

Wars of Dependence: Contested Histories Among Tolai People of Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I look at the ways in which a number of forms of providing for a livelihood have increased in importance in the region in this period and explore the ways in which they have created the possibility for new ascriptions of dependence and independence. I explore these issues with particular reference to Tolai people of Papua New Guinea's East New Britain province, where the wealth of ethnographic and archival material going back many decades provides the possibility for a particularly rich and deep historical perspective. Wage labour has increased in importance for many communities in the past few decades. Similarly, resource extraction and cash-cropping have also expanded in scale and importance in many parts of the region in recent decades. I argue that shifting evaluations of dependence come in and out of vision in relationship to these trends and these shifting evaluations are themselves central components of the construction of new hierarchies and relations of dependence.

Keywords: dependence, Tolai, East New Britain, wage labour, cash cropping.

From the perspective of dependency theory, Oceanic countries are ‘inadequately compensated’ for economic developments that have occurred since the colonial era, and are, ‘thereby sentenced to conditions of continuing poverty’ (Lea 2000:106; see also Teaiwa 2014; see also Lea 2000:109–15 for a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of this analysis). These developments also intensify the perception of new forms of impersonal dependence among many residents of the region. Among Tolai people in East New Britain province, there has been a long history of controversy on these issues. The Tolai occupy an unusual position in PNG’s history (see *e.g.* Epstein 1968; Epstein 1969; Martin 2013; Neumann 1992; Salisbury 1970). The Tolai have long been viewed as something of an indigenous elite, both by themselves and by outsiders, expatriate and fellow Papua New Guinean alike. This is to a large degree the result of their particular relationship to local, national and global markets, as I shall explore in the following sections of this paper. Although access to customary land is a common feature of nearly all indigenous Papua New Guinean groups, the particular proximity of Tolai customary land to the major port of Rabaul made it possible for many Tolai to begin to make significant sums of money from cash-crops from the late 19th century onwards, generations before the first coffee boom in the Highlands of PNG in the 1970s, the vanilla boom in the Sepik of the early 2000s, or the spread of oil palm production in recent years. In addition, the Tolai were among the first groups in New Guinea to receive Christian missionaries and subsequently formal Western-style education.

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As a consequence of this and their proximity to the major business and administrative centre of Rabaul, many Tolai men who were interested in wage labour were able to secure reasonably well paid white-collar work in the nearby town. For this reason and also because of the degree of independence allowed by their income from cash cropping, many Tolai tended to avoid the most common form of wage labour available to men in the colonial era, namely indentured labour away from their home villages on expatriate owned plantations. This work was looked down upon as poorly paid and unskilled, and up until recent years there has been a tendency for many Tolai to view other Papua New Guineans as less developed and more 'bush' than themselves in no small part because of their involvement in this kind of labour.

Such tendencies were even more strongly noticeable in the Tolai villages closest to Rabaul Town, such as Matupit, where the Manchester anthropologist Epstein conducted fieldwork in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ By the time of Epstein's work, the village's day-to-day life was already deeply integrated with that of the town, with large numbers of young men working as clerks. Matupit provides an interesting example that blurs the conventional boundary between village and town, being a customary village that came into the orbit of Rabaul Town. At times, Epstein (1969:39) describes Matupit as having, 'many of the features of a peri-urban settlement'. It is not surprising that a village in Matupit's unique position came to occupy a unique position in Papua New Guinea's move towards political independence in the 1960s and 1970s. The first recorded public call for political independence was made by a Matupit resident, Epineri Titimur, during a United Nations visit in the early 1960s. One of the most significant organisations attempting to hasten Australia's departure from New Guinea was the *Mataungan Association*, which was formed at Matupit in the early 1970s and two of its most significant leaders, John Kaputin and Damien Kereku, came from the village.² Equally significant is the fact that the *Mataungan Association* never became a nationwide organisation but was almost totally limited in its support to Tolai residents in East New Britain. This reflected the suspicion of other groups that Tolai wanted to use the Association's strength as a means of imposing their will on other, less organised, local groups (for example for the purposes of land grabbing) as much as they wanted to use it to assert their rights against the Australian colonial government. It also perhaps reflected the peculiarly strong sense of group consciousness developed by Tolai due to their unique position in the colonial era and their scepticism about being forced to cohabit in the newly formed nation state of Papua New Guinea with other groups that they viewed as backward and undeveloped. In particular, many Tolai had reservations about the alleged levels of aggression and violence that they viewed as typical of the residents of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Although on occasion Mataungan leaders made statements that suggested they were interested in building a pan-Territory nationalism (see *e.g.* Epstein 2009:68), on the whole they were largely concerned with local autonomy (see Grosart 1982). Many local factors inspired the growth of the Association among Tolai, including the establishment of 'multi-racial councils' in the 1960s as part of a move towards self-governance. Many Tolai feared that this would cement a shift in power from Tolai towards expatriates and other ethnic groups in the area. This suspicion was given added force by the way in which the new multi-racial councils were given control of the assets of the co-operative 'Tolai Cocoa Project', which had been established in order to promote cash-cropping of cocoa in predominantly inland Tolai villages in the 1950s (see RW 1971:296).

A generation later, Tolai politicians were at the forefront of attempts to declare independence for the 'Islands' region of PNG from the nation state in the early 1990s and it is again no surprise that the plans to raise the flag of a new nation were made at Matupit in September of 1994. The plans were only scuppered by the volcanic eruption of that month

that devastated the town of Rabaul and many surrounding villages, including Matupit. The story of 'dependence' and 'independence' at Matupit is not only a story of the politics of national or regional independence. It is also a story of challenges to established village-level relations of dependence. In particular, it involved threats to the authority of the village 'Big Men', whose political authority across Melanesia has long been described as the outcome of their creation of relations of 'dependence' among their followers, particularly *via* the mechanism of 'gift-debts' created through the Big Man's sponsorship of lifecycle events such as bridewealth payments. Before outlining the ways in which entanglements with colonial and global economic forces, such as the growth of a market in skilled wage labour, undermined the big men's power, it would be wise to sound a note of caution about the implication that can be drawn from such a depiction that the big men's authority was a kind of pure and autonomous Melanesian customary form of dependence, separate from those externally introduced economic forces that were about to challenge and alter it. Epstein (1969:18) describes how early contact with European settlers led to a greater 'concentration of power in the hands of the "big men"', not least through their ability to monopolise the acquisition of firearms gained in exchange for coconuts that were then processed by European traders and shipped abroad as copra. This picture is backed up in contemporary reports, such as that of William Wawn, a recruiter for indentured labour for plantations, who provides an account of a visit to Matupit and Rabaul in 1883. In this, he meets a 'chief' from Matupit, 'Torlogga' at a copra trading station run by a German trader, Mr Hershheim, who trades among other items in exchange for coconuts, Snider rifle cartridges (Wawn 1973 [1893]:289). A similar story is described at other coastal Tolai villages by Salisbury (1963:334) who describes the situation at the nearby Tolai village of Nodup where:

... as early as 1883 the *ngala*³ of other Nodup settlements had obtained enough rifles to equip every man of their groups. Goods, which represented a source of power, were overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the *ngala*. Not merely did these own weapons obtained from traders, their monopoly of trade goods enabled them to drain the inland people's supplies of shell money and to become rich in the native tokens of power.⁴ But they were dependent on Europeans, and the relationship was one of mutual interdependence as long as Europeans did not settle on the coast and trade further inland.

The result of all this was that, as Epstein (1969:19) reports, '[t]he big men in these parts were dependent for their... power and wealth upon the traders.' The sometimes hidden sometimes open assertions of independence from the big men that Epstein describes as a feature of life at Matupit throughout much of the mid-20th century are best not seen simply as the effects of the intrusion of external economic forces into an autochthonous system of power. Instead, they might better be seen as a stage in the process by which such power relationships and the dependencies that they were built out of were themselves in part constituted through the negotiation of other networks of dependence, such as the growing dependence of the big men upon Europeans and traders for their monopoly of firepower and trade wealth.

The story of the increasing emergence of moves towards political independence and the story of the increasing assertion of personal independence on the part of young men are not separate stories but are fundamentally best seen as different aspects of the same wider set of social developments. The development of the *Mataungan Association* in the early 1970s, for example, can only be understood in the context of a longer history of challenges to customary authority and the increasing assertion of independent political activity on the

part of young men, who were empowered by their economic independence. Epstein showed a keen degree of interest in such processes, as evidenced by his work co-editing a volume entitled *The Politics of Dependence: Papua New Guinea 1968*, which explored emerging political tensions in the territory as it moved towards independence. His own contribution to the collection (also co-authored) explores in more detail the ways in which the growing personal independence of many young men was reflected in an increasing rebellion against political leaders who were seen to be too accommodating to the colonial authorities.

Epstein's 1969 monograph *Matupit: Land, Politics and Change among the Tolai of New Guinea* provides a historic and ethnographic account of some of the tendencies underpinning these developments. He describes a series of movements that emerged from the 1930s onwards. He describes these movements as being headed by young men who were 'workers' in town and argues that these were developments that 'the "big men" would inevitably view as a deliberate slight, if not a challenge to their authority' (Epstein 1969:307). Epstein's account (1969:307–8) draws attention to the significance of the wage labour status of the successive generations of young men who both rejected dependence on customary authority in the village and also increasingly asserted political independence of the colonial authorities based in town. The post-war movements had a tendency toward a wider political set of aims than the more village-focussed partial challenges to customary authority that characterised the movements of the 1930s, a development that Epstein (1969:308) puts down to the ways in which improved education meant that many more Matupi were now 'employed in more responsible positions than in the past and some earn relatively high wages.'

SHIFTING INTERDEPENDENCIES

This situation had some parallels but also some significant differences with the ways in which indentured labour altered village-level interdependencies, in particular the dependencies cultivated by big men in the creation of indebted followers in other parts of Papua and New Guinea. There is a long history of descriptions of the ways in which indentured wage labour challenged established patterns of intergenerational interdependence in village life and encouraged a more independent attitude among young men who engaged in indentured wage labour. The indentured labour system neatly illustrates some of the ambiguities surrounding wage labour regarding the maintenance of (in)dependence in social relations. The indentured labour was often described as partly depending upon the customary relations of dependence and village-level authority described above in order to operate (e.g. Good and Fitzpatrick 1979:127; see also Good 1979:105; Ploeg 1985:255). Customary leaders are described as putting pressure on young men to sign up when they were reluctant, and as helping to enforce labour contracts on young men who knew they would evoke the displeasure of leaders upon whom they were socially dependent back home if they left early. This meant that traditional customary authority 'further explains the worker's dependence and isolation and why he served out his contract' (*ibid*). Lest we think that this is a purely Melanesian phenomenon, Young and Wilmott (1957) describe how factory labour in the East End of London was recruited in the 1950s largely *via* kinship networks, in the expectation that an older relative who vouched for a younger male relative would feel responsible for ensuring that he accepted appropriate labour discipline at work (for more detail see Martin 2018a:93). Yet, while dependence on customary leaders is described as enabling the peculiarly intense form of dependence on an employer that characterised indentured plantation labour, these young men's independent access to wealth was simultaneously often described as undermining the kind of control that big men traditionally exercised over the

young through their sponsorship of necessary presentations such as bridewealth payments. To take one example, Todd (1934:94), in the course of a 'report' on South West New Britain, initially describes the village leader's role in organising such payments in conventional and familiar terms: 'the headman tends to arrange the marriages of his junior kin... He will in the case of a boy assist him and his father in providing the bridewealth ...'.

Todd goes on to describe however, how this sponsorship of marriage and the social control and dependence that it implied was already under threat:

Wealth, per se, holds a definite and important place in this society, and a man of rank with little wealth cannot exert his influence to any great degree. On the other hand there exist, particularly to-day as a result of the acquisition of money earned by indentured labourers, a class of newly-rich who are often a source of considerable irritation to the headman and those of his followers who have not been affected in this way by white contact (1934:95).

Indentured labour is described as destabilising traditional leadership, both because it provides an independent source of wealth to young men who are no longer dependent on elders, and also because for as long as they are away from home pursuing wage labour, the young men are no longer a source of support and labour for those elders in the village. As Margaret Mead (1947:268) reported for the Mountain Arapesh of New Guinea:

... enough young men are away at work to have made a considerable difference in the social scene had they been present; their principle contribution was to complicate the whole marriage problem.

Although Mead is clear that these changes did not lead to a total revolution in village life, due to the 'intermittent' nature of such wage labour, she remained convinced that such trips ultimately served to 'undermine... traditional authority', (1947:269). Otto (1992:429) reports for the post-war years at Manus that 'indentured labour also affected the power relation between young and old men. The latter traditionally provided the bridewealth for the younger relatives who thus became heavily indebted and dependent'.

Reports of these kinds of developments have continued, with both the wages brought back by workers who leave their home villages for long periods and the remittances they send back home (*e.g.* Dalsgaard 2013:284) being presented as a means by which the dependencies that were traditionally cultivated by village level leaders are weakened.

As mentioned, Epstein also describes the ways in which young men at Matupit who were engaged in wage labour increasingly asserted their independence from village elders and big men. Despite this similarity with the situation prevailing in villages who sent young men out to plantations for indentured labour, there were significant differences.

Perhaps most important, as the young men at Matupit commuted daily to Rabaul for their skilled or clerical labour, they were still involved in village politics on a daily basis, in particular the intense disputes over control of customary land that are the centre piece of Epstein's monograph. These village-level political disputes between clans inevitably took the shape of an intergenerational battle between older men who tended to be more conciliatory to the colonial regime and younger men with a more radical outlook. The reason for this is that a key element of the increasing land shortage that Matupit was facing at the time of Epstein's fieldwork was the willingness of village elders to make 'easy money' (1969:53) by selling customary land to the colonial authorities who needed to expand Rabaul Town throughout the twentieth century. This was opposed by younger men who saw their own future interests threatened by these transactions; these were young men whose schooling

and wages gave them a degree of independence from customary elders. As Epstein (1969:56) observes:

The major cleavage here was between those who exercised rights of control over the land, and those who were in various ways dependent upon these 'land authorities' for the means of cultivation; but what is striking is that the most prominent spokesmen in the debates were frequently younger and more educated people who were in employment in Rabaul.

Customary land remained important for the young men as it was continued access to it for cash-cropping that enabled them to maintain a more independent attitude to wage labour and to their employers. Although in Western political discourse wage labour has often been posited as one of the major potential foundations of personal independence and self-sufficiency, we are aware that it can be seen in other ways, as idioms such as 'wage slavery' indicate. I would argue a number of structural factors in colonial New Guinea problematised the development of an association between wage labour and individual independence that developed in England in the early 19th century. The plantation economy of the colonial era meant that the indentured worker 'was dependent on the employer for the basics of life, and only participated in the wider economy through the employer and his trade store' (Good and Fitzpatrick 1979:125; see also Mitchell 2007:111). In Tolai villages, such as Matupit, cash-cropping on their own customary land has been common since the late 19th century. This source of independent wealth made them dismissive of unskilled manual labour on plantations and they tended to look down upon those from other parts of New Guinea who engaged in such activities (Epstein 2009[1978]:48–50; Martin 2013:11).⁵

Fitzpatrick (1980:86) describes how in much of colonial New Guinea, plantation owners actively opposed native attempts to establish cash-cropping on their own customary land for fear that it would damage their potential supply of labour. Salisbury (1963:22) describes how this situation seems to have distinguished coastal Tolai from other groups in New Guinea from a very early date, mentioning how labour recruiters found 'a coastal people generally uninterested in work abroad.' This picture is backed up by contemporary accounts, such as Parkinson (1887:27, cited in Salisbury 1963:339), who reports that whereas recruitment of indentured labour from nearby New Ireland was comparatively easy, in the Tolai area it was almost non-existent. Although Tolai were not yet growing coconuts specifically for the purpose of cash cropping, Salisbury describes a situation in which they already had access to a ready surplus of coconuts for trading, which seems in part to explain this relative reluctance. This meant that the coastal Tolai village's position improved rapidly in relation to their inland fellows, as within a short period of time the entire surplus of coconuts from the entire Tolai area made its way to the coast, where the coastal Tolai were able to take advantage of their proximity to the harbour to act as middlemen, 'thus enriching the coastals with a minimum of work on their part' (Salisbury 1963:333). It is for this reason that, 'traders but not [labour] recruiters... were welcomed' (1963:334). The traders themselves made active attempts to discourage the growth of a market in indentured labour among coastal Tolai for these reasons as well (see Wawn 1973[1893]:289, 294).

The result of this was that Tolai tended to engage in wage labour on their own terms, not only looking down on plantation labour, but also having a comparatively 'free' (Epstein 1969:30) attitude toward urban labour, which caused expatriate employers to view them with suspicion due to their perceived 'unreliability' compared to other native groups:

The fact was, as the Rabaul Times once (25.8.1936) somewhat ruefully acknowledged, that loss of or dismissal from employment held no terrors for the Tolai

because every one was a landed proprietor ... Continuing to live in their own hamlets and settlements, and growing increasingly prosperous from the produce of the soil, they were able to retain a considerable measure of their economic and social independence.⁶

One anecdote reported by Epstein sums up the situation with regard to wage labour among Matupi at this period:

... in the main, the Matupi attitude towards casual unskilled work is one of aggressive independence, well illustrated in the following incident. The main street of Rabaul was being relaid, and the young man just mentioned had secured a sub-contract to provide labour to cut down and remove the roots of the mango trees that lined the avenue. The Matupi understood they were to receive £1 apiece per day for the work. On the first day, a Sunday, about thirty men turned up for work and at the end each received £1. They worked for a further two days, but when they received their money on Tuesday evening, they discovered that it amounted to only £1 apiece for the two days. It is likely that the Matupi had not appreciated that they were being paid for their work on Sunday at double rates. But whatever the source of the misunderstanding, they made it plain that they regarded 10s. a day as inadequate payment for the work, and they promptly told the European contractor not to send his lorry down to the village again.

The difference from the situation, described by Good and Fitzpatrick (1979) as typical for indentured labourers, of severe dependence on their employer could not be clearer. More generally, according to Fitzpatrick (1980), plantation owners in colonial New Guinea actively opposed native attempts to establish cash-cropping on their own customary land for fear that it would damage their potential supply of labour. The situation at Matupit also differs from most other descriptions of urban wage labour in the ethnographic record, as the Matupis' relatively high levels of skills and their access to customary land gives them a degree of independence from wage labour that is unusual.

THE MARKET

Male-dominated formal wage labour was not the only way in which the Matupis' proximity to town entangled them in new forms of economic exchange. Matupit women made up a large share of the traders at the famous town market and a steady stream of copra grown and produced by Matupi on their own customary land left for overseas from the town's port throughout most of the twentieth century. Both genders at Matupit therefore engaged with and became increasingly dependent on 'the market', but often in markedly different ways; for young men it was the labour market of expatriate run businesses or government services, for women it was the sale of produce at the town market place.⁷ The growth of markets is often associated with the growth of independent freedom in much liberal thought, the outcome of an engagement with markets is not pre-ordained. As anthropologists have long argued, physical marketplaces do not always run purely according to the market principles laid out in economics text books (*e.g.* Geertz 1978; Ho 2009). Epstein (1968:145) who, along with Richard Salisbury, conducted a study of Tolai women traders at the Rabaul market in the early 1960s strongly argued that the women did not act predominantly with a view to 'economic gain', but instead used the market as a means to cement enduring social relations amongst themselves. For Epstein, the ways in which the marketplace becomes the

site for the extension of non-market relationships is fundamentally linked to the non-emergence of the kind of *dependence* on the market that she argues might be found in other parts of the world:

This lack of competitive spirit and absence of 'sales drive' may be explained by a number of different but interdependent factors. Most important was the fact that... none of the vendors was dependent for her livelihood on her income from trading. Moreover, as we have seen, Tolai, in particular those coming from the interior (who supplied most fruit and vegetables to the market), were still living by subsistence production and their cash requirements were limited. There was thus not the urgency or incentive for sellers to maximise their gains by underbidding their neighbours. Market trade was regarded as a welcome addition to cash or *tambu*⁸ wealth rather than as a necessary means to earning a living. (Epstein 1968:143)

In Epstein's account, those who are not dependent on the market for buying essential goods or selling the commodities needed to buy them are under no compulsion to treat the market as a market, but can instead treat it primarily as a means by which other kinds of social relationships are reproduced and extended. As with Epstein's predominantly young male workers from Matupit, so Epstein's female market traders are described as not being dependent upon the market exchanges that they enter into. Whereas for the Matupi male wage labourers this lack of dependence upon the labour market is described as weakening conventional relations of dependence in the village (particularly the dependence of young men upon older big men), for the female market traders it is this lack of dependence upon market trading that is described as being the reason that they transform the market into a place where traditional interdependencies are recreated and extended.

Although most Tolai women were not dependent on the market for a living, some Tolai villagers were becoming dependent on the market in other ways. Epstein concentrated predominantly on women from inland Tolai villages, such as Rاپitok, that were less integrated into the urban economy on a day-to-day basis than coastal peri-urban villages such as Matupit, studied by her husband Epstein. The increasing land shortage in villages such as Matupit meant that even in the early 1960s, many people in these villages did not have the access to garden-grown food for their own consumption, which those at villages such as Rاپitok might take for granted. Hence, the lack of dependence on the market that Epstein could describe for Rاپitok women was not so clear-cut at Matupit. A quarter of a century later, the situation seemed to have changed significantly. In the late 1980s, Jacob Simet, himself a resident of Matupit conducted fieldwork on the village and reported that:

The shortage of land makes it difficult for the Matupit to maintain some aspects of their traditional life. For instance, much of their diet today consists of imported foods, such as rice, bread, biscuits, tinned-meat, tinned-fish. For more traditional foods such as bananas, taro and *aibika* (spinach), the Matupit have to depend very heavily on the town market ... The Matupit are very much tied to the town for their livelihood. They engage in village-based economic activities such as fishing, collecting megapode eggs, and preparing food for sale in town. The fish, the eggs and the food, all have to be sold in town for money. (Simet 1991:16-7)

The extent to which the Matupit had to 'depend' upon the market (whether conceived of as a physical space or as an economic abstraction) was unusual in Papua New Guinea at the time of writing thirty years ago. Today, this degree of dependence is more common, as urban

and peri-urban populations boom and wider numbers of the rural population become integrated into the production of globally circulated cash-crops (such as oil palm) and become increasingly dependent upon the money that they yield. As with other forms of relational entanglement, whether that entanglement is characterized as 'dependence' and whether or not it is viewed in a positive or negative light is subject to ambiguous or conflicting evaluations. The market might be viewed as a liberation from an oppressive dependence upon kin and customary authority. Conversely, an over-reliance on the market for money and staple products can be viewed as an unhealthy dependence upon impersonal forces beyond customary or reciprocal control. And the conventional opposition between market and custom is itself complicated by the different kinds of phenomena that can be described under the rubric of 'the market'.

Martin (2018b) conducted fieldwork with members of the Matupit community in the early 2000s, about forty years after Epstein and 15 years after Simet. Many were by now living at a resettlement camp at Sikut in the rainforest interior of New Britain, following a volcanic eruption in 1994. Those who had made the transition to Sikut often contrasted their new lives with the lives they had left behind. They argued that being dependent on the market, as they had been before, was harder than their new lives at Sikut, where they could be self-sufficient in terms of food and not be at the mercy of fluctuating prices for the goods such as copra that they sold on the global market and the imported foods that they bought in Rabaul's supermarkets. This was not understood simply as a return to a traditional state of affairs prior to the emergence of dependence upon the market, described by Simet in the early 1990s. In many regards the opposite was the case. Land at Sikut had been allocated by the Provincial Government on an individual rather than customary basis. The intention was to discourage the emergence of customary interdependencies that were held to be a disincentive to economic development, or as one of the minority opposed to this decision argued, a continuation of the previous Australian colonial authorities' attempts to, 'turn us into white men' (see also Martin 2013:72). The majority of Sikut residents however were in favour of this move and stated that Sikut land was better *because* it was not customary. And it was not only the case that the move away from the town was seen as a move away from custom in many regards. It was integration with the town and its markets that was seen as the factor that tied those who had stayed behind most firmly into the most negatively evaluated types of customary relationships. Those who had made the move to the rainforest viewed themselves as progressive and energetic pioneers and those who had stayed behind as lacking in initiative. Paradoxically it was their inability to break free of their dependence on market produce that tied them into a continued dependence on using customary relationships to demand support and assistance from their more productive kin. Far from the market being the route to escape dependence on backward custom, from the Sikut perspective it was dependence on the town market that intensified their cousins' inability to break free of such traditional dependencies. By breaking free of dependence on the town's market places, the Sikut pioneers positioned themselves as being able to establish themselves as more independent actors able to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them through producing cash crops for the global market.⁹

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

Claims to independence and ascriptions of dependence are inherently tied in with imbalances of socio-economic power. Martin's work with Tolai people in East New Britain focuses on two sides of this equation. First, the emerging local elite seeks to stress their independence of customary or reciprocal obligation in certain contexts. This is posited as a

moral virtue. They need the strength to resist claims made on their independence by their poorer kin in order to demonstrate the ability to govern rationally or run businesses efficiently. In this regard, Martin (2007:285–6) argues for their claims to independence as the basis for modern rational subjectivity akin to the kinds of claims documented by Macpherson (1962) as the basis for ‘Possessive Individualism’. Others at Matupit might also make claims for independence from customary authority or obligation, such as young women going to nightclubs who argue ‘it’s my life, not the clan’s’ (Martin:297). Such claims are echoed in other examples across the region, such as the young men who flee the village for the town because there are no big men in town and so ‘you are free to walk about; you are the master of yourself’ (Gewertz and Errington 1991:108).

Despite similar claims to independence, there are two key differences between these kinds of claims and the previously mentioned claims of the ‘Big Shot’ members of the new elite. First, the young urban dwellers and nightclub frequenters are not normally in the habit of making the same claim to moral virtue or wider social benefit that Martin describes the Big Shots as making when their independent way of being is presented as making it possible for them to establish businesses that benefit the wider society or economy, for example. Secondly, while the young individualists often posit their claims to self-ownership on the basis of a rejection of traditional or customary modes of organisation (‘the clan’ or ‘big men’), the Big Shots often claim that they themselves are the contemporary instantiation of the Big Men of the past and the upholders of customary authority and obligation. This claim is often rejected by their grassroots relatives for whom the Big Shots’ declarations of independence from customary obligation in their professional lives renders their claim to customary authority in others illegitimate. If, as Sahlins argues, the big man’s authority was a hard won and constantly negotiated achievement, dependent upon continuously securing the support of his followers, then the claim of today’s Big Shots to have a political-economic authority that is independent of such negotiations renders their claims to be today’s Big Men suspect in the eyes of those that they claim independence from.

Interdependence between big men and their followers was described as being a two-way street, albeit that they occupied different positions in a web of enduring interdependencies. And just as the grassroots critique of the Big Shots is couched in terms of dependence so is the counter-critique going in the opposite direction. However, this critique takes a different tenor. Rather than being a criticism of illegitimate independence, the Big Shots increasingly argue that the grassroots are victims of a ‘culture’ (Martin 2007:288) that encourages illegitimate and one-way dependency. The increasing demands that they place on the new elite on the basis of kinship or reciprocal obligation are presented by the big shots as the abuse of custom rather than its extension. The expectation that they will be ‘spoon-fed’ (Martin 2020) is held to be the ‘sickness’ (Martin 2013:xx) that holds the country back and means that the poor do not ‘produce’ and stops them from improving their lot.¹⁰ Rather than the poor’s claims for assistance being seen as part of a web of interdependencies, they are seen as asking for everything while contributing nothing. In this respect, the contemporary situation in countries such as Papua New Guinea can be seen as a specifically Melanesian instantiation of a much wider trend towards the denigration of the poor for their ‘dependence’ that emerged in England in the 17th century (Macpherson 1962) and can currently be found in varying instantiations across the globe (Martin and Yanagisako 2020). The claim that ‘custom’ encourages dependence among the poor is an ambiguous one. On the one hand the poor’s dependence upon the emerging elite is considered an illegitimate demand for spoon-feeding that holds back economic development. On the other, the poor are expected to remain reliant on their kin in the absence of a welfare-state that would otherwise provide the safety net that they could depend upon in the absence of available wage labour or other economic opportunities. This dynamic is explored ethnographically for Tolai

people by Martin (2018a), but its emergence across the region was noted far earlier by Hau'ofa, who observes how the emerging elite 'tell the poor to preserve their traditions' (Hau'ofa 1987:349), whilst at the same time denigrating the poor for:

... being too culture bound to see things as they should be seen and act accordingly. If they could only be less traditional and less indolent, pull up their socks (as if they had any to begin with) and adopt the Protestant Work Ethic, they could easily raise their standards of living (1987:353–4).

The demand that the poor 'pull up their [own] socks' is a long-standing trope used by those who seek to deny that the poor could legitimately lay claim to the resources of the more fortunate. It stands as the complement to the claim that they currently demand to be 'spoon-fed.' It also provides another illustration of the point made by Ferguson (2013) for South Africa, that the idea of 'independence' is not a universal aspiration for each individual citizen of earth, but is often imposed upon those who need assistance as a disciplinary trope. The corollary of this demand is the claim that the emergence of an elite that rejects illegitimate claims to customary dependence on the part of the poor is a moral necessity that acts not only as an expression of self-interest but in the interests of the nation or the 'wider social good', (Martin 2007:293). In this regard, such discourses continue the concern of those from the former colonising powers who helped manage the transition to political independence in the 1970s and who were concerned about the challenges caused by the absence of an 'educated elite to enter into ... the administrative structure' (Davidson 1973:160). The concern of those preparing countries such as PNG for independence was the education and technical capacities of those locals who were to take their place. The locals who now largely occupy governing positions in industry and politics are more concerned with their ability to insulate themselves from claims made on the basis of a history of reciprocal interdependencies. These claims must now sometimes be denigrated as inappropriate demands to dependency if business and politics are to operate in an appropriate manner. In both cases there is the claim that there needs to be a class of people capable of governing with separate and superior capacities from their kin, whether that be the education that enables them to read policy documents or double-entry bookkeeping or whether it be the moral capacity to assert their independence when required in the interests not only of their immediate family but ultimately in the interest of the wider social good.

CONCLUSION

The history of Tolai people's entanglements with global political economic relations is one that brings shifting evaluations of dependence in and out of vision. In particular, Tolai at Matupit have had a relationship with markets of various kinds (the market in labour, the town market, global markets in cash crops) that problematises a simple characterisation of them as being made 'dependent' by colonial political economies. To the contrary, from the perspective of colonial authorities, the problem with the Matupi was their independence, enabled by their superior education and their access to global markets in cash cropping. It was this independence that made them unruly workers and rebellious political subjects in the eyes of expatriates. Today, new forms of political and economic inequality have emerged with a local Tolai political and business elite often viewing their own relatives with a degree of suspicion. From this perspective, however, it is dependency that is claimed to be the problem that afflicts the grassroots who are accused of expecting to be spoon-fed. In this regard, there is a contrast with the accusation of an unruly independence that the expatriate

elite threw at Tolai people in the colonial era. What remains constant is that ascriptions or accusations of dependence and independence continue to be a central part not only of how social relations are described but of how they are managed and maintained in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

NOTES

1. For this reason, historical accounts taken from coastal villages such as Matupit should not be taken as strictly representative of the Tolai region as a whole. Inland villages often displayed less of the kind of socio-economic changes described for coastal villages, as is made clear for example, in Epstein's (1968) account of the inland Tolai village of Rاپitok.
2. See also Maden (2019).
3. *Ngala* is the word for 'big' in the Tolai language, *Kuanua*. It is often used as a shorthand for the term *ngala na tutana*, which literally translates as 'big man'.
4. Tolai customary shell-wealth or '*tabu*' is used in most customary life-cycle events among Tolai people and has also long been used in commercial transactions as well. It was at the heart of traditional 'big man' leadership in Tolai villages, for example, being a way that an elder could bind younger men to his leadership, through the sponsorship of ceremonial prestations, such as bridewealth payments. In recent years, *tabu* has become increasingly convertible with state currency, leading to a situation in which there are growing fears that only the cash-rich can become *tabu*-rich, thereby excluding those without access to state currency from positions of customary or ceremonial leadership or that the meaning that *tabu* previously had in terms of cementing local relations of reciprocal interdependence is threatened (e.g. Epstein 1992; Martin 2006).
5. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper observes that some Tolai did engage in indentured labour in Samoa early in the colonial period. The presence of the labour recruiter Wawn at Matupit in the 1870s mentioned earlier clearly indicates this as well. However, it is notable that in Wawn's account, he is already describing a reluctance for Tolai from coastal village such as Matupit to sign up. This reviewer also suggests that the major reason why the Tolai were unwilling to engage in local plantation labour was that their access to customary land enabled them to provide the garden produce upon which indentured labourers from other regions were fed as opposed to their ability to use their customary land to produce copra for sale on the global markets themselves. This contradicts the argument of many other academic sources (see above). Even if it is true, it does not contradict the main argument made here, namely that it was the Tolai's access to customary land that gave them a privileged position of access to the global market (whether directly through the sale of copra or indirectly *via* the sale of garden produce to indentured labourers who produced copra on plantations) that encouraged their reluctance to engage in such work.
6. Although this picture is complicated by Good's (1979:102) depiction of the situation at the nearby Tolai village of Vunamami. Good notes that many villagers did grow cash crops on their own customary land. He argues that their inability to compete with 'larger capitalist enterprises' (in this context foreign owned plantations) meant that they 'did not establish themselves as independent agents' (*ibid*). Instead, the Vunamami ended up as a 'captive labour force' (Salisbury 1970:102) for those plantations. Nonetheless, even in these cases such Tolai villagers would have had a far greater degree of independence from their employers than indentured labourers on faraway plantations, by virtue of not relying upon them for food and accommodation and having potential access to alternative sources of employment in the nearby town. See Smith (this volume) for a discussion of a contemporary case in which cash-cropping is praised for providing a more genuine form of independent self-reliance than working for an expatriate boss.
7. The historical development of changing patterns of gender relations in coastal Tolai villages, with special reference to their integration into the growing urban economy, is dealt with in detail in Bradley (1982).
8. In common with some other authors, Epstein prefers the word 'tambu' to 'tabu' to describe Tolai customary shell wealth. I use the latter spelling as it is closer to the pronunciation that I heard during my fieldwork at Matupit, and it is that preferred as correct by the Tolai born anthropologist Jacob Simet.
9. This freedom from dependence on the actual town market could therefore of course be perceived as a form of dependence on the abstract 'global market' when viewed from other perspectives.
10. See also Gewertz and Errington (1999:49, 58) and McCormack (this volume). Hoëm (this volume) by contrast provides an example where a communal 'feeding relationship epitomizes the vision of positive dependency'.

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