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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Outside the Benefit Zone, Inside the Impact Zone: Jerry Jacka on Mining and Social Change in Porgera, Papua New Guinea**

**Review by Alex Golub**

*Alchemy in the Rain Forest: Politics, Ecology, and Resilience in a New Guinea Mining Area*

by Jerry K. Jacka

Duke University Press, 2015

The Porgera valley in Papua New Guinea is well-known as the home of one of the largest gold mines in the world, and this book documents the lives of people in the eastern part of the valley, who live just outside of the main area affected by mining. These are people whose lives have been changed not by the direct impact of mining but by its present absence in their lives. The eastern Porgerans Jacka discusses receive little of the money and benefits that have gone to people whose lands have been taken by the mine, but they must still struggle with the massive negative social change that the mine has engendered. In particular, it is the road which supplies the mine, rather than the mine itself, which runs through their territory and which deeply alters their lives. Although much of the material in this monograph has been published before in articles and book chapters, *Alchemy in the Rain Forest* is a valuable, readable ethnography that greatly enriches our understanding of Porgera and contemporary Melanesia more generally.

Jacka is an environmental anthropologist and the organization of his book reflects this fact. The book is divided into three sections. The first section sets the stage for the rest of the book, with a chapter reviewing the literature on political economy and introducing the valley's main features, and a second chapter on the history of the valley from the 1930s, when Australians first reached it, to the creation of the mine in the late 1980s. The second section of the book describes main themes in Ipili culture. There are chapters on land, gardening and kinship, and spirits. The final section of the book looks at

ecological and social change in the valley since the coming of the gold mine. This section includes a chapter on deforestation in the valley and fluctuations in rainfall, and another on the impact of money, warfare, and the highway on eastern Ipili people.

This book's analytic model revolves around three terms: ontology, resilience, and alchemy.

First, ontology. Throughout the book Jacka cites the ontological turn in anthropology, and particularly the work of Phillipe Descola. Jacka's engagement with this literature is relatively brief – for Jacka, ontology really just is another word for culture and 'ontology' is a way to focus on local meanings. This is a lucky turn for the reader, because the ethnography in this book is infinitely more readable than monographs such as *Truth in Motion* (Holbraad 2012).

Indeed, the ethnography in this book is its strongest feature. The central three sections on Ipili culture and relation to land are a superb blend of ethnographic example and generalizing statement. Jacka often appears as a character in his book, but never in a way that is distracting or narcissistic. Best of all, the book is written in a clear, lean style which will make it very accessible to students and nonspecialists – something that might not have happened if Jacka had used a more 'ontological' prose style.

Jacka's description of Ipili culture is not new or original – in addition to his previous publications, much of this material repeats the work done by Jacka's dissertation supervisor, Aletta Biersack. Indeed, since Biersack was a major influence on Marilyn Strathern's influential *Gender of the Gift* (1988), Jacka's work is, in a sense, pre-ontological! But Biersack's writings are often at a very high level of academic abstraction, and her classic papers of the early 1980s are not as much in the public eye as they should be. This volume is valuable because it is the first easily-accessible, comprehensive overview of general themes in Ipili culture which a non-specialist can read. At this, it excels.

That said, Jacka's book does more than simply repeat Biersack's work. His account is an up-to-date portrayal of contemporary Porgera, complete with consumerism, tribal fighting, and changing gender relations that simply did not exist during Biersack's initial fieldwork. What's more, while there have been specialist accounts of the mine from geographical and social impact perspectives, and my own political anthropological case study, *Leviathans at the Gold Mine* (2014), Jacka fills a needed gap in the literature in Porgera by providing this readable overview of the valley's culture. Contemporary, accessible, and informed, this volume is at its best when it describes the lives of everyday people living

life in Porgera today.

Resilience is another major theme of Jacka's book, but as a Porgera specialist and not an ecological anthropologist I have less to say about this theme. Although Jacka does attempt to map social change in Porgera onto the model used by Gunderson and Holling, he does not seem to advance the use of the concept, nor does he suggest ways in which Porgera could become more resilient – something the valley badly needs. At the same time, no-one so far as been able to come up with answers for the valley's many woes, so perhaps it is hoping for too much to expect to find a solution here.

Throughout the book, Jacka seems to use the term 'resilient' to mean that Ipili culture is not disappearing underneath the impact of resource colonialism, or to say that it shapes the way Ipili people respond to new events. But Jacka seems to misunderstand the implications of this argument when he argues that "Porgeran ontological systems serve to inhibit social transformation by providing templates with which to understand novel events. In essence they channel disruptive events into recognizable frameworks of experience (cf. Sahlins 1981)" (p. 235).

Simply because change is culturally mediated does not mean that it is culturally inhibited. Indeed, in the piece that Jacka cites, Sahlins argues that the cultural mediation of novelty can both amplify and inhibit change, depending on the cultural structures which mediate. Roy Wagner, Alan Rumsey, and many of the other authors that Jacka cites argue that Melanesian cultures – and especially highland cultures such as the Ipili – value novelty and change for its own sake. And indeed, Jacka's own material supports the idea that Ipili culture mediates and amplifies – rather than just inhibiting – change. He emphasizes the long tradition of migration in this area, and then discusses the way that in-migration into the valley put stress on social order. He points out that Ipili want 'development', but also contend with changing gender roles, consumption patterns, and the influence of money.

Might it not make more sense to argue that Ipili want change, but got more of it than they could handle, and too quickly? Although Jacka is careful not to paint Ipili as primitive conservationists, one does feel at times there is one ecologically noble savage in this text – Jacka himself – who seems to value the good old days of myths, rituals, and subsistence agriculture more than some Ipili do.

As for the final of Jacka's three concepts, 'alchemy', this is the one about which there is the least to discuss. It's a cunning, rich notion which connects Ipili culture to premodern understandings of nature

and to the tragic, greedy quest for wealth. But after the introductory chapters the idea drops out from the book and is never developed again, except as the star concept of Jacka's brilliantly written conclusion.

I do have some other minor quibbles about the book – Christianity perhaps deserved more time than it got, and the mine is offstage for most of the book despite being its ostensible subject. And at times, Jacka's views seem less that of an independent analyst and more a conveyor of the views of Eastern Porgerans who look with indignant disdain at the landowners of the goldmine, believing that they are rolling in money rather than in mine waste. But while there is much for Porgera specialists to debate in these pages, these are not issues that detract from the book for a general reader.

In his review of my book about Porgera, Jacka (2014) said that it was full of jargon and lacked an indigenous voice (I plead guilty to the first count, but not the second). It's probably not surprising, then, that I wished his volume had more follow-through on its theoretical claims and less romantic populism. I do agree with Jacka, however, that our differing perspectives result in an increasingly rich body of literature about the valley.

In sum, this book is a valuable addition to the specialist literature on mining and social change in Melanesia, but also written in a clear style that will be of great use in the classroom. I recommend Jacka's accessible, straight-forward ethnography to all readers.

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