
Book review

Alex Golub. *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating indigenous and corporate actors in Papua New Guinea*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2014. Pp.xiv + 247, figures, tables, afterword, bibliog., index.

Reviewer: Patrick Gesch

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Golub's original motivation on coming to the Porgera gold mine was to study the Ipili as a success story. Now "the Porgera experiment is over, and the Ipili are the losers." (p.213) The only hope now is for "a postmine valley". Golub writes a competent account of life in Porgera, as he experienced it, against the background of the negotiations of stakeholders. The book will be of use for anyone engaged with the development of villages in the face of multinational corporations.

It is an intensely detailed account of the meeting of a huge multinational mining corporation with a village-based community, seeking enormous profits on the one side, and seeking eschatological fulfilment in material terms on the other side. Barrick Gold is the largest gold mining company on the planet and is responsible for about 200,000 tons of tailings discharged into the Pongema River each day. A 5% remainder "becomes gold bars. In this way what was once a mountain has become a giant pit." (p.5) The mine produces typically a million ounces of gold each year.

To retell the story of the mine meeting the villagers and the government, Golub uses the Leviathan image. The mining agreement might be seen as the leviathan of the mine negotiating and working with the leviathan of the Ipili people. "The personal backgrounds of the negotiators on both sides of the table affected the way they personated their respective leviathans." (p.72)

The book aims to be significant on a number of levels. There is the meeting of the mine and the villagers and the national and provincial governments in terms of intense negotiation which spans impossible things on all sides. There is a colourful history of Enga Province in modern times, putting names and faces on actors past and present. Then Golub wishes to apply what he has written to all of Papua New Guinea as tradition meets modernity.

Golub had an electric immersion into the realities of negotiation in Porgera, arriving at the time of the Yakatabari negotiations about new arrangements for disposing of tailings. The mine representatives were speaking "very, very forcefully", and one had "blown his top" and stalked out of the meeting. The landowner was yelling and screaming until all hell broke loose. (pp.42-43)

Such negotiations went on for eighteen months from April 1999 to September 2000.

He comes to the remarkable conclusions that there are no clans in Porgera, which can be extended to the fact that there are no ethnic groups in Papua New Guinea, and that the Ipili who are the respondents in the negotiations do not even exist. "It is ironic that the word 'Porgera'—which ... comes from a mishearing of the 'Pangema' River—is unpronounceable to Ipili." John Burton, who has spent so many years documenting landowning claims in Porgera, is quoted, "There are no corporate groups we can call 'clans' in Porgera." (Burton [1991: 9] quoted in Golub p.120)

The negotiations of the Ipili with the provincial government and the national government, came up on 15 May 1989 with "the best deal in the history of mining in the country. ... Three days after the signing, Bougainville Copper Ltd. shut the Bougainville copper mine for good." (p.110)

It is common folklore in PNG that when the landowner registers were opened in Porgera, groups from everywhere came flooding in to claim the title of landowner on the flimsy pretexts of small gardens, quick marriages or matchbox buildings. Golub says that this is simply not true in any large part. The incoming people mostly had some claim to their title, and those from further away were actually the most contributive and long-standing citizens.

Residency on land is not recognized by Golub as a basis for claiming ownership of that land. A big man does not feel the need to stay on his own land. This is already assured. So he patrols around to his various allies, marrying a new wife when it is needful, and he is continually moving to firm up a broad power base. Lineal descent does not do justice to landowner claims. Golub presents a network diagram.

If there are no clans; and residency is not essential for identifying a landowner; and the Ipili do not exist at all; and leadership is largely a matter of violent self-assertion; and leviathans are essentially distorted by the individuals who personate them, then what is a mining agreement and how can it bring wealth and happiness? There is no easy road in all of Enga.

But Golub does not stop there. After all, he asserts there are no ethnic groups in PNG even if people react with each other as if there were. He draws as witness the project of Jürg Wassmann, *Historical atlas of ethnic and linguistic groups in Papua New Guinea*, where even Wassmann laments that sometimes clusters of villages with the same language and traits want no shared identity; common designations usually come from outsiders; and naming is inconsistent across reporters. (Golub 183-184)

Golub does not find stable ethnic groups in PNG. Cultural innovation and importation was much more the rule. Migration and porous ethnic identities led to a focus on conflict and engagement rather than agreement and consensus. He writes, "At the risk of exaggeration, I would claim that most of Papua New

Guinea has a focus not on stability, fixity, and patrimony but on change, flux, and novelty.” (p.189)

This book deserves a very close read. The accounts of the negotiations between mine and people are given in great detail, showing how individuals change the outcome. According to Golub, Porgera has become awful, a rubbish dump of a mine area where once there were beautiful forests; a crowded, crime area besotted with alcohol where before people found it indecent to live so close so as to be able to see each other's houses; and it has an atmosphere of greed, lies and sexual violence. Golub documents how ever more amazing things have been pulled out of the opportunities that Porgera represented to all sides, a process which neither mine nor landowners want to come to an end. But he leaves no doubt, you would not want a big resource development next to your village.

References

- Burton, John. 1991 *Porgera census project. Report for 1990. Report for land and community relations*. Porgera Joint Venture.
- Wassmann, Jürg. 1995. *Historical atlas of ethnic and linguistic groups in Papua New Guinea*. Volume 3. Basel: Wepf.