Keeping the Network out of view: Mining, Distinctions and Exclusion in Melanesia
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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the 'property effects' surrounding competition over access to mining benefits in Papua New Guinea. Under conditions of rapid social change engendered by large scale resource extraction, Libirian islanders have increasingly recalibrated their social networks, manifest through shifting notions of sociality and obligation, and ownership strategies that seek to limit other people's claims to wealth. These local changes are paralleled by larger and more paradoxical processes: although the state uses the mining project to consolidate itself, Libirians have consistently challenged the state through their attempts to appropriate the mine for their own ends. By keeping the multiple layers of their social networks out of view, Libirians deny the connections that can provide others with access to benefits. In considering the strategic responses to the inequalities, discontents and inconsistencies of life in modern Papua New Guinea, it becomes apparent that questions of property are simultaneously questions about identity and belonging.
Key words: Mining benefits, social networks, identities, exclusions, nation making.

In an earlier series of discussions on Melanesian property rights,1 it was argued that Western ownership strategies tend to promote rights based on exclusion, while Melanesian strategies generally seek to expand the possibilities for inclusion. James Carrier (1998) rightly raised attention to the intellectual assumptions and interests that have shaped such distinctions: the enduring legacy of Maussian notions of gift societies that contain an inclusive model of property, that are compared with equally essentialised Western property constructs (cf. Carrier 1995: Gregory 1982). Marilyn Strathern’s contributions have brought new light to bear on the relationship between different ownership practices and the ways that people construct and imagine social networks. Her argument is best articulated in her response to Bruno Latour’s (1993) claims in We have never been modern. Latour argues that modern social networks are distinguished by their scale, whereas ‘non-modern’ social networks, apparently found in archetypically ‘non-modern’ societies like Papua New Guinea, are usually limited in length. But as Strathern argues, this neglects crucial differences in the ways that societies construct social networks, and ignores that fact that while ‘technology might enlarge networks, proprietorship can be guaranteed to cut them down to size’ (Strathern 1996: 531). That is, Western property claims usually require people to shorten or ‘cut the network’ in order to establish ownership. The division in terms of scale is largely contingent upon content: pure or homogenous networks, compared to heterogeneous or hybrid networks (Latour 1993: 11). The first instance falls within the domain of classical social network analysis, while the latter is an example of more recent actor-network theory, linking human and non-human entities. Nevertheless, network remains a relatively neutral phrase for interconnectedness. Moreover, when considered in relation to ownership, we find that all networks can all emphasise exclusivity over limitless incorporation.
Following Strathern’s lead, Stuart Kirsch suggested that ‘Melanesian social networks typically include all of the persons who have contributed to another’s success, each of whom may later lay claim to their share of what ever is produced’ (Kirsch 2004: 83). This abstraction drew upon events that occurred around the Lihir gold mine in Papua New Guinea, when Lihirian landowners claimed compensation from the mining company for environmental damages and the death of pigs. Supposedly when making compensation claims Lihirians, and other Melanesians, seek to keep the entire social network in view. This is contrasted with mining companies that often appeal to Western property rights that draw upon legalistic definitions and scientific explanations to shorten the network, limit liability and secure profits.

These distinctions, which we can place on a continuum of strategies, are intended to emphasise rather than essentialise difference; as Kirsch notes, both miners and Melanesians can adjust their social networks to suit contexts and desired outcomes (2001: 155). However, in such radically transformed circumstances this still potentially conceals important processes: as keen modernists, Lihirians have increasingly sought to limit ownership, particularly of the financial benefits and development associated with the mining project. Lihirians might include the company in their chain of implication when making compensation claims, or rely upon non-Lihirians for political and economic success—the strategic utilisation of an expansive network. But when it comes to actual ownership of any compensation, benefits, or achievements many Lihirians can now be guaranteed to cut the network.

Lihirians who receive royalties, compensation and other economic benefits would probably argue they have not severed their social connections in their attempt to control the flow of wealth (cf. Strathern 1979). Perhaps in one sense this is true, given that these Lihirians are known to host some of the most lavish customary feasts that continue cycles of reciprocity and increase the chains of indebtedness—transactions that underpin social reproduction and keep the network in view. Even so, they definitely seek novel ways to strategically manage these relationships in order to contain wealth within a limited sphere. Moreover, as money has entered the ceremonial economy it has sustained the cyclical image of exchange and relational continuity. Similarly, emerging forms of possessive individualism reveal the connection between different forms of wealth transaction, test the moral grounds of relationships and shape the ways that networks are perceived and employed. Over time many Lihirians have refined, and in some cases redefined, the ‘rationales of ownership’ and the boundaries of inclusion, coupled with a re-categorisation of ‘non-Lihirians’ in ways that ideologically shift notions of sociality, obligation and reciprocity.

In this article I address the ‘property effects’ that have arisen since mining began in the Lihir Islands in 1995. The shifting forms of sociality, both internally and externally, that surfaced through new economic relations reflect the contradictions that emerge through modernisation. Of particular interest are the ways in which Lihirian big men who traditionally relied upon their relationships with people outside their clan and the islands of Lihir—their extended networks through marriage and exchange—now seek to keep them from view. Unprecedented social changes, particularly unchecked migration, have brought these relationships into question. For many Lihirian men, wealth and status is no longer contingent upon maintaining these relationships. Consequently, the reclassification of outsiders has developed in tandem with a distinct sense of Lihirian ethnic identity: together they serve to exclude others.

These local level processes are paralleled in the relationship between Lihirians and the nation state. Regardless of any Lihirian arguments that suggest otherwise, the mine only exists through the mediating role of the state: like the extended traditional social networks that channel wealth and fame, Lihirians rely upon the state for mining riches. However, mining has empowered Lihirians as part of a wider national critique of the nation state in Papua New Guinea, which is seen to be corrupt at worst, and inefficient at best. Lihirians have challenged the state’s authority to control their lives and mine related wealth. In doing so, they not only attempt to keep the state from view but simultaneously deny its legitimacy.
Effectively Lihirian leaders are reshuffling their immediate networks and simultaneously attempting to expand them in order to deal directly with international capital. The process is immediately insular and cosmopolitan: local networks are recalibrated and existing ties throughout the region are skipped over for more attractive connections abroad. This draws attention to a further paradox: although the state seeks to use the mining project to consolidate itself the mine is appropriated by Lihirians to provide a counterpoint to the state and its wide definition of relatedness embedded in the nation-making project—the creation of new (and often artificial) relationships through state processes of ‘vertical encompassment’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Moreover, the income and benefit streams employed in the mining industry are critical, because they stipulate how widely and how narrowly benefits are to be distributed, and thus provide a critical base upon which Lihirians and non-Lihirians can build an image of entitlements, as landowners, community members, and citizens.

LIHIR AND ITS GOLD MINE

The Lihir Islands (Niolam, Mali, Masahet, Mahur) are situated off the east coast of mainland New Ireland. Although survival has never been contingent upon trade with neighbouring groups, Lihirians have strong historical exchange and marriage alliances throughout the region with people from Namatanai, Tanga and Tabar (Kaplan 1976). Lihirians are largely subsistence farmers, growing tapioca, yams, and sweet potatoes, and rear pigs and harvest small amounts of marine life. As common throughout the region, Lihir is a matrilineal society, with great importance placed upon mother’s brothers, the close bond between same-sex cross-cousins, and avoidance taboos between uterine brothers and sisters (Bell 1935; Clay 1977: 47; Wagner 1986: 70). Lihir is divided into two moieties, each containing numerous clans with smaller lineage groups. Land and other property rights are generally reckoned through these matrilineal descent groups. These lineages tend to occupy single hamlets and leadership by big men (tohie) is primarily vested in the maintenance of the lineage’s rihi (men’s house) as a social institution and physical edifice, and the guidance, discipline and nurturance of its younger male members (Bainton 2008). These men’s houses are the primary location for the performance of ritual feasts (kastom) that involve the exchange of pigs and shell money, and increasingly cash and commodities.

In Melanesia, group consciousness is not simply a product of the colonial era which drew arbitrary lines around places and routinely named and designated social units. It would be absurd to suggest that in pre-colonial times Lihirians (or other New Irelanders for that matter) lacked a concern for socio-cultural difference, or an awareness of similarity. Nevertheless, despite variation throughout the region, differences are generally commensurate; they are usually intelligible in terms of common cultural and structural features. For instance, no two groups share the same feasting and exchange protocol, but it is taken for granted that other groups exchange and consume pigs, garden produce and shell valuables. Similarly, while each group has its own clan leaders and men’s houses, or forms of esoteric knowledge and local epistemologies, these are never identical or put to the same use (see Eves 1998; Foster 1995a; Groves 1934, 1935; Powdermaker 1971 [1933]: 196-199). Familiarity with regional difference means most groups have always been able to find points of commonality or local equivalents. To be sure, Lihirian culture is unique, but it is located within a matrix of correspondingly structured societies with similar forms of leadership and descent, social values, cosmological frameworks, and closely related economic and ritual practices (cf. Schwartz 1963). These points of convergence enabled people to establish strong bonds through trade, mutual assistance in ritual feasting and exchange, and marriage alliance.

While there are cultural similarities that unite the region, recent historical experiences have exacerbated difference and prompted groups to view their neighbours in new ways. During the colonial period and continuing into Independence, Lihirians felt neglected by
both the Administration and the new Independent state of Papua New Guinea. By 1960 Lihirians began to realise that they were one of the poorest groups throughout the district (see Bainton in press). They had more by way of material possessions than ever before, but compared with many other New Irelanders they were not economically advanced. Essentially the colonial Administration refused to invest its meagre resources in the Lihirian copra industry until Lihirians showed signs of independent progress and improvement; such policies ensured Lihirian marginalisation. Many Lihirians felt they were denied an equal humanity by their European interlopers, which some thought was a result of their relative material poverty (cf. Burridge 1995 [1960]: 259; Errington and Gewertz 2004: 24).

In the late 1960s, Lihirians began to engage in politico-religious movements aimed at reversing material and social inequalities, and addressing the general feeling of Lihirian dissatisfaction, inferiority, and the need for political and material change (Bainton in press). These movements, known locally as the Tukukul Isukal Association (TIA) (stand up and work together), and later the Nimamar Association, were crucial in the formation of group consciousness, uniting (and dividing) Lihirians across clan ties through rituals and cosmologies geared towards radical departure from their perceived plight. Lihirians positioned themselves against the Administration and later the state, which were seen as the source of their discontent. By the time mining activities got under way in 1995 these movements were less politically active, however they remained pivotal in the formation of Lihirian interpretations of mining activities and local expectations for economic development, shaping their relationship with the mining company, the Government, and other Papua New Guineans. Staunch adherents believe that they called the company to Lihir, interpreting the project and its related economic development as the fulfilment of earlier prophesies of change.

The project, which is currently owned and managed by Lihir Gold Limited, is an open cut gold mine with a projected life span of thirty years. When construction commenced in 1995 the Lihirian population was around 6000 people. Since then, the population has more than doubled, reaching approximately 14000 people in 2007. This excludes close to 1000 expatriates and ‘fly-in-fly-out’ workers, and an increasing number of migrants that has pushed the total population to an estimated 18000 people. Although the mine only employed around 500 Lihirians in 2007 from a total work force of approximately 1500 people, Lihirians continue to look to the company as the primary source of income, through employment and compensation (cf. Filer 1997; Macintyre and Foale 2004). The hope that the mining project would be their economic salvation—their ‘road belong cargo’ (Lawrence 1964)—meant that Lihirians placed huge expectations upon the company to deliver all forms of economic development, fostering the so-called resource dependency syndrome. This has only exacerbated the keen sense of propriety over the mine, and fuelled the local conviction that Lihirians should be in control of the mine and any subsequent wealth and benefits.

GUESTS ON THE OUTER

In the past, people who arrived in Lihirian hamlets and men’s houses were generally regarded as wasier, regardless of whether they were Lihirians from another village, or non-Lihirians from another island. In the vernacular this means guest or visitor and may be used to describe people known and unknown, those from afar or those who have come from another part of Lihir. Wasier differ from members of the household or lineage as they are the recipients of the work and hospitality of the household or lineage associated with a particular rirhi. Implicit in the use of this term is a sense of obligation to pinari wasier (to provide food, hospitality and gifts to guests)—a vital function of both households and rirhi. Wasier, or visitors, are an accepted category of relations across the spectrum of villages and islands. Traditionally, wasier from the neighbouring region knew they would be assured of hospitality, and if so desired, could stay on as incorporated guests. The term wasier is closely linked
to the concept of berturan, which can be translated as ‘a group of friends’, or in Tok Pisin as ‘yumi ol bratas’ (we are all brothers), implying moral commitment. In this sense, berturan conceptually connotes collectivity and mutual obligation. It is used loosely to include kin and non-kin and implies a particular way of incorporating and behaving towards other people. In recent years this hospitality and sense of inclusiveness has been conspicuous through its absence and the frequent complaints from senior males about the lack of respect for rirhi ethos.

Ritual feasting in Lihir is usually dependent upon wider social networks, as people are called upon to contribute and support their clan members or bisnis (business)—the New Ireland Tok Pisin term for both small scale enterprise and exchange partners or relations created through marriage alliance. Prior to, and even throughout the early years of the mining project, Lihirians eagerly incorporated non-Lihirians into customary activities. On the east coast of Niolam this activity often involved people from the neighbouring islands of Tanga who were seen to be rich in pigs, thus making them valuable exchange partners. Not only did people from Tanga know that they would be assured of hospitality and welcomed when they came to Lihir, as were Lihirians when they travelled to Tanga, but they also felt comfortable to stay for long periods of time. From the perspective of the host society, wasier are non-threatening because in effect they are becoming indebted.

There are many instances where wasier have been incorporated into Lihirian lineages and remained on in Lihir. In the past, and even throughout the early years of the project, incorporated wasier were commonly given access to land and other resources for subsistence. These relationships were partly shaped by Lihirian notions of hospitality, rihri ethos, and the moral sentiments of collectivity and obligation implied in the categorical and conceptual terms wasier and berturan. Such relations also provided an important context for Lihirian ‘big men’ to expand their network and sphere of influence. Indeed, it is only through exchange, hospitality and incorporation—actions that implicate people both inside and outside of the lineage and clan—that Lihirian men can indebted others and achieve status, fame and authority (cf. Clay 1992).

In the construction phase of the mine and the early years of production, most Lihirians positively received migrants who came in search of work or the benefits and services associated with economic development. At this point there were relatively few negative reactions to migrants, partly due to lower numbers, and because of the way the mine was located within past prophesies. This interpretation reinforced the unrealistic expectation that all Lihirians would benefit equally from the project. Lihirian expectations for compensation and royalty payments meant that initially employment was not considered as the primary means for economic advancement. Although many desired the status they associated with employment in a modern institution, economic attention was riveted on mining benefits. This view partly substantiates the ‘dream’ (driman) or prophesies sown in the TIA movement that promised an inverted world order, where all Lihirians would gain access to unlimited wealth without expending effort or substance through morally diminishing labour undertaken expatriates and other educated Papua New Guineans. In this aspirational framework other Papua New Guineans, or non-Lihirian relations, would work for Lihirians in their mine and ensure the continuity of their new wealth and hierarchy. Non-Lihirians were welcome because they would provide the labour for gold production that would enable Lihirians to receive winmoni. Combined with existing notions of guest/host relations and the need for an expansive network, at this point non-Lihirians were uniquely embedded in Lihirian society and desires.

Throughout the excitement of construction in the mid 1990s there were few Lihirians who fully anticipated the extent to which unequally distributed mine-derived wealth would create a pernicious form of internal stratification. The villages of Putput, Kapit, and Londolovit, which are home to the majority of clans that claim ownership over the land used by the mining company, are now occupied by the upper stratum in the new socioeconomic
hierarchy. These clans have been recipients of the largest amount of mining royalties and compensation. Putput village was relocated during construction, and has received the greatest amount of infrastructural development, giving it a decidedly urban feel. As people from Putput moved into their new modern relocation houses and began receiving compensation payments, they conspicuously consumed thousands of kina on holidays, beer, trucks, pigs and trade store items. They also incorporated much of this new wealth into customary activities, invigorating and amplifying Lihirian culture (cf. Sahlins 1992; Strathern 1971; Thomas 1991: 197). Other Lihirians looked on with envy and rising discontent, with a dawning realisation that not everyone would be rich. It was also becoming obvious that Putputs were readjusting their relationships and imposing new boundaries with other Lihirians.

Some people began describing them as ‘greedy show offs’. Not only did they resent Putputs for their wealth, but they no longer felt welcome or equal in their village or men’s houses. Some relatives invoked sentiments of traditional egalitarianism in an attempt to coerce Putput big men to distribute their new wealth in a more even manner. In response these men gradually sought to cut their networks with demanding and less enterprising kin. After all, they argued, they were the ones who ‘sacrificed’ their land for the mining project. Following the emergence of internal boundaries and the exclusiveness of Putput, Lihirians without royalties or compensation began reassessing their relationships with non-Lihirians. They were now largely considered an encroachment on other available benefits such as employment, or local services like schools, hospitals, the police force, and government departments—effectively, their development.

FROM VISITOR TO STRANGER

By 2003, most Lihirians remained beguiled by the development and lifestyle changes dangled tantalisingly close by expatriate miners and a minority of privileged Lihirians. These changes, or rather the feeling of being short-changed, gave way to a steady decline in the level of inclusiveness towards non-Lihirians. The terminological shift from wasier to weira—from visitor to stranger—to describe non-Lihirians reflects the process in which identities are socially constructed to serve new requirements. As people from the neighbouring district continued to make their way in greater numbers to Lihir to call upon previously established relationships, coupled with larger numbers of people from around the country migrating in search of work, to sell produce at the market, or simply to raun tasol (just travel around), drawn by the imagined possibilities of a new centre, many Lihirians were growing somewhat wary, if not altogether xenophobic. In a conceptual sleight of hand, Lihirians began labelling these people weira, thus realigning their sense of obligation and reformulating Lihirian identity.

The term weira originates from the Gunantuna language found on the Gazelle Peninsula in East New Britain, though in more recent years it has become part of the lingua franca, Tok Pisin, and is used commonly throughout Papua New Guinea to denote strangers and outsiders, or those who are of different ancestral lands, speak different languages, and come from different descent groups. Its use carries negative connotations, and when Lihirians use the term to describe non-Lihirians, it effectively stereotypes or lumps all outsiders together, marginalising and distancing them from Lihirians, implying a lack of obligation.

The connection between the terms wasier, berturan, and weira became apparent one afternoon in 2003 while sitting in the rihiri with which I was closely incorporated in Kina-mi, several villages away from Putput. As I sat around with the other men eating our plates of rice and tinned fish bought with a recently received share of mining royalties that had trickled down kinship lines, a group of men from Tanga laboured along the road through the middle of the village carrying several pigs strapped to poles, obviously on their way to sell or exchange them in a neighbouring village. At the time I happened to be asking about the meaning of berturan. In response, a middle-aged man pointed to the passing Tangans and
explained how he should invite them in to eat and rest, or at least go and offer his assistance to show that ‘we are all brothers’. The group remained quiet and a distinct sense of ill-ease emerged. Afterwards I asked why nobody invited them in or helped them: why we did not treat them like waisier. To this another man replied, ‘ples ipulap long ol weira, na mipela les nau’ (this place is full of weira and now we cannot be bothered). I pressed the matter and asked if the Tangans were their bisnis. The group unanimously agreed that ‘ol igat bisnis long maining tasol’ (the Tangans only have a relationship with the mine). The reference to bisnis carried double effect. The underlying assumption was that people were only coming to Lihir to benefit from the mine, to seek work, eat their rice, drink their beer, spend their money, and sleep with their women: to establish a foothold in Lihirian society to access development.

ILLUSIONARY NETWORKS

Lihirian custom is primarily structured around feasting and exchange practices that mark key stages in the life-cycle (Bainton nd). These mortuary rituals have always been more than an opportunity to mourn the dead. They contain deep symbolic meaning, and are intricably woven with political and economic struggles, social reproduction, and obligations to both the deceased and their lineage. They are an important avenue through which Lihirian men can express themselves as leaders, and clans can host and nurture others. Pigs, garden produce, shell money and cash and commodities are exchanged and consumed, and guests are expected to reciprocate later on at similar feasts. As new mining wealth has been channelled into custom, there has been an efflorescence of competitive exchange. In order to meet the demand, men frequently purchase pigs and garden produce off shore for ceremonial presentation.

Gifts that are reciprocated must be of similar quantity and quality. What is important is the personal investment of nurturance, substance, knowledge, labour and agency that is required to assemble the necessary resources for their production. This is supported by the belief that personal relations are not reducible to a monetary value. When big men purchase these items with cash, in transactions that entail no further social obligations, and put them to use in Lihirian custom, they maintain the illusion of an active social network. The ideal cyclical image where sociality is made to ‘come up’ through the reciprocation of ‘equivalents’ is maintained through customary practices that present certain goods as if they embody the culturally valued attributes that were traditionally invested in gifts. Female contributions to kastom are usurped by men with access to cash, removing female productive capacities from the equation, which effectively reduces the distinction between producers and transactors. This also means that producers are not always present at these feasts, nor are they required. They have no claim on the success of the host, nor can they expect anything in return. While this new economic logic may appear irrational in light of the deeper significance of exchange, it is an entirely rational response to a changing world. Pigs that are presented as if they embody social networks actually serve to sever connections and limit the claims that other Lihirian and non-Lihirian bisnis can place upon individual and group resources.

TOO MANY FACES

Migration invariably poses problems for resource development projects, including the added pressure on local resources from the rapid rise in population. As Banks (2006: 263) observed in Porgera, local landowning communities ‘shift from being relatively self-contained and known (by the people in them, at least) to being much more diverse and fragmented in terms of people and agendas, and residents experience a loss of control, direction and security in their lives’. Local communities are often wary of the urban influences that
accompany migration, such as drug use, prostitution, gambling, petty crime, and the importation of weapons, pornography, and more importantly sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS (cf. Butt and Eves 2008). Lihirians often attribute these influences to the migrant population, conveniently heaping all responsibility for negative change upon outsiders. These views maintain the polarisation between Lihirians and non-Lihirians. Outsiders are criticised for ‘disturbing the peace’ and failing to respect local customs and social protocols. Following Koczberski and Curry’s (2004: 367) observations in oil palm plantations around Papua New Guinea, which house large migrant worker populations, these discourses promote and legitimise the political power of the local community and homogenise outsiders.

Initially migrants were arriving on Lihirian shores from the New Guinea Islands region. In latter years there has been a sharp rise in the number of people from the mainland, especially the Highlands. Population estimates by the mining company put the migrant numbers at around 5000 people in 2007. However, the data are unreliable, and according to one Community Relations officer, ‘the migrant population remains a black hole’. Nevertheless, Lihirian leaders remain committed to their removal. Nuanced shifts in sociality and fears of outside disturbance or opportunism have been officially manifest in exclusionary policies that seek to remove and refuse entry to all migrants. The Lihir Law and Order Committee, which was established in 2000 and contained members of the Local Level Government and the Lihir Mine Area Landowners Association (LMALA), devised a monitoring plan known as the Sengseng Policy, to screen movement in and out of the islands. According to the committee the greater influx of outsiders is blamed for ‘the rapid deterioration of the high moral integrity of the original Lihir society’ (LMALA 2002: 6). Conflating ideas of past and purity, Lihirian leaders were adamant that such malignancy could be stemmed through closed boundaries and limited engagement with outside influences. The policy has been applied at various times with degrees of efficiency, evicting non-Lihirian settlers and razing their temporary houses. Future plans have also included an operational unit to carry out the necessary duties of ‘border protection’, ultimately aimed at installing a visa-like system. Villagers would be required to monitor their own bays and roads and report people entering outside the ‘designated areas’; an unlikely prospect given that no one would consider their own relations as illegal bisinis.

The Law and Order Committee members took a blanket approach to the situation, theoretically addressing social disturbance and a more deep-seated resentment towards non-Lihirians who use local services and benefit from economic opportunities on their island. This localisation of state functions of policing and border control—the repertoire of gatekeeping procedures—is a crucial component in the construction of Lihirian identity (cf. Foster 1995b: 15-16). Just as the project of nation making is contingent upon establishing an association between people and some definite territory, separating insiders from outsiders, citizens from aliens, Lihirian policies are equally geared towards developing a local ideology of belonging.

It is becoming obvious that economic and population changes associated with large scale mining have overwhelmed Lihirian notions of hospitality and relatedness; previous beliefs about the benefits of an expansive and inclusive network have been reconsidered, if not altogether dissolved. Importantly, these changes presuppose a form of possessive individualism: Lihirians have begun to realise that sometimes it is better to limit other people’s claims to ownership to certain items and resources, or forms of wealth and development. Ultimately the epistemologies of capitalism, combined with historical experiences and the interpretation of mining through local cosmologies, have become the reference point for considering individual and collective identities. Put differently, the possessive relationship between persons and things in a world of commodity relations has restructured Lihirian relations and social networks.
KNOWING OTHERS

In his classic study of urban relations on the African Copperbelt Clyde Mitchell (1959) demonstrated that the definition and categorisation of people by tribe or ethnic group reflects a need to make the behaviour of others knowable, and hence, in some sense predictable. Mitchell argued that in urban settings relations are fixed less by kinship, clan or village membership, and instead communities are formed around personal relations. Essentially legal and economic processes create dependency between people who are in close physical proximity, but socially distant. The Kalela dance was a particular response to a situation where people were forced to interact with strangers in the everyday mix of urban life; the dance was effectively a performance of ethnic identity that rendered others known.

While Lihir is gradually becoming more urbanised, through the growth of the town site and transformations in landowner villages, Lihirians remain the dominant group: it is their island and these are their villages. Yet there is an increasing level of interpenetration and dependency between Lihirians and outsiders, as greater numbers play a more significant role in the local economy and become more embedded within different villages, especially as Lihirian big men enter into patron-client relationships with outsiders (much to the chagrin of some Lihirians). Although Lihirians find little need for novel dance performances of ethnic identity in order to make others known, they have found other ways to categorise and know outsiders. However, they are less interested in the particular features or cultural dialectics of strangers, and more concerned with defining Lihirian identity on the basis of blood, descent and customary activity. Lihirians certainly notice the dark skin of Bougainvilleans, the stature of Highlanders, or different languages and practices of the Tolai. But their insular perspective reflects a deeper concern with internal social changes and the problems surrounding how to define and understand Lihirian identity in a time of widening disjunction and cultural upheaval. Simultaneously, by categorising all outsiders as weira, this enables Lihirians to know and predict their behaviour—even if it misrepresents reality. Indeed it is often in their interests to do so. By painting everybody with the same brush, as thieving gold diggers who are intent on unravelling the moral fibre of Lihirian society, it predetermines their intentions, justifying the shifts in sociality, obligation and reciprocity—the cutting or concealing of the network.

THE DEFINITION OF A LIHIRIAN

The desire to stop the flow of wealth in the face of escalating migration has resulted in the increasing bureaucratisation of Lihirian identity. To ensure that Lihirians were the main recipients of employment and mine related benefits, Lihirian leaders found new ways to define exactly who is a Lihirian and therefore who qualifies for work and access to other benefits. The pressure to delineate group boundaries increased as Lihirians without land in the mining lease zone began to realise that access to limited wage labour was the only way they would directly benefit from operations. During the negotiation phase Lihirians pushed for ‘Lihir-first’ employment policies that award priority to Lihirians over other applicants in positions with the mining company. The landowners association instituted an identification system that assigned a Village Population Survey (VPS) number to all Lihirians. Applicants for positions where Lihirians are given priority must produce this number to verify their identity. This has angered New Irelanders who feel that they should at least have equal opportunities to benefit from the mine. In these instances it is not in their interest to assert strong local identities that emphasise differences between themselves and Lihirians. Instead they emphasise their inclusion in a wider social network, appealing to historical links, similarities in customary practices and beliefs, and unity under provincial political boundaries (cf. Premdas 1989: 251-256).

Lihirian big men often manipulate this system to their own advantage by incorporating
non-Lihirians (usually from New Ireland, although increasingly from New Britain and the mainland) with good employment prospects into their clan. This provides these non-Lihirians with a VPS number to potentially attain employment with the mining company. Effectively these non-Lihirians become indebted to their patrons who can expect to benefit both directly and indirectly from any earnings or the status and resources associated with employment. However, it is not uncommon to find those Lihirians who benefit from the presence of outsiders (particularly local businessmen), among the most vociferous defendants of a 'pure' Lihirian identity based on undiluted traditions maintained through exclusion. Lihirian complaints about outside disturbance are not always accompanied by a genuine desire for closed boundaries in much the same way that compensation claims for environmental damage are not always seeking an end to destruction. This echoes the strategic (and often diffuse) ways that Melanesians tend to approach resource extraction as a source of income, and the ways that networks can be manipulated for personal gain—even if people are not always happy with the consequences.

In latter years—particularly in 2006 as Lihirian leaders were preparing to distribute the first equity payments from shares invested in the company on behalf of all Lihirians—there has been greater emphasis on the specific delineation of Lihirian identity. The landowners association subsequently devised the following definition of a Lihirian:

The Lihirian MATRILINEAL system of descent confirms a Lihirian identity. Therefore a Lihirian is a person who is born of a full blood Lihirian mother or born of a 50% mother or born of a mother who traced her matrilineal link to a Lihirian clan identity. His/her clan membership is a solid fact of his identity no matter where he/she was born.

Underneath this definition, the authors explain that they define a Lihirian based on the following categories:

1. A born Lihirian with full and half blood through the matrilineal descent.
2. A person from outside inherits rights by fulfilling customary requirements.
3. A person from outside is adopted into a Lihirian family and clan and fulfils customary requirements.
4. A person from outside that has lived on Lihir since pre-exploration days and fulfils category 2 and 3. (LMALA nd)

The paper further explains these categories, with four classes of Lihirian blood identity, and three categories of non-Lihirian. These essentially state that one is either 100% Lihirian, that is, both mother and father are able to trace their descent through their mother’s line, or one is a variant of this with declining Lihirian status as the blood runs thinner. Those without full Lihirian blood on their mother’s side, or who qualify as either 50% or 25% Lihirian must await this through fulfilment of customary obligations: long term residence in Lihir and extended involvement with a clan, in both customary exchange and daily participation in labour and men’s house activities. Equally those with no Lihirian blood in their line of descent must illustrate that for at least 10 years prior to mining activities their customary obligations have been exclusively with Lihirian people.

In constructing their identity vis-a-vis non-Lihirians and the nation-state, Lihirians draw considerably on defensive primordial sentiments. The contiguities of blood, custom, language, and shared common descent or ancestry have assumed an ineffable and overwhelming coerciveness for leaders and the community alike. Lihirians regard these ties as more or less immutable aspects of the social person, and fundamental characteristics of Lihirian identity. It is these points upon which Lihirians articulate a sense of ethnic difference with other New Irelanders and Papua New Guineans, in order to subvert the networks
and connections established through historical ties, provincial boundaries and national citizenship.

When Highland migrants angrily respond to Lihirian attitudes and policies, and appeal to a national identity and point to their skin saying, 'yumi ol wankain, yumi gat wankain skin tasol' (we are all the same, we all have the same kind of skin), it is to gain access to an economic domain which they believe is the privilege of citizenship. Here we can see the full effect of those ideological apparatuses of the state—a la Althusser—that constitute subjectivities in relation to institutionalised political authority that is accounted for in terms of a common interest or morality (Foster 1995b: 16). On another level, these people can afford to be Papua New Guinean first, as opposed to an unassailable Hagen or Gorokan identity, because the resources which inform their local identity are not under pressure of exploitation or expropriation by other Papua New Guineans.

Arguably, others would act in similar ways if resource extraction occurred on their lands, indicating the limited success of state ideologies. Or more precisely, that people have multiple identities from which they can choose depending upon the context. But the appeal to dark skin colour as a signifier of Papua New Guinean identity is not just an assertion of citizenship or nationalism, but race. More accurately there is a fusion of nationalism with race. The mobilisation of blood and descent as a defining characteristic of Lihirian identity mirrors the same logic of birth and descent (as a race or nationality) that is associated with citizenship in the modern state. Lihirians have taken the logic of bureaucratic and legal classification and turned this against the subsumption of local identities into national ones. The idea of a biologically inherited 'racial' identity is clearly historically dominant in European ideology; the naming and grouping of Melanesia—the dark islands—evidently reflects the idea of phenotypic features as indicative of intrinsic behaviour concomitants and social characteristics (cf. Trigger, 1989: 229). This is the substance of nationalist ideologies. Although Melanesian elites have tried to incorporate (and subvert) cultural diversity, through the Melanesian Way, nationalist ideologies primarily remain informed by arbitrary colonial grouping. Mining projects create opportunities for people to respond in different ways to ideologies of the state, as either individual citizens, descent corporations or regional ethnic groups. Lihirians have drawn upon and appropriated state forms that attempt to remediate ethnic identities that in themselves have an ambiguous relationship to national structures.

However, it is not just Highlanders who appeal to skin type. In a further twist, the presence of racial ideologies points to another process where Lihirians use Whites (essentially the company) to critique their own national (and local) elite, rationalising their desire for greater autonomy. Notwithstanding the tensions between Lihirians and Whites emerging from inequalities and a lack of sociality, Whites are used as a foil to appraise the state. Lihirians have been developing a definitive localism in conjunction with a sense of cosmopolitanism through trips abroad, international property purchases, engaging foreign consultants, business partnerships, and investments, not to mention consuming modern goods. This internationalism is instrumental in their accusation of the state as the source of Papua New Guinean backwardness, and more importantly Lihirian deprivation. This is largely based on the belief that the state benefits disproportionately from the project at Lihirian expense.

CONSOLIDATING IDENTITIES AND NETWORKS

Resource development typically requires the delineation of boundaries on the ground and between the groups who live within these areas. The process by which mining benefits can be distributed is contingent upon legally recognising some people as recipients at the exclusion of others. Closer to the mining lease zone this means drawing a line between ‘landowners’ and ‘non-landowners’: those who can claim ownership over the land and resources to
be developed through either customary or state law, and those who cannot. As we have seen, this can prove particularly divisive, bringing existing networks into question. Alternatively, outsiders, regardless of whether they are from the neighbouring district or far away, tend to regard all Lihirians as 'landowners', in so far as they are all perceived to be better off than other Papua New Guineans.

When Lihirian leaders finally negotiated the Integrated Benefits Package with the state and the developer in 1995, officially beginning operations, this legitimised the authority of the state, but it also provided Lihirians with a platform for defining themselves in relation to others based on access to benefits. In 2000 this agreement was subject to review, guided by Lihirian concerns over the amount of wealth leaving Lihir through Government taxes and royalties, remittances from other Papua New Guineans employed in Lihir, or through foreign owned businesses and stores. The new development plans proposed by Lihirian leaders raised considerable consternation among the company and the state. Although the revised agreement that was signed in 2007 was significantly modified, it was still a blue-print for a micro-nation: it was a political manifesto and economic strategy for Lihir, based on gaining greater control over mining operations and the associated wealth, exploiting opportunities for local business and providing entrepreneurial training for all Lihirians. But the struggle is not always expressed through a neat insider-outsider dichotomy. In 2008 tensions flared between 'landowning' clans that expected to maintain a monopoly on business contracts with the mining company, and other Lihirians seeking similar opportunities. When 'landowners' began describing other enterprising Lihirians as 'ol outsidait lain' (all outside groups), this further obscured the battle over the correct recipients of mining benefits."

Lihirian leaders have been attempting to by-pass or become independent of the state through the resources that the company can provide and that the state never could. Lihirians have continually fought to appropriate the mining project, which they have always considered theirs, to provide a counter to the state. This resonates with Jacobsen's point about the ways in which the continuing integrity of local communities throughout Papua New Guinea subverts the nation state, rendering it self-contradictory in its very constitution (Jacobsen 1995: 229). Accordingly there is strong relationship between modes of production and nationalism: capitalist relations reproduce both the political and institutional foundations of the nation. In many rural areas capitalist social relations of production have not replaced or fundamentally transformed existing forms of production praxis. What we find in many places, including Lihir, is a sort of hybrid economy that accommodates both a market economy and the necessity of subsistence production, often combined with ceremonial forms of exchange. Jacobsen argues that the prevalence of subsistence production in many rural areas actually sustains some level of political and economic autonomy, implying less ability for the nation state to control them. Ironically, as capitalism has advanced in Lihir, local political leaders have sought to appropriate for themselves the very means by which the state is able to influence and direct Lihirian lives in order to (re)gain some level of autonomy. From a Lihirian perspective, the mine and the access it provides to global capital is the subsistence basis for independence.

Of course none of this is isolated from wider national trends. We find a history of similar threats to national coherence throughout all resource extraction projects in Papua New Guinea (see especially Ballard and Banks 2003; Dinnen et al. 1997; Filer 1990, 1992, 1997, 1998; and Jorgensen 1996; Koczberski and Curry 2004; cf. May 1982; Nash and Ogan 1990). Increasingly individual groups, and in some cases individual regions, are attempting to deal directly with the international economy, raising the question whether the state is even required as an intermediary link with global capital. Leaders of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville are already discussing the possibility of re-opening the Panguna Mine, and in 2007 the Governor of New Ireland Province, Sir Julius Chan, announced at the Independence Day celebrations in Lihir that he would be pursuing autonomy for New Ireland. The desire to withhold resource rents from the state is paramount.
New social divisions and legalistic identities have emerged as groups restructure themselves around new economic opportunities. This is readily identifiable in the proliferation of Incorporated Land Groups that have supposedly disentangled the social webs that ensnare customary land and the resources that they contain (Filer, 2007; Fingleton 2007; Weiner and Glaskin 2007). But as Filer (1997) earlier observed, for some time Papua New Guineans have been eagerly responding to the ideology of the landowner. Many have readjusted their relationships accordingly, masking (or in some cases denying) the complex social networks that originally gave them access to ground, supported their existence, and provided their identity. Each instance is driven by a desire for greater control over scarce economic resources; the lack of allegiance to the state which has failed to fulfil the hopes of many for an improved existence is compounded by the opportunities for its circumvention.

CONCLUSION

The changes taking place in Lihir provide a useful platform for considering larger processes across the nation. Tensions surrounding the ways that Lihirians perceive, utilise and reconstruct their networks mirror the same difficulties that arise as national connections and identities are both indirectly and deliberately sabotaged for local interests. The direct (and sometimes volatile) relationship between Lihirians and the mining company and other international agents, allows them to evade existing relations and political arrangements, challenging the authority of the state to regulate the distribution of resources and the definition of citizenship and social identity.

In some ways much of what I have said parallels older arguments about the ways that ethnicity is rendered a political category expressed in phenomena or processes manifest during power struggles, or competition over scarce resources (cf. Barth 1969; Cohen 1978; Despres 1975). Lihirians are increasingly consolidating their identity against other Papua New Guineans, which has given rise to a sense of ethnic distinction, or a pan-Lihiran identity. However, attention to networks foregrounds the connection between various identities, relationships and ownership strategies, and enables a nuanced comprehension of the diverse ways that relationships are forged, maintained, hidden, and cut. More precisely, we can see how some relationships are covertly concealed, and how others are overtly denied in order to exclude outsiders, maintain group solidarity or increase individual prospects, and most importantly to retain wealth. Thus, challenges to the state not only occur at the provincial or 'ethnic' level, but specifically within the muddle of overlapping local networks, identities, and agendas (cf. Regan 2005).

By concentrating on the ways that Lihirians strategically construct ownership of wealth attained through mining we find that ownership is concurrently a matter of property and belonging (Strathern 1996: 531). As Lihirians play with their social networks, they are not just placing a limit on ownership, but also relationships. Thus the sorts of interests, social or personal, that can extend networks can also truncate them. In daily contexts there is a process of expansion and contraction in response to a changing environment in an attempt to reconcile competing dreams and values. However, despite fluidity and manipulation there is a noticeable shift towards greater reduction: cultural differences have been invoked, pre-existing notions of incorporation abandoned, and flexible boundaries made rigid. In these instances we are presented with precise examples of the complex dialectic between local and global forces; the articulation of communities and local and individual identities within the national arena forged through the interpenetration of history and culture.

The task for Lihirians is no longer to find ways to sustain relationships but rather to place a limit on them. Many have found new ways to restrict the social relations that they are willing to recognise. While particular economic and social transactions always served to create alliances and control the flow of relationships, the need to limit relationships looms larger as the number of potential relationships (and demands on resources) increases with
migration, access to new technologies, ease of mobility, and new forms of economic and political engagement. Relationships that extended beyond the clan—throughout Lihir and abroad—represented the ability to engage in exchange, increase the network of indebtedness and draw wealth back into the lineage. Others respected these relationships because they reflected the leadership qualities of big men. Under conditions of rapid social and economic change, these relationships have lost their social capital.

Paradoxically intra-Lihirian networks are pursued and promoted as part of the parallel process of defining Lihirian identity, while extra-Lihirian relations are questioned. Simultaneously, local networks are being readjusted, tempering any outside images of Lihirian political or social unity based on a distinct identity. Nevertheless, at the wider level the dominant concern is with those who increase their network at the expense of other Lihirians. Such relationships no longer symbolise a conduit through which wealth can reach Lihir. Instead, many regard relationships with outsiders as an ever widening one way channel through which Lihirian resources flow out to the shores of their neighbours and the pockets of the undeserving.

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NOTES
2. Although the geographical isolation between island communities undoubtedly assists the formation of social distinctions, it is debatable whether pelagic islands constitute a special case (cf. Barth 1969: 11). It has been amply demonstrated that groups living in near proximity, who can appear extremely culturally similar to the external observer, still consider themselves as separate ethnic units, often on the basis of numerous cultural diacritics (Watson 1900).
3. As Lihirians pushed for increased forms of local governance in the late 1980s, there was strong support for alignment with Tanga and Anir to form a single local level government. This idea was soon abandoned when mining operations commenced. As a result of the Organic Law (1995), by 1997 Lihirians had formed the Nimamar Local Level Government (see Bainton 2008).
4. Exploration was first conducted by the Kennecott Explorations Company in 1982. When operations began in 1995, it was managed on behalf of the major shareholder, Rio Tinto, by the Lihir Management Company. Rio Tinto has since relinquished its involvement, and the project is now owned and operated by Lihir Gold Limited.
5. It is estimated that at least double the number of Lihirians work for other contracting companies based on the island.
6. Richard Eves notes similar frustrations on mainland New Ireland among the Lelet who claim that if a man travels to a coastal village and has to stay over night, he may not be assured of being fed and may have to sleep on an empty stomach, which they claim contradicts Lelet custom (1998: 83).
7. In the vernacular, sengeg means movement or to 'walk about'.
8. There have been similar policies at other projects throughout PNG.
9. The Village Population Survey (VPS) is conducted by the Community Relations section of the mining company. Demographic information is partly required for the provision of services. While this survey work is intended to gather data on the entire population, VPS numbers are only given to those people who are identified as Lihirian. These numbers are important for employment positions where Lihirians are given priority over other applicants.
10. Lihirians fought hard during the negotiation phase to secure 50 percent of the overall 2 % royalty rate (which had been raised from 1.5 %), a 15 % equity stake in the project, and a 500,000 kina start up grant to local Lihirian business.

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