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The Broker: Inequality, Loss and the PNG LNG Project

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Introduction

People of the southern highland fringes of Papua New Guinea (PNG) have always interacted with other worlds—those inhabited by spirits, or accessed through dreams—in pursuit of desired resources (Weiner 1988; Knauft 1998). But the arrival of colonisers, missionaries, prospectors and others has created awareness of previously unimagined worlds and revealed new forms of wealth to desire. More recently still, technologies such as mobile phones and associated social media platforms have introduced new modes of engagement between local, national and global worlds (Foster and Horst 2018).

In this chapter, we trace processes and consequences associated with one man's ventures into those new worlds, and the shifting motivations and mechanisms that framed his journey. Bob Resa has played a crucial role in brokering relationships between Febi and Kubo people from tributary watersheds of the upper Strickland River (Western Province) and others who, it seems, control access to the possible futures that those people now imagine for themselves.¹

1 In contexts where there may be ambiguity about a person's intentions, and potential disagreement with respect to the morality and worth of actions and outcomes, Febi and Kubo people generally refrain from publicly naming a person whose behaviour may be judged in a negative light (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 107–9). The identity of the 'unnamed' person will be known to an 'in group',

‘Brokers’ are people who connect providers and consumers of knowledge and other resources, shape the flow of these through systems and, in most cases, seek to accrue personal benefit by doing so. To be effective, then, brokers must have connections with both sets of people, have some familiarity with the language, practices and value systems of both, and be able to move between the spaces where each operates. Recent interest in the role of brokers (James 2011; Lindquist 2015; Goodhand et al. 2016; Meehan and Plonski 2017; de Jong 2018) has focused on the forms brokerage takes in different kinds of geopolitical space—at borders or frontiers, in weak and strong states, colonial and postcolonial settings. This chapter, in contrast, through the lens of a single life history, focuses on the multiple modes of brokerage that may emerge in a single community, at the intersections of different socio-political spaces (Lindquist 2015: 873). By following the trajectory of a particular broker as he traverses those spaces, we reveal some of the frictions and contradictions between domains that have shaped his journey. We show, too, how his endeavours both contributed to differentiating the domains that he purported to bridge and enhanced social inequalities in his home communities. Brokers may be powerful, but they are also morally ambiguous individuals—people who cross social boundaries and whose motives and loyalties are thus always open to question (Lindquist 2015: 870; de Jong 2018; Severs and de Jong 2018). Ultimately, then, as in the case we describe, brokers may experience a personal sense of alienation, failure and loss.

We begin by setting the scene, geographically and historically, and positioning our approach within the broader literature on brokers and brokerage in and beyond PNG. We then present Bob Resa’s story through the past 40 years, first tracing growth in his power and influence as he sought out domains that might hold the promise of wealth and well-being for his people, and then turning to a subsequent decline in influence as a new generation, and new modes of communication, began to redefine worlds that hold the key to desired futures. Finally, we reflect on implications for those who take on such roles, and those who look to them to deliver the hoped-for ‘good life’ (Robbins 2013), as movements of people—not just of ideas or resources—begin to reshape imaginings of what that life might entail.

but ‘not naming’ allows the two parties to maintain a semblance of amicable relations until the cause for concern either spills over or dissipates, while simultaneously reducing the risk to the aggrieved party of ensorcellment. Naming is, in a sense, a last resort. In this paper, we use pseudonyms as acknowledgement of local practice.

Background

Our interest in the story of Bob Resa has been stimulated, in part, by increasing tensions in recent years over the role and performance of brokers negotiating benefits from the massive PNG Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project. Through 2018, the PNG Department of Petroleum and Energy (DPE) organised several Landowner Beneficiary Identification (LOBID) exercises in an effort to resolve competing claims to a share of benefits by people asserting association with particular PNG LNG licence areas. But these were merely the latest in a series of such exercises—social mapping studies, landowner identification studies, clan vetting forums, alternative dispute resolution hearings—that have been undertaken in the past decade with little sign of final resolution (see Filer 2019 for an excellent overview).

As new LNG projects are envisaged in Gulf and Western provinces, and agreements for mining projects across the country are challenged (Bainton and Banks 2018), conflicts over landowner identification and over the right to speak for potential beneficiaries proliferate. Effective brokers in such contexts depend for their authority on recognition accorded by both putative landowners and those bureaucrats and others who have the power to declare beneficiary status. Aspiring brokers must convince all sides that they have the capacity to deliver the ‘best possible’ deal. But that claim itself may be contested, particularly where the potential exists, or is presumed to exist, for brokers themselves to accrue significant personal benefit through arbitrage.

For the Febi and Kubo-speaking people of PNG’s Western Province (Figure 4.1), the people with whom Bob Resa lived much of his life, the most recent negotiations must be understood against a more general history of struggle to secure access to desired resources. Those resources were imagined to be controlled by representatives of the state, church and markets—institutions that operate at scales much larger than the kinship networks in which Febi and Kubo were, until recently, entangled as subsistence hunter-horticulturalists (Dwyer and Minnegal 1992). This struggle is most evident now in the efforts people make to render themselves visible to both the state and multinational corporations, doing so in the hope that they will be eventually officially recognised as landowners eligible for a share of the benefits that extraction of oil, gas, gold or timber may bring (Minnegal et al. 2015; Minnegal and

Dwyer 2017). But agreeing to the extraction of resources from their land is not the only means these people pursue in seeking to access the wealth and well-being they desire. Like people elsewhere in PNG, they seek recognition as citizens entitled to access government services, and as worthy souls who warrant support from the church in their efforts to lead 'good' lives (Gewertz and Errington 2016; Cox 2018). They also actively pursue opportunities to engage with both local and more distant markets as producers, not merely as owners, of desired goods and services. These different identities, and distinct domains of exchange, frame the different modes of brokerage that Bob Resa has sought to mobilise.

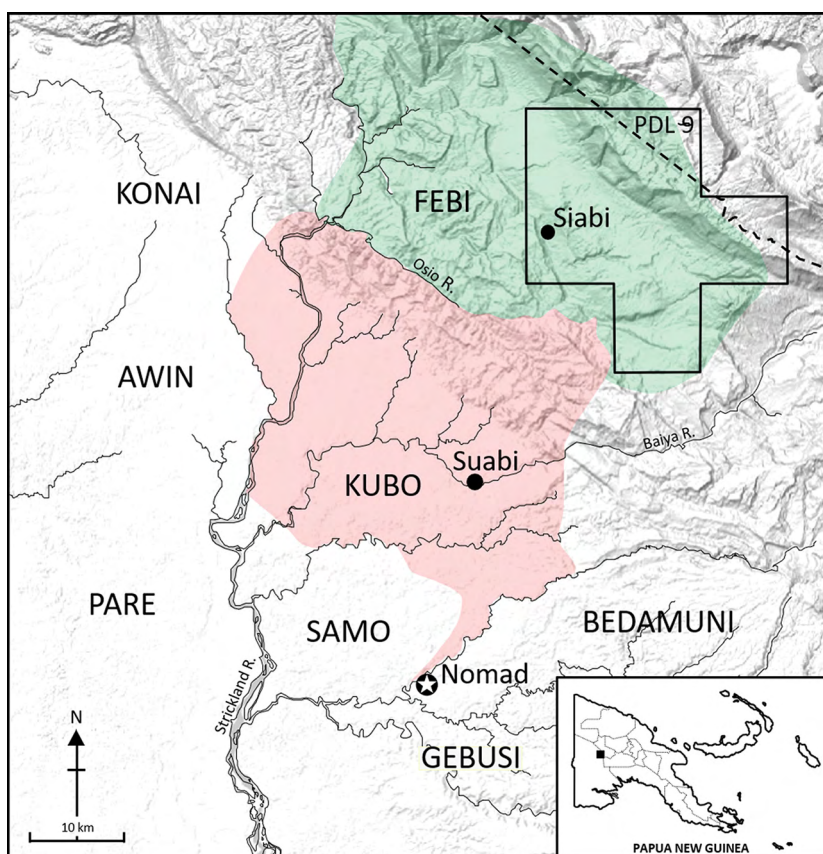


Figure 4.1 Map showing Febi and Kubo territories and location of Juha (Petroleum Development Licence area PDL 9).

Source: M. Minnegal and P.D. Dwyer.

Brokerage in New Guinea and Beyond

Like other peoples of the southern highland fringes of PNG, Febi and Kubo valorised those few men who were able to cross over into the world of spirits and, through relationships established with those met there, gain access to desired resources—particularly game—on behalf of the human communities in which they lived (Schieffelin 1976, 1977; Sørum 1980; Knauf 1985; Kelly 1993; Gérard 2017). There was always risk in moving between human and spirit worlds; those who did so could be ensnared by spirit beings, disappear into the forest and be forced to abandon their human kin. Significant cultural capital could be accrued, however, by those who successfully traversed the boundary between worlds and returned. Elsewhere in PNG, ‘big men’ brokered relations with people in and beyond their communities, accruing political power through mobilising the resources of others to meet aspirations of kin in marriage negotiations or intergroup conflicts (Godelier and Strathern 1991).

Colonisers, missionaries and prospectors, bringing with them knowledge of other worlds, arrived comparatively late in the land of Febi and Kubo people. Australian government patrols first arrived to document people and land in the mid-1960s, missionaries did not establish a base in the area until 1980 and, though prospecting for oil and gas in the area has been intermittent since as early as 1948, it was not until 2006 that plans for extraction took shape and multinational companies established a persistent presence in the region (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 53–87).

The first people brokering relations with these new worlds were themselves outsiders, sent to secure access to resources (land, labour, souls, gold, oil and gas, timber) that the state, church and corporations desired: government patrol officers, expatriate missionaries, community affairs officers sent by corporations to raise ‘awareness’ of development plans. While these initial incursions often were led by white men, all were accompanied by Papua New Guineans from elsewhere—policemen, evangelists, interpreters. The latter tended to be the more influential brokers in these contact situations, for they usually interacted on a more direct interpersonal level with local people. But brokers also emerged from within. Some were co-opted by the new arrivals, others by local people. And some individuals actively pursued the role of broker, attracted by the excitement and perhaps the danger entailed, as well as the possible economic and political benefits.

None of this is unique to the region where Febi and Kubo live, or even to PNG. Analyses of colonialism around the globe are replete with tales of cultural brokers and political middle-men (Shellam et al. 2016; de Jong 2018). Interest in the role of brokers faded with the end of the colonial era, as the agents and institutions of the postcolonial state were increasingly seen as key to shaping processes of social change (Lindquist 2015), and as new class dynamics and individual interests seemed to be replacing dynamics grounded in kinship and ethnicity as drivers of change (Rodman and Counts 1983; Gewertz and Errington 1999). But the neocolonialism framed by resource extraction driven by multinational corporations, by tourism with its cultural commodification, and by large-scale movements of political, social, economic and environmental refugees, together with the rise of neoliberal ideology and its reframing of the relationship between state and markets, has led to a resurgence of interest in the brokerage that these phenomena entail (Lindquist 2015; Meehan and Plonski 2017; Hönke and Müller 2018).

Whereas earlier analyses tended to presume that brokers mediated between already existing cultures, the studies emerging now see brokers as themselves active in producing, encapsulating and commodifying identities (Lindquist 2015; Minnegal and Dwyer 2017). This renewed focus moves beyond ideas of cultures as static and bounded entities, to seeing them as crystallised in and through encounter; brokers actively seek to differentiate their ‘clients’ from those of competitors, homogenise their client set and sell the claims of that set as distinct from those of others. Similarly, these approaches move beyond a static conceptualisation of the relationship between the ‘local’, ‘national’ or ‘global’, instead understanding scale as emergent and directing attention to the scale-making projects that frame encounters (Tsing 2000). This, in turn, alters the way that brokers are conceived—as mediators, who ‘transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’, rather than as an intermediary, who ‘transports meaning without transformation’ (Latour 2005: 39). Brokers are thus positioned at the centre of analysis, as a starting point for considering the processes that underpin production of social forms.

Again, while initial analyses focused on internal brokers as both ‘exemplary’ and ‘exceptional’ individuals (de Jong 2018), later analyses recognised that individual attributes were less important than deep-seated relations of social and economic inequality—based as much on access to education and experience as on differential control of resources—in shaping brokerage opportunities (Mosse and Lewis 2006). More recent studies, however, are concerned with the ways that brokerage may actively

enhance perceptions of inequality between the fields it mediates, and construct actual inequality within those fields (James 2011; Koster and van Leynseele 2018; Bräuchler 2019: 455). While gender and generation may constrain access to brokering roles, brokerage itself may reinforce such categorical distinctions.

Recent research in Melanesian communities, too, has placed brokers centrally in analyses, with much attention to the ambiguities that frame the precarious position of these individuals and to the inequalities that they both navigate and generate through their actions (Martin 2013; Golub 2014; Schwoerer 2018). These studies, however, have tended to focus on the institutional settings within which brokers negotiate, rather than following brokers themselves through those settings.

The story we recount of one particular broker is based on conversations with him and about him with other Febi and Kubo people, over more than 20 years. We have walked with him through the bush and sat with him in houses and at feasts. While we did not follow him in person as he moved beyond his homelands to the highlands and to the capital of PNG, we have watched his appearances in newspapers and on television in his self-proclaimed role as spokesman for his people. And recently we have followed his posts on public Facebook pages, as well as those of his acolytes as some began to challenge his claim to that role.² Finally, information from government gazettes, public databases such as that accessed through the ‘Do It Online’ service of the Investment Promotion Authority (www.ipa.gov.pg), and the research tools provided by the PNGi Portal (pngiportal.org) has revealed much about connections between people and events.

The Story of a Broker

First Steps

We first met Bob Resa in October 1995. A Febi man then in his mid-30s, he was a small boy when Australian government patrols first explored the rugged landscape of his homeland in the mid and late 1960s. But the

² We have been studying social change among people in this region since 1986 and, unsurprisingly, both the foci of our research and our methods have themselves changed over time. What we never expected was the ways in which international mobile phone calls and Facebook would become crucial research tools. These are sources of much of the information in this chapter.

government seldom ventured into this remote region, and made little effort to impose its influence on local people or entice them to more central locations. Bob grew up on his own land, coming to know the place and its stories. Then, in the mid-1970s, new outsiders appeared and this time Bob followed them. As a young man, he established contacts with Huli people and the Christian Brethren Church across the mountains to the northeast, and spent several years at bible school in Wewak.

In the late 1980s, Bob returned to the land of his clan. He married and, for some years, served as pastor. By 1990, he represented the community as ward councillor (*kaunsil*) in the North Koroba Rural Local-Level Government (LLG), which had offices at Koroba across the mountains to the east, in what was then Southern Highlands Province.³ In the early 1990s, he was focal in establishing Siabi village (Figure 4.1) on the land of his fathers, in the area where exploration for petroleum had begun. He encouraged families from his own and related clans to move there, promising access to work with the exploration teams and benefits when gas was found. He dictated the layout of the village and allocated house sites. In 1995, when we visited, houses were arrayed along both sides of a straight road edged by deep ditches, paths inset with stepping-stones led to the main water-source and washing places, and some multi-storey houses had been built. All this was quite unlike our previous experiences of local house structures or hamlet designs.

The Juha area was—and still is—exceptionally isolated. There is no airstrip within three days walk from Siabi, no government services, no roads and—until very recently—almost no money. Bob gardened and hunted as others at Siabi did. But he was not the same as those others. In his earlier travels, he had learned Tok Pisin, though not English, and made valuable contacts with nationals of other language groups who were associated with missions, petroleum companies and government. In these ways, he remained connected to a world beyond Juha. As a pastor and a councillor, he drew resources and knowledge from the worlds of church

3 The area with which Bob is associated is, geographically, within Western Province and, politically, falls under the umbrella of Nomad LLG. However, several villages within this region are listed as being under the jurisdiction of Koroba Rural LLG. In 1990, Bob challenged patrolling census workers on the grounds that they were including villages for which he was councillor with counts for Western Province when, in fact, his people were ignored by Western Province and recognised by only Southern Highlands Province. It was more than 10 years before Bob represented his people's interests by reference to a Western Province identity.

and state into his community. And through his personal connections with men from the larger, more powerful, language groups to the north he began to venture into the world of business.

We had heard tell of Bob before we met him, in 1995, on the track between the Febi community of Siabi and the Kubo community of Suabi (Figure 4.1). A dispute had arisen and Bob was abandoning the village he had established a few years earlier. Through much of the three-day walk Bob carried his young son on his shoulders, teaching him Tok Pisin—the language, he told us, that the boy would need in the future.

For the next 12 years, Bob was based at Suabi. His wife died and he remarried, fathering three daughters. He shared ownership of a trade store, contemplated an eco-tourism venture, and in 1997 was named as director and secretary of an officially registered company.⁴ He experimented with growing agarwood,⁵ and accessed outside funds with which he purchased a rice mill. In the mid-2000s, he negotiated a loan to purchase a walkabout sawmill.⁶ These were all attempts to benefit both the community and himself, to access opportunities that he had seen people elsewhere enjoy. His reputation as a man who got things done grew.

Becoming a Broker: Acceptance and Doubt

By the mid-2000s, plans for the PNG LNG project began to take shape. Oil Search undertook additional drilling in the mountains around Juha, operating from a base at Suabi. And through that period Bob came into his own. He was, for example, recognised as the principal landowner

4 PNG Investment Promotion Authority records show that the sole shareholder of that company was a Huli man who, by 2017, served as Registrar of Companies and Chairman of the Securities Commission of PNG.

5 Agarwood is a species of *Aquilaria* (also known as eagle wood, gaharu, 'gold tree' or the 'wood of the Gods') that produces a dark resinous wood in response to fungal infection. The resinous wood is used as incense and for medicinal purposes in the Middle East and Asia, and may fetch up to USD30,000 per kilogram. Local people had been selling small quantities of agarwood harvested from wild-growing trees, but Bob planted a few trees in a small plot near his house in an attempt to increase, and have greater control over, production.

6 These ventures all ultimately failed. Bob initially discussed his hopes for eco-tourism with us in 1995, but no scheme eventuated. The rice mill was not maintained, and those who had begun to grow rice abandoned their efforts when faced with a two-day walk to the nearest working mill. Oil Search had advanced the money to purchase the walk-about sawmill so that planks could be provided to floor drilling platforms, but when the company departed in 2008 the sawmill failed to attract others willing to pay the cost of hire; when it too broke down, it was locked away in a shed. In 2014, the local community health worker tried to bring the sawmill back into operation, hoping to mill local timber for a new health centre, but it had deteriorated beyond repair.

representative by Oil Search. Their community newsletter of February 2007 highlighted 'three-way cooperation' between Oil Search, the Western Province government and local landowners—the last represented by Bob. He was regarded as final arbiter on questions of ownership, made decisions with respect to employment practices at then current drilling sites, and was singled out for praise in both deflecting and making public a payment offer that was potentially corrupt (Kia and Mora 2008). In addition, Bob was recognised as an 'authority' by visiting academics who conducted social mapping and heritage studies, and as having the qualities of 'an intelligent persuasive person whose ideas and organisational abilities were highly respected'. He was seen as 'a person concerned with the welfare of the community', as someone 'whose opinion is normally accepted with silent assent in discussions' (Ernst 2008: 66). Similarly, to archaeologists who surveyed the route of a proposed pipeline along which gas from Juha would flow, Bob served as 'community liaison and translator' and, in matters concerning Febi people, was their 'major informant' (Denham et al. 2009: 4.21, 4.23).

In 2005, guided by Huli contacts, Bob registered a company under the name of Juha Development Corporation (JDC). There were 11 named directors—one from each of the then-recognised Febi clans—with Bob as chairman. This company operated as a subsidiary to the well-established Huli-based Gigira Development Corporation (GDC), providing services to petroleum companies that worked at Juha. In early 2008, in payment for those services, the Huli company directed PGK810,693.13 to the Febi company (Goldman 2009: 3–101; Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 162). Some of that money was used to fund construction of a sawn-timber building beside the airstrip at Suabi to serve as headquarters for JDC and, perhaps, to rent to exploration companies using the strip. Some may have paid to build a two-roomed house of sawn timber and tin for a community schoolteacher.⁷

But now things started to go awry. The Gigira payment was divided among 11 people, but these were not the originally named directors. Bob received a share, but so did another man from his clan. Representatives of another five Febi clans also received shares, but six of the originally nominated Febi clans missed out entirely. And five Huli men—some connected to the parent company (GDC), others long-term advisers to Bob—received

7 Of money spent in the community on the two buildings, much will have been paid to Bob as hire charges for use of the sawmill.

45 per cent of the payment. By this time too, in his capacity of primary landowner representative, Bob had received more than PGK100,000 in compensation payments for environmental damage associated with land clearance at Juha drilling sites.

Now, with money in hand, Bob departed for Port Moresby, the capital city of PNG and the location of the head offices of all national government departments. Only there, he told people, would he have access to politicians, bureaucrats and officers of petroleum companies. Only through direct contact with these powerful ‘others’ could he ensure access for his Febi compatriots to financial benefits from the PNG LNG project—to business development grants, infrastructure grants and, eventually, royalties and equity. In Port Moresby, he would be able to monitor bureaucratic and legal processes, and intervene if needed so that they ‘would eventually receive what was rightly theirs’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 152).

Initially, at least, Bob’s efforts to differentiate and promote the interests of his people appeared to be succeeding. He was acknowledged by Department of Petroleum and Energy (DPE) as a major representative of landowners associated with the Juha gas field and, in this capacity, invited to participate in a May 2009 meeting that was convened to negotiate an overarching agreement between the state, provincial and local governments and landowners concerning the future distribution of benefits through the entire PNG LNG project area (GPNG 2009; Filer 2019: 32–35). In fact, Bob chose not to go and was able to stop most other nominated Juha representatives from attending. At this time, he was promoting a view that Juha should be operated as a Western Province, stand-alone venture, physically and economically disassociated from the rest of the PNG LNG project. His campaign attracted media attention, and Bob began to develop a wider profile as spokesman for his people. There was no chance, however, that separate development would be viable; the Juha gas field made only a minor contribution to the whole. By November 2009, Bob had put these plans aside and was a major contributor at a forum, specifically concerned with distribution of future benefits from Juha’s association with the PNG LNG project, that was convened, initially, at Suabi. Huli participants, seeking to establish their own status as beneficiary landowners, complained that the venue was too muddy, facilities and food were inadequate, women came to the meetings and there was risk of sorcery with Bob always ‘looking at’ them. In response to their intense lobbying the forum was relocated to Moro, a long-established

base for Oil Search, near Lake Kutubu in Southern Highlands Province (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 83, n. 18). Initially, Bob's representations on behalf of his people prevailed. The draft agreement presented at Moro stated that beneficiary landowners for the Juha area would comprise 12 Febi clans together with other Western and Hela Province clans 'as invited by the Febi clans'.⁸ The Febi clans were to receive 90 per cent of Juha-derived royalties. In the end, however, the meeting was judged to have failed; in March 2010 the Minister for Petroleum and Energy signed an interim determination that reduced the proposed share to Febi clans from 90 to 50 per cent of the total; and 10 years later, despite two attempts to vet landowners, no final determination of beneficiary landowners has been gazetted.

In the course of these negotiations, the idea of 'Febi' as a collective identity, on behalf of whom one could speak and enter into a formal agreement, was becoming more concrete. Much of this shift may be attributed to Bob's personality and actions. In the years that followed, he encouraged Febi people to channel all applications for business and infrastructure development grants through him. Many did so and, though some were disgruntled by his failure to share in expected ways, most still felt he was a good man, working on their behalf. They certainly considered him better placed than anyone else to mediate relationships with government and petroleum companies. In acknowledgement of this assigned status, Bob began to speak of himself as 'Chief' or, indeed, 'Paramount Chief' of the Febi people. In doing so, he both reified Febi as a distinct collectivity bound by common interests and set himself apart from, and above, other Febi in a manner that was entirely alien to the contingent inequalities that had, heretofore, prevailed among people of the Strickland-Bosavi region (cf. Kelly 1993).

Throughout this period, Bob's relationships with Huli men were ambiguous. Some of those men were persistent in promoting their own claims to ownership with respect to Juha. Others were not only Bob's intellectual advisers, but also became his sponsors in establishing necessary contacts, his monetary benefactors in providing long-term loans and, as is standard Huli practice, his affinal kin in encouraging him to abandon the mother of his daughters and marry a Huli woman. Guided by these men, Bob pursued funds in the name of Febi people. Details are fragmentary,

8 Juha Petroleum Retention Licence 2 Licence Benefits Sharing Agreement 2009, copy held by authors.

but, at the least, he accessed more than 2 million kina and was supported for two short visits to Australia. In Port Moresby, he bought a house, acquired office space, and supported several young male acolytes who could read and write on his behalf (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 152–53); the latter were mainly Febi from clans other than his own whom he sponsored to study in the city. He hired legal and financial advisers. And he ensured that his daughters continued their high school education.

None of the money Bob now secured, however, was directed to developments within the territories of Febi or Kubo people. People living there began to wonder what had happened to him. In 2011, a message addressed to Bob was scrawled on the wall of the now-disused JDC building: it asked where he was and asserted ‘someone wants to marry your daughter’. Bob’s relationships to the Febi people he purportedly represented were beginning to dissolve.

In December 2012, Bob briefly returned to Suabi. He was guest of honour at a major community feast, a feast that was planned by senior residents with the deliberate aim of attracting people who had moved elsewhere and appeared to have ‘forgotten’ their origins. Bob accepted the ‘invitation’, but insisted that the feast be an occasion for cultural revival. He came by chartered plane, accompanied by his acolytes. From a podium built so he could oversee the cultural performances he had demanded—mock raids, costumed dancing, hilarious performances by men disguised as ogres—Bob addressed his people. ‘He spoke of all he had done, and was doing, for the community, hinted at planned autonomy for the Juha area’, and talked of the desirability of electing a ‘Juha president’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 153).

Bob’s audience was not satisfied. They challenged him, drawing attention to the fact that they had seen no benefit from the money he had accessed. That money merely fed his life in town, generating inequities in access to resources and in quality of life. He had abandoned his place and his people, they declared. After Bob returned to Port Moresby, people asserted that if he came again he would have to rent accommodation or sleep outside under coconut palms that he himself had planted years earlier. Later, in 2014, when we censused the village, even his closest kin in the village insisted that he should not be listed as an ‘absentee resident’, he was no longer to be accorded status of any sort as a ‘resident’.

To Bob, however, these accusations were unwarranted. Local people did not understand the importance of what he was doing in Moresby, he told us; they did not appreciate his persistent efforts on their behalf.

The Fall

In May 2014, the PNG LNG project shipped its first load of gas out of the country. There have now been more than 500 shipments to Japan, China and Korea. None of the gas came from Juha, but, under the 2009 umbrella benefit-sharing agreement, Juha landowners were entitled to receive 2.02 per cent of royalties on those sales.⁹ By late 2019, however, no royalties had been paid to any gas field landowners, even to owners of the fields from which gas has been taken.¹⁰

At all petroleum licence areas there are huge problems entailed in identifying legitimate landowners (Koim and Howes 2016; Filer 2019). The task of assessing claims falls to the DPE and/or the judiciary. The final decision, however, is that of the Minister for Petroleum and Energy (now the Minister for Petroleum), who is not obliged to accede to the advice of either the legally required social mapping reports or officers of his own department. As a consequence, the potential for lobbying and 'clientelism' is great. And thus the importance of well-placed brokers is also great.

Of recent years, this is where Bob has devoted his efforts. But, so often, those efforts have been thwarted. An interim ministerial determination of Juha beneficiaries in 2010 was put aside. A process of clan vetting in November 2013 was challenged and judged to be inadequate. The process was scheduled to recommence late in 2017. Bob and others assembled at the proposed venue but promised funds failed to materialise, DPE staff did not arrive, and nothing was accomplished. The process almost got off the ground in mid-February 2018 but, again, at the last minute those plans were put on hold; a massive earthquake intruded, the epicentre

9 According to the benefit-sharing agreement negotiated at the start of the PNG LNG project, as soon as gas is sold from any one of the participating gas fields all licence areas are to receive a share of payments proportional to their anticipated contribution of gas to the project as a whole. Juha landowners are thus eligible to receive 2.02 per cent of royalties even though production has not yet commenced there and is unlikely to do so in the next decade.

10 Owners of the land on which the LNG processing plant at Caution Bay, near Port Moresby, was built have received royalty payments.

close to the Hides gas conditioning plant and the impact reverberating throughout the land of Febi and Kubo people (Dwyer and Minnegal 2018; Main 2018; Zahirovic et al. 2018).

In the course of these promises and frustrations, Bob continued to seek and report connections with people he judged to be in a position to help. On his behalf, and often in his name, others promoted his cause through social media, particularly posts to a widely followed Western Province forum. In one 2017 post, where he was named as ‘Chief of Chiefs ... of JUHA PDL9’ he is ‘joint hands together’ with ‘HON. Dr. Fabian Pok, Minister for DPE’ as they planned a ‘way forward in clan vetting ... for Juha PDL9 projects area’. In another post, from January 2018, he is named as ‘paramount chief of Juha PDL 09’. The post shows him accompanied by a Huli man who, six years earlier, had acted as consultant in promoting the aims of one of Bob’s companies and, post-earthquake, was appointed deputy provincial administrator for Hela Province; together, they are about to present a proposal to the government clan-vetting team led by DPE Vice Minister Manessah Makiba. And, in a May 2018 TVWAN video clip, Bob appears with purported landowners of the Angore petroleum licence area, one month before they burned ExxonMobil equipment at the Angore wellheads. The man speaking for Bob on this occasion is brother to the Huli man who sponsored Bob’s 2016 trip to Australia.

None of these efforts came to fruition. Bob aged. He became despondent. A Facebook post from February 2018—we presume it was ‘written on his behalf’—stated:

I am in Bomana jail. I am the Chief of Juha PDL9. I do not know when I will get out of jail and go to my place. I would like the Governors of Hela and Western Provinces to release me so that I can go to my place now. [Our translation from the original Tok Pisin.]

The allusion to jail was metaphoric. Bob was tired of waiting, exhausted by his failed efforts, unsure why the process was, once again, stalled. He was tempted to nostalgic recall of the place he once knew as home. But who, or what, was keeping him ‘in jail’?

Competition and Marginalisation

In late June 2018, quite suddenly, it seemed that there was a turn for the better. DPE officers arrived at Kiunga, a river town 100 kilometres west of Suabi. The Port Moresby-based Juha claimants—including Bob—flew in. DPE rustled up others who worked in Kiunga, lived in Kiunga or happened to be visiting Kiunga. Huli claimants from Koroba had access to funds and were well represented. But most Juha clans were unrepresented; no funds were available to bring rural people to Kiunga, and the only means of travel from Suabi were by air or a four- to five-day walk.¹¹

There were multiple meetings: meetings to name the beneficiary clans and agree to their respective shares; meetings to elect representatives to an umbrella association and an umbrella company; a meeting to schedule another meeting at which Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs)¹² would be established to enable receipt of payments; and, in the absence of DPE officers, ‘unity’ meetings to devise strategies for future negotiations.

Despite all this talk, there was no final resolution. The division of royalties to Huli claimants was left to future negotiations in Port Moresby; these people had exceeded the tolerance of DPE officers in listing the names of several hundred clans—most freshly created—as deserving beneficiaries. Nothing was done with regard to setting up ILGs. That remained the state of play more than three years later with a final ministerial determination of Juha beneficiaries still pending.

But there were other reasons for dissatisfaction. As Wisu Miago—another, younger, Febi man at these meetings who had been one of Bob’s early ‘acolytes’—commented in a public Facebook post, the process started late and ran over time. The DPE officers, he asserted, lived in luxury but extended no courtesies or allowances to Juha landowners who, as a result, were stranded in Kiunga, living on credit, waiting for the Fly River Provincial Government to fund return flights to Port Moresby. Other posts reinforced and elaborated these observations.

11 Unable to attend the negotiations themselves, people at Suabi queued on the hill behind the village each evening to hear news of progress via mobile phone. We too, back in Australia, waited avidly for news via phone from our contacts in Suabi. Few were entirely happy with what was reported, but told us that it was time for dispute to end. They hoped that with agreement reached over identification of landowners, even if that was not accurate, at least some money would reach the community.

12 For a discussion of Incorporated Land Groups, the processes entailed in setting these up, and ambiguities about their status as the legal entities to which benefits from LNG projects are to be paid, see Minnegal et al. (2015).

Wisu had other things in mind, however. He had been elected chair of the proposed new Umbrella Company, while Bob received a less significant position as chair of the Umbrella Association. Wisu, it seems, was quietly out-manoeuvring Bob, his one-time mentor.

In August 2018, still stranded in Kiunga, Wisu ‘shared a memory’ on Facebook. A year earlier, he had returned to Suabi, joining with kin to celebrate the opening of a new classroom for the Juha Elementary School. His ‘leadership’ was noted by Huli Facebook friends: ‘you can lead Juha landowners’ they declared, remarking that he attended to the ‘grassroots’. In acknowledging the compliments, Wisu responded that there were some people who lived a ‘luxurious life’ in Port Moresby and forgot ‘priorities’. He did not name anyone—that is not Febi or Kubo practice—but his allusion was unambiguous to people in the know.

A few days later, Wisu posted a photograph of a bowl of breadfruit nuts. He wrote of the hardship and sacrifices entailed in leadership and commented that feeding on the breadfruit would equip him for taking up the roles and responsibilities required of a leader. Stranded at Kiunga, living on credit, Wisu and others were reduced to harvesting breadfruit for food. Breadfruit, however, is seen as bush food; it grows like a weed along the edges of roads and needs no human labour to produce. For Kubo and Febi, to offer such food to guests would be shameful, indicating you were not able, or willing, to invest in a relationship with them (Minnegal and Dwyer 2001: 282). Wisu turned this ‘shame’ to good effect, however. His Facebook post revealed that he would accept the ‘hardship’ entailed in making ‘sacrifices’ on behalf of others. He had shown himself willing to assume the responsibilities, and associated pains, of a true leader.

Through late 2018 and 2019, Wisu’s prominence in Juha-related negotiations has continued to grow, as Bob’s visibility has declined. Like Bob, Wisu is based in Port Moresby but, unlike Bob, he has no history of demonstrated ‘good works’ in his home community.¹³ Further, his audience is reached via social media that few Febi or Kubo people can routinely access and his support comes from Huli friends and sponsors whose motives are regarded as doubtful by most Febi and Kubo people. Bob may have overreached with his claim to be ‘chief of the Febi’, but

13 The new elementary school classroom, for the opening of which he had returned to Suabi, was built of bush materials by local people while Wisu was in Port Moresby. He had invested neither money or labour in its construction.

his attempts to broker relationships with government and company were undoubtedly endorsed—at least initially—by those people and were recognised by the academic and administrative authorities with whom he interacted. Further, Bob was of Wuo clan, unambiguously associated with the Juha wellheads, whereas Wisu's natal affiliations are with another clan whose land does not encompass any of the four wellheads. Wisu is courting support and authority from among people who live beyond, or have ventured beyond, Febi land, and not directly from people who remain in place. Within that wider constituency, the demands for, and the reach of, mediation have grown. Through early 2019, Wisu was acting as spokesman not just for Febi people but for their Siali neighbours, as the latter sought recognition as beneficiary landowners of PDL 7 and the Juha pipeline route. The stage is shifting. And the networks from which power is perceived to derive, the sources of authority, too, are shifting. Culturally specific measures of worth and capacity remain relevant, but those who judge these are now more likely to be from elsewhere.

Discussion

By the mid-2000s Bob Resa had assumed, and was accorded, a leadership role among Febi people. He was experienced, knowledgeable, persuasive. He was concerned with the welfare of the community. Among people of the Strickland-Bosavi area these were qualities that gave men authority. But there was much more to it than that. Bob, it seemed, was able to venture into worlds beyond the horizons of everyday life for most Febi and Kubo, and establish relationships with those he met there. In this, he resembled the *save* men—men of knowledge—who had in the past mediated relations with the spirit world. But negotiating with spirits was not a task to be taken on lightly. It was a task for men with the strength to resist the lure of life with their spirit affines, able to control their own desires and behaviours, and aware of the risks entailed (Gérard 2017). Few who ventured into that other world managed to return, with or without the resources they had sought for their kin. Those who were not vigilant—who, for example, ate the food of the spirits by mistake—would become spirits themselves, lost to their human kin.

Gérard (2017) has argued that among Febi, since colonisation and, particularly, exposure to Christian teachings and the arrival of men seeking petroleum resources, there has been a shift in emphasis with respect to

desired resources; it is money now, rather than game, that people seek. As before, however, some men are more able than others to move between worlds, to build relationships with the outsiders, the inhabitants of those other worlds, who are the ultimate arbiters of access to money and well-being: Huli, government, God and petroleum companies. Bob Resa was such a man; a post-contact analogue of a 'spirit medium'.

For some years now, however, Bob has shown signs of being captured by the 'other': he has a wife from outside, lives apart from his own people in the domain of the other, has failed to bring back the resources he accessed there and, as evidenced by becoming fat, is 'greedy' for city life. Some people would like to reject him. Others are uncertain who could replace him. Many remain anxious that he may be spiritually powerful and dangerous. They fear him, even as they envy him.

Bob Resa is not alone in moving to Moresby. Others, like Wisu, have followed, in part seeking to emulate Bob but also seeking to succeed, where Bob has failed, in bringing wealth from outside back to the community. So far, however, despite Wisu's efforts to imply otherwise, it seems no one has managed to cross to the 'other side' and then return.¹⁴ A new way of being Febi is emerging. And it may soon prove to be the dominant mode of being Febi. At present, as it comes into being, it generates inequality. And, in different ways, both for those at home and those elsewhere, it generates senses of loss; for those at home, loss of what might have been if the spirit of egalitarianism had prevailed, and for those who departed, loss of what once was but, increasingly, is recalled only as stories, not as lived experience.

For people like Bob, who has left, and can probably never return until he dies, we must appreciate that, despite the outcomes of his behaviour, he himself continues to imagine that his actions are honourable, that to achieve desired ends for the community he serves he must remain in the metaphorical jail that is Port Moresby.

14 Like local people, however, we retain hope that a 'save man' may one day return with the keys to well-being in the community. The young man elected as councillor for Suabi ward in 2019 had returned to the village at the end of 2014 after post-secondary studies in Port Moresby. He is the eldest son of a highly respected pastor at Suabi who died in 2010. He has chosen to remain in the village, where he advises people to stop waiting for royalties that may never be paid, and encourages them to establish small agricultural businesses to supply local demand (fish, chickens, rice) and, perhaps, export (cocoa, vanilla, agarwood). In 2019 a new school building of the sort people had long desired—steel-framed, with tin roof and glass windows—was constructed at Suabi, funded by the provincial government through the PNG LNG Development Levy.

Conclusion

With specific attention to South Africa, James (2011: 318) has argued that brokers do not ‘merely negotiate’ between the ‘fixed positionalities’ of, on the one hand, ‘people’ and, on the other, the ‘state’ or the ‘market’. Rather, she wrote:

they embody and bring into being socio-economic positions and identities. They blend together the egalitarianism and rights-based character of post-liberation society with the hierarchy of re-emerging traditional authority.

Her general point seems appropriate to the present case study. Bob Resa, as broker, is deeply implicated in what we see as epistemological and ontological shifts that are transforming Febi and Kubo into ‘new kinds of people’ (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017). To paraphrase Gewertz and Errington (2016: 350), in years to come ‘the Febi will still be there and they will still be Febi, yet they will definitely and fundamentally not be their (grand)father’s Febi’.

But James’s processual point about brokers seems not to apply to the Febi case. What we see happening is almost the reverse: a blending, almost a submerging, of an egalitarianism implicit in traditional Febi society with expressions of hierarchy—of status, factionalism and possessive individualism—perceived to be operative in modern, neoliberal society.

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