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The *Papua Niugini* Paradox. Land property archaism, and Modernity of peasant resistance ?

Rémy HERRERA, Poeura TETOE

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The *Papua Niugini* Paradox

Land property archaism, and Modernity of peasant resistance?

Rémy HERRERA^{*} and Pooura TETOE^{}**

Abstract:

After Papua New Guinea's society has been presented in a first part of this paper, the second part focuses on traditional land institutions and relationships to land – often considered to be “archaic”. The third part exposes the process of land registration during the colonial and since the independence, in order to examine finally the modernity of peasant resistance forms in this country (fourth part).

Résumé:

Après une présentation de la société papouane-néo-guinéenne, dans une première partie, la deuxième partie de ce cahier de recherches se concentre sur l'étude des institutions foncières traditionnelles et sur les relations à la terre – souvent considérées comme étant « archaïques ». La troisième partie expose le processus d'enregistrement des terres au cours de la période coloniale et depuis l'indépendance, pour finalement déplacer l'analyse vers la modernité des formes de résistances paysannes dans ce pays (quatrième partie).

Keywords:

Development, state, access to land, peasant societies, social conflicts

Mots-clés:

Développement, État, accès à la terre, sociétés paysannes, conflits sociaux

JEL Classification:

E6, L7, N17, O56, Q32

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Introduction

Independent from Australia since 1975, Papua New Guinea (*Papua Niugini* in pidgin Creole) currently accounts for about 6.5 millions inhabitants. This population is spread out along a territory of 463,000 km² which consists of two thirds of the Eastern part of the large New Guinea Island plus surrounding archipelagos (Niu Briten, Niu Ailan, Manus, Milen Be, Bougainville). Its social formations have provided for long time an ideal ground amongst ethnology and anthropology that found in their singularity complexity an unending source of research whereas few economists had turned their attention to them. Thus, the contrast is striking between on one hand the relative scarcity of economic analyses on this country, and on the other hand, the numerous experts' reports emanating from government agencies or more frequently from foreign transnational corporations,¹ which are attracted by mineral resources (gold reserves could place the country in the third position at a worldwide scale according to local estimates),² hydrocarbon fields, or even forestry resources, and are massively investing.

Land question is a real issue in this peasant society —characterized by a population consisting predominantly of farmers and breeders, having a domestic economy largely based on subsistence, with the persistence of “customary” systems and autonomous local territories integrated in the space of a “nation-state”. Indeed, it is a source of recurrent and sometimes violent conflicts as regards of land ownership and use between transnational corporations, the state and the civil society —the latter has often been demeaned by archaic prejudices.³ Thus, to stress the existence of a landownership which is not founded on private propriety of soils, and of collective forms of land cultivation and production where range of rights are placed side by side applying to individuals and run by a range of institutions and practices emanating from the state, modern authorities and “customary” communities, is one matter; another one is to consider all these factors as insurmountable impediments to “development”, in a capitalist meaning. Conversely, if the “undevelopment” of this southern country is undoubted, such a phenomenon cannot be only explained by the external openness, adopted under pressure and uncontrolled.

The original feature of Papua New Guinea is that community lands still today cover more than 90 per cent of the country (*Table 1*)—somewhat incredible in a dependent and neoliberalized economy.⁴ The peasant resistances, we want to be disembarassed from an a priori appraisal, have a lot to do with it.⁵ We will try to analyse how internal factors (connection between Papua New Guinean society and the state) and external ones (connection between the state and foreign capital) are linked to prevent in fine the country from development. After a brief demographic and cultural presentation (first part), we study the traditional land institutions and the relationships to land —frequently considered to be “archaic”— (second part), then the steps of the process of registration of land during the colonial period and since independence (third part), in order to finally examine the surprising modernity of this peasant society and its resistance capacity⁶ to the unusual forms of neoliberal policies⁷ (fourth part).

¹ Many of these experts' reports are written by distinguished academics —who, for some of them, are listed in bibliography— as public authorities observers, the Australian Agency Aid or consultants for private mineral interests. For an informative analysis, see Stewart and Strahern (2005).

² Department of mining (various years). For an analysis of foreign capital and the mining exploitation issue in Papua New Guinea, see: Herrera and Tetoé (2011).

³ Unfortunately, several examples are found in the daily press, especially from Australia, and academic reviews (see for example Helen Hughes).

⁴ Lakau (1991), Corrin Care and Paterson (2007).

⁵ Herrera and Tetoé (2012a).

⁶ Here: Scott (1985, 1990) and Cooper (1994).

People and culture

Although a set of questions remain to be addressed about the exact origins of Melanesian people,⁸ the latest archaeological and linguistic discoveries during the last decades have shown that the settlement of Papua New Guinea come from successive arrivals from the easternmost of island South-East Asia.⁹ More than 40,000 years ago, the first wave brought the hunter-gatherer ancestors of Papuan population, who had settled in various parts of the northern coast of New Guinea, then crossed to the neighbouring islands of New Britain and New Ireland, then to Bougainville (by 30,000 Before Present) and to Manus (by 20,000 BP). These populations had early established on the lowlands, then progressively penetrated into the rugged mountainous valleys of the central highlands where the climatic improvement had permitted to cultivate land. The practice of irrigation in agriculture, for yam, sagu, taro, and sugar cane for instance, has been testified for at least 9,000 years (i.e., the end of the last glacial period), making Papua New Guinea one of the centres of early agriculture.¹⁰

Furthermore, the development of an intensive agriculture led to a concentration of populations in the Highlands. Since 10,000 years BP, a second large migration occurred, bringing Austronesian people to costal lowlands of the great island and the surrounding archipelagos. All these migrations have led to an exceptional diversity as regards languages¹¹ but also, socially and culturally speaking, making hazardous any generalization.¹² However, many observers have suggested existence of common features. Papuan groups share the same attachment to ancestor worship mythology and beliefs, as well as artistic expressive forms, which seem to characterize the island of New Guinea, and more generally the Melanesian area. The lack of hierarchy to define socioeconomic organization of population groups has been often pointed out as autonomy and adaptability of traditional institutions leading to put into perspective the state authority.

The scattering of these communities does not mean that they were separated from each other, or were only in contact for fighting, as it is often assumed. In the Highlands, most of them are maintaining exchange networks that connect them with remote groups, as revealed by salt trade, for example. Ceremonial exchanges as *Moka* and *Tee Cycle* were opportunities for hundreds of groups —and among them individuals— to compete each other for prestige and influence through their *big men*.¹³ The difficulty to assimilate a clan or a group to a “policy”, the relative but real autonomy of the individual behaviour among those communities, added to the linguistic differentiation, are many elements that maintain the idea of a social formation on the verge of breakup, sank into recurrent internal conflicts, which in turn have produced the view that national sentiment could not emerge in Papua New Guinea.¹⁴

⁷ We define “neoliberalism” by referring to the running of the capitalist world system and by giving it a class meaning, as “the doctrinal system on which is developing the global strategy of domination of the high finance, provided with the institutional and ideological superstructure under its control”. On this point: Herrera (2010).

⁸ Read: Pawley, Attenborough, Golson and Hide (2005).

⁹ See: Gille and Toulellan (1999), O’Connor and Chappell (2003), Hope and Haberle (2005).

¹⁰ Denham *et al.* (2003, 2004), Bourke (2009). See also: Sullivan, Hughes and Golson (1987) or Golson (1991).

¹¹ Almost 750 languages and three vernacular languages (tok pisin, hiri-motu and English) have been listed. The average number of speakers per language is about 10,000 with a discrepancy going from 200,000 to some hundreds. Here: Schroeder (1992).

¹² There are more than 1,000 different cultural groups in Papua New Guinea, each with its own languages. See: Foley (1986), Pawley *et al.* (2005).

¹³ See: Godelier (1982).

¹⁴ According to Defert (1996), the word “Papua” apparently came from the Molucca Islands and could mean “fatherless”, in order to highlight the absence of centralised power.

The European colonisation, whose Australia —this England from the antipodes, as Fernand Braudel wrote—¹⁵ was the main actor, was slow in coming¹⁶ but has had a great resonance on populations diversified according to history and culture. The colonial legacy is heavy, notably because of the artificial partition of the country. The New Guinean island is cut into two parts: its eastern one is the independent state of Papua New Guinea, formerly British Papua in the South-East and German territories in the North-East, both reunified in 1949 following the *PNG Act* benefited Australia, while the western part, Papua (ex-Irian Jaya), a former Dutch colony, has been Indonesian since 1962. Separatists tensions still shake some Melanesian islands, as in Bougainville, where conflict even degenerated into a tragic war from 1989 to 1998.¹⁷ The racial distinction drawn between “black islands” (Melanesia) and islands of Polynesia had far-reaching effects on the European collective imagination and fantasy: the violent “black cannibal” in the West;¹⁸ the apolitical and isolated “noble savage” in the East. This European penetration slowly and partially integrated indigenous to global capitalism, transforming most of them into small farmers, and maintaining them under the dependence of colonial plantation companies, particularly for the productions of palm oil (in Sepik or New Britain) and coffee (in the Highlands). Yet, almost the three quarters of the Papua New Guinean workforce are still involved today in growing subsistence crops. A considerable proportion of what is produced is for self-consumption or sold on local markets, and only a very small amount is exported. One of the most significant distinctive features characterizing this peasant society is its connection to land and persistent attachment to traditional institutions to defend collective landownership —even if it is not possible to oppose the latter to private ownership in a dualistic manner.

Connection to land, customary rights and collective ownership

In Papua New Guinea, as in most societies of the South and particularly in Oceania, land is only exceptionally subject to private appropriation, as modern capitalist right means it (*Tables 1 and 2*). This customary management, which excludes private property but secures for all its members access to collective land, does not mean in any way an egalitarian access as differentiations exist between families, clan leaders and gender. Customary practices are not free from social hierarchies and prejudices. Thus, it is without naivety, nostalgia, nor unconsidered panegyric that we tackle the question of customary rights in this peasant society.

¹⁵ Braudel (1981).

¹⁶ For the most isolated regions, it happened from 1930, or even later.

¹⁷ Watts (2007).

¹⁸ These prejudices were revived by tragic events, such as in 1961 during an expedition in Asmat (South- West), with the death of Michael C. Rockefeller, the youngest heir of the well-known wealthy family.

Table 1. Distribution of land by property form in Oceanian area
(in percentage)

	<i>Public property</i>	<i>Private property</i>	<i>Customary property</i>
Federal States of Micronesia	35	1	64
Fiji	4	8	88
Kiribati	50	5	45
Marshall Islands	1	0	99
Nauru	10	0	90
Papua New Guinea	2,5	0,5	97
Samoa	15	4	81
Solomon Islands	8	5	87
Tonga	100	0	0
Tuvalu	5	0	95
Vanuatu	2	0	98

Source: Corrin Care and Paterson (2008).

Table 2. Proportion of registered customary lands in Oceania
(in percentage of total lands)

Fiji	+90
Federal States of Micronesia	+50
Kiribati	+50
Marshall Islands	-10
Nauru	+90
Papua New Guinea	-5
Samoa	+20
Solomon Islands	-1
Tonga	0
Tuvalu	100
Vanuatu	n.a.

Source: Corrin Care and Paterson (2008).

Notes: +x = more than x per cent; -y = less than y per cent; n.a. = no available data.

Under customary law, some members within clans and families are designed as leaders to administer lands. Generally, family ties give access to land, but very often the only effective involvement in collective work (clearing, upkeep of gardens, etc.) allows someone to exploit temporarily land, without having the possibility however to sell or to rent it.¹⁹ Furthermore, this interest in land does not confer the right to exclusive use, enjoyment and occupation of the land as others communities may also share the same rights on it. Hence, it results a singular and complex economic system where very personalized relations of production still remain today, a vision of individual labour lies within protection or association pacts and turns towards self-consumption and basic needs satisfaction, a trade dominated by exchange of prestige and barter, an apprehension of money separated from market prices, hoarding along accumulation of capital...²⁰

¹⁹ Read here: Herrera and Tetoe (2010).

²⁰ Godelier (1982).

In Papua New Guinea, land law draws from two main sources, that are admitted by the Constitution: the western capitalist tenure system on the one hand, on which “alienated” lands (freehold and leasehold) are concerned, was introduced by the colonial administration and is currently held by the modern state,²¹ on the other hand, the customary land tenure. Currently, alienated lands and specially those used for mining exploitation represent only 120,000 parcels, or 600,000 hectares, that is to say less than five per cent of the national territory.²² More than 90 per cent of Papua New Guinea land corresponds to customary lands. According to the 2000 census, about 80 per cent of the total population is still living in rural areas. Nevertheless, land is always the object of private interest desire and under pressure for registration and privatization. More than a thousand of parcels have been registered by the Department of Lands.²³

Facing pressures from foreign investors and international donors, the position of the state of Papua New Guinea seems rather ambivalent. Theoretically and legally, all customary land transactions are controlled by the state. The persistence of customary land use rights, which imposes upon foreign capital, arises serious problems to public authorities for the grant of mineral deposits to transnational firms or for the building of infrastructures to boost private foreign investments. This requires both concessions of resource exploitation rights to private investors and the alienation of customary land (which could be unlimited and exclusive) by the State.²⁴ However, we can observe that the dominance of traditional collective forms of social organization within the peculiar structure of land tenure in this country did not prevent—but only slow down—the growth of export of mineral, hydrocarbon, and agribusiness products.

It is true that some transactions on land are beyond state control. But, it has been noticed that, when the state acknowledges land ownership of families and clan leaders—even when the soil is rich—the protective role of the state over customary land use is only effective when private interests are not involved in and that no natural resources have been discovered. Elsewhere, the state takes over the soil to sell the exploitation of all resources existing on, in, or below the surface of any land: all minerals (gold, copper, nickel...), oilfields and gas fields, but also forests, and even water, etc. The access to natural resources and their exploitation by foreign transnationals are carried out with the support of the state of Papua New Guinea, which articulates this process of land appropriation with the previous ancestral structures of collective land ownership without introducing “free” land markets.

When a resource project is launched, general compensation solutions are financial payment to landholders by mining and petroleum companies, as well as royalties payment by the state. In addition, local communities could also have direct equity involvement in all major resource developments. If the law does not require first the identification of all landholders, the distribution of these compensations and royalties is legally dependent on the identification of each landowner. The jurisprudence on land affairs has de facto encouraged competition between landholders, leading some of them to adopt a logic of “ideology of landownership”²⁵ and rent seeking strategies.²⁶ Even in Papua New Guinea where traditional social structures remain strong, the majority of the peasant society has been receptive and reactive to such financial incentives.²⁷

²¹ See: World Bank (1978).

²² At the beginning of the 1990’s, on the total land area of 47,615,700 hectares, Lalau (1991) counted 435,100 hectares of private freehold lands (1 per cent), 870,200 hectares of state lands (2 per cent), and 46,310,400 hectares of customary lands (that is, 97 per cent).

²³ Read the informations disseminated by the Department of Lands; and section 6 of the Mining Act (1992).

²⁴ Anderson (2006).

²⁵ See: Filer (2006) or Filer, Burton and Banks (2008).

²⁶ Banks and Ballard (1997), Filer and Imbun (2009). Also: Strathern (2009).

²⁷ Fingleton (2007).

However, the monetization which followed has not necessarily led to the collapse of the social structures as the effects on them were complex and contradictory. Obviously, self-interest behaviours have spread, leading to strained relationships and even to the disintegration of families or clans. But simultaneously, groups that were identified as landholders —or even as equity holders!— have not only earned money but also prestige and honour. Maurice Godelier has already demonstrated —in the 1980s, when about two thirds of the peasant families were involved in the monetary economy— the singular way the Papua New Guineans eat up money to maintain or extend social relationships,²⁸ particularly for weddings. From an economic point of view, usually money is not saved nor invested, but spent into social competition of gift and gift giving. Social structures have not been collapsed, but rather adapted. Over the last decades, the distribution of royalties paid by transnational firms to the central state, to local governments, and to landowners has been in favour of the latter.²⁹ Even if more and more land disputes are brought before the courts, most complaints are relating to the amounts of compensations paid by private investors, more than in connection with the land ownership. On the other side, a strong revendication from the peasant communities is the jointly-held ownership, as a measure to prevent dissolution of groups (by introducing division between brothers, among others). In fact, although constant and convergent pressures from foreign transnationals, the governments of developed countries, and international institutions towards an individualization of land ownership, the successive Papua New Guinean authorities did not succeed in (nor did want to) challenging the customary collective landownership. The main reason is popular resistances engaged by the peasant society against the privatization of lands, the imposition of modern register for lands and their management by the capitalist laws. Consequently, if the customary land system has not represented a conclusive obstacle to the neoliberal strategy applied by the government towards the opening to foreign capital and the growing exploitation of natural resources, people of Papua New Guinea is vested in legitimate land ownership.

Collective ownership under threat of land laws: some historical facts

The registration of customary lands and the establishment of cadastral systems have always been the first priority for the Australian colonial administration.³⁰ If inland areas have been lately “discovered”, pressures exerted by the colonial authorities on local groups have brought about frequent confrontations between colonists and natives.³¹ The colonial plantations and trading companies, from Southern Australia (or Germany) arrived in force on the costal plains and surroundings islands, where alleged “vacant” lands (according to the expression used by the colonial power, because of uncultivated and unoccupied lands) were grabbed by private companies, especially for the cultivation of copra. Progressive opening of the Highlands gave new opportunities to the Australian administration to conquest more areas. Parcels were requisitioned and rent out to colonists, who recruited workforce among local people, in particular for coffee cultivation. This latter increased among communities, and monetization along with it, up to the Highlands. In some restricted cases, access to land use was managed by customary authorities under colonial state supervision (employing traditional leaders) in order to oblige peasants to produce the pre-established quota of export cash crops —as it was also implemented by the Dutch in Indonesia.³²

²⁸ Godelier (1982).

²⁹ For many people, otherwise, compensations are not a solution. Some groups have asked the removal of the national money and the return to the *kina*, that is, the ancient exchange of traditional shells...

³⁰ Dale (1976), James (1985), Crocombe (1987), Williamson (1997).

³¹ Antheaume, Bonnemaïson, Bruneau and Taillard (1995) or Neale (2005).

³² Herrera and Tetoë (2004b). For a case study of an African country, see: Herrera and Ilboudo (2012).

Most of the time, the aim was land grabbing, and more generally the direct control of colonial authorities on land. After the Second World War, mining explorations and exploitations led to the most important penetration into the territory.³³ From the end of the 1950s, Australian mining companies came massively. This investment inflows speed up in the 1960s, supported by Canberra and the World Bank, then turned towards the petroleum sector. Following the opening of the Panguna mine by Bougainville Copper Ltd. in 1972, the Australia subsidiary of the London-based giant conglomerate Rio Tinto, gold and copper became Papua New Guinean largest export items, well ahead of copra, coffee or cocoa, from 1976 onwards. This expansion further consolidates the country's productive and commercial specialization in primary activities and increased its reliance on Australia, whose domination on these sectors is crushing. In return, Papua New Guinea is the largest recipient of Australian aid in the region, enabling the country to equilibrate its balance of payments and to cover its public deficits. The state priority has always been, and remains today, the highest attractiveness for foreign direct investments in strategic sectors like mining (gold and copper), hydrocarbon (petroleum), and also agricultural cash crops (coffee, cocoa, copra, palm oil, etc.). In order to attract foreign transnational firms, institutional environment was "secured" by reducing the risk of expropriation and by minimizing taxations³⁴.

Since 1952, the Native Land Registration Act established the Native Land Commission, in charge of customary land registrations and dispute settlements. Ten years later, in 1962, this institution was replaced by the Land Titles Commission which pursued the same goals, but with fewer ambitions. At that time, a strict control over land transactions was implemented. The Land Act provided that "a native has no power to sell, lease or dispose of customary lands otherwise than to natives in accordance with custom" (section 73). It saved the government for purchase or lease customary land (section 15), and applied a principle of unanimity as all members of a landowning group must grant a transaction. Actually, the results of these systematic land registrations were poor, forcing the administration to think up new incentives. The idea was then to encourage communities towards voluntary transactions. By virtue of the Land Tenure Conversion Act (1963), when all members of a group of landowners agreed, a member of the group could individually apply for registration of a freehold title to the land. Indeed, fewer than a thousand conversions orders have been made under this Act in 1965.

Faced with the landowners resistance, the Australian administration finally came to the decision to secure their rights on acquired lands. A package of Land Titles Bills was adopted from 1969 on, supplemented by additional Land Reform Bills in 1971. This new offensive launched by the Land Titles Commission against collective landownership contemplated to "clarify" and move towards simplification the customary tenure, while strengthening controls on land transactions. As the export specialization of Papua New Guinea was evolving from agriculture to mining sectors, the laws intended to establish the most appropriate land tenure to articulate at best gradually the country into the Australian productive and trade structures. The Bills intended to operate geographically selective registration of interests in customary land. Group interests were to be registered in the names of representatives, who were given the power—but not necessarily the right—to deal with lands as if they were their absolute owners.³⁵ But finally, these Bills were withdrawn in the face of widespread objections, and the so-called "reform" was suspended. Some of these popular oppositions focused on the risks of tenure individualization and those of land aggregation in an elite's hands, with landlessness and landlordism as likely consequences.³⁶

³³ Here: Herrera and Tetoé (2011).

³⁴ See: Bank of Papua New Guinea (various years) and Economist Intelligence Unit (various years). Also: Herrera and Tetoé (2012b).

³⁵ Trebilcock (1983).

³⁶ Bruce (1988).

In 1972, Papua New Guinea had become self-governing. Following the withdrawal of the land laws, the new authorities set up the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters, which reported in 1973. Its report recommended a range of reforms related to numerous issues of land policy, including inequalities reduction as to allocation of land ownership, control of private freeholds, prohibition on selling land to a foreigner in areas characterized by land shortages (with compensations), and the setting up of a decentralized system of dispute resolutions at the district level. Leasing conditions to non citizens were limited to a 60 years term. In 1974, the government also declared its intention to acquire land alienated by the Australian colonial administration and colonists by implementing the Plantation Redistributive Scheme under which plantations owned by expatriates or foreign companies have been nationalized, except for plantations with strong capitalistic structure like tea or palm oil plantations and cattle breeding farms. Furthermore, communities have been offered the possibility to acquire some plantations with the financial support of the state: the group taking over the land was expected to pay a deposit of 10 per cent of the plantation's value and to transfer to the government the remainder within three to five coming years. At the independence in 1975, Papua New Guinea embedded in its Constitution the recognition of local groups landownership.

Yet, "national" development experienced a so short duration that the country seemed to move straight from colonialism to neoliberalism³⁷. The Papua New Guinean economy still deeply depended on the world system, especially on Australia —the main regional power.³⁸ Trade and financial exchanges dynamics remained unequal and polarizing to strengthen a structure of capital ownership dominated by foreign transnational firms, and was entirely dictated from the outside, without meeting the country's needs of consumption and development. The only possible outcome for the state to implement an economic policy favorable to concessions for foreign investors to exploit natural resources and to increasing exports of cash crops was the commitment into an advanced process of customary lands alienation³⁹ —along with the registration process initiated at the colonial time.

Under the Lease-Lease Back Scheme of 1979, the customary owners nominally lease to the state, that provided titles by which the custodian could lease lands to a third party. Such a mechanism has boosted the development of transnational agribusiness through the settlement of smallholders. In 1981, the Land Registration Act carried on the registration of land and legalized new private landowners (forbidding confiscation by banks). This trend expanded during the 1980s, leading to the Land Administration Improvement Programme in 1984, then to the Land Evaluation and Demarcation Project in 1987, with the support of generous financial aids from the World Bank, the Australian agency aid (AusAid) and the United States. At the same time, some experiences relative to registration were attempted in several areas, like the Sepik region with the East Sepik Land Act.⁴⁰

All these developments were the start of a conclusive offensive carried out by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP). The neoliberal opening policy to foreign direct investment which was adopted by the Papua New Guinean government had been curbed by the extend of lands which are exempt from capitalist laws and depend on ancestral systems of communal property⁴¹. Many observers and experts have considered this peculiarity as the most decisive factor of restrictions affecting the private sector, with examples to be listed in the World Bank reports.⁴²

³⁷ Herrera and Tetoë (2012b).

³⁸ Amarshi, Good and Mortimer (1979). On the mechanisms of the dependence towards Australia, see: Herrera and Tetoë (2013).

³⁹ Weiner and Glaskin (2007).

⁴⁰ Fingleton (1991), Power (1991), Kavanamur (1997).

⁴¹ Herrera and Tetoë (2004a).

⁴² See, among others: World Bank (1978, 1989).

In a context of external imbalances (balance of payments, indebtedness) and under the aegis of the IMF and the World Bank, the government of Prime Minister Sir Rabbie L. Namaliu undertook the first SAP in 1989. As elsewhere in the South, the reforms implemented consisted in privatizing national companies, in cutting public spending, freezing wages and making the labour market more flexible, in restricting the monetary policy and devaluating the currency (kina), in dismantling tariff barriers, liberalizing the external trade and making the economic national territory more “attractive”... In Papua New Guinea, however, the SAP keystone was its landownership core: the implementation of a modern legislative frame for registration and division of lands. As a prerequisite to loans and grants awarded by international institutions, the Land Mobilisation Program went on for five years from 1989. With the support of Australia through the Australian Contribution to the Land Mobilisation Project, this program was extended in 1993 for three additional years.⁴³

In 1995, a second SAP, called the “Structural Reform Plan” —hoping to give the appearance that it had been possible to dismiss some of the IMF diktats— was imposed by the government of Sir Julius Chan. The reality was a deepening of the country’s economic submission. At the core of the measures that were taken, among which the adoption of a floating exchange rate, privatizations, weakening public services (health, education) and the lowering of wages, the reactivation and the speeding-up of the land registration process was listed again under the “land reform” designation, not to say land individualization. Later, in June of the same year, the main sections of the Customary Land and Registration Bill were disclosed. As a sine qua non condition for interational grants and loans, it was planning a legal frame for land registration to be finalized and implemented in the provinces of East Sepik and East New Britain.⁴⁴

A surge of protests roused accross the country, forcing the Ministry of Lands to stop the programme, and constraining the IMF and the World Bank to accept the withdrawal of the land issue from the SAP. To calm people down, a Land Group Incorporation Act was consented. Rest was quite brief, as the Land Mobilisation Programme was being extended. Moreover, a series of Acts was promulgated by sector, aiming at easier access to lands and then to natural resources exploitation. The Mining Act (1992) and the Oil and Gas Act (1998) are particularly important as the rights of landowners to use their lands are laid down and finally limited (article 113 Oil and Gas Act). The third SAP launched in 1999 following external repercussion of the Asian financial crisis (1997-1998) put back at the core of “reforms” the land issue, with again the financial backing of the IMF, the World Bank, the closest neighbour Australia and its ally, the United States (*via* the USAID),⁴⁵ joined by the Asian Development Bank and Japan. In 2001, the government of Sir Mekere Morauta resorted to a group of experts to draft a bill on privatization of customary land. But again popular demonstrations ruined the bill...

Social issues, peasant resistances, and popular mobilizations

The social indicators of Papua New Guinea —which has the third highest gold reserves in the world— are amongst the lowest in the world. According to PNUD estimates, 38 per cent of children were provided with schooling at the beginning of the 2000s.⁴⁶ The literacy rate was 63.9 per cent against 47.0 thirty years earlier. Even if linguistic diversity which characterizes the country hardly makes the education authorities’ task any easier, it is equally clear that

⁴³ Iatau and Williamson (1997).

⁴⁴ Larmour (2003).

⁴⁵ U.S. Agency for International Development is the “cooperation” agency of the Federal government of the United States of America.

⁴⁶ UNDP (various years). Also: World Bank (various years).

public expenditure on education remains inadequate and that neoliberal offensive launched against public services has caused a drawing back of the public educational sector in front of the private one (notably religious and international). With regard to health, indicators are also very poor. Infant mortality rate was close to 80 per 1000 live births in the year 2000, whereas life expectancy at birth was still below 60 years old. There were barely 7 doctors per 1,000 inhabitants. Vaccination rates remain lower than average in the Oceanian sub-region.

Concerning food consumption, in spite of nutritional deficiencies that at times are serious, cases of chronic and severe malnutrition are quite rare in Papua New Guinea. One explanation might be that the large majority of the agrarian population has access to community lands and that there exists a practical support system in operation, based on the redistribution of income from collectively grown subsistence crops (named the *wantok* system), helping to reduce inequalities, cushioning the effects of the structural crisis and, in some cases, preventing social decay. These traditional support mechanisms seem, however, to be less operational and less effective in urban areas, where such social ties tend to become weaker —or to be rebuilt using other methods. Consequently, poverty has increased, especially in town, where almost 70 per cent of the population was said to be living below the poverty line in the mid-2000s. Poorly developed, public health care service is declining compared to private structures which gather support of the state and international organizations, but are out of reach for the poorest Papua New Guineans.

From then on, one can easily foresee what devastating impact the expansion of capitalist landownership has on the survival of these ancestral and institutionalized solidarity ties, and the reasons for which some sectors of the society are rebelling. As a matter of fact, the recent popular uprisings in this country have not only involved peasants *latu sensu*, but also workers organisations from the mining industry, civil servants (notably teachers unions) and students movements, women associations, and even some (impoverished) soldiers of the army.⁴⁷ And for some years now, more and more researchers have made the choice —with right, according to us— to study the complex and fastly evolving contemporary Papua New Guinean society in terms of “classes”.⁴⁸

As we stated it, neoliberal strategy which was implemented by the dominant capital on a worldwide scale has stumbled over (without being broken off) the absence of generalization of the private land property in Papua New Guinea where the land chapter of successive SAPs recommending registration and division of collective lands has always caused considerable popular discontent. Before the neoliberal era, massive resistance to the penetration of mining transnational companies had occurred. The most virulent action was that exerted by people from the island of Bougainville against the conglomerate Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia, forcing to close the gigantic gold and copper mine of Panguna in May 1989, and worsening a latent and recurrent secessionist conflict, which later turned into an open war between the Papua New Guinean armed forces —loudly supported by Australia— and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). Although its singularity, in the sense that it was amplified by a separatist movement and because of the violence of an unequalled aggression against local populations in the country, the Bougainville conflict created a precedent which was followed by numerous community groups anxious to assert their fundamental rights in front of the state and transnational corporations.

Resistance to successive governmental “reform” projects of the statute of customary lands, imposed by foreign capital interests and supported by locals elites —including the military—, lays at the very core of most popular mobilizations organized during these last years. In fact, demonstrations by communities did not cease to increase, expand, structurate and intensify over the greatest part of the country. Protesting people fear that possible division of collective

⁴⁷ Read: Imbun (2000), Herrera and Tetoe (2011).

⁴⁸ For instance, in economic anthropology: Gewertz and Errington (1999).

lands would lead to weaken clan leaders' control over their territories and to lose traditional values, along with the deepening of social inequalities and the emergence of new landless peasants.

Among many examples, there is the case of groups from New Britain rejecting fiercely World Bank's and Asian Development Bank's programmes aimed at increasing cultivated areas of high-yield palm oil plantations.⁴⁹ Production of palm oil, for which Papua New Guinea is now one of world leader producers (behind Malaysia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Thailand and Colombia) is devoted to exportation and to provision of transnational corporations of the agro-food sector and of synthesis chemistry, especially refining of biofuel.⁵⁰ Another example occurred in the Enga Province in April-May 2007. Following demonstrations by peasant communities, the Porgera mine, one of the largest gold and copper deposits in the world, had to shut down; remembering that the Panguna mine has not reopened since Rio Tinto, the main shareholder of Bougainville Copper Ltd. was constrained to leave in 1989. Since 1999, a violent conflict also broke out at Ok Tedi, in the Star Mountains of the Western Province, close to the Indonesian border, opposing the Ok Tedi Mining Ltd., majority-owned by BHP Billiton (the largest mining company in the world and the first one listed by market capitalization in Australia) and the local communities scandalized by devastating effects of open-pit mining on environment.⁵¹

Faced with such popular uprisings, the Papua New Guinean state took an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it alternated with demagogic "good intention" statements and the negation (against all evidence) of any will to reform the customary land tenure; and, on the other hand, it reasserted the attractiveness of the national territory for foreign capital, fiercely negotiated royalties or compensations payments, and resorted to protesters repression. Most experts and intellectuals consider that landowners are worrying for nothing as Papua New Guinea has embedded in its Constitution recognition of customary land titles, or that land registration is essential for development as traditional ownership obstructs it.⁵²

As for international institutions and donors, they openly encourage all practices which are in favour of a new land tenure, like the Land Mobilisation Programme or others more specific projects, since the World Bank recommendations in the 1960s. It seems quite difficult for some people to understand that this resistance is much more than crispation on an antiquated past to which one would like to reduce it. This resistance expresses the defence of inalienable rights of access to land and its collective use for the well-being of communities systematically attacked by neoliberalism from three decades now. Besides, it conveys a legitimate revolt against ecological crimes caused by intensive natural resources exploitation by transnational companies.

In addition, a crucial point is to understand that these peasant resistance events are articulated on more global claims from other components of the Papua New Guinean society —workers of the private sector, civil servants, poor urban people, students, environmentalist militants, feminists, or even religious progressives—, confronted with the SAP austerity and with the privatization of common patrimony. The climax of anti-neoliberal protests, gathering together diversified but convergent social movements, was reached with the series of demonstrations registered in 2000-2001. One of these movements came from the army, and notably from the regular troops based in Port Moresby. They contested a decision took by Commonwealth

⁴⁹ Since 1971, the World Bank encouraged the production of palm oil in New Britain (Hoskins), then, from 1976 onwards, in East Sepik, allegedly with "the support of local landowners". See: Bourke (2001, 2006) or Bourke and Vlassak (2004).

⁵⁰ A press release by local communities of New Britain informed: "We, the landowners, are developing and will continue to develop *our land* on our own terms. We therefore sternly warn all those parties involved in wanting to use our land for oil palm to *stay out!* Any attempt to bring oil palm on our land will be strongly resisted"...

⁵¹ Herrera and Tetoë (2011).

⁵² Iatau and Williamson (1997), Curtin and David (2006).

experts —but directly deriving from the SAP framework— to reduce military budgets and strength. The soldier protesters clearly claimed the eviction of all Australian military advisors present over the national territory, of foreign mercenaries under contract with the Papua New Guinean government or employed by transnational corporations to secure strategic places (like mines and oilfields), as well as of the IMF and World Bank experts. Hundred people joined these demonstrations in the streets of the capital. Few months later, in June 2001, again in Port Moresby, a several days walk was planned by students associations. They protested against the neoliberal policy of the government, screaming “*Rausim* IMF, World Bank, Australia!” (to be translated by “out IMF, World Bank, Australia!”). Whereas the procession of demonstrators, added to thousands of trade unionists, clan leaders, militants of progressive associations, etc., were headed towards the Parliament, which was secured by the army, some soldiers joined suddenly the movement.⁵³ The police repression that followed forced the government to suspend privatization programs of public enterprises (among them, post and *Telikom*, transports, banks...) and to give up its customary land “reform”.

Conclusion

It is high time to actualise the way the rest of the world perceives the popular struggles in Papua New Guinea, which appear much more modern and more radical, from many aspects, than in other places worldwide. Most western dominant medias often take them the wrong way, confining them to the expression of irrational fears in front of so-called “ineluctable” socioeconomic changes: opening of domestic markets to foreign investors, privatization of public enterprises, and above all breaking of customary land ownership. According to the economic mainstream, private alienability of land ownership at market prices is considered as the only rational management and the optimal use of this means of production, at individual and social levels. Consequently, in practice, the methods from western modernity used for the expansion of capitalism worldwide should be generalized to Southern people, that is to say, deprivation of peasantry.

In a peripheral economy like Papua New Guinea, the complex land ownership combining rights of the state and persistence of customary practices could have served interests of a savage capitalism maintaining the country into dependence and increasing inequalities. Nevertheless, from the leading point of view of this social formation, the challenge is to resist to the violence of neoliberalism that has been imposed on for decades and to the carving-up of natural resources. What is defended is legitimacy of the principle of collective landowning and free access to the peasant community land; what is demonstrated is the possibility of other rules for land use; what we reasonably suggest is to maintain the existence of a non-capitalist peasant farming.

These resistances got less coverage in the media than the views on insecurity hold by the dominant classes —and a fraction of the middle-classes that profited by neoliberalism. Various prejudices obliterate the reality of the dependence on Australia and the struggles of a people longing to master its collective destiny. In our analysis of the economy of Papua New Guinea, we have stressed the potent constraints on it. In a country where the gross domestic product (15 billion dollars) hardly exceeds half of the annual turnover of one of the numerous transnational companies working in its ground (as it happens for Rio Tinto with a turnover of more than 25 billion dollars per annum), the government has little room for manoeuvre. But options exist. An alternative to neoliberalism is asked, along with the emergence of a “class alliance” around peasantry, to draw a modern development strategy that benefits the Papua New Guinean people.

⁵³ Read, among many others, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 2001).

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