Kubo are a small, patrilateral language group living on both sides of the Strickland River near the northern limit of the Strickland-Bosavi language family, in south-western Papua New Guinea (Dwyer, Minnegal and Woodyard 1993). The people assert that marriages should not occur between ‘clans’ (obi), identified as “brothers”, whose lands are contiguous, either on the surface or via underground paths that were once followed by human ancestors or other beings. The focal sites for such neighbours will differ but their activities, moving out from those sites, are likely to trace overlapping paths where lands adjoin, with resources and experience of those places shared.

During the time that we lived at the Kubo village of Gwaimasi, on the west bank of the Strickland River, we learned that marriages between Gamososo and Gomososo clans were, and had been, acceptable. The two clans, it seemed, were respectively identified with land west and east of the river, though activities of their members often extended across the river to the land of their neighbours. We wondered, therefore, whether the river itself was sufficient to negate geographical contiguity and, thereby, legitimise marriages between men and women whose clans apparently fitted all the criteria for being “brothers”. We were wrong. When we pursued this matter further we were told that, in fact, a narrow strip of land east of, and adjoining, the river was identified with a lineage from another clan—Kesemo. The people of that line had died out, but the memory of them—whether real or fictive—served to disrupt the possible geographical contiguity between Gamososo and Gomososo and, thereby, legitimise marriages between them.

In 1995, rumours had reached Kubo to the effect that the Papua New Guinea Government planned to initiate a country-wide register of customary land ownership. Much discussion focussed on the possible location of “borders” between clan lands when, in earlier years, the sense of ownership diffused outwards from particular sites, declining with distance and with the likelihood of access to and use of resources (Minnegal and Dwyer 1998, 1999). There was no Kubo word for border that had a fixed geographic referent. Only the existence of people in-between could delineate people and land as being, in some sense, other.

To us, the planned register posed a conundrum for Gamososo and Gomososo people. If they declared their clan lands to be separated by a strip of land that no living person owned there was the potential that this might
be claimed as *terra nullius* by the National government. If, however, they asserted that this portion of land was owned by one or other of the two clans that now used the land then they would be declaring that, at the least, future marriages between Gumososo and Gomososo should not occur and, further, that many past marriages had not been in accord with ideal practice.

**BOUNDARIES AND BARRIERS**

The social geography of Kubo is reliant upon both real and imagined boundaries—between “brothers” who share, between “others” who may exchange—that are fluid with respect to their actual location in space and diffuse with respect to temporality and the constraints they impose on behaviour. Like the boundaries that exist in all biological and human systems, they are permeable. They are sites at which exchanges occur and at which negotiation is possible. They are sites that, by their existence, reduce “noise” in the world and thereby facilitate communication between components of that world. For people, they are often implicated in providing a basis from which one’s identity *vis-à-vis* others may be consolidated and rationalised. They may provide sites that facilitate the expression of agency (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007). Boundaries, then, are ever-present and always necessary. They are created, repositioned, transformed and sometimes extinguished as systems change.

But boundaries entail risk. They hold the potential to firm up as barriers that render exchange impossible between particular domains of practice or understanding and thereby, at the least, shift modes of communication to a different register or, at the most, increase the likelihood of system closure and eventual (entropic) collapse. But barriers, then, are rare in biological and human systems. But in the latter, at least, they can be imagined—indeed, they can be constructed—and their consequences felt or manipulated. Had, for example, the project of a National register of customary ownership come to fruition, and had Kubo excised the Strickland River division of Kesemo from their memory, they would have imposed a barrier to marriage between Gumososo and Gomososo. In so doing, they would have reordered connections between the two clans, restricting some channels of potential exchange while opening others. In the experience of those who detect (or invoke) barriers, it is the former that is prioritised; identifying a barrier serves primarily to direct attention to what cannot, or can no longer, be transmitted rather than to the information that continues to flow.

Boundaries and barriers, then, should not be imagined as two kinds of things. Such a construction would merely serve to reify the always transient outcomes of what are interrelated processes—of bounding, of barring. All boundaries filter information. All boundaries act as barriers to some kinds of
exchanges even as they facilitate others. But to cross a boundary—to bring possible exchanges to fruition—entails negotiation. The permeability of the boundary must be manipulated to either enhance or foreclose exchange. But foreclosure does not, in itself, preclude relationship. Rather, it predicates relationship on a very different logic, one that presumes a categorical distinction between the parties to exchange, and thus creates the potential for asymmetries to emerge as the attributes and actions of those parties— their properties—are compared and evaluated. It is this potential, we argue, that informs the tension entailed in reading boundaries as barriers, and the increasing tendency to do so in modern contexts.

If boundaries and barriers are indeed distinguished by reference to ways in which they are perceived—by reference to the domains of communication they facilitate or negate and by reference to ways in which this is experienced and evaluated—then we may usefully ask how these experiences are themselves shaped and transformed. In this paper, with initial reference to Kubo, we explore some emic dimensions of boundaries and barriers both synchronically and diachronically. We extend our reach, in the first instance, to a few neighbouring and more distant social groups of southern New Guinea and, finally, reflect upon ways in which anthropologists—for all-too-human reasons that are not entirely removed from those of Kubo and others—similarly indulge in the creation of boundaries and barriers. The anthropologists, we shall argue, often do so for reasons that amount to territorial claims over intellectual property. The consequence, however, is that they may impose barriers to anthropological understanding. And, perhaps more crucially, they may reduce opportunities for those whose lives they study to dwell within relational worlds where the flexibility of boundaries always takes precedence over the fixity of barriers.

**KUBO AND NEAR NEIGHBOURS**

Kubo are a very mobile people (Minnegal and Dwyer 2000). They move often between village and bush houses within their usual subsistence zones. They frequently visit friends and kin at neighbouring communities. When disputes arise, individuals or families may abandon one village and take up residence at another. A desire to share and an expectation of sharing facilitate these short-term and longer-term movements. But when movement entails contact with other people it is never free from constraint. To enter a new village is to cross a threshold that should be always marked in some way. A subdued entry by the visitors, and an exchange of food or tobacco smoke from hosts to visitors, may serve to negotiate the arrival. Or, when the place of arrival is within the land of neighbours who speak a different language, then a pause and quiet reflective prayers are likely to be the prelude to entering the village.
Arrival, therefore, is a liminal state that varies in duration in relation to the degree of familiarity that those who have arrived share with those they visit. Between close kin or close friends sharing tobacco smoke, or a gift of cooked bananas, may suffice to join visitors and hosts in comfortable interaction. At other times, when the visitors are little known, and their purpose uncertain, it may be several days sitting and awkwardly waiting in the longhouse—often alone, as hosts go about their daily tasks—before they gain acceptance in the host community.

At places that are more distant both geographically and socially there may be strong feelings of anxiety. When, in 1995, we travelled with Kubo friends from west to east across Fëbi territory, moving ever-further to the north of lands they knew, they were excited, sometimes exhilarated, by encountering terrain that was very different from their own—the mountains, wild torrents and vistas to the lowlands of the south. But they were anxious too, often suggesting that we abandon our journey and turn for home. They were homesick. Even more, they were disconcerted by the prospect of engaging with others whom they did not know—or, rather, knew of only by reputation, as people of a particular kind—and whose mores might be unfamiliar. At Tobi—our most distant stop—a senior resident of that place and our senior companion explored mutual connections until a realisation of distant kinship lent warmth and legitimacy to our visit.

There are occasions, however, when resolution is not possible. Two days travel south of Tobi we arrived at Siabi, a recently established community of followers of the Christian Brethren Church. To reach the village we followed a long ridge and climbed a set of wide steps cut into the earth. A row of men stood silently, watching us, barring our way; one man carried a home-made shotgun. No women or children were in sight. The men introduced themselves by name. There were no handshakes and no offerings of food; if we wished to eat, we could buy food. Smoking was prohibited, we were told, within the bounds of the village. There was talk of paying rent for the duration of our stay. None of this was conventional Kubo or Fëbi practice. Our visit was perceived as being ‘business’ (bisnis) and our rights—or lack of them—and responsibilities were fore-grounded. All of us felt isolated; the mood was of discomfort. It was easy to decide to curtail the visit and depart promptly the next morning.

But it is not merely in their role as visitors that Kubo may experience anxiety. Their responsibilities, and desires, as hosts may be also fraught. The village of Gwaimasi was established during the first six months of 1986. The 25 people who came to live there had, for two years, been dispersed as smaller groups living, for the most part, at garden houses. In January 1987 they hosted their first feast as a community, inviting more that 50 people
from other communities. Their aims were twofold. On the one hand, they sought to demonstrate their viability as a cohesive social group that had the capacity to garner and produce all resources needed to participate in their own right in the full gamut of social obligations within and beyond that group. Here, then, they sought to demonstrate their community’s autonomy—its boundedness—with respect to others. But, at the same time, they sought to demonstrate their attractiveness as a self-sustaining community and, thereby, encourage others to join. Here, then, they asserted a collective identity that was open and welcoming. This second aim negated the entropic identity of the first, the potential that autonomy might be experienced by either or both insiders and outsiders as independence, inhibiting communication across groups.

In 1969 William Paterson led a patrol that crossed Kubo land west of the Strickland River (1969a, 1969b). For two nights they slept at the Sigiafoihau longhouse, 20 minutes north of the later site of Gwaimasi. They purchased food, processed a sago palm, provided medical treatment and found the people hospitable. They did not know that either shortly before or shortly after their visit these people hosted a feast at which five guests were killed and eaten. In 1987 we snacked on breadfruit at the long abandoned site of the Sigiafoihau longhouse, while people told us the tale. The unfortunate guests had been members of a Kubo-speaking clan that, in the 1980s and 1990s, was named Habiei. Surviving members of that clan fled west and realigned with Awin-speakers, adopting their language and modes of living.

For more than ten years Habiei kept their distance from other Kubo people. The memory of the cannibal feast was a barrier to interaction. It was not until the 1980s that people sought to re-establish relations: first, by holding a joint ceremony at which one Gomososo and several Habiei youths were initiated together at an Awin longhouse at Gasuke, close to the Elevala River; and, secondly, by arranging a marriage in which a woman from one of the cannibalistic clans wed a Habiei man. At the outset, the marriage was interpreted, at least by Habiei, as partial compensation for those who had been eaten in the past. It was not balanced by an exchange of sisters. The joint initiation failed to have long lasting effects in that, unusually for Kubo, the co-initiates did not maintain life-long friendship and contact. The marriage, though not without complications, was more effective in dissolving the potential barrier to interaction and providing the ground upon which continuing encounters and exchanges could occur between the descendants of those who had participated in the cannibalistic feast. Through that marriage, communication was restored and the risk of system closure was averted.

Through the 13 years that we visited Kubo, and largely in response to their desire for, though not their experience of, the paraphernalia of modernity,
there was a gradual, though never complete, shift from a relational to a
categorical epistemology (Dwyer and Minnegal 2007; see also LiPuma 2000).
Increasing familiarity with money was a primary factor in promoting this
change which, in practice, was expressed particularly in gender relations,
patterns of exchange and understandings of rights to land. At a local level—at
the scale of villages—there was an emergent individualism in which sharing
decayed and people were more inclined to acquire and hold possessions
as private property. People increasingly judged their own self-worth, and
evaluated others, in terms of what they possessed rather than the relationships
they produced. And identifications between people, too, became increasingly
grounded in shared attributes, rather than shared actions. The structure of
village feasts altered in that where once the distribution of game and garden
produce was to men, women and children in their own right, this was replaced
by a distribution to, as Kubo expressed it, using the English word, named
“groups”.6 There was a sense in which an emerging individualism—as
attention increasingly turned inwards to what people brought to an encounter,
rather than what might emerge from an encounter— acted as a centripetal
force drawing people together as ever-reducing coteries of self-identifying and
self-regarding individuals. And, yet, at the same time, at a larger scale, and as
a mechanism for circulating money, a pattern of pig exchange emerged that
crossed language boundaries in ways that had not existed before (Minnegal
and Dwyer 2007). To this extent the centripetal force of individualism was
counteracted by a centrifugal force that reached outwards to a larger world and
reduced the risk of isolation.7

Our focus in these ethnographic examples has been with circumstances
in which, as Williams (1982: 131), writing of Yolngu of Arnhem Land, in
northern Australia, put it, “a boundary is to cross”. They reveal how, among
Kubo, boundaries are ever present and that to cross them entails negotiation.
Where those boundaries reflect greater social distance between potentially
communicating (or exchanging) participants then the necessary negotiation
may be either or both more elaborate and time consuming. The examples
show, too, how Kubo actors must sometimes counteract expressions of
autonomy by simultaneously expressing welcome, thus avoiding the risk
that a valued boundary be perceived as a threatening barrier. Indeed, in a
context of change, a shift towards greater in-group boundedness was, in part,
balanced by a shift towards greater out-group connections.

The emphasis in all these examples, however, has been with ways in
which boundaries are negotiated and the potential emergence of barriers to
communication minimised. But Kubo do not invariably seek to minimise
barriers to communication. Among these people invisible beings are ever-
present. The domain in which those beings dwell is distinct from, though
all-pervading and intimately connected with, the domain of people. The intimate connections between visible and invisible worlds are often ambiguous and, though action in each domain may be simultaneously expressed in the other, movement between the two domains, and direct intervention across the boundary that separates them, is regarded as neither straightforward nor to be undertaken lightly. The spirits of the dead reside in ‘forbidden places’ (toi sa) or occupy the bodies of animals. Sometimes, in séances, their advice or help may be elicited. At other times, they spontaneously interact with the spirits of living people, to whom they can thus cause harm. In the aftermath of some all-night curing ceremonies initiated bachelors must enter the otherwise forbidden toi sa to cook, and share with spirits, pig meat that has been sanctified through the long night-time dancing (Dwyer and Minnegal 1988). At other times, when an animal species has been seen outside its usual habitat, it is known to be a manifestation of a spirit that intends harm to the person who saw it and, perhaps, others close to that person. To reduce that threat the spirit must be ritually encouraged to return to the place where it belongs. At times, therefore, an apparent barrier between visible and invisible worlds must be temporarily dissolved and crossed. At other times, a desired barrier is transgressed by a spirit or by a person and must be ritually restored.

KALULI AND ONABASULU

Kaluli people live to the southeast of Kubo, on the northern slopes of Mt. Bosavi and the Great Papuan Plateau. E. Schieffelin (1980: 506-7) has briefly reported a Kaluli myth where

…in the beginning... the world was entirely filled with people. There were no trees, plants, or animals. Without food or shelter, people became hungry and wet and wondered what to do. Finally one man said: ‘Everyone gather here.’ When they had gathered, he divided them: ‘You be trees,’ he said to one group, and they became trees, ‘you be sago, you be fish, you be birds ...’ and so on for all the things in the tropical forest and the spirit world, each according to its own kind. Each group became what they were designated. The few men and women that remained became the ancestors of people today.

Schieffelin continued:

[In the myth] the logic of the divisions between species and entities is not primarily of an intellectualist kind—that is, where things are distinguished from one another by conceptual features of a logico-categorical type. Instead, it is a social logic which implies that things in the world are set off from one another through opposition, tension, potential confrontation, and reciprocity. ... In the myth, similar but distinct social groups are transformed and opposed as
different biological species. It is only as the original people become ‘socially’
divided in this way (into different plants and animals) that there can be the
interdependence that enables all to live. Social reciprocity becomes ecological
interaction. (1980: 507; our emphasis)

In the language that we have chosen to use in this paper, “social logic” is
relational; as illustrated in the Kubo case, it is founded upon a recognition
of, and necessity for, fluid boundaries between things that are produced and
persist through dynamic, and reciprocal, interaction and interdependence.
As Schieffelin noted, relational logic is, at base, ecological: the social
and the ecological—mind and nature—are “a necessary unity” (Bateson
1979, Minnegal 1996). This contrasts with categorical logic, which asserts
the existence of fixed barriers between things that are defined only by the
attributes each possesses; at the extreme, both in reality and the imagination,
such things stand in isolation without interaction with, or dependence upon,
other things that may be near neighbours. Relational logic and boundaries
are suffused with ambiguity; categorical logic, and barriers, tempt with the
semblance of certainty.

Indeed, as Ernst (1999) has shown for the Onabasulu—another language
group of the Great Papuan Plateau—the temptations of categorical logic
may be great indeed and, at first appearances, seem to hold a promise of
substantial future reward. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Onabasulu
were, at best, vague about geographic limits to that language grouping, there
were no identifiable clans as these are formally defined in anthropology
(e.g., Keesing 1976: 509), and shared and recognised membership within
patrilineal ‘lineages’ (mosumu) was the primary substantive expression of
social structure. Even here, however, residential affiliation cross-cut lineage
affiliation, with rights to use resources near residential sites only minimally
tied to the lineage that, purportedly, held shallow ancestral connections to that
land. And, further, in a context of these rather vague and diffuse structural
principles there was always scope for lineages to divide in response to
demographic contingencies (Ernst 1984).

Twenty-five years later, in the aftermath of extensive prospecting for oil
and gas in the region, and the development of oil fields at Kutubu to the
southeast, Onabasulu had established 17 legally Incorporated Landowner
Groups (ILGs) that, they now asserted, were the originating Onabasulu clans.
They had equated mosumu with clan but, in the process, had fixed those
clans through time. Fission was now effectively ruled out of court—there
was no legal space for additional ILGs—and, where dispute led to some
separation on the ground, it was necessary to create and invoke a notion
of subclans as subordinate taxonomic categories. The people told stories
that asserted concrete limits to the borders that separated Onabasulu land from that of neighbouring languages and identified Onabasulu as a self-contained grouping known by the land it distinctively, and exclusively, possessed. The process entailed is described by Ernst as “substantivization” or “entification”. Onabasulu now operate with conceptual categories—which are more ambiguous in practice than in the mind—with the eventual aims of legitimising rights to mineral discoveries on and, perhaps, near their land and asserting territorial rights over that land. They are formalising intellectual expression of property rights. Both in the past and more recently, Onabasulu lineages were “historically contingent and dependent on the activities of” men and women (Ernst 1984: 95), and ILGs, too, were originally conceived in these terms. But through time, what were once conceptualised as diffuse boundaries that facilitated communication at a range of scales had been reconceptualised as fixed barriers that consolidated and rationalised identity. That shift, however, held the potential, and ironic, consequence of eventual subordination to, and manipulation by, the bureaucratic, corporate and legal structures upon which the new arrangements had been modelled (Weiner and Glaskin 2007). The same semblance of certainty that tempted Onabasulu to reconfigure their physical and social space into fixed and impermeable entities has tempted others—as B. Schieffelin (2002) has shown for Kaluli—to reconfigure time in analogous ways. In the 1960s, Kaluli spoke of time in relational terms. Time stretched out from each present, into the past and the future, but with no independent scale along which those presents could be aligned, and no sense in which different moments in time could be compared and evaluated: “...their perception of events [was] not governed by causal or developmental sequences” (E. Schieffelin 1976: 142). Each moment stood alone, though not in isolation. And when people connected events they did so in terms of how one balanced the other, not in terms of cause or consequence. Within ten years, however, the temporal discourse of Christian proselytising among Kaluli and other Bosavi people had dichotomised time, in effect, create a barrier between a past that was to be denied and a present-future that was to be embraced (B. Schieffelin 2002). Within the frame of this discourse, the present was seen as having no connection to the past, which comprised a fundamentally different time; one to which the present could be compared—and in contrast to which a better future could be imagined—but which had played no part in shaping the present. For those who recognise it—who live by it—this barrier (though Schieffelin wrote “boundary”) between past and present-future secures a stake in a world of modern aspirations. But it does so by consigning to an unreachable and irrelevant past the events and peoples of previous generations.
Whereas, previously, the experience of Strickland-Bosavi peoples was that “oppositions crystallized groups”, as E. Schieffelin (1976: 223) wrote of Kaluli, increasingly these people came to see fixed groups—clans, generations—as producing oppositions. Thus, the Kaluli and Onabasulu cases reveal deep, and longer term, outcomes of social change in which the temptations of categorical logic may facilitate voluntary imposition of structures and language that, ultimately, in their lack of ambiguity, reduce flexibility and, indeed, opportunities to express agency. To the extent that negotiable boundaries progressively firmed up as barriers to communication—and, indeed, to practice—so, too, the life-affirming character of the former was eroded.

THE ANALYST’S DILEMMA

In *South Coast New Guinea Cultures*, Knauft provided a detailed critique of the comparative analysis of ethnographic regions. He wrote (1993: 122):

> In so far as they become influential, conceptual contrasts between regions tend to become working assumptions. The issue here is reification. Once parameters of contrast are established, boundaries between ethnographic regions or conceptual types tend to be gerrymandered to fit them.

As Bourdieu (1991: 223) observed: “The act of categorization, when it manages to achieve recognition or when it is exercised by a recognised authority, exercises by itself a certain power.” The difficulty here is widely recognised and regularly criticised. Ernst (1999: 92) noted, for example, that reading “ethnic categories [as] radically separate bounded cultures… [does] ethnography a serious injustice”, suggesting that such readings resonated more closely with colonial perceptions and modern ideologies than they did with actual sociocultural forms in New Guinea. Hays (1993) critiqued interpretations of the New Guinea Highlands as a region or culture area and argued that the social groups living here might be better understood as a “fuzzy set”. In other parts of the world, and at a different scale, Lien (2003) revealed the intricate global connections of a Norwegian fishing community that in the popular imagination has been caricatured as remote, isolated and backward, while others write of ways in which cosmopolitanism dissolves pre-existing boundaries between groups or generates new forms of boundedness (Osborne 2006, Stolcke 1995). And, more generally and much earlier, in his introduction to the edited collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth (1969) argued both against the essentialising of ethnic groups as fixed categories and for recognition that boundaries exist and are crucial to the persistence and dynamics of social relations.

The problem is complex. On the one hand, as the few preceding examples demonstrate, scholars are apt to challenge any tendency to reify particular
configurations of people; fixed borders, or implied barriers to interaction or exchange, are dismissed. But, on the other hand, assertions of limitless flow and flexibility may be similarly problematic. As Williams (1982: 137) wrote, with particular reference to Yolngu,

... what anthropologists have characterized as ‘flexibility’ in hunting and gathering societies... may depend not on the absence of boundaries, but rather on the existence of boundary concepts and uses that are at some points more subtle than those derived from European legal traditions, and at some points may be at variance with them.

But the problem, though identified in its various manifestations, recurs. It is persistently unresolved. There are, perhaps, two primary reasons for this, which have more to do with the practice of scholarship itself than with the not uncommon tendency to impose inappropriate ideologies onto the subjects of anthropological research. In the first instance, all analysis—though particularly comparative analysis—entails abstracting from that which has been observed and locating it within a broader, global, frame of reference (Dwyer and Minnegal 2010). The language of analysis is always a metalanguage. As such, it is necessarily at some remove from both the understandings and the practices of the subjects of enquiry and, for this reason at least, will tend to reify—to concretise—those understandings and practices. This, then, is the analyst’s dilemma.

There is, however, an additional reason for the persistence of problems with comparative analysis. Scholars thrive on exposing and demolishing the implicit dualities and reified concepts of other scholars, though they seldom note that they have been often guilty of the same sins. It is through this on-going critical practice that they reproduce and transform their disciplines. And it is through this on-going professional practice that they assert proprietal rights over domains of knowledge or, even, as anthropologists, the lives and subjectivities of particular configurations of other people. They defend territories of knowledge and understanding. To achieve their ends and lay claim to rewards that may be on offer, they invoke conceptual barriers that should not be violated. This, then, is the all-too human dilemma entailed in specialisation and the politics of power within the academy.

Scholars, like modern Onabasulu and many others, engage in a “politics of difference” that is “announced and contested in storytelling practices” (Ernst 1999: 88). Indeed, to draw further from our ethnographic examples, there is a sense in which the Kubo case shows how, and in what ways, potential barriers to practice and ideology are always subject to negotiation such that flexibility is prioritised over fixity while the Kaluli and Onabasulu cases show how, in contexts of change, systems may easily slip towards fixity.
A MATTER OF SCALE

In this brief exploration of boundaries and barriers among Kubo and others it seems that a variety of concepts—or, more dangerously, dualities—tend to cluster around those two terms. Boundaries are necessary; barriers are tempting. Boundaries generate ambiguity; barriers offer certainty. Boundaries have to do with relations and the involvement of parts; barriers concern categories and the individuation of form (see Minnegal and Dwyer 1998). Boundaries facilitate the expression of centrifugal forces; barriers facilitate the expression of centripetal forces. Boundaries draw those within outwards and beyond—evoking the image of a “hollow and transparent” sphere; barriers are visible only to outside observers who cannot penetrate the surface—evoking the image of a “solid and opaque” globe (Ingold 1993). Boundaries are implicated in the social relations that constitute the soft and people-centred realities of tenure; barriers are implicated in the material relations that constitute the harsher and object-centred realities of territoriality (Ingold 1986). And in the domain of the imagination, boundaries promote figurative expression and tropes that endlessly, and restlessly, reach out from the core while barriers promote literal expression and tropes that take refuge in the certainty of a seemingly concrete centre (Dwyer 2005; see also Wagner 1977).

But to catalogue such dualities is to reveal their inherent weaknesses. (And, of course, it is always ‘wiser’ to declare the weakness oneself, rather than to be told about it later.) As so often, where dualities intrude, the issue in need of resolution is one of scale. There is no sharp divide between a boundary and a barrier, between necessity and temptation, between ambiguity and certainty, and so forth. Dualities are themselves artefacts of intellectualisation that seem to imply barriers when, in fact, they direct attention to boundaries of understanding that should be crossed. It is only where conceits of self, and the politics of power, intrude that dualities firm up and resist decomposition. Only then will it seem that groups of actors produce the oppositions that frame those conceits and politics, rather than being themselves crystallised by those oppositions.

Whether we are talking or writing of the microcosm of Kubo visiting practices or the macrocosms of transnational flows and cosmopolitanism, we will, as anthropologists, surely invoke analytical categories that risk doing an injustice to those of whom we write. The task must be always to see the former in the latter, and vice versa; to appreciate the effects of scale on one’s analyses and, thereby, detect that which is processually, even structurally, different within an overarching pattern of human similarity and unity. Can we, therefore, identify clusters of people that might qualify as culture areas, or commonalities among people that might justify writing of geographically bounded regions? Can we identify sets of qualities that coalesce as ethnic
groups? Or must we always assert that these are artefacts of analysis despite the fact that, often, they may be the subjective realities of the people of whom we write, despite the fact that people may order their lives by them while continually transgressing them. Such identifications, we assert, are both inevitable and legitimate. Inevitable as an outcome of the task of analysis. Legitimate as temporary props to defining, as it were, that about which we speak and write. But it is necessary, too, to remain reflexive—to always remember that inevitability is not diagnostic of truth and that legitimacy is merely a tentative step to understanding.

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NOTES

1. Kubo obi may include more than one patrilateral lineage whose members may assume, though they cannot specify, genealogical connection to a common ancestor. In at least some cases the link is supported by myths. In one myth, the male ancestor of a particular obi poured water from a bamboo tube to create the Strickland River and, thereafter, committed members of that obi to use land on both sides of the river. In another, the crocodile and water monitor swapped living places and, in doing so, were implicated in founding two obi, each of which forbids the consumption of one of those species. For these reasons, we risk glossing obi as ‘clan’.

2. The connection between “brother” obi that do not hold geographically contiguous land may be established in myths. In one case, the connection was established when pigs vanished into a cave on the land of one obi and travelled underground to emerge on the “brother” obi’s land (Dwyer et al. 1993); people too, we were told, could then follow that path. Another myth explains why there is no longer evidence of a visible link between the lands of the “brother” obi Gomososo and Dimiti. People were felling a huge tree above the entrance to a bat cave known as Doitafa on Gomososo land. The tree fell towards the cave. A bird flew up, caught one end of the tree and held it, stopping its fall. Then the bird flew to the other end but it was too late. The tree crashed down in the land of Dimiti people, closing the entrance to the cave at the Dimiti end. If the bird had been successful it would still be possible, as had happened in the past, to enter the cave at Doitafa and emerge on Dimiti land.
3. We have visited Kubo people on six occasions for a total of 24 months between 1986 and 1999.

4. Lineages that were once considered part of the same clan may become differentiated as “brothers” if the focal sites shared by members of the respective lines diverge. Indeed, if those lines move far enough apart, such that interactions between them entail traversing the land of others, marriage between the lines may become recognised as legitimate. Thus, though all Headubi consider that they have a common origin, we knew several couples formed by marriages between three named subdivisions of Headubi. Though, arguably, the location of the boundary between lineages has not changed, some modes of communication have closed, and others opened, as the character of the boundary transformed.

5. Although dictionary meanings of ‘boundary’ and ‘barrier’ overlap, it is common to find a sense of the arbitrary and relative in meanings attributed to the former and of the concrete and absolute in meanings attributed to the latter. Thus, for example, The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines boundary as “that which serves to indicate the limits of anything” and barrier as a “material obstruction of any kind which bars advance or prevents access”. Or, as examples drawn from Collins Dictionary, “the boundary of an area of land is an imaginary line that separates it from other areas”, while “a barrier is something such as a rule, law, or policy that makes it difficult or impossible for something to happen or be achieved”. It is these usages that influence the distinction that we draw on in this article. This is consistent with Wilden’s (1980: 122-23) emphasis upon the fluid or analogical nature of boundaries and the fixed or digital nature of barriers; he argues that the former are necessary for communication but, as a common ideological error, are often confused with the latter.

6. In most cases, these groups comprised men of a particular clan, their wives and children. The emphasis on equivalence in sharing remained but, whereas once each person in the village received an equal share in distributions, now that equivalence was between shares received by the groups. We, for example, as a group of two, now received the same amount in such distributions as that received by a group of ten.

7. Elsewhere we have commented on the centripetal forces of language and ritual form and the centrifugal forces of exchange relations with reference to the distribution of primary Kubo communities at the peripheries of the land that they occupy (Dwyer et al. 1993).

8. Busse (2005) argued that people who are the subjects of comparative analysis will themselves have a comparative perspective on the world and on their own position vis-à-vis others. He has directed attention to the hegemonic stance implicit in the anthropological project of comparison. That stance, as Keen (1995) has shown, may emerge as a consequence of the metaphors implicit in the cultural constructs favoured by anthropologists. However, where local comparative perspectives are ethnocentric—where they assess, measure or judge others using self-referential criteria—they cannot fulfil the (often unrealised) intent of comparative analysis which strives to accommodate all local perspectives within a single frame.
REFERENCES


**ABSTRACT**

With specific reference to Kubo people of Papua New Guinea, and their neighbours, we explore the manner in which boundaries and barriers—are implicated in wide-ranging expressions of sociality both within and beyond the group. We reflect upon ways in which anthropologists, similarly, indulge in the creation of boundaries and barriers—often doing so, not unlike some Papua New Guineans, for reasons that amount to territorial claims over intellectual property. Such claims, we argue, may impose barriers to anthropological understanding. More importantly, however, they may bar opportunities for those whose lives are studied to dwell within relational worlds where the flexibility of boundaries always takes precedence over the fixity of barriers.

*Keywords:* comparative analysis, identity, intellectual property, scale, Papua New Guinea