

11-2014

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Jerry K. Jacka

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Recommended Citation

Jacka, Jerry K. (2014) "Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 4, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.4.1.1083>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol4/iss1/7>

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Review

Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea

Alex Golub. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 247pp

Jerry K. Jacka^{*}

Social analysis in anthropology today “oscillates uneasily” between a concern with Foucauldian global regimes of governance on the one hand and Deleuzian assemblages of agentive actors on the other. In *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea*, Alex Golub asks if there is “a better way to do justice to a contemporary scene characterized by both spontaneity and regime” (2). Golub’s book seeks to find this middle road through the analysis of the development of a world-class gold mine on the homelands of a group of indigenous people—the Ipili—living in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Golub’s book offers a refreshing panacea to the tired argument of “global” impacts on “local” people by focusing on the agency of Ipili actors who actively courted mining development on their lands in order to improve their socioeconomic statuses.

* **Jerry K. Jacka** is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Texas in San Antonio. As an environmental anthropologist, his research is focused on the intersection of development, natural resource management, and the political ecology of land use and land cover change. Since 1998, he has worked in communities adjacent to the world-class Porgera Gold Mine in highlands Papua New Guinea examining the differential impacts of mining on social and ecological systems in Porgera. His research also investigates how religious conversion to Christianity influences indigenous environmental knowledge and resource management practices. Additionally, he has conducted research that examines the intersections of economic development, conservation of natural resources, and subsistence livelihoods in Alaska, Ghana, and Uganda. He has published in *American Anthropologist*, *Oceania*, *Ethnohistory*, and the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*.

The central concern in the book is to understand and examine how collections of “separate and single individuals” turn into “abstract things” like mining companies and indigenous groups. Golub’s inquiry thus focuses on a critical problematic in the social sciences: how do humans form social groups and what are the implications of these processes? The “main theoretical trope” deployed to explore these processes is the leviathan, which is “any sort of black boxed corporate entity” (xi) that is simultaneously a monstrous creation capable of great chaos. Conceptualizing social totalities as leviathans allows Golub to productively link together analyses of multinational corporations, indigenous identity, and the state by moving beyond the notion of the state as a monolithic entity, instead demonstrating how the concrete practices of agentive individuals both constitute and destabilize states (and, by extension, corporations and ethnic groups).

The author turns to science studies to delve into the obscured workings of leviathans who gain their power by making many elements—modes of thought, practices, and objects—act as one within a “black box.” By focusing microscopically and unpacking the black boxes of the mine and the Ipili, Golub unveils the divergent and opposing ideas and individuals that are subsumed by macro actors like leviathans. But as he shows by the end of the book for the case of the Ipili, the very constructed nature of these leviathans makes them vulnerable to collapse and dissolution, and provides us with a cautionary tale of seeing corporate entities as reified and static. To demonstrate how leviathans are fashioned, the author examines the concept of “feasibility,” which captures the ambiguities of an individual’s attempts to gain recognition by others that he or she represents the collective. There is thus an inherent uncertainty when an individual speaks or behaves in a certain way; does this person really represent “the mine” or “the Ipili,” or are they guided by some other agenda?

Following the introductory chapter which lays out the theoretical arguments above, each chapter in the book takes a progressively larger look at how “the Ipili” and “the mine” as leviathans came to be. Chapter 1 describes a series of negotiations over the development of a proposed waste dump and the benefits that Ipili landowners hoped to gain by allowing the waste dump to displace them from their current lands. Golub attended many of the meetings that accompanied the negotiations and provides fascinating transcripts of the claims and counter-claims that Ipili landowners and mining officials sought. As the negotiations over the waste dump began to fall apart due to the

inabilities of individuals to become feasible representatives of their respective leviathans, the state unsuccessfully attempted to mediate an outcome that pleased both sides. As Golub summarizes, while we often think of groups like “the Ipili,” “the mine,” and “the state” as having one voice, in reality “these leviathans are complex entities composed of multiple actors with diverse interests.”

The historical interactions between the Ipili and Australian prospectors and colonial officials, and the development of the Porgera Gold Mine, are the focus of chapter 2. “The Birth of Leviathans” begins with first contact between the Ipili and Australian colonial explorers in 1938 and ends with the signing of the Porgera Agreements which allowed for mining development to begin in 1989. Following the discovery of gold in 1939, a handful of expatriate prospectors and Ipili prospectors pursued alluvial mining over the next several decades. Golub highlights the ways that “Eurochristian” (the term used throughout the book for expatriates) prospectors were incorporated into Ipili social and political networks. Unfortunately, chapter 2 is largely told via the experiences of the Eurochristians. Golub mentions interviewing many of the key indigenous players in the alluvial mining era, but sadly their voices and interpretations of this historical period are overshadowed by an attention to external perspectives and, as such, readers miss insight into an important chapter of indigenous history in Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea is unique in that nearly the entire land base of the country is controlled by customary indigenous groups. National laws require resource developers to distribute royalties to and compensate affected groups that fall within the ambit of a development area. As such, who is and isn’t “an Ipili” or “a landowner” (the term used to designate the official beneficiaries of royalty sharing and compensation agreements) is critically important in terms of gaining access to lucrative cash payments. In chapter 3, the processes through which land tenure and kinship define Ipili and landowner identities are described. Drawing mostly on the work of another anthropologist who works among Ipili speakers in an adjacent valley, Golub depicts the kinship system as a dense network where individuals are linked to other individuals through multiple ties to similar groups (so-called clans). Ultimately, ethnic identification and kinship are less about descent from a common ancestor and residence than they are about the abilities of individuals to be recognized as “Ipilis” or “landowners” in the larger social milieu.

Chapter 4 draws the lens of analysis out fuller to encompass Ipili identity and sociality within the context of national discourses about development and modernity.

Golub marshals an impressive array of writings from Melanesian writers and anthropologists of Melanesia to critique notions of bounded, descent-based culture groups with ancient ties to ancestral lands. In lieu of depicting Melanesian cultures as trapped between tradition and modernity, Golub offers an image of Melanesian social life as innovative, creative, and actively seeking change. The failure of the negotiations over the waste dump described in chapter 1 highlights the fact that Melanesians are “allergic” to the bureaucratization and routinization that leviathans depend upon.

The book ends both on a hopeful and bleak note. Golub sees his contribution as a comparative study of social order. Attending to the leviathans of the global world system, decomposing “the beast back into its constituent networks” (206), provides social scientists the tools to make a radical critique of the forces of neoliberal global capitalism. And on the bleak note, in the afterword, Golub provides an honest appraisal of the effects of large-scale mining on life for the Ipili—violence, rape, killings, environmental destruction, and a host of other social problems define Ipili experiences of mining leading Golub to claim that “the Ipili are the losers.”

But are the Ipili the losers? Unfortunately, it is impossible for the reader to draw this conclusion. The famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski once wrote that the goal of ethnography was “to grasp the native’s point of view ... to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (1984 [1922]:25), emphasis in original). *Leviathans at the Gold Mine* as such is not good ethnography. The bulk of the book is secondary analysis filtered through the author’s eclectic (and often muddled) juxtaposition of social theorists punctuated with occasional “catchy” phrases and pop culture references that many readers will find tiresome. The lack of rich ethnographic description and the lacunae of indigenous voices leave the Ipili vision of their world strangely mute.

REFERENCE

Malinowski, Bronislaw. (1984 [1922]). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press).