Agency and the « Avatar » narrative at the Porgera gold mine, Papua New Guinea

by

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ABSTRACT

The Porgera gold mine in Papua New Guinea is a subject of contention in the international development community. Anthropologists are among a range of scholars who have investigated community-mine relations since 1981, as solo postgraduate students, as leaders of university research teams, as members of social impact assessment teams, and as members of an oversight body. Recently, in a leading journal, the NGO activist Catherine Coumans accused the anthropologists who have taken on advisory or impact assessment roles of lending legitimacy to the commercial interests of the mining company, while 'remaining silent' about environmental damage and human rights abuses. This paper looks at the various accounts of Porgera in terms of 'narratives' of mining, leading to a close examination of the Coumans' portrayal of the mine through the lens of an Avatar *narrative, after the film of this name. The paper presents evidence to reject the arguments of Coumans.*

Keywords: Anthropology, development, mining, human rights, Indigenous people

RÉSUMÉ

La mine d'or de Porgera en Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée est l'objet de dissensions dans la communauté de développement international. Les anthropologues comptent parmi les chercheurs qui ont enquêté sur les relations mine-communauté depuis 1981, en tant que doctorants, chefs de projets de recherches, évaluateurs indépendants des impacts sociaux, ou membres du comité de surveillance externe. Récemment, dans une revue de premier plan, C. Coumans, militante d'une ONG opposée à la mine, a accusé les anthropologues impliqués dans les études d'impact de légitimer les intérêts commerciaux de la compagnie minière, tout en « restant muets » face aux dommages environnementaux et aux violations des droits humains. Cet article montre la diversité des « récits miniers » portant sur Porgera et examine en particulier le portrait de la mine proposé par Coumans, qualifié de récit Avatar*, d'après le film éponyme. Les éléments de preuve rassemblés permettent de rejeter ses arguments.*

Mots-clés : Anthropologie, developpement, exploitation minière, droits humains, peuples autochtones

The story of the Porgera gold mine in the Enga Province of the Papua New Guinea highlands (see map in Jorgensen, this volume, Figure 1, p. 25) is well known from the works of the scholars who worked in the area from the early exploration period around 40 years ago (Gibbs, 1975, 1977; Wohlt, 1978; Biersack, 1980), the premine period 30 years ago (Gibbs, 1981, 1982; Mangi, 1988; Kyakas and Wiessner, 1992), as well as from those starting their research in the production period (Banks, 1997; Imbun, 1995; Jacka, 2003; Golub, 2006). At least four books have been written on the mine from the perspective of mine-community relations (Golub, 2001; Imbun, 2002; Jackson and Banks, 2002; Golub, 2014). I do not count myself as a Porgera specialist, but I have also worked in Porgera: in 1990, 2005 and 2006-2007 (Burton, 1991, 1992, 2005a, 2006).

In this paper I look at five narratives about mining in Porgera, that is to say five different written perspectives about «what is going on» in

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Porgera, with a view to offering a critical analysis of the last of the five which, for reasons that will become evident, I have called the *Avatar narrative* after the 2009 James Cameron movie of the same name (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film).

For the few readers who – judging by the movie's record-breaking ticket sales – missed this film, a plot summary is as follows. In the 22nd century, the Resources Development Administration (RDA) has aquired mining rights over Pandora, a planetary satellite in the Alpha Centauri system, the only source of a rare mineral known as unobtanium[1]. A condition of the mining rights is that the RDA must not endanger the way of life and the environment of the blue-skinned, three metre tall Na'vi, intelligent beings who live in harmony with nature on Pandora. In the movie, however, the RDA security force plans to kill or evict the Na'vi and to this end the «Avatar Program» – a community relations team whose members include an «exobiologist» and a «xenoanthropologist» – is tolerated as an expedient way to persuade the Na'vi to evacuate the mining area. When the team comes to realise that RDA will destroy the Na'vi sacred sites, and the Na'vi themselves if they do not move, they switch allegiance and rally the Na'vi to defend themselves. All looks lost until the wildlife of Pandora, summoned by prayer to Eywa, an ecological goddess, intercede and help the Na'vi defeat and capture the evil humans who, with the exception of the «good» ones working for the Avatar Program, are expelled from Pandora forever.

The movie's main theme is clearly an allegory for the unchecked appetite of corporations for the resources of others. Humans in *Avatar*, in the guise of the Resources Development Administration, are not content with having exhausted Earth's resources (read «First World resources») and so turn to the resources of people on other worlds (read «on the lands of Indigenous People in developing countries»)[2].The commercial success of the film suggests that this theme was popular with movie-goers, indeed so popular it might be argued that the whole thing has become a *meme*, a persistent idea that takes on a life of its own.

As I shall show, a form of this narrative – or even *meme* – drives an NGO's engagement with issues at the Porgera mine, leading to the publication, in the pages of *Current Anthropology*, of its representative's promotion of her activities at Porgera and her disparagement of the forms of engagement of all other anthropologists in the affairs of the mine.

The questions I raise in this paper are (i) whether the Avatar narrative is at all helpful in understanding the complexity of relationships between mining companies and mine area communities in modern Papua New Guinea and (ii) whether the specific account of Porgera that the narrative gave rise to in *Current Anthropology* is accurate enough to advance knowledge.

The other narratives

A first narrative about Porgera emerges from the collective work of ethnographers, geographers and cultural specialists working towards an understanding the unique social organisation, deep history and interconnectedness of small scale societies in all parts of the Pacific over the last two and a half centuries. Early studies of the Ipili people of the Porgera Valley and their neighbours fall into this tradition, starting with the brief summary by Meggitt based on a short visit in 1957 when the Ipili numbered between 2000 and 2500 people (Meggitt, 1957). They were described as one of several small, remote ethnic groups in Western Enga, linked through ties of kinship, shared threads of oral history, and through trading systems to larger populations in valleys to the south (e.g. Glasse, 1968) and east (e.g. Meggitt, 1965; Hays, 1992). In this *ethnographic narrative*, the political processes of engagement with the outside world that engender development and that development engenders are largely absent. If there is any portrayal – not particularly by the writers of the 1950s and 1960s – of the prospects for development, it is framed only in terms of their curiosity about but incapacity to influence the forces of global capital[3]. More detail and views informed by another three and a half decades of work by anthropologists expands Meggitt's early glimpse of the Ipili in a collection of papers edited by Biersack (1995).

A second narrative is that provided by more recent scholars, and specialists in social development, social and environmental impact as-

1. Aerospace engineers have been using variants of this name (usually spelled «unobtainium») since the 1950s, usually to describe materials with performance characteristics beyond that of currently available materials, or whose source placed them out of reach during the Cold War.

2. The politics of *Avatar* have been widely discussed (*cf.* www.cbsnews.com/news/the-politicq-of-avatar/) with comments pro and con coming from the likes of the president of Bolivia (a «profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defense of nature») and Vatican Radio (the film «cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium»).

3. Some Ipili ventured as far as the Wabag Patrol Post, 80 km to the east, in the 1950s where their presence «interested» Meggitt (1957: 31). He says the presence of alluvial miners at Porgera in the 1950s was tolerated by the Ipili «as a source of trade goods» (1957: 32). These are the two mentions of relationships with the outside world.

sessment (SIA/EIA). A vein of PhD scholarship emerged in the 1990s to explicitly reject the «helplessness» theme of the ethnographic narrative. An insider's perspective is that of the Engan academic, Benedict Imbun, whose writings focus on Indigenous economic participation. His thesis is that remoteness was quickly transformed through the development brought by mine construction, and that far from being bystanders, the Ipili underwent a rapid transformation from being tribespeople following their traditional ways to a skilled workforce able to operate one of the world's largest mines (e.g. 2000). Among the outsider perspectives are those of Glenn Banks who, while absorbing the above, has profiled the considerable complexity of the economic relationships and «lines» of sustainability at Porgera (e.g. Banks, 1997, 2006); Alex Golub, who started out by looking minutely at the relationships between landowners and the mining company through the prism of year long negotiations over a large waste dump (Golub, 2006, 2014); and Jerry Jacka, who was able to offer a complementary view of a «have-not» group just outside the main mine lease areas (Jacka, 2003). All three take in the ethnographic narrative, but add the extra ingredient of local agency. Arguably the best exemplar of this approach is the treatment of landowner interactions with capital at the Lihir mine in Papua New Guinea (Bainton, 2010). I will call the collective outcome the *ethnographic+ narrative* – «ethnographic» for the traditional deep understanding of local processes and «+» for the emphasis on local agency.

I should clarify what is conveyed here. Obviously all human societies have agency in the sense that they organise their own lives and run their own internal politics, but I am using the word «agency» in the special sense of the *external relations* of the Ipili and other mine area communities that bear on the control of their own destiny. Agency or not-agency has little to do with the popularism/miserabilism discussed in some parts of the development literature (e.g. Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 118*ff*) or a hypothetically closer identification by the recent ethnographers with the development challenges of the people among whom they work in the activism of a particular form of *encliquage* (Olivier de Sardan, 2008: 93*ff*). Filer's portrayal of the «moderate» version of political anthropology with its role for the practitioner as «the moderator, the mediator, the negotiator» (Filer, 1999b: 90; *cf.* Filer, 1996; Kirsch, 1996) is closer, but I am talking of narratives here, not interventions, and in few of the cases I have mentioned have the scholars been able to be anything other than ethnographers. It is essential to emphasise that political activity at and around mines can be constructive – the ideal, where representative bodies work effectively to advance the interests of their constituents – or it can be destructively conflict-ridden, but the fact is that the kind of agency we are talking about in Papua New Guinea from about the middle 1980s onwards is so muscular that the spaces in which Filer's «moderate» outsiders, *encliqué* or otherwise, might be able to participate are small and politically irrelevant. This also explains my preference for the terms *ethnography* and *ethnography+*, which carry a more observational and witnessing connotation, over similar plays on the term «anthropology».

Those who are active in the production of the ethnographic+narrative incline to be positive about the capabilities of local communities to cope with change. This is no better expressed than by Kirsch in his introduction to *Reverse Anthropology*:

> «the Yonggom are actors in world history.» (2006: 5)

In emphasising agency, I suggest, what those concerned with mining are thinking of is that local voices are properly heard[4], inter-community competition is channelled constructively, the terms of mining agreements are adhered to, companies fulfil their national and international compliance obligations, and the recommendations of social impact assessments are correctly digested and implemented. We do not have to conduct an opinion poll among the ethnographers to find this out; these are views frequently expressed by the members of landowner communities among whom the ethnography+ scholars spend their research stays.

What the insider views amount to is a third narrative, a *narrative of agency*, such as is seen at Porgera and at a variety of other mines in Papua New Guinea. Macintyre and Foale discuss how complaints about the environmental impact of mining on Lihir coexisted with eagerness to engage with it: when the mine opened, absentees flooded back to the island wanting the benefits of development and to escape mainland towns where life is hard and services are poor (2004: 234). I have an empirical involvement with this as it was I who censussed the resident Lihirians in 1992. In 2011-2012 I was back to design a survey of migrants living around two mine leases and at both periods local discourse was all about engagement with the mine in one form or ano-

4. Internationally, this is framed in terms of mining on the lands of Indigenous people proceeding on the terms of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, but what this really means is seldom pursued in any detail. For some of the ethnography+ scholars, by contrast, almost the entirety of their written output is devoted to elucidating how local actors engage with mining, what they think about it, what they think they will get out of it, who they are conflicted with, what strategies they employ to pursue their goals – amounting to the intense scrutiny of just one thing: FPIC.

ther. At Ok Tedi, a University of Papua New Guinea colleague and I took some trouble in the 1990s to track down Krenem Wonhenai, the man who had represented the North Fly in the National Parliament at the time when the *Mining (Ok Tedi) Act* 1976 was passed, finding him at his village. All he could tell us was *mi pait strong long kisim main,* «I fought hard to get the mine» (Burton, 1997: 33-34). The same observations could be made of the communities around the Hidden Valley mine in Morobe Province. In 1987, they contested one another in court, not to repel the forces of international capital from their lands but to establish which among them should lead the engagement with it as principal landowners. I first visited these communities in 1995 and my last extended round of fieldwork was in 2012. In that time village elders have never waivered in their central aspiration: they have always wanted development and the means of obtaining a better life for their children than they have enjoyed themselves, but it has to be on fair terms.

The «on fair terms» qualification is an indication that no community members at any of these places favour mining for its own sake and it has certainly not been the role of any of the anthropologists mentioned in this paper to advance the case of mining.

A notable anti-mining contribution to the narrative of agency is that offered by some of the ex-combatant groups on Bougainville. These ex-combatants – there are others aligned with the President of the Autonomous Bougainville Government who are thinking of re-opening the Panguna mine with the goal of being able to finance independence from Papua New Guinea – are dealing with many other issues in a post-conflict situation. What is relevant is that they have a voice and that they are using it in a powerful way.

A fourth narrative is the *mine operator's narrative*. At Porgera the mine operator is the Porgera Joint Venture (PJV), currently 95% owned by the Canadian miner Barrick Gold, with 2.5% shareholdings each held by the Enga Provincial Government and the Ipili landowners. Since Barrick has mines, or prospects about to open as mines, in eleven countries, at the general level this narrative is about «responsible mining» and «stakeholder engagement» through which a «licence to operate», it is claimed, is earned by the miner (Barrick, 2013: 11-12).

The *mine operator's narrative* has contradictions that have yet to be resolved in any country, let alone at Porgera. On the one hand, the slogan on Barrick's current home page reads «Disciplined, profitable production», i.e. a Friedmanite view that a corporation has no other responsibility than to make profits for shareholders, subject to the taxes and production royalties kept by host governments. Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian-born Harvard and Oxford-educated economist, has reinforced this by promoting the economic contribution of mining to the economies of the global «south» as a pathway to development (Moyo, 2009), and it is not surprising, therefore, that she is a recent appointment to the board of Barrick Gold (Barrick, 2011a). But on the other hand, Barrick is a member of the ICMM, at the core of whose sustainable development framework is the undertaking to «integrate sustainable development considerations within the corporate decision-making process», i.e. being profitable is fine, but the sustainable development of mine area communities cannot be compromised.

I introduce these narratives to contrast them with what follows. I will now leave them to devote the rest of this paper to the *Avatar narrative*, because of the popularity of this as a meme-like idea and the black-and-white views it appears to promote[5].

Porgera and the Avatar narrative

My specific point of departure is a recent paper on Porgera by Catherine Coumans of Mining Watch Canada in *Current Anthropology* (Coumans, 2011). Coumans had close knowledge of the 1996 Marcopper Mine disaster in the Philippines where toxic waste polluted a river and the ocean (*cf.* Danielson, 2002: 347-248). The link between Marcopper and Porgera is that the most significant shareholder at both mines during the 1990s was the mining company Placer Dome. Placer ceased operations in the Philippines but continued its operations at Porgera until acquired by Barrick Gold in 2006. Legal actions against Placer (and now Barrick) continue to the present day (Cinco, 2014).

The Avatar narrative could easily be about Placer and Barrick's behaviour at Porgera: for example whether they have been exploitative, or operated the mines in breach of basic sustainability principles. However, being a *narrative* it is not about those things. I have linked it with *Avatar* because its main theme is a binary formulation of the relationship between capital and tribal people.

In the film, the two sides were helpfully differentiated on screen: the forces of (interplanetary) capital by their use of enormous machines and the members of local communities by being 3m tall and coloured blue.

5. A sixth, a seventh and however many more narratives as is necessary could be derived from national conversations about the exploitation of natural resources in Papua New Guinea now being played out in villages away from mines, in the print media, on television and, increasingly since the introduction of low cost mobile telephony in 2007, on social media. However, this paper is not about them.

As applied to a real life situation, the narrative must necessarily divide everyone into two camps: the forces of world capital and those who assist them, on the one hand, and the guileless members of local communities, on the other hand. I will call these the *capital* and *blue* teams.

The position of the ethnographic+scholars in this narrative is problematic. Their forebears, the producers of the ethnographic narrative, are clearly with the blue team, and the miners are with the capital team, but it is not clear where to place the newer scholars and the impact assessment specialists. Filer pointed out in the 1990s that a «multilocal, multivocal and multifocal form of ethnographic inquiry» had *already developed* in Papua New Guinea, where practitioners found themselves out of necessity talking to a wide variety of stakeholders, contrasting this with a «unilocal, univocal and unifocal» form of ethnography where the radical agenda was to achieve a transfer of power from the «system» to the «community» (Filer, 1999b: 89). Into the bargain, the Avatar narrative would prefer the members of local communities to be community-minded and fairly unsophisticated, whereas the accounts of mine area politics appearing in the writing of the ethnographic+ scholars in the 1990s and the 2000s – whether they are looking at Porgera, Lihir or Bougainville – show a quite different picture. In these accounts, while some landowner leaders lead in an orthodox way, others scheme incessantly, show shifting allegiances, fail to co-operate with each other, game mine benefit schemes, and endorse quite unexpected ideologies.

In her *Current Anthropology* paper, Coumans shows no uncertainty. She is quite uncritical of «Ipili leaders» (see «The wrong blue team?» below), but condemns anyone who accepts sponsored or consultancy work around the Porgera mine, including those who sit on the mine's oversight body PEAK[6] as reprehensible «corporate engagement actors» and «for-profit experts». I should say that this also includes Philip Gibbs, who began his engagement with the Ipili as their local parish priest. She moves anyone undertaking impact assessments from the ethnographic+ narrative, where they thought they were, to the mine operator's narrative.

Coumans does not mention the doctoral students at all, despite the fact that, mirroring her experience in the Philippines, their work has been the documentation and analysis of what has been going on in Porgera and it is they who have contributed so much to the ethnographic+ narrative. Following the logic of Coumans «unilocal, univocal and unifocal» exegesis, they must have the concepts of agency with which they have populated their analyses of local political processes stripped away from them. In consequence, it would appear that their efforts are for nothing as their findings are returned to the fold of the agency-less ethnographic narrative.

Glossing over the fact that Coumans' «for-profit experts» may well be handing any earnings from work at Porgera to their university (in my case I turned over project income to the University of Papua New Guinea in 1990-1991 and to the Australian National University in 2005-2007), she says such people have lent legitimacy to the way that Barrick Gold deals with the local communities, while «remaining silent about the environmental and human rights abuses to which they become privy» (Coumans, 2011: S29).

This is much more serious than a mere confusion over what narrative or paradigm Porgera scholars should be assigned to. If substantiated, the accusations would imply that a range of malpractices had been carried out over many years by those undertaking consultancy or advisory roles at Porgera.

A sketch of social impact monitoring in Porgera, 1990-2005

The Porgera mine was opened in 1990 with the Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke in attendance. I was there myself, locked in an office as part of the security measures for Hawke's visit. As a staff member of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University Papua New Guinea, it was quite reasonable that I should bring senior students and the late Saem Majnep, an Indigenous ecological researcher of international renown, out on fieldwork to Papua New Guinea's most recent economy-supporting mining project. Given that an influx of migrants from other districts was likely to be one of the project's biggest impacts, we set to work on a census of the Porgera Census Division. Our figures bore out the magnitude of the influx, showing that the population had grown at the rate of 7% a year from the 5,029 counted in the National Census in 1980, not counting the mine workforce (Burton, 1992)[7]. The response of the mining company was to cancel the project.

6. Porgera Environmental Awareness Committee. Coumans singled out the Melbourne University anthropologist Martha Macintyre, alleging that she «became complicit in PEAK's implicit and explicit support for the PJV mine's responses to environmental claims and alleged abuses of human rights in the SML area» (Coumans, 2011: S36). Macintyre successfully obtained an apology from *Current Anthropology* (Aiello, 2012).

7. Growth has continued at this rate ever since. By the time of the later events described in this paper, the population had grown beyond 30,000 with a large influx of people in search of a livelihood in artisanal mining.

I have reviewed what happened next on three occasions (Burton, 1999, 2005b; Filer *et al.*, 2008). In summary, in compliance with PNG legislation, the company was required to have an Environment Management and Monitoring Plan (EMMP), part of which was to monitor social impacts over the life of the mine. Colin Filer, Glenn Banks, Susy Bonnell and I designed the first iteration of the social monitoring part of this (Burton *et al.*, 1993). My participation – to restart the census and genealogy project from 1990 – was cancelled again in mid-1993 (Burton, 1999). Instead, a local leader was contracted to collect fresh genealogies for the seven lease area descent groups[8] so that river damage payments could be made to them.

Banks and Bonnell began mine monitoring in 1993-94, which overlapped with a standalone study undertaken by Bonnell (1994) and Banks' doctoral fieldwork (Banks, 1997). In 1997 they produced an Action Plan comprising 77 points in urgent need of attention (Banks and Bonnell, 1997). But instead of implementing the plan, Placer Dome cancelled local monitoring and began issuing an annual 24 page brochure with a short section on «social progress» written in Canada (Placer Dome, 1999-2004). A compendium of the work completed before Placer shut down the monitoring studies was later published in an edited volume at the Australian National University (Filer, 1999).

Commodity prices were low at the start of the 2000s and Placer management began mine closure planning (NSR *et al.*, 2002). But at the start of 2006 Barrick Gold acquired Placer Dome and, with rising gold prices, the prospect of mine closure was shelved. Barrick embarked on a new course of resettling the 189 families that its predecessor had moved away from the plant site in 1989. This led to new and controversial work on the resettlement project at Porgera in 2006-2007.

Controversies, 2006-2011

I now come to the issues that most directly bear on what Coumans says about the «for-profit experts».

A first controversy relates to a decade of human rights abuses by company security guards. The incidents included rape, beatings and the shooting deaths of artisanal miners within the mining lease and were investigated separately by the Harvard Law School (HLS, 2009) and Human Rights Watch (2010). Barrick was obstructive for several years, but conceded in April 2011 that it had now «evidence suggesting possible criminal conduct, including some instances of sexual assaults» and that cases had been referred to the police. Barrick assured stakeholders that «external researchers» had been commissioned to investigate the causes and nature of violence against women (Barrick, 2011b). In fact, it had resisted such a step since Bonnell's 1994 report and this initiative was instigated by PEAK, at the urging of Macintyre (Johnson, 2011).

A second controversy was «Operation Ipili»which took place between April and July 2009 when three police mobile squads and a Defence Force communications section were deployed to Porgera to put a stop to the armed conflicts then raging across the Porgera Valley. The operation started on 27 April 2009 when the mobile squads moved onto customary land at a place called Wangima and – inexplicably – burnt down 309 houses (*Post-Courier*, 30 April 2009). This has been investigated separately by Amnesty International (2010). The juxtaposition of these events and the presence (or non-presence) of anthropologists, such as me, is as follows.

Barrick had determined to adhere to the IFC's «Policy and Performance Standards on Social and Environmental Sustainability» in the resettlement project, specifically Performance Standard 5 «Land Acquisition and Involuntary Resettlement». This required a social impact assessment and a study to identify the people to be resettled. I was hired through my university by the consulting firm that was contracted for this work. In this context Coumans (2011: S33-S34) wrote:

> «[…] from 1990 on, anthropologists were engaged off and on by the PJV mine in efforts to gather census data and conduct social and ecological mapping and in a number of rounds of genealogies of the mine-affected Ipili communities related to relocation and compensation […] (Burton, 1999: 286-290)»

The embedded citation is to a paper by me, where I discussed those who had *preceded* me when my university team and I updated the genealogies of the Porgera landowners in 1990. No anthropologist followed me; I was the only one to «gather census data and conduct social and ecological mapping […] in a number of rounds of genealogies» from 1990. Coumans continued:

> «Most recently, in 2006 and 2007, following Barrick's takeover from Placer, anthropological expertise was engaged as part of a major study … related to a proposed resettlement of all clans living in the SML area. It is fair to say that the most extensive study of Ipili genealogy and culture in Porgera since 1990 has been done by anthropologists under hire by the

8. Golub (2007) should be consulted to get a feel for the problematic ontology of the seven descent lines, which overlap in membership. For good or for ill, the Ipili have chosen to represent themselves in terms of what they term seven «clans» and all genealogical work 1981-2007 has been organised in terms of them.

FIGURE 1. – The mining pit at Porgera and the settlement where the meeting with the Mamai Kenja described p. 46 was held. Sixteen years after the mine went into operation, the settlement had unimproved sanitation and no water supply (picture John Burton, 17 May 2006)

PJV mine and that much of this information remains proprietary.» (Coumans, 2011: S34)

Again, the only anthropologist involved in this was me. I and my field team worked on the landowner identification aspects of the resettlement project from May 2006 until June 2007. There is no escaping the fact, therefore, that the person that Coumans is pointing at under her subheading «Mapping the Ipili: Inside Knowledge, Proprietary Data, and Human Rights Abuses» is me alone. She next goes on to discuss the use of genealogies by the company for the purposes of paying out compensation and other entitlements:

«The problem of immigration for the PJV mine is in part related to the need to sort out entitlements to compensation and other mine-derived benefits related to the impacts of the mine. The ability to do this depends on reliable genealogies.» (Coumans, 2011: S34)

Referring to the statement by Filer, Banks and myself that community affairs had been:

«dogged by failure to maintain a proper record of who was actually entitled to receive whatever the company has agreed to distribute among the "local landowners".» (Filer *et al.*, 2008: 174)

Coumans says:

«The dispute between the [Porgera Land Owner Association] and the PJV mine over the houses that were burned down by PNG military and police during Operation Ipili […] highlights the need for transparency with regard to the PJV mine's proprietary genealogical data […] it is clear […] that the lists of landowners the company is using may well be deficient, opening the door to further conflict between clans and between clans and the company.» (Coumans, 2011: S34-S35).

The implication here is that negligence by me contributed to conflict in Porgera that led to the launching of Operation Ipili.

Fact check

Coumans's claim that the information I collected in 2006-2007 became «proprietary» data in the possession of the mine is wrong. I have previously discussed the ownership of genealogical information and the anthropologist's duty of care to look after it (Burton 2007b)[9]. I was careful to insert a research protocol in the contract governing the Porgera resettlement work to allow me to protect data that we collected[10].

9. Full disclosure: this paper appeared in *TAJA*, a journal now edited by Macintyre; my paper was published by the previous editor.

10. An evolution of this protocol is currently on the web site of the Australian Anthropological Society (http://www.aas.asn.au/) and was discussed by me at the Society's AGM in September 2012 in the context of a review of the AAS Code of Ethics.

Where	Homicides per 100,000	Source
Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, 2009	>132	Associated Press (2009)
Porgera 2002-2006	103	Wiessner et al. (2007, 2010); Jacka (pers.comm. 2007); own data
Iraq 2006 (civilians)	101	Iraq Body Count (www.iraqbodycount.org)
South Africa 2006-07	40.5	South Africa Police Service (2008)
Brazil 2005	29.2	PAHO (www.paho.org)
USA 2006	6.1	FBI (www.fbi.gov)
Australia 2005-06	1.5	Davies and Mouzos (2007)

TABLE 1. – Annual homicide rate in Porgera, 2002-2006, with worldwide comparisons

All organisations in OECD countries have long been bound by data privacy legislation. In Australia's case, the *Privacy Act* 1988 makes it a matter of law that information collected on individuals cannot be used unless it is «accurate, complete and up-to-date» and in cases of «transborder data flow» there must be «a law, binding scheme or contract» in place to guarantee its safe handling at the destination (OECD 1980; Office of the Federal Privacy Commissioner 2001).

As a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation regional organisation, Papua New Guinea falls under the umbrella of APEC commitments to data privacy[11], the latest guidance being the APEC Privacy Framework (APEC, 2005). To date, PNG has not made an effort to comply, but as soon as data collected on individuals enters or leaves PNG and crosses the international border of a party to the OECD Privacy Principles (http://oecdprivacy.org) (Australia, Canada, France, United States, etc.), OECD data privacy compliance is triggered at the sending or receiving party's end. Sending an email containing genealogical information from a university in Australia to a recipient in Papua New Guinea is «transborder data flow», as is carrying a field notebook across the international border by hand, if the notebook carries personal information.

The company's most recent database of landowners was handed to me at the start of the resettlement project as «baseline data». It proved to be contaminated with around 22,000 duplicates as a result of political interference in data collection and an absence of quality control within the company in the 1990s. Removing the duplicates and establishing verified identities for the real landowners was a major task between May 2006 and July 2007. The poor condition of the data[12] and the lack of understanding of the problems this was causing made it clear that a «binding scheme» was not in place. Consequently, I did not release raw data to Barrick before a new mine manager called off the resettlement project. I had the Dean of my college write to Barrick's head office to make sure that they understood why this was so.

Coumans is right that the company was using deficient information and that this may have been the cause of local conflict. But she is in error if she thinks this came about as a result of the complicity of anthropologists. On the contrary, it arose in spite of efforts by me to correct what the company already had – in 1990, in 1993 and 2006-2007 – not as a result of me, the only anthropologist to tackle this problem in the period she covers, creating this information.

The heart of Coumans' constructed narrative is that anthropologists have been «keeping silent in the face of human rights problems». This is a bizarre claim. I have noted Macintyre's efforts to have the plight of women in Porgera investigated. For my part, as soon as I became aware of an escalation in local conflicts I warned Barrick management of the likely intersection of the landowner identification exercise and local provocations of conflict. I did so at a workshop in Cairns in July 2007 called to resolve my non-release of the data. At the workshop I presented a 50 page analysis of the community conflicts around the mine (Burton, 2007a).

Coumans knows[13] that my warning resulted in Barrick's Director of Social Responsibility in Toronto replying to my Dean saying it was «unprofessional» of me to raise the issue of violence as if it was an «unexpected challenge» in working at Porgera. Barrick's letter dismissed my analysis and said a recent government study had established there was no local increase in violence. But this was wrong too; the «government study» was research personally funded and carried out

11. At least as far back as APEC's 1998 *Blueprint for Action on Electronic Commerce*.
12. The duplicate-contaminated data were on a single set of floppy disks. There were no backups.
13. I discussed this with her at a conference in Toronto in March 2009 during the course of a two hour conversation.

by Polly Wiessner of the University of Utah. Wiessner actually showed that in other districts of Enga Province warfare deaths had *declined* between 2001-03 and 2004-06, but in Porgera they had *doubled* (Wiessner, 2010: Table 7)[14]:

« […] in the Porgera area fighting increased to the point where a state of emergency was declared and a massive police operation carried out in 2009 quelling tribal warfare, amongst other things. However, magistrates do not feel that the underlying disputes over land with mine royalties have been solved. » (Wiessner, 2010: 17)

Does Coumans' blanket condemnation of anthropologists working in Porgera cover Wiessner as well?

Statistics included in my analysis, derived from Wiessner *et al.* (2007), Wiessner (2010), Jacka (pers. com., 2007) plus homicides that were common knowledge in Porgera between 2002 and 2006, showed that Porgera had been one of the world's most dangerous places in this five year period (table 1).

When the government did say something about the violence it was that police and soldiers would be sent to Porgera «to flush out the warlords» (*The National*, 6 April 2009). Obviously, the presence of «warlords» would be a bit more for most anthropologists than an «unexpected challenge» during fieldwork.

Coumans knows that Operation Ipili was requested by the local MP after conflict had escalated in 2008 and running gun battles had erupted all around the valley in the early part of 2009, but she neglects to explain this context.

Coumans is also aware that a document entitled *Restoring Justice* was issued in 2008 by the local MP, the provincial governor and the company's corporate affairs manager (Kikala *et al.*, 2008), but did not include it in her bibliography. Given that I had briefed the third author about the escalation of violence on two occasions, there is a fair chance that the document was in part prompted to be written – belatedly and despite the corporate scorn heaped on me from Toronto – as a result of my analysis. It is some comfort that while the Director of Social Responsibility, with no local knowledge, was saying my emphasis on the escalation of violence in Porgera was nonsense, these authors were saying the opposite:

« tribal fighting has […] increased dramatically in the Porgera District.» (Kikala *et al.*, 2008: 5)

In summary, Coumans' claim that complicity by me and/or other anthropologists in «keeping silent in the face of human rights problems» and supplying «proprietary genealogical data» that fuelled conflict in Porgera is fiction.

FIGURE 2. – Peakame Taro, a Tuanda woman, venting a grievance about living conditions at a meeting with Burton's research team at Apalaka, a mine area village at Porgera, 9 June 2006 (picture John Burton)

The wrong blue team?

The issue of how and on what terms anthropologists can work ethically in «difficult» field situations merits long and proper debate. What does not help is a forced analysis of the situation at Porgera, making anyone engaging with the Porgera mine fit into a binary formulation of the relationship between capital and tribal people, following the main theme in *Avatar*.

The secondary theme and denouement in *Avatar* concerns the heroic efforts on the part of the Avatar Program team to save the Na'vi and their lands. Accordingly, the Avatar narrative also requires heroes, both within the community and optionally among those who assist them. Coumans stakes a claim to the moral high ground – and perhaps to the role of «assisting hero» – by talking up the way she deals with members of the Porgeran community. She says:

«I have hosted Ipili leaders from Porgera in Canada yearly since 2008. I maintain ongoing communication with these leaders, as well as with members of other organizations and institutions with an interest in the Porgera case.» (Coumans, 2011: S30)

But who are these leaders and who elects them to their positions? Coumans does not name them, but we know perfectly well from media reports that one of her close associates at Porgera is the Chairman of the Porgera Land Owner Association (PLOA), Mark Ekepa, a strident critic of the mining company. Mr Ekepa, as media reports relate, regularly travels to Toronto to protest at Barrick company meetings. Throughout

14. Wiessner's findings were available in draft form in 2007. Her 2010 publication made no substantive alterations.

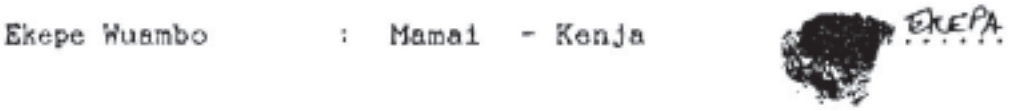

Figure 3. – «Mark» (thumb print) of Ekepa Wuambo on the signature page of the 1988 resettlement agreement (Placer PNG 1988)[15]

her paper, Coumans conveys the sense that the PLOA, as the locally endorsed representative body, is engaged in a valiant activist struggle on behalf of its members. But the PLOA, and Mark Ekepa in particular, appear in a very different light in the account given by Human Rights Watch in 2010.

Under the heading «poisonous local politics», Human Rights Watch reports that Porgeran informants allege that «the organization's leaders are lining their pockets with royalty payments that might otherwise flow to ordinary landowners», citing the fact that in 2009 the dozen or so PLOA executives[16] received US$1.4m in royalties compared with US$1.7m paid to the approximately 10,000 ordinary landowners who make up the membership (HRW, 2010: 35). If HRW's arithmetic is reasonably correct, it is obvious that accountability is a problem. The finding is backed by Banks' documentation of inequitable payment distributions in the early 2000s (Banks, 2002: 4). Pressed by Human Rights Watch to explain, Mr Ekepa claimed that Porgerans who laid complaints about the lack of financial transparency were «paid by the company to discredit him». Another PLOA official lost his temper (HRW, 2010: 36).

This completely different light on the PLOA is backed by a scathing report by the PNG National Research Institute:

> «The [Porgera Development Authority], the PLOA, the managers of the landowner portion of the equity stake, and [Local Level Government] officials have been unable or unwilling to explain where and how billions of kina are spent.» (Johnson, 2012: xi)

> « […] in the PLOA case, K40.2 million [of royalties] is untraceable and unaccountable to anybody but a very small number of people. » (Johnson, 2012: 88)

Worst of all, it is common knowledge in Porgera that Mr Ekepa achieved his position, not through popular acclaim and regular elections, but by killing his father, Ekepa Wuambo, one of the original 23 clan signatories to the Porgera agreements in 1989. The PNG Mineral Resources Authority's Project Liaison Officer told me this in 2007 by way of explanation why Mr Ekepa was invariably absent from Porgera, living in the capital city. Neither I nor my field team of three saw him once during thirteen months of field inquiries. In this time we interviewed 892 community members.

To get a feel for Mr Ekepa's local relationships, it is worth recounting a meeting that I held with the people that Mr Ekepa was meant to represent, the Mamai Kenja. My assignation with the Kenja was preceded by three failed attempts where men swore aggressively about the meeting process, the mining company, the mining company's community relations system, and basically anything to do with the relationship between the community and the mining project. In other words I was treated to a classic «blue v. capital» rant.

Finally, persuasion prevailed and the Kenja consented to a meeting with me within the bounds of their settlement at which they could air their grievances. These were wrapped up in a long parable[17] about water flowing down a pipe to a tap, where a person desiring to receive water could reasonably expect water to appear. Except that, in their case, nothing came out of the tap. The metaphor was about the flow of mining benefits which was, they had imagined, assured by the 1989 «mark» of their elder, Ekepa Wuambo (figure 3). Their complaint, once properly deciphered, had nothing at all to do with «blue v. capital»; it was really a «can't you see it's an elephant» tirade about internal conflict. They still did not refer to the fate of Mr Wuambo (his fate = the «elephant») which would have left a listener completely baffled if the background were not explained, as it was by our local advisers.

A search of the Papua New Guinea media fails to reveal any contemporaneous report of the killing, which is a recurrent problem when trying to establish timelines of locally notable events in all provinces, but finally an inquisitive journalist has asked the kinds of questions that Coumans might have thought to ask for herself some seven or eight years ago. In 2012, when looking into the curious relationship between an unnamed NGO – but which can hardly be other than MiningWatch Canada – and the Porgera Land Owner Association, a new journalist to PNG, Mike Butler, asked Mr Ekepa Jnr. some blunt questions:

15. This was one of a series of mine agreements approved by Ekepa Wuambo and his peers in 1988-1989.

16. This may in fact be made up of payments to Kupiane Yuu Anduane, the royalty recipient body whose 14 members include PLOA representatives. However, the conclusion would be unchanged.

17. Parables and metaphors are important forms of expression by those who contribute to the narrative of agency.

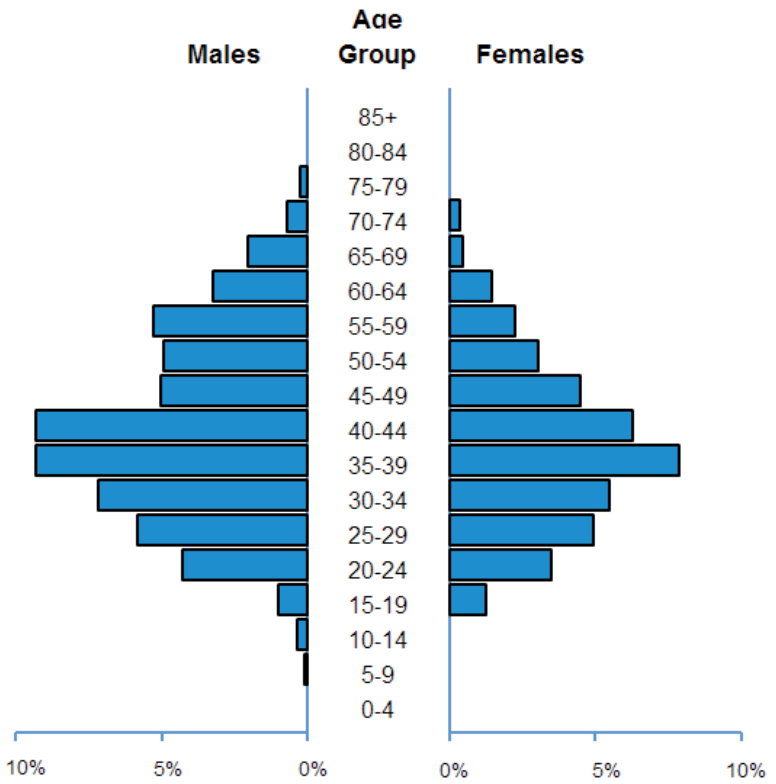

Figure 4. – Age and sex of 892 informants during 12 months of interviews at Porgera, 2006-2007

«I saw the glint of a gun on his hip, a Colt 45. "What's the gun for?" I asked. "For self-defence", he replied. I asked if he'd ever shot someone. "No" was the answer as we drove on in silence. It wasn't until later that night that I found that wasn't true. In 1996, after Ekepa was elected chairman of the PLOA, Ekepa shot his father point blank in the head in a very public dispute that was said to be about mine compensation money.» (Butler, 2012)[18]

This is essentially what local informants, and the government Liaison Officer, said in 2006-2007, although in the version I heard, he became chairman after the killing. Golub also says:

«his rise to fame began *after* he took his father's place by shooting him at close range with a shotgun and killing him in a drunken fight.» (Golub, 2006: 109, my emphasis)

The emergence of violent, mob-style standover men is referred to by Jacka in terms of the rise of a «dangerous class of "super big men"» (cited by Kirsch, 2011: S41).

Coumans knew[19] this information but chose not to disclose it. In doing so she did exactly what she said anthropologists must not do:

«Knowledge of criminal activity or human rights abuses should not remain confidential through contract or through professional courtesy.» (Coumans, 2011: S40)

In summary, if Coumans' account of Porgera purports to fit the Avatar narrative, it is, as a popular television show says, «busted».

The responsibility to find out «what's going on»?

In discussing anthropology, we often say we divide knowledge into theory and description or observation. Theory, we imagine, is about concepts and getting our hands on more satisfying or more powerful ones. It has been customary in anthropology to treat description guiltily as the neglected sibling, but we really know that analysis means deploying description and theoretical understanding seamlessly to arrive at the best answer for the basic question «What's going on here?»[20].

18. See also *PNG Industry News*, 9 December 2011, «Wild times at Porgera», and Wikipedia's entry on the PLOA (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Porgera_Landowners_Association).

19. From my two hour discussion of the situation with her in Toronto in 2009 and/or from Golub's account.

20. Jorgensen (2002: 271) suggested that «the process of describing what's actually going on» that emerged from Filer *et al.* (1999a) looked like progress.

The «best answer» means the one most able to withstand inconvenient observations. On that score, Coumans' arguments collapse, as I hope I have just shown. However, there is more to the quality of an analysis than this. As has been wisely said «mining is no ethnographic playground» (Ballard and Banks, 2003: 289) and the manner in which we acquire information (go about «description») is critical. A suggestion is that in difficult field situations, it is wisest to approach investigations with three considerations uppermost:

(i) avoidance of conflict,
(ii) respect for basic rights and
(iii) the maintenance of an equality of opportunity.

My team and I detected the *risks of conflict* early in the landowner identification project, and minimised the risks to the project by protecting the data and warning the client. We were very careful with the *basic rights of community members* to represent their own identities and rights themselves – and not, as had happened so many times in the past, by means of tainted lists made up by factional leaders. Formal oversight for our work was provided by a Resettlement Committee that included many of these leaders, but we maintained an *equality of opportunity* for everyone in the affected communities to participate in the project, removing as many filters to gender and age as was feasible (figure 4). In doing so we expressed no opinion as to whether the members of the Resettlement Committee should provide information *ex officio* or just like everyone else. They were welcome to come to our interview location but, to the best of my knowledge, none did in the course of a year.

Our narrative in respect of Porgera, fitting into the ethnographic+ tradition, may not have been heard much beyond the landowner communities, but that is because the «+» refers to the agency of community members themselves, who came in their many hundreds to tell us how they fitted into the scheme of landownership in Porgera and what their entitlements were in respect of the mine and the resettlement project. These were not passive people, but the old, the young, male and female, who wanted to say something for themselves, in their own words, and in respect of whom our task was to create a safe space for them to say it in. If we have not told the world at large what they said, it is because we have yet to be sure they are comfortable about us saying anything without their permission.

In the end, is there anything of merit to be found in the Avatar narrative? Has Coumans, by taking a polarised view and through dealing with the PLOA, obtained better outcomes for Porgerans than others who have been repelled by its «poisonous politics»? In my opinion, she has not. To answer my earlier questions (i) the Avatar narrative is not helpful in understanding the complexity of relationships between mining companies and mine area communities in modern Papua New Guinea and (ii) Coumans' account of Porgera in *Current Anthropology* is not accurate enough to be a meaningful addition to «what we know so far».

In informal language we say «don't let the facts get in the way of a good story» and in the end the Avatar narrative is a problem because it is a constructed narrative that demands that we find heroic local champions to resist a corporate juggernaut, whether they really exist or not. There may well be local champions at Porgera, but I have given sufficient examples to show that Coumans has not found them.

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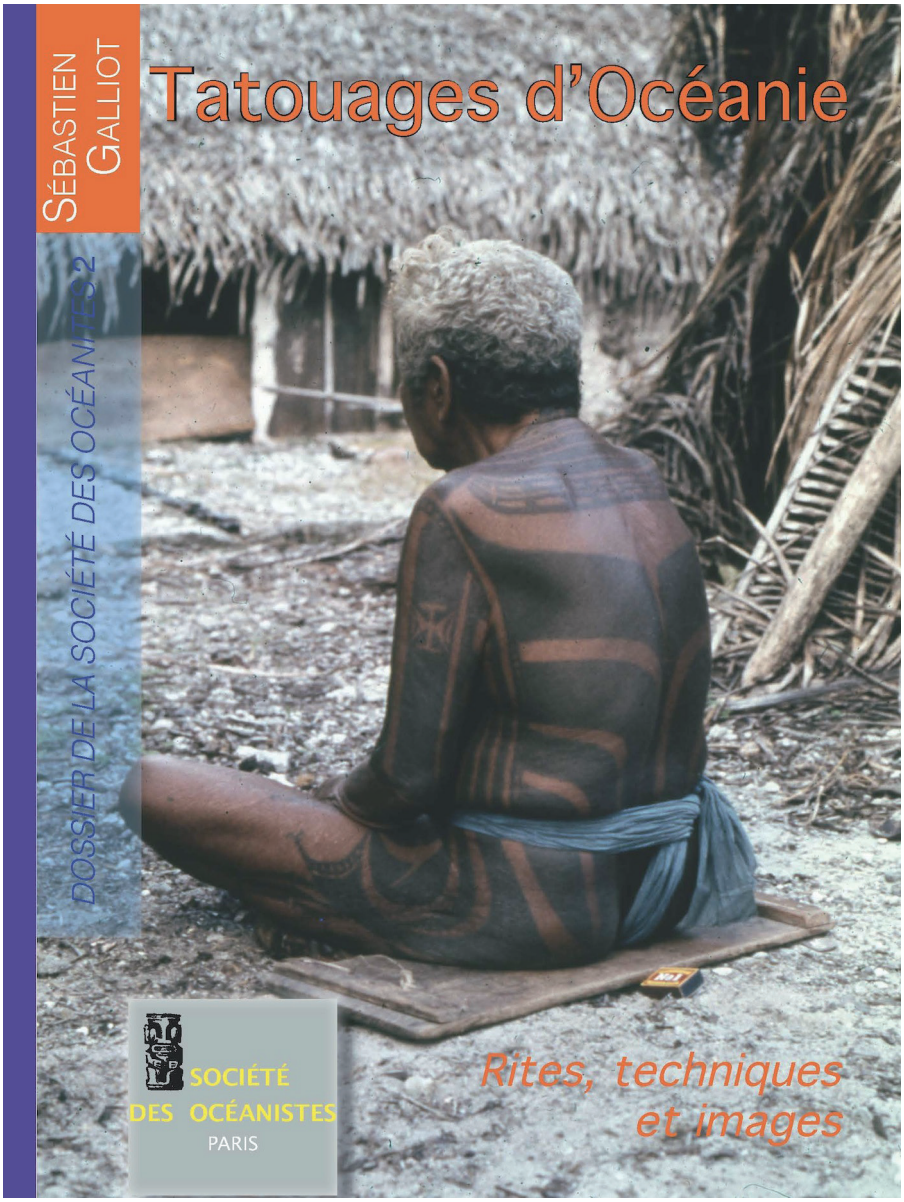

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