

# Resource conflicts and the anthropology of the dark and the good in highlands Papua New Guinea

Jerry K. Jacka

University of Colorado Boulder

In this article I consider why individuals sacrifice their lives for the collective. In the Porgera Valley of highlands Papua New Guinea, young men who are called ‘Rambos’ engage in sustained tribal conflicts due to increasing social inequalities in an area that is supposedly benefiting from socioeconomic development. The opening of the Porgera Gold Mine in 1990 ushered in an era of anticipated benefits that were hoped to transform the lives of the region’s subsistence horticulturalists. Yet, anticipated flows of mining money and social benefits have largely failed to materialise. The abjection experienced by young men eventuated into a series of tribal fights, resulting in deaths, displacements, and the destruction of most infrastructure. I examine the fighting and its aftermath in relation to anthropologies of the dark and the good and argue that these polar opposites can hinder more subtle understandings of value plurality among Porgerans.

**Keywords:** Papua New Guinea, resource conflict, development, warfare, value plurality

## INTRODUCTION

Resource extraction in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a cornerstone of government policy that is expected to bring development to remote areas of the country (Ballard and Banks 2003). Yet, as the case of Bougainville showed in the late 1980s (Filer 1990), resource extraction and resource conflict frequently go hand in hand in PNG. More recently, two reports (Jubilee Australia 2018a,b) highly critical of PNG’s economically lauded Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) project argue that instead of an anticipated doubling of PNG’s GDP, the LNG project has only increased it by 10%. Other socioeconomic indicators such as household incomes, employment, and government expenditure on social services have all fallen since the project started in 2014. Moreover, violence toward LNG workers and sabotage of LNG infrastructure by supposed beneficiaries of the project have increased dramatically ‘as a younger generation of leaders... begin to flex their muscles’ (Jubilee Australia 2018b: 5). As the authors of the report argue, supporters of the LNG project have suggested that this violence is

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‘merely a continuation of previous “tribal” violence’ (Jubilee Australia 2018b: 9). In the Porgera Valley of highlands PNG, violence associated with the development of the world-class Porgera Gold Mine in 1990 has likewise been argued by the mining company to be based on prior conflicts rather than responses to inequalities associated with resource extraction (Burton 2014).

In PNG resource extraction and resource conflicts are entangled in complex ways. While contemporary conflicts are often related to previous conflicts, the advent of cash payments to resource beneficiaries has intensified inequalities in resource development areas. Coincident with flows of new cash into these areas has been increasing procurement and use of high-powered guns such as M-16s, AK-47s, and AR-15s. Young men have enthusiastically adopted these guns in tribal conflicts, with those who use such guns in battle called ‘Rambos’. As I discuss later, the status of these Rambos is complicated. On the one hand they are admired by both young men and women alike, but on the other hand people are also critical of their actions, which often drag non-combatant clans into tribal conflicts against their will. This dovetails with the vast scale of destruction that occurs in the context of current resource projects. In 2016 I interviewed people in the eastern Porgera Valley regarding a series of tribal fights that raged from 2004 to 2012. During the eight years of fighting approximately one hundred people were killed, hundreds more displaced, and nearly every structure in eastern Porgera was burned or razed to the ground. As Roland<sup>1</sup> explained to me:

This fight actually started back in the 1980s when one of our clansmen took some gardening land from one of the clans that lives on the mountain above us. One day this clan came down and killed the man who took their land and his son. We fought for some time. During the village court hearing regarding these killings, we killed one of their clan members. Then we went up to their villages, burned their houses down, and drove them out of the area. Later, some of our clan members who had married women from this enemy clan started making gardens on these abandoned lands. My father pleaded with them to not do so, as he said that more trouble would come in the future.

The events that Roland was recounting to me had occurred in the mid-1980s, but like nearly all of the young men I have met from Porgera, he could retell stories of past conflicts with the same kinds of details that his clan fathers had related to me during fieldwork in the late 1990s. At the time of the 1980s fights Roland was three months old. ‘My mother said that I was always crying. She and the other women were hiding in the forest at this time. She thought my crying was going to get all of us killed,’ he recalled. By the end of this first phase of conflict in the 1980s, six men had been killed: three men from the enemy clan (all sons of three brothers) and three allies who had come to assist Roland’s clan. To everyone involved this was ‘a big fight’ (*yanda andane* in Ipili) since Roland’s clan would have to compensate not only the three men killed, but also the three clans from which their allies hailed. Warfare compensations typically require between 70 and 80 pigs, so Roland’s clan would need to come up with nearly 500 pigs to ensure that hostilities would not rekindle.

Roland's clan would eventually make the necessary compensations. But simultaneously with these events, the resource extraction industry expanded dramatically in the Porgera Valley—from small-to-medium scale alluvial mining to construction of a large-scale industrial mine, given that discovery of a sizeable gold deposit made such mega-mining feasible (Biersack 1995; Golub 2014; Jacka 2015). Anthropologists researching the impact of the mine agreed that it brought 'uneven development', by which they meant it created a diverse field of haves and have-nots, with the latter greatly outweighing the former. In these conditions, with men having greater access to money than ever before, I was drawn to study increasing warfare and escalating violence across the region. In the first sections of this article, I examine these developments as the 'dark' side of neoliberal capitalism (recalling Ortner's [2016a] argument discussed below). I also consider the ways in which warfare became comprehensible as both a 'bad' and 'good' response to the new social inequality that emerged. I conclude that a rigid adherence to different analyses in terms of 'dark' and 'good' anthropology can hinder subtle understandings of a larger human question that has been raised in many times and places: why a young man, in this case any one of a number of young fighters called Rambos, might sacrifice his life for the larger collective. This was a problem that bothered the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (Hubert and Mauss 1964; Mauss 1990; cf. Guyer 2014) in the early twentieth century, as surely as it worried my Porgeran friends and informants during the years of our current century.

The start of large-scale mining in 1990 set the conditions for what Sherry Ortner (2016a: 49) has called 'dark anthropology: that is, anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them'. A mere decade and a half after mining began the Porgera Valley was beset by tribal fighting, state and corporate-sponsored human rights abuses, and social and environmental degradation (see Jacka 2015). Dark anthropology is in many respects similar to what Joel Robbins (2013) has recently termed 'the anthropology of the suffering slot'. In the 1980s, he argues, anthropology moved from the savage other to the suffering subject as a means to better engage key cultural problems facing humanity. In what he calls 'an anthropology of the good', Robbins (2013: 457) urges us to complement the suffering subject by examining 'the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project'.

We are indebted to the work of Robbins and Ortner for setting out the terms of a debate that can show a path for ethnographic analysis of deeper meanings for apparently brutal human experience. My goals in this paper are to hold these two theories—dark anthropology and the anthropology of the good—in productive tension with one another through the analysis of conflict and post-conflict community rebuilding in Porgera. As I will demonstrate, dark anthropology and the suffering subject are effective in highlighting key aspects of life in late capitalism: the abjection (Ferguson 1999), devaluation (Marx and Engels 1955), and dispossession (Harvey 2005) that many people experience despite the diverse ways that capitalism unfolds in specific

places and times. To risk slipping into the excesses of dark anthropology, however, it is important for ethnographers to make sense of how people struggle 'to live lives within the powerful hegemonies of their time' (Ortner 2016b: 34) by focusing on perceptions and actions related to what individuals and collectives within different cultures construe as 'good'. The task at hand, then, is to examine both dark and good anthropology to avoid the potentially simplifying extremes that each of these alone could project in analysis. In the remainder of this article, I provide ethnographic background for the Porgera case and consider in greater detail how the ethnographic facts speak theoretically to what is dark and what is good in Porgeran culture. I then focus on the events leading to the eight-year long war in eastern Porgera and its outcomes, concluding with an examination of recent efforts to reconcile conflicts through community re-building.

## **PORGERA AND THE PROMISE OF DEVELOPMENT**

Located at the end of the Highlands Highway, the Porgera region was once a remote, rainforested valley in western Enga Province (see Figure 1). Elevations in the valley range from 900 m a.s.l. in the north to high mountains up to 3900 m in the south. Most people live in a fairly narrow elevational band between 1700 and 2400 m. Approximately 60% of the land is covered in mid-montane rainforest. Rainfall averages 3740 mm annually and there is little seasonality, so crops are planted continuously. The staple food is sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) supplemented by taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), bananas (*Musa* spp.), corn (*Zea mays*), and several types of greens. Pigs are raised for compensation exchanges and goats are raised for meat. Approximately 95% of the population are subsistence horticulturalists living in bush material houses.<sup>2</sup> Ipili speakers consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of the valley. With the onset of mining, however, significant numbers of neighbouring Enga and Huli people have moved into the valley, marrying into Ipili social groups, thereby constituting multilingual, multiethnic families. From a pre-mine population of 9000 in 1990, those living in the valley are now estimated at more than 50,000 people (Jacka 2015). Given the complex ethnic configurations that now dominate social dynamics, I refer to the people as Porgerans to reflect this dynamism.

Warfare in highland Papua New Guinea has spawned rich ethnographic accounts (Glasse 1959; Vayda 1971; Meggitt 1977; Sillitoe 1977, 1978; Wiessner 2006, 2010; Wiessner and Pupu 2012), and the situation in Porgera is analogous to these depictions, as Roland's story of warfare above highlights. There are many reasons why Porgerans fight: they go to war over women, money, garden boundaries (as described above), and the theft of pigs, wild pandanus nuts, and garden produce, to name major causes. The complete takeover of land and the subsequent expulsion of losing groups due to resource pressure (cf. Meggitt 1977; Rappaport 1984) is never a cause, as will be seen later. Based on oral history and other sources, Porgeran warfare has always been destructive. For instance, during one initial government patrol into Porgera in 1939, John Black<sup>3</sup> noted that 'today's journey was through a devastated tribal no

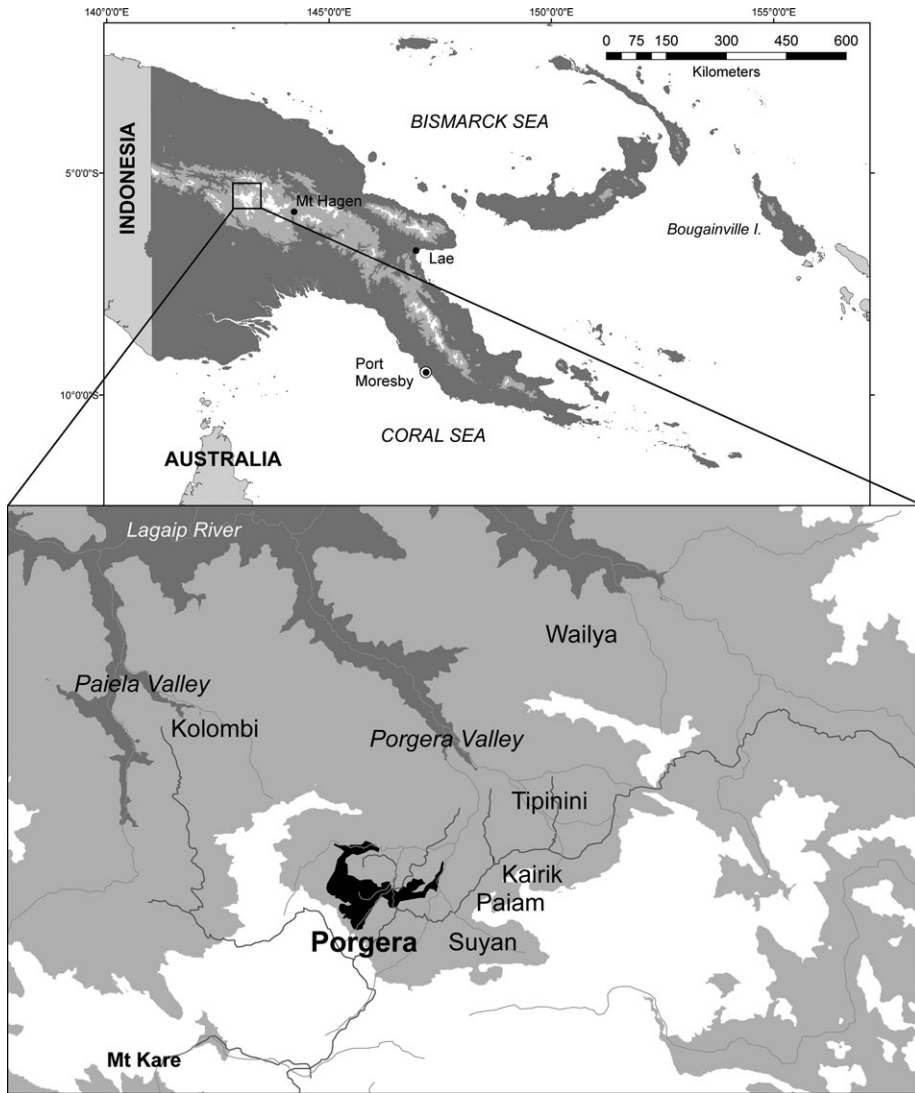


Figure 1 Map of the Porgera Valley.

man's land, the scene of recent tribal fighting. All houses had been burnt and gardens razed to the ground. Several square miles had been devastated'. Contemporary fighting seeks the same goals: burning houses, destroying gardens, chopping down economically important trees, and killing enemy combatants. As I discuss later, however, new developments including the introduction of high-powered guns have resulted in massive deaths, which poses severe challenges to managing and reducing conflicts by means of compensation processes.

Prior to the discovery of gold all Porgerans were subsistence horticulturalists. From the 1960s through the 1980s, however, alluvial gold beds on the banks of the Porgera River were referred to as 'second gardens'. By one estimate (Gibbs 1977) 75% of the male work force engaged in alluvial and small-scale mining at some point in time during the year. A unique aspect of PNG and its indigenous inhabitants is that approximately 97% of the country is held ('owned') by customary social groups. As such, under PNG law and in accordance with the PNG Mining Act of 1979, resource development projects must provide benefits and compensation for indigenous landowners affected by the project. The opening of the Porgera mine in 1990 dramatically altered participation in the new, large-scale gold economy. From an environmental standpoint the riverine disposal of mining wastes and processed tailings buried the downstream alluvial gold beds, removing the possibility of obtaining gold from people's 'second gardens'. From a social standpoint the distribution of royalties and compensation money associated with large-scale mining reduced the number of people enriched from the gold economy: only 23 sub-clans represented by seven clans out of about forty were considered to be 'official' landowners. Under the Mining Act, official landowners associated within the Special Mining Lease (SML) area were the only recipients to receive monetary benefits, relocation houses, and preferential hiring at the mine. Under this arrangement, participation in the gold economy fell from 75% of the male work force in the valley pursuing alluvial mining to less than 20% of the total population receiving benefits from large-scale mining.

In an attempt to ensure that other clans and parts of the valley would benefit from development, a quasi-governmental organisation called the Porgera Development Authority (PDA) was created to oversee development projects generated from mining revenue. In the eastern Porgera Valley two projects were earmarked to develop training facilities as well as income-generating schemes. One of these was a cattle-raising project; the other was a coffee plantation. The cattle-raising venture was to be a showcase project of PNG's agricultural division, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), which would provide an extension officer to teach and oversee cattle raising to people in the area. The area chosen for the project was on the land of one of the sub-clans of the Piango, a group called the Topeko. In the mid-1980s the Piango Topeko had already ceded land for the building of district level government offices that included houses for a patrol officer and a DPI officer. In 1999 I followed a gleeful group of Topeko men as they cut boundary markers for the cattle operation. July, one of the men, admonished a large group of Topeko before the work began, stating: 'We must not fight with each other like we did in the past. We can't act like wild dogs and bite the hand of the government. We MUST become developed'.

The second project, a coffee plantation, was eventually supposed to be 165 hectares, but in 1999, contracts were given to clear only 10 hectares for planting coffee. While the plantation was being cleared and planted the government paid to extend a gravel road from the main Porgera road to the plantation. Every day people would sit

alongside the road and watch the excavator at work. Women set up informal cooking stalls to try earn income from the spectators. People would spend hours discussing how much the coffee, cattle, and road were going to improve their lives. From an area that people said had suffered neglect from both the state and mining development, they opined that eastern Porgera would one day become the centre of socioeconomic development in western Enga Province. One man laughed and said: ‘Just wait until the mine closes and those [SML] landowners no longer have anything. They’ll come begging to us for food and money, and we’ll turn our backs to them just like they do to us now’.

Both of these projects dovetailed with expectations throughout the Porgera Valley that the presence of a world-class mine would utterly and positively transform the lives of the people living there. Due to government and PDA deficiencies in managing these projects, however, the cattle project never got beyond demarcating the boundaries of the cattle holding area. By contrast, the coffee project was met with great enthusiasm by the participants during the time the first 10 hectares were planted. A picture showing the future development of the town of Paiam, which was to be the base for mining operations, was posted in the local level government headquarters and in the PDA offices (Figure 2). People talked with high hopes about how Paiam would attract a large population of expatriates to live in the valley. The land that had been chosen for the coffee plantation, however, straddled the boundaries of two clans who had been enemies for years. The PDA and the local government shared the



**Figure 2** Artist's rendition of Paiam in the future (source: Porgera Joint Venture). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

notion that the promise of development would quell bad feelings and people would work together at the plantation to make it successful. As will be seen, these hopes were greatly inflated.

## THE 'GOOD' AND THE 'DARK', INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY

It is productive here to examine the conceptualisation of 'good' and 'dark' anthropology—and to think through them in terms of both individual and collective interests. Notwithstanding the over-cited notion of Melanesians as 'dividuals' (Strathern 1988), my experience with many Papua New Guineans is that they do not see themselves in such radically different terms of personhood from other peoples in the world. Most Papua New Guineans I know live in a system fraught with tensions between articulating the goals of the individual with the goals of the collective group. Porgerans claim alliance with multiple groups through descent, marriage, and acquaintance (Biersack 1995; Jacka 2015). These groups, called *yame* or *tata* (often 'clan', or less frequently 'tribe', by English-speaking Porgerans; *lain* in Tok Pisin), are named, landowning assemblages of agnatic and cognatic kin, in-married affines, and non-kin who share collective interests of the clan in endeavours such as marriage compensations, warfare, and death compensations. This system allows individuals to shift alliances to another clan when the individual's interests no longer align with their original group, or when the fortunes of another clan entice individuals to join them. This is what has led Porgera's population to balloon to its current level, as there are few mechanisms to prevent kin and affines from claiming membership in a local Porgeran group. Women, in this sense, are said to be bridges (*wana ipa toko*), in that once a woman marries into a Porgeran clan her entire extended family can claim membership to that group as well.

At times, however, individuals can be swept up by their group's intentions, even when their own interests differ, especially during warfare. This engages local conceptions of the good and the dark. The Tok Pisin terms *gutpela sindaun*, or good life, and *taim hevi*, or heavy times, captures elements of distinction we might roughly associate analytically with the good and the dark. When referring to *gutpela sindaun* people mention things like abundant gardens, ample supplies of dried firewood, healthy and numerous children, and harmonious relations. *Taim hevi*, on the other hand, is the inverse of these things, with the addition of warfare, poor fortune (such as an accidental house fire or lost pig), and the death of a close relative or spouse.

Warfare complicates this relationship between the good and the dark in several ways. Wars are fought between groups, with two primary groups considered the war's 'owners' (*yanda tene*, 'war source'), which are frequently joined by allied groups (*yanda eka*, 'war birds'). The war's owners are responsible for paying compensation to the other side at the cessation of hostilities as well as compensating the deaths of any of their allies. Porgerans say that 'war is wealth' (*yanda takame*) in recognition of the ways that conflict and death move wealth by means of compensation between and among social groups.



An individual's perspective on war is just as complicated as the distinction between war as something that creates both wealth and heavy times. Fierce warriors are respected members of groups. Prior to the era of gun-based warfare (pre-2004) the fiercest and most fearless fighters were called *peyapeya* (from the verb *peya* 'to hit or kill'). This term recognises these men's ability to kill an enemy in broad daylight in a public setting by sidling up to his foe as if a friend and then quickly chopping him in the head or neck with an axe or bush knife. This contrasts to most fighting that occurs with groups of men conducting night-time raids, ambushes on a trail through dense forest, or attacks on a lone enemy in a garden. As one *peyapeya* remarked to me in 1999, 'people in my clan respect me, when they see me, if they have a little bit of money, they give me some. If they are smoking a cigarette or drinking a Coke, they'll give me half. That's how it is'. With the incorporation of guns into warfare since 2004 the term *peyapeya* has been replaced by Rambo (see also Wiessner 2006). Whereas *peyapeya* were typically men in their 20s to 50s, Rambos are exclusively young men who specialise in killing with firearms. In some cases a Rambo owns his own gun, but in Porgera a clan usually owns a gun and trains a half dozen or so young men as Rambos. Today Rambos are often employed by other clans. Among the neighbouring Enga, Polly Wiessner (2006: 183) notes that when Rambos were 'fighting for clans of distant relatives, they were paid in pigs and money and given access to women during their stays in the host clan . . . [and they] may have sex with 10–20 women during one war'. In 2006 young men in Porgera waxed enthusiastically about various Rambos they knew, re-enacting for me how they dodge bullets and roll behind logs and boulders, all the while dropping their enemies one by one.

Yet the lives of *peyapeya* and Rambos are not easy. The same *peyapeya* I interviewed in 1999 lamented to me that because of his status he couldn't leave his own clan's lands for fear of being targeted by his enemies. For the Enga, Wiessner (2006: 183) reports that 'Ex-Rambos are hunted men who can only travel within a limited range for years after they cease fighting'. By the end of the fighting in 2012 in Porgera my friend, the *peyapeya*, plus several others were dead. Of the half-dozen Rambos that the Piango had trained with their M-16 (see next section), all of them had been targeted during the fighting and killed in ambushes. In 2016, as I walked past the numerous graves dotting the eastern Porgera Valley (see Jacka 2016), my companions would point out who was buried there and how they had died. After passing a cluster of three graves (Figure 3), one friend, Wanpis, commented to all of us: '*Ai, Rambos, ol i kisim hat taim nau*' ('Hey, the Rambos, they're having hard times now').

As Vigh (2015: 96) argues, for young men in Guinea-Bissau living marginal lives outside of the dominant order, engaging in conflict provides 'a space of participation' in order to 'enable movement toward [what young men see as] better lives and positive futures'. However, unlike the young men in Vigh's article, young men in Porgera are not living lives of poverty or precarity. With access to abundant land resources, any able-bodied individual in Porgera can build a house, clear land, plant a garden, and subsist reasonably well. The desires of young men in Porgera are not to escape poverty but are, rather, to live like a young man from an SML landowning clan,



**Figure 3** A grave with Meme the M-16 and a pump action shotgun painted onto it. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

receiving quarterly royalty checks, being able to buy alcohol and other conspicuous consumer goods, perhaps even to own a Toyota Land Cruiser. But young men in Porgera are marginalised from the wealth generated by mining. Participating in conflict for them is likened to ‘working in the life market’ (Jacka 2015), which they describe as being willing to sacrifice their life for the clan. Many men do this knowing that their clan will be compensated for their deaths: men know that the gift of their life to the group obligates the group to reciprocate through a revenge killing of someone from the enemy clan (cf. Mauss 1990). If a dead man’s clan brothers delay a revenge killing, the spirit of the deceased man haunts their dreams, asking why they haven’t revenged his death.

While men are aware of their expectation to fight, the vast majority of them prefer not to. As Roland noted: ‘When you’re fighting, you never really sleep. You can’t be in your house, so you sleep at the base of a tree, one eye open waiting for the enemy to come. Rain pours down, insects bite you. Your eyes are constantly blood-shot from lack of sleep’. Moreover, with an established cash economy in place, many people have businesses or jobs with the mine or the government. When a business person’s clan is involved in a conflict, the first casualty is often the business, which is looted and burned to the ground. Many men complain about losing their jobs, as they were afraid to expose themselves to their enemies while travelling from their homes to their jobs.

During and after fighting the demands on people who earn money are also profound, as they are expected to buy food and bullets for the fighters, and then pigs in the aftermath of fighting when compensations must be paid.

Tensions arise then from the inequality between the power of the collective over the power of the individual in shaping social dynamics in Porgera. This is because there are constant pressures to accede to the demands of the collective. Few men are able to negotiate a path outside of these constraints short of leaving the region and living elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. Ezekiel, one of Roland's clan 'fathers,' highlights this dilemma. Ezekiel was one of the few men from Roland's clan to obtain a Grade 10 education. For several years after graduation he worked at the mine, and in the mid-1990s he became the Director of Ipili Porgera Investments (IPI)—an investment group founded at the start of mining to create development opportunities in Porgera. While Director, Ezekiel embezzled 'over 1 million Kina' (approximately US\$ 750,000, at the time) from IPI, much to the delight of his fellow clan members. Roland explained: 'In your culture this wouldn't be a good thing, but we always think about the group'. In doing this, 'Ezekiel was making our group stronger. He would always have money and we could go to him when we needed help'. But as Ezekiel complained to me in 2000, the demands of his clan were so excessive that he eventually moved to one of his wives' clan's lands to escape the expectations that his own clan put on him.

## THE DEATH OF EZEKIEL

During times of conflict, two kinds of men are singled out for murder—leaders and good fighters. In 2003, Paul, one of the key leaders in the eastern Porgera Valley, was killed in broad daylight in a village trade store. The killer was from one of the clans associated with the coffee plantation. As word spread about the murder Paul's clansmen gathered together and raided the killer's village, burning houses and killing pigs. From there they went to the plantation and started chopping down coffee trees. Fighting died down after a few days and in March 2004 most of the clans in this part of the valley were gathering a compensation for Paul. While Ezekiel and his clan had not been part of the conflict, as a leader Ezekiel nevertheless brought a large pig to contribute to the compensation to ensure that hostilities would not resume. While waiting for the compensation to begin, Ezekiel joined a group of people sitting on the ground playing cards. Engrossed in the game, Ezekiel and the others failed to see a man sidle up behind Ezekiel with a bush knife. In an instant the man chopped Ezekiel in the back of the head splitting open his skull but not immediately killing him. While some clan members rushed Ezekiel to the hospital, others caught the killer and 'hacked him to little pieces' with their axes and bush knives.

So, what were the motivations of a young man to give his life in the murder of Ezekiel? According to several people I talked with, the killer was one of the grandsons of one of the three brothers who had all had a son killed in the fight from the 1980s, as alluded to towards the beginning of this article, in which these three brothers and others had lost land after the conflict. By the early 2000s the three brothers and their extended families

had come back to some of their non-contested lands to resettle in the eastern Porgera Valley. Since compensations had been paid in the late 1980s everyone assumed that hostilities would not resume. However, it is often the actions of a single individual making a revenge killing that draw an entire group into a protracted conflict. In this case, the brother of one of the men killed in the 1980s had urged his nephew—who many called ‘a marijuana man’, a man of no account—to revenge his brother’s death. Guns have also reshaped the power of individuals to wage war, which customarily was the prerogative of elder men (Sillitoe 1978; Wiessner 2006). As one interviewee in Enga recounted to Wiessner (2010: 1): ‘the few young men who possess guns make the decision whether to go fight or not. . . . We are all like passengers in a public bus and the driver is in control. If I happen to have a gun, then my people must listen to what I have to say. I am the driver. The power is in the gun. It is the gun that is speaking and not me’.

Shortly after Ezekiel was attacked he died. When word was sent out from the hospital fighters from his clan swarmed up to his killer’s clan’s lands. En route they encountered the killer’s sister and seized her. Arguments ensued about whether to let her go or not, and eventually they chopped off her hand in retribution. When they arrived at the houses they killed two men, burned all of the houses down, and stole the pigs and goats. When they returned to Ezekiel’s clan’s lands, Roland’s father pleaded with them to stop fighting. He emphasised that he had stressed that something bad would eventuate after the 1980s war, and now it has come about. However, he noted, Ezekiel’s death had now been revenged. But the young men were still eager to fight given Ezekiel’s status as a leader. So his clan took some of the money that he had embezzled and bought an M-16 on the black market (Figure 4).

A few months after they buried Ezekiel, they brought the gun to his grave late at night and ‘called’ (*ge mina*) to his spirit to come join them. When Ezekiel’s spirit arrived they told it to go live in the gun to ensure that it would always shoot straight and kill all their enemies. According to Roland, the spirit-enhanced gun was amazing: ‘It just ate everything in its path, so we started to call it Meme’ (Tok Pisin for ‘goat’). With their spirit-powered M-16, a seven round pump shotgun, and several homemade guns, Ezekiel’s clan initiated a series of revenge killings that had no precedent in the history of the region. Eventually seven other clans joined the two sides in the conflict. With no promises for development from the failed projects initiated by PDA, many young men felt they had no choice but to fight. Between 2004 and 2012, as mentioned, approximately one hundred men were killed, hundreds of people displaced, and nearly every structure in the area—houses, trade stores, schools, aid posts, and churches—destroyed and burned to the ground. Women returned to their natal lands with children in tow, as for the first time in the history of conflicts, women were being targeted for revenge murders, with two women from Ezekiel’s clan and one woman from his killer’s clan being killed.

Teyo, one of my long-term informants and a clan brother of Ezekiel’s, heard that he was going to be targeted during the fighting. He remarked:

During this time my sons and wife were very worried I was going to be killed during the fighting and wanted me to run away. But I don’t usually leave during fighting so I just



**Figure 4** A group of graves of Rambos killed in fighting. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

stayed here. Besides my wife's land is adjacent to Atakai [the enemy clan] land, and everything up there was destroyed. Everyone left except for my wife, my sons, and five other men from our clan. Then one night the Atakai came and killed one of my clan brothers. They tricked him by calling his mobile phone and when he stepped out of his house to answer the call, they shot him dead. So, the next day I went up to Apalaka [a community in the SML] where some of my clan were staying during the fighting. One of my clan brothers wanted me to stay there and make a garden, as he was afraid I would get killed. I went up to the garden area he pointed out to me but then I looked back at my mountain in Tipinini [Mt. Kalepe in eastern Porgera; most clans are associated with particular mountains and streams (see Jacka 2018)] and started to feel really sorry for my place. I just stood there alone in that garden crying about my place. No one saw my tears fall. The following day I made up an excuse to my Apalaka brother and told him some people wanted me to go to a court in Tipinini. I also had left my wife here and I worried that she may have been killed while I was away. So, I left and came back here. I couldn't stand to be away from my place.

## **AFTER THE FIGHTING STOPS**

By 2012 the fighting began to wind down. There was nothing left to burn down, all of the Rambos from both sides of the conflict had been killed and no one had any

property left to loot or destroy. In addition, national elections were beginning, and due to the long period of fighting, Porgerans had lost their local MP seat to an outsider from an adjacent valley during the 2007 election. Peace negotiations began and word was sent to the people who had fled to return, build houses and gardens, and recreate community again. Secondary forest had encroached into the old gardening sites as had wild pigs. 'There were too many wild pigs and too much forest to go back to the old garden sites', Roland noted. In an act of reconciliation, Lemongo, one of the 'fathers' of the man who killed Ezekiel, and the husband of one of the women killed in fighting, offered a prime piece of gardening land to Teyo to distribute to his clan that was located between two rivers which served as natural barricades to the wild pigs.

Gifts of land such as Lemongo gave to Teyo are incredibly rare (I have never heard of it before, but there may be instances of it I am unaware of). A gift of land of such a size—nearly 40 hectares—is especially notable since Teyo publicly tried to draw Lemongo close to him during the fighting by loudly asking to come give him a cigarette and light it. Teyo remarked: 'I did this because I wanted to kill him when he came close to me. I was mad because I had been living in the bush for so long'. Lemongo related to me that the land gift was necessary because everyone was so closely related and so many people had died. While Teyo and Lemongo always referred to the land gift as from one man to the other, it certainly involved each of their clans as well. Average garden sizes are around 0.5 hectares, and in fact, in 2016, Teyo had already distributed plots between 0.25 and 1 hectare to 16 different clan members.

Because of the new garden land, Teyo's influence as a traditional leader, and Roland's efforts to reconstitute the Seventh Day Adventist Church, people started to trickle back into the region. By mid-2016, several new houses were being built, gardens planted, and bridges repaired (Figure 5). However, many people I met with said they will never go back: 'too much passion for fighting, too much bush' they claimed. Others want to return but can't. Takia, Teyo's son, killed an enemy fighter on his father's doorstep late one night during a battle. As the spirit of a man haunts the area where he was killed, Takia can't even enter his own parents' house for fear of being attacked by the spirit of the man he killed. In the final conversation I had with Teyo in June 2016, I asked: 'So everything's peaceful now and the fights are over?' He replied: 'Well, for now [long pause] but you know, someday someone's going to get upset about his father being killed, or his brother being killed, and it will all start again'.

Ostensibly compensations are the antidote to the resumption of conflicts. However, as shown by Ezekiel's case, which is not an anomaly, there is always the possibility that old tensions will surface and be acted upon at death compensations (see also Glasse 1959). The death toll from fighting has also inflated the price of pigs in Porgera. Pigs that in the early 2000s would have cost K900 (about US\$300) now sell for around K3000. Of the total number of dead, the Piango (which is Teyo and Roland's clan) are responsible for compensating the deaths of 26 men, which will require something on the order of 2000 pigs, or about K6 million. As one man noted 'sons and grandsons'



**Figure 5** Bridge being repaired in eastern Porgera Valley. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

will still be paying off the compensation debt for decades to come. Added to this, the Piango had to come up with novel arrangements to coalesce the necessary pig herds for paying compensation because most of the leaders left alive are Seventh Day Adventists and are not supposed to engage in compensation with pigs. In this case, Teyo and

Roland's father were given 'exemptions' to care for pigs until their compensations have been paid. With the looming debt for compensations and a lack of leaders to care for pigs, the notion that 'war is wealth' seems counterfactual for the Piango. Moreover, the Piango feel especially vulnerable after one of their young men, desiring to be a Rambo, along with another man, snuck off with Meme, the M-16, to attack an enemy in March 2016. He was himself killed, however, and Meme was seized by the killers' group. As Wanpis said to me later after walking by the Rambos' graves: 'Not only was our leader, Ezekiel, killed, but during the fighting all of our Rambos were killed too. Now we are just weak/men who are like women (*meri man tasol*; 'just women men')'.

## CONCLUSION

Abjection, in Ferguson's (1999: 236) description of declining modernity in Zambia's mining industry, is not just about being cast out against the promises of development, but being cast down relative to what many former miners once had, and what they sense they will never have again. My use of this term for young men in Porgera attempts to capture their sense of frustration over what they perceive as exclusion from the wealth that mining and associated projects would supposedly bring—images of modernisation and development seen in the artist's conception of Paiam, the dreams of access to cash via cattle, coffee projects, and other business opportunities associated with socioeconomic development. However, in contrast to Sahlins' (1992) description of humiliation or abjection in the face of failed development, Porgerans do not thereby give up or disparage their own received social and cultural orientations (cf. Robbins and Wardlow 2005). Two examples of this are the ways that Porgeran men talk admirably about those individuals who use mining money to buy guns and extra wives.

My goal in examining anthropologies of the dark and the good has been to hold them in tension and to deny them as universalising categories. What is dark and good will always need historical and ethnographic contextualisation. Warfare in Porgera from a Porgeran perspective is both dark and good. Young men's desires to be Rambos fuel much of their energy when engaged in conflict, but then the attainment of such a status makes them targets during conflict and marginalised in post-conflict settings. Similarly, compensation is generally considered by Porgerans to be a worthy undertaking to foster social harmony, yet there is easily an undercurrent of revenge in the hearts and minds of participants in compensation exchanges—doing good while holding bad thoughts. Keeping the anthropology of the dark and the good in productive tension also helps to prevent the excesses of either approach. As Laidlaw (2016) points out in his response to Ortner's (2016a) article, the historical trajectory of the world under neoliberal capitalism has not been entirely negative (see also Harvey 2005). Likewise, exploring local conceptions of the good highlight what Joel Robbins (2015: 226) has called 'value plurality', or the recognition of the existence of many different values in society, some complementary, some competing.



As ethnographers of the dark and the good it is critical that we continue to document the negative realities and the hopeful expectations that capitalism brings in relation to local beliefs, practices, and developments, including in the far corners of the world.

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*Please send correspondence to Jerry K. Jacka: jerry.jacka@colorado.edu*

## NOTES

- 1 All of the names of Porgeran individuals, clans, and sub-clans in this article are pseudonyms.
- 2 2011 National Census, National Statistical Office, Waigani, Papua New Guinea.
- 3 Papers of John Black, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 8346/3/11, p. 294.

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