

**Controlling the Dragon:  
An ethno-historical analysis of social engagement  
among the Kamoro of South-West New Guinea  
(Indonesian Papua/Irian Jaya)**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the Kamoro (also known as the Mimika) people of the south-west coast of Papua (former Irian Jaya), Indonesia have adapted to major political and economic changes over a long history of interactions with outsiders. More specifically, it is an ethnohistorical analysis of Kamoro strategies of engagement dating back to the seventeenth century, but focusing on the twentieth century. Taking ethnohistory to most generally refer to the investigation of the social and cultural distinctiveness of historical consciousness, this thesis examines how perceptions and activities of the past shape interpretations of the present. Though this thesis privileges Kamoro perspectives, it juxtaposes them against broader ethnohistorical analyses of the “outsiders” with whom they have interacted. For the Kamoro, *amoko-kwere*, narratives about the ancestral (and eternal) cultural heroes, underlie indigenous modes of historical consciousness which are ultimately grounded in forms of social reciprocity. One key characteristic of the *amoko-kwere* is the incorporation of foreign elements and their reformulation as products of indigenous agency. As a result of this reinterpretation expectations are raised concerning the exchange of foreign material wealth and abilities, both classified in the Kamoro language as *kata*. Foreign withholding of *kata* emerges as a dominant theme in *amoko-kwere* and is interpreted as theft, ultimately establishing relationships of negative reciprocity between the Kamoro and the powerful outsiders. These feelings are mirrored in contemporary Kamoro conceptions of their relationships with the Indonesian State and the massive PT Freeport Indonesia Mining Company who use a significant amount of Kamoro land for deposition of mining waste (tailings) and for the development of State and company infrastructure.

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Yanwarin and Ibu Augustina Operawiri patiently explained their community's perspectives amidst rather dire circumstances. Tom Mutaweyau's positive outlook on things was infectious. From the Tipuka communities, I appreciated the stories and insights into Kamoro cosmology given to me by Alo Nataiku Wania. In Hiripao, Simon Natipia and Polykarpus O. provided invaluable insight into Kamoro cosmology. Methodius Mamapuku proved not only a capable researcher, but also his understated sense of humour made him a particularly pleasant work partner.

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Most of all my undying love and gratitude to my wife Gretchen who agreed to follow me despite the potential impact on her own career and the uncertainties that living abroad for almost the entirety of our married life has brought about; all of it associated with this project. To Gretchen and to our children Sean and Hailey I dedicate this thesis.

## Preface

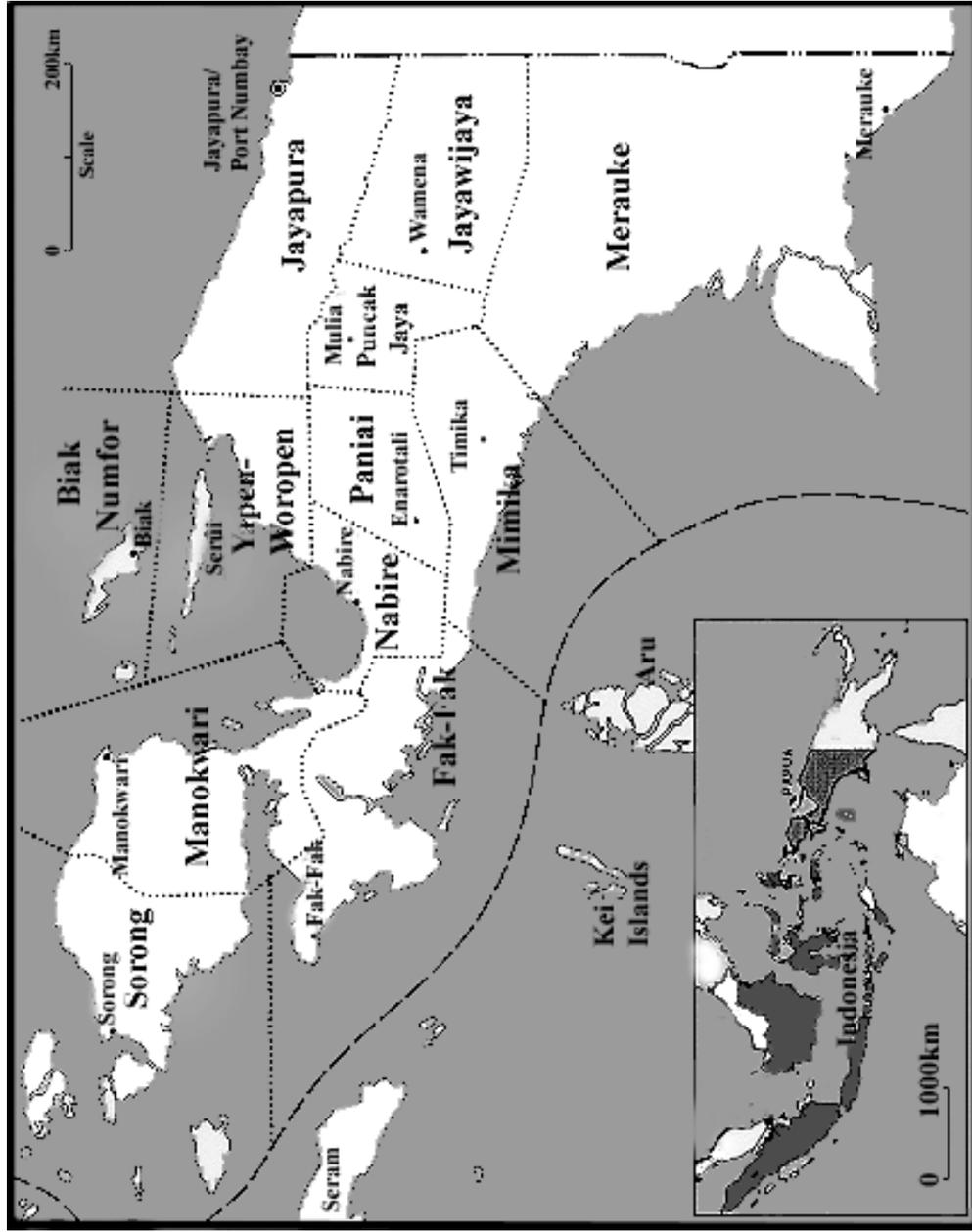
In many politically delicate regions of the world, access for extended ethnographic research is restricted and often impossible. This was the case at my field location in Timika, Papua (then known as Irian Jaya, see Map 1 on page xii). My initial involvement was unanticipated, the result of a chance opportunity to conduct a museum feasibility study. Though it was hardly an ideal field situation for a number of reasons, I sought other opportunities to return to Timika. The choices that I made which allowed me continued access between 1996 and 1998 were at a cost of personal and professional criticism. From an ethical standpoint, from start to finish I followed the guidelines that I was initially bound to by my status as a student at the University of Kansas, even after my affiliation with that University ended. Most generally these guidelines were designed to minimise risks to informants and communities. They required included informed consent, adequate provisions to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality, and the right of potential informants not to participate in any or all parts of my research.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of my own position on ethics of fieldwork, I understand the critiques of my involvement, but in my opinion, the nature of my work is indicative of contemporary trends in cultural anthropology in the post-colonial era. As anthropologists we are multiply entangled in our field communities and our own. The “field” has never been an isolated village with limited social interaction between the anthropologist’s “population” and other people and we are continually dealing with increasingly complex interactions and exchanges.

While this thesis deals explicitly with the Kamoro, it is important for the reader to realise that throughout my work among the Kamoro, I constantly worked between various “fields” and communities. Daily I witnessed and took

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Kansas’ Advisory Committee on Human Experimentation, or ACHE, has a particularly demanding application and review process for any fieldwork that deals with human subjects. Details about the ACHE can be found on their website at <http://www.research.ukans.edu/resadm/ache.html>.



Map 1: The Province of Papua (Irian Jaya) with Kabupaten Boundaries. Adapted from Map provided by ANU Cartography Unit.

part in Kamoro lives that also crossed these “fields,” though in differing ways to my own “crossings.” Kamoro living both within and beyond the Freeport Project Area were but one of my “field communities.” Others included expatriate and Indonesian employees of the mining company in both private and professional capacities (in the US and abroad), local, provincial, and national-level Indonesian government officials, Indonesian and expatriate academics, the Catholic Church (both in Papua and in Holland), and other Indonesian citizens (both Papuan and non-Papuan).<sup>2</sup> My specific involvement ranged from museum researcher, to consultant, to academic, and back to museum researcher (though from a different museum). I highlight these roles to contextualise the broader project of this thesis.

In February 1996, I set out for Timika as a representative of the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>3</sup> With my wife’s assistance, my task was to conduct a feasibility study for a potential museum and cultural centre. While the proposed museum was to focus on the cultures of the two ethnic groups indigenous to the PT Freeport Indonesia Mining Company’s Project Area (see Map 2, on page iv) and more broadly on all of the cultures of Indonesian Papua, my specific responsibility was to work among lowland Kamoro (also known as Mimika) communities.<sup>4</sup> This work entailed discussing potential locations, collections, and modes of representation with Kamoro representatives as well as documenting their social and material culture.

Having planned to conduct fieldwork on the eastern side of the island, Papua New Guinea, I arrived in Papua with no training in *Bahasa Indonesia*, the *lingua franca* of all of Indonesia. Further, my knowledge about the Kamoro in particular

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<sup>2</sup> Here I use the term “Papuan” to refer to the indigenous inhabitants of West New Guinea. A more detailed explanation of this rationale appears in the Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Within the Smithsonian I was affiliated with the Asian Cultural History Program within the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History. My position was both Research Collaborator and Program Assistant.

<sup>4</sup> PT is the Indonesian abbreviation for *Perseroan Terbatas*, the equivalent of a limited company (e.g. Ltd. or Inc.). PT Freeport Indonesia is the Indonesian affiliate of the American Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold (<http://www.fcx.com>). Listed on the New York Stock Exchange as FCX and FCX.A they are engaged in the exploration and development, mining and milling of copper, gold, and silver in Irian Jaya (Papua), Indonesia, and the smelting and refining of copper concentrates in Spain and Indonesia. PT Freeport Indonesia is eighty-six percent owned by Freeport McMoRan, and the remainder is shared between the Indonesian Government and Rio Tinto Ltd.

was limited to the scanty Dutch resources I was able to find in the short lead-up to my departure and my elementary level Dutch linguistic skills.

After just one month of work among a group of Kamoro in urban Timika, I found myself in a coastal village witnessing a boy's initiation ceremony that apparently was the first one in nearly a decade. If linguistic difficulties, cultural deficiencies, and the task of understanding an indigenous ceremony (attended by not only my wife and I but also a public relations team from Freeport) were not enough of a challenge, just then a large-scale riot erupted in Tembagapura, Freeport's highland town near the mine. Overnight, the riot had spread, leaving a path of destruction from Tembagapura to the lowland town of Timika fifty kilometres away. The broken windows, damaged vehicles, and lifted rooftops looked almost as if the place was hit by a Kansas tornado.

During my initial year (1996), various Kamoro people taught me *bahasa Indonesia* and some *akwere Kamoro* (Kamoro language).<sup>5</sup> Through daily interactions with Kamoro people of various backgrounds and communities, I learned a substantial amount not only about their social and material culture but also about their histories and worldviews. Marked as an outsider to the Freeport system by my lack of a vehicle, I also learned a lot about varying Kamoro perceptions of Freeport. Outside of chance encounters in the Timika Market, I had little personal involvement with those Kamoro directly impacted by Freeport's operations (i.e., those who had lost land to the mining process) during that first year. Most of my time was spent initially at the (I) *Gedung Seni Kamoro* (Kamoro Art Centre) in Timika, a development project co-sponsored by Freeport and the Indonesian Government (through the Department of Industry). Before the end of that first year, I had visited all of the villages along the approximately 170-kilometre stretch of coast between Otokwa in the East and Pronggo in the West. Beyond Pronggo, Kamoro communities occupy a further 130 kilometres of coastline extending to Etna Bay. While I did not visit these

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<sup>5</sup> This thesis includes words from three non-English languages: Dutch, Indonesian, and Kamoro. In the text, all are italicised. Generally I try to make the language of origin evident within the

communities in far West Mimika, I interacted with individuals from almost every settlement as most had at least partial residences in or had visited the Timika area during my stay.

At the conclusion of my contract with the Smithsonian, I had an exit briefing in Jakarta with Freeport Executive Management. During the meeting, they solicited my opinion of the situation of those Kamoro directly impacted by the mine. Having had only limited direct experience with these populations, my perspective was based primarily on discussions with Kamoro communities not directly impacted, my limited understanding of Kamoro history and ethnography, and my basic knowledge of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights. The general focus of my comments was on various resettlement projects carried out jointly by Freeport and the Indonesian Government. Despite the fact that some of the resettlements were with community consent, they were largely unsuccessful. The underlying reason for the failure of these settlements was a lack of direct access to community-owned resources due to the existence of the Freeport Levee system built to contain the mine's tailings, the ground-up by-product of mining and processing ore. Notwithstanding issues such as the volume of tailings or the release of heavy metals into the water system, I had suggested that the prohibition of free and open access to land by indigenous owners is a violation of the UN Charter on Human Rights. At the time I felt that my opinion might be considered provocative, as according to Indonesian law all land and resources are owned by the government and are to be used for the good of the people of the Republic. To Freeport's credit, both Indonesian and Expatriate upper-level executives offered no fundamental opposition to my statements and they solicited my ideas for rectifying the problem. Surprisingly, I found myself advocating the rights of a group of people to live to the east of Timika town, east of Freeport's tailings deposition area.

This suggestion explicitly contradicted both Freeport's plans and the Indonesian Government's five-year plan (RDTR) for the region forbidding any development east of the Aikwa system. Admittedly, this plan had been drafted

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context of the sentence it is used in, when some ambiguity exists, I use a (I) to indicate *bahasa Indonesia* or its predecessor, *Melayu*. I use (D) to indicate Dutch and (K) to indicate Kamoro.



with consideration of Freeport's needs, but was also designed to serve as an environmental "buffer zone" between the Aikwa system, laden with tailings, and the Otokwa River which marked the Western boundary of the Lorentz Nature Reserve.<sup>6</sup>

For personal and professional reasons, by this time I had planned to discontinue my affiliation with the Smithsonian. At the same time, I wanted to continue to work in the region out of a commitment to actively assisting Kamoro communities and secondarily to continue to collect data for my dissertation. In the context of discussing my future with Freeport Management, I said that under certain circumstances I would be willing to consult to the company. These circumstances were twofold. First, I specifically requested that my role would focus on research, rather than policy decisions. I wanted to enable development officials and others to make more knowledgeable decisions about any projects relating to the Kamoro, in particular ones that would benefit from a better knowledge of community histories, which seemed largely unknown to both Freeport and the Government. For the second aspect of my involvement, I wanted to facilitate research in the area by liaising between Freeport and other researchers coming to the region. Part of this included the creation of an on-site library to improve the quality of social research conducted on the ground, to avoid the duplication of work, and to enable researchers to work with a broader understanding of the past in the region. I was keenly aware that there was no formal mechanism for archiving the work that had already been done, and as a consequence the local communities were extremely survey-fatigued and felt that they were not benefiting from previous research. My own attempts to find the results of previous research were in vain. The limited amount that I did find was scattered among the three primary Freeport Offices in New Orleans, Jakarta and at "Jobsite." Thanks to a relatively high turnover among employees working with the indigenous communities, no one in the company seemed to have a comprehensive grasp of what social research had been done. Freeport's Public Health and Malaria Control Program stood out from the other departments in this

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<sup>6</sup> In 1999, the Lorentz Park was declared an International Heritage Site.

respect; they had the best archive of data related to all of the lowland communities in the form of an excellent log of malaria levels and treatments for a number of settlements. Freeport's executive managers in Jakarta were amenable to the conditions that I had set out and soon after I was hired through a manpower company as a consultant.

When I initially started as a consultant it became quite clear what Freeport's motives were for hiring me. During my first weeks, I was thrust into meetings regarding a social and environmental audit known as the AMDAL (*Analisis Mengenai Dampak Alam Lingkungan*).<sup>7</sup> This was the official procedure crucial to Freeport receiving Government approval to increase milling output from 160,000 tons per day to 300,000 tons per day.<sup>8</sup>

I remember being wholly unprepared for the questions that were asked of me at a large meeting held at the Sheraton Timika. It was very clear that other departments within Freeport had clearly recognised the need for ethnographic data, though amidst a crowd of engineers it was difficult to explain the various technical difficulties in obtaining the data that they required without extensive, long-term research.<sup>9</sup> The Tailings and River Management Project (TRMP) and the environmental department wanted clear statements as to what land areas were used and what they were used for inside of the area where tailings were disposed of, the Aikwa Deposition Area (ADA). Having only made my first trip around this area a few days prior to the meeting, I really could offer little. However, as there was pressure (and my own thought that if I did not speak up, perhaps it might be assumed that most of the area was not being used) to make some response, I outlined basic and broad environmental zones on the map. These I had understood from previous detailed Dutch military maps of the region coupled

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<sup>7</sup> Here I wish to make it clear that in no way did Freeport hire me under false pretence. My notes from the meetings in Jakarta explicitly outlined that the company was engaged in the process of social and environmental reviews necessary for application for an increase in mine output.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately ninety-seven percent of the total amount of ore processed is released into the Aikwa River (at its upstream source near Tembagapura) and ultimately settles out within a lowland plain bounded by levees (the Aikwa Deposition Area or ADA).

<sup>9</sup> As it would turn out, this would be a common trend throughout much research at Freeport. Timelines for social projects were generally determined not by the needs of the particular project, but by the company's poor integration of social research into their operations, which usually meant that social research was almost an afterthought to all of the company's other concerns.

with information that I had gathered from neighbouring Kamoro communities regarding their general environmental usage. These included coastal areas (primarily fishing), a mangrove zone (mostly used for gathering prawns with some fishing), a marshy zone (used for gathering sago and various medicinal plants), an interior lowland area (used for hunting pig and cassowary), and a foothill area used primarily to gather wood for making canoes. I was shocked to find that soon after my rough estimation of land use, a computerised version of my sketch-map appeared in a report created by a group contracted by Freeport who were ultimately *responsible* for carrying out the social and environmental audit. In fact, the group had already worked in the region for approximately five months before my arrival, yet seemed to regard this information as new.

Eventually, an Indonesian Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), *Yayasan Sejati*, arrived in the region to “facilitate” a “recognition” process that involved developing a compensation package for the two most heavily impacted groups in exchange for their signing a release crucial to the AMDAL approval.<sup>10</sup> Initially, a small team from the NGO arrived to conduct a preliminary investigation. In coordination with my office at Freeport, a pair of researchers conducted a brief preliminary study in the region and developed a report that essentially mirrored my initial thoughts that I had discussed eighteen months earlier (above) with Freeport Executive Management in Jakarta.

During the months after this initial report and preceding any agreement with the Non Governmental Organisation to return, my assistant and I along with a few recent Kamoro high school graduates from the community began to conduct systematic research among the groups living near Freeport. Our research centred in the first place on developing rough maps outlining land usage areas for each village (later to be broken down into sub-village and family rights), highlighting resource use. Next, we began to gather genealogical data from the communities, beginning with the two most directly affected communities—the Nawaripi and the Tipuka.

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<sup>10</sup> Within Indonesia, the more common designation for a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) is not *Yayasan*, which is a foundation, but *Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat* or LSM.

From this research we were able to improve our maps of community land use for all of the Kamoro communities in the immediate vicinity of Timika. As we began to slowly regularise these maps, it became clear how strategically and politically useful they might be to both Freeport and the Indonesian Government. While we had made clear to the communities the purpose of our mapping (solely to outline what each community viewed as theirs), we cautiously protected these maps.<sup>11</sup> Initially our genealogical data was limited to what we had gathered on a first round of research among the Nawaripi and Tipuka communities. By the time we were prepared to further our genealogical research among these two groups, the Jakarta-based NGO had signed on to the “facilitation” process. Effectively, these communities were off limits to any other researchers at this point.

Not long after the arrival of the NGO, another project began which involved cooperative research conducted by the Australian National University and *Universitas Cenderawasih* (Cenderawasih University of Jayapura) in conjunction with PT Freeport Indonesia. This project, known as the UnCen-ANU Baseline Studies project, or UABS, aimed to develop baseline information for the communities that were directly impacted by Freeport.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that they were the most directly impacted lowland communities and had the most to gain from the UABS project, due to the “facilitation” project under way among the Tipuka and Nawaripi communities, their inclusion in the project was limited to social and economic monitoring interviews. Their exclusion from the more detailed social and economic mapping process is unfortunate as it stands to obscure the results of the “recognition” process because there is no quantifiable

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<sup>11</sup> On several occasions I was approached by various departments within PT Freeport Indonesia for copies of my master-map on which I had roughly sketched the territories of all of the Kamoro communities living within the Freeport Project Area. Their main objective was to have an easy mechanism for identifying traditional usage and ownership patterns of the various communities. Though this seemed innocent enough, many communities that I had collected information from expressed concerns regarding the usage of the maps, in particular because some of them had had land alienated from them when they had apparently errantly signed maps in the past. Since I told the communities that these maps were for my office’s *general* understanding of ownership in the area, I felt that I should protect their usage and use them only for the reasons that I outlined to the community. I was willing to suggest to Freeport staff or Government Officials whom they should talk to (in terms of general communities) regarding certain land areas.

<sup>12</sup> While resource projects generally attempt to conduct baseline social and economic studies as part of good practice, the Freeport project had already operated for nearly thirty years without one.

baseline against which to compare the directly impacted communities to neighbouring communities. Effectively, the UABS group, which my assistant and I joined as often as permitted by our other commitments, extended and systematised the process of documentation that we had initiated.

During the period from the last field segment of the UABS project until the submission of the final reports, my work as an on-site consultant ended.<sup>13</sup> Immediately after this point, I began my affiliation with the Australian National University first as a Departmental Visitor in the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, then as a Research Scholar/PhD Candidate.

This thesis is unique in a number of many ways, when compared to the “standard” anthropological academic thesis project. I played little role in the choice of my fieldsite or population and my position was never simply to collect data regarding village life for the production of an academic thesis. I feel that this heightened my awareness of the entanglements of all researchers with their field populations. Having worked among the Kamoro from both within and outside of the agency of Freeport, I am particularly well aware of the local and global dynamics of the issues that impact the region. In particular, the desire to understand Kamoro entanglements within these issues that ultimately inspired my approach in this thesis. Further, the probability of my being able to conduct social research anywhere in Papua from 1996 to 1998, yet alone in a region both in and near the Freeport Project Area, without following the paths that I did is extremely low. Since the end of my consultancy, I have twice returned to Mimika, once in 1998 as part of the UABS team and once in 2000 as a member of a small group from the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden.

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<sup>13</sup> The reason given for the termination of my consultancy was the impact of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1998. During this period, a significant number of expatriate positions were either phased out or nationalised. Soon after my departure, my immediate supervisor, another academic, returned to his post at Cendrawasih University (Manokwari Campus, now *Universitas Papua*). By the end of 1998 PT Freeport Indonesia was granted permission to increase its milling output to 300,000 tonnes per day. This approval was later reviewed during the Habibie interim presidency and with minor modification, approved. Under the Wahid presidency, the approval is again under scrutiny.