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Paula Brown  
Excerpt  
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## *Introduction*

My background, training, interests, and experience are all expressed in my view of anthropology and my aims in this book. I have studied the interrelations of ecology, culture, and society and attempted to demonstrate this interdependence in the New Guinea highland setting.

An ecological view of a people considers the environment and resources available, the effect of environment upon such things as diet and population patterns, and the people's knowledge, use, and effect upon the environment and resources. A cultural study examines beliefs and values and how these are reflected in religious practices, artistic endeavors, the ideology of the habitat and the management of resources, and technology. A social study concentrates upon behavior, group formation, structure, and composition, and interpersonal rights and obligations. No belief, object, or practice is pertinent to only one of these inquiries.

Put most simply, I might say that there is an ecological system of organisms in an environment, a cultural system of beliefs and practices, and a social system of relationships and groups. However, this set of distinctions seems to me formal and of limited analytic value. My book attempts to show how these systems are interdependent.

The stability and change of any system, or the group of interrelated systems I call ecological, cultural, and social, is complex. To stress stability, the concepts of homeostasis and equilibrium are used. They emphasize the continuity and tendency to balance the ecological, social, and cultural systems and to resist the effect of external influences which may alter this balance. But we know that these systems are never wholly isolated or unaffected by new external and internal environmental, cultural, and social events and ideas. The ability of a people or organism to adapt to a changing environment minimizes the disruptive effects of such forces. Evolution or unilineal development is a progressive trend to intensity, complex-

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ity, increase in size and efficiency. Other reactions to external or internal change may be fluctuating, an absence of direction and perhaps tendency to regain an earlier position, and revolution, a more complete change, destroying some or all of the previous organization and creating many new elements to make a different whole.

Thus, to say that society is an interrelated social, ecological, and cultural system is not to say that it is unchanging or resistant to new ideas. My aim here is to understand the present in the New Guinea highlands, and to achieve this some understanding of the past influences is desirable.

Three broad contexts for studying the highlands as a whole involve: (1) examining its place in the larger region of Melanesia and especially New Guinea; (2) the distinctiveness of the highland culture; and (3) the differences within the highland culture itself.

In terms of the first of these contexts, Melanesia is an environmental and cultural unit, in which some trade and interchange has always existed. There is no sharp boundary between highland and other New Guinea societies. Highland groups and relationships are of the same unstable, fragmented, and competitive character as those of lowland Melanesia. No centralized states, conquests, stratification, specialization of labor or other institutions characteristic of the complex societies, such as are found in Indonesia or Polynesia, emerged in New Guinea.

Secondly, altitude, climate, temperature, and other environmental characteristics set the highlands apart from the tropical lowlands. The interior of New Guinea is mountainous, with steep slopes and deep valleys. Many small and sparsely populated groups inhabit this mountain region. They garden, hunt and gather food at low and high altitudes, and trade goods between lowland and highland regions. I refer to these peoples as the highlands fringe, to distinguish them from the highlands. From their subsistence agriculture, with technical advances, the highlands have a potential for intensifying agriculture and supporting a dense population in some areas. The size of social groups, scale of festivities, and intergroup relations of the highlands are possible because of their efficient food production. Population expansion has produced large language and cultural

groups; some ceremonial exchange systems connect over a hundred thousand people, and there are large-scale alliances and warfare.

Finally, as the reports of research have accumulated, many differences between peoples and communities have been noted. Some of these appear to be related to intensification of agriculture and population expansion: Between different communities and areas of a single language and cultural group, there may be one or more centers with more populous clans, larger alliances, more permanent settlements, continuous cultivation of gardens, and closely guarded land boundaries. Such cultural specifics as sorcery beliefs, cannibalism, initiation rituals, tool types, agricultural practices, and settlement types all show some variation from place to place, often appearing in several adjacent, or separated language and cultural groups, but in different form and combination. While each community or tribe is a coherent cultural and social system, there are many variations and differences, which cannot be simply explained as adaptation to differing environments, invention or diffusion. Some contrasts, such as the distinction between eastern-Chimbu settlement in large villages and central-Chimbu scattered-homestead settlement, might be expected to have more cultural concomitants than we have found. Others, such as the gradation of size of Dani confederacies, seem to fit with differences in population density. There are alternative ways of managing land pressure and allocation of resources to people and groups: For example, Chimbu groups, in the denser areas as in the less dense, invite relatives to join and share resources, thus redistributing people according to needs and resources, while Enga discourage such movement especially in the denser groups, thus restricting resources for the use of members.

A wealth of evidence suggests that the highlands people had a remote common origin. They have been in New Guinea for many thousands of years, at first widely dispersed gatherers and hunters subsisting upon the indigenous plants and animals. Their technology and later introductions of agriculture and pigs were developed from Southeast Asia and Melanesia. These reached the highland peoples by ancient trade routes which carried goods and knowledge into the interior. The highlanders have much in common with Melanesian peoples, the most with those of interior New Guinea

who were less affected by the Austronesian influences which led to the settlement of eastern Oceania. In the agriculturally favorable central highlands of New Guinea a distinctive cultural type emerged, with centers of dense settlement, local and specialized forms.

New Guinea is the largest island in Melanesia, near Australia and Indonesia. The central highlands are a region about 700 miles (1,120 km) long and 100 miles (160 km) wide, four to seven degrees south of the equator, spanning parts of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea (see Maps 1 and 2). The western part of New Guinea is still relatively unknown. It was formerly within Netherlands New Guinea and is now Irian Jaya, a province of Indonesia. The Irian Jaya highland region may contain 400,000 or more people. Papua New Guinea, formed from the former territories of Papua in the southeast and Australian New Guinea in the northeast, became independent in 1975. There probably are more than 900,000 people in the Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, Western Highlands, Enga, and Southern Highlands provinces of Papua New Guinea. The highlands of Papua New Guinea are more well known because of the studies carried out, especially since 1950.

The highlands, with peaks as high as 16,000 feet (5,000 m), are the source of the major rivers of New Guinea. They can be approached from numerous valleys, through steep mountainous terrain which seems increasingly untenanted. Until 1930 only native traders followed routes into and through the highlands. They brought products of the lowland and seashore, and exchanged food and manufactured goods. After the beginning of colonization about 1900, some items of European manufacture were also traded. Highland culture can only have been developed from resources and cultural forms common to New Guinea and Melanesia. The subsistence base is gardening: Sweet potato, introduced hundreds of years ago from an American origin and taken into the highlands by native trade, has become the staple food of people and their pigs. It is the only vegetable crop known which will grow in these highland tropical climates to provide sufficient food for the population there.

The most distinctive feature of highland culture is agricultural specialization, which supports large concentrations of people and periodic festivals at which thousands of visitors are entertained and

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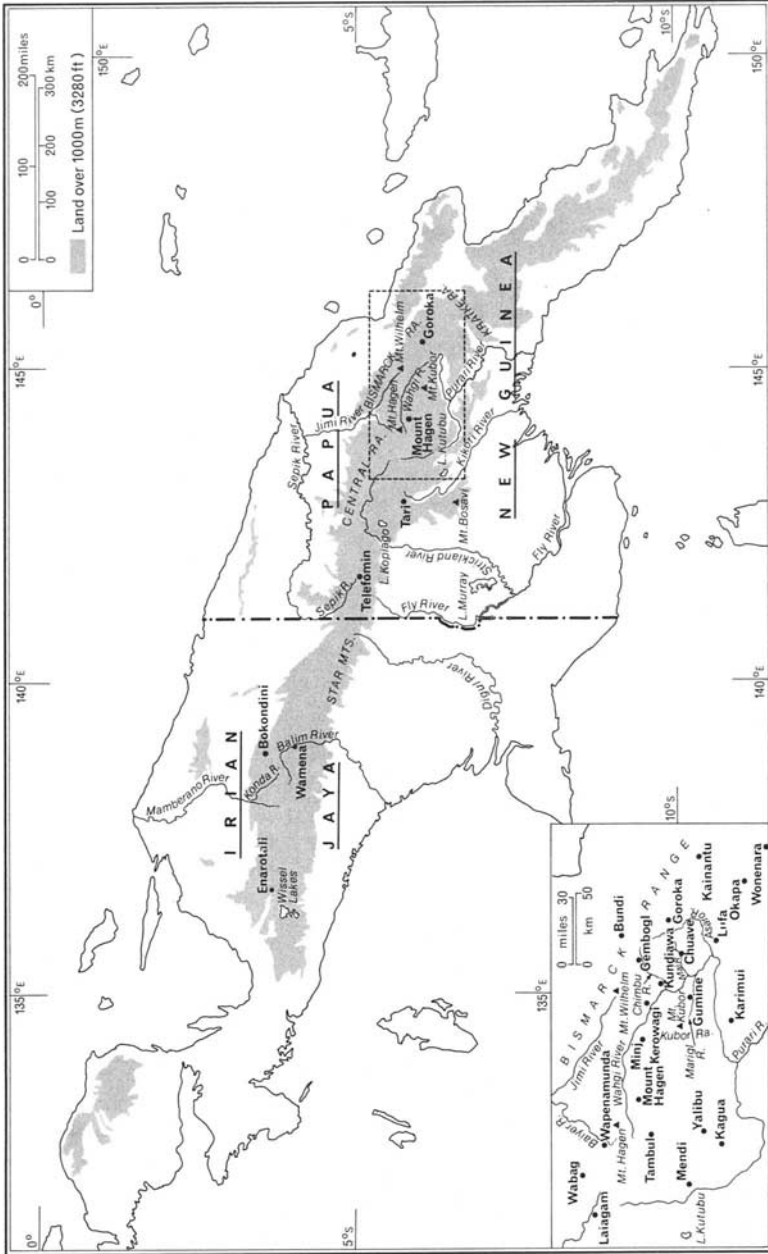
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feasted. In Melanesia, ceremony, feasts, and exchanges are the high points of social life; the highlanders value pigs, certain stone objects, feathers, and shells for display and distribution. Local groups conserve their land and resources, protect their property, and defend their land and prestige by fighting nearby groups. Highlanders in competition are brilliantly adorned in oils, cosmetic paints, plumes and feathers of bird of paradise, and iridescent shells; they carry bows, barbed arrows, spears, and finely polished stone axes. War, festival, and ceremonial exchanges are the stage for rivalry of men – for individuals and for “big men,” the leaders of groups. The competitive activities – with frequent fights and tests of skill and accomplishment – split traditional groups, attract individual followers, and move people to new settlements or associations. There is no static or stable life in the highlands.

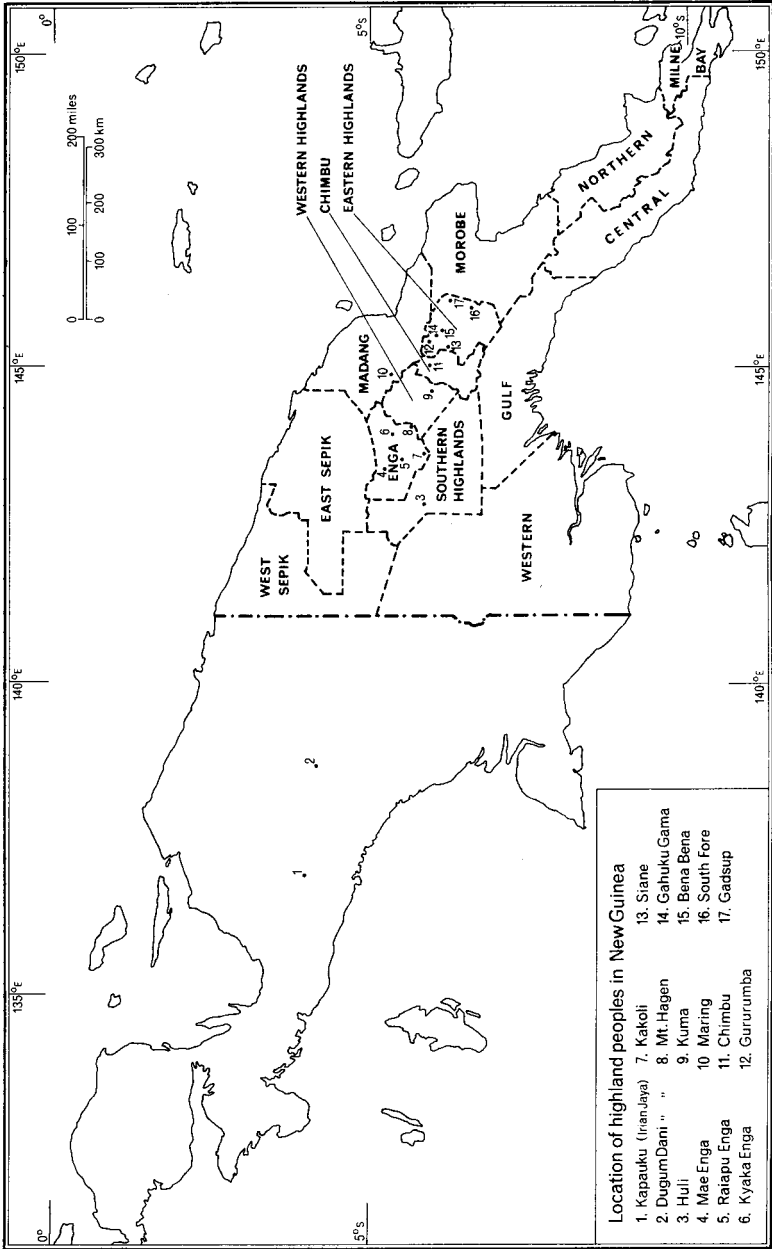
The characteristic agricultural practice of most coastal and inland New Guinea peoples, and of many in the highlands, is shifting cultivation – meaning that the people clear land for a garden, and after a single harvest or possibly two harvests, leave the land to bush for many years. When the secondary forest is well established, it may again be cleared for another garden. Thus the community requires enough arable land for a long fallow cycle of twenty to fifty years. However, in Chimbu and several other densely settled areas, a short fallow pattern of land use prevails, with expanded cultivation to provide food to fatten pigs and serve guests at feasts. The core area is fenced and divided into many individually owned and inherited garden plots. These are cleared and prepared with drainage ditches, tillage, mounds, and other special techniques. After a harvest, the plot may rest only briefly, and be planted with another crop. Each owner cultivates for his own needs, leaving some of his land in short fallow for a few months or years. But the plots are never abandoned and any attempt by others to encroach is resisted. These practices, and the land claims, are a form of semipermanent tenure. Many highlanders have a core area which is intensively used and outlying areas where shifting cultivation is practiced. The difference may be one of proportions; in the Upper Chimbu and Grand Valley Balim a high proportion of arable land is in permanent cultivation or short fallow, while in the Wahgi Valley and Western Dani nearly all arable land is in shifting or long-fallow cultivation. Two

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Map 1. The highland area

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Map 2. Location of highland groups in New Guinea. Provinces of Papua New Guinea are named and outlined.

characteristics of this situation are notable: the intensity of agriculture in some areas, and the practice of both permanent and shifting cultivation by some groups of people. These variations in agricultural practices clearly show the adaptability and inventiveness of the people and their ability to prepare periodic large feasts. The spacious highland valleys and slopes provide livelihood for communities of hundreds and some tribes of thousands of people. Through intensive cultivation and permanent settlement, highlanders have reached population densities found nowhere else in Melanesia. Four areas: Kapauku of the Wissel Lakes, Dani of the Balim Valley, Enga of Wabag and Chimbu, are each centers of agricultural development, population growth, and large group activities. Between and around these are less-concentrated peoples of the same language groups whose settlements, sometimes large and permanent, are often surrounded by larger areas of fallow land. Peoples and groups have moved about, settling on new or long-unused land, returning to old sites and pioneering. This redistribution of peoples is probably a constant characteristic.

My own fieldwork in the highlands was centered in Chimbu, which today comprises a province, renamed Simbu, of over 160,000 people in six subprovinces in Papua New Guinea. I arrived at Mintima, the center of the Naregu tribe, in Chimbu in 1958. I had an initial impression of patrilineal clans and subclans, because other highlands anthropologists had reported this, and the Chimbu spoke of "house belong Moa," an older man of the locality, "line belong Kagl," a local leader and government-appointed *tultul*, or "Bau-Aundugu," a clan segment of intermediate status. I was readily told the general plan, but my knowledge of the actual boundaries and behavior was built up over many months of observation, questioning, and rechecking. I expected, for example, that there would be localized named groups, that men would own the land and their sons would inherit it. This is patrilineal clan and subclan organization. For the most part men remain in their area of birth, and bring in wives from other clans. Such clan exogamy and patrilocality is the general rule, but in practice there are many individual choices and special cases. Everyone has visited and most people have resided for a time in settlements of other tribes where relatives and affines hold land rights.



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Men's houses, on a prominent ridge or hilltop, are the residences of men and older boys, and the gathering place for the local group. Women, girls, and all young children of a family use a small house often located in garden areas near a fence, with pig forage areas outside. The house, with a door at each end, is partitioned into pig stalls and family sleeping and eating sections.

During the first few days after my arrival I was also struck by the differences in the social behavior of men and women. In all public activities, men take the leading part; they plan, announce meetings, speak, travel, visit, and direct activities. Women were not often present at public discussions or men's work or planning activities. If seen at all, they were carrying food, working in gardens, or sitting on the sidelines at gatherings. I later realized that many of the exchanges between men and groups are transactions concerning women; wives, daughters, and sisters are the links between men that establish and maintain exchanges. But women rarely speak or perform in public. I saw little questioning of these roles. However, modern education may well give women and men new occupations and opportunities.

At Mintima the big men of local and subclan groups were introduced as leaders. Several wore the badge of office of *tultuls*, a title used for leaders who had been recognized and appointed by the Australian administration and were responsible to mediate between their people and government representatives. They called out for men to help improve my house and its site, notified people of my presence and requirements, and discussed current issues. These were not hereditary chiefs, but men whose competence and ability gave them influence and respect – in local parlance, “big men.” Later, councilors were chosen in local government council elections as representatives of groups; former leaders and the runners-up became committee men, leaders of subgroups. Ageing leaders retired as new abilities were needed in the developing political and economic spheres. In 1958 a remarkable Chimbu named Kondom was the outstanding big man of Naregu, respected by Chimbu in other tribes, and also regarded by the Australian administration as a progressive leader and a government-appointed *luluai*. This headman title, which originated in New Britain, was used throughout New Guinea. By example and leadership, Kondom encouraged the

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Naregu in cash cropping, economic, and political development. In the years of successive visits to Naregu, I spent two periods at Kondom's home area, Wandi, which had become headquarters for meetings, discussions of disputes, the primary school, and local government council activities.

Naregu are a Chimbu Valley tribe, who trace their origin to the middle and lower valley of the Chimbu River. They point to former land in territory now held by Kamanegu, another Waiye group. As Kamanegu grew in size and strength, pressed into the lower Chimbu Valley by other expanding tribes, they drove the Naregu out to the southwest, so that the Naregu lost the best land of the Singga Valley, a tributary of the Chimbu, and moved down the slopes into the area of Mintima and other streams which flow southward into the Wahgi River. The Naregu lost very rich limestone land, suited to settlement and permanent cultivation of a variety of crops. Mintima is good land, but below in the Wahgi Valley are grasslands on soil which is only arable on a long-fallow rotation, or for pigs. This land type, with some richer pockets, extends over the slopes and has been used by Nauru and Naregu for occasional gardens and pigs.

The Nauru, who speak a slightly different dialect, say that they have long been at Gor and in the Wahgi Valley area. They have a different tradition from the Chimbu Valley people, and were once a single tribe with Endugwa, whose territory is in the southeastern quarter of Waiye. However, the Endugwa and Nauru quarreled and broke up. While Endugwa land is uneven in quality, most of it is better than that of Nauru. The Nauru are least favored of this group of tribes. Only Gor Peak has valuable land, and very few of the favorite feast foods – pandanus nuts and oil fruit, bananas, and sugarcane – can be grown. Some introduced crops and livestock such as peanuts and cattle may give them new opportunities. The land between Gor and Mintima is comparatively undesirable, used less for gardens than for pig grazing and pig houses. Usually, women tend the livestock and gardens; the men visit the area infrequently. Gardens and social life cluster at Mintima and Gor.

Thus the Nauru and Naregu men had little contact and few common interests. The dialectical difference is indicative of this lack of contact. It was embellished with beliefs about sorcery, theft, attack, and danger from one another, which increased the avoidance. They