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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Brokerage, bridewealth and benefits on a resource frontier in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine tensions over intermarriage and resource sharing between two groups on a Papua New Guinean resource frontier. These tensions are mediated by a ‘brokerage fix’ led by Febi clan heads responding to financial demands from their Pangia neighbours and sometime affines. Here social and financial debts have become entangled in the shadow of much-anticipated resource rents. In the ethnographic case study considered here, tensions over unpaid (cash) bridewealth—successfully resolved through cultural brokerage—reflect not only the debt itself, but broader questions about the relationship between the two groups. In this case, we argue that the dynamics of brokerage from within involve shifting modes of relational and transactional exchange across competing temporalities. The task of the broker emerges as being the re-establishment of the grounds for a relational mode of sharing, with future long-term benefits foregrounded over demands for repayment of past debt.

KEYWORDS

bridewealth, brokerage, brokers, Papua New Guinea, resource frontiers

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Classic theories of brokerage have focused on how brokers create bridges between two structurally distinct realms or fields of action such as the state and rural populations (Boissevain, 1974). More recent approaches recognise that brokers also have a role in emphasising and reshaping difference and distance between parties so that they can centre themselves as the mediators of these distinctions (Rodman & Counts, 1983; Swartz, 1983). Less attention has been given to the work of brokers operating within communities, although this is emerging as an important aspect of brokerage (Bräuchler et al., 2021), and marriage brokers have long been a focus of inquiry.

Internal brokers mediate relationships between structurally equivalent entities—lineages, clans, tribes, or consociations based on shared experience or practice—rather than between the structurally asymmetrical realms that have been the focus of attention for most recent analyses of brokerage (de Jong et al., 2023; Diprose, 2023). Emphasis on horizontal rather than vertical flows as defining internal brokerage, however, risks ignoring new social inequalities in developing societies and the consequent potential for patron–client relations to develop between what had been structurally equivalent entities (Bierschenk et al., 2002).

The argument in this paper focuses on internal brokerage within two intertwined ethnic communities on a resource frontier in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Here social and financial debts between individuals and groups have become entangled in the shadow of much anticipated resource benefits. New marriage practices and marriage of landowner beneficiary clans into other groups are creating social and financial tensions that internal brokers attempt to moderate. While not always successful, this kind of brokerage requires brokers to redefine the boundaries (and equivalencies) between social groups (Lindquist, 2015).

The paper begins with background information about the PNG resource frontier, Febi and Kubo people, and their relationships with highlanders such as the Pangia. We then focus on the urban setting of Kiunga and explore a conflict over unpaid bridewealth that was a flashpoint for tensions between Febi and Pangia.

The role of brokering peace between the two groups is our particular interest as an example of ‘brokerage from within’. We develop the argument that brokerage from within entails managing tensions between the levelling imperatives of social obligations, competing claims to authority over resources, honouring of agreed transactions, and accumulation of financial capital.

2 | BACKGROUND

Resource frontiers are spaces where competing visions of the future, material aspirations and sharp inequalities of power converge. They are often places where the power of states is relatively weak or devolved to private sector developers or civil society organisations (Bainton & Skrzypek, 2021; Meehan & Plonski, 2017; Tammisto, 2024).

The Papua New Guinea Liquified Natural Gas Project (PNG LNG) is a nation-building resource development that cuts across five provinces: from active gasfields in the Highlands (Hela, Southern Highlands), the potential Juha wellheads in Western Province, and the pipeline that runs from the highlands through Gulf and Central Provinces to the export terminal near Port Moresby. Production commenced in 2014. The project exports some 8 million tonnes of gas to China, Japan and Taiwan every year (PNG LNG).ⁱ

The promise of PNG LNG money has inflated expectations at the highest levels of government as well as at the local scale among communities that see themselves as beneficiaries. Anticipating

transformative resource rents from PNG LNG and other developments, Prime Minister James Marape pronounced that 'PNG will be the richest black Christian nation on earth' (Graue, 2019). This claim is now ridiculed by his detractors, because of the failure of the PNG state and its development partners to provide for its people (Bainton & McDougall, 2021). Some argue that PNG would have been better off without the massive resource developments of the past two decades (Flanagan & Fletcher, 2018; Howes et al., 2014; Main, 2021). Nevertheless, Christian economic nationalism and the influence of the prosperity gospel are enduring features of PNG's public realm (Cox, 2018, 2021).

Among most communities with landowner claims to gas wellheads and pipelines, high expectations of great wealth have been unrealised. In some areas, competition over resource rents has inflamed existing political divisions and tribal conflicts (Cox et al., 2022). Royalties and other payments to landowner beneficiaries are highly vulnerable to elite capture and lack a convincing record of being reinvested in community services. While communities may anticipate transformation of their circumstances by resource rents, the reality is more often frustration as clan heads and other leaders enjoy the high life in Port Moresby.

The most upstream of the gas fields encompassed by PNG LNG is Juha, located below the land of Febi-speaking people (see Figure 1). No gas has yet been extracted from Juha and it may be years before extraction begins. Under the PNG LNG project agreement, however, the owners of the land within the Juha licence area (PDL 9) are entitled to share in any wealth generated by the project. That entitlement, though as yet only partially realised, has shaped interactions between Febi and their neighbours through the past two decades.

3 | FEBI AND KUBO PEOPLE

Febi (also spelled Phembi) and Kubo (sometimes Kubor) are two language groups along the Strickland-Bosavi continuum in PNG's Western Province. Like their close neighbours the Samo (Shaw, 2022), Bedamuni (Dwyer & Minnegal, 1998) and Gebusi (Knauff, 2002), Febi- and Kubo-speakers lived autonomously in small, dispersed hamlets until very late in the colonial period. Sustained contact with Australian colonial administration commenced in 1968, only 7 years before PNG Independence (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 54ff; Minnegal & Dwyer, 2023).

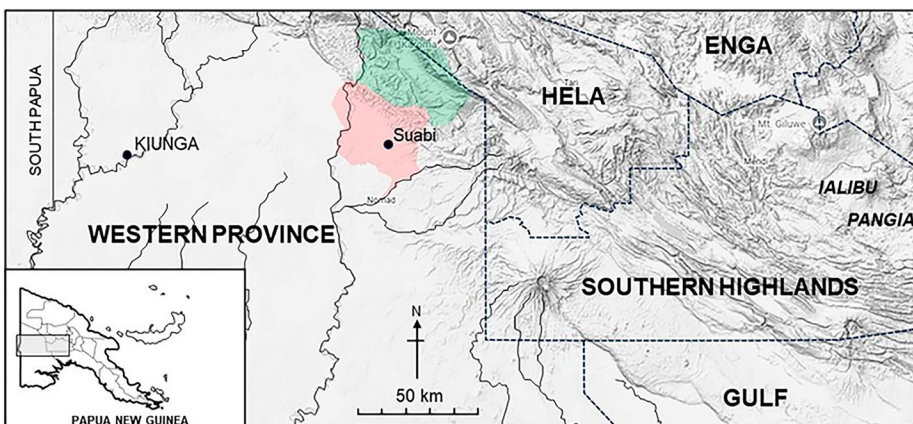


FIGURE 1 Location of Kiunga, where the research was conducted, Febi (green) and Kubo (red) land, and Ialibu/Pangia district to the far east.

As with many other groups in PNG, Christian missions have shaped Febi and Kubo social life more directly than government. But mission contact, too, was very late. An evangelical Christian mission began at Mougulu on Bedamuni land in 1968 and, in the early 1980s, missionaries from there established a hub on Kubo land at a place now known as Soabi (also spelled Suabi), with many Febi people moving there to access the services offered. American missionaries lived at Soabi until 2006 (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 75–77). With their departure, Soabi began to lose its efficacy as a hub. The missionaries had trained pastors but not the teachers or community health workers required for the essential services the mission station had offered.

From 2005, the chimera of resources development began to reshape Febi and Kubo imagination with the promise of great wealth from the PNG LNG project. The search for extractable resources had driven much early colonial exploration of the mountains above Soabi (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 77ff). Through 2006–2007, and again in 2012–2014, an exploration camp was established at Soabi, providing men with work as helicopter load masters, opening new possibilities that had not existed in mission days. Students began to study in secondary schools in the highlands, creating a new cohort of educated leaders and a greatly expanded social network that has enduring effects many years later, as the ethnographic case in this paper illustrates.

PNG LNG has expanded the geographical scope of Febi and Kubo dramatically. As the work of Febi clan leaders in negotiating landowner recognition advanced, they travelled to other centres: the national capital Port Moresby, Kokopo in East New Britain where the Universal Benefits Sharing Agreement was signed, and Kiunga, the administrative capital of Western Province. At the same time, the need to register Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) led to redefinitions of community that both include and exclude non-kin and kin (Minnegal et al., 2015; Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017; Weiner, 2013).

As Soabi waned, Kiunga became increasingly important as a hub for Febi and Kubo. Declining services pushed many into moving permanently to Kiunga (Minnegal et al., 2024). Some Febi landowners who captured the benefits of grants funded by PNG LNG have bought land and established households in the town. Febi leaders have left behind empty houses in their ancestral hamlets and the Soabi corners of Gweobi and Dufosi. Many Kubo, too, have moved but tend not to have the capital for buying land and so make their homes at informal settlements mainly on church and state land in town. They are also more likely to have kin still living at Soabi and return to visit them.

This spatial reorientation has led to a paradoxical reorientation of Febi aspirations. Having abandoned their ancestral lands and moved first to Soabi and then Kiunga, clan leaders are now applying for development grants that focus on Juha as the locus of future prosperity. Minnegal and Dwyer (2024) have documented the emerging fantasy of Juha City, supported by multi-million Kinaⁱⁱ grants to build infrastructure such as an airstrip, connecting road and health facilities in a remote village with a declining population of less than 50 people.ⁱⁱⁱ These threadbare foundations notwithstanding, Juha looms as a promise of unlimited prosperity for Febi and draws in the interest of Huli and other highlanders, including the Pangia who emerge as focal in the case we discuss here.

4 | HIGHLANDS CONNECTIONS: PANGIA

Pangia is an area within the Ialibu-Pangia District of Southern Highlands Province, home to speakers of the Wiru language (Stewart & Strathern, 2005). Traditionally, Pangia people were subsistence horticulturalists and, like other groups along the highlands fringe, including



those of the Strickland-Bosavi corridor, lived in hamlets around longhouses that were the centre of male community life (e.g. Dwyer, 1990; Dwyer & Minnegal, 1998; Knauff, 2002; Shaw, 2022; Weiner, 1988). These hamlets mostly have consolidated into larger villages following interactions with missionaries and colonial government (Stewart & Strathern, 2005, p. 208). Wiru-speaking people number 20,000, in contrast to 1000 Kubo and 500 Febi. Pangia also have a longer history of engagement with colonisers: linked by road to places like Mendi and Mount Hagen along the Highlands Highway, access to formal education and recruitment into paid employment was available to Pangia decades before people of the Nomad District (Stewart & Strathern, 2005).

While there are similarities in subsistence and residence patterns between Pangia and Febi or Kubo, one significant difference is in marriage practices. Wiru have a bridewealth system where valuables are paid to maternal kin as a symbolic exchange for the children the wife produces (Stewart & Strathern, n.d.; Merlan, 1988; Strathern, 1971). Febi, Kubo and other Strickland River groups follow a sibling exchange model, where participants negotiated their own marriages (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 130ff). As we explain below, the differences in understandings of bridewealth and marriage between the two groups are significant for the tensions we describe.

Long before the colonial period, Febi had roles as middlemen in trade between highlands and lowlands (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, p. 131). However, the Pangia homelands are distant from Febi and Kubo territory, so direct connections between Pangia and Febi/Kubo are relatively recent. A key point in the relationship was when Soabi mission station became a base for seismic testing in 2006–2007. For the first time, Febi and Kubo students went to study at schools in Tari, Mount Hagen and Goroka. In Mount Hagen, several students were taken in by established Pangia families and looked after, forming close bonds. Returning the favour, some of these students brought their Pangia age mates to Soabi to work alongside them on the seismic testing.

The relationship between people from the two groups has developed over time. As Pangia began to appreciate the possibilities of wealth that the Juha gas field might deliver to their Febi friends, they sought to solidify their ties. Some funded Febi clan leaders to fly to Port Moresby to pursue recognition as landowners and gave advice on those processes. In return, some Pangia individuals and other outsiders were named in lists of Febi landowners submitted for formal ILG registration (Minnegal et al., 2015).

In Kiunga, the relationship is now a means of mutual support in an urban environment. Survival in towns requires people to have connections and Febi and Kubo, as small groups, need allies from other networks. Some Pangia families live alongside Juha landowners, sharing daily expenses and loaning them money. But, as a Kiunga-based Kubo man, Titus,^{iv} observes, this proximity is not entirely reciprocal: 'These Pangia people stay with Juha people and give money daily for bus fare and for foods. But they're not getting anything back'.

This comment followed the conflict detailed in the next section, and points to the problem that underlay that conflict—ambiguity as to whether the social field was characterised by generalised reciprocity or by sharing. Titus sees Pangia as expecting returns on their gifting, albeit unspecified returns—an expectation that resonates with Sahlins' (1972) description of generalised reciprocity. Sharing, in contrast, as Gell (1999) and Widlok (2013) argue, responds to the needs of others, or because it is the right thing to do, not because return gifts are expected (cf. Gregory, 2012). Below we argue that slippage between fields of reciprocity and sharing is central to the Febi and Pangia bridewealth dispute, and that this potential for slippage creates demand for brokers who can reconfigure the terms of exchange between the two groups.

4.1 | Bridewealth on the resource frontier

Several Juha landowners have used their newfound wealth, from PNG LNG Business Development Grants, Infrastructure Development Grants, or Development Levy funds, to remarry or take second or even third wives. Often the new wives are much younger and come from adjacent provinces such as Southern Highlands and Hela (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022, p. 119). Other Febi leaders have used project grants from the provincial government to negotiate marriages to highlands women (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, p. 132). These arrangements involve engagement with bridewealth, a different system of arranging marriages from the sibling exchange that is more traditional among Febi (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 130f). Among Febi and Kubo themselves, demand for bridewealth has become increasingly common as marriages are contracted with people who do not follow sibling exchange, or as sharing of 'sisters' across lineages is constrained by competition for access to benefits. Given that cash is usually scarce, bridewealth debt is common.

The amount to be paid as bridewealth (*braid prais* in Tok Pisin [TP], the creole lingua franca of PNG) usually is agreed at the time of marriage, but all parties understand that it will be paid over time, sometimes years after marriage, or sometimes renegotiated if the bridewealth is later thought to be insufficient (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017, pp. 183f). As Margaret Jolly (2015, p. 70) observes of bridewealth more generally in Melanesia:

... the payment of a bride price is usually not a singular transaction, but part of inter-generational cycles of alliance, and thus the payment of bride price is not final like a commodity transaction where the relation between buyer and seller ends at the moment of payment.

Bridewealth payments then are not the purchase of a wife, so much as a key step in rituals of exchange that affirm collective connection and recognition. In the Wiru/Pangia case, their practices focus on the production of children by the wife-giving clan (Strathern, 1971). Another quotation from Jolly (2015, p. 74) articulates this collective dimension, particularly for marriages that are outside of existing cultural groups with a history of intermarriage:

... the bride price is increasingly used to mark not just the "worth" of the woman but the worth of her group. Increasingly, it values not just the worth of a woman's labour, sexuality, fertility, education, and employment, but her origins.

In the case we discuss below, the 'intergenerational cycles of alliance' being negotiated entailed a bonding together of Febi and Pangia. In this case, however, these dynamics between Febi and Pangia had stalled, leading to a confrontation that involved local police and soldiers from Kiunga's Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) base.

5 | STAN'S UNPAID BRIDEWEALTH

In an intriguing case where brokerage, moneylending, marriage and landowner status intersect, two Febi men were, on separate occasions, held in the Kiunga police lock up for failing to organise payment of a large debt. That debt ensued from a longstanding failure to pay agreed bride-wealth to a group of Pangia people, and the incarcerations resulted from tensions over this that had been simmering for some time.

In 2009, a Febi man who we call Stan decided to take a new wife—a young Pangia woman, ‘Diana’, whom he met in the highlands. Stan took Diana to Port Moresby where, with other clan leaders, he was undertaking negotiations to be recognised as a landowner beneficiary of PNG LNG. Stan has claims to land around one of the Juha wellheads and so stands to receive significant royalties from PNG LNG, which he assured his new affines would be used to pay the requested bridewealth.

The marriage did not go well; though a son was born, Stan’s jealousy caused problems. One Febi informant tells the well-known story succinctly:

Stan was an old man, and he had a young wife, and he didn’t treat her well. He locked her in the house all day and didn’t let her out to see her friends or play. So, she decided to leave him for another man. She was gone for three months. But then she got sick, and she came back. They were together for one week and then she died.

At the time of Diana’s passing in 2012, Stan had not yet paid the agreed bridewealth. Her family were unhappy because they believed Stan had mistreated their kinswoman, contributing to her death, and because their expectation of a reciprocal payment recognising the value of their contribution to the son born of the marriage had not yet been met. Despite their concerns, however, they did not immediately pursue payment of the debt.

The decision to allow the debt to remain unpaid probably factored in the cycles of resource rents that Stan was likely to receive once his beneficiary status was confirmed, a process that in PNG is known to take many years. In a kind of Maussian logic, the in-laws allowed the debt to remain open, anticipating that the passage of time would increase the obligation to them, with proportionate financial returns. Indeed, they invested further in Stan, lending him money and buying him air tickets to Port Moresby for *papagraun bisnis* (landowner recognition work).

5.1 | Mediating conflict

In 2023, this unresolved tension was renewed, probably following Stan’s return to Kiunga from Port Moresby and the allocation of PNG LNG development grants to Febi landowners. Money was flowing; since 2019, grants worth several million Kina have been awarded to Febi leaders, including some of Stan’s clan brothers. But Stan’s Pangia in-laws saw none of that money. Diana’s death had occurred a decade earlier, but they had been prepared to put the bridewealth debt to one side as long as they could hope to share in the prosperity of Juha. The actions of Stan and other Febi leaders, however, had left them feeling ignored and increasingly angry. Now, rather than leaving the debt open indefinitely, they were about to call time and demand payment.

The Pangia in-laws decided that they were tired of waiting and accosted Stan. They brought him to the Kiunga police station where they demanded K60,000 in outstanding bridewealth, treating him as a common debtor, not as an affinal kinsman. Cr Suri Digimo, the ward councillor for Soabi, himself of mixed Febi and Kubo descent, came to mediate and promised that the Pangia people would be paid in 1 month, by which time everyone expected that the grant monies would be released.

Stan was released, but after a month no money had been paid. The Pangia people escalated the dispute by sending armed soldiers (in uniform but acting unofficially) to arrest Cr Suri. Titus describes what happened:

So, after one month, they sent some soldiers from the PNGDF up to Kilo 7 to chase Suri. One man with a gun took him to the police station and locked him up. There were three PNGDF with uniforms and guns and maybe five Pangia people. And some were not related, they were *maket moni* people.^v

As Titus observes, the implications of the debt were growing and had become about the relationship between two groups of people. Now not simply a personal debt owed by Stan to his in-laws, the debt had become collective, a form of 'relational liability'. When Cr Suri promised, on behalf of his Febi constituency, that the money would be paid in a month but then did not keep the promise, Pangia in Kiunga—not just Stan's affines but others too—were angered. So, they apprehended this leader of the Febi and Kubo community to show that they were serious and wanted the matter resolved.

Titus describes the tense situation at the police station:

I came in and I saw Stan's *tambu* brother [TP: brother-in-law]. He was my best friend. I welcomed him to Kiunga when he first came. I said to him, "He's the leader. How can you arrest the leader? He's the one who will work around and find a solution". But he said, "No. Enough is enough. He's the one who said the money would be here in a month". Then I said, "Brother, we are brothers. You will benefit from Juha and from Seismic. Do you have anywhere else to go if we drop you?" They thought about it and said, "OK. We'll think about it" and then after some time, they said "OK. We will let your leader go".

Titus's question, 'How can you arrest the leader? He's the one who will work around and find a solution' resonated with all parties and became key to easing the tensions. Leaders have a key role as mediators (Burridge, 1975). Various Febi men pleaded with their Pangia counterparts, reminding them of the close connections and goodwill, and of the access to Juha money that would be lost if relations soured.

Eventually, two other Febi clan heads stepped into the negotiations and reluctantly offered to pay half of the sum requested (PGK30,000). Bob Resa, whose leadership had been key to attaining landowner beneficiary status for Febi clans, and who had been one of the first Febi to build relationships with highlanders (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022) initially refused to contribute. He brushed away requests to support Stan, saying that the debt was Stan's responsibility alone. Bob had never approved of the marriage and blamed Stan for souring relations with the Pangia.

Bob finally relented and proffered PGK15,000 of his own money. Rather than acceding to the demands of others, however, he pointedly represented his contribution as a gift given of his own free will to his Febi kin—a payment that he was not obliged to make but that was motivated by his own generosity and virtue (cf. Hukula, 2019). He also sought to corral his obligations to Febi without opening up further claims from Pangia. He removed himself from negotiations with Pangia, keeping himself at a safe distance from their claims to resources.

The offer of part-payment angered the Pangia in-laws, who accused Stan and other Febi, particularly those who had received support when studying in the highlands and staying with Pangia households, of ingratitude. One Febi clan leader, Ivan, responded to this anger with a reminder of the promise of Juha funds and the continuing relational connection between Pangia and Febi. According to Titus, who witnessed the affair, Ivan told the Pangia:



Listen. We have a good bridge here. We have access to Juha, and you are relying on us. We're standing on the wellhead. It's good you looked after me, but you can ask for projects. What are you going to do if you chase us away? The good thing is that through Stan and his wife, there is a baby boy and through him, you have a right to Juha.

Hearing the kinship connection restated publicly was compelling. Bridewealth is, after all, about binding two groups of people together. But the kind of cross-cultural marriage seen in this case is a relatively new phenomenon for Febi, leaving ambiguities about what the implications of the relationship might be, particularly in relation to questions of to whom children belong. Somewhat counter to the Wiru logic, where payment of bridewealth is an exchange that recognises that the children of a marriage primarily belong to the husband's kin (Strathern, 1971), Ivan reassures the Pangia that, even with part payment now made, the child still belongs to them and is a sign that they, through that child, have an enduring right to Juha monies.

The alternative would have been for the in-laws to insist, under Pangia logic, that Stan's failure to pay bridewealth meant that the relationship between the two sides was over and they had the right to take the child back into their lineage. By maintaining the child's connection with the father's family, the Pangia retain their stake in the benefits that would accrue to the child. Through Ivan's cultural brokerage, the child then becomes a symbolic bridge between the two groups, his ongoing connection to both groups—a connection that would have been severed by either full payment or refusal to pay the bridewealth for his mother—signifying mutual obligations between them. In effect, then, the giving of a wife to Stan is again acknowledged as establishing a claim to future resource monies. After all, it seems that what the Pangia wanted foremost was the Juha money, rather than an extra child.

The Pangia in-laws reluctantly accepted part-payment of K30,000, on the understanding that the remaining K30,000 would be paid in due course as Juha projects come through the system. They remained angry about the death of Diana and Stan's failure to pay the promised bride-wealth. Ultimately, however, they were not willing to sacrifice the relational work they had already invested in, or their longer-term objective of ensuring that they too could benefit from Juha money.

5.2 | Locking up leaders

Being locked up for failing to pay informal debts is not unusual in PNG, although it is absent from Goddard's (2005) study of moneylenders and local courts. Port Moresby Police recently turned to Facebook to warn that their stations are overwhelmed by requests to pursue bad debts.^{vi} Their post advises that recovering debts is a civil matter that should not involve police. Informal borrowing (*maket moni* or *dinau* in TP) places people at risk of falling into debt traps because of the very high interest rates (typically 50% or 100% for the term of the loan).

In Kiunga, using state authorities to enforce payment of private debt has been normalised. In addition to the two Febi leaders discussed in the above case study, several other clan heads had been locked up for their debts, as well as a Kubo broker who was arrested after a loan he negotiated for another Febi landowner went unpaid.

Titus tells of two clan heads being taken to jail for failing to pay their debts:

They arranged for a Wabag policeman to arrest [Arthur and Jonah]. They took them to the police station, and they were put in a cell for two and a half hours. [Bob Resa] came and he said, “You can’t lock people up without a case. Get them out!” [Bob] paid K3,000 to the police. He himself gave K2,000, [another man] gave PGK500 and the rest of the community paid the rest. I put in K5 or K20.

Maybe this policeman was friends or the brother of this Wabag lady [the money-lender]. She has a *kai bar* [TP: food stall] opposite the shopping centre and [Stan] borrowed K5,000 from her. Bit by bit, not all at once.

In none of these cases was the incarceration or involvement of police formal: the aim is to intimidate debtors, not to lay charges against them. Bob Resa recognised this in his challenge to police authority on the basis of law (then softened by a large bribe). As is common in the ‘relational state’ of PNG (Peake & Forsyth, 2022), police seem to have been involved because of their kinship links to moneylenders, or because they too are clients of the same lenders.

Stan’s case differs from that of Arthur and Jonah, being grounded in a more explicit construction of a relationship between groups, rather than a simple financial transaction between individuals. Nevertheless, in arranging the arrest of Stan and Suri, the Pangia in-laws were marking that the relationship had moved out of a relational mode into a transactional one. Slippage between these apparently disparate modes of exchange lies at the heart of how the dispute played out. To make sense of that slippage, and how those brokering the dispute over outstanding bride-wealth actively sought to control it, we turn now to more general considerations.

6 | BROKERING RELATIONSHIPS AND RESOURCES

The relationship between the Febi and Pangia lines is at the heart of the attempts to broker a resolution of the unpaid bridewealth. Here it is appropriate to revisit some important features of the relationship, particularly the flows of resources between the two groups, and the models of exchange that underpin different modes of sharing and giving, obligation and debt, along with the consolidation of new forms of hierarchy and resource patronage.

6.1 | Sharing *in* and sharing *out*

Initially, Febi looked to Pangia and other highlanders as people who, due to their much earlier interactions with state and corporate institutions, and longstanding access to formal education, could help them negotiate the unfamiliar world outside their own territory (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022, p. 119). Pangia accepted this role, perhaps initially with some of the compassionate *luk save* (TP: recognition) that Rooney (2019) identifies as a value governing sharing among women market vendors in Port Moresby. This kind of sharing is highly valued across PNG and, while grounded in kinship, can also encompass broader connections such as neighbourliness and even the customers of a vendor (Rooney, 2019, p. 163; Hukula, 2019). The sharing of food and bus fares—everyday expenses—mentioned earlier by Titus typifies *luk save* relations.

As the spectre of resource wealth has loomed ever larger, the nature of the relationship has changed. Perhaps as they did all along, Pangia—or at least Stan’s affines and their kinsfolk in Kiunga—now explicitly hope to gain a share of the anticipated Juha riches. Gregory (2012) uses



the example of Fijian *kerekere* (sharing) to distinguish practices of everyday demand sharing, where no return is specified, and loans of larger amounts, where the promise of return becomes the basis of the request. In PNG asking directly is frowned upon, and so the request is likely to be implicit, appealing to the ethical disposition of the giver in recognising a need (Rooney, 2019, pp. 161ff). However, in both cases, the underlying relationship between the two parties is the grounds for giving and receiving. Both are grounded in a sense of entitlement to share *in* what the world provides for the benefit of all in the group, an expectation that anyone who receives more will share *out* this bounty to other members (Minnegal, 1997).

Pangia have repeatedly given to their Febi friends and affines over many years, without return. Febi have taken their Pangia 'kin' for granted, assuming a *luk save* relationship but doing little to maintain it themselves. This is in keeping with norms among Kubo and Febi where sharing is normative and return gifts not expected (see Minnegal & Dwyer, 2007, on different modes of sharing among Kubo). By initially giving to Febi, Pangia were indicating that they had a surplus of money or things to give away (cf. Minnegal & Dwyer, 2007, p. 12).

The balance has been shifting. Most Febi follow relational imperatives when they receive money and share out windfalls immediately by giving to kin, supporting the needs and aspiration of relatives, acknowledging and reciprocating past support. Their Pangia affines, however, do not seem to have appeared on this list of priorities. As they see the Febi they have supported for so long now being given very large sums of money, without sharing this with them, a sense of inequity has grown; expectation of return has become central to Pangia perceptions of their relations with Febi.

Another dimension of sharing illuminates some of the dynamics of neglect in this case. This concerns the parameters of the 'resource-sharing community', which can be understood from the perspective of 'sharing out' (being included in distribution of benefits), as against 'sharing in' (holding a right to access benefits). This distinction comes from Ingold (1986, pp. 223ff) and has been applied to Kubo subsistence fishing practices by Minnegal (1997).

Of particular relevance here is Minnegal's insight that 'sharing in a haul of food does not necessitate receiving or even seeing any portion of that haul' (1997, p. 30). This observation derives from analysis of subsistence foraging and hunting, the historical and ecological context that has shaped contemporary Febi and Kubo values and approaches to the cash economy. By analogy, if Febi acknowledge that Pangia affines have a right to share in the resources of Juha, this need not imply that any specific portion of these resources will be shared with them. We read this as the logic underlying Ivan's assurances that, while they may not have received a share of recent grant monies, the child of the ill-fated marriage in question is a guarantee that Pangia rights to share in other distributions from Juha have not been revoked and will not be forgotten.

6.2 | Relational liability: Keeping debt open

In addition to taking their Pangia friends for granted (as they would their own kin), Febi have been borrowing larger sums of money from Pangia sources without recognising that this entails a shift from *luk save* relations to a more transactional lender/debtor model. In his account, Titus notes that, when the PNGDF soldiers came to arrest Cr Suri, there also were Pangia people present and 'some were not related, they were *maket moni* people' (Goddard, 2005). This shift into a market transactional framework underpins the Pangia action of arresting the Febi leaders.

'Relational liability' is a term we use to describe how debts may extend beyond the arrangement between borrower and lender to implicate the borrower's kin, agents, or extended community, making them liable for repayment. This inverts Schuster's (2015) concept of 'social



collateral' where social networks are used to guarantee loans. With relational liability, social capital also becomes financial capital but, rather than collateral guaranteeing a loan, it emerges as a form of collective responsibility moneylenders impose when they cannot recover a debt from the individual borrower and so turn to their associates and relatives.

In the case of Arthur and Jonah's debt to a moneylender, Bob Resa accepts his relational liability and bribes the police to let his fellow clan leaders free, albeit with the intention of reinforcing his own self-appointed status as 'paramount chief' of the Febi.

With Stan's unpaid bridewealth, however, relational liability operates on a larger scale, including broader communities, not simply individual debtors. The Pangia in-laws accost Cr Suri, not simply because he has made a false promise but because he, as the elected representative of Febi people, is the formal leader of the whole group. The problem has moved beyond Stan's failure to look after his wife and pay bridewealth, to indict the whole Pangia-Febi interrelationship.

Pangia attempts to extract the promised bridewealth took a form more commonly associated with moneylenders and bad debtors: arrest and imprisonment. Shifting the arrangement out of the relational field of generalised reciprocity into the field of commodity exchange was a provocation and a statement that the disrespect shown by (some) Febi to (some) Pangia had broken the relational connection altogether. If Febi were going to treat Pangia simply as moneylenders, then Pangia were going to respond as moneylenders do: with coercion.

Here there is a transformation in understanding of the original transaction. With no 'exchange' happening, the decision seems, almost, to have shifted the anticipated bridewealth—which opens up further exchanges—into a required compensation payment, which would close down the relationship. This parallels the ways that local courts resolve unpaid debts: moneylenders are required to forgo interest and simply accept return of the capital loaned, returning the situation to what it was before the transaction (Goddard, 2005). The Pangia wanted to close the relationship, but the interventions of Ivan and others on the Febi side provided the brokerage required to commit to keeping the relationship open.

6.3 | Brokering Juha relationships

Bräuchler et al. (2021, p. 282) observe that 'brokers are not simply facilitating the relationship between two groups but actually constitute, mould and redefine this relationship'. These dynamics of group identity are apparent in the discussion between Stan's in-laws and Ivan, the clan head who was trying to mediate relations between Febi and Pangia. Juha is central to Ivan's pitch. He tries to soothe Pangia anger by appealing to the long-term benefits of being connected through the Febi 'bridge' to Juha. As a broker of this conflict, Ivan was in a position to redefine the two parties, reassuring the in-laws that, though Pangia, they were indeed included as project beneficiaries through their connection to Febi.

In these debates between Febi and Pangia affines in Kiunga, Febi act as brokers of second order resources, negotiating access to those who control flows of money (Boissevain, 1974). Febi clan leaders, often competing with each other, try to monopolise that access or take direct control of the funding flows (Minnegal & Cox, 2026). Including Pangia kin as fellow beneficiaries does not necessarily challenge that monopoly. After years of waiting and broken promises, Ivan's brokerage turned to recasting the relationship between Febi and Pangia as binding and enduring. The child of Diana and Stan embodied the unity of the two lines as inheritors of Juha.

Jancsics (2015) distinguishes between brokerage within systems of balanced reciprocity and general reciprocity. In the former, a known and equivalent return is expected within a set period of time,



while in the latter the giver expects a significant benefit, but the exact nature or timing of the return gift is not specified. This definition draws on Sahlin's (1972). Though Sahlin's classification has been critiqued by scholars such as Gell (1999), Rooney (2019) and Widlok (2013) as inadequately accounting for sharing (see also Gregory, 2012), the tension between Pangia and Febi is well explained by distinguishing balanced and general reciprocity. While the two groups have a day-to-day sharing connection, logics of both balanced and generalised reciprocity apply to the outstanding bridewealth payment in different ways. On the one hand, the expectation of a specific return (the agreed bridewealth) is the driver of this conflict, particularly following Cr Suri's promise of payment in a month. On the other hand, Febi know that Pangia hope to share in Juha benefits; hence Ivan's strategy of reassuring them that the reciprocal return gift is secure (though it might not come at a designated time or with a designated amount). Ivan reasserts the relational, kinship-based grounds of the connection between the two groups: Febi and Pangia are reaffirmed as affines.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The ethnographic case presented here involves tensions between two groups that are successfully resolved, at least temporarily, through cultural brokerage.

In this fine-grained exploration of a dispute between members of two distinct groups, we have sought to shed light on the dynamics of brokerage on a resource frontier, particularly those of brokerage from within. These dynamics include shifting modes of relational and transactional exchange, where the task of the broker is to re-establish the grounds for a relational mode of sharing, with future long-term benefits foregrounded over demands for repayment of past debt.

Oscillation between collective and individual responsibility is a feature of these brokerage strategies. Febi brokers distance themselves from their kinsman who has accrued the bridewealth debt, even as they raise funds among themselves to (part) settle the outstanding amount. Then the child of the marriage is brought back into the negotiations as a guarantee of collective allegiance. This step moves the relationship between the two groups beyond the broken promises and failures of reciprocity that have come to characterise it, but that now are put in the past and seen as failings of individuals, not the shared destiny of Febi and Pangia.

It remains to be seen how durable this brokerage fix will be. Febi and Kubo men who have received Juha money have largely spent it on their own consumption: travel to Port Moresby, purchase of houses and vehicles in Kiunga, or new marriages. When money has been spent on project activities, the funds have either been redistributed to kin doing manual labour or, as at Soabi, poor project design, budgeting and management have incurred major expenses without tangible benefits (Minnegal & Cox, 2026). Either way, the prospect of major benefits coming to Pangia seems remote, so the promise of Juha is highly likely to lead to disillusionment and further conflict.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Original data drawn on this research is held by the authors and anonymised sources will be made available on request.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

All photos and maps included have been produced by the authors.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ <https://www.pnglng.com/About/Our-Operations/Export-and-shipping>.

ⁱⁱ The Kina (PGK) is the national currency of PNG. In late 2025, 1 PGK = 0.36 AUD/ 0.24 USD.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bainton (2010) has documented a similar city fantasy on Lihir Island, where gold is mined; as has Cox (2018) for Bougainvilleans enthralled by the U-Vistract Ponzi scam.

^{iv} This, like other personal names in this paper, is a pseudonym. Interviews were conducted mainly in English but with much code-shifting into Tok Pisin. Until very recently, Kubo and Febi have learned English before being exposed to Tok Pisin. Quotations are transcriptions from field notes and recordings that have sometimes been edited for clarity.

^v *Maket moni* is a term for informal money lending (usually at high interest rates) and for the moneylenders themselves (also *maket moni lain*).

^{vi} 'Borrowing money ...' (Police—NCD/Central Divisional Command, 31 March 2025 | Facebook).

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