Decolonizing Conservation

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(John Aini and Paige West, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, Photo by JC Salyer)

Collaboration

In June 2018 John Aini and Paige West presented joint keynote lectures at The International Marine Conservation Congress in Kuching, Malaysia and The POLLEN (Political Ecology Network) Biennial Conference in Oslo, Norway. John presented their lecture in Kuching and Paige presented their lecture in Oslo. They wrote a single paper together in May 2018 and then worked independently (sitting across a table from each other on both Nago and Nusa Islands, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea) to translate the single paper into two lectures for two very different audiences. Their goal was to talk about their on-going collaboration and the work they have been doing for the past decade to "decolonize conservation."

Aini and West understand that many indigenous scholars have written about decolonization and decolonizing methodology – their practice draws on this work. They work together to read, understand, and discuss both older and newer work on decolonization and, with the elders and communities that they work with, develop avenues for this scholarship to inform their on-going collaboration. They take seriously Tuck and Yang’s 2012 argument that “Decolonization is not a metaphor.” Because of this, their work is meant to decolonize practice actively and daily.

They also take seriously the issue of West’s subject position, her position as a settler on Lenape land (her office and apartment are located on stolen land), and the troubling colonial history of both of their scholarly fields (Conservation Science for Aini and Anthropology for West). They try, together, to always think about how this implicates them both in ongoing dispossession. They have developed a process and methodology that is specific to New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, a place with a very specific history of colonization and a very specific history of anthropological dispossession, and they work with local elders who guide them in terms of when and where and how West, as a white woman anthropologist, can and can’t be a part of things. They also work with elders to make sure that Aini, a senior chief from Lovangai and a man, is always working in a culturally appropriate way when he is working with people from different New Ireland socio-cultural groups. Their process and practice is on-going and always in dialogue with the elders and communities with whom they work.

None of the work that Aini and West do together would be possible without the funding they have received from The Christensen Fund, Barnard College and Columbia University, and the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. Their work has also been supported by Nusa Island Retreat through logistical help and a whole
myriad of other help. Additionally, other scholars who have connections to New Ireland, people like Matthew Leavesley, J.C. Salyer, Cathy Hair, Rachel Sapery James, Jeff Kinch, and Hugh Walton have been unfailingly supportive of their work. Finally, their work, indeed their lives as scholars and community empowerment workers, would not be possible without the support from the elders who advise them, the young people who challenge them, and their extended family. There are too many people in that network to name everyone individually, but their sister, Secunda Aini, and their mother, Pat West deserve special mention.

The two lectures are below, exactly as they were presented as spoken word lectures.

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(Woven wall created by artists from Lovangai, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, photo by Paige West)

Communities Matter: Decolonizing conservation management.

John Aini (Ailan Awareness) and Paige West (Barnard College and Columbia University)

Greetings from the people of Papua New Guinea, from the land of the unexpected, from a land with a multitude of cultures and traditions, we speak over 800 languages, we are home to 5% of the world’s biodiversity contained in less than 1% of the world’s land area.

Today, I offer this welcome to you as a Maimai – a chief in the Malangan culture in northern New Ireland, a Ainpidik, in the Tumbuan Society from southern New Ireland, a Merengen from my own Tungak culture from Lovongai, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, my home.

I became a Chief in these cultures because I wanted to be part of the traditional cultural hierarchy – in the past Chiefs had the power to close marine environments for the purpose of management and conservation, upheld and were guardians of sacred places, masalai spaces which have contributed to resource management and conservation. Without that traditional power, and the traditional knowledge that comes along with it, conservation in PNG won’t work. This status gives me a different kind of standing, a standing that enhances m
work as a marine environment advocate and the founder and Team Leader of the NGO, Ailan Awarenes.

While I have been working in marine conservation since 1993, today the talk I present is based on work that I have carried out and since 2007 in particular, in partnership and collaboration with Paige West, an anthropologist who is a professor at Barnard College and Columbia University, in New York City.

Since 2007 we have worked together to bridge the gap between the conservation and revitalization of culture and the conservation and revitalization of marine systems. I am trained in Tropical Fisheries and Paige is one of the pioneers of the anthropology of conservation. We met, by accident, in 2007 and realized after decades of working independently, that we had a shared vision for the future of conservation in PNG.

We had both, independently, come to the conclusion that large, internationally driven, conservation projects in Melanesia, tend to fail to meet the promised outcomes, both in terms of conservation and in terms of local expectations. We had both witnessed donor driven projects fail and witnessed the backlash faced by big NGOs when the promises that were made to communities did not pan out.

I don’t have time today to give all the examples from PNG but you should look to the Lak conservation project in Southern New Ireland and the Crater Mountain project in the Eastern Highlands. We had both also been faced, when we were critical of our friends and colleagues working for big NGOs, with the question “well, can YOU do it better?” While we had always beforehand dismissed this question, in our initial conversations we agreed, well, yes, yes we can.

During our initial discussions about how to begin to work together, with our very different expertise, we centered in on our desire to help people in New Ireland understand the role that the increasing number of oil palm plantations across the East Coast of New Ireland were having on their marine areas, their terrestrial areas, and their socio-cultural lives. We wrote a proposal and were lucky to find The Christensen Fund, who took a risk on us and because of them, we have spent the past ten years developing our methodology – A methodology that we consider “decolonial.”

The theme of this conference is “Science matters” and we agree, science does matter. Particularly now. Particularly given the threats to our lives, livelihoods, and the waters, reefs and lands that we all depend on and care about. It matters in how we understand biological diversity and the current local and global threats to it. Yet the translation of scientific knowledge into conservation practice often tends to be a fraught process.

More often than not, the questions asked by scientists derive from their interests and the agendas generated at the international levels of funding, governance, and trends in scholarly disciplines. While this produces important knowledge and drives new forms of knowledge making processes, it often alienates communities living in places with high levels of biological diversity. The very places where scientists work and where conservation scientists wish to have meaningful conservation impacts.

Communities often feel that scientific research does not address their needs, answer their questions, or focus on their agendas. This is the case in numerous knowledge-making fields, indeed in all of the traditional sciences and social sciences, Indigenous scholars have termed these knowledge making processes “colonial” and have
argued that until method, theory, and practice are transformed, that communities still suffer a form of colonialism.

Our methodology works to decolonize conservation science. We believe that conservation in New Ireland can only be achieved if the people of New Ireland have sovereignty over both their marine and terrestrial areas AND over the interventions and projects that seek to contribute to conservation. Here we draw on the work of indigenous scholars from across the globe in general and Pacific Islander scholars in particular. Before I talk about our current projects, I want to tell you a bit about my home.

(Kavieng, New Ireland, Photo by Paige West)

**New Ireland, my home**

New Ireland is the northernmost province in Papua New Guinea – a parliamentary democracy that gained independence from Australia in 1975. The province has about 195,000 people and the majority of them depend on marine resources for their livelihoods. This is especially true in the rural areas of the province. In addition to the island of New Ireland, the province consists of numerous larger islands and island groups and countless smaller islands that are inhabited and some uninhabited.

Like all of Papua New Guinea, all of this land is held in customary tenure and the indigenous people are the ones who legally hold the rights to the land. Additionally, because New Ireland is a marine province, the indigenous people also hold the marine systems in traditional tenure.

New Ireland’s marine and terrestrial systems have faced numerous threats over the past hundred and thirty eight years. In the 1880s the German colonists arrived and began to create coconut plantations, took away prime land from our people for the price of an axe and 3 to 5 sticks of tobacco, conscript locals for forced labor and slavery, known as “black birding”, and force people to move from the high mountains in the center of New Ireland Island to the coastal areas.

Right after the Germans came, the Missions followed. While they have done some good things in my home, they have also worked to erase traditional cultural practices that once supported conservation. After the Germans left, the cash economy came into the province with force and local people were compelled to over exploit their natural resources to gain access to cash for school fees, church dues, and much needed commodities.

The rape of our forest through illegal logging began in the 1980s, large scale mining and palm oil plantations began in the 1990s, and illegal fishing by boats from across Asia has been going on for a million years. Today people face all of these threats and a new kind of threat called a Special Agricultural Business Leases which allow nefarious members of a community to sign over the access to indigenous land for 99 year leases. Effectively making the land ownership by indigenous people null and void. Today we are also facing the first under water mining site on the planet. Solwara One, set to go into production next year, will be a global experiment that uses our sea and our reef to test this new form of extraction.
Through all of this dispossession, some of the people on New Ireland have worked tirelessly to maintain their traditional beliefs and practices. New Ireland is famous for Malagan cultural practices, which result in extraordinary carvings, and Shark Calling, a process documented in film and books.

Historically, conservation efforts in New Ireland that were driven by outside organizations and donors have focused on conserving biodiversity and ecological processes in the face of these threats. But the ecology is only part of the story. What we have found, as directed by the elders we work with, that there is an inextricable link between the biological diversity and its conservation and maintenance and the cultural practices that are slipping into memory.

What we do (and why it is different)

Though western forms of environmental conservation and appreciation are not taught in schools or homes in most of PNG, I can recall a profound respect and concern for my natural surroundings from early childhood onwards. While those around me often used weapons of mass destruction to fish and carelessly tossed garbage into the sea, I was hesitant to follow such practices and was compelled to learn as much as I could about the spectacular ecosystems around me. I enrolled at the National Fisheries College in Kavieng, where I studied tropical fisheries. Upon graduating in 1983, I began working for the PNG Fisheries Department.

While working for the Fisheries Department, I began running awareness campaigns in the coastal communities of New Ireland to promote conservation and management of marine resources and marine ecosystems. Meanwhile, both fisheries stock assessments and local reports of declining catches confirmed my fears that the resources which sustain the coastal peoples of NIP were in serious danger.

Whenever I could save enough money for a visit home to New Hanover, I traveled to villages around the island, educating rural communities about the threats to marine ecosystems and the importance of resource management.

Together with my brother, Miller Aini, our cousin Michael Ladi, and a group of youth from my hometown, I founded Ailan Awareness in 1993 to formalize these efforts and engineer an approach to marine conservation and management that was new at the time: Community Based Fisheries Management Plans.

My brother passed away soon after that and part of my commitment to my work is my love for him.

From 1993 to 2007 we worked to develop community based fisheries management plans along the lines that many of you have written about and studied. But I was left unsatisfied by the results.

While we were having some success with our efforts we were both finding it increasingly hard to access funds to sustain our projects. I was feeling that we were missing a crucial piece of the conservation puzzle.

We had founded Ailan Awareness so that we could focus on facilitating community understanding of external marine conservation efforts and external organization, mostly big environmental NGO, understandings of local uses and knowledge of marine systems.
What we wanted to develop was an organization that translated between epistemological systems – one that could say to BINGOS, “Okay, here is what is happening on the ground, or in the water, the things that people here in this specific community are noticing and this is how they are explaining things. This is what they care about. This is how they rely on marine resources. This is how they have seen them decline.” And then turn around and say to specific communities, “Okay, this is what this NGO focuses on, this is their project, these are the species or systems that they want to understand or conserve, and this is what they want from you and this what they can give you.”

Our small NGO also wanted to focus on what they called at the time “community education.” I had been to school and worked for NGOs and along the way had become well versed in marine science and everywhere I looked I saw people using their marine systems in unsustainable ways. I wanted to teach people across New Hanover and New Ireland about things like the reproductive biology of food fish, sedentary resources and other marine resources, the breeding habitats created by healthy mangrove forests, and the importance of sea grass.

And finally, our NGO was to focus on small-scale conservation areas located in zones defined by communities and on species defined by communities as vital to their livelihoods.

Our first goal was to develop a process where AA staff would go to coastal communities and do conservation and management awareness. This was to be the first of the “products” that the NGO developed. To say that there was a frenzied buy-in from BINGOS and from the national government for this work immediately, is an understatement. Remember back to the late 90s and early 2000s, this was the heyday of CBFM and ICADs – everyone wanted a local team to go out to rural sites and “teach” people about conservation and fisheries management. Our team got swept up in this. And we did well in terms of helping NGOs, the Fisheries Department and others facilitate their projects. But our vision, the vision Miller, Michael and I had initially – that of an organization that also worked to educate outsiders – was not fulfilled.

Everyone wanted to engage Ailan Awareness to do CBFM education but nobody wanted to give us money to do anything else. We became, in essence, a service provider to the very kinds of projects that we had been critical of early on.

Additionally, we became a kind of cover for BINGOs, who could say to their funders, organizations that were increasingly nervous about the lack of local engagement and local partners, that they had an indigenous NGO as an equal partner in their work.

Yet, the partnerships were incredibly unequal. Ailan Awareness was only engaged to do waged contract work, we were never funded at a level that allowed for us to adequately maintain an office, a staff, a vehicle, or a boat. All things you need to be a functioning NGO. For these things, we relied on the National Fisheries Authority, which gave us a spare room to use as an office, a used vehicle for work around the island of New Ireland, and access to one of their boats for trips out to outer islands and New Hanover.

But this meant that Ailan Awareness was at the beck and call of the NFA – who could demand that they drop everything else and do work for them as needed. Sometimes this was fine because NFA funded the small scale conservation work that we wanted to do, sometimes this was bad because our staff could be called away at any
moment to work for NFA for months, leaving AA and the small scale conservation areas to languish.

In all of this, I had become increasingly uneasy with the assumption of one-way learning that was embedded in most of Ailan Awareness’ work. The idea that coastal people were lacking in knowledge about marine environments and that knowledge could only be provided by outsiders.

(Traditional Lime Ceremony, Lovangai, Photo by Patrick Nason)

This is where my collaboration with Paige West began. We met in 2007 in a parking lot. Paige was visiting New Ireland after a fieldwork season in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, where she had done research for ten years. Paige is an environmental anthropologist whose work focuses on knowledge, power, capitalism, and nature and in early 2006 she had published her first book, which was about conservation, and was almost finished writing her second book, which was about coffee.

Her first book was about the political ecology of environmental conservation projects as they were conceptualized, funded, and staffed in North America, Europe, and Australia and as they were carried out in places like Papua New Guinea. The book was focused on the connections between indigenous ideas about land and ancestors and how conservation organizations understood, and did not understand these ideas. Theoretically her work focused on the seemingly insurmountable divide between how indigenous people understand natural resources and how people working in western conservation understand natural resources.

Paige and I had come to the same conclusions about conservation independently – that in PNG there was a missing link.

(Aini and West, Lovangai, Photograph by Patrick Nason)

That missing link was the connection between conservation and understanding cultural traditions.

We had both seen that most conservation projects failed to really see and understand how local beliefs and traditions had historically been related to conservation and how, if revitalized, could once again foster conservation. So in late 2007 we reached out to The Christensen Fund and they agreed to fund our initial collaborative project. From there, we have developed four new programs under Ailan Awareness as well as enhanced the CBFM road show and conservation, management areas that were part of the initial Ailan Awareness project. Let me turn to three of those now.

Road Shows:

Working with Fisheries and witnessing the decline in fisheries stocks that our people relied on for food and cash,
and witnessing how our own people used weapons of mass destruction to harvest marine resources without knowing the impacts on marine ecosystems and resources, we embarked on the road shows.

We thought government was not doing enough and did not care about what mattered most to our rural population, their future and resources sustainability for a growing population.

For example, our people thought it was their right to poison a whole reef ecosystem to get enough fish for their family’s dinner. They thought God created everything on earth and that he also created all the fishing methods, so even though they were using what we now know as destructive fishing methods that did not matter to them. They did not understand that this would not be okay in the long run. They did not understand that in the past, when these destructive methods were developed, that population was not a problem, but that today, it is. There is a lot more pressure on resources to feed a growing population so it must been seen different today. Most of the government focus on marine education was focused on industrial fishing, income of the nation and the likes, it was not focused on the needs of local fishers or growing concerns locally about population.

We wanted our people to realize that what we may not care about in this time and age may dramatically impact our future and our children. Being responsible, we must take actions, find solutions to ensure sustainability.

The road shows was basically an awareness and education program that involved us going out to communities and discussing with them a broad range of fisheries/ecosystem conservation and management issues, some of which they know about – Traditional Resource Management and together compromise on which actions to take to ensure there was “fish” for now and for our children

We used power point presentations, role-plays, songs and showed environmental documentaries projected under coconut palm trees to convey messages of love, respect and care of the marine environment. From the beginning we connected this to family planning and to conversations about population.

During the road shows we also talked to people about the kinds of changes that they were seeing in their marine environments and explained to them that if they wanted to work to mitigate those changes that we could help them. That we could work with them to develop management plans that relied on a combination of traditional conservation methods, like fish traps and taboo zones, revitalizing our sacred and masalai spaces as well as scientific conservation methods. With this, we used the road show to develop our bio cultural approach to conservation. An approach that blends Indigenous science and Western science to result in sustainable conservation outcomes.

Today, our method for the road show has changed. I do not have time to talk about it today, but it has evolved into a method that is truly collaborative WITH communities – a process that always begins from their interests and needs and moves forward from there.

**Solwara Skul (Saltwater School)**

The Ranguva Solwara Skul, was co-founded by Miller Aini, Paige West and myself, and it came about after a fight at sea when we ran short of fuel after an awareness campaign on Lovongai Island and were drifting out at
sea. Miller, my younger Brother (now in Heaven), after several arguments and lots of swearing and nearly punching each other suggested we build a school to bring people together to educate them about BOTH scientific understandings and traditional understandings about the sea. Finally, we agreed, using the metaphor for what we were experiencing at the time – drifting out to sea – that it would be better to bring people together to educate them in multiple ways of known than to let them either drift out to sea or, to use a metaphor that works for people living on the coasts of the big islands, die in a car crash.

We decided that building a school would allow us to reach more people and to connect traditional knowledge keepers (chiefs and others) to the scientific knowledge we had access to as conservation scientists and anthropologists.

And so Paige, Hugh Walton (a fisheries advisor), Dr. Matthew Leavesly (an archaeologist), Cathy Hair (a fisheries biologist), Dr. JC Salyer (a lawyer and anthropologist), and I, with our personal salaries, built the Ranguva Solwara Skul. The goal of the school is to both teach contemporary marine science and to facilitate the transmission of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next. The school runs, so far, on a model whereby people contact us and access our programs to help them better understand the connection between both biological diversity and cultural diversity and to better connect elders and young people in their community.

(Architects from Lovangai building the school, photo by Paige West)

**Malagan Project**

*Malagan* ceremonies are the lynchpin for an entire system of belief and knowledge in the *Malagan* cultures of New Ireland. These ceremonies bring together communities in the wake of death in order to undertake important activities that help to maintain internal community ties and ties between communities. The ceremonies also maintain ties between the living, their ancestors, the land, and the sea – so there is a fundamental conservation related aspect to them.

Through their motifs *Malagan* carvings, intricate and beautiful mask-like objects that are a central part of these ceremonies, contain family histories, community genealogies, and crucial knowledge about the relations between humans and others (plants, animals, ancestors, spirits). The carvings themselves are not objects of value for *Malagan* culture, rather it is the imagery, or the motifs that are carved onto the objects, that contain what is of value.

Only master carvers can produce these carvings – there are strict rules for when, where, and to whom a carver can pass on his craft and knowledge – and today there are only seven master carvers left in New Ireland. Additionally, each carving houses multiple levels of knowledge that are increasingly complex as one goes deeper into the reading, and only certain people who have the indigenous literacy skills to read and interpret the complex series of motifs on the carvings. The vast majority of people who can read these carvings are in their late seventies and early eighties.
Malagan carvings have been ‘collected’ by outsiders since the earliest days of the colonial encounter between the indigenous peoples of New Ireland and others. Indeed Malagan serve as some of the most important objects in museum collections in New York, Canada, Paris, Berlin, London, Oslo, Copenhagen, and Sydney, and many of these collections have objects collected between first contact in the early 1600s and the late 1800s when there was a surge in both colonization and collecting in this part of the world. These collections are very important because when left in the sites they were meant to be, after Malagan ceremonies, the carvings disintegrate, returning their stories to the land and the sea.

Nevertheless, the collection of cultural artifacts has always creates the danger of dis-embedding objects from the cultural context from which their meaning and importance is derived. In the case of Malagan objects, their international renown has stemmed primarily from their esthetic spender at the expense of deeper cultural and social meanings and significance.

In 2012 we were approached by a number of the last living carvers to help them find a way to preserve their cultural practices, and our Malagan carving project has emerged from that collaboration. We work with the carvers in several ways. First, we facilitated their meetings and discussions with regard to passing on the carving motifs – motifs that are owned, powerful, and sacred. Second, we worked with them to build a series of carving schools where the carvers could work with novices to pass on the techniques. Third, we worked with the American Museum of Natural History to create digital archives of Malagan carvings housed at that museum from places where people have lost the cultural tradition. Thereby giving contemporary carvers access to motifs that can be used for teaching. Fourth, we created an e-book of carvings that is currently circulating around New Ireland, teaching young people about the history of Malagan AND the connection between these ceremonies and conservation. Fifth, we are developing a cultural repatriation protocol for Malagan culture- focusing on digital repatriation as there is no museum in New Ireland at this point.

**Conclusion**

In some of the social sciences, scholars have begun to consider what a “decolonized methodology” might look like. Our work, over the past decade, comes from a place of engagement and critique – having worked with and for conservation for a long time previously – and we attempt to decolonize conservation practice through our methodology of consulting with communities, focusing on multiple forms of knowledge, as well as through our consultation process, always asking communities what they need and what they see as the most important aspects of their livelihoods that they want to preserve, revitalize, and conserve.

We understand that science matters. **BUT** science alone cannot realize conservation and management, that there needs to be a mix of science and traditional resource management.

However traditional resource management is not effective these days due to western influence. When we say western influence we mean a range of things – everything from masalai spaces, traditional taboo areas, to traditional sacred places. These places are no longer off limits, there has been a decline in how people understand the power of these places. We work to bring awareness back to communities, awareness of the science and of the traditional aspects of their cultures that once helped to help them conserve their resources.
Part of our focus is working with traditional leaders to teach our young people the importance of our historic ways of doing things.

Part of our focus is working with scientists who can enhance already existing cultural knowledge through their scientific knowledge. Part of our focus is revitalizing traditional practice and belief.

We hope that through these projects and practices, we can contribute to the future. To the lives and hopes and dreams of the people in New Ireland province, who live marine biodiversity and marine systems in ways that are beautiful.

(New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, Photo by Paige West)

Critical Approaches to Dispossession in the Melanesian Pacific: Conservation, Voice, and Collaboration

Paige West (Barnard College / Columbia University) and John Aini (Ailan Awareness)

Thank you all so much for inviting me to give this keynote address at the beginning of what I know is going to be a wonderful, challenging, and thought provoking conference. And thank you to the organizers of POLLEN and the faculty and staff at the University of Oslo who made my trip to Norway possible. I am always so honored to be asked to give a talk – and honestly, a little amazed by it sill. The idea that people value what I might have to say is such an extraordinary privilege. And to be asked to talk to people here, it what is a room full of people in Political Ecology, well that is amazing. I know of no other field that moves with such careful alacrity and grace between the structures and processes that define lives and the day-to-day poetics of how those lives are lived. And again, thank you.

While I am the person delivering this address, the paper is co authored with John Aini, my long-time research partner in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. John is, as we speak, on his way to Malaysia to deliver another co-written keynote address at the International Marine Conservation Congress. I bring you greetings from John, who in addition to being a scholar is also an Ainpidik in the Tumbuan Society from Southern New Ireland as well as a Meregen in the Tungak Society from Lovangai, or New Hanover Island. He is what would have been called in an older kind of anthropology, a chief, twice over. For the past decade John and I have worked together, so while this keynote may be in my voice and the one delivered in Malaysia may be in his, our epistemological practice – our research, thinking, acting, and writing – comes from collaboration.
Today, I'm going to tell you the story about the history of our shared work and describe a few of our on-going projects. Along the way I will raise some challenges for the field of Political Ecology and for all of us as politically engaged critical scholars. I will draw out the following threads and then, hopefully, tie them together at the end of the talk.

First, in most of the places in the world where we do research, national, local, and indigenous labor and knowledge production is often not valued in and of itself, it is only valued when it advances the institutional goals of external agents, agencies, and organizations. While Political Ecology is better than many fields of study when it comes to valuing non European derived epistemic practice (and in ‘epistemic practice’ here I include a broad definition of labor – thinking, writing, facilitating, and manual), I think we have work to do to co-produce a truly equitable field where a range of epistemic practices are valued and intertwined as our scholarly products. Let me say this clearly, and somewhat pointedly, I believe we need to do a better job of decolonizing our field in a way that stops dispossessing people in the places we work of sovereignty over knowledge production.

Second, I want us to think about the genealogies of knowledge that we produce and replicate in Political Ecology and while I love you all and I love this field, we are a field that valorizes and draws on the scholarship of white male scholars over that of other kinds of scholars and that draws on European philosophical traditions to the exclusion of other philosophical traditions. Additionally, across the field, men are cited as making theoretical contributions and pushing the field forward while women are characterized as producing “case studies” that show the effects that are theorized and analyzed by their male colleagues. These practices make our field less robust than it could and should be.

Third, most of our institutions of higher learning value, reward, and promote scholars who do work that stays in the academy and tend to degrade and not promote scholars who do what is seen as “applied” work. Our institutions also fixate on particular kinds of knowledge products – peer reviewed papers with high “impact factors” for example – products that are read by few and that are part of a capitalist publishing machine where our labor is transformed into money for corporations. Corporations who then refuse access to this knowledge for the people we work with. This disallows for the broad circulation of our work and its reception by people who might benefit from it and who might transform lives because if it.

Fourth, as a field that tracks, documents, and understands dispossession and the forms of accumulation that derive from it, we better than most understand the socio ecological ramifications of today’s increasing global disparity of power and wealth. I would go as far as to say that Political Ecology understands our current planetary socio ecological crisis better than any other field. I think that this means that we have a responsibility to act and write in ways that reach widely outside of our field and the academy and in ways that transform.

Let me turn to my and John Aini’s intertwined histories to draw out these themes.

(John Aini, June 2018, Nago Island, Papua New Guinea, Photo by Paige West)

The Past
John Aini started working in marine conservation as a young man. First as a fisheries student working with visiting scientists, next as a researcher working to document then on-going collapse of the beche de mer fishery in Papua New Guinea, and then as an employee at a major international conservation organization focusing on developing community based resource management plans for coastal fisheries across Melanesia. In all of these positions, John watched outsiders come into coastal villages with already formed research questions, already formed data collection plans, already formed plans for conservation, and with very few of the skills that he thought necessary to understand the links between local livelihoods and the health of marine biodiversity. He also watched conservation project after conservation project fail because of a lack of communication between organizations and communities.

In 1993 he, his brother Miller, and his cousin Michael, all of whom had grown up on New Hanover Island, fishing and learning about the sea from their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, decided to start their own organization, a small NGO, that would focus on facilitating community understanding of external marine conservation efforts and external organization’s, mostly big environmental NGO, understandings of local uses and knowledges of marine systems. What they wanted to develop was an organization that translated between epistemological systems – those of communities and those of big NGOs and outside scientists.

They also wanted to focus on what they called at the time “community education.” John is a really stellar marine scientist and everywhere he looked he saw people using their marine systems in unsustainable ways. He wanted to teach people across New Hanover and New Ireland about things like the reproductive biology of beche de mer, the breeding habitats created by healthy mangrove forests, and the importance of sea grass for reef fish diversity. But with the understanding that this scientific knowledge had to be in a feedback loop with the already existing local knowledge.

With initial funding from the Asian Development Bank the three men founded Ailan Awareness and they developed what has come to be known as “the road show” – a process where AA staff go to coastal communities and do conservation awareness. This was to be the first of the “products” that the NGO developed. To say that there was a frenzied buy-in from BINGOS and from the national government for this work immediately is an understatement. Remember back to the late 90s and early 2000s, this was the heyday of CRBM and ICADs – everyone wanted a local team to go out to rural sites and “teach” people about conservation. John and his team got swept up in this. And they did well in terms of helping NGOs and others facilitate their projects. But their vision – that of an organization that also worked to educate outsiders – was not fulfilled.

Everyone wanted to engage Ailan Awareness to do CRBM education but nobody wanted to give them money to do anything else. They became, in essence, a service provider to the very kinds of projects that John, Miller and Michael had been critical of early on. Additionally, they became a kind of cover for BINGOs, who could say to their funders, organizations that were increasingly nervous about the lack of local engagement and local partners, that they had an indigenous NGO as an equal partner in their work. Yet, the partnerships were incredibly unequal. Ailan Awareness was only engaged to do waged contract work, they were never funded at a level that allowed for them to adequately maintain an office, a staff, a vehicle, or a boat. All things you need to be a functioning NGO.

Ailan Awareness had also gotten a reputation as a “fixer” for research scholars and research teams that wanted...
to come to New Ireland to do work. John was constantly being asked to provide logistical support for people, provide introductions to communities where people wanted to conduct research, provide biological information about where certain species and habitats were likely to be found, and to serve as a middle man when researchers had conflicts with communities. All of these scientists and social scientists came to New Ireland, collected their data and went away. There was almost never any return of data to communities, there was almost never any discussion about what the scholars had collected and what the communities wanted them to make public or not, there was almost never any proper acknowledgement of the labor that both Ailan Awareness staff and others whom John had connected the scholars with as research collaborators. Nor was there any prior consultation with people from New Ireland about what research might be valuable to them or important to them and what research questions they themselves had.

This brings me to my first conceptual thread – What kinds of labor and epistemic practice are valued in our field and in others? On the one hand, there is a tendency to value what is seen as local or indigenous knowledge but on the other there is still a tendency to see it as something to be understood and analyzed and documented and not as an alternative form of epistemic practice that may well hold answers that are not accessible through Euro-American-Australian forms of epistemic practice. There is certainly not the push to seek indigenous or local epistemic practice as theoretical in nature and thereby something that we might see as supplanting or enhancing European social theory. Additionally, there is still a kind of colonized mindset to most of the scholarly research that goes on in places like Papua New Guinea (and most other post-colonial and still colonized states). Outsiders come in, extract knowledge, benefit from the multiple forms of labor provided locally, and then benefit from all of this thorough the dissemination of their knowledge products. How do we, as Critical Political Ecologists, address this and transform our field accordingly?

In early 2006 Miller, John’s brother and co founder of Ailan Awareness, died unexpectedly and John was devastated. Everyone was. And, in 2007, when we first met, John was in mourning for Miller and I was in mourning for my research life as I had known it. In 2005 a graduate student was gang raped at the research station about a three days walk from where I had based myself for research for a decade – from 1996 to 2006 – the Crater Mountain area in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The fallout from that was extraordinary. And while I go almost every year to visit friends and family in that area still, I won’t do long-term work there anymore. In early 2006 I published my first book, which was about the political ecology of conservation, and by 2007 when John and I met, I had almost a finished writing my second book, which was about the political ecology of commodities, and I was looking for a new project.

That first book and the papers I published related to it focused on environmental conservation projects as they were conceptualized, funded, and staffed in North America, Europe, and Australia and as they were carried out in places like the remote mountains of Papua New Guinea. Ethnographically my focus was on the connections between Gimi speaking peoples and the lands on which they and their ancestors resided as well as the propositions about “nature” and “culture” made by conservation practitioners working on those lands.

Theoretically my early work on conservation developed two interlinked sets of arguments. The first was about
how when state services and programs recede, because of structural adjustment constraints and other various "reforms", outside entities, like International Non Governmental Organizations, insert themselves into the roles that state agencies once filled. As this happens, people begin to turn to these NGOs to fill the role of the state – to provide infrastructure for medical services, transportation, education, and access to markets for products and businesses. As that happens, and as NGOs become more and more entrenched in these places, people begin to lose the full right to make decisions about their ancestral lands without any interference from outside sources, bodies, or institutions, or what we might call now, indigenous sovereignty over land.

The second argument was focused on the ontological divide between Gimi speaking peoples and conservation practitioners. Gimi have affective kinship relations with their surroundings, where everything and everyone (human, plant, ancestor, animal) is animated by a constant exchange of Auna (life force) and Kore (spirit). Without the forests and its inhabitants, there are no “Gimi” and without Gimi, there is no forest. For those 1990s and early 2000s conservation practitioners, nature had “value” and that value was made through market logics. Places like the Eastern Highland, where numbers of species were abundant, could work to off-set places where numbers of species were scarce. Gimi, who were assumed to be Enlightenment derived rational-acting selves, like the conservationists, were subject to the tragedy of the commons dilemma so it was assumed that they needed to be taught to value biodiversity. According to the conservation actors, creating a market value for it through tourism, handicraft production, and other economic endeavors could do this.

So in that early work I analyzed neoliberalization, capitalism, and ontology and linked them together theoretically. But almost immediately, in what seemed like seconds after my work was published, it became referred to as a “case study”. And over the past 12 years I’ve seen it referred to like that hundreds of times. I was relegated to the world of the case study, like almost all other women and people of color working in Political Ecology and Environmental Anthropology, from the beginning. I myself had drawn almost exclusively on white Euro-American and Australian scholars in my thinking and writing and I had replicated that very tendency I mentioned at the beginning of my talk: fixating on a limited set of European philosophical thinkers to create a theoretical architecture.

So here is my second conceptual thread – I ask, how do we as a field value and produce knowledge through our reading, citing, AND teaching of some scholars and not others? Who do we give primacy in our construction of the genealogy of the field and why? What are the politics of relegating women’s scholarship to the realm of the case study? Why do, predominantly, white male scholars become the theoretical stars of the field? And what does this foreclose? What kinds of epistemic advances don’t happen because we fail to expand our ideas of whose work matters and what kinds of work count as theory and what kinds don’t? And If I as a white scholar am asking these questions, what must it be like for non-white and Indigenous scholars?

In conservation circles in the United States, the initial reaction to my early work on the political ecology of conservation was a kind vitriolic anger that blindsided me. But this was not the case in PNG. There, national scholars and conservation practitioners, and a few white NGO workers, took on board my critical analysis of conservation. Because of this, I began collaborating with a group of national scholars and two international scholars in the early 2000s and by 2006 we founded the Papua New Guinea Institute of Biological Research, a
small national NGO focused on providing opportunities for young people from Papua New Guinea who want to become scientists and anthropologists. One of our founding principals is the proposition that the conservation of biological diversity in Papua New Guinea can only be achieved if Papua New Guineans have full sovereignty over that biological diversity and that that sovereignty has been slowly stripped away by BINGOs working in the country. I never spoke publicly about this until 2009, after I was tenured at my university, because it was made clear to me that this sort of work would be considered “applied” and looked down upon by my colleagues and that I would jeopardize my promotion if I talked about this work. This is something many others scholars who have done this kind of work also report.

This brings me to my third conceptual thread – how might we radically transform what is valued by the institutions that hire us? That fund us? That promote and tenure us? And what are the politics of an academic stance that looks down on work that is considered “applied”? Why are people working in this way considered less scholarly than people who are working on solely scholarly projects? And why is there the assumption that projects that are attempts to effect positive change in the world are not scholarly and theoretically driven? And, what, given the state of the world today and the increasing global inequality, dispossession, and oppression are we doing if we are not doing work that is meant to transform and liberate? And, how can we still think that writing scholarly papers and books is enough?

(Aini and West, Bol Village, 2010, photo by Michael P. Moore)

The Present

Today, because John and I had come to the same conclusions about research, conservation, dispossession, and
how we wanted to be in our fields of study, work together with a number of collaborators, and have a whole host of projects that are grounded in critical local epistemic practice as well as critical political ecology. All of our projects are both scholarly and meant to contribute to local sovereignty: Sovereignty over knowledge, territory, bodies, and representational practices.

Drawing on the epistemic work of scholars like Linda Twala Smith, David Welchman Gegeo, ‘Okusitino Mahina, Audre Lorde, Faye Harrison AND the epistemic work of thinkers from the Gimi world, the Tumbun world, the Tungak world, and the Malagan world, we have developed a methodology for research that I want to turn to now.

Our methodology begins with a new kind of “road show.” During this series of consultations we, or staff working with Ailan Awareness, go to communities or groups who have contacted us with a problem. For example, they may see a decline in the numbers and kinds of fish on their reef or they may see a growing problem with young people not wanting to learn about cultural traditions – people come to us with any problem that they term as related to biodiversity and social practice or belief. We then organize a “road show” event in their chosen location. The revised road show consists of presentations about our previous work, discussions about what the community wishes to understand or change, and a clear discussion about our methodology – highlighting what we can and can’t do. During the road show we focus on local epistemic practice around causality – trying to understand both what they see as a “problem” and the possible causes that they have identified.

After the road show, the community or group spends time discussing our meeting, reflecting on our methodology and what we can and can’t provide, and deciding how to proceed. Sometimes they come back to us, sometimes they do not, and it is made clear during the road show that we are happy to work with them but that we understand if they choose not to work with us.

If they return to us and ask us to help them understand and then perhaps mitigate the change or the problem that they have identified, we then work with them to determine how they want us to do this. We can offer multiple forms of research (everything from a clear and accessible literature review focused on their issue to a full-blown on the ground research project driven by their questions) and we walk the group through exactly who and what will be involved in the research. We outline what research means to everyone involved.

After this, the group goes away again and has another round of consultation. If they agree to move forward, the next step is to do the research. Which we do through our many partnerships with institutions and individuals in PNG, Australia, and the United States. The research itself is carried out in extremely close consultation with the community or group, with our researchers, be they outsiders or locals, checking in with them continually and almost always working with members of the group as co-researchers.

After the research has been carried out, the results are returned to the community or group. The findings are presented in another version of the “road show” and they are discussed at length with the community. They are presented in multiple forms – in one on one discussions, in power point presentations, and in group discussions. They are also presented in multiple languages- from scholar speak to plain English to Melanesian Tok Pisin to the local indigenous languages used by the people we are consulting with.
After the results are presented we go away again and allow the group to work through the results on their own, ask any follow up questions, and then decide how to move forward. For each set of results we provide a series of plans meant to address the changes that people have identified and their causes. We offer plans that are drawn from scientific conservation and preservation methods, plans that are drawn from historic indigenous conservation and preservation methods, and a combination of the two. If the community decides to move forward we then move to a series of meetings to discuss how to move forward with the implementation of the plan or plans to make sure that local knowledges are built into the plans from the beginning.

All implementation is organized and carried out by the community or group – while we facilitate these discussions, we step back and serve as external knowledge providers but do not involve ourselves in the day to day workings of the community. We do however, return to the groups or communities periodically to reflect with them on the successes and failures they see and work with them to change the plans if they need to be changed. Our final step is the production of knowledge products connected to their project. These products are decided upon by the community they have sovereignty over what we say about them, where we say it, and who gets to speak and author.

(Aini leads elders and West to a Malagan ceremony, photo by JC Salyer)

Here are some examples of our work:, which of course I can only talk about through the slides because I’m running out of time! Please ask me about these projects during the Q and A!

1. Community Conservation Sites

2. Cultural Revitalization Projects

Lovangai Fish Trap, Malagan Project, Carving Schools, NIP Digital Repatriation

3. Strengthening Local Socio-Ecological Stewards

Solwara Skul, European curriculum / indigenous curriculum, MaiMai Strengthening Project, Cultural Exchange Project, Fisheries College Interns

(Aini and West, September 2016, New York City, Selfie)
About paigewest
Paige West, the Claire Tow Professor of Anthropology at Barnard College and Columbia University, joined the faculty in 2001, the year after earning her Ph.D. in cultural and environmental anthropology. Dr. West’s general research interest is the relationship between society and the environment. More specifically, she has written about the linkages between environmental conservation and international development, the material and symbolic ways in which the natural world is understood and produced, the aesthetics and poetics of human social relations with nature, and the creation of commodities and practices of consumption. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia, Germany, England, and the United States.
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