1. Introduction

Towards west of Juha Gas, there are several sacred places. The biggest and
the most fearing of all is called Gamlihai. At Gamlihai a Sago Palm was
right in the middle of the swamp where a man called Kesomo or known
by other two names; ‘Wogibi and Womogosai’ came out of the sago palm
and went up to Mount Gamilhai and married a young woman from there.

Out of this marriage, four (4) sons were born … [they] and their
descendants have hunted, fished, made gardens, made sago and have
always lived together as one big extended family. They were and are
a communal clan; they shared everything found on the land with each
other. There were never any land boundaries in place to separate the four
Kesomo sons from each other (Taprin 2007/8: 3–6).

‘The Origin of Kesomo’ is an unpublished 12-page booklet compiled by
Henick Taprin in 2007 and 2008. The stated ‘purpose’ was:

to have the origin of Kesomo Clan, its descendants and its inherited
natural physical features documented so that a copy can be submitted to
the LNG Fembi Land Owner Association for reference and a copy kept
by Kesomo clan executives so that this document will be used for any
beneficiaries out of the LNG Project (Taprin 2007/8: 2).

The Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas (PNG LNG) Project is
a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that in May 2014 shipped its first cargo
of gas to Japan. The project is run by a consortium of multinational
companies led by ExxonMobil. It is expected to produce nearly seven
million tonnes of gas each year and to do so for a period of 30 years. One
third of the projected income of USD31 billion will remain in Papua New
Guinea (PNG) and, eventually, a proportion of this will flow to the people
on whose land the gas wells are located (Business Advantage 2014).
Navigating the Future

The project will draw gas from three previously undeveloped fields and four previously operating fields, transport it via a 700 km pipeline—400 km underwater—to Port Moresby and, after processing, ship it to overseas markets. The most distant of these fields is Juha (Fig. 1.1). Five wells have been sunk there, but they are on hold and not scheduled to produce until 2020. Nor, as yet, have they been connected by a pipeline to the rest of the system. In the meantime the people who live, or lived, close to the well heads wait in expectation of huge windfalls in the form of royalty payments. Most of these people are Febi-speakers. To their south live the closely related Kubo. To their north are Bogaia and Duna people, and to the northeast, across unpopulated and rugged mountains, are Huli. Kubo-speakers accept Febi, or some Febi, as the legitimate owners of the land on which the Juha wells have been sunk. At the same time, however, many Kubo-speakers seek to realign as Febi. Huli-speakers assert that, at the least, they too are legitimate owners of that land: they have a long history, and much experience, of strategising in this way (Goldman 2007).

Figure 1.1: Location of gas fields and pipeline associated with the Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas Project.
Sources: Based on images available through Google Maps and Coffey Natural Systems (2009: 1.2, Figure 1.1).

1 In 2014, the Febi population was about 400–500, and the Kubo population about 1,000.
The cover of Henick’s booklet features the ancestor Kesomo, his wife and the sago palm from which he emerged (Fig. 1.2). The names of mountains, rivers and creeks, waterfalls, sacred sites, lakes, swamps, special trees and caves on the land associated with each subclan are listed and mapped. The living and deceased descendants of Kesomo’s four sons are named. They span from four to six generations.

There are, however, complications. Some of the people named as second and third generation descendants were alive at the time the booklet was compiled. And, further, in the years 1986 to 1999, many of those named identified themselves as members of quite different clans. In some cases, husbands and wives are both listed as descendants in the same line. Henick himself, his siblings and his father, are named as descendants of two of Kesomo’s sons but they hail from Oksapmin, more than 100 km northwest of the land attributed to Kesomo. By birthright they are neither Kubo nor Febi and, indeed, it is only Henick who has any direct connection to either of these language groups. In the mid-2000s Henick came to Suabi—a mission station on Kubo land—as the community health worker. He married a Kesomo woman, left with her and their son for a year or two, and returned, unemployed, in the later 2000s.
These complications might, of course, merely reflect the fact that, in PNG, asserted connections between people and asserted affiliations with land are remarkably fluid. That is, the complications may concern us, as analysts striving for order and consistency, but may give little concern to the people themselves. Those complications are, however, expressed in another way. The affiliations of people with land, with clan and subclan, and with each other that are represented in Henick’s 2007/08 booklet were not those that we had imagined to be the case ten years earlier and nor were they those that we elicited six years later. Throughout this time, Kubo and Febi people were reimagining their social world, doing so with great rapidity and in two ways. They were reimagining the social ‘things’ of their world and the ways in which these were to be ordered. And they were reimagining the ways in which they might know those things. The ontological and epistemological foundations of their lives were changing (compare Naveh and Bird-David 2014).

This book will explore those changes. At one level, we describe the changes themselves, tracing shifts in the ways people relate to the land, to each other and to outsiders, and the histories of engagement that frame those changes. In addition, however, we are concerned with the processes through which these changes have emerged, as people seek to imagine—and work to bring about—a radically different future for themselves while simultaneously reimagining their own past in ways that validate this work.

The context in which change is currently occurring is the prospect of PNG LNG. Geo-surveys, seismic surveys and drilling—with oil and gas as targets—have been underway on Febi land for three decades. The airstrip at Suabi, opened in 1984, has facilitated these activities but, to the chagrin of Kubo people, their own land has not been focal to either exploration or discovery. These activities are driven by a variety of international petroleum companies and are regulated by the nation state of PNG. But both the companies involved and the edicts that flow from government change frequently. To secure their hoped-for future—to access the monetary benefits that one day will flow from productive wells—Kubo and Febi people must navigate this ever-fluctuating landscape. Simultaneously, however, they must find ways—both processual and structural—to accommodate being Kubo or being Febi to a future that lacks tangible guide posts. They must demonstrate to themselves and to an outside world that the past they articulate—their history of engagement with land and with each other—fits them for a future that they do not yet understand. Here too, therefore, the task they confront is akin to navigation. Out of a vast array of always intersecting esoteric and concrete memories they must discover and foreground those that fit the moment and establish a path to satisfying their desires.
1. Introduction

The Setting

Figure 1.3: Map showing approximate location of Kubo territory.
Source: Based on images available through Google Earth.
Notes: The map shows Kubo territory (highlighted), neighbouring language groups (large font, capitalised) and primary locations mentioned in this and later chapters. Sesanabi was no longer in existence by 1986 but was re-established by 1999; Gugwuaasu was established in 1987 and Mome Hafi in 1998–99. Kubo people assert that their territory extends to the government station at Nomad. We suspect that Samo, Gebusi and Bedamuni people would make the same claim.²

² The distinct border to Kubo territory shown in Figure 1.3 is based on information elicited in 2014. Willie Samobia, of Suabi, provided the most explicit details. His interpretation was reinforced and, in places, slightly modified by others. Our prior knowledge of Kubo-Konai connections provided a more satisfactory representation in the northwest corner of Kubo territory than did information from Suabi residents. Willie Yofu—a Samo man based at Honinabi—confirmed some details concerning the border of Kubo and Samo lands. In the years to 1999 people spoke of the mix of languages represented at different communities, but at no time suggested a definitive border for any one of those language groups.
The people who we know as Kubo are the focal actors in this book. They live in a small area of the interior lowlands and foothills of the Western Province of PNG (Fig. 1.3). We first met them in January 1986 and, through the next 13 years, lived with them on five occasions for periods of between one and 15 months. Our base throughout those years was a small hamlet—initially near a waterfall on the stream Gwai, later at the mouth of the stream Mome—on the west bank of the Strickland River. At first, our research focused on the always interconnected play of social and ecological dimensions of people’s lives (Dwyer and Minnegal 1992a). Later, however, the emphasis shifted to change and to the subtle processes that underlay change (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007; Minnegal and Dwyer 1999).

In 2011, after a 12-year hiatus, we returned to Kubo land. The overt changes were remarkable. The population had doubled. There were children everywhere. The survival of infants, first-time mothers and the elderly had greatly increased. Many people were now fluent in both Tok Pisin and English where, before, few had much facility with languages other than Kubo and those of their immediate neighbours. And people had travelled, and were travelling, to places throughout, and occasionally beyond, mainland PNG. On these later visits—a total of seven-and-a-half months in 2011, 2012–13, mid-2013 and 2013–14—we were based at the Suabi Mission Station. Advancing decrepitude placed our former research site out of reach; we were no longer physically equipped for, or attracted by, a two-day walk through the swamp lands that separated the airstrip at Suabi from our friends—many known since the time of their birth—who still lived close to the Strickland River. This proved hurtful to them. They felt we had abandoned them. But our research interests had shifted, and we were beholden to the grant that supported our work. Our focus was still with change. The pace of change in this area, however, and the imperative to change, had increased dramatically. The PNG LNG Project was now underway to the immediate north of Suabi and the airstrip located there served as a base from which companies accessed the Juha area or undertook exploratory work in the vicinity. The activities of these companies and, often, the physical presence of their representatives were the source of major impacts on people’s lives. They suggested new understandings of the world and facilitated access to the world beyond Kubo land. They were the immediate source of expectations, desires and
frustrations. They reshaped the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of Kubo lifeways. How this happened and what it means for both Kubo and Febi have been the foci of our recent research.

Changes analogous to those we describe in the following chapters have happened elsewhere in PNG. Much has been written about the ways ‘desires, subjectivities and histories are being unevenly reconfigured’ (Bell 2016) on resource frontiers across the nation, as land is cleared through logging or for oil palm plantations, and mines tear apart ecological and social landscapes (Kirsch 2006; Curry and Koczberski 2009; Lattas 2011; Bryan and Shearman 2015; Gabriel and Wood 2015; Jacka 2015). But the communities that are focal to those studies have, in most cases, had much longer histories of engagement with the forces of modernity than Kubo and Febi people. Indeed, it was not until the early 1960s that the colonial government established a foothold in the region where these people live. For more than a decade thereafter the focus was to the east where a larger, and seemingly more aggressive, population of Bedamuni-speakers captured most of their attention. Kubo and Febi were a backwater, occupying a thinly populated region of backswamps, forest and mountains with, it seemed, little to offer the outside world and, for themselves, a seemingly unpromising future. In places like the Highlands or Bougainville or Gulf Province, colonial administration, Christian missions, market economies, and migration for wage labour or education have been part of local lives for decades before multinational companies arrived in pursuit of resources to extract from their lands (May and Spriggs 1990; West 2006; Bainton 2010; Bacalzo et al. 2014). Most studies, too, have focused on impacts once industrial extraction has commenced. At Suabi, however, the uneven development that too often accompanies encounters with the forces of modernity remains nascent. Even by 2014 there were no mines or gas wells on Kubo land, though their territory was encircled by exploratory ventures. Nor, by this time, were there any producing mines or wells on Febi land. Kubo wait for discoveries on their own land. Febi wait for existing wells to start producing. For us, this has provided the opportunity to see the earliest phases of change, and thus capture something of the processes entailed.
Becoming Modern

In the next three chapters of this book, we describe shifts in understandings and practice over three decades, as Kubo and Febi people have sought to reposition themselves in relation to a world that, increasingly, intruded into their lives from beyond previously experienced horizons. **Chapter 2** traces the story of one community on the land of Kubo people between 1986 and 1999, and the ever-changing relationships that gave it form. Through those years, the lives of people at Gwaimasi retained much of the rhythm of earlier times. Little had changed in the material conditions of life. But people did not ignore the accumulating signs that new ways of being—previously unimagined possibilities—were emerging in the world. As the anxieties and desires these signs evoked grew, they sought ways to draw the outside world into their own and, thereby, gain access to and control over what they perceived as its future possibilities. We describe how, while material manifestations of the outside world remained minimal, people began to reconfigure previous understandings of exchange, gender relations and rights to land.

In **Chapter 3**, we turn to the histories of engagement that framed the signs of change people at Gwaimasi perceived and the responses they devised. The social landscape of Kubo has never been static; change itself was not new. But through the past century, and increasingly in recent years, new kinds of beings—with extraordinary possessions and extraordinary powers—began to appear. And what it meant to be Kubo changed as a result. We trace stories told by these outsiders, explorers and colonial officers, as they encountered and constructed Kubo as a distinct category of people. And we trace, too, the stories told by the people who now came to have that name; stories of relationships and interactions—with each other, with the land and with outsiders—that shaped the lives of individuals and groups in the present. We recount the histories of more recent times as missionaries and others came to stay, bringing with them new understandings, new possibilities and new expectations. Finally, we turn to people’s encounters with bureaucracy in the guise of the PNG Department of Petroleum and Energy and other national and provincial departments that, though distant and anonymous, exert little-understood but determining control over people’s lives and desires in the earliest decades of the twenty-first century.
Chapter 4 brings our story forward to 2014, depicting patterns and institutions of life at Suabi, a village where many of the historical threads traced in the previous chapter have been woven together around an airstrip, mission station and base camp for companies seeking oil and gas in the mountains to the north. While the changes we observed in earlier years emerged in response to rumours of a very different future that could be only imagined, those imaginings have taken more concrete form at Suabi. Aggregation as a larger and more sedentary community, emerging constraints on access to land, changes to marriage practices and expectations, paid employment and its effects on both access to money and the distribution of subsistence tasks among men and women have dramatically altered the rhythms of life here. New institutions—markets, schools and churches—have changed the ways relationships are negotiated and life trajectories shaped. But Suabi is more than just a village; it is a portal through which information, wealth, people and hopes flow both from and out into a wider world.

What emerges through these chapters is the increasing entanglement of local people with forces of modernity and globalisation. Two themes recur. First, people here have been left in little doubt that the future for themselves and their children will be very different from their past. This is something they welcome. They are aware too, however, that past experience provides little guidance to what will come, or to how they themselves might shape that future. Secondly, the relational imperatives that informed and patterned people’s lives have eroded, with the infiltration of categorical ways of knowing the world. The money that seems key to the desired future has introduced its own logic, where the value of things—and of people—no longer lies in the relationships they mediate but, rather, in the attributes they display and the roles they play.

An orientation towards the future is not new for Kubo. They did not see events of the past as constraining, much less determining the future. Rather, the obligations and expectations that entangled a person’s life were shaped not by those who came before, but by the relationships negotiated for oneself: lands traversed, trees planted, gardens made, marriages contracted, children borne and youths initiated. But the kinds of relationships possible, the range and distribution of those with whom these might be negotiated, have expanded enormously in the past three decades. How are these new terrains—their potential unknown and their nature uncertain—to be navigated?
The people we describe now see themselves on a global stage, objectified as ‘Kubo’ or ‘Febi’ through the imagined, and indeed often real, gaze of outsiders. But their position on that stage is at the margins. And, as different modes of engagement with that wider world emerge, attention is increasingly drawn to differences between people in their potential to draw on these modes. Before, all were hunters and gardeners, spouses and parents; difference lay only in the choices people made with respect to the places and other people with whom they negotiated those relationships. Now, however, only some people find paid employment, only some attend high school, only some will be recognised as potential beneficiaries of the wealth to flow from gas extraction. Which category a person falls into, which position he or she holds, is in many ways determined by others; companies employ workers, churches designate pastors and the government appoints community health workers and teachers, while village councillors are elected at the whim of a local majority. The attributes of persons thus become more salient, in deciding what can be expected of them, than the relationships they have entered into. As a consequence, what has been done in the past matters in new ways; it becomes objectified, open to evaluation.

A sense of rupture between past and future, and of differentiation in the present, has been recognised by others as key to a modern sensibility (Englund and Leach 2000; Knauft 2002a). People at Suabi know that the future will be different. But how different will it be, and in what ways will it differ from the past and present? They are intensely engaged in imagining what that future might be like, evaluating different possibilities and working to bring the future they desire into being. In doing so, the past itself becomes a point of reference—to be rejected, perhaps, or restored, but always as something against which new possibilities are evaluated. In the next two chapters of this book, we trace ways in which people at Suabi in recent years have been navigating the uncertainties that arose from encompassment within, and their own attempts to encompass, the promises and threats of a modern world.

Navigating Change

Kubo and Febi people have always lived in a world of uncertainty. They seek to recognise and act on the ever-changing opportunities that emerge in the world. Always, however, this is done in the knowledge that outcomes may not be as hoped; other agents, too—human and
non-human—are pursuing their own agendas, and this may alter the consequences of action. But there are new agents to be dealt with now—church, state, company—whose decisions have profound effects on both available opportunities and what must be done to seize those opportunities. The world that people must navigate ‘in relation to the push and pulls, influence and imperatives, of social forces’ (Vigh 2009: 432) is now more fluid. Like the West Africans with whom Henrik Vigh worked, people at Suabi:

spend a great deal of time debating how global, regional and local influences and conflicts will affect their lives, what spaces of possibility will emerge or disappear, what trajectories will become possible and what hopes and goals can be envisioned (ibid.: 422).

Vigh’s concept of ‘navigation’—of moving through an environment that is itself always in motion—captures well the tactics and strategies deployed by Kubo and Febi people as, in recent years, they have felt their way through ‘the immediate convulsions of a fluid environment whilst simultaneously trying to gain an overview and make [their] way toward a point in or beyond the horizon’ (ibid.: 429). Their actions are concerned with ‘both the socially immediate and the socially imagined’ (ibid.: 425). But, simultaneously, their tactics have changed the environment for future action, reconfiguring the social world in key ways.

In seeking paths to a future that was itself barely imagined, a future that held the promise of great wealth and potential influence, people at Suabi had to navigate the complexities of government and company bureaucracy—complexities that seemed impossible to pin down, were ever-changing, and could be known only through constant attention to the rumours that trickled in from outside. To establish their credentials as legitimate actors entitled to negotiate relationships and enter into agreements they drew up lists of named people, planning to register Incorporated Land Groups that were eligible to receive royalty payments. In this process they reworked the organisation of households and the relationships between men, women and land. They drew maps, and compiled catalogues of mountains and streams and swamps that belonged to groups of people that they now represented as bounded in ways that had never obtained in the past. They drew upon the discourses of the government and corporate sectors: tribes, clans and subclans; councils and committees; companies, chairmen, treasurers and agents. In all these ways they explored different ways of being in the world, with the outcomes
that they brought very different social entities into being and, ultimately, themselves became different kinds of people. It is these changes, and the navigation of imagined futures that framed them, that are the themes of Chapter 5.

Although people drew on the language of outsiders to pursue their objectives, the logic that informed their efforts was not that of either the state or resource companies. The relationality that grounded identity in the past continued to inform decisions. The process of bringing new forms of collectivity into being has entailed revisiting—and re-visioning—past actions and interactions. Chapter 6, therefore, focuses on the ways in which people at Suabi sought to validate action in the present by selectively drawing on the past—by navigating a past that could be always read in other ways. The readings foregrounded in 2011–14, however, projected new interests and imperatives into that past. As people sought to position themselves in relation to opportunities offered by global capital flows, they mobilised connections established long before. They will have always done this. But, in drawing on a past that now played out in a very different world, they were rereading events and understandings that had once shaped that past. They gave overt expression to this in both the resolution of disputes through the new mechanism of village courts and in reshaping mythological pasts as they reshaped social groups.

In the former domain, at public court cases concerning unreciprocated marriages, inappropriate liaisons, behaviour that risked angering spirits, or accusations of sorcery, protagonists appealed to events that had occurred decades before or drew on past practices, sometimes long abandoned, to critique actions in the present. By these selective appeals to the past, they sought to mobilise compensation payments in the present. The effect was to redistribute money that entered the community along paths that not all could directly access.

In the latter domain, people devised symbols that were intended to ground and sustain the new social collectivities that they were bringing into existence. They did so in the form of logos, using elements drawn from the mythological past. Mythologies that previously had woven people together in an unbounded relational field were now, themselves, being deconstructed. Different groups of people began to creatively define the limits of the cosmological by declaring selected stories or
selected constructions of stories to be properly and exclusively their own. They were, in effect, corporatising social and cultural identity (compare Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

In both domains, then, Kubo and Febi people drew selectively from their remembered pasts, both secular and sacred—often foregrounding some details while suppressing others—to fit their lives to an ever-changing present. For them, the present is deeply imbued with desires that are oriented towards a future imagined in terms of ‘development’—a future in which they are no longer ‘remote’ and forgotten, and in which wealth that is perceived as ‘rightfully’ theirs is given material expression. In 2011–14, that imagining was closely bound up with the presence at Suabi of a relatively large campsite that served as the base for exploratory geo-surveys and seismic surveys being undertaken by several different petroleum companies.  

**Encountering Otherness**

The concluding chapters of this book turn to ways in which people at Suabi framed their encounter with ‘otherness’ in the form of the exploration camp, and with how this informed a deeper refiguring of local ontologies and epistemologies. We develop more explicitly conceptual threads that emerged in earlier chapters. Most importantly, we emphasise the contingency, plurality and interrelatedness of ontologies and epistemologies. Drawing on Heidegger, Tim Ingold (2010: 4) writes of a ‘thing’ as having ‘the character not of an externally bounded entity, set over and against the world, but of a knot whose constituent threads, far from being contained within it, trail beyond, only to become caught with other threads in other knots’. An ‘object’, by contrast, ‘stands before us as a fait accompli, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very “overagainstness” in relation to the setting in which it is placed’. The emphases here are, respectively, on what we distinguish as the relational and the categorical. But where, it seems, Ingold favours a view that there are no objects in the world, there are only things, we favour the view that at different times and places, and

---

3 People at Suabi often referred to the mix of companies that were based there as ‘Company’ and the campsite as ‘camp’, ‘Company camp’ or, occasionally, ‘mining camp’. In this book, in contexts where particular company identities are not relevant, we follow the local practice of using ‘Company’ to denote the collective.
irrespective of the possibility that Ingold is correct, people may come to know things as objects. This was evident in the ways that people at Suabi related to, and made sense of, the exploration camp and the company representatives based there.

People at Suabi had high hopes for future benefits from the PNG LNG Project, in the form of royalty payments and business development grants. In their understanding, those benefits would be provided, either directly or indirectly, by ‘Company’. And, for them, Company had a very material, and personalised, presence (compare Golub 2014); a presence that offered opportunities in the present for those who were able to discern and act on them. The camp at the Suabi airstrip was woven into everyday life. These everyday interactions, and the access to benefits that they facilitated or constrained, are the focus of Chapter 7. They reveal much about how local people understood the nature of Company and their relationship with it. But these interactions were framed, too, by the understandings of Company representatives, and these understandings did not always coincide with those of local people. Nor were they constant. On the one hand, it often seemed that there was an air of arrogance in the performance of Company representatives, a sense of presumed superiority that precluded any need to either pay attention to local concerns or communicate their own intentions. On the other hand, it often seemed that local people were complicit in the dictates and ideological persuasions of Company—working to project an image of themselves as ‘cooperative’, welcoming, non-demanding and non-threatening hosts. To us, as observers, these perceptions were discomforting. But they did not do justice to either party. In this chapter, we show how the apparent ‘arrogance’ of Company and the apparent ‘complicity’ of local people were mutually imbricated, each more a product of the ‘friction’ between two ontological systems than an expression of either system alone (compare Tsing 2004).

In Chapter 8, we shift scale, to explore how not just interactions with those at the exploration camp, but also the ways in which the structure and operation of that camp affected local ontologies. Through earlier chapters we trace shifts in the ways that people at Suabi interacted and sought to manipulate relationships, not only with each other but also with the new beings, things and powers that have appeared in their lives through the past three decades. But lurking behind these changes there have been deeper shifts in modes of understanding. In this final chapter, we pull together some of the threads woven through previous
stories, to highlight the interplay of ontologies and epistemologies in the strategies that people deployed to navigate both future and past, and to manoeuvre in the present.

Our perspective on both ontology and epistemology—on the known and the knowing (Dewey and Bentley 1975)—is that neither is static and unchanging, and that each arises and may alter in the course of living in the world. Our perspective is, thus, phenomenological (compare Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2000; Blaser 2009a, 2013). It is not, we consider, in accord with the recent and influential perspectives that have been developed by Phillipe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.4 The ‘things’ in the worlds of people are not pre-given. They emerge and consolidate or dissolve as people engage with that world. Nor are the ways in which those things are ordered pre-given. As Gregory Bateson wrote: ‘The division of the perceived universe into parts and wholes is convenient and may be necessary, but no necessity determines how it shall be done’

4 Discussion of the recent ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology is concerned, especially, with the substantive and challenging contributions of Phillipe Descola (2006, 2013) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004a, 2004b; see Carrithers et al. 2010). Descola offers a structural analysis under which identity and difference on two intersecting axes of ‘physicality’ and ‘interiority’ generate a fourfold typology of ideal ontologies; models with ‘no empirical existence’ (Taylor 2013: 201). His concern is with ways in which ‘things’ may be ordered, more than with the ‘things’ per se. His axes of ‘physicality’ and ‘interiority’ resonate, perhaps uncomfortably, with an understanding of body and mind as distinct categories and he acknowledged this in writing that ‘according to developmental psychology, the awareness of this duality is probably innate and specific to the human species’ (Descola 2006: 147). Descola’s ideal ontologies do not arise in contexts of engagement with environment—that is, in practice—but are given, or made possible, by pre-existing mental templates. Viveiros de Castro, working initially from Amazonian ethnography, offers ‘perspectivism’ as an ontological type under which humans and animals see themselves, other beings and the ‘things’ they and other beings are afforded by environment in precisely reciprocal ways; thus, for example, a jaguar sees itself as human, sees humans as animals, and sees the blood it drinks as humans see manioc beer (1998: 470). To Amazonian peoples, he wrote, ‘the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity’ (2004a: 465). Viveiros de Castro enlarges on this perspective in proposing ‘multinaturalism’ as a more general, and speculative, ontology under which all the inhabitants of the world share the same ‘culture’ but have many different ‘natures’. These are challenging ideas. We agree that different people may apprehend the ‘things’ of the world in different ways and that this may result in a ‘communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and do not know this’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 8). But we have one primary concern. Not all beings or objects are understood to fall within the ambit of perspectivism and, indeed, there is variation across Amazonia with respect to both those that do and the human persons who hold the knowledge of their status (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 48, 53–4). Beings with great symbolic or practical importance receive most attention, and context may thus inform observed variation. What, therefore, is the ontological status to Amazonians of those beings or objects to which perspectivism does not apply? To them, is ontology itself to be understood as multifaceted? We accept that these authors, Viveiros de Castro in particular, provide access to a critical and radical anthropology that acknowledges that we all potentially live in ‘multiple realities’ and can be other than we are (Hage 2012), but their take on, at least, ontology is not that which informs discussion in this book.
(1979: 42). The ‘ontological bricolage’ (Gewertz and Errington 2016) that results must be understood as an expression of ‘shifting, situational, melded, often self-conscious, and sometimes critically appraised ways of being and acting in the world’ as people ‘slide in and out of multiple frames of reference’ (ibid.: 375–6).

One way in which people give substance to the ‘things’ of their world is by naming them. We open this chapter, therefore, by discussing ways in which Kubo and Febi people have altered ways in which the bestowal of names reveals how individual people and groups of people perceive themselves and are perceived by others. As in so many other domains of their lives, the changes reflect erosion of a pre-existing and predominant relational ontology and epistemology and an infiltration of a categorical ontology and epistemology. And, always, these changes, though never absolute, arise in practice. They arise, are tested and rejected or affirmed, in the course of everyday experience—in the course of people’s everyday engagement with the world.

It has been in the course of their engagement with representatives of petroleum companies that the people who live at Suabi have had their most immediate and direct experience of other ways of living and other ways of knowing the world. They themselves, as hosts and workers, have contributed to the sustainability of the resource extraction ventures that have operated on or near their lands. Their efforts have flowed outwards to a globalised world, to a distant world that has no sense of the efforts that people in a remote, lowland forested corner of the world contribute on its behalf. In return, the ideological persuasions of that world, the assumptions of science and the market place that give it certainty—in short, the ontological and epistemological foundations of that world—have penetrated into the very being of the people who live at Suabi. Those persuasions and assumptions underwrite the structure and performance of the exploration camp at Suabi. They pattern the behaviour of the men who work there. To local people they provide models of how the world could be and of what might be done, or should be done, to achieve desired ends. These processes, and their consequences for people at Suabi, are the central concerns of this chapter. We draw on the diverse understandings of, among others, Anna Tsing (2004, 2009), John and Jean Comaroff (2009) and Mario Blaser (2009a, 2009b) with respect to ways in which the hospitality or products of local people may service the wants of distant elites, the ways in which the ideological persuasions of intruding outsiders may infiltrate the understandings of those whom they
intrude upon, and the ways in which the meeting of diverse ontologies and epistemologies plays out on a political stage where, ultimately, it is people’s everyday experiences that shape their world-view.

The processes we write about tell of ways in which the people at Suabi are comprehending their own social arrangements in new ways and, indeed, how they are comprehending themselves in new ways. They tell, also, however, that there is no absolute rupture. Issues of identity and concomitant issues of practice run deep. At Suabi, as so much has changed, people continued to engage with an environment that, on the one hand, they understood to be unpredictable and, on the other, to ‘give’ without a requirement that they reciprocate (compare Bird-David 1990). Nor did people ever forego their deep concern that they might be ensorcelled by others within their community, or themselves be accused of sorcery by those others. Though they were reaching out to a world beyond the local, and though the ontological and epistemological framing of their world was in flux, they remained committed to expressions of relationality that, for a time at least, seemed to obviate that concern.

The changes we describe in this book, whether surface or deep, were not forced upon Kubo and Febi. They learned that life was different elsewhere. Outsiders came to their land and, in their own ways of living, both revealed something of those differences and enhanced desire for what might be offered by embracing such alternatives. The changes that followed were, in large part, an outcome of the actions of the people themselves. A new world is emerging for Kubo and Febi people, a world that they themselves are building, a world in which they are emerging as new kinds of subjects.
This text is taken from *Navigating the Future: An Ethnography of Change in Papua New Guinea*, by Monica Minnegal and Peter D. Dwyer, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.