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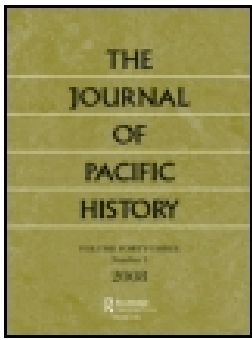
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NARRATIVES AND DOCUMENTS

The Beharell Patrol of 1938: The First Government Patrol Across the Land of Kubo People (Nomad District, Western Province, Papua New Guinea)

MONICA MINNEGAL  AND PETER D. DWYER 

ABSTRACT

In 1938, John S. Beharell led the first colonial government patrol into the then ‘uncontrolled’ land of Kubo people east of the Strickland River. That patrol is not referred to in reports of subsequent patrols a decade and more later. Nor does it appear in published histories of the area. That is unfortunate, for Beharell encountered a social landscape that differed from the landscape documented by later patrols. Analysis of Beharell’s report points to more general issues around use of patrol reports in documenting purportedly pre-colonial realities. These concern the nature of knowledge construction by patrol officers, the potential to render static what were complex social dynamics in pre-colonial contexts, and untangling change resulting from contact with outsiders from endogenous processes of change when these will necessarily have been entangled.

Key words: Papua New Guinea, patrol reports, knowledge production, social landscape, peri-colonial history

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and historians have long used archival resources to understand the early history of colonial encounters in remote areas of Papua New Guinea (PNG). While these are immensely valuable, their use can be problematic. Colonial encounters are never one-sided, and attention to the Indigenous social, cultural, and political situations into which Europeans explorers arrived is increasingly common. But written records retain an authority that oral histories are rarely accorded.¹ In documenting a moment in time, such records risk rendering static the dynamism of local worlds. Analyses may presume that residents of these regions were ‘people without history’, and that initial census records and maps document a pre-colonial condition. That tendency becomes even more problematic when archives are poorly catalogued. We illustrate this here by reference to a report that documented the first patrol through one of the last regions of PNG to be visited by Australian government officials – a patrol led by J. Beharell in 1938², through the land of Kubo people in the northwest of what is now Western Province. Beharell’s report was not referred to by subsequent patrols a decade and more later, or in histories of colonial exploration in the region. That is unfortunate, for this initial patrol encountered a social landscape that differed from the landscape documented by those later patrols.

In this article we consider those differences and discuss their implications. We first locate the Beharell patrol in relation to the history of colonial expansion in this region. We then contextualize the patrol itself within events of the time to show why it was undertaken and how it was set up. This is followed by an analysis of observations from Beharell’s report, drawing out themes relevant both to understanding the challenges of translation that patrol officers faced and to re-interpreting the social and technological landscape of people in this region. Finally, we comment on the significance of this report having been ‘lost’, in a context where patrol reports form a primary data source for social mapping and landowner identification studies that routinely inform decisions about people entitled to a share of benefits from resource extraction.³

¹ For an illustration of the complexities entailed in drawing together written records and oral histories in PNG, see Edward L. Schieffelin and Hiroyuki Kurita, “‘The Phantom Patrol’: Reconciling Native Narratives and Colonial Documents in Reconstructing the History of Exploration in Papua New Guinea’, *Journal of Pacific History* 23, no. 1 (1988): 52–69.

² John S. Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 9 Sept.–14 Oct. 1938, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea (hereinafter National Archives of PNG), Patrol Reports, Western District, Daru (Kiunga) Station, 1938–9, vol. 36, 116–26, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb9592505c> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023); John S. Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 15 Oct.–8 Nov. 1938, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Daru (Kiunga) Station, 1938–9, vol. 36, 127–43, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb9592505c> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

³ Colin Filer, *Methods in the Madness: The “Landowner Problem” in the PNG LNG Project*, Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper no. 76 (Canberra: Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, 2019).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Recent publications have discussed the history of European visits to the lands of people who live east of the middle and upper reaches of the Strickland River, Western Province, Papua New Guinea.⁴ Those visits commenced in the mid-1880s, when an exploratory venture sponsored by the Geographical Society of Australasia reached the junction of the Strickland and Murray rivers⁵, and have continued to the present, with multinational companies exploring for gas and gold. But those visits have been sporadic, even after a government station was set up at Nomad in the early 1960s.⁶ Indeed, by the early 2000s nearly all White people in the region were again itinerants, occasionally passing through the area in pursuit of resources (miners), or information (anthropologists), or to deliver ‘aid’ of various kinds.

Our concern is with the middle phase of this history, when colonial authorities were patrolling the region. The well-known patrol by Jack Hides and Jim O’Malley travelled up the Strickland in 1935, then followed the Rentoul across the Great Papuan Plateau to reach the fringes of the highlands before returning to the coast.⁷ Two years later, in 1937, Hides led a private expedition up the Strickland in search of gold,⁸ and a year later, in 1938, the Island Exploration Company began intensive prospecting for oil along the river.⁹ The war then intervened, and it was another ten years before White prospectors returned to the region. Through these years, colonial authorities considered the area east of the Strickland River to be ‘uncontrolled’ and access was restricted. It would remain so until the early 1960s.

Published histories record the first excursion through the land of Kubo people east of the Strickland as being by a 1948 team from the Australasian Petroleum Company (APC), supported by Patrol Officer Des Clancy as they mapped the Cecilia anticline.¹⁰ Now, however, we have found the 1938 Beharell reports

⁴ Monica Minnegal and Peter D. Dwyer, ‘Timelines’, in *Navigating the Future: An Ethnography of Change in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017); Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal, with photographs by Bob Hoad, *Taim Bipo: People of the Nomad District, When the White Men Came* (ResearchGate, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27445.76001> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

⁵ Walter W. Froggatt, *New Guinea 50 Years Ago: Records from my old Diary kept during the Geographical Society of Australasia’s Expedition to the Strickland River, New Guinea 1885*, unpublished manuscript, 1936, University of Papua New Guinea Library (Special Collections), AL 4; Peter D. Dwyer, Monica Minnegal, and Chris Warrillow, ‘The Forgotten Expedition – 1885: The Strickland River, New Guinea’, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 101 (2015): 7–24.

⁶ Minnegal and Dwyer, *Taim Bipo*.

⁷ Edward L. Schieffelin and Robert Crittenden, *Like People You See in a Dream: First Contact in Six Papuan Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

⁸ Jack G. Hides, *Beyond the Kubea* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1939).

⁹ The geologist Geoffrey Barrow, working for IEC, provides an account of several mapping ventures on the Strickland River, north of the Rentoul River. Geoffrey Barrow, ‘Geological Reconnaissance of the Strickland River Area, Permit 4, Papua. Island Exploration Company Pty. Ltd Report April 1939’, unpublished, Papuan Oil Search Limited library, Sydney.

¹⁰ Des J. Clancy, Daru patrol no. 2 of 1947/48, 20 Nov. 1947–19 Jun. 1948, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Daru Station, 1947–8, vol. 45, 4–56, 88–95,

from a government patrol that occurred ten years earlier. In the second of these, Beharell recorded his travels 25–30 km eastwards from the Strickland River across Kubo land.¹¹ Though it originated from Kiunga police camp, documentation for Beharell's patrol was filed at Daru. Later administrators based at Kiunga were apparently unaware of the report's existence. Thus, in an overview of a 1959 patrol led by Brian McBride, the Acting Director of Native Affairs, T. C. Aitchison, wrote that there had been only one pre-WWII patrol to the region.¹² He presumably was referring to the renowned Hides and O'Malley patrol that passed well to the south. Similarly, those leading patrols out from Kiunga after WWII did not acknowledge Beharell's patrol. That is unfortunate, because Beharell's report offers important insights regarding people living in this area and may have usefully informed interpretations made by those later patrols. We turn now to the reasons for Beharell's patrol.

THE BEHARELL PATROL

From the beginning, European interest in the middle-Strickland area focused on the potential for extracting resources. But colonial authorities also sent out patrols tasked with drawing maps and conducting censuses, thus rendering land and people legible and eventually governable. While this imperative was harnessed by the demands of companies exploring for resources, patrol officers themselves were driven as much by curiosity and human interest as by economics. Beharell's patrol demonstrates this complex of motivations.

First patrol: to the Strickland River

The immediate stimulus for Beharell's patrol was to resolve trouble that a team of prospectors was having with local people near the Strickland River. From 14 July 1938–21 January 1939 Geoffrey Barrow, working with Island Exploration Company (IEC), undertook geological surveys along the middle and upper reaches of the Strickland River.¹³ His base camp, on the west side of the river, was about four km north of the eastern junction with the Cecilia (Baiya) River.¹⁴ Barrow spent much time away from that camp, engaged in survey work. He lost control of

<https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb2254555w> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023); Dwyer and Minnegal, *Navigating the Future*, 59–61.

¹¹ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39.

¹² T.C. Aitchison, Folio 49 in Brian McBride, Kiunga patrol no. 2 of 1959/60, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Kiunga Station, 1959–60, vol. 8, 43–111, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb4984957w> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

¹³ Barrow, 'Geological Reconnaissance of the Strickland River Area'.

¹⁴ Spelling of names often varies. When quoting we use the spelling provided. In other circumstances we use a currently favoured spelling. Thus, e.g. we render Beharell's 'Kubua' as 'Kubo' and his 'Biam' as 'Biami' as they are named by their Kubo neighbours, though the Biami self-

carriers and workers who, on the one hand, laid claim to the houses of local people and, on the other, felt threatened when challenged by armed men. By radio, Barrow sought assistance from government officers at the Kiunga Police Camp.

Patrol Officer J. Beharell was delegated to ‘report on troubles IE Com. are having with local natives’ and to ‘restore friendly relations among the natives between the Fly and Strickland Rivers’.¹⁵ On 9 September, he travelled by canoe from Kiunga to an IEC base camp on the Elevala River (approximately 90 km). The next day, with carriers, he commenced the two-day walk east to Barrow’s base camp on the Strickland River.

Through the next three weeks Beharell visited company camp sites north of the Strickland base camp, evicted non-local carriers from local houses, and encouraged some of them to return to the Elevala River base camp. Beharell himself turned back to the Elevala on 3 October, arriving there two days later.¹⁶ He concluded his report with the words:

I have spent over a month in this area now and I feel confident in saying that the friendship we had with these people has been restored through removing the causes, which, if they had been allowed to continue may have led to open hostilities. However, a firmer friendship has been made, and I feel sure will be kept with these locals between the Fly and Strickland Rivers.¹⁷

On 28 September, while still in the field, Beharell ‘received instructions by radio ... for my patrol on the east bank of the Strickland River’. His brief was, simply, ‘general exploration’.¹⁸

Second patrol: east from the Strickland River

On 14 October, Beharell returned to IEC’s Strickland base camp with a team of Kiwai prisoners who had been brought up the Fly River and across from Kiunga by Patrol Officer D. M. O’Connor to act as carriers for the east-bank patrol.¹⁹ Beharell noted that ‘O’Connor is endeavouring to get one or two of his Pare friends to accompany me as possible interpreters on my Patrol on the east bank of the Strickland River’.²⁰ However, this did not eventuate: ‘the two PARE men who had promised to accompany [Beharell] on this Patrol, had left during the night’ of 14 October.²¹

identify as Bedamuni. Similarly, the river named ‘Boiya’ by Beharell is often denoted by ‘Baiya’, ‘Baia’, or ‘Boiye’.

¹⁵ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 123; Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 218.

¹⁹ D.M. O’Connor, Daru patrol no. 10 of 1938/39, 25 Sept.–12 Nov. 1938, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Daru (Kiunga) Station, 1938–9, vol. 36, 95–115, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb9592505c> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

²⁰ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 125.

Through the next three days, with assistance from carriers loaned by IEC, Beharell moved his team and supplies to the north. On 17 October he made his first camp on the east bank of the Strickland, a little north of the west-side junction with 'a very large tributary' (the river locally named Dua).²² The campsite was at an abandoned 'village' where, at the side of the house, there was 'the skeleton of a deceased person wrapped in bark'.²³ It was from here that Beharell, accompanied by seven police and 39 carriers, commenced his east-side patrol (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Though Kubo people sometimes crossed to the west bank of the Strickland to engage with White men and, a month earlier, Beharell himself had briefly visited the village where he set up that first camp,²⁴ no White man had previously camped in 'uncontrolled' territory east of the river. Beharell was entering 'unknown' land. While two of the police travelling with him, Borege and Budua, had accompanied Hides and O'Malley in 1935, that patrol had followed the Rentoul River 40 km to the south. For the next eleven days Beharell's patrol ventured to the east, before circling back and returning to the west bank of the Strickland River on 1 November. We turn now to insights that the patrol report offers, not only into the people encountered and the social landscape in which they dwelt but also into the challenges of eliciting knowledge in the process of patrolling, contextualizing these with reference to later patrols. Throughout this discussion, we rely on both our own experience of the area traversed and things we have been told by people who accompanied us on those travels.²⁵

The land

The intense work schedule of IEC geologists meant that Beharell had few opportunities to elicit much information about the lay of the land or rivers east of the Strickland, that, by this time, the exploration companies had surveyed from the air.²⁶ He thus described the land as he encountered it, extrapolating at times based on what others had reported of the land much further south. His notes are clear, and his route – with descriptions of streams and rivers crossed, swamps passed, and changing terrain – can be traced on modern maps. At times the names he elicited for streams and rivers remain those in use today (Wa, Baiya), in other cases the names are unfamiliar but details provided leave little doubt about identity. The major stream he named Tabu, for example, is the one we knew as Bo; he may have misheard and

²¹ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 128.

²² *Ibid.*, 129–30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 130. In his reports, Beharell used 'house', 'doba', or 'village' for settlements that we would have described as 'longhouses' or, where there was a small cluster of houses, as 'hamlets'.

²⁴ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 122.

²⁵ Minnegal and Dwyer, *Navigating the Future*.

²⁶ Barrow, 'Geological Reconnaissance of the Strickland River Area'. Plate 1 shows routes flown in aerial surveys. See also Dwyer and Minnegal, *Taim Bipo*, 7.

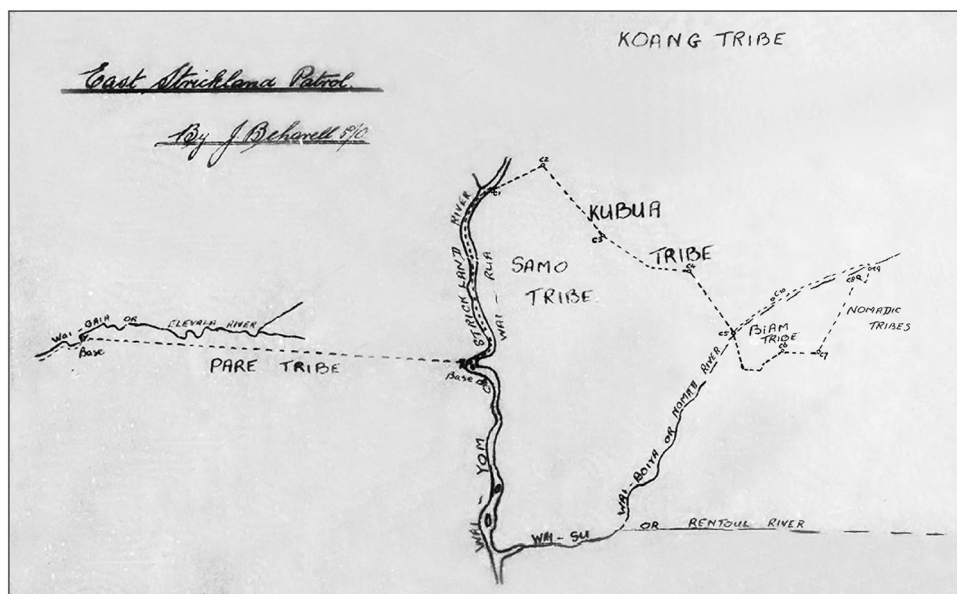


FIGURE 1. Beharell's map of his 1938 patrol east of the Strickland River.
Source: Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 142.

misunderstood a Kubo explanatory expression 'that is Bo'. When Beharell crossed the Baiya, he first encountered more frequent sago swamps and then increasingly hilly terrain rising to ridges. From his description, the furthest extent of his journey was just downstream of a deep gorge on the Baiya.

In seeking to locate his route within a larger landscape, however, Beharell presumed that the Baiya was the Nomad River that, three years earlier, Hides and O'Malley had recorded as a major tributary of the Rentoul.²⁷ The mistake is understandable. The Baiya flowed southwest where Beharell encountered it, and on that line might well have joined the Rentoul. Beharell was not to know that the Baiya turned back to the northwest a little downstream of his camp. Nor, at that time, would Beharell have known of other rivers joining the Strickland between the IEC base camp and the Rentoul.

People

Between the Strickland River and the Baiya River, Beharell passed through five 'Kubua' [Kubo] villages. The first, Faiwogi, had been recently abandoned, probably due to a death. The next, Eodibi (in the vicinity of a community named Headubi on the 1975 topographic map of this area), was large; thirty men from here accompanied

²⁷ Folios 13–14 in Jack G. Hides, Purari Strickland patrol no. 1 of 1934–35, 18 Dec. 1934–10 June 1935, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Gulf District, Purari Strickland station, 1934–5, vol. 1, 3–92, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb8465893g> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

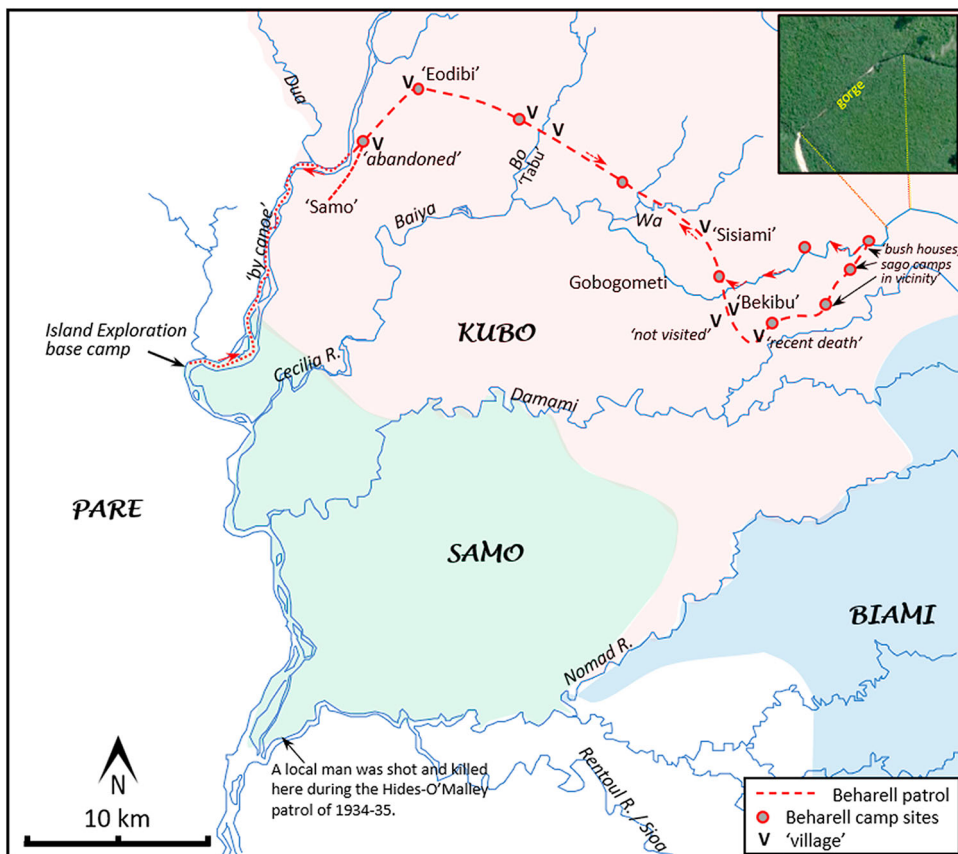


FIGURE 2. An interpretation of Beharell's east Strickland patrol route. Text in quotes indicates identifications and notes by Beharell. He named Baiya ('Boiya') as a river and Damami ('Daman') as a place. He recorded the current name Wa for one major tributary of Baiya, but recorded the other major tributary as 'Tabu' when it is now usually known as Bo. Language names and distributions follow post-2000 understandings.

Source: Authors.

the patrol on the next day's walk. That day they passed two 'villages' where they met 'more men' and 'many people'. Across Tabu [Bo], the next day, the patrol 'came to another KUBUA house and met more men and two SAMO men'. The following day, having crossed Wa, they came to a 'large village' named Sisiami with a substantial longhouse and other shelters (in the vicinity of a community named Soabi 2 on the 1975 topographic map). A few hours later, they reached the river Baiya, at a point not far upstream from the present location of Suabi.

Through much of his journey, Beharell travelled along well-established tracks, noting several side tracks to what he reportedly was told were other villages – a Samo village about two hours walk south of Faiwogi; other Samo villages south from the village east of Tabu [Bo]; and, from east of Wa, two Kubo villages named as Suia and Gobogaibi (the latter name possibly referencing a group we knew as Gobogometi with land in the indicated direction). It is unclear, however,

how far away these villages were, or whether the names referred to villages or to land associated with a particular group of people.

At the river Baiya the patrol found a suspension bridge. This river, Beharell was told, 'divides the KUBUA and BIAM tribes'.²⁸ He recorded three 'villages' south of that bridge and saw a track that led to 'DAMAN', which he assumed was another village but may have referred to the nearby river Damami. On their first day south of the Baiya they reached a house with an 'exceptionally large garden' where they were met by 'many men' but, because of a death, they did not stay.²⁹

From this point on, signs of human activity became scarcer, tracks were less clear and eventually disappeared, and local guides abandoned the patrol, appearing to 'not like the eastern track [Beharell was] following'.³⁰ The patrol came across some 'bush shelters', small gardens, sago swamps, and pitfall traps, but met no people. With the terrain becoming more rugged, and Beharell himself feverish, the patrol turned north to the Baiya, rafted back to their first crossing place, and retraced their route back to the Strickland.³¹

Far more people were living in the area traversed by Beharell in 1938 than was the case even ten years later. In 1948, Clancy spent several weeks in the land of Kubo people, mostly a little north of the area Beharell traversed, and reported that the population was 'very sparse'. He established a drop site close to the present location of Suabi, where a very large garden was shown on aerial photographs taken 'some ten years ago', but saw 'no signs of recent habitation' through the three days' walk before reaching the site or between it and the river he recorded as Bai'a [Baiya]. He commented that 'this area would seem to have been heavily gardened at one period and has now been abandoned for some considerable time'.³² A month later he reported that 'people from the west have at last overcome their fear of the Cecilia [Baiya] R and are coming in' to the drop site, including some from the river Osia to the north.³³

Patrols through the western side of Kubo land in the years 1964–9, by Hoad, Johnson, and Patterson, found few communities in the area and 'at most they met only 15–20 people at each community they visited'.³⁴ In 1970, Cawthorn traversed

²⁸ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 133–4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 134–7.

³² Clancy, Daru patrol no. 2 of 1947/48, 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ Minnegal and Dwyer, *Navigating the Future*, 63; Bob A. Hoad, Nomad patrol no. 4 of 1963/64, 13 Nov. 1963–12 Feb. 1964, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Nomad Station, vol. 1, 3–84, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb9934068h> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023); A.E. Johnson, Nomad patrol no. 2 of 1968/69, 8–16 July 1968, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Nomad Station, 1968–9, vol. 6, 36–51, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb6964499g> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023); William R. Paterson, Nomad patrol no. 14 of 1968–9, 10–21 Feb. 1969, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Nomad Station, vol. 6, 189–206, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb6964499g> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

the area between the Baiya and the Damami in which Beharell reported three substantial villages, but met no people; he commented ‘there does not appear to be any population in this area’.³⁵

It seems, then, that the area Beharell traversed suffered significant depopulation in the decades after his patrol. Oral and written records hint at two factors contributing to this – disease and displacement.

Like many other colonized nations, New Guinea peoples suffered a series of epidemics in the decades after outsiders arrived among them. Nomad patrol reports refer to influenza in the late 1960s/early 1970s killing as much as ten per cent of the population in the Strickland–Bosavi area. Local histories recorded by anthropologists suggest earlier impacts. Edward Schieffelin and Raymond Kelly, for example, reported epidemic-induced depopulation on the Great Papuan Plateau dating from the 1940s or 1950s.³⁶ Those epidemics may well also have swept through the Kubo region.³⁷

In addition, it seems that within ten years of Beharell’s patrol Kubo people had effectively abandoned the north-eastern reaches of their territory. In the face of raids by Biami people, they retreated westward, to live along or even across the Strickland River. Patrol reports through the late 1960s and early 1970s document the associated tensions,³⁸ but this history remained salient in the mid-1980s when people told us stories of that time and attributed the then prevailing refusal to grow coconut palms to a fear of being raided.³⁹

Deaths and displacements may have been linked, of course. Epidemics disrupt normal life; the taken-for-granted relationships that frame the meanings

³⁵ Folio 220 in W.A. Cawthorn, Nomad patrol no. 13 of 1969/70, 13 May–17 July 1969, National Archives of PNG, Patrol Reports, Western District, Nomad Station, 1969–70, vol. 7, 196–246, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb63160300> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

³⁶ Raymond C. Kelly, *Etoro Social Structure: A Study in Structural Contradiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); Edward L. Schieffelin, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).

³⁷ Populations in this region were, and remain, vulnerable to epidemic diseases introduced from outside. It is not the case, however, that exposure to these diseases required direct contact with colonizers. In the Strickland–Bosavi region, and in other sparsely populated and seemingly remote areas of PNG, intercommunity and cross-language movements were sufficiently common that exposure occurred often as much as two decades before colonizers appeared on the land. R.M. Garruto et al., ‘High Prevalence of Human T-lymphotropic Virus Type I Infection in Isolated Populations of the Western Pacific Region Confirmed by Western Immunoblot’, *American Journal of Human Biology* 2 (1990): 439–47; Carol Jenkins et al., ‘Change and Epidemiological Patterns Among the Hagahai, Papua New Guinea’, *Human Ecology* 17 (1989): 27–57.

³⁸ Cawthorn, for example, reported that Biami raiding had displaced Kubo people even as far west as the stream Bo and later that ‘all KUBOR people know of the BIAMI and hold them in fear’. Cawthorn, Nomad patrol no. 13 of 1969/70, 204, 229.

³⁹ The fear may have been mutual. Clancy noted in the summary of his 1948 patrol that the people he met at the Nomad River ‘gave us to understand that previously they had been friendly with the Bai’a until a great battle had been fought, and many people had been killed. For this reason they had abandoned their gardens and moved east. Although sago was very scarce in the new region they did at least feel safe’. Clancy, Daru patrol no. 2 of 1947/48, 44.

people perceive in everyday activity – relationships with kin, with neighbours, with land – may be broken. Whatever the cause, the social landscape Beharell documented changed before the next patrol arrived.

Social landscape

The people Beharell met during his patrol were friendly; though at times some were reserved, none were hostile. Indeed, many seem to have been not merely open to engaging with the patrol but actively sought to trade food and artifacts with them. These attitudes may have reflected Beharell's own intercultural competence. He notes, for example, his practice of 'allowing them time to send their women away' before entering any village.⁴⁰ But he also displayed great curiosity and patience in eliciting information.

At Eodibi, 'due to the solid help of A/C Borege', Beharell collected a list of 100 words in what he understood to be the Kubua [Kubo] language, with an impressive 75 per cent of these closely related to their purported English analogues.⁴¹ There was a tendency to confuse specific names for group names (for example, recording the name of a type of banana when eliciting the name for 'banana', or recording the word for 'palm' when eliciting the name for betelnut palm), he was more likely to be correct when recording names for categories (man, woman) than for relationships (father, wife), and he inverted the sequence of digits for the numbers 1–5, though the names recorded for digits were correct. These are easy mistakes to make when there is no intermediate language through which to clarify questions or referents.

That same day, Beharell elicited an outline of the Kubo social landscape, recording the group names of peoples who lived in different directions from Eodibi, and the relationships between them and Kubo.⁴² Over the next two days, Beharell learned of other groups of people living further away – to the south along the Sioa [Rentoul] River and, to the east, Biami [Bedamuni] people. Again, allowing for variable pronunciation, Beharell's summary is accurate; peoples associated with each of the names he recorded still live in the directions indicated. But the referents of names Beharell recorded as 'tribes' are not all of equivalent logical type; some refer to linguistic groups (Kubo, Samo, Biami), others to subgroups within these that now tend to be labelled 'clans' by local people (Yawuasoso, Habiei).⁴³

⁴⁰ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 131, 140–41. It was Beharell's wordlist that first brought his report to our attention. As part of an unrelated study, we were searching patrol reports from different stations for references to 'dog' and encountered Beharell's record of 'so' as the word for dog; we knew this to be Kubo usage.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴³ The Kubo word *oobi* connotes one or more patrilineal lineages whose borders were fluid and whose members assumed, though seldom specified, genealogical connection to a common ancestor. In most current contexts, the word *oobi* has given way to 'clan' in which borders are more rigid and membership is more strictly bounded by patrilineal connections (Minnegal and Dwyer, *Navigating the Future*, x). We shall continue to use 'clan' in these contexts.

Beharell was told, too, of the relationships between these different groups. Except for the ‘Koang’ to the north, ‘with whom they are not friendly’, people at Eodibi assured him that the patrol ‘would be well received by any of the others’. Indeed, when the patrol reached the Baiya, Beharell was told not only that the river formed a border between Kubo and Biami people but also that ‘the two tribes are very friendly’.⁴⁴

The purportedly friendly and hostile relations between groups that Beharell reports are intriguing, given the subsequent history of the region. By the 1960s, the ‘very friendly’ Biami were considered dangerous enemies by Kubo; they raided Kubo communities, killing many and at times taking women and children captive.⁴⁵ People recalled those who had been taken, told stories of them and, as much as three decades later, welcomed them or their descendants when they returned home. The only marriages between Kubo and Biami people that we learned of at Suabi in the years to 2014 were traced to such histories of capture. Through the same years, in contrast, Kubo freely intermarried with Konai and Febi people – probably Beharell’s ‘Koang’, with whom Kubo were said to be ‘not friendly’ – and there was much movement between the lands of these people.⁴⁶ Since the time of Beharell, the social landscape of Kubo people has been reoriented away from the southeast and towards the north.

It may be that Beharell was confused about the Biami. Though he identified those he met south of the Baiya as ‘Biam’, he also noted: ‘These BIAMI people as far as I can make out speak the same language as the KUBUA people. There may be a difference, but I could not detect it’.⁴⁷ Given Beharell’s excellent ear for language, revealed in the wordlist he collected at Eodibi, this observation is telling. The Bedamuni [Biami] language, while related to Kubo, has a very different lexicon.⁴⁸ In addition, given Beharell’s interest in mapping and recording the names of waterways, it is striking that he makes no mention of ‘Poriamia’, the Bedamuni name for the river that Kubo name Baiya. It is thus likely that the people Beharell encountered between the Baiya and Damami rivers were Kubo, rather than Biami. In 1970, Kubo people told Cawthorn that the land along the upper Damami, while now occupied by Biami, was not Biami land.⁴⁹ Our own records show that several Kubo clans trace their origins to topographic features (islands, caves) in that stretch of country.

⁴⁴ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 133.

⁴⁵ Cawthorn, Nomad patrol no. 13 of 1969/70, 121–22.

⁴⁶ Minnegal and Dwyer, *Navigating the Future*.

⁴⁷ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 133.

⁴⁸ Kubo and Bedamuni are reported to share 32 per cent of basic vocabulary. R. Daniel Shaw, ‘The Bosavi language family’, *Pacific Linguistics* 24 (1986): 45–76.

⁴⁹ ‘KUBOR from SUABI and MAGWIBI told me how BIAMI raiders forced their fathers westward, continually attacking them until KUBOR settlements broke up and scattered under the pressure’. Cawthorn, Nomad patrol no. 13 of 1969/70, 140. ‘They say that they lived at the headwaters of the CECILIA about a generation ago, but the BIAMI forced them downstream’ to areas well to west of where Beharell crossed the Baiya. *Ibid.*, 120.

Biami do indeed live to the southeast of the Baiya, as Beharell was told. They may hold long-term rights to lands as far north as Damami. The presence of a vine bridge suggests Beharell was on a major route to the southeast that may well have led to Biami territory. But this does not mean that Biami land lay immediately across the river.

Technology

Beharell reported four vine bridges along the roughly 12 km stretch of the Baiya that he rafted. Yet no subsequent patrol makes any mention of such bridges in this area. In the 34 years that we have been visiting Suabi, we heard no talk of such bridges across streams in Kubo land, though people complained often of the danger entailed in canoe crossings when rivers were in flood. When we explicitly asked about bridges, prompted by Beharell's report, a man in his forties told us by phone that there had indeed been such a bridge across the Baiya near the junction with Wa, and others towards the headwaters of Baiya, but that he had not himself seen them; he had only heard stories. During fieldwork in October 2022, it emerged that those younger than mid-30s were not aware bridges had ever been built across the Baiya and were sceptical of the possibility. A few of their parents could recall, when prompted, that a bridge sometimes featured in stories, though they had not given this much thought. Only the elderly could give any details of locations, recalling tales of a bridge located at the mouth of Dima, near the end of the airstrip at Suabi, and another upstream on land associated with Hobua clan.

Vine bridges are not easy to construct across a river that is 40–50 metres wide, and they require regular maintenance. That there were four such bridges along a comparatively short stretch of the Baiya suggests, again, both a larger population than later patrols reported for the region and much interaction, if not 'very friendly' relations, between the people living to the north and south of the river.

That this technology was apparently abandoned, though bridges continued to be built further to the south and north, again supports the interpretation that the social landscape of Kubo people was significantly disrupted soon after Beharell's patrol. It is possible that the bridges were destroyed as Kubo withdrew to the north and west away from Biami raids. There is, however, another possibility – that the bridges were no longer maintained when alternative means of crossing the river became more readily accessible. Kubo people did have canoes when Beharell's patrol arrived; he reports a 'canoe landing' where they crossed the stream Tabu [Bo].⁵⁰ During his earlier patrol on the west bank of the Strickland, however, Beharell observed that men from the east-bank village were 'not used to canoeing'. Though those he met 'insisted, once in the [patrol's] canoe, of doing their share of paddling ... [they] several times nearly gave us a swim'.⁵¹ Canoeing across a creek is very different from crossing a river the size of the Baiya (much less the Strickland),

⁵⁰ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 132.

⁵¹ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 11 of 1938/39, 122.

particularly when in flood. Yet, over subsequent decades this seems to have become the sole means these people had of crossing the Baiya. Given that there was another significant technological change at this time – the introduction of steel tools – the possibility of a causal connection must be considered.

When the patrol eventually returned to Eodibi, Beharell commented that the villagers ‘have almost doubled the size of their garden area since I passed through [twelve days earlier] and the axe I gave them has done its share of the work. I never saw anything but stone adzes on the whole trip’.⁵² Beharell left a tomahawk and knives as gifts elsewhere along his route and local people clearly recognized the potential of these new tools. That potential would have extended to their use in making dugout canoes. Chipping away the heartwood of a tree trunk with a stone adze is a slow and tedious process; it would be greatly facilitated with steel tools.⁵³ It seems feasible, then, that Kubo made more canoes in the years following Beharell’s patrol.

Canoes are a very different technology from vine bridges. The latter cannot be constructed by a person acting alone, may last many years if regularly repaired, do not require skill to use once built and thus tend to be common goods. Dugout canoes, in contrast, can be carved by one man alone (although several working together will speed up the process), are not easily repaired, have a lifespan of two to three years at best, and require considerable skill to operate effectively. As a result, they tend to be identified with individuals, in a way bridges are not. The implications for social change are significant. A shift from reliance on bridges to increased use of canoes may have reduced incentives for collective action and, in as much as collective action serves to counter intra- and inter-group tensions, may have played a part in enabling the violence that seems to have erupted in this area through the decades after Beharell’s visit. Crucially, too, the potential to control access to the tools needed to make canoes, as well as to control the use of canoes and thus access to the skill needed to operate them effectively, may have changed gender relations in this area. In 1986–7, canoes were owned and almost exclusively operated by men. Women’s mobility will have been much more limited, and dependent on men, at this time than it was when bridges spanned the Baiya.

A final possibility must be canvassed. When asked about bridges in 2022, the immediate and emphatic response by those who knew of their previous existence was that ‘we had no canoes’, so had to build bridges. While people now often complain of the difficulty they have making canoes because of limited access to concave steel adzes, the absence of canoes in the past is attributed not to this but to a taboo on their use upstream of the junction of Wa with the Baiya. That taboo would not have been particularly onerous during the years when the area along upper reaches of the Baiya was largely depopulated due to fighting. As people returned to the area following colonial intervention, however, constraints on crossing the

⁵² Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 137.

⁵³ In 1986–7, there was one steel canoe adze available along a 40 km stretch of the Strickland River. This was passed around among men from several communities and, indeed, three language groups.

river will have become more problematic. The taboo, we were told, was first broken less than 50 years ago, when a man now in his 60s was initiated. A canoe was brought upstream hidden under leafy branches; when disaster did not strike, others followed. But taboos encode social knowledge as much as they shape social practice. In this case, the imposition of a taboo on use of canoes, and its subsequent lifting, could well accord with the other interpretations offered above.

An historical note

While Beharell did not see steel tools other than those he provided, at least some of the people he encountered were aware of White men travelling through the lands of other people to the south. On the third day of the patrol, one of Beharell's constables 'picked up a used .303 shell from the track, which he brought to me. It was a Mark vi shell and the locals readily told me that a man, pointing to an A/C, had killed a man near the SU-WAI [Sioa River] in a sago swamp with this cartridge'. Beharell concluded that 'this must be one of the shells used by A/C Agoti on the late Jack Hides' patrol'. A/C Borege, presumably drawing on his observations during that patrol, told Beharell that the Kubo practice of wearing a long leaf 'pinned just above the forehead' was common also among people of the Sioa River, though local people 'added that they were not friendly with these people'.⁵⁴ How the cartridge came to be more than 40 km north of where that incident occurred (see [Figure 2](#)) we cannot know. But the fact that this unique object, and the story associated with it, did move so far testifies, again, to extensive networks of communication linking peoples across the region at this time.

DISCUSSION

The discovery of Beharell's report, and the insights it offers to analysis of social relations and dynamics through the early phase of colonial encounters in one small part of PNG, points to more general issues around use of patrol reports in documenting purportedly pre-colonial realities. These concern the nature of knowledge construction by patrol officers, the presumption that the people in previously 'uncontrolled' areas are somehow 'without history', and untangling change resulting from contact with outsiders from endogenous processes of change when these will necessarily have been entangled.

Here we summarize key findings about Kubo people, their sociality, and history, before reflecting on some of those more general issues. We end by returning to the invisibility of Beharell's report in colonial histories of the Strickland–Bosavi region, speculating as to how it might have been misplaced, and why that matters.

Beharell's report on his 1938 patrol through the land of Kubo people documented a secure and well-networked population north of the Baiya that seemed

⁵⁴ Beharell, Daru patrol no. 12 of 1938/39, 131–2.

confident in engaging with outsiders. Each community he visited was within four kilometres of another. While reports of friendly or non-friendly relations with distant others should be treated with caution, the presence of Samo visitors in at least one village, together with well-used tracks and vine bridges, suggests that people moved often and comparatively freely beyond immediate neighbours at this time. The same conclusion is supported by the demeanour of those whom Beharell met; he described them as ‘most friendly, but very inquisitive’, examining his body and possessions closely, ‘taking off my helmet, touching my hair, skin and clothes’.⁵⁵

Once Beharell crossed the Baiya there seems to have been more hesitance. He describes the first men he met there as ‘very timid, but friendly’ and a little further on, for the first time, the patrol was not made welcome at a village.⁵⁶ His local guides abandoned him and, for the first time, he set a guard around the camp at night.⁵⁷ People waited out of sight for exchanges to be made for food, and some overtly expressed fear that the patrol had come to kill them.⁵⁸

The demeanour of these eastern Kubo, living much closer to Biami territory, resembles that described for people throughout the region in later patrol reports; these wrote of people avoiding contact with patrols, and of guides who were reluctant to take the patrol to villages and much better at finding tracks that led out of the region than into it. The sense of security and openness to new encounters that Beharell described among people north of the Baiya seems to have been lost in the intervening years. The population, too, declined, with villages of 15–20 people, including women and children, now spaced ten kilometres or more apart. But place names and the names of social groups Beharell recorded remain recognizable in later reports and, eighty years later, tracks still follow routes Beharell documented.

Beharell’s report was remarkably accurate in its observations of people and places that he encountered. But his attempt to map the wider social landscape must be treated with more scepticism; while directions recorded are generally correct, distances to other people and places were understandably harder to judge. Beharell seems to have assumed that references were to near neighbours, not allowing that social networks and knowledge may have extended over larger distances. Similarly, his interpretation that the Baiya formed a social boundary, and thus that the people on the other side were of a different ‘tribe’, may have reflected Western expectations rather than what he was told. Fifty years later, Kubo defined lands associated with particular people by reference to focal sites and streams rather than ‘borders’; to the extent that boundaries could be said to exist, these lie along watersheds rather than waterways.⁵⁹ Any reading of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 133–4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 134–5.

⁵⁹ Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal, ‘Where all the Rivers Flow West: Maps, Abstraction and Change in the Papua New Guinea Lowlands’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 25 (2014): 40, 47.

patrol reports must attend to such influences and constraints on how information is heard and ‘knowledge’ produced.⁶⁰

Colonization is a process and not an event.⁶¹ Neo-colonial processes associated with extractive industries, however, too often still seek to pin distribution of ‘benefits’ to associations with land as depicted in early colonial records, treating these as documenting the moment at which an authentic past was disrupted. Beharell’s report, like those from later patrols, has captured the configuration of Kubo sociality at one moment in time. It would be wrong, however, to assume that his description, being earlier than those other reports, somehow more accurately represents a ‘pre-colonial’ Kubo world. Configurations will have been always in flux. But the social and cultural dynamics that shape responses to disruption may have been more resilient.⁶² It is for this reason that we find Beharell’s report so valuable; it enables us to glimpse the ‘histories’ playing out alongside colonial endeavours to ‘control’ the region.

Attending to those multiple histories also challenges the reader to consider the processes that shape them. We do not know whether Beharell’s patrol, or the IEC geologists working along the Strickland River at the time, introduced influenza to the region, though an epidemic probably affected local people soon after the patrol. Nor do we know whether the steel tools Beharell left with these people contributed to abandoning vine bridges and substituting canoes as means to cross the Baiya. We do not need to postulate either epidemic or declining commitment to maintenance of common goods as having triggered the increasing conflict that Kubo were caught up in after 1938, although these may well have exacerbated the tensions already evident south of the Baiya. But the questions can be asked only because Beharell’s report has come to light.

The invisibility of Beharell’s report in previous colonial histories of the Strickland–Bosavi region is thus unfortunate, and warrants being addressed. The reasons are likely to have been at least twofold. First, the patrol occurred in the very early days of a government station being established at Kiunga, when no consistent practice had emerged about where to lodge reports of patrols from what was then a police outpost. Some reports were kept at Kiunga, where they were readily accessible to those planning subsequent patrols from there; others, like those of patrols led by Beharell in 1937–9, were carried back to Daru and stored there. Secondly, Beharell’s patrol occurred less than a year before the start of WWII. Beharell left the colonial service to join the Australian army, fighting in the Middle East and then New Guinea before returning to Australia. He did not rejoin the colonial service in PNG after the war, instead taking on a somewhat similar role with the Western

⁶⁰ Schieffelin and Kurita, in ‘The Phantom Patrol’, wrote of the culturally specific ‘constraints and influences’ that affect production of oral histories in PNG, but pay less attention to the cultural perspectives and modes of storytelling that shape patrol reports.

⁶¹ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassel, 1999).

⁶² Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal, ‘Theorizing Social Change’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): 629–45.

Australian Department of Native Affairs.⁶³ Unlike some others who conducted early patrols in the Strickland–Bosavi area, therefore, Beharell was not around to remind later colonial officers of his work. Nor did he have a public profile like Jack Hides, media coverage of whose exploits ensured his reputation survived after his death. Personal networks, it seems, may have as much to play in shaping histories of colonization as good documentation and effective strategies for archiving records.

CONCLUSION

That Beharell's report was lost, and that others, elsewhere, may have suffered the same fate, does matter. Such reports, when read in context and through a comparative lens, provide valuable insights into local socio-ecological processes, as well as into histories of colonization and colonial knowledge production. But their value reaches beyond such academic interests. These past exploratory excursions are drawn on in preparing social mapping and landowner identification reports for major resource development projects, and in promoting or sustaining local claims to land ownership. The reports thus have current economic significance.⁶⁴ Factors that might affect the visibility of reports need to be considered when identifying materials to be drawn on in constructing and evaluating local histories.

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⁶³ After WWII, Beharell worked until 1985 for the Western Australian public service, initially with the Department of Native Affairs and later with the Department of Community Affairs. He corresponded with the anthropologist Ronald Berndt about marriage practices among indigenous Australians. D. McL. Beaton, 'Conditions of Natives in Kimberleys', letter to the Editor, *The West Australian*, 13 June 1953, 3; Jack Edmonds, 'Integration – Big Step Forward in W.A.', *The Canberra Times*, 21 Dec. 1966, 21; Tom Grahamslaw, Extracts from 'Recollections of ANGAU', Papua New Guinea Association of Australia 2015, <https://pngaa.org/recollections-of-angau-tom-grahamslaw/> (accessed 5 Aug. 2022).

⁶⁴ Colin Filer, *Methods in the Madness*; Laurence Goldman, 'Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas Project: Social Impact Assessment 2008' (Report to ExxonMobil Corporation, 2009).