



# Melanesia's violent environments: Towards a political ecology of conflict in the western Pacific

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon Michael Watts's work on governable spaces and "economies of violence" in the Niger Delta (2004a,b,c) and Colin Filer's concept of the "ideology of landownership" in Papua New Guinea (1997) to explore how resource capitalism has been at the heart of violent conflict in post-colonial Melanesia. This schema of the political ecology of violence is elucidated with reference to three governable spaces – landownership, indigeneity, and nationalism; four different resource–industrial complexes – mining, oil and gas, logging, and oil palm; and the region's three most serious conflicts to date – the Bougainville conflict, the Solomon Islands 'ethnic tension', and on-going violence in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, particularly in Enga and Southern Highlands provinces. It is argued that in each of these places the story of violent conflict is ineluctably one of resource capitalism and its engagement with local socio-political contexts. In sharp contrast to the resource determinism, state-centrism and ahistoricism of much of the 'resource conflict' literature, attention to governmentality and scale highlights the highly contextual and contingent nature of resource-related violence in Melanesia. The diverse experiences of different regulatory approaches to the encounters between resource complexes and governable spaces across time and space are also examined, giving rise to policy implications for governing resource conflict in Melanesia.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades the western Pacific, the culture area known as 'Melanesia', has been the site of considerable violent conflict and social tumult. The region has witnessed a 10-year secessionist struggle on Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (PNG), a 5-year low-level civil war in neighbouring Solomon Islands, a resurgence of localised armed conflict in parts of the PNG Highlands, and a number of less serious episodes of social unrest in Vanuatu and New Caledonia. These conflicts, as well as those in Indonesia on the region's western flank and in Fiji at its eastern fringe, have given rise to depictions of the region as an 'arc of instability' populated by states at various stages of 'failure'. These portrayals, and the assumptions and interpretations that undergird them, have informed an increased willingness on the part of Australian governments and policymakers to directly intervene in the affairs of their Melanesian neighbours (Fry and Kabutaulaka, 2008). This

has been manifest most dramatically in the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

The region's trajectory of violence and instability has coincided in time with a shift in the economic bases of its two largest post-colonial states, PNG and Solomon Islands, away from agriculture towards commercial logging, mining, and, in the case of PNG, oil and gas. The advent of these resource industries has brought global capital and its agents into an unprecedented encounter with the small-scale agrarian societies who lay claim to ownership of the land upon, or under, which the resources sit.<sup>1</sup> As has been the case in many other developing-country contexts, this encounter has been productive both of violent conflict – so-called 'resource conflict' – and an efflorescence of scholarship seeking to explain it (Duncan and Chand, 2002; Ballard and Banks, 2003; Regan, 2003; Allen, 2005; Banks, 2005, 2008; Horowitz, 2009). I argue that Melanesia's most intense violent conflicts – the really big 'blow outs' – have been resource conflicts; but resource conflicts of a very different kind to

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<sup>1</sup> I characterise the exploitation of these resources by predominantly multinational corporations and consortia as 'resource capitalism'.

those theorised and constructed by political scientists and neoclassical economists (see, for example, Collier, 2000; Ross, 2004; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Building upon recent studies of resource conflict in Melanesia (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Banks, 2005, 2008; Horowitz, 2009),<sup>3</sup> and the burgeoning scholarship on the political ecology of developing-country violence (for example Peluso and Watts, 2001b), I engage a contemporary political ecology framework in my analysis. It is suffice to briefly highlight four of its broad contours. First is its attention to scale; the interactions between the local, regional, national and international. Second is its careful delineation of the full panoply of actors, and their diverse motives and perspectives. Third is its attention to the plurality of conceptions and representations of Nature and of the dialectics of Nature and Society. Fourth is its enduring focus on the encounter between agrarian societies and the capitalist world system. At the centre of this encounter one invariably finds struggles over access to, and control of, land and natural resources (Peluso and Watts, 2001a; Watts and Peet, 2004).

Taking my lead from Michael Watts's work on governmentality and "petro-violence" in the Niger Delta and Colin Filer's concept of the "ideology of landownership" in PNG, I intend to explore how resource capitalism has been at the heart of violent conflict in post-colonial Melanesia. Following Watts (2004a,b,c), who draws upon the work of Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose, I conceive of conflict as sitting both in physical places and in fields of power or governmentality: 'governable spaces' (particular configurations of resources, territory and identity). In his analysis of the economies of violence in Nigeria, Watts delineates three such governable spaces: the space of chieftainship, the space of indigeneity, and the space of nationalism. I suggest that in the Melanesian context, the space of chieftainship is better conceptualised as the space of 'customary landownership' (hereafter referred to as the space of landownership). I have initially placed this term in inverted commas because, as Filer has argued convincingly, the concept of the customary landowning group in Melanesia is at once an idiom and a misnomer. It is driven by an ideology that asserts that customary groups – commonly described as 'clans' – and land groups are coterminous, and that "these 'customary landowning groups' are

the basic building blocks of Melanesian societies" (Filer, 2007, p. 161; also see Filer, 1997, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein Tanya Li demonstrates how indigeneity is not a pre-given, natural or inevitable identity, but rather a positioning which draws upon aspects of territory, culture and history, and emerges through particular trajectories of struggle and engagement (Li, 2000, p. 151). Much the same may be said of nationalism. Indeed all three governable spaces – landownership, indigeneity and nationalism – can be characterised as territorialising projects. All must attempt, in the words of Poulantzas writing about national unity, "a historicity of a territory and a territorialisation of a history" (quoted in Watts, 2004a, p. 74). In Melanesia, resource capitalism has provided the crucible in which these ideologies have been turbo-charged: customary landownership is invoked to gain access to resource compensation under differing forms of state recognition of customary rights to land and resources; indigeneity is mobilised in claims for new sub-national political institutions which stand to derive resource rents (or at least to exclude the state from doing so); and the post-colonial nation-building project in Solomon Islands and, especially, PNG has well and truly pinned its colours to the mast of large-scale resource capitalism.

I am not denying that the state has played a role in these conflicts. The inability of the post-colonial state in Melanesia to convert resource wealth into services and development opportunities for the rural populace has undermined its legitimacy in matters of resource ownership and development, while simultaneously producing and exacerbating patterns of relative deprivation. This has led to PNG being described as 'resource cursed' (Auty, 1993) and a classic 'rentier' state (Standish, 2007, p. 137). Communities across Melanesia have sought to pursue their own 'roads to development' preferably through by-passing the state and dealing directly with potential developers (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Filer and Macintyre, 2006). We have also seen pernicious state actors, political elites, seeking to capitalise upon violence – in some cases deliberately escalating or prolonging it – in pursuit of their own political and economic agendas (Fraenkel, 2004). Finally, along with communities and corporations, the state is a critical actor in Melanesia's 'resource complexes' (see below). The state and its agents are, undeniably, actors in these place-based conflicts; but they are only one set of actors, and, I contend, not the most important ones when it comes to understanding the origins and drivers of conflict in Melanesia.

In the case of the Niger Delta, Watts demonstrates how "the oil complex" gives rise to particular types of enclave economies and particular sorts of governable spaces characterised by violence and instability, effectively 'ungovernable spaces' (Watts, 2004c, p. 278). In the case of Melanesia we are dealing with four different resource–industrial complexes – mining, oil and gas, logging and oil palm – which combine to form four branches of production in the "Melanesian version of 'heavy industry'" (Filer, 2007, p. 139). The precise form of each resource complex varies in terms of its corporate structure, property and other institutional regimes, forms of landowner engagement and representation, and benefit-sharing arrangements (including between different levels of government). The structures of the three resource complexes that are common to

<sup>2</sup> The large-N quantitative studies conducted by Collier and Hoeffler have spawned a corpus of literature that seeks to explain statistical correlations between resource abundance, socio-economic variables, and the onset, duration or intensity of violent conflict (for a recent discussion see Korf, 2011). There is little consensus on the question of causal linkages, with neoclassical economists explaining resource conflict in terms of methodological individualism and political scientists seeing a strong link with state dysfunction and the notion of the 'resource curse'. This econometric research on developing-country conflict has been the subject of a 'beyond greed and grievance literature' that stresses the need to situate motive and agency within broader structures of opportunity and constraint (for example Cramer, 2002; Ballentine and Sherman, 2003) and to provide fine-grained, micro-level explanations for small wars (for example Richards, 2004; Verwimp et al., 2009). A sub-set of the resource conflict literature has been concerned with the conflict properties of different types of resources (Ross, 2004) or different resource geographies and political economies (Le Billion, 2001). My concern here is not to engage in a comparative analysis of resource types and conflict types in Melanesia, but rather to highlight the highly contingent and site-specific nature of resource-related violence in the region. A further objective is to analyse the spatially and temporally diverse experiences of governing resource capitalism in Melanesia.

<sup>3</sup> There was a wealth of cultural and human ecology research on 'traditional warfare' and resource conflict conducted in Melanesia during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the New Guinea Highlands (see Knauff, 1990). The more recent studies by Ballard and Banks employ political ecology perspectives on mining-related conflict in PNG, as does Horowitz in the case of the French 'overseas country' (pays d'outre-mer) of New Caledonia. My study builds and expands upon this work by broadening the geographical scope to cover Solomon Islands; by examining a wider set of resource industries viz logging and oil palm, in addition to mining and oil and gas; and by explicitly engaging with Michael Watts's work on governable spaces and "economies of violence" in the Niger Delta (Watts, 2001, 2004a,b,c).

<sup>4</sup> In reality "the units of social affiliation or membership and the units of property ownership might be different things" (Weiner and Glaskin, 2007a, p. 8). The Western (read colonial) juridical tendency to apply models of unilineal descent to indigenous social organisation has provided the impetus for the postcolonial delineation of discrete social units in defiance of ethnographic diversity and complexity (Weiner and Glaskin, 2007b). In practice individuals may belong to more than one 'customary group', and any given 'land group' may contain members who are not part of the local 'customary group', especially when the latter is narrowly defined in terms of unilineal descent.

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