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## **Absent Development as Cultural Economy: Resource Extraction and Enchained Inequity in Papua New Guinea**

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### **Coin of the Realm**

During the past four decades, mining and oil/gas developments have increasingly become the centrepiece, the Holy Grail, of economic and social development in Papua New Guinea (PNG). This is highly evident in national-level discourse and in local desires for mega-development. One may take by example an eight-page full-colour PNG advertising spread in *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), which came to news-stands in the US in November 2018 (Eye on PNG 2018). Based on published advertising rates for the WSJ, the newspaper insert cost about USD2 million, or about 6.5 million kina, for distribution in the US alone. This is equivalent to 1 kina and 20 toea for every man and women in PNG over the age of 15.<sup>1</sup> A prominent statement of self-promotion to the larger world of global investment and finance, this advertising section is also a significant statement of national self-identification and aspiration.

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1 The current estimated population of PPG is 8.3 million, of which 64.6 per cent are estimated to be more than 15 years of age.

Under the statement's section, 'Find a New Route to Prosperity', one reads that PNG is 'growing in stature as a global investment and tourism destination'. Under 'A Mine of Opportunity', it is proclaimed that 'the taxes and foreign currency that mining generates are ... the engine of the country's development', and that the mining sector alone contributes more than 50 per cent of the country's entire export revenue (Eye on PNG 2018). In addition to existing mine sites such as Lihir and Porgera (Ok Tedi with its large-scale ecocide is not mentioned), new projects such as Frieda River, Wafi-Golpu and Ramu nickel and cobalt are foregrounded, along with Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) projects such as Hides, P'nyang and Juha. The advertising spread declares such projects to be the centrepiece of PNG's future development.

In recent years, as discussed further below, a range of anthropological research has explored the local, regional and national impact of resource extraction in PNG. This work has poignantly brought to light key issues concerning inequality, development and cultural response in and around major mining and oil/gas sites in PNG. Beyond these developments but importantly linked to them are the larger entrainments of expectation and disappointment among local peoples who are not directly impacted by large-scale resource extraction itself. These expectations and disappointments inform regional patterns of inequity and pursuit of development in its effective absence (see Knauft 2019a).

Across PNG, one finds enormous interest, attentiveness and preoccupation with the influence and potential impact of international resource extraction initiatives—sometimes all the more so because they have *not* materialised locally. In the Strickland-Bosavi area of PNG, these dynamics have been documented among the Kubo, where an LNG exploration camp was established for several years (see Minnegal and Dwyer 2017), and the Gebusi, who were subject to social mapping along the route of an anticipated LNG pipeline. In both cases, the promise of resource development is deferred despite great expectation and local excitement concerning major resource development projects elsewhere.

On a larger scale, the entire economy of PNG's Western Province has been severely impacted by—and continues to be dependent on—royalties from the Ok Tedi mine. As these revenues have reduced and dried up, along with the degradation of the Fly River ecosystem, government infrastructure outside the province's few towns has declined if not collapsed. This same trajectory characterises many rural outstations across PNG as a whole:

mines, LNG projects and other major resource extraction initiatives fuel the assumption that wealthy energy companies will build and maintain local infrastructure and services—while the government is absolved from responsibility even as it positions itself to receive the lion's share of royalties. In this respect, major resource extraction projects are in some ways all the more powerfully felt in and by their *absence*. More palpably, a sense of being left behind or left out is often at the heart of conflicts and disputes not only at or near the epicentre of resource extraction sites but in areas far distant.

I here examine resonating chains of expectation and inequity that devolve from major resource extraction projects in PNG. I consider these dynamics at resource extraction sites themselves and extend their trajectory to areas much less directly impacted, including as reflected in anticipatory hope, expectation and fanciful projection, if not fantasy. These processes both broaden and deepen our understanding of the larger dynamics and trajectories of perceived inequality that both connect and polarise peoples who are taken to benefit more, or less, from resource extraction in PNG. Given the anticipated centrality of large-scale resource projects in the economic and political future of PNG, these articulations seem particularly important.

In PNG, the impact of large-scale mineral and petroleum extraction projects presents not just a huge and consistently adverse impact on the communities most affected but a culture of expectation, frustration and disempowerment. There is a stark if not catastrophic or cataclysmic mismatch between plans and aspirations for resource extraction and the actual results of these projects in fomenting and escalating contention, inequality and misery. One cannot understand much less address this situation by considering economics alone, even in relation to politics. This is at heart a problem of *cultural* political economy, both national and local, including ideas, beliefs and values of modernity and progress against which local, regional and national realities become icons of failure and testaments to continued lack of development.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

An analytic issue from the start is our conceptual understanding of 'inequality', 'inequity' and 'culture'. Inequality tends to reference conditions of objective difference between individuals or groups of people,

including especially their differences in possessing money or commodities and access to and exercise of political power. Inequity, by contrast, denotes the subjective sense of fairness or justice in these relations, especially the degree to which differences in wealth or political influence are seen as unjustified or intolerable. Though the two terms overlap and shade into one another in common usage, they beg different analytic and theoretical articulations. Documentation and analysis of inequality tend toward economic and political consideration of the material causes and conditions of differences in wealth and/or power. Considering inequity, on the other hand, leans toward understanding the subjective assumptions and dynamics whereby inequality is perceived and experienced as unfair and unjust. On the one hand, large differences of wealth and power may be accepted and legitimated by those with less as well as by those with more wealth. At the extreme, such differences may be seen as the natural social and cultural order of things. On the other hand, small or even negligible or imaginary differences of wealth or power may be seen as virulently unfair and unjust.

These differences are important, including in the specifics to be presently considered, insofar as they pinpoint the articulation or fulcrum point between differences of material condition and those of subjective perception or projection upon which social or political responses to inequality are formed and enacted. Melanesia in general and PNG in particular have long been considered areas in which strong ethics of egalitarianism make people vigilantly aware of and critically resentful of differences of material acquisition and wealth, especially insofar as such discrepancies are not based on differences in individuals' own work and physical labour (e.g. Read 1959; Sahlins 1963; see Knauff 1999: Ch. 1).

In a contemporary setting of mining and other forms of large-scale resource extraction, the slippage between an economic assessment of rationally justified wealth differences and a subjective understanding of why people get so upset has large if not monumental consequences. It informs, for instance, the great differences of perception and power that inform mining officials, politicians and local people who benefit from major compensation vis-à-vis those many locals who receive no significant material payment.

Cultural processes are not just implicated in but are central to this disjunction. This is not to imply some unitary or bounded notion of culture. Rather it is to stress the subjective and perceptual dimension that so strongly informs people's experience. For present purposes, culture can

be taken as the subjective dimension of social life, including especially its results in the collectivisation of subjectivity. As such, there is a cultural dimension to virtually everything in the social world, including the subjective experience of inequality and the attribution or projection of inequity. In the present context, this dynamic is at the heart of how and why Melanesian discontent is sown so deeply and spreads so far and wide in contexts of major resource extraction. These dynamics pertain not only to the sites of actual resource extraction but to much broader surrounding areas, especially including those that are not directly impacted by these projects in material terms. Such ostensibly non-impacted areas are often in fact profoundly influenced by the perception of large-scale inequality and the subjective experience of gnawing inequity.

## A Cultural Conundrum

It is obvious that mining and oil/gas development in PNG have major negative consequences. These stretch from the disastrous Bougainville civil war following the bitter Panguna mining dispute with local people (May and Spriggs 1990; Liria 1993; Denoon 2000; Lasslett 2014), to the ecocide of major parts of the Fly River system from the Ok Tedi mine (Kirsch 2006, 2014, 2018), to the horrific violence and social degradation associated with the Porgera mine (Golub 2014; Jacka 2015), to rising tensions, inequality and restrictions of social networks at the ‘best-case’ offshore mine at Lihir (see Filer and Jackson 1989; Bainton 2009, 2010).

Beginning her paper on women and work in Lihir, Macintyre (2015: 1) writes:

I asked a woman with whom I work: ‘What does money do?’ She replied ‘It makes men drunk and young women single mothers—money has spoiled this place.’ In 1994 Filer predicted various forms of ‘social disintegration’ for Lihir. Great economic inequalities that now exist, violent arguments, once rare, are commonplace. Millions of kina have been spent on beer. The simultaneous introduction of beer, roads, crimes and motor vehicles has its own devastating effect.

Concluding his book on the impacts of the Porgera mine, Jacka (2015: 231) states: ‘In essence, I argue that Porgera is a massive development failure both socially and environmentally ... [T]he costs of mining in human lives and the degradation of biodiversity far outweigh the benefits of development.’

Jacka (2019) has recently documented the Porgera-inspired proliferation of a Rambo mentality, by which young men with expensive high-powered automatic rifles enter the so-called ‘life market’ to kill others repeatedly—until they themselves are killed in return. Reproducing the cycle, these deaths generate large-scale compensation demands and seed further conflict between the kin of the person killed and the killers. Absent effective compensation, the taking of further lives by way of revenge—negative reciprocity—is forcefully re-engaged.

Even among those privileged few at Porgera who receive major compensation benefits and relocation housing, Golub (2014: 139–40) suggests that their settlement was ‘considered dangerous, dirty, degraded, and squalid’, and so awash in drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, kept women and unsavoury and uncomfortable living conditions that many residents preferred to go and sleep in their traditional bush houses.

The problems associated with large-scale mining and oil/gas extraction projects are legion in PNG; they are practically a textbook case of the extractive resource curse in developing countries: lack of sustainable economic growth; dependency on unearned windfall profits; social and cultural degradation through alcohol abuse, sexual exploitation and gambling; and skyrocketing problems of national, provincial and local autocracy and corruption (cf. Ross 2001, 2013; Murshed 2018).

And yet, large new resource extraction projects remain the epitome of hope and positive promise in PNG among the large majority of politicians as well as the populace, including at national, regional and local village levels.

It is predictably hard to generalise about PNG, as it is about Melanesia, much less the wider Pacific Islands. It is a truism that PNG’s renowned cultural diversity, including hundreds of local languages, makes it quite possibly the most culturally diverse country per unit land in the world (see Knauff 1999: Ch. 1). Anthropologically, Melanesia and New Guinea within it have long been considered the acid test case region for adjudicating general theories or ideas about pan-human psychology, social life and culture.

In this context, the project by Filer and Macintyre to survey the diversity of community responses to mining in Melanesia is particularly revealing. In case after case from across the country, they find that ‘in the minds of most Papua New Guinean “grassroots” or village people, mining has become the way to gain wealth rapidly and to ensure that dreams of

“development” and “modernity” come true’ (Filer and Macintyre 2006: 216). Hence, even though non-governmental organisations ‘have tended to emphasize the negative impacts of mining, especially on indigenous communities and their environments’, they nonetheless find that the responses of Papua New Guineans themselves ‘testify to the enthusiasm with which Melanesians welcome mining on their land’ (ibid.: 221). Hence:

[F]or a majority of Papua New Guinean villagers, the desire for development sweeps aside contemplation of its negative effects—even when these have been directly experienced. (ibid.: 223)

While the reality might not conform to the myth-dreams of those who hope that their land will be the site for the next mine, there is sufficient evidence of relative wealth and advantage to feed aspiration among those who have no mine and nostalgia among those whose mine has closed. (ibid.: 224)

For all of mining’s negative effects, then, we are left with a burning question: how and why are people up and down the social food chain, from grassroots villagers to national politicians, so fervently and petulantly desirous of these massive and challenging intrusions? And why, when the obvious results are so often so negative, do ‘the experiences of marginality in one project in no way dampen enthusiasm for yet further large-scale projects’ (Filer and Macintyre 2006: 226)? This issue is global and not limited to PNG. Chronicler of American society and culture, Arlie Hochschild (2018), finds a similar phenomenon among the large majority of Trump supporters in her native Louisiana. Despite enormous and crushing problems caused by petroleum industry refineries—including pollution and local ecocide, skyrocketing rates of environmentally caused cancer, and degrading and paltry employment prospects at the facilities themselves—residents support petrochemical industries on their doorstep and are loath to criticise them. The seeming explanation, in Louisiana as in many regions of PNG, is, simply, that there appears, at least, to be no other option.

The question of what constitutes a viable development option would appear on the surface to be an economic or at least politico-economic one, including the larger desire to secure more money and commodities. But the cultural assumption thereby skirted is that these will ultimately provide a more satisfying and happier life. As Weber (1958) and others have long suggested, capitalism is itself undergirded by cultural

assumptions of value that are not given by economic rationality, but are themselves—when viewed in simple cost–benefit terms of work and reward—rather irrational. In the insular Pacific, mercurial and sometimes downright bizarre workings of Western capitalism are often dramatically on display—as Patterson and Macintyre effectively brought to light in their collection *Managing Modernity in the Western Pacific* (2011).

An important factor that informs these developments—from the capitalist sublime to the capitalist ridiculous—is the cultural idea that people deserve and are entitled to betterment by way of a new and better future (Koselleck 1985). This modern orientation, which has had strong impact in so-called marginal world areas such as Melanesia as well as in most other parts of the world, is thrown into relief by the region’s diversity. A century or two ago, most New Guineans had no expectation of future betterment over time, no notion that time should unfold as an arrow of continuing progress into an unknown but hopeful future. Now, however, the cultural mandate for betterment and progress makes even the most dismal and difficult legacies of mining and its extractive cousins not just acceptable but practically necessary wherever it is financially and logistically feasible. There is a palpable sense that a lottery ticket for windfall betterment is worth almost any current risk or price. In the process, hundreds of New Guinea cultures have now become hundreds of inflections of localised and localising modernities of frustrated desire and entitlement, *not* giving *up* on so-called ‘traditional’ aspirations, but employing and inflecting local culture in and through the lens of needing and wanting progress, a better future and a more commodified way of life. Local versions of becoming or aspiring to become modern are if anything shot through, pervaded, with a depth and richness of local social and cultural resources bequeathed by long-standing practices, traditions and beliefs (see Knauft 2002a; cf. Knauft 2019a).

## **Porgera: The Golden Rainbow Goes Over the Hill — and Down the Other Side**

An important pair of books throw the dynamics of cultural reaction and response to mining in PNG into special perspective: Golub’s *Leviathans at the Gold Mine* (2014) and Jacka’s *Alchemy in the Rainforest* (2015). Both pertain to the mega-mining development at Porgera in the Enga Province of the PNG highlands. But the books are as different, and as wonderfully complementary, as one could imagine. Golub, who is something of



a Sahlinsian post-structuralist, lived and worked among core royalty-receiving landowners in a relocated clan settlement near the epicentre of the mine—located on ‘a bulging pocket of land bounded by the waste dump [of the mine] on two sides and the open pit of the mine on a third side’ (2014: 136). His study focuses on the dynamics whereby Ipili core landowners, on the one hand, and ‘the mine’, on the other, became reified and powerful Leviathan-like entities of legal, political and economic power, prominence and contestation. He also notes in an afterword how brutally conditions had further declined after he left in 2001 and returned six years later—drunkenness, crime, enormous illegal in-migration, violence and spiralling claims of victimisation, shooting and bad faith on opposed sides. Indeed, conditions became so problematic that Golub himself could no longer straddle the reified division between the Ipili and the mine that he so effectively describes (*ibid.*: 210). Golub started his work hoping Ipili would be a success story showing how assertive indigenous people and a major mining company could negotiate arrangements to their mutual benefit (*ibid.*: 212). He ends up believing that the valley would have been better off if the mine had never been built, concluding that: ‘The Porgera experiment is over, and the Ipili are the losers’ (*ibid.*: 213).

Jacka’s book, as he notes (2015: 10), contrasts with Golub’s in being a detailed study of Ipili who are *not* primary landowners of the mine site—but who were promised various forms of development programs. They have been wildly excited about these as part of the penumbral mine benefits promised by the company and the government. Bringing to bear interest and expertise in ecology, forestry and subsistence livelihood in addition to social and cultural change, Jacka documents how for most Ipili, the elite landowners and their wealth are a source of great desire and envy and also of resentment by others. Gravitating to the high-altitude road that leads directly to Porgera, many Ipili, and especially young men, have compromised their subsistence—along with their more fragile, higher-elevation environment—by adopting a ‘highway life’ of ‘doing nothing’ and ‘wandering’ (*raun raun*) in aimless search of wealth and excitement (*ibid.*: 203ff.). Resentment festers between them and the lower-dwelling Ipili, who consider life along the highway degraded, immoral (including rampant prostitution) and without proper social relations of exchange and reciprocity. In the mix, non-compensated Ipili have become bitterly embroiled in armed disputes among themselves over the lack of resources and failure of development projects; their disputes have become locked in a vicious circle as both cause and effect of failed development.

Project infrastructure has been completely destroyed by local fighting, along with wholesale burning and looting of houses, stores and practically all other structures. Killings, revenge killings and warfare with high-powered rifles escalated to the point that homicide compensation for the many persons slain rose to astronomical levels—forestalling restitution and preventing reconciliation (see Jacka 2019).

These problems are thrown into stark relief insofar as they persist in the shadow of others' excessive and profligate wealth. While most Ipili remain subsistence farmers, new 'super big men' may drive very expensive cars and have as many as 25 or 30 wives or kept women sequestered in dormitory-like compounds (Jacka 2015: 210). As is extremely common in major cases of mining compensation payments, core landowners tightly restrict and narrow their traditional social networks in order to retain their wealth. This pattern is particularly striking among Ipili, whose pre-mining system of kinship, exchange and reciprocity was especially extensive and flexible (Golub 2014: 113–33; Jacka 2015: Pt II). Against this, enormous immigration by those from other areas, attracted by Porgera's wealth, has allowed a range of them to become insinuated by marriage, co-residence or gifts into the compensation payout system—a system from which most Ipili, who are not landowners at the mine site itself, are otherwise excluded. As such, mining-induced disputes, cleavages and factionalisation within Ipili society as described by Jacka articulate with and echo the escalating elite polarisation between legally reified Leviathans as described by Golub—between the mining corporation and the select and enormously wealthy few Ipili landowners of the mine land itself.

This cycle of contestation, factionalisation and polarisation is not limited to one subgroup or dimension of the sprawling social and economic inequalities fomented by the Porgera mine; rather, it ramifies extensively. For instance, the Huli people, some 200 kilometres from the mine site and in a wholly different province, have significant relations of clientage and wife-giving to wealthy Porgeran men. Wardlow (2019) describes how a range of Huli women have been sold off for elevated bride price to Porgera men, only to find that their lives were not luxurious and free of work but degraded as servants and sex objects—reduced in effect to sexual and domestic slavery. Some of them even considered it a positive relief to have contracted HIV from their husbands and hence be able to leave Porgera and return to their Huli homeland—as titled in Wardlow's (2019) article, 'With AIDS I am Happier than I Have Ever Been Before'.

In essence, Golub's *Leviathans at the Gold Mine* focuses on the extravagant, divisive and ultimately debilitating and degrading impacts of mining compensation among those few who qualify as local landowners at the mine site itself. Jacka's *Alchemy in the Rainforest*, by contrast, focuses on the effect of resentment, jealousy and aspiration that leads to internalised conflict, devastating warfare and destruction among those who are *not* direct mine site landowners but who live in the general area. Finally are accounts by Wardlow describing the *indirect* impact of the Porgera mine among the Huli, across a provincial boundary.

The larger point is that a cultural economy of inequity spirals desire, envy, aspiration and resentment. The experience of inequity does not stop at the border of the mine itself, nor even at the border of the larger ethnic group within which it is situated. Rather, the wealth associated with the mine becomes alternately a magnet of attraction from elsewhere and a lightning rod for dispute. Attraction from afar is driven by modern aspiration—a desire to be better off along a newly demonstrable yardstick of unimaginable wealth. Against this, internal disputes are driven by the spectre or the reality of wealth and possessiveness that lie newly outside the bounds of long-standing norms, values and expectations of exchange, sociality and reciprocity (cf. Strathern 1988; see Gregory 2015). The abrogation of meaningful reciprocity is often at the cultural heart of Melanesian tensions that intersect with and inflame desires and resentments of being or becoming modern. This is a widespread pattern. Among the Yonggom people subjected to ecocide of their environment from the tailings of the Ok Tedi mine, development is perceived simply and revealingly described as 'failed exchange' (Kirsch 2006: 95).

## **The Strickland-Bosavi area: 'Of Course it Might', OR, Things in the Mirror May Be Closer Than They Appear**

What about groups yet further afar, beyond even the penumbra of economic and demographic connections with the mine site itself? Here issues of anticipation, expectation and projection come strongly into play, including in very remote areas that are hardly on the map of anyone's scheme of development or modernity—except in the perception of local people themselves. This perspective foregrounds the impact of mining and oil/gas developments not by their presence but their crushing absence.

In their innovative article, 'Waiting for Company', Dwyer and Minnegal (1998) describe the poignancy of the remote and distant Kubo people, who reside in PNG's Western Province in the northwesternmost section of the Strickland-Bosavi area. As described by Dwyer and Minnegal (1998) Kubo wait patiently, in principle endlessly, for outside agents, institutions and corporations to come and lift them up, empower them, give them development and fulfill their aspirations.

All outsiders have failed Kubo. At each small community the people's explicit complaints are the same. The missionaries have not come, nor have they sent pastors. The White missionaries based at larger communities are themselves departing. The government has not provided school or aid post or funds for the construction of an airstrip; nor does it offer more than an occasional 'make-work' programme. Mining companies are transient, employing people for a few months and then departing with no guarantee of return. The rumours concerning logging companies are just that; rumours that encourage an understanding that it is only people elsewhere who receive the benefits of modernity. And the anthropologists are too few in number. (Dwyer and Minnegal 1998: 32)

Decades later, Kubo are still waiting (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017). A local Esso seismic survey and alluvial gold search in 1985/86 raised Kubo expectations astronomically. But by 1987 Esso had left. For months, even years, their left-behind equipment and stores were painstakingly relocated and stored by Kubo. But Esso never returned. By 1995, Kubo were still 'waiting for company', complaining that outsiders had not come and accumulating a lengthening list of disappointments. They were ecstatic in early 1996 when Porgera reconnaissance helicopters landed, giving each village 200 kina to build a helipad. But then they departed, and after a few more furtive visits, never returned. By the 2000s, natural gas development was actively pursued among the Febi people just north of the Kubo. Five gas wellheads were drilled at the associated Juha gas site. Associated with this, a significant exploration base camp was established next to the Kubo's airstrip, at Suabi. Kubo began to associate more intensely with Febi in hopes of identifying with them for compensation. In 2014, the multi-billion-dollar PNG LNG project shipped its first natural gas from another pipeline, through 700 kilometres of rainforest from interior New Guinea all the way to the coast—but not from areas near to the Kubo.

People at Suabi had high hopes for future benefits from the PNG LNG Project in the form of royalty payments and business development grants. In their understanding, those benefits would

be provided, either directly or indirectly, by ‘Company’. And, for them, Company had a very material, and personalised, presence (compare Golub 2014); a presence that offered opportunities in the present for those who were able to discern and act on them. The camp at the Suabi airstrip was woven into everyday life. (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 14)

The LNG base camp at Suabi was active for a range of seismic exploratory projects from late 2012 to early 2014. Kubo drew up elaborate lists and complex calculations concerning who among them would get compensated and by how much (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 144ff.). But at the same time that the Hides gas pipeline started piping its mega-exports, Esso decided to close and dismantle its small exploratory base camp in Kubo territory. Further, the Juha wellheads in Febi territory just north of the Kubo remained offline and unconnected to the extensive gas pipeline further east; they remain on hold and not scheduled to produce until the mid-2020s—or perhaps indefinitely if the global price of liquid natural gas does not increase. To local people, this further and potentially indefinite delay is extremely frustrating; their hopes are dashed yet again (ibid.: 78). Adding to the confusion was a social mapping survey that documented residence rights for land compensation associated with yet another projected pipeline that would connect with a major gas wellhead yet further northwest, at P’nyang. But the projected pipeline corridor land compensation area edged just outside of all Kubo territory—and the pipeline was never built in any event.

From the perspectives of Kubo and Febi people, through these three decades ... explorers ... found valuable resources and held them for the future. There was, it seemed, much secrecy. Eventually, however, those resources would be taken from the ground and royalties paid to land owners. In the meantime it was necessary to host the company representatives and, as possible, accept employment at base camp or in the field as labourers, assistant loadmasters, security officers, laundry workers, assistant cooks and so forth. Only one Kubo man had permanent employment associated with exploration activities, as a fully trained loadmaster with Pacific Helicopters. Kubo people, in particular, felt disenfranchised. (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 80)

In December 2013, Kubo finally did receive some money—a government infrastructure grant of K81,500 to support maintenance work on the airstrip and to fund the building of a new community health centre (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 167). But a significant portion of the money

‘disappeared’, and a divisive court case ensued. In 2014, representatives of Talisman—the company that had taken over the exploration camp at Suabi, provided what they considered to be a ‘final payment’ to local people—in the very modest amount of K6,400. The distribution of this money among Kubo was fraught and contentious. The exploration camp was dismantled and shut down, with remaining material goods given out until nothing was left.

To people at Suabi ... the present is deeply imbued with desires that are oriented towards a future, a future in which ‘development’ comes, in which they are no longer ‘remote’ and forgotten, and in which wealth that is perceived as ‘rightfully’ theirs is given material expression either in the form of extractable resources—gas, oil, minerals, timber—on their own lands or rights to the benefits expected from such resources on the lands of their immediate neighbours. (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017: 205)

Over decades, Kubo are still waiting for their company. And through waiting, their social relations, their sense of money and individuality in lieu of community integrity have fundamentally changed.

## Further Down the Line ...

Gebusi and their direct neighbours are yet lower in elevation and of less interest geologically than even the Kubo or the Febi. But this has not lowered the significance of the presence of the absence of development; rather, it has underscored it. Focusing on issues of development and resource extraction, there might seem little to say about Gebusi (cf. Knauf 1985, 2002b). And yet Gebusi are highly interested in and desirous of the kind of development they associate with Ok Tedi to the northwest, Juha to the north, Hides gas to the east and Porgera to the northeast. None of these project sides can be viably accessed by Gebusi, as this would require weeks of trekking, dangerous crossings of major rivers and traversing the country of multiple foreign or enemy groups. There are no roads within their own Nomad Sub-District (see Figure 6.1). But one edge of their territory is within the 5-kilometre border of the projected route of the P’nyang gas pipeline after it is tunnelled beneath the Strickland River—though it remains highly doubtful if this will ever happen in fact.



**Figure 6.1 Untrammelled Gebusi rainforest, with Mt Sisa (left) and Mt Bosavi (far right) in the distance.**

Source: Photo by Bruce Knauft.

In 2013, I charted the borders of Gebusi tribal territory by GPS and wrote and publicly posted a report about customary Gebusi land tenure practices (Knauft 2013). This was done to help ensure that if the pipeline *was* ever built there would be independent documentation of—and hopefully at least some protection of—Gebusi land rights. But describing a gas pipeline in vernacular Gebusi is almost impossible. When I gave one high school leaver who didn't know me very well my business card, he saw I was from the Emory College of Arts and *Sciences*. Surmising I was a scientist, he proceeded to ask if I was taking up Gebusi minerals into my GPS so I could take them away and sell them.

When a social mapping helicopter did in fact circle the village to pay me a field visit, residents went wild. In a frenzy, several young men even grabbed axes and tried to hack down venerable coconut trees that ringed the village clearing so the chopper could land more easily. As the chopper fluttered away to land in a larger clearing by the mission station, everyone chased after it. Though my brief meeting with the social mapping representative was inconsequential (see Knauft 2016: 201–8), it was momentous for Gebusi. It put them on the map: of all the places the helicopter flew over,

the one spot it chose to land in their whole area was on their doorstep. This validated for them, in a way that I never could, the legitimacy of—and expectation of benefit from—the GPS mapping that I was doing.

As described elsewhere (Knauft 2019b), Gebusi have a virtually wage-less economy. Yet, in the absence of that, they have developed elaborate standards and records of daily work for a host of activities that in principle could, but almost never are in fact, paid for in money.

Likewise, Gebusi are highly attuned to the potential value of their land—if and when outsiders ever take an interest in it. When reports circulated of social disruption around the Hides gas project station at Moro, rumours circulated that the Nomad Station was being considered as the location of an alternative LNG field office site. The Nomad airstrip would be repaired and enlarged, cell phone towers would be built and made working, new government offices would be built, the school would be upgraded, and the Nomad market would flourish once again. This prospect generated wild and inflated enthusiasm in large part for the very reason that the Nomad Sub-District government offices were all closed, the airstrip is now closed, as well and the existing cell phone tower is non-functional, with no plans for its repair (see Figure 6.2).



**Figure 6.2 Abandoned government house at Nomad Station, 2013.**

Source: Photo by Bruce Knauft.



## Conflict and Violence Fuelled by Lack of Development

As among Kubo, Gebusi heightened their commitment to be ready for modern development whenever it might eventually come. They drew up elaborate lists of landowners and charted land boundaries, especially those at or close to the Nomad Station, where land was expected to be dear. Long-simmering disputes escalated between clan members who claimed ancestral rights to part of the land near the Nomad airstrip.

Across the Strickland River, at a place called Yebo (Yavo), stories surfaced in 2016 that the Talisman exploration company would be building a major wharf and staging port for its LNG exploration teams to the north. The few people in Gebusi territory who had ties to this area rushed across the river and tried to legitimise land claims to the locale in question. In the process, they spent large amounts of very scarce money in an attempt to get their claims legally processed in Kiunga for contestation in court. These attempts were predictably futile; they lost their money in legal fees, and the case was never brought to trial. Their attempt nonetheless caused enmity not only between the Gebusi residents and their Strickland kinsmen but between them and others in their home settlement at Gasumi Corners. Those long resident in the community claimed that the attempt by their co-residents to establish land rights on the other side of the Strickland River reflected and reinforced their non-local identity—and undercut their right to continue residing in Gasumi Corners itself. When the senior man of the group pursuing land rights in Yebo died, fears mounted that tensions between his clan and the rest of the settlement would erupt in sorcery accusations and split the community.

Even in the absence of any development at all, then, its possibility, its potential presence, is enough to fuel expectations, plans and intensifying disputes. As in the present case, all this can occur without a single kina being given or even asked for in compensation.

A yet more dramatic case is that of Powa, a senior Bedamini man in a remote mixed Bedamini-Gebusi village who was tied to a tree and executed as a sorcerer in May 2016 (see Knauff with Malbrancke 2022: Ch. 4). The rationale for Powa's execution, carried out collectively by Bedamini through a large network of persons, was that he had worked magic against his wife's son from her previous marriage in revenge for a presumed land dispute between them. It was reasoned that the son was a natal owner of local

land that might, at least in hypothetical principle, be subject to eventual compensation for LNG pipeline passage by ExxonMobil. Wanting to take over this young man's presumed land claim, it was retroactively believed that Powa, as the man's stepfather, had killed him to arrogate the land claim onto himself. As I discerned during an ethnographic visit to the distant village, there was no evidence that any compensation funds had been in any way promised or even hinted at by ExxonMobil, no evidence that the pipeline would ever be built, and not even evidence or history of an open or persisting dispute over the land issue beforehand between Powa and his stepson: it was largely if not completely projected post-factor. But in the context of a young man's sudden and unexpected death, and projected need and greed in the complete absence of resource extraction development and compensation, Powa was presumed to have killed his stepson by sorcery and was executed by his Bedamini relatives in return.

In their own way, Gebusi, just next door, are already in the cultural economy of large-scale resource extraction; it has already changed their calculus of action and expectation. They are influenced in concrete material terms as well. Gebusi have no cash crops or other resources that are valued by outsiders. The sole exception is marijuana, which is grown and traded surreptitiously. At great personal risk, this contraband can be carried across the territory of several different ethnic groups and sold in or near the PNG highlands. The other commodity, even more risky, is the rumoured existence of an overland human transport network that ferries disassembled high-powered rifles up the Strickland River from Australia across the Torres Strait and via the Strickland-Bosavi area to highland areas such as Porgera. In a world of no money, running drugs and guns to mining and gas areas that are flush with cash has become the only viable option for significant Gebusi 'development', as risky and deplorable as Gebusi find these activities to otherwise be.

In recent years, the Nomad airstrip has closed and virtually all government services have ceased; as Gebusi put it, 'The government has died' (*gamani golom-da*). Gebusi still have no roads to anywhere and virtually no wage economy. The average adult daily income of between USD0.10 and USD0.20 a day is between one-tenth and one-twentieth of the absolute world poverty level of USD2.00 per day (see Knauff 2019b).<sup>2</sup> Like Kubo, Gebusi have been tantalised for decades by the possibility but the continuing absence of any resource development or compensation (see Figure 6.3).

2 For a field video of underdevelopment among Gebusi, see: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqSf7XyJbHs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqSf7XyJbHs)

And yet, as a virtual replacement for this non-economy, Gebusi have developed robust and elaborate time sheets and record-keeping for a host of activities that could in principle be paid (Knauft 2019b).



**Figure 6.3 A Gebusi man wearing ragged clothes, 2017.**

Source: Photo by Bruce Knauft.

## Reactive Modernity

It is perhaps unsurprising that studies of large-scale resource extraction projects in world areas such as Melanesia focus on the land and the people most directly affected. This includes indigenous discontent, resistance or violence near and along the path of resource extraction. But this seems just the tip of the iceberg. Under conditions of locally modern aspiration, mining or LNG developments can be as or even more important by their local absence as by their presence.

Major resource sites of mega-money, machines and men are certainly a magnet of attention in countries like PNG; their travelling imaginary of good fortune and amazing wealth spreads far and wide (cf. Mageo and Knauft 2020). Among rural peoples such as the Gebusi and Kubo, however, actual information and accurate news pales beside the force of cultural and imaginative projection. This process is hardly new. In 1981, I trekked to a distant Gebusi village to attend the spirit séance of Wahiaw, a renowned shaman. Crippled for many years, Wahiaw could not walk and had to be carried from settlement to settlement; it is highly unlikely he ever saw the Nomad Station or its officers, as his remote settlement was days' walk from the post. Yet his spirit séances were flush with fantastic stories, allegories and dramas—often quite accurate in spirit—told by the spirit people (*to di os*) about a spirit-world incarnation of outside officials, work projects and fantastic wealth (see Knauft 1989). Bordering on cargoist in zeitgeist, Wahiaw's narratives were at the same time cautionary tales about the excesses, impersonality and lack of reciprocity in money-fuelled development.

Over the years, however, the kind of caution voiced by Wahiaw has largely fallen by the wayside. Not that Gebusi have much reliable information about developments outside their own narrow range of direct experience. But their aspirations can be fuelled all the more by lack of reliable information or reality checks. Even by 1998, Nomad schoolboys regularly envisaged themselves as successful workers at the distant Ok Tedi mine. As reflected in a drawing by Tony Semo, they envisaged a world of plenty in which the forest was also brimming with wildlife and a smiling sun (see Figure 6.4).





**Figure 6.4 Schoolboy drawing in 1998 by Tony Semo — of aspiring to be a successful heavy equipment operator at the Ok Tedi mine.**

Source: Photo by Bruce Knauft.

Here we confront modernity, the time–space projection of beneficial progress into an unknown but desired future (cf. Harvey 1989; see Knauft 2002a: Introduction). This is a future that is almost invariably projected as the alter or antithesis of traditional culture, which by contrast is easily seen as deficient or backward (for Gebusi, see Knauft 2002a: Ch. 3). In PNG, progress is iconically if not overwhelmingly associated with major mining and oil or gas projects; these are taken as the armature for social and economic ‘development’ across the country as a whole.

In this cultural context, the impact of major resource extraction projects does not decrease as a function of geographic distance. Rather, cultural exposure and relative deprivation create alternative or opposed logics whereby the impact of ‘development envy’ can be as great or even greater among those further away. Their motivation and projection can be all the stronger given their remoteness and difficulty of access. The illusion that the impact of major resource extraction projects is at the centre, radiating out, betrays a bias shared by energy companies and the PNG state—namely, that problems outside a very limited area of direct impact lie outside their responsibility or concern. Indeed, it was highly evident during work among Gebusi in 2016 and 2017 that the government has given up any attempt to develop infrastructure in the Nomad Sub-District, as the area is considered to have no exploitable resources.

Given this, and notwithstanding the calamity of Porgera, new projects such as the potential P’ynang LNG pipeline bring heightened attention and hope to Gebusi, Kubo and other peoples of PNG’s Western Province. Yet the triangular structure of relationship between landowners, multinational energy corporations and the government of PNG practically ensures these aspirations will result in divisive conflict and antagonism even in a best-case scenario.

Key here is the issue of land. In an attempt to shield energy companies from local discontent, it is now increasingly mandated by the PNG Government that issues of land ownership in areas of potential compensation be settled in court (see Church, this volume). In effect, landowners must negotiate via the highly problematic legal mechanism of the PNG state rather than having their claims made or adjudicated by the resource extraction company itself. Government officials increasingly insist that compensation packages cannot be implemented until it is definitively determined who has a clear and confirmed title to each portion of relevant land. This, in turn, cannot occur until all disputes concerning land ownership and boundaries have been settled by the disputants themselves in court. As such, the onus of legitimate

representation devolves from the grand collective indigenous Leviathan as depicted by Golub (2014) to the individual landowner, who must pay (and bribe) to receive a confirmed land title. This affords increasing leverage to those who already have money and to those who ally with wealthy, if often unscrupulous, outsiders. The circle is thus easily closed between wealth obtained by government corruption or graft and the ability to further increase wealth by buying into or paying off those in land compensation cases. In the process, local landowners lose their direct bargaining power and are forced to negotiate vis-à-vis a largely corrupt legal system and a highly aggressive rent-seeking state. The way that those with money can effectively buy into and exploit this process is prominently evident in the accounts of Jacka (2015) and especially Golub (2014) concerning the Porgera mine.

## Conclusion

Large-scale resource extraction projects in PNG have an enormous cultural as well as economic impact in the minds of people in remote rural areas as well as across the nation. Against the unearned largesse of major land compensation, almost any local development scheme can seem, by contrast, to be a two-bit ante, hardly worth the effort. Instead, the symbol and significance of the mega-development site becomes a great looming imaginary, potent and powerful by virtue of its very distance from rural realities. This exacerbates a deep sense of inequity and resentment both at the local level and across larger regional and national networks and constituencies. The enormous gap between expectation and actual result makes these tensions ripe for generating conflict.

In such contexts, social fragmentation and divisiveness through aspiration and competition can continue in a reinforcing cycle. The Ipili mine landowners at Porgera contest against the Porgera Joint Venture Company. The Ipili *non*-mine landowners contest against the Ipili elite. Within the Ipili non-elite, those living in villages contest against those living along the Porgera road. On a broader scale, the Huli curry favour with but resent the Ipili. The Kubo resent the Febi. And, if either of them were to get compensation, the Gebusi would resent them as well. Even among Gebusi, with no compensation or viable prospect thereof, resentments arise between those who *might* be able to claim compensation *if* development comes, and those who presumably or ostensibly cannot. As described further above, an elderly Bedamini man was crucified in 2016 based on the belief that he sent sickness that killed his stepson (see Figure 6.5).



**Figure 6.5 Enemies of the slain Bedamini sorcery suspect pose with their weapons as proud killers.**

Source: Photo: Bruce Knauff.

Most people in rural PNG fantasise and project, but more practically and immediately they yearn. They yearn for the amazing wealth they perceive in other areas beyond their own. This underscores rather than diminishes the monetary value they perceive in the one potentially valuable commodity that they have: their land. As such, conflicts easily arise over the hoped-for benefit that development could hypothetically bring even in areas such as Gebusi where there is no evidence of land shortage or overpopulation. Hence we find reinforcing cycles between the projection of fantastic windfall, disappointment, waiting and a reinforced sense of being left out. This feeling of being unfairly deprived is magnified against the imagined shining gem of almost unimaginable wealth projected over the hill or even in the hoped-for future of one's own village. Absence of resource development does not forestall or efface such effects but can easily magnify them. This is not the abjection of *develop-man* in Sahlins's (1992) sense of the term (cf. Robbins and Wardlow 2005). Rather, it is a local inflection or incarnation of being a suffering subject, of being left behind in the tidal development of modernity—and precluded from benefit by others who stand in one's rightful way (see Robbins 2013; cf. Knauff 2019c).



Against the elevated and impossible standard of gargantuan riches, everyone can feel disadvantaged and left out—relative to those known or believed to have received so much more. Development projects such as Porgera, Lihir and Ok Tedi are indeed a success in at least raw economic terms for those very few who receive a disproportionate share of wealth. For others, including those scores or even hundreds of miles away, mega-development projects are a shining symbol of one's own backwardness. In this sense, large-scale resource extraction projects in PNG and other parts of Melanesia are the pinnacle not only of fantasised projection but also of ultimate inequity bequeathed by modern development.

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