Finding the good: Reactive modernity among the Gebusi, in the Pacific, and elsewhere

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Conditions of being left behind in economic and political terms are keenly felt in many areas of Melanesia and the wider Pacific Islands—as is more generally the case in many developing and also developed countries. Insofar as modern expectations portend a future that should be improving, it is unsurprising that modern expectations or entitlements are throttled by economic and political downturns across many cultural and class conditions. Ensuing circumstances are not so much 'post' modern—since ideals of modern progress are not given up—as they are 'reactively' modern in cultural terms. In this context, a poignant and longstanding sense of backwardness in many areas of the insular Pacific arguably provides a cultural bellwether of increasingly widespread perceptions and reactions elsewhere. Among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea prolonged economic downturn under conditions of marginality and remoteness has thrown people back on their own material and cultural resources. Despite a general absence of cash economy, monetisation or fiscalisation of 'work' increasingly orchestrates social relations. So, too, in the absence of government presence, police, or courts, mechanisms of dispute mediation have become locally developed and effectively elaborated, including through rhetorics of monetary compensation that were previously undeveloped in indigenous contexts of person-for-person exchange both in marriage and in death. In selected ways, reactive modernity among Gebusi has features that seem salutary—evoking an 'anthropology of the good'—despite and even because of Gebusi's politicoeconomic marginality. Drawing on work by Ortner, Robbins, and others, the larger relevance of this development reframes the relevance of Dark Anthropology and an Anthropology of the Good.

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INTRODUCTION

How do people who are left behind in the drive to obtain money and commodities react when their hopes are dashed, when their attempts to attain a more developed, modern lifestyle are blocked? This question seems especially germane among peoples in geographically remote areas of developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, rural regions far from centres of power, prestige, and large-scale money and

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commerce. In many such areas, government presence is minimal or even nonexistent, cash economy is paltry, transportation to and communication with other areas is difficult and arduous, and, yet, awareness of and desire for economic advancement push forward.

Amid drumbeat assessments of an increasingly globalised and interconnected world (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Friedman 2006), it is easy to forget how spotty, idiosyncratic, and uneven economic development continues to be (e.g., Ferguson 2005, 2006). Yet, even in highly marginalised if not impossible conditions, the drive for upward mobility is often strong if not seemingly obsessive, fuelled by painful and heightened self-awareness of being marginal and left behind. As Gregory (2018: 9) suggests in *The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times*:

> There are no new formulae...to replace 'the localisation of the global' or 'the indigenisation of modernity'; however, we...highlight some of the moral dilemmas and paradoxes faced by some people in the twenty-first century: those who find themselves to be land-rich and dirt-poor; who seek the good life by participating in rituals about good deaths; who value kin highly but are faced with the reality of estrangement; or those other, less fortunate members of the precariat in the Pacific...

In remote rural areas such challenges throw into distinctive relief Sherry Ortner's (2016a) conceptualisation of dark anthropology and Joel Robbins' (2013) characterisation of the anthropology of suffering subjects. Both of these important contributions conclude that for the past few decades Anthropology has emphasised conditions of human oppression, including especially as caused by rapacious capitalism and state intrusion. Both also agree that concern with this oppression and suffering became dominant since the 1980s, following earlier interest in remote and marginalised peoples that Trouillot (1991) called Anthropology's fascination with the so-called 'savage slot.'

Amid enormous variations of response and coping mechanism, people in rural areas of developing countries often have a distinctive place, including in relation to dark anthropology and/or the anthropology of suffering subjects. Rather than resisting or rebelling against modern disempowerments—capitalist expropriation, elitist inequity, governmental oppression, growing labour competition and low wages—peoples in marginal areas frequently want *more* of the very features that anthropologists critique and that people elsewhere may reject: more government intrusion, more expropriation of local natural resources, more business and corporate presence—even if the share of benefits that local people receive from these developments is incredibly small (e.g., Dwyer and Minnegal 1998).

Failing this, remote and marginalised peoples are typically left or pushed back on their own. At least in relative terms, and sometimes absolutely, they are off the grid and politically and economically disposable. Even in terms of protest or resistance, their leverage is typically limited. Over time, perhaps for decades or longer, their responses take shape, distil, and evolve to a significant respect on their own. This provides special opportunity for research and empathic understanding: how people cope

and create proactive responses to compromised development and dashed hopes of becoming modern.

If failure of development is a social, economic, and political process, the crushing of modern hopes—of a local modernity—is a crisis of embraced value and expectation. Modernity here refers to a view of time as an arrow of progress, a contemporary sense that the future should be not just different from but better than the past (see Koselleck 2004; cf. Knauft 2002b). Modernity betokens the hope of temporal improvement, of advancing development in material terms, to be sure, but with deep cultural values of expectation and anticipation if not entitlement. Though the intellectual critique of modernity is well advanced, including in relation to multiple or alternative modernities (e.g., Jameson 1991; Mitchell 2000; Trouillot 2002), in practical terms the desire for improvement and expectation of economic advancement have become, if anything, stronger than ever, including across developing as well as developed nations. There is hardly a country anywhere that now lacks a committed plan for economic development and social improvement—a path to a better future. Indeed, such sentiments can be so pervasive and ubiquitous—the air we breathe—that it may be easy to forget how distinctively Western-cum-modern they are in world historical terms. And yet, the significance of cultural dynamics does not thereby disappear: if anything, they become yet more important (Gaonkar 1999; Knauft 2002b). Cultural proliferations deeply inform regional and permutations of locally reactive modernity. In the mix they inform how people respond and react to the shortcomings and failures of modern aspiration.

This perspective refines and to some degree recasts our understanding of the 'anthropology of the good' in relation to the 'suffering subject' and so-called 'dark anthropology' (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016a). In particular, it casts greater light on people's own perspectives of what is good, or not so good, under so-called dark conditions (see Laidlaw 2016; cf, Ortner 2016b). In this particular sense, those in remote hinterland regions of Melanesia and elsewhere may actually be ahead of rather than behind the global curve. They are forerunners of a deepening global condition: how it is that people come to terms with the inflated and ultimately unrealistic expectations of an endlessly improving modern future.

Standing received understandings somewhat on their heads, I hence contend that in contemporary circumstance, the sensibilities of peoples in places that are so-called left behind are in fact at the forefront of impending global developments— and more comparatively relevant than ever.

MARGINALLY GEBUSI

Within this context we can consider the Gebusi people, tucked away in the remoteness of Papua New Guinea's expansive Western Province. As of summer 2017, after more than a half-century of outside contact, Gebusi and the Sub-District Office to which they are attached continue to have no roads to anywhere, a closed airstrip, no government officials, virtually no wage labor, no cash crops, a

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paltry local market, a barely functioning aid post, and no effectively employed outmigration or remittances.

First contacted in 1959, Gebusi were by 1980 approximately 450 people who were highly dispersed and thinly settled: 18 persons per square kilometre during the years of first contact they were difficult to locate in the deep rainforest, and when a village was finally approached residents typically fled.[1] Though Gebusi build stout houses and keep permanent residences, at first contact longhouse communities housed as many as fifty persons (Hoad 1962–63). They were thought to be nomads and were administered, nominally, from the so-called Nomad Patrol Post, now the Nomad Sub-District Office.

Following national independence in 1975, Papua New Guinean administration was introduced at Nomad, along with rudimentary cash cropping schemes involving chillies and rubber. These initiatives foundered and were abandoned within a few years: among other things, the high cost of air transport made exporting local products unfeasible. Though national officers, police, aid workers, and teachers were regularly resident at Nomad during the 1980s and 1990s, their outreach and presence in rainforest villages was quite minimal.

In 1980 when I first lived with them, Gebusi resided in multi-clan longhouse communities along with scattered smaller family houses. Communities averaged 26.5 persons and were situated in small clearings closely ringed by towering primary rainforest. Public social interaction and conversations within and between families reflected a general decorum of soft-spoken respect punctuated by boisterous camaraderie and joking among men during spirit séances, feasts, dances, and the many rituals that intensified and climaxed the Gebusi initiation cycle. Ritual festivities pervaded village life, including striking costuming and creative body art. Feasts and dances occurred despite, and in sense as a bulwark against, spasmodic sorcery accusations that wracked communities in the wake of sickness, deaths and ensuing inquests, usually within communities themselves (Knauft 1985: chs. 4–5, 7–8).

In Gebusi social life at the time there was little if any division between work and leisure. Some subsistence tasks were arduous and protracted, such as women's processing of sago, but the general ethic was one of pleasant if not happy or boisterous accommodation with the rhythms of daily activity in the rainforest, including foraging and gardening. Almost half the nights of the average person (44.4%) were spent in forest hamlets or garden houses, or visiting kin and unrelated friends linked by gift-exchange or initiate relations in other communities. Terms of happiness (*obeagim-da*) and goodness (*hone-wi-da*) were used more frequently than they have been in recent years, and the community ethic of sharing-talking-'cheering'—*kogwayay* or 'good company'—was a pronounced and emphasised aspect of community life (Knauft 1985: ch. 3).

Gebusi social life at this period was importantly facilitated and reinforced by the impact of colonial pacification, which was directed not so much at Gebusi themselves as against their more numerous and aggressive neighbors, the Bedamini. Prior to colonial intrusion, Gebusi were decimated by Bedamini. Without enforced pacification

Gebusi would have become a remnant population or culturally extinct within a decade or two. On the other hand, cessation of Bedamini raids, along with the introduction of steel tools—enabling much larger and more numerous gardens, settlement clearings, and houses (cf. Salisbury 1962)—allowed Gebusi a relatively self-determined ability to develop social and ritual life with unprecedented frequency, stability, and effervescence—and without significant outside interference.

BECOMING LOCALLY MODERN

By the late 1990s, most Gebusi from various settlements had relocated at their own initiative to be near the activities and services associated with a government or missionary airstrip. The village community of Yibihilu, where I resided from 1980 to 1982, relocated along with its associated hamlets to become 'Gasumi Corners,' a corner settlement near to and highly oriented toward the activities associated with the Nomad Sub-District government station. The services and congregations of the PNG Evangelical, Seventh Day Adventist, and Catholic churches were booming. A thriving and robust Nomad market was held twice a week, at which Gebusi women regularly brought and sold forest food. Virtually all Gebusi children went to the Nomad school. On weekends almost all men and boys spent hours playing and/or watching refereed games of soccer and rugby on the manicured pitch beside the Nomad government station house (see Knauft 1998, 2002b, 2016).

Culturally as well, Nomad Station had a strong influence. Individualised activities in and around the station, in school, at church, and in sports had a decentralising effect on local community organisation. The longhouse was given up in favour of individual family dwellings, and the community expanded into an archipelago of houses across a stream and several hillocks. Welcoming etiquette and the traditional pipe-sharing of tobacco among men declined, along with sexual joking and other forms of male camaraderie (Knauft 2016: ch. 7). Spirit mediumship and a number of rituals became defunct, notably including the male initiation, and the incidence and severity of traditional sorcery inquests and inquisitions also declined.

By contrast, the impact of the Christian churches in social and community life was strong at this time. On National Independence Day Gebusi celebrated the demise of traditional culture with buffoonish skirts that mocked precolonial customs in favour of increasingly Westernised development, Christianity, and budding local modernity (Knauft 2002c, 2016: ch. 10). It appeared, in short, that many longstanding Gebusi beliefs and practices were becoming a thing of the past.

What political economy undergirded these developments? Though there were (and are) no exploited or mined resources in the Nomad area, royalties from the Ok Tedi gold and copper mine, in the mountainous north of the Western Province, supplied up to 25% of Papua New Guinea's entire national export revenues, as well as the lion's share of the Western Province's budget. Despite government graft and inefficiency, at least a trickle of this money supported the workings of government outstations such as Nomad during the late 1980s and 1990s.

By the late 1990s the Nomad government station included a large, long airstrip with frequent air traffic (usually several flights a day); an electrical generator and power lines to station houses (which cost K14,000 apiece to connect to the grid); several highly attended churches; an active and well-staffed health clinic; a police force; a thriving twice-weekly market; a robust school from first to eighth grade; a very active sports league with soccer, rugby, volleyball, and basketball matches managed by paid referees; a stream of government development projects for local infrastructure and agricultural development; and government funds for village improvement projects paid through locally elected ward councils.

In 1998 the officials at Nomad included 26 salaried national and provincial workers, almost all of whom hailed from other parts of the country. To these were added various paid local assistants and helpers. Salaried employees received Western-style housing at the Nomad Station and were full-time residents, along with their families. Their presence both as salaried professionals and as agents and conduits of government services and projects undergirded the cash economy of the Sub-District as a whole, which has no exportable resources or roads either within itself or to any other part of the country.

PROBLEMS ARISE, THE GOVERNMENT DIES

By the 1980s and especially the 1990s, however, Nomad's local modernity declined, challenged both politically and environmentally by developments further afield. Toxic rock tailings and sediment from the Ok Tedi mine destroyed the riverbanks and downstream livelihoods of thousands of villagers along the Fly River. This included dire ecological and health consequences of mushrooming concentrations of heavy metals such as mercury in the water and in riverine wildlife. These problems informed what is probably the largest ecocide in and along a major rainforest river system in the world (see Kirsch 2014; cf. 2006). This ecological calamity has not had a direct environmental impact in the Nomad area, which is part of the Fly River's tributary Strickland River system (itself polluted upstream, though less severely, from the mine at Porgera). The legacy of the Ok Tedi mine has nonetheless had a major impact on the entire region's political economy.

Due to the country's fiscal dependence on Ok Tedi mine revenues, the Papua New Guinea state felt it could not tolerate the closure of the mine that was augured by its owner and operator, the multinational mining giant, BHP. Amid falling profits of the mine itself, the building of large tailings dams to contain toxic mine sediments was somewhere between impossibly expensive and simply impossible. Along with a half-billion dollar compensation settlement (Kirsch 2014: 102, 2018: ch. 2), the mining behemoth decided strategically in 2002 to transfer majority ownership of the mine—and full future responsibility for its environmental problems—to the government of Papua New Guinea. Since then, the Ok Tedi mine has continued to operate under state control, though it has been plagued by continuing problems and declining revenues. To these have been added systematic government siphoning and depletion of

the resource royalty trust fund that was supposed to fund services and projects in the Western Province in perpetuity.

By the late 2000s, state and provincial funding for Nomad dried up, and government presence waned. With no funds to maintain or repair the large airstrip, it fell into disrepair, and flights landed only sporadically. Government officials responded by moving out of Nomad and leaving the area, though they continued to draw their pay in town at Kiunga. The situation has worsened progressively since, as documented by fieldwork in 2013, 2016, and 2017. The Nomad airstrip is effectively and perhaps permanently closed; all government officials and police have left, partially excepting one locally born government liaison administrator. All government offices have been closed for several years, and there is no initiative to re-open them. The Western-style houses on the station have become derelict and are either unusable or inhabited by squatters. The sports field is overgrown, and the medical aid post barely functions. Gebusi say simply: 'The Government has died' (*gamani golomda*).

With the departure of government workers, their salaries, and their programs, the local cash economy collapsed and the local market has become moribund. The cell phone tower no longer works, and there is no communication by phone—or radio— to the outside world. In this breach, the local Catholic Church, with its sometimes-resident priest, remains the most prominent outside organisation at Nomad. However, church attendance and participation have declined, and the Protestant churches near the station have either closed or become greatly reduced in size and activities.

In terms of cash economy, the Gebusi's situation is now dire. Those in the large community of Gasumi Corners are, as of summer 2017, 211 persons still located a scant half-hour walk from the Nomad Station. But their average daily adult income is generously estimated to be only $0.20 per day—one-fifth the level of abject poverty assessed for those who earn but a dollar a day (cf. Collier 2007). Of this, the majority of money in the settlement is earned not in small amounts by the populace as a whole, but by three individuals who have modest semi-regular employment: two lay church leaders who receive up to K120 ($44.40 USD) per fortnight from the local Catholic mission, plus one carpenter temporarily employed, also at K120 per fortnight, at the Nomad school.

RESILIENCE AND RESURGENCE

Fortunately for Gebusi their meagre cash income is counterbalanced by robust subsistence gardening. Amid the plentiful availability of rainforest land within an hour or so walk or canoe ride, including along fertile river banks, burgeoning Gebusi food production includes bananas, sago, sweet potatoes, and a range of nutritious introduced crops as well as foraging and hunting in the deeper forest (Knauft 2016: 198–201). Apart from years of El Niño drought, there is no evidence of food shortage or epidemic disease, notwithstanding general lack of health services. Indeed, the population is booming and there is little evidence of land shortage amid extensive forest tracts for gardening, even along valuable riverbank sites. Families now boast six, eight, and even

ten surviving children (cf. for the Kubo, Minnegal and Dwyer 2018: 95). Lack of threat from tribal raiding or warfare enables people to invest more time and energy not only in large gardens but also in making and regularly using canoes.

Thrown effectively back on their own resources, both cultural and material, Gebusi have revived and resuscitated a number of their previous customs, while others have not been rejuvenated and seem permanently defunct. Alongside declining church attendance, the scale and calibre of local community life has, on the whole, increased during the past decade. At the same time, there are increasing stresses between the growing population of increasingly differentiated segments or 'sub-corners' of Gebusi Corners. A large longhouse has served as the focal point for all-community gatherings, socialising, and occasional dance rituals, but was shut to a significant extent in 2017 when its principal owner was accused of sorcery and moved out of the village with his extended family. Whether a new pan-community longhouse or meeting house will be re-established is presently uncertain.

Long-standing customs of smoking, drinking kava, and joking have become increasingly resurgent, along with the drinking of alcoholic home brew now made from yeast and sugar (compare Knauft 1987b). Intra- and inter-village feasts continue to be avidly organised and festively carried out, now including large quantities of sweet potatoes as well as large traditional rolls of steam-cooked sago with greens and/or coconuts, as well as butchered pigs for especially large or festive occasions. Feasting food is prepared and presented similarly to the way it was in the early 1980s (though with more formalised designation of village sub-corners and of those from other villages). On the other hand, practices of sorcery divination, while not absent, have become highly decentralised and individualized, making collective vengeance against accused sorcerers much more difficult.

WORKING IN THE ABSENCE OF WORK

Despite their subsistence success and social viability, Gebusi continue to painfully feel their remoteness and marginality from centres of money, commerce, and political power. They lament their ripped clothes and few commodities, and they struggle to find ways to get to Kiunga, the nearest town, even if only to witness commercial life and lifestyles in which they cannot effectively participate. However, Gebusi do not feel oppressed by governmentality or exploitative profit-taking. Rather, they feel oppressed by the nearly complete *absence* of government and of capitalism. They would like to be actively governed, and they are eager to work for wages almost no matter how low (cf. also Minnegal and Dwyer 2018; contrast Scott 2009).

One of the most powerful and poignant responses Gebusi have made to their marginality is to fiscalise and monetise work, to create a *kind*-of-capitalist work. And they have created what might be called pseudo-official government in the absence of governmentality—this amid a dearth of both money and government presence.

The Gebusi word for work is '*ho-tola*:' literally, to have agency or effect by holding something, to grasp an object in one's hand and use it instrumentally. Back in the

1980s, when, to put it crudely, Gebusi were pre-modern rather than after-modern, doing-while-holding—especially in gardens, house-building, or other chores—was just another form of daily activity, an unmarked part of the circadian rhythm. Children spontaneously and regularly engaged in *hotala* in their 'work play:' playful role-playing, pantomiming, and practicing of adult productive activities (cf. Crittenden 2016: 168–170).

Now, however, '*hotola*' is work as 'labour'. As such, it conveys value and meaning in powerfully new ways. Gebusi now gauge and assess their productivity against a current daily rate of ten kina (about $3 US dollars) for an 8-hour workday. They assess this and keep track of their work from 9 am to 5 pm in diverse spheres of social life that were previously unmarked and uncounted. (Indigenously, Gebusi number words included only 1 [*hele*], 2 [*bena*], 2 + 1 [*bene-bwa, hele-bwa*], and 'many' [*bibina*].) Almost any major work project is associated with and indexed by large ruled sheets that list the names of those who worked and columns with checkmarks indicating which people worked which days—and hence how much they should or could be paid. This applies to community labour and especially to activities associated with external entities, including the building of our own new house, unbeknownst to us before our arrival in 2016, and its subsequent upgrading in 2017.

The procedure of keeping rigorous time worksheets is followed individually by those who receive occasional payment for their work from the Catholic Church. The same applies to other activities that are not paid for but which in principle or in hope *could* be recompensed. In the 1980s, working as 'to hold and to act' was commonly, if not usually, associated with a social sense of enjoyment: the satisfaction of cutting and maintaining a garden, planning for a feast, or building a house, even when work was long or hard. Now, by contrast, *hotola* is generally sober obligation, an onus rather than a seamless or taken-for-granted part of community life.

Gendered components of *hotola* are especially important insofar as women are typically charged with a disproportionate share of subsistence labour and physical carrying. Though they are not paid or provided time sheets for intra-village work, women are now, in contrast to the past, publicly exhorted by men to work, to labour, especially for community feasts. Feasts are now organised, at least in principle, by a male village committee and committee Chair, who direct villagers and especially women to work in various capacities on a set schedule: that is, to collect firewood, pick cooking leaves, cut and process sago, obtain other food, and bring it together for cooking on the designated feast day. Though these efforts parallel the decentralised self-organisation of community feasts in the past, they are now encapsulated by a presumed structure of ordered hierarchy based on commanding work and, at least in principle, its feasible payment. For feasts that entail a component of external involvement, such as the Parish Feast Day in relation to the local Catholic Church, the labour of villagers is assessed against the presumed, anticipated, or hoped-for reciprocity of payment to villagers by the parish Priest. If this is not done through actual payment for labour, it is expected or hoped that a pig will be purchased with church funds so it can be cooked and distributed as a festive capstone to the event.

So, too, the use of the longhouse is subject to monetising claims. The principal extended family that spearheaded and led the building of the longhouse tried to claim payment or rent when it was used for major gatherings such as a dance or ritual. (The logic here was that heavy use of the longhouse degraded it and wore out the floorboards more quickly.) Though such payments are either resisted or given only in token amounts, they reflect an attempt to claim work-payment for what in the past was a collective project of community effervescence and consolidation. As the settlement has grown tensions have increased as to whether the longhouse is or should be a collective community resource, as opposed to being simply a large house belonging to those who provided the bulk of labour to build it.

Village feasts and use of the longhouse are rarely 'paid for'—but that is the point. The same is true of 'work' women do cultivating and hauling food to the Nomad market, where it is almost never sold (cf. Knauft 2016: ch. 8), and work that men and women conduct on one or another vaguely defined government construction project, for which it is unlikely they will be properly or in fact ever paid. This larger idea is not that work *is* paid for, but that it is *deserving* to be paid for and *should* be paid—in principle. 'Working' in our sense of 'labour' gives value and meaning, a sense of personal discipline and efficacy.

The dynamics of Gebusi work can be thrown into relief by comparing and contrasting it to what Graeber (2018) calls 'bullshit jobs' in Western countries. Whereas the latter entail make-work employment that is vacuous, boring, uninteresting, or mindless (but nonetheless paid with regular wages) Gebusi 'work' is in some sense the reverse: work that is instrumentally useful and valuable but *not* generally paid, even though it is defined and considered as deserving of payment. Analysis of the so-called Western 'gig' economy emphasises its reliance on piecemeal work, part-time jobs, contractual decentralisation and privatization: shifting employment that lacks long-term stability or dependable benefits (see Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Hyman 2018; Kessler 2018). At least in a cultural sense, the Gebusi notion of 'work' carries this to extremes: the value of work is maintained as an economic and moral imperative in the absence of payment. This parallels the strong sense in the U.S. and many developed countries that having a job, having 'work,' is a key if not prime feature of self-worth and value.

As a complement to the sober monetisation of 'work', the 'good' (*hone-wi)* among Gebusi is less oriented around or attributed to community collectivity and camaraderie than it used to be (cf. Tuzin 1997; Minnegal and Dwyer 2018). Now, what is pre-eminently 'good' is having money and commodities. In this sense, Gebusi's modern marginality makes them less happy than they used to be but more officially organised, deserving, and, in a sense, locally modern.

Aspiration for modern development and economic improvement have not declined among Gebusi; indeed, these sometimes appear to go into hyperdrive, being particularly unrealistic or fantasised. A prominent example here is the prevalence of formalised, elaborate, and painstakingly baroque requests for money that proliferate in so-called 'Letters of Request for Assistance.' These concern all manner of

money-needing activities, from school supplies for teachers, school fees, equipment needs, repairing the local bridge, village improvement projects, community house building, and so on. That these requests are rarely if ever funded becomes almost beside the point: the propriety of the request itself establishes *worthiness*. Letters of request supply tangible evidence that one is *trying* to work and to develop productively, that one has *capacity* and *credentials,* and, finally, that one has legitimate *need*. This all attests to the local production of meaning and value, of participating deservingly in a modern cash and political economy amid its material absence.

Here I risk a brief analogy to so-called Melanesian cargo cults, those ritual movements of the past that intended to produce or fabricate Western commodities and money through so-called magical and ritual means (Burridge 1960; Lawrence 1964; Worsley 1968; Knauft 1978; cf. Lindstrom 1993). In our present register, cargoism suggests the production of meaning amid the value of commoditisation and the commoditisation of value. This is not just 'rational' in cultural terms, but highly meaningful in the context of materialised lack. At issue here is neither so-called traditional culture nor the abjection of develop-man, *pace* (Sahlins 1992; cf. Robbins and Wardlow 2005). Rather it is a contemporary way of making left-behind modern lives meaningful: what Patterson and MacIntyre (2011) call simply, *Managing Modernity in the Western Pacific*. As they stress, there is much more similarity here to the realities of Western-style casino capitalism in the Pacific and elsewhere, its own inflated economic risk, hope and delusion, than first meets the eye.

Viewed from this vantage point, cargoist sensibilities among Gebusi are not an index of irrational instrumentalism but a way to make 'good' out of modernity's own failure. This point does not relegate Gebusi notions of 'work' to the sphere of fanciful belief or projection. It rather underscores the continuing importance of meaningful value and human actualisation in productive, laboured enterprise, as Marx (1988) originally stressed in his Paris manuscripts of 1844. This is a problem that has attended or afflicted Melanesian societies in contact with Westerners for decades if not centuries. In other cultural guises, it also now informs the capitalist accumulation by dispossession of others, including the difficulty of finding adequate 'work' in Western countries, even when the economy is, in some senses, booming (cf. Harvey 1990, 2005). A recent article in *The Economist* (2018) entitled 'All Work and No Pay', laments how unemployment in Britain is so low that there is no pressure to increase wages: pay and benefits are stagnant. Against modern expectations of continuous growth in standards of living, this is easily perceived and experienced as pernicious decline, particularly for those who are underpaid and underemployed, desire better benefits, and long for higher pay.

In a world of increased automation, robots, and AI (artificial intelligence) how Westerners cope with their productive 'needlessness' in a cash economy becomes an increasingly large challenge: the shared challenge of dehumanisation under capitalism. In this larger context, the reactions and responses of people such as Gebusi are not a marginal or quaint relic of some by-gone era. Instead, they can provide an important bellwether of emergent changes that foreshadow future developments in a context of

threatened modernity and lack of work elsewhere—what Harvey (2015) calls universal alienation (cf. Knauft 2018).

GOVERNING IN THE ABSENCE OF GOVERNMENT: STRESS, CONFLICT . . . AND RESOLUTION

Analogous developments appear in the Gebusi realm of government and social control. Prior to the local 2017 national election, villagers drew up elaborately ruled voter registration rolls that carefully recorded each adult resident in Gasumi Corners. These were not paid for or consulted by election officials, though they *might* have been. Indeed, national census patrols *had* paid for the supposed collection of updated voter lists by outsiders in the Nomad area even though the results were woefully incomplete and inaccurate. The irony of this supposed census taking was underscored when the official voter registration rolls included only six voting members for Gasumi Corners out of 98 adults (see Knauft 2017). Other communities in the Nomad area had similarly denuded voter registration lists. Despite this, the villages' own residence sheets were never consulted, and the work of accurately compiling them was never acknowledged or paid for.

So, too, elaborate government project funding requests and proposals are highly developed by Gebusi who have some degree of literacy. Some of these proposals are quite long and intricate, scores of pages that carefully follow elaborate government funding request protocols. They request hundreds of thousands or even millions of kina for local commercial and infrastructural development. Such requests continue to be produced despite having a negligible chance of being funded.

Homicide reduces to zero

Lineaments of Gebusi self-government seem especially poignant and productive in social control and dispute resolution. In particular, Gebusi have developed, tailored, and expanded means and mechanisms of dispute resolution that were formulated during the early post-colonial period following national independence. Previously, Gebusi had one of the highest rates of internal homicide yet documented in the ethnographic record: at least one-third all adults died from homicide, largely from the execution of suspected sorcerers within their own communities (Knauft 1985, 1987a). But as mentioned above, the physical killing rate dropped precipitously during the 1980s and has been zero—not even one actual killing—for the past 29 years, since 1989 (Knauft 2002a: chs. 3–5, 2011). This remarkable change, which has been recently re-verified in the field with Dr. Malbrancke (Knauft and Malbrancke 2017), has occurred amid the decline and then total *absence* of police presence or other legal authority with enforcement power. It has also occurred amid major decline (though not total absence) of Christian church influence during the past decade. The collective good for Gebusi is very much in their own hands amid a paucity of government, market, business, and even to an increasing extent outside religious influence. In most respects, they really are on their own.

How have Gebusi been able to reduce their rate of killing so dramatically under conditions of remoteness and marginality? Their ancestral customs privileged person-for-person exchange, both preferential sister-exchange in marriage and lethal reciprocity in death. In particular, the life of the sorcery suspect was taken through physical execution in reciprocity for the person he or she was believed to have killed through illness. Unreciprocated marriage and sorcery were linked via elaborate spiritual procedures of divination. By means of these inquests, consensus was formed in the multi-clan village concerning the identity of the sorcery suspect and the extent of his or her guilt (Knauft 1985: chs. 4–7). Moreover, a very high proportion of sickness deaths were individually avenged through the actual execution (and, traditionally, cannibal consumption) of the accused sorcerer. Outside of this context, however, the rate of killing was minimal, including in inter-community confrontations.

Marriage asymmetries and sorcery killings were organically linked among Gebusi insofar as the frequency and distribution of sorcery executions strongly paralleled marital disputes or presumed marital disgruntlement when the marriage had not been reciprocated through sister-exchange. For the most part these glaring statistical connections were denied or downplayed by Gebusi themselves in deference to inquest results derived through spirit séances and public divinations (Knauft 1987a). Through the 1980s Gebusi did not have recourse to compensation payments to forestall animosity in marital transaction or in sorcery accusations. The payment of only 4–8 kina or a major portion of a cooked pig was hardly seen adequate as reciprocity for a woman given in marriage, much less for the death of someone through sorcery (Knauft 1985: 170). Against this, accusations were expressed via spirit mediums in divination séances and then galvanised in collective action against the accused sorcerer.

Especially since the 2000s, however, Gebusi have greatly increased their claiming of compensation payments in cases of marriage and in other disputes. In marriage, bride-givers may demand as much as K5,000 or K10,000. Such sums may be realistically obtained in some parts of PNG, but certainly not among Gebusi. Nonetheless, the overt expression of conflict, including especially the angry public claiming of compensation, has increased significantly among Gebusi over the decades.

The effect of such claims, however, has been somewhat counterintuitive. In the general absence of money, voicing compensation demands typically reduces the anger of those who feel aggrieved, even though it does not result in much payment in fact. In many cases those accused may agree in principle to pay compensation. This face-saving development allows the protagonists to vent their anger and then to make peace or at least not to escalate the dispute. This remains the case even though major payments are invariably both highly delayed and greatly reduced. Often they amount to only a tiny fraction of what was originally demanded, and this in minimal instalments parlayed over a long period of time. Thus, for instance, a promised bride price of several thousand kina may end up being finished by the payment of just a few hundred kina over the course of many years. This conclusion was validated in the field in 2016 and 2017 through the systematic compilation of Gebusi bride price

compensation payments from the 1980s to the present by Dr. Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke. At the same time, as we discovered, the idea that the demanded compensation *could* be and is *intended* to be paid lends important impetus and meaning to the social process of negotiating marriage without serious violence.

Mediating disputes

In conjunction with 'compensation in its significant absence' are developed local procedures for mediating and resolving disputes. Drawing on the pattern of village complaints and hearings established by previous police and village courts, Gebusi now turn either to their locally elected 'Committee' (a single individual) or to the ward-elected 'Council' (also an individual) to convene public dispute mediation. Neither of these persons has any enforcement power or recourse to higher authority. Rather, they work as neutral parties, much as the effective Senior Constable did when he was present at the Nomad Police Office during the 1990s (Knauft 2002a: ch. 4). The emphasis is on airing and mediating disputes openly: encouraging and cajoling all sides to give full account of facts, grievances, and retorts.

A hallmark of these extended proceedings is that the Council or Committee patiently invites and inveigles everyone remotely associated with the dispute to tell his or her complete story. The inclusion of women is particularly important and sometimes challenging, insofar as women often harbor major disgruntlements that are less openly expressed, including in cases in which the principal protagonists appear to be men. Though the Committees and Councils have no formal authority, their neutral demeanor and attentiveness to detail makes them surprisingly accepted and effectual in formulating and reinforcing reconciliation. This is furthered by the tendency for the formal process of dispute mediation to be delayed, with principal antagonists simply staying away from each other until tempers have cooled sufficiently for an organised village palaver to ensue. In some cases, the principals may have floated the rough outlines of a compensation agreement or other resolution through go-betweens prior to the formal meeting itself.

In all, Gebusi experience more *overtly* expressed social *conflict* than they did in the 1980s and presumably before, when resentments in the congealed longhouse community were papered over until they eventually exploded into violence. However, the rate and severity of actual Gebusi violence has declined dramatically, and homicide has been eliminated entirely for almost three decades. This development is particularly noteworthy given that for many years now there has been no effective presence of authorised agents of government enforcement or police. Indeed, the cost of police intrusion in local matters would itself have to be paid for locally, including the inflated cost of air transport, supplies, and other associated costs for official investigation and action. Even in the case of an actual homicide among the neighboring Bedamini people during the summer of 2016, there was no government intrusion, presence, or follow-up by the following year. In essence, Gebusi have affected a dramatic decline of violence through practices of virtual compensation and compelling dispute mediation despite an absence of government or police presence. This development draws on

their longstanding cultural emphasis on collective good company in multi-clan communities, even as these communities now grow and develop in challenging ways (cf. Knauft 1985: ch. 3).

AN AFTER-MODERN CONCLUSION

Though Gebusi might be described as the left behind of the left behind, they have established their own economic, political, and social control, and their own locally reactive modernity. They have done this by drawing upon their cultural resources in the context of a seemingly inescapable and irrepressible drive to develop on their own terms and not be simply 'left behind'.

The notion of reactive or responsive modernity draws on notions of 'vernacular modern' or 'alternatively modern' or 'alter/native modernity' (e.g., Gaonkar 1999; Mitchell 2000; see Knauft 2002b). These notions have been appropriately critiqued, among other things, for suggesting or implying that alternative modernities are equivalent, despite their enormous differences in economic scale, success, or poverty in different contexts. It remains the case that all world areas, including the most remote corners within them, have now been exposed in local context to the coming and going, the local boom and bust, of money, commodities, and their associated modern styles of life. This is clearly evident among Gebusi, at least in relative terms, during and since the late 1990s.

The global distribution of such ebbs and flows reflects the uneven nature of capital intrusion and profit-making or exploitation across time as well as space. As such, people everywhere face an almost inevitable decline or forestalling of economic development at one or another juncture. These conditions are not *post*modern: they are not beyond or transcendent of notions of modern progress. Indeed, people typically continue to take lifestyles of perceived modern development, however these are locally construed, as axioms of intensified aspiration and commitment. Under circumstances that are *reactively* modern, the goal of modern development can be all the more important by its mounting *in*ability to be actualised in fact.

In remote and marginalised areas, conditions of being reactively modern are thrown into relief and dramatised by relative self-containment and isolation. This does not imply being beyond the reach of global forces. Indeed, lifestyles may be all the more transformed as their continued local emplacement makes them more invisible to or illegible from an outside perspective. It is in this sense that peoples previously seen to have been most left behind may be useful bellwethers for considering alternative responses and adaptations to conditions of compromised or failed modernity, of precarity, that are now felt and experienced in so many world areas (see Han 2018). Among Gebusi, at least, reactions and responses to economic collapse and modern failure have produced social formations that thrive in significant ways by drawing creatively on long-standing cultural traditions.

An important factor here, which is highly variable both across Melanesia and globally, is the degree to which people have recourse to their own land and livelihood.

Under conditions of major land alienation, cash cropping, migration, or physical displacement, options for social response and reconstitution on local terms may be reduced or constrained. The same pertains to major intrusions from extractive resources industries, such as mining, oil/gas, and logging projects in Melanesia. Peoples close to these developments such as the Porgeran people described in Jacka's contribution to this special issue, are easily in the crosshairs of economic boom-and-bust cycles that intensify both expectations of progressive development and a sense of loss and betrayal when anticipated entitlements are not forthcoming or highly uneven in local distribution. Under these circumstances heightened conflict and the effective destruction of local economic capacity may easily ensue (see similarly, Connolly and Anderson 1992).

Amid dramatic cases of social discord documented in such areas of intense resource development and expropriation—as documented for Ok Tedi (e.g., Kirsch 2006, 2014); Porgera (e.g., Golub 2014; Jacka 2015); Panguna in Bougainville (e.g., Denoon 2000); and Freeport in West Papua (Kirksey 2012)—it is important not to neglect less dramatic but likely much more numerous 'run-of-the-mill' cases in which such large-scale impacts are minimal or absent. In the present special issue, for instance, the contribution by Malbrancke concerning the Baruya may be more in this category along with the Gebusi. In this context, the present paper is toward one end of a continuum in the present special issue, illustrating relatively positive and recuperative possibilities associated with marginality. These are certainly quite variable across Melanesia: an ongoing reflection of the region's remarkable cultural diversity. Developments analogous to those among Gebusi or Baruya may be relatively more pronounced and elaborated in those many rural areas of Melanesia, and the Pacific more generally, where the direct impact of large-scale corporate or extractive resource or other business development is less.

Here Joel Robbins' (2013) complementary focus on the anthropology of the good, or at least the potentially good, seems important. By itself, anthropologists' study of disempowerment and disenfranchisement among marginalised and stigmatised people, be they in the remote regions of Melanesia, Rohingya in western Burma, or Appalachians in the U.S., too easily privileges their victimisation to the exclusion of all else. It is important to recognise major differences of economic scale and degree of immiseration, and also that poverty and disenfranchisement are in important ways culturally constructed: they are not simply economic or economically absolute.

I should guard in conclusion against the generalised implication that peoples such as Gebusi provide a positive archetype of recuperated after-modernity, much less that they are beyond the strife of modern exposure. Gebusi do have significant levels of low-to-moderate conflict, lament their marginality, continue to project and fear sorcery, and are threatened by the asociality that can attend a culturally configured monetisation of social life, including in the absence of significant wealth or income. As Minnegal and Dwyer (2018: 50) note for the nearby Kubo:

They extrapolated the logic of money—reification, commensurability, categorisation and anonymisation—to expressions of exchange, to gender relations and to notions of use rights. They did these things themselves. The changes we witnessed were expressions of their agency, of their attempts to draw the outside world in and, thereby, gain access to what they perceived as its future possibilities for their own lives.

These patterns are widely diverse across the range of societies in rural Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the Pacific. To cite just one alternative example, Jorgensen (2014) has documented how new forms of internal violence can destroy families among the Telefolmin.

The larger point is that an anthropology of the ethnographically remote and marginal should be empowered rather than undercut by the challenges of reactive modernity elsewhere, including both its comparisons to and contrasts with Western contexts. If an anthropology of the good is not always appropriate or applicable, the contextual anthropology of the marginally or peripherally good— or at least the not-*quite*-so-bad—remains important to pursue in tandem with critical understanding of political and economic conditions. Sometimes local responses may foreground the advantages of sensibilities found among remote peoples vis-à-vis those of Western societies' own so-disgruntled members. As such, anthropology of the most so-called left behind peoples can be, like Gebusi themselves, not perfect, but very much alive with meaning and contemporary significance.

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NOTE

1   I have previously described the Gebusi as having been first contacted in 1963, based on records at the Nomad Station itself. However, I have recently become aware of important historical research by Minnegal and Dwyer (2018: 61–62) that documents the McBride patrol of late 1959 as the first Western intrusion into Gebusi territory. The Nomad Station was founded in 1961–62, and the Nomad airstrip opened in 1963. By the late 1960s, attacks at the Station by Bedamini still occasionally occurred.

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