

CLOSING THE FRONTIER, OPENING  
DOORS: LOCAL CASH CROP  
PRODUCTION, LARGE-SCALE RESOURCE  
EXTRACTION, AND SHIFTING RESOURCE  
FRONTIERS IN POMIO,  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

ABSTRACT

In this article I examine a recent communal cocoa planting project in a Wide Bay Mengen community in East Pomio, Papua New Guinea in relation to histories of resource extraction. I discuss how the community members modeled the current planting of cocoa in accordance with earlier forms of agriculture, namely copra production and swidden horticulture. The cocoa planting project is linked to a longer history of labour and resource extraction in Pomio. I analyze the cycles of labour recruitment, logging, and oil palm expansion through the framework of the frontier, by which I mean a spatio-temporal process through which certain areas are portrayed as having abundant resources, which are made available for extraction. The cocoa planting project was a local response to these conditions and intended to be a source of income based on inalienated labour and local landholding and a spatial strategy of establishing points of access to other places, called 'doors' by the community members. My aim in this article is twofold. First, I argue that the frontier understood as a spatio-temporal process helps us to conceptualize cycles of resource extraction. Second, I show how people living in areas understood as frontiers form their own analyses and responses to the conditions under which their land, labour, and resources are made available to others.

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Keywords: cocoa, commodification, frontier, infrastructure, natural resources, oil palm, Papua New Guinea, place, territorialization

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine a communal cocoa planting project in a Wide Bay Mengen<sup>1</sup> village community in East Pomio (East New Britain, Papua New Guinea) in relation to local land use and commodity production in the area. The cocoa project began in 2018, when the village conservation association received a grant from the UNDP to formalize the village conservation area. The grant included a ‘livelihood component’ and men in the village decided it should be used to plant cocoa. Their intention was to revive the community’s copra plantation with cocoa. Up until the 1990s, copra had provided this community of swidden cultivators a reliable source of income, but due to falling prices, transport costs, and the dwindling of copra buying infrastructure, copra production in the community had virtually stopped. The men, and community members in general, hoped that the smallholding of cocoa, which is a more high-value crop than copra, would provide income and be a community project—as copra had been in the past. As I will show, the cocoa project was intended to be a source of income, a means of securing local forms of landholding, and a spatial strategy for establishing connections to other places, mainly transport and buying infrastructure of cash crops, which the local actives conceptualized as having ‘doors to go out of’ (Tok Pisin: *doa i goaut*).

The decline of local copra production, local conservation of forests, and the new cocoa project are all intertwined with each other and with logging and large-scale oil palm projects in the Pomio District. Pomio is the largest, but most sparsely populated, of the four districts of East New Britain Province. Historically, its inhabitants have been marginalized in relation to wider political and economic structures within the province and the country (see Rew

1999; Rohatynskyj 2001). Still in the 2000s, it was one the 20 most disadvantaged of Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) 85 districts measured in terms of land potential, agricultural pressure, access to services, income from agriculture, and child malnutrition (Allen 2009: 486). With large forests and mineral wealth, Pomio is also seen to have potential for further natural resource extraction.

Due to its perceived rich resources and its marginalized and remote position within the province and country, Pomio district can be characterized as a frontier (see Tammisto 2016; 2018: 3–7, 21–23). In recent literature, frontiers are understood either as areas that are not fully under state control (e.g. Geiger 2008: 88; Kituai 1998: 15, 128, 157; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013: 10; West 2016: 23) or more specifically as resource frontiers, which are imagined to have abundant resources that can be cheaply extracted and where state regulation and presence is, intentionally or not, weak (e.g. Bell 2015: 131; Davidov 2014: 41; Geiger 2008: 88, 97; Peluso and Lund 2011: 668, 671; McCarthy 2013: 183–184; Tsing 2005: 28–29). As put by John McCarthy (2013: 183), the frontier is a physical place in transformation, where population densities tend to be low and in-migration high, where organs of the central state are weak and where different actors compete to establish claims over resources (see also Geiger 2008: 88, 97). On the frontier, different actors do not only compete over the control of resources, but over what is defined as a resource in the first place, and how local environments, different forms of tenure, and practices are valued (McCarthy 2013: 184; Peluso and Lund 2011: 668; Stella 2007: 49, 52).

Building on these notions, I understand the frontier not only as place, but as a political-economic dynamic and a spatio-temporal process, or a ‘time window’, during which the

conditions that constitute a frontier exist in a given area (Tammisto 2020: 31), for example when certain resources are for certain actors ‘up for grabs’ (McCarthy 2013: 183) due to insecure tenure rights (Hall 2011: 839). Frontiers may ‘close’, ‘shift’, and ‘re-open’: when a particular resource is depleted in a given area, the frontier ‘closes’ (Li 2014: 2, 176, 180), and shifts, when certain actors move to new areas where frontier conditions are present or created (Gregory 1982: 119, 131). Finally, frontiers can ‘re-open’ when the conditions that closed it are reversed. Frontiers can thus be cyclical processes (Geiger 2008: 88). Frontier conditions do not last forever, and when they end, other dynamics set in.

Pomio and PNG have experienced such shifting frontiers: up until the 1950s Pomio was a labour frontier serving as a source of cheap plantation labour (Gregory 1982: 118). As described by Chris Gregory, the labour frontier shifted through colonial PNG: when people in one area started cultivating cash-crops and were unwilling to work on plantations, cheap labour had to be recruited elsewhere (Gregory 1982: 129–131). In Pomio, local cash-cropping of copra, which had closed the labour frontier in the 1960s, started to decline in the 1980s, with declining infrastructure and falling commodity prices (May 2001: 313–315, 317). Around this time, the PNG government began to emphasize natural resource extraction as a source of revenue (May 2001: 317, 321; Bell 2015: 137), while Malaysian logging companies looked for new forests to log (Filer 1998: 57, 60). Many local people hoped that logging would bring them income, infrastructure, and services. Thus Pomio (as many rural areas of PNG) became a resource frontier for Malaysian logging companies, a place where abundant resources were made available. Later, from 2003–2011, reinterpretation of PNG’s land legislation made land cheaply available for foreign

companies through long-term land leases (Filer 2012). As land and cheap labour were again readily available, the conditions under which plantations had exited PNG were reversed in Pomio and new oil palm plantations were established (Tammisto 2016). As income from local cash-cropping had declined dramatically, many Wide Bay Mengen sought wage labour on the new plantations (Tammisto 2019a).

Conservation emerged among the Wide Bay Mengen in the 1990s as a reaction to logging, when some Mengen and neighboring Sulka landowning groups wanted to protect their forests from logging (Tammisto 2018: 165–169). Elder women in the landowning groups feared logging might destroy socially important forests and places in them as well as hamper swidden horticulture (see Tammisto 2019b). Their younger, and often highly educated, relatives feared also that logging companies might cheat locals and that it would not bring lasting development. They also conceptualized the opposition to logging as ‘conservation’ and sought links with state agencies as well as national and international NGOs. (For a similar case elsewhere in PNG, see Barker 2016.) When the Wide Bay Mengen conservationists set up their conservation association, they were inspired by a copra cooperative their parents’ generation had set up in their village, which I will discuss below. From the beginning, local conservationists sought not only to protect their forests from logging, but also secure their customary tenure rights, find alternative forms of income, and improve the position of the local people as swidden horticulturalists and cash-croppers. They did so, in part, through territorializing strategies such as defining areas and what can be done within them, as well as communicating the borders and rules of the area to relevant authorities (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 387–388).

In this article I discuss the cocoa project in relation to the histories of commodity production that I examine through the framework of shifting frontier dynamics. I start by introducing the current cocoa project, and in the next section, I show how the cocoa project is based on earlier forms of agriculture, namely swidden horticulture and copra production. I discuss how the community began to produce copra, how they organized land holding, and how copra production set the terms for the current cocoa project. In the following section, I take a longer historical view starting from the early colonial era and discuss local cash cropping in relation to labour and resource extraction related to shifting frontier dynamics in Pomio up until the 1990s, and how local conservation emerged as a reaction to these. In the final section, I show how the conservation association initiated the cocoa project as a source of income based on local labour and land holding and as an alternative to large-scale oil palm development and alienated labour. Moreover, I discuss how those active in the project conceptualized it, like copra production in the past, as establishing 'doors', namely as points of access to other places and relationships.

In the concluding section I draw the discussion together and show that while those active in the cocoa project did not conceptualize the resource politics in Pomio in terms of the frontier, which is my analytic frame, they were keenly aware of the conditions under which their land, labour, and resources have, in various constellations, been commodified and made available for outside actors. With the cocoa project, and by establishing 'doors', they actively sought to change these conditions to their advantage and retain control of their own land and labour. My aim in this paper is twofold: first, to show the frontier understood as a process helps to understand long-term

dynamics of resource extraction in Pomio, and second, how local people actively engage with those dynamics.

## THE COCOA PROJECT

The cocoa project was initiated by middle-aged men of the Mengen speaking village community in Wide Bay. I use here the term 'community' as it was used by the inhabitants themselves to refer to their village (Tok Pisin: *komuniti*). In 2018 the locally established conservation association of the village received a grant from UNDP to formalize the nearby conservation area under PNG law. The grant included a 'livelihood component', namely funds intended to support the livelihood needs of the community members. The chairman of the of the association talked about this with two other middle-aged men, considered leaders<sup>2</sup> and elders in the community. All the three men thought that the community should plant cocoa. In an interview one of the men noted to me that he had for long thought that cocoa would be a good source of income and that he was happy when the grant offered a possibility for the community to establish cocoa plantings. After preliminary discussions among themselves, the men were confident that using the grant to plant cocoa would be supported and introduced the idea to the conservation association's committee, consisting of just under ten members, men and women alike. The female elder who had first opposed logging had died before the grant was received. Finally, the association's chairman and the committee introduced the idea to the community.

The community supported the idea and joined the project nearly unanimously. The Wide Bay Mengen are swidden cultivators, and tropical horticulture is the main livelihood activity, which is also socially and culturally central (see Tammisto 2018: 37–39). They



Photo 1: Young men working at the community's cocoa nursery. Photo by Tuomas Tammisto.

receive money income from smallholder cash-cropping, migrant labour, petty marketing of village produce, and from compensations during logging operations. Up until the 1990s, copra was the most important cash crop cultivated by community members and households of the community had their own coconut plantings. Many of these plantings were on a coconut plantation the community had established in the 1960s. The conservation association chairman had initially suggested the cocoa would be planted into the conservation area, on land allocated to livelihood activities, but one of the men noted the old copra plantation is located more conveniently near the coast. While the initial suggestion to plant cocoa was made by three men, others in the community, including women, did not just passively follow them, but actively agreed to the project.

In practice this meant that people who joined the project took part in clearing a site for the cocoa nursery, building it, nursing cocoa seedlings, filling plastic bags with earth to plant seedlings in, and taking care of the seedlings in the nursery. An important step was the budding of cocoa seedlings to clone pest-resistant and high-yield varieties of cocoa. The budded cocoa seedlings that grew large enough to be planted were divided equally among the people who had joined the project. Those who took part in the project<sup>3</sup>, also cleared the copra blocks they had access to and planted cocoa in them.

The conservation association chairman informed the Local Level Government (LLG) about the funding and the project. The LLG 'counter-funded' the project by providing plastic bags for the planting of cocoa seedlings. In the initial stages, the agricultural extension

officer of the LLG also provided training to the community members. To summarize, while the cocoa project received external funding and help, the idea and decision to plant cocoa came from the community members, who nursed and planted the cocoa trees.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the community from July to December 2019. During the time of my arrival into the community, the budding had been completed and people were preparing their 'blocks' to be planted with cocoa. By the time I left, most participants of the project had completed planting the cocoa seedlings.<sup>4</sup>

## LOCAL COPRA PRODUCTION AND COMMUNITY COOPERATION

During the 1960s the community, that is parents and grandparents of the current community members, planted coconut palms, started producing copra, established a copra cooperative, and bought the land area on which they had planted the palms. The earlier copra production was important for the current project in four ways. First, the community's copra plantation, which the co-operative bought, became the site of the cocoa project. Secondly, people regarded the co-operation during the copra production as exemplary and many noted they should work in the same way on the cocoa project. Thirdly, smallholder copra production brought income and helped to close the labour frontier. Finally, the demise of copra production in the 1990s was another factor in re-creating frontier conditions in Pomio. This paved the way for the coming of logging and plantation companies, while local conservation in turn was a reaction to these. In the following two sections, I will describe these connections in more detail.

As recounted to me by village elders, copra

production in the community began in the early 1960s, when government patrol officers encouraged people to plant coconut. Located on a plateau at about 300 m asl, the village area is not large enough for cash crop plantings and the environment is not suited for coconut palms. The village representative (Tok Pisin: *luluai*) told the patrol officer this, who then asked who owns land on the coast. The *luluai* replied that it belongs to a particular matrilineal clan and one of their members is the *luluai* of the neighboring village. As told by the *luluai*'s son, now in his 80s:

The *kiap* [patrol officer] was patrolling and he told [my father, the *luluai*] to plant coconut palms. And he replied: 'My village is too small and the land is not good either.' (...) The *kiap* looked down [toward the coast] and asked: 'Whose land is that?' My father said that one man is inside it. They went down to carry the *kiap*'s cargo and my father showed him the elder, whose land it was. (...) The *kiap* asked him [for land], [and he replied] 'They are my people, I'll just give them [a parcel of land].' (29.07.2019)

This *luluai* and his clan agreed to give a tract of land covered by primary forest on the coast to the community, as they were 'his people', namely people he and his clan had close relations to. He said, however, that once the community gets income from copra, they should compensate his younger clan members for the land.

After receiving the land, an area of about 20 hectares, the community members began to establish their copra plantation. Men cleared the area of primary forest by making food gardens for their families and then planted coconut palms in them. The gardens thus formed the basis for individual coconut plantings, or

'blocks'<sup>5</sup>. Much like swidden gardens, the blocks were in the name, or property, of the men who cleared them, which means their families and descendants would have access to them. This is in line with Mengen land tenure in general. The Mengen society is divided into several named matrilineal exogamous clans, all of which own their distinct territories based on the mythical emergence of the clan ancestress in the area and on first settlement (Panoff 1970; Tammisto 2018: 48). Due to clan exogamy, people have to marry members of other clans and hence families and villages consist always of people of several different clans (see also Scott 2007: 223).

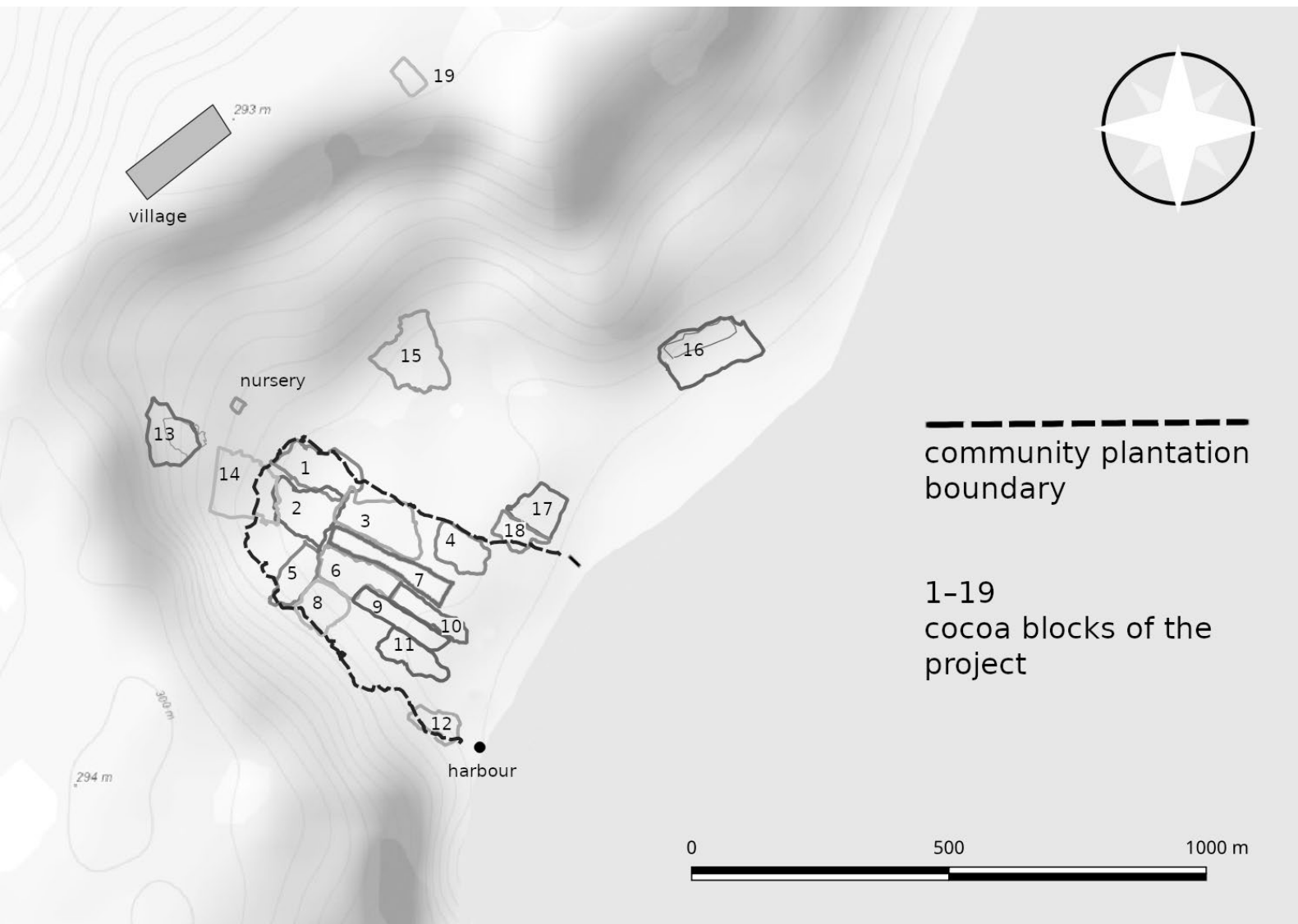
While a given clan owns a particular area of land, it is inhabited and cultivated by people belonging to several different clans, who in the course of their lives establish strong connections to the land. This is especially pronounced in swidden horticulture: people retain strong user-rights to the gardens they have cleared and these rights are passed on along multiple ties, often from parents to children and their spouses (Tammisto 2018: 49–53). Mengen land tenure thus follows two main principles: the communal ownership of land by the matrilineal clans and the use of land by the multi-clan communities that inhabit it. As most people live on and cultivate land that does not belong to their clan, land use can be characterized as reciprocal exchange (or alternatively sharing [see Tammisto 2018: 191–196]) of land between the landowning clans. Land use also resembles other inter-relations of the clans, not least marriage. (The Mengen system closely resembles other matrilineal land tenure systems of Austronesian societies of Island Melanesia, e.g. Scott 2007.)

In terms of land holding, the cocoa project is built on the previous copra project, which in turn follows the practices of Mengen swidden horticulture. For example, the blocks vary in size according to how big gardens the men initially

established for themselves were, the blocks are in size similar to family food gardens, and are passed on according to same principles (see also Panoff 1970; 1976; Tammisto 2018: 50–51). With the copra plantation, the community had reproduced key dynamics of Mengen land tenure based on the collective ownership of a land area (which in this case was owned by the community after receiving the area from the landowning clan) and the actual plantings, held by individuals and households. As researchers of infrastructure have noted, new infrastructure is rarely completely new, but is incrementally built on, and, so to say, grows from previous infrastructures (Appel, Anand and Gupta 2018: 12).

Cocoa tree and coconut palm plantings differ from swidden gardens in one important respect: a swidden garden is left to reforest for 5–20 years after one harvest and while the user-rights to it remain with the clearer, they can be re-negotiated, whereas tree crops 'fix' the use of land for a longer period. The division is not absolute: the clearer of a swidden garden retains strong user-rights to the garden area and fallowing gardens are still regarded as somebody's gardens. Conversely, block areas can be cleared, but the Wide Bay Mengen place great importance on work and the results of work. Planted trees are not only the result of work, but also signs of those who planted the trees and their presence on the land, and thus removing them is not a light matter (see Tammisto 2019b). Like gardening rights, also access to blocks can be re-negotiated as the user-rights are passed on.

When the coconut plantation was given to the community by the landowning clan, its leader asked the community to compensate his clan for the land area. This brings me to the second point, namely how the community members regarded cooperation during the



MAP 1:

Household blocks in the current cocoa project: the blocks range in size between 0.4–1.6 ha (on average 0.8 ha). The blocks are acquired much like gardening rights, and many tend blocks their fathers had cleared, while others have acquired them through clan-ties, for example by tending a block their mother’s brother cleared. The blocks outside the area acquired by the community are on land to which the clearers of the blocks had close connections. For example, blocks 15 and 18 are located on the land claimed by the clan, which provided the community with the land area. The holder of block 18 is a member of that clan, while block 15 was originally cleared by a clan member, who passed it on to his daughter, who in turn passed it to her daughter, the current blockholder. Map by Tuomas Tammisto.



copra production as an ideal and important predecessor to the cocoa project. A middle-aged woman described copra production to me as follows:

We would go and work together. If a man was heaping coconuts [to make copra], he would tell the *komiti* [village representative]. And the *komiti* would tell us during the Monday meeting [village meeting] that on this day we will go [and help the man], men will shell coconut and women will carry them to the drier. (06.08.2019)

A village elder, a former representative of the village, told me in an interview how the community co-operated in clearing the block area and planting the coconuts. For example, they appointed one man to oversee the copra project and appointed certain days on which the community would work on it. He noted that in less than a year, the small community had cleared a large area of primary forest (Mengen: *lom*). Moreover, he recounted this as an example to the people involved in the cocoa project and spoke about it with the association chairman.

Later, when the villagers already produced and sold copra, cooperation took new forms. Copra was produced by individual households, but people told me how they would come together on community workdays and help one household to gather coconuts, break, and scoop them to make copra. Moreover, the community was saving income from copra for the building of a church. By the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, a Sulka man, who had married into the community, suggested forming a cooperative society with a license to buy copra from locals and sell it on to companies. The community cooperative, established in 1971, bought copra not only from the community

members, but from other villages throughout East Pomio. With the profits from buying and selling copra, the cooperative reached two main aims of the community. First, around 1980, the community paid the clan, which had given them the land area on which they planted copra. Secondly, in the early 1980s, the community completed the village church, built from store-bought permanent materials. In addition, the community built copra driers and bought boats, which are important infrastructure in copra production.

The community paid for the land by giving the representatives of the landowning clan two round pieces of shell money (Mengen: *paik*; 'value'; Tok Pisin: *kaka*), at least two pigs and PGK2000–PGK3000 and a large heap of garden food<sup>6</sup>. The recipients were younger clan members of the *luluai*, who initially agreed to give the community land for planting coconut. The composition of the payment closely resembles Mengen ceremonial gifts, especially gifts given by the husband's maternal clan and cross-cousins to the bride's clan. The community used income from the copra cooperative not only for the money part of the prestation, but also to buy the shell valuables from other Mengen-speaking groups in Central-Inland Pomio. An official of the local level government was present at the prestation to witness it and one of the community members recorded it on a cassette.

Acquiring the land was not a commodified and fully alienated transaction, but was based on the existing relationship between the community and the landowning clan. Similarly, the payment given for the land included a substantial amount of money, but also local media of value, namely shell valuables, pigs, and garden food. It is interesting how the community members used part of the money they had earned to buy shell valuables from



Photo 2: Cocoa seedlings waiting for planting. Photo by Tuomas Tammisto.

the southern Mengen areas. In doing so, they converted income from commodity production into a local medium of value.

The exchange of land and the payment for it should not be understood either as a commodity transaction nor as a reciprocal gift. Rather, it encompasses features of both, and, most importantly, the ceremonial prestation is a Mengen way of finalizing an agreement. Along with the use of commodities, it is interesting that a state official was asked to witness the ceremony. By doing so, the parties involved, namely the community giving the prestation and the clan which had given the land, made the agreement visible to the state, even though the transaction was based on local conceptions of relatedness, local land use practices, and local forms of making agreements. In this way, the parties recognized the state as an important party on the one hand (see Lund 2011: 886), but

also made their authority and ways of making arrangements visible to the state (see Timmer 2010).

Local copra production has laid important groundwork for the cocoa project. As shown above, swidden horticulture and Mengen land use practices formed the basis of copra production, upon which the cocoa cultivation was modeled. The actual cultivation and production practices between these modes of farming vary, as swidden cultivation is shifting and tending of diverse crops, and coconut palms require little tending, whereas cocoa requires regular cleaning of blocks and pruning to maintain yields and prevent pests. Some women involved in the project also expressed concern over the work-intense nature of cocoa and how it might be at odds with garden work. In terms of land use and land holding practices, they share the same infrastructure, understood

literally as an underlying structure or template. In addition to this, the copra planting and cooperative formed an example and an ideal that the current community members strove for.

As noted in the beginning of this section, local copra production and cash-cropping in general was instrumental in closing the ‘labour frontier’ both in Pomio and elsewhere in PNG (Gregory 1982: 157). In short, this meant that as locals gained increasing income from cash-cropping, they were less willing to work as cheap labour on plantations. Cash cropping allowed them to take part in the commodity economy *and* use the commodity economy to strengthen local ‘gift economies’ (by converting commodities into gifts) and ultimately strengthen the social relations through which the local communities controlled their land (see Gregory 1982: 165; Strong 2020 [2006]: 125). In the next section I discuss these shifting frontier dynamics starting from the colonial period until the 1990s, when large-scale logging began in Pomio and community conservation emerged as a reaction to it.

## LOCAL CASH CROPPING AND SHIFTING RESOURCE FRONTIERS

Great Britain and Germany partitioned and colonized what later became PNG in 1884, and Australia continued the area’s colonization from 1914 until PNG’s independence in 1975. The colonizing powers were after natural resources and the labour of local men (Gregory 1982: 188). As Chris Gregory (1982: 118) notes, the locals had no need to sell their labour, so the need had to be created and their labour commodified. Gregory (1982: 119) uses the concept of the ‘labour frontier’ to describe the process through which Britain, Germany, and later Australia opened new areas up as supplies

of cheap labor, especially for plantations—often initially through the use of force (see also Kituai 1998). This was a long, drawn-out, and often violent process that started in the Island region of current PNG with forced overseas indentured labour (1863–1904), continued as semi-forced domestic indentured labour (1963–1950), semi-free or agreement labour (1951–1974), and finally free labour (1927–) (Gregory 1982: 118).

During the colonial era, the people of PNG were in various ways made to work on plantations, first through cheating and outright coercion during the ‘Pacific labour trade’ era when Melanesians were recruited as cheap labour for plantations on Queensland and Samoa, and later through the imposition of taxes payable only in government money (Gregory 1982: 119, 153). After people became more experienced with plantation labour and demanded more pay, when they shifted to the production of cash crops, or when the colonial government restricted the recruiting of labour in over-recruited areas, cheap labour had to be procured elsewhere (Gregory 1982: 118, 131, 146). Finally, when the last labour frontiers in the Highlands closed in the early 1970s, the plantation sector relying on cheap labour exited PNG (Gregory 1982: 131, 135).

The shifting labour frontier is well illustrated by Pomio District: New Britain Island was the first labour frontier to open and to close (Gregory 1982: 129). The labour frontier was opened in Pomio before the colonial era when labour recruiters raided the area in the 1870s and 1880s for labour for plantations on Queensland and Samoa (Laufer 1955: 33; Panoff 1969: 111). Later on, the German imperial administration, followed by the British and Australians, sought in various ways to mobilize locals into labour. This required various forms of coercion since locals often only took on labour when it suited them. (Dennis [1980]: 28; Firth 1976: 52,

54–56; Gründner 1985: 171). For example, until the 1950s Australia maintained cheap labour through criminal penalties for labourers ‘deserting’ their work or anyone harboring a deserter (Fitzpatrick 1980: 78–80). While Australia sought to preserve ‘traditional societies’ and even banned labour recruitment in some areas, labour laws initially sought to ensure that the locals remain workers rather than cash-croppers (Dennis [1980]: 232; Fitzpatrick 1980: 78–79, 83).

The labour frontier was upheld through these measures. The penal sanctions were lifted in the 1950s (Fitzpatrick 1980: 80) and, as Gregory (1982: 146, 155) notes, former labourers became smallholders and no longer signed up as workers, contributing to the closing of the labour frontier (see also Tammisto 2020: 28–30). The Sulka man, who came up with the idea of founding the community’s copra co-operative, told me that without the penal policies and the discouragement of local cash cropping people would not have worked on the plantations. Indeed, by the 1950s, the labour frontier in Pomio began to close. This is well illustrated by a patrol official, who in the mid-1950s noted how the Baining and Sulka of Pomio were ‘loath’ to work for long periods on plantations and left quickly, leading plantation owners to rely on labour from other areas (Hearne 1956). As I recounted in the previous section, the community started planting coconut trees in the 1960s and established the cooperative in the 1970s through which they were able to finance communal projects, especially the village church, and household needs.

Local production of cash crops diminished in Pomio and PNG with the decline of buying infrastructure in the 1980s and 1990s (Allen 2009: 296). At the time Pomio had no road link to larger centers, so copra ships visited the rural areas and bought produce from the locals.

However, in the mid-1990s they stopped and the smallholders had to transport their produce to buyers, increasing their costs. Large-scale logging began in Pomio, much like elsewhere in PNG, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when PNG became a resource frontier for foreign logging companies. Frontier conditions emerged as a combination of several processes: the state of PNG needed revenue with the decline of the plantation sector and the closing of the Panguna mine in Bougainville (Gregory 1982: 135–137; May 2001: 313–315, 317, 321); at the same time, infrastructure in rural areas was deteriorating and the income of many rural cash-croppers decreasing due to transport difficulties and declining prices of agricultural commodities. The state of PNG was thus eager to grant logging concessions (Bell 2015: 137), while many locals hoped to access infrastructure, income, and services in exchange for their forests (Leedom 1997: 44; May 2001: 321; Tammisto 2018: 4–7, 85–90). This opened PNG to foreign logging companies at a time when Malaysian logging companies were looking to move on to new territories because of the ban on logging on Sabah and Sarawak (Filer 1998: 57, 60).

In order to bring income, services, and infrastructure to the area, local politicians in the district initiated large-scale combined logging and agriculture projects in the early 2000s (Tammisto 2010; 2016). The plan was that foreign logging and oil palm companies would connect existing logging roads in Pomio to the national road network in exchange for logging concession and plantation land. In 2008, a new oil palm plantation was established by a Malaysian company in East Pomio on land leased from the customary owners (Tammisto 2016; see also Global Witness 2021: 8, 10–20). Under PNG legislation land under customary tenure cannot be alienated, and due to unsustainable logging in the 1990s the export

of raw logs was restricted. The reinterpretation of land lease legislation, however, re-opened the land and logging frontiers: between 2003–2011 up to 11 % of PNGs land area was leased under long-term agricultural leases, often to private companies (Filer 2011: 599). In Pomio the oil palm companies had then access to two prerequisites of the plantation mode of production: cheap land and labour (Dennis [1980]: 219), because with the diminishing returns from cash-cropping due to falling agricultural commodity prices, high transport costs, and, in the case of cocoa, blights, many inhabitants of Pomio needed the income from labour (Tammisto 2019a).

Local conservation, and consequently the cocoa project, in the Wide Bay Mengen community emerged in these shifting and changing frontier conditions. As noted above, one of the landowning groups of the community decided not to allow logging on its lands in the early 1990s for the fear that logging might destroy the forest, important places in them, hamper swidden horticulture, and the logging companies might cheat them. Young and educated members of the clan conceptualized this opposition as ‘conservation’, sought help from national and international NGOs, and sought to establish their land area as a legally recognized conservation area. Initially, this caused a land dispute between locals supporting logging (both within the community and in neighboring villages) and the clan group wanting to conserve the area they claimed as their clan land. The clan supporting conservation won the dispute. (Tammisto 2018: 165–166, 167) After a long and many-phased process the conservation area was finally officially formalized in 2019.

The conservation-minded clan and community members actively sought links with both national and international NGOs and

donors, and faded out contacts to them, when they thought they were no longer beneficial. Similarly, they sought to formalize and make visible the area, and the terms of its use as a community conservation area, to neighboring communities, state officials, company representatives, and others. These are key features of territorialization, as defined by Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 387, 388), namely the attempt by an actor to control people, phenomena, and relationships by asserting control over an area, prescribing activities within spatial boundaries, and communicating both the boundaries and restrictions. For territorial claims to be successful, they need to be recognized by a ‘relevant audience’ (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 389).

Under frontier conditions different actors not only struggle over the control of resources, but over how resources are defined and ultimately over how local environments and tenure practices are valued (McCarthy 2013: 183). Similarly, on the frontier old authorities are challenged, as Peluso and Lund (2011: 668) note, and tenure rights are often insecure (Hall 2011: 839). Through the community conservation project, the clan group opposing logging sought to secure its ownership of the area as well as local forms of valuing the forest and the places in it through territorial strategies (Tammisto 2019b). Later, in the early 2010s, the local conservationists cautioned people in their own and neighboring communities not to enter into long-term land lease agreements, thus trying to secure the customary land use rights of the local landowning groups (Tammisto 2018: 171). The cocoa project started in 2018, and was a continuation of this process, as I will show in the next section.

## OPENING DOORS: THE COCOA PROJECT AS A SPATIAL STRATEGY

Those active in the conservation association and other community members wanted to plant cocoa, because its price was substantially higher than that of copra. So much so that even when transported by the locals themselves on boats to Kokopo, East New Britain's provincial capital, it was profitable. While the higher value of cocoa was important, another important factor was that if local cash-cropping was once again profitable, people would not need to go work on plantations. Many Wide Bay Mengen, like other inhabitants of Pomio, had taken on wage labour on oil palm plantations after local cash cropping did not provide adequate income. The plantation was an ambiguous place for many Wide Bay Mengen. While income from plantation labour was important and especially for youths going to the plantation could be a way to distance oneself from the obligations in the village, most of my interlocutors who worked or had worked on the plantation in general disliked the alienated character of plantation labour, namely working under the control and schedules of others, and were oriented to returning to their home villages. (Tammisto 2019a). During my earlier fieldwork in Wide Bay in 2012, the former chairman of the conservation association noted that their intention was to create opportunities to earn income in the home villages so that people would not need to go sell their labour on plantations. This was done by his successor, who initiated the cocoa project and acquired funding for it.

One of the men, who had initially suggested planting cocoa, told me in an interview that cocoa was a good choice, because not only does it bring higher income than copra, it has advantages over other alternatives, such as oil palm. The man noted that cocoa is

environmentally better than oil palm, because it requires less fertilizers and pesticides and no landscape modifications, such as terracing (see also Chao 2018: 628). Moreover, unlike oil palm, the community members themselves can plant and cultivate it according to their own strength and need not to clear large areas of forest. Finally, cocoa is *politically* better—to use his expression—because the smallholding of cocoa does not require changes in land tenure, but land remains under customary title. (For comparison, see Yaneva-Toraman's (2020) work on how the Kairak speakers in East New Britain have turned to cocoa *and* allowed planting of oil palm in an attempt to secure their lands.) Other interlocutors also noted that cocoa is less damaging for the environment and soil than oil palm. As I noted above, the community planted its cocoa on land it had communally acquired and where individuals and households held individual tracts according to the Mengen landholding system. From the point of view of the community members, cultivating cocoa allowed them to control their own land and labour, as well as combine commodity production with swidden horticulture—just like copra production in the past.

The man who in the 1970s had initiated the copra cooperative told me in an interview that for the land-locked community, acquiring the plantation area on the shore was important, because it was their 'door to go out' (Tok Pisin: *doa i goaut*). As he told me:

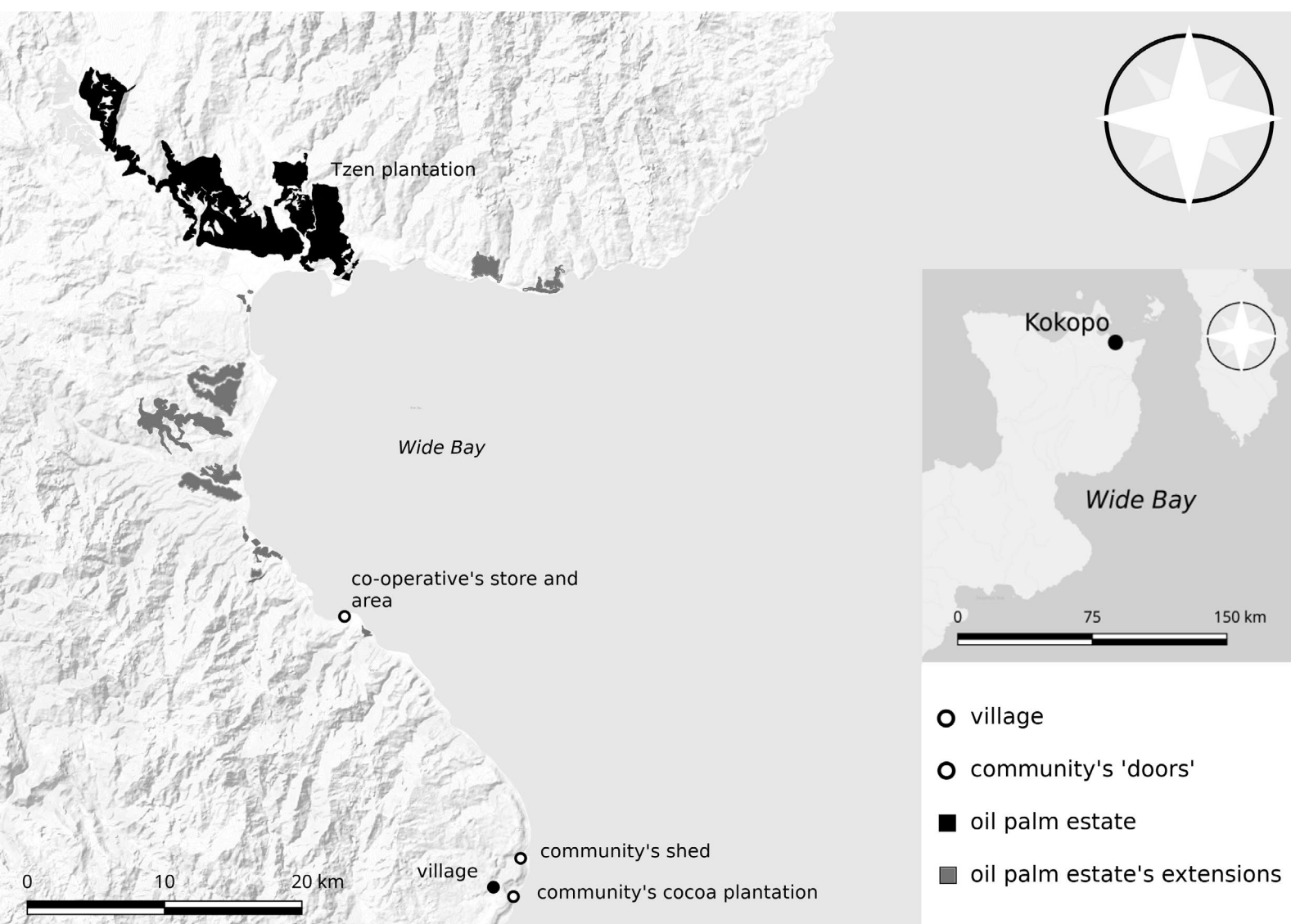
If they [the community members] had planted [coconuts] in the forest [inland], there would have been no access to the sea, especially if [other communities] blocked their harbors. So they needed to stay on good terms with the others, to have a door to go out to the sea. So there [on the community's plantation] and in [the

neighboring village], we paid to have doors to go out. (27.7.2019)

There was a natural harbor in the plantation area from which copra (or cocoa) could be loaded onto boats and transported to ships or to buying points. For this same reason, the community had in the 1970s acquired a small tract of land for a copra shed in a neighboring village located on the shore. The sandy river delta there was used by both villages as a harbor and place to keep boats, to which the reef shores of the plantation were not suited.

Taking up this idea of the 'door', the chairman of the conservation association was involved in a cooperative that operated on Kiep plantation, a former colonial-era copra

plantation some 30 km to the north from his home village. The plantation had a good natural harbor suitable for ships. There the cooperative had operated a buying point for copra and cocoa in the past. A local official had acquired the title of Kiep plantation from the previous titleholders and it was divided into cocoa blocks among the cooperative members. When a cocoa pest, the cocoa pod borer, devastated cocoa production in PNG, the official feared that the state could sell the title to someone else, who would develop the area. To prevent this, he allowed the oil palm company operating the Tzen plantation to establish a 137 ha 'mini-estate' on Kiep plantation (its area is 246 ha in total). He told me he was not fond of oil palm but saw it as the only option to secure the title<sup>7</sup>.



MAP 2: The community's 'doors' and oil palm expansion in Wide Bay. Map by Tuomas Tammisto.

The cooperative remained in Kiep operating a store and a portable sawmill and selling gasoline to boats. The chairman of the conservation association had initiated setting up the large store, because it provided a regular income for the cooperative in an area with only small trade stores, to which the cooperative store sold to wholesale. The store was also established deliberately to compete with the stores of the plantation company. The cooperative did not want the plantation company to establish a store in Kiep, like it had done on its main estate, because it would create a closed loop in which company workers buy from the company store and the company profits from the consumption of the local population in general. Finally, the store was intended also as a basis for infrastructure: ships that resupply the store could transport local cash crops on the way back and so the local producers would have access to regular, and cheaper, transport. During my fieldwork, the chairman and the cooperative were liaising with shipping companies in Kokopo to arrange for regular shipments. The colonial-era plantation, and especially the area of the cooperative and the store, could thus become an important hub, where locals could store their produce and access transport.

This is one of the spatial strategies used by those active in the cocoa project: they were keenly aware of the infrastructural situation in East Pomio and sought to improve it by thinking about their community plantation and the sheds for storing cash crops they acquired as ‘doors’ *in relation* to other important locations, such as the colonial-era plantation and the buying points in towns. As noted above, the villagers thought about copra production already in the 1960s in terms of transport and spatiality, especially of the ‘doors’ through which they could access other places. Both men, the elder and the chairman, used the Tok Pisin word for ‘door’

(*doa*) as a metaphor for a point which allows access between spaces that would otherwise be separated. For example, ladders and ramps that go over a garden fence were sometimes referred to as ‘doors of the garden’ (TP: *doa bilong gaden*). To my understanding, the metaphor of a door was relatively straightforward, denoting connecting points or places of access.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the beginning of this text I noted that Pomio can be characterized as a frontier area with its sparse population, perceived abundance of resources, and relatively limited state presence (Geiger 2008: 88, 97; McCarthy 2013: 183–184). More specifically, following Gregory (1982), Geiger (2008), Murray Li (2014), McCarthy (2013), Kelly and Peluso (2014) and Peluso and Lund (2011), the frontier can be understood as a spatialized political economic dynamic illuminating cycles of resource extraction, related struggles over the control of resources and—crucially—struggles over what is defined as a resource that can be extracted, and over different evaluations of local environments, practices, and tenure systems. As I have shown, understood in this way, the concept of the (resource) frontier can help us to make sense of the shifting and changing dynamics of resource extraction in Pomio.

In relation to the above, I have also shown how the members of the Wide Bay Mengen community were very aware of the dynamics and different evaluations of labour and resource extraction, even though they did not conceptualize them as a frontier. As I have argued, the locally initiated cocoa project was intended to bring income, but explicitly according to terms which allowed the community members to retain control of their land and work. The cocoa was planted



on communally held land the community had acquired with its cooperative society in the early 1980s, while the individual plantings were held by households and passed on like swidden gardens, in accordance with Mengan landholding practices. The community's copra cooperative was also an example on which the community's conservation association was modeled. The conservation area was located on land owned by one matrilineal clan, but the conservation association was of the whole community. Similarly, the cocoa project—funded with the livelihood component of the grant the association had received—was a communal project. As I noted, one household did not take part due to grievances over a land dispute. The majority of the community members, however, took part in the project.

The cocoa project, like the community's copra plantation before it, was also a spatial strategy for the community to establish places of access to seaborne transport and buying infrastructure. Those active in the project conceptualized these points of access as 'doors' (Tok Pisin: *doa*) or 'doors to got out' (Tok Pisin: *doa i goaut*). Initially, the copra plantation and sheds on the shore were such 'doors' that allowed the in-land community to access the sea and transport. Later, the project activists sought to keep these points of access and open new 'doors' at a nearby plantation that served as an infrastructural hub and secure regular shipping to the area.

In addition to establishing spatial links, or 'opening doors', those active in the cocoa project established and strengthened existing links to particular state institutions and officials. They did this, for example, by seeking training in cocoa cultivation from agricultural extension officers and informing the local level government about the project. This is what the community's conservation association had done

in the past, namely informing the government and logging and plantation companies about the conservation area, its borders, and the (formalized) rules regarding its use. Through these territorializing practices the clan that initially opposed logging sought to protect their customary land and its forests. Through the local conservation association the community was involved in the conservation project, which for example brought the funding for the cocoa project. Establishing such links to the state, or certain state institutions, can be seen both as 'seeking the state' (or a particular kind of state) (e.g. Herriman and Winarnita 2016) and 'being seen like the state' (e.g. Timmer 2010). The community sought specific support from state institutions, while at the same time seeking to be recognized as controlling their land, forests, and means of livelihood.

In this article I have argued that understood as a spatio-temporal process, the frontier can help us to make sense of cycles of resource extraction in places like Pomio. In parallel, I have shown how people, like the Wide Bay Mengan community, living in places framed as frontiers have their own analyses and metaphors of the dynamics that take place. More so, as I have shown, the community members actively sought to change these conditions for their own advantage. As the cocoa of the community grows, time will tell if it will bring reliable income and how the community will succeed in 'opening doors'.

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## NOTES

- 1 The people with whom I conducted fieldwork lived mainly in eight village communities between the southern part of Wide Bay and Cape Orford in East Pomio and spoke North Coast Mengen (also: Maeng, Cape Orford Mengen), one of the three dialects of the Austronesian Mengen language. North Coast Mengen is sometimes classed as a language of its own, as it differs from other Mengen dialects spoken further south in Pomio. (Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2015). The people in these eight communities referred to themselves as ‘Mengen’ and spoke a dialect that slightly differed from other North Coast Mengen dialects. I use the term ‘Wide Bay Mengen’ to refer to the inhabitants of these eight communities. The term is mine, but it reflects local conceptions of dialect differences. (See also Tammisto 2018: 7–10).
- 2 Leadership among the Wide Bay Mengen is not ascribed to an institutionalized position, but it is achieved or ascribed to people who are considered respectable, who lead by example, and are organizers in the community. Several people within a community can, and are, considered to be leaders, some of them taking the lead in different matters. Often the leaders are middle-aged and elder men, but not exclusively. Also women and younger men can perform these roles. In addition, communities have official elected representatives, ward members, who form the lowest stratum of PNG’s state hierarchy as well as members of boards, which oversee the functioning of local official institutions, such as schools, aid-posts, and day clinics. Board members of these institutions act as the spokespersons and representatives of these institutions within their respective communities. Both men and women serve as board members.
- 3 Nearly all households of the community took part in the project. This meant that one or more household members had taken part in the communal work and thus were entitled to their share of budded cocoa seedlings. They were married couples, single young men and women, unmarried women with children (‘single mothers’, usually heads of their own households), and elder unmarried or divorced men and women. One unmarried young man did not take part, but helped others, while one recently married couple told they would plant cocoa later on but did not have the means to join the project at the time. One household initially took part in the project but pulled out over an old land dispute regarding the conservation area.
- 4 During my fieldwork, I spent time with community members working on their blocks and the nursery. This included clearing them, tending seedlings, and planting. I also took part in community meetings on the project. In addition to participant observation, I surveyed people’s copra/cocoa blocks by measuring them and tracking how people had acquired them. I conducted semi-structured interviews with selected participants and members of the community, cocoa smallholders from other communities, agricultural extension officers, and officials of the Cocoa Board, a state body overseeing cocoa production in PNG. By the end of my fieldwork, I conducted a standardized interview survey with project participants. My understanding of the context is based on my previous research in the area in 2007, 2011–2012, and 2014.
- 5 Smallholder cash-crop plantings and tracts of land acquired for perennial crops are called ‘blocks’ (Tok Pisin: *blok*) throughout PNG.
- 6 I interviewed elder community members who took part in giving of the gift as well as one of the clan elders, who was one of the recipients. Their accounts of the event and the gift were the same, although many noted they did not remember the exact amounts of money or pigs. However, the different amounts given by people

were in line with each other and my interviewees held a shared understanding of the magnitude of the gift. Similarly, people I interviewed, did not always remember the years, but dated the prestation between 1978–1981. Between the 1975–1985 one (1) PNG Kina (PGK) was 0.99–1.55 US dollars (USD), 1.26 USD in 1975, 1.55 USD in 1980 and 0.99 USD in 1985 (see Table 4.1.1. in (Bourke and Harwood 2009: 477). In 2021, 1 PKG = 0.29 USD.

- 7 See Yaneva-Toraman's (2020) careful and nuanced analysis of how the Kairak speakers in northern East New Britain have attempted to reclaim their lands first by planting cocoa and then allowing companies to plant oil palm on it, similar to the official who allowed limited oil palm planting on Kiep to secure the title. The situation of the Kairak differs that from the Wide Bay Mengen, as the Kairak have been displaced from their lands and there is pressure on their lands from people living in and around the provincial capital of Kokopo. The Wide Bay Mengen have not faced such pressure, but many were worried that the expansion of oil palm could dispossess people of their lands.

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TUOMAS TAMMISTO  
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
[tuomas.tammisto@iki.fi](mailto:tuomas.tammisto@iki.fi)