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

D. K. Feil

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The Evolution of Highland Papua New Guinea Societies

This book is an explicitly comparative, anthropological analysis of the societies of highland Papua New Guinea. Particular societies have been documented by anthropologists since the 1950s, yet there have been relatively few attempts at rigorous comparison of the findings. This book argues that the highlands cannot be treated as a homogeneous region, socially, culturally, historically or environmentally. Rather, societies of the eastern highlands have followed markedly different paths of development in the past to those of the western highlands, and it is upon this divergence that a comparative treatment of the present should be mounted.

The most crucial fact of the past which informs the present, has been the differential development of productive resources east and west. Western highlands societies adopted and intensified agriculture and pig production very much earlier than societies in the eastern highlands, where a mixed hunting and horticultural existence persisted perhaps until the arrival of the sweet potato only a few hundred years ago. This fact influences all other features of social life and culture. In this book the author discusses comparatively configurations of production intensity, warfare, leadership and politics, social structure, male–female relations and ceremonial exchange, and relates them to the evolution of factors of production. The book opens with a brief chapter on the history of anthropology in the highlands, and concludes with a look at the present as a ‘legacy of the past’.

The book thus posits material factors as the most important in a comparative treatment, but there is a wealth of other issues and data presented which seeks to make sense of some of the more notable ‘debates’ in anthropology that have taken place on the nature of society in the New Guinea highlands.

Dr Daryl K. Feil, an American-born anthropologist who studied at the Australian National University and the University of Cambridge, began work in Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s. After teaching at the University of Queensland he is now Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sydney. His earlier publications include *Ways of Exchange* (1984).

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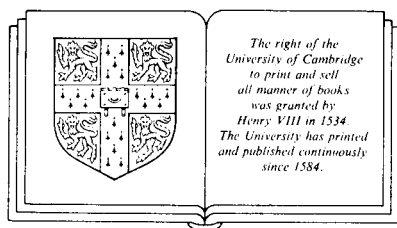
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To Maximilian

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Preface

This book began as a ‘straightforward’ comparison of the societies and cultures of highland Papua New Guinea. I believed, perhaps naively, that a thorough reading of the ethnography would automatically reveal patterns and configurations which would make sense of the rich literature published over the past five decades by generations of anthropological fieldworkers and other observers. While the final product retains an explicitly comparative focus, the process by which it was achieved has been anything but straightforward.

The ethnography of highland New Guinea is vast, excessively detailed and theoretically eclectic, and any notion of proceeding inductively was doomed, at the outset, to fail. Clear-cut patterns continually evaporated in a mass of complex variations. It became clear to me, very early, that comparison could not advance by using a synchronic idiom, and that a perspective on the past was necessary to understand the present. I began to look afresh at the prehistoric material from the highlands, even to dabble in its ecology, to broaden my essentially social anthropological viewpoint. In the end, it was these sources which led me to the conclusion that the highlands could not be treated as homogeneous – socially, culturally or environmentally. A reading of prehistory convinced me that areas of the highlands had followed markedly different paths in the development of agricultural production and pig husbandry, and especially in the timing of transformations and rate of intensification. Even if this interpretation is debatable, the striking variability in intensity of agriculture and pig production across the highlands today is undeniable, and it is upon these facts that a comparative study of social life should be mounted. This book is the result of thinking about the present while trying, simultaneously, to think about the past.

A comparative analysis immediately places one in the debt of others upon whose work one builds and relies. Some may feel

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slighted or misrepresented, for which I apologise, but it is with gratitude that I acknowledge the work of anthropologists who long preceded me to the highlands, and those who came after. At the risk of omitting someone, I would like especially to pay tribute to those whose writings have left a sustained impression on me and whose ideas and insights will appear repeatedly in the pages that follow: Michael Allen, Jack Golson, Shirley Lindenbaum, Nicholas Modjeska, Andrew Strathern and James Watson. The last particularly, has consistently sought to link past and present in his writings on the highlands.

A number of more immediate colleagues have given assistance. Peter White directed me to the archaeological sources and let me test some wild ideas against his wide-ranging knowledge; Norman Yoffee, Alan Rumsey, Francesca Merlan, Peter Lawrence and Lester Hiatt have all commented on some of the ideas presented here; they, of course, bear none of the responsibility for the finished product. Annette Weiner read the entire manuscript and offered detailed criticisms. Marjorie Fisher, Lorraine Howard and Robyn Wood typed several drafts of this book cheerfully and I thank them for their patience.

My fieldwork in the New Guinea highlands with Tombema-Enga began in the early 1970s. They taught me a way of life geared relentlessly to ceremonial exchange. With some difficulty I came to realise that not all people in the highlands are so motivated. I acknowledge with lasting affection their friendliness and tolerance offered to an outsider.

In the course of writing this book, my wife Rosemary has been a constant inspiration and source of encouragement. My son Maximilian made sure that one of my feet at least was always firmly on the ground. My first thoughts of this book coincided with his birth; it is to him that it is dedicated.

D.K.F.