This paper describes two different contests over a tourist event in East New Britain Province (ENBP), Papua New Guinea (PNG). The disputes centre around the PNG Mask Festival that is held each year in the province. On the surface the disputes seem unconnected. The first is a dispute over whether or not '*kastom*' (Tok Pisin: custom) has been 'commercialised' in the course of turning it into a tourist attraction. The second is over the site of the festival; in particular whether it should be held in the famous old port town of Rabaul or in the new provincial capital of Kokopo. Both disputes speak to a common fear however; namely the rise of a new and unaccountable indigenous elite for whom *kastom* and tourism are allegedly nothing more than resources to be mined for the political and economic gains that they can bring.

The 'commercialisation of *kastom*'.

The PNG Mask Festival is organised by the National Cultural Commission (NCC), an organisation whose mission statement is to, "preserve, protect and promote art and culture in Papua New Guinea." The Mask Festival is perhaps the most significant event in the NCC's calendar, taking up a great deal of its labour time and resources. The festival involves a great number of events, including the performance of various kinds of PNG pop music and church choirs. The main attraction of the event however is undoubtedly the performance of '*kastom*' and in particular dances of masked figures from around PNG, where such attire is often associated with male secret ritual societies. And the annual highlight amongst such masked figures is the performance of the *tubuan*; the masked figure of the secret male ritual society of the local Tolai people. The Tolai are amongst the best known of PNG's eight hundred plus

linguistic-ethnic groups. They were amongst the first to be contacted by European missionaries and the first to experience European education and to develop their own cash cropping, leading to them being viewed as something of an elite and exceptionally 'developed' group. It also led to them being the object of much anthropological interest, as during the 1960s they were held up in contrast to the 'first contact' ethnography that dominated the anthropology of the region, following the opening up the New Guinea Highlands in the 1950s. There is a rich ethnographic history of Tolai sociality in general and the *tubuan* in particular (Epstein, T.S. 1968, Epstein, A.L. 1969, Salisbury 1970, Bradley 1982, Fingleton 1984, Simet 1991, Martin 2006) and it is not my concern here to revisit the historical record of the *tubuan*. Rather my concern is with the contrast drawn by many Tolai themselves with the ways in which the *tubuan* was supposedly conducted in the past and should be conducted today on the one hand, and how it is allegedly conducted now. One quote from a Tolai man from the village of Matupit on the outskirts of Rabaul Town sums up a commonly expressed feeling.

> You can't just raise a *tubuan*. *Tubuans* have work pulling clans together, showing who is related to who when someone dies. In the past the real big men would never have allowed a *tubuan* to be raised just for tourists. They would have said if a tourist wants to see the *tubuan*, they have to wait until the time for the *tubuan* to do its work. But now they just raise the *tubuan* to make money so they can pay off their debt to the lousy World Bank.

Such a feeling is not uncommon. I have dozens of similar denunciations scattered throughout my field notes. These denunciations are also not limited to the Mask

Festival. Other occasions upon which the *tubuan* or other forms of customary performance are displayed also provoke similar denunciations. Some stories seem a little far fetched. I was told that one local entrepreneur and customary leader, known as ToNgala had sold photographs of the *tubuan* to a 'German internet company' for 10 million Kina[1]. On other occasions I was told that his support for a government programme of relocating villagers after a volcanic eruption in 1994 was actually inspired by his desire to turn the entire island village of Matupit into a giant tourist resort from which he would make millions of Kina a year. However unlikely these stories may seem they do speak to a growing distrust of the emerging indigenous business and political elite, and it is undoubtedly the case that many members of this group see *kastom* in general and the *tubuan* in particular as a potential economic resource to be exploited in the tourist business. ToNgala did a run a tour operator business, ferrying foreign tourists (primarily Japanese) around the Rabaul and Kokopo area, and used his pre-eminent position within Tolai *kastom* to ensure that dances and displays were often available for them to witness. It is behaviour such as this and the raising of *tubuans* at the Mask Festival that caused such disquiet among many Tolai. On the one hand entrepreneurs such as ToNgala were distrusted as it was claimed that they paid the young men who performed for the tourists handfuls of uncooked bananas whilst they pocketed thousands of Kina. But the complaints actually went much deeper than that. As the informant quoted above makes clear it is the purpose that the *tubuan* is raised for that gives it legitimacy in his eyes. It has 'work' that it performs in the village, '**pulling** clans together and **showing** who is related to who'. As such the *tubuan*, as it is ideally presented here represents a classic example of the familiar description of customary performance in Melanesian ethnography; an activity

[1] The PNG Kina was worth between 0.15 0.2 British Pound sterling at the time of my fieldwork between 2002 and 2004.

that simultaneously both **constitutes** and **symbolises** the ties of reciprocal interdependence between different kin groups. When the *tubuan* is raised for reasons other than this work then from this perspective, its legitimacy is called into question. As another informant put it to me,

> We have to retain customs, but I see the Big Men and they're taking it as their business now... for building up their wealth… they've turned it into a business, they're not doing it like *kastom* anymore… If there is tourism I reckon the guys helping should get a little money like commission.

Here we see an example of the complaint that people who perform '*kastom*' for tourists are exploited. But more than that we also see an example of how the very 'customary' status of tourist performances is called into question. If the motivation for the performance is the building up of wealth rather than the work of marking relations between clans, it becomes a 'business' not '*kastom*'.

Elsewhere (Martin 2006), I have argued that the concept of '*kastom*' in East New Britain is best understood not as a term that refers to a fixed set of practices, but rather as a socially contested sign that measures the moral evaluation of others' actions. In particular whether or not an action, performance or transaction is adjudged to be '*kastom*' or not is a position that is taken upon whether that action embodies an ethic of reciprocity to the satisfaction of the person judging it. The involvement of the business and government elite in *kastom* that is performed for tourists can be dismissed as being the conceptual opposite of business on two grounds; first the exploitation of the grassroots village performers, who are allegedly treated as 'work

boys' or as an event that is staged for illegitimate financial reasons. In both cases it is the perceived removal of *kastom* from cycles of reciprocal obligation that turns it from real *kastom* to business in the eyes of these critics. In the case of the exploitation of the performers it is the alleged transformation of the relationship between the sponsor and performers from one of ongoing reciprocal interdependence into a wage labour relationship of boss and worker that is the problem. In the second it is the way in which *kastom* such as the *tubuan* is removed from its real work of cementing ties of reciprocal interdependence in order to build up individual wealth or pay off government debt that is the problem. In both cases what is demonstrated is that there is a fear amongst grassroots Tolai villagers that a new generation of leaders are separating themselves from accountability to the village. They are contrasted with the 'real big men' of the past whose concern and source of power was attention to the reciprocal obligations of village life. I do not have time here to detail the ways in which members of the emerging indigenous elite justify their involvement in the tourist trade as being genuinely customary, but it should of course be pointed out that they reject this position. Rather my concern here has been to briefly illustrate the ways in which tourism has become an arena for contest over the legitimacy of the elite's involvement in *kastom,* and in particular has become one of the key sites for a wider grassroots critique of the way in which the emerging elite are perceived to be increasingly freeing themselves from reciprocal obligations to their less fortunate kin in the villages.

Rabaul versus Kokopo; the location of tourism.

The second dispute over the Mask Festival concerns its location. Prior to its partial destruction in a volcanic eruption in 1994 Rabaul was one of PNG's major urban settlements and certainly its most popular and romanticised. In contrast to cities such as Port Moresby and Lae that were reviled as ugly dens of violence and crime, Rabaul was referred to as the 'Jewel of the South Pacific', with its breathtaking natural harbour making it a popular tourist location. After the eruption, the government decided that Rabaul was not to be redeveloped as its proximity to the major volcanoes made it unsafe, but that the Provincial capital should be relocated to Kokopo. To an extent the government's hand was tied as one of the conditions tied to assistance by external donors such as the World Bank was that reconstruction should be focussed on Kokopo which was considered to have a more viable potential future, despite the immense cultural and economic attachments that many in the region had to Rabaul. The rationale behind this decision was not universally accepted however. The villages around Rabaul had previously had a degree of pre-eminence amongst Tolai villages owing to their proximity to the town. In the years prior to the eruption other Tolai villages had begun to 'catch up' and many Tolai from these villages now occupied bureaucratic positions that had previously been monopolised by 'Rabaul side' Tolai. The suspicion was that these bureaucrats were strengthening their position by using the volcano as an excuse for the relocation and even using it as an excuse to 'pay back' their more 'developed' neighbours for their previous superiority. Suspicion was not confined to Tolai from the Rabaul Area. The most vocal proponents of the feeling that the prospects for restoring Rabaul had been deliberately sabotaged was a small group of Australian expatriates who had remained in the ruined town after the eruption. During the colonial era the white Australian population of Rabaul had numbered several thousand, and they had without doubt been the

wealthiest and most powerful group in the plantation economy of the post-war period, occupying many key government positions. Since independence in 1975 many of these positions had been filled by PNG nationals, but still many had stayed on running businesses such as hotels and construction companies. After the volcano the gradual decline in their pre-eminence that had begun in the run up to independence was intensified, until by the time of my arrival only a few dozen were left, many financially unable to return to an Australia that had changed massively in the decades that they had been away, many scratching out precarious existences on the margins of the shattered town's economy. For this group the destruction of the dream of the revival of Rabaul was perhaps an even bitterer blow than it was for local Tolai villagers and they never wasted an opportunity to berate the government that, as they saw it, had condemned Rabaul to death.

In this context the development of the tourist industry, and the location of the Mask Festival in particular became a central part of the political struggle over the post-disaster reconstruction. Great hopes were held out for the tourist potential of Rabaul, if the government made it possible. During the course of my fieldwork I regularly attended meetings of the Rabaul Landholders' Association; a group made up of clans from Tolai villages near Rabaul that were in dispute with the government over the ownership of the land that Rabaul Town had been built on, claiming that it had been unfairly alienated in the colonial era. There was passive support from many local Tolai for their claim, but one of the problems that they had in translating this into activity was a feeling that Rabaul had no real future. Tourism was held out as the solution. At one meeting, Anton Daniels the chair of the Association, told his members that,

> The world is waiting for us to recreate Rabaul. In the 1960s we had 3 tourist boats [a week]. If we sort this out we can beat Fiji.

In a conversation that I had with Anton around the same time, he told me that, "…in the 1960s there was a truck of tourists every day at Matupit. People made money canoeing people to the volcano." The seriousness with which people took tourism is illustrated by the response to the news that locals in the neighbouring Pomio region had killed some of their own people who had robbed a tourist. Anton addressed the Association, informing the meeting to unanimous agreement that,

> …the Pomios who killed the people who robbed an Aussie tourist had it right, and we should do the same as tourism is the main thing to get money, and we need to do anything to avoid scaring them.

The stakes were clearly considered to be high and any moves that were felt to jeopardise Rabaul's tourist potential were liable to be met with a furious response. The angriest that I ever saw ToNgala was when I bumped into him on the road and he told me that he had heard through the grapevine that the Provincial Tourism Chief had said in private that as far as he was concerned that Rabaul could go to hell. ToNgala was furious and was on his way to Kokopo to chase the matter up and have words with the individual concerned. As an entrepreneur with an interest in the tourist trade in Rabaul, ToNgala had more of an incentive to follow up on such matters. In this respect he was similar to elements of the Australian expatriate population in Rabaul, particularly those who ran hotels and guest houses who were similarly outspoken and

vocal on these issues. However the sentiment was shared by others in the Rabaul area, in particular Tolai villagers who anticipated spin off benefits if tourism was to become a growth industry in the area. On another occasion, Anton told me that,

> We don't mind if they take all the industry to Kokopo... as long as we make Rabaul what it was before... a fully tourist destination. I'm sure in the 1950's we had more tourists than Fiji. There were two tourist boats a week. People at Matupit used to get money every day; every canoe. They went to Tavurvur, Dawapia, and Hot Springs[2]. US, UK, Aus navy boats too. They'd play baseball with us at Queen's Park. Everything was there; athletics, tennis etc. "People from Kokopo know if they open Rabaul...We want roads back to our villages, then you'll see development. People will have the lives they used to have.

Following this one of his friends added, "...they just want to take revenge, because people from Rabaul held all the top posts."

Tourism is held up as the road to recovering the prosperity of the past and the relocation to Kokopo is considered as the biggest threat to this prospect. This is the context that explains the anger that met the relocation of the Mask Festival from Rabaul to Kokopo in 2003. The Festival is normally held in Rabaul as it has a sports field that was built before the eruption that is the most suitable venue for the event, and it still had more hotels that had survived the eruption that were of a quality likely to appeal to foreign tourists. In 2003 however the volcano began to show signs of activity. Although the vulcanologists at the local observatory proclaimed a fresh

[2] Tarvurvur is the Tolai name for the main volcano located near Rabaul. Dawapia is the local name for a pair of dramatic rocks located in the middle of the main bay, known in English as 'The Beehives'.

eruption highly unlikely, the volcano was throwing out huge plumes of sulphurous ash several times an hour that rained down on the town and surrounding villages day and night like grey snow. The ash was extremely irritating to the lungs and skin and provided the rationale for attempts to move the festival to Kokopo. Perhaps in other circumstances this rationale would have proved acceptable, but the suspicion of the motives of the Provincial Authorities made this an impossibility. Just as the scientific advice that Kokopo was less susceptible to the effects of another eruption than Rabual was seen as the cover for political manoeuvrings, so the argument that dust storms made hosting the festival in Rabaul a practical impossibility were seen in the same light.

The disagreements with this decision took many forms, from letters to politicians and newspapers from expatriate Australian businessmen in Rabaul to claims by some Tolai that the heavy rains that fell in the Kokopo area in the run up to the festival were caused by the *tubuan* spirits that were angry with the relocation. In the end however the festival was moved, although it was felt by many not to have been as successful as in previous years. It is not my intention to pass judgment on the veracity of the claims or counter-claims as to the motivation of the decision to move the festival. What is clear however is that the previous decade of relocating government services to the Kokopo area had created a situation where it became easier to justify relocating the festival as well. For example at one planning committee meeting for the 2003 festival that I attended, after a lengthy discussion about whether or not the dust made Kokopo or Rabaul the most suitable location, the issue of provision of food and accommodation for guests of honour was raised. The local vocational colleges were commonly agreed to be the best source of provision, at which point one Kokopo based

government official was quick to point out that Kokopo would be easier in this respect. Before the eruption of course, this was not the case. Kokopo's advantage here was not as a direct result of the eruption but of the political responses to that eruption over the previous decade. This is the context in which the seemingly rational decision to move the Festival can easily become seen as part of a political campaign to promote Kokopo at Rabaul's expense, just as the claim that ToNgala makes millions from selling photographs of the *tubuan* can seem plausible to some in the wider context of a growing distrust of the indigenous elite and their relationship to *kastom*.

The defence of Rabaul's interests united people who in other contexts would hold very different views. Both the Rabaul Landholders' Association and the Rabaul Chamber of Commerce (CoC) shared an interest in promoting Rabaul, although the CoC was vehemently opposed to the Association's claim for compensation for alienated land. The head of the CoC, an Australian hotel owner named Bruce Alexander was often keen to stress to me the tight profit margins with which companies operated in post-disaster Rabaul. The landholders however suspected that vast amounts of money were still being made in Rabaul, most of which made it into the pockets of outsiders. One of leaders of the Association told me one day that, "Bruce is making heaps of money. There's tourists everyday. He's on the internet." Likewise grassroots villagers who would normally suspect ToNgala of profiting from the commercialisation of *kastom* would share his anger and suspicion of Kokopo based bureaucrats wishing to move the festival from Rabaul.

The two issues of commercialisation and location therefore draw very different battle lines. But in both cases there is a fear amongst some groups of people that those more

powerful than themselves are manipulating the situation to their advantage. With regard to the commercialisation of *kastom* many grassroots villagers suspect some of their own customary leaders who are also part of an emerging indigenous economic elite. With regard to the relocation of the festival many people who would be seen as elite from that perspective, such as ToNgala or the Australians businesspeople in Rabaul, now see themselves as a marginalised group in the post-disaster environment relative to the growing economic and political influence of those who threw in their lot with Kokopo.

These contests over the meaning and practice of tourism belong to a wider context of growing distrust of the state in post-colonial PNG. As economic prospects have worsened and foreign aid has been cut the state has increasingly withdrawn from its previous duties of care to its citizens. Health centres and schools are no longer maintained to the standard that was taken for granted twenty years ago. The post-disaster reconstruction has exacerbated this feeling. One of the other constraints put on reconstruction funding by organisations such as the World Bank was that it should all go on infrastructure designed to help re-grow the economy rather than on assistance to individual households as had been the case in the aftermath of previous disasters. Once the decision had been made that Kokopo was more economically viable than Rabaul this meant that many villagers from the Rabaul area (who had been the most affected by the eruption) saw little of the money that flooded into the area after the eruption. The neo-liberal world within which the PNG state now operates has had a major influence on how it has responded to the disaster and how its citizens respond to it. Sometimes Tolai very explicitly place their criticisms of government and emerging elites within this context, as the informant that I quoted towards the

start of this paper makes clear. Contests over tourist events such as the Mask Festival are part of wider contests over the future of sociality in PNG in a neo-liberal era in which both the state and local leaders are viewed as increasingly unaccountable and unconcerned with their obligations to those at the grassroots and in which business overrides *kastom*.