

Introduction



‘Give me a betel nut!’ I looked up from my task, carrying out a small repair to a canoe. Chauka walked towards me along the shore carrying nothing but his flip-flops in his hand, clearly hoping I was in possession of betel nut. As I rooted around in my bag I asked him, ‘Where have you been?’ ‘I have been around the world’, he replied, and laughed, while indicating with a gesture that he had walked around the island, a two-hour walk at most. Even bearing in mind that life-worlds in which people live their lives are not identical with the world as a physical globe, his statement was far from true: Chauka’s social world reaches far beyond the shores of Mbuke Island in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). Chauka grew up on Mbuke, the biggest in the island group of the same name.¹ He left the island aged fourteen and went to high school in Lorengau, the provincial capital of Manus, after which he moved to Port Moresby (PNG’s capital city), where he became a banker until he returned to the village and moved into his late parents’ house – a house that he had himself funded the building of while he was away.

But it is not only by the token of his personal biography that Chauka’s world reaches far beyond the one he had circumambulated that day. He is in frequent contact with his older brother, who lives and works in Port Moresby; he regularly calls his younger brother, who lives in Lorengau, where he works as the local representative of an international NGO; and Chauka also tries to keep in touch with his two sisters, who are ‘married to [men in] Australia’. In all his correspondence, a set of quite frequently asked questions among the Mbuke occurs. These may analytically be summed up as the question of ‘what about me?’ and involve questions such as ‘can you send me ...’ ‘I need money for ...’ ‘your nieces and nephews are hungry, can you help with ...’ Mbuke people tend to categorize these kinds of questions using the Tok Pisin (PNG Pidgin English) term *singaut*, which in this context refers to a request or demand.² Apart from extracting remittances and utilities such as fishing equipment and materials for house building from migrant relatives with access to money, these questions maintain, expand and sometimes contract Chauka’s social world, a world

made up of relations connecting Chauka with other persons and sets of persons. These questions are ‘value questions’ (Gregory 1997: 7–8), which demand that others respond to the question ‘what about me?’ by valuing the relationship. Chauka might *singaut* to his brother, who might respond by giving the value he ascribes to the relationship a visible form (such as a bank transfer altering Chauka’s bank statement or a shipment of sheet metal for his roof), and thereby confirm to Chauka that they are brothers, and that such a request and such a response are appropriate expressions of their relationship. In Chapters 2 to 4 I discuss various forms of transactions initiated by verbal requests or demands (*singaut*), which all point to limitations in classic anthropological theories of reciprocal gift exchange – and the prominence such approaches have been given in ethnographies of Melanesia – to account for the ongoing production and reproduction of value, relationships and personhood in a contemporary PNG community.

In addition to the ‘what about me’ question, another question gradually emerged in recent decades among the Mbuke, that of ‘what about us?’ The social conditions of extensive temporary labour migration have not only given sharing and demands for remittances a central place in the valuing of social relations and in the constitution of personhood, it has also given rise to a new sense of ‘us’, referred to among the Mbuke with the English word ‘community’. The temporary absence of nearly half the adult population has created an inclination for a Mbuke person to think of themselves as part of a social whole, which is not geographically local, and which is not based on specific kin relationships and personal alliances. Directing the question of ‘what about us?’ to state or government representatives has often led to disappointment among the Mbuke. PNG’s state institutions increasingly fail to provide certain services (such as community schools and adequately staffed healthcare posts), which people in Manus – even in its remote parts, like the Mbuke Islands – had become accustomed to during late colonial times and throughout the years after independence. Being both well connected to the national political elite and comparatively wealthy in monetary terms, through having a highly educated migrant diaspora, the Mbuke have taken it into their own hands to respond to the question of the value of their community. During the seven years I have come and gone to the Mbuke Islands, a new school and two healthcare posts have been built in the villages using funds raised by and for ‘the community’ (see Figure 1). When I did my longest period of fieldwork among the Mbuke in the islands’ villages and among Mbuke migrants in PNG’s urban centres in 2008/9, discussions about ‘social welfare programmes’ were beginning to take place in community meetings, reflecting, not least, a widespread hope on the part of migrants that they might ease ‘*singaut* pressure’ from village relatives. The word ‘community’ has become an important and disputed

concept with which to refer to this emerging social whole, a social totality that may take on tangible forms (such as concrete ‘community projects’) as responses to the question of ‘what about us?’ that Mbuke people might ask themselves and others.

‘Community’ as a localized concept refers to a particular kind of social whole in which the constitution of personhood and the formation of value differ from their constitution and formation within the sets of concrete social relationships in which sharing and remittances take place. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I deal with the historical emergence of ‘community’ as an indigenous category of description and level of social organization, with the valuing of actions measured by their ability to ‘benefit the community’, and the social contestation and negotiation of community vis-à-vis other temporal social wholes.

In this book I provide an exploration of local concepts and practices of value, personhood and sociality by addressing the conflicts, negotiations and transformations relating to what it means to be a person and what can be expected of a relative or a fellow community member among the Mbuke. I address a contemporary situation in PNG in which migration and remittances, sharing on demand and ‘community development’ are at the centre of relationships and of value formation. Rather than analysing



Figure 1: Launching the new healthcare post on Mbuke Island. Photograph by Nia Itan.

social change as a conjunction of cultural systems and fixed standards of value in the transition towards a market economy, I present a processual account of acts of valuation in a composite lived world. I aim to show that value is measured by ongoing and occasionally conflicting human judgments, rather than being determined by social norms and cultural precepts. The title of the book reflects the observation that ceremonial exchange of 'the gift' has gradually lost its significance in the production and reproduction of social relations and personhood. The growing absence of the gift, in this sense, has given way to sharing among close relatives, and an emerging concept of sociality as 'community' that is rendered tangible as 'community projects' in responses to the value question of 'what about us?' The central contention regarding value is that by exploring specific acts of valuing we might better grasp the complex and multiple sets of relationships and other temporal socialities that are produced and reproduced by acts of valuing. I argue that value emerges in transactions and actions that simultaneously reconstitute the sets of social relations by which their value may be measured. My contribution to the anthropology of value is the understanding of value among the Mbuke as formed in the interplay between verbal utterances and visual responses, between questions and answers.

Remittances as Sharing: Relational Personhood in the Absence of the Gift

What would the formation of value and personhood look like in PNG in the absence of ceremonial gift exchange? Contributions to the anthropology of value and social reproduction based on ethnographies of PNG have often focused on ceremonial gift exchange (e.g. Gregory 1982; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988, 1992a), and for good reason, since, as those accounts have demonstrated, many Melanesian socialities have indeed been based on gift exchange in many respects. In the specific case of Manus Province, where levels of migration and education have long been among the highest in PNG, the logic of the gift has been lurking in the anthropological literature. Several authors have noted that temporary labour migrants from Manus remit in order to draw on some kind of reciprocity after their return (see Otto 1991: 247; Gustafsson 1999: 68; Dalsgaard 2010: 231), and those who have written elaborately about remittances have specified that ceremonial exchange in villages has been a major factor in transferring money from migrants to villagers (Schwartz 1975; Carrier and Carrier 1989). Even though the former explanation does play its part among the Mbuke, the contemporary rarity of ceremonial exchange and the widespread absence of (material) reciprocation for remittances on the part of villagers indicate

that remittances are most aptly described as ‘sharing’, not formal exchange governed by the reciprocal logic of ‘the gift’.

In my use of the concept of ‘sharing’, I follow Gell’s definition in his discussion of an ‘indigenous service economy’, where moral obligations to give rather than reciprocal ‘debts’ motivate sharing (Gell 1992: 152). Rather than making ‘sacrifices’ that will later be reciprocated by other ‘sacrifices’ (ibid.), migrants, by remitting, simply avoid losing or jeopardizing, as part of the relational constitution of their person, the relationship indicated by acts of *singaut*, a relationship that might otherwise have been granted to them by birth (such as brotherhood). Sharing is often described, following Sahlins, as the most vague form of reciprocity, namely ‘generalized reciprocity’, where, among the closest of relatives, transactions are ‘left out of account’ (Sahlins 1972: 194). But as Sahlins elaborates, ‘[t]his is not to say that handing over things in such form, even to “loved ones”, generates no counter-obligation’; it is rather the case that ‘the expectation of reciprocity is infinite’ (ibid.). Following this understanding of sharing, people share with others in ways that they expect those others would share, if the situation were reversed, and generalized reciprocity is simply ‘what the recipient can afford and when’ (ibid.). In the case of sharing among close relatives, on the actual Mbuke Islands it cannot be ruled out by the people involved in it – or by the observer – that over a very long time span, such generalized reciprocal ‘debts’ might eventually level out. But in the contemporary situation in which much sharing is through remittances, it can, in fact, be ruled out in most cases. My point is, in essence, that the obligation to share is not generated by previous sharing; nor is it primarily motivated by the hope for future reciprocation.

Rather than the infinite delay of reciprocation, which is tolerated because the receiver will do what they can to reciprocate eventually, sharing is – in this context – better described as tolerated consumption.³ In sharing among the Mbuke, objects and resources shared often ‘leak out’ of circulation entirely, and value is the result of mutual recognition in which words (such as demands or requests) may play as important a role in valuing as do material things (cf. Keane 1994). Sahlins more recently argued that ‘mutuality is the hallmark of kinship’ and, drawing on the work of Marilyn Strathern (e.g. Strathern 1988), he defines ‘mutuality of being’ among relatives as characterized by participation in each other’s person, and states that ‘[k]inship entails an internalization of difference’ (Sahlins 2011: 227). If that is the case, and there is no clear distinction of self and other in the transaction, then there is no *hau*⁴ residing in the receiver until appropriate reciprocation takes place since, as my Mbuke interlocutors would sometimes put it, close relatives are ‘one flesh’. What migrants are faced with, then, when they are subjected to *singaut*, is giving what they

owe to themselves, to value a relationship that entails both themselves and the requester.

It is worth noting that sharing among the Mbuke, especially in the context of remittances, is most often on demand, and rarely unsolicited. It is well known in economic anthropology that reciprocity and ceremonial exchange has stolen the thunder at the expense of other less spectacular exchange practices that nevertheless are important in the constitution of social relations. Weiner pointed out that the preoccupation with the norm of reciprocity – starting with Malinowski (1983) and Mauss (1990) – has led anthropologists studying exchange to focus on things in circulation between groups (such as between descent groups who ‘exchange’ women), rather than on things kept out of such circulation, things which stay within certain groups, but which nevertheless ‘act as the material agents in the reproduction of social relations’ (Weiner 1992: 3). While in Weiner’s analysis, material things act as agents of social reproduction by being kept within a group (and preserved), in the case of *singaut* they do so by being consumed within such ‘groups’, and are often given in response to requests.

In the context of sharing, Peterson and others have argued that the fixation on the norm of reciprocity has led anthropologists to overlook the moral obligation to respond positively to demands, what he refers to as ‘demand sharing’ (Peterson 1993). Demand sharing among indigenous Australians (*ibid.*: 861) and its Manus version, *singaut*, plays an important role in the ongoing constitution of social relations. Demand sharing is suitable for my purposes because, as pointed out by Macdonald, this analytical term depicts the ‘moral obligation to respond to demands rather than an obligation to reciprocate a “gift”’ (Macdonald 2000: 91). This counteracts the Maussian legacy in economic anthropology (*ibid.*), while also bringing the role of the verbal demand into focus.

Whether or not it makes sense to say that among the Mbuke ‘the gift’ is increasingly absent at the expense of other forms of transactions, and to say that as a mode of valuation reciprocity has overshadowed other ways in which non-market transactions produce value, is of course a matter of definition. If one were to follow Gregory’s definition of gifts as ‘products that are valued according to the non-market principle of reciprocity’ (Gregory 1994: 911), which hence potentially defines as reciprocity all transactions that are ‘non-market’, then nearly all of the transactions described in this book are actually ‘gifts’. However, I find it useful to distinguish, as Gell (1992) does, between ‘sharing’ and ‘reproductive gift exchange’, and I argue that sharing, which has otherwise been described as generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972: 194), may also be looked upon as being ‘the absence of reciprocity’ (Gell 1992: 152). If it is the case, as Rio notes, that anthropological convention holds that reciprocity is inherent in

the term 'gift' (Rio 2007: 450), then it makes sense to say that remittances are not gifts, even if they are clearly non-market transactions. Most saliently absent among the Mbuke is what Gell refers to as 'reproductive gift exchange': exchanges conducted between affinally linked groups (such as inter-marrying descent groups) in conjunction with marriage, childbirth and death, for example (Gell 1992: 143), which I refer to generally in this book as ceremonial exchange. The gift is, in that sense, very much absent, and I shall deal with the historical emergence of this absence in Chapter 1. In the increasing absence of reproductive gift exchange and in a situation of geographical dispersal, informal sharing among close relatives and friends has grown in scope and transformed the ways of achieving social reproduction among the Mbuke. This provided me with a unique opportunity to study the complexities and dynamics of the interplay between *singaut*, what Gregory has referred to as 'the value question' (Gregory 1997: 1–12), on the levels of 'what about me/the two of us', and the way the answer is made manifest in visible, often material forms as the response. Value, then, is formed in the interplay between questions and visible answers.

A central point to be made about *singaut* and remittances is that persons are constituted in terms of relationality in the absence of reproductive gift exchange. The production and reproduction of relationships between those with better access to resources (in many cases temporary labour migrants) and those more dependent on others (in many cases people living in the villages) is analysed as a kind of sharing, rather than in terms of 'gifts'. This is not to say that better-off Mbuke people are always happy with the constant demands for money and goods and with tolerating consumption. Like emerging elites from Matupit and Rabaul in PNG's East New Britain Province, described by Martin, who complain more explicitly about the emerging 'culture of consumption' among their relatives in the village (Martin 2007: 289–90), Mbuke migrants and well-off villagers are looking for alternatives to this growing dependency, one of which is sometimes referred to as 'community projects'. As pointed out by Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, 'absences are important social, political and cultural phenomena that impinge on people's lives' (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010: 7), and the widespread absence of material reciprocation for remittances and assistance is very much present among better-off Mbuke people as a motivation for reformulating, in response to requests, the 'what about me' question to a 'what about us' question.

The Value of Community

In a Port Moresby bar, Jacob told me with great enthusiasm about his plans for his return to the Mbuke Islands. After his upcoming retirement

from a senior government position in Port Moresby, he was going to start a small business on the island in which he would buy fish from other men in the villages, freeze it and then sell it in the provincial capital. That way, he felt, he could benefit the community by providing a means of income for the villagers as well as himself. Shortly after our conversation, when I was back on Mbuke Islands, the leader of Jacob's clan took up his planned initiative at a community meeting among leading Mbuke men. In response to the proposal one man commented, 'We must determine if that business is just meant to benefit himself, his family only, or if it will benefit the community'. I demonstrate, in the last three chapters of the book, how 'the community' is an emerging standard of value by which both individuals' actions and organized collective action such as 'community projects' may be valued against their ability to benefit and value the community as such. The emergence of this conceptualization of sociality as a social totality ties into a long and complex history, starting in late colonial times and especially involving what was known as the Paliau Movement, a history I discuss at length in Chapter 5.

In the early 1970s, a Mbuke organization called the Sugarloaf Youth Club was established in Port Moresby by young men and women from Mbuke living and working there, and among other things it was the intention from the outset that the club should 'help the villages' in the Mbuke Islands as a whole. In the late 1990s, when those youths had grown older, the club became central in organizing fund-raising events for projects in the villages, such as for the building of a new community school on Mbuke Island. At that time, the club changed its name to the Mbuke Islands People's Association (MIPA), and the association came to cover 'Mbuke people' as a totality – whether they lived as labour migrants outside Manus Province or lived in the villages. In the late 1990s, as dependence on remittances increased in the villages and state institutions began ceasing to provide services like schools and healthcare posts in villages, migrant members of the MIPA decided that the association needed a regular income of its own to provide money for 'community projects'. A company owned by the association, named MIPA Holdings Limited (MHL), was therefore established with the explicit aim of earning money to be used for 'community projects', an example of which was the plan of building new healthcare posts in the two biggest villages in the Mbuke Islands. The hope was to earn money in a variety of ways, such as organizing the collection of sea cucumbers around the islands for onward sale to Asian buyers, and by running a small cargo ship chartered from the Manus provincial government. In 2006, many Mbuke people told me with great enthusiasm that they were now doing something for themselves, as they were 'tired of waiting for development'.

During the Christmas holidays of 2006/7, the population of Mbuke Islands nearly doubled due to the many labour migrants who came ‘home’ from PNG’s urban centres for their Christmas leave. When the festivities were at their peak, the small cargo ship run by MHL arrived on Mbuke Island. Nearly everyone in the village on the island walked towards the beach while the ship dropped anchor in the shallow waters, and the bow door opened directly onto the beach.

It was the first time the ship had been to the Mbuke Islands, since it normally operated out of Rabaul (in East New Britain Province). Mbuke men started unloading numerous barrels of petrol and other things. I joined the crowd going aboard the ship, and many of my companions repeatedly told me with obvious pride ‘this is our ship’, and that it was ‘run by the community’. But there were also those who kept their distance. One of them was a Mbuke *lapan* (traditional leader), who I spoke to later that day. He expressed concern that the ship had been used to transport the petrol, which, as it turned out, was intended for a local man’s political campaign around Manus villages. ‘That’s just one man’s company, you know’, the *lapan* said, pointing towards the ship. This same *lapan*, like many others, had previously often assured me that the community company (MHL) would add to the ‘good of the community’, that it would benefit everyone. Meanwhile, each action and every social event (such as the arrival of the



Figure 2: The *MV Manus* on Mbuke Island. Photograph by Ton Otto.

ship and the unloading of the petrol) provides the possibility of socially negotiating and evaluating actions as well as organizations and their ability to benefit the community, while at the same time disputing the appropriate perceptual form that the community should take. As reflected in such debates and disagreements, 'the community' does not simply exist; rather, it is 'made to appear' in perceptible forms by (community) projects that claim to benefit it – like gifts render specific relationships visible, but also make claims about those relationships. MIPA and MHL are in that sense organizational 'visual appearances' of community, possible answers to the value question, 'what about us?'

Like the *lapan*, there were people who felt that MHL was not successful enough in allocating funds for community projects. For example, many people complained that the promise of building new healthcare posts was not being honoured, and some suspected that those Mbuke men who were running the company from a small office in Rabaul (mostly highly accomplished migrants now employed in the company) were 'eating the money' themselves, rather than using it for the benefit of the community. In 2008, one migrant couple took matters into their own hands and organized a large-scale fund-raising dinner in Port Moresby, to which they invited members of their urban elite network, as well as fellow Mbuke migrants. The money raised on that occasion, along with other donations from Mbuke migrants, was used to build two new healthcare posts (see Figure 1) without the direct involvement of MIPA or MHL. While 'the community' has emerged as a kind of social whole, a standard of value, among many Mbuke people, the tangible forms – both in terms of organizational structures (e.g. MIPA) and specific actions and events – by which 'the community' may be valued are subject to ongoing contestation. Some would say that the plans laid out by leading members of MIPA were 'mere talk', while the actual building of healthcare posts was evidence that certain people were genuinely 'benefiting the community'. Yet others felt uneasy about bypassing MIPA, as this placed the couple who organized the fund-raiser in a potentially privileged position in the community. We might say that by organizing donations to the community, the couple constituted themselves as persons in terms of an idea of membership of an abstract social whole (community), rather than revealing themselves in their relational constitution by sharing with specific relatives. The problem for the sceptics then became that they revealed themselves in a particularly important membership position vis-à-vis others, not simply in that particular project, but in the community as such, which the project rendered tangible.

Community is not a clear and single shared or agreed upon standard of value among the Mbuke, but a temporal and contested social whole, and several kinds of actions may give tangible form to it. While acts of

remitting money to village kin might be valued in, and give specific value to, the sociality of particular kin relations, a community project is valued for its ability to benefit the community, its ability to value the community. Here the person who conducts projects that ‘benefit the community’ does not reveal specific relationships with specific relatives through their actions and donations, but rather reveals themselves as a member of a more abstract community. But just as the person requesting remittances and the person responding to that request might not agree about the appropriate guise of the relationship, so too does a project like building a healthcare post provide a site for negotiating the community as such. The person as a member of the community as opposed to a person in a specific kinship network ties into current discussions about the emergence of forms of individualism as opposed to the ‘relational person’ in contemporary Melanesian ethnography. In this book I discuss these changes not as a radical rupture, but as ongoing and long-term negotiations between different concepts of sociality and personhood – persons and socialities that are only temporarily constituted when transformed into visible forms.

Value and Temporal Wholes

Discussions of value in anthropology have often dealt with part-whole relations in ways that are relevant to the way in which Mbuke people value things and actions as answers to value questions that imply certain temporal social wholes. In this book I develop an understanding of valuing among the Mbuke as a dialectical process of questions and answers in which both value and the standard by which it is measured are outcomes of the transaction, not its precursors.

Dumont (1980) is perhaps the most radical, in terms of defining valuing as closely associated with holism. He argues that the value of an entity (or context) is relative to its position or encompassment in a larger context or whole (Itéanu 2009: 339). Here, an entity’s value is relative to the context in which it is hierarchically situated from the point of view of another entity therein (Dumont 1980). This fundamentally structuralist understanding of the relationship between value and social wholes is similar to what Graeber describes as a linguistic understanding of value: the value of a sign vis-à-vis other signs, or meaningful differences within a system of signs (Graeber 2001: 2). The problem with Dumont’s approach, for my purposes is that it assumes the existence of the social whole as prior to actions producing value within it. Graeber’s more action-centred theory of value also presupposes certain part-whole relationships: ‘forms of value can only be realized on some sort of larger stage ... [F]or the actor, “society” is simply the audience one would like to impress’ (ibid.: 78).

The use of the concept of community among the Mbuke seems to invite a similar understanding of value as related to a social whole.

However, conceptual totalizations of sociality like 'community', 'culture' and 'society' have been widely criticized in anthropology (cf. Bubandt and Otto 2010: 2). In Melanesia, such critiques have highlighted that Melanesians do not necessarily conceive of themselves as individual members of a social whole that exists beyond specific persons in specific relationships (Wagner 1975). Most famously, Marilyn Strathern has argued that the conceptualization of society vis-à-vis the individual carries certain assumptions about the relationship between parts and wholes, which entail that the whole encompasses its parts (Strathern 1992b). She argues that such part-whole relations are misleading when applied to Melanesian local conceptualizations of sociality, which are allegedly based on the assumption that 'there are no principles of organization that are not also found in the constitution of the person' (ibid.: 86). Society and similar analytical categories cannot be assumed to have 'indigenous counterparts' (Strathern 1988: 3), and rather than conceptualizing the person as an individual member of the abstract social totality of society, the person is, according to Strathern and others, a model of the concrete social relationships in which it is entangled, and hence the part is not a fragment of its whole but a microcosm of that very whole (Strathern 1988; see also Wagner 1991).

This issue of personhood has given rise to the now famous Melanesian 'relational' or 'dividual' person, constituted out of that person's concrete relationships. Through exchange, this person is continuously composed of 'parts' which may be understood as those relationships with others that are 'made [to] appear' by gifts (Gell 1999). The same person is, in conjunction with death, symbolically decomposed, for example in mortuary exchanges (e.g. Mosko 1983; Strathern 1992b: 76; Mimica 2003), when the deceased person is 'finished' with regard to otherwise ongoing exchange relations (cf. Foster 1995a: 97). Hence the social whole in which the person lives is temporary and changes with specific acts of exchange, when people reveal relationships to themselves. For Strathern, 'the moment of exchange renders value visible' (Keane 1994: 606; cf. Strathern 1992b: 172). The concrete sets of social relationships, which are constituted or reconstituted in that moment, are the source of value. As Gell has phrased it, Strathern has proposed a framework for understanding how Melanesians make visible that which is otherwise invisible through what Gell calls 'appearances', such as gifts embodying relationships (Gell 1999: 37). Borrowing Gell's meaning of the term 'appearance', actions and things transacted are analysed in this book as visible answers to value questions. I analyse both acts of remitting and 'community projects' as 'appearances' whereby actions can be said to make statements about (or be embodiments of) the

sociality in which they unfold, as well as about the nature of being a person in (or as a social microcosm of) such a temporary social whole. In this way I develop an action-centred approach, and take the concept of 'appearances' to contexts where 'the gift' is absent, and to where relationality is not the only way in terms of which persons are constituted.

My understanding of 'community' as a shared but contested standard of value, for example, deals with that which is considered good, valuable or meaningful within a social totality as it is revealed by acts that claim to benefit it. The idea of a 'standard' of value might indicate a degree of fixity, a structure in which certain things or actions have fixed value relative to other things and actions therein, but, as Gregory points out, 'human valuers are the means by which values exist' (Gregory 1997: 13). Considering the example of *singaut* and response, the point of comparison (standard) is the outcome of the inter-personal interaction when, by means of the dialectical process of questions and answers, human valuers reciprocally recognize and negotiate the form of the relationship. A Mbuke migrant might see a request for remittances from the village as recognition of the fact that they have a valuable relation to the person making that request. On the other hand, the person making the request will see the money they might receive in response as recognition of the same relation. In this way, the same value is produced (or the relationship confirmed or constituted), although a phone call and a banknote are not easily conceived of as equivalent or comparable in other contexts. Value is an outcome of the transaction, not a precursor of it, and so is the standard. This contrasts with the model of value derived from the 'barter model of value' in which specific things have value vis-à-vis one another (e.g. Strathern 1992a: 176). Transactions, in this sense, also involve a change of personhood and mutual obligations, as they are implied by the act of *singaut* and the response it might conjure, as well as involving a change of socialities embodied by persons and changes in the temporary social whole in which value is formed.

It is worth comparing the contemporary Mbuke situation with a classic case of exchange in Melanesia, namely one from the Kula ring. I said earlier that Chauka's world reaches far beyond the shores of Mbuke Island, because of the specific relationships that connect him with places as far as Sydney, where one of his sisters lives. Munn has argued, in the case of Gawa, an island in the Kula ring, that value is the result of actions that succeed in extending the person or the community in space and time, such as through newly established connections in Kula exchanges (Munn 1986: 9). To the Gawans, as described by Munn, value is the ability to create new social relations. For Munn, the social whole that provides a standard in the light of which acts are valued is that very whole as expanded by those acts (the expansion of 'the fame of Gawa'). In that sense, all acts are

measured by the same standard, even if those acts themselves transform it. Among the Mbuke there is no clear agreement about the appropriate social whole by which to determine the value produced by a particular action. Among the Mbuke such temporal social wholes often come into conflict, and distinctions between them become unclear and are socially disputed. Is Jacob's fish project really going to benefit the community? If so, does that place Jacob in too privileged a position in that community? Or might it end up only benefiting his specific kin relations?

The relationship between social wholes and value is understood here as the temporary social wholes by which human valuers value their actions and relations. These wholes are constantly reworked and therefore changed when transformed into perceptible forms (appearances) in a process of action and recognition.

Personhood and Social Change

Those questioning Jacob's fishing project and insisting that 'it must benefit the community' testify to an emerging concept of a social whole beyond specific relationships, a social whole in which actions can be valued and a person can be socially constituted as an individual member of a 'community'. This indicates a move away from the more relational understanding of the person and of sociality. While in recent years a number of anthropologists have pointed to the emergence of individualism in Melanesia, this book draws attention to the emergence of a social whole of which such individuals conceive of themselves as parts (fragments rather than fractals, perhaps). Numerous accounts of personhood and forms of relationships in Melanesia have pointed to the emergence of individualism, as opposed to dividual or relational personhood, and discussed its consequences for forms of exchange (e.g. Foster 1995b; Robbins 2004, 2007; Martin 2006, 2007; Sykes 2007a, 2007b). While Martin associates individualism with those who are successful in the commodity economy (the 'Big Shots') and less successful persons with relational personhood (e.g. Martin 2007), the situation is rather different among the Mbuke. In the case of the Mbuke, the local concept (*eh mo ye*) that appears to come very close to Macpherson's (1962) definition of possessive individualism is associated with selfishness and is mostly used in moral critiques of others (cf. Sykes 2007a). Among the Mbuke, possessive individualism is not often a legitimate perspective held by certain persons in certain situations (as in Martin 2007). 'Community', on the other hand, is a new way for Mbuke people to construe themselves as individual parts of a whole. It is a way of relating to others which must also 'appear' in a perceptible form such as organizational structures made concrete by actions conducted in accordance with them.

Recent critiques of the ‘Strathernian’ position on issues of personhood and sociality in PNG have focused on the way in which persons are in fact conceived of as individuals in certain contexts, for example as Christian ‘sinners’ who are individuals vis-à-vis their God (Robbins 2004, 2010), or as successful businessmen who pose as possessive individuals when attempting to limit the scope of reciprocal obligation towards village relatives (Martin 2006, 2007). These critiques have argued that there are certain contexts in which it is not reasonable to talk about the person as ‘relational’ or ‘dividual’ (Robbins 2010; see also Errington and Gewertz 2010; Knauff 2010). In doing so, they have paid comparatively little attention to the concept of the social whole of which such individuals must consequently form part (although see Foster 1995b). In this book I deal with the emergence of what appears to be such a social whole, and I compare the type of personhood which it entails with the one reflected in the transfer of remittances and day-to-day sharing that mostly take place between kin. Rather than viewing this ‘new’ kind of social whole simply as a break with past understandings of sociality, I show that although part-whole conceptions may vary, some of the concepts by which social action reveals the temporal social whole within which it takes place do form a good basis for understanding many different forms of sociality among Mbuke people. Thus, rather than rejecting the idea of a social totality beyond specific relationships, I argue that different socialities are relevant to different people in different situations, as also revealed by their internal disagreements about the specific relevance of various socialities in specific situations. As Rio puts it, ‘if we can no longer hope to approach society as a “coherent whole”, then we can at least trace empirically how people themselves conceptualize their social life world’ (Rio 2007: 1); moreover, I argue, with Martin, that ‘there is more than one way to constitute a person in contemporary PNG’ (Martin 2007: 297).

Value and Personhood in the Absence of ‘the Gift’

The central focus of this book is twofold. First, it addresses relational personhood in a situation where ceremonial exchange plays a minor role compared to other places in PNG and shows instead the significant role that the informal sharing of money has come to play in the ongoing constitution of persons in terms of relationality. Secondly, the book addresses an explicitly stated concept of a social whole which appears initially to be an ‘indigenous counterpart’ to the idea of ‘society’, namely that of ‘community’ as a meaningful social whole in which Mbuke people conceive of themselves as individual members. This is not to say that Mbuke people have now finally reached a ‘stage’ of development (nor to say that such

a universal stage can be identified) in which a person is an individual member of society, but rather that they too have ideas about a kind of social totality. Following Rio, I argue that 'they' might have concepts of social wholes even if anthropology has left them behind (Rio 2007: 7), and that such ideas may be of assistance to an anthropological concept of the social wholes that people nevertheless live by.

In the absence of ceremonial gift exchange, value and personhood are formed in other contexts, in which actions and things render sociality and personhood tangible and create value. This is a book about questions asked and the value of the answers. Answers and questions may differ, valuers may disagree, and often answers tend to rephrase the question. For instance, when a relative in the village calls and asks for money the answer might be 'we are working to find solutions for you people in the villages'; thus, the book also provides insights into the dynamics of social change.

Rather than approaching value as specified by particular fixed standards of value or as relative to the hierarchical ordering of entities vis-à-vis paramount values within a particular social whole, I argue instead that the comparative basis ('standard') for valuation is implied, negotiated and contested by acts of valuation, when temporal social wholes are transformed into perceptible forms. Visible forms enable a reciprocal recognition and negotiation in which people can value relationships and actions by reference to temporary social wholes suggested by such actions and contested by their responses. Hence, it is by actions that 'settle' the obligation to 'benefit the community' that the person 'appears' as an individual member of that community, while it is by sharing with relatives that the person appears as an embodiment of their relational personhood. While a relationship between a labour migrant in the city and a village relative can take on the perceptible form of a banknote or a changed number on a bank balance, 'the community' can take on the form of the unfolding of organized action, such as felling a large tree for a 'community canoe' or organizing a village business. In such 'appearances', the constitution of social relations as abstract (and invisible) wholes appears in perceptible forms. It is such appearances that others may contest, recognize and misrecognize, and it is in this dialectical process between actors and 'audiences' of action that value as well as the social whole in which value takes form are socially negotiated, changed and reproduced. In this sense Mbuke people do not have a conceptual counterpart to social scientific concepts such as 'a society' or 'a culture' (or even 'a community' as it is sometimes understood) as fixed wholes, since their social wholes are of a provisional kind. In this book I make the claim that such local ideas about the properties of social wholes and their formation can be of assistance to an anthropological understanding of sociality and value.

Fieldwork and the Scope of a Captive's Perspective

On my very first morning in Lorengau, the Manus provincial capital, I was woken by the sound of someone banging on my hotel door while shouting my name. My great confusion about the fact that someone in this part of the world not only knew my name but was able to pronounce it exactly like Danish people do was resolved when I opened the door. I recognized Francis, whom I had got to know when he was in Denmark as part of an exhibition about Manus at a museum where I was working at the time. Having heard of my arrival, he kindly offered to take me to his village for my fieldwork. I politely declined, explaining that I had planned to study the building of outrigger canoes and therefore intended to go to the Mbuke Islands, where such canoes are built in great numbers (cf. Rasmussen 2013). Over the following two days, similar scenes occurred. Another man who I got talking to in the hotel told me that I was very lucky because they had just cut down a tree for a canoe, and that I should come and live with his family on his island. When I first arrived in Manus, I was clearly not the first anthropologist there. In the large village of Pere they have even named a village hall the 'Margaret Mead Hall', and people from there told me with great pride about the many anthropologists who had come to their area. 'Anthropologist' is a far better known category in Manus than it is, say, in Denmark, and having 'their own anthropologist' is something that Manus people take pride in.

After Francis's visit I walked to the large roofed market in the middle of town. The hotel bartender had told me that I would find a few Mbuke women there, selling betel lime (a white powder made from coral, which is chewed with betel nuts), but to my bewilderment half the stalls in the market sold betel lime. In despair, I asked two women in a random stall if they knew of anyone from Mbuke, and in an amazing stroke of luck that neither of us have yet entirely got over, they happened to be the Mbuke women I was looking for. I told them who I was, and they must have spread the word because over the following days Mbuke men started finding me at the hotel. First came a man who introduced himself as what I understood as 'the chairman of Mbuke' (later I found out he was the 'chairman of MIPA'), explaining that he would organize a boat for me to go to Mbuke. The following day, however, without having heard from the first man, there was a knock on my hotel door again, this time by a rather wide and tall man wearing sunglasses followed by two small and thin men. They entered my room and, after a brief conversation, the large man finally said, 'I will take it from here.' And so it happened that I sailed off towards the Mbuke Islands – after, on this man's instructions, having spent all my cash on petrol and canned food – into a bit of a gale in a small open boat.

In many ways, in doing fieldwork among the Mbuke, I have allowed for them to 'take it from here'. This has got me deeply involved in relations and transactions among the Mbuke, but it has in turn tended to limit me a bit in terms of Mbuke people's relations with non-Mbuke people.

In any period of ethnographic fieldwork there are certain limitations as well as benefits attached to the roles and social positions, and hence the knowledge, that a particular researcher manages to access. In turn, the roles and social positions that a fieldworker manages to achieve depend in obvious ways on the researcher as a person (e.g. Jenkins 1994: 445). The more trivial aspects of the researcher as a person are those such as gender, skin colour (at least in PNG) and age. Had I been a woman I would have gained access to other spheres of Mbuke life; had I not been as young as I was the first time I arrived on the Mbuke Islands, I might have had greater difficulty in getting acquainted with young people; and had I not been so European in appearance I might not initially have been associated with 'ol masta' (TP: white people, lit. 'the masters') and the high status often ascribed to them that the term reflects.⁵ My own adoption by a specific family and kinship group, along with the role of being a member and representative of the Mbuke community outside PNG, indicates the multitude of ways of being a 'person' among contemporary Mbuke. Common to them both, however, was that I was understood as 'belonging to Mbuke', and during my initial periods of fieldwork this made me feel a bit like a captive.

On my initial arrival on Mbuke Island, I was provided accommodation in a household that, in fact, turned out to be that of a close relative of the man who had taken me there. And so I was thrown right into a potential conflict between kinship relationality and 'community' by being snatched out of the hands of the MIPA chairman, who might have had other plans. Not long after I had moved in with Polongou and Linda, a middle-aged couple, and their teenage daughter, Paula, they gave me a local name. After this the terms of reference changed. Not only did people start referring to me and addressing me as Mwaton (my new name), they also acted to a degree in accordance with the associated kinship relation, of me being the son of Linda and Polongou. For example, my male cross-cousins started joking with me in ways that came as quite a surprise after having been addressed as 'masta', 'big man' and even 'sir' by younger men until then. The relationship between male cross-cousins among the Titan, the ethnic and linguistic group to which Mbuke belong, is often characterized by competition and jesting of a somewhat abusive (though joking) nature, often with sexual connotations (see also Mead 1934: 250–52). Men who had previously addressed me in an overtly respectful manner suddenly began to use every chance they had to insinuate sexual relations between women of the village and me – a common joke in that sort of relationship.

My becoming an adopted member of one particular household made me a son, a cousin, a brother and an in-law, and meant that I had a meaningful place in terms of kinship relations. This made interaction with me much easier because kinship relations often help determine appropriate behaviour, and my being 'someone' among Mbuke people made this possible. Going along with these new relationships meant that I was sometimes instructed as to whom it would be appropriate for me to go and live with, when going to Port Moresby for example, which in itself was a source of insight; likewise, being a relative I was trusted to carry envelopes with money back to people in the villages and otherwise get involved in things that a more distanced observer might not have been able to do. Ton Otto, who did fieldwork on Baluan, also in Manus Province, described his adoption as a moment of social recognition and, indeed, a methodological breakthrough (Otto 1997). Otto looks upon the role that he was given by local people as a kind of 'role play', as we (anthropologists) cannot fill the role we are given fully or properly, and both parties know this (*ibid.*: 98). This kind of role play may have been what my cross-cousins were doing, although using the word 'play' might erroneously indicate that such actions are not the same as the 'real' actions taking place between cross-cousins who are 'real' Mbuke people. But not all Mbuke people know how to fulfil their role properly either, for instance in ceremonial exchange (as I discuss in the following chapter), and adoption is in fact extremely widespread in Manus, and even adopting someone from another language group is not entirely unusual.

Another way of understanding my adoption may be that by being adopted I filled a void in relationships, replaced a 'road' that had in fact been cut off by death. Mwaton was the name of a son of the couple with whom I lived who had passed away some years before my arrival. He was a university student, as I was at the time, and I was even told that I reminded everyone of him because of my abstracted air and heavy smoking, among other things. A similar kind of replacement has, in fact, been observed in the sphere of leadership among Titan elsewhere in Manus. In some of these cases, if the ageing chief had no suitable children himself, or if they had not survived, members of other families, 'may have taken the places of missing men of the lineage' (Schwartz 1963: 70). The adoption of strangers from other villages or islands further indicates that biological descent was not a prerequisite for a person to become a member and even leader of a family or clan, and the anthropological literature on Manus reports how the kidnapping of children for adoption was widely practised (Schwartz 1963: 86; Fortune 1969: 107, 313; Otto 1991: 59, 74–76; Gustafsson 1999; Mead 2001). In fact, there was indeed a sense of being kidnapped in the way I first went to Mbuke.

Reflecting on his own adoption, Otto has said that certain people had a specific interest in adopting him because the land he was living on could

more easily be claimed after his departure by those who were his relatives (Otto 1997: 99). I cannot identify such direct instrumentality in the way I was adopted, but it was clear that initially Mbuke people saw me as a kind of investment, both as a white person assumed to have privileged access to money, but also as a chance to enhance the 'fame' of Mbuke in the wider world by my writings. Mead noted how most adoptions among Titan people in Pere village were carefully planned, and they were often a means to 'widen economic roads' in a network of trade relations: 'adoptions [were] carefully planned to meet deficiencies in the economic strength of the household' (Mead 2001: 58). As discussed in the following chapter, highly educated temporary labour migrants providing remittances is a crucial determinant of the economic strength of most households in the Mbuke Islands. A 'white man' from a Western European country would seem perfect for such a purpose since the few 'white people' who make their way to Manus (NGO workers who distribute money, for example) are often roads to resources. But clearly, I was also seen as a suitable replacement for the son who had died, both in terms of potential future remittances (and in that sense also an asset, although a more local version), and a person who did in fact resemble Mwaton in terms of personality.

Being meaningfully conceived of as a Mbuke person and entering into relationships of the kind that Mbuke people engage in amongst themselves gave me the role of an apprentice (e.g. Wadel 1991: 45). Being Mwaton, I suppose, is a case of what most anthropologists experience during the long process of fieldwork: gradually learning to be a proper person as they are perceived among the people with whom one lives. From my brothers' actions and responses to me, I learned to be an appropriate brother to them. To people in the periphery of the network of relations I came to occupy I am perhaps simply 'the white guy' attempting to behave like a Mbuke man. Migrants and certain village leaders occasionally consulted me on funding applications for NGOs and other funding agencies, when planning 'community projects', and I tried my best to be of assistance. In that sense, I became both a node in a kinship-based network and a migrant member of 'the community'. As I discuss in Chapter 7, my different roles as, on one hand, a person of a particular descent group and, on the other, a member of the community at large, occasionally came into conflict in a similar way to the case of Jacob and his fish project, described above. I also faced restrictions in certain situations as a man whom some might suspect is politically affiliated with certain kinsmen.

Having been 'captured' for adoption by one particular family, and thereby by one particular clan among Mbuke people, I make no claim to be able to see all perspectives. But after all, an ethnographer's perspectives are always partial and positioned (cf. Haraway 1988), although perhaps

differing from one situation to another, in which the personhood of the researcher also might differ accordingly. This sort of partial perspective is not a disadvantage as much as it is an advantage, since being meaningfully conceived (or captured) as a certain person among Mbuke people meant that I had to participate in relationships and transactions ‘as Mwaton’ and that people acted towards me ‘as though’ I was a ‘real Mbuke person’. I saw no point in retaining the role of ‘masta’ (including ‘researcher’) since in participant observation that would have mostly taught me about the relationship between ‘white people’ and local people in PNG, which was never my focus of enquiry. In this book, when I speak of ‘Mbuke people’, I have no illusions of being able to represent *all* Mbuke people, a few of whom I have never met, since such a task would have been highly difficult (if not impossible and meaningless) and would have prevented me from forming strong relationships and trust with certain persons. Although I try like other anthropologists to account for certain general tendencies in one way or another, the perspective is partial and ‘captured’ – but this is a consequence of the fact that the tool of the research in question is a human being with certain personal properties.

When Margaret Mead left Pere after her first period of fieldwork there, ‘the death drums were beaten’, and she argued that at that time Manus people had only a very vague idea of a world outside their own, and so leaving it was in that sense similar to death (Mead 2001: xxviii). As she herself noted (*ibid.*) following her second visit after the Second World War, much had changed since the 1930s, and places like Denmark are now part of the world of Papua New Guineans as much as Papua New Guinea is part of the world of Danes. Even today, several years after I lived in the Mbuke Islands, I am addressed on the phone and in online chat situations as Mwaton, not as Anders who once came around and played the role of Mwaton for a limited period. For this reason too, I have only changed the names of informants in cases that are particularly conflict ridden, since changing the names of, say, the people I lived with in the village would really only seem odd – everyone knows who I am and where I lived.

In summary, much of my fieldwork was done in the channels through which my Mbuke friends and relatives ‘sent me’, which hence has limited my insights into, for example, Mbuke people’s interaction with other Papua New Guineans in Port Moresby. Whether deliberately or not, I have thereby lived up to the ‘collaborative ideal’ valued in much anthropological fieldwork (*cf.* Marcus 1998: 112). This in turn means that this account deals more or less strictly with relations and transactions among Mbuke people themselves, and less with Mbuke people’s relationships with others. By noting this I do not mean to blame Mbuke people for possibly superficial accounts of their memberships of diverse religious groups or elite

networks in Port Moresby, or friendships with people from neighbouring islands. But I would claim that for the specific questions I have set out to answer here, these issues are of lesser relevance and that their exploration would have been undertaken at the expense of both the depth of the answers to the questions I addressed as well as the social role I gained by being Mbuke's own anthropologist.

The study is based on a total of twenty months of fieldwork among Mbuke people carried out between 2006 and 2012 in periods ranging from one year to a few months. Apart from those on the actual Mbuke Islands, the network of people who identify themselves as Mbuke people living in Port Moresby has been my main field site (for between four and five months), and it is on them that I base my understanding of Mbuke people as migrants. While most of my fieldwork has been conducted in Tok Pisin, I did eventually manage to learn Titan well enough to understand it. All Mbuke people, like most Papua New Guineans, speak Tok Pisin entirely fluently, since it is the daily lingua franca of this province of only 50,000 inhabitants, where thirty different languages are spoken. In some households, such as those that involve intermarriage with other groups, it is even the preferred language of everyday communication.

Book Outline

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the historical and ethnographic setting, providing an overview of historical processes during the late colonial era and throughout the years after PNG gained independence, which contributed to making money and remittances a crucial part of the livelihoods of the Mbuke, and the ethnic group to which they belong – that is, the Titan, previously referred to as 'Manus' (cf. Fortune 1969; Mead 2001). Here I argue that sharing on demand among close relatives plays a key role in drawing remittances to the villages. The Tok Pisin word for request or demand, *singaut*, is employed analytically to highlight how a kind of 'demand sharing' (Peterson 1993) plays an important role in the constitution of personhood and social relationships, especially between migrants and non-migrants. In other words, while it has often been pointed out that ceremonial exchange plays a key role in the 'social reproduction of persons' in PNG, informal sharing between close relatives, by contrast, plays a major role in these processes among the Mbuke. *Singaut*, I argue, is the verbal demand of another to value a relationship by making it visible in the form of a response to that request.

My focus in Chapter 2 is an attempt to theoretically develop local concepts of visibility and value. I discuss how *singaut* is acknowledged with acts of sharing, all of which are conceived of as the visual appearance

of personhood and relationships – that is to say, visual forms of value. Following Mbuke concepts of vision and visibility used in the context of sharing and other kinds of transactions, I argue that giving is not only a way of seeing, but also of ‘making seen’ persons and relationships as they are constituted and valued socially. Although the need for visual ‘appearances’ points to a degree of distrust in words and is analysed as a way of transcending ‘the opacity of other minds’ (Robbins and Rumsey 2008) I show that particular kinds of verbal utterances do play a role in these same social processes.

Chapter 3 is about the exchange of words. I discuss how gossip and curses, in the form of statements, are ways of reconfiguring relationships in their right order through attempts to draw appearances from others by questioning their will and ability to make such appearances. As a disputed standard of value, the obligation to respond positively to *singaut* is an important indicator of *tawian*, a person’s value, as reflected, among other things, in the person’s (visually) apparent valuation of others. As this local concept of human worth connotes, value is essentially reciprocally and interpersonally constituted, even if material reciprocity may be completely absent. In this chapter I give examples of ways of responding to a lack of sharing, as well as responses to sharing that cannot be materially reciprocated; that is to say, the problem of value that cannot take visual form.

Conflicts between *singaut* and business are the focus of Chapter 4. I show how attempts to do small-scale business in the villages easily become difficult when customers are friends and relatives with whom one is expected to share. Central to such conflicts of interest is the accusation of selfishness. I argue that these critiques are often ways of manipulating the relevance of kin solidarity. In line with the discussion of reciprocity and sharing above, I point out that the social obligation to give and the social obligation to return are not always fundamentally interrelated; they may even be rhetorically presented as radical opposites. Given that different transactions reveal different kinds of relationships and that most Mbuke people engage in a number of different kinds of relationship, even with the same person, the nature of a specific transaction may not always be entirely clear and therefore open to manipulation. It is this difference that is being manipulated when people who run up debts in other people’s trade stores, forever deferring the ‘tomorrow’ of repayment, present the obligation to return a loan as the refusal of a relationship characterized by the obligation to share. In this chapter it becomes particularly clear that the extent of obligations to help relatives is far from agreed upon, being subject to constant social negotiation in a changing economic situation.

The next three chapters deal with the social negotiation and conceptualization of ‘community’ as a meaningful social whole that is beyond

specific kin relations (and their concomitant *singaut*) and in explicit opposition to possessive individualism. Chapter 5 addresses the idea of community, both as a level of organization and as a specific concept. I expose its historical roots in the colonial encounter, such as in cooperative plantations, and in past and ongoing social movements such as the Paliu Movement in Manus. I show that community is not simply a pre-colonial social form with a new English label. On the other hand, new kinds of socialities among Mbuke people are not simply deliberate radical ruptures that betoken cultural abandonment since Mbuke people have been highly selective in their appropriation of certain organizational forms from colonial times.

I offer examples of how certain organizational forms and events act as visual ‘appearances’ of the social whole that is ‘the community’ in Chapter 6. Here I argue that others may judge a person by their success in meeting ‘community’ goals: a good person supports a good community, regardless of their obligation to specific kin. I further argue that it is by actions that ‘settle’ the obligation to ‘benefit the community’ that the individual ‘appears’ visually as a member of that community. Such actions are likewise the means by which the community appears in visible forms, in the same way that sharing and remittances reveal the social whole embodied in a relational person understood as a microcosm of relationships (Strathern 1988). But the ‘community’ is a bigger social whole within which value can also be produced by actions that reveal the person as a part rather than an embodiment (or fractal) of a social whole. Acts of donating to the community show the means by which the constitution of the person – which is revealed as relational personhood by remitting to kin – becomes individual membership in that context.

Chapter 7 centres on a single case of felling a large tree for a ‘community canoe’; I discuss the ways in which this reveals the social negotiation and contestation of ‘community’ as such. As I show, ‘community’ is not simply ‘new lives for old’ (Mead 2001), and Mbuke people have their own ways of theorizing totalities and their own dialectical practices of social negotiation. Drawing on a local concept of totalizing and valuating social relations, I argue that organized social actions reveal communal value visually, along with the standards by which such valuation is accomplished. The unfolding of ‘community projects’ makes claims about what is good for the community, and by doing so about what ‘community’ involves and contains: claims that may be denied, disputed or recognized by others who exert forms of agency in response to a project as it unfolds. Like other standards of value and acts of valuing, the community and the actions aimed to benefit it are conceived and contested when they are transformed into visible forms.

Notes

1. The name 'Mbuke' tends to be hard for native English speakers to pronounce. While intuitively they might be inclined to pronounce it '*em*-buke', I find that with the specific dialect of the Titan language spoken among Mbuke people, simply pronouncing it 'buke' is a better approximation.
2. Tok Pisin is the most widespread lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, a form of Pidgin English also occasionally referred to as Neo-Melanesian. In the spelling of Tok Pisin terms I follow Mihalic (1989), though this is not always possible, since this language is continually evolving, with new words being incorporated all the time. Where a Tok Pisin word or phrase is recognizably English in origin, the word is given in roman type; other Tok Pisin terms are given in italics. Hereafter, I indicate Tok Pisin terms with the abbreviation TP; words in the other locally spoken language, Titan, are indicated with the abbreviation T.
3. 'Consumption' refers here to the word in the sense of 'eat up, devour, waste, destroy or spend' rather than its more recent meaning in the 'anthropology of consumption' and its application to 'consumer societies' (Graeber 2011: 491).
4. That is to say, there is no part of one person residing in the other until reciprocation (Mauss 1990: 12), if the very distinction between self and other is blurred.
5. The Tok Pisin term 'masta' derives from the English 'master' and reflects, if not racism, then at least ethnocentrism on the part of previous colonial powers in the area who introduced such terms.