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A Road, a Border, and Development in New Guinea

Peter D. Dwyer  and Monica Minnegal 

A road being built in north-western Western Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), addresses local desires for mobility, for development, and for establishing materially beneficial relationships with people living west of the border in the Indonesian province of South Papua. This road is explicitly intended to reach beyond the nation and, like all routes to border-crossings, exposes differences even as it connects. On the Indonesian side a new sealed road reaches the border at Yetetkun, which is being established as a third official Indonesia–PNG cross-border post. More resources are committed to the Indonesian project than to the PNG project, a difference that is materially apparent at the border. The potential exists that the construction of roads and cross-border posts of these kinds, in combination with triggers arising elsewhere in PNG, may fuel persistent dissatisfactions within Western Province and tempt realignment to the west.

Keywords: Border; Development; Indonesia; Papua New Guinea; Road; Security; Trade

Introduction

In October 2018, the Hon. James Donald, Member of Parliament (MP) for the Papua New Guinea (PNG) electorate of North Fly announced that the Alicepit to Indonesia road had been launched. This road, he said, would make possible his ‘dream to build a city in the jungle’ (Donald and Hon 2018a). It is one of several long-term road projects that are overseen by Donald and supported by District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) funds allocated to him. In a later report, he noted that with 2.6 km of the Alicepit to Indonesia road remaining to be cleared, his team’s efforts were ‘receiving attention from PNG National Government and Indonesian Government towards this road project and more border infrastructures’ (Donald and Hon

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2018b). Donald has recently won his second term as an MP and been appointed as Vice Minister for Mining and Border Development (Rava 2022).

The roads Donald is developing include several that will improve access to markets at the towns of Kiunga and Ningerum for people at outlying communities, a road from the Kiunga area through the refugee base at Iowarra to reach the remote Nomad district east of the Strickland River, and the Alicepit–Indonesia road that links two nations and will make it possible for Western Province people ‘to access basic goods and services, business and travel to the more advanced border towns and cities in Indonesia’ (Anon 2018; Mathias 2018). Though these will improve movement in the north of Western Province, they will leave the middle and southern reaches still isolated by road from each other and from the north.

In this paper, we seek an understanding of Donald’s Alicepit–Indonesia road project within the frame of several concerns that are widespread in Papua New Guinea. These are the right to travel, the desirability of development and, with particular reference to western provinces, relations with people across the border in Indonesia. All three foci concern mobility, but the latter two introduce themes of directionality and reflexivity into movement. In PNG, as elsewhere, roads are seen as a vital component of strategies to integrate the nation, as epitomised in the ‘PNG Connect’ programme of road construction. The road we are concerned with here is explicitly intended to reach beyond the nation. This draws attention to the relationship between roads as facilitating movement and borders as constraining or directing movement. And, like all routes to border-crossings, the road exposes differences even as it connects (Dalakoglou 2017). We thus examine differences in the way the border-crossing that the road was designed to facilitate was perceived on the two sides of the border. Like the roads discussed by Matthäus Rest and Alessandro Rippa (2019), Donald’s road ‘actively participates in shaping the ways in which people ... conceptualize their position ... understand their past, and imagine their future’ (Rest and Rippa 2019, 374).

Crucially, however, roads may exist in the imaginations of people far beyond their actual reach. In this paper we draw on imaginings presented, interrogated, and contested in the spaces of media—mass, social and virtual. There is no recent ethnographic research among those living along the new road, or along the border that it seeks to access. While we do touch on ethnographic work conducted some distance in space and time from the crossings that concern us here, we cannot speak of the ways that Donald’s road has affected the daily lives of those whose land it traverses. Rather, it is the ways those concerned with the road express their aspirations and fears to a wider audience that we address. While we begin with a review of widespread concerns expressed in media across PNG, we turn to a consideration of methodological issues before focusing in on Donald’s road.

Freedom of Movement, Development and Cross-Border Relationships

The freedom to move within and between provinces and, to a lesser extent, between countries, is ranked highly as a constitutionally enshrined right by contemporary

Papua New Guineans—at least when the ability to move is threatened. In many places, and through various media, people ask often for access to roadways or airways that will facilitate mobility. They have done so for decades (Hayano 1990, 2; Beer and Church 2019). People in PNG have always travelled—adventuring, trading, and raiding—beyond the spaces of everyday subsistence. But the distances to be traversed in search of a good life now are far greater. New mechanisms, as well as modes, of mobility must be sought—mechanisms that compress space—if people are to participate fully in the life of the nation rather than merely in their local social worlds (Maclean 1994, 2013).¹

Crucially, these networks of movement are not seen merely as paths out into a wider world. Indeed, as Neil Maclean (1994) argued decades ago, they provide means along which to draw the resources and knowledge of wider society into home communities (see also Minnegal and Dwyer 1999, 77). It is incorporation into the network of movement enabled by roads and airways that renders one a citizen of the new world order.

Often there is an expectation, by local people, that though they may have to pay for the privilege of using these facilities it will be government that pays for building and maintaining them. Access to ‘roads’ is a right of citizens, their provision a responsibility of government. In Western Province, with its vast distances and minimal roads, this expectation was pervasive in campaigning for the 2022 election and in critiques on social media of performance by past and present politicians.

But provision does not confer control. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic an ambiguously worded announcement from the government-appointed controller was read as implying that people would not be able to access commercial flights within PNG unless they held proof that they had been vaccinated (RNZ 2021). An outcry was immediate and passionate. Given government statements that vaccination was voluntary the new edict seemed to curtail people’s constitutional right to the freedom to travel (Greenfield Pacific 2021). The leader of the Opposition in parliament, Belden Namah, declared the move to be in ‘direct breach of Section 52 of the Constitution’, to which Prime Minister James Marape responded confirming that ‘freedom of movement is a fundamental right, which is protected under the national constitution’. The issue attracted intense concern through early July among Western Province participants on Fly River Forum, where these statements from both leaders were reposted.² The controller revised his earlier announcement, now stating that ‘it was not our intention to marginalize those who have not been vaccinated, nor force them to be vaccinated but to ensure that those who have been vaccinated are free to travel when and where-ever they wish to domestically’ (National Control Centre for Covid-19 2021). This reinforced awareness of a constitutionally enshrined freedom of movement within PNG and beyond its borders.

A second widespread discourse, common in Western Province and the highlands, concerns an expectation that a city will emerge in an area that is generally considered to be remote or underdeveloped. This concern is of long standing. Among Kubo people of the north-eastern corner of Western Province it is expressed in

understandings that failures dating to the late 1940s by an earlier generation of local men caused ‘white people’ to abandon established camp sites and build ‘Mosebi’—Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea—at Nomad rather than at the place where they had camped (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017, 67–68). In the same district, work has been recently underway clearing a site as the foundation of an intended, though romantically idealised, future city (Malingi 2021). The thought is explicitly expressed in Donald’s suggestion that a road from Alicepit to Indonesia might fulfil the dream of a ‘city in the jungle’ (Donald and Hon 2018a), in the assertion of Larry Andagali—a prominent Huli business man and advocate—that ‘we will not stop until Hela becomes a city’ (Main 2020, 16), and local enthusiasm for the prospect that the Chinese might build a city and fishing port at Daru (Whiting 2021).

Expectations underlying this trope concern centralisation, growth, and development. But they reflect, too, resistance to being absorbed into the undifferentiated transactional field that democracy and capitalism appear to establish. These ‘cities’ are imagined as embodiments of new collective identities—ethnic, provincial, national—that, in structuring relations to the state, have emerged as new loci for differentiation. In effect, the call to establish a city of one’s own is an appeal for what Maclean (1994) termed ‘autonomy’, in contrast to the freedom offered individuals by an unbounded network centred somewhere beyond the horizon.

That resistance may be reinforced, especially in Western Province, by drawing upon recent life-ways as dispersed ‘gatherers and hunters’ to assert inherent disadvantage or by charging the incumbent national government with accepting huge financial benefits from, for example, the Ok Tedi mine to support development in Port Moresby while ignoring the citizenry of the largest province with the lowest population density in PNG. In both cases, the call is for an inversion of status, with centres of wealth and power to be established in what have until now been peripheries too often parasitised by past development agendas. In both cases too, however, perceptions of peripheral status are linked to the challenge of accessing, much less constructing, a ‘growth centre’ in the absence of roads.

These two tropes converge in the interest people show with regard to plans, or desired plans, to upgrade existing airports to an international standard (Anon 2021a, 2022a; Auro 2021; Greenfield Pacific 2022; Marape–Rosso Government 2022; Maso 2020); to develop new airstrips; and to work completed, underway, or intended by the Rural Airstrip Agency (RAA), PNG.³ In much of Western Province, air provides the only means of relatively rapid access to manufactured goods—salt and soap are priorities—or of emergency medical evacuation. Given these and other motivations, it is not surprising that, through the years since 1963, 11 airstrips serving six language groups have been opened in the northeast corner of Western Province.⁴ None, however, has attracted outside interest in scheduled flights, and all remain at risk of imminent closure by the RAA due to inadequate maintenance. In PNG, as elsewhere, both roads and airstrips are valorised not only for their compression of time and space but also as pathways to a desired future (Harvey 2012). Roads and airstrips differ, however, in the autonomy of movement that they facilitate.

While the former may seem more difficult to construct, in terms of length and the diverse territories to be traversed, once carved out of the forest there is no need for external certification of a road or negotiation with external service providers for access to scarce and costly seats on a flight. The dreams of physical and social mobility for people in remote regions of Western Province are thus increasingly framed in terms of roads. Images of roads—despairing of current quality, extolling roads seen elsewhere, or celebrating progress in the construction of new roads—are daily fare on social media sites.

Thirdly, grassroots opinions expressed by people of Western Province about those from the neighbouring Indonesian provinces⁵ are contextual and ambiguous, varying from ‘they are our brothers’, through ‘they cross the border to plunder our resources’ (eaglewood, vanilla, sea foods, the swim bladders of fish, game animals), to ‘they are potential trading partners and could be the source of a new future’ (Datmans 2022; Dumo 2021; Marubu 2022; Sarufa 2022). People from several PNG mountain communities complain that they have been ignored by their own government though the nearby border markers (Meridian Monument [MM] 7, 7.1 and 7.2) have been visited by representatives of the Indonesian government (Alokim 2021; Kayonem 2021). Similarly, stark contrasts are depicted between services available east and west of the border at Sota, about 85 km east of Merauke, in Indonesian New Guinea, and well to the south in Western Province, PNG (Faiparik 2019; see also Anon 2022b).⁶

Announcements from the PNG government have little to say about the rights of people or the kinship that binds Melanesians across the border but, rather, treat the border as a security issue that is properly handled by defence forces, police, and international cooperation (Faiparik 2020; Firth 2014; Lepani 2022; Zarriga 2017). By contrast, Donald’s public messages feature the possibilities of trade and development but do not touch directly upon either ethnic or security concerns.

These three themes are strongly represented in social media from the Western Province, PNG (Dwyer and Minnegal 2020). All are implicated in Donald’s project to connect northern Western Province by road with Indonesia.

Methods and Sources

The interpretations presented in this paper are based on analysis of primary sources including media releases posted on Facebook sites of Western Province politicians, comments posted to the Facebook group Fly River Forum (FRF) or reposted to that site, and articles published in online editions of PNG newspapers *The National* and *Post Courier*. Some of the FRF posts were traced back to original sites, including those from government and other sources in Indonesia. An initial review of FRF posts in 2020 for a different project (Dwyer and Minnegal 2020) drew our attention to the deep concerns of people in Western Province with mobility, roads, and borders; with the exception of concerns about corruption, these issues garnered more posts and higher engagement than other topics. Since that time, posts to FRF have been checked daily and a record kept of those concerned with these themes;

a search of its archives using ‘road’, ‘border’, ‘Indonesia’ demonstrated that we had not missed any relevant posts or comments. Similarly, online editions of the two newspapers were reviewed daily and records kept of relevant articles.

Social media platforms have become a regular source of data for ethnographic analysis in recent years, a transition accelerated by constraints on in-person fieldwork associated with COVID-19. The implications of relying on data from these platforms to inform interpretations, however, must be recognised. By 2018, around a million people in PNG had access to the Internet, and nearly 750,000 of these were listed as users of Facebook (Highet et al. 2019); those numbers will have increased substantially in the four years since then. Many politicians, government agencies, and media outlets use Facebook as a primary communication tool. And forums set up around geographic or thematic foci have become a major locus for expression and discussion of community concerns.⁷ Access to these forums, however, is far from equal; though Digicel does provide free access to Facebook for its PNG subscribers, using that platform requires both literacy and access to a smart phone. It also requires availability of a 3G mobile network. The views of people in rural areas, of women, and of those—predominantly, but not exclusively, older—who have not had formal schooling, are thus underrepresented in the posts we analysed.

The brevity of most online posts also contrasts with the nuanced conversations possible during long-term ethnographic fieldwork, but the views expressed online about roads, the border, and Indonesia resonate strongly with those recorded during our in-person visits to Western Province through the past decade. Since 2011, we have spent a total of some seven months with people at the village of Suabi, five days’ walk east of the North Fly District capital Kiunga and even further from the border with Indonesia (Minnegal and Dwyer 2017). Access to mobile phone connection here is intermittent at best, and Internet access is non-existent. Few residents have completed more than primary schooling. While many residents have travelled to Kiunga, and others to the Highlands or Moresby, life in such towns for most remains precarious; they find casual work in Chinese-run supermarkets, or grow crops for sale in the market. A few, who identify with that pervasive PNG phrase ‘the elite’, work intermittently as brokers for government offices or politicians, or have established landowner companies that, with limited success, tender for grants to build infrastructure in their home community. Most of those who venture to Kiunga and beyond, irrespective of education or gender, now have Facebook accounts and monitor Fly River Forum when in town. Though few have directly posted to the forum, others regularly engage with, share, or comment on posts.

The views we report from FRF, therefore, cannot be dismissed as representative only of a privileged elite; the ‘grassroots’—villagers and the insecure lower-income earners in town (Cox 2014)—comprise much of this forum’s membership. Perhaps more importantly, the concern with and desire for roads revealed on FRF also pervaded discussions with people in the village. By 2020, some people from Suabi had travelled to Merauke in Indonesia in pursuit of markets for their forest products (especially eaglewood) and resources (such as air rifles) that they had not been

able to access on their own side of the border. They told us of the five-day walk to Kiunga, the canoe ride down to where the border followed the river, and the ease of taking a car or bus the rest of the way to the capital of what is now South Papua Province in Indonesia. And they talked with astonishment of their experiences in a city of 102,000 people. These were people who had never imagined they might travel to Port Moresby. And the stories they told resonated with those found in the public forums that we draw on in this paper.⁸

One issue that necessarily arises when drawing on social media platforms for data concerns anonymity of sources. We have decided to identify quoted posts by username, because FRF is set up as an open forum for sharing information and debating issues, and because politicians and media outlets use their sites for public engagement. Out of the same respect for authors, we have chosen not to correct spelling and grammar in quotes from these sites.

Details of progress on the road were tracked using satellite imagery from Planet Explorer (<https://www.planet.com/explorer/>), which provides monthly basemaps; and images from Global Forest Watch (<https://www.globalforestwatch.org/>), an online platform that provides data and tools documenting forest clearance each year (Figure 1). On the Global Forest Watch site, we tracked loss of trees (>30 per cent loss of canopy density) in the four years before and four years after Donald initiated the Alicepit to Indonesia road. The position of the border between Indonesia and PNG is incorrectly represented on satellite images from Planet Explorer; it has been corrected in Figure 1(b), and added to Figure 1(c and d).

Context: Border Posts and Roads

The road west from Alicepit, on the Ok Tedi (Alice River) south of Ningerum, reaches the border with South Papua, Indonesia, at meridian monument [MM] 8.2. MMs were established as border markers from 1966 onward by cooperative arrangements between Indonesian and, at different times, Australian and PNG governments (Figure 1; Doran 2006; Jacob 2012; May 1987; Murphy 2017; Sai, Abidin, and Sutisna 2005). The initial project in the late 1960s saw installation of 14 MMs. Later work altered the positions of several of these, installed as many as 38 intermediaries, and suggested that some had been incorrectly positioned (Purwanto and Mangku 2017).

Places of crossover that have current official recognition are Skouw, Waris, and Sota on the Indonesian side of the border, and Wutung and the mouth of Torassi River on the PNG side. Skouw, Waris, and Wutung are to the north with Skouw near the coast and 5 km west of the border, Waris about 60 km inland and Wutung at the border itself (Figure 1(a)). Sota and the mouth of Torassi River are at the border in the south. There are other places where, both north and south in lower altitude country (<200 m ASL [above sea level]), access is facilitated by nearby roadways and the PNG government has plans to build ten border posts that will service needs for defense, quarantine, and immigration (Sodu 2020). With

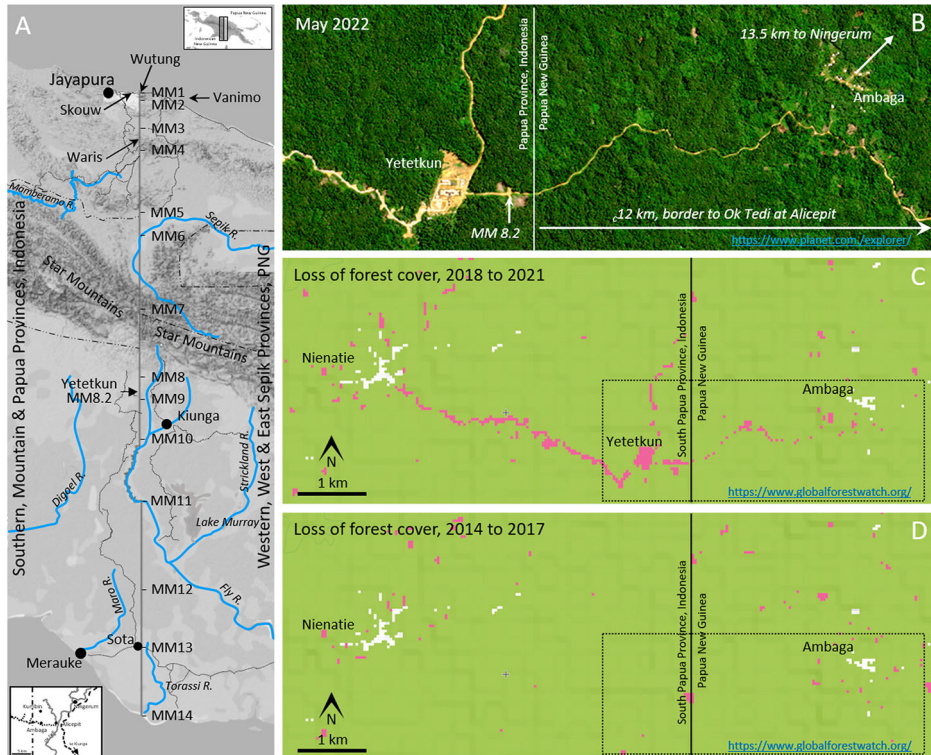


Figure 1. (a) Map showing the PNG–Indonesia border; major waterways as solid line, province borders as dash-dot-dot, roads as dotted black lines. The inset map at bottom-left provides detail to the east of MM 8.2. Source: Authors. (b) Satellite image of road construction in progress at May 2022 from Ambaga in PNG to Yetetkun in Indonesian New Guinea. Source: Planet Explorer. (c and d) Loss of forest cover between Ambaga in PNG and Nienatie in Indonesia in the years 2018–21, as road is constructed in this area, and in 2014–17 before the road was initiated. Source: Global Forest Watch.

the exception of a future defense outpost at Ambaga, none of the five places named in Sodu’s report, all in Western Province, is within 10 km of the border and the closest is inconveniently placed in being east of the Fly River. Everywhere, however, the 820 km border is porous (Kenneth 2020; Kora 2021; Robinson-Drawbridge 2020) and both legal and illegal cross-overs to trade, visit kin or relocate are common (Annisa 2020; Conroy 2020; Ivarature 2020; NBC News PNG 2020).

On the Indonesian side, there are well developed roads within 25 km of the border reaching north from Sota to the Boven Digoel foothill community of Worokpo (5° 25’ S, about 300 m ASL and 420 km north from the Torassi River boundary mark) and south to beyond the Keroom community of Senggi (3° 40’ S, about 350 m ASL and 130 km south of Skouw). Thus, as much as 75 percent of the border is readily accessible from the Indonesian side. These roads provide access to timber

resources and to places where plantations of oil palm could be established, facilitating the entry of more people to these areas. Proximity to the border, however, also seems to be a motivating factor. Throughout Indonesia, some border places are given official status as cross-border posts (*pos lintas batas negrata*, PLBN) that, by presidential edict, are to have new postal buildings of better quality than those of the neighbouring countries (Alfurkon 2015). Despite their potential economic and diplomatic significance, however, we have no evidence that either west-side border roads or cross-border posts are supported with funds from the Chinese 'belt and road' initiative (Pramona et al. 2022).

On the PNG side there is a good road north from Kiunga to the Ok Tedi mine-site at Tabubil but otherwise only a logging road, east of the Fly River, running north from Aiambiak to a loading ramp on the Fly River near Kiunga; and dirt roads in poor condition, with unusable bridges, in the southern Moorhead region. The first of these, with potential for having side branches west to Indonesia, spans only a tenth of the length of the border. Access to the border is not a priority with any of these roads.

From Alicepit to Indonesia

The road west from Alicepit to the border with Indonesia was initiated in 2018 and passes to the south of Ambaga, which is one of several communities in the foothills west of the Ok Tedi (Alice River). Donald provided initial funds from the PNG District Services Improvement Program (DSIP), which allocates money to each member of parliament to use at their discretion for constituency development (Fraenkel 2011; Laveil and Wood 2022). Several constraints limited the available funds and contributed to delays in the road project. Funding arrangements meant that short-term top-ups or emergencies could not be handled immediately but necessitated a wait for the next year's allocation of DSIP money. Pressure to fund other projects, concerns about COVID-19, reorganisation of Western Province electorates, the 2022 national election, and a charge of criminal defamation all consumed Donald's available time and financial resources (Kabuni 2022; Wahun 2020).

Satellite images, and images uploaded to social media, reveal that most forest clearance for initial road work from Ambaga to the border was achieved in 2020. Through the years to 2021, there was neither time nor money to contribute to related development projects in this area (Figure 1(c and d)). Additional financial input is essential if the road is to be maintained, and population growth is needed to enhance the likelihood that it facilitates trade to the west. Without these inputs, and Donald's continued election to parliament, his dream of 'a city in the jungle' (Donald and Hon 2018a) will be reimagined from 'rhetorical' to 'hollow'.

Donald's project undoubtedly seeks to address the PNG-wide concerns of a freedom to travel, the need for accessible means to provide this freedom, and development. He is, however, more circumspect regarding relations with people who live west of the border. The indigenous people of the area around the new border-crossing, referred

to as Muyu to the west of the border and Yonggom to the east, speak the same language; the latter are thought to have moved east from the vicinity of Nientatie, beyond Yetetkun, many decades ago and several thousand Muyu also moved to PNG in the 1980s (Schoorl 1993 [1957]; Kirsch 1993). But Donald's posts to social media or reports through newspapers and television do not mention ethnic disputes in the western half of New Guinea (Elmslie, Webb-Gannon, and Kareni 2021; Jorari 2021; Martinkus 2020), the intake of refugees across the border to PNG (Chandler 2019), or security concerns (Purwanto and Mangku 2017). Rather, they feature the material wherewithal of places west of the border though close to PNG, imply a difference in this respect with PNG, and touch upon the possibilities of Western Province producers accessing Indonesian markets. People featured in uploaded images tend to be Indonesians with standing as administrators or professionals. The implied message—aimed as much at his Indonesian interlocutors as at those in his electorate—is, perhaps, to the effect that 'we are not an encumbrance, we can work with you'.

The Indonesia to PNG Cross-Border Posts

On the Indonesian side of the border there was substantial work between Nientatie and Yetetkun in 2019 as a well-developed access road was built eastwards toward the future border post. In 2020, a road and official cross-border post were established at Yetetkun and in the same year there was considerable development of Yetetkun itself (Figure 1(b–d)). As in PNG, there was little additional loss of forest cover in 2021.

During this time, the Indonesian government released promotional videos, uploaded to YouTube, that presented Yetetkun as a PLBN under construction with an initial expectation of completion in 2020.⁹ The videos feature a large statue of Sukarno—the founder of the republic and first Indonesian president—in military uniform, a welcoming immigration desk, a nearby Muslim prayer room, new buildings for both residents and officers, and road work in progress at the emerging town. There is no mention of security concerns and neither Papua New Guineans nor indigenous people from west of the border are depicted. The accompanying text reports that 'YETETKUN PLBN is an Indonesian and PNG Cross-border Post located in Boven Digoel Regency, Ninati District, Yetetkun Village' and that 'the border area is the front porch of Indonesia which represents the face of the nation' (translated from Indonesian).

There is similar promotional material for the cross-border post at Sota, now a settlement of about 1300 people, that was inaugurated by President Joko Widodo (commonly known as 'Jokowi') in October 2020 as the second PLBN for Indonesian New Guinea and the eighth for the country as a whole (Anon 2022c, 2022d). A video promoting the new PLBN features a welcoming immigration desk, customs facilities, Muslim and Christian places for prayer and quiet retreat, a Melanesian man acting as immigration official, a monument of *Garuda Pancasila*—a mythical eagle—that is the national emblem of Indonesia and, as at Yetetkun, a statue of Sukarno.¹⁰

In his inaugurating address, Jokowi spoke of cross-border posts as 'front verandas' that represented Indonesia's progress in the world. Overall, Sota is presented as a

tourist town that is an hour's drive on a 'comfortable'—that is, sealed—road from Merauke, as 'Point Zero' in the east of Indonesia, as encouraging a parallel visit to Sabang City, Aceh, where a grand monument marks 'Point Zero' in the west, and thus, as Jokowi said, making people proud to be citizens of such a large country. As one visitor commented, at the monuments a person can feel the spirit of nationalism. In contrast to the Yetetkun videos, there is mention of security concerns, particularly with reference to COVID-19, and the need to be checked by defence personnel before entry to the border park, where towering termite mounds are an attraction and a few PNG people may be encountered.

The symbolism was important in both the presence of, and words said by, senior political figures. Jokowi commented that 'with a new face, with a new look, and also, no less important, with better service methods', the Sota PLBN would reflect 'our commitment to developing border areas'. Public Works and Public Housing Minister Basuki Hadimuljono added that 'the development of the PLBN is not only an entry gate, but also the embryo of a regional economic growth centre that can improve the welfare of border communities'. 'Porches', 'verandas', and 'vestibules' feature in videos that explore liminal spaces in Indonesia.¹¹ It is this sense of being transitional, and of protecting the door through which desired change will flow, that may best fit these presentations of PBLNs. But implicit in these videos, too, is a sense of superiority, that Indonesia holds the key to change, and that association with Indonesia is itself desirable as a way of opening development for those on the other side of the border. It is a judgement that seems shared by many of those posting on FRF.

Cross-Border Aspirations

Donald's road to Indonesia is the second to be built from within PNG that has the specific aim of providing an entry point to Indonesia. The first was the road to Wutung at the north coast of the two countries that then continues to Skouw in Indonesian New Guinea. Skouw was classed as one of the first seven Indonesian PLBN in 2015. Donald's road also is unusual in being funded through his DSIP grant. It is not funded by the National programme PNG Connect that builds and upgrades major roads within the country, often between provinces (Anon 2021b; Elapa 2022; Leng 2022). For example, PNG Connect underwrites a major effort that is currently building a road from Tabubil in Western Province, via Olsobip and the Hindenburg Wall, to Telefomin in West Sepik (Koke 2022). A longer-term ambition is that this nationally funded road will continue to Kopiago in Hela Province before turning north and crossing the mountains to reach the coastal town of Vanimo that, like Telefomin, is in West Sepik.

The stimulus for the road to Indonesia arose from frustration with the perceived development failures of the PNG national government and the related perception that Western Province was particularly disadvantaged compared to other provinces. The possibility of the road was grounded in frequent negotiation and an imagined congruence of hopes, plans, and intentions with those of people living on the

western side of the border. That supposed congruence, however, disguised a significant difference in how the project was perceived on the two sides of the border. From a PNG perspective the project was local and pragmatic, with the possibility that it would enhance opportunities for travel and trade, whereas from an Indonesian perspective it is better understood as symbolic in demonstrating both the financial power and the capability of a large, unified Indonesian nation.

In a comment to the Facebook group Fly River Forum, Kwangtem Kabin wrote of ‘the poor state of Papua New Guinea villages versus those to the west in Indonesia’ (Imbum 2021). He continued by saying that:

customary land of PNGeans extends to Indonesia while the wrongly placed imaginary border line drawn from birdview does not mean anything to customary land limits. As such the border villagers have the right to invite Indonesians to open road services for access of goods and services. The border villagers see light coming from Indonesia while PNG government has failed them miserability over the last 4 decades. Hope PNG has eyes to see now before it is too late.

With these few words Kabin captured an essence of Nurit Bird-David’s (2019, 43) complaint that locational maps informed by cartographical assumptions may obscure the lived worlds of local people ‘when they are used cross-culturally and cross-scalarly in studies of minuscule indigenous societies’. He conveys, too, the sense of uneven development that, in drawing attention to ‘the light’ offered on the other side of the border, inspired Donald’s road.

Donald himself has noted that the North Fly region—his electorate—was entirely dependent on support from Ok Tedi Mining Ltd and asked rhetorically how this region would survive when the mine was abandoned in, perhaps, just one more decade (Bekiman 2022; Kamus 2022; Mauludu 2022; Ok Tedi Mining 2022).

Imagine if there is no Ok Tedi Mine tomorrow. How do we stand on our own two feet. How we got to the top of the house roof, we don’t know. When one day they remove the ladder, we will fall really badly and either we survive or we completely be killed. (Donald and Hon 2021)

In a later post he indicated where the means of that survival might be sought:

When you are placed in an awkward location and asked to survive what do you do? You either sit and complain doing nothing [and] eventually die or you find your way out to survive. North Fly sees it’s exit door the nearest Indonesia as the only means of survival and for the benefit of bigger development plans. (Donald and Hon 2022)

This mood continues to grow. In November 2022, after the latest election, a post to Fly River Forum bluntly stated: ‘Say No to Road connecting Western to Gulf and Southern Highlands ... Let’s focus on connecting own districts and open two Indonesian borders (Kiunga & Daru) with proper road access’ (Nedu 2022). Another FRF poster, in mid-December 2022, reflects the asymmetry implicit in Indonesian border rhetoric, identifying his land near Alicepit as the ‘door step’ of the Alicepit–Indonesia road and offering to make that land available for ‘development purposes’, such as construction of a school, hospital, or agriculture (Bex 2022).

The significance of the border in local imaginings, and the role that roads play in shaping and realising these imaginaries, have begun to be acknowledged in national government rhetoric. During a visit to Western Province on 27–28 December 2022, Prime Minister James Marape announced ‘a contract for a road to Weam with plans to develop the area into a small township’, with agricultural development to take advantage of ‘a readily-available market across the border in Indonesia’ (*PNG Sun* 2022), and plans to construct a new road from Simpall/Lake Murray to Indonesia (Neiman 2022). Crucially, these and other recent announcements by the government seem to be explicitly addressing the asymmetry that has characterised cross-border relations to date. Thus, for example, the announcement in November 2022, by the PNG Minister for International Trade and Investment, of plans to repair and upgrade both the road to and the border post at Wutung was linked to recognition that ‘[w]e cannot continue the one-way trade of our people going to Batas in Indonesia to buy Indonesian goods’, that ‘[w]e cannot have a situation where only Indonesia will have goods to sell to us, we must also produce and sell to them’ (Maru 2022a, 2022b). But scepticism about the likely effectiveness of plans by the PNG government to develop border areas remains strong, as comments on these posts evidence.

Conclusion

The Alicepit–Indonesia road is enmeshed in the social lives, frustrations, and aspirations of the people of North Fly. There may as yet be few, if any, vehicles using that road but it serves as a potent expression of the ways that people of Western Province are conceptualising their position in the nation and the region. In promising access to the ‘light’ that Indonesia actively designs its border posts to project, the road draws attention to the uneven development that to date has characterised the experiences of local people.

In various ways, then, this road speaks to the themes with which we opened the paper, while adding a local inflection to those PNG-wide concerns. It holds the promise not only of freedom to move but also the means to do so in new ways, travelling through the lands of others both rapidly and without need to stop and engage with those others. Crossing the border entails negotiating as an individual with representatives of the state, not with local landowners; it is citizenship that matters. But roads do more than connect. The dream of roads as the route to development is grounded in recognition that the flows they facilitate are asymmetrical, linking previously isolated and ‘deprived’ areas to those where services and commodities are concentrated (Gibson and Rozelle 2003; Wiegand et al. 2017). Increasingly, however, there is acknowledgement that the asymmetries may be intensified by connection, not eased (Hobbis 2019; Sari and Rahman 2021). People may use roads to access centralised services, but this may result in reduced provision of education and health services in the periphery. And while roads may increase access to commodities in peripheral areas, this often is in exchange not for goods that local

people have produced but, rather, for extraction of raw materials from those peripheries, extraction that tends to be controlled and often driven by outsiders who have followed the roads out from larger centres. As Sari and Rahman (2021) have observed in Indonesian Papua, development programmes that focus on the construction of roads may be more concerned with the flow of commodities than with servicing communities. In effect, by enhancing individual freedom to travel and consume, roads may actually weaken the autonomy of communities of which Maclean (1994) wrote, an autonomy that grounds development in *ples*.

Interestingly, in Indonesian Papua indigenous men reportedly see road development as a gift from the central government, showing that the government cares for the lives of Papuans (Sari and Rahman 2021, 151). In contrast, we have argued that people in PNG—where there is no migrant population against which to measure ‘care’—see access to roads as a right, with the state having a duty to provide them. In both cases, however, roads indicate the presence of the state. The potential for roads both to threaten local autonomy and, at the same time, to symbolise state care and responsibility means that roads themselves may become a focus of negotiation with the state. Roads may be desired, but they may also be cut, or their construction rejected. The call by Biskar Nedu (2022) to not connect Western Province to its neighbouring provinces concerned a fear of the violence, crime, and exploitation that would flow along those roads, if built.¹² Elsewhere in PNG, a road perceived to have failed to deliver development to local communities, instead serving to drain services and wealth, may be blocked and tolls charged as a means to deflect at least some of the flow along that road to benefit locals.

As Sep (2021) had remarked, by 2018 people at some Western Province border villages felt that the PNG government had no plans for their lives as citizens of that country and that after the forthcoming election they would ‘open the door for Indonesians to come in’. It is frustrations of these sorts that fuel the mood of the people of Western Province. It might take little to nudge them (Moseley 2020) into acting on that mood. A final outcome of independence for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, which is currently both a likelihood and a serious concern for PNG, may well see other provinces either seeking comparable status or contemplating allegiance elsewhere (Harding and Pohle-Anderson 2022; Lyons 2022). For many Western Province people, and in these sorts of circumstances, the seemingly tangible, readily accessible temptations across the border to their immediate west may be hard to resist.

Notes

- [1] We focus here on roads and airways, since these are primary concerns in North Fly district, the focus of our attention. Waterways are crucial means of transport elsewhere in PNG and, indeed, Kiunga was initially developed as a port for import of supplies and export of extracted resources. Calls for better shipping services are also frequent on Fly River Forum. But the river is unpredictable, and the difficulties and uncertainties of river transport feed into the call for other means of transport.

- [2] See for example, Bex (2022), Greenfield Pacific (2021), and Londakai (2021).
- [3] Information about the Rural Airstrip Agency, PNG, is available at <https://www.facebook.com/RAAPNG>.
- [4] Another eight strips have been partially built by local people in that area—one of these being provided with government funds and cleared of trees three times.
- [5] In 2022, what had been a single bordering province of Papua was divided into four: South Papua, Highlands Papua, and Papua along the border with PNG, and Central Papua encompassing the Freeport mine (Harson 2022; McBeth 2022).
- [6] For images of roads both sides of the border crossing at Sota, see consecutive posts by Dumo (2022a, 2022b).
- [7] Fly River Forum, for example, set up explicitly to ‘draw together the various citizens, friends and stake holders of Western Province’, has a membership of 32,882 in April 2023, an impressive number given that the province itself has a population of less than 250,000; see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/flyriverforum>.
- [8] The research at Suabi, and among residents of Suabi living for a time in Kiunga, was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne, as Ethics ID 1237732.1 and Project ID 24867. Social Media research was conducted, in part, under Project ID 23729.
- [9] See, for example, the video produced by Kabar Digoel Chanel/ Media Online Boven Digoel (n.d.).
- [10] See video produced by Ditjen Cipta Karya (n.d.).
- [11] See videos by Alyx De La Cruz (n.d.) and ‘Plumber 1981’ (n.d.). See also Davies (2006) and Birchok (2013, 73–77).
- [12] See Hobbis (2019) for similar concerns regarding a road in Solomon Islands.

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