

Stranger in One's Own Home

A micropolitical ecological analysis
of the engagements of Kanak villagers with
a multinational mining project in New Caledonia

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Abstract

This thesis takes an actor-oriented approach to a micropolitical analysis of the engagements of Kanak villagers in the Voh-Koné area, New Caledonia, with the Koniambo Project, a proposed joint nickel mining venture involving a multinational (Falconbridge) and a local mining company (SMSP). In the introductory chapter, I outline my theoretical framework, which expands political ecology by applying insights from micropolitical theory to a focus on intracommunity disputes surrounding natural resource exploitation projects. I argue that such a close examination is necessary if we are to understand local tensions and factions and their multiple influences on the outcomes of development projects.

The Koniambo Project promises to redress some of the economic imbalances prevalent in the archipelago by benefitting the largely Kanak, and historically underprivileged, Northern Province. Thus, this mining project has great politico-economic significance, both for pro-independence leaders as well as for those who wish to maintain New Caledonia as a part of France. However, while people expected benefits for the Kanak people as a whole, the project sparked intracommunity conflicts at the local level. I argue that villagers' claims to the right to authorize mining activities as well as their desires to receive recognition from the mining company reflected their eagerness to prove a high social position. Meanwhile, in line with the traditionally competitive political climate within Kanak communities, there were many debates about who exactly the 'landowners' were. Indeed, the project's potential to disrupt or reinforce control over land – which, unlike material goods, was a socially acceptable object of overt rivalry – created unexpected socio-political stakes. These differential micropolitical possibilities shaped people's discourses about the project's other impacts. For instance, those who expected to be able to access employment opportunities as well as social recognition from the mining project were more inclined not to worry about the project's consequences for natural/cultural resources. Similarly, Voh-Koné area villagers' statements and actions regarding dangers from spirits or forbidden places were strongly influenced by their expectations of the project's ability to strengthen or weaken their social status, as determined by their genealogies and proven through demonstrations of their relationships to their ancestors.

In the final chapter, I provide a summary of my conclusions about the micropolitics behind local community members' engagements with the Koniambo

Project. Next I explain how, while this case itself is unique due to the project's unusual politico-economic significance, the theoretical framework and methodology I used can help to create balanced, nuanced analyses of intracommunity diversity and micropolitical conflicts that objectively yet sympathetically portray local people as real human beings. Finally, I suggest new directions for further research on the interactions of mining companies and local communities.

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