

PUZZLING OVER MATRILINEAL LAND TENURE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NEW IRELAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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The Lelet of Central New Ireland are in the process of reforming their land tenure system, though not in the way that land policy reform advocates have in mind. Generally, the impetus for the mobilization of land in Melanesia has come from governments, donor agencies, and business interests promoting development. However, the Lelet are implementing changes on their own initiative. Although they have long been using their land to plant vegetables as cash crops, the more recent drive to make money from coffee growing has precipitated an upsurge in conflicts over land. This pressure on land and a resulting desire for security of tenure is driving their land reform agenda. They are considering abolishing aspects of their complex land tenure system in favor of a system that unequivocally privileges matriliney.

Introduction

IN THE PAST, EFFORTS to reform customary land tenure in Melanesia have been called for, shaped and implemented largely by external actors. Today, the subjects of this paper, the people of the Lelet Plateau in central New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, are implementing changes on their own initiative. Their own desire to produce a more diverse range of crops has brought the Lelet to grapple with the anomalies inherent in their tenure system.

Calls for land tenure reform in Papua New Guinea have been made repeatedly over the years, generally by governments, donor agencies, and business interests, which see the customary systems of land tenure and ownership as impediments to the particular forms of economic development they favor. In several provocatively titled articles ("Aid has Failed the

Pacific”; “Can Papua New Guinea Come Back from the Brink?”), the economist Helen Hughes has claimed that “Communal land ownership has held back indigenous entrepreneurship in the Pacific as it has everywhere in the world” (Hughes 2003, 11) and has “not permitted any country to develop” (Hughes 2004, 7). Hughes even goes farther to suggest that communal land ownership is the “principal cause of poverty” in Papua New Guinea (Gosarevski, Hughes, and Windybank 2004, 137; Hughes 2004, 7). The argument commonly put is that communal ownership of land does not provide adequate security; therefore, people cannot borrow against their landholdings. This impediment to market development results in underutilization of the resource and reduces the level of economic security in the nation (Jones and McGavin 2001, vii).¹ The solution is said to be division of customary land into “private” parcels that individuals can sell, lease, or mortgage (Hughes 2004). Others argue that commentators such as Hughes portray customary land tenures as static, nonadaptive, uncertain, and backward looking and overlook the fact that they often exhibit a flexibility that allows them to be adjusted to changing demands (Bourke 2005; Fingleton 2005a, ix; 2005b, 2007; Golub 2007, 38). However, this flexibility is not able to respond to all changing demands, as my case study shows.

Colonial governments often responded to the problems that the complexities of the land tenure systems presented to the development of a market economy by asserting the primacy of one way of reckoning land rights over another. Confronted with a variety of ownership and use rights deriving from both the maternal and the paternal line, the solution was simply an either/or choice. Thus, in this era, land came to be viewed through a particular Western legal discourse of property rights. Rather than individuals owning discrete parcels of land as the more recent advocates of land reform recommend, colonial authorities sought to have discrete parcels of land owned unquestionably by discrete groups of people defined by principles of descent (see Westermarck 1997, 222).

This was applied during the short-lived era of land demarcation in Papua New Guinea in the late 1960s, when committees were established to assist the new Land Titles Commission in its task of determining and preparing for registration of interests in customary land. Rather than seeking to acknowledge the complexity of customary land ownership and access, strict unilineal interpretation of ownership was emphasized, to the exclusion of other means of access.² Land demarcation committees generally lasted only a few years before being disbanded. According to Owen Jessep, “demarcation was not pursued in quite the same way in each area, nor were the effects identical in every place” (1980a, 131). To understand these variations required consideration of each instance to see whether they were

“due simply to the Committee members misunderstanding their role, or perhaps to ignorance, prejudice or deliberate activity on the part of officials” (Jessep 1980a, 132). However, they “always seemed to be directed towards simplifying and rationalising the principles of customary land tenure” (Jessep 1980a, 132). In the effort to consolidate all landholdings into definable, single, and conterminous blocks, other ways of accessing land as well as customary exchanges of land were discounted.

The effort toward this type of codification was not unique to Papua New Guinea, but was also favored elsewhere in Melanesia. Referring to the Solomon Islands, Simon Foale and Martha Macintyre note that the colonial systems of land adjudication established by the British stressed a single line of descent and presumed simple inheritance as the major means of acquiring land (2000, 30; see also Tiffany 1983; Burt 1994, 318; Hviding 1996, 348). They argue that these inheritance rules have in many instances been readily embraced by the people themselves, who now “perceive and represent them as quintessential principles in ‘customary law’” (Foale and Macintyre 2000, 30).

Although not quite what the current advocates of land reform in Melanesia have in mind, the Lelet are in the process of reforming their land tenure system in a way that looks remarkably similar to the earlier efforts of demarcation with its emphasis on a unilineal interpretation of land ownership.³ With his election to the governorship of New Ireland in 2007, Julius Chan instigated a push to plant coffee, cocoa, and coconuts, as part of his grand vision for the development of New Ireland, an enterprise encouraged by generous subsidies.⁴ On the mountain terrain of the Lelet, suitable perhaps only for coffee, ambitious targets have been set for planting, each person being encouraged to plant at least 1,500 trees to achieve the government’s aim of one million coffee trees in New Ireland by 2012 (*Post-Courier*, 19 March 2009). The Lelet have a long history of planting vegetables for cash crops, but this recent desire to plant coffee has brought contention and precipitated the desire for reform.

As a matrilineal society, the basis of land tenure among the Lelet lies with the unilineal descent groups, which are the primary landholding units. As I explain later, the relationship between the members of the unilineal descent group and the land is one of kinship, because the members of the group are related to the place-spirits, which originally demarcated and settled the land generations ago. In addition to these rights through descent groups, land can be obtained in several other ways.⁵ Much of the present conflict over land is about the usufructory or use rights to land that have been inherited through the paternal line from the father and the father’s father, the basis of which is explained below. Although such use rights allow

a person to plant subsistence and even cash crops, the planting of more permanent crops, such as coffee, has brought to a head some of the tensions between the customary system of land ownership and use rights. Therefore, the Lelet are considering abolishing some of these complex aspects of the land tenure system in favor of a reassertion of more straight-forward matriliney. This entails the primacy of unilineal descent groups that was a feature of the original land demarcation.

Lineality: Rights through the Mother

As I have noted, the Lelet are a matrilineal society characterized by matrilineal descent groups comprising clans and lineages.⁶ Matrilineal descent is traced through females; hence, children belong to the same group as their mother.⁷ Lelet matrilineal descent groups continue to fulfill the function of land transmission as well as other significant customary functions.⁸ For the Lelet, the concept of “communal ownership” refers to the property rights of a communal group defined in terms of descent and historical links to a particular parcel of land (Macintyre and Foale 2007, 51). The primary group for communal ownership is the matrilineal descent group—that is, the clan or *libibinat*, a term derived from the word for womb, *loxontinenat*. Hence people assert that clan members come from their mother, who was carried by her mother back through the generations to one original mother (see also Ogan 1971, 82). It is through the clan that rights to certain forms of property, such as land, heirloom shell valuables (*levena avolo at libibinat*) and certain forms of knowledge are gained and transmitted. Each clan has a leader who is ideally the most senior living male of that clan, although eloquence, strength, and personality play a part. If there is no suitable adult male, then the most senior woman can fill the role. The main occasions when an entire clan gathers are the funerals of members and the subsequent mortuary feasts that commemorate the lives of the deceased. In recognition of their shared nurture and identity, clan members should “stand up” together at these times, and those who do not are censured. A clan may be subdivided further into smaller groups, called lineages, or in the vernacular Mandak, *lavatparus*. This is derived from the word for breast, *lentus*, for as people say, lineage members have been nurtured by “milk from their mother and she got milk from her mother.”⁹ Thus, although clan members have their origins in one womb, lineage members share nurturance from the same breasts. Many of the qualities of clans also apply to lineages: having rights to certain parcels of land and other property. A lineage also has a leader who acts as spokesperson. Because lineages are smaller and more localized, they are more likely to

act as a corporate group on occasions beyond funerals and mortuary feasts. Although people may not be able to trace their lines of descent to a particular ancestor within the clan, this may be possible within the lineage. Lineages claim their origins in the fission of the main clan into segments which then dispersed to different tracts of land within the clan's territory or sometimes even further afield. Several lineage narratives document their coming into being from one clan, recounting conflict, fragmentation, dispersal, and ultimately the formation of a new group. This is usually recounted as having been caused by a conflict at a feast because of an inadequately made earth oven.¹⁰

As Bell remarked many years ago of the Tanga Islanders of New Ireland: "The relationship existing between a native and his land is not a simple property relationship." Rather, it varies, "in accordance with his age, sex, marital status, social status and the use to which the land is put" (Bell 1953–1954, 34). However, for the Lelet the relationship goes far deeper than this. For them, the relationship between a descent group member and his or her land is one of kinship. Central to understanding this is the clan tutelary being, the *larada* or *masalai*, whose significance in defining land ownership cannot be overemphasised (see also Jessep 1980b, 304–306). A clan has at least one *larada* abode (*lubungtada*) on its land, and accounts of how these beings came to inhabit their particular piece of land are significant in the justification of land claims. These beings are centrally concerned with transforming space into place and giving people a sense of identity. The Lelet greatly desire that people continue to be attached to their place, a sentiment that is expressed frequently through the metaphor of being seated (Eves 1997, 1998). The abolition of communal ownership undermines this connection.

Larada are powerful, knowledgeable, and, in some circumstances, vengeful beings with consciousness and a transformative ability that allows them to occupy different bodies, spaces, and ontological states (see Eves 1998, 152–155). These forms can be visible, such as the phenomenal form of a snake, or invisible to be experienced only through revelatory dreams, which can occasionally bestow magical or other powers (Eves 2009, 183).

Larada can also embody many other material forms, such as trees, stones, water holes, and caves. They can manifest themselves in many forms such as a possum, dog, pig, eel, oyster, shark, or octopus and can also take human form, a white person being a common type. Often they have unusual or abnormal appearances and properties, a uniqueness that sets them apart from normal living things and objects. They can materialize themselves as monstrous in appearance, taking on the form of an unusual-shaped stone, a deformed plant, or a two-headed possum, for example.

It is through the larada that the Lelet have an abiding relationship with their land. Sometimes the relationship between a larada and their human clan members is direct, clan members being descended from the larada, as shown in the story of the lineage Luxulep of the clan Tunau (see also Jessep 1980b, 303).¹¹ This lineage originated from a short yellow snake larada called Lumu, which gave birth to a girl. Here is the story:

A man went to a larada abode. He pulled at a vine at the abode. A child was asleep at the end of this vine. The man heard the child and wondered what it was. He pulled the vine again and the child cried. The man pulled the vine towards himself and discovered the child at the end of it. He took this child and went to the coast, going to his house. His wife asked him, "Where did you get this child?" and the husband replied that he found it at the end of a rope at a larada abode and had brought it here. At night, they locked up their house. A short snake left the larada in search of his child. The snake arrived at the couple's house and started shaking it. The wife went outside and saw the snake, calling out to her husband, "There is a snake here." The snake said to the couple, "That's my true child, I'm a larada, why did you take my child?" The wife went inside the house and got some shell money which she hung on the door. The snake saw this and returned to the larada abode. The child grew up and married a man and carried two children, a boy and a girl [and it is from these that the lineage descended].

More commonly, the larada is conceptualized in terms of the mother's brother-sister's son relationship. This is clearly illustrated in the kind of relationship the larada has with some (though not all) in-marrying humans, who are conceptualized through a certain affinal category.

Unlike people from other parts of New Ireland, a Lelet clan member does not fear, and cannot be harmed by, his or her clan larada.¹² A Lelet clan member can go close to the larada of his or her clan and, if it takes a form such as a tree or a clump of bamboo, can even cut it down without fear of retribution. However, the situation is different for people who have married into a clan and are resident on that clan's land, because they are vulnerable to attack. This is a consequence of the kinship relationship pertaining between humans and the larada of their descent group. This follows the same rules as the human kinship system. In effect, the relationship between a person and their spouse's larada is similar to the affinal relationships between a man and his sister's son and their respective

spouses (male ego: MBW and ZSW; female ego: HZS and HMB), who call each other's spouse *nasong*.¹³ The relationship of a person to their spouse's larada is one of shame (*lok mamang*), just like relationships between two nasong, and the spouse must maintain respectful avoidance (*lokngao*) of the larada and vice versa. In particular, in-marrying wives or husbands should carefully avoid the larada and its abodes, which are considered forbidden places (*lenkotkala*).

Not only is the relationship between a person and their spouse's larada one of respect, it is also governed by fear, especially when the person lives on or visits his or her respective spouse's clan land. This fear leads people to circumscribe their behavior in many ways, such as not going to certain places at night lest one meet a larada, not washing in a larada water hole, and abstaining from certain foods. Some people do not even eat chickens raised on their spouse's lands because, in scavenging for food, these may have eaten a larada in the form of a snake. A person resident on the clan land of his or her spouse does not dispose of rubbish close to places where a larada resides, for if the larada consumes it, the careless person will become ill (see Eves 1997, 180–181; 1998, 164–169). People who live on the land of the larada of their husband or wife try not to disturb the larada in any way. They avoid going to areas where the larada is thought to move, lest they step over its path and become ill.

Choice of a place of residence is often governed by fears for the safety of a spouse. Because residence after marriage is often virilocal—that is, the wife moving to the hamlet of the husband—it is women who are most at risk from these beings, because they constitute in-marrying affines. For example, one of my closest informants did not live in his lineage hamlet because it was located adjacent to a larada abode, and he feared for the safety of his wife, who had been attacked by her husband's larada in the past. She had inadvertently cut a larada snake while gardening and almost died as a consequence (Eves 1997, 181; 1998, 168–169). Four others who had married members of this clan had also been attacked and killed by the larada.

Although they are territorial beings located on a clan's land, larada are by no means permanently located there, having the capacity to leave one abode for another, or one place for another. Larada, I was told, "get up and sit down in other places." The movement of larada from their abodes can be temporary or permanent. The temporary travel of larada is not random or arbitrary but is along well-known paths between abodes. They are said to move from the dominant or central abode—the *laxatlitada* ("eye" of the larada)—to other sites dispersed around a clan's lands.¹⁴ These other abodes may be situated nearby or several kilometers away, depending on how many separate parcels of land belong to a clan.

Narrative accounts of the permanent movement of larada explain the way clans have come to migrate, colonize, and inhabit their lands. In these stories, larada travel from one place to another and, in that movement, claim new areas of land for their clan. At these times, the larada in their embodied forms often move along valleys of unowned land, making paths that open up vacant space for occupation. This ability to move, and thus to migrate, means that a clan's land can be scattered over a large geographical area. Land that has already been delineated by other larada, and thus claimed, cannot be acquired. If a migrating larada attempts to traverse land already claimed by another larada, the latter will be angered.

The following origin narrative illustrates this claiming of land through larada movement:

The clan of Luben had its beginning in the sea at Kinaba on the west coast of New Ireland, in an oyster (*laxalas*), the shell of which is used by women to peel taro. In this time of origin, some men were on a reef, fishing with a net (*uben*). Nearby there was a larada abode—a lubungtada—a hole in the ocean called Kanemara. This larada was avoided by people in canoes, for if a person's shadow were cast into the hole, that person would die. The oyster larada would not leave its abode during the day, but only at night. One night when the oyster larada was moving about on the reef, it was caught by the fishermen in their uben. When they had caught enough fish, the fishermen went ashore to divide their haul and then to cook some of it. They decided to cook and eat the captured oyster larada. It was placed on the fire to cook and thus to open, but to no avail. They tried to open it with a knife, but this also failed. One man then tried to smash the oyster open with a rock, but this did not succeed either, the oyster remaining intact. Finally admitting defeat, the men threw the oyster away. During the night when the fishermen were all asleep, the larada communicated through a dream with the man who had tried to smash the oyster open. The oyster told the man that he would from now on bear the name of uben and the larada would be his guardian.

The discarded oyster, together with the fishermen's net, which also became a larada, journeyed from this site to a water-hole at a place named Sarum. This water-hole then became a larada of the clan Luben. The oyster larada, however, did not remain here for very long because a person in an avoidance relationship with it visited the pool. This lack of respect caused the oyster larada to flee once again. From this coastal area, it moved into the

mountains of the Lelet, journeying via the hamlet Tualom at Kaluan, where it found that all of the land was already occupied by other larada, and thus other clans. It then moved to the other side of the plateau where it found an unoccupied area of land. Here the oyster larada and its companion went to a place where the oyster made a hole for the net to reside in. This larada abode was named Lubentada after the primary larada residing there—the Luben. Afterwards, the oyster larada journeyed to another place and made a hole there, naming this place after itself—Lurugalas-silok. It then moved and made a further hole, also naming it after itself—Lurugalas-lik. Finally, when the oyster larada made its abode, the net larada Luben moved to demarcate the boundaries of the Luben clan land, in a way similar to that used in enclosing and trapping fish. As Luben journeyed along valleys and over mountains, mapping the space of its land, it occasionally came to the boundaries of other clan lands, so that it was forced to change its route. For example, in the south its path was restricted by the land of the clan Kantaon, in the northeast by the land of Bungaring, and in the west by the land of Solong.

The Luben clan leader who told me this story of the origins of his clan and its larada admitted that he had never seen the oyster larada, but he authenticated his story by pointing out that coastal vegetation grows at the places where the larada now resides. Further authenticity is furnished by the existence of an omen that indicates an impending death of a member of the Luben clan: should a Luben member be about to die, the oyster larada makes an exploding sound.

The wandering movements of larada, as recounted above, are part of the process by which space is named and transformed into meaningful socialized place. These narratives serve not only as the means by which people are attached to place, but they are also important in giving people a genealogical connection to that land and, thus, rights of ownership and control. The relationship between people and larada is primary in determining ownership rights of land. This relationship connects a clan and lineage to a piece of land and gives the human owners the authority to evict others using the land.

Filiation: Rights through the Father

Thus far, I have described only one aspect of the Lelet's land tenure system—that is, the ownership of land by the matrilineal descent groups,

the clans and lineages. However, the situation is decidedly more complex than this. Indeed, land tenure in Melanesia is far from straightforward: “Melanesian systems of descent reckoning and property transfer are both complex and flexible” (Foale and Macintyre 2000, 31). Much like the Tolai of East New Britain Province (PNG), the social organization of the Lelet has many outwardly discrepant features that defy attempts at easy generalization (Epstein 1964, 2). Although ownership of land is primarily vested in the matrilineal descent groups, especially the lineage, other usufructory rights—that is, rights of use—are granted by other means.¹⁵ Thus, despite the fact that the ideology is unequivocally matrilineal, links to land exist through the paternal line (see also Hogbin and Wedgwood 1953, 263; Epstein 1969, 133; Weiner 1976, 137–167; Jessep 1987; Scott 2007, 341). This access to land through the father complicates the system of Lelet land tenure considerably and is often the source of conflict. Although the allowing of rights through the paternal line attempts to reconcile competing interests and loyalties, this is fraught, and with the planting of permanent cash crops, it unleashes latent conflicts.

Audrey Richards used the term “matrilineal puzzle” to describe the tensions that arise as a result of the conflict of loyalties between a man and his wife and children, who belong to a different descent group (Richards 1950). When the places where people actually garden are examined, it becomes evident that many people have their gardens on land belonging to other clans and lineages and that the right to do so has been gained through the paternal line. The Lelet use the name *kabolobon* to describe these use rights that have arisen as a way of reconciling the tensions inherent in the matrilineal system.

Rather than referring to the types of land rights entailed in *kabolobon* as patrilineal, which can easily slide into the assumption that patrilineal descent groups are part of the social organization, the term patrification is preferable, because this simply recognises that a link from father to (male) child exists.¹⁶ Thus, although these rights are passed through the paternal line, they are not passed to the control of a descent group. Although a son may have inherited access to a plot of land from his father, this is not available to other members of his descent group (except his brothers who would have the same rights). The right to use this garden is then passed to his son, who in turn belongs to a different descent group.

It is important to understand that the rights entailed in patrification involve a different kind of relationship to the land. Those who have such rights are not related to the land in the same way as those who access land through their descent group, because as I have described, clan members have a particularly deep kinship relationship with their land. Although

patrification may also be said to entail a type of kinship to the land through the paternal line, this is less close and immediate, comprising connections back through the generations.

Some anthropologists working on New Ireland have suggested that, if these types of land rights are not a relatively recent innovation born of the colonial era, they have at least been given an impetus during this era (Bolyanatz 1996, 90; 2000, 56). Alexander Bolyanatz argues, for example, that land inheritance among the Sursurunga has shifted in the past thirty years from a norm of matrilineal inheritance to a norm of patrilineal inheritance (1996, 90). The Lelet, however, have tended to go the other way—reemphasizing matrilineal inheritance. The case of the Sursurunga is possibly different because the land tenure situation for coastal dwellers like them has been complicated by the movement of large numbers of people from the interior to the coast during the colonial era. Other examples from New Ireland suggest that patrilineal land rights are long standing, and some scholars have noted that access to land is not reckoned only through the matrilineal descent group but also through the paternal line. For example, Robert Foster remarks of Tanga that the practice of allowing children of the lineage to remain on lineage land continues the relationship of nurturance between father and children. He also suggests that the fluidity entailed here has always been a feature of Tanga social organization and, much like the Lelet example, is a source of complication, because their immersion in the world economy through cash cropping and land sales has led to land disputes (Foster 1995, 88).

In the Lelet case, patrilineal use rights are unlikely to be a recent innovation because the importance of the paternal line is also emphasized in other cultural practices. The Lelet have an abiding concern with paternal nurture, as it is sometimes called in the literature on matrilineal societies (Battaglia 1985; Foster 1995).¹⁷ This refers to the contributions to a child's growth that come from the father and his descent group. This entails not only the procreative contributions from the father that create the child. Because wives often move to live on their husbands' land, children are often nurtured by products from the father's matrilineal land.¹⁸ The euphemism "blood" is used to refer to the father's bodily contribution to the child's creation to avoid the shame of saying the true word, semen. This term, though, has far wider connotations than it might seem, for blood used in this way refers to the fact that a person is created, in part, not only through his or her father's bodily contribution, in the form of semen, but also in the long line back through his descent group (see also Jessep 1987, 11). Thus, to express paternal nurture, people say that they are the blood of their father's clan—for example, *lamaxalum mexatanuat*, meaning blood

from the clan Katanuat. People are often reminded that, if it were not for their father's or even their father's father's descent group, they would not exist. Debts created through this are often acknowledged and reciprocated in the ceremonial exchanges and the ritualized play that takes place at mortuary feasts commemorating the dead. People draw unhesitatingly on these connections in eliciting support for various activities, but more essentially for this paper, it is blood that validates the right to use land through the paternal line.

Much of the contention over kabolobon rights is concerned with garden land that is different from other land (Bolyanatz 2000, 55; see also Hogbin 1967, 4). Garden land is called *laramang*, whereas those areas outside a garden, and which probably would not have been planted traditionally, are referred to as bush or forest (*laxairing*). Conflicts over land are largely over garden land, especially taro garden land. Taro, the most culturally significant food, is planted on the best land, ideally the floor or the rising slopes of valleys, depending on the season.¹⁹ Rights to such garden land are long standing, and somewhat paradoxically, people with kabolobon rights often have use of this most productive land, rather than the descent group owner.²⁰ Consequently the situation often arises that members of land-owning descent groups have to plant their own gardens on marginal land, resulting in considerable resentment and complaints of others eating the fat of their land.

Although the term kabolobon refers mostly to taro gardens, the principle of kabolobon also confers other use rights, also explained in terms of blood, including residence, hunting, the cutting of timber for firewood, and the planting of some tree-crops such as bananas (see also Rodman 1984, 64). Thus, if a man is planting banana suckers in a place where his father or father's father carried out this activity, this is considered to be exercising kabolobon rights. However, if he is planting on the clan or lineage land of his paternal grandfather, who did not himself actually exercise his rights to this land, people will merely say he is "following blood" (*bihainim blut*) or working following his grandfather (I am working following my grandfather—*mi wok bihainim pupu* or *a gugu mu asu ne tubuk*).

As noted, it is when it comes to the planting of more permanent crops, such as coffee, that the limitations of kabolobon use rights become clear. Land among the Lelet has long been potentially subject to dispute, because this land tenure system often gives use of the best land to people whose direct connection to the descent group owners may be several generations back and who belong to other clans. The crucial problem in relation to these patrilineal rights, as Michel Panoff says, is "how a matrilineal society can cope with such disrupting forces" (Panoff 1976, 185). Panoff suggested

that the obvious means of containing within manageable limits most of the strains resulting from patrification was to have two descent groups intermarry regularly (Panoff 1970, 180; 1976, 185). In the past, this was a common solution on the Lelet, where a man living on his father's land would marry a woman from his father's clan group. Ideally he would marry his cross-cousin, resulting in his children growing up on their descent group land (see also Ogan 1971, 83, 86; Foale and Macintyre 2000, 33). This is referred to as marrying back (*lepót amlong*).²¹ This strategy avoids the potential for conflict that arises if a father wishes to transmit forms of wealth, such as access to land but also moveable property, such as shell valuables, to his son rather than his sister's son. When his son marries a cross-cousin, any inherited wealth will eventually return to the rightful clan because the children will be in the same clan from the whence the wealth came. Such strategic marriages are encouraged even when a clan does not have any land in a particular village, because the patrilineal rights allow children to access land of their father and their father's father. In such cases, a son will marry a girl from his father's village or even hamlet (*lepót tonu*). However, because people mostly marry according to their own wishes today, these ideal marriages are not often realized. One consequence is that in the future an increasing number of children will grow up without access to land on the Lelet. This is particularly acute for men marrying women from other places, because their children will belong to clans with no land on the Lelet.

The recent turn to planting coffee has greatly exacerbated the problems raised by patrilineal rights to land. Previously, when the cash crops were mainly annual vegetable crops that could not be inherited, kabolobon rights were less problematic.²² The planting of coffee trees effectively transforms temporary use rights into permanent occupation. Although there is a fairly long history of coffee planting on the Lelet, it is only in recent years that it has become a source of contention.²³ Although coffee need not be planted on the best land, some people have attempted to plant it on land traditionally set aside for taro gardens. The renewed push for cash-crop development in New Ireland has made this, the most fertile land, more highly valued.

Those wishing to plant coffee on a kabolobon garden should obtain the permission of the owner—that is, the head of the clan or lineage on whose land they are gardening, the "papa bilong graun" (*temen laxangka*). So far, this has not been forthcoming. Indeed, when I asked one informant about this, he remarked that the development of coffee, "i lok long dispela"—that is, the development of coffee is blocked on this issue. Some people, however, have gone ahead and planted coffee when permission has been

refused, whereas others simply have not asked in the first place. The response by some descent group members when permission has been denied is simply to pull up the plants or cut them down. This has led to blows being exchanged, accusations of sorcery, and to litigation through the courts.

Reforming Land Tenure

The increasing conflict over land has brought *kabolobon* rights increasingly into question, and moves are afoot to abandon them altogether, or at least to limit them severely. Although some clans had sought to do this in the past, recent attempts have sought to institutionalize such rules more comprehensively across the whole of the Lelet through community government initiatives.²⁴

When I was in the field in June 2008, Village Planning Committees (VPC) had been established in the four villages of the Lelet, and each village community was in the process of formulating a constitution and a five-year development plan.²⁵ When each village community had agreed on its constitution, the constitution was to be submitted to a ward level committee for formulation into a Lelet-wide constitution, although each village constitution would remain applicable in its place of origin.²⁶

The village constitution planning was most advanced in the village of Limbin where I was based, and a draft constitution was being given three readings before being adopted, although this was not finalized before I left the field. A major feature of the proposed new Limbin constitution was the abolition of the practice of *kabolobon*. Rather than people being able to use gardens through rights gained either through the matrilineal descent group or through the paternal line, it was proposed that the matrilineal descent group have priority. In short, a reassertion of the right to access land through matriliney was advocated.²⁷ Although people talk about the abolition of *kabolobon*, what was being proposed was actually curtailment rather than total abandonment, since the current generation can still exercise these rights. However, because the proposal is that the *papa bilong graun* can veto those with *kabolobon* rights from using the land, it is far from an automatic right, as it was in the past. A further proposal is that those who wish to remain living on their father's land should be encouraged to purchase blocks (40 × 40 m) from their father's clan or lineage. This would curtail the rights of others to use this land and, if the land is registered, would entail a form of alienation.

At the time of my fieldwork, this reformulation of land tenure had support in three of the four Lelet villages, although whether such a policy

will be institutionalized across the whole of the Lelet is not assured, because resistance is likely to be vigorous. This is largely because there is considerable inequality in land ownership, with not everyone having access to land through their clan. Although this is particularly acute for those who have married into the Lelet from other places, it applies also to some Lelet clans which, despite having sizeable populations, have little or no land.²⁸ Some clans are land rich, whereas others are land poor.

In Limbin, there is wide support for the abolition of *kabolobon*. The minister for the Lelet United Church, Reverend Loxodan, for example, thought the abolition of customary land rights was “a good thing,” and it would be preferable if people simply purchased land either from their own clan or from other clans. In his view, the practice of *kabolobon* was problematic because people tend to expand their garden boundaries, causing conflicts. Unsurprisingly, people who have clan land are the strongest proponents of the abolition of *kabolobon*, because they feel that it deprives them of the benefit of their own land. Whatever the outcome, the results are unlikely to be satisfactory. Should people choose to leave things as they are, the sources of conflict will remain. Should they change the land system in the way I have outlined, new forms of conflict seem inevitable.

Conclusion

The current efforts to institute reform are very similar to the previous attempt to reform land tenure during the 1960s. The recent attempts to reassert matriliney entail the same kind of codification that occurred during the earlier period. Many anthropologists who undertook field research in the 1960s and who wrote in the wake of demarcation, stressed that flexible land systems were invariably made more rigid. Flexibility was not lost simply by the definition of boundaries but also by the limits imposed on different ways of accessing land (Jessep 1980a, 132). “Demarcation imposed this rigidity in retrospect, by forcing firm Western interpretations of buying, giving and lending upon a fluid, socially and politically convenient system of land acquisition” (McSwain 1977, 123). On Karkar Island in Madang Province, demarcation “re-affirmed the formal groups of traditional kinship structure but weakened cross-linking relationships through land” because the demarcation committees tried to force all land into neat clan boundaries, even where the original clan acknowledged that it had been transferred to other owners through exchange or sale (McSwain 1977, 120).

A similar picture emerges from New Ireland. Writing about northern New Ireland, Peter Lomas commented that the demarcation and registration of plots and the issuing of land titles was a threat to the earlier more

flexible system of land control (Lomas 1979, 61). Brenda Clay, writing about the situation at Pinikindu, in central New Ireland, noted that some of the complexity of the land tenure system, particularly some of the rights obtained through the paternal line, was undermined when: "the Australian government, which read a strictly matrilineal interpretation into local customs . . . decreed that a man must pay for all land transfers out of the clan" (Clay 1977, 65). Other groups in central New Ireland were also encouraged to purchase land previously accessed by use rights. Jessep, who worked among the Barok, commented that demarcation committees formulated their own "laws" of land tenure. This included a law that people should not live on ("sindaun nating") the land of another lineage but should buy it with cash and another that fathers should buy land for their children (Jessep 1987, 20). Jessep notes that people thought that the latter was because the government wanted them to think about their family rather than just their lineage.

That the government desired land be purchased in preference to exercising use rights is clear in colonial government patrol reports from central New Ireland in the mid-1960s. These mention that many complaints about land, especially along the east coast road, arise from the landowners allowing use by others, but then withdrawing it later. "The people were advised," according to the patrol officer at the time, "to discontinue this practice in favour of either outright sale or lease agreements. Outright ownership of land was advocated strongly, in preference to the traditional clan ownership" (Territory of Papua and New Guinea 1965–1966).

The experience on the Tanga Islands, described by Robert Foster, differs from the accounts of Lomas and Clay, who see the objective of the committees as consolidating clan and lineage land to the exclusion of other use rights. Foster observes that the sheer scale of the enterprise among the Tanga indicates that demarcation committees delineated blocks of land for individual households rather than for clans or lineages (Foster 1995, 59). On the island of Boang, for example, which had only eleven clans, the two committees worked at a frenzied pace, marking out over 1,300 (1,347) blocks on an island of 10.4 square miles (Foster 1995, 59). Possibly, the people of Tanga embraced the idea promulgated among the Barok that people should think about the family rather than the lineage and acted accordingly.

The Lelet's experience of demarcation in the 1960s was closer to that described by Lomas and Clay. Much as the northern New Ireland and Pinikindu demarcation committees reasserted the primacy of unilineal descent groups, the Lelet demarcation committee gave priority to lineage and clan as land-owning entities to the exclusion of use rights through the

paternal line. Consequently, people who were resident in hamlets on the clan land of others relocated to their own clan land. A similar situation arose in Limbin in the year 2000 when one of the main clans, Katanuat, abolished kabolobon rights after a conflict over land. This brought about the fragmentation of the village, because many people, having only rights of residence through their father, moved to their own clan land.²⁹ If the current attempts to reform the tenure system of the entire Lelet succeed, it is likely that similar fragmentation of communities will occur, bringing new problems associated with dislocation and new forms of conflict over land.

If the other villages adopt the Limbin option that tries to avoid disruption by allowing a man to purchase a block of land in his hamlet to live on, problems of inheritance still remain. For those without clan lands, the problem will be acute, for the small parcels of land for purchase are inadequate for subsistence, let alone for cash cropping or the development aspirations of coffee planting. Further, the proposed size is far too small to allow for inheritance, because these blocks will need to be divided between offspring. Thus, whether kabolobon is abolished, partially curtailed, or continues unchanged, it appears that land on the Lelet will continue to be under pressure and subject to considerable conflict.

NOTES

1. As early as 1965, the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development review of economic development in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea stated that the "tenure pattern, evolved by custom, . . . may have fitted traditional subsistence production but it does not meet the requirements of an emerging commercial agriculture" (1965, 38), adding that "the key feature from which most developmental limitations spring is that the concept of individual ownership as recognized in the Western world does not exist" (1965, 173).

2. Land demarcation committees were established in 1966 under a series of acts that saw the Native Land Commission replaced by the Land Titles Commission. These included: Land Titles Commission Act 1962 (No. 5 of 1963); Lands Registration (Communally Owned Land) Act 1962 (No. 10 of 1963); and Land (Tenure Conversion) Act 1963 (No. 15 of 1964).

3. Mandak language terms are indicated by italics and Tok Pisin by underlining.

4. During 2008, the New Ireland Provincial government allocated one million Kina to encourage this development, with small growers receiving K2,500 if they planted a minimum of one hectare in the previous twelve months (*The National*, 22 January 2008).

5. Land can simply be exchanged for cash or for pigs and taro in a more traditional way. However, if the new owner fails to register the change in ownership, which few if

any appear to do, the exchange can be rescinded by the return of the items exchanged. Land can also be obtained in compensation for a death, and it can also be accessed on the more temporary basis of use rights, through exchange.

6. Like many other New Ireland societies, the Lelet are characterized by a moiety system, which classifies people into two groups: Bik Pisin (*Lamalom*) and Liklik Pisin (*Laragam*). Moiety identity is also obtained matrilineally; thus, just as a person belongs to the clan and lineage of his or her mother, they also belong to her moiety. Moiety exogamy deems that a person in Bik Pisin should marry a person in Liklik Pisin. Because members of a moiety are dispersed over a wide area and do not have any common or group dealings, they do not constitute corporate groups (Jessep 1980a, 114; 1987, 9). Neither do moieties have a role in land tenure, as some other writers on New Ireland have suggested (R. B. Clay 1972, 46; B. J. Clay 1977, 20).

7. It should never be assumed that, in matrilineal societies, authority within the group lies with the women or, indeed, that such women have more power generally. Although this appears to be the case described by Nash (1974) for the Nagovisi of Bougainville, where women are the owners and managers of lineage property, including land, and the senior women are the effective lineage leaders and decision makers, much more commonly almost all authority rests with men (Allen 1981, 16; see also Thomas 1980, 172).

8. In his insightful writings on the nature of New Ireland matriliney, Alexander Bolyanatz cautions against assuming any intrinsic connection between land tenure and descent. In his view, there is “no reason that the primary function of a descent group has to be the transfer of land across generations” (Bolyanatz 1996; 2000, 60). Although Bolyanatz says that descent group functions often actually do involve the transfer of land rights, this is not automatically the case. Indeed, he argues that the matrilineal transmission of land can disappear without the concomitant disappearance of matrilineal descent understandings (Bolyanatz 1996, 86; 2000, 60).

9. The number of lineages in a clan can range from two to a dozen. The clan Katanuat, for example, has eight lineages, three of which are extinct.

10. The myth has variations about place, details of preparation, and what was being cooked (see Eves 1998, 125).

11. Indeed, there is a close linguistic relationship between the word for this entity—*larada*—and the word for a human being—*laradi*.

12. For the Barok studied by Roy Wagner, the masalai or *tadak* can be wrathful, even harming its own clan members (Wagner 1986, 101; see also Jessep 1980b, 304–305). Writings of Lihir, Martha Macintyre and Simon Foale comment that masalai abodes are generally avoided as places that are dangerous (Macintyre and Foale 2007, 52). Referring to the Mandak-speaking people of Pinikindu of the east coast of New Ireland, Brenda Clay states that masalai are feared by clan members and nonmembers alike and can cause illness and even death (Clay 1986, 54).

13. M = mother; B = brother; W = wife; Z = sister; S = son; H = husband.

14. The laxatlitada sometimes bear distinguishing marks or features that signify lineages within the clan. The laxatlitada of the clan Katanuat is a water hole, named Limbin, located a few kilometers from the village bearing the same name. When this water hole is cleared of debris and mud, the water effuses from several holes or “eyes” in its depths, each of which is said to mark a lineage of the main clan.

15. Should a lineage become extinct, its land should go to the other lineages of the clan.

16. Some writers refer to such connections as patrilateral. For example, see Jessep (1987, 3).

17. Scholars sometimes use the term “nurturant paternity” to express the kind of productive labor that creates debts (Strathern 1984, 53; Foster 1990, 433, 438). Some of the abiding concern with relationships through the paternal line in matrilineal societies in Melanesia is also evident among other societies in the Pacific. See Marshall (1977, 644); Severance (1979, 135).

18. For interesting accounts of the idiom of blood in other matrilineal societies in Melanesia, see Panoff (1976); Rodman (1984, 64); Jessep (1987, 11); and Burt (1994, 320).

19. Taro has literally dozens of named varieties and, as is common in Melanesia for culturally important food crops, it is anthropomorphized. Taro is highly regarded for its capacity to give strength to the consumer, and in the past, infants were introduced to it early through a process of ritual feeding. Taro is an extremely important item that accompanies pigs and pork meat in exchanges at the culturally important mortuary feasts.

20. People have detailed and exact knowledge of the location of gardens and especially the basis of their use.

21. Some clans have formed close relationships over time, through a process of repeated cross-cousin marriages. For example, the clans of Laragat and Katanuat in the village of Limbin have engaged in a considerable marrying back and forth over time.

22. When cardamom was planted in the early 1990s, it did not cause contention because the land used was located in valleys relatively distant from hamlets and not used for any other purpose. Other writings about matrilineal land tenure systems in Melanesia have also commented on problems that ensue when cash crops are planted on land accessed through use rights, such as those obtained through the father: New Ireland (Lomas 1979, 64; Jessep 1987, 19; Foster 1995, 88); Papua New Guinea (Epstein 1968, 107; Panoff 1970, 190–191; 1976, 182; Ogan 1971, 86, 91; Mitchell 1982, 62, 64) and beyond (Rodman 1984, 67).

23. Coffee was first planted on the Lelet in the late 1950s. The Kavieng Patrol Report 5, 1957–1958 mentions that a mere fifteen coffee trees had been planted. The number of trees reached nearly 14,000 by the late 1960s, but patrol reports speak of them being badly neglected, and only negligible amounts of beans being sold through the Agricultural Department (1965–1966). By the time of my doctoral fieldwork in 1990 and 1991, most

of the trees were long abandoned, and only a few remained. In the late 1990s, coffee was again promoted as a cash crop by the Coffee Industry Corporation and plans were afoot to grow 100,000 seedlings for planting. Many people at that time adopted a wait-and-see attitude, being sceptical of the corporation's claims of the riches to be had. Similar claims had been made in relation to cardamom, which many had laboriously planted and harvested only to be disillusioned by the extremely small returns.

24. Although there had been earlier attempts to establish this level of community government after the provincial government reforms, such initiatives did not make much headway. For example, there had been discussions about instituting community government when I was in the field in 2004, but the idea was not embraced to the same degree as what is now occurring.

25. The VPC comprised a chairman, a member of the three-person committee that organizes the Monday morning *lain* meeting, the Masa (the village leader), the village policeman, the village magistrate, and a representative of each of the following: youth, church, and women.

26. Wards comprise a political unit of about 1,000 people and have a representative, elected by the adults living in the ward. This person represents them at Local Level Government (LLG) meetings.

27. This reassertion of matriliney runs counter to some past anthropological writings, which predicted the death of matrilineal systems. For example, in the 1960s, Mary Douglas made the general remark that, "On many accounts matriliney appears to be a fragile institution and its future at risk" (Douglas 1969, 121). Implicit in many of these analyses, according to Douglas, was the assumption that the elementary family is the basic and universal unit of society. She concluded that the general impression given by many of the anthropological analyses of kinship systems was that matriliney was a "cumbersome dinosaur. Its survival seems to be a matter for wonder" (Douglas 1969, 123). This view was also articulated in the literature on Melanesia when Hogbin, commenting on the impact of cash cropping on the Tolai of East New Britain, stated that "the matrilineal system is on the point of collapse" (Hogbin 1958, 146). According to him, the available evidence suggested that regular rules of residence and inheritance no longer existed. Other more authoritative writers on the Tolai were not as pessimistic; Hogbin seems to have mistakenly understood access rights to land through the paternal line as synonymous with the death of matriliney.

28. This probably came about in the past through women from elsewhere marrying into the Lelet where they had no clan lands to pass on to descendants.

29. Some have now returned to the community, but others have not.

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