

A person is seen from the back, carrying a large, heavy bundle on their head. They are wearing a light-colored, patterned t-shirt and dark shorts. The person is standing in a lush, green, tropical environment with banana plants and other vegetation. The background is misty and hazy, suggesting a mountainous or forested area. The overall atmosphere is one of labor and nature.

Tuomas Tammisto

# HARD WORK

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Producing places,  
relations and value on  
a Papua New Guinea  
resource frontier

**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



**Tuomas Tammisto**

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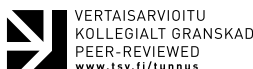
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## Abbreviations

DLPP	Department of Lands and Physical Planning
ENBPOL	East New Britain Palm Oil Ltd.
FCA	Forest Clearance Authority
ILG	Incorporated Land Group
ICAD	integrated conservation and development
LFA	Local Forest Area
LLG	Local Level Government
LMA	Logging and Marketing Agreement
LOC	landowner company
M	Mengen (language)
NGK	Deutsche Neuguinea-Kompagnie
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RH	Rimbunan Hijau
S	Sulka (language)
SABL	Special Agriculture and Business Lease
TP	Tok Pisin (language)
TRP	Timber Rights Purchase
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VOP	village oil palm
VSA	Volunteer Service Abroad
WMA	Wildlife Management Area



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1 Tuomas Tammisto, “Life in the Village Is Free: Socially Reproductive Work and Alienated Labour on an Oil Palm Plantation in Pomio, Papua New Guinea,” *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 43, no. 4 (2019): 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v43i4.79476>.

2 Tuomas Tammisto, “Making Temporal Environments: Work, Places and History in the Mengen Environment,” in *Dwelling in Political Landscapes: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Anu Lounela, Eeva Berglund, and Timo Kallinen (Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.21435/sfa.4>.

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- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Bishops and priests, you are<br/>in the company of the leaf of<br/><i>ganu</i><br/>You call him to you out of the<br/>group of people</p> | <p><i>Bisop me pater me mo tosin nga<br/>ganu(lo)loun</i></p> <p><i>Mo kiki pge ne mlou lon re</i></p>             |
| <p>C. The man of renown rises and<br/>walks the path<br/>He walks, he walks, to give<br/>himself to you</p>                                     | <p><i>Re deip e re e kolope e lala<br/>pamoure</i></p> <p><i>E lala, e lala techungmilgne pge<br/>mo</i></p>       |
| <p>2. Krirpak with her grandmother<br/>gather all sorts of taro<br/>And give the rakaimun to the<br/>different languages</p>                    | <p><i>Krirpak imo svugme gokpikse ma<br/>kukchung</i></p> <p><i>Totaipkam na re rakaimun<br/>mgueng mamtan</i></p> |

—Rospita Mrei, song recorded in Sampun village, 30 November 2011



A taro plant. (2019)



## Introduction

“Hard work” is often associated with drudgery and physically exhausting labor. The Mengen of Wide Bay on the east coast of the island of New Britain, Papua New Guinea (PNG), use the expression *klingnan ti main* (hard work) in reference to activities related to marrying people from other clans, care and nurture, ceremonial events, sharing, and working the land together. These activities produce people, places, and social relations, both among people and between people and the environment. Through hard work, be it taking care of children, giving food to visitors, burying one’s kin, or tending of food plants, the Mengen reproduce themselves, their lived environment, and their society. Abandoned villages, old burial sites, planted trees, and fallowing gardens are tangible results of the hard work done by past and present people making the landscape a materialization of living history for the Mengen. Similarly, initiated children or marrying adults are results of hard work: the care and nurture their kin have given them. The Mengen find all of this valuable. Hard work, then, produces value; similarly, all activities that produce valued people, places and relations are hard work.

While agreeing that hard work produces value, the Mengen are by no means unified over exactly how value is produced and what amounts to hard work. Mengen men engaged in logging sometimes seek to promote the establishment of local landowner companies as hard work that creates links between clans and productive relations with outsiders, whereas those opposed to it fear that logging destroys valued places in the landscape. Plantation workers often share their wages with kin or give them as contributions

to ceremonial gifts, thereby converting monetary value into hard work. Others move to plantations to pursue commodified relations, to earn meager wages in order to buy basic necessities, or to escape communal obligations of village life. Indeed, for many Mengen, moving between different places, such as the village and the plantation, is also conscious moving between different political orders and value regimes. Attempts to conserve the forests by some Mengen clans create tensions, as others—those using the land—see the “closing” of the forests as negation of their relations with the land and the dismissal of their hard work.

Other actors, such as colonial rulers or logging and plantation companies, have sought to revalue Mengen lives and environments, for example as cheap labor and resources. Resource extraction and state formation have often taken place under frontier conditions in Wide Bay and New Britain. Frontiers are areas which some actors, such as companies, portray as having abundant and “unused” resources—often ignoring local uses. Under frontier conditions, the actors compete not only over the control of these resources but also over how local environments and lives are governed and valued (McCarthy 2013, 184). The frontier is thus a condition, under which it is not clear who is in control and whose values prevail.

This book is a study of human–environmental relations, value production, natural resource extraction, and state formation. I examine these themes by looking at how the Mengen relate to each other, their environment, and outside actors through local agriculture, logging, plantation labor, and environmental conservation. These practices have produced, reproduced, and at times significantly changed the lived environment of the Mengen. These are also sites of fierce struggle, not only over who gets to control value but also over who gets to define what in fact is valued and how (Graeber 2001, 88). In these struggles, the actors themselves, from Mengen kin groups to companies and the state, are reproduced, redefined, and formed. In the analysis, I combine a materialist political ecology perspective on environmental questions with a meaning-focused analysis of value production. My

aim is to provide a holistic theoretical framework for the analysis and comparison of both large-scale processes of extraction and intimate forms of human–environmental relations and different value regimes acted in and through these.

### Making Relations and Places

The Mengen of Wide Bay speak the north coast dialect of Mengen and live on the southern side of the bay around Cape Orford.<sup>3</sup> The eight village communities they inhabit are on the coastal plain that stretches a few kilometers inland. The coastal plain is hilly and covered with gardens, secondary forests, and fallows, as well as cash crops such as coconut and cocoa orchards. Farther inland, the Mengen territory becomes rugged terrain covered by primary forest. While the 3000 or so Wide Bay Mengen live on or near the coast, people venture into the inland forests to gather materials, hunt, or visit old settlements.

Mengen society as a whole is divided into two moieties, called “vines” (M: *val*), and into a number of named matrilineal kin groups, called “types of vine” (M: *valmtan*) or nowadays “clans” (TP: *klen*). Both the moieties and clans are exogamous, meaning that marriages within one’s own clan or a clan of one’s own moiety are prohibited. Each clan traces its origin to a founding ancestress, who is said to have independently emerged from the land. Some clans have named “small roots” (M: *sinpun*), or subgroupings

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3 The Mengen language is divided into two main dialects—or distinct languages according to some linguists—namely Poeng, or South Coast Mengen, and Maeng, North Coast or Cape Orford Mengen (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015). The Mengen of Wide Bay speak a dialect of North Coast Mengen that differs from other North Coast Mengen dialects spoken a bit further south. Poeng is spoken in the heartland of the Mengen around Jacquinot and Waterfall Bay. In this book I refer to the dialect spoken by the Wide Bay Mengen as “Mengen” unless otherwise stated, and I identify terms in North Coast Mengen with “M:” before the term. I mark text in Tok Pisin, the lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, with “TP:” and words in the language of the Sulka, close neighbors of the Wide Bay Mengen, with an “S:”.

(TP: *sabklen*), which trace their origin to a split from a mother group. These named matriline are also the basic landholding units, as the clans claim territories based on the first emergence of the ancestress, first settlement, and other reasons discussed in the coming chapters. As the clans are exogamous, members of each clan live dispersed. By the same token, all Mengen communal groups from families to villages are by necessity composed of people from several clans. In short, this means that many members of a given clan do not live on their clan land, and that the land area of a given clan is likely to be used and inhabited by people from other clans.

The relation between the landowning clan and the land-using multi-clan group has its spatial equivalent. Each clan has a place of origin from which the apical ancestress had emerged alone—called *plangpun* in North Coast Mengen (*plang*: to emerge, to go first; *pun*: root, cause)—which roots the clan to its land. Communal life, based on productive relations between the clans, also produces places, burial grounds, villages, gardens, and orchards through which the people actually living on the land become rooted in it (also Scott 2007, 201–202, 213). For the Mengen, these places in the landscape are important historical markers and concrete signs of different kinds of productive relations, as well as personal and communal histories (M. Panoff 1969c, 163; also Kirsch 2006, 11, 189). The Mengen landscape, therefore, constitutes the origin of humans as well as being the outcome of human activities. As a result of the practice of swidden horticulture, the Mengen landscape is an ever-changing, but not random, patchwork of gardens, fallows, and forests of various ages that index different kinds of temporalities and relations (Ingold 2000, 193, 198; Stasch 2003; Padwe 2020, 11–12, 117; Demian 2021a, 119, 134–135).

During field research, when I was walking with people in the forest, they would point out the sites of old villages they recognized by the domestic trees planted by past inhabitants, or sites where somebody had recently gathered leaves for roofing and so on. Similarly, as villagers walked along the paths to their daily activities, they often made small cuts on the trees with their bush



knives. I was told that the habit had no special significance, and that people did it “just because,” but, if nothing else, it helped me to recognize the paths in use. Because of the importance for the Wide Bay Mengen of “work,” or socially productive activities, people pay considerable attention to the signs of it in the landscape. In the discussion of swidden horticulture in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) I show how Mengen kinship, based on notions of care and nurture, or “work,” is enacted through everyday practices such as sharing food, food plants, and gardens. In the process, plants and gardens become material indexes of the interrelations between people and clans (see Stasch 2003, 2009).

The importance of places is not just a facet of everyday life; they are also significant for clan histories, which recount the emergence of the clan ancestress and then describe how she married a man from a different clan, who their children were, which places they inhabited, and the villages they established. These *topogenies*, or ordered recitations of place names such as those of past settlements, are a common feature of understanding history in Austronesian societies (Fox 1997a, 8, 12–13). As James Fox (1996, 10–11) notes, places—as embodiments of history—are also media through which the past is present and can be scrutinized. Places, as outcomes and signs of human activities, are central to Wide Bay Mengen conceptions of history and landholding, and thus have political significance. For example, claiming old villages as those of one’s own ancestors or making one’s presence visible in the landscape by planting trees were often ways to make claims on decision-making power over the land. As I will discuss in more depth in [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#), and [Chapter 7](#), places as signs of rooting to the land are consequently often sites of contest for the Wide Bay Mengen. Indeed, as Jerry Jacka (2015, 28) notes, in PNG struggles over resources are often struggles over relations because, unlike many other rainforest people, Papua New Guineans in general own their land under the national law (also Strong 2020 [2006], 125–126; Halvaksz 2020, 51).

As the literature on production shows, all productive activities are emplaced inasmuch as they happen in particular places

and produce those same places (Munn 1992, 11; Moore 2015, 11). This means that human activities are never outside the environment, but rather happen *in* and *through* it; a dialectical view of historical change understood as humans making environments and environments making humans (Moore 2015, 13, 28–29, 36). As human activity produces places and unfolds in them, places are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local, and multiple constructions, as Margaret Rodman (1992, 641) notes. The “multiplicity” means that a place holds different meanings and is often experienced differently by different people (Rodman 1992, 641–642, 647, 652; also Jacka 2015, 37; Teaiwa 2015, 11). Space and time also come concretely together in places, and hence are often historical markers (e.g., Basso 1996; Rumsey 2001a; Kirsch 2006, 11, 189; Halvaksz 2020, 6, 11, 14)—not only “locally” constructed but, as Jerry Jacka (2015, 37) points out, a result of multiscale interactions. Or, as Katerina Teaiwa (2015, 9, 11) aptly puts it, places constituted by multiple actors, on multiple scales, and through flows of resources are places in motion. Due to this, “place” is a central term in contemporary political ecology; a place is not a “local” opposite of “global,” but the grounded site in which global–local interactions and articulations literally take place (Biersack 2006, 16–17).

The study of space and place is an established research theme that informs various theoretical directions, from political ecology (e.g., Biersack 2006; West 2006; Jacka 2015) to more phenomenological analyses of being in the world (Weiner 1991; Ingold 2000). Due to the ethnographic significance of rootedness and emplacement, space and place feature in important ways in studies of Oceanic societies (e.g., Fox 1997b; Kirsch 2001, 2006; Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Harrison 2004; Scott 2007; Hau’ofa 2008; Bell 2015; Teaiwa 2015; Kai’ili 2017; Halvaksz 2020; Chao 2022). In addition to these, Rupert Stasch’s (2003, 2009, 2013) semiotic approach to the study of places is instructive in showing how places both signify and mediate social relations. In his work on the Korowai speakers of West Papua, Indonesia, Stasch (2003, 362; 2009, 14) focuses on the concrete media of values and social relations,

specifically the material things and practices through which the Korowai relate to each other and communicate these relations (see also Munn 1992, 7, 16).

As noted, the Mengen too place great importance on the signs of people's work in the environment. Places like abandoned villages are both signs of past relations as well as points through which people relate to the past. The Mengen settlements, gardens, and food plants index a variety of social relations and temporalities. For example, individual gardens become visual indexes of the multi-clan, land-using groups. And like the Korowai longhouses (Stasch 2003, 364), they are not only signs of kinship relations, the sharing of gardens and plants in many ways constitutes them. By emphasizing that gardens and plants are signs for the Mengen, however, I am not claiming they are inert media. On the contrary, they are living entities with which people are in mutual relations. In [Chapter 2](#) I discuss how the productive activities of the Mengen create a deeply temporal landscape in which people's histories as well as ecological temporalities converge (see Stasch 2003, 363, 369–370; Hau'ofa 2008, 63, 69; Padwe 2020, 37, 132). Like individual plants or gardens, the Mengen landscape and its places are obviously not inert either, but composed of a variety of organisms—some which the Mengen refers as *sai*, nonhuman entities we might refer to as “spirits.”

As places are produced not only locally but also in interactions of different actors operating on different scales, or with different spatial reach, certain spatial formations hold historical power “because of the multiple relational connections they mediate” (Stasch 2013, 555). This means that certain places embody multiple historical processes and socio-cultural orders that have formed those places (Stasch 2013, 566, 560; Demian 2021a, 126). As I examine in greater detail in the following chapters, the activities of colonial administrations, the state of PNG, and various companies have changed the Mengen environment, and made places that signify for the Mengen their relations with these actors and processes. In [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#) I discuss how wage labor, the commodity economy, and state formation become tangible

on a newly established oil palm plantation, which was a part of a combined logging and agriculture project established to connect Pomio District, East New Britain Province, to the provincial road network. The Mengen, both plantation workers and others, often contrasted the plantation with the surrounding villages in their talk, thereby commenting on and comparing the different social orders and relations that characterized the places. Much like the Korowai (Stasch 2013, 566), the Wide Bay Mengen moved between the plantation and the villages in order to pursue different values and live out or shun the different kinds of relations associated with them.

### **The Creation of Value and Struggles over it on the Frontier**

Production, in the sense discussed above, produces not only material goods and social and environmental relations, but also meaning and values (Marx [1884] 1978, 118; Munn 1992, 6–7; Fajans 1997, 11). Indeed, this notion of production lies at the root of Marxian value theory, which, according to Terence Turner (2008, 43), is based specifically on an analysis of capitalist society, on the one hand, and on more general anthropological concepts, such as production, praxis, social consciousness, and exploitation, on the other—making it thus more generally applicable. In its broadest sense, value in Marxian theory is seen as the importance of people’s activities (Graeber 2001, 55). Depending on the social context and system of social production, it is constituted and represented in different ways. Value, as a constituent of systems of social production, consists of forms of representation by which value is defined, circulated, exchanged, and appropriated (Marx [1867] 1976, 142, 149, 225, 932; Turner 2008, 47, 53; Eräsaari 2023, 8–9, 23). Because of this, the role of semiotic representation in mediating and shaping material activity is central in this line of theory (Munn 1992, 7, 16–17; Turner 2008, 43; Eräsaari 2023, 26).

Semiotic media vary from case to case, but they need to be understood in relation to the respective systems of production

(Turner 2008, 47–48). In a capitalist society, for example, value is constituted by “socially necessary labor time,” the average amount of labor needed to produce commodities, and money is the semi-otic medium through which (exchange) value is represented, appropriated, accumulated, and compared (Marx [1867] 1976, 129, 199–200; Turner 2008, 45; Eräsaari 2023, 8–9, 20). In other systems, or value regimes, value is produced and represented differently (Marx [1884] 1978, 120; Munn 1992, 11, 16–17; Anderson 2008, 6, 75–77, 108).<sup>4</sup> For the Wide Bay Mengen, creating and recreating social relations, especially within and between clans, is a key source of value. Value is objectified in and represented by media such as food plants, places that result from people’s activity, pigs raised by people, and songs of lament. It is also objectified in shell valuables, which are passed on within lineages, thus reproducing relations within them, and given as gifts to other lineages, thus creating or reaffirming inter-clan relations, in various ceremonial exchanges. The most valued objects are grooved shell rings, called *paik* in Mengen, literally meaning “value.” In addition to being a noun, the term is also a verb, as in “*Ya paik ngoen*” (I value you).

Mengen call all socially productive activity “work,” and work is thus a key source of value. Acts of care and nurture, of giving food or ceremonial gifts form the basic “template” for the production of value for Mengen (see Munn 1992, 18, 121, 147; Fajans 1997, 11, 268). Society in this tradition is, on the one hand, the result of people’s productive activities; consequently, the most basic forms of inequality and exploitation are rooted in the relations that

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4 I am thinking about two excellent examples of how value is represented, materialized, circulated, and compared in different value regimes. One is Warwick Anderson’s (2008, 6, 75–77, 101, 108) account of medical research on the kuru disease in New Guinea, and how specimens became circulating objectifications of scientific values of knowledge, health, and academic prestige. The other is Matti Eräsaari’s (2023, 5, 18, 25–26) study of how time, ostensibly the same “thing” can be used to measure and compare very different values in and between different value regimes.

reproduce society (Graeber 2001, 24). On the other hand, society is not only the product of actions, but the context or framework which make the actions meaningful, and the “arena” in which values—represented in different ways—are realized (Graeber 2001, 69, 71; also Marx [1867] 1976, 177). Basing his discussion on the work of Fajans, Munn, and Turner, David Graeber (2001, 75, 83) notes that society is the process in which activity as pursuit of value is coordinated (also Munn 1992, 12, 20). In this tradition, value is also fundamentally a political question (Graeber 2001, 88). Politics is about the struggle to appropriate value and, more importantly, as Graeber (2001, 88) notes, “the struggle to establish what value *is*” (original emphasis).

Mengen sociality displays a tension between two complementary features or values, which I refer to as a *productive contradiction*, namely the relation between the autonomy of the matrilineal clan and the interrelations between clans that form communities from families to entire villages (see also Scott 2007, 33). I treat these two features as two fundamental values that are in a complementary tension with each other (Robbins 2004, 192–193, 195–196). By doing so I link the discussion of Mengen clan relations to the system of social production, questions of how these values are mediated (e.g., Marx [1884] 1978, 152–153; Stasch 2009, 2013), and ultimately to politics—understood as the pursuit of as well as the competition to appropriate and define values. These two values presuppose each other in the sense that clan divisions are needed so that interrelations between clans are possible, and interrelations between the clans are needed to reproduce each individual clan. On the other hand, the pursuit of one is necessarily at the cost of the second. This is one feature of the “productive contradiction”: in order to ensure the continuation of the clan and its link to the land, one has to do “the opposite”—that is, marry and bring other people to the clan’s land (also Jorgensen 1981, 52, 204; Wagner 1981, 118; Munn 1992, 9–10; Robbins 2004, 183, 184–186). To paraphrase Joel Robbins (2004, 195), the two values are in a dialectical relation and when they mutually condition each other, the dialectic is *socially productive*.

Such productive contradictions can, however, result in unfavorable consequences. For example, among the Arosi of Solomon Islands, whose landholding is also vested in matrilineal, a lineage that places too much emphasis on its ownership of a land area risks dispersing the community by making members of other lineages feel unwelcome on the land, as Michael Scott (2007, 245–246) notes. Similarly, Nancy Munn (1992, 3, 11–12, 20) observes how on the island of Gawa, PNG, value is created in relation to the perception of how it *cannot* be achieved. Certain acts, like not giving food to visitors, thus hold “negative value potentials,” inasmuch as they may prevent the creation of value (Munn 1992, 12). In a similar vein, Marx ([1857–58] 1973, 545–546) examines “barriers” to value production and realization. Building on these notions, I use the concept of productive contradiction to illustrate that acts, which for the Mengen hold the potential for achieving one value, hold also negative value potential in relation to the other. For example, excluding people from other clans from income received from logging because they are not landowners, holds the potential of damaging inter-clan relations. Producing and reproducing valued relations both within and between the clans is classed as “work” and, consequently producing either kind of value is “work.” As I show in the chapters to come, issues among the Wide Bay Mengen concerning land are often about accommodating these two values.

Logging, like other forms of natural resource extraction, draws attention to value and different value regimes, because natural resources do not simply exist: rather, they are a result of *valuation*. Like commodities, natural resources are not *resources* simply because of their material properties or use values, but because they are defined and treated as resources in particular kinds of social relations (Marx [1867] 1976, 153–154; [1884] 1978, 121, 240, 303; Bridge 2011, 820; McCarthy 2013, 184; Golub 2014, 18; Teaiwa 2015, 9, 18). Or as Jason Moore (2015, 145) puts it: coal is coal, but it is fossil fuel and a resource only under very specific historical and social conditions. Similarly, people’s capacity to work is not automatically “labor” that can be bought and sold:

the conditions for it have to be created (Marx [1884] 1978, 121; Gregory 1982, 118).

Over the course of this book, I will examine how, by whom, and with what result have the lived environments of Wide Bay, and the lives of people living there, been revalued as resources and commodities. In the chapters on logging ([Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#)), plantation labor ([Chapter 5](#), [Chapter 6](#)), and environmental conservation ([Chapter 7](#), [Chapter 8](#)) I examine not only the process of commodification but also how the Wide Bay Mengen have—in very different ways—sought to pursue social values in the context of resource extraction and wage labor, convert exchange values into social ones, and accommodate different value regimes in their lives.

The revaluation of lives and environments in Pomio District as resources has happened often under frontier conditions. Most broadly, a frontier is a zone between two different kinds of political entities (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 10). In contemporary research, frontiers are understood as either areas not fully under state control (Kituai 1998, 15, 17, 157; Geiger 2008, 88; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 10) or as resource frontiers, namely areas that are imagined to have abundant resources waiting to be extracted and where state regulation and presence are—intentionally or not—weak (Tsing 2005, 28–29; Geiger 2008, 88, 109; Peluso and Lund 2011, 688, 671; McCarthy 2013, 183–184; Davidov 2014, 41; Bell 2015, 131). In the case of PNG, Regis Stella (2007, 49, 52, 205) shows how colonial actors described the island of New Guinea as “wild” and “empty,” thus glossing over local presence and use. This *imagination* and depiction of an area by some actors as a site of expansion is typical to state and resource frontiers (Tsing 2005, 27, 30; Banivanua Mar 2007, 20, 24, 26; Eilenberg 2014, 160; Li 2014, 13–15; McDonnell 2023, 104–108, 113). On resource frontiers, tenure rights are typically uncertain and different actors compete not only over the control over resources but also over what counts as a resource in the first place, and how local environments, forms of tenure, and practices are valued (Geiger 2008, 88, 97; Hall 2011, 839; Peluso and Lund 2011, 668; McCarthy 2013, 183–184).



The revaluation of people's lives and environments as commodities and resources has also involved active *devaluation* (Federici [2004] 2021, 109, 113–114; Hermkens and Lepani 2017, 18). For example, in the chapters of plantation labor ([Chapter 5](#), [Chapter 6](#)) I examine how the planters and colonial officials first revalued people's capacity to work as *labor*, and then devalued it as *cheap* labor through various measures, such as bad working conditions and by relying on local economies to reproduce labor. Similarly, to paraphrase Jason Moore (2015, 53, 62), local environments on the frontier are not only revalued as resources, but as *cheap* resources.

The frontier is not only an area, but a spatialized and temporal process or dynamic (Banivanua Mar 2007, 44–45, 72, 82; Geiger 2008, 93; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 12; Tammisto 2020, 30–31, 2021; Lounela 2021; Lounela and Tammisto 2021). Or more simply, the frontier exists in an area for a time period during which the abovementioned frontier conditions exist. When, say, state control over the area becomes consolidated (e.g., Banivanua Mar 2007, 94) or the resources there are exhausted, the frontier “closes” and other dynamics set in. Tracey Banivanua Mar, for example, examines both how European colonizers actively created frontier conditions in order to extract labor and occupy land on Melanesian islands in the late 19th century (2007, 20, 26; 2009, 24, 28, 37) and what “kind of world people built in the aftermath of the frontier” (2007, 44). Frontiers can, however, “shift” or “reopen,” even cyclically (Banivanua Mar 2007, 69; Weizman 2007, 109; Geiger 2008, 93; Li 2014, 6). For example, during the colonial period, plantations in New Guinea depended on the “labor frontier”—that is, the availability of cheap labor in a given area (Gregory 1982, 119). When people refused to sign up for work or there were no more workers to be recruited, the frontier “shifted” to new areas, until the last frontier in the Highlands “closed” in the 1960s and plantation capital went into crisis (Gregory 1982, 123, 131, 135; Moore 1990, 35, 37). In [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 7](#) I discuss how logging, oil palm plantations, and conservation took place in Wide Bay under shifting frontier conditions,

and how the inhabitants of Pomio have adapted to and actively contested these dynamics.

### Making Actors on the Frontier

As noted, on the frontier, and as long as frontier dynamics prevail, different actors compete not only over control of resources but also over what constitutes a resource and how local practices and environments are valued (McCarthy 2013, 184). The actors themselves are also elicited, changed, and unmade during this process, because under frontier conditions relationships are transformed (Bell 2015, 131). Through productive activities people relate to each other in certain ways, and through these relations people are made into certain kinds of persons (Marx [1867] 1976, 171, 273, 411–412; [1884] 1978, 118; Munn 1992, 15) and incorporated into different groups and social formations which may become actors in their own right. For example, it sounds reasonable to say that a company, a state, or a clan performs this or that action. Social groups are, however, not unproblematically actors; rather, as Robert Foster (2010, 99) notes, their “identity as autonomous units periodically emerges with effort out of a field of relations.” The notion that “collective actors” such as “the state” or “the locals” are not simply pre-existing, but are formed in encounters that unfold in a given time and place, is a central insight of modern political ecology (Trouillot 2001; Biersack 2006, 25–27; Golub 2014; Welker 2014). Based on this notion, I examine how the Mengen of Wide Bay have taken part in state formation and the creation of various collective actors, such as landowner companies, clans, and associations. Indeed, a central theme of this book is how the Wide Bay Mengen reproduce their society in the context of large-scale natural resource extraction.

According to the legislation of PNG, most of the land is communally owned by local kin groups, dubbed as “clans” in the legislation (Lakau 1997; Filer 1998, 30). The legislation, however, does not specify to which group a given area of land belongs, and hence recognizing or “finding” the landowning groups is an integral part

of any project that has to do with land. The land legislation of PNG is in many senses unique and innovative inasmuch as it seeks to give official recognition to local landowning practices (Fingleton 2007; Demian 2021a, 167–168). Yet, as many studies have shown, the legislation has not only given recognition to “traditional land-owning groups” but, in pre-supposing their existence, it has created them (Ernst 1999; Golub 2007a, 2014; Weiner and Glaskin 2007; Halvaksz 2020, 65–66). Thomas Ernst (1999) aptly calls this process “entification,” meaning that through it local and often fluid kin groups become represented as lasting and clearly defined entities. Whereas kin groups or clans are more stable in the matrilineal societies of Island Melanesia than in the fluid groups of the Highlands, state legislation has often “entified” the groups and locals have then taken state law into account in their local land tenure arrangements (Wagner 2007; Eves 2011; Martin 2013, 79, 94).

Landownership and the composition of landowning groups are also central concerns in Wide Bay Mengen engagements with logging and plantation companies and the state of PNG. The land-owning unit among the Mengen is the matrilineal clan, but land and resource use often creates questions such as which clan owns what territory, who is included in the clan, and how to take into account the land-using rights of non-clan members living on the land. Throughout this book I discuss how the Wide Bay Mengen produce and reproduce social relations, and especially relations that make up the matrilineal kin groups and the relations between them. I begin the discussion in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) by showing how land use, the lived environment, and social relations are intertwined. I then move on to discuss how the Wide Bay Mengen have settled questions about landownership and kin group belonging in the context of logging and locally formed landowner companies (LOCs). While the LOCs were, and indeed still are, forms of corporatized governance (Lattas 2011), they have also offered the means for certain Wide Bay Mengen men to take part in territorializing logging schemes. The corporatized form of organization is based on a different logic than Mengen sociality based on generation (Bear et al. 2015). The complex politics of

setting up and managing these companies at the time of the logging operations also reflected Mengen power struggles, and they became a new arena in which relations within and between clans were reconfigured.

As I have noted, Wide Bay Mengen form and reproduce kin groups through material media and practices such as sharing gardens and food plants. Social groups are also reproduced and reshape themselves through language and speech (Merlan and Rumsey 1991, 56; Stasch 2011, 163–164; Martin 2013, 77). As Keir Martin (2013, 83, 89) notes, kin groups are made and defined using certain kinds of language, and this often happens in land dispute cases in PNG when the existence and definition of groups comes to the fore. In [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 7](#) I examine in detail such a speech event: namely, a meeting to settle a land dispute brought up by the expansion of logging to Wide Bay in 2013.

The making of resources is also fundamentally about territorialization (Bridge 2011, 825). Territorialization, as defined by Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso (1995, 388), is an attempt by an individual or group to influence or control people, phenomena and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area. In [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#) on logging and [Chapter 7](#) and [Chapter 8](#) on conservation I show how the rural Wide Bay Mengen took part in various territorializing projects that sought to establish new forms of territorial organization and control, such as logging concessions or conservation areas, on their land. As these projects operated within the framework of state legislation, they affirmed or contested the authority of the state. Questions of landownership are, therefore, central instances where state power is affirmed, because when people accept the allocation of land by a given institution or even the definition of landownership by it, they also recognize and legitimate the authority of that institution (Lund 2011, 886). Or to put it more simply: when people accept a legal definition of landownership, they also recognize the power of the institution which made the definition.

The Wide Bay logging and plantation projects under study here are connected to state formation in other ways as well. Through

them, local politicians of Pomio sought to expand infrastructure and services in the remote region. This blurred the lines between companies and the state, as the provision of services and infrastructure is usually associated with national states (Beer and Church 2019, 6; Bainton and Macintyre 2021, 108; Bainton and Skrzypek 2021a, 25, 27). Drawing on work in the anthropology of the state, I do not regard “the state” as a monolithic actor (Abrams 1988, 58, 80; Fisher and Timmer 2013, 153; Tammisto and Wilenius 2021, 11–13, 24–26), but following Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001, 126) I examine “the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognizable through their effects.” One such site where “state effects” take place is the oil palm plantation established in Wide Bay that I discuss in [Chapter 5](#). Historically, plantations in PNG were established under frontier conditions and depended on the labor frontier (Gregory 1982, 4, 19)—that is, the availability labor that was made cheap. The plantations also expanded the state frontier (Dennis [1980], 219). The oil palm plantation in Wide Bay is also like a frontier outpost, serving for example as a base for police. Plantations are not only sites of agricultural production and exploitation but also political projects based on the ordering of people and landscapes (Dove 2012, 30). Hence, they also produce “state effects.” In Wide Bay, the oil palm plantation became a state-like space also as a result of state formation “from below” (e.g., Timmer 2010; Jansen 2014; Oppermann 2015; Herriman and Winarnita 2016, 132), as workers demanded state-like representation there.

The Wide Bay Mengen in various ways have taken part in a number of state-making and territorializing practices. Mengen laborers on the plantation sought to influence its governance by enacting state-like order. Through the corporatized mechanisms of LOCs, some Mengen men attempted to overcome the frontier-like conditions of Pomio and gain access to income, infrastructure, and services. Involvement in logging raised disputes over the ownership of land and distribution of compensation; indeed, some Mengen outright rejected logging from the very beginning. Older women in particular were concerned that logging would

harm local livelihoods and destroy important places in the landscape; they were the first to voice their opposition to the practice, often disagreeing with brothers and male kin who wanted to engage in it. This exemplifies the competing valuations of local environments that occur in frontier spaces, demonstrating that the Wide Bay Mengen were far from unified on the issues of natural resource extraction. While the older women faced opposition from their male and female kin alike, some of their children and younger kin supported their position. Often highly educated, these younger relatives turned to conservation in order to protect their lands and forests from logging. As I show in [Chapter 7](#) and [Chapter 8](#), this too involved territorialization, or “counter-enclosure” (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 1445; Baletti 2012, 578), through the creation of conservation areas and attempts to have them officially recognized.

Over the course of the sections on logging ([Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#)), plantations ([Chapter 5](#), [Chapter 6](#)), and conservation ([Chapter 7](#), [Chapter 8](#)), I discuss how the Mengen have engaged in various ways with actors such as foreign companies, colonial administrations, and the post-colonial state. The Wide Bay Mengen, like other inhabitants of Pomio, have not been passive bystanders, but have actively taken part in the revaluation of their lived environment, reaffirming their presence or ending frontier conditions. As I will show, Wide Bay Mengen, from men engaged in logging to plantation workers and local conservation activists, have often sought to reaffirm Mengen social and values and territorial orders, and their differences have often been over how best to pursue Mengen social values.

## Conducting Research in Wide Bay

This book is based on several periods of ethnographic research I have conducted in Wide Bay over the years, mainly in the villages of Toimtop, Wawas, and Sampun, as well as Tagul, Baein, and Lamarein. I first traveled to Wide Bay in 2007 to conduct three months of preparatory research for my MA in the village

of Toimtop. Being interested in land use and questions of logging, I had come into contact with a Papua New Guinean NGO, which offered legal help to local communities especially in regard to environmental questions; they suggested I travel to Toimtop—after receiving permission from the community. Later, I conducted research for my doctoral thesis in Wide Bay for 12 months in 2011–2012 and for 3 months in 2014. During this time, I stayed mostly in Toimtop, but visited the neighboring villages of Sampun and Wawas almost daily. I also lived in Tagul, Sampun, Wawas, and Baein for longer periods. I was also able to conduct shorter periods of research in Maskillie village on the southern border of East Pomio, and stay for some days on the (then new) oil palm plantation in the northwestern corner of Wide Bay, north of East Pomio. In 2019 I returned to Wide Bay to conduct six months of ethnographic research dividing my time among Toimtop and the neighboring villages and Lamarein, just south of the oil palm plantation.

I had initially come to Wide Bay, and to Toimtop, through Toimtop's conservation association, and stayed in the household of the Vomne family, who had first opposed logging and initiated the conservation activity. As kinship is an important system of organizing relations in the villages (and beyond), I too was assigned a role as the Vomnes' child and brother. And from this position, I related, by extension, to others as their sister's son, cross-cousin, maternal uncle, father, and so forth. However, during my first and initial stay, the village community agreed that I should eat with a different household each day and that, if I had no other plans, accompany that household in whatever task they were undertaking. Accordingly, I compensated the community as a whole for my stay. During my stays in Tagul, Sampun, and Wawas, I stayed with a single household in each, but took part in community activities more broadly. From the beginning, both the conservation association and I emphasized that while I had come to Pomio through the association's contacts, my work there was to conduct research. Despite the previous land disputes and differences among the communities, past or present, my association

with the conservationist family did not impede my work. On the contrary, even people who had been in a land dispute with them were keen to tell me their side of the story.

This does not mean that it did not take time for me to become integrated and acquainted with village life and people in the communities. Initially, people—especially women—were reluctant to let me follow them to their daily tasks and faraway gardens, mainly as they were concerned that I would hurt myself, become ill, or otherwise slow them down in their work. These were all legitimate concerns as, especially in the beginning, I hurt myself, became periodically ill, and slowed people down. However, as I became more habituated to the climate, work, and terrain, people let me accompany them and participate in what they were doing. On a typical day of research in Toimtop, I worked with people in their gardens, often participating in a specific task, such as planting and weeding (done by women), or clearing and fencing (done by men). Similarly, I took part in various forms of communal work, the preparation of feasts, participated in ceremonies as a guest or host, and attended public events such as communal meetings or dispute settlements.

In addition to participating as much as possible in the everyday life of my hosts and their communities, I conducted research on specific topics and with different methods, for example through focused interviews or through land-use surveys in which I collected the use histories of gardens and measured gardens with a GPS device. During ceremonies, I discussed with hosts who had contributed to ceremonial gifts, how and why, and who were recipients, thus learning about the network of relations. People taught me in discussions about things such as plants, planting seasons, mythical stories, lineage histories, the history of logging, plantation work, and so forth. During my research, I also focused in certain settings more on certain themes than on others. For example, in the communities of Wawas, Baein, and Maskilkie, I focused on logging, as these communities had been active in it, while in Tagul I focused heavily on plantation labor, as many left for the new oil palm plantation during my stay in 2011–2012.



Of course, these topics and themes also came up in everyday life and conversations, on which I constantly took notes—much to the amusement of my hosts. Indeed, this became something of a running joke with people telling me something and then waiting until I got my notebook open, and then grinning, “Ah, there it is!”

The questions and themes I encountered and researched in Wide Bay have heavily influenced the structure of this book. I have divided the monograph into four parts dealing variously with land and locality, logging, plantations, and conservation. I begin each part with a *tandaning*, which are songs of lament, composed mainly—but not exclusively—by women, and which women perform publicly at initiation ceremonies. Each song is composed by a person who mourns, or cries for, another person, often a child, parent, sibling, spouse, or someone the composer is otherwise close to. The genre derives its name from the verb *tandan*, to cry. The songs are based on events concerning the person to whom the song is dedicated and which made the composer cry, such as the death or illness of the loved one, but also feelings of anger over the perceived mistreatment of the person, sorrow over their absence from the community, them being accused of something, or loving pride mixed with longing felt when a relative leaves the community to take on important work. After the initial emotion subsides, the person composes a *tandaning* for their loved one.

I became interested in the songs, and with the help of several composers and people familiar with the genre, I collected a total of 29 by asking people to sing to me. I recorded 27 of them, 2 while they were performed during a ceremony and the rest as my interlocutors sang them to me upon my request. My interlocutors—especially Josephine Matapoeng, Alberta Guptaol, Otto Tniengpo, Melchior Loait, Tekla Leiv, Maria Mtogle, and Maria Komair—helped me to translate the songs and, crucially, explained to me their context, namely the events and people which they are about.

The initiation ceremonies during which women perform these songs are the most joyous of the Wide Bay Mengen ceremonies. The series of songs sung for a specific initiate or initiates—for example, a pair of siblings being initiated into girl-/boyhood or

a girl into womanhood—are about people related to the initiate, such as their lineage members, parents, or even the initiate themselves. The songs are thus, both in content and the context of their performance, an example of the concrete media through which the Wide Bay Mengen create and recreate relations. The songs are about important relatives and they are performed for relatives in initiations, during which gifts of shell valuables, pigs, and food are given to formative relatives of the initiate. These are members of the initiate’s clan, their father’s clan, and other people who have done hard work for the initiate. As I will discuss in the part on land and locality, the *tandaning* songs are like other media of relations, such as shells, food plants, and pigs. Social relations are enacted through them, and in the process they also become signs—icons and indexes—of the relations. Indeed, the person who is being sung about in the songs is not mentioned by name, but rather is referred to with either their relation to the composer, such as “my child,” or with metaphors, such as “my leaf of *rin*” or “the *rakaimun*”—a decorative plant and a variety of taro, respectively. As I will discuss more thoroughly, people are closely associated with plants in general, and plants stand for people iconically and indexically in these songs. In this case, the yellowish leaf of the *rin* refers to a person with a light complexion, while the *rakaimun*—a taro associated with a particular lineage—stands for a person of that lineage.<sup>5</sup>

In the song quoted at the beginning of this book, Rospita Mrei was moved to tears as her husband’s younger brother Eric was ordained as a deacon of the Catholic Church. In the song she describes how priests and the bishop call her brother-in-law to join their ranks. Rather than naming him, she refers to him as the leaf of the valued *Ganu* cordyline. In the middle verse, or the chorus, she describes how the deacon-to-be, a man of renown, walks along the path—that is, the aisle of the church—to give himself to them. In the final verse she sings of how her daughter

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5 For a more thorough discussion on the songs, see Tammisto (forthcoming). For Jacquinot Bay Mengen songs, see Be (2021, 62–64).

Krirpak and her grandmother, Wowlin, who is also the deacon's mother and Mrei's mother-in-law, hand over the *rakaimun* (the deacon) to "different languages" (foreigners)—that is, the priests and bishops. In the song Mrei expresses a variety of emotions, her pride at her brother-in-law and her sorrow that he will leave his lineage and likely his home to work as a priest far away. The song was performed publicly some years later when Eric was ordained as a priest and came to hold his first mass in his home village of Sampun.

I quote the *tandaning* and have discussed them at some length here for several reasons. By listening to them, translating them, and being taught about them, I learned a lot about Wide Bay Mengen relatedness, both to people and plants. As I understood the multiple ways in which the songs enact and represent relations, I also became more sensitive to how other media, such as valued plants, and acts of sharing everyday items, pigs, and shells are similarly media of relations. And in the case of plants and pigs, organisms which the Wide Bay Mengen not only use as media of care, or hard work, but which are also recipients of people's hard work. In the *tandaning*, as noted, people sing about events that have moved them; some of the songs were composed generations back, but new ones are constantly being composed. The songs thus turn personal events into shared history (see Maschio 1994) and are like diary entries of careful and thoughtful observers—as John Waiko (1986, 37) notes is the case for similar songs of the Binandere of Oro Province, PNG.

Taking part in the preparation of ceremonies, attending them as a guest, examining in detail the gifts, tracking their givers and recipients, as well as learning about the *avlu*, the "big men" or spirit beings who dance at ceremonies attracted by the singing of the *tandaning*, I gained crucial insights into Mengen kinship, landholding, and environmental relations. Christianity is also an important part of people's lives and the focus of many commu-

nal efforts, as shown by Rospita Mrei's song.<sup>6</sup> However, I do not discuss the ceremonies or Christianity in greater detail here. As aesthetically, ritualistically, and culturally rich events and central tenets of Mengen communal life, they deserve a more thorough discussion that is way beyond the scope of this book and my abilities. More so, parts of the ceremonies, like the *avlu*, are gendered secrets, which are not to be discussed in public in more detail than has been done here.

In this book the songs thus reflect the larger ceremonies of which they are part, like small piles of food that in Mengen terms are *koun*, reflections or shadows, of the ceremonial gifts to be given later. This resembles the concept of "reflection" as used in the Marxist tradition: the *tandaning* are not ceremonies as such, but related to the ceremonies, and entities that reflect the same structural features as the ceremonies, namely the relations and hard work of the Wide Bay Mengen. The *tandaning* I quote throughout evoke the ceremonies, and Mrei's song also alludes to Christianity, as marks of absence, like the blank spots on the floorboard where stains have been removed, as Debora Battaglia (1990, 199) characterizes the objects of past relations reminding people of an absent one on Karkar Island, PNG.

Finally, the *tandaning* songs I quote at the beginning of each part are related to the themes of the parts. The songs are based, as noted above, on careful observations by their composers in addition to being about specific people. In June 2024 I was conducting research for a new project in Wide Bay. One evening I was chatting with my sisters Perpetua Tpongri and Josephine Matapoeng as well as Josephine's husband, Otto Tniengpo, and we ended up

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6 The majority of the Wide Bay Mengen are Catholic, which is also the majority denomination throughout Pomio. Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) are a newer but now established minority denomination in East Pomio, and some Wide Bay Mengen communities have SDA congregations, although the denomination has a larger following in Sulka and Tomoive. There are also smaller and often newer denominations, such as revival and Pentecostal churches, but they are decidedly smaller than the SDA, let alone the Catholic Church.

discussing Mengen songs. As all of them had sung to me, I told them that I was intending to start each section of my book with a *tandaning*, because the songs discuss the central themes and, more importantly, they are expressions of local analyses—of people’s relationship to their lived environment, logging, plantation labor, conservation, and values. Otto Tniengpo, a man well versed in *mloai ta ngan ravulung*, the customs of the ancestors, or *kastom*, agreed. He noted that in the songs people express their feelings and thoughts about the historical events that inspired the songs.

In the same discussion, Otto Tniengpo asked me, after having read some of my articles, why I mention the names of the authors I cite but not my local interlocutors. The comment struck me, and I explained that it is an academic practice to protect the privacy and safety of interlocutors—especially regarding sensitive topics. Tniengpo felt that this was understandable, but that in his view many of the things I discuss are not sensitive. More so, he continued, if future generations read my work, he would want them to see the names of their elders and ancestors in it. While I have mentioned many of my interlocutors by name in various acknowledgments, Tniengpo’s comment emphasized that well-meaning academic practices displace the voice of interlocutors while foregrounding academic knowledge. After the discussion with Tniengpo, I talked about naming practices with my interlocutors, and sought their approval in using their names and images.<sup>7</sup> In

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7 Wide Bay Mengen names consist of a Christian name and a local name. Both of these are first, or proper, names and can be used interchangeably. Indeed, people refer to each other with either or both. In state settings, people often use their father’s local name as their surname. These local names are often descriptions of events or people: for example, the female name Seglelin means “Does not see her brother” (implying that the name describes a woman whose brother died), while the male name Tniengpo means “Hides behind his walking staff” (describing a man using a walking staff that he can also strike with if necessary). Some of the names are old and people do not remember to whom or to what event the name refers. New names are composed to refer to more recent events concerning the relatives of the newborn child to whom the name is given. Some names, both old and new, belong to specific clans. They

cases related to disputes, I still omit the names of individuals and clans just to be on the safe side. In some cases, I mention people by name even though it was not possible for me to get their explicit approval for it. These are cases which, to my understanding, are in no way sensitive, and where I believe that the person would rather be mentioned by name than remain anonymous.

At one point during my research in 2011–2012 my host brother William Vomne remarked to me: “Your study will be a historical account of how you saw us, when you stayed here.” His notion summarizes in one sentence what I have struggled to formulate in the course of this introduction, and indeed in this book. While some of my Mengen interlocutors, friends, and kin have read my work, this book is written primarily for different audiences and for people who are not familiar with Wide Bay. In fact, I assume this book does not tell much that the people of Wide Bay do not already know, and at best connects what they know in new ways to issues they are very familiar with. I start each part of the book with a *tandaning* song to remind the reader that what I present here I have learned, because of the patient guidance of my interlocutors, and that the Wide Bay Mengen obviously have local analyses and interpretations of these same themes.

## Summary of the Chapters

As noted above, the book is divided into four parts discussing land and locality, logging, plantation agriculture, and conservation. Each part consists of two chapters: the first introduces the theme and gives a broad perspective view of the subject, while the second focuses on a specific case study.

[Chapter 1](#) introduces the Mengen concept of hard work, namely the production of valued social relations, and how it organizes

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can be given to members of a different clan, and in such cases members of the receiving clan “return” the name by giving it to a child of the clan which owns the name. In this sense, names resemble other objects of exchange between the clans.

Mengen society, land use, and environmental relations. [Chapter 2](#) focuses on how Mengen history is materialized in and mediated through the environment—produced by hard work. [Chapter 3](#) recounts the history of logging in PNG, how logging began on Mengen lands under frontier conditions, and how Mengen men established LOCs in an attempt to control logging according to local landholding units. [Chapter 4](#) focuses on a specific land dispute caused by logging and how “collective actors” such as clans, companies, and the state are constructed and destabilized in dispute cases. [Chapter 5](#) recounts the intertwined history of cyclical frontier processes, plantation agriculture, and state formation in PNG from the colonial era to the present day. [Chapter 6](#) discusses life on a contemporary oil palm plantation and how Mengen workers move between their villages and the plantation to pursue different values. [Chapter 7](#) discusses Mengen opposition to logging and how local conservationists used state legislation to protect their clan lands and attempted to end the frontier conditions under which logging and plantation agriculture expanded. [Chapter 8](#) discusses how Mengen conservationists had to negotiate complex questions of value when “closing” their clan lands from logging and swidden horticulture. In [the concluding chapter](#) I draw together the discussion and make some concluding remarks.

### Wide Bay on the Map and in Context

The 3000 Mengen of Wide Bay inhabit eight village communities around Cape Orford from Tagul in the north to Maskillkie in the south. I use the term “Wide Bay Mengen” to refer to the North Coast Mengen speakers living between Tagul and Maskillkie. North of Tagul, between Setvei and Milim, live Sulka speakers, and north of them Tomoive (or Tomoip) speakers. North of the Tomoive, the inhabitants of Long and Lamarein speak Mengen and Sulka. Similarly, Lop village near Korpun is a distinctly bilingual community of Sulka and Mengen speakers. While the Sulka and Mengen languages are entirely different, the Sulka and Wide Bay Mengen have a long history of good relations and intermarriages.

Indeed, both groups organize themselves into named matrilineal kin groups and moieties, and their ceremonial and other traditions are remarkably similar.

North of Lamarein, on north side of the Mevlou River, meaning “large (*vlou*) river (*me*)” in Mengen, live speakers of Simbali, one of the Baining languages, which are spoken farther north. The Mevlou is also an administrative boundary: south of it is the East Pomio Local Level Government (LLG) area, while the land to the north is part of Sinivit LLG. These are two of the five LLGs of Pomio District. Pomio District is the largest and most sparsely populated of the four districts of East New Britain Province, which comprises the eastern part of New Britain Island. The urban districts of Kokopo, the provincial capital, and Rabaul are the most populated and small in terms of area, while the surrounding peri-urban Gazelle district is larger. However, Pomio District covers 11,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or over two thirds, of the province’s 15,000 km<sup>2</sup> area, while in 2011–2012 about a fifth of the province’s 328,369 population lived there (NSO 2014, 34).<sup>8</sup>

While rich in resources, Pomio has for a long time been disadvantaged in terms of income from agriculture, child malnutrition and access to services (Allen 2009, 486). Although now regarded as a “fast-developing” area, Pomio has been a hinterland when viewed from colonial and post-colonial governing centers. For example, the first tentative road connection between large parts of Pomio and the provincial capitals was established in 2015. In contrast, the area around the provincial capital of Kokopo (and formerly Rabaul) is relatively well off and has a well-developed infrastructure.

Kokopo became the seat of German colonial administration in the late 1800s and the Tolai, the linguistic group living in the area, in time became important intermediaries to the administration (Firth 1972, 361; Hempenstall 1989, 144). The Tolai were

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8 The 2011 National Census is the last to have been completed and the official reports on it were published in 2014. The 2021 National Census was deferred to 2024 (Laveil 2023).



also successful cash-croppers, produced a number of important intellectuals, and were active in anti-colonial movements (Rew 1999, 148–149). In addition, the Tolai are, demographically, a large language group in terms of PNG (Martin 2013, 10). Due to their political activity, their proximity to the centers of administration, and their demographic strength, the Tolai held, and hold, important positions in the provincial administration. This has created friction between the urban and rural areas, especially in Pomio, where inhabitants feel marginalized from the political and economic structures of the province (Rew 1999, 147; Rohatynskyj 2001, 27).

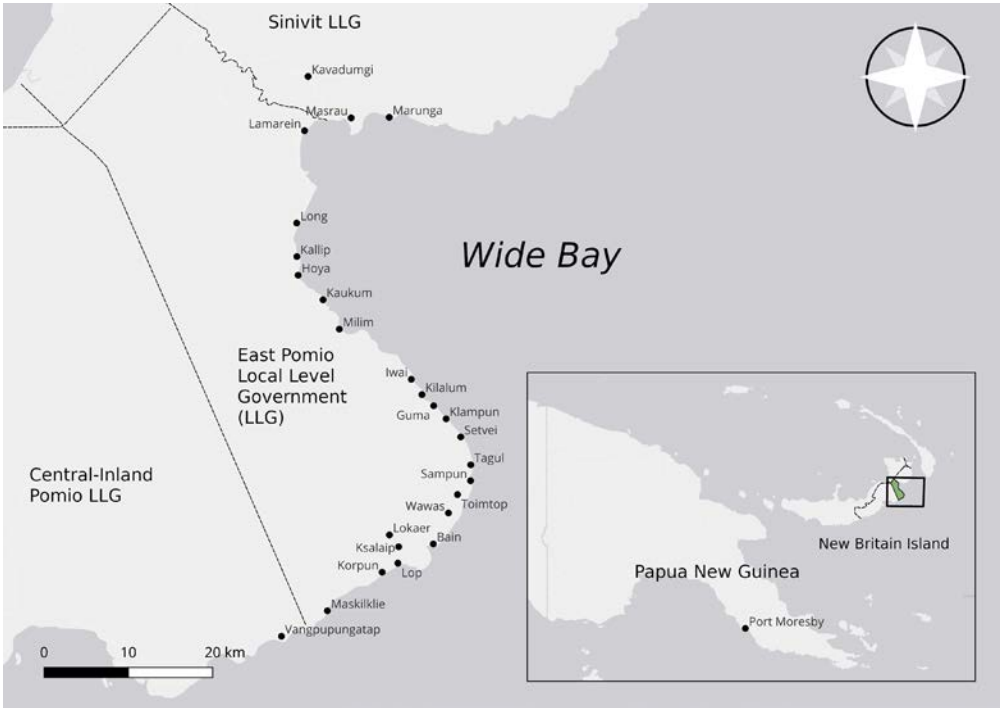
Due to its large land area and forests, different actors, from colonial governments to foreign companies, have regarded Pomio as frontier—a site of expansion and a source of cheap labor and resources. State actors have regarded Pomio as a different kind of frontier, an area not fully under state control. Many inhabitants have in various ways sought to address the marginalized position of Pomio as well as the frontier conditions. As noted above, in the 1990s large-scale logging operations began in Pomio, as many inhabitants hoped logging would bring income and services. Others opposed logging out of concern for the forests and fears that logging would not bring lasting development. In 2004, Paul Tiensten, a Wide Bay Mengen man and MP for Pomio, initiated a large combined logging and oil palm plantation project, Ili-Wawas,<sup>9</sup> in order to connect the existing colonial and logging roads of Pomio with the provincial road network, as well as provide income and services.

Over the course of this book, as noted, I will discuss logging, plantation agriculture, and environmental conservation in Wide

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9 The project is named after the villages of Wawas on the south side and Illi (or Ili) on the northeastern side of Wide Bay. The provincial road network extends along the east coast of New Britain as far as Illi, whereas the colonial-era coastal road and logging roads connecting much of the Pomio district in the south extend as far as Wawas. By connecting Illi and Wawas by road, the existing roads of Pomio would be connected to the provincial road network.

Bay, and especially how the Mengen of Wide Bay have engaged in them. As I will show, Mengen participation in these forms of resource extraction and their disagreements over it have often been about how to best to pursue Mengen social values, and whether these practices constitute hard work.



**Map 1:** Wide Bay and the East Pomio Local Level Government area.

## PART I

# Land and Locality

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|--|---|
| 1. This illness struck<br>My strong man, I do not see<br>him, oh | <i>Mamteng re pasapge ae<br/>Pengkainre tongo ya se gele oe</i> |
| C. I cry for my child, oh,<br>My thoughts return to him          | <i>Ya tandane goitaku, o<br/>Loge glili te</i>                  |
| 2. The illness struck him, and<br>Pulled him into Minsai         | <i>Mamteng re pasapge ae<br/>Agluke ya ne Minsailon</i>         |

—Chris Lelengvail, song recorded in Wawas village, 20 December 2011



Wawas village. (2011)



## CHAPTER 1

# Gardens, Plants, and Land

## Socially Productive Work and the Media of Relatedness

Gardens, gardens—work of the village.

As if commenting on his own thoughts, Raymon Tokunwan, a Mengen man in his forties, said this as we were walking along a logging road lined by fenced gardens and fallows. He was seemingly complaining that life in the village is all about gardening. My Mengen friends often made similar comments, noting, for example, that theirs is a “hard life” (TP: *hat laip*) and contrasting it with mine and those of other town-dwellers who do not have to toil in their gardens for food. The Mengen, like other rural people of PNG, often referred to their work in gardens as hard and all-consuming (e.g., Bashkow 2006), and this was no exaggeration: men felled large trees and dragged the heavy trunks to where they were building fences while women cleared plots with fire, weeded, and carried weighty baskets of plants to and from the gardens across the hilly terrain. These tasks left their marks on people’s bodies: my friends showed me how the skin of their shoulders was hardened from carrying; middle-aged women often started experiencing knee pains and problems caused by the heavy loads and steep gardens. Yet Raymon’s comment and the references to “hard work” (M: *klingnan ti main*) were ambivalent, and in fact often expressed the pride and interest people took in their work and its products. Moreover, “hard work” is a central Mengen idiom for

socially productive activity, which is the basis of Mengen conceptions of relatedness and value.

Gardening, or swidden horticulture, is the prototypical form of work for the rural Wide Bay Mengen. It is their main livelihood activity and something with which they are concerned most of the time. Plants grown in gardens are the products of this work and the very staff of rural life—or, to put it simply, the food that keeps people going. The numerous tasks related to gardening, gardens, and plants, however, are invested with meanings that go beyond questions of subsistence. They are, as I will show, “total social phenomena,” as defined by Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2002, 3), inasmuch as “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time”: from the religious, juridical, and moral to the political-economic and familial—not forgetting the aesthetic, as Mauss cautioned. By examining the myriad meanings condensed in gardens and plants, I have two main aims: first, to describe Mengen gardening practices, gardens, and food plants because of their central role in Mengen life; and secondly, through the discussion of Mengen horticulture, to introduce key concepts and dynamics that are central for understanding how the Mengen relate to each other and their land.

One of these central themes is the Mengen concept of *klingnan*, or “work” in English. The term does not simply mean physical activity, but could be translated rather clumsily as “socially productive activity.” This means that “work” is what produces and maintains valued social relations and contributes in recognized ways to the social life of the rural communities. Thus, the Mengen concept of work is very similar to that of the Qaqet Baining of East New Britain, as identified by Jane Fajans (1997). For the Qaqet, all activities that transform “natural” entities into social entities are work (Fajans 1997, 7, 268). For example, care turns “natural” children into social persons and gardening turns the forest into a social space. Even though the physical activities of child-rearing and gardening are different, the underlying schema—socialization through human activity—is the same (Fajans 1997, 11, 80). Moreover, work is a key source of value among the Qaqet (Fajans

1997, 8, 80). For the Mengen, too, work produces and maintains social relations.

Gardening, as a socially productive activity, produces most obviously the food crops people eat, but also environments and people. Just as gardening is the prototypical form of work, so food plants, especially taro and yam, are the prototypical forms of food. Feeding and the act of giving food are, for the Mengen—like for many other Melanesian peoples—the basic forms of care and nurture (see, e.g., Chao 2022, 79 on the Marind; Fajans 1997, 69 on the Qaget; Halvaksz 2020, 55 on the Biangai; Kahn [1986] 1994, 39 on the Wamiran; or Stasch 2009, 129, 165, 167 on the Korowai). They are constitutive of kinship and other social relations. Care and nurture, manifested as acts of giving food, are classed by the Mengen as work, or indeed as “hard work.”<sup>10</sup> For example, when a young Mengen man was to be ordained as a priest, his relatives planned festivities in connection to his first mass. The biological mother of the priest wanted the festivities to include the proper giving of food and pigs as gifts in accordance with Mengen ceremonial traditions. The priest’s other mothers (the mother’s sisters) wanted to limit the festivities in order not to distract from the religious character of the celebration. This caused a longer argument between the mother and her sisters, with the mother once remarking to me that it was up to her to decide, because she had

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10 Sophie Chao (2022, 79, 81, 82) describes how for the Marind of West Papua, becoming human or a social person, *anim*, is based on care and nurture, and people emerge out of a field of nurture, which comprises their relations to other humans and their environment and is mediated by various forms of physical work. Indeed, the Marind also describe the activity of making and becoming an *anim* as “hard work” (Chao 2022, 82). This resonates with the Tsimihety of Madagascar, who refer to the various activities of creating and maintaining social relations as *asa*, work, as described by Jenni Mölkänen (2021, 20–21, 68–69), and with Darmanto’s (2022, 295–298) discussion on gardening, value, and personhood among Mentawai on Siberut Island, Indonesia. In a similar vein, Jamon Halvaksz (2020, 55, 71) discusses how for the Biangai of PNG, care is an activity that makes people, plants, and places—and the relationships among them.

taken care of her son, while her relatives had not even contributed to his school fees. The mother maintained that her opinion should override the others, not automatically as a mother, but because she had undertaken the hard work of raising her son.

Discussing various concepts of work among the Jacquinot Bay Mengen in the 1960s, Michel Panoff (1977, 11–12) notes how “suffering” was a central concept in relation to various activities. For example, because people had “suffered” in clearing gardens, they could pass the tenure rights of the land to their children. Likewise, the harvesting of food was seen as compensation provided by the land, which had absorbed people’s “suffering,” while people gave parts of the first harvest to spirits and ancestors, who made the food grow. According to Panoff (1977, 12), “suffering” demanded compensation, and in all their relations the Jacquinot Bay Mengen strove to achieve an equal outcome, or the eradication of debt. Moreover, the Jacquinot Bay Mengen did not regard gardening as “production” (understood as production of wealth through work), let alone as the conquest of “nature,” but rather as a “contractual relation” between partners (people, spirits, land), which should result in an equitable outcome among the parties (Panoff 1977, 12, 17). Gardening was for the Jacquinot Bay Mengen thus also a moral question and expressed people’s moral virtues, and so a model of all productive activity (Panoff 1977, 12, 14). In many ways, the term “suffering” has similar connotations to the Wide Bay Mengen expression of “hard work.” Moreover, the Jacquinot Bay Mengen were concerned over the maintenance of proper and equal exchange relations, which resembles the Wide Bay Mengen focus on the creation and maintenance of valued social relations.

Socially reproductive ceremonies such as initiations, marriages, and mortuary rituals (TP, *kastom*) are referred to as “work.” These include ceremonial exchanges of food, pigs, shell valuables, and money. During initiation ceremonies, the parents of the initiates present gifts to people who have been a formative presence for the initiates—that is, who have worked hard for the initiates, or were the offspring of people who had cared for them or their parents. The recipients include members of both the initiate’s clan, people



from affinal clans, and, as noted, people who had otherwise shown care. Part of the bridewealth given by the clan of the husband to the clan of the wife was given to the wife's father, who is of a different clan, for the "hard work" of caring for his daughter (see also Jacka 2015, 118). Thus, for the Mungen, work is any activity in which the "underlying schema" (Fajans 1997, 11, 80) of producing social relations through care is the same. Because the Mungen concept of work encompasses actions that produce valued social relations, it resonates with Marxist-inspired, symbolic, and praxis-oriented anthropological theories of value, which emphasize that production is ultimately about making people (Munn 1992, 15; Fajans 1997, 272; Turner 2008, 45; Graeber 2013, 223). Through their productive activities, people do not only produce material means of subsistence, but also new needs, the human beings themselves and different relations of social cooperation (Turner 2008, 44).

Systems of social production also produce value, which in turn needs to be represented in order to be circulated, exchanged, and appropriated (Marx [1867] 1976, 139, 225; Turner 2008, 47, 53). This, as Terence Turner (2008, 47–48) notes, happens through semiotic media (see also Marx [1867] 1976, 932). Besides being central to people's livelihood, food plants and gardens are also important *media* through which the Wide Bay Mungen relate to each other and their environment (e.g., Munn 1992, 17, 74–75; Stasch 2009, 14). Food plants that people grow are inherited and received from kin and friends and they index the web of social relations of the holder of those plants. The same applies to gardens, rights to clear gardens are passed on in accordance with complex kinship relations, and individual gardens are divided among kin and friends. Gardening practices both make visible and constitute land-using groups. Gardens and plants are not only passed along to others according to social relations, but the acts of giving food and sharing gardens establish and strengthen such relations.

I start this chapter from the very ground, by focusing first on the food plants the Mungen cultivate and by discussing how they are simultaneously both objects of care and concrete media for caring for others. From the individual food plants, I widen my

focus to the gardens in which the plants grow and where they are tended by people. Like plants, the gardens are also media through which Mengen relate to each other by sharing the gardens and working together in them. In the final section I broaden my focus even further to the institutions of landholding, namely the inter-relations between landowning matrilineal clans, and how garden-land is distributed among them. I conclude by showing how landholding and swidden horticulture express the productive contradiction between the values of clan autonomy and inter-clan relations.

### Main Food Crops: Care, Continuity, and History

Gardens, both newly cleared and those which are mature and abundant with plants, dot the surroundings of Wide Bay Mengen villages. Within the village area, which women keep meticulously clean, people plant a wide variety of fruit trees, various palms, and decorative plants. In addition to the large gardens circling the village, there are also a number of backyard plots for minor supplementary food plants and spices. Sometimes these plots were kept merely to experiment with new plants, like that of my adoptive brother who told me that he wanted to see how cabbage would grow in the village. It soon became clear to me that most of the villagers were very interested in plants and cultivation techniques, and proud of their skills in this field. The Wide Bay Mengen interest in plants is clearly demonstrated by an ethno-botanical workshop that local conservationists conducted in Toimtop village (see [Chapter 7](#)). The resulting study contains about 400 identified trees and plants, most which have a vernacular name.

People cultivate a great number of edible and useful plants in their gardens, but each garden is dominated by the main food crop of the season, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*, M: *ma*, TP: *taro*), and two species of yam: the greater yam (*Dioscorea alata*, M: *klaip*, TP: *yam*) and the lesser yam (*Dioscorea esculenta*, M: *mis*, TP: *mami*). Sweet potato (*Ipomea batatas*, M: *konge*, TP: *kaukau*), the third

central staple, is planted either in its own gardens, bridging the taro and yam seasons (see [Chapter 2](#)), or along with taro and yam. Out of the main staples, taro and yam are also the most valued foodstuffs and subject to the most elaboration. They are central components of any ceremonial gift, given as part of initiation rituals, bridewealth exchanges, mortuary gifts, or acts of compensation. These ceremonies (M: *klingnan*, “work,” TP: *kastom*<sup>11</sup>) can only be performed, or “played” as the Tok Pisin idiom goes, with taro or yam. Sweet potato can be included as a supplement, but no gift can consist solely of it.

Many of the foods planted by the Mengen are divided into several named subvarieties. During my fieldwork I recorded 66 types of taro, but this is probably far from exhaustive since it was based only on interviews I conducted with women from Toim-top; inquiries in other villages would probably have resulted in a longer list. For both species of yam, I recorded 12 named subvarieties, and 10 sweet potato, which is considered an ancestral food.<sup>12</sup> Women distinguish the varieties by paying attention to subtle differences in the color and structure of the leaf, stem, and the tuber itself. This is gendered knowledge inasmuch as men with whom I spoke knew the varieties by name but were often not able to identify them as well as women, who usually did the planting and weeding.

This, like many aspects of Mengen agriculture, is not an unchanging tradition: in an interview, Margaret Glentou—an elder who in her calm and perceptive manner taught me much

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11 Initiation ceremonies during which bridewealth presentations are also made are called *pnaeis*, roughly meaning “feast” in Mengen.

12 As a historical and regional comparison, Françoise Panoff (1969, 22; 1972, 73) mentions 150 named varieties of taro, 19 yam, and none of sweet potato, which she recorded during the 1960s among Jacquinot Bay Mengen. Joseph Schneider (1954, 287), who worked from 1915 to 1947 as a missionary among the Sulka, notes that the Sulka had 450 named varieties of taro, 50 of which were of Mengen origin. Michel Panoff (1969b, 11–13) recounts how the peoples of New Britain traded plants with each other using local trade networks.

about plants and gardens—told me that in the past men had their own, more valued, taro varieties and did the planting. Over time, however, the planting and tending of food plants had become mostly a female endeavor. I was not told precisely why or how this change had occurred. The gendered division of labor was, however, flexible, and men both planted and weeded if required.<sup>13</sup> Yet, while men can and do help, the repetitive tasks of planting, weeding, and carrying food from the gardens fall more heavily on women. The repetitiveness of the tasks makes them tiring and carrying food baskets from the gardens across steep slopes is extremely arduous. Men, for their part, perform tasks like felling and fencing, which are also very heavy, but less repetitive.

The relationship between people and the plants they tend is personal and one of direct interaction and mutual nurture. Women told me that the taro feels their hand when they weed it and this makes the plant grow. Likewise, one can directly interact with plants through spells. Garden magic is widely, but not universally, practiced by both men and women. Spells are personal; they are inherited from kin and friends, and their power is based on secrecy—that is, if too many people know the spell, its power wanes. However, spells are not known to all, and one older woman told me that her ancestors had never taught her spells, but that her food grows well all the same. When discussing the tending of people, pigs, and plants with my interlocutors, a male friend told me that the verb *penge* can be used only for caring for pigs and children, while plants grow by themselves. A female friend noted that this was unsurprising, since men usually do not tend plants; in her opinion, *penge* could be used for tending plants too. The relationship between people and plants is mutual, because people give care and nurture to the food plants and then use the plants to provide care and nurture for each other. This care, or “hard work,” is a central component of kinship. While Mengen kinship is based on notions of shared blood (M: *svul*), giving food and care is also

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13 Schneider (1954, 286) also notes the absence of a strict gendered division of work in gardens among the Sulka.

a constituent part. For example, a father who has not cared for his children is not considered a real father, while adoptive parents who have done so are without question real parents.

As food plants are tended and cared for by women, much like children, it is no wonder that the plants are closely associated with their tenders. This is evident, for example, in mortuary practices. When a woman dies, her taro is sometimes uprooted and placed on a platform (M: *songom*) and left to rot. This emphasizes the absence of the deceased: as she is not there to care for her relatives anymore, her taro, with which she used to care for others, also rots away (see also Laufer 1962, 450; Fajans 1997, 69). It is also common for people to taboo valued foods as a sign of mourning—often when the deceased was someone who used to provide the mourner with that food. The taboo then emphasizes the relation of care that had existed between the deceased and the mourner. Such a relation of care is both constituted and reproduced by the act of giving food, and the food plants come to signify that relation indexically.

Food plants and domestic trees are not only associated with those who tend them but also serve as metaphors for people in Mengen song and poetry. I once toured a number of gardens with Gertrude Mguellelin, who was teaching me the names of distinct subvarieties and how to recognize them, as well as stories associated with them. As I was writing down a name she had just mentioned—*Ukonekwa*, the black (*kwa*) Ukone—I noticed she was quietly singing a song. I asked her what it was, and she told me that the taro had reminded her of a wailing song (M: *tandaning*; *tandan*: to cry) composed for a man who was likened to the *Ukonekwa*. The Wide Bay Mengen do not generally refer to each other with personal names, but rather with teknonyms and nicknames as a sign of respect. In wailing songs, people are often referred to as plants, metaphors that followed two main logics: first, the plant's physical qualities are said to resemble iconically those of the person. For example, the dark plants, like the *Ukonekwa*, are used as metaphors for people who were regarded as having dark complexions. Secondly, people could be likened

indexically to plants that belonged to their matrilineal clans, as in the *tandaning* of Rospita Mrei quoted at the beginning of this book. As I discuss in more depth in [Chapter 2](#), due to the close association with individuals and their productive activities, plants and trees elicited emotive reactions from people—by reminding them of deceased relatives, for example (see also Maschio 1994, 162, 181).

Some of the named subvarieties of taro, yam, and sweet potato are associated with specific people who had in one way or another contributed to the variety—if only by buying it from a town market and introducing it to the village. Some introduced varieties are part of wider historical processes, like the *Kraises* sweet potato, a variety which Francis Kiamolo brought home from Bougainville where he served in the PNG Navy during the conflict, or crisis, of Bougainville. Others are associated with deceased people who appeared in the dreams of the living and told them where new wild varieties could be found, while certain sweet potatoes were named after women who had found wild varieties, taken them into their gardens, and domesticated them. This is obviously a concrete instance of socializing through caring and nurturing.<sup>14</sup>

Each woman, and many men, have their own distinct “collection” of plants of different subvarieties. Some are associated with specific matrilineal clans and others, as noted, with specific people. The food plants are inherited from parents; upon marriage a woman usually received plants from her affinal kin, and new varieties are received as gifts from friends, brought back from travels,

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14 According to Françoise Panoff (1969, 28, 30), Jacquinot Bay Mengen in the 1960s regarded taro as nutritional because it had a spirit, as did people, which it acquired through domestication and care—that is, when it was brought into the social sphere (see also Battaglia 1990, 94; Schneider 1954, 287; Fajans 1998, 17; Jorgensen 1998, 102; Bashkow 2006, 164–165). When inquiring about the spirit of the taro or other plants, I was explicitly told that plants do not have spirits; nevertheless, the socializing effect of care was evident in how people related to their plants.

bought in town, and so on. During our tour of the gardens, Gertrude Mguellelin explained to me how plants were given:

So this Tovail [a taro variety], previously I didn't use to plant it. So Martha, she's a woman from Vgar [another clan], she knows that my cousin Alberta's father is also Vgar. So she gave the taro to her. And now, my cousin, she went on and gave it to me, because their [maternal] uncle is my father, so she acknowledges me and gave me this taro. ...

And this Boain [a taro variety]: Vrugelin went and named the daughter of Glentou ... so with us, if you name someone, you'll look after them. So when she got this new taro, the one that is black [purple] inside, she went on and gave it to her [younger] namesake. She said, you all plant this for my namesake. ... So, it became popular and people began requesting it. (7 Jan 2012)

The first part of the quote illustrates one way of mediating the productive contradiction: Martha gives her clan's taro to her cross-cousin Alberta, whose father is from Martha's clan. Alberta in turn gives the taro on to her cross-cousin Mguellelin—belonging to a third clan. Through these transactions, the women maintained and emphasized their interrelations as cross-cousins as well as the relations between their respective clans. Simultaneously, as all the women acknowledged that the taro was given because it belongs to one of the clans, the transactions emphasized clans as entities. Even though this was a mundane transaction among three people, the logic and outcome resemble formalized gift-giving during initiation and mortuary ceremonies, where both intra- and inter-clan relations are highlighted with gifts. Finally, the account is an example of how, in most cases, the productive tension between the two values of clan unity and inter-clan relations does not amount to disagreement or conflict.

More generally, this account shows how plants become signs of social relations. The different varieties of taro, yam, banana, sugar cane, and sweet potato in an individual collection of crops acquired through different connections are a materialization of

the owner's social relations to other people—or, in more technical terms, one of the material media through which these relations are communicated (also Stasch 2009, 22; Halvaksz 2020, 58). The personal stock of foods is, then, an index of the person's relations to others (see also Stasch 2003, 362, 365). The diverse plant species and varieties cultivated by a given woman on her plot are, to paraphrase Nancy Munn (1992, 121), both an outcome and a sign of her relations to others. Moreover, the diversity of plants in the plot and in her collection are an *icon* of the diverse relations (see Munn 1992, 121). In this sense, food crop collections resemble individual gardens, which are also concrete manifestations of relations between individuals and between matrilineal clans. Food crops do not just materialize personal histories and continuity; they are also tied to a more general conception of social continuity. When interviewing Clara Mraipaken about the reproduction of taro, she explained that great care is taken so that the taro varieties of the ancestors do not die out. The specific histories of many varieties are—to varying extents—known. People were also keen to adopt new varieties, which could be highly valued for their taste, growth, or other aspects; however, ancestral taro varieties are often valued more and their dying out would constitute not just the loss of a good crop, but also a break in historical continuity.

### Clearing and Dividing a Garden

Clearing gardens is a many-phased process which starts with the clearing of undergrowth, a task often assigned to children and youths. This is followed first by the cutting of young trees with bush knives and later the felling of larger trees. The garden is then left to dry and, a few days later, the felled trees are cleared of branches. After the trees have been felled and the branches cut and left to dry in the sun, the clearing resembles a chaotic pile of branches, twigs, and trunks through which movement is laborious at best. (At least this was my experience.) The cleared areas are, however, only seemingly chaotic: when cutting felled trees, men are already starting to align young tree trunks and larger

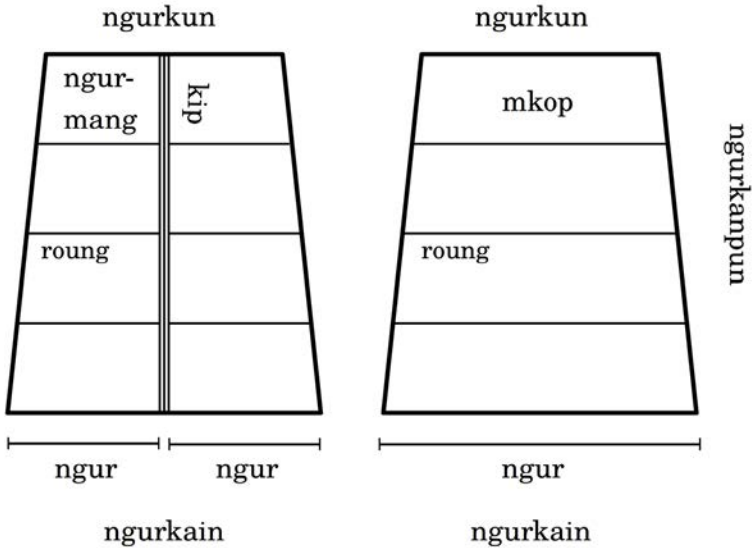


branches into piles with further steps in mind. This all dawned on me when I was helping a friend to clear a garden at this stage, using fire. As the twigs and dried leaves burned, neat piles of trunks emerged. Most of the piles were aligned along the borders of the cleared area ready for fence-building. This is characteristic of Mengen gardening and swidden horticulture in general: what to an outsider may seem unorganized or even random acts are, in fact, highly sophisticated techniques and part of a well-organized process.<sup>15</sup> Some of the tree trunks and larger branches are piled into one or two rows that cut the cleared area lengthwise, usually from the “head of the garden” (M: *ngurkun*, *kun*: head)—the elevated side if the garden was located on a slope—to its “leg” (M: *ngurkain*, *kain*: leg). This row, called *kip*, divides the cleared area that would later be fenced into gardens (M: *ngur*), each held by an individual household. [Figure 1](#) shows the prototypical division, or plan, of a garden.

The individual garden, demarcated by the fence (M: *savnu*) and the *kip*, is divided further into neat rectangles with small tree trunks and branches. These rows consisting of single trunks are called *roung* (boundary in Mengen), and individual plots (M: *mkop*, *ngurmang*; lit. part of a garden) demarcated by the man who cleared the garden. If it is cleared in secondary or fallowing forest, meaning that the area had been cultivated before, the division of the garden follows the old *kip* and *roung*, which tend to be visible as slight elevations as people had placed garden debris and rubbish on top of them. Yet this use of tree trunks, branches, and debris is not only a way of making the division of a garden visible; it also had an ecological function. If the garden is located on a slope, the *roung*—and in some cases the *kip*—running across the slope forms an embankment which prevents erosion and fertile matter from being washed off by rain.

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15 See Panoff (1972, 44) on the organization of Mengen gardening and Bird Rose (2001, 109–110), Geertz (1970, 24), Scott (2012, 48–52), and Wagner (2008) on the sophistication of swidden horticulture in general.



**Figure 1:** Schematic division of a garden.

After a man has divided his garden into plots, his wife—or, in the case of an unmarried man, his mother—assigns the plots to individual women. How the plots are distributed principally depends on the household composition of the “mother” and the “father” of the garden. In the case of a married couple with children, most of the plots are divided between members of the household. The mother of the garden usually holds the greatest number of plots along with the unmarried daughters, while married daughters would only have individual plots, as they have husbands to clear gardens of their own. Unmarried male children could also be assigned plots, usually cultivated by female relatives, but in case of young children this is done so that they learn how to work in gardens and learn to “know” their food by taking care of the plants. The distribution of plots is, however, not confined to the household; plots are distributed according to a wide array of kinship and friendship ties. The mother of the garden ensures that widows or unmarried women close to her receive plots, although

married women are also given plots in gardens other than their own.

Individual plots are usually even-sized and the division into plots is also a way of keeping track of the number of plants cultivated in a garden—thus the mother of the garden also divides the area she occupies into individual plots. Women have to learn to estimate how much food they can extract from a garden without depleting it too early. Sometimes the mother of a garden assigns or names the plots she cultivates after her husband and sons, again to keep track of the amounts of food being grown and required by the family. While women have intimate knowledge of their gardens, plots, and plants, and can accurately estimate how much food they can extract at a given moment or under surprising circumstances—such as a mortuary feast—individual plants are not counted. If the garden is intended to provide food to be distributed in ceremonial exchanges that were part of life-cycle rituals, the division into plots is even more crucial for keeping track of food. In the case of a *kastom* garden, the women who receive plots are not allowed to harvest without the permission of the owners and are obliged to help the owners of the garden with food, an obligation that consists of 20 tubers (M: *parun*) per plot. After this requirement has been met, food can also be used for everyday reproduction—although in order to have a successful feast, women often wanted to see their gardens “empty” after it was over, as a sign that distribution had been abundant (see also Munn 1992, 88).

Women regularly ask for plots from others, so that the food they cultivate is not concentrated in a single garden as a safeguard against marauding pigs. If a pig raids a garden, “outside” plots ensure that not all the food is lost and also promotes the continuity of plants in different ways. Absent people, like young women who have gone to work on nearby oil palm plantations (see [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#)), are also assigned plots, which are then cultivated by their mothers or sisters to ensure that the plants of the worker do not die out. Even if it was not explicitly formulated by the women themselves, here again there was a close analogy with

children. Women who go to work on plantations often have to leave their children in the care of others—often with the very same relatives who take care of their food plants. Keeping an absent person's plants alive is important, because food and its distribution are central media through which the rural Mengen relate to each other. With her food plants dead, the woman returning from a plantation would find it hard to participate fully in the social life of the village and care for her relatives. Losing the plants would also be an emotional loss as they link the owner to other people, both past and present.

Keeping the stock of taro (and other plants) alive is not just a matter of subsistence but, as noted in the previous section, the food crops have emotional and historical value. Moreover, as Françoise Panoff (1972, 32) has noted, gardening among Jacquinot Bay Mengen in the past was necessary for the social success of men—that is, the gaining of prestige and supporters in the quest for leadership through displays of skill, strength, and the distribution of food. An abundant garden was a sign of one's skill and the strength of one's magic, and allowed for spectacular ceremonial gifts—which still feature the display of garden food. During my fieldwork, distributing large amounts of food as part of ceremonial gift-giving was highly valued and was certainly noted by others. Conversely, men who spent more time tending their cash crops—for the purposes of generating income, for example—were called lazy, because they “did not work,” and, following Nancy Munn (1992, 3, 11, 20) generated “negative value potentials.” In my interpretation, however, if the income was used for socially productive activities, cash-cropping would be classed as work (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Even though gardens tend to be dominated by one of the main staple foods, an abundant variety of plants are found on each plot. Most of them are food plants, but decorative and ritual plants—most notably cordyline (M: *el*, TP: *taget*)—are also included. Mengen gardens are diverse environments, effectively demonstrating Clifford Geertz's notion (1970, 16) that swidden gardens emulate the diversity of the forest in which they are cleared.

Indeed, swidden gardening, rather than dominating nature, has been described as creating favorable conditions for plants to grow (Ingold 2000, 86), also called “coaxing” (Maschio 1994, 141) or “generation” (Bird Rose 2001, 109). Mengen gardening is based on intimate knowledge of the various plants, their interrelations, the soil, and the climate; the different plants are not planted at random but, rather, after considering the properties of the individual plant and how well they grow together.

### Gardens and Land Use

As noted, landownership among the Wide Bay Mengen is vested in the exogamous matrilineal “vines,” or clans.<sup>16</sup> According to Mengen clan histories, the apical ancestress of each clan autonomously emerged in an area, often from a plant or a topographical feature; the Mengen landscape is scattered with such origin places (M: *plangpun*, *plang*: to emerge, *pun*: root). The clans claim land areas both on the basis of this mythical precedence and also first settlement in a vacant territory, as is common in Austronesian societies (see Fox 1996, 9; Panoff 1970, 177; Scott 2007, 7). Named subclans branch off from the “mother-clan” in the course of clan history (see [Chapter 2](#)), and their relations with landholding vary. In some cases, they hold and manage their respective areas and are largely autonomous in terms of land, as noted by Panoff (1970, 178) for the Jacquinot Bay Mengen. Hence the qualities of clans can also apply to subclans, as Richard Eves (2011, 353) has noted in relation to the Lelet of New Ireland. In other scenarios I encountered during my research, clans had decided to “act as one” and downplayed possible subclan divisions; different subclans all claimed to represent the senior group and were in fierce

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16 In terms of landholding practices, the Mengen closely resemble other Austronesian-speaking matrilineal societies of Island Melanesia. See Eves (2011, 353) and Foster (1995, 68, 72, 84) on the Lelet and Tanga of New Ireland; Goodenough (1962, 6) and Martin (2013, 31, 37) on the Lakalai and Tolai of New Britain; and Scott (2007) on the Arosi of Solomon Islands.

disagreement with each other; and members of the mother-clan sought to downplay the authority of subclan members regarding decisions over land. John Wagner (2007, 28) has noted this tendency elsewhere in PNG—namely, how landholding can shift simultaneously to larger and smaller units.

Yet, because of clan exogamy, strictly practiced by the Wide Bay Mengen,<sup>17</sup> no clan group can live alone on its land. Therefore, real social existence is only achieved when lineages intermarry and dwell together on the land (Scott 2007, 223; also Eves 2011, 359), and the land-using entities are necessarily composed of members of several clans. In practice, the most obvious land-using entity is the village or settlement (M: *mankun*). Michel Panoff (1970, 178) recounts how in pre-colonial times new villages were established either because a more favorable site was found or because a village split—perhaps due to accusations of sorcery. The founders of the new village would have had some connections to the land on which it was sited: for example, a man leaving his natal village after being accused of sorcery could establish a new settlement on his clan's land, and some of his relatives would follow him to the new site. Villages are necessarily multi-clan polities, to borrow Scott's (2007, 218) expression, since the founder's children belong to his wife's clan and subsequent migrants to the group would enlarge the village's "clan base." This is especially the case in the present

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17 During my fieldwork I recorded only a handful of cases where the exogamy rule was broken. Most of these were marriages between people from different clans, but of the same moiety. One case was unclear to begin with, since the wife came from another Mengen group, which assigned her clan to a different moiety than did the Wide Bay Mengen. Hence, according to the wife's group, the marriage did not break the exogamy rule, whereas according to the Wide Bay Mengen it did. I encountered only one case in which a man and a woman whose mothers were sisters had married—to the dismay of their clan and village members as in the Mengen kinship system they were siblings. People assigned the troubles of the couple to the incestuous quality of the marriage, noting it was doomed from the start. Aside from openly expressing their dismay and opposition, however, the relatives and community members could not prevent the couple living together.

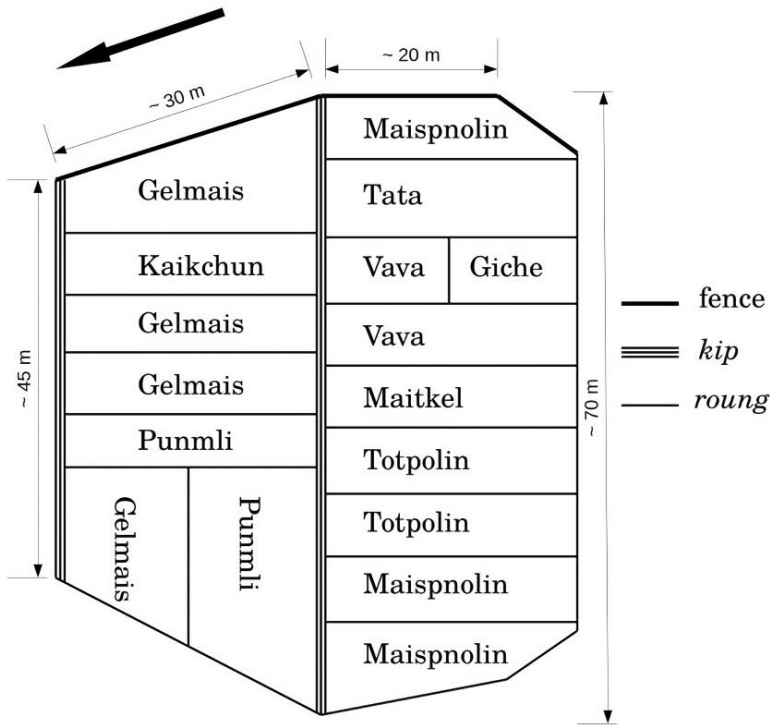
era as many villages have grown considerably in size due to the colonial policy of encouraging people to abandon small hamlets in the forest and move to villages on the coast or along main trails.

Each village has a territory of its own and commonly recognized boundaries with neighboring villages. Panoff (1970, 182) notes that among the Jacquinet Bay Mengen, land rights in hamlets were passed on “corporately” from generation to generation—not strictly based on descent, but to children of native residents who were members of the founding descent groups. At the time of my fieldwork, land rights in the villages followed similar relationships of filiation—that is, married couples built their houses on the same or adjacent sites as the parents of either spouse. Gardening rights were passed on similarly. First, gardens were usually collectively fenced, with plots given to individual households due to the small size of the initial hamlet, but in time, as the village grew, gardening areas also expanded (Panoff 1970, 185). While “administrative rights” were vested in the local descent group, the individual gardening rights were passed on from father to son (Panoff 1970, 186; 1976, 184; see also Scott 2007, 61; Eves 2011, 359).

Figures 2 and 3 describe a typical succession of gardening rights and the allocation of plots. The site was originally cleared by three men (marked with a “1” in Figure 3)—two brothers<sup>18</sup> and their sister’s son—of the same subclan, which also claimed to be the owner of the land area, with one of the men commonly being regarded as the founder of the village in question. The complexity and occasionally contingent manner with which the garden rights are passed on emerges clearly from analysis of the subsequent clearers of the garden. As one of the original clearers had no sons, his garden was cleared by his brother’s son on the second

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18 People of the same sex, generation, and moiety are sisters or brothers. In the case at hand, the men’s mothers were sisters with a single mother, and hence the men were “true brothers”—that is, of the same clan and lineage. People of the same sex, but of different moieties are “cross-cousins” or *ruvung* in Mengen (TP: *kasin sista*, *kasin brata*; S: *ros*). Cross-cousins of different sexes refer to each other as sisters and brothers.

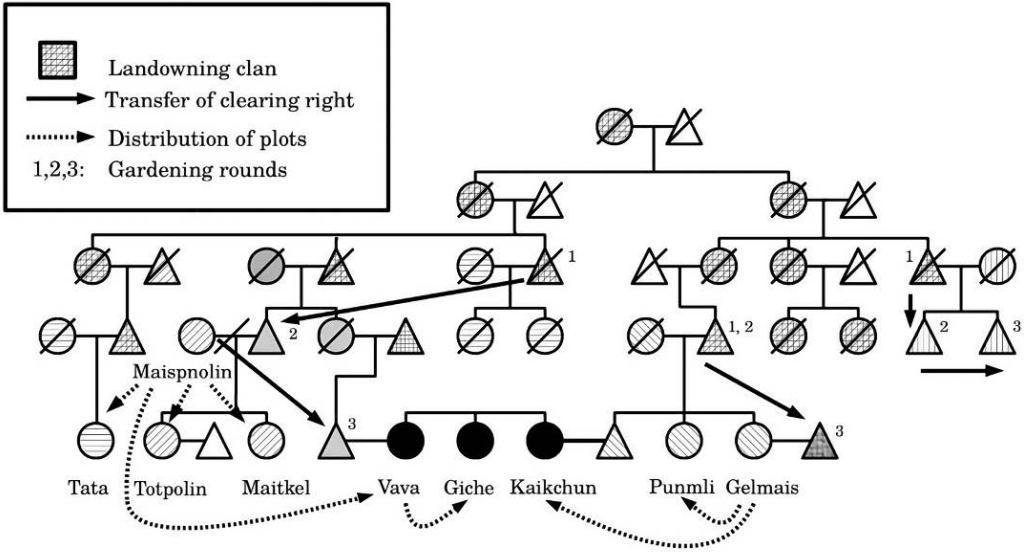


**Figure 2:** Plot division in a garden in Toimtop in 2011–12.

gardening round. During this second round (marked with a “2” in [Figure 3](#)), the son of the second founding member and that of the third original clearer—the nephew of the two brothers—also took part in clearing the garden—that is, they exercised their rights to clear it.

In the “third generation” of the garden (marked with a “3” in [Figure 3](#)), the garden “moves” even further away from the original group. The brother’s son, who cleared the garden for the second time, had left the village, but his former wife decided to cultivate the garden again, or “remember the garden” as the Mengen expression goes, and gave the task of clearing it to her ex-husband’s sister’s son. In the second case the garden was cleared again by a son of the original founder—although this time by a junior brother of





**Figure 3:** The transfer of gardening rights and plots in the Toimtop garden. In the genealogy, the different shadings represent different named clan groups; no shading means that the clan affiliation is not known.

the second clearer. In the third case, the original clearer passed the rights to the garden to his son-in-law, who had moved to the village after marriage. While the passing on of the rights to clear the garden follows multiple connections vertically, the distribution of plots follows similar connections horizontally. For example, in the case of Maispnolin, the ex-wife, plots were given to her daughters, the wife of the man who actually cleared the garden, and to a woman who is the daughter of the ex-husband's cross-cousin. Likewise, the daughter of one of the original clearers gave plots to her younger unmarried sister as well as to the wife of their brother.

The history of the garden was told to me by Margareth Gelmais, whose father Francis Paupa was the youngest of the original clearers. I had accompanied Norbertine Giche, a young woman who held a plot, to help her plant taro but also to measure the garden and inquire about plot distribution. Giche knew who held the plots in her garden, but did not know the specific history of the garden

area. As she planted her taro on the steep slopes, I wandered off to talk to the other women tending their plots, and Gelmais gave me a thorough, on-the-spot history. It was not unusual for people to remember who had first cleared a garden they were cultivating, but the longer the garden had been in use, the fewer the number of people who remembered the specific succession of land rights and who had done clearing in the intermediary periods.

In this instance the original clearers of the garden belonged to the landowning group—or at least the subclan claiming the area—but this is not necessarily always the case. The original clearers could be original residents of the village, affines of the founder, for example, or other people who have moved to the recent settlement—perhaps following old neighbor ties. They would have been allowed to clear gardens and so the passing on of rights would still be similar to the case outlined above. The above example also clearly shows how user rights to the land move away from the landowning group. Michel Panoff (1970, 1993) makes an interesting observation when noting that “in the process of time, the right-holding unit comes to be different from the original descent group,” with this new group resembling what Ward Goodenough (1962) called a “nodal kindred” characterized by a core consisting of the original descent group and surrounded by affines, patrilineal descendants, and “various protégés.” Panoff (1970, 1993) also notes that the Jacquinet Bay Mengen called this group *galiau* (“shield”), and that it was this precise group that was mobilized for warfare and feasts. In North Mengen *galiau* abbreviates into *rglie*, which I will use henceforth as the name for the “nodal kindred” group.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the term *rglie* was used occasionally as a translation for the English word “relative.”

Central to the formation of the *rglie* group is the rule of exogamy as well as the flexible inheritance of gardening land and hamlet

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19 My Wide Bay Mengen interlocutors noted that in North Coast Mengen words are abbreviated from other Mengen dialects. For example, origin place is *plangpun/palangpuna* and the sea is *plei/peleau* in the Wide Bay dialect of North Coast Mengen and Jacquinet Bay Mengen, respectively.

sites according to descent, filiation, and residence. Contingent factors, such as the number of female children who continue the descent group, are important and affect the “outcome”—namely, the composition of the land-using group. Note how, in the example above, the original descent group is represented by only two male elders and the current users of the garden represent seven distinct named descent groups, out of which five are subclans of two distinct clans. The same applies to the composition of villages in general—albeit on a larger scale—inasmuch as the clan composition of a single village is largely determined by how many children the women of the different clans have, whether they stay in the village, and so on. So, in practice—as in this case—the “core” based on the matrilineal descent group can be nearly nonexistent (if counted in terms of the number of living members), while the members “gravitating” around this core—to borrow Panoff’s (1976, 187) expression—dominate in numbers.

The ways in which gardens are passed on and individual plots are distributed invoke the *rglie* group. The gardens with their plot divisions are also visual indexes of the land-using group, much as the Korowai longhouses are indexes of their owners (Stasch 2003, 364). Panoff’s (1970, 193) notions of how certain tendencies—specifically, the importance of patrifilial ties and residence, along with matrilineal exogamy—invoke a new group can be taken further to note that mundane practices not only constitute groups, but kinship as well. While kinship and residential ties form the blueprint on the basis of which gardens are passed on and divided, contingent factors and personal friendship ties play a crucial role as well. Not all cross-cousins are “remembered” when a woman distributes plots in her garden, and a man might clear a garden with his brother-in-law instead of a brother from his clan. While certain proclivities, or “rules,” in Mungen sociality—such as patrifilial inheritance—are put into practice and produce certain kinds of groups such as the *rglie*, mundane practices also produce kinship on a more general level.

This is very nicely put by Françoise Barbira-Freedman (2018, 9) in her preface to a reprint edition of Françoise Panoff’s (1972)

work on Jacquinot Mengen gardens, in which she notes that there is a duality in the social time embedded in Mengen gardens, first, there is a cyclical renewal of the *galiau* (or *rglie* in Wide Bay) and clan ties, and a “transformative regeneration” of these ties through the nurturing of personally owned plants. Similarly, gardens in Wide Bay are inherited and distributed according to relevant kinship ties, but the sharing of gardens also produces the relevant ties by differentiating them from a “mass of relations,” because in Mengen society everyone could trace some sort of kinship connection to everyone else.<sup>20</sup> Barbira-Freedman’s (2018, 9) expression of “transformative regeneration” describes this process very well.

The Mengen landholding system consists of different layers of claims and types of ownership, a common feature of many Melanesian landholding systems which John Wagner (2007) calls mixed property systems. The communal ownership of land by the clans and subclans—justified by mythical emergence or precedence of settlement—forms the basis of the system (see Fox 1996, 9; Scott 2007; Eves 2011). The first clearing of primary forest, irrespective of the clan affiliation of the clearer, turns a patch of forest into a garden that is privately owned by the clearer (also Wagner 2007, 30). Precedence of emergence and settlement legitimizes landownership, whereas the precedence of clearing gardens establishes strong user rights over the gardens. As noted, this is typical for Austronesian societies, and notions of precedence can simultaneously justify contradicting tendencies—in this case clan ownership vs. multi-clan use of land (Fox 1996, 9). The first clearer then has more or less exclusive rights to clearing that garden, because he (as gardens are cleared by men) has conducted the initial “hard work” of clearing the large trees. This exclusive right, however, is vested only in the original clearer. After his death, the right to clear that garden again could quite flexibly be claimed by both his children and younger members of his descent group, like a sister’s

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20 Relatedly, see, for example, Jacka (2015, 127) on how “quotidian practices” of everyday life make kinship in Porgera, PNG.

sons—as seen in the example above. Likewise, the “ownership” of a garden means the right to garden on the particular site, while the land is owned by the respective clan group.

Gardening practices and land use point to an important dynamic in Mengen society—namely, relations between the land-owning clan and the people from different clans cultivating and dwelling on that land. As discussed in the Introduction, they are two central values that presuppose each other (e.g., Robbins 2004, 195–196). Each clan seeks to emphasize its relation to its land and the autonomy of the clan. But in order to reproduce the clan, its members have to establish productive relations with members of other clans through intermarriage, sharing land, and holding ceremonial exchanges. These two values, which are also modes of relating to the land, are necessary to the reproduction of Mengen society, but can at the same time be in tension with each other. The relation between these two is a *productive contradiction*, because in order to pursue one value—such as the continuity of the clan—one has to pursue the other: establishing productive relations, such as marriage, with members of other clans. However, pursuing one value too strongly—overemphasizing one’s ownership of the land, for example—might put at risk the other: peaceful communal life on the clan’s land (e.g., Wagner 1981, 118; Scott 2007, 201–202, 223). “Contradiction,” then, does not automatically mean conflict, but refers to an underlying source of tension between the conditions of the clan’s existence that account for much of the dynamics in Mengen land-use practices as well as social and political life in general.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have focused on the Mengen concept of *klingnan*, “work,” or *klingnan ti main*, “hard work.” For the Wide Bay Mengen, work is essentially socially productive activity—that is, activity that produces or maintains social relations through care and nurture. This hard work lies at the heart of Mengen conceptions of kinship and relatedness. Yet notions of shared blood are

also important to Mengen notions of relatedness. People from the same clan are regarded as sharing the same blood, and this should not be mixed, hence marriages within a clan are forbidden and considered incest. People share their father's blood as well, however, and consequently marriage with one's father's sister's children is also considered incestuous, even though purely in terms of clan-belonging they would be ideal marriage partners. Yet shared blood alone does not constitute relatedness in its full scale and with all its moral connotations: a father who has not provided for his children's needs is not really a father, whereas adoptive parents who have taken care of their children were without doubt real parents.

This and the numerous other examples mentioned in this chapter demonstrate how central the notions of care and nurture are to Mengen kinship, manifested most concretely in the acts of giving food and providing for someone's needs. If acts of giving food are the prototypical forms of care, cultivated food plants are the prototypical food; gardening, moreover, is the prototypical form of work. Food plants and gardening are, therefore, not just central to the livelihood of people; their meaning extends well beyond that, constituting them as central practices and media through which the Mengen relate to each other, and indexing people's relations with one another. For example, a woman's stock of taro, to which her relatives and friends contribute, illustrates the socially productive relations that are formative for the holder. Likewise, as the food plants have been tended for generations, they also materialize people's links to past. The same applies to gardens: they are shared among kin and friends in acts that emphasize certain relations within the vast web of relations that constitutes Mengen society. Not all relatives are given plots and not every cross-cousin is remembered. By working together in the gardens, people strengthen their mutual relations. The gardens and their divisions into neat plots are also visual indexes of the land-using group in the landscape.

Gardening exemplifies the central dynamics of land use and its ownership among the Mengen—specifically the relationship

between the landowning clan and the land-users. As the example of the passing on of gardens shows, land is owned by a matrilineal clan based on the precedence of emergence or settlement in the area. However, due to clan exogamy, the land-using group is always necessarily a multi-clan group whose members become rooted in the landscape through their hard work. This relation is a productive contradiction in Mengen society, although by this I do not mean that the relation amounts to conflict. On the contrary, that people cultivate land belonging to other clans is analogous to productive interrelations between clans, most notably marriages and ceremonial exchanges, but also the exchange of personal names. Rather, by “productive contradiction” I refer to a central tension that accounts for many of the dynamics of Mengen landholding and political life in general. As I will make clear in the following discussion, these dynamics were at play in Mengen engagements with natural resource extraction projects in different ways.

Gardening not only produces food and relatives, but also distinctly temporal environments. The close environment of the Wide Bay Mengen consists of gardens and fallows at different stages. The work people do on the land creates places and a thoroughly social landscape in which the actions and histories of people—both past and present—are materialized. In [Chapter 2](#) I turn to the place-making activities of the Mengen.





## CHAPTER 2

# Places of Origin, Villages of Belonging

## Living History in the Mengan Landscape

In 2012 I was attending an initiation ceremony in Wawas village. The three-day festivities were at their height, and the *avlu* associated with different initiates came to dance in front of the men's houses. After an *avlu* has danced, the men dancing with the *avlu* stomp their feet and shout the name of the *avlu*, thus revealing it to the spectators.

One of the figures was named after Telpuputkeis, a spectacular waterfall in the rainforest. The name means “Cutting the possum out of a rock” and it refers to a mythical story which recounts how the place was formed. The story, as I have learned it, tells how a spirit or “devil” (*kwa*) was at the waterfall where he saw the shadow of a possum sitting in the trees on the rocks. The spirit mistakes the shadow for the possum and starts chopping it with his ax, cutting the large holes that are still visible in the rocks. A man walks by and asks the spirit what he is doing, to which the spirit replies that he is trying to catch game, but as he is having no luck, he will eat the man instead. The man points to the possum, and when the spirit looks up and is startled, the man runs away.<sup>21</sup>

The *avlu* at the ceremony I attended depicted the story, with a humanoid figure holding an ax, river crabs on its sides, and a possum on top. When the men at the ceremony shouted “Telpuputkeis,” the man who had organized the initiation exclaimed angrily

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21 In another version I heard, the holes are cut by a man who similarly mistakes the shadow on the rocks for a possum.

that he should have been first to shout the name of his ancestor—the waterfall is located on land his clan claimed, which is why this particular *avlu* came to dance at his children’s initiation.

This brief account illustrates how for the Mengen the landscape is an important materialization of personal and group histories. People see in the landscape traces of each other’s productive activities, namely “work” as the Mengen understand it, and this makes it socially valuable (see also Kirsch 2006, 11). In this chapter I examine how the Mengen, through their productive activities, create a thoroughly historical landscape, and how the places that comprise it are also important expressions of value.

Work, as activity that creates and maintains valued social relations, is the basis of Mengen conceptions of relatedness. By the same token, all activity that produces and maintains valued social relations, is classed as “work”—hence, work is a key source of value for the Mengen. Care and nurture, expressed especially in acts of giving and feeding, are important, if not the most important, forms of work. As I described in [Chapter 1](#), food and gardens are important media through which these relations are acted out, as well as key expressions and objectifications of value (e.g., Marx [1867] 1976, 142, 149, 225; Turner 2008, 47, 53; Stasch 2009, 14, 19–20). The socially productive activities of people, such as gardening, establishing villages, or burying the dead, also leave visible traces on the environment. Thus, in the course of their social life, people make places (see also Scott 2007, 167, 213). Given the importance of “work,” it is no surprise that the Wide Bay Mengen are very attentive to the signs of it (also Kirsch 2006, 11, 194–195; Halvaksz 2020, 6, 51), which are also important materializations and expressions of value. The Mengen landscape and places in it are not merely inert media acted upon by humans: they consist of living organisms; are fashioned by different forces; and *sai*,<sup>22</sup> or “spirits,” and other nonhuman persons are said to reside in them.

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22 Some places are said to be inhabited by the *sai* (TP: *masalai*), who may appear to humans as snakes and later in human form in dreams. The spirits are powerful in the sense that they can cause illness, but to my

The near environment of the Wide Bay Mengen villages is a patchwork of gardens, fallows, and secondary forest in its different stages. What to an outsider looks like undifferentiated forest is, for those who live there, an environment made by, and speaking of, human activities. These places constitute the Mengen landscape, which is indeed “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them,” and “a pattern of activities ‘collapsed’ into an array of features,” to borrow Tim Ingold’s (2000, 193, 198) definition, or a process, as noted by Eric Hirsch (1995, 22). Abandoned villages are visible to the attentive onlooker in the shape of domestic trees planted by former inhabitants, although the sites have returned to primary forest. Even old and more distant forests are full of signs of past and present activity: paths, old burial sites, places where people had gathered house materials, and so forth. In other places, the visible features are said to be the outcome of activity of non-human persons, such as spirits. These signs of work are “memories” (M: *rnagil, gil*: to know) of people, bringing to mind the individuals associated with them. There is an importantly visual aspect in this (see also Descola 2016; Demian 2021a, 134–135). The existence of places is proof of the events that were said to have happened there (Rumsey 2001b, 27) and to see was to know, as in similar Austronesian societies (see Foster 1995, 175). This came nicely together in the Mengen term for landscape, *glanpapa*,

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spirits are powerful in the sense that they can cause illness, but to my understanding they are not inherently benevolent or malevolent toward humans. Likewise, I was told that the spirits, or powers, of the large Mevlou River broke the bridges constructed by the plantation company, and stones inhabited by spirits broke bulldozers of logging companies. These spirits were referred to in Tok Pisin sometimes as “nature,” for example in saying that the river is inhabited by *wanpela* [one] *nature*. I also heard that some areas had been inhabited by spirits in the past, but that these had resided, for example due to “development” and increased human presence. In some mythical stories people end up in the villages of spirits, for example when falling into a pond. The topic of spirits is important and related to people’s relation with their environment, but it is also one that is beyond the scope of this book and my abilities.

translated to me as “how things draw themselves out clearly when you look at them”.<sup>23</sup>

In this chapter I examine how the Mengen make their landscape, how time and place intersect in it (Hau’ofa 2008, 63, 66, 68), and how places become one of the concrete media through which the Mengen relate to each other (see Munn 1992, 17; Stasch 2009, 19–20). I start by focusing on how the Mengen organize their horticulture in time by following the cycles of particular trees, thus dividing the year, dominated by the dry and rainy seasons, into several seasons during which different gardening tasks are done. The “tree calendar,” as the Mengen called it, is a concrete example of the temporality of the Mengen landscape. It shows how various ecological temporalities, such as the growth of certain trees and food plants, intersect or converge with human temporal trajectories (see also Stasch 2003, 369, 381). During my fieldwork, the tree calendar was an important part of Mengen daily life, as people conceptualized and coordinated their tasks according to it. Moreover, it is based on careful observation of plants and their interdependencies, serving as an example of the extensive botanical and ecological knowledge of the Mengen.

Rural Wide Bay Mengen do not only coordinate their gardening activities according to a temporal landscape; through their gardening activities, they also create it. In the second section of this chapter, I examine how gardening practices create different types of forests and how the Mengen conceptualize these. Mengen forest terminology is closely related to gardening and illustrates how the relationship of the Wide Bay Mengen with their forest, or different kinds of forests, is a thoroughly social one. Gardens, new fallows, and fallows that have turned into robust secondary and primary forest not only form an ecological continuum in which cultivated gardens became forest again, but are also a continuum of human presence. Gardens and villages primarily index

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23 The term may very well be a neologism. Nonetheless, it illustrates well the visual aspects of the Mengen landscape. (*M: gel:* to see, to look; *pa:* to draw, to write.)

contemporary relations, while the fallows—as well as old places in the primary forest—are signs of older relationships that people had with each other and the land. These places remind people of deceased relatives and thus hold emotional value. In this sense, the places indexing old relations are also concrete points through which people relate to the past, which as anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa (2008, 66) notes is located “in front” in Austronesian societies. The past is concretely present in the places, which tell about movement and belonging (Hau'ofa 2008, 72; Demian 2021a, 119). As Hau'ofa (2008, 73) further notes, when places are important materializations of relations, histories are read by knowing the land- and seascape (also Halvaksz 2020, 52–53). Like the food plants and gardens discussed in [Chapter 1](#), the Mengen landscape is an important medium of relations, but this does not mean it is inert. On the contrary, like individual food plants, the Mengen landscape is living and alive with the movement of people, plants, and animals, like as Sophie Chao (2022, 36–37) observed among the Marind of West Papua.

People's relations with these places of importance are not static. In their daily activities people engage with them, for example by clearing the sites for gardens, all part of people's ongoing relations with each other and the land. Therefore, these are not neutral activities: planting trees or clearing gardens could be seen as productive acts in themselves and as orientations toward future productive relations—for example, when clearing a garden for food to be distributed at rituals. However, the same acts could also be seen as claims to the land or, in some cases, even as attempts to erase other people's claims to it. Engagements with the places that constitute the Mengen landscape are often expressions of productive contradiction—namely, those between the values of clan autonomy and interrelations between the clans. These two values also have their spatial equivalents in the Mengen landscape. Clans are rooted in the land, especially through their places of origin, while villages, abandoned settlements, and gardens emplace both the landowning clan as well as other inhabitants. The productive contradiction of pursuing these two values accounts for the

dynamism of Mengen landowning practices, and Mengen political life generally. In the final section of this chapter, I examine how these two categories are emplaced and how they feature in both Mengen clan histories and questions of landholding.

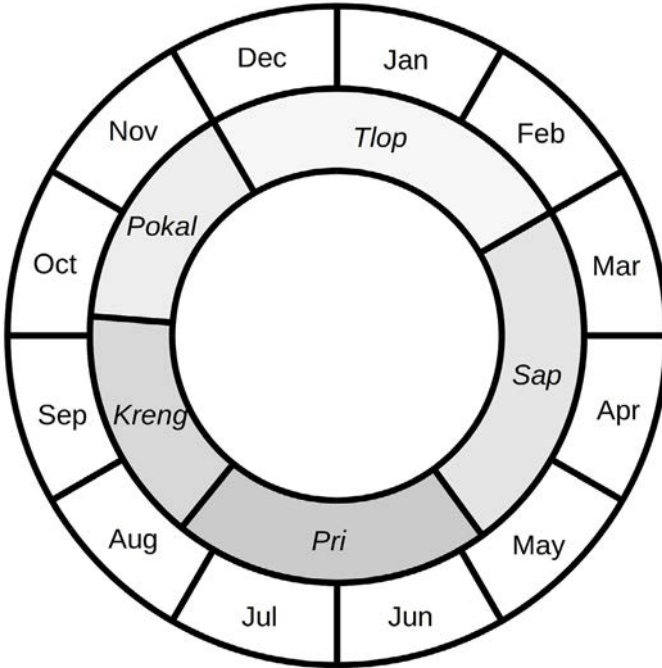
### The Mengen Tree Calendar

The tropical climate of Wide Bay is most notably divided into two main seasons of about equal length, the dry and the rainy. The Wide Bay Mengen call the dry and rainy seasons *kae koureta* (“only sun (*kae*)”) and *wind*, respectively.<sup>24</sup> The seasons are most strongly associated with their extreme periods: November to January for the dry season and June to August for the rainy season. The intermediary times are characterized by more or less gradual shifts from one extreme to another. The seasons dominate activities inasmuch as planting is not possible at the height of the rainy season and the rough seas caused by the strong winds of the period make traveling by boat difficult—and dangerous. However, there is no major shift in livelihood practices or dwelling corresponding with the contrast of seasons (M. Panoff 1969c, 154).

The two seasons provide the most general division of time, but the Mengen conception of seasons is much more sophisticated. Specific gardening activities are done according to the so-called tree or village calendar (TP: *kalender bilong ples*), in which the yearly cycle is represented according to the flowering and leaf phases of five index trees (see [Figure 4](#)). (The notion of an “index tree” is that of Michel Panoff (1969c, 156), who documented this calendar in use in the 1960s among the Mengen of Jacquinot and Waterfall Bay.) During my fieldwork, the Wide Bay Mengen coordinated their gardening work according to this schedule, having systematized their calendar in the early 2000s so that it could be taught in elementary schools. This was part of a national education reform initiative in which elementary schools began teaching

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<sup>24</sup> See M. Panoff (1969c, 154) for a comparison with the Jacquinot Bay Mengen.



**Figure 4:** The index tree phases according to months.

in local languages. In this version, the phases of the index trees are adjusted in terms of Western calendar months, which are more generally used for time reckoning. However, people followed the index tree phases—in Wide Bay Mengen known as *vekmein* (*vek*: tree, *mein*: phase, “round”)—in their day-to-day gardening work, and spoke about their work in terms of them. People confirmed, for example, that a garden being cleared was to be planted with taro of the *sap*, one of the index trees, or that during another tree phase, *pri*, the yam harvest would begin, and so on. The five index trees used by the Wide Bay Mengen to define the phases are:

- *Tlop* (*Euodia elleryana*; also *Melicope elleryana*): The phases of the *tlop* tree index the time roughly between December, when its distinctive red flowers appear, and February. The height of the dry season, occurring in January, is sometimes called *tlop maengngan* (heat of the *tlop*), while the end of this

period around February is called *tlop kan*, as the seed (*kan*) of the *tlop* is clearly visible. During the flowering of the *tlop*, lesser and greater yam is planted, to be harvested around September–October. Meanwhile, in December–January taro is also planted. This constitutes a “slow” season for taro, which is ready for harvest from around October until December. Yearly festivals (M: *pnaeis*, TP: *kastom*, also *lukara*) are held during the season of *tlop* as the main food, taro, is ready for harvest.

- *Sap* (*Alphitonia marcocarpa*): *Sap* is used as an index for the period lasting from March to April, with *sap lvun* (the leaf of *sap*) referring more specifically to April. The *sap* phase is still part of the dry season, although is characterized by light rains. During *sap*, taro is planted, which will be ready for harvest around October–November. The taro planted during *sap* is often transplanted from yam gardens planted during *tlop*.
- *Pri* (*Erythrina indica*): The start of the *pri* phase is identified differently by different people, either starting in May or June, but in most accounts *pri* is associated with June and July, which could also be referred to as *pri chu chumtan* (*pri* is leafless). The rainy season starts at this time. Both taro and yam can be planted around the beginning of *pri*, although it was regarded as a “minor” season for both. The taro-planting season of *pri* usually merges with *sap*. In this phase, Yam planted during the later *kreng* phase starts to ripen and becomes ready for harvest. During the height of the rainy season no planting is usually done.
- *Kreng* (*Pterocarpus indicus*): *Kreng mukmguang* means that the *kreng* starts to flower and “leads” (*mukmguang*) other trees, which start to flower later. This occurs by the end of August and into September, when the rains are diminishing. The season of *kreng* continues into October when the rainy season is over and the weather is “good”—that is, moving toward the dry season. *Kreng* is the main season for planting yam. The yam gardens are readied during August and September and the seed yam brought from the *kreng* gardens of the previous year. Yam planted during *kreng* is ripe around June–July (see *pri*). While



the yearly ceremonies are usually held in January, *kastom* can also be “played” with yam, and in such a case the ceremonies would be held in September–October. Sometimes minor prestations are held with yam at this time, anticipating the actual ceremonies in December–January. These minor prestations are “shadows” (M: *koun*, shadow, spirit, image, reflection) of the actual ones.

- *Pokal* (*Albizzia falcataria*): The flowering of the *pokal* tree occurs during November when the dry season is well under way. While identified as one of the index trees, many people with whom I spoke tended to leave *pokal* out of their accounts and merged the season with *kreng* and *tlop*, respectively. During *pokal* yam and taro could be planted and gardens were cleared for the yam and taro seasons of *tlop*.

The index trees flower once a year at different times and in particular phases of their cycle, meaning that flowering coincides with, and thus indexes, the Mengen’s 12 lunar months (M. Panoff 1969c, 156). The calendar is not, however, strictly lunar, and the phases of the index trees correspond only very roughly with the lunar months, for example due to the late flowering of certain trees for meteorological reasons (M. Panoff 1969c, 156, 158). It is precisely this flexibility that has, according to Michel Panoff (1969c, 156), made the addition of a 13th month to the calendar unnecessary. In the Wide Bay Mengen calendar, the *vekmein* merge into each other and overlap. This also explains my interlocutors’ different accounts, which at first startled me. Because the main food crops also have several planting seasons, different interlocutors explained the system in a variety of ways. Thus, the planting of yam, occurring in November–December, could be indexed with two trees, for example.

Variations of the tree calendar are used by all the Mengen groups (M. Panoff 1969c, 156) and similar systems are common throughout New Guinea. The Rauto of Southwestern New Britain have a division of lunar months and a system for coordinating gardening activities, which can—if needed—be correlated with

the growth phases of three tree species. The Rauto index trees also feature in the Mengen system (M: *tlop*, *kreng*, and *pri*), indexing roughly the same periods (Maschio 1994, 179). The northern neighbors of the Mengen, the Sulka, use the same index trees as well (Schneider 1954, 284; Schneider only mentions two species). Even though similar tree calendars were and are used throughout New Britain, they do not seem to form a large system of interdependencies, as Fred Damon (1990, 11, 13) has claimed for the societies of the northern part of the inter-island exchange system known as the Kula ring. While the different New Britain societies have been and are still in close contact with each other, their tree calendars do not form an overarching system that would, for example, prescribe certain ritual sequences or a “division of labor” related to it in the different societies (cf. Damon 1990, 13). Nor do the differences between the tree calendars seem to be a set of “systemic transformations” developed in relation to each other (Damon 1990, 13, 226). Rather, the differences between the systems seem to stem from adaptation to local environments. Michel Panoff (1969c, 156) mentions how in the mountain areas the succession of seasons was more gradual, which is why the inland Mengen seasons were slightly different at the time of his research. Similarly, my friends noted how during the same tree phases different work phases ought to be carried out in the coastal and elevated areas.

The division of the year into *vekmein* constitutes a sophisticated way of dividing the principal meteorological seasons into distinct phases for the planting and harvesting of the main food plants. My interlocutors did not know how the system had evolved, nor were there any accounts of its emergence, but it is clear that it is based on very careful observation of trees, their relation to the growth of food plants, and the yearly cycle. It is an example of the impressive knowledge the rural Mengen have of their environment. People noted that, if the system were observed carefully (and nothing unusual such as droughts occur), food would be abundant throughout the year. For example, when a garden is being planted, the clearing of new ones for the next season or crop

should be started, as the clearing and fencing might take considerable time—usually at least a month. The need for seamless continuity in the flow of gardens was also used as an explanation for the gendered division of labor. One man noted that women disapproved of men doing the planting and weeding (typically seen as women’s tasks), because by the time one garden was being weeded, the men should be clearing a new area for the next planting season. Today, irregularities such as overtly long rainy seasons or droughts raise concerns about effects of climate change, and how well index trees phases will continue to match the growth phases of food plants in the future.

Besides the tree calendar, people use plants more widely to conceptualize time. In an interview on the history of Toimtop, Otto Tongpak, an elder and the son of the village’s founder, used the growth of coconut palms to recall how, for many years, the villagers hid in the forest during the Second World War:

The war started and we fled into the forest. I think we must have been something like three years in the forest, because when we came back, the coconut palms were ready to carry fruit. (6 Jul 2007)

While trees are a way of observing the flow of time and conceptualizing seasons, for the Mengen they also serve as metaphors for history (M. Panoff 1969c, 164). Like the growth of a tree, history was seen by the Jacquinot Bay Mengen as progressive, and events, such as branching, as irreversible. This conception also applied to the histories of clans which, as already noted, were called vines and vine-branches in the vernacular. This kind of “botanic metaphor ... that combine[s] notions of growth and succession,” as James Fox (1996, 8) observes, is common among the Austronesian peoples to which the Mengen also belong.

### Gardening and Place-Making

The Mengen landscape has other temporal features—besides the yearly cycle as indexed by particular trees—which are also con-

nected to the practices and work of the Mengen, but in a different way. Gardening and dwelling practices, as active engagements with the environment, create places that are visible in the Mengen landscape—and constitute it. Gardens are left fallow after one harvest and the near environment of the Wide Bay Mengen villages is a patchwork of differently aged fallow-forests. Along with gardens and fallows, there are also abandoned villages, burial sites, and other signs of people’s productive activities that have created a temporally many-layered landscape.<sup>25</sup>

There are several temporal trajectories in Mengen gardens. The food plants in the garden require weeding and pruning at different times and stages of growth. The lifespan of a given garden is largely determined by the main food plant and its maturing for harvest, after which it is left to fallow. This creates an ever-changing landscape of gardens and fallows at their different stages. For example, when a yam garden matures, the taro planted in it are uprooted and transplanted into newly cleared gardens. Later the yam is harvested and seed yam is left in “bush-houses” (M: *rabail*) near the fallows that were to be cleared for yam gardens. Like the *vekmein*, which seamlessly merge into one another, there is no absolute distinction between a mature and an abandoned garden, but letting the garden become fallow is a gradual process. Gardens are never planted with only one crop, and different food plants mature at different times and are thus not harvested together. Final harvesting takes place as the fences start to deteriorate and the species associated with bush fallow start to take over the garden.

The importance of horticulture is evident in the forest terminology of the Wide Bay Mengen. The general term for forest, *gurlon*, covers both primary and secondary forest of different kinds. *Gurlon*, however, is divided into four terms referring to forests of distinct types and ages:

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25 For “landscape” as the deliberate transformation of the visual features of the environment, see Descola (2016).

1. *Papli*: encompasses mature gardens, a garden left fallow, and secondary forest that begins to grow in abandoned gardens. *Papli* is recognized as a former gardening area, and no new gardens can be cleared at this stage.
2. *Mlap*: secondary forest growing in abandoned gardens. *Mlap* is distinguished from *papli* by the size and type of trees. Certain tree species start to grow and displace species typical to immediate secondary growth, or *papli*. In contrast to *papli*, *mlap* starts to resemble “real forest” and trees grow into substantial specimens. *Mlap* is still recognized as former garden, and traces of human work—such as tree stumps and ax marks—are visible. *Papli* becomes *mlap* in about 7–20 years, depending on various factors that influence the growth of trees. At this stage, new gardens can be cleared: there is no rule in terms of for how many years *mlap* must be left before being cleared for gardens, rather it depends on the size of the trees, and this varies from area to area. To my knowledge, fallows younger than 5 years should not be cleared.
3. *Lom*: primary forest. *Lom* is not regarded as a former garden, but some of my interlocutors noted that if left unused for a “very long time,” *mlap* will turn into *lom*. The *lom* is distinguished from *papli* and *mlap* through the type and size of the trees: the trees are of different species and considerably larger than in a secondary forest. Traces of work—such as gathered plants, but also trails (*gue*), abandoned villages (*knau*) distinguished by domestic plants or earth oven stones, and burial sites (*o*)—are visible in the forest.
4. *Lom son*: the definitions for this category were somewhat vague, but it refers to forest growing on mountain ranges, with poorer vegetation due to the less fertile land and poor fauna. In some definitions *lom son* was distinguished from other types of forest due to the lack of any (visible) human activity. One person noted that if people were to start using this kind of forest, it would change into *lom*. Another considered the main distinction to be the different flora. The distance from the everyday environment is also a factor. Some people noted that *lom son*

are the “blue ranges” visible far away (as opposed to the more proximate forest characterized by a different shade of green<sup>26</sup>). The counterpart of *lom son*—in the opposite direction, toward the sea—is *mail son*, the faraway ocean, which is characterized similarly by another shade of blue.

As is evident in the forest terminology, the Mengen emphasize the importance of work (see [Chapter 1](#)) and its visibility in the environment. The two terms for secondary forest refer to garden-ing areas and are directly linked to horticulture, as these types of environments would not exist without human action. The terms *ngur* (garden), *papli*, and *mlap* are partly overlapping and form a gradient. A garden where harvesting has started may be called *papli*, while a secondary forest ready to be cleared again (*mlap*) can be also referred to as somebody’s *papli*. My interlocutors thus emphasized that fallows are always *somebody’s* fallows (see [Chapter 1](#) on landholding). In contrast, secondary forest that has been logged but not cultivated is not *papli* or *mlap*, but rather *tlanglis* (M: *tlang*: to fell, *lis*: to decompose), forest cleared for no apparent reason (TP: *katim bus nating*). While *lom* is not an anthropogenic forest type, it incorporates a wide range of visible human action. However, in terms of horticulture, *lom* is “empty” and whoever clears a garden in it retains further rights to cultivate the area.

Botanists’ classification and description of the forests near Toimtop village overlap with Mengen classification. Pius Piskaut and Phille Daur (in Mack, Ewai, and Watson 2007, 21) distinguish between early secondary forest with tree heights of up to 10 m, and advanced secondary forest with the canopy layer at 20–25 m and trees occasionally as high as 30 m. In primary forest the canopy layer is generally at 20–30 m with trees occasionally as high as 40 m. Botanists divide primary forest into three types: upper and lower lowland hill forests (at elevations of up to 220 m asl), and *Dillenia* (230–400 m asl) and mixed *Castanopsis* forests (400 m asl

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26 Note that in Mengen the colors green and blue are referred to with the same word.

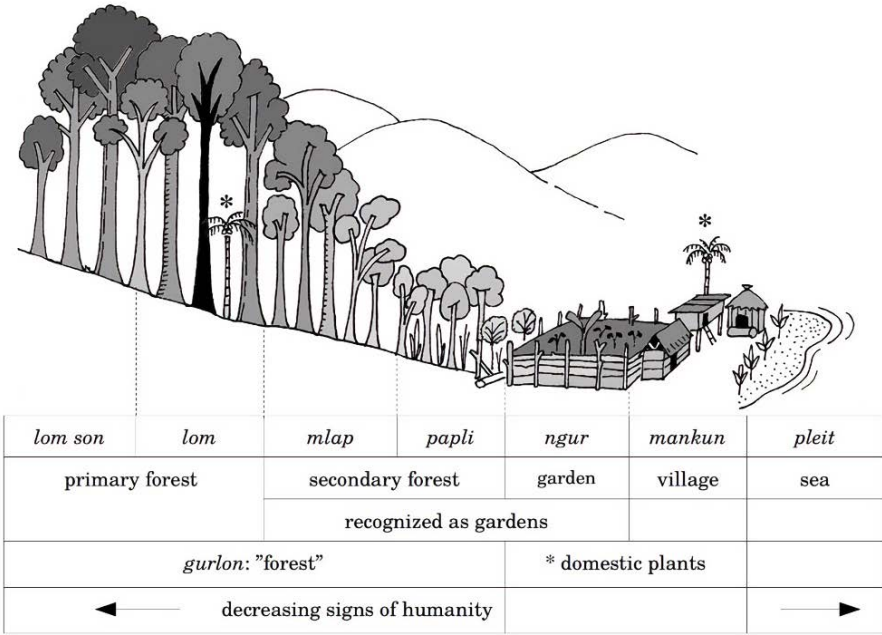
and upwards) that grow on ridge tops with shallow and nutrient-poor brown forest soils (Piskaut and Daur, in Mack, Ewai, and Watson 2007, 20).

Taking the village as a starting point, the fallow succession and different types of forests can be schematically represented in relation to time and the gradual diminishing of the signs of human presence (see [Figure 5](#)).<sup>27</sup> The village and the surrounding gardens are the most evidently human areas. As the gardens start to become fallow, signs of human activity decrease. In the primary forest (to which the fallows return if left uncleared), signs of human presence decrease yet further: the forest itself is not anthropogenic in the same way as secondary forest, but domestic trees, oven stones from abandoned village sites, and so on provide evidence of past usage. Finally, the faraway forest, the *lom son*, is characterized by the absence of signs of human activity. In this sense the gradient of human presence is also temporal. The *papli* is young bush which, over time, grows into more robust secondary forest and finally back into *lom*, primary forest, a temporal gradient that is connected to the signs of human presence and the social relationships they index, according to anthropologist Thomas Strong (personal communication, 2008). The villages and gardens index contemporary and present social relations, whereas older fallows and abandoned villages highlight past relations. Moreover, ancestral origin places in the forest relate the origin of the matrilineans, which I will discuss further in the next section.

Like taro associated with the people who tend it, the signs of people's socially productive activities—or work—in the landscape materialize personal histories (also Maschio 1994, 180; Kirsch 2006, 189; Halvaksz 2020, 53–54). These places evoke memories of

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27 I have consulted a biological survey (Mack, Ewai, and Watson 2007, 20, 47–49) conducted in Toimtop village as a reference for tree profiles and relative heights. The sections on forests and botany were written by botanist Pius Piskaut and plant ecologist Phille Daur from the University of Papua New Guinea. My schematic (Figure 5) representation is not an accurate natural scientific depiction, but I have sought to represent the changes in tree heights in careful accordance with the biological survey.



**Figure 5:** Mengen forest terminology.

those people—both past and present—who created them through their activities, and are thus not just about recollecting past activities: remembering other people often has a strong emotional component to it. Maria Kosmilgne recounted to me an experience she had with one of her grandfathers:

once we were clearing a garden on an abandoned village, he sat down and cried. It's bush now! But people still know this area. And he said he recalled his mothers and uncles from before, because when I felled that tree, a *rin*,<sup>28</sup> it smelled. ... He asked me: "Do you smell that? That tree they planted in front of the men's house." And he said to me, "You go and plant that garden." And

28 The *rin* (*Euodia anisodora*) is a fragrant plant often planted in villages, because it had ritualistic uses and because of its aesthetic and decorative properties. In time the shrub grows into a tree.



once I had done it, I gave him a piece of shell money, a pig, and a heap of food. And another one [a *paik* shell valuable] I gave to an old grandmother of mine. I compensated the two like that. I made the two cry and made them mourn and think back, because in the past they lived there, then the government came and we came down [to the coast] and now we go back to work our gardens there. (14 Aug 2011)

This quote raises several important issues. First, while the visual aspects of places are central in the visual epistemology of the Mengen (see Foster 1995), other senses are also important. In this story it is the smell of the *rin*, a domestic plant and an index of people's activities, that triggers the memory of the abandoned village, the men's house and the people who had lived there. In another similar example, a young man told me how he had gone to look for an abandoned village his grandmother had told him about. Knowing only the approximate location, he finally found the village because of the scent of the domestic plants. This brings us to the other important consideration: the places in themselves are not the whole story, so to speak; their full social significance unfolds only when people know the area and its history. This knowledge is passed on both by visiting the places and through narration—in these two cases by elders telling their younger relatives about abandoned hamlets, where they were located, and who had lived there. This intertwining of places and history is common for Austronesian societies (see Fox 1997a; Hau'ofa 2008): for the Rauto the recitation of place names and the stories connected to them are a social history (Maschio 1994, 182), and this is also the case for the Mengen.

Thomas Maschio (1994, 181) notes that among the Rauto, the trees people had planted could be called memorials, as indeed they are by the Mengen. Signs of people's productive activities, such as trees, are called *rnagil* (M: *gil*, to know) and were points of active remembering—to paraphrase Debbora Battaglia (1990, 10). When I was preparing to leave Wide Bay, a friend of mine suggested that I plant a fruit tree, so that people could remember

me by it. In Wide Bay Mengen, like in Rauto, remembering uses spatial imagery (Maschio 1994, 182), as the word for it, *longlili*, literally means “going (walking) back in thoughts” (*lomtan*: thought, *la*: to walk; *glili*: to return). In the quote above, Maria Kosmilgne says that she “compensated” her elders for making them cry and “mourn.”<sup>29</sup> The use of “compensated” does not imply that Kosmilgne had done wrong. On the contrary, her grandfather had approved her family’s clearing the garden on the site of the abandoned village (which was, moreover, located on land that their clan claimed). Rather, it was an acknowledgment of their sorrow and the work of people in the past.

Finally, the Kosmilgne quote illustrates how, in the pursuit of “legibility” (Scott 1998), the colonial government wanted the Mengen to leave their small, dispersed hamlets and move into existing hamlets along the coast and main trails. This process took place gradually and people continued to move between their inland settlements and coastal villages, coming down to the coast for church and the government-appointed communal work day on Monday before returning. Likewise, in some cases people who had already permanently settled on the coast returned to their inland hamlets to perform their children’s initiations—on their own clan land. The last forest villages of the Wide Bay Mengen were abandoned in the 1970s. While the gathering of people on the coast increased the size of the villages, the logic of their composition—a mix of people from several clans—did not. At the time of my fieldwork, people in the southern Wide Bay Mengen areas had resettled old inland villages as new roads were established in the area in the course of logging operations (see [Chapter 3](#)). This resettlement was most probably also a way of enforcing claims to land in disputes over ownership of the area that had arisen in consequence of the logging.

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29 The Tok Pisin idiom *wari*, which is derived from the English “worry” and which I translated in the quote as “mourn,” means here sorrowful, nostalgic longing (see also Maschio 1994).

Given that the Mengen value socially productive activity highly, as noted in [Chapter 1](#), it is not surprising that the traces of people's activity make the landscape socially valuable (see also Kirsch 2006, 11). As the quote from Maria Kosmilgne shows, the relationship with the socially meaningful landscape and its scattered places of significance is not static or confined to the past. On the contrary, it is one of active engagement. Jamon Halvaksz (2020, 71) notes how, through their agricultural work, the Biangai of PNG create and maintain their relationships with places; his observation can be applied to the Mengen as well. In the above example, an abandoned village was cleared for a garden and the appearance of the place was transformed. Moreover, after the harvest, the garden was left to become fallow and turn into forest again. With the ceremonial gift prestation, the clearers of the garden publicly acknowledged the emotional and historical ties of their relatives to the place—thereby also upholding the memory of the site as a past village. Here one can appreciate Hau'ofa's (2008, 66, 72) notion of how the past is “in front” and alive in the landscape.

The productive activities of people rooted them in the land and left a testimony of their lives on the landscape. This is an inevitable result of Mengen social life, but like all social life, it has also its tensions. Rootedness in the land is not only about emotional and historical connections to it, but for the Mengen there are also claims of various kinds over it (see [Chapter 1](#)). Because of this, people occasionally hope that others will not be attached to the land they themselves covet and that their presence will not be visible in the landscape. As Simon Harrison (2004, 147) has noted for the Avatip of the Sepik area of PNG, sometimes the landscape remembers too much. In a society where knowledge of the past is a value whose circulation should be controlled and carefully restricted, people do not want the landscape to remember more than they do (Harrison 2004, 147). Because of this, my interlocutors sometimes also deliberately sought to erase the traces of others. In the following section, I focus more closely on these questions of placed histories and landholding.

## Placed Histories and Relating to the Land

Along with the histories of individual people, important categories such as the autochthonous clan and the land-using group are inscribed in the Mengen landscape. In the final section of [Chapter 1](#), I noted how landownership among the Wide Bay Mengen is vested in matrilineal clans, which are associated with their places of origin (also Panoff 1970, 177). This cosmological link between the people and the land, however, does not translate into a clear-cut local community. Members of the landowning clan and those who actually inhabit its land are likewise emplaced by the work performed in villages and gardens. Few people live on their own clan land, and thus land use is conceptualized as a reciprocal relationship between the clans, much like intermarriages or ceremonial gifts. This is a common dynamic in the matrilineal societies of Melanesia (e.g. Panoff 1970, 177, 194; Scott 2007, 223; Eves 2011, 353; Martin 2013, 31, 37). As already mentioned, the autonomy of the landowning clan and socially productive relations between clans are also two central values. Pursuing these two values, as noted in the Introduction and [Chapter 1](#), produces both a productive contradiction in Mengen society, and the dynamism of Mengen political life in general and that of the landholding practices in particular. The two categories—landowners and users—have their spatial equivalents, namely origin places and abandoned villages.

Like in many Austronesian societies, clans claim land both on the basis of mythical precedence (being the area where their apical ancestress autonomously emerged) and first settlement into a vacant territory, as noted in [Chapter 1](#) (see also Fox 1996, 9; Scott 2007, 7). Some Mengen clans also have a *vtongtata*, or “abode of the dead” (see Panoff 1970, 177; also Laufer 1955, 62; Rascher 1904, 26)—namely, places to which spirits of clan members are said to return upon death. The term *vtongtata* refers to a thunder-like bang that marks and reveals the return of the spirit to its place. According to some, this means a return to the clan’s spirit place, although one elder denied the existence of these and noted

that the word refers to the bang which is heard upon the death of a sorcerer. Cosmological notions and beliefs are, of course, not universally shared anywhere. People also evaluate clan origin stories differently: some report that they are ancestral lies, others hold them to be largely true, while many note by way of comparison that ancestral stories, the Bible, and modern science give differing accounts of the origin of humans. More important than what people do or do not believe is the fact that people hold these categories as important—that is, they are values which people consciously pursue and which inform their actions (see Graeber 2013, 230–231).

Each clan has its own history which recounts the emergence, movement, and intermarriages of its members. Those histories I was told follow a similar pattern, beginning by describing how the apical ancestress emerges from the *plangpun* in an area devoid of other people. She resides alone on the land until she meets a man from a clan of the opposing moiety who has ventured into the area while hunting or because he had seen smoke from the woman's fire and was inquisitive. The two inquire about each other's marriage status in a roundabout way and, realizing that both are unattached, they pair up. After this, the clan histories list the children of the apical ancestress and whom they marry, in other words they become genealogies listing the members of the matriline. The histories also recount where the apical pair and later generations moved, the villages they founded, the locations of their gardens, and so on.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the clan histories are also listings of places, or *topogenies*, which are a common Austro-nesian “means for the ordering and transmission of social knowledge” (Fox 1997a, 8). When attached to specific locations in an inhabited landscape, topogenies are “a projected externalization of memories that can be lived in as well as thought about” (Fox 1997a, 8). In the Mengen case, the topogenies are intertwined with genealogies (see Fox 1997a, 13).

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30 See Michael Scott (2007, 74, 190) on very similar lineage histories of the Arosi of Solomon Islands.

In the *tandaning* quoted in the beginning of this part, Chris Leleingvail mourns his son, referred to in the song as “my strong man” and “my child,” who died as a result of illness. In the song, death is not mentioned directly but described in a roundabout way with the phrase “The illness struck him, and pulled him into Minsai.” Minsai is a river between Sampun and Tagul, and its delta is the place of origin—or *plangpun*—of two Mengen clans. It is also the abode of the dead of one the clans, of which Leleingvail’s wife and children are members. The notion of being pulled into Minsai refers to the return of the son’s spirit into his clan’s origin place and abode of the dead. The song was first performed at the initiation ceremony of Leleingvail’s wife’s sister’s children, who are members of the same clan. The song and its performance affirm the memory of clan members, the dead brother of the initiates, as well as the connection of the clan with its origin place. As noted in the vignette with which I started this chapter, the *avlu*, the secretive figures that dance during initiations, can also strengthen the link between the clan and its land through places.

Many of the Mengen clans also have named subclans whose histories recount the fission from the “mother-clan.” There are three possible reasons for this splitting: the first is a fight between sisters resulting in one expelling the other from the clan. The second is the birth of twins, as in the past twins were a taboo and, if discovered, one would be killed. Since birth was a women’s secret, however, some people said that an older women would hide one of the twins in the forest and a later bring the child into the village claiming that it had been born of a rock or plant. The child was then given into the care of the nursing mother. If the “found” child were a girl, she would start a new subclan named after her place of birth. Finally, some clans claimed their ancestry stemmed from “wild” or spirit women in the forest. In these stories, people found children in the forest and took them under their care. In some versions, the spirit woman with superhuman strength fights the villagers, who eventually succeed in killing her, while in others, the spirit woman comes to the village, agrees that her child can

stay, and tells the villagers their clan affiliation, which then creates a subclan within the said clan.

The relationship of a subclan to the mother group and land varies from case to case. Some subclans recognize their junior position, but hold their own territory, which is either adjacent to the territory of the mother group or claimed on the basis of first settlement. These subclans to all intents and purposes resemble clans (also Eves 2011, 353).

The Mengen clans claim land areas basing on their histories of emergence, settlement, and place-making. The area around the origin place is called *mgalpun*, the root (*pun*) of the land (*mgal*), and it is usually bordered by topographical features such as rivers, streams, or ridges, which are perceived as immutable. The members of the landowning clan are called fathers or mothers of the land (M: *mgal tman/nanme*). However, clans and subclans also claim land on the basis of first settlement and thus a clan can claim several land areas. According to Leo Kaingemang, a clan elder and experienced land mediator, these are “reserve lands” (TP: *riserv graun*) or *mgal na pouch* (literally “land on the outside”). Scott (2007, 201–202) also notes that among the Arosi of Solomon Islands there are two ways of relating to the land, what he terms *utopic* and *topogonic*. The “non-placed” or *utopic* refers to the separate emergence of the various lineage ancestresses in areas which are devoid of others and the places they make. The *topogonic* relation is based on place-making and dwelling.

In Mengen clan history, uninhabited land is “land nothing” (TP: *graun nating*), as Leo Kaingemang expressed it, until the ancestress emerges. Through place-making activities, both the original lineage and people from other lineages are rooted in the land (see Scott 2007, 225). The Mengen have distinct spatial categories for the two ways of connecting people to the land. The place of origin only refers to the clan that emerged from the place, whereas villages (M: *mankun*), gardens (M: *ngur*), and abandoned settlements (M: *knau*) create a link between the land and all its long-standing inhabitants and their progeny. As a Mengen man noted, “Once you have cleared gardens, made *kastom*, and buried

your dead, your blood is in the land.” These two spatial categories are an important part of Mengen conceptions of history (M. Panoff 1969c, 163).

The histories of the different Mengen clans intertwine: the intermarriages mentioned in one clan’s histories are affirmed, at least in theory, by the histories of the other clans. In fact, the recognition of land boundaries and histories by other clans, especially those who share borders and have intermarried, is central to the constitution of Mengen landownership. (Indeed, is not all property based on its recognition by others?) However, the histories of two clans could differ in small but important details. For example, in a history told to me, the son of the apical ancestress settles on uninhabited land with his wife from another clan. However, according to the history of the other clan, the son in question met his future wife on that land—which explicitly makes the claim that the other clan was already there and that the land was theirs. Because of the long histories of intermarriage and dwelling together on the land, and the first settlement of what is considered vacant land, several clans could regard themselves as its “original owners.” With increased logging and other resource development programs, there is also a new interest in controlling land, which in turn has raised disputes over its ownership that touch on the specific locations of boundaries, the ownership of entire areas, and who should have a say in matters concerning them.

In the cases I encountered, knowledge of clan histories was often unevenly distributed. In some instances, the history of a specific clan was widely known, at least in its roughest outlines. In others, clan histories were regarded as knowledge restricted to clan members. Clans involved in disputes were especially interested in restricting who had knowledge of their histories, for fear of the disputing clans modifying their stories accordingly in order to present a more convincing case for ownership. Especially in cases where two or more clans might claim the same land or disagree over boundaries, histories should be kept secret and revealed only at appropriate times, such as during formal dispute settlements in order to convince others. This dynamic of hiding and revealing



at appropriate times is constitutive of power in many Melanesian societies (Foster 1995, 194, 207; Slotta 2014), including that of the Wide Bay Mungen where knowledge of clan histories is also constitutive of authority over the land *within* the landowning clan. In some clans the knowledge was distributed among its members who would come together before dispute settlements to brief a selected spokesman. According to one woman, in these situations, when the histories were recounted, the children and youth of the clan learned the stories. In other clans, this type of knowledge was held only by certain members and strategically passed on. In [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#), [Chapter 7](#), and [Chapter 8](#), I will return in more detail to the issues of disputes and clan histories.

As place-making roots people in the land and as signs of the work of others should be respected, the planting of domestic trees can become a loaded issue. During a land dispute, a friend of mine cut down cocoa trees planted by a man of a different clan on land that my friend's clan claimed. The man had a long-standing right to clear gardens there, but gardens are more temporary: they are left to fallow and the right to clear the garden can be renegotiated (see [Chapter 1](#)). Trees, on the other hand, have a longer lifespan; they “fix” land use in a different way (see Dove 1998) and hence make the presence of the planter on the land more long-lasting (see [Chapter 5](#)). And it is precisely this that my friend wanted to avoid by erasing traces of the other man from the land (see also Li 2014, 92). Conversely, a man I was accompanying to his newly cleared garden had cleared it in primary forest held by a different clan close to the village in which he lived. He did not bother to ask permission, as it was near his home village and nobody had used the land for gardening. However, he was careful not to clear abandoned villages claimed by landowners—because the work of others should be respected, as he noted.

## Conclusions

Various human and nonhuman temporalities converge within the Mungen landscape. I borrow the notion of “convergence” from

Rupert Stasch (2003, 359), who describes how different human temporal trajectories and intentions converge with ecological temporalities of plant and animal development in the preparation of feasts by the Korowai of West Papua. As I have shown in this chapter, the Mengen coordinate—individually and in groups—their gardening work according to the leaf and flowering cycles of specific trees, which indexed lunar months and the growth seasons of the food plants the Mengen cultivated. The “tree calendar,” as people called it, is based on intimate knowledge of plants, meteorological cycles, and the environment in general. During my fieldwork, I found that people used the months of the Western calendar for time reckoning, but conceptualized and coordinated much of their work according to the tree phases.

The Mengen do not just coordinate their work—or socially productive activity—according to the phases of the trees visible in the landscape; through their work, they actually produce the landscape as well. Swidden horticulture, as practiced by the Mengen, creates an ever-changing, but not random, environment consisting of a patchwork of gardens, fallows, and forest in its different growth stages. As I have described, this landscape is a both a result, as well as visual testimony, of people’s work—both past and present. Indeed, the differently aged patches of forest index differently aged relations: the robust secondary forest, as a sign of previous gardening activity, indexed relations of the fairly recent past, while abandoned villages that dotted the primary forests of the inland area and the coast alike, were indexes of older activity. In [Chapter 1](#), I showed how the concrete practices of swidden horticulture constitute kin relations and land-using groups. Building on this notion, I have shown in this chapter how the places—villages, gardens, orchards, and so on—that were the result of people’s activities, become signs of people and their relations as well as points through which people relate to the past.

The temporal landscape produced in this way is, however, not only an embodiment of personal and group histories. People’s activities are oriented toward the future and anticipate future relations. As cultivators of their own food, the rural Wide Bay

Mengen organize their work in order to ensure plentiful and continued harvests. Women who tend the plants seek to make sure that their families have enough to eat, but also that they can respond in unanticipated situations—such as having enough food to contribute to the mortuary ceremonies upon the death of a village member. When a family clears an exceptionally large garden and invites important relatives to plant it, people know that they are preparing for a ceremony—an initiation or a marriage gift. Indeed, people's work—which creates both social relations and a temporal landscape—consists not only of routinized activities concerned with ensuring a livelihood, but also of acts connected to wider questions of social life. A newly cleared garden might be a preparation for a ceremony or a way of re-establishing one's presence on the land and claiming rights established by one's parents. Likewise, clearing a garden on a place of significance such as an abandoned settlement is, depending on who does it, a continuation of people's engagement with the land or an attempt to erase the signs of other people's activities from the landscape.

These activities are also pursuits of the values of clan autonomy and its ownership of the land, on the one hand, and the interrelations between clans on the other. Forbidding others to clear forest at the origin place of one's clan or clearing a garden in order to claim user rights on land belonging to another clan are examples of pursuing these values. Similarly, clearing a garden for a future initiation both reproduces the clan of the initiate and recognizes productive relations between the clans by giving gifts to relatives of the initiate across clan boundaries. These two values also have their spatial equivalents: the clans are rooted in their land through their places of origin, while both the clans and the land-users are rooted in the land by places such as villages, gardens, and burial sites that have been established through socially productive activities. The abandoned settlements (M: *knau*) that dot the landscape are especially important, since they are historical signs of people's dwelling. Because of this, they are an important feature of clan histories; but because settlements are always multi-clan communities, they emplace other clans to a given area as well.

Here and in [Chapter 1](#) I have focused on swidden horticulture as practiced by the Wide Bay Mungen. Swidden horticulture is not only their main livelihood activity, but it also expresses and constitutes Mungen conceptions of relatedness as well as central values which are expressed and circulated through material media such as food plants, songs, and socially significant places. Likewise, people's socially productive activities produce a deeply temporal and socially significant landscape. In the following part on logging ([Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#)), I continue this discussion by examining how foreign logging companies revalued the forests of PNG as sources of timber, and how the Wide Bay Mungen engaged with large-scale logging that began on their lands in the early 1990s. I focus especially on how the values of clan autonomy and inter-clan relations were enacted in the context of large-scale logging under frontier conditions, where different actors compete over resources and valuations of local environments.



Roberta Tata in a garden in the Toim River valley. (2019)



Manuel Kerker in his newly planted taro garden. Note the plot divisions marked with tree branches. (2011)



Margaret Glentou cleans her plot for planting yam. (2012)



Gertrude Mguellelin in her taro garden. (2012)



Hard work: Joseph Teivotaip caring for his son Arnold Mguengpetel. (2011)



Catherine Kaltenmak feeding her pigs in Toimtop village. (2024)



The *avlu* named Telpuputkeis.  
(2011)



The waterfall named Telpuputkeis,  
meaning "Cutting the possum out  
of a rock." (2007)



## PART II

# Logging and Landowner Companies

1. We rise from the village of Wawas  
To go talk with all of them about land
- Is kulope ngei Wawas ngwael  
Lalat magueng malume mgalgere*
- C. We sit and listen to them talk  
They say we are outsiders, that we three do not have land
- E is tara nge is longlol magueng  
Re malure e tovla mgal,  
sekan mgal is panmlueik*

—Otto Tniengpo, song recorded in Wawas village, 17 August 2011



Detail of round log marked with PNG Forest Authority tags. (2012)



## CHAPTER 3

### Frontier Forests

#### Logging and Landowner Companies in Wide Bay

Baein, or Vei in (“the Edge (*in*) of the Sand (*vei*)” in Mengen), near Cape Orford, is a large Mengen village on the south side of Wide Bay. It is surrounded by forested hills that at the time of my fieldwork were patchworks of swidden gardens and fallowing forests. Tall primary forest grew atop the hills on terrain that was too stony for gardens. In contrast, near the shore at the foot of the hill was a grassy plain taken over by spiky vines. Next to it, in the sea, were remnants of a wharf. Niugini Lumber, a Malaysian logging company, had had its camp on the site from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. During its operations the company cleared logging roads to the inland forests and widened the coastal road that now connects Wide Bay Mengen villages to regional centers such as Guma and Marunga in the north. As part of the deal made with the locals, the logging companies provided cocoa seedlings, which people planted in smallholdings around the villages. Like abandoned villages or fallows, the logging roads, cocoa blocks, and defunct logging camps are materializations of histories in the landscape, signs of often unequal relations with logging companies and global resource capitalism, as Joshua Bell (2015, 127) puts it in his description of debris left by logging operations in the Purari Delta of mainland New Guinea.

Wide Bay, like other rural areas of PNG, became a resource frontier. As noted in the Introduction, the frontier is a sparsely

populated area where state presence is limited, law is an abstract concept, and different actors compete over claims to abundant natural resources, often imagined to be “unused,” as defined by John McCarthy (2013, 183; see also Geiger 2008, 88, 97). On the frontier, different actors compete not only over the control of resources but also over what is defined as a resource in the first place, and how local environments, different forms of tenure, and practices are valued (Stella 2007, 49, 52; Peluso and Lund 2011, 668; McCarthy 2013, 184). Frontiers are thus spatiotemporal processes during which the conditions that constitute a frontier exist in a given area (Tammisto 2020, 31). It is a period of time during which it is not clear whose values prevail. Frontiers may “close,” “shift,” and “reopen”: when a particular resource is depleted in a given area, the frontier closes (Li 2014, 2, 176, 180), and it shifts when certain actors move to new areas where frontier conditions are present or are actively created (Gregory 1982, 119, 131; Banivanua Mar 2009, 23–24, 28). As I will recount in this chapter, frontier conditions emerged in Wide Bay, like elsewhere in PNG, as a result of state deregulation of logging, deteriorating rural infrastructure, diminishing possibilities of income, and Malaysian logging companies looking for new forests to log.

In the early 1990s people from Baein and the neighboring villages of Lop, Korpun, and Maskilklie formed a LOC, Balokoma, to which the state of PNG awarded the rights to the logging concession covering the area. Through their LOC the Mengen subcontracted logging to Niugini Lumber, which operated in the area, initially from Baein and then from Pulpul, until June 2012 when the permit expired. Logging, like other human activity, changed the Mengen landscape. Besides causing drastic physical changes through the cutting down of forests and building of roads, logging companies also revalued the Mengen landscape as a natural resource and a potential source of commodities. The local people had to be transformed and transform themselves into landowners (see Filer 2006), and their areas needed to be conceptualized as timber concessions. Logging, therefore, involved a set of complex territorializing and de-territorializing practices, its concessions

establishing new abstract territories and prescribing specific activities within them (see Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 388), while local residents were encouraged to take part in the global resource economy as landowners or territorialized corporations. In PNG this often involved the establishment of LOCs in which local landowners were ostensibly represented.

In this chapter I examine how and why some Wide Bay Mengen established LOCs with the help of the forestry administration and foreign loggers. LOCs were both a symptom of the revaluation of the Mengen environment as a source of resources and an important vehicle through which the revaluation was advanced. They were also a mechanism whereby locals were brought into the resource economy. It is also worth noting that they were highly gendered spheres of action. While women voiced their opinions on logging, the men took the lead in the public and official spheres of decision-making—sometimes by excluding women.

A key motivation for the Mengen to allow logging on their lands was the real and perceived marginality of the Wide Bay area in comparison to the areas around Kokopo, the provincial capital of East New Britain. Rural areas had no telephone or electricity and relied on boat transport for access to markets. Some Mengen were initially receptive to logging in the hope that logging companies would provide public services, such as roads, aid posts, and schools, as well as monetary income, much like in other remote rural areas of PNG (Leedom 1997, 44; Simpson 1997, 24; May 2001, 321; Bell 2015, 137).

Logging also helped the Mengen to imagine trees as a natural resource evenly spread across their landscape, and created a new interest in controlling land. However, the Mengen still do not imagine their landscape solely as a resource, or nature as something purely physical and detached from the human realm. People in PNG often do not imagine themselves as participants in a commodity economy but as partners in exchange (Robbins and Akin 1999; Kirsch 2006, 89; West 2006, 46) and, as long as actual development is not delivered, such partnership is just as “fictive” as the commodities in Polanyi’s scheme ([1944] 2001, 76). But it

has consequences for society that differ from the commodity fiction. Instead of being atomized into individuals, as in European capitalist development, local society is “entified” and represented as comprising lasting groups, as Thomas Ernst (1999) notes, because, under PNG law, land is communally owned by undefined kin groups under customary land titles (Filer 1998, 30). In resource extraction, the formalization of these groups is central to establishing contractual relations with them and, indeed, to making them “legible” to companies and the state.<sup>31</sup>

In the years following the arrival of logging companies, new LOCs proliferated among the Wide Bay Mengen. In addition to contracting commercial companies to cut wood on their land, the Mengen LOCs also began to make contracts with each other, even as new companies emerged or broke away from the existing ones. As local landowning groups are turned into companies that operate as contractual partners with foreign companies, organizations, and the state in a spirit of seemingly “democratic joint venture” (Lattas 2011, 91), they become detached from local meanings and re-territorialized as part of a larger order. By combining representatives from several local groups, LOCs in PNG often created—or failed to create—new levels and scales of political integration and action (see Filer 1998, 287; Simpson 1997, 30; Lattas 2011, 102). In the Mengen case, too, logging and LOCs created a new arena where men forged alliances with each other in their pursuit of economic development and infrastructure. However, the emergence of new and smaller LOCs and their internal disputes points to ways in which people sought to emplace the newly created companies and justify their claims to the forests.

The beginning of logging in Wide Bay was preceded by intense negotiations between the Mengen, state officials, and company representatives. The state’s institutional structures and the political economy of logging formed the wider framework in which Mengen actions were situated. I start the chapter, therefore, by

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31 See Barlow and Winduo (1997, 9) and Jorgensen (2007) on making local landowners “legible” to outside actors.

discussing the history of logging in PNG in order to describe the conditions under which foreign logging companies came to the Wide Bay area. The first Wide Bay Mengen LOC was established by local men who navigated institutional possibilities and constraints with the help of forestry officials and logging company representatives to become the holder of a timber permit, which gave the LOC control over logging performed in the area. In the next section I discuss how the Mengen operated within this company and how new companies were set up in the course of logging, established because Mengen villagers wanted to control logging in their own areas. While the LOCs were mechanisms through which local people were transformed into partners for foreign loggers, the proliferation of LOCs among the Mengen also reflects the central dynamics of Mengen landholding practices. Setting up new companies shows how the Mengen men active in logging sought to emplace themselves and legitimate their actions by appealing to meaningful spatial categories, local political units, and values.

## Historical and Institutional Background

The amount of commercial logging in what is now PNG during the early colonial period was limited (Bird et al. 2007, 10). The first appraisals of timber resources were made by the British colonial administration in 1908, followed a year later by the first timber ordinance in the territories of both Papua and New Guinea (Saulei 1997, 26). In New Britain, the Catholic mission, which had established itself in 1888 in the Gazelle Peninsula near Kokopo, contributed to the commercial use of forests. The leader of the mission, Father (and later Bishop) Louis Couppé, was instructed by Rome to establish an economic base which could sustain the mission locally, because with the increase in missionary activity, provisions from Europe might be reduced or cut off completely in case of a war (Baumann 1932, 115). To this end, the mission logged eucalyptus trees and established sawmills, which were moved to new locations after the nearby forests were exhausted,

and established plantations on mission stations (Baumann 1932, 116–117). This pattern of forest use based on logging followed by the establishment of plantations was taken up on a large scale in the 2000s as a development strategy for the rural areas of East New Britain (see [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#)).

Australia—given control in 1914 of both the British and German territories that later became PNG—initially surveyed the forest resources of the British territories briefly in 1908, and passed a new forestry ordinance in 1937 to establish a forestry industry and to acquire and manage forest estates (Saulei 1997, 26–27). The export of logs started that year and nine saw mills were operating in New Guinea in the period before the Second World War (Saulei 1997, 27). In New Britain, colonial patrol officials, or *kiaps*, were instructed to pay attention to natural resources, among other things, during their patrols (patrol report, Mack 1926). During the war the Allies made increasing use of timber resources and 188,000 m<sup>3</sup> of logs were produced between 1943 and 1945—compared to the 16,500 m<sup>3</sup> exported in 1940–41 (Saulei 1997, 27). According to Simon Saulei (1997, 27–28), post-war forestry was based on reconstruction through two government-run saw mills; until the 1960s the rate of expansion of forestry was cautious, because the colonial government considered inventory data to be insufficient—indeed, up until the 1960s the main forestry activity was surveying and inventory-making.

At the end of the 1950s, the administration announced a new forestry policy that was based on the establishment of training centers, a research institute, reforestation, and the promotion of the timber industry (Saulei 1997, 27). Both the Department of Forests and the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development recommended large-scale and industrial development of timber resources in the reports of 1964 and 1965, respectively; in this model the involvement of capital-intensive and skilled foreign companies was deemed necessary (Bird et al. 2007, 10). As Bird et al. (2007, 10) note, this trend is reflected by the increase in Timber Rights Purchase (TRP) arrangements, under which the state bought timber rights from the customary owners; the area of



PNG covered by these arrangements increased from 317,000 ha in 1961–62 to over a 1.1 million ha in 1967–68, while the volume of harvested logs increased by 230 percent (also Filer 1998, 179). The increase of TRP areas in East New Britain during this period is even more marked. During the 1950s five TRPs covering an area of 20,970 ha were issued, while the seven TRPs issued during the 1960s covered 162,970 ha (PNGFA 1998, 22; see also [Table 1](#)).

**Table 1:** TRPs issued in East New Britain Province (based on figures given in PNGFA 1998, 22)

Period	Number of TRPs	Total area (ha)
1950–59	5	20,970
1960–69	7	162,970
1970–79	6	60,400
1980–89	6	166,147
1990–98	5	118,320

Even though in the late 1960s the intensity of the forest industry was dramatically increased, it was still based on lumber production, reforestation, and tree plantations (Saulei 1997, 28). During this period PNG shifted toward greater autonomy with the establishment of the House of Assembly in 1964, with elections held in 1968 and 1972. The government elected in 1972 started a process designed to lead to self-government, resulting in PNG gaining independence in 1975 (Hawksley 2006, 166). By the end of the 1970s the forestry policy of PNG shifted to the export of raw logs (Bird et al. 2007, 12), and in 1979 the government revised its forest policy, calling for the use of natural resources to generate revenue and the expansion of opportunities for wage labor and self-employment in the rural sector (Saulei 1997, 29; Bird et al. 2007, 12). While the policy included increasing the efficiency of existing processes, it also relaxed the formerly strict limits on log exports in order to create a profitable industry and generate income for the newly independent country (Saulei 1997, 29–30;

Bird et al. 2007, 12). This opened up PNG as resource frontier to foreign parties at a time when Malaysian logging companies were looking to move into new territories because of the ban on logging in Sabah and Sarawak (Filer 1998, 57, 60). This illustrates the shifting nature of resource frontiers in which frontier conditions in one area end, meaning the frontier “closes,” while frontier conditions emerge, or are created, in another place—thus “opening” it as a frontier.

The export of raw logs rose at a pace which is now widely regarded as unsustainable, and large tracts of forest were destroyed. Widespread public concern for PNG’s forests led to a commission of inquiry in 1987. The widely cited results published in 1990 painted a grim picture of PNG’s forestry industry, corruption was endemic, monitoring inadequate, logging practices unsustainable, and the manipulation and cheating of resource owners persistent (Holzknecht 1996, 7). The findings led to a two-year moratorium on log exports as well as the revision of the national forest policy and the existing Forestry Act—with the support of the World Bank, reform-minded bureaucratic sectors, and environmental NGOs (Holzknecht 1996, 7; Filer 2000, 11; 2013, 308). The new Act tried to close a loophole whereby the loggers could negotiate their own agreements directly with the resource owners with reduced state supervision (Filer 2000, 17). Much of the logging was conducted according to the TRP mechanism under which the state could gain rights to the forest on customary land without any changes in the ownership of the land itself by obtaining consent—at least in theory—from all the landowners concerned, and by making payments in installments to them until the area was given to an investor to be logged (Filer 1998, 179; Bird et al. 2007, 7). The TRP agreement formed the basis for the timber permit, which regulated the exploitation of forest resources (Filer 1998, 183). Under this set of agreements, it was—again, in theory—the government who chose the investor, which then conducted the actual logging under the terms set in the timber permit.

State control over the selection of the operator could, however, be circumvented in two ways: one was the Forestry (Private

Dealings) Act of 1971, which granted customary owners the right to apply for their forests to be declared a Local Forest Area (LFA) and to sell their timber directly to outsiders under a Logging and Marketing Agreement (LMA) negotiated between a LOC and a logging operator (Filer 1998, 179; Bird et al. 2007, 8). Another avenue via which to circumvent state selection of investor was for the LOCs themselves to apply for the timber permit directly. In this move, local landowners would set up a LOC, often with the help of a foreign logging company, and apply for a timber permit. The LOC, which as a rule lacked the capacity to conduct any actual logging, then subcontracted a foreign logging company to do the logging (Holzknecht 1996, 4), invariably the one who had helped to set up the LOC in the first place. According to Filer (1998, 183) the net outcome of this type of deal was, however, very similar to the direct deals made under the Private Dealings Act, and in practice many conditions were ignored.

According to the World Bank, NGOs, and reform-minded members of the bureaucracy, local landowners were on the losing side in direct deals with companies (Filer 2000, 19–20; 2013, 307, 308, 310). Thus, the repeal of the Private Dealings Act became central to the reform of forestry legislation (Filer 2000, 17). A key concern of the critics was that LOC directors were actually—or, at least, felt morally—indebted to the logging companies for start-up costs and other expenditures (Simpson 1997, 21). John Leedom (1997, 64) and Gary Simpson (1997, 33) conclude in their respective analyses that, ultimately, LOC directors were disempowered, becoming dependent on the contractors, which also led to their losing status within their communities. Michael Wood (1997, 85, 105) notes that the national elite was opposed to reform because it would reduce its ability to enter into deals with loggers. In short, the logging companies sought to set up LOCs in order to obtain the rights to log and because LOC directors would then mediate between them and the local population.

The new Forestry Act was devised in 1991, but only gazetted in 1992 due to efforts by the then forests minister, Jack Genia, and his departmental secretary, Michael Komtagarea, to delay it

(Filer 2000, 17). As noted, the new Act tried to close the loopholes that allowed foreign loggers to negotiate their own agreements with resource owners. This, along with sections which would have delayed the allocation of new resources to the companies, prompted log exporters and LOC directors to exert pressure on Genia and Komtagarea to block the gazettal of the new act, which they saw as an assault on the interests of loggers and logging-minded landowners (Filer 1998, 151; 2000, 17). It was widely assumed that Rimbunan Hijau (RH), a Malaysian logging giant that had come to dominate the logging industry in PNG in the 1990s, was behind the delay (Filer 2000, 17; 2013, 307).<sup>32</sup> However, the Act also contained amendments which exempted existing logging permit-holders from the new legal requirements—

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32 Since the 1990s the forestry sector in PNG has been dominated by Malaysian companies. RH was the most powerful of these, accounting with its subsidiaries for about a half of PNG's log exports in 1994 (Wood 1999, 179; Filer 2013, 311). Since then, RH's role in log exports has declined, but in the 2000s it still retained its dominant position in the selective logging industry and downstream processing of timber (Filer 2013, 316, 322). Michael Wood (1999, 182) notes that RH's position was actively facilitated by PNG's political elites, sections of the bureaucracy, and local landowners, rather than it being simply a question of Malaysian "domination," as is sometimes claimed in simplistic accounts (see also Filer 2013). Between 2003 and 2011 large amounts of land were leased ostensibly for agricultural development projects (e.g., oil palm) and logging has been conducted under the forest clearance permits given for these projects, which seem in many cases to be fronts for logging and ways to circumvent restrictions on the export of raw logs (Filer 2011, 24–25; 2012, 599, 606; Lawson 2014, 24; Nelson et al. 2014, 8–9). RH is openly involved in one oil palm project in West Pomio, East New Britain Province—which is highly controversial and opposed by many locals (see Lattas 2012)—and possibly in two other projects through its subsidiaries (Filer 2011, 23). For further information, see Colin Filer (1998, 54) on the structure of the so-called Sino-Malaysian logging cartel and the same author (2013, 311–316) on RH's role in PNG's logging industry; Andrew Lattas (2011; 2012) on the relationship between state violence and logging companies in New Britain; and Michael Wood (1999) on the political role of RH in PNG.

a provision which, according to Hartmut Holzknecht (1996, 18), made “a mockery out of the act.”

The gazettal of the new Forestry Act in 1992 was preceded by a controversial maneuver by the Minister Genia and his secretary. In early June 1992 both the prime minister of PNG as well as the country director of the World Bank sent Genia letters in which they criticized the delays in formalizing the Act (Filer 2000,19). The prime minister complained that the new act, “a major achievement” for the government, should not be postponed any longer, especially since it may have “unfortunate implications with the donor agencies” (Filer 2000, 19). The World Bank stated this quite clearly in noting that any further delay would be interpreted “by the donor community as waning commitment ... to the reform process” (quoted in Filer 2000, 19). At the same time, logging companies were complaining about “bottlenecks” and lack of landowner representation in the Act (Filer 2000, 19–20). Despite the complaints of the loggers, Minister Genia gazetted the Act at the end of June—one day after he had allocated 17 new timber permits, most of them acquired by RH and its subsidiaries (Filer 2000, 20). The permit based on the Cape Orford TRP was one of these, and it was awarded to Balokoma—a LOC established by Wide Bay Mengen men with the help of Niugini Lumber, a subsidiary of RH.

### **The Cape Orford TRP**

The Cape Orford TRP, covering an area of 33,700 ha, was awarded to the Mengen LOC Balokoma, with the timber permit granted on the last day on which the old forestry legislation was still in force. This made it possible for Balokoma directors to negotiate their own subcontracting deal with a logging company of their choice. The establishment of the Cape Orford TRP and Balokoma were, however, not straightforward processes; rather, they involved complex arrangements and struggles over different forms of territorialization. Logging concessions established new abstract territories, prescribing specific activities within them—which is how

Vandergeest and Peluso (1995, 388) define territorialization. Local people were encouraged to take part in logging as landowners or territorialized corporations. Yet, contrary to their name, LOCs are not necessarily based on existing landowning groups, but are merely companies created under the PNG Company Act (Holzknecht 1996, 4). They were often established along the lines of logging concession areas, which, according to Colin Filer (1998, 287), more closely resembled foresters' ideas of viable logging projects than local political units. They have often brought together people from different linguistic groups and have created—or sometimes failed to create—levels of political interaction that did not previously exist (Simpson 1997, 30; Lattas 2011, 102). In Wide Bay, enterprising Mengen people on the one hand embraced logging and sought to participate actively in it but, on the other, rejected aspects of the de-territorializing logic, especially the incorporation into entities they perceived to be too large.

During 1989–90 three large TRP agreements were made in Mengen areas, the Nutuve TRP in parts of inland Mengen, the large Inland Pomio TRP (over 80,000 ha), and the Tokai Matong TRP (22,170 ha) issued in 1989 (PNGFA 1998, 23). Located some 30 km southwest of the village of Lop, the Tokai Matong TRP was important for the expansion of logging to Cape Orford. At this time the president of East Pomio District, a Wide Bay Mengen man, was planning logging over an area starting from the Mengen village of Pulpul in the south and extending as far as the Sulka village of Setvei in the north. According to his plan, the inhabitants of the area would be represented by the Notomera LOC, named after the Noait (near Setwei), Toim, Meroi and Rak (near Pulpul) rivers. The project never took off: according to the provincial member himself, because he wanted it researched too thoroughly. Directors of current LOCs operating in Cape Orford noted either that the plan encompassed too many people or that the terrain in the north was too rugged to be attractive to logging companies at the time. A Wide Bay Mengen elder, who had been an early proponent of the Notomera plan, thought that the project never

materialized because people from the southern Wide Bay area decided to pursue one of their own.

In the late 1980s, Niugini Lumber was logging at Tokai Matong and it tried to extend its operations to the Wide Bay Mengen areas. Company surveyors came to villages such as Baein and Maskillie and proposed that the villagers allow logging on their lands. During my visit to the villages that had formed Balokoma, I interviewed a middle-aged man who had been a founding member of the LOC. Like most LOC directors I met, he continued to live in his home village and earn his livelihood as a swidden cultivator. In the interview, he explained why they rejected the idea of being incorporated into the LOC at Tokai Matong:

The company [RH] had first been working at Tokai, and they wanted to extend the operation there and include some of us individually from different villages as directors, so that we would oversee this area. But we didn't agree with their idea. We wanted to do it by ourselves. ... Because we saw that they had too little forest and they are in a slightly different tribe and we are in another. Whatever small service, benefit, or resource there is should go back to the people in the very same area. So we here would benefit from our resources. And they would benefit from theirs. (Man, 40–50 years, 19 Jan 2012)

The Wide Bay Mengen, and especially the men involved in the LOCs, rejected both the inclusion of their areas in the Tokai Matong TRP and also their becoming a part of a LOC formed by people from a different Mengen dialect group. Instead, they wanted their own TRP area and LOC to control the permits. In an interview, one director noted that they did not follow the correct procedures and bypassed the provincial government level altogether. According to the director they went straight to their *wantok* (TP, lit. “one language”) in the national capital of Port Moresby: the abovementioned departmental secretary Michael Komtagarea, himself a Mengen man from the Jacquinot Bay area. One reason for bypassing the provincial level was the suspicion the directors held toward the Tolai, a large linguistic group living

around the capital of East New Britain.<sup>33</sup> According to the director, if they had followed the correct procedures, obtaining the permits would have taken a long time because, due to their “jealousy,” the Tolai would have hindered any attempts by the Pomio peoples to develop themselves. Alan Rew (1999, 154) notes that many inhabitants of Pomio wanted “development,” but not on terms mediated by what they saw as Tolai-dominated institutions.

This is a fairly common discourse in the rural areas of East New Britain, partly because, as a legacy of colonialism, the area around Rabaul and Kokopo is more developed in terms of infrastructure and services. Another reason is that the Tolai control the provincial administration due to their demographic strength and because they live around the administrative center of the province. In this context, even well-meaning actions by bureaucrats in the provincial administration may be interpreted very negatively by the rural population of the province. Such an event occurred in June 1992 when Balokoma was issued a timber permit—under the fast-tracking maneuver by the minister of forests and his secretary—at the height of the struggle over the gazettal of the new Forestry Act. Eleven senior staff members of the Department of Forests had protested about Komtagarea’s rushing through of new timber permits before the gazettal of the new Act, but the secretary insisted that the permits were issued according to the cabinet directives (Filer 1998, 148). The parties opposing the dealings of the minister and his secretary had to concede that the permits issued in breach of the moratorium on log exports remained valid under the amendments made to the Act, but noted that it was possible to review these according to provincial legislation. This legal advice had been given by a counsel who had assisted in a related governmental inquiry into the forestry industry and its unsustainable practices and also helped to draft legislation with which the

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33 The Tolai, successful cash-croppers active in pursuing independence from Australia, have dominated the provincial government of East New Britain since the 1960s (Whitehouse 1995, 175; Fajans 1998, 20; Rew 1999, 138, 149; Martin 2013, 12).



East New Britain Provincial Government was trying to prevent the issuing of two new timber permits in Komtagarea's home district, Pomio (Filer 1998, 148).

As one of the latter permits was that which Balokoma came to hold, the director's view that the Tolai were trying to prevent development in Pomio becomes understandable. It also demonstrates how the well-meaning actions of the donor community, NGOs, and bureaucrats committed to reforming the old forestry legislation were negatively interpreted in the specific context of Pomio. Rather than regarding the reforms as intended to protect rural landowners from logging companies, they were seen by those Mengen men active in logging as restricting the autonomy of the rural population and preventing their attempts to achieve the development manifest in the towns. The real and perceived inequality of development between the urban areas of the Gazelle Peninsula and Pomio were also key reasons why some Mengen were drawn to logging in the first place. As the director mentioned above noted:

We saw how down there [north: in the Gazelle Peninsula] services were expanding, while we here lived like our ancestors before us. ... When we sat down with the bosses of RH, we asked them how they could help us landowners in the village with things like bridges and roads. ... They helped us with the schools, building schools and aid posts. ... And then, in the past, our area had no roads. Only bush tracks from the time of the ancestors, and for many years up until today. But now we have the company, and it helped us to build the road. (Man, 40–50 years, 19 Jan 2012)

In the early 1990s, many Mengen—men and women alike—hoped that logging would grant them access to income and services. And it was not only the Mengen: these sentiments were shared by many throughout the rural areas of PNG where people hoped that natural resource extraction and increased company activity would bring development in the shape of increased

income, improved services, and better infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> Since the mid-1980s, infrastructure and services in many rural areas had deteriorated (May 2001, 313). After independence, the foreign-owned plantations largely waned, and with deteriorating infrastructure and the falling prices of agricultural commodities, many smallholders found themselves in a difficult situation with little cash income (May 2001, 313–315, 317; also Gregory 1982, 135–137). As their forests had been revalued as sources of commodities, some Wide Bay Mengen turned to logging to realize this value.

The closing in 1988, due to anti-mining conflict, of the Bougainville mine, a major source of revenue, worsened the situation (May 2001, 313–315). According to Ron May (2001, 317, 321), the government began to emphasize natural resource extraction as a source of revenue, while at the same time many rural people hoped that logging companies would provide them with income and infrastructure. Joshua Bell (2015, 137) describes how the conjuncture of the abovementioned factors with the rise in hardwood prices encouraged foreign companies to harvest the forests of PNG and the government of PNG to grant concessions in order to raise revenue. In Pomio, which in the 2000s was still regarded as one of the most disadvantaged districts in PNG (Allen 2009, 486; also Rew 1999, 155–156), logging began at the same time and for very similar reasons as in Purari. In both cases it was conducted by RH.

In 1994 Balokoma became the permit-holder for the Cape Orford TRP. This gave the LOC considerable institutional power, since it could select which company would do the actual logging. As recounted by several Mengen men who had been among the first directors and founders of Balokoma, the choice of the “contractor”—that is, the company to whom the actual logging was to be subcontracted—provoked disagreements among villagers. Some people supported a company (whose name and the reasons

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34 For logging, see Bell (2015, 137), Filer (1998, 278), Kirsch (1997, 111), Leedom (1997, 44), and Simpson (1997, 24).

why some villagers preferred it I did not learn) other than RH, while the men who had been active in setting up the LOC wanted RH as the contractor. Michael Wood (1999, 85, 104) notes how in another logging project of the same era, local groups were in intense competition over which “contractor” to select, as individuals and different factions competed for influence and income. It is likely that in the Wide Bay Mengen case there were similar reasons for the dispute.

In the end, Niugini Lumber/RH, was contracted to do the logging. RH had, for its part, helped the locals to set up Balokoma, covering their travel expenses to Port Moresby to negotiate with the Forestry Department and so on. The men who became directors had a very positive view of RH, as according to them it had acted according to the terms of their contract. However, this close relationship between (future) directors and the logging companies was one of the reasons why donors and sections of the bureaucracy wanted to reform PNG’s forestry legislation: while local people started LOCs to control the logging companies, the situation often resulted in the reverse (Leedom 1997, 51, 64; Simpson 1997, 22).

Another early LOC director summarized the argument over the choice of contractor as follows:

We were arguing over two companies. ... We saw that RH had started to work at Matong. So we said, “That it is easy, the folks are already there and they can extend downwards [north]. To get another contractor would be hard and would take a long time.” ... The argument ended when they started working and the royalties started to come in. ... They bought [during the time of Balokoma] roofing iron, timber and built the houses. So then there was no more arguing. (Man, 40–50 years, 17 Nov 2011)

Once Niugini Lumber/RH became the contractor for Balokoma, it made a camp in Baein. In 1995 the actual logging of the Wide Bay Mengen forests began. At first, the company conducted logging in the areas of the four villages that had created Balokoma. However, as Niugini Lumber and Balokoma sought to

expand logging toward the south and north, they met with resistance from villagers that were not part of the LOC.

### **Proliferation of LOCs in Wide Bay**

Not long after Niugini Lumber began logging in the Cape Orford TRP area, people from villages adjacent to the Balokoma villages began to form their own LOCs, just as the directors of Balokoma who had refused incorporation into the LOC at Tokai Matong had done. The first of these, Marau Ltd., was set up by men from Pulpul village, which is not far from the southernmost Balokoma village, Maskillie. Inhabitants of Pulpul belong to a different dialect group of North Coast Mengen and their landowning clans are different from those of the Wide Bay Mengen. At first, representatives from Pulpul were part of Balokoma, but they felt sidelined and feared that Balokoma would take advantage of their resources, so they formed their own company. There was, according to a Marau director, even a small conflict when loggers came to Pulpul and the director instructed young men to block the operation. The logging company brought in the police, but in the end the director noted that as landowners they had the final say. This led to negotiations in Kokopo between Marau directors, RH, and the Department of Forestry, and Marau became a subsidiary of Balokoma with its own supplementary conditions for logging.

As Balokoma tried to expand north, people from the neighboring village prohibited the advance of logging in areas they considered their own. They then formed two LOCs—Kaluan Ltd. and Kulkulon Ltd.—in order to make their own contracts with Niugini Lumber, utilizing the permit held by Balokoma. One of the driving forces of Kaluan Ltd. was an elder who had sought to bring logging to the area under the Notomera plan. The board members of Balokoma initially refused Kaluan as a subsidiary and the directors of Kaluan contacted the LOC at Tokai Matong seeking to become their subsidiary instead, but administrative territory intervened: according to forestry regulations, LOCs must become subsidiaries of the permit-holder of the nearest TRP—which in



they perceived as theirs. Quite simply, the Mengen who embraced logging rejected territorialization into groups they perceived to be too large—from their point of view, de-territorialized units—and created LOCs that more closely reflected their conceptions of local political groups. As noted above, in many cases in PNG, TRP areas and associated LOCs were often based on foresters' notions of viable logging concessions, rather than reflecting local political groups (Filer 1998, 283, 287). In the Cape Orford case the opposite happened, as new LOCs were formed according to a segmentary logic and the new LOCs encompassed smaller groupings than the initial ones.<sup>35</sup>

The crucial difference between Balokoma and the new LOCs is that Balokoma was the permit-holder. Thus, in order to make deals with Niugini Lumber, the new LOCs had to become subsidiaries of Balokoma. By doing so the new LOCs could negotiate their own deals within the parameters of the timber permit, while Balokoma received a commission for each cubic meter of logs. Commenting on the hierarchical structure and the multitude of subsidiary LOCs, Martina Gomeyan jokingly referred to "Balokoma and its subclans." A perceptive and witty clan elder in her sixties, she made the comment as an offhand remark during a discussion in which she and her husband, Sylvester Vomne, recounted to me the expansion of logging at the turn of the 21st century. With her joke she deliberately indicated important dynamics within and between the LOCs that I understood much later. In short, the sometimes-difficult interrelations of the LOCs and the men's quest for control over logging resemble land disputes between and within clans. For example, in disagreements about authority over land, various subclans within a clan may all claim the position of mother group. In the dispute over the selection of the developer, one director told me how he had trumped his opponents:

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35 For similar cases, see Leedom (1997, 44, 62) and Wood (1997, 104).

They tried to oppose us, but they couldn't. Because we told them, I myself told them: "I am [clan name] and I'm the father of the land here. And I have all the rights, no matter that you [singular] are my subclan; you are a subclan and you must respect me, I'm the mother-clan and I oversee the land." (Man, 40–50 years, 19 Jan 2012)

Above I noted that the Wide Bay Mengen, and especially those who were active in forming the LOCs, rejected LOCs that they regarded as too large. Even though RH and forestry officials actively helped the Mengen to set up LOCs, their scale and composition seems to be largely a Mengen creation. In short, the vast majority of the LOCs in the Cape Orford TRP area were multi-clan groups and were mostly based in adjacent villages. The largest of the LOCs, Balokoma, encompassed only four villages (Baein, Lop, Korpun, and Maskillkie) and their inhabitants. Marau was based in Pulpul village and comprised three landowning clans that claimed areas there. Kaluan was based in Wawas village and encompassed all its inhabitants, who represented seven clans in total. Kulkulon encompassed two landowning clans, which claimed areas between the villages of Baein and Wawas. Mavang operated out of smaller settlements near Lop village, encompassing four clan groups, while Talinga was based on the Talinga clan. Noteworthy is that only one of the six LOCs was based on a single clan.

All the multi-clan LOCs were named after places: Balokoma after the four villages in which it was based; Marau after the abandoned Marau plantation in Pulpul, because the directors thought the plantation had made the name famous; Kaluan and Kulkulon after abandoned villages (*M: knau*); and Mavang after two mountains. Naming the LOCs after places is no coincidence, but rather a way of emplacing them. This resembles cases from elsewhere in PNG where LOCs were named after spatial units in the hope of mobilizing the associated groups (see Leedom 1997, 62). In [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) I discussed how the Wide Bay Mengen used and made places to index personal and group histories. In light of

this, naming LOCs after places was also a way of emphasizing the connections between the groups that the LOCs claimed to represent and the area in which they operated. This was especially so in the case of the LOCs named after abandoned villages.

By naming the LOCs after places, the Mengen men who set them up sought to elicit the land-using groups and highlight that the LOCs were village, or community, projects rather than clan-based endeavors. By doing so, they also invoked the value of forming inter-clan relations. In some cases—and this is my interpretation—the LOCs were named after abandoned villages because key directors, who were active in getting logging to the area, came from clans which did not own land around the villages in which the LOCs were based. Therefore, they evoked the histories of land use—rather than clan-based landownership—in order to gain authority, or to legitimate it, within the LOCs. Initially, the LOCs were community projects in the sense that royalties were evenly distributed among the inhabitants of the villages that the LOCs encompassed, and directors were drawn from each village—as in the case of Balokoma—or from each clan within the village, as in Kaluan.

In the *tandaning* quoted at the beginning of this section, Otto Tniengpo expresses his anger and sadness over how he and his two lineage members, or clan-brothers, referred to as the (inclusive) “we” in the first verse, head out from the village of Wawas in order to “talk about land”—that is, to settle a dispute. In the chorus he sings how he and his two brothers just sit and listen to how the (unnamed) others say that they do not own land in the area, and are “outsiders.” Being called an outsider in land disputes is especially insulting, as it negates all the relations the other has to the land. In this case, Tniengpo composed a song of lament out of his frustration and anger. To underscore his point, Tniengpo omitted altogether the second verse, which is a common feature of the *tandaning* genre.

This centrifugal logic was also present in Mengen landholding practices. For example, people often contemplated the idea of moving to their clan land to avoid possible disputes over land



and its use—although, in the case of the men planning the move, this solution would have been temporary, since their children would then, of course, inhabit land not belonging to them. Likewise, among the Mengen LOCs, clan claims to land can and do resurface. The directors of Balokoma recounted how logging royalties (paid by logged cubic meters) were initially divided equally among all the members—for example, all the villagers encompassed by the LOC—while the LOC retained supplementary payments, such as agricultural and infrastructure levies. Later, around 2000, the system was changed so that individual landowning clans would now receive the royalties from logging conducted on their respective clan areas. According to all the directors, this system was preferred by the people. Even though logging was a way to realize the commodity value of the forest, LOC politics were also about accommodating the two Mengen values of clan autonomy and the socially productive interrelations between the clans.

The two values of clan autonomy and creating interrelations between the clans are, as noted, always to some degree in tension with each other. In such a situation, community-building is about striking a balance between the two (Jorgensen 1981, 204; Robbins 2004, 196–197, 206; Scott 2007, 242). This is also evident in Mengen LOC politics: how the LOCs were established, how new ones emerged or broke away from existing ones, and how clan claims to land and benefits resurface in multi-clan LOCs. The LOC directors as well as villagers referred to both values in the negotiations and disputes over logging, the distribution of benefits and who had authority over decision-making. Joel Robbins (2004, 197, 206) notes how Urapmin big men gained social prominence by exerting their “willfulness,” one of the central values, in socially productive ways—but often bordering on breaking the value of “lawfulness.” Similarly, Mengen LOC directors maneuvered between the values of clan autonomy and relatedness, often verging on overemphasizing their clan’s relation to the land at the cost of relatedness.

## Conclusions

Even though the colonial governments and other actors, such as the Catholic mission in New Britain, logged forests and laid the ground for expanded logging operations, commercial forestry was limited until the independence of PNG in 1975. Logging in PNG intensified in the 1980s and early 1990s, when PNG became a resource frontier for foreign logging companies. Frontier conditions emerged as a combination of several processes: the state of PNG needed revenue with the decline of the plantation sector and the closing of the Panguna mine in Bougainville; at the same time, infrastructure in rural areas was deteriorating and the income of many rural cash-croppers decreasing due to transport difficulties and declining prices for agricultural commodities. The PNG state was thus eager to grant logging concessions, while many locals hoped to access infrastructure, income, and services in exchange for their forests. Furthermore, Malaysian logging companies were looking for new forests to log and were initially able to operate with limited state regulation.

Logging in Wide Bay commenced under these frontier conditions. Before the actual logging could start, however, forestry officials set up logging concessions, the Wide Bay Mengen established LOCs to act as representatives of local landowners, and foreign logging companies had to persuade the PNG officials and locals to grant them permission to log the forests. In short, logging was preceded by complex arrangements in which the Mengen forests were revalued as resources and the Mengen had to be transformed and transform themselves into landowners. As shown in this chapter, these processes were far from straightforward. The Mengen who wanted logging had to navigate the institutions of PNG's forestry governance, bypass certain parts of the administration and align themselves with others, deal with logging companies, and negotiate with and coerce their kin to establish the LOCs.

In the Wide Bay case, the LOCs were set up by local men with support from Niugini Lumber/RH and forestry officials. Even though land was owned by the matrilineal clans, it was often men

who took the leading role in logging. They became directors for various reasons: some were regarded as adept leaders in their village communities, while others were, through their education, familiar with contractual language and bureaucracy or could merely present themselves as such. Public and official politics and leadership was previously a male sphere, and while women took part in decision-making, they did not occupy formal roles in the LOCs. The rights to the concessions were granted during a time when international donors, NGOs, and PNG's reform-minded bureaucrats were seeking to reform forestry legislation and "break the alliance" between loggers and landowner representatives (Filer 2000, 11, 17, 19–20). The reformists thought that local landowners were being used by foreign loggers, whereas the forestry industry and landowner representatives saw the reform as an assault on their interests (Filer 2000, 17). In the Wide Bay case, too, local LOC directors interpreted the reform as an attempt by the Tolai-dominated provincial government to prevent their attempts to engender development—or at least they expressed it in these terms.

When loggers came to East Pomio, locals did not want to be incorporated into existing LOCs, and instead they formed their own LOC, Balokoma. As logging expanded, men from neighboring villages likewise formed their own LOCs or broke away from Balokoma—for the same reasons Balokoma was instituted—because they wanted to control logging and the income received from it. Even though the establishment of new LOCs in some cases created disputes, the new LOCs became subsidiaries of Balokoma, which held the permits to the logging concession. The Wide Bay Mengen LOCs were fairly small and resembled the composition of local land-using groups, which differed from other cases in PNG. As I have argued in this chapter, the Wide Bay Mengen LOCs were formed along similar lines as local political units. For the most part they comprised adjacent villages and resembled local land-using groups and only one reproduced a single landowning clan. The multi-clan LOCs were named after places, and this was, I suggest, an attempt by the LOC directors to

emplace the LOCs, mobilize groups associated with these places (see also Leedom 1997, 62), and a way to emphasize connections to and authority over land.

Central Mengen landholding dynamics, namely the relation between the landowning clan and the multi-clan land-using groups, were visible in the establishment, composition, and relations in and among the Mengen LOCs. While the LOCs were formed for the most part as communal projects, clan claims to the land could surface: when people wanted royalties from logging to go to the clan on whose land the actual logging took place, for example. Striking a balance between the values of a clan's claims to the land and the interrelations between the various clans who live on it is, as I have argued, a productive contradiction in Mengen society. Hence, it is no wonder that this dynamic was also visible in Mengen LOC politics. By this I do not mean to suggest that disputes over landownership, the desirability of logging, and the activities of LOC directors are purely a result of Mengen landholding practices. On the contrary, in this chapter I have attempted to show that logging in Wide Bay was influenced by actors and a political-economic framework that most of the Mengen could only minimally influence.

In this chapter I have focused on the wider political-economic framework in which the forests of New Britain were revalued as resources and in which Mengen actions took place, meanwhile examining the structure of Mengen LOCs. In [Chapter 4](#) I will look more closely at the complex politics, power relations, and struggles over values within Wide Bay Mengen LOCs.

## CHAPTER 4

### “Nothing but a Name”

#### Constructing Corporate Entities in Logging

So that’s how I established Kaluan [a LOC]. It’s not easy. It’s hard and it’s hard. (Leo Kaingemang, 3 Nov 2011)

To people like me who have lived their entire lives in industrialized countries, corporations and states are familiar social formations: indeed, so familiar that we easily take them for granted and regard them simply as actors. As Leo Kaingemang, a village elder and the chairman of a former LOC, notes, this is not universally so. In places like Pomio, states and corporations are present, but they are not as routine a part of social life as elsewhere and hence people more readily recognize the social effort that is needed to set them up and make them into actors. Following Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey (1991, 40–41), Keir Martin (2013, 97) notes that social groups, particularly corporate social groups, are always “hard-won social constructions” that are “more or less problematically” conceived and reproduced in social action—something with which Leo Kaingemang could certainly agree.

In [Chapter 3](#) I focused on the arrival of logging in East Pomio and the formation of the Mengen LOCs. Over the course of the chapter, I took a wide view in which institutions such as the state and particularly companies, as well as Mengen clans, appear as actors that log forests, make contracts with each other, and liaise with the rural people. Yet, as Robert Foster (2010, 97) asks, can corporations act? After all, is it not people who do the acting?

Foster's rhetorical question is part of a discussion concerning what an anthropology of corporations should look like. Foster (2010, 99) calls on us to defamiliarize the corporation by depicting their social complexity, making them appear contingent and heterogeneous—entities whose “identity as autonomous units periodically emerges with effort out of a field of relations.”<sup>36</sup> In this chapter, I examine how, and exactly by whom, the Mengen LOCs were set up. What kind of social action, or effort, was required to make them into actors recognizable by others? What, as Foster (2010, 99) asks, does the field of relations out of which the companies are elicited, encompass?

I examine these questions in the context of a meeting concerning a logging operation, which started on Sulka and Wide Bay Mengen lands in December 2013. Men from three villages had set up a new LOC called Nato Ltd., which had made a deal with Tzen Niugini, the logging and plantation company operating the Tzen plantation, referred to sometimes as Masrau, a location near the plantation (see [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#)). As Tzen Niugini paved the way for the new operation—quite literally by widening existing roads and clearing a new road inland to the areas to be logged—questions arose concerning old land disputes and details of the operation. Members of a clan involved in the dispute called a meeting to clarify matters.

The discussion of the meeting focuses on two interrelated issues: the different participants involved in the dispute and how they sought to define its scope. As we shall see, the participants not only held contesting views of who owned the tract of land, but also of what the dispute was about—whether it was just over

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36 Note how Foster implicitly compares corporations with the “dividual person”—familiar from the work on so-called “Melanesian personhood” (e.g., Strathern 1988) and Tanga Island lineages, which emerge as groups only periodically in certain contexts (Foster 1995). Marina Welker (2014, 4, 32) makes a similar point by noting that the concept of “relational personhood” well describes corporations as entities and that the enactment of corporations is based on social relations and material practices.

landownership or the validity of the logging project in general. Depending on how people defined the scope of the dispute, they also had different notions of who precisely was part of it: did it only include the two competing clans or was the LOC also involved? Was the state an actor in the project? What I am especially interested in is how the different participants in the meeting talked about clans and LOCs. Thus, along with the process of creating LOCs, my focus is on how people elicit, renegotiate, and contest the matrilineal clans.

In [Chapter 3](#), I discussed how the forests of Pomio were made into "natural resources" under frontier conditions. As noted in the Introduction, natural resources do not simply exist because of their material properties, but because they are defined and treated as such in particular kinds of social relations (Marx [1867] 1976, 153–154; [1884] 1978, 121, 240, 303; Bridge 2011, 820; McCarthy 2013, 184; Golub 2014, 18; Teaiwa 2015, 9, 18). On the frontier, in turn, different actors compete over how local environments, practices, and justifications are valued, as John McCarthy (2013, 184) notes. Through their productive activities, people relate to each other in specific ways, and through these relations people are made into certain kinds of persons and parts of certain kinds of social formations (Marx [1867] 1976, 171, 273, 411–412; [1884] 1978, 118; Munn 1992, 15). When the valuations and activities change, these relations that constitute the actors are transformed (Bell 2015, 131). In this chapter then, I examine how social groups and corporate actors are elicited, constructed, and defined in the context of logging.

The role of social groups is a classic discussion in the anthropology of Melanesia. In his famous article, Roy Wagner (1974, 107–107) asks whether there are social groups at all in the New Guinea Highlands, claiming that what the anthropologists thought of as groups among the Daribi were in fact names, or distinctions, rather than "things named"; the anthropologists' presupposition that social life is organized on the basis of lasting groups was what

made them find groups (Wagner 1974, 97, 103). According to Wagner, the social life of the Daribi was more fluid.<sup>37</sup>

Merlan and Rumsey (1991, 40–41) note, however, that in the Highlands corporate groups can be “the things named”—that is, historically specific social actors. Segmentary and corporate groups can, and do, play an important part in social life, but as Merlan and Rumsey (1991, 56) note, the agency of either people or groups cannot simply be taken for granted but needs to be opened up. In this chapter I follow Merlan and Rumsey (1991, 56) and Martin (2013, 83, 89) who note that social groups are not only names but also important actors that exist “in part as more or less contested representations” and are elicited, contested, and reproduced through speech—very often in dispute cases in which the definition of these groups becomes an issue that people have to face (also Rumsey 2000, 112). How people speak about social groups is, then, not simply a matter of representation of “pre-existing entities”; as Rupert Stasch (2011, 163) notes, ritual and oratory have important “world-making effects.” I take social groups to be, following Stasch (2011, 164), at once problematical semiotic constructions with very real material consequences.

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37 The notion of lasting corporate groups or the “groupness” of lineages in Melanesia has been criticized more widely. On critiques of stable and lasting groups in New Guinea, see, for example, Barnes (1962), Ernst (1999), Foster (1995, 67), and Golub (2014, 188). Robert Foster (1995, 11, 62, 67, 194), for instance, claims that the matrilineal of the Tanga Islands emerge as groups only in certain (ritual) contexts, not unlike his view of corporations cited at the beginning of the chapter, while Thomas Ernst (1999) and Alex Golub (2007b, 45; 2013, 200) have noted how people in the PNG Highlands represent themselves as corporate kin groups when expected to do so by the state, especially in relation to landownership and natural resource extraction. Arguing against Foster (1995), Michael Scott (2007) has convincingly noted that in parts of Island Melanesia matrilineal are conceived to be stable entities or groups. Alex Golub (2014, 204) notes that this is very much an ethnographic, not a theoretical, question about how concepts of groups differ across Melanesia.



I now turn to the meeting, a single speech event, in order to look at how people spoke about, elicited, and contested different groups, such as clans and companies. In doing so, I address the following questions, How are corporate groups enacted, as Marina Welker (2014, 4) asks, and what are the "political and semiotic processes" that make them look like actors, as Alex Golub (2013, 2) puts it? In order to contextualize the statements and positions of the participants, I also refer to past events and relations in order to provide a more fully rounded picture of LOC politics in Wide Bay and show the real, material consequences of these constructions.

### The Meeting

The meeting was held in February 2014 in Sampun village. Preparations for the logging operation by Tzen Niugini had raised a number of issues and many inhabitants of the villages near the logging area were unclear about the details of the proposed enterprise. As Tzen Niugini had established several extensions of its oil palm plantation in Wide Bay, people were wondering if oil palm would be planted. Precisely what agreements had been signed? Had land been leased? Old issues also rose to the fore: a clan group not represented in Nato Ltd., which I call the *Disputing Clan*, noted that they had an unresolved land dispute with one of the clans that was represented, which I call the *Disputed Clan*. The tract of land in question was included in the proposed logging operation. As the dispute preceded the operation, members of the Disputing Clan wanted to know why activities were starting without taking this fact into account.

In order to clarify these issues, the Disputing Clan called a meeting in Sampun, where most of its members lived and which was one of the villages surrounding the area of operation. Members of the Disputing Clan sent letters of invitation to representatives of the Disputed Clan—whose members also lived mostly in Sampun, Tagul, and Setvei—as well as other representatives of Nato Ltd. In the letter, the Disputing Clan stated that it wanted to discuss two issues: first, why people had not been made clearly aware about

the project; second, that part of the project area was the subject of an unresolved dispute between the two clans. Respected people who were not directly involved in the dispute were asked to form a panel to hear the parties and facilitate discussion—a course of action typical of the informal hearings of dispute cases in the area. In land dispute cases these hearings are the first stages of dispute settlement—called pre-mediation—in which villagers appointed as ad hoc land mediators hear the parties and try to help find a compromise.<sup>38</sup>

The meeting in Sampun was not a land dispute hearing as such, but a land mediator—a Sulka man from the Local Land Court based in Milim village—attended the meeting nonetheless. This was because one objective of the meeting was to establish how the two clans should proceed to solve their dispute. The panels in dispute cases comprise respected people, often village officials and elders—almost always men. In this case the chairman of the panel was a Sulka man from Klampun, whose clan was involved in a local conservation initiative there. The other panelists were ward members (elected village representatives) of Sampun–Tagul and Setvei wards, while the highest-ranking state official was the vice president of the East Pomio LLG, also a Sulka man. Mengen conservationists from Toimtop village had been asked to attend the meeting and share their views, but they were not on the panel.

The meeting was held at the meeting ground in Sampun, which was on the beach under a large *Calophyllum* tree in front of a new copra shed. Men and women from the Disputing Clan sat in a group on the ground facing those of the Disputed Clan, who sat with representatives of Nato on the other side. The panelists sat between the groups on plastic chairs, while the land mediator highlighted his role as an observer and commentator by sitting on the ground beside the panelists. People not directly involved

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38 If a compromise is reached, it can be formalized into a binding agreement (TP: *wanbel agrimen*) by a land mediator. See Melissa Demian's (2021a, 127, 171, 172–178) work on the legal role of land mediation and for a comparable mediation case.

had come from neighboring villages to observe the meeting and sat around the meeting area in smaller groups. As I had come to Wide Bay a few weeks prior to the meeting for a follow-up period of fieldwork, I took part as well and sat with other observers from Toimtop village. The ward member of Sampun, a man originally from Tanga Island (New Ireland) opened the meeting. In the typical fashion of Wide Bay meetings, he acknowledged and thanked all the parties present and gave the floor to the chairman of the panel, who also thanked everybody, summarized the main issues, and started the discussion by allocating turns to speak.

Overall, the meeting was calm and the speakers addressed each other politely, and in their opening statements always acknowledged the parties present. The chairman of the panel kept the meeting firmly organized by reminding speakers of the issues they should discuss, summarizing what had been said and asking for responses. In short, the chairman mediated the discussion by distancing issues from speakers by repeating them so that people would address the issues rather than the speakers personally. The meeting lasted for several hours and was followed by a lunch of rice served by women from Sampun. (No formal event in Wide Bay is held without serving food.) The participants discussed both the issues, first debating what constitutes "proper awareness" (see also [Chapter 7](#)). Regarding the dispute, the two clans decided to take it to the next stage—namely, formal mediation at the Local Land Court—and they received practical advice on how to do so from the attending mediator. The representatives of Nato agreed that no logging would be conducted on the disputed tract of land until the dispute was resolved.

What was at stake, however, was not only the issue of land-ownership, but also the validity of the project itself and the larger framework of how natural resources were being used, by whom, and under what authority. The participants sought, with varying degrees of explicitness, to define the scope of the dispute in different ways. In addition, the speakers also defined the actors involved in the dispute in different and occasionally conflicting ways.

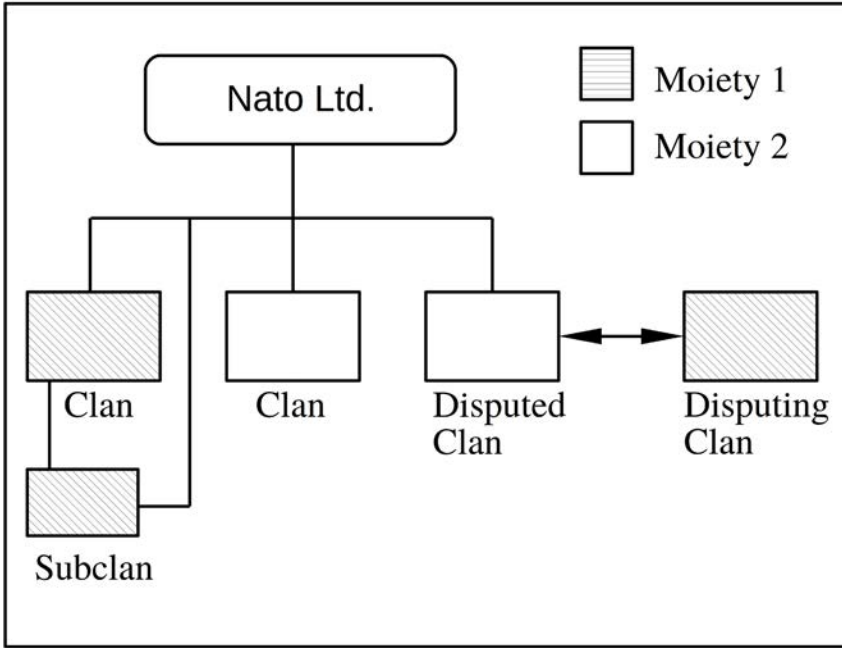
## The LOC

The meeting started with a representative of the Disputing Clan taking up the first issue: the lack of clear awareness. The chairman of the panel asked to whom, specifically, they were directing the question—to the Disputed Clan or Nato. The spokesman of the Disputing Clan, a calm man in his early fifties, replied:

I think I will address Nato to clarify this, because we all understand that it is a party along with us in this dispute. (Spokesman of the Disputing Clan, 18 Feb 2014)

The Disputing Clan regarded Nato as a relevant party, or actor, in the dispute. Nato Resource Ltd. was the newest addition to the LOCs of the Wide Bay area. It had been registered in 2013 by men belonging to four clan groups that claimed adjacent parcels of land between the Noait and Toim rivers—after which the LOC was named. These four clan groups were logical team partners: they claimed adjacent land areas and reaffirmed each other's boundaries. (The recognition of one's ownership of a land area by others, especially those owning neighboring tracts of land, is a crucial feature of landownership among the Sulka and Mengen.) The four clans also formed two pairs, belonging to opposing moieties (see [Figure 7](#)). Two of the clans formed a clan-subclan pair. This means that the named subclan recognizes its junior status in relation to the “mother group,” but both groups claim authority over distinct, but neighboring, land areas. The other two clans of the opposing moiety formed a pair as well, although one that was less clear-cut. One was a Mengen and the other a Sulka clan with similar names. According to some they were two distinct clans that corresponded to each other, others maintained they were the same clan with Sulka and Mengen versions of the name, and some claimed that one or other of the clans was a subclan of the other. These questions were related to a lingering border dispute between the two groups.

As these two clan pairs belonged to opposing moieties, they were also frequent marriage partners with each other. This created



**Figure 7:** Composition of Nato Ltd.

cross-cutting kinship ties between the men who set up Nato and became its officials. For example, the chairman was married into one of the other Nato clans, which his son (belonging to his mother’s group) represented as a director. Similar kinship ties cut across other LOCs as well. In fact, navigating and utilizing the kinship networks to set up and maintain the companies has been an important task of LOC officials throughout PNG (see Lattas 2011, 93; Leedom 1997, 59). LOC directors are central brokers in the resource economy: for foreign contractors, LOCs and their directors are important mediators through which to liaise with the local population, something made easier by them coming from the communities themselves as well as through their kinship ties and relations to the local people. Andrew Lattas (2011, 90) has characterized LOCs as “ways of using local knowledge, relations and practices to control unrest, protests and compensation

demands.” For foreign companies, LOCs have come to represent the “corporate interests” of the locals, or even “the locals” as such (Wood 1997, 98; Lattas 2011, 91).

LOCs have also provided an avenue for educated men to rise in status and influence, as they are more proficient than their fellow villagers in the ways of companies and states—or can present themselves as such. Many of the Wide Bay Mengen LOC directors were young or middle-aged men who explicitly noted that they had become directors because of their education. Yet most of the directors with whom I spoke and who had been active in the LOCs lived in the villages and cultivated their gardens like other rural Mengen; only a few were part of an emerging middle class, living in towns and gaining their income from salaried jobs. Some of them had also held positions in the state bureaucracy and were sometimes classed by other villagers as “Big Shots.”<sup>39</sup> As Keir Martin (2013, 3, 7, 65, 141, 177) notes, the figure of the Big Shot is explicitly contrasted with that of the “big man,” the “traditional” leader, and is used to talk about emerging class divisions and disputes over the extent of reciprocity.

One particularly important source of the authority of the LOC directors is the access to, and knowledge of, clan histories that recount the emergence of the clan and its links to the land (see [Chapter 2](#)). Often restricted, this information is only revealed to convince others in appropriate situations, such as land disputes. Access to these histories is also constitutive of leadership, and in some Mengen clans such knowledge is held by only a few clan members and passed on strategically (see [Chapter 7](#)). One woman told me that children of the clan learn the stories in meetings, prior to dispute situations, in which clan members come together to select a spokesperson and check their stories, as the

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39 This is a derogatory term, used especially by the Tolai of East New Britain, for members of the elite who do not participate in the reciprocal networks of the “grassroots” villagers (Martin 2013, 3). According to Peter Bosip (personal communication, 2016), executive director of CELCOR, an NGO in PNG, the term is a Tok Pisin slang expression and is in use throughout the country.

full genealogies and histories might not be remembered by a single person. In other clans these stories were written down and the records held by clan leaders. A female clan leader recounted how her clan compiled the clan histories:

We compile the family tree individually. The apical ancestress is at first alone, but then she gives birth to children. They start the big branches, which then give birth to the small, small ones [lineages]. We track them down individually so that you for example write down our lineage until the ancestress, which gave birth to our lineage. And another ancestress, she gave birth to his [named man] lineage in [village name], so he writes down his lineage's family tree. And then we come together and combine the genealogies and that's how you come up with the family tree of your clan. (Woman, 50–60 years, 14 Aug 2011)

One man, who had been a LOC director in previous operations, told me in an interview that he would pass his clan records to a young man whom he sees as being fit to lead the clan. I asked him if a woman could become a leader, and he replied that women were less assertive in public settings and hence not strong enough leaders. Contrary to the comment of the director, I observed that elder women especially were more than capable of voicing their opinions strongly, and the woman quoted above had assumed the role of a clan leader. However, the LOC setting was nevertheless highly gendered. During my fieldwork I did not encounter women who had been directors, and in the LOC documents I reviewed I found only one woman marked as a director. While some women assumed the role of clan leaders, most people—men and women alike—noted that it was less common, because in the past women were regarded as less assertive leaders, were not taught to take part public settings, had less experience in oratory, and so forth.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In his account of LOCs in West New Britain, Andrew Lattas (2011) notes that they are foremostly male settings. In the Mengen case, women attended land dispute meetings, and took part in the compiling of genealogies and in less visible discussions over the use of land, even though they did not hold formal positions in the LOCs.

While many of the LOC directors had access to clan histories, their ability to claim the knowledge necessary in dealing with states and companies was another reason why they had been appointed to their positions. Many LOC directors I interviewed noted that they had become directors either because they had an education and knew how to deal with companies, or because their fellow villagers lacked the “mindset for business.” In short, they had managed to present themselves as necessary mediators.<sup>41</sup> One LOC official told me that he had sidelined his kin from LOC decision-making due to their ostensible lack of knowledge. Unlike most directors, he had worked in the state bureaucracy and was decidedly part of the urban middle class. Many of his rural clan members resented being sidelined and, justly, felt dispossessed. They also noted that they felt unable to challenge his control over forest resources vested in the LOC, but hoped that a younger, highly educated clan member could do so. The institutional framework of the LOC thus provided the possibility for dispossession, but this threat had actualized itself in only one of the LOCs. Due to their multi-clan composition and the possibility of fission, asserting long-time and institutional control over the forest resources through the LOCs was difficult in the Wide Bay Mengen case.

In previous logging operations, in which Balokoma held the timber permit and subcontracted logging to Niugini Lumber (see [Chapter 3](#)), the directors also wielded considerable power by selecting the contractor. Sometimes these instances became sites of contestation, as different local factions sought to align themselves with different contractors (see also Wood 1997, 85).

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41 James Slotta (2014, 628, 631) has noted that, in the Highlands of PNG, access to esoteric knowledge and its revelation to others is constitutive of power. Knowledge of transnational institutions such as churches, NGOs, or companies can be presented in a “revelatory framework” as esoteric knowledge, and those who hold this—often young and educated people, especially men—can present themselves as necessary mediators (Slotta 2014, 627, 638). “Gradual revelation” of the hidden is constitutive of power more broadly in Melanesia (Foster 1995, 194, 207, 209)—including among the Mengen.



One LOC director told me how he had trumped his clan members, who supported a different contractor, by noting that the others belonged to a subclan holding land elsewhere, while he was of the superordinate group, thus delegitimizing the others’ claim to authority. Yet while the locals, especially directors, have undoubtedly sought to control foreign companies, the opposite has also been the case, as LOCs have become indebted to foreign companies for start-up costs, while directors have felt moral indebtedness for their help in setting up the LOCs (Leedom 1997, 64; Simpson 1997, 21–22, 33).

Those who set up Nato had wanted to engage in logging as early as the mid-1990s when it was conducted under the license held by Balokoma. However, the operation based to the south of their areas never expanded that far north, and the villages between the Noait and Toim rivers saw no logging. They did not give up, however, and when Tzen Niugini started operating in Masrau, north of their villages, they set up their LOC in order to be able to make a deal with it. The Tzen operation was also based on a new legal scheme. Rather than holding a timber permit for a logging concession—that is, a TRP (as in the previous operations, see [Chapter 3](#))—Tzen Niugini conducted its logging under a Forest Clearance Authority (FCA), needed for clearances of over 50 ha for agricultural purposes (Filer 2011, 5).<sup>42</sup>

The plantation in Masrau was not just a front for logging (see [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#)): the harvest of timber was also vital for financing the Ili-Wawas project. Likewise, for those who set up Nato, it was a chance to attract logging and enter into deals with foreign companies in order to “improve the cash flow of the

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42 Under the new regulations, timber permits would be granted only for selective logging and on-shore processing, while timber logged under an FCA could be exported as raw logs—a reason why many of the new “agroforestry” projects are merely logging projects in disguise (Filer 2011, 20; Nelson et al. 2014, 189, 192). As a result of the introduction of Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABL) combined with old concessions, PNG became the world’s largest exporter of tropical wood in 2014 (Mousseau 2016, 4).

area,” as one of the founders put it, meanwhile emphasizing how they had “struggled” to get the project. Some of them had been involved in unsuccessful attempts to get logging to the area 10–20 years earlier. I interpret the expressions “hard work” and “struggle” to refer also to the social efforts—briefly discussed above—needed to set up the LOC, which involved establishing links with outsiders, dealing with state officials, and negotiating with—and occasionally outmaneuvering—fellow villagers.

As Tzen Niugini machinery began rolling into the area and with surveyors visiting the forests daily, it seemed that the men of the four clans had been successful in their attempts, and Nato had performed its role. The logging operation had arrived, and it was in part due to their efforts. The opening statement of the spokesman of the Disputing Clan referred to this as well: he recognized the crucial role of Nato in facilitating and making the logging operation possible, and therefore regarded it as an important actor in the dispute.

### Disputing Clans

Returning to our meeting, in response to the question of the alleged lack of awareness about the logging project among the local population, the chairman of Nato claimed that open meetings to share the relevant details had been conducted in Setvei and Tagul, but people had failed to attend. The different parties and panelists then discussed for some time precisely what was meant by “awareness” (see [Chapter 8](#)), after which the chairman of the panel suggested the discussion should focus on the land dispute between the two clans.

If Nato was regarded as an actor in the dispute, at least by the members of the Disputing Clan, the status of clans as relevant parties to the dispute was acknowledged by all. Indeed, in the meeting in Sampun, clans were successfully performed by all representatives. By this I mean that the representatives were regarded as the voices of their clans and none of the speakers questioned the notion of a landowning clan as an entity or actor.

On the contrary, the spokesmen of the clans involved in the dispute raised the issues “on behalf of the clan” and their statements were addressed to the opposing clan, rather than individual representatives of it. Similarly, Nato representatives noted that the company was based on “four recognized clans.” The speakers also agreed that the main “issue was between two clans,” as a spokesman of the Disputing Clan noted. Similarly, the chairman of Nato, switching quickly to his role as a clan representative, remarked that his clan was “chasing” another clan, while others “chased” his, referring to the ubiquitous land disputes and thus portraying the clans as the main actors. In this instance, the issue was that members from both clans claimed the land area and delegitimized the claims of the other party in identical terms. In interviews with representatives of the two clans, I was told in both cases that the other group had confused land-user rights with ownership and that “our” clan was the “original clan” of the area and had brought in the other through intermarriage. For example, a member of the Disputing Clan characterized the core of the dispute as follows:

The [people from our clan], they can trace their ancestors, who lived in these villages up there in the bush. So, [the people from the other clan], their story is not clear. Because they don't know which of their ancestors lived up there, in the old villages that are called *knau*. Who lived in this *knau* and who lived in that *knau*. Like that. So [the other clan], they are not quite clear about which of their ancestors lived where. But [our clan], they know their stories well; they know which of their ancestors lived in the area. (Woman, around 25 years, 6 Feb 2014)

Like the clans represented in Nato, the disputing parties were of opposing moieties and thus also related to each through frequent intermarriage. Due to this, the disputants occasionally referred to each other as cross-cousins (M: *ruvung*, S: *ros*). People commonly describe each other in kinship terms, as noted in [Chapter 1](#), and those of the same age and gender who belong to intermarrying clans are each other's *ruvung*. There is also a strong moral implication, because people related to each other as *ruvung* should be

allies and supporters. This was argued by Michel Panoff (1976, 177, 181) for the 1960s, and it was still the case during my fieldwork. In day-to-day village affairs, *ruvung* often help each other and people emphasize the importance of this relationship, selecting their *ruvung* as recipients in formal gift prestations, for example. This is because, along with intermarriages, the cross-cousin relationship signifies and emphasizes socially productive relations between the respective clans.

The panelists at the Sampun meeting also referred to the disputants as each other's *ruvung*, with the explicit intention of reminding the disputants of the mutual recognition (M: *glang lomtan*, TP: *luksave*) that should exist between them. Urging the disputants to settle their dispute through a compromise, the LLG vice president stated, "If this recognition and *ruvung* you are both talking about is a tight *ruvung*, then you two should bring it out clearly." This was not just a neutral statement but one that reminded the disputants that disputes often arise when people consider that they have been sidelined, and that cross-cousins should take each other into account. By invoking the value of productive inter-clan relations, the vice president urged them not to draw Nato into the dispute and endanger the whole project.

Conversely, the prescription of cross-cousin solidarity also highlights the fact that, especially in land matters, *ruvung* can be in fierce contestation with each other. One reason for this is that two clans that have inhabited the same area and are long-standing marriage partners often both regard themselves as the original owners due to the long history of dwelling on the land (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)). Even when both clans agree on who is the landowner, members of other clans with strong ties to the land often feel that they are entitled to benefits and decision-making rights—that is, recognition—on the basis of their status as *ruvung* or land-users in general.

As noted in the previous section, managing relations between the landowning clans has been an important aspect of the construction of LOCs in Wide Bay. LOCs and resource extraction in general provided instances in which clans—or clan representa-

tives—entered into new kinds of alliances with each other. Frequent intermarriages between two clans, prestations in initiations, and other interaction create bonds between the clans, and it is common for people then to regard the two clans as allied or paired (M: *vimbis kam*, “to hold hands”). Today, the notion of being “attached” (TP: *pas wantaim*) to another clan extends to issues of land ownership. A young man noted in reference to a land dispute in which his clan was involved that they had no trouble with a neighboring group, with whom they had been “one” from the time of the ancestors. Being “one” meant working together, remembering the other group in prestations and the confirmation of land boundaries, or “supporting the other one with talk” (TP: *sapotim long toktok*) in the case of disputes.

This kind of support could be reciprocated with benefits. When a proposed repeat operation caused a land dispute between two clans in one of the Wide Bay Mengen villages in 2011, the clan marked as the principal landowner was supported by the rest of the clan groups, while the Disputing Clan was left on its own. In the land dealings of the Mengen this is a precarious position, as one of the key pieces of evidence for the ownership of a particular tract of land is confirmation of the borders by a neighboring group: ownership of land is substantially based on mutual recognition. The clan marked as the landowner, or its representatives, had agreed to the repeat operation on the condition that, as the landowners, they would receive the premium (supplementary payments paid by the contractor to run the LOC), while the royalties would be divided evenly among the seven clans of that village and then distributed by the respective leaders to individual members. The leader of the landowning clan had decided to give 20 percent of the premium to the three clans that had testified for his clan in the dispute, in order to recognize their “hard work.” The clan leader, an articulate middle-aged man, explained the rationale for keeping 80 percent of the premium for his own clan:

We told them that if you [plural] want to take part in this, all the service payments the company gives will be distributed among

all of us. Only one, called the “premium,” we’d like that this payment should go to [our clan]. I’m not in the habit of getting everything—I do not like that, but I would like to get this premium in order to show that I am the father of the land. Because if we all get the same service, it looks like we are all landowners. So that’s why I must get a bit more than you [plural] to show that I am the father of the land and that I go first in approving something connected with the land. And they agreed with my getting the premium, because as a landowner I should have it. (Man, 40 years, 16 Nov 2011)

The proposal of the clan leader to give a part of the premium to those who had supported him in the dispute case resembles instances of customary support and prestations such as a landowning clan giving small areas of its territory to allied groups, although the same event could of course be interpreted quite cynically as an instance of buying support. On the other hand, this was connected to central Mengen notions of relatedness, as actions that contributed to the maintenance of valued social relations were classed as “work” (see [Chapter 1](#)). Recognizing the “hard work” of others in the form of gifts—given for example during initiation ceremonies—were pervasive acts of reciprocity and relatedness.<sup>43</sup>

Keeping the premium payment for the landowning clan was also interesting in another sense: rather than a question of maximizing benefits, the clan leader wanted the premium to go to his own clan as a sign of landownership and authority over the land. This was intended to reproduce the moral order of Mengen communal life—namely, that the different clans live productively together (in this case sharing the benefits), forming a multi-clan community on the land, which is owned by one of the clans.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the cynical interpretation and the notion that the shar-

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43 To follow Jane Fajans (1997, 51, 70, 79), the “underlying schema,” namely work as relation-making, was operating here, even though its outward expression and context had changed.

44 See Michael Scott’s (2007, 218–220, 223) account of the construction of “multi-lineage” polities among the matrilineal Arosi.

ing of benefits resembles and reproduces clan alliances are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, possible self-interest and strategizing are enacted in culturally specific forms.

In the quote above, the clan leader sought to personify his clan by using the first-person singular ("I") to refer to his clan. People often used these referents to talk about their kin groups. Alan Rumsey (1999) has analyzed similar uses of the singular forms in reference to social collectives among the Ku Waru of Highland PNG. The Ku Waru did not use the "collective I" in oral history accounts to describe the actions of ancestors, as in Polynesia (see Sahlins 1985, 47), but these forms were used in inter-group events where they played a key role in constructing segmentary-level social identities as the relevant actors in play (Rumsey 1999, 57, 58). Furthermore, the use of the "collective I" was not restricted to chiefs, also as in Polynesia; several aspiring men could use it when seeking to represent a given collective. Rumsey notes that it was not always clear whether a Ku Waru big man was referring to himself, or his group, and that in fact this was a moot point, because the big men were simultaneously aspiring to represent their groups *and* trying to amplify their persons. Acting as the "collective I" required social effort (Rumsey 1999, 56). This applies to the quote above as well: the clan leader shifts between plural and singular forms and it is not always clear whether the decision to distribute the money in a given way was made by him or by several members of his clan. What the clan leader sought to do was to present clans as the relevant actors in the discussion of logging operations and simultaneously himself as the embodiment of the "corporate will" of his clan. In the end, the particular operation never materialized and slowly the dispute faded into background.

Returning to the dispute regarding the operation of Nato Resources Ltd., what was not addressed in the meeting was the fact that neither of the disputing clans was as unified in its position as one would assume on the basis of discourse. The Disputing Clan was in fact deeply divided over the issue: the land dispute was raised by one lineage within the clan and was supported by another, with members of both noting that the clan was unified

over the issue. However, a man speaking for a third lineage of the same clan totally refuted the claims of the representatives of the other two lineages, himself claiming that the land belonged to the opposing clan—that is, to his *ruvungs*. I use here the term “named lineage” rather than subclan, because all the lineages claimed to represent the “mother-clan,” awarding the junior status of subclans to the others. This often involves rejecting a subclan name attributed by others and claiming the name of the main clan. The opposing clan in Nato was not as explicitly divided into contesting subclans, but it too was far from unified over the issue. A female clan leader had at one point, along with her male supporters, tried to withdraw her clan from the project altogether. She was not successful, being trumped in a meeting by other Nato representatives and state officials, according to her own account. Other clans in Nato were similarly divided: opposition to the project was not always explicated, but as one member of a clan in Nato told me, he was glad of the contestation between the two disputing clans, since it stalled a project that he was not at all happy with, although he felt it was socially difficult to oppose those advocating logging.

Matrilineal clans are routinized and taken-for-granted groups for the Mengen. This does not mean that they are unchanging or perceived by different people in the same way. On the contrary, the clan and subclan groups are reproduced in different instances, such as customary exchanges and land dispute cases, and at these points the composition of the groups could be renegotiated. As noted by Keir Martin (2013, 97), in cases of a land dispute among the Tolai of New Britain, the existence of matrilineal clan groups is not questioned, but their composition and nature are subject to negotiation: in rituals a clan group may act as “one,” but be divided into lineages in questions of landownership. This is the case with Mengen clans as well: there is a general agreement that land was held by the “original” clan, but there can be significant disagreements over which clan is the original, who was included in it, who has the authority to speak for the group, and so on. The subclans are a case in point: in some cases, they are autonomous in terms of land and resemble “actual clans” (see also Eves 2011, 353, and



[Chapter 8](#)). This depends partly on contingent factors such as whether the spokespersons of the group manage to present their case and convince others. In other cases, appealing to the superior status of the “mother group” may trump dissenting voices, while some clan groups decide to disregard subclan divisions and “act as one.” As John Wagner (2007, 31) has shown for other parts of PNG, authority over land may fragment and move simultaneously to groups of smaller and larger orders.

### “Nothing but a Name”

While the clans as actors appeared as rather unproblematic entities in the statements of the participants, the role of the LOC was interesting. Relating to both points—people’s awareness about the logging project and the land dispute—the chairman of the panel noted that Nato Ltd. was also a part of the dispute, because the clans that formed Nato also took their orders from it. This was also the stance of the Disputing Clan, whose representatives explicitly stated that Nato was a party in the dispute, and should have consulted the Disputing Clan before including the contested territory in its logging plans. Nobody, not the panelists, clan, nor Nato representatives, questioned the principle that the clans had a right to advance their claims over land areas and raise disputes.

The proponents of the project suggested that the clans deal with the land dispute as they saw fit, while allowing the logging operation to continue; whoever won would become part of the LOC. This was suggested by the Nato chairman as well as by one of the panelists. The vice president of the LLG took a strong stance in support of the project by thanking Nato for offering “its resources”—that is, the resources of the clans—“to get development” (the road) that the government itself could not fund. Moreover, he warned the litigants that they might miss a “good chance” for development and told them not to “touch Nato,” to

leave the company out of the dispute, in other words.<sup>45</sup> As noted in the previous section, he emphasized this by appealing to the litigants to settle the dispute quickly, as cross-cousins.

This is an important statement as, with it, one of the speakers sought to define the stakes and nature of the dispute. In an email concerning the dispute and the call for the meeting by the Disputing Clan, a local (Mengen) consultant of Tzen Niugini noted that the land dispute did in fact pre-exist the operation and that the LOC officials had known about it beforehand. He concluded that as no resolution had been passed in previous mediations, the dispute should now be settled properly and quickly. According to him, “stopping the operation will have severe consequences since it is a government project.”<sup>46</sup> The consultant did not specify what these “serious consequences” might be, but he explicitly appealed to the government as a legitimating framework (see also Li 2014, 37, 86). The Ili-Wawas project was indeed initiated by the sitting MP, Paul Tiensten, and was also endorsed by the president of the East Pomio LLG—and then again in this meeting by the vice president. In this sense the logging operation had the support of at least the administration of Pomio District. However, critical voices noted that Tzen Niugini was a private company and its operations were therefore not above the law, and that if the landowners wished to stop the project, they had the right to do so.

The proponents of the project sought to present the issue as a disagreement between two clan groups over the ownership of a particular land area. The chairman of Nato told the audience that getting such a project was extremely hard and asked them not to “kill the child” that had come among them. He too noted that the issue was up to the two clans to resolve and that, until it had been, no logging would take place on the disputed area,

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45 Büscher and Dressler (2012, 371) report similar cases in other settings where locals were encouraged to participate as laborers in “development” projects with warnings that if they did not, they would lose the opportunity to realize the benefits of such development.

46 The quote is from a printout of the email, which was circulated before the meeting.

where ultimately one clan would have to be proved owner while the other would need to submit. He also distanced the company from the dispute even more starkly. Before the meeting, the female clan leader had suggested that Nato take representatives from the Disputing Clan—that is, from the clan with whom her own clan was in a dispute—onto its board of directors. With this measure she proposed that recognition and participation be granted to her *ruvung*, even though she never questioned that her clan was the rightful owner. However, the LOC chairman asserted that he was opposed to this. He thus advanced a more exclusive view of land ownership by emphasizing that the LOC should only include landowning clans in the project area, while the female clan leader wanted to emphasize the interrelations of the clans. This is a concrete example of how different actors sought to settle the productive contradiction between the autonomy of the landowning clan and the interrelations between clans in different ways.

According to the Nato chairman, the real level of the dispute was between Incorporated Land Groups (ILG)—by which he was referring to the disputing clans, not all of which had in fact registered themselves as ILGs. This notion alone is highly interesting, since the chairman conflated the “traditional clans” with ILGs, which are kin groups incorporated under PNG law.<sup>47</sup> This shows how the legislation of PNG—particularly that concerning customary land titles—and the “ideology of landownership” (Filer 2006) have influenced “traditional” conceptions of relatedness, often resulting in existing kin categories (“distinctions” in Wagner’s (1974, 106) terminology) being reshaped as clearly defined stable groups (e.g., Ernst 1999; Golub 2007b, 2014). The chairman added that above the ILGs (namely, the clans) was the LOC, but

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47 While there has been a proliferation of ILGs in PNG (Filer 2012, 601–602), very few of the Wide Bay Mengen clans had actually incorporated themselves. This is because ILG legislation requires a thorough listing of members, their birth certificates, and so on, in a laudable attempt to avoid wrongdoing and ensure that ILGs reflect existing groups (see Fingleton 2007). In practice, this makes applying for ILG status difficult for many rural people.

according to him, that was just a coordinating level, and thus the LOC should not be included in the dispute. He further stated during the meeting:

At the higher [LOC] level, you should not fight; it is an empty body, a controlling body to make things happen. When everything is in place and you get the power over the land, it is you who will run all the work, not the LOC. Not Nato! Nato is nothing but a name!

Like the LLG vice president before him, the chairman of Nato also sought to define the scope of the dispute so that Nato and the project would be left out of it. He did this in even starker terms by “deconstructing” the company from being an actor in and of itself to just the sum of its parts—the clans—by noting that any potential issues were between them. In my opinion, this correlates with the fact that clans were talked about in the meeting as unproblematic entities by all parties—albeit for different reasons. For the proponents of the project, this was a convenient way to “contain” the dispute as an issue between clans. For the parties disputing the area, it made sense to downplay any divisions within their clans as these could undermine their claims to ownership of the land.

In the meeting, therefore, clans appeared to be the relevant actors, successfully performed by their representatives because people acknowledged that they indeed represented entities that can be termed landowning clans. This was also the case with the LOC: members of the Disputing Clan as well as the chairman of the panel regarded it as an actor in the dispute. This was a problem for the LOC members, because the dispute was then not only about landownership between two clans, but threatened to halt logging in the disputed area. In a desperate attempt to keep the LOC out of the dispute, the chairman spoke like a true “Wagnerian” by claiming that the LOC, literally, was only a name, rather than the thing named, in an attempt to avoid speaking about the very real consequences of the LOC, namely the ongoing logging operation.

The chairman of Nato was aware that the LOC was not just a "coordinating body" but, rather, was an important actor in the logging operation that had caused the disagreement over land to resurface. For this reason he sought to obfuscate Nato's role in the issue and keep it out of the dispute. If social groups are "hard-won constructions," as Martin (2013, 97) notes, sometimes the effectiveness of an actor seems to be best achieved when it is seemingly dissolved and left out of the framework. Or, as David Graeber (2001, 259) puts it, social action is considered to be competent or successful when it can make the structures and templates of action behind it disappear. With a sort of crude rhetorical sleight of hand, the chairman of Nato sought to do just that: make the LOC disappear from the picture.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have focused on a meeting concerning a logging operation conducted by a plantation company with the blessing of Nato, a Sulka and Mengen LOC. The meeting was called by members of a Mengen clan group who claimed land areas that were part of the logging operation. Members of another clan group claiming the same area had been active in forming the LOC to facilitate the plantation company logging the area they perceived as theirs. The disagreement over the land area was older than the logging operation and the clan groups had in the past sought to establish who the landowner was, but without clear results. Even though, in Wide Bay Mengen (and Sulka) landholding practices, land is owned by single matrilineal group, people from several clan groups often have long-established rights to use a particular piece of land. Thus, in everyday life, disagreements over land may lie dormant as people cultivate their gardens, while each of the disagreeing parties quietly regard themselves as the landowners. However, when one party openly claims authority over the land in question, the disagreement can resurface.

On the surface, the clan left out of Nato had called the meeting to clarify two questions: Why had the local population not

been made properly aware about the logging project? And why had the LOC ignored the land dispute over a part of the project area? These issues were addressed in the meeting, in which the two disputing clans decided that they would settle the dispute formally, as no compromise was in sight. The LOC agreed that logging on the disputed area would be halted until it was resolved. As I have shown in this chapter, however, much more was at stake in the meeting. People involved in the dispute had diverging opinions not only on the matter at hand—namely, who owned the land—but also on what the dispute was in fact about and who was part of it. Members of the Disputing Clan were against the logging project itself, and many affirmed that they would not allow it should their claims to ownership be recognized. The LOC officials and supporters of the project said that whichever clan group won would become a member of the LOC, but sought to persuade the disputants to let the logging continue. Depending on how the participants viewed what the dispute was about, they also had different views on who was part of it. The proponents of the project claimed that it was a dispute between the two clans, while the opponents maintained that the LOC was also part of the dispute, because it had brought logging to the area. Interestingly, nobody in the meeting claimed that the logging company, Tzen Niugini, was involved in the dispute.

Furthermore, the participants in the meeting not only sought to enforce their own views of what the dispute was about and who was part of it, but also elicited and reconstructed the actors. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a Mengen man who observed that setting up a company is hard work, referring to the social effort needed to build up a company, which in his case meant dealing with foreign logging company representatives, members of the bureaucracy, and community members in different ways. This is in line with Robert Foster's (2010, 99) call for a new anthropology of corporations, in which corporations should be examined as contingent and heterogeneous constructions, rather than simply as actors. As Marina Welker (2014, 32) notes, this call has been informed by work in the anthropology of the state (e.g., Trouil-

lot 2001; Mitchell 2006)—which has sought to move away from a view of the state as a monolithic actor—as well as the discussion of corporate groups, or the lack thereof, in Melanesia (e.g., Wagner 1974; Foster 1995; Golub 2014). I took as my point of departure the notion that social groups, whether states, clans, or companies, are simultaneously social constructions as well as important actors. These actors are commonly constructed in speech events—and in PNG, in land dispute meetings in particular—where people talk about the groups, renegotiate their boundaries, contest them, and, most crucially, seek to personify them. As Golub (2014, 20) notes, people look to amplify their own actions by seeking to personify corporate groups.

By focusing on the dispute meeting and how different participants talked about the actors involved, I looked more closely at a variety of concrete practices, like dealing with bureaucracy, the use of logging money as gifts to recreate kinship ties and clan alliances, and the use of clan histories that are crucial to the formation and the politics of the Mengen LOCs. With this I have sought to show that while speech and speech events are important in eliciting and renegotiating social groups, the complex semiotic and political processes that both Golub (2014) and Stasch (2011) mention are not restricted to speech alone.

Two interesting things happened in the meeting in terms of the construction of corporate actors. First, all the parties present—regardless of their stance—regarded matrilineal clans as important actors in the dispute. The people present also successfully performed them—that is, the audience regarded the speakers as representatives of their clans and indeed as the personifications of their clan's opinions. This was the case despite the fact that the clans were, in reality, much less unified over the issue of logging than they seemed on the basis of discourse. Second, the men who had formed the LOC had initially been successful: they had managed to get logging to the area and they had constructed the LOC as a relevant actor. But in doing so they had almost been too successful: their opponents also recognized the important role the LOC had played in the logging operation, which risked the LOC

being drawn into the dispute, which was not just about how and to whom income from logging should be distributed, but whether logging should take place at all.





Remnants of the Niugini Lumber wharf in Baein (Vei in). (2019)



A log ship off the coast of East New Britain Province. (2024)



The Tzen Niugini sawmill on the Tzen plantation. (2012)



Simon Makrain shortens logs at the Tzen Niugini sawmill. (2012)



Ludvig Tniengpo walking through the Tzen Niugini log pond and workshop on Brown Island, Lamarein. (2024)



The Rimbunan Hijau log pond in Pulpul. Ambrose Tigas illustrates the size of the logs. (2012)



## PART III

# Oil Palm Plantations

1. We three rise to go away                    *Mang pamlueik ra e kolpe tlang*  
[and]  
I will leave you somewhere                *Pasule goen yan e wawgenrim e*  
behind
- C. I cry for my child, my leaf of *rin*,        *Ya tandane rae goiku e rina*  
oh, my leaf of *papi*                            *lolounoku papi loloneku*  
Muteness takes me because of        *Re kuberi gu yo te goen*  
you  
in the village of Masrau, oh                *ya ne Masrau nga vail o*
2. I put my leg into the boat                *Ya chongu kaik ne botorelon e*  
My inside [thoughts] returns to        *Loge re glili te chuk yenarim gae*  
my son left behind

—Elizabeth Manmanweng, song recorded in Wawas village, 2 November 2011



Part of the main estate and workshop on the Tzen plantation. (2019)



## CHAPTER 5

### Frontier Outposts

#### Oil Palm Expansion and State Formation in East New Britain

In 2008 a Malaysian company called Tzen Plantation Ltd. established a new oil palm plantation in the Mevlou River valley on the northern shore of Wide Bay. Soon after, many inhabitants of Pomio, including numerous Wide Bay Mengen, moved to the plantation as laborers. In this chapter I investigate the spaces of governance produced by the plantation and how it contributed to state formation in Pomio, where state presence and service provision were limited at best. As noted in [Chapter 3](#), logging began in Wide Bay in the late 1980s under frontier conditions. For Malaysian logging companies PNG was a frontier to which they could move after having depleted the forests of Sabah and Sarawak (Filer 1998, 57, 60). Meanwhile, the PNG state granted logging concessions in order to raise much needed revenue, and many rural people hoped that logging would provide them with income, services, and infrastructure (e.g., Leedom 1997, 44; Simpson 1997, 24; May 2001, 317, 321; Bell 2015, 137). In Pomio, frontier conditions persisted and, due its large forested areas and the comparatively small amount of industrial agriculture, the district was seen in the early 2000s as having potential for the expansion of logging and oil palm plantations.

The plantation was established as a part of the Ili-Wawas project, a combined logging and oil palm enterprise initiated in 2004 by Paul Tiensten, then the MP of Pomio. The goal of the

project was for companies to connect the existing logging roads of Pomio with the road network around Kokopo, the provincial capital, in exchange for logging concessions and leases on land for plantations. The road would improve people's access to markets and services, and logging revenue would fund the road and bring immediate income. In its turn, the plantation would provide employment and, through long-term company presence, ensure the maintenance of infrastructure (Tzen Niugini Ltd. 2005, 8–9, 12). In short, local politicians hoped that the Ili-Wawas project would provide funding for infrastructure that the state was unable or unwilling to provide, and tie Pomio more closely to the state and markets. As the modern state's power is enacted and advanced through infrastructure in important ways (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998; Chalfin 2010, 238), and as people in PNG and elsewhere evaluate the legitimacy of the state through the provision of services and infrastructure (Ballard and Banks 2003, 296; Anand 2011, 545; Jansen 2014, 253–254; Andersen 2016, 18), state formation is a central issue in relation to the Ili-Wawas project.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, corporate land grabs have been linked to the new expansion of the state as they include alliances between state officials, local political elites, and investors—foreign and domestic alike (White et al. 2012, 627). In PNG, as Bettina Beer and Willem Church (2019, 6) note, infrastructure is the primary vehicle that conflates the interests of the state and of multinational companies, as companies can offset taxes by building infrastructure (Bainton and Macintyre 2021, 133). While road-building remains primarily a state undertaking in PNG (Beer and Church 2019, 6), establishing the missing road links under the Ili-Wawas plan was given to logging and plantation companies.

The oil palm plantation was established on land leased from its customary owners, the Simbali. In 2007 five Simbali men had established the Simbali ILG. The ILG is a legal mechanism which is intended to give legal recognition to groups which “already have a corporate identity under custom,” thereby securing the

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48 For the unintended political effects of the project, see Tammisto (2010).



land rights of customary land groups (Fingleton 2007, 16). ILGs are intended to organize and mobilize the customary landowners without threatening customary ownership through individual titles, but extractive industries have also used them to create partners for their initiatives (Fingleton 2007, 16; Filer 2012, 601; see also [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#)). After its incorporation in 2008, the Simbali ILG signed a Special Agricultural and Business Lease (SABL) with the state of PNG for ca. 25,000 ha of land. SABLs are agreements made under the peculiar lease/lease-back scheme devised in 1979 to compensate for the absence of any method of registering customary land titles (Filer 2012, 599). The scheme was later added to PNG's Land Act, allowing the state to lease land from its customary owners and then lease it back to them or to other people or organizations approved by it for a period of up to 99 years (Filer 2012, 599; Schwoerer 2022, 36, 38). Any customary rights in the land—except those reserved in the lease—are suspended for the duration of the lease.

After leasing the land from the Simbali ILG, the state of PNG leased it back to the ILG, which, in July 2009, signed a sublease agreement (Journal number 1.14090—Volume 17, Folio 130) with Tzen Plantation Ltd. until 27 November 2107—that is, for the remainder of the 99-year lease period. Tzen Plantation Ltd. is a part of larger corporate network consisting of plantation companies and palm oil mill companies registered between 2004 and 2012 (see PNGi Central 2018; Hambloch 2022, 6), which I shall call the “Tzen Group.” The companies in the group are connected to each other by Malaysian men, who in various constellations are or have been shareholders and directors of the companies. Some of the entities, like Tzen Plantation and East New Britain Palm Oil Ltd., are owned by holding companies registered in the British Virgin Islands. The group of companies was connected up until 2012 with the Malaysian logging company Cakara Alam.

The relation between state formation and the new plantation became explicit during my fieldwork. As a significant number of people had moved from Wide Bay Mengen villages to work on the plantation, I started to focus on questions of labor and plantation

agriculture. I conducted interviews and spoke with Mengen workers who were or had been working on the plantation, visited the new plantation first in 2012, and conducted further research in the area in 2019, focusing on how people from the neighboring community interacted with the plantation. In one of the interviews, a man mentioned the councillor of the plantation. In PNG's administrative structure, a councillor, or ward member, is an elected representative representing their ward, or village-level government, in the LLG. During my research and interviews, I learned that the "councillor" was in fact a "compound manager," a company worker acting very much like a councillor. More so, the company had *komitis*, which in the state structure are deputies of the councillor, elected by the workers, but their allowances were paid by the company. In addition, the company had hired a catechist of the Catholic Church and, perhaps less surprisingly, an ex-police officer who acted as the security guard or "policeman" of the plantation. Administratively, the plantation belonged to the nearest government ward, but the state-like representation through *komitis* was fully private. Not only was the building of infrastructure and the funding of services outsourced to the company running the plantation, as elsewhere in the country, but in this case the company had also assumed a state-like form.

Historically, plantations in Melanesia have been a means of occupying, pacifying, and bringing new land into development, thus supplementing the work of the colonial administration, as Maxine Dennis ([1980], 219) notes. More generally, plantations are both sites of agricultural production and exploitation, and political projects that create and represent governance through the reordering of the landscape, the mobilization of labor and capital, and the surveillance of people, as Michael Dove (2012, 30) observes: places where people are controlled and their activities are prescribed according to the demands of the company and agricultural production (Dennis [1980]; Bernstein and Pitt 1974; Benson 2008). This resonates with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (2001, 126) notion that state power has no institutional fixity and that "state effects"—that is, processes that result in state governance—are

never solely obtained through national institutions or in governmental sites. Thus, the study of state formation must focus on the multiple sites in which state practices and processes are recognizable through their effects. Following work since the mid-2010s in the anthropology of the state (Jansen 2014; Oppermann 2015; Bainton and Skrzypek 2021b) that seeks to understand state power as “contingent relations and practices rather than isomorphic with any singular state” (Fisher and Timmer 2013, 153), I examine the Tzen plantation as one of these “multiple sites” in which state effects are produced (Trouillot 2001, 126). This continues the discussion in [Chapter 4](#) on how social relations and actors are transformed and elicited on the frontier.

I begin this chapter by examining the history of the plantation economy in PNG, and by focusing especially on how plantations and state formation were deeply intertwined. Plantations were both the reason for colonial annexation and central vehicle of it. Europeans established plantations in New Guinea and New Britain under frontier conditions; the plantations functioned as outposts on the “government frontier” (Kituai 1998, 15) and the plantations depended on the “labor frontier” (Gregory 1982, 135), namely the availability of cheap labor in a given area. This is tied to the wider theme of valuation, because labor as a commodity that can be bought and sold does not simply exist, but needs to be created (Marx [1884] 1978, 121; Gregory 1982, 118). Hence, I examine how the lives of people in New Guinea and New Britain were revalued as “labor” that could be extracted from the “labor frontier.” The historical examination shows how the labor frontier “shifted” as labor recruiting in one area became impossible and Europeans had to procure cheap, or devalued (Federici [2004] 2021, 102, 106, 119; Hermkens and Lepani 2017, 7, 17), labor from another area. As Chris Gregory (1982, 135–137) shows, when the last labor frontier was exhausted, plantation capital in PNG went into crisis and made its exit from the country. As I show, the decline of local cash-cropping in Wide Bay reopened the labor frontier as people were more ready to take on wage labor. Around the 2010s the land frontier opened as well, as foreign companies

could access customary land through long-term land leases. The oil palm project in Wide Bay began under these frontier conditions.

After the historical account, I turn to the Tzen oil palm plantation in Wide Bay, and examine what kind of order and spaces of governance were created by the company and emerged on the plantation. I focus here especially on the state-like order on the plantation and how it radiated outwards beyond the plantation's confines. In the final section, I discuss how the Tzen Group has expanded its oil palm plantings in East New Britain. The piecemeal expansion in multiple locations under frontier conditions resembles the expansion of plantations that served as outposts. Paradoxically, in some cases local landowners have agreed to oil palm plantings to end frontier conditions, particularly insecure tenure rights.

### History of Plantations and Frontier Cycles

The history of the plantation economy in PNG has been intertwined with that of state formation since the very beginning. European colonizers were after land, labor, and resources of New Guinea (Gregory 1982, 118). Especially in the early years, the role of the colonial administration was to facilitate the creation and extraction of these resources (e.g., Firth 1989, 192). Indeed, the plantations were both a reason and means for state formation, especially under the German colonial administration (Dennis [1980], 219; Hempenstall 1989). However, as historian August Imbrum Kituai (1998, 3) notes, people in New Guinea did not invite foreign powers to establish control and the colonial administrations lacked legitimacy. Nor were there structures of authority that colonizers could co-opt; instead, the previously independent people had to be subjugated by “force or passive acquiescence” (Kituai 1998, 2).

Historical accounts of the imposition of commodity relations on PNG often divide the process into overlapping phases distinguished by the most prevalent form at a given time. Chris Gregory

(1982, 118) divides the history of labor as a commodity in PNG into four phases: forced overseas indentured labor (1863–1904); semi-forced domestic indentured labor (1863–1950); semi-free labor (1951–1974); and free wage labor (1927–). Robert Foster (1995, 37, 42, 50, 57) uses a similar periodization to describe commodity relations in New Ireland: the labor trade in the late 1800s; systematic labor mobilization between 1884 and 1945 under German and Australian rule; the shift to local cash-cropping under cooperatives controlled by local big men in the 1950s; and the household control of cash-crop production from the mid-1960s onwards. Foster's account applies broadly to the Sulka and Mengen areas, which have a long history of labor and commodity relations.

The first recorded contact of the Sulka and Mengen with Europeans was in 1878 when Methodist missionaries visited the area on a brief voyage (Laufer 1955, 32). Around this time the inhabitants of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago also began to be involved with the colonial labor trade. There are indications that labor recruiters, who recruited, coerced, and even kidnapped Melanesian labor to plantations, may have raided the area, as Michel Panoff (1969a, 111) puts it, in the 1870s and 1880s. A Catholic missionary, Carl Laufer (1955, 33), notes that Sulka men were acquainted “relatively early” with recruiters looking for labor for plantations in Samoa and Queensland. The “Pacific labor trade,” which brought Melanesians as cheap labor to plantations in Queensland, was suspended due to the appalling death rates among laborers and other transgressions between 1884 and 1892, and completely halted in 1904 (Corris 1968, 94, 97, 102, 105; Banivanua Mar 2007). Labor recruiting from Melanesia was called “blackbirding,” which is testimony to the racist nature of the labor trade. While Melanesians were not simply passive victims, as Clive Moore (1990, 31) notes, racialized violence was a structural feature of the trade and the colonial project more widely, as Tracey Banivanua Mar (2007, 33, 122, 147, 182) has shown. The appalling conditions, cheating, and violence were measures by which the labor capacity of Melanesians was *made* cheap, or actively

*devalued*, to paraphrase Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (2017, 7, 17).

For the inhabitants of Wide Bay, labor mobilization under the German colonial rule was more significant. While the Germans were minor actors in the labor trade, they employed a significant number of people from their own colonies on plantations (Firth 1976, 51), and labor relations reflected changes in the way the colonies were administered. German planters and traders started operating in Oceania in the 1800s, including the archipelago around New Britain, and their representatives pleaded for a takeover by the German state in the late 1800s (Moore 1990; 31; Munro and Firth 1990, 13; Speitkamp 2021, 21). Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was wary of assuming direct colonial possessions out of fear of administrative costs and conflicts with other colonial powers, but also wanted to support German business; eventually, in 1884 the Reich started taking the territories where German companies were doing business as protectorates—that is, as *de facto* colonies (Speitkamp 2021, 21, 23–25; also Munro and Firth 1990, 13).

Between 1885 and 1899 the German properties in New Guinea, consisting of New Guinea's north coast, the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomons, and other adjacent islands, were administered by the German New Guinea Company (Deutsche Neuguinea-Kompagnie, NGK), a chartered company which initially sought to speculate with land (Firth 1972, 362; Speitkamp 2021, 25, 31). From 1885 it had exclusive rights to take possession of "unowned" land in the colonies or buy it from locals. As the NGK administered the German possessions, it could exercise the authority vested in the kaiser except with regard to foreign relations and the administration of justice (NGK Annual Report 1886–87, in Sack and Clark 1979, 8–11; see also Firth 1972, 362). The German Navy was, for instance, obliged to protect the NGK; similarly, when the new imperial commissioner attempted to address NGK wrongdoings in 1891, he was instructed that the administration was supposed to further the company's interests (Firth 1972, 363, 368; Speitkamp 2021, 26, 31).

The NGK was soon forced into the plantation economy as the thousands of settlers to whom it had planned to sell land never arrived; it established plantations on mainland New Guinea where the locals were, however, unwilling to work on them (Firth 1976, 52). Thus, a workforce was recruited from the islands, where people were much more familiar with contract labor (Firth 1976, 53). Conditions on the mainland plantations were bad and the annual death rate was a staggering 40 percent of the 2800 laborers who passed through Kokopo between 1887 and 1903 (Firth 1976, 53). This obviously decreased the appeal of plantation employment, and attacks on recruiters increased while the number of laborers on the mainland decreased (Firth 1976, 53). At the same time, the Gazelle Peninsula in New Britain became a much more popular destination among laborers from the islands, as conditions were healthier and it was closer to home (Firth 1976, 53). The NGK, however, had concentrated its plantation investments on the mainland where people were less willing to work for them and opportunities for copra trading were fewer than in the Bismarck Archipelago, which produced substantially larger volumes of the commodity (Dennis [1980], 228).

The NGK was economically and administratively out of its depth and tried to cede the sovereignty (*Hoheitsrechte*) to the Reich in 1889 and 1892 (Speitkamp 2021, 31). Indeed, in the NGK's annual report of 1893–94 the company officials stated that it was impossible to combine political administration and profitable business (in Sack and Clark 1979, 89). The annual reports show that the NGK was plagued with problems from the start, setbacks ranged from the inexperience of officials to accidents and illness. Perhaps most dramatically, the general manager von Hagen was fired for mistreatment of laborers—only to be shot by a local convict a month before his departure for home in 1897 (in Sack and Clark 1979, 13, 18, 22, 56, 108, 128). Bad economic decisions and the NGK's attempt to engage in what Stewart Firth (1972, 374, 377) calls “imperialism without rule” eventually forced it to relinquish control of the colonies.

In 1899 the Reich itself took over the administration from the NGK (Firth 1972, 374). As most New Guineans were quite independent and only took work when it suited them, the administration was faced with a labor shortage (Dennis [1980], 228; Firth 1976, 54). Under the NGK, recruitment had resembled the Pacific labor trade as it was based, at least in theory, on mutual consent (Firth 1989, 180). The NGK's labor ordinances were, however, brutal, and included measures such as flogging, reduced rations, and confinement (Hempenstall 1989, 137). After the NGK's departure, the ordinances did not improve much, but the colonial administration decided to change the voluntaristic aspect of recruitment, and labor mobilization became its special task (Firth 1976, 52, 54–56; 1989, 180; Gründner 1985, 171; Hempenstall 1989, 137). Administrators figured that occasional administrative (and punitive) patrols were not enough, and the Germans began establishing new government stations in 1900 to make the surrounding areas safe for planters, develop infrastructure, and mobilize villagers for labor (Firth 1989, 188, 190, 192).

The administration incorporated frontier areas by establishing police posts, confiscating land, building roads, and establishing a system of administration-appointed “chiefs,” or *luluais*—sometimes following violent punitive expeditions, such as the brutal attack on the Varzin area near Kokopo in 1903 (Hempenstall 1989, 143). By 1913 Germany claimed to control the coastal areas of the mainland and large parts of the islands (Firth 1976, 55). Even though Germany's control of its New Guinea colonies was uneven, its impact on the coastal areas was significant, as it made the coast safe for plantations and provided them with labor (Firth 1976, 55).

New Guineans were mobilized as laborers through statutory forced labor introduced in 1903, which required up to four weeks of work on government plantations or roads, and the head tax, introduced in 1907, which was an alternative to forced labor. As the tax was payable solely in marks, the only option for most locals was to earn it on plantations (Firth 1976, 58, 59). Tax defaulters could be assigned to forced labor: this should have



been performed on government projects, but in practice district officers could conscript men for local plantations (Dennis [1980], 229; Gründner 1985, 171). These measures, common features of the colonial mode of production, rapidly increased the labor pool, and the administration met resistance with force (Firth 1976, 59, 60). The intention was to break the economic and political independence of local economies (Bernstein 1979, 424) and create “the social basis for commodity relations” (Foster 1995, 43), turning people’s capacity to work into commodified labor (Marx [1884] 1978, 121; Gregory 1982, 118), a very concrete example of “resource-making.”

In New Britain, the Catholic mission also turned New Guineans into laborers. Virtually from its inception, the mission was instructed by Rome to ensure its economic sustainability locally in case support from Europe diminished as the missions expanded or was cut off completely in case of a war. For this purpose, the leader of the mission, Bishop Louis Couppé, ordered the establishment of small copra plantations adjacent to the mission stations, as copra was regarded the most “secure crop” (Baumann 1932, 115). These were not enough, however, and the mission was “forced” to set up bigger plantations administered by the mission brothers (Baumann 1932, 116).<sup>49</sup> The mission also established saw mills in New Britain to provide both building materials and monetary income (see [Chapter 3](#)). After timber resources had been depleted in an area, plantations were set up (Baumann 1932, 117–118)—a practice which is continued by contemporary integrated projects. Obviously, again, local labor was needed.

In Wide Bay the recruitment of labor by the Catholic mission began in 1901 when a mission brother, Hermann Müller, proposed making a recruiting voyage to New Britain’s southern coast. According to Müller’s (1932, 130, 132) own account, the Sulka were initially eager to sign up and he recruited 123 workers during the

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49 The mission became a significant landowner in German New Guinea (Gründner 1985, 179). On questions of church landownership more broadly, see Alava and Shroff (2019, 1289–90).

first two trips. The annual report of the German imperial administration of 1901–02 states that the Catholic mission thus “opened up” new areas for labor recruiting among the Sulka (and presumably Mengen) of Cape Orford (in Sack and Clark 1979, 226). This illustrates the opening of the labor frontier in Wide Bay. Later, however, people often deserted their villages upon sight of Europeans—precisely because they were familiar with labor recruitment and its wrongdoings, as Müller (1932, 134) himself notes.

In 1913 the mission established a station and plantation in Karlai in northwestern Wide Bay (Schneider 1932, 51, 53). Two private plantations followed, Tol plantation in the northeast in 1918 (Davies 1967b, 11; Bablis 2023) and Kiep in southern Wide Bay around the early 1920s.<sup>50</sup> Karlai was thus an outpost of sorts, as it extended mission and plantation presence to Wide Bay. Most of the plantations were in northern New Britain around Kokopo, where the administration was based. Europeans also established plantations on coastal areas farther south in New Britain.

By the first decade of the 1900s, contract work had become an accepted part of life in New Ireland, from where half of the laborers employed by the Germans came (Firth 1976, 61). Fearing depopulation and a future labor shortfall, however, Governor Albert Hahl closed some limited areas of New Britain, including Sulka and Mengen settlements, to recruitment and banned the recruitment of New Ireland women, as the population there was already declining (Firth 1976, 64; 1989, 201). This was resented by planters at the time, even though Hahl’s motives were to preserve the reproduction of labor in the villages and the subsidies gained from the subsistence economy; indeed, Hahl saw the future of the

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50 Oral histories collected by Gregory Bablis (2023) and an account by a plantation manager recorded by patrol officer Michael Davies (1967a, 11) date the Tol plantation to 1918. Records from the provincial Department of Lands and Physical Planning (DLPP) date the lease for Tol to 1928. I have not obtained sources that explicitly state when the Kiep plantation was founded, but patrol officer Ian Mack (1926) mentions it in his patrol report from 1926 and the DLPP records date the lease to 1923.

colony in plantations, and did not encourage local cash-cropping as he did not want to deprive planters of labor (Firth 1989, 202).

Under Australian rule, which began in 1914 and was formalized by the League of Nations in 1921, the indenture system continued in the same way as under the Germans (Fitzpatrick 1980, 78; Moore 2003, 181). According to Peter Fitzpatrick (1980, 77), despite Australia's reputation as a "good" colonist, it acted very much like any other, and emphasized the maintenance of cheap labor through labor laws and regulations. Similarly, Firth (1989, 202) notes that the German planters found in the Australian military administration officials who were in some ways more sympathetic to them, as Governor Hahl had been. While Australia sought to preserve "traditional societies" and even banned labor recruitment in some areas, labor laws initially sought to ensure that the "natives" remain workers rather than cash-croppers (Dennis [1980], 232; Fitzpatrick 1980, 78–79, 83). This was enforced by criminal penalties for laborers "deserting" their work or anyone harboring a deserter. While labor laws also applied to employers, their prosecutions were few until the early 1950s, even though breaches were frequent (Fitzpatrick 1980, 78–80).

Fitzpatrick's (1980) account accurately reflects the experience of many Sulka and Mergen as they describe it themselves. Sylvester Vomne, a Sulka man in his seventies at the time I met him, told me how in the past many workers perished on the plantations and were buried "here and there" (TP: *nabaut*)—that is, not on their home land. Not all men willingly signed up as laborers, however: many were forced to do so under contracts for years to come. Those fleeing such contracts, as well as those harboring them, were imprisoned. Sylvester Vomne also noted that cash-cropping or *bisnis* (TP) by the locals was discouraged to ensure that there would be enough workers. (As noted, unlike under German rule, the Australians initially actively discouraged local cash-cropping; Fitzpatrick 1980, 79.) According to Vomne, laws forbidding de facto slavery were introduced when Queen Elizabeth succeeded King George in the 1950s. This is an accurate dating, as most of the penal sanctions against workers were abolished by the end of

1950s—after which convictions against employers also decreased sharply (Fitzpatrick 1980, 80).

Around the late 1940s and into the 1950s, the labor frontier in Cape Orford and Wide Bay areas began to be exhausted. During administrative patrols, Australian patrol officers also assessed the “labor potential” of the patrol areas. In several reports from the era, patrol officers noted that Cape Orford and Wide Bay had no available labor remaining and should be closed for recruiting (Dowling 1947, 8), and that there had been “gross over recruiting”; for example, 40 percent of the able-bodied men were absent in Korpun, 44 percent in Maskilkie, and 47 percent in Baiein (Bell 1950b, 23). Others stated that Wide Bay could no longer be regarded as a source of labor (Hearne 1956, 4). Similarly, Michel Panoff’s (1969a, 112) study from the late 1960s shows that 90 percent of Mengen men in Jacquinot Bay aged 50–70 had experience of contract labor, demonstrating how prevalent plantation work was at the time.

Sylvester Vomne, who was one of the founders of a local copra cooperative (see [Chapter 7](#)), observed that cash-cropping increased in the 1960s, often aided by the mission and the government. This is echoed in scholarly accounts of the colonial economy (see Foster 1995; Gregory 1982, 146, 157) as well as patrol reports from the mid-1950s and 1960s (e.g., Walsh 1955, 4; Hope 1963b, 1; Davies 1966, 7). For example, officers noted that locals should, with the help of the administration, have copra driers and better transport options so that they could sell their copra directly to buyers instead of selling it cheaply to local plantations, which would then sell it on to buyers (Henderson 1962, 4; Hope 1962, 2).

The history of wage labor in PNG and New Britain describes a shifting labor frontier. According to Gregory (1982, 146, 155), former indentured and agreement laborers became smallholders and primary producers, and no longer signed up as workers—which contributed to the closure of the labor frontier. Patrol officers mention that Sulka, Mengen, and Baining worked only for a few weeks or months to earn what they needed, meaning plantation owners had to rely on labor from other areas (Bell 1950a, 12; Hearne

1956, 4; Davies 1968, 12). Ultimately, New Britain, the first labor frontier, became the leader in smallholder commodity production and was among the first of the frontiers to close, whereas the Highlands region held out to be the last (Gregory 1982, 131, 157).

Over the following decades, household cash-cropping brought monetary income to rural people; however, it did not end wage labor. In Wide Bay the household production of cash crops diminished with the decline of the buying infrastructure (Allen 2009, 296). Since the mid-1990s, copra ships have stopped visiting the area and the buying points are now far away. While most households at least had access to the copra blocks of their relatives, cash-cropping—especially in the villages located farther inland—became sporadic at best. Among the Wide Bay Mengen many young men thus worked for varying lengths of time as wage laborers. During my first period of fieldwork in 2007, some young women had also gone to “the West”—that is, to West New Britain—mostly to accompany their relatives, and a few worked on the plantations there. However, by 2011 many had gone to the then new Tzen oil palm plantation—although Wide Bay Mengen villages farther south had not witnessed such a rush at the time, and nor, I was told, had the Sulka of Wide Bay.

According to many, the Sulka at the time were keener to cultivate their copra blocks as selling the produce was, and remains, easier due to the larger number of buying points in their area. Near the southern Wide Bay Mengen villages, logging was still being carried out in 2012, and a successful LOC also operated in the area and planned to set up a buying point for cash crops there; it thus seems that in the southern Wide Bay villages there were other possibilities for monetary income than migrant labor. Comparably, Wawas, Toimtop, Sampun, and Tagul villages formed a very local “periphery” or frontier: they were relatively far away both from the copra buying points in the north and the logging centers farther south. This effectively illustrates Bernstein’s notion that areas with a lower rate of commodity production often geographically correlate with labor reserves in situations where commodity production has become a necessity (Bernstein 1979, 423, 426; for

PNG see Allen 2009, 411). Indeed, the demise of cash-cropping reopened the labor frontier in Pomio, while the Ili-Wawas project and the possibility of leasing land opened the land frontier.

### State Effects on the Oil Palm Plantation

Like all plantations, the Tzen plantation in Wide Bay is a highly organized environment. This is because it is a concrete place, but also an example of the more general plantation form, which is a way of organizing agricultural production. The plantation form is a constellation of land, labor, and capital, which intends to produce a particular agricultural commodity, usually for export; it depends on a large supply of cheap—or actively devalued—labor and land, and is characterized by rigid class differences and divisions of labor (Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 514; Dennis [1980], 219, 237; Mintz 1986, 47; Li and Semedi 2021, vi, 1). The plantation form was, and still is, based on racialized oppression and on structural or direct violence (Banivanua Mar 2007, 69, 148; Benson 2008, 594, 600; McKittrick 2013, 3, 9; Chao 2022, 10).

On plantations, social life and the environment are organized according to the requirements of production—to make it as profitable as possible to the owners. On the Tzen plantation, large areas of forest have been cleared to make way for the oil palms, which are planted in straight rows. Hillsides have been terraced so that oil palm can be planted on them and so that the palms are easily accessible. On the nursery, oil palm seedlings are organized according to the planting date and palms that are mature enough are transported to the fields for planting. Collector roads cut across and surround the oil palm plantings so that the palm fruit can be loaded onto tractors and trucks after harvest. These parallel roads run within a set distance from each other based on how much fruit workers can carry from the field to the road, and all the roads are connected to the mill, where the oil palm fruit is pressed. Oil palm fruit spoils relatively quickly after harvest and thus cannot be exported as such, so it is pressed into palm oil—the actual export product.

Social life is equally organized. Mornings start with roll call, and workers are divided into different sections working on particular tasks: sprayers, harvesters, tractor and truck drivers, and so forth. During the early stages of the plantation they may also be assigned duties as chainsaw operators, nursery workers, and planters. On the Tzen plantation, the houses of the manager and expert workers are on a hill overlooking the plantation; supervisors have their own area and workers live in smaller houses in the main compound. Some workers on fields, or “blocks,” farther away sometimes live in shacks. The rigid class differences and divisions of labor that characterize the plantation form are thus also built into its spatial organization (Dennis [1980], 219, 237; Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 514; McKittrick 2013, 8; I discuss life organized according to the demands of production more thoroughly in [Chapter 6](#)). The plantation also has security guards, who keep order, man the guard posts at the entrance roads of the plantation, and guard specific locations such as the mill and store. Some of the security guards are directly employed by the plantation company, while others work for a company owned by Simbali men—i.e., the landowners—contracted by the plantation.

Due to this radical transformation of the pre-existing environment and social life, plantations are not just agronomical but inherently epistemological and political projects, as noted by Michael Dove (2012, 24–25). He likens plantations to Foucauldian totalizing institutions that are concerned with “the conduct of conduct” (Dove 2012, 30). Plantations and concessions have been and are used to create state spaces (Dove 2012, 23; Chao 2022, 41, 46). Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, the history of state formation and the plantation economy were intensely entangled in colonial PNG—to the point that, during the early period of German colonization, a plantation company (the NGK) essentially *was* the administration.

As noted, in his discussion on states and state formation, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001, 126) notes that state power has no institutional fixity, either theoretically or historically. Rather, “state effects,” namely processes and practices that result in state

and state-like outcomes, take place in multiple locations and are done by multiple actors, not just institutions of the national state (Trouillot 2001, 126, 127, 131; also Bainton and Skrzypek 2021a, 7–8). The Tzen plantation is exactly one such site, where state and state-like order are created—by multiple actors. Trouillot (2001, 126) names four “state effects” that contribute to state formation: 1) the isolation effect, namely the production of atomized individuals; 2) the identification effect, which aligns the individuals into recognizable collectives; 3) the legibility effect, namely the production of knowledge and language for governance; and 4) the spatiality effect, or the production of boundaries and jurisdiction.

The organization of the plantation produces such effects: roll calls and registers of workers resemble the isolation effect, while the division of workers into different task-based groups, such as supervisors, field workers, and sprayers, is akin to the identification effect. Plantations are prime examples of what James Scott (1998, 30) has termed “legibility”—that is, the simplification of social life and environments so that they can be more readily grasped and controlled from a center. The creation of legibility is based on abstractions and knowledge, for example when the infinite complexity of an environment is simplified to a limited number of topographical features on a map. Often the creation of legibility is taken further, when environments are physically simplified to be easily governable (Scott 1998, 30). Hence the legibility effect is the most evident of the effects on the Tzen plantation, where different oil palm fields are numbered, census workers (a collective produced by “identification”) count the number of palms in the fields, the age of palm seedlings in the nursery is recorded, workers are housed according to their task-based groups, and the forest area is simplified to a monocrop environment. This kind of ordering is, of course, based on the demands of agricultural commodity production, but it also results—through the four state effects—in state-like order.

In his account of state effects, Trouillot (2001, 133) further notes that the “spatialization” effect—that is, creation of governance over particular areas—is probably the last domain that



national governments will give up. To a limited degree this has, however, happened on the Tzen plantation, as the security guards have a spatializing effect, inasmuch as they enforce a particular kind of order defined by the plantation company. They guard, and thus express, the borders of the plantation. The company's head security guard was referred to as "police" by workers and people of the surrounding communities, not only because he was a former police officer but also because he and the other guards performed a policing role. In 2012 when I conducted research on the plantation, I was told by workers that the plantation had a catechist and *komitis*, who are, as noted above, deputies and assistants of the "councillor," or ward member, an elected community representative of the village-level government, the lowest level in the state hierarchy of PNG (see Demian 2021b, 250–252 for more on *komitis*). Ward members and *komitis* typically organize village meetings and communal matters, as well as represent their wards in LLG meetings (Tammisto 2016). Later, in 2019, I saw one of the plantation *komitis* at work, going round the workers' compound during the evening and asking people to donate toward the funeral proceedings of a deceased worker.

What is interesting is that the plantation *komitis* were not formally part of the state structure. Or, as put to me by a Mengen man who had worked on the plantation and had been a *komiti* there between 2013 and 2014:

I got my allowance too from the company—apart from my pay as a worker. As for the councillor, we are under the Kavadumgi ward, where there is a councillor elected by the villagers. But because us workers became a [village] community, we needed a leader to solve our issues. And also, sometimes us *komitis* talked about worker rights. We spoke to the company that they must do something for us workers as well. (Man, 50–60 years, 19 Dec 2019)

In wards consisting of several smaller villages, each village typically has their own *komiti* to assist the ward councillor. Similarly, as the Tzen plantation was like a village community belonging

to a larger ward, it had its own *komitis*, but they received their allowance from the company. With its catechist, a “compound manager”—resembling a ward councillor—and the *komitis*, the plantation was thus organized like a government ward, without being one. The organization was privatized in the sense that the *komitis* and catechist received their allowance from the company, but was also entwined with the formal village-level government structure by being a part of the nearest ward. What is even more striking is that workers noted they had wanted *komitis* to represent them. While the securitized and legible state-like organization was a result of the way plantations are run, the organization of the plantation along government ward lines was the result of worker action, or what can be described as state formation from below (Timmer 2010; Fisher and Timmer 2013, 153; Jansen 2014, 254; Oppermann 2015; Herriman and Winarnita 2016, 132; Tam-misto 2016). To paraphrase Stef Jansen (2014, 252) two processes of state formation *converged* here, as the company created, from the top down, the kind of order it needed to advance production, while the workers created another kind of order, enacting a village-level governance structure to advance their interests.

By enacting an idealized state order—the government ward with its catechists and elected representatives—the workers were making claims of what the state should be like (Timmer 2010, 707, 711). In the Wide Bay case, the term “enact” is more appropriate than “emulate” or “mimic,” which refer to the same form without the same content (Oppermann 2015, 200) and which have been used to describe how people in rural Melanesia adopt and subvert institutions or create localized and alternative forms of governance to engage with the state and politics on their own terms (e.g., Carrier and Carrier 1989, 17; Barker 1996, 211; Lattas 2006). These interpretations are accurate and valuable, and they shed light on how people in Melanesia have engaged with outside political and economic structures. However, if the idea of “mimicry” is taken too far, it always places the state as something external to society and may obscure cases where the state is thoroughly enmeshed in local politics, and where locals are not

mimicking the state, but building it locally, as Oppermann (2015, 210, 215) notes. On the contrary, the workers in Wide Bay knew how the state worked, or was supposed to work, and enacted that kind of order. For all intents and purposes, this is state order, not its copy; rather, it is building the state through what Oppermann (2015, 199, 211) calls parastatal groups. In PNG these comprise a large number of more or less formal groups ranging from so-called civil society and business and kin groups to “formalized” informal courts, village governments, and bureaucratized “traditional” authorities. At other times these parastatal groups become a corporatized form of governance, as in the case of LOCs (Lattas 2011, 90) or on the plantations.

In addition to keeping order on the plantation, the security guard, or “police,” also took part in matters of the neighboring community. A ward member from one of the East Pomio villages told me in 2019 that there had been village court session in one of the villages regarding a suspected crime. Invited to the court session were the ward members of the neighboring communities and the security guard from the plantation. I was also told that the suspect had been named in the village in question and a security guard from a nearby extension of the plantation had informed the “police” on the main estate. I asked the ward member why the security guard had been invited to take part, and he replied that the security guard was a former police officer and “gives this kind of service” to the neighboring communities. At this time, I was conducting research on the road, and on one occasion noticed the security guard transporting a group of men toward the village in question in his pickup truck. In another case, the security guard had come to one of the villages to apprehend a suspect.

In her account of the Indonesian occupation of West Papua, Sophie Chao (2022, 38) notes how military garrisons impose order beyond their boundaries, while plantations—as socially and spatially isolated enclaves—generally direct order inwards. As discussed above, the Tzen plantation too is concerned mainly with order within its bounds. But the plantation is also a state-like space from where state and state-like power radiate outwards, an

“entangled enclave” to borrow from Mira Käkönen (2023, 281–82, 284); for example when the plantation security guard performs the role of the police or when the actual police use the plantation as a base.

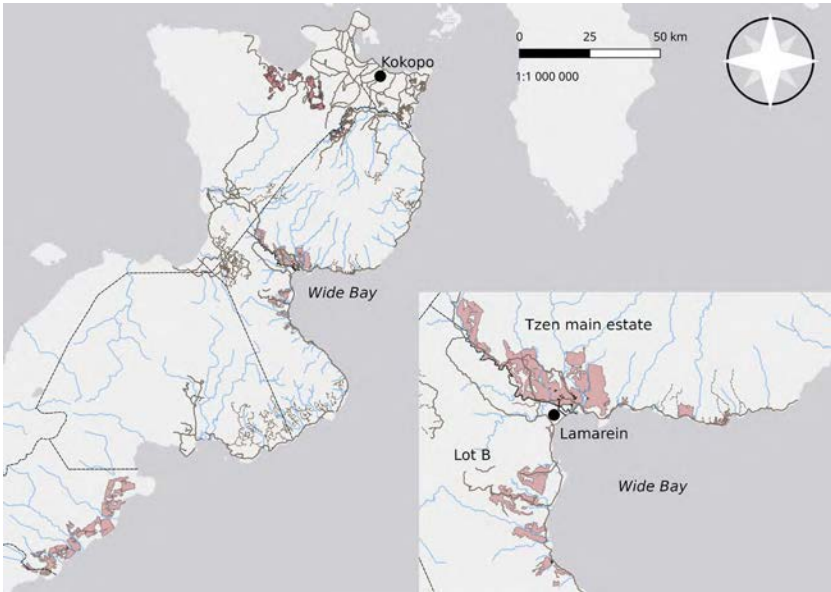
When I was in East Pomio in 2014 doing follow-up research, I heard that men from one Wide Bay Mengen village had all left the plantation. Men from that village had been accused of sorcery by people from another Wide Bay Mengen village—possibly due to grievances over local politics. Due to their contact with a local politician, the accusers were able to get the state police to the area. One of the accused men was brought to the plantation and badly beaten, and from there was transferred to the jail in Kokopo, the provincial capital. The people of the village of the accused men all fled into the forest before the police reached their village and stayed there—men, women, and children—in hiding until the police left empty-handed. The men from the village who at the time had been working on the plantation all left and went into hiding as well, as they felt like easy targets in the legible environment of the plantation. Women plantation workers from the village remained on the plantation though, as sorcery accusations in Pomio are made against men, and thus they were not threatened by (state) violence. In this sense, the current oil palm plantations resemble the colonial-era copra plantations, which patrol officers used as bases during their patrol; indeed, the first police force in German New Guinea was established by planter Richard Parkinson on Ralum plantation in north New Britain (Hempenstall 1989, 147).

The sorcery accusation incident shows that neither the colonial-era plantations nor the new oil palm plantations have created a uniformly governable territory, nor easily governable subjects. The organization of the plantation along government ward lines was, I was told, achieved by workers in supervisor roles and those who had been *komitis* in their home villages. When ordinary workers were threatened by state violence, they fled to their home villages, and later into the forest. This shows that legibility is a matter of degree, Wide Bay Mengen villages, while sometimes

remote and hard to reach, are relatively legible (see also [Chapter 2](#)) spaces. When people wanted to hide properly, they fled into the forest, which for rural people is a familiar environment, but is very hard for outsiders to move about and comprehend. Rural Wide Bay Mengen are adept in navigating the uneven territories, as they take on wage labor when needed, take part in state formation, return to their home villages, or flee state violence (see [Chapter 6](#)).

### **Oil Palm Expansion and Infrastructural Connections in East New Britain**

Since the establishment of the main estate in Wide Bay, Tzen Group has expanded its oil palm plantings across East New Britain. On the northern shore of the Gazelle Peninsula, around Kerevat and Vudal, located some 30 km west of Kokopo, are about 7000 ha of oil palm plantings. They were planted starting in 2012 by East New Britain Palm Oil Ltd. (ENBPOL), one of the companies of the Tzen Group (*National* 2015; Filer 2019, 33; Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 200; Hambloch 2022, 5–6). The plantings are in three locations: first, in Ataliklikun Bay are 800 ha of palm and a palm oil mill on state land established in 2014 (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 200, 206). Second, southeast from the coast between Vudal and the Kerevat River are about 3000 ha of oil palm on land leased for 99 years from the Kairak speakers. The total lease area acquired by ENBPOL from the Kairak ILG is, however, significantly larger—about 11,000 ha (Filer 2019, 33; Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 202). Third, close to Vudal are about 3000 ha of oil palm around Mandress. On the east coast of the Gazelle, in the “Bitapaka Mope zone” just north of the Warongoi River are four smaller oil palm plantings comprising together around 1000 ha. These were established in 2017 by the Tzen Group (*National* 2017). On the south side of the Warongoi are about 1300 ha of oil palm. Geographically, these are



**Map 2:** Oil palm plantings in East New Britain Province.

located in the northern Gazelle Peninsula, but administratively they sit within Pomio District.<sup>51</sup>

The plantings in the north of New Britain are connected to each other and the mill in Ataliklikun Bay by the road network around Kokopo and the town of Rabaul. In 2015 this road network was connected with the New Britain Highway, a road that runs through the Gazelle Peninsula to Open Bay and from there along the north coast of New Britain to Kimbe, the capital of West New Britain Province. The plantation company cleared an existing road connecting Wide Bay and Open Bay and linked it with the New Britain Highway, which meant that the roads in Wide Bay that run along its south coast to Jacquinet Bay were now con-

<sup>51</sup> The areal sizes of the oil palm plantings are based on my mapping using GIS software and openly available satellite images from the start of the 2020s. The ESRI satellite image basemap I have used is composed of images taken since around 2020.

nected to the provincial capitals. The intended connection on the east coast between Ili and Wawas was, however, not completed. The road connecting Pomio to the New Britain Highway is also precarious: flooding rivers south of Wide Bay regularly cut the road for vehicular traffic; the connection between the Tzen plantation and Open Bay also rests on a very rough road which can only be traversed by four-wheel drive vehicles.

The Tzen Group also extended its oil palm plantings to the south and over to East Pomio. Just south of the main estate on the south side of Mevlou, in the East Pomio LLG area, are a few hectares of village oil palm (VOP) in Lamarein ward—individual plots on which some locals have allowed Tzen Group to plant oil palm. VOP is nominally an out-grower scheme, in which the oil palm company plants the palms, but the plot-owners tend and harvest them, and sell the produce to the company. In Lamarein, however, the company workers also tend the VOP plots, or blocks, and the block-owners receive rent. Only a few inhabitants of Lamarein, which is inhabited by Sulka and Mungen speakers, have agreed to the VOP scheme—some of them to “test out” the new cash crop, while others have agreed to oil palm planting on swampy plots they have deemed unsuitable for other cash crops.

More important than the small VOP blocks is the palm oil pipeline that connects the palm oil mill on the main estate with the shore at Henry Reid Bay in Lamarein. This 2.5 km pipeline runs from the mill over the Mevlou River along the most convenient route to the sea. The pipeline ends on a sandy beach at a pumping station consisting of manually operated valves and a tool shed made from a repurposed shipping container. As Henry Reid Bay is a natural harbor, large tanker ships can anchor there. When they arrive, a floater hose is connected to the pipeline and pulled onto the ship. Then, by operating the levers, the workers start the flow of palm oil from the mill to the ship. This sandy beach, with no other built infrastructure other than the pipeline seems unimpressive, but it is the point of contact between the oil palm estate in Pomio and the buyers of palm oil. By operating the valves, workers very literally regulate the flow of palm oil from

Pomio to global markets. The pipeline not only connects the mill with the shore and the global markets, also but the Tzen plantation—located on leased land—to another territorial order, namely customary land of the Mungen–Sulka living in Lamarein. The company rents the area from both the community as a whole as well as the people through whose plots the pipeline runs.

Through the pipeline, the plantation infrastructure extends beyond the physical and administrative borders of the plantation. It is, however, also a choke point (Li and Semedi 2021, 116) in the infrastructural system of the plantation, as the export of palm oil hinges on it (Tammisto 2024, 114–115). Any malfunction in the pipeline means that palm oil cannot flow to the tanker ships that transport it to buyers. Such choke points are particularly convenient locations for protests as they can be used to disrupt the whole operation. For example, in order to pressure companies, disgruntled smallholders in Indonesia blocked palm oil mills (Li and Semedi 2021, 116), while customary landowners in Highland PNG cut the main power line of the Porgera mine (Golub 2014, 7, 22). Likewise, inhabitants of Lamarein have staged road blocks over disagreements with the company, but so far they have not interfered with the pipeline. On the contrary, when tankers arrive in Henry Reid Bay, people from Lamarein are hired to assist the tugboats that pull the hose to the ship with their speedboats. Despite this, it is noteworthy that the Tzen Group has placed the end of the pipeline on land owned by the inhabitants of Lamarein—that is, outside of the area leased by Tzen—and so to say it handed the switch that regulates the flow of palm oil to them.

Farther south, between the Malkong and Ip rivers, the Tomoive speakers in 2011 entered into a SABL agreement that covers 9472 ha of land (Filer 2019, 33). Of the lease area, at least 4736 ha (known as Portion 805C) is subleased to Tzen Plantation Ltd. for 99 years (until 2110). Based on aerial images from the early 2020s, oil palm plantings on Portion 805C encompassed about 1700 ha. Within these plantings are small compounds with a few barracks-style houses for workers and the site manager on the inland hills. There are around 900 ha of oil palm plantings on Tomoive lands outside



the lease area in three locations along the coast. In one of these in Waibu, there is a larger compound with worker houses, some workshops, and a company store. Finally, Tzen Group has planted ca. 140 ha of oil palm on the Kiep plantation just east of Milim on the south side of Wide Bay. In 2019 there was no compound in Kiep, just a small area with shacks where a few workers live.

The Tzen Group has expanded its oil palm plantings under frontier conditions and in a piecemeal way, first by establishing the main estate and then by setting up plantings of different sizes around Wide Bay and the Gazelle Peninsula. These are like outposts that extend the foothold of companies on what has been called the “plantation zone” (Parkinson 1907, 10–11; Li and Semedi 2021, 2, 24), the wider area under the influence of plantations. This resembles territorial annexation through frontier outposts, such as the *Homa u'migdal* (“wall and tower”), pre-built defensive settlements used by settlers and Kibbutz members in Mandate Palestine in the late 1930s that were used to quickly establish outposts that could be defended easily and later turned into more permanent settlements (Rotbard 2003, 42–43). As Sharon Rotbard (2003, 48) notes, the *Homa u'migdal* was an instrument of territorial control enacted through place-making. Oil palm plantings and the plantation compounds with their barracks-style houses—often preceded by shacks (see [Chapter 6](#))—bring to mind such outposts.

While the Tzen Group has not annexed land by direct armed force in Wide Bay, the comparison to outposts is warranted. The oil palm plantings extend the plantation zone, but also the presence of private security personnel of the plantation as well as the reach of the state police, who use the plantation as a base and its road network to reach remote areas. This resembles the colonial era during which plantations were used by the colonial administration and missions as tools of annexation or “pacification” (Dennis [1980], 219). Plantations, such as the Karlai mission plantation in Wide Bay, served explicitly as outposts that extended the state frontier, or the contact zone between the colonial administration and local inhabitants, and opened up new labor frontiers. Patrol officers also used plantations as bases, traveled aboard plantation

tractors and trucks, and used the plantations' radio transmitters to send and receive messages (e.g., Mack 1926; Cavalieri 1945; Williams 1949; Fayle 1960; Davies 1967a; Brown 1972).

As Sophie Chao (2022, 37, 46, 48) shows, oil palm plantations are part of the militarized annexation of the West Papuan frontier by Indonesia. They, along with military garrisons, are “pressure points”—sites with potentially dangerous effects—in the topography of terror experienced by many Papuans (Chao 2022, 37). New Britain is not a site of violent conflict like West Papua, but as noted in the previous section, oil palm plantations can be “pressure points” where the inhabitants of Wide Bay experience or are threatened by state violence. When RH established its large oil palm plantings in West Pomio, police were based on the plantation and violently suppressed local protest (Lattas 2012). Finally, oil palm plantings in a very literal sense *occupy* space, as Tania Li and Pujio Semedi (2021, 7) note. Like outright military occupations, the “corporate occupation” does not only take over space, but also creates new political arrangements (or reintroduces very old ones) as well as new subjectivities, social positions, and moral evaluations (Li and Semedi 2021, 7–9). The organization of the plantation along state lines with elected representatives, discussed in the previous section, is an example of this.

Some inhabitants of East New Britain have, however, sought to use the permanence of oil palm and the longevity of land leases to *end* frontier conditions. As noted above, the Vir-Kairak living in the northern Gazelle have entered into a lease agreement with the Tzen Group and allowed it to plant oil palm on their land in order to reclaim it (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 200). As Inna Yaneva-Toraman (2020, 181, 192, 250) shows, the Vir-Kairak had already been displaced from their lands in the colonial era and their land situation was precarious before the arrival of oil palm. Especially concerning for the Vir-Kairak was the expanding settling of their customary land by people from mainland New Guinea who had not received the approval of the Vir-Kairak to do so (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 190). As the Vir-Kairak were displaced from their customary lands, which were being settled, many were initially

receptive to allowing the Tzen Group to plant oil palm on their land, because oil palm would *occupy* (or reoccupy) the land and prevent others from using it (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 181). The customary land from which the Vir-Kairak were displaced seemed like a land frontier for landless settlers.

The Vir-Kairak have sought to use oil palm as “vegetal infrastructure” (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 181) that occupies the land and prevents its use by others—unauthorized settlers in their case. This resembles the planting of large pine forests by Israel on annexed land in the occupied Palestinian territories in order to prevent herding and cultivation by Palestinians (Weizman 2007, 120), a form of “civilian occupation” (see Segal and Weizman 2003, 19, 20, 24–25). Of course, the wider context is different, as the Vir-Kairak have been displaced and marginalized and are trying to reclaim their customary lands by agreeing to oil palm planting, whereas Israel uses planting to displace Palestinians. Allowing oil palm onto their territory was thus a way to show they still had authority over the land, and the permanence of oil was seen by many Vir-Kairak as a way of consolidating such authority (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 190, 194)—and indeed, close the frontier.

The southernmost extension of oil palm in Wide Bay on the Kiep plantation was allowed for very similar reasons. Kiep is a colonial-era copra plantation which became state land after independence, but the title was held by the descendants of the Australian plantation owners. The Sulka living next to the plantation were able to get the land back, and the former president of East Pomio LLG, Mr. Ereman Yareng, a Sulka man himself, took on the negotiations over the transfer of the title—a process that, at the time of writing, was still ongoing. The plantation was divided into smallholder plots for locals and a locally established cooperative society ran a store and a cash crop buying point in Kiep. After attacks by cocoa pod borer moths, cocoa-growing nearly ended, while copra production suffered from the commodity’s low price and high transportation costs. As the president told me in an interview in 2019, he allowed Tzen Group to plant 140 ha of oil palm on the 246 ha plantation because he feared that if the

plantation was undeveloped, the title would be forfeited to the state, which might transfer it to someone else—perhaps even to the oil palm company. Hence, the limited amount of oil palm was seen as a way to secure the title.

Eyal Weizman (2007, 4, 7) aptly notes that frontiers are “elastic” territories. This elasticity can make resources “up for grabs” (Weizman 2007, 88, 163; also McCarthy 2013, 183) and be used by powerful actors to mold the territory to their liking. For these reasons, elastic territories are often more dangerous than static ones (Weizman 2007, 8). On the one hand, companies have used this elasticity provided by the land lease mechanisms and multiple kinds of territories, such as state land and customary land held by different owners, to expand oil palm plantings. On the other, the former president of East Pomio and many Vir-Kairak have sought to use the institutional and material “fixity” of oil palm to make their territories less elastic. More so, a Sulka-Mengen man once told me that “inviting a project”—that is, allowing something to take place on the land—is a good way of claiming rights over it, because later on one is remembered as the party who authorized the land use. So, people do not necessarily claim land rights in order to “get projects,” such as logging or oil palm, but seek to “get projects” to claim or consolidate land rights. Such projects create “facts on the ground” (Weizman 2007, 63, 83, 90) that may be hard to refute. Or, in the case of oil palm, also physically hard to remove. Finally, to paraphrase Christian Lund (2011, 885, 887, 889), decisions over the use of land do not just reflect authority over the land, but produce it.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have examined the shifting frontier dynamics under which companies have expanded their oil palm plantings in East Pomio and the Gazelle Peninsula. As logging and plantation companies were tasked to build road infrastructure, activity usually associated with states, I set out to examine what kinds of spaces of governance and territorialization are produced by

different actors as part of these projects and under shifting frontier conditions.

The Ili-Wawas agroforestry project was initiated by local politicians to overcome the marginality of the Pomio region. For them, Pomio District was like a frontier where the presence of the state and its services at national and provincial levels was limited. To this end, logging and plantation companies were contracted to build the road and fund services in exchange for logging concessions and land for plantations. For the companies, Pomio seemed like a frontier with its seemingly unused resources and cheap labor. The opportunity to lease land from its customary owners for up to 99 years and the demise of cash-cropping reopened the land and labor frontiers in Pomio. The inhabitants of Pomio and Wide Bay have taken part in different ways in these processes: some have leased large amounts of land, others have refused to do so, and yet others have challenged lease agreements in court.

Like the plantation roads and palm oil pipeline that extend beyond the plantation, the securitized governance of the plantation too extends beyond its borders. The plantation security perform a function similar to the state police in neighboring communities—often with the communities’ consent. Here company and state lines become blurred, like on the plantation itself where the workers have introduced a similar form of formal representation as in their home villages. On the plantation, as discussed in this chapter, multiple actors from the company to workers have produced “state effects”—processes that end up with state and state-like results. This is not a new thing: plantations and plantation companies were both the reason and means for colonial annexation—up to the point that German New Guinea was administered for a time by a private venture, the NGK. By examining how companies, politicians, and locals engage in state formation, I have continued the discussion of how collective actors such as “states” and “companies” are transformed and elicited under frontier conditions (see [Chapter 4](#)).

While companies produce “state effects” and build infrastructure that the government wants and needs, the organization of the

plantation and its roads and bridges are best suited to the needs of production. Like the German colonial administration, which hoped that the ventures of the NGK would fund the administration of the colonies (McKillop and Firth [1980], 87–88), the former MP of Pomio and other local politicians hoped that the companies would fund services and infrastructure that Pomio was lacking. The NGK, however, noted that the administration of a colony and its profitable exploitation are very difficult to combine, and in the end the German Reich had to take over the administration. The infrastructure built by the Tzen Group similarly serves the company in the main: roads are passable to vehicles as far as there are oil palm plantings, and in the southern parts of Wide Bay the company built bridges that lasted as long as its logging operation in the area (see [Chapter 4](#)), but not much longer. Rains and floods swept away the earth and log bridges, and the company has not rebuilt them. Bettina Beer and Willem Church (2019, 6) have noted that infrastructure is the primary vehicle that conflates the interests of the state and multinational companies in PNG, but this conflation has its limits.

In this chapter I have discussed how plantation companies have expanded their plantings under frontier conditions. As I have noted throughout the book, by “frontier” I mean a spatiotemporal process in which certain actors, such as colonists or plantation companies, imagine and portray an area as a site of expansion (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 10, 12), because it is “empty” and has abundant and “unused” resources (Tsing 2005, 28–29; Banivanua Mar 2007, 20, 24, 26; Stella 2007, 49, 52, 205; Geiger 2008, 88, 109; Peluso and Lund 2011, 688, 671; McCarthy 2013, 183–184; Davidov 2014, 41). Such portrayals gloss over, often quite intentionally, local uses, and hence frontiers are characterized by insecure tenure rights (Hall 2011, 839; McCarthy 2013, 183–184). This uncertainty makes frontiers “elastic” (Weizman 2007, 4, 7). We have seen in this chapter how planters expanded their holdings, taking advantage of this “elasticity,” and how locals have sought in different ways to consolidate their use and presence on the land.

Another central feature of frontiers is that, on them, different actors compete not only over the control of resources but also what is defined as a resource in the first place (Geiger 2008, 88, 97; Hall 2011, 839; Peluso and Lund 2011, 668; McCarthy 2013, 183–184). In the first section of this chapter, I discussed how the lives of New Guineans were imagined first by Europeans as “labor,” as a commodity that can be bought, sold, and extracted (Marx [1884] 1978, 121; Gregory 1982, 121), much like the forests of New Guinea were revalued as sources of timber resources, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Plantations depend, however, not only on the availability of labor, but on *cheap* labor (Dennis [1980], 219, 237; Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 514; Mintz 1986: 47; Li and Semedi 2021, vi, 1). Hence, the colonial policies discussed in the historical section not only revalued lives as labor, but also actively *devalued* it (Hermkens and Lepani 2017, 18).

In [the next chapter](#), I turn to questions of value, and examine more closely life and work on the Tzen oil palm plantation, where many Wide Bay Mengen and other inhabitants of Pomio moved to work for meager, but vital, wages. I examine how, on the one hand, their labor is devalued, and how, on the other, plantation workers take part in social reproduction in their home villages, and convert commodity values into social ones. As discussed in this chapter, the territory created by the expansion of the plantation zone is a “variegated” one, to borrow from Tania Li and Pujo Semedi (2021, 23). In [the next chapter](#), I examine how the Wide Bay Mengen operate in this territory and move between its different places—the plantation and villages—which are materializations of different political orders and value regimes.





## CHAPTER 6

### “Life in the Village is Free”

#### Socially Productive Work and Alienated Labor on the Oil Palm Plantation

Life in the village is free.

This was a phrase I often heard during my fieldwork. People used it to compare life in the rural villages with that in the towns. In this discourse, towns were sites of money use and commodities, places where people had to pay for everything, whereas villages were the opposite; this contrast was used by both the Sulka and the Mengen living in villages as well as those holding salaried positions in towns. Those with less access to money were especially aware that in town, one indeed had to pay for everything, even the most basic things such as food and accommodation; in the villages, on the other hand, inhabitants produced their own subsistence. People also used this phrase to contrast plantations and villages. In reference to plantations, life being free acquired a new nuance: plantations were not only places of wages and the use of money, but also of regimented and controlled labor. In the village, one worked as one pleased (TP: *long laik*), whereas on the plantation one had to work according to the commands and schedules of others.

In this chapter I analyze the Tzen oil palm plantation as a place of controlled or alienated labor, wages, and the use of money. As a *place* it is very different from the village. Vast areas of forest were cleared to create it and people who had worked on the plantation described it to me as a “desert.” When I visited it myself, I too

was struck by the look and feel of the seemingly endless straight lines of oil palms, and the hills which had been turned into terraces. The nearby environment of the Wide Bay Mungen villages is characterized by swidden gardens, fallowing forests in different stages of growth, and dense rainforest extending into the inland areas. It is dotted with small places of importance: streams, burial sites, abandoned villages, and fallowing gardens. For those who inhabit it, the village landscape is a materialization of their histories and activities (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)). The plantation, on the other hand, has been made into a “legible” environment, a place more easily administered and controlled by the management (Scott 1998, 30). It, too, is a materialization of histories and relations, but of very different kinds.

As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the plantation was established by Tzen Plantation Ltd. on land leased for 99 years from its customary owners, the Simbali, in 2009. Soon after the plantation was established, many inhabitants of Pomio District, including the Wide Bay Mungen, took wage labor on it. When the plantation was being established, youths from Tagul were the first Wide Bay Mungen to go there, due to the kin connections some Mungen clans in Tagul have with the Simbali on whose land the plantation was established. Later on, people from other Mungen villages started to move to the plantation for different periods of time. By 2019 the oil palm plantation was more established: it had a mill and palm oil was being exported, and several extensions had been established across Wide Bay, as described in [Chapter 5](#). Similarly, plantation work had again become more established: some Wide Bay Mungen had worked on the plantation continuously for long times, while others returned, and others again moved to take on labor there. This chapter is based for a large part on my research in Wide Bay in 2011–12 and 2014, when the Tzen plantation was still relatively new. During that time, many of interlocutors worked, or had worked, as planters, loggers, and nursery workers on the plantation.

The oil palm plantation differed from the village in important ways, not only in terms of landscape and spatial features but also due to the different kinds of relationships to which it gave rise.

The two places are associated with, and stand for, different ways of life with different relational and historical connections. And when people noted that life in the village is free, or that on the plantation one is a slave, they evoked these relations and histories—condensed in the place, so to speak. As Rupert Stasch (2013, 555) aptly notes, certain spatial formations can hold special historical power because of the multiple relational connections they mediate. As I have discussed in the previous chapters (especially [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 3](#)), for the Mengen, places are materializations of different types of relations. In societies which emphasize the spatial aspect of relations, processes, and stories, places laden with meaning can be used to mediate history and historical processes (Stasch 2013, 566). First, as noted, the places stand for a multitude of relations. Second, meaningful places can be contrasted with other places, and this makes a frame around which “many domains of life can be organized in a single broad polarity,” as Stasch (2013, 566) notes. By contrasting the village and the plantation, the Mengen reflect on the different relations and ways of life associated with them. But people did not just contrast these places in their talk, they also moved between them. In 2011, many young people from Toimtop were working on the plantation. People noted how it made the village feel quiet. Then, when one of the village elders died, they all returned to take part in the funeral and mortuary ceremonies, and suddenly the village was bustling with people busy with the funerary activities.

In this chapter I seek to unpack the social relations, histories, and processes materialized by the oil palm plantation (see M. Panoff 1969a; Dennis [1980]; Firth 1972; Bernstein and Pitt 1974; Keesing 1986; White and Dasgupta 2010). I then look at the plantation as a site of earning money and channeling it back to the village (also Carrier and Carrier 1989; Curry and Koczberski 1998; Robbins and Akin 1999), and finally as a generative, yet ambivalent, site, where people form new relations, escape others, and endure hard labor to reproduce life in the villages (Keesing 1986; Bashkow 2006; Stasch 2013). The ambivalence revolves around different understandings of “work,” commodified labor,

and socially productive activity, and the different and sometimes contradictory values they produce. By contrasting the plantation and the village, the Mungen reflect on different value regimes, and by moving between the places, they pursue and escape these systems as well as combine them into their lives (Stasch 2013, 566).

### **Life on the Plantation**

In the song of lament quoted at the beginning of this part, Elizabeth Manmanweng describes the sorrow of leaving her child in the custody of relatives when she and her husband go to work on the plantation. The song aptly illustrates a common experience. Especially young people often wanted to go to the plantation, because for them it was a welcome change from the routines of village life. On the other hand, work on the plantation was hard and people longed for the relatives they had left behind. It is this ambiguity of plantation life on which I focus.

When I first visited the plantation in 2012, workers in the main compound lived in shacks they had built themselves from bush materials and corrugated iron provided by the company, while supervisors lived in barracks-style permanent houses with little cooking huts and shared toilets. By this time, Mungen workers lived separated according to gender, and people from the same villages shared huts. Similarly, other workers had divided according to their language groups. I was told this was not the result of deliberation, but simply how things had turned out. The state of housing was at the time a common complaint, while the water supply for the workers in the main compound was a small stream nearby and they had no toilets. The lack of proper toilets coupled with dependence on nearby streams for water was a potentially dangerous combination. There were also differences in living conditions among workers employed in different tasks or from different backgrounds. Some loggers lived in huts or tents in the bush while Indonesian logging contractors lived near the compounds in metal shipping containers with cut-out windows. The abysmal housing of the Indonesian workers reflects their difficult position:

migrant workers in a foreign country, totally dependent on the company. Workers from Pomio at least had the possibility of voting with their feet and leaving—something which they often did.

In 2019 workers on the main compound lived in permanent houses: supervisors and their families had been moved to bigger houses, while regular workers lived in the old supervisors’ barracks—but in more crowded conditions, as two families shared the two-room apartments. Water was still taken from the nearby streams. Some workers also lived in huts on compounds located in fields farther away. The situation was similar on the extensions of the main estate. In Lot B, near Lamarein, workers lived in houses but had no toilets; in Waibu there was a small compound of houses and a store; while workers on the Kiep extension lived in makeshift huts. The “expert”—and expatriate—workers and managers lived separately in houses on a hill overlooking the plantation.

The poor condition of housing is a common feature of plantation agriculture. In the US, for example, immigrant workers on tobacco farms live in harsh conditions in labor camps, and agricultural workers are the worst-housed group. Peter Benson (2008, 603; 2010, 57) describes how tobacco growers justify this situation by portraying the immigrant workers as less deserving, adding that the quality of housing is better “than in Mexico,” for example. For the immigrant workers, the conditions of the camp are not only uncomfortable but also demeaning. Thus, the camp is a “dispossessed space” (Benson 2008, 601, 607). Interestingly, the migrant laborers on tobacco farms used the term *campo*, which means more generally “rural” or “field,” but also specifically “work camp,” to refer to low wages and other poor conditions of farm labor, remarking, for example, that the wages of farm labor are “campo” (Benson 2008, 590, 598). This is an example of using a place as a sign, inasmuch as the work camp, *campo*, is used to refer to a broad spectrum of social relations and processes, such as poor working conditions and hierarchical labor relations (Stasch 2013, 555, 560). The harsh conditions and portrayal of workers being less deserving are measures by which their labor is actively deval-

ued (Hermkens and Lepani 2017, 18), as discussed in [Chapter 6](#)—or, in more ordinary terms, made cheap (see Moore 2015, 53).

According to Peter Benson (2008, 590), the unequal relations of farm labor amount to structural violence in that they represent the systemic constitution of inequality and suffering. The cause and maintenance of unequal labor relations is a result of, and perpetuated by, a convergence of large-scale political-economic forces and intimate interpersonal relations (P. Benson 2008, 594, 596, 620). Tobacco growers in the US, for example, are at the mercy of big agribusiness companies with flexible buying networks. One way for these growers to compete in the international commodity markets is to cut the costs of wages and housing for their workers, which systemic government neglect of labor law enforcement allows (P. Benson 2008, 594; 2010, 57; 2012, 35, 173). Equally crucial are the stereotypes of immigrants that contribute to their being perceived as less deserving. The negative perceptions of workers among growers and the justifications for the inequality that such perceptions engender do not result from a lack of engagement between the workers and growers—rather, as Peter Benson (2008, 596, 620) suggests, the perpetuation of inequality is the result of active perception in which poor conditions are seen as features of the place to which workers also belong.

The situation in Pomio was similarly produced. In 2012 the plantation manager, a Malaysian man, told me that the houses inhabited by the supervisors were intended for the workers and new houses for the supervisors were being built. According to him, the workers and supervisors should live separately in order “to maintain a standard.” These spatial divisions maintain and reflect the hierarchies of plantation work. He also noted that the company, through the plantation, was trying to bring development and give local people the chance to earn an income—which reflects the commonly voiced aim of these projects. These statements implicitly present the workers as poor, not to say primitive, people, who should be grateful for the opportunity to be able to make money on the plantation—a variation on the “better than Mexico” theme.

## Regimented Work

Work there [on the plantation] is good. They don't beat us.  
(Woman, around 25 years, 13 Jul 2011)

The work is ok, but not that ok. (Man, 40–50 years, 30 Dec 2019)

In structured interviews in particular, workers responded in characteristically reticent Mengen fashion by saying that work on the plantation was "just good" (TP: *gut tasol*). A middle-aged Mengen man working as a planter, for example, said that the work was extremely hard, but had to be done to raise school fees, without which there would be no educated people. When conversation was more relaxed, they elaborated and gave a more detailed picture.

The workers noted that, on the plantation, one works not as one pleases, but under the command of others. This is one of the defining features of a plantation, which is characterized by a rigid division of labor and class distinction between workers and managers (Dennis [1980], 219, 237; Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 514; Benson 2008, 600). Work on the plantation in Pomio, like elsewhere, is indeed regimented and highly divided (see also [Chapter 5](#)). Workers are employed in different sections with their own tasks, all of which are necessary for the proper functioning of the plantation. Some workers are needed as mechanics, carpenters, and electricians, maintaining and building plantation equipment and buildings. Others work at the sawmill, which is operated by a different company in the Tzen Group, making lumber and some as surveyors. A contractor operating the tug boats that assist log and tanker ships is also responsible for the shore-side of the palm oil pipeline. As the plantation was new, clearing the forest was a major task and loggers were in high demand. Many of the specialized tasks, such as logging and carpentry for building, were performed by workers employed by contractors from Indonesia and Malaysia. These jobs in particular were open to young men with vocational education or skills acquired through previous work experience.

Some men from the Wide Bay Mengen villages had become skilled in using heavy chainsaws and cross-cutting large logs during the logging operations of the 1990s. Others had also learned to “rip” planks from logs with a chainsaw to provide villagers with building materials. These men were in high demand among the contractors as loggers. Not only were they proficient with chainsaws but, due to their background as swidden cultivators, they were skilled in felling large trees—a hard and potentially very dangerous task. A friend of mine who worked as a logger told me that many loggers left the work because they were concerned for their safety. Wide Bay Mengen men working as loggers, on other hand, did not work in a rush, he noted; they studied the trees before felling them and knew how to make them fall in the right direction. He noted how his body knew the trees—referring to the embodied knowledge of how to behave when felling them. He took pride in his skill and that he worked carefully, avoiding unnecessary accidents. Yet, like other Mengen men who had worked as loggers, he was dissatisfied with the minimum-wage pay and the fact that they were not compensated for injuries:

The contractor does not pay for our blood [if we are hurt]. (Man, 39 years, 27 Oct 2011)

Aside from logging, many workers from Wide Bay were employed at the nursery and in the field planting oil palm. Work at the nursery and “in-field” are the main types of labor on the plantation—the heavy and repetitive tasks needed to plant and maintain the crops. At the nursery this consisted of planting seedlings—filling plastic bags with soil, planting seedlings into the bags, and carrying the bags of oil palms to the place where they would be loaded onto tractors. In the field, slashers cut the grass and weeds around the palms with long knives. During my visit I was able to follow a planting section through their routines: some stayed at the nursery, while those working “in-field” dug holes, unloaded and aligned the seedlings, fertilized holes, or planted the palms. When the palms started to bear fruit, workers were also employed in harvesting, either cutting down the fruit bunches



from the palms or carrying the bunches to the collector roads, spraying the palms with pesticides, and as drivers operating dump trucks and tractors.

Each worker performed only one particular task and was paid according to how many palms they planted or holes they dug. Needless to say, the work was extremely demanding. The seedlings in their plastic bags are heavy and the palm stems have sharp needles. After rain, the bulldozed soil turns into a field of mud where walking, let alone digging, is extremely difficult and there is no shade whatsoever. Most of the workers went barefoot as rubber boots had to be bought, and only a few had gloves.

The sprayers, or “spray boys,” who administer pesticides and insecticides on the palm also worked without protective gear. In 2019 a man who had worked as a sprayer noted that 1 hectare has about 136 palms, and a sprayer was meant to spray 2 hectares a day at a pay rate of PGK 0.15 per sprayed palm. He observed that the pesticides irritate the skin, and many reported other issues such as swellings of the testicles due to carrying the 24-liter tanks in hilly terrain. The pesticides in question are paraquat dichloride (under the brand name of Gramoxone) and glyphosate (RoundUp), both highly toxic, with paraquat also having been linked to Parkinson’s disease (INCHEM 2012; Marshall and Prior 2022; National Center for Biotechnology Information 2023; Park and Kofsky 2023).

In 2012 when I followed a section of in-field laborers during their working day, the regimentation of work was striking. The workers were divided into sections, each with its particular tasks; the work day started at five o’clock with the ringing of a bell which called the workers to the assembly area, where they stood in lines according to their section with their supervisors standing in front of them. After the plantation catechist had read a brief prayer, the plantation manager allocated tasks to the assistant managers and supervisors, who then instructed the workers in their sections. This all bears an obvious resemblance to military camps and other “total institutions” that produce social relations of certain kinds (Dove 2012, 23). As noted in [Chapter 5](#), in these places, power is not only asserted through the surveillance of everyday life but also

through more discreet and seemingly apolitical structuring of it through the “conduct of conduct” (Dove 2012, 30).

The workers were obviously very aware of the structured, and oppressive, nature of life on the plantation, and people often left the plantation when they had had enough—often without any forewarning. As in Dove’s (2012, 222) description of rubber plantations in Borneo, where Dayak workers are often regarded by the managers as hard-headed and lazy, the manager at the Tzen plantation told me that many of the workers “are not yet accustomed to work.” In the sense of being able and willing to do physical work, this is, of course, not true at all. The inhabitants of Pomio and other rural areas of PNG are accustomed to extremely hard work in their swidden gardens and they performed exhausting physical labor on the plantations. Indeed, as noted above, because they were experienced in felling large trees in their gardens, the Mengen were valued as loggers—underpaid yet dangerous work. Rather than being about what the workers were or were not accustomed to, the question was about political relations on the plantation; this is obfuscated by statements such as people “do not know how to work” and spurious explanations that their unwillingness to submit themselves to certain relations is because they lack skill—as Dove (2012, 195, 225) notes.

The portraying of workers in this light was, as noted above, a way in which class distinctions on the plantation were maintained. It also points to very different understandings between the plantation management and rural Mengen over what is productive and meaningful work. For the management, “proper work” is adhering to the plantation mode of production, while for the Mengen the idiom of “hard work” means socially productive activity, as I will show in the following sections. Plantation labor, in this sense, is “hard,” or socially productive, if the wages are used for social reproduction, as they are by many Mengen. Another Wide Bay worker I spoke with in 2019 characterized the unequal relations on the plantation by noting that the Malaysians were not bringing development, but had come to do business.

The workers with whom I spoke seemed all to prefer the “task-scape” (Ingold 2000, 325) of the village, where the rhythm of work comes from the task at hand rather than being determined by abstract time (Eräsaari 2023, 7, 32, 38), as on the plantation. Yet, despite the exhausting work on the plantation, it seemed to me that, for young people especially, work there also provided a welcome change to the village routines. The logger mentioned above said that his brother, an experienced plantation worker, told him to leave village work and come to the plantation to “relax” for a while. Another young man explained that he took on plantation work so that “the mouths of the elders could get some rest,” referring to the control and discipline of the elders. A young woman described how she and other young villagers had decided to go to the plantation:

We were [in the village], and *kastom* was over, so we thought about going. Us women said: “Oh, we’re tired of gardening work, let’s go to Masrau to make us some money.” (Woman, around 25 years, 13 Jul 2011)

Despite the hardships of plantation life, wage labor was, for young people, a way to ascertain their independence, “rest” from village commitments and responsibilities, see different places, and live among their peers in a different setting than the village. The work on the plantation was also gendered inasmuch as while both men and women were employed in the field, no women from the villages where I conducted research were employed as mechanics or carpenters, although some had attained the position of supervisors. Before going to the plantation, the young women had asked male village elders for permission. The men granted it, but urged the women in strong terms not to become pregnant on the plantation.<sup>52</sup> In one case, a young woman did not want to return to her home village after becoming pregnant on the planta-

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52 Having children in marriage was the norm, but it was not uncommon for women to be single parents. These women and their children were not ostracized and took a full part in the social life of their community.

tion—despite her relatives urging her to return and assuring her she would not be ostracized. While young women initially sought the approval of their parents and village elders, the decision to go to the plantation was ultimately negotiated within the respective families. However, as many unmarried women worked or had been working on the plantation, it seemed in the end the women themselves decided if and when to go to the plantation. Indeed, in many families the remittances from young people working on the plantation were highly valued.

### ***Wok Mani—Wage Labor***

When discussing my plans to visit the plantation with my brother William in 2012, I mentioned that I was interested to know why people go to the plantations. He looked at me as if I was rather stupid and replied: “What do you think? Money of course.” Phrasing my answer badly, I said that so much was obvious, but money for what? (I was thinking about the wide range of needs from school fees to tools as well as the creative uses of money in Melanesian societies; see Robbins and Akin 1999.) Interpreting my answer in a way I did not intend, my brother angrily replied: “Do you think we do not need money?” In my opinion, his reply clearly illustrates two important points. First, people take on wage work because they need money. This is a deceptively simple statement, for as the discussion on labor mobilization (see [Chapter 5](#)) shows, the need for money is not an endogenous property of it, but often has to be created; consequently, people need money for a variety of reasons. Secondly, it shows that the Mengen are painfully aware that, as rural cultivators who grow their own food, they are often thought to live outside the money economy—thus needing less money. This is an important and complicated point connected to how plantation labor is devalued.

As growers of their own food, the rural Mengen are indeed less dependent on money and more secured against, say, rises in food prices than the urban poor. In a classic Marxist sense, rural Mengen are not free labor, or proletarians, as they own their land,

which means they own their means of production and control their own labor. The Wide Bay Mengen can be better thought of as peasants. I use here Michael Watts's (2009, 524) definition of peasants as people distinguished by their direct access to land as a means of production, their predominant use of family labor, their partial engagement with markets, and their subordinate position in larger political economies (see also Wolf 1966, 18, 25; Meggit 1971, 208–209; Meillassoux 1973, 81; Grossman 1984, xviii, 13–14). More precisely, the rural Mengen with whom I worked are food-producing peasants who gain monetary income from cash-cropping of copra and cocoa as well as occasional compensations from logging (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#)), but are not solely dependent on money for their livelihood (Bernstein 1979, 429). This gives them a degree of autonomy and security. With reduced possibilities of selling their produce, however (Allen 2009, 477, 486; Allen et al. 2009, 296), the importance of wage labor as a source of income had increased, as described in [Chapter 5](#).

That the Mengen need money is obvious. People from the rural areas of New Britain have been involved in wage labor and commodity relations since the late 19th century. In the era of colonialism, commodity and wage labor relations did not just develop by themselves, but were imposed—initially with violence and through measures such as the introduction of taxes payable only in government money in order to transform rural peoples into workers and small-scale commodity producers, as discussed in more depth in [Chapter 5](#). Likewise, some European-made commodities, such as steel tools, were quickly incorporated into local modes of production, while others were quite blatantly advertised and imposed in order to tie the independent New Guineans more tightly into the market economy—with “tobacco schools” providing a case in point (Firth 1972, 365). During the time of my fieldwork, money was especially needed for school fees, which were very high at the high-school level. In addition, basic items such as tools needed in swidden horticulture, clothing, medicine, household utensils, and building materials all required money, along with the boats, outboard motors, and gasoline needed for

transportation in an area where roads were few and poorly connected. Money and commodities are a part of everyday life and needed for the physical reproduction of people.

In my interviews and discussions with villagers who had been or were working on the plantation, I asked if they had certain explicit needs for money that prompted them to take on wage labor. Young people in particular noted that they had “aims” (using the English expression). The youths of Tagul, the “pioneers of Masrau,” told me that they wanted to buy instruments and revive a village band formed by their parents. Along with the general needs and school fees mentioned above, one of the most common answers was corrugated iron (TP: *kapa*) used for roofs. In the Wide Bay villages, a household has at least a “cooking house,” which is home to the married couple and female children. These are often thatched because that offers better ventilation, although it has to be replaced every seven to ten years. In addition, many families have separate “sleeping houses,” which are also used to store belongings and are invariably built with roofing iron. In the past, unmarried women lived with their parents in the cooking house, and young boys in the men’s house. Nowadays young people usually build their own sleeping houses, which they share with same-sex siblings. In several Wide Bay Mengen villages, some young men also lived in the men’s houses.

Roofing iron might sound trivial, but it highlights an important issue. The young who went to the plantation were ultimately oriented toward the village. Their aim was not to become full-time laborers and leave farming, but rather to return to their village and continue life there. This contradicts Tania Li’s (2011, 295) provocative notion that one should not assume that rural people have an attachment to an “ancestral way of life”: subsistence farming for many is the only way of survival because transition to wage labor is not possible. However, while Li is probably right in pointing out that there is no reason to categorically assume that all subsistence farmers want to remain in that role, most of plantation workers with whom I talked definitely wanted to return to the village and build houses for themselves there.

The wages at the plantation are not high. The minimum wage was PGK 2.29/hour in 2012 and PGK 3.5/hour in 2019; however, many workers on the plantation were paid according to completed tasks, such as holes dug, fresh fruit bunches carried, palms weeded or sprayed, and so forth, and hence the wages fluctuated. Workers were not paid for days on which they did not work, such as when sick.<sup>53</sup> The fortnightly wages paid to planters and nursery workers were usually somewhere in the region of PGK 150–300, or less if the worker missed workdays. Workers occasionally complained about the low pay:

Sometimes we complain. They say: "Now, I am not able to change the wages, because the company is new and has not much money." That's what they tell us—you just keep working. (Man, 30–40 years, 17 Jul 2011)

Others noted that they did not understand subtractions from wages and this caused arguments with supervisors. The young woman quoted at the start of this section noted that the Mengen workers often did not complain directly to managers, as the Mengen avoid direct arguments among themselves as well as with others. Moreover, when the plantation was newly established, some workers who threatened to strike over wages were fired. In 2019 and 2024, when I spoke with plantation workers, the low pay remained an issue.

The plantation is not only a site of monetary income but also one where money could and needs to be spent. From the start, the plantation had a store where workers and their families could buy basic commodities, such as rice, tinned food, and other household items. By 2019 the plantation store was much larger, and new supermarkets at the nearby "growth center" at Tol additionally offered a wide variety of items. In the early days of the plantation, many workers planted their own food in garden plots. The

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53 In 2012, 1 Papua New Guinea Kina (PGK) was about 0.5 US dollars (USD) or 0.4 Euro (EUR), around USD 0.27 or EUR 0.26 in 2019, and USD 0.29 or EUR 0.25 in 2023.

garden plots were dug in the cleared areas and gardening at the plantation was faster, because no large trees needed to be felled or fences built. Meanwhile, as the forests were clear-felled, the wild pigs that were normally a threat to gardens moved away into forests that were not logged. Some workers also planted their food crops amidst the oil palms where they grew well as long as the oil palms were young, but when the palms started to carry fruit, the soil became too depleted of nutrients for food plants to flourish. People noted that, during that time, food grew fast and plentifully—it was, after all, planted on land cleared of old-growth forests—to the extent that food from the plantation was occasionally sent back to the villages, often as contributions for feasts. But when the oil palms started to mature, the situation was reversed and relatives began sending food baskets to the workers on boats going to the plantation.

Planting food amidst the oil palms or cultivating gardens on recently cleared areas was one of the “weedy” ways in which the workers coped on the plantation (see Trouillot 1988, 71–72; Tsing 2005, 174; McKittrick 2013, 10), but it also had its downsides. As noted by Bernstein (1979, 436), among others, the value of commodities produced by peasants—by gardening, in this case—is often lessened through their use-value production, in that their reproduction is “subsidized” by it (also Trouillot 1988, 72, 74). I argue that this applies to the Sulka and Mungen wage workers, as the value of their labor commodity was lessened precisely by this subsidy. Or, to put it in more conventional terms, the workers could—and were partly willing to—work for low wages, with the help of swidden horticulture at home or on the plantation. In fact, the availability of cheap, or devalued, labor often enabled investment in estate plantations in the first place, something achieved by maintaining existing social relations and non-capitalist modes of production (Meillassoux 1973, 89; Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 519). As Bernstein and Pitt (1974, 515) have noted, plantations often coexist with a substantial peasant sector. Thus, under German and Australian colonial rule, maintaining “traditional society” and land rights through “protective” laws was also in the interests



of the colonizers in order to maintain the labor supply (Fitzpatrick 1980, 83; Firth 1989, 202). This does not mean plantation workers acted against their own interests by growing their food, but that labor dynamics on plantations have changed little over time.

In 2019 a man working as mechanic on the plantation told me that such gardening was not done anymore, also because the Simbali, who had leased land to the plantation, did not want workers to establish gardens in the surroundings of the plantation. For this reason, food has become an extra expense for plantation workers, especially when they have visitors to feed, such as rural kin. In 2019 many workers noted to me that the company had started to pay wages monthly rather than fortnightly. This forced many to buy food from the plantation store on credit deducted from their pay, commonly known as "whitepaper" due to the white credit forms. The monthly wage that forced many to take credit was heavily resented by workers, who knew very well that the company got back part of the wages it paid to workers with the credit system. As the credit is deducted from pay, it also ensures that the cycle of debt continues, because the workers are left with less money on paydays, which forces them to buy food on credit again. By creating a closed loop with "whitepaper," the plantation company reduces the flow of money from the plantation to the surrounding communities. As many workers have to rely on store credit issued only at company stores, they are not able to buy food from local trade stores or cooperatives or from villagers selling fresh food on the plantation.

### **Converting Labor into Work**

I first met many of the workers whom I have cited here after I had been conducting my fieldwork in Pomio for a few months. The absence of people in many Mengen villages was striking, and in Toimtop where I mostly stayed it was the young in particular who had left for the plantation. When the last founding member of the village died of old age, they all returned for her funeral. Suddenly, the village was busy with people engaged in the tasks

of mortuary ceremonies: digging the grave, collecting firewood for earth ovens, carrying pigs, bringing in food, and staying with the family in mourning. The young people had not come home empty-handed; they brought with them bales of rice to be served during the ceremonies as well as money.

During my discussions I learned about the “aims” of the plantation workers and that very few had actually attained them. This was not only because life on the plantation required money but also because workers often gave substantial amounts of their wages back to the village as various contributions to local needs: informal requests by relatives or formal collections in contribution to ceremonial exchanges, church activities, and the like. Some had even gone to work on the plantations in order to accumulate money for their relatives’ ceremonies, such as for bride-wealth gifts. A good friend of mine told me that his father had asked him to go to the plantation to help the family gather money for his cross-cousin, who was to be ordained as a priest. The clan mates of the future priest and his cross-cousins had formed a “family group”—remarkably similar to the *rglie* groups discussed in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)—to finance his studies, a permanent house, and the expenses of his ordination feast. Each household involved had agreed to come up with at least PGK 1000.

My friend had contributed PGK 600 in cash along with various transportation costs. Another young woman had contributed PGK 450 to another seminarian, PGK 50 for a mortuary feast, and PGK 200 for the school fees of relatives. These contributions were high, compared to the relatively low wages earned on the plantation. In my conversations and interviews, I asked the workers if they resented paying the contributions or not achieving their “aims.” Nobody would admit to it, and mostly I was told that this was just basic reciprocity; they had been helped by relatives when they attended school and now it was their time to help out in return. The workers seemed to share their money in much the same way as they would share things such as food, betel nut, or tobacco with their fellows.

Socially reproductive rituals also require money. Money and other store-bought commodities have become an integral part of gift exchanges. Most explicitly, this is the case in bridewealth exchanges where cash now forms part of the gift. The bridewealth consists of (in order of the importance given to the items) shell valuables, pigs, garden produce, money, store-bought loincloths, as well as foods (rice and tinned meat). The amounts of cash given can be thousands of kina, up to PGK 5000. In addition to the other commodities which are given, money is sometimes used to buy pigs and even shell valuables. Only domestic pigs, raised by the giver or bought, are usually given as gifts. Other exchanges, such as those held during initiations or mortuary feasts, do not feature large amounts of cash, which is given as minor gifts to individuals (ranging from PGK 5 to PGK 100 per person), but money is also required for rice, tinned meat, and pigs, so in total the money involved can amount to considerable sums.

As the Mungen exchange substantial quantities of commodities as gifts, it is tempting to say that they have successfully "domesticated" such commodities, or that in ceremonial exchanges they convert commodities into socially reproductive gifts. This indeed is part of the story. The idiom of hard work, *klingnan ti main*, is used to refer to socially productive activity, from gardening and tending plants to the nurture given to relatives, and it is this that also makes things valuable: giving wild pigs in ceremonies, because they can be "simply" hunted in the bush, is usually not done, as they are not as valuable because no hard work is invested in them. Pigs bought from elsewhere or from fellow villagers, however, are a common feature in Mungen ceremonies. As a middle-aged woman from Wawas told me, "My aim on my journey to the plantation was to buy a pig" (4 Aug 2019). She went to the plantation with her young child, along with a group of other mothers from Wawas, and worked as a harvester carrying fresh fruit bunches from the palms to the collector roads. After she returned, she bought a large pig for PGK 1000 from a neighboring village, and a year after having planted gardens with her husband, she organized the first initiation ceremony for her son.

When explaining to me why domestic pigs are valuable, William Vomne affirmed that bought pigs can be given in ceremonies, because earning money is “hard work” too. It is, however, not the physical properties that make something “hard work,” but rather how the results of that work are distributed and to what ends (Robbins and Akin 1999, 15, 23, 34; also Fajans 1997, 70). If and when money is shared and given as a gift to contribute to the well-being of others, it is nurturing and that makes it “hard work.” The Mengen notion of “hard work” as socially productive activity obviously differs greatly from the plantation managers’ view of “real work” as alienated and controlled labor. There is, however, a productive contradiction between these differently valued types of work, because many Mengen workers took on wage work in order to do “hard work” for their relatives.

The workers on the plantation use money to take care of their relatives and finance village projects and ceremonies. In short, they reproduce social relations in the village. This does not mean that things do not change. Plantations have, since their establishment in the late 19th century, been places of contact between Melanesians and Europeans and between people from different parts of Melanesia (M. Panoff 1969a; Keesing 1986), and thus have a substantial time depth as well as regional scope. Through this network, new commodities as well as stories, spells, and ideas spread throughout Melanesian societies (Keesing 1986, 163, 169). The Mengen, for example, have keenly observed other people’s customs and brought things of interest back to the village—particularly new crops, dances, and medicine (M. Panoff 1969a, 115–117, 125). Similarly, Christianity spread via men who had worked on plantations (Keesing 1986, 165), also to Wide Bay villages.

The medium of plantations also spread ideas of resistance to colonialism—from millenarian movements to the news of the strike in Rabaul in 1929 (Gammage 1975; Keesing 1986, 166; Kituai 1998, 88, 245). In one report, patrol officer Michael Davies (1967b, 4) notes how the Kamandran and Karlai plantations “appear to be centers [of] dissemination of thought, and an arena for discussion, on everything that occurs in northern Wide Bay.”

The Melanesian "plantation cultures," as Roger Keesing (1986, 168) calls them, have been profoundly creative spaces, because islanders from different parts of Melanesia as well as Europeans often had to invent appropriate social practices extemporarily in the face of questions of life (and death!) on the plantations. The Tzen plantation in Pomio is similarly a generative space, where people from different parts of Pomio, wider PNG, and other countries meet and establish new relationships. Young Mengen became romantically involved with, and in some cases even married, Mengen from other villages or people from other parts of PNG who they met on the plantation. In the latter case, the workers either followed their spouses to their homes or brought them back to the workers' home villages. This too, is the reproduction of a well-established convention: the Wide Bay Mengen have been marrying into other linguistic groups for a long time, and these contacts have often occurred on plantations.

The kin relations established on the plantations are not just confined to marriages. A friend of mine who worked as a logger on the oil palm plantation said that he had adopted an older man from the Highlands as his father. The old man had come to work on the plantation, but could not keep up and was alone. My friend told me how sorry he felt for him, and that he had proposed that the older man come and live with the loggers in their forest camp and guard the loggers' hut during the day in exchange for a small allowance paid by the logger. The old man agreed and, over the course of time as the relationship deepened, the logger started calling the old man his father, as did the logger's sisters. This initially surprised their fellow villagers, who commented that the man was from another part of PNG and not really their father; but the sisters noted that the old man always fed them and never refused any of their requests, and the villagers came to agree that he was indeed a real father. Finally, the biological father of the logger started to call the Highlands man his brother. This case of adoption was certainly the most unusual one I encountered, but demonstrates both how care and nurture are the basis of Mengen

conceptions of kinship and also the generative nature of the plantation spaces.

In the past, “Melanesian plantation culture” was very much a male concern (Keesing 1986, 166). Subordinated and exploited on the plantations and developing their relations from a subaltern position, the young men also had a common “class interest” in sharing knowledge and ideas with each other because of the generally subordinate position of young men in Melanesian societies (Keesing 1986, 165; Kituai 1998, 70, 84). There is an important difference between the old plantations of the colonial era and the 21st-century oil palm plantation, however; in the Mengen case, many women had also taken on wage labor. Married women with children had also started to undertake periods of plantation work and traveled to the plantation in groups. An older woman remarked to me that they chose to work to pay school fees and for family needs, as well as to make sure that the men do not blow all the money. The income from wage labor was then controlled by the earner, and for married women wage labor was a way to ensure that the monetary needs of the family and children were met. In the Mengen villages in which I worked, women had for a long time earned money through the making of copra and small-scale marketing. Wage labor on a substantial scale, on the other hand, was a fairly recent phenomenon—greatly increased by the new plantation nearby.

Money, commodities, and wage labor have for a long time been part of the life of the Mengen. They are an important feature of social reproduction and, in the villages, money earned from alienated labor is transformed—by sharing and giving it as gifts—into “hard work” as the Mengen understand it.

## Conclusions

The rural Mengen go to the plantation for varying periods of time, but most of them remain oriented toward the village. People explicitly said they wanted to return; they valued village life more than plantation life, and their plans to use their wages usually

involved a project in the village. Likewise, much of the money was channeled back to the village; alienated wage labor was, so to speak, "converted" into "hard"—that is, socially productive—work. People move between the village and the plantation to live out different relationships, as did the Korowai of West Papua, for whom living in close proximity in the village is associated with communal values, while the dispersed life in the forest is associated with the value of autonomy (Stasch 2013, 557). Much in the same way, young people move to the plantation to escape the routines of village life, see new places, and pursue their aims. But, more importantly, people often go to the plantation and to work in other salaried positions in order to finance life in the village. The village and the plantation then, as places of different kinds of relations, articulate with each other.

As research on peasant economies has shown, plantations greatly benefit from the subsidies of the surrounding peasant sector, inasmuch as peasants whose livelihood is secured from subsistence agriculture can work for low wages (Meillassoux 1973, 89; Bernstein and Pitt 1974, 515; Bernstein 1979, 436; Dennis [1980], 232; Fitzpatrick 1980, 83; White and Dasgupta 2010, 599). Important as this notion is in capturing many real dynamics between industrial agriculture and the surrounding countryside, it often reduces the role of the village to a passive source of subsidies and labor, stripped of its own dynamics, as James and Achsah Carrier (1989, 9–10, 228–229) aptly note in their study of migrant labor in Ponam, on Manus Island. Remittances sent back home by inhabitants of Ponam have contributed in various ways to the social life and dynamics of Ponam and the Ponamese division of labor in which migrant workers' channeling money back to Ponam has been a central adaptation to colonialism.

The comfortable life in Ponam also encouraged migrant workers to send money back there and maintain good relations with their home village (Carrier and Carrier 1989, 183–184). This is a central aspect of the dynamic between "village and town"; James Ferguson (1999, 132, 140, 164) shows, for example, that for the urban workers of the Zambian mining belt, one retirement

strategy was to move back home to the rural areas, but that this was only successful if they had maintained good relations with their rural kin. The village orientation of the Wide Bay Mengen workers is also exemplified by their attitude to regimented labor and the controlled life at the plantation. While the young in particular went to the plantation not only to make money but also to experience something new, the workers clearly preferred the freedom of their own pace of work in the village.

The relationship between the oil palm plantation and the Wide Bay Mengen villages reflects both the abovementioned dynamics: first, the plantation extracting benefits from the surrounding peasant sector, and second, plantation workers sending money back to their rural villages. On the one hand, the plantation gains important “subsidies” from the villages in terms of cheap labor. People in the villages send food to their kin on the plantation and the workers make use of their skill as gardeners to get by on the low wages. On the other hand, the plantation is a site where people make the money required for the social and physical reproduction of life in the village. The Mengen, while independent in terms of subsistence, do not live outside the money economy; money became a necessity a long time ago. Here it is important to remember Henri Bernstein’s (1979, 426) notion that more important than trying to establish the degree of commodity production in relation to subsistence activities, is whether commodity production and money have become social *necessities* (also Foster 1995, 26). This means that even if the Mengen villagers need relatively less money than the urban proletariat, for example, they still do need it and have to get it somewhere. In addition to cash-cropping, working for varying periods of time on plantations has been a part of the Mengen itinerary since the end of the 19th century (M. Panoff 1969a), thereby reproducing the labor dynamics of the export-agriculture plantations of the colonial era (see [Chapter 5](#)).

The circulation of things between the village and the plantation exemplifies the relationship between the two places from the point of view of the workers and villagers. The villagers send garden food by the basket to the plantation and go to the plantation



to sell garden food, betel nut, coconuts, fruit, and cooked food. This village produce is converted directly into commodities when sold for money, as in the case of betel nuts and fruit, or—in the case of food sent to workers—more indirectly into money as the food allows workers to save their wages, much of which the workers give to their relatives in the village. When money is shared in this way, it is “converted” again into “hard work” as the Mengen understand it—that is, socially reproductive work that makes and upholds valued social relations. The plantation, then, produces necessities for the reproduction of the village as much as the village subsidizes the plantation.

Nevertheless, my drawing attention to how the Mengen workers use money to reproduce valued relations is not intended to downplay the fact that plantation work is done out of necessity, and that life and work on the plantation are physically hard and underpaid. While the relation between the village and plantation is highly unequal, in the case of the Mengen it is leveled to some extent by the fact that the Mengen lands are not alienated. As Chris Gregory (1982, 116) notes, the non-commodification and non-alienation of customary land retained the material basis for the “gift economies” and their value regimes in PNG. This allows the Mengen to convert the wages produced by commodified and alienated labor into socially productive “hard work” in the village. Through this conversion, they keep the commodity relations encompassed within the Mengen value regime where the creation and maintenance of social relations is a central value. Due to this, the villages are not passive labor reserves, but rather places where the pursuit of socially productive values is, for the Mengen, possible and meaningful.

Despite this, young people go to the plantation, not only out of economic necessity but also to “relax,” as one Mengen worker expressed it, to escape the routines of village life, or when feeling oppressed by the demands of the elders. Even though people as a rule channel their income to their relatives, the plantation is also a place to act out one’s individualism through consumption, much in the same way as people in Porgera regard the Porgera Highway

as a “place of money,” as described by Jerry Jacka (2015, 203–208). Furthermore, people who have severed ties with their kin or fear for their safety due to accusations of sorcery, for example, might leave the villages for good and go to faraway plantations. More so, the plantation is also a socially productive space, inasmuch as youths meet partners and establish families on it. Like the Porgera Highway (Jacka 2015, 208), the plantation is a profoundly ambiguous space for the Mengen.

I began this chapter by noting that this ambiguous character of the plantation for the Mengen is largely due to their ambivalent relation to alienated labor and its relation to “work”—that is, socially productive activity. If the reproduction of society and the pursuit of values are, as David Graeber notes (2001, 24), human creative activity, then different values need to be produced by different kinds of work. Mengen “hard work” not only maintains and produces valued social relations, but through their work—such as gardening, establishing hamlets, and burying people—the Mengen also create and recreate meaningful places that index and materialize those values (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)), just as the plantation materializes the relations of a commodified economy.

So far, I have noted that the Mengen values of clan autonomy and inter-clan relations are in a contradiction with each other, but a similar socially productive contradiction exists between wage labor and “hard work,” as understood by the Mengen. On the one hand, the socially reproductive work done in the villages helps workers to sustain themselves on the plantations, most concretely when they receive garden food from villages. At the same time, this help “subsidizes” the plantation company and helps to keep the labor of rural people cheap. On the other hand, many plantation workers use their small wages to reproduce life in villages, by contributing to school fees and socially reproductive ceremonies. As these different, at times contradictory, value regimes are materialized in the two distinct places—the plantation and the village—movement between them allows people to combine disparate socio-cultural principles in their lives (Stasch 2013, 565). This, I think, explains the feeling of many of the Mengen with

whom I spoke, who saw the plantation as necessary and in some ways useful—in its place, but only as long as it stayed in its place, and did not creep and take over the land on which the Mengen could work hard—to create and maintain social relations.



Henrik Chuprekao and Rospita Mrei walk along the main coastal road passing through oil palm plantings. (2019)



Workers transport oil palm seedlings from the nursery to the field for planting. (2012)



A worker collects loose oil palm fruit that have fallen from bunches at a loading ramp on the Tzen plantation. (2024)



Workers' houses in the main compound of the Tzen plantation. (2019)



The palm oil mill on the Tzen plantation. (2024)



A tanker ship being loaded with palm oil off the coast of Lamarein. (2019)



The Tzen plantation market on pay day. (2019)



Members of the husband's clan add money to a bridewealth gift in Baen (Vei in). (2012)









## CHAPTER 7

# Conserving the Forest, Closing the Frontier

## Environmental Conservation and Counter-Enclosure

In the song of lament at the start of this part of the book, Martina Gomeyan mourns her son Peter Vomne, who in the late 1980s was criticized for speaking out against a proposed logging operation at a large meeting where several Wide Bay villages had gathered. Gomeyan was one of the few who had opposed it back then; when the first logging proposals were made, she notified Peter, who was attending a teaching college in the Highlands. He wrote back to his parents, urging his mother to prevent their clan members from signing any documents for fear that his less educated relatives would not understand the implications of logging contracts. He returned to the village to persuade the clan not to allow logging on their clan land and was later joined by his younger brother William, also a highly educated young man. Their opposition to logging was initially criticized by others, as described in the lament song. What the mother found most distressing was that the clan (M: *val*; “vine”) was not united and that her son was criticized by his fellow clan members as if he were from a different clan with nobody to support him.

As described in [Chapter 3](#), logging became an issue toward the end of the 1980s when Wide Bay Mengen men wanted to establish a LOC covering the area from the southernmost Wide Bay Mengen villages all the way north to the Sulka areas. For a variety

of reasons, discussed previously, these plans never materialized, but even at the planning stage they were already opposed by a minority of locals. Among the Wide Bay Mengen, Gomeyan was opposed because, according to her, as a woman she had to think about her clan land in respect of her children, whereas her brothers were thinking about the shorter-term benefits. Moreover, as her children were acquiring good educations, she wanted them to use their knowledge “on their land.” She was supported by her husband, Sylvester Vomne, a Sulka man who, as a teacher, had traveled widely in New Britain and was dismayed by the loss of forests and land among the Tolai living around the provincial capital.

In 2024 I discussed Gomeyan’s song with her daughter Perpetua Tpongri and niece Catherine Kaltenmak. Both remembered the song, and I was able to record it—and correct some mistakes I had made while initially transcribing the words. The song made Perpetua recall the early days of conservation, and she noted it was distressing time, reaffirming that initially it was only her family that had stood up against the logging proposals, for which they were criticized by other community members.

Older women among the Sulka opposed the proposed logging as well. One elder Sulka woman who initially opposed logging was in fact affinally related to Gomeyan, being of the same clan as Gomeyan’s husband, Vomne. During my initial fieldwork in New Britain in 2007, I interviewed Elizabeth Tongne, a Sulka activist who was of this same clan, and she explained why this elder woman, who was her clan-mother, opposed logging:

Many of the traditional boundaries and landmarks where our grandparents resided on the mountain are still there—like the cemetery, like the old villages. Because our clan had settled on that mountain, we had all these things there. And she [her clan-mother] wanted the children too, the future generations, to know them. For them to be able to see those landmarks. (Woman, 40–50 years, 9 Aug 2007)

Both among the Sulka and the Mengen the impetus to oppose logging came from older women who distrusted logging due to their longer temporal perspectives—with a view both to the past and the future. They were concerned for swidden horticulture, for the role of the forest in providing for basic needs, and for the places linking the clan to its land (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)). The women's central role in swidden horticulture as the tenders of people and food plants made them attentive to the dangers of logging. In a similar locally initiated conservation project among the Maisin of PNG, it was the women in particular who wanted to save the forests (Barker 2008, 203). More crucially, women's formal position as maintainers of the matriline among the Sulka and the Mengen probably gave them special authority to voice their concerns compared with women in situations where landholding is organized differently, such as in the Highlands (e.g. West 2006, 121).

Notwithstanding all of the above, it was not the case that Mengen women uniformly opposed logging or that all Mengen men were inattentive to its dangers. The younger and more educated relatives of the elder women, both male and female, distrusted logging on the basis that it might not bring lasting development (see also Barker 2008, 181; Lattas 2011, 91). They feared the royalty money would just be spent on consumption, that logging trails would not provide adequate road infrastructure, and so on. They also conceptualized and organized the opposition to logging as “conservation” by setting up conservation associations and forming links with NGOs, both national and international. As happened elsewhere in PNG, some of the young, educated people held salaried jobs which they abandoned in order to return to their villages and contribute to the emerging conservation work (Barker 2008, 180; Kirsch 2014, 65), such as the example given above when Peter Vomne, Gomeyan's son, was joined by his younger brother William, a university graduate who left his salaried job and returned to Toimtop, his home village, to work on conservation. Like many LOCs (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#)), the Mengen conservation association was explicitly set up as a village

project with a committee containing representatives of all the clan groups present in Toimtop. The conservation area, however, was specifically vested in the clan group whose members had initially opposed logging and proposed conservation. Unlike in the Sulka case, the Mengen conservation area was not formalized as a Wildlife Management Area (WMA)—a locally managed conservation area—until 2020. Nonetheless, the Mengen were successful in securing donations and help from NGOs (discussed more thoroughly in [Chapter 8](#)).

In this chapter I describe how and under what conditions the educated Sulka and Mengen of Wide Bay reframed their opposition to logging as conservation. They were familiar with “conservation” as an international discourse and practice; however, as I show in the first section, their organized opposition to logging, framed as conservation, should be understood in relation to the marginal position of Pomio District within the wider province, which made many rural inhabitants initially receptive to logging (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 5](#)). Moreover, I argue that the framing of opposition to logging as conservation by Mengen and Sulka needs to be understood not only in relation to the marginal position of Pomio, but also in relation to the previous social movements through which the rural inhabitants of Pomio sought to address this marginalization and uneven development in the past. In the following two sections I demonstrate that conservation in Wide Bay was not just about “conserving the forest,” but was rather a movement with broader environmental and political aims. The conservationists questioned the notion of development based on natural resource extraction, and sought to educate their fellow villagers on operating within the state framework and to further the position of the rural population as rural cultivators within the political and economic structures of the province and country. Because of this, I analyze the conservationists as *peasant intellectuals*. The term “peasant” is the analytical category which I use to highlight questions of class based on relations of production, and the position of the rural cultivators in the province (see [Chapter 5](#) and [Chapter 6](#)). I argue that Wide Bay conservationists

sought to “close” logging and labor frontiers by enclosing their clan land and by trying to advance local cash-cropping.

### Community Conservation in Wide Bay

In the 1960s, state officials and missionaries began pushing locals to plant cash crops, particularly coconut (e.g., Walsh 1955; Davies 1966). As noted in [Chapter 5](#), some patrol officers supported locals who wanted to grow their own cash crops by suggesting that the administration should provide them with production infrastructure and training from agricultural extension officers, something locals had asked for (Henderson 1962; Hope 1962, 1963a, 1963b; Davies 1967a). By that time, the village production of copra and cocoa was seen as key to local “development” (Henderson 1962; Davies 1966), and the shift to local cash-crop production ultimately contributed to the closing of the labor frontier (Gregory 1982, 155–157). In 1960, patrol officer Fayle (1960) still noted that taxation had the “desirable effect” of forcing men to seek employment, and that men returning from plantations would sometimes plant cocoa and copra. Prior to Fayle’s observations, other officers had already noted that Wide Bay should not be regarded as a source of labor as the work input of men was needed to sustain and improve “village economies” (Walsh 1955). In 1968, one patrol officer noted how local labor could not be increased and also that planters tended to favor labor hired from elsewhere (Davies 1968), illustrating the closing and shifting of the labor frontier.

As told to me by elders Otto Tongpak and Sylvester Vomne, Toimtop, like other villages, began cultivating copra in the 1960s. However, as the village is located on a fairly narrow plateau at an altitude at which coconut does not grow, patrol officers suggested acquiring land closer to the coast. A village official from a neighboring village, who was also an elder in his clan, agreed to provide the people of Toimtop about 20 ha of his clan’s land. He asked the people of Toimtop to compensate his clan members for the land after the coconut started to generate income. After receiving the

land, men from Toimtop cleared swidden gardens in the primary forest for their families and then planted coconut in them. These gardens formed the basis of the individual coconut plantings, or “blocks,” and much like individual gardens, they were in the name, or property, of the men who cleared them, and were passed on to their descendants and families (see [Chapter 1](#)). During that time, families produced their own copra, but I was told that people would come together on community work days to help a given family to gather coconuts, then break and scoop them to make copra. The villagers were also saving money to build new church.

Later, cooperation took new forms, such as when Sylvester Vomne, who had married into the community, suggested forming a cooperative licensed to buy copra from locals and sell it on to companies. “The Society” was formed in 1971, and it bought copra from people throughout East Pomio. With the profits, the cooperative achieved two main aims of the community. First, around 1980, Toimtop paid the landowning clan which had given them the land for planting coconut. The payment consisted of a substantial amount of money, shell valuables, pigs, and heap of food (Tammisto 2021, 46). Rather than a simple alienated transaction of land, it was based on existing relations between the landowning clan and the people of Toimtop community. This is also illustrated by the payment, which included a substantial amount of local media of value—pigs, shells, and garden food. The prestation was neither a commodity transaction or a reciprocal gift, but incorporated elements of both. The ceremonial prestation is also a Mengen way of publicly finalizing an agreement; in this case, a state official was invited to witness it as well. Secondly, in the early 1980s, Toimtop completed the village church, which was built from store-bought materials. In addition, the Society built copra driers, bought boats, and built a copra shed on the coast—on land acquired from the neighboring village.

In the late 1960s there were large-scale protests among the Tolai against the Australian administration (Whitehouse 1995, 30). The Tolai set up the influential Mataungan Association, which strove for self-governance, reclamation of alienated lands,



and empowerment through cash-cropping (Whitehouse 1995, 31, 34, 36). The Mataungan spread to other groups in New Britain as well; the Uramot Baining, for example, were initially sympathetic to what they perceived as its radical ideas (Whitehouse 1995, 32). Around this time the politico-religious Kivung (Gathering) movement also emerged in Pomio. Unlike the strictly secular Mataungan, the Kivung was a millenarian movement focusing on ritual action and spiritual transformation (Bailoenakia and Koimanrea 1983, 172–173; Whitehouse 1995, 36; Lattas 2006, 132). However, it was also “nationalistic” as it united different linguistic groups in Pomio, ranging from the southern Mengen, Kol, and Mamusi areas to the Sulka and the Baining lands in the north. One reason for its success was that it sought to empower the rural inhabitants of Pomio, who perceived themselves to be in a marginal position in relation to the Tolai (Bailoenakia and Koimanrea 1983, 173; Whitehouse 1995, 36; Lattas 2006, 132, 139).

The Kivung also became a successful political movement, holding the parliamentary seat of Pomio from the commencement of self-government in 1964 until 2002 (Whitehouse 1995, 45; Rew 1999, 140, 143; Lattas 2006, 32). The movement had been active in funding and establishing a high school for Pomio, as well as funding the education of students and health services (Bailoenakia and Koimanrea 1983, 178–180). Kivung members are highly bureaucratic in their ritual practices, which Andrew Lattas (2006, 135, 148) interprets as the mimetic replication of administrative practices and the creation of local and alternative grounds for participating in politics, government, and the money economy; in other words, a mode of localizing power (see [Chapter 5](#) on bottom-up state formation). The Kivung, however, also directly funded the district government (Bailoenakia and Koimanrea 1983, 181)—engaging thus in very concrete state formation. In 2002 the Kivung lost the national elections to Paul Tiensten, the initiator of the Ili-Wawas project and a supporter of economic development based on natural resource extraction (Tammisto 2008).

By briefly discussing these various movements and societies in New Britain, I want to emphasize that the Sulka and Mengen

conservation associations in Wide Bay were not externally imposed; on the contrary, they join a long line of local political movements in New Britain. Common to these, whether copra cooperatives or millenarian movements, is the emphasis on local governance and self-empowerment. (For a more recent case, see Aini et al. 2023, 352.) As I have noted previously, there is a self-conscious aspect of cultural revivalism inherent to Wide Bay conservation (Tammisto 2008, 80–84), which is a common feature of both localist movements (e.g., Keesing 1982, 237) and conservation initiatives (e.g., Barker 2008) in Melanesia.

In the 1980s the Toimtop Society disbanded—according to some, because it had reached its main aims, namely buying the land and constructing the church; according to others, due to bad economic decisions and competition from other cooperatives. Later in the 1990s and early 2000s, cash-cropping of copra in villages like Toimtop became less profitable with falling commodity prices and rising transport costs. This, as recounted in [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 5](#), reversed the conditions that had closed the labor frontier and paved the way for logging and later oil palm plantations, both introduced to Wide Bay under frontier conditions. For Malaysian logging companies, PNG and Wide Bay were frontiers into which they could expand in the 1990s and 2000s—the possibility of long-term land leases had opened the land frontier, as companies now had access to customary land, and diminishing cash-cropping had reopened the labor frontier, as rural people were again willing to take on wage labor on plantations.

Conservation in Wide Bay emerged first, as noted, as a reaction to logging. The conservationists in Toimtop modeled their conservation association on the cooperative society established by their parents, seeing the Society as a direct predecessor to conservation. Throughout their long-standing work, the conservationists also sought to challenge the frontier conditions—insecure tenure rights, the view of their forests as “unused” sources of timber—in multiple ways.

When Toimtop received help from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to formalize the conservation area

in 2017, the community also received funding for a “livelihood project,” which the conservationists and leaders in the village decided to use to rehabilitate the community’s coconut plantation with cocoa. The conservationists and the wider community saw this as a parallel of the communal efforts to establish the copra plantation and cooperative society. In 2019, when I was conducting research in Wide Bay, the inhabitants of Toimtop were busy planting cocoa on their coconut blocks they had inherited from their parents and grandparents. Only one family, which bore a grudge over a land dispute in the early 2000s, refused to take part in the project, because they still disputed the conservationist clan’s ownership of the conserved area.

While the conservation area is under the customary ownership of the clan whose members begun conservation in Toimtop, the conservation association and the cocoa project were both community projects. The conservationists, village leaders, and community members decided to plant cocoa in order to make local cash-cropping feasible and give the villagers a source income, as copra had been used in the past. While cocoa is a more demanding cash crop than coconut, it can be still locally produced and is a higher-value crop than copra. While cocoa groves must be kept clean to ensure yields and prevent pests, cocoa-growing can be combined with swidden horticulture. Indeed, people in Toimtop, Wawas, Baein, and throughout Wide Bay had grown cocoa in the past, after having received seedlings from logging companies (see [Chapter 3](#)), for instance, but cocoa production had waned after the cocoa crop was attacked by pests in the 2010s. Due to this, people in Toimtop planted a new pest-resistant variety of cocoa.

The explicit aim of the conservation actives in Toimtop was to further the position of their community members as rural cultivators engaged in local food production and family cash-cropping. Cocoa, like copra in the past, was supposed to bring income to villagers so that they would not need to go to work on plantations, or feel the need to engage in land leases. Many of my interlocutors noted that they knew cocoa as a plant, unlike other commodity crops such as oil palm, which many also regarded as

environmentally more damaging. Or, as stated by Joseph Teivotaip, a middle-aged elder from Toimtop, cocoa is *politically* better than oil palm, because planting oil palm usually involves changes in land tenure, whereas cocoa can be grown on customary land by the locals themselves.

The conservationists in Wide Bay, and Toimtop in particular, did not conceptualize plantation expansion and logging in terms of the frontier, but they were very much aware of the conditions that make up a frontier, such as insecure tenure rights and that outside actors, such as logging and plantation companies, regarded Wide Bay as a source of resources and area of expansion. The consolidation of the conservation area as a formally recognized WMA was meant to secure the tenure rights of the landowning clan, while the cocoa project was intended to bring income for locals. The conservationists thus attempted to “close” the land and labor frontiers, by trying to advance the position of the rural population *as* rural cultivators. I discuss the conservationists in the next section as peasant intellectuals.

### Conservationists as Peasant Intellectuals

In their talk, Wide Bay conservationists often used terms and catchphrases such as “capacity building,” “roles and responsibilities,” “awareness,” and the like. Based on this, it would be tempting to see them as converts to a dogma of technocratic and depoliticized governance perpetuated by the process whereby states and transnational actors shift responsibility to NGOs and “civil society”—or more broadly, “neoliberalism” (West 2006, xii; Peluso and Lund 2011, 674; Hilgers 2013, 81). Conservation in Wide Bay indeed emerged under frontier conditions in which private entities, such as logging and plantation companies, were taking part in governance and in providing infrastructure and services (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 5](#)). NGOs and conservation projects have also played a part in this trend, as several studies have noted (West 2006; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; C. Benson 2012). And indeed, in 2019 a Wide Bay conservation active observed that the

state was not present in the rural areas and that NGOs had taken its place (see West 2006). The conservation association of Toimtop, for example, which was led by highly educated people, had become a representative of the community in many instances, as I noted in the Introduction. Operating according to the norms and practices of formal governance, the association was an easily recognizable, or “legible” (Scott 1998), partner both for donors and NGOs, as well as state institutions. For the conservationists this was a way of “being seen like a state,” to paraphrase Jaap Timmer (2010)—in other words, being recognized as an authority (see also [Chapter 5](#)).

In this sense, the conservation association resembled the LOCs through which Mungen men sought to secure income and services from logging companies and promote their own authority. The conservationists were not only successful in generating donations for their projects—as discussed above and something to which I turn in [Chapter 8](#)—but also in presenting their village as a locally well-organized model community with the association as its representative. Consequently, when the state-owned telephone company, PNG Telikom, was expanding its mobile network to Pomio during the period of my fieldwork in 2011, and building towers across the district, Toimtop was chosen as a site, not only for its geographic location but also because it was regarded as a reliable community due to the association. Another tower was built on the Tzen oil palm plantation.

However, dismissing Wide Bay conservationists simply as products and vehicles of neoliberal governance would miss important aspects of the work which they conducted in the rural communities. They all came from rural backgrounds and many lived in their home communities. Those who worked in towns with the local or national NGOs maintained close ties with their home villages and channeled money back, like other laborers (see [Chapter 6](#)), and hosted rural kin in their homes when the latter were in town. They did not merely seek to act as representatives of their communities in contact with formal actors, but sought to educate their fellow villagers as widely as possible on the implications of natural

resource projects and other issues. This is why “awareness”—as the conservationists themselves put it—was a central part of their work. Meanwhile, they actively sought options for income and service provision other than large-scale natural resource extraction projects, which they felt threatened the local population with dispossession—the cocoa project being an example of this. Furthermore, the conservationists often took part informally in situations that arose in their home communities, such as when people had to deal with the police or other officials—simply because they were proficient in dealing with the administration.

The “awareness” work of the conservationists was significant. Before the start of my fieldwork, around 2010 and 2011, when the land lease boom (see [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 5](#)) was at its height, officials of the provincial Department of Lands and Physical Planning came to educate Wide Bay villagers on the lease/lease-back schemes by holding awareness presentations, allegedly encouraging people to enter into deals which would have enabled the department to sublease their lands for development projects. The proposals by the Lands Department were part of the program introduced by the government to encourage people to voluntarily “mobilize” land they held under the customary title: in other words, to encourage them to lease it out for development purposes. Under PNG legislation, land could not be alienated, but it could be leased for periods of up to 99 years (Filer 2012, 599; Schwoerer 2022, 35–36). An official of the Lands Department told me that the leases are “more flexible” and better suited to PNG where people do not like the concept of individual freehold titles. During one such awareness presentation, the local conservationists inquired about the risks of local clans ultimately losing their land, and requested details of the full implications of the lease agreements. As a result, people refused the agreements, with the conservationists thus arguably preventing large-scale dispossession.

Shortly afterwards, in 2011, a governmental commission of inquiry was set up to probe the leasing schemes and the granting of new leases was put on hold. The commission’s investigations

found numerous faults and wrongdoings in the lease cases, and the findings were published—although this did not halt existing projects. For instance, in West Pomio, the Sigite Mukus Integrated Rural Development Project, sister to the Ili-Wawas project, was established on the basis of the controversial leases and faced active opposition from local activists who also made their struggle internationally known (Lattas 2012). Likewise, the Tzen Group had expanded its oil palm plantings during the 2010s throughout East New Britain ([Chapter 5](#)) and conducted logging in the Sulka and Mengen areas in 2014.

As noted in [Chapter 4](#), Sulka and Mengen formed a new LOC, Nato Ltd., and signed a logging contract with Tzen Niugini, the company operating in Masrau. As the actual logging operation started, the project was contested by other inhabitants of the area due to an unresolved land dispute. A highly educated young local, who had worked for a local conservation NGO but returned to his home village, had begun to inquire about the project as the first surveyors entered the area, in order to make sense of what it was about and how it might be dealt with. He had also been spending time further south in the Waterfall Bay area, where his clan owned land, trying to discourage his clan members, especially the older men, from signing their land away for the Sigite Mukus oil palm development; he urged them to hold back and find other ways of funding development. In an interview I conducted with him about the two projects, he offered an analysis of what he considered to be the basic problem with these approaches. Due to its clarity, it is worth quoting at length:

It is not up to me to criticize the government, but according to my observations the government has partly failed in its responsibility to distribute services to the people. Although it has established many mining and logging companies in the past years and, more recently, oil palm companies, it has not distributed goods and services fairly and equally to them [the people]. What it does, it gives the people the option, through departments like Lands and Forestry, to negotiate with them and then go to the developers [com-

panies]. But after having helped them to bring in the developer, it leaves them with the developer and passes on responsibility to the developer or whatever company. But actually, it is its [the government's] responsibility. (Man, 30–35 years, 27 Feb 2014)

This is an illuminating quote, because it gets to the heart of the matter: in large-scale natural resource projects, governmental institutions usually assist “developers,” or capital, whereas people at grassroots levels often get less assistance. Or, as in the case of the abovementioned commission of inquiry, assistance comes after the fact, if at all.

More generally, my interlocutor criticized the neoliberal approach to development in Pomio whereby the production of services previously associated with the state was shifted to companies, local communities had to trade their resources for basic services and the regulation of corporations was minimized.<sup>54</sup> While PNG has undergone neoliberal reforms (West 2012, 99–100), the state’s involvement in natural resource projects—such as acquiring ownership in major mining ventures, subsidizing foreign investment, and ending the privatization of state enterprises, carried out at the time when projects such as Ili-Wawas were being initiated—runs counter to neoliberal doctrines to the extent that Filer (2013, 321) has called it “state capitalism.” However, as Stuart Kirsch (2014, 231) notes, the state’s lack of capacity or willingness to regulate has in practice produced the neoliberal outcome of deregulation. In [Chapter 5](#) I come to a similar conclusion regarding the Ili-Wawas project.

The conservationists played an important part in educating and organizing their fellow villagers to prevent them from being cheated by logging companies and dispossessed of their land and, more generally, to enable them to deal better with the state and importunate companies. Here the notion of intellectuals as people

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54 See Benson and Kirsch (2010, 465) on corporate deregulation; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones (2012, 243, 252) on land acquisition through leases; Hilgers (2012, 81) on state support of markets; Jessop (2013, 70) and Lattas (2011) on corporatized governance.



or groups with directive or organizational roles, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, is instructive.<sup>55</sup> According to Gramsci ([1929–1935] 1971, 8–9), intellectuals are not defined by their intellectual activity as such, because all human action involves some degree of intellectual activity, but rather by their *social role* as intellectuals (see also Feierman 1990, 18; Crehan 2002, 131). This function is “directive and organisational,” or educative, and thus intellectual (Gramsci [1929–1935] 1971, 16; see also Crehan 2002, 131).

In this sense, the local conservationists of Wide Bay were intellectuals. They operated mainly in their own communities and the association’s focus was very much on the community and its conservation area. Similarly, the conservationists placed great emphasis on local knowledge and needs, and wanted the association to be as independent as possible, so that conservation would not be externally imposed (see also Aini et al. 2023, 352, 357). Over time they organized a variety of formal workshops designed to educate the villagers on various themes. Some initiatives, such as butterfly farming, have been “standard” approaches to small-scale development and, as noted by the conservationists themselves, proved failures that could readily be compared with the sometimes-naïve approaches of well-meaning donor organizations (see also Kirsch 1997, 108). On the other hand, with their paralegal training, the information supplied by conservationists about the legal rights of locals in concrete situations, such as negotiating logging contracts, aimed to give the rural people a more rounded picture of their position in the political economy of PNG.

I have noted previously that the Wide Bay Mengen are peasants—that is, people with direct access to land, with a high degree of self-sufficiency, who use mostly family labor, are partially

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55 In my understanding of Gramsci and also my framing of local conservationists as intellectuals, I rely heavily on Kate Crehan’s (2002) excellent exegesis of Gramsci, and Steven Feierman’s (1990) work on peasant intellectuals in rural Tanzania. To give credit where credit is due, it is mainly through Crehan’s work that I became aware of Gramsci and the nuances of his work beyond the concept of hegemony, and of Feierman’s work on peasant intellectuals.

engaged in markets, and subordinate in larger political economies (Watts 2009, 524; also Meggit 1971, 208–209; Grossman 1984, 5, 13, 19). By helping the rural people to retain control of their land, the conservationists sought to improve their position *as* rural producers, or peasants. The cocoa projects initiated in Toimtop and in the Sulka village of Klampun show that the local conservationists sought also improve the peasant means of production among their fellow villagers. Gramsci’s discussion of intellectuals is tied to questions of class, and the struggles between classes. Intellectuals are produced by classes—that is, they do not exist either as individuals or groups independently of class relations—and they play a crucial role in formulating “the incoherent and fragmentary ‘feelings’ of those who live in a particular class into a coherent and reasoned account of the world as it appears from that position” (Gramsci [1929–1935] 1971, 5; Crehan 2002, 132).

The Wide Bay conservationists were few in number and they were not trying to build a mass movement to overthrow capitalism in PNG. They were, however, raising questions regarding the position of rural people in their province, the state structure of PNG, and the capitalist resource economy. For the most part, the rural people, or the grassroots level, comprised small-scale farmers, food-producing peasants growing cash crops for export (coffee, cacao, copra, oil palm) and—peculiarly for PNG—owners of their own land. In the case of Wide Bay, as I noted in [Chapter 5](#), the rural areas with dwindling cash-crop production provided labor reserves which were essential for the new plantation projects (Bernstein 1979, 426). Thus, it is, in my opinion, justified to regard the rural population of New Britain as belonging to a *class* of peasants. Consequently, Gramsci’s notions of intellectuals as tied to particular classes can be used to think about a situation which is comparable to that which gave rise to Gramsci’s theorizing—namely, the interrelationships of particular classes and especially the role of peasants.

## “What Is Awareness?”—Challenging the Extractivist Hegemony

The idea that economic and infrastructural development is best achieved through natural resource extraction projects like the Ili-Wawas was being perpetuated by state officials in Pomio in the 2010s and was part of the hegemonic discourse. The conservationists wanted to challenge this hegemony because of its adverse effects on rural people, effects including the loss of land through de facto alienation by long-term leases and the destruction of lived environments. Thus, “awareness” was not only a buzzword adopted from “NGO-speak,” but an important factor in challenging the “extractivist hegemony.” As Stuart Kirsch (2014, 192) has shown, the information disparity between local communities living near natural resources and companies engaged in extractive industries can have detrimental effects on the communities.

Based on his long-term research on, and involvement with, struggles against the polluting Ok Tedi mine in PNG, Kirsch (2006; 2007; 2014, 190, 188) notes that activists must engage both in what he calls the “politics of space” and the “politics of time.” Using the politics of space, the anti-mine activists followed the circuits of capital, campaigned at important nodes in the commodity chain, and sought to mobilize members in multiple locales. However, because mining companies learn from previous defeats, because the manifestation of the impacts of mining is often delayed—making it possible to characterize such impacts as “slow-motion disasters”—and because opposition takes a long time to mount, it is also important to act at the right points in time, thereby engaging in the politics of time (Kirsch 2014, 186, 190). It is of course essential to prevent disasters from occurring, and this requires changing how people perceive the impacts of mining as well as targeting the planning stages of new projects (Kirsch 2014, 190–191). This in turn often requires that activists learn new things quickly and that the information disparity between communities and companies is diminished (Kirsch 2014, 192–193).

The Wide Bay conservationists have used the politics of time as they have sought to educate their fellow villagers, discourage landowners from signing land lease deals without proper knowledge, and inform people about the effects of oil palm plantations. As the news about the new logging project conducted by Nato Ltd. began to spread, for instance, the Wide Bay conservationists asked Nato directors to come and provide villagers with “awareness” by telling them what the project was about (see [Chapter 4](#)). In order to avoid conflict between conservation and logging, the conservationists also gave their management plan both to state representatives and to the chairman of Nato. The conservationists decided to “communicate the borders” of the conservation area because it was contiguous with the logging project area. This is also a good example of adopting “territorial strategies” to protect life-worlds (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 387; Baletti 2012, 588, 593), discussed further in [Chapter 8](#). The conservationists’ work probably influenced local people because, as the new logging project began, a clan excluded from the project called a meeting with the LOC and the clan with whom they were in dispute, as described in [Chapter 4](#). One reason given for the meeting was the “lack of awareness” regarding the project.

In [Chapter 4](#) I analyzed how the various participants of the meeting talked about clans and LOCs, and how they sought to reframe the nature of the dispute. I turn now to the statements of the conservationists who were invited to the meeting to offer their comments as observers. The conservationists took up the issue of “lack of awareness” and asked what people meant by it: knowledge, consent, or something else? A conservationist noted:

For me, awareness is that you state clearly to me what will actually happen on the land. (Man, 40–50 years, 18 Feb 2014)

After saying this, the conservationists reminded people that when they sign deals with logging companies, they enter the state system, which means that proper procedures mandated by the government must followed. One conservationist then asked whether these procedures had been followed, stressing that while

everybody wants development, the way things are done matters as much as the outcome. He continued, “We have omitted the proper steps” in the new logging project—the use of “we” softly but implicitly connoting the LOC actives—and that was why the project had run into trouble. During the meeting the conservationists acted in an explicitly neutral fashion, not taking sides in the land dispute and not condemning logging as such. However, regarding proper procedures, they took a firm stand:

This kind of talk you throw around about the company continuing to operate despite the dispute—I suggest you to be careful with that kind of talk. *Careful!* Because the strength, the law, it recognizes you, it recognizes all the people present. The law will serve you, the law will serve you too—we play on a level playing field. (Man, 40–50 years, 18 Feb 2014)

This quote clearly illustrates the Wide Bay conservationists’ relationship with the law and the state. They were proficient in the legislation of PNG and knew how institutions worked, or at least were supposed to work. Law, as Kirsch (2014, 86–87) notes, is often regarded by skeptics as favoring the powerful and as a way of depoliticizing conflicts and alienating subalterns from their own language. On the other hand, the law may be a more open-ended resource for promoting economic and social transformation, as Kirsch (2014, 86) suggests in relation to the campaign against the Ok Tedi mine by the Yonggom activists of PNG. Corporate lawyers can often outspend their opponents and those working for the Ok Tedi mining company sought to influence legislation in PNG, which would have criminalized the PNG activists’ involvement in a case against the company in Australia (a maneuver for which the company was judged to be in contempt of court). Thus, while the law is certainly not a “level playing field,” the Yonggom activists were able to secure important legal victories, making the company accountable for the pollution it had caused (Kirsch 2014, 89, 97, 104). Likewise, being able to utilize the law was definitely a strength of the Wide Bay conservationists. For example, after they had won a land dispute in court (discussed more in [Chapter 8](#)),

the position of the conservationists was strengthened both within their own clan as well as in relation to local supporters of logging and the logging companies.

This reliance on the law and the “proper system of the government” has two principal, connected consequences: first, it legitimizes the state as an institution and as a source of authority; and second, it is a claim for the state institutions to work in particular ways or, more simply, a political argument regarding the preferred role of the state. (See also the interlocutor’s remark earlier in this chapter about the state’s failing in its responsibility vis-à-vis the rural population.) In the specific case of the logging project under the Nato LOC, these statements were also intended to destabilize the hegemonic position of natural resource extraction that its proponents, by portraying it as the “will of the government,” sought to grant it. Both in the meeting in question as well as in other instances, the conservationists reminded listeners that the state (TP: *govaman*) was not a monolithic actor, but consisted of different institutions. According to them it was a *system* in and through which actions were played out. One conservationist explicitly stated this during a conversation with another villager as we waited for the meeting to start. He noted that just because companies operate in the framework of the government does not mean that they are government projects.

Domination, according to Gramsci, rests on coercion, persuasion, and hegemony—that is, the deep-rooted ideological dominance that makes the worldview of one class tacitly accepted by others; thus, overcoming hegemony, or creating counter-hegemony, is as important as gaining state power in a class struggle to overcome subordination (Schwimmer 1987, 81, 90; Feierman 1990, 19; Crehan 2002, 132, 138, 147, 153). In Wide Bay, the conservationists engaged in explicitly organizational and educative activity, seeking to “produce and instill knowledge,” as Kate Crehan puts it (2002, 132), and to undermine the hegemonic status sought by proponents of development through large-scale natural resource extraction. And not only that. The conservationists also sought to produce a counter-hegemonic discourse as they tried to

present alternative definitions for “development.” Development, as a concept, had hegemonic status in the politics of New Britain (and elsewhere)—not least because of the term’s ambiguity, inasmuch as it can mean just about anything (e.g., Ferguson 1994). In the rural areas of New Britain, development usually meant increased income and better access to services such as roads, hospitals, and so on. It also referred to changes made on the land relating to cultivated plants, especially cash crops. Finally, development was often regarded as synonymous with large-scale projects such as logging and plantations. Proponents of these projects have often accused NGOs of preventing development because they and local conservation associations have sought to ensure that people were informed about the consequences of large-scale agribusiness and have stressed the need to follow the proper procedures and guidelines set up by the state to protect local landowners. For example, in the meeting described in [Chapter 4](#), a state official said to the Disputing Clan members:

And the Tok Pisin talk<sup>56</sup> is like this: “I will put you in court and I will pull my resources out [of the project] and I do not need others to develop.” You see? We NGOs, our Tok Pisin is like: “It’s our forests; our forest rivers must remain—don’t disturb them! Because their future ... the benefits from them will come.” Because you stand by this kind of thought, hit on Nato! (Man, 50–60 years, 18 Feb 2014)

The state official thus ironically mimicked what he thought was the stance of NGOs and conservationists. Responding to these allegations and in order to challenge the hegemonic status of the projects, the conservationists at the meeting noted that conservation is also a kind of development and should be seen

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56 The term “Tok Pisin” used in this way refers to official or public talk and statements, regardless of the actual language spoken. For example, in land disputes it is common to note that the opponents are confused in their comments by saying that their “Tok Pisin is not straight” (TP: *Tok Pisin bilong ol i no stret*).

as complementary to other forms of natural resource use. Being deliberately constructive, the conservationists emphasized the need to work together on these projects and plan them well. They also noted that they, as a clan, had sacrificed their “heart” (land) by conserving it and that this sacrifice was not for them only, but for everybody (see [Chapter 8](#)). They said that because oil palm had “eaten” all the land around them, the conservation area would serve future generations, enabling them to experience “the work of God” (i.e., “untouched” nature). One conservationist went further:

And not only the hand [work] of God! Many of the things we use, according to which we define ourselves as Mengen and Sulka, they are in the forest. ... If you grow up, if your community grows up on cocoa, inside a cocoa environment, then you talk cocoa, your language is cocoa, your children will talk cocoa. That's how you will be! (Man, 40–50 years, 18 Feb 2014)

This is an interesting statement. On the one hand it refers to the idea of “untouched” nature, whose criteria the conserved forest fulfills when compared to large-scale logging or areas cleared for plantations, but not in light of the dwelling practices of the inhabitants. On the other, the conservationist highlighted the cultural meanings of the forest and its role in his and his fellow villagers’ identities as Sulka and Mengen, expressing his genuine concern for their way of life, culture, and traditions. It was not only a strategic statement meant to impress outsiders, or paint “the locals” as guardians of unchanging nature. On the contrary, this statement was directed at fellow villagers in the context of a meeting in which I was the only outsider present and, as far as I can tell, someone whom the conservationists did not need to take into account or impress. Associated with this “tradition” and “way of life” was also the relative independence of the rural people who were able to cultivate their own food and control their own land. As noted in [Chapter 6](#), villagers often described life in the village as “free” and the ability to control one’s own time and labor is an integral part of this freedom. The local conservationists were



concerned that the uncritical and unrestricted expansion of logging and plantations could threaten this.

This does not mean that conservationists rejected out of hand any use of natural resources or “development,” defined as increased income, services, and standards of living. On the contrary, and somewhat ironically, three years later the very same conservationist quoted above played a part in initiating the UNDP cocoa-growing project discussed earlier. As I have aimed to show, the cocoa project was fully in line with conservationists’ attempt to improve the situation of the rural population as rural cultivators and in challenging the frontier conditions. Having resorted to concepts such as “intellectuals” and “counter-hegemony,” I do not claim that the conservationists, as “peasant intellectuals,” were engaged in a simplistic class struggle or trying to take over the state and establish their own hegemony. However, I do think that these concepts illuminate some important facets of natural resource politics in New Britain and how they pan out among the rural population.

## Conclusions

Members of two clans—one Sulka, one Mengan—initiated community conservation in the late 1980s when logging was first proposed to southern Wide Bay Mengan villages. Even though the areas to be conserved were the lands owned by these two clans, conservation was intended as a community project. Despite initial frictions within communities, the local conservationists were supported by their fellow villagers across clan boundaries—although, at the time, many hoped that logging would grant them access to services and income. In short, the Wide Bay communities did not uniformly support or oppose logging. Initially, it was older women who were skeptical about it and voiced their opposition in meetings organized by the Sulka and Mengan from Wide Bay to discuss the possibility of logging. Their opposition was framed in reference to swidden horticulture, their concern for the important places in the forest, their broader time perspectives, and the

hope that their children would use their knowledge “on their own land”—as Martina Gomeyan noted. Their children and younger relatives, many of whom had high levels of formal education, joined the opposition provided by the older women. It was these young relatives who first conceptualized the opposition to logging as “conservation” and successfully established contacts with donors and NGOs as well as state institutions.

In this chapter I have focused on the emergence of community conservation in Wide Bay by outlining its development from opposition to logging to the deliberate organization into “conservation” and associations. Locally initiated conservation in Wide Bay resembles other cases in PNG, especially that of the Maisin (Barker 2008). In both cases, women played an important role in questioning logging from the early stages and were joined by educated younger people, and also in both cases the initiative for conservation came from the locals themselves and was aided, but not imposed, by NGOs (see Barker 2008: 174, 181, 183, 203; Aini et al. 2023: 351–352, 357). Young people active in conserving the forest have also engaged in cultural revival (Barker 2008: 211; Tammisto 2008: 71, 74, 80–83). As John Barker (2008: 175, 181, 203) notes, over the course of a decade many of the Maisin started to conceptualize the intact rainforest as wealth, a source of food and shelter—something rarely mentioned when they first rejected logging out of distrust for logging companies, having witnessed deforestation and uneven distribution of royalties. This differs from large-scale conservation initiatives, such as that in the eastern Highlands of PNG, which seem to be outside impositions offering a stark contrast with how locals perceive their relations with the environment and the kind of relations they would like to establish with outsiders (West 2006). Similarly, the Wide Bay Mengen who supported and initiated conservation had seen logging in their neighboring communities and, over time, more people came to perceive conservation as justified.

Conservation in Wide Bay was not only about opposing logging but also about finding alternatives to extraction-based development, and about empowering the rural communities. This is

not a new thing in New Britain. Various movements from the Pomio Kivung and the Mataungan Association to the local copra cooperatives have shared this aim of creating local options for economic development while enhancing self-governance and gaining more equal participation in the larger political and economic structures of the country. The Mataungan was directed against the colonial administration, whereas the Pomio Kivung continued well after independence to further the political role of the rural population in the province. Alan Rew (1999, 148) notes that the Kivung demanded of the post-independence provincial administration the same things as the Mataungan had of the colonial administration. The Mengen conservationists explicitly positioned themselves on this continuum by claiming the village cooperative society as their predecessor.

By setting up the conservation area on their clan land, and by initiating the cocoa project, the Toimtop conservationists have engaged in the “politics of space” (Kirsch 2014, 188) and territorializing tactics (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 387–388). By closing their clan land from logging and industrial agriculture, by consolidating their ownership of it, and by supporting local cash-cropping, Wide Bay conservationists have sought to end frontier conditions. The explicit politics of space are evident in the expression of the Sulka man who was a founding member of the copra cooperative. He regarded the plantation and copra shed located on the shore as “doors” of Toimtop—a landlocked community. Through these doors, or points of access, the people of Toimtop could reach copra buyers and transport their produce. The contemporary conservationists, some his children, have taken up his conceptualization of “doors” and rehabilitate the copra plantation with cocoa. More so, they have secured a shed on the Kiep plantation, mentioned in [Chapter 5](#), where a local cooperative operates. As Kiep is a transport hub, the Toimtop conservationists regard it as yet another “door” through which the community can reach cash-crop markets.

The conservationists have also engaged in the “politics of time” (Kirsch 2014, 190) by seeking to educate their fellow villagers as

to the legal obligations logging companies have toward local landowners and the implications of large-scale land leases, as well as providing people with the means to operate within the state's legal and administrative system in general. In the national elections of 2007 (see Tammisto 2008), the conservationists supported a like-minded parliamentary candidate. In short, they have attempted to further the positions of the rural cultivators *as* rural cultivators in the province and the country. Reflecting this conceptualization and the relationship involved, I have used the concept of “peasant” (see Watts 2009, 524) to describe the position of the rural cultivators of Pomio in relation to a larger political economy and ecology framework. Furthermore, I see the Wide Bay conservationists as “organic intellectuals” of the peasant class—intellectuals that have “organically” emerged from and are tied to a particular class, whose interest as a class they seek to advance (Gramsci [1929–1935] 1971, 107; Crehan 2002, 137–138).

In Gramsci's ([1929–1935] 1971) analysis, organic intellectuals arise from and are tied to a particular class and serve the perceived interests of that class. Because the local conservationists of Wide Bay were from rural, or peasant, backgrounds and because they attempted to advance the interests of their community members as rural cultivators, their characterization as peasant intellectuals is fitting. They sought to advance these interests by protecting the forests that were economically, socially, and culturally central for the rural population, and by “educating and organizing” their community members more broadly. By referring to peasants, class, and Gramsci, I do not claim that the rural people of Pomio identified themselves as peasants or that the rural population had a consciousness of class. As noted in the Introduction, I use the term peasant to highlight certain dynamics of agrarian political economy and to position my work with other studies of rural PNG (Meggit 1971; Grossman 1984; Foster 1995). The use of the term “intellectual” also draws attention to political struggles: LOC directors (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#)) and plantation supervisors (see [Chapter 5](#)) were engaged in organizational activities and were in that sense intellectuals as well. They too were mostly

from rural backgrounds and saw themselves as working for the rural population. However, LOC directors and supervisors were also products of the forestry industry and plantation companies, whose operations they sought to advance. Hence, I regard them as intellectuals who have organically emerged to represent the companies and state capitalism, and who advance the hegemony of extraction-based development.

In this chapter I have recounted the emergence of community conservation in Wide Bay and emphasized that the Wide Bay Mengen conservation association had broader aims and significance than only protecting the forest. I have focused here especially on the political commentary, organization, and education of the conservationists, and how they have engaged with the members of their communities, the companies, and the state. The conservationists also took part in cultural revival, which they combined with protecting the socially significant forests. As local activists, their work was embedded in the village communities and their moral order. In [Chapter 8](#), I focus more closely on how the conservationists negotiated the politics of local land use, the moral economy in the village, and the productive contradiction between the landowning clan and the interrelations between the clans.



## CHAPTER 8

# “We Sacrifice the Forest to Get Development”

## Struggle over Values in Conservation

Along with logging and industrial agriculture, conservation can be regarded as an aspect of the new natural resource economy in the Wide Bay area for two reasons: firstly, it emerged as a reaction to logging and as an inversion of it; secondly, it also utilized the forest as a resource to achieve similar goals—or pursue commodity values—as logging, albeit in a different way. For many inhabitants of Wide Bay, natural resources were seen as the key to acquiring the income and services they lacked. Thus, it is relevant that, for reasons discussed in this chapter, conservationists have sought to address issues of income and development by adopting the integrated conservation and development (ICAD) or conservation-as-development model. This has involved adopting new practices and perspectives in respect of the forest while outlawing the old—such as gardening. Or, in the words of a Mengen conservation activist:

We sacrifice the forest to get development.

This statement resembles comments by LOC directors who noted that in order to gain development, in the form of income, roads, and services, one has to give something in return, which usually means agreeing to logging or leasing one’s land to companies (see [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#), and [Chapter 7](#)). People in PNG often do not imagine themselves as participants in a commodity

economy but as partners in exchange (Robbins and Akin 1999; Robbins 2003; Kirsch 2006, 89; West 2006, 46), because in many Melanesian societies, exchanges are privileged sites of making, maintaining, and structuring relations (Robbins and Akin 1999, 8, 39). Thus, rather than seeking finite commodity transactions, people often hope to establish longer, socially productive relations. While commodity transactions also create social relations, they are not the long-lasting or reciprocal variety valued by people in many Melanesian societies (e.g., Halvaksz 2020, 135; Robbins 2003).<sup>57</sup> The Mengen conservation activist, using a similar expression as his relatives engaged in logging, was not talking about cutting down trees or leasing land areas, but about banning gardening in the conservation area: “sacrificing the forest” referred to the non-use of it. Given the social and economic importance of gardening (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)), banning it indeed was tantamount to sacrifice.

In [Chapter 7](#) I focused on the origin of the Wide Bay Mengen conservation association and on the explicitly political work of conservation activists in organizing and educating people, presenting alternatives to development understood as natural resource extraction, and questioning neoliberal governance. In this chapter I focus on conservation as development and the role played by conservation in the commodification of the Mengen lived environment. Logging helped the Mengen to imagine the trees and their forests as resources evenly spread across their landscape (see also Bridge 2011, 820). Even before the trees were physically felled, logging had already conceptually turned the forest into a source of potential commodities, things that are commensurate with other things on the market (Marx [1867] 1976, 132, 140; [1884] 1978, 121; Gregory 1982, 12, 19). This revaluation had

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57 This obviously is not meant to imply that people in Melanesia are not familiar with commodity relations (see Gregory 1982; Robbins 2003). As I have shown in the previous chapters, the inhabitants of Wide Bay have long been involved in them and have elaborated notions of their social consequences.



important consequences, as trees turned into commodities could be sold for money, and—perhaps more crucially—in the imagination of many Mengen, their exchange could establish relations with actors such as logging companies, which would enable access services and infrastructure. This had ramifications for those Mengen who wanted to conserve their forests. As other clans began receiving royalties from logging and logging brought tangible benefits—such as roads, portable sawmills, and cash crops (see [Chapter 3](#))—there was increasing pressure to justify conservation. This prompted the conservationists to attempt to commodify conservation.

On the surface, Wide Bay Mengen conservation has shifted from opposition to logging to conservation as development. Dominant actors, such as transnational conservation organizations, have employed the latter model in order to exchange the conservation of local environments for development in the eyes of the locals (Kirsch 1997, 105; West 2006, 32–35; Wagner 2007, 32; Halvaksz 2020, 102, 110–112; Mõlkänen 2021, 195, 202). In this model, as Paige West (2006, 34) notes, providing development becomes not an end in itself, but something to be exchanged for conservation. Conversely, conservation also ceases to be observed on its own account and becomes something to be provided in an exchange situation (West 2006, 39; Kelly 2011, 684; Büscher and Dressler 2012, 367). Peluso and Lund (2011, 671) call this an “almost universal” turn from protection for the sake of it to commodification, as the establishment of conserved areas creates new frontiers of value. As the local conservationists very well knew, the conserved area was not only forest preserved for traditional subsistence use, but also a *potential* commodity and a source of income in the form of eco-tourism and possible carbon trade—and later cash crops.

This resembles the tendencies of neoliberal conservation which, according to Alice Kelly (2011, 684), turns protected areas into capital “in the form of environmental services, spectacles, and genetic storehouses.” Moreover, the acts of enclosure, dispossession, and dissolution of commons that often produce protected

areas, can make them look like examples of “primitive accumulation” (Marx [1867] 1976, 875), or “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003, 145; West 2016, 12–18)—that is, the separation of producer from the means of production (Kelly 2011, 683, 685). As Michael Levien (2012, 940, 964) notes, “accumulation by dispossession” is best defined as extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production, subsistence, or commons for capital accumulation.

In this chapter I examine Wide Bay Mengen conservation in relation to questions of commodification, territorialization, and the enclosure of commons. I start by discussing how the conservation area was territorialized and how the conserving clan strengthened its relations with the area. The conservationists have used territorial strategies to protect their forests. This has involved both communicating and defining the borders of the conservation area, and also banning certain practices within it. Hence, I ask whether conservation in the Wide Bay case amounts to primitive accumulation.

### Conservation, Enclosure, and Territorialization

As noted in the Introduction and throughout this book, natural resources do not simply exist—rather, they have to be made. This means that the process by which existing things—trees, forests, water, and so on—come to be regarded as *resources* is inherently social, cultural, economic, and political (Marx [1867] 1976, 153–154; [1884] 1978, 121, 240, 303; Bridge 2011, 820; McCarthy 2013, 184; Moore 2015, 145; Teaiwa 2015, 9, 18). When logging companies arrived in Wide Bay in the 1990s, natural resources were created in the course of the revaluation of local forests as sources of commodities by foreign companies, the state of PNG, and the inhabitants of Wide Bay (see [Chapter 3](#)). The process created new actors such as local LOCs ([Chapter 4](#)) and conservation associations ([Chapter 7](#)), as well as modifying existing ones such as matrilineages. It also generated new interest in the control of land and produced new forms of territorialization ([Chapter 2](#), [Chapter 3](#),

and [Chapter 5](#)). Logging involved a complex set of territorializing and de-territorializing practices, concessions established new abstract territories and prescribed specific activities for them (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 388) and Wide Bay Mungen were encouraged to join existing LOCs which thus became new territorial units. As shown in [Chapter 3](#), however, even the Wide Bay Mungen men who embraced logging resisted parts of the de-territorializing logic—especially incorporation into entities they perceived to be too large.

As resource-making is fundamentally also about territorialization (Bridge 2011, 825), it is no wonder that conservationists have used explicitly territorializing strategies to protect their forests from logging. In the early 1990s the Mungen conservationists conducted a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) with the help of a Kokopo-based national NGO. The PRA is a tool used by conservation and development workers to gather relevant information—especially regarding land and resource use—in rural communities by involving the inhabitants themselves in the data collection. In the Wide Bay case this included community mapping with the goal of locally delineating the conservation area and its borders. In practice this was conducted in the village closest to the conservation area with the participation of its inhabitants as well as people from five other villages. During the sessions the villagers drew a map of the area on the ground using sticks, stones, and other markers to indicate rivers, villages, and topographical features. After establishing the features of the area, the participants discussed the borders of the intended conservation area and its relation to land areas claimed by other clans. When the map was completed and participants had agreed to it, it was documented. According to NGO documents and the facilitators, the PRA was a success as the land boundaries were agreed upon by participants and, most crucially, the clans claiming neighboring areas.

The PRA became important later on when logging conducted in the southern Wide Bay Mungen areas expanded north to the borders of the conservation area. As described in [Chapter 7](#), a dispute emerged when proponents of logging claimed ownership of

parts of the conserved area, which was eventually settled in court in favor of the conservationists because they were able to provide more evidence, including the results of the PRA, for their customary ownership of the area. Meanwhile, the opposing clan was unable to explain why it had initially agreed to the borders established in the PRA but then later disputed them.

Mapping is a powerful tool of territorialization. A map does not only represent a given area in an abstract way, thereby making it legible to an outsider (Scott 1998, 45); maps are also central in the *making* of territories (Neocleous 2003, 418). For example, colonial powers often mapped, renamed, and claimed faraway places on maps *before* actually setting foot there and erasing local names, claims, and knowledge (Neocleous 2003, 418; Stella 2007, 82). The power of the modern map lies in the seeming authorlessness of it; in other words, we are encouraged to forget that someone has produced the picture represented by the map by abstracting, selecting, and manipulating (Neocleous 2003, 421; also Stella 2007, 82; Chao 2022, 55). In short, maps help to naturalize the politics of territorialization.

Maps and mapping of experienced space can also “freeze” fluid social situations—like still pictures of a flowing river, to borrow from James Scott (1998, 46). Fixing indigenous land boundaries to global standards—with GPS technology, for example—may dissolve local flexible practices of reorganizing land relations according to demographic shifts or local dynamics (Kirsch 2006, 203; Chao 2022, 53). (Compare this to the “entification” of fluid social groups, as discussed in Ernst 1999, Golub 2007b, and also [Chapter 4](#).) However, the Wide Bay conservationists sought exactly to “fix” the land they regarded as theirs under frontier conditions when territories are “elastic” (Weizman 2007, 4, 7–8) and tenure rights insecure (Hall 2011, 839). Like the Kairak—who allowed oil palm on their land to “fix” it as theirs (Yaneva-Toraman 2020, 192, 194), as discussed in [Chapter 5](#)—the conservationists sought to end the frontier conditions by making their presence known through maps and formalizing the conservation area, as described in [Chapter 7](#).

Early on, in addition to communicating the borders locally and in the PRA, the conservationists mapped the borders of their area using a GPS device. While the result is a conventional cartographic representation of the area of about 2000 ha, the mapping process and the coordinates of points marking the border (collected using GPS) follow a conventional Mengen way of describing an area. The description of the area is an itinerary which tells how the border follows specific topographic features—rivers, creeks and ridges, named places, and the like—along the way. Some of the named places are abandoned villages (M: *kнау*) and other places of significance, some of them connected to mythical events; others, with names such as “Trespass road,” refer to recent events like the logging operations of the turn of the 21st century, when the logging company operating south of the conservation area cleared a logging road about 1 km into the conservation area, thus trespassing the area boundary. The border description is then a topogeny—that is, an ordered sequence of places (Fox 1997a, 8), discussed in [Chapter 2](#). The places mentioned in the border description are also not simply geographic points of reference: some of them—like the abandoned villages and marks of previous logging operations—are indexes of people’s historical relations to the land.

The maps of the conservation area helped the conservationists to communicate the borders of the area to relevant audiences—another crucial feature of territorialization (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 388). For example, during the 2014 logging operation discussed in [Chapter 4](#), conservationists gave their management plan, which included an area map, to the logging company in order to make sure that no logging would take place within the conservation area. When the conservation area was finally formalized in 2020, the borders were communicated publicly in the *National Gazette* (Kama 2020), not as a map (although coordinates were listed) but as an itinerary describing the borders.

As noted, maps help to make local situations legible to outsiders, and the Wide Bay conservationists used this strategically: the maps of the land tenure situation helped to convince the land

court, which enforced their claims to the land. This is an important point, since the constitution of property is not only about the rights that people acquire, but who enforces them (Lund 2011, 888). In the Wide Bay case, the land rights of the conservationists were not only recognized by most of their community members but, in the case of the dispute, also by a state institution. Conversely, as the court decision was widely accepted, people also recognized the authority of the state to grant these rights (Lund 2011, 888).

This recognition had important effects on landholding. The conservationists in Wide Bay decided to conserve the land owned by their clan group, and the land dispute and ensuing court case shifted authority over that land to the conservationists within the clan. In the decision to conserve the forest, and the gaining of authority within the clan, they were supported by clan elders, who passed the clan histories over to them (see [Chapter 7](#)). Furthermore, the court decision, as the backing of the state, added new authority to the land claims of the conservationist clan and to the authority of the young conservationists within that clan. For example, when members of the clan who had disputed the conservationists cleared gardens in the conservation area (on fallows to which they had claims), the conservationists brought the matter to the village court, which backed the prohibition of gardening in the area. This is an example of how customary land tenure practices in contemporary PNG have to, and are mostly able to, incorporate and accommodate external agencies and processes: the pressures of logging, the rulings of land courts, and participation in ICAD projects (Wagner 2007, 29, 31). These situations are also often points of innovation in land tenure, as John Wagner (2007, 31) observes.

The establishment of a conservation *area* is of course by definition a territorializing action, an attempt by individuals or groups to influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 387–388). Control by territorialization excludes or includes people on the basis of particular geographic

boundaries and dictates what people do and how they access resources within them. In the case of conservation, this usually involves the prohibition of certain activities such as cutting down trees or hunting. Among the Wide Bay Mengen, too, clear rules about activities within the conservation area were introduced. Logging, gardening, and the collection of certain plants were banned, although the hunting of wild pigs was allowed. The prohibition of gardening, the main livelihood activity and a valued form of work, raises the question of enclosures and primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession; conservation practices open up new frontiers of value because protected areas themselves may become forms of capital (Kelly 2011, 689; Peluso and Lund 2011, 668, 671). Conservation in Wide Bay has also become commodified in the sense that conservationists have sought and have been able to generate income through it. In the following, I analyze how commodification has played out in Wide Bay and the reasons behind it.

### **Commodifying Conservation**

In the early 2000s Wide Bay conservation began moving toward the “conservation-as-development” model. In 2000, conservation committees were formed in Wide Bay villages; later, in 2002 when the dispute had moved to the land court, the conservationists in Toimtop instituted an organization which was named the “Toimtop Bio-Cultural Conservation and Development Association” (Ewai 2007, 14; Vomne and Rewcastle 2011, 14). As has been the case with LOCs, young educated men—the intellectuals described in [Chapter 7](#)—have risen to positions of leadership within their clan and within the conservation association. With the formation of the new association, local conservationists began to mobilize other villagers to support conservation; they also sought to forge contacts with national and international partners and donors. The incorporation of the association also marks a shift from the initial idea of conserving the forest for the sake of swidden horticulture and traditional use to regarding conservation as a possible source

of income and economic development. In an unpublished and NGO-facilitated draft management plan, the Wide Bay conservationists stated:

Whilst the original action for conservation was an impulsive action responsive to consequences arising from logging, the acute realisation of traditional resource lose [*sic*], the emerging scientific and economic value of the biodiversity became overriding reasons for conservation.

This shift happened gradually over the 20-year history of conservation in Wide Bay. In the late 1990s and early 2000s the Wide Bay conservationists arranged several surveys, workshops, and community mappings in tandem with national and international NGOs. In 2003, when the land dispute was resolved in favor of the conservationists, the association began working on a village resource center and cooperating with partners (Vomne and Rewcastle 2011, 14). The resource center was funded by the World Bank and was intended to be the basis of a project for recording and archiving local knowledge, especially folklore in the form of stories, myths, and songs. The center itself was a community house built by the villagers from locally sawn timber and modern building materials bought with the World Bank grant. It was completed in 2007 and has since served as a community meeting place. It also has guest rooms for housing visitors—anticipating the possibility of eco-tourism.

In the early 2010s the Toimtop association entered into partnership with a New Zealand volunteer program (Volunteer Service Abroad, VSA) and received a volunteer to help with eco-tourism and devising the management plan. During my fieldwork in 2011–12, Toimtop welcomed its first two tourists, who stayed for a couple of days in the village and visited the conservation area. Even though no tourists had been there before (or since, at the time of writing), the people of Toimtop were familiar with the idea, as the conservation area had brought several visitors over the years, including the scientists surveying the forest, NGO workers, and then myself in 2007, all of whom had stayed in the guest house



and paid for their keep. To help with the tourism project, VSA also donated a boat and an outboard motor to the association.

In 2011 Toimtop was selected as the site for a base station tower by PNG Telikom, which was expanding its cellphone coverage to rural areas. Several towers were set up in Pomio District and the sites were chosen not only on the basis of the technical demands of the network but also with reference to “reliable partners” who would look after the towers. Toimtop village was chosen because the conservation association was regarded as having mobilized the community to handle such projects well and it already had the necessary infrastructure in place, such as a satellite phone. For the conservationists, this obviously represented important recognition by the state. The mobile tower and the satellite phone prior to it, as well as the resource center, were also tangible—and useful—services which had come to the area as a consequence of the conservation project, which also occasionally brought in small sums of money when villagers helped visitors to the conservation area (see also Wagner 2007, 32 and Barker 2008, 195 for similar projects in PNG). And as discussed in [Chapter 7](#), in 2018 the conservationists started a cocoa project in the community with financial aid from the UNDP.

Community conservation in Wide Bay has not remained static; rather, it has changed over the years, most significantly in terms of the above-described shift from conservation for the sake of swidden horticulture, traditional use, and protection of significant places, to conservation as development. The then chairman of the conservation association told me:

One of the founding ideas was to conserve nature and culture, but we changed it into the direction of commercializing this idea. To include business into this idea. (Man, 42 years, 10 Jul 2011)

In their review of the relationship between conservation and capitalism, Dan Brockington, Rosaleen Duffy, and Jim Igoe (2008, 10, 18) argue that from the start of modern conservation, usually associated with the national parks of the US, conservation and capitalism have been allied. In the period 1985–1995 the number

of protected areas rose greatly and, according to the authors, this was when neoliberal governance was at its strongest (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008, 1). Conservation and capitalism became increasingly compatible as neoliberalism, defined by the authors simply as faster and more excessive liberal capitalism, sought to resolve its problems with its own, market-based, means (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008, 175, 190; see also Castree 2008). Other critical studies claim that (market-based) conservation is not only a result of dominant neoliberal ideologies and practices but also a key driver of them (Büscher and Dressler 2012, 369; Halvaksz 2020, 16).

Conservation can bring, and has brought, things previously outside the sphere of markets into them, transforming them into commodities (West 2006, 183–184; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008, 175; Kelly 2011, 686; Halvaksz 2020, 102, 112). Büscher and Dressler (2012, 367, 374) use the term “commodity conservation” for conservation based on assumptions that the commodification of natural resources and the social relations governing them produces win–win outcomes and optimally allocated resources. This concept can also be taken in a very literal sense, because the fictitious notion that land and labor comprise commodities needs constant upholding and legitimation (Büscher and Dressler 2012, 374). This critical literature also demonstrates that local populations are often on the losing side of the deal, excluded from previously lived areas and exploited in various ways (e.g., Halvaksz 2020, 107; Mølkänen 2021, 236). Paige West (2006, 185) discusses how commodified conservation can disengage people and their social institutions from their environment in ways that are, paradoxically, detrimental to the environment. Likewise, the commodification of relationships between people and their work can lead to the loss of social meanings (West 2006, 201, 211; Halvaksz 2020, 112–113, 120).

How do these notions apply to the case of Wide Bay? How should we interpret the commodification of conservation there and the increasing focus on economic development? Conservation, as noted, emerged as a reaction to proposed logging and it

was these logging proposals by local men and foreign loggers that revalued the forests as potential sources of commodities which could be traded for income and services. In fact, in many rural areas of PNG a key motivation for remote rural communities to enter into deals with extractive industries has been the lack or poor condition of government services (Kirsch 1997, 109; Leedom 1997, 44; Filer 1998, 278; Lattas 2011, 90; see also [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 4](#), and [Chapter 5](#)). This is not only the case in PNG but, as noted by anthropologist Heikki Wilenius (personal communication, 2014), is also a common dynamic in other marginal, or marginalized, frontier areas which lack government services but contain in-demand natural resources—such as Borneo.

As other villages and clans began receiving royalties and services from logging, the conservationists were increasingly under pressure to justify the non-use of the forest. In the larger framework of things, this “commodification from below” has been identified as a common dynamic when conservation and other forms of governance become increasingly market-based (Büscher and Dressler 2012, 375). Büscher and Dressler (2012, 375) note two interrelated dynamics connected to this: on the one hand, there are outsiders exerting pressure on local communities to commodify their resources, and, on the other, communities are doing it themselves so as not to be excluded from the broader market and socio-political dynamics. Of course, this does not apply to conservationists alone: logging and, more recently, industrial agriculture are seen by many inhabitants of Wide Bay as ways to integrate themselves into the political and economic circuits from which they feel marginalized.

Local proponents of logging and oil palm made this explicit by noting, for example, that development does not come for free: that in order to get, one has to give. These statements are in stark contrast to descriptions of locals in PNG passively waiting for development; rather, local communities are often active in building reciprocal relationships with outside actors (Robbins 2003; West 2006; C. Benson 2012, 71; Halvaksz 2020, 135). Further, the rationale for this is frequently not only the pursuit of commodity

values, in the sense of simple, stand-alone transactions (Martin 2013, 4) such as exchanging resources for infrastructure, but is related to the importance of exchange in making, reproducing, and structuring social relations in Melanesia (Robbins and Akin 1999).

Sharing and recognition are important practices in Mengen ideology, and regarded as key values—in fact, Sulka and Mengen conservation associations have, somewhat schematically, listed the most important “traditional values,” which include sharing and recognition. The recognition of others, *luksave* in Tok Pisin and *glang lomtan* in Mengen, is centrally important in people’s discussions and evaluations of the moral aspects of each other’s actions. Generous helping and giving to someone seen to be in need is a central feature of recognition and what people said was the “way of the ancestors” (TP: *kastom*; M: *mloai* [habit, custom] *ta ngan* [of the] *ravulung* [elders]; see [Chapter 1](#) on “work” as socially productive activity).

### **Sharing the Land or Exchanging Benefits? The Politics of Commodification**

In Mengen land-use practices, people with legitimate claims to the land or particular gardening areas can “close” them to clearance. This usually applies to single gardens and arises when multiple people have access to them. For example, a member of a landowning clan wishing to plant a larger garden in anticipation of a ritual may prohibit affines from clearing an area to which they have user rights. These actions usually create only minor disputes, if at all, and are easily resolved in village meetings. However, the categorical enclosure of a whole area is something different. The prohibition of gardening in the conservation area was not only a question of livelihood but also had important emotional and social aspects to it. What made the issue even more sensitive was the fact that gardening rights are passed along on the basis of multiple relations, whereas landownership is vested, ideally, in matrilineal corporate groups (see also Eves 2011, 359; Scott 2007, 61). Thus, as

discussed in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#), many people cultivate land that belongs to a different clan group in an expression of generalized reciprocity. As the members of the conservationist clan had their gardens on other clans’ land, but had taken their own land out of the circuit of swidden horticulture, there was a chance this might raise problems. Indeed, a committee member of the conservation association took this issue up in a meeting: he noted that, especially for older people, gardens are a big deal (TP: *bikpela samting*) and, as the conservationists “eat from the land of others,” the ban on gardening should be properly explained to prevent problems from arising.

In fact, the conservationists were well aware of the potential sensitivity of banning people from cultivating land to which they had long-standing user rights and to which they felt attached on the basis of the work done by them and their ancestors. In 2011 I asked the then chairman of the conservation association about this. He noted that the ban on gardening also applied to the members of his own clan, so it was not simply a matter of excluding others from the land, and insisted that:

The benefits they previously received from going in [to the forest] and working gardens will be replaced. They have no more rights to garden now. In the interest of conservation, we moved them out, but our idea is that if we commercialize [conservation], any benefit that comes from the conservation area will benefit the whole community. So in a way, we didn’t just block them out and pull [our area] out, but we changed [the user rights]. (Man, 42 years, 10 Jul 2011)

According to him, the benefits received from conservation would be, and were, enjoyed by the whole community, and not only by the conserving clan. Thus, in his view, the conservationists had not denied the user rights of others, but merely *replaced* them with other benefits. This is an interesting notion. If Wide Bay Mengen land use is seen as reciprocal exchange, or exchange that strives for a balanced outcome, then the legitimation and acceptance of conservation depends partly on whether people

accept “benefits and services” as a substitute for land in land-to-land exchanges between landholding groups.

Here, Joel Robbins and David Akin’s (1999) discussion of exchanges and their role in structuring societies in Melanesia is instructive. In Melanesian societies, exchanges are often privileged sites in structuring society, inasmuch as different kinds of exchanges are used to make and reproduce different kinds of relations (Robbins and Akin 1999, 8, 39). Robbins and Akin use the concept of “spheres of exchange” to make sense of the different kinds of structuring exchanges. In their model, a sphere of exchange is defined by three things: the relationship between the transactors, the modality or type of exchange, and the objects exchanged (Robbins and Akin 1999, 10). In this model, one of the three aspects may “override” the others in defining the sphere, and hence the morality, of the exchange. Objects and relations can be defining, but, according to Robbins and Akin (1999, 13–14), Melanesians very often stress the modality of exchange in creating different kinds of relationships, and the modalities of exchange structure society. Or, to put it simply, *how* the exchange is done often matters more than what is being exchanged. For example, if kinship relations have previously been defined by the sharing (modality) of food (object), sharing money and store-bought commodities might not disrupt the relationship as the modality of sharing remains constant even though the objects change. Conversely, if relatives start selling food to each other, they risk their relationship as relatives (Robbins and Akin 1999, 13–14).

Thus, the substitution of land for benefits in reciprocal exchanges between clan groups can be acceptable if people stress the modality of exchange more than the objects exchanged—or, more conventionally, accept that benefits and services from conservation can be exchanged for user rights to land in exchanges that define the relations between clan groups. By and large this has been the case, as people for the most part acknowledged that not logging the forest has its advantages and that conservation also brings tangible benefits—albeit more slowly than logging and not so much in the form of cash income. This does not mean that

conservation was uniformly accepted; some members of the clan which had lost the land dispute against the conservationist clan still regarded the issue as unresolved, or claimed to have been “left out” by their cross-cousins. Due to this, they refused to participate in the cocoa project discussed in [Chapter 7](#).

Other inhabitants of the village noted that maybe gardening could be allowed on the slopes close to the village, while not disagreeing with conservation or the outcome of the land dispute. The ban on collecting roof thatch materials was periodically broken—by members of the conserving clan against the wishes of their clan leaders as well as by others—in a spirit of silent defiance. Both the ban and breaking it were occasionally frowned upon, but in general it seemed to me that people agreed that it was good to let the plants used for thatch regrow. Nor did the local conservationists take any significant action against those breaching this ban.

In the case of community conservation in Wide Bay, the shift toward the commodification of conservation was not an imposition from outside actors, such as donors or NGOs, but rather a consequence of landholding dynamics and the commodification of the forest by logging. Many studies of conservation in PNG have noted that in order to be successful, conservation has to bring tangible benefits to the local people, who often live in remote and poor areas (Kirsch 1997, 108–109; Wagner 2007, 34; Helden 2009, 156–158; C. Benson 2012, 76). John Wagner (2007) notes that people living near a conservation project on the eastern coast of mainland New Guinea obviously care about the environment but, as local use of the environment is not very intensive, conservation of large areas is not justified from the local perspective. In such a case, for a globally justified conservation project to be successful, currently unavailable services and income must be provided (J. Wagner 2007, 34). As I hope to have shown, a further important factor in the Wide Bay case is that because conservationists had taken their area out of the exchanges of gardening land between the clans, they felt they had to provide something else in return in order not to disrupt the moral economy and relations between the clan groups.

For such a replacement to be successful, others have to recognize and accept it, something often demonstrated in subtle ways rather than through explicit negotiations and arguments. In fact, for reasons of respect, the Mengen were unwilling to criticize each other openly because being criticized in public was seen as embarrassing; generally, people did not want to subject others to that, often observing that it was “hard” for them to say something to someone’s face. Indeed, the public critique of one of the conservationists, discussed in [Chapter 7](#), prompted his mother to compose a song of lament for him. Obviously, arguments and public discussions did take place, but attention should also be paid to people’s seemingly everyday and mundane comments, which were often not only propositional or simple descriptive statements about how people perceived things or their analyses thereof, but also implicitly value-laden. They were thus performative, inasmuch as through them people sought to assert, reject, strengthen, or renegotiate the framework by which actions were valued (Graeber 2001, 75, 88; Martin 2013, 181, 213).

In the following I present an example of such a statement, demonstrating that, far from being simply descriptive, it was intensely value-laden. I also discuss how it connects with the political debates in the village.

### *“Kastom Is Not About Giving for Free”*

Once, when returning home after a day spent in the gardens in 2012, I stopped to chat with one of the local conservationists in front of his house. We talked about the ban on gardening and he said that he was irritated by other villagers’ notions that in villages things are given for free. Indeed, it was common for people to contrast life in the village with that in towns and on plantations by emphasizing that in the village one is not only free to work at one’s own pace, but that things are also free (see [Chapter 6](#)). Growing visibly agitated, my interlocutor asserted that these people had misunderstood the customs and tradition (respectively, *pasin* and *kastom* in Tok Pisin), which are not about giving for



free, but about exchange. For example, offering food to any man who comes to one's house is not about giving free food, because, according to my interlocutor, “when I give you food in my village, I know you will give me the same in yours.”

His comments and agitation initially surprised me and made me wonder what he was making such a big deal about. After all, is not “giving for free” much the same thing as giving based on the trust that others will treat you in the same way in the future? And why did other people's comments to the effect that “giving for free” was characteristic of village life irritate him so much? Clearly, something important was at stake, but I could not figure out what it was. Only later did it occur to me that probably what was at issue was the role of the conservation area once gardening had been prohibited, and the substitution of land and user rights with benefits from conservation. And in fact, giving for free, or sharing, may not at all be the same thing as generalized reciprocity, as Thomas Widlok has argued. Widlok (2013, 19) claims that sharing is not generalized reciprocity, or a neutral baseline from which other forms of transfer have evolved, but a complex social arrangement in its own right. Sharing can be characterized as giving without expectation of return and as something often initiated by the receiver through conversation (e.g., through statements of not having) or even by mere copresence, which obliges others to give what they have (Widlok 2013, 12, 19). Sharing, then, does not presuppose the willingness to give—in fact, people may hide possessions in order not to share them—but a willingness to give up a possession in order to remain on good terms with others and fulfill one's social obligation (Widlok 2013, 21, 23).

Day-to-day village life in Wide Bay is indeed characterized by sharing as defined above. There is a strong feeling that one must share those things one can be seen to possess, and the mere presence or arrival of a person often creates the obligation to share what one has at that moment, especially food, betel nut, and the like. Visibility is a key thing: if others see something that one has, it would be incredibly rude not to offer it to them. Conversely, a woman whom I was observing preparing food for a ceremony in

her cooking house quickly hid her taro shoots when she heard visitors coming. She said that if the visitors saw them, they would demand them and she would rather plant them herself later on. Dan Jorgensen (1981, 190) notes aptly how among the Telefolmin the hiding of possessions in order not to share and the subversion of public values is a finely performed art. The ubiquitous baskets people carry in Wide Bay are used not only to store personal items, but also to protect them from the “demanding gaze” of others. And often, when people are asked for tobacco or betel nut and have none, they open their baskets and let others verify the lack for themselves—lest they be thought lying and greedy. Referring to these kinds of situations, Robert Foster (1995, 210) notes that in instances where seeing elicits desire and the obligation to give, controlling who sees what constitutes control over property: hiding a desirable object from view saves it from the demands of others, while, on the other hand, by putting it on display, one elicits the desire of others—which is also a form of power. The dynamics of power enacted by concealing and revealing are also at play in land issues, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 4](#).

In the short term, no return was expected for things shared in this way, but obviously if one did not share, one soon acquired the reputation of being stingy and greedy—and, indeed, an immoral person. But how does this relate to whether sharing is a misinterpretation of *kastom* or indeed its central characteristic? Keir Martin (2013, 7, 60, 101) has discussed how notions of tradition, or *kastom*, and statements of its proper meaning, are used by the Tolai of New Britain—for whom *kastom* is a shifting signifier whose meanings are contested—in debates about the extent of reciprocity and obligation. For example, urban Tolai with wages sometimes attempt to delimit the meaning of *kastom* to rituals, rather than to a more general practice of sharing, in order to delimit the claims from their rural kin to share their wealth. Conversely, grassroots villagers might note that the *kastom* of wealthy relatives—even when complying with the formal rules of the rituals—is not real *kastom*, as it is not embedded in reciprocal networks at the grassroots level and does not exemplify the reciprocal spirit (Martin

2013, 126). By emphasizing that *kastom* was not sharing—that is, giving for its own sake without expectation of return—but reciprocal exchange, the Wide Bay conservationist was drawing attention to the fact that they still participated in reciprocal exchanges, even though they did not share their land.

There are good reasons for seeing everyday land use among the Wide Bay Mengen as the product of sharing. People gardened quite freely in areas where they had some sort of claim, and also cleared new gardens in primary forest which, as already noted, constituted a strong right of use to the particular tract, regardless of which clan owned it (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) on land use). Put this way, land use resembled demand-sharing. Thus, withholding one’s clan land from the—even if only implicit—sharing expectations of others would be immoral. However, from another perspective it makes just as much sense to argue that the use of land among the Wide Bay Mengen was generalized reciprocity, or exchange. After all, everybody cultivated land belonging to others, which amounted to identical exchange between the clans. In my opinion, however, it is beside the point to go to great lengths to establish whether land use among the Mengen was unequivocally demand-sharing or generalized reciprocity. Both points of view make sense depending on perspective and the aspects one wants to highlight. And indeed, what one wants to highlight is really the crux of the matter.

Arguing, like the man quoted above, that life in the village was exchange rather than sharing, was, in my interpretation, a statement intended to justify the conservation area. *If* land use was seen as sharing, then by enclosing their clan land, the conservationists stopped sharing it. The land was merely there, visible to others, like food on the table one does not offer to those who pop into one’s house and see it. If land use was perceived as sharing, then the conservationists would have broken a central moral rule. The conservationist was obviously aware of this possible interpretation, which his comment was meant to counter by embedding conservation in the moral economy. Because if the transfer of land, food, and so on was viewed as exchange—no matter how

diffuse and how uncertain the return—the conservationists had a much stronger case when arguing that they adhered to the moral order despite enclosing the land, because they had replaced the object of exchange—in this case land—with benefits. Seen in this context, the statement by the conservationist makes perfect sense and one can rather clearly see what the “big deal” was.

These are large issues acted out with small gestures and brief comments. Often these were said in a seemingly offhand way, as simple asides, or stated in even more subtle ways, such as by raising one’s eyebrows in a knowing fashion when saying that a neighbor had decided to sell the meat of her dead pig rather than give it to a village member who had customary obligations to contribute elsewhere—or by commenting that in the village everything was free. Looking back at my fieldwork, I remember a number of instances in which such statements were made, which I often overlooked or did not record. Eventually, however, I reached a saturation point, after which I began to realize that these were not only random comments, but part of a discourse which, some time later, I finally began to understand.

The small, apparently throwaway, yet meaningful statements discussed here provide evidence that the moral order was constantly being recreated and contested just as the morality of people’s actions was constantly being evaluated and revalued. This took place both in explicit debates (see [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 7](#)), and also through everyday comments which were performative inasmuch as they built and reshaped the moral framework in and according to which people’s actions were evaluated. And this in turn makes small statements—multiplied again and again—part of large issues since, as David Graeber (2001, 85), following Terence Turner, has noted, the biggest political struggles are not only about appropriating value but about *defining* it.

The Mengen scenario, in this regard, strongly resembles the debates on the extent of *kastom* and renegotiations of moral obligations among the Tolai described by Keir Martin (2013, 7, 177), and not only in content, with *kastom* being used as a “shifting signifier.” The debates in both groups rested on seemingly

descriptive statements which were used to assert or destabilize certain notions, a process which always involves language and language ideologies (Martin 2013, 89). The central issues, as Martin (2013, 181, 223) puts it, are the contexts in which people assert or reject certain characterizations of economic transactions and that these debates are often struggles over the applicability of different moral visions. Indeed, in the Wide Bay case, acceptance of conservation rested partly on how people characterized land use and the benefits received from conservation. The fine nuances of whether an action was evaluated as exchange or sharing are important. These negotiations, conducted in the Mengen villages with seemingly ordinary statements and fleeting gestures, were at the very root of village politics which, in their turn, profoundly affected the outcomes of natural resource projects in the Wide Bay area, just as natural resource projects like logging, initiated by “outsiders,” informed and affected the politics in the village.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have described how, and why, the Wide Bay conservationists moved to a “conservation-as-development” model. Since the early 2000s, the model has been pervasive in conservation projects in PNG and elsewhere (see Kirsch 1997; West 2006; Wagner 2007; C. Benson 2012; Büscher and Dressler 2012; Halvaksz 2020; Mölkänen 2021); indeed, so pervasive that Nancy Peluso and Christian Lund (2011, 671) call it the “nearly universal turn” in conservation practices. Conservation practices have been linked, as Alice Kelly (2011) has shown, to the enclosure of common lands, the dispossession of local populations, and the introduction of private accumulation, as conservation creates “new frontiers of commodification” (Kelly and Peluso 2014). Hence, I began this chapter by asking if conservation in Wide Bay amounts to “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003, 145)—that is, the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production and subsistence or common property for capital accumulation (Levien 2012, 940; also Marx [1867] 1976, 875).

In this chapter I have discussed how the Wide Bay Mengen conservationists territorialized conservation by declaring their clan land as a conservation area through mapping and formalization of the area as a legally recognized conservation area. The enactment of the conservation area did not only involve banning logging, and later industrial agriculture, within its borders, but also local swidden horticulture. The Wide Bay forests had been revalued as potential sources of commodities with the arrival of logging. This does not mean this valuation replaced all other ways of conceptualizing and using the forests, but it meant that people could sell logging rights, and exchange trees for money, infrastructure, and things like cash crops.

As I hope to have shown in this chapter, this possibility encouraged Wide Bay conservationists to justify conservation by showing that conservation also brings benefits akin to other forms of resource use. In addition, the Wide Bay conservationists were very well aware that, as “untouched nature,” the conserved forest is a potential commodity as well, for instance in the form of eco-tourism or carbon trade (Kelly 2011). For these reasons, the Wide Bay conservationists banned gardening on the area. This in turn added one more justification for conservation: the conservationists have been especially successful in securing grants, which over the years have brought the community things like a community house, a satellite phone, and a boat. And, as described in [Chapter 7](#), support for the planting of pest-resistant cocoa on the community’s copra plantation. The cocoa project was part of the support received for the formal gazettal of the conservation area in 2020—an important milestone in the 20-year history of local conservation in Wide Bay.

Over the course of time, the Wide Bay conservationists have had to negotiate with their relatives, community members, and people from neighboring villages the justification of conservation, both morally and economically. In [Chapter 7](#) I examined the politics of conservation in terms of community organizing and cash-crop production, while in this chapter I have focused on how the politics of land use, inter-clan relations, and moral behavior

are enacted through speech and discourses by which people seek to assert different kinds of values (Martin 2013). To this end, I focused especially on the question of whether *kastom* is understood as sharing or exchange, and that behind a seemingly trivial distinction larger questions of value are negotiated.

As for “accumulation by dispossession,” I argue that conservation in Wide Bay has not created capital by the expropriation of means of production and commons. The ca. 2000 ha conservation area is a significant land area, but most of it is located in the rugged inland places currently not inhabited by Wide Bay Mengen nor used for cultivation.<sup>58</sup> In the past, some community members—including those disputing the conservationist clan over the ownership of the area—had gardens within the conservation area near its eastern border. More recently, the conservationists have zoned this area as possible cultivation land, so there is a possibility that the gardening ban might be lifted. For the most part, people have their gardens on the coastal strip extending about 2 km inland, and the conservation area has reduced this area only a little.

The conservation area has also not become private property, but the clan which claims the area has—through the formalization of the conservation area—consolidated its ownership of it. This was done by “extra-economic means,” namely in court and through the formalization of the area, but it remains common property of the clan, although within the clan the conservationists have a strong say in how the area will be used. Most crucially,

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58 The conservation area of the Wide Bay Mengen is ca. 2000 ha, while the average size of WMAs in PNG gazetted by 2020 is ca. 48,700 ha, based on a total of 39 WMAs, of which 15 are over 10,000 ha, 16 are 1000–10,000 ha, and 8 are under 1000 ha. These figures are based on the listing in Shearman et al. (2008, 102) for WMAs gazetted by 2002, and on information provided by the UNDP (2022) for WMAs until 2020. I have included in the figures the new Managalas Conservation Area, which is a locally controlled conservation area, but not strictly a WMA. Combining the information in the two aforementioned sources, there were 39 WMA-type protected areas in PNG at the time of writing. I have excluded national parks and marine conservation areas. Note, however, that a large part of the Daru WMA area is sea.

the area has not become capital, namely a means of production in a relationship, where its owners control the value produced by others using said means of production (Marx [1867] 1976, 293, 876, 932). This does not mean that the conservation area cannot become a means of accumulation. Kelly (2011, 689) notes that dispossession and accumulation can be separated by long stretches of time, while private property is not a prerequisite for private accumulation. Although the conservation area was not private property and nor was it totally enclosed, as villagers were able to hunt and gather there, it is imaginable that it could be utilized for private accumulation—through tourism, for example. Indeed, the control over conservation by the leaders of the conservationist clan could result in their accumulating capital without dispossessing their fellow clan members of the communally owned land: a variation of “accumulation without dispossession” (Paudel 2016, 1007). I say imaginable, because private accumulation on a significant scale has not happened in this case.

With the possibility of logging and later the *de facto* alienation of land through large-scale land leases, Wide Bay conservation can be thought of as a counter-enclosure—that is, as a way for peasants to limit the accumulation of capital (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 1445). The ability to make counter-enclosures hinges on the control of land (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 1450)—something which the Wide Bay conservationists knew very well. Indeed, in order to protect their territory as a lifeworld, as something “produced by the society it contains” (Baletti 2012, 578), and to put limits on extractive capital, the Wide Bay conservationists have had to adopt territorial strategies and cement their clan’s ownership of the area through state institutions.





Rainforest in the conservation area. (2014)



Gardens, fallows, and rainforest on the hills near Toimtop and Sampun villages. (2024)



Allen Plermoteip watches as Peregrine Mtepenge marks the conservation area borders due to a nearby logging operation. (2014)



William Vomne in the conservation association's office in Toimtop village. (2011)



Cletus Momni and Douglas Rmetein work in the cocoa nursery of Toimtop village. (2019)



A ceremonial gift during an initiation in Wawas village. (2011)



Inhabitants during a community meeting in Wawas village. (2012)



Otto Tniengpo, Bernard Maktman, William Vomne, Margaret Glentou, Tekla Leiv, Trecia Metkoi and Francis, and Maria Losongmlu during a community meeting in Toimtop. (2024)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1. The faces faces [everyone] are<br/>in the forest<br/>We [incl.] have left our food in<br/>the men's house</p>             | <p><i>Raik raik ngan me lom re lon</i><br/><i>Is pasle kning teng is nge ging re lon</i></p> |
| <p>C. My heart cries for my uncle,<br/>my belly aches due to my<br/>uncle<br/>The thoughts up there get<br/>covered in dust</p> | <p><i>Re log tne owa, re maglik lale owa</i><br/><i>Lomatre rirme re pairi yaptai</i></p>    |
| <p>2. The faces faces are in the<br/>forest<br/>We have left the pig and the<br/><i>paik</i> in the men's house</p>             | <p><i>Raik raik ngan me lom re lon</i><br/><i>Is paisle ge lu paik nge ging re lon</i></p>   |

—Marsil vlou, song recorded in Toimtop village, 20 June 2024



A *paik* shell valuable. (2024)



## CONCLUSIONS

### The Political Ecology of Value

My aim in this book has been two-fold: the first empirical and ethnographic, inasmuch as I have attempted to give an account of how the rural Wide Bay Mengen speakers organize their relations with each other, their lived environment, and outside actors in the context of natural resource extraction. I have done so by focusing especially on swidden horticulture as practiced by the Mengen, not only because I initially became interested in PNG as I wanted to study how people who communally hold their land cultivate it, but also because swidden horticulture as an active engagement with the lived environment and plants expresses Mengen conceptions of relatedness, landholding, and values. Through swidden horticulture, the Mengen reproduce not only themselves but also their environment. Based on this, throughout this book I have discussed how the Mengen engage, and have engaged, in very different ways in the commodification of their environment and lives through logging, plantation agriculture, and also environmental conservation. Throughout the discussion I have examined how the Mengen have reproduced and transformed matrilineal and their interrelation, set up new forms of collective actors such as LOCs and associations, as well as engaged in state formation—again, in very different ways and for different reasons. However, very often, these actions have been attempts to affirm Mengen social values. This does not mean the Mengen mechanically reproduce a particular social order. On the contrary, I have sought to show how the Mengen pursue very different values, combine multiple value regimes in their lives, and even when agreeing on a particular set of values, often disagree how they are best pursued.

The second aim of this book is theoretical. My intention has been to contribute to environmental anthropology and especially to the body of theory known as political ecology, which seeks to understand environmental relations as part of political-economic structures and power relations (e.g., Biersack and Greenberg 2006; West 2006, 2012; Jacka 2015; Halvaksz 2020; Chao 2022). And, crucially, vice versa—namely, understanding social relations and political-economic structures as environmental relations (Moore 2015, 40, 78). In discussing how the Wide Bay Mengen reproduce their society and the lived environment as well as engaging in natural resource extraction and state formation, I have found the anthropological literature on production and value particularly useful. This body of theory understands “production” as the production of material means of subsistence, the production of new needs, the production of human beings themselves, and the production of different relations of social cooperation (Turner 2008, 44). As people produce material goods, they enter into social relations with each other and thus create and recreate themselves and each other “when acting with the world” (Munn 1992, 6, 15; Fajans 1997, 272; Graeber 2001, 57; 2013, 223). This acting with the world happens “in and through” the environment. Thus, human productive activities are always emplaced, because they happen in places as well as creating them (Moore 2015, 11, 13). Production—understood in this way—also produces meaning and values (Munn 1992, 6; Fajans 1997, 11; Stasch 2009), which are broadly conceptualized as the importance attributed to people’s activities (Graeber 2001, 55). How value is constituted and represented depends on the social context and the system of social production, but it always consists of the forms of representation by which it is defined, circulated, exchanged, and appropriated (Turner 2008, 47, 53). Thus, semiotic representation in mediating and shaping material activity has a central role in this body of theory (Turner 2008, 43).

This understanding of production and value provides a holistic framework to think about human social life that is attentive to its material conditions, human motivations for actions, politics, and



cultural meanings, without over-privileging any of these aspects or holding one—such as material conditions—to be the determining factor. Rather, these are seen “distinctions within a unity,” similar to how moments within a process form a unity (Marx [1857–58] 1973, 99, 101; [1884] 1978, 180, 183). What features, or aspects, or combinations of them are at a given time and in a given situation more important than others is an empirical question. For example, in this case, I argue that the Wide Bay Mengen have been able to retain their system of values focusing on relatedness, have managed to incorporate new people, practices, and goods into it, and adapt it to changing circumstances, because they have retained control of their lands (see Gregory 1982, 116). This does not mean that land tenure as such is the determining factor underlying the value system, but it is a necessary condition. The lived environment to which the Wide Bay Mengen relate as they see fit, because they have not been dispossessed of their lands, forms—literally and in a more metaphorical sense—the environment in which Mengen pursuits of value are possible and meaningful.

This form of value theory fits well with the aims of contemporary political ecology because the focus on production and value bridges the gap between a focus on material conditions—the “ecology” in political ecology—and the focus on values, meanings, and their expressions. The production-focused approach to value addresses the “political” in “political ecology,” as value in this line of theory is fundamentally a political question; after all, politics is the coordination, debates, and the struggles to pursue values—and perhaps most importantly, to define what value actually is (see Graeber 2001, 88).

As I have noted above, the actions of the Wide Bay Mengen in questions of livelihood production, natural resource extraction, and state formation are often a result of their pursuing Mengen forms of value of relatedness. In response to this, I have focused on the semiotic media through which the Mengen enact their relationships: particularly the food plants people cultivate in their gardens, the gardens themselves, and various other places people create in the course of their activities. These media are not inert,

but living organisms or components of the environment and hence say a great deal about Mengen ecological practices.

Likewise, Mengen debates and disputes over these questions have very often been disagreements over whether a given action—like the distribution of royalties or conserving the forest—constitutes socially productive activity and is thus constitutive of value. As Nancy Munn (1992, 3) notes, value is created in relation to the perception of how it is *not* created. In her account on value creation on the island of Gawa, Munn (1992, 13–14) focuses on positive and negative value transformations and how some acts hold negative “value potentials” inasmuch as they inhibit the creation of value. In this book I have shown that the Mengen too regard some acts—for example, not sharing—as preventing the creation and maintenance of valued social relations. However, in many cases the negative value potentials of certain acts depends on the perspective of others and may be evaluated very differently by different people (see also Martin 2013, 127, 138). In addition to this, I have used the notion of “productive contradiction” to show that pursuing one of the two main values in Mengen society—clan autonomy and inter-clan relations—could hold negative value potentials in relation to the other. For example, distributing logging royalties only to clan members might emphasize the coherency of the clan and its authority over the land it owns, but at the same time alienate affines and people from other clans living on that land. As Wide Bay Mengen convert commodity values into social ones, or convert wage labor into hard work, I argue that there is also a similar productive contradiction between these value regimes.

Value—how it is pursued, defined, mediated, and appropriated—also lies at the heart of large-scale natural resource projects. A key principle of political economy and ecology is that “natural resources” do not simply exist but, rather, are socially and culturally defined (Marx [1867] 1976, 153–154; [1884] 1978, 121, 240, 303; Bridge 2011, 820; McCarthy 2013, 184; Moore 2015, 145; Teaiwa 2015, 9, 18). In order to address this insight I have made use of the notion of the frontier, understood as a spatialized political,

economic, and ecological dynamic, in which some actors see and present an area as a site for expansion and a source of resources that have been made cheap (Tsing 2005, 28–29; Geiger 2008, 88, 109; Peluso and Lund 2011, 688, 671; McCarthy 2013, 183–184; Davidov 2014, 41; Bell 2015, 131; Tammisto 2020, 30–31). For extractive companies, Pomio District seemed like a large area of “unused” forest, land, and labor, but an important aspect of the frontier is that different actors compete not only over resources but also over different *definitions* of resources and the value of different practices (McCarthy 2013, 184). This echoes the notion that the greatest political struggles are not only about the appropriation of value, but about its definition (Graeber 2001, 88). Finally, just as natural resources are constructed and deconstructed on the frontier, so the actors themselves are elicited, changed, and unmade, because histories and relations are transformed on the frontier or even erased and replaced with new versions (Bell 2015, 131).

The focus on value production bridges not only the gap between ecological practices and semiotic mediation—between “material” and “meaning”—but it is a holistic framework in another sense as well. A focus on production and values understood in the sense described above provides a framework to think simultaneously and with the same terms about the very different ways in which people organize their relations with their environment and one another. In short, it provides a theoretical framework to think about the globalized resource economy and the political ecology of natural resource extraction in the same terms as, say, specifically Mengen ways of cultivating the land and valuing the environment. I think this is crucially important. Such a focus allows us simultaneously to take into account real difference, both within and between value regimes, and at the same time compare the differences and similarities, and account for the articulation between the systems.

A focus on production understood as a self-transformative process through which humans produce material goods and, in the process, relate to each other and their environment, allows us

to examine the formation of corporations, matriline, and state institutions as *different kinds* of social relations and collective actors—and abandoned settlements, clear-cuttings, and plantations as indexes of different value regimes and productive activities.

By advocating for a political ecology approach focused on value production and mediation, I do not claim it is a “one-size-fits-all” approach or the only correct way to examine human–environmental relations. On the contrary, by focusing on some aspects, such as meaning and materiality, politics and production, this approach misses others. In this book I have not examined, for example, the ontological position of matriline with the same depth as Michael Scott (2007) has done in the case of the Arosi of Solomon Islands. Similarly, while I have focused in this book on people’s relations with their environment, and with the places and organisms that constitute it, my work has been very centered on humans. A multispecies approach, such as the one taken by Sophie Chao (2018, 2022) in her work, would definitely illuminate aspects of the socio-environmental relations in Wide Bay I have not even been able to conceptualize. My aim with this book has been to offer a complementary approach to the examination of human–environmental relations and the politics thereof.

### On Readjusting Our Values

My interest in the topics discussed in this book stemmed from my desire to learn how people who communally hold the land they inhabit and who organize their day-to-day affairs independently cultivate their food and engage with their lived environment. As someone who grew up and lived their whole life in a middle-class urban setting in a post-industrial Nordic state, I was especially fascinated and impressed by the knowledge of and intimate relations with plants that people engaged in swidden horticulture have. This was something I wanted to understand and I have been lucky enough to have been able to pursue this interest and feel

similarly fortunate that people in Wide Bay have hosted me on several occasions.

What started out as an interest in the relatively specific topics of local agriculture and landholding soon became a wider interest in questions over value and values. Over the course of my research, I came to understand how Mengen landholding and agriculture are embedded in a wider value regime based ultimately on the idea that care and nurture is work, which produces value. The pursuit of social values is possible and meaningful as the Mengen have not been dispossessed of their lands and forests, but they form the material base for the value system. This is not something external, or a stage on which social action is played out; rather, as I hope to have shown in this book, the Mengen produce their lived environment as they produce values, and vice versa.

My initial interest in swidden horticulture and communal landholding stemmed also from my dismay over how the way of life of people like myself, of the urban middle classes in industrial countries, is creating globally unfavorable consequences—to say the least. The exploitation of human and nonhuman lives and the creation of environmental conditions hostile to human and nonhuman life are issues of production and values too. Over the course of researching and writing this book, it seems to me that the pursuit of exchange value to create more exchange value controlled by those who already control the means of production is very much at the heart of many of the problems we face at the time when I write this.

Working on this book has made me appreciate how the Mengen of Wide Bay value care and nurture. Hard work, understood as care and nurture, in my opinion underscores the point that in order for us to build more environmentally sustainable and socially just societies that are not based exploitative relations, we need to rethink what we value and how we pursue it. Such calls are not new. David Harvey (2010a, 45–46; 2010b, 234–235, 249–250) notes that social orders alternative to the capitalist one require an alternative value system. In scholarship and activism there are increasing calls to systems of value production based on mutual

aid (Kropotkin 1902), care (Curtin 1991), nurture, repair (Jackson 2014), and mending (Milstein 2021), and critical analyses of what “care” is (e.g., McEwan and Goodman 2010). Other scholars, such as Roy Rappaport (1976, 246), pondered that instead of a universalizing metric of value, such as money, we need a metric or accounting system capable of accounting for different incommensurable values in order express the multitude of crucial socio-environmental relations.

If we want more just and sustainable futures, I believe we need to reorient our productive capacities to nurture the manifold relations that sustain and create us. In many ways I find the Wide Bay Mengen pursuit of relations based on care and nurture a better value regime than the pursuit of endless economic growth understood as growing profits. This may sound like I am romanticizing, but what I hope to have shown with this book is exactly the opposite of utopic romanticism. During my work in Wide Bay, I learned that alternative value systems and egalitarian communities exist. They are not utopia, but the result of people’s collective action, values and, well, their hard work. Neither are they utopia in the sense of an end of history and politics. On the contrary, as I have shown, even when people agree to pursue values of care and nurture, they rarely agree on how they are best pursued, for whom, and what to care for.

Even the pursuit of the best of values is hard work.

## EPILOGUE

### The Bones of Segletaun

The song quoted before the concluding chapter was composed several generations ago by Marsil, a talented composer and the great-grandfather of Josephine Matapoeng, who sang the song to me in June 2024. Some weeks earlier, one of the elders of Toimtop, Paul Segletaun, had died unexpectedly. Segletaun was the son of the founder of Toimtop and was one of the last of his generation in the village. Matapoeng mentioned that there was a song in which Marsil cries for his uncle Segletaun the elder, the namesake of Paul.

I had recorded other songs by Marsil, but this was new to me, so I asked Matapoeng to sing it. With Matapoeng and her clan-sister Perpetua Tpongri, we translated the song from Mengen to Tok Pisin. Matapoeng and Tpongri also explained to me why Marsil had composed the song, as well as the metaphors he uses to refer to his maternal uncle. When we were done, I realized I want to end my book with it (a month earlier I had received a message that this book had passed peer review). I told my sisters that Marsil had expressed in a few verses what I wanted to say about value. More so, the line about thoughts getting covered in dust seems to me like a perfect ending for a book.

In the song Marsil cries for his maternal uncle Segletaun (“Does not see his elder brother”), and specifically for his bones. As was customary at the time, after the death of Segletaun his bones were placed in a string bag that was hung from the ceiling of the men’s house. Possibly due to disagreements over gardens or other disputes over land, Marsil and others had to abandon the hamlet they lived in. As Marsil at the time lacked the means—food, pigs, and

shell valuables—to perform a ceremony and give a ceremonial gift that would have been required in order to disturb and to move the bones of Segletaun, he had to leave them in the men’s house in the hamlet.

In the first and second verses of the song, Marsil laments that he and his fellows have had to leave behind his uncle, who he evokes variously as “our food,” a pig, and a *paik* (a grooved shell ring). These are, as mentioned throughout this book, the most important objectifications and material media of value among the North Mengen. They are given as part of ceremonial gifts during initiations, marriages, and funerary events. By referring to these, Marsil not only expresses how he valued his uncle but also how his uncle took care of him and others by giving them food, and helping them, with shells and pigs, in ceremonies.

In the chorus, Marsil describes his uncle—specifically, his uncle’s bones hanging from the ceiling—as “thoughts”, meaning the wisdom and teaching given to him by his uncle. Marsil cries for his uncle’s earthly remains which he has had to abandon. The thought of his uncle’s bones hanging alone and getting covered in dust in the abandoned men’s house pains him.

Marsil expresses in this song the main themes of this book. The metaphors he uses refer to the most central media of value—teaching, food, pigs, and shell valuables. But as Marsil so powerfully points out, these are not valuable in and of themselves. Food is valuable when it is given to others to care for them, just like wisdom, shells, or pigs. The valuables mentioned in the song express and are used to enact what people *really* value, namely the mutually constitutive relations of care between them, in this case between a maternal uncle and his nephew. Marsil’s song expresses this ultimate value, and the pain when such relations are lost.



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