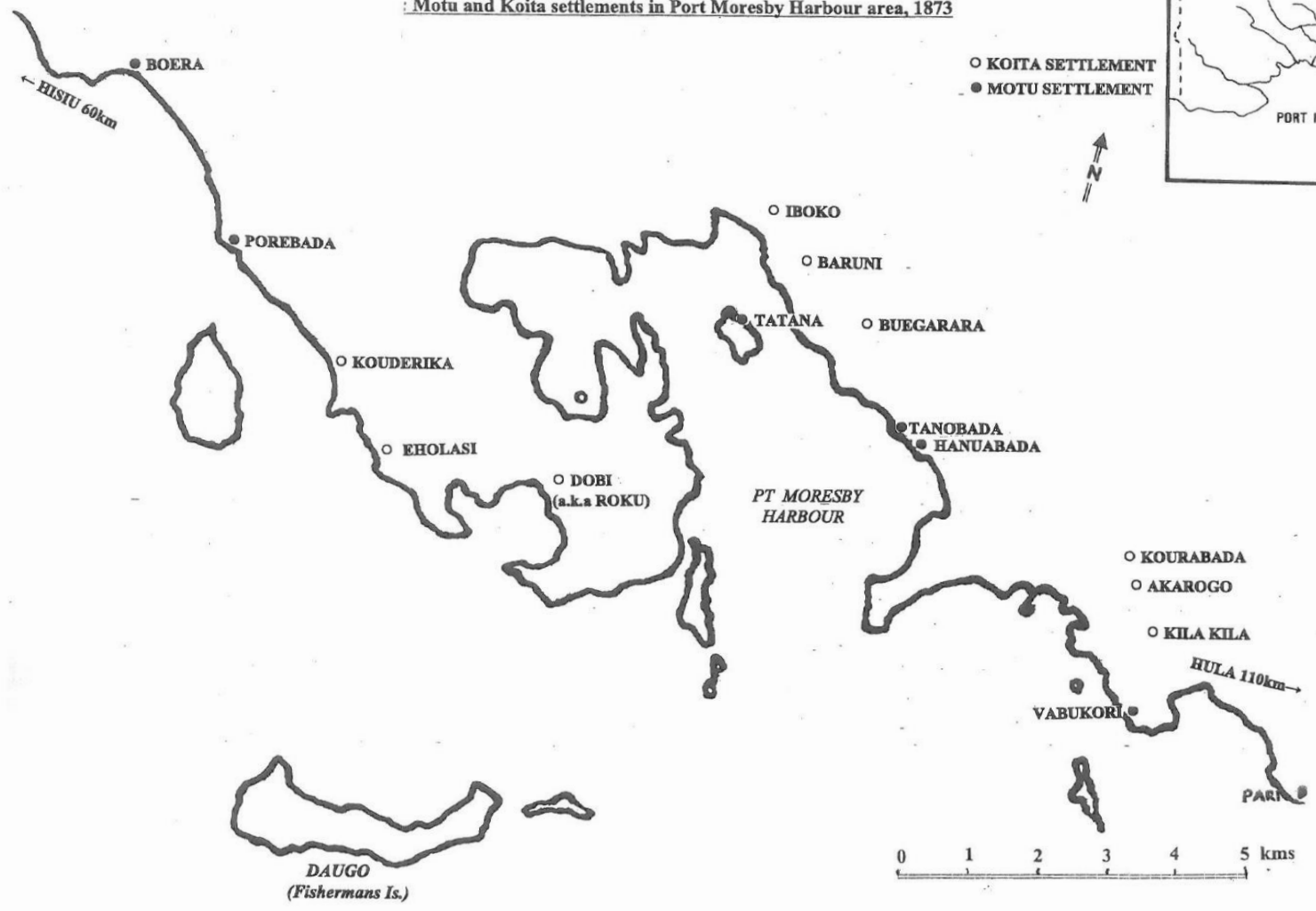


**The origin and effects of the 'patrilineal'  
rule among the Motu-Koita of Papua New  
Guinea**

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Motu and Koita settlements in Port Moresby Harbour area, 1873



## **The assumption of patrilineality**

19<sup>th</sup> century colonial pre-anthropological descriptions (circa 1885-90) would nowadays fit a conventional ‘cognatic’ model of Motu-Koita kinship.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist C.G. Seligman found no ‘mother-right’, so described them simply as ‘patrilineal’.

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists (C. Belshaw, M. Groves) consolidated ‘patrilineality’, despite the analytic anomalies this created for them.

J.B.C. Bramell wrote a pamphlet on ‘land custom’ in 1964 for legal reference. It described some quasi-cognatic features, yet perpetuated Seligman’s fundamental ‘patrilineal’ classification.

In law courts Motu-Koita customs are presented like rules:

e.g.:

“Control of the land.....is vested in the eldest male of the senior patrilineal line who has the right to allot pieces of land to individuals who are descendants of the common ancestor, for their own exclusive use”

[land court statement cited by a National Court judge, 2013]

## **The moral context of land inheritance**

Moral judgments, based on past and present behaviour, historical conflicts, neglect of social duties and obligations, etc, played an important part in decisions about individual land inheritance and acquisition.

Formal descent models ('cognatic', 'patrilineal') do not account for these influences, or the constant need for consultation, negotiation, compromise, etc, that they entailed.

## **Capitalism and ‘patrilineality’**

Capitalism and the increasing commercialization of land have contributed to a resistance among new generations to some traditional communal aspects of land apportionment, involving consultation, negotiation, behavioural considerations and situational compromise.

The ‘patrilineal rule’ is increasingly being invoked parochially, as entrepreneurial individuals seek to exploit the commercial potential of plots of land they claim to exclusively ‘own’.

There is a noticeable shift away from the communalism that has sustained the Motu-Koita as a whole in the past.