

# 1 Prologue: anthropology in the Papua New Guinea highlands

*The Highlands of Papua New Guinea have come to be recognized, even by anthropologists whose regional interests lie elsewhere, as the home of a group of societies that cannot be overlooked in any discussion of the general characteristics of human culture and social institutions. The broad similarities ... provide, as it were, laboratory conditions for the investigation of many significant variations on a common base.*

Barnes (1968:3)

The highlands of Papua New Guinea offered anthropologists a unique opportunity and a stirring challenge. When the first generation of fieldworkers arrived there in the early 1950s, they encountered often large, dense populations that had only recently been subject to a colonial presence, whose technology belonged predominantly to another age, and who, despite many indigenous, long-range contacts, had little knowledge of, or direct communication with a wider world. Here was the chance to study the social, economic and political life of people relatively 'untouched' by the influences which made analyses of Australian Aborigines or the Neuer, for instance, seem, by comparison, more like reconstructions of the past than accounts based on first-hand observation. When missionaries and government agents preceded anthropologists, reliable information could still be obtained from people who had lived most of their lives unaffected by outside contact. In addition, the missionaries and governmental representatives themselves, a highly literate and prolific group in the highlands, provided much material of benefit to anthropological investigation.

The challenge was, firstly, to make sense of the ethnographic region, to document the many variations which, plausibly, had a common underlying foundation. Secondly, the task was to relate

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 *Highland Papua New Guinea societies*

these findings to what was known elsewhere in the tribal world, to put the peculiarities of highland cultures temporarily in the background, in order to say something, more generally, about social life and institutions. The dual challenge was met head-on. The first ethnographers, sent out from the Australian National University and the University of Sydney, were concerned primarily with social structure, with the principles governing social organisation, and with issues of social order and control. These were problems with which, at that time, the whole discipline grappled. Across the highlands, similar features emerged for comparative treatment, and descriptions seemed to accord well with what was known from that other great continent of anthropological investigation, Africa, where many of the field's theoretical developments had been spawned. Along the way, of course, 'uniquely' Melanesian social forms were uncovered: the emphasis on regional exchange, the intensity of warfare, the elaborate gender dichotomies, and the instability of leadership. The results of that earliest research are formidable and the value of it endures in such monographs as *The Kuma* (Reay 1959), *Excess and Restraint* (R. Berndt 1962), *From Stone to Steel* (Salisbury 1962), *Struggle for Land* (Brookfield and Brown 1963), *The Lineage System of the Mae-Enga* (Meggitt 1965), and in numerous articles by these authors and K. Read, R. Bulmer, R. Glasse, D. Ryan, and others. These accounts remain a solid base from which all more recent analyses must build.

Later generations of researchers have concentrated on narrower topics and, while sometimes critical of earlier approaches, have taken their cue from them. In-depth studies have been made of one society's religion, of another, its pattern of male–female relations or of the interplay of ecological and social variables; we have analyses of a society's ritual and cult life or of its system of ceremonial exchange. Some more recent fieldworkers have focussed exclusively on how these and other aspects of society and culture have changed in the decades since the first anthropological descriptions appeared and, more importantly, since colonialism, capitalism and national government intervened and took hold. The literature of the highlands is vast and still growing and, furthermore, subject to a wide spectrum of theoretical perspectives. Few peoples and areas remain unstudied; several have been studied more than once. Researchers in the 1980s have headed for the coasts or the highland fringe in implicit recognition, perhaps, that the highlands, once the region of exciting anthropological prospect, is finally a bit 'overexposed'.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Prologue 3

We are blessed with intensive descriptions of highland societies rich in detail and theoretically informed. What is lacking are explicitly comparative treatments of highland Papua New Guinea societies which take into account the research and writing of the last forty years. That is the aim and subject of this book. Others have gone before. Read (1954a) noted continuities and differing cultural emphases from Kainantu to Wabaga. This perceptive comparison was made when very few detailed studies were available. Other writers have taken specific aspects of society and culture and sought broadly to compare them (for example, Barnes 1962; J. Watson 1964a; Meggitt 1964; A. J. Strathern 1969a, 1969b, 1970b; Sillitoe 1977, 1978, to name only a few).<sup>1</sup> Some others, as an adjunct to their major concerns, have included brief comparative statements (for example, Meggitt 1965; Allen 1967; A. M. Strathern 1972). There are collections which have brought together material from the highlands, with comparative introductions (for example, Lawrence and Meggitt [eds.] 1965; Glasse and Meggitt [eds.] 1969; Berndt and Lawrence [eds.] 1971; Brown and Buchbinder [eds.] 1976; Cook and O'Brien [eds.] 1980; and A. J. Strathern [ed.] 1982).

There have also been two, more recent, full-length monographs, explicitly comparative. Rubel and Rosman (1978) examined thirteen Papua New Guinea societies, six from the highlands, and attempted to construct a 'prototypical structure' from which, through a series of 'transformations', the social structure of each society could be derived. The prototype consists of seventeen features (Rubel and Rosman 1978:320–3). The analysis is, however, flawed on a number of grounds. The authors apply no critical perspective to the ethnographic sources they use. They assume, rather than demonstrate, that societies as vastly different as Banaro and Enga, for example, may have 'a more or less remote genetic relationship between them' (Rubel and Rosman 1978:4). Their account, while using the concept of 'transformation', is ahistorical. But most importantly, there is no understanding of how one 'structure' might have developed or 'transformed' from another; there is no process to their implicitly 'evolutionary' model, only typology. Diverse social structures are simply arranged side by side; the connections between them are absent. As others have also pointed out (for example, A. J. Strathern 1982a:160), while exchange is a basic element in their prototypical structure, it is regarded as *sui-generis*; it

<sup>1</sup> I have, no doubt, left out some comparative studies; these are only a sample.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Highland Papua New Guinea societies*

appears to exist prior to intensive production upon which it is necessarily predicated. Exchange, no doubt, impels production, but cannot exist prior to it.

Brown (1978) attempted a more narrowly focussed comparison of highlands societies proper. Her approach sets out to show the interrelationship of ecological factors, social organisation and cultural premises. Four areas of the highlands, Kapauku, Dani, Enga and Chimbu (see also Waddell 1972), show highest agricultural intensity and development, are permanently sedentary, have greatest population density, and most elaborate group activities. An evolutionary perspective is implied, with these regions showing greatest complexity. This study has much merit, though mainly synchronic and broadly undeterministic. Agricultural production is, however, seen as a key factor in the rise of highland societies. This study also proceeds *a priori*, with the view that the highlands are, with minor variation, best treated and understood as a homogeneous region.

**An approach to comparison**

Almost all ethnography of the highlands and, therefore, the comparisons which are built on it, has a number of common features:

(1) It has been done in a synchronic framework: situations are described as they are found. There has been little attention given to diachronic, or historical, processes, prehistoric patterns or change other than that resulting from colonialism. Prehistoric evidence has only recently, of course, become available, but few ethnographers have consistently reflected about the past in an attempt to make sense of the present.<sup>2</sup> Reading into the past is a highly speculative undertaking, but some patterns and variations are tantalisingly apparent in the archaeological record.

(2) It has taken for granted that the highlands are a homogeneous region, socially, culturally, ecologically, even prehistorically. Variations have always been noted, but continuities have been more frequently stressed. Divergence in the ethnographic present is seen as a matter of degree, not kind, and few attempts have been made to interpret it.

(3) It has failed to fit social, cultural and material factors together to discover if there are constellations of features which regularly occur together.

<sup>2</sup> J. Watson is the notable exception here. He too was one of the first generation of ethnographers in the highlands who, while using mainly synchronic material, sought its significance in the past (see also Heider 1967).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

- (4) Few attempts have been made to posit determining factors, even in a non-dogmatic fashion, which might be applied to the continuum of highlands societies, their development and transformation.

These points are addressed in this study. The available prehistoric evidence allows the construction of a plausible path to the present. It will be suggested that the prehistoric past in the highlands is not unitary, that changes across the highlands took place at different times and with different intensity, and that some areas were subject to developments experienced, only much later, elsewhere. This divergence in prehistory is evident in the present. Accordingly, contrasts across highlands societies are emphasised more than similarities. Societies direct their energies towards profoundly different ends. Ecological variation is also pronounced in the highlands and offers further clues to divergent development. In sum, the view adopted here is that there is no very good reason for regarding the highlands, either in the past or the present, as a unitary entity, subject to a single process of development through time.

Furthermore, it is argued that social, cultural and material factors are mutually reinforcing and yield distinct societal ‘configurations’ from east to west in the highlands. There is an overriding order and pattern to the minutiae of detail. Socio-cultural and material variables are in continuous interaction, they developed apace and transformed concomitantly. Nevertheless, the facts of production are given priority in both the reconstruction of the past and the interpretation of the present. The facts of production include both ‘forces of production’, broadly speaking, environmental possibilities and technological processes, and ‘relations of production’, the social relationships into which people enter to produce their subsistence and surpluses. It is argued here that the interplay of relations and forces of production provide the ultimate logic for understanding the rise of highland New Guinea societies.

### Configurations of highlands societies

It has been noted that the highlands of Papua New Guinea have usually been regarded as a relatively homogeneous region. The million or so people who live there have, for comparative purposes, been distinguished from the so-called ‘highland fringe’ groups and those of the Papuan Plateau (part of the congeries of peoples recently termed ‘SWNG’ – southwestern New Guinea coastal fringe)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Highland Papua New Guinea societies*

(Herdt 1984a, see Chapter 7), and even more so from the coastal 'seaboard' (particularly Sepik) peoples on the bases of geography, subsistence, language, and highly divergent aspects of society and culture. To be sure, these differences are real, and intraregional variability is outweighed when wider interregional comparisons are sought.<sup>3</sup>

Brookfield (1962, 1964) has thus defined the eastern section of the highlands, based on a range of attributes, as the area between Huli and the Kainantu Shelf. Brown (1978) writes that highlanders inhabit the altitudinal range of between 900 and 2,100 metres. Wurm (1975) shows that highlanders speak languages of the East New Guinea Highlands Stock. Lawrence and Meggitt (1965) describe highlanders as tending towards secularism in world view versus the religiosity of seaboard peoples. J. Watson (1964a:12) very early suggested that highland peoples 'share a uniform basic technology, the single staple crop, a patrilineal ideology, and many other tendencies'. More recently, he referred to the unified highlands by the acronym CHNG – central highlands of New Guinea (J. Watson 1977). S. and R. Bulmer (1964:40) also noted the 'wide-ranging continuity evident in the contemporary cultures of the [highlands] region' as justifying their isolation as a unit of study. The differences which exist between highlands societies and cultures have been seen, then, as matters of emphasis; issues of degree, not kind (Read 1954a). It is ironic, perhaps, that while adhering to the rather vague concept of the highlands as a cultural-ecological unit, most social anthropologists, at least, have preferred highly descriptive ethnographies of single societies rather than seeking comparisons between them, comparisons which might have supported (or dispelled) the idea of highlands uniformity.<sup>4</sup>

Within the highlands, a number of distinct societal configurations are apparent, the empirical details of which form the basis of this study. At the eastern end of the highlands are related societies here referred to as 'Kainantu' groups. To their east and south are the Anga (Baruya and Sambia) who represent an important watershed between societies of southwestern New Guinea and Kainantu. This book is principally concerned with the continuum of societies from

<sup>3</sup> There are scattered references to societies now part of Irian Jaya, but the bulk of this study addresses those groups in the modern state of Papua New Guinea.

<sup>4</sup> There are of course exceptions to this trend. I think of the work of Allen (1967), A. J. Strathern (1969a, 1970b) and, more recently, that of Rubel and Rosman (1978) among others.

Kainantu westward to Wabaga, but the relevance of Anga groups and those of 'SWNG' to an understanding of the highlands proper will be noted throughout, especially in Chapter 7.

Immediately west from Kainantu are 'Asaro' groups. Asaro societies are clearly 'eastern' in the parameters for analysis discussed here. They may differ in emphasis and minor detail from the Kainantu configuration, but share many features with it. Between Asaro societies and those of the western end of the continuum are those here termed 'Central Wahgi' – among them Chimbu, Maring, Narak (Manga) and Kuma. These groups are intermediate between those of 'lowest production' to their east, and 'highest production' to their west.

Western highlands societies form a final configuration at the opposite pole to Kainantu ones. Beyond these, further to the west, are found societies of a different sort (for example those of Telefomin and other Ok groups), whose adaptation and cultural emphases are unrelated to the highlands and will not be considered here. Southern highlands societies, including Mendi, Wola, Kewa, Wiru, Huli and Duna are more closely related to the western highlands; indeed, as will be seen in Chapter 8, there are institutions which link parts of these two areas. Again, there remain important variations between the western and southern highlands as noted later, but on the comparative continua of this study, the southern highlands are clearly associated with, even sometimes influenced by, the groups of the western highlands.

### **An evolutionary perspective**

In employing the word evolution in the title, I may give the mistaken impression that this book seeks to resurrect the neo-evolutionary frameworks which gained some popularity in past decades (for example Fried 1967; Service 1967, 1975). I must make very clear that I do not regard highland New Guinea societies (nor Melanesian ones) as representing some evolutionary stage or as being suitable for some simple pigeonhole of 'cultural progress'. My aims are much more specific and ethnographically focussed. As such, this work can profitably be seen as related to a tradition of scholarship in the Pacific beginning at least with Sahlins (1958), traced through Goldman (1970), and, more recently, excellently fostered by Kirch (1984), in which explanation is sought for transformation and differentiation in a clearly defined, historically



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Highland Papua New Guinea societies*

related set of societies through time. In contrast to Sahlins and Goldman perhaps, I further share with Kirch a concern to illuminate diachronic processes apparent in prehistory as a guide to present social and cultural configurations. Similarly, I also eschew simple uncausal determinism in the evolution of highland New Guinea social and cultural forms.

Highland societies, it is argued, form a particular evolutionary sequence. As early as 9000 years ago, the area around Mount Hagen in the western highlands (as exemplified by the Kuk archaeological site) was the scene of agricultural production, permanent settlement and, perhaps, limited pig husbandry (Golson and Hughes 1980). Hunting and gathering were subsidiary practices, which slowly, but steadily, decreased in significance or were closed off as subsistence options by the spreading, pervasive agricultural mode of production and a growing, unique symbiosis of people and domesticated pigs (Steensberg 1980:111). The Mount Hagen area may rightly be regarded as the 'birthplace' of agriculture in the highlands. The sexual division of labour was related exclusively to aspects of the agricultural cycle and pig management. The prevalent swamps, providing advantageous environmental conditions, became the locus of the intensified production of taro, an indigenous New Guinea crop. Yields far exceeded those possible from cultivation on surrounding, dry land. Taro surpluses were 'invested' in pigs which were now increasingly domesticated in large numbers as wild protein sources diminished. Those who controlled access to the swamps exchanged pigs with those who had none in return for political patronage, labour, women, power and prestige. Pigs were the first scarce resources in the highlands, surplus products to be exchanged as valuables. Increasingly in the western highlands, greater surpluses were produced and numerous exchange contexts, in turn, created a higher demand on production. When, centuries later, the sweet potato 'arrived', it was taken in stride by an agricultural complex already geared to surplus production. Production could now expand even further and into areas unsuitable for taro cultivation. Larger pig herds could be maintained and exchange patterns proliferated. Through time, and into the present, western highlands societies remain committed to the production of large agricultural surpluses, converted to pigs, for use as exchange items in regional systems. In the present, all production decisions are geared to the requirements of the exchange sphere. Pigs are never



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue* 9

raised to be eaten if they can be exchanged for political capital. These developments were both ancient and autochthonous, yet reverberated only locally.

In the eastern highlands, the evidence suggests that a hunting and gathering mode of production was practised until much more recently. Men hunted and only intermittently tended 'male' crops of ceremonial value; women gathered. Permanent settlement was slow to be taken up and pigs were hunted, never husbanded. Perhaps only with the advent of the sweet potato and its potential did these societies begin to intensify agriculturally, to keep pigs and to begin to trace the developmental paths which had occurred in the western highlands long before. Rapid 'intensification' brought problems, confronted earlier, more gradually, in the western highlands where, for example, solutions had evolved to the dilemma posed by the increasing sedentism of proximate groups. Even up to the present, agricultural and pig production lag far behind the levels attained in the western highlands. Production is not overly geared to exchange needs; surpluses are small; a group's energies are directed to the production of other things.

In the highlands, then, we can witness the divergent development of two distinct economic formations. In one, productive forces grew and expanded early; 'use values' and production for provisioning, characteristic of the other formation, were breached. 'Exchange values' came to predominate; production was invested in exchange and while some economies remained narrow, domestic-focussed and underproductive, others were integrated into areal economic systems, the effects of which spread widely into every other sphere of social life. The differing social and cultural configurations in the highlands, addressed in this book, are ultimately determined by these contrasting economic rationales whose foundations are pre-historic. Eastern highlands societies have social structures, patterns of warfare, leadership, male–female relations and exchange which are compatible with and reinforced by economies of 'low production'. Western highlands societies, conversely, are those of 'high production', regional orientation and integration, the effects of which resound in their configurations of social life and culture. This continuum of social forms across the highlands posits the earlier evolutionary development of high production and concomitant social relations in the west as the basis for comparing ethnographic regions in the present.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13175-9 - The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

D. K. Feil

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Highland Papua New Guinea societies***Comparative dilemmas and methodological pitfalls**

A work, explicitly comparative as this one aims to be, is from the beginning potentially beset with problems. It seeks to interpret and explain the 'ethnographic present'. Aside from the final chapter, this account makes scant mention of changes in the highlands wrought by colonialism, the penetration of capitalism, the cash-cropping of coffee, the rise of provincial government and the emergence of the modern state of Papua New Guinea. As if this restricted framework were not enough, the 'ethnographic present' itself is not unproblematic. The anthropological and other sources culled for this study span a period of over forty years. Some authors describe events and institutions which no longer existed at the time of writing or reconstruct them only as they might have been. Often, this is not made clear or the time period under scrutiny is not clearly defined. Ideal and real frequently, indistinguishably, merge. While I make no apology for the temporal focus of this study, I confess that, albeit with a critical eye, I have taken ethnographic accounts largely at face-value. To do otherwise would have compounded possible errors. In this book, precolonial warfare is still being waged, boys are still being initiated, and gardens remain full of sweet potatoes to be fed to pigs, rather than given over to coffee and other cash-yielding crops.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, ethnography is notoriously difficult to separate from theoretical inclination. Much of the material used here for comparative purposes was originally intended with a narrower end in mind, or to prove some specific theoretical point. Moreover, each ethnographic fact is a generalisation derived from many distinct incidents. My rendering is, thus, a generalisation from many generalisations. In short, the chances of distortion are great and must be continually borne in mind. The course set here can do little justice to the meticulous ethnography of others. The aim is to achieve a general understanding of the rise and development of highland New Guinea societies, a goal which may only partially illuminate the individual case.

It is also true that important ethnographic facts are sometimes missing, or discussed only briefly in passing. The inclination is often to make much of too little, or to take lack of mention to mean non-

<sup>5</sup> Of course, in many places in the highlands even in the 1980s some version of 'tradition' remains; initiation is still to be observed (for example Herdt 1981), and ceremonial exchange persists.