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**Stranger in One's Own Home
Kanak people's engagements with a
multinational nickel mining project in
New Caledonia**

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Stranger in One's Own Home

Kanak people's engagements with a multinational nickel mining project in New Caledoniaⁱ

Abstract

More than perhaps any other form of economic development, large-scale industrial resource extraction activities clearly threaten to turn customary landowners into 'strangers' on their own lands by acquiring rights to the natural resources that the lands contain and radically altering the surrounding environment. However, local communities are neither homogenous entities nor helpless, static victims of powerful manifestations of global capitalism. In this paper, I discuss my research in a few New Caledonian villages near a potential mining project. I analyze the diversity of individuals' responses to industrial activities, the intra-community conflicts that this development triggers, and local people's sources of power in relation to mobilizers of global capital. I argue that, through their interactions with the mining company, what many if not most of these villagers primarily seek is respect of their social positions and control of their own destinies. They especially aspire to determine what happens to their land, the source of their identity and dignity – the only place where they feel completely 'at home'.

Introduction: land, mining and politics

Old Kabo (laughing): So you still cling to legends! You'll have to be reborn to reality, reborn of a new spirit in a new world, reborn of a new identity.

Old Saké The hardest thing isn't being reborn, but feeling that one is a stranger in one's own home. Feeling one's land dying under one's own feet, and letting it die while doing nothing.ⁱⁱ (Gope 2001: 18)

More than perhaps any other form of economic development, large-scale industrial resource extraction activities clearly threaten to turn local residents into 'strangers' on their own lands by acquiring rights to the natural resources that the lands contain and radically altering the surrounding environment.ⁱⁱⁱ Local groups often assert their ownership of the land or sea and the resources it contains, demanding the right to refuse projects, to be compensated for environmental damage, or to exploit the resources themselves (see, for example, Howitt, Connell et al. 1996; Hviding 1996). Often, they also proclaim a special spiritual connection to the land and warn of the dangers of disturbing sacred sites. The inability of developers and governments to understand the necessity of taking local people's economic and metaphysical concerns into consideration has led to serious, sometimes violent clashes (Kolig 1987; Jackson 1991; Howitt, Connell et al. 1996; Lane and Chase 1996; Jacka 2001), of which the Bougainville rebellion is the most striking example (Filer 1990; Connell 1992).

However, local communities are neither homogenous entities nor helpless, static victims of powerful manifestations of global capitalism to which they are ethically opposed, as the academic and popular literature on the subject has often simplistically portrayed them. Unquestionably, over the last few decades countless crimes have been committed in the name of 'progress'. Nonetheless, Third World cultures are not simply fixed entities, with admirable spiritual values, being destroyed by 'modernity'. Rather, they are, as they have always been, composed of individuals with individual agendas who are adapting to new circumstances, new possibilities, and new desires. Many villages are active, dynamic loci of intense internal conflicts provoked by differences in individuals' expectations from the agents of landscape-altering economic development, with whom they engage in reciprocal relationships. The complexities of intracommunity conflicts and villagers' attempts to direct or prevent resource development activities may be elucidated by paying 'closer attention to

the ways in which land, and the identities it confers, are deployed as terms in the debate,' (Ballard 1997: 61).

This paper engages with the issues often addressed in the field known as 'political ecology', as an examination not of the macro-level politico-economic forces behind environmental change but of the engagements of local actors with global players and, in the context of huge economic and ecological stakes, with each other. Specifically, I analyse the relationships of the residents of a few New Caledonian villages with a multinational nickel mining venture known as the Koniambo Project. Perceptions of this project's potential costs and benefits have catalysed dormant intra-community tensions into factional conflicts. Because of their different positions within local social hierarchies, which inform their relationships with the mining company, individuals stand to gain or lose more or less than their neighbours. Therefore, some local people emphasise the importance of maintaining local ecosystems and cultural heritage while others highlight the project's economic benefits. They also worry to varying degrees about the importance of appeasing the area's spirits. These concerns are genuine; however, what underlies them are the villagers' desires for respect of their social positions and control of their own destinies. They especially aspire to determine what happens to their land, which is the source of their identity and dignity – the only place where they feel completely 'at home' – rather than simply an economic resource.

Particularities of New Caledonia and the Koniambo Project

Figure 1. New Caledonia in the Pacific.

The archipelago of New Caledonia, an overseas possession of France, lies just north of the Tropic of Capricorn (Figure 1). It is 1,500 km east of Australia, 1,700 km northwest of New Zealand and 18,000 km from Metropolitan France. Grande Terre, the main island which measures 400 x 50 km, possesses phenomenal mineral wealth, primarily nickel; needless to say, this makes the island attractive to both local and multinational mining companies. Meanwhile, long isolation and unusual ecological conditions have combined to generate extremely high levels of biodiversity (Mathieu-Daudé 1992 (1989): 28; Mittermeier, Werner et al. 1996; Conservation International and Maruia Society 1998: ii; Olson and Dinerstein 1998).

The great majority of the residents of the Northern Province live in villages (ITSEE 1998). Nearly all these villagers are Melanesians known as Kanak. Based largely on transfers from Metropolitan France, New Caledonia's GDP of approximately US\$10,000 per person places it among the world's 20 wealthiest nations, despite its under-developed productive sector (Freyss 1996: 261). However, this wealth has traditionally been concentrated in the capital, Nouméa, which is populated almost entirely by people of European origin.

The political will to redress these imbalances is represented by the Koniambo Project, a joint venture nickel mining project involving Canada-based Falconbridge, the world's third largest producer of refined nickel, and SMSP, a Kanak-run mining company. If it goes ahead, this project will involve the exploitation of the Koniambo massif, located between the towns of Koné and Voh in the Northern Province (Figure 2), as well as the construction of a pyrometallurgic refinery and a small dam.

Figure 2. New Caledonia.

Study sites

Figure 3. The Voh-Koné area.

Half a dozen villages surround the Koniambo Massif (Figure 3), which straddles the Hoot ma Whaap and Paicî/Cèmuki Customary Regions. My main study site, Oundjo (Figure 4), lies within the Hoot ma Whaap Region, mid-way between Koné and Voh. A village of approximately 300 residents (ITSEE and INSEE 1997), Oundjo is a focal point of many conflicts concerning the Koniambo Project. The nearby peninsula of Pinjen (Figure 3), eight kilometres south-east of the village, had been reclaimed by Oundjo residents during the New Caledonia-wide, pro-independence 'Events' of the 1980s; at that time, the Land Bureau had purchased the land from a multinational enterprise and granted it to the villagers on the condition that they form a co-op to use the land for economic development purposes. In 1999, Falconbridge/SMSP identified this peninsula as the preferred site for construction of the Northern Refinery. The villagers subsequently divided themselves into two camps. The customary landowner clans pronounced themselves in favour of the refinery's construction on Pinjen while the cattle co-op operating on the peninsula was opposed. In March 2000, some of the co-op's members set up a road block to prevent Falconbridge from conducting feasibility studies for the refinery construction. In June 2001, approximately 20 members of customary landowner clans, led by 41-year-old Bernard Tchaounyane, moved to Pinjen which they began to occupy in order to ensure that the studies would proceed. Unable to resolve these conflicts, a few months later the mining company began research at another potential site, Vwavuto (Figure 3), three kilometres north-west of Oundjo. Although less explosive than Pinjen, this situation similarly led to intra-community tensions.

Figure 4. Oundjo.

In 1999, Falconbridge/SMSP also began to investigate potential sites for the dam that would provide a source of fresh water to cool the refinery's machinery. In early 2000, they determined that the most convenient site would be near Wapan (Figure 3), a bend in the Témala River ten kilometres north of the villages of Témala and Ouélisse. However, these villages' customary landowner clans refused the dam's construction, outlining several reasons. First, the river that would be dammed was an important source of fish and crayfish, and the lands that would be flooded were used as a hunting reserve for deer. Secondly, the area had been seized during the colonial period and had recently been successfully reclaimed by the villagers in the aim of using it for the village's economic development. Moreover, as will be explained in greater detail below, the villagers needed to avoid the risk of severe punishment from their ancestors for disturbing their resting place.

Meanwhile, in response to the advent of the Koniambo Project, the chieftainships from the southern end of the massif conferred with each other in order to grant their permission to Falconbridge/SMSP to conduct prospecting activities on the massif. Although there was some disagreement about who exactly had what rights, in the end they reached a consensus. In 1999, when Falconbridge/SMSP decided to commence prospecting activities on the massif, the mining company performed a highly publicised customary ceremony at the Voh stadium with the clans whom they had identified as customary landowners. Later that same year, the customary landowner clans from the southern end of the massif, concerned to protect the workers at the mine site, performed their own ceremony in which they apologized to their ancestors for the disturbance and explained to them what was happening.

Methodology

From January-June 2000, I worked as a consultant to Falconbridge and co-authored a 'Landscape Heritage' baseline study which included a map of the region's taboo sites. This paper is based on my own fieldwork, conducted during free moments while working for Falconbridge and during my subsequent return to the area in July-December 2001 when I was based at Oundjo. Research methods consisted primarily of participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Politico-economic importance of the project

The Koniambo Project embodies a great many economic and political aspirations for people in the Voh-Koné area, not only for the Northern Province but at the village level as well. Differences in the expectations of who exactly would receive the benefits created disputes within the community. What was ultimately at stake had less to do with financial gain than with social status. However, a pervasive discourse on the value of 'custom' led each side to accuse the other of greed for money or power at the expense of customary values.

'Greed, pride, selfishness'

At Oundjo, one 70-year-old man believed that the customary landowner clans of the Koniambo massif would receive payments from the mining company while other local residents such as himself would suffer the economic consequences of the resultant pollution and destruction of their fisheries resources. A few months later, however, when the mining company began seriously to investigate the possibility of building the refinery on the peninsula of Vwavuto, to which this man had indirect customary rights, he joined with other customary landowners of the site in order to formulate demands for royalties and preference in employment. Such attitudes echo Colin Filer's observation, in Papua New Guinea, of

the tendency for all forms of compensation to be placed under the umbrella of 'custom' (a good thing) by those who actually claim them, but then to be repudiated as a form of 'politics' (a bad thing) when the claims are lodged by other people. (Filer 1997: 179)

This ambivalence toward potential disparities in financial gains from the mining project must be examined in the context of Kanak people's relationships to money and its connection to social status. The Kanak became integrated into the market economy very rapidly at the beginning of the colonial period (Merle 1995; Naepels 1998). However, the economic sphere was, and remains, marked by discourse and practice emphasising equality (Bensa 1995: 88). For example, it is not well regarded to consume conspicuously, as this evidences a lack of consideration for others with less spending power.^{iv} Meanwhile, relatively affluent individuals are constantly anxious that others will try, through sorcery, to prevent them from enjoying their wealth (Bensa 1995: 89; Faugère 2000: 42).^v

Exchanges of goods and services, whether informally between relatives or friends or formally through customary ceremonies, still serve as frequent reminders of the interdependence of members of communities or kin groups. However, unlike many other areas of Melanesia, social status is not achieved by the accumulation and subsequent grandiose distribution of material goods (Bensa and Antheaume 1982). Instead, high social standing in Kanak societies is attained through proof of the ability to claim relative seniority and, especially, membership of a first-occupant clan. Historically, individuals constantly attempted to raise their families higher within the social hierarchy by manipulating myths and engineering marriages in order to associate themselves ever closer with the first-occupant clans, a position which, if less explicitly sought today, is still just as coveted.

In the context of natural resource exploitation projects, the reception of royalties or priority in employment is high-profile proof of one's position as customary landowner. My findings thus differ from those of Strathern and Stewart (1998: 213) who noted that a need for increased sums of cash was provoking interecine quarrels and accusations of jealousy among the Kawelka in Papua

New Guinea. In the case of the Koniambo Project, I argue that while financial benefits in their own right undoubtedly interest people, their desire to receive visible, tangible forms of recognition from the mining company actually represents a wish for confirmation of a high social standing which is far more important, or at least can be enjoyed far more openly, than the money itself. Therefore, it is not surprising that villagers at Oundjo sought to affirm or improve their social status by attempting to convince the mining company that they had the rights to negotiate about, and receive financial benefits from, the resource exploitation activity. Meanwhile, they sought to belittle their opponents by accusing them of demonstrating excessive pride in falsely claiming to be customary landowner clans, thereby (according to these accusations) revealing a selfish, greedy desire for material wealth.

Who decides?

Decision-making authority is another resource that is a cause of conflict within the community and that, like the reception of mining money, is a sign of high social status. The decision about whether or not to accept the refinery's construction on local lands, and the determination of who has the right to make that choice, emerges at a time when people fear that their customary positions of authority are being challenged by various aspects of the villagers' integration into a market economy. For instance, the administrative position of Lesser Chief (*petit chef*, chief of a village, as opposed to *grand chef*, responsible for a district) is currently held by a member of the Tchaounyane family, which feels that its power base has been fundamentally shaken by the activities of the cattle-raising co-op. Similarly, people who hold a position of customary authority at Oundjo but who work in Nouméa fear that others, back in the village, are taking advantage of their absence to invent land claims. In the context of a gradual erosion of their influence, it is not surprising that local customary authorities welcomed Falconbridge's recognition and implicit support of their positions, rights, and decision-making powers.

At the Voh stadium on 27 April 1998, representatives of Falconbridge and SMSP exchanged ritual packages of cloth, money and tobacco (a gesture known as 'doing custom', *faire la coutume*) with representatives of the clans claiming customary ownership of the Koniambo massif. After seeing their mountains exploited against their will for over a century, the massif's customary landowner clans had finally been consulted by a mining company. Nearly everyone in the region accepted these clans' right to decide whether or not to allow the mining company to operate on the mountains, explaining that only certain clans had the prerogative to negotiate with Falconbridge, and that each of these clans had the right to speak only about the area pertaining to it.

However, people were more unclear as to what this 'ownership' entailed. Throughout Melanesia, although rights to and authority over land have historically been restricted to certain groups, such rules were – and still are – flexible, nuanced and dynamic (for example, see Hviding 1996). Additionally, use rights are often distinguished from permanent relationships to geographical areas (see Jacka 2001: 7), although temporary users may try to claim more definitive privileges. Especially, customary systems of land rights were obviously not designed to address the complexities of engagements with large-scale development, as 'none of the traditional uses of land offers a satisfactory analogue to mineral rights,' (Jorgensen 1997: 620).

Even putting aside questions of what exactly a landowner was, people did not agree on who exactly local landowners were. In many parts of Austronesia, land rights are determined by ancestors' itineraries (Malinowski 1922; Bonnemaïson 1987; Parmentier 1987; Kahn 1990; Toren 1995; Hviding 1996) as is the case for New Caledonia (Leenhardt 1937; Bensa and Rivierre 1982; Guiart 1994; Bensa 1995). However, there almost always are differing versions of the history of the passage of these ancestors through each region (Naepels 1998: 105).

In contradistinction to Bruce Knauft's findings in regard to Papua New Guinea (1998: 145) and many non-Aboriginal Australians' complaints (see Merlan 1998: 211), I do not suggest that villagers in the Voh-Koné area were creating new myths in order to claim land to which they had no customary rights. Rather, I argue that the oral histories and genealogies relative to local land rights

are so multifaceted and ambiguous that individuals were able, as they have always done, to draw upon certain kin relations, ancestors' itineraries and remembered exchanges in order to assert their own perceived rights and to deny those of others.^{vi} In other words, conflicting claims did not necessarily involve dishonesty but rather divergent constructions of complex, overlapping legitimacies.

The villagers themselves, however, felt that their opponents were being audacious if not downright dishonest, corrupted by a desire for dominance. Several lamented the fact that there were no knowledgeable elders still alive to help them determine the correct social structure, and that each clan was therefore obliged to interpret the situation, leading to disagreement.

Nonetheless, both Pinjen and Vwavuto officially belonged to entities that fell under the jurisdiction of French, not customary, law: respectively, the cattle-raising co-op and private individuals. Despite the official legal status of these lands, however, the customary system of land rights was still recognized by the villagers. 'Competing cultural [and legal] constructions of the landscape' (Moore 1998a: 377) here overlapped in complex ways. In New Caledonia, the co-existence of such contrasting regulatory systems often leads to intra-community conflict, as individuals with various social positions experience different benefits and costs from each system (Teulières-Preston 2000). Anxious to maintain if not improve their current economic and social status, individuals sought to assert their rights through whichever legal structure, Kanak or French, was most supportive of their interests of the moment. This does not indicate that Oundjo villagers were particularly wily negotiators of the contemporary political scene, but rather that they did not hesitate to use the intellectual tools that best served their cause.

Sometimes, co-op members based their arguments on customary law. One 38-year-old member of the Diela clan, a customary landowner clan at Pinjen that is also represented within the co-op, asserted that his clan had customary title to the largest portion of the peninsula. This could be proven by the fact that the names of many landscape features were isomorphic with the names of his family members (André Pwahmo Diela, July 2001, Oundjo). However, members of the co-op relied primarily on the argument that they had legal title to the peninsula under French law, as proven by the fact that they were the ones who paid the land tax every year. Members of the co-op filed suit against Falconbridge, claiming that the mining company had obtained no legal authorisation to drill, build roads, or do other work on their lands.

The clans in favour of the refinery's construction on Pinjen also made use of both systems of land rights to justify their position. At times, they looked to French law as a means of attaining their goals. When the mining company showed signs of giving up on Pinjen, the Tchaounyanes and their allies wrote a letter to the Agency for Rural and Land Development (ADRAF) to re-reclaim their customary lands. According to Dipiba Fouange, a 55-year-old man whose primary land rights were at Vwavuto but who also claimed a small area at Pinjen, the pro-construction clans had contacted SMSP's CEO. The latter reportedly promised that although the refinery would not be built at Pinjen, SMSP would reward them for their prior support by helping them with any other projects, such as a housing estate, they might choose to initiate on the peninsula (November 2001, Nouméa). Thus, the pro-construction clans made use of the French legal system and external capitalist institutions to support their claims and efforts. At the same time, they relied on customary law to insist that the customary authorities were the legitimate landowners.

Ecological consequences

Like social status and decision-making authority, livelihoods are likely to change radically with the advent of the Koniambo Project. Currently, most local people's economic activities consist mainly of the exploitation of marine resources and land for gardening and raising livestock; understandably, they are concerned that mining activities will destroy this source of income. Many of the people in the Voh-Koné area evidenced a genuine concern for what was to them the most important aspect of their environment: its role as both a source of natural resources and a seat of cultural heritage. However, most residents perceived the mining project as involving a trade-off: on

one hand the environment would undergo a certain degree of damage, and on the other hand employment and royalties would be generated.^{vii} Whether or not the villagers deemed the trade-off worthwhile depended on, first, the benefits they expected from the project, in terms of money, social status, and control over land; and, secondly, the degree to which they trusted Falconbridge/SMSP. These expectations and this trust depended in turn upon the relationship they had with the mining company and whether or not they believed that this relationship, and the project, would increase their control over their land.

Concerns about pollution

Many villagers were convinced that the prospecting work on the mountain had already begun to pollute local rivers, which would eventually result in siltation of the mangrove and reef ecosystems. Many people also lamented the fact that the area's marine resources were being exhausted because of an increase in the numbers of people fishing there, and feared that with the arrival of workers for the refinery project, this depletion would accelerate. One woman, who often went fishing for crabs and other shellfish along the coast of Pinjen, noted the irony of the fact that the villagers had long fiercely defended their fishing zone from outsiders but now had given the mining company leeway to destroy the area (Hélène Phoea Goa, July 2001, Pinjen).

Those who supported the refinery's construction on Pinjen, however, were less concerned. While cautious, they believed that some ecological sacrifices would be necessary for the community's greater good, and that one must adapt to one's times. They were convinced that the mining project would provide benefits that would more than compensate for any decline in the fisheries resources. Bernard Tchaounyane, the leader of the pro-refinery group at Pinjen, admitted that mining projects always entailed negative ecological aspects; he claimed that his main worry was the environment and that it would be necessary to be very careful. Nonetheless, he insisted that 'we have to go that way,' (July 2001, Pinjen). Meanwhile, supporters of the refinery's local construction expressed less anxiety about ecological consequences than did their opponents. Bernard was convinced that if the refinery were constructed at Pinjen, the situation would not be nearly as dire as the co-op's flimsy arguments would have suggested. Many supporters of the refinery's construction on local lands mentioned that the area had already been polluted by other economic activities practiced by their fellow villagers, especially cattle farming. Moreover, they believed that natural areas could easily regenerate.

Lesser Chief François Tchaounyane believed that people who cried 'pollution' were actually out to sabotage the mining project (October 2001, Pinjen). His brother's partner, a 32-year-old woman named Maggie Leack, did not feel that mining activities presented a genuine threat to local marine resources. She believed that people's apparent interest in the environment was spurious since it surfaced only when money was involved.

We Kanak, we are too attracted by money. As soon as there is an economic benefit, when it's a question of money, we'll search for a little... We'll talk about the environment, we'll talk about the fish. (August 2001, Oundjo)

Like Maggie, Falconbridge/SMSP representatives privately vented cynicism about local people's abilities to assess environmental risk and the real reasons behind residents' expressions of concern. However, the mining company's public response to villagers' anxieties was to try to reassure local people. At first, their official statements reflected a putative desire for no negative environmental impacts whatsoever from the project. By 2000, however, Falconbridge's representatives had nuanced their discourse, repeatedly insisting that in any instance of industrial development, 'zero risk is impossible.' Nonetheless, in November 2000, Falconbridge's Director of Environment assured the Mining Committee, composed of administrative officials, elected representatives, and local residents, that the company's goal was to design their antipollution dams so as to approach '100% efficiency'. In a similar vein, that same year the official answer to local residents' complaints that the rivers had become muddier since the start of the prospecting activities was to insist that the real cause of this pollution was the record levels of rain witnessed in 1998 and 1999.

Whether or not villagers chose to believe such claims and promises depended on their expectations of other benefits and costs from the mining activity and the degree to which they felt that the project would increase, or decrease, their economic autonomy and control over land. Bernard Tchaounyane stated that the mining company's work on the massif compared very favourably to other, more polluting, mining activity that he had observed in the past. To him, this change vindicated Kanak people's desire to see mining projects on their lands, a radical departure from past attitudes when Kanak had been excluded from the mining sector.

Now, with the regulations that are in place, that has changed lots of things. So maybe that's why it's more the Kanak who are demanding it. We Kanak, we had talked about resource access; now it's the case, there has been the exchange between the two massifs, so for us it's something positive. (July 2001, Pinjen)

This change in attitude may indeed have resulted, at least in part, from observations of improvements in environmental standards followed by mining companies. It is likely, however, that Bernard's last sentence reveals a more fundamental reason behind his interest in this project: the fact that, unlike past mining activity which had removed resources from their land against their will and generated wealth in which the Kanak did not share, the Koniambo Project's major goal was to benefit the people of the Northern Province, giving them 'resource access'. In other words, his sense that the project would increase his, and other Kanak people's, control over these resources made him inclined to place his trust in Falconbridge.

Bernard and other members of customary landowner clans who had received demonstrations of respect from Falconbridge through customary exchange ceremonies also tended to feel that, in being given a voice, they had been granted a degree of power over the mining activity. They were therefore more inclined to feel that the mining company would respect their decisions and concerns. Others, however, expressed a sense of powerlessness. They wished to be able to monitor and control the mining activities, but despaired of being granted such authority. For them, the fact that Falconbridge was a multinational company was a further reason not to trust it. Convinced that despite the company's promises, they would be no different from other, nearby projects which had caused substantial environmental damage, these people pointed out that Falconbridge had no long-term commitment to the area. Unlike the supporters of the refinery's construction at Pinjen, these villagers did not occupy a social position that caused them to be recognised by the mining company as figures of authority. Instead, they stood to lose control over their land and resources to a large, powerful, multinational mining company from whom they felt alienated and whom, therefore, they chose not to trust.

Cultural heritage

Many residents viewed the heritage contained within Oundjo's fishing zone and on clans' customary lands as important not only for economic reasons. For the Kanak, certain places have, in addition to their pragmatic worth, an important value as the foundation of cultural identity. Customary relationships to the land constitute one of the defining characteristics of a contemporary pan-Kanak identity that is being formulated (see Horowitz forthcoming), partly as a rejection of Western cultural and economic values (Roux 1974: 41), and in ways similar to trends found elsewhere around the world (see, for example, Conklin and Graham 1995; Morris-Suzuki 1998; Warren 1998). In New Caledonia, many local people no longer possess the detailed knowledge of clan histories and taboo places that their elders had held, nor, after over 150 years of missionary activity, do they fully adhere to their predecessors' spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, their notion of a special relationship to the land – to both domesticated and uncultivated, uninhabited spaces – gives them a sense of personal and Kanak identity.

Many of the nationalist identities that are being forged throughout Oceania are based on similar statements about the importance of the customary relationship to land (see, for example, Rumsey 2001: 38). However, such claims in New Caledonia take on a particular valence in the context of the desire for sovereignty. As in Australia as described by Francesca Merlan, the discourse of

connection to land is both 'cultural and profoundly political' (1998: 164). The growing need to reaffirm connections to land and to establish a sense of rootedness in the soil partially constitutes a response to the land spoliation of the colonial period and the desire of a dispossessed people to reassert their rights (Naepels 1998: 237). This exemplifies what Donald Moore, using 'a Gramscian metaphor for environmental resources' (1996: 126) – an emphasis on the interrelationships among power, history, culture, and ecology – terms 'the simultaneity of symbolic and material struggles over territory' (1998b: 347).

Certain sites, markers of clan history, serve important psychological and strategical purposes as both mnemonics and proof of clans' relationships to the land. The significance of such places was brought into relief by the advent of the Koniambo Project. The cultural meanings of particular natural features, key sources of identity, were threatened by the changes to the landscape that the mining project would inevitably entail.

At Ouélisse, the 50-year-old head of the Economic Development Committee of the Council of Elders recounted that he had initially been in favour of the dam's construction at Wapan, in view of the economic benefits that it would provide for the village. However, he later realized that this reaction had been superficial, and that there were 'deeper' reasons to refuse the dam, based on Kanak people's desires to maintain their cultural heritage, of which they had lost much due to colonisation and acculturation. He explained that the late Lesser Chief, Mepone Ouédoy, had 'culturally defended' the area, which was the home of their ancestors and belonged to the villagers by birthright (Georges Bouigou Goa-Bealo, November 2001, Ouélisse).

Similarly, Oundjo villagers sometimes evoked the importance of their cultural heritage as a reason to oppose the refinery's construction on Pinjen. Some spoke of the importance to the Kanak of their lands of origin, the only place where they were sure of finding a place to live and garden, and where they could truly feel at home. Others spoke of the negative psychological effects they expected from seeing their ancestral residences bulldozed if the refinery were built there. Many recollected their efforts to reclaim the lands in the 1980s. A 45-year-old woman recalled the emotional impact of a moment during this period when, in digging the soil to build a hut on the land, people had discovered human bones. 'That's when I knew that our ancestors were there. [...] I truly saw that it belongs to our ancestors,' (Henriette Cae Diela, July 2001, Oundjo).

For others, memories of the land claim struggle imbued the peninsula with a particular political significance. One 38-year-old man noted the irony of the fact that if the villagers rented the peninsula to Falconbridge/SMSP they would no longer be at home on the land they had striven so hard to reclaim: 'We will have done just the opposite of what we fought to obtain.' He pointed out that without the physical evidence of the sites of former habitations, others could deny the validity of Kanak land claims: 'I often hear people say that "the Kanak claim all that, but it doesn't show that they are the ones who did all that,"' (André Pwahmo Diela, August 2001, Oundjo).^{viii}

Several people feared that a loss of the particular features of their clan's lands, which commemorated their history, would entail a sense of disorientation. One man worried that 'if we accept any old thing, I am no longer me. I won't have my reference points any more. [...] Where will I have my identity?' He also spoke of the strength that he acquired from visiting sites that commemorated his clan's history. For him, this connection was a defining characteristic of the pan-Kanak culture: 'Our own identity, that cultural identity, it's what we have with nature,' (X, August 2001, Oundjo). Decrying the upheaval caused by the inevitable presence of large-scale industrial projects, which were radically altering both nature and local lifestyles, he insisted that people needed to maintain important sites as reference points in order to be able to assimilate all the new elements in their surroundings.

Some of the supporters of the refinery's construction on Pinjen agreed that it would be painful to see the bulldozers destroy the landscape and its features such as the resident animals and the marks left by their ancestors, such as yam terraces. However, they insisted that such sacrifices were counterbalanced by the economic gain that the project represented. One woman declared,

We're going to lose somehow a little bit of the heritage of our elders before, but it will be for our children later on. If we have to make sacrifices for our children, I think we have to go for it. (Maggie Troyko Leack, August 2001, Oundjo)

The secretary-general of the Voh Town Hall, a 30-year-old man from Ouélisse, expressed a similar sentiment but qualified people's attachment to certain places as stemming from ignorance: 'I think that people haven't quite grasped economic development,' (Joël Boatate, June 2001, Voh).

Spirits and taboo places

In addition to their cultural importance as evidence of clan histories and identities, taboo places are respected for the dangers they represent. Disrespect of a taboo can result in illness, accidents, or natural disasters which often affect not the individual concerned but another family member or even his entire group of relatives (see Salomon 2000: 98-102). Mountain tops are also considered to be the domain of ancestral spirits. In the Voh-Koné area many Kanak, both young and old, unequivocally demonstrated anxiety regarding taboo places and associated ancestors. Yet again, however, whether or not individuals expressed concern about taboo sites and spiritual beings depended on their beliefs as to whether or not the mining project would increase or decrease their control over the land.

Dangerous?

These sites were believed to be gradually becoming less dangerous, due to an increase in the numbers of automobiles, airplanes, and other noisy machinery that disturbed the ancestors' previously peaceful surroundings, causing them to seek refuge in places ever farther from human habitation. People also often mentioned the loss of forest cover from bush fires and cattle ranching as another factor contributing to the spirits' departure. Christianity was another force that was gradually eliminating dangers from spirits based at taboo sites. For the time being, however, these areas still possessed a mysterious yet perceptible force.^{ix} Moreover, even if such places were no longer to be feared *per se*, they must still be respected out of consideration for the clans that owned them. Also, in many cases, respect for taboo places reflected less a fear of punishment from spirits than a desire to maintain a sense of cultural identity. One man from Témala in his mid-40s, who had become the head of a small enterprise, explained his interpretation of the meaning of taboo sites.

If we stop believing in all that there, well it's all over, eh? No use saying 'I'm a Kanak.' That's sort of the characteristic of the Kanak. It was believing in all that. (Auguste Fouagne, June 2000, Nouméa)

Evocation of the existence of such places was occasionally used to support arguments against the Koniambo Project, but did not necessarily involve opposition to mining activity. Rather, it most often constituted a reason to be very careful to avoid certain precise areas, small in size, where spirits resided or where ancestors had forbidden entry. It was also a factor evoked retrospectively to explain mysterious misfortune.

At the same time, knowledge concerning these sites became a political stake during Falconbridge's baseline studies. Part of my research for the 'Landscape Heritage' study included locating, photographing, and mapping as many taboo sites as possible. Although the precise location of such places is often kept secret by a select few, and I was later told that I had been the first person of European origin to visit the sites, I met with almost no resistance from those whom I approached. On the contrary, they expressed approval of Falconbridge's intentions to avoid the dangers involved in destroying such places. However, the late CEO of SMSP, himself a Kanak, believed that another reason was involved in people's willingness to reveal their taboo sites. According to him, self-proclaimed customary authorities hoped to manoeuvre themselves into a position of 'privileged representatives' in order to obtain a 'parcel of power' by presenting themselves as the

possessors of these sites. Other community members' recognition of the sites as taboo would allow the knowledgeable individuals to claim the position of 'landowners' and thus to rise in status (Raphaël Pidjot, March 2000, Nouméa). Indeed, various people, some of whom had chosen at the time not to provide me with information, later told me that the map was 'all wrong'. They maintained that their rivals had invented some of the taboo sites indicated on the map and neglected to mention others. Thus, in the specific social and political contexts of various communities around the massif, the placements of taboo sites and their associated spirits were evoked or denied by different individuals to support their particular arguments.

Pinjen

The existence of taboo places, the former habitations of ancestors, was a source of worry for those who opposed the refinery's construction on Pinjen. The supporters of the refinery's construction on the peninsula agreed that the ancestral spirits were still powerful at certain places. However, they were convinced that few such places existed on the peninsula and that the necessary steps had been taken to ensure that those sites would not be destroyed.

One woman feared that in the disagreement over Pinjen, each side would call upon its ancestral spirits for support by visiting the cemetery and speaking to recently-departed family members. A born-again Christian who had personally rejected such acts of sorcery, she worried that this conflict would degenerate into a war of 'spirits vs. spirits,' (Alice Kaleine Kahmene, October 2001, Oundjo).^x Her sister-in-law, also a born-again Christian and member of the group known as Children of God, was certain that the refinery would never be built on Pinjen. She and other members of her religious sub-community had experienced visions that demonstrated that the customary landowner clans' spirits were creating conflicts amongst the clan members and thus preventing the project from going ahead. Seeing this, God had decided that the clans would first have to be reconciled before the project could proceed. In contrast, at Vwavuto, where her clan had customary land rights, the families concerned had quickly come to an agreement; this was a sign that God wanted the refinery to be built there.

Vwavuto

However, this informant later had visions about Vwavuto. In November 2001, God contacted her to warn that the spirits of Mormons (who, she explained, wore long robes and covered their heads with a cap that revealed only their eyes; she had seen them in old movies) were present at a site on Vwavuto. These spirits, whom she suspected might be working with people who still called upon their invisible elders and worshipped idols, wanted to block the refinery's construction. Thanking God for this sign, she walked to the site and prayed energetically, at which point God burned the spirits into oblivion (Rose Roda Kahmene, November 2001, Oundjo).

Other than this particular individual, few of the Oundjo residents with whom I spoke were concerned about the dangers from spirits at Vwavuto, Mormon or otherwise. The adjacent area of Traa was known to be the residence of *mwaxheny*, mischievous dwarves who were the Gwa-Cidopwan's totem. However, the president of the Council of Elders, who preferred to see the refinery constructed there, assured me that Vwavuto itself was free from these beings and that to his knowledge there were no taboo places there (Henri Cip Kahmene, November 2001, Oundjo). Dipiba Fouange, strongly in favour of the refinery's construction at Vwavuto, laughed when I asked whether such dangers were important (October 2001, Nouméa). In contrast, Tone Goa, whom Dipiba excluded from negotiations and who consequently opposed construction at this site, affirmed that it could be hazardous to build the refinery there because of the *mwaxheny*, and because knowledge of the location of taboo areas had not been passed on by the elders (September 2001, Oundjo). Thus, people's evocations of dangers from non-human creatures or spirits on the peninsula correlated with their opposition to the refinery's construction at the site, which in turn reflected concerns about losing their rights over the land.

Wapan

Although many people at Oundjo worried about possible punishments from spirits if the proper customary procedures were not followed, I rarely heard anyone evoke this concern as a main reason to oppose either work on the massif or the refinery's construction. At Ouélisse, in contrast, the danger of disturbing the ancestors was one of the primary arguments used in refusing a dam at Wapan. The man who represented the villagers in discussions with Falconbridge/SMSF explained that the area contained ancestral burial grounds as well as taboo sites marked by trees or stones. Members of the landowner clans were the only people who would have been able to cure illnesses contracted from accidentally behaving disrespectfully in a taboo place, but they had lost the relevant knowledge. Moreover, the water that would flood the ancient cemeteries would unearth the ancestors' spirits, who would then head directly for their descendants to punish them for having disturbed their rest. My informant, as well as several members of the chiefly Ouédoy family, was certain that such an event would entail the disappearance of the landowner clans. Thus in September 2000, after a series of debates in which the members of other families were allowed to express their opinions, the Council of Elders accepted the customary landowner clans' decision and sent a letter of refusal to the mining company.

All the villagers felt obliged to respect the landowner clans' decision, but not all agreed that a categorical refusal was necessary. Émile Tein-Boanou, the president of Ouélisse's Council of Elders, stated that during the intravillage debates, he had argued that there were rituals that could be performed in order to displace the taboo sites. Moreover, he pointed out that the villagers were all Christians, and their religion taught that such beliefs and practices concerning ancestral spirits were 'the works of Satan.' In addition, modern science had proven that humans themselves were the ones who created strange phenomena, through their own beliefs. Compromises would be necessary, both on the part of the villagers and the mining company; however, he felt that the dam project had much to offer in terms of economic development, and that it would be 'more beneficial than those things [i.e. the preservation of taboo sites],' (November 2001, Ouélisse).

It is no coincidence that Émile's parents were from the nearby village of Ouengo, where he was raised, and where – rather than at Ouélisse or Wapan – he had land rights. As another community member maintained, the 'further' that families were from the Lesser Chief (that is, the more recent their arrival at the village), the greater their tendency to support the dam's construction (Georges Bouigou Goa-Bealo, November 2001, Ouélisse). Thus, as at Oundjo, individuals' actions and discourses relating to ancestral punishments linked to the mining activity depended directly on their expectations of the project's implications for their own control over the land. In contrast to the customary landowner clans, those with no land rights to lose at Wapan stood to gain from the increased water supplies and employment possibilities offered by the dam; one might even speculate that they were not adverse to seeing other community members lose their land and the high status associated with land ownership, which would imply a relative rise in status for themselves.

The massif

Not only taboo places but also mountain tops were known to be frequented by spirits. Many people from the villages surrounding the massif reported that mysterious beings, often in the form of silent old men, had been seen by workers on the mountains. These beings resembled relatives who had passed away, and thus were assumed to be ancestors. Reactions to these apparitions were varied; people who trusted Falconbridge to provide employment opportunities and to cause as little ecological damage as possible – those who also supported the refinery's construction on Pinjen – were prone not to worry about the spirits' emergence. Others, more mistrustful of Falconbridge's promises, believed that the sightings of the spirits demonstrated that people had entered places they should have avoided. The ancestors were thought to express themselves in other ways as well. Two years in a row after the beginning of exploratory activities on the Koniambo massif, the Voh-Koné area experienced record levels of precipitation. One senior member of a customary landowner clan wondered whether the excessive rains were due to ancestors' annoyance (Kowi Poangone, February 2000, Tiéta). Others were convinced that, indeed, the weather was a warning.

The head of a customary landowner clan near Voh pointed out that his clan's totems, *mwaxheny* (mischievous dwarves) and *xhwaala* (thunder), could control the weather. Angry that the mining company had not consulted the customary landowner clans at every step, they had been demonstrating their discontent (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, October 2001, Tiéta).

These spirits were dangerous because, if angered or bewildered by unfamiliar activity, they could cause workers on the massif to become ill or have accidents.^{xi} As described by Michael Taussig (1980) and June Nash (1979) in their respective studies of Bolivian miners, workers involved in dangerous resource-exploitation often try to prevent disaster by communicating with spiritual beings. As the only people who could transmit information directly to their ancestors, customary landowners of the massif were able to claim a position as the only group that could ensure the workers' safety. These clans justified their prerogative to approve or reject the mining project by explaining that the resident ancestral spirits needed to be properly informed of the activities that would occur on the mountain tops. The mayor of Koné, a member of a clan from the Paici/Cèmuki Customary Region that claimed rights to the massif, explained the situation. 'As long as it's the clan itself that gives permission, the spirits follow automatically. And that doesn't follow simply from the spoken word, it's with the ceremony that must be done,' (Joseph Goromido, June 2001, Koné).

The ceremony to which he referred had occurred in 1999, when the customary landowner clans realized that the mining company's prospecting activities were disturbing the spirits and causing accidents. They needed to apologize to their ancestors and to explain what was happening on the massif, in order to ensure the workers' safety. The ceremony involved placing packages of cloth and tobacco in a hole in the ground, pronouncing speeches to the ancestors, and then planting columnar pines or kauri trees in the hole. This was performed at several sites.

However, no similar ceremony was performed by the customary landowners of the northern end of the massif: the Xuti, Xutapet and Gwa-Cidopwan clans. This was an important oversight because each customary area had its own set of ancestral spirits who needed to be addressed separately. As one of the participants in the ceremony explained, 'The customary ceremony that we did has no value for their place,' (Raymond Hauli Diela, February 2000, Oundjo). Several members of customary landowner clans from the Koné region were concerned that this negligence might lead to misfortune. One member of a clan from the southern end of the massif suggested that the fact that the ceremony of addressing the ancestors had not yet been performed at Voh might explain the fact that, according to him, there had been accidents in that area as well as river siltation from soil erosion.

Jacob Couthy, the person from the Voh region to whom the demands for a similar ceremony had reportedly been addressed, agreed that the current mineral exploration was upsetting to the ancestors who expressed themselves through signs such as small footprints. However, he denied that anyone had approached him with a request to speak to the ancestors; nor, according to him, would it be necessary as a ceremony had already been performed with the mining company at the Voh stadium two years previously. Jacob was strongly in favour of the mining project, for whom he worked on a contractual basis and which would provide employment to the members of his association for local unemployed people. His lack of anxiety concerning the need to communicate with the ancestors may have been due to his trust in Falconbridge/SMSP and his desire for the mining project's economic benefits. In contrast, one elderly Oundjo resident who was concerned about the mining activity's potential impacts claimed that after a series of minor industrial accidents, some workers had presented the customary landowner clans of the northern end of the massif with a ritual gesture in an attempt to appease the ancestral spirits. All three clans accepted the gesture, although my informant expressed his own reluctance to do so (X, September 2001, Oundjo). Concerned that the mining project would result in a loss of the area's marine resources, he resented the fact that his gesture would protect the miners while providing no benefits for his clan or the other members of his village.

In some ways, like the Papua New Guineans at Kurumbukare described by Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi, the villagers in the Voh-Koné area were '[c]aught between their desires for wealth and

their fear of the ancestors,' and thus strove 'to bring the ancestors into agreement with their mundane goals,' (1997: 650). However, the ceremonies that took place also made clear that the two objectives, economic development and respect of the ancestors, were perfectly compatible – as long as the correct protocol was followed by both the appropriate local customary authorities and the mining company. This action was thus not only an attempt to prevent potential accidents but also a means for the local customary landowner clans to affirm their authority over the massif (see Jacka 2001 for a similar example from the Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea). The ceremony was carried out in private, in the presence of a restricted set of individuals, and without informing the mining company. Thus, it was performed as a statement to other community members, and quite probably also as a means of restoring or bolstering their own confidence through a reaffirmation of their influence with the spirits. One participant, the head of a customary landowner clan at Tiéta, described what he had said to the ancestors. While reassuring them that Falconbridge had ritually asked permission to operate on the mountains, he also reminded the spirits to punish any future mining activity that might occur without authorisation from the customary landowner clans: 'I said that, "I'm going to do 'custom' to protect our young people and to let the others work who have already... but those who go above our heads, who will go without telling us, you will supervise all that,"' (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, May 2000, Tiéta). Indeed, some people later interpreted a tragic helicopter crash precisely as punishment from the ancestors for disrespectful behaviour.

Interpretations of a helicopter crash

In November 2000, Raphaël Pidjot, the Kanak CEO of SMSP, perished along with five other mining company employees and the pilot. Just like the dangers of taboo places and the apparitions of spirits, this event was interpreted differently by individuals with different concerns and interests.

Among those who supported the refinery's construction at Pinjen, some suspected that the crash was due to sabotage by right-wing elements who wanted to destroy a highly successful Kanak individual and to undermine a mining project that would benefit the Kanak people. However, like illness (Salomon 2000), misfortune is often believed to be caused by ancestors' anger or by sorcery. Thus, some viewed the event as a punishment from the spirits for disrespect, individual greed, and/or planned ecological degradation, or else the result of jealousy.

Many attributed the crash to Raphaël's ambition and pride, and speculated that he may have failed to think of his customary duties and forgotten to show respect to his relatives. Others blamed the mining company; the head of a customary landowner clan at Tiéta was convinced that the accident had been the ancestors' way of punishing Falconbridge/SMSP for neglecting to consult his clan at every step (Félix Yeiwene Foawy, October 2001, Tiéta).

A young woman who was in favour of the refinery's construction on Pinjen agreed that Raphaël may have been punished by ancestral spirits for disrespect of customary paths or for political or financial intrigue. However, she thought it more likely that people had used sorcery to cause the accident because they were jealous of Raphaël or of the people in the region where the project would take place (Maggie Troyko Leack, August 2001, Oundjo).

Others conjectured that the helicopter crash might indeed have been provoked by sorcery, due not to envy but to concern about the maintenance of natural resources. In contrast, one woman felt that the crash might have resulted directly from ancestral action, without human intervention: 'The elders from before, the elders who are already dead, they don't want you to destroy the land,' (Alice Kaleine Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo). A member of the religious sub-group known as Children of God, she subsequently expressed the opinion that God, rather than the spirits, was responsible: 'He doesn't want us to destroy His creation.' The crash had been a warning to Falconbridge/SMSP, and by extension to all those who placed individual profit above the long-term well-being of the community. However, this message had gone unheeded: 'He's speaking to those bigwigs, Pidjot and company. [...] But they don't realise, or else they don't understand; all they think about is money,' (Alice Kaleine Kahmene, July 2001, Oundjo).

Conclusions: where's the truth?

It might appear from the evidence presented in this paper that villagers in the Voh-Koné area are pretending to worry about ecosystems or spirits when all they really care about is social status. However, I believe that the fact that social positions determine actions and statements, or that individuals invoke different, even contrasting, arguments in different situations does not imply that people are being dishonest about their beliefs. Rather, in the contemporary context, there is a multiplicity of ideas in which to believe and with which to formulate an identity, and most Kanak at least partially accept all of these points of view. As Gilbert Lewis argues, '[b]elief is not a matter of all-or-none commitment. Attitudes and feelings shift according to context, time and circumstance,' (1995: 178). Similarly, Sherry Ortner explains that 'cultural and psychological survival may require' a 'fragmented and shifting self' (1995: 187).

As far as I could determine, all the villagers with whom I spoke did in fact worry about their natural resources and the anger of their ancestral spirits, at the same time that they accepted, or even embraced, what they saw as the inevitable advance of economic development. Amidst the confusing array of influences and options, the need for re-establishing control of their ancestral lands is the one constant certainty. Thus, the degree to which individuals are concerned about the costs of industrial expansion, or interested in its benefits, depends on how much they believe they will gain from or be harmed by the mining project, not primarily in a directly economic sense but rather in terms of dignity and authority over land. Therefore – and, in my view, unconsciously – they choose, among the range of beliefs available to them, the arguments that will best support their need to become masters, not strangers, in their own homes.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ My sincere gratitude goes to all those at Oundjo, Ouélisse and the other villages of the Voh-Koné area who gave so generously of their time and warmth, especially my hosts Henri and Antoinette Kahmene. I would also like to thank Alban Bensa, Jimmy Weiner, Jean Guiart, Glenn Banks, and Adrian Muckle for their stimulating comments on fieldwork results and theoretical analysis. Special thanks also to Clive Hilliker for his patient technical assistance and artistic advice. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, of course, exclusively my own responsibility.
- ⁱⁱ This and all subsequent translations from the French are my own.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Such activities include, for example, mining, logging, and industrial fishing. There are, of course, other forms of development that involve the alienation of large areas of land or sea, such as dams, nuclear testing, infrastructure construction, urban expansion, and even, in some cases, national parks.
- ^{iv} As an example of this, my host family, upon returning from a fund-raising fair late one evening, declared that they were very hungry because they had not eaten anything there. Although they could have afforded the food that was for sale, they had been in the company of relatives who could not; unlike people of European origin, they explained, they could not eat something in front of a friend or relative who did not have the ability to do the same.
- ^v Religion provides the only escape from the social constraints surrounding material wealth, first by providing an excuse not to participate in customary exchange ceremonies and secondly by relieving people of their fear of sorcery. At Oundjo, the largest houses and newest cars were possessed by members of the highly religious 'Children of God' group, who lived on the outskirts of the village and only rarely participated in customary ceremonies. Elsa Faugère (2000: 59-60) describes the 'weapon against [the financial obligations of] custom' provided by conversion to Pentecostalism on Maré.
- ^{vi} See Dan Jorgensen (1997) for a similar example, from Papua New Guinea, of the invocation of myth to assert land rights and to deny those of others, in the context of a mining project.
- ^{vii} In contrast to villagers' beliefs, Falconbridge maintained that it would not pay royalties, or give preference in employment, to customary landowner clans.
- ^{viii} See Edvard Hviding and Tim Bayliss-Smith (2000: 242) for a discussion of similar concerns in Marovo, Solomon Islands.
- ^{ix} See Christina Toren (1995: 171) for a discussion of similar beliefs in Fiji.
- ^x Christine Salomon (2000: 80) describes myths recounting land conflicts among totemic spirits in the A'jië language area.
- ^{xi} In Melanesia, most events are believed to be caused by the agency of individual actors, whether human or spiritual, and thus are rarely considered to be true accidents. See Pamela Strathern and Andrew Stewart (2000) for a discussion of this belief in the Highlands of New Guinea.