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0521025249 - Ku Waru: Language and Segmentary Politics in the Western Nebilyer Valley,
Papua New Guinea

Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey

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1. Introduction

Near the middle of the western Nebilyer Valley, in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, there is a large expanse of grassland locally known as Sibeka Sweet Potato Garden. Though the ground there remains fertile even after thousands of years of cultivation, almost all of it has lain fallow since 1979, when it was used as a battleground between people living to the northeast and south of it. We heard about that fighting when we first visited the area in 1981 and settled at Kailge, immediately to the northwest (see Map 2). The Kailge people told us they themselves had not got into the fight. Fighting commenced at Sibeka again in 1982. This time our hosts at Kailge did join in, on the side of their eastern neighbors. The opposing side called in their allies from further south, and the Kailge people, in turn, called in their allies from over the Tambul Range to the west.

The way in which the 1982 battle ended was remarkable, to us and our hosts. On September 13, onto the battlefield marched the members of a local women's group, one of several that had grown up in this area since around the beginning of 1982. Dressed in identical T-shirts which bore the national insignia, and carrying the Papua New Guinea flag, the women marched into the no-man's-land between the opposing lines and exhorted the men on both sides to lay down their arms. They carried with them onions, cabbages, money, cigarettes and bottled soft drinks, and offered these to the combatants if they would desist. Both sides accepted the offer, the goods were divided equally between them, and they dispersed.

In the following year, 1983, each of the acts of recruitment which brought people into the 1982 war, and the bold act by which the women stopped it, were duly 'paid for' by public, ceremonial presentations of wealth. As is usual at such occasions, there was extensive speech-making at each event.

1.1 TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF EVENTS

Those events of 1982 and 1983 are what this book is largely about. We will be discussing them in sometimes microscopic detail, not so much to provide a record of what happened (though that will be a leading source of interest for

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people at Kailge), as to advance the understanding of Nebilyer social life, and within it, the relation of certain social structures to specific historical events. By doing so we hope open up new ways of pursuing the general issue of the relations between *structure* and *practice, history* or *event* (cf. e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Sahlins 1981, 1985; Kelly 1977).

The ascent to general theory is not an end in itself. For, among its other uses, theory enables observation: it is only within the context of some set of general assumptions about what can happen, that we are able even to 'describe' certain basic aspects of what did happen (cf. Popper 1959).¹ Consider, for example, the events described in the opening paragraphs above. Though that description may serve as an introduction to the events in question, it is in many respects beside the point. It may be (as coroners say) consistent with what happened, but much of what it includes is incidental to the events as such (even to what made them remarkable), and most of what constitutes them as social action is left out (cf. Sapir 1949 on 'pattern'). We can get a little further by proceeding from an assumption commonly made by 'civilized' folks (some of them anthropologists) that warfare among peoples such as the New Guinea Highlanders is commonly organized in terms of 'tribes' (or 'clans'). Indeed, soon after settling at Kailge we learned that the people grouped themselves into named units they called *talapi*, which did figure centrally in their accounts of the events described above (and of warfare in general). Thus, the principal combatants in the 1979 war had not fought as 'people living to the northeast [of Sibeka]' vs. people to the south of it. Rather, they had fought as Kusika, Midipu, Epola, Alya, and Lalka (hereafter K-M-E-A-L), on the one side, and, on the other, Tea and Dena. And in the 1982 battle, our hosts had not joined in as 'people to the northeast of Sibeka', but as Kopia and Kubuka (see Map 2). Exactly how that is to be construed is far from transparent, as we shall see below. But it should also become clear that social units such as the ones we have just named do figure crucially in the events in question: we cannot begin to understand what happened without including them in the picture. Thus our received notions of 'tribe' are of some use, however modified they may be by the encounter.

Insofar as we think of tribes as 'proto-nations' (see e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1965: 32–48), we think of them not only as discrete groupings of people, but also as territorial groupings of some kind. This will also get us a certain amount of mileage in understanding what happened in the events we describe here, insofar as Kopia, Kubuka, etc. are identified with discrete blocs of land (as shown in Map 2).

So far, we are within the realm of Western common sense understanding of events such as the above – the kind of understanding common among European expatriates living in the Highlands. This was, after all, a 'tribal fight', so what could the belligerents have been but 'tribes'?

Other aspects of what happened do not conform to established common sense (and therefore are unlikely to have been noticed by most Westerners) but are readily comprehended within the terms of standard anthropological theories about how certain kinds of tribes are organized. These include concepts such as: *segmentation*, which directs us to notice the fact that, for example, the Kopia 'tribe' comprises lower-level divisions (as in section 3.2.1 below), each of which made its own separately-identified contribution as part of the compensation payment by 'Kopia' to the allies they had recruited for the fighting;

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agnation, which inclines us to notice that the cooperation within each 'tribe' was enjoined partly on the basis that all male personnel were said to be 'brothers' or 'fathers and sons'; *complementary opposition*, which inclines us to notice that a dispute between men from particular segments of the Epola and Dena tribes respectively, rapidly escalated to include, among others, all segments of Epola on one side and all of Dena on the other; or that a dispute which in 1982 had been escalating towards open warfare between two segments of the Kopia 'tribe' quickly faded into the background when Kopia joined the multi-tribe alliance against Tea-Dena and Tola-Wanaka.

All of this is readily recognized in terms of these anthropological concepts from segmentary lineage theory. That – as we shall argue below – some of this is actually misrecognition is here beside the point, which is that, here as elsewhere, theory directs our attention to things which otherwise we might not have noticed.²

Besides these general anthropological concepts, there are a number of others which have been developed or adapted specifically within the context of Melanesianist anthropology, which direct our attention to yet other aspects of what happened at the events in question. Foremost among these are concepts of *reciprocity* or *exchange* as developed by writers such as Mauss (1954), Malinowski (1922), Sahlins (1972), Wagner (1967, 1974), and, for the Hagen-Nebilyer area in particular, by A. Strathern (1971, 1979a) and M. Strathern (1972a, 1988).

In its application to this part of the New Guinea Highlands, exchange theory has provided a valuable corrective to segmentary lineage theory. The latter included the presupposition that what 'holds together' the segmentary system – the principle by which social groups are defined – is 'descent', i.e., common connection through more or less extended series of parent-child (read: father-son) links to common ancestors. Initial assumptions to the contrary, no such principle is evident here (see section 3.1.2).

Conversely, to a much greater extent than in classical 'segmentary lineage' societies, what delimits and/or relates social segments in the Hagen-Nebilyer area is exchange transactions. Thus we shall see, for example, that what links Kopia and Kubuka together as a tribe-pair, and predisposed them to enter the 1982 war together (if at all) is, in large part, the fact that both of them have been involved in a single long series of ceremonial prestations to another tribe-pair: Poika and Palimi. This is something we would have been less likely to notice (instead perhaps searching in vain for a notion of common ancestry for Kopia and Kubuka) if we had not been equipped with concepts of exchange such as those mentioned above, especially Wagner's provocative claim (1967, 1974) that, in the Highlands, exchange *defines* social units whereas descent relates them.

The above examples should suffice to demonstrate the value of theory for noticing what happens (or, if you prefer, for 'constructing' it). So far, the theoretical tools which have been most successfully developed by anthropology have been concepts of structure or institutions, such as exemplified above. All such theory is based upon the positing of general *types* such as 'tribe', 'segment', 'alliance', 'alternating disequilibrium', to which concrete instances or 'tokens' (e.g. 'Kopia\Kabika', 'Kopia-Kubuka-cum-Laulku', the prestation of July 24, 1983) arguably belong.

In order to understand particular events such as those described above, it is

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not enough just to be able to identify the relevant type of action or actions concerned. Doing so does carry us a step beyond the naivety of our initial description of those events as, for example, in the additional information that *talapi* ('tribes') were involved, and about the segmentary lines along which the conflict escalated.

But a description in terms of social structures alone is of limited use for understanding the detail of what happened. For that, we need to have recourse to the history of concrete *tokens* of the structural types. In the present case, for example, we have not gone very far towards understanding what happened until we know that it involved a dramatic shift in the alignments of *talapi* in the area: the belligerents in the 1979 fight – K-M-E-A-L and Tea-Dena – had previously been allies; in particular, they had been allied against the Kopia-Kubuka, with whom they had fought a bloody war in the period just before the area was pacified by the Australian Colonial Administration in the 1950s. This being so, the 1982 battle marked an equally dramatic realignment from the Kopia-Kubuka viewpoint, in that they were now fighting on the side of their erstwhile major enemies.

Nor can we begin to understand the way in which the women stopped the fighting without knowing about how the area was pacified in the first place; about subsequent colonial and post-colonial economic and political 'development'; about the recent history of women's work cooperatives in the area, the history of the particular club involved here, its relation to the Kulka tribe, and the relationships between its female leaders and particular big-men in the area.

Historical and structural modes of description or understanding have sometimes been seen as antithetical or mutually exclusive. Though this may be advanced as a matter of principle, in practice, neither mode can ever be used in isolation from the other. Anthropologists, for example, would never have been able to formulate general theoretical concepts such as *segmentary lineage* or *alternating disequilibrium* without having known of historically particular entities or cases, such as the Nuer or Kawelka and Tipuka.³ Conversely, historians, however atheoretical they may proclaim themselves to be, could not begin to narrate 'what really happened' without such general concepts as *state*, *king*, *peasants*, *landed gentry* etc.

The account we wish to develop of the relation *between* structure and history is not one which can replace either of these two modes. On the contrary, we must begin by pushing both to their limits by developing both a maximally explicit account of the structural and actional types – the medium in which action takes place – and an equally detailed account of particular past actions and relationships among historically specific tokens of the types.

Having done so, what additional mileage can we gain by focusing explicitly on the relation between structure and history? Would theory here again enable us to see things we might otherwise have ignored? To see how it might do so, consider some of the complications we will later introduce into our account of what happened at Sibeka on September 13, 1982.

Consider, for example, the question of who it was that was recruited by the Kopia and Kubuka to fight on their side. In the skeletal account above, we have described the recruits merely as 'their allies from over the Tambul Range'. Most of the men who came from over the range are people who in most contexts are identified as of the Laulku *talapi* ('tribe'), but it was by no means all of the men

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of Laulku – in fact, only a minority of them. And conversely, several men also joined in from the *talapi* which is normally thought of as Laulku's paired tribe – the Mujika. At least two of these Mujika were injured in the fighting. But did the Laulku participate as a *talapi* in the fighting? Did the Mujika?

Similarly, several men who joined in the fighting were identified as Poika, the paired tribe of Palimi. Many people identified with the latter live on a pocket of land which was ceded to them by the Kubuka, and which borders on Kubuka and Kopia territory. But did *Poika* participate?

Another man who joined in the fighting was Bai, who by most accounts is a Laulku man, having been born in Laulku country to a Laulku father. But from an early age, Bai has been living with the Kubuka, his father's mother's tribe. So in which of these two capacities had he participated in the fighting?

For the people involved in each of these cases, the issues at stake are far from from the hair-splitting they may seem to the reader. Each is a matter of very real material consequence. For, as M. Strathern (1985a) has recently emphasized, warfare in this area is an integral aspect of the larger complex of exchange relationships in terms of which social life (including economic production) is largely organized. The 'exchange of blows' is a transaction which, if it is not to precipitate further belligerence, must instead be followed by an exchange of wealth items. In the present case, for example, if the Kopia-Kubuka are to retain their western recruits as allies, they must pay them ample compensation for the blood they have shed in their cause. So the question of whether the Mujika participated as such will in principle determine future exchange obligations between them and the Kopia-Kubuka. During the compensation staged in 1983 by the Kopia-Kubuka, the roles of the Mujika and Poika in the fighting were not presupposed, but were actively contested as a part of the larger process by which some Kopia were attempting to convert this relatively new military alliance with Laulku (or Mujika and Laulku?), to a major *makayl* (ceremonial exchange) relationship, to follow upon the imminent completion of a thirty-year cycle of payments to their older, established allies, the Poika-Palimi.

What are we to make of such apparent indeterminacies and ambiguities about 'what really happened'? In most structural anthropological accounts, they are apparently just ignored. Warfare and other exchange transactions are discussed and tabulated as if there were no such complications about them.

To say this is not necessarily to accuse the ethnographers of distorting their data. In most cases, the account is probably quite true to the data they have gathered. For, in the first instance, it is not just anthropologists who simplify and schematize 'what happened' in order to produce authoritative accounts. This also happens (in the Nebilyer and presumably elsewhere) within the social life of the people concerned in the events, and even more so among their descendants who inherit the traditions.

No anthropologist who wants to be able to generalize about what happens in ceremonial exchange or warfare, for example, can possibly do so entirely on the basis of events she or he has directly observed. In order to have a sufficiently large sample of cases, the researcher must rely on what she or he is told about many other events of the same sort, many of which happened before she or he (or even the informants) came on the scene. This allows for a kind of synoptic or *post festum* view (Bourdieu 1977), in which all indeterminacy,

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ambiguity, the radical sense of contingency of lived experience, is completely effaced. This effacement is not an obstacle to structural analysis, but an essential precondition for it (*ibid.*). Accordingly, in order to provide a background for our analysis of the main events, our own discussion of the structure and history of exchange and warfare in the Kailge area will partake amply of the synoptic view provided for us by informants' accounts. But by explicitly posing the question of the relation between structure and history, we are also able to go beyond the synoptic view and focus in detail on the way in which issues such as the above are actively contested, and given instantiations of the structural types ('tribe pair', 'alliance', etc.) are more or less problematically reproduced in the event.

The limits of a purely structural approach – the 'objective limits of objectivism' (*ibid.*) – are even more evident when we turn to the question of how it is that the 'structural types' may change. Although it is obvious that they do so everywhere, accounts of 'social structure', even in New Guinea under conditions of rapid post-contact transformation, usually do not focus upon those aspects of social life that have been most altered by the recent changes, but rather attempt to (re-)construct an 'ethnographic present' which is as much like the pre-contact traditional social order as possible. This is – no doubt – partly due to the retrospective nature of case material provided by informants.⁴ But it is also determined by the nature of structural accounts, which are inherently synoptic or synchronic.

In such an account of the events of 1982 and 1983, we would probably give short shrift to what was at the time generally regarded as one of their most remarkable features – the intervention and subsequent exchange role of the Kulka women's group. This is even less amenable to a purely structural account than the ambiguities and indeterminacies described above. For in the former cases, the structural types themselves are not at issue – only their instantiation in this or that particular token. But in the case of the Kulka women's actions, we are confronted with a challenge to the existing types of political transaction. This is, for instance, a social order in which it had previously been regarded as unthinkable for women to constitute themselves as a group or groups which could transact as such, either on the battlefield or the display ground; or for women to stand up and speak (much less on behalf of such a group) at a public exchange event (cf. M. Strathern 1972a, Lederman 1980). Their performance did not merely instantiate or enact existing structures; it 'made history' in such a way as to alter those structures.

Thus it is only by explicitly posing the question of the relation between structure and history that we are able to avoid banishing the women's actions from our 'ethnographic present' and instead take them as a central part of our analysis.

What other aspects of what happened are opened up to us by this theoretical perspective? Besides the contested character of transactional tokens and of structural types, there is one very concrete aspect of these events which it motivates us to take up as our central subject matter: in order to show *how* they are contested, we must give detailed consideration to the form and content of the many speeches that were made at both compensation events. That might seem an obvious thing for any anthropologist to do, since oratory was the main thing that almost everyone attended to for most of the time at both of the

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events. But that alone would probably not have led us to notice what the orators were saying. This is apparent from the fact that, although Highland ethnographers have often remarked upon the importance of oratorical skills for big-man status, and alluded to the enormous amount of time, energy and attention given to oratory at public exchange events (see section 2.5), very few of them have reported on what was said in any of the speeches, or offered extensive analysis of them as central evidence for the understanding of Highlands politics and exchange (but cf. M. Strathern 1972b, A. Strathern 1975, Goldman 1983). Instead, it is common to remark on the 'conventional' character of what is said (Meggett 1965:14), and/or to claim that the speeches merely announced decisions or states of play between groups that had been reached behind the scenes in private discussions (Reay 1959:120 ff, A. Strathern 1975). The reader gets the impression that oratory itself is mere window-dressing, often tedious, long-winded, and the orators 'harangue-utans' (Sahlins 1963:290).

Thus, if we have been led to focus in detail on what is said in the oratory, it cannot be because its importance is self-evident.⁵ Rather, it is probably because, to the extent that the observer's perspective is limited to the synoptic, the content of the speeches *does* become superfluous – mere 'harangue'. Insofar as it deals in ambiguities and transformations such as those discussed above, it introduces complications which are not only irrelevant to the synoptic perspective, but a positive hindrance to it.⁶ But precisely the same qualities turn it into crucially important data for an investigation into the relation between structure and event.

These in brief are some of the ways in which we think our theoretical perspective may supplement the structural and historical ones in such a way as to enable us to register otherwise obscure aspects of what happened at the events in question, and others like them. We hope that our linguistically-informed way of investigating the relation between structure and history will be widely applicable. Though the instances we examine are specific to a small, long-isolated corner of the world, the problem of structure and history is of far more general importance, both within social theory and elsewhere. If social structures and historical events are related to each other in a mutually-constitutive way, this is not a fact about the Nebilyer Valley alone, but about human social life in general. If it is true, for example, of complementary opposition and warfare on the relatively microscopic scale on which it is fought in that corner of the world, it is equally true of comparable, potentially catastrophic processes on a world scale.

Nor is our motivation for studying these instances strictly theoretical or academic. The question of the relation between structure and history has indeed become a central one within recent social theory (see Ortner 1984), but this is no doubt related at least in part to pressing concerns extending far beyond the walls of academe. The history of the twentieth century has made it increasingly clear that the fate of humankind is bound up in global politico-economic structures which, for all our rationality of means, seem to propel us helplessly toward catastrophic ends, as chillingly foreshadowed in 1905 by Max Weber (1958:181), who saw the modern economic order as having unwittingly built itself into an 'iron cage'. While it would be foolish to imagine that we alone could change all that with an attack upon the problem of

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structure and event, we do share with such seminal social theorists as Marx and Durkheim the conviction that the attempt to understand social structures and process in general can and should be pursued as a step toward improving our own in particular. If theory can help us bring to light that which would have otherwise remained invisible (as we have argued above), it might also empower us – like the Kulka women’s group – to act where we must otherwise have remained immobile.

1.2 WHO CONDUCTS EXCHANGE? PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY IN SOME HIGHLANDS EXCHANGE SYSTEMS

In order to provide for those without specialist knowledge a fuller picture of the anthropological context from which our central problem emerges, we now turn to a brief review of some of the main trends in recent (western) Highlands studies; this is followed by a close exegesis of some recent polemics over the question of whether exchange is conducted by groups or individuals. This will show the kind of impasse that can result from attempting to describe ‘what happens’ without reference to the ‘representational’ aspects of social action, including, in this case, what is *said* in the course of it. This will motivate our own approach to the problem, which focuses closely upon what has otherwise been largely ignored: the form and content of Highlands oratory.

Detailed ethnography began to emerge from the central Highlands at a time when descent theory dominated social anthropology. Much of Highlands ethnography was initially concerned largely with group structure and its relation to patterns of residence, marriage, ceremonial exchange, political leadership, dispute settlement, warfare, and so on. Following the Africanist tradition, descent was usually seen as *the* key organizing principle of Highlands societies, and agnation was thought to account well enough for group membership, including both recruitment and lasting affiliation.

After Barnes (1962), however, there was an increased emphasis on differences between the Highlands and Africa, and among various Highlands societies. In most of the latter, genealogical memory is very short, and there is little or no emphasis on extended agnatic (or even cognatic) pedigrees as a basis for full group membership. The idiom of social co-identity is often one of shared substance or ‘siblingship’ (Weiner 1982), from which common ‘descent’ is assumed, rather than vice versa. In place of descent, some writers (e.g. Langness 1964, de Lepervanche 1967–8), increasingly identified co-residence and consociality as the actual basis of group solidarity or recruitment or both. By comparison with the presumed African ideal of fully solidary segmentary lineages, Highlands New Guinea was sometimes characterized as having ‘loosely structured’ societies (Pouwer 1960, Brown 1962). More often (and sometimes concurrently), the relation of patrilineal descent to co-residence in the Highlands was treated as that of ideology to practice. In other words (those of Sahlins 1965) co-residence provided the sociological ‘matters of fact’ upon

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which patrilineal descent was more or less artificially or arbitrarily imposed as an ideological construct – ideology here serving its ‘usual Mannheimian function of keeping people from knowing what’s going on in the world’ (Sahlins 1965:105). In a somewhat modified version of the same position, A. Strathern (1972), following Scheffler (1964), argued that for the Highlands a distinction must be made between ‘descent constructs’ as bases or ‘idioms’ of segmentary group identity, and the principles by which people are *recruited* to the groups, and that descent was relevant for the former but not the latter.

Although it cannot be said to have been settled (see Feil 1984 and Scheffler 1985 for recent discussion), the issue of the role of descent in the Highlands has been a less hotly contested one during the 1970s and 1980s, as the earlier emphasis on descent as a key organizing principle has been replaced by an emphasis among Melanesianists in general on reciprocity or exchange (see e.g. Wagner 1967, Forge 1972, Schwimmer 1973, A. Weiner 1976, Sillitoe 1979). Theorists who are otherwise as different as Wagner and Sillitoe in the ways they go about characterizing social life have argued that early Highlands accounts over-emphasized the role of solidary agnatic groups as units of social interaction. For example, as part of his general objection to the imposition upon the people studied of Western presumptions that society has determinate form, Wagner (1974) has argued that the anthropological problem should rather be posed as that of discovering how those people ‘create themselves socially’. In this vein he (and others, e.g. M. Strathern 1987) have argued that rather than segmentary units participating in exchange as entities defined in advance by descent, the segmentary categories can themselves be precipitated out of exchange transactions. For example, in Daribi society, a condition of children being fully identified with their father’s clan is that their mother’s brothers be given wealth objects. This establishes a difference between a person and his or her mother’s people which is proportional with the similarity or identification between that person and his or her father’s people. The aggregate of such differences ‘defines’ a clan (Wagner 1967).

Others, such as Sillitoe (1979) and Feil (1984), while also arguing that exchange is a fundamental organizing principle in the Highlands, have downplayed its relation to segmentary social structure (and the importance of the latter overall), and stressed the *individual* (within his kin network) as the relevant unit in exchange activities. (Cf. Lawrence 1984 for a similarly individual-based approach in his description of the Garia people of the coastal province, Madang.)

We concur in the emphasis on exchange which is common to all these recent writers, and suggest that, properly developed, the concept of exchange provides an even more powerful organizing principle for the understanding of Highlands societies than does that of descent for African societies. This is because, unlike descent, which is principally a structural notion, the concept of exchange is, as we hope to demonstrate, equally useful for analysis in terms of *structure* and *process* or *event* (cf. A. Weiner 1976: 219–20).⁷

Thus, albeit for different reasons, we agree with Forge’s (1972) claim that in his pioneering studies of exchange, Malinowski (1922) procured for Melanesianist studies a ‘golden fleece’, the full value of which has not yet been fully realized. But, unlike Forge, we consider that one of the major obstacles to its full realization was already created by Malinowski himself, in that, even while

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providing a mass of interesting details concerning the conduct of particular *Kula* transactions, he explicitly aimed at what he called a 'synoptic' view of exchange as the ultimate goal of a truly 'scientific' account of the phenomena in question (Malinowski 1922:11–17). With but few exceptions (e.g. A. Strathern 1979a, Lederman 1980, Gewertz 1984) this emphasis still prevails in studies of exchange.

As a recent example of the problems that can result from this, and as background for our own analysis of exchange events in the Nebilyer Valley, we turn now to detailed consideration of two accounts of ceremonial exchange among the nearby Enga people – accounts which draw diametrically opposed conclusions concerning the question of who conducts exchange.

The Enga are a language group of some 160,000 people (making them New Guinea's largest), who occupy a large area (now a distinct province) to the northwest of the Kaugel people, extending to within 40km of our Nebilyer field site at Kailge (see Map 1). In terms of its degree and scale of areal integration, their *tee* exchange system is the most highly developed in the Highlands. The central Enga, called Mae, are well known through the work of Meggitt, whose most detailed accounts have been of lineage structure (1965) and warfare (1977), while his most explicit description of ceremonial exchange (1974) is brief. Most recently, a 'fringe' Enga group, the Tombema, have been extensively described by Feil (1984 and refs. therein), whose greatest emphasis has been upon exchange.

Meggitt's ethnography stresses 'the significance of agnatic affiliations in determining the identities of actors and the compositions of groups in recurring and more or less stereotyped social situations' (1965:263). He sees most kinds of ceremonial prestations among the Mae as intergroup transactions, and claims that the prestation types are ranked in a 'hierarchy of social importance and precedence which in turn parallels the hierarchical structure of Mae patrilineal groups, such that particular kinds of prestations are the responsibility of groups at different levels in the descent system' (Meggitt 1974:169). Thus, for example, marriage payments (bridewealth, etc.) are made by patrilineages, while the more 'important', death payments (to matrilineal kinsmen of the deceased), are made by the sub-clan. *Tee* exchanges – more important still – are transacted among clans. Success in the *Te*⁸ is crucial to the clan's survival, since 'Prestige achieved through prestations helps a clan maintain its territorial boundaries by attracting both present military allies and wives who produce future warriors. The basic preoccupation of the Mae . . . is with the possession and defense of clan land. Participation in the *Te*, as in other prestations, is but a means to this end' (Meggitt 1974:171).

Feil paints a very different picture. He down-plays the importance of descent ideology for Enga social life in general, especially in matters of exchange. He claims: 'At least in Tombema⁹ clans are not "responsible" for making *tee* . . . lineages for bridewealth, and so on. All Tombema transactions are individual ones, without overall planning, and without group concerns or coordination in mind' (Feil 1984:71). *Tee* networks are 'composed of ego-centred, maximizing individuals' (Feil 1984:10,fn.3), who pursue it as an end in itself. Far from seeking to enhance the prestige of their clan as a whole, *tee* participants compete with their fellow clansmen for individual prestige, in the struggle for which they are entirely dependent upon the cooperation of exchange partners