The woman and her children came out of the forest to the edge of the river. That is where they saw the fish. It was dead and had washed onto the bank. It was longer than a man’s arm and without scales. The body was reminiscent of an eel but the head was peculiar; it was large and the mouth was underneath. The woman thought that the dead fish was an eel with a man’s head, and was frightened. She hurried back to the village to tell others what she had found. Then she led some men to the place. They looked at the dead fish but did not touch it. None of them had seen anything like it before. But it reminded them of a story they had heard when they were young—the story of Kongwa, a huge eel that could take the form of a man and which lived in the river and the largest tributaries. Sometimes Kongwa threatened people who were crossing the river by dugout canoe and at other times, when the water was rough, he swam beneath the canoe and guided them to safety. The men concluded that this fish was a child of Kongwa. They decided it had died because a mining company, located in mountains hundreds of kilometres to the northeast, had poisoned the river by adding chemicals to the water. Often, through the past few years, people had caught catfish with ulcerated sores on their bodies and these too had been attributed to pollution. The dead child of Kongwa was understood to be a sign that people should no longer eat fish from the river. It was a sign that the world was changing in ways over which they had no control. But it also reminded the men of rumours that had reached them from a variety of sources; rumours which suggested that, elsewhere, there were other people who were benefiting from the changes. The dead fish created both anxiety and desire.
The men used sticks to push the body of the fish away from the bank of the river and into the current. It was caught in an eddy, held there briefly, and then swept downstream. No one found another fish of the same kind.¹

When we first arrived among Kubo people, in 1986, their lives retained much of the rhythm of earlier times. Metal was replacing stone, and cloth replacing string skirts, but material and social life seemed little changed. Even the new tools and clothes arrived along old pathways. The Kubo we came to know were experimenters, responding to the always unpredictable opportunities that the forest offered, playing with alternative ways to build an oven or ornament a dance costume. Relationships negotiated in the past did not constrain who one should marry, or where one should live; it was always possible to seek out new ties, to construct new identities. But modes of relationship, the expectations and obligations that accompanied them and the actions that produced them, were familiar to all. Through the next 13 years, however, signs began to accumulate that new ways of being—previously unimagined possibilities—were emerging in the world.

In this chapter, we trace the story of one Kubo community through those years, and the ever-changing relationships that gave it form. Though little changed in the material conditions of life at Gwaimasi between 1986 and 1999, the anxieties and desires evoked by signs like that dead fish found on a river-bank in 1997 gradually transformed the ways people made sense of their lives.

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¹ A likely candidate for the dead fish found in the Strickland River is an immature river shark, *Glyphis garricki*, which is known from northern Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG), and which had ranged far to the north in response to the devastating drought of 1997 (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000a; Compagno et al. 2008; Thompson 2011).
Relationships in Place

Sinage, Monu and Tobu were initiated together in the early 1960s. They were young men of three different oobi—different named, patrifilial groups. The venue was a longhouse near the junction of the streams named Mome and Dege. They were decorated, received ceremonial arrows from their initiation sponsors and committed to several food taboos that were to persist to the time when the first garden they themselves made after initiation had been harvested and was giving way to secondary-growth tree ferns. Uhabo, who was of a fourth oobi, should also have been initiated at this time, but he had eloped with the widow Umode and, in the practice of Kubo-speakers, a man who married before he had been initiated could never be initiated.

The streams Mome and Dege drain backswamps in low-lying, densely forested land immediately west of the Strickland River in the interior lowlands of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG; see Fig. 1.3). The altitude is 100 m above sea level and annual rainfall may reach 6 m. To the east and north the swamps give way to forested foothills and rugged mountains. Sago palms, nut trees, wild pigs, cassowaries, fish and crayfish are abundant. The swamplands and foothills are occupied by Kubo-speakers, the lower mountains by Febi-speakers. To the west are Konai and Awin-speakers and to the south and southeast Pare, Samo and Bedamuni-speakers.

As co-initiates Sinage, Monu and Tobu maintained a long-term association. They addressed each other as samo—‘co-initiate’. As particular longhouses deteriorated and new ones were established in different places they moved together. Uhabo travelled with them. They married. Monu married the widow Haga. Sinage married Wanai who was one of Tobu’s sisters. Uhabo’s first wife, a classificatory sister of Sinage, died and he remarried to another of Tobu’s sisters, Fafobia. Tobu was the

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2 A Kubo oobi is, literally, a ‘man mound’—an assemblage of people brought together, as a brush turkey (djago) rakes together the leaves on the forest floor to make a mound (djago bi) in which to incubate its eggs. Golub (2014), writing of Ipili in the highlands of PNG, describes analogous assemblages as ‘activity sets’—a group of people who have come together for some purpose, its membership always contingent though certainly not random. Among Kubo, who one is born of may influence which oobi one is aligned with; children are, after all, more likely to associate with their birth family than with others, at least in their early years. But where, as was too often the case for Kubo, men die young and widows remarry, a child may well be raised by his or her mother’s new husband of a different oobi. Where one chooses to garden, or to hunt, matters too. The places visited, and the stories learned from others, and with others, also matter. Oobi identity is strong, and persistent; it aligns people with others, and with places. But it is not exclusive, and it is not immutable.
last to marry. His marriage balanced Uhabo’s second marriage, for he married Babio who was stepdaughter to Uhabo. At that time exchange marriages—preferably by two men who married each other’s sisters—was the usual pattern among these people. And indeed when, much later in 1986, Tobu’s younger brother Sidine married, his wife was classificatory sister to Sinage. She was of the oobi into which, as a boy, Sinage’s father had been adopted. The two couples formed through an exchange marriage commonly chose to live and work closely together. They were, after all, more closely related to the children of their exchange siblings than to those of other brothers or sisters.

In 1979 these men, with their wives if they were already married, were part of a group of perhaps 60 people—speakers of Kubo, Febi and Konai languages—who assembled as a new community close to the stream Sigia, on the land of Konai. This was Sesanabi and the people who came together here were responding to the call of an Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) pastor who had come overland from the town of Kiunga. An initiation was held in 1984 and soon afterwards, when the pastor had left, some deaths had occurred, and sorcery concerns were in the forefront of people’s imaginings, the community fragmented and dispersed. Monu and Uhabo with their affiliates—sons to the previous husband of Monu’s wife, a man of Uhabo’s oobi—moved to a temporary garden house downstream on Sigia, close to its junction with the Strickland River. Sinage and Tobu with their affiliates—oobi brothers to Tobu—moved further south to a temporary house where sago palms were near at hand. They were living at these places when we first met them in January 1986. Most of those aligned with Sinage and Uhabo were of, or affiliated with, Gumososo oobi. Most of those aligned with Sinage and Tobu were of, or affiliated with, Gomososo oobi. They had decided, however, to regroup, build a longhouse at the place where the small stream Gwai tumbles over a waterfall to join the Strickland River, and reassert themselves as a community. The relational bonds that tied these families together were those of initiation and exchange marriages.4

3 In the 1980s, no bridewealth payment was involved in marriage exchanges, though the men did, for some time afterwards, make occasional gifts of meat to their wives’ fathers.

4 Two other young men were initiated at the same ceremony as Sinage, Monu and Tobu. One had died by 1986. The other did not live with his co-initiates at Gwaimasi in 1987 but, rather, with his wife’s people at a neighbouring Konai community. He often visited Gwaimasi through that year, however, and in later years rejoined his co-initiates. The 1984 initiation at Sesanabi was the last held in the west of Kubo territory. Initiations were held in eastern Kubo territory in 1987 and 1991 but there have been none since 1991. Several youths and young men from western oobi were participants in the 1987 ceremony.
Our visit in January 1986 was to introduce ourselves and ask whether we could return. We did so in August of that year and stayed for 15 months. By this time the people we had met had, as they said they would, built a longhouse at Gwaimasi on the land of Gumososo people (Fig. 2.1). Two families had also built separate houses, and other houses were under construction. People were adopting the new practice of establishing a hamlet at which traditional communal longhouses were replaced by family houses (Fig. 2.2). Through this intense period of building, people relied on sago as their staple carbohydrate, though sometimes they would make the two-hour walk to harvest remaining bananas at gardens they had abandoned at Sesanabi. They had prepared and planted new gardens, however, at which the primary crop of bananas was coming into production by the time we arrived to stay.

Figure 2.1: Residents of Gwaimasi at August 1986.

Source: Authors.

Note: Dashed lines show oobi affiliations. Oobi names are capitalised. Daledi was of Gomososo oobi but not of the same lineage as Tobu and his siblings. Gege and Gowati were orphans in the care of the widow Gowe. Changes to November 1987 were as follows: the Febi males Daiwo and Hwogu departed; Gowati departed in marriage to a man at Suabi Mission Station and, in a balancing marriage, a girl from Suabi married Geswa and came to live with him; Gehogwa departed for school in January 1987 and was absent thereafter; a young Headubi man, and later his new wife, joined the community on a temporary basis; and children were born to Haga, Wanai, Tudu and the unmarried young woman Gufu, but two of these four had died by November 1997. 

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5 The longhouse at Gwaimasi had been abandoned and demolished well before October 1991.
Livelihood

The people living at Gwaimasi were hunter-horticulturalists (Dwyer and Minnegal 1991, 1992a, 1994). They hunted and trapped wild pigs. They used palm-wood bows and cane-grass arrows, putting the finishing touches to the former with flaked chert tools. They built hides on the ground and in trees from where they shot cassowaries and smaller birds. They fished with hooks and line in the always silt-laden river and the clearer larger streams. In the latter, men shot fish using a length of strong wire that was propelled by rubber. Occasionally they prepared poison

6 In 1986–87, the Kubo fish spear (*audi*) was made from modern materials. These, however, had simply replaced an earlier design that had been first described by W. Patterson and attracted the interest of senior administrators. Patterson (1969a) wrote: ‘An interesting type of fish spear was noted in the upper Kubor area, the spear itself was simply a bamboo shaft with a single point although they may have multiple prongs. The back end of the shaft was attached to a larger piece of bamboo and the larger piece of bamboo was then passed over the end of the shaft. The attaching piece between the shaft and the bamboo tube was a piece of native rubber, locally grown and cured. To fire, the shaft of the spear would be drawn back through the tube and then released, the tension of the rubber driving the spear point into the body of the fish. … The rubber substance was gained from the centre of a type of [vine] which was placed in a hollow tube of bamboo and then dried or cured in the smoke over a slow fire, the result is a tough and highly elastic piece of rubber of roughly ½ inch diameter, this is then cut to the required length – approx 7 inches for a fish spear’. In a later report, where he corrected ‘cane’ to ‘vine’, Patterson noted that the spear was used by people of the upper Strickland and the Cecilia [Baiya] Rivers, that ‘in some instances the curing process may be started by spreading the sap thinly over the forearms where body heat would start the curing process’ and that ‘a rubber
from the roots of particular plants and used this to take larger hauls of fish. Crayfish and giant shrimps were speared in their burrows. Smaller animals—snakes, lizards, frogs, some insects—were taken more casually, adding variety to an always protein-rich diet.

Nearly half the carbohydrate that people ate was flour processed from the pith of both wild and planted sago palms. Some of these palms were felled to incubate the fat-rich larvae of weevils and others were used as traps for wild pigs which could eat their way into the trunk but could not reverse out again. Breadfruit and the nuts of *Terminalia* and *Canarium* were available in season and seeds from these latter trees were regularly planted at garden sites and the clearings where longhouses or hamlets were established. Fruit from a dozen or so red and yellow varieties of fruit pandanus (*P. conoideus*), all cultivars, was available in the later and earlier months of each year. The fruit, steamed in earth ovens and squeezed to remove the seeds, yielded a rich oily sauce that was eaten with sago. Fern fronds and fungi were other valued wild vegetable foods.

On the levee banks of the river and larger streams families made banana gardens at which the ground was cleared, crops planted and trees then felled on top. It was 15 or more years before these garden sites could be reused (Dwyer and Minnegal 1993). A few smaller gardens, usually fenced against the depredations of wild pigs, were prepared for tubers—taro, yams and a little sweet potato. Sometimes yams were planted in the burned-out mounds of leaves and twigs that had been scraped together by jungle fowl to incubate their eggs (Dwyer and Minnegal 1990). Sugar cane, a variety of vegetables (for example *Hibiscus manihot*, *Rungia klossi*, *Setaria palmifolia*) and lowland pitpit (cane grass, *Saccharum edule*) were found in nearly all gardens. Some small gardens, however, were dedicated to lowland pitpit which is, perhaps, the most seasonal of the crops that Kubo people grow. *Hi a*—pitpit time—is the name given to this season and when the inflorescences of this plant are abundant, and ready to harvest, they often form the basis of small feasts. The saplings of tulip trees (*Gnetum gnemom*) are left when gardens are felled and the young leaves are gathered, often by children while their parents weed or harvest bananas, to be cooked and eaten.

will last only 18 months to two years before requiring replacement’ (1969b; supplementary letter dated 11 August 1969). In 1987, Hami demonstrated the process to us, though he cured the rubber on his chest and by lying in the sun. We did not use the sample he made but it retained elasticity for nearly ten years. Beek (1987: 93, Fig. 26) described and illustrated a similar fishing spear used by neighbouring Bedamuni people. It used wire prongs attached to a length of cane and was propelled by ‘modern’ rubber. He wrote that it was ‘essentially new’ to these people.
During our first year at Gwaimasi, the only domestic animals kept by the people who lived there were pigs and dogs. The former, which numbered between seven and 13 through 1986–87, were sows or castrated males that were either captured as wild piglets or born to domestic sows that had been impregnated by wild boars. They were individually owned by men, women or children. Responsibility for their care fell to women, though a woman would avoid this responsibility in the later stages of pregnancy or the early months of lactation. Pigs were a threat to unborn babies and young infants, and care was taken to minimise the likelihood that a pig might feed on the urine or faeces of a young child. The bond between a domestic pig and its carer was exceptionally close. For up to 18 months the pig might accompany its carer when she went to gardens or to process sago, or be taken to the forest to forage while its carer stayed nearby. Thereafter, the animals were left to forage alone in the back swamps, though they were visited by their carer to be groomed or, if they were sows that had given birth, to capture the piglets. Domestic pigs were not tame; they were imprinted on their carer and few other people risked going near (Dwyer 1993; Dwyer and Minnegal 2005). They were killed and eaten at feasts and curing ceremonies and, occasionally, simply because they were being a nuisance. Dogs were valued as hunting animals. Four or five would accompany a man who was seeking pigs. There were usually around 20 dogs resident at Gwaimasi in 1986–87, a little less than one per person.7

Through 1986–87, there were five attempts to raise a wild-caught cassowary chick with thoughts of selling the birds to people in the highlands. All attempts failed: the birds died, escaped from the string bags in which they were being held, or were killed by dogs. People said that attempts to rear chickens had been similarly unsuccessful, at Gwaimasi and at neighbouring communities, due to the depredations of dogs. By 1991, however, after a distemper epidemic had killed 15 of 19 resident dogs and with more Kubo people aligned with the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) mission, both cassowaries and chickens were being raised (Dwyer and Minnegal 1992b). In 1991, one cassowary at least 120 cm tall was in captivity at Gwaimasi, and another three had been raised to a good size in the previous few months. At this time, Gwaimasi was also home to a rooster, a young pullet, and at least six chicks ranging from a few weeks to a few months in age; all had been procured from other places and

7 In 1986–87, the dogs at Gwaimasi howled, rather than barked, and frequently chorused. We consider them to have been representatives of the dogs found as domestic animals at all altitudes of New Guinea, and as wild animals in high altitude locations, at the time of European colonisation (Dwyer and Minnegal 2016).
none as yet had been hatched locally. The captive cassowaries were not
tamed, but held in strong pens with food carried to them daily. Chickens,
by contrast, were raised in ways analogous to pigs, with a strong bond
developing between the bird and its carer. But the cassowaries raised in
1991 were no longer destined for distant markets, their meat intended
rather for use in local exchanges, either for sale at markets or as formal
prestations. Chickens, too, were intended for consumption on special
occasions; there was little interest in harvesting their eggs.

All these key resources came and went—some seasonally, others
unpredictably. The environment was rich but procurement was boom
and bust. Sago flour was the primary carbohydrate at some times,
bananas at other times. The meat of wild pigs was not always available
but fish were a reliable, and regular, source of protein. Some resources
offered immediate returns, with others there was a delay. But no one was
concerned by these erratic fluctuations. People took what was available
and, when one potential resource was unavailable, turned to others.
They were always confident that the environment would continue to give
(Bird-David 1990; Dwyer and Minnegal 1998).

New gardens could be established at any time of the year; there is little
seasonality here, in rainfall or temperature. Sago, too, could be processed
at any time. The resultant flexibility meant that there was little patterning
in activities. Individuals, and households, were likely to be engaged in
very different tasks on any day—some felling gardens, others processing
sago, one man hunting, another fishing, yet another visiting friends at
a neighbouring village. All attended to signs of what was available, or soon
would be, in the forest or at gardens—which sago palms were showing
signs of flowering, where a pig had been rummaging or fruit dropped to the
ground by feeding birds. They watched and listened, too, for indications
of what others were planning to do in the next few days; if one man had
thoughts of hunting pig, another might be better advised to turn to some
other task. But these were decisions for individuals, attending to signs
that the time was right to undertake a particular endeavour (Minnegal
2009). When nut trees bore prolifically, as they did every few years, then
everyone might harvest these in the course of other activities. And in the
months when pandanus fruit were available these too were carried to the
village on most days. Only *hi a*—pitpit time—gave some consistent form
to the year, a consistency that allowed this season to become a marker of
passing years. As the inflorescences of this cane-grass began to appear,
towards December each year, people prepared for feasts that brought
neighbouring communities together. Even here, however, there was
flexibility. Larger feasts—one held at Gwaimasi in 1986 (Fig. 2.3), and another at Gugwuasu in 1987 to which Gwaimasi residents contributed much smoked game—brought a common focus to activities, but families remained free to schedule tasks to suit household interests.

Figure 2.3: Young man, decorated in preparation for a feast.
Source: Photograph by Peter D. Dwyer, 1986.
Note: A label from a can of fish has been used in the decoration.
By 1986, people at Gwaimasi were already aware of the new foods that white men carried and ate. At the 1986 feast, one man from Nanega added a kilogram of rice and a tin of fish to his prestation; we provided the same to Monu, so that the gift could be appropriately balanced. Over the next few years, rice and tinned fish became standard additions to feast fare. During a serious drought in 1997, the Australian Army delivered supplies of rice, tinned fish and oil to the community as part of a nationwide relief effort; relief that was not, in fact, needed in the Gwaimasi area (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000a). But such ‘modern’ foods had not become a regular part of the diet for anyone at Gwaimasi by 1999.

The World of Spirits

In small communities where the acquisition of resources cannot be guaranteed, sharing is necessary. It buffers returns. Sharing food was an everyday occurrence at Gwaimasi. A woman returning from processing sago would give a portion to someone in a neighbouring family and might receive in return bananas or, indeed, a portion of sago equivalent to the one she had given. A man returning from a successful pig hunt would deposit the carcass at someone else’s hearth and retire to his own house. Others would emerge, butcher the animal, light a fire, heat stones and make an oven. The pig belonged to everyone and when it was cooked, men, women, children who were not nursing and anthropologists would each bring their own plate and receive a share. At Gwaimasi, people shared in the food resources to which, as residents of that community, they held collective rights. And they shared out resources that they themselves had acquired to some or—if the amount was large—all members of the community (Minnegal 1997).

But sharing food does more than merely buffer returns. It creates goodwill. At Gwaimasi, people were deeply concerned with sorcery. At night they were vulnerable to we, sent by mountain people, which travelled along water courses to seek out sleeping people. These spirits were often held responsible for the deaths of infants or for epidemics that spread through communities. When many people at Gwaimasi fell ill in 1987, suffering from what we interpreted as influenza, and two older men appeared close to death, Biabia—a soi, able to see the activities of such spirits, though not directly communicate with them—was summoned from the next village to diagnose the problem. He removed the tiny bamboo ‘arrows’ that had been shot into these two men, and advised that they retreat to bush houses
to hide from further attack. In the forest, people were vulnerable to assault sorcerers—*hugai*—which were thought to come from the lands of Pare people to the southwest. *Hugai* killed people, stole organs, returned the victims to life and allowed them to return to their own houses where they soon fell ill and died. And people were also vulnerable to parcel sorcery—*bogei* sorcery—which someone, either from their own or a neighbouring community, could initiate by stealing hair, nail clippings or possessions identified with a particular person and, using these, call on dangerous spirits to harm the chosen victim. People at Gwaimasi shared food with others to show that they themselves did not have sorcery in mind, and to offset the risk that they themselves might be ensorcelled.

There were, as well, other spirit beings that could aid or harm people. The spirits of the dead resided for a time in the bodies of animals but ultimately rested at a *toi sa*—a forbidden place—that could be visited only by bachelors, and then only after at least one of them had been purified by dancing through the night. The spiritual essence of living people left their bodies at night and these spirits too could cause harm. When Geswa fell ill, the visiting spirit medium Tobasi conducted a séance in which he communicated with spirits, learned that Geswa was being attacked by a crocodile spirit and, with his apprentice son, oversaw a curing dance at which the implicated spirit was challenged and evicted from Geswa’s body (Dwyer and Minnegal 1988). When Tobu was diving for fish in foothills east of the Strickland River he saw a large catfish—*Aiodia (Plotosus papuensis)*—outside its usual altitudinal range. It harboured a spirit being that was guiding its movements. Tobu’s health, and that of his younger brother Sidine, was threatened. A curing dance was deemed necessary. Yakabai danced through the night, painted and costumed and wearing a cassowary bone dagger through his arm band. When the butcher bird called at dawn the dance finished. A screaming piglet was held taut above Tobu and Sidine. The now spiritually-strengthened dagger was plunged into its body and its blood ran onto the two men. Parts of the piglet, together with a powerful spherical stone—an *ugwi*—were buried in the forest and the danger to the two brothers passed. There are other beings too. A python without a tail guards the *toi sa*, the huge eel Kongwa is found in the river and larger streams and a giant hunter, Nakobaia, with multi-segmented limbs and a corkscrew neck, roams the back swamps with his bow and with arrows that never miss. For Kubo, the invisible world of spirits permeates the land; it is coextensive with the visible world (Dwyer 1996).
By 1986, two further spirits—Godi and Yesu—had been added to this pantheon, and prayers to these were often said before meals, before journeys, or when someone was ill. People had learned of these beings from the pastor at Sesanabi, a few years before, but they had been added to, rather than displacing, the spirits that populated their world. People at Gwaimasi had no doubt that Godi and Yesu were powerful, but they were not of the forest; and, it seemed, while they could be appealed to, people were unsure how to know what they wanted or what they were doing. One young man from Gwaimasi, Gehogwa, had been sent to school (five days walk away) so that he could learn to read the bible and reveal its message. In 1986, after four years of schooling, he occasionally held prayer meetings and bible readings during breaks from school. But there was no pastor within a day’s walk of Gwaimasi, and it was not till 1995 that a church was built in the community and regular weekly services held. By this time, séances and curing dances had been abandoned, and it was now through prayer that people sought some control over their fates.

Expanding Horizons

In 1986–87, Gwaimasi was a small and materially, though not socially, self-sufficient community. Admittedly, steel tools such as axes and bushknives had largely, though not entirely, replaced stone tools (Fig. 2.4). Most people had metal cooking pots, plates and spoons, and people—men more than women—had at least some Western clothing. Salt and soap were now accessed through distant trade stores and fishing line and hooks had not been available until Europeans arrived in the area. But at this time it was, perhaps, only the axes and bushknives that had become necessities. For the most part, what was needed to build houses, make clothing or the tools wanted for gardening, sago processing and hunting could be, and most often was, acquired from the nearby forest. To get these necessities, however, people moved a lot.

For some tasks, people at Gwaimasi preferred stone over alternative materials. In particular, the pounders used in processing sago were made from knapped chert cores. By contrast, steel greatly reduced labour costs in the construction of canoes though the most appropriate tool was not easy to access and, by local standards, expensive. In 1986–87, the residents of four villages—speakers of four languages—spread out along 40 km of the Strickland River shared use of a single canoe adze.
In 1986–87, Gwaimasi residents spent nearly a quarter of available nights at a garden house, or at a house from which they hunted or processed sago, scattered through a 50 km² area that we refer to as the local subsistence zone (averaged over a 14-month sample period; Minnegal and Dwyer 2000b). Females were slightly more likely to be absent than males (24 versus 20 per cent of available nights, excluding children). These absences might be for one night only but, more often, were for several days or even a week or more. A man with his wife, and children if there were any, might leave the village to fell a sago palm and process the flour. It was usually women who washed out the pith though there were men who sometimes helped with this work. More often, however, the husband fished or hunted while his wife processed sago. At other times a woman accompanied her husband when he went hunting, perhaps sitting at the base of a tree to catch birds that fell after he had shot them from a hide concealed in the upper branches. And sometimes, if a feast was pending, a group of men with dogs would travel together and hunt for pigs and other game in the daylight hours.

The distances people travelled were not great, often just a few kilometres from the village. With garden and sago work they could have returned each evening. People stayed away because they enjoyed their time in the forest and, perhaps as well, because it obviated the not particularly arduous
need to share. What they ate while away was of huge interest to everyone. When seven-year-old Agiyai and three-year-old Kaibo returned from some days away with their parents they were always called to someone’s hearth, given food, and asked ‘what did you eat?’ It was the meat foods that people wanted to know about. We, of course, did the same.

There were, as well, many movements beyond the subsistence zone. People visited a Kubo community at Sosoibi, on the east bank of the Strickland River, a journey of one hour to the south by dugout canoe or raft, and later, when these people relocated, visited them at Gugwuasu six hours walk to the southeast. They visited a Konai community at Nanega, three hours walk to the west, and a community of Konai and Febi people at Ogwatibi, a day’s walk to the north. These visits were for social reasons. People visited kin, attended feasts or funerals, joined hunting ventures, negotiated marriages, resolved disputes, or participated in séances and curing dances at which illness was diagnosed or treated. Males spent 9 per cent of available nights at these communities or within the subsistence zones associated with them; for females the equivalent value was only 3 per cent. Hunting and the politics of dispute resolution and séances account for most of this gender disparity. Other movements—11.5 per cent of available nights—were further afield, entailing more than one day to reach the destination. In these cases, however, the primary rationale for travel was ‘modern’ in that most trips were to the community health centres at the mission stations of either Suabi or Dahamo and were undertaken because infants were ill.9 On another occasion, some men and women travelled to Dahamo to vote in the national election, though they knew little of either the candidates or the issues. When one youth, Gehogwa, left Gwaimasi to return to school near Kiunga, five days walk away, he was accompanied by his older brother-in-law who remained away for a month. There were no other movements of this magnitude.

In the longer term, based on records across ten years, people often relocated from one place to another because the site of a particular hamlet changed or, more often, because marriages and disputes were associated with the departure of either wife or husband to join the community

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9 At Suabi Mission Station an airstrip was opened in 1984 and a community health centre soon afterwards. At Dahamo Mission Station these facilities arrived in 1987. Gwaimasi was closer to Dahamo than to Suabi, and when the latter community health centre opened people switched their allegiance to it.
of their spouse or with realignments of entire families (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000b). Departure was the conventional way in which Kubo people and their neighbours resolved disputes: to a bush house for a short period if the dispute was minor, by relocating to another community if the difficulty was greater. The knowledge that you were suspected of sorcery could provide the motive for relocation. What was striking, however, was that over a ten-year period people who had left a community often later rejoined the original group. The attraction of their oobi land was very strong. In the short term, people appeared to be very mobile, but in the longer term small communities or, better, small sets of communities were remarkably cohesive. That coherence arose from a network of agnatic and affinal connections, together with those of initiation, that tied people together. It was that coherence that prompted us, in an earlier report, to depict Kubo as ‘sedentary nomads’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000b).

With a growing recognition of facilities available only elsewhere, people at Gwaimasi were expanding their field of movement. They carried infants to health centres, sent children to schools, travelled to distant trade stores to purchase clothes and tools. While movements had previously been shaped by social imperatives, these ‘modern’ movements followed individual agendas. The health of a particular person or the acquisition of new knowledge by a particular person were no longer to be assured by appropriate relationships within the community, and did not in themselves enhance relationships. The survival of an infant, however, kept open relational possibilities. Local relationships continued to be focal for Kubo. Gehogwa returned to Gwaimasi in late 1991, after completing Grade 10 studies at Rumginae and Kiunga. The children who attended schools that opened at Suabi in 1987 and Dahamo in 1988 also returned. Clothes and tools purchased at distant trade stores were brought back to the village and shared with others. Horizons had expanded, but reaching out towards these was done, it seemed, in an effort to draw the resources of that wider world into the ambit of local communities. Simultaneously, however, people were being drawn out of—disembedded from—their place; children at distant schools no longer learned to read the land, and Gehogwa was not allowed to forget that he had been away during the initiation at which his peers at Gwaimasi had become men.
Leadership and Dispute Resolution

There were no acknowledged leaders at Gwaimasi, no one to whom others accorded the authority to speak for them, or to instruct on what should be done. Admittedly, one man did have a title, specifying a role and status that existed beyond the incumbent. In 1986, Monu was often addressed as ‘Komit’—not a name, we eventually learned, but a title that denoted his position as the government-appointed ‘Committee’ for the local community. But there were no tasks, and no power, associated with the role. Monu did not attend meetings at distant centres. Nor did he convene meetings or take a leading role in those that did occur in the community. Some people were acknowledged as skilled in particular domains: Uhabo made superb arrows, Daledi killed far more wild pigs than other men, and Fafobia composed songs that everyone admired. But this did not give these people special standing in domains beyond those in which they had distinguished themselves. Indeed, since performing a task particularly well one day did not necessarily guarantee effective performance on future occasions, their authority even in those domains was not generally acknowledged.

To say that Kubo did not recognise authority does not mean that no one had any influence over others—that there were no leaders. But influence was exercised through action not instruction. In 1995, we watched as Gehogwa, now graduated from high school, sought to establish a small crocodile farm to bring in some regular money to the community. He did his homework, contacted buyers and obtained advice on how to build pens. Then he called a meeting and told everyone what needed to be done. But no one did anything. The project never got off the ground. In contrast, in that same year, Daiwo—a 50-year-old man once resident at Gwaimasi but now visiting from his own land to the north—decided that the village should be cleaned before a pending feast. He said nothing to anyone, but one morning at dawn began slashing the grass. Others emerged from their houses, watched for a while, then gradually joined in. And within an hour Daiwo was sitting on our veranda, watching, as those others continued the work he thought should be done. Each of those others had independently decided that it would suit them, too, to have the village looking good when the visitors arrived.
But, as use of the title Komit implied, people at Gwaimasi were not unaware that new sources not just of moral leadership but also of power were becoming available—sources that, like Godi and Yesu, lurked at the margins of their world but, at times and with the right knowledge, could be drawn on to shape events.

In January 1987, the young unmarried man Hami asked us to write a letter on his behalf. Gufu, in her late teens and unmarried, was pregnant and it was thought that Hami was responsible. To the people at Gwaimasi, there was ‘no road’—no relational future—for a child born out of wedlock. Gufu’s stepfather and her half-brothers threatened to kill both her and Hami and to throw their bodies in the river. The letter that Hami dictated was addressed to the police at the government station at Nomad, three days walk away. Hami explained the problem and asked the police to jail him. He did not ask that they protect Gufu. Though he asserted his innocence he felt that incarceration would both remove him from the immediate threat of death and, eventually, be accepted as a satisfactory alternative punishment for the imagined wrong.

For two days there was much animated and often angry discussion. On the evening of the second day Hami, Gufu’s stepfather and a few other men came to our house. A decision had been reached and, with few Tok Pisin speakers at Gwaimasi, it was now Hami’s role to translate. They had decided not to kill him, being concerned that if they did so we would be frightened and might return to Australia. Hami kept, but never delivered, his letter.

Twelve years later, in January 1999, we observed a lengthy but failed attempt to resolve a complex dispute that involved Kubo, Konai, and putative Awin-speakers (Fig. 2.5). A few weeks earlier, the young man Dengwa had married Biwo, the daughter of Biabia’s sister who had married an Awin man but whose marriage had not been directly reciprocated. As a young girl, Biwo had left her home village and commenced living with Biabia’s family. It was intended that she would eventually be an exchange sister for one of Biabia’s sons; in effect she would replace her mother in Biabia’s lineage, thus negating the imbalance the earlier unreciprocated marriage had caused.

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10 The Awin-speaking participants in this dispute were referred to by Kubo people as Habiei and were the survivors and descendants of a former Kubo oobi who had, in the late 1960s, relocated to Awin territory after an attack by other Kubo which resulted in several Habiei men being killed and eaten.
In fact, Biabia had no biological sons. Dengwa was Biabia’s wife’s younger brother and, in part, Biabia constructed the Dengwa–Biwo marriage as balancing his own marriage to Dengwa’s sister. That is, he fabricated Biwo as his own sister rather than as a sister to his son.\(^1\) No one, however, informed Biwo’s Awin relatives of what was happening. They learned of the marriage only when Biwo’s biological brother arrived from his Awin village to claim his sister. He too wished to marry but his intended spouse’s brother would not sanction the marriage unless it was immediately reciprocated. He came with a substantial contingent of other young Awin men. The Awin did not accept Biabia’s assertion that Biwo qualified as the substitute exchange sister for his own sister. Rather they argued that the marriage of Biabia’s sister to an Awin man had been in compensation for one of five cannibalistic deaths that had occurred in the late 1960s and, thus, no reciprocation or substitution was required. There were hours of discussion that were forceful but polite. But neither side moved from their firmly held position. There was no resolution. In the end Biwo’s brother said that he would take the matter to ‘court’ at Nomad. Biabia said: ‘Go ahead. I will be there’.

\(^{11}\) The Dengwa-Biwo marriage was also constructed as an immediate sibling exchange. Dengwa married Biwo at the same time that Awabu, who on the basis that his early years were spent in Awin territory was constructed as a classificatory brother to Biwo, married Dasogo who was a relatively unambiguous classificatory sister to Dengwa. If Dengwa’s marriage was broken then the validity of Awabu’s marriage would have been also in doubt.
In the years to 1999, relatively few disputes surfaced among the people at Gwaimasi and neighbouring communities. If a married couple quarrelled, two families fell out or there was concern about sorcery then, for a time, one of the protagonists would leave the village. When Tobu shot his sister’s dog—to hurt but not to kill—because that dog had killed his caged young cassowary, an open discussion, facilitated by a senior man, ensued and Tobu and Fafobia were each required to give PGK20 to the other. The amounts were identical but each of them delegated someone to carry their 20 kina note to the person they had offended. The notes changed hands in public and simultaneously. The two disputes summarised above were, however, judged to be more serious. And, in both cases, one or more participants sought to deflect potentially serious and immediate consequences, or defer outcomes that they did not desire, by appealing to the higher authority of governmental structures and processes. In neither case, however, was that appeal directly implemented by visiting Nomad. Had this happened it is unlikely, as Bruce Knauft (2002b) made clear in *Exchanging the Past*, that administrative officers based there would have been particularly interested in adjudicating or have had the means to adjudicate in relation to such complex disputes.

Northern Kubo people living near the Strickland River had, and continued to have, remarkably little direct engagement with the paraphernalia of law and order associated with either colonial or national governments. If problems arose they were expected to walk to Nomad and air their grievance; the police did not come to them. What happened instead, with some disputes, was that people strategically employed imagined structures of external governance to stall or deflect possible outcomes of customary modes of dispute resolution where they judged the likely outcome to be unfavourable to them. In doing so, however, they disrupted conventional forms of resolution—departure, reciprocal exchanges and, in serious cases, assault that might lead to death—that were embedded in a relational ethos. In the case of Hami, for example, his decision to write to the police, and to seek incarceration for an offence that he may not have committed, was made without reference to the opinions of other members of the community with which he was affiliated. He did not even seek protection for the young woman Gofu. In a context of opportunities that were imagined to be provided by the bureaucratic structures located at Nomad, Hami had individualised decision-making and, to this extent, negated the pre-existing and predominant relational
basis of dispute resolution.\textsuperscript{12} Again, as it became clear that there was no easy resolution to the complex dispute arising from Dengwa’s marriage, and thoughts turned to Nomad, the terms of reference were collapsed and consolidated as involving only Biabia and Biwo’s brother. Here again, therefore, issues of blame and morality were being disembedded from a network of relational others as the epistemological foundations of Kubo lifeways shifted subtly to a prioritisation of the categorical and existential. An erosion of the relational ethos and a heightened emphasis on the individual characterised many changes that occurred among the people at Gwaimasi through the years that we visited them.

Money and the Commensurability of Difference

When we arrived at Gwaimasi in August 1986—via three helicopter trips from the mission station at Suabi—we brought supplies: personal items such as clothing, bedding and toiletries; a medical kit for ourselves and to tend, where we could, local needs; work items such as tape measures, balances, stationery; a solar panel, battery and lights; some tools and food and money. We needed money to pay for our house and firewood, for other occasions when we employed people, to buy food and, because we planned to monitor hunting, to buy the skulls of fish and other animals. For food and skulls we needed coins. But coins, in bulk, are heavy and in PNG air freight is expensive. So we carried less than we needed intending that, as our supply diminished, we would exchange paper money for the coins that people had accumulated. At the outset there were few people who had any money at all and for some months our contributions were greatly valued.\textsuperscript{13} The time came when our own supply of coins was low

\textsuperscript{12} In 1986–87, Hami’s instances of individualising decision making were more frequent than those of most other Kubo we knew well. In his early teen years he had accompanied an SDA pastor on patrols through Samo and Bedamuni territory and spent some time at an SDA mission and teaching centre near Komo, in Huli territory. Thus, during his formative years, he had greater exposure than most of the Kubo people we knew well to different understandings and different ways of living.

\textsuperscript{13} In the 15 months from August 1986 the total income to Gwaimasi was between PGK1,700 and PGK2,000. Our presence, combined with a brief visit by representatives of a company that had been exploring for gold in the region and came to pay for ongoing maintenance of the camp they had previously established about a half-hour walk north of the village, increased people’s access to money. Through a 399-day period, each person older than about 15 years earned an average of between PGK85 and PGK100. Males spent on average 22 days (5.5 per cent of their time) and females spent on average 4.3 days (1.1 per cent of their time) in tasks specifically directed at earning money (Minnegal 1994: 102–6). Through the early months of the survey nearly all money received was spent—most
and we asked people to bring us theirs to exchange for notes. No one responded. More time elapsed and our supply seemed likely to run out. We became more insistent. People felt sorry for us, and sought to oblige. Someone might carry PGK2.30 in coins, and in return we would give a PGK2.00 note and 30 toea in change. Someone else might carry 80 toea, and we would give it back; there was no exchange. It seemed to those who were trying to oblige us that we were thoroughly inconsistent. Sometimes we took some of their money and returned the rest. Sometimes we rejected their offer of assistance. We needed to find a solution.

We had learned early on that when people talked about money they held or had spent they spoke of coins or notes rather than an aggregated total. A person who had visited the mission station at Suabi and bought a bushknife would explain that it had cost, for example, ‘two kina three, one kina one, twenty toea six and ten toea three’. They would not say that the bushknife cost PGK8.50 and, indeed, were likely to speak of ‘beio muni’ (cuscus money) or ‘djiwo muni’ (cassowary money) in reference to the animals depicted on, respectively, 10 toea and 20 toea coins rather than invoke either the abstract value of a coin (10 or 20) or its abstract standardisation (toea or kina) as a unit of currency. It was not that people at Gwaimasi could not count or, to some extent, add. It was simply that they did not know that two beio was equivalent to one djiwo. Without realising what we were doing, we proceeded to teach them what they did not know, and thus contributed to changes that swept through their society for the next decade and more (Minnegal and Dwyer 2007).

Our solution to our problem was to prepare a chart on which we made pencil rubbings of all combinations of coins that yielded one kina and to reinforce the understanding that two one kina coins had the same value as a two kina note. Now people would bring their coins, lay them out on top of our pencil rubbings and provide us with sets equalling one kina. It was through this process that people came to appreciate that different denominations of money were commensurate. Where, before, particular coins or notes were personalised—the history of each was known and could be recalled—people came to appreciate money as reified, as an

spent on clothes, some used to purchase axes, bush knives, fishing tackle and cooking pots, and some to buy small quantities of rice and tinned fish that were served at intercommunity feasts. After about eight months, however, most people had received as much money as they currently had a use for. From that time on they were less willing to undertake more time-consuming tasks despite the fact that our pay rates were considered to be relatively high compared to those of missionaries or exploration companies (Minnegal and Dwyer 2007: 209–10).
abstract category. It was this sense of categorisation that increasingly, though never absolutely, came to permeate people’s understandings of and relationships with pigs, women, assemblages of people and land.¹⁴

Pigs

In 1986–87, when Kubo people exchanged domestic pigs the ideal—and most often the practice—was that the exchange occurred between two people, not between groups, and that the pigs were of the same size, the same sex and the same colour.¹⁵ Like was exchanged for like. Further, it was often the case that the two pigs had been captured by men when they were wild piglets. These men would each give their piglet to a woman—often a classificatory sister but not necessarily their exchange sister—to care for through the next few years on the expectation that, in the future, they would receive that pig from the woman’s husband. In the years immediately following 1987 people learned that schoolteachers, community health workers and, occasionally, visiting government or company employees would sometimes buy domestic pigs. Through those years too their desire for money, and indeed their conceptualisation that money was needed, increased. Pigs, they decided, were a means to satisfy their desire and need. Thus, though in fact there was no market, they committed a great deal of time and effort to increasing the size of their holdings (Minnegal and Dwyer 1997). By 1995 the domestic pig population at Gwaimasi had more than doubled. In the earlier period, in any one month, there was an average of 0.38 domestic pigs per person; in the later period the average was 0.88. Now, people would have sufficient pigs to take advantage of any offer from outsiders to buy one, while still meeting local social obligations. Now they were prepared to

¹⁴ Gwaimasi and its neighbouring communities close to the Strickland River were remote. Government officials had seldom visited them in the years before Independence (1975) and, to the best of our knowledge, never in the years after Independence. While, at Gwaimasi, we contributed to an appreciation of the commensurability of difference, people living nearer to the patrol post at Nomad or mission stations in the region will have been introduced to the same notion in other ways and, probably, somewhat earlier. Nor is it unexpected that it was more than 20 years after Europeans first came to the region that Kubo people began to incorporate and act on this notion. Salisbury (1970: 180–7), for example, observed that it was at least 25 years before Tolai people of East New Britain accepted cash payments and that, 85 years after European contact, he himself reciprocated ‘gifts’ of food with tobacco rather than with money because the former was understood as ‘barter’ between friends and the latter would have been an insult (Minnegal and Dwyer 2007: 17).

¹⁵ As reported by Jadran Mimica (1988: 20, n. 8), Thomas Ernst noted that among Onabasulu of Mt Bosavi, Southern Highlands, ‘not only is there a concern with the exact size of two exchange piglets, but it is made sure that they have the same sex and, in so far as it is possible, exactly the same fur colour and spots’.
forego the expectation that all exchanges be of like for like and, rather, to accept a certain amount of money as payment for a pig of a certain size. In these contexts, a pig was just a pig. The particularities of its origin and ownership, and of the care given by one woman over a long period—particularities that made visible the relationships between particular people—were no longer relevant to the hoped-for transaction. They were of no interest or consequence to the person who might buy the pig. The pig was suitable for purchase simply because it was a ‘pig’. For people at Gwaimasi, the boundary between animals categorised as ‘pig’ and those in other categories was now more salient in guiding social action than were the relational particularities of pigs that had hitherto affirmed them to be, or not to be, appropriate to a specific exchange.

An external market for pigs failed to materialise. Indeed, through the later years of the 1990s the failure of government to fund remote schools and health centres saw the withdrawal of government employees and, hence, even less likelihood that a schoolteacher or community health worker might buy a pig. Yet by 1999, people at Gwaimasi kept even more domestic pigs with the ratio of domestic pigs to people now averaging 1.0 (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000a: 507). By this time, however, in the absence of the expected market, Kubo people and their Konai and Samo neighbours began acquiring pigs for events such as church feasts and marriages by buying from each other, though only from those of a different language group (Minnegal and Dwyer 2007: 15). The recognition and acceptance of ‘pig’ as a category had been extended to people who spoke different languages. Exchanges between Kubo people themselves remained embedded in the relationships that tied those people together. It would be years before these too were disrupted.

**Women**

For Kubo people, immediate exchange was the ideal. As seen above, it applied when pigs were exchanged. It also applied in the case of marriage, where two men would exchange sisters as brides—though always on the proviso that the women themselves agreed to the transaction.16

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16 As the paired marriages of Sinage and Sidine, and of Uhabo and Tobu, illustrate, it was not always possible to achieve the ideal of immediate sibling exchange. A common and continuing strategy in cases where a man has no sister, or a couple have more sons than daughters, is for parents of the wife to adopt one of her daughters as a future exchange sister to one of their sons (Minnegal and Dwyer 2006: 131–2, n. 6).
By and large, in 1986–87, marriage negotiations concerned only these four parties. Indeed, because few people lived beyond 50 years it was often the case that the parents of the prospective couple were no longer alive. The primary constraint on eligibility with respect to marriage was that the man and woman were not to be of the same oobi or, in fact, of oobi that were said to be ‘brothers’ because their lands were either contiguous or linked mythologically by, for example, underground passages. There were cases where this constraint was ignored (the couple eloped) and these were routinely the subject of disapproving gossip. And there were other cases where a couple pre-empted negotiations with exchange siblings, eloping before an exchange had been agreed or even when an exchange had been rejected; these cases, too, elicited much critical gossip, and intense debate about how the de facto marriage might be reciprocated and thus legitimised. But always, as with customary exchanges of pigs, it was the relational particularities between individuals that were foregrounded and validated the marriage. It was not that a ‘man’ married a ‘woman’. It was that a particular man, embedded in a particular set of relationships, married a particular woman who, likewise, was embedded in a particular set of relationships. It was their union, put in place by their actions, which established or reinforced affinal connections between the oobi to which they belonged. It was not pre-existing connections between those oobi that served as the backdrop to the marriages. Agency, rather than structure, was primary.

In 1986–87 the relationship between a husband and wife was extremely close. The family was an autonomous unit, gardening together and, very often, spending time together in the forest or backswamps when the husband was hunting or the wife was processing sago. Public displays of affection were not uncommon. A newly married couple might walk through the village holding hands, or a man might lie with his head in his wife’s lap while she searched for lice in his hair. But this began to change through the next few years, as people increasingly looked to those bearing word from the wider world for guidance as to how the opportunities evident in that world might be accessed. New forms of Christianity arrived with messages that clearly differentiated, and differentially valued, men and women. Initially, all Gwaimasi residents were affiliated with the ECPNG and, though there was no resident pastor, Sunday services
were not uncommon. In January 1987, Tiotidua came from Suabi in marriage to Geswa. She was affiliated with the SDA Mission and, thus, was not to eat fish without scales, turtle, bandicoot or pig. At first she complied with these dietary strictures though, in compensation, people were very generous in ensuring that, when they ate what she couldn’t, she was given meat that she could eat—particularly fish with scales and birds. Gradually, however, Tiotidua drifted away from these constraints by, at first, eating fern leaves that had been cooked with pig and were enriched in fat and later, after about six months, sharing pig with everyone else and aligning with ECPNG. The different church paths and practices, and the different ways these divided up the things of the world as edible or not, were less salient to people at Gwaimasi than the potential benefits offered by affiliation with a Christian mission. Through all this time, people considered that these missions had contributed more to their well-being than government. But they wanted more; in particular, they wanted an airstrip and their own white missionary.

By 1995, some disillusion was apparent. A Konai pastor had lived at Gwaimasi for a year or so but, with his family, had departed. There was no airstrip. White missionaries had not come. People told us that ECPNG was ‘not strong’ and, for a time, were refocusing attention on the Christian Brethren Church which was actively proselytising among Febi communities to the north and extending its reach to the south. Huli pastors had visited and one charismatic Febi man, who at this time was often present, held prayer meetings, led hymns, asserted that assault sorcerers were common near the village, that the world would end in the year 2000 and that Jesus’s return was imminent (Minnegal and Dwyer 1997). Drawing on Genesis he taught that it was women who were responsible for the downfall of men, held private meetings with women where he instructed them in proper behaviour and, with considerable success, insisted that women should, at all times, cover their heads. Church services became more frequent as this man progressively imposed a structural separation between men and women—a separation that was increasingly played out in more secular domains of life too, because the increased number of domestic pigs had simultaneously increased the work of women, tied them to the village to a greater extent than before and greatly reduced the likelihood that families went to the forest together.

17 Services were held in most weeks from the time of our arrival in August 1986 to late January 1987. During this period the youth Gehogwa officiated but, when he returned to school, the frequency of services was greatly reduced.
Husbands and wives were now far less likely to be together than in 1986–87. The impact of this phase and form of Christian expression was to subsume particularised social identities as sister, wife or mother and as brother, husband or father within overarching and contrasting categories of female and male. Again, therefore, in the years after our first long stay at Gwaimasi, a relational epistemology was giving way to a categorical epistemology.

People and Land

At Gwaimasi, an emergence of categories as salient where they had not been so before was manifest in other ways too. By 1995, when small feasts were held, food was no longer distributed to each person but rather to ‘groups’ which, at that time, comprised those people of, and most closely aligned with, each of the two primary oobi that constituted the community (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998: 34–5). Married women associated with their natal oobi rather than with that of their husband. At larger feasts too, where people from other communities attended, groups rather than persons were now focal to the distribution of food, with the two Gwaimasi groupings treated as distinct.18

In 1986–87 neither rights to land nor use of land were congruent with oobi membership. Many people were resident on land other than that which was identified with their oobi, and here, though at least with sago they contributed less work per person than did those of the oobi whose land it was (Dwyer and Minnegal 1997), they were relatively free to make gardens and to take forest products as required. Indeed, though people did not hesitate to name the oobi to which they considered they belonged, this had little salience in everyday life. Oobi membership did not, in itself, dictate conventions of resource acquisition and marriage. Rather, it arose out of practice, out of the recognition that they were members of a group who obtained the wherewithal of subsistence from shared land and who did not intermarry. Moreover, people did not identify particular bounded areas of land as being either their own land or the land of someone from another oobi. In the first place, they spoke of land as associated with a particular person, rather than a group of people. And in identifying someone’s land they spoke of focal sites—the junction of two streams,

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18 The shift to ‘group’ level sharing proved a little embarrassing for us in that, early on, we were identified as a separate group which, despite having a membership of only two, should receive as much as other groups.
a cave, a named hill, the site of a former longhouse. They did not refer to boundaries. It seemed that the associations to which they referred, and their sense of belonging, decreased in intensity as they moved away from any one of these sites. And, in the second place, they rarely spoke of these sites, or of the areas around these sites, as being identified with their fathers or with themselves. Rather, if they were married and had children, they named those sites or areas as belonging to those children and, in this way, wrote their children onto the land. With respect to land, and in other ways too, genealogical connections were submerged—indeed, few people could trace back more than two generations—in favour of an orientation to the future, to those who would come after them (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999: 65–6). In those years, then, social identity arose in an always fluid context of relationships with a particular set of people who lived on, and used, a particular area of land. And it was given expression in action that was shared with those people and that land. It was only when referring to peripheral people or places—to their deceased forebears, to people who lived at a distance on unfamiliar land—that ‘oobi’ or ‘language’ identification became salient. Categorisation, in these ways, was foregrounded only in the absence of ongoing interaction.

By 1995 there were signs of change. Rumours had reached Gwaimasi that government was planning a country-wide register of land ownership.19 There was concern that land which was not used, or could not be shown to be ‘owned’, would be acquired by government. The matter was the subject of much discussion and, for the first time in our experience, one focus of that discussion concerned ‘borders’—marks or lines on the ground that separated the land of one oobi from that of another. The English words ‘border’ and ‘mark’ were deployed in these discussions; Kubo, it seemed did not have suitably analogous terms.

For the first time, too, a dispute about land—or, rather, about the use of land and about appropriate places of residence—emerged (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999). The village of Gwaimasi had been in place for more than nine years. In customary practice longhouse communities had moved every three to four years. Now, however, as a consequence of longer-term residence, convenient locations for gardens were more distant from the village. People continued to eat well, for there was no diminution in available bush foods, but it proved more difficult to feed visitors

19 At that time, an offer of a loan by the World Bank to PNG was contingent upon development of a register of customary land-ownership. The register did not eventuate.
appropriately at feast times. On these occasions, it should be evident to everyone that the food provided embodies the productive effort of the hosts, and bush foods were not the product of human labour (Minnegal and Dwyer 2001: 282). Further, residents who were not of the oobi on which the village had been established were now using resources—especially sago—more freely than had previously been the case. They were acting as though long-term residence gave them the right to do so without a need to either wait or ask to be invited.

It was in this period that a young man, Sigio, wanted to marry Agiyai. He was of the oobi on whose land the village was established. He had no sister. While by this time there was some acceptance that sibling-exchange could be replaced by bridewealth, Sigio also had neither money nor kin who could provide monetary support. His offer of marriage was rejected. He was angry, and demonstrated this by starting to chop down a coconut palm that belonged to Agiyai’s mother’s brother. He shouted to those who gathered to watch, asking what the outsiders—the people of other oobi—were doing here, using resources that were not their own. He asserted that he would ‘spoil’ the village and force those others to leave, to return to their own lands.

Sigio’s desire to marry Agiyai did not come to fruition. Nor did he succeed in felling the coconut palm. In expressing his anger, however, Sigio appealed to oobi identity, to the possibility that oobi were corporate groups and held inalienable rights of ownership, rights that were given prior to either residence or the ongoing and productive use of land which would be visible to everyone. And in the action that he initiated—his attempt to fell a coconut palm—he sought to remove from ‘his’ land a material expression of the palm’s owner and, thereby, cut the network of relationships that that man and his kin had, through their actions, established both with the land and with him. Sigio had, as we observed with both pigs and with gender, de-emphasised relational imperatives in favour of categorical ones.

Changes in the layout of the village itself reflected the same shift in emphasis. In 1986–87, the longhouse at Gwaimasi was available to all, the place where visitors to the community were hosted, fed bananas and tobacco while exchanging news from elsewhere. The small family houses people built nearby were open, dominated by a large unwalled cooking area on ground level at the front. A smaller walled sleeping area was accessed by a few steps up from the sitting platform at the rear
of the hearth, but the door to this was closed only when those living there retreated inside for the night. People moved freely back and forth between these houses, carrying gifts of food, sharing what had just been cooked, and gossiping. Indeed, the houses themselves were close together and neighbours could converse without moving from their own hearths. By 1995, however, there was no longhouse at Gwaimasi and family houses were larger, more widely spaced and more solidly built than before (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998: 34–5). Houses were now fully walled, and hearths were inside behind relatively secure doors. People no longer wandered freely in and out, even when the door was open, but usually knocked and waited to be invited inside. And visitors to the community now had to decide whose house they would go to on arrival. Sometimes they chose ours, for we had retained the earlier structural arrangement.

The size and solidity of these new houses, the closed doors and the isolation they imposed, even the internal partitions that assigned individuals within the household their own private space, reflected an increasing emphasis on differentiating people by their possessions rather than by the relationships they had established with others. Pigs were increasingly valued according to size or colour rather than who had reared them, women according to age, attractiveness or fertility rather than whose sister they were, and men according to oobi identity rather than what they had planted or built and the places where they had done these things. So, too, persons were increasing valued in terms of the things they accumulated—things others might desire—rather than the connections those things mediated.

By January 1999, with the exception of one family, Gwaimasi was abandoned. People had returned to Mome Hafi where, about 35 years earlier, Sinage, Monu and Tobu had been initiated. Now, however, they were being joined by a river-side community from the south. New houses were under construction. A church had been built but people had not continued their earlier flirtation with the Christian Brethren Church. The new village would include 53 people together with a Samo-speaking ECPNG pastor, his wife and four of their children. Sinage, Uhabo and Tobu continued their close residential alignment but Monu, who had left his first wife and remarried, had moved to Suabi. Sigio’s expressed desire that people should live on their own oobi lands had not come to pass though he himself did not make the move to Mome Hafi but, restlessly, lived sometimes with his half-brother’s family at Gwaimasi and, at other times, alternated between neighbouring Konai and Febi communities.
He was not yet married. At Mome Hafi, however, there continued to be concerns about the use of land, concerns that were now expressed by a claim to ownership (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007).

One of the residents of the new Mome Hafi community was Noah who, with his wife and daughter, had relocated from Suabi. Noah was the sole surviving male of Woson oobi and, at Mome Hafi, chose to garden and fish in an area that he asserted had, at a much earlier time, been ‘given’ to members of his oobi by the previous owners (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007). During preparations for a feast, the previous owners had granted rights to fell sago palms and incubate sago grubs to Woson co-residents—their land was distant, in the lower mountains and had few palms—though Noah now extrapolated this act of generosity as being a ‘gift’ in perpetuity of the land and the streams in the vicinity of those sago palms. He went further, as well, by attempting to exclude other Mome Hafi residents from the area of land in question, and it was this that caused much friction. His claim was constructed as one of exclusive ownership and was demonstrated, in his view, by his current use of the land which was in keeping with conventional Kubo practice, by invoking his own version of the past and by drawing on an emerging ideology of ownership that was grounded in specification of bounded areas of land associated with particular groups of people. His claim drew upon both relational and categorical understandings of the world. To this time there were no such disputes that were not partially embedded in a demonstration of ongoing use of the land by those who were laying claim to it. Claims to ownership were not yet abstracted from practice.

Waiting

Through the years 1986 to 1999, people lived comfortably at Gwaimasi and, later, at Mome Hafi. They had little access to money or the things that money could buy. Food was usually easy to come by and their proximity to backswamps meant that sago palms were numerous. A major drought through 1997 had few adverse consequences for them, though it had seen some people join their community to escape deteriorating conditions at higher altitudes (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000a). Disputes were few, far between and usually quickly resolved. Past concerns about cannibalistic raiding parties had dissipated, though the threat of sorcery remained ever-present. Through those years, however, the people changed. In many domains of their lives, both material and social, they de-emphasised
a relational understanding of the world in favour of a categorical understanding. They extrapolated the logic of money—reification, commensurability, categorisation and anonymisation—to expressions of exchange, to gender relations and to notions of use rights. They did these things themselves. The changes we witnessed were expressions of their agency, of their attempts to draw the outside world in and, thereby, gain access to what they perceived as its future possibilities for their own lives.20

But, through all this time, they waited. They waited to be visited by friends and kin from other communities, for when that occurred life and affinity could be celebrated with talk, laughter and feasts. They waited for timber or mining companies to come and provide what was needed to facilitate access to the rumoured world that lay beyond. They waited for God and for the return of Jesus, for here there was the promise of a different kind of salvation that would continue long after death. And, at times when we departed, they waited for our return or for the arrival of people like us who we sent because, though we had less to offer than companies or God, we had been at least a tangible presence in their lives.

Little of what they waited for eventuated. Kin and friends continued to visit, but neither God nor Jesus put in an appearance. Even we let them down because, after 1999, we never returned to the Strickland River. Nor did we send replacements. And other expected opportunities came to naught. Men came from Kiunga in the west promising a timber industry. They solicited money, departed and were never heard of again. Men came from the north, asserting that the mine at Porgera in the Highlands was polluting the river and contaminating the land. They too solicited money to ‘fight’ the mining company but they too departed and were never heard of again. Throughout these years the people lived comfortably but with deep anxiety about what might be, about what others had and they did not, about their future. The dead fish on the bank of the Strickland River was a sign that their anxiety was fully justified.

Through all those years of our engagement with people who lived close to the Strickland River we were impressed by the changes that seemed to be endlessly underway. But our engagement, though it spanned 13 years,

20 Throughout this book we discuss consequences for the people of their engagement with the logic of money and of their increasing desire for more money. To them, money provided opportunities to access desired goods and a lifestyle that was judged to be ‘better’ than that which they currently experienced (Minnegal and Dwyer 2007). They imagined that money was empowering. Bill Maurer (2006) makes many similar points in his review of the anthropology of money.
was a mere snapshot, a moment in time. There had always been change and there always would be change. Agents of the Australian colonial government, missionaries, and men seeking gold or oil, had engaged with Kubo people and their neighbours for more than two decades before we arrived. Parties of explorers had intruded on their territory at earlier times. And, more recently, officers of the National Government and the bureaucratic procedures within which they are embedded, and which they impose on others, have encompassed the lives of the people who we have come to know. These encounters are the themes of the next chapter.