Notions of (In)Dependence at a Papua New Guinean University

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ABSTRACT

This article explores notions of interpersonal dependence and personal independence voiced by university students, graduates, and staff in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It discusses how those obtaining a university education to become regular wage earners reflect on navigating the financial requests of less privileged kin. Wage earners often ascribe dependence to these kin and former sponsors who subsequently may rely on them in times of need. As the number of putatively dependent kin are often large, the process of social stratification that university-educated wage earners experience also gives rise to reflections about social welfare systems that underlie or could potentially alleviate specific constellations of perceived dependence. Ascriptions of dependence as discussed in this article highlight the combination of the dynamic circumstances of ongoing social stratification and nation-making with increased levels of connectivity through transport and mobile phone infrastructure, leading an emerging middle class to reconsider some of their social connections.

Keywords: dependence, kin relations, social stratification, welfare systems, university students, Papua New Guinea.

INTRODUCTION

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), emic notions of dependence and independence constitute a popular pair of antonyms. They are invoked in relation to a range of contexts and varying scales. In its perhaps most obvious sense, independence marks the end of the Australian colonial administration and the declaration of the independent state of PNG (compare Hoëm 2021, this issue, for a different constellation in Tokelau). Yet, Papua New Guineans commonly lament the country's continued economic dependence on foreign loans and development aid since PNG's political independence from Australia (compare Martin 2021b, introduction). Some suggest that Australia never meant to let PNG be entirely independent, and always intended to keep PNG on a tight leash of economic dependence so that it could access the country's resources on favourable terms (for more specific resource-related discussions see Hoëm 2021, McCormack 2021 on fish, Smith 2021 on land, all this issue). This emic perspective voiced in PNG is often reminiscent of world systems and dependency theory (*cf.* Martin 2021b, Introduction; Smith 2021, this issue; Wallerstein 1974).

There are other contexts in which notions of dependence and independence become mobilised in PNG and at its universities, in manners that do not immediately seem to reference these kinds of theoretical debates but instead frame the issue from different angles. Students and staff at the University of Goroka (UoG), for example, regularly use these terms when describing the relation to their sponsors and relatives, especially to those who do, or will in future, rely on their financial support. In these instances, an emerging wage-earning PNG middle class (*cf.* Cox 2014, 2018; Gewertz and Errington 1999; Gibson 2019; Rasmussen 2015) draws attention to what they perceive as their unwaged relatives' dependence on them for financial needs. Nation-making and development theory are never far away in these ascriptions of dependence either, as notions of interpersonal dependence become evaluated against the imagery and concept of welfare states in other countries and the potential scope for such systems in PNG – could a social welfare system make PNG's so-called grassroots population become independent of their more privileged and wage-earning kin (*cf.* Smith 2021, this issue, for grassroots perspectives in Vanuatu)?

Throughout the different ways of mobilising explicit notions of dependence among my interlocutors at UoG, dependence usually remained a negatively charged category, in contrast to independence that is styled as a valued attribute. The reference to national independence may be clear. The imagery that is mobilised in popular usage in PNG today, however, also shifts away from the achievement of independence in terms of gaining national sovereignty that ends subordination to a coloniser. The notion of independence that Papua New Guineans colloquially apply today brings to bear rather the imagery of an entity or person that does not rely on others for their economic means of survival – whether as state or private person. Recently, Martin and Yanagisako (2020) have built on James Ferguson (2013) to argue that the idea of being completely independent largely remains an elusive aspiration. Instead, the value of independence in social relations is often evoked to critique specific relational dynamics of perceived dependence across gradients of (structural) inequality. The notion of dependence is thus applied to relations of interdependence that are regarded as a nuisance or unsustainable burden, between persons, or a problematic reliance on other states.

In his article on 'declarations of dependence', Ferguson (2013) raised the issue that liberal ideas about the value of personal independence tend to obscure what or whom people are dependent on. Developing on this, Martin and Yanagisako (2020) argue that the question of the extent to which wage labour makes someone dependent or independent is in the eye of the beholder. Most people engaged in wage labour depend on it for their living. From another perspective, it is celebrated as granting people a degree of independence from the reliance on other people or the state and its social welfare systems, where such exist. The question then becomes what or whom people are dependent on that consequently allows them to be relatively more independent of other sources of support. Indeed, whether to focus on people insisting on certain ideals of independence or on their denunciation of specific forms of dependence, is to explore the contextual constructs that characterise the webs of interdependence everyone's existence is enmeshed in.

What are regarded as appropriate or desirable forms of (inter)dependence also varies historically. As Martin and Yanagisako (2020:650) point out, in 17th century England it was ownership of property in land that was regarded as making someone independent of reliance on others. But such definitions changed with the industrial revolution when wage labour became increasingly pitched as affording levels of independence to the non-propertied classes. With regard to PNG, Martin (2021a, this issue) describes for East New Britain's Tolai, how different kinds of dependencies relating to forms of patronage (from 'Big Man' to 'Big Shot'), land-ownership and cash-cropping, and white-collar wage labour, have enjoyed different appreciations over the last decades and are all part of changing

constellations of relational interdependencies. All these different sources of support carry or afford different degrees of dependence and independence from others. Elsewhere in PNG, Rasmussen (2015) discusses the requests by Mbuke islanders for remittances from their wage-earning kin in urban centres of PNG and beyond, glossed through the Tok Pisin term 'singaut'. Here as well, different forms of interdependence and their relative emphasis become important. In the absence of a social welfare system, those who are receiving requests for remittances are seeking to foster a sense of 'community' among islanders that shifts the emphasis of interdependencies from their remittances to local collective action of working together.

In this article, I expand and contribute to this scholarship by illuminating and analysing the rhetoric around explicit notions of personal dependence as they become voiced, reflected upon, and theorised, at specific junctures and positions of social stratification in PNG and particularly in its higher education system today. These notions are often ambivalent, as they juggle the acknowledgment of social interdependencies and a desire to limit their reach (see Martin 2021b introduction, this issue). This brings up recognisable themes about navigating novel forms of social stratification in PNG (see for example Cox 2018, 2021; Gewertz and Errington 1999; Golub 2014; Martin 2013; Rasmussen 2015), which I wish to add to and develop in several ways. Firstly, rather than describing divergent rhetorics based on established differentiated subject positions with competing interests and narratives, I map the conceptual concern with notions of interdependence, and explicit ascriptions of dependence as emerging from specific processes that lead to social stratification: in this instance, higher education. Secondly, I describe and analyse such ascriptions of dependence in the context of a national institution that mirrors and shapes a pan-PNG national culture which often subsumes local specificities into a broader shared narrative. The specific and frequent reference to PNG's universities as 'national institutions' at which the 'national elite' becomes constituted is more than of tangential interest in this regard: it creates a context of explicit nation-making where personal (in)dependence and national (in)dependence become (re)connected in reflection and rhetoric.

This specific ethnographic context of the national institution of a university may well be one in which rhetoric surrounding the term 'dependence' is both frequent and prominent, in possible contrast to rural settings that anthropologists tend to study. Dependence here is not derived from my cabinet of analytical categories, but is rather an emic concept. During 18 months of fieldwork at UoG in 2013 and 2014, it presented itself as a recurrent theme and term brought up by staff and students in both public rhetoric and personal conversations with me. As Ira Bashkow's presence as a foreign anthropologist in PNG elicited reflections on whitemen (Bashkow 2006), so did I as someone from a place associated with state-run social welfare systems prompt conversations about differences in customs and the rationale of public welfare schemes. However, the concept of dependence circulates well beyond the university; it features often in letters to national newspapers that I will discuss.

Through the sections that follow, I attempt to make visible the entanglement of different values and meanings that coalesce into ascriptions of dependence in PNG today, while at the same time dissecting their common spine. I do so in four steps. First, I illustrate how dependence is discussed among wage earners (and wage earners to-be) at the University of Goroka who are immersed within personal relations to kin. Then, I expand on the reflections that students and staff engage in on whether and how these perceived (inter)dependencies could be alleviated through a national social welfare scheme. Thirdly, I discuss how wage earners, and especially those recently graduated from university, negotiate degrees of independence as part of processes of social stratification. In a final step, I place these contemporary questions about personal (in)dependence in juxtaposition with historical concerns about nation-making in an independent PNG which were voiced by colonial era bureaucrats and

academics. They were, for example, concerned about the challenges of state-formation in the Pacific in the historical context of what they saw as small-scale societies that were not adapted or suited yet to the impersonal abstract functioning of state bureaucracies (Benedict 1967).

One of the conceptual anchors around which ascriptions of dependence gravitate is discussions of the *wantok system* which often explore the tension between particularistic personal social obligations *versus* the putatively universalistic bureaucracy of the state (Nanau 2011; Schram 2015). The term *wantok* (one talk) literally describes a person with whom one shares the same language. In a country of more than 800 languages it thus inherently refers to the idea of a shared customary community that may be small and tightly bonded internally. The term gets applied in varied contexts, however, and can imply connection through kinship or other ways in which bonds or unions have been created. Generally, in any case, the term wantok is a rather broad category that denotes relations that draw on some established or traceable local connection while at the same time being distinct from, or more distant, than one's closest and most immediate kin (*cf.* Schram 2015). In other words the term wantok signifies a gradient of both connection and separateness that is important in analysing ascriptions of dependence and the tension between particular personal relations and the putatively abstract and impersonal bureaucracy of the state. At this point, suffice to point out that ascriptions of dependence are often becoming conceptually connected to notions of the wantok system and to voiced concerns about the dependence on and obligation to wantoks, perceived as characteristic of contemporary PNG and as having corrupted the supposedly impersonal bureaucracy of the state (*cf.* Golub 2014:174). I argue that ascriptions of dependence among kin are a rhetorical device used to draw attention to the dynamics of interpersonal relations, which are also personally experienced as part of the dilemma in PNG nation-making in the context of emerging (structural) inequalities.

I should also point out that the concept of class for example has been rather muted in PNG-related scholarship as a category of analysis until relatively recently, although it is enjoying growing attention. Its relative absence in scholarly literature may partly be explained by the influential critique of transplanting specific Western concerns and conceptualisations into the analysis of Melanesia, which has its own specific constellations of inequality that differ from those along the lines of class and gender often studied in the West (Strathern 1988). A lot has changed, however, from the early days of gendered migration into the urban and then explicitly colonial Port Moresby (Strathern 1975). This includes the emergence of a new socio-economic stratum which is increasingly involved in the globalised economy and in national developmental aspirations while still connected to less privileged kin (Cox 2018; Rasmussen 2015). All this exists entangled within gendered relations and gender conflicts that are inherently rooted in PNGs social fabric as much as they can be analysed through global gender categories (Demian 2017; Spark 2020). Through this article, I contribute to the recent scholarship on emergent class, urban PNG, and to some extent, gender, through an exploration of debate around the emic concept of dependence among students and, mostly, precarious university staff who are in an uncertain process of social stratification rather than in established (subject) positions in terms of class and wealth. By following the prompts of people's discussions of dependence in relation to social welfare schemes, I further trace the sustained significance of ideologies, introduced as colonial concerns, in how notions of dependence are discussed and ascribed in dialectic distinction to certain ideals of independence. Taken together, the analysis points to the shifting grounds of negotiating intersubjective belonging in the personally experienced process of social stratification in the context of national institutions (and rhetoric) in urban PNG today. It also points to the related and continuing challenge

resulting from a too quick correlation of emic concepts of dependence, wantokism, or corruption, with western ideas about them, colonial or contemporary, that keep infusing the understanding, and misunderstanding, of social processes and experiences in PNG today.

SETTING – THE UNIVERSITY OF GOROKA

The University of Goroka (UoG) in the PNG highlands that I draw on for ethnographic illustration in this article is one of four public universities in the country. It was established as the Goroka Teacher's College in 1962 and later incorporated as a highlands campus of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). It functioned as UPNG's Faculty of Education before it was given the status of university on its own in 1997. While increasing the number of programs on offer since, the University of Goroka remains foremostly an institution focusing on teacher education. It is the go-to government institution in PNG for becoming teachers and for teachers seeking in-service training and degrees; from the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), *via* the B.Ed. (Honours) that is a separate postgraduate qualification in PNG, up to Master and PhD programs. The university attracts students from all over the country and beyond, including students from the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru and occasionally further afield.

The demography of students at UoG, however, differs somewhat from those of the two older and more prestigious PNG universities, UPNG and the PNG University of Technology (Unitech). These two universities require better grade average points from school leavers and higher fees for attendance. UoG thus largely attracts students who either did not meet the entry requirements or could not afford the higher fees of UPNG or Unitech. Often, these students have marked UoG as a second or third choice after UPNG and/or Unitech, to study their subject area at UoG, either on its own, or towards an education degree. Other students choose UoG for the exceptionally high prospects of employment as a teacher following a B. Ed. degree from UoG. Basically, at the time of fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, all students who completed the B.Ed. programme and sought teaching positions in schools secured employment for the following year. Some schools, provincial education departments and private education providers even come to UoG for recruitment drives that compete for final year students to join their schools. Again others, especially students from the highlands, choose UoG for its proximity to their home and kin. Some may have relatives in Goroka town who can look after them during their studies. In summary, and in rather marked difference to UPNG and Unitech, students at UoG are often from rural, less privileged backgrounds. They are frequently the first generation to achieve a university education among their kin and sometimes wider community. In other words, most students and junior temporary staff at UoG inhabit a very different subject position from those of established middle-class backgrounds attending UPNG. This also means that students regularly rely on large networks of kin and sponsors to attend university and to meet the costs of their education fees and living expenses in urban Goroka. This is the case even for those with a partial government scholarship.

While students rely on kin each year to meet their fees and residential costs in Goroka, once students finish their degrees a similarly large number of people will rely on them for support in times of financial need, or even on a more regular basis. Students, then, require the support of their kin and sponsors for their university education – often bringing a considerable burden to their sponsors along with the annual uncertainty of whether the required financial resources can be raked in. This situation is reversed once students have graduated and are in employment as teachers. Following a period of several months, which is often what it takes to be added to the government payroll as a new teacher (and during which

graduates continue to rely on kin and sponsors), it is their kin and former sponsors who expect reciprocation and assistance in return. From that moment onwards, it is the teacher with a regular fortnightly income who is called upon for support from his kin and former sponsors. This may take the form, for example, of regular assistance to ageing parents who otherwise rely on agricultural activities for their livelihood, or to sponsor other kin in turn for their university fees or other arising needs. In this constellation, 'dependence' is now flipped and refers increasingly to one's kin and community articulating requests for support. Such concerns are often expressed by freshly minted teachers and university staff when describing the dependence of their kin on them. It is these ascriptions of dependence that I now address in more detail.

ASCRIPTIONS OF DEPENDENCE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS

When students have settled back onto campus and into university routines at the beginning of the academic year, provincial student associations call the students of their provinces for an introduction meeting. Provincial student associations are important avenues for student socialization and constitute one of the main networks that students form part of and spend time with, during their time at university, along with groups of classmates, fellow worshippers of various religious denominations, sports teams and fellow residents of dormitory blocks (compare Reed 2003 on such diverse collectivities). The main purpose of the annual introduction meeting by provincial student associations is to introduce new students to other students from their respective provinces. This is often in the presence of one or more 'patrons' from the province, such as a member of staff at the university or someone residing in Goroka town. These meetings usually have a common pattern: an introduction by the new student association executives that had been elected at the end of the previous year, speeches by student leaders and patrons, and then students from each year of study are called to the front to introduce themselves. This formal program is followed by socialising over a shared meal.

At the beginning of the academic year in 2014, I was invited to the Simbu Student Association introduction meeting. Prior to the start of the meeting, I stood with a group of students outside the venue, a lecture hall in the university's main quad that had otherwise been quiet this Saturday afternoon. Our conversation was dominated by the difficulty students faced once again over the Christmas holidays in raising the fees and costs to attend university during the upcoming academic year (compare Sykes 2001 for a different kind of discussion surrounding school fees in rural New Ireland). The recent struggle to collect sufficient fees to register for the academic year was still fresh in students' minds. Those present were relieved that they had managed. For many it remained an ongoing uncertain endeavour every year, which was further compounded by rising fees as the university attempted to make up for stagnant or reduced annual budget allocations by the government - despite the imperative to grow and expand the student intake and academic offerings.

A mature student, let's call him Patrick, exemplified the burden of rising university fees across PNG's universities through his own specific circumstances. As a public servant, his employer facilitated the opportunity to attend university. Yet things remained challenging, for in his status as wage-earner he was expected to support others of his extended kin with their university fees rather than attend university himself. According to him, his decision to attend studies for completing a degree was met with disapproval among his extended kin. Why would he seek to advance himself even further as public servant while many other less fortunate kin without a wage were desperate to attend university or training courses so as also to find employment? The only way to alleviate this disapproval by kin was for him to

support others with fees to attend tertiary education. He was thus forced into debt himself to meet what he calls his obligations to extended kin. He claimed that this was a common problem for public servants like him. Whether advancing their careers through a university degree or not, they end up indebting themselves throughout their career to meet the demands placed on them by kin.

Other students around us signalled approval and qualified his account by recourse to the notions of independence and dependence that they commonly applied to such contexts: we are not independent but still dependent – '*mipla stap dependent yet*'. In other words, people are dependent on each other *via* networks of extended kin for university fees and other needs that require modern money. In Patrick's account, he is overburdened by obligations. His account draws a picture of extended kin remaining dependent on him as a wage earner for the rest of his working life. This dependence leads to debt, as the demands outpace the financial income of a public servant or employee. The '*yet*' in Tok Pisin, which can be translated as 'still' in English, also signals that this possibly could or should be different in future, towards a more independent existence; a possibility I will return to below.

Others spoke of his account as illustrating a bad side of the wantok system, which facilitated such unrelenting demands. However, others were also quick to chip in that the wantok system also has a good side, as it enabled individuals to rely on others in times of need, providing a system of caring solidarity (compare the *Inati*-system, Hoëm 2021, this issue; Smith 2021, this issue). Presumably, many of the younger students around us were exactly at this other end of this system, requiring the assistance of kin to attend university. At the same time, they know that the tables will turn once they complete their degree and enter employment. The concern expressed in Patrick's characterisation of dependence is that one cannot reasonably meet all these requests and expectations for the rest of one's working life (compare Rasmussen 2015). Patrick evoked the image of the public servant returning home with nothing upon retirement at the end of a career, building a bush material hut as home and relying on the goodwill of those one had supported throughout one's career. As a lecturer at UoG poignantly suggested to me in a different instance: in nearby Australia academics travel and see the world whereas 'here in PNG we are stuck buying pigs for our relatives'. The wantok system, as someone among the students added as we were waiting for the Simbu student association meeting to begin, is PNG's welfare system.

A few weeks earlier in the beginning of 2014, I ran into a former student of UoG, William, who I first met during studies at UoG in 2010. He completed his degree in 2011 and had been teaching since. He lives with his wife and their three-year-old child. The birth of their child prevented his wife from completing her studies while he completed his. They had hoped to return to university together, for her to complete her degree and for him to do further studies. He asserts, however, that this will not be possible, and that instead his wife will return to UoG to complete her studies this year, and once she is teaching, he may return for further studies. The point is that they would not be able to study both at the same time even if the private school he is teaching at would support them to do that. As he explains, too many relatives rely on their support and may request assistance in times of need. If both returned to study at the same time, they would not be able to come up with such assistance. Thus, at least one of them must be working so as to be able to meet any arising needs of relatives. He summed these thoughts by remarking on an already familiar ascription: that while PNG became an independent country, its people are not independent yet, but remain dependent (on others).

William explained that this dependence was due to the unavailability of services for those living in PNG's villages, or so-called grassroots in general, and that people are thus dependent on those with incomes for any arising financial needs. Once the government developed the ability to look after everyone's needs properly, then it may make sense for

people to become independent of each other in the way people are perceived to be in rich countries with more comprehensive welfare systems. For as long as that is not the case, however, it is not good to turn one's back on people in or from the village or other relatives in need. William added that there are many who go their own way and ignore their relatives in need once they have entered employment. They are dubbed 'whitemen' for they are seen to enjoy unfettered independence (*cf.* Bashkow 2006).

In these two accounts, independence is used as a notion that means to leave behind the contextual circumstances in which kin depend on one another. According to the two instances of rhetorical ascriptions of dependence above, dependence among kin is a general feature of life in PNG, especially in the absence of a welfare state that could step in for those in need. When wage-earners imagine their less privileged relatives as potentially independent from them through the provisions of a social welfare system administered by the state, they also imagine their own freedom from financial obligation to kin in a lifestyle that is independent from (the unrelenting needs of) others.

SOCIAL WELFARE AS THE STEP OUT OF DEPENDENCE?

In this context, where dependence is ascribed to kin who request one's support, some see the solution towards peoples' independence in a social welfare system that provides for those without an income or employment. This stands in contrast to the idea that Ferguson (2013) and Martin and Yanagisako (2020) report of Europe and elsewhere, where the notion of dependence became ascribed to exactly those who relied on the state for their welfare. Wage labour has in European welfare systems become regarded as that which afforded personal independence for the masses (without property). Papua New Guineans may agree that wages from employment such as the teaching profession can lead to independence, were there not be, as discussed above, poor kin who remain dependent on them. Rather than representing a conceptual contradiction between ascriptions of dependence in Europe and PNG, this only further illustrates the point already made by Martin and Yanagisako (2020) and Ferguson (2013) that there is no such thing as complete independence. The question rather is: dependent on or independent from what, and in which instances does a specific constellation of perceived dependence become a topic of common concern and articulation? Whereas in Europe politically conservative voices suggest that people should not depend on the state for their welfare, Papua New Guineans in employment feel burdened by the amount of kin who they perceive as dependent on them for their livelihood. For those Papua New Guineans, their relatives and extended kin should preferably depend on the state rather than the wages of their kin. This is not only a statement of personal preference but also a question about nation-making. It is also linked to the perception that people in positions of power or public service with too many kin dependent on them compromise the state through needing to resort to corruption (*cf.* Walton 2019) to fulfil the requests of kin and thus maintain their standing in the community.

A particularly poignant observation was made by a temporary tutor at UoG, Thomas, who wrote a commentary titled 'Social security wages good option' which was published as 'Letter of the day' in PNG's daily newspaper *The National* in May 2013. He describes himself as working many years in urban areas while rural relatives sent word about requests and expected contributions for happenings in the village. As someone with training in the social sciences and an interest in anthropology, Thomas was a keen observer of the dynamics surrounding wage earners and the status economy of his native village. His standing was determined by his contributions to village affairs and peoples' requests, without which, he suggests, he would be a no one. Although he has been living in urban areas for many years, he was fortunate to receive an income throughout those years even if his situation was often

precarious. He raised a family in urban PNG despite job insecurity, low pay, and lack of fringe benefits as a temporary tutor. He actually had few disposable resources to respond to relatives' requests. Previously, he described how he had more easily been able to ignore village affairs that come with a call for contributions by claiming the message did not reach him. Nowadays, however, since the advent of mobile phones, individuals cannot claim not to have got the message, and failing to contribute to village affairs has repercussions for their standing more than before. Moreover, the ease and thus frequency of such requests that reach one by mobile phone communication has created the need to explain with more insistence how at the end of the fortnight there is not much left of the wages of a temporary tutor looking after a family and other urban dependents. This is indeed a rather different context to that of financially solvent big shots (Martin 2013) or the local elites described by Gewertz and Errington (1999). Thomas suggests that slowly his own relatives are understanding his situation, although it remains a constant negotiation to retain one's status and good relations with kin and community. It is from this background combined with the concern about the broader challenges of corruption perceived to be affecting the state in PNG that the excerpts below from his letter to the *The National* newspaper can be understood:

> I believe our country is as wealthy as other rich countries but it's just that we have a high corruption rate […] The outside world see our corruption as tied to our culture, our people in employment or business are expected to contribute to every occasion in the village, or they are expected to be generous. The moment they fail to contribute, or display generosity, they lose their status and leadership. It would be shameful for someone who is looked upon as important not to contribute and adhere to the people's expectation. […] This kind of outcome or scenario related with failing the expectation of people can leave no room for a person to respect honesty when opportunity provides for stealing. This is the problem Papua New Guinea faces, and is considered a corrupt country. Corruption breeds from the dependency syndrome therefore, the dependencies need to be given some form of support from the Government in order to break that tie. The best alternative here is to introduce the Social Security wage […] The payment will stop others from depending on another, and this will enable each to stand on their own feet, and to live independently. This will also be reason for the expectation thing to be dropped, which allows for a corresponding reduction in corruption.

Here, the focus on the dependence between kin is problematised in two distinct but interrelated ways. In the first instance, the dependence of kin on the wage earner obliges the wage earner to meet their requests or face being ostracised by kin and community. This allegedly leads to a further problem for those in employment or business. As the requests by kin frequently overstretch the capacity of the wage-earner or business-owner, those subjected to frequent requests become susceptible to stealing and corruption to meet requests and retain their standing and status in the community. Ultimately then, connecting the dots of these ascriptions of dependence with the challenges of nation-making in PNG, the specific interpersonal dependencies that wage-earners ascribe to their kin and 'community' (Rasmussen 2015) are perceived as a threat to the state. The proposed solution, a social welfare system that pays those in need with a social security wage. This will relieve the burden that wage-earners shoulder at the hands of kin, and will, thus, also remove the main incentive for corruption in PNG that undermines the development of the nation. When wage-earners are not pushed to seek more resources to channel to their relatives, they are freed from the main pressure that makes them engage in acts of corruption or to steal from the

state or business that they work for. Dependencies need to be broken, between persons in particular, for people to be independent and the nation to prosper.

Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Another academic with training in anthropology at UoG, James, had a different take on these matters. While he as well struggled with requests from kin and community, which he would prefer to be less subjected to, he refutes the idea that a social welfare system that pays out money to people would change things in the way other interlocutors often suggested. He is not *per se* against the idea of giving money to people, but he warns that it may not necessarily bring the expected results of people having their needs looked after and thus ceasing to ask kin for support. Rather, James suggested, such payments would enter the same circuits and exchange networks as money does now – which differs from the idea of the personalised handling of individual welfare benefits deployed towards meeting one's basic needs that seems to be the premise of the social security wage Thomas called for. According to James, such payments would be mutually requested and demanded among kin for their projects and village affairs. In fact, James insisted, that is what happens to the resources people do have at hand through cash crop production or entrepreneurial activities such as running village trade stores or other informal marketing activities. Rather than saving such income for future needs – or even for predictable expenses such as recurrent university fees – cash tends to be brought into circulation by responding to requests for immediate needs or other circuits of exchange among neighbours and kin. When, then, a more substantial need for cash arises for specific purposes, people request it from their kin rather than drawing it from a savings account. Wage-earning kin in town find themselves disproportionally at the receiving end of those requests.

Rather than solving the problem of peoples' dependence on each other, according to James, such social security payments may inflate the existing exchange economy – echoing the argument about how the cash economy leads to the efflorescence of the gift economy in PNG (Gregory 1982). Bride-prices would go up, and people would request the contribution of others towards their projects based on notions of obligation and knowing very well how much others receive from the state. While cash payments to people may of course also be successful in alleviating poverty and existential needs, such payments would not change the mutual dependence among kin and the demands and claims upon one another. Money from the state in the form of welfare payments may instead be regarded as free in the sense of not being attached to an obligation to be returned in future. This, according to James, is the kind of money that people buy beer with. An individualised independence looks different.

For James, as long as people have their social relations, they will continue to rely on these, and more so of course if people do not have effective access to land (*cf.* Bratrud 2021, this issue; Smith 2021, this issue). Those who appear really dependent, to James, are the people who nowadays live in urban areas without access to land or employment. They depend on their social relations much more strongly, unable to grow or provide food for themselves, but relying on activities such as informal marketing that hardly gets one by in town (*cf.* Hukula 2015, 2017, 2019; Rooney 2017, 2019; Sharp et al. 2015). Most important, for James, is to get the causality right: it is not that people start depending on their social relations in the absence of other means of survival – which could then be reversed if people had such means through a social welfare payment. Rather, people only exist because of and through their social relations, both materially and metaphysically, and no individualised flow of financial resources will change that. Only if these ways of organising social relations are removed from people could one expect them to act differently. As long as these ways of organising relations exist – and they will continue to exist even if they change form with time – hopes that people may fundamentally change the ways they relate to kin as a result of technical fixes such as individualised cash payments may be misplaced.

NEGOTIATING DEGREES OF INDEPENDENCE

Despite these assessments on the persistent dependence among kin, some people are perceived to not honour the demands of interdependent relations (*cf*. Martin 2013). Those who seemingly remove themselves entirely from circuits of exchange may get, as indicated above, dubbed 'whitemen'. They are perceived to pretend to be independent by keeping their wage to themselves, and thus mimic an image that people have of 'whitemen' (*cf*. Bashkow 2006). Such Papua New Guineans start living ostensibly independent lives and cut ties to those in the village and other kin – even if it is kin who supported them throughout their upbringing and studies – or they may keep such ties selectively and sporadically. They do not enjoy any major standing in the village and neither do they appear to care.

Some of those against whom such a critique is levelled may return to engage with kin again once they have settled themselves comfortably with urban property and wage-earning children. Sometimes kin then also appreciate these choices retrospectively for they can then rely on well-off urban kin and cultivate anew a relation of dependence (Ferguson 2013). The distancing from kin by wage-earners in the first place is an approach that is promoted through some contemporary Christian churches and creeds, who preach the need to break the tie with tradition and to take responsibility for one's own nuclear family first. That is how it was put to me by a senior university staff, Mary, who presented it as her Christian duty to see her children well settled before giving back to those who had supported her in the village while she was raising her children. I will not go further into such perspectives from persons in well-established socially stratified positions here, which are varied. John Cox described how the emerging PNG middle class see themselves in a role of 'Christian patrons' for rural kinsfolks (Cox 2018:138–59), which resonates with how Mary described her role in her reengagement with rural kin. I introduced Mary here also as she and some other university staff kept repeating the mantra that students should learn to be independent, by which they meant that students needed to learn to resist the pressure of relatives – and also the peer-pressure of fellow students – and to make their own decisions for their individual life-course. As pointed out above, many students for whom relations to kin and sponsors continue to be important do not regard this as practical or even desirable.

Many students, however, do consciously negotiate their relations to kin and the expectations placed on them. Especially female students, but also some male students, seek more personal and financial freedom in their life after studies, preferably by teaching in schools away from the reach of too numerous kin and wantoks. While not feeling opposed to the idea of supporting kin, many do voice some dread about the idea of becoming the go-to person for anyone's need among kin and community. A male first-year student from the highlands region in conversation mentioned to me that he often ponders the idea of a life in a distant coastal place, far away from the reach of kin and 'highland influences'. He spoke of 'going into hiding', far away from the pressures and expectations of kin. Even though he has just completed the first of four years towards a university degree, the expectations that will be placed upon him once he earns money presented a worrying concern that he spoke about spontaneously. He added that not many kin had supported him with university fees, but he anticipated that expectations towards him will be high and widely spread regardless once he finishes his degree and enters income-generating employment since he is the first from his *ples* (place, that is village-community). Choosing to start one's teaching career away from the immediate reach of kin does not necessarily mean that one shuns obligations to kin. Rather, this often stems from a desire to be able to support some especially close kin and sponsors, without becoming the subject of the more numerous and frequent requests that one could expect, especially given the likelihood of running into them randomly when walking about town.

Such views were also voiced by a female student in her final year of study, Nancy. She tried to be out of reach of kin when starting her teaching career. She was successful in applying to teach in a school in a province faraway from kin. It was a struggle to convince her immediate family and sponsors about this once she got a job offer. They agreed in the end, as she convincingly made the case that she would be better able to support them from a distance, rather than being at home where she would randomly run into wantoks all the time and could expect to become subject to many more requests from extended kin and community. From far away, she could save to support her immediate kin and former sponsors and respond to other specific requests more selectively, because she would not be exposed to constantly meeting wantoks, as she called those who may make spontaneous claims on her income when running into her in town. For her, the ability to choose and prioritise the allocation of her salary in a distant place, including the possibility of being out of reach from kin by changing her phone number or deciding not to travel home over the holidays, all conferred a desired degree of independence.

Yet others, especially some male students at UoG, were determined to serve their communities as teachers and income-earners and thus willingly expose themselves to the requests levelled at them by looking for a teaching position close to home. They noted feeling obliged or sorry about struggling kin that they wished to support. For many this may also just be the regular thing to do, an expectation for which they had been sent to university and that they have no second thoughts about. For some of the male students, however, the status and standing they will gain in their community is also something they seek for a different ambition rather than simply to serve kin and community. Ultimately, the hope of many university-educated men in PNG is to eventually become a Member of Parliament. In a place where attending university in itself is already regarded as a distinction of leadership that in popular imagination singles one out as part of the future national elite, a significant number of students harbour the ambition to eventually win the vote in their local constituency. To serve kin and community as teacher and wage-earner amongst them is one way to approach this. That is the regular pathway to status for political ambitions – in contrast to the more competitive shortcut of distinguishing oneself as an effective leader by becoming Student Representative Council president and subsequently organising a prolonged student strike (Syndicus 2018).

Ultimately for many youths the desire and possibility for some personal independence from kin was a matter of degree. While in rhetoric the demand for students to embrace personal independence is strongly voiced by some sectors of university staff, others – including students – are sceptical about the practicability or even desirability of such personal independence. Rather, many students actively negotiate their standing vis-à-vis kin and community, and the proclaimed desire for personal independence and bemoaning their relatives' dependence frequently forms part of this.

NATION-MAKING AND BELONGING

The way these ascriptions of dependence and aspirations for independence are articulated often reference some historical colonial concerns that partly persist in postcolonial PNG. Anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, and also those tasked to establish a university system in PNG in the 1960s, were preoccupied with how supposedly small-scale societies like PNG and much of the Pacific (*cf.* Benedict 1967) would find it difficult to transcend the particularistic quality of specific personal relations in favour of the abstract universalistic notion of the bureaucratic impersonal state (Currie et al. 1964). The latter has

been sarcastically characterised by Herzfeld (1992) as the supposedly modern bureaucratic disposition of indifference.

Contemporary ascriptions of dependence at PNG universities echo these concerns, as exemplified in the perspectives about the merits of a state-run social welfare system as discussed above. The way these concerns are rooted in external representations is also hinted in Thomas' assertion above that '[t]he outside world see our corruption as tied to our culture' as when 'our people in employment or business are expected to contribute to every occasion in the village, or they are expected to be generous'. There is an odd resonance of this line of thought with the way both academics and policy planners conceptualised challenges in colonial Papua and New Guinea's movement towards an independent state. The Report of the Commission on Higher Education in Papua and New Guinea, for example, claims that '[i]n all groups […] it is difficult to transcend the local, the personal, the concrete; yet modern knowledge and skills must use, continuously, the general, the impersonal, the abstract' (Currie et al. 1964:5).

Resonating concerns were voiced by academics teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea in its early years. John Ballard, who was professor of Administrative Studies at UPNG from 1973 to 76, became concerned that the way social relations work in PNG, such as the wantok system, appeared rather antithetical to those forms of social relations required for the running of administrative bureaucracies (John Ballard, personal communication, 2012; *cf.* Golub 2014:195). Gerry Ward, foundation professor of Geography at UPNG, has also observed people finding themselves in a constant personal conflict between different ways of relating: on the one hand what could be seen as family relations (in the widest sense), and on the other hand a sort of universalist way of relating upon which bureaucratic and administrative institutions are reliant on for functioning (Gerry Ward, personal communication, 2012). Burton Benedict (1967), during UPNG's initial years, sought to relate Max Weber's ideas of 'particularistic' and 'universalistic' value orientations to the challenges faced for integrating so-called small-scale societies into larger political and organisational structures. These different observations and conceptualisations became common in the discourses around the wantok system in relation to national development in PNG.

The way contemporary concerns about wantokism and corruption are framed and conceptualised, as through ascriptions of dependence, often echo these tropes. I have used discussions about the expected effects of a state-run social welfare system and personal negotiations of degrees of personal independence to challenge the dichotomy between particularistic personal relations *versus* universalistic impersonal bureaucracy. This may not be where the crux of the challenge is located. What matters in contemporary ascriptions of dependence and aspirations for personal independence may not be found in appraisals of how dependence is tied to particularistic personal relations that could give way to personal independence in an imagined and more ideally impersonal and universalistic bureaucracy à la Weber. Rather, I suggest, it is important to consider in more detail the distinctions and dynamics in the relation to different kinds of kin and wantoks that articulations of dependence and independence in the context of processes of social stratification reveal.

It is important, then, to recognise that there are the circles of closer and extended kin, both those who have sponsored an individual and those who have not but may still construct a claim to a relationship close enough to request support. These two can overlap and can be labelled wantoks. It is a question of how widely or narrowly a wage-earner draws the circle for those he or she feels obliged to; that is those whose sense of obligation he or she is willing to meet. How regularly, substantially or frequently an individual supports kin and others is often something that becomes negotiated. Wage earners may move away from the reach of wider networks of wantoks who might claim the right to make spontaneous claims for help, particularly in town contexts. Such choices are often so as to be better able to support

closer kin and former sponsors. They demonstrate the force of the distinction between specific kin categories and an urban category of wantok that Schram (2015) has discussed. On the other hand, some wage earners may move closer to kin and community so as to build status and rapport among a local constituency, possibly with a long-term view towards running for parliament or some other influential position.

An appropriate theoretical lens to understand these dynamics, and thus ascriptions of dependence in contemporary PNG, and possibly beyond in Oceania, may be to understand the navigating of relations within a framework of intersubjective belonging as formulated by Stasch (2009). Importantly, and in distinction to the broad brush of wantokism as a supposed principle of relating, Stasch points out that kinship is not Gemeinschaft. Categories of kin and wantoks are instead negotiated along different degrees of mutuality and strangeness. These are then mediated through the material action of giving, whether as response to a specific request or initiated by the giver to acknowledge and foster such relations.

CONCLUSION

For those students in PNG who enter universities against the odds of financial constraints and their 'grassroots' background, in contrast to children of the established PNG elite or middle class, their changing social position of becoming more privileged and a future wage earner is a significant material aspect of social stratification. In contexts such as UoG, many of those fortunate enough to make it beyond admission barriers and to come up with the required funds to attend university rely heavily on kin (beyond just nuclear family 'parents') and community. To send someone to university and to succeed in gathering the necessary finance is a significant investment by those contributing. The pressure of expectation and obligation placed on students by sponsoring kin that financially and emotionally invest in them is immense. Students who are in the process of becoming entry-level public servants such as teachers, or temporary tutors at university, take the resulting responsibilities placed on them seriously, and they need to find pragmatic ways to navigate growing future expectations and demands that outstretch their solvency. This has become recently especially acute through the easy reach and connectivity provided by transport networks and mobile phones. It is in this context that ascriptions of dependence become salient and social welfare schemes become imagined as alternatives. As in Ferguson's (2013) description of declarations of dependence in South Africa, however, doubts are also sown in PNG whether idea(l)s of personal independence are achievable through such schemes or whether they must remain an illusion. Beyond the rhetorical ascriptions of dependence, and sometimes the connections drawn to wantokism and corruption in contests over appropriate forms of social interdependence, the negotiation of degrees of (in)dependence among socially stratified kin also point to reconfigurations of social relations through the emergence of class. New kinds of inequalities are thus taking shape that create novel social networks as well as separations. It may be premature to describe this as neatly delineated structures of class, but clearly processes of social stratification and inherent changes of perspectives are reconfiguring the constellation of social interdependencies that yield the contemporary ascriptions of dependence within ongoing nation-making in PNG.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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