Opening Story

Several years ago Joseph Alex, a community leader in Divinai village, planted vanilla crops on his land on the advice of government officials from the Department of Primary Industries. A number of other villagers did the same and, now that their crops are finally producing fruit, all have found themselves unable to sell the vanilla beans they thought were ‘green gold’. Why did this initiative, like other cash-cropping projects in Divinai, fail to live up to expectations?

Markedly different from customary practices of subsistence agriculture, where surplus produce is sold within relatively localized systems of labour and exchange, the primary purpose of cash cropping is agricultural production for sale into an extended market. Most commonly cash crops are produced for the export market, drawing local communities like Divinai into global systems of trade and exchange. Cash cropping is expanding as an economic emphasis right across Papua New Guinea, promoted by the national government, and in turn by international financial institutions and donor countries such as Australia. The vanilla plots in Divinai are not the village’s first attempt at cash cropping. For many years, copra—the dried kernels of coconuts—was its principal cash crop, but declining world prices mean that it no longer provides a reliable source of income for people. Some people who used to produce copra moved to coffee or cocoa. Many returned to growing garden produce for their own consumption and small-scale selling in informal markets.

Then, in 2000, a cyclone wiped out much of the vanilla crop in the world’s biggest producer, Madagascar. It sent world prices sky-rocketing, and suddenly made vanilla production an enticing option for other ‘developing’ countries. As Joseph puts it, ‘when they started looking at other markets they thought that was an opportunity to get the idea of planting vanilla to the village people.’ Joseph planted it after learning that it was returning profits to farmers in the Sepik region—‘they were saying it was green gold’.
But vanilla is possibly the labour-intensive crop in the world, often requiring hand pollination and taking as long as five years after planting to produce aged extract. By the time his crops were ready for harvest, production in Madagascar was starting to increase again, supplemented by production in countries such as Uganda, India, Costa Rica and Colombia who, like Papua New Guinea, entered the market in the wake of the Malagasy crisis. The arrival of these new players, together with a concomitant increase in the use of synthetic vanilla by food manufacturers, meant that global prices for vanilla beans slumped by almost 90 per cent from their peak in 2003. Thus, the reason for their disappointment lies in complex set of factors including, amongst other things, weather patterns in Madagascar, export-oriented development policies in PNG and its donor countries, poor timing, agricultural production in India, the increased use of synthetic vanilla extract in food manufacturing; and, perhaps most importantly, the fundamental volatility of global markets. In other words, local, national and global issues all make a difference to village life. All this means that Joseph cannot find a market for his vanilla. It’s not an uncommon story in Divinai, he says:

My uncle planted a hectare of cocoa, someone else has planted, maybe a reasonable amount of coffee, but they’re not even selling it because there’s not a market … I know these are good ideas that the government has told us to follow, to get into, but the big question is are they going to provide us the market?

The DPI station at nearby Bubuleta has now started distributing nutmeg seedlings, but there is anxiety amongst many of the villagers who worry that they will again fail to find a market for their crops. Joseph, while recognizing that the economy he is engaged in is complex and transnational, sees the lack of markets for his cash crops as a failure of the government to provide for its farmers. In truth, the vagaries of the international trade in agriculture are something the Papua New Guinean government is in no place to control, but it is encouraging local communities to grow cash crops with the assurance that it will provide a consistent, and considerable, source of income. Sometimes there are markets, and the crops become ‘green gold’ as they were for the Sepik farmers who were able to harvest their vanilla crops and sell them before world prices plummeted. Other times, as has been the case in Divinai, local people are left at ‘the losing end of the whole thing’, with crops they cannot sell, and which their families cannot eat.

**Place—Past and Present**

Divinai village is a small community of around 700 people, located in the Milne Bay province on the coastline overlooking the Bismarck Sea, towards the far eastern tip of the Papua New Guinean mainland. Narrow, black-sand beaches run along the Milne Bay coast, with mountains behind them and the Stirling Range to the north, rising to summits of 5000 feet. Thick jungle, scrub, mangrove and sago swamps are key features of the province’s
environment. The land immediately around Divinai, however, is largely flat and dry, with poor soil and occasional drought. Coconut, sago and betel-nut palms occupy much of the land, along with gardens and cash crop plantations. The Divinai population is organized into just over one-hundred households, with families living together in homes built mainly out of bush materials, located according to clan arrangements and matrilineal systems of land ownership.

Central to the story of the place, is the history of the missionaries and churches in the area. Samoan missionaries from the London Missionary Society first arrived in the region in the late nineteenth century. In 1891, the reverend Charles Abel arrived to establish a base for the Missionary Society on Kwato Island, approximately three kilometres west of Samarai Island in the China Strait of Milne Bay. The island was envisaged as a ‘total society’ for the Christian converts who lived there: isolated from the heathenism around them, they were trained to be evangelists, teachers and players of cricket and football. The island community was dispersed with the outbreak of World War II, but the Kwato church continued on as the Kwato Extension Association. Villagers in Divinai—which is a short boat ride away from Kwato Island—still refer to ‘Mr Abel’ as if he were a present figure in their lives, and the Kwato church is still the central religious body in community life. In recounting its own history, the Divinai community draws attention to these early interactions with strangers, with Charles Abel and the Samoan missionaries before him. Mrs William, an older villager woman whose grandmother was taught at the Kwato Island school, describes ‘something about this village that is very unique … a mixture of what we get from the outsider, from the foreigners who have been through the villages and the communities’.

The provincial capital of Milne Bay, Alotau, is located just twenty minutes drive north-west of Divinai. The proximity of the township—hence our designation of the community as peri-urban—and the quality of the road network in the area means that travel to and from the centre is relatively easy, and the community is able to access the services located there, including the market, bank, medical services, post office, shops, and government and private sector offices. Gurney airport has daily flights connecting Alotau to Port Moresby, weekly flights to Popondetta in the Northern Province, and flights three times a week to both Misima Island and Kiriwina Island in the province. Alotau itself was constructed in the late 1960s, shortly before Independence, its location selected because of the existence of the Gurney airstrip. The airstrip is a legacy of the Second World War, built when Milne Bay became a site of strategic importance in the struggle for control over the Pacific. Beginning in July 1942, large numbers of Australian troops were stationed in the area, and a major battle between Allied and Japanese forces was fought in September and October of that year. The Papuan communities in Milne Bay suddenly found themselves in the midst of a cruel conflict being fought on their lands, one which took
a heavy toll on them. Today, the wrecks of planes and ships which remain dotted around the area—both in the jungles and underwater in the bays off the coast—have become key attractions for a local tourist industry offering eco-lodge accommodation and scuba diving. Alotau itself is also a commercial centre, a result of its accessibility via the Gurney airstrip, and gold-mining operations on Misima Island.

**Organization and Governance**

The Divinai community includes a significant number of migrants who have moved to the area as a result of intermarriage, and amongst respondents to the questionnaire, 27 per cent indicated that they had lived in the area for five years or less. Many of those who have moved to Divinai are from nearby villages, and shared language and extensive networks of kinship and intermarriage connect communities in the surrounding area. Mrs William, a senior woman in the Divinai community, described it like this:

> Here, in this area—we call it the Tawala area—the same language that we speak here extends as far as East Cape, and around there to Huhuna and right down here around the bay. We speak Tawala language, and we follow our mothers’ side, matrilineal society. So we all fall back to our mother. And my daughter will be taking after me, if I go. She will continue to live on my land. I am sitting on my grandmother’s land—I got it from my mother, and my daughter is going to get it from me.

The matrilineal system of community organization means that upon marriage, it is the husbands who move to their wives’ family lands. Upon death, however, their bodies return to their mothers’ land for burial. Mourning rituals around death and burial play an important role in affirming customary ties to land, and it is through the burial ceremony’s that elders pass on and confirm the land rights of clans and families. Relationships of responsibility and reciprocity are reinforced through the ritual practices at times of death, as they are through the practices around marriage, bride-price, birth and initiation. As a result, there are strong relationships of kinship which include those members of the community who have migrated from other places. Extended families and clans provide support networks and collective identity, and community members credit the strong kinship relationships for the social cohesion within Divinai.

Organization and leadership within the community is provided through the co-existing structures of the chiefdom system, the churches and the local level government. As with land rights in the community, clan leadership is passed down along matrilineal lines, from uncles to their eldest nephews. The leaders of individual clans are united under a paramount chief, who is the highest authority within the customary-tribal system. In addition to guarding and passing on customary knowledge of rituals, stories, land boundaries and history, the paramount chief and the clan chiefs are called upon to intervene in disputes within the community and matters relating
to cultural, land and marine resources. In cases where disputes cannot be resolved through the chiefdom system, however, they are now referred to the modern legal system to be adjudicated through the village courts.

Since the first arrival of missionaries in the area in the late-nineteenth century, the governance and decision-making structures of the chiefdom system have been existed concurrently with those of the Christian churches. Churches in Divinai and the Alotau area, particularly the Kwato Church, clearly play a fundamental role as a basis for communal life. When asked what they identified as their main source of community, 28 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire in Divinai identified the place that they lived, which is consistent with the overall results across all the research sites and attests to the widespread importance of land and place. Significantly though, another 24 per cent—much greater than the overall figure for all locations of 7 per cent—identified their main source of community as being a ‘club, community or religious centre’. This was confirmed and reiterated in more in-depth strategic conversations and interviews, in which individuals consistently referred back to the centrality of the church in the community.

There are four denominations in the area, although the Kwato church appears to be the dominant religious body, and certainly holds an important place in the history of the community. Under the church structure, the pastor is the leader of the congregation, with deacons acting under him. So while the paramount chief and the clan chiefs continue to be respected as the guardians of customary knowledge and practices, leadership within the community also comes from the pastor and deacons who guide the community in their spiritual life and congregation. Clans continue to serve as crucial mediums for the organization of families and individuals, providing a source of identification through which people exist in the relation to one another, and through which land and forms of knowledge and practice are passed from one generation to another. However, the community is also organized and mobilized through the structures of the churches—through the Women’s fellowships, youth groups, community activities and collective worship.

The continuing importance of customary rituals, practices and forms of organization and identity, exists concurrently with the importance accorded to the churches and Christian ideologies. In some ways, Christianity frames the way in which the contemporary relevance of customary practices is negotiated. So, when asked about the place of traditional values in community life, Mrs William spoke of the centrality of systems of matrilineal land ownership, and the practices associated with marriage and death, as ‘some of the customary things that we still retain’. At the same time, she pointed to a move away from customary initiation rituals, of which sorcery and charming are key elements. The distinction, for her, is in their compatibility, or otherwise, with Christianity. Initiation ‘goes on with witchcraft’, she says, ‘so we try to do away with that, according
to the biblical principal. Whatever is against God we don’t participate in very much.’ Clearly, though, there is some ambiguity in interpretation and practice. Initiation rituals and sorcery are still practiced, but in a way that is less publicly and collectively sanctioned than, say, clan-based funeral feasts which occur alongside Christian burial services.

Where Christianity and the customary dimensions of collective life seem to sit in a relatively harmonious, fluid relationship to each other, there are much sharper points of tension in the relationship between the churches and the local level government. Under the 1995 Organic law reforms, political power in Papua New Guinea was further decentralized from the provinces to local level governments (LLGs), and Divinai is now one of twenty-nine wards in the Alotau LLG. The ward councillor in Divinai is, under this system, the over-all head of the community, and considered to be the representative of the government at the local level. He is supported by a committee of five people appointed by the community, and under his leadership they constitute the core group which does most of the planning in the ward. A Ward Development Committee brings together representatives from families and clans, key programs such as health and education, and groups such as the Women’s Fellowship, youth, sporting clubs and church groups. These representatives are responsible for taking back information and decisions from the Committee and disseminating them throughout the community. The Ward Development Committee also has a number of sub-committees tasked with co-ordinating sports, law and order, youth and women’s activities in the community. In addition, it co-ordinates community work days, held every Tuesday, at which community members are intended to contribute labour and time to the general upkeep and maintenance of the village. Collective tasks include the beautification and cleaning of the village cemetery and individual homes, as well as of the church, local school and other shared spaces. The cleaning and de-vegetation of roads is done under contract from the Department of Works and Implementation, and earns the community some income. Attendance at community work-days is poor however, and the community leaders appointed under the LLG system frequently encounter difficulties in mobilizing the community through the Ward Development Committee.

The stated goal of the 1995 Organic Law reforms was to create stronger links between national government and the community life, while making law and government responsive to local needs and realities, but the sentiment expressed by a number of people within Divinai is that the new structure has failed to meet the needs and demands of the local people. Referring to the 1995 reform, Joseph Alex, a Divinai community leader within the Kwato church, described it as ‘something on paper alone—the practical part of it has never happened’. He spoke of his frustration at the difficulties in accessing government services, and the lack of responsiveness of government to the proposals put forward by community leaders. For him, the fact that he had put forward development proposals which had not been
taken up by the councillor and LLG, was evidence of the failure of the of
the government system. Doubtless there are a whole set of factors at play
here—including political will, funding, available resources and conflicting
demands—but Joseph’s comments illustrate the perception of government
by many community members both here in Divinai and across Papua New
Guinea. There is an abiding sense of disconnect between the experience
of daily life at the local level and formal structures of government.
Significantly, the argument which Joseph and other community members
made was that the church is much more central in organizing and bringing
people together than are the agencies of government. As he put it:

The government does not bring people together ... How the people
interact with each other is more or less through the churches. The
churches play an active role in people’s lives. When my councillor comes
and tells me, ‘OK, village people get together; we are going to talk about
this and this and this’, I am going to guarantee you this; you will find five
or ten people will attend ... but when you talk about my pastor, he’ll say
‘people come, we gather round and do this’, you’ll find that the whole
community’s going to come around.

The structures of religious authority and organization, then, seem to carry a
much greater importance within the Divinai community than do the formal
structures of political authority. Where the churches and chiefdom system
appear to co-exist in a relatively harmonious way, the churches and local
government seem to sit in uneasy tension with one another. A commonly
voiced sentiment was that there needed to be greater co-operation between
the two, and more respect for the churches in the development process.
Notwithstanding these tensions however, the results of the Community
Sustainability questionnaire suggested that structures of leadership and
decision-making in Divinai have comparatively high levels of support from
the community. When asked how much they agreed with the statement,
‘I feel that decisions made about life in my neighbourhood are made in
the interests of the whole community’, 77 per cent of respondents to the
questionnaire in Divinai either agreed or strongly agreed, and 15 per cent
disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is considerably more positive than the
overall results across all the research sites, where only 62 per cent agreed
or strongly disagreed, and 20 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.
When researchers posed the statement, ‘I feel that governments make
decisions and laws that are good for the way I live locally’, 52 per cent of
Divinai respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This is hardly a resounding
expression of faith in government, but still considerably higher than the
overall result across all the research sites of 43 per cent. It suggests that while
the perception of government is poor within Divinai, as it arguably is across
the country, the relationship between state and citizenry here is less strained
than it is within many of the other research sites.
Overall, the results from the questionnaire, and material gathered from community conversations, interviews and ethnographic observation, point to high levels of community wellbeing in Divinai. Eighty per cent of survey respondents said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their community neighbourhood, and 84 per cent said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with feeling part of their community. Seventy-nine per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with their life as a whole, with 10 per cent indicating they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This compares favourably to the overall figures across of the research sites of 72 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. Respondents in Divinai also reported a much higher feeling of safety within their community, with 81 per cent saying they were satisfied or very satisfied with their feeling of safety, compared to an overall figure of 72 per cent. Only 4 per cent of people Divinai respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their feeling of safety, much lower than the overall result of 12 per cent. A feeling of social cohesion, connectedness to the provincial capital in Alotau, the strength of the church and kinships relationships, ranked highly amongst those things which community members and leaders identified as positive features of community life.

Livelihood and Provision

Daily livelihood in Divinai is sustained through a variety of activities, the predominant ones being agriculture for subsistence and for sale at markets. The ocean too is an important source of food, and, as in coastal villages across the country, there is wealth of knowledge about fishing which has been passed down family-lines for many generations. Within families, livelihood activities are frequently divided on the basis of age and gender. Women are the main income earners, and it is they who sit at market stalls in the local village market or at Alotau selling their families produce and catch for a small income. In practice, it is the best fish and vegetables which are sold at market, with the rest retained for the family’s own consumption. Many of the village women also engage in periodic small-scale income generating activities such as selling handicrafts or baked goods like scones. As Mrs William described it, ‘any grass-roots woman can pick up something like a bundle of pumpkin tips, or a coconut, and sell it at the market—she gets one kina or two kina, something to buy kerosene—basic needs.’ In total, 52 per cent of Divinai respondents to the questionnaire said that their main way of making a living was through work within the household. Another 21 per cent identified selling goods at market or on the street. Eighty-nine per cent of people surveyed said that their main source of food was work done on their own land or fishing, a figure significantly higher than the overall result of 78 per cent across all the research sites. Five per cent identified a supermarket, and 4 per cent identified local shops as their main source of food.
The income which the women earn is distributed to cover the costs of immediate family needs such as school fees, health expenses, clothing and household goods, and community obligations like church contributions, funerals, feasts and bride prices. A small microfinance initiative has been set up to enable women in the community to accrue some savings from the money they earn. However, unlike in the Tokain group of villages in Madang Province, being the primary income-earner does not always ensure that women are able to control how the family’s money is spent. Through interviews and conversations, women in the village expressed concern about men spending family money on alcohol. The Councillor and Law and Order Committee have been asked to take up the issue, but it remains a matter of concern for community women.

In addition to gardening, fishing and small-scale income-generating work such as marketing, a significant number of people in Divinai are engaged in livelihood activities within the formal sector. In the responses to the Questionnaire, a much higher than average percentage of respondents from Divinai—26 per cent as opposed to 14 per cent across all the research sites—indicated that they were receiving a wage, either from the state, private business, or ran their own business or were paid a cash income as a casual service-worker or labourer. A key reason for is the proximity
and accessibility of Alotau, and accordingly with the commercial, political and tourist activities based there. Additionally, the development of cash-cropping agriculture means that increasing numbers of villagers within Divinai are being drawn into formal-sector employment—and the much broader systems of production and exchange within which such work is situated—through the growth of cash cropping as a livelihood activity. Often, though, this work is precarious and inconsistent, and families may revert to subsistence agriculture and the selling of small surpluses in the local informal markets when they are unable to find a market for vanilla, cocoa, coffee or copra they produce.

Formal-sector employment, then, encompasses a broad range of activities, and accordingly there are significant variations in the lifestyles, status and subjective self-understandings which these activities afford. Many of the people in formal employment work for relatively small incomes, with little to distinguish their lives from those of the majority of villagers who make their living from gardening, fishing and selling goods in the informal markets. There are some, though, whose levels of income position them in sharp contrast to those they live around, providing them with conspicuously different lifestyles and according them particular status. The relationship between these people and the other Divinai villagers seems ambiguous. One the one hand their incomes and housing are a marker of difference; on the other hand, they are connected through kinship and wantok relationships, and in some senses their presence is claimed as a way of elevating the status of the community at large. The provincial administrator for Milne Bay lives in the area, married to a village woman. So too does the assistant secretary for the Department for Primary Industries, and other officials and business people: ‘All the tall people’, as Mrs William describes them. ‘They are in the bush here; they have big high-covenant houses. They’re hiding in the bush, you won’t see them! But in the morning if you are [outside] washing dishes, you’ll see all these flashy cars driving out. So you will note that this village too has some tall people here’.

**Learning and Education**

Levels of education in Divinai are comparatively high in relation to Papua New Guinea as a whole. The presence of the community primary school in the village means that all people have completed at least a basic primary education. In fact, only 2 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire in Divinai said that they had received no formal education, significantly lower than the overall figure of 9 per cent across all the research sites. 54 per cent said they had completed primary school, compared to 42 per cent across all eleven sites; however, the percentage of those who said they had completed some or all of their secondary education was lower than the overall figure, at 28 per cent as opposed to 33 per cent. Beyond primary school level, access to formal education becomes much more difficult, and the expense is often too great for families to continue. However, the immediate proximity of the
village to Alotau means that many people with skills training or higher-level education still reside in the community while employed in the urban centre. Outside of the formal education system, learning takes place within families — as skills and customary knowledge are passed down from one generation to the next — and through forums provided by faith-based and governmental agencies. Familial forms of learning are being emphasized by both tribal and modern-political community leaders as a remedy to the challenges facing youth in the community, including those posed by alcohol consumption, the lure of urban centres, and the struggle to retain customary ways in the face of the modern. The obligation falls upon older family members to pass on local knowledge to the young men and women, in preparation for them to take on adult family and community responsibilities. Training for both young and older women comes as well from the churches, particularly through the Women’s Fellowship. An Agriculture Station in the village has run some training sessions, especially on cash cropping. It could be utilized to assist the community in agricultural methods such as soil improvement and improved gardening skills. When researchers visited the community in 2006, a community resource centre was in the process of being constructed, and the hope was that it would also be a place for training and learning activities.

There is a strong desire for greater access to learning and education within the community. When surveyed about what sort of training they desired, 52 per cent of respondents agreed that agricultural training would be useful. Twenty-five per cent selected training in income-generation as desirable, and 23 per cent wanted that training in management skills. As was common in all of the communities where the questionnaire was conducted, training in family-life and traditional ways of doing things were also important to people, with 34 per cent and 30 per cent of respondents respectively expressing a desire for such education in these areas. The forms of education and training which are desired by people in the village correspond strongly to the nature of the community itself. The strong cultural basis of Divinai, rooted in its kinship and clan networks, means that customary forms of learning are highly valued. At the same time, though, people and families are clearly negotiating the effects of social, cultural and economic change. The desire for training workshops on traditional family-life activities, sits alongside the desire for skills training which will enable them to tap into the growing tourism industry in the region. People want more information on cash-cropping and the functioning of the export market, but they also want to learn how to improve their subsistence gardening as population growth creates pressures on available land. They want to be able to access the knowledge held by outside experts, at the same time that they are holding strongly to the knowledge of their tribal elders.