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'Do you want us to feed you like a baby?' Ascriptions of dependence in East New Britain

Abstract

This paper explores some accusations of wrongdoing in Papua New Guinea in the early 2000s. These accusations illustrate an ambiguous encouragement and discouragement of different kinds of perceived dependence as Papua New Guineans struggled with a growing disenchantment with their nation-state and the withdrawal rather than expansion of state services and assistance. The paper explores the dynamics by which these accusations brought particular dependencies, cast as legitimate and illegitimate, in and out of view, and compares these with other instances in other parts of the world. Ascriptions of 'dependence' are shown not only to shift with context but also to be highly performative, being a central means by which persons engaged in highly entangled interdependent relations attempt to re-shape the nature of those entanglements.

Key words dependence, corruption, individualism, morality, Papua New Guinea

Introduction

In this paper, I explore some accusations of wrongdoing and corruption in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the early 2000s. These allegations point towards an ambiguous and simultaneous encouragement and discouragement of different kinds of perceived dependence as Papua New Guineans struggled with a growing disenchantment with their nation-state and a realisation that the future was likely to produce the withdrawal rather than expansion of state services and assistance. In particular, relationships of kinship-based interdependence that were simultaneously viewed as social safety-nets and economic straight-jackets (the famous Papua New Guinea '*wantok* system') became the locus of bitter dispute as attempts were made to encourage land-holding patterns that might encourage an appropriate balance of independence and interdependence. The paper explores the dynamics by which these accusations brought particular dependencies, cast as legitimate and illegitimate, in and out of view and compares these with other instances in other parts of the world. Ascriptions of both 'dependence' and 'corruption' are shown to be highly interlinked in manners that shift contextually so that 'corruption' can be constructed as the attempt to either maintain or loosen dependence on wider networks of relational obligation. Such shifting ascriptions of a

relationship between (il)legitimate dependence and corruption can be seen as a central means by which persons engaged in highly entangled interdependent relations attempt to re-shape the nature of those entanglements – not just in the contemporary South Pacific, but as part of a globally observable tension over the appropriate degrees and kinds of dependencies that should be encouraged or discouraged in order to create a good society.

After the volcano

The background to these accusations is the relocation of members of the Matupit community following the Rabaul volcanic eruption in PNG's East New Britain Province, in 1994. The story of the Matupi is an unusual one that has been outlined on many occasions before (e.g. Martin 2013). The Matupi are members of the group that have come to be known as the Tolai; PNG's second largest ethnic group. The Tolai were commonly described as one of the most economically and culturally 'advanced' native groups in the colonial era and to this day many Tolai will favourably compare themselves to their 'bushman' neighbours. Perhaps most crucially, the Tolai's combination of education and land enabled them a degree of independence from aspects of colonial rule not afforded to other native groups, in particular indentured unskilled manual labour on plantations that the Tolai traditionally looked down on with contempt. The Tolai's educational superiority meant that those who sought wage-labour could often find white-collar clerical work in the colonial administration or expatriate-owned businesses. And the high fertility of their land (in large part caused by the active volcano at the heart of the region) and their proximity to the major port of Rabaul meant that, unlike most other native groups at the time, they had the capacity to make significant amounts of money from independent cash cropping on their own customary land. These developments were not evenly spread across the Tolai region. Those inland Tolai villages furthest from Rabaul saw less of a development of cash cropping and skilled wage-labour, which were concentrated in coastal villages such as Matupit that by the 1960s was largely described as a peri-urban satellite of Rabaul. This degree of economic independence was mirrored by an increasing drive for political independence in the post-war years. The first call for independence was made by a Matupit resident, Epinuri Titimur, during the visit of a United Nations delegation in 1961, and the largest political movement aiming to end Australian rule was the Mataugnan Association that was established at Matupit in the early 1970s. The Mataugnan was not a national movement but almost entirely limited to the Tolai and gained most of its support from the areas around Rabaul, and its two most important leaders, John Kaputin and Damien Kereku, both came from Matupit.

The unusual prosperity enjoyed by the Matupi came to a sudden end in 1994 with the volcanic eruption that devastated Rabaul Town and its surrounding villages. Following the eruption, the Matupi had been offered land deep inland in the rainforest location of Sikut. Some Matupit residents had remained at Matupit or returned from Sikut after a few years, hoping perhaps for some economic revival in the area despite the Provincial Government's decision to relocate economic activity to the less vulnerable Kokopo area, and Sikut's location was deep in what the peri-urban Matupi viewed with some scepticism as bush territory. One attraction of resettlement, however, was the status of the land at Sikut as opposed to at Matupit. Matupit land was

'customary', meaning that claim or *kaikele* (Kuanua[1]) to named pieces of land was said to vest in named matrilineal descent groups (*vunataria* Kuanua, *klan* Tok Pisin[2]). At Sikut, the Provincial Government had made the deliberate decision not to recreate this system of land tenure, instead giving title to the blocks to named individuals, usually the male head of a household, with the expectation that the title would be inherited by his children and not end up being occupied by his sisters' children as would ideally be the case under a customary regime. This new regime was enthusiastically supported by the majority of Sikut residents, who often told me that Sikut land was better as it would enable them to become 'free from custom'. This meant that their hope was that Sikut land would ideally allow families to pass on land and inheritable investments on that land to their children independent of customary politics and obligations.

Blocks had been handed to individuals on a licence in 1995/6. The licence carried a number of obligations, including an obligation to establish residence at the block and to develop it, meaning clearing of the forest and cultivation of at least some garden and cash crops. There were not enough blocks at Sikut to go around, and while many residents of Matupit preferred to remain at Matupit despite its damaged post-disaster state, there were some who had remained at Sikut and were stuck in the so-called 'care centre' at the middle of the new village. This was a collection of around 40 households, clustered together, each of which had access to a small piece of land on which they were allowed to plant temporary garden crops, but no permanent cash-crop investments, leaving them in financial limbo and unable to build up the financial independence that was hoped for as the outcome for the block holders. For these residents and their supporters, one obvious solution was to attempt to enforce the obligations on licence holders, and to institute a policy of forfeiting the blocks of those who had not fulfilled those obligations, in order to provide blocks for the residents of the care centre. This situation led to a large amount of behind-the-scenes politicking and debating from the summer of 2002 onwards. Although the occupation of resettlement blocks was ultimately a matter for the Lands Division of the Provincial Government, based in the regional administrative centre at Kokopo, much of the day-to-day life of the community at Sikut was administered by a 'resettlement committee', which was established by the Provincial Government in the aftermath of the resettlement programme in the late 1990s. The committee was made up of Sikut residents who were elected by their co-residents at public meetings. Leaders of this committee were clearly in ongoing discussions with the Provincial Government Lands' Division and any decision to change the implementation of block-holding policy would by necessity involve political manoeuvring, both at the level of the resettlement committee and at Provincial Government level.

Wantokism and corruption

On 26 November 2003, a community meeting was held in which the incoming chair of the resettlement committee, ToParam, promoted the virtues of the new policy. He

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[1]   Kuanua is the vernacular language of the Tolai people.

[2]   Tok Pisin, commonly referred to as 'pidgin (English)' is a Melanesian pidgin language and is the common *lingua franca* of Papua New Guinea's 700–800 different linguistic groups.

was backed up by his predecessor, Tony Dannett, in what was a very deliberate and public display of unity given the well-known history of disagreements between them. ToParam was a controversial figure, known to lose his temper with people on occasion. Normally this would have acted against his being accepted as a potential leader, however such was the frustration among many with those who were holding on to blocks that they refused to develop (alongside other social problems) that many were prepared to overlook these flaws, or rather to re-imagine them as a potentially positive force in overcoming resistance to change. After prayers and apologising for his conduct in an argument with another villager a few days earlier, ToParam moved straight into a discussion of the eagerly awaited forfeit policy. 'This isn't really a big clarification', he began; 'you've all had information about this – about removing people from the state land'. In the previous months there had been increasing agitation concerning the removal of 'squatters' from the ruins of Rabaul. These squatters mainly originated from other provinces (though many of them had been born in East New Britain and had no links with their putative 'home' provinces). Tolai resentment against these economic migrants from other parts of PNG had been flaring up periodically for decades. Migrant squatters were blamed for most of the crime that occurred in the area and had often been the target of demonstrations by local Tolai villagers (which did not stop many of them charging the squatters 'rent' for their occupation of empty state land that Tolai from villages such as Matupit claimed to have customary rights over). ToParam announced that he had confirmation from figures in the Provincial Government that the much-debated proposed eviction of these settlements was about to go ahead. Most crucially, this was to occur not just with the non-Tolai squatters, often derogatively referred to in Kuanua as '*waira*' or 'outsiders', in the empty colonial ruins of Rabaul but also in the resettlement camps. Bundling together *waira* squatters with kinsmen who had not yet developed blocks that they had been allocated as Tolai villagers marked a notable rhetorical shift from previous discussions, marking both sets of people as illegal 'squatters'. It also prepared the ground for the resettlement committee potentially countenancing previously hard to imagine levels of state violence against their own fellow villagers and clan relatives, with ToParam going on to say that the evictions would be carried out by the heavily armed police 'mobile squad', in a manner that did not appear to distinguish between the violence that might be meted out to the *waira* (an action that had happened on previous occasions) and that which might be meted out to Tolai villagers refusing to vacate a block that they had not yet developed.

Yet there was an important distinction between the case against the *waira* and the case against the Matupi whose blocks were to be forfeited. The *waira*'s claims were rejected because they had no claims of connection to the land and the animosity towards them was often tempered by a sympathetic understanding that they came from less 'developed' parts of the country and were working hard to try to improve their lives under difficult circumstances. The Tolai whose blocks were being forfeited on the other hand had claims that were being dismissed on the alleged basis that they had not expended any effort to improve their own lives. ToParam dismissed those who had not developed their blocks with the contemptuous declaration, 'Do you want us to feed you like a baby?'

This denunciation of dependency was similar to that often delivered by politicians and businessmen who were members of PNG's newly emerging socio-economic elite. They were often referred to locally as 'Big Shots' (Martin 2013), a deliberate and pejorative rhetorical contrast with the romanticised village 'Big Men' of pre-independence

generations. Sir John Kaputin, for example, had been the Member of Parliament for Rabaul from 1972 up until his crushing defeat in the general election of 2002. In part, his defeat had been blamed on a tendency to denigrate grassroots villagers for their alleged desire to be kept in a state of dependency by the PNG state. His fate was sealed when at one election meeting at his home village of Matupit he responded to requests to re-open the school, for which the village had once been famous, by claiming that the villagers' problem was that they 'wanted to be spoon-fed'. The irony that in making these accusations he eerily mimicked the tone of the Australian colonial administrators, who accused natives of a desire to remain in a state of dependence, that he launched his political career in opposition to, was not lost on many.

ToParam mentioned, to general agreement, that there had been too much corruption and *wantokism* in recent years, and that some families had too many blocks. ToParam gave the example of Ward 4, the council ward predominantly inhabited by members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. He reeled off a list of names, including that of Eli, the former Ward 4 village councillor, and pointed out that they all had blocks and that they were all brothers. ToParam was claiming that the old committees at the time of the block allocation in 1995, of which Eli was a part, did not screen this and this was *a ngala na kaina* (Kuanua: a big wrong). 'Don't be surprised if I do something to one of the brothers in the interests of fairness', he added. I knew that the blocks of these brothers were in varying states of 'development', from almost completely untouched in one case, to having cash crops ready to harvest in another. ToParam's attack seemed to be only loosely connected to the avowed rationale of the forfeit system, suggesting that the policy was also being used to correct other perceived wrongs from a decade previously that had a very different kind of social dynamic.

Wantokism, a phrase that occurred often in ToParam's speech and the following discussion, is a widely used and understood concept in PNG. It refers to the idea of favouring persons that one is related to by virtue of kinship and ongoing cycles of gift exchange and reciprocal obligation. It is fundamentally a way of describing networks of mutual interdependency and obligation.[3] And the obligation that is often felt to favour one's *wantoks* over others is frequently held by Papua New Guineans and expatriates alike to be the basis of the widespread perceived corruption in the country, particularly with regard to the provision of government services. On the surface, this instance of the denunciation of corruption appears to be an example of this genre, with '*wantokism* and corruption' conflated in ToParam's speech that followed on from a claim made a few seconds earlier that what he was proposing was 'fairness, not *wantok* system or corruption'. However, on closer inspection the problem with Eli's behaviour as ward councillor a decade earlier, as it is characterised by ToParam, could be constructed as being one in which Eli's behaviour was morally inappropriate by virtue of its lack of concern for the relations of interdependence that characterised the *wantok* system rather than its capitulation to and subsequent recreation of that system. During his speech, when he had listed the six brothers with blocks, he had paused and asked 'what's missing in the family?' Dannet had replied with something that I could not make out, to which ToParam had responded '*Boinatuna tambu*' (Kuanua: Thank you, my in-law). As it turned out, the problem raised by ToParam was not that Eli as ward councillor at the time had been part of an allocation process that had favoured his brothers over his non-kin or more distantly related kin, but rather that the process had

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[3]   See Nanau (2011) for an overview of the *wantok* system in Melanesia.

favoured Eli's brothers over his sisters, none of whom had received blocks, in this process. But why did some at least perceive this to be such a problem?

When I went to see ToParam the next day, we discussed the issue again. When I asked him about the previous day's meeting, he launched into a description of why the action he was proposing was important in order to keep the clans together. At first, he told me that this was important in order to avoid disputes coming up if landless nephews of block holders felt excluded from land on the block-holders' deaths. However, as the conversation went on it became clear that this was not his only concern. Rather, it was a phrase that another resident, Marie, had used the night before when discussing the meeting, of 'not wanting the land to separate the clans', that provided the main motivation. ToParam told me that he feared that, in the long run, making all the land at Sikut pass through the father's line inside nuclear families would ultimately lead to the clan 'falling apart'. I knew that, for some people, what ToParam was presenting to me as a catastrophe to avoid, namely the end of clans and their associated obligations of extended interdependence that pulled one outside of obligations to immediate family, was sometimes described as a kind of dream future to be aspired to. Some people were adamant that it would be better to be like 'Westerners' and forget the time-consuming and resource-wasteful business of fulfilling the clan-based customary obligations. 'That's true', ToParam told me, 'but even the people who say that kind of thing will help a cousin or other clan relative in trouble, when push comes to shove. Or at least they will for now, and that is what we need to preserve. We need the clan network to provide support for each other. The kind of individual self-sufficiency that these people are talking about is not an option here economically in most cases and probably never will be. So, the land here needs to be tweaked in order to provide a "safety net" as we don't have a "social security system"' (these English phrases were dropped by ToParam into a conversation that was conducted mostly in Kuanua).

Eli was widely viewed as a man of uncommon personal integrity, so these accusations were somewhat surprising to me. But from another perspective, they made sense however. Eli was also unusually keen to protect his own family's interests against that of the extended claims of *wantokism*. He took a strong position in public that this was not 'selfish' as such a position could often be portrayed, but highly moral; one's first moral obligation was to one's family, even if that meant turning down other more 'distant' relatives. Eli's membership of the Seventh Day Adventists is of some importance at this point.[4] The SDA was notable among the three major church denominations at Matupit for their more strongly anti-customary stance. Some SDA members frequently tried to avoid entanglement in customary ritual, often with some degree of success, and were consequently often criticised for being 'selfish' and for being more concerned with their individual families than the kind of wider networks of reciprocal interdependence and clan relations that were often described as being at the heart of Tolai 'custom'. Hence when Marie had described Eli and his brothers as being 'selfish' for not giving away at least a block to their sisters, I understood that word instantly as being a reference, not so much to a simple idea of individualised gender inequality, but more as an appeal to a commonly understood sentiment along the lines of 'well what would you expect from that lot, they never really think about the clan'. Her argument can be understood as illustrating the point made by Yanagisako and Collier when they argue that gender and kinship should form a unified field of analysis, that what is at

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[4]   For an overview of the role of Christianity in contemporary Melanesian societies, see Barker (2012).

stake is the ways in which specific groups of people, 'recognize claims and allocate responsibilities' (1987: 35).[5] What is at stake here is a particular understanding of how a fair allocation between brothers and sisters impacts a wider distribution of kin-based claims among the Matupit community. To distribute in a manner that excludes a specific set of women (the sisters) can also be seen in the context of matrilineal descent groups as part of a wider tendency to curtail 'claims and responsibilities' that can be made on the basis of enduring reciprocal kinship obligations that extend beyond the immediate household. While disputes around the balance of such 'claims and responsibilities' have been a feature of Tolai life for over a century (e.g. Martin 2013), these debates as they occurred in this case can themselves only fully be understood in the context of post-colonial discontent and economic crisis as they were experienced by Matupi in the early 2000s. As Yanagisako and Collier also observe, understanding such evaluations as processes of cultural meaning-making does not imply, 'static … timeless, self-perpetuating structures of "tradition"' but rather involves understanding 'the importance of historical analysis' (1987: 41).

ToParam's argument could be paraphrased as a statement that Matupi knew that they would never 'develop' to the point where they could become economically self-sufficient Western individuals, and it was increasingly clear that the nation-state that they were unfortunate enough to inhabit would never be able to support them as it could in more prosperous countries. Therefore, they needed to preserve the *wantok* system. However, in many other contexts I had heard ToParam advance versions of the seemingly opposite proposition, a proposition that could be paraphrased simply along the lines of: Matupi will never economically develop because the corruption of the *wantok* system and the way it disincentives individual initiative and encouraged dependency held them back. ToParam articulated an ambiguity about relations of dependence that was not only characteristic of Tolai discussions at the time of my fieldwork but also expressed a more widespread tension in human relations.

Promoting and preventing 'dependence' – a global dynamic

Although many of the details of this case are unique to the population of East New Britain of the early 2000s, similar dynamics can be seen at different times and spaces. The inhabitants of 'The Flats' of Carol Stack's ethnography of black underclass life in a mid-Western US city of the mid-1960s may not have had to deal with the kind of land tenure debates that my Tolai informants did, for example. But *All our kin* does document a similar perception of the double-edged nature of informal networks of reciprocal interdependence that are seen to both support and hinder the lives of her informants (e.g. Stack 1976: 35–40, 57). Equally ethnographically striking is the response to Stack's book by readers. Online reviews, such as those on Amazon.com (see below), predictably mirror the fault lines of contemporary US politics: 'a great job of exploring what happens to poor people in a poor community in a capitalist world', says one review from 2012. An 'outdated piece of propaganda … portraying them as victims despite the fact that they commit more crimes than all over races combined … how tragic it is that young people throughout the country are being misled by this

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5   See also Rubin (1975: 169–70).

reverse-education book written by a pseudo-intellectual quack', reads another from 2017. The review that first caught my attention while browsing for a copy of the book in 2005 is still online as I write. Under the heading 'Carol Stack isn't as boring as I thought', Jeff T writes in 2001:

> I dreaded reading this when it was assigned to my Anthropology course … however … it is insightful … It brought up facts that I've seen around me but failed to recognize as part of a culture. One question I do pose though, when the family which inherits a large sum of money decides to share it among the poor community. Wouldn't the community be better off if that one family decided to move out of poverty, enabling the poor community to become smaller and thus have more items being able to rotate within the community? Eventually the community can become richer because of this instead of dragging those around them down.

Mr T's comments are interesting as the question as to why people do not and indeed cannot simply 'decide' to take their money out of the community is one that Stack returns to repeatedly in her book (e.g. Stack 1976: 106–7). And in fact, her book details at least one example of a family who do manage to 'purposively remove[d] themselves from the network of kin cooperation' for at least ten years before a divorce broke up the household as an economic unit, forcing them to re-engage (Stack 1976: 95–6). It would be easy, and probably not entirely wrong, to simply dismiss comments such as Mr T's as representing the perspective of a group of presumably predominantly white and relatively privileged students failing to fully grasp the import of a book that their limited life experiences had left them unable to understand. But reading those comments, what struck me then and still strikes me now is their structural similarity to the kind of contradiction expressed by ToParam and other Matupi in their conflicted relation to the *wantok* system of interdependency that they very much had day-to-day lived experience of and that they too simultaneously wished to both bolster and destroy. What both Stack's informants and her readers seem to illustrate in their different ways is the ways in which such ambiguities occur across different times and places. The ambiguous expression of attachment to and revulsion for networks of interdependence that hold one up and hold one down simultaneously might suggest that analyses of dependence and independence that take them as expressions of regionally located bounded cultures do not always provide our best starting point. For example, Ferguson's (2013) article 'Declarations of dependence' has rightly been widely praised for bringing this issue back to the forefront of our attention and for bringing our attention to the ways in which a revulsion towards ascriptions of 'dependence' is not to be universally assumed but can instead be seen as the manifestation of a strong current in Western liberal political theory (Ferguson 2013: 224). However, the subsequent claim that the desire of black South Africans to claim dependence on others reflects a long-standing cultural and 'political logic that was broadly characteristic of most precolonial Southern African societies' (Ferguson 2013: 226) potentially leads to a situation in which Euro-Americans imagine that 'we' are to independence much as 'they' are to dependence, in a manner similar to the misreadings of Mauss that, as Gregory (1997: 50) observes, can lead to a situation where we imagine that 'we' are to commodity as 'they' are to 'gift'. While, as Macpherson (1962) famously notes, Western liberal theory might often be premised on a validation of 'independence', what authors such as Stack

let us know is that the relative balance between acknowledging and rejecting dependencies is a constantly shifting dance of moral evaluation and contestation in North America, as it is in Southern Africa and East New Britain too.

And, while the *wantok* system has always been seen in such a double-edged manner, ToParam's attempt to bolster the *wantok* system politically in the early 2000s should be seen in the context of a moment of extreme political pessimism. Papua New Guinea was widely viewed by many of its citizens as a failed state (this is rhetoric that is far from being the sole preserve of conservative Australian politicians who like to use it as a stick with which to beat their former colony). Any hope that there was going to be a continued slow and steady expansion of welfare services following independence had been crushed over the past 15 years and the anxiety around *wantokism* simultaneuosly intensified. As the economy collapsed and the state withdrew, there was an increased incentive to remove the handbrake (*wantokism*) and to preserve the safety net that the state was not responsible for (*wantokism*). The steady withdrawal of state services during and up to this period led to an intensification of tendencies seemingly going in opposite directions; a possibility that should not surprise anthropologists, but sometimes seems to (e.g. Laidlaw 2015: 912). And in the contemporary context it is easy to see how the ambiguity that is felt by Tolai such as ToParam towards *wantok* dependency can intensify under neoliberal conditions of the withdrawal of state care as people simultaneously become both more attached to the safety net of the *wantok* system and more aggressively opposed to its allegedly anti-economic development effects.

The argument that I wish to stress here is that this ambivalence and sometimes painful tension between the drive to sustain and the drive to escape particular networks of interdependency is best seen as a fundamental potential inherent in our human status as beings enmeshed in such relational interdependencies. The particular forms that this tension takes might vary massively from Melanesia (e.g. Strathern 1975) to Southern Africa (e.g. Ferguson 2013) or the US mid-West (e.g. Stack 1976). This occurs in a manner reminiscent of the way that Mauss (1970 [1925]: 65) describes the tension between gift-obligation and a 'tradesman's morality' as being universal in the much-overlooked final chapter of *The gift*. Mauss (1970 [1925]: 20–1) is concerned to stress that the problem of finding the balance between different kinds of relational obligation is not a new one, as his use of Malinowski's account of Trobriand Islanders' disputes over whether other men were really conducting *kula* or *gimwali* makes clear. But he is also keen to stress that it is a problem that manifests itself in particular ways with a particular urgency at particular moments in history. His own engagement with gift theory was an attempt to politically intervene at a moment of crisis in European history when he considered the need to live with the ambiguity of different exchange obligations to be threatened by the extremes of Bolshevism and free-market dogma (e.g. Godelier 1999: 4, 64, 208; Graeber 2001: 151–2). The tensions of managing that ambiguity were experienced as being particularly intense at that moment in history. Similarly, the ambiguities of ascribed dependence were felt as particularly intense at this point in East New Britain, as economic instability led to increased demands both to dismantle the *wantok* straightjacket and strengthen the *wantok* safety-net.

ToParam's comments seemed to suggest that if there were a welfare state then 'Western' individualism would be possible, because if there were a state welfare system then he would not need to tweak land tenure systems to preserve the *wantok* system as an alternative. This would seem to fly in the face of conservative political theories for which dependency on the state and appropriate self-reliant individualism are

diametrically opposed (e.g. Mead 1986). But if all persons are dependent upon some relations with others to exist then what often matters most is whether or not the form of those relations allows them to present those relations to themselves and others as unimportant or enabling autonomy rather than as a form of dependence that destroys individual autonomy. Every moment in which a person is presented as being an autonomous individual, independent of others, is reliant on other particular interdependencies that allow that self-presentation. The couple that Stack describes as escaping their network of mutual obligations for a decade did so in part on the basis of them both acquiring a 'steady job' (Stack 1976: 95). Their 'independence' from kin was dependent on a wage; a dependency on all sorts of other relational entanglements largely invisible to both their kin and to the readers of Stack's book, all of whom inhabited different perspectives from which those dependencies could not so easily be seen. Although wage-labour might have been commonly presented in Western European political discourse as the basis for individual independence ever since the 1800s, it is always vulnerable to other perspectives that point out the inherent dependencies that it entails. As Marilyn Strathern (1975) observed over 40 years ago, the wage-labour in town that was seen by Australian expatriates as allowing freedom from the sickening dependency on *wantokism* of New Guinea migrants in Port Moresby was viewed by those migrants themselves as often being the most horrific curtailment of autonomy and imposition of dependency.[6]

Dependence and independence as ambiguous cravings

Underlying ToParam's comments and the comments of others who I talked with is an ambiguous relationship to ideas of what they would see as 'Western' individual independence and an awareness that the independence that is simultaneously craved and feared would require the creation of new and currently unavailable relational dependencies – wage-labour or state social security being the most obvious candidates.[7] The move towards what might appear to be more impersonal forms of dependency that remove one from the obligation to care for related dependents or to be dependent on one's relatives, with all the complications that that entails, can often take surprising forms. I was struck by one conversation I had with another SDA elder at Sikut, in which he bemoaned the amount of work that taking care of elderly relatives took and the extent to which having to behave in certain ways to secure the support of one's relatives in old age was also burdensome. 'You white people have got the right idea', he said in Kuanua, before switching to English, 'with your old people's farms'. I nearly spat out my tea, but the point he intended to make was probably made even more strongly by his accidental replacement of the word 'home' with 'farms' – impersonal dependency can sometimes seem an awful lot more attractive than being dependent on those one has been entangled with throughout one's life.

This ambiguity towards the kind of 'independence' represented by the figure of the 'white man' is common across Papua New Guinea (see for example Bashkow 2006:

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[6]   The emergence of conceptions of autonomous individualism in PNG is also discussed in some of the recent literature (e.g. Martin 2007; Gewertz and Errington 1991).

[7]   See Martin (2018b) for a discussion of wage-labour as rhetorical technology for the limitation of relational obligation in East New Britain.

13). The praise of 'white people's … old people's farms' marks the positive pole of eval-
uation. The condemnation of John Kaputin that one of his former Mataungan com-
rades muttered to me behind his back during the election campaign – 'the trouble with
John is that the money turned him white' – marked the opposite pole. As Bashkow also
observes for Orakaiva people, for Tolai, white men can become fascinating figures, as
they appear to not be 'bound to each other by ties of dependence and nurture' (2006:
91), although most of my Tolai informants would be unlikely to share the Orakaiva
view that whites still retained a 'dependence' on 'maintaining the favour of their dead
ancestors' (Bashkow 2006: 13), a position that many Tolai would dismiss as 'bush' or
even 'cargo-cult' in its framing.

Both the ambiguous craving for 'independence' in the region and its rejection
are expressed in ways that might seem unexpected. Sykes (2001) describes the way in
which the people of the Lelet Plateau, in the neighbouring province of New Ireland,
agitated against the government's attempts to provide their children with free edu-
cation and insisted on finding some kind of mechanism to pay school fees even after
they had been abolished. The Lelet Plateau is in many ways culturally similar to the
Tolai area, in particular sharing a very similar matrilineal descent model of reckoning
clan membership and where the relationship that a person has to their father's clan is
important, as it is among the Tolai. In both cases, the father's clan is usually considered
to be responsible for important acts of nurturance and care for the child that is con-
sidered to be in many respects a child of the whole clan, and the person is considered
in no small part to be dependent on this nurturance from birth until the relationship
is severed at mortuary rituals in the months after their death (for the Tolai case, see
e.g. Martin 2013: 34). In Lelet, the paying of school fees had come to be considered a
central part of this relationship of care and nurturance and Sykes describes their fears
that the state intervening to provide the care of school education for free without the
father's clan having the opportunity to be involved in the provision through the pay-
ment of school fees threatened what had now become conceptualised as a central part
of this relationship. Impersonal relations of dependence, through state provision for
example, can be hoped for as a means of escaping kin dependencies and equally well
they can also be feared for precisely the same reasons.

This is not a dynamic limited to discussions of matrilineal land-tenure in
Austronesian PNG. The concerns of many centrist and conservative academics and
political figures in Europe and North America that individualised welfare payments ran
the risk of destroying the relationships that held poor or working-class communities
together express in some regards a similar fear that too much state support fosters the
expectation of an illegitimate independence from kin or community obligations. This
is one of the central arguments of the influential British sociologist Michael Young in
his final book *The new East End* (Dench *et al*. 2006). Young's intervention is especially
significant given his status as the co-author of the Labour Party election manifesto
of 1945, which led to the establishment of the post-war UK welfare-state. His argu-
ment 60 years later can in many ways be seen as an expression of anxiety that the very
state support that he was instrumental in establishing had become a central component
in the destruction of the extended kin-based working-class communities that he had
described in his ground-breaking 1957 monograph *Family and kinship in East London*
(Young and Wilmott 1957). Young's concern was that 'independence' for all of the
poorer sections of UK society had become a chimera in the economic conditions of the
early 2000s and that therefore communities of mutual assistance and mutual regulation

of anti-social behaviour remained necessary. In both PNG and the UK, unsustainable individual state support that enabled people to break free of such community ties could therefore be described as potentially becoming damaging to the social fabric.

The historical specificities of each case are of course central to understanding their emergence. Ferguson (2013) observes how opposition to the 'new politics of distribution', such as Basic Income Grants, in an era where ever larger populations are 'surplus' to the needs of the global wage-labour economy, is still commonly based on a position influenced by conservative fears of the debilitating effects of 'dependence' on the state. The material presented here suggests the possibility of other bases for lack of enthusiasm for such schemes, such as ToParam's scepticism that the nation-state of which he is a part could ever sustain such schemes or the fears of what such schemes might do to other socially valued interdependencies that he shares with Sykes' New Ireland interlocutors. However, an understanding of the differences between such cases is not best advanced by framing it as the emanation of a fixed cultural difference and opposing such an framing to an exploration of their structural similarities as expressions of basic human dilemmas concerning the recognition of specific 'claims and responsibilities'. Indeed, it is only a consideration of their positioning in a particular moment in global history that enables us to fully understand the emergence and significance of particular forms of difference (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

Conclusions

As I have argued elsewhere (Martin 2018a), the hopes that many people have pinned on land tenure reform in Papua New Guinea is primarily a hope that they can use it as a technology to create a new, less dependent type of Papua New Guinean person. ToParam to an extent fully buys into the premises of this discussion, namely that changing the legal nature of the relations of obligation that are mediated through land changes the nature of the persons who are thus related, but he sounds a note of caution about whether that individualism is actually sustainable and so the tenure system needs to encourage a mixture of scope for individualism with a degree of continuation of ongoing customary obligation. In this respect his attitude towards property is actually something akin to Edmund Burke's, for whom, as Macpherson (1980) again observes, a defence of tradition was not an absolute rejection of the market, enclosure and private property, but a defence of a particular form of balance of principles that had emerged over the previous centuries. Burke's antagonism towards the French Revolution was not the simple feudal nostalgia that it is sometimes wrongly characterised as, but rather based on a feeling that the principles of defence of private property and individualism that the Revolution claimed to stand for were actually threatened by convulsions that tore away the compromises with customary regimes upon which their continued existence relied. We see something of this too in Mauss' insistence that a market economy relies on the preservation of non-market relations and that while the two might be usefully opposed conceptually that their continued strength relies on finding an appropriate balance between them.

Returning to the accusation of 'corruption' that is launched against Eli, far from feeding into the commonly accepted trope that cultural corruption in PNG involves acceding to the *wantok* system, Eli is seemingly denigrated for having failed to do so. The term 'corruption' is here used as a pejorative that brings its morally

evaluative dimension back into the foreground. Brian Smith (2008), in a recent piece on the Warren Hastings impeachment trial, argues that 'corruption' scholarship has deliberately moved away from looking at it as a moral issue in recent years in order to focus on an agenda of 'constructing or reforming institutions'. It was Edmund Burke who famously led the case for the prosecution against Hastings, and Smith draws attention to the ways in which the open debating of the underlying principles of moral evaluation took centre stage both of his prosecution and Hastings' defence. ToParam's use of the 'corruption' accusation likewise returns the question of moral evaluation to centre stage precisely by virtue of its turning the oft-made association of corruption with *wantokism* on its head. But it does so in a rather different manner to that presented by Burke at Hastings' impeachment. Burke's (1877: 439) attack is one in which he condemns a British official who allowed the correct standards of independent agency to drop by immersing himself in the gift-giving dependencies that constitute, as he put it in his closing address for the prosecution on 16 June 1794, 'the enormous and overpowering influence of Eastern corruption'. Rather, ToParam's accusations suggest that the opposition between fairness on the one hand and corruption and *wantokism* on the other can be taken to mean an evaluation of which dependencies it is appropriate to promote for the greater social good in any particular context.[8]

No one ever accuses Eli of *actively* pursuing corrupt acts back in 1995. No one suggests that he deliberately manipulated the process to give his brothers blocks and actively removed non-kin from blocks in order to secure this outcome. The point is that Eli, when faced with this situation, did not act to ensure that there was an equitable distribution that ensured that his clan nephews and nieces would be taken care of in years to come as well. It is this that is characterised by ToParam and a few others as corruption and *wantokism*. If Smith is correct to say that a failing of much contemporary scholarship is a failure to acknowledge the moral dimensions of anti-corruption movements, in the hope that by so doing that they will be able to buildi broad stable coalitions around the technocratic restructuring of institutions, then ToParam's intervention is a reminder that such coalitions can never be permanent. Instead they have to be understood as constantly being built and re-built on the basis of the partial suppression of an ongoing moral tension and contest over which dependencies are to be recognised as being such, and when they are recognised as such, when they are considered to be legitimate and beneficial or when they are to be considered morally corrupting and harmful.

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[8] There is a wide body of work in recent years focusing on the relationship between *wantokism* and 'corruption' in PNG that usefully complicates conventional understandings of the meaning of the term corruption (e.g. Walton 2013, 2014; Larmour 2012).

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« Voulez-vous être nourri comme un bébé ? » Attributions de la dépendance dans la Nouvelle-Bretagne Orientale

Cet article examine certaines accusations de méfaits en Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée au début des années 2000. Celles qui illustrent l'encouragement et le découragement ambigus de différents types de dépendance ressentie alors que les Papouans-Néo-Guinéens luttaient contre un désenchantement croissant à l'égard de leur État-nation et le retrait plutôt que l'expansion des services et des aides de l'État. L'article examine la dynamique par laquelle ces accusations ont fait émerger des dépendances particulières, considérées comme légitimes et illégitimes, visibles et invisibles, les comparant aussi à d'autres cas dans d'autres parties du monde. On voit que les attributions de « dépendance » évoluent non seulement en fonction du contexte, mais sont également très liées à des questions performatives, constituant un moyen essentiel pour les personnes engagées dans des relations d'interdépendance enchevêtrées de tenter de remodeler la nature de celles-ci.

Mots-clés dépendance, corruption, individualisme, moralité, Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée