narratives of land and value near the Ramu NiCo mining project (Madang, PNG)<sup>1</sup>

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Two narrative themes are apparent around the relation to land in the Rai Coast hinterland of Madang Province, PNG at present. Senses of loss on the one hand, and of opportunity on the other, reveal deeper concerns over sovereignty over land and lifestyle. Under pressure from large-scale extractive industry, customary tenure is changing from the condition for constitutive and generative relations with land to a relation of property and control over land. This paper reports on narratives in which places figure as animate, creative participants in relationships between people, and those associated with the mine in which it is seen as the property of individuals, regulated by the state.*

**KEYWORDS:** land, sovereignty, cash economy, customary tenure, Papua New Guinea, Ramu Nickel Co

## RÉSUMÉ

*Deux motifs narratifs émergent actuellement au sujet de la relation à la terre dans l'arrière-pays Rai (province de Madang, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée). Des sentiments de perte d'un côté et d'opportunité de l'autre révèlent des soucis plus profonds quant au mode de vie et à la souveraineté sur la terre. Sous la pression de la grande industrie extractive, le régime foncier coutumier, qui était la condition de relations constitutives et génératives avec la terre, se mue en relation de propriété et de contrôle sur la terre. Cet article rend compte de récits qui font des lieux des participants animés et créatifs dans les relations entre personnes ou qui sont associés à la mine, où ils sont vus comme la propriété d'individus, gouvernée par l'État.*

**MOTS-CLÉS :** terre, souveraineté, économie monétaire, foncier coutumier, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée, Ramu Nickel Co

Although Papua New Guinea's current development is highly dependent upon mining and resource extraction, the vast majority of the population rely upon subsistence agriculture and kin based production for their livelihoods ([www.indexmundi.com/papua\\_new\\_guinea/economy\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/papua_new_guinea/economy_profile.html)). In this context, not only are direct conflicts over land ownership,

benefit distribution and fairness apparent around resource extraction. A more subtle but equally significant source of concern is apparent relating to the significance of customary land ownership<sup>2</sup>. This concern arises in the context of expanding markets and other forms of capitalist enterprise that encourage people to undertake cash cropping with little or no long term

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1. This paper is a companion to «20t has no power now», published in *Pacific Studies* 43 (2/3) 2011. Some of the interview data I use here also appears in that article.

2. This paper does not discuss a major concern, what Filer terms « land grabs » (2011), but focuses on a less dramatic but nevertheless powerful shift in the meanings of customary tenure for rural people.

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FIGURE 1. – Land cleared for planting in the Rai Coast hinterland, 2012 (picture James Leach)

planning. Past sustainable livelihoods based on what amounted to sovereignty over land, and social reproduction organised around principles that treated land as a subject of mutual possession (as explained below) are thus being replaced without the opportunity for consideration of the consequences for sustainability or for social and cultural life. While many rural people feel the pressure to «develop» and thus engage in cash cropping and ancillary activities around resource extraction, they also express deep concerns over the future that show an awareness of the emerging changes to their fundamental condition of life. These concerns are often expressed in narratives and discussions concerning land, money, power, and autonomy.

This paper focuses on the conceptions of land and its value that feed into narratives about sovereignty, autonomy, and community in the rural hinterland of the Rai Coast, an area in which people are experiencing the diffuse and diverse pressures of large scale mining with the advent of the Ramu NiCo nickel processing plant at Basamuk Bay (Highlands Pacific, 2010). My contention is that at present there is a vaguely comprehended but insidious shift underway in the way people relate to their land, one they express through comments about land, money, and an increasing lack of sovereignty.

The basis of the shift is encapsulated in the way that customary tenure of land is now continually visible and contested through various narratives about, and schemes around, land registration, land group incorporation, land seizure, and land alienation. It is also present, if less immediately visible to an outsider, in the way land is being used for individual cash cropping enterprises. Under these circumstances, «customary tenure» of land comes to be a double-edged reality. On the one hand, customary tenure provides security and autonomy to rural villagers, on the other, increasingly, it seems that the only way to realise this autonomy and security is to turn land over to commercial or extractive production, thus precipitating social and environmental changes that result in its degradation. Until the present decade, customary tenure of land allowed for the continuing development of culturally and biologically diverse and rich ecosystems. This diversity was fostered by modes of relating to land, and to other people, that relied on different assumptions about what land is, and where its value can be realised, than those attendant upon cash cropping and market gardening.

While based on one small area, and a limited set of narratives and statements from people there, I address some of the wider underlying legislative and institutional assumptions that

structure interactions between resource developers as purveyors of capitalist development and indigenous land owners. I seek to contrast these assumptions with assumptions about land that lie behind expressions of sovereignty and autonomy as articulated by Rai Coast people when they discuss land, the mine, cash cropping, and their future. I seek to analyse current trends in a particular case study area in Papua New Guinea to inform readers about the implications of engaging land in these two contrasting ways. While there is an implied critique of development rendered through resource extraction, the paper seeks to understand the conceptual and institutional dynamics that mitigate against sustainable and long term productive relations between indigenous life worlds, and livelihoods, and development based around market penetration, as they are made apparent in people's changing narratives about, and activities with, land.

### **Narrating land in the «time of money»: mutual possession or property?**

#### *Approach and Method*

The paper is based on long-term anthropological participant observation in an area of the north coast hinterland of Papua New Guinea in Madang Province. That area is the Rai Coast, with a focus on Reite village in the Rai Coast Local Level Government Area of Rai Coast district. This village is located about 20 km from the nickel processing and shipping facility at Basamuk Bay, and is thus well outside any mine agreement area. Significant impact however is apparent, as will become clear.

The paper sets out the issue of state assumptions about property in land, and then draws upon a description of the importance and significance of land in the area of study for indigenous people there. It is noted that the interactions people have with land, and with each other through relations to land, are not the same as relations structured around the core concept of state institutions and resource developers, that of «property» in land. Data from the area is then presented that highlights people's concerns about recent changes that promise some kind of development in association with mining projects, land registration, and markets for cash crops. This is supplemented with a description of contemporary narratives about land and its use that demonstrate a new uncertainty about the autonomy people have under customary land tenure. Following that, a discussion of the history of property and its role in the organisation of human relations to land is briefly outlined, emphasising the difficulty of utilising those concepts when administering

indigenous relations to land. The paper concludes with a summary of the different notions of sovereignty and autonomy now competing for narrative space in Reite people's discourses about land and their future.

#### *Issue*

Underlying all the different situations and jurisdictions in which indigenous people find themselves engaged in struggles over land, its ownership, its meanings, and their relation to it, lies a commonality. That commonality is provided by the default assumption that nation states make about property rights being the enforceable and visible manifestation of people's connection to land. As Glaskin writes in the Australian context, «Indigenous relations to country must be translated into categories that can be recognised within the Australian legal system». The legislation articulates a view of Indigenous title that, as Webber (2000: 61) says, presupposes that «it were simply another kind of interest affecting land, slipped into the structure of Australian property law» (Glaskin, 2003: 72). Whether we are looking at native title in Australia or customary land tenure in Melanesia (e.g. Crocombe, 1971; Larmour, 1991), the way that the nation state conceptualises its role, and the assumptions it enshrines in law about property (Filer, 2006) in land generate at least a conceptual co-presence in people's lives and experiences between property thinking and other modes of connection to land (Strathern, 2009). It might be suggested that this is a kind of «legal pluralism» (that accompanies the acknowledged legal pluralism in criminal law in Papua New Guinea [Chalmers *et al.*, 2009; Goddard, 2009]). Just as with criminal law, the state considers its legal code with regard to land unambiguous, but indigenous conceptions of land do not fit with those conceptions in a manner that results in convergence. The underlying logic and practice with regard to land rely upon different principles as is shown below. There follows at least the possibility that a series of problems arise from the translation of one kind of inhabiting land (the state recognised form of property) with another (the indigenous).

On Independence in 1975, the constitution of Papua New Guinea granted customary landowners rights over their territories. The vast majority of the population were then, and remain, such customary land-owners. Over the last decade there has been some pressure, partly created by neo-liberal economic advisors in Australia (who are the major overseas aid donor to PNG) for the economic value «locked away», as these economists see it, in customary land, to be realised and re-invested in «development» (Gosarevski *et al.*, 2004; see Weiner and Glaskin,

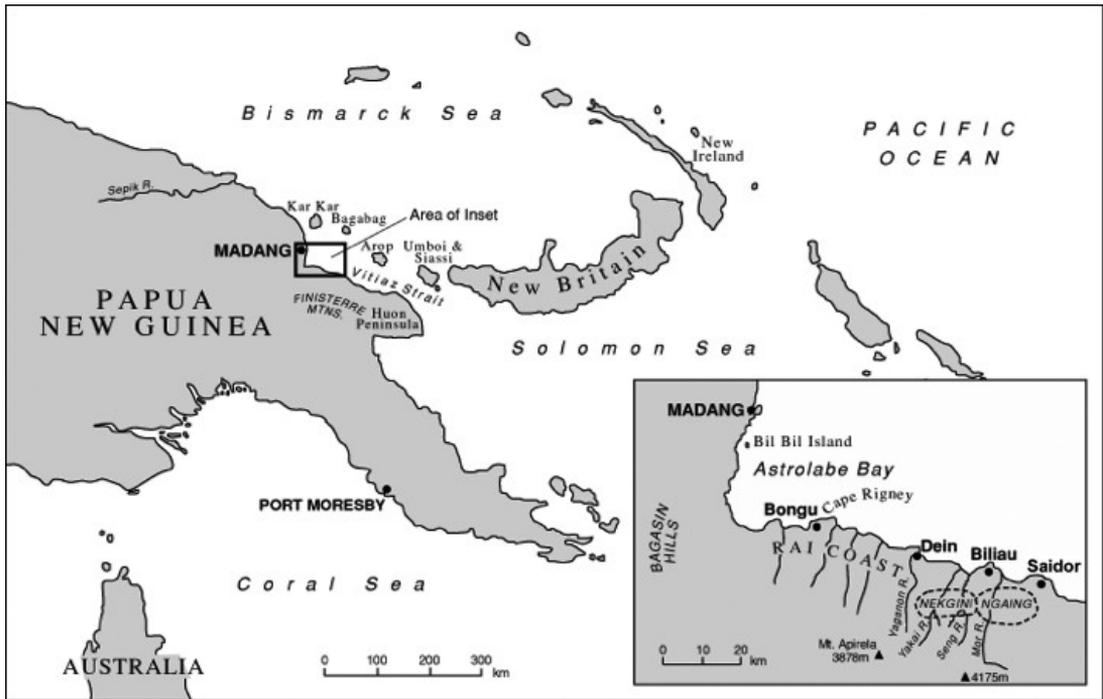


FIGURE 2. – Map of Madang and the Rai Coast

2007: 1-3). Whether or not it was related to such pressure, new PNG legislation in 2009 allowed for the group registration and subsequent lease of customary land (Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission, 2008). The legislation demonstrates the equation between land and economic value by institutions of the state and significantly, the way the notion of customary ownership is defined as a version of a property right (see Filer, cited above). In fact, the legislation for the registration of customary land is explicit about making it possible to transform complex and embedded, distributed, and fragmented ownership into simple property rights that can be transacted. (The legislation «aimed at unlocking the vast economic potential that is locked up in customary land due to legal and administrative constraints relating to the application of customary land to modern economic enterprise» (Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission, 2008: 5). This translation to property in turn reflects the discourse of state driven modernisation, making reality legible in its own administer-able terms, as identified by Scott (1998).

Alongside this change in legislation is a more pervasive and inexorable process whereby people are being encouraged in one way or another to realise value from their lands through entry into the inequitably structured cash economy. In the village of Reite for example, cash cropping has been sporadically practised for 50 years, promoted by the colonial regime originally, then more haphazardly by the under-resourced independent state. Today,

a transition from subsistence horticulture to market oriented agriculture is being accelerated by the development of large-scale extractive industry (the Ramu NiCo mine and processing plant) in the vicinity and the produce markets established around that development. There is, then, a rapid move to realise the value of land through cash cropping and marketing of specific produce grown to the specification of buyers from the mine (see Leach, 2011: 302-4). These changes are resulting in a massive increase in the amount of land used each year for market gardening, and subsequent degradation of forest, shortage of land for traditional subsistence cultivation of starchy tubers, and for hunting.

Clearly, access to money is scarce enough and yet attractive enough to make the opportunity for marketing produce attractive. Reite people, as mentioned, do not benefit directly from the mine, either through employment or compensation. In this situation, the catering companies operating at the mine during both the construction and operational phases provide the most visible source of «development» opportunity. The attraction is for reasons of both everyday comfort, emerging village hierarchies, and expectations of future change. There is a perception that somehow in the «time of money», as some describe the current situation, money is the correct (moral) way of realising value in land. These are part and parcel of aspirations based on a limited knowledge of the actual long term effects of a cash based economy on social and environmental relations. Motivation

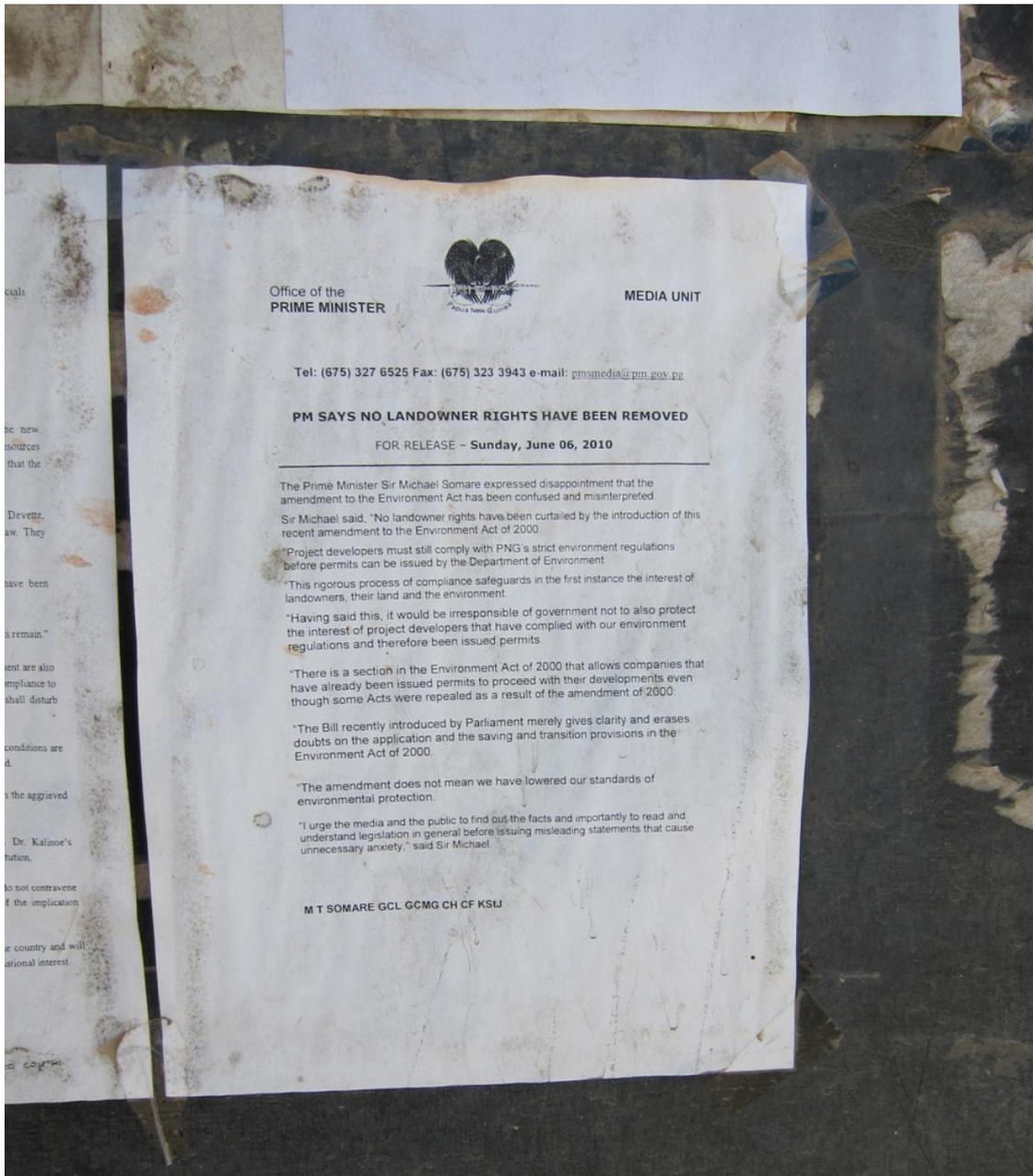


FIGURE 3. – «PM says no landowner rights have been removed». Media release from Office of the Prime Minister, attached to one of the gates at Basamuk Bay refinery (June 6th, 2010, picture James Leach)

for many is about anticipation of an imagined future of wealth and ease, a narrative of radical or millenarian change not unfamiliar in this region (Lawrence, 1964). With no direct development or benefit from the mine operation, Reite people are left with a discourse of intensification and commodification of agriculture.

As I outline below, these aspects are not uncontested in the villages. In fact, there is a deep but generally unfocussed concern about the future expressed by everyone, however enthusiastically or otherwise they participate in

cash cropping. Here is a passage drawn from a conversation with a thoughtful and concerned group of men after a visit to Basamuk Bay. It demonstrates the narrative themes and concerns involved.

«How will we change and develop? If we remain with our ancestral ways, how will we accommodate this new life? What should we do to live with money and its ways? What route will we follow to become like developed countries? We have land, we grow things, some people sell some of this to help them with rice or tin fish. But we get these things for free.

It is through our own hard work that we eat for free. Everyone says that our customary practices are the best as we have all we need for free. Money is not part of that custom. If we desire the custom of money, things will go bad here. So many of us do what we can to strengthen knowledge of custom so it will survive. We like things for free, I don't mean we don't work hard for them, we work very hard, but we don't have to buy things we need for money.

People at home in the village are making huge gardens, and then turn the land into cocoa plantations. People make large blocks. Our land for growing food crops is very scarce now. Forested land is almost finished. What can the Government do to stop all these developments? If they set higher prices for the few cash crops we have then we could implement our own restrictions on cutting new forest, on looking after land and environment and the community would listen to them. At the moment they just say, "it's my land, I will do what I want on it". What can we say? If prices were better for cocoa and vanilla then people would be content with the little income they gain for school fees and for rice sometimes and would not keep cutting forest for gardens for market and turning the land over to cocoa afterwards.

[The mine is] not like a Government station that is put there to assist us, but to take something and go. Sickness and sores were rife, and land gone. The mine isn't old, but brand new, yet these things were there already. They are ruining the land that we live through. Good forest land where we are free and get things for free. They come and buy us to do their work and our land goes to them so we will not be able to have these free things again.» (Leach, 2011: 305-306; see also Nombo and Sisau, 2013).

What is striking in terms of narrative construction is that those challenged about their over-exploitation of forested land have a stock answer: that «now is the time of money», and the land is their land to do with as they wish (*ibid.*: 306). Imagining a future in which all problems will be solved by the new possibilities of money, they forcefully assert that it is *right and proper* to turn land over to market oriented cultivation in order to participate in this new time. In fact, that they are acting morally and those that do not make the effort in this direction are holding back progress. Somewhat in the mode that Nancy MacDowell (1985) outlined in her analysis of «episodic time», the narrative «time of money» is seen as both a radical alternative with different rules and possibilities to «the time of taro and yam», while its current manifestation relies upon the same underlying logic of infinite resource potential provided by the mythic landscape of that previous «time». Two important facts about the current and future situation are thus masked by the idea of «the time of money».

Firstly, «the time of money» does not yet mean that these people could or do subsist through the cash economy. They are subsistence farmers operating independently of the market economy for their everyday needs. They rely upon shifting cultivation to grow tubers and raise domestic animals, and hunt

in the remaining forest to subsist. As we see from the statement above, cash is a luxury item, an addition to this livelihood. The «time of money» as it is currently practiced in Reite could not be sustained without the foundation of the subsistence regime; the social organisation, mutual support, and kin based exchange (including labour) that are integral to taro and yam cultivation. One should note that it is unlikely that the same level of cultural and biological diversity, social equality, or autonomy from wage labour will be maintained under a cash economy proper.

Secondly, the system of taro and yam cultivation is on the edge of collapse because of the use of land in «the time of money». That is, forest is being cut far too rapidly now for regeneration and fertility to be maintained. In other words, the «time of money» is unsustainable in a very immediate sense, and worse, it is destroying the foundation for an existence based on the cultivation of tubers. The hope of «development» arising from the conversion of relations to land from something we might describe as «mutual possession» (see below) to property ownership and exploitation is a chimera, promoted locally by developers who suggest that they bring opportunities to Rai Coast people (markets for produce), and nationally by moves towards making it possible to «realise» the economic potential of land by converting customary ownership into economic wealth.

Given the serious nature of these developments for an area of outstanding ecological and cultural richness, it seems worth examining some of the underlying assumptions about what customary tenure has been, and now is in Papua New Guinea. One of the factors at work here, I suggest, is a shift in assumptions from when customary tenure was a mode of autonomy to one in which customary tenure is a kind of property ownership. Property ownership is indeed what the state in a nation state model can protect for its citizens, giving them rights over land as an object to be exploited or alienated. But the assumption that the realisation of value will be in economically visible wealth conversion fuels the transformation of sustainable, generative and vital interactions with land as an inter-subjective constituent of people, to relations of control over, disposal of, and degradation of land as an object. Far from giving greater sovereignty, the time of money and its underlying mechanism of the individual exploitation of property amounts to the ceding of sovereignty to the state, and the interests of the corporations it relies upon for its income.

## Discussion

### *Land in the time of taro*

Let me take one example to demonstrate the relations Reite people have maintained with their lands under customary tenure until the present

crisis: the way that myth, history, cultivation of tubers, and cultural creativity are bound together in the reproduction of persons.

Reite people rely on taro as the staple of their subsistence economy. As an aspect of this centrality, indistinguishable from taro's function of sustaining bodies, taro gardening provides form and structure to people's activities, to their interactions, and to the very landscape in which it has played a major part. Knowing how to grow tubers in the specific manner that Reite people do so is passed to younger people in initiation rites by their maternal kinsmen. Those maternal kinsmen in turn can trace the routes by which they came to grow tubers; that is, the routes by which they share knowledge as a mode of relating to land. This relation to land is an aspect of the connection they trace to specific others. And at some point in the past, that way of existing in that particular place was given to an ancestor by an entity, a character in myth that was situated as an aspect of the land. The name of the myth of taro, the character who gave it to Reite people, and the place in which he resided are named as the same thing: *Samat Matakarang Patuki* which translates as «the story/knowledge/character of Samat Matakarang place». *Patuki* is a nexus, a conjoining of knowledge, myth, transmission, and route related to land. The «narrative» associated with the «time of taro and yam» is a narrative about the emergence of a distinct and sovereign people through their relationship to this taro deity.

By growing taro in relation to this *patuki*, and through doing so, demonstrating a relation to history and specific kin, taro grown under traditional practices is Reite taro, already part of and anticipated as constitutive of, the particular bodies that are Reite bodies, and the particular trajectories, activities and growth of situated people. Land as specific known and inhabited places comes to form the bodies of Reite people, and the cultivation of the land is also the generation of particular people. Land is part of people in a very easily comprehensible manner. The right relations to it and its powers result in the growth of kinsmen. The substance of kinship, the substance of connection between people who are kin, is substance drawn from the land itself and incorporated into bodies through consuming taro. Land is kinship (Leach, 2003: 207-211) because persons emerge from and return to places as aspects of historically constituted groups with particular connections to particular areas. Those places remain animated by the others who live on land, in landforms as manifestations of spirits and powers, and in other people. Further, by drawing their knowledge of production and reproduction from placed others, action and effect are tied into land. Relating to land and *patuki* is relating to

people of different types and histories, modes of effect, presence; but kinds of person nonetheless.

«Landscape» then is an emergent animate process in which a particularly «Reite» mode of life comes into being and is sustained in creative yet known ways. The potential and affordance of specific areas of land are engaged with not as substrate or object, but as an integral part of persons and their identity. Strathern highlights the material *and* immaterial dimensions of land in exactly this context (2009). In other words, landscape and land are shared spaces of common imagination in which bodies and persons, institutions and histories are formed. The land is redolent with human presence, with the history of kinship, of people, of closely allied myth that inhabits space not as an overlay, but as its formation. Myth and person are enfolded in land and land enfolds myth, history and person (Wagner, 2001).

So the Reite social world is one in which land and people are explicitly and consciously interwoven in processes of social formation, production, and reproduction. Kinship is rooted in particular places; land underwrites the social relationships it nurtures. Those relationships manifest in persons, and in things, making these creations aspects of the place itself, drawn from and feeding back into a specific emergent productivity.

Reite people have a strong claim on land through this kind of reproductive engagement. Their ownership of land and long history with it manifests as persons, and as the things those persons make from and generate alongside themselves in a rich artistic and cultural life. People know where others are from because of the sounds of the spirit voices they produce from that place, or their ability to name lands in a recollection not of «use», but of the emergence of people through previous gardening, exchanges, and labour. This kind of connection to places is genuinely different from the kind of relationship to land as an inanimate *object* shaped by regimes of property. Of course property is also a form for a social relation to take, but calling all social relations with regard to land a form of «property» is myopic, a myopia encouraged by the state's need for legibility mentioned discussed above.

The distinguished political historian and philosopher J.G.A. Pocock describes clearly how western state jurisprudence since the Enlightenment has systematically denigrated forms of relation to land such as those described above, relations that are not based on property ownership. He describes the importance of the heavy plough as a technology of appropriation and demarcation in the European imagination and how systems other than those of settled agriculture have been ignored. He argues that systems of human association and tenure that

deviate from the relations of property ownership have been swept aside or dismissed.

*Property assumptions under state modernity*

Pocock traces a history of the development of western states in which the protection of the person and thus the rationale for the state or sovereign's power could be reduced in essence to the protection of rights over property<sup>3</sup>. The development of a society or civilization, all the institutions and achievements that made a people the people they were (and see Wagner, 1975: 22-23), were seen as dependent on forms of association (relationship) made durable by the rights each person had over property. He writes:

«Western European theorists of natural law were turning towards theories of natural right, and to that end were constructing a concept of a state of nature, a primeval condition of human existence in which individuals were depicted as without rights, without mechanisms for distributive justice, and without civil government.» (Pocock, 1992: 31)

The individual preceded property in European political theorising according to Pocock. The «state of nature» was an image of a series of individuals roaming the earth's surface. Appropriation of things on that surface resulted in systems of institutionalised values (the recognition of other's property rights over what they had appropriated). Appropriation led to property, which led to social recognition of others' rights, which led to governments to enforce that recognition. In effect, the human individual as a sociable creature was defined by his property after the Enlightenment, and the individual who had not yet appropriated was not fully human. Having not appropriated, they had no reason to develop «social» relations because these «social» relations were fundamentally supposed to be the recognition of others' property rights. Human society was imagined as based on the ownership of property, as relationships between individuals came into being because of appropriation of resources and the need to institutionalise that appropriation. In other words, to use Pocock's phrase «property was their name for relationship». Other modes of relating to land have been swept aside as the state makes visible people's connection to land in the specific mode of property.

Papua New Guinea is a state in which customary ownership has had a positive effect in allowing the persistence of relations to land such as those in Reite. One in which an exchange of yams and taro as part of kinship and marriage have flourished

after 35 years of the country's independence from colonial rule. But this is under threat, not from any direct assault on customary ownership, but from the more subtle redefinition of all relations to land as relations of property, «the move to make all value from land realisable as an economic value» (Farran, 2011). This change has been accelerated hugely by the arrival of the Ramu NiCo processing plant at Basamuk Bay.

Now this leaves a dilemma when it comes to customary tenure, a way of allowing rights over land, guaranteed by the state. For that guarantee to take effect, those rights have to be a kind of property right. That translation means only a very narrow sense of what is valuable about the relationships of «customary tenure» are acknowledged by the state (Filer, 2006).

*Land registration and new land «associations».*

Nowhere is the pressure Reite people feel about the future more apparent than in their concerns over the status of their connection to land, and the possibility of either losing it to resource extractors, or missing out on development opportunities because they have not properly registered or demarcated their particular holdings. I submit that these anxieties are a knock-on effect of the state's increasing clarity about its recognition of customary tenure as a form of property right.

The concerns over the status of customary tenure and future economic value have fostered a whole series of schemes around land registration on the Rai Coast in recent years. In many cases, these appear little more than a way of extracting cash in exchange for putative inclusion in various land associations or organisations playing on people's fears and ignorance of the law, or on their desire to organise in new ways to take advantage of the «time of money». In essence, they are schemes that propose each local land holding group join an «association» that will act for them in organising a collective registration of land under the new Land Groups Incorporation (Amendment) Act (2009). Holding out the hope of «becoming visible» to the state, or to developers, or at the very least, of maintaining control over their own lands (which by implication could be lost if people do not join the new association), they draw village people into paying locally significant amounts of money to «join» and receive a «certificate» which not only promises membership but also sets out their claims to customary land plots. To not do so, it is implied, will result in a loss of power over land and development. Playing on fears of loss of sovereignty because of loss of land, they accelerate the process of conversion of customary

3. See also Joyce (2013) who describes a similar picture, and outlines possible alternatives based on analysis of indigenous knowledge and social systems.

tenure to a property right, imagined as held by certain individuals, over single plots.

In all the cases I am aware of in which Reite people have paid for membership, the associations have been riven by dispute and become inactive, or have had their membership fees «used» by the leaders for their own consumption. Often both these things happen. The badly printed «certificates» are all that are left of their significant cash investments, while uncertainty and anxiety persist over the status of their customary tenure in the time of mining and money. The pieces of paper are not land group certificates, but locally produced «certificates» of inclusion in a promised application for registered status. Happily (in a rather black way) the failure of all such schemes so far means no changes have actually occurred to land title in the area. It appears there have been no ILGs gazetted. And that is positive, as customary tenure does not require registration at present to remain effective. But that threat of loss of control over land, a most alarming one for Reite people, is no doubt behind the continued co-operation of these villagers with the «entrepreneurs» behind such schemes.

What we see then are the relationships that Rai Coast people have had with land being translated into one where economic value is taking precedence over other value, and thus their ownership of land as a form of property is coming to the fore. The arrival of the mine processing plant at Basamuk has shifted current conditions to a situation in which the autonomy granted by customary land tenure is the kind of autonomy that property relationships bring: the power to alienate, to exploit, and to appropriate. It amounts to the drastic narrowing of the value of land. That narrowing is not built into property per se, but to the system of person/state//subject/object of which it is a key element. One aspect where this narrowing is particularly apparent is in the crucial area of autonomy. That is, property gives a kind of autonomy in that it secures a right to hold something exclusively against the rest of the world, and the right to dispose of it. But to achieve that autonomy, intricate historical relations between land and people, and between people through their connections in land, are substituted for versions of individual property ownership. Mutual possession between people, land, and animate and sentient other beings, are replaced with property rights; and the agency of self-regulation and social order is replaced by the state's putative upholding of equal citizen rights.

Reite people regularly narrate their current situation through different possible scenarios regarding customary tenure, land registration, cash cropping and markets. This is also the narration of different conceptions of sovereignty and the future. Threats to land register threats to a way of life and living, they channel and make

real to people an otherwise unformed sense of deprivation arising from changes in the vicinity. The sense of a degradation of relations to land, and removal from it, speaks volumes about the narrative form of the mine's presence in their lives.



## Conclusion

The very clear disadvantage, unsustainable nature of, and increasingly precarious existence for Reite people on the fringe of the mine development is not alleviated by their customary ownership when what that ownership amounts to is the right to exploit and degrade their lands. This tension is apparent in Reite people's concerns about land, the future and development. The concerns and complaints expressed by Reite people in this paper point to the fact that the «name for relationship» is now contested in Reite, with money, as a proxy for property, coming to hold increasing sway. The narrative of money and progress that comes with the mine is rather different in its focus on an individual autonomy supported by rights in land as property, from a narrative of sovereignty and vitality supported by the mutual possession of land and person by one another. It is this conflict in meaning and practice that is being played out in Reite.

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