Article Type: Book Review

Victoria Stead. *Becoming Landowners: Entanglements of Custom and Modernity in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. Pp. xvi+ 216, illustrations, index, bibliog., US\$68.00 (Hc.), ISBN 9780824856663

Victoria Stead's *Becoming Landowners: Entanglements of Custom and Modernity in Papua New Guinea* analyses how people and land are being reconfigured in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. As Stead notes, in 1975 both countries achieved their independence (from Australian and Portuguese, respectively) colonial rule, but this coincidence is no guide to the two very different histories that preceded independence in each country, nor their trajectory since. Given these significant differences, not to mention the more traditional anthropological preferences for the study of small scale communities in Melanesia, at first glance this comparative project is intellectually (and logistically) very ambitious.

Stead's remarkable achievement in *Becoming Landowners* is that her comparative project works extremely well (and without sacrificing any ethnographic credibility). She is helped by her long-term familiarity with both countries. Stead demonstrates great perceptiveness about the parallel processes of dispossession, land mobilisation, capitalist development and the ambivalent embrace of modernity that are playing out in the two countries and beyond. In this book the reader learns to think more clearly about Papua New Guinea through case studies in Timor-Leste and vice-versa. Each country provides examples of processes of change unfolding in similar ways in the other. Stead's extraordinary skill is in her selection of these case studies and her ability to unpack them in ways that draw out the significance of events that might otherwise have been (mis)read simply within a local or national framework.

In the manner of Paige West, Anna Tsing or Tania Murray-Li, Stead builds an argument about how the specific historical circumstances of local situations reveal global dynamics of abstraction and resistance, particularly in relation to land ownership and use. Her metaphor of entanglement captures much of the complexity of these situations. While Stead works hard to emphasise the agency of less powerful actors, by the end of the book she concedes that resistance is not always successful and that inequalities of power and wealth exercise a disproportionate influence in shaping social conditions in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste.

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/taja.12265](https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12265)

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I am unashamedly impressed by this excellent book. However, if I have criticism, it concerns the role played by NGOs in Stead's research. There is room for more reflection on the role of NGOs here and their relationship to the researcher. At times, Bismarck Ramu Group or Lao Hamatuk, the major NGOs that Stead worked with, stand as proxies for the community. Moreover, the secular lens of developmental NGOs often relegates religion to a minor role. In both of Stead's fieldsites, the Catholic church has been the dominant religious body. However, her treatment of Christianity in this book is mostly focused on the appropriation of land for plantations by Catholic and Lutheran missionaries in PNG, or on Christian resistance to Indonesian (framed as Muslim) occupation in Timor. The place of Christianity in the entanglements of custom and modernity in Melanesia, particularly in relation to land ownership, is worthy of further exploration.

The above criticism aside, Stead's book is a fine contribution to contemporary debates about land and inequality. She has produced an outstanding work of scholarship that will encourage many more anthropologists to engage in comparative fieldwork.

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Title:

Becoming Landowners: Entanglements of Custom and Modernity in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste

Date:

2018-04-01

Citation:

Cox, J. (2018). Becoming Landowners: Entanglements of Custom and Modernity in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY, 29 (1), pp.133-134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12265>.

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