By late April 2014, Talisman had finally decided that the exploration camp at Suabi would be ‘demobbed’. Stoves, refrigerators, toilets, showers, marquees, generators, pump and water purifying system, a small forklift, tools, fuel drums, satellite dishes, computers, printers and so forth would be gradually packed into containers and moved by helicopter to either the Talisman base at Yavo on the Strickland River or a new exploration site more than 45 km to the northwest. First, however, it was necessary to carry out an audit of everything that remained. Sean, who was then the resident camp manager, had been assigned this responsibility. In one container he found a large amount of rice, old stock that was now infested with weevils. He checked with the camp medic who assured him that if the rice was well cooked it would be safe to eat. So he gave it away: eight bales—each with 20 kg of rice—to the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) Mission and another eight to the Seventh-day Adventist Mission. He included cartons of chicken noodles that were also past their recommended ‘use-by’ date. He told us, however, that as the old rice was being handed out those who were assisting managed to filch quite a lot of good-quality rice. They were quick; he never saw who it was that took the rice. A week later, auditing a different container, Sean was disappointed to discover that many files and hacksaws were missing. Local men, employed as labourers and security guards, had been helping themselves to Company belongings.

People at Suabi had high hopes for future benefits from the Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas (PNG LNG) Project, in the form of royalty payments and business development grants. They understood that these would be provided to those who—through incorporation as legal actors—rendered themselves visible to the structures that governed distribution of benefits. But it was the presence of ‘Company’ on their
land, and undertaking exploration work and drilling wells near their land, that offered an immediate, tangible and personalised expression of all they hoped for. ‘Company’ itself was an abstract entity. But in its physical and personalised manifestations it offered opportunities in the present to those who could discern and act on those opportunities. The camp at the airstrip, and the activities that took place there, were woven into everyday life. People watched the comings and goings, gossiped about things seen passing through or accumulating at the site, and speculated about what these activities might mean for future plans. ‘What’s the news from Company’, people so often asked us and each other. A few gained access to the site itself, as cooks or cleaners, as labourers or security guards. These *kampani bois* (and very occasionally women) became brokers of information, and sometimes of goods and services. They passed on rumours, smuggled mobile phones in for charging and sometimes, as with the rice and noodles mentioned above, delivered largess from camp to community. They mediated relationships, not with Company as an entity, but rather with the individual people who represented Company; with individual people whose presence at the site was always short-term for turn-over of staff was the persistent state of affairs. The ‘leviathan’ that was Company, to use Golub’s (2014) term, was mutable—changing form as the men who were its public face at Suabi came and went.

Sean was one of five white men who, through the first four months of 2014, arrived as camp manager before departing again for Australia, New Zealand or Port Moresby. Other men—Papua New Guinea (PNG) nationals—came as medics, mechanics or cooks. Helicopter pilots, or labour managers from the Juha camp passed through occasionally. More senior Company representatives visited rarely. The identities of these men, their personalities and practices were scrutinised closely, their names, origins, connections and behaviour discussed as local people clustered at the camp boundaries to watch what was happening. To establish at least the semblance of a personal relationship with one of these men—to be able to declare him ‘my best friend’—was seen as key to accessing what the camp had to offer by way of either information or material goods.

These everyday interactions, and the access to benefits that they facilitated or constrained, are the focus of this chapter. They reveal much about how local people understood the nature of Company and their relationship

---

1 In this chapter, in accord with local practice and as an anonymising courtesy, we usually refer to the amalgam of companies utilising the Suabi camp as ‘Company’.
with it. But these interactions were framed, too, by the understandings of Company representatives. And the understandings did not always coincide or mesh.

**Taking and Asking**

The acquisition of Company property occurred regularly throughout the early months of 2014. Building materials and tools were greatly favoured, with nails high on the list of preferred items. Men returning from work in the late afternoon or early morning would often carry a small, wrapped package of goods. They might, during the day, conceal what they had taken behind a tree or in vegetation near the river-bank and collect it when they finished work or, later, under cover of darkness. Foodstuffs were also popular, especially with men who, as trainee helicopter loadmasters, came from Juha to organise the shipment of supplies to the Juha campsite or were returning to Suabi because their work had terminated or they had been granted a break. Chicken noodles, biscuits, sugar, peanut butter and sweet soft drinks—taken from the apparently endless supply in the mess—were favoured items.

People were careful to minimise the likelihood that their actions would be seen by Company representatives and, for the most part, preferred that other community members were unaware of what was taken until after the fact. In the cases of tools and nails, secrecy was intended to reduce requests to share what they had obtained. But there was no sense of guilt, no sense that their acts of ‘appropriation’ might be judged as immoral. Indeed, with acquired foodstuffs, sharing was commonplace. When Sean gave weevil-infested rice to the missions, people came together for a community feast. The good-quality rice and noodles that were acquired at the same time were widely and publicly distributed, though then eaten at home or sold to others. Foodstuffs carried from Juha were openly shared, often to children who waited at the airstrip in the hope that their father would be coming home. We ourselves were the grateful recipients of a gift of two jars of peanut butter and, occasionally, were asked what we would like brought back.

There were, however, a few occasions when the community response was different. Late in 2013 someone wanting a length of hose seriously damaged the camp’s water-supply system. This was a cause of much concern to Tassie, who was camp manager at the time. His annoyance
was relayed to the community, which was always alert to the possibility that overt bad behaviour on their part might cause the resident company to depart. They found out who was responsible, raised PGK400 and, together with the missing length of pipe, delivered the money to Tassie as compensation. They did not name the thief. Tassie declined the payment; he did not know what he would do with it and felt that the bookwork that would be entailed in documenting the payment was not worth the effort. He suggested the money be given to the Mission, which could then use it to do something for the community.

On a later occasion, a large shipment of food supplies for Juha had been delivered to the Suabi airstrip. Men were sorting the delivery, readying it for transport by helicopter to the Juha campsite. A young man joined the workers. He was swinging a length of heavy saw-toothed chain attached to a handle. He picked up a carton of chicken noodles, shouldered it and walked away from the crowd to stand alone, watching from the edge of the airstrip. Men called him back. He did not respond. Someone ran to the camp to report what was happening to the camp manager. Company representatives appeared and also watched. But still the young man ignored everyone. A woman walked across the airstrip and talked to him. Eventually he gave her the carton, which she returned to the pile of supplies. Men had taken no action other than to call to the young man. They were concerned that if they approached him he might wield the chain, and the tension explode into violence. The woman who retrieved the carton was his mother.

Visiting companies regularly extend goodwill with gifts to the local community. In the late-2000s, Oil Search and ExxonMobil provided small backpacks and T-shirts to school children. The former carried the words ‘wokim wantaim’ (working together) and the company logo; the latter, the words ‘PNG LNG’ and ‘mi stap seif’ (I am safe). In 2013, ExxonMobil gave many wakawakas—small, solar-powered LED-light lamps that can also be used to charge mobile phones—for distribution to school children to aid studying at night. Some reached the children but many were acquired by adults for personal use and, in some cases, including by schoolteachers, for sale. ExxonMobil also gave many copies of a specially commissioned six-book series of readers that followed a boy named Toea as he travelled through different parts of PNG and learned

---

2 Ben Coxworth (2013) provides a description and review of the wakawaka power solar lamp and device charger.
about the ways of life that he encountered. In 2014, in response to ongoing written requests on behalf of the missions, community health centre and elementary schools, several of the expatriate camp managers made a variety of small contributions (for example, fuel for the airstrip mower, rice and noodles to feed people who had worked to maintain the airstrip, some medicines, stationery, building materials), though they themselves were awkwardly placed with respect to the ambiguity entailed by the official need to obtain advance permission from their employers. There was the added complication, too, that while the camp was set up and operated by one company, most of the property held there belonged to another. Guy refrained from handing out Company property. He, however, had personally brought to Suabi hundreds of school readers from the 1960s and 1970s that he obtained in his home town after advertising in a local newspaper. With our assistance, he organised a morning assembly during which he shook hands with all elementary school pupils—none of whom could read but many wearing *mi stap seif* T-shirts—and gave each of them two booklets (Fig. 7.1).

Figure 7.1: Gift giving at the Company camp.
Source: Photograph by Peter D. Dwyer, 2014.
With one exception, it was rare that local people would ask Company representatives directly for goods or other forms of assistance. The exception was references that were sought when a person finished a period of employment. Many people carried such references. They came in three types. Some were from Papua New Guinean companies that provided labour, security, catering or other services to support exploration activities. These tended to take a standard form and different companies plagiarised each other’s wording. Variants on the following were usual:

During this duration, Mr. [...] was found being matured, reliable and hard working person. He posses leadership qualities and executed given tasks under minimum supervision.

Other references were provided by officers of international companies. A few of these carefully outlined the kinds of work that the person had done and were informative with regard to that person’s capabilities and competencies. Most, however, said no more than that the person in question had indeed worked for the company between stated dates. The third category comprised fraudulent references on which the name of the intended recipient had been deleted and the name of a different person inserted. Because the computer skills of the forger were seldom of a high order it was nearly always obvious that the reference had been manipulated. We ourselves were often asked to alter a reference in this way. Our refusal to do so, and our discussion of fraud and its potential consequences, were understood to be our own peculiar idiosyncrasies. People knew that in the modern world references were useful when seeking employment and presumed that, therefore, many people wrote their own. In the one case where we ourselves wrote a very favourable reference for a young man who had worked for us, we learned a year later that his Port Moresby-based ‘brother’, whom we had not met, had found it ‘very helpful’ in his own endeavours to find employment.

When seeking assistance from companies people preferred, and for the most part adopted, indirect contact. This was a practice of long-standing that applied more often when approaching people at the fringe of, or outside, local social networks than people within those networks. With insiders there was little ambiguity. A person would not make a request unless confident that there was little likelihood of refusal. With outsiders, however, there was the risk that a request would be denied; it was difficult to know in advance. And a denial would be shameful to the person making the request. In our earliest visits to Gwaimasi we provided a great deal
of low-level medical assistance: treating cuts, ulcers, fevers, infections, skin fungus, toothache and so forth. For a long time, people wanting medical attention either came with someone who made the request on their behalf or said, for example, ‘ma odio do igidehai’ (‘I have a very bad headache’) or, less attractively from our point of view, positioned their often suppurating wound directly in front of us and waited for us to offer appropriate treatment. We had offered; they had not asked. At Suabi, too, during our more recent visits, people who we knew less well adopted similar strategies. A man would arrive carrying paper, holding it in such a way that we saw it, and wait until we offered to type the handwritten words. Some delegated another person to ask on their behalf.

Letters provided a new way in which people could distance themselves from the request they were making. The ‘request’ was in the written words; it had not been spoken by the person who hoped that the request would be fulfilled. And, further, to reinforce the distancing that was sought, it was seldom the case that the person making the request would be the person who delivered the letter. Company representatives received letters requesting assistance written on behalf of the mission, community health centre and schools. Other letters came from individuals seeking employment, or free travel on Company-chartered flights that had delivered supplies to the exploration camps. Kigi, for example, had been employed as an assistant foreman on the Juha seismic project. He worked for ten weeks without a break. In the closing weeks of that period he was based at a bush camp at high altitudes in Hela Province, close to Levani valley. Armed Huli-speakers from the valley visited the campsite, challenging Western Province workers and threatening harm if they did not leave. Understandably scared, Kigi left the field site but, under then prevailing practice, his departure meant that his employment was terminated. A few months later, he learned that a new seismic line was being cut and that this was distant from areas populated by Huli-speakers. He wanted to return to work but needed to explain why he had previously abandoned his position. In his letter, addressed to three named camp managers at ‘Juha Mining Camp’, Kigi wrote:

When I was working on Lines (4) to Line (3) I worked for two months. While I was working Lebanny [Levani] people came to the campsites bringing bushknives, axes and guns. They made us very frightened to work for money in their land. With permission I came back to my home at Suabi Station on December 29th, 2013.
In January 2014, young men wanting to return to schools in the Highlands wrote letters to ‘Oil Min Field Services’ and the ‘Gama Camp Manager’ requesting free flights from Suabi to the Highlands. The first of these letters requested lifts for 16 named males ‘because this is the good relationship between your Company, youths and the communities’. There was no response to this letter. The second, to ‘Gama Camp Manager’, requested lifts for 12 named males, asserting that they were residents of Suabi, Siabi or Gesesu ‘where the project is operating now’ and stated that:

We the total of (12) students attending High Schools, Secondary Schools and Technological College at Highlands Regions are seeking for transport from Suabi to Mendi by South West Air during next week from your charter backloading.

Eleven males were eventually provided with a free flight to Mendi though, in fact, none of those listed was a resident of either Siabi or Gesesu, some had not been named in the letter and some who flew did so for reasons other than furthering their formal education. This proved to be the last occasion on which a locally based company provided free transport. Talisman had decided that, at 650 m, the Suabi airstrip was shorter than required for safe landing by Twin Otters and, thereafter, began ferrying supplies and people by helicopter from the longer airstrip at Nomad.

In only one case did we see and, with some improvements to expression, type a letter of demand. This was addressed to ‘Juha 4 Camp Oil Min Field Service Ltd’, was to be signed by six ‘owners of the ground on which Juha camp has been built’—men from two Febi clans—and asked the company to sign a new agreement for 2014. The letter stated that ‘we would like your Company to appreciate the difficulties that we, the owners of the ground, are facing’ and asked that company workers receive free transport to Mount Hagen and Kiunga, sick people be airlifted to hospital and school students receive free lifts to towns at which they would attend schools. The letter included a list of revised rental charges for camp house areas, lay down area, rig board, helipad, water pump, generator and fuel tank sites and ‘all other buildings’ and stated that ‘at the time the Company moves away from the Juha camp, items that are to be abandoned must not be burned or destroyed but must be given to the owners of the ground’.
The total amount of rent sought was PGK5,000 per month. On the day the letter was carried to Juha by someone returning there for work, a man purportedly representing the two Febi clans spoke aggressively to the helicopter crew. None of the signatories to the letter spoke. There would be trouble, the speaker said, if their demands were not met. News of this altercation reached Juha. The next day Mick, the current Juha labour manager, visited Suabi. He asked a group of Kubo people about the previous day’s ‘problem’. They were reticent, unwilling to admit any knowledge of what had happened. Mick pushed for details. Who was it, he asked, had harangued the helicopter crew? Reluctantly, people gave him the name, making it clear that the person concerned was a Febi man from Gesesu; he was not one of them and they were not responsible for his behaviour or the demands that had been made. Mick knew the man and laughed the incident off. ‘Em i yunpela man, em i no lidaman’ (‘He’s a young man, he’s not a leader’), he said sarcastically. The protest and letter of demand had no effect.

When Company Came

The flow of goods from the camp to people at Suabi—whether simply taken by local people or demanded by them, gifted by Company representatives or provided in response to requests—was substantial. To understand what was going on in these transactions, however, it is necessary to look at how the relationships that underpinned them were negotiated.

Companies operating in the territories of Kubo and Febi people make numerous contributions to the communities where they establish campsites. They do so in the name of the company and as an expression of their social responsibility. Oil Search, for example, reports that:

[Our] approach to sustainable development is collaborative, relying on the formation of close relationships with key stakeholders such as host communities, governments and our development partners.

---

3 At Suabi, in 2013–14, Talisman paid PGK50 a day as rent—approximately PGK1,500 a month—for the entire campsite and the facilities located there. At the Fasu community of Haivaro, in Gulf Province, rental arrangements associated with a 2008 Talisman and Sasol Petroleum seismic operation were assessed on the basis of separate payments for campsite, water pump site, water source, airstrip landing fees and helicopter pads and amounted to a total of PGK2,900 per month (Fitzpatrick 2010: 63–4). Haivaro people have had decades-long experience with the timber industry and were likely to be attuned to possible returns and experienced at negotiating those returns. At Suabi, people did not negotiate but took what was offered.
Built on mutual trust, these relationships help to ensure the Company’s
development programmes are effectively targeted, efficiently managed
and continuously improved.4

This company publishes booklets that illustrate ways in which it works
‘with local people to make a difference to their everyday lives and build
a sustainable future for their children and their communities’ (Botten, in
Stone 2012: 1). In PNG the human dimension is clearly evident in the
ways in which oil and gas companies communicate with a broader public.

The men on the ground—camp managers, labour managers, etc.—also
seek to establish good relations with local people, though their largesse
is constrained by the facts that they are beholden to distant employers,
are charged with minimising costs and, to varying extents, confronted by
incidents of theft, damage to property and, sometimes—though not at
Suabi—outright aggression.

There is, however, another side to the interactions between exploration
companies and the Suabi community, concerning what is not done
rather than what is done. Our interest here is with the behaviour of
representatives of resource-extracting companies ‘on the ground’. How
do they engage with local people? How do they fulfil obligations to their
employers and to what extent do they meet expectations with regard
to social responsibility at the time they initiate a project on the land of
other people? This other side of interactions may be illustrated by events
surrounding establishment of an exploration camp at Suabi late in 2012.5
Those events reveal arrogance on the part of Company and complicity
on the part of the local community that, taken together, since these
behaviours are not entirely unexpected, are more deeply indicative of
strategies whereby each of the participants navigates the vastly different
social and material worlds they encounter but do not understand.

4 Viewed 28 February 2017 at: www.oilsearch.com/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/7749/2015-
Oil-Search-Approach.pdf.
5 It is not always clear to outside observers which companies are associated with a particular
project. The primary operator may subcontract others to undertake particular components of
a project and the latter may, in turn, subcontract cooks, medics, labour force, transport, etc. In 2013,
for example, a minimum of eight companies were represented in the work force at the Suabi camp.
Arrival

‘Company is coming’, people called. As usual they had heard and seen the helicopter before we did. The helicopter had been chartered by an oil and gas exploration company. Three men, the senior man ‘white’ and the others Papua New Guinean, had come to inform local people that they planned a laydown—an exploration base camp—at the village. They wanted to rent the Mission House—the US missionary and his family had departed eight years earlier—for the duration. They said that the camp would be small and they would stay for only six weeks. The people at the village were excited. They would be paid to build and service the camp, they would be paid to cut ‘lines’ through the forest and, if valuable resources were found, they would receive royalties.

The crowd that met the helicopter was dominated by women and children, because most men, youths and village dogs were in the forest hunting for a forthcoming feast. Alex, the community health worker and himself a local man, had obligations at the village and had not gone hunting. He immediately took charge of negotiations with the three arrivals—they had quickly checked that we were not missionaries—and led them to the Mission House. He did not tell them that the house was currently occupied by the pastor, Martin, and his family, though it would have been obvious that people were living there. Martin himself was away hunting.

The visit was brief. The Company representatives inspected the house, held a meeting inside with local men—the house was high set and the women sat underneath in the shade—marked out areas where they planned that two large marquees would be built to house workers, identified positions for a laundry, ablution block, toilet and generator site, checked water tanks and the solar system, and said that they wanted 400 poles cut and ready to commence building on 5 January. There was no discussion of payments they would make to rent the house or for poles. There were no details about where the exploration lines were to be cut or the number of people to be employed for this work. They said they would return on 20 December—one of three planned feast days—to continue discussion about their needs.6

---

6 We did not join any of the meetings that took place inside the Mission House. They were of great interest to us but were not our ‘business’. We were not alone in making this decision. Two men—one from Oksapmin, the other from Morehead—who had, in the past, been community health workers based at Suabi and had married local women, made the same decision for the same declared reason.
Men, youths and dogs arrived from the forest through the next few days. With the exception of the community health worker, all men holding ‘official’ positions in the community had been absent when the helicopter arrived, either hunting or at Kiunga. It was some or all of these men that the Company representatives should have consulted. Pastor Martin told us that his wife had been ‘disappointed’ by the behaviour of the men who had inspected her house without consulting her. She had sat with other women under the house during their visit. Martin himself said that Company men had failed to show ‘respect’. He confirmed with others that no rental contract had been signed.

Through the next week, some men and youths commenced clearing the ground where marquees were to be built and others travelled out from Suabi to cut poles, float them down the river, and stack them in readiness. Through the same period, however, people from other Kubo villages and from neighbouring language groups started to arrive. They were invitees to the feast, became caught up in the excitement of what might be happening and, like most local residents, hoped that they too would soon be contracted for the planned Company work.

Company men returned on 20 December, the second day of the feast when 65 domestic pigs were exchanged, killed, butchered and, through the night, cooked in heated-stone ovens. On this day three men arrived. They were all Papua New Guineans with one, Taylor, a community affairs officer. Pastor Martin, with supporters, met them on the stairs to the Mission House. He was blocking their path. He spoke strongly to the Company men and the large group of local people. The area of land with the Mission House and associated buildings, he said, had been given to the ECPNG by local people, and the ‘things’ on this small area belonged to the mission. He asked those who were listening whether they agreed. There were no dissenters. In this public forum, Martin made it clear that, with respect to the Mission House, Company should negotiate with the mission—with the pastor and church leaders. He did not say—that the community health worker had no authority with respect to allowing people to use the Mission House.

When Martin had finished speaking, Taylor addressed the assembled group. He spoke in a mix of English and Tok Pisin with Alex translating into Kubo. The planned project was small, he said. Lines would be cut through the forest and, when this had been done, geologists would
arrive, walk the lines and survey the ground. There would be no seismic testing. Company had come to Suabi because this village provided the most convenient access to the area of exploration. They would employ landowners to cut the lines but, as yet, did not know who these people were. Taylor stressed that, at this juncture, nothing had been found, and it was possible that nothing would be found. People should not expect that they would necessarily receive ‘big money’. That depended on what, if anything, the survey found. He handed over one copy of a map, printed on an A4-sized sheet of paper, showing a small portion from a topographic map on which the proposed survey lines had been drawn. He did not tell people where the area depicted was located.

There were questions and comments from the audience. One man suggested that Company had come to Suabi to establish their base camp because Huli people, to the northeast, were too demanding. He was correct, but his comment did not elicit response. One of us asked whether a social mapping study would be carried out in advance to identify ‘landowners’. Taylor replied that this knowledge emerges slowly and is subject to revision as the project continues. Several people stated that there were no identifiable rivers or mountains on the map that had been provided and, therefore, they did not know where the licence area was or where the lines would be cut. No explanation was provided.

The Company men and some local males now moved into the house to discuss financial and other administrative matters. They offered PGK500 to rent the Mission House for the period that they would be based at Suabi. But Martin had come prepared. He had drawn up a price list that we had typed and printed on his behalf. For businesses, such as oil and gas companies, rent was set at PGK120 per day with a reduction to PGK720 per week for long stays. His document stated that ‘access to radio room and store room where battery is held by Mission staff and by MAF [Mission Aviation Fellowship] staff must be maintained at all times’ and that there was to be ‘no access to radio room by guests at any time’. (The radio provided contact with mission-operated medical and airways services, and the room in which it was kept was attached to the house with entrances from both inside and outside.) No agreement was reached. Martin’s demands, he was told, would need to be discussed with the ‘bosses’ at Company’s home base.
We photographed the small map that Taylor had shown, and matched it to one of our topographic maps. The proposed exploration area was 45 km north of Suabi, approximately 25 km northwest of the existing Juha gas fields and in an extension of the same geological formation (see Fig. 3.2). The combined length of the base line and three cross-lines was 45.95 km. Most was in the recently named new province of Hela; only 14.4 per cent of the total was in Western Province. The implications were clear. No Kubo person would qualify as a landowner, and of Febi it would be, at best, only a few with affinal connections to northern language groups who might justifiably assert rights to that land. Company would have known this from earlier social mapping studies in the region, studies that they themselves had funded (Ernst 2008; Goldman and Ernst 2008), but had withheld information. They were disinclined to operate from a base in Huli territory and intent on ensuring the cooperation of Suabi people (compare Warrillow 2007: 103–4). To that end, holding out hopes of employment and future benefits seemed wise.

Company came again, four days earlier than expected, on 1 January 2013. This time, three Papua New Guineans and one ‘white’ man arrived. Mick had 40 years experience in PNG, and at once established a warm rapport with local people. We told him of people’s concerns about the lack of respect shown to the pastor’s family on the first visit by Company. At a later meeting inside the Mission House—again, with only males in attendance—Mick apologised for earlier behaviour and said he would raise the matter at headquarters. Martin discussed rent and reported that Mick had responded favourably to the prices he proposed. But no contract was signed; he and Mick shook hands and talked of ‘trust’. Mick left soon after the meeting. But the three Papua New Guineans stayed behind. The campsite was now in place and these men were tasked with converting it into an operating base. The senior man was Dave. He had come on all three visits and was second-in-charge to Ronald, the ‘white’ man who had come on the first visit and was to be camp manager.

Through the next two weeks seven local men were employed to build and fit out the two marquees, and another as ‘security officer’. They were supplied with overalls, boots and dark glasses and, each morning, before work commenced, attended a meeting at which ‘safety’ issues were discussed. One of the marquees provided cover for eight large one-man tents, each with a bed, small cupboard, lamp and fan. At the entrance to each there was a ‘welcome’ mat. It was here that more senior Company people would sleep when the three-bedroom Mission House was fully
occupied. A storeroom was built beneath the Mission House, and almost every day helicopters arrived to offload food, a refrigerator, gas cylinders, a pump, building materials, safety and other equipment, and drums of fuel. A generator was installed and, thereafter, through the night, the campsite was flooded by security lighting.

Before long, tensions began to emerge. More poles were needed to provide frames for the laundry, ablution block and toilet, but poles already delivered had not been paid for. Timber that had been stored beneath the Mission House—the property of the Church—was used without asking permission. The trunks of two coconut palms were wanted to frame the toilet pit. Pastor Martin offered two palms that were not producing. Company men felled one of these and, without asking, another that was producing well.

By 14 January the entire area including the Mission House, marquees and ancillary buildings had been enclosed by tape that was striped in red and repeatedly featured the word ‘danger’. Access to the radio room was not closed off but the tape sent the unambiguous message that people were not welcome and, further, closed off the area beneath the house where people sheltered from rain and sun while waiting for mission planes or medical information. Local people were irritated by the presence of the tape, insulted by use of the word ‘danger’—was it them, they wondered, who were thought to be a danger. Quite regularly, people (often women or children) leaned against the tape until it snapped and then, because the barrier it represented was no longer present, moved into the shade.

Rumours continued to circulate concerning the number of people who would be employed to cut lines, the number of these who would be from Suabi, and the day when the list of employees would be drawn up. On a few occasions arguments broke out when men, anxious about employment opportunities, challenged others to justify their status as ‘landowners’. But an increasing number of men were beginning to doubt that the tally of employees would be high or that many of those who were employed would be Kubo-speakers.

On 17 January, Ronald, Taylor and a contracted cook returned and would now stay for the duration of the project. Ronald and Taylor stopped briefly before entering the Mission House. They were positioned inside the ‘danger’ tape and, from here, talked to the assembled people. For the first time they acknowledged that the lines to be cut were partly in Hela
Province and partly in Western Province. The work would need to be divided: to be split *namel* (in the middle) between people from the two provinces. They did not acknowledge that less than 15 per cent of those lines was in Western Province. Taylor said that he would meet with people later that day to make plans. He told them to draw a map showing villages near the exploration area so that landowners who should be consulted could be identified. He stressed, once more, that the job was a ‘small one’, that it was a geo-survey, not a seismic survey. Several men in the audience muttered that this indeed meant little work would be involved though, at this juncture, they were left with the impression that at least half the workers would be from Western Province.

By 2 pm people had assembled outside the Mission House. Febi people predominated; Kubo people were beginning to accept that they had no claims to land in the exploration area and would not be employed to cut lines. People were showing signs of frustration because Taylor had not appeared. Horace—a candidate for forthcoming district-level elections—spoke strongly: ‘It is nearly three o’clock and no one has come to talk’. Another man interjected that people had been waiting since 1 January and there was still no list of people who would cut lines. Horace reminded everyone that Company men had taken over the Mission House, suggested that they would be drinking and associating with women, and said that such behaviour was inappropriate in ‘God’s House’. He asserted that he himself was a ‘border man’ and should definitely be consulted.

A local man went into the house to express people’s frustration at the delay. Taylor appeared and sat on the grass. He had brought a rough map—a pencil sketch. He spoke of the need to identify villages near the exploration area on both sides of the border, and then to find landowners and distribute work. He could not provide a better map, he said, because the printer had not yet been set up; everything would become clear when a proper map could be provided. Some Febi men had also prepared a sketch map on which they had named some villages on both sides of the border. In a few days’ time, Taylor said, some leaders from Western Province, and others from Hela Province, would be flown across the exploration area to clarify issues of landownership. He stressed again that this was a small job, designed to facilitate access by the geologists. He said that only three crews, each of ten men, would be needed—in fact there were to be five crews—but added that some Suabi people would be
The helicopter trip to the north was scheduled for 19 January. By this date Horace had been provided with a laminated copy of the small map seen weeks earlier. He showed it to others waiting at the Mission House. ‘Dobai kauimi’ (not big work), he explained. And continued by asking rhetorically why, given that the work was in the Highlands, Company had chosen to make their camp here at Suabi. Three men from Suabi—two Febi and the village councillor who had returned from Kiunga in time for the December feast—were taken on the flight to the north. Others were picked up at Tobi, the northernmost of the larger Febi villages, and from Geroro, a Duna-speaking community approximately 12 km east-northeast of the exploration site on the Hela side of the border. The Tobi participants stated that they had some connections to land on the Hela side but did not assert strong claims. The Hela participants asserted that they had full rights to all land in the exploration area on both sides of the border. The trip did not resolve questions of landownership. Both Company people and local people often spoke as though provincial borders matched language group borders, but on the ground, or when actually viewing the ground, local people brought understandings of past and recent engagement and of marital connections to bear on their interpretations. It was rumoured by some that when Hela people viewed the land, seeing that it was exceptionally rugged and dotted with limestone sink holes, they were afraid and said they did not want to work there; if the lowlanders wanted the work they could have it. This was wishful thinking and the rumour did not gain currency.

By this time a ‘medic’ had arrived and a clinic was being built under the Mission House. The medic was to conduct clearances for all the men who would cut lines, and deal with emergencies if any occurred, but would not himself be based at the field site. Company had contracted Alex to fill the field position. Ronald rationalised the fact that this would leave Suabi without a community health worker by telling us that Alex was eligible for two weeks annual leave. He did not comment on the fact that cutting lines would take much more than two weeks.
More poles were cut and delivered for building purposes, and people were employed to carry stones from the river to the campsite to lay paths between the Mission House and the marquees, laundry, toilet, etc. Company employees could not be expected to walk through mud—rainfall is high at Suabi—when moving between locations.

From 21 January the contracted helicopter was usually based at Suabi because it was expected that, very soon, men would be shifted to and from the field sites. There were delays, however, because wireless communication between the field site and Suabi was problematic; Suabi could receive messages from the field site but the latter was not receiving Suabi. The field project could not be initiated until this problem with the repeater station was resolved.

On 23 January another white man joined the team—Kane, a petroleum geologist, who had been contracted to, as he put it, ‘hold the fort’ during times when Ronald was overseeing work at the exploration area. Kane was to be responsible for ensuring that communication was maintained between the remote mountain camp and the Suabi base camp. He had been flown from Wales to take up this appointment. He told us that the ‘job’ should be finished by the end of February, in six weeks, which was the original estimate of the duration for the planned project. He told us also that 30 men would be arriving soon. They are ‘foremen’, he said, employed by Company and experienced at cutting lines. In addition, there would be 30 ‘labourers’. We understood now that each of the so-called foremen was to work with a labourer and that only the latter would be selected from among recognised landowners. Once more, the number of local people who might be employed had been, publicly, whittled down.

On 25 January Company was obliged to change arrangements with regard to water supply. Water was needed both for the Suabi base camp and for delivery, by helicopter, to the field site. The Mission House tanks could not meet the demand. Dave, who had been left in charge of establishing the camp, had planned to pump water from the Baiya River and a pump had been delivered for this purpose. It rained heavily before the pump could be installed. The river flooded—it became a raging torrent—and it became clear that the initial plan was seriously flawed. Dave then decided to take water from a tank 500 m from the Mission House. Without asking, he got the workers to lay a narrow pipe from that tank to base camp. Local people were deeply concerned. This tank was the primary water supply for more than 250 people who lived in
two of the clusters of houses that make up Suabi. They stressed that it had recently been a ‘dry time’—there had been little rain—and their own needs for water were not being considered. They prevailed upon Dougal, the Suabi Council, to talk to Ronald, who had returned to take charge of the now-established camp. It was then decided to obtain water from a large and fast flowing stream on the other side of the Baiya River. Drums of water—one at a time—were to be transported by helicopter.

Through the next few days Company provided free helicopter lifts for nine youths and one young woman who were departing for the remainder of the year to continue secondary school studies, or in one case tertiary-level technical study, at Kiunga, Tari, Mount Hagen, Goroka and Lae. The students would be dropped off at places where Company had major facilities and would then make their way by foot and public transport to their target locations.

On 25 and 26 January the 30 ‘foremen’ arrived, though the ongoing failure to establish radio communication between Suabi and the field camp meant that line cutting could not yet be commenced. The foremen were accommodated in one of the marquees, received some training in loading and unloading the helicopter, and waited. On 27 January we learned that Company now wanted full and exclusive access to the Mission House. They did not want local people waiting around the Mission House. They asked Pastor Martin and the radio operator to move the radio from the room where it had been installed 17 years earlier to either a very small storage room under the house or, preferably, to another location away from the house. Their request was denied.

On 28 January we left Suabi for five months. We spent much of that morning near the Mission House, waiting for the plane. To this time no money has been paid for rent or for the poles that had been cut for building the camp. Some people from outside Suabi had contributed to the latter work and remained in the village waiting for payment, being fed and accommodated by local people. Two young women had now been employed to wash laundry, and two additional local men were being trained as helicopter loadmasters. The communication problem between Suabi and the field camp persisted, and none of the foremen or labourers had yet been moved to the field camp. Five weeks had elapsed and the project was still not off the ground. We asked Ronald where the ‘land-owning’ labourers would be selected from, but the most he would say was that they would be a mix of Hela Province and Western Province men.
He volunteered, however, that it was difficult working in the Highlands where you were likely to ‘get a gun pushed in your face’ and, by way of self-congratulation, told us that Company had facilitated free trips in the direction of school for quite a few Suabi students.

**Aftermath**

In early July 2013 we returned to Suabi for one week. Through February and the first three weeks of March, the survey lines had been cut and the geo-survey was completed. The hired labour force comprised 17 men from the Duna community of Geroro and 13 from the Febi community of Tobi. The three geologists who undertook the ground-based geo-survey were not Tok Pisin speakers and were assigned assistants who were relatively fluent in English. One of the assistants came from Geroro, the other two—including Martin—were Kubo-speakers from Suabi. On the final day of the geo-survey the three parties—each comprising a geologist and his assistant—were lifted by helicopter to Geroro to pick up rock samples they had accumulated through the past week before returning to Suabi. They found the samples being guarded by Geroro men who challenged the geologists, asserting that no environmental impact report had been conducted and, thus, the geologists had no right to remove resources from Duna land. The encounter grew increasingly heated. The Geroro employee attempted to leave the helicopter but was restrained by the two Suabi men who considered that their own safety was enhanced if at least one Duna man remained with them. On Martin’s very strongly worded advice the helicopter pilot departed for Suabi without the rock samples. At Suabi, Ronald, the camp manager, ordered Martin to return the next day to collect the samples. Martin refused, saying that ‘life’ was more important than ‘stones’. His employment, which he had found very interesting, ceased. The rock samples were eventually collected, though we did not learn what negotiation was entailed at Geroro.

The Suabi camp was now closed. Company paid Martin PGK100 per week for the 11 weeks they had occupied the Mission House. This was a fraction of the amount that he had thought had been negotiated and that had been stated unambiguously on the price list provided, on separate occasions, to both Taylor and Mick.

---

7 Our account of Company activities from February through June 2013 is based solely on reports by Suabi residents.
Company left Suabi and then returned a few days later on 28 March. It had been decided to undertake a long-term seismic survey in the Juha area. They wanted to rent the Mission House again but Martin refused, saying that he was using the house to run a year-long Bible school for a number of Kubo, Febi, Samo and Bedamuni men and women. Local people understood that he had been disappointed by the amount received as rental payment, and several told us that it was for this reason that he refused Company’s request. Through April, a large campsite was established near the airstrip on land that had not been assigned to the mission. Through May and most of June, a contingent of ‘foremen’ was brought to Suabi and many men from local language groups were employed. In late June a serious helicopter accident in the mountains was attributed to bad weather, and the seismic survey put on hold until the weather improved.

In early July, the campsite was in the care of two Company men (a camp manager and a mechanic), two local men acted as night-time security guards, a few others as labourers and Alex had been contracted to oversee any medical needs of people remaining at the camp. Six Febi men were based in the mountains, two to provide security and maintenance at a repeater station and four to provide security and maintenance at a field campsite. Though the seismic survey at Juha had been suspended, helicopters came to Suabi on an almost daily basis. They were servicing social mapping and environmental impact teams along the route of a different proposed gas pipeline to the west of Suabi. This route had been chosen to minimise engagement with Huli in the Highlands.

More surprising to us than all this was the state in which we found the Mission House. That house had been built in 1986. It was high set. On the advice of Tom Hoey, the long-term Bedamuni missionary, the stumps were of an extremely hard and naturally insect-resistant wood, and were oil-treated and capped with metal to further minimise access by termites. In early 2013, the house was still in excellent condition. At that time, Company built a storeroom and a clinic in the area under the house, with more than 40 timber uprights framing the two rooms. But none of those uprights was protected from termites, and none was removed when Company departed. Had they remained in place they would have provided easy access for a termite invasion. And, further, when Company used the Mission House early in 2013 they disconnected the solar pump
that fed water to the header tank and, instead, used their own generator. When they departed they took the generator, failed to reconnect the solar pump and misplaced required fittings.

Through those first months of 2013, then, it seemed that Company representatives paid little attention to the needs or concerns of local people. At the same time, local people went out of their way to minimise the likelihood that they might be perceived as difficult, as uncooperative. Though there were certainly grumbles behind the scenes, they did little that could be judged as ‘resistance’. Company representatives were ‘arrogant’. As Martin had put it, they did not ‘respect’ those with whom they engaged; they did not acknowledge local people as persons. Local people, however, were complicit, always attending to signs of what Company wanted and adjusting their presentation to suit.

**Arrogance and Complicity**

In a far-reaching analysis of controversies surrounding the Jabiluka uranium mine in Australia, and of the position of indigenous people vis-à-vis those controversies, Subhabrata Banerjee (2000: 4) argued that ‘current organization theories on managing stakeholders are complicit with colonialist attitudes and values’. The problem, he argued, is that ‘social appropriateness’—a catch-cry of those theories—is often ‘subsumed under notions of “progress” and “development”’ (ibid.: 24) with the outcome that the interests of indigenous stakeholders are, ultimately, subordinated to those of the mining company and the state. Those notions are substantiated through capitalist and colonialist discourses that prioritise science, the market and assumptions of superiority–inferiority, and assert a morality under which their concomitants are assumed to be beneficial to all stakeholders. Such discourses are, ultimately, self-righteous and arrogant.

Our assertion of ‘arrogance’ on the part of Company representatives at Suabi is based not on what they said but, rather, on what they did not say, or what they delayed saying, and on what they did. It was five weeks after Company arrived at Suabi before it was acknowledged that the exploration area fell well outside Kubo territory and, indeed, that most of the area fell outside Western Province. The first map they showed was uninformative, and the next a mere sketch. Only after six weeks, when the 30 foremen arrived, did it become clear that very few local people would be employed
to cut lines. Throughout those early weeks, Company representatives withheld information that, from their decades-long experience in PNG, including in the Juha area, they would have known: for example, that Kubo territory was separated by one language group from the exploration area. Not until the base camp was thoroughly established were they more forthcoming about their plans and intentions. In all these ways, Company failed to adhere to well-established guidelines of ‘free, prior and informed consent’ that are intended to promote responsible interactions with indigenous people (Whiteman and Mamen 2002; Salim 2004; Macintyre 2007; Gilberthorpe and Banks 2012).

But the arrogance of Company representatives was most evident in practice: for example, failing to activate or fulfil contractual obligations with respect to renting the Mission House; taking water from a tank that provided the needs of more than 250 people; contracting the local community health worker to relocate to the field campsite without due consideration of implications for the health of village residents; and attempting to have the radio moved from the room it had occupied for 17 years. Moreover, in early meetings with local people, Company representatives said that they had come to Suabi because it was most ‘convenient’ to the proposed exploration area. The impression was that Suabi was closer to that area than any other accessible location. This reinforced the (mis)understandings that the survey lines would be cut on Kubo land, that Kubo people would be employed to cut lines and that, as landowners, Kubo people would be eligible for royalties if gas was found. Not until mid-January, with the camp fully in place, was it acknowledged that the choice of Suabi had been made to minimise engagement with ‘demanding’ Highlanders; lowlanders, in contrast, were ‘cooperative’ and thus more desirable hosts.

When scholars invoke ‘complicity’ it is often in a frame of disparaging the efforts or understandings of Western thinkers or actors who analyse, or engage with, the lifeways of people thought to be, in some way, at a disadvantage either relative to the ‘West’ or relative to other members of their own society. Anthropologists or feminists, for example, though asserting defence of the disadvantaged, may be charged with being complicit with prevailing Western discourses that are seen as the ultimate source of that disadvantage (McPhail 1991). There is less inclination to report and analyse the ways in which purportedly disadvantaged people may be themselves compliant with that which befalls them and, in consequence, complicit—perhaps innocently so—in the ideological
persuasions of their purported oppressors. Rather, there is a bias for demonstrating ways in which those people ‘resist’ the impositions of the world beyond themselves (Ortner 1995; Brown 1996; Seymour 2006). There are important exceptions, particularly under the rubric of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 2001). In some analyses, for example, women are reported to be, at least in part, complicit in their own purported oppression by men (Strathern 1988; Moi 1991). Complicity and resistance, however, may be closely connected and, in different circumstances, either may give way to the other.

At Suabi, desire for the actual and imagined benefits of development, combined with understandings of the authority and expectations of both the state and state-sanctioned industries, underlay the compliance of residents with and, ultimately their complicity in, much of what happened when Company arrived to establish a base camp on their land. In usually performing as asked or expected, they were aligned with the motives and ideological persuasions of Company irrespective of their understanding of, or agreement with, those motives and persuasions.8 This is evident throughout our account of the laydown. A striking, and oft-repeated, instance was the spatial and participatory segregation of women and men that occurred at meetings with Company representatives. Women never joined a meeting that was held inside the Mission House but, rather, assembled beneath the house waiting to learn of outcomes. And at meetings held outside they stood, or sat, apart from the men and did not contribute to discussion. This segregation was in marked contrast to usual practice at community gatherings; women and men mix and converse freely at events such as local court cases, working bees and informal sport. The one exception was at church services where, when these are held in the church itself, women and men sit on different sides of the building. When the church building collapsed and, for some months, services were held in people’s houses, there was no spatial separation. The gender equality

8 While acknowledging that relationships between Kubo people and Company could be analysed in terms of symbolic violence—‘violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it’ (Bourdieu 2001: 246)—we are disinclined to unilaterally declare Kubo ‘victims’, preferring instead to see much of what they did as strategic.
that usually prevailed among these people was voluntarily suppressed in circumstances where it was presumed that intruding, and powerful, outsiders had quite different expectations of roles.\footnote{Martha Macintyre (2011) discusses ways in which females may be disadvantaged within the context of mining in Papua New Guinea noting, for example, that in rural or remote areas they have few opportunities for employment and are unlikely to participate in ‘stakeholder’ meetings.}

Other expressions of complicity included the undertaking of work with no prior arrangements concerning remuneration and the failure to indicate disagreement with Company activities to Company representatives, with expressions of concern being confined to discussion among members of the local community. Again, it was striking that local people employed by Company acceded to all demands even when they knew that the required tasks would inconvenience or disturb other community members. The employees informed community members that this work was underway, but never themselves challenged the instructions they received. Nor did community members rebuke the men who carried out these tasks; they accepted that the employees were beholden to Company and understood that a person who complained could be easily replaced.

People at Suabi were often disgruntled by the activities of Company and by Company’s failure to provide relevant information. But this seldom spilled over as resistance. People talked among themselves or made rhetorical statements that implied dissatisfaction, but their acts of resistance were for the most part minor. They were motivated to act, after the fact, when it became apparent that Company intended to draw substantial quantities of water from a community tank. More striking, perhaps, was the frequency with which people ‘accidentally’ broke the tape that was intended to mark out an area from which they were excluded. There was no prior discussion about doing this.\footnote{The sign Michael erected near the airstrip (Chapter 5) was certainly an act of overt resistance, in accusing outsiders of having destroyed a place sacred to his clan. Others in the community, however, paid little heed to the sign and openly disparaged the value of erecting it.}

On one occasion, Pastor Martin, with supporters, delayed access to the Mission House by Company representatives until he had made a speech to assembled people. On other occasions he refused to comply with a request to relocate the radio, refused a demand that he return to Geroro to collect rock specimens and, when Company returned a second time, refused their request to again rent the Mission House. On none of these occasions, however, did he indicate anger. He conformed to the local desire that Company be made to feel welcome and should neither be
offended nor see that, at times, there was discord within the community. This latter concern was most strongly evident, publicly, when Amasai accompanied his classificatory sister to an aeroplane, chartered by Company, when she was en route to school. Under Company rules he had no right to approach the plane because he was not a passenger. The local security officer ordered him to leave the area. But that man had, in the past, assaulted the young woman. Amasai shouted at him: ‘She is my sister now, she is not your sister’. He continued walking to the aeroplane. The altercation became more heated. Throughout the encounter, Amasai spoke in Tok Pisin; he wanted everyone, including outsiders, to hear and understand. Others in the crowd called him back but he ignored them. A local man, training as a loadmaster, spoke to him quietly and led him off the airstrip. The discomfort in the crowd was palpable. Amasai was publicising a local dispute. Matters such as this, people felt, should be hidden from Company representatives.

Much of what we have labelled ‘arrogance’ on the part of Company may be attributed to the perceived necessity of achieving required end points with minimal time delays. Consultation takes time and time is money. Company representatives often acted first and reacted later because they could, because they perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable than their hosts, because they perceived the task they were committed to undertake to be, ultimately, beneficial to all and sometimes because, despite the asserted ‘cooperative’ nature of lowlanders, they were anxious about security. Local people, however, from their own perspective, were also winners. By complying with Company’s wishes and withholding evidence of internal discord, they ensured that Company remained at Suabi, that at least some monetary payments flowed to members of the community, that considerable savings of money or time were achieved when Company provided free helicopter or aeroplane trips for a number of school students and that they were less marginal than had formerly been the case. In achieving these outcomes, local people acceded to an understanding that they were the less powerful partner in the relationship. But they understood too that, as Sherry Ortner (1995: 175) expressed it, ‘in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal’. Though there were times when some people expressed dissatisfaction or indulged in minor acts of resistance, they did little that might jeopardise potential returns. Rather, they conformed to the collective desire for ‘development’ and, acting within the frame of conventional social practice, maintained an appearance of harmony and good relations.
What we saw as the ‘arrogance’ of Company and the ‘complicity’ of Kubo, then, are perhaps better recognised as epiphenomena. On both sides of the encounter the participants were being strategic and, at least in the short term, effective in achieving their objectives. Each set of participants was navigating the terrain of the other, though neither set fully understood that, ultimately, these were epistemological and ontological terrains that were given expression as moral imperatives. Company, in effect, treated local people as anonymous objects, to be manipulated and controlled for the greater good that would flow from success in its project. Kubo, in contrast, perceived Company representatives as subjects, to be engaged with in pursuit of productive relationships. But not all relationships are equivalent, and engagement may take different forms.

The Giving Environment

Nurit Bird-David (1990) depicted the economic systems of forest-dwelling Nayaka of southern India, Mbuti Pygmies of Zaire and Batek Negritos of Malaysia in terms of what she called ‘the giving environment’. These people, she argued, perceive the forest environment as an ‘ever-providing parent’ that expects no return for what it gives. In a later article, reflecting on the post-contact activities of forest-dwellers, and with particular reference to Nayaka who supplement hunting and gathering with gardening, trade and wage labour, she argued that individuals or families often shift between different ways of appropriating resources (Bird-David 1994). Autonomy of action and an immediacy of response to changing circumstances are central to their mode of living.

The characteristics Bird-David outlined in these two articles are not confined to a particular set of hunter-gatherer societies. They appear as well in some Papua New Guinean societies that are better described as hunter-horticulturalists; in Sawiyan of the Sepik (Guddemi 1992) and, we have argued, in Kubo (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998).

Kubo live in a world of uncertainty. It is relationships that matter here—relationships with others whose character is always contingent and can be known only through the ways that those others respond to one’s actions. Social relationships are continually renegotiated; they can never be taken for granted. An ally one day may be an enemy the next, with sorcery an ever-present threat. Attention to others, and respect for others, is thus fundamental to sociality. Kubo valorise individual and family
autonomy, but it is through sharing and reciprocity that commitment
to relationships—mutual recognition of others as party to relationship—is revealed. And people pay close attention to the signs of mutual recognition that such exchanges constitute.

But, for Kubo, not all other beings are part of that social realm. The environment, too, is uncertain for Kubo—varying in unpredictable ways from day to day and year to year. It provides all that people need, in one form or another, but does not do so at the behest of people, or itself pay attention to the actions of people. Here, then, there is no need to ‘give back’, to reciprocate. This, to use Bird-David’s language, is a ‘giving environment’. People are free to take what they want or need from what happens to be available at any time. But this does not mean that the environment need not be treated with respect, that there is no need to pay attention to its vagaries. Kubo attend closely to the subtleties of what the environment is doing, not just so they can take full advantage of what it offers but also because there is always the possibility that the environment, or unseen forces that lurk within it, may withhold what is desired. The environment ‘gives’, but caution is advisable in ‘taking’. There are forces at play that it is best not to antagonise.

At Gwaimasi, in the earliest years of our engagement with Kubo, people responded to opportunities and constraints as these appeared. Families or the entire community would, at times, switch from a predominant orientation to hunting-fishing-gathering-gardening to take up employment cutting survey lines or growing food on behalf of an exploration company. In the boom-bust environment that they experienced, this was an appropriate and life-affirming response. They were risk averse. As evidenced most strongly during the El Niño drought of 1997, they accommodated local uncertainty with respect to the availability of food by foregoing potentially higher returns in most years for the security afforded in years when food production was placed in jeopardy (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000a). To Kubo people, what is present—what the environment is affording now—is salient; it is the subject of both action and conversation. That which is currently absent lacks relevance. The environment is fickle. There is little point in being nostalgic about what is missing or what might have been. For example, during two weeks, late in 2011, people at Suabi harvested and ate vast quantities of the fruit of a species of Pometia (kau ko, a relative of lychee and rambutan). They collected the fruit after it had fallen into the river or after they felled a tree so that it dropped into the river. Pometia is a mast
fruiter but our earlier visits to Kubo—five visits amounting to 25 months across 13 years—never coincided with the appearance of the fruit. Nor, in all those years did anyone mention it. Despite our interest in subsistence ecology, a focus of our earliest work, it was 25 years before we learned that *kau ko* was sometimes an important resource. To Kubo, environmental resources come and go. They are noteworthy only when they are present.

Shifting the predominant focus of interest was evident throughout our visits to Suabi in the years 2011 to 2014. In 2011, for example, people volunteered little about the fact that a company had been based on their land through the years 2006 to 2009. ‘We ate rice every day’ was the lingering memory though, in fact, there was much evidence of the past presence of that company in the form of material possessions, travel experiences and recent access to distant schools. And in that year, unless we prompted, no one referred to the PNG LNG Project. It was not active, and thus lacked salience. People’s interests were redirected to the recent appearance of representatives of International Timbers and Stevedoring (IT&S) who, in exchange for lease-hold rights to land, promised a road that would reach from Kiunga to Port Moresby with side roads to and beyond Suabi. A year later, in 2012–13, few people talked of IT&S, for now attention was directed, initially, towards a forthcoming feast and, later, towards the arrival and potential promise of an exploration company. It was not until the latter half of 2013, when further exploration was undertaken at Juha and, more particularly, when the Department of Petroleum and Energy completed a clan-vetting process at Siabi, that people’s attention was again directed to the PNG LNG Project and they became engrossed in the particularities of devising Incorporated Land Groups. Always, however, there were people or families whose focus was elsewhere: in 2011, for example, a Suabi family was based for several months at Famobi on the Strickland River, where they cared for their own and other people’s pigs and planted and harvested a sweet potato garden on an island in the river. And, in 2014, there was a family who preferred life in the forest to life at Suabi and were away so often that initially they were forgotten by the man who, on our behalf, completed the census of Timaguibi Corner.

In the foregoing, our distinction between the ‘social’ and the ‘environment’ is both problematic and insufficient. For Kubo, there are many ways in which what we might see as natural is incorporated into the social and the cosmological (Dwyer 1996). A wild pig may be caught and domesticated, its potential for use in negotiating further relationships now predicated on the labour that its carer invests in it. A medium may marry a spirit
woman, entering into a relationship of exchange with her kin. Invisible beings that inhabit the forest may be manifest in the bodies of animals, and intrude regularly upon the social life of people. The ‘environment’, as we have used it here, is a gloss. It refers to resources that are ‘given’, that require no, or minimal, input from people prior to their appropriation and which, on this count, for Kubo, are outside the social. In this sense, ‘environment’ is an emic category. What is included, and what is excluded, is a Kubo judgement—or, rather, our judgement of a Kubo judgement; a judgement, on our part, based on their practice.

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, we observed Kubo people shifting their understanding of, and practice towards, ‘foreigners’—missionaries, visiting Company representatives, government employees, anthropologists—from being potential relational others embedded in local social networks to being components of an environment that ‘gave’ without a requirement to reciprocate (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998). The ‘foreigners’ were often generous, sometimes frightening, but they lacked social commitment to Kubo. They did not participate in the necessary ethos of never-ending sharing. Like the environment that Kubo had always experienced, they were potentially beneficent but always unpredictable. In consequence, the conventional response to the locally persistent ‘boom-bust’ nature of access to environmental resources was extrapolated to encounters with, and expectations of, ‘foreigners’ who appeared intermittently but ultimately departed. It was the ‘foreigners’ who failed, who never took up the unexpressed but ever-present offer to become Kubo.

By 1995, Kubo were treating outsiders as components of an enlarged experience of environment. Outsiders held the potential to provide desired resources. All that was necessary was to find ways in which those resources could be garnered without risking refusal or worse. Avoiding the former, as we have described above, was facilitated by distancing oneself from a direct request. Avoiding the latter was trickier. A fish taken in the wrong place, a bird you have shot, a dog that bit you, a silhouette glimpsed in foliage, or words glimpsed on paper each had the potential to embody or attract the attention of a malevolent spirit being. The environment gave needed resources but was unpredictable. It could also give that which was not desired. Reciprocity was not necessary but the environment did not always comply with one’s wishes.
By 2014 Kubo responses to outsiders had changed further. Our own position was ambiguous. To some people, we were social beings caught up in webs of friendship and reciprocal relations. We had, at the least, a taint of Kubo-ness that was given overt expression in the way that we lived. Our house was positioned within a cluster of their houses. It was small, with an enclosed and private sleeping area raised off the ground and an entirely open kitchen and work area on the ground. In many ways it was more like a traditional Kubo bush house than were any of the other sleeping houses at Suabi. It caught breezes and people enjoyed sleeping on the benches or watching while we typed or cooked. In our living arrangements, though never in our work, we were of the village. And not once in all those months were any of our belongings taken, though that would have been easy. We left much in the open. The front and back doors to our sleeping and storage area were of rough bush materials; it would have needed little imagination to gain entry. And to the surprise of many people we did our own cooking on an open fire. Indeed, one of the cooks from the Company camp filmed us as we cooked; he had never before seen white people cooking in this way. To many other people we were, perhaps, a harmless curiosity, nice to have around, tame ‘whites’. Indeed, one of our friends often joked that we were ‘albino Kubo’. But to most Suabi people, most of the time, we were as we had been from 1995 onwards—an asset, a means of acquiring resources and knowledge by those who learned best how these might be accessed. There were many days, sitting at the computer, typing yet another list of names, a business plan, a letter of request, or copying a reference that we hoped was not fraudulent, when we felt we had come to Suabi to act as village secretaries. There was, however, one significant difference. We had far less to offer by way of material goods, money or the future than did Company. It was with Company that people’s response to the ‘giving environment’ had undergone most change.

The living arrangements of Company representatives were totally at odds with those of Kubo. There were hot showers, flush toilets, air-conditioned tents, refrigerators and freezers, electric stoves, covered walkways, computers and internet, satellite phones and ten or more containers holding surplus food, tools and equipment. The camp was self-contained. Staff from elsewhere seldom ventured out of sight of the camp and if the camp manager did go walking he was obliged, by Company regulations, to carry his radio and be accompanied by a security guard. In four and a half months there were only three occasions when a camp manager visited our house—800 m from the camp—to see, and be unimpressed
by, the way in which we lived.\footnote{We ourselves visited the Company camp on more than 20 occasions in 2013–14, both to introduce ourselves to the fly-in fly-out staff based there—including the five expatriate men who filled the role of camp manager through that period—and to offer or glean news. We were often invited to the mess for tea or coffee and sometimes enjoyed an evening meal. On one occasion, several senior Company representatives made a short visit to check the condition of the camp, fly over possible future exploration areas and move towards a decision about retaining or closing the camp. We visited to introduce ourselves, met the most senior of the visitors at the entrance to the camp and rapidly understood that he was not going to let us cross the threshold. We were not welcome. Our friends at Suabi were entertained by our dismissal and interpreted it as one more indication that we were Kubo-like. We note, however, that our engagement with Company employees was always as visitors and never as co-residents or co-workers. We were participants in several conversations in which white employees of one petroleum company disparaged purported approaches of another petroleum company or condemned the purported approaches of companies engaged in the timber industry. We recognise the diversity of backgrounds, knowledge and experiences of Company employees, and have observed differences in the ways individuals engage with and refer to local people, but have limited understanding of the ways in which these men engage with each other within or beyond the limits of the camp. Situated research is called for. In many ways, however, both in the field where critical balance is not always easy to achieve or subsequently when challenged by colleagues, this is fraught with difficulties (Coumans 2011; Golub 2014; Kirsch 2014; Welker 2016).} Only Suabi residents who were employed by Company were officially allowed to enter the camp and, though a few others did enter from time to time, it was usual that someone wanting to deliver a message or get their mobile phone charged would wait at a distance until they caught the attention of one of the local workers. Footwear was compulsory. In both its physical and social construction the camp was removed from the village and the people who lived there. It was, in this sense, dehumanised.

For many people at Suabi, there was an expectation that we would give, or that we had enough to give, without a requirement that we be reciprocated. But, always, it remained our prerogative as to whether we gave, as to whether we acknowledged and acted on our status as a component of environment. Company, however, unwittingly assumed a more distant and anonymous status. Some camp managers interacted warmly with the local men they employed and one, against Company expectations, sometimes swam in the river with children or went walking with a local man he had befriended. But Company seldom contributed to the daily social give and take of life at Suabi. Indeed, what we have reported as ‘arrogance’ on the part of Company was experienced by local people as indicative of Company’s lack of participation in their own social world. For the most part, the representatives of Company did not pay attention to local people, did not ‘respect’ them, or recognise their social reality. It was, therefore, perceived as thoroughly legitimate to take from Company. Food stuffs, nails, tools and so forth were abundant,
often unused, sometimes seemingly going to waste. They were there for the taking. Taking these things, without asking, was not ‘resistance’ any more than harvesting fish from a stream, or nuts from a tree, constituted resistance to the constraints of environment. Nor was it theft for, as church sermons sometimes made clear, stealing was sinful because it disturbed social relationships. Taking from either the forest or from Company was not disruptive in the same way. There was, however, always risk. The risk lay in overstepping the mark, in reaching beyond Company’s threshold of tolerance—a threshold that could not be known in advance—and eliciting retaliation in the form of departure and loss of access to all that Company potentially offered. That is why people complied with Company expectations. That is why they were unwittingly complicit in the ontological persuasions of Company.

***

From the perspective of people at Suabi, Company was an objectified resource that could be freely exploited—with the proviso that those who represented Company were not made aware that, ultimately, this is what underlay local expressions of compliance. At the same time, however, throughout periods that Company was present, local people were negotiating with each other with respect to who would be employed, who had rights to land on which Company facilities were established and who, if anyone, had rights to the land on which Company would conduct their surveys. Here, then, irrespective of personal desires, their strategy was to conform to conventional expressions of morality and responsibility, by affirming reciprocal relations through ongoing exchanges and thus minimising the likelihood that they might be either subject to, or suspected of, sorcery. Stated simply, Company was not seen as party to the moral universe of people at Suabi.

Simultaneously, however, the ‘complicity’ of Suabi people—their behaviour as ‘cooperative’, welcoming, non-demanding and non-threatening hosts—reinforced a perception on the part of Company representatives that there was no need to attend to them, to negotiate relationships with them, as individuals. To Company, the people at Suabi were merely part of the equation of capitalist production—anomalous, substitutable, impersonal. Crucially, then, both the ‘arrogance’ of Company and the ‘complicity’ of Kubo were products of the ‘friction’ between two ontological systems, rather than being solely expressions of one or other of those systems.
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.