The incorporated ground: the contemporary work of distribution in the Kutubu oil project area, Papua New Guinea

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*Draft Only: Please do not cite*

Paper presented in the Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Project Seminar Series
The Australian National University, March 1998.

June 1998
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It has long been an anthropological truism that public social life throughout Papua New Guinea centres around the mechanisms and activities of distribution of a variety of resources: food, marriageable women, ceremonial wealth items such as pigs and shell valuables, and less material things such as cult formulae, sorcery and magic techniques, and songs. However, the manner in which such traditional distributive mechanisms have responded to the more recent challenge of distributing revenue from resource extraction projects throughout the country has yet to be addressed in as comprehensive a manner. I’d like to make a start in this paper by outlining some of the dimensions of distribution of petroleum revenue within the societies of the Kutubu Joint Venture’s Kutubu oil project area. Since I have carried out fieldwork exclusively with the Foi-speakers of this area since 1979, I will restrict my examples to those from the Foi, though I suspect that most of the things I say are applicable across the entire range of longhouse-based societies within the oil project area, and specifically the Fasu, the main landowners within the project area.

The Foi number between 7,800 today and inhabit the heavily forested region of the Mubi River Valley in the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. Until 1988, their low population density, the inaccessibility of their habitat, and the limited prospects for agri-commercial development in this soil poor high rainfall area ensured that both the Provincial and National Governments paid little attention to the area. All this changed dramatically when a joint venture headed by Chevron Niugini discovered one of the biggest reservoirs of light sweet crude oil in the southern hemisphere in the region directly to the west and south of Lake Kutubu.

The Chevron Company has chosen to deal with local landowner compensation and payment through the mechanism of the Land Group Incorporation Act of 1974. Both royalty money and equity benefits are paid into bank accounts owned by incorporated land groups. In fact since mid-1992, Chevron has incorporated virtually all local clans in the Kutubu oil project area, including local clans who are not in receipt of any petroleum or pipeline revenues. Thus, the Land Group Incorporation Act will affect the nature of collective and distributive activity within the entire Kutubu oil project area and not just those groups in receipt of revenues.

Since Foi and Fasu clans have become incorporated under the Land Group Incorporation Act (1974) and have begun to receive royalty payments from the sale of petroleum, there have been numerous applications for new ILG status from sub-groups already incorporated in the early 90's. In 1998, thirteen new Fasu ILG applications were lodged, all of them apparently by sub-groups within already incorporated clans. The most common reason given is that the income is not being satisfactorily shared by those designated by the clan to control its income. These new ILG’s wish to have their own passbooks and receive their income payments directly.

State petroleum policy in Papua New Guinea stipulates that all landowning groups within a Petroleum Development License (PDL) area shall receive a share of royalties, regardless of whether the wells are located directly on their land or not. Since the Royalty payments on the well-head value of petroleum produced each month are a predetermined amount, the more ILG’s which are registered within Chevron Niugini’s Petroleum Development License Area (PDL-2), the less each single group will receive as regular cash benefit.

The Company interprets this trend in two ways: as a sign that local clan leaders are dishonest and that clans themselves are unable to act effectively as corporate or collective units for the common interest of its members. It could be, however, that this response of progressive fissioning of royalty receiving groups is the Foi’s and Fasu’s own way of implementing a distributive mechanism that is considerably more culturally entrenched within this region. I would therefore like to suggest an alternative explanation that is more in line with the way Foi and Fasu and other oil project area peoples conceive of local groups of this sort, and their functions in social life. I’d like to first talk about how clans divide in Foi and to question

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Tony Power, Colin Filer, Chris Warrilow, Mick McWalter, Tim Rowse and the members of the Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Project seminar (RSPAS, ANU) for comments and corrections on this paper.

1 Despite experiencing an influenza epidemic in the early 1950's, the Foi population has doubled twice since that time.
the status of the sub-clan as a global feature of Foi clan organisation. I would also like to link this
description of local organisation with the social function of distribution, both as mechanism attributable to
the way social systems "work", as a conscious goal of social competition which importantly centers around
its verbal forms, and as a more narrow focus of Foi concerns these days, when the distribution of petroleum
revenues in various forms, not entirely understood by them, is the most pressingly important issue for them.

Given the fact that about 97% of the land in Papua New Guinea is held under local customary land
tenure, Chevron's decision, and those of other resource extraction companies who have followed the same
path, represents the most practical and culturally empathetic fusion of western corporatism with Melanesian
customary resource management. It may occur to some readers that an anthropologist might very well
approve of the enshrining of local custom and the power of indigenous decision-making in this way. But I
reserve the option of distinguishing between the domain of local clan and landowner politics and values,
and the less culturally entrenched liberal democratic institutions which a developing non-western country
such as Papua New Guinea could be expected to put in place to make such local custom continue to work.
The main conclusion of this paper is that the very reasons why the Land Group Incorporation Act is so
successful in serving as recipients of landowner benefit are the same reasons why it cannot provide a firm
base for broader, more long-term democratic, representational political life in resource development areas.
I'd like to make a case for a foundation for revenue distribution policy that makes a clear distinction
between the domain of landowner custom and politics, and a separate domain of representational
organisations not tied to landowner interests per se, as the best way of managing the Solomonic task of
balancing landowner and non-landowner benefit in resource development areas.

Western and New Guinean forms of sociality
Let me first try to draw a broad contrast between the way people of the Kutubu oil project area and we
English-speaking westerners "do" social life. Our own English-derived western notion of social life starts
with the irreducible "individual", the "given" of social life. The individual is thought to be born as a unique
organism—genetically, temperamentally, and in terms of history and identity. We westerners then pose
"society" as a matter of deliberate, conscious, rational "contract" between discrete individuals, a contract
entered into by those individuals for their common good. The social contract stipulates that it is in the
interest of the individual to forego some of his/her passions, drives, strivings, and so forth in order to forge
a functioning and positively-valued social system in which the individual can pursue his/her interests with
the maximum amount of freedom and yet also (under ideal conditions) serve the community or public
interest as well. To sum up, we see the individual as "natural", or "God-given", and society as a human
artifice set up to mediate the innate strivings and drives of the individual (in broad terms, self-preservation
and the maximisation of property and comfort).

For many Papua New Guineans such as those within the Kutubu oil project area, this scheme is
exactly reversed. People are born not as unique individuals, but as already-connected through bodily
substance, ancestral intervention while in the womb, in terms of the series of debts and obligations that
attended the marriage of one's mother, by being nourished on the same land—to others within their social
field. What is "natural" or "given" in social life is this web of connections. If this is the case, what then do
people consciously and deliberately "do" themselves? Under these conditions, Papua New Guineans must
consciously and deliberately "achieve" individuality—it is not a condition that is given to them at birth.
They must strive to cut themselves off from others, to pre-empt the duties of debt and obligation, to make
themselves unique and powerful in the face of this convention which connects them to others.

But when one's world is given to one as a total universe of connections, where one connection
implies all the others in that world, to break one's self off means to break one's self off from the total world.
To make one's self different means finding a different whole world for one's self, with a whole different set
of connections. In other words, in the Foi social world, it is all or nothing. A quarrel, over property, over
adultery, over sorcery accusation, inevitably leads to the departure of one of the disputing parties to another

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2 I employ the term "non-landowner" in this context to refer to those groups within the oil project impact area who are
at the same time not entitled to petroleum revenues of any type.
3 In this regard, I expand on the recommendation made by Taylor and Whimp (1997: 103).
5 See Wagner 1981.
place, especially if powerful men are involved. Foi and Fasu history becomes the history of disaffected men taking their retinue, that is, the fragment of their social universe remaining to them, leaving their natal residence, and migrating to other places. At these places, they are given access to and control of sites so that they can carry out the total range of subsistence tasks.

I think it is important to understand that these quarrels and departures and migrations are the visible form that the normal state of affairs takes in this part of the world. They are not aberrations within the theoretically smooth functioning of a social organism, because there is no social organism as such. When people become disaffected from their nominal groups of affiliation, they do not assert their individuality and leave, for individuality is not the “default setting” of non-sociality for Papua New Guineans. Rather, they take a miniature fragment of the social world to which they belonged, in the form of immediate family and other assorted hangers-on and sympathisers, and go off and recreate another, albeit smaller, version of the social whole from which they have detached themselves. Another way of describing this situation in Foi is to say that there are sub-clans without there being clans: sub-clans are the effective local unit in this part of Papua New Guinea. Each sub-clan assumes it is related to other sub-clans of the same name, even if they cannot specify the actual kin connection. Even if they could, these sub-clans never act as a single "clan" in any circumstances. But even the local sub-clan is a contingent unit: It is clan fragments that migrate, immigrate and emigrate, not individuals, and it is clan fragments that are taken in and given land, status and brides as local clan groups. The consequences of fragmentation of groups then is not ultimately a set of atomised individuals, but smaller and smaller versions of a single global social totality which only ever achieves a hypostatized ideal form.

Bridewealth
The matter of distribution, in any number of forms, some of which I will mention here, is of central importance to the articulation of Foi social activity. If my characterisation of Foi and Fasu sociality is correct—if, in other words, there can be no decomposition of social groups into component individuals, but only into smaller groups which retain the functions of the original group—then we should be able to confirm this in the kinds of distributive mechanisms associated with these groups.

We can begin to inspect it at its most basic level when we watch a Foi hunting party deciding how to distribute the various portions and cuts of an animal collectively trapped or killed. Considerations of, for example, the ownership of the dog involved, who first sighted the animal, who dealt the lethal blow, who may have been injured during the chase, who did the work of butchering and cooking, all contribute to determining the correct portions allotted to all. In line with what I have said about social convention, in such occasions, the “rules” of distribution are usually tacit and understood by all and rarely, except in an explanatory passage to the visiting anthropologist, articulated as "a rule".

Although I have argued elsewhere that for the Foi, what we call law and the quality of being law-or rule-governed is not something that was consciously articulated, the coming of the government administration and Missionaries provided them with exposure to the idea that social law and customary action, including these tacit conventions of distribution of resources, were something that could be objectified, codified and altered by human effort, rather than as phenomena that were only revealed in the course of humans reacting to otherwise situational and contingent social engagements and encounters. One of the most concerted ways in which Foi experimentation with codification proceeded was in the area of bridewealth. As a result of the influx of large numbers of high quality pearl shells into the Highlands by Australian administrators after the second world war, the Foi experienced a great inflationary pressure on what was perceived to be the normal size of bridewealth payments. Along with the appointing of komitis of various sorts, each village had, by the time I first arrived in 1979, appointed a bridewealth komiti to represent its interests and opinions in this regard. These bridewealth komitis met on at least two occasions in 1980 and 1981 to agree upon a standard amount and composition of bridewealth.

Because social rules are not usually overtly articulated, as ethnographers such as Merlan and Rumsey (1991), Goldman (1983), A.J. Strathern (1975), M. Strathern (1974) and more recently Brison (1994) have demonstrated, communal agreement concerning the normative in social life is often reached after a protracted process of public argument and verbal contention. As Marilyn Strathern suggested in an early paper (ibid.), the idea that in a public dispute, all points of view should be aired and made visible, all person’s opinions should be voiced, is very important to achieving an acceptable resolution to a conflict in these areas of Papua New Guinea. We can suggest, again to elaborate on the metaphor I am employing, that points of view must be distributed as widely as possible, at least in these public speech events.
There was never, therefore, a hard and fast rule concerning how much bridewealth one had to give in earlier times; there was only the communal assessment of a bridewealth as being proper or insufficient. Since the obligations of wife-takers to wife-givers was a continuing one, it was likely that agreement as to sufficiency of bridewealth at the time of a bride’s transfer did not preclude requests for additional payment in the future. What was important about distributive mechanisms of this sort was not exactly how much material resource was spread out within a social field but rather how wide one could expand one’s social network of indebtedness and obligation to others.

On the other hand, the whole institution of bridewealth was perfused with normative understandings, most of which were given quite explicit public acknowledgment in the discussions amongst bridewealth komitis in 1980 and 1981 that I attended. The komitis and head-men talked for some time about the size of shells, the number of shells, and the people who should be recipients of them. Finally, as the argument went back and forth, and agreement started to converge upon the proper amounts and sizes of items, the opinion was voiced that these agreements had to be written down, sample pearl shells had to be collected and marked with a fixed price to serve as standard, and a pamphlet produced that could be distributed throughout the area, informing everyone what the correct and agreed upon composition and mode of distribution was to be. In this particular conversation, there was agreement that in the matter of the distribution of a girl’s bridewealth, distant relatives should get less, a token amount, while more recognition should go to the man and woman who played the major parental and nurturing role in the girl’s upbringing. It was suggested that the mother and father or persons in that role should divide between them a cash payment of K200 (which in 1980 was a large sum of cash in the area), in recognition of the “hard work” the two expended in nurturing the girl. I’ll return to this in a moment.

Control of land within clan groupings
Let us now shift our attention to a different side to the issue of distribution in Foi social life, and specifically, the relation between clans, people and land. The distribution of Foi villages and their territory, and of component local clan groups within each village territory is perceived to be such that each person and local clan has access to all types of terrain and resource thought necessary to subsistence and social life: garden land, sago swamps, riverine and creek frontage, hunting areas, access to useful species of trees, and so forth. In some cases there are large-scale discrepancies: Tugiri Village, for example, was situated on the east bank of Lake Kutubu, a long way from its own garden and sago swamp territories to the east and southwest. They had chosen the social and dietary convenience of being on the Lake to the isolation of locating their longhouse close to their horticultural resources (these same considerations ultimately led them to put pressure on the territory of Hegeso Village which was closer at hand to them and which contained additional sago swamp areas). But in most cases, each village territory contains within its borders ample resources of all types of major importance to Foi subsistence.

This distribution of ecological variation is replicated at the clan level, the largest nominal land controlling unit in the area, and my use of the qualifier nominal will be made clear shortly. Theoretically, each clan also controls all types of subsistence resource within its holdings. But here discrepancies are more common, because clans are more mobile, more variable in their size and more prone to division than are longhouse villages. (Longhouse villages came about because of the exigencies of warfare, raiding and blood feud. Their function is not so apparent these days but they nevertheless maintain a stability of regional, if not political, identity.)

The division of clans into so-called sub-clans is a contingent and situational occurrence in Foi and is not a uniform or defining part of Foi clan organisation. The key distinguishing feature here is that the sub-clans are differentiated by name. According to Charles Langlas, who worked in the Upper Mubi in the mid-60’s, this type of division occurs if the local clan “has been large in the past, or if part of the segment is descended from an immigrant” (1974: 46-47). Under such conditions, such as occurred within the Aidobo clan of Herebo Village, intermarriage is even possible and did occur, although it elicited disapproval from some clan members.

A man and his sons, however, exercise more immediate control over specific locales and sites within clan territory, just as they exercise decisive control over the bridewealth of their daughters and sisters. These individual “lines”—and the Foi call them ira, meaning “tree” and which I have previously glossed as “lineages”—are differentiated by the territory they inhabit, exploit and control. Groups of men related as full brothers or sons of full brothers inevitably find themselves living in and exploiting contiguous areas of clan land, and thus are territorially differentiated from other more distantly related groups of agnatically-related men within the same clan. As I have argued elsewhere, a man and his grown
sons are the effective resource exploitation unit in Foi society (Weiner 1986). In Hegeso, those So’onedobo
men who inhabited territory near the “source” of the Mubi (the place where it emerges from its
underground traverse) were differentiated from those other So’onedobo men whose land was near the site
of the Hegeso longhouse. The former called themselves the “Ibuga” (ibu: ‘water; stream; river’; ga: ‘source,
head’) So’onedobo, and in fact most of these men traced their descent directly from that original group who
came down from Nipa via Lake Kutubu, while the latter were known as the a hua, the “longhouse”
So’onedobo. There was a similar territorial differentiation made within the next largest clan in Hegeso, the
Orodobo clan: there, reference was made to the “Hesa” Orodobo, who made their homes, gardens and sago
stands near the place Hesa along a stretch of the bank of the Mubi near the longhouse, while another group
were called “Yebibu” Orodobo, living somewhat further upstream. Each of these groups centered around a
group of full brothers or at most full parallel cousins, and it shows that even within the clan, the local
bridewealth and land-owning unit, territorial distinctions were made up to the smallest family units
possible. This tendency then, has not been a response to the presence of petroleum revenues, but a mode of
differentiation always inherent in Foi and Fasu social differentiation that was given an additional stimulus
by the influx of oil revenue. Recent memoranda within and between both Chevron and the Department of
Petroleum and Energy evince frustration that landowning ILG’s within the Foi-Fasu area are rapidly
breaking down into what appears to be "family" units, but which are most likely these extended lineage-like
ira. The point I am making is that the Foi local clan traditionally had only a weakly developed form of
corporate identity: those of its members who asserted control over particular tracts of land through long-
term habitancy and use were its effective owners. Other clan members could dispute these effective
owners’ decisions concerning disposal of land, but my point is that the bigger the local clan the less
successful it was in reaching clan-wide agreement as to the disposition of its resources and the more likely
it was that individual men and/or sets of brothers would arrogate to themselves effective power of disposal.

Further, men kept their land-using activities if not exactly secret then certainly private. Men of the
same clan were never certain as to what tracts of land or sites specific men had asserted claims to. It was a
father’s responsibility to take his sons around and show them all the spots where they had planted
permanent tree crops, sago and where they had set traps, so that the sons could know what spots their father
had a legitimate claim to as against other men of the clan. The only time when this total catalogue of
inhabited and utilised places was made public was in the public poetic recitation of place names associated
with a man after his death (see Weiner 1991).

I make these points if only to suggest that caution should be exercised in assuming that the clan is
by definition a corporate group and that it recognises or acts upon a commonality of interest. Clansmen
were obligated to each other to provide support in bridewealth, ceremonial exchange and disputes, but the
assumption of a commonality of interest is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for this sense of
obligation. The obligations had more to do with blood kinship and affinity rather than clanship as such.

The distributional politics of petroleum
Petroleum is different than surface horticultural resources. Unlike bridewealth, persons and territorial
resources, it is not infinitely partible nor is it evenly distributed. Its distribution was determined by the
inevitable processes of geological formation which caused the oil to become trapped within an anticlinal
ridge which runs northwest to southeast in the Kikori-Mubi River area along one of Papua New Guinea’s
major geological fault lines. This line governs topography to a marked extent, and inevitably marks out the
geographical boundaries between different language groups. The territories of the Fasu, Lower Foi and
Upper Foi are divided by this anticlinal-synclinal boundary and as luck would have it, the Lower Foi and
Fasu inhabit the surface of the oil bearing ridge while the Foi to the northeast are situated in territory atop
its synclinal rise.

There are two broad political phenomena at work in the Kutubu oil project area: (1) the fissioning of
revenue-receiving ILGs that I have been discussing so far; and (2) the struggle over regional
representation within an area differentiated by revenue receiving and non-revenue receiving clans. It could
be said that the current arguments between what are now termed the “landowners” (that is, incorporated
land groups who own land within the PDL) and those who are not all revolve around the attempt to make
the oil distribution as random and as equitably distributed as all the other resources, both human and
material, which the Foi and Fasu have access to in more or less equivalent degrees.

Historically, a good number of Foi local clans throughout the Lake Kutubu and Upper Mubi River
region can trace their origin to Fasu. Typically, in the time before colonial control, warfare, homicide,
sorcery accusations and the like ultimately resulted in the departure of clans or other groups of people to
new homes, sometimes outside of their linguistic territory altogether. Many Foi clans of Lake Kutubu are also connected to the Fasu through more historically proximal affinal and resulting maternal connections. Warfare and a generalised social aesthetic of compensation ensured that movement between villages and regions was a constant feature of interior Papua New Guinea life. Migration and incorporation into a host domain, including the granting of rights in territory, were normal features of local organisation throughout this broad region. Many of the disputes over landowner status within the PDL-2 and the PL-2 revolve around a consideration of just these historical factors of movement and re-settlement.

Before the discovery of petroleum, the Foi and Fasu were not only jointly administered from Pimaga Patrol Post (as they continue to be today) but also participated (at least nominally in the case of the Fasu) in the Foe-Fasu Progress Association, a non-official organisation designed broadly to promote the development interests of the region, particularly at the Provincial level, where they maintained an office in Mendi. Shortly after the petroleum was discovered in Fasu territory, the Fasu abandoned the Foe-Fasu Progress Association and formed their own Namo’apor Landowners Association, the official representative body of the Fasu petroleum land owners. By and large, its previous and newly-acquired functions were coterminous, since virtually all Fasu local clans were landowners in this sense. The Foe Association was left to represent the Foi alone, though in this case there were many more non-landowning Foi groups than there were landowning ones. These landowning clans are in receipt of a regular payment deriving from petroleum revenues. Their income is bitterly resented by those clans with the misfortune to own neither type of land and who do not share in these payments. The previous Papua New Guinea Organic Law of Provincial and Local Level Government stipulated that all royalty of this kind was to go to the Provincial Government within which the mining projects are located. Since royalty was redirected directly to landowners under more recent legislation, the major problem facing all local leaders is how to arrive at a distributive agreement which provides some participation by all local groups in the receipt of profit from the Petroleum project.

There are several ways in which landowners within the Petroleum Development License Area 2 (PDL-2) and the oil Pipeline route (PL-2) receive benefits. First, they receive royalties on the well-head value of the petroleum. They receive from the National Government a 30% share of the royalty paid to the Government, which is 2% of the well-head value. The other seventy percent of this amount goes to the Southern Highlands Provincial Government. In the original agreement, 90% of the landowner portion went to the Fasu landowners and 10% went to the Foi landowners within PDL-2. By the end of 1995, about 10m kina in royalties had been paid to Foi and Fasu landowners in PDL-2 (Power and Hagen 1996: 769).

Second, landowners share in equity. The State, through its holding company Petroleum Resources Kutubu (PRK), originally owned a 22.5% equity interest in the Kutubu Project. This equity was originally distributed to both the Gulf and Southern Highlands Provincial governments and to landowners in both provinces. Thus, 12% of the State’s 22.5% was originally promised to landowners after PRK had repaid the oil developers for costs incurred during the project development (Power and Hagen 1996: 756). Of this 12%, 7% went to the landowners in the Southern Highlands Province and the remaining 5% to landowners in the Gulf Province. An additional 3% share of PRK holdings was allocated to landowners following renegotiations between Government and landowners in January 1996. As a result of this agreement, the potential equity value of the landowner share of the Project is estimated at over 62m kina (Power and Hagen 1996: 767).

The Foi are currently gripped by a contest between the original Foe Association, claiming to be “the mouthpiece of the Foe People”, headed by Hami Yawari, Sese Vege, and Nelson Kigiri, and the Foe Landowners’ Association, led by Nixon Mira of Damayu Village, which is more exclusively aligned as a landowners’ organisation, and more specifically, locates its support within Mira’s own sphere of influence among Foi PDL-2 landowners of the Damayu-Fiwaga area. The split between these two organisations began in earnest in August-September 1995 with Mira’s formal attempt at the registration of the Foe Landowners’ Association on September 12. Since then, the leaders of the two organisations have been attempting to leverage support from both Provincial and National politicians and government officials in the attempt to out-flank each other.

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6Officially, the Foi spell their name "Foe", which was the original spelling employed by Murray Rule, the linguist/missionary who first transcribed their language by way of English orthography. I therefore use the term “Foi” to refer to the culturally distinct language group I have been studying since 1979, and "Foe" in all the contexts which the Foi themselves use this term as official self-designation.
Since I have been based at Hegeso Village since 1979, my first accounts of this situation came from Nelson Kigiri, a Hegeso man and an executive member of the Foe Association. This is his account of the equity division that served as a catalyst for the conflict between the two groups: Of the total PRK holding, that allocated to the PDL-2 landowners amounted to 7% of the total PDL-2 equity. The original equity arrangement arrived at in 1991-92 allocated this 7% to the Southern Highlands Province landowners in the following manner: the Fasu received 5.4%, the Lower Foi received 1% and the Upper Foi received .6%. The advantage of the Lower Foi is explained by the share of equity they receive as pipeline landowners as well as PDL landowners. In late 1995 the so-called Kutubu Review took place. The National government increased the 7% to 10%. Of this 3% increase, 1.5% went to the Fasu, and 1.5% went to the Foi. Hami Yaware, then the Secretary of the Foe Association, in a meeting of February 12, 1997 which I attended, referred to an undated Memorandum of Agreement which was signed by him and the late Henry Kapi Nato of the Namo'aporu Landowners Association, agreeing to divide the additional 3% equity granted by the National Government to the Landowners between the Foi and Fasu. 7

In the discussion held on February 12, 1997 two Upper Foi ILG representatives, Thomas Kapi and Kai Daima, spoke thusly: The Lower Foi have only 20 landowning ILG's, while the Upper Foi have 64. They sought to make a division of the additional 1.5% which favoured the Upper Foi and which was designed to rectify what they perceived was the inequity engendered by the differing numbers of landowners in the two regions (the point being that the less numerous Lower Foi landowners were sharing a greater portion of wealth than the more numerous Upper Foi landowners). Hami Yawari made the point at that meeting that it was the responsibility of the Foe Association to vote on the distribution of this 1.5%. The landowners have to all agree to it to make the distribution binding. If they disagree, they still have to come together to alter it.

Hami Yaware is from Gesge Village at Lake Kutubu, has historically recent maternal kin connections with a Fasu landowning clan, and can thus consider himself an oil landowner himself. Yet in the meeting he seemed to support distribution of equity income to non-landowning Foi clans. At one point he said,

If a man kills a marsupial, all the men who went hunting share. The marsupial is the equity money. For the eighty-four landowning ILG's, there is no problem, they all eat. But it's not right that some men eat only bone and skin and the others eat the flesh. All must share all the parts equally. It's not fair that the Lower Foi, who are few in number, receive much more than the Upper Foi, who are numerous. That would be like us eating the bone and skin while the Lower Foi eat all the meat.

The marsupial is the equity money, Hami Yawari says. Sixty-four Upper Foi ILG's and twenty Lower Foi ILG's are involved as either well head or pipeline landowners. If in the event that an agreement is made by a group of land-owners to redistribute equity, if even one ILG does not sign the agreement, they may bring legal action against the other landowners. Therefore, he said, the Foe Association cannot make these kinds of decisions in a meeting such as this. They cannot decide to give non-PDL landowners a share of the equity in this meeting. It is a matter for all the eighty-four Foi landowning ILG's to get together and decide unanimously. However, the executive then went ahead and proposed a vote on several alternative distributions. Hami Yawari suggested that the division could be 1.1% to the Upper Foi, and .4% to the Lower Foi. A representative from a non-PDL-2 landowning Lake Kutubu Village suggested 1% for the Upper Foi and .5% for the Lower Foi. The actual distribution approved was 1.3% for the Upper Foi and 0.2% for the Lower Foi.

As I have noted, the Lower Foi who are also PDL landowners receive both pipeline revenue and PDL entitlements, while those outside the PDL still receive entitlements by virtue of being pipeline route landowners. But when the pipeline revenues were handed out, some of the Lake Kutubu Upper Foi groups who are pipeline route landowners were left out, and so they feel they have been cheated out of what is their due-- this primarily affects Tugiri and Yo'obo Villages at Lake Kutubu. The kaunsils of these two villages, Kai Daima (Tugiri) and Thomas Kapi (Yo'obo) made this complaint, and so they opposed any distribution to non-landowners. Nelson Kigiri's point was that through the Foe Association, non-

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7 This meeting was chaired by John Giheno and attended by representatives of the Department of Petroleum and Energy.
landowners like himself and Manitage Yamabo of Barutage Village fought on behalf of the entire Foi area to get the equity percentage raised. Now some of the Foi landowners want to exclude the non-landowning clans from the distribution. What we’re seeing here is the same kind of tussle over decision-making that has always characterised intra-clan arguments over control of clan resources: it is true that the clan should act collectively in matters of land and property disposal, but in fact, those persons residing on and exploiting a piece of land have the last word. It is also important to recognise that in these public encounters that revolve around dispute over distribution, what appears as an attempt to achieve unanimity in decision-making invariably involves the renunciation of conflicting claims by one or more parties (see also Goldman 1983 for an account of similar processes in Huli land disputes). In the same vein, corporatisation might call for western-style collective decision-making, but in the absence of a culture of representation as such, oppositions emerging from differences in control, access and disposition of resource are likely to govern whatever further distribution of revenue landowners make, just as is the case of resource disputes internal to the clan.

Shortly after this meeting, on February 27, a different meeting held by rivals of Hami Yawari, Bai Waiba (Wasemi) and Nixon Mira (Damayu), also including landowners representatives, at which no executive members of the Foe Association were in attendance, but at which nevertheless the claim was made that it was speaking for 53 landowning Foi ILGs, though Nixon’s area of immediate control includes about 30 of these groups, from Fiwaga, Damayu, Geneva’abo and Ibutaba Villages in eastern Foi. At this meeting, at which Chevron company personnel from their External Affairs department were in attendance, a decision was made to divide the 1.5% as follows: The Upper Foi, most of whom are not landowners, were given 1% of that equity, while the remaining .5% was allocated to the Lower Foi. Of the 1% granted to the Upper Foi, .6% was granted to non-PDL landowners, while .4% was retained by PDL landowners among the Upper Foi. At this point I am still not sure which division became the official one or whether indeed any of these decisions were legal in any binding sense, though the second meeting was at attended by Chevron External Affairs personnel. At any rate, it is the decision making process which governs rhetorical confrontations during these encounters which is of more interest to us for the moment.

The faction headed most visibly by Nixon Mira, representing about half of the Foi landowners, want a specifically landowner representative organisation. The other group, representing through the Foe Association most of the Foi villages, is lead by Hami Yawari, Sese Vege and Nelson Kigiri, and seeks to continue the Foe Association’s charter as the Foi people’s official political body. But in both venues, the numerically more numerous Upper Foi forced a redistribution of revenue to which the Lower Foi landowners were technically exclusively entitled. Historically, the more numerous Upper Foi have always asserted themselves at the expense of their more remote and less numerous Lower Foi neighbours to the south. In recent times, and given that the Lower Foi are involved as PDL landowners in their own separate project area at the Gobe field, this has resulted in the establishment of a separate Lower Foi landowner association, the Fukigi Association (the business arm of the Lower Foi landowners, Tiate Eboda, was also a response to what the Lower Foi perceived to be their lack of executive and shareholder power within Foe Digas O Oil Company, which nominally had been the business arm of the Foe Association but is now restricted to the Upper Foi. The Namo’aporo Landowners Association is similarly linked to the company Lagifu Oil and Gas). We are witnessing new, putatively representative organisations such as the Foe Association becoming transmuted into more traditional forms of oppositional and fragmentational social life, because the Incorporated Land Group Act enshrines the oppositional culture of clan fragmentation in its own constitution. What this has led to in the Kutubu oil project area is the percolation of land-owner values and loyalties into local and regional politics on a much wider scale than was previously the case in this area.

What might be more desirable, however, is the encapsulation and limitation of landowner custom so as to allow new forms of democratic, representative culture to fill the expanding political domain. A hypothesis worth pursing is that more contemporary, representative organisations such as political and landowner associations are not as subject to fragmentation as more traditional land- and genealogical-based social units such as clans. This is because such associations are founded on a commonality of interest. The clan, however, is not a unit in which commonality of interest is a political underpinning. Its conventions of association are, as I have suggested earlier, only tacit, and are subject to the oppositional maneuvers of its members.

It is important to understand that the landowning ILGs have interests which are distinct from that of their villages, as politico-residential units. Each village sends a komiti, to the Foe Association, but it is the landowning ILGs and not the villages per se, which are represented by Nixon Mira’s Foe Landowners’
Association. Only two of the men who attended the Foe Association as representatives of their villages also signed their names to Nixon Mira’s petition of incorporation for the Foe Landowners’ Association as ILG representatives. It is reasonable to consider that members of the revenue-receiving ILG’s may feel that they have a stake in both organisations and feel that there is room for both in the total landscape of political functions in the Kutubu Oil Project Area. It is evidently in the interest of the National Government to maintain this distinction as well, in the interests of trying to distribute petroleum revenue as equitably and as widely as possible throughout the project impact area. Company and Government encouragement in this direction might prove to have some surprising results.

A final observation I would like to make in this regard is this: if landowner values are affecting the development of representative bodies in the Oil Project Area, the reverse influence is also possible: clans could theoretically become more representative, and achieve a more communal function. Thus, at Wasemi, with the stimulus of a powerful and influential local leader, Bai Waiba, three So’onedobo subclans decided to incorporate as a single ILG, contrary to the trend already identified in the area. Further, a superficial inspection of the Foi ILG lists indicates that nearly all of the separate registration of so-called sub-clans has occurred in Damayu and Fiwaga villages, where Nixon Mira has his support. It could be that Mira is trying to inflate his nominal representational base, and there are indications that both he and Hami Yawari are engaged in this competitive accumulation of “on-paper” numerical support in their search for Provincial and National political allies. The confluence of leadership, representation, and the development of a culture of communal interest needs more careful monitoring in the near future.

Some final observations
What I’d like to bring out in this comparison of very different yet also very procedurally similar attempts at achieving a convention of distribution is to comment on the different way in which they articulate the relationship between relationality and life activity. Bridewealth accumulation and distribution is a social activity “from the ground up”. Foi men are actively engaged in it as life activity from the point of acquisition. It is therefore not discontinuous with all of the other life activities they are also simultaneously enmeshed in, which are also social activities with social consequences. As a result, the conventional pressure to keep as many people involved in the affair of bridewealth distribution is great, as many people can claim to be co-engaged with this variegated range of activities from the point of view of the main participants. Participation in conversation, which the Foi see primarily as verbal exchange, and participation in bridewealth transaction, which is exchange of another sort, are central to the task of social distribution upon which Foi place a central value.

With petroleum, however, the situation is markedly different. Here we have a resource the collection of which is not undertaken by the Foi themselves, but by the foreign company and their personnel. The collection of the oil as such is invisible to the Foi and not articulated with their local social activity. It can much more readily be seen in its more important manifestation, that is, in the form of regular royalty payments to which landowners are entitled. But by that token, it is more “alienated” and external to their lives, first because the Foi only see and control it in its cash form, and secondly, the komitis cannot exercise control over its distribution. This was not the case with the bridewealth komitis: they could legislate an alteration in the size, composition and distribution of bridewealth across the Foi area (whether there was any way in which they could enforce this agreement was another matter; people of the villages represented by each komiti accepted that they had the prerogative to enter into such agreements on their behalf).

Another point I’d like to pursue here concerns the metaphor between public debate and argumentation over the issue of distribution per se, and the role that distributive mechanisms play in a more broadly viewed social mechanism. The impression on the part of the Resource Companies is that an intolerable amount of time is spent at various meetings of landowners and landowner representatives arguing again and again over the same issues. I suggest that this can be explained as a distributive mechanism in its own right: In an society still dominated by the oral form of language, in which the written word is still the prerogative of only a privileged few, the public forum is the only place where people can make their opinions known and assess the state of their leaders' intentions and knowledge. It is important to view these often interminable and repetitive encounters as part of what we could analogously label the exercise of local democracy, for everyone has the right to express him or her self on these occasions. Indeed, they must in order for any consensus to achieve some amount of efficacy. Thus, the bringing to public awareness of these mechanisms of important distributive mechanisms like marriage choices and bridewealth, and the subjecting them to conscious manipulation must play some role in the mechanisms
themselves, especially when such distributions will ultimately have subsistence and residential consequences for people.

It could be that the division between landowning and non-landowning ILG's within the Foe Association will prove to be too great to overcome by appeals to still visible regional, linguistic and cultural cohesiveness, and that the Foi ILG's who are petroleum revenue recipients will realise that their political future is more closely aligned with the Fasu than with the other Foi clans. Some indication that this might be the case emerged in the “Petrokina” affair. The leader of the Fasu landowners attempted to replace the current government equity holding body for the Kutubu landowners, Petroleum Resources Kutubu (PRK), with his own holding company, to be called Petrokina. Part of garnering support for this move involved offering representatives of the Foi PDL-2 landowners a higher percentage of royalty payments (currently, Fasu ILGs within PDL-2 receive 90% of royalty; Foi ILGs receive 10%. The Fasu leader offered to increase the Foi landowners’ share to 40%). In any case, the Petrokina move, which was a direct challenge to government management of equity holding through their Minerals Resource Development Corporation (MRDC), failed, and equity for all Kutubu area landowners remains managed through PRK. However, the control of PRK will remain a target for those who are now competing for sole representational power within the oil project area: In early 1998, it was the stake in Yawari's and Mira's competition for ascendancy among the Foi.

I maintain that what an earlier generation of anthropologists used to refer to as the "plasticity" and "lability" of New Guinea kinship have very real distributive and regulative effects on human behaviour vis-a-vis the environment. Modjeska, speaking of the Duna lineage, said:

> Lineage organisation is not simply an effect of the ideological validation of certain pre-existing genealogical ties and distributions of people. Rather, it is a matter of actively creating certain ties and securing others through the exchange of pigs against rights in people, as well as the continuing validation of relations between men within the lineage through reciprocal 'helping'.

With respect to the present topic, in The Heart of the Pearl Shell I suggested that the coupling of bridewealth inflation and rising population had a qualitative effect on Foi kinship: because there was more bridewealth to obtain, men had to go to more distant relatives for aid in amassing it, and consequently, when his own daughters and sisters married, men had a wider circle of other men to whom they were indebted and which they had to reciprocate. This put pressure on formerly "close" relatives to be actively involved in support and nurturance of children so that they could cement a claim to their bridewealth when they married, if they were female. The agreement that the bridewealth *komitis* reached in their 1980 meeting was consistent with this emerging recognition of the collapsing of kinship into parentage, something which always modeled Foi kinship but which never totally defined it. The point is both that anyone can "become" a relative by evincing the proper nurturative and cooperating behaviour towards others, and that the distribution of important tokens of social reproductivity were distributed as widely as possible despite the countervailing tendencies to narrow the social field of recipients. The lability of Foi local clans and the strongly bilateral features of Foi clanship assured that large clans would not place undue pressure on their own resources but would in a pinch have access to that of others.

The 1974 Land Group Incorporation Act had no effect on the Foi until the discovery of petroleum. The Foi were then forced to adhere to the convention of incorporation in order to be in a position to deal with both the government and Chevron Niugini. The effect of this is to rigidify the boundaries of a social entity whose most centrally important feature was its porousness and flexibility. The appeals to clan

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8Burton (1991) refers to as "cadastral" units which come into existence as a result of legislation that identifies them and grants them an interest and function, as is the case with Incorporated Land Groups in resource extraction zones in Papua New Guinea.

It is ironic that the model of the corporate descent group, for so long a mainstay in the anthropological rationalisation of non-western social units in places like Papua New Guinea, should be now reintroduced into the ethnographic landscape on behalf of and with the cooperation of New Guineans themselves. During the 1970s anthropologists working in New Guinea such as Wagner (1974), Strathern (1972) and Kelly (1977) adduced evidence that led to the successful critique of this British social anthropological model and catapulted the social anthropology of Melanesian societies to the forefront of theoretical advance during this period.
“solidarity” were always only chiefly rhetorical, since more dispute occurred within the clan than between them. The Foi Incorporated Land Group will find it harder to maintain this porousness which was always a hedge against the intractability of disputes, the porousness that maintained the strength of distributive mechanisms of all sorts. Under the conditions of late 20th century nationhood in Papua New Guinea, it seems likely that such regulatory and distributive mechanisms will be transferred onto various administrative bodies, both official and quasi-official, of the national and Provincial governments, and outside of the primary local arenas of Foi social consciousness. The understandable and legitimate tendency of both Government and Company is to want to deal with landowner representatives and to turn community and area management as such back over to Local and Provincial government agencies. But the exigencies of distributive mechanisms I have touched on briefly here, and the pressures on landowning groups to share income widely within the Oil project area will ensure that this is a difficult if not downright quixotic goal.
References


