In mid-October 1991 we returned to Kubo-land after an absence of four years. The plane landed at Suabi and we shook hands and talked with many people who we had not seen for so long. One man told us that Bimo was at Gwaimasi waiting to see us. He had not come to meet us because he was not sure that we would return. Only when he saw us would he know we had come. But we did not know anyone named Bimo. ‘You know him’, the man said. ‘He is Peter’s friend.’ It took some time before we understood that Bimo was the man we had known as Tobu; the man to whom Peter had been closest through our previous 15 months stay at Gwaimasi. But Tobu’s name had changed. In 1986–87 his talent as a hunter was fading. He now seldom killed a pig. His returns from hunting trips were smaller fare: lizards, snakes and, particularly, birds. He became known as Bimo, for it was this species of pigeon that he was now most likely to shoot.

We walked to Gwaimasi and found few people present. As a government ‘make-work’ project, most were cutting a ‘road’ through swamp and forest to the mission station at Dahamo. And a recent death, attributed to sorcery, had seen people scatter to tiny forest shelters that were hidden and protected by fences from threatening forces. Bimo was working on the road. When we found him in the forest he was carrying Gabia, his three-year-old son who had not been born when we left at the close of 1987. Bimo made the introductions. ‘My sister,’ he told Gabia, indicating Monica. Peter—again, no name was mentioned—was introduced as Monica’s hwo de (‘good child’—husband). The implication was clear; Bimo had given his ‘sister’ as wife to Peter and thus these two men were deeply bonded as brothers-in-law. This meant as well, however, that Peter was in debt, for he had not yet reciprocated Bimo’s ‘gift’. Bimo’s form of introduction was an invitation—neither a request nor a demand—to accept the relationships he had mapped out. It was up to us to respond through time as we chose.
Through the preceding chapters we have traced various shifts in the ways that Kubo people interacted, and sought to manipulate relationships, not only with each other but also with the new beings, things and powers that have appeared in their lives through recent decades. But lurking behind these changes have been deeper shifts in modes of understanding. In this chapter we bring together implications of the diverse accounts presented earlier. We do so to highlight the interplay of changing epistemologies and ontologies in the strategies people deployed to navigate both future and past. The ways in which Kubo and Febi people come to be known and named have changed through the time we have lived and worked with them. Those changes reflect deeper shifts in how relationships are understood and negotiated.

Naming Persons

When we first lived with Kubo people at Gwaimasi, in 1986–87, children were not named until about the time that they walked. Until then they were spoken of or addressed as sobosio (girl/woman-like) or oosisio (boy/man-like). The implication was clear; they may have had the superficial appearance of being male or female, but even this basic aspect of identity remained uncertain. Indeed Gehogwa, who had attended school for five years, translated these terms as, respectively, ‘false girl’ and ‘false boy’. The uncertainty remained until a child began to reveal, through its actions, who he or she was. Only then was the child given a personal name—an appropriate ‘custom name’ that invoked connections to past people, places or events. A particular person might be given the right to name the child, and thus position the new person in relation to themselves and their world, to reproduce the past in the present: the name of an ancestor, perhaps, who had shaped the social and physical world; the name of someone close who had recently died—the namer’s father, perhaps, or a sister; or the name of a place, or of a being that inhabits that place, interaction with which is now less common. Even then, however, there might be ambiguity, with several names tested before consensus about the child’s identity was reached. One small girl, for example, moved from being Sobosio to Bosai (like Sai) and, only later, as her similarity to the long-deceased Sai seemed to be confirmed in her behaviour, did her name become Sai. These ‘custom’ names were powerful, evoking the larger social domain from which they have been drawn, and people used them with care. We never learned the custom names of some people at Gwaimasi.
Other names emerged as the growing child interacted with the world in the present; names that reflected, perhaps, something of the person’s appearance—‘grass grub’, or ‘tall man’. Or the names reflected actions and behaviour—Hwo ton (dead child), for a boy who had suffered a fit as an infant and was thought to have died, or Bimo for someone whose hunting now focuses on procuring fruit doves rather than pigs or fish. These names were less potent than ‘custom’ names, but were still used with care; people preferentially referred to others by kin terms. And as interactions played out, names might change, new names become recognised as more appropriate; the boy known first as Hwo ton later became Gawua (grass grub) and eventually Fuhuwa. Such names were always contingent, grounded in the present of everyday life.

If, however, a child was born at a community health centre, or had been otherwise hospitalised or vaccinated, then medical staff—if they were not of the home community—required, and often themselves suggested, a name for their records. These names were usually taken from English or from the Bible—though some mothers cleverly suggested variants on ‘Baby’ (for example, Bebi)—and gained currency before a custom name was discovered.

Custom names, and the other names discussed above, emerged out of the contingencies of everyday life. They were found to be appropriate by other people and attached to a person, who, at that time, could never say their own name. But, again, at that time, and increasingly through the years that followed, some people—particularly youths or young men—chose an English name for themselves. These modern names were an expression, by the name’s bearer, of who he or she would like to be, or be like; unlike custom names they sought to shape the future, not merely reproduce the past. These names, increasingly, are drawn from the outside world. Some are from the Bible—Elijah or Israel, or Peter and Paul and Rebecca. Others have more secular connotations. Jackson was a common choice a decade ago. One young man chose Elton, and is also known as John. Betty, Diana and Sandra all live at Suabi. And, finally, there were other names—reciprocal names—that two people might share to mark an incident or occasion they had had enjoyed together. At Gwaimasi there were two men who addressed each other as Gwamo Dihio (frog eye) in

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1 At Suabi, in 2011–14, the community health worker was a local man. His records of births include the name of the mother and, if known, father but do not provide a name for the child.
memory of a time when they had carefully shared a small frog—they had each eaten an eye—which one of them had captured; no one else addressed either of them with this name.²

By 2011–14, at Suabi, all the above kinds of names continued to have currency but there had been shifts in the time at which they were first used and in the frequency of different kinds of names. Now, very soon after birth, a child would receive either one or two names: a custom name and an English or biblical name. If they received both, the custom name might initially be withheld from public knowledge, to allow time to learn whether it was indeed appropriate. In these cases, then, it was the English or biblical name that rapidly gained currency. We did not hear infants addressed as sobosio or oosisio. As before, custom names could alter, or shift back and forth, through the course of a person’s life but, to a much greater extent than earlier, young men and women chose for themselves an English name and, with varying success, encouraged people to use that in both address and reference. They were now far less reticent to speak their own name. Indeed, many earlier name taboos had been abandoned though most people were hesitant, especially in public, to use the name of an affine and were very resistant to naming the clan of their mother-in-law.

In 1986–87 and, indeed, through the next decade, people seldom used ‘surnames’ that directed attention to a relationship (with parents) that they had played no part in producing. This practice had been introduced by patrol officers when they took a village census; it was usual to ask for the father’s name and record this as an analogue to a surname. And, later, these double-barreled names were used by government officials who issued documentation that a person was eligible to vote. At Gwaimasi, in 1987, when an election was pending, we were brought a package containing the electoral papers of people who were registered to vote. These papers had been stored together for safe-keeping, but no one could read and so they could not discern which document belonged to which person. We were asked, therefore, to distribute the papers. But there was a problem; we did not recognise any of the recorded names. No one had stated their own name when registering—to speak it was taboo—and

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² Knauft (2016: 14) termed these ‘gift exchange names’, and reported that among Gebusi such names link each pair of men in a village, with this being the most common mode of address and even of reference. At Gwaimasi, such names were much less common; certainly, not all pairs of men used reciprocal names.
the names that had been offered as father’s names were seldom those of the person’s biological father. We read out the names, and people stepped forward to claim their registration paper.

Gradually, however, double-barrelled names assumed increasing importance. They were required for school enrolment lists, and as people began to write letters—especially official letters to exploration companies or government departments—became adopted as standard practice. It was most common that father’s name would be used but, in some circumstances, people used the name of the male ‘head’ of the house in which they lived. Some young men—particularly those who had no biological sister—chose to use the name of a different, senior male kinsman as their father’s name in an attempt to enhance their options with respect to marriage partners. Similarly, where a man had more sons than daughters, a girl from a related family might be ‘adopted’ as an exchange sibling for one of the boys and, from then on, name that man as her father. And, not infrequently, where a man had been killed or diagnosed as a sorcerer his child was ashamed and chose the name of a father’s ‘brother’ to use as father’s name.

Among Kubo and Febi, as our opening example made clear, customary naming practices were contingent and relational. Indeed, the relationship was of more significance than the name itself. The names emerged in the contexts of a person’s perceived actions and appearances and, as these altered through time, so their names might alter. In 1986–87, at Gwaimasi, we learned that the father of the boy Sigio was Tameho. There was no one at the village with this name, and Sigio associated with older classificatory brothers. We assumed that Sigio’s father had died. But, after some months, the married couple Fafobia and Uhabo argued and, for a few weeks, Fafobia moved elsewhere. Sigio immediately realigned with Uhabo and, by everyone at Gwaimasi, Uhabo was immediately spoken of, and to, as Tameho. Clearly, the connotations of those names—the person each name evoked—were different; Uhabo was Fafobia’s husband but Tameho was Sigio’s father. The relationship that prevailed at any time elicited the appropriate name. Indeed, when Fafobia returned to the village, Sigio moved out of her house and his father once again became Uhabo.

The name that had currency at any time, then, marked the relationship between the bearer of that name and those with whom he or she interacted. Names emerged in place as a reflection of who, or what, that person was
or had become. They emerged in the context of community and, indeed, given that their use was taboo to the name’s bearer, he or she had minimal influence over their form. They expressed a collective judgement about salient relationships and, though for some people the one name might persist for decades, there was never any certainty that a person would not change and reveal a new name. Indeed, a common expression of change occurred at the time a child was first given a name—as Monica, for example—and its parents from then on became known, in address and reference, by the teknonyms Monica-dua (-mother) or Monica-ade (-father). Here, again, therefore, relational configurations were prioritised in naming.

In several ways, the changes in naming practices since colonisation have reduced the importance of the relational. This is evident, first, in that naming a child very early in life reduces opportunities for that child, through its actions, to reveal an appropriate name to the people with whom it increasingly interacts. It is evident, even more forcefully, when individuals choose their own name and, with varying success—some older women, in particular, are resistant—encourage others to adopt it. It is evident too in the fact that so many people are now willing to speak and, of course, write their own name and, finally, in the ‘fixity’ that arises from the perceived need to satisfy outsiders—government and Company—by consistent use of the one double-barrelled name. Where, once, names reflected who or what a person was or had become at a particular time and in a particular context, names at Suabi were now, increasingly, pre-emptive. Increasingly, names positioned a person; the name itself, and not ever-shifting actions and appearances, now made a person what or who he or she was. Whereas, in the past, it might be said that a person’s interactions revealed their name, it is now much more the case that one’s name is presumed to reveal one’s personality (compare Harrison 1990: 59). And as names come to be written down—on birth registers or in vaccination records, on census or election rolls, on wage sheets or references—names

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3 ‘Monica-dua’ does not mean ‘mother of Monica’ which would be expressed as ‘Monica ba dua’. Teknoyms of this sort were not common in 2011–14, though self-reciprocal kinship terms retained currency and were sometimes expressed in English. Thus, for example, ade is the Kubo reciprocal term of address between father and child (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999: 65–6) but, at Suabi, a father would sometimes address his young son as ‘Daddy’. Similarly, ‘uncle’ often replaced the reciprocal term ‘babo’ when a man addressed his sister’s son.

4 Harry Walker (2013: 139–40) discusses the adoption of Spanish names by Amazonian Urarina people and the ways in which these are employed to confer legitimacy within contexts of the Peruvian state.
become immutable, carried between contexts. Thus the way in which people were known, or knew themselves, was shifting profoundly. In the domain of naming, as in so many other domains, fluidity was giving way to fixity as a predominantly relational epistemology was progressively eroded.

Naming Groups

The erosion of a relational epistemology was even more evident in the ways in which sets of people were known, named and placed on the ground. By 2011–14, households had assumed a salience that had not, previously, been the case. Family had always been important; a husband, wife and their young children undertook many subsistence tasks as a unit—family autonomy was valued highly (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998: 29–30)—but, progressively, the spatial separation from others that this entailed carried over to periods people spent at the village itself. The shift had commenced by 1986, initially with a move from communal longhouses to villages as clusters of houses in which, at first, two closely related families—exchange brothers-in-law, for example—might share a house and, later, in conformity with an emerging expectation that each married man with his wife, or wives, and children should live separately in their own house.5 Particular men became recognised, and named on documents, as ‘head of household’ and each ‘household’ stood alone.

While households were increasingly recognised as distinct, the layout of villages strongly reflected relationships between them. At Gwaimasi, through the 1980s and 1990s, the focal relationships were affinal; men who had exchanged sisters tended to build adjacent houses, with men of different oobi thus interspersed through the village (Minnegal 1994: 82). At Suabi too, in 2013, it was not uncommon for a man to build a house near that of his wife’s family. But this was changing. In January 2014, at the market and at other informal meetings, there was much discussion about the need to clean the village Corners, improve hygiene by relocating toilets, confine pigs to fenced enclosures and alter layout from a perceived haphazardness to a more orderly arrangement with central

5 At Suabi, in 2011–14, one man had built separate houses for each of his two wives and the children born to each of them.
streets and individually fenced houses. Some men argued forcefully that families whose ‘household heads’ were members of the same clan should establish houses as a single cluster, though others suggested that an arrangement of this sort was more likely to promote, rather than alleviate, disputes. Several work parties formed to clean village Corners, and a burst of building activity commenced, as men built new houses near those of their fathers and brothers. While some of the more ambitious proposals were not taken up, all reflected a perception of order that was structured according to defined and bounded assemblages of people. Now, however, the assemblages were to be defined by agnatic relationships between men, rather than those established through marriage or initiation.

More striking, and of greater significance, was the reordering and restructuring implicit at the level of ‘clans’ that occurred through time and informed the vision of a new village structure. In 1986–87 neither the English term ‘clan’ nor the Tok Pisin ‘klen’ was used by Kubo people. It was oobi identification that was salient and in our own earlier writings we, too hastily, glossed oobi as ‘clan’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999, 2011a). There was, in those earlier years, relatively little ambiguity about oobi affiliation. Though people would, if asked (usually by us), readily name the oobi with which they identified, there were few occasions when oobi identity featured in the course of spontaneous conversation. Admittedly, when marriages occurred—when new relationships were being negotiated—the oobi affiliations of the partners was a topic of keen interest and, if the liaison was judged inappropriate, of gossip. But it was what particular people were doing, where they were doing it, with whom they were doing it and, always, what they were eating that was of abiding interest and the subject of daily conversation.

Oobi identification, then, had its place but was of little relevance to people’s daily lives. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 2, it was day-to-day practice that informed oobi identity. A child raised by a man from a different oobi might well identify, and be identified by others, as associated with the oobi of his stepfather, not his biological father. And the association of people from a given oobi with a particular area of land was similarly mutable. No one spoke of ‘borders’ that marked the land of one oobi off from that of another. Rather, people from adjoining oobi

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6 One advocate of these suggestions—a former Suabi community health worker—drew on the Healthy Islands Concept that he had encountered in a recent course on health education and which has been promoted elsewhere in PNG (Temu and Chen 1999).
were ‘brothers’, they should not intermarry and their lands, activities and patterns of residence flowed diffusely one into the other. On the ground, oobi were fuzzy (compare Hays 1993)—they lacked definition; the social relations they inscribed achieved certainty only with distance (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999: 68–9).

By 2011–14 people at Suabi spoke of ‘clans’—the term oobi was seldom used—and, as described in earlier chapters, these were now conceptualised, and to some degree documented, as coherent sets of known people who were associated with a known, and bounded, area of land. Certainly, in practice, neither the sets of people nor the place had been irrevocably decided, let alone accepted by government. But the ideal and intention were there. Clans and their subdivisions—subclans—were conceptually fixed, their expression infiltrated, it often seemed, by earlier and mistaken models drawn from the anthropology of New Guinea (compare Golub 2007: 39–40). The task for many people was to decide who to include and who to leave out. The task for many others was to have a desired association recognised and ratified on paper. In attending to these tasks a relational epistemology was to the fore. People called on both past and present connections—mythological and mundane—to assert or deny rights. But at a higher level these details were embedded within, and subservient to, a categorical configuration of social order; a hierarchy of

7 In 2011–14 most lists of members of Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) nominated the ‘block’—the graticular block—with which that ILG was asserted to be associated and with which, therefore, the members of the ILG were asserted to hold rights. The blocks were identified by their official number—assigned by the state—and by a name chosen by local people. Two blocks—named as Siagu and Tihin—were nominated most often; three others—Bebesy, Bogubi and Wasiga—were nominated once only. Siagu is the name of a place in the southeast of Febi territory. It is possible that Wasiga is the Febi name for a species of tree kangaroo; we had earlier recorded Wasigia (will trick) as a Kubo name for a species of mammal, noting the likelihood that it was a tree kangaroo. We have no information on possible sources of the other names given to these blocks. Inherent in this naming practice, however, is the first indication that land could be marked out, and ultimately conceptualised, according to the dictates of an abstract geometry. But, while Kubo and Febi people were reframing geographical understandings in terms of abstract borders—of lines on maps—some Westerners who visited their lands were, for quite different reasons, losing any sense of local position in space. During four-and-a-half months at Suabi in 2013–14, five men from Australia and New Zealand served as camp managers at the exploration camp. They were ‘fly-in, fly-out’ workers, arriving by plane or helicopter from Mount Hagen, staying for a few weeks and, with one exception, not moving even as much as one kilometre from the camp during that time. None of these five men knew where he was relative to the Strickland River; that is, none knew whether Suabi was east or west of that river. The circumstances in which they worked, with excellent radio and satellite phone facilities, provided the guarantee that, should the need arise, they could be rapidly evacuated. They had no need for local geographical knowledge. It had become irrelevant to the way in which they lived.
clans and subclans each of which was divided according to the status and attributed rights of acknowledged members, whoever they might prove to be.

The clans and subclans that Kubo and Febi people spoke of and wrote about in 2014 were increasingly, in their imagination at least, individuated (Minnegal and Dwyer 1998) or, as Thomas Ernst (1999) expressed it, ‘entifed’. They stood apart from other clans and subclans. They were not as they had been before, and people’s affiliations with them, likewise, were not as they had been before. Clans were emerging as bounded, as individuated. And, increasingly, persons were emerging as individuals, defined by the attributes they possessed rather than the relationships established with others. The world of ‘things’ that lent order to the lives of Kubo and Febi people was changing. In the imagination of these people new, different, social ‘things’ were coming into existence and were being ordered in new ways. The ontological framing of their world was in flux.

The Known and the Knowing

Things are both necessary and inevitable. This is because the inherent ambiguity of relations in complex, open and autopoietic systems—systems of life and imagination—can be only obviated where ‘parts’ of the system appear as ‘individuated’ (Dwyer 2005: 20, n. 12). It is at the boundaries between those ‘parts’ that exchange occurs, that ‘noise’ is reduced, communication is facilitated and, in human systems, agency may be expressed. Those boundaries may be real or imagined: ‘they are created, repositioned, transformed and sometimes extinguished as systems change’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 2011a: 316). Boundaries give expression to concatenations of relations that may be perceived and conceptualised as ‘things’. It is often the case that names act in this way in appearing to specify a domain of relations.

Anthropology has a renewed interest in material objects as ‘things’, showing how they may be deeply enmeshed in social and mental life (Appadurai 1986; Bell 2009; Malafouris and Renfrew 2010; Zeitlyn and Just 2014: 8–9) and often arguing, though this is not our position, that they have
agency in their own right (Gell 1998). But, as Benedict Anderson (1991) made clear in *Imagined Communities*, ‘things’, as understood, acted on and acted with, by people need not have material expression. They may be figments of the imagination, though their effects may still be profound. Anderson’s concern was with the nation as an imagined political community. He attributed its emergence to the development of printing in vernacular languages and to the ways in which this facilitated a common understanding among groups of people who might never encounter one another. The lists of members of Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) drawn up by Kubo and Febi people—lists that profess a corporate identity for a bounded set of named people, at least some of whom may not know each other—might be similarly appreciated as ‘imagined communities’ in the making.

Ontology concerns the ‘things’ of the world, what they are and how they are ordered. But what things are understood to be, and how they are ordered, need not be the same for all people or for the same person through time. There was a time, for example, when ultimate physical reality could be reduced to atoms, then later to protons, neutrons and electrons, and now, it seems, to a particle—the Higgs boson—that gives mass to other particles. This in turn, perhaps to come, may lead to yet other refinements of the ontological universe in which some people dwell. There is, as yet, no theory of everything.

Ontology is not static. It shifts as people experience, metaphorise, and ultimately concretise, the world in different ways. There is no unchanging ‘essence’ or ‘Being’. Nor, it must be stressed, does that which is known to people—the ‘things’ of their world—necessarily assume priority in their daily lives. The ‘things’ they come to know are epiphenomenal

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8 We take agency to refer to acting on the world rather than merely acting in the world. It is ‘intentional causal intervention in the world’ (Ratner 2000: 413), though that neither precludes a plethora of constraints on action nor implies that ‘intentions’ necessarily come to pass (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007). With respect to the outcomes of agency, contingency is unavoidable. We accept that there are people, including Kubo and Febi, who consider that some species other than human, and some material objects, have a capacity for ‘intentional causal intervention in the world’ or may harbour beings that have this capacity. They understand agency in much the same way as we do but attribute this capacity to a wider range of things (compare Povinelli 1995; Morphy 2009). Some of them appreciate this difference, as was made clear when, at Suabi, one man observed that ‘white men’ do not think that snakes have ‘life’. We had been asked how we would react if one of us was bitten by a death adder and died. Our initial response, that the one who had not died would be sad but would not seek redress, was dismissed; it took no account of the fact that, to Kubo people, death could happen only if the death adder had been empowered to act on the world—and, thus, had ‘life’ (agency)—by a malevolent sorcerer.
concatenations of relations—they appear as ‘entities’—but, to some people, in some circumstances, the relationships between those ‘things’ are more fundamental than the ‘things’ themselves (Wildman 2010: 54; compare Wagner 1977). This, Wesley Wildman (2010: 54) wrote, qualifies as a relational ontology, to be contrasted with a substantivist ontology in which the ‘things’ are primary and the relations derivative. The distinction between the dividual and the individual person provides an example from anthropology, with the former relational and the latter substantivist (Strathern 1988; Busby 1997; Mosko 2010). Brent Slife (2004: 159) wrote similarly, contrasting a relational ontology in which ‘all things … have a shared being and a mutual constitution’ that is immanent in practice, with ‘abstractionism’ in which ‘theories, techniques, and principles, capture and embody the fundamentally real’ but may be distanced from day-to-day practice (ibid.: 157). Analytical dichotomies are, of course, always risky—to easily misread as rendering that which is analogical and messy as digital and unambiguous—but our take on the contrast to which Wildman and Slife draw attention is to think in terms of relational and categorical ontologies as co-existing potentialities.

Or, better, to acknowledge that there are domains of people’s imaginary and quotidian lives in which their experience of ‘things’ may prioritise either relations or categories.

The shift from relational to categorical ontology that we envisage emerges in practice and does so via a process of abstraction—a distancing from lived experience that, simultaneously, ‘transforms that experience and creates contexts for further transformation’ (Dwyer and Minnegal 2014: 51). There should be no expectation, therefore, that the lifeway of a particular people—some philosophers excepted—at a particular time will be underwritten by a coherent ontology (Keane 2013: 189). We should expect, rather, that in some domains of people’s lives the ‘things’ that fall within that domain are experienced, understood and employed by reference to the relations they have with other ‘things’ while, in other domains, ‘things’ are experienced, understood and employed as standing alone, as concrete ‘objects’ (compare Ingold 2010: 4).

But here, of course, we have intruded on the epistemological, on the ways in which people know the world of ‘things’ within which they dwell. If ontology can be represented, for a particular people, by reference to their experience and understanding of ‘things’ in their world then, while allowing that the ‘things’ can change, epistemology can be represented by reference to their understanding and employment of those ‘things’ and
The truths and beliefs that, for them, thereby, follow. And, once again, this is manifest in practice. As Mario Blaser (2009a: 877) wrote: ‘ontologies do not precede mundane practices, rather [they] are shaped through the practices and interactions of both human and non-humans’. The same may be said of epistemologies.

Again, as with ontologies, and as argued throughout this book, epistemologies may be appreciated as either relational or categorical and, again, as with ontologies, it will be in particular domains of experienced worlds, and not the entirety, that relational or categorical ways of knowing are prioritised. Nurit Bird-David (1999, 2006), writing of animism and the hunter-gathering Nayaka of southern India, states the matter clearly. A relational epistemology, she wrote, is ‘about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. The knowing grows from and is the knower’s skills of maintaining relatedness with the known’ (1999: S69).

Her emphasis, as is ours, is with practice—with the phenomenological. She contrasted a relational epistemology with a modernist epistemology, declaring the latter to comprise ‘a totalising scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint’ (1999: S77) and asserted that: ‘Framing the environment relationally does not constitute Nayaka’s only way of knowing their environment, though in my understanding they regard it as authoritative among their other ways’ (1999: S78).

There are contexts, Bird-David allowed, in which modernist—we would say categorical—ways of knowing infiltrate Nayaka epistemology, and in a later article, writing of change and of shifts to cultivation and animal husbandry, she demonstrated this with respect to contexts in which some forest and domesticated animals or plants were treated as objects (Naveh and Bird-David 2014).

To capture the difference between relational and modernist epistemologies, Bird-David contrasts the way in which, on the one hand, Nayaka ‘live’ with the forest and, on the other, botanists ‘study’ the forest. The former are attentive ‘to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them’, they are attentive to what a tree does ‘as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree’ such that they
grow ‘into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility’ (Bird-David 1999: S77). The botanists, by contrast, acquire knowledge ‘through the separation of knower and known and, often, furthermore, by breaking the known down into its parts in order to know it’ (ibid.; see also Wagner 1977, Gow 1995 and Scott 1996 for comparisons of knowledge construction by scientists, on the one hand, and, respectively, indigenous Papuans, Amazonians and north Americans).

Among Kubo and Febi the way in which children were, and are now, named may be understood in a similar fashion. In customary practice, a child’s name emerged in the context of his or her interactions with others. The name was revealed in practice, in the ongoing and ever-shifting ‘mutual responsiveness’ between the growing child and the community of others who came to know the child. The name connoted those relationships, and through time, as that child developed and his or her actions and appearances altered—as he or she became other than they had been and, hence, related in other ways to other people—so too his or her name might alter. Now, however, a child’s name is attached in advance of any experienced ‘knowing’ what, or who, that child is becoming. The name no longer emerges through the child’s relationships with others but, rather, from the knowledge—a new kind of knowledge—that this child stands apart from all that impinges upon him or her.

But this shift in naming practice was not absolute. In 2011, it was the ‘chosen’ names that many people at Suabi favoured, and preferred that we and others use. By 2014, however, nicknames or custom names were again more commonly used to identify people in both address and reference. Kubo were reorienting, it seemed, to relationships of the past and the present in marking identities. This does not mean that the future had become less salient. Rather, people were now looking to the past—reconfiguring the past—as a way to position themselves for what they envisaged would be a radically different future. Being able to take full advantage of new possibilities that might open up required that identities be securely grounded both in relationships of and with the past and in interactions in the present. Which name was prioritised depended on context. Similarly, in 2014, in the context of feasts Suabi residents foregrounded the relational concomitants of food—of, for example, pigs or pots of rice—in distributions, while in the context of exchanging a pig as compensation or bridewealth ‘a pig was just a pig’; its categorical concomitants were foregrounded. And, again, the ILG lists produced through 2014 included people on the basis of productive relationships
with the inscriber, but were to be presented to government as specifying the bounded set of those who shared ‘membership’ in, and thus rights to the land of, a named ‘subclan’.

Finally, as Bird-David (2006: 43) insisted, ‘knowings are always and everywhere inseparable from the knowns’ (see also Dewey and Bentley 1975; Ingold 2000: 111–2). She argues that the ‘animistic ontology’ of Nayaka is ‘inseparable from their animistic epistemology’ (Bird-David 2006: 34). Ontologies and epistemologies travel through time as a package. A shift from relational to categorical in the former will establish the ground upon which there will be a coincident shift from relational to categorical in the latter.

**Global Flows**

Anna Tsing (2009, 2013) has shown how some local resources, matsutake mushrooms for example, may enter extensive supply chains, filtering via local and itinerant harvesters and a succession of buyers, distributors, processors, exporters, importers and retailers—gaining value at each step—to eventually be sold at high prices to elite international consumers. She has shown, too, how these supply chains irrevocably entangle biology, environment, economics, politics and multiple expressions of social life in ways such that each of these domains ‘rubs up’ against the others to ultimately create capitalist commodities from what were once ‘free to take’ natural resources. It is in the interplay of these domains, in their never-ending engagement one with another, that people act, change is facilitated and a semblance of, admittedly, heterogeneous order is generated. It is that interplay—that rubbing up against each other—that Tsing (2004) has metaphorised as ‘friction’.

Commodity chains are usually discussed as though they are unidirectional, with the direction being from local to global. As Tsing makes clear, this need not imply that those at the origin point consider themselves oppressed. Indeed, the mushroom hunters she worked with in Oregon regard their activities as an expression of ‘freedom’ and the mushrooms they gather as embodying social relations and, therefore, as ‘gifts’ (2013: 26–32). But though they may understand themselves to be free, the system in which they are entangled progressively erodes social relations as those mushrooms move along the chain. Their gifts, as Tsing argues, become commodities. To the elite consumers the mushroom hunters are
anonymous, encompassed by a system of interconnections and frictions that the latter embrace but that, ultimately, depersonalises them. The morality of the gift—a morality in which they are beholden to known relational others—is rendered subordinate to a morality in which they are beholden to anonymous and controlling outsiders (compare Minnegal and Dwyer 2011b: 205–9). Or, as Tsing wrote: ‘The new subjects of liberalism are even more trapped in power because they imagine it as freedom’ (2004: 215). Ultimately, there are no social relations that connect persons at the two ends of the chain.

In fact, however, the flow is never unidirectional (Appadurai 1990; Bestor 2001). This is made clear in Ethnicity Inc. in which John and Jean Comaroff (2009) show how, among others, native Americans, Shipibo of Peru, Catalanians of Spain and Agukuku of Kenya have appropriated some of the trappings of modernity—particularly those of the market place—to forge both viable commercial ventures (casinos, tourism) and new, revitalised identities. Indeed, often, it is identity itself that is marketed and, ‘with a good measure of critical and tactical consciousness’, corporatised (ibid.: 27). At one level, then, this is the ‘invention of tradition’ writ large (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Jolly and Thomas 1992) and, though it risks reifying ‘culture’, it ‘also has an impact on everyday conduct: on those less-objectified, unremarked upon ways of doing things—even things instrumental, bureaucratic, and commercial—that embed themselves, “thickly” or “thinly,” in local conventions, styles, and values’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 75).

But what is that process and what is it that, at base, is being appropriated? The ways in which people change how they dress, talk, organise spaces in which they live, selectively acquire material possessions, educate their children, alter religious practices and accommodate to a monetary economy are likely to be immediately apparent. But these are surface expressions only. The process itself runs deeper. It entails ideas taking on a life of their own, values being measured against a common standard, the attributes of things assuming definitional status, and transactions foregoing prior relational commitment (Minnegal and Dwyer 2011b: 208). These are the neoliberal persuasions of, respectively, reification, commensurability, categorisation and anonymisation. All are party to commodification. It is these expressions of process, and their attendant tropes, that flow from the global to the local and, in the ways they infiltrate and inform local practice and understandings, underlie social transformation (Minnegal
and Dwyer 2007). The multiple encounters entailed in commodity chains are those of sometimes subtly different, sometimes profoundly different, knowledge systems; they are ontological and epistemological encounters.

Kubo and Febi people living at and near Suabi are not harvesting natural resources that then enter a supply chain of the sort Tsing and others have described, though in the recent past a few have sold small quantities of agarwood to buyers, and there are some who contemplate future possibilities with this highly valued resource. Nor, of course, have these people developed tourist ventures, let alone casinos, though, again, some know that elsewhere in Papua New Guinea (PNG) there are people who derive income from marketing ‘traditional’ ceremonies or being engaged in eco-tourism (Errington and Gewertz 1996; Otto and Verloop 1996; Silverman 1999; MacCarthy 2013; Sakata and Prideaux 2013). What they have done, however, is to provide labour and services—use of land, access to water and so forth—to mining and oil and gas companies that have explored, and established infrastructure, on or near their lands. For the companies concerned, that labour and those services are cheap. In late 2014 and early 2015 oil and natural gas prices collapsed worldwide and many companies put new ventures on hold and reduced engagement with existing ventures. But this was not the response in PNG where, for example, the managing director of Oil Search said that the prospects for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) expansion remained ‘attractive based on the current oil price outlook’ (Macdonald-Smith 2015). The cheap labour and services provided by local people contribute substantially to the economic viability of LNG projects in that country.

The labour and services provided by Kubo and Febi people are, in fact, the origin point of a different kind of supply chain. The links are again numerous. The chain reaches from local participants as workers and hosts, through the field officers of companies and a hierarchy of officials of those companies, to the stock market and, ultimately, to shareholders. And, again, of course, to those shareholders the people at the origin point of the chain are anonymous and non-relational. For Kubo and Febi people, however, the immediate source of new experience and new knowledge is the presence, and the activities, of those officers of companies who visit and live on their lands. It is through their immediate engagement, in time and place, with those who come to their lands that they encounter different ways of living in, and understanding, the world and that their pre-existing ontology and epistemology are challenged and may be transformed. How then might we characterise the worlds of, on the one hand, Kubo and Febi
people and, on the other, Company representatives when they meet on the lands of the former people? How are their different practices framed? It is in the differences between the two that new ways of living emerge and give shape to new ‘things’ and new ways of knowing those ‘things’.

At the Company Camp

The epistemological, ontological and moral underpinnings of Company, and by extension of Company’s representatives, differed from those of Kubo and Febi people. The abstract entity that is Company occupies a world of risk, not uncertainty. The focal environment is not experienced as ‘giving’; the gas being sought is already there and once found in sufficient quantity may be extracted. Market considerations, and the potential rewards from resource exploration, favour a risk-prone strategy under which the adverse outcomes of some ventures are expected to be more than balanced by the high returns of others. Gas may, or may not, be present in any place, and the value—the viability—of a find may fluctuate with the market. But probabilities can be calculated before action is taken. Inasmuch as considerations of science and economics—of technology and the market—lie at the core of practice, so too, for Company and its representatives ‘on the ground’, both the social world and the material world are grasped and experienced largely in categorical terms.

The camp that Company established at Suabi in 2013–14 was ordered with respect to both structure and performance. There were street signs and arrows to direct people to work areas, sleeping quarters, mess halls, clinic, ablution blocks, a muster point where people should gather in emergencies and so forth (Fig. 8.1). A notice board listed the names, responsibilities, company of origin and allocated accommodation of senior employees. Another, open to the public, showed the campsite fire plan, reported weekly statistics about man-hours worked and safety incidents, and provided information about what to do in the event of heat exhaustion, excess noise exposure and medical emergencies. Covered walkways, of timber and wire mesh to minimise slipping, connected different sections of the site. The site was bounded, an island of difference from the greater village of Suabi within which it was located. It was a place of and for people who were themselves spatially bounded by the structures that enclosed them, and who therefore, on this count alone, were different to the people on whose land they now lived.
The physical structure of the camp reinforced the sense of attributed rank and differential authority that prevailed there. Thus, the quality of accommodation rapidly reduced from the air-conditioned, generously fitted, large tent where the camp manager worked and slept, through the smaller but private tents for lesser ranked senior staff—geologists, helicopter pilots, medic and others—to the communal, dormitory-like tent where Papua New Guinean ‘foremen’ were housed. And when the site was fully operational, with seismic or geo-surveys underway and a hundred or more outsiders either in residence or back and forth between field and base camp, senior staff—professionals—were served high quality and varied meals in one well appointed mess while ‘foremen’ and labourers were fed a less varied diet at a well separated, and much less well appointed, mess that could not be accessed via a covered walkway.

Time too was carefully structured. There was a compulsory early morning meeting to discuss and reinforce issues of safety, and fixed times when meals were served, when people should be seen to be working and when they were free to wash or to rest. The places people occupied, the facilities they were provided with at those places, the paths they followed to move between places and the times at which they should be found at these
places were all given in advance. They were preordained. There was little room for contingency and no expectation that individuals—at any level—would not conform.

The camp was both a gendered and hierarchical space. With the exception of a few local women who worked as ‘laundry girls’ there were no women. At no time, in our experience, was a woman included among the Company workers who came from elsewhere. Hierarchy, as noted, was evident in the physical structure of the space but it was evident, too, in the way people dressed—helmet colour reflected status in field situations—and in what they did, and in who they instructed or were instructed by with respect to those tasks. White staff were ranked most highly, locally recruited staff held the lowest positions. But even the former lacked independence. They were in daily contact by satellite phone, radio or email with senior Company officials who were based elsewhere, at offices in Moro at Lake Kutubu, Yavo on the Strickland River, Port Moresby, Sydney or Calgary. It was unnamed ‘bosses’ elsewhere who determined who did what and when it should be done, who determined when supplies of food and equipment would arrive, when there would be a change-over in resident camp manager, and when the camp would enter a ‘standby period’ or be ‘demobbed’. The lives of those who worked at the Suabi camp were, to a large extent, controlled by distant outsiders who, in the final analysis, not even the most senior camp employee was likely to have ever met. Indeed, it was rare that any of the expatriate men who worked there met each other, or knew how the others lived, in contexts outside the camp. And, to the extent that the exploration camp was focal for local Kubo and Febi people, providing some immediate employment and implying future possibilities, so too their lives were increasingly beholden to those distant, unknown outsiders.

The camp itself was not unchanging. Gama ran the camp but, at different times, did so for clients—Oil Search or Talisman—who, though material evidence of safety was a major consideration to both, prioritised different aspects of structure and performance. And at times when the camp was on hold, with a small staff and no exploratory work underway, some camp managers were more relaxed than others about enforcing hierarchical differences between workers. One acknowledged to us his reliance on the knowledge and experience of his ‘deputy’—a Papua New Guinean man—and suggested that, when no exploration teams were based at the
camp, there was no need for highly paid white staff like him. What had to be done could be easily accomplished by men such as the one to whom he himself turned for guidance.

For Company representatives, then, both the social world and the material world were grasped largely in categorical terms. They lived in a highly structured environment, with space and time, roles and expectations clearly defined: a camp where the place and purpose of each tent was known and movement between them followed clearly defined paths; where roles were marked by the colour of a helmet; and where the clock marked what should be done next.

All this, Kubo and Febi people saw, and talked about, every day when exploration camps were based at Suabi. It is what many of them experienced directly, when they themselves were employed either at the camp on in the field. It was part of daily experience through the years 2006 to 2009, when a base camp at Suabi serviced a long phase of work in the Juha area. Their observation of and encounters with the camp, in turn, had multiple effects. They revealed the material disadvantage of local people relative to those who came from outside and demonstrated that what was once rumoured was, indeed, the state of the world beyond the limits of their land and their previous imaginings. They revealed ways in which the lives—indeed the social being—of outsiders were structured and performed: the ways in which gender and status were explicit organisational props; workers were more valued for their performance of designated tasks than for their capacities as persons; the physical structure of the camp came to define the site and its parts without reference to a broader context; and employees at all levels were both subject to the dictates of seniors and expendable and replaceable if they failed to conform. Those observations and encounters revealed, too, the limited place of relational understandings and actions in the lives of those who came to their land in search of oil or gas. And they revealed that those people, though seemingly powerful, were themselves subject to the authority of unseen others.

While people at Suabi may have strived to know Company representatives as persons—to know their personal names, and engage with them as particular ‘best friends’—they could not avoid the recognition that those men, as camp manager or medic or mechanic, also ‘personated’ Company and the bureaucratic leviathan it was (compare Golub 2014). Everyday encounters in and around the camp revealed directly, through grounded experience, that the sociality of Company—‘Company’ as an entity—
was underwritten by reification, categorisation, commensurability and anonymisation; that the ‘things’ of the world of Company and the ends to which those ‘things’ were put were at a far remove from the ontological and epistemological persuasions that had once underpinned the experience of local people. It made explicit the more tentative experiences and understandings that were emerging in contexts of locally-based missions and school. It revealed that categorical expressions of ontology and epistemology could be extrapolated to all domains of living. And it revealed, too, that desires might best be satisfied, or at least made tangible, by conforming to those categorical imperatives—by performing as the outsiders they hosted performed.

Political Ontology and Identity

Ontologies change. When peoples with different ontologies meet each may influence the other though, not unusually, both the relationship and the exchange are asymmetrical. Diane Austin-Broos (1996) wrote of two ‘ways of being Aranda’—of living simultaneously, as the people themselves said, by ‘Aranda law and God’s law’—at Hermannsburg in Australia. ‘Aborigines’, she wrote, ‘change and reposition practice in response to European incursions’ (ibid.: 5). They do so ‘both as a conscious practice and as an unconscious one … as [n]ew elements of practice and knowledge are assumed [and] positioned and repositioned within an Aboriginal circumstance’ (ibid.). And, always, identity is at stake. ‘“Two-laws” talk refers to ontologies, but also marks a passage between them. The identities this talk articulates are ethnic identities, modes of historical consciousness based on a social experience of difference that is also hierarchical’ (ibid.: 6).

‘Ontology’, she wrote, ‘is not something beyond practice … but rather a specifying integration of practice that defines a world that can also be changed or radically undermined’ (ibid.: 18).

There are places and times, however, when the encounter between parties whose originating ontological persuasions differ erupts as dispute. Where tensions arise, issues of identity may be foregrounded and, even though ‘new elements of practice and knowledge’ have been incorporated into ways of being by one or other of the parties, what has seemingly changed is put aside in favour of what has seemingly persisted (Keesing 1989). Disputation promotes discourses of difference and these, as Blaser (2009b: 11) wrote, often may be underwritten by ‘the entities that make up a particular world or ontology’.

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In the late 1990s, Yshiro people of Northern Paraguay came into conflict with inspectors of the National Parks Direction over an issue of sustainable, though commercial, hunting. The former asserted that sustainability necessarily entailed maintaining far-reaching reciprocal relations with others, while the latter asserted that both ‘Yshiro and nonindigenous hunters were actively disregarding the agreed-on regulations, thereby turning the program into “depredation” and “devastation”’ (ibid.: 10). To Yshiro the ‘human-to-human interface’ was central to their understanding of conservation; to scientifically-minded bureaucrats it was ‘human-to-animal relations’ that were central (ibid.: 14). The Yshiro prioritised qualitative considerations; the outsiders prioritised quantitative considerations. As Blaser (ibid.: 11) wrote, an apparent agreement to adopt ‘sustainable’ practices negated realisation that “animals”—and, by extension, the world(s) they are part of—were radically different entities for the Yshiro and for bureaucrats and experts involved in the hunting program. To the former, animals are agentive beings entangled in relations of reciprocity with humans and cohabiting a world or cosmos—the yrmo—that is, itself, ‘governed by … the mutual dependence of all that exists’ (ibid.: 13). To the latter, animals lack ‘volition of their own’ but, rather, are ‘conceived as objects’ standing apart from, though ultimately measurable and manageable by, responsible humans. It was this ontological difference, Blaser argued, that was at the heart of the dispute and awkward negotiations he described. This difference, however, came to the fore at a time when the encounter of Yshiro people with government, Christian missions, loggers and military had persisted for more than a century; ‘in the early decades of the 20th century … [Yshiro] were more or less forcefully incorporated as a cheap labor force into logging camps’, and later, when the logging companies collapsed, were resettled at missions and cattle ranches as their own lands were sold to speculators (ibid.: 12). They were not uncontaminated by

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9 Andreas Roepstorff (2003) has discussed the incommensurability of understandings of ‘overfishing’ by commercial fishermen of Greenland and the Danish fisheries scientists who advise on management. To the former, ‘overfishing’ connotes the behaviour of those who take more than they need; to the latter, ‘overfishing’ connotes an overall level of take, irrespective of the behaviour of particular fishermen, that jeopardises maintenance of viable stock. He observes, as well, that where the fishermen understand fish as like ‘non-human persons’ that may be known only by interaction and engagement, to the fisheries scientists fish are ‘objects’ amenable to abstract quantitative analysis (ibid.: 131–3). These divergent understandings, for both parties, entangle objectivity and subjectivity and arise in practice. To the fishermen and the fisheries scientists ‘fish’ and ‘overfishing’ might be understood, in Bruno Latour’s (1999) terminology, neither as ‘facts’ nor ‘fetishes’, but as ‘factishes’. The same may be said of the notions of ‘animal’ and ‘sustainability’ to Yshiro and the bureaucrats and experts with whom they come into conflict.
those experiences. They had put new social structures in place—a Yshiro federation, for example—and learned new ways of resolving new problems as evidenced, for example, by their success in obtaining support from a European Union sustainable development fund (ibid.: 10).

Alex Golub’s (2006, 2014) detailed exploration of the encounter—often fraught, always ambiguous—between Ipili-speaking Porgeran people of highland PNG and the enormous gold mine established on their land in the late 1980s also may be appreciated in a frame of political ontology. By 1992, its second year of production, Porgera was the third-largest gold mine in the world and, by 2000, had spent more than PGK13 million on salaries and wages—much directed to Porgeran people—and PGK20 million as donations to local groups. In addition, the Porgerans have received tens of millions of kina as compensation payments for damage to their land and as royalties from the sale of gold and, through the government, have been provided with roads, a hospital, support for school fees and other services.

The Porgerans, however, were by no means satisfied. ‘Ten years into what was supposed to be an age of effortless wealth and health, they felt cheated by what the mine had wrought and deeply entitled to more than they had received’ (Golub 2014: 30). They were, by this time, experienced and forceful negotiators with access to, and the funds to pay for, legal advice. They knew that documentation—both their own and that provided by the mine—could both legitimise demands or promises and, at times, be constructed to reveal or conceal intended actions. They knew that delaying tactics could sometimes jeopardise the financial position of the mine and encourage concessions in their favour. They had, themselves, assumed many of the organisational trappings of bureaucratic and corporate bodies. But they were not united. There were factions within Porgeran society with competing agendas and, thus, employing different ‘facts’ and different strategies in negotiating with each other and with representatives of the mine.

Golub (2014: 12–7) depicts both the mine and the Porgerans as leviathans, but leviathans of different sorts. The former is ‘leviathan-as-bureaucracy’ with ‘professional, dedicated and disciplined people acting in accordance with predetermined rules and regulations’. It is ‘regimented, efficacious, [and] expansive in its power’. The latter is leviathan-as-cosmology where ‘standardization, legibility, and simplification’—in the Porgeran case of, for example, “customary law,” “kinship,” and “clan systems” —underwrite
a sense of order. And it is in this difference, at base, that there always has been an unresolved disjunction between the understandings, and the concomitant intentions and strategies, of the mine, on the one hand, and Porgerans on the other. Neither party fully comprehends the other. Representatives of the mine understand themselves to be ‘doing good’ for the company, for PNG and for local people but do not recognise, or acknowledge, the intricacies and never-ending flux of local perceptions of kinship and land ownership and the ways in which these are deployed in practice or debate (compare Filer 1997). They expect both compliance and gratitude, but do not get them. They incline to the opinion that local people are greedy, ignorant and unwilling to appreciate the many benefits of health, education, housing, etc. that have flowed from the presence of the mine. Porgerans understand themselves to be presenting objective accounts of kinship and landownership but do not recognise, or acknowledge, that these accounts remain deeply committed to a dynamic, and always contingent, relational ethos. They expect both comprehension and generosity, but do not get them. They incline to the opinion that officers of the mine, whatever their status, are greedy, deceitful and unwilling to act according to the rights, and ongoing disadvantage, of landowners. The mine and the Porgerans have been engaged in a political struggle—one which, Golub (2014: 208–13) concluded, by the mid-2000s the Porgerans had lost—that resisted resolution because the two central, though ultimately indefinable, participants knew the world in different ways.

On multiple counts, the scale of the encounters between local people and resource extracting companies differs greatly between the operations focused at, respectively, Porgera and Juha. The Porgerans were contacted, brought under colonial administration control, and initiated access to and interpretations of Western ways, in the late 1930s and 1940s, 30 years earlier than Kubo and Febi. In 2000, the Porgerans probably numbered about 23,000 people with, by PNG standards, a moderately high population density of around 36 people per km² (Jacka 2015: 39, 46, 181–2); by 2010, Kubo and Febi numbered about 1,500 people with an overall population density of less than one person per km².10 The Porgerans

10 In both the Kubo-Febi and Porgeran cases much of the area of land over which they hold rights is not used or very seldom used. At Porgera, in-migration prompted by mining has seen a great increase in population. Most of the immigrants are not Ipili-speakers. Between 1990 and 2004 the number of people living within the area of the Special Mining Lease increased from about 2000 to about 15,000 (Banks 2008: 30; see also Jacka 2015).
formalised agreements with company and government in the 1980s; agreements with Kubo and Febi had not been finalised by mid-2014. Porgerans have received a hundred million or more kina in royalties and grants since mining commenced in the early 1990s. Kubo and Febi are yet to receive royalty payments from gas wells on the land of the latter people and have received little more than two million kina as Infrastructure or Business Development Grants. Porgerans own the high rise building in Port Moresby where Placer Niugini—the operator of the mine—located its headquarters (Golub 2006: 268); the only property owned by Kubo or Febi people beyond the limits of their own lands is a house in Port Moresby. Additionally, while the visible imprint of quarrying on the land at the Porgera mine is vast and extensive, the visible imprint of the wells sunk at Juha is minor, highly localised and will remain small. And, tellingly, while the situation at Porgera has been often one of contention and conflict, at Suabi there has been neither overt contention nor conflict in the experience of local people and the companies they have hosted. For the Porgerans, issues of identity have come to the fore. At Suabi, to the middle of 2014, though people desired more than they had, felt disadvantaged and strove to improve their lot, they did not respond as though their sense of identity was being challenged.

Continuity and Change

Through the past 30 years Kubo and Febi people have changed a great deal. Population has doubled, lifespan has been extended, formerly dispersed longhouse communities have come together, access to money and formal education has increased, many people are now relatively fluent in Tok Pisin and English where previously most had competence in only their natal language and, perhaps, the language of their immediate neighbours, and travel beyond their own territories is now a common experience. All these changes were facilitated by the arrival of missionaries and of health and education services, and by the intermittent visits of outsiders in search of minerals, oil or gas. But these easily detected changes are surface appearances only. Of greater significance were the gradual and continuing shifts in the ontological and epistemological foundations of people’s lives. In the context of new experiences, and in pursuit of the opportunities these experiences promised, people acted on the world in different ways. And, in so doing, they came to know things and to employ those things in different ways. In many domains of their lives, but not in
all and not in all contexts, they placed less emphasis upon the ways in which they and the ‘things’ of their world—other people, other beings and material items—were entangled one with another in far-reaching, never dissolvable, networks of relations, and came to place more emphasis on those things as ‘objects’ that stood apart from other objects, categorisable by attributes possessed in common with other objects of the same kind. Gradually, a categorical imperative infiltrated the material and temporal expressions of their lives (house and village structures, scheduling of activities), exchanges of women and pigs, the ways they named people, and the ways they conceptualised and, most recently, recorded the form and organisation of social groups and the connections these groups had with land. And in parallel with these changes—indeed as party to them—people themselves were transformed as, increasingly, they chose to act as individuals, beholden to personal interests and desires and less obliged to always concede to the relational ethos within which they continued to be embedded.

But all these changes, whether surface or deep, were not forced upon Kubo and Febi. They learned that life was different elsewhere. Outsiders came to their land and, in their own ways of living, both revealed something of those differences and enhanced desire for what might be offered by embracing such differences. The changes that then followed were, in large part, an outcome of the actions of the people themselves. There was no external force that drove those changes. In the ways they talked and acted, missionaries, company employees, government officers, schoolteachers, health workers and anthropologists presented models of what could be possible, and thereby enhanced desire and expectations. But, sometimes despite their own intentions, those outsiders were not the ultimate cause of changes. The changes we have described arose internally, as expressions of the agency of the people themselves; as outcomes of the conscious choices of people ‘trying to solve their problems and achieve their aims’ (Strathern and Stewart 2004: 160).

There was, however, much about the way in which Kubo and Febi people interacted with one another, and with the environment that was the source of their livelihood, that persisted through this time. With respect to garnering needed resources from the environment, Kubo had been risk averse; that is, they favoured security of supply over security of tenure and, to this end, tracked shifting patterns of resource availability by moving between different modes of acquiring that which was currently available. Immediate response to changing circumstances was both usual
and expected; the need to redirect primary modes of appropriation was not a cause for alarm. When outsiders came and provided access to money and the things and opportunities that this made possible then, for a time, people redirected attention to these new possibilities. But when the outsiders departed, as they usually did, people returned to conventional ways of living; they gardened more, hunted more and processed more sago. They did not, however, lose their desire for that which they had recently experienced.

Again, as discussed in Chapter 7, Kubo people acted on the environment as a world of affordances that ‘gave’ without a requirement that they, in turn, reciprocate. They understood, however, that risk was entailed, that there were forces at play beyond their control. The environment was unpredictable—it could give what was not wanted or, at times, withhold what was wanted. Reciprocity was not necessary; respect and caution were. When outsiders came, bringing the possibility that emerging desires might be satisfied, local people sought to engage with them as persons. But, in as much as those newcomers failed to respond as expected of persons, they revealed themselves to be ‘other’. Increasingly, they were positioned within the frame of an environment that ‘gave’ and eventually, as with petroleum companies, of an environment from which people could ‘take’.

And, finally, through all this time, there remained a deep concern with sorcery, with the possibility of random assault from hugai sorcerers that lurked in the forest or came from elsewhere, of unwittingly giving offence to a person you knew and being targeted by them by means of boge (parcel) sorcery, or of being entrapped by new, though little-understood, forms of sorcery that were encountered beyond home territory or arrived with outsiders. People at Suabi were always alert to the need to do what they could to offset the likelihood that someone would make them the target of sorcery or conclude that they were practising sorcery. As we wrote of our early experiences at Gwaimasi: ‘Among Kubo a concern with sorcery was an abiding reality and those with whom one had day to day dealings were potentially most threatening’, and though ‘departure could defer both the threat and the accusation of sorcery … it was through food-sharing that everyone in a community sought to reduce the likelihood that they themselves were in danger’ (Dwyer and Minnegal 1992a: 48). With the proviso that departure is no longer an easy option—people are now less dispersed across the landscape, with most living in close association at the large village of Suabi—these concerns and responses persist to the present time. It is in the public space of feasts that people declare by
their behaviour that they feel no antagonism towards others, and thus are neither inclined to sorcery nor deserving of ensorcelment. In the ways people share food at these events they emphasise equivalence, personal neutrality and the relational bonds that—in the past, in the present and into the future—have and will sustain them.

All that had changed, all that was changing and all that had persisted provided the frame within which the people who lived at Suabi in the years 2011 to 2014 sought ways to establish their credentials as legitimate beneficiaries to the wealth they expected to come from Juha. The activities of the PNG LNG Project on and near their land held out this promise of untold wealth and simultaneously, through the practices of its representatives, seemed to reveal what should be done to bring that promise to fruition. This was the context, then, in which Kubo and Febi people came to put in place new conceptualisations of the world of ‘things’, with respect to both what they were and how they might be employed. It was in this context that they drew up lists of members of ILGs, or devised logos to stand for different configurations of people and, thereby, reshape social form. It was in this context—the ‘shadow of the liberal diaspora’ (Povinelli 2001: 320)—that they sought to be radically different, to render themselves visible to the state and to be heard. And it was in this context that they were deeply engrossed in navigating a future that, because their experience of the present was ever-changing and thus lacked clear guide posts to the way ahead, was itself uncertain.

The task was forbidding for, despite all that changed, to Kubo and Febi people, on the one hand, and Company, on the other, there remained an insurmountable difference in the worlds of ‘things’ to which each was committed. In this domain there was no ‘social commensuration’ (Povinelli 2001). For Company, the abstractions of science and the global market prevailed. For Kubo and Febi, despite the increasing place of categorical imperatives in their lives, the grounded experience of exchange relations and the sense of environment as giving persisted. For Company, the trappings of bureaucracy prevailed; for Kubo and Febi, the cosmological could not be put aside. To each party, different ‘things’ were at stake. But the outcome was that, in their encounter, and in the long term, Kubo and Febi were obliged—unwittingly perhaps—to concede more than Company. They were positioned by the representatives of an ontology that was grounded in certainty and who understood other life worlds to be either inferior variants of their own or striving to participate in, and join, their own.
Indeed, for people at Suabi, time itself had to be reimagined. In our earliest years at Gwaimasi, when we travelled with people, we would often ask ‘whose sago palm is this?’ or ‘whose grove of fruit pandanus is this?’ or ‘whose land is this?’ Sometimes, especially if the person we asked was unmarried or as yet without children, they might declare the palm, or the fruit pandanus or the land to be their own (Minnegal and Dwyer 1999: 66). What they did not do is attribute the item in question to an ancestor, to their father or to another person’s father or grandfather. But most often, they named a child, sometimes a boy, sometimes a girl, as the person associated with the plants or the land to which we had directed attention. They did so not as an assertion of personal ownership—the land had not been apportioned among the children of a family—but rather as a way of inscribing the named child onto the land. In these contexts, and again when they renamed parents after a child born to those parents, their orientation was toward the future. With respect to both land and interpersonal relationships the meaning of the present was sought by reference to contingencies of the future. Identity was not understood as constrained by past actions but, rather, by what one might do next. Yet, while ‘what is done next’ might reconfigure the relational field and thus change the identity of the actor, it was expected that the relational embeddedness of current practice would be reproduced. But this is changing. Past, present and future are being reconceptualised as an inevitable, and abstract, sequence; there is increasing adherence to calendrical time—fixed market days, Easter, Christmas, birthdays—in patterning activities. Rights to land and resources are now asserted by declaring ancestral connections, and the benefits that may flow from them are expected to be delivered in the near future to those who are established as rightful owners, irrespective of what they themselves have done. It is neither expected, nor desired, that the future will reproduce the present, let alone the past. The future, however, now imagined as a very different—and undoubtedly better—place, is problematic. It is a place that beckons, a place of as yet unfulfilled promises, a place that may be reached only by navigating the ever-shifting landscape that lies between present circumstance and present desire.
In all these ways, therefore, a new world is emerging for Kubo and Febi people and they themselves are emerging as new kinds of subjects within that world.\footnote{In their recent account of the lives of some Chambri people, Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (2016: 349–50) show how encounters with ‘capitalism have demanded serious readjustments in the nature of Chambri habitus’. Reflecting on observations of Marshall Sahlins concerning the Eskimo and Hawaiians they write that, despite decades of change, ‘the Chambri are still there and are still Chambri; yet they are definitely and fundamentally not their (grand)father’s Chambri’. They are (ontologically) new subjects.}

Coda: Then and Now

Infants are everywhere at Suabi. There are so many of them. But the explosion in numbers has not detracted from the overwhelming attention they receive from their parents, their older siblings and from anyone else who is passing by. A baby will be lifted from its mother’s arms, carried away, shown to others, talked to and caressed. A mother, father or sibling will point to a garden plant, a pig, a chicken, an aeroplane overhead, holding the child towards the object of attention and saying, as appropriate, ‘Look, banana, look’, ‘Look, your pig, look’. Even before the child can hold its own head steady, they encourage it to look. And, at first, they fail to get the response they seek. This takes time. As one father told us when his four-month-old son failed to focus on a passing chicken: ‘He is seeing, but he is not yet looking’. The child was not yet attending to what was going on in the world around him.

In May 1987 we joined a group from Gwaimasi who were visiting Gugwuasu, six hours travel away by canoe, raft and foot, to celebrate completion of a new longhouse and village site. It was a relaxed day. Some of us walked down-river to a place where we were ferried by canoe to the small hamlet at Sosoibi on the opposite bank. Some travelled by canoe and raft, transporting more than 100 kg of dried meat—pig, cassowary, cuscus, bandicoot, fish, sago grubs—that had been prepared through the preceding few weeks. We met with other people at Sosoibi, gossiped and shared food. There was no hurry; we would sleep here tonight and continue to Gugwuasu in the morning. A few easy hours walking through the forest would get us there, and we did not want to arrive until late afternoon. While we rested at Sosoibi, Digati made a rattle. She had saved the claws of a species of small crayfish that is favoured as fish bait. She threaded these together as a bundle in such a way that, if jostled, they
would click one against another. When the rattle was finished, Digati attached it to the string bag in which she carried her five-month-old infant son Gai. It was a miniature version of the rattle worn by Kubo men when, fully painted and costumed, they danced through the night to celebrate the move to a new longhouse or at curing ceremonies (Dwyer and Minnegal 1988). The rattle is heard by the spirits of the dead who come to give support to the living. This is what Digati intended for Gai. She was directing the attention of the spirits to her infant child. She was calling on their beneficence in shaping the future of her son.

In 2014, at Suabi, we saw a lot of Alice and her infant daughter Kamari. Alice was having an unhappy time living in the house with her husband’s parents. She often needed to escape. And our open living space caught the breeze and was cooler than the enclosed house in which she lived. While we wrote notes or typed lists, she would suspend Kamari’s string bag from a beam and wander away to complete other tasks. Above Kamari, hanging from a length of home-spun string and swinging gently, was a one kina coin; the Papua New Guinean coin that has a hole through the centre. It was close enough to be seen by Kamari but she was not yet old enough to reach out and touch it (Fig. 8.2).

At Sosoibi, Digati was calling on the spirits of the dead to care for her son in the present and into the future. She was invoking the past. Twenty-eight years later, at Suabi, another young mother sought a profoundly different way in which the future of her infant daughter might be secured. She did not seek to draw the attention of beneficent spirits to her child. She did not call on the past. She directed Kamari’s attention to an iconic representation of that desired future. In doing so she sought to clear the path that her child would need to navigate.
Figure 8.2: ‘Directing attention’ and navigating the future.
Source: Photograph by Monica Minnegal, 2014.
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.