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Siobhan McDonnell, Matthew G. Allen and Colin Filer (eds.): *Kastom, Property and Ideology. Land Transformations in Melanesia*. Canberra: Australian National University ePress, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Series, 2017, 419 pages.

The present publication discusses the transformation of traditional communal land-tenure relationships into market-oriented capitalist private property in the Melanesian states of the South Pacific. This is more relevant than ever, since the region has been subject to its own version of land grabbing, which since the turn of the millennium has received increasing attention in the scholarly literature on developing countries. The main focus here is on Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest country by area, where between 2003 and 2011 more than five million hectares (eleven percent of the country's surface area) of traditionally-owned land has been appropriated – largely illegally through so-called special agricultural and business leases (SABLs) – by private companies, mostly on 99-year leases, for the purpose of plundering the primary forests. For Global Witness (2014) this amounts to nothing less than the largest land grab in modern history. In Vanuatu too, more than ten percent of traditional land has already been converted to private ownership.

The analyses in this volume are based on the theoretical framework of the book “Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia,” published in 2011 by Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li, which is sketched out in the introduction by Colin Filer, Siobhan McDonnell, and Matthew Allen. This earlier volume explores the large-scale appropriation of land rights in Southeast Asia for agricultural projects at the expense of local or indigenous communities and smallholders by, for the most part, foreign investors. The different variants of land transformation, which are analyzed in terms of the combination of the four “powers of exclusion” (regulation, force, the market, and legitimation), are embedded in social processes structured by power relations. Accordingly, the aim of this new volume is to answer the question of whether the transformations of land in the three Melanesian states, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, are moving in a direction that is comparable to Southeast Asia.

The three countries of Melanesia, whose traditional societies knew no separation of economy and society, and thus had no concept of ownership, are experiencing fundamental changes due to the influence of modernization and globalization, and are moving towards individual economic wealth accumulation. This is occurring in a political economy characterized by the exploitation of natural resources (mining, forestry, and plantations). Nevertheless, in these countries traditional clan groups are still the fundamental unit of the social and political organization of the nation-state. In PNG alone, they control 95 percent of the land. Rights to land are based on a mixture of descent, residence and participation in social and political activities. This neo-traditional social order (*kastom*), which often develops into a potent symbol of resistance to expropriation, has a complex and dynamic relationship to the force of law in the context of land regulation.

In PNG and the Solomon Islands, the rule of law is massively compromised today by ignorance of legal provisions and the deliberate misinterpretation of laws by politicians and civil servants, who are linked in a culture of complicity for their own financial advantage and that of the foreign investor. However, politicians also obtain approval for such projects because the state does not have the capacity to initiate development in peripheral areas. The political will to introduce corrections leading to legally correct official procedures and to impose sanctions on abuse and corruption scarcely exists in the two countries. As a result, the legitimacy of law and social

justice often fall by the wayside. In addition, in Vanuatu the “masters of modernity” (McDonnell) use the power of the state as well as their claim to traditional authority to lend authority to the deals they make with foreign or non-indigenous housing developers.

In contrast to the volume on Southeast Asia, this book also addresses the rapidly increasing migration into urban centers, today a melting pot of national identity, and the gender issues associated with the transformation of land. The urban and suburban population currently accounts for up to 20 percent of the population in PNG, over 25 percent of the population in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and over 50 percent in Fiji, which is not included here. Between 30 and 50 percent of these inhabitants live in poverty-stricken settlements on previously expropriated state or traditional land, mostly on the outskirts of cities. Although PNG has the lowest urbanization rate in the Pacific, it has the largest urban population with up to one million urban residents, more than half of whom live in the capital city of Port Moresby. The key challenge is the shortage of urban land for the purpose of housing or development. With regard to the gender issues of land ownership, the book makes it clear that women are not excluded only when making decisions about land. The benefits deriving from sale or leasing of land (compensation, rental income or royalty payments) are also appropriated by men. Only Vanuatu implemented a gender-sensitive hybrid land reform that seeks to unify modernity and *kastom* in 2014.

In the epilogue of his book, Philip Hirsch compares the conditions of transition in Melanesia with those in Southeast Asia. The comparison makes clear that the political economy of land appropriation in Melanesia is fundamentally different. The reaffirmation of traditional land rights has far greater significance in the Pacific or is far more forceful than in Southeast Asia. The quasi-feudal arrangements around land and labor found in Southeast Asia contrast with an absence of pre-colonial and colonial state influences in Melanesia. The ethnically structured rather than peasant-based societies are far more resistant to expropriation. In addition, authoritarian forms of the state that resort to the use of force as found in Southeast Asia are unknown in the Pacific, where State and *kastom* cooperate. While investments in Southeast Asia involve the expulsion of ethnic minorities, in Melanesia transactions regarding traditional land are almost always informal. Common to both regions is that neoliberal arguments in favor of development legitimate exclusion.

Ralph Regenvanu, Member of Parliament and currently Foreign Minister of Vanuatu, rightly points out in his preface that the Melanesian states today stand at a crossroads where the traditional community-based concept of land as the basis of all life, meets the modern notion of land as real property or material that can sold as goods. But it also becomes clear that land in Melanesia retains existential significance for the preservation of *kastom* and thus also for (group) identity, kinship structures, and languages. Moreover, for all inhabitants, access to land remains a key factor in the sustainable development of the Pacific states, ensuring food security and preventing marginalization and poverty. In this respect, any land tenure reform that is envisaged should build on existing traditional land tenure rights and retain these rights instead of dissolving them. The goal should be small-scale development models that increase the efficiency of traditional ownership. The publication, for which broad attention and widespread discussion in Melanesia is to be hoped for, is an open-access digital document available at the following website: <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/state-society-and-governance-melanesia/kastom-property-and-ideology>

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