

# Staying in contact

## *Colonial encounter as constitutive fiction*

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**Abstract:** Maclean (1998) has argued that the tenuously shared sovereignty of local communities and the national state in Papua New Guinea owes to the simultaneously systematic yet shoestring colonial governance of the country, and particularly the method of government by patrol that was established after the second World War. For Maclean, the closure of the frontier was never more than “barbed connections to a surface” (86) In this paper, I argue that the contact between patrol officer and community, and the risks to the identities that it entails for both parties, is not only the conditions for political participation in colonial PNG but the constitutive fiction of the postcolonial PNG state. As citizens, people of PNG are required to encounter each other as others, and to be ethnographers of each other and themselves.

**Keywords:** colonialism, citizenship, contact zones, Papua New Guinea, identity.

### Initiation into nation

Over two weeks at the end of 2019, people of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (PNG) participated in a long-awaited referendum on independence. The vote was one of three pillars of the 2001 peace agreement that ended the secessionist war that began in 1989. All aspects of the referendum, and especially the voting process, were watched with keen interest in PNG and abroad. On November 29, the Bougainville Referendum Commission (BRC)—an independent body instituted by the peace agreement—published a press release demonstrating its commitment to poll access (“Upes Come Out to Cast Their Vote. Bougainville Referendum Commission” 2019). To ensure that all eligible voters could participate, the BRC set up an all-male polling station near the village of Kunua for young men undergoing a secret initiation into adulthood. The initiates were living in seclusion for several months because the esoteric knowledge and the ceremonies of these initiations are forbidden to women, and so they could not appear at the polling place for their village where women would see them. In its press release describing the men’s polling station, the BRC included photographs of the initiates, known as *upe*. In one picture, the men file into a fenced enclosure through a gate where they are shielded from view by blinds made from woven palm fronds (fig. 1). In another, taken within the enclosure, the men cast their ballots while other male poll workers in fluorescent BRC-branded vests look on (fig. 2). In every picture, each voter is seen wearing a woven, onion-shaped hat, also called an *upe*, which is worn for the entire period of seclusion.

The press release frames the vote of the *upe* as an example of the BRC’s commitment to an equitable process. The text also notes that poll workers visited a local hospital to collect



Figure 1: A line of men wearing *upe* hats enter the all-male polling place established by the Bougainville Referendum Commission for the 2019 independence referendum at Kunua on November 29, 2019 (“Upes Come Out to Cast Their Vote. Bougainville Referendum Commission” 2019).

ballots from patients. Even so, the images immediately suggest another reading. The *upe* hat has long been an icon of Bougainville as a whole. The flag of the independence movement, and the official flag of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, consists of an *upe* within a black circle on a field of blue: Bougainville island is the *upe* nation. Indeed, this nationalist reading of the images was indeed already present in the BRC release, which was entitled “Upes come out to cast their vote.” Thus, in these images, the men are simultaneously both *upe* and voters. Juxtaposed with the hospital patients, the state appears to reach into their isolation to bring them their rights as citizens. Yet when seen in light of the *upe* flag and Bougainville’s history, the parallax effect is inverted and the initiates reach out from a distinct community, shedding their identities and roles in that community to declare their independence as members of a national polity. The *upe* hats are both secret and public, both sacred and secular. They signify the men’s particularity and their universality at the same time.

While casting one’s vote may seem like the quintessential act of the modern liberal citizen, the figure of the *upe*-voter also harkens to Bougainvilleans’ former status as imperial subjects. In her ethnography of a northern Bougainville society very much like that of Kunua village, Blackwood (1935) notes that the local colonial officers grudgingly gave their permission for *upe* initiates to be absent from their villages during the regular census patrols, but only for three months. In time, this shortened period of seclusion was established as the standard (Blackwood 1935, 197). Here as well, how one reads this encounter depends on where one stands. It is equally plausible to say that either party—colonizer or colonized—was able to make the other accept its norms as the basis for their relationship. The colonial



Figure 2: A man wearing an *upe* casts a ballot in the 2019 Bougainville independence referendum at the all-male polling place at Kunua on November 29, 2019 (“Upes Come Out to Cast Their Vote. Bougainville Referendum Commission” 2019).

officer can say that he induced the reform of the ritual complex, and made sure that all subjects would eventually be exposed to the surveillance of the state; the initiation leaders can say that they secured their exclusive jurisdiction over the sacredness and secrecy of the male initiates. Similarly, in the BRC photos, we may ask whether the *upe* interrupted their seclusion to fulfill a civic duty, or if the state agreed to enter into the men’s exclusive space on their terms. Then as now, the political status of the individual Bougainville person eludes simple classification. The Bougainville citizen presents a double-exposure image, and a Gestalt-switch illusion.

Why does the PNG citizen appear in such an ambiguous form? In my current research, I argue that this ambiguity is the underside of the ethnographic citizenship of the post-colonial PNG state. In PNG, public spaces are conceptualized as zones of contact among people of profound differences. People can participate in public politics only if they translate themselves for each other. To appear as citizens, people must become ethnographers of themselves. Politics requires that people produce public knowledge of their differences rather than acculturate to a common civic identity and accept a common set of political norms. Hence, the duality of the *upe*-voter is a necessary condition of citizenship. People claim standing in public on the basis of their alterity. Yet this also means that people must decide how their particular positions, and especially their communal identities, relate to their membership in a liberal order as citizens.

Drawing on Maclean’s arguments about the nature of colonial pacification in PNG, I argue that the same kinds of complexity that he finds in early encounters between indigenous



societies and the colonial state emerge again in the political imagination of citizenship today. Maclean argues that the encounter between colonizer and colonized places both positions at risk, and required both sides to collude in producing a boundary between two kinds of order. I argue that this hidden dynamic of pacification is today the means by which the PNG state achieves the constitutive fiction of a sovereign people.

### **Does PNG have two publics?**

In some ways, citizens of PNG grapple with a situation that resembles many other post-colonies. Ekeh (1975) argues that European colonialism in Africa has produced political systems based on two publics, one which he calls the primordial public, and another that he calls the civic public. For Ekeh, colonial domination of African societies has taken two principal forms. The first is an ideology of European superiority in contrast to what it imagines are various small, primitive, traditional, prepolitical African tribes. The second is a strategy of “divide and rule” in which the colonial state governs native subjects as members of these tribes through the people identified by the state as traditional authorities (Ekeh 1975, 98, 103; see also 1990; Mamdani 1996, 2012; Suleiman 2017).

Under these conditions, the field of one’s social relations is polarized. On the one hand, personal ties of birth and kinship are reified as an intrinsic, permanent connection to an ethnic homeland, or what Ekeh, citing Shils (1957), calls a primordial identity. On the other hand, a select few have the opportunity to navigate the colonial education system, market economy, and civic institutions to join a new African bourgeoisie. For Ekeh, these elites embrace the colonial ideology of progress from tradition to modernity yet claim the right to rule in the place of Europeans on the basis of their primordial membership in an ethnic nation. As a result of winning independence, Ekeh argues, “most educated Africans are citizens of two publics” (Ekeh 1975, 108). Having achieved upward economic and social mobility in the civic sphere, the postcolonial bourgeoisie are expected to act as patrons to their particular ethnic communities in which members are tied to each other by shared moral ethos of mutual obligation. Citizenship in the civic public is based on liberal rights, yet without any shared norms to legitimate them. Conversely, citizenship in the primordial public consists of moral duties to fellow members, yet at the expense of fellow citizens in the civic sphere who are outsiders.

A number of scholars have argued that the contemporary relation of rural communities to the state in PNG can be characterized by the same kind of dual division. Gordon and Meggitt, for instance, argue that postcolonial state institutions are subject to “a process of upward colonization” by the ethnic communities of public officials and upwardly mobile elites (Gordon and Meggitt 1985, 181). Similarly, Ketan (2005) demonstrates how elections in rural electorates have been appropriated by indigenous leaders as another venue for their ongoing competition for followers, and have fueled the efflorescence of the ceremonial exchanges on which their power is based. Others have argued more in line with Ekeh’s model, for whom the primordial public emerges through a process of tribalization that is catalyzed by colonial state encapsulation (Ernst 1999; Gilberthorpe 2007; Jorgensen 2006; Strathern 1993). It has become generally accepted among scholars of PNG that sovereignty is divided between the state and discrete rural communities, and that each offer distinct, alternative models of politics.

If PNG and other postcolonies appear as two-headed chimera to us now, perhaps that is because we assume at some level that the Western model of the state is itself unitary, that its emergence is a definite break in history, and hence, that what was once called pacification of the tribal frontier was a linear, progressive movement. In fact, this process was always riven with negotiations and compromises on both sides, and like the agreement between officials and *upe* in 1930s Bougainville cited above, always achieved partial, provisional, and ambiguous results.

In large part, Australian colonial administration was defined by a contradiction. The Australian state was ideologically committed to the necessity of imperial control of some form to bring order to people it believed were otherwise ungoverned, and hence deprived of the benefits of any state protection. Yet, it often shrank from the duty it imposed on itself, and relied on a threadbare, often improvised, and mostly self-financed administrative apparatus. Its main mechanism for incorporating indigenous societies into the colonial order was a system of foot patrols by Australian junior officers (*kiap*) and armed Melanesian police (*polisboi*). The Australian state pointed to this system to demonstrate its claim that indigenous societies had renounced violence and accepted colonial rule under Australian and international law (particularly when the United Nations mandated this as a goal after 1945). Yet the so-called pacification of the frontier was not systematic and did not achieve total hegemony. Interventions by the state were ultimately a series of “barbed connections to a surface” (Maclean 1998, 86). As one moves from the continental scale on official maps to the local scale of patrol routes, swathes of incorporated territory are revealed on closer inspection to be a series of infrequent, sporadic meetings between *kiaps* and *luluai*, influential men they had appointed as headmen in each area they visited.

To be clear, this is not to say that colonial domination was nothing more than a veneer, a thin layer on the surface of otherwise autarkic indigenous polities to improve their appearance in the distant gaze of the metropole (see for instance Kahn 1983; R. M. Keesing 1968). For instance, *kiaps* entering the Highlands after the second World War often planned their patrol routes to cross battlefields used by neighboring (and feuding) communities. As Maclean notes, this tactic was intended as a symbol of the colonial state’s impartiality, but only insofar as it also drew an analogy between the *kiap* and the traditional leaders who competed for followers through cycles of war. Like these war leaders, the *kiap* ruptures one geopolitical order and establishes his own (Maclean 1998, 91). Thus, Maclean argues, *kiaps* sought to disrupt indigenous political processes by inserting themselves personally into them, even if it meant subverting their own formal authority. *Kiaps* needed willing partners to be intermediaries but for this strategy to succeed these intermediaries also had to translate the *kiap* into local categories of authority

Every kind of intercultural encounter exhibits the same ambiguity. Both parties to move into a space in which no single epistemological framework is necessarily paramount. In her analysis of actual early contacts between white Australian settlers and Aboriginal people, Merlan (2018) demonstrates that Aboriginals seized on the normlessness of their encounter to capture and direct the attention of settlers with, Merlan concludes, the goal of establishing an intersubjective alignment between the parties where none existed. Similarly, in the colonial period, Melanesian plantation workers recruited from distant places and having no common languages forged a common pidgin language amongst themselves (Jourdan 2008; R. Keesing 1986). Drawn into an undefined social field, the *kiap* faces a similar situ-

ation and must himself mimic the people he meets in anticipation of establishing a future rapport.

Yet, the ambiguities of these encounters also means that they are fraught. They reveal that the ideological categories that legitimate colonial rule are themselves fundamentally unstable. For that reason the colonial state always governs anxiously in contact zones (Stoler 2010). Aboriginal invitations to exchange, of either signs or objects, were often represented by European settlers as childish mimicry, ignorance, or deceit (Merlan 2018). If they copied the behaviors of visitors too well, there were only superficially imitating them. If they behaved in unanticipated ways, or simply avoided contact, they were mysteriously alien. Likewise, colonial officials in PNG constantly feared that the intermediaries on which they relied would turn in despots in their home communities (Hogbin 1946). Pidgin language was suspected of being fundamentally incapable of expressing rational thought, even though it was quickly learned and widely used in the territory, and indeed made it possible for officers to communicate with native subjects. What we see in retrospect as a structure of symbolic domination is in fact the result of rupture. Faced with the potential of illegitimacy, agents of colonial power impose a closure on the potential for new identities to emerge. They extract themselves from the encounter and freeze it in place as though its contingencies were essential traits.

To the extent that there are two publics now in PNG it is because of the inherent flux of these kinds of encounters, rather than specific institutional structures established by the colonial state. Both the colonial state and its successor have validated primordial ties in civic institutions, at least in practice. The *kiap* offers patronage to subjects like a big man, as Highlands leaders are known, as a means to creating the durable contact that would facilitate their entry into the civic sphere as individuals. The two publics are conjoined because they are in fact the faces of Janus of the same colonial encounter. Interventions from one side to the other are necessarily present in every instance of this encounter. Yet only one is visible at a time. As in the past, moments of ambiguity are brought to a close when they threaten to undermine political order. A boundary within the space of encounter is imposed and two separate publics with two distinct normative subjects established.

### **The fictional frontier**

We can draw a series of conclusions from this. The colonial frontier in the sense of a no-man's-land between native and *kiap* is not a historical fact, but the constitutive fiction of the colonial order and the postcolonial successor state. PNG's contemporary political order operates as if there are two separate, alternative publics. It posits that the people who enunciate their constitutional order are both united in the civic sphere and divided in the primordial sphere. The meeting of *kiap* and native on the patrol route is, in this sense, a founding myth which legitimates the contemporary political system. The state is legitimate because it shares sovereignty with many particular communities that once responded to the summons of the *kiap* and accepted his rule through their *luluai*. In this fictional origin, citizens presume that an encounter has taken place at a boundary between two separate and distinct normative orders, and that this boundary remains as the framework for the political participation of citizens today.

In some ways, an encounter in a borderlands is an antimyth of origins. Rather than posit a prior—if not truly primordial—sovereign people, encounter as trope embraces the pos-

sibility of radical pluralism. No member of the public can rely on the security of tacit knowledge or shared values. No one can presume that they will set the terms of recognition of the other. Having no “home” on which to ground one’s self, one is compelled to embrace the possibility of finding common ground with others in political contest itself (Honig 1996). The constitutive fiction is, in this light, not based on a origin but a destination. By embracing the possibility of encounter, this political imagination also assumes that people will eventually arrive at norms that are uniformly shared and yet truly equitable. Every political question is an opportunity for the refounding of the present order in a new and better form. In this respect, the metaphor of PNG’s democracy as a borderlands opens citizenship as widely as possible.

For Benhabib (1997), this openness must be complemented by a new basis for the state’s legitimacy. Speaking of liberal democracies generally, Benhabib argues that as these societies broaden to include new groups of people and generally become more complex, it becomes practically impossible to hold rational deliberation among a group of citizens as a regulative ideal of political decision-making. To secure the legitimacy of democratic politics, society appeals to a public sphere of impartial deliberation in the abstract as a constitutive fiction (Benhabib 1997, 2). Rather than seek new ways for people to deliberate as a mass public, these societies reach outside to posit a perfectly impartial perspective as a locus of sovereignty (Benhabib 1994, 1996). Although the historical origins of its pluralism are distinct, PNG faces the same kind of uncertainty and resolves questions of legitimacy through its own fictional origin. People of PNG play the part of *kiap* and *luluai* for each other.

Constitutive fictions of democratic order are sustained by rituals of citizenship. The United States, for instance, appeals to the framing of its constitution as a myth of founding. Citizenship is symbolized in what Bellah (1967) calls the civil religion of state pageantry, but even more important than this is the use of founding texts to interpellate people to positions as citizens through their ritual quotation (Norton 1993, 11). For instance, during the bicentennial of the United States Constitution in 1987, facsimile copies of the 1787 Constitution were displayed in supermarkets and schools throughout the country. Each of these copies had a blank signature block at the bottom where viewers could, if they chose, sign their own names (Norton 1993, 15; see also Levinson 1987). The latter-day signatories reenact the founding speech-act of the country, writing as if the Constitution’s text was their own words and they were among those who utter the “we” of the preamble. (Likewise, a common form of commemoration of the Fourth of July is the public recitation of the text of the Declaration of Independence.) In reenacting the event, however, the 1987 signatories are not playing out all of the 18th century’s legacies; women and people of color were also free to participate. Rather this was a reiteration of the text itself alone, including any amendments, but with no reference to the history of compromise and contestation through which the first text was written and then effectively replaced by the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments. Liberal citizenship is thus realized in a “simultaneous affirmation of the absence of history and the presence of the past” (Norton 1993, 15). PNG’s rituals of citizenship are similar, yet they interpellate people to two different positions. One person re-enacts the role of the colonial *kiap* and the other the role of native subject. The absence of history is affirmed on one side only. One party plays the role of an ahistorical *kiap* who discovers the other party, who represent the presence of an empirical, sociological difference from the traditional past.

The reportage of general elections in PNG's daily newspapers every five years offers many illustrations of how this ritual of citizenship works. General elections take place over two weeks in June and July so that ballots can be transported to every part of the country. In recent years, reporters and photographers have documented the process of moving ballots out to every community, the casting of votes by rural citizens, and the safe return of the ballots to counting centers. As the election gets underway, readers can see poll workers moving out by truck, helicopter, boat, and foot to every part of the country no matter how remote (Kenneth 2007b, 2002, 2007a; Nicholas 1997; Palme 1997; Rheeney 2007; Thomas 2002). Likewise many other photos capture both ordinary voters, respected elders, and former and current politicians casting their ballots (Ivaharea 2007; Kalimda 2007; "Hiccups as Polling Opens" 2002; "Madang Votes" 2002; "Never Too Old to Vote" 1997). In the 2017 election, Sylvester Wemuru, a reporter for *The National* newspaper, not only captured elections officers and local residents in a rural part of Western Province walking from village to village, but also a special trip by the officials to the home of one voter who was unable to walk to the main polling site (Wemuru 2017a, 2017b). His photo of the latter depicts two poll workers seated besides an elderly woman named Shilda Mitieng in her home presenting a ballot paper to her. The caption notes that the Mitieng was unable to walk to her village's polling place, itself created by the patrolling electoral team for the day. She is reported to say that this may be her last election, and that she "hoped that people in her village would receive basic government services" (Wemuru 2017a, 4).

Like the BRC press release, the overt news value of these pictures is the PNG electoral commission's commitment to equal poll access for every citizen, irrespective of their rural location and infirmities of age. Yet these pictures also deploy a metaphor for citizenship in which only one dimension of the dual PNG citizen comes to the fore. The state reaches out to touch every one of its citizens, deputizing along the way citizens to carry the ballots which voters will send back to select their leaders. In one case, the patrol does not simply stop at the village. It proceeds further to an individual homestead and enters to make it possible for one person to vote. Wemuru's caption notes the particular reasons why she votes from home (which are themselves not exceptional). Nonetheless, depicted in the privacy of her home, Mitieng is framed as a symbol of all rural voters. As a rural voter she is not merely a representative of a specific demographic constituency. Rather she appears much like the Bougainvillean *upe*-wearing voters. Her rurality and her vote exist in a permanent contradiction. By bringing her a ballot, the poll workers do not so much travel far, but surmount literal and figurative obstacles. As colonial state did before, PNG newspapers present rural indigenous communities as outsiders who must be brought into the democratic public. Mitieng is not simply at home, she is isolated by distance that the poll workers' patrol will overcome. As Mitieng says, she votes specifically for the entitlements that come with citizenship. Yet in her words, her exclusion from basic services is itself simply a fact of her isolation. At least in the context of this report, when she casts her ballot, she votes for the same incorporation that Australian colonial rule promised, and her vote is evidence that this incorporation has begun. The intrinsic tension between being a villager and being a voter is constitutive of the PNG state itself.

The story of the election that these images tell is also part of the PNG ritual of citizenship. By reading this text, readers see themselves as part of the larger world that it represents. They can see themselves in either the position of the poll worker or the voter. The fictional "we" of the US is a serial category of individuals. In the PNG fiction of encounter, citizen-



ship is split into two distinct yet interdependent halves. The voter needs a poll worker to cross mountains; the poll worker needs indigenous communities to reach. Furthermore, in aligning oneself as a reader of this text with either of these positions, one also needs to be a fluent consumer of a specific kind of ethnographic knowledge of PNG's diversity. When public spaces are conceptualized as frontiers, people must learn how to be ethnographers and informants for each other in order to participate as citizens. They speak from different standpoints but they share a common metalanguage of these differences. People in the US imagine that they sign constitutions; people in PNG imagine they write an ethnography of themselves.

### **Ethnographic citizenship**

Thus the people of PNG are ethnographic citizens. Their rights are only recognized if they are able to participate in producing ethnographic knowledge of oneself that fits oneself into the constitutive fiction of contact in PNG. PNG's ethnographic citizenship is not unique. In some ways, it is a variation on a theme of the problems of democracy in societies characterized by structures of cultural and other kinds of symbolic domination, especially post-colonial societies.

A number of scholars of colonialism have argued that anthropological theories of culture and ethnographic representations of people's lives as expressions of an underlying form of culture have not only served to ideologically legitimate colonial domination but also transform the nature of that rule into a management of people's welfare as members of traditional, if not primitive, societies (Pels 1997; Dirks 2001; Steinmetz 2008; Burke 2014; Mamdani 2012). Arguably, the same kind of governmentality of culture informs the strategies of contemporary settler-colonial and postcolonial states for framing multicultural policy (Povinelli 2002; Shah 2007; Middleton 2015). Likewise, ethnographic citizenship is not the same as a special status given to either individuals or groups as designated cultural minorities, and which may entitle them to special kinds of rights of cultural expression or claims as a group to autonomy. If liberal subjects are forced to be free, then these ethnographic subjects are forced to be nothing more than the bearers of their culture.

The argument that ethnographic knowledge serves the state as a mode of governmentality dovetails with the critique of ethnography as what Bourdieu calls a synoptic illusion of people's experiences and modes of action. A positivist episteme not only reifies particular ways of life as systems but denies the historical context for relations between observer and observed, and the interaction and unequal relations among different societies. Yet it is important to remember that this is an internal contradiction in the representational form found in classical ethnographies. It is not an objective limit of cultural analysis, but rather a failure of cultural analysis to live up to the potential of the ethnographic imagination, which is above all a relative conception of difference. In the same way, what sustains one's citizenship in a multicultural state is a capacity for at least some members of the community to straddle and to cross between multiple normative and conceptual frameworks. If a state calls on some or all of its citizens to be informants, and seeks to elicit information from them which it can read as evidence of their culture, ethnicity, or nationality, then it also needs go-between and translators. Like what anthropologists often call "key" informants, they are not merely scribes, but savvy bicultural and transcultural operators. At some level, actors in a contact zone are also necessarily ethnographers of themselves in the sense that

they take a relative view of difference. They acquire an ethnographic imagination that makes other's people ethnographic representation of them possible. I would like to argue that PNG is one example of this kind of ethnographic citizenship.

When the public is conceived as a frontier encounter, the state delegates to the citizens the power to define their rights and duties with respect to each other in practice. They can make political claims on the basis of and within the context of a particular worldview and values. However, much as one finds in ethnographic research, there is a two-fold inequality in the relationship between the ethnographic citizen and the state. First, while state listens to citizen-informants, it does not cede its epistemic monopoly on difference. The ways in which people choose to make connections between their particular values and their status as liberal citizens will still always be read in a positivist episteme in which individuals' standpoints are reflections of their membership in a single, closed, normative order. Second, every public expression of difference can potentially be read either as a unique cultural identity or as an unruly otherness that disqualifies them from full standing. Ethnographic citizens are forced to be their own ethnographers, yet live with the uncertainty that their claims to knowledge about themselves will be validated. Thus, the creativity of ethnographic citizenship in my sense still nonetheless risks calling forth government by ethnography in which a state recognizes specific kinds of difference in relation to its own official categories of ethnicity, civilization, or tradition. These kinds of multicultural policy are each one possible outcome of what I see as a process and practice of politics in which everyone participates in producing a public knowledge of difference. Democracy in PNG is the struggle against this kind of epistemic dispossession.

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