



# Conservation as homogenisation? Socio-spiritual-ecological futures and collaborative relations

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**ABSTRACT:** By juxtaposing the ethics and practices associated with the creation of Marine Protected Areas with the ethics and practices associated with Indigenous-epistemology based socio-ecological projects, and based on over twenty years of collaborative work, this paper investigates the role of anthropology in contributing to Indigenous self-determination and asks what true collaboration between variously-situated actors might look like in the future.

**Keywords:** Reciprocity, Anthropological practice, collaboration, Indigenous self-determination, Marine Conservation, Melanesia

## Introduction

It is such an honour to be here with you all today and to share the stage with these extraordinary thinkers to celebrate the work of Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen. I think of what we do as scholars as relational, something I'll return to throughout this talk, and I've been thinking with the work of Professor Eriksen, Professor Strang, and Professor Hornborg for over two decades now. Doing this has been a privilege, indeed so many aspects of my journey as an anthropologist have been a privilege. And things like this, speaking with and thinking with colleagues, like all of you, about our work and what we, as scholars, can bring to bear on some of the most pressing issues of our time, is just incredible. I know some of you, but for those of you who I don't know, I'm going to take a minute at the outset of my comments to tell you about my work and to contextualise it in the themes of the symposium.

My training as an anthropologist started in 1991 in the Master's program at the University of Georgia and ended in 2000 when I completed my Ph.D. at Rutgers University. During that decade, examinations of globalisation, modernisation, and transnationalism came to dominate anthropological inquiry. For example, from 1980 to 1990, there were only 1,270 papers and chapters which used the phrase "anthropology of globalisation"; by the next decade, 1991 to 2000, there were 16,000. And between 2001 and 2010, my first decade as a faculty member, there were 95,200. So, much of my scholarship has been framed through engagements with questions about the articulations between the local and the global, and all of my scholarship has been focused on Papua New Guinea.

In my initial work, carried out in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, I asked what happens when external, and international, ways of understanding, narrating, and managing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their biophysical surroundings come into

contact and conflict with Indigenous ways of understanding, narrating, and managing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their biophysical surroundings (West 2006). I asked this question specifically focused on terrestrial environmental conservation projects in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea that were located on the sovereign territory of Gimi-speaking peoples.

There are many nuanced ethnographic answers to this question, but a few key points are as follows. The globalised ideologies and practices of conservation worked to materially disenfranchise Indigenous people and to discursively cast them as unable to properly value the biodiversity on their lands. These ideologies and practices located Indigenous peoples in a colonial, racist, narrative that hinged on ideas about so-called primitive, child-like, natives needing to be brought into the modern by well-meaning conservation actors. These ideologies and practices also worked to remake *in situ* socio-ecological actions and relations which had been in place for thousands of years and which did not result in the decline of biological diversity but in fact contributed to its endurance, in ways that resulted in increased pressures on women's labour, disrupted local social relationships, and more extractive pressure on plants and animals. They also created conditions whereby people who had been full of pride about their ancestors and their socio-spiritual relations with their ancestral lands, felt ashamed of them. And finally, the lenses and languages through which Indigenous practices were seen and articulated worked to generify them, to make them seem commensurable with many other 'elsewheres' for conservation practitioners, and the solutions that were thus found worked as a kind of virtual reality machine – bringing the visions of the conservation practitioners into being through their conservation interventions and in this, they worked towards homogeneity.

My second large project was driven by my Gimi-speaking friends' and collaborators' questions about why external actors who wished to conserve biological diversity through economic development interventions never paid attention to local development projects, like coffee production; and why the business people who did pay attention to coffee production seemed to see the coffee they produced in their villages as a marker of primitivity and poverty when they saw the coffee they produced as a marker of them as a key node in global commodity chains. These questions pushed me to think more carefully about production, distribution, and consumption, and how semiotic messages and ideologies come to have economic value in the global marketplace (West 2012).

As I was doing all of this work and writing about it, I was lucky enough to be constantly challenged by my colleagues from Papua New Guinea, most of whom are ecologists, biologists, and environmental activists. Initially they saw me, as a young white American woman with a faculty position at a rich university, as someone who was replicating the very histories of dispossession that I was theorising and critiquing in my scholarship. Because of this, they pushed me by asking: What does your scholarship do for people in Papua New Guinea? And how are you going to work to change the unequal conditions that you illuminate with your research? Because of these questions, since the mid-2000s, I've been working with colleagues from Papua New Guinea to redress some of the dispossessions that have come from the globalisation of Euro-American conservation ideologies and practices and to redress some of the histories of dispossession associated with anthropological research (West 2016).

Today I want to tell you about some of my current work as a way to think with you about the future of multiple forms of diversity, and what is happening to that diversity today

in the face of mass extinction, climate change, and mass dispossession tied to extraordinary capital accumulation by a small number of global elites.

In my current work I ask, is there any way to contribute to the longevity of systems that people want to continue into the future without transforming them and making them less unique? In other words, can people contribute to the long-term health of ecological systems without importing ideologies and practices into them that increase homogeneity?

### **Relations towards diversity**

In 2008, I met my long-term collaborator John Aini, a fisheries management scholar from Lovangai, or New Hanover Island, PNG, who is also the founder of the NGO Ailan Awareness. *Ailan* means “Island” in Melanesian Tok-Pisin, the creole language spoken in Papua New Guinea. By the time we met, John and I had come to the same conclusions about environmental conservation: most conservation projects don’t work in PNG, and one of the reasons is because they fail to take into account the existing, and dynamic, relations between humans and the non-human inhabitants of the same systems (Aini and West 2014). Together over the past 14 years, we have developed a methodology for fostering local consensus building around ecological and social futures that starts from the premise that if conservation matters to communities at all, it is because people maintain both their livelihoods and their socio-spiritual connections to the world through their relations with their biophysical surroundings. This methodology was developed during conversations with elders where we came to understand what Eriksen (this issue) would term their “biosemiotic” approach. The elders who advise us, see all of the physical and metaphysical entities in their world in communication and cooperation. Once we came to understand this, the form that our practice took with regard to biodiversity was radically altered. Through Ailan Awareness we have worked with communities to help them develop socio-ecological revitalisation plans based on Indigenous ecological practices, anthropological methods for research and understanding, and collaborations between elders, young people, and outsiders. Our work supports communities in developing projects focused on reviving non-flourishing systems. These systems can be ecological, social, political, economic, or some intersection of any or all of these. The systems are always assemblages, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s Batesonian inspired term (Eriksen, this issue). They are made up of people, creatures, processes, ancestors, and spirits.

New Ireland, where we work, is one of the twenty-two provinces that make up Papua New Guinea. It is a marine province that is comprised of several large islands like New Ireland Island, Lovangai / New Hanover, and Lihir, as well as numerous island groups like the Saint Matthias Group, the Tabar Group, the Tanga Group, and the Feni Islands. There are 2,43,000 residents who speak 23 unique languages with 45 different dialects. New Ireland also has a long colonial history that includes missionisation, blackbirding, and forced relocations.

Today New Irelanders depend on a mix of fishing, marine gleaning, horticulture, and income from extended family members working in business and commerce, mining, oil palm plantations, and tourism. Today 75 per cent of the population lives adjacent to, and relies upon, the marine environment and coral reef systems for their income, for the food they eat, for their recreation, for their ritual needs and obligations, and for a whole host of other relations that make up daily life.

Papua New Guinea is located in the extraordinarily biologically diverse ecoregion that international conservation organisations have termed “the Coral Triangle” which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste (Hughes et al. 2002). The marine environments surrounding Papua New Guinea are some of the healthiest and richest in this region (Huber 1994). They are home to more than 2000 species of tropical fish and 500 species of coral. To date, Papua New Guinea has yet to suffer from the extreme effects of overfishing, industrialisation, and extensive commercial agricultural runoff that have destroyed nearly 25 per cent of the reefs in neighbouring countries (Allen 2007; Asaad et al. 2018).

Indigenous people make up the vast majority of the residents of New Ireland, with only about eight per cent of the population born outside of the province. Internationally, while Indigenous peoples consume only two per cent of the global yearly commercial fisheries catch, per capital consumption of marine species in Indigenous communities is 15 times higher than in non-Indigenous communities (Cisneros-Montemayor et al. 2016). This means that while outside forces may be driving fisheries declines globally, locally the health of reefs and marine species is crucial for Indigenous life. To date, the dominant methodology for attempting to achieve sustainable harvests for communities and for maintaining reef health both internationally and in Papua New Guinea has been the creation of Marine Protected Areas or MPAs (Carr et al. 2019).

Externally designed and demarcated MPAs are often driven by the interests of outsiders, and organised and facilitated with a focus on the use of reefs and species that assume purely instrumental relations between people, plants, animals, and entire ecological systems. While the acknowledgement by some conservation organisations in the past decade that communities living in Papua New Guinea depend on their reefs for subsistence and livelihoods is crucial for any conservation success is important, by simply seeing instrumental value in ecological systems, these organisations continue to miss a larger context. People across New Ireland have deeper relations with their biophysical surroundings and the other beings that inhabit them than can be captured by the facts of subsistence and livelihoods (Collins 2021; Otto 1998).

Even though we were both coming to our collaboration with a lot of experience, during the first few years of our collective work, John Aini and I carried out a very large province-wide ethnographic investigation into the question of systems change. We had both seen external actors come to Papua New Guinea with extant ideas about declining biodiversity and models for understanding what actions and events were causing that decline and what methods might reverse it. All of these models were derived from work elsewhere and, when put to work in Papua New Guinea, they got things wrong, they missed nuance, they imported erroneous assumptions, they created projects that failed, they dispossessed local people in myriad ways, and they made assumptions about what changes should matter to local people. We wanted our work together to start from a point of listening, so we set out to talk to as many people as we could through multiple forms of surveys, interviews, focus groups, listening visits, and participating in local life, with four questions in mind: 1) What are the changes that you are observing in your social and ecological life that you are concerned about?; 2) Why do you think these changes are happening?; 3) What would you like to see done about them?; and 4) Who would you like to see address these changes?

We then sat down with people from New Ireland, analysed the data, and concluded

that there are a whole host of systems that people want to see flourish. These systems are social, ecological, spiritual, economic, and political. They are often the combination of some of all of these things. Some are ancient and some are not. And they are populated by beings that are in constant forms of communication and exchange and that communication and exchange or lack thereof, results in stability or instability in the systems. To use the terms laid out by Eriksen, these systems are biosemiotics in nature. And people in New Ireland often have robust theories of causality – having asked themselves and others “why” things are changing and / or not flourishing quite a bit.

Since analysing the data from that initial work, John and I have worked together with people from villages around the province and with the elders I mentioned earlier who advise us to create local sites that help the environment flourish and that are an alternative to MPAs, to create programs to strengthen the local socio-spiritual-ecological system (referred to as the *Malagan* system), to create a site for cross-generational education at a school, and to foster a new generation of people who are interested in this kind of work.

I’ll spend some time on the alternative to MPAs because that gives you some insight into our methodology. We call these *Vala* Areas.

In the Tungak language *Vala* describes a form of socio-spiritual practice whereby people with deep ritual knowledge and experience call on that knowledge, their relationship with their ancestors, their ecological knowledge, and their relations with certain marine species to create favourable conditions on a reef. These favourable conditions are both material, insofar as they increase numbers of desirable and useful species, and relational, insofar as they smooth relations between living persons, living non-human creatures, spirits, and ancestors. The practice of *Vala* is both this socio-spiritual practice and the material practice of placing markers crafted from specific plants onto the reef to indicate to others that the area has been ritually enhanced and protected and that there are prohibitions against, and rules for, using it. Because of the socio-spiritual work of *Vala*, anyone who fails to adhere to the restrictions which were placed on the reef by the ritual expert, is in danger of falling ill or dying. Areas or places become *Vala* through this combination of practice, demarcation, and the local understanding that an area has been ‘worked on’ by a ritual expert. But they only become *Vala* through relational negotiations, conversations and agreements about causality and solutions. So *Vala* is what the place becomes, the method by which it becomes it, and the social processes that allow for it to become.

The *Vala* Plans we facilitate are made by a collaborative community effort, each uniquely designed to address a problem identified by the community with near-unanimously approved solutions. These plans draw on a combination of the *Vala* practices I just described, and research conducted by Ailan Awareness staff and outside researchers, that allows for the contextualisation of causality whereby local causes can be nested within multiple scales of *ex situ* causes.

I’ll give two examples of the *Vala* work.

In one site, people saw the bay in which they fish for both local use and commercial species becoming less healthy. Key species were declining and there were a number of local theories of change. Working with colleagues from the site, interns from the national fisheries college, engineers from the local government, and ecologists from the University of Papua New Guinea, we did a socio-ecological study to understand what was happening. We found that a logging road built in the late 1980s had eroded and that the physical changes from this

erosion were changing the nutrient balance in the bay and that people were coming from adjacent areas and fishing in the bay without permission from local elders. We also found that a huge number of young people had left the site to work elsewhere, and that elders were worried that they were not able to train the young to carry out important practices that work to enliven and keep healthy the local reef system. We worked with people to facilitate a plan of action that included repairing the structural problems with the road, instating a *Vala* area in the bay with strict protocols and rules, creating a program for getting young people excited about learning what elders wanted to teach, and facilitating some difficult conversations between elders and young people.

In another site we worked with elders who were having trouble controlling the taking of appropriately sized species from their local fringing reef area and keeping people from other islands off of their reef. They set up a *Vala* area and then working with us they revitalised local fish traps. They drew on their own existing knowledge, archival research that I and my students at Barnard and Columbia did and reading translations of texts focused on fish traps in other places across Oceania.

Our other kinds of collaborative work grew out of our initial collaborative work and the methodology we use for it.

In 2012, a group of elders, traditional leaders or *Maimai*, and master carvers came to John and me and asked us to work with them to think about the longevity and liveliness of the *Malagan* system. *Malagan* is the name for a complex system of ceremonies, rituals, and customary practices in Northern New Ireland that includes the carving of extraordinary wooden objects. Since then, we have worked with elders to think about *Malagan* carving techniques and what needs to be done to strengthen the conditions whereby these practices, and the entire socio-ecological and spiritual matrix that they are a part of, continues into the future. Here, we partnered with the American Museum of Natural History and the US Ambassador's fund for cultural perseverance and created a digital archive of *Malagan* objects housed at the museum which were repatriated to the master carvers and their families through a gift of iPad tablets from the Tow Foundation. These carvers used this as an impetus to create lineage specific carving schools that are getting young people interested in the more esoteric aspects of *Malagan* as well as in learning to carve.

Additionally, in 2009, we cofounded the *Ranguwa Solwara Skul*, a school dedicated to teaching at the nexus of Indigenous and scientific knowledge. The school functions like what we would call a sleep-away camp in North America. When we have the funding for it, we bring young people together with elders and outside researchers to conduct week-long projects focused on teaching about reef health at the nexus of local expertise, scientific expertise, and pedagogical techniques that get kids excited about both the environment and the things that their grandparents and community elders know about the world. This is also tied to a project we have with a group of *Maimai* focused on strengthen traditional leadership.

From the beginning of our collaboration, we have worked with the PNG National Fisheries College to host interns who want to move from fisheries management degrees into NGO work. These students work with John and I each North American summer to do a range of projects that teach them different aspects of how NGOs work. We have also worked with interns from my university. Some of these students have come to PNG to volunteer with Ailan Awareness but the majority of them have done work towards bio-cultural revitalisation through archival research, through designing digital repatriation programs,

and through other various tasks that support both Ailan Awareness and other local NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

Finally, in late 2019, we received a grant that was going to allow us to expand our *Malagan* work. Women leaders came to us in 2017 and asked us to work with them on documenting and revitalising women's dances, women's songs, and women's epistemic practice around biodiversity. This work was stalled by the Covid19 crisis but our wonderful funder, Synchronicity Earth, allowed us to repurpose that entire grant to facilitate Covid education across New Ireland. We worked with the local nursing college and the local hospital to take health care workers to remote islands to talk with people about Covid prevention and to try and dispel some of the misinformation about the pandemic.

### Conclusion

Our approach in everything we do follows an ethical guideline that we have developed with the elders who serve as our advisors. It is based on three action-based practices: 1) Step up, 2) Mobilise resources, and 3) Step back.

**Stepping Up:** For us this means that we go where we are asked to go when communities or community members invite us to meet with them and to talk about their concerns over socio-ecological and socio-spiritual loss. We do not impose ourselves on communities who do not invite us.

**Mobilising Resources:** Once we have a relationship with a community and we understand what their needs and desires are with regard to socio-ecological and socio-spiritual revitalisation, we work to find the resources and tools that allow for the plans they make to come to fruition. We utilise the expertise we have in-house, we call on and draw on the expertise of our colleagues across the globe, we work with interns from Barnard College and Columbia University as well as from schools in Papua New Guinea, and we seek funding from foundations to bring community plans into being.

**Stepping Back:** We believe that once we have provided our expertise and resources that communities must own their projects or enact sovereignty over them. We have watched too many NGOs micromanage community-based projects in a way that seems to indicate that the project 'belongs' to the NGO and not the community. While we provide on-going visits and spaces for discussion and plan revisions and refinement, at a fundamental level we believe that all our work belongs to our partners, not to us. We rely heavily on the work of community elders in this part of our process. We believe that entrusting the projects to elders both creates conditions for their longevity and strengthens local respect for elders.

Our work together focuses on fostering Indigenous self-determination with regard to socio-spiritual-ecological relations during a time of overheating (Eriksen 2016) and the acceleration of acceleration (Erikson, this issue). We are not naïve about the state of what people might call 'biodiversity' and 'cultural diversity'. In many places in the world the complex assemblages between creatures, systems, human understandings, and cross-being communication are changing in ways that tend towards homogeneity. In New Ireland the gain in momentum of 'acceleration' has brought the worst of marine and coastal climate-related transformation. The water, already the warmest water in the world, is getting hotter. Thermal expansion has resulted in sea level rise that has affected drinking water, food production, settlement location, and other aspects of people's daily lives. Changing weather patterns, and the increased intensity of storms, have affected everything. Yet, the systems of

relationality, the biosemiotic assemblages, if one is to use the language of this issue, that the people we work with care about, while changed, are still there. Our work foregrounds the desires for system longevity decided upon by local people and together we try to do what we can to make lives better while we still can.

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