

# It is Christ or Corruption in Papua New Guinea: Bring in the Witness!

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## ABSTRACT

Endemic corruption and fervent Christianity dominate Papua New Guinea (PNG) public discourse. We draw on ethnographic material—including the emplacement of a King James V Bible in Parliament—to contextualise corruption discourse and Christian measures against corruption within evolving Papua New Guinean ideas about witnessing. Both corruption discourse and Christianity invoke a specific kind of observer: a disembodied, reliable witness capable of discerning people's intentions. Established ethnographic and linguistic data from PNG meanwhile document witnesses as imagined to be embodied, interested, lacking a privileged relationship to truth, and thus susceptible to coercion. Recasting the PNG corruption issue in terms of witnessing foregrounds a perceived cultural conflict between inclusion and duty; it also reveals how and why the Christian God was invoked—using debt and obligation rhetoric—to end corruption at the national scale.

Keywords: corruption, Christianity, politics, Papua New Guinea, witnessing, social change.

On their Independence Day, September 16, many Papua New Guineans take a moment to reflect on their colonial history and on the country's journey since 1975. In the capital Port Moresby, the annual celebrations are centred around the iconic Parliament building (opened in 1984 and modelled on Sepik River cult houses) and the adjacent Independence Hill where, on the morning of the day, the national flag is ceremonially raised to the tune of the national anthem. The Prime Minister and other dignitaries make speeches to citizens, many dressed in the flag's red, black and gold motifs. Pickles spent the 40th Independence Celebration of 2015 in a rural village absorbed in agricultural routine, but Santos da Costa was at the centre of events. As public servants working in the Parliament of Papua New Guinea, it was Santos da Costa's interlocutors who organized the celebrations.

The 2015 Independence Hill ceremony was followed by another inside Parliament, marking the installation of a 400-year-old King James V Bible on the Clerk's table, at the centre of the Chamber. The Bible arrived in Port Moresby earlier that year, donated by an American missionary<sup>1</sup> as a gift to 'all Papua New Guineans'. The initial recipients were the Unity Team, a group of Evangelical Christian reformers that included politicians and public servants, liberal professionals and pastors working within or outside Parliament. They wanted the Bible recognized within the state's political and symbolic centre. Months of planning and negotiations followed; a Parliamentary motion recognized the Bible 'as a National Treasure and the Property of the People and the Government of Papua New Guinea'. The Unity Team reached the zenith of their Christian-led interventions in

Parliament on Independence Day 2015 with the Bible's placement 'in the heart of Papua New Guinea' (Santos da Costa 2018).

Two years previous, the head of the Unity Team and Speaker of Parliament Theodor Zurenuoc controversially ordered the removal of prominent contemporary Papua New Guinean carvings adorning the Parliament building and Chamber using a chainsaw, because they were 'evil and ungodly' (Hill 2013). His actions were greeted in many quarters with incredulity and outrage. Detractors claimed that at worst the carvings were inert objects whose association with Parliament had turned them into national treasures and at best they possessed the living spirit and innate dignity of indigenous Melanesianness (Elapa 2013). Some commentators understood the placement of the Bible inside Parliament as an attempt to substitute religious creed for secular law, ultimately criticizing the encroachment of religious ideas upon the state (Higgins 2015; Kamu 2015; PNG Exposed 2015). Others, who, ever since the destruction of the carvings, had seen the then Speaker as a fundamentalist of sorts (Eves and Haley 2014:1–2), interpreted the ceremonial respect with which the donated Bible was received as more evidence of Zurenuoc's 'cargo cult mentality' and 'idolatry' (PNG Exposed 2015; Sullivan 2013). For them the Speaker's belief that the Word of God is the only means through which Papua New Guinea can develop as a country meant that he and his supporters fetishized both the 'evil' carvings and the godly text as each containing some kind of 'magical power'. While not downplaying the importance of spiritual warfare in the Unity Team's iconoclastic purge of idolatrous symbols from Parliament (see Eves et al. 2014; Rio et al. 2017:2), we would direct attention to the constructive aspects of the larger project, that of reconstructing the Nation around Christian ideals.

The Unity Team had designed and were implementing an Evangelical Christian-led political program, the Reformation, Restoration and Modernization Program (RRMP), which envisioned a reformed Parliament and a transformed Papua New Guinea. Their religious initiatives were designed to do a great deal more than end the veneration of allegedly idolatrous imagery. The Unity Team were trying to put an end to un-Christian preoccupations like corruption, which is widely understood as having ground the legislature, and the country, to a halt.

One day in 2015 Santos da Costa was accompanied by a member of the Unity Team while returning from a parliamentary event held in a famous Port Moresby hotel. 'See .... the paradox?', he asked Santos da Costa rhetorically,

Papua New Guinea is a filthy rich country, island of gold floating in a sea of oil powered by gas. And we are living in poverty. What happened? This is the question we are asking, something happened. What the Speaker is trying to do, establish principles with [the] Bible. Inspire our people and politicians for the good of the country.

We were both hard pushed to pass a day without hearing some version of this complaint in conversation, and more often than not, the complainant names corruption as a primary cause. Corruption discourse is ever-present on the radio, on television and in the newspapers (see Ayius and May 2007). When people use the Tok Pisin *korap* ('corrupt') it evokes images of ugly people glamoured with a sheen of success. Corruption confounded Papua New Guineans capacity to perceive moral failing evidenced physically on the skin because money may be used to disguise such an unhealthy appearance (Pickles 2013). Countless accusations, some earnest, some cynical, reinforce corruption's place in the national consciousness. Speaker Zurenuoc himself, while claiming to fight corruption through Christianity, was accused of corruption and misappropriation of funds for allegedly using taxpayer money to fund a 'junket' (PNG Exposed 2015).

Corruption discourse has become a key register; politicians and bureaucrats in the capital Port Moresby and the residents of the rural Highlands imagine their nation as united in

its corruption. Between them, on cross-country Public Motor Vehicles, passengers eagerly share moral tales of corruption with captive audiences of Papua New Guinean strangers, whistling at potholes and pointing out of the windows at fallen pylons, incomplete shells of buildings and other absent infrastructure. People referenced successive resource booms powered by extraction projects, asking where the promised wealth went, and how much was 'eaten' by the politicians. Transparency International yearly rates PNG as perceiving itself as highly corrupt, apparently more so than almost any other country in the world (Transparency International 2018). Political scientists also regularly attribute a debilitated institutional system to widespread corruption (Okole 2002; Okole et al. 2003; Walton 2018).

Our aim here is to sketch a necessary vantage point within this corruption discourse: the disinterested witness. We trace the ethnographic contours of an imagined witness, one capable of adjudging a transaction to be corrupt against a moral and/or legal framework in the nation of Papua New Guinea. We have two inter-related objectives: 1) to demonstrate that the projected witness in Papua New Guinea corruption discourse draws on long-held beliefs about the importance and character of witnessing that we see embedded in ceremonial transactions and language; 2) to examine efforts by some PNG political actors to mobilize a particular understanding of Christianity as a solution to corruption, and how a Christianity *vs.* corruption dichotomy privileges a 'disembodied' third perspective on human intent that embellishes existing ideas about the role and power of witnessing. Commonplace embodied witnesses with needs and interests become symptomatic of corruption, while disembodied and privileged witnesses such as God and potentially the state become potential solutions to corruption, if only they can be harnessed effectively. If our characterization has explanatory value, it is with respect to corruption discourse and not actual corruption cases or prevalence levels.

After contextualizing PNG corruption accusations with a second vignette, we draw parallels between corruption discourse and LeRoy's landmark 1979 article excavating the social animus of witnessing in the everyday and ceremonial transactions of the rural Kewa. Anthropological observations on the marked need to mollify witnesses to transactions prove helpful in explaining rampant corruption accusations, but we also identify a productive inversion of the witness role in corruption discourse. A credible witness, one capable of diagnosing corruption, must be disembodied (*i.e.* lacking the appetites of the composite body). The disembodied witness ideal that is an essential component in all corruption discourse places the kind of interested witness Leroy identified as unenlightened, hamstrung by culture, and potentially corrupt (Muir and Gupta 2018); in other words, a primitive. The disembodied qualities attributed to, and the increased legitimacy given over to witnesses in corruption discourse, therefore coincides with a populace grown cynical about itself, having watched the nation repeatedly fail to fulfil its promise, never finding the fabled 'Melanesian Way' between traditional values and a modern lifestyle, and instead become increasingly stratified, corrupt and desperate (Santos da Costa 2021:902). The disembodied witness encourages such cynicism, and for politicians like Zurenuoc it also proffers a simple solution: Christian politics as a national elixir.

#### POLITICS (AS USUAL)

The newspapers made it clear that Mr. Ampel's political career was in jeopardy.<sup>2</sup> Violent clashes had erupted between his supporters and those united behind a man from a rival tribe. The decision-making body they were both trying to influence was then relocated to a distant town by a technicality, and Mr. Ampel needed protection and support if he was to ride out

the enveloping crisis. In his own electoral district, the carrot of having considerable discretionary funds at his disposal and the stick of suspending local government gives parliamentarians like Ampel considerable sway over their local bureaucracy (Ketan 2004:240). The wealth that MPs command makes them into 'super big-men' eclipsing local political activity (Stewart and Strathern 1998). However, this time combatants were ferried across the country in open-top trucks, so their numbers were reduced. The local police in their new battleground had no tacit allegiance, so the factions' sought allies capable of supplementing their forces, swaying the local bureaucracy and police, and providing room and board.

A political officeholder with bureaucratic influence called 'Paul' lined up against Mr. Ampel and accommodated his rival. Assisting Mr. Ampel was 'Bob', a police officer and aspiring politician close to Pickles. Both owned land which they rented to settlers, both could rely on those settlers for muscle and both had an intimidating reputation for using excessive force. The distant rural conflict was re-inflected through these ongoing urban tensions. Underemployed young men flocked to both sides looking for money, beer, a full belly, and perhaps the chance to be unaccountably violent. Naturally each faction claimed they were only extending hospitality to their guests and their violence was provoked.

There was a good deal at stake. The struggle over state resources is acute in Papua New Guinea (which is consistently among the poorest countries in the Asia-Pacific by most metrics), and especially so for people without access to resource extraction-derived wealth. Elective officeholders have converted their representative role into one of patronage towards their electorates (Ketan 2004:240–1). Voters tend to vote for candidates who belong to their group, and considerable resources are spent securing the 'full support' of the largest group one can claim to represent. With low literacy standards come opportunities for vote rigging, and the rurality and devolved nature of census-taking and vote counting make vote tampering easy too.

Electoral politics [thus] accounts for much government overspending and official corruption. It costs a lot of money to get elected and there is a high turnover among incumbents [58 of Papua New Guinea's 111 parliamentarians lost their seats in the 2017 elections]; if returned, MPs seek to recover their considerable political expenses. Many run as independents and join political parties during post-election 'horse trading' sessions, producing unstable coalitions held together more by patronage (an offer to pick up the tab for election expenses or to be given a ministerial post) than by party loyalty. (Kombako 2007:32)

Candidates are also under tremendous pressure to reward supporters: 'almost all expenses can be forwarded to your member (MP) if you voted for him' (Manning and Windybank 2003:6). Faced with this political reality, elected representatives have little choice but to ceaselessly extend their personal networks with gifts of pigs, uniforms, corrugated aluminium and the like. The spoils of office are conspicuously consumed so that they personally deliver material benefit to their voters and supporters, and unscrupulous politicians theatrically manipulate the tension between service and factionalism while syphoning away monies for their personal use. In a self-reinforcing sequence, state resources get used continually in local arenas of competition, strengthening these and relegating the importance of political parties or individual policies in elective decision-making as well as atrophying the capacities of the state bureaucracy (Fraenkel 2011; Ketan 2004:262). In PNG the state is not so much 'failing' or 'weak' in comparison to European ideals of statehood (Hill 2007); rather state functions have the capacity to become disarticulated from the general and wielded as a potent source of personal power and enrichment, making access to the state extremely alluring.

To curry favour with the MP, Bob spent a lot of his own resources, including compensating his injured foot soldiers, but the biggest expense was Ampel himself. Bob had to feed, entertain and hopefully impress his guest, but Ampel had expensive tastes. Unlike the Unity Team, these men only paid lip service to Christian values during speeches. Their lifestyles reflected typical masculine interests in alcohol, young women, and high-stakes gambling. Bob ran a brothel and bar and was therefore able to cut some costs, but he was hurting financially.

After just over two weeks (and many accusations of corrupt decision-making) Mr. Ampel won out, guaranteeing his continued access to government money. Pickles' adopted Father Tom said this outcome moved Bob into the 'main vein of benefit'. Mr. Ampel's powerful position in the governing coalition meant he could both avoid the politically motivated log jamming of opposition MP's discretionary funds and grant lucrative central government contracts. Bob was seen bombastically driving around Town in a rental pickup truck supplied by Ampel, offering lifts to kin and supporters, sometimes of just a couple of hundred meters. He was soon flown to the capital, put up in an upmarket hotel, and wined and dined for three months while he acted as an unofficial 'advisor.' Doubtless many people in this politician's electoral district would have seen the car and the advisory role as evidence of corruption. Their relentless support and votes surely entitled them to greater wealth than this unknown man of another Province? As May put it '(b) ehaviour which is defended as "cultural" ... within the group ... becomes corrupt when someone outside the group does it.' (2007:61).

Bob's hopes of life-changing wealth went unrealized in the end. He had wanted contracts to build security infrastructure and provide security personnel to public buildings in his hometown. Pickles learnt that from Bob's perspective, the politician who instead awarded these contracts to companies belonging to himself (and by extension his kin), was not circulating money between partners, and was therefore 'corrupt'. Meanwhile Bob used his limited proceeds in a way which he felt would increase his reputation, ferrying people around in the ultimate status symbol, a Toyota Land Cruiser rented on the government purse, until he wrote the car off in an accident. Nevertheless, because Bob travelled to the capital city to meet this politician numerous times and conspicuously communicated with Ampel on his mobile telephone at every opportunity, Pickles also heard complaints that Bob was corruptly hiding the true extent of his gains. Meanwhile the urban poor living in the settlements saw no benefits, thus contributing to the sense that leaders are increasingly corrupt and out of reach. It was business as usual in the *wantok sistem* (lit. 'one-talk system') where kin, affines, language-mates and/or allies get special treatment and everyone else be damned (see Nanau 2011). Corruption perception is therefore perspectival in everyday practice in PNG, as it is elsewhere (see Muir and Gupta 2018:S5). And yet, perspectives always emanate from somewhere specific.

The Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) highlighted the problem that corruption might pose to the soon to be independent PNG in 1974 (Walton 2018:65). There was hope on the part of the emerging political class that the country would carve out its own cultural solutions to problems of corruption. The most influential expression of such hope became the 'Melanesian Way' as articulated by Papua New Guinean Christian, intellectual, politician and self-described 'artist writer' Bernard Narokobi (1980). The 'Melanesian Way' was Narokobi's attempt to capture the social and cultural distinctiveness of what it is to be Melanesian in opposition to the Western World (see Golub 2014:166–7). It was also a programmatic attempt to stabilize this supra-regional Pacific form in order to coax modernity into conforming to local configurations, rather than accepting a subservient relationship to external forces (Dobrin and Golub 2020:158; Lawson 2010). The PNG Parliament building carvings were made as Narokobi was

writing about the ‘Melanesian Way’ and for some the carvings were a material embodiment of that pan-Melanesian idealism.

Public confidence in a Melanesian solution to government misconduct faded in the 1990s as PNG’s politics became saturated with *wantok*-ism and naked corruption (Ayius 2007; May 2004). This reckoning coincided with the emergence of a global anti-corruption discourse that shifted attention from corporate corruption in the developed world to political corruption in the developing world (Katzarova 2019:213–29). In 1997 Transparency International began operations in PNG, where it was instrumental in establishing what Walton calls its anti-corruption industry (2018:91). Corruption discourse has therefore grown in public consciousness over the years. Measures against corruption and *wantok*-ism have also become more drastic (including the disturbing notion, sometimes taken seriously, that ‘white people’ should recolonize PNG to get it back on track (see Golub 2014)). Increased attention to corruption in PNG certainly reflects global trends in corruption perception; corruption discourse also reworks a PNG-centred complex of ideas relating to the way transactions appear from the perspective of a witness.

### INTERROGATING THE WITNESS

Our framing begins with witnessing in John Leroy’s ethnography of pig killing festivals among the Kewa of Southern Highlands Province in 1970–1972 (1979). Leroy describes everyday tit for tat sharing, emphasizing a marked interest in transactions among Kewa. Kewa were (and probably still are) acutely aware that any given transaction is conditional and might have been conducted with a number of other people, and Kewa ‘always retain awareness of the wider relations and temporal processes into which the single transaction merges’ (Leroy 1979:185). Even two-party transactions are conceived as triadic, with a potential alternative recipient always imagined as occupying a third perspective on any actual or possible transaction.

The imagined witness is presumed to be jealous, and this is a potential risk to the two transactors. Transactions were of central importance in determining Kewa status, Leroy argues, amplifying the threat of avaricious witnesses, which in turn shaped the formal structure of men’s pig killing ceremonies. The basic dynamic at pig killing ceremonies was one man agreeing to exchange two pearl shells for a side of pork, and then agreeing to do so with another, and then another, and another man. By enchainning more and more transactions every man involved started getting other people’s pork and shells all down the line. All these transactions occurred in public and over a short time period and were understood as a single chain. To mitigate the number of potentially jealous witnesses, people worked hard to include as many people as possible; that way the excluded, jealous witness became an included participant, forced to publicly accept the apportionment that had occurred. The fragile chain created by the ethic of inclusivity was a mark of the organizers and principal transactors’ skill and status, so leaders made themselves the lynchpin of as many transactions as they could. To host a successful pig kill one had to both transact and ensure others’ transactions were successful, and this meant being so many others’ witness. It sometimes also meant accepting a lower quality side of pork or pair of shells than one gave, all for the sake of achieving a big inclusive chain of exchanges. Crucially for Kewa and for our purposes, men from distant villages who were enmeshed in exchanges were the primary object of Kewa fantasies about the event. Kewa constantly placed themselves in the eyes of this outsider and imagined viewing themselves being evaluated for their collective exchange.

*Moka* payments among nearby Melpa-speakers also contained analogues to Kewa perspective-switching (Strathern 2013:48). Elaborately costumed *moka* donors lined up as a

clan in a formal display before giving shells and pigs to another clan. In their finery the performers considered themselves to be inviting spectators to observe them as transformed into the visual embodiment of a nexus of strong and potent relationships. Whereas people wore very little in their daily work and thus revealed little about themselves, Strathern claims that decorated dancers displayed what was hidden inside their bodies during daily life, placing their wealth on their skins and making themselves vulnerable to criticism (Strathern 2013:61–2). As men displayed themselves and their wealth, they turned all who saw them into spectators, recipients of their visage, a few of whom were destined to be recipients of the pigs and shells. Display and donation were simultaneous explicitly so that jealous witnesses could be turned into thankful spectators. A successful display affected the spectator's inner state of being and if they expressed those emotions then the dancers had to compensate them for having been drawn in (Strathern 2013:78). Both Melpa and Kewa attempted to fold in potentially critical and dangerous witnesses during moments of vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> Bob explained his insistence on using his new car to ferry people around Town in strikingly similar terms. He literally 'brought them inside' (the car) in a way that 'people on the street would see', and by telling the story behind the car to his passengers, he advertised that the car from Ampel was disposable wealth destined 'to be shared'.

The character of witnessing has been further encoded in PNG languages, particularly in the way mistrust of the speaker is emphasized. Those New Guineans who speak non-Austronesian languages mark the source and reliability of knowledge in everyday utterances through verb-forms and expressions that locate observer and actor in space and time (see Barth 1975:18). Prefixes, suffixes, and infixes all give a sense of where, when, and how that which is being said is known to the speaker and to the intended listener (Sillitoe 2010:17–8). In practice this means many New Guinea languages can't grammatically say 'I saw' without also making clear whether I was there, and/or whether I was observed by the subject. There were either no extra-local authoritative bodies to adjudicate truth when these languages took shape or truthful authority is/was successively revealed as lies as one succeeds through initiation grades (Barth 1975; Robbins 2001). The effect is that no one expects trust from some people over others, and there is little scope for the kind of fraud that Transparency International would call corruption without an assumption of trust because there is no common standard for adjudication outside of particular people's interests. These 'postmodern tenses', as Sillitoe calls them (2010:23), emphasize the importance of witnessing in the embedding of veracity upon memory, and a resistance to any investment of authority.

If the Kewa case shows that witnesses are assumedly adversarial agents that need enticing into an inclusive relationship, Sillitoe's linguistic analysis demonstrates that witnessing is an embodied process and not merely an ocular one. Witnesses are human agents with human interests shaping their perception, never neutral recording devices. Witnesses have no privileged relationship to truth or impartiality, and they are susceptible to coercion through effective use of strategies of inclusion. Given such a problematic relationship with speakers, it is unsurprising that New Guinea language speakers are known for both identifying agency with listeners and treating speech in a speculative, prospective manner, testing it out to see what it elicits (see Kulick 1992; Schieffelin 1986). Action (of which public transaction is an axiomatic example) is given primacy in conveying relational transformation and this is the mirror reflection of the fact that speech is not trusted or even associated with sincerity (see Pickles 2013; Robbins and Rumsey 2008). This New Guinea language ideology is firmly at odds with the European Enlightenment ideals of honest communication, impartial adjudication and laws of perspective that Thomas Nadel (1986) dubbed 'the view from nowhere' and that are necessary components in legitimizing the adjudicators of corruption claims.

We see 1) a mistrust of speakers and a consequent emphasis on material transfers as speaking what words cannot, and 2) an assumption that witnesses are jealous of material transfers and consequent efforts to pull in those witnesses to turn them into accomplices. One therefore has a simple recipe for escalating the scale of transactions at every strategic opportunity. It so happens that this is a prominent attribute of many PNG contexts, in which the value of transaction conspicuously eclipses the utility of transactables (Pickles 2020:16–7). The strategy of escalating inclusiveness is also a feature exacerbated and rendered socially destructive when PNG turned into a capitalist periphery (Pickles 2019:163–7, 2021). For the sake of clarity, we do not aim to imply that transactions in PNG have in the aggregate become more inclusive. Quite the opposite is the case, with rising inequality and the emergence of a monied elite (see Bainton and McDougall 2021). However, with inequality has also come inflated ceremonial transaction costs, increased political campaign costs, and an escalating theatre of inclusive transactions that the haves can and do use to mollify the have-nots. We see the embodied witness that is invoked at such times as a central antagonist in the modernist discourse surrounding corruption in PNG, particularly in critiques of *wantok*-ism, even if the more harm is caused by those who embezzle or otherwise abscond from both kinship and official obligations.

### WITNESSING CORRUPTION

Public servants of all pay grades and affiliations working in Parliament constantly talked about corruption. They reproduced a globally recognizable modernist framing of corruption as either a sign of pre-existing backwardness or of present-day societal decay (Muir and Gupta 2018). Sometimes they observed how *wantok*-ism gets in the way of the proper functioning of politics and bureaucracy. Foreign interests doubtless employ corrupt practices to gain access to Papua New Guinean resources or evade costly responsibilities, and this formed a third prong of PNG corruption discourse, although the perceived influence of this corruption was generally restricted to the relatively small numbers of Papua New Guineans directly involved. More often, corruption occurred among Papua New Guineans because ‘Papua New Guinean ways’ or ‘culture’ were being distorted by ‘outside influences’ and social changes linked to aspects of modernization and globalization such as access to social media, cell phones, new gender arrangements and social mobility (e.g. Cox 2021; Macintyre 2011). When a member of the Unity Team spoke candidly with Santos da Costa about the pressure he felt under to act against the public interest, he spoke in terms of being trapped in a system that compelled him to attend to his ‘culture’ in the form of the ‘*wantok* system.’

[...] we come from a culture, we have the *wantok* system, we have connections, we went to school together, we live in the same neighbourhood, so the bond becomes stronger and when we come to places like this [the parliament], we utilize those relationships [...] It is good in our communal society [...] but [...] these are the boundaries. It is hard [...] because coming from a communal society [...] we are the big shot back in the city [...] some of us get drunk by the euphoria of that name, [...] it is really tempting at times, you feel the temptation of giving in.

Peter Kelo observed Parliament from the outside; in 2015 he worked as General Manager of Programmes and Projects at Transparency International PNG. Peter understood decay, not backwardness, as the primary factor during another conversation with Santos da Costa:

Firstly, it was urban culture [where corruption took place], but now there is no difference. In rural areas, it is almost the same. [...] More happens here because here there is more money. [...] It is becoming a kind of culture, a hybrid culture, between our traditional lifestyle because we practiced three things: giving, sharing, and getting. Now, that practice of giving is almost disappearing, the practice of sharing is almost gone, now everybody wants to get.

Santos da Costa and Pickles often heard one or the other view. Perceived endemic corruption in among Papua New Guineans was always caused either by decay, backwardness, or a combination of the two (*e.g.* Golub 2014:170; Martin 2013:167), and people, in both rural and urban settings, struggle to think of ways to mitigate it. Exasperated letters like the one below, from an election candidate in East Sepik Province in 2002, appear frequently in the national newspapers.

[H]ow did all this start? Or more to the point, who started this? Are our MPs corrupt or is our society corrupt? If our MPs are corrupt where did they come from? Did they fall to earth from outer space or did they come out from society? (The National 2 July 2002 in Gelu 2007:12)

Finding a suitable definition of corruption might seem a good starting point for diagnosing the root cause of corruption, but the definition alone has spawned its own vast literature (May 2007:60–1). Corruption is normatively defined as something along the lines of ‘politics as business.’ Or ‘business as politics.’ Or, as the World Bank has it, ‘the abuse of public office for private gain’ (1997:8). In all cases corruption is seen as an infringement of one notionally sovereign domain onto another, distorting both. Domains such as the public and the private (or state and society; or politics and business; or centralized allocation and the free market; or materialism and the rule of law; or entrusted authority and personal interest) are presented as ideally fixed, unproblematic, inviolable, uncontested, and timeless, varying only in the framework that implements their division (see Nye 1967:419). Two domains are brought into conjunction improperly, such that neither functions as it should, with the modern figure of the disinterested analyst as observer and arbiter. It is corruption as dysfunction that dominates both official (*e.g.* the World Bank) and civil society (*e.g.* Transparency International) positions, and the public administration literature. Writings about corruption in PNG overwhelmingly link corruption to dysfunction resulting from conflicting imperatives (Walton 2013). In the dysfunctional model it is the analyst who witnesses and judges whether corruption is occurring, how dysfunctional it is, and who may speculate on whether the dysfunction comes from without (decay) or within (backwardness).

Characterizing corruption as dysfunction elevates modernist forms of governmentality and economic practice and proclaims them to be a universal goal, overseen by a disinterested witness. Culturalist accounts question the grounds for judgements of functionality and dysfunction, aligning with structural-functionalist arguments when they claim that what is labelled corruption may be beyond individuals’ volition due to cultural expectations. They argue that customary gifting, for instance, should not be labelled corruption or vilified (see Walton 2013). Culturalist accounts lay agency at the feet of a ‘culture’ which requires wealth for the greater goal of cultural reproduction. Collins (2012) goes so far as to suggest that where collectivism is a dominant cultural characteristic, corruption may function to plug gaps in the system of governance. The corollary to such arguments is that anti-corruption initiatives might reshape the economic rules in a detrimental way, or at least in a manner that benefits extra-national enterprises more than it does local economies. Culturalist arguments illustrate that the label ‘corruption’ carries with it a modernizing agenda that

problematizes its explanatory power, but they also needlessly distinguish material wants from issues of prestige. Walton (2013) concludes that there remains work to be done in articulating how corruption operates in PNG. We agree, adding that PNG corruption is complex in part because transaction-witnessing is a site of intensive and elaborate manoeuvring.

David Kombako developed a hybrid formulation combining cultural and dysfunctional arguments. He perceives ‘corrupt’ actors as culturally embedded peoples demanding personal enfranchisement from a colonial-capitalist system that has collectively impoverished them. Kombako’s nuanced framing results in some perspicacious descriptions of corruption in action:

Political leaders build prestige and following through the gifting of grants, development projects, infrastructure services and other resources to their constituencies. State ‘gifting’ becomes a means for constituting political ‘bigmanship’. It is not so much that ‘bigmen’ use the state primarily to accumulate personal wealth (although this practice is increasing rapidly); rather, political leaders use the state to distribute wealth in order to accumulate personal power and status. (Kombako 2007:33; see also Donigi 2007)

Kombako centred his analysis on organizational culture and how, in PNG, organizations have failed to act as impartial witnesses. PNG organizations have proven incapable of distinguishing between permissible culturally derived practices that appear corrupt but should be acceptable, on the one hand, and wilful corruption on the other. The impasse means both proceed largely unchecked. It is this organizational impasse which the Unity Team addressed by attempting to empower Parliament with the KJV Bible.

This is our interpretation as it stands: corruption discourse constantly suggests that a proper, just, impartial witness can, should or does exist if only people could agree upon it. At the same time corruption accusations, anti-corruption rhetoric and measures are often used in a way that might itself be interpreted as corrupt. The pre-learned response available to PNG politicians is to performatively include as many people as one can in your transactions so as to encompass the all too embodied and interested witnesses who might otherwise accuse you of corruption, and organizations lack the grounds and motivation to arbitrate a blurred boundary between what they see as culturally-driven and duplicitous actions.

In a situation where it seems there are no earthly grounds from which an impartial perspective upon proper conduct could be accepted by all, the Unity Team took radical steps. The 2015 emplacement of the KJV Bible in the chamber of Parliament was one of their most striking anti-corruption measures. For the Unity Team anti-corruption measures were *necessarily* Christian measures. Their Christianising efforts aimed to marshal God into acting as a verifiably impartial witness, thereby solving corruption once and for all.

### WITH GOD AS MY WITNESS

Throughout early 2015 Santos da Costa found the Unity Team increasingly referring to the Bible as part of Parliamentary business—from writing the Motion to be read on the floor on June 30th, to the political and bureaucratic negotiations required to have the Motion read. Some public servants were tasked with finding out how the 400-year-old Bible could be formally recognized as a document, others to coordinate dates. As they did so, members of the Unity Team began discussing the reasoning behind the Restoration, Reformation and Modernization Program initiative with Santos da Costa.

Emplacing the Book in Parliament and recognizing it as a ‘national treasure’ would affirm Papua New Guinea’s commitment to the Word of God, ward off satanic influence and renew Christianity as the national religion (Kanamon 2015; Pokiton 2015; Santos da Costa 2018). But the Unity Team were careful to distinguish these religious aims from their political purposes. The Bible, once ensconced, would have the complementary political effect of becoming a permanent memorandum to MPs. ‘The purpose is to remind politicians of their priorities, to do what is right for the country’, said one Unity Team member. The RRMP saw the Bible as potentially refocusing MPs’ attention and thereby preventing allegiance to one’s constituency from being enacted in misplaced or inappropriate ways. This goal is captured in the following excerpt of a paid publication released by the Office of the Speaker:

[...] many of our MPs fall victims of being nicknamed ‘Instant ATM’ [...] Local politics, tribal contentions, Melanesian ‘Big-Man’ syndrome and other cultural factors play a part in drawing an MP away from his or her mandated national responsibility as a lawmaker and overseer of the executive government and its bureaucracy. (Zurenuoc 2014:40)

Santos da Costa learnt that the primary political issue for the Unity Team was how to deal seriously and practically with culture and tradition as inextricable parts of every Papua New Guineans lifeworld (see Demian 2015; Eves et al. 2014; Schram 2014). For members of the Unity Team, the problem was not necessarily that traditional culture was altogether ungodly and evil, but that the pull of one’s place of origin and kinship connections was too strong, too real, and too irresistible to be counteracted by measures such as anti-corruption legislation. The Unity Team perceived politicians engaging in corrupt practices as tragically responsive to their *wantoks*’ witnessing gaze, compelled to bring *wantoks* in on their deals and in so doing fulfil their own fantasies of being ‘the big shot back in the city.’

Opposition to the Unity Team’s efforts is reflectively instructive. When the KJV Bible arrived in Port Moresby, court proceedings to hold Zurenuoc accountable for the destruction of Parliament’s carvings in 2013 were ongoing. The appeal was filed by the Director of the National Museum, Dr Andrew Moutu, and PNG’s ‘founding father’ and longest serving Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare. Tellingly, the Unity Team wrote off Somare’s opposition to their nationalist project, claiming he was motivated by particularistic interests, not national ones. Their evidence was material, it lay in many of the carvings, and the form of the Parliament building itself. Both were created in the style associated with Somare’s Province, the East Sepik (and are widely suspected to influence Parliament through ‘Sepik magic’). The carvings, and Somare’s protection of them, were seen as inappropriately over-representing the collective interests of a particular clan and a specific province at the cost of Papua New Guinea as a Christian nation. By contrast, Zurenuoc figured in his supporters’ eyes as the kind of leader whose commitment to God was concurrent with a commitment to the nation as a public, visible space (Santos da Costa 2018). Likewise, the Unity Team saw the placement of the Bible in Parliament as a means to rework the state into a new, Godly form, imbued with a new capacity to witness and judge its politician’s and public servant’s actions, trumping particularistic interests in the process. In promoting Christianity as a means to achieve commitment to a modern bureaucratic ethos, the Unity Team really thought they had provided the definitive answer to *wantok*-ism.

One member of the Unity Team reflected that the only way people could change their behaviour was by embarking upon a sincere consideration of their own moral values, which would lead them to take the most appropriate decision. Among Evangelical Christians, proper self-conduct may be achieved through everyday practices such as prayer and Bible

reading, which provide a means to improve ‘discernment’ (making a choice in accordance with what is revealed by the Words) (Marshall 2009:212). By emplacing the KJV Bible in Parliament the Unity Team introduced an inescapable prompt, forcing elite politicians and public servants to self-reflect at moments of national importance by reminding them that He is watching, and He offers a righteous alternative course of action.

Robbins (2001, 2004) observed that Christian prayer offers a radical departure from the commonplace separation of intent and speech that we identified as limiting the credibility of corruption witnesses among Papua New Guineans. If one accepts that God alone can know one’s intentions, then to pray aloud in earshot of others is to speak your truth convincingly in a previously inaccessible way. God can both hear your prayer and know your intentions, so one cannot pray without committing that you do indeed desire the thing you pray for. The ‘omniscient listener elicits a new kind of truthful speaker’ (Robbins 2001:907). God may not make general talk more indicative of truthfulness, but prayer creates a new kind of talk that is not subject to the same scepticism because He witnesses and verifies your actions.

For Evangelicals, insofar as prayer directs the believer to their interior space, it helps them in their search for God’s guidance. Prayer, coupled with reflection upon the scripture, are central to the laborious, and sometimes ambivalent, achievement of discernment as well as recognizing God’s voice within oneself (Luhmann 2007). Those unable to achieve proper discernment are diagnosed as in a state of ‘confusion,’ as one member of the Unity Team told Santos da Costa: ‘people are caught up in a crossline, “which way do I go?” They are confused now.’ This confusion resulted in illicit or immoral actions in Parliament. The Unity Team drew on this theological perspective when they responded to their critics’ claims they were fetishizing the power of the KJV Bible, countering that they did not expect the Bible to solve corruption once and for all simply by being there; it would instead remind politicians and public servants to follow His perspective. The placement of the Bible at the Parliament’s Chamber was therefore a way to draw attention to their vision of Christianity as transcending the kind of parochial politics that ideas around embodied witnessing reinforces.

In thoroughly Christian Papua New Guinea, corruption discourse is welded to the unrelenting, implacably moral gaze of the Christian god (see also Foster 2002:9; Smith 2007:207). More so because Evangelical forms of Christianity have gained many followers in PNG since the 1980s and Evangelicals tend to be more vehement in characterizing corruption as a moral failing caused by succumbing to evil and satanic forces (Jorgensen 2005:448; Eriksen and Rio 2017:197–7; Eriksen et al. 2019:168). When the donated Bible was placed in the Parliament’s Chamber in 2015, the Unity Team understood themselves as proposing a kind of universalism (*cf.* Handman 2015b) and received praise for tapping ‘the blood of every Papua New Guinean’ in a way that secular and traditional ideologies could not, reminding the nation that ‘we are all brothers and sisters’.

Santos da Costa (2018) has argued that tackling *wantok*-ism in the public administration required people to displace the nexus of relationships that differentiates people from each other, forcing it to the background of one’s attention, and bringing forth the nexus that unifies: Christianity. Commitment to God would elicit appropriate behaviour by superseding prior commitments. The Unity Team believed that, by exercising discernment, people would become capable of choosing the sets of relationships that they activated depending on their activities. As seen among Evangelicals in other countries in the Global South, Evangelical Christianity was seen as more than a framework offering a critique of traditional cultures. It was a force capable of enabling people to become good bureaucrats and good citizens with the appropriate vantage point to reform the Parliament and, ultimately, have a positive impact in the nation’s development (see also O’Neill 2010:200; Smith 2007:211).

When seeking a Papua New Guinean solution to corruption, seen as caused by a sincere need to include embodied witnesses, Christianity therefore lent itself as a potent disembodied witness that scaled up the sense of ‘oneness’ by encompassing the whole country and framing the relationship between citizens as one of equality before God.

Our final observation re-clothes the transformative potential of the donated Bible within the existing tradition of coercing witnesses through inclusive transaction. When the special Bible was emplaced, apparently instituting God as a disembodied witness guiding all political decision-making, it also took a familiar form. The Parliament’s ceremonial acceptance of the KJV Bible as spiritual wealth *given as a gift* cast the missionary Dr Gene Hood as donor, PNG and Papua New Guineans as recipient, and the Christian God as interested witness.

Members of the Unity Team heightened the impact of the Bible *as gift* by highlighting the gift’s unexpectedness at every opportunity. They carefully explained that Hood was inadvertently told about Zurenouc’s initiative while in Tambul, Western Highlands Province. Intrigued, Hood visited Parliament, whereupon ‘something touched’ the avid bible collector. According to Hood’s son, Hood realized then and there that the KJV Bible he had felt drawn towards, had acquired with great difficulty and subsequently held for 26 years—despite never feeling it belonged to him—belonged here. As Bialecki argues (2017:95–96), being surprised by one’s own motivations and events are a means through which believers feel the divine will as external, transcending human efforts. The events leading up to the donation of the Bible were retrospectively identified as God’s work, with participants unaware of the higher purpose of their actions until completion. The gift was therefore both from the missionary and from God, and as in a great many accounts of gifting in PNG, not all agency was attributed to the donor(s). Unity Team members told Santos da Costa that the Speaker’s Program ‘prompted’ Hood to ‘release his possession’ and their efficacy in completing the chain of events that culminated in the arrival of the Bible was understood as ‘evidence’ that God had been watching and approved their initiative.

The KJV Bible had enhanced potential to deliver a prosperous future for Papua New Guinea because it locked all politicians into a specific recognized role as recipients, indebted and therefore forced accordingly, knowing that the Almighty is now an interested party. This historic Bible was already an embodiment of previous devout relationships with God, culminating in its selfless donation (under guidance from Him) by the American missionary to the nation of Papua New Guinea. The Unity Team therefore expected it to act as a uniquely suitable point of departure toward yet other positive social outcomes (see also Haynes 2015).

Battaglia argued that ‘[t]he gift, as a memory, objectifies the subjective experience of relationship [...] it coordinates the different trajectories and perspectives of the donor and the recipient while creating a new point of orientation from which to develop the relationship’ (1992:5). For the Unity Team the Word of God embodied in the Bible was expected to elicit growth for Papua New Guinea through the rechannelling of the country’s richness to a national purpose instead of seeing its misappropriation due to corruption. Thus, the Unity Team expected the Bible in the Chamber of Parliament to work as a reminder (and what better reminder is there than a debt) to politicians of their commitment to God. By taking the form of a national debt, the Unity Team empowered the KJV Bible to command national attention, transforming and guiding the politicians of PNG in what they considered an appropriate - nationalist - direction.

The Unity Team’s initiative—attempting to elevate God as a disembodied witness by appealing to norms of reciprocity—both echoed the coercive efforts of Kewa who folded outside third perspectives into their own terms, and also mobilized the nation and God, thereby upscaling the level of reciprocity. Success, in the Unity Team’s eyes, meant forever

enmeshing a disembodied witness as the arbiter of rightful political and bureaucratic action. In its role as gift to the nation, the Bible was imagined as drawing all the observers (*i.e.* the Nation) into becoming equal recipients, and thereby included within a new imagined unity brought forth by an act of gift-witnessing.

## CONCLUSION

Akhil Gupta demonstrated the utility of ‘corruption discourses’ to anthropology as a leitmotif for the relationship between local level politicking and notions of the state (1995), stimulating an engagement with the meaning, nuance, utility, and ambivalence of corruption and its discourse (Jauregui 2014; Parry 2000). Internationally, corruption as a rationale for political action has proven problematic, and anti-corruption politics has become an empty signifier at best and a dog whistle at worst (Haller and Shore 2005). In their thoroughgoing literature review, Muir and Gupta (2018:6) conclude that ambiguity and inconsistency are a feature of corruption discourse that enables its weaponization, and not merely a bug. We have aimed to add a PNG-centred account to recent anthropological efforts to understand corruption as a self-generating field that feeds upon dysfunctionalist and culturalist understandings (see Smith 2007:224–9).

Whatever people’s particular motivations, drawing outsiders into your official transactions can be called corruption, and this is seen as a problem. Potent accusations of corruption draw authority from a witness that exists out of time and across situations. The extent to which this witness can claim impartial legitimacy is heightened in modernist agendas of progress, including in corruption discourse. A solution to the self-perception of corruption was therefore to corral in a witness whose scale matched and exceeded that of the state, the Christian God. When it came, the catalyst was a gift.

This too-graphic commentary by another member of the Unity Team was made in the context of confessing how hard it was to strike a balance between ‘looking after’ your own relatives or *wantoks* and the bureaucrat’s job of ‘looking after everyone’.

The Bible is just a catalyst to activate a force that will cause change for the better in this country because physically, politically, economically speaking, ... we will never save this country. This country has been like a woman that has been raped, prostituted for such a long long time, that it has been impossible to rehabilitate to get that human being back into this noble way of life. Physically it might be healed, but mentally, imagine the scars, the trauma, the effects are going to haunt them. That is the kind of effect we are feeling because of corruption, bribing and stealing, nepotism and all that has been going on for forty years.

Anthropologists have noted that Evangelical Christianity offers either a new discursive field or new social forms with which subjects can engage, criticize and recreate their current reality (*e.g.* Meyer 1998; Robbins 1998). From that vantage point people can ‘critique’ their ‘local culture’ (Handman 2015a:244). In this sense, the Unity Team offered yet another instance of Christianity as a form of veridiction (Marshall 2009:145) that distinguishes itself from others available - such as traditional knowledge and western knowledge - in a given social context. Santos da Costa has argued (2021), however, that the Unity Team offers a case of Pentecostalism conferring a positive attachment to the nation (*cf.* Robbins 1998; Foster 2002:137). Christianity works here not only as a critical tool but as a technology of governance against the background of what the Unity Team defined as the particularistic interests of politicians and bureaucrats. By providing a Christian focal point for the nation,

the Unity Team hoped to stimulate the rise of selfless, godly, hard-working leaders and citizens that, in their own view, would be capable of transforming themselves and the nation (Marshall 2009:112). They are not alone, there are a great many organizations emphasizing youth that bear the names of their efforts to fulfil this promise: names like the New Generation Party, or Youths Against Corruption Association.

We attempted to problematize the positionality of the observer in PNG corruption discourse by treating it as an ethnographic subject. Occupying that witnessing perspective is a strategic vector in the political machinations that invoke corruption. In PNG the concretization and transcendence of a moral framework was the necessary condition to build a mass anti-corruption movement, and the most potent, ready-made example of a disembodied witnessing perspective that could be mobilized through coercive acts of righteousness was the Christian God. In other words, it is Christ or corruption in Papua New Guinea, so bring in the witness!

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Relevant research by Pickles was supported by the British Academy under Grant pf160081, by Trinity College, Cambridge, by the Royal Anthropological Institute through an Emslie Horniman fieldwork grant, and the ESRC under Grant ES/G012814/1. Pickles' contribution was sharpened during the conference *Debt* organised by Holly High, in seminars at Cambridge University, University of Lucerne, Brunel University and the University of East Anglia and by the close reading of Taras Fedirko. Thanks also to C.N.-C. Research by Santos da Costa was supported by the International Balzan Foundation, as part of the 2018 Balzan Prize in Social Anthropology awarded to Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern. Santos da Costa's contribution has benefited from discussions with Steffen Dalsgaard. She is especially grateful to the public servants working at the PNG Parliament for supporting her research.

### ENDNOTES

1. The Evangelical missionary in question is Dr Gene Hood. Dr Hood was a pastor of the Independent Nazarene Church of Beech Grove for most his life and founded the Independent Nazarene Church in New Palestine (Indiana) in 2014. He was the owner of various radio towers, stations and programs and his missionary work was mostly aimed at the Global South.
2. This vignette has been fictionalized and selectively decontextualized to protect Pickles's confidants.
3. Rio reveals an analogous interest in the power of 'third perspectives' on Ambrym Island in Vanuatu (Rio 2007:55, 213), but for practical purposes we confine our interest to Papua New Guinea.

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