
VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

Mountains of Gold: The People of Porgera. 1993. Video, 52 min., color. Produced and directed by John Davis. New York: Davis Film & Video, distributed by Filmmakers Library (124 E. 40th St., New York, N.Y. 10016; <http://www.filmaker.com>). US\$395; \$75 rental.

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA HAS AFFORDED a rich field for ethnographic films notable for their attention to the contexts in which people negotiate their often troublesome engagement with modernity. Yet filmmakers have devoted relatively little attention to what, since the Bougainville rebellion and the Ok Tedi lawsuit, has attracted international media attention: the relation between indigenous people and Papua New Guinea's growing number of mining projects. All the more reason, then, to welcome ***Mountains of Gold***, which focuses on the situation of the Ipili people, landowners at the site of the large Porgera gold mine.

An opening voice-over announces, "It is often fashionable to tell a story like this as the destruction of the noble savage by the wicked ways of capitalism, but the Ipili are a practical and resourceful people." The film thus promises at the outset to go beyond shopworn stereotypes by portraying the Ipili not as victims, but as active players on the contemporary scene. For the most part it makes good on this promise by attending to the hardheadedness with which they manage their affairs in the world that transnational mining has brought to them.

One of the film's strong points is the historical overview it gives of mining in the Porgera area. An aim of the Black and Taylor patrol of the 1930s was to find gold, which John Black sums up by saying that "good colors [were] showing" at Porgera--prospector's parlance for signs that local streams bore traces of gold. Small-scale prospecting began following the Second World War, and in 1984 sluicing got underway. At that point significant numbers of local people were hired as laborers and, more importantly, issues of compensation for landowners came to the forefront, where they have remained since. By 1990 Porgera Joint Venture (PJV) went into operation, opening one of the worlds largest gold mines.

From this point on, much of the footage is devoted to an examination of the tensions and maneuvering that inevitably arise when mining transforms land into a source of royalties and compensation payments on a scale dwarfing subsistence farmers' usual incomes. In the run-up to mine construction, PJV paid out US\$12 million in a variety of compensation claims, and continual negotiation was the order of the day. In a scene that must stand for many, a PJV surveyor relocates a road route to avoid an intransigent landowner's demands for compensation, the surveyor's frustration spilling over as he asks, "who else wants to stop the work?" Another company employee complains that as soon as word gets out that PJV is interested in drilling in a particular area, new houses spring up overnight, the better to stake compensation claims. In this part of the story, the Ipili show themselves to be capable and shrewd in their dealings with PJV, much to the latter's chagrin.

The eagerness with which mining was awaited is shown in shots taken in the 1980s when Kule, an Ipili man, complains that there had been too much talk about mining and too little action for his liking. The same man is later shown--after he and his family relocated to housing PJV provided when the mine went into production--with a new wife, who proudly displays their home freezer. The wealth is obvious, as is Kule's satisfaction with his new prosperity.

But the situation is not without its problems. Kule's wife is not Ipili, but comes from a neighboring area, and part of the attractiveness of the match is revealed by her relatives' willingness to accept reduced bridewealth payments in exchange for a diffuse connection to Porgera and its wealth. Such marriages have become something of an issue among Ipili women, who complain that second wives originating outside Porgera are responsible for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Whether "outside women" are a menace to public health or not, the charge exemplifies tensions rooted in disparities that are largely a function

of proximity to the mine. Porgera has acted as a magnet for people from surrounding areas, who often come at the invitation of Ipili hosts who welcome outsiders as allies to bolster their strength. Thus Ekake, an Ipili landowner, has been joined by more than 200 Huli and Enga affines, and he makes it clear that he sees this as a way of underwriting his own position. Such tactics are double-edged, however. Ekake later complains that his allies should be given payments of their own, rather than sharing in those made to him. Here the division between landowners and others manifests itself in demands that PJV pay for “all” the local land (and not just that needed for mining) and help look after the new immigrants.

Ekake’s situation registers a larger problem facing the Ipili, for the influx of outsiders--mainly Enga and Huli--has exacerbated local discord. In 1986 Porgera’s population stood at 10,000, but by 1993 that figure had grown to 15,000. Although many came in search of work, the mine employs only about 900 local people, leaving the rest to shift for themselves. Enga newcomers number about 2,000 and figure as the film’s villains, styled as one of Papua New Guinea’s “wildest and strongest” groups. In one memorable scene, closely packed Enga men brandish spears as they dance menacingly forward to claim death compensation from local Ipili. Escalating Enga demands contain an element of intimidation, and the Ipili complain about their relative weakness vis-à-vis the Enga. Further afield, another Enga group blocks roads, threatening to starve the mine and its township out unless their demands for payment are met. Faced with this, the viewer is left to conclude that if the Ipili have been tough and resourceful in dealing with PJV, they have had a harder time holding their own against the pressures of their neighbors.

The film closes on this note, citing an Ipili myth that the world will end when too many outsiders come to Porgera. Declaiming before a group of onlookers, an older man confronts the camera and with a mocking laugh says that in his day people had to fight for their lives; now his children have to fight for their land.

The Ipili may turn out to be victims after all, the film implies, but victims of local politics rather than of transnational mining per se. Critical viewers will find this troubling--the silences on environmental issues and the role of government are deafening, and the mining economy has after all been the source of discord--yet Davis is surely right in emphasizing the intensely local nature of the tangled politics surrounding the mine. Without an edifying moral, the story departs from the tales of victimization and resistance we are accustomed to telling, reason enough to recommend *Mountains of Gold* to a wide audience in and out of the classroom.