

Documenting discontent: Struggles for recognition in the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea

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Within the context of the Purari Delta's transforming materialities of resource extraction, and the legacy of the Tom Kabu iconoclastic modernist movement (1946–69), I examine the processes of materialisation bound up with two related but different things: heirlooms (*eve uku*) and documents (Incorporated Land Group (ILG) forms). *Eve uku* ('hand head') lie within a continuum of things (names, relations, totemic ancestral spirit-beings and sites in the environment) through which ancestral actions are shown to have happened, and descent groups' identities manifest. However, given the ambiguous status of the traditional past among the I'ai, the power of these forms is circumscribed to the village thus making them ineffectual tokens in the bid to secure royalties from resource extraction. Instead, highly coveted documents known as ILG certificates have emerged as efficacious things by which royalties can be secured. Examining these certificates as objects, I investigate how these documents help materialise anew descent groups, communities' relations to their environment and thus their aspirations for development with its attending materialities. The problem for the I'ai, however, remains how to obtain these documents and, as with *eve uku*, how to control them.

Form is ... visibly and explicitly dependent on a discourse about form ...

(Strathern 1999: 55)

INTRODUCTION

One morning Ke'a Aukiri, an I'ai chief, a respected elder, and my principle host in the village of Mapaio, related a dream. Ke'a dreamt frequently and was visited often by his ancestors who gave him advice.¹ This morning was no exception. Ivia, the tutelary ancestral spirit-being (*imunu*) of the Purari River, had come with several of Ke'a's deceased fathers. The large snake began complaining about his unhappiness with the logging activities along the Purari River, and the I'ai's not having access to the logging royalties. Collectively, the ancestors urged Ke'a to continue assisting me, and to reveal the *vau ikave omoro* ('hidden talk') because in this way *e'e lima'a* ('development') would come. As Ivia explained to Ke'a,

three white men have come to the I'ai, [Rev. James] Chalmers, [F.E.] Williams and now Joshua...You must reveal the whole ancestral talk [*airu omoro*] because it may be the last time someone comes to record our *airu omoro*. If you give the *airu omoro* correctly, we believe that one day your children or grandchildren will stand on your *airu omoro* and go to the white man's country (Fieldnotes 24 May 2001).²

Upon hearing this dream, I smiled nervously at this affirmation while simultaneously breaking into a cold sweat at the expectations that accompanied it (Bell 2003).³

Ke'a's dream was part of a wider reconfiguration of my research by the I'ai, and the rest of the Purari, within the ongoing social, economic and environmental repercussions of large-scale logging (1995-present) and oil exploration (2002-present) in the Purari Delta (Bell 2003, 2006a,b). In the wake of these projects *airu omoro* have become incredibly important, as descent groups struggle to incorporate themselves as traditional land-holding entities. While incorporation does not entail the legal recognition of customary resource ownership, Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) are the corporate body by which groups enter into negotiation with multinational companies and the Papua New Guinea National Government. They have become critical forms of self-identification and the means by which descent groups hope to elicit wealth through their engagement with the State's bureaucratic structures (Weiner and Glaskin 2007).

The I'ai's marginalised position in this process only extenuated the expectations articulated in Ke'a's dream. Indeed, despite my explanations, people understood the true goal of my research to be documenting *airu omoro*, thereby restoring the I'ai to their regional prominence. On several occasions, I was asked about the existence of a computer able to verify the credibility of *airu omoro*, whether my hand-held GPS machine confirmed whether a site we were visiting was ancestral, as well as being told stories of how customary owners emerged in photographs taken of their resources while they were absent. My answers to the contrary were always met with disappointment. Amidst this confluence of expectations, I obliged interested elders and transformed their *airu omoro* into texts. It was through these texts that elders hoped they could materialise access to political and economic power.

That the I'ai consider texts to be potent objects is not surprising given their long-term use by missions and the colonial regime in Papua (*cf.* Schieffelin 1996; Hirsch 2001).⁴ Equally unsurprising are the I'ai's expectations of, and desires for, 'entextualisation' of these narratives (Silverstein and Urban 1996). These dynamics have been productively explored in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere (Errington and Gewertz 1987; Gewertz and Errington 1991; Weiner 1997; *cf.* Shryock 1997; Povinelli 2002; Henare 2007). Here, I contribute to these discussions but do so through a focus on two things, or forms, in Strathern's (1999: 55) words, that are intimately involved in the I'ai's struggles to obtain development as expressed in their desire to have their *airu omoro* become texts. The first are *eve uku* ('hand head') or heirloom objects and, second, ILG certificates. While both are part of

the eliciting of relations with the State and multinational companies, which inform people's preoccupations with *airu omoro*, they engage and emerge out of the network of persons, things, ancestors and the environment to different ends. Although understood to be powerful instantiations of ancestors and ancestral events, the efficacy of *eve uku* are increasingly being circumscribed by ILG certificates. Products of the processes of entification (Ernst 1999) and generification (Errington and Gewertz 2001) necessitated by Papua New Guinea's legal structures, ILG certificates are emblematic of the bureaucratic things that are increasingly shaping community life as the State seeks the legibility of property regimes, and custom (*cf.* Strathern and Hirsch 2004; Weiner and Glaskin 2007). By exploring how the 'nexuses of intentionalities' (Gell 1996: 29) of *eve uku* and ILG certificates are transformed by one another, I examine how these things achieve and fail to materialise the relationships that the I'ai desire. Doing so helps to reveal some of the processes that informed Ke'a's dream and the I'ai's wishes to possess *airu omoro* as textual things.

In what follows, I provide a historical overview of the I'ai's struggles and the process of ILG registration, thereby foregrounding the context in which *eve uku* and ILG certificates operate and the various relations that men seek to elicit through their manipulation. Following a discussion of *eve uku*, I turn to what transpired when ILG certificates finally came to Mapaiio in September 2002.

ECONOMIES OF DESIRE IN THE DELTA

Numbering some 11,000 people today, the Purari are composed of six linguistically and culturally related but self-described 'tribes'—Baroi, I'ai, Kaimari, Koriki, Maipua and Vaimuru—that dwell in twenty-two villages on the Delta's flood plains. Ranging in size from 650 to thirty people, villages are divided into longhouse communities (*ravi*) that are composed of patrilineal descent groups (*ava'i*),⁵ rooted in the relationships between fathers and their productive sons.⁶ Resources—access to sago, gardens, hunting and fishing grounds—are ideally managed by agnates with their wives (Williams 1924: 120–123; Ulijaszek and Poraituk 1983). The composition of these groups and their relationships to one another and resources is shaped by long-term and recent histories of movement between and within *ravi* as *ava'i* have split and fused. These temporal and spatial relationships or *kapea* ('paths') are further shaped by exogamous marriage patterns that have been complicated by urban migration and marriage to other ethnic groups. Since the 1950s the population of urban-dwelling Purari has grown such that it roughly equals those in the villages (Hitchcock and Oram 1967). While these populations exist in a symbiotic relationship to one another, with people moving back and forth between locales, tensions exist that principally find expression in debates around access to the cash economy and control over resources. While the former have easier access to cash, villagers remain largely dependent on subsistence economy with limited access to cash incomes and a dependence on remittances (Bell 2006b). As the elder Aikava

Ipai explained, 'In the past our *kapea* were like a rolled up mat, but now they have been rolled out and we are not close' (Fieldnotes 30 April 2001).

Relations with God and beliefs about *imunu* also shape these *kapea*. While Church members (Seventh-Day Adventist, Pentecostal and United Church) predominantly gloss *imunu* as demons, there are those who recognise specific *imunu* as ancestors. Conflicts abound in communities about the nature of these relations, and how to alternatively understand and disengage from them. The Purari's intertwined cosmology and social system, however conflicted and transformed through colonialism, continues to inform understandings of how persons, things and the environment are interconnected as fluid forms within a spectrum of possibilities. The current resource extraction projects are just the latest frames for these engagements (see Bell 2006a,c).

Perceptions of, and engagements with, these projects are informed by the legacy of the Tom Kabu Movement (1946–69), an I'ai led modernisation movement that transformed the Delta through iconoclasm in the name of business and religion.⁷ While the Kabu Movement failed to achieve its goals of economic self-sufficiency, it succeeded in altering communities materially and socially, thus shifting their perceptions of themselves and the world. The iconoclasm of the Movement most dramatically effected social organisation and transmission of ritual knowledge, the nexus of which was materialised in the male-controlled *ravi*. Before their abandonment, *ravi* (some thirty-four metres long with twenty-four metre high facades) formed communal wholes, which were divided into exogamous moieties led by a chief (*ravi amua*). These sides competed with one another in hunting, warfare and through displays of wealth during rituals. In alcoves (*larava*) along the *ravi*'s sides resided the entirety or segments of an *ava'i*, which possessed their own set of hereditary titles, ritual responsibilities and ritual things (Williams 1924: 95–104; Bell 2008).

From carved boards (*koi*), barkcloth masks (*aiai'imunu*), large wicker-figures (*kaiaimunu*) to *eve uku*, ritual things through ceremonies helped materialised social relations and ancestral forces (Williams 1923, 1924). Collectively they were *ruru* ('skins') into which unseen *imunu* could flow and dwell. *Koi*, for example, bundled together in their slight curves their former manifestation as part of a canoe, along with being part of a tree. While all of these instantiations were homes for *imunu*, a *koi*'s design channelled specific *imunu* into it, such that a *koi* can be thought of as a tree turned inside out with its inner capacities revealed. Within an *ava'i*'s alcove *koi* materialised the forest of relations that composed an *ava'i* and animated it. *Eve uku*, along with *koi* were central to male initiations through which knowledge of these relations as articulated in *airu omoro* was transmitted and political hierarchy maintained (Bell 2006c, 2008) (Fig. 1).

In the wake of the Kabu Movement, the I'ai rose to regional political power through Roy Evara, an I'ai man who held the Kikori Open Parliamentary seat for fifteen years.⁸ A vocal supporter of agroforestry projects, Evara failed to launch several logging projects while nonetheless channelling remunerations to key supporters.

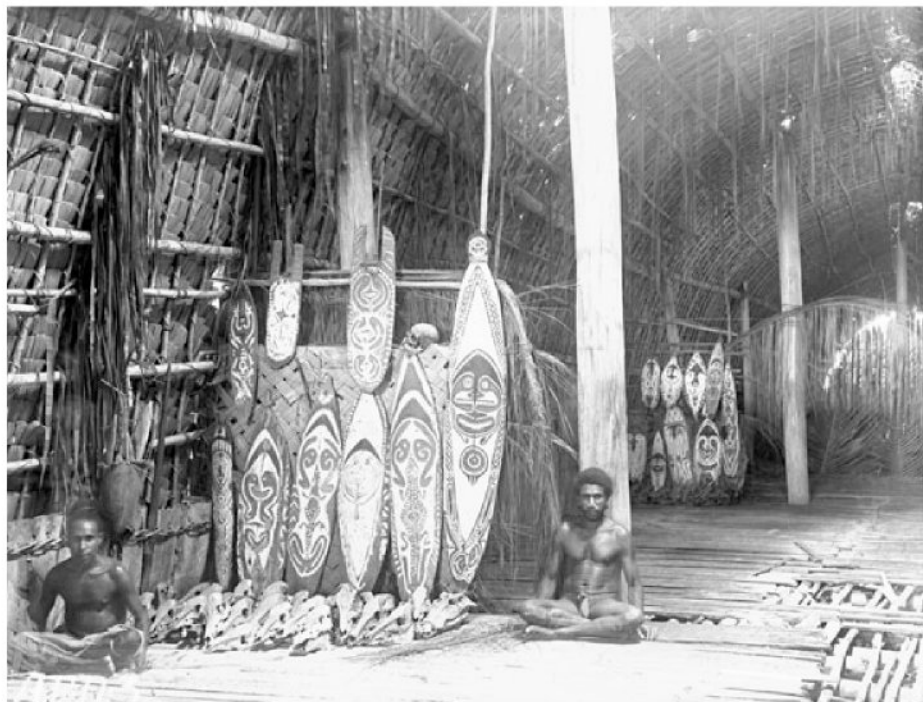


Figure 1 Au Maria's larava inside Onopolavi, in which are displayed *koi*, and pig and crocodile skulls. *Koi*, along with other ritual things, helped materialise relationships between persons, ancestors and the environment. Photograph credit: F. E. Williams 1922, National Archives of Australia A6300, 53.

The I'ai's fortunes deteriorated in the 1997 election when Riddler Kimave, a Kikori man, won the seat and became governor of the Gulf Province. In retribution for their lack of support, Kimave helped to block the I'ai from registering their ILGs, thus denying them access to royalties from new logging concessions in the Delta. Granted through loopholes during the reform of the Papua New Guinea forestry laws, these concessions were given to Turama Forest Industries (TFI) and Frontier Holding (FH), a subsidiary of the Malaysian conglomerate Rimbunan Hijau (see Filer with Sekhran 1998). In 1999, FH commenced logging on the Purari River's upper eastern bank, and since then, has been the only active logging concession on land claimed by the Purari.⁹ Though the I'ai began to receive some royalties by 2005, in 2001 they were vexed by the wealth that other Purari groups, and the neighbouring Pawaiians and the Kaura, were receiving and that they could not tap into. In 2002, these desires were magnified by the national elections, and the commencement of exploratory drilling activities in the Delta's hinterland by the United States company InterOil (Bell 2006a).¹⁰

In addition to amplifying the Delta's informal economy, these projects offer illusory redemption from declining infrastructure, as well as access to development,

which seems to flourish elsewhere. As Rose Kau'u, a middle-aged woman, explained, 'We don't know how to grow money. We know how to grow bananas and sweet potatoes but we don't know how to grow money. We just know how to eat it' (Fieldnotes 9 September 2002). The failure of the Kabu Movement, the demands of the cash economy, and the attenuation of social relations confirm for many I'ai that they are living in an era of unregulated consumption and jealousy (*moni kaeou*, 'money ground') (Bell 2006b). These discourses are about the increased speed and promiscuous nature of exchanges, as well as about how the form of social relations is shifting (Strathern 1999), which brings me to ILGs.

ILG REGISTRATION AND ITS EFFECTS

As legal entities empowered by the *Land Groups Incorporation Act 1974*, ILGs were originally designed to facilitate the return of land alienated for plantations back to indigenous owners. The Act languished until Chevron Niugini used it to deal with resource owners in the Kutubu petroleum project area (Filer with Sekhran 1998). With ninety-seven per cent of Papua New Guinea's landmass under various forms of customary resource tenure whose claims are supported by the National Constitution, the ILG process is an attempt to mediate these diverse systems with the needs of companies and the State (Curtin *et al.* 2003). Though incorporation neither registers resource rights nor recognises a group's resource claims, the Act does legally incorporate a land-holding group and thus significantly shapes indigenous self-presentation and conceptualisation of these relations. While an ILG was intended to be a parallel body to the lived realities of an actual descent group (Holzknecht 1997: 377–8), within the Delta, the registration process and the recognition of being registered has encouraged social groups to: (i) see their rights and the constitution of their social group as fixed, and no longer fluid; and (ii) creatively circumvent these new rules and activate relations through their maternal kin. These shifts have also led to re-conceptualisation of the transmittable substances by which the body is constituted and relations materialised (Bell 2006a; *cf.* Weiner 1998; Ernst 1999; Kalinoe and Leach 2004; Weiner and Glaskin 2007).¹¹ Although novel articulations, these processes are part of what the Purari have always done in their attempt to creatively elicit relations with others (Sahlins 2000).

Just as 'money divides the mind' (Strathern 1999: 96), the promise of wealth through ILGs has led the Purari to divide themselves into ever smaller kin groups to maximise their royalty payments. Initially, in 1995, the I'ai formed twelve core unregistered ILGs (which they likened to the twelve tribes of Israel). However, tensions caused by the deaths of prominent elders linked to ILG-inspired jealousy led to the proliferation of forty-seven groups by 1999 (Fig. 2).¹² This proliferation was facilitated in part by urban migration, as well as by the fragmentation of villages during the Kabu Movement. *Ravi* and *ava'i* are now divided between these different sites and, though cognisant of their connections, are striving to

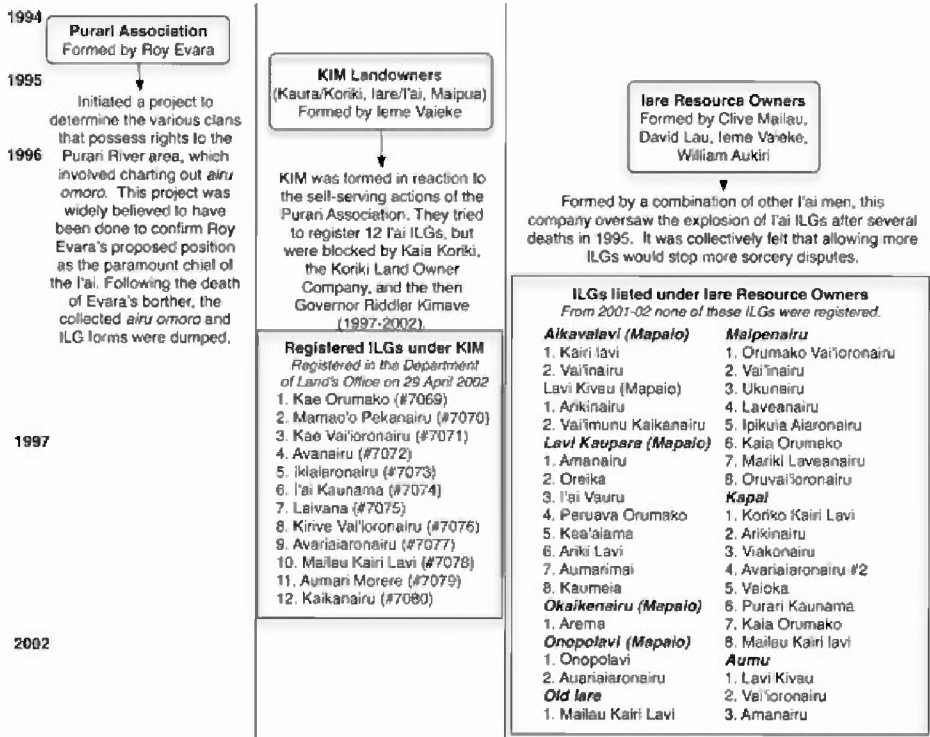


Figure 2 Diagram of the three I'ai Landowner Companies and both registered and unregistered Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) over time. Following the failed Purari Association (left), KIM Landowners was formed and put forth twelve applications for ILGs. While these ILGs were initially blocked in 1999, following KIM's dissolution David Lau and Clive Mailau of Iare Resource Owners pushed through the registration of these ILGs.

form their own ILGs on the basis of their new locality. For example, the descent group Kairi Lavi is divided into four ILGs in three villages. The multiplication of ILGs is assisted by the perception that the chairmanship of an ILG is akin to being recognised as an *ava'i*'s hereditary chief. Struggles for ILG leadership have emerged between elders, whose authority rests on their age and knowledge of *airu omoro*, and younger men who, through their education and mobility, can better deal with the elusive agents of the Papua New Guinea State. As individuals strive to delineate their ILG's membership, previously hidden histories of adoption and migration that compose all *ava'i* are being revealed thereby antagonising already tense relationships, and fuelling sorcery fears. The ILG registration process has instigated different ways of objectifying the substances by which social relations and the body are brought into view in order to materialise the wealth that ILGs are believed to provide. At the centre of these claims for the I'ai in 2001 was the possession of ILG certificates.

As enumerated by others, documents are important in people's constitution of themselves as subjects in nation states (*cf.* Lund 2001; Kelly 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2007), as 'whole' persons in the context of adoption (*cf.* Yngvesson and Coutin 2006), and as part of institutional networks (*cf.* Weber 1968; Riles 2000). In their array of forms, documents 'anticipate and enable certain actions by others...[they] elicit particular kinds of *responses*' (Riles 2006a: 21–22; italics in original). These responses are bound up with their aesthetics; their capacity to condense information through their formal qualities (i.e., lists, bullet points, spaces), which possess their own logic (see contributors in Riles 2006b). These responses are also bound up with the materiality of documents, that is, their properties as things in the world that can be exchanged, manipulated, lost and destroyed (Gordillo 2006).

The capacity of ILG certificates as documents invites several analogies to other representational medium. Like money, they possess transparency, such that people see through them to what can be obtained by their possession (Robbins and Akin 1999), while also possessing power through their thing-ness (Foster 1998). The same connection can be made with the representational techniques of photography (Edwards 2001; see Geismar, this volume, p. 48), land deeds (Gow 1995) and land registration forms (Riles 2003), the indexical capacities of which are bundled up with their sensorial qualities (see Veys, this volume, p. 131). The materiality of these forms, as with documents, constrains and shapes the ways in which they are generative of social relations, elicit the responses they do, and instantiate particular regimes of value and knowledge.

Not surprisingly, ILG certificates operate, and are understood to function, through a similar logic to other P'ai ritual things, of which only *eve uku* remain (*cf.* Reed 2006). Like *eve uku*, they instantiate networks of relations; but while the presence of *eve uku* helps to confer validity on *airu omoro*, which outlines the extent and substance of these relations, only ILG certificates are understood to be the materialisation of successful recognition of these claims by the State. Therefore, while *eve uku* ideally support the obtainment of these documents, it is only through the possession of the latter that groups have the possibility of eliciting logging royalties. With their ability to materialise a translocal network, ILG certificates circumscribe and envelope the network of *eve uku*. Despite this capacity, ILG certificates are by contrast more fragile, threatened by the humidity and insect damage. Focusing on their thing-ness, without obviating the value placed in the relationships made possible by the objects (Leach 2003), allows for a more nuanced consideration of what it is that people perceive *eve uku* and ILG certificates as doing in the world (Gell 1998), and how these struggles are at once continuations and transformations of communities' ongoing attempts to materialise relations through exchange.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF EVE UKU

Ranging from stones to wooden carvings, *eve uku* are understood alternately as gifts to an ancestor, objects used or carried by them, as well as a portion of an ancestor's

body.¹³ Despite the Kabu Movement and subsequent iconoclastic events, *eve uku* have survived, albeit transformed.¹⁴ Canonised by these events, *eve uku* condense relations formerly distributed across a wide range of absent ritual things and practices. *Eve uku* not only materialise specific histories and thus particular claims made by their owners, they also stand more widely for a forsaken past to which communities must now return to in order to secure logging royalties. Though potent instantiations, the power of *eve uku* is ambiguous due to the uncertain status of *imunu* and the past they connect to. They are thus treasured, but cautiously so, as their mishandling can cause misfortune. For example, a chief attributed his prolonged illness to his inability to marshal the resources needed to transfer his *imunu* into a new black palm fighting staff (*erau*). The ancestor materialised in this *eve uku* gave him rights (as yet unrealised) to important tracts of land up river. By the time I left the Delta, he had neither carved the new staff, nor carried out the feast to accompany this task, and his illness lingered. As Ke'a remarked, 'Imunu can go both ways. If they are not happy they twist things and cause problems' (Fieldnotes 18 February 2002).

This capricious power of *eve uku* is complicated by their haphazard dispersal among individuals, who may or may not be 'true' chiefs or have the accompanying knowledge of *airu omoro* to activate their possessions. The scattering of *eve uku* during these periods of iconoclasm coincided with the Kabu Movement's erosion of the subtleties of achieved and ascribed chieftancy materialised in ritual (Maher 1967, 1984), as well as elders' loss of the control of sorcery knowledge (Bell 2006a). Fearing sorcery, knowledgeable elders refuse to clarify these intricacies publicly resulting in many 'true' chiefs and *airu omoro* remaining hidden, while others falsely asserting themselves (Bell 2003, 2006c, 2008). These instabilities feed into the materiality of surviving *eve uku*, which are at odds with the fiction of their permanence within a group (Weiner 1992; cf. Baker, this volume, p. 112).

A set of stones exemplifies these dilemmas, the details of which I have purposefully left vague. The *eve uku* came to light while speaking to the chief of a particular *ava'i*, who had asked me to transcribe his *airu omoro*. In the privacy of his home the middle-aged man explained that these stones were the discarded 'skins' of his apical ancestors passed down to him along with his chieftancy. Following our interview, he left Mapaio to take his sick son to Moresby. At the man's insistence, I took a photograph of him holding the stones. Subsequently, I learned about how photographs are understood to be extensions of the person or object imaged (Bell 2008). Wary of the problems that might lie in this photograph, I privately gave it back to him upon his return to Mapaio 8 months later. Despite my caution, news of the photograph spread and a female elder of another *ava'i* demanded the return of the stones. In a subsequent interview, although her sister urged her to be quiet lest she be killed by sorcery, she related how the chief's father had stolen the stones in the 1950s, and that the stones were actually earth taken from their ancestor's origin point up river. She, and others of her *ava'i*, interpreted the chief's son's illness as a

manifestation of this transgression. The chief, however, refused her demands and left for Moresby. Subsequently, an elder of the chief's *ava'i* revealed to me that the stones and the group's chieftancy had been given to the current owner because of his father's sorcery powers and that the true chief resided elsewhere. At stake here within these different *ava'i* was how these stones materialised ancestral action through which each understood their rights to the logging concession to reside (see Bell 2006a).

In a process analogous to the creative inter-generational transmission of Mountain Ok ritual knowledge (*cf.* Barth 1987; Crook 1999), the last 50 years during which *eve uku* have remained latent have allowed them to keep an array of their associations, as well as for their owners to generate them anew upon their revelation in the wake of the regional iconoclasm. Though generative, these improvisations are constrained, by sorcery and ancestral wrath. As a result, while the presence of *eve uku* is tacitly known, they are only privately shown within *ava'i*, or to ethnographers, for fear of the desires they may elicit in others (Bell 2008). This is in marked contrast to other Purari groups, or groups engaged in disputes around Ramu Sugar Limited in the Upper Ramu Valley (Errington and Gewertz 2004: 172–180), where heirlooms are deployed to materialise ancestral histories in court cases. Among the I'ai, *eve uku* are thus potent but absent presences (Battaglia 1997), the control of which is bound up with inter-generational conflicts between elders and middle-aged men as they seek to assert political control in the village and beyond. However, as mentioned, *eve uku* are being encompassed by a new aesthetics of form demanded by the National Forest Authority (NFA) and the logging companies—the ILG certificate.

THE POWER OF ILG CERTIFICATES

The ILG registration process, as enumerated above, has resulted in numerous things. Here, however, I wish to turn to what it is ILG certificates do and what, as documents, they entail. A central step in the recognition of an ILG is the filling out of an application form on which a chair and committee for the group is named, the group's membership listed and a constitution detailed (Fig. 3). The details of this constitution are left to each group to determine and may be as comprehensive or as minimal as desired. While the identification of resource ownership is not required, in practice those wishing to register draw up a list of their resources as an appendix to the application. Once completed, ILG forms are lodged with the National Department of Lands and Physical Planning, and notice of the ILG wishing to be registered is posted in Moresby. Barring disputes the registration number is granted and the group issued with a certificate (Filer with Sekhran 1998: 182). The registration of ILGs is just one step in a larger process of forming a Landowner Company (an umbrella organisation for ILGs) and entering into a Forest Management Agreement with the National Government (see Filer with Sekhran 1998; Weiner and Glaskin 2007).

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

LAND GROUPS INCORPORATION ACT (1974)

Sec.3(1)

Form 1

APPLICATION FOR RECOGNITION AS AN INCORPORATED LAND GROUP

The Registrar of Incorporated Land Groups -

I, of Village, Province, being the person authorised by the members to make the application on behalf of customary group of persons, apply for recognition of the group as an incorporated land group to be known by the name of Land Group (Incorporated)

The group is entirely made up of the members of group (Attachment 2) which has been in existence for at least generations, and which has common customs and shared interests in customary land.

The members of the group reside in the Local Government Council / Community Government area. The group enjoys absolute ownership according to custom of the properties of customary land and other resources set out in Attachment 3. The proposed dispute settlement authority of the land group is the body described in Section 5 of its Constitution (Attachment 2).

Dated day of, 20..

(Signature of Applicant)

- Attachment 1: Constitution
Attachment 2: Membership Lists and Genealogies
Attachment 3: Property List

Figure 3 Page one of a photocopied ten page Incorporated Land Group (ILG) Application Form. The form asks for the names of committee members, name of the ILG, details the terms of membership, and the powers of the group, as well as a membership list and property list. Photograph credit: Author 2002.

I have briefly enumerated this complicated process to stress the relations that must be activated and maintained to complete it. This is where younger and middle-aged men with their greater mobility and their connections to government officials in Moresby and Kerema emerge as powerful agents. Viewed with suspicion by elders and those lacking education and mobility, the unseen activities of these men are sources of speculation, as are the activities of I'ai urban elite who occasionally visit villages. This was certainly the case surrounding David Lau's procurement of the eleven ILG certificates that he brought back to Mapai in September 2002. The events involved in David's return illustrate the power of these ILG certificates, as things, the relationships they materialise and ways in which they and documents more widely are involved in the I'ai's struggles for recognition.

Upon his return, David called a much-anticipated meeting with elders on his verandah. A maligned player in the I'ai registration debacle, David was the vice-president of Iare Resource Owners, the current I'ai Land Owner Company. David had used his position as the local coordinator of the Pangu Party to activate his connection with Chris Haiveta (a Pangu member), the Gulf's regional member. It was through these political connections that he and his colleague Clive Mailau procured the ILG certificates. Eager for me to document this event, David invited me to the gathering. After stressing his strenuous journey, David explained in I'ai:

If I was a liar I wouldn't get these things. I am happy to see you elders here. This thing has its *dore* ['stone'/money]...I didn't want to show you people. But because someone is doing this I want to show him [referring to me]. It is not something that is small [the certificates]...But I won't give them to you. I don't want you to hold them or to see because they are *ia'a aruruku* ['important possessions']...I don't want to pull it out because they are *ia'a aruruku*. I must keep all of them (Fieldnotes 29 September 2002).

During the meeting David insisted on the control of these documents, and only allowed me to hold them as we sat with the group. His insistence of control and partial revelation echoed other men's control of *eve uku*. Moreover, the certificates encapsulated another set of possible relations—money—metaphorically referred to as *dore*, which David was intent on controlling access to. Enmeshed as they are within the bureaucratic structures of the State, ILG certificates possess their own hidden potential. To heighten their status, David repeatedly told the group the condition upon which he showed them the documents. His withholding the certificates was part of his attempt to retain control over the registered ILGs within the village, as well as his bid to remain the vice-chairman of the Iare Resource Owners and its middleman when dealing with officials. This was also made explicit when he repeatedly stressed, while giving me a blank ILG application form, 'You have to write it on top not to be used...Don't give it to anyone.' David had returned with six extra applications that he was intent on using to barter even greater social standing.¹⁶

After David revealed the presence of the ILG certificates, the assembled men related how Roy Evara had ten days earlier come to Mapaiio and obtained the signatures of all the elders and ILG chairmen for a power of attorney document. While a parliamentary member, Roy had formed a Landowner Company named Purari Association through which he sponsored a project in 1994 to collect *airu omoro* to determine the rightful owners of the Purari River. Besides being seen as a way to make him the paramount chief for the I'ai, the project was deemed responsible for numerous deaths because of the public enunciation of *airu omoro*. It was partially a result of these struggles that the I'ai had resolved to allow the proliferation of ILGs. This project and Roy's wider political legacy had caused much of the I'ai's current problems registering their ILGs. Arriving during Independence Day celebrations, Roy came to Mapaiio with two lawyers; representatives of the Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights Inc. (CELCOR) based in Moresby. Roy, who

resided in Moresby, told the assembled men that both David and Clive had given him the power over the I'ai ILGs and Iare Resource Owners and that they were intent on him leading their struggle. The signature collection was therefore at their bequest. With the lawyers' help, Roy explained, the power of attorney document would enable him to pursue a court case against FH for the environmental damages. Tired of the empty talk and campaign promises of the last four months by visiting candidates for the 2002 national elections (Roy among them) and eager to obtain money through the proposed court case, the men signed with enthusiasm. Brandishing their signatures, Roy remarked,

What you people have signed is locked up. What you people have signed today is what David and Clive have given me. So if they come and dispute, they have no power (Fieldnotes 17 September 2002).

Having capitalised on the moment, Roy left the next day for other villages, and more signatures.

Hearing this account David responded angrily, 'He is a big man, he could do something, but I hate him using my name'. Lifting the ILG certificates, he continued, 'He should have this and do something. These are the things they looked for!' When the assembled men responded that they had signed because of Roy's promises, David responded,

A clever politician is using my name. You must have the black and white in front of you before you sign. Don't be stupid. If I have signed yes, you sign but just hearing [it] verbally...This is why brother, father and son have problems and people start dying. Before you sign ask for David's paper...He has no land! I got this [ILG certificates] already! ...He is using my name because there is twenty million kina for spoiling land and water.

After some muttered interjections by the men, David finished by saying:

I told you people—stay where you are. We have been waiting to get these [ILG certificates] and this is it! I won't give them to you. You people already put me in trouble—who are you going to really trust?...Today is a modern world. You have to have the black and white...There is going to be a dispute. (Fieldnotes 29 September 2002).

Following David's diatribe the group dispersed with the troubling knowledge that their signatures now circulated on a document out of their control in Moresby, and that their 'important possessions', the ILG certificates, remained with David.

Commenting on writing, Goody (1987: 54) reminds us of how the technology allows for increased knowledge accumulation that can be detached from its producer, thus transcending current hierarchies. It helps create them anew through education and access to books (Goody 1987: 164). We see this at play in David's invocation of it now being 'a modern world', which was an attempt to reinforce distinctions between those bound to the village through lack of education and those who, like himself, possess education and mobility. The new hierarchy that David,

and others like him were trying to reinforce, rested in their ability to engage with agents of the State, and thus their role in leading the ILG and Landowner Company. David's stress on the need to have 'the black and white' is part of the recognition of the form that relations must take for efficacious actions in the politics around landownership (Errington and Gewertz 2001; Weiner and Glaskin 2007). But in making these assertions, I do not wish to imply the technical superiority of writing over *eve uku* or that the I'ai naïvely accepted writing as being more efficacious (Lévi-Strauss 1971 [1955]: 286–97).

The I'ai engagement with texts and writing is not so straightforward, being complicated by their understanding that the Bible and the written word are indigenous in origin. In an *airu omoro* reminiscent of elsewhere in New Guinea (*cf.* Kirsch 2006), it is said that two brothers descended from the sky to the Delta. The younger brother brought the Bible which, despite his urging, was rejected by the people in favour of the older brother's encouragement to continue masked ritual performances. Vowing to return to lift them from a foreseen darkness, the younger brother left with the Bible; taking it, and his knowledge, to the West. In different accounts, he gave this knowledge to Europeans or his sons, who became Europeans (Bell 2006a: 304–11; *cf.* Williams 1940: 437–8). Writing and the power of documents are thus part of a shared history, the relations of which have been cut (Strathern 1996). Writing and documents are things that the I'ai understand as something that they must re-master in order to transcend this ancestral failure and to establish equitable exchanges with others. This perception in part also motivated the Kabu Movement, the failure of which continues to haunt communities. This understanding of writing and documents underpinned both Ke'a's dream and the wider community of elders' wishes to have me document their *airu omoro* in order for them to obtain recognition both within the ILG process and the wider politics of recognition in Papua New Guinea.

Incorporated Land Group certificates are more than just words; they are pieces of paper enlivened by their connection to the State and the capability of extending outward, enunciating and affirming a descent group's place within the Delta, its connections with the government and foreign companies. Their absence, and the frustration around their obtainment, is also about resolving unrequited reciprocity whose current form takes the shape of being denied resource royalties. The powers of these documents are made clear through the outcomes they are known to have effected elsewhere for other 'landowners' in the Delta, which the I'ai anticipate they will also enact for them. They also possess power through the hidden processes by which they are acquired, through their ability to render legible relations through which engagement with the State and companies can occur. These documents are generative in their capacity to expand and cut aspects of social group's networks of relations (Strathern 1996). ILG certificates capture ancestral legacies that these groups argue they possess, and orient the groups towards an anticipated future where these legacies will be materialised and validated through royalties. What the I'ai do not know is what the relations that these documents help materialise will

elicit from the State and companies and what, in turn, they will have to exchange for them.

'THE ROOTS OF LETTERS ARE THINGS'¹⁷

Within this paper, I have given an account some of the transforming materialities in the Purari Delta through an examination of *eve uku* and ILG certificates. The Delta's current resource projects have amplified concerns about the nature of group affiliation and composition, leadership, and the means by which people can effectively mobilise different things to materialise these relations and assert their property rights. In the process, *airu omoro* has become a highly charged resource by which these relations can be secured. As part of these struggles for recognition, *eve uku* and ILG certificates have emerged as potent but problematic forms through which men attempt to encapsulate and control the relationships between persons, things, ancestors, the environment, the State and multinational companies.

It would be a mistake to see the power of these documents, or *eve uku*, as merely a result of what they index, just as it would be wrong to see value lying only in relationships they engender. As Thoreau reminds us, language is ultimately bundled with its referent or, in other words, the form of things matters. As sensuous things, both *eve uku* and ILG certificates bundle a set of associations. In the case of the latter, their 'black and white' extends to cover 'development', access to money, participation in the national economy and the status of being 'landowners'. Possession of these certificates helps to materialise these desires and gives them a physical presence in villages that induces particular affects and responses (Riles 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2007). While it is unclear whether David relinquished these certificates or continues to hold them, their procurement and indeed their absence have participated in a transformation of relations and the understanding of their material forms. As Strathern (1999: 19) reminds us, during exchange men 'present a version of themselves as they would like to be seen'. While this is certainly the case in the exchanges enacted around *eve uku* and ILG certificates, these documents force the I'ai, and communities attempting to become 'landowners', to take a specific form *in order to be seen*. The entification necessitated by these documents helps to materialise new notions of group affiliation, descent and corporality. By engaging with these things, the I'ai are attempting to do what they have always done—secure for themselves a productive future through the manipulation of relations. Focusing on what things are used to materialise these desires not only elucidates this dynamic, but also reminds us that, while people's lives cannot be reduced to a piece of paper, they are nevertheless increasingly being shaped by them.

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NOTES

- 1 I carried out fieldwork from March 2001 to late October 2002, with a follow-up trip in April 2006. Letters, email and phone calls also inform my discussion of shifts after my departure in 2002.
- 2 The Reverend James Chalmers of the London Missionary Society (LMS) visited the Delta in 1883 and until his death in 1901 travelled extensively through the region (Chalmers 1895). Today he is widely commemorated along the south coast (*cf.* Busse 2005; Demian 2007). The acting assistant governmental anthropologist, F. E. Williams, carried out research among the Purari in 1922 and produced the first monograph about the region (Williams 1924). While adults knew of Williams none possessed his monograph and many believed that their grandparents purposefully withheld information from him, which is why they reasoned they were not receiving logging royalties (Bell 2003: 113–4, 2006c).
- 3 Kirsch (2006) usefully explores these dynamics in the context of his fieldwork with the Yonggom.
- 4 Pamphlets and books also played a role as things in the Vailala Madness and the Kabu Movement (see Williams 1923, 1934; Maher 1961).
- 5 *Ava'i* is used today interchangeably to refer to one's household or one's extended network of male agnates. *Airu ava'i* ('ancestral descent group') is used to clarify the latter. Used interchangeably, 'clan' and 'tribe' are increasingly used to describe social relations (Bell 2006a).
- 6 Maternal uncles also play a role here, and in the past were responsible for male initiations. Today these responsibilities take the form of helping to pay for their sister's son's education and or providing them with clothes, etc. (Williams 1924; Bell 2006a).
- 7 Begun in 1946 by Tom Kabu along with returning members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion and converts to the SDA church, the Movement quickly engulfed the rest of the Purari. Critical aspects of the Movement were: (i) the cessation of ritual practices, (ii) the destruction of ritual objects, (iii) the reordering of communities through their relocation and dispersal, (iv) the adoption of *hiri motu* by the Movement's adherents, (v) new housing styles, and (vi) the commencement cash cropping and other business activities. The movement also helped establish the Purari community in Port Moresby (Maher 1961, 1967, 1984; Hitchcock and Oram 1967).

- 8 Roy Evara held the Kikori Open Parliament seat for multiple terms (1977–82, 1982–87 and 1992–97).
- 9 FH is current harvesting Vailala Block 3 (200,100 hectares) which stretches from the coast into the hinterland between the Purari River's eastern branch and the Vailala River. Though dormant, since 2000 TFI began paying the Kaimari, Koriki and Vaimuru their initial quarterly payments in anticipation of the logging of Baimuru Block 3 (245,800 hectares), which extends west from the west bank of the Purari River over the Kereru Range to Mount Faveng (see Bell 2006b).
- 10 InterOil possesses three petroleum licences (PPL 236, 237 and 238), which cover coastal and inland areas from Port Moresby to Ivi River in the western Gulf. The upper Purari River falls within PPL 238 and has shown promising signs (InterOil Corporation 2008). It remains to be seen what the ramifications of these projects are for the Purari (Bell 2006b).
- 11 As elsewhere in Melanesia, Purari corporeality is understood to derive from the transmission of several physical substances. The male substance of bone (*da'aro*) is now being asserted as the only true mark of affiliation (Bell 2006a).
- 12 By contrast, though the Koriki talk about the ILG process as reinvigorating their cultural identity and allowing them to transcend fears of sorcery, they are the most divided. In 2002, they had 116 registered ILGs, some of which possessed as few as six people.
- 13 They are also called *airu aruku* ('ancestral possessions') and *ine'e pei* ('something to think about').
- 14 Robert Maher records how a Samoan LMS missionary in Mapai'o destroyed some thirty 'sorcerer' bundles within a year (8 June 1954, Robert Francis Maher Papers). In the 1960s, Mapai'o's councillors also destroyed ritual artefacts found in the homes of suspected sorcerers. These purges were minor in comparison to destructions wrought by the Pentecostal revival, which asked converts to break or cast *eve uku* into the river (Calvert 1985).
- 15 Clive Mailau, president of the Iare Resource Owners, kept the twelfth certificate for his ILG with him in Moresby.
- 16 For 100 kina, David offered an application to Kaia, my research assistant, who was also the leader of his yet-to-be registered ILG.
- 17 David Thoreau, 16 October 1859 (Thoreau 1962: 389).

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