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Land, Custom and Conflict in East New Britain

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Land, custom and conflict in East New Britain

The Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain province has for many years been regarded as one of Papua New Guinea's most 'developed' regions. And if the local Tolai people were seen by many as leaders among Papua New Guineans, in terms of education, employment and indigenous business development, then the village of Matupit was similarly seen as leaders among the Tolai. It was the village closest to the town of Rabaul, and by the 1970s was regarded by many as a suburb of the town. Matupit was one of the most prosperous villages in PNG, where Tolai people enjoyed a peri-urban lifestyle and (by PNG national reckoning) comfortable standard of living paid for by wage labour in town and the cash cropping that the Tolai had themselves developed on their own customary land.

This paper contributes to anthropological research that addressed business and change in the Gazelle (Epstein, T.S. 1968, Epstein, A.L. 1969, Salisbury 1970, Bradley 1982, Fingleton 1985) by describing processes that come to a new resolution in the resettlement process following the eruption of the volcano in 1994. It will examine how on going debates about custom and its meanings in new economic times were reframed by Tolai people in the new social and geographical environment that they found themselves in after the eruption.

Despite the prosperity, in the time leading up to the volcanic eruption of 1994, pressures were developing. East New Britain was among the leaders in the country in terms of number of land disputes registered. In particular there was a growing tension between the matrilineal land-holding clan and the increasingly important nuclear familyⁱ. Fathers wanted to ensure that investments made on clan land passed to their children rather than to their clan nephews. Customary land came to be seen as a problem, and people were reluctant in many cases to build new developments on it. When the East New Britain Provincial Government offered up 5 agricultural blocks for lease to individuals before the eruption in 1994, they were amazed to find thousands of applicants. The problem was, as John Brown, the then Advisor for the East New Britain Lands Division explained, "people felt as if they had no rights to customary land".

Matupit, as the Tolai village with the highest population density and the most extensive economic development suffered more than most from these problems. Many people described the eruption to me as a "blessing from God", as the village was about to explode under the pressure of disputes. It is this irony that drew my attention; namely, that a disaster could be a blessing of divine intervention that would transform conflictive social relations. The disaster is said to be the main reason for the decrease of disputes in the heart of the village where people have built their houses as many Matupi have subsequently moved to the government sponsored resettlement area at Sikut. Around 200 families have been given blocks of around 3 hectares each. The government is adamant that this land is for individual families, not for clans, and that it will be inherited as property by the children of the of the title holder (in most cases the husband of a nuclear family unit).ⁱⁱ

This position, is, on the surface shared by the majority of those Matupi who have relocated to Sikut. I was struck in the first few months of my fieldwork, by the number of occasions on which Sikut residents told me that the land at Sikut was "better" than Matupit land. Not because it was more productive or plentiful, but because it was not customary. They described themselves as being 'free' from customary ground, and all of the problems associated with it. Here they could work hard and pass on the benefits to their children. Many Matupi with Sikut blocks now claim a lack of interest in maintaining customary land at Matupit. One example is a middle-aged Matupit woman, who is acknowledged to be one of the most knowledgeable members of her clan in the histories that are essential for defending one's land when it is disputed. She and her husband have decided that now they have the block at Sikut, that she will no longer go back to Matupit to get involved with disputes. If you have land of your own that you can live on, why run the risk of people getting cross with you and killing you with sorcery. A contrasting viewpoint is put by a senior public servant, brought up at Matupit, but currently resident in Port Moresby. He often told me that

customary land is inherent to each Tolai person's identity, and you cannot simply abandon your claims to customary land without abandoning a part of yourself. He points to himself as an example. He is currently embroiled in a lengthy and costly dispute over ownership of a small piece of land in the Kikila area of Matupit. He points out that he has bought 9 hectares of land near Warangoi, so he is secure, and that the land under dispute is economically worthless, yet he still feels compelled to fight to protect it. Other Matupi have a different analysis of his motives however. As is often the case with senior public servants, he is widely suspected (despite his frequent denials) of planning to run for parliament in the 2007 election. If he is unable to defend his own clan land, then clearly he is demonstrating that he is not enough of a big man to be a serious candidate according to this argument, and that explains the effort that he is putting into to this dispute.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not to say that the land at Sikut is free from dispute. Rather the disputes are, for the time being taking on a different character dividing some block-holders from those still waiting for blocks. A large number of people at Sikut are still waiting for blocks in what is euphemistically referred to as the care centre. This is a small area of land in which shacks have been put together out of old pieces of tin iron, wood, and even cardboard. For people, some of whom previously lived in air-conditioned homes on their customary land at Matupit, this is still a huge shock and embarrassment. These people have been temporarily allocated land for gardening of just under 1 hectare per family. However they have been forbidden from planting cash crops such as cocoa or vanilla, as the land their gardens stand on has been earmarked for future use as a centre for commercial activities, and government services. The government is wary of the potentially costly and time consuming claims for compensation that would arise if people's cash crops had to be removed. Many block-holders have returned to Matupit, and their blocks remain virgin rainforest. This has led to increasingly vocal demands for these blocks to be forfeited and given to those still waiting in the care centre. It is argued that they have shown the greatest commitment to the project of resettlement, by living there with no land of their own for years, and that they have always been at the forefront of the community work (such as maintaining the churches or clearing the roads), whilst those who have returned to Matupit, but still hold on to their blocks, are said to have contributed nothing. The supporters of those who have returned, claim that they will develop them at some point in the future, and that many of the first settlers received government assistance, such as the provision of kit houses, and cocoa seedlings that have not been made available to them, meaning that those with money (for building a house, buying seedlings, hiring labour, and chainsaws for cutting the bush) have an advantage when it comes to development.

In my experience a majority of the Sikut community supported the forfeit policy, as did in theory the provincial government Lands Department. Towards the end of my time in Sikut a concerted effort was made by the resettlement committee to get the Lands Division to authorise a mass forfeit of around 40 of the undeveloped blocks. Eventually the Lands Division went ahead. Blocks were allocated to all families living in the care centre. This led to a series of stormy meetings at Sikut in which blockholders and their supporters living at Matupit would descend en masse. Blockholders who had been threatened with forfeit by the resettlement committee turned up to 'work' on the block for a few weeks more as a warning to the person to whom the block was to be allocated than as a serious attempt at development, before returning to Matupit. It had been hoped by many that this time around the official backing of the Lands Division would make this tactic impossible. However political leadership at all levels was divided. The elected resettlement committee were largely in favour of the forfeit, however they were opposed by most of the councillors, who went to the Rabaul District Government to declare the resettlement committee null and void. No-one knew who held authority over the land- the Rabaul District Government, or the Provincial Government's Land Division, meaning that if the forfeit policy goes ahead it is likely to be held up by several years of legal wrangling. An additional problem is that no-one yet has title to the Sikut blocks. Most of the blocks were allocated in early 1995, with the expectation that title would be issued to individual title holders within a year. Yet at the start of 2004, title has yet to be issued, because the Provincial Government and the Gazelle Restoration Authority (GRA), have not had the money to complete the necessary surveys.^{iv} The result is that as one lawyer who was sympathetic to the forfeit policy informed a Sikut meeting shortly before I left, that the forfeits

issued by the Lands Division would not stand up in court. In order to remove someone's title to the land, they first had to have title. In 1995 every block-holder had been issued with a one year temporary title that had not been renewed. Consequently, every block-holder at Sikut, whether resident or not, is in legal terms a squatter remaining on government land with tacit approval. Only when title was issued, would the government be able to attach conditions, such as block development to the continuation of that title. The resettlement committee went ahead with the forfeits anyway and started moving people up on to the blocks. In my last week in East New Britain, the inevitable fights were breaking out as the original block-holders arrived to remove the newcomers.

I have discussed the local level politics of resettlement at Sikut as it sheds light on one of the big issues of PNG politics today, namely land tenure. On one level the Sikut experience seems to provide evidence for the desirability of wide scale land tenure reform. The pressures on customary land tenure systems, and their widely acknowledged effect of acting as a disincentive to investment is one factor. The widespread enthusiasm of Sikut residents for the new land as 'freeing' them from the obligations, constraints and disputes inherent in customary land is another. There has indeed been a large amount of investment and development in some blocks. In a few blocks, block-holders have planted thousands of cocoa trees and are now beginning to enjoy an income of several thousand kina a month (dependent of course on price fluctuations and crop success). Yet we must add some caveats to this development success story. Individual tenure, requires the state to have the resources and intention to back it up, if tenure is to be more than a piece of paper. The inability of the state in East New Britain to even provide title after ten years, and the lack of clarity as to which of the competing arms of government has jurisdiction at Sikut has directly lead to the under-utilisation of large amounts of Sikut land. Those people who have been allocated new blocks this time around are in many cases wary of putting too much effort into the land as they have seen others lose their blocks back to the original landholders before. One of the two main roads leading up to the blocks at Sikut is only sealed half way along the road. This is because in 1995, despite warnings to the contrary, one of the block-holders, planted cocoa seedlings close to the edge of his block. When the time came for the road to be sealed, he demanded several hundred kina compensation if the Division of Works was going to remove his seedlings to seal the road. Exasperated by the prospect of wasting years and thousands of kina on legal action, the Provincial Government re-allocated the money to another resettlement scheme. Now all of the blocks further away from the centre of Sikut are served by a dirt track. Buses refuse to run past this blockholder's house, as the cost in spare parts if they go on the dirt track is prohibitive. For a similar reason it is hard for these block-holders to hire cars or trucks to take their cocoa to selling points, meaning that these blocks are among the least developed in the resettlement area. In theory, as this was government land, not customary land the government could have taken action to remove his cocoa seedlings and press on with the road development. In reality they could not afford the legal costs, or the cost of the police action. They were as unable to enforce development projects on land to which they had title as they often are on customary land.

It is also worth bearing in mind that individual title in and of itself does not free one from the demands of kin and customary obligations that many see as a disincentive to development. While large amounts of development have gone on at Sikut, no-one has yet planted their entire 3 hectares with cash crops and food. The maximum level seems to be 2 out of 3 hectares. One reason that is frequently raised is the desire not to be the target of constant appeals for assistance from those without extensive plantings, and even more worrying the desire not to be the target of jealousy. Many people reported being scared to plant too much cocoa. People would know exactly how much you were selling, and once you reached a certain amount, you would not keep much over that for yourself. As one block holder put it, "if they see me harvesting all the time and I don't give to some people they can do somethings to my block and my cocoa won't bear fruit." Or worse, this informant along with others told me that although the problem was not as bad as it had been twenty or thirty years ago, it was known for people who consistently refused such requests to end up dead or injured because of sorcery, nearly always inflicted by jealous siblings or cousins. The chair of the resettlement committee was one of the few who consistently attacked this fear, yet

his credibility in the village in this respect was undermined by chronic arthritis in his left leg, that was clearly seen as being the result of someone with magical power's jealousy.

Most important of all, the granting of individual title does not guarantee that customary practices of tenure will not re-emerge on the land. There is a precedent for this in East New Britain. In the 1950s, the Australian administration released several large blocks of land for lease to individuals from Tolai villages near Rabaul. These leases came with the guarantee of individual title, and a policy that the land was to be inherited by the next of kin, ideally the children of the block-holder. However in most cases the land has stayed within the block-holder's clan, often passing on to his sisters' sons, as would be the case in customary land. Although the majority of Tolai are adamant that this is 'new land', and it is morally right for the children of the block-holder who had put in all of the hard work of development to inherit it, the strength of kinship ties makes it hard to refuse nephews of one's own clan when they arrive asking to be allowed to help out on the block and plant a section of it for their own cash crops. Once they are on the land in numbers it is even harder to remove them. In most cases they have ended up in possession of the block after the death of the original block-holder. In theory they could be removed legally in many cases. Practically it is a process that can take decades, and cost thousands of kina, which is not a practical option for most Tolai. There are three blocks at Wudal that were given to Matupi. Of these, two are now inhabited by nephews of the same clan as the blockholder. In only one case have the children managed to assert their legal right to inherit the title.

There are of course no guarantees that Sikut will follow the same pattern as Wudal. Many Sikut residents will argue that Tolai society is very different now than it was in the 1960s. Now, they argue that the nuclear family is stronger, and that the large number of people at Sikut as opposed to Wudal, will make it easier for a culture to emerge in which demands by clan nephews of the original holder over the block-holders children will be easier to resist. Although people never refused to recognise their nephews, I observed many occasions on which clear boundaries were drawn around the relationship and in particular the nephews' rights to come and stay for extended periods on the block. This is important to note as traditionally the relationship between a boy and his maternal uncle was in the matrilineal system seen as being in many contexts more important than a boy's relationship to his father, and uncles and nephews were expected to spend as much time as possible together. Now fear of land grab meant that uncles tried to limit this relationship and the amount of time that nephews spent on their block. This was put strongly by many including one Sikut blockholder working at one of the big mines elsewhere in PNG. "Now custom is fading away. What happened at Wudal won't happen here. Sometimes the nephews do 'take over nothing' 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."

I was continually struck by the strength with which these feelings were expressed at Sikut. Although there were some who felt that customary tenure would re-establish itself as it seemed to have done at Wudal, they were a clear minority. And although it is early days, in the majority of cases where blocks have been transferred as a result of death or choice it has gone to the original holders children or other relatives outside the clan. Perhaps the most vitriolic dispute at Sikut was between a sister and brother. The block was in the name of the mother who initially allowed her

daughter to live on the block. Several years later she decided to remove the daughter and replace her with a son. This action was believed to be motivated by an intense dislike of her daughter's husband. The daughter and her husband had already planted hundreds of cocoa seedlings and erected a permanent house however leading to a very heated dispute. Without going into the details of this dispute, what was commented on by many Sikut residents was that the mother's original arrangement would have ensured that the land stayed in her clan for the next two generations. By attempting to remove her daughter and replace her with a son, she was in one person's words, "giving the land away". Her actions were seen by many Sikut residents as evidence of a new attitude developing towards kinship and land tenure on state land. A final piece of evidence that Sikut may not be about to automatically repeat the experience of Wudal, is the resettlement at Sunnybird. In 1984 a large number of members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church at Matupit, bought land from a co-religionist at Sunnybird and resettled there. At Sunnybird, the land appears to be staying within individual families, although this may be a slightly exceptional case, as the SDA's avowed aversion to custom in general may make it more likely for them to avoid a return to customary land tenure practices, especially in a community of their own, where they are not subject to pressures from the wider village community and clan members in other churches.

And if the allegedly individual discrete nature of block-holdings at Sikut is potentially complicated by the tendency of customary ways of thinking and acting to creep back into the kind of social relations that persons constitute with each other through the land, then it is perhaps also the case that the allegedly customary nature of land back at Matupit has been complicated by Tolai responses to the pressures that they have faced in new economic circumstances. At Matupit a very large proportion of houses are built on bought land. The buying and selling of customary ground is in theory illegal in Papua New Guinea, unless the buying and selling can be shown to be a customary practice. The custom of 'buying' ground is known among the Tolai as *kulia*. However, Epstein who conducted fieldwork at Matupit in the early 1960s was keen to stress that *kulia* does not neatly equate with the Western idea of buying and selling as an alienable commodity transaction (Epstein 1969:131). He reports that the *kakelei* or 'claim' "remains vested in the vendor lineage" (Epstein 1969:104). I have been told that in the past there would often be expectations that the land might return to the vendors at some point after the buyer's death, and they would be considered to have an ongoing relationship with the piece of ground. The two parties would be expected to have an ongoing relationship that predated and postdated the *kulia* transaction that was not the end of the relationship as a pure commodity transaction is often (unrealistically) presented in some Western social and economic theory.^v Epstein gives the fact that *kulia* payments in no way approached what he describes as "market value" for the ground as further evidence that it should not be seen as being identical with 'purchase' in the Western sense, although he suggests that there were pressures taking it in that direction. Today, I would argue that although *kulia* retains features that distinguish it from the purest ideal of commodity transaction, it has changed in many respects. The American legal theorist Radin (1996) suggests that what is referred to as 'commodification', is necessarily an incomplete process, and whether a thing, transaction, or relationship should be viewed as a commodity is therefore a matter of degree, rather than an 'either/or' distinction. In my opinion changes to *kulia* over the past 40 years can be usefully looked at in this way. Although the parties to the transaction will tend to be involved in ongoing customary relationships, almost everyone at Matupit is involved in customary relations with everyone else anyway, and I found no evidence that *kulia* transactions tend to imply a consequently stronger link. And in some cases there is no ongoing relationship. The current elder of the SDA church at Matupit has built his house on land that he bought from the last male representative left at Matupit of one of Matupit's major landholding clans. This purchase was made in 1983, and to my fairly certain knowledge the purchaser has had no ongoing customary relationship with the vendor, and would give him very short shrift if he came to ask for favours or gifts on the basis of his ancestral links with the land upon which the purchaser has built his house, which is something that vendor is wont to do with some people that he has sold land to. What is interesting is the attitude of the majority of Matupit to requests such as this. Most people say that it is dishonest as it is an attempt to get money 'twice for land that you have already sold'.

Also interesting is people's response to the statement made by Epstein that *kakelei* remains with the vendor clan even after sale/*kulia*. In 2002-4, the response to this was universally one of incredulity, and assertions that of course *kakelei* can be transferred, what would be the point of buying something if you didn't receive the *kakelei*, followed on some occasions by the suggestion that this must be the statements of crooked old men who want to get money twice for the same piece of land. Epstein notes that sale by *kulia* never gives secure ownership as it only takes one member of the vendor clan to stand up and claim not to have been consulted a couple of years down the track for the land to revert back (Epstein 1969:131-2). Epstein implies that this is one of the mechanisms by which *kakelei* remains with the vendor clan. If this is the case it is thus a mechanism for control of the land to pass back to the vendors, perhaps if the purchasers are remiss in maintaining an ongoing customary relationship with the vendors after the *kulia* transaction. Today, this 'problem' has been partially resolved by the practice that has evolved over the past 30 years of witnessing all purchases with statutory declarations, which all adult members of the vendor clan must sign before a purchase is finalised. I was often told that if you have what is referred to as "the paper", i.e. the statutory declaration, then you are safe. One old man explained to me that "before we did not know how to buy and sell properly. Now that we have the paper, we have more *savvy* (know-how)". In this context 'papers' do have power as the practice of 'strengthening' (as one person described it to me) the buying of ground with statutory declarations is a process that the Matupi themselves developed in response to their own perceived need to make more secure the land that they were buying to develop for their children. The paper has power as the Matupi themselves acknowledge that the statutory declaration "kills the talk" on a piece of ground, at least between the selling clan and the buyer (of course there is always the possibility for a third party to claim that the vendors never had the right to sell the ground in the first place). I never came across a case where the selling clan was able to reclaim land from a buyer where the buyer had a statutory declaration. Older purchases from the 1950s and 1960s and early 1970s were still subject to dispute as the big men who witnessed the payments without 'paper' died, the selling clan tried to deny all knowledge of the payment and argued that the buyers residence on the land was merely by temporary permission that they now wished to terminate. This statutory declaration practice which has evolved at Matupit is now semi-officially recognised by the Provincial Government, which has copies of all statutory declarations of land purchases at its Lands Division and has official guidelines for the practice.^{vi} The land is still legally considered to be customary land, and although the purchaser, if a man, has the right to pass it on to his children, in the next generation it must follow matrilineal principles (and so it will most likely go to one of his daughter's children- meaning for example that if a man buys land from his own clan for his children, the land passes from his matriline to his wife's). The Lands Division and the majority of Matupi clearly view *kulia* today as a transaction that implies the complete alienation of all rights in a piece of land from one group to another. Epstein's claim that "the estate vested by a 'purchase' is *always* regarded as inferior to a *kakale?*" (Epstein 1969:131, my emphasis) has at the very least been complicated by changes to Tolai *kulia* over the past 40 years.

I have mentioned the role of customary practices in regard to land transactions in passing, and I would like to finish this paper with a brief look at attitudes towards custom, first in relation to land and then in general among the Matupit community today. The performance of custom has always been of great importance to people's claims to reside on certain pieces of land. A man wishing to stay on his father's clan land after his death would pay close attention to helping his father's clan in custom, in particular distributing large amounts of shell money upon the occasion of his death. Even someone residing on his own clan land would not expect residence by right, but would be expected to help in custom. Someone remiss in their customary obligations would be considered to bring shame on the clan and would be likely to be given the worst pieces of ground to live and garden upon. Today the picture is slightly different. The decline of power of the big men in the clan means that in many cases young men simply build a house on clan land without consultation with elders of the clan. There is genuine fear of the actions of the current generation of young men. They are perceived as violent and aggressive and they are very rarely challenged. (One old Tolai told me that 'our young people today are not Tolai, they are like Highlanders', which is a powerful statement for a Tolai to make given their self perception as PNG's civilised indigenous elite as opposed to the supposedly violent and 'backward' Highlanders). The Matupit community

as Sikut has just begun the performance of some customary practices at Matupit, such as the *namata*, a kind of initiation for the first born son of a family. These trends are pointed to by some such as Jacob Simet as evidence that customary land tenure practices are bound to re-emerge at Sikut. For the majority of Sikut residents however this is not the case. As one young man resident at Sikut explained to me “when you do custom at Matupit you are concerned with land. When you do custom here it is custom *tasol* (only)” This man argued that many Matupit residents who had been heavily involved in custom before they got blocks at Sikut, now were involved in the bare minimum for social respectability. He argued that now they had their own land, they no longer felt the need to keep the clan happy by performing custom.

Although people were often reluctant to speak out in public, custom was often referred to in private conversations as an expensive waste of time. In particular the role of what are often referred to as ‘big-shots’ (in deliberate contrast to the traditional Tok Pisin ‘big man’) is notable. In this context one individual, who I shall refer to as ToNgala in particular stands out at Matupit. He is the village’s most successful businessman, owning a tourist operation, and he is also the pre-eminent leader of custom at Matupit. In private conversations he is continually attacked for his alleged ‘commercialisation’ of custom in general, and the secret men’s *tubuan* society in particular. It is alleged that while he makes large amounts of money from getting tourists to look at customary dances, he only gives the boys who perform them bunches of uncooked bananas as payment. There is anger amongst many that he allegedly treats custom as a ‘business’ and the boys who dance as if they were just “workers”. It is widely acknowledged that no-one at Matupit has the same amount of customary knowledge as ToNgala, yet even this knowledge is sometimes denigrated. This kind of knowledge has to be ‘purchased’ with shell money. A contrast is drawn by many between the big men of the past who acquired the necessary shell-money through a lifetime’s involvement in the ongoing web of customary obligation, and ToNgala who allegedly simply bought the necessary shell-money in one go with money he made from his business. Strathern (1999: esp. 206-12) argues that in looking at Melanesian custom it is important to understand how the public performance and presentation of customary wealth items is seen in some way as demonstrating the presenter’s handling of certain valued “capacities”. In this case the capacity demonstrated by knowledge ultimately bought with money, is seen by some as being very different and of a lesser legitimacy than the capacities measured by the same knowledge when it was in the hands of the previous generation of big men. This ties into a wider sense of disillusionment with the current generation of leaders who are seen as being out of touch with the village that they no longer reside in. One Sikut resident described his feelings to me in the following manner. “the bigmen before were bigmen in the gardens or in making fishtraps, it’s not like ToNgala with his big belly pulling the men to get shell-money for himself. Before bigmen became bigmen with their own strength, it’s not like JK (John Kaputin, a Matupi who was the former member of parliament for Rabaul and a close ally of ToNgala’s) or ToNgala, you can’t see their big garden, how many gardens have they got, how many pigs have they raised? Before men became big men in the tubuan through their work, and people recognised the bigmen. How did ToNgala come up, he hasn’t got a garden, he hasn’t got a fishtrap for custom” The speaker then went on to rubbish John Kaputin’s involvement in custom, in particular his habit of returning from Port Moresby to curry favour by distributing shell money when people at the village had died. “We said JK was ‘the member for dead people’ when they were alive he did nothing. There’s some stupid people in the village who don’t understand this. They say, he helps us with shell-money. He eats shit so we’ll eat shit too.” There has recently been a lot of attention paid to the emergence of class divisions in Papua New Guinea, in particular with the publication of Gewertz and Errington’s book, “Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea”. What my experience at Matupit leads me to believe is that attitudes of class rivalry are not just to be found in ‘new’ social environments such as the Rotary or the Wewak Golf Club but can also be found at the heart of people’s attitude towards and practice of ‘traditional’ village activities such as custom, and that also the contempt in which the new indigenous elite hold grassroots Papua New Guineans is more than reciprocated.

Other stories about ToNgala abound. He is alleged to have sold photographs of the tubaun society’s masked dancers to a “German internet company” for 10mK. He is supposed to have supported the Sikut resettlement scheme as part of a plot to dispossess Matupi of the island that

their village is built on and turn it into a tourist resort from which he would of course make millions. The response of ToNgala's supporters to such accusations is simple- "cargo cult". Yet in the classical Melanesian cargo cult material, it is always the whites who are envisaged as the long lost kin who refuse to honour their reciprocal obligations by holding on to the cargo meant for Melanesians. If these accusations are to be viewed as ToNgala's supporters wish, then it means that in grassroots Matupit consciousness, their own home-grown indigenous elite has taken the whites' place. Maybe it is no surprise to hear that ToNgala and John Kaputin are referred to by some at Matupit as "black mastas", ('masta' being the Tok Pisin term for 'white man'). Indeed one of Kaputin's former colleagues in the anti-colonial Mataugnan association of the 1970s explained to me that John's problem was that "the money turned him white". There is an interesting parallel with the fears that ToNgala will steal their ancestral land with a similar fear during the Mataugnan era that the Australians were going to resettle them and turn their island into a naval base. When I told this story to an ex-Australian patrol officer, his response was unsurprisingly the same- 'cargo cult'. In the 1970s the "cargo cult" fear was that the Australian government would steal their land. Today it is their one of their own.

During my first year in East New Britain, these criticisms of ToNgala were never made publicly. Then the leading elder of ToNgala's father's clan died. In normal circumstances, ToNgala would be expected to play a leading role in the organisation of his mortuary feasts. With the death a long simmering dispute between ToNgala and the young men of his father's clan rose to the surface. They claimed that he kept wanting to delay the feasts to look after his tourist business which they saw as disrespectful, but the dispute was also clearly linked to a long standing resentment over ToNgala's continued use of land and ritual knowledge acquired from his father that they considered to be theirs). In an unprecedented move, the young men organised the rituals themselves and even raised two tubuan dancers without ToNgala's assistance. Such an act was understood by everyone as an open revolt against ToNgala's authority and a public humiliation for him. For the next few weeks ToNgala's opponents were ceaselessly gloating over the fact. Over the next few months, ToNgala, who had previously been the ever present leader of all customary events at Matupit, was absent from all custom. Although he has now made a partial return, his position is unlikely to be fully restored. On one level this is nothing new. In particular it is well known that the death of an elder who acted as the glue between the clan and one of its children can often act as the catalyst for divisions to emerge in public. But what was striking in this context was the way in which widespread support was expressed for the young men, by others in the village with little direct involvement in the dispute as it represented a blow against ToNgala's alleged money minded degradation of custom. It would be no exaggeration to say that on the day of the mortuary feasting, that that particular customary performance was amongst other things celebrated by many as a public blow against the perceived heartlessness of the new indigenous elite.

To conclude I would like to suggest that the volcanic eruption and in particular the settlement of new land at Sikut has acted to an extent as a catalyst for certain changes that the Matupi have been battling with at home for decades. Although no anthropologist would argue that they are simply being 'Westernised' (although many Tolai will themselves make this claim rhetorically with either a positive or negative gloss), I would argue that there are more opportunities for Tolai who wish to partially cut themselves out of the extended networks of obligation that tend to characterise Melanesian society. The Sikut resident that I quoted earlier clearly recognises the importance of land tenure to these changes when he admits that his attempts to limit his relationship with his clan nephews would create a lot of trouble if he was living on clan land. I suspect he and others like him will still have plenty of battles ahead, but for now they clearly believe that new land tenure gives them extra possibilities to act in new ways. Yet it is also clear that simply changing land tenure by itself is not the magic bullet that will turn Melanesians into the acquisitive individuals so beloved of economic developers, even if this were morally desirable. The fear of sorcery for example shows that extended kin networks and the passions that they arouse will have to be taken into account for a long time to come.

ⁱ See for example Fingleton (1985:58-59) or Bradley (1982:191-200) on the increasing importance of the nuclear family in Tolai social life.

ⁱⁱ This was made clear for example in numerous interviews that I had with Horim Ladi the current head of the Provincial Government's Division of Lands

ⁱⁱⁱ A few Matupi also ascribed his tendency to talk in such terms to his time as a PhD student in anthropology at an Australian University!

^{iv} According to the GRA this is because World Bank regulations, have consistently lead to delays in funding being made available.

^v "In the indigenous system land was not a commodity. Transfers of land were not conducted according to the principles of the market; rather they were effected between parties who saw themselves as already linked by social bonds, and when land was exchanged in return for *tambu* it was usually in recognition of the obligations of kinship or other customary claims... the payment demanded in *tambu* was also small. This remains the position today in regard to 'sales' of land within the village, where the sums involved in cash and *tambu* fall very far short of the market value." (Epstein 1969:132)

^{vi} A practice that started in this part of East New Britain under the Australian Administration in the early 1970s. See Jessep 1980:123-4, who cites sources noting the recording of land sales in East New Britain and mentions that although the practice conferred no title that it was "apparently valued for the documentary evidence of the sale and the publicity of the payment made at the office." Also Fitzpatrick 1983:19; who makes a general point for some areas of PNG drawing largely on Tolai evidence, "...unofficial and semi-official land registers... had emerged...unofficial transfers as land as a commodity were taking place between members of different groups. Various operative strategies had developed to restrict the range of obligations effective in succession to land, to increase individual control over the process and to confine transmitted rights more to the nuclear family or a favoured son. Nor were these trends without suggestive precedent in the 'customary base... With the extension of cash-cropping after the second world war... there emerged, a greater awareness of land as having a reified value and greater, and effective, pressure for more clearly defined individual rights in land."

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