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Where Do You Belong? Identity, New Guinea Islanders, and the Power of *Peles*

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ABSTRACT

Peles *is a Melanesian concept related to the grounding of a person's Indigenous origin in a particular place. This notion is especially important in Papua New Guinea where, upon first meeting, people are likely to ask, 'Where are you from?' Ascertaining someone's* peles *enables the rapid establishment between previously unknown people of social connections and obligations, kinship, and identity. Despite the increasing influences of westernisation, globalisation, urbanisation, and migration,* peles *remains steadfast at the centre of Papua New Guinean social identity construction. This article addresses the current and emerging ways in which people of New Guinea Islander descent – both at 'home' or in the diaspora – connect to* peles*, whether physically or otherwise and details the social politics of these assertions.*

Keywords: Papua New Guinea, identity, place, *peles*, *wantok* system.

> *Mi meri Kavieng, bilong Lavongai. Liklik peles bilong mi Ranmalek.*
>
> [I'm a Kavieng woman, from Lavongai. My *liklik peles* is Ranmalek.] (Author's acknowledgement)

INTRODUCTION

'*Yu bilong we*?' is arguably Papua New Guinea (PNG)'s most commonly asked question, particularly in situations where people meet for the first time. Literally meaning 'Where do you belong?', this query most often translates as 'Where are you from?' although its complex connotations are infused with various socio-political meanings. As a response to this *type* of question, a person having grown up in Australia may be accustomed to stating their birthplace, where they grew up or went to school, their city of residence, their country of citizenship, or their ethnic background. However, what '*Yu bilong we?*' really means is '*Peles bilong yu we*?' [Literally: Where is your *peles*?] or '*Wanem peles bilong yu*?' [Literally: What is your *peles*?], to which there is a multitude of valid responses, especially if you have PNG ancestry.

Peles[1] is a multivocal Tok Pisin term referring to a person's place of Indigenous origin. It is worth emphasising the idea that *peles* denotes the place of Indigenous origin rather than birth or residence as this is an important distinction and lends weight to my conclusion that a person can 'access *peles*' in ways other than physically being there. While an immediate connection may be drawn between *peles* and 'village', *peles* is greater, encompassing both the tangible and intangible aspects of landscape, seascape, starscape, and spiritscape. To understand *peles* is to acknowledge that the term encompasses elements of ancestry, belonging, community, descent, emotion, identity, and sentience, and unites the binary of culture and nature.

To this point, it is relevant to consider Viveiros de Castro's (1998:469–470) description of Amerindian cosmological beliefs which invert traditional western notions of a culture/nature opposition. The result: a construction of culture as the objective universal and nature as the subjective plurality – that is, nature is seen as having evolved to distinguish itself from culture, rather than vice versa. Furthermore, Amerindians hold a worldview hinged instead on spirituality versus corporeality, and physical 'bodies', whether human or non-human, become 'envelopes' for spiritual beings (Viveiros de Castro 1998:470–472). Nature and culture become '. . . part of the same sociocosmic field', and spirituality/corporeality becomes the binary (Viveiros de Castro 1998:475). This holistic '*peles*-way' of viewing 'place' also mirrors Bradley's (2011) description of 'country' in the context of the Yanyuwa people of Aboriginal Australia, and Mondragon's (2004:303) account of 'place' as perceived by Torres Islanders of Vanuatu.

The elastic conceptual boundaries of *peles* draw cues from conversation among participants and location, as well as from the known *peles* of each participant (Johnson and McGavin 2004; McGavin 2007, 2014). In this way, *peles* could indicate: village [*liklik peles*: literally 'small *peles*'], the nearest urban centre to the village, its island, province, region, or the entirety of PNG.

In 2013, I began to consider the value of *peles* after an informal conversation with a colleague at the University of Hawaii, who suggested that *peles* no longer holds the power it once did in relation to PNG identities. My colleague posited that given increased globalisation, westernisation, and urbanisation, contemporary PNG identity had very little involvement with *peles*. Conversely, I argue that people of PNG ancestry (from my viewpoint as one of them) utilise new, emerging ways to connect to *peles*, connections that may be more intangible than those that were made historically but which nevertheless may be argued as being equally legitimate. Indeed, I contend that *peles* holds immense power in the claiming and affirmation of a grounded ethnic[2] identity.

In this article, I describe the notion of *peles* and detail its role in determining identity and social relationships and obligations for people of PNG descent. I then explore the question of whether *peles* maintains this power in the contemporary world. Finally, I expose and analyse the ways in which people connect with *peles* as a centre for identity construction and highlight the ways in which these connections may be contested.

I argue that PNG identity is constructed and interpreted from a foundation fixed in the concept of *peles*. In this way, the geo- and socio-political implications of theories of 'race' and 'home' become pertinent. For example, Baylis (2003) describes her experience being a 'black' Canadian woman of Caribbean descent who looks 'white'. She says of 'racial identity', '[People] are both who we say we are (based on our interpretation and reconstruction of personal stories) and who others will let us be (as mediated through historical, socio-cultural, political, religious and other contexts)' (Baylis 2003:148–149). She states, 'Racial identity is not to be found in our DNA [responding to the utilisation of DNA testing to trace the ancestry of African Americans], but in the world in which we live and in the stories we are able to construct and sustain' (Baylis 2003:147). This is especially relevant in terms of racial identity, which Olumide (2002) reaffirms is continually socially constructed. Anthropological understandings of 'home' reflect this dynamic, positioning processes such as migration and transnational belonging alongside the continuing, subjective processes of shaping and defining 'home' and 'away' (Bal and Willems 2014; Bose 2008; Gardner and Mand 2012). As Bose (2008:114) explains, 'Diasporic populations feel intimately connected to "place" ' and likewise, 'displaced populations within those "home countries" feel no less attached to such "places" '. 'Home' is inextricably linked to a place of emotional or spiritual comfort and belonging – not necessarily where you happen to be living.

This article draws on data collected during continuing ethnographic fieldwork including conversations, interviews, and participant observation in Australia and in the New Guinea Islands (NGI) region of PNG (see Fig. 1) from 1999 to 2014. The NGI data were gathered in: Buvussi, Hoskins, and Kimbe (West New Britain); Kokopo and Rabaul (East New Britain); and Lavongai, Kavieng, and their surrounds (New Ireland). *Peles* and identity were at the core of my various research projects, and much of the data for this article was drawn from across this range of project field notes. Informants in my study were men and women (over 18 years) of PNG – but especially NGI – descent. I also work from my own socialisation as a 'mixed-race' person of NGI descent and utilise my understanding of the power of *peles* in order to analyse data.

As per my opening acknowledgement, my maternal ancestry is from Lavongai, PNG. Our *liklik peles* is Ranmalek, where our clan's symbol is a *kokomo* [hornbill]. Through paternal descent, I am a New Zealand (NZ) *pakeha* (non-Maori, especially of European descent). I am also a first-generation Australian. The articulation of my heritage in this way is equally as important to both personal and professional spheres as it adheres to the protocols employed by many Pacific Islanders and Pacific Islander scholars (Baba et al. 2004; George 2010; Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). For example, Hau'ofa (2008), Tengan, Ka'ili and Fonoti (2010) and Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) contend that employing Islander/Indigenous/source-community/emic ways – *e.g*., narratives and genealogies – helps to decolonise academia and research methodologies. Likewise, 'black' feminist anthropologists such as McClaurin (2001) and Slocum (2001) also contend the importance of doing so, arguing that exposing authors' and speakers' ethno-cultural identities adds visibility in western academia to researchers other than 'White' men who historically and epistemologically have dominated the field.

Reaffirming this Islander approach is important because it recognises notions of *peles* as being at the core of not only academic understandings of PNG identity, but also the personal/social and professional lives of Papua New Guineans – whether researchers or informants. This balances the epistemological 'hierarchy' by shaping and 'Islanderising' anthropology in both subtle and overt ways. To this point, a major impetus for writing this article was that I foresaw that my 'Insider' approach to anthropological research meant that much of my future work in the Pacific region would rely and build upon this *peles*-based foundation.

I turn now to an exploration of the power of *peles* in order to establish its importance for PNG identity and sociality.

THE POWER OF *PELES* AND PLACE: POLITICS, 'RACE', AND THE *WANTOK* SYSTEM

The fact that '*yu bilong we*' remains what is arguably the most common question upon meeting anyone in PNG is a prominent signifier as to the importance of *peles*. *Peles* matters. To determine someone's *peles* allows a person to position others in comparison to themselves and establishes immediate connections, ethnic group membership, boundaries and social relationships, as well as important vernacular epistemological insight. Before I discuss the intricacies and evidence for these assertions, it is necessary to highlight a very important way of thinking about *peles*.

The term *peles* is often anglicised as 'place' by visitors, locals, and academics. I have noticed the term 'place' being used online and within local media by people of PNG descent. For example, in a recent article, PNG-based *Stella* magazine (2013:12) profiles travellers at the airport, asking them, 'Where are you going?' to which one family responds, 'To Bougainville. Basically, it's our place and we are travelling back to visit'. Indeed, in this and in many other instances which I have witnessed, the term 'place' (as *peles*) is often used as a

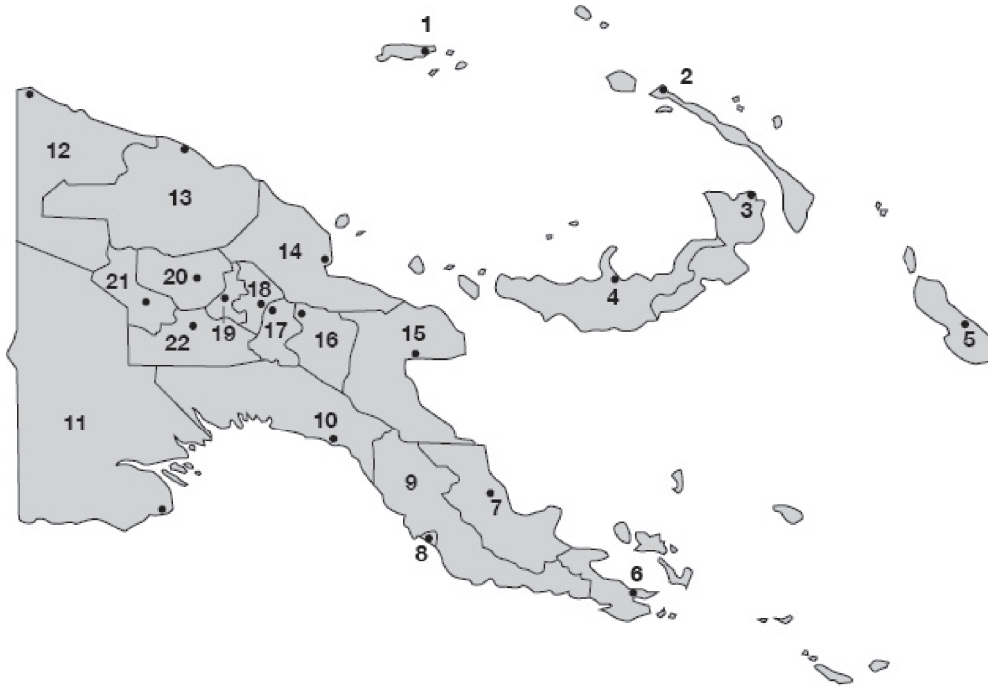

Figure 1: Map of Papua New Guinea provinces.

1. Manus
2. New Ireland
3. East New Britain
4. West New Britain
5. Bougainville (North Solomons)
6. Milne Bay
7. Oro (Northern)
8. National Capital District
9. Central
10. Gulf
11. Western (Fly)
12. Sandaun (West Sepik)
13. East Sepik
14. Madang
15. Morobe
16. Eastern Highlands
17. Chimbu
18. Jiwaka
19. Western Highlands
20. Enga
21. Hela
22. Southern Highlands

The New Guinea Islands region consists of provinces: 1 (Manus), 2 (New Ireland), 3 (East New Britain), 4 (West New Britain) and 5 (Bougainville).
(Map used under Creative Commons licence, sourced from: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Papua_new_guinea_provinces_(numbers)_2012.png. Modified by author)

synonym for 'home'. In this article, I hesitate to use the anglicised version of *peles* without first reiterating that its connotations are far more complex than commonly recognised in the English term. However, I believe it is useful to discuss *peles* as 'place' here, given that many other academic works (*e.g.*, Bradley 2011; McNiven 2008; Schieffelin 2002) discuss place, place-based identity, and place-based knowledge in ways which are highly relevant to this paper.

For example, Schieffelin (2002) highlights the traditional Bosavi (Southern Highlands) people's sense of 'placed space-time', in which major life events such as marriages and deaths are not thought of in terms of calendric chronology but rather in terms of place. As Schieffelin (2002:S9) states,

> place and place-names, important in everyday experience, discourse, and ritual expression, were used to demarcate all memorable events. . . . Locality and place-names were anchors for significant ceremonies and events as well as remembrances of personal experiences. . . . Place-names in family conversations . . . linked persons to the named places . . . [and] were key to their local activities and identity. . . . This encoding was local, deeply connected to the place where (rather than the time when) people had done things together.

Similarly, Feld (1996:111) notes from his work with the Kaluli people of Bosavi that across a range of contexts involving talking, singing, or lamenting, 'it is striking to notice how quickly and thoroughly a person and a memorable feature of his life are narratively located in a placed space-time'.

In terms of the impact that processes such as urbanisation have on concepts of place identity, it is important to note, as Sissons (2005:63) does, '[I]ndigenous people are as culturally creative and adaptable as anyone else'. Indeed, Behrendt (2004:40) states, in the context of Australian Aboriginal people who now live in cities, 'Distinct cultural values exist today in urban Aboriginal communities . . . Even where traditional lifestyle has been lost, land becomes a central part of Aboriginal life'.

This section is divided into three parts. First, I discuss the social politics of *peles* and belonging. Secondly, I examine the ways in which *peles* interacts with concepts of 'race' and 'racial' identity in PNG. Finally, I investigate the interlocked nature of *peles* and the *wantok* system, a system for the organisation of social relationships that is arguably at the heart of contemporary PNG life.

The politics of *peles*

Peles holds a range of power, expressed both in practical terms such as landholder's rights, and also in less tangible ways, such as the grounding of identity in place, an attribute that is revered socially and culturally across the country. Access to this power is negotiated and contested in a number of ways, especially in relation to identity and belonging. As Gupta and Ferguson (2001:14) state, 'Questions of identity . . . demonstrate with special clarity the intertwining of place and power in the conceptualization of "culture". Rather than following straightforwardly from sharing the "same" culture, community, or place, identity emerges as a continually contested domain'.

In PNG, it is a compliment to refer to someone as '*meri/man/mangi bilong peles*' [literally 'woman/man/youth from *peles*']. This praise is given to people who display, for want of a better term, 'village smarts' – what is perceived as being both an esteemed and humble quality. Such attributes may be demonstrated in a person's attitude or behaviour mirroring that of *peles*-based tradition and/or cultural protocols, or it may include something more specific, such as: wearing *kolos* (emerging traditional attire including *meri blaus* [a smock-style

top/dress] and *laplap* [sarong]) or speaking *tokpeles* [vernacular languages, or '*peles* language'] especially if the person receiving the compliment lives in the city or away from their *liklik peles*. The compliment can even be given to non-Papua New Guineans, as I have witnessed a 'white' American being referred to with admiration as '*meri bilong peles*' because of her skill in speaking Tok Pisin and her preference for wearing *kolos*.

However, it must be noted that referring to a non-Papua New Guinean as '*meri bilong peles*' is a statement of admiration and not confirmation that they are 'from *peles*'. (This is explained to a greater extent in the next part of this section, on 'race' – a term which I acknowledge is contested both academically and at personal levels of interpretation.) Indeed, I know of a 'white' Australian woman who refers to the village where her family conducted missionary work as 'my village' and 'my *peles*', and the fact that she does so irk almost every person of PNG descent within earshot of her words – whether in PNG or Australia. On the most recent occasion to which I have been witness, a man of NGI descent approached me afterwards and argued that the woman is 'not *from* PNG' and therefore has '*no right* to say that she has any *peles* there' (emphasis mine). Claims to *peles* are about more than behaviour, attitude, and protocols; they are also about ancestry, origin, 'bloodlines', and 'blood' (with my informants using these latter terms to express genealogies of descent). In a similar way, Sturm 2002 examines how Cherokee people in Oklahoma express their identities in terms of 'blood', which is often conflated with ideas about 'race' and culture – although, contrastingly, Sturm's focus is the social interpretation of 'blood' quanta). Understanding this difference, another 'White' woman, born to American parents who served as missionaries in PNG, instead says (in describing her identity) that she '*grew up* in PNG' rather than that she is *from* there.

While being thought of as 'having or being from *peles*' is a compliment, being considered as being without *peles* is perceived as an insult, especially if you have PNG ancestry. A woman of NGI descent told me how upset it made her when Papua New Guineans mistook her as being from somewhere else and she believed this caused people to treat her unfairly. She told me that eventually, these people would overhear her speaking Tok Pisin and ask, surprised, 'Oh, you're Papua New Guinean?' to which she would respond, 'Born and raised. And *from* there!' (emphasis hers). Her statement reinforces the idea that a claim to *peles*-based identity is both a process and a state of being. For example, her mention of 'born and raised' indicates some form of socialisation as a Papua New Guinean through which she would have acquired appropriate cultural knowledge, while her emphasis on '*from* there' demonstrates the importance of ancestry and ethnic origin. Being born in PNG was made distinct from being 'from' there. In this way, a person's ancestry makes *peles* their birthright, while being born in PNG is something that may add legitimacy to the socialisation aspect of their claim to *peles*.

Studies into transnational adoption offer further insight to this matter. Marre (2009:73–85) explains that some parents involved in transnational adoptions perceived a flexible or permeable boundary between nature and culture in terms of the 'cultural origins' of the child. For example, Marre (2009:73) describes how a Spanish family adopted a baby in China and wanted the child to 'learn her language and maintain her culture', as though the acquisition of Chinese cultural knowledge was a natural 'right' of the child's Chinese descent. As Marre (2009:83) puts it, 'in many of these and other cases, the terms "origin" or "culture of origin" are used to refer to phenotypical features, that is, to "race" '. Therefore, if the child was born in China but was 'racially' 'White' or of Mediterranean descent, the Spanish parents may be less inclined to think of the child as having a 'right' to acquire Chinese language or cultural practices. It is the child's 'bloodline' that links them to China and (as part of their claim of 'belonging') to the 'right' to acquire Chinese cultural knowledge. *Peles*-based identity functions in a similar manner.

However, it is important to note that *peles*-based identity can exist independently from essentialised notions of 'race'. I argue that people in PNG often utilise a concept of *peles*-

based 'race' in order to determine identity frameworks. Identity in PNG *is* about your line of descent, but it is more about *peles* than it is about 'race'. Nevertheless, there are some circumstances in which *peles*-based identity may be contested on the basis of cultural knowledge – or lack thereof.

Within the Australian-based PNG diaspora, I have witnessed many instances in which a person's *peles*-based identity has been scrutinised by other people of PNG descent questioning the person's cultural knowledge, their connection to *peles*, or their dedication to the PNG community – primarily because they had never visited their *peles*. People's physical appearance, even their perceived 'race', arguably does not matter as much as 'blood' and behaviour; knowledge of *peles* and custom – and in the PNG sense of the word, 'to know' something – is to have an ongoing understanding, a continuing relationship with it, seen in the Tok Pisin word '*save*'. For example, '*mi no save kaikai pis*' can mean both 'I do not know how to eat fish' and 'I never eat fish'. In the same way, '*em i no save peles bilong en*' can mean both 'he doesn't know his *peles*' and 'he never goes to/stays at his *peles*'. Therefore, while descent is essential in claims of a *peles*-identity, *knowledge* of *peles* (and the ways in which this knowledge is enacted) is also important and can decrease the incidence of identity contestation. Linnekin and Poyer (1990:8) reinforce the importance of *enacting* Islander identity: 'in Oceanic societies identity is continually demonstrated, a matter of behavior and performance'.

However, the politics of belonging to *peles* are further complex. If those who have lived most of their lives elsewhere return to *peles*, their return would still be met with *kastom* (traditional customary practices) ceremonies and related events to celebrate and welcome them 'home'. During research in the NGI (McGavin 2007:204), informants indicated that people:

> are often proud to welcome home [others] from their *peles* who have grown up or spent much time elsewhere; many times the link to social acceptance is through acknowledgement of family connections to the area, with actually calling the names of the relatives being vital to this association. People understand that when others are away, they 'forget' how to talk in language, they 'forget' *kastom* ways.

Interestingly, the implication is that people who live away from *peles* – even if they have never been to their *liklik peles* – have an innate knowledge of vernacular language and *kastom* and that it is their absence from *peles* which has made them 'forget'. By this logic, increased time in their *liklik peles* will allow them not to *learn*, but to *remember* this knowledge.

Further, if a person lives in their *liklik peles*, they are considered to be *papa graun* or *mama graun* (literally 'father ground' or 'mother ground' and more figuratively 'father/mother of this land'). These titles provide their bearers with subtle social power over others. For example, Tina, a Kavieng woman in her mid-thirties, explains, 'You have to respect *ol* [every] *mama o* [or] *papa graun* and you never pick a fight with them because they kind of have the right to win. It's their place, not yours. If you don't like how they do something, you can just go home to your own place'. Matthew, a New Guinea Islander in his mid-twenties who has lived for many years in Kimbe, adds, 'You get these Highlanders who come over [to Kimbe] and think they're big men and they make trouble with the local boys – why would anyone do that? Are they *longlong* [crazy]? You make trouble with the Kimbe boys and *all* the Kimbe boys are here to back [Kimbe people] up; all the Hoskins boys, the Talasea boys. You just want to say to these Highlanders, "You're not *papa graun* here. Behave or go home." ' The power of traditional landownership is made clear in that 'blockholders' (who have bought or leased state-titled land for oil palm production in West New Britain province) from other provinces, despite legally owning and sometimes living on the land, are not afforded the same social privilege or sense of belonging that a *peles* connection provides.

In addition, whether or not a person 'belongs' to *peles* may also depend on whether the line of descent connecting to their *peles* is maternal or paternal and whether this aligns with the clan's system of matrilineal or patrilineal descent. For example, I spoke to Michael, a man in his late thirties whose father is from Lokono and whose mother is from Pinikindu – both *peles* locations with matrilineal descent systems in New Ireland. Traditionally, Michael and his siblings 'belonged' only to their mother's clan and *peles*, and were classified as visitors to the father's *peles*. Cases like these are usually overcome (as Michael's was) by the mother's family paying the father's family in order to come to an agreement, effectively buying the child's way into the father's *peles*. The child then can claim that both 'places' are theirs and is free to visit the father's *peles* without the father being present (and after the father's eventual death) and be acknowledged with full rights as someone who belongs there. In my own case, my *peles* is inherited matrilineally; my mother's *lain* (line of descent) connects me to *peles*. Other people's circumstances may be more complex, for example, when a child's mother is from a patrilineal *peles* and the father from a matrilineal *peles*. It can be as though they do not 'belong' anywhere.

'Race'

Peles is a determining factor in establishing 'racial' identity in PNG. Johnson and McGavin (2004) use emic terminologies of 'race' and 'mixedness' to present two major ideas in support of this argument, specifically relating to 'mixed-race' and 'mixed-parentage' identities (both locally generated and utilised terms). Firstly, 'mixed-race' Papua New Guineans were most often defined by self and others as being those people who could draw ancestry from both *peles* and non-*peles* – that is, from outside of PNG and especially from outside of Melanesia. Secondly, people of 'mixed-parentage' – again, as defined by self and others – were those who drew ancestry *only* from *peles* (within PNG). This establishes both *peles* and PNG as a whole, as markers and determinants of 'race' and 'racial' identity. Perceiving PNG as a whole as a marker of 'race' is significant because it is counterintuitive to do so, juxtaposing the hundreds of *peles* and language groups that usually signify vernacular ethnic difference in the country.

This is the power of *peles*: it can determine 'race', 'mixed-race', and 'mixed-parentage' identities. For example, I know of two now adult children of former missionaries in PNG: a 'white' American woman and a 'white' Australian man, both in their mid-thirties. Both are extremely patriotic towards PNG and often are referred to by their PNG counterparts as having 'black souls' or being '*bilong peles*' because of their use of Tok Pisin and, in the man's case, a vernacular language also. However, because they have no point of Indigenous origin in PNG, they have no *peles*, and although they are often given these compliments, they remain 'White' and foreign, despite one of them having been born in PNG and both having grown up there.

In contrast, a 'mixed-race' Papua New Guinean is someone who can draw *peles* ancestry as well as non-*peles* ancestry. For example, I would be considered 'mixed-race' because I draw on my mother's line of descent for *peles* descent from Lavongai as well as my father's line of descent from NZ. (Note that the 'mix' does not have to occur in the parents' generation, but can be much earlier. The important thing is the combination of *peles* and non-*peles* affiliations.) This type of 'mixed-race' categorisation also applies – albeit sometimes questionably – if both parents are from Melanesia. Among those I encountered in my research was a woman in her late thirties whose mother was from Manus and whose father was from Vanuatu. She was often perceived (and categorised herself as) 'mixed-race', although sometimes, people would question this, as she was *only* Melanesian – and general Melanesian concepts of *peles*/place-based identities were perceived as mirroring that in PNG. This highlights the idea that some people perceive PNG as the outer limit of the *peles*/'race' identity marker, while others perceive the boundary to be the expanse of the region of Melanesia. However, in all cases that I have witnessed, a 'mix' from elsewhere in the Pacific would still be considered

'mixed-race', *e.g.,* New Ireland mother and Tuvaluan (*i.e.,* non-Melanesian) father. 'Mixed-parentage' is a term that applies to someone who can *only* draw *peles* heritage, *e.g*., Sepik father, Milne Bay mother.

Importantly, these distinct 'racial' categories highlight the power of *peles*. People 'without *peles*' are often pitied, or sometimes looked down upon, because there is power in *peles*-knowledge and that grounded identity. For example, some 'mixed-race' people are said to be without grounded identities if they do not know or have not spent much time in their *peles* and therefore do not know much about their traditional language or practices. Indeed, such 'mixed-race' people are likened to 'tumbleweeds', an analogy clear in its implication that *peles* provides identity with roots and fixes it in 'place'. Interestingly, non-Papua New Guineans (especially non-Melanesians) – visitors to PNG, even if they were born or grew up there, or if their family has been in-country for generations – are seen as 'tourists', a label that does not even incorporate these people into the *nature* (*i.e.,* the environment) of the 'place' (McGavin 2007:240).

Wantok system

The '*wantok* system' is a highly nuanced social framework of relationships in PNG. The term *wantok* often translates as 'someone who speaks the same language', especially but not always in reference to *tokpeles*. This is a pertinent category of social organisation considering that PNG is a country of over 800 languages (Brownie 2012:80). To this point, Reilly (2008:13) notes, 'On most measures of ethno-linguistic diversity, PNG is probably the most heterogeneous country in the world'. Indeed, the '*wantok* system' is highly relevant to any discussion of place in PNG, as the system draws as much on the complexities of *peles* as it does on language, and signifies a complex set of meanings and values.

A *wantok* relationship signifies a bond of commonality, primarily of shared language, clan, 'bloodline', identity, and/or *peles* origins, which may be expressed in various ways, from simply offering niceties to delivering financial, material, physical, social, or spiritual support for one another as circumstances arise. For example, Reed (2011:29) notes that the '*wantok* system' even shapes the relationship between prison wardens and prisoners, with wardens more likely to uphold the personal safety of *wantok* prisoners and meet their requests for tobacco or marijuana, family or legal contact. The 'flipside' of this, Reed (2011:29) notes, is that prisoners are more likely to protect *wantok* jail staff, should the need for such protection arise. In my own research, I have spoken with people who show disdain for corrupt politicians' misuse of government resources to aid their *wantoks*, and yet, in the same conversation, people belittle other politicians for not paying special attention to the politician's own *peles*/province/region. If your visa application process is taking too long, you need to find a *wantok* who works at the consulate. Trying to get a boarding pass for an overbooked flight? Find a *wantok* who works at the airport. In some cases, people pay for their *wantoks*' school fees or council rates, offer accommodation, or help them to find work. It is a system of egalitarian (if you are the beneficiary or provider), need-based welfare – and social privilege, concentrating on the requirements of those from the same *peles*. As PNG social and political commentator Deni Tokunai (2008) explains in his blog, *The Garamut*, 'The wantok system is an apt reflection of where the Papua New Guinean and his loyalty lies'.

Indeed, despite westernisation and globalisation, the '*wantok* system' remains a pervading force, drawing on and working alongside notions of *peles* to construct local, provincial, regional, and – perhaps paradoxically – national identity. As Tivinarlik and Wanat (2006:5) state,

> Modernization and mobility in Papua New Guinea brought about by education and professional careers have led people to expand the idea of the wantok system. After

moving to urban areas and other parts of the country, people form broader wantok groups to create and extend their 'kinship community'.

It is important to remember that the boundaries of *peles* are elastic; determining who your *wantok* is can be both a signifier and a symptom of these expanding notions of *peles*. This is shown most clearly in conversations between Papua New Guineans, especially in their introductions and trying to determine whether to call each other *wantok*. For example, if two people from New Ireland meet outside of the province, they are extremely likely to consider each other as *wantoks*, even if they are from different areas of New Ireland. Further, two people from separate provinces in the NGI region may call each other *wantok*, if their meeting/conversation is conducted outside the NGI. Likewise, a Highlander (from the mountainous area of 'mainland' PNG), including Eastern, Southern, and Western Highlands provinces (Enga and Chimbu) and an Islander (from Bougainville, Manus, New Britain, or New Ireland) would be unlikely to call each other *wantok*, unless they are outside of PNG, in which case the entirety of PNG becomes *peles*.

EXPANDING NOTIONS OF *PELES*

Gupta and Ferguson (2001:13) state that identity is not just related to a specific locality, but to difference: 'at issue is not simply that one is located in a certain place but that the particular place is set apart from and opposed to other places'. Similarly, Barth (1998:6, 10) argues that ethnic groups are defined as much by their boundaries as by their 'internal' content and that ethnic groups persist in circumstances in which ongoing intergroup interaction occurs. This explains why *peles* identities remain strong even when shaped by globalisation and migration. Anna, a West New Britain woman in her late forties told me, 'Even if you move to the city, your *peles* is still your *peles* and your *wantoks* are still your *wantoks* – no matter how long you've been gone'. Indeed, Imbun's (1995:60) research on Engan workers in Bougainville showcases a continued social and political alignment with people from the same *peles* despite their living outside of their 'home' province. 'Place' has a strong relationship with identity, and as Bird (2002:523–524) and Claval (2007) attest, 'places' continue to be important aspects of grounded heritage, in Western countries as well as elsewhere. Similarly, in a Lavongai context, Kaiku and Kaiku (2008:59) describe how Indigenous knowledge is provided by nature (*i.e.*, the environment), thereby creating a type of symbiotic relationship between 'place' and Indigenous identity.

In this section, I discuss the implications of viewing the entirety of PNG as *peles*; describe how *peles* is thought of in the Australian-based diaspora; explore emerging provincial identities and their relationship to *peles*; and briefly examine other *peles*-like identities.

Although certain *wantok* relationships enable the frequent interpretation of PNG as *peles* (*e.g.*, a Highlander and Islander in Australia viewing each other as *wantoks*), this is a contested reading of both *peles* and *wantok*. For example, Alex is a nineteen-year-old woman of Papuan (Port Moresby) and Kavieng (New Ireland) descent who was born in Port Moresby but currently lives and has grown up in Australia. When Alex 'goes home', she goes to her mother's *peles* in Port Moresby and has never been to Kavieng. Her continued absence from Kavieng is seen by her family and PNG friends as something negative, and she is often encouraged to visit her father's *peles* as well. In this case, if PNG were seen as *peles*, then Alex's visits to Port Moresby would be sufficient for her to solidify her *peles* identity. However, I have heard people say to Alex that she will not be 'complete' until she has visited her father's *peles*. I was present when one Kavieng woman in her mid-thirties told her, 'You're from Kavieng – you have to go there! You have to take in all the beauty of the place and it'll make you strong. Then you'll know who you are'.

Regional differences within PNG also make it difficult for people to view PNG as *peles*. PNG is thought of as consisting of four distinct regions (see Fig. 1): the Islands region; the Highlands region; the Papuan region (including Central, Oro, Gulf, Western, Milne Bay provinces); and the Momase region (including Sepik, Sandaun, Madang, and Morobe provinces). For example, people from the Islands region and Highlands region would rarely consider themselves to be *wantoks* and would view each other as having little in common, culturally, linguistically, or ethnically. Although this does occur in the Australian-based diaspora, the strength of *wantok* associations inter-regionally largely remains minimal.

It may be that this regional 'division' has also been shaped by historical Territory of Papua (controlled by Britain/Australia 1883–1949) versus German New Guinea (1884–1914) loyalties. Certainly, the German influence in what was German New Guinea continued long after their period of official governance, with German teachers, church workers, and managers maintaining their positions, with many older Islanders (my grandmother included) still speaking German (along with English, Tok Pisin, and vernaculars) today. Perhaps then, a less contested way of expressing the 'PNG as *peles*' concept is that PNG refers to a place where 'we have *peles*' or 'there is *peles*' – and certainly, there is some social bonding in that notion, especially in diasporic settings.

The concept of 'province as *peles*' or 'urban centre as *peles*' is used often in conversation and is rarely contested. Indeed, provincial identity is becoming increasingly relevant as an identity marker in PNG. Although Waiko (1997) posited that provincial identities were becoming so strong they threatened to undermine *liklik peles* identities, I argue that provincial identities complement and mirror traditional notions of *peles*, serving as an expansion of the *peles* boundary rather than a '*peles* alternative'. For example, 'He's from Kavieng' might apply to anyone from New Ireland. Although there is arguably as much significant affinity with Kavieng as with your *liklik peles*, your *liklik peles* remains at the core of your identity. Further, the *wantok* association with someone from your province remains strong. I work with a friend who, like me, identifies as being 'from Kavieng'. We very much consider each other *wantoks*, even though she is from Tabar and I am from Lavongai. Provinces have clearly developed identities of their own, incorporating a sense of belonging and 'home' for those from 'places' within them. New Ireland is known as *bilas peles* (beautiful *peles*); NIPS (an near-acronym of New Ireland Province) and people from New Ireland are known as *karanas* (the ground-up white coral that constitutes a lot of the roads and beaches) or *nilpis* (a type of local rabbitfish). West New Britain is known as 'oil palm province' due to the large amount of oil palm being grown there, and its people are known as *lus prut* (symbolic of the oil palm fruit); with *pasin west* (attitude/passion/mindset/behaviour/spirit of West New Britain) being a popular catchcry.

In the Australian-based diaspora, links between identity and *peles* are strong. When an Australian (of 'White' NZ and Filipino ancestry) mentioned to a group of people of PNG descent that she had recently met a woman from PNG, the group's immediate response was 'Where is she from?'. The Australian woman shrugged and said that she had not asked about that. This playful response came from a woman of PNG descent, in her late twenties, 'Well, you have to ask next time, so we know. She may as well be from Antarctica otherwise'. Establishing a *wantok* relationship or a *peles*-based identity when you live away from *liklik peles* is about creating deeper connections and social affiliations. In Brisbane, there are various communities of people of PNG descent, groups based on *peles*/urban centre/provincial identities. For example, I have been involved in the Rabaul reunion, the annual Kavieng picnic and the (now defunct) Australian New Guinea Islander Social Club, whose membership consisted mostly of 'mixed-race' New Guinea Islanders who had lived in Rabaul, specifically, Malaitaun.

Malaitaun is an example of the continuing use of *peles*-based identity in an urbanised area. Malaitaun (built in the 1940s and destroyed in the mid-1990s by a volcanic eruption) was a residential area of Rabaul whose population was largely 'mixed-race' people from across the NGI, shaped not by official policies of 'racial' segregation but by the penetrating social politics of the time.

Thomson (1973:28), whose 1951–1952 study of the social conditions of 'mixed-race' people in Papua and New Guinea focuses on Malaitaun, argues that 'mixed-race' people in Malaitaun had limited (if any) connection to *peles* and therefore lacked the security framework of the *wantok* system. Further to this point, he (1973:32) contends that because Malaitaun was an inadequate substitute for *peles*, 'mixed-race' people exhibited low levels of loyalty and gratitude. Second, Thomson (1973:14) refers to 'cliques involved within mixed-race groups' in Malaitaun, indicating that this further added to their instability as a community. His first point, despite featuring stereotypical perceptions of 'mixed-race' people in the 1950s, highlights his recognition of the importance of *peles* both to identity and the '*wantok* system' and also to the acquisition of socially favoured characteristics. Importantly, his second point may provide verification that the importance of *peles*-identities was actually upheld in Malaitaun, regardless of 'physical knowledge' of *peles*. Indeed, I contend that Mailaitaun residents not only maintained their *peles* identities, but also viewed Malaitaun as a quasi-*peles*. Further to this point, older 'mixed-race' New Guinea Islanders (my relatives among them) have indicated that they continue to associate in *wantok*-type relationships not only with people from their *liklik peles*, but also with people who lived in Malaitaun.

Peles (and all its various forms) remains at the centre of PNG identity, both at 'home' and in the diaspora. *Peles* is 'home', regardless of how long a person has been gone or how far away.

CONNECTING TO *PELES*

In this section, I describe the ways in which people express their identities through establishing connections to *peles*. Although I acknowledge that for some people, 'PNG and/or Melanesia as *peles*' are realities, these are considered to be at the maximum limits of *peles* and, as such, are the most contested forms of the concept. For this reason, I focus on *peles* at the levels of *liklik peles*, urban centre, province, and region.

People of PNG descent have many legitimate ways to connect to *peles* (and to construct or strengthen a *peles*-based identity) including: 'representing', voyaging 'home', language, tattoos, totems, social media, and material culture. Although I have already discussed the intertwined relationship between *peles* and the '*wantok* system', it is worth reiterating that knowing who your *wantoks* are – and having them know (or know of) you – is significant. Maintaining *wantok* relationships (and being able to cite your *lain* to *peles*) enables a person to claim a socially verified and reinforced *peles*-identity.

As Kingston (2003:685) states, 'An "associational", "thoughtful" mode of sociality, and of identity formation, is based on interaction with persons, practices, objects and places'. However, it is important to note that identity may not always be related to collective group belonging, but instead may be more of a personal expression of self (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2002:170–171). This means that people expressing a *peles*-identity may not necessarily publicly disclose their 'knowledge of *peles*'. Because *peles* is about more than just a physical location, it is natural that engaging with it will involve both tangible and intangible methods, *some* of which are highlighted as follows.

Visiting *peles*

Spending time in *peles* is arguably one of the most important factors in strengthening *peles*-based identity. Many people with whom I have spoken say that *peles* is important to

them; they feel 'homesick' for *peles*, and they intend to visit when they have the chance. They are drawn to *peles*. Indeed, Emma, a New Guinea Islander woman in her late forties told me, 'Going home strengthens . . . your bond with *peles*. You recharge your energy supplies when you go there', the implication being that *peles* provides its 'people' with a particular type of power. As previously mentioned, if someone has never been to their *peles*, it can be difficult for them to claim an uncontested *peles*-identity. Despite this, a key point is that sometimes, others may acknowledge that processes such as urbanisation and migration have adversely impacted people's ability to 'know' their *peles* and allowances are made for them, with many Papua New Guineans understanding people's need to 'reconnect' to *peles*. Importantly though (as already discussed), people 'descended from *peles*' are often viewed as having the ability to *remember* '*peles* knowledge' rather than *learn* it – and being in *liklik peles* facilitates this process.

Language

Language, especially *tokpeles*, is a significant factor that anchors identity to *peles* (and to the initial framework of the '*wantok* system'). This is well demonstrated by an example from my mother's language, Tungak, in which we have the same word for *peles* as we do for 'mother' (*rina*) and the same word for 'language' as we do for 'umbilical cord'. However, it is widely acknowledged that as people move further away from their *liklik peles*, they will have less opportunity to learn, practise, listen to, or speak their vernacular language. For this reason, younger people in particular who have grown up outside of their 'home' province are held in especially high regard if they are able to speak – or at least understand – their *tokpeles*. For example, in Kimbe in 2013, Jerry (a Hoskins man in his early twenties) told me that he really respected Andrea (a Rabaul woman in her late twenties also living in Kimbe) because she could speak her own *tokpeles* (Kuanua) and was also fluent in his (Nakanai). The other people present at the time also expressed admiration for Andrea's language skills.

Tok Pisin, a first language for many children (Brownie 2012:71), connects a person's identity to *peles*. This point is especially salient in terms of the range of ways in which people speak Tok Pisin. For example, Brownie (2012:71) states that there are distinct regional (and sometimes provincial) differences in the pronunciation, vocabulary, and linguistic structures used in Tok Pisin, especially when comparing speakers from the Islands region with those from the 'mainland'. In this way, it is easy for people to identify which region (or sometimes, province) of PNG a person is 'from' – or at least, in which region they learnt Tok Pisin.

Tattoos

Tattooing is a widespread practice across the Pacific, with various designs and techniques being utilised by different groups (Thomas 2005:88). It is unsurprising, given the country's immense cultural diversity, that there is a multitude of motifs and underlying meanings related to traditional tattoos within PNG, recognisable as being associated with certain 'places'. For example, Hemer (2008:124) states that in Lihir (New Ireland), the diagonal line that many women tattoo on their cheek is interpreted as a 'sign of Lihirianness', while Barker and Tletjin (1990:218) note that Maisin (Oro) women's traditional tattoos provide them with an instant, visible, cultural identity. Importantly, Barker and Tletjin (1990:225–230) also highlight the ways in which traditional tattooing practices and their underlying meanings continue to evolve in a manner that maintains their status as symbols of ethno-cultural identity.

Many people of PNG descent use tattooing as a method of 'representing' their *peles*-identity, incorporating aspects of traditional tattoos in their own designs. Popular motifs arise from symbols on provincial flags, clan totems, or are directly related to personal province/*peles* links. For example, on November 28, 2013, a woman in her early twenties (whose *peles* is at Hoskins, West New Britain) posted to Facebook a photo of her new tattoo: a conch shell

on her wrist. Along with the photo, which she had labelled, '*Pasin West tasol*!' (it's/just/only West New Britain attitude/passion/mindset/behaviour/spirit), she commented, 'I just wanted to get something that represents home so the conch shell was perfect coz it's on our province flag!!' Another woman who I met in Kimbe, now in her late thirties, bore a tattoo of a magpie, her clan totem. She explained, 'Anyone who sees this knows I'm magpie and I'm protected by other magpies. If they mess with me, they're messing with all the magpies'.

Totems

Totems are important symbols of clan identity and link people to a *peles*-based identity, especially through engagement with the social/nature-based 'spiritscape'. Rivers (1968:75), focusing on Melanesian cultures, explains totems as a form of social organisation based on a clan's special relationship – usually involving a belief of kinship – with a particular animal (or sometimes, plant). Bradley (2011) illuminates the relationship between *peles*, totem, and identity in the context of the Yanyuwa people of Aboriginal Australia, with the terms 'country', 'countrymen', and 'Dreaming' being akin to *peles*, *wantoks*, and 'totem', respectively. 'People speak about country in the same way that they talk about human and nonhuman relatives . . . Close relatives will often address each other as country, and when people see animal or plant species that are their Dreaming, their ancestor, they will often call out, "Hello country!" ' (Bradley 2011:50). Bradley (2011:50–51) goes on to explain how a Yanyuwa Elder, while observing a group of crows (a species he called 'his most senior paternal grandfather's sister'), noted, 'Country is full of countrymen, you can never go lonely'. The totem relationship can be expressed in a variety of ways; note the woman who wore a totem tattoo, above. My great grandmother 'kept' a *kokomo* (our totem) with her in Rabaul; it had a habit of stealing people's washing off their lines, and people would report back to my great grandmother, 'Your *wantok* has taken my laundry again!'.

Online

McGavin (2014) discusses the deterritorialisation of identity and the virtual reterritorialisation that online media have facilitated. Social media allow people to form and associate with a like community, regardless of their physical whereabouts. This does not eliminate the importance of 'place' but rather demonstrates that there are different mediums through which a person can connect to both 'place' and others who share your 'place'. Group pages on Facebook, including 'We <3 [♥] Kavieng New Ireland Province, PNG!', 'Annual Kavieng Picnic' (north Brisbane), and 'Kavieng Kids' (for adults who grew up in Kavieng), allow people to comment about *peles* and identity, mentioning phrases like, '*meri bilong peles*'. Some users post excited status updates about 'going home' or being 'homesick' for *peles*, with one user, in a series of updates stating, '*bai mi lukim bilas peles blo mi lo avinun*' (I'll see my *bilas peles* this afternoon); 'home sweet home: *peles blo mi*' (my *peles*); and '*mi stap lo peles*! [I'm at *peles*] feeling recharged ☺'.

Food

Food plays an important role in people drawing connections to place-based identities. Laing and Frost (2013:324–325) explain how food festivals are mechanisms for diasporic people's expression of heritage and the maintenance of their ethno-cultural identity. Although in the diaspora 'Island' food may allow people to express a general Islander identity (*e.g.*, *buai* [betel nut], coconuts, *kulau* [young, drinking coconut], rambutans, sago), particular food items are associated with specific provinces, allowing a closer connection to *peles* (both within PNG and in the diaspora). For example, Kavieng is coupled with mud-crabs, Rabaul with mangos, Sepik province with sago. Indeed, it is common to hear someone say 'I have [or want] some of *your* mud-crabs' (emphasis mine) to someone from Kavieng. On January 21, 2014, a

Facebook user of the page 'We <3 Kavieng New Ireland Province, PNG!' posted a photo of some mud-crabs, about which the following were some of the comments made:

> *Trupla na peles naw* [sic] (This comment indicates that the crabs are authentic markers of *peles*)
>
> Only found in *Bilas peles*
>
> . . . crab *blo nips u* [sic] still best *ya* . . . (Crab from New Ireland, you are still the best)
>
> *almang blo peles strt* [sic] . . . *swit moa tru* (Crabs exactly from *peles*, the sweetest)
>
> *Ssshhhh ... na sali ting2* [sic] *gen lo peles NIPS U M FOREVER BEST YA*. (Sending thoughts again to *peles*, New Ireland you are forever the best)
>
> *Peles ya* ('*Ya*' is a verbalised exclamation, used for emphasis)

Interestingly, the same user on 11 January 2014 posted a photo of sago and dried fish at the Kavieng markets, but none of the twelve comments – although positive – mentioned *peles*, *karanas*, *NIPS*, and/or *bilas peles*. This indicates that mud-crabs are more commonly associated with Kavieng and a Kavieng identity. Jarrod, a Kavieng man in his late thirties explains, 'Everyone knows that Kavieng's got the best crab and everyone loves it, so if Kavieng had a crest or a totem, the mud-crab would be it. It's home. "*Nilpis*" is the same – it's Kavieng *stret* [exactly] and *swit moa tru* [the sweetest]'.

Material culture

Material culture is a marker and expression of identity and serves as a connection to *peles*. As Tilley (2011:348) says, 'Material culture materialises identities'. The link between material culture, identity, and 'place' is especially visible in the use of shell money, often worn as necklaces, for example *mís* from Kavieng or *tabu* from Rabaul. Sheree, a Kavieng woman in her fifties, told me,

> If someone's from Kavieng, they have to have *mís*. A local tourist could get some [*mís*] for a souvenir, but it's a deeper, personal relationship if you're from there and your mother gave you your *mís* or you got it from a *pasim maus* [a system of exchanges related to funerals] ceremony, or whatever. If you wear your *mís*, it says, 'I'm from Kavieng, Kavieng's mine'.

Indeed, Robbins and Akin (1999:32) describe how shell currencies in Melanesia are 'taking on new meanings as symbols of tradition and kastom' and define group, sub-group, and individual identities. In a similar way, Arthur (1998) describes how the Hawaiian *muu'muu* and aloha shirt are associated with Hawaii, while the *holuku* (a formal traditional dress, with a train) is worn as a symbol of Hawaiian ethnicity. Tilley (2006:12) explains, 'collective identities are always bound up with notions of . . . shared material forms'.

CONCLUSIONS

The ubiquitousness of the question 'Where are you from?' (expressed as '*Yu bilong we*?' and '*Peles bilong yu we*?') in PNG reveals the prevailing importance of *peles* to contemporary

PNG sociality and identity. However, people are mobile, and identities – like concepts of *peles* – are flexible. It stands to reason then that many people of PNG descent connect to *peles* in ways *other than* by tending its gardens, fishing its sea, swimming its rivers, waking up each day, and going to bed each night physically there in *liklik peles*. The range of alternative, valid engagement methods that people employ reflects both the tangible and intangible nature of *peles*. Further, there are two components in claiming a *peles*-based identity. 'Bloodline' or descent is an essential factor in being 'from' or *having peles* and when combined with 'knowledge of *peles*' (whether expressed in a private or public/social manner) provides the basis for a sense of belonging that would rarely be contested or questioned by others.

It can be argued that the need to 'return to *peles*' (an action which I place in inverted commas in order to emphasise that some have never been to *liklik peles* despite the urge to *return*) is vital to *recharge* a person's *peles* connection. By this logic, the desire to recharge implies that *peles*, especially *liklik peles*, emits an energy (power) that may be stored in a Papua New Guinean's 'blood' (or at least our psyche) and feeds our *peles* related 'knowledge', in whichever manner it is expressed. Certainly, there is power in *peles* at many levels; it plays a role in determining land ownership, descent; social behaviour; and the ability to claim a grounded identity.

Indeed, it may be argued that within this article, I am invoking the power of *peles* (or at least my connection to it) by expressing its importance, in articulating my genealogy, or by acknowledging that as a person of PNG descent who is also currently practising 'Insider' anthropology, *peles* is as an important foundation to my professional career as it is to my personal identity.

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NOTES

1. Regional differences in Tok Pisin mean that *peles* sometimes appears as *ples*, as per Mihalic's (1971 *The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin*) adherence to Madang-based rather than NGI-based pronunciation and orthography.
2. I define 'ethnicity' as the classification of people – based on their ancestral and cultural/historical membership – as belonging to a group. (Many of my informants expressed the idea of ethnicity as being carried in a person's 'blood'.)

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