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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, On the roadThe social impact of new roads in Southeast Asia 158 (2002), no: 4, Leiden, 837-854

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A road to freedom

Mee articulations and the Trans-Papua Highway

'[M]etanarratives of destruction and invention need to be held in a kind of unresolved ethnographic tension' (Clifford 1997:187).¹

Pre-colonial routes

Many anthropologists, linguists, and travel writers have emphasized the isolation of Papuans in general and the Mee in particular.² Papua is the Indonesian-occupied half of the island of New Guinea that was officially known as Irian Jaya before its name was changed in October 2001. Leopold Pospisil was the first anthropologist to conduct field research among the Mee in the 1950s. While eating lunch with Kirksey at the 98th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Chicago, he described how he had unsuccessfully attempted to contact the Oge Bage Mee. The word Mee, which means 'people' in several mutually unintelligible Papuan languages, is a general ethnic grouping consisting of several sub-tribes, or *bage*, who live in the Bird's Neck region of Papua. These groups are also

¹ This article is dedicated to Kansus Uweia, who passed away before his aspiration of freedom for his people was realized. Kirksey's field research was graciously funded by New College of Florida, the Explorer's Club, NSEP, the US-Indonesia Society, Wolfson College, the University of Oxford, and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission. The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) provided facilities during the write-up stage of the article. Stimulating conversations with Maria Vesperi, Michael O'Hanlon, and Peter Carey improved this piece. Van Bilsen would like to thank Jan Sjerps for hosting her in the field and Dan Murphy for being a supportive travelling companion. Many thanks to Benny Giay, Niko Kobepa, Octovinus Mote, and Neles Tebay, who served as engaged critics of their own culture.

² Reviewed in Kirksey 2000; see for example Matthiessen 1987:xiv; Connolly and Anderson 1987:14; Mead 1968:4; D'Albertis 1880:2. On the Mee, see Steltenpool 1969:iii; Pospisil 1965:2-3.

known as the Kapauku or Ekari peoples. According to Pospisil, at the time of his fieldwork the Oge Bage Mee had been isolated even from neighboring Papuan groups. He suggested that Kirksey may have 'discovered' the Oge Bage Mee in 1998-1999 when he conducted fieldwork shortly after the completion of the segment of the Trans-Papua Highway through their territory.

There is a competing tradition among Melanesian anthropologists that emphasizes the dynamic and interconnected nature of Papuan societies (Strathern and Stürzenhofecker 1994; Haenen and Pouwer 1989). Lately it has become theoretically fashionable to think about non-local locals, but several of the classic New Guinea ethnographies exemplify this tradition. Malinowski's foundational ethnographic study, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, focuses on a people whose lifestyle is intimately bound with travel and trade (Malinowski 1922:1). While Margaret Mead's study (1968:4) of the Manus characterized her subjects as 'untouched' and 'isolated on [a] small Pacific island' her later work describes the Mountain Arapesh as 'an importing culture' who traditionally derived cultural concepts and material goods from outsiders (1938). In the words of Peter Worsley (1957:50): 'Europeans often underestimate the facility with which news and ideas, and even material objects, can be passed on even in [New Guinea] societies lacking modern techniques of communication'.

Evidence of pre-colonial migrations and exchanges destabilize the framing of 'first contacts'. Reading against the grain of ethnographic accounts of the Mee, one can trace their pre-colonial travels. Despite terrain that made travel difficult, an elaborate network of communication among different Mee groups existed prior to European arrival. For example, the Kamu Valley is a swampy basin dotted with numerous small lakes, which is at an elevation of 1,500 metres above sea level. Steep mountains, with sharp ridges and numerous limestone cliffs rising to over 3,000 metres, surround the alluvial plain (Pospisil 1963). Travel to surrounding regions can be made through lofty mountain passes: three connections exist between the Tigi Lake region and the Kamu Valley, one line of communication leads directly to the Paniai Lake region over the high and rugged Ogijajdimi Pass, two equally difficult connections exist between the valley and Oge Bage Mee territory to the northwest, and a steep passage to the west connects the Kamu Valley with the Mapia region (Pospisil 1963).

Long-distance migrations took place in New Guinea well before the establishment of the first permanent European outposts in the 1890s (Strathern and Stürzenhofecker 1994; Haenen and Pouwer 1989). In the Bird's Head region, which borders the western edge of Mee territory, migrations that took place as early as the sixteenth century can be viewed as a result of people fleeing slave-raiding vessels along the coast (Miedema 1994:124). Contemporary Mee tell stories about their ancestors originating from the east, and these stories possibly map on to a relatively recent historical migration.

Highland Mee conducted expeditions, involving over a week and a half of walking, to salt wells in the neighboring territory of the Moni prior to European arrival (Pospisil 1963). When Europeans first encountered the Mee in 1935 they found an elaborate trade network between coastal and highland groups (Giay 1995; Pospisil 1963). The Mee exchanged palm wood, palm wood bows, stone axes, stone knives, and net bags with coastal people who provided them with cowrie shells, glass bead necklaces, steel axes, and machetes (Pospisil 1963). Before the arrival of Europeans the Mee were already participating in pre-Columbian global exchange networks. The sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is originally from South America and it arrived in Mee territory, via a chain of coastal and either Indonesian or Pacific traders, before the establishment of the first permanent European outposts on the island (Scaglione and Soto 1994).

Before colonial encounters some Mee groups were – and still are – mobile within their own immediate environments. For example, the contemporary Oge Bage Mee live a semi-nomadic lifestyle. In contrast to highland Mee groups who primarily rely on intensive agriculture, the Oge Bage Mee employ extensive horticultural techniques that depend on having a fallow cycle of more than ten years. Oge Bage Mee villages are moved once the soil in a particular locale is exhausted, to allow the forest to regenerate. Many Oge Bage Mee families also employ a series of homesteads in the jungle to serve as temporary bases as they supplement their horticultural yields by hunting pigs, marsupials, birds, and bats as well as gathering forest products such as insects, grubs, fruits, ferns, and mushrooms.

Rooted subjects

Contested framings of local homebodies on the one hand and indigenous travellers on the other hand, speak to wider normative debates within anthropology about the constitution of good ethnographic subjects. The ideals and methodological conventions of the dominant anthropological research paradigm have prescribed that ethnography be conducted in a single isolated site (reviewed in Marcus 1995). New normative standards are being constructed for ethnography that emphasize going beyond the boundaries of traditional village ethnography to frame ethnographic subjects as multi-sited phenomena (Marcus 1995; Clifford 1997) and to destabilize the distinction between the field and the home (Amit 2000). In response to this trend, Englund and Leach (2000) have recently argued for renewed support of localized fieldwork. However, Gupta (2000:240) maintains that it is not justified to assume 'that "the local" is its own universe, a geographically circumscribed space where meanings are made, where the most important social interactions

occur, where economic and affective life is lived, and where social structures are reproduced'.

In our present study of the Mee we hope to contribute to this debate by providing ethnographic and historical evidence of indigenous subjects that are in motion. We, like our interlocutors, have been mobile during the course of our research: in the words of Marcus (1995:106) we have been 'following the people'. Ethnographic field sites have been viewed as being increasingly authentic if they are located far away from the researchers usual home (Amit 2000:2). Gupta and Ferguson (1997:13) argue that this has resulted in the construction of a 'hierarchy of purity of field sites'. Some of our field sites could be viewed as 'pure' within this tradition, but we have not limited ourselves to observations that were made in a geographically bound local context.

In 1998 and 1999 S. Eben Kirksey studied the Oge Bage Mee: he made several extended trips along the Trans-Papua Highway with Oge Bage Mee interlocutors, lived for a total of three months in a village that he calls Misty Ridge, visited Mee homes in the urban centres of Nabire and Jayapura, travelled between Nabire and Jayapura via ocean ship and airplane with Mee interlocutors, and attended courses for four months along with several Mee students at Cendrawasih University. Kirksey taught a university-level anthropology course to several Mee students in 2000. In 2001 he tape-recorded oral history interviews with Paniai Bage Mee living in the highland town of Enarotali and met with leaders of the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, Organization of Papuan Freedom) in an Edage Bage Mee village.

Kiki van Bilsen has been conducting oral history research, from 1999 to the present, among Dutch Franciscan missionaries who work with the Mee. In 2000 Van Bilsen conducted research among two highland Mee groups: the Kamu Bage Mee who live along the Trans-Papua Highway in a densely populated and intensely cultivated valley, and the Debei Bage Mee who live at a distance from mission airstrips and the road in a forested environment.

The academic authority of the ethnographer has stemmed from his (and less frequently her) ability to travel to such distant locations and describe local phenomena (Clifford 1997). Locals with the ability to travel or maintain international correspondence have the potential to undermine this authority. For example, recently in *Anthropology News* a group of Papuans accused an anthropologist of breaching their intellectual property rights and of publishing materials without their approval (Dariawo et al. 1999). Members of the transnational Mee diaspora and Mee scholars who currently live in Papua are our colleagues, friends, advisors, and critics of our work. Mee living in America, Italy, and Papua maintain regular e-mail contact with Kirksey. He has met Mee scholars at two separate international conferences, one in the USA and one in Germany.

Film production companies, newspaper editors, interested friends, professional anthropologists, and even some Mee have encouraged us to view our fieldwork – particularly that among the Oge Bage Mee and the Debei Bage Mee – as 'first contacts' enabled by the Trans-Papua Highway. The secondary literature reviewed above and our ethno-historical interviews with the Mee suggest that this framing of our research erases a long history of trade, migration, communication, colonial contact, and religious conversion. The few primary historical documents that are relevant to this question support the idea that the Mee were engaged with agents of globalization before 1979, when construction began on the Trans-Papua Highway. In 1939 an expedition led by a Dutch colonial named Harzen explored Oge Bage Mee territory in the Siriwo River valley. This expedition was followed up by a police patrol to the same region in 1940. Ambtenaar R. Neher, a Dutch adjunct administrator, travelled to the Siriwo Valley in 1957.³

The travel opportunities open to the Mee dramatically increased following the establishment of the Dutch highland outpost of Enarotali in 1938. By 1940 an airplane flew on a weekly route from Enarotali to coastal cities (Giaŋ 1995). When the Japanese invaded Enarotali during the Second World War, many Mee porters and guides fled east with the Dutch to a remote hideout in the mountains. Most of the Dutch were eventually airlifted to Australia and some Mee accompanied them. When the Dutch returned to Enarotali after the war, they set up theological and primary schools. Some Mee were sent to coastal cities for further training and to occupy positions as civil servants. In 1962 Indonesia assumed control of Papua, and opportunities for Mee to study and work in western Indonesia were opened. In addition to the asphalt airfield in Enarotali, a series of fourteen other grass landing strips have been constructed in Mee villages (Petocz and Raspado 1989). Most of these landing strips are serviced irregularly by missionary airplanes, but some of the larger strips have regular service by private airlines. Many of the missionaries started up small-scale agricultural enterprises, such as coffee cultivation, that depended on these landing strips before the construction of the Trans-Papua Highway.

There are still no functioning landing strips in Oge Bage Mee territory. Nonetheless, before the construction of the Trans-Papua Highway, Oge Bage Mee travelled via canoe or by foot to urban environments where they sought employment and education. For example, the man who hosted Kirksey dur-

³ These documents can be found in the Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), The Hague; Kantoor voor Bevolkingszaken (Nederlands Nieuw Guinea), Collection 2.10.25; Microfiche Cabinet D15C, inv. nr. 248, 250, 252, 283, and 284; the documents are indexed in P. Nienhuys, *Inventaris Kantoor van Bevolkingszaken inzake Nederlands Nieuw Guinea: rapportenarchief (1852) van 1951 tot 1962*, (typescript 1968).

ing his 1998-1999 fieldwork had travelled down the Siriwo River by canoe in the late 1950s. In Nabire he secured a job as a deck hand on a regional shipping line. As part of his job he had regularly travelled to each of the Papuan coastal cities and made several trips across the border to what is now the independent country of Papua New Guinea.

The Trans-Papua Highway

In 1979 construction was begun on the Trans-Papua Highway, an ambitious project to build a road linking some of the major urban centres of Papua (Antara 1997). By the late 1980s the first stage of the road leaving the coastal town of Nabire was complete: a forty-kilometre dirt track had been constructed to a government-sponsored transmigration site called Topo bordering Mee land. The remainder of the road through Mee territory, connecting Nabire with the highland town of Enarotali, was gradually completed by the mid-1990s. Sections of the road leading to the transmigration site are now sealed with asphalt, but the majority of the Trans-Papua Highway is dirt. Logging companies extracted timber from the region and unofficial transmigrants set up trade stores, operated restaurants, and prospected for gold.

The transmigration program, which was funded by the World Bank, brought landless peasants from over-populated islands in western Indonesia to what were perceived as uninhabited lands in eastern provinces. The transmigrants were initially given free equipment, seeds, and one-way tickets to new homesteads in freshly cleared plots of rainforest. But the rainforest soils proved to be largely unsuitable for farming, and the transmigrants were left to scramble for other means of supporting themselves (Monbiot 1989). Transmigrants living in Topo, as well as unofficial transmigrants from throughout Indonesia, had a wealth of opportunities opened to them by the Trans-Papua Highway.

In the mid-1990s vans, jeeps, and trucks left the market of Nabire every day, transporting goods and people to Enarotali and the villages along the road. A series of landslides and washed-out bridges effectively made sections of the road impassible to everything except foot traffic since late 1997. Today in many places the road is a muddy track that is rapidly being taken over by the jungle, but new plans to improve the road are under construction by the provincial government of Papua.

Transmigrants have been directly employed in road construction, logging, and road-maintenance crews. The Trans-Papua Highway has also given transmigrants the opportunity to participate in the informal sector. Many have served as drivers of trucks, taxis, and motorbikes that travellers can charter to destinations along the road. Others have settled into

more sedentary enterprises. For example, in Moanemani, which is midway between Nabire and Enarotali in the Kamu Valley, there are six kiosks run by Indonesian transmigrants. These tiny cube-shaped buildings are made of wood, have aluminum roofs and front windows that are covered with wire mesh. Transactions are made through small holes in the mesh windows. Goods in the kiosks are relatively uniform and include sacks of rice, canned meat and beans, tinned fish, soy sauce, kecap, tobacco, napkins, soft drinks, matches, and batteries.

In the late 1990s gold was discovered in Oge Bage Mee land along the route of the Trans Papua Highway. A gold rush ensued. Tent cities were rapidly put up along the side of the road with kiosks, restaurants (*warung*), makeshift karaoke bars, and brothels. Most prospectors use simple equipment such as shovels and woks to search for gold, but some have pressure hoses that they power with diesel generators. Some Mee have tried their hand at panning for gold but they have had little success.

For the Wahgi of Papua New Guinea's highlands, modern roads are considered to be the same as paths that the Wahgi themselves have been building and maintaining since before their first colonial encounters (O'Hanlon n.d.). Symbolically, roads are kinship networks that link geographically separated patrilineal Wahgi groups (O'Hanlon 1989). Affinal relations are viewed as roads. Our interviews with Mee interlocutors were conducted in Indonesian and, therefore, we have focused on how roads are portrayed in this new idiom. While novel concepts are being employed to talk about the Trans-Papua Highway, the Mee, like the Wahgi, do not think of the advent of modern roads as marking a radical break with their past. Before the advent of the Trans-Papua Highway the Mee were mobile agents who were engaged in a complicated network of exchanges with their neighbours. Through a series of middlemen the Mee participated in the global traffic of ideas and commerce. The road has facilitated indigenous migrations and communications that had already been taking place.

Articulations

Polanyi (1957:6) characterizes modernization as a 'great transformation' involving '[a]n almost incessant series of open wars [that] accompanied the march of industrial civilization into the domains of outworn cultures' or primitive peoples'. Historically there has been a tension within Occidental discourses about modernity: some theorists view modernity as involving a process of rupture, while others maintain that it also involves continuity with the past (Habermas 1987:5, 58). In the eloquent prose of Joel Robbins (2000: 242): 'Making a fetish of continuity strikes me as at least as dangerous as

going whole hog for the modern meta-narrative of rupture'. In bringing this debate to bear on evidence from the New Guinea Highlands, it is apparent that a 'traditional' baseline does not precede the arrival of 'outside' influences: change does not take place on a before/after axis (Clifford 1997:154; O'Hanlon 1993).

Contemporary Mee have hybrid worldviews that explode the dichotomies of rupture/continuity, before/after contact, invented/authentic culture, and modern/traditional identity. Articulation theory can serve as a model to allow us to move beyond these dichotomies and understand the diversity of Mee responses to the Trans-Papua Highway.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'articulation' in the terms of both anatomy and linguistics: '1. The action or process of jointing; the state of being jointed; mode of jointing or junction [...] 6. The utterance of the distinct elements of speech; articulate voice' (OED On-Line 2001). Stuart Hall, building on the work of Ernesto Laclau (1979), applied this concept to more abstract phenomena: 'a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects' (Hall 1986:53). When applied to indigenous societies, articulation theory models the dialectic between local cultural traditions and violent disruptions by foreign elements (Clifford 2001:479). In this section we will use the Trans-Papua Highway as a site where there are articulations between Mee tradition and three elements: global capitalism, the church, and the Indonesian nation-state.

On 6 April 2001, Kirksey attended the thirty-ninth anniversary celebration of the GKII (Gereja Kemah Injil Irian Jaya, Protestant Church of Irian Jaya) in a large auditorium in Nabire that was filled with over one thousand people, the majority of whom were Mee. Purple streamers hung from the ceiling and two live banana trees framed the stage. Each of the articulated elements that we are discussing in this article were embodied in this event. The legitimacy of this church function depended on the presence of Indonesian officialdom. The district head (*bupati*) of Nabire, who is Mee, gave a keynote speech during the celebration that was followed by a dialogue with pre-selected members of the audience. A Papuan man named Jack Ikomou told the district head that he had been showing evangelical films to primitive tribes (*suku terasing*) who lived along the Trans-Papua Highway. Ikomou was probably referring to the Oge Bage Mee. He said that his efforts had been hampered by the poor condition of the road. Ikomou formally requested that the district head provide new funding for the maintenance of the road. A roar of applause greeted the suggestion.

Once the clamour had settled down, the district head replied that his office was indeed planning to jointly fund the maintenance along with the district

head of Paniai, who is also Mee and is based in Enarotali. The auditorium exploded with clapping. The funding that Nabire's district head referred to is from his district's budget and of relatively small scale. There have been much larger infusions of transnational capital directed to the Trans-Papua Highway. In 1994 the Asian Development Bank approved a 150 million USD loan for the Trans-Papua Highway (*Xinhua* 1994). Four South Korean companies signed a contract with the Indonesian government in August 2000 to make 1.7 billion USD worth of improvements to a segment of the Trans-Papua Highway in exchange for logging rights to a swath of forest on either side of the road (*Jakarta Post* [on-line] 7 August 2000).

For Mee living in Nabire, or beyond in other urban regions of Papua, the Trans-Papua Highway is an important route to maintain a connection with their roots (see further Clifford 1997; O'Hanlon n.d.). The articulation, facilitated by the district head of Nabire, between traditional roots and transnational capital is welcomed by these members of the Mee diaspora. For the Mee who live in rural areas, and who are considered by urban Mee to embody tradition, this articulation is nuanced and in many cases openly contested.

The Edage Bage Mee (People Inside of the Fence) choose to live in areas that are distant from the road and other development projects. This traditionalist group originated in 1950 when Zakheus Pakage returned to his home from abroad, and began preaching a radical reinterpretation of Christianity in Mee cosmological terminology (Giay 1995). The Edage Bage are the followers of Zakheus's teachings and they formed villages that were deliberately isolated from other Mee (Giay 1995). The Auye Bage Mee, who see themselves as ethnically distinct from most other Mee groups, similarly rejected plans to build a bridge that would connect one of their villages with the road in the Siriwo Valley. The Auye fear that Indonesians and other foreigners would migrate to their land via the road and bring about destructive changes.

In the official transmigration site of Topo the rainforest has been clear cut. The Mee see the gold mining camps along the road as teeming with unofficial transmigrants who cut down trees, muddy the streams, engage in violent fights among themselves, litter the landscape with trash, and harbour deadly tropical diseases. A diverse collection of foreign agents and institutions have benefited from the road: banks, civil administrators, military troops, researchers, petty merchants, corporate contractors, transmigrants, gold prospectors, bus drivers, and miscellaneous middlemen. Many Mee landowners, who had been the exclusive and uncontested owners of the resources that are being exploited by these agents, do not feel that the road has been an equitable project. The Indonesian government did not purchase the land that was used to build the road from the Mee. Nor did the timber companies directly pay the Mee for trees that were taken from their land.

Official laws are on the books recognizing indigenous land tenure in Indonesia, but in practice the Indonesian government rarely compensates Papuans for their land. In some cases the government has required evidence to back up indigenous land claims that have nothing to do with traditional systems of land tenure. One man in the Kamu Valley told Van Bilsen that written evidence is required to demonstrate land tenure along the Trans-Papua Highway. Among the Mee land tenure depends on abstract kinship rules, not on written contracts.

The same man in the Kamu Valley told Van Bilsen: 'It's easier walking on the road, but I have to walk much further now to get my wood.' Mee requests for compensation from the construction and logging crews have largely been treated as irrelevant and unsubstantiated. For example, on Christmas Eve of 1998 members of the village where Kirksey was conducting research requested rice and ramen noodles from a road maintenance crew that had been working near the village. The road construction crew became angry at the request and reported them to the local Indonesian-appointed village head (*kepala desa*).

Other Mee polities in rural areas are excited about the articulation between transnational capitalism and tradition that is embodied in the Trans-Papua Highway: they would like to see the road restored to a functioning condition that would allow vehicles to once again travel its length. To accomplish this goal some Mee are employing supernatural means to encourage road maintenance. In January of 1999 a renowned shaman (*kamu tai mee*) travelled to the site of a major landslide in Oge Bage Mee territory where road maintenance was taking place. A pig was sacrificed and a festival was staged to facilitate the work.

The material abundance promised by discourses of modernity has been reworked into Mee cosmology. For example, some Oge Bage Mee hope that the road will enable them to build a new city on their land. The new city would herald the return of Kugi Pasai, a supernatural hero from the island of Biak who the Mee have appropriated as their own. According to my Oge Bage Mee interlocutors, this supernatural being travelled through Siriwo several thousand years ago creating all of the food and material wealth in the world as he went. Kugi Pasai fled to America after the ancestors (*orang tua*) became angry with him. Once a city has been built on Oge Bage Mee land, Kugi Pasai will return and bring a wide variety of material goods.

The construction of the Trans-Papua Highway led to a direct infusion of cash into the Mee rural economy when some men were offered opportunities by companies engaged in surveying, road construction, logging, and road maintenance. However, Mee were usually offered the lowest-paying jobs: they were hired as guides, cooks, porters, and manual labourers. Transmigrants, and in a few cases foreign workers, were given the high-paying jobs.

The road has also allowed some Mee groups to have 'economic growth' in ways that are unrelated to participating in the global economy. They have been able to elaborate traditional subsistence strategies in new and unpredictable ways (Kirksey 2000). Clearing canopy trees from new garden plots is a difficult and time-consuming task. Selective logging along the road by timber companies following the construction of the road has made the process of establishing new gardens easier. In Oge Bage Mee territory the gap in the rainforest that was created by the road has produced a microclimate that is particularly favourable to populations of edible grasshoppers, katydids, and praying mantids. These insects previously had only been collected in fallow gardens, but currently Oge Bage Mee women and children collect them in vast numbers during leisurely strolls down the road. Hunters feel safer when they shoot birds, wild pigs, marsupials, and rodents from the road, compared to stalking animals in the forest, where dangers – such as snakes and spirits – abound. The increased mobility that has come about with the road has also facilitated local nomadic migrations as Mee visit their distant garden patches and hunt game.

Lower transportation costs following the construction of the road led some Mee entrepreneurs to expand cultivation of cash crops such as peanuts, corn, and coffee for sale in regional markets. This showed prospects of becoming a sustainable economic enterprise. Following the series of major landslides and washed-out bridges in 1997-1998 the road was effectively closed to all but foot traffic, since the Indonesian government did not have sufficient funds to repair it. After the close of the road, the only options available to those who had grown cash crops for sale were to carry their produce by foot to regional markets or, if they were close to a landing strip, pay expensive airfreight charges. Many of these cash crops rotted. Mee farmers who have grown cash crops in the past would like to see the road reopened. Thus, at the local level transnational capitalism is driving traditional rituals. These farmers are encouraging the shaman to perform rites that will bring back a functioning road.

The proceedings at the anniversary celebration of the Protestant Church clearly illustrate the articulation of Christianity with the Trans-Papua Highway. When Jack Ikomou told the district head that the road was an integral part of his evangelizing efforts, he mobilized the full force of the one thousand Christians in the room in support of funding for the road. Ikomou articulated this government modernization program with the theological quest for salvation. In addition to asking for maintenance on the road to resume, he requested funding to distribute bibles in the Mee language to the 'primitive tribes' (*suku terasing*) living along the road.

Ikomou's use of the phrase 'primitive tribes' hints at an underlying dichotomous structure in his discourse on modernity: he seems to distinguish

primitive heathens from enlightened moderns. Interestingly, each of the Mee living along the Trans-Papua Highway who discussed religion with us identified themselves as Christian. Under the Indonesian national ideology of Pancasila it is a requirement that citizens belong to one of five world religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism. 'Modern' Mee living in rural areas have a discourse on modernity that makes a sharp distinction between a world based on tradition (*adat*) and the modern world that followed the coming of religion (*agama*) and the state (*pemerintah*).

Christianity, which is an important marker of modern identity in Papua, began spreading to Mee communities from the highland outpost of Enarotali in the late 1940s (Giay 1995). Mee who have adopted the discourse of Indonesian modernity view *adat*, which can generally be defined as customary tradition (Pemberton 1994), as a backward primitive mentality that should be eliminated through spiritual progress. For the Oge Bage Mee the Indonesian word *adat* is frequently used in a more restricted sense to denote 'sorcery', a practice that persists even though villagers believe that it is strictly forbidden both by religion and national law. Thus, the Mee who are not 'modern' are – in some contexts – stigmatized and viewed as being dangerous.

The Edage Bage Mee maintain that they follow the true Papuan form of Christianity. They have rejected all foreign versions of Christianity as taught by Indonesian and European missionaries. Along with this resistance to evangelization, the Edage Bage Mee have refused to take part in the articulated project of modernization by prohibiting the possession of foreign material culture and ignoring national law (Giay 1995). In other contexts, foreign Christian missionaries have appropriated local practice into their doctrine. In the village of Diyai, for example, missionaries participate with the Mee when they sacrifice mice, rats, pigs, or chicken to local spirit beings. All of these animals are eaten by the Mee, but most missionaries will only eat the meat if it is pork or chicken.

The articulation between the Indonesian nation-state and the Trans-Papua Highway sits uneasily with many Papuans. During the church anniversary celebration the district head of Nabire did not give details about his negotiations with Indonesian officials about funding for the road. Presumably the district head articulated the connections between the Trans-Papua Highway and Indonesia's overall Five-Year Development Plans (Repelita). According to the Indonesian Directorate General of Highways in the Ministry of Public Works, a key goal for the construction of new roads in the context of Repelita is the '[m]aintenance of dynamic and healthy national stability' (Bina Marga 1992:6).

For Indonesians 'Irian Jaya', which is the politically charged name that was given to the territory by Soeharto in 1972 and only recently abandoned

officially, is an integral component of the unitary nation-state. Stability in this context signifies control of the territory. In general Mee and other Papuans view the Indonesian occupation of their land as illegitimate and look to freedom fighters to provide them with an alternate, stable, system. Some Mee also think of their territory as having some of the same characteristics of a nation, and stability for them is to maintain the boundaries of this territory.

In the terms of the Indonesians, the goal of the Trans-Papua Highway promoting 'national stability' seems to have backfired. The road has allowed the Mee and other Papuans to coordinate independence activities aimed at gaining freedom from Indonesia. In the words of one Kamu Bage Mee man, 'the road will bring freedom (*merdeka*)'. In the eyes of many Indonesians the road has become the symbolic domain of the OPM: Kirksey was repeatedly warned by Indonesians living along the road near Nabire not to travel further down the road because of the danger of being taken hostage. In the neighbouring independent country of Papua New Guinea there are similar fears about roads. Urbanites in Port Moresby do not want the Highlands Highway to have a direct link to their city because it would allow wild highlanders to descend and wreak havoc (Strathern and Stewart 2000).

Despite Indonesian fears about OPM marauders using the Trans-Papua Highway to descend from the highlands, the OPM have not been controlling the road since it was closed to vehicles in 1997-1998. The only major OPM base in Mee territory is near Enarotali, which is now several weeks' walk from Nabire. The myth of the road as the domain of the OPM may stem from an inability on the part of Indonesians to distinguish OPM troops from ordinary Papuan citizens. In Papua there is a saying that anyone with curly hair is a member of the OPM. In some cases this has led to the killing of innocent Mee. For example, during the sugarcane incident (*peristiwa tebu*), which took place before the construction of the road, a group of ordinary Oge Bage Mee villagers were killed when an Indonesian military patrol travelling up the Siriwo River failed to find any OPM troops (Kirksey 2000).

The Mee view the Trans-Papua Highway as being directly related to state authority. In Indonesian they call it the 'State Road' (*Jalan Pemerintah*). Outside of permanent government outposts the state is viewed by contemporary Mee as a cultural phenomenon – a collection of little-understood rules and norms prescribed by national law (*hukum nasional*) – rather than an established governing bureaucracy. Even after the completion of the road in the mid-1990s the only 'administrators' who are currently stationed in Oge Bage Mee, Edage Bage Mee, and Debei Bage Mee territory are local people who have become government-appointed tribal heads (*kepala suku*), village heads (*kepala desa*), and village secretaries (*sekretaris desa*). In the absence of permanent administrators, national law has been enforced sporadically, and brutally, by TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Army) patrols.

During some specific confrontations the OPM have managed to maintain control of the road. In 1982 during the Madi incident there was a standoff between the OPM and the TNI along a freshly constructed segment of the road between Enarotali and the nearby village of Madi. The OPM, who were armed primarily with bows and arrows, hid in the grass along the road and silently picked off troops as they marched by. In a narrow pass at Gunung Merah (Red Mountain) the OPM were able to hold the soldiers at bay for several days. The TNI eventually were able to storm Madi village, bypassing the road by travelling through a swamp with canoes.

In other cases the Trans-Papua Highway has more readily served the needs of the TNI. In the early 1990s Thadius Yogi, a Mee man who is the regional commander of the OPM, arranged to buy some guns from a dealer at a site along the Trans-Papua Highway called Cabang Dua. Before the deal was concluded Yogi was ambushed by Indonesian military troops, who used the road for a swift approach and killed several of his top men.

During several incidents the road has played a neutral role, being exploited by the TNI and the Mee equally. In November of 1999 a military operation was launched against Mee in a gold-mining camp along the road. Initially the road facilitated the military operation by allowing the TNI to transport troops from Nabire in trucks. But after the operation started, Mee leaders in Satgas Papua immediately travelled by road to Nabire, where they went to the offices of the regional assembly (DPRD) and demanded a stop to the human rights violations that were taking place (Van den Broek 2000).

For Mee the idea of 'national stability' as it is applied to the road goes beyond military confrontations. In August of 1998 Kansus Uweia, who was the Indonesian-appointed tribal head of the Oge Bage Mee, attempted to register all of the gold prospectors on the land of his people. The prospectors have compromised the stability of the Mee 'nation' by cutting down trees, polluting rivers, and generally disregarding Mee land claims. Kansus planned to charge prospectors a licensing fee and issue them a permit. When Kansus entered the main camp of several hundred gold miners and announced his plan, the miners banded together. The miners offered Kansus a small amount of gold in exchange for unconditional license to mine the land. Furious, Kansus returned to the city, where he attempted to enlist the support of the Indonesian authorities and military to drive the prospectors from Oge Bage Mee land. The Indonesian officials refused to acknowledge the problem.

Oge Bage Mee view the lack of state control of gold prospectors in their territory as a politically calculated move to further rob them of their land. In the absence of support from Indonesian administrators, Oge Bage Mee have attempted to replicate the functions of the state. Mee have built tollbooths along the road to collect levies from passing traffic. Calculated violence is used against those who refuse to pay the toll.

Discussion

Contemporary Mee ethno-historiography has a streak in it that idealizes the past. Many Mee who identify themselves as modern have elaborated critiques about processes of degeneration that were initiated by modernization. A group of prominent Mee church leaders in the Paniai region of the highlands told Kirksey that their land had been paradise before the arrival of the Dutch and Indonesians. Food was plentiful at this time and the only human diseases were tropical ulcers, itchy skin diseases, and headaches. The rainforest was healthy and game animals abounded.

According to many Mee, the Trans-Papua Highway is promoting degeneration: deaths from malaria and unknown diseases have skyrocketed since the construction of the road. Logging and noise from vehicles and machinery are thought to have caused the animals to flee deep into the forest. In this article we have discussed several polities that have resisted the elements articulated with the Trans-Papua Highway: the Edega Bage Mee have chosen to reject global capitalism, Mee in rural areas are already Christian and do not need evangelizing missionaries, and Papuans in general oppose advances of the Indonesian nation-state. Yet these different elements have not yet joined together to form a cohesive coalition against the road.

In the words of James Clifford (2001:481),

Articulation theory cannot account for everything. Pushed to the extremes it can take you to a point where every cultural form, every structure or restructuration, every connection and disconnection, has a radical contingency as if, at any moment, anything were possible. [P]ossible connections and disconnections are constrained at any historical moment.

We close this article with a question that could be answered with future research or action: What contingencies would allow for the articulation of the different groups opposing the Trans-Papua Highway?

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