What price paradise: a study of the effects of the Ok Tedi Mine on Ninggirum people of Papua New Guinea

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Statement of Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UWS or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UWS or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project’s design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Signed  ………………………………………

Date  ………………………………………

The research for this project received the approval of the Monash University Standing Committee for Ethical Research on Humans (Project No CF08/2831 – 2008001460).

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Dedication

For Ninggirum people
through all we've shared together
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Abstract

The aim of this cultural story is to explore the effects of global economic development on the local indigenous culture of the Ninggirum people of Papua New Guinea whose border lands encompass the Ok Tedi Mine. Since 1991 I have lived in the Ninggirum community, working in their language development programme as a linguist/translator, and a significant part of the study has been the examination of my own entanglements in the constitution of the postcolonial subject and its communities and places.

Research methods include recording traditional oral stories and contemporary life stories in Ninggirum language, Tok Pisin and English, and recording the process in extensive field notes and personal journals. Language texts were analysed linguistically and structurally for grammatical and cultural meaning. Conversation texts were transcribed and assembled as storylines. Traditional oral stories were analysed using principles of mythopoesis and the trickster literary device. All texts were analysed performatively for what they said about Ninggirum reality, perceptions of development and impacts of global change processes on environment and community. All materials were interpreted through a representation of Ninggirum ontological and aesthetic understandings of orature.

The findings show that even with the effects of environmental degradation, social fragmentation and loss of cultural practices, local peoples would still prefer the actual benefits of development. This implies a need to strengthen cultural identity through recreating the ceremonial space where ideas are thought together and communal identity is reconstituted. It also implies the creation of an in-between space of cultural contact as a choreography of difference where, becoming other to self, participation may be respectful, mutual, and caring, considering the priority needs of the least advantaged.

The study extends Melanesianist literature, making an original contribution to the ethnography of post-colonial PNG. It contributes to the general understanding of contemporary globalisation and development theory through an examination of global-local relations. It adds indigenous voice to scholarly discussions of culture theory, indigenous identity, language as local practice, the globalisation of time, space and gender through language, Southern theory, and ethnoepistemology.
Invitation to Place

Come with me to Ninggirum place. Listen to my story as we cross over into Ninggirum world.

We are happy to just sit, enjoying the quiet. I can hear Cicada’s shrill ‘kiderr kiderr kiderr’ rising from the bush. She is a water dweller, most present in the heat of the day. When we hear her song, we know we are near the water. A momentary breeze caresses my body, a cool touch refreshing my heart. On bep (kite) is circling in the sky to the north. He has patrolled this sky since time began. Round and round he goes, higher and higher. There he is, hovering, diving, shooting towards the sun. Wings stretched wide, he soars the length and breadth of Ninggirum country. Imagination stirred, I close my eyes to ponder these ancient mysteries.

Soon, a whole series of images come flashing across the back of my eyes, in my dream space. Caught up with On bep I can see forever, a land clothed in cloud forest. Mountains, majestic, blue. The guardians of the north. Water pouring from their breasts, Ok Mungaa (Menga), Ok Maa, Ok Tii (Tedi), Ok Taop, Ok Ao, Ok Tarim, Ok Birim, rushing to the south. River divides tree-clad ridges criss-crossed with walking tracks, dotted with houses. People doing daily life. Mother with baby, pounding sago; father and son hollowing a canoe; small sons nearby, mimicking father’s every move.

Intip tan lies in the north, the place of the people who live ‘up there’. I can see Saweebon, Deronggo, Kumkwit, Ok Maa 11, Hyotkim, Korkit, Angkwit, and Kaokwirok. I remember Howard telling me how about the time in October 2000 when he and Hans, Bokoli, and Avenon took a very long walk to visit these remote villages to check language for dialect differences. The first day they hiked Ok Ao to Hukim to Ogun to Ambelee/Ok Tarim. Then a very long day to Hyotkim. Another day to Angkwit and Korkit, then another long day to Kaokwirok. Finally, a long, adventurous climb up a sheer cliff face to the mine site, and on to Finalbin and Tabubil, a week’s walking in all. You have to be a cross between a marathon runner and a tightrope walker to manage the trails. Walking through the mud is like walking through treacle, and the leeches are as big as eels. These northern villages are all in the mountains, and their pronunciation and a lot of their vocabulary is quite different to the lower Ninggirum dialects. In fact, Howard overheard one woman say to Hans, in Tok Pisin, ‘Please speak to us in Tok
Pisin so we understand clearly what you are saying.’ But everyone assured him, ‘Oh yes, it’s all the same language.’

In the east we follow the rivers from north to south. This is *wem belek bao tan*, where the ‘small road’ people live. Monggolowalawam, Yongtao, Haelewogam 104, Kolepbon, Wuwuungo, Wogam, Bumbin 90, Tamaro. In more recent times, people from Haelewogam and Bumbin have left their place on the ridge for a space near the highway. They now have easier access to town and all they seek there. On the ridge above Ok Taop, the ‘middle ridge’ people, *dukbit tan*, live in Digam, Wombon, Tengkim, Bikim, Minipbon, Hukim, and Bwakim. They speak the *kawoma* dialect. Further west, beyond Ok Ao, the ‘up on the ridge there’ people, *nimilup tan*, live in Tarakbits, Betanok, Bingkawuk, Digo, Ogun, Kwikim, and Ambere. In this last decade, the communities at Kwikim and Ambere have joined together at Ok Tarim. They all speak the *kadaopka* dialect.

And slowly, like fog rolling away, other communities appear, groups of shadowy people, living daily life, simultaneously, in the same space. In the sky, another shadowy community drifts into view, and yet another under the ground. I wonder if that is *Bii wongo*, the place where the dead spirit people are staying (Kowa, 2009).

But older people say that the Ninggirum originally came from the mountains. They originated there, but as the population grew, people needed to spread out. As they moved south, they found plenty of fish in the rivers and many good places to grow gardens. So they settled on the land between Ok Tii (Tedi) and Ok Birim rivers, and even some areas east and south of Ok Tii. This is Ninggirum land. This is where Ninggirum people come from. This is where Ninggirum people live.
Chapter One – A postcolonial story

Whatever Papua New Guinea (PNG) lacked by way of common tradition at Independence was more than made up for by an enthusiasm for development in all regions of the country. Claims to legitimacy of the new state were based on promises that all Papua New Guinea peoples could expect development to come their way. If one were to ask where the Melanesian Way (Narokobi, 1983) led, the answer would be, to ‘development on authentic Papua New Guinea terms’. While short on specifics, the notion of a Melanesian path to development did more than simply espouse an essentialised identity based on values of community and the continued viability of tradition: it claimed modernity as a Melanesian project. Thus the end of Australian rule did not mean the end of the prospects of development that had figured so prominently in Australia’s own justification of its tenure in PNG. The dreams awakened in the colonial era would not vanish, even if the colonialists did (Jorgensen, 2007, p. 58).

Background and context

Western Province is home for the Ninggirum people (Map 1). Their place lies between Ok Birim and Ok Tedi (rivers), south of the Ok Tedi mine in the Star Mountains (Map 2). The majority of their approximately 5,000 members live in hamlets and villages on the PNG side of the border, while about 1,000 live on the Indonesian side (Map 3). Some of their members live in Tabubil, the town that has grown up around the mine. In working for the mining company they are able to earn regular income, but the majority continue to live closer to their traditional ways. Since the advent of the mine, the Ninggirum have seen many good things come to their neighbours, but feel that their group has missed out.

In 1963, when officiating amongst the Min people of the Star Mountains, a government patrol leader noticed signs of copper mineralisation near the present mine site and collected samples for analysis. By 1968, copper-gold deposits were discovered at Mt Fubilan, and after extensive negotiations between the PNG Government and Broken Hill Proprietary Limited (BHP), the Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML) was incorporated to develop and operate the project. In April 1981, construction began and continued over the next eight years at a cost of US$1.4 billion. Given the remote location of the
site and the unstable terrain, building the mine and infrastructure proved to be a major engineering feat. Ore was to be piped to the Port of Kiunga at the head of the Fly River, and tailings were to be stored in an on-site dam at the head of Ok Ma (Map 2). In 1984, the dam, still under construction, was destroyed by a massive landslide, and OTML’s only tailings management strategy had failed. Consequently, Government permission was granted and gold production began with tailings being dumped straight into the Ok Tedi River, the eastern border of traditional Ninggirum land (Ok Tedi Mining, 2008).

During the 1980s, Government development plans benefiting the peoples of the North Fly region were made. Plans for the Ninggirum included a new Government Station with an airstrip in the south west at Ok Ao, and a road and bridge across the Ok Tedi which would connect Ninggirum people to the region’s major centres. Ok Ao would become the site of a Grade 10 top up community school, an equipped and functional aid post, a small hydro-electricity plant, an agricultural school, an Evangelical Church of Papua (ECP) Bible school with resident missionary, and the beginnings of local industry in the form of their own titanium mining venture. For the most part, people were happy to work towards these ends so that their lives would be a little easier and more enjoyable.

At this time, the Christian church’s presence was strong, as was the Ninggirum desire to have a Bible in their own language. In 1990, Ninggirum church leaders invited an international non-government linguistic training organisation to assist them with the work of local language translation for language preservation and development. Since 1991, my husband Howard, our daughters Sarah and Erin, and I, have lived with Ninggirum people and worked with the community to assist them in reaching their language goals. Part of our work includes helping elementary school teachers develop curriculum and materials for teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills in Ninggirum language, reflecting the PNG Government’s Education Reforms (Siegel, 1997) of 1993-4. By 1998, the Ninggirum Translation Project (NTP) had been formed, and work had progressed gradually, though not as quickly as we had expected. We began to reassess the programme with a view towards more culturally appropriate training (Carr, 2000), based in a Melanesian philosophy of education (Matane, 1986), which would align our training more closely with National education goals. In 2002, this type of training was well received by NTP participants, and produced greater motivation, productivity and momentum in language work. The work continued in this style until early 2006, when,
for no apparent reason, NTP participants failed to attend training in Ok Ao. This non-event marked the beginning of deep soul-searching on our behalf to understand what had happened, and why.

Reflecting on many conversations with Ninggirum people and my own experience of living with them in their place, I realise the gravity of the situation in which they find themselves. The continual disintegration of the national economic infrastructure has rendered health, education, transport, maintenance and other essential services practically inaccessible to the rural majority. Insufficient government funding to pay for workers and materials, along with inadequate community cooperation and support, reveals much conflict of interest in this intersection. Ninggirum people feel the effects locally in the closing down of aid posts, community schools and churches in the more remote villages.

The uncertainty of this situation is compounded by the imminent closure of the Ok Tedi Mine scheduled for 2014, the failure of their mining venture (HKB) to produce capital, the closure of their Bible School in 2005 and subsequent collapse of the Western mission/church infrastructure, and the closure of the Agricultural School in 2009. With most forms of financial support drying up before their eyes, their social fabric vastly altered, and their environment compromised, it seems to the Ninggirum people that the gods of the West no longer care for them or seek to supply their daily needs. As they consider the negative effects of economic development on their society, economy and environment, Ninggirum people are beginning to wonder if development is what they need after all (Katuk, 2005). Is this, in fact, their road to davii dap, their good Ninggirum life?

**Trajectory of the research**

What do development and change mean to Ninggirum people?

**The research question**

How do Ninggirum people understand the world and how does change happen within their reality? And what does this mean for education and learning in relation to development and change?
Guiding questions

What constitutes a Ninggirum good life? What do Ninggirum people want development to do for them or give them?

What is a Ninggirum concept of equitable relations and how they should work in the development discourses?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of global economic development on traditional culture in the Pacific region, focussing on the Ninggirum people of Papua New Guinea. It is hoped that the research process will create the desire and opportunities for Ninggirum people to be reflective, intentional and proactive about how they want to develop in modern Melanesia.

Aims

This qualitative research aims to:

- explore Ninggirum ideas about development and its relation to their concept of the good life, especially the role of learning in this life project

- outline and use an understanding of Ninggirum reality and spiritual knowledge as the foundation for education, enabling Ninggirum people to achieve the life of their choice, rather than relying on Western values that serve Western agendas

- examine effects of large scale natural resources development on social changes in regional PNG

- understand the place of education and learning in the Ninggirum future

- develop more appropriate pedagogical tools that will facilitate learning and practice in the contact zone where Western literacy and Ninggirum orality meet

- develop decolonising methods of inquiry.
Importance of study

We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable (Behar, 1993, p. 273).

The Ninggirum quest for the good life typifies, in many ways, the contemporary experience of Papua New Guinea peoples who are experiencing in a lifetime the changes usually wrought through millennia. In writing of the experience of traditional Papua New Guinea societies catapulted into the future by natural resource development, the mystique surrounding indigenous culture fosters the urge to romanticise, sensationalise, or criticise, and hence dichotomise their experience on the basis of cultural difference. And while the desire of these societies for a better life in a globalised world may be similar, each journey is unique to its culture. Though a small, local identity, the story of Ninggirum agency needs to be taken seriously as an essential part of global diversity.

This study is important to me because it is motivated by my deeply held belief in the diversity and equality of humankind and the environment. I share with many a strong sense of justice, and highly value the notion of fair play for the less powerful. In the context of language development work with the Ninggirum people, I have been inspired and challenged, personally and professionally, by Robert Greenleaf’s (1970) ethic. He imagines living well in this world, not by the control of rank and privilege, but through caring for the needs of others. In this vision, the most privileged ensure that the highest priority needs of the least privileged are being served. In translating these ideas into practice I have become increasingly aware of the disparity of material, cultural and educational power that exists between Ninggirum people and myself, and my greatest regret would be that as a white Western academic, my involvement is only adding to their burden.

This study should be of interest to the academic community because it expands the Melanesianist literature, and makes an original contribution to the ethnography of postcolonial PNG. It adds indigenous voice to scholarly discussions of postcolonial theory, indigenous identity and contact zone exchanges. It grows the knowledge of how Papua New Guinea’s colonial past affects its postcolonial present, and how social change occurs over time in local communities surrounding natural resource
development sites. Understanding relations between development and the Ninggirum grows knowledge of the effects of globalisation and the construction of global reality and local reality as they operate today, thus contributing to the world’s knowledge of the global/local relations of minority cultures. It contributes to the general understanding of contemporary debates in globalisation and development theory as it expands academic understanding of education development in the Pacific region. This study also contributes to the conversations surrounding language as a local practice (Pennycook, 2010), the globalisation of time, space and gender through language (Appleby, 2010), Southern theory (Connell, 2007), and ethno-epistemology (Maffie, 2005).

**Limitations**

The population of this study is specific to one indigenous group, their place and to those elements of reality that affect their education and learning. As a local representation, it does not claim to speak for all indigenous groups. Similarly, the trickster device is used with Ninggirum stories to explore power relations within and surrounding the storyteller in his/her place, where individual and collective subjectivities come into play. This usage does not claim that a Ninggirum experience applies to all indigenous groups, or that one Ninggirum experience applies to all Ninggirum people, except where the storyteller indicates otherwise.

Presentation of language is limited to the speakers choice and use, in the context in which it was spoken, and the treatment of oral and written Ninggirum language is limited to the methods outlined in this research. It does not engage wider linguistic issues that are peripheral to this study. Therefore, meanings of oral language in the context of daily lived experience are limited to a basic, working analysis of Ninggirum language, and to my experience and understanding of Ninggirum ways.

The discussion of author subjectivity is concerned with researcher and participant positions in conducting decolonising research in the cultural contact zone. Authorial voice is backgrounded in writing that seeks to show rather than tell, in order to release and give voice to indigenous subjectivities through their mythological and contemporary life stories.
Literature

Situated in a milieu of economic development, this study focuses on dimensions of global, postcolonial and indigenous concerns emerging in the current technological hyperreality (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, editorial comments). Therefore it is necessary to investigate this global postcolonial intersection in order to examine the qualitative changes that are likely to affect indigenous peoples.

Postcolonialism

The literature consulted shows two basic orientations towards the relationship between the historical processes of postcolonialism and globalisation. The first assumes that globalisation is a postnational phenomenon, linking postcolonialism to the nation-state. It connects postcolonialism to the rise of modernity and the epoch of nationalism, and globalisation to the rise of postmodernity (Jay, 2000). In the second view, European imperial expansion, colonisation, decolonisation and the establishment of postcolonial states are integral to global history, and postcolonialism marks a break in but not a break from that history (Jay, 2000). While the first view polarises postcolonialism and globalisation (Albrow, 1997), the second view productively connects the two by questioning the whole idea of an historical break that separates postcolonialism from globalisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000).

Ghandi (1998, p. 28) identifies two basic philosophical ideas that have shaped the development of postcolonial thought, Marxist humanism and post-structural ‘anti-humanism’. The former assumes a universal human nature and a politic that analyses and acts upon the structures of society as a whole. Hence it has developed a critical, anti-imperialist stance. This critique fails to address the specific political needs and experiences of the colonised world, i.e., the effects of imperialism, the formation of a nationalist elite, and the cultural blindness towards the world beyond Europe (p. 70-71). It is concerned with chronology and location, understanding postcolonial as ‘after the time of colonialism’, and the liberation of oppressed groups (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 186).

Ghandi’s idea of ‘anti-humanism’ bases its understanding in Enlightenment scientific theory of knowledge and the impossibility of a universal human nature. Being concerned with the material effects of historical colonialism, it has developed
postcolonial theory in the tradition of post-structural theories of the human subject (Weedon, 2002) and psychoanalytic writers of colonial discourse theory, i.e., Said, (1993), influenced by Foucault’s ideas of discourse; Bhabha, (1994), influenced by Althusser’s ideology and Lacan’s theory of language; and Spivak, (1988), influenced by Derrida’s ideas of identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 186). While postcolonial is concerned with chronology and location, state of being is concerned with the tangible effects of the historical condition of colonialism. Rising out of differing ontological and epistemological assumptions, critical and post-structural traditions generate different kinds of knowledges and different representations of the colonial experience and its aftermath. Postcolonialism, then, according to Ghandi (1998, p. 53), derives from the ‘anti-humanism’ of poststructuralism and the ‘new humanities’ view of Western power as a symptom of Western epistemology and pedagogy. It maps a critique of colonial modernity as an intervention into the realm of Western knowledge-production.

Through inquiry into colonialist discourse and the concomitant decolonisation of the postcolonial world (Mutua & Swadener, 2004), postcolonial theory has gained popularity in recent decades within academic circles (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). It deals with cultural identity and the dilemmas inherent in developing a national identity after colonial rule (Bhabha, 1994). Postcolonial theory uses both analytical and operative thinking to understand the processes of early and recent colonial dependencies, and to deconstruct these inequalities. The analytic examines the relationships between the former or present colonising and colonised countries, and the operative marks the political goals that have to do with overcoming old and new colonial structures, racial bias and cultural prejudice, and the imbalance of power between the North and South (Lützeler, 2001, para. 15). Hence, this intersection between postcolonial and globalisation studies delves into the controlling force of the nation-state, and the steady disintegration of its power by multinational corporations that increasingly operate outside the interests and boundaries of the nation state (Jay, 2000).

Postcolonial theory is strongly concerned with how postcolonial writings often articulate and celebrate national identity as reclaiming identity and independence from, while simultaneously maintaining strong connections with the coloniser. It allows exploration of the ways in which the knowledges of the colonised, subordinated people have been generated and used to serve the coloniser’s interests, whereby colonialism is
justified via images of the colonised as a perpetually inferior people, society and culture (Kipling, 1899; Césaire, 1972). Postcolonial inquiry is also concerned with the adoption of an activist position that seeks social transformation in any site, area or region previously colonised (Todd Peters, 2004). Struggles concerning identity, history, and future possibilities (Kituai, 1998) often occur in the metropolitan areas, and, ironically, with the aid of postcolonial power structures (Connell, 2003).

In making sense of the notion of postcoloniality, Anderson (2006) advises that it be aligned, not with political ideologies, but with the colonial cultural system that preceded it, out of and against which it came into being. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (2000, p. 46-51) say that while earlier civilisations had colonies, and understood themselves as a central imperium in relation to a periphery of provincial, marginal and barbarian cultures, post-Renaissance imperialism developed in different ways. It sponsored the development of a modern capitalist system of economic exchange where the colonies provided raw materials to strengthen the economies and institutions of the colonial powers. This presupposed a relation between coloniser and colonised that was locked into a rigid hierarchy of difference, deeply resistant to fair and equitable exchange in all realms of life. In colonies where people were of different race or indigenous, the ideology of race became a crucial part of the construction and naturalisation of an unequal form of inter-cultural relations (Eriksen, 2010).

In a postcolonial sense, globalisation has become known as the sum of processes whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate across the whole world (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 110). Development aid refers to general support for the improvement of Third World societies, and the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010) illustrate how development has become an interdisciplinary field, implementing programs in various areas and dealing with numerous variables such as economic, social, political, gender, cultural, religious and environmental issues. The field is further complicated because these variables are highly intertwined. Therefore, the analysis of gender issues and many other development topics must also consider the effects of and be linked with economic, religious, and cultural issues. However, the predominant development literature surrounds the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the UN, and still appears to be based in the belief that economic growth in the developing
countries will bring about the conditions of life that exist in the advanced industrial
countries of the West (Halperin, 2007).

Alternative theories of development offer a different moral vision of the future. Sardar
points out that in the merging of Christian and Enlightenment discourses, rationalism
operates toward the fulfilment of the expectations of faith, recasting Providence as the
progressive development of humanity. In this light, religious knowledge may be seen as
a means of furthering global development. While these theories discuss the
secularisation of traditional belief systems and the promise of utopian humanity, Capra
political ecology, ul Haq (1995) proposes a human development paradigm and Long
(1994) critiques structural theory in development proposing a return to anthropological
thought as a way of addressing human and cultural factors. Friedmann (1992) mentions
human and citizen rights and human flourishing as the value orientation of
development, while Moe-Lobeda (2002) and Todd Peters (2004) emphasise the moral
obligation to honour creation and life, to share power equitably, encourage care of the
planet, and to promote peoples’ social well-being. The fact of these alternative
perspectives suggests that theory and experience from the developing world needs to be
given space in this conversation to find voice.

In this study I take a view of development as multidimensional political,

economic, cultural, technological and informational processes facilitated through

transnational institutions whose interests lie in the extractive industries. Though
globalisation as a process has its own momentum, it is historically connected to
capitalism, state-making, industrialisation, and the ideological and social components of
modernity (Grew, 2008, p. 217). And though these globalising processes are at work
transforming the new geo-economy, it is the nexus of complex interactions between the
transnational corporation and nation-state, set within a volatile technological context
(Dicken, 2004, p. 1) that imposes the greatest influence on Ninggirum daily life.

**Papua New Guinea – the nation-state**

Postcolonial Melanesia is still dealing with the many effects of cultural exploitation that
developed with European expansion over the last four centuries. After thirty years of
independence for most of the nation states of Melanesia, nation-building and forging a
collective identity is still a work in progress. The great diversity of peoples, languages and cultures spread across the arc of Melanesia makes drawing boundary lines and building a cohesive, national identity difficult, through the merging of introduced systems (Westminster parliamentary democracy) and customary values (Morishita, 2012).

The body of literature that investigates postcolonial identity of Papua New Guinea at both macro and micro levels (Clarke, 2003; Denoon, 2005; Kidu, 1997, 2005) is small in comparison with that concerning other Oceanic identities. This literature is chiefly concerned with how Papua New Guinea is dealing with the many effects of European and Asian imperialism and colonisation (Schieffelin & Crittenden, 1991) since its independence from Australian rule in 1975. A large part of this literature looks at emergent neo-colonialism and its political, economic and social impacts on PNG’s colonial experiences (Bonnemère, 2004; Bradley, 1990).

In 2011, as Sir Michael Somare, the father of the Papua New Guinea nation (Fox, 2011) faded from its political scene, the peoples of Papua New Guinea were reminded to reflect on their aspirations and hopes for the future of their nation (Namorong, 2011). They were encouraged to look to the wisdom of the Melanesian Way (Narokobi, 1983) to guide them through the transition of political power (Callick, 2011). The Melanesian Way (1983, p. 6) is a vision of cosmic harmony in which the nation is united and developed through its culturally diverse peoples. Central to this vision is the idea that the peoples of PNG are its greatest wealth. To develop the nation is to develop its people, in all aspects of the person, in the context of their environment and social relationships in ways that are not dependent on outsiders (Matane, 1986). It offers opportunity for all people to participate in a process of development on equal grounds, calling on the strength of the Melanesian way, which embraces the value of self-sacrifice, the principle of reciprocity and obligation, and a common belief in the reality of the ancestors (Narokobi, 1983).

In recent times, many Papua New Guinea peoples’ view of the world has been shaken. As village people, they depend on the wisdom and support of their clan (wantok) obligations for their security (Topham, 2011). As inhabitants of a modern PNG world, they depend on their capacity to earn money for survival. Many feel they cannot live in both worlds, and must choose ‘between the so-called primitive past of their ancestors,
and the civilised and enlightened present of Western civilisation’ (Narokobi, 1983, p. 17).

Historically, Papua New Guinea peoples have lived as relatively independent societies in harmony with the environment, the source of their physical, spiritual and intellectual nourishment. Their land defines them, and confines them to a locality. So much so that there is enormous diversity of language, culture, and even bodily features across the multitude of groups. Individuals could own personal property, but the land and all it produced was owned communally. Everyone expects a fair share, though not necessarily an equal portion. This balancing act between the interests of the individual against those of the tribe is recognised in the idea and activity of exchange. Namorong (2011) discusses exchange as:

Melanesian Equilibrium, the genius of our forefathers who juggled with the Economic Problem – human wants are infinite while the means of satisfying those wants are scarce. Many beliefs, laws, values, practices, and systems of social, economic and political organisation were aimed at achieving that balance. Hunting, gardening, fishing, marriage, birth and death all had cultural norms aimed at satisfying everyone and maintaining social order (para. 4-6).

This is the case in many traditional communities despite contact with the outside world. They still depend on traditional ways for survival, and the modern State has little or no real influence in how they live their daily lives.

However, as a member of the global international society, Papua New Guinea is a developing nation faced with considerable economic challenge, particularly concerning degraded infrastructure, law and order problems, and a weakly performing public service (UNPNG, 2011). The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) reports that PNG struggles to translate strong economic growth and political stability into improved development outcomes (AusAID, 2009), and they predict that PNG will be unable to achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015 (UNDP, 2010). Over the years from 1975 to around 2002, PNG’s population suffered significant declines in living standards due to their poor economic performance. Since then, relative stability and economic growth have come to symbolise a country gradually finding its place in the world, though PNG is far from a cohesive state (Webster & Duncan, 2010).
Although the country does not exhibit the widespread abject poverty present in some developing countries, poor health, literacy rates and other social indicators show that poverty is a serious problem (AusAID, 2009). While the main social indicators, i.e., life expectancy and maternal and child mortality rates have improved since 1975, they are still well below the averages for lower-middle income countries. Primary health care provision is limited, infectious diseases claim many lives, there are serious public health risks from endemic diseases such as malaria, and an emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic. An estimated 2.56% of adults in PNG carry the HIV/AIDS virus.

In education, the rate of participation in primary schooling is improving, but it remains low, below that of most other countries in the region (UNPNG, 2010). Youth has become the prime target of the advertisers of consumer goods and services (Akope, 1996), and the urban youth of most Pacific nations, combined with continuing internal migration to urban centres, has left towns and cities across the region with a high proportion of young people, often unemployed and reluctant to return to the villages and a life of agricultural labour (Banks, 2000).

Narokobi (1983) makes it clear that failures such as these are not a reflection of the inadequacy of tradition. It is the perceived ‘normality’ of traditional ways of life in many rural communities that sometimes causes Papua New Guinea people to dispute references to their poverty. How is poverty and wealth defined in this neoliberal milieu when Papua New Guinea people live in two realities of the present? Namorong (2011) states that, ‘We live in the reality of our ancestral land and the modern State that exists on that land. Our cultural practices are as relevant to us as modern medicine, science and political organisation’ (para. 10).

Within the economic rationalisation of global culture, foreign aid is a powerful factor in reshaping the identity of the developing nation, commonly problematised as ‘other’ from a Western perspective (Robertson, et al., 2007). Development tends to be understood through such concepts as the triple bottom line, a holistic concept of sustainability where environmental, social and economic considerations are identified and considered concurrently in decision making (ECOS, 2009; Vanclay, 2004). It is meant to be a way of thinking about corporate social responsibility, not a method of accounting. However, development projects as with other change-provoking events, often accentuate inherent cultural instability, accelerate social change and undermine those forces that counteract the forces of disintegration (Vanclay, 2004). Gough (2004)
and Sauvé (1999), in their analyses of development discourses, show that sustainable development usually means economic development, solely or primarily. Though policies, market arrangements and program plans are said to be made with the needs of the people uppermost, the problem is that any definition of ‘needs’ assumes an ideological stance on the part of the definer (Leagans, 1964).

While economic development is extensively critiqued (Held & McGrew, 2003), communitarian development is less rigorously criticised. The Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) Pacific Strategy takes a communitarian approach, and refers to sociocultural context, including the implications of modernisation and globalisation, and the complexities of traditional land ownership for tribally based cultures. However, the strategy criticises traditional value systems that elevate tribal and family allegiances above all else. Both discourses inform development endeavours in PNG, and both problematise the culture and system of production of particular groups of people in different ways (Fleming, 2001; Schoeffel, 1997).

PNG’s economy now operates dually through an enclave economy in mining, petroleum, and logging, together with a subsistence economy focused mainly on agriculture (Banks, 1993). Nearly all people support themselves via rural livelihoods, yet there is now a shift away from primary production and self-sufficiency as overseas-owned transnational and multinational companies with interests in mining and logging take over larger and larger areas of land. People are being forced away from a traditional exchange economy towards a monetary economy (Kukari & Ogoba, 1999). This change has profoundly affected traditional societies and the way they distribute wealth. At the village level, traditional patterns of social organisation for collective action have been seriously disrupted, and life has become difficult (James, 1997; Ryan, 2009).

Local identity

The major development discourses that impact Ninggirum life are rural development, mining, the environment and education. The literature that addresses these issues is chiefly economic, sociological, and ethnographic. Jorgensen (1990, 1996, 2007) reports on regional history, focusing on the Telefolmin to the north of Ninggirum land, and Kirsch (2002, 2004, 2009) concentrates his inquiry on the Yonggom whose land lies to the south. Government reports exist in regional, country profiles and statistics (NSO,
2003), and OTML has undertaken ongoing regional environmental monitoring (Burton, 1991, 1993; Hyndman, 1988; King, 1993) and social impact studies (Filer, 1996). Banks’ (2002a, 2002b) baseline studies of minerals and sustainable development in PNG encourages study of social change over time in local people groups surrounding the Ok Tedi Mine.

The Ninggirum postcolonial situation is not just an academic one. In 1999, PNG’s dire financial situation led the Marauta government to ignore the undeniable evidence of the damage the mine was causing to the local environment. In 2002, BHP Billiton (which had 52% ownership of the mine) wanted to shut the mine because of the environmental damage done to the Ok Tedi, but the rest of the partners (PNG Government 30%, Canadian Metal Mining Corporation 18%) did not (Mining Watch Canada, 1999). The Government, in great need of the mine’s annual royalties and taxes to attract ongoing foreign aid, instigated special legislation whereby an independent trust, the PNG Sustainable Development Project (PNGSDP) was established (Mines and Communities, 2007) to take ownership of BHP Billiton’s share of the mine, in exchange for indemnity (Ryan, 2009). The mine continues to operate, and the people continue to wait for a clean river.

Struggles continue around the latest water environment damages. On May 28, 2011, the mine temporarily suspended production following spillage of treated tailings at four locations along its pyrite pipeline. The 128 kilometre pipeline runs from the tailings processing plant at the mine site, following the Highway to Bige in the Lower Ok Tedi area, where the concentrate is stored in underwater storage pits. Although the ruptures have been repaired, and a cleanup program implemented, OTML Board and Executive Management decided to suspend ore production at the mine and mill to allow further investigations and tests on the pipeline (Joku, 2011a). On June 9, 2011, Government representatives signed a change notice which agreed that mine operations should resume, and adhere to strict conditions. The first condition is that OTML must compensate the Ningerum and Matkomnai communities in the areas affected by the spills, and the second is that they build two tailings disposal dams at the mine site. However, while the dam is being built, the company will continue to dispose its waste directly into the Ok Tedi River, and stockpile the pyrite at the mine site (Joku, 2011b). Within the historically contingent and overlapping assemblages of both individual and collective powers, place-based struggles highlight the possibilities of local agency being
transformation. Agency refers to the ability of postcolonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power, and is essentially to do with reclaiming difference (Davies, 2004). This choice to engage or resist arises because there are many and contradictory discursive practices that the subject engages in. Agency can arise through the taking up of agentic subject positions within discourses, or in positioning oneself or being positioned by others. The power to choose does not lie in freedom from discursive constitution, rather, it comes from the freedom to recognise multiplicity, and be in that realised place where no discursive practice or positioning by powerful others can capture and control one’s identity (Davies, 2000). Agency is not autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process. Autonomy becomes the recognition that power and force presume counter-power and counter-force, which in turn create new life-forms. These life-forces are capable of disrupting hegemonic forms, even potentially overwriting or eclipsing them (Davies, 2004).

This means that local people actively participate in changing their situation although the ways in which this happens are often deeply embedded in the taken-for-granted activities that characterise their daily life. Ninggirum is an out-of-the-way place, and this idea invokes the need for a processual sense of place that is not a pre-existing object set in concrete, but essentially constituted through the on-going relations of objects and events. It allows the full layering effects of time and space to work themselves into historically contingent and globally located sites of identity (Escobar, 2001).

**Other theses**

Throughout the literature I have found nothing that replicates my proposed study. The closest research is Golub’s (2006) feasibility study that examines land tenure and negotiations with the Ipili people of the Southern Highlands regarding the Porgera mine. It deals with theoretical issues underlying the logistical, social, and legal obligations involved in keeping the mine operational. It focuses on finding meaning for engineering in Ipili narratives. This highly interpretive ethnography tells about Ipili experience, though the author does not explore his own relationship with the people and how that influences his knowledge production. Ryan’s (2006) postcolonial investigation of neocolonial practices in science education in PNG exposes ways that practices are irrelevant to the indigenous subject, and how they effectively silence the indigenous voice. Her strong critical theory calls Western science educators to account, advocating
the use of postcolonial discourses as a way of understanding the relationships and
dialogue between different ways of knowing. Watson’s (2011) thesis examines the role
of mobile telephony in rural communities in the Madang region of Papua New Guinea,
particularly attitudes of rural villagers to this technology, and ways in which social
relationships are changing or being reinforced. Together these studies have produced
valuable knowledge of indigenous identity and power relations, providing very helpful
insights into theoretical issues that are contingent to my proposed study.

This literature addresses some contemporary issues of development and globalisation in
postcolonial Melanesia and is inadequate for exploring the effects of global economic
development on a traditional, indigenous society. While it is preoccupied with ideas of
development and associated global phenomena, current theory is still based in an
ontology of duality. It favours dichotomous processes of selection, measuring global
development in terms of economics through production, trade and foreign investment. It
uses indicators such as the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010) to determine
and distinguish the rich from the poor of the world. The intensification of competition
between nations or societies in different parts of the world is demonstrated through
global shifts and the emergence of new geographical centres of economic activity and
the transnational companies (Dicken, 2004), and processes of transformation within the
global economy are still based on the nature and significance of technological change in
facilitating the transformation of economic activity (Caselli, 2004).

**Organisation of the study**

After this introductory discussion, Chapter Two constructs a conceptual and theoretical
frame through which I make sense of my process of adjustment to postcolonial and
postmodern ideas as a way of knowing myself and Ninggirum life. Chapter Three
describes the methods I used to establish the evidential basis of the thesis, focusing on
interaction with Ninggirum people while gathering research materials at Ningerum
Station in 2009. Chapter Four records my experience of processing the materials here in
Australia, culminating in a discussion of mythopoesis, trickster stories and indigenous
aesthetics as a framework for understanding traditional oral stories. In Chapter Five I
analyse a traditional oral story to learn to recognise trickster and his activities in
Ninggirum orality.
Focus then shifts to the Ninggirum landscape. Chapter Six analyses a traditional place story to explore the issues surrounding Government/multinational company and traditional land ownership around the Ok Tedi mine site. Chapter Seven analyses another place story to discover meanings linked to the Ok Tedi River, and the social disturbance created by the presence of the mine. Chapter Eight analyses the central Ninggirum creation story to discover their thoughts about space and time and how these form their reality. Chapter Nine laments the injustice of disregarding traditional values in local development activity, and Chapter Ten explores the meaning of the traditional feast in how change happens traditionally, and the impact of these changes on Ninggirum identity and ways of knowing.
Chapter Two – Place as a way of knowing the world

It is January, 2010, and I am back in the Sunshine Coast hinterlands. I am at the Mary Cairncross National Park, one of my old stamping grounds. From here I can see the Glasshouse Mountains, each a tall, silent sentinel guarding the coastline. It is a balmy summer afternoon, and I am eager for new sites to photograph. Rambling through the rainforest, I am looking through my camera lens to see what I can see. It is like wandering through a museum, such diverse plant and animal life, so close you can almost touch, only so far lest we molest. It is like stepping back in time, a remnant of the majestic rainforests that once covered the Blackall Range. This is my land. I was born here. I played here as a child, long before it was a tourist park. Right on this very spot. Our family played cricket over there. Mum made our lunch on that table.

Look. Here is the old water tank. I remember once, we had been playing cricket, and I was dying for a drink. So I ran over to the tank, turned the tap on, filled my glass and began to drink. The water was so cool and refreshing, making me want more. As I refilled the glass I noticed something curious. You can imagine how I spluttered when I saw all these little black mosquito wrigglers swimming in the water.

I wonder if they’re still there. I cup my hand, turn the tap. Yes.

This place is alive with memory, its tranquillity and sacred beauty embodying my self and the hosts of others who have been here with me and before me (Personal journal, January, 2010).

I feel a strong connection to the mountains I grew up in. I also feel strongly about the mountains of Ninggirum land. Perhaps Ninggirum people feel similarly about their mountains. I wonder how they are connected to their land? What does their place mean to them?

Moving away from a dominant model of research is a challenging endeavour. When my experience with the Ninggirum took its postcolonial turn, my research interest moved from the preferred structuralist model of linguistic and cultural study of my workplace, into a different area. It is a place of shifting landscape, where not much is neat and tidy, and even less is certain. It ‘emphasises the irrational, messy and embodied process of becoming-other-to-one’s-self in research’ (Somerville, 2008, p. 209). In this place I rediscovered previously felt tensions I had worked hard to avoid. These tensions gather
around truth and realities, methods and theories, participation and observation, in
developed and developing contexts. They demand that I do the hard emotional work of
visiting our colonial past, in order to learn new ways of knowing people as the authors
of their own lives. They demand that I become more aware of my impact on the
processes of knowledge production, and exercise greater accountability in how I speak
and write about people and their ways of living. For me, it is a long hard road, learning
to step out of the objectivist stance that allows the attitude of speaking for (Spivak
1988).

In this study I explore the meaning of development and change to the Ninggirum people
of postcolonial Papua New Guinea, to learn how they understand their world and how
change happens within their reality, in order to gain insight into the current state of
education and learning in the Pacific Region. To understand the implications of such
development and change, I investigate the effects of global development on local
culture through natural resource development on traditional land by exploring the
impact of the transnational company, Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML), on everyday
Ninggirum life. In this chapter I construct the theoretical and conceptual frame that
forms the lens through which I make sense of the complexities of life as it happens in
this global local interface. I discuss the significant concepts, assumptions, subjectivities
and methods (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 25-29) that interlink to provide a way of
understanding the impact of global processes on traditional Ninggirum cultural ways of
knowing.

My researcher self

For twenty-six years I have worked with an international training organisation dedicated
to the survival and welfare of the world’s ethnic languages and cultures. For almost as
many years, in the academic community of the organisation’s Papua New Guinea
branch, I have struggled with a perceived contradiction between our stated beliefs and
actual practices. How is it that while serving the ‘different’ of the world, we claim to
value diversity, yet live and work in ways that conform them to our status quo or push
them to the margins?

Over the past two decades, my work community has reluctantly and uncomfortably
moved into broader understandings through the use of multiple research methods, but in
my experience, the colonial past can easily keep shaping reality in our workplace. In
trying to come to terms with these and other issues, Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994, p. 1-17) history of the development of qualitative research has helped me to appreciate the organisation’s position regarding approaches to research, and Rorty’s (1979) history of philosophy has helped me to grasp the underlying assumptions of these approaches. I now realise that in trying to come to grips with decolonising research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), indigenous identity and the indigenous subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), my life took a postcolonial turn, and my research interest has moved in the direction of authenticating the interpretation and representation of other peoples, their cultures and experiences. It is a process that continually challenges me to go beyond my own cultural, ideological and ethno-epistemological assumptions.

Living in Papua New Guinea society has forever changed my conception of reality. When I first started in this direction I was youthfully idealistic, and fully convinced of the danger to ethnic minority languages and cultures posed by the economy and technology of the English speaking world. I held firmly to a Christian ethic and wanted to do some good in the world. I thought I could bring some relief to the peculiar sufferings of indigenous peoples through education and the translation of the Bible into local language. Thus my family and I went to live with the Ninggirum people to help save their language and culture. Over time, I began to recognise the conflicts I was experiencing, but felt powerless to find better ways. As a missionary/language worker, how can I support and maintain Ninggirum language while simultaneously bringing change through Bible translation, training and literacy?

The hardest part of my experience has been coping with the chaos (Somerville, 2008) of living and trying to do right in and across other cultures. While life within the organisation’s multi-culture offered some comfort through the continuation of conservative Western living, its unwavering commitment to the study of language and society through positivist assumptions (Gane & Johnson, 1993, p. 158-161) shaped by colonial ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15-16) tended to obstruct my ways of making sense of my life with the Ninggirum. The more deeply I became immersed in Ninggirum life, the more my compartmentalised universals toppled, revealing my culture-bound beliefs and activities. Through the pain of being discriminated against as a white outsider, I have begun to understand, to some degree at least, my own ethnocentric and othering ways, and I realise that it is more comfortable for me to see Ninggirum life the way I want it to be, rather than to come to terms with a different
reality. Over time, I became very critical of the organisation’s work culture, thus straining my relations with and within the community. As I had no resources through which to address this tension, it sat beneath the surface, nagging.

In undertaking this research I have lived in Australia for the past five years. Prior to moving to PNG in 1991, the Australia I grew up in was a secure place for me. I knew who I was, where I belonged, how I functioned, and what I believed. I had gained the necessary cultural knowledge and ways of being that made Australia ‘home’. The person who returned from PNG in 2007 was decidedly different, as was the Australia I returned to. It is now defined by different philosophical understandings around more complicated sets of economic and political factors that shape a society of people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. The development of polyethnic Australian society has challenged the order of my world, and it is this social fact that finally caused me to confront my deeply hidden binary assumptions, and to examine the philosophical understandings that structure my reality (Crotty & Wurst, 1998).

**Thinking differently**

Throughout this experience I have been privileged to work with Professor Margaret Somerville who has supervised my research. In looking for alternative ways to make sense of my cross-cultural work experience I was drawn to Margaret’s postpoststructural and postcolonial ideas of place and emerging subjectivities (Somerville, 2007), because they focus on the creative potential to generate new knowledges. Rather than being the objective researcher, or following the fundamental deconstructive thrust of critical postmodern/poststructural thought, she suggests a process of change that is embedded in new understandings in the field of place studies. The following discussion is guided by Margaret’s ground-breaking work (Somerville, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010; Somerville, Power, & de Carteret, 2009; Tomaney, & Somerville, 2010; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon & de Carteret, 2011).

**A place framework**

During one of my campus visits, I was discussing my struggles with Margaret, and she suggested that space/place theory and body/place writing (Somerville, 1999) might be a
way of handling the tensions. When she asked, ‘What is your connection with place?’ I struggled to respond. Suspended in a vacant space amidst many different worlds, I felt profoundly detached, and very alone. After a long silence my response was, ‘I have no place’. She explained that, as children, we are attached to places we care about, and we learn about them through our immediate sensory experiences. Yet the aim of the educational processes of modernity is to achieve placelessness, hyper-rationality, emotional neutrality and abstracted, universal forms of knowledge. She recommended place as a productive framework because it functions as a bridge between knowledge systems, enabling different understandings of the ways global processes affect local places (Somerville, Power, & de Carteret, 2009, p. 4). It also acts as a bridge between scientific research and indigenous epistemology, creating a conversation that can disrupt taken-for-granted knowledges, and potentially change the way I think about Ninggirum place and the challenges that face the Ninggirum community. In considering the indigenous peoples of the world, place offers a way of looking at global local relations from the local perspective, producing a different kind of knowledge about the global that gives voice to the local people and their concerns (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 5).

**Positioning the research**

This study is located in a junction between education, social theory and cultural studies that intersects with postcolonial studies and place studies. It is an interdisciplinary space that allows exploration of cultural studies in ways that enhance the study and practice of education in postcolonial Melanesia. Released from fixedness I have been able to think in new words, languages and metaphors about educational research and practice. The study proposes a postcolonial understanding of ways in which global development shapes agency in local indigenous identity in one Papua New Guinean culture. It uses a place methodology to analyse the social, cultural, political, historical and economic contexts within which local, informal epistemology develops and must be understood. It is chiefly concerned with the representation of indigenous story, the indigenous subject, and decolonising research.

It uses ‘postcolonial’ to mean resistance to the ‘colonial’ and, simultaneously, that the ‘colonial’ and its discourses continue to shape culture long after the severing of formal ties with colonial rule (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin, 2000). It is interested in constructs of
indigenous subjectivity through the ideas of culture, space and time, language, and transnationalism. As a decolonisation project (Bishop, 2003), this study seeks to be ‘minimal, existential, auto/ethnographic, vulnerable, performative and critical’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 619). It generates from the space between myself and Ninggirum people, acknowledging my own subjectification through the research as much as it focuses on Ninggirum language and storytelling in this space of global development. As such, it seeks a research process that is democratic, emancipatory and transformative (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009).

In the realm of social theory, Connell’s (2007) Southern theory presents a case for a radical rethinking of social science and its relationships to knowledge, power and democracy on a world scale. This theory argues for a more democratic global recognition of social theory from societies outside the dominant European and North American ways of understanding the world. While Northern theory addresses the reality of metropolitan society as universal knowledge, Southern theory draws out knowledge-making through the social experience of those who inhabit the outer edges. It enables a view of global and local relations through the knowledge-making systems of both the North and the South, by considering the role southern perspectives should have in a globally connected system of knowledge. Though patterns of colonial science still dominate the view of the postcolonial world, this theory enables me to present a view of the world theorised from local knowledge, that uses local indigenous language to speak back to the metropole (Connell, 2007, p. viii-ix).

While cultural studies enable insight into educational theorising for cultural transformation, place studies, a sub-set of cultural studies, looks at the relationship between culture and the environment. As an interdisciplinary formation that focuses on finding new ways of understanding place (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 6), the field moves beyond the earlier conceptions of theorists such as Bachelard (1958) and Relph (1976), drawing on contemporary cultural theorists (Soja, 2000) who focus on the transdisciplinary use of all aspects of the spatiality of human life. These reconceptions emphasise the human and more-than-human aspects of places as active participants in knowledge making, enabling a focus on the mutual constitution of bodies, identities, histories, spaces and places. They are also productive as a conceptual tool through which to explore alternative understandings of relations with place for important cultural transformations.
The indigenous community is an important site for learning about place. In this study, ‘indigenous’ is theorised, not as race, or autochthony (Morgan, 2003), but through place. Concepts of place show the very complex interaction of language, history, and environment in the experience of colonised people, and the importance of space, location and relationships in the process of identity formation (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 70-73). Cosmological understandings rise out of the notion of place, the ground in which the present, past and future meet, and where the past lives on in the present. Place understandings show how the world works, and our place in it (Somerville, 2003). They tell us how the world was created, how people came into being, who the ancestors are, where they lived, how they lived, how they related to their world and to one another. They provide an idealised form of the ancestors’ lives as knowledge passed from one generation to the next. This is authoritative knowledge that acts to propagate and protect subsequent generations so that they do not lose their way in life.

While modernity is about erasing the sense of attachment to place (Green, 2007), postmodern place studies recognise the multiplicity of places, and the possibility to create alternative storylines that carry the potential to reconnect human to nature, mind to body (Leder, 1990) and person to place (Somerville, 1999). Pedagogically, place as a centre of experience teaches about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Thus, living in a place makes our identities and shapes our possibilities (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 647). Hence, research into these spaces needs to tread carefully. From his critical stance, Gruenewald (2003a) identifies two broad and interrelated aspects of place learning, decolonisation and reinhabitation. Decolonisation entails the ability to recognise ways of thinking that ‘injure and exploit other people and place’, and reinhabitation identifies, affirms, conserves and creates ‘those forms of cultural knowledge that nurture and protect people and ecosystems’ (p. 9). These parallel processes are decidedly postmodern and postcolonial in their intention, which was to critique the ‘romantic excesses of ecohumanists’ (Ball & Lai, 2006, p. 270), underpinned by an idealist view of nature and the autonomous, rational, patriarchal subject of liberal humanism (Weedon, 1997).

Somerville (2008) pushes further with a poststructural and postcolonial understanding of decolonisation and reinhabitation that moves beyond binary constructions of thought (Rose, 2004). Her theory reaches beyond deconstruction in order to create something
new from the space between binary oppositions. She articulates three key principles that rise out of this reconceptualisation of place: relationship to place is constituted in stories and other representations, place learning is local and embodied, and deep place learning occurs in a contact zone of contestation (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 8). Hence, place studies allows an alternative exploration of people’s relationship to place to help them make sense of their lives in a changing, global world (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 7).

**Relationship to place is constituted in stories and other representations**

The principles of story and storytelling are central to place pedagogies of change (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 8-9; Somerville, et al., 2011, p. 4-5). Stories help people make sense of the world, be they visual, aural, performative, popular or statistical scientific representations of place stories. Indigenous place stories usually incorporate song, music, dance, body art and performance that are attached to particular places (Somerville, 2010) thus extending the possibility of different ways of knowing places to come into conversation with each other.

Storylines as an analytical process (Davies, 2000; Sondergaard, 2002) enables the identification of the dominant storylines of place that reveal the emergence of alternative stories. Davies understands a storyline as the plotline of collective stories about place, that shape modes of thinking about ourselves, others and our place in the world. They form a ‘stock of imaginary storylines through which life choices can be made’ (Davies, 2000, p. 81), and lived out. In postcolonial discourse, dominant colonial storylines of place ‘deny our connection to earthly phenomena [and] construct places as objects or sites on a map to be economically exploited’ (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 624). Therefore, deconstructing such storylines, in order to reconstruct previously invisible place stories, is part of the process of decolonisation and the legitimation of the suppressed, alternative stories that already exist. Hence, changing our relationship to places means changing the stories we tell about places, introducing new storylines of embodied connection (Rose, 2004).

**The living story**

Traditionally, indigenous cultures are said to conceptualise their world in terms of their origin stories. Things, people and events are linked to stories that give meaning to their
world. The stories tell how their world came into existence through the actions of the Ancestors, the more-than-human beings who created the whole reality and who are parts of that whole (Fugmann, 1985). This metonymy is reflected in relationships with humans, spirits and the natural environment, and all of life is ordered in the space of these relationships. The origin stories link the past with the present, reassuring human beings that all things and events have order and structure in their world.

In Western scholarship, this genre of stories has been referred to as ‘myth’. Enlightenment science has been brutal to nature and therefore to myth, now understood as fiction or even lies. When things are considered objects of representation, or as needing to conform to the intellectual categories of a judging subject, they lose their hidden-ness, their inner depth and self-sufficiency (Boe & Boe, 2009). Thus, the trickster character, prevalent in these stories, becomes locked within one reality, losing his transforming power (Hyde, 1998). In this idea of truth, myth is marginalised, and the places it takes us become relegated to the fringe of everyday experience (Deardorff, 2001). Myth is considered to be untrue because it articulates reality that exists outside the more provable worlds that we construct for ourselves. This implies a shift from the authority of the plants and animals, each the spirit-child of more-than-human progenitors, to human authority, dwelling godlike in the centre of our constructs. Once the animals become domesticated, they stop talking (Thompson, 1981). But traditional society that has not been through our ‘Enlightenment’ still holds history and origin as constitutive of identity, and therefore authoritative.

Within the enactment and expression of mythological thinking and poetic imagination, these stories have an amazing ability to transmit experience on a personal level and to reconstitute the full richness of the experience. Making sense from these stories, then, rises from the exchange of energies between the hearer and the teller; where every telling, although unique, is the original. Thompson (1981) comments that matter-of-fact, empirical treatment of myth, blocks, rather than unlocks our way into mythic experience. Deardorff (2001) explains that the ‘concept’, a product of rational mind, is more narrow and constricted than the associative and inclusive ‘deep image’, a product of poetic imagination. What the concept as container is incapable of holding and will not include can be held in the poetic image. Eliade (1961) states that, ‘To have imagination is to be able to see the world in its totality, for the power and mission of the image is to show all that remains refractory to the concept: ... without imagination,
humankind is cut off from the deeper reality of life and from our own soul.’ To appreciate the value of myth and poetry is to confirm that imagination is a valid and essential dimension of reality (Deardorff, 2002; Boe & Boe, 2009). However this creative, performative space tempts empirical analysis to conform stories to universal theorisation, and preserve them as museum pieces. When myth becomes rigid and fixed it reduces to dogma, and ritual becomes imitation (Elder, 1996). Hence, the challenge of ‘writing’ the culture story is to not lose the qualities of the meaningful, living performance.

**Place learning is necessarily embodied and local**

This principle emphasises the mutual constitution of places and bodies through Grosz’s theory (1994, p. 5) that puts the body at the centre of the notion of subjectivity. This radical conceptualisation completely transforms the way we think about ourselves and our relations around knowledge, power and desire. Somerville, Power & de Carteret, (2009, p. 9) apply this strategy to place, causing us to think about place and experiences of place with the body at the centre, making the body a key site for change. Soja (2000, p. 361) suggests that ‘the space of the human body is perhaps the most crucial site to watch the production and reproduction of power’, opening us to the materiality of places. The things that happen to places can affect them deeply, also profoundly affecting the people who live there. Thus, the environment may be seen as a subject in its own right, which needs care and consideration for its longevity (Rose, 1996, p. 7).

**Melanesian subject**

In trying to represent an embodied, indigenous Melanesian subject, Western theories of subjectivity seem unable to reach far enough beyond their own universalist or culture-bound assumptions. The modern self incorporates elements of both Enlightenment thought (Harvey, 1989) and Romanticism (Gergen, 2000), culminating in a self who is autonomous, rational, passionate and moral. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the order of representation of the self was challenged, and the rational subject began to be exposed as a construct by language (Weedon, 1997), gender (Giroux, 1992), production (Eagleton, 2000) and the forces of the unconscious (Rosenau, 1992). The subsequent poststructural and postmodern emphasis on language as the predominant site of subject formation has focused critical attention on the notion
of the unstable subject (Schrag, 1997) and the decentred self (Giroux, 1992). Hence, postmodern theories of subjectivity challenge essentialism by shifting attention away from universals to the process of constructing subjectivity, where the subject is no longer seen in terms of an essence. Rather, it is conceptualised as a subject in process, never unitary and never complete (Marshall, 1997, p. 108-9).

However, Grosz’s theory (1994, p. 5) puts the body at the centre of the notion of subjectivity. Concerning the term ‘body’, some writers use it as a synonym for self or person without any sense of bodiliness. This tends to dissipate its salience, taking body as a methodological starting point, objectifying it as a thing without intentionality and intersubjectivity (Csordas, 1994, p. 4). Eves (1998, p. 25) argues that consciousness is not independent of the body but is bound up in guiding its practical engagement with the world. Hence, ideas of self and person emerge from the mutual constitution of bodies and places.

**Bodiliness**

Among Melanesian cultural identities, the body is conceived through social discourses and knowledges that construct it in particular ways, and images of the body pervade conceptualisations of the way the world is constructed and inhabited. The use of the body, its permeable and partible parts and substances (Strathern, 1995; Busby, 1997; LiPuma, 2000) are an important aspect of the process by which Melanesian people develop attachments to their places (Strathern & Stewart, 1998, 2007). Their origin stories construct a cosmology of space and place around the contrasting images of body through ideas such as gender, directionality, mobility, and emotionality (Strathern, 1988, 1995). Hence constructions of the body and the flow of figurative possibilities are imaginatively fashioned in this way of viewing the world. The body and its movement through space is integral to the process by which the world is known, valued and inhabited. Through the active and moving body, people live their lives as concrete embodiments of intentionality, and these actions and products circulate beyond themselves to others, enmeshing them in an intersubjective world of intentionality (Eves, 1998, p. 25). So, body movement is integral to the transformation of space into lived place. It enables a process of thinking through the body to negotiate the tensions between traditional modes of social harmony and the culturally constructed requirements of living in their places, today.
Melanesian culture stories concur with Strathern and Busby’s conceptualisation of the Melanesian body as dividual (Marriott & Inden, 1977), i.e., a physically embodied human subject that can be endlessly divided, shared, or participated in, in common with others. Therefore the Melanesian person is conceptualised as permeable and partible (Busby, 1997). In contrast to the dominant western concept of individuality that presents personhood as bounded, unique and self-determining, dividual persons may be thought of as multiply-authored composites made up of substances i.e., blood, cooked food, liquids and knowledge that are transmitted between bodies, persons and positions. Substances mingle within bodies, but are inseparable from the outside world. They constantly circulate and transform through social interactions; and the giving and receiving of substances changes a person internally (Marriott, & Inden, 1997).

The person in Melanesia, though obviously identifiable on one level as male or female, nevertheless represents a mosaic of male and female substances, internally dividing the body into differently gendered parts (Busby, 1997, p. 270). Thus, there is an equivalence of men and women as both mosaically constructed, and at the same time, a radical distinction is made between gendered male and female body parts (Strathern 1988, p. 122). Persons in Melanesia, socially constructed through their relationships, can be imagined through the flow of body substance and the attachment and detachment of the body as parts. Such parts can also be objects outside the boundary of the skin, yet are nevertheless considered part of the person. The perception of Melanesian bodies as internally divided creates an apparent harmony between internal and external relations or parts. Thus the person, through his/her relations with others appears to extend beyond the skin boundary to include objects and persons considered at any one time to be products of such relations. These transactions appear as the extraction and absorption of parts of the person. In being multiple, person is also partible, capable of sharing parts in relations with others (Strathern 1988, p. 185).

Self as interconnected with others in their place is a natural starting point for exploring Melanesian subjectivity. This sense of self does not rest on assumptions of individuality and the opposition of self and other, but on the inclusiveness of difference. Thus, the self contains some of the other, participates in the other, and is in part contained within the other. In the collective sense, persons know themselves as inextricably embedded in nature, interrelated with other persons and beings, while occupying particular social
positions and roles (Chang, 2008, p. 25-6). Hence, selfhood is understood in relation to different, agentic others within a community.

Culture and land

In this study, culture is conceptualised as a web constructed of self and others, because it addresses people as interactive agents. It is inherently group-oriented, resulting from human interactions (Chang, 2008, p. 20). Rather than locating culture outside of individuals or in people’s minds, this theory conceptualises culture as a work-in-progress. Individuals are cultural agents, but culture is not all about individuality, therefore, individuals are not prisoners of culture, though individual autonomy is the foundation of inner-group diversity (Chang, 2008, p. 20-3). In considering the relationship between indigenous culture and environment, the more-than human aspects of places as active participants in knowledge making needs to be explored (Rose, 1996, p. 7), therefore, in this study, I am scoping culture as broadly as possible, in order to recognise, reflect, and respect its dynamism and contemporary nature. Traditional indigenous culture is dynamic because it changes over time and space, while holding practices and meanings that are maintained through generations. It is created in the lived experience of the present community, through their mythology, relations with their land and environment, social organisation and institutions, their beliefs concerning death and beyond, and through a person’s contribution to the community. It is thus contingent on history, space, time, power of life, and contemporary social, economic and political factors.

Geography also has a role in the definition of culture, confirming the importance of both place and spatiality in the construction of culture and the ways in which space is constructed by culture (Heatwole, 2006). Landscapes are complex phenomena that reflect human activity and are imbued with cultural values. They combine elements of space and time, and represent political as well as social and cultural constructs. As they have evolved over time, and as human activity has changed, they have acquired many layers of meaning that can be analysed through historical, archaeological, geographical and sociological study. Therefore the concept of cultural landscapes presents the need for cultural and natural elements to be considered together. Both elements are essential parts of the construction of cultural landscape, as well as key components of a sense of place (Leader-Elliott, Maltby, & Burke, 2004). As vernacular landscapes or landscapes
of the everyday, they are fluid constructs that identify with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility (Jackson, 1984, p. xxi).

Landscape can also be viewed as a place of cultural exchange, where the practices and processes of cultural interaction become forms of cultural heritage. Landscapes are shaped by ideological discourse, and can be understood as texts capable of being analysed as literary works, poetry, prose, painting and film are analysed (Sauer, 1963). The cultural landscape of a country is integral to its cultural diversity, and connections with familiar landscapes forms part of political and cultural identity as people feel they belong to one place, one region, one country. Therefore cultural landscape is more than just the sum of its physical places, it is equally concerned with the spaces between places and how these are given meaning, as well as the documentary and oral history stories that are woven around both (Leader-Elliott, Maltby, & Burke, 2004). The deeply social nature of relationships to place has always mediated people’s understandings of their environment and their movements within it, and is a process that continues to inform the construction of people’s social identity.

Land is where global development processes interconnect with local culture in ways that may be beneficial or detrimental to the people who live there. Culture and land are inextricably linked in the dynamics of relationships that embody the meaning and value of land. While these relations are linked to history, they are also involved in the changing quality of contemporary relationships surrounding land. Therefore, contemporary, culturally situated relations around land envelop both present and past conceptions (Skelton, 1997, p. 73). Among indigenous peoples, land is instrumental in creating and recreating both place and cultural identity (Schuerkens, 2003). While the neoliberal position may use Indigeneity as an idea within its mental construction of the geoeconomy, indigeneity is, simultaneously, an ontological and physical reality for the people whose land is their ‘life’ and their ‘home’. In the face of external threat or change, traditional cultural relationships to land may re-emerge as a form of resistance against impinging global forces (Sardar, 1997, p. 37), and the negative power of the cultural constructions of development. Therefore, true respect for and consideration of traditional, indigenous societies requires an understanding of the centrality of culture to development, and an exploration of the meanings of place, locally and globally, so that issues of land and cultural interpretation may come into focus.
Space and time in global local relations

In the interface between the local and the global, the construction of places as building blocks of global space is widely recognised as virtual interactivity. They are interactive processes that give rise to emerging cultural forms. Giddens (1991, p. 64) theorises global space through the reduction of geographical, spatial, and temporal factors as constraints to the development of society. He speaks of structuring properties which allow a binding of time and space in social systems, therefore making it possible for discernably similar practices to exist across varying spans of time and space. He explains a time and space distanciation as standard and abstract dimensions of space and time that come to order and rationalise activities in the place of local contexts, thus disembedding traditional relationship forms. Out with the old and in with the new. Similarly, Harvey’s (1989) time-space compression, and Sassen’s (1991) global city theory are ideas that enable an understanding of the formation of global culture through relations of time and space due to instant communication, and the establishment of new cultural forms in distant places, e.g. world wide web, mobile phone technology and satellite television.

Writers of culture in development stress that the interactional role of places is essential for understanding the dynamics of global spatialisation. According to Wittgenstein (1961, cited in Rossi, 2008b, p. 344) place is constructed by the interactive encounters of people, and it does not have meaning independently of people’s interactions, in the same way that words have no meaning separately from the contexts and particular situations where they are used by interacting individuals. As such, global theories make global space a new frontier to be explored and conquered under the banner of ‘progress’. While these theories might imply the notion of universal space, they make no reference to the interactive encounters of actors with expanded consciousness and multiple identities that support these types of structuring properties (Rossi, 2008a, p. 13). Even interactive and person-centred views of global spatialisation reject the epistemological view of a universal space that pre-exists human interactivity. These theories tend to describe ways of knowing reality as virtual and real, through binary assumptions about the material world in which religion subordinates to rationalism. Therefore, these ideas make no room for the appearance of sacred indigenous or ethnic space. However, cultural materials do not transfer in a unilinear manner. They entail interpretation, translations, and customisation.
Because the earlier theories are contingent on binary logic, they tend to define time and its characteristics as the primary constituents of both space and time. Thus, time is the privileged signifier. This means that space is defined by absence or lack, implying that time equals change, movement, history, dynamism, and space equals the lack of these things. If space is associated with negativity and absence, the exact opposite of temporality, then to spatialise a place or event is to eliminate its temporality. These ideas render a static and apolitical space that forms the basis of conceptions of space as either homogeneous or heterogeneous (Massey, 1992, p. 73). Massey argues for an understanding of spatiality as ‘dimension’. She asserts that though spatiality and temporality are different from each other, space is not static, nor is time spaceless, and neither can be conceptualised as the absence of the other. She advocates that we think in terms of all the dimensions of space-time, to conceptualise space that is constructed out of interrelations, and the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global (p. 80).

Soja (1991, p. 133, cited in Rossi, 2008b, p. 344) stresses that historicity, sociality, and spatiality must be considered in constructing an adequate social basis for development. Sardar’s (1997 p. 47) ideas push the study of spatiality even further, by his comments on the time dimension. He views the West’s hegemony as its ability to define the parameters of the world and development, not only by shrinking space through its technological and economic resources, but by its colonising of the future. The West is not only in history, it is remade in the present and reconstructed in the futures of the global consciousness. Therefore, the way space is described and the positions assigned within that space and time must be explored when writing a contextual rather than linear and limited account of development (Rossi, 2008b, p. 344).

**Language**

As globalisation processes intensify worldwide social relations (Giddens, 1991) and expands the consciousness of the world as a whole (Robertson, 1992), existing linguistic borders are becoming irrelevant as they dissolve. English language and globalisation processes are said to work as pull factors for one another. On one hand the English language plays a major role in the progress of globalisation (Phillipson, 2009) by facilitating political understanding, economic activities and cultural exchange, and on the other hand, globalisation functions as a driving force to strengthen the position of
English as a global language (Grin, 2001). Hence, English can be said to be the language of globalisation (Crystal, 2000). In an increasingly globalised world, linguistic skills strengthen international ties while they foster cultural exchange, and proficiency in English is critical for successful participation in global society (Ouane, 2003).

However, language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. As a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs, it has an important social function and fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is a means by which a culture’s traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved (NSWDET, 2010). Language is also fundamental to cultural identity, and for indigenous peoples, their unique world is expressed in their language, and loss of language means the loss of culture and identity (Koohan Paik, 2006). In many societies throughout history, the suppression of the languages of minority groups has been used as a deliberate policy to suppress those minority cultures. As a result, a large number of the world’s languages have been lost through the processes of colonisation and migration (Krauss, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). As languages disappear, culture dies, and the world becomes a less interesting place for the loss of raw knowledge and the intellectual achievements of millennia (Davis, 1999). Therefore, it is important that people keep their own language alive. In the local indigenous community, proficiency in first language is essential for expression and survival of identity (Eckert, et al., 2004).

The maintenance of a community’s first language is a significant issue for the more than 820 indigenous communities of Papua New Guinea (Lotherington, 1998). This diversity has always been embedded in the nation’s traditional societies, and has been broadened over the last two hundred years with the migration of people from other distinct cultures from around the world (Narokobi, 1983). While Hiri Motu, Tok Pisin and English are the dominant languages, many people speak their local language within their families and communities as their first language. English is the language spoken within the government and the education system, used by 1-2% of the people. Tok Pisin, also known as New Guinea Pidgin or Melanesian Pidgin (Cass, 2002), is a creole language and the most widely used. Hiri Motu is spoken by less than 2% of the population, and is most common in the southern region (UNPNG, 2010). The causal link between the global adoption of English and the demise of many minority languages has been well established in research (Nunan, 2003). Yet the emergence of global language has stimulated and mobilised a strong response in support of local minority languages.
Rather than suppressing linguistic differences, minority and indigenous groups have resisted and re-asserted identity in the pursuit of their cultural and linguistic rights.

In response to this linguistic dilemma, Pennycook (2010) encourages the global linguistic community and language policy makers to think differently about language. In the global sense, language as commodity is seen in terms of the homogenising effects of capitalist expansion, environmental destruction, economic demolition and cultural exploitation. The local becomes the site of resistance, tradition, authenticity, and all that needs to be preserved. To go beyond a critique of large scale global change is to seriously engage with the local processes. Rather than seeing language as a global system (Eckert, et al., 2004) or as abstraction of meaning through symbols, Pennycook (2010, p. 1-8) offers a view of language as a form of action in a specific place and time, where language is a product of the deeply embedded social and cultural activities in which people engage. In this conceptualisation, locality is explored in its complex manifestations as place, and language practices are viewed in terms of mediated social activity that open new ways of thinking about the interrelationships among language, place and practice. Hence, language emerges from the activities it performs, allowing a view of how language operates as an integrated social and spatial activity. It allows an exploration of the relationship between language, space and place, where space is not a static, still background, but organised and given meaning in interaction with humans. Within this more dynamic understanding of space, place can be known through the circumstance of practice, hence constructed and interpreted through the words we produce. Therefore, language can be considered a spatial practice (Lefebvre, 1991), rather than a structure.

**Place is a contact zone of cultural contestation**

This principle acknowledges that indigenous knowledges of place are a force of change for research into global/local contexts (Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon & de Carteret, 2011, p. 6). Somerville, Power & de Carteret, (2009, p. 9) conceptualise specific local places as material and metaphysical in-between space for the intersection of multiple and contested stories. This site of change is a contact zone, where power relations become visible and obvious. It is space that includes ‘the placed stories of different classes and ethnic communities, and of different religious, gendered and sexually oriented collectives’ (Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon & de Carteret, 2011,
p. 6). Pratt (1991) challenges the stance of the stable, centred sense of knowledge and reality in this transnationalised world. It is a major legacy of imperialism that the modern nation state and transnational corporations imagine an homogenised social world in which language, communication and culture are governed by a single set of norms shared by all participants – a vision that allows for a community of other, unified and homogenised with respect to the dominant power, where anything contrary to what is specified by the dominant group, is invisible or anomalous in the overall scene (p. 3). Hence, this contact zone calls for a re-conceptualisation of ideas about community that acknowledge the realities of life for the community’s participants.

Hegemonic forces that maintain the status quo may dissolve when internal social groups insist that their own histories and life ways determine the mode of their membership in the collective. This demand for belonging opens conversation in the space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other (Pratt, 1991, p. 1), often in contexts of unequal power relations (hooks, 1990). It requires ‘continual engagement with difficult questions, moving beyond a personal comfort zone to refuse easy answers and often to dwell in a space of unknowing’ (Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon & de Carteret, 2011, p. 6). It is difficult and emotionally demanding work (Anzaldúa, 2004) to move within, between and across boundaries, but it also produces many new possibilities. Giroux (1992) sees these exchanges as attempts to transgress the borders sealed by modernism, to reveal the arbitrariness of all boundaries, drawing attention to the sphere of culture as a shifting social and historical construction.

These processes allow an examination of difference from the perspective of individual and group participation, past and future, in the social construction of knowledge. They seek to interact with ‘the mechanics of the intricate processes of cultural contact, intrusion, fusion and disjunction’ (Young, 1995, p. 5), that make ‘difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way which makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different’ (p. 26). Carter (1992) theorises difference through the incommensurability of the contact zone, holding the different stories in productive tension. He sees that the main function of the contact zone is to preserve difference, even to the point of suspending meaning.
Change

Understanding how change happens in this contact zone provides valuable insight into how the players are able to change, and useful clues for facilitating desirable change in respectful, peaceful, just and equitable ways. In Somerville’s conception of place (2011, p. 4), change draws attention to the intertwining of humans and the more-than-human world. It is full of creative possibilities and potential that enable alternative responses to current situations arising from the processes of globalisation. Grosz’s (2008, p. 5) conceptualisation of change focuses on the chaos, the life force of the dynamic of inevitable processes of change, and the frame, as a way to engage with these forces intelligibly. She understands chaos as the condition of the universe. Chaos is not absolute disorder, but a plethora of orders, forms and wills that cannot be distinguished or differentiated from each other. Matter and its conditions for being otherwise are indistinguishable, but essential to the whole. The frame (p. 10) enables us to interact with the life force of chaos, by allowing a part of chaos, the unknowable real, to enter into the realm of representation, thus becoming intelligible to us. While science constitutes one such frame, art produces another, allowing us to comprehend more of the unknowable real. Hence, these ideas of change give rise to emergent arts-based methodologies through which to learn about place (Somerville, Power, & de Carteret, 2009, p. 9).

Postmodern emergence

As a postmodern interpretation of place identity, this qualitative research investigates people in their natural world, focusing on embodied, lived experience in the local context. It creates a sense of place that is linked to the global well-being of the individuals and communities who inhabit a particular place. It shows the complex entanglements that connect self with landscape, society and identity, how these complexities interact, and the need to develop better arrangements between the subjectivities who live there. It espouses a postcolonial theoretical perspective that critiques traditional modes of knowledge production that have evolved in settings structured to legitimise elite social science knowledges and to exclude other forms of knowing (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It assumes that meaning is intrinsic to place and that place itself is an agent in the construction of identity, therefore the subject-object relation is not a binary construction. It does not
split subject and object. It shows how people develop a connection with their physical environment through memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, conceptions of behaviour and experience related to that physical environment. Therefore it assumes no split between human and environment, giving humans access to the more than human world. It presents the positive and negative character of person-place interactions that assume the validity of a community's landscape and spatial preferences.

This methodology, as an alternative representation of place, expresses multiple forms of place through the stories that give voice to the embodied experiences of the people who live there. It is emergent because it emphasises the undoing of dominant stories of place (decolonisation) and the collective and relational making of new place stories (re-inhabitation) (Somerville, Power, & de Carteret, 2009, p. 10). The stories are local and responsive, and cannot be pre-empted prior to creating the conditions for their telling. Hence, their emergence is facilitated in the process. It is arts-based in order to allow multiple forms of representation of place to produce alternative perspectives. It requires bodily engagement with the materiality of specific local places to consciously facilitate the representation of alternative and invisible stories. It also requires the development of a new ontology, or way of being-in-the-world, and a new epistemology, or way of knowing-the-world (p. 10).

Somerville suggests a process of becoming in the liminal space between self and other, out of which new knowledge and forms of representation emerge through writing (Somerville, 2007, p. 225). She articulates the process through concepts of wondering, becoming and generating. It begins as wondering. To think or speculate curiously about something strange and surprising carries connotations of open-mindedness, uncertainty and seeking to know the unknown. Instead of aiming for precision, control and proof, it is more that we allow astonishment and admiration to lead the inquiry. Rather than following fixed patterns, almost invariably the researcher comes to a transformation point from which new knowledge and new ways of representing research emerge (Somerville, 2007, p. 228).

It uses the idea of becoming as its ontological underpinning (Somerville, 2007, p. 232). Moving away from the fixedness of the liberal humanist self, it focuses on the process of growing to be, or coming into being each time self is spoken into existence (Davies, 2004). Thus a precondition for emergence is the undoing of subjectivity, conceptualised
as liminality, the space of becoming (Somerville, 2007, p. 232). It is ‘that time and space betwixt and between one context and another, where self is neither what he has been nor what he will be’ (Turner, 1982, p. 113).

From this space, emergence takes the quality of becoming other. It assumes that as humans we are in a continual process of becoming, incorporating ideas of self that has history, who we imagine we are, and our embodied relationship with others. Though Others may be plant, animal, spirit, element or mineral, they are embodied things existing in relation to each other. In the dynamic of this reciprocal relation between self and other, subjectivities are formed and transformed. Thus, becoming-other by engaging in new experiences born of the space in-between, provides the condition for generating new knowledge (Somerville, 2007, p. 233-234).

Becoming other selects the idea of generating as its epistemological basis (p. 235). While knowing is to understand as fact or truth, or to apprehend with clarity and certainty, generating focuses on the makings, the creation of products and assemblages, in an iterative process of representation and reflection through which we come to know in research (p. 228). So, this liminal becoming-other may be seen as the relational basis for an ontology of the self that acknowledges the significance of the Other in the constitution of self, and in the emergence of new knowledges and alternative practices of representation through writing (p. 234). In handling traditional oral stories, the development of alternative methodologies was not so much a choice as a fundamental requirement of the nature of the research.

This methodology assumes that research fundamentally involves power. Historically, traditional research has silenced members of oppressed and marginalised groups by ignoring issues such as ethnicity, gender, and other social identities that are crucial for understanding experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Hence, the research work and texts seek to capture a plurality of different identities or voices associated with different groups, individuals, positions or special interests, recognising that single participants may convey multiple representations. It seeks to present phenomena using a variety of narrative modes, including the use of different sorts of descriptive languages. It assumes knowledge of different theoretical perspectives and familiarity with the critiquing of these on the part of the researcher, and this reflexivity leads to the possibility of openness and different sorts of readings surfacing in the research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 194-5). It incorporates the culturally inclusive practices articulated
by indigenous researchers as multiple ways of knowing the subject (Archibald, 2008; Trent Jacobs, 2008). It acknowledges that the report is not transparent, but authored by a raced, gendered, classed, and politically oriented individual. Such elements break the mould of traditional research patterns through subversion, inversion, irony, pastiche, innovative forms, humour, slyness, and paradox (Jipson & Paley, 1997, p. 11) that make the strange, familiar – and the familiar, strange.

The framework for this research process is consistent with postmodern emerging place theory in its attempt to capture the specific and partial perspectives of Ninggirum people, traditional and modern. It uses different styles of narrative as ways of seeing possibilities for social change through the reconceptualisation of subjectivity both in relation to knowledge generation and the relationship between individual, collective and society. Narratives are represented in several different forms in the research, drawing on the work of Richardson (1990) and Trinh (1989). As experimental representation, they are emergent and transgressive (Richardson, 1994, p. 520), referring to ways of writing research as ‘drama, responsive readings, narrative poetry, pagan ritual, lyric poetry, prose poems and autobiography’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 3). Trinh adds a disruptive element by juxtaposing different forms intertextually, demanding interaction with complexity, pushing the audience beyond easy and conventional meanings. She explores the pauses and silences, attempting to articulate the unsayable, because ‘the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be. To allow it to emerge, people approach it indirectly by postponing until it matures, by letting it come when it is ready to come’ (Trinh, 1989, p. 1). In representing research in these forms, new insights emerge that open up and disrupt taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world. This research writing necessarily opens the self to radical transformations, making spaces for existential doubts and uncertainties (Somerville, 2007, p. 226-7).

Research participants are engaged in a process of sharing their traditional, personal and autobiographical narratives as part of the memory work of collective narrative (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Some stories explore the auto/ethnographical nature of narrative through my capacity to relate to and present the stories told to me by the participants (Pratt, 1991; Chang, 2008). Langellier’s (1999) notion of personal narrative as political, reflective practice informs my analysis of transcripts and translation of language materials. This also relates to and draws on Richardson’s (1990) concept of the cultural narrative in terms of attention to the ways in which the stories presented reinforce the
dominant cultural story. As collective narrative it is a liberation story that promotes the voices of those people who are attempting to tell a different story that might challenge the dominant narrative. I approach the writing of the thesis, and specifically the chapters detailing the stories from research, as researcher narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in recognition of the overall meaning making of the analysis and the writing of the final document.

**Ethical considerations**

Engaging in cross-cultural or cross-national work in neo-colonial settings places research at the boundaries of disciplinary practices, presenting many ethical and methodological dilemmas. It also encounters critical disjunctures between aspects of everyday behaviour in the field and the University’s institutional frameworks that aim to guide/enforce good ethical practice. Conducting fieldwork is contextual, relational, embodied, and politicised, and it is important to pay careful attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations in the field in order to undertake ethical and participation-ary research. Such concerns are even more important in the context of multiple axes of difference, inequalities, and geopolitics, where the ethics and politics involved in research across boundaries and scales need to be understood and negotiated in order to achieve more ethical research practices (Sultana, 2007).

Within the paradigm of this research, Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon and de Carteret (2011, p. 3) speak of knowing place with ethical uncertainty, where ethical refers to our mutual responsibilities to others and to the more-than-human world, and uncertainty that acknowledges the unpredictability inherent in our relationship with this world. This kind of learning cannot be known in advance. Hence, this methodology focuses on creative experimentation with ways of learning place that might enable the dynamic relational learning of connections between people, places and communities.

Respectful research relationships with participants are fundamental to this research process. Showing respect through cultural protocol, appreciating the significance of and reverence for spirituality, honouring researcher and participant responsibilities, using culturally appropriate pedagogy and practicing a cyclical type of reciprocity are important parts of methodology. The principles of holism, interrelatedness and synergy work together to create powerful storywork understandings that have the power to help with people’s emotional healing and wellness. Therefore, learning to appreciate the
beauty and power embedded in stories is essential because in this understanding, it is as though the story comes alive and becomes the teacher. This requires that complexity be engaged with, and preferences for different kinds of knowledges be honoured (Archibald, 2008, p. ix, x, xi).

This inquiry presents a close examination of how Other is represented. It uses the self as both subject and object, to cut through the multiple layers of consciousness that connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Hence, the embodied self becomes the instrument through which social processes and identities are constructed and contested, changed and resisted in the contact zone (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because the researcher is the same person as the person supplying the information, I address the objective outsider convention by positioning myself inside the contact zone in mutual relationship with Ninggirum people, whereby my subjectivity becomes a producer and product of the text. Hence, the goal of the writing is to understand Ninggirum society and societal issues, not my own self-discovery or self-indulgence.

The writing tries to 'show' rather than 'tell', using dramatic recall, vivid language and cultural metonomy to create a sense of the lived, embodied life for the reader. It incorporates emotions and feelings in the examples of dialogue, traditional and culture-based stories that are elements of social structures and common histories. It accounts for the complex interplay of my own personal biography, power, status, and interactions with participants and with written text, and vigilance around the dynamics of the ethics and politics of research. It produces a critical, social, politically-stanced, cultural narrative through an auto/ethnographic process that acknowledges my own subjectification in the research.

The next chapter takes us into the contact zone, the liminal space between Western and Ninggirum worlds in which my researcher self interacts with Ninggirum people in collecting research materials. It begins with a description and discussion of the methods used to generate the knowledge of this thesis, and includes auto/ethnographic writing which produces a representation that the other constructs in response to my researcher activity.
Chapter Three – Methods of the contact zone

In this chapter I describe the methods I used to collect, generate and analyse the materials that form the evidentiary basis of the research. It details interactions between myself and Ninggirum people in a contact zone that has been in the making since 1991. It is the space in which we are trying to share our differing cultural understandings and knowledges. In this site I have tried to gather information in ways that Ninggirum people understand and feel comfortable with, a process fraught with mis/incomprehension, mis/noncommunication, incommensurability and heterogeneity of meaning.

Pratt (1991, p. 6), as an educator, expresses the desire to make the contact zone the best site for learning that it can be. She identifies some of the learning tools of the contact zone as 'storytelling, the ideas, interests, histories and attitudes of others, transculturation, collaborative work, critique, parody, and comparison between elite and vernacular culture forms. These include reclaiming indigeneity, orality, and people’s suppressed histories by establishing ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect, and a systematic approach to cultural mediation'.

My approach to this chapter is auto/ethnographical (Pratt, 1991, p 3). Auto/ethnography is one of the literary skills of the contact zone, and this kind of writing addresses the general audience for this study as well as the local community. It is a collaboration in which dominant social meanings intersect to some degree with indigenous ways to create a representation of self-other relations intended to intervene in dominant modes of understanding such relationships. My embodied self as both subject and object is the instrument that explores the many layers of consciousness that connect self and culture. Therefore the following representations involve concrete collaborations between Ninggirum people and myself through different languages, societal values, contestations and resistances that occur in the contact zone. One side embodies orality, equality and fraternity, assuming the principles of cooperation and shared understandings while the other side embodies the values that support writing and literacy as platforms on which to build society. A contemporary contact zone exists between these spaces.
Previous knowledge

I began work with Ninggirum people as a linguistic and literacy consultant in 1991, and since then, I have lived with Ninggirum people in their land as co-worker and friend. During this time I have been engaged in learning Ninggirum language and ways while home-schooling my children, participating in the National Department of Education's reform movement in curriculum design, and in Ninggirum literacy and translation activities and training. Though I lived in north eastern Victoria in Australia for the duration of this doctoral research, I visited Ningerum Station for three weeks in January, 2009, to collect materials that might reflect Ninggirum people's current understanding of the factors that have deeply impacted and changed their lives since the advent of the Ok Tedi mine. Therefore, much of the knowledge generated by this thesis relies on my previous experience and knowledge of the culture and language. This social and cultural learning happened in the course of my daily life in Wogam, Ok Ao and Ningerum Station, restricted mainly to women's informal activities and language, semi-structured, language learning sessions with natural Ninggirum speakers, and literacy and translation training workshops.

When we first went to Ninggirum land, Ninggirum language had not been recorded or produced in writing. Our first task was to learn the wider cultural context, and record natural language in its spoken context. These materials consist of cultural observations, language learning and analysis materials, photographs and artefacts, collections of stories generated in writer's workshops, stories arising from personal interactions in everyday activities, and journals of my personal experience of daily life. From 1991-2005, language translation materials were collected from individuals in semi-structured language learning sessions, informal groupings around everyday life, and from men and women in writer training workshops designed to gather natural, oral material for phonological and grammatical analysis. Before the availability of digital recording devices, we made audio tape recordings of stories and conversations, and as a matter of practice, text given in Ninggirum language was accompanied by the speaker's own back translation in English or Tok Pisin. Linguistic analysis was a scientific process that discovered meaning from words and patterns of words, finding the smallest units of meaning and building up from these parts (Healey, 1975). Notes of fieldwork experiences and events (Jarvie, 1967) were comprised mostly of cultural observations (Emerson, 1995), anthropological interpretations (Whyte, 1984) photographs and
artefacts (Stimson, 1986). Personal journaling became a way for me to process the disturbance I felt as I tried to make sense of life in Ninggirum culture and how my self and my world was changing.

So these materials contribute largely to the background and experiential knowledge of the research. Participation in workshops and speaking language onto recording devices was, of necessity, preceded by speaker's consent, so any materials not the product of my own writing have been quoted verbatim, and used with permission.

2009 field trip to Ningerum Station

The following is an account of this field trip to Ningerum Station to collect research materials. It is paraphrased from my personal journal, January, 2009.

So begins the day we leave for PNG to collect research materials. Very early this morning, as I stirred in that land between sleep and wakefulness, I had an uneasy feeling. Weeks of preparation for this trip, still so many things beyond my control. Living in Australia for the past two and a half years has reminded me that in the West we feel more comfortable with certainty, organisation and efficiency. PNG is known as ‘the land of the unexpected’, where for many, life is always uncertain. As this idea played at the edge of my mind, I slipped back into unconsciousness with the realisation that the time had come, ready or not, to re-enter Ninggirum world, to the life we share, there.

We began our trip on New Year’s Day. All packed, last minute jobs done, Howard, Lynette, and I left Wodonga, heading to Melbourne and a very enjoyable overnight with dear friends. Growing up, Lynette and Howard lived on neighbouring properties in the Indigo Valley in North East Victoria. They went to the local primary school, so they share this history. Lynette now lives in Albury, and coordinates the Trinity College special education program across its campuses. When she learned that I was planning a story-telling workshop in PNG in January, 2009, she was most interested to be involved in whatever ways she could. I was very thankful that she was making this trip with us.

4.00am alarm, off to the airport. Brisbane. Port Moresby. Mapang Guest House. This routine has become so familiar to us over our years of travelling to and from PNG. Early morning starts, excess baggage, being herded through terminals, children crying,

Afternoon, outside the Jackson terminal, scorching sun, luggage loaded into the guest house bus, carrying us into the night. As we drove through the town, it was particularly interesting to see Port Moresby’s beautification activities, thanks to the Happy Gardener (Joku, 2008). The airport surrounds had been landscaped with large, potted palms lining the terminal entrance. It gave a pleasant touch, and greatly brightened the outlook. From the bus window I noticed neatly trimmed grassy parks and drainage works in progress in various places. A park on Boroko Drive boasts a huge, copper statue of a Raggiana Bird of Paradise, flanked by rows of carved and polished totem poles. Intricately designed, frighteningly different, they stand as cultural heritage – powerfully commanding a deep reverence for all who have gone before, making this nation what it is today.

The sight of the Raggiana took me back to the verandah of my house in Ok Ao, to an earlier time. It is late afternoon and I am sitting in my old cane chair. Feel the cool breeze on your face. See the river down below, beyond the glorious profusion of trunks, hanging vines and green leaves that is our friend’s food garden. No matter where you look, there is always something different to see. Listen to the silence. Hear the water rushing over the rocks, a low, distant sound. Hear *on wiru* calling from above, and the buzz of industrious *wolo wolo* on her way home after a busy day. The buzz fades. Silence. Enjoy the solitude.

The sight of *wolo wolo* leads me to reflect on my busy life, rushing here, rushing there, doing this, doing that. Always something to be done. Always someone who wants something. While these sentiments are predictable and understandable, they are, nonetheless, signs that I am often not present to myself. Too busy to notice the beauty, joy and simple pleasures, unable to receive graciously the gifts of today. But you know, don’t you, how elusive this simple presence is. It can easily seem useless and even a waste of time. Still, without a conscious desire to spend this time, it is hard to recognise the blessings (Nouwen, 2002, p. 80).

As I linger in this thought, I see a flash of red from the corner of my eye, then I hear a squeaking sound in the breadfruit tree nearest the house. On a branch, not three metres away, sits *on talop*, a Raggiana bird of paradise. Look at him bowing and strutting
across the branch, as if performing to an adoring audience. He looks rather plain at first, until he opens his wings. Then, drawing himself up to full height, as if to invoke deeper adoration, he shakes out his tail feathers. Faster and faster, until his movements climax, bursting into an ecstatic dance. Stretching his wings, he claps them over his back, rhythmically, tantalisingly, his song crescendoing dramatically.

Soon, a small, brown bird comes and joins him on the branch. She just sits, watching intently. He is a proud fellow, colourfully and masterfully romancing his lady-love. They stay there on the branch for a while, and then, as quickly as they appeared, they fly away, first the male, then the female. In deep reflection I realise that I have just witnessed a performance of a ‘meaning of life’ shared by many Papua New Guinea cultural groups. Raggiana is the country’s national emblem. His dance mirrors the wooing of the cosmos, the consummation of Melanesian ways.

The jolting of the bus brought me back to the present and a consciousness of all that would happen before we finally found ourselves, the next day, on the plane, heading for the Western Province. The flight path heads west, across the Gulf of Papua to Daru, and north, along the Fly River to Kiunga and Tabubil. Flying over the Gulf gives a spectacular view of the rivers that empty into the Torres Strait. As the plane approached Daru, I could see the mouth of the Fly. Even down here at the delta, the silt build-up is enormous. It is horrifying to see this mighty river with its huge tongue of silt poking kilometres out into the Pacific Ocean.

It was quite a pleasant temperature in the plane as we travelled, though it began to warm up by the time we landed at Kiunga. On the ground, the temperature was very high, and the wind hot and humid. See the mirages rising from the damp ground, making everything around them shimmer. It was a relief to get back into the plane. From Kiunga, it is only a short leg to Tabubil, so the pilots tend to fly close to the ground. This means a hot, lurching ride through the lower cloud and thermals. I am susceptible to motion sickness, and I really didn’t enjoy this part at all. But it was an excellent opportunity to take photographs of the river, mountains and the Ok Tedi Mine. We arrived at the Tabubil terminal around 1.30pm, glad to be on the ground again. After collecting our luggage, we were promptly ushered out of the air-conditioned building into the stifling heat. Ours had been the last flight of the day, and everyone was keen to close up and go home. I can’t blame them.
On Saturdays, the last bus south from Tabubil leaves at 11.00am. Because our 7.00am flight had been over-booked, and we had been shuffled on to a later plane, we now faced the dubious task of finding a car to take us the 70 kilometres to Ningerum Station. Howard left us in the car park, while he walked about three kilometres to the highway to find a vehicle going our way. Lynette and I chatted, and sipped our water, and waited. We waited. And we waited. 4.00pm, still no car. We were feeling pretty tired by this time, and I knew Howard would be feeling concerned about how to provide for us in this situation. But all we could do was wait. So we waited. Then, much to our relief, a security truck drove into the car park. In it was the airport security officer, and Howard was with him. We were so pleased to see them. Apparently they had arranged for the manager of the Airlines PNG group, who lived close by, to take us to Ningerum Station.

So, in a little while, Rose and her family came to collect us, and we were soon on our way. It's a slow, dusty, trip down the highway to Ningerum Station, and we finally arrived just on dark. We were all very relieved when we pulled up at Joe’s house. Joe works for Ok Tedi Mining Limited. He lives in a high-set, Western style house provided by the company. It has a large water tank and a traditional kitchen at the back, where the family prefers to spend the day.

When we arrived, Joe and Biodi were not at home. Thankfully their older children were there, and they welcomed us in, helped us with our bags, and cleaned up the living room floor, which was to be our bedroom for the next two weeks. The house has a Western style bathroom and toilet which rely on water from a header tank on the roof. As the pump no longer worked, there were no facilities for us that night. That was hard. So we carried buckets of water up the long flight of stairs and across to the bathroom. We washed ourselves out of a bucket, and felt much better with clean hair and fresh clothes.

Now for dinner. Well, we had no food with us, and the family had none to give us. So that night we went to bed, tired, a little hungry, and quite unsure of what tomorrow would bring. We were very grateful though, for all the courtesy and kind help we’d received from such generous, hospitable people. As I reflected on the day, I remembered how good it had been to see brown faces and white smiles, and to speak Tok Pisin and Ninggirum language. But the most nostalgic moment was when I saw the mountains again, then the river, the jungle, and the familiar colours, sights and sounds of Ninggirum land. We were so tired. We scarcely noticed the hard, wooden floor, and we slept the sleep of the exhausted.
Site

Ninggirum land is located in the North Fly Region, and Ninggirum Station is situated on the Ok Tedi River, about 80 kilometres south of the Ok Tedi Mine site near Tabubil in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea (Map. 1). It is the major government and business centre that services the Ninggirum community, situated on the highway that runs between Tabubil and Kiunga (Map 2). It is the most likely place to meet up with Ninggirum people from remote locations as they make their way to and from the Ninggirum area. The major players in this research are the people of the Ninggirum clans, the Ninggirum Translation Project, the PNG Government and Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML), a transnational company and development entity operating to the north of the area, and myself as participant and researcher.

Collecting materials


At Ningerum Station. Visit Mr Kowa.

Mr Kowa teno Is Mr Kowa there? (a toss of the head and chin pointed to the distance)

Uda In the bush.

Uda. Hekaen. Alon komatep kwin haen mananen In the bush? Where? When will he come back?

Ne kaa dahao. Timoti be onoten I’m not sure. He went to Timothy.

Timoti? Timothy?

Eee. Timotile elaa be onoten. Timoti ben kwang keitop demkwoten, elaa holen haoten. Kowalep de ti dagaleii onee onaten Yes, he went to Timothy’s feast. Timothy killed many pigs and made a big feast. Kowa went to help him.

Eeelo? Haen mananeno Oh, is that so? Will he come back?

Alon kwandinep, alon angao ben, alon kolep kwin Thursday, Friday, sometime like that maybe.

Ayii! Helono delaom raeta kooso engmemnaop takmemnaop konet, de ko tenodo.

Nilo koma haemnaop Oh no! We are trying to start a writer’s course with him today, but he is not here. What are we going to do?
Mongop ke. Ava, menenaa mananen I sympathise. Just wait a while. He’ll come back later.

Kwin mo, baemnaop. Kwin mo, dapman nilo dageendyeva. Baeva. Am be onuup boup ke OK, we’ll stay. OK, thanks for helping us. You stay, we’re going to the house.

Oniva. Baan ke You go, I’m staying.

My original plan had been to collect current life stories in the context of the annual Elementary Education teacher in-service training held by Mr Kowa at Ningerum Station. This scenario would have given access to the thoughts and experiences of a number of young adult men and women, as well as their families and the wider community. However, the workshop did not eventuate.

Déjà vu

Ranu (Kowa’s wife) had greeted us warmly. Her handshake showed her delight at seeing us again. When she told us that Kowa was at Timoti’s feast, my heart sank. What! No Kowa, no workshop. This scene was familiar somehow. Why do I feel like all this had happened before? Though the exact circumstances of the earlier event were somewhat dim, the feeling was reminiscent of the 2002 workshop to which no one came.

Plans thwarted

We were very disappointed. We had begun discussions with Mr Kowa in September 2007. At that time, we had talked about making a book of traditional and everyday Ninggirum stories, and the idea had been affirmed with pleasure and excitement. In July 2008, we discussed the idea of grand tour stories and how we might go about gathering them. We thought Mr. Kowa had agreed to allocate us some time during his January, in-service training. For the first week of the project, we had planned a daily story-telling session with the elementary teachers and any interested community members. The second week, we would transcribe and translate any recorded stories, and prepare a small storybook for use in elementary, vernacular reading classes. It appeared to us that these arrangements had been mutually agreed. Further assurance came in the form of a letter sent to me by Mr Kowa in November 2008 (Appendix 3), confirming his willingness to act as the project’s on-site coordinator, in compliance with the
requirements of the Monash Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans (SCERH). We proceeded on this understanding.

Now here we were, with nothing in place. I felt devastated, actually. In Ninggirum society, a woman does not try to call people together for a project such as this. I felt powerless. I also understood Howard’s feelings of frustration about plans going awry, since, in earlier visits, he had worked hard to make clear and firm arrangements. However, years of experience in working with Ninggirum people has taught us that if people don’t come to you, then you have to go out and find them.

**What we did**

Early Monday morning, Lynette and I located ourselves at the Allied Local Churches (ALC) building, ready to begin story-telling sessions, should anyone arrive. Howard went out to the places where people congregate (markets, stores, bus stops) to find anyone who was interested in telling stories. We waited, and waited, but no one came. I had a gut feeling that people wouldn’t come. The only hope was that something would come of Howard’s searches. About midday, Lynette and I packed up and went back to Joe’s place for lunch. Howard was there, and he said that he had met a very helpful young man who took him to various squatter settlements around Ningerum Station, to find people who might be interested. As they walked, the young man told Howard all about himself and his family, and how, when he was a young boy, he had seen Howard visiting his village. He said that his uncles were keen to have their traditional stories recorded, and he would arrange for us to meet with them over the next few days. We were very relieved to have made this contact, and keen to see where it might take us in our search for stories.

After lunch, Howard went off with the young man to meet his uncles. Lynette and I stayed at Joe’s house, waiting for news from Howard. As we waited, one of our young translators came along. He and his family were on their way back to their village, about four hours’ walk beyond the river. We shook hands, gave them water to drink, caught up on their news, and told them about my study (Appendix 1). He was happy to sign the consent form (Appendix 2), and then we recorded his conversation. He said he would come back next week and we would story some more. I was very grateful for his interest and cooperation.
Not too long afterwards, Howard and the young man returned. They had organised an interview for 5.00pm that afternoon at the young man’s uncle’s house, and it was now time to go. It was a forty minute walk along rocky, unsealed roads to get there. The sun was still hot, and as we walked, I could feel the sharp, pointed rocks through the soles of my runners. We finally left the road and followed a grassy path that led to a group of houses nestled under some shady palm trees. The uncle greeted us in a friendly manner. He had a long conversation with the young man in Ninggirum language, and eventually invited us into his house. We climbed up the crude, rotting steps which took us about three metres above the ground, where we sat on the decaying black palm floor of the verandah. The uncle introduced us to his wife and children, and spent a long time telling us about his family and his life.

When that conversation ended, we tried to explain the nature and purpose of the study. We gave him the information and consent forms, but he was decidedly disinterested in them. He had a cassette recording of an ‘origin story’, and appeared very eager to have the story re-recorded and written down. He was even more eager to be paid a lot of money for it. One of his older brothers, now deceased, had told him to take good care of the cassette, because, someday, it would be worth big money. He talked about school fees and how it takes lots of money to live in the modern world. We sympathised, and told him that we did not have a lot of money to give. We said we could give him a small amount of money, because it was only right that we help him where, and if, we could.

Kalup: Because, what my elder brother advised me was, if someone asked to record this one, he will have to pay for it.

Howard: I’m happy to pay a small amount for it, if you want me to.

Kalup: That’s ok but aaa yeah , that’s what he asked me was, what he said was … he says if anyone want to get this information from this, it’s a confidential information.

Howard: So, so, um, it’s up to you. If you want me to not record it I’ll turn it off. But if you want me to pay for it, I’m happy to pay a small amount for it.

Kalup: We’ll listen to this first, and later we can aaa, later we can aaaa decide.

Howard: Yes, alright.

So the uncle agreed to play his cassette on our cassette recorder, and talk about it into our voice recorder. We were looking forward to hearing the story, but when he played
the cassette, the sound quality was so poor and distorted that it was unintelligible. That was disappointing. He also talked over the top of the recording, making it impossible to hear the original story. He talked for a very long time, and offered to give us lots of stories. He said he would go to his village, sit with the old people, and listen to them as they make their stories. Then he would write them down. We finished the session warmly, and parted amicably, or so we thought. In our minds at least, it was clear that we were not able to pay large sums for the story, but that we would help in other ways if we could.

Hmmm.

We left the settlement just on dark, feeling quite exhausted. Negotiating with the uncle had been stressful. We were never quite sure of what was really meant, by what was actually said in three different languages. As we walked along the road, appreciating the cool of the evening, we met up with another friend who said he would be very happy to work with us over the next few days. That was very welcome news! We chatted a while, and agreed to meet the next morning. As we made our way back to Joe’s house, I tried to initiate conversation with Howard and Lynette to learn their impressions of the interaction with the uncle, but by then, we were too tired to think.

Early next morning, we set out to find the young man. Maybe he had other contacts who would be happy to share their stories. We walked down the road to his house. He was there. So far, so good. He said he would ask the people who lived in his corner if they would like to story. We sat down in the haus win to wait. Soon people started to gather around us, and the haus win filled with all ages of men, women and children. The young man introduced us and explained what we wanted to do. As his understanding and use of English was good, I gave him the explanation and consent forms. This caused a reaction amongst some other men who were present. One man took the form, and a few others gathered around him, all the while speaking, agitatedly, in Ninggirum language. They saw the official Monash University letterhead, and became very suspicious. While this was happening, the young man explained the meaning of the form to the rest of the group. They talked it around for a while, and then, while the young man signed the form, the other men walked off, in what appeared to be an attitude of disgust. We did not know what that encounter was about, but I suspect that the other men were from a church which prohibits the use of all forms of Ninggirum customary ways.
Leaving that issue, we began to suggest a few topics about Ninggirum life and ways, hoping to remind the people of something they would like to say. Howard recorded his own story in Ninggirum language and played it back for them to hear. He then invited them to share a story, in whichever language they felt comfortable to use. They sat quietly for a while, and gradually, small groups of people began speaking together in low whispers and laughs, which grew louder as more people joined in. Then, silence descended. An older man was first to speak in Ninggirum language.

*Ilin, ilin …* Once upon a time...

As he wove his story, everyone sat quietly and still. You could have heard a pin drop. Then we heard the familiar ‘*ko mo*’ (that’s all), and people began to talk amongst themselves as they digested the meaning. Soon there was silence again, and another person began to speak. This time, accompanied by a few nervous giggles from her friends, it was a teenage girl speaking in Tok Pisin. We continued this way until everyone had said what they wanted to say.

Howard: *Dapman. Kup veng tup, dapman.*

It’s all good. Your stories are good. Thank you.

*Kwin mo, beimnaop. Kwin mo, dapman nilo dageendyeva. Baeva. Am be onuup boup ke.* OK, we’ll go. OK, thanks for helping us. You stay, we’re going to the house.

Everyone: *Oniva. Beip ke.* You go. We’re staying.

Back to the house for lunch. Out again in search of stories.

Along the road we met up with two other friends. Apparently, word was out, so now, people were happy to see us, and very ready to tell us their stories. Further on, we saw our friend. He’d been looking for us. We caught up with him in the area where the new teacher’s houses were being built. This place was strangely eerie. It was as if a sad, lonely presence was pressing in on us. Yet the cool breeze, as it caressed our sweaty skin, brought with it a quiet reassurance. As we stood in the shade of a house and recorded his story, our friend talked for a long time about the impact of development. His bitter sweet account left us sad, and thoughtful, as we considered the meaning of his talk. Later we learned that, the day before, a man had been killed while working on one of the teacher’s house. Maybe it was his spirit that we had felt. I hope he found the comfort he was looking for.
Our friend then took us to another corner to meet an old man who had great power because of his deep knowledge of traditional culture. He wanted to have his stories written down so that following generations would be able to know their origin, and embrace their identity as Ninggirum people. The old man was happy to see us. We shook hands, clicked knuckles loudly, and sat down together to listen to his concerns. These were confidential matters, and we all intuited a strong sense of mystery surrounding this encounter.

Men, women and children crowded around us, watching everything we did. After much negotiation, we recorded some stories that everyone enjoyed. Then women and girls were sent away, and we recorded stories which were for men’s ears only. I was quite surprised to have been allowed to hear these stories. More negotiation. Then everyone was sent away. Only the old man, our friend, Howard and myself remained, to see the sacred stone, and record the story of its origin. At the time I was not aware of the very rare privilege bestowed upon Howard, an outsider, and me, a woman, in being allowed to see and hear this secret, cultural knowledge. The story has been recorded, transcribed and translated. It has been written in Ninggirum language and English, and the recording and hard copy have been sent to the old man. I hope it will comfort him to know that his knowledge has been recorded.

Mr. Kowa returned to Ningerum Station on Thursday, making himself available to work with us during the following week. I presented him with a copy of ‘Bubbles on the Surface’, a gift from my supervisor. He accepted it graciously, and appeared to be excited by the prospect of making a book which would tell a Ninggirum story. He signed the consent form, thereby validating my work to the community. We felt the warmth of social harmony once again, and story-telling continued.

But what was Mr. Kowa’s earlier non-appearance all about? I remembered the feelings of frustration, and the utter desperation I had felt on Monday morning, when the workshop didn’t proceed. I realised that he had been at his brother’s feast, but I didn’t really understand the significance of that until later. Feasts are clan obligations, and loyalty to one’s clan takes precedence over any other relationship. I had to acknowledge to myself that I felt put out because my plans had been thwarted. Then I realised afresh how easy it would be to blame Kowa and allow bitterness to spoil the relationship. Or, I could see the clash, appreciate his predicament, and respond by finding other ways to
achieve my goal. I think this is a prime example of the clash between linear and circular time, and between goal and event orientations.

Over the course of the following week, we recorded many stories and conversations with our friends. We really enjoyed their stories, and appreciated their willingness to share them with us. I came to a deeper understanding of the significance and worth of traditional stories, because they bear the knowledge of how the Ninggirum people came to be, and of how they are to live in and care for their world, for the benefit of generations to come. I felt deeply honoured by the friendship we share with our Ninggirum friends, and I understood the responsibility of the trust they have given, in opening their world to us. Relationship is no small thing in communities like Ninggirum. It bears reciprocal obligations.

Returning to conversation with Mr. Kowa…

As we talked about collecting traditional stories of everyday life, Mr. Kowa suggested that, the next week, we might go to Wombon village. We could sit with the old people in their place and listen to their stories. Going to Wombon meant a six hour walk, crossing the river, and staying a few nights so that people could prepare their stories. We agreed enthusiastically, but he did not return to the subject, and the trip never eventuated. At Mr. Kowa’s suggestion, we also discussed another opportunity for a village story-telling time to be held during the 2009 Easter break. We negotiated logistics and finances, and again he appeared enthusiastic. It was arranged that he would contact us a month before that time, so that we could organise flights and make other arrangements. But he did not contact us, so the session never took place.

Through this process I was able to collect traditional oral stories and personal life stories that contribute to the body of materials of this research. The traditional Ninggirum stories and contemporary life experiences were given during informal storytelling sessions with people in their homes and in community settings. Sometimes there were a few people present and other times there were many. These unstructured sessions began with a grand tour question (Spradley, 1979, p. 86) that allowed me to draw a broad picture of Ninggirum reality. This opened a space in which I could discover what I and others thought and felt about aspects of their lives since the mine entered their world. This led me to construct a general framework in which Ninggirum people might think (Chapter Four), the terms they use, and the context in which they use them (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987, p. 318). People were engaged in story and conversation for one to two
hours or more, and the speech was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated where necessary, and checked by Keop Kowa, the on-site coordinator of the research (Appendix 3).

Participants

The stories and conversations were collected according to whoever was available at the time and willing to share. This collection was further limited to those who consented to the use of their story and name, and those who preferred to remain anonymous. They were selected to give voice to men and women from different Ninggirum clans, ranging in age from youth to elderly, and to the expatriate language workers as participants in this cultural contact zone.

Maria, mid 30s, is a wife and mother who lives in Wuwuunggo (Map 3). Before her marriage, she often participated in the writer training workshops we held in Wogam village from 1991 to 1993. She is an able illustrator, and enjoyed telling stories from pictures that she drew.

Steven Katuk, late 40s, initiated, from Ok Ao (Map 3), was a community leader, whose wife passed away in 2010, leaving him with small children as well as married children. In the 1980s he was trained by OTML for the work of boiler making, but left his job at the mill in 2000 to work for the good of his people and community. He lived at Ningerum Station until his death in 2012.

Keop Kowa, mid 40s, initiated, from Wombon (Map 3), is a community leader. Married with married and school aged children, he holds the position of Coordinator of Elementary Education in the North Fly Region. He lives at Ningerum Station and is responsible for the training, resourcing and care of Elementary level teachers in all language groups in the North Fly area.

Joe Boikun, mid 40s, initiated, from Minipbon (Map 3), is a community and church leader. He is married with small and married children. He spent all his school years at Ninggirum Station, basically growing up away from his family, displaced from village life. In order to provide for his children's education, he worked for many years as a Community Liaison Officer for OTML, and now serves his community as an elder.

Matias, mid 60s, initiated, is a clan elder. He lives in Ok Tarim in the west (Map 3), and spends some of each year with his family in Ningerum Station.
Hans Guimbin, mid 40s, initiated, from Hukim (Map 3), is a community leader and member of the Local Area Government. His wife died a few years ago leaving him with four children still in high school and primary school.

Domki, late 20's, initiated, from Wombon (Map 3), has a young wife and two small children. He is an Elementary school teacher who seeks the integration of traditional ways into contemporary Ninggirum life.

Johanna, early 60s, is a member of Matias' clan. She is a widow who lives with her family at Ningerum Station.

Gorgina, 16, is a member of Matias' clan. She has been raised at Ninggirum Station and attends the High School.

Telma, 14, is a member of Joe's clan. She lives with relatives at Ningerum Station during school terms, and spends her holidays at home with her family at Minipbon.

Howard Oates, mid 50s, is the expatriate translator/linguist of the Ninggirum Translation Project, the committee formed to drive Ninggirum language affairs. He worked in Australia in mechanical engineering before retraining in linguistics and translation in the early 1980s. Since 1991 he has lived with Ninggirum people in their land, and worked to develop the value and use of Ninggirum language through the translation and production of vernacular literature.

Elang Byangalop, late 60s, initiated; Uncle, late 30s; Young man, early 20s and *kalup ketbao* (youth), 17, all chose to remain anonymous, so I have used these nominators when referring to them.

**Processing materials**


By the second week, word of our presence had spread, and we were delighted to see friends from more distant villages. Some of these people had worked with us in the translation project, and they were happy to work with us now. Howard had set up an ‘office’ under Joe’s house so that we could do the transliteration and translation work. Because civil and technical infrastructure at Ningerum Station is very scant, we had carried our computers, a printer, and a small petrol generator from Australia, to ensure that we could get this work done. By Friday, we had processed enough material to make
a small, illustrated story book. Stories told in Ninggirum language were written verbatim, followed by an English translation. Similarly for stories told in English. Stories told in Tok Pisin were presented verbatim with no accompanying English translation. Contributors were each given their own copy, and this gift was generally very well received.

Wini and Sharon found the Ninggirum stories so much easier to read when they had an English version to help them. Sharon was all smiles and very happy. She told us that the stories were very clear and readable. This was very welcome news. On the last day of our visit, the young man came to sit down with us. He sincerely thanked us for the book, and gave us feedback. He was very excited. He cried as he told us that for the first time, he could actually read and understand his own language. With the English gloss next to it, he could read the Ninggirum text and understand it quite clearly. Being able to understand written Ninggirum language had affirmed him personally, and reassured him that his language and culture are important and good. He had been raised speaking and reading English with Ninggirum as his second language, and his Ninggirum identity had never been affirmed for its value, worth and beauty. He was very happy that we had made the book. He was also insistent that the book was riddled with mistakes in the Ninggirum language, and was very concerned that we should get it right. He spoke the upper dialect using kw not ky, j not dy, l not d (among other differences), while the people who gave us the stories used different sounds. Maybe, someday, he will help us get his language right, and pioneer the way for literature to be written in his dialect.

The last night of our stay was party time. The family had prepared a special meal and invited our friends. We all sat down to eat together, and exchange gifts. We took photos and told stories about our visit to Ningerum Station. It was a pleasant but solemn time. We had lived with the family in their house, and they had cooked and cleaned, and taken care of us. They were sad that we were leaving, and I felt humbled by their selfless, overwhelming generosity. Sunday found us making our way back to Australia.

**Developing appropriate methods of analysis for materials**

Materials consisted of five mythological stories as oral and written text; fifteen contemporary stories from lived experience of Ninggirum place; anecdotal writings, descriptions of Ninggirum understandings from researcher's fieldwork and language materials, story-lines generated from the original transcripts of conversation texts,
personal narrative, space/place/body text (Somerville, 1999) and auto/ethnographic 
writions constructed from researcher's personal journals, photographs and memories. 
Because relationship to place is constituted in stories and other aesthetic representations 
(Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 8-9), these kinds of data gave access to 
modes of thinking about ourselves, others and our place in the world, from which life 
choices may be made and lived out (Davies, 2000, p. 81). These collections of stories 
and conversations from lived, embodied experience form the corpus of Ninggirum 
knowledge and experience that is explored in this study.

Materials were approached in an attitude of wonder, a deep curiosity about the familiar 
topic as something new, strange and surprising (Somerville, 2007, p. 228). Data had 
been collected in Ninggirum language, Tok Pisin and English. Ninggirum and Tok Pisin 
texts were transcribed, translated and presented in English as free translation (Temple & 
Young, 2004), making every effort to remain faithful to the original meaning. Translated 
language texts were analysed linguistically (Campbell & Miller, 2000) for grammatical 
meaning, and structurally (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) for meaning of story in cultural 
context. This process is detailed in Chapter Four.

Traditional oral stories were analysed performatively using principles of mythopoesis 
(Deardorff, 2001) to access knowledge of the hidden-ness of meanings about life and 
universe underpinning Ninggirum place and identity. Trickster is one of the principles of 
mythopoesis, and it has been theorised in terms of its characteristics that appear in 
Ninggirum oral mythological stories. It has been used to identify and explore 
uncertainty, contradiction, conflict, inversions and reversals (Vizenor, 1993), hence, 
opportunities for change, in the context of Ninggirum culture.

The trickster strategy was very useful in analysing oral language because it does not 
conform to linguistic patterns of language, rather, it jumps across them. It acts to 
disengage linearity, thus engaging spatio-temporality. In tracing trickster's activities 
through story-lines I was able to find ways to think about Ninggirum ancestor identities 
such as Belep ok baenkwoo the crocodile (Chapters Four and Eight), the Amooman 
(creator spirits becoming human) identities as historical culture heroes (Chapter Eight), 
and the double-eyed man as contemporary bigman leader (Chapter Nine), and to explore 
the purpose of these identities in Ninggirum lived experience. In making meaning from 
myth, trickster does not reconcile difference, or validate one identity or reality over the 
other, but allows space to sit in the tension of incompatible and contrary ways of being,
doing, and knowing. It enables interaction with the whole and consideration of implications without necessarily leading to fixed conclusions (Deardorff, 2001), in order to think otherwise to find a way forward. Trickster is also discussed in Chapter Four.

All stories were analysed performatively (Langellier, 1999; Somerville, 1999; Spry, 2001) to try to understand what Ninggirum embodied experience says about Ninggirum reality, their perceptions of development and the impacts of global change processes on their environment and community. Seen through a lense of becoming as the experience of performing self (Deleuze, 2004), place stories connect material, embodied practices explicitly to socio-cultural values. These performances enable understanding of identities as new subjectivities emerge in this aesthetic space. They facilitate sociocultural learning that contributes to equal participation in research. Hence, they are capable of extending the possibility of knowing and representing lived experience in places in different ways (Somerville, Power & de Carteret, 2009, p. 8-9; Somerville, et al., 2011, p. 4-5).

All materials were analysed to trace story-lines (Davies, 2000; Søndergaard, 2002) as the plot-lines of dominant, colonial stories about place (Davies, 2000, p. 81). These were then deconstructed in order to reconstruct previously visible Ninggirum place stories, and to facilitate the representation of alternative stories (Rose, 2004).

**Reflexivity**

All materials were analysed reflexively (Willig, 2008. p. 42) for what they show about life in Ninggirum place, Ninggirum reality and knowledge production, and the changes that have occurred in the lives of the people who inhabit it. Epistemological reflexivity involved reflection on self, methods, representation, the critical examination of power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Nast, 1998). This opened the research to more complex and nuanced understandings of issues where boundaries between process and content often became blurred. Examination of myself and the process occurred throughout the project to try to avoid introspection resulting in the reinforcement of positivist methodologies (Nast, 1998). This involved reflecting on the ways in which my own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities had shaped the research. It also involved thinking about how the research may have affected and changed me. I used auto/ethnographic writing to make
sense of Ninggirum life as I participated in it, focusing on the experience of life and events in Ninggirum place, in relationships with people who had become my friends.


... turning language back on itself to see the work it does in constituting the world. It entails the development of a kind of ‘critical literacy’ in which researchers understand that they too are caught up in processes of subjectification, and must see simultaneously the objects/subjects of their gaze and the means by which those objects/subjects (which may include the researcher as subject) are being constituted. (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 88)

When the research process brings personal experience into focus, it can access ways in which people make sense of their lives and the strong emotions embedded there. In confronting my discomfort, I entered a period of critical reflection and autobiographical journalling about the social experiences that my memory selected and presented to me. I began to appreciate that I am a social being who participates in socialisation processes as a subject, as well as an object. This reflexive process enabled me to re-inhabit personal memory, where I found new meaning for my life. It presented me with new ways of understanding Ninggirum life through the way I have experienced it. I now realise that Ninggirum stories are memories which Ninggirum people may re-inhabit to find new meaning for their own lives. In trying to make sense of their stories, I have engaged in their memory work as they seek to make sense of their lives in the midst of current upheaval. This reflexivity is a complexity of movement between the subjectivity of my own experiences, emotions and interpretations, and the more distanced and academic processes of collectively theorising the meanings of those experiences.

Writing auto/ethnographically


In this liminal space my previous experience became strange to me. Familiar, yet chaotic and unknown. Here, my usual ways of making sense of life were no longer adequate or productive.

In trying to make sense, I began to paint in free form. In the absence of a visible subject, I learned to paint from memory, imagination, emotions and intuition. Painting like this allowed me to process my thoughts in an intensely personal way. Each canvas, the form of an idea, taking shape as it appears.
As I paint, images of experience that I hold in my mind, there at the remembering, emerging. Every act of painting about experience, an experience with the capacity to generate many other experiences, and many other forms.

Painting, writing, knowing, playing together, gathering all that has always been there. Rolling, tumbling, a kaleidoscope of what may be.

These naïve representations (Somerville, 2007, p. 227) enabled me to process my thoughts and feelings pre-cognitively, releasing me to record experiences about myself and my life with Ninggirum people, over time, in my own words and ways, through my own body. Not structured around sets of questions, they have given access to kinds of information that are otherwise very hard to obtain. Because the representations are temporally ordered, they reveal how I saw events unfolding prospectively, in real time, invoking bodily responses and personal interactions that might otherwise not emerge in face to face encounters. They provided descriptive information about people's interactions; relationships among various aspects of the entries accounting for effects of the immediate social context; variations in experience due to individual differences, and reflections on bodily affects of encounters, experiences and events (Somerville, 1999; Spry, 2001; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Hence, personal journals became reflexive accounts of personal memory, photographic and painted representations, self observational and self reflective accounts (Chang, 2008) of embodied, lived experience in Ninggirum place (Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon & de Carteret, 2011).

Through the struggle, I learned to verbalise myself again. The process challenged me to write what I am knowing, born out of the tensions of representation, the necessity to create new forms through which to represent other ways of knowing. In exercising 'the right to use experience as a basis of knowledge' (Haug et al., 1987, p. 34), writing auto/ethnographically enabled me to focus on the subjective and shifting territories of experience and memory, in order to speak of Ninggirum experience in a way that dominant approaches generally do not allow.

**Interpretation**

All materials were interpreted through a representation of my understanding of Ninggirum orature from language, stories, lived experience and what people have told me. I use the term 'Ninggirum orature' to refer to an oral system of aesthetics constituted by a Ninggirum view of life and universe, expressed through life in their environment,
their stories, their arts and ritual feasts. My construction of this framework is detailed in Chapter Four. Guided by the philosophical stances of wa Thiong’o (2007) and Zirimu (1998), this representation assumes that Ninggirum arts and language and the ways in which Ninggirum people use them reflect the originary understandings that shape their view of reality. It selects lived experience as a basis through which to explore Ninggirum struggle with the cultural, social and economic effects of the global presence in their place. This epistemological reflexivity involved reflection on the assumptions about the world and knowledge that the research is based on, and the implications of these assumptions for the research and the knowledge it produces.

**Representation**

Research into global and local indigenous realities involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development, different language, culture and types of knowledge while trying to avoid exploitation and the perpetuation of relations of domination and control. Hence, the issue of representation that pays attention to reflexivity, positionality and power relations in research across boundaries is a challenge. In trying to avoid Western biases, the perpetuation of neo-colonial representations, and speaking 'for', I have employed the strategy of writing 'with' rather than 'about' in order to redress concerns of marginalisation, essentialism, and differences in representation. Even so, I have struggled with positionality and universalising tendencies in representation.

**Positionality**

In writing of the experience of traditional societies catapulted into the future by global processes, the mystique surrounding indigenous culture fosters the urge to romanticise, sensationalise, or criticise, and hence dichotomise their experience on the basis of cultural difference. To my Western academic mind, this is akin to maintaining and/or inverting the binary, practices that are inconsistent with the paradigm used for this research. Reflexivity about my own subjectivities was needed to reflect on how I was positioned in the power relations that operate in the research process, and how my presence influenced methods, interpretations and knowledge production. It also relates to how I interact with research participants and what can/cannot be done with research within the institutional, social and political realities of this context.
Returning to Ninggirum land to collect data was like going home. I felt strong relational ties to the land and to my Ninggirum friends, but I was also very aware of my socio-economic and educational privilege. As such, I felt like I was simultaneously insider, outsider, both and neither, and the borders I crossed are always here within me negotiating the various locations and subjectivities I am part of and apart from. Hence, the ambivalences, discomfort, tensions and instabilities of my subject positions provided opportunities for reflection, signalling the need to explore the contradictions and rework the in-between status. It would be naive of me to assume that I became an 'insider' or that relationships were fully equal, or that I could fully access the lives of the people I interacted with. But I believe that the person I am and how I interact with people was basic to forming the trust that was fundamental to these research relationships. For me, the most important thing was to try to be faithful to the relations in that space and time, to the stories that were shared, and to the knowledge produced through the research, however partial.

By and large, people were very welcoming, and very willing to talk freely. Some extended warm, generous hospitality, and I sometimes felt uncomfortable when treated with deference. Despite the differences, people tended to accept my presence, collectively positioning me as an accepted outsider doing 'useful' research. Occasionally I also felt othered in the research situation. e.g., the failure of the workshop to occur, people who showed hostility in their rejection of the invitation to participate, condescension towards my ties with privileged educational institutions in the West, and being linked with the mine and its global hegemony. These positionings in multiple locations meant that research ethics had to be negotiated on a continual basis. The similarities and difference that emerged through the research process as it unfolded show how alliances and collaborations can be forged, enabling research participants to have meaningful roles. Rather than rising from my a priori agenda, this fluidity and openness in the research process was actually presented by the failure of the workshop as the means of producing the research materials. Therefore, differences in power, knowledges and truth claims have been constantly negotiated.

**Power relations**

While all were invited to tell their stories, the majority of the participants were men, hence the majority of stories examined were men's stories. This is perhaps due to the
focus on traditional stories, the provenance of the elders, for the purpose of reconstructing a view of Ninggirum life before the impact of the Ok Tedi mine. Some youth and women's perspectives have been referenced, but these groups are marginal in the light of traditional, patriarchal social values. Though the conceptual framework of place fosters respect and inclusion of all groups, within this study, inclusiveness or exclusiveness seems to have more to do with clan politics surrounding feast practices.

From what I understand of the situation in 2009, the clans of the eastern villages were aligned with traditional feast practices that include women in community feast, but exclude them from secret, male ritual ceremony. They also maintained secrecy around traditional stories, forbidding public sharing and the use of their origin and history stories by outsiders. The clans of the western villages were pursuing a politic that includes women in some of the private rituals, as well as public affairs. They also shared certain traditional stories with me on the basis of reciprocity in our family relationship and community ties. Therefore, power relations can work both ways, and the choice to participate or not can be a political act of defining and redefining power relations in different groupings, on different levels, according to different agendas.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

This study is important because it shows how various Ninggirum people are dealing with the effects of the Ok Tedi mine, the state and corporations behind it, on their land, water, ways of being in the world, and their physical bodies. As place research, this study connects self with landscape, society and identity. It shows that human connections with natural resources and the landscapes in which they occur are multifaceted, complex, and saturated with meaning that arises from the inseparable link between the utilitarian and more intangible spiritual values and aesthetic qualities inherent in the meanings that people assign to their places. In its exploration of relationships to place, it shows that people develop memories, ideas, feelings, values, preferences, meanings, experiences and conceptions of behaviour through interaction with their physical environment. Therefore, place meanings are unique to location, the politics and meanings of place are the unique outcome of interactions occurring within the specific location, and identity formation incorporates place itself as an agent in the construction of identity.
The study has heuristic value in that it reconstructs a detailed picture of some of the ways Ninggirum culture operated in its forest and river context before the impact of the mine. It does this through the analysis and interpretation of oral, mythological, and contemporary life stories that identify key Ninggirum cultural themes such as significant place experiences, relationships with elders, ways of dealing with disruption and offences to the gods. It is intellectually challenging in its exploration and explanation of Ninggirum life-world through Ninggirum language, and its rethinking of time and space.

At another level, this is a personal account of doubt and change in rethinking my self as I have been reconstituted in Ninggirum place. As I reflect on these changes, I am looking for better ways to interact with Ninggirum people and to cooperate with their efforts to strengthen the value and use of their language.

Though concern is focused on the effects of economic development on traditional indigenous culture, the population of the study is specific to one indigenous group, their place, and to those elements of reality that affect their education and learning. Therefore, the knowledge produced does not intend to speak for all indigenous groups, all Melanesians, all Papua New Guineans, or all Ninggirum people. However, the stories show a tendency to present a voice that speaks 'for', according to the group with which the teller is identifying in the story, e.g. we Melanesians, or we Papua New Guineans, where the speaker includes him/herself, but not the one spoken to. Participant's stories have been documented as his/her own words, and care has been taken to not use their words to speak for the whole group, even though the storyteller actually does position himself to speak on behalf of his people. Extensive reflexive examination of myself and the process occurred throughout the research project, to try to avoid lapses into introspection that keep positivist influences intact.

**Ethical considerations**

While permission, transcription and translation matters have been addressed, data storage and access remains an issue. In oral societies, knowledge is generated in cultural products and stored in the collective memory (Lattas, 1996). As suitable technology for data storage is not available to Ninggirum people, this presents the problem of equitable availability of generated knowledge. Though digital and hard copy recordings can be made available, climatic and social conditions make them temporary at best. At this
time, knowledge is really only available to the Ninggirum as memory retrieved and passed on in conversations over succeeding times.

The knowledge produced in this study is within the context of the inter-subjectivities and the places occupied in the moment (physically and spatially as well as socially, politically and institutionally). This knowledge is partial, and representations of knowledges produced through this research embody power relations that I have acknowledged and interacted with. Inter-subjective learning is important in these processes that are often iterative and difficult to pre-define in institutional ethics forms and research proposals. The knowledge produced occurs within the context of the research process, embedded within broader social relations and development processes that place me and the participants in different locations. As such, these knowledges are interpretive and partial, yet they yield stories that may otherwise not be told (about land, mountains, water, sufferings, development etc.), and reveal broader patterns that may or may not be stable over time and space. Being ethical and true to the relations and experiences that occurred in the field were important to me. Therefore, in being true to the context, specificities and interpretations of the research, I have tried to reflect such problematics. Responsibilities to self, others, research outcomes, disciplinary boundaries and institutional ethical approval are all involved in the daily lived experience of the research.

Through the dynamics of language, writing and representation, I recognise these materials as transgressive forms, new representations that bring new and disruptive insights to my fixed and limited understandings of Ninggirum reality. In the following chapters I explore these materials for what they show of contemporary contact zone relations between dominant and other around natural resource development.

**Return to Australia**

The return trip to Australia went quite smoothly. On Sunday afternoon, Howard, Lynette and I, along with Joe, Bodi, Ian and others, all piled into a Public Motor Vehicle (PMV) to make the trip to Tabubil. We sat squashed against each other, swaying and bumping to the rhythm of the road. No one was talking, and all we could hear was the droning of the engine. In my mind, I drifted to another place, of peaceful scenes and private thoughts. I realised, yet again, that the more I get to know Ninggirum people, the less I really know them. Living and laughing with them, sharing their food, their grief, and
hearing their stories only deepened a yearning in my heart to know them more deeply. I was leaving Ninggirum land with far more questions than answers. And much less certainty about truth and meaning.

Howard had arranged for us to stay overnight with some Australian people he knew, who would take us to the airport the next morning. I had never met them before and I was feeling tired, untidy and unwashed. When the PMV pulled up outside their house, they came to greet us. Mike and Libby are from Adelaide and they work for OTML. Their children, Rebecca and Chris, were home for the Christmas holidays from boarding school in Australia. They welcomed us warmly, and we chatted excitedly. That evening, after a hot shower, we sat down at a neatly set table, enjoyed familiar food, lively conversation in English, and slept between clean sheets in a real bed, in a room to ourselves.

It did my heart good to share their hospitality, and feel the peace of the familiar that transcends difference and unknowing. Chords of belonging were struck through our shared culture, language, and spirit. In the surrounding sea of human diversity, we were of a kind.

Port Moresby, Brisbane, Melbourne, Wodonga.
Chapter Four – Understanding Ninggirum Stories

Our stories are important to us. They were spoken, long ago, by the Ahwaaman, to our ancestors, through time, generation to generation. Now the old people are passing them forward to us (Hans, 2009, spoken in Ninggirum, translated into English).

In the space between orality and literacy, stories, dance, drama, body decoration and artifacts form the body of Ninggirum oral traditions based on the ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitudes and sentiments of nature that people learn through their social interactions (wa Thiong’o, 2007). So Ninggirum orature is the conception and reality of their life communicated through the oral performance of narratives and customs. As unwritten literature, it actualises in a specific event when a performer formulates it in words and actions. Each time traditional knowledge is represented in these ways, the usual way of interpreting the world is disrupted, opening the audience to new ways of thinking about life and how to be in it.

In this chapter I explore the space between language and meaning through my experience of processing research materials after I returned to Australia at the end of January, 2009. I describe the translation process that enabled me to analyse the language in which the stories were given, and produce a written English representation of the oral story. Then I discuss the principles of mythopoesis and the trickster literary device used to analyse the oral stories. I then create a representation of some principles of Ninggirum aesthetics that provide a frame through which to make sense of the oral stories (Grosz, 2008).

The quest for meaning

In my understanding of Ninggirum world, language and thought are bound to the framework of Ninggirum society. Their origin stories are still integrated with social life, and though they are fragmenting, they are not yet totally assimilated to other cosmologies. Ninggirum people have kept impressive amounts of information relatively intact for generations through these stories and customs, and they are almost entirely orally transmitted. In recent years, Ninggirum people have come to understand the importance of recording their language in their stories, before this body of knowledge,
embodied in the old people, passes away. Though recorded in temporary paper copy, in a very small data-base of translated text, Ninggirum language is still predominantly oral language, in both form and use. Technology provides various means of collecting and storing language material, but it is a temporal phenomenon, which by itself cannot ensure the survival of Ninggirum knowledge for Ninggirum posterity. Just as Ninggirum language contributes to the world’s linguistic diversity, so Ninggirum culture is valuable to the vitality of the global community. I think that the destiny of Ninggirum identity rests, first and finally, in the hearts of Ninggirum people, whose privilege it is to hand down their cultural and linguistic heritage through future generations, in their stories.

Making sense of Ninggirum oral text

Asked if indigenous language and indigenous experience can be translated, Gerald Vizenor replied, ‘Well I don’t think it’s possible, but I think people ought to intersect themselves in trying to translate it … I think it can be re-imagined and re-expressed … (Blaeser, 1996, p. 16).

In a postmodern sense (Blair, 1995), Vizenor speaks of ‘intersecting’ in the process of translation. I understand him to mean that, as form moves from one reality to another, it passes through a space between the two. In this liminal space, the translator interfaces with the ideas of the new reality, groping for thoughts and words that express those ideas with accuracy, clarity and naturalness. As language passes through this space, it transitions. It emerges, taking on meaning in the new reality. What would be the value of translation that only exchanges form, if the aim is to decolonise?

Following is an account of how I have made meaning from the written Ninggirum texts that comprise the material for this study. It is the part of my journey through which I am exploring my Ninggirum identity. In this space I am learning to make sense of the written transformation of oral material embedded in a very different cultural context from my own.

The translators

Much has been written about the difficulties of translating and transcribing the spoken word into written text (Elder, 1996). It was when we began to translate the stories from Ninggirum language into English that I began to grapple with the anomalies, ambiguities and complexities of the transcribed oral text, in the context of Ninggirum
culture and ways of knowing. If I were a Ninggirum person who had developed the necessary language analysis skills, I wouldn’t have to translate the stories in order to unpack their meaning. But this is my limitation, and Steven, as vernacular translator, and Howard's linguistic analyses (Oates, 1991, 1993, 1993-2012, 2004b), have guided my translation of story texts. Throughout the process I have learned that context is everything. Often an English back-translation or explanation was given along with the story. Even so, as an outsider, I found it difficult to understand meaning with any certainty. Though I have taken pains to maintain the integrity of the text, there is no guarantee that nothing has been lost in the translation. It has been an immense challenge to translate and make sense of these stories.

The process

I have chosen, as an example, the story ‘Inup ben karuvi kon kahii koonoren’ (‘The snake who stole man’s wife’) to illustrate a process of constructing and analysing the Ninggirum story texts. This process transliterates and produces a free English translation of the original Ninggirum text. It analyses the structure and organisation of the narrative text, showing how the story communicates what it wants to say. It looks beyond the written words to the way in which the teller and listener create meaning together, to understand how the same story can have different meaning for people in different contexts. It then looks beyond the words to the unspoken communications of a person performing the story, in real life and time, to a live audience.

The story

We first collected the snakeman story from Maria on audio cassette in 1991 at Wogam village, in the course of a series of writer’s workshops designed to gather natural, oral material for phonological and grammatical analysis. The story was transcribed and hand written on to a stencil, then printed onto paper using a silk screen. The audio cassette has since mildewed, but the original, hand-printed book of stories still exists. It is a record of Ninggirum language before orthography had been established and agreed upon, and before grammatical rules had been identified and consistently applied. I call these books our historical, hysterical collection of culture stories. I read them now and laugh, appreciating their rawness. They really show our very first attempts to write an unwritten language, and our misconceptions of a very different world.
This same story was given to me again in 2001, at Ok Ao, by an old man named Kuwuni, in the context of discussions around the impact of the Ok Tedi mine on Ninggirum life. Choice of words and expression is minimally different, and construction and general meaning of the story remains consistent. As we, in the present, translated this story from the distant past, I wondered about its meaning for Ninggirum people in their present.

_Inup ben karuvi kon kahii koonoren_


**Linguistic analysis – transliteration and the translated text**

The story was spoken in Ninggirum language, captured as a digital voice recording, and then transcribed verbatim (\textit{t}). The resultant text was analysed morpho-phonemically, to find the meaning of affixes and words (\textit{m}). These meanings were given expression through English words (\textit{g}), which were then written as sentences (\textit{ft}). This process analyses the internal structure of the language. It renders a literal translation of the words, in order to represent meaning as clearly and accurately as possible. In its communicative work, it enables me to know what the story says through a literal interpretation of the words.

_Inup ben karuvi kon kahii koonoren_ (The snake who stole the man’s wife)

\begin{verbatim}
/t Aron mwim karup eko onoren ke, bya ba onone
de kon mo am be bouren.
/m Alon mwim kalup eko on-olen ke, bya ba on-on-e
de kon mo am de ba-ulen
/g Day one man that go-he(dist past) it was, meat hunt go-he-SR
his wife only house at stay-she(dist past)
/ft One day a particular man went hunting, and his wife stayed at home by herself.

/t Boune inup eko kahiip himaeket ko kwaen am be koone
veng houvoren, "Manep kop ne am be onem,"
daone.
\end{verbatim}
As she stayed, a certain snake smelt her, came to the house and said to her, "Come, let’s go to my house."

They went, he took her up and she stayed sitting up at the fireplace.

At evening her husband came and saw that she had gone, he got up and followed only looking where she went, it was there at the fireplace he heard her.

"Hiss", it (snake) said. He heard and saw his wife seated at the fireplace. She said to him, "It’s a snake!".

He speared and killed the snake and took his wife and went back home.

NOTE: SR (switch reference) - next clause will have a different subject person. T - main topic; /t - text; /m - morphemes; /g - gloss; /ft - free translation
The snake who stole the man’s wife

One day a particular man went hunting, and his wife stayed at home by herself. As she stayed a certain snake smelt her, came to the house and said to her, ‘Come, let’s go to my house’.

They went, he took her up and she stayed sitting up at the fireplace. At evening her husband came and saw that she had gone. He got up and followed only looking where she went, it was there at the fireplace he heard her. ‘Hiss’, it (snake) said. He heard and saw his wife seated at the fireplace. She said to him, ‘It’s a snake!’ . He speared and killed the snake and took his wife and went back home. That’s all.

This is my translation of the story. It is a written representation of the oral language. At best, it is a representation of someone’s reality, by someone outside that reality. Though these are the storyteller’s ideas and words, they are, finally, my expression of those ideas and words. The points at which the Ninggirum words are ascribed English meaning, and where the English words are formed into sentences, are still subject to my subjectivity, cultural preferences, and language limitations. Thus, it also embodies an interpretation relevant to my own understandings. Even with its inherent limitations, analysis of this kind is invaluable. By examining the internal structure of the language and how the parts function, we have been able to write Ninggirum language, and produce it as English text.

Structural analysis

Analysis of the structure and organisation of the text allowed me to understand how the story communicates what it wants to say. The table shows the Ninggirum story presented in an identifiable, story pattern of traditional Western literature, following Labov’s (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) construction which is set out as follows: setting, summary, initiating event, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, coda.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>A typical day in the life of the husband and wife</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Snake steals man’s wife away to his house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating event</td>
<td>Husband comes to find her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicating action (internal reaction –)</td>
<td>Husband comes to find her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Often the summary or evaluation is absent from a story, because these are left for the audience to decide. The most common form of setting for the origin story is *ilin ilin* (before, a very long time ago). Contemporary stories tend to begin with the teller’s personal identity and place of origin. Most stories focus on the initiating event, complicating action and resolution, and when the order of these is varied, it usually indicates that the story in focus is embedded in another story or other layers of story. All stories, without exception, end with *ko mo*, or *ne vengo komo*, (that’s all, my speech has ended). I found this type of analysis helpful for identifying subject positions, and for understanding a character’s function in the story.

While linguistic and structural analysis of traditional stories had shown me some of the art and beauty of language, and the complexity of culture, I felt defeated in the area of cultural meaning making. This treatment of the text enabled me to fill in some implied information, but it is tied far too tightly to the literalness of the words. The processes show that my interpretation is bound to my own culture, and while essential for basic communication, they are not sufficient for interpretation inside of Ninggirum culture. In stripping the story back to its basic propositions, so much other information is ignored which often carries the implied cultural knowledge that reveals the story’s meaning.

I think what I am trying to do is analyse and interpret written oral language, in its cultural context, as an outsider, from the space between oral and literate worlds. I think it is concerned with indigenous mythology and cultural aesthetics (Personal journal, March 12, 2010).

**Performative analysis of indigenous mythology**

The following discussion arises out of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s (2007) ideas of orature, in its attempt to describe a Ninggirum aesthetic, expressed through the performance of oral stories. It is shaped by Daniel Deardorff’s work in performative mythology (2001,
2002), outlining the power of the enacted story to reveal knowledge that is encapsulated
in the layers of meaning of cultural narrative. While Lewis Hyde’s (2008) exposition of
the trickster helps make sense of this literary device, Gerald Vizenor’s (1993)
postmodern theorisation of trickster outlines the power of the culture story to effect
change in society, hence, the characteristics of trickster reflected in Ninggirum stories
have been used to explore themes of colonial domination and change in the oral
performance.

Being a Ninggirum, in our traditional world, we know it by making feast, by the
different varieties of the environment, and the history. These show us the real
origin. And from there, before we know the modern style, way of life, some people,
they are still living that way (Domki, 2009, spoken in English).

Ninggirum people know themselves traditionally through their connection with nature,
their history, and the rituals that define how they live. Their lives matter. Their
experiences are important. How they make sense of their temporal life and random
experience can be seen in the stories they tell. In Western scholarship, this body of
stories is referred to as ‘indigenous mythology’, and I am challenged by the ontological
and epistemological authority it carries in Ninggirum understanding.

I think there is a system in place that prevents a certain kind of knower from being
accepted as an expert, and this kind of knowing might have much to offer the world
(Trent Jacobs, 2008, p. 16).

Enlightenment history has been brutal to nature, and therefore to ‘myth’, now
diminished as simplistic fiction. The word ‘myth’ has come to signify commonly held
cultural beliefs that are untrue. If held up to scientific scrutiny, they are thought of as
‘old wives’ tales’. When the realities of life are considered objects of representation,
needing to conform to the intellectual categories of a judging subject, they lose their
hidden-ness, their inner depth and self-sufficiency. In this conceptualisation of truth,
myth is marginalised, and the places it takes us become located in the ‘other’ of
everyday experience. Rather than relying on binary opposition to order reality, myth
articulates reality that exists outside the more provable worlds that we construct for
ourselves. This implies a shift from the authority of the plants and animals (each the
spirit-child of more-than-human progenitors) to the authority of humans, dwelling,
godlike in the centre of our own constructs. Once the animals become domesticated,
they stop talking (Thompson, 1981). But Ninggirum society has not been through our
‘Enlightenment’. Ninggirum still hold history and origin as constitutive of identity, and therefore authoritative. It is the lived experience of the characters in their landscapes that organises reality.

So, Ninggirum stories are the stories of Ninggirum life. They are living stories, constructed through Ninggirum language and the wisdom of the earth. Through the worlds they create, and the characters who experience life there, these stories express traditional insight and deeper ways of knowing. Each one is a performance, an embodied enactment which inexplicably draws human selves into the rhythms of the living world.

Ninggirum stories show Ninggirum people how they know themselves and their environment. They communicate a relatedness of identity which allows Ninggirum people to know ‘what’ they are. They hold for Ninggirum people a sense of location and purpose in being ‘where’ they are. Set in a before-time, they capture knowledge in patterns of memory capable of reproducing the images and events of that before-world, thus bringing ancient understandings forward into everyday life. I think this may be true for peoples the world over. In this space between present and past, we are able to find new understanding as the stories teach us about ourselves and the world. When the lesson is finished, they send us back to now, with new insights which may change present reality. So, out of these place-meanings comes the creative energy to discover and disclose ‘who’ we are and ‘how’ we are, in conversation with the living world.

Within the enactment and expression of mythological thinking and poetic imagination, these stories have an amazing ability to transmit experience on a personal level, and to reconstitute the full richness of the experience. Making sense of these stories, then, comes from the exchange of energies between the hearer and the teller, where every telling, although unique, is a new original. Like Thompson (1981), I realised that my matter-of-fact, empirical approach to myth was blocking, rather than unlocking, my way into the mythic experience of Ninggirum thought. Deardorff (2001) explains that the ‘concept’, a product of rational mind, is more narrow and constricted than the associative and inclusive ‘deep image’, produced by poetic imagination. What the concept, as container, is incapable of holding, can be included in the poetic image. As Eliade (1961, p. 20) says:

> To have imagination is to be able to see the world in its totality, for the power and mission of the image is to show all that remains refractory to the concept: …
without imagination, humankind is cut off from the deeper reality of life and from our own soul.

To appreciate the value of myth and poetry is to confirm that imagination is a valid and essential dimension of reality (Boe & Boe, 2009; Deardorff, 2001).

Living story holds opportunity to interpret life and the world in a different, more inclusive way. It seeks the balance which enables us to live in harmony with the forces surrounding us. In myth, the cosmic powers and human life are intentionally and artfully interwoven. This opens a space with its own reality, inside which we can participate in the living relatedness of all things. In this space certain experiences can be confirmed that simply cannot be confirmed in any other way, and which are vital to Ninggirum creativity, community and healing. Living story affirms the presence of the invisible, more-than-ordinary worlds in the air and below the ground. It affirms the existence of uncontrollable forces and energies, through the more-than-human, and other-than-human creatures, ancestors and spirits which interact in Ninggirum daily life. It affirms that all things have a life, and the power to act. This life is a ‘soul’, capable of interrelating with all other lives. Living story also shows that these understandings are disclosed in Ninggirum reality through visions, dreams, dance, song, story, art, ritual, and initiatory ordeals of Ninggirum orature. It confirms their basic reality of creation, that ‘matter and consciousness is a hidden background of unknowable flux, out of which all apparent forms unfold, and into which they return and are enfolded’ (Deardorff, 2002, para. 4; emphasis in original). Performance, then, is a way of entering into this space, to bring out what is hidden there, so that we can know and experience it.

The living story has the capacity to retain and convey the hidden-ness of life and universe, and therefore provides the clearest disclosure of place and identity. Performance of story is involved with the performance of identity. This approach allowed me to identify and learn about the characters in the story as representations, as selves, myself, or ourself. Performance, as poiesis, meaning making, is ever shifting. As the story creates itself, it must deform or destroy the fixed and rigid forms that precede it. Performance can be entertaining, but it has efficacy in that, like ritual, it intends to bring something about. ‘While elucidating and enacting, it enables us to focus on the actions and process of—and—in story, on the one hand, and the actions and processes of—and—in the storyteller on the other’ (Deardorff, 2001, para. 5). Thus the living performance may elicit highly ambivalent meanings.
While ‘myth’ can mean a complete falsehood, it can also mean a sacred truth. For example, while ‘performance’ often indicates faking or lying, a performance report may be used to ascertain the truth about a person’s efficiency. As these contradictions indicate, ambivalence, or multivalence is essential to this way of knowing. ‘Consciousness is essentially mythopoeic intelligence’ (Deardorff, 2001, para 6) using all of the senses. It is simultaneously inclusive, polyvalent, contradictory, and paradoxical. When these ideas are brought to the performance of identity, it opens understandings of a self that is not fixed or closed, but continually loosed and disclosed. This identity is not explicitly known, but being hidden, it is apprehended by implication (Bohm, 1980; Deardorff, 2001).

At the heart of this approach is the trickster’s trick of leaping from identity to identity, and reality to reality. Trickster’s aim is not to reconcile differences, or validate one over the other, but to dwell in the tension of incompatible and contrary ways of being, doing, and knowing. In making meaning from myth, trickster enables interaction with the whole, so that implications may be considered without necessarily leading to fixed conclusions.

**Wrestling with trickster**

Whatever else the trickster might be thought to be ... he is a dissembler of meaning in narratives – one who ‘uncovers distinctions and ironies between narrative voices’ (Vizenor, 1993, p. 192).

A trick may be a mischievous action, a practical joke, or a prank. It may also be an action designed to achieve an end by deceptive or fraudulent means. A trickster, then, may be one who tricks, who disobeys normal rules and eschews conventional behaviour. Trickster is a god, but less than a god; human, yet other than human; male, female, more or other than. He lives inside and outside of time, part of the world, yet not of the world, so that the laws of that world do not always apply to him. He is a product of the creative imagination. As a predominant figure in oral mythologies, trickster behaviour may bring meaning to human experience by enabling people to make sense of their patterns of person-hood and participation in the web of relations that comprise their world.

Trickster may also be a device used in traditional story to talk about and make sense of life's many complexities. Like a wild card, trickster is capable of thinking and acting
contrary to fixed and accepted norms of identity and reality. As a product of disruptive imagination, trickster disrupts regularity, making it possible for people to imagine otherwise. Because it is not a simple reduction of complexity to two equal, opposing principles of being in the universe, it enables diversity to be embraced. Hence, applied locally, trickster is free to act within, across and outside local situations, perhaps enabling people to rethink their identity and even to reshape their reality.

Trickster is a ubiquitous figure who dwells on borders, at crossroads, and between worlds. As such, it is a creator and crosser of boundaries. Every society has its edge that creates its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, orchestrating. He also dwells on the internal boundaries that delineate a group’s social life. But at every opportunity, trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. He can be a culture hero in one tale, and a villain in the next, or both, in the same story. He creates and crosses boundaries in the same act. Where our sense of honour leaves us unable to act, trickster may appear to suggest some right/wrong idea that might get life going again. Trickster also creates boundaries, bringing previously hidden distinctions to the surface by creating a problem that he then sets out to solve. At the same time he creates and destroys, gives and takes away, tricks and is foiled. He is the living story’s ‘embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox’ (Hyde, 1998, p. 7-8).

Trickster is also a shape-shifter who has the ability to alter his physical appearance. He may become whatever the story needs him to be – a ghost, a male, a woman, an anthropomorphic animal – in order to play his tricks. He may want to take on another form in order to use its powers to deceive or get what he needs, to disguise himself, to usurp another, to bring about desired outcomes, or to deliver just or unjust punishments. He may do this voluntarily or involuntarily, as symbolic reference, or for specific purpose. Gender-shifting, imagined through a female mystique, results in a feminised trickster. In this strategy, the act of appearing as a woman allows a man to enter situations where men are forbidden, and vice versa. Tannen's (2007) postmodern treatment of trickster connects female with issues of environment and nurture, humour, and achieving balance in the tension between opposites. Shape-shifting, then, is a way of understanding change where all the same elements become different.

Trickster is permission-giving, inviting us to think differently. The trickster character links to imaginative self-perception, and in the storyteller, he is a transformer linked to
the changes the storyteller is experiencing at the time. He troubles the regularity of life. He rebels against authority, pokes fun at the overly serious, creates convoluted schemes that may or may not work, plays with the laws of the universe, and rushes in where angels fear to tread. He exists to question, and to cause us to question. He does not accept things blindly, and comes into play when outmoded ways of thinking need to be torn down and renewed. Culture is opened for transformation when trickster’s creations point out flaws that have been carefully constructed by its society. He can act as a steam vent in the face of conflicting forces, but remains crucial for survival in situations of cultural and political domination. Where thought and word are dictated by the system, he acts to produce the new thoughts and words that may bring freedom from domination. Trickster’s cultural function seems to be reinvented in successive eras and generations. How trickster transmits culture, while at the same time, changing and recreating it, remains the work of trickster.

Change seems more possible when we are at or near boundaries, experiencing periods of major transition. In these boundary events, change seems more accessible through trickster’s unsettling and transformative behaviours that find expression in creative imagination and experience. But when this performance space becomes rigid and fixed, myth reduces to dogma, and ritual reduces to imitation. Hence, the challenge of ‘writing’ culture is to not lose the qualities of the meaningful, living performance. Trickster must live on.

**Interpretation**

I am writing from the space between myth and reality, where oral and written narratives are more than discourse. They are aural performance, un-bodied in translation, where trickster laughs at the incoherence of cultural representations as he leaps across the play of language. In order to try to understand Ninggirum stories, I am learning that I must turn to the source of Ninggirum ways of knowing and of being. In trying to unlock the issues embedded in Ninggirum writings that draw on the oral traditions of Ninggirum reality, I have become aware, not only of the challenges of encountering their stories as text but also of Ninggirum aesthetics.

I am in a space between Ninggirum orature and literature. By orature, I am referring to the Zirimian (1998, p. 111) idea of ‘utterance as an aesthetic means of expression’. I do not see the story-telling arts, communicated orally and received aurally, as occupying a
lower rung in a linear development of literature. I agree with wa Thiong’o (1998, p. 6) that ‘art needs to be active, engaged, insistent on being what it has always been, the embodiment of dreams for a truly human world’. Just as nature, culture and art are interwoven in the web of life, there is a fluidity between drama, story, song, dance, discourse and performance, the wholeness of which is greater than the parts that contribute to it. This wholeness encapsulates feeling, thinking, imagination, moving, taste and hearing, the flow of a creative spirit (Zirimu, 1998). In speaking of Ninggirum orature, I am referring to an oral system of aesthetics constituted by a Ninggirum view of life and universe, expressed through life in their environment, their stories, and the arts of their ritual feasts. Ninggirum orature, then, is the conception and reality of a total view of life, and as such, does not need validation from the literary.

**Culturally–based aesthetic**

The trouble with most religions is that they have expelled God from the Universe and from the human soul to a residence outside of both, an onlooker on earth supervising adherence to moral instructions already contained in a holy text, with threats of hell and rewards of heaven, both also outside the universe. In orature, godhood is treated as the ideal spiritual expression of nature and nurture (wa Thiong’o, 2007, para. 7).

I have been a student of Ninggirum culture and language for many years, and it has been hard work to transcribe, analyse and present their language in writing. I have also been a student of Ninggirum spirituality for as many years, and it has been difficult to understand traditional, sacred, and everyday oral forms, and their purposes in Ninggirum life. I have struggled to enter into Ninggirum thought, and to appreciate their ideas of reality. It has only been in recognising my own cultural, religious dualisms, and submitting them to reformation, that I have begun to make sense of Ninggirum orature. wa Thiong’o’s sketch of performative theory and ideas of orature (1998, 2007) guides the following discussion, which is my current attempt to describe some key ideas of Ninggirum life from the space between my reality and theirs. More ideas will find focus and explanation as subsequent chapters unfold.

Underlying the specific features and elements contributing to the wholeness of life is the connection between nature, nurture, more-than-natural, more-than-human – each an expression of the primary substance that connects them all. While nature is concerned
with all that is created, nurture is concerned with caring for and sustaining it all. The ‘more-than’ relates to the whys and hows of life and person, according to Ninggirum truth claims. But the focus is on the multitudinous expressions of the underlying, all-connecting substance.

**Life power**

In Ninggirum thought, as I understand it through language, this substance is called *kaong*. It refers, generically, to the power of life. *Kaong* is the primary substance of all being, and it expresses the interdependence of all existence. It is generally taken for granted, because the connection between nature, nurture, more-than-natural, more-than-human is seen as normal. Things, non-specifically, are referred to by the word *inum*, and classes of things are referred to using a specific word. *Kaa* (skin or body) refers particularly to human; *kulu* refers specifically to more-than-human; *bya* refers to wild animal, as distinct from *kwang*, that literally means pig, but stands for domesticated animals in general, e.g. *kwang kamel* (camel); *on* refers to birds; *kyon* refers to water creatures; *nong* refers to vines; and *a* refers to trees. A class word is then paired with a specific descriptor, which indicates type, e.g. *bya awon* is a tree kangaroo, *bya apta* is a type of frog, *on kalabut* is a type of butterfly. The patterning of the language thus highlights the interrelatedness of the specific and the distinct.

**Being**

The verb *ke* (is) expresses the idea of being. Through vowel harmony, lengthening, and consonant vowel (CV) patterning, *ke* becomes *kyoon* (to be, become, happen), where the action is always done to the subject – ‘something did it to me’. For example: *batat kyoon* (I’m tired).

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/t batat kyoon
/m batat kyoon
/g tired/worn out it hit me
/ft I became tired.
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*Ke* becomes *kyaan* when ‘I’, the subject, act, making something happen to something else’, e.g. *veng kyaan* (I talk, cause speech).

```
/t veng kyaan
/m veng kyaan
/g talk I am doing the talk,
/ft I am making you to have interaction with me
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The embodied Ninggirum subject *ne* is the personal self in the present moment (plural: *nup* (us)), that is also constituted in memory. The subject is the source that makes the action happen. At the same time, the subject has something done to it. This subject, whether human, more-than-human, or inanimate, has power to do, and to be done to.

**Spatio–temporality**

The self, *ne* (me) or *nup* (us), is the point of reference for spatiality. Direction, distance, location, proximity, landscape and the sacred are all oriented from wherever the self is, now. The language uses separate words to signify these spatial relations. Self is also the referent for time oriented from me/us, here (space), now (time). The language uses words and suffixes to delineate general time periods in which events occur. Today is generally understood in terms of being and happening in specific periods of time from first light, *am hinee baon*, through to dark, *am gumdi*. The present is what is happening at this very moment and around now. The past holds anything that has happened, beginning a short time ago (maybe half an hour), going back to when it happened, and our memory brings it forward to us, now. It remembers earlier on today, yesterday, back a few months to maybe a couple years ago. It remembers the distant past, in things that happened more than a couple of years ago. The future is full of desires, intentions, hopes and dreams, but remains indefinite, because it hasn’t happened yet. I think these ideas constitute place (space/time) understandings where being and happening occur, and where meaning is constituted in the event, the beings and happenings that make space special.

**Community**

Though different, humans, animals and plants are same in that they all depend on the earth, air, water and sun for their life. They are produced by the same mother, the environment. This oneness assumes the same interactive mutuality between the various realms of being as is seen in stories where humans, animals, birds and plants interact freely, assume each other’s forms, and speak the same language. Because different forms of being interchange, change itself is a central theme of community. Nature, then, manifests as a web of connections of mutual dependence, who speak to each other in the language of nature, actively communicating among themselves and with others. This
system of communication is seen, for example, in the interaction of bees and butterflies with flowers, the process enabling fertilisation between plants. Eliminate all bees and butterflies, and famine will threaten human life.

Environment

Respect and regard for life has a direct relationship with nature, because care for community and land mimics the interdependence and interconnectedness inherent in nature. By blurring the boundaries between them, the sacred comes out of nature but it still remains sacred. Similarly, the sacred exists beneath the material, in the sense that it is hidden. I think the sacred exists in an awareness of nature, the more-than-natural, and beyond nature that is more-than-nurtural, in time and beyond. The conception of the more-than-natural appears to be Ahwaaman the creator spirit, codified in stories, feasts, dances, weapons, body art and other enactments that carry the beliefs and practices of everyday life as Belep ok baenkwoo (the crocodile).

Feast-event phenomenon

The clearest manifestation of interconnectedness appears in angaon manen (happening, it came), the space/time/place understandings of environment and history stories that come together in the ritual performance of feast. Steven told us in conversation about angaon manen, which translates roughly as ‘phenomenon’.

Traditionally, our social organisation included two types of feast. First type is inum bon (thing feast), public, general feast which is for everyone, e.g. bride price, child payment and so on. Second type, dewat kwang (ritual feast), where women and children are forbidden to know anything about it. There are many types of dewat kwang, some happen here on the ground, and others happen in the spirit places (Katuk, 2009, spoken in English).

Being female, I was excluded from the rest of the conversation, though I understand these feasts to refer to exclusive men’s rites, such as kawaa – sorcery, initiation, fight, protection and justice ceremonies.

Feast meanings are rich with kaong, handled respectfully and responsibly by those who are privileged to do so, lest kaong diminishes or causes harm. Understandings of the use of kaong give rise to the notions of public and hidden knowledges, and the idea of inclusive and exclusive knowledges. It needs to be mentioned that, just as men exclude
women from certain knowledge, women have ways of knowing that exclude the men. Hidden knowledge is most real because it is most powerful. *Angaon manen ke* (the happening, it came) becomes ‘event phenomenon’ where *kaong* experiences connect sacred, nature, thought and spirit. This is the interconnectedness of ‘event’.

**Person**

The conception of the more-than-natural is *kulu* (the soul also known as spirit), and the soul is where *kavep* (the life) is. Ninggirum language describes two understandings of the soul of a person.

*Kulu* refers to the soul as spirit that endows person-hood, identity and gender. *Kaabiit* is the understanding of soul as shadow, the haunted spirit. In life, *kaabiit* pretends to be *kulu*, and can exist apart from the body for short intervals. When death claims *kavep*, it sends *kulu* back to the creator. But *kaabiit* does not reach the creator. It stays between the creator and earth, and comes back and hurts people. It is a bad spirit (Steven, 2009).

/\t homon kulu
/m homon kulu
/g corpse spirit
/ft spirit of the dead

*Homon kulu* (the spirit of the dead) goes to the place of the dead, where it stays until such time as it is renewed, enabling it to go back to the place of the living in the body of a newborn child. The soul is where nature and nurture reunite, where spirit and nature join, and where good and evil struggle for dominance. It is where body is inextricably linked with nature, spirituality and ethicality. This, then, completes the cycle of nature according to my understanding of reality in Ninggirum orature.

In writing this chapter I have learned that traditional stories and personal life histories serve to train storytellers to help children and adults think, feel and be through the power of their stories. And the power of the story lies in the cultural principles they uphold. In examining these aesthetics I realise that Ninggirum people value respect, reciprocity, community responsibility, reverence for life and nature, holism and its interrelatedness, and consider that a good life is more than the sum of the parts interacting well. These principles form a theoretical framework for making meaning from stories and for using them in educational contexts.
Through the activity of trickster I can appreciate that traditional stories take on a life of their own, becoming the teacher of cultural values and the practices they create. As trickster jumps in and out of contexts, situations and dilemmas he weaves these values into a distinct shape, combining them to create the meaning of the performance. With each new story, these values are transformed into new designs capable of educating the heart, mind, body and spirit through succeeding generations. In the next chapter I analyse a traditional story to identify the liminal spaces in which trickster dwells, and trace his activities to learn his roles in the performance of Ninggirum orature.
Chapter Five – The Snakeman

Reconstruction of previous experience recorded in personal journal, 2010.

We are at Ningerum Station, sitting with Kuwuni on the verandah of his house, in one of the squatter settlements beside Ok Tedi. I’m glad to be under cover, shielded from the sun’s blazing rays. The air is sticky, and we feel lethargic. Kuwuni is old now. His teeth are tender, and we have dropped by to bring him some cooked food. He is almost blind. When we ascend the ten feet to the verandah, I am amazed that he still uses the notched, climbing pole. Intrigued, I watch his hand follow a length of nong (rope) as he passes through the doorway to take the food inside.

Sitting closely, as we are, I notice plenty of muscle still defines his small frame. Patches of grey tint his tight, curly hair. His skin is scarred. Deep lines carved in face, secret knowledge, the wisdom of time. Ancient body, born of earth, shares with all that was, is, and ever will be, a deep knowing of Ninggirum. He tells wonderful stories, and we hope he might delight us today.

I ask him to tell me about life before the Ok Tedi mine came, and what his life is like, nowadays. He stories about the mountains and rivers; how on bep can no longer care for the environment; and he laments the change. He talks about the changing political climate in PNG, and he tells us the snakeman story.

This story makes me immediately curious. I recognise it as a two brothers story which expresses the Ninggirum thought that a human has two souls, kaabiit and homon kulu. Each brother represents the characteristics of each or other soul, and as the story plays out, the similarity and difference in the nature of the brothers determines the outcome of events. Because it is performed by an elder, addressing the effects of the Ok Tedi Mine on Ninggirum life, I also recognise that the snakeman story must hold significant understanding and instruction for Ninggirum people at this time in their history.

As we translated and analysed this story, I began to realise its complex, multivalence, and paradoxical nature.

The story

The snakeman story is important because it presents understandings of the Ninggirum world and how Ninggirum people live in it. It shows how life is structured, how relationships are defined, and how they are conducted so that people can live together,
wholesomely and happily. It shows how Ninggirum ways can be learned and reinforced, and how Ninggirum people learn to change. It presents *davii dapman* (our good Ninggirum life), a plan for life and its practices which, when followed consistently, makes life good in Ninggirum communities (Turner, 1967).

While the snakeman story teaches about traditional life, it also holds important ideas about living well together with others in the modern world. Consideration of the impact of global activity on tribal life necessarily reveals the role of the nation state. The ways in which global affairs are conducted are generally replicated in the nation state, and how the nation participates in these affairs has direct bearing on how affairs are conducted locally. In the local arena, patterns similar to global patterns may be propagated with local adaptation, and local response may seek alternative, resistant, or even oppositional action. In the context of global activity, the snakeman story has great potential for leading Ninggirum people to explore alternative responses to the forces which affect their lives.

As I realised the snakeman story’s application to local and global discourses and the depth of its meaning, I saw its potential to direct the structure of my thesis. So the snakeman story has become formative in my representation of the effects of development on traditional Ninggirum ways. Because it carries wisdom and knowledge of the Ancestors, I have used it to map the landscape of Ninggirum relations, and to guide the representation of change in Ninggirum identity and ways, as they share their space with global economic development in the guise of copper mining.

*Inup ben karuvi kon kahii koonoren*


Snake steals man’s wife

One day, a man goes away for the day, hunting. His wife stays back, and she is at home, by herself, doing her daily chores. A snake catches her scent and goes to her
house. He talks with the woman, and convinces her to go with him to his house. He leaves her by her fire. Later, in the evening, the husband comes home from hunting, and finds her missing. He looks around, sees their tracks, and follows them right to the snake’s house. As he approaches, he hears the snake talking. He looks inside and sees his wife sitting by the fire. She sees her husband and calls out to him. Arrow in hand, he rushes inside, spears the snake and kills it. The husband takes his wife and they go back to their house.

The story opens in the everyday life of a Ninggirum family. The vagueness of the setting signals the suspension of time and space, creating some other-space in other-time. It situates the performance inside traditional social discourse where I can explore a vision of the Ninggirum ideal, through the generally accepted expectations, patterns, roles and responsibilities of good relationships in the community. The husband is away for the day, hunting, and his wife stays back to care for house and home. But today, something unusual happens. Someone unusual comes to visit. As the woman is going about her daily chores, a snake catches her scent and stalks her to her house. But this is no ordinary snake. We are surprised. Something tells us that he is not what he appears to be. We are intrigued by his sssilky wordss; messsmerised by his sseductive beauty. His appearance is unsettling. We laugh nervously. His presence is disturbing. Now we are r-e-a-l-l-y curious. Who is this snake person?

Then something happens that we all know is not good. By some means, he manages to convince the woman to go with him to where he lives, and we see her, inside his cave, seated by the fire. Why has he done this? We feel uncomfortable. We need to know more.

What made the man’s wife go with the snake to his house? Might she be so unhappy that she would prefer life with this fellow? He sure is a tricky one, and we laugh, hesitantly, but admiringly. There he is, thinking himself so very clever. ‘He left her alone. She came with me. I’ve got her now. She’s mine.’

Later, in the evening, the husband comes home from hunting. He is shocked to find that his wife is gone. Imagine his fear. Imagine his outrage. We empathise.

He rages, ‘Who has done this?’

We are frightened by his anger. Tension grows.

We feel his torment. ‘I’ve paid bride price. She’s rightfully mine.’
Fixated on getting her back, he looks around, sees their tracks, and follows them right to
the door of the snake’s house. As he approaches, he hears the snake talking. He looks
inside and sees his wife sitting by the fire. She sees her husband. He waits in torment.
Will she call out or won’t she? We hold our breath. Every second is agony.

She calls out to him. ‘It’s a snake!’

We gasp with relief. His courage rises and his confidence soars at her words. Arrow in
hand, he rushes inside. The ‘clever’ snake is now defeated and dead. Everyone cheers.
But we all know that he will rise to live another day, in another story, because who, after
all, who can kill the everpresent, everlasting, trickster? Anger appeased, the husband
takes his wife and they go back to their house.

That’s all. My story has ended.

Though much of this is not written in the text, it is possible to understand all these
things in that space over and between the sounds, words, and sentences of the story.

Traditional interpretation

The text above is a transliteration of the original, oral story. It is literal in interpretation,
and traditional in its revelation of conventional wisdom, social norms, cultural values
and appropriate responses. It is a short, comical tale about a hero and a villain who fight
for the hand of the fair lady. It is meant to entertain, to bring fun and excitement to the
sameness of everyday life in the village. But what the words do not say is made known
by implication. It speaks loudly and clearly to the audience situated within the
discourse. It is a clever way to transmit traditional values, thus reinforcing the status
quo. But it is also a trickster story, which indicates that change is needed within the
discursive context. It purposes to disrupt the relational norms, exposing any oppressive
elements which threaten the harmony of community relations. As I explore the identity
of the characters and the relations between them, the story presents ways of interpreting
and reinterpreting current circumstances, to find creative ways to restore the balance of
life.

Note to self

Originally I had written here a piece about traditional values that follows the rhetoric from Hovey (1986), Knauft (1998), Malinowski (1961) and Whiteman (1984) to
Franklin (2004), Stella (2007) and Strathern (1995). On reflection, I erased it. My writing was more concerned with anthropological objectivity and the way it defines and describes Ninggirum reality to a Western audience. My writing was more concerned with anthropological objectivity and the way it defines and describes Ninggirum reality to a Western audience. Though valuable, the effect of this literature was to locate me at a distance, talking 'about' rather than 'with' the other.

Owens (1992, p. 4) and Vizenor (1989, 1990) concur that what is considered the real world is an invention, and its inventor is unaware of his/her act of invention. Thus the invention becomes the basis of his/her understanding and actions. These ideas challenged me to think beyond the rhetoric, back to what the Ninggirum say of themselves. As thought shifted, I was reminded that this thesis needs to show how Ninggirum people identify and construct their realities. I am constructing only one of many possible representations of Ninggirum reality, formed from my own understanding of Ninggirum thought.

Who is the husband?

In the interpretation of the story, the husband is the hero. We know he is also a more-than-human being because the storyteller attributes to him the power to slay the more-than-human snakeman. The presence of this spiritual being (the husband) signals that there is a meaning to all that happens. It instructs the audience to see the whole story as having some purpose and direction. He is a role model whose behaviour and responses set the pattern for the good Ninggirum husband. He has paid bride price for his wife, and he is bound by honour to his clan to retrieve what was stolen from them. He must also do right by the less powerful wife, and protect her from shame. When he has been wronged he seeks to do right according to the mores of his culture. As the comic hero, he slays the beast, rescues his wife, and delivers her to safety. Fearlessly, he takes on all dangers and overcomes them. Foolish or brave, he transcends all odds to transform the chaos of a world spinning out of control. He suffers all for the greater good, to create a new and better future. Greatly respected for his admirable qualities, he offers people a way of being that they aspire to. He represents the ideal man of traditional life.
Who is the wife?

The story does not directly say much about the woman. Though not in focus, she is the desired one, the subject of the conflict between the two men. As a comic heroine, she is tricked into going with the snake, and is now under his spell. She is in his power. The stage is now set for the action to be played out. She represents all that is good and right in Ninggirum femininity: hard-working, kind-hearted and submissive, capable of bearing many children. Therefore, she symbolises clan wealth and well-being. She is the legal property of her husband’s clan and must be restored to her rightful owners. Passive and silent she may appear, even foolish, but she carries great power in terms of how events are played out.

The story tells me that while the woman is about her work, a snake smells her scent, comes to her house, and ‘convinces her to go with him to his house. He leaves her by her fire’. This construction of the text leaves the identity of the woman wide open for interpretation. To my mind, she is sitting by the fire in the snake’s house. But the text is not definite, and it could also indicate that she is by the fire in her own home. In the other-time setting of the story, characters may travel great distances instantly, and move backwards and forwards in time; events may happen concurrently, and people can be in two places at once. So it is possible to imagine her in two places at once. Another possibility could be that her physical body is sitting, entranced, by the fire in her own house, and her shadow (Chapter Four) is sitting at the fire in the snake’s house, or vice versa. However I might care to explain it, the text indicates that there is something unusual about the woman. While her identity is hidden, and there is scope to explore the interaction of male and female shadows, the story leaves much to explore concerning issues of traditional womanhood.

Who is the snakeman?

Is this a real snake or a human? The snakeman is a trickster character. He existed for Ninggirum people in times long ago, and he exists for those living in the present. He is a lively, diverse, unpredictable actor whose unconventional ways are meant to entertain. He lives between then and now, and appears wherever life is troubled and uncertain. His presence introduces multiple perspectives from which to challenge a stultified, stratified, bland or prescriptive status quo, demanding that the competing voice be recognised.
In this story, the storyteller cleverly blurs the boundary between divinity and humanity, thus representing humanity’s relationship with spirit and signalling that the snakeman is a more-than-human being, a spirit man, capable of comprehending the universe. His shape-shifting allows his identity to take the guise of a snake in order to use its powers. The boundaries between human and animal blur, and he is presented as an anthropomorphic creature, representing humanity’s relationships with the animal world. Beautiful, alluring, spell-binding, and often thought to be particularly wise, a snake is a very effective form in which to stalk and subdue his prey. However he is configured in the imagination, he is referred to as ‘snake’. But he is no ordinary snake.

While thoroughly fascinating, this snake is also dangerous. His shocking, unconventional behaviour bursts into the banal, disrupting the existing order and flow of good Ninggirum relations. By his actions, he contests the husband’s claim to this woman as his wife. His presence demands that a competing voice be recognised, thereby unleashing his power to bring about transformation in characters, and changes to the status quo. His trickery causes the wife to go away with him, thus opening the space for the wife and the husband to explore anomaly in themselves and in their relationship.

**Ninggirum becoming**

This traditional interpretation raises many questions that need to be explored in order to grasp the story’s transforming power. As a performance, the story occupies the space between discourse and story. It represents an interpretation by the performer where meaning transacts in such a way as to enable the audience to understand the story not only in the context of the performer, but in the context of their own lives and circumstances. Reposition the story from inside its discourse to between discourses, and new understandings may open up; transfer the story from distant past to present, and meaning will find application amidst the current, discursive flows; transfer the experience from character to self and it may take on personal meaning that self and others were not previously aware of. There are more ways than one to interpret the story.

As performance, this story enables me to ask new questions. Why is this more-than-human being appearing in Ninggirum world now? Is it just that harmony is momentarily restored, or have husband and wife slain dragons this day on their way to better times?
But what if the wife preferred the snakeman? What would life be like in that relationship? How would this effect the community? What are the systems of oppression that trickster seeks to disrupt? Is trickster really dead? Is all hope of change gone with him?

As performance, the story extends the possibility of identities and the range of relations that can be explored. It allows the exploration of identities and relations that may otherwise be marginal or invisible in the story. Within the marriage discourse, the man is identified as a husband. Place the story within the wider social discourse where marriage is an exchange relationship which strengthens clan ties, and the husband may be a father, a brother, an uncle or any role he fulfills in his community. Place the story between traditional and national discourses, and he may represent the Ninggirum tribe. Place the story between time and space, and he becomes an Amooman (Ancestor), the ideal Ninggirum man. It is in these new positions and at these junctures that existing patterns may be disrupted, opening ontological and epistemological understandings to examination and review. Notions may be entertained; ideas may be retained. New ideas may be created and obsolete ones discarded. Ideas may be ordered and reordered, leading to new learning and changing people, who may then effect change in their circumstances.

The snakeman is that border dweller who lives at crossroads, jumping from identity to identity, from world to world, never settling in any one. In the marriage relation he might be an interloper. In the social discourse he might be an Ancestor spirit intervening in the everyday affairs of the community for some greater good. Between discourses he could represent the PNG nation state, and he could represent global development in its various, seductive forms. His identity and activity is limited only by the imagination of the performer and of the audience.

The woman is the husband’s wife, and within the marriage discourse, she is the contested prize. She also has significance as a bearer of children who are invisible in the story. Within social discourse, these children become visible because they are highly valued, representing the future of the tribe, and must be nurtured within tribal life. Between discourses, wives and children are symbols of the power, strength and wealth of the tribe. They are the contraband of tribal fighting. In relation to the story, I can see how it is that the secret, concealed things are most important.
However, the woman also becomes the snakeman’s wife, and this idea allows me to consider her identities and roles in this relation. The trickster moment casts her in intimate relationship with the snakeman, which causes me to think about the traditional woman in a different light. Who is this ‘other’ Ninggirum woman? How will this relation change the way she knows herself? How is she meant to contribute to Ninggirum society? In the context of the PNG nation state, her identity becomes apparent. Otherwise invisible, she becomes an enigma to be examined for all her potentials and possibilities. As the wife of the snakeman, this relation may also represent how Ninggirum people are becoming in relation to the modern world. This idea causes me to ask, who are Ninggirum people, and what are their aspirations, potentials and possibilities? Is a life shaped by the agenda of the government–multinational company relation what they really want for their future?

So the husband character presents ideas of traditional Ninggirum identity, the wife presents ideas of a different Ninggirum identity, and the snakeman presents ideas of global development discourses as they have become established in the Ninggirum web of relations. The husband–wife relation allows me to explore historical traditional discourse, while the husband–snakeman relation opens up the plurality of discourses occupying the same space and time. The wife–snakeman relation allows me to explore some of the complexities of the multiple modernities of Ninggirum becoming.

Since the modern world in the form of natural resource development has swamped their place, their own experience has shown Ninggirum people a life driven by money in which humans control and consume nature for their own purposes, with little regard for the future generations. It has caused them to wonder, ‘What is happening in the world that is changing our daily lives?’

In the context of development, the question of davii dapman—our good Ninggirum life, is significant for Ninggirum people. It is significant because natural resource development has brought them face to face with the language and political, economic, and cultural practices of the modern world. As a Ninggirum community leader, Steven Katuk (2006, spoken in English) defines the modern world as the place where ‘different stories, different language, and different skin people, ... all different colour of skins, with different knowledge that help me understand the world, and different culture all come together’. The Ninggirum now know a world made of very different people coming together in geographical and virtual spaces beyond and within Ninggirum
borders. Steven’s vision holds ideas of different social identities with their different cultural histories and ways exchanging knowledge and sharing together to make life good.

Joe Boikun (2006, spoken in English), speaking on behalf of his Ninggirum people, affirms that ‘they want their society to progress, to gain the things that are missing from their lives, and to catch up with the rest of the world’. He too envisaged this happening in a mutually beneficial relationship with development, where customary ways would continue to guide Ninggirum life, and together, they would work for the good of the Ninggirum people and global development. Joe’s words leave no doubt that Ninggirum people hold their own ways as normative and seek development to add to their lives. However, not only has this development subtracted from their customary life, it has disrupted their ways of being in the world, and thrown Ninggirum society into perpetual crisis. Since the early 1980s, the Ninggirum have been obliged to live with the continual effects of the Ok Tedi Mine (OTML), which cohabits their land and pollutes their environment. Every day in the course of its operation, OTML dumps more than 100,000 tonnes of crushed rock directly into the Ok Tedi River, the base of the local food chain (Nadar, 1995). Even though this practice has been exposed worldwide and resisted locally, it continues, today, at this very moment. The OK Tedi Mine is one of three mines in the world, all located in the Pacific Islands region, that continues to dump mine waste directly into a river (Ryan, 2009).

What does development now mean for Ninggirum people? In this global world, whose life project do they follow so their lives will be good?
Chapter Six – Ninggirum Place

The very process by which one culture subordinates another begins in the act of naming and leaving unnamed, of marking on an unknown territory the lines of division and uniformity, of boundary and continuity. … In its broadest sense, it includes the entire system by which one culture comes to interpret, to represent, and finally to dominate another (Spurr, 1993, pp. 4-5).

I am writing from the space between Ninggirum and non-Ninggirum worlds, to better understand traditional life and the course of change to its postcolonial and post-traditional contexts. I am exploring Ninggirum place as it offers insight into development theory through concepts of culture and land, based on a more intimate understanding of Ninggirum life. Come with me on a journey into Ninggirum place. It is about the space Ninggirum people occupy, the land they live on, and the things that happen there, that make it ‘home’ for them. These are made known through their experiences of daily life, their history stories, their environment, and their feast practices.

I am using the snakeman story to guide my exploration. The snakeman story exists in the Ninggirum imaginary, and it has been evoked in this present, to help Ninggirum people make sense of their changing world. Since the advent of Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML) in the late-1970s to early-1980s, life has changed suddenly and dramatically for Ninggirum people. They now live between their traditional life on the land, and the ‘town’ existence of Ningerum Station characterised by dependence on ‘money’. The town stands as much a memorial to colonial and missionary order, as a symbol of global, economic development in the North Fly Region. It is a symbol of life in modern PNG as it is lived out in the Ninggirum experience. The effects of globalisation on Ninggirum life are seen more clearly here, and though it bears the Ninggirum name, Ningerum Station is not situated on traditional Ninggirum land.

Joe Boikun (2006, spoken in English) reminds me that ‘Ninggirum people want development with the Western culture way of doing things, and they also want the Ninggirum or Melanesian way of doing things. The two are to be together, in doing things in developing the place ... so it [Western development] can make life better [for Ninggirum people]’. In the following chapters I aim to sketch an impression of life as it may have been prior to, and since the appearance of the Ok Tedi Mine on the northern
border of Ninggirum land. I am using accounts of everyday experience and traditional stories to gain insight into how Ninggirum people know their life and their land in their place.

**Snakeman presence**

It is Monday, January 3, 2009. I am standing at the foot of the airstrip at Ningerum Station, just across the road from Joe’s house. In the north stands *A nong huubin*, bare, scarred, stripped of his crown, bones exposed. The *kompani* calls it Mt. Fubilan, but it is *A nong huubin*, where the mine pit is, one of the sacred places. About 30 metres below me, I can see the rocky shore of the Ok Tedi. All the land to the north west of the river belongs to Ninggirum people, *Ninggirum be alon umanane*, with Aekyom country to the north east, *Aekyom alon tavee*. The river from here up to Faiwol country comes in from the north, *Ok Tii alivo*, turns sharply to the west, and just as quickly, turns south, from here down to Yonggom country, *ngwero*. Its present appearance reminds me of *inup tok*, the small-eyed death adder, thick bodied, greyish-cream with dark-tipped, scaly edges, and broad, dark bands along its back. The airstrip runs east to west along the river, between the two bends. The temperature is about 34 degrees Celsius, with 98% humidity, and the air smells like mud. I am making my way back towards the road, past an old, rusted grass cutter neatly camouflaged in the waist-high grass. There is the old tractor, incongruously overgrown with flowering vines. I remember seeing it when we first came to Ninggirum, when the Islander would set us down here. It’s been many a year since that tractor hauled the cutter across the airstrip. This place is now a haven for snakes.

I’m back at the road, still in the west end of the Station, near the government offices and council buildings. This is a U-shaped road, and both ends join up with the Kiunga–Tabubil highway at the eastern end of the Station. The main settlement is nestled in this rectangle, with squatter ‘corners’ skirting the road to the south. These corners have been established by local peoples who leave their village communities to live at the Station while their children attend school.

I am now passing through the central area. The high school, primary school, hospital, main generator, and various churches occupy this space, with worker’s houses dotted throughout. Houses and buildings are generally Western style, made of fibro cement or masonite, with tin roofs and glass windows, though some are made of leaves and grass.
There are a number of people waiting outside the hospital, and the school area is a hive of activity. In 2004, OTML began a K 4,000,000, three stage plan for the development of the high school. It is buzzing with construction: new classrooms, amenities block, dormitories, teacher’s houses, workshops and sporting facilities. It is rumoured that plans are being made for a university at Ningerum Station in the future.

Further on toward the highway is the Ningerum Jail. It was built in the 1970s, closed in 1998, and reopened in 2004, when its holding capacity settled at 30 inmates. It is rumoured that the jail will be relocated when the District Administration and OTML implement this part of the development plan. Recent news is that rifle and drug smuggling across the border from Indonesia is on the increase. With more unrestricted movement of people across borders, Wini Nemo, acting Prison Commander, is concerned that the extra people in the area will also put pressure on the already overcrowded jail (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, February 21, 2011).

I am heading toward the commercial area which runs along the highway. The Ningerum marketplace is at the northern end, the Aekyom marketplace is at the southern end, with various business places and trading stores between. People are milling around at the public motor vehicle (PMV) stops. Some are chewing betel nut – see the red spit splattered all over the ground. Some are sitting in the shade, playing cards. Above the noise there comes a shout, and people swarm around a man who raffles live chickens for a living. He is about to draw the winning card, and each person hopes he or she will be the lucky one.

I am at the highway, standing outside the largest of the trade stores. There are people all around, some standing under brightly coloured umbrellas. The women are wearing meri blouses with laplaps, and the men are wearing shirts and trousers. I am conspicuous in a sea of black hair and brown faces. There are no white skinned residents at Ningerum Station, and very few white people visit here, even though commercial business enterprises at Tabubil and Kiunga have drawn small European communities. The people who live here are generally Papua New Guineans, from all over the country. I can speak with some people in Ninggirum; more, in Tok Pisin; a few, in English; and with some, I have no common language. After chatting with friends, I am making my way back to Joe’s house.

From 1991 to 1994, Howard, Sarah, Erin and I lived in Wogam village, in a house made of bush materials, just like everyone else’s. To get to the village from the organisation’s
base station in the Eastern Highlands, we flew in a Cessna 206, three hours due west, to
where it set us down on the airstrip at Ningerum Station. We usually stayed in the
village for about four months at a time, so we had to take everything we needed to live
there, until the next trip back to town. In those days, Ningerum Station was basically an
airstrip, with a few government offices, staff houses, a jail, a community school, a small
medical clinic, and two or three trade stores.

From the airstrip it is a seven kilometre walk along the highway to the Ok Tedi River
crossing, carrying our supplies. These were mainly food, toiletries, school texts, and
recreational things like books, games, and hobby stuff. Sometimes Howard was able to
find a PMV to drive us to the river. The only way to get across the river was in a dugout
canoe, a government operated ferry service for the local people. Usually the canoe was
on the other side of the river, and we had to wait for someone to come our way before
we could cross.

From there, it is an eight kilometre walk along a weathered, slippery, red clay track, up
to the village on the ridge. The road is quite flat near the river, before passing over
undulating hills turning into steep grades up to the higher ground. It was cut just a year
or two earlier by the people who live in the area, as a government funded, community
project. On either side of the road is thick, cool bush, but it gets very hot along the
track, where there is no shade from the sun. Our girls learned to walk this route when
they were very young. All along the way, Howard and I would look for interesting
things to show them, so they would forget how hot and tired they felt.

The last climb up to the village is long, and steep. Even in the dry season it is very
slippery. We marvel at the women who carry, from their foreheads, a heavy bilum of
sweet potato, and another of fire wood, and a small child on their shoulders. They walk
slowly, sure-footedly, right to the top, and rest at the haus win while they catch their
breath, the cool breeze drying their skin. From there, it is a very short walk to our house,
with its water tank and single solar panel. Howard and our friend Timothy literally
hand-carried all the makings of our life up to the village. Howard used a kerosene
fuelled blow torch to solder the tank together, and he dug, with a shovel, a septic pit, so
that we could have a flushing toilet. We learned to live without many things, and with
many things in Wogam village, but we were very grateful for running water inside the
house, and a private loo.
The Wogam ridge runs west from the road, which continues north for about a kilometre past a parallel ridge, Wuwuungo, and on further another ten kilometres, to Kolepbon. This is the area of the Kabuluula clan. On the ridges, families have cleared and levelled the ground, and built houses. At Wogam, the ridge has a central path about two metres wide, with a row of houses either side. There are small hamlets of about two or three houses beside the road leading up to and away from the main village, and others in the bush below the ridge, near the water places. These are the places where the families live, and where their lives happen. Our house no longer exists, but people still use black palm and sago leaf to make their houses, and they still raise them six to ten feet above the ground, as in earlier times.

The first outsiders to come in were Dutch government people, before the war. At that time, we all lived in houses built into the tops of tall trees. Safety. It was for safety. If someone was hunting in the bush, or in the garden, and a dangerous animal or an enemy came, he would run to the vine ladder hanging down from the house. He would pick up the bottom rung and hang it on his shoulder as he climbed up, so that the ladder would come up with him, and no one else could get up to his house. There was a trapdoor in the floor of his house (called om maeng). He would climb up through it, put the ladder inside, and close the trap door. Then he was safe. So we all lived in houses that way, maybe three or four families in one big house, close to gardens and hunting areas. Other close relatives would live in another house, maybe one or two kilometres away. We were all spread through the bush like that (Hans, 2002, translated from Ninggirum to English).

Standing in the haus win, turning full circle, I can see all of Ninggirum land spreading out in every direction. A gently rolling sea of green, broken only by the red scar of a village or an airstrip, and the shining, serpentine shapes of rivers wending in the distance. Away to the north west, wave upon wave of foothills climb to the Star Mountains. The range runs west into Indonesia, and east to the Hindenburg Wall, a huge cliff about one kilometre high and forty kilometres long. These mountains are an immense, tree clad, limestone formation, riddled with large caves, deep gorges, and mysterious sinkholes. In their midst stands A nong huubin, the place of origin of Ninggirum people.
Effects

[mountain] most sacred places because that’s where they came from. This big mountain [Fubilan] has a name … They [old people] worship it. They hold on to the initiation very strongly because the Ninggirum people, they believe that they originally come from this area, formed by this land … (Joe, 2009, translated from Ninggirum to English)

The mountains are the area from which the Ninggirum came. They originated there. It is widely held that as the populations grew, the mountain people moved south to the lower lands, where they found plenty of fish in the rivers, and many good places to grow gardens. So they settled in the land between Ok Tii (Tedi) and Ok Birim (rivers), and even in some areas east and south of Ok Tii. The upper Ninggirum clans live in the mountains and the hill country, and the lower clans occupy the valleys, but they all know themselves as the Ninggirum tribe who came from the mountains.

One of the upper families, the Amesan clan, knows a story of their origin, and the following is a paraphrased version of a part of that story, as told by Elang Byangalop, in Ninggirum language, in the course of conversation in Ninggirum, Tok Pisin and English.

Long ago there were two brothers, one was a cassowary, and one was a crocodile. Cassorwary’s mother was cassowary, her mother was bandicoot, and her father was kaskas (tree kangaroo). Crocodile’s mother was pig, and her mother was lizard. … These are the generations of the upper and the lower Ninggirum people. Now it happens that they were living at Ambelee. One day, one of the brothers ran away from that place, and went to live there on the mountain. He died where the Mt. Fubilan mine is now, Ok Tedi. He died there, and by mining that place, they remove his bones from that area we now call Ok Tedi mine. Faiwol people (the next tribe to the North) call it Fubilan, but we know it as A nong huubin.

So while this brother, the cassowary, went to live on the mountain, this crocodile also went behind him, following. But the brother (cassowary) who went ahead, turned back and told him (crocodile) not to go with him. So crocodile turned back. That brother who went to that mountain now, his name is Huup belepon … Huup beleypup, father of this man, father of the crocodile. So, what is the gold and copper and minerals here? It’s their bones and everything of the person here. So when we have our pig feast … the action and activities are related to this. So all the gold is
huupbeleyup (father), his bones. … So that’s the story, Ahwaaman and Amooman, our Creators and gods.

In the time when the world was made, two brothers lived at Ambelee. The two brothers are known, first, as the Ahwaaman and the Amooman, the creators of the Ninggirum tribe. The Ahwaaman are spirit, and the Amooman represent the form embodied by the spirit which gives it its life, e.g. crocodile. Ahwaaman becomes Amooman when the spirit becomes a human, a plant or an animal. Thus, crocodile exists as the animal itself, and as the spirit that gives it its life.

Many traditional Ninggirum stories use two brothers, or a brother and a sister, an uncle and a nephew, or one of a series of brothers, as the central characters. Sometimes the characters work together to achieve a good outcome, and at other times they are enemies. One may be wise and clever while the other is stupid or foolish, but one is usually stronger or more astute, thus, the hero. Sometimes they may do good to each other, or they may deceive each other. It is this difference between the inclinations and abilities of each of the brothers which determines the outcome of events in the story.

In this story, Elang is not so much concerned with the origin of all men, as with the origin of his own Ninggirum group and clan. The brothers are recognised as Ancestors of the Ninggirum clans, and Ninggirum people know many stories that tell how these fathers shaped different parts of the landscape and settled as guardians of their territory. The people of the clans like to identify with a plant, animal, object or element that they are known by. The children of each generation identify in terms of the family structures that organise Ninggirum society. In this way, people know how they are related and how they are to behave towards each other. It determines whom Elang calls ‘brother’, whom he might marry, and the people for whom he is responsible.

Elang begins by identifying the generations of the cassowary and crocodile Ancestors. The mother of the Kasiwa people is the cassowary, byangalop. The cassowary’s mother is bandicoot. Her real name is bukbukkare. Bukbukkare gave birth to that cassowary, and the cassowary gave birth to human beings, all the generations of the Amesan clan. This father is possum oknat elang. He is the brown and white one seen on PNG money, the ten toea piece, and his name is Huupbeleyup. From the cassowary then, people descend.

The lower Ninggirum originated from the crocodile. This crocodile is alimbelep. His mother is mokman (pig), and his father is worimkwit woranip. His grandmother is
wapkok (lizard). This lizard with the short shell and its brown and very frightening skin, is called alimwapkok. That is the lower Ninggirum. Those clans who know the cassowary as their Ancestor comprise the upper group, and those of the crocodile Ancestor form the lower group. Together they are the Ninggirum tribe. Though the groups each comprise different clans, the story instructs the clans to live together, as brothers, in their land.

Ideally, Ninggirum people are to live as ‘friends’. This is a reciprocal relationship in which one is always solicitous of the welfare of the others. This reciprocity is understood through the activities of community cooperation, sharing and giving, and is usually demonstrated by the exchange of food and gifts, in hospitality, and in mutual assistance in life’s responsibilities. It is these ideas which underlie the name, Ninggirum.

Later in the conversation, Elang talked about the meaning of the name ‘Ninggirum’.

Some people believe and say, that Ninggirum man, got the name, Ninggirum, through shaking of hands, *Ni kinum, Ni kinim*. That’s the way we got our name, some people say. But I disagree. That is, there is no such source of the real name of Ninggirum. We are Ninggirum. *Ninggirumbe kambe*, Ninggirum. So Ninggirum, itself, is what we are, Ninggirum. So, it’s not, it doesn’t mean, because we shake hands, [and say] our friends, *Ni kinum Ni kinum*, friend friend, we got a name from that. That is not [so], that one *banis* [fence] … We were [have always been] Ninggirum, and we [still] are Ninggirum. So through that, the Ninggirum people now, the whole clans Ninggirum, we are a victim, because, *ka mit man*. Yeah *ka mit man*, what is terming *ka mit man*, means, is the originating, is the source of the evolve of the Ninggirum tribe.

Elang explains that, according to some people, when white skinned people came, the Ninggirum people greeted them in their traditional manner. They shook hands and said something like *Ni kinum* (my friend), extending hospitality toward the strangers. From then on, the government officers patrolling the area referred to them by this name, and they became known as *nikinum* people. Elang disagrees with this meaning. He asserts that Ninggirum people are who they are, Ninggirum. That is their name. It always has been and always will be. The idea of being named by government officials is abhorrent to him. He uses the Pigin word *banis* which means ‘fence’ (to enclose, cut off, barricade, imprison). In Elang’s mind, this word recalls stories he has heard long ago. It
conjures images of white explorers who enclosed their campsite inside a rope fence. The local people were safe as long as they stayed outside the boundary. If anyone crossed the fence line, they were shot with a rifle (Connolly & Anderson, 1983). To Elang, it is intolerable that this should be happening to him on his own land, the place that he came from, *ka mit man*, the source place of the Ninggirum tribe.

The Ninggirum greeting is a welcome to place. Not only does it signal permission to be there on the land, it is also, in a sense, an appeal to the host for permission to be there. It is a very powerful process, an engagement with *kaong* (Chapter nine), that relational aspect of the universe that offers the opportunity to be the author of one’s own being. It springs from the profound generosity of Ninggirum people flowing from a powerful knowing of their place. Take this away, and they lose their ability to be.

Living as ‘brothers’ begins with an attitude of love and acceptance between men. It is a relationship in which men enjoy deeper personal bonds of understanding, respect and appreciation. The aim in this relationship is to act towards your brother as you would have him act towards you, and the intention is to act generously, leaving to the other the responsibility for returning such generosity. This relationship is the basis of clan solidarity, and calls for every effort to respect the dignity of the other, and to contribute to his welfare. Even if an outsider, who is not a blood relative, joins a group, he may be called ‘brother’ if he is willing to enter into a mutual relationship in which he helps and is helped. Men of the same clan are meant to live harmoniously together as brothers, who help each other in their work, are loyal, and generous with each other.

While much is said about the brother/brother relationship, brother/sister and sister/sister relations also have their place in the stories. At the ontological level it appears that there is no exclusion of females. They are present, different, powerful, but secret. It seems to me that in these relationships also, the ideal is to care for and to be cared for. So reciprocity in relationships is an ideology which dominates all considerations of social life. Perhaps, as all too often happens, these relationships may be taken for granted and become disturbed through selfishness, foolishness, and laziness.

Elang says that the brothers of the story were living at Ambelee, located in the central west of the Ninggirum area, close to the Indonesian border. One day, the cassowary brother ran away to live on the mountain. The story does not say why he went away, just that he did. So this ambiguity allows for many interpretations of why the brother left that place. When cassowary went to live on the mountain, crocodile followed him, but
along the way, cassowary turned back to tell crocodile that he should not come with him. Again, the story does not say why, just that he should go back. This silence too, is the site of many explanations about relations between clans. So crocodile went back, indicating that cassowary settled on the mountain, and he, crocodile, settled in another place.

Elang establishes that, though the two brothers have different mothers, *Huupbeleyup* is the father of both, and it was he who died on the mountain. His bones, body fluids and substances are believed to form the rock, soil, minerals, foliage and people which come from the mountain. It is these ancestors who are honoured, and it is these events which are re-enacted when the people of the Amesan clan make their pig feasts. It is these ideas which underlie a Ninggirum way of knowing their life and their place as sacred.

Elang’s story reveals his belief that he originated from the mountains, and that the site of the Ok Tedi Mine pit is his source place, *awotom*. It is a sacred place. It establishes his clan as the owners of the land on the mountain, which the Ninggirum people know as *A nong luupbin* (*a*-tree; *nong*-vine; *luup*-wind; place). However, in the 1960s when the Ok Tedi copper and gold deposits were discovered, a solid line drawn on maps assigned the local groups to distinct territories, thus segregating Ninggirum land from Faiwol/Wopkaimin land (Map 2). This boundary line falls to the south of the mine site along the Ok Tedi, attributing ownership of the land to the Wopkaimin. To the local people this line is more about defining mining leases than describing origins. To Elang, it marks an abrupt economic schism between ground eligible for royalties and other economic benefits, and land which is not (Banks 2006, p. 266). It is also a comment on the way OTML might view the communities on either side of it – as if the boundary marks the limits of their worlds, devoid of history, culture, country, cut off from the effects of life beyond themselves.

An early ethnolinguistic survey conducted by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) also draws lines on maps, culturally and linguistically. Alan Healey (1964), a respected scholar and colleague, in his linguistic mapping of the languages of the peoples of the Star Mountains, describes a family of languages which use the word ‘*ok*’ to mean water, river, and fluids (Map 4). Of the people using these languages, he refers to those groups who live in the highlands as the Mountain Ok, and those living south of the mountains as the Lowland Ok. He suggests that Ninggirum people probably originated in the Star Mountains, north east of where they live today. As cultural
distance between tribes increased, due to tribal conflict involving head hunting, cannibalism, and language change arising from geographical separation, they spread out along the rivers to the lowlands looking for land and food.

The Min speak a tongue belonging to a group known to linguists as the Mountain Ok Family. The Ningerum speak Lowland Ok. … But the Ningerum can understand very little of what is being said. … Yes, they want the mine to go ahead. Yes, they think many of the young men would want to go and work for the company. … No, it is very difficult to get money, it is too far to the patrol posts at Olsohip and Ningerum (the latter in the nothing world) (Jackson, 1982, p. 23).

Later scholarship tends to classify the local groups according to cultural association, marked by the suffix -min appearing in their name. Jorgensen (1996) references the local cultures according to their relationship with Afek, the central, ancestral figure of the local mythologies. The Faiwolmin, Wopkaimin, Telefolmin, and other ‘min’ peoples north of the mine site, who recognise Afek as their Ancestor, he calls the Highland Min. Those who do not recognise Afek as their Ancestor, the Ninggirum, Kati, Yonggom, Aekyom/Awin and Muyu peoples, have become known as Lowland Min. Because of the placement of the boundary line, the Wopkaimin people in the immediate vicinity of the mine have been recognised as the land owners. They are the lease holders who receive royalties from OTML (Map 2). But OTML also compensates the surrounding groups north of the site. However, land is not simply a solid state of earth to build houses on, or to farm, or to dig for minerals. In the mythologies of the Min peoples, the spirits of the dead still live on earth, and do not remove themselves to some remote heaven. On their way to their resting place, they cross Ok Tedi at Moyansil (near Tabubil), and pass Mount Fubilan, where they must honour Afek (Rettet Die Elbe, 2001). Perhaps this is, in part, why Min peoples living north of the mountains around Telefolmin, who are not materially affected by the mine, are, nonetheless, compensated by OTML.

The evocation of Afek, the female Ancestor of the peoples of the region, suggests that myth and ritual based, sacred geographies and genealogies are being resurrected to align with an emerging local, mineral based geopolitics (Clark, 1995, p. 384; Jorgensen, 1997, p. 603). The Afek ritual cycle appears to centre around the power of the periphery. In the case of the Wopkaimin, the outlying neighbours are able to furnish their needs while their land is being laid waste, and in return, are compensated by OTML. However, periphery may also imply a realm of deviance associated with illness,
cannibalism and sorcery, as Jackson (1982, p. 23) pointed out. To the Mountain Min, the Ninggirum belong to ‘the nothing world’.

Linguistically, the languages in the vicinity of the mine, Ninggirum, Faiwolmin, and Wopkaimin, form a dialect chain. This phenomenon occurs where groups who live side by side, overlap. They experience changes in their language as one language blends into the next. Thus the Ninggirum people who live in the mountains speak more like their neighbours to the north, and the groups in the south tend to speak more like the Yonggom. In these areas the way of speaking may become quite different, to the extent that a new dialect forms. In this North Fly region, Wopkaimin is considered a dialect of Faiwol, as it is influenced by Ninggirum speakers who live in the mountains.

In October 2000, Hans, Bokoli, Avenon and I visited some of the more remote Ninggirum villages to check dialect differences on a standard SIL 160 Word (and phrase) list. The first day we hiked Hukim/Ok Ao to Ogun and Ambere/Ok Tarim, then a very long day to Hyotkim, then Angkit, Korkit, another long day to Kaokwirok, finally a long adventurous climb up to the mine site and on to Finalbin and Tabubil by vehicle, a week’s walking in all. These northern villages are all in the mountains, and their pronunciation and a lot of vocabulary is quite different to the lower Ninggirum dialects. In fact I overheard one woman say to Hans (in Tok Pisin), ‘Please speak to us in Tok Pisin so we understand clearly what you are saying!’ But everyone assured me, ‘Oh yes, it’s all the same language!’ (Howard Oates, 2002).

Though OTML would claim that the boundary line aligns with the genealogically grounded lines of land ownership around the mine site, Elang disagrees. In his understanding, land ownership is vested in the descent group, where all members are co-owners who have the right to use land, but not to alienate it. Owning this land is his inalienable right, because it is passed from the ancestors into his guardianship for the succeeding generations. As the land is tied inalienably to his tribe and clan, it is inconceivable to Elang that he could be dispossessed of his land by an agreement between the national government and OTML. His story indicates that he has a relationship with the land in which he is obliged, by tribal law, to honour his role and responsibility as defined by kin relations. Hence, drawing a map with lines of demarcation impacts Elang as a spatial reordering of his past experience. While a map represents his natural world, it also marks a separation from nature, increasingly divorcing his life experience from the natural world.
Elang also comments that the ‘Faiwol people call it Fubilan’. He acknowledges, if begrudgingly, that the Ninggirum and the Faiwol have a common interest in this area, because they each regard it as their ancestral home. Fubilan, the place where Afek buried her fubi (adze), is sacred to the Faiwolmin, just as A nong huupbin is sacred to the Ninggirum. He believes that ideas which allow the Ninggirum and the Faiwolmin to hold these beliefs about the same place, still exist. However, the literature surrounding the Ok Tedi Mine largely attributes land ownership to the Wopkaimin (Banks, 2006; Burton, 1994; Filer & McIntyre, 2006; Hyndman, 1991; Jorgensen, 1996, 1997; Kirsch, 2004; Polier, 1999).

In his story, Elang is asking, ‘what about us?’.

The government claims that he is the owner, but, still I have a bit of it, this [stone]. I claim that I am the owner of the resource. But how come, that he [PNG Government] ignore me, and takes everything of his own? It’s not fair, it’s unfair! While I have this one [stone], I claim it, … That is unfair. That’s what we are talking about, impact. Impact is not just physical, looking of the damage, but with inner source of the people [life] (Elang Byangalop, 2009, translated from Ninggirum to English).

During the conversation, Elang rails against what he perceives as the government’s unfairness towards himself and his people. He refers to the stone which he inherited on his father’s death. In his mind, the stone is definite, indisputable proof of land ownership. The stone is significant because it is symbolic of the Ninggirum Ancestor, made known in their central creation story (Chapter Eight). In this story, Belep ok baenkwoo, the creator spirit, is identified as a hard, solid rock, and just as the Wopkaimin know Afek, the Ninggirum know Belep ok baenkwoo. Further conversation reveals that Elang’s stone was given to him by Belep ok baenkwoo, when he (Belep ok baenkwoo) travelled from A nong huupbin, through the sacred tunnels, to the place where the dead spirit people are. To him, the stone is undeniable, unquestionable proof that the mine is on Ninggirum land, and therefore, owned by Ninggirum people. He sees that the government can not possibly own the mineral resource because they are not of his tribe, they did not originate from this land, and they do not possess this stone. He feels very deeply about the damage to the environment, and even more deeply about the ways in which the lives of his people are being affected. To Elang, land ownership is fluid and these borders are just lines on maps made by outsiders.
Elang’s story, in the context of Ninggirum–Faiwol relations shows a picture of two brothers, one who lives in the mountains, and one who lives in the lowlands. The Ancestor of the brother in the mountains holds the dominant position in the upper region, while the other brother’s Ancestor defines life in the lower region. Though they have different mothers, these men are still ‘brothers’ who need to live together, harmoniously, in the land. Elang’s grievance is that, though he occupies the same land and shares common ways of being, even language, with his Faiwol brothers, he is excluded from benefit and compensation by the company and the government. This position does not honour him as a brother, or respect his suffering. It does not consider the offence given, or recognise the undermining of the cooperation and sharing implicit in the ‘brother’ relationship. It is by maintaining this brotherly affection that both the Ninggirum and the Faiwol have been able to orient themselves from, and share the space of this place without undue conflict. To Elang’s mind, land ownership is plural, never static, and a solid line on a map should not have the power to redefine his world, his relations, his identity, or his being.

The power of Elang’s story lies, not in what is said, but in what is concealed. With the snakeman presence comes the promise of a better life for Ninggirum people. Just when it looks as if this dream will become reality, trickster deals his blow. Snakeman takes all the benefits and leaves Ninggirum man with the huge loss of what is rightfully his, carrying the burden of this reality.

The story of transformation for Ninggirum people began in the 1960s, when Ningerum Station was just an airstrip built by missionaries, allowing access to the Ninggirum tribe. By 1964, the Australian administration had expanded the mission settlement into a government station. It became the seat of colonial administration from which local life was organised, until the withdrawal of Australian government, at the time of PNG’s independence, in 1975.

Ningerum Station had proved very convenient for Kennecott Copper geologists in the early 1970s, during their drilling program which confirmed the existence of rich gold-copper deposits in the Star Mountains. It also became a central access point for Broken Hill Proprietary Limited (BHP) and the PNG Government in 1976, when they formed an international consortium to assess the feasibility of developing a gold and copper mining operation on Mt Fubilan. The airstrip was used to receive and trans-ship stores and equipment to the exploration site at Tabubil. Every hour, several aircraft and huge
helicopters would descend to and ascend from the airstrip, immersing Ninggirum people in the modern world. Ningerum Station had become a doorway to the area for Kiunga, the base of exploration situated at the head of the Fly River. Dockyards were built at Kiunga, which became the access port for transportation by sea. By then, the interior of Western Province had been effectively opened to world trade. With the construction of the Ok Tedi mine in the 1980s, a large township grew around the site at Tabubil, and at Kiunga. These towns are now joined by a road called the Kiunga-Tabubil Highway. The mine has brought a dramatic increase in contact with foreigners, and a great deal of commerce to the region, but has also caused environmental degradation in several rivers.

Elang’s argument is that Ninggirum people also are traditional owners of the land which is being mined. He disputes the transnational corporations’ right to own the land and mineral resources, because they are not traditional land owners. He criticises their domination in allowing the continued destruction of the environment. He is indignant at the arrogance of their disrespect for his communications, and enraged by their blatant disregard for Ninggirum people by not sharing the benefits with them. He mourns the loss of traditional life as he has known it, and rails at his powerlessness to effect any positive change in these areas of concern.
Chapter Seven – The Ancestors

From the ridge at Wogam, I can see patches of water reflecting the sunlight. My eye connects the shimmers, tracing the course of riverbeds. Hewn by the mighty forces of seasonal deluge, they carve their way from mountain peak to lowland savannah, through mile after mile of dense, green bush. Moist, montane rainforest, with a profusion of mosses, orchids and ferns. The Star Mountains are a watershed for many rivers. Rain from the northern slopes feeds the Sepik river system which drains into the Sea of Bismarck, while that from the southern slopes feeds the Ok Tedi/Fly River system. The rivers of Ninggirum land, Ok Birim, Ok Tarim, Ok Ao, Ok Taop, Ok Mungaa, and Ok Tii (Tedi), rise in these mountains which capture around ten metres average annual rainfall. They eventually empty into Ok Tedi, which joins the Fly just south of Ninggirum land. During the rainy season, an overnight downpour can cause these rivers to rise by up to ten metres, making them impassable. Then, in the space of a few hours, or a day, the water subsides and the levels are back to normal. Hence, these rivers serve as natural boundaries between the forest ridges where the Ninggirum clans have established their territory.

The clans in the north are referred to as intip tan, the people who live ‘up there’. They established their villages at the head of the rivers in the mountains: Saweebon, Deronggo, Kumkwit, Ok Maa 11, Hyotkim, Korkit, Angkwit, and Kaokwirok. In the East, between Ok Tii and Ok Mungaa, is where the wem belek bao tan, the ‘small road’ people live, in Monggolowalawam, Yongtao, Haelewogam 104, Kolepbon, Wuwuungo, Wogam, Bumin 90, Tamaro. The dukbit tan, the ‘middle ridge’ people, live on the ridges around Taop and Nemen, in Digam, Wombon, Tengkim, Bikim, Minipbon, Hukim, Ok Ao and Bwakim. Further west, to Ao, Tarim and beyond, the nimilup tan, the ‘up on the ridge there’ people, live in Tarakbits, Betanok, Bingkawuk, Digo, Ogun, Kwikim, and Ambel.

These are the clans of the Ninggirum. They live in the land between Birim and Tedi. Their community is the whole environment: people, land, plant, animal, the living and the dead. They share certain beliefs and values, and similar ideas and feelings about how people should relate to each other, and to the environment. They share a common land, name, custom, and language, and will act together in matters of war, yet each clan...
is politically autonomous, sometimes even fiercely so. They share history stories, and participate together in ritual feasts, so keeping their community safe and well.

To the west, the rivers look clean, Birim, Tarim and Ao. If you were to go to the village on the ridge above Ok Ao and look to the west, you would see the border post, just three kilometres away. It is a white obelisk, about eight feet tall, surrounded by dense, green bush. It looks just like a white man sitting under a tree. Every few years, the Indonesians come and clear the surrounding area, leaving a big circle of red clay around it, so that is easily seen from the air.

Prior to colonisation by the Dutch and Australians, Ninggirum people lived as far west as Ok Kao (Map 3), the zone where they intermingled with the Muyu people. There was no such thing as a border then. During the 1960s, following the Netherlands–Australia Fly River border agreement (Wise, 2001), territorial boundaries were marked through the jungle, along the 141 degrees east line of longitude, with concrete posts situated every 40 to 60 kilometres. Subsequently, people who lived in the vicinity of the markers were compelled to choose residence in either Irian Barat, under Indonesian control, or Papua, under Australian government.

In 2001, while on a dialect survey hike of the western villages, one of our friends, Benny, took Howard to visit his uncle, who owns the land surrounding a border post. This is Howard’s story of that visit.

We waded across Ok Ao, then hiked along narrow tracks through the bush, all the while brushing branches and fronds aside, breaking the occasional spiders web, and sometimes flicking off big, hairy spiders dangling on a short thread from the brim of our hats, right in front of our faces. We climbed short, steep ridges and descended them again, occasionally crossing a small creek via the trunk of a tree, 10 or 20 centimetres in diameter, which had been felled across it. Most of the time the tall trees kept us a lot cooler than walking in the sticky heat of direct sunlight.

Every now and then there would be a small break in the vegetation which allowed us to see ahead a kilometre or so, but I was glad to have a guide who knew the road. It would be very easy to get lost in this bush. Finally, after two and a half hours, with Benny saying, ‘it’s close now’, we climbed a longer ridge and could see a clearing at the top. In the middle of a red circle stood a painted, white tin post covered in black mould, with ‘PNG’ stencilled on one side, and ‘RI’ on the other. That was it. Very unspectacular.
Very soon after we arrived, having flopped down on a bit of wispy grass in some sparse shade to cool off, a short, slight man with grey, curly hair arrived and greeted us warmly. He told me, ‘you must come and rest in my house, and eat with me. It is close to here, and I have something important to talk about’. So we went with him a few hundred metres, and climbed the long, pole ladder up into his house. It was made of sago stem, and the roof was a sago-leaf thatch. It stood about three metres above the ground. I remember thinking that the house appeared to have a distinct lean to one side, and it swayed a bit as we moved around. But the solid shade was very welcome, as was the cool water we were offered, and the pork we were served with a meal of sago, bananas and greens. We were certainly treated with great hospitality.

After we had eaten and rested a while, our host came to the important matter occupying his mind. ‘My friend, you saw what the Indonesians have done. They keep coming and putting a border post on MY LAND. This is MY LAND, and they shouldn’t put their things on MY LAND! Now, I want you to help me dig it up and move it about five kilometres west of here to where it REALLY belongs off MY LAND’. I listened sympathetically to his deep-felt grievance, but was unable to help with his difficulty.

This uncle is from one of those communities who chose to relocate on the PNG side, leaving the Kao/Birim area largely uninhabited by Ninggirum people. Their subsequent generations now occupy the western area between Birim, Tarim and Ao.

Howard, Sarah, Erin and I lived in the Ok Ao community from 1999 to 2006, and we have wonderful memories of swimming at Keip Kwit. Keip Kwit is the place where Ok Kwit flows into Ok Ao, a tributary of Ok Tedi. Over the years, the force of the waters running together has cut a cliff, now about ten metres high, and gouged a hole in the riverbed at least six metres deep. It is perfect for jumping and diving and swimming. We have spent many happy hours there with our friends.

Just downstream a little way from the junction, a very large fish trap appears each year. It is a construction of sticks, rather like a large, open weave basket, lashed together with nong (vine), and it works as a net strung across rapids, or in the shallows. It is like the traps they once used in Ok Tedi, but no longer. Ninggirum people are fishermen, who hold the knowledge of the river, its life, and its management. Traditionally, they know a wide variety of kyon (fish), eeyoom (prawn), and alimbelep (crocodile), and mourn the loss of so many species in current times. They still fish the smaller tributaries, formerly
stocked by the seasonal migration of fish and crocodile, making their way from the Fly
and Ok Tedi into the smaller waters, to spawn. The people often comment that the fish
no longer come here, now.

One day, while out walking in the bush near Ok Ao, Steven offered us some water to
drink. It was cool and sweet, and we were surprised by how much better it tasted than
the water from our plastic bottles. He told us that it came from oget.

*Oget* is the traditional way of fetching water from the stream. That’s how, long ago,
and still today, people use it, because this is the right container, in this bamboo,
oget. It holds the water just in that section, not a big amount like a bucket, or a billy
can. The water in the bamboo keeps cool all the time. This is a young bamboo so I
can cut it down here and I can drink it (Steven, 2002, spoken in English).

*Ok* is the general expression for water, fluid, and is gendered feminine. The form *ok*,
usually occurs with a descriptor, an accompaniment, a proper name or a qualifier which
identifies the fluid. *Ok tii* is a cup of tea; *ok nimin* is hot water; *ok kerasin* is kerosene,
and *ok*, accompanied by a place name, *Tedi* is the name given to the water formation we
know as a river in its particular place. *Ok et* (which changes morphophonemically to
become *oget*) refers to the water that naturally occurs inside a growing bamboo stem.
The stem is a series of self-contained segments, each containing its own portion of
water. By twisting and pulling the lower section away from the upper, leaf covered part,
the segments can be separated at the notches. Once its water has been used, the lower
part can be refilled with fresh water from the stream, and put back together. Usually,
when walking in the bush, Ninggirum will cut a stem three notches long, and carry it on
their shoulder.

Ok Taop is the middle river (Map 3) in Ninggirum land, and its junction with Ok
Nemen, near Wombon, is a sacred place of the Kaabuluula clan. In this place, it is
forbidden that people should touch or alter anything. It marks an opening through which
a dead person’s spirit will travel to get to its resting place. If anything changes or defiles
the place, the passage of the spirits may be disturbed, and they may lose their way.

Ok Mungaa joins Ok Tedi just south of Wogam. In the Ok Tedi Mining Company’s
original plan, Mungaa had been selected as the site of the tailings dam (Map 2). Jackson
(1982, p. 19) explains that:
whilst the mine, the township, and the power generating plant will be all on Min land, the tailings dam will be on Ningerum territory, in the upper valley of the Ok Maa [Mungaa]. The Ningerum occupy an environment less harsh, but also far less varied, than that of the Min. Except for the extreme north of their area, almost all land is below 500 metres above sea level, and the greater part of it is lower than 200 metres. Their land slopes gently to the south and into it a series of parallel streams, the Ma, Taub [Taop], Birim and their tributaries, have cut quite deep and steeply sided valleys. It is this that makes the Maa so suitable as a site for a tailings dam.

Tailings are the remains of the ore after minerals have been removed either through crushing or grinding, and usually contain some unextracted metals and some of the chemicals used to extract the metal (Hanson & Stuart, 2001, p. 134). They are comprised of rock powder, silt and water. According to the original plan, tailings would be stored in a dam, and after the solid particles settled, clean water would flow down the river. It would have been an engineering marvel to build such a dam on the side of a mountain which receives an annual rainfall of more than ten metres, and where earthquakes are common. In 1983 construction of the foundations began, but in 1984 they were destroyed when a landslide dumped approximately 35 million cubic metres of soil and rock into the excavation (Griffiths, et al., 2004). The half built dam collapsed, and construction of the mine went ahead without a feasible waste disposal plan.

To the east, Ok Tedi flows from its pure beginnings at Kwirok, picking up the mine tailings at Tabubil, continuing south, and pushing millions of tonnes of silt into the Fly River at the D’Albertis Junction, south west of Kiunga. Over the years since 1984, the forest along the banks of the river has died back, forming mud plains which encroach further into the available garden land. The once wide, deep, slow flowing river is choked with rock and dirt, and in some places, only a narrow trickle along the middle of the river bed remains.

I remember times in the early 1990s when we crossed the Ok Tedi by canoe. One particular day, the canoe was moored on the other bank, and Timothy decided to swim across and bring it back. When we were all crouched inside, holding tightly to the edges, Timothy paddled us across the river. As his strong arms heaved the oar through the water, sun full on his back, we noticed that he looked pale, and shiny. Scanning his body I could see that in a few short minutes the water had dried, leaving a white, sandy coating on his dark brown skin. He said it felt itchy and uncomfortable, and the water
tasted taetboo (bad). As I look at Ok Tedi, I am angered by what I see, and I grieve over the devastation of the environment on which Ninggirum people depend for life as they have known it.

**Ok Tedi story**

Ninggirum people know the origin of all the rivers, big and small, through the Ancestor who made the water run through the land, this way or that way. This is the story of the beginning of Ok Tedi, as told by Elang Byangalop (2009, translated from Ninggirum to English by Steven).

This Ok Tedi River now, people know everywhere, even around the world, knows, because of the Mine. Ok Tedi became, because, there was not, no Ok Tedi. The river, now, down there, was nothing, was nothing until there were two people. The uncle and the nephew, were up at the mountain, the nephew knows where the water was, so every time after their food eating, uncle didn’t know the water. So nephew used to go and get that bit of water, come and drink and share it with uncle.

So the uncle has been carefully watching him. So, while the nephew went away to do some other thing in the bush, uncle was looking around to where the water used to be, nephew gets. So he went and he saw big drops of water coming up from the ground. So, it was just too little, so he wanted to make, collect it, more water. So what he did was to remove some stones and other leaves or whatever in there. So, he removed it. Then suddenly he heard a noise, a kind of a cracking noise, he heard it. And then he was afraid, race from there. And then when he looked up, he could see water shooting out from every point of that mountain!

Water shooting out! Iiiiiii!. He tried to block it, all of it, but couldn’t. It was impossible. So the rush of water came out from that mountain and then, then, he himself, couldn’t stand. So, water just rush and make him fall down. And then, on top of him, how why the Ok Tedi came fast, because he was knocked down, and then water rushed over from him, and then came down. From the strength the water got from him, that makes it run down. You can see now today Ok Tedi runs down fast there. So, these two men were not from the Faiwol tribe. They were the Ninggirum people. They were the Ninggirum people.

So, while the nephew came back, he couldn’t help, So, while the uncle now, he’s a big snake, a big snake, in around there, at the mountain. So, he’s the security of all the mineral, copper gold, up there. So, around there, the ground is unstable. It’s all
detected through, modern [instruments]. The ground up there is unstable because this big snake, lives, and guide the resource up there. This is the friend of the people, how they make themselves to become rich (vyan). They know this one. People still believe that there is a masalai up there, because snake, you won’t see it. It’s a big snake, they call [secret name], name of the snake, but this name, it won’t appear today, no picture or the name in writing. The name is only for the people. So, when you measure with some kind of ground detecting instrument, up the side, the ground is unstable, always shaking, because snake there, lives there, and is moving, its moving. He makes the mineral. That’s the source of the mineral. He’s the guardian of the mineral. He’s the guardian. He turns it, it becomes these things here. I go to [see the snake] that’s why I’ve got this thing [stone].

The nephew became a bird, this bird is not the one that they see on the river bank, on the sand but, the other one with the, neck is white and the feather brown, eagle type and the eagle. On bep, like balus, balus bird. That bird also do the work. He plants the sago tree. When he flies around, we say, he is planting the sago, so you see the sago always around. Because that turn the environment to produce this kind of thing. It’s not only the river, in village, too. Ok Tedi wouldn’t be now down there, because she is doing a bit of work. So all the [vyans] all this rop tambu, money, the uncle … yeah, vyan. So what, what happens, his father get the rest of the Ninggirim, elder people, they knows the way, they go to this snake here, but, you don’t have to be a physical form now here. You have to turn into something. Maybe they turn themselves to a snake of one kind, and then they go play with it, and whatever they get from him, just bring it, a stick or a stone or whatever. (gesticulating emphatically) You have to bring it. You do reject, you get big sick. You die. But this thing, extinct rapidly due to the religions beliefs introduction into the place.

The story of the rivers begins in the time before there were rivers in Ninggirim land. Tedi, Mungaa, Taop, Ao, Birim, none of them were there, until there were two people, an uncle and a nephew, who lived on Anonghiupbin. Living on the mountain, nephew would gather and prepare food for uncle, and after they ate, nephew would bring water for them to drink. Even so, uncle did not know where the water came from. He thought that nephew was playing a trick on him by hiding the whereabouts of the water. So, he watched very closely whenever nephew went to fetch the water. One time while nephew was in the bush, uncle went to find the water place. He found it, but it was only a very
small pool. So he cleared the stones and leaves from the area to make more space for the water.

As he was digging, he heard a thunderous, cracking noise. It frightened him, so he ran away. When he looked back, he saw water shooting out from the mountain in all directions. Even though he enjoyed the strange sight, the uncle thought perhaps this was not a good idea, so he tried to block all the places where the water was pouring out. Too late. It was impossible to stop the water. As it gushed out, its force knocked him down. The water ran all over him, and through him. With the strength it got from the uncle, the water ran down from the mountain, away to where the river is now.

So, while water was pouring out of the rock, nephew came back. But he was unable to stop the flow. As the water washed over uncle, he gradually changed into the form of a big snake who lives up there in the mountain. He is the guardian of the mountain and all the minerals. Though nephew tried, he could not help the uncle. Nephew turned into a bird who is known as the caretaker of the environment.

**Interpretation**

This is a very exciting story that explains how the rivers of Ninggirum land came to be. It is about the Ancestor who shaped the landscape of the waterways. Because it is true for all or any of the Ninggirum water places, it holds meaning which is true for all generations of Ninggirum people, anywhere in their territory. It tells Ninggirum people where they are. It is a humorous story formed around the antics played out between two men who live on the mountain, the site of the Ok Tedi Mine. The mine is well known as the world’s largest gold and copper find, notorious for its failure to satisfactorily manage its wastes, resulting in the chronic pollution of the rivers and local environments the length of the Ok Tedi/Fly River system.

While many Ok Tedi stories have been circulated worldwide by OTML, the media, and interested parties, Elang is making the statement that the Ninggirum story is the true story. To him it is true because it is based on the authority of Ninggirum traditional knowledge. It reveals Ninggirum origin and their ways of being in the world, and reflects the plurality of Ninggirum society and sociality. In his presentation, the traditional story is embedded in contemporary discourse, a conversation among Elang Byangalop, myself, Howard, Steven Katuk, Keop Kowa and other Ninggirum men. The conversation is an ongoing complaint against OTML about their devastation of the
environment, about ignoring his clan’s claim to land ownership, and their exclusion from a share of the profit and compensatory remuneration.

Through his story, Elang shows that he is intimately connected with Ok Tedi, because the river originates from his Ancestor, as he himself does. He emphasises that the uncle and nephew of the story are Ninggirum people. Ok Tedi is historically Ninggirum, because the place on the mountain where the water came out of the ground is the origin of the Ninggirum group. Therefore, because the two men of the story are Ninggirum, the Ok Tedi mine site could not possibly belong to Faiwol people only. He offers his story as evidence to further validate his claim that he and his clan are true owners of the site of the Ok Tedi Mine also.

But this story is not only about the environment. It is also about Ninggirum sociality and appropriate relations within the community. In choosing the uncle–nephew relation, Elang is upholding the traditional teaching that Ninggirum people should care for their environment in the same way as the nephew cares for his uncle. So it is a canonical story that carries the authority of ancestral lore, emphasising the fact that honouring this relation is imperative for good community living.

**Uncle and nephew**

_Havi_ is a term used of Ancestors and descendants, literally translated as grandfather. It is an authority relation of unequal power, in which the lesser is obliged to the greater in significant ways. To fulfill obligation is to bring blessing. To ignore obligation is to court retribution. _Havi_ is also used reciprocally between father’s father and son’s son, fathers and sons (_elang-tena_), and uncles and nephews (_mom-nek_).

The term _havi_ is used of the head of the clan. While he has status and privilege, he is also the guardian of the clan’s knowledge, secrets and wealth. He carries responsibility to protect, provide, nurture and care for clan land and all the peoples of his ‘family’. His role is to lead the clan so that they will live long in their land, and prosper. His responsibility is to grow a large, strong, healthy community, leaving behind him provision for a good life for the generations that follow. In this instance, uncle is ‘father’ of the clan, therefore, uncle and father are parallel terms and roles.

‘Uncle’ may be father’s brothers, because a man and his brothers share the same father (_elang_), so they have the same blood. Just as a son must honour his father, so he must
honour his father’s brothers. Father’s brothers are his uncle-fathers (*mom*). The son (*tena kalup*)/daughter (*tena kon*) generation know themselves as brother/sister, older (*bap*) or younger (*taman*). They may be siblings or cousins, but together, they are all same-blood children, older (*tena bap*) or younger (*tena taman*), of the father generation, and they are nephew (*nek*). *Tena* are one generation removed from *elang/mom*. Thus, the father relation shows the structure of the clan through same-blood relations. People know who they are, how they are related, and where they belong in their society.

Mother’s brother is also uncle, and this relation lays the foundation for understanding the connections between clans. It gains currency as an other-blood relation. In the domain of marriage protocol, a man must not marry within his own bloodline. Ideally, he must always obtain a woman from another man. It is forbidden that a man should marry his own or his brother’s sisters or daughters, because they all come from the same father, and have the same blood. Likewise, mother and her sisters have the same father and same blood, therefore marriage with mother’s sister’s children is forbidden. Though mother’s children are same-blood as her husband, she comes from a different father, as do her brothers. Therefore, mother’s brothers’ families are appropriate sources for marriage exchange for her children. In this way, clans intermingle and continue to grow, producing strong, healthy children. The marriage exchange is a powerful mechanism by which clans live in peace together, through honouring the obligations of these family ties. So, patterns of other-blood relations can be mapped across the families, and people always know whom they may or may not marry.

Frequently, a very close emotional bond grows between maternal uncle and nephew, evidenced in the tendency of this uncle to teach and guide his nephew through life, and to favour him with generous gifts. Nephew’s responsibility is to respect, honour and care for uncle, blessing him with genuine appreciation, warm regard and attention to his needs. If they are good to each other, then life is good.

Each of these areas of meaning of the term ‘uncle’ gives insight into the nature of this character, his roles, responsibilities, and status in the community. He is *havi*, the father who gave the Ninggirum people *ok*, their water places. Uncle (*mom*) carries the authority of the creator Ancestor, and his word is to be obeyed. He must be honoured for the contribution he makes to the community’s survival and well-being. To ignore reciprocal obligation is to forfeit the blessing of uncle’s favour, and to call down retribution upon self and community. So this story shows Ninggirum people their origin.
It shows where they are, who they are, and how they are to relate in their world. It teaches that Ancestors, elders and the environment are to be honoured as ‘uncle/father’.

I find it significant that, as soon as Elang ends his performance of the traditional story, his discourse continues with his own interpretation of the story. I think he is actually trying to reveal the other half of the story that traditionally remains hidden, all the more powerful for its absence. By assigning specific meaning, I think he was trying to make it clearer for Howard and me, who lack the heritage of Ninggirum customary culture. The language he uses indicates that he is referring to the special relationship between maternal uncle and nephew, so the following explanation explores this context.

As the water washed over uncle, he gradually changed into the form of a big snake, known to Ninggirum people as the creator and source of the gold and copper minerals, up there in the mountain. Therefore he is the guardian of those resources, who lives there and moves through the mountain, making the ground shake. After the collapse of the tailings dam, OTML employed modern, scientific instruments to discover that the mountain terrain is subject to strong seismic activity, and therefore unstable. Scientific knowledge of this kind, underscored by economic factors, formed the basis of OTML’s environmental assessment, leading to the decision to dump the tailings directly into Ok Tedi. However, Ninggirum people know that the mountain is unstable because the snake lives there. He moves around inside the mountain, making the minerals and the sacred things. So whenever there are landslides and earthquakes in the mountains, Ninggirum people know that uncle is there, working to make their lives good.

Elang goes on to explain that while uncle became the big snake, nephew became a bird, that he identifies as on bep, the white-necked, brown kite. He is careful to distinguish the kite from the heron, the subject of a different story. When on bep flies around, people say that he is ‘planting sago’, meaning ‘providing for us’. On bep oversees the land and the rivers, so that there will be plenty of sago (staple food) to eat. It is interesting that Elang uses the feminine form when he talks about ‘turning the environment’ (literally, ‘to turn the earth’). I think he is distinguishing between what on bep symbolises, referred to in the masculine, and the work that on bep does, referred to in the feminine form. Thus an important male role is to govern and provide for the community, and the complementary female role is to cooperate in the actual physical work of providing and caring. As a colloquial expression, this carries the idea that in the wider scheme of life, everything and everyone has a part to play, and when each does
their bit, life will be good for all. So this area of meaning includes life in the villages and harmonious relations between people. In the masculine form, on bep is caretaker, the guardian of the environment. In the feminine usage, on bep is the care-giver, doing the work of preparing the earth, planting, nurturing, gathering. Perhaps it is this idea which divides labour along gender lines. So, just as the nephew honoured and cared for the uncle, Ninggirum people are to honour the life of the river and the earth, and live to care for them.

Sacred things

Perhaps the snake exists in the Ninggirum consciousness as spirit, the father who provides and cares for his children. He is the source of traditional money (kevo), and traditional wealth (vyan). While pigs, tusks, dog’s teeth, cassowary and bird of paradise feathers are articles of traditional money used in ritual exchange ceremonies, vyan is the form of wealth that is believed to come directly from the snake.

One day while walking to Hukim village (three kilometres from Ok Ao), we passed a house where an older man was sitting on the verandah, making what looked like a belt of pearly shells. We stopped to chat, and he explained that he was making vyan, because his son was soon to be married. He held it across his chest like a sash, and we admired the effect. It reminded me of hours I had spent sewing sequins onto my ballroom dancing costumes. It had hundreds of tiny, round shells, the colour of fresh cream, reflecting a shiny lustre. Each of the shells had been stitched to a long piece of hand plaited vine, several of which had been arranged, side by side, in lengths of 100 shells. He then stitched these lengths together to form the solid band. When we asked about the shells, he indicated that they had come from the snake in the mountain, and carry the life power of the ‘uncle’.

Traditionally, there is a belief in kalup keop halop, the two-eyed man or the double-eyed man, who is also known as ‘uncle’. He is conceived of as spirit and man because he is able to negotiate both sacred and physical reality. He has the knowledge and skills that enable him to communicate with the Ancestors on behalf of the community. When trouble or need arises, it is believed that he can change shape and instantly travel to the place of the dead spirits. There, he enquires into their knowledge of past and future, seeking their wisdom and intervention in the events of daily life that will bring about the desired outcome. He must bring back the vyan that they give him, be it a secret object or
knowledge that will effect the change. If this object or instruction is rejected, the consequences may be dire. Usually someone of the community will get very sick and die. The man told us that he had hired the services of the two-eyed man who went to the spirits, to buy a bride for his son.

*Iyan* shows how traditional society works. It is symbolic of the intimate connection that Ninggirum people have with their fathers who gave them their natural world. The river story teaches me that the environment originates from the Ancestors. It was the Ancestor’s idea to give them the rivers so that they could have plenty of food and live well. The water symbolises the Ancestor’s body and its fluids that carry the power of life, water rushing down the mountain like the powerful flow of body fluids. They are symbolic of forces or processes that are essential to life, and embody the principles of maleness and femaleness. Just as male and female body fluids combine to grow a child, the water joins with the earth to produce strong, prolific, life. The life power of the Ancestor/uncle symbolised by the snake, enables the river to yield life, and nourish the environment.

**The lived world**

Against the background of global economic culture, Elang’s story highlights community life, their institutions and economy. It teaches *davii dapman*, their desire for a quality of community where life is good. The term translates literally *davii* - our life, *dapman* - good, happy. It refers to that space, time, place and being where the world is at peace, the community is content, and life is most satisfying and rewarding.

*Davii dapman* is expressed in *davuup baem* - let us go on happily together. It is a form of blessing, often spoken when taking leave of family and friends. It expresses a vision of life based in the desire to live cooperatively with others, for the benefit of all. It springs from an understanding of self as same, where humans regard more-than-human and other-than-human beings as being the same as themselves. They are connected with them in the web of relations. *Nimala kaluva* (community) is nature, the whole environment (land, water, sky, spirits), the living (humans, plants, animals) and the dead (spirits). The community all share certain beliefs, values, ideas and feelings about living in the world so that life will be good. The way of life in this community is respectful of nature, so that both people and the environment may survive for the long term. It
regards all members as equal, respecting their way of being in the world. It requires all members to cooperate in the business of life so that all may enjoy its benefits. It requires that all share, so that all may have a share. It requires that all members live as ‘friends’. Friendship, as the basis of all relationships, is a significant and recurring theme of the Ninggirum history stories. Friendship implies a self and an other, enfolded in the desire to do good towards each other. This concern for others is a reflection of personal regard for ones own self, the idea from which respect and true affection rise. All members of the community are to relate as ‘brothers’. As they are involved in daily life together, they build respect, cooperation, generosity, honour and dignity into each other’s lives, and into the community. These values are handed down from the Ancestors through the stories that teach the ‘good ways’, and people learn these ways through participating together in life, and in their feasts, which ritually re-enact acceptable practices. Living these practices serves to maintain harmony in relations with nature, the environment, the living, and the dead.

Within the living community, life organises as clans through the father’s line (tenaaluu). Rather than tracing descent from a common human male ancestor, the clans appear to share a unified identity, descending from a common mythical ancestor. The community recognises special relational terms, and when addressing each other, they use the relational name. These names show how social interaction within a group is organised, reflecting local social behaviour and politics. They also specify certain obligations and privileges that exist between clans linked by marriage and other social ties. The community keeps harmony through choosing to honour these relationships and practices of reciprocal exchange. The practice of using a ‘Christian’ name, owned only by an individual, appears to be a legacy of colonisation.

This network of significant relationships creates and maintains itself through the exchange of wealth in the feast event. Brideprice is one such exchange. Kon kewoo (bride money, payment) is the term used for the goods which a man’s family and relatives give to the family and relatives of the woman he intends to marry. It is a form of exchange as on-going payment to the woman’s family for the services they will lose after their daughter’s marriage. Traditional bride-price consists of food and items of traditional wealth, and these payments start before the marriage and continue according to the number of children borne by the wife. The clan who receives vyan receives much
blessing (favour from the Ancestor), and the woman, for whom the vyan is exchanged, bears many children, a source of much wealth for the clan.

Exchange creates relationships. It symbolises the ‘brother’ relation, and provides a way of expressing the friendship which strengthens the bonds. Exchange is not payment for goods received, as in a consumer society. In the context of davii dapman, exchange is a reciprocal giving and receiving, based on family relations and entailed social obligations. An exchange usually creates an obligation on the part of the receiver to reciprocate a favour at some other time in the future. The counterflow does not aim to balance a previous gift in value, because if it is balanced, there is no need to continue to reciprocate, and the relationship would cease to be active. It works as a mechanism which allows a continuous flow of goods, services, peace and goodwill throughout the community.

Elang understands that actions are social, and that in their relationships, people need to consider the behaviour of agentic others. Honouring obligation, then, is the factor that facilitates thoughtful attention to living well with others. It is precisely this agentic quality of the living environment which prompts Elang’s story of the rivers. He understands life in a community where relationship with nature, the environment, the living and the dead form the basis of social and economic institutions, and these relationships are defined by equality, brotherly concern, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation and mutual respect. He knows an economics where resources are developed and wealth is produced for equitable distribution amongst the community. In this way, all members may be provided for in ways that make them free of need. It also means that members remain connected with each other, and community is built and strengthened in these dynamics. In the context of global economic consumerism, Elang and his clan enjoy no equitable exchange in relationship with OTML. All he can look forward to is continued damage to the river and the environment, with no compensation to ease his burden.

Elang ends his traditional story with a good outcome - the rivers are there and they give life, reinforcing the blessing of traditional custom. However, his narration of the effects of development on Ninggirum lives continues as grievance. The outcome of this story is not good. To the traditional mind, everything in life is sacred, because it all happened through the life power of the Ancestors. Now, the mountain is being mined and nephew is unable to fulfill his obligations. Uncle has been neglected. His blessing has been
withdrawn, and retribution is ensuing. Ninggirum people understand that much more than just the environment has been damaged by the mine’s activity. Elang’s message is clear. Ok Tedi lies there, a dying river, the story of a dying community.

Beneath the surface

But what of meaning that remains hidden?

Life in all its richness and abundance is a driving force behind the development of Ninggirum cultural institutions and systems. Ever since the Ancestors created the world, life has been played out in nature, the theatre in which culture has developed. In this theatre the Ancestors organised themselves into communal groups that were egalitarian, self sufficient and intimately connected to the land and its resources.

Elang’s performance of the river story shows that Ninggirum knowledge of the environment is created in communication between human society and nature. Birds communicate by their presence in the sky. They speak Ninggirum language when they call their own names. They tell the time of day by their calls and movement. They signal the season when they steal ripened fruit from the trees. They talk about the weather through their yearly migrations. They signal impending misfortune when they appear in the wrong place at the wrong time. In these ways, much information is passed on, like the right time to plant, to gather, and when the level of the river will rise.

These communications do much more than pass on information about natural events. They also provide information of social significance. There is belief held by Ninggirum people that if a wild pig comes to your bush house, she is telling you that someone will try to hurt you. You can ask her about it, and her spirit will tell you how to address the situation. So this communication serves as a warning to Ninggirum people. In the night, if the whistling of the lizard is heard, it is a sign that happiness will follow, and tomorrow is a good time to do enjoyable things. If, in a dream, a woman comes to the village, it indicates the opportunity to set traps for cassowaries. Thus, the laws that govern nature are also seen to guide human affairs.

This communication between nature and community works both ways. Ninggirum people use ritual practices and specific types of language to communicate their intentions and desires to the natural world, as when the double-eyed man goes to the snake and brings back vyan. Through such ideas, Ninggirum people know reciprocal
relations with nature. Nature is an endless source of information within myriad stories. And because of the social nature of living beings, life is performed through these stories, about people, plants and animals, living together, cooperating in the events of daily life, for the survival of the community.

It is precisely this reciprocal relationship between nature and human that gives life its meaning through the organisation of the Ninggirum community. The earth is full of knowledge about the way each of its parts contributes to the balance of the whole. Each animal and plant has a function that is intimately connected to another aspect of the environment. The ancestors knew these relationships, and have based their understanding of themselves on the lessons of the earth. Each living thing possesses a gift, a way of living in the total environment that allows it to fulfil its obligation to the larger order.

Take, for example, the crocodile. Its strong relationship with the environment, and dependence on the land for survival is the same for crocodile as for humans. As crocodile is threatened, so too are people. In today’s world, crocodile is painted as a fierce and bloody creature, a force to be conquered. But Ninggirum people know him differently. In a most obvious way, crocodile is an example of strength and supremacy, and those born into the family that takes his name are expected to understand his characteristics and ways. They use his knowledge of life and ways of being as a role model. Therefore, through the stories of their communications with nature, the Ancestors educate the succeeding generations. They outline the necessities for survival and social responsibilities.

But what happens when the water is gone, and there are no longer any crocodiles or fish in the river, or birds overhead, or game in the bush along the Ok Tedi? When the natural world grows quiet and conversations with the creatures cease, what does story become? When symbol loses its capacity to generate insight into the human condition and to address the dilemmas that people face, what can ritual represent?

In the face of environmental collapse, Elang is left with a sense that the rules governing the natural environment are no longer in effect. Uncle’s life power has gone. He is no longer present to provide for nephew and set the example of right living. In the broken relationship with the Ancestors, nephew is no longer provided for, and he has no one to teach him the right way to live. Now, nephew has the mine to provide for him and show him how to live. Uncle has withdrawn, and they do not know where he is.
The language of Elang’s stories reflects ways of thinking and being in the world that rise out of communication with the natural world. It shows me that nature is the vocabulary of Ninggirum stories, their ritual practices and sacred understandings. Because of the impact of the Ok Tedi mine, Ninggirum sacredness is in danger of becoming a dead language, lost to younger generations of Ninggirum people, and to global communities who could benefit from these ways of knowing and being in the world.
Chapter Eight – Space and time in Ninggirum thought

When we began work with the Ninggirum people more than two decades ago, the stories we collected were mainly local histories spoken in Ninggirum language, about everyday life, where it happened. When we were out and about, people loved to tell us where they went, who they were with, what they did, and how they did it. They would take us to a place, and we would explore it. We would sit in that space and talk, and they would story about their experiences, relived from vivid memory. That would trigger more memories, and more stories of many other things that happened in that place.

A walk in the bush was also a time when people would speak of deceased family members. They would show us where a loved one is buried, point out a tree he had planted, or where he had made a garden. So, memories of the deceased person are closely linked to the places where the events occurred. After a death, people sometimes refused to leave the village, afraid to go near the places where memories of the dead one continued to echo in the world of the living. Therefore, these stories refer to places metonymically. As a figure of speech, metonymy uses the name of one object or concept for that of another to which it is related, or is a part of. It enables the understanding of one part or aspect of an experience that stands for some other part (or the whole) of that experience. It does not assume separateness as does metaphor. When metaphor is used, two separate domains of experience are involved. It is based on similarity, where one thing is said to be like or as the other. Metonymy uses only one domain, relying on closeness of association in order to understand the meaning of the other object or concept. It is the other. It maintains the unity of the parts. Thus, by association, a place comes to represent important experiences in a person’s life.

During translation sessions, it was difficult to make sense of these early narratives. The stories do not form around a well developed, narrative subject, as English stories do. I kept looking for obvious subjects on which to focus meaning, and my mind wanted to order the events in chronological sequence. But in these texts, the events are described in relation to the places where they occurred, regardless of when, and in what order they occurred.

In 2009, I collected more contemporary life stories, and these texts show a definite shift in how Ninggirum people are representing their experience.
Ninggirum, others were spoken in Tok Pisin as the preferred language, and even presented in oral and written English. Some of these stories organised their accounts of the past in chronological sequence, as in Steven Katuk’s creation story. Others, for example, Matias’s lament (Chapter Ten), began by referring to place, then shifting abruptly to a chronological framework starting in the year 1984.

In this chapter, I am examining text in order to gain ontological understanding of how Ninggirum thought organises the space of the Ninggirum world. I am interacting with Steven Katuk’s written Ninggirum and oral English accounts of the central creation story. It is told from memory. Set in ancestral time, this story describes how Ninggirum world came into being and how Ninggirum people originated in their place. Through analysis of the structures of the stories and some grammatical features of language I will explore concepts of space and space/time conjunction to learn how they organise traditional life. I will analyse the stories performatively and explore story-lines to identify how these ideas of space and time facilitate change in lived experience.

Creation story

The written account

The following is Steven Katuk’s written Ninggirum representation of the creation story, ‘Our Ninggirum People’s History’ (2009).

_Nup Ninggirum tani amoo_


2. Ko be kwaen vimtura bya be ko avendiven. On be, bya kaami bya be, Kwang be, Byangallop be, Mong be, Holot be, Git be, Tuptup be, On kalabut be.


Veng dumino kalen mwim. Mwim di awotomo, byala kwanga, ona, ala, alima, inuva, monga, kaka be ben di awotomep, konet, kaluva, inum kwin inum kwino. Ahwaaman Ahwaaman be mo awotom. De duno Balap ok baenkwoo.

This is our very literal translation of the written text.

Long long ago there was no [planet] Earth [generic form: world, cosmos, universe, planet Earth]. So then there was only a crocodile staying, and that crocodile [Balap ok baenkwoo, a species of crocodile], he was Ahwaaman [rock] [plural subject], and that was his name. Crocodile and crocodile’s wife, that was a tortoise. Crocodile and tortoise gave birth to a child and that one was name stone [rock]. That rock was there and became many different kinds of rock. And that had other children, and they were jungle plants, and its name was nong giit [bush vine], and rock and vine gave birth to a tree, and it was a kektap [specific type of tree]. And from that came a kim, a single tree and tree leaves and bush type vines. And it was like that, different trees, grass and vines started growing and they had two children.

1. So that child, crocodile and tortoise, and they gave birth to different types of fish that are hidden in the water, and

2. birds, kaskas [tree kangaroos], pigs, cassowaries, wasps, flies, grasshoppers, butterflies.

3. And then they got two children, crocodile alimbelep [another species of crocodile] and tortoise, and those children, they got more children and that was bya mee, a species of frog.

4. And that woman child gave birth to a man and that was crocodile alimbelep and

5. they got two children, and their names were scorpion and centipede. And those children grew up and gave birth to people with tails. And those people became what we call Ninggirum man.
6. So the final word, *kalen mwim*, the source of animals, pigs, birds, trees, lizards, snakes, wasps, scorpions, they all came, but that is where people came from. *Ahwaaman* is the source. His name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*.

A very long time ago, when the world was being made, the creator was there. He is *Ahwaaman*. He is crocodile and his name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*. Female was there and she is tortoise. Together they bore a child who is rock. From rock came many other kinds of rocks, and rock had children who were the trees and plants.

Then rock became so as to make all fish and life that is hidden in the waters.

Then rock became so as to make all the animals that live on the land.

Then rock became *Amooman*, the human, who became so as to make people with tails, who became Ninggirum people as they are today.

So, *Ahwaaman* is the source of all life. His name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*, and that is where Ninggirum people come from.

*The oral account*

The following is a slightly edited transcription of Steven Katuk’s oral presentation of *Nup Ninggirum tani amoo* (2009), when he was processing his thoughts about the effects of development on Ninggirum life. He performed this version a few days after his written piece, as an amendment to his thinking. So this version represents what Steven wanted to tell me about the origin of his people, as he perceives the threat to his language and culture posed by global development.

History of our Ninggirum people.

Long long ago there was no Earth. The only thing that was there was a hard rock that covers all over the earth from the north, south, east and west. Just within that rock was *Ahwaaman* itself, so God was there, the rock itself was God. So this God in Ninggirum, He had His own name, this was *Balap Okbaenkwoo*. This *Ahwaaman* had a woman whose name was a Tortoise. From them the tortoise and *Ahwaaman* gave birth to the first son which was a stone itself. From this stone it generated all kinds of stones on the Earth, soft stones, strong stones and all kinds of stones was generated. When they saw that all the stones and rocks were nothing covered, they got an idea to make so that it is covered and hidden from it. So God himself *Ahwaaman* put an excretion and build them on the stones. So the excreta and urine became the Earth. Excreta itself became the soil covering the stones, and
the urine became the water, or oceans we have. So this covered all kinds of stones we have on the Earth. Then following that, the second stage they gave birth to all kinds of plants we have on the ground, trees, all kinds they gave birth to. And some of the plants were given birth in order, and this one can be pronounced in the Ninggirum tokples. So first generation of children was from the soil, and when that finished, in stage two they gave birth to all kinds of plants we have. Then when this is finished, then in stage three, they gave birth to two child and their name were, one was a crocodile and one was a tortoise. From these parents, crocodile and tortoise, they gave birth to all kinds of fish in the water. That was stage four. Then when that finished, all kinds of fish, that are hidden in the water, finished, then they gave birth to all kinds of animals on the land. From the birds, from cassowary, from all pigs, all kinds. When that finished in stage five, they gave birth to one child, and this was another tortoise. No, I come back again. When all the animals generation finished, then they gave birth to two children, that was a tortoise and a crocodile. From this tortoise and crocodile they gave birth to one child which was a frog. This was a frog. Then this frog got married to a crocodile. From this crocodile and the frog gave birth to two children that were centipedes and female and male of those two centipedes. In Ninggirum we call awom kaket kak miingaring. So from this centipede’s parents, parents of the centipedes, kak miingiring and kak avaen in Ninggirum [language], they gave birth to a human being which they have tails at the back. So this history comes up to the end now. From this people with tails is where the Ninggirum man came up to be a Ninggirum man today. So the name Ninggirum was taken from this parents kak miingiring and kak avaen, from the female of the centipede and male of the centipede. So we got the name in Ningirum, centipedes we call kak miingiring. So that’s how the Ninggirum man got the name, and that tribe’s name. To conclude, all the clans in the Ninggirum tribe have their own origins, from one one clan they have their own origins. Their origins can be told themselves that they come from a tree, they come from a fish, they come from a cassowary, they come from a centipede, they come from a stone, they come from a flying fox, they come from a bird, each clan will tell their origins from all these animals or plants. But for the whole Ninggirum tribe, was given, taken name because they were originated from these centipedes, male and female, but originally was from the Ahwaaman, and that is the stone. That’s the end of my story of Ninggirum history.

Imagine, if you can, the beginning of Ninggirum existence. There is no world, only space. It is Ahwaaman. Ahwaaman is kaa, all knowledge. Ahwaaman is kaong, the
power of life. He is God. His name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*. Energy, alive and active. Living energy taking form. *Ahwaaman* is *awotom*, the source of all life. *Ahwaaman* is rock, the foundation upon which life is built.

*Ahwaaman* is male and female. Male, his name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*, the crocodile. Female, she is *Balap ok baenkwoole kon*. Her name is *Awonkenam*, and she is tortoise. Together they gave birth to a son, who is stone (*boo*). It is the Universe. From the stone came all kinds of stones, the beginnings of all kinds of life that exist. So *Ahwaaman* is the knowledge and life power of the Universe. This is the first generation of life. But when the *Ahwaaman* saw that the stones were bare and exposed, they thought to cover them. They used their own body fluids to cover the rock. Their excreta (*oo*) became the soil, and their urine (*damun*) became the waters that cover the Earth. These are the events that describe how the Earth was made. So the Earth holds the knowledge and power of life, and it enables life to grow. These are the events of *Ahwaaman* appearing, the arrival of the children of the soil (*balapman*) in Ninggirum space.

Having made the Earth by covering rock with water and soil (*ok balavo*-water with (accomp.) soil), the *Ahwaaman* decide to make all kinds of plants, vines (*nong* (generic)), trees (*a* (generic)), and there are sets of stories which teach how each kind came into being, and the order in which they were made.

Then the creators shape-shift to become each type of fish, so that they could make all the creature that live inside the water. This generation made the children of the water.

Then they become each type of bird (*on* (generic)), animal (*bya* (generic)), and insect (*kuliip* (generic)) so they could make all the creatures that live on the land. Each of these creative acts opens yet more story lines that tell how the species of each kind came to be, and these are taught to the young men during their initiation activities and to the young women during their preparation times. These generations are the children who live on the land.

Then the crocodile and tortoise, together, made a frog. This is the first human.

From this human came Ninggirum man. This frog and another crocodile made two children, a centipede (male), and a scorpion (female). And from this union came humans with tails, who became the Ninggirum people who live today. These are the events of *Ahwaaman* becoming.
This is how the Ninggirum people got their name, from the centipede parents, *kak miingiring* (father centipede), and *kak avaen* (mother scorpion). The generations from *Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Awonkenam* through to the centipede parents mark the origins of the Ninggirum clans. Every time a new kind of life was made, each a phenomenon of nature, it became the father of yet more life. As progenitor, this father is the clan’s Ancestor. The plant, animal or other life forms through which the stories make him known, is the anthropomorphic representation of the clan. It is their secret identity.

While each clan has its own Ancestors and stories, these progenitors are brothers, and the intimacy of the ‘brother’ relationship shows how they are to live together in the land. Though each clan has a different origin story, they all agree that *Ahwaaman* is their source, the foundation of Ninggirum existence, and his name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*. Together they are the Ninggirum their emblem, and their name was given when the centipede parents named them into being. So this is an account of how the world began, and how all of life exists in and spreads out from *Ahwaaman*.

**Textual analysis**

There is much ambiguity across these English representations of the creation story, and it is difficult to keep track of the subjects of the sentences. This is usually clarified in Ninggirum language by the various markers, at the word, phrase and sentence levels of linguistic analysis. But most enlightenment comes from the logic of the language and the patterns it forms, that express ideas through the representations of the reality they construct. These representations then, find clearest meaning in the context of the time and space in which they were created. Thus, the same story in a different time and space, is able to present a different meaning of reality. So it is significant to contrast Steven’s written account and his oral presentation of the story.

The written account begins in the distant past, signalled by the words *ilin ilin* (a very long time ago). It gives a brief summary of the eras through which Ninggirum life emerged. Though the text uses the distant past tense marker *en* on the verbs, it concludes in the present, asserting the truth of the origin of the Ninggirum people. It assumes knowledge of the creation of the world which exists in the Ninggirum collective consciousness, focusing on the paths of the generations of the Ninggirum clans. It presents content in discrete paragraphs, reduced to the central propositions or the bare facts. Consequently, it does not convey the depth of meaning of the oral history.
The paragraphs are listed numerically, indicating that separate periods of time occurred in chronological sequence. Hence, this account represents the events of Ninggirum creation occurring in linear, incremental, progressive time.

The language of the earlier stories shows that notions of incremental time recognise intervals determined by the position of the sun and the phases of the moon. *Am hinee baon* refers to that time of the morning when it is just getting light. *Hintawon* refers to morning when the sun has risen. *Alon viip* is midday, when the sun is highest, followed by *amnyon* which is afternoon. *Amnyonyon* is evening, and *amgumdi* is the darkness of night. These intervals reflect spaces in which social activities occur, which are not dependent upon precise chronological measurement. Since temporal and seasonal distinctions are determined on the movement of celestial bodies, there is considerable chronological fluidity rather than fixedness.

In the counting system, temporal units are not given a numerical quantity because they indicate, rather than measure time. The monthly calendar organises around foods coming into season, rather than progressing numerically, quantitatively or cumulatively. Years are unnumbered, and the passing of days organises referentially. *Helok* is now (right this minute), *helon* is today, *tanula* is yesterday, and *hanaben* is the day-before-yesterday. Tomorrow is *duwen*, the day-after-tomorrow is *heneben*, and so on.

Sometimes people make a line of stones, or tie knots in a piece of vine, to indicate the number of days it will take them to harvest sago, and have it ready for an event. But these are relative, rather than absolute measures.

Given these understandings, the written format separates the events of the story, eliminating the connections between the eras. It leaves out much information that is vital to the meaning of the story. In linear logic, that which is omitted is irrelevant, redundant, too wordy or difficult to say. It has the effect of compressing reality into just one, concise idea, creating distortion and ambiguity where originally, there is none. This construction led me to consider the eras as separate, prerequisite realities, and to interpret the symbolism metaphorically. The linear format ties the events to time, sequencing them according to when they happened rather than where they happened. It marks a shift away from the spatial logic of the language, separating events from their places, hence lived experience from nature. These are factors which illustrate that much is lost in the act of orality becoming writing.
The oral story also begins in the distant past, ending in the present, with the assertion that Ahwaaman is the source of Ninggirum life. It discusses the eras of creation more fully. During transliteration, I had thought to break the text into paragraphs, following the sequencing of the written account. This structure had the effect of reinforcing my natural tendency to separate and sequence the events in linear time, blinkering my mind to the spatial and spatio-temporal patterns inherent in the language. The more I tried to make all the events fit neatly into a concise time line, the less sense I could make of the connections between them. Hence, for the purpose of analysis, the text remains one, long piece.

It is curious that in the oral account, Steven also refers to stages of creation by number. He closes the events of one stage before he moves into the events of the next, so the disconnected narrative signals separate eras of time. But he uses the discontinuous aspect to express the idea that the actions occurring within an era are completed. Therefore, the eras of creation are represented as separate, complete, and occurring in numerical sequence. I think this idea is better understood using an example from nature. The life cycle of a frog takes it through an ordered progression of stages over varying intervals of time. As it moves through the stages, it takes very different forms, yet they are each, frog. One stage must be completed before the next begins, but each is a part of the same event.

However, the language also indicates that the same event occurs in other eras, illustrated through the idea of crocodile and tortoise giving birth to different beings in different times. This indicates an arrangement of events in space, rather than in time. So the spatial organisation of the mythic (atemporal, discontinuous) events, signals the movement of creation across space and time. Though the story presents a preferred historical sequence, the events are not confined to that time. In a similar way, frogs continue to be present on the world because, as one generation dies, a new generation begins. But they must return to the same place, the water, before the cycle can begin again. So the focus is not on one particular frog, but on frogs that grow through the same process, in the same place, but at different times.

Even though the eras are separate, the language does not mark a point in time as the end of one, and the beginning of another. There is always movement across that zone and a phase through which one passes to become the next. Thus, discontinuity signals
liminality, the end of one cosmological era that heralds the start of a new historical epoch, just as a frog’s life cycles through different stages and forms.

The oral presentation uses head-tail linkage to show the connections between ideas and events, which signal this continuity and transition. Head-tail linkage is a literary device that connects ideas by duplicating the end of the previous sentence at the beginning of the next. This construction serves to make the relationships and associations visible, enabling the speaker to keep track of his subject, and hold his train of thought as he unfolds the detail of the story.

From this tortoise and crocodile they gave birth to one child which was a frog. This was a frog. Then this frog got married to a crocodile.

This is also a good example of the use of reduplication, a form of repetition that slows down the information rate, creating a space in which the performer can think. Here, he is able to assess the facts, focus on important issues, emphasise and reiterate certain points in the story. From here he can choose the direction in which he will take the story in order to develop his ideas. This formatting signals specificity and accuracy. It leaves no doubt in the hearer’s mind about meaning and intention. Ambiguity arises when the performer chooses to omit, leaving the audience to fill in the blanks. Reduplication is a form of mental mapping that facilitates the spatial ordering of events in place, rather than in chronological time.

The language also indicates that events unfold within an era and continue into the present. This is illustrated through the arrival of spirit beings or people in different cosmological spaces, and the concurrent formation or shaping of those zones that continues to act in the present. Therefore, time is atemporal and discontinuous in the epochs of the past where life is organised spatially. Space and time meet in the event trails where life continues in its cycles of renewal. Hence, the creation episodes occurred in space, and in this particular account, those actions have been given a preferred temporal order, but the effects of those actions continue for all time. Steven’s message is that life, here, began in this way, and Ninggirum people exist to enable it to continue.

In his oral presentation Steven says, ‘no, I come back again’. It appears from the flow of the text, that he is trying to mentally sequence the events, but he gets them out of order. This suggests confusion based on his temporal distance from the original events, and the
structure imposed by the numerical sequence of the ideas. Therefore, each of these changes in the use of language highlights the almost inevitable changes brought by literacy, education and language shift as worlds collide. Perhaps they also indicate a shift in the Ninggirum consciousness as their environment is deformed and stripped of its meaning. As pollution from the mine rearranges their material environment, memories tied to the landscape appear to be losing their moorings.

**Knowledge concerning space and time**

The following explanation comes out of what people have told me, and from my experience and knowledge of Ninggirum language and culture derived from field notes and language analysis materials. I am approaching the analysis of the stories spatially, trying to step outside the limits of chronological sequence. This has brought me face to face with the complexity of Ninggirum life and the need to peel back the layers to unfold the meanings of the story.

Ninggirum space is understood as *Ahwaaman*, the subject of the creation accounts. In the beginning *Ahwaaman* was there, the power of life, rock that filled space, north, south, east and west. *Ahwaaman* thought, and formed materially. Male and female, moon and sun. They made the sky and all that is there. They made the Earth and all that lives there. Living energy taking shape. This is *Ahwaaman* appearing. Living energy taking particular form. This is *Ahwaaman* becoming. Therefore, *Ahwaaman* is foundational to all the creation stories, but it is in the detail that the nature of meaning and relationship is expressed.

It is interesting to think about Steven’s use of the word, God. He seems to have no difficulty identifying God, in Ninggirum, as *Ahwaaman*, whose name is *Balap ok baenkwoo*. He gives no evidence of ontological conflict on this point. Whatever meaning is attributed to God by non-Ninggirum religion, God fits into Steven’s schema of truth and life according to his own ontological structure. This is perhaps a very significant form of resistance to religious colonisation by the various cultural expressions of non-Ninggirum, religious knowledges that exist in current Ninggirum life. I think this reflects an essentially pragmatic stance. If God exists, then he has to make sense in the context of everyday life. He must come through for them in daily need. *Ahwaaman* is the way that Steven understands the efficacy of the unseen in his life, so, God is *Ahwaaman* in Ninggirum. The emphasis here is not on who God is, but
on his place and contribution to life in the community. Though Steven is able to express this idea, there are many Ninggirum people who do not hold this perspective.

**Plurality**

*Ahwaaman* is multivalence, the quality or state of having many values, meanings, or appeals. The word, *Ahwaaman*, takes the singular form but refers to a plural subject, so they are many in number and form. Male and female, they are *kavep*, the essential life. More-than-human, they are *kuluu*, spirit. Human, they are *kuluu*, soul. Other-than-human, they are plant, animal, element. *Ahwaaman* is spirit and soul, the power of all life, *kaong*. In the spatial ordering, these ideas are understood metonymically. Therefore, while rock, plant and animal are distinctly different, they are not separate realities. Each is a part of the same whole, and each is an expression and experience of *Ahwaaman*.

**Kaong**

This term expresses the idea of Ninggirum space saturated with life because *Ahwaaman* is *kaong*, the knowledge and power of life. Nothing lives without *kaong*. It is present wherever there is life, and as long as something is living, it has *kaong*. *Kaong* is living, procreative, flowing energy that resides in the forms it brings to life, i.e. rock, mineral, water, air, soul, spirit, the human, the anthropomorphic, the zoomorphic. Thus, the world is alive because it is with *kaong*.

*Ahwaaman* is *kaa* – knowledge which is inextricably linked to *kaong*. From the knowledge came *amop* (law). *Ahwaaman* gave *amop* to guide the flow of *kaong* so that life would go well, according to the cosmological design. Therefore, the illegitimate or foolish use of *kaong* is an act against the design, breaking the law (*amop*). This draws disciplinary action and the consequences of a spoiled life. In conversation with Steven about this story, he told me that

> [a] knowledge is made because we are doing things, and the things that is existing around our environment. .... What exists in our environment, that makes people collect their knowledge, so what we do, is the knowledge. … *kaa kii* is getting wide knowledge, *kep kaa kii* is getting specific knowledge, *kaa kii dowam* is missing knowledge.
Knowledge (*kaa*) is in the environment, and knowledge is in the body (*kaa*). So, Ninggirum people learn through the environment and their bodies. They learn as they go about the activities of daily life in their place. When knowledge is incomplete, the flow of *kaong* becomes disturbed. It is a sign of imbalance in the exchanges between the spaces of the cosmos. It means that the missing knowledge must be found in order to restore the balance of life. So space discloses being, meaning, and truth. Ninggirum people know the world is real because they can see, hear, smell, taste and touch it. They know it is true because they are in it. Therefore knowledge is embodied in nature and flesh.

**Ok**

While *kaong* is about to the power and knowledge of life, *ok* points to its generative potency. It is concerned with the many and various ways in which this knowledge and power is efficaciously engaged. *Ok* incorporates the idea of fertility, fruitfulness and increasing the capacity of life to be good. Its chief concern is growth, the evidence of its successful use and dissemination. It is signified in the various capabilities of powerful persons and personified animate/inanimate things (i.e. ceremonial objects) to successfully invoke various kinds of transformative forces that lie inherent in the living world. It is present wherever there is life, growth, development and success.

In the natural world, *ok* refers to soft substances like fluids and vapours, characterised by the substance, water. It is the notion of the fluid movement of *kaong* across and throughout the creation. In this usage, the word *ok* is accompanied by a supporting word which specifies its type. For example, *oka kana* is garden magic.

/ **t** okakana  
/ **m** oka – kana  
/ **g** water – fluid movement through the elements – sweet taste  
/ **ft** blessing carried by wind, rain and water which increases the growth and sweetness/goodness of life

It translates as water, sweet taste. It means fluid that has power to produce abundantly and to satisfy. It conveys ideas of fertility and blessing carried by wind, rain and water, which increase the growth and goodness of food. It is concerned with the continual flow of *kaong* doing its good work. Therefore *ok* is the means by which the generative power of life circulates or is distributed in the direction that makes life good.
Oka nat refers to the act of manipulating kaong to harness power. It is the ritual knowledge used by a person to extend kaong towards the environment, to effect a desired change, (e.g. rain-making). It also directs a person’s kaong through the environment towards other persons, (e.g. through love magic and sorcery). In this sense, ok is the successful use of knowledge that evokes and directs the transforming powers of the living world. It is a means by which the flow of life is turned towards the good, or the not good, for those towards whom it is directed. Hence, it may be used to deliver blessing, discipline or retribution.

In order to effect the rituals that elicit this productivity, specific knowledge encoded in specific language, i.e. formulas, chants and spells, is used to invoke the kaong of a ceremonial object, the basic material component of this technology. These ceremonial objects are vyan, the sacred objects of the Ninggirum clans, used to invoke the transforming forces of the living world. Therefore, a powerful person is not necessarily one who holds great knowledge or wealth, but someone who knows how to elicit ok, and use it skilfully and respectfully in the natural and social environments. I think these ideas form an underlying notion of the power of the double-eyed man.

Body fluids

When the creators created, they named the world into being with constitutive power - kaong. They spoke their thoughts, and their knowledge became real in the material world. In this story, the name of Ahwaaman is Balap ok baenkwoo.

The name Balap ok baenkwoo refers to the foundation of life. Balap ok baenkwoo is awotom – cause, origin, source of strength, the foundation. Therefore, Balap ok baenkwoo is the notion of a rock around which the world is built, as bones are the frame that supports the body. The use of the word bone carries the idea of solidarity, a central core. It is fixed and permanent reality. And this idea strongly associates with life, growth and maleness. Balap ok baenkwoole kon is the feminine accompaniment, carrying the idea of the soft flesh which surrounds the bones. It is the lived world of experience, fertile with change, carrying strong associations with depletion and decay.
In this cosmological schema, there is life and death, male and female, and these truths are immutable.

These ideas imply the emergence of the physical environment from the mythic reality. In the act of covering the bare rock, the Ahwaaman used their own body substances. Faeces became soil, stones, rock and mountain. Urine became river, rain, swamp, all the waters that cover the Earth. In this way, the physical world was created. The word for ground, balap, is associated with maleness, and the word for water, ok, is associated with femaleness. Therefore, male and female are concepts through which kaong is known to produce and nourish life on the Earth.

As the Earth is formed by body substances, the formation of animal and human life is imagined in the same way. A child is made when male sexual fluids collect together with female sexual fluids. It is believed that semen constitutes the lymphatic system and the inner life, kavep, and vaginal fluids and menstrual blood constitute the blood and the outer body, eekaa. Together, these make the body of the child. Though the fluids are in the child’s body, they still belong to the mother and the father. Therefore those fluids exist as parts of, but outside and separate from, the maternal and paternal bodies. By association then, male fluids constitute and transmit the life, enveloped by female fluids which constitute the body. Thus, a child’s body is formed from the mother, and its life from the father, in the same way that the Earth is formed from the ground and water.

Male and female

Male and female is situated within non-dual space and cyclical time. Thus one not only implies, but becomes the other, making the opposites mutable. This idea is best illustrated through the life of kuliip om, the sago insect. The adult Capricorn beetle lays hundreds of eggs on the new growth of the sago palm. Though rationalist science would classify the adult beetle as female, Ninggirum science understands the beetle as male. The eggs hatch into white larvae that burrow inside the sago tree, feeding on the soft, internal fibres. After a month, the soft, plump larvae begin their pupation, leaving the tree to form cocoons from the dead leaves at its base. The creatures at these stages are referred to in the feminine form. After another month, the larvae have changed, and they emerge from the cocoons as pupae that grow into adult beetles. The life of the sago insect encompasses the opposing cultural principles of maleness and femaleness. Analysis of language shows the beetle as male, and the larva, female. It cycles through a
process in which male becomes female becomes male. One implies the other, and one becomes the other. Through the transition, the same life undergoes both maleness and femaleness. Therefore, depletion is a precondition for growth, just as death is a precondition for life.

In the same way, a boy becomes a man during initiation ritual. The child, regardless of its genitalia, begins as male, because its life force transmits from the father’s male fluids. However it is female because its body comes from the mother’s body fluids, and is sustained by her breast milk. As the child grows, the person is formed according to what s/he contributes to the social world.

At the onset of puberty, gender is determined as either male or female. Girls are recognised as women, with the appearance of menstrual blood. A girl undergoes preparation and training which affirms her orientation and contribution to society. She is now able to add to the social world by supplying the necessary body fluids which can make a child and nourish it. Boys at this stage, still considered female, undergo preparation and training which changes their orientation. Through the ritual use of male body fluids, the young boys are birthed as male. This marks the time when they are able to marry, procreate, and take their place in the adult world of men. In this idea, a man transitions from female to male.

**Community**

*Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Balap ok baenkwoole kon* made the Earth with their body substances, and everything they created is a part of them. Hence plurality, the parts of the whole existing separately, is a basic principle of life in Ninggirum society. This is the central notion of the clan structure, the image of the specific Ancestors, *Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Awonkenam*, who created the social world as they mapped their lives across the landscape. It records the patterns of dispersal of humans throughout the land, and shows how families are organised along patriarchal lines. It relates people according to the *kavep* (life) inside the blood. Children, male and female, carry the same *kavep* if they have the same father, so they are considered to have the same blood. These ideas offer a way of understanding of creation of the world and the procreation of life in Ninggirum thought. Therefore *Ahwaaman* (*Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Balap ok baenkwoole kon*) appears as *Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Awonkenam*, the becoming of the Earth.
These are all ways in which *ok* may be understood to distribute and circulate *kaong* according to the ontological design. As long as *kaong* flows in these ways, life for Ninggirum people is good. However, when *ok* is abused, it is believed that the flow of *kaong* reverses, causing life to move away from abundance, towards depletion. So *ok* shows ways in which the power and knowledge of life appears, moves and acts in the world.

**Social spaces**

In the course of conversation with Domki at Ningerum Station in 2009, I learned that he understands the world as a human heart, made up of three interrelated spaces embedded in a web of interactions that people have with their environment. There is the lived world of human experience, filled with things of everyday life that can be seen and touched. Trees, animals and humans live in the environment, and they are the life of the ground (*balap*). There is the space above, inhabited by the spectral beings who live in the sky (*awii*) above the trees, separate from the human world, yet a part of the same space. I have heard of a feast that is held between the cloud base and the tops of the trees, but generally people are silent about this space.

People who know how to make the feast, have power to make rope ladder that goes up to where the feast place is. They climb the ladder and take it up with them and nobody can see them or anything to do with the feast from the ground. So they set a time for the feast and people who have the power for the feast all know to come. So they all come, all climb up their ladders, and have the feast. This feast happened traditionally, but it doesn’t happen any more, because nobody has the power any more (Kalup mwim, 2009).

There is also the space below (*dumko*) that envelops, threads and dots its way through the same space as that of the lived world. It is inhabited by all kinds of spirit beings, and is present in the same space that people inhabit. It exists like an invisible, mirror world layered across and beneath the lived world of human experience. It also encompasses the idea of *Bii wongo*, the place of the dead spirit people. So this reference to space entails the idea of a spatial span disclosed in notions of middle, above and below. It invokes the image of a physical environment for the living, a place for the spirit people, and a place for the Ancestors and nature spirits, all of whom interact in the social world. Thus, Ninggirum thought recognises interactive spaces according to their relationship with the physical environment.
From these understandings, social life dances, simultaneously, in a cyclical flow of interaction between the different social spaces. *Dong* refers to the space of the garden, and *uda* refers to space deep inside the bush. These are places where the natural environment collapses into a social space, through the particular language and images used to represent the relationships that transform the space. For example, when cicada calls in the late afternoon, she tells people that it is time to go home for the night. So, from deep within the bush, the sound indicates the sun’s position, forming associations and relationships through which people know that the Ancestors are calling them home to safety.

There is social space enclosed within social space, as in the secret feast, *elaa*, that happens in the space above, or in the notion of *bon*, spaces existing as feast places, ceremonial grounds or clan territories enclosed within a village territory. These are the social spaces of the spirits – thought that exists as *kuluu* (spirits (generic form)), specific types that inhabit particular places. While the spirits influence events among the living, people can only enter the spirit places by means of the ceremonial performance of ritual knowledge.

*On kon* is the term used of spirit women, and *on man* is spirit men who live *ahin* – in the top of a particular tree. *Oniima* are the spirit women who turn into animal form in order to seduce young boys and men, while *kaabiit* and *tuan* refer to spirits who harm others. These harmful spirits inhabit the space above and influence the natural world through negativity and fear.

*Masalai* refers to nature spirits who live in water, trees and mountains. *Tok* refers to clan spirit, and *homon kuluu*, referring to the souls residing in *Bii wongo*, are also understood as the Ancestors who, although dead, still reside among the living. They are the forefathers who care for and protect the living community, e.g. the frog who whispers in the night, warning of impending danger. Embodied in the spatio-temporality of the material world, these thoughts exist as spirit in the lived world.

**Renewal of life**

These ideas extend further in the understandings of life and death, through the imagery of the children of the soil. The story tells that the first generation of life was from the soil, and the word used is *balapman* (soil, all people, the people of the ground). This is the meaning of *kavep* (life).
Kavep encapsulates the idea that life happens just as a new, green shoot comes up from the soil. It grows where it is planted, matures, dies, and goes back to the soil to return as another of itself. This is how the land yields life. Therefore, Ahwaaman is the cycle of life and death, the renewal of life.

This is also the idea of Amooman, the Ahwaaman becoming human. When the Ahwaaman emerged from Bii wongo, spirit became material. They made their appearance as Balap ok baenkwoo and Awonkenam, the First Ancestors. These are the people of history. They also appear in nature as crocodile and tortoise, and they appear as Amooman, the First people. They are the culture heroes who mapped their lives across the landscape, shaping the living environment as they inhabited it, learning its secrets and its ways.

The appearance of the First people in the physical world is the event through which time met space, and changed the direction of life. With the appearance of the human, death came amongst the living, changing the ways in which life occurred. Arriving into the beginning of a backward period as the previous forward period closes, the Amooman are the survivors, the changed ones, the new culture heroes who make their way across the land, establishing life in the new age. They are the clan Ancestors, the forefathers of the Ninggirum people who live today. I think this is another way in which the double-eyed man is understood.

These notions translate into patterns of space and time known through human personhood, and how it orients Ninggirum people in their world. The person has a physical body (eekaa) which can be seen, and is able to act. A person has a kavep (his or her essential life). A person has kuluu (a soul), and kuluu (spirit known as a shadow). This is the shape of the person that can be seen on the ground when the sun is shining. It is believed that the shadow leaves the body when it is asleep, and if it does not return before the body awakes, the person will become sick and die. This is kaabiit, the troubled or haunted spirit who is not able to make the journey to the place of the dead. Trapped between the ground and the sky, it is the unhappy spirit that roams the space above, hurting people in the lived world. It is fraught with negative energy because, in
the space above, it has no means of renewal by which it may transition back into the lived world.

After a body dies and is committed to the ground, the soul separates from the corpse as homon kulu (dead person spirit), and makes its journey downwards, to Bii wongo. Here, through ritual feast, homon kulu becomes fully integrated with the Earth. This is davii dap, the philosophy of Ninggirum life. Homon kulu stays in Bii wongo, celebrating and feasting, awaiting the time when it will be called back into the physical world, as the kavep of a new child. This is how Ninggirum people understand that life is renewed. Kavep moves in cycles from the lived world to the space below, back into the lived world as a new form of itself. Therefore, death is a precondition for life, just as life is a precondition for death.

For those in the lived world, feast is the celebration of life. As long as the Ancestors in Bii wongo continue to sing, dance, and eat the feast, there will be davii dap in the lived world. However in troubled times, the motion of the creation reverses, bringing great and severe change. At such times many species of animals are destroyed, along with the majority of the people. Then feasting in Bii wongo ceases, and the blessing of the Ancestors is withdrawn from the lived world. Instead of life spreading out in all its abundance across the landscape, it recedes towards the space above. With Ahwaaman no longer guiding the creation, the world is left on its own. Following its own fate and innate desires, the flow of life turns in the opposite direction. When the creation is being guided by Ahwaaman, it moves forward, and life is good. When it is left to itself, it moves backwards through time, and life becomes less good. Therefore, this disruption of time marks the end of an era, and the start of a new historical epoch.

In this socio-cosmic vision of the universe there is no dichotomy, only one cosmos that must be comprehended in its totality. It is within the different contexts and complexities of interactions that the conjunction of Ninggirum space and time becomes apparent. Therefore, there are many sources from which life emanates in space and time. These are also points of social connection between middle, above and below. They are powerful with kaong, giving life its continuity as kavep traverses these regions.

Referentiality

Ahwaaman is point of reference. The space that one occupies is the centre, and life emanates in all directions from that point. From the centre (awotom), life flows up from
here to there, and it flows down from there to here (*alivo*). It also flows down from here to there, and it flows up from there to here (*ngwere*). This is the understanding of up and down, to and from, towards and away, forming the spatial patterns of upper and lower, where upper equates with west, and lower equates with east. This is the pattern of distribution of the clans in the upper and lower regions of Ninggirum land – the Upper and the Lower Ninggirum. Therefore, *Ahwaaman* shows Ninggirum people where they are.

Direction is also derived from the image of a tree (*a*). *Akim* translates as log, the middle part of the trunk or the trunk itself, and it refers to the main body of an elongated object. *Intip* refers to the top of any tall object, such as the tip of a tree or mountain, or the highest part. *Awotom* also refers to the source or base, as in the foot of a tree. Therefore, *intip* connects with *awotom* by *akim*. It is the distance between two points. It is understood as the length of a road, the distance between here and there.

*Intip* also refers to the highest or purest expression of an idea, such as truth, beauty, creativity. In this sense it carries the idea of appreciation. It is also the highest authority, the final word. In this sense, it appeals to *amop*, the law for moral guidelines of ethical behaviour. Therefore, *Ahwaaman* is the source, whose ways lead to *Ahwaaman*, the highest expression of Ninggirum life. *Ahwaaman* shows Ninggirum people how to find their way in their world, and they can never be lost here.

The body is also a site of referentiality which emotionally orients Ninggirum people in their world. The three cardinal points of the body are the eyes, intestines, and penis/clitoris with its associated semen/vaginal fluid. The eyes (*kyop*) are the source of emotion, the basis of desire or cause of passion. From the eyes, emotion is carried to the thinking (*hopkonii*), by means of a duct or vine. From there, it spreads all over the body to the belly, arms, legs, finally concentrating in the intestines (*oo*). It continues along a narrow vine which leads from the stomach directly to the bladder, through the genital organs, out of the body.

The intestines (*oo*) are the main or middle part or trunk of the body system. From there, other vines lead to the penis/clitoris, and the tip or point of the whole system, the eye. So when the eyes see an object of desire, they ‘wake up’ by communicating the impulse to the intestines, which transmit it to the penis/clitoris resulting in erection or non erection. Hence, the eyes are the primary motivator of all emotion/desire/sexual excitement for men and for women. This way of thinking underlies a quality of life
which incorporates body, thought, emotion and sexuality into person-hood (identity), within the totality of life. The imagery does not separate emotion from thinking. It situates both faculties within the body, inside the natural world. Therefore, emotion is not separated from thinking, emotion and thinking are not separated from the body, and the body is not separated from nature - thus presenting an holistic logic in which the faculties are not compartmentalised.

These notions of body and sexuality translate into patterns of space and time. As Balap ok baenkwoo and Balap ok baenkwoole kon, they describe space in which west, upward and forward equate with maleness, and east, downward and backward equate with femaleness. With reference to time, the upward direction indicates the forward movement of time, and the downward direction indicates the backward movement of time. Hence, when kaong is in forward motion, it flows up to growth, strength, abundant life, and satisfying, balanced living, and these ideas associate with maleness. When major change occurs, the balance of life is disturbed. It turns kaong in a backward motion, flowing down to depletion, decay and death, ideas which associate with femaleness.

In terms of the human body, the front (mouth, eyes, ears) is male, denoting west, while the anus is female, and east. Tall, long, narrow, and straight associate with maleness, corresponding to the shape of the penis. Short, round, thick, and wide are decidedly female, associating with the shape of the vulva. Texture also follows these ideas, where stiff and hard associate with maleness and soft and furry associate with femaleness.

These ideas also form a gendered division of space along an upstream and downstream axis. The male source of the river is associated with vyan, the ceremonial belt made of pearl shells, that moves from clan to clan in a downstream or female direction, during exchanges of women in marriage. This movement of vyan signals when, and with whom clan marriage arrangements can be made. There is also a gendered division in temporality that manifests in two directions, signified by the migration patterns of fish. Upstream moves towards masculine life and sociality, and downstream moves towards feminine decay and death. These concepts demonstrate that Ninggirum spatio-temporality is embodied space and time.
Time

Just as Ahwaaman orders Ninggirum space, time is ordered around Ahwaaman, the point of reference that marks the world’s beginning. Time moves in multivalent cycles following the movements of the moon and the sun. As space is known according to the web of relations it inheres, time is also understood in the context of the relationship it has with some form of practical, everyday activity, like hunting, fishing and gardening. In the lived world, time is all about the present moment and the things that are happening in a place. In this sense, time is tied to the space and the events in which experience occurs.

The language shows how time moves from the speaker, who is in the present moment, according to the time words or the tense and aspect markers attached to a verb. The forms of the verb refer to things that happened sometime today, yesterday, a few days ago, back a few years, and before that. They refer to the present in terms of what is happening now, and what one hopes to do very soon, sometime today, tomorrow, in a few days or after that. The present is continuous and intentional, and it is the only interval in which anything can be anywhere near certain. Even then, nothing is certain until it happens, because something is never finished until the action is completed. Nothing is real until it appears, where and when it can be seen and known. In this sense, always, the future is not definite, and not real, because it has not happened yet.

Time is gendered according to an understanding of the sun as female and the moon as male. The dry season, the time when the sun is hot and strong and there is less rain, associates with femaleness. The wet season, when it pours rain day and night, and the sun is not seen for weeks at a time, associates with maleness. Therefore, the garden work of the day associates with the female, and the hunting of nocturnal creatures, and ceremonial activities of the night, associate with the male. In the embodied sense, hot and sticky associates with femaleness and cold and smooth associates with maleness. Outside the practicalities of life, the notion of time is somewhat vague and empty.

While the lived world depends on continuous time and the uncertainties of eventually, the place below expresses different characteristics of time. It is both timeless and every time. In the mythic world of the Ancestors, the waves of creation began. As a repository of time and of death, it is where ancestral knowledge, truth and history are accumulated. It is the source from which the waves of reality mount and break within the lived world,
and when spent, recede to the space below. Therefore, life in *Bii wongo* is the pattern, held in the collective memory, waiting to become reality in the lived.

The reality that the creation stories constructs finds its meaning in the context of space and time that is expressed through the language of *Ahwaaman*. *Ahwaaman* organises Ninggirum life according to the movement of living energy, shaped by time, into the patterns which form the Universe and its unlimited varieties of life. It is the language of *Ahwaaman* which thought and named the world into being. Therefore, *Ahwaaman* is the thought around which nature appears, and upon which sociality rests.

The organisation of space is inextricably linked to the act of becoming, which connects ontological reality with materiality and sociality. Becoming implies the notion of transience, a smooth passage into the next thing. It is *kaong*, the knowledge and power of life that transitions from the space below, into lived experience. Therefore ontological knowledge becomes reality in the material world as land, human, plant and animal interact in the social world.

The oral story represents the history of the Ninggirum people in a series of cycles of time, in which similar events occur in the same place. The language uses the distant past to indicate that the events of history occurred a long time before the lived experience of the current generation. It uses the discontinuous aspect to differentiate the events of history by time. This signals that the events of an era have been completed, and have become real, therefore they are true. The language also uses the continuous aspect when discussing the events occurring within an era. This signals that the activities of the actors occurred in Ninggirum space, during that period of time, and those actions continue into, and affect life in the present. It also signals that the details of the events of an era may be recalled and represented differently, but still be true in the collective memory. Therefore, Ninggirum life happens within the conjunction of space and time.

The spatio-temporal ordering of the eras shows that the events of each one occur in the same place, at the same time, and at different times. Ninggirum spatiality organises the cosmos into regions which approximate to middle, upper and lower. These spaces are characterised by the types of life that exist there, and by the time in which these forms appeared within that space. Hence, these zones are known, socially, by the era of the creatures who appeared in them, and shaped life there. In time, life occurs in these zones simultaneously. Each zone is inhabited by its particular forms of life which interact within their zone, and with other life across the zones. Life also moves through the
zones by transitioning from life as it is here, into life as it is there. Life in one space depends on charitable, hospitable, equitable and just relations with life in the other spaces, to keep balance and harmony in the spatio-temporal world. Therefore, change happens over time, as life transitions through its stages, and zones.

I think that the most basic understanding of change lies in the cycle through which life renews itself. A life begins, grows, and matures. It decays, dies and is renewed as a new creature of its own kind. Therefore, when the forms of life inside their zones follow their regular cycle, all of life is continuous and abundant. When life is synchronised across all zones, all of life is balanced and harmonious. When life cycles through the zones, eventually returning to its own zone as new life, all of life renews. Therefore, when life successfully transitions through these cycles, all of life renews in all spaces and times. Then life is good. But sometimes, a catastrophe occurs that disturbs the cycle, turning life along a path of destruction, leading into spaces where life is unable to renew.

I think that Ninggirum people envision their lives through events in motion, attached to the landscape. Memories of the past are linked together like camp sites along a track, organised by physical proximity rather than chronological order. And people can revisit these places, enter their memories, and even make new ones, in their search for meaning in the present. Thus, the social world exists and functions in spatio-temporal reality.

While the lived world exists in present time, the space beneath the surface exists in no time, any time and all times. Therefore, cultural creation stories need to be interpreted from the spatial and temporal understandings of the culture, within the spatio-temporal organisation of thought as it defines cultural reality.

Through the organisation of its ideas into chronological, numerical order, the written account constructs a representation that, to my mind, reflects Western economic concepts of space and time. Linear chronology arranges reality so that life happens in separate increments of time in a straight line. It divides the spaces and positions them successively, where one is prerequisite to the next. It then attaches value to the increment, according to its capacity for production towards satisfying society’s needs and wants. In this paradigm, life is tied to one-directional time, for the purpose of economic production for unlimited consumption. It is assumed that the more we accumulate, the further we progress towards our ultimate goal of a good quality life. Therefore, the disconnectedness of life steadily and continuously grinds along,
relentlessly consuming everything in its path, to keep it in the manner to which it is becoming accustomed.

The effect on traditional life of organising ideas into chronological, numerical order is to rearrange reality. Space is reorganised according to time instead of place, thus ‘othering’ spatio-temporal sociality. Because the link between increments in time is causal and conditional, it abstracts by separating ontological thought from material reality. By omitting the connections between nature and sociality, life becomes demythologised. The cycles of history are reduced to a disconnected abstraction of unrelated events, removed from the lived world. The basis of truth is removed from experience of nature to conceptual reality. Instead of interacting within nature, the human is contained in thought floating above, looking down at nature’s potential for production.

Because chronological ordering separates space and time, the loss of social connection with nature effectively reduces metonymy to metaphor, the comparing of separate realities. This way of thinking separates human from nature, human from every other being, and ideas of self become distorted. By separating person-hood from nature, a person ceases to know where they are, how they are and who they are. Cardinal reference is lost, along with the ability to make sense of life in their world. The self loses dividuality, the communal identity through which it knows life in the social world as same, other and another. Limited to the space within its own skin, self becomes individual, reduced to the dyad of binary opposition. Separating person from nature also separates person from body. This dissolves the connections with nature by which Ninggirum person is gendered. When the body loses gender definition, person becomes de-sexualised, and alienated from communal identity.

This shows the tendency of Western economic thought to homogenise traditional space by collapsing the cosmological zones and social spaces into one, functional stratum of time that imprisons both nature and the person, inside impotent, infertile, self-consuming space. I think Ninggirum people’s experience of this space might be something like kaabiit, trapped in the space of endless death where the possibility of renewal through the continuous cycling of nature is eliminated.

To my mind, the incidence of past events being organised by abstract chronologies points to a growing separation of the Ninggirum natural and social worlds, once conjoined in their shared use of the landscape. The separation of time and space divides
experience from landscape, placing new emphasis on the ontological differences between people and nature. The change marks ontological and epistemological shifts from orality with its spatial and spatio-temporal organisation of ideas, to Western literariness that emphasises the writing of ideas in a chronological, linear order.

In the following chapters, I will examine the main stories that address change, to discover the significance of the lament and feast in Ninggirum development. I will do this by tracing storylines that show the impact of this shift from traditional to progressive development.
Chapter Nine – Lament

A long time ago, our people discovered the secret of life – live well, love well, have something good for every person and die a happy death (Narokobi, 1983, p. 13).

The accounts of the history of the Ninggirum people, as given by Ninggirum themselves, have taught me that Ninggirum sociality exists in the orality of spatio-temporal thought, the foundation of Ninggirum reality. It thrives when interaction within and between their known social spaces is cooperative and harmonious. Through these accounts, I have identified four major aspects of sociality, characterised by the beings who appeared in Ninggirum space and shaped life there. In earliest times, the children of *Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Balap ok baenkoole kon* appeared in thought, as the beings who dispersed and embodied various aspects of the natural environment, such as rain, wind, water, stones. They are the Ancestors who still inhabit these natural phenomena today. They bless those who honour the life/spirit of the land, and punish those who offend. They are the guardians of mythic sociality who are both feared and highly respected.

Another time is characterised by the emergence of the natural world from the mythic world, and the arrival of the spectral creatures who live there. These are the hosts of good and bad spirits who intervene in the daily affairs of the lived world.

Yet another time is characterised by the appearance in the natural world of the more-than-human and individually named Ancestors, the *Amooman*. These are the children of the first beings, *Balap ok baenkwoo* and *Awonkenam*. They are the Ancestors, the fathers of the Ninggirum people, some of whom are responsible for the emergence of such things as yams, sago, pigs, and gardens, into the cultural environment. They are remembered for having successfully negotiated the orderly distribution of people across the land. It is they who instigated the range of practices, institutions and laws which aim to establish and maintain social and cosmological balance.

Though the creation accounts do not say it directly, the shift towards linear, chronological representation of origin stories and contemporary experience may indicate a new epoch. This is the most recent of times, known through the arrival of white skinned people and foreigners in the lived world. While the appearance and
impact of these people pre-dates the establishment of the mine, recent contemporary stories name the year 1984 as the beginning of a time of great change for Ninggirum people.

In this and the following chapter, I will examine a group of stories that address change in sociality, to learn the cultural significance of lament and feast in Ninggirum development. I will do this by tracing storylines that show the impact of the shift from traditional to progressive development.

**It’s all changed**

I am sitting on the verandah of Joe’s house eating juicy pineapple, watching a canoe ferry passengers across the river. The air is still, and the heat, stifling. As I look at the Ok Tedi, I cannot locate places where we once swam, or set fish traps. I cannot recognise the shady places where we built a fire and ate our catch. Where tall trees once stood there are only ghostly, twisted trunks, and the swamp where Sarah, Erin and I first saw the ladies beating sago has now dried up and filled with sand.

In the distance I can hear the roar of a truck convoy, PMVs and other vehicles along the highway.

As the rumble subsides, my attention is captured by the sound of singing drifting across the river from the bush beyond. It is solitary, masculine, and sad, and I can not make out the words. Sound penetrating my body, resting on my heart, bringing tears to my eyes. Low groans and sighs, beckoning across space and time, calling me into a moment, joined with the creation in mourning, clinging together, the hope of comfort. Maybe someone has died. But in deeper knowing, the pain has no end.

Another truck roars along the highway scattering the Universe’s tears. It thrusts me back into now. Connection shattered, hallowedness eluded, I wonder what was in that moment when I heard nature’s grief.

That evening, around the fire, I ask about the singing, and people tell these stories:

Elang Matias spoke in Tok Pisin, which I have translated into English.

I want to tell you story about an ancestor. It’s about how all food and greens came to us. Whoever created those, they began with him. I will story about it.
A long, long time ago, there were only a few men, only they weren’t humans like us, they were half man and half spirit [Ahwaaman, Amooman]. Masalai man, they existed then. So, in this time, they looked at life and they turned their attention to getting food, like cutting sago and making garden. Before, the gardens weren’t true [physical] gardens, they were symbolic [spiritual], that’s all. So they planted greens, sweet potato, taro, this kind of thing, and they grew. They were happy with what they did, and saw that it was good. They were happy, and the plants grew happily. Then later, this spirit man who made all the plants we can eat, one day, he went [to another place] to build a house, and after he had finished it, he slept. He had planted banana, taro and all kinds of things, and they were there [planted].

Later, in the night, he was asleep, but he woke up because he needed to urinate. So he got up, and when he looked, he saw that he was urinating on the plants and all the urine was running down the banana leaves and taro leaves. When he realised, he laughed out loud and shouted, ‘iiiii!’ The plants grew well. They came up big and strong, and they were happy. Later, the spirit man, he was whistling, ‘whiiuu’, and the next thing he knew, he couldn’t see the ground any more. The garden was growing. It grew and grew until the whistling stopped, and there was only a little patch of ground left. So the garden was happy and it grew well. So that’s how it started, and that’s how it happens, from the time of our ancestors to our father’s time, and now we do it like that. So, how do we do it? We cut the trees and clear the bush, cut the plants and plant them, and just as our ancestors and fathers had good, big, healthy gardens, we will, too. So we put the shoots in, they grow well and our garden is healthy and happy. That’s the end of my origin story.

But since 1984, that’s right, the effects of the mine have interfered with our food gardens and now they don’t grow good. Our gardens are not healthy and happy, something has caused them to dry up and shrivel, and they don’t grow well any more. Us too, people too, it’s the same with us. We plant the taro and eat its fruit, but now we must remember that poison is inside this food, and we eat it, and it goes inside our bodies and stays with us. It’s the same with our water. We drink this water with poison in it. So we see also that, sometimes we get sick, all people, because our place is not good.

So the story of the garden, how it grows food and taro etc., and how we make it, before it was good, now it’s no good. Now, when we prepare the ground and plant the plants, some things will die and some things will grow a little and give us some food that we can eat. But now our gardens are not healthy and thriving, they barely grow. Sometimes making garden is just plain hard work when we plant banana,
sweet potato, and the like. Now about sago, we cut sago tree, scrape it and eat it. Even so, it does not taste nice. The same with banana and sweet potato, they don’t taste the same any more. Before these things tasted really good and we enjoyed eating it. Water was the same. Now we drink water and we don’t enjoy it. It has a bad taste. Before it was good. So now, here we are, and we’re staying here. Things have changed. Before life was good, now it’s not. It’s all changed.

Matias’s origin of the garden is a delightful story which captures the sense of peace and contentment that Ninggirum people know when there is harmony in their world. It is set in mythic time, existing in the Ninggirum consciousness, referring to reality that exists beneath the surface. As ontological reality, this story is nestled within the deeper knowledge of the origin of the earth, and of humankind. It tells of the Ancestor who created all kinds of plants, and taught Ninggirum people to make garden (dong). He is one who made a path across the landscape, building houses, planting gardens, and making the bush that covers the land. Therefore, he is the Ancestor of Matias’s clan who settled them between Ok Birim and Ok Ao, and taught them how to live in a respectful, loving relationship with the natural world.

Matias knows this deeply intimate relationship with the environment through the uncle–nephew relation. To the clan, this Ancestor is maternal uncle, the sign of fertility and continuation of life through marriage exchange. In this story, he uses his own body fluids to make the garden grow big and healthy. Through the act of laughing and shouting as he urinates on the plants, he directs his power into the environment to do its life giving work. This is oka kana. Later, while the Ancestor went about his work, whistling, the garden spread out all over the ground, and kept spreading until he stopped whistling. This action forms the basis of another ritual which uses the sound of whistling to invoke ok, so that the plants will multiply, and spread prolifically. Through these rituals, Matias understands that Ahwaaman is sending kaong through the land to make the plants grow well and multiply.

So this is a story of the Ancestor who gave the Ninggirum people their food. He is the culture hero who planted trees, built houses and inaugurated gardening rituals as he moved across the land. He used his own body fluids to make a garden flourish. In the same way, Ninggirum people use their body fluids to invoke the kaong of this Ancestor, to make their gardens produce abundantly. Contrary to my Western, abjecting view, the Ancestor’s body fluids are a powerful source of life and blessing for Ninggirum people.
So that’s how it started, and that’s how it happens, from the time of our ancestors to our father’s time, and now we do it like that.

This is how Ninggirum people understand the blessing of the Ancestor of mythic time, who provides them with food in the lived world.

**Interpretation**

Though Matias had ended his origin story, he had not finished what he wanted to say. He continued with a contemporary interpretation of his origin story which begins by referring to place, but shifts to a chronological frame starting in 1984. To the Ok Tedi/Fly communities, 1984 is a term that encodes significant cultural meaning.

In local memory, 1984 marks the beginning of gold and copper mining in the Star Mountains. Due to the tailings dam disaster, a policy was instituted that permitted the dumping of a maximum allowable level of sediment and copper waste, straight into the river system. Thus began the systematic destruction of the river and local environs. Also in 1984, two major cyanide spills occurred. A transport barge capsized in the Fly delta, losing its load of 2600 60 litre drums of cyanide, most of which were never recovered (Pernetta, 1988, p. 6). In another incident, a tap was left open overnight, which released untreated cyanide waste into the river, killing thousands of fish, prawns, turtles and crocodiles (Dundon, 2002; Kirsch, 2009).

The events of 1984 are also believed to be of great cosmological significance. They are understood, collectively, as the catastrophic disturbance which turned the creation away from Ahwaaman, sending it spinning along a path of its own desires. The disturbance is understood as a change in the direction of time. It turns backward, which reverses the flow of kaong. Instead of moving forward, towards renewal in the lived world, life moves backwards, down towards decay and death. The reverse motion of life is understood as a time of great and severe change, when many species of plants and animals are destroyed along with the majority of the people. This disturbance describes the cosmological rupture that marks the end of an era, which heralds the start of a new historical epoch. This current era for Ninggirum people is defined by contact with the foreign and white skinned people of OTML, and Matias rues the appearance of the mine in their world.

Since the mine came, Ninggirum lives and their environment have been ruined. The failure of the tailings dam has resulted in the contamination of the air, rivers, land, and
food chains, by the rubbish and poisons from the mine. Because the environment is polluted, food supplies are disappearing. Fish and crocodiles have left the rivers, and land animals are becoming harder to find. Bush foods and gardens no longer thrive. Some plants grow, others die, and what does grow is not healthy. Food and water used to taste good, and Ninggirum enjoyed eating and drinking. Now they eat the food but the poison stays with them. Even their bodies are being contaminated. People get sick because their place is sick. Making garden used to be satisfying, but now it is just hard work with no enjoyment. Therefore, people understand that oka kana is diminishing, sending life out of balance.

Now, as the mine is dumping the mountain into the river and washing it away to the sea, the Ancestors’ body substances and fluids are also being washed away. They no longer fertilise the ground. As it loses its vitality and capacity to grow, the environment is dying, and people are further separated from the land and the life they shared with nature. That’s the way life has become. That’s the way it is, and it just keeps on being this way. Life has been disturbed by development since the coming of the mine, and with Ahwaaman no longer guiding their lives, Ninggirum have been left on their own.

Even within the traditional story, there are signs which highlight ontological difference between people and nature. Because the ideas of story are formed in the language used to express them, Matias’s origin story is situated inside the time and culture of Tok Pisin, the language of trade which communicates to the national milieu. Because language situates story inside its culture and time, it makes its own ontological assumptions the basis of interpretation. Therefore Matias’s origin story is given meaning through the colonial understandings of the development culture, where the movement away from Ninggirum spatio-temporality brings different meaning to the traditional text.

In the story, Matias compares the gardens. He notes that in mythic time, they were not true, physical gardens, just a spiritual representation symbolic of the real. This points to metaphysical duality and the reversal of truth claims. It sounds as if he sees a physical and a spiritual reality, where physical is true reality, and the spiritual is not true reality. If myth has been stripped of its definitive power and authority, then it is understood dichotomously, as other. It is rendered merely spiritual, and therefore, not true. If myth is stripped of reality and devoided of truth, then it may be used metaphorically, rather than metonymically. Matias would be seeing a dualistic cosmos rather than parts of a
unified whole. Hence, this kind of knowing separates person from nature, and from the fundamental truths of reality which form the Ninggirum world, their experience, their identity and their bodies.

Similarly, he speaks of the masalai man as half spirit and half human. If traditional Ninggirum thought describes Amooman as Ahwaaman, becoming-human, then much is lost in Ninggirum personhood and identity, in a half-half construction of person. Rather than a transient being, s/he is a divided person, each half less than, and separated from the whole. No longer are body parts and fluids spatio-temporally vectored into the world where they can become abundant, blessed community. They are confined and contained within skin, limited to an individual, stripped of their creative potential. No longer the time traveller, Ninggirum persons are trapped in one dimension. In these ways, the demythologising of Ninggirum place reduces it to linear, chronological, homogeneous space, in a divided world populated by fractured people.

It is not good because the mine is here and it is destroying us, our life and our environment.

Matias’s basic contention is that before, life was good, and now it is not good. Before, harkens back to the days when life was davii dap, characterised by walking in the paths of the Ancestors who set the foundation of cosmological and social harmony. It is in following these ways and laws that life is good. It is sustainable. But now life is not sustainable. Until they stop dumping the mountain into the river, life is this way.

As I listened to Matias’s story, I felt drawn into deep grief for the events that have brought such enormous change to the Ninggirum world. The term used is oo belo taetboo, which refers to the area of affect associated with sadness, grief, sorrow, and depression.

It is a total embodiment of the emotion, right to the core.

When he had finished speaking, Matias sat quietly, brooding, as if troubled by the place his thoughts had taken him.
The sacred stone

After a while, Elang Byangalop began to speak, and the conversation continued. In this story, Elang gives another response to the politics of loss and grief surrounding the PNG Government’s annexation of the land and minerals of the Ok Tedi Mine. It argues the Amesan clan’s claim to ownership of the land and mineral resources. These excerpts of the conversation form a storyline through which Elang disputes the government’s right to own the land, and OTML’s compensation of those living in ‘affected’ areas. He contests their right to define how the environment is ‘affected’, and their minimalist interpretation of the term. Elang is certain of his claim because he is in possession of a particular stone that proves to him that his claim is true.

Elang: Before the mine, this Mount Fubilan, they call it Mount Fubilan that’s where their mine pit is. Originally before through them was a place of sacred. [It] was a place of sacred where people tend to gain the economic sources, I mean money sources. …

Steven: … That’s their right they’re talking about. And not just talking, because they have this one [stone]. As Papua New Guinea government did not have this one to witness and to claim as Papua New Guinea government, or even the Australian. Australian government does not have this one. It’s impossible. It is possible when you drill, get the sample out, and through the depth of the ground, then you claim you own it. But this one was not drilled. It’s inherited. How it came about is, they know themselves, and that’s why he claims. …

Elang: … I know the depth story of this ground, and I’m talking about my rights. … [G]overnment claims that he’s … the resource owner, but, still I have … this [stone]. I claim that I am the owner of the resource. But how come, that he ignore me, and takes everything of his own [for himself]? It’s … unfair! While I have this one [stone], … I have something, [but I get nothing]. That is unfair. That’s what we are talking about, impact. Impact is not just physical, looking at the damage. But with inner source of the people.

Howard: … In Australia, the government law is that whoever is the owner of the land only owns, I think it’s one metre, only one metre below the surface of the land. Anything lower than that is owned by the government. That’s the law in Australia. So if you find oil on your land, the oil is more than one metre deep, so the government owns the oil, you don’t own it. That’s the law in Australia. But I think the law in PNG must be different.
Steven: Six metre above …

Keop: Papua New Guinea is still following the same … yeah so now they are gonna make changes …

Elang: … Government would have it. Government is just from today or tomorrow yesterday. But people have it. We have only bare rock down there before. Therefore the law has to be re-amended to suit the rights of the people. I believe in that. Yeah … They should change it to suit the needs of Papua New Guinea, a different culture. The law has to be in the flexible where it suit to the people. … because I’ve showed you something, that, in the proper way, it used to be done …

Steven: It is inherited from his father. He died, he inherited it. Rumko, dumko means in the depth of this stone.

Elang: Amisan clan, is the source of the Ninggirum tribe, and through claiming the honour of the resource, for example the Ok Tedi, many of us claim to get something for the messing of the environment. … though the government knows the depth of the earth, I know what is there, ground, stones, big stone down there. I know. My father told me. You are a white man, I show you because. But for rest of Ninggirum men, nogat nogat. The Earth, originally, there was no soil. There was a flat, concrete stone, bare, flat stone. But, there is somebody, was there. The creator was there, and, he just thought of it, something fall on to that stone, and from there it built … I know the depth of this earth, being the owner of the resource. Ok Tedi and government doesn’t listen to me. … deprived the right of the resource. Government deprive or the company deprive [us] of the rights of the people. So that’s the end of it.

Steven: Whatever was inherited was, while the bare earth was there, only concrete stone, and there somebody, who pick up other things, and give it to, each man, and name him that clan. So that object, belongs to him. That represents each clan. So, those are inherited. Those are very important. That’s why he said, this one here, he has [the stone]. But it’s, it’s never shown now, [confidential], but, by talking, he has, by claiming. Actually, we cannot see it. It’s samting bilong Amesan clan, so the rest of us cannot see it. So, that’s why while this clan is, they are the owner of the resource, because they have this one (the stone). They have the right to claim, to talk about it – bekos, were you there on the bare ground, on the concrete stone before? Nogat! [If] you have this one, you should claim. So if government denies this right, did he have this one before? before PNG government form? That’s the
big question. PNG government should have this one before forming the company

Background

In this storyline, Elang discusses yet another set of meanings of the mountain and the river. The topic of the story is the stone whose existence is always implied but never stated. Its hidden-ness emphasises its importance, making it the focus of the story which contests the government’s claim to ownership of traditional land. It voices a complaint which protests the government’s role as sole decision-maker, to speak for the Ninggirum people. It also laments life in current times, under these circumstances.

Pollution

The story is backgrounded by decades of disputation over riverine tailings disposal, and the uneven distribution of compensation for sustained environmental damage. According to Kirsch (2002), at the beginning of the Ok Tedi mining project, land lease agreements had only been established with the Min peoples residing in the vicinity of the mine site. The land owned by the communities living along the river did not fall within the Mine Lease Area (Map 4), and there had been no formal agreements drawn up between these landowners, the company, and the government. Few social impact assessments had been carried out, and very few contingency plans had been put in place to address adverse effects on the river communities. Preliminary planning had predicted that the sediment level in the Ok Tedi River would be minimal, and mining went ahead under these conditions. However, by 1992, sediment levels were 100 times higher than had been predicted, and the peoples of the Lower Ok Tedi region began to react to the pressure caused by environmental damage. In 1994, they lodged a complaint with an Australian law firm in Melbourne, and began legal proceedings to restrain the corporation from further pollution of the Ok Tedi/Fly River system.

Legal action

By 1996, the company (BHP) had agreed to an out of court settlement with the landowners, which included compensation packages, relocation of villages from the affected areas, and the establishment of the Ok Tedi/Fly River Development Trust for small community development projects. However, BHP did not undertake to build a tailings dam. Instead, they promised to look at all feasible options for tailings
containment (AGSM, 1997). The people along the river seemed satisfied with this decision, and eagerly awaited the restoration of their river.

All seemed quiet amongst the local land owners until, in August 1999, BHP announced that none of the proposed options for handling mine wastes would substantially alter the existing destructive processes. Regardless of whether the mine closed or continued to operate, conditions downstream would worsen over the next 40 years (Kirsch, 2002, p. 10). Understandably, local communities were outraged, and resistance mounted.

During this furore, BHP succeeded in presenting its position to the local landowners in the light of only two options. If the mine stays open, it has no choice but to continue to pollute the river. If its operations shut down, it will cause extensive social and economic hardships at both the local and national levels. As the Ok Tedi mine is the only source of support for rural development for the region, the people of the ‘affected’ areas could see no alternative but to allow the mine to operate for another decade, in the hope of receiving some of the benefits of development, even though the destructive impact would continue unchecked.

Community Mine Continuation Agreements

These negotiations concluded with communities along the river corridor being asked to give their consent for the mine to continue, with indemnity against liability for long term environmental damages, in exchange for cash compensations and community driven investments. These were made possible through the Ok Tedi 9th Supplemental Agreement, which also made provision for a set of trusts called the Community Mine Continuation Agreements (CMCA) (Map 5). 14 different, unequal, individual trusts were negotiated, separately, with each of these communities, based on the then current and projected damages. The CMCAs included provision for the review of agreements after five years, if or when the environmental predictions for environmental impact outlined in the CMCA were exceeded. By 2004, environmental conditions had grown much worse than originally predicted, and different and improved negotiations were sought by the CMCA participants, even though damages caused by mine wastes continue to adversely impact the more than 50,000 people who reside in the affected regions adjacent to or near the river (Adler, Brewer & McGee, 2007, pp. 9-10).

This story shows a long history of land acquisition settlements and compensation agreements being drawn up through fixed, legislative frameworks appropriate for a
specific set of circumstances at a particular time (Adler, Brewer & McGee, 2007, pp. 9-10). Because of these arrangements, local landowners had been alienated from the legal process at every point. Initial agreements had not included the rights of traditional land owners, thus excluding them from decision making procedures. Exclusion, coupled with the company’s tendency to control change by eliminating or silencing conflict, evoked strong backlash from local communities. This resulted in the formation of local pressure groups protesting the loss of their rights, mounting resistance to what they perceived as coercion of ways in which their communities should respond to their changing circumstances.

As in the 1994 legal suit (Banks & Ballard, 1997), the conflicting nature of relations between PNG Government as OTML shareholder and regulator, and the OTML corporation as the only source of regional development, was further aggravated by local groups seeking clarification amidst the shifting of roles and responsibilities. These actions eventually led BHP Billiton to transfer its 52% equity stake to the government, through the formation of the PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited, and by 2002, BHP had completely withdrawn from the Ok Tedi project. So pressure groups who subsequently made claims against the company and the government continued to be treated as problems to be solved, rather than as integral to the process.

**West Ningerum Pressure Association**

Elang Byangalop and his clan belong to one such resistance group. Though they do not live along the river corridor, they know that, over time, their bodies, land and rivers have been polluted by the operations of the mine. They feel that they too, deserve compensation, but because they do not live in an ‘affected area’, they have been excluded from receiving benefits through the North Ok Tedi CMCA (Adler, Brewer & McGee, 2006, p. 6). During the late 1990s, the excluded people formed the West Ningerum Pressure Association (WNPA) around Boka Kondra, then the Western Province’s member of parliament. Kondra is a Ninggirum man who is also Elang’s nephew. In 2000, the WNPA submitted a petition to the corporation claiming compensation for damages extending along the full course of Ok Birim and Ok Tarim. These rivers eventually empty into the Ok Tedi, but their headwaters rise in a geographically separate watershed, south west of the Ok Tedi mine site. When I asked to see the petition, Elang told me that someone, somewhere else is holding it.
Crook (2007) documents the story of the petition, its contents, style, and knowledge practices. He comments that the petition resembles a scientific report, presenting evidence of poor crops, unfruitful trees, poor water, sparse river life, dried out foliage, and rocks now slippery with moss, as measurable effects of mine wastes believed to be entering their river systems through underground passages (Crook, 2007, p. 222). He notes that the writers remained silent on the topics of the mountain’s cosmological connections with the fertility of Ninggirum land, and any assertion of Ninggirum ownership of the entire mineral deposit. Though the petition was presented in linear style, reflecting efforts to respectfully communicate in a manner that is acceptable and comprehensible to the reader, the claim was rejected.

WNPA emerges as a group whose right to hold and use their land has been severely compromised in unequal power relations with the modern legal system. In their expression of dissatisfaction with the mining project’s waste disposal and compensation arrangements, their processes for settling disputes and making decisions have been overridden by the government (Viewpoint, 1999). Because the project rewards compliance, they feel that they have been marginalised by corporate decision makers for their resistance, and ignored for their non-compliance. Having been denied the right and the power to define themselves, their rights, and their own way of dealing with ongoing and new problems caused by the mining project, they feel coerced into accepting decisions that are not their own.

**Clan knowledge**

When it was first suggested that Howard and I should see the stone, we declined. We understood that it was sacred to Elang’s clan, and forbidden to anyone else. However, the more Elang talked about his grievances, the more emphatic he became that we should see it. He told us that it is allowable because we are white people. We noticed the silence surrounding his reasons for this, which we will undoubtedly discover in time, as our relationship works out in the reality of everyday life.

As his story continues, he asserts that he knows what is under the ground. The word *dumko* means ‘down below’. It implies the knowledge of the Ancestors and the way of life beneath the surface of humanity. The stone is symbolic of the flat rock, the base of the natural world. It is tangible evidence of the truths which attest to the legitimacy of his claim. Because he holds the stone, he knows that the PNG Government could not
possibly own the land and the mineral. It makes no difference to him whether PNG law stipulates that land can be owned to the depth of one metre or six metres. The creation story defines his reality. It tells him that Ninggirum people originated dumko. So the stone is a sign of the reality upon which his claim is based. It testifies to the truth of his existence.

Steven: … Money sources … their identity is big, and they are recognised as elders and they are the boss. And they have power, what they say, what they lead the community before, real.

The stone was originally given to the first father of the clan by Balap ok baenkwoo during the settling of the land. It was passed down though the forefathers, and is now Elang’s inheritance. The fact that he holds the stone indicates that Elang has inherited traditional land, which carries responsibility for the welfare of the people who claim family ties with the Ancestor. So he is father. As father, his responsibility is to honour the Ancestors and follow their ways. He is also uncle who must provide and care for his people, through the skillful management of the community, the river, and the environment. Therefore the stone is symbolic of the Ancestor who established them in their land. It is of central importance to clan leadership, and in respecting nature. It identifies Elang as traditional landowner and bigman leader of his clan.

Steven: In our traditional way, if a man is a double-eyed man, then he has many ways of getting something, so he might have association with the spirit. He has connection with the spirit, and he might change himself from a physical body to a spiritual body and goes to the world of the spirit and negotiates to get some things, with the spirit people, to get money rop tambu or to get wild pig or this kain, yeah, they do. But the spirit people give him a piece of anything, a stick or stone. When they come out to the world, the physical world here, then it becomes something.

As bigman leader, Elang cares for his people through the knowledge and practices of the double-eyed man. Through the stone, he is able to direct the flow of kaong to bring the power of the Ancestors into the natural world. It serves as material component in the ritual performance of oka kana. Therefore the stone has great value to the clan as a powerful, ceremonial object, and it is Elang’s responsibility to harness its power for the welfare of his people.

The stone can also be understood as vyan, a traditional ceremonial object, acquired when a double-eyed man travels to mythic social space to consult the Ancestors. During
this event the Ancestors impart their knowledge to the man, who returns to the natural world with the knowledge, in the form of a stone, for example. This object, powerful with kaong, is then used in oka nat, a ritual which enables the double-eyed man to vector across space and time, to become other forms in other cosmological spaces, to do the work of the Ancestors. Therefore, the practice of the double-eyed man is central to the welfare of the community, and Elang confesses that he is skilled in these arts.

The stone identifies Elang as his clan's archivist. He is one who records, in memory, the network of relations linked to the Ancestors, who named the natural world into being as they created the landscape, and the paths of settlement across the land. It is ok that links people with the land through the ritual use of clan names and emblems. The name of each clan encodes the identity of the Ancestor that links Ninggirum people with their distant past, and with cosmological phenomena and their patterns of behaviour, for example, Ahwaaman the crocodile. So each generation of life represented by a creature from nature, corresponds to a clan group. Therefore, the ritual use of the clan name calls on the Ancestor’s kaong, which arrives in the lived world as the clan's namesake, to bring life, growth and blessing (for example, the frog who calls at night, warning of danger). In this way, Elang’s stone is a powerful instrument through which to invoke ok.

Sacred imagery

Elang knows the mine site as a central, Ancestral place. He identifies the mountain as the place of original separation and dispersal of life when the cosmos was formed. The language of the origin story suggests that the original dispersal of cosmic life took place in a series of separations, each characterised by a distinct pattern of reproduction and movement. It shows a pattern of parts branching from a unity, recurring, perhaps, infinitely. This is the idea of the rock giving birth to the stone who made all kinds of other stones. It is life, making life, making life, making life. The imagery captures the patterns of kaong moving across the Universe, and the subsequent dispersal and settlement of life in the spatio-temporal zones.

The idea of rock-becoming-stones provides a binding image by which the dispersal of life across the land follows specific patterned trajectories. These dispersals are traced through a kind of mapping in which space and time are condensed in the same image. Though the imagery presents the activity of anthropomorphic creatures who created the landscape of the lived world (e.g. the river story in Chapter Eight), it refers to the
manner in which the dispersal of people across the landscape is thought to have taken place. Therefore, as the place where the *Ahwaaman Amooman* first appeared in the natural world, the mountain marks the place from which this dispersal of human life began, the beginning of the paths created by the Ancestors as they settled the land.

As sacred imagery, ancestral pathways function as a way to help settle land disputes, by showing the disputants their historical relationship to the land. This knowledge usually exists in the minds of clan leaders who arbitrate these disputes. The clan pathways are not drawn for all to see because, in judicial contexts, to refer to a written text would undermine the authority of a speaker’s competence of memory and oration. The image is a mnemonic device by which plots of ground are known and ordered. It provides a map of landholdings based on the history and settlement of that land by the Ancestors. It marks and names the foundation places situated throughout the land. They are the resting places of the original and subsequent Ancestors of the people living today.

The living share an intimate, yet unsettled relationship with these forefathers (*havi*), who continue to inhabit the land in which they are buried. These parcels of land are usually marked by large rocks or particular trees, as proof that the Ancestor has merged with the earth in that place. The ability to identify these sites and markers, and to trace descent through the history of the Ancestors they contain or represent, is important in claiming rights to the use of land. Through marriage and ceremonial exchanges between clans, each Ninggirum person is able to claim links to several Ancestors, and has the right to claim the use of his/her land. In this way, land is linked to the Ancestors who named the creation into being. To use the Ancestor’s name is to use the Ancestor’s *kaong*, and the land is one means through which *kaong* becomes available to any Ninggirum person who is able to substantiate his/her relation to that Ancestor. Therefore, clan names determine ritual prerogatives, land rights and custodianship over ceremonial objects, such as Elang’s stone.

**The appeal to historical inheritance**

Through the creation story, Elang asserts that he is the true owner of the land and minerals of the Ok Tedi mine. The stone is his evidence and it bears witness (*akmiiman*) to his claim. A witness is one who can give a first hand account of something seen, heard, or experienced. This word indicates that the stone was present and has personal knowledge of all that makes Elang’s claim true. The stone is an eye witness to the
creation. It was present at the creation and knows the truth, first hand. Elang inherited the stone through his forefathers, who received it from Balap ok baenkwo when he gave the sacred objects to the first children. They are the first brothers who are the fathers of the clans.

The stone is a silent witness. It represents Ahwaaman, the imagery of the clan pathways which were covered by the natural world. Therefore the stone reveals that which is concealed. This is how the WNPA petition honoured the supremacy of the hidden. It presented physical evidence as scientific fact, but kept Ninggirum customary knowledge below the surface, the more powerful for its silence. Even though the scientific evidence was not strong enough to convince them, the readers also failed to recognise the voice of customary knowledge. Crook (2007) reports the writer’s assumption that, even if the readers did not understand the meaning of Ninggirum knowledge, they should at least have respected the fact of its existence, signalled by its absence. Therefore, the readers should have honoured its requests, because it is the right thing to do.

With the failure of the WNPA petition, Elang turns to the authority of the Ancestors. The presence of the stone tells him that the mine is on his family ground. Elang knows that the PNG Government as a new, Western institution, could not possibly own the land and the mineral, because they do not hold the stone. When the ownership of land is contested, the knowledge of sacred names becomes central, and it is the work of those who holds this knowledge and the clan father (havi), to be vigilant in remembering and safeguarding clan names. Because clan pathways exist beneath the surface of humanity, people will appeal to this timeless cosmology to authenticate their claim, rather than to any political justification. It is on this basis that Elang contests the government’s right to ownership of the land and minerals of the Ok Tedi mine. He knows that they do not have any link with his Ancestors, and can not claim any clan pathway. If WNPA had been included in the original landowner lease agreements, along with the Wopkaimin, perhaps this situation would never have arisen.

However, the mine developers have ignored this claim because of hierarchically organised, foreign knowledge and political rule. Arrogant presumption.

Clan disputes

Elang: Amisan clan is the source of the Ninggirum tribe.
Because CMCA people along the Ok Tedi corridor receive regular monetary compensation and WNPA people are excluded, clan debate has begun inside the Ninggirum group. WNPA asserts that not only did the Ancestors appear in the natural world through Anonghuubin (known to foreign and white skinned people as Mt. Fubilan), but that they reside in their resting place in the mountain. Therefore, Elang claims that his land and Ancestors are the awotom (source) of the whole Ninggirum group.

While the Lower groups empathise with Elang in this grievous position, they do not accept the Amesan clan’s ascendancy to origin status. The central creation story only recognises one source Ancestor of the whole group. He is Balap ok baenkwoo and Balap ok baenkwoole kon, the progenator of all the clan brothers. To elevate a clan's Ancestor to the status of Balap ok baenkwoo would be to create another awotom (source Ancestor). If the challenge to the dominant mythic history were to succeed, it would reorganise the politico-ritual organisation of the whole community, and split the group. Therefore, the consensus of the tribal elders is to mute the claim and expunge this version of history from historical memory.

Within the group, the sacred name of the disputed ground, A nong huubin, is less a claim to ownership, than an issue of personal identity, political authority and profound, historical knowledge. Though both Upper and Lower groups argue for the existence of an objective past that is unaltered by human politics, the practice of Ninggirum history allows for no lasting sense of historical realism. The debate illustrates that Ninggirum past is remembered, within the framework of clan history, only as far as it pertains to contemporary politics and clan identity. Therefore, the dispute over compensation issues is really about the jural arrangement of the clans, and the overt legitimacy of lineages.

Within clan understanding, contemporary happenings require mythic-historic justification in order for thought to become reality. Things must have names, and people must have life paths to follow in order to be real. In the absence of clan authenticity things cannot be real. The act of denying them their right to own their clan ground not only separates the Amesan clan from their traditional land, but severs their identity from its location in mythic history. It effectively erases their pathways, rendering them non-reality, just a figment of imagination. They become faceless refugees in their own land. So material wealth or money is not the primary concern here, but the competition for
symbolic power of names and the right to their place in mythic history. The company’s
denial of WNPA’s petition pressures the reorganisation of clan history.

I feel his ken, that area of affect which manifests anger, bitterness and murder.

Clan pathways exist beneath the surface of humanity, and even though they are
immutable, people privately agree that political actions such as debates and disputes
alter mythic histories and configurations of identity. Because all mythic configurations
of the past are contestable, the politics of the descent group comes into focus. People do
not want to appear guilty of stealing names and trying to restructure the past in
accordance with their own politico-ritual agendas and strategies, but in fact, they are.

Now our parents believe that the mine waste travels along the spiritual tunnel. The
spirit is angry - ‘why did you people let these people come and spoil the
mountain?’ Some people say that it is the spirit who is sending the poison as a
payback - but its hard: the old people think this, but which one are we going to
stand on? Geologists have their own ideas (Young Ninggirum man, mine worker,

The young people appear to be confused about reality. They do not know what to
believe. They do not know which path to follow so that their lives will be good. With
people no longer following in the ways of the Ancestor, he is powerless to care for and
help them in traditional ways.

After the failure of the legal battles to win him a hearing, what does Elang have left?
Even his clan heritage gives him no currency in the world of development. As the
environment is no longer able to support their life, Elang’s people have no choice but to
follow the Western style of living. This way of living depends on regular income, and
with no way to earn money, they feel they must depend on benefits from the mine. So
Elang and his clan waited, but the company did not pay them. They formed the WNPA
in order to petition OTML for the restoration of their environment, and for
compensation for damage and loss. They submitted their petition in the hope of a good
outcome, and still they received nothing. Though they face an impossible situation, with
every request for help rejected, they feel they have done all they can to assert their
position. But still the government/company does not respond.

Where is justice for the victim? Life is unsustainable, with no prospect of getting better,
and the government continues to ignore the Ninggirum. What does one do when the
gods will not be propitiated? I feel his resentment towards coercion, his contempt for exclusivism. Are they to be the sacrifice?

Government and mine don’t care about us on the border. They only support those whom they think are affected by pollution. We are also affected, but we can’t prove it scientifically. Even when we tried to show evidence of how we know our environment is affected, they don’t believe us, and they dismiss our claim. We own the land and the resources, but they judge in favour of CMCA and they completely disregard us. They take all and give us nothing. I hear his bitterness.

Where is mongop? Mongop is the word used for the strongest type of affect. It refers to feelings of love, kindness, sympathy, empathy directed from a person towards another. It carries connotations of respect for the fact of suffering, and comfort for the sufferer. It carries an invitation for a person to be in the space of grief and sorrow for as long as it takes, and when it is finished, all will share good times again. It means fellow feeling. ‘I am feeling for you.’ Silence.

In his story, Matias grapples with life in the social space characterised by the Ok Tedi mine. He laments his experience of development in terms of before and now. Before, when they followed the ways of the Ancestors, life was good, and Ninggirum people rejoiced in its blessing. Now life is not good, and the change has caused much suffering and grief.

In his story, Elang Byangalop grapples with the presence of the foreign and white skinned people in the Ninggirum world. Now that Ninggirum people follow the ways of economic development, they realise that they must depend on development for survival, and that foreign and white-skinned people do not treat everyone respectfully, equitably and justly. As he struggles to share space with them, he laments their domination of Ninggirum sociality.

Both Matias and Elang lament life in the social space dominated by development. Since the mine appeared in their world, changing the course of Ninggirum life, the Ancestors have been silent. As the mine crushes rock and extracts mineral, the body and bones of the Ancestors are being systematically (metaphorically) flushed down the toilet, along with their life giving body fluids. With the desecration of their bodies and resting places, the Ancestors are no longer renewing life in the natural world. So life becomes progressively worse as the environment marches on a path of destruction, dementia, and death.
Pain in the research process

Through the work of this chapter I have realised that I am handling the materials of current Ninggirum memories (Davies & Gannon, 2006). In collecting these histories, Ninggirum people and I engaged deeply together. Memories were stirred as we shared our experiences, generating these unique stories with their unexpected outcomes. And long after our last meeting, I am still gaining new insights into Ninggirum world, and my perceptions are still changing. I hadn’t realised that I am engaged in a deeply powerful, painful process of Ninggirum people making sense of their chaotic world and of themselves in it, through the stories they were sharing with me. As I consider this, I am deeply moved. To be invited onto another’s sacred ground, to walk with them through their collective and personal suffering is humbling.

I have also struggled with my own ambivalence towards my researcher authority in the collective production of stories. As I reflect on the storying sessions, I believe we had a high degree of respect, sharing and trust, due to relationships built over a long period of time. People were not afraid to express their opinions, knowledge and judgments. I’d like to think that for the most part, we share non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, and non-manipulative relations with our closer Ninggirum friends. But I did feel pressure from some Ninggirum people, around ethical and political agendas. I felt very uncomfortable when I realised that a few people may have held the expectation that I would have a powerful voice in the PNG and Australian Governments, and be able to bring about their desired outcomes. The political agendas of these people clearly motivated the focus, process and critique used in story-telling.
Chapter Ten – The Feast

I am writing from the space between two knowledge systems: one that assumes an unproblematic reality and innocent language, and one in which knowledge is a product of power existing within its cultural representation of social reality. In my exploration of meanings of development and change to Ninggirum people, their creation stories have taught me that for them, nature is a temporal space in which Ninggirum life is formed. In this space, customary ways are all about caring for the natural world, to maintain cosmological balance and social harmony. But in this present age shaped by Western thought, their natural world continues to suffer the impact of mining as human directed activity, and those who know the traditions lament a life departed from the ways of their Ancestors. Each of these systems holds very different understandings of development, and defines different processes of change which act, simultaneously, on Ninggirum life. In considering the effects of these processes of change on Ninggirum knowledge making, I have realised that Ninggirum people are engaged in a new and individual process of learning to be in this modern world. And there is very little to structure and support their alternative journey through the current global epoch (Somerville, 2007). Full of complexity, this is an exciting space of culture learning and educational development.

I now return to the snakeman story (Chapter 5), which has guided the path of this thesis. Through the previous chapters I have explored some encounters of tradition with the snakeman presence to learn as best I can the reality that gives meaning to those encounters. I have learned that for Ninggirum people, the soil is their origin and their land is where life happens. Therefore the interactional role of places is essential for understanding the dynamics of global spaces and their effects on indigenous life. Conversely, indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world have much to say to the structure of ideas centred on development. Ninggirum ways orient daily life from the environment through the sites of interaction with the Ancestors. It is the life of the Ancestors in mythic, temporal space communicated through traditional stories and practices that defines reality and practice. Place is the reality out of which life grows. Where creation is plural and creator is communal identity existing within and outside of bodies, body links to bodies in a vast web of relations.
With the discovery that his wife has left him, the husband’s world is shaken. As he seeks her out, we see the impact of a multinational company driven by profit, efficiency, accountability, productivity, and competition for scarce resources affecting holistic human development within the natural environment. Through their acts of trying to find a place within economic development, I have seen the effects of neoliberal economic values on traditional Ninggirum values, and how the economic agenda selects processes of change that have a reconstitutive impact on traditional society. Through their traditional stories and contemporary life histories, I have gained insight into how Ninggirum people have made sense of the events that have impacted and profoundly changed their lives. I have tried to understand their experience of change and to lament their loss.

In this chapter I am exploring the role of the feast in traditional processes of development and change, to understand how life may be experienced by the wife of tradition who, by choice or deception, came under the influence of progressive development.

Feast

Sitting around the fire listening to Elang’s lament, we shared mongop. After a long time, conversation continued. It drew me, body and soul, into a space where people explored their perceptions of social life as it is changing around them. They talked about how they knew their life in the days when there was feasting in Bii wongo. The more animated they became, the less I could follow the language.

Performance transported us into another space in another time: people dressed ceremonially, drums calling across the universe.

My name is Hans Guimben. I am about to say this, about the Keip River junction feast, Golang’s feast, gathered together. I am telling you that talk, about Golang’s feast December 18, 2005. He killed pig. Then people dancing groups were two, the other road the other road came dancing. Two dance leaders led them. Then he told them the feast story, the feast he was making, it is not a feast to remember his parents or child. Yes, Wulenop saw a crocodile at Keip River, and they killed it and ate it, they thought it was just an animal. From there, it was a disturbance staying, making the piglets sick and also the people as well, so he decided to make a feast, whether it makes the problem area good. I went to that feast, about 500 or 600 or
700 people, they came. They came, but others, they were thinking about fighting
habits/customs. So then, they took the pig meat outside, they cooked the pigs inside
the tree bark. Then at night they played disco, dancing inside the feast house. When
day was breaking, they opened the tree bark mumu and distributed, and left. Yes,
I’m saying that’s what they did at Golang’s feast. So that feast he made, he made it
for the crocodile. He made, thinking his wife and children later might become well.
That was Golang’s feast. So that is all, there is no other talk (Hans Guimben, 2009,
spoken in Ninggirum, translated into English).

The story

One day, a man and his relatives were out hunting at Keip Kwit. They saw a crocodile,
so they killed it, and took it home to share with their families. Soon after, many bad
things began to happen. All the small pigs in Golang’s herd became sick and died. Then
people in his family became sick. This worried him very much, so he thought he should
make a feast to see if the trouble would settle.

From what I understand, Ninggirum people recognise illness, accident, and untimely
death as the result of disrupted relations between the lived world of human experience,
and the Ancestors and nature spirits who inhabit the space beneath the surface. If killing
and eating the crocodile was the source of the disturbance then the crocodile was not an
ordinary one. It must have been a spirit-being. This abuse of another species must have
breached a taboo, causing offence to the crocodile spirit, making the Ancestor angry. In
order to prevent further misfortune, the man must address the disturbance in the manner
laid down by the Ancestors. He should make a feast.

With this understanding, Golang begins the long, elaborate preparations. He has to grow
many more pigs for the sacrifice. He has to build a central feast house where the ritual
will take place. He has to house and accommodate his visitors for the duration of the
event. And he has to prepare, methodically and thoroughly, for the ritual ceremony,
because ritual must be performed perfectly. Were he to fail in this, more wrath would
descend upon the community. While he works, month in, month out, he considers how
life has been. How did it become this way? As the day approaches, practising the ritual,
meditating on the meanings encoded in the words, his thoughts lead him to consider
how life needs to become. When all is ready, he calls the clans together, and everyone
who is able, comes to the feast place.


‘Maniiwa!’ the man shouts. ‘Come!’

From each side, the dance men appear. Ancestor and spirit. Lines of people inch their way, dancing, chanting. Outside the feast house, a sea of faces, welcoming the unseen. Silence descends. The man steps forward. Before the whole community, he tells the story of this feast. He goes into the feast house to perform the sacrifice, presenting his peace offering to the crocodile spirit.

Outside the house, he prepares the mumu. During the evening, everyone is happy. In the morning they receive their food, then they go.

I think the purpose of this feast was to restore peace and harmony to people’s lives by honouring the Ancestor who had been offended. In performing feast, the man shares the history of the Ancestor. He recalls the Ancestor’s great achievements, revisiting the paths he created, reenacting his heroic deeds. The performance opens a space into which the whole community is drawn. As they enter into the story, remembering, meditating on the Ancestor’s good ways, they think about their lives now. The man sacrifices the pig, offering its life for his own. In exchange, the Ancestor’s power comes into the community, driving out the negativity that has come to dominate their lives. Recasting the Ancestor’s vision of life, the people surrender to gratitude and renewal, (re)embracing his good ways. Back in the lived world, emerging remade, they celebrate. So, in this storied space, self and community are reconstituted.

Through the reality it constructs and the identities it constitutes, feast opens the possibility of a good Ninggrirum life with and for others, in just ways of living together. Yet people have ongoing experience of their community’s inability to accomplish this way of life, and their own propensity to not relate well with others. When people hurt each other and the web of relations is disturbed, the flow of kaong is disrupted and misfortune soon follows. Disturbance is settled through equitable exchange between those involved. This is an expression of davuup baem, the assurance that from now on, we will strive to live well together. So, davii dap (our good life) calls on people to live co-operatively, to share what they have, to be hospitable, and to be satisfied with
‘enough’. When they participate together in their good ways, caring for one another in every day life, the good that they hope for becomes reality.

**Contestation**

The story also tells that some people were not happy about the feast, and were thinking of opposing the event. This is a trickster moment in the story when the unthinkable could happen. It signals a serious rift in the community, existing around the practice of customary ways. These people could have contested the validity of the practice, but no challenge was issued, and they absented themselves from what could have been a unifying community experience. This is a moment for careful examination by the community and its leadership.

I think that in local community, power exists when people come together to work for a common cause. This power becomes actual in the communal space when people speak out what they mean, and act accordingly. The plurality of this space gives the community its essential character as the web of relations in which individuals act out their roles according to the history stories. People become real to each other as they recognise the role that each plays in the story. Therefore, power exercised in concert preserves the communal space that makes it possible for the individual to exist. Power springs up between people when they act together, and it vanishes the moment they disengage. When someone isolates themselves or does not participate in community, they become unable to access this power. They become impotent and ineffectual. Therefore, power exists in the actions and speech that preserve the web of human affairs, and the relationships and the stories created by them.

**Ignoring cultural heritage**

Conversation continues in which Steven Katuk, Keop Kowa, and others, debate the impact of Western social institutions on everyday life. These institutions are fixed in a reality that prioritises production for consumption over holistic, human development and the natural environment. Some Ninggirum people have interpreted their experience of these institutions as disaster which has altered nature, causing *kaong* to flow in reverse motion, away from their good life. Others appear to uncritically accept this modern life.
Steven: … [L]ot of people are ignoring the bad effect and they are attracted to that development, right on the spot, on their eyes, that is good, but, a lot of things we are missing it. … That things are missing, what I mean is the cultural heritage, the good values and traditions of the place … they don’t understand the life now.

Steven laments that a lot of Ninggirum people are not considering the effect that their life might be having on present community and future generations. He highlights the idea that in current life, many things are missing. ‘Missing’ is a key term in this discussion. The word used is dowam - nothing, absent, empty, not there, lost. I think this idea refers to cosmological balance. When components are missing, life is experienced as imbalance. For life to become good again, the missing things must be found or obtained.

Historically, globalisation has had a significant impact on cultural identity. When traditional culture is threatened, the question of cultural identity becomes newly problematic. In light of the movements to preserve traditional values and customs that are being woven into the fabric of globalisation, the issue of cultural identity takes on new urgency (Tomlinson, 2008). Steven recognises that in the absence of normative cultural standards, traditional life stands wide open to the influence of global processes as its only formative cultural device.

As conversation continued, it tended to focus on the young people, particularly those who are displaced from village life.

Kowa: But before … to make people to be valued, they had to go through initiation, they go to certain stages, and they will see how the young boy, not the girls … Those young boys who don’t go through initiation, they are regarded as a valueless. … [B]ecause of this, Western culture comes in, has influence, our custom culture died out … not been continuously carried on.

**Becoming men**

Kowa expresses the opinion that the unpreparedness of young people to own responsibility is a direct result of the obsolescence of traditional exchange feasts. From the central creation story I understand that identity is a cosmological phenomenon. Ninggirum personhood is constituted socially through ritual ceremonies that mark the passage of individuals from one stage to another. The first feast is usually held a year or two after a child is born, when it is accepted into society as a new life. Ceremonies
continue through puberty when boys and girls become adult members of the Ninggirum group. Usually, these feasts are carried out conjointly with the male initiation ceremonies.

Initiation is the means by which boys become men. From birth, boys are considered female because of their strong associations with femaleness. They are nurtured by breast milk and cared for by women until they reach puberty, when their association moves towards maleness. During the cycles of initiation, boys transition through the form inherent in each stage, until they emerge as adult males, ready for marriage, family responsibility, and community leadership. Through ritual impartation in the feast space (dowantem), initiates receive the life power of Ahwaaman, endowing them with the knowledge, gifts and abilities that birth them as male. I think this is how they become Amooman, the changed ones, now able to take their place as the new culture leaders. They are the next generation of clan Ancestors. If a boy does not pass through the stages of initiation, then he does not become a man. He is without value in the community because he has not been ritually empowered to take his place in the community as a functional adult.

**Becoming women**

Preparation for womanhood does not take public prominence as does male initiation. I think this is because girls are already female, and have no need of a ritual rebirth. Their preparation begins at a very early age, as they copy and imitate mother’s actions, attitudes, speech and knowing. By the time she is ready to marry, a girl must have developed the strength and balance to enable her to carry heavy bilums of taro, firewood, and children through the bush, from garden to village. It is women’s responsibility to know how their gendered cosmos works, and to contribute to life in the ways in which the Earth endows them as female.

However, patterns of life for Ninggirum women appear to be changing. Gorgina is a high school student who was raised at Ningerum Station. She asked to speak Tok Pisin because her Ninggirum was not good.

Gorgina: Mi stori long sikul, how moning mipela save kirap na go

Moning streng mipela save interest long go long sikul. Moning streng mipela save kirap go waswas, kam senis, na early streng mipela save go long sikul. Mipela save go i stap first bell, second bell, last bell na mipela stap. Olsem sikul i go lunch,
mipela save go long haus, na after lunch mipela save go bek early. Sikul i go abinun mipela save kam, mipela save kam i stap, slip, kirap, dispela kain tasol mipela save mekim.

My story is about school.

Early in the morning I like to go to school. First thing, I get up, go wash, come back, get dressed, and go early to school. I usually get there by the first bell, second bell, then third bell is when school starts. Then we work until midday. Then we go home for lunch, and I go back early. Then we work till afternoon. Then I come home, sleep, get up, and this is what I do.

Gorgina’s life at school in town is very different to what it would be if she were still living in her village. She loves to go to school. It is what she does.

Telma Opeal had been staying at Joe’s house, helping out while we were there. I noticed scarred patterns and tattoo marks on her skin, and when I asked her about them, she was outwardly coy, but secretly delighted to tell me what they meant to her. She too, attends the high school at Ningerum Station, but spends her holidays with her family in their village. She chose to speak Tok Pisin, though she usually speaks to her family and friends in Ninggirum language.

Han Bilas


Mi stap long liklik meri yet. Mi kissim brumstik, mi laitim long pia na mi putim long han bilong mi na mi laitim. Bihain em i kamap soa na em i drai.

Mipela kisim plawas, olsem hibiscus wantaim lam, na mi putim long pepa. Na mi kissim liklik stik na putim hibiscus wantaim lam na putim design long pes bilong mi. Mi kissim nil na pokim i go i kam na long wokim dispela tatoo. Mi larem i stap i go long wanpela mun olsem bin kamap liklik soa na mekim tatoo.

Mi amamas long ol dispela mak.

Marks on my arm

(Pointing to the pattern of shiny, bulbous scars on her upper arm). This mark is decorating my arm. I asked my brother, and he got a cigarette, lit it, and put it on my arm.
(Pointing to her forearm). When I was a small girl, I got a piece of broom (straw), lit it, and put this pattern on my arm. After that it came up into a sore, and then it healed.

(Pointing to tattoo marks on her forehead and cheeks). I got some hibiscus flowers, squeezed the juice and used a small stick to mix it with lamp black. Then I put it on some paper. Then I put it on my face, and used a sharp needle to tattoo the design on to my skin. It was sore for about a month and now I have this tattoo. I like these marks and am happy that I made them.

At Ninggirum Station, I noticed that lots of young girls are decorating their bodies with marks and tattoos. They burn a pattern onto their skin with home-made ink. They are proud of their skin and their bodies, and want to show them off.

I also noticed that older, widowed women can enjoy a measure of independence through their gardens. Neng is an old woman who spoke her story in Ninggirum, which I have translated and paraphrased.

Her daily life is enjoying making gardens, like a subsistence farmer. She always gets up early to go to the garden, which is not a long way away, and comes back to the house at four o’clock in the afternoon. She grows bananas from shoot, sweet potatoes, taro kongkong and greens. Out of making garden she survives, eating food each day and selling some in the market. Without a garden she would not have that.

Her husband died before her, and she now lives with her son and his family. As she has no daily responsibility for a young family, she is able to work her own garden and sell some of her produce. With the little money she makes, she is able to buy soap, tea, and the occasional treat. Her garden is her enjoyment. It is her life.

The fact of women finding meaning for their lives beyond traditional ways opens new possibilites for their becoming. It also presents the community with the need to respond sensitively and justly to these challenges to the ways of traditional identity formation.

Marriage exchange

I think that in communal consciousness, girls have become women when their bodies begin to contribute female body fluids to the community collective, and boys are men after initiation, when their beards appear. Then the community knows that they are ready for marriage. Central to this process is the cultural feast, entailing mythic-
historical ritual that serves obvious and direct social functions of identity and gender formation, in the process of children becoming adults.

**More than an economic institution**

Steven: You must be mature when you get married, … healthy through initiation first … Nowadays’ generation … He’s very premature.

Kowa: Mmmm. They don’t have this background … of all our customs.

Steven: … In that time … you must pick lady, get everything ready. Your father knows that he must have *rop tambu*, he must buy the bride price, … Father, brother, mother, uncles, … we all cooperate to buy the wife of another man, and later on, this man repays to the people, … we try to help him to build up family in our clan power …

Kowa: So, the *rop tambu* and the pig, is very strong in marriage …

In the absence of initiation as the traditional means of preparation for adulthood, young men are not properly formed, and people are marrying before they are equipped for this social responsibility. ‘Premature’ also connotes that people are tending to partner without bride price agreement. I think that a lot of Melanesian societies see marriage structured around clan ancestry and family ties as the most basic of their social institutions. It serves social and economic functions based on principles of reciprocity and exchange.

I now understand that exchange is the means by which Ninggirum social institutions accumulate the Ancestors’ resources and distribute them amongst the community. Marriage serves the economic function of distribution, which keeps resources such as *rop tambu*, known as *vyan* (shell money, pigs, food, tools, weapons and PNG money) circulating around the community. It involves the ritual act of exchange, *ok*, which brings abundance and prosperity to the community. It keeps life moving in the forward direction of cosmological balance so that everyone may have their share in *davii dap*. In giving a woman to a man, the woman’s clan asks for payment for their losses once she joins the husband’s clan. His clan must compensate her clan for the loss of her contribution to their daily life, their grief and sadness, her body fluids, any children she might have, and for the use of ancestral land that she is connected with. So, marriage creates alliances between families. I now understand its value as a social covenant that carries the promise of continued good relations between the clans. It builds social
capital in the form of cohesion within and between groups. Therefore marriage also
exchanges social welfare.

I am also understanding more of the meaning of body fluids within the community. I
think that marriage carries the authority of a legally binding agreement between the
clans. Through the exchange, the woman’s body and her body fluids become the
property of the husband’s clan. Therefore, knowing the clan pathways, the disperal
patterns of the first Ninggirum clans who established life across the landscape, and the
family relations - who is a direct blood relative of whom - are central to determining the
legitimate exchange of women between clans. These patterns have been adhered to,
traditionally, as a means of keeping seminal and vaginal fluids circulating through the
group, in a manner that avoids incestuous alliances. Therefore, marital alliance
according to the clan patterns of relationship is understood as the communal exchange
and equal distribution of male and female body fluids for the healthy propagation of the
Ninggirum group.

According to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
Against Women (CEDAW), ‘women are entitled to decide on the number and spacing of
their children’ (Ergas, 2010, para. 1). Yet this entitlement is far from being fulfilled in
many parts of the world. Women’s claims to reproductive rights are being increasingly
understood through the emergence of human rights as a social lens; by the ideas of the
globalisation of motherhood (Chavkin & Maher, 2010); and through the development of
technologies that have facilitated markets in babies and baby making. Ergas (2010, para.
2) raises the questions: If reproductive rights are to be understood as human rights, what
are the implications for the decision making capacity of men, as well as women, as to
when and how to reproduce? What are the consequences for women’s control over their
own bodies? What kind of rights are at stake in the global market place for
reproduction?

Generally, PNG women not wanting to create disharmony within the family will tend to
go along with whatever their culture requires. One woman (ABC, 2000) says:

I do respect our traditions and values. There are good aspects, but also some
detrimental to the status and health of women. Bride price for example has been
detrimental especially where women have been victimised. They get into situations
where they can’t return to their villages following conflict with their husbands
because their ‘bride price’ has been paid and they’ve been declared ‘the property of
their men’. This implies that they can do what they want with you. And that’s the type of thing we should try to change, while retaining the good values.

The protection of women within the clan is another delicate area of traditional life. In times of strife and alienation, a woman from outside the clan is likely to become the object of blame for the community’s woes (Strathern, 1988). In a social order where the husband’s clan has total power and authority over her, it is very difficult for a woman in this situation to find help when she needs it. As a category of the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010), this entitlement, also, is far from being a reality. These ideas raise the issue of impunity. Living free from violence is a human right, and violence against women is a violation of that right, which cannot be justified by any political, religious, or cultural claim. Any participation in a global culture of discrimination against women, [overt or otherwise], allows violence to occur daily and with impunity (Amnesty International USA, 2012, para. 16).

In discussion on this subject, one man commented that nowadays, relative to a mine worker’s pay, bride price has become inflated and prohibitive. In adjusting to this situation, tribal leadership has instated the practice of periodic payment, separate from ongoing child payment. A deposit is paid at the time of the marriage. Ongoing payment is made until the woman’s clan is satisfied. Often, if the woman is happy, they will forego payment as a gesture of good will. If her husband’s clan is not taking good care of her, then her clan may increase their demands as incentive for the husband to address the relational disharmony. It is to be hoped that innovative mechanisms such as this new financial arrangement, addressing the social needs of communities, will be able to protect the vulnerable, and maintain equitable, harmonious relations within and across the clans.

Clan sociality

The creation stories show that exchange refers primarily to that which passes between the mythic and the natural world, and feast is the mode by which this kind of exchange occurs. It is based in the relationship that current generations have with their Ancestors. When the Ancestors in Bii wongo are feasting, it is understood that they are making good things, vyan, with which to bless the lived world. In order to receive these provisions and blessings, a reciprocal feast must be made in the lived world. Vyan is central to this exchange because it embodies the Ancestor’s kaong. It is exchanged
according to the imagery of clan sociality that determines the use of land, resources, labour, and marriage rites. Marriage thus serves the equitable distribution of vyan amongst the whole group. It secures the exchange of kaong between the clans, keeping the cosmological balance.

Reciprocity is the attitude in which the exchange takes place. It values equality, sharing and equitable distribution. It assumes that everyone is entitled to their share, even if it is not the same as everyone else’s. It is the protocol that keeps exchange fair. Reciprocal exchange is about wise planning and decision making based on respect for people’s wishes, and on environmental sustainability. It is about people being educated to be of use to the whole group. It is about making and maintaining a just society.

Steven: … today’s impact, … isolating ourselves from one another, being afraid … People are not taking good care or looking out for one another. They must act like a human being towards one another, … the community or … the government and the Company. Those things are missing really.

Historically, Ninggirum people have been able to thrive within traditional reality. However, the demands of the Millenium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010), seeded in the assumptions of economic rationalism, present traditional society with tremendous challenges in addressing their particular kinds of inequality. From his stance on integrated human development, I think Steven is trying to say that if people think more about life in the community and their place in it, there is likely to be more respect and cooperation, which would make life better for the whole group.

Kowa appears to react from the othered position in relation to the dominant culture. He comments that in the presence of Western social institutions and practices, traditional customary ways have been neglected, causing them to die out. Inverting the binary, he expresses the opinion that Western society has no ceremonial rituals, and no truly significant initiation customs through which people are equipped to participate in society, and to maintain just ways of being in the community.

**Intergenerational justice**

Steven: Education separate … good people from the community … it makes division. … My child goes away to school, then he does not learn good thing about our village culture … so after his education, when he comes back, he’s hopeless, unless he’s employed in a company or in the government. … When he’s not
employed, he come back, he stay, … just like a stupid man. So, I’m really worried about my children, because my child doesn’t know what is happening now. He thinks it is okay. Every day now he is protect by parents, … everything is free. But tomorrow he’ll find it. He’s going to find these impacts. So, I’m sorry for this.

Steven makes the point that formal education also plays a role in undermining customary ways. One young man who was sitting by the fire spoke tentatively (in English) from his social position.

Kalup ketbao – young man: Life in village is hard, too hard. I don’t know how to make house and go through big bush and all these things. … I talk to with my friends in Pisin because our language is too hard …

At this moment some fathers were quick to condemn the young man, but Kowa put forward the perspective that if the young boys have not been taught from an early age, they can not be expected to know these things. The current generation of young people (15 to 25 years) have had their village experience interrupted by spending most of their childhood years in school, at Ningerum Station. The reasons behind their exclusion from customary ways has been the compulsory nature of national education, and parental aspiration that they enter into the modern world through highly paid employment. So how are young people observing their elders exerting effective leadership in local decision-making?

While Kowa understands the plight of the young men, I would like to think that he would be as generous towards the young women on this issue.

Kowa: … before … Ninggirum people … believed their environment around them, … they worship, and they get food out, … whatever they harvest they said, ‘Ahwaaman this is yours’, because you gave us, we’re giving it back … that time up til now, … nobody could put all these things into written form, and so they could not [keep] track, … within that time the Bible came in …

Steven: Western religion is in verbal, and then in written. … in the community … and clans they are only in verbal … so it [our spiritual understandings and oral ways] dies out. … so we forget.

Kowa: People must look at themself first, before they decide. Otherwise, they will forget all their custom value. When it goes then that’s it! … Because the language and customs are the first to decline. … people from Ninggirum are marrying from other Provinces, and they are not teaching their language. They are only using Tok
Pisin and English and, if they do that then very soon the Ninggirum language will die out.

As the National Department of Education’s (NDoE) Director of Elementary Education for the North Fly Region, Kowa promotes a view of the interaction between traditional and dominant culture through the lens of early education in local language and cultural practices. Stepping back from his lived experience of the cultural system, Kowa sees that the decline of customary ways also lies in the ideological clash between orality and literacy. Using reading and writing to preserve knowledge in a book, more often than not, acts as a substitute for memory and performance. Steven’s complaint is that with such emphasis on reading and writing, oral knowledge is being devalued, and generally forgotten. He sees this as a disadvantage of Western education. With much more rigidity, Kowa links Western education and religious institutions as major causes of the loss of oral knowledge, language, and customary ways. He comments that in the presence of these institutions, traditional culture and language are the first to decline. Due to the current practice of taking a partner from outside their own culture, parents are not teaching their children to use their own language first. If this trend continues, the language will die. Preserving language in writing may be a good thing, but it is no substitute for organising, storing and transmitting knowledge through memory and oral language. It is no substitute for immersing children in their culture so that they can know their language and use it proficiently.

In Ninggirum reality, the *Ahwaaman* are the thoughts and emotions of the earth expressed through the oral language and performance of their origin and history stories (Deardorff, 2001). This knowledge is embodied in the earth, and the story is embodied in the performer. When a Ninggirum storyteller performs his story, he encodes the knowledge of the Earth, imparting it in ways that the audience can hold in memory, and pass on. If the story is forgotten, the knowledge still exists in the earth. If the performance ceases, then the knowledge lies dormant. If the performer dies, all his knowledge passes with him. Then people forget. Therefore, the use of language and memory are essential to the life of traditional, oral knowledge, and the growth and development of language and memory skills is central to the transmission of mythic history, and the care of the environment - *ok balap* (cosmos). With the dispersal of Ninggirum people through mixed marriage and generations of uninitiated young people, where are the new *Amooman*?
Narokobi (1983) comments that modern children are an unfinished product. I am now able to appreciate that, from the perspective of traditional Ninggirum values, young people are being socialised into the economic, technologic and political values of global development (Watson, 2011; Kral, 2012), and the injustice of collective individualism (van Djik, 2006). It is experienced as a value system that fosters personal generational satisfaction without due consideration for the wider community. It is unjust because it excludes traditional values from current reality. When there is little respect for nature, elders, customs and the most vulnerable of society, traditional culture fragments, and children are left without roots.

Steven and Kowa uphold the absolute necessity of handing down their Ninggirum birthright and cultural heritage to an informed, prepared generation. Though progressive development is firmly entrenched in most levels of national and local life, and the mine is still killing the river, the young people are the future who must carry Ninggirum identity forward.

But trickster is not dead, and the snakeman story may play out with different endings when told by different performers in different settings. In tracing the storylines through the body of this thesis, I have been able to see various discourses through the eyes of the performers that reveal perceptions of power and its operation in the course of their lives. And while each storyline tells me something about Ninggirum reality, no one story tells everything that can be known of Ninggirum life.

Through the feast and creation stories I have learned that feast is basic to the way Ninggirum people know their world. Through Hans’ story I have learned that feast provides a powerful learning experience, capable of bringing change in the individual and the community. Through its words and actions, feast opens a space in which people can meet the realities and problems of life with each other. It is a way to bring their ideas into one space so that they can be thought about together. It is a very powerful cultural mechanism that opens people to possibilities of new ways of thinking, being, and knowing as community.

I now understand the feast as a liminal space through which change happens. It is where self is neither what it has been, nor what it will be. It is a space of unknowing, of disjunctures, silences and creative potentials from which ‘new subjectivities emerge simultaneously with new forms’ (Somerville, 2007, p. 234). It is liminal space in which self is undone and redone, changing the very conditions of its limitations. It creates a
process through which self comes into being each time it is spoken into existence (Davies, 2004). So feast is a process that orchestrates the coming into being of the Ninggirum people, and the change and development of the community and its ways of being in the world.

In this liminal space, becoming other is a relational understanding of self that acknowledges the significance of other, be they embodied as human, plant, animal, landscape or spirit, in the constitution of self. It is from this relational space that new knowledges emerge. I now understand that life in the contact zone is about acknowledging the reality of the other, and engaging, in a fundamental way, in the dynamics of reciprocal exchange which enable me to learn about the other in ways that make me adjust, appreciate, grow and change as a person. This is a rich space for learning new things about myself and other, from which we each may emerge changed. Therefore, becoming other in the relational space that exists between embodied selves is a condition for generating new knowledges (Somerville, 2007, pp. 232-235).
Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore the effects of global economic development on education and learning in the local indigenous culture of the Ninggirum people of postcolonial Papua New Guinea. It considers the meaning of development and change to Ninggirum people through my own understanding of their world and how change happens within their reality. Against a backdrop of globalisation and development, the literature examined was inadequate for exploring the effects of development on lived experience in traditional society. Preoccupied with endless theorisation of global phenomena, current thinking based in ontological dualism favours dichotomous processes of economic selection that measure global development in terms of production, trade and foreign investment. It also favours processes of transformation within the global economy that are based on the nature and significance of technological change to facilitate the transformation of economic activity, requiring local indigenous communities to live beyond their traditional understandings.

Since 1991, I have lived in the Ninggirum community, working in their language development programme as a linguist/translator, and a significant part of the study has been the examination of my own entanglements in the constitution of the postcolonial subject and its communities and places. Rather than the critical, oppositional stance of postcolonial theory, this study uses Margaret Somerville’s post-poststructural and postcolonial ideas of place and emerging subjectivities that harness the creative potential to generate new knowledges and ways of being in the world, that seek a way forward, together. In decolonising the research process, our mutual responsibilities to others and to the more-than-human world, and to the unpredictability inherent in our relationship with this world are laid bare, inviting creative experimentation of ways of learning place that might enable the dynamic relational learning of connections between people, places and communities.

Place is space that is special to someone. It is space in which life happens. Conceptually, place creates a space between grounded physical reality and the metaphysical space of representation. Place is both a specific place and a product of the imaginary that serves as an alternative lens through which to construct knowledge about the world (Somerville, 2010, p, 330). In exploring the complex intertwining of place, memory (Davies, 2000) and identity (Somerville, 1999), assessing a sense of place is not an
exact science, but a creative analysis of the attributes of a place, and how we are in it. People often become attached to landscape, attaching special meanings to particular locations and landforms, and these meanings are capable of generating all kinds of images and stories to explain the significance of those places (Vanclay, 2008). Therefore, sacred meaning is embedded in place. It develops through engaging with creation in a broader sense, being in the world in such a way that we realise our role in co-creating the context of our lives. This engagement with the universe has the ability to open a sense of the sacred that is not reduced to, or dependent on human engineering.

People experience significant events that occur in particular spaces, and these events take on personal meanings that become embedded in their memories and the things they talk about. Communities also experience events that take on social meanings that embed in their memories and stories. Whether the events are actual or imagined, associated with positive feelings or negative, it is their personal and social meaning that turns space into place (Vanclay, 2008). Therefore, place is a communal space in which relations with environment, family, spirit and outsider find their meaning. In this space, social harmony is maintained through adherence to the protocols of exchange that show people how to live well together, to keep the peace, and to restore peace when relationships are damaged and broken. As a context for community, place shows who we are, how we relate and how we belong.

Decolonising research, of necessity, opens a contact zone of contestation between Western and Ninggirum worlds. It is a liminal space in which my researcher self interacted with Ninggirum people in collecting traditional oral stories and life stories that formed the body of research materials for this thesis. Research methods included recording traditional oral stories and contemporary life histories in Ninggirum language, Tok Pisin and English, and recording the process in extensive field notes and personal journals. Language texts were analysed linguistically and structurally for grammatical and cultural meaning. Conversation texts were transcribed and assembled as storylines. Traditional oral stories were analysed using principles of mythopoesis and the trickster literary device. All texts were analysed performatively for what they said about Ninggirum reality, perceptions of development and impacts of global change processes on environment and community, and all materials were interpreted through a representation of Ninggirum ontological and aesthetic understandings of orature.
Through the dynamics of language, writing and representation, I recognised these story materials as new representations that bring new and disruptive insights to my fixed and limited understandings of Ninggirum reality. Traditional stories and personal life histories serve to train storytellers to help children and adults think, feel and be through the power of their stories. And the power of the story lies in the cultural principles it upholds. In examining Ninggirum aesthetics I realised that Ninggirum people value respect, reciprocity, community, responsibility, reverence for life and nature, holism and its interrelatedness, and that a good life is more than the sum of its parts interacting well. These principles form a theoretical framework for making meaning from stories and for using them in educational contexts. Through the activity of the trickster, I began to appreciate that traditional stories take on a life of their own, becoming the teacher of cultural values and the practices they create. As trickster jumps in and out of contexts, situations and dilemmas, he weaves these values into a distinct shape, combining them to create the meaning of the performance. With each new story, these values are transformed into new designs that serve to educate the heart, mind, body and spirit.

In tracing the storylines through the body of this thesis, I have been able to see various discourses through the eyes of the performers. They reveal perceptions of power and its operation in the course of their lives. Each storyline says something about Ninggirum reality, but no one story tells everything that can be known of Ninggirum life. Yet stories may play out differently when told by different performers in different settings. They may change characters, reverse roles, and make all kinds of different endings.

Traditional storylines show that, along with the Wopkaimin people whose traditional land lies to the north of the Ok Tedi mine site, Ninggirum people are also traditional owners of the land that is being mined. In the face of the continued destruction of their environment, lack of compensation and blatant disregard for the welfare of the local people, Ninggirum people dispute Ok Tedi Mining Limited’s (OTML) right to own the land and mineral resources, because they are not the traditional owners of the land. In the face of environmental collapse, Ninggirum people are left with a sense that the rules governing the natural environment are no longer in effect. Because of broken relationship with the Ancestors who have withdrawn their support from the natural world, nature no longer abundantly provides for Ninggirum people. When the natural world grows quiet and conversations with the creatures cease, symbol loses its capacity
to generate insight into the human condition and to address the dilemmas that people face.

The language of the traditional stories reflects ways of thinking and being in the world that arise from communication with the natural world. It shows that nature is the vocabulary of Ninggirum stories, their ritual practices and sacred understandings. When the processes of economic development damage the connections between nature and sociality, traditional life becomes demythologised. The cycles of history reduce to a disconnected abstraction of unrelated events, removed from the lived world. Instead of interacting within nature, the human is contained in thought floating in the air above, looking down at nature’s potential for production. Space becomes reorganised according to time instead of place, thus ‘othering’ spatio-temporal sociality. Because the link between events becomes causal and conditional, it abstracts by separating ontological thought from material reality. The effect of this reorganisation of ideas on Ninggirum life is to rearrange their reality.

This way of thinking separates human from nature, human from every other being, and ideas of self become distorted. By separating person-hood from nature, a person ceases to know where they are, how they are and who they are. Referentiality is lost, along with the ability to make sense of life in their world. The self loses indivuality, the communal identity through which it knows life in the social world as same, other and another. Limited to the space within its own skin, self becomes individual, reduced to the dyad of binary opposition. Separating person from nature also separates person from body. This dissolves the connections with nature by which Ninggirum person is gendered. When the body loses gender definition, person becomes desexualised, and alienated from communal identity. Thus, Western economic thought homogenises Ninggirum space by collapsing cosmological zones and social spaces into one, functional stratum of time, imprisoning both nature and the person inside impotent, infertile, self-consuming space, eliminating the possibility of renewal through the continuous cycling of nature.

Contemporary story-lines show that Ninggirum people want their society to progress in order to gain the things that are missing from their lives, e.g., roads, bridges, electricity and the means of earning regular income. But this needs to happen through a mutually beneficial relationship with development, where customary ways continue to guide Ninggirum life, and technological ways work for the good of the Ninggirum people.
However, not only has progressive development subtracted from their customary life, it has disrupted their ways of being in the world, and thrown Ninggirum society into perpetual crisis. These stories grapple with life in the social space characterised by the Ok Tedi mine and the presence of foreign and white skinned people in the Ninggirum world. Since the mine appeared in their world changing the course of Ninggirum life, the Ancestors have been silent. As the mine crushes rock and extracts mineral, the body and bones of the Ancestors are being systematically flushed down the river, along with their life-giving body fluids. With the desecration of their bodies and resting places, the Ancestors are no longer renewing life in the natural world. So life progressively deteriorates as the environment marches along a path of community amnesia to destruction.

In following the ways of economic development, Ninggirum people realise that they must depend on ‘money’ for survival, and that foreign and white-skinned people do not always treat everyone equitably, respectfully and justly. As Ninggirum people struggle to share space with them, they lament this domination of Ninggirum sociality. In trying to make sense of these stories, I came to realise that I was handling the materials of Ninggirum memory. In collecting the stories, memories were stirred that generated these unique performances of story with their unexpected outcomes, engaging us in a deeply powerful process of Ninggirum people making sense of their chaotic world and of themselves in it.

Central to the way Ninggirum people know their world is the feast. Feast is communal space in which power is actualised. It is Ninggirum choreography through which people collect, exchange and process their thoughts together. In this way, they build a common understanding of where they are, where they are headed, and what they need to do. Consensus, then, enables them to move forward together, in harmony. In this space, Ninggirum person-hood is constituted through mythic-historical ritual that serves the social functions of identity and gender formation, as in the process of children becoming adults. Through ritual impartation, initiates receive the life power of the Ancestors, endowing them with the knowledge, gifts and abilities that birth them as mature males, ready for the social responsibility of marriage.

Feast facilitates exchange as the means by which Ninggirum social institutions accumulate the Ancestors’ resources and distribute them amongst the community. But exchange is far more than payment of goods received as in a consumer society. While
marriage serves the economic function of distribution that keeps traditional resources (shell money, pigs, food, tools, weapons) circulating, it builds social capital in the form of cohesion within and between groups. It compensates a woman’s clan for the loss of her contribution to their daily life, their grief and sadness, her body fluids, any children she might have, and for the use of ancestral land that she is connected with. Marital alliance according to the clan patterns of relationships is understood as the communal exchange and equal distribution of women amongst the clans, and of male and female body fluids essential for the healthy propagation of the whole group. It exchanges social welfare. However, the status and roles of women in traditional society are changing as issues of human rights and equality become a core interest of many global development agencies.

Feast also involves the ritual act of exchange, *ok*, that brings abundance and prosperity to the community. As a liminal space in which change happens, feast provides a powerful learning experience, capable of bringing change in the individual and the community. Through its words and actions, feast opens a space in which Ninggirum people meet the realities and problems of life with each other. It is a very powerful cultural mechanism that opens people to possibilities of new ways of thinking, being, and knowing as community.

Western development practices and technology supported by formal education and religious institutions tend to exclude young people from customary ways that enable the development of a sustaintainable feast space. These institutions emphasise the reading and writing of scientific knowledge, hence traditional oral knowledge tends to be devalued and eventually forgotten (Ong, 1982). Preserving language in writing is a good thing, but it is no substitute for organising, storing and transmitting knowledge through memory and oral language. There is no substitute for immersing children in their culture so that they can know their language and use it proficiently.

By far the most devastating sacrifice has been the environment. It seems that the only offering consumerism will accept is the way of life that has sustained Ninggirum people throughout the history of their existence. Though perhaps not deliberate, failure to respect the life of the environment through mismanagement and neglect has had severe and destructive effects on the river, local environs and sociality. The neglect of feast as social space that produces common, on-going stories capable of driving community action forward diminishes the power to act communally. Over time, people lose cultural
solidarity and sensitivity to cultural practice. Their stories become more individualised, and in this new space, people are making many different stories. This implies a need to strengthen cultural identity through recreating the ceremonial space where ideas are thought together and communal identity is reconstituted. It also implies the creation of an in-between space of cultural contact as a choreography of difference where, becoming other to self, participation may be respectful, mutual, and caring, considering the priority needs of the least advantaged.

While Western thought reflects a preference for knowing the world through continuity, certainty and a stable self, where change happens progressively and incrementally, I think Ninggirum tradition prefers to know the world through spatio-temporal, relational dynamics with the natural world, where the development of the whole community embraces the development of the whole person. And change happens as a process of transition through stages of being that cycle between the natural world and the space beneath the surface. Ninggirum people appear to handle change by drawing on their ancient, traditional stories, by adapting to some things and rejecting others, and by trying to educate their children to live differently in the face of dominant pressures from governance and employment patterns associated with economic development, environmental exploitation, literacy education, religious institutions, technology and network communications, and their accompanying ideologies (Kral, 2012).

These two systems of thought now exist in the same space, a circumstance that has challenged known ways of being Ninggirum in the world. In the space between the two systems, each has opportunity to learn from the other, through exchanges that may allow them to live with acceptance of difference, with respect for each other’s becoming, and with genuine regard for the environment. So the Ninggirum people live in hope of such conversation, waiting for their river and environment to come alive again.
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Appendix 1

Participant Explanation Form

MONASH University


Nup Ninglup veng heilla bivala.

Kelek kelevo nup velokdi awotomo veng waswendyan ke.

Tiksa kelevo ne kulmedi kon ke, du duno Margaret Somerville. Dula kon hulen sikul hulen Monash University. Du ben ni izi dageleenu, dip veng bugo engmendenee naap.

Helobo nup ben Ninggurum ninglup veng be veng hwooup velokdaup boup ke, Avotomo Kema? Nimala kula haedi hopkondelke kele keh.

Nup vaga amova kurnu hene nglangle inum holon, ko kwon kop kale nup ninglup venga hopkondelke amobalo buke wandaemnego, ko mivninki danman. Nup havi dyab enenaad avenemnego tan ben buke kelevo wunemnego, di mivninki sap keem dendy. Di ben di amobalo maa keem dendy nup kale.


Alimmungu mwin bim ninglup veng veng haemenke, belendii haemenke, pikalo wandaemnego, nup hopkondelke holen doman.

Alimmungu haleb veng kalevo buke mivninki mo wandaemnego. Menena, alimmungu dawom kopyon kap, nuve elaa belekalo haemenke. Dip keem dendy Alon kaleo, veng kalep buke dip mivm mwin ti okwemnego.


Kaa kiti veng melap, Monash University amop kele kev. Divo mivm mwin ben kwon mo vengi dip. Divo mivm mwin ben kele kelevo be dip duno kalei keh, ko kwon mo vengi kele kev ke.

Kaono manemagalo, divo Mista Kowa ti oniva veng yaleko, Ninglum Seseben.

Title: What price paradise?: and the Ningigrum good life

This is Dr. Margaret Somerville, a leader in the Department of Education at Monash University in Australia. She is my teacher and will help me make a book about Ningigrum life.

This paper will explain the purpose of our meeting together.

Now (today) we (inclusive) are gathering together to discuss the Ningigrum story. What is the reason? Some people think like this, our (inclusive) language and laws and customs are important, so that if our stories and history and thinking is written in books, that is very good. When our grandchildren coming later (in following generations) read these books, they will be very happy, because they know their history.

But this story will not stay only in books. No. It will be in our thinking and conversations. Many people will hear it. Our children and grandchildren will know about it. When you (plural) participate in this, it is an important event.

In the first week, we will discuss, make dramas (dance), and pictures about the important things we think about.

In the second week we will write these in a book. Later on the weekends, we will make a small feast. Let's celebrate (be happy)! At that time each of you will be given a (copy of the) book.

Colleen is a work lady for the Australian school where she is a PhD student. The school is called Monash University, they are doing this work. But the information (produced) belongs to you (plural), it's not theirs. If someone else wants to know this information, Monash University will tell them, no, it is forbidden. Because you Ningigrum people must say it is OK first.

There is another announcement. Monash University has a rule. Each one of you must say it is all right to participate.

Each morning we will tell stories about Ningigrum life here in Ningigrum land. The stories will be about you and what is important to you. If you don't want people to know about you or your story, we will hide your name. We will record our story-making and stories on audio cassette tapes. Then we'll have midday food together and rest.

Then you can work on drawings/abstracts/drama/body painting/singing that tell your story. We will do this for five days, and then we'll rest. Then the following week we will make a book. We will write our stories on paper in Ningigrum language and turn them into English (so the university's leader can read them and know who Ningigrum people are). We will keep working on our singing and at the end of the week we'll have a small feast and show the community what we have learned. We will celebrate the knowledge we've made.

Our elders will be with us to help us remember our ancestors and about times long ago. They will help us with our language and teach us Ningigrum ways. They will help us, and comfort us if we feel sad.

Ningigrum knowledge is very important, and Colleen will hold it so that no one can steal it or use it without you knowing.

When the study is finished, and the teacher has helped me make the book about Ningigrum life, you, me, Howard and Ningigrum people will come together for a feast. I will give back to Ningigrum people the book, the audio tapes, drawings and photographs, and we will eat together to celebrate the coming of the knowledge. You can make singing to tell the story of how the book was made and how it is important to Ningigrum people. We can thank Akhsaaman for our good Ningigrum life.

If you have concerns about the study, you can talk with Mr Kowa at Ningigrum Station.

NOTE: This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix 2

Participant Consent Form

Nup Ningtup veng helila bwilla.

Kelek kelevo nup velokdi awotomo veng waamendyane ke.


Konst, veng kelevo buli be ma baan ben. Dahao. Veng kelevo nup veng veng hopkondie la be baanen. Nimafa k آلاف kekse be veng kelevo wandaemnaivo ke. Nup tena dyi a havi dyi la be veng vao kaai keemnaip. Diwe haemnaivo, inu mivanyi kap.

Almingggu miwam be ningtup veng veng hwemnaipo, belendii haemnaipo, pikala wandaemnaipo, hopkondie haen doman. Almingggu halipo be veng kelevo buli be mivinyi mo wandaemnaivo. Menaan, almingggu dowami ko anpo ko, vula maa belekaado haemnaipo. Dap keendyog Alon kelevo, veng kelevo buli di mivinyi miwam diwami haemnaipo.


Nelep kambang tanep ningtup veng veng hwemnaipo

Ni tan ben veng kelevo teep be haemnaipo

Nup mivinko mupiksa kelevo snap keemnaipo

Nup ben ningtup veng kelevo wanduup buli mo engmenneke

Menenai ben, di veng malo wandaal, ne veng malap veng haanen

Di ben Monash sikulu be ni vengi keipv, wes ango be mo baemnaip

Kalup malo ni kwin mo be veng vao wandaanen

Ne dunep ne ningtup vengir buli be wandaemnaivo, ke kwin ma

Ne piksalep ne wandeilep ne dipe buli be wandaemnaivo, ko kwin ma

Participant's name

Signature

Date

Kaa kli veng: Kelle kelevo nuvep ni tisan be baanen

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Consent Form – Ninggirum story-making project

Title: What price paradise?: and the Ninggirum good life.

Now (today) we (inclusive) are gathering together to discuss the Ninggirum story. What is the reason? Some people think like this, our (inclusive) language and laws and customs are important, so then if our stories and history and thinking is written in books, that is very good. When our grandchildren come later (in following generations) read those books, they will be very happy, because they know their history.

But this story will not stay only in books. No. It will be in our thinking and conversations. Many people will hear it. Our children and grandchildren will know about it. When you (plural) participate in this, it is an important event.

In the first week, we will discuss, make dramas (dance), and pictures about the important things we think about. In the second week we will write these in a book. Later as the week ends, we will make a small feast. Let’s celebrate (be happy)! At that time each of you will be given a (copy of the) book.

Colleen is a work lady for the Australian school where she is a PhD student. The school is called Monash University; they are doing this work. But the information (produced) belongs to you (plural), it is not theirs. If someone else wants to know this information, Monash University will tell them, no, it is forbidden. Because you Ninggirum people must say it is OK first.

There is another announcement. Monash University has a rule. Each one of you must say it is all right to participate.

I agree to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the Explanatory Statement, which I keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that

I volunteer to take part in a story-making group Yes No
The sessions will be audio-taped Yes No
We will take photographs Yes No
We will make a book of the stories Yes No
I will be available for follow-up if required Yes No
Our stories will also be kept at the Monash school in Australia for 5 years Yes No
No one else can use them unless they ask us first Yes No
It is OK for my name and stories to be used in the book Yes No
It is OK for my photograph/s/drawings/singing to be used in the book Yes No
Appendix 3

Mr. Kowa's letter

From: Mr. Keel Kowa
P.O. Box 28,
Tokelau, W.P.
Papua New Guinea
8th December, 2008

Dear Ethnic Committee of Monash University Australia,

I, Mr. Keel Kowa, the District Elementary Teacher, Torriveri Nunggurum local level Government (LLG) hereby acknowledged the letter of request for me to lead the Story Telling Workshop here at Nunggurum from 4th – 16th January 2009. I will be very much happy to assist and lead the story telling of which Colleen Gathy will be collecting the materials for the study of the Nunggurum tribe life and ways.

I will also be available to hear anyone’s complaint or concerns during the workshop should they arise. If your committee needs further clarification, I am more than happy for you to contact me at the given address above.

Thank you

Yours Sincerely

Keel Kowa