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Shifting Ground

Economic Creolisation and Land Sales on the Edges of Goroka, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

Urbanisation in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is increasingly characterised by the sale of customary land to migrants from other provinces. As the borders of towns transform through this process, I ask: what does selling customary land in PNG mean, and what implications do sales have for Papua New Guinean sociality? I address these questions by analysing land sales in a community in Bena, near Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province (EHP). Drawing on approximately three months of fieldwork in the area, I explore the region around Goroka as a space of intersecting logics of exchange, ownership, and personhood, I argue that land sale is an example of the creolisation of both economic forms and ideas of personhood. As buyers and sellers draw on both legalistic and customary symbols of exchange, land sale is neither a gift exchange nor an example of commodification, but rather exists in a space of economic-semantic ambiguity. Sellers and buyers draw on a creole of economic signifiers to communicate the ownership and transfer of land. Further, due to the central place of land in constructing sociality in Melanesia, this economic creolisation has important consequences for the construction of personhood in Bena. By examining the centrality of land in competing ideas of “freedom” in Bena, I place economic concerns in conversation with questions of personhood. As Papua New Guinean towns expand into the surrounding customarily-owned areas, these dynamics provide insight into the role of land in ongoing urbanisation in PNG.
This thesis is dedicated to my father, who died on 20th June, 2015. We miss you.
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Glossary

Key Tok Pisin Words Used in this Thesis

*banis* literally fence, used in Bena to describe the fenced area in a house line containing the houses of directly extended kin

*haus lain* common alternative used to refer to the village (*ples*). Literally “house line”, which refers to how houses are laid out along the sides of a central road in the village. Also alludes to *lain* (line), which refers to a kinship group.

*haus man* refers to both the men’s house, which only initiated men could enter, and to older men who taught other men secrets and appropriate conduct. No longer a cultural institution in Bena.

*kaikai* eat or food

*kaikai mani* literally “eating money”, used to refer to the practice of living off money or using up money

*papa graun* literally “father of the land”, used to refer to the primary claimant(s) of an area of ground. Often translated as “owner of the land”.

*ples* village

*rot* literally “road”, often used in conjunction with ideas like *rot bilong lo* (the road of law), which are a kind of path or ideology to a given goal

*spin nating* going for a walk with no purpose

*taim bilong tambuna* typically used to refer to pre-colonial ancestral times

*wan spin tasol* just going for one spin

*wessen* literally “wet sand”, used to refer to gardens that periodically flood

*wokabaut nating* walking around and doing nothing

Key Bena Words Used in this Thesis

*Morex* the name of a *wessen* garden in Bena

*yagofa* hard ground which is used for building houses on, and for gardening during the wet season
Introduction

I met Samson, my adoptive father and one of my key informants, in my first week in the Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea (PNG). My academic supervisor, Mark Busse, was driving us south, out of Goroka, to give me an idea of the surrounding area. As we drove along the Highlands Highway, the town fell away to reveal rolling hills of greenery and gardens. Following the twisting road down the valley, we passed numerous villages, the disability centre, Kamaliki Vocational Training Institute, coffee factories, and the imposing chain fence and machinery of Crusher, a rock-crushing facility. Eventually, a leafy canopy closed over our heads, and coffee plantations became more common as we came to the stretch of road aptly called Speedway. We heard a shout of "Mark!" just as he was explaining that he would like to introduce me to a community in the area. Pulling over, we saw Samson walking up the Highway near his haus lain (house line\(^1\)). We slowed down and he jumped into the four-wheel drive.

As we drove, he told us the tale of his ongoing land woes. He was particularly happy that I had a research interest in land. At this stage my Tok Pisin was quite limited, so I listened with difficulty as he recounted how, some years beforehand, he had sold some land near the Highway to a man from Okapa, named David. Like many sales, the buyer paid half of the 10000 kina\(^2\) upfront, and agreed to pay the remainder later. Samson explained that although he waited several years, David had not paid the money he owed. Samson went on to say that by this point he was annoyed about the general conduct of the buyer—after buying the land, David had made little effort to integrate himself into Samson's community. Fed up, Samson resold the land to a different buyer. David was displeased with the resale, and now, years later, the police were investigating the situation. Samson had signed a statutory declaration that he owed the money to David, and if Samson did not repay it, the police were going to arrest him.

The following week, I went down to the haus lain with a chicken to visit Samson and introduce myself to his family. I was nervous but also full of questions: what was the significance of the expectations for David to integrate himself into the community? Was reselling common? How individual is land tenure? Does individual land sale even make sense

\(^1\) Haus lain was a common alternative used to refer to the village (plies). Literally, it translates as “house line”, which refers to how houses are laid out along the sides of a central road in the village. However, it also alludes to lain (line), which refers to a kinship group. Thus a haus lain is both a place and a group of people.

\(^2\) During my research, 1 Papua New Guinea kina was worth, on average, 0.50 New Zealand dollars, or 0.39 US dollars.
in a context of customary ownership? However, any hopes for a gradual introduction to the community or this complex situation were dashed when I learnt that the police had visited during the night. Samson was in jail.

My early encounter with land sales was a crash course on the cultural intricacies and economic-political tensions on the edges of town. Bound up in this brief encounter were many of the elements that typified land exchanges—a man in the community selling a relatively small (in this case roughly 40m x 40m) area of land near the Highway and town to migrants from further-afield groups or neighbouring provinces. The dual presence of the town and the main road made this land valuable—buyers explained that they wanted to be closer to town, where store goods were cheaper and government services, like healthcare and education, were of higher quality. Sometimes migrants already had work in town. Other times, they planned to use the proximity to town to find work or alternatively sell produce. People in and around town were constantly talking about these kinds of sales; an official I spoke to from the Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) Lands Department estimated they dealt with between 400 to 800 sales a year. Of course, these were only the official sales, and many transfers went through informal agreements. For people living around Goroka, these types of sales repeatedly emerged in debates and discussions about land. They also were a source of re-emerging tensions—competing claims developed as people fought over land now worth potentially tens of thousands of kina.

My initial encounter with Samson illustrates the key dynamics in land sales that I examine in this thesis. Like the physical location of the village I did research in, land sales occupy an interstitial space—they occur between the rural and the urban, land transfer is both individualised and has expectations of reciprocal relations, and parties draw on both legalistic and customary understandings of exchange and ownership. The presence of money and pretensions of “private exchange”, combined with expectations of ongoing relations with a seller, meant that land sales existed in a state of economic-semantic uncertainty. Both parties deployed symbols and behaviours to indicate that the exchange was both impersonal and individualised at some moments, and reciprocal and inclusive at others.

My thesis is that land sales are an example of economic creolisation, as people draw on multiple symbolic inventories to discuss and perform ownership, sale and personhood. Combining a modified anthropological usage of creolisation (Price 2007), which I discuss below, with Carol Rose’s (1994) approach to ownership as communication, I explore how parties in land sales simultaneously draw on the rhetoric of reciprocal obligation during sales,
while also contextually presenting the sale as private and individualised. I argue that these changes are linked to the creolisation of symbolic expressions of personhood. Due to the central place of land in constructing sociality in PNG, changing symbolic positioning of exchange is bound up in changing ideologies of personhood. I explore this through examining the multiple meanings of “freedom” in Goroka in relation to different economic activities and ideologies of personhood.

These dynamics have critical consequences for Papua New Guinea's future. The country is in the midst of rapid demographic change; while the majority of the population is rural, the United Nations (UN) estimates that between 2030 and 2050, PNG will become the ninth-fastest urbanising country in the world (UN 2014). Because Papua New Guinean towns are surrounded by customary land, the demographic and spatial expansion of urban centres has important consequences for the relationship between PNG’s growing towns and the immediate rural population. This thesis offers a snapshot of these changing relationships by examining the consequences of land sale in Bena.

**Hybrid Persons and Economic Creoles**

Terms like “economic creolisation”, “personhood”, and “the semiotic ambiguity exchange”, require me to take a theoretical detour to provide some clarity on my use of these concepts. Anthropologists working in Melanesia have a long-held interest in the consequences of colonialism, Christianity, and capitalism on customary practices. In the realm of economic anthropology, a range of scholarly work has explored the uneven and uneasy relationship between customary institutions, typified by the circulation of gifts, and the impact of expanding capitalist production and exchange. This work has included examining how practices like bride-wealth (Jolly 2015) and political institutions like big-men (Finney 1973) have been impacted by commodification. These interactions have influence in both directions, with institutions commonly associated with commodity exchange, such as trade-stores, exhibiting a distinctly Melanesian character (Curry 1999).

An analytic tension at the heart of these studies is the relative usefulness of using the Western-Melanesian, commodity-gift, modern-traditional dichotomies for understanding cultural, political and economic change in PNG. As James Carrier (1998:101) emphasises, anthropologists have used Melanesia for the ethnographic exploration for a range of ideal types, including big-men (Sahlins 1963), competitive gift exchange (A. Strathern 1975), and individuals (M. Strathern 1988). Each of these formulations provided significant theoretical
traction in attempting to understand a range of ethnographic observations, as well as acting as a foil to discuss many assumptions about economy, personhood and political organisation in the West. For example, by exploring gift economies, anthropological work unseats Western understandings of neoclassical economics, whose sole concern is the production and exchange of commodities (Gregory 1982).

However, various scholars have critiqued these ideal types for being overly stylised or failing to capture nuances on the ground. Ideal types are *Gedankenbilder* (thought-pictures), deliberately simplified concepts that researchers create for heuristic purposes. In Max Weber’s own words, ideal types are “conceptual means for the comparison and measurement of reality” enabling the researcher to highlight or emphasise features of an observed phenomenon (Weber 1949 in Zijderveld 2004). Social scientists critique ideal types when they are falsely construed as representations of reality or when they fail to throw relief on particularly salient features of an observation. Some examples of this in Melanesian anthropology is how the classic conception of the big-man was problematised by Maurice Godelier’s (1986) introduction of the idea of the “great man”, who draws his power from control of ritual activity and through hunting prowess rather than exchange (Godelier and Strathern 1991). Following Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) introduction of the dividual Melanesian, theorists like Edward LiPuma (1997) critiqued the overuse of the individual-dividual distinction as an example of overwrought West-Melanesian dichotomies in the context of globalisation and cultural exchange.

When I analysed my findings the tensions over the utility of theoretical frameworks became clear. As I will argue, the gift-commodity distinction is central to understanding the debates at the heart of land sales. However, unlike some analytic distinctions which also have a degree of vernacular usage, such as urban versus rural, the idea of discrete or different circuits of exchange was not something my participants distinguished. Highlanders comfortably moved in and out of what anthropologists think of as different forms of circulation, drawing on alternative logics of exchange as it suited the situation. Bena happily pointed out the importance of reciprocity in land sales, while also attempting to maximise economic returns from an exchange. When attempting to analyse this interplay, it is vital to have a theoretical framework that captures the fluidity of these economic actions. In a post-

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3 It is also worth noting that “ideal” in this case is not value-laden and does not mean “good”. Rather it is a strictly analytical Neo-Kantian “pure type” (Zijderveld 2002).
colonial, peri-urban setting where multiple customary and capitalist exchange networks intersect, overly rigid ideal types fail to capture important aspects of land sales.

While writing this thesis, I struggled to find the best approach to capture this tension. Since the 1980s, anthropologists have made various attempts to reconstruct the idea of culture based on flows of ideas, goods and a mixture of cultural and political institutions (Stewart 1999) in the aftermath of the critiques that dismantled depictions of culture as bounded, discrete, largely homogeneous, and fully knowable (see Abu-Lugod 1991, Clifford 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Rosaldo 1989, Friedman 1994). Edward Said (1993:xxv) captured these dynamics well when he pointed out that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is simple and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic.” These concerns led to debates over the utility of the concept of culture (Abu-Lughod 1991, Brumann 1999) and the development of ideas such as syncretism, hybridity, and creolisation, each of which attempt to get away from earlier understandings of culture (Stewart 1999).

A common method for thinking about these post-colonial issues is hybridity theory (Bhabha 1994, 1996). Hybridity theory emerged both as an analytic and political critique of the colonial separation of cultures into discrete categories (Prabhu 2007:1-2). By pointing to spaces of diaspora and hybridisation, hybridity theorists have emphasised how displaced, subaltern populations have transcended the static us/them boundaries placed upon them by colonial forces (Prabhu 2007:2). In this regard, hybridity acts as a political critique, emphasising the empirical phenomenon of cultural heterogeneity, which is matter out of place for racist ideals and therefore undermines ideologies of racism and nationalism.

Anthropological studies of creolisation have a similar analytical and political approach. Like the term ‘hybrid’, with its uncomfortable etymology rooted in racist nineteenth century biology (Stewart 1999:45), ‘creole’ has a complex and equally problematic history. The word creole comes from the Portuguese crioulo, and was used to refer to slaves brought up in the master’s house (1999:44). In Spanish, the term creole was used for any Old World organism (plant, animal or human), that reproduced in the New World, including the offspring of Europeans and Africans (1999:44). Creolisation had a general connotation of deculturation and biological impurity within the racial ideologies of the time.

Despite this ugly history, like hybrid, the term creole has changed over time. In the late 1960s “creolisation” moved from this history to its current linguistic and anthropological usage following the collection Pidginization and Creolization of Languages (Hymes 1971).
Linguists and anthropologists use the term creolisation in distinct ways. The definition of creole is debated in linguistics (Muysken and Smith 1994:3). Broadly, creoles are pidgins that have become a natural language that is nativised by children. Pidgins, in turn, are languages that do not have native speakers and are used to communicate between people with no common language (Muysken and Smith 1994:3). Stylistically, creoles come into existence relatively abruptly, often through linguistic (and social) violence, and are based on the lexicon of multiple parent languages (Muysken and Smith 1994:4). It is worth emphasising that “creole languages are not in the slightest qualitatively distinguishable from other spoken languages” (Muysken and Smith 1994:4-5). Thus, the definition of a creole language is often based on its specific linguistic and social history. As this tentative definition makes clear, there is debate in linguistics over the definition and process of creolisation, a debate that is outside the scope of this thesis to address.

Anthropologists have used the term “creolisation” in a different vein. The idea of creole culture became a “most promising root metaphor” (Hannerz 1987:55) for studying cultural change in the Caribbean and Afro-America during and in the aftermath of the “violent colonial cauldron of the early New World” (see Mintz and Price 1973, Price 2009:18). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1998:8) coined the “miracle of creolization”, to describe the extraordinary flourishing of cultural forms in the New World, a context of violent displacement and oppression, where slaves and indigenous peoples were displaced from their linguistic and cultural context and placed into a violently hostile situation.

There are two primary dimensions to how anthropologists have used creolisation. First, like the linguistic understanding of the term, anthropologists have used creolisation to evoke the “sense of a continuous spectrum of interacting forces” (Hannerz 1987:551) and “cultural interaction and synthesis” (Bollard 1998:4). As a metaphor, creolisation emphasises the Caribbean as a space of “mimicry, syncretism, creativity” as a range of diasporic cultures meld together (Khan 2001:273). The second is focused on a political re-reading of history: creolisation emphasises the agency of Caribbean and Afro-American peoples in contrast to a unidirectional imposition of power within the Atlantic slave trade and plantation economies. Thus, the notion of a “creole society” is also a political manoeuvre to claim agency where historians had often ascribed none (see Bollard 1998, Kahn 2001). However, creolisation became problematic when used as a broad metaphor for mixing, tautologically showing that “all cultures are creole” owing to the fact all cultures are invariably mixed (see Khan 2001 for a summary of these debates).
Each of these ideas—hybridity, creolisation, and syncretism—has a different historical trajectory. Theories of hybridity largely have their origins in literary theory and cultural studies, creolisation in regional anthropology and linguistic studies, and cross-cultural religious studies provide the empirical basis for studies of syncretism. For this reason, scholars have applied them to geographically-specific questions of identity, ideology, art, and diaspora. Economic anthropology has been largely absent from these discussions, potentially because these studies have focused on “ideal” subjects traditionally outside of economic anthropology, such as identity, and because of economic anthropology’s general decline as a central in anthropology (Gregory 2009). Therefore, I face the delicate task of deploying “creole” in both an alternative ethnographic context than where it was originally developed, and giving it a slight theoretical shift. In this thesis, I apply creole more broadly than the strict linguistic sense of the term, and use a more succinct definition than creoles’ metaphorical usage in the Caribbean and Afro-America, while nevertheless (trying to) stay true to the term’s meanings and not falling into the trap of creating neologisms.

I do this by keeping my theoretical sights fixed on the symbolic nature of economic activity and broadening the language-as-symbolic element of linguistic creolisation. Rose (1994), in her seminal essays on *Property and Persuasion*, argues that ownership, rather than a bundle of rights, is a system of communication that people assert and contest. By drawing on different discourses of ownership, such as legal deeds, family histories, and physically fencing areas off, actors attempt to establish claim over objects and spaces. Ownership-as-communication draws attention to the myriad of culturally specific ways that people depict and emphasise the nature of a relationship between a person and a thing. Critically, within a given cultural context, there are an array of signifiers of ownership that are acceptable and comprehensible.

Economic anthropologists (e.g. Parry and Bloch 1989) have consistently emphasised that exchange is also symbolic—the extent my purchase of food at Papindo Supermarket in Goroka entails no further relationship with the cashier, while receiving a *bilum* (bag) does, depends on the necessary communication and interpretation of the relevant symbols of exchange. Thus, exchange is eminently material and symbolic. In the context of rapid cultural change, such as in the Highlands, the symbolic inventory of communicating exchange and ownership is changing as well—new meanings, like the notion of wholly alienated land, are emerging which were not conceivable within the previous cultural frame of reference. While
giving a person land never represented the idealised Maussian gift, the individualised exchange of land for money is new.

With these considerations in mind, I use “economic creolisation” to describe this process for two key reasons. First, Papua New Guineans do not operate in two mutually unintelligible languages of exchange and ownership. Rather, the symbols land buyers and sellers use to communicate the nature of exchange and ownership is a creole of multiple economic forms. Secondly, there is an ongoing borrowing and redeployment of symbols of exchange, ownership and personhood. If economic activity is a symbolic array, it has vocabulary (signifiers) and grammar (rules governing the ordering of signifiers) that are genealogically grounded in the colonial encounter, but also transcends it. Thus when I claim “personhood is creolised” I do not simply mean it is becoming “mixed”. Rather I point to something specific—the signifiers used to communicate personhood is broadening, in this particular case due to the intersection of multiple historical forces, most saliently in PNG due to colonialism, capitalism and Christianity. Using this approach, this thesis explores the intersection of urban and rural, town and village, as spaces where people draw on a symbolic creole to discuss ownership, exchange and personhood.

Of Mauss and Marx: Commodities and Gifts, Estranged Persons and Embedded Things

As I explore land sales in Bena, I will repeatedly draw on the ideas of gifts, commodities, alienation, and personhood. Like creolisation, these terms are worthy of further scrutiny. All four concepts have been strongly influenced by two thinkers: Karl Marx and Marcel Mauss. I did not intend to use these theorists in such a fundamental way when I began my research; however, they became increasingly relevant as I thought about both personhood and exchange. If the areas outside Goroka exist as an intersection of gift exchange and commodification, then the most notable theorists of capitalism and gifts seem an appropriate place to begin. Marx’s and Mauss’ understanding of gifts, commodities, alienation and personhood are vital in this thesis, so it is important that I provide a clear genealogy of their thought on these central topics.

Both Mauss and Marx provided significant foundational work on the entanglement of persons and things. Mauss’ *The Gift* (2000 [1925]) is a classical text in economic anthropology. Drawing on a range of ethnographic examples including potlatch (2000:8) and a contested account of Maori *hau* (2000:13, see Sahlins 1972: chapter 4), Mauss introduced the idea of the gift as an inalienable object, culturally embedded in networks of reciprocity, and
fundamentally linked to the personhood of the giver. The idea of the Maussian gift was central to economic anthropology during the pre-1970s era, through the seminal work of Karl Polanyi (1944), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), and Marshall Sahlins (1972). The primacy of the gift in economic analysis is equally true for anthropological work in Melanesia. Gift exchange occupies a key place in ethnographic studies of competitive exchange (e.g. A. Strathern 1975), theoretical discussions of economic anthropology (Gregory 1982), and debates over the alienability of labour in cross-cultural settings (M. Strathern 1988). In the 1980s, debates flowered over the utility of the gift-commodity distinction (Appadurai 1986, Carrier 1990, 1991, Gregory 1982, Parry 1986, Parry and Bloch 1989, also see Rus 2008). Recently, anthropologists have become less concerned with the politics of gift exchange. This change has followed the recent shifts in economic anthropology that focus on agency and consumption more than the earlier paradigms of exchange and production (Gregory 2009:288). Nevertheless, I argue that understanding the gift-commodity distinction is a necessary theoretical bedrock for comprehending both land sales and social personhood around Goroka.

A central component of Mauss’ depiction of the gift is its “saturation with the person of the giver” (Jolly 2015:65), and therefore changing practises of gift-giving is linked to changing ideas of personhood. Mauss' study of cross-cultural understandings of personhood is lesser known than *The Gift* (1985 [1938]). While scholars did not systematically adress Mauss’ studies of personhood until the second half of the 20th century, his analysis of the history of Western personhood is prescient today. Mauss made an early argument that social personhood varies cross-culturally, and that the particular individualised notion of person and self that is prominent in the West is a product of its particular cultural history. Like the gift, debates about social personhood found their way to Melanesia via Mauss. Scholars like Strathern (1988) and Roy Wagner (1991) have used terms such as “dividual” and “fractal person” in an attempt to capture alternative ideas of Melanesian personhood (see Chapter Three).

Like the historical focus on Mauss’ study of the gift, rather than his work on personhood, Marx is better known for his political economy than for his humanistic philosophy. While Mauss played a pivotal role in theoretically formulating the gift, Marx has ongoing influence on how anthropologists understand commodities. Marx (1976) opens his critique of political economy with a systematic analysis of the nature of the commodity. For Marx, there are two key dialectics contained within the commodity: a dialectic between exchange-value and use-value, and a dialectic between abstract and concrete labour power. Exchange-value refers to the ratio that economic actors can exchange one commodity for
another (1976:128). This value should not be confused with price, and is based on the socially-necessary labour time required to make each product (1976:129). Use-value, on the other hand, refers to the actual usefulness of the commodity, and unlike exchange-value, “does not dangle in mid-air” by being based on the physical properties of the commodity (1976:126). These dimensions of the commodity are mirrored in the labour workers use to create them. Concrete labour is the physical process required to make a commodity, and like use-value, is heterogeneous depending on the properties of the object in question (1976:132). In contrast, abstract labour is the generalised “socially necessary labour time”, the average time it takes an average worker in a given society to produce a product, which determines exchange-value (1976:130). Marx argues that these abstractions, combined with the money form, allow people to exchange as equivalents a heterogeneous range of commodities made from a heterogeneous range of labour processes (1976: 130). For Marx, once everything that makes a commodity unique is stripped away, only labour time is left—“as exchange values, all commodities are merely definite quantities of congealed labour-time” (1976: 130, emphasis in original).

The notions of exchange-value and abstract labour are central to understanding Marx's notions of alienation and fetishism. They bridge his political economy theories and his humanistic critique of capitalism (1976:163), and are vital to understanding the place of alienation in commodification. For Marx:

the mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves (1976:164-165, emphasis added).

That is to say, commodities, produced in a range of social settings with heterogeneous types of labour with different forms of technology, become objectified in the infinitely exchangeable and fungible form of the commodity. For sellers and buyers of commodities, “social relations between men themselves...assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of relations between things” (1976:165). This makes the commodity a fetish; social relations between people are obfuscated as relations between objects expressed through exchange-values.

Marx's notion of fetishism has been influential in anthropological understandings of commodities and commodification (for example, Taussig 1980), and for creating a theoretical tension between commodities and gifts. Despite the popular description of gifts as “inalienable”, Mauss (2000) does not mention alienation by name in his essay on The Gift. Rather, Chris Gregory (1982:29) drew together theories of commodities and gifts to create a
framework for understanding the (re)production, consumption, distribution, and exchange of gifts, compared to commodities in his seminal work on *Gifts and Commodities*. Here, Gregory provided the theoretical bedrock for the juxtaposition between gifts as “inalienable objects between transactors who are related”, and commodities as “alienated objects between independent transactors” (1982:71). He argued that:

Marx was able to develop a very important proposition: that commodity-exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence...The corollary of this is that non-commodity (gift) exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence. This proposition is only implicit in Marx’s analysis but it is...a precise definition of gift exchange (1982:12, emphasis added)

It is precisely the abstraction of labour and the capitalist's interest in commodities as exchange-values that enables alienation to take place (Marx 1976:716).

While scholars have focused on the centrality of the commodity in Marx's analysis of capitalism, the ethical underpinnings of his critique of alienation only became clearer when Soviet economists translated and released *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1974). Here Marx builds on his critiques (1969) of Ludwig von Feuerbach’s concept of the species-being, arguing that labour is how humans materially manifest their will, and that it enables people to objectify themselves in the world. Marx contends that capitalism alienates this capacity from humans, forcing them to confront their products and their own labour-power as “something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (1974:29, emphasis in original).

The degree that land sales represent “commodification”, or “sales” for that matter, are a central concern of this thesis. Communicating that an object is alienated, separate from either the exchanger or producer, is central to that thing becoming a commodity. Thus Marx’s detailed meditation on alienation, most clearly spelt out in the *Paris Manuscripts* (1974), is a vital component of my argument that land-sales are creolised economic forms. By drawing on legal documents and transferring money, sale parties communicated the potential individualism of land sale, leading to tensions because of the threat of future alienation.

Exploring this alienation requires a three-pronged approach that considers the cultural construction of persons, objects, and the relations between them. I argue that central to alienation is the culturally imaginable separation of persons and things—if alienation is central to the process of commodification, both persons and things must be conceivably fungible in a
given relation. In this regard, Chapter Three examines how the wider symbolic inventory of commodity exchange, such as money, legal ownership, and contracts, all play a key role in providing the necessary symbolic vocabulary to make land and exchange parities imaginatively fungible.

By bridging Marx and Mauss, I bring this broader conversation on gifts and commodities, embedded persons and estranged species-beings, to the sale of land in the New Guinea Highlands. It seems appropriate: *prima facie* the borders of Goroka are at an intersection of the urban and the rural, of gift and commodity circulation, and of the state and political self-organisation. However, in laying out these intersecting elements, I do not want to fall into false dichotomies. Land sales are ambiguous theoretically because they do not easily fit into the heuristics of “gift” and “commodity”. As noted above, Bena do not draw on the ideas of gift and commodities, and comfortably use logics of what anthropologists have categorised as both commodity and gift exchange. On the ground in Bena, the logics of gifts and commodities are *not* like oil and water. With this in mind, my thesis draws together the threads of Mauss and Marx, of estranged persons and embedded things, by exploring land sales as economic creolisation.

**Methodology**

This thesis is based on approximately three months of ethnographic research from the middle of September until the beginning of December, 2014. I spent most of my time in a Bena village, a twenty-minute drive from Goroka. Bena is a cultural-linguistic group in the area, officially designated the Unggai-Bena district of the Eastern Highlands Province. I supplemented my research in this locale with interviews with Chimbu land buyers who regularly attended a Catholic church ten minutes east of Goroka, providing me with insights into the perspectives of land buyers. Finally, I also interviewed researchers at the University of Goroka and representatives at the Lands Department. Other than these interviews, most of my research was done by way of informal participation in people's daily lives. This involved helping in gardens, cooking food, and travelling to and from town, in addition to observing community events, such as bride-wealth and land court disputes. Most of my discussions were done in an informal context without a recording. When I talked to someone about a topic central to my research, I sometimes took notes as they talked, but most of the time, with permission, I wrote down discussions after finishing the conversation.
Because of the multilingual context in which I was working, it is worth making a note about the use of language and translation. Within Bena, most people spoke English, Tok Pisin, (the lingua franca of PNG), and Bena (the local tok ples, the language of the area). Older people were likely to understand and use Bena and use less English. Younger people, on the other hand, were likely to understand but not speak Bena. They also occasionally used English when speaking Tok Pisin (code-switching). Both older and younger generations communicated extensively in Tok Pisin. There were also cultural contexts in which people spoke more Bena. For example, speakers used more Bena during ceremonial events, like a bride-wealth, or when recounting ancestral stories. This was notable during land court hearings, where people gave lengthy stories in Bena. Except for interviews with government officials in town, almost all the discussions I had with my informants were in Tok Pisin.

I learned Tok Pisin for six months before leaving for Papua New Guinea, and I became more comfortable with talking exclusively in the language during my research. I learnt some Bena, mostly greetings and the categorisation of ideas central to my research, such as Bena names for types of land. For quotes in this thesis, I have translated Tok Pisin discussions into English. However, where a particular word is notable or important, I indicate whether English was used by writing [English] next to the word. When I use Tok Pisin words in this thesis, such as kastom (custom), I indicate this by italicising the word. Bena words, like yagofoa (discussed in Chapter Two), are underlined and italicised.

Travelling to the Eastern Highlands with the intention of studying changing land use presented me with challenges. Land is a contentious topic, and land sale even more so. While all my participants were comfortable with me using their name, all the names I use in this thesis are pseudonyms, and at times I have combined informants together, broken up individuals into two people, or changed minor details about accounts. This is to protect the identities of my informants, and to keep the cast of characters to a manageable level. I also have not provided the name of the village.

These concerns, compounded by the short time period I was in PNG, meant that it was not logistically or ethically feasible to work with multiple communities embroiled in concerns over land sale. While numerous people asked me to come to their homes and share their stories about land sales, at times I needed to refuse. It was not fair for me or them to half-build the reciprocal relations these types of exchanges are based upon. My research mainly focuses on the lives of twenty or so people living in a specific village, although I routinely interacted with people far outside this circle. I aim to provide a snapshot of changing lives rather than a
comprehensive representation of buying and selling customary land in the Highlands. I hope that these insights provide fertile ground for future studies of urbanisation, land sale, and commodification in PNG.

Outline

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One introduces Goroka and Bena. I provide a brief history of Goroka and a history of the anthropological work completed in the region. The Eastern Highlands have been an area of anthropological study for many years (Langness 1963, 1964, 1967, 1968; Read 1954, 1955, 1965). Situating this work relative to these ethnographies and the broader history of the area (Munster 1986), studies of urban areas in PNG (Goodard 2005, 2010) and urban theory beyond Melanesia, I contextualise my observations both theoretically and historically. Subsequently, I turn to the Bena village itself, heuristically breaking down the day into morning, afternoon and evening, each with a different theme that is relevant to the subject of this thesis. Using this approach, I aim to provide both a taste of a day in the village and give a broader context for a more specific study of land sales.

Chapter Two introduces the ongoing struggles with land sales of Samson, my adopted father. This account goes on to provide the core ethnographic case study throughout this thesis. By exploring how his previous land sales troubled him during my stay, and how he attempted to sell land in order to pay past debts, I provide ethnographic grounding for my discussion about the economic creolisation and changing ideas of personhood. Drawing on the extensive literature on ownership, gift and commodity exchange in Melanesia and beyond, I explore the complexities of understanding land sales as “sales”, and argue for the ongoing importance of using gift-commodity distinctions analytically to investigate ambiguous commodification on the ground (contra Appadurai 1986). To do so, I have drawn on Michael Goddard's (2000) understanding of alienation based on Marx's 1844 manuscripts (1974). I use this understanding of alienation to build on Kopytoff's (1986) processual approach to the cultural production of commodities, by focusing on the role of alienation in commodification. I argue that land sales exist in a space of imaginative ambiguity, where both parties can contextually emphasise the commodity or gift-like elements of an exchange. Tensions emerge precisely because the possibility of an impersonal exchange exists. In drawing attention to the creolisation of the symbols of exchange, I trace how land sales exist in an interstitial space between both commodities and gifts. By drawing on particular forms of exchange, such as land sale contracts, sellers and buyers produce and materially solidify potential imaginings of an
exchange. The resulting tensions lead to emergent forms of land exchange that take into account the qualities of both commodities and gifts.

Marx’s humanistic understanding of labour, combined with the centrality of exchange in constructing relationships in the Highlands, leads me to discussions of personhood. In Chapter Three, I explore ideas of “freedom” and the creolisation of personhood in Bena. I juxtapose ideas of freedom in the village, based on mobility, land and reciprocal relations, with freedoms of town associated with kaikai mani (eating money) and being removed from the demands of kin networks. By discussing local understandings of freedom, I engage with the lack of systematic anthropologies of freedom underscored by Christopher Kelty’s (2011) recent series of posts on *Savage Minds*, a popular blog written by anthropologists. Additionally, I examine how the discourses people draw on to discuss dreams of a less reciprocally bound existence echo both Deborah Gewertz and Fredrick Errington's (1999) work on emerging class and Kier Martin's (2013) recent study of “big shots” in East New Britain, PNG. While none of my informants could be described as a big shot, the ability to live off money without the demands of kin was a morally ambiguous fantasy. By exploring these competing understandings of freedom, I examine changing ideas of social personhood in Bena.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I recount the conclusion of Samson's land sale saga as I left PNG, and the community's reaction to it. I use this account as an empirical stepping stone to discuss ownership and expanding capitalism in PNG. Here, I emphasise how actors are increasingly able to draw on multiple discourses of ownership to position and claim land. Drawing on Rose's (1994) notion of ownership as communication, I explore a non-rights-based understanding to land ownership in Bena. By highlighting ownership as a form of communication, I demonstrate how actors involved in land sales draw on a creole of ownership to emphasise more (or less) individualised modes of tenure, in turn acting out alternative configurations of sociality and personhood.

I conclude the chapter by exploring the place of land sales within fears of widespread alienation and proletarianisation. By examining the historical literature on dependency theory in PNG (e.g. Amarshi, Good and Mortimer 1979, Howlett 1973), and more contemporary work on mining and land (e.g. Filer 1990, Weiner and Glaskin 2007), I argue that anthropological studies of land take place under the shadow of primitive accumulation⁴ (Marx 1976:877), with questions of the degree, if any, that PNG is similar to early stages of

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⁴ Marx uses “primitive” to mean “original”.

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capitalism in England. The exact road PNG takes, as it becomes increasingly entangled with the world through globalisation, is unclear. It is an open question whether PNG is on a path to violently enforced dependency, demonstrates “capitalism with Melanesian characteristics”⁵, or something else entirely.

In considering these changes, I understand capitalism in a specific sense. When I refer to capitalism, I mean a state of affairs where the dominant mode of production is the capitalist mode of protection. This mode of production is typified by the production of surplus-value commodities by alienated labour-power. This value is then realised in the sphere of exchange. I use this narrow definition for several reasons. As demonstrated by Strathern's (1988:4–8) critique of the application of exploitation cross-culturally, there is a danger of not adequately appreciating local interpretations in an effort to apply abstract frameworks developed in an academic setting. This is particularly true when importing theoretical tools from one cultural context to another. A specific definition of capitalism also enables me to make a demarcation between institutions, symbols and economic practises that are often associated with capitalism, such as rent, that are not necessarily central to the capitalist mode of production. This makes it easier to understand the economic and social flows between adjacent social processes. In doing so, I do not deny the broader cultural contours of capitalism—for example, one parallel process to the expansion of capitalism, individualism, is central to this thesis. However, precisely because of the cultural elements of capitalism, it is easy to analytically muddle the relationships between associated processes.

By examining these debates over dependency, proletarianisation and land alienation, I emphasise the importance of the capillary institutions of the state, rather than capital, in shaping the future of land ownership in PNG. With this in mind, I argue that the relative hegemony of legalistic relationships to property is a critical precursor to wide-spread commodification. My thesis is that land sale represents economic creolisation, but one where different elements of the language are emphasised. This represents a broader power struggle of economic forms., between different imaginings of land-person relations. I argue that the future of land sales and commodification depends on which parts of this creole becomes hegemonic.

⁵ To rephrase “capitalism with Chinese characteristics”.

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Chapter One—The Village and the Town

Two locations defined my stay in the Eastern Highlands—the town of Goroka and a village in Bena (see Figure 1). Neither of these locations fully captured my time in PNG. Both for myself and the people I lived with, there was a constant ebb and flow between the village and town. I routinely travelled to Goroka to go shopping, to stop at a house, and to meet with people for research and socialising. This was characteristic of the relationship between the two spaces, with their constant physical, symbolic and economic interplay. From the flow of visitors to town, to the sale of vegetables at the fresh-food market, urban and near urban life is closely entangled. I introduce this entanglement by providing a taste of these two spaces. I begin with an introduction to Goroka and attempt to convey the sights, sounds, moods and temperaments of the town. After giving a sense of these moods, I describe fragments of village life, using some snippets of a typical day, to illustrate the key themes in my research—land, urbanisation and interdependence.

My intention is to bring together the contingent and quotidian aspects of village life, using each period to point to a particular theme. This is to convey something of the everyday experience of a village on the edge of urbanising Goroka, while emphasising the structural changes that it deals with on an everyday basis, such as urbanisation and the increasing place of commodity exchange. Throughout my research and throughout this thesis, I keep the locations of the town and the village in analytic conversation. People moved freely between the town and the village, and consequently, each of the core topics of my research—land sale, personhood and ownership—were strongly influenced by the nearby presence of the town. More analytically, this thesis is a story of the entwined social and economic logics that people associate with these different spaces.
Figure 1: Map of the region around Goroka. I worked within the circled area (Google Maps 2016)
Studies of the Urban in PNG and Beyond

Anthropologists and academics have spent less time examining urbanisation in PNG compared to land, personhood, commodification and exchange. Within anthropology, early work included Hal and Marlene Levine's (1979) study of “ambivalent townsmen”, as well as Strathern's study of first generation Hagen migrants in Port Moresby (1975), both providing a broad sketch of urban-rural cultural continuity and discontinuity. More recently, Goddard (2005) explored the lived experiences and discourses surrounding settlements around Port Moresby. Here he stresses the disparity between discourses surrounding settlements and the lived experiences of those inside them. Goddard also emphasises the cultural continuity between “raskols” and big-men styles of competitive consumption. Along a similar vein, Timothy Sharp et al. (2015) examine the struggles of Papua New Guineans to survive in the “formal, the informal, and the precarious” areas of urban life. Finally, the geographers Gina Koczberski, and George Curry (2004; Koczberski, Curry and Connell 2001) have stressed the historical similarities between the state's increasingly militaristic approach to settler communities and historical colonial attitudes towards urban dwelling Papua New Guineans.

Despite these studies, there is limited research on the experiences of villagers living in the areas immediately around town with an explicit urban focus. A notable exception to this is the recent edited volume Villagers and the City (Goddard 2010). While focused on Port Moresby, and mainly on residents in Moresby, Deborah Van Heekeren's (2010:44) essay on the “moral limits of capitalism in a Vula'a village” provides an ethnographic account of the ongoing consequences of the construction of the Magni Highway between a Vula'a village and Port Moresby. Many elements of her account echo my findings here, even though the village Heekeren worked in was further away than Bena is to Goroka. She recounts how initially the road was a boon for Vula'a villagers, providing a rapid increase in traffic to Moresby for both social and economic ends (2010:56). However, local government failed to maintain the road, leading to its steady decline. For the Vula'a villagers, the road and the Public Motor Vehicle (PMV) drivers who travel along it became a source of moral tensions. Operators became “caught between the capitalist economy in which they seek participation and the moral constraints of village perception of appropriate behaviour that construct personal wealth as the direct product of greed” (2010:64). The highway was the material manifestation of the entanglements between the village and city which linked villagers’ livelihoods and their ongoing exchange networks. The decline of the road, and the precarious position of PMV
drivers straddling these two spheres, metaphorically and literally capture the complex relations Vula'a have with Moresby.

On the world stage, there have been significant changes in urban studies. Scholars (see McFarlane 2008, Edensor and Jayne 2011, Robinson 2002) have increasingly critiqued urban theorists’ practice of hierarchically comparing Global South cities to cities in the Western World. Urban theory has historically been split between studies of Western cities and urban spaces categorised as part of the “Third World” (Robinson 2002, 531). Problematic geographic distinctions aside, this separation also gave rise to an intellectual division of labour of sorts. Students of Western cities were the primary producers of urban theory, while those who studied the “Third World” focused on “practical” matters like development (Robinson 2002). This has resulted in theorists using cities like London, Paris and New York as baselines for comparing urban areas. Where the comparisons hold, it shows that the “Third World” city in question is developing towards the idealised model of a Westernised city. Where the trajectory of the “Third World” city differs, it is both analytical and developmentally divergent.

Similar to other narratives of hierarchical comparison, like development and modernisation, urbanisation is haunted by explicitly and implicitly ranking urban areas against normative Western ideals. In response to these trends, there has been a “Southern turn” (Rao 2006: 227) as critical urban theorists highlight how Global South cities like Mumbai, Khartoum, or Jakarta are not following a unilinear trend of urban development (Davis 2006, McFarlene 2008, Simone 2009). Theorists highlight the unique paths that different cities of the world are following in order to explore a diverse range of potential cityscapes. These include phenomena like the massive spread of slums, undermining dreams of development (Davis 2006), while others emphasise the rise of interstitial spaces between the state and capital giving rise to the opportunity and possibility of new urban politics (Appadurai 2001, Simone 2009).

The second major theme is a deconstruction of what is considered a “city”. Instead of introducing extra taxonomic distinctions, like peri-urban, authors such as AbdouMaliq Simone (2009) have focused on ideas of “city-ness”, whereby various features associated with the city define the subjective experiences and nature of living in different spaces. These features are not understood exogenously—rather they emerge out of the experiences and happenstance of actual inhabitants of a space. Central to Simone's conception of the city is the layering of Deleuzian-style assemblages—the urban is something that residents gradually build through
their diverse attempts to navigate city life. For example, Simone paints a picture of life at 3 am in a city as an “assemblage of discrepant activities”: the sale of marijuana, food stalls, charms and local medicines, “seem[ing] to pile up on each other given their proximity” (2009:4). This vision of the city does not deny the agency of individual actors nor reduces the city to them. Critically, urban spaces exist because, as urban dwellers attempt to go about their days, they invariably become enmeshed in the production of space—each “discrepant activity” alone does not make 3 am. Rather it is the convergence of drug sales, food stalls, and groups smoking cigarettes and drunken party-goers, each navigating social life, that leads to the emergent spatial experience of the urban at 3 am. Through these “rhizomatically joined assemblages” (Lemert in Simone 2009: xi), residents co-construct city life.

While building a locally-grounded understanding of city life, Simone has global ambitions. It is the similarity between assemblages of city life that creates the impression of similarity between world cities—an impression that both reflects solidarity between urban living while also concealing its manifest diversity, since it is precisely the emergence of the cobbled-together elements of the urban that produces the stunning diversity observed in the world's cities. This interplay makes the urban simultaneously local and global.

Central to Simone's (2009:7) interests is the juxtaposition of this agentive creation of the structure of city life with the attempts of authorities to tame, control and plan urban spaces. By focusing on how everyday people live in and create the city, Simone casts a critical gaze on the attempts of planners and international capital to shape urban spaces in their image. Such an approach also makes understanding city life a fundamentally ethnographic project that involves understanding and dissecting the lived experiences that produce the individual assemblages of urban life. This theoretical perspective avoids being reductionist by emphasising the interaction, flow and emergence that urban interactions create. Finally, it is notable that an assemblage approach to space does not need to be confined to an urban setting—the “city” element of urban assemblages is due to the local identification of city space, rather than these spaces meeting externally defined criteria. Rather than cities or towns being idealised categories based on ideas of population density or mode of employment, cities and towns are concentrations of certain kinds of social behaviour, kinds that will vary case by case.

This approach helps clarify many analytic questions about the nature of the urban in Global South settings. Instead of trying to match different settlements to criteria of a town, this framework helps emphasise the urban as spatially-located social relations. This is not an understanding of the urban based on external criteria, but Simone understands the urban based
on the form of social relations and cultural meanings that people ascribe to certain spaces. This approach is useful in deconstructing the similarities in how my informants used the Highlands Highway and Goroka, and the spread of economic forms of land exchange. Urbanisation, manifests in the day-to-day lives of people near town as the expansion of town-like social and economic relations. These expansions flow out of the town along different vectors with varying degrees of resistance—most notably, proximity to the road plays a vital role in acting as a space of commodity exchange, impersonal encounters and going for a spin. In this way, the road is a partially-urban space.

This highlights direct tensions between how people categorise space and the distribution of urban assemblages. On one hand, people associate impersonality and moral ambiguity with town. Roaming encounters between people from different backgrounds and relationships based on impersonal commodity exchange is definitive of the town experience. Nevertheless, the Bena village exists in a hybrid space that partially incorporates these elements of town. Trade-stores line the road, which face pressure from kin for “free credit” while also attempting to sell their goods. There is a distinct difference between where assemblages lie versus where people feel certain actions ought to take place. Villages near the road and town incorporate characteristics people associate with different spaces, and therefore represent spaces of ambiguity and pollution—sociality out of place.

People had a relationship to Speedway, the section of the Highlands Highway that ran by the village, that was strikingly similar to how they interacted with town. Combined with the oscillating nature of the population of Goroka, this spatial convergence raises questions about the nature of towns and the future of urbanisation for surrounding communities. Here I ask, what is the nature of Bena as a peri-urban space? What is the distribution and form of social relations that make up that area? Finally, what might changing economic relations around town reveal about the nature of Papua New Guinean urbanisation?

**Goroka**

Colonial administrators formally purchased the land that forms modern Goroka from local landholders in 1948, and the town is built up around a colonial-era airstrip first constructed during World War II (Munster 1986:484). The outpost grew into a town, fed by gold prospecting in the 1930s (Muster 1986:521), the introduction of *Coffeea arabica* cultivation, and the urban migration associated with these industries (May 1978). Now it is the second largest town in the Highlands region (Bourke & Harwood 2009). Goroka is in the Goroka
Valley river basin, ringed by a stunning crown of mountains and surrounded by a host of communities whose people visit town to purchase food, see relatives and sell produce at the market. The valley is relatively densely populated—the EHP has a population density of around 52 people per square kilometre (National Statistics Office 2012). This density is evident in the structure of the landscape—as one drives out of Goroka, gardens spread out over the rolling, hilly landscape. Neat garden squares surrounded by banana trees break up hills of greenery. The Asaro, the main river in the area, cuts across the region from the northwest to the southeast. It supplies water for communities along its border, for bathing, fishing and, at times, recreational white-water tubing. It is also the primary water supply for the town itself.

The Highlands Highway also goes through Goroka, and is one of the two main ways to reach the town—one can either drive up from Lae or fly in from the coast, as I did. Goroka is in the middle of the Highway, a two-lane road that runs from Lae all the way to Tari and Pogera. From Goroka, the road heads southeast down to Lae, and northwest up to Mount Hagen. PMVs and trucks packed full of people roar up and down the Highway, as do large construction vehicles carrying heavy equipment from Lae.

There has been significant previous ethnographic research in the area in and around Goroka. Most notable was Kenneth Read's (1952, 1954, 1955, 1965, 1986) pioneering work among the Gahuku-Gama in the area immediately northwest of Goroka. Read's ethnography, *The High Valley*, was novel both because it was the first work in the Eastern Highlands region, and due to its evocative style and lengthy discussions of his personal relationships with informants—a rare approach for his anthropological generation. His also studied morality (1954) and men's cults (1952), which were considered new in the anthropology of the Highlands. Lewis Langness's work (1964, 1967, 1968, 1974) followed Read's ethnography. Langness studied in Bena Bena, the linguistic group south of Goroka, and within the cultural group that I worked. Langness emphasised cultural similarities between Bena Bena and other groups in the Highlands, emphasising big-man political organisation (1967:162), pollution beliefs surrounding women, and political exchange (1967:165), while also pointing to differences in the specificities of gender “antagonism” (1967), the centrality of warfare in establishing political power (1968) and the role of ritual knowledge in maintaining gendered power (1974). Following on from these two anthropologists, ethnographies of the Eastern Highlands have blossomed, and include studies of food and pollution (Meigs 1984), the cultural meshing and conflict between big-men political models and entrepreneurship (Finney
1973), as well as work that continues Read's original interests in gender, masculinity and rituals of initiation (Herdt 1981, see also Langness and Hays 1987).

Bena is a cultural-linguistic group in the area south of Goroka (see Figure 1). Officially, it is south of Goroka district, and part of the Unggai-Bena District which, according to the 2011 census, has a population of over 67,000 people (National Statistics Office 2012). People at the village I worked at describe Bena as a “big name”. Bena encompasses a large area running south of Faniufa, which is directly adjacent to the southern end of Goroka, and extends down to Bena Bridge. This name is above their “little name”, which is the local collection of *haus lain*, each of which have a *ples* (village) name. I arrived at Goroka with an open-ended focus on exploring how people in and around Goroka understand and use land, in light of urbanisation.

![Figure 1: Setani Street](image)

Initially, I spent most of my time in the township itself, staying at a house in the northern area of Goroka, which was being rented out for a different research project studying the main market. I explored the town from here, practised Tok Pisin and started to make tentative first contacts. The first thing that struck me about Goroka was how green it was. In contrast to Port Moresby, with its concrete sidewalks, two-laned roads and numerous
compounds, many parts of Goroka are more like a green space with occasional houses [Figure 2]. Residents divide Goroka into four main areas: north Goroka, west Goroka (or simply “west”), the market, and town, which is central and is built up around the airport. North Goroka includes the University of Goroka, a nightclub and several hotels. A paved main road with many potholes winds through north Goroka leading out of town, and dirt roads branch off into other streets. When I was in town, I stayed on the middle-class Setani Street\(^6\) that had large houses, large lawns and high fences [Figure 2]. This was typical in some parts of town—large, multi-storeyed houses commonly had several families inside with some kind of high, sometimes barbed-wire, fence ringing the property. Moving towards the market, the main street goes downhill to look out over a park where an old hospital used to be [Figure 3]. This main road eventually splits—one way going to town, the other into the market. The expatriate community lived in large houses hidden by razor wire and security guards on a hill rising up on the left, out of the picture.

![Figure 2: Main road in North Goroka leading down to the market](image)

Walking around Goroka in the middle of the day, I saw numerous small stalls or “tables” with colourful umbrellas, selling betel nut, cigarettes, rolled village tobacco, mints

\(^6\)Setani means “red ground” in the local Gahuku dialect.
and sweets to people passing by. Many town dwellers used this kind of purchase and resale as a source of income. People huddle around these tables selling their wares, chewing betel nut, talking, and playing cards. These umbrellas dominated the visual landscape, particularly in the market [Figure 4], which was a bustling area full of people, stalls and stores. It was a busy fresh food market as well as a main depot for PMVs driving within and out of town. There are no signs on the buses, and drivers called out the name of their destinations at rapid speed; the air was full of machine gun cries of “LaeLaeLaeLae” and “BenaBridgeBenaBridgeBenaBridge”. In the middle of this area was National Park, where various groups held rugby games, events and sermons.

![Figure 3: Goroka Market](image)

The market was a large area dotted with people, mostly women, sitting on the ground selling various fruits and vegetables spread out on blue tarpaulins. Some sat inside roofed areas, each area with a different speciality like fruit or vegetables, while others sat on the ground outside the fence. Goods that wealthier customers commonly bought, like cucumbers or capsicum, were clustered near the entrance. Beyond the main market was the “chicken market” —- ironically, however, chickens were sold elsewhere. Here, sellers of buai (betel nut), daka (pepper sticks) and kambang (powdered coral lime), all imported from the coast and
islands, lined the sides of the hill. Various trade-stores with corrugated-iron walls, few windows, and security guards, surrounded the market area [Figure 5]. These stores sold a range of products like rice, tinned fish and meat, salt, and washing powder.

![Figure 4: Trade-Stores](image)

I regularly caught PMVs going down the Highlands Highway to Bena from the market area, a hilarious exercise for other passengers. PMVs are retrofitted vans packed full of seats to maximise capacity, and with my height, I had to “fold” into a seat, much to the amusement of other passengers. After squeezing into a PMV, it was a short ride down to the village. A driver and a door-person operate PMVs. The door person opens the doors at stops and collects fares while the PMV travels. Somehow, door people managed to collect the cash from passengers and (generally) remember how much change each was owed. Everyone helped each other pass stacks of coins up and down the crowded van as it rumbled along the Highway.

While locals did not classify the area around the Bena community as *bus* (bush), it was not quite *kunai* (grass) plains either. *Bus* was used to refer to denser areas further away from the town and had an unsophisticated connotation—the people who lived in *bus* were often referred to as being wilder. If pressed, people classified the area as *kunai*, but they explained...
that it was not real *kunai*, like the plains on the other side of the river. With the Asaro River snaking down almost parallel to the road, the area was lush and full of high trees and greenery.

As I approached the village, I would shout out to the driver “*haus lain wandaun*” (one down at the house line), and after stopping, everyone would need to go through the comical process of getting out of the PMV to give me enough space to get out, before piling back in to let the PMV go on its way. When I first started, this was a less regular trip—I would stay in the village for a few days, before returning to the house in Goroka. Eventually, the reverse became true, and instead of returning to my house in Goroka, I would return home to Bena.

**A Day in the Village: The Morning and Work**

Days started early in Bena. The walls of the houses were thin, so at around 5:30 am, the sound of roosters, people moving about, babies crying and the locally-made, reggae-electronica music booming from mobile phones regularly woke me. People happily shouted at each other through walls, so by 6:00 am, most people were up. We typically ate a breakfast of sweet potato or corn, boiled or roasted on a fire started by burning a plastic bag. I stayed in what people referred to as a *banis* (fence), the area inside a wooden and wire fence that surrounded the houses of Samson, his four children, his sisters Felicity and Jayla, and their grandmother [Figure 6]. Most of the houses were made of *pitpit*—shoots that are dried, beaten and then tightly woven to form walls and floors. Some houses had *kunai* roofs, while others had corrugated-iron. People liked these roofs because of their permanency, although they complained that it would get hot in the middle of the day as the sun baked the metal. The *banis* is part of a *haus lain* (house line) of extended kin; this was a line of compounds containing houses dotted along either side of a dirt feeder road that goes from the Highway down to the Asaro river.
Figure 5: Inside the banis
Early in the morning, many of the older women, like Jayla, left for gardens. It got hot in the middle of the day, so people liked to work in the morning. It was difficult to find clear patterns in the days that people went to the garden. People did not go to the garden every day, but based on my observations, the older women, and some younger women, went to the garden approximately two out of three days. People categorised and used these gardens in various fashions. The main two types of land were *yagofa* and *wessen*, meaning “hard ground” and “wet sand”, in Bena and Tok Pisin respectively (there was a mix of opinions whether *wessen* was Tok Pisin or Bena) [see Figure 7]. The *banis* I stayed with had eight *yagofa* and *wessen* gardens distributed around the area, some up to a forty-minute walk up the Highway, others that required fording the river.

*Figure 6: A yagofa sweet potato garden*
The two main gardens that people used during my stay were a *yagofa* garden, simply referred to as “mountain garden”, and a *wessen* garden called “*Morex*”. The mountain *yagofa* garden was on the other side of the Highway, which people regularly crossed in order to get to gardens and *haus lain* on the other side. In that garden, there were rows of crops running down raised piles of black ground, in which people planted taro, corn, cucumber, sweet potato, and *as bean* (a form of bean). The gardens, some which were more closely attended than others, belonged to a range of people in the *banis*. *Morex*, on the other hand, was a *wessen* garden. It was far more difficult to reach, and took around 20 minutes of slogging through muddy coffee gardens and “short cuts” adjacent to the river. Unlike *yagofa* gardens, of black ground, the ground there was flat, with square gardens ringed by banana trees [see Figure 8]. Here there were a range of crops: sweet potato, bananas, cucumber, peanut and corn. The river had washed away some of the gardens at *Morex* when it flooded a few years ago.
This two-garden system played a sophisticated role in food management. As a tropical region, the PNG Highlands have a dry season and a wet season. During the wet season, *wessen* gardens flood, so people go to *yagofa* gardens where the water drains into the gullies. After the wet season, the flooding rejuvenates *wessen* garden land and people shift to using them instead. The sweet potato (*kaukau*) gardens that made up the bulk of people’s crops played a crucial role in subsistence patterns. *Kaukau* gardens were mixed gardens consisting of sweet
potato, corn, cucumber and kumu—a general category for greens such as watercress and pumpkin tops. People planted kaukau in mounds, with corn growing adjacent to each of the four corners of the mound. The gardener then planted a couple of cucumbers on the side, before finally scattering kumu seeds everywhere over the top. These four crops ripened at different, staggered intervals and formed the basis of daily diets. The kumu takes approximately one month to become ready for harvest, the cucumber two, the corn three and finally the kaukau four to six. By having multiple mixed gardens growing at different stages of readiness, people were able to eat a range of foods throughout the year. They supplemented this with other crops like cassava. In Bena, cassava was not a staple crop. However, many cassava crops lined the edges of some wessen gardens, and some yagofa gardens had large raised rows of cassava. People explained that they used cassava as food during famines (taim bilong hangre) caused by particularly long dry spells. If the dry season goes on longer than usual, the other primary crops, such as sweet potato, fail. However, cassava survives. Further, sweet potato becomes inedible if unharvested for about a month, meaning people must harvest it regularly. In contrast, cassava will simply remain in the ground, edible until harvest, providing a stock of food for times when crops fail (or people tire of eating sweet potato).

**Gardens and Memories of the Past**

Opa, Samson's nephew and a middle-aged man, explained that in ancestral times (taim bilong tambuna), gardens used to be significantly larger with high fences surrounding them. These gardens had to be so large because of how many pigs people had. Opa explained that now people are lazier, buying lamb flaps or pigs from other people for customary feasts. The decline of the size of gardens was also due to communities becoming Seventh Day Adventist (SDA)—instead of consuming pigs, which Leviticus of the Old Testament forbids, the village raises goats. Unlike pigs, which break into gardens and dig sweet potato out of the ground, goats are much better at finding food, such as scraps while people are cooking, or attempting to grab food out of people's (my) hands. Nevertheless, Opa said the quantity of goats held now was far less than the number of pigs villages had in the past:

Before, strong men made strong fences and grew large gardens. Before, town was small. There were not many people to buy food. Now, people sell food, so they don’t want to give it to pigs.

As will become increasingly apparent as this thesis goes on, my participants frequently situated current events with remembrances of the past, particularly *taim bilong tambuna*
(which generally referred to pre-colonial ancestral times). The place of oral histories, the past, and remembering have all been significant objects of inquiry and debate in anthropology. Critically, history is not simply “what actually occurred”, but also an amalgamation of intra-subjective recollection, remembering and contextualisation of the present. The degree the past represents “another country” (see Ingold 1996:199), and the role of the past in acting as an organising structure for producing the present (Peel 1984, Sahlins 1981, 1985, Obeyesekere 1992) have been hotly contested in anthropology.

Central to these discussions is the nature of the dynamic between history and the present. As John Peel (1984:113-114) emphasises, the relationship between the present and the past is one of mutual co-construction. Despite broad agreement that history is created in the present, and is more complex than an empirical representation of the past, the nature of this temporal dynamic is disputed. In some regards, the structural-functional position, that societies use the past and “strive to make history repeat itself” (Peel 1984:113, emphasis in original) as a means of political continuity and continuation, has a degree of truth. However, the strong version of the structural-functional view of society, which depicts societies tending towards equilibrium and changelessness is deeply problematic and has been strongly critiqued in the modern anthropological era (Valeri 1990:155). This is particularly true in cultures undergoing rapid change where history, in many regards, cannot be repeated.

There is clearly a degree of nostalgia to these remembrances reproduced by Opa. In interpreting these remembrances, it is useful to keep in mind analytical distinctions between the mythical past and historical past (Valeri 1990: 164). The historical past is analogous with the present, and is a model for and open for critique precisely because it is comparable to and comprehensible within the present. In contrast, the mythical past is separated by a fundamental rupture, impossible to recreate and therefore beyond debate. Where particular events are situated as mythical or historical is also a point of significant political struggle.

Melanesianists have emphasised that historically many Papua New Guinean societies predominately made distinctions between the mythical past and the present, with the historical past largely interpreted within a cyclical framework (see Burman 1981, Munn 1977, 1986, 1992, Silverman 1997). For example, Eric Silverman (1997:107) suggests that cyclical time co-exists with linear time for both “political strategy” and social structure among Iatmul. With the arrival of colonialism, there is an increasing tripartite division of time for Papua New Guineans. The mythical ancestral past, the historical past which includes pre-colonial memories directly passed on to living persons, and finally the present. In this regard, the more
immediate pre-colonial *taim bilong tambuna* is in an ongoing process of becoming mythicised. In some ways, it is intimately accessible, and disputed within the present. Bena I talked to often had parents or grandparents that had personally experienced pre-colonial times. At the same time, it is also increasingly separated by a chasm of cultural change. Remembrances reflect participants building on multiple accounts to create a coherent connection to the past, which is used to throw relief on concerns of the present. As such, viewing the past through such accounts is necessarily composed of multiple partial truths, though a version that gives an impression of both the past and how people situate themselves in the present.

**Coffee Ideology and Gendered Labour**

Reflections on the past were also rife in village discussions about gendered labour. Unlike the women in the village who tended food gardens, men did not consistently leave the village early to go to work. Young men in particular were more likely to hang around during the morning, playing cards, chewing *buai* and wandering to Speedway service station. Samson often worked on a flower garden, and other men, like Samson's middle son, Junior, headed off early to work in the coffee gardens. These provided the primary, albeit irregular, cash income for men in the village, in contrast to the more regular money women acquired from selling garden produce and/or wage-work.

People commonly talked about the hard work necessary for harvesting coffee, and there was a significantly different ideology surrounding the growing and sale of coffee compared to garden produce. As I explore in Chapter Three, people associate growing food in gardens with a form of tending—people create an environment that enables the food to grow. Because the land grows the food, the food is free. In contrast, nobody described coffee harvests as free. Samson and other men routinely reminded me that coffee requires lots of backbreaking labour. It requires constant work and weeding to make sure it grows properly. While people do not use chemical assistance to grow their other crops “because the ground is blessed”, they constantly tend the area around coffee trees with chemical weed killers. Further, people pointed to the harvesting, drying and processing of coffee cherries into beans as a labour-intensive process and the basis for the connection between coffee harvesting and wealth. Samson explained:

Coffee is hard work. If you look after coffee, it looks after you. If you work hard, work on the trees and harvest it all quickly, you will be rich. If you are lazy and do not work, the trees will not give cherries and you won’t have money.
People use and understand the money acquired from this hard work differently than money earned through wage labour or selling garden produce. Women selling garden produce routinely explained that they used the money they gained for the three basic essentials—soap, salt and cooking oil, in addition to other small items like tinned fish and rice. In contrast, Samson and Opa used the income from coffee to distribute cash to kin and pay customary obligations like bride-wealth or compensation payments. Thus, men who are able to harvest large amounts of coffee are able to display their wealth (and work) at intercommunity gatherings.

The idea that coffee growing is hard work that can build prestige, while gardening produces free food fits into wider anthropological understandings and debates over the gendered contributions to wealth and subsistence in PNG (see Josephides 1985, Modjeska 1982, A. Strathern 1986, M. Strathern 1988). For some time anthropologists have observed seemingly unequal divisions of labour between men and women in Highlands societies (although, see Modjeska 1982 for a breakdown of the gendered contribution of garden labour). Central to these discussions was the question of the validity of applying Marxist ideas of exploitation to gift societies. Strathern (1988) seminally argues that the “exploitation” of women's labour did not accurately capture gendered economic relations in Melanesian societies, since there was not a discrete separation of personhood between men and women. As men and women are relationally bound, women's labour could not be strictly alienated through the exchange of pigs for prestige by men. While it is inappropriate to talk about the alienation of women's work, these debates also explored how women's work can be culturally obfuscated when women's labour is not necessarily as highly valued as men's. Despite the ethnographic observation that women's and men's work, and ability to gain status, occupy separate spheres, it does not necessarily entail that these domains are hierarchically ranked in an echo of Western public/private gendered divisions of labour.

The tensions between separate gendered spheres of labour are central to ongoing frustrations with labour and sharing. Concerns over people, particularly young men, being lazy, came up repeatedly during my stay. One day I was walking along in the mountain garden with Mere, Samson's second oldest daughter, and my closest friend in PNG. She is a tall woman, and was often free flowing with her opinions. Picking cucumber in the garden, she turned to me, frustrated, and said:

They [men] are lucky that you are here because otherwise I would not feed them. That is my rule—no work, no food. Felicity says if I want to go to heaven, I should share. I don't care. When my mother left, that is when I decided that I would not
feed people anymore. Men here just want to eat. They don’t want to work. Who do they think I am? Their mother? I’m not their mother, but they expect me to cook for them, even when they do nothing.

As one older man explained to me:

When you stay here and wake up in the morning, you will see there are two lines. One line is hard working. They wake up early, go to the garden and work until they sweat. Others are the lazy line. They wake up and do nothing.

These discussions often emerged when sitting around Felicity's fire during the evenings. Felicity is Samson’s older sister and always seemed to be in the midst of starting or working on a new project. While Samson spoke more at intercommunity events, like bride-wealth or court cases, I soon learned that Felicity commanded more respect within the compound itself.

Sitting around her house one evening, she found they had run out of wood. Exasperated, she turned to Semu, Samson's youngest male child, and said:

This is men’s work. When you are walking around and you see some good wood, you must bring it. In the time of ancestors, the *haus man* said “you must always have a large fire. All the time. Whether you have food or not.” This is good. So men, when you walk around, you must keep our stock of wood high.

These tensions around expectations of labour reciprocity and sharing are not new to communities in PNG (see, for example, Kahn 1986, Whitehead 2000). Sharing garden food is a clear domain for women to gain prestige and status, as I explore in my discussion of evenings below. While there were continuities to the past in these tensions between men and women, I observed new undercurrents to the concerns. These struggles are in line with general observations of changing masculinity in the face of a troubling modernity in Melanesia (see Jolly 2000, Taylor 2008, Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). Like many places in the Pacific, changing circumstances increasingly dislocate young men in Bena. Traditional means of prestige, such as warfare, are now closed to them, and much of the previous kin support structures for the societal control of men’s behaviour have declined—notably male initiation and the institution of the *haus man* (house man). In ancestral times, after male initiation, men in Bena gained access to the men’s house. There, older men would teach younger men secrets and guide them in appropriate conduct. As Felicity, who is also a primary school teacher, put it:

Before, it was the house where older men would tell stories to younger men. Teach them about gardens, marriage, all kinds of things. People would not be big-heads. If you were a big-head man, they would show you. Now men wander about doing nothing, smoke, drugs, beer. This is finished. It was before colonialism [English]. Now people go to school, so now parents have to do this type of thing. If they
kids] listen to parents, it will be alright. If not, they will cause trouble. In school people only learn things in theory [English]. When it comes to practice, people say whatever. They do not learn.

This idea that there is a problem with young men because traditional structures for teaching them are gone was repeated by multiple older informants—both men and women. Another older man explained to me that the concerns of rising rates of youth violence and gang rape in cities were due to the decline of the haus man. Yet others attribute increasing domestic violence to the Christian idea of co-habitation—as Opa explained, when men and women lived in separate houses, they did not get frustrated and physically fight one another as much. These concerns echo my earlier discussion of the past. Bena actively positioned the past depending on what they wanted to emphasise about the present—people pointed to the boons of modernity in the form of commodities, but repeatedly used the past as a source of morality to condemn present behaviours. These experiences and reflections point to the general concerns people have for an emerging crisis of masculinity in the village, where the gendered classification of “women's work”, a hegemony that can obfuscate women's contributions, acts as a double-edged sword that also closes young men off from being able to contribute to village life. These stories are part of broader attempts to narrativise and make sense of rapid social change, which has gone hand in hand with destabilising gender roles (see Hermkens 2008)

The Day, Money and Town

In the middle of the day, villagers returned from their work and commonly slept through the hot noon sun. After hard work in the garden, they describe themselves as “soft” or “weak” (malomalo) and needing rest. Once they woke, they sat around the village a bit, chatting and chewing buai. Occasionally, they caught the bus up to town. Samson’s children regularly made trips up to Goroka Builders, a small construction business in west Goroka [Figure 9]. During the majority of my time in the field, Samson and his wife were estranged and she stayed in west Goroka with kin. Her brother owns Goroka Builders, and Samson’s oldest son works there. When Mere was sick of the village, needed an easy place to sell buai, or simply had tasks in town, she would stop by and sometimes stay at Goroka Builders. When Mere was going to a defamation hearing at the nearby village court, she and the four other family members stopped by the business to catch up, play cards and pass the time. This back and forth between the village and Goroka was typical of the community. People visited town
around once or twice a week, sometimes to buy food, sell produce at the market, visit kin, or just walk around.

Figure 8: Goroka Builders
This regular travel to the town, both to see people and to visit, was part of a broader ebb and flow of people that formed a fundamental feature of Goroka. Talking to an Australian ex-pat about the few times he had been to Goroka, he said, “Sometimes the town is pumping. It’s like after a music festival—the streets are packed with people walking around and chatting. Other times it feels empty, like it is deserted”. While only based on limited experience, this sentiment gives a good feel for the different temperaments of the town. During my time there, it became apparent that Goroka follows a weekly cycle, one with varying intensities at different times of the year. On Sunday, the town is quietest—the streets are nearly empty and few people are selling wares. I took the picture below on a Sunday, and it gives a good idea of how empty the streets are [Figure 10]. Many people go to church on Sunday, while others recover from Friday and Saturday night. However, over the course of the week, the town and its streets begin to swell as people visit from the surrounding villages. By the time Friday rolls around, it feels as though the population of the town has quadrupled. People mill in the streets, some going to various places in town, but many simply wandering around, socialising. Saturday is less intense, and on Sunday, it drops right off, and the cycle begins anew.
I often asked people why they went to town, travelled to Goroka with them, and listened to their accounts of why other people went to Goroka. Some reasons and activities were highly instrumental, like going to the market or to a government office. However, other reasons, such as people going to town “just to have a look”, “go for a spin” or “wokabaut nating” (walking around, doing nothing) were common. In this case, going to town was in itself a recreational activity—town itself was the objective. Talking to a friend from Bena, he said, “You sit around in the village all week. You go to the garden, work, so by the end of the week you want something different. You’re sick of seeing the same things.”

In addition to this more positive face of town, people worried sometimes about its negative influence on behaviour and morality. These concerns focused on the prevalence of drinking and gambling in town, as well as the sexual promiscuity it was perceived as promoting. As Mere and many others were keen to explain, both men and women were not interested in marriage for love anymore—it was now about money and sex. This sexualisation of town also had a sinister backdrop, as town was a space of potential sexual violence. A range of people expressed concerns of rape by prowling packs of out-of-town men. The focus here...
was threefold: the rising unpredictability and immorality of young men, the “out-of-town” element using Goroka opportunistically, and declining customary punitive institutions that people felt prevented these actions. Asking if such violence occurred in ancestral times, I was told immediately, “No, the criminals would have been killed by the women's kin”.

Similar social relationships and discourses surrounded the usage of the Highway as well. The village was adjacent to the road and the Asaro River. People regularly declared that they were “going for a spin” or a “nothing spin” (wan spin tasol or spin nating) up to the local Speedway [Figure 11]. People came from as far as the other side of the river to see the road. Residents from my village joked it was because they wanted to “count cars”—“they don’t have any cars near their village, so they come here to see the cars”. While tongue-in-cheek, this statement also reveals a degree of truth—a major recreational activity of people is to go visit and see different places. Both going to town and visiting the road were variations of a general theme of recreation.
Figure 10: Speedway

The central place the road takes in the imagination of urban space and modernity in Bena is striking. Rot (road) as a metaphor has played a central role in a range of Melanesian ideologies over the 20th and 21st century (Filer 2006:72). These include rot bilong bisnis (the road of business), rot bilong lotu (the road of God), rot bilong kastom (the customary road), rot bilong lo (the road of law), and perhaps most famously, rot bilong kago (the road of cargo) (Lawrence 1989). Colin Filer (2006) argues that these are best understood as Roads, a form of local ideology centred on a particular means of getting somewhere in both a literal and
metaphorical sense. Peter Lawrence's (1964) study of cargo movements (or cargo cults) emphasises the particular blending of local cosmology, particular historical circumstance, understandings of Christianity, political context and a ruptured economic sociality as a result of modernity. Through ritual activity, Lawrence's Madang informants hoped he would “open the road to cargo” (1964:3), creating a path to the power white people were preconceived to have. While cargo movements have fallen distinctly out of favour, politicians and grassroots villagers routinely deploy the language of roads to discuss development, power and modernity more broadly. Filer (2006) traces the conflict between rot bilong kasom and rot bilong lo, where Papua New Guineans debate on an everyday level how customary practices ought to intersect with legislation. In this context, the Highway as a road to town holds particular resonance—it was a road to town, literally, and a road to what the urban symbolises, both in its modernity and moral ambiguity.

Night, Power and Sharing

Finally, as the sun sets, people returned from their chores and began finding dinner. Sometimes Jayla or Mere brought food from their afternoon stint in the garden, or others bought rice and tinned tuna from a nearby trade store. Women usually provided the food, either from stores or gardens, and cooked it. Multiple trade stores that sold rice, batteries, tuna and other goods were dotted around the area. They were periodically open and closed, depending on the time of the year, as well as how close it was to the coffee season, since it was expensive to buy all the stock upfront. Some people, like Opa, casually bought and resold buai. As the day ended, more people would settle down, and buy and sell goods around the area. Around the middle of my stay, more of the female family members started to sell goods to people in the haus lain and in town. This was because Felicity decided to form a women’s group with all the women in the banis, and had received a business loan. Julie Soso, the governor of the EHP at the time, had created a program that enabled women to group together in order to apply for small business loans. These transactions were not as elaborate as the wok meri movement (Sexton 1982). However, many of the same dynamics remained—the group consisted of lineage mates from the same village, organised by a woman of status whom many respected (Sexton 1982:170). In this case, Felicity wanted to purchase chicks for later sale at the market. She told me she would eventually like to hire a man to look after the chickens. However, first she needed to repay the loan. Therefore, Mere and Emily started to sell buai around the banis and up in the town near Goroka Builders.
In one particularly memorable encounter, Samson’s youngest daughter, Julie, was selling *buai* to help make money to repay the loan. After complaining for some time about only having a few coins, Noah, Felicity's son, attempted to buy a nut for 10 toa (there are one hundred toa in one kina) that was being sold at 40t. Julie hummed and hawed before finally giving an assertive, “No”. Noah then hopped around a bit, fingering something in his pocket, while glancing at the other people sitting around. Finally, he pulled out five kina from his pocket. Junior gave a triumphant call, and Noah bought a round of *buai* for everyone there. What struck me about this encounter was how unambiguous the expectations of sharing were—everyone knew that if Noah had enough money, he would be buying for everyone.

This form of reciprocity was typical during my time in Goroka. In my first week, some *buai* sellers near the town house were kind enough to give me a small talk about reciprocity. As they explained, you do not ask if the person wants what you are to give them, you just give. These features give a good sense of expectations of sharing—although it is also the explicit spoken ideology of generosity, not to mention a morality lesson to convince me to share generously with them. People also did not necessarily ask permission to have items shared with them. Whenever I walked up to Speedway to buy something, Mere or Junior happily asked the shop owner to add various goods to the pile I was purchasing. This obligation to share permeated both everyday encounters and commercial relations. Like previous research examining trade-stores and commercial exercises in the Highlands (Curry 1999), there were constant tensions between people who were selling goods, and kin asking for credit. In all the trade-stores in the village there were small signs saying “no credit”—which did not stop the requests for goods “on credit”. Sitting with Opa while he sold *buai*, I watched an almost constant battle as people asked for free betel nut, attempted to buy it at a reduced price, or complained that they did not have enough money to purchase the nuts. Precisely because Opa had the ability to buy stocks of betel nuts, he was straddled with the expectation to share those gains.

Here, the cultural nexus of sharing, reciprocity and gender comes to the fore. My earlier account on coffee, labour and gender, emphasised production as a site of strongly gendered economic relations. In this case, the village at night is a similarly loaded site, but the focus is on exchange. Like gardens, to some degree women's work is concealed by the strong expectation that they share the products of their labour. At the same time, women's ability to cook and share food at night lets them valorise their earlier work in either the garden or through wage-labour. Women's labour was not invisible—people paid close attention to who
prepared and distributed food, and it was important to foster a positive relationship with those who did so. These power dynamics were also a basis for tensions between young men who were sometimes perceived as lazy, and the women of the banis, who controlled the food supply. Giving out and eating food together was precisely the time when those who distributed the food spoke about priorities and complaints. Similar to customary events where men would speak before the distribution of meats, preparing and giving out food was how people voiced concerns on a day-to-day level in the village. As women gave out food, they also took the time to explain what ought to be happening in the village or voice grievances about people's conduct.
These elements were clear in the spatial dynamics of food consumption in the village. In the evenings, people gathered around the cooking fires, boiled rice and roasted sweet potato. Sometimes people sat outside the small lean-to adjacent to Samson’s home, but by far the most popular area was Felicity’s house [Figure 12 above], where people met, exchanged food and shared stories late into the night. It was telling that people mainly gathered outside this house—each of Samson’s sisters cooked food around a fire too. Nevertheless, Felicity was the one most people and visitors went to. Felicity sometimes complained about this, but it was almost in a gloating fashion. After one particularly large group of people came, she said to me,
“See all these people? They are all full. I fed them all. I don’t have a husband, just me. But I fed them all.”

This ability to give and make people full was a key part of both hospitality and power in Bena. People tended to have a large meal in the morning, snack during the day, and then eat huge amounts of food in the evening. People ate until they were “full up”, or their “stomach is tight”. They explained that without this tightness, they would not sleep well. When going to customary events in other communities, such as a funeral, people evaluated the hosts based on how well they filled everyone up (see also Bashkow 2006:95). Through Felicity's ability to give and share food with people, she formed reciprocal social bonds, the strength of which were literally embodied by being “full up”. This was not unconditional sharing—there was a clear expectation of reciprocity. The sharing of food also has a particularly important position in everyday sociality. As Anna Meigs (1988) has emphasised from her work on the Hua, sharing and eating food is one the main methods whereby “physical properties and vital essences” are transferred between persons and things. Sharing food not only indicates a distinct material sacrifice that the sharer is making, but also a sharing of vitality and essence—a person handles, grows and cares for food, so by ingesting it, you also embody this process. People in the village made a big point at the end of my stay to tell me how much fatter I looked than when I arrived, to demonstrate both the strength of the hospitality they gave me and the nature of our social bonds.

Conclusion

Goroka and Bena are increasingly entangled spaces and bring many new concerns into people's lives. The use of land for market produce, the growth of coffee and the emerging troubled masculinities are all relatively new elements in Bena. At the same time, there are significant continuities as well—the tug-of-war over sharing and reciprocity, as well as tensions over the gendered division of production and exchange, all have a long genealogy in Bena life. The continuities and changes are not discrete—they are in constant conversation with one another, and both play a role shaping the future forms and struggles of expanding urban spaces. With its central place adjacent to the Highway, and a short PMV trip to Goroka, the Bena village is a prime location for getting a snapshot of these changes.

As demonstrated by the features considered in this chapter, Bena (and Goroka) is an assemblage of social influences emanating from both spaces. Goroka is not a discrete space on the material and imaginative horizon. With the constant influx of people from surrounding
areas, to the food people bring in and purchase, Goroka is a town produced as much by its surrounding “negative space” than its officially drawn borders. Likewise, the way people interact with Speedway demonstrates how “the urban” is as much about the types of relations people have with spaces, like going to have a “spin” or purchasing food, than characteristics associated with towns. Bena villages around the Highway are peri-urban spaces precisely because they share many of the assemblages that Goroka has.

If urbanisation is the spread and increasing layering of assemblages people associate with the urban, then Bena is urbanising because of the increasing entanglements of economic forms and social behaviour with Goroka—the sale and purchase of food, morally concerning behaviour like drinking, and going to places to “have a look”. However, so far, I have neglected the physicality of space and place in this discussion. These “rhizomatically joined assemblages” (Lemert in Simone 2009: xi) that together shape social life on the edges of Goroka are not layered in mid-air—and are grounded in the land that food is grown on, people are buried in, and increasingly, is sold.
Chapter Two —Ambiguities of Land Sale

During my stay in Goroka, I could not escape debates about land or the sale of land. When I talked to people about my project, every second person either had a problem with land sale, or knew someone who did. This experience cut across class and geography—university lecturers and bank tellers living in Goroka town seemed just as likely to be embroiled in concerns over land sale as people living in villages on the borders of town. Typically, the land in these exchanges was not large—it involved square meters, not hectares, of land as people immigrated from other provinces to get closer to Goroka. While it was always men doing the sale of land, both women and men purchased land and had much to say about it. In this regard, I was somewhat spoiled for choice—people routinely invited me to their village to talk to them about the latest land debacle. However, because of the strong emotions that often surrounded these cases, here I focus on my adopted father Samson's struggles over land sale.

In this Chapter, I will present and analyse the phenomenon of land sale near town by examining a case study of Samson’s accounts of selling land in Bena—first, his history of selling land catching up with him, and then his hunt for a new buyer for a new piece of land. In doing so, I depict Bena as a place of creolised economic exchange as different logics of exchange. By exploring this account, I draw attention to the ambiguity at the heart of land sales that enables exchange partners to construe them both as individualised and reciprocal exchanges. In doing so, I address the ongoing anthropological debates about the analytic relevance of the gift-commodity distinction (Appadurai 1986), and the form and process of commodification in cross-cultural settings.

In particular, I draw attention to the semantic ambiguity of the object at the centre of exchange, in this case, land. I demonstrate that land does not necessarily shift from being a commodity to a gift (Kopytoff 1986), but can be imagined by exchange partners as both at the same time. In this regard, this work fits closely with Margaret Jolly's (2015) recent work disputing the gift-commodity distinction for understanding bride-wealth in Vanuatu. By analysing land as both a gift and a commodity, I seek to emphasise the continuing analytic utility of gift-commodity distinctions and “thaw frozen binaries” (Jolly 2015:74). I want to go beyond what Strathern (1988) described as the slippage of “commodity logic” into land sale. By emphasising the fundamentally imaginative qualities of how parties understand a current or historical exchange, I examine how parties produce different understandings of a “sale” by drawing on creolised symbols of exchange. Through this creolisation, land sale is an “ambiguous transaction” (Martin 2013:61) with unclear expectations of reciprocity on the
buyer and seller. Analysing this ambiguity charts a course for examining how individual actors situated in wider processes of urbanisation and commodification understand and leverage their expanding economic worlds.

Samson

To recap Samson's situation presented in the introduction, he had found himself embroiled in a land dispute when a previous buyer of land, David, was now asking for his initial payment back after Samson had resold the land to someone else. When I introduced Samson, I described him as my adopted father. Samson's adoption of me was simultaneously aspirational, performative, and constitutive. I was a son because he wanted me to be his son, because I sometimes acted as if I was, and because by staying with him and situating myself in the village, I was his son. When I first met Samson, he declared that I was to be his son, so that he could teach me about Bena and his land struggles. I think there were several layers to this—I was a younger man in a somewhat patronage relationship with my academic supervisor who also knows Samson, and declaring his intentions to adopt me was an indication of his intention to create a tight social relationship with me. Finally, because of the fluid nature of sociality in the Highlands, there is a thin line between the performance of sociality and constituting sociality—precisely because I stayed with him in the village, travelled with his children, and attended community events I was acting as if I was his son. Of course, this inclusion was contextual—when people wanted to emphasise their closeness to me, they pointed to these actions. If they desired to demonstrate difference, they pointed to my different country of origin or my whiteness.

After arriving at the village and learning that he had been arrested, Mark, Mere and I, made our way to my first, but not last, trip to the Goroka police station. Mere explained that many of Samson's lain had already gone up to Goroka in order to find out what was happening to Samson, and were attempting to get together money to bail him out of jail. The events following the arrests quickly demonstrated how people in Bena understand land and dealt with crises within kin circles. We met up with seven members of Samson's family—mostly his sisters and his children, but also a couple of his brothers and cousins. We sat around in Peace Park, a large park on the north side of the airport in the centre of town. Peace Park got its name because it is often used as a site for conflict resolution and compensation payments between groups while police supervise the meetings. Sitting around, we alternated between light banter and serious conversation about what to do about Samson. Eventually, we all
formed a circle while Felicity spread a *bilum* (bag) to act as a "bed" to collect money for bail. She started off by putting K100 on the bag. Most people put in a range of denominations from K5 to K50. I put in K20. In total, the group raised K350.\(^7\)

The group of about fifteen people walked up to the police station which is, perhaps not coincidentally, opposite Peace Park. The Goroka station is a large compound consisting of a series of blue buildings inside an iron fence. The main two-storey building in the front is the cellblock, and people mill around waiting for family members or to make inquiries. Behind it, to the left of the compound, is a squat building that houses various police units—fraud, family violence, violent crime, and so on. Finally, a couple of prefab buildings acting as offices are dotted around. It felt odd entering the police station so casually. However, looking around, I saw that this was hardly unusual. Large groups of 15–20 people sat around chatting, waiting and socialising. It felt more like the park than my previous experiences in stale, intensely bureaucratic, police stations. As we sat around and waited at the police station, I talked to Felicity, and what I learnt led me to re-evaluate my understanding of the complexity of the dispute I was observing. Samson had not sold and resold the land to one person, but rather had sold and resold the bit of land to four different people over the past twenty years. The police believed he owed people in the order of tens of thousands of kina in outstanding debt. Listening to discussions, I started to get a feel for how controversial and common land sales were. Mr Mao was a court clerk, and was also related to the Bena community because his brother was marrying someone from Samson’s house line. He said that during his time working at the court he sees land cases all the time. He told me, “This [land sales] is a big concern. People should not do it. When they sell to a man from another line, they are depriving their children of the land.” After Samson had been released, Mr Mao talked passionately to the group about the fears around the sale and resale:

> He is your leader, and now he has messed up the name of your line. He will be known as a con man. He cannot keep doing this. Trying to sell to one person while still sorting out this sale with another? He has messed up your name. What happened to the money? K35000 is a lot of money! Where has it gone? You can’t sell land like this. Your children will not have any. He sold to people outside the lain. What about his children? What land will they have? This cuts up the community. He got into trouble once and came to me. I told him not to sell land. Now he does it again. What can I do?

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\(^7\) At the time, this was equivalent to 175 NZD. However, a rule of thumb for understanding the relative value of currency in Goroka is one to one equivalence. For example, if I bought something for K20, people viewed it just as expensive as 20NZD.
Debates over Sale

Mr Mao’s speech highlights key fears that many Bena have about land sale depriving future generations of land, creating tensions within communities, undermining reputations and leading to debates about where money goes. These concerns echo wider rhetoric by both politicians and villagers over potential landlessness (Ballard 2013, Fingleton 2004). That said, the rhetoric around land sale was notably different to discussions around actual cases. Almost everyone I talked to about land sales had something negative to say, mainly about the sellers. The concerns were wide-ranging: repeatedly, people voiced their concerns that children would not have land in the future, leading to conflicts over land in the long run. Another worry was that the buyers, coming from other groups, would not fit into the host community’s traditions, linked to the idea that “they have different ways to us” as well as their capacity to become integrated through customary exchange—a concern I will deal with below. Finally, people were suspicious that money from sales was being wasted away on drinking and gambling.

At the same time, the sale of land was incredibly widespread. According to estimates the Lands Department gave me, they deal with three to five sales, three days a week, making some 400–800 sales a year. And as far as I could tell, many sales were not completed formally through the Lands Department. These figures present an apparent contradiction—most people I talked to said land sale was wrong, yet many people were doing it. When I posed this question to a friend, he explained that now people want “quick money”:

People sell land and get quick money. They buy beer, drive around and have black glass [darkened glass on SUVs]. They feel like a big-man. And then it’s all gone and what do they have?

This sentiment was repeated by those who buy land. As one buyer from Chimbu put it:

If you walk down a house line, you see two kinds of houses. Land sellers have grass houses with no power. Buyers have nice permanent houses, power and fences. Sellers get the money from the sale and quickly use it (kaikai em). They spend it all on food and beer.

Compared to sellers, buyers were more likely to have some form of regular income. This does not necessarily mean that they were massively wealthy, but they were more likely to be able to afford more consumer goods. Joseph, another buyer from Chimbu, worked full-time and tended his coffee patch on his small patch of land on Saturdays in order to get enough money to pay back the loan and purchase occasional food. The idea that those who sell land are
irresponsible or greedy chasers of quick money was repeated again and again. Through these concerns, the presence and importance of land sales in the Goroka area have created the categories of "land sellers", who have neglected to think of their descendants, and "land buyers", people who arrive suddenly in SUVs with bilums full of money, as social groups in the popular imagination. However, during my short stay in Goroka, these complaints were generally aimed at theoretical land sale, and the idea of selling land more generally. The story became significantly more complex when confronted with cases of actual sale.

Opa is the other man in the haus lain who was interested in selling land. I was a little taken aback when I first learned of his interest—after Samson’s struggles, many in the community kept at an arm’s length from land sales. Nevertheless, he explained his interest in selling land in straightforward terms—he needed money to get more coffee trees and get appliances for his house. Opa was a relatively young man in his early thirties, but one who clearly had an interest in becoming a more influential member of the community. He always seemed to have some project to gain money. He had a small stall where he sold buai and cigarettes, and he was the main source of beer in the village, which he bought and resold from town. At some of the customary events I attended, he made a point of standing up and speaking after the older big-men had spoken—something some of the other (older) men of the community did not do. Opa told me how he had gone to the bank several times to try and get a loan to buy more coffee plants. But, he said, “They asked too many questions and wanted too much paper”, and since he had lots of land, he was going to sell some so he could use the money to buy more coffee trees. Nobody in the community had anything particularly negative to say about Opa's ideas when he voiced them in public. This stands in contrast to the generalised condemnation of land sales in the abstract.

Samson’s previous sales were a more contentious topic—it served as a particular focal point for people to complain about individual practices. During my interview with him, Samson explained that he sold the land in order to pay for school fees for his children—in the 1990’s, schooling was not government-funded. When appealing to the group at the police station, he said that he did it “for you”. As the second instalment of land payments had not arrived when the new school year rolled around, he said he was forced to resell the land to pay the school fees. He paid back two of the former buyers, and stated that the two who were currently chasing him for money were fine with it at the time. Samson’s claims about selling land to pay for his children’s schooling was viewed sceptically by some in the community, who said he simply wasted the money. I was never able to get to the bottom of what did
happen to the money—his children did go to school, so there must have been some means to pay for his fees.

Regardless of what had happened in the past, during my time in PNG Samson was once again considering selling land. As a condition of getting out of jail, he had signed a statutory declaration agreeing to pay back K35000. That meant Samson was in a tricky situation. He had no desire to be arrested again—by his account, jail in PNG sounded awful. After coming out of the police station, he had made a point of telling me about his experience to ensure I had an example of what it was like in PNG jails. He said that he was lucky that he was a big-man—he watched prisoners beat other prisoners around the head with concrete bricks, stripping others naked and urinating on them, as well as beatings with hoses. Samson had no paid job, and relied on coffee harvests for large cash payments. He would never get K35000 from a season’s harvest. In order to extricate himself from this situation, Samson endeavoured to sell one last piece of land. "I am sick of selling land", he would often tell me, "No more half payments. All upfront. After this, I’m done with it. After I sell this land and pay off my debts, I will be free". I spent much of my remaining time in PNG following Samson’s attempt to sell this final piece of land [Figure 13].
Before delving deeper into an analysis of this case, it is worth pausing and emphasising that Samson’s case was somewhat unusual. The repeated sale and resale of land was uncommon. While talking to several people unrelated to Samson's kin group, they mentioned how they had heard about a man down in Bena who resold a piece of land repeatedly. News gets around in Goroka. Likewise, Samson’s position as a prominent man in the community
was somewhat contentious. The context surrounding the sale combined with his wife leaving him (six months before my arrival) led the family to blame him for some of the troubles in the village. Finally, he was a key informant and friend of mine, which put me a complex position—both in how much and what I wrote about, and in terms of the accuracy of what he shared. The nature of Samson’s case raises important ethical and epistemological questions about how to situate his experiences against other case of land sale in the Highlands. While not representative of many experiences of land sales, there is a heuristic value in using a somewhat extreme case as it enunciates various features of land exchange—critically, the contentiousness of the sale within the village, contests over ownership of land and the way which sales are bound up with state agency are all drawn to the fore through his account. Ethically, I have tried to present the case as accurately as I can, while being sensitive to Samson's position and desires.

**How to Sell Customary Land in the Eastern Highlands**

By all accounts, finding someone willing to sell land near the Highway was an easy affair. I heard many stories of prospective buyers driving along the Highway with *bilums* full of tens of thousands of kina, and asking, "Who is the owner of this land?" They would find land owners who would “look at the money with hunger” and sell the land there and then. Despite the seeming hyperbole of this story, I ended up meeting a couple of people who bought or sold land just like this. Another friend of mine told me how sellers would eye up buyers to see how rich they might be in order to offer a price. If the person looked wealthy, they pitched high. Samson had a different method for figuring out a price. "This land here," he told me one day as we walked around the hanging branches of coffee trees, "this land is my livelihood. I worked and planted all these trees. They help me pay for debts and get my children married. I cannot give it away for nothing, like in ancestral times when white people first came. Now we know the value of land." The 38m x 40m coffee garden he was trying to sell is *wessen*, wet sand. The ground is at the bottom of a hill and periodically floods during the wet season. It is excellent land for growing crops but poor land for building houses, which must be raised up so they are not flooded. When I asked Samson about whether he would get land valuers in to help him find a price for the land, he told me, "If a land valuer came here, they would say this land was worth around 100,000 kina. But no one would want to buy it for that much. So I am selling it for around 50,000."
Samson found potential buyers in a range of different ways. Some approached him out of the blue. However, many learned that he was selling land through kin. One particular case is illustrative. Yerema is Noah’s (Felicity’s son’s) wife, and works up at Faniufa near Goroka. Her boss, Moho, learned of Samson's intentions, and met up with him to talk about the possibility of buying some land from him. Having already set up a successful business, she wanted to open a church near the road. When meeting Samson, she repeatedly told him that he needed to sell her the land because it was “God’s will”. She pointed to the fact that another prospective buyer had suddenly been recalled to Moresby as proof of the divine plan behind her proposed purchase of the land. In addition to her religious rhetoric, Moho has been helping Samson with his teeth. Partway through my stay in Goroka, Samson’s artificial teeth broke, making eating difficult for him. Dental care in PNG is not cheap, so after one of their meetings, Moho gave Samson K500 to fix his teeth.

Samson’s method of setting a price for the land, his negotiated relationship with several buyers, and other family members various attempts to protest and gossip about the sales raise important questions. What does it mean to sell customary land in Bena? Is this an example of the commodification of land? How do sales relate to material and cosmological connections communities have with land?

**Land Sale in Law and Practice**

The exact position of customary land sale in PNG law is complicated. According to Section 81 of the Land Act, the sale of customary land is prohibited, except to nationals in accordance with customary law (Land Act Ch. No. 185)\(^8\). When I asked representatives from the EHP Lands Department, they explained that the Lands Act stipulates that "no native may sell their land" unless, a subsection explains, they want to. To sell land, the Lands Department would go down to the community, check if there are any disputes, and then a document is signed agreeing to the sale. This process seems to be similar to the one required by the Land (Tenure Conversion) Act (1963, 1964), which enables customary land owners to convert land ownership into freehold title, which can subsequently be sold to nationals. In the cases I observed, and the cases the Land Department dealt with, this was a "complete sale"—as Samson said, "They can sell it, give the land to whoever they want, and do what they like with it. It is theirs now." Nevertheless, Samson's complaints about post-sale reciprocity, and Moho's

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\(^8\) For an excellent summary of the legal complications surrounding selling land, PNG’s land laws, and the role of the courts in mediating land disputes, see Robert Cooter (1991).
help with dental care indicate there is more to the picture than a straightforward alienation of land. These features beg the question of whether “sale” is the most appropriate term for the exchanges, with its connotations of impersonal commodified exchange.

It is tempting to analyse the sale of land as expansions of commodity exchange, especially when participants talk about exchanges as land sale. Nevertheless, when looking at the practices that surround the sale of land, the picture becomes more complicated. As discussed in my Introduction, anthropology has had a long-held theoretical distinction between gifts and commodities. Before entering into a more in-depth discussion about alienation, I want to reiterate some features of how anthropologists have conceptualised gifts and commodities. These distinctions built on Mauss' seminal essay on *The Gift* (2000 [1925]) and Bronislaw Malinowski's pioneering work on the Kula Ring (2014 [1922]). These early works both introduced the ideal type of a “gift” as a form of un-alienated exchange that builds social relations between persons (Mauss 2000:15). Additionally, these studies demonstrated that so-called primitive societies did not produce solely for subsistence production and had a rich life of exchange (Mauss 2000:92). As Mauss argues, “it appears that there has never existed, either in the past or in modern primitive societies, anything like a 'natural' economy” (2000: 3).

Gregory (1982) built upon these ideas, and drew together Lewis Morgan, Mauss, Marx and Lévi-Strauss to build an analytic critique of neoclassical economics’ representation of economic life as consisting solely of commodities. From these writings, a depiction of gifts versus commodities emerged. On one hand, gifts are objects that are exchanged for (re)establishing relationships between subjects. As Mauss (2000:9-10) emphasised, gifts are inalienable from the giver, as the central focus of the exchange is not the object, but the relationship. Further, gifts come with clear expectations of reciprocity—Gregory aptly points out that “the gift economy, then, is a debt economy. The aim of a transactor in such an economy is to acquire as many gift debtors as he [sic] possibly can and not to maximise profit, as it is in a commodity economy” (1982:19). This is not to claim there is no operational calculus in gift exchanges. Rather the focus of the calculus is social relations, not the objects themselves. In contrast, commodity exchange involves exact equivalence, negating the need for reciprocity, and is focused on the objects themselves. Finally, gifts and commodities are stylised as juxtaposed ideal types, and should be viewed as “extreme points of a continuum” rather than a “bipolar opposition” (Gregory 1982:23).

At first blush, several features of land sale near Goroka suggest that they are commodity-style exchanges. The exchanges involve strangers—migrants from other provinces...
come to buy land from local land holders. Further, the main focus of the exchange is the object, the land itself. People routinely complained that selling land was not “our kastom”. My participants explained that customarily, land owners, typically men, gave land, or the ability to use land, to their children. The majority of land passed onto earlier born males, although describing this system as “patrilineal decent” overemphasises rigidity—early born male children received more land so long as they maintained good relations with their father. Similarly, while most marriages involved women going to stay with their husband’s kin, when the opposite occurred, women received more land. Based on these difference, people depicted land sale to non-kin was a distinctly new non-customary practice.

However, understanding these land sales as pure “sales” also papers over a range of far more personal features. In cases of sales I observed, and historical ones I could gather, there was typically some kind of pre-exchange leading up to the sale. In the case outlined above, Moho was helping Samson pay for his dental bills. The exchanges take place in a cultural setting where the constant exchange of gifts make, break and re-solidify relationships between people. Thus, these pre-exchanges should not be viewed as sweeteners before the deal itself, but rather an indication of intentions to form a relationship between parties.

Following the transfer of money, there are strong expectations of ongoing relations between land buyers and sellers. These expectations were a dimension of ongoing negotiation and frustration for both parties. If sellers had compensation payments or bride-wealth to pay, the buyer was expected to contribute. Likewise, if the buyer had compensation payments, the seller would help pay. For some people, this was a virtuous relationship, as mutual interdependence meant that "if I have a problem, I know that they [the seller] will help me". There are strong expectations of relationships following the sale—Opa once told me that there is a law in PNG that stipulates that "if you buy land from someone, you must become part of the haus lain". However, like expectations of sharing with kin, these relations were also a source of latent tension, particularly among buyers. Many I spoke to felt torn between the customary obligations they had to former landowners which helped secure their tenure, and the legal insecurity of tenure under threat of government expansion. Because many buyers purchased land without documentation, and the land is often prime land near the road, they worried that either the government would confiscate their land in the future in order to deal with expanding urban populations, or feared that other kin of the seller would come and take the land, unhappy with the deal. Even buyers who purchased land through the Lands Department had this fear of government alienation.
Alienation and the Gift-Commodity Distinction

How to understand these land sales strikes at the core of contemporary anthropological debates over the utility of the gift-commodity distinction. As Martin (2013:61, 65-66) emphasises in his discussion of *kulia* land transfers in East New Britain, there is a danger of uncritically associating customary exchanges with reciprocal expectations, and linking sales with Western property transactions. Simply because people draw on the rhetoric custom to denounce land sales, does not make these exchanges a clear cut case of commodification.

The assertion of an analytical distinction, even on a continuum, between gifts and commodities has been contested following Arjun Appadurai's (1986:11) critique of the “exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity in anthropological writing.” Appadurai's (1986) opening to *The Social Life of Things*, and Kopytoff's (1986) essay in the same volume, marked a significant shift in anthropological thinking about gifts and commodities, and was part of a broader shift in economic anthropology towards the agency of objects and consumption (Gregory 2009). For example, Appadurai argues for an analytic focus on “(1) the commodity phase of the social life of anything, (2) the commodity candidacy of anything; and (3) the commodity context in which anything may be placed” (1986:13). Appadurai's claims fits into Kopytoff's subsequent essay which calls for a more biographical, processual approach to analysing economic exchange. Kopytoff (1986) does not attempt Appadurai's call for a collapse of the gift-commodity distinction. Instead of emphasising the differences between gifts and commodities, he calls for a focus on the cultural production of commodities, asking: how do things become considered commodities?

Because of the ambiguities of land sales presented here, it is tempting to dismiss the gift-commodity distinction as overwrought, since Samson's experiences clearly indicate elements of both at different times. However, I will instead delve into the gift-commodity dichotomy. While recent work on commodity-chain analysis tracing the biographies of commodities from production to consumption have been a valuable exercise for defetishising commodities (e.g. Collins 2000, Foster 2008, Gewertz and Errington 2010), I am less convinced by the desire to dispense with the distinction between gifts and commodities. Central to this concern is a lack of analytical nuance about what makes up a gift. Goddard (2000) illuminates the issue by pointing out that the central heuristic concern when making gift-commodity distinctions is a question of alienation. He emphasises that Marx (1974) distinguished four types of alienation, each of which are worth spelling out here in full (Goddard 2000:142).
A product can be alienated when the subject that produced it is not understood as intrinsic to the object that is being exchanged. This is the classic distinction where it is of central social concern who gives a gift, but not who sells a commodity. Critically, this form of alienation can take place in both capitalist and non-capitalist societies, and opens the door for commodity exchanges outside the capitalist mode of production. This form of alienation makes both commodities and the parties involved fungible—the people on either end of the exchange, and the specific object, are not important for the exchange itself. In a gift exchange, the parties and objects are constitutive of that exchange—the parties cannot be interchanged with another actor. In contrast, alienation makes parties in commodity exchange necessarily fungible—it does not matter who is selling the object, only that they are. When I purchased food from the fresh food market in Goroka, the food was alienated from the seller as I had no further relationship with them and it did not matter who was doing the selling (of course, this might have changed if I had stayed longer).

Secondly, a product can be alienated when the subject's objectification is not under their free control. This form of alienation focuses on the relationship between the labourer and their labour power, where both the labour-power and the product of labour have no relation to the subject. The capitalist mode of production introduced this form of alienation (Marx 1974:64-7 cited in Goddard 2000:142). When workers are hired to grow food, this duel alienation takes place. The work removes both the product, and the person’s labour-power.

The third form of alienation is the human alienation from themselves as a “species-being”, where people are unable to imagine production as a means of objectifying themselves in the world. Finally, there is the alienation of human subjects from one another, through competition for labour and the division of labour in the productive process, making individual subjects irrelevant for the productive process. For the purposes of understanding the key difference between gifts and commodities, the first two senses of alienation are vital. While the capitalist mode of production is sufficient for the production of commodities in the first sense, it is not necessary—people in non-capitalist societies routinely exchange objects alienated in the first sense, while commodities and people in capitalist societies are often alienated in all four senses.

Goddard (2000) also clarifies some analytic confusion surrounding the use of the term “fetishism”, another key concept in understanding commodities. Marx created a great deal of ambiguity around the concept of fetishism because of his shift from the analytical prose present throughout his exposition on the nature of commodities, to florid metaphor when
discussing fetishism (Marx 1976:163-167). Goddard points out that anthropologists have often taken Marx's passage to indicate that commodity fetishism is an imaginative or cognitive delusion, where the relations between persons are masked and misconstrued as relations between things. Instead, Goddard (2000:144), drawing on Geres (1972) points out that ascribing social life to objects is not a psychological turn, but a particular social reality, where the social life is structured so that relations between persons are constructed as relations between objects. Combining these observations, commodification can be understood as increasing degrees of alienation and fetishism, adding analytic depth to the idea that “commodification is a necessarily incomplete process” (Martin 2013:65).

This creates a precise and clear answer to the question: what are objects whose primary social function is exchange but are not alienated, in either sense, from their exchanger? The gap here is filled by the term “gifts”. Certain economic processes, like mass production and the division of labour, are associated with, but not central to, commodification. In contrast, alienation and fetishism are necessary and sufficient for objects becoming commodities. By focusing on the creation of alienation and fetishism, it is possible to take Kopytoff's (1985) processual focus on cultural production and apply it to this more rigorous demarcation of gifts and commodities by asking: what processes do actors draw on to signify the potential, and therefore imaginable, alienation of land from its seller? Conversely, how do actors communicate the intrinsic relation between themselves and the land? And finally, what enforces and expands the hegemony of these particular means of communication? These questions neither exaggerate nor reify the gift-commodity distinction. Rather, they highlight that commodification (and “giftification” perhaps) can be an ambiguous and contested process, where actors draw on a creole of symbols to emphasise or minimize the fungibility of the objects and persons involved. Finally, it emphasises the importance of the relationship between exchange and production in the creation of alienation. While alienation begins in production, it is valorised in exchange. Alienation is culturally produced in the act of individualised exchange. The degree this valorising takes place is dependent on the vocabulary available for this creolised exchange.

**Ambiguous Commodification**

Central to the ambiguity surrounding land sale is the ability of exchange partners to imagine the transaction as an impersonal commodity trade. As Goddard (2000) points out, fetishism occurs when producers
...find it difficult or impossible to imagine an intrinsic relation between themselves and their products, whereas producers of gifts find it difficult or impossible to imagine the absence of such a relation.

While both parties recognise intrinsic relations to land, the shadow of commodification hangs over the exchanges precisely because both parties contextually downplay the personal aspects of the sale. On Samson's side, much of his ability to construe the exchange as personal or impersonal depended on rhetorical positioning. When he wanted to emphasise hospitality and building relationships, he happily invoked expectations of reciprocity and community integration. He complained to me and to others about the expectations on a buyer to create ongoing social relations. At times, he would actively foster this by exchanging gifts with the man who finally bought the original piece of land off him—he would visit, carrying the gift and sit and chat with him for long periods of time. At the same time, when I asked him whether other people in the haus lain, like his sons and nephews had some say in the land sale, he told me that land sale is “a private thing.”

In contrast, land buyers drew on legal means to distance themselves from the relation between the land and the seller. One of the key reasons my Chimbu friends said they wanted to acquire legal title of land via the Lands Department for the areas they purchased was to minimise the insecurity surrounding their ownership of land. Critically, legal title is an abstracted relation—the nature of a legal title is largely the same for each manifestation as the parties in a title can be replaced with others with no change in the nature of the relation. The actors in legal title are fungible. It does not matter who is the owner in a legal title—there is a separation between legal-social position and the person. This is in contrast to negotiated control of land, where who is the primary claimant plays a critical role in defining the nature of the claim. At the same time, buyers participated in customary exchanges with sellers to solidify their claim to the land.

The availability and usage of these symbols—the idea of “private”, gossip, legal title, post-exchange gifts, and money—are critical to the economic creolisation of the transfer of land in Bena. Leading up to, during, and following the exchange of money, parties constantly position and reimagine the nature of the transfer. The sale never semantically settles.

Because of how often Tok Pisin uses loan words from English, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether people are code-switching or a word is just homologous with English. I do not get the impression that there is a Tok Pisin term for “private” – people might say “samting bilong mi tasol” (something that is only mine). For these reasons, I am inclined to give significance to the fact he chose to use the word “private”.

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sociability that the transfer may (or may not) entail, and the degree the land is alienated from the seller, is constantly renegotiated and disputed using a creole of exchange.

**Alienation, Cosmology and Personhood**

Finally, it is necessary to turn to the complex question of how land is alienated. A key dimension of Marx's concept of alienation is production (1976:203). However, if production is how a person constructs a relationship between a subject and an object, how is land produced? The theoretical tangle here is partly linked to the academic lineage of contemporary anthropological understandings of alienation. Much of economic anthropology's key concepts, such as commodities, are inherited from the classical economists. However, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stewart Mill and Marx separated land from the other factors of production, such as labour and capital (Smith 1776: 132; also see Hudson 2010, 2012). Labour creates value, but land collects rent—unearned income irrelevant to the socially necessary cost of production. The classical economists not only separated rent from the other factors of production, but also were actively disdainful of it, with Smith (1776: 44) proclaiming that “The landlords, like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed…” For the classical economists, land (and money) does not require upkeep *per se*, and therefore any money gained from the ownership of land was an unearned overhead—in contrast to labour's need for pay, and capital's costs of maintenance.

This presents a dilemma for understanding the commodification and alienation of land—what connection is being removed? As Ballard (2013:48) points out, “to observe that rural communities in Melanesia enjoy some 'special' relationship with the land is now an almost dangerously common act of elision”. Recent anthropological studies of land in Melanesia have repeatedly demonstrated a two-fold dimension in metaphysical relations to land (Ballard 2013, Jorgensen 1997, 2007, Leach 2004:193, Rumsy and Weiner 2001; 2004, West 2006: 53). First, that customary land groups routinely have a mythical relationship to land, and second, that this relationship becomes prominent when groups attempt to gain political leverage against both the state and extractive companies (Ballard 2013:48). It is no coincidence that Alan Rumsy and James Weiner's (2001) edited volume on *Emplaced Myth* about space, narrative and knowledge in PNG and aboriginal Australia was a companion volume to *Mining and Indigenous Lifeworlds in Australia and Papua New Guinea* (Rumsy and Weiner 2004). These concerns of lifeworlds, cosmology and alienation from land continually come to the fore as PNG pursues a national agenda based on exporting mineral wealth and other natural resources.
Contemporary cosmological relations of landholders are deeply material, political and social. In a commonly cited statement, three Bougainvillean students wrote:

land is our physical life [and] our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world...We have little or no experience of social survival detached from the land. For us to be completely landless is a nightmare which no dollar in the pocket or dollar in the back will ally; we are a threatened people (Dove, Miriung and Togolo 1974:182 cited in Ballard 2013: 49)

This quote gives a sense for the depth of relationship Papua New Guineans have with land both materially and ideologically. Given this backdrop, in Bena there was a surprising absence of concerns about land sales expressed through myth or the invocation of a cosmological relationship to land. I did not hear people draw on historical and ancestral connections to land when they were debating the merits of selling land to migrants. The strongest statements I heard about a metaphysical relation to land was when people told me about the blessing the land had received from God.

There are a range of potential reasons for this absence. I was in the Highlands for a relatively short period, which gave less opportunity to hear these concerns. Secondly, land sales did not necessarily present an existential threat to Bena. While people often talked bitterly about the effects of land sales on villages, these sales were relatively small cale compared to mining or wholesale alienation. Finally, it is possible I missed instances where people invoked cosmological connections as when big tensions did flare up, like at court cases, the older man began switching to Bena.

Nevertheless, connections with land and food were present in discussions about land. As emphasised in Chapter One, sharing food also entails sharing parts of the giver’s, and producer’s, essence (Meigs 1988). There is a significant literature on the centrality of consumption in Melanesia as a means of constituting bodies and persons (Dundon 2004, Lutkehaus 1995, Morton and Macintyre 1995, M. Strathern 1988). As Nancy Lutkehaus (1995:14) emphasises, the consumption of symbolically important substances such as breastmilk, bones, food and semen, is central to constituting persons in Melanesia. In the case of food, a critical component of this connection is land—by growing and consuming food produced here, Papua New Guineans construct a grounded form of personhood. In a very human-species fashion, Highlanders project their will on the world through grounded production in order to construct both social relations and persons. The production, exchange and consumption of grounded food intersects with a nexus of the cultural production of Highlander persons, bodies and selves (Morton and Macintyre 1995). Samson routinely
pointed out the reason that the land was valuable because of its potential economic value to him—he used it to grow coffee. By selling the land, he sacrifices the value he has created through labouring and reshaping the land with his hands. Despite the depictions of the classical economists, land is not a static, unchanged entity, but one where Samson sweated and embodied himself in the physical world. This connection and embodiment is the backdrop that buyers and sellers contextually downplayed through a creole of exchange.

**Conclusions**

Land sales on the edge of towns sit at a nexus of blended economic logics, where actors routinely draw on a creole of exchange. This is not to say that Samson or any of the buyers are being manipulative in how they interact with people about land. Rather, it demonstrates the transient state of the land sales in question. They exist in a state of ambiguity, thereby giving room for the individual actors involved to negotiate the meaning of the exchange. Critically, this ambiguity exists precisely because of the personal and informal nature of the exchange, and because of the multiple modes of economic exchange available.

This space of agency enables land sales to play along the continuum between gift and commodity while simultaneously introducing tensions and contradictions for the parties involved. What will happen to this space of interpretive agency hinges on the relative lack of hegemony of these different means of communication. Currently, neither the state, via land courts, nor local communities has the final word on the interpretation of a land exchange. It strongly depends on how entwined a given exchange is with either of these parties, as sometimes exchanges are done formally, other times not so. This potential slippage of interpretation is important to keep in mind in the context of powerful economic commentators strongly suggesting a more “rationalised” form of land tenure, or the widespread growth of incorporated land groups (ILGs) (see Weiner and Glaskin 2007, Weiner 2013).

This chapter has provided an account of Samson's experiences selling land in the area surrounding Goroka. By exploring his previous sale, arrest and attempts to track down other buyers to clear his debt, I critically evaluated how useful the gift-commodity distinction is for understanding these exchanges. Drawing on Goddard's (2000) central focus on Marx's (1974) depiction of alienation in understanding commodification, I examined how land sales were not cases of simple commodification because of the ongoing importance and expectations of land buyer/land seller relations. Nevertheless, the land sales exist under the shadow of commodification, whereby both parties are aware of how the exchange could be imagined as
individualised, thereby leading to tensions over the extent and nature of expectations. I pointed to key means of communication both parties used to emphasise the social nature of the exchange. There is an increasing array of the means of construing these sales as commodity exchanges, notably through the involvements of the Lands Department and the courts, leading to an economic creole of exchange. As urbanisation increases and more migrants come to buy land for town, these questions of alienation versus non-alienation are likely to grow in importance and come to a head. Finally, the tension over imagined alienation draws attention to the seemingly simple question “alienation from whom?” Answering this question is not easy, and requires a shift to questions of personhood.
Chapter Three—Antagonistic Freedoms: Personhood, Food and Land in Bena

We are free because we help each other. If I am in trouble, my brother will give me food. If he is in trouble, he will give us food. It is our way—Samson


These two quotes illustrate a tension over expectations of reciprocity and its role in constructing one's social personhood in PNG. On one hand, Samson, like many people, constantly emphasised how free they were in PNG because of the easy access to land, food and because of everyone's willingness to help one another. At the same time, there was a strong ambivalence to these expectations at times, and a desire to escape them. While the conflicts over sharing are not new, the potential for Papua New Guineans to escape these expectations through money is.

In this chapter I examine these contestations, exploring the relations between land, freedom, social personhood and reciprocity. I start by contextualising my study within previous anthropological inquiries into personhood in PNG. Drawing on Christine Dureau’s (2015) account of the intellectual history of studies of personhood in Melanesia, I trace the thinking about personhood starting from Mauss. I touch on the debates over Strathern's (1988) idea of the dividual, before settling on the concept of fractal personhood (Wagner 1991) as a means of capturing relation-centric understandings of persons in PNG. Subsequently, I link the economic and personhood by examining how ideas of relational personhood are constructed through gift exchange networks, and how Martin's (2013) recent study of “big-shots” emphasises the social anxiety and disapproval surrounding the rise of powerful members of society who do not participate in these reciprocal exchange networks. I then turn to my own ethnographic work, exploring the centrality of ideas of free food and free land that underpin the idea of freedom in the Highlands. By exploring the contested idea of “freedom”, I highlight different visions and expectations of reciprocal interactions with kin.

Personhood in Melanesia

The intellectual genesis for contemporary anthropological understandings of personhood is found in an essay by Mauss in “A Category of the Human Mind. The Notion of Person, the Notion of Self” (1985 [1938]). Mauss' fundamental argument was that the Western
understanding of the self and personhood are socially constructed and historically specific. He examined the historical forces that led to the contemporary Western ideas of the self, moving from the introduction of “independent, autonomous, free and responsible” persons into Roman law, to Christianity's creation of the metaphysical separation of the self from the manifest person (1985: 18).

Mauss recounts how the Romans (or “the Latins”) made the initial cultural shift from *persona* to *personne* (1985:14). The persona is a role that one adopts within different social contexts. The idea of a persona does not necessarily imply a true self that is concealed by a position—this notion came later. Rather, the persona fits within a cultural context, is a part of a wider whole, and cannot be considered in isolation (1985: 15). Mauss claims that the move from *persona* to *personne* emerged from the creation of Roman citizens with rights separate from their roles, and notes the emergence of the usage of forenames, surnames and nicknames (1985:16). This critical change marked the severing of the persona from the person—personas were no longer constitutive but an external addition to the “real” person. The changes were augmented with Greek notions of character and personality, which are in the inner-most nature the person (1985:18). However, the emergence of the transcendental self, severed from bodily essence, owes its origins to Christianity, followed by a blending of Cartesian dualism and the Protestant Reformation. Christianity provided the metaphysical foundation for the idea of a “moral person”, a divine person that is separate from its bodily manifestation (1985:20). The final piece of this puzzle was the construction of consciousness that emerged from Enlightenment meditations of philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Kant (1985:21-22). Combined with the Reformation, which emphasised individual liberty and the individual capacity to communicate with God, the path of making the person equivalent to the consciousness experience of the self (a rational, individual substance) was set. The key equivalence that emerged from this history was that “the 'person' (*personne*) equals the 'self' (*moi*); the 'self' (*moi*) equals consciousness, and is its primordial category” (1985:21).

Mauss finishes his account of the development of Western personhood with a nod to the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1985:22). However, he does not delve into the history of capitalism in shaping contemporary personhood. While Christianity and Roman law have both been a focus in the anthropological and sociological studies of personhood, the emergence of capitalism is the final historical step to contemporary Western personhood. Most famously, Weber (2005 [1920]) argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that Calvinist ideology played a central role in facilitating the rise of capitalism in predominately Protestant
countries. He claims that the importance of individual hard-work, frugality and investment for salvation all contributed to the emergence of capitalism. While focusing on Calvinist thought, Weber's work underscores the important links between ideas of social personhood and capitalism. Weber's thesis has been attacked on a range of fronts. Henryk Grossman (2006 [1934]), drawing on Marx's (1976:871-926) historical analysis of the origins of capitalism in enclosure and the poor laws, argues that the origins of capitalism were based more on the violent appropriation of labour and land than any ideological alignment. Additionally, the emergence of capitalism in less Protestant, less individualistic societies such as Japan, India and China, poses issues to the simplistic relationship between individualistic ideas of personhood and capitalism (Turner 1988).

Following Mauss' critique of the notion of a natural concept of personhood and the self, there has been ethnographic interest in cross-cultural variation of ideas of personhood, and how these ideas are influenced by capitalism and Christianity. Read (1955) pointed to differences in self-conception and morality of the Gahuku-Gama, who live near modern-day Goroka. Read argues that the Gahuku-Gama do not have a universalised abstracted idea of a person to whom they have moral obligations. The crux of his argument is that they do not distinguish between social and moral obligations—Gahuku have obligations towards persons because they are socially situated. Like Mauss, Read (1955:247) argues that the idea of generalised abstracted moral duties are particularly Western notions that have emerged out of Christian ideas of the self. All humans are humans with souls and are owed certain obligations, like conversion, regardless of specific social relations.

These threads were later picked up in a collected volume in honour of Mauss' original essay (Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985). In this volume, J. S. La Fontaine (1985) contrasts Western ideas of the individual and individualism with Gahuku personhood and senses of self. Drawing on Read's (1955) ethnographic work in the New Guinea Highlands, Fontaine points out that simply because a society is individual-glorying, this does not entail Western-style individualism (1985: 136). Both Western and Highland societies valorise prominent individuals who prosper through competition; however, only one produced an ideology based around individualism. Fontaine argues this was for two reasons. First, like Read, she emphasises the particular role of Christianity in the West in emphasising transcendental, universalised duties. She also points to how autonomous individuals in the West are nevertheless situated within a wider reified society—the nation-state (1985:136-137). In
contrast, among the Gahuku, society does not have this abstracted character, as it is composed of lived everyday relations.

Beyond these works, discussions of personhood and the self have a contested history in the study of Melanesia. Building on Dumont's (1965, 1980, 1985) and McKim Marriott's (1976, Marriott and Inden 1977) work on personhood in India, Strathern (1988:13) famously argues that Melanesian personhood is one of *dividualism*, as juxtaposed against Western individualism. Louis Dumont (1980, 1985) had used Mauss' insights about the historical nature of Western personhood to argue that the idealised Indian person views personhood as part of wider corporate wholes because of caste. Marriott (1976) critiqued Dumont's (1965) approach, and attempted to build theoretical frameworks upon local worldviews—in particular, the concept of the dividual embedded in wider networks reinforced by the exchange of food and bodily fluids, which are important to the maintenance of caste relations. Strathern argues for a similar situating of the self in PNG—with individuals containing a "generalized sociality within". Sociality is made up of social relations of homology, where people conceive individuals as both separate and constituting wholes (1988:13). Like Marriott and Inden (1977), Strathern locates the construction of Melanesian dividuals through exchange relationships.

Strathern's depiction of Melanesian personhood was later critiqued for being homogenising and dichotomising of the difference between "dividual" and "individual societies", particularly in the context of increasing Western entanglements in Melanesia (LiPuma 1988, Smith 2012). Because of these valid concerns, I will not be using the term "dividual" further in this thesis. Nevertheless, the overall points that Strathern, Read and La Fontaine raise about cross-cultural understandings of the self and personhood in Melanesia remain relevant. Their general idea about Melanesians conceiving people as repositories of multiple relations, without the tension between “society” and “individuals”, are true. Following Wagner (1991:162), I use the term “fractal personhood”, to represent and provide analytical structure to the observation that social relations are often emphasised in the construction of personhood in many Melanesian societies. For Wagner, fractality is an attempt to move beyond the contrast between the singular and the plural that plagues society/individual distinctions. He constructs a fractal person as a person not “standing in relation to an aggregate or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit” (1991:163). Like the persons within a wider genealogy, they are neither entirely separate from it, nor completely encompassed by its structure.
Wagner uses the fractal person as an ideal type to explore Melanesian forms of political leadership and personhood. However, I instead want to focus on fractal personhood as a particular stressing of irreducibility in light of LiPuma’s (1988) concerns of exaggerated Melanesian ideal types in a context of cultural interchange, and my broader interest with creolisation. While fractal persons are neither separate from, nor reducible to, their social relations, the extent the fractal locus of an individual is emphasised, or the collective structure is underscored, depends on a particular performance of ideology at the time. As I will explore, individualism communicated through land relations provides Melanesians with an avenue for underplaying this fractality.

At this point, it is worth pausing and making some analytic distinctions clear between personhood versus the self, and individualism versus the individual. La Fontaine (1985) makes an observant distinction between the person and the self. Personhood applies to the social roles in a society and how that culture understands “the human being”, in contrast with the self, which pertains specifically to an existential concern of how people understand themselves. I break these two notions up for analytic clarity, not ontological separation. While this is a definitional distinction between the self and the person, the exact relation between these two categories varies between cultural settings. In turn, I understand 'the individual' as pertaining to a distinct person—while there is cross-cultural difference between what being a person entails, the distinct sense of being an entity, separate from other persons, appears to be universal. Individualism, in contrast, is a specific ideology that has emerged out of the cultural and political history as outlined above. Individualism stresses the individual as the primary organising unit of social life and cultural understanding. Additionally, the individual is conceived as distinctly separate from the social roles that person occupies—a conception grounded in the transcendental soul from Western Christianity. Thus, within the ideology of individualism, the individual is separated from his or her social personhood as something additional that can be imposed or strained against.

Contrary Figures of Reciprocity

In his study of *The Rise of the Big-Shots*, Martin (2013) juxtaposes the cultural figure of the big-man with the rise of a new cultural category of the big-shot, which he argues represents “the contemporary Melanesian possessive individual” (Martin 2013:212, Macpherson 1962:3). Big-shots is a derogatory term used by villagers around the town of Rabaul, East New Britain. Martin's informants used the term to accuse typically wealthy and/or politically influential
individuals of not being sufficiently involved in reciprocal relations with their grassroots kin. Big-shots typically claim that they are only able to acquire their level of success by defending their business or political career from the pervasive demands of kin demanding money and favours. Martin (2013) traces the ideology around this strategic selfishness. Big-shots depict their actions as both rational and necessary for the good of all—they claim that without a defensive attitude towards requests for sharing, their businesses would never function (Martin 2013:223). Grassroots villagers deploy the pejorative concept of “big-shot” in direct comparison with the big-men and kastom of old. By doing so, they call attention to the big-shots’ lack of willingness to fulfil their obligations to others at the same time as making a broader complaint of a perceived increase in individualism in Matupit. One of the key reasons big-shots are able to ignore their social obligations is their possession of money, which removes them from the need to entangle themselves in webs of economic reciprocity.

While I never heard the term “big-shot” during my time in PNG, Martin's informants' concerns with independent, isolated individuals who are able to live off money (kaikai mani), and their refusal to share, played a key role in how people in the village juxtaposed themselves against people from town, white people and land sellers chasing fast money. Central to this comparison between these groups, was the idea of “freedom”. For some, this freedom was grounded in people’s control of land and relational dependence. For others, it centred on a kind of fantasy surrounding the ability to “eat money”, and was based on their desire to be free of unreasonable obligations and people telling them what to do. In dissecting the idea of “freedom” in a Melanesian setting, I will how it was deployed by people living in Bena, and how it played into the fantasies of those wishing to live a less relational life. My contention is relatively straightforward—as exchange is fundamental to the construction of relational personhood, individuals who act along different forms of exchange foster alternative understandings of personhood. Within the diversifying space of possible economic relations, creolised forms of personhood sit hand-in-hand with creolised economic forms.

The (Lack of an) Anthropology of Freedom

Freedom is a difficult subject of study because it has both a philosophical and vernacular meaning, and has an overbearing symbolic weight in Western culture. Despite the semantic intensity of freedom, the study of freedom holds a surprisingly unremarkable place in anthropology. As James Laidlaw (2002:311) points out, “freedom is a concept about which anthropology has had strikingly little to say.” While anthropology has an interest in numerous
adjacent concepts, such as resistance, agency and governance, anthropological is surprisingly barren on the subject of freedom itself. The dearth of anthropological studies of freedom recently prompted Kelty (2011) to write a series of posts on *Savage Minds*, a popular anthropology blog, on this topic, who provides a helpful review of much of the literatures I consider below.

While anthropological research has not commonly addressed freedom, none other than Malinowski (1944) published a major work on the subject—*Freedom and Civilization*. Despite being grand in ambition, *Freedom and Civilization* is focused on critiquing totalitarianism and arguing that widening freedoms have been made possible by expanding civilization (see Cook 1945). Franz Boas (1940) wrote about “Liberty Among Primitive People” in a edited volume on *Freedom: Its Meaning* (Anshen 1940). Once again, Boas (1940) drew on Western understandings of freedom as freedom from constraint, concluding that “with all this, the concept of freedom is not found in primitive society” (Boas 1940, cited in Kelty 2011). After this initial work on freedom, research into freedom is few and far between in anthropology. David Bidney's (1963a) edited volume about *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology* covers the idea of freedom in cross-cultural settings. Bidney's (1963b) opening essay is largely a philosophical exercise attempting to create analytic separations between different kinds of freedom. However, other essays in the volume have more anthropological reflection. Edmund Leach (1963:74) takes the strongest position, arguing that freedom is neither “an identifiable thing” nor “a good thing”.

Dorothy Lee (1959) provides an array of contemplative essays in *Freedom and Culture*. Rather than drawing on any particular ethnographic context, Lee skips between peoples like the Wintu, Hopi, Tikopia and Trobriand Islanders to consider questions about freedom, equality, autonomy, personhood and obligation. She approaches these concerns from a Whorfian perspective, such has how Wintu Indians (1959:8) conceptualise autonomy through how they describe cooperation—“I went with the baby” rather than “I took the baby”. Central to Lee's concern is how non-Western groups respect autonomy, and the tensions between social pressures and this autonomy.

Lee's work went on to inspire Paul Riesman's (1977 [1974]) study of *Freedom in Fulani Social Life*, based on ethnographic research in the intersection of Mali and modern-day Burkina Faso. Riesman was clearly influenced by Lee's earlier work, dedicating his ethnography “to the memory of Dorothy Lee”. Riesman (1977:2) explains that a central concern of his study of Fulani life was:
what concepts are implicit in their everyday actions, what their experience of freedom is like, how freedom is maintained or curtailed in social life, and how these aspects of freedom can be related to facts of social structure, technology and environment.

Notwithstanding the centrality of freedom in his title and interests, freedom comes up relatively sparsely in the ethnography, which is largely concerned with tensions around agency versus structure rather than how Fulani themselves understand freedom in social life (1977:140, 256). When addressing questions of freedom, he analyses the terms *pulaaku* and *semteende*, which correspond broadly to obligation, shame, honour and custom (1977: 116-140).

Despite working around questions of freedom, these studies have largely avoided addressing the question of how freedom, or concepts people similarly deploy, are understood in cross-cultural settings. Authors like Boas (1940), Lee (1959) and Riesman (1977) examine how a range of cultures might be construed as free, as freedom is understood in the West. While an interesting exercise of exploring how non-Western societies compare to Western political ideals, they avoid exploring how, and if, members of different cultures understand these actions and thoughts that scholars have labelled “freedom”.

A notable exception to this trend is Caroline Humphrey’s (2007) astute analysis of the uses of “freedom” in Russia. Rather than drawing on philosophical understandings of freedom, she explores the usage of *svoboda, mir* and *volya* compared to Western ideas of freedom by examining their historical trajectories and current usage. Like the chimeric meanings of freedom in English, each of these terms has different connotations. Rather than a universalistic state-of-being, *svoboda* pertains to a specific “privileged political state of liberty”. Historically, this was associated with the aristocracy and, during Soviet times, being independent and not the part of society that is unfree (such as political prisoners) (2005:2). In contrast, *mir*, routinely translated as “peace”, refers to a more universal notion of humanity and unboundedness. If *svoboda* is a political status, *mir*, like the Soviet spacecraft, is “directed outwards limitlessly” (2005:4). Finally, *volya*, translated as “will”, as well as individual freedom, is linked with “sensation, emotion, and action” (2005:6). It is also associated with more negative emotions such as being demanding or commanding (2005:6).

I have detailed Humphrey’s (2007) study here because it emphasises the complicated task of exploring freedom and freedom-like notions in a cross-cultural setting, both linguistically and analytically. While all the terms she considers have some echoes of the Western ideas of freedom, they are historically-situated and inhabit different value systems.
Therefore, Humphrey (2007) takes pains to point to the problems in translation and the subtle
differences in the terms. These difficulties are compounded when working in a linguistically
creole language like Tok Pisin, where the main words people used to discuss freedom are
“freedom” and “free”. While it is revealing that the loan word Bena use is “freedom”, these
references in PNG cannot be taken as synonyms for freedom as talked about in the Western
World. As Filer (2006:68) emphasises, because of the overlap in vocabulary between English
and Tok Pisin, it is easy to presume similarity of meaning. However, Tok Pisin vocabulary is
relatively small, so various words, such as the meanings of rot discussed in Chapter One, sit
across a broader semantic space, acting as a master-signifier to align and make sense of a
wider array of symbols. Because of these problems, this chapter explores the complications of
unpicking Bena understandings of freedom.

Beyond this survey of studies of freedom in anthropology, there are two recent studies
with an interest in exploring freedom in Melanesia. The first is Neil Maclean's (1994)
exploration of the tensions between “freedom and autonomy” in the Western Highlands
Province. Maclean understands freedom in a particular fashion. Rather than the classical
understandings of positive and negative freedoms espoused by Isaiah Berlin (1958),
draws on George Simmel's (1982) understanding of freedom as an “expansionary and volatile
form that the self takes when faced with the universe of value created through money”. For
Simmel (1982), this freedom is a specific disposition that emerges as a result of the money
form’s (theoretically) infinite exchangeability. Maclean juxtaposes this freedom with
autonomy, which he understands as “a stance against the world” that is grounded in particular
ties to people and places. He points to the gender-based division of labour and the
“unmediated access to land at the level of everyday organisation of production” as the basis
for this relative autonomy in PNG (Maclean 1994:675). The subjective demarcation between
“here” and “there” is central to Maclean’s depiction of the autonomy-freedom distinction—
freedom does not lead to autonomy because it requires constant moneyed connections to the
outside world, while autonomy's inward-looking disposition negates the possibility for
freedom in the market.

While an engaging tension, Maclean’s use of the terms “freedom” and “autonomy” do
not sit with my research interests here, which is how Bena understand “freedom”. However,
his broader concerns do. He emphasises that contemporary issues in Melanesia are not simply
an:
articulation of systems of circulation [gift and commodity circulation] with distinct
and contradictory structural characteristics...rather, these forms of circulation have
particular corresponding subjective orientations to the world that raise the question
of how people live this articulation. (1994:684)

This concern eloquently articulates one of the central concerns of this thesis—the relationship
between emergent forms of economic circulation and the subjectivities that sit alongside these
forms of exchange. Maclean's emphasis on autonomy through grounded access to land and
kin-networks is also how people in Bena talked about certain kinds of freedom in PNG.

The second, more recent piece which selectively discusses freedom in PNG is Holly
Wardlow's (2006) ethnography, Wayward Women. Wardlow's primary interest is the
socio-cultural world of pasinja meri (women in PNG who accept money for sex) in order to
explore and challenge understandings of female agency, sex-work and gendered modernity.
Wardlow (2006) argues that, contrary to recent studies of “sex-work” which have sought to
shift the discourse around this topic towards economic necessity, pasinya meri's initial reasons
for exchanging money for sex were about anger and resistance rather than material need. She
claims that this resistance emerges in a post-colonial context of declining monitoring of
female action and attempts to manage and police this agency (2006:4).

The bulk of Wardlow's study is interested in agency rather than in how her participants
conceptualise freedom per se. Nevertheless, Wardlow spends extensive time exploring how
pasinja meri understand and assert agency, sometimes by drawing on the idea of freedom
(2006: 140). Notably, mobility is a critical dimension in how pasinja meri understand their
freedom, using terms like “mi raun long laik” (I go around where I like) (2004:140). Some of
her informants, pasinja meri and other Huli alike, describe themselves as “free”, although
sometimes it is unclear when this is a translation (2004: 53, 138, 141). I found that many of
her findings echo similar sentiments in Bena. As I will show below, the idea that you can
“bihainim laik bilong mi” (literally, “follow my desire”) was a critical dimension of freedom,
particularly for young women, in Bena.

Free Food

If people were complaining about life in town, they often did so by talking about how the
village was “free”. This notion that village life was more “free” than town constantly
confronted me during my stay in the EHP: typically while I was eating with people, or when
they were spending money in town and they were not pleased about it. As we ate food outside
Felicity's house, she emphasised the freeness of food. Felicity cooked kumu and boiled sweet potato, and then would say to me,

This is garden food. It is free food. When you stay in town, you need to pay for food. You have to live off money. Here, food is free from the garden. We have garden food here.

Someone else would chime in, “If we have money, we go to town and buy some food. If we don't, we go to the garden and get free food”.

I heard this refrain almost verbatim from so many people that I cannot ascribe it to one individual. This notion of garden food as “free food” came up repeatedly in the village, and was central to how people juxtaposed life in the village to the town, as well as “Western ways” to PNG. It was also a method people used if they wanted to emphasise the superiority of the village over Western lifestyles—if they wanted to do the opposite, they complained about how much food people in the village liked to eat and that Highlanders had bikhet (literally “bighead”, meaning obstinate or unable to listen). People not only emphasised how the food in the village was free, but also that this was different from food in town. If I stayed an extra-long period in town, Felicity expressed concern over town being expensive and would implore me to stay at the haus lain longer. It is also notable that eating is the central metaphor in this juxtaposition—the village is a place of free food, while in town you must kaikai mani, literally “eat money”.

Felicity's complaint about eating money in town needs to be understood in a context where sharing food is also an embodied process. As outlined in Chapter One, Meigs (1988) has emphasised that by eating food that is shared, one partially shares vital essences of the person who grew and gave it. These connections created by sharing food are central to the maintenance of reciprocal kin relations. Exchange links people both economically and physiologically. This forms a sharp contrast with eating food bought in town. As Martin (2013) explored, big-shots were figures of suspicion precisely because of their ability to remove themselves from interdependent reliance through their access to money. By consuming commodities bought from town, no embodied sharing takes place. Individuals who lived off money are physically more individualistic, since they do not need to share food. This complaint was not only expressed by people living in Bena—one of the most common complaints I heard when chatting to town dwellers, like PMV drivers, was that food costs too much money in town, while in the village it is free. The connection of food-people-place via land is central to the everyday acting out of the cosmological relationships discussed in
Chapter Two. Critically, the space of town denies this food-people-place connection that commonly constructs personhood in the Highlands.

These complaints take place within a wider context of complaints about the influence of money degrading kin obligations and inflating bride-wealth. Of course, people did not exclusively dwell in, or consume the products of, the town or the village. People were composites, constantly buying, selling, growing and exchanging food in a variety of contexts. Many evenings Mere or Felicity purchased food from town or nearby trade-stores for consumption in the village, while at other times, they ate food from the gardens. By doing so, they performed new forms of personhood that were neither the idealised reciprocal individual nor an anti-social eater of money.

There was broad consensus that food in the village was freer than in town. However, there were varying opinions over what and when something counted as “free”. Mere had a strict understanding of whether food was free—she explained that the seeds had to be taken from the garden or given as a gift. If you bought seeds or fertiliser, the subsequent food was not free. Others, like Samson, had a looser understanding of when food was free. It did not matter if the seeds were bought or fertiliser was used, what mattered was that the final product was acquired without purchase. Further, Samson explained that if you sold these free goods, like cabbage or broccoli at the Goroka market, the money gained was “free money”. This did not entail a lack of requirement to reciprocate, like a “free gift”, but was about the source of the money emerging from outside the moneyed economy.

Notably, Samson emphasised that this was different from the sale and resale of trade-store goods. When he first talked about “free money” being the difference between how much it cost for the products and how much you sold it for, I said “Ah, so this is like marketing betel nut, yea? Like how Opa goes to Goroka and buys some betel nut and beer and then comes to sell it at the village”. Samson took issue with this, and clarified my interpretation. “No”, he explained:

Let me give you an example. You go to town and buy some cabbage seeds, then you go to your gardens and plant them. You clear the bush, turn over the ground and plant the seeds. You work and work in the garden and a few months later the cabbages are ready. You then go to the market and sell them. When you buy betel nut and sell them, you just get the betel nut and sell it. It is different. It is not free money because you spent money to buy betel nut and then you sold betel nut.
For him, the difference between marketing trade-store goods and selling food with pre-bought seeds was the transformation. People are not reselling seeds—they are taking the seeds, transforming them, then selling the final product.

This brings me to the question of how this transformation takes place. Where does this food come from? How is this village/town division produced? Regardless of the differing understandings of whether something counts as free, people emphasised the place of both land and labour in this transformation. After talking about the virtue of “free money” that came from “free food”, I asked Samson a question that irked me—how can something that is “free” be sold for money? Samson explained that the cost is a necessary compensation for the work done in the garden—the work that Samson could have been doing, instead of working in the garden. However, Samson’s explanation of the “source” of the money is fairly atypical. When I was walking around the Goroka township with Junior, we chatted about the nature of free food. Junior pointed to a banana tree within the Round Round Theatre:

That banana, its owner did not pay for it. When it is ready, they will cut it down and plant it again. He won’t need to pay for it! It is free food. This is the blessing. Like with sweet potato and cassava. Put a stem of sweet potato in the ground and it will grow. It is free!

Junior emphasised how the “miracle” was the fact that you could simply plant the stems and the ground, producing an entirely new “free” item. The religious allusion of “miracle” was not unusual either—Samson commonly told me that they were blessed by God because the land in Bena was so fertile. Locating the miracle of growing food in land was central to how people understood the production of freeness. If they had to pay for land, or did not control land, they would not have free food. Similarly, people in town did not have free food precisely because they did not have land to grow food. As Junior later said to me, “In your country, if you have no money, the government looks after you. Here, the government doesn’t look after us. If we don’t have money, we go to the garden. The land looks out for us.” This also underscores the juxtaposition of vulnerability of town as a social space, as illustrated by the quote from the Bougainvillean students in Chapter Two. The possibility of living without land is on people's imaginative horizon—particularly in the context of concerns of land sales and sufficient land for children, the sentiment “if we don’t have money, we go to the garden” prompts the question “what if there were no gardens?” It also draws on a common sentiment of landedness and Papua New Guineans subscribing a degree of agency or at least reciprocal relations to the
land, an idea that lead to Peter Sack (1974:200, cited by Ballard 2012:52) proposing that “land in Papua New Guinea owns the people, instead of the people owning the land”.

These distinctions are important because people see free goods as a virtue and a means of differentiating between themselves and town dwellers; this creates alternative economic and symbolic assemblages in the village and town. In the accounts I have provided here, there is a tension between viewing the land as providing the “free” food, or this food coming from the work of people in the gardens. By and large, people saw gardening as being about tending the food as it grew, while the food itself grew in the ground. Land is central because people emphasised that they have access to land, which in turn enables them to grow food—a clear distinction between food-buying town dwellers and food-growing villagers. It is also central because people locate the ground as having a transformative quality that enables creation. Thus, access to land, and the freedom it brings, becomes a key means that people use to distinguish from their landless, town-dwelling counterparts. The exchanges become “free” because people now increasingly buy food. Purchased food, on the other hand, is also freer of social obligations. In the village, the emphasis on land rather than labour also obfuscates the gendered work of those who do tend the garden, who were typically women, as discussed in Chapter One. It is notable that it was often young men quick to complain about how hard life was in town compared to the village. Thus the boundaries people draw between the village and the town are produced by economic juxtaposition, the physicality of existence in that people live on land, and economic relations to the land through the fact that they largely control the products of their labour.

**Ingesting Land and Social Relations**

This centrality of free food as a distinction between town and the village is also important because of what people do with food in terms of social relations, and therefore what kinds of persons are created in these two different spaces of economic exchanges. As emphasised repeatedly here, and in the literature in the Highlands generally, the giving of food is central to how people demonstrate care, power, and interest in building a relationship with a person. Felicity's ability to feed everyone who comes to her house with “free” food also speaks to her ability to build and maintain social relations with multiple people. This aspect of free food demonstrates the interlinked, non-alienated nature of food produced in the village. There is a clear economic and embodied connection between land, labour, food, and people.
subjectivities and the land food is grown on are internalised through exchange and consumption.

This process is different from food bought in town. Commodities purchased from trade stores are suspended in space, with less connection to person and place. People certainly gave away products purchased from town, but these were not grounded in the labour and land of the giver. By purchasing food, instead of growing and receiving it, one is acting out a different cultural connection. This links to Ira Bashkow’s (2006) observation that the Orokaiva describe white people as particularly 'light', because of their ability to move around without relationships with people. Even if I connected myself to the village by consuming food grown there, my ability to live in town always gave me the ability to move away. This made me less grounded in the village. From this vantage point, it becomes clearer that the necessity to purchase food in town make it an ideologically asocial space—a space where alternative forms of social personhood are played out. When people complained that town food costs too much money, while food in the village is free, there is an underlying complaint about how people relate to one another in town.

**Alternative Freedoms in Bena**

The nature of free food is important because it is intimately linked to people’s construction of the village as being free, as in freedom. People would tell me, “PNG is a Free Country”, a pun of sorts, where PNG is free because it does not cost too much money to live in, and because one is “free” by simply living there. In one memorable instance, I was sitting around Mere's fire, cooking with Junior and Semu talking about wages in New Zealand (NZ). As we turned corn on the fire, they were fascinated by my stories about the size of incomes there. Like many people in PNG, they had an impression that wages were higher in New Zealand than in PNG. However, after talking about my weekly expenses, grins turned to looks of outrage. Two particular expenses stood out for them—rent and food. The idea that most of my money goes to paying for food and rent appalled them. Mere turned to me and said:

You have to pay rent, pay for power, pay for water, pay for food. Here, life is free. I don’t have to pay rent, pay for water or pay for food. If I want to go to the garden, I do. If I want to go to town, I do. If I don’t, I stay in the village. Here, I am free.

Mere went from one sense of free — the fact they do not have to pay for rent, water or food — to the idea of freedom, which, in turn, is entangled in relational personhood and grounded living. The lack of freedom in NZ is as much about the lack of relational dependence as the
cost of living. Further, access to land was central. While this context was juxtaposed against my rent and food-buying lifestyle in NZ, this difference is also a key comparison against life in town. An axis of comparison which people ideologically draw between life in the village and life in the town, is the necessity of money, which informs the freedom in the village.

Before moving from one sense of “free” to another, I want to pause for a moment and delve deeper into the complications in analysing “freedom” in a cross-cultural setting, and take the time to unseat freedom from its loaded historical and ideological trappings in the Western consciousness. As discussed above, freedom has not been a topic of extensive anthropological inquiry (Kelty 2011, Laidlaw 2002). Anthropologists’ lack of interest in freedom is surprising, given multi-layered and sometimes contradictory ideas of freedom in Western philosophical and vernacular thought. The size of the philosophical literature on freedom makes it beyond the scope of this thesis to complete a detailed survey. In this case, it is sufficient to trace the dominant genres of freedom in order to draw attention to key themes and tensions. There has been significant concern with the metaphysical idea of freedom, with philosophers debating the relationship between causality, determinism and free-will (McKenna and Coates 2015). Here the central concern is the degree ideas of choice and free will are compatible with the deterministic qualities of the universe, the so-called “compatibilism” versus “incompatibilism” debate (Clarke and Capes 2015, McKenna and Coates 2015). The other significant strand of thought is the place of freedom in political philosophy. Freedom became a central rhetorical and political topic leading up to and following the American and French revolutions as the ideas of thinkers like Locke (1764 [1689]), Rousseau (2010 [1755]; 2010 [1762]) and Thomas Paine (1776) reflected anti-monarchical concerns and became more widely read. Contradictory ideas of liberty and freedom emerged from these revolutions. On one hand, revolutionaries sought freedoms to minimize the coercive forces of the state, on the other, they desired freedoms that enabled citizens to maximise their own capabilities.

In an attempt to disentangle these threads, Berlin (1958) famously introduced the distinction between positive and negative liberty. These distinctions highlight differing understandings of freedoms as “freedoms from” and “freedoms to”. Positive liberty focuses on self-mastery and the capacity of individuals to realise one's own will. For Berlin, this concept can be traced to Aristotelian notions of citizenship and the ability for citizens to choose government (1958:8). Negative freedom, on the other hand, focuses on the ability for individuals to act without external interference. For Berlin (1958), restrictions on negative liberty must come from other people—being imprisoned is a restriction on negative liberty,
while being trapped in a cave following a natural disaster is not. Berlin argues that the difference between positive and negative liberty is a source of political debate (1968: 3). For example, Berlin (1958: 29) warns that governments can abuse the idea of positive liberty by curtailing agents’ negative freedoms in an attempt to expand positive freedoms.

There are a range of other philosophical and political debates that intersect with freedom—these include questions of good governance (Machiavelli 1998 [1532]), and Jean-Paul Sartre's ontological existentialism that makes humans “condemned” to be free (see Flynn 2013). The two themes traced above—debates over free will and determinism, and the nature of freedom to and freedom from—give an idea of the political tensions over freedom and the contradictions in the idea of freedom that philosophers have persistently tried to work through. These contradictions also informed my own misunderstandings of freedom in the field.

“Free” and “Mus”

When people first started to talk about freedom in Bena, it took me some time to tease apart my own understandings in what I saw as an apparent contradiction between reciprocal obligation, subsistence production and claims of freedom. Despite declaring themselves to be free, numerous friends would constantly talk, and sometimes complain, about how they “mus” (must) go to this wedding or that funeral. As Samson and I took a crowded PMV down to Bena Bridge to go to a land case, Samson brought up, once again, the fact that life in the village was free. At this point I protested, pointing out that some ten minutes earlier he had explained that we must go down to see his brother to help him with the land case. If he constantly was obliged to go to this event or another, how could he be free? He looked at me in confusion and repeated that yes, we have to go “show face”—in Bena, it was important that you show your face at significant events. By showing face, you demonstrate your commitment to that relationship, reaffirming it and ensuring that your brother comes to help you when you were in trouble. What confused me was how his claims that he “must” go to social events clashed with my understanding of freedom—indicating a clear divergence of interpretation.

Such confusion also emerged during my discussions about gardening with Mere. Mere liked to compare her free lifestyle to married women and to myself, so I pointed out that earlier in the day she was complaining about how she could not be bothered going to the garden again to feed ungrateful men. Once again, there was an awkward back and forth where she saw no apparent contradiction between the two claims, while I tried to dissect my confusion in Tok Pisin. My struggle between the two homonyms, mus and must, free and free,
betrays the homonym pitfalls pointed out earlier in the Chapter. The apparent contradiction existed precisely because I was trying to comprehend their ideas based on my understanding of freedom. It also emphasises the contradictions in Western ideologies of freedom that I had internalised, as emphasised by Berlin’s (1958) distinction of negative and positive liberty. I assumed that obligations indicated a un-freedom, however for Mere and Samson, there was no such association. This begs the question: if the village is freer than the town, but freedom is different from how I understood the term, what comparison were they making? What did it mean to say the village is freer than the town? To understand this, it is necessary to turn to the three components of this apparent contradiction that have emerged in the accounts above—the idea of freedom itself in the Highlands, how my informants understood “must” and kinship obligations, and finally the concept of personhood.

At the beginning of the wet season in November, Mere and I were sitting in her house playing cards, as we often did, and talking. I finally decided to interview her about her notions of freedom. She forcefully articulated her dissatisfaction with the idea of living a purely moneyed life, frequently proclaiming that she would live and die in the village rather than spend all her time working to pay for rent and food. Of course, she also complained a lot about working in the garden and being bored in the village too. When I asked her what she meant by being free, she explained:

Mere  I am free because I have no boss. If I want to work, I do. If I want to do nothing, I do.
Me:  But don’t you have to go to the garden? If you don’t work at the garden, you will have nothing to eat
Mere  But I do not have a boss. No one tells me to go to the garden. If you work, you have a boss. They tell you when you need to go to work and when you get to leave. You don’t do as you want. But here, I don’t have a boss. I wake up when I want, go to sleep when I want. If I want to go to the garden I do. If I want to go to town, I do.

Mere's comments echo Wardlow's (2006) findings about tensions over female autonomy among Huli. Mere was quick to complain about marriage and its demands on female autonomy. She explained “I do not want to get married. Have a man always asking where I am and where I am going. Thinking he is my boss. Forget it”. Her articulation of the freedom of the village being juxtaposed against wage work and bosses was not uncommon. Like money, a key axis of comparison is a relatively new experience in the lives of the Bena—wage labour. However, the idea of freedom as “no-bosses” is also situated within the Bena value system which values autonomy—numerous authors (eg. Langness 1968; Read 1955; Sahlins 1963)
have highlighted the fiercely egalitarian and individualistic nature of many Highland societies which is, nevertheless, played out in a context of unequal power between individuals. This individualism is acted out with expectations of reciprocity and collective obligation, particularly in the context of big-men political leadership, where people expect a degree of patronage from those with power and coercion. In this regard, it is necessary to have a degree of caution in interpreting the term *bos*. While it still holds connotations of a social position because of its association with paid work, compared to the term *masta* with its colonial connotations, *bos* was also used to refer to people with influence and power. When people used the term *bos* to complain about someone, it was typically coupled with terms like *stonhet* (stone-head). This emphasised a person’s inability to take others into account by being bossy. *Bos*, therefore, could have both neutral and negative connotations.

The problems interpreting how Highlanders use the term *mus* are illustrated in Read’s (1955) essay on “Morality and the Concept of the Person among the Gahuku-Gama”, discussed earlier. Read’s essay was written in 1955 so there have been substantial changes in the High Valley since. Nevertheless, echoes of his findings are present within Bena. Crucially, the main time that I heard people talk about abstract generalised duties were in reference to Christian expectations. Mere and others often declared they were “backsliding” because they chewed betel nut and drank beer—a term echoed by many within the SDA community in Bena. Mere explained it was because “your body is a temple” and it is God's desire for you to not pollute your body. In sharp contrast, when people justified other “must” statements being imposed on other people, it would be done through appealing to specific social relations. With this understanding in mind, it starts to become clearer that there is no contradiction between the fact that Samson “must” go help his brother and Samson being free. It alludes to a different sense of obligation, which relates more to his relative positioning than an abstract duty.

This is in contrast to the impersonal obligations of work and debt imposed in town. Rather than mutual aid and reciprocity through dependency on kin, many people I talked to associated life in town with a dependency on debt. People in Bena said that the practise of “selling money”, making informal loans at interest, meant town dwellers were in a constant state of imposed obligation to non-kin. Compound dwellers who were short on money or waiting for their next pay check would go “buy money” from a loaner, in order to get essentials like food. This was the trap of town—people would be constantly spending their pay checks paying back their loans, so they would always have to work. If they did not pay back the loans, the lenders would hurt the debtors or their families.
Individualist Freedoms

One day, I was talking to a Highlands friend of mine at the university, who was not a land buyer, and he said to me:

    You know what? The Medieval Europeans had it right – they made fucking moats. You know? Like a deep ditch all around a castle. I'm sick of all this tribal bullshit. When I get back to my village, I'm going to build a moat around my house. It'll just be me, my wife, and kids.

He was joking, and as I found the sentiment about the moat quite funny, I repeated the anecdote to Mere and Felicity at the village. However, they did not laugh, they looked at me seriously and said, “This is selfishness [English]. You should not do this.” The mixed reception to this comment illustrates how conceptions of freedom founded on reciprocal obligations were not held universally and many people complained about these burdens. These complaints are not new, and the tensions around sharing and work are common in PNG (Kahn 1986, Whitehead 2000) and beyond (Widlok 2013). However, there is now a clear material form that could deliver release from social expectations on people's imaginative horizon—town and money. As Martin (2013:163) points out, the power of people who have money comes from the option to simply live on money in town. Felicity's use of the term “eating money” to describe town highlights the power of town and money. By eating money, you do not need gardens, and you do not, in theory, need to have reliance on your kin. Life in town is an imaginable, even if not necessarily viable, life-course that removes people from their constitutive exchange networks.

William, Samson's first-born son, embodied some of these contradictions and desires for a less obligation-heavy life and a more individualist form of personhood. He also emphasised dissatisfaction with working a waged existence. William works on a contract-by-contract basis for Goroka Builders. When work comes in, he is busy. Otherwise he hangs around the concrete compounds, watching compilations of action movies bought from the local Chinese owned DVD stores that dot town—they all exclusively sold this genre. Body building has a lot of popularity in Goroka, so William and his friends often sought out old action movies with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Men liked to hang pictures of flexing, muscular men around their houses. The compounds have a different feel to the village—they are square concrete constructions, and because they are in West Goroka, their water supply regularly goes off for weeks at a time. While we sat around at Goroka Builders, William told me about his dream to learn a range of different trades, become his own boss and own a “convent house”. Like his
sister Mere, William emphasised the importance of freedom and owning land. He explained that if the government owned all the land then:

... the government is the boss of you. Not here. We are free. Independent. You don't have a bossman. You are the boss of you. If you want to work the garden, want to find work in town, you can. You can do what you like.

However, William's problem is that he is not his own boss. His dream is to become a tradesman by studying all the trade—each time a job comes in that requires skills other than his, he goes to help and learns a bit of that one. Eventually, he will become a tradesman who is able to work at all the jobs. That way, he explained, when someone looks at “your paper [CV], they will say 'oh, you know all the trades. You are the boss automatically'”. Once he becomes his own boss, he wants to buy a covenant house—a town house with a high, sloped ceiling similar to what early missionaries built. I was initially confused by this allusion, but after some discussion, he explained that this was in direct comparison to village life:

In the village, lots of people come and go. It's noisy. In a covenant house, it's peaceful. No one disturbs you. You sit and it’s quiet and secret. You go to work, and then you go back to your private [English] house surrounded by a fence. The compound is like the village. People are coming and going, coming and going. It's better, becoming a boss. I'll buy an area of land, a private house, private fence. Live in luxury [English]. That's what I want. Living like a boss. Me, my wife and children.

William's dreams of upward mobility through the accumulation of skills stands in comparison with my example in Chapter Two of Opa's desire for more coffee trees and attempts to speak at customary events. It is an alternative mode of social mobility based on accumulation and consumption rather than exchange and patronage. William rarely spent time down at the village or came to events—I did not know Samson had an older son until I started visiting Goroka Builders.

William is not a big-shot (a la Martin 2013), by any means. However, his desires have echoes of a localised form of possessive individualism through seeking to become a “proprietor of his own person or capacities” (Macpherson 1962:3). While it remains to be seen what would happen if William becomes a tradesman, the specific details of the dream (private houses, private fences), and its associations with power, allude to the dual figures of power within the cultural imagination of the Highlands. On one hand, there is the big-man, who gains power through his ability to make and muster relationships through gift exchange, and on the
other, there is a person living in a private house, aloof and above connections. While the latter is a target of criticism for many villagers, it undeniable that it has seductive power.

Conclusions

People's relationships with land, commodities, and exchange are not simply material ones. They are also bound up in ideas of personhood—the construction of the “who” of economic encounters. Goroka's contrast to the village is one of the ways these different forms of personhood play out. Free food is a defining feature of the village. It is linked both to not needing to pay for food, and to the central place of giving and exchanging food in constructing relations. People contrasted this free food to the town, where people lived off money. Eating non-free food was an expense and a reflection of the individualised, ungrounded life of town. However, “town” and “the village” were not discrete spaces. People routinely travelled up from Bena to the village and vice versa.

This mixing of multiple land-food-person relations creates emergent forms of personhood as people act out exchange and consumption. The notion of free food was tightly linked to the idea of freedom. For some, the ability to rely on kin obligations was also a source of freedom. It also illustrated that many people think of obligations to kin as being part of giving freedom. Sources of unfreedom were located in the inability to make reciprocal connections, get into debt with non-kin, and being forced to work under a bos for food and rent. These obligations were an aspect of life that chafed many people. The complaints about obligations were not new, but the ability to escape them was. People, like William, imagined the ability to live a bit more exclusively, with money and a house.

These discussions reveal the emergence of two competing ideas of forms of freedom. Unlike Humphrey's (2007) account of Russian notions of svooda, volya, and mir, these ideas were not demarcated by different terms. Bena code-switching to the English “freedom” depicted a creolisation of both language and ideas of personhood. On one hand, Samson and Mere espoused ideas of freedom based on reciprocity and autonomy, spatially associated with village life. These ideas more tightly align with what Maclean (1994) described as “autonomy” in Melanesian life, geographically bounded and not overly dependent on support from outside exchange-networks. Reciprocal relations provided people the necessary space to go bihain laik bilong mi (follow my desires). This freedom was dependent on the material relationship that villagers had with land—because land lukautim (looked after) people and
provided free food, they did not have to submit to bosses in town or acquire non-kin debts to buy food.

The second idea of freedom is associated with money and a freedom from the demands of the village. While similar to the Western notion of negative liberty (Berlin 1958), of being free from interference, it is also closely associated with the control of space. By having the power to separate from one’s kin obligations and the comings and goings of the village, one becomes freer. It is telling that this freedom is metaphorically associated with fences—the ability to close oneself off from the demands of kin demonstrated a morally dubious attitude and the power to *kaikai mani* (eat money), instead of the material exchange people enact kin-networks through. This figure closely aligns with Martin's (2013) depiction of big shots and the more removed middle-classes of PNG (Gewertz and Errington 1999).

Finally, both ideas of freedom were linked through the centrality of land, and the idea of bosses. Both Mere and William stressed the importance of being one’s own *bos*, by being free to do as they please through gardens and trade skills respectively. Both chafed against the idea of having to constantly follow the unconditional orders of another person, although the path they sought in order to escape this coercion was different. In both cases, the control of land was key. Free food was only available because of access to land, while William identified with purchasing land in order to set up a house for his wife and kids. Through these diverse ways of performing personhood, Bena creolise freedom by simultaneously drawing on and reinterpreting Western ideas of “freedom”. This reflects both the changing economic opportunities for Highlanders and the widening means of communicating social personhood. In my next chapter, I will explore how these changes link to the broader historical trends of globalisation, capitalism and state-building.
Chapter Four—Creoles of Ownership and Conversations with the State

The entire concept of the country, the idea of the nation state, is an act of violence and really an act of hostility against native village independence and village autonomy. You have 700 or 800 language groups with over 2000 villages, each having its own autonomous existence, then you have superimposed on it a legal entity called Papua New Guinea. This is one of the basic factors we have to grapple with. (Narakobi 1991)

This final chapter deals with the complex “superimposition” of legal entities onto everyday land relations in PNG. The term “violence” invokes images of physical clashes between the state and landowners (a la Lattas 1998). However, for the villages outside of Goroka, the superimposition of the nation-state manifests more subtly through the quotidian vernacular of ownership. While the PNG state is routinely depicted as “weak”, “failed” or “fledgling”, the presence of the state and state institutions leave their indelible mark on land sales, either through their explicit presence in contracts and statutory declarations, or through the latent possibility that people could express land sales through the language of law. As emphasised in Chapter Two, Samson's case is somewhat unusual—not every land exchange ends up with arrests, meetings at the police station, and accusations of fraud. Nevertheless, the state sits in the background of these exchanges, providing legitimacy to alternative expressions of ownership, exchange and economic personhood.

I explore this dynamic in two distinct parts. I analyse the creolisation of ownership, by drawing on Rose’s (1994) notion of ownership as communication. Rose’s approach fits well into local understandings of land ownership in the Highlands, and also provides an important alternative to rights-based approaches, which are common in studies of ownership. I link communication to questions of personhood, arguing that in communicating a certain form of ownership, land owners also communicate individualised and/or reciprocal constructions of personhood. I compare the performance of ownership of a proposed large-scale sale of land to a PNG-born Australian farmer, to how ownership is construed for the sale of land to migrants.

Secondly, I situate this creolisation of ownership within processual understanding of the state, based on Trouillot’s (2001) depiction of state effects. Rather than projecting what the state is, and how the PNG state meets or fails to meet these criteria, I analyse the specific state-effects that manifest during land sales. In doing so, I argue that the creolisation of ownership goes hand-in-hand with a partial expansion of the legibility and spatialisation of land in PNG. By conditionally being able to express land relations in an abstracted, fungible fashion, land relations and exchange relations can be alienated from the particularities of the
case at hand. This provides the social, but not necessarily temporal, precursors for commodification. By locating the symbolic antecedents of commodification within the state rather than capital, I argue that the future commodification of land in PNG depends on the relative hegemony of legalistic understandings of land relations within languages of ownership. This, in turn, hinges on the future trajectory of the economic creoles Papua New Guineans speak.

**The Shadow of Primitive Accumulation**

Changing notions of ownership raise wider questions about commodification of land, globalisation and the incorporation of PNG into the international capitalist economy. The nature of capitalist expansion in PNG is the subject of ongoing debate. In the late 20th century, there was a growth of world systems analysis, in the vein of Immanuel Wallerstien (1987), exploring the position of PNG in the global capitalist system (see Amarshi, Good and Mortimer 1979, Donaldson and Good 1988, Fitzpatrick 1980, Howlett 1973). Ideas of increasing dependency was prevalent in the late 20th century literature in response to the wave of modernisation theory in the 1960s, which claimed that “traditional societies” were purportedly transitioned into modern capitalist nation-states (Howlett 1973:249). Authors critiquing this perspective drew strongly on dependency theory, ideas of proletarianisation, and primitive accumulation (Marx 1976:877) to argue that PNG was becoming progressively underdeveloped into a highly dependent neo-colony and Melanesians were in the process of becoming terminal peasants as the country became increasing incorporated into the capitalist world system (Amarshi, Good and Mortimer 1979: xvii, Howlett 1973).

Amarshi *et al.* point to a range of features suggesting the broader trend of underdevelopment, including increasing divergence between domestic resources and domestic demand, political classes highly dependent on external forces, stunted manufacturing sectors and the persistence of high rates of unemployment and underemployment—see Amarshi *et al.* (1979:xv) for a complete list of the stylistic features of underdevelopment. These ideas were, in part, a response to the optimism of modernisation theory, whose proponents argue that Western-style political economy was universally attainable and desirable. They were also influenced by Marx's (1976:877) account of the origins of capitalism, which involved both the violent appropriation of land through enclosure of common lands and the disciplining of the landless working class through the coercive poor laws.
Both dependency theory and ideas of modernisation fell out of favour following more sophisticated work on the entanglement of capitalism with local circulations of gifts (Gregory 1980, 1982) and with broader changes in economic anthropology (Gregory 2009). For example, Gregory (1980) emphasises that the contemporary political, social and economic dynamics of PNG owe more to the articulation of commodity and gift circulation than the hegemony of capital. More recent work has highlighted the complex indigenisation of capitalism, including the production and political deployment of a reified form of kastom (custom), similar to much of the Pacific (see Filer 2006, Golub 2007, Jolly and Thomas 1992, Jorgensen 2007, Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Martin 2013) and the attempts to create legal constructs like Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) that try to translate local kin groups into corporate entities capable of making contracts in the eyes of common law courts (Filer 2007, Weiner 2013).

Despite depicting a more Melanesianised form of capitalism, the shadow of primitive accumulation and questions of underdevelopment hang over land debates in PNG. For example, Andrew Lattas (1998) has stressed the role of the state using violent means of repression to enforce land deals with large foreign corporations. The extent PNG represents a case of ongoing alienation of land and proletarianisation is an open question. Here, I set my sights lower than the more obvious clashes of mining or forestry companies and customary land owners. By focusing on economic creolisation, I examine the changing symbolic landscape of economic exchange near town. I argue that emergence of a language of alienation, where land can by symbolically expressed (even conceived) as separate from persons is a social, but not necessarily temporal, precursor for any wide spread commodification of land. The give and take over how ownership is communicated represents a broader struggle between state institutions and villagers for hegemony over the means of symbolic production.

**Full Circle: Conflict and Confusion Over the Sale of Land**

Samson’s land sale saga came to a close of sorts on my last week in Bena. It seemed fitting—my introduction to the community was under the shadow of the sale, and as I left it, this shadow seemed to be passing. I found out about Samson's “sale” of the land by sheer chance. Like most of my fieldwork encounters, it was more about being in the right place at the right time than anyone notifying me that something important had happened. Junior, Noah and I were sitting in Mere's house playing a new card game. A bleary-eyed Samson and a couple of his kin poked their head around the door frame and watched us play. Samon’s sister's husband
chatted to me a bit before both of them moved off. After a short period, Junior wandered off and left me playing with Noah before I asked where Junior had gone. Noah casually explained that he had gone to find Samson, to ask him about the money he got from selling the land last night. I sat bolt upright. Having carefully followed Samson's attempts to sell the land, the sudden sale of the land was big news.

The casual way people talked about land in Bena had its upsides and downsides. People were quite happy to tell me about potentially contentious land issues, and liked to point out exactly what they thought should happen. The flipside to this casualness meant that I often found out about big events in an offhand manner. People were not avoiding talking about them—quite the opposite. Rather, people dropped land sales and disputes into everyday conversation the same way they talked about the weather. It occurred to me that if I had not inquired, I would have probably been none the wiser about this new development. I rapidly asked Noah questions about when this happened, whether it was one of the existing potential buyers and what Junior was enquiring about. After some back and forth, the story became clearer: late last night someone in a white SUV stopped and talked to Samson about buying the land. He then received the money, and went out with two other drinking buddies—hence the bleary-eyed pair from earlier on.

Junior, and Noah as it turned out, were angry for two reasons. Samson's two friends received a large share of the money, through the alcohol Samson had bought and shared. Samson, as a man without work, often relies on other people sharing food when it is the off-season for coffee. He is someone who gets his money in big windfalls. However, people complained that when he got money he did not share it with the people that supported him previously—he likes to go drinking with two other kin. Noah, and later others, as different members of the *haus lain* found out, repeated the refrain, "Where were they when he was in jail? Nowhere. We put together money and got him out, but where were they?" Junior's other concern was that the sale went through without consultation. As Samson's second eldest son, and Noah, as Samson's eldest sister's son, both had some claim to the land after Samson's death. This emphasised an ongoing theme in my investigations—Samson’s relationship to the land was not one of exclusive property ownership. Rather, he was the primary holder of inclusive claims. By selling the land, he minimised his obligations to the people who helped him, and did not adequately acknowledge Junior and Noah's potential claims to the land.

We eventually followed Junior up to the Highway, where Samson was playing cards, stood around a bit and eventually went back to the village to recount the events to Felicity. She
became angry and called Samson, to berate him about not thinking about his family. Like Noah, she continually asked, "Where were they when you were in prison?" When I asked Samson, he denied that he had sold the land. Rather, the person had visited to express interest in it. It is worthwhile pointing out that Noah and Junior's account and claim that Samson sold the land, then went out with others drinking, is classic behian tok (literally back talk). This gossip was a means for the two younger men to vent their frustrations about Samson. While claiming to not have sold the land, Samson never denied that he got some money from the visitor. Instead, the money was the beginning of a relationship—Samson explained that the buyer had arrived with an interest in buying the land.

Customary Ownership

Questions of ownership dogged my understanding of Samson’s land sale saga. When I talked to Samson about who owned the land, and who he had to talk to in order to make decisions about the sale of the land, he was unequivocal that the sale was between him and the buyer. He said it was a private matter. However, the subsequent discussions and disputes around the sale with Noah and Junior complicate this picture. The idea of individualised ownership is further complicated by disputes over the notion of ownership itself. When talking to people outside of Samson’s haus lain, many people disagreed with the idea that one person could own a piece of land. As one Papua New Guinean academic said to me, “Papa graun is a lie”, where papa graun is Tok Pisin for “owner of land”—literally father of the land. They explained, “The idea that one person owns land is a lie and is a new idea. Land is collectively owned”. Claims to land in Bena certainly seemed more complex than exclusive individual ownership—when people wanted to give away or sell large swathes of land, it was necessary to gather together extended groups of people. Carrier (1998:86) neatly summarises the difference between inclusive and exclusive understandings of property; inclusive property is an object “embedded in and reflects durable relationships between those people implicated in its past”, whereas exclusive property is “under the sole control of or associated only with the person who happens to own it at the moment”. Carrier's emphasis on the temporal differences between inclusive and exclusive property aptly captures the nature of land relations in Bena, where people claim ownership over land through both material and cosmological historical relations. Numerous other studies (Jorgenson 1997, Ballard 2013) have emphasised the political complexities in claiming land ownership, where in times of dispute, particularly after the discovery of resources, people maximally widen their claims, to include all the land they have
potential claim to. To disentangle this picture and problematise simple dichotomies of individual versus collective ownership, it is necessary to delve into theories of ownership and develop a picture of what customary land is.

Legally, customary land in PNG is:

land that is owned or possessed by an automatic citizen or community of automatic citizens by virtue of a proprietary or possessory kind that belong to the citizen or community and arise from and are regulated by custom (Land Act 1996:2)

Traditionally within both anthropology and law, ownership is understood as a bundle of certain kinds of rights over persons or things. Typically this bundle includes the right to use, sell, give away and destroy the object. However, this approach has been critiqued for ethnocentric assumption in how theorists conceptualise human relations to objects cross-culturally (Humphery and Veredy 2004) and for being overly static (Rose 1994). Additionally, rights-based approaches assume a legalistic and state-centric style of social relations, more akin to how states idealise their subjects than the messiness of stateless regimes of property (Scott 1999). Discrete, partitionable “rights” have the hallmarks of visibility and divisibility of state and legalistic ideas of ownership seeking to paper over local vernaculars—features that sit uneasily in the negotiated customary context of land ownership in Bena. Rose’s (1994) analysis of ownership as “a culturally and historically specific system of symbolic communication which people assert and contest” (Busse and Strang 2011:4, my emphasis) has more utility for understanding the contestation and debates around the land sale presented here. It emphasises that Samson positioning land sale as a private matter is a communicative posture about how his ownership ought to be understood. A communicative approach to ownership also emphasises ownership as an agentive act—Samson (and others) do not possess abstract rights to a given piece of land that external institutions enforce. Ownership, like group membership, is something that is actively done and communicated. In light of this understanding of ownership, combined with the earlier observations of inclusive ownership, I argue that customary ownership in Bena is an area of ground where people claim inclusive ownership by effectively communicating their relationship to the land’s past. This past could be material, like ongoing usage, or more cosmological, like historical stories of ancestors arriving at the land. The land becomes emphasised as customary precisely because people communicate and situated their relationship to it within a customary discourse of ownership.
However, when discussing the ownership of land, people do not exclusively draw on historical connections.

**Creolised Signifiers of Ownership**

The link between using land as a means of communicating sociality, and Rose’s understanding of ownership as communication, enables me to delve into the composition of the creole of land ownership in Bena. State actors, like officials in the Lands Department, commonly told me that they prefer that people officially establish ownership with the Department. This establishes a one-dimensional claim to land—a communication of ownership that is backed by state force via the courts. In contrast, the more informal methods of communication used within Bena require constant application. This is why the use of land has such importance in claims of land ownership, a nuance that is lost by simply distinguishing between use-rights and ownership rights. People in Bena do distinguish between the ability to use land and the ownership of it—many of the land disputes I attended centred on whether a line was given land, or simply the ability to use it.

That said, ongoing use of land gives a person a strong say over what can be done with the land. Conversely, people's strength of claim over land declines if they fail to use land for prolonged periods of time. Samson claimed that, as the owner of the land, he had the ability to sell, give away and allow people to use the land. For example, Samson says the land that Mere and Junior use to garden in Morex is his. Samson, as their father, enables Mere and Junior to use the land, but they decide what they do with it. However, it is important to recognize Samson also used the land he was attempting to sell for coffee production. He explained that if someone else was using the land, he would have to talk to them about the sale before selling it. Likewise, gossip and complaints about other peoples’ usage of land, like at the opening of this Chapter, are another method for emphasising a stake in the inclusive ownership of land. As such, the relationship between user, owner and the land itself is something of a constant negotiation and communication of different types of ownership. The fluidity of these communications also creates space for particularly vocal individuals to leverage their interests.

Communicating ownership was illustrated clearly during a contest over land up near the mountain garden. One morning I woke up at around 5:00 am to find Semu getting my bush knife out from under my sleeping mat. Confused, I asked what was going on. After apologising profusely for waking me up, he explained that they were going to Opa's father's coffee plantation to hack down coffee trees, where another group had planted coffee thinking
it was their land. When I later asked Opa about this, he said, “This is our way. We fight first, and then settle the debts afterwards.”

Part of being able to claim ownership of the land was about the action of cutting down the coffee trees—they were solidifying and asserting their claim to the land. Leaving the coffee trees there would have effectively communicated that the land belonged to the people who had planted them. Further, not acting at the time would have weakened their ability to say the land was theirs when settling the dispute. The actions taken by Opa and his kin was not to close a discussion, but one way of opening debates of the expectations of different land holders. These actions also underscore the mirrored violence that exists on both sides of land sales and how different imaginations of ownership and alienation assert their potentially competing visions. For example, if it had been a more legalised dispute, the violence of the state would have been behind the disagreement, as evidenced by Samson's arrest over his dispute. Land relations in the Highlands have always taken place in the background of potential violence—the critical question here is who is the dispenser of this violence and what are the forms of claims that violence is enforcing. Different means of ownership are therefore entangled with different means of enforcing that ownership, and either side can attempt to invoke (or reject) the particular means of compunction invoked by the other party.

Given this backdrop, the question of who is able to sell land is a question of who can most effectively communicate the necessary signifiers—in this case, acknowledged inheritance from its previous owner and ongoing usage of land. However, as a communicative act, people claiming ownership can also draw on multiple symbolic systems to justify it. The use of contracts is a clear example of this. In Samson’s case, he drew on alternative, more exclusive, ideas of property ownership when it was convenient and available. By specifically drawing on the idea of private ownership, and rejecting the idea that he needed to talk to kin about the sale, he invoked a creolised language of ownership akin to, but not subsumed by, Western notions of private property.

These ideas nevertheless held sway insofar as they meshed with Samson’s widely acknowledged claim to be the primary owner of land. By selling and making decisions about land in a more individualised fashion, instead of talking to other claimants, and then distributing the gains from sale (or pre-sale) to others, Samson effectively emphasised more social distance from Felicity, Junior and Noah, all of whom complained about the sale. At the same time, these three’s emphasis on having a say in the land, and helping Samson out of jail, all underscored claims of social closeness. If gifts and reciprocity make and reinforce
relationship in the Highlands, the failure to give and reciprocate creates more distant social proximity.

This back and forth, over one primary claimant of land minimising his expectations with others, stood in contrast to another case of proposed land sale. Faith was a PNG-born Australian farmer who visited Bena for about three weeks in the middle of my stay. She was born locally, before moving to Australia for education with her Australian-born father. She and her husband worked in farming for many years in Australia, and were considering purchasing land across the Asaro River to start a large farm. There, she hoped to grow fruit as well as raised cattle. Faith envisioned this as a mixed venture with the local community—they would own part of the company, employ local people and provide a place for women to directly sell garden surplus. Faith told me she hoped people would use this money to improve housing and sanitation infrastructure in the area.

Because of the size of the area under sale, there were a number of people who had potential claims, and so Samson held large *mumu* (gatherings involving the distribution of meat cooked via an earth oven) for his numerous brothers and uncles to discuss the prospective sale. These were vitally important—both Samson and Faith were clear that they wanted to make sure everyone heard about the sale first hand, so that there would be no hurt feelings (or court cases) down the road. This meant there were multiple gatherings, since at first a few key figures were not able to attend the events. Like the sales, gift exchange was central to these discussions—Faith brought boxes of lamb flaps, which Samson helped distribute. In this case, the legal framework of sale was in constant conversation with informally reaffirming land ties with the claimants. Faith was explicit about her intentions to make the farm part of the community, and to acknowledge everyone that had potential claim to the land. The discussions were not about a competing dichotomy of informal versus formal. The legalistic elements of the prospective sale sat alongside the customary negotiations.

**Commodification and the State**

However, what does this creolisation mean within the wider socio-economic transformations in PNG, such as the commodification of previously non-commodified exchanges, and the state-building? It is necessary to proceed carefully, so I want to take a slight detour and explain how I will be using the term “the state”. Like theorising capitalism, understanding the nature and form of the state in cross-cultural settings is a road paved with potholes. This is particularly true in a setting like PNG, where the state is historically recent, has a relatively
weak presence in people's lives, and is emerging in a context where villages traditionally had a high degree of autonomy (Read 1965, Waiko 2003). To build an appropriate understanding of the state, I use Trouillot's (2001) depiction of the contemporary state as a historically and geographically specific institutional concentration of a certain array of political effects. However, the sovereign nation-state is not necessary for these effects to function. Trouillot identifies four key state effects as:

1. **an isolation effect**, that is, the production of atomized individualized subjects molded and modeled for governance as part of an undifferentiated but specific "public";
2. **an identification effect**, that is, a realignment of the atomized subjectivities along collective lines within which individuals recognize themselves as the same;
3. **a legibility effect**, that is, the production of both a language and a knowledge for governance and of theoretical and empirical tools that classify and regulate collectivities; and
4. **a spatialization effect**, that is, the production of boundaries and jurisdiction. (2001:126, emphasis in original)

Like my depiction of capitalism in the Introduction, I do not desire to use this as a totalising understanding of the state, but rather as one that provides a basis for analysing the local dynamics of state-effects. Focusing on how land owners, sellers and buyers leverage, reformulate and resist institutions that reproduce state-effects provides a fertile ground for building a precise understanding of the nature of state-building in PNG. Spatialisation and legibility, for example, are central processes for the maintenance of private property. Combining these two approaches creates theoretical space for a processual understanding of the role of land sales in the interaction, complementarity and friction between attempts to impose state-effects and the expanding presence of the capitalist mode of production in PNG.

With these two dimensions in mind, I can turn to situating land exchange near Goroka within the wider currents of expanding capitalism and state building in PNG. In some regards, certain elements of changing land relations in PNG represent a direct example of the expanding capitalist means of production, arguably in a neo-colonial guise, since much of the surplus produced is exported overseas. Mining conglomerates are interested in renting, leasing, and otherwise controlling land for the purpose of producing economic surplus. Nevertheless, corporate relations with customary land groups, NGOs, and policy makers give this expansion a distinctly local spin (Kirsh 2014). Other elements of land relations have a darker character, more akin to accumulation by dispossession than production (Marx 1976:870). The (potential) violent relationship between the PNG state and land-owners is a frequent background to royalty disputes over mining rights (Ballard 2013:53). Narakobi (1986:6) argues that “in very many respects, the number one enemy of the village or the clan is a thing called the
Independent State of Papua New Guinea”. On the strongly coercive side, Lattas’ (1998) study of the deployment of paramilitary police units on behalf of logging companies represents this thread most clearly. On a more subtle dimension, authors like Weiner (2013) who analyse the use of legal constructs like ILGs, have pointed to an awkward isomorphism between customary and legal forms. Thus, land relations are a central stage for where Papua New Guineans physically and discursively engage with the state. Within this debate over the place of land in PNG, I ask similar questions when addressing the land sales explored in my ethnographic evidence so far—are land sales part of the expansion of capitalist relations in PNG? Who are the primary political actors in these exchanges? What is the state's role in these exchanges?

The relationship between the land sales examined in this ethnography and the expansion of the capitalist form of production in PNG is ambiguous. Land sales for migration are clearly entangled in the increasing availability of commodity exchanges, as one of the primary reasons for migration is a desire for easier access to cheap trade-store goods. Further, actors involved in the exchange commonly draw on a rhetoric of individualism to justify the “private” nature of exchange. However, the actual exchange, and the immediate economic relations around it, are distinctly non-capitalist. Land is not sold for the future production of surplus for profit—Samson's sales, and that of the Chimbu migrants were for migration, in contrast to Faith's desire to purchase land for a farm. Likewise, the primary actors in the exchange were not underscored by neo-colonial relations—exchanges were between customary land owners and migrants from nearby or other provinces.

The presence of the state, rather than capital, is far more central to these land sales. In addition to increasing connections to the global economic system, internally PNG is undergoing social change through the expansion of a historically new state into previously stateless modes of interaction. Land has been central to this transformation with a raft of legislation, legal entities like ILGs, and debates over how to best manage customary land in PNG (see Fingleton 2004, Gosarevski et al. 2004a, 2004b). Buyers and government officials often call for more legalistic approaches to land ownership and sale. When I spoke to the Lands Department, they voiced their frustrations at trying to convince landowners to incorporate their land and lease instead of selling it, so that customary groups keep their land. At the same time, they readily admitted that, given the size of the sales that are common, land surveying for incorporation is either very expensive (if private) or slow (if public). Many of the land buyers I spoke to desired a more secure form of tenure that did not require continued
good relations with the kin of the seller. The complaints of buyers and the Lands Department highlight the role of the legalisation of land relations in pulling land sales towards commodity-style exchanges. The putatively discrete unambiguity and impersonality of contractual exchanges of rights removes the need for the reciprocal relations that currently surround the sale of customary land.

The Lands Department spoke highly of these signed contracts, and claim that they halt disputes quickly and effectively. Even if other competing claims arrive later, the sale was finished and the new owner had complete, exclusive rights to the land. However, for a range of reasons, landowners like Samson were not interested in these approaches. For those who either wanted or needed fast money, this was not an option, due to the cost or time involved. Incorporation also sacrificed much of the flexibility at the heart of the sales that I have considered here. Finally, sellers like Opa expressed a degree of scepticism over incorporation and paperwork. Given these tensions, there a distinct ambiguity to both what land sales are now, and what they ought to be in the future. The future development of this creole of ownership is a space of political contestation.

The Vocabulary of Alienation

Land sales exists in concert with a raft of social processes that are political, but not necessarily temporal, precursors to capitalism in PNG. The creation of specific state technologies, such as ILGs and contractual exchanges, provide frameworks for managing impersonal relations between parties. The Lands Department’s attempts to provide a legal framework, such as titles, for land sales is an instance of a widening language of legibility in PNG. Without these frameworks, land sales are invisible to state actors, who are forced to rely on the idiosyncratic testimony of the parties involved in the exchanges. As James C. Scott (1999:33) emphasises, the replacement of informal customary systems of land ownership with individualised forms of tenure using standardised measurement systems was a vital step enabling the collection of market duties, taxes and other such forms of revenue for the pre-modern state. The standardised, decontextualised creation of legibility for “seeing like a state” (Scott 1999) is a necessary precursor to governing like a state. Without political technologies like discretely partitioning ownership and contracts, land ownership and sale confront the state and individual

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10 I want to emphasise that while I argue that state-enforced private property regimes are a necessary social antecedent for expanding capitalist relations, it does entail that these expansions will follow later in time (they are necessary, but not sufficient).
actors as a plethora of the particular—each exchange, is a unique instance, unordered by the state. Through technologies of legibility, these instances of the particular become instances of a universal. Like the money form (Marx 1976:181) that lets an array of heterogenous commodities be transformed into a common medium, contracts and formalised agreements enable exchanges and ownership to be fungible and comprehended as one of the same class as many others.

Thus, the process of individualising land relations dovetails with the commodification of land. One of the central tensions within this ethnography over the ambiguous commodification of land emerges from the tension between customary, inclusive forms of tenure and strictly demarcated, legally enforceable impersonal forms of ownership. These tensions demonstrate that legalised forms of ownership provide the necessary cultural vocabulary for the widespread alienation of objects. However, I have shown that this tension does not exist along a strict dichotomy—the customary forms of ownership and legalistic presentations of exchange are not mutually exclusive languages. The resulting discourse of ownership is more accurately a creole, rather than two mutually unintelligible languages. Actors mix and freely juxtapose the symbols of legally enforceable exclusive private property with negotiated customary ownership. As such, when considering the future of land sales in PNG, it depends as much on the relative expansion of capitalism as it does on the relative hegemony of the depersonalisation of economic exchanges through the expansion of legal forms of social relations.
Conclusions

Before I left Bena, social impact researchers, acting on behalf of the Department of Works, visited the village. They explained that the PNG government had recently acquired a loan from China in order to expand the Highlands Highway by two lanes. The researchers were starting social and environmental impact studies to assess the consequences of the project on communities living adjacent to the road. They asked people a range of questions about their activities near the road, such as where they grew food, what their monthly incomes were, and how many people lived in the village. People voiced a range of concerns—how would children be able to walk down the road to the nearby school without being hit by cars (children are already occasionally hit by cars hurtling down the Highway), whether they would be compensated for the land they were giving up, and how they would access the other side of the road. The actual process of expanding the road also brings up concerns—one of the researchers explained that in exchange for lower interest rates, the road will be constructed by Chinese workers. Relations between locals and Chinese immigrants, who own and work in a range of stores in town, are often strained at best, so the large influx of workers working near villages seems likely to increase tensions. Once the road is finished, it will have fundamentally changed people’s everyday lives. During my time in Bena, people routinely crossed the Highway to access the various coffee and produce gardens, as well as kin, on the other side of the road. Crossing the road is also how they get to the village after catching PMVs from town. While it is possible to cross a two-laned Highway, walking to the other side of a busy four-laned Highway is another matter entirely.

I open my conclusion with this account because it re-emphasizes that Bena villages on the edge of Goroka and the Highlands Highway are a locus for rapid social change in PNG. People’s lives are routinely thrown into new circumstances as forces outside their control impose themselves on these communities. Both the road and the town suck in adjacent areas into whirlwinds of change. At the same time, the residents of Bena are not necessarily the central actors in these changes—like urban migration into Goroka, the people in Bena are affected by, but do not necessarily drive, these changes. Nevertheless, they are caught up in them. Like the land that encircles Goroka, the people I stayed with are an essential frame to these changes—not within the content of the picture itself, but essential for demarcating the shape and form of change.

Here I have reassigned focus to this frame in order to create a more grounded understanding of urbanisation in PNG and examine the interplay with those areas adjacent to
spaces of change, namely the road and the town. In doing so, I have emphasised how areas not traditionally considered “urban” play a key role in defining the shape of urbanisation. Central to this shape are the land sales to migrants coming to live closer to town and the road. These changes are characterised by three interlinked themes—ambiguous alienation through the creole of sale, the entanglement of ideas of personhood and exchange, and the dialectical interplay of customary and legalistic forms of ownership. In all, these dynamics demonstrate that land sales are an example of the creolisation of sale, ownership and personhood.

Land sales are examples of an ambiguous alienation expressed through an economic creole. The key difference between gift and commodity exchange is degrees of alienation, which is the extent the producer, the labour of the producer, and the object are related. Critically, there is nothing intrinsic to objects that make them linked to producers. Rather, alienation is strictly about how the object-subject relation is culturally communicated and understood. I do not argue that land sales are ambiguous because land is “partially” alienated. On the contrary, they are ambiguous precisely because they could be understood by either party as an impersonal exchange—exchanges exist in a state of economic-semantic uncertainty. This shadow of commodification creates tensions before and after exchanges, as potential claimants, such as family members, all jockey for ways to situate the exchange as entailing ongoing relations. Nevertheless, the extent that the identity of the seller and other claimants matter, and therefore the degree the land is alienated, is a constant negotiation pre- and post-exchange.

The framing of these exchanges are inherently linked to ideas of personhood, in this case the “who” of the person, social relationship, object tripartite. Exchange is central to the construction of relational personhood in Melanesia—through the reciprocal exchange of items, people signify and construct networks of relation. Likewise, land plays a particularly central role in this circulation of objects. By gifting land, people in Bena reconstruct the social and physical landscape of communities. Within quite fluid notions of group membership, claiming land by drawing on collective histories invokes and reaffirms certain kin relations. Further, land, in addition to providing a vital economic basis for the production of food, is also the basis in which social space is created. By giving land for marriages and deaths, Bena recreate who has the ability to produce social space within the local area. While not related to land sales, the construction of extra highway lanes is a clear example of the changing nature of this power—both the Chinese government and the Department of Works, as well as whoever uses the road, suddenly have greater degrees of power in how social space is produced near Bena.
Likewise, land sales to migrants from outside the area is part of an ongoing reconfiguration of who creates space in the area. This is both in the form of the immaterial “sociality”, but also the physical symbols people deploy in areas.

The control and usage of land is also central to creolised performances of personhood in Bena. Mere and Samson emphasised one form of “freedom” based upon the lack of a *bos*, the ability to grow food and the social support of kin. They juxtaposed the village and the town through villagers’ ability to grow and exchange “free” food. This freedom was grounded in ongoing access to land. However, people were not always happy with the kin-network demands of this kind of freedom. Drawing on a different idea of freedom, Samson’s son, William, talked about his desire to be his own *bos*, and to live in a quiet “convent house”. For Samson, William and Mere, physical availability of houses was one of the ways that people communicated different forms of social personhood—by having a house with high fences, a person minimizes social connectivity, by physically demarcating those who live in the fences (the nuclear family), and those who do not. In these ways, the configuration of land, how it is exchanged, used and understood, plays a role in configuring social personhood. By potentially, but not absolutely, commodifying land, people in Bena perform different kinds of individualised personhood who have different forms of freedom.

One of the ways people communicated this creolised personhood was through their relationship to land. When discussing ownership, Samson and others drew on multiple languages of ownership. Actors mixed and freely juxtaposed the symbols of legally enforceable exclusive private property with negotiated customary ownership, such as through gossip, statutory declarations, *mumu* distribution, and land titles. This creolised form of ownership was possible due to the lack of hegemony of any particular means of ownership. It also created tensions in land sales because ownership and sale could contextually emphasise alienation and separate of the land from the original customary owner. With this in mind it is necessary to ask: what changes supply the necessary cultural vocabulary for expressing ownership relations in an alienated manner?

The ongoing, negotiated relationship Papua New Guineans have with the PNG state, manifested through the Lands Department, is one of the primary local institutions for providing legitimacy to more exclusive forms of land ownership. While it is easy to analyse these changes as a straightforward example of expanding capitalism and commodification, a key factor in the commodification of land sales is not capital, but the state. Unlike mining, special agricultural and business leases (SABLs) and other extractive projects, foreign capital
is almost entirely absent from the types of transfers I have considered. Instead, it is impersonal, legally certified exchange that enables the possibility of commodification. While government departments were not central to all land sales, the widespread awareness of a legally enforceable mode of ownership, provided both by the Lands Department as well as the general symbols of the state, like contracts and deeds, provide the necessary cultural vocabulary for expressing subject-object relations in a fashion where the identity of the subject is more irrelevant. In short, these technologies provide the necessary cultural vocabulary for alienation. While alienation is entirely possible without the state (and capital), the state provides the necessary political technologies for recording and enforcing large amounts of impersonal commodity exchanges.

The future course of this creole of ownership is one of the factors that will shape urbanisation of PNG, since rural-urban movement consists of both migration to customary land around town and to government-owned land inside it. The shape of these changes depends as much on the relative expansion of capitalism as it does on the relative depersonalisation of economic exchanges through the expansion of legal forms of social relations. Based on my short, geographically-limited ethnographic study, it is impossible for me make any kind of prediction of what this future will look like. Nevertheless, through the case study of Bena, I have provided a rough model of some of the key forces involved in this expansion. The shape of customary land relations depends on the relative capacity of social actors to muster the forces that sustain these different economic forms—the ability of the state departments to rationalise land sales, the capacity of customary land owners to situate sales within ongoing reciprocal relations, and the ability for people to continually creolise different forms of economic and social relations. The result of these forces is the emergence of a constantly changing creole of land sales, land ownership, and personhood.
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