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TRACTION
The role of executives in localising global mining and petroleum industries in Papua New Guinea*

Alex Golub and Mooweon Rhee

ABSTRACT. This article presents interview data from corporate elites in Papua New Guinea's mining and petroleum sector and other members of the business community. It describes their world view, and in particular their belief that resource extraction and business will help bring development to their country in a way that its social-democratic government has not. The article uses this data to make three contributions to the existing literature. First, it argues that globe-spanning industrial capitalism is subject to description through ethnographic fieldwork. Secondly, it demonstrates that elites in Papua New Guinea gain 'traction' and thus make corporate projects possible because of -- not despite -- their particularistic ties and personal biographies. Finally, it argues that it is possible to study corporate elites in a disinterested way without being co-opted by their political agenda.

'Can one gain an ethnographic purchase on global connections? Where would one locate the global in order to study it?' By the time Anna Tsing asked this question in 2005 (2005:3), anthropology's answer to it had changed. Increasingly dissatisfied with 'academic tendencies to "believe the global hype"' (Ho 2005:88), anthropologists have produced ethnographically concrete studies in order to document globalisation 'in the wild'. Studies of global capitalism (Fischer and Downey 2006) and the corporate form (Welker, Partridge and Hardin 2011) have sought to deflate excitement about the supposedly kaleidoscopic effects of global capital, while a more Foucaultian approach has examined 'globalization' not as a concrete phenomenon of global connection, but as a 'problem space' in which anthropologists can explore an anthropology of the contemporary (Collier and Ong 2005).

Tsing's ethnography of Indonesia's resource frontier exemplifies this trend. In it, she uses the concept of 'friction' to 'open [...] the possibility of an ethnographic account of global interconnection' (2005:6) which would render globalisation amenable to analysis. In this article, I playfully explore the conceptual space opened up by the notion of friction by rubbing the two sides of globalisation -- global forces and their local instantiations -- against one another. Specifically, I develop the concept of 'traction' to describe the functioning of global capitalism. Through an analysis of the life worlds of

* This article is the product of a joint mixed-method study carried out by Alex Golub and Mooweon Rhee and presents the ethnographic part of the study. It has thus been written mainly by Golub and uses the first person singular. Further publications from the project are forthcoming.
mining and petroleum executives in Papua New Guinea (PNG), I hope to make three original contributions to the literature.

Tsing claims that global forces are susceptible to ethnographic treatment because of the inevitability of their localisation, even as the awkward and contingent nature of that process limits anthropological aspirations. Friction 'emphasize[s] the unexpected and unstable aspects of global interaction' (Tsing 2005:3) by focusing 'on the zones of awkward engagement' (Tsing 2005:xi) which 'are transient' and 'arise out of encounters and interactions. They reappear in new places with changing events' (Tsing 2005:xi). As a result, she concludes that 'the only ways I can think of to study them are patchwork and haphazard' (Tsing 2005:xi).

In contrast to this, I argue that an ethnography of global connection needs not be carried out at the price of ethnographic ambitions of completeness and systematicity. My first claim, then, is that attending to traction enables us to undertake a truly positive ethnographic programme, one which seeks not merely to destabilise 'the global', but also to trace the hard work that systematically reveals how action is coordinated across space and time.

I make this claim through an analysis of the role of mining and petroleum executives in Papua New Guinea. Already the home to several world-class mines, Papua New Guinea is currently undergoing a major resource boom coupled with a renewed interest in the power of business, rather than government, to solve the country's problems. Some of the most educated Papua New Guineans in the country enthusiastically embrace extractive industry, not out of cynical self-interest, but in the name of national development. How, I ask, can Papua New Guinean elites allow their natural resources to be extracted by global corporations in the name of patriotism and national independence? I argue that executives provide traction for the mining and petroleum industry by serving as liaisons between their companies and the elite world of the capital, Port Moresby. Their unique biographical circumstances - their personal network of contacts - give the industry traction. At the same time, they underwrite these interventions with reference to specific notions of development, patriotism and bureaucratic rationality which stem from their education during Papua New Guinea's independence period.

By undertaking the familiar anthropological project of making their life worlds comprehensible, I demonstrate that 'globalisation' is tractable to anthropological analysis. A description of the role of elites in large-scale mining and petroleum projects can inform studies of globalisation because the complex coordination across space and time that these executives make possible exemplifies the dynamics of contemporary globalisation, and I argue that my account of the 'traction' with which they provide international corporations may be generalisable.

Exciting new studies of markets, capitalism, and finance have focused on business elites;¹ while others have documented the extractive industry's relationship with local

communities. Less well studied, however, is the role of elites in extractive industry. My second contribution in this article, then, is an ethnographic rather than a theoretical one: to present one of the first ethnographic studies of mining and petroleum elites in Papua New Guinea.

My third contribution speaks to the ethical dimension of studying elites. The anthropological literature on elites has tended towards extremes: some, adopting a leftist-populist approach, insist that any anthropological study of corporate elites is by its very nature morally compromised. Others, on the other hand, have argued that anthropologists ought to embrace complicity with elites, making them partners in the research process. In contrast to these approaches, I use Richard Salisbury’s concept of the ‘anthropologist as ombudsman’ (2004) to ground a study of corporate elites which meets our discipline’s ethical imperatives. All three of these contributions, in sum, are meant to suggest that the ethical study of globalisation can be achieved using relatively orthodox anthropological methods.

Tribologies of Globalisation

Tribology – the science of rubbing – is a mainstay of the mining and petroleum industries, where drills, mills, and pumps require properly lubricated parts to function properly. It is also an apt term to describe anthropology’s three-decade examination of global forms, whose tribulations have been followed since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Globalisation theory’s central task was to ‘understand [...] planet-wide interconnections’ (Tsing 2000:330) and ‘the way powerful institutions and ideas spread geographically and come to have an influence in distant places’ (Tsing 2000:336) – an aspiration which, pace Tsing, never entirely forgot the drag created by adhesion. After all, it was often the disjunctive nature of global flows, their ability to ‘precipitate various kinds of problems and frictions in different local situations’, that made them seem so novel (Appadurai 2001:5).

The pressure of globalisation was originally assumed to be vertical – ‘the global’ was ‘above’ and pushed ‘down’ on local circumstances. This vertical diagram structures much of social thought’s imaginary, where empirical particulars are always beneath the general forces (langue, structure, social organisation) which I believe subsume them. It is for this reason that so much of friction seems like a reinvention of Sahlin’s “Islands of history” (1985), which makes essentially the same argument. And indeed, Tsing draws on poststructuralist thinkers such as Butler, Mouffe and Laclau in developing the con-

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2 Ballard and Banks (2003), Sawyer (2005), Benson and Kirsch (2010)
3 Exceptions include Shever (2010) and especially Rajak (2011).
4 For overviews of this literature, see Appadurai (2001) and Inda and Rosaldo (2002).
cept of friction (Tsing 2005:274–275). The goal is to destabilise globalisation and demonstrate its contingency.

Tsing is certainly correct to emphasize the achieved and contingent nature of global interconnections, and her work is an important step forward in this regard. That said, however, a purely negative account of globalisation is 'a tacit declaration of the immutable might of corporate capitalism, unwittingly reproducing the very power it attempts to critique' (Rajak 2011:17). Accounts of global interconnection — the coordination of action across space and time — must continue the transformation begun by Tsing by shifting to a horizontal dimension: one in which social action overcomes the inertia of natural logics in order to create action. Global scope is not something assumed which must be destabilised, but a painfully achieved process whose success must be scrutinised.

In this account, global forces are not 'mediated' in local situations because they are not 'macro'-level forces which interact with 'micro'-level forces. Contemporary analysts 'flatten' social phenomena and insist that 'global' is a quality predicated of actors situated, as they always must be, in particular sites. Thus for Bruno Latour, 'the global is a form of circulation inside those sites, not what could contain them' (2009:5), and the job of the analyst is to trace networks of associations between physical locations, rather than a spectral force that is above or behind them.

After receiving corporate funding, Tsing has begun to take this tack (2009), but a continuing interest in disjuncture has led her and her colleagues to examine the start, as it were, of the supply chain of a commodity (matsutake mushrooms). Latour, in contrast, would counsel us to search for 'panoramas' or narratives of global scope and activity, and the 'oligopticons' or the specific influential locations in which these narratives are made and transmitted (Latour 2005:187). Such oligopticons are empirical locations where concrete actors create narratives of globalisation which have performative effect, where 'elites must reduce to human terms within the framework of their knowable communities the vastly more complex and objectified worlds which their actions, narrowly conceived, significantly affect' (Marcus 1983:51). This 'reduction of global complexity to knowable matters' (Marcus 1983:51)

makes possible for elites a manageable perspective on the objectified institutional processes that both isolate and globally implicate them. Thus it is important that an ethnography of elites captures just how larger worlds are understood in the routine activities of an elite community (Marcus 1983:53).

Thus 'a project of tracking the global' must be 'engaged with its dynamics from their orienting point of view' (Holmes and Marcus 2006:248). Study of these sites, ritual centres of authority in Michael Silverstein's sense (2004:632), is thus key to the study of globalisation, because these are the locations where the empirically discernible assemblages of actors get traction by convincing themselves and others that they are 'the
global’. As Sahlins would put it, elite actors have their agency amplified by virtual of their structural position (2005).

The ethical study of elites

Historically, the study of particularly efficacious people and the places where they construe globality has run afoul of ethical questions about how best to ‘study up’ (Nader 1972). On the one hand, contemporary inheritors of anthropology’s leftist-activist tradition advocate an ‘imperative to critique’ (Welker, Partridge and Hardin 2011:6) corporations. ‘Politically and ethically’, write Welker and her co-authors, ‘we find a sense of security and satisfaction in exposing corporate harm; to many anthropologists, it feels right to be critical of corporations’ (Welker, Partridge and Hardin 2011:8). At its most extreme, this position considers that ‘conducting fieldwork in corporate offices [...] entail risks of co-optation, because the tendency of ethnographers to empathize and identify with their subjects may limit their findings or critical stance’ (Benson and Kirsch 2010:464). Ethically, these anthropologists believe they must find ‘alternative modes of studying up that do not involve ethnographic placement within the corporation’ (Benson and Kirsch 2010:464), such as analyses of press releases.

An alternative scholarly tradition sees this position as a ‘grotesque expression of a liberal moral conscience or witnessing (with a too-easy tendency to denounce or express outrage) as the purpose or primary rhetoric of disciplinary discourse’ (Marcus 2008:4). In this account, ‘the fields of moral, ethical, or political valuation and activity are shifting’ as a result of globalisation (Collier and Ong 2005:17), and ‘appropriate avenues of political, ethical, or moral response were not immediately obvious’ (Collier and Ong 2003:426). Thus Hadi Deeb and George Marcus have conducted research at the World Trade Organization in which they are not only not critical of this organisation, but seek ‘a mutual shift in stance from researcher-subject to epistemic partnership’ (2011:51) in which anthropologists and financial elites ‘share a perspective’ (2011:53). Here, corporate elites are not the enemy, but collaborators in the process of para-ethnography.

Each of these positions suffers from a partisanship which limits their ability to understand those on the other side of the corporate divide. In contrast, I will model this work on Salisbury’s idea of the anthropologist as ‘social ombudsman’ (2004), mentioned above. Rather than decide the moral status of executives in Papua New Guinea beforehand, I seek to ‘express publicly but anonymously the view of the informant even if the anthropologist does not himself agree with them’ (Salisbury 2004:257). Like Salisbury, I believe that

when an anthropologist commits himself to one side only, he nullifies many of the benefits that his professional training could give to that side. He is not able to retain any confidence from the other side and so is unlikely to make an accurate analysis of that side’s point of
view, while any analysis he makes of his own side’s point of view is unlikely to weigh with the other side (2004:271).

In what follows, then, I present an account of how elites and their world views become efficacious by virtue of their position, an approach which seeks neither to endorse nor denounce them, but to understand how global forces gain traction in specific and ethnographically comprehensible places.

**Methods**

This research is based on two stints of ethnographic research. An initial pilot study was conducted in Port Moresby in July and August 2007. This fieldwork consisted largely of establishing whether work on elites was possible, and it grew out of my previous research in Papua New Guinea, which stretched back to 1998. This research focused on the Porgera gold mine, but I visited Port Moresby and first became aware of the existence of its business community during that time. In 2007 it seemed that it would be possible to conduct research in Port Moresby.

In 2009 I returned to Port Moresby for research from June to July. I lived with a middle class Papua New Guinean family in Hohola and attended social functions at clubs and restaurants, including meetings of civic clubs. I conducted 26 interviews with 25 individuals. One interview was done on deep background and head notes were recorded immediately after the meeting. The rest took place using a standard interview log, although topics varied based on the backgrounds and interests of the respondents. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, some fully, some only for central or salient quotes.

I originally selected respondents by contacting the heads of all those organisations that were full or supporting members of the Papua New Guinea Chamber of Mining and Petroleum, the industry association in the country. I also made a list of all civic and social clubs in the city. I then attempted to contact or interview managers or executives of all these institutions. As is typical of elite research, this proved extremely difficult. In the event, respondents included a wide cross-section of Port Moresby’s business community, including both Australian and Papua New Guinean business executives, managers of local clubs and working class, low-level secretaries. This allowed for broad coverage of a wide variety of world views in Port Moresby, although it was skewed towards senior men.

There were limitations to this study. The important Malaysian business community was not studied, nor was the ‘new Chinese’ business community. Overall, however, I believe that this brief ethnographic research, when combined with my past experience in the country, has yielded a reasonably accurate picture of the local Port Moresby scene. I begin the next section of this article, then, with an ethnographic description of one of the key locations in that scene.
Port Moresby as oligopticon

It is 9 June 2009. I am at the Royal Papua New Guinea Yacht Club, interviewing the country manager of a large mining company over brunch. The yacht club’s main building feels like an airport terminal: large, open, with structural supports visible as architectural elements which descend from the side of the room down to a long series of sliding glass doors leading to a large patio overlooking the marina. The colour scheme is teal, while much of the furniture has a blue colour palette. The waiting staff, like the large rotary fans which cool the room, circulate with a slight rustle. As we sit down with our plates of food, the executive starts talking about his struggle with an obesity-related illness, something he never encountered in the small village where he grew up. As an overweight American and practicing Jew, I am horrified by the amount of treif on offer at the club’s Australian-style breakfast buffet and stick with toast and eggs, while my interviewee helps himself to rashers of bacon he has just told me he would do better avoiding. Throughout the course of the brunch the executive breaks off our interview to shake hands with the people who greet him as they walk past. Not just the head of an important international company, he is also related to politicians and civil servants and has a long history in the country’s resource-related government offices.

Towards the end of our meal-cum-interview I ask him ‘What is the role that mining and petroleum, and in particular your company – how do you see that as contributing or putting challenges to PNG’s future?’ His answer is articulate, well-phrased, and obviously oft-repeated. Clearly, he wants me to put it on the record:

My view is, countries can only pay for their development through the development of their resources. There’s no guy out there writing a check book for us to fund our development. We have to use the resources we have. Every country’s done that. So now it’s our turn to do it. All these people are sitting up, they’re telling us ‘No don’t cut the trees down, don’t dig the ground, don’t use the fisheries’. I don’t think that’s a fair thing to say from where they are. I think the country needs to decide where we need to go and how we are going to get there. And mining companies are a very important part of that. That’s the only way you can pay for your roads, your bridges, the schools, the health centres. [Foreign] aid is there, but I don’t think that’s enough. So we need to accept the fact that when you cut the trees down, when you dig the ground, when you take the fish, there’s some trade off. That’s if we decide to move forward. If we decide to stay still where we are, then fine. Let’s not wake up in the morning. We’ll just stay in bed. But I don’t think PNG has made that call. PNG has made a call to move forward and be part of the developed world. Inherent in that decision is the need to develop the resources that we have. Yes, there are negatives that come out of development or using resources. But that’s part of the management and that’s why governments have laws and that’s why there are benefit sharing agreements and MOAs [memorandums of agreement]. The resource sector plays a key roll in the development of any country, and particularly in small countries like ours, where it’s the only way to go. There’s no other way.
His response and the entire meal epitomises the life world of executives in Port Moresby which this article will seek to describe: nationalist sentiment, the reaction to first-world environmentalism, a global viewpoint, and a discrete ducking of the part of my question which suggests the mining industry might be a challenge, rather than a solution, to the country’s future.

**History and Context**

One of the oldest institutions in the city, the Royal Papua Yacht Club is an institution central to networking in Port Moresby. A relatively young town, Port Moresby was originally a collection of three villages inhabited by Motu- and Koitabu-speaking people, and was chosen as the location of an early mission station because of its prominence in regional trade networks. For more than a half century after its founding in 1872, Moresby remained a ‘small, sleepy, colonial backwater’ (Oram 1975:27) which served as the administrative centre of the Australian territory of Papua. By 1946, the population was still quite small: roughly four hundred expatriates and three to four thousand indigenous people (Oram 1975:27). In 1949, Papua was combined with the Trust Territory of New Guinea into a single territory, with Moresby as its capital. After Papua New Guinea achieved independence in 1975, the city grew quickly, from a population of 77,000 in 1972 (Oram 1975:84) to 254,158 in 2000 (Government of Papua New Guinea 2002).

The mining and petroleum industry has a long history in Papua New Guinea reaching back to the late nineteenth century, and revenues from mining were important to the colonial economy (Nelson 1976). Mining and petroleum became even more important after independence because Papua New Guinea counted on revenue from large-scale mines operated by foreign companies to help bankroll the development of a social-democratic state. By the early 1990s, numerous operations – including the first petroleum and natural gas developments – were underway. However, by the end of the century local dissatisfaction with mining, a worsening economy, low commodity prices and threats to political stability resulted in a steep decline in new exploration and a generally pessimistic mood throughout the country.

By the time of my breakfast at the Yacht Club, the country had changed considerably. Commodity prices rose after 9/11, and law reform worked to stabilise Papua New Guinea’s parliament and the integrity of its political parties. The Morauta government began a series of neoliberal reforms in the country, partially privatising the phone system, the ports authority, and the power company. In early 2000, a stock market was created as part of the conditions for a loan from the World Bank. In 2001, tax regimes were changed to encourage more overseas investment. In 2006, a new agency, the Mineral Resources Authority, was created using funds from the World Bank and the European Union to regulate (and facilitate) mining. New private-public entities were created to hold and invest revenues from mining. The global financial crisis did little to impede
growth, as few in the country had invested abroad. Although privatisation slowed under the next prime minister, Michael Somare, the political stability of his unprecedented ten-year period in office has encouraged – and, according to some, been complicit in – increased foreign investment.

Executives in the mining and petroleum industry today are thus working in the midst of a resource boom set against a backdrop of neoliberal policies – a boom epitomised by a three billion dollar liquid natural gas project operated by Exxon-Mobil which is projected to double to country’s gross domestic product in the next ten years (Esso Highlands Limited 2009). Hard data on the size of the boom is difficult to come by, but documents obtained from the Department of Petroleum suggest that as of July 2009 there were 88 companies with exploration licenses registered with the department. As of August 2010, there were 98 companies with points-of-contact registered with the Mineral Resources Authority. The Papua New Guinea Chamber of Mines and Petroleum – the main lobbying group for the industry – reports that in 2008 there were 186 exploration licences, 41 renewals, and 55 applications (Anderson 2009:4) for new licences for mines.

**Port Moresby’s small world**

Mining and petroleum companies have always had a presence in Port Moresby because it is the administrative centre of Papua New Guinea. It is not difficult, ethnographically, to locate the portion of Papua New Guinea’s mining and petroleum industry that runs through Port Moresby. The business district, or ‘town’ as it is called, is only three or four blocks long and three blocks wide. Most major companies are located in just a few buildings. Four of the largest resource companies – Rio Tinto, Highlands Pacific, Ok Tedi, and Lihir – all have offices in the same high-rise building: Pacific Place on the corner of Musgrave and Douglas Street. Barrick Gold, the Papua New Guinea Chamber of Mines and Petroleum, and the European Union all have offices in “The Lodge” (named after the masonic meeting hall in the basement) which is just up the street. InterOil, the Papua New Guinea Business Council, and the Port Moresby stock exchange are all located in Defence Haus, while New Guinea Energy and Eaglewood Energy are both located in the Pacific MMI building. Oil Search, Esso and Exxon Mobil all have offices at Credit Haus, and so on. Junior players and others who cannot afford office space downtown tend to cluster in a few other well-known buildings near town, such as the Pacific View Apartments in Korobosea, which has been home to Cheetah Oil, Buffalo Gold, Triple Plate Junction and Petromin.

The demographics of the men (and they are mostly men) who personify global capital in Port Moresby is elusive. The definitional issues that plague studies of elites are compounded by the fact that very little has been written about educated, urban professionals in Papua New Guinea. The national census provides no data on income levels,
and most ethnography of urban Moresby is focused on the less well-off (Goddard 2005). What work has been done on the middle class has focused on regions such as the Sepik (Gewertz and Errington 1999) or New Britain (Martín 2010), areas far from the capital.

Still, it is clear that there is a strong sense of community amongst Moresby elites. As one businessman put it, ‘this country works on person to person and contact to contact. All places do, but it especially works that way here because it’s so small’. Indeed, although Port Moresby regularly appears at the bottom of The Economist’s list of liveable cities, several executives were enthusiastic about their social lives. One expatriate described the nightlife at ‘spectacular’ and said his social calendar was so full he struggled to be able to stay at home in the evenings. The circles for these events are quite small. As one man said,

if you have a function here in town, for instance a cocktail party at the Crowne Plaza, the same faces will front up every time – it will be the heads of the big banks, the heads of the mining companies, the heads of the big trading houses, the heads of the big car firms, you know, the heads of the industry bodies. They’re always on the invite list.

For men like these, the social scene is dominated by institutions shaped by Moresby’s past. Until the Second World War Port Moresby operated under a system of racial apartheid, and the few formal social institutions that did exist were typical of British colonial men’s’ clubs: the Royal Papuan Yacht Club, the Papua Club (with an exclusive, male-only rooftop clubhouse atop one of Moresby’s tallest buildings), the Golf Club, the Rotary Club and the Aviat Club, which began as a club for pilots during World War II. More recently, other special-interest clubs such as the Papua New Guinea Orchid Society (for flower-fanciers) and the Badili Club (for younger executives) have also grown more popular. Papua New Guinean business leaders inherited these institutions during independence and they continue to be an important part of social life in the city.

The up-market nightlife scene in Port Moresby has also crystallised around the restaurants and bars attached to large, expensive hotels in the city which also double as venues for live music. The Davara (now the Ela Beach Hotel) was the first of these new, modern up-market locations, and was soon followed by places such as the Crowne Plaza, the Gateway, the Islander, and more recent entrants like the Airways and the Lamana. Often clubs in hotels have public and private sections, for instance, the general-admittance pub at the Lamana will feature female mud-wrestling, while its popular Gold Club draws European expatriates with weekly ballroom dance lessons. As elusive as the urban scene is in Moresby, it definitely seems coherent.
The front of the company: the jobs of executives

It is within this booming, small-world setting that international capital situates itself. Given the scope of the global mining and petroleum industries, one might expect their headquarters to be grand affairs. To a certain extent, this is true: national offices in Port Moresby feature wall-to-ceiling glass doors that one must be buzzed into (often with a small, handwritten sign taped to them indicating which of the doors to push when the buzzer goes off), massive wood desks and the sort of bone-chilling air conditioning that signifies power in tropical countries.

However, the impressive reception areas of these office suites often conceal a back stage that is much more modest. Moresby offices are richly appointed, but not highly staffed. National offices are just one node in a network of locations through which mining and petroleum operations pass, ranging from 'the site' where resources are extracted to logistics depots to regional and international headquarters. While details vary, many of the executives in the oil and petroleum industry are not, on the whole, directly involved with managing the day-to-day activities of exploration and operation. It is not unusual for the offices of the largest mining and petroleum companies to employ a dozen people or so: typically two or three executives and a secretarial or accounting staff. Indeed, some companies will have little to no presence in Moresby. One developer's national headquarters consists of an empty suite of offices with a single furnished room inhabited by a janitor and a chauffeur who attend to the managing director when he flies into Port Moresby from his permanent base in Australia. It is not unusual to have expatriate management living and working in Australia (typically Queensland) and commuting to Papua New Guinea only when specific issues need to be dealt with. Junior explorers who have done little more than obtain licences and begin exploration will have no office at all, but be represented by an accountant or law firm in town that receives their mail.

There are exceptions to this rule. InterOil, Papua New Guinea's vertically integrated petroleum producer and retailer, has a large series of offices to administer its business, as does Oil Search, a company that began in Papua New Guinea and still has a large administrative presence there. Junior explorers may retain specialists in Moresby to analyse data from exploration, even though much of the complex chemical and metallurgical work done on samples is handled by off-shore labs. But on the whole, national offices in Moresby are relatively small.

The jobs of executives in Port Moresby reflect this division of labour. They tend, as one man put it, to 'serve as a conduit for most of the requirements in PNG' or, as another put it, to serve as the 'front' of the company in Papua New Guinea:

I basically coordinate various activities of the company. I guess first, represent the company in PNG, coordinate its various activities in PNG, ensure the government is informed of what we are doing at various levels of government and the stakeholders get informed what...
they're doing. I guess we provide the front of the company in PNG. So I get involved in various things with various government agencies, provincial governments, and the departments down to the level of ILG [incorporated land group] and communities in the areas. I'm kind of the first contact for the company in PNG.

Although there is considerable variation in the responsibilities of the Moresby offices, one of the most central tasks of executives is to deal with government offices. Petroleum companies must acquire and maintain leases, file periodic reports on their activities and submit environmental and social impact studies. Mining companies interact with the Mineral Resources Authority in a similar way. Depending on the size of an operation, companies may also have to apply for and renew water use permits with the Department of Environment and Conservation for sewage and septic systems. According to several interviewees, acquiring visas for expatriate workers in a timely fashion from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Immigration is a particularly challenging and important part of office work in Moresby.

Papua New Guinea's public service has a poor reputation throughout the business community - 'it's shit for a service' said one executive - and executives see overcoming the intransigence and inertia of public services to be a main part of their job. One particularly emotional interviewee summarised the litany of complaints I heard throughout my interviews: 'You get away with anything in the government', he said; 'nearly all semblance of discipline and structure and the way you normally run things is gone'. He called public servants 'garamut [slit drum] people' because 'they're all hollowed out - they can't produce or achieve anything'. The worst, he said, was middle management, who felt that their position higher up the hierarchy meant they could do less work, rather than more. 'You get idiots and rat bags in the top jobs', he concluded; 'It's hard to feel sorry for them'.

This cynicism about public services is matched by the academic concern with corruption and capacity-building (Aysius and May 2007, Imbun 2001) and, interestingly, by public servants themselves. 'I suppose we feel relaxed at work', said the secretary of one department. When I asked what exactly that meant, I was told: 'We have instances where staff are very careless in their approach to work [...] There are some departments where you walk into the office and there's no one there on Friday afternoon', although the officials I was talking to hastened to add that that was not the case in their department. Others pointed out that public servants were underpaid and often lived in the settlements (slums, essentially) surrounding Port Moresby. 'Morale is low [...] housing is a problem. People don't feel the comfort of the house before they come in to work', said one man. In such a situation, they did the best that could be expected. This matched my own experiences with the public service. During my fieldwork in 2009, the Lands Office was closed because the government had failed to pay rent to its landlord, who cut off the electricity. In 2007, when I attempted to interview officials from one department the day after they received their pay checks, they did not show up to the office at all.
It is in this context that executives see themselves as carrying out a somewhat paradoxical task: using personal connections with bureaucrats to ensure bureaucratic rationality. When I asked one man about his connections in town, he said:

I'm sure that is one of the big reasons why I got recruited. I've got many contacts here, not only, I mean, my involvement with NGOs, my involvement with charity organisations and business non-profit organisations. I have a lot of contact plus I have intimate knowledge of what of the government of PNG and the departments and stuff like that. So that would be probably something important when they are looking for someone to be in the Port Moresby office. I got approached and asked whether I was interested.

When I suggested that using personal connections in this way might itself be an example of corruption, executives were adamant that it was not: ‘There's nothing wrong using informal contacts to get the results you want’, said one; ‘no big money is involved’. Another said:

I think getting simple information or being introduced to a second layer of people and then you do your own talking, I don't think that's unethical to do. Where you want to use his position or your own position to abuse a process, then I think that is unethical.

Another major job for executives is to communicate regularly with the offshore office or regional centre for their company. Executives in Moresby e-mail their offshore offices (or the site, if they answer to the site) in the course of day-to-day business. Conference calls tend to be the most regularised form of communication, and often companies have fortnightly or monthly round-ups of outstanding issues. One executive described himself as developing ‘message tracks’ to issues, creating bulleted lists of issues or concerns, and then developing responses to circulate in Papua New Guinea:

>[S]everal key people will sit down, and I often go and sit with them and develop messages, general messages which you can read, you don't have to go word for word, but you understand when a question is asked: what are the advantages of [this method of mining]? You should be able to go bit by bit like that [gestures with hand as if reading cards]. Are you going to harm the fish [with tailings]? You should be able to answer this.

While the degree of latitude people have depends greatly on their situation, executives do not see themselves as the pawns of distant and powerful companies. Just as they pass official stories down to Port Moresby, they also work with companies to develop appropriate responses to events or crises that occur in the country. ‘The bulk of the questions and answers and issues, trying to develop positions on issues, is actually done, for example, from the Port Moresby office’, said one executive. ‘So the guys from [global headquarters] depend heavily on what we provide, and that forms the basis for [a] global response’. It is their knowledge of the local scene and their ability to read the situation ‘on the ground’ directly that makes executives valuable and efficacious.
For some operations, quarterly calls or annual visits to corporate headquarters allow executives to compare notes with their peers on other projects and in other countries. The occasional visit of corporate or regional heads, on the other hand, is an infrequent opportunity to show off — and justify — local operations. It is also a moment when personal connections come to the fore. As one man put it,

Port Moresby is a small town, so it really helps. I mean, it’s amazing that when we have important visitors, Oh, [from] global or [regional headquarters] come, we are able to organise a meeting or dinner with different ministers or even sometimes an appointment with the PM or the police commissioner, key figures like that. In other countries I don’t think it can happen like that. So we are very fortunate to be one of those countries where, because it’s small enough and people know each other, you are able to build up those networks and relationships and things can happen, well beyond how they could happen in the other jurisdictions.

To outsiders, the idea of industry executives holding private meetings with politicians often evokes images of corrupt elites making decisions behind closed, sinister doors. In fact, many of the people I interviewed disliked dealing with politicians, who they viewed as corrupt, unreliable opportunists acting in their own interests rather than that of their constituents. ‘Parliament’, as one man said, ‘is a fucking joke’. Executives reported that mining and petroleum were so central to the country that politicians required no real lobbying — they already agreed in principle to support the industry. Rather, the key issue for them was implementation. As one man said

It’s an interesting setup, Papua New Guinea, where you can get hold of members of parliament quite easy, a lot easier than you can anywhere else in the world, I would imagine. The trouble is that the minister just dictates policy, he doesn’t really do any of the work. So the issue you’ve got then is getting through to the public servants.

Meetings with politicians were mainly, my interviewees told me, about ‘the big picture’, and sometimes even to remind the politicians what was legal and what was not.

I deal with politicians. And its mainly on the basis of giving them information and clarifying what the rules are in terms of for us trying to access permits […] You’ve got to get to know them and you’ve got to talk to them. But my role has always been making sure that they see the big picture for PNG’s future in the investment, and then in the details I deal mainly with public servants.

For the handful of the most influential executives in Port Moresby, this ‘seeing the big picture’ was the key to their position in the community. As the people responsible for creating a ‘panorama’ in Latour’s sense, the job of seeing the ‘big picture of PNG’s future’ involves gauging, like Marcus’s elites, what was the case for the broader world in which they were centrally placed. The role of executives was thus a curious one of ‘soft power’ — they did not directly make decisions about operations, but had tremendous
influence as the people who were responsible for producing 'panoramas': authoritative narratives describing what, at a national level, was going on with the mining industry in Papua New Guinea.

**Personal Backgrounds**

Portrayals of large-scale mining and petroleum projects are often negative, and some readers may find my depiction of mining executives as fundamentally more ethical, responsible and professional than public servants and politicians questionable. But this is in fact how executives see themselves. In fact, there is a strong sense among the people I interviewed that the larger and more globalised the company one belonged to, the more likely it was that one represented standards of rational, ethical behaviour, largely because of the increased scrutiny that international companies face. 'Smaller companies have nothing major to lose if in the event [bribery] becomes public', said one man, 'whereas for [my major developer], just imagine the public perception if something like this came up. So yes, it's [i.e. corruption] happening. But we won't go [there]'. One interviewee contrasted the fishing and forestry sectors, where 'companies just come and pay the bloody minister', to mining and petroleum: 'It sounds self-serving', he said, 'but it's only a certain sector of the business community that is the only bulwark against corruption'. Indeed, he argued that 'some of the best people we've got weren't head-hunted, they got kicked out of government because they refused to do the dirty deeds of certain politicians'.

Thus while all the executives I interviewed were, as one interviewee put it, interested in 'driving my own personal wealth to grow' most also saw their jobs as having a positive moral charge.

There is a deep biographical dimension to this moral charge. Most of the senior executives in Papua New Guinea came of age during the country's independence period, and were among the first generation to attend high school and college. Their sense of themselves, the nation and their place within it was shaped by these experiences. R.E. Young has described how the first wave of educated Papua New Guineans were influenced by Australian colonial administrators, who believed in 'the interchangeability and objectivity of professionals and their knowledge, a belief in the efficacy of the knowledge concerned for the achievement of societally important tasks, and a belief in the certification of competence through qualifications' (Young 1978:278). The educated elite were, unlike some newly independent African countries, seen not as similar to or aligned with colonial powers, but as a group whose job was to lead Papua New Guinea forward. The result was 'an elitist ideology based upon an acceptance of the efficacy of western knowledge for the overriding goals of nation-building' (Young 1978:233).

Wayne Fife has also pointed out the legacy of widespread missionary schooling in the country, which created continuity between the 'older educational goals of mission-
ary schooling for literate salvation in the Bible and what I regard as the new morality of salvation' (1995:133). As a result, he writes, Papua New Guineans ‘are often striving to fulfil their conceptions of developing modernity, [in which] the moral dimension of discourse becomes the bureaucratically defined social universe’ (Fife 1995:131). While there are important differences within Port Moresby’s small world, then, one can say that corporate elites often feel a sense of duty to use their education for their country’s betterment, even if the result is, as Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (1999:33) point out, the ontologisation of inequality.

Papua New Guinea’s current resource boom is happening at a time in which these long-standing ideals are being deployed on a neoliberal playing field in which dissatisfaction with the government is widespread. While some respondents were proud of how far Papua New Guinea had come since independence, most believed that, as one expatriate told me, ‘the dreams of the independence period have gone out the window’. A senior executive who remembered independence had similar opinions, citing in particular the lack of management skills amongst newly nationalised managers:

Papua New Guineans wanted to run their own country, they thought this was how we do it, and hence started to slowly remove expatriates from key positions, but still had a demand to deliver to the big picture. I think what happened was that we lost the skills and the implementation agencies, so that while we had the big picture, we couldn’t deliver against it.

Lack of capacity in the public services was thus more than just an impediment to business in Papua New Guinea: it reflected the failure of the country to achieve its aspirations of a social-democratic government in which a technocratic elite helped grassroots Papua New Guineans develop in the name of national solidarity. In such a situation, mining and petroleum are seen not as opposed to the national interest but, ironically, as the proper means to realise its ambitions, and privatisation is the solution to the nation’s problems. One younger businessman spoke of ‘chopping off’ the hand of the government as a way to increase the quality of public services quickly:

We still have Telikom you know, a big monopoly in telecommunications. If there were some reforms and then let’s say the government was chopped off, that’s it – it’s going to just come out like that. It won’t take long. It won’t take ten years. Nasfund, it took it less than about three years just to revive. PNG Power, like, you know, electricity – there’s always blackouts. It just needs reform to just chop out the government hand and then that’s it.

Another respondent with extensive experience in government also argued for an extremely minimal – even minuscule – role for government in the country. ‘You can’t continue to kid yourself that we can do it ourselves without relying on others’, he said.

Respondent (R): You should create partnership with others who can do things more effectively than the government machinery. So there’s a lot of thinking that they’re [the government] living in the past. They are not caught up with the experience every-
where in the world. The administration now has to narrow its focus to directing the traffic and allowing others to do it.

Alex Golub (AG): So the role for the government should be to direct traffic, I think you said?
R: Yeah, I mean you know just policy direction, looking for partners who can do it, contracting out, and your job is just to monitor what's been done.
AG: Including things like infrastructure and health and education?
R: Absolutely. Absolutely. The government should limit its role to those areas which nobody else can do. The policy planning, monitoring, that's the role for government. And all other things that can be done better by somebody else, give it out.

On this account the government should contract out roads, schools and hospitals to private contractors – an image directly opposed to the social-democratic expectations of independence-era PNG. For executives in the mining and petroleum industries, then, neoliberal reforms represent the fulfilment of national aspirations for development, aspirations best achieved without the state. Independence goals are pursued with neoliberal means, and working for international mining and petroleum companies is part of a patriotic duty to develop the country.

**Conclusion: Traction**

In her 2006 work, Tsing seems ambivalent about friction. At times she recognises that contact between global and local realities is an adhesive force which 'gives grip to universal aspirations' (2005:1; italics in the original) and is 'required to keep global power in motion' (2005:6). Overall, however, her ethnographic strategy is a defamiliarising one which seeks to demonstrate that globalisation is not as inevitable as it seems by revealing moments of friction when global projects become problematic. In this article, I have argued that a point of view within global capitalism can help highlight the other side of friction: To those localising global projects, it is no surprise that globalisation entails friction – indeed, all of their time is spent resisting this force. Large-scale mining and petroleum projects are complex global systems with timelines that stretch into decades, unforgivingly complex logistical requirements, tremendous amounts of capital investment, and chains of authority that stretch from remote project sites to metropolitan corporate headquarters. Only those who are naively unfamiliar with the infrastructures underpinning their lives would find this fact surprising. Indeed, the fact that global action is always achieved locally makes it amenable to study – thus anthropology, like globalisation itself, need not be random or haphazard.

In particular, I have argued that elite life in Port Moresby exhibits a dynamic I have called 'traction'. Elites reduce the potential friction created by the adhesion of global capital to the country by lubricating, as it were, these companies with their particularity. Although they are required by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state and
employed to insist that that apparatus conforms to its own administrative logics, executives' ability to create panoramas of globalisation in Papua New Guinea does not reside in the way globalisation flattens them out or standardises them to conform to it – their lives, unlike the lives of factory workers or standards of measurement, are not metricised by globalisation. The biographies of individual executives have a surplus particularity that exceeds the generalised structural forces that produce them. The result of this excess particularity is, however, not a poor fit between global forces and their local instantiations which results in friction. Rather, it is exactly these personal characteristics which allow executives to be successful in reducing the friction between the nodes in the network that comprise mining and petroleum projects. The fact that one executive is a minister's brother, another the former teacher of an undersecretary for the environment, is what gives them the ability to ward off irregularities and contingencies which might drag the company down. In doing so, they lubricate the pathways through which transnational capital passes and connect off-shore offices, exploration camps and full-scale operations, enabling distant forces to gain traction in Port Moresby. It is worth exploring whether this phenomenon of 'traction' is applicable only to Papua New Guinea or may be a more generalisable phenomenon useful in broader comparative studies of globalisation.

Finally, this study speaks to the methodology and ethics of elite field research. I believe the perspective and data gathered here could only have come from interviews and fieldwork with elites – something which some authors would consider 'co-optation'. At the same time, this presentation of elite views should not be read as an endorsement of, or collaboration with, mining and petroleum executives. My principle of positioning the anthropologist as an 'ombudsman' may predate contemporary discourses of globalisation, but its utility lies in developing the concept of traction. Indeed, it may indicate that older notions of prudence, disinterestedness and impartiality may yet be vital for ethically challenging fieldwork.

This study does have limitations which circumscribe the force of its conclusions. Due to the difficulty of studying elites, little actual fieldwork was carried out shadowing executives in their daily tasks. Thus, although I have described the sort of work executives have been hired to do, I cannot provide concrete ethnographic data on which offices executives visited when, which specific e-mails they sent, and so on: that is, the actual specific tasks they have been hired to fulfil. This article has also consciously sought merely to describe, rather than evaluate, business men's self-understandings. As a result, I do not take a stance on whether the political economy of resource development in Papua New Guinea is a good thing, a bad thing, or even has the structure which these businessmen claim it has. My goal here has been mainly to elucidate their self-understanding and personal life worlds – to perform, in other words, a preliminary prosopography of Papua New Guinean elites. Much work remains to be done on Port Moresby's small world.
In conclusion, there is surely something ironic about the situation of a contemporary anthropology which sees the world as simultaneously more regimented and more contingent than ever before. The approach developed here suggests that such a picture is not entirely paradoxical, and that globalisation can be both lubricated by local particularity as well as dragged down by it. Attending to both sides of this notion of friction might lead us to a more powerful cultural tribology.

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