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# *Highland Peoples of New Guinea*

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TO THE MEMORY  
OF MY PARENTS

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## *Preface*

I knew very little about the highland people of New Guinea when I arrived at the Australian National University in 1956. Shortly after I arrived there, a group of social anthropologists gathered to discuss their fieldwork findings in New Guinea, and I learned that the highland people of New Guinea were one of the last large groups to be brought into the world community.

When, in 1930, Australian gold prospectors penetrated the heavily forested interior mountains of New Guinea, which they believed were inhabited by only a few small groups, they discovered in this eastern highlands area of New Guinea large village settlements in gardenlands and grasslands that covered broad valleys and slopes at altitudes about 4,500 feet (1,400 m). Further exploration revealed that, totally unknown to the outside world, a population of hundreds of thousands dwelt in the highlands, energetically grew sweet potatoes, raised pigs, competed and fought with their neighbors, exchanged goods, and celebrated their achievements in large festivals. The extraordinary development of this concentrated and specialized highlands culture is the subject of this book. Highlands New Guinea society was an amazing discovery, because most of interior New Guinea consists of groups that subsist on a sparse livelihood provided by shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering for small groups living in scattered hamlet settlements.

The continuing research of anthropologists, geographers, archaeologists, and many other social and natural scientists has added greatly to our knowledge of the highlands culture, ecology, and society. This book has drawn on their work. Over the years, my debt is to the countless people who, in writing and discussion, have raised and answered questions about the highlands. But I surely owe the most to the Chimbu of Mintima, with whom my own fieldwork was centered. When I arrived in May 1958, the people of Mintima immediately welcomed me, with continuous good will and help in

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every way. Mintima was my home base, where I knew the names, households, and family relationships of nearly a thousand people, closely studied marriage, kinship, leadership, local, and clan activities. H. C. Brookfield, a geographer, and I collaborated in studying settlement, land use, and agriculture. Mintima also provided a convenient center for the exploration of other areas of Chimbu by road. We could visit other parts of Chimbu to map land and territories, study tribal traditions and regional differences, and attend ceremonies. I revisited Mintima many times between 1958 and 1965, and then returned in 1976.

I am most grateful for this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Australian National University, which supported my research in the field and in Canberra, to my colleagues, especially J. A. Barnes, D. Freeman, M. Reay, and W. E. H. Stanner, and to Sir John Crawford, former Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies. More recently, my research has been supported by the State University of New York.

My initial goods included camping equipment, staple foods, and the salt, tobacco, and other trade materials which I used to purchase fresh produce from my neighbors. I depended almost entirely on local people and supplies, that first year. Mintima is close to the so-called highlands highway, but in 1958 there was no through traffic because heavy rains had washed away the Chimbu River bridge. My mail and supplies landed by air in Kundiawa, and then reached me when a car or truck was passing on district business. In later years, when bridges and roads were improved, more vehicles were in use, and road traffic became hazardous.

I discovered that the boundary of two large clans runs through Mintima, the stream forming a boundary in places, and the ceremonial ground and rest house site are divided by the clan boundary. The first house I occupied had two rooms, each built by and on the land of one clan: I ate in Kombaku and slept in Numambu. But these names, and the names of clan segments, which are the identity marks for people, group activities, and land divisions, only slowly acquired meaning as I met people, visited gardens and houses, and attended gatherings. We spoke in pidgin English as I tried to learn Chimbu. My first and main informants were men, who were more fluent in pidgin, more accustomed to dealing with Europeans, and



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more active in political and economic affairs than women and children.

My first important lesson in fieldwork was that what people say is not always what they do. This is not due to intentional misrepresentation on the part of the people, but rather resulted from their attempts to simplify a complex reality. During my first few days several men identified for me the men's house locations in the vicinity and listed their occupants. Only after months of survey and census did I realize to what extent these are idealized statements of memberships, while actual residence is both impermanent and dispersed.

One early experience, which in retrospect is of great significance, was an intertribal gathering organized by the "big men" of what a few months later became Waiye Local Government Council, named for the highest peak in the area. Four of the groups I came to call tribes were involved: Naregu, Nauru, Kamanegu, and Endugwa. I was taken, and at times literally carried on a steep footpath from Mintima to Gor, the Nauru tribal center, by Kondom, the highest ranking big man in Chimbu, and an escort of other Naregu men. Our walk was cheerful and easy-going until we reached a point on the trail crossed with a line of casuarina trees. These had been planted on the advice of a government officer, to serve as the intertribal boundary marks. Once in Nauru territory, the home of traditional enemies, the Naregu were tense and wary. We spent several hours at Gor, the central meeting place in Nauru territory, where several hundred people, leading men of the other tribes, and many men and a few women of Nauru attended the meeting. We were served food by the Nauru. Representatives and speakers of all the groups spoke about the prospects for a council and political and economic development, stressing good relations between the several tribes. A number of the speakers said that formerly, the four groups fought one another, and that this must now cease; in future they would work together and have a single council which would promote the progress of all. Kondom was a prominent speaker; he commanded attention, and his remarks elicited cheers. When the speeches ended, some men were given more food by the Nauru and remained overnight. My escort group returned, another two-and-a-half-hour walk. As we crossed the border, the Naregu men visibly

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relaxed. I noticed that within Naregu territory all passersby were greeted, and men entered any convenient house if they needed an ember to light a cigarette. Outside tribal territory they were circumspect. The Naregu and Nauru had not been friends.

Much later, and only gradually, I understood the relations between settlement, land, and political relations of the Naregu and Nauru and other Waiye groups in ecological and social terms. The evidence was there, during this walk, but I was not able to appreciate it, or to phrase questions that might elicit the important information from my companions.

I found that life in Chimbu was rarely dull. Each day brought something new. Someone or some group would start a new activity – a garden, a house, a fence – some expansion or development of his personal and domestic estate. The plans and arrangements for personal and domestic affairs involved others, who might have competing plans or be drawn into a group project. A loss, misfortune, a quarrel or illness calls for a meeting and discussion of rights and responsibilities. The intricate considerations – holding back a pig now for a daughter's wedding in a month or two, inviting an affine (in-law) to share in a bean feast, wondering whether it would be expected to repay a debt in shells or money to help a kinsman's funeral feast – always involve a give-and-take with other people. Every person can be seen as the center of a social network. Debts and obligations tie the individual to clan and kin; one man may know just what is owed him, but he must also reckon on competing demands when he plans his daughter's wedding. At every occasion the onlookers calculate their expectation, and look for opportunities to gain support or prestige.

Before the end of my first field season there was a pandanus nut presentation, a *mogena biri*: Kamanegu tribe had invited Endugwa. On the morning, my friends at Mintima labored for hours over the adornment and facial painting of a young Endugwa man who worked for me. Then we all went to Pari, where a huge circle, perhaps fifty yards in diameter, was marvelously arranged with bundles of sugarcane, bunches of bananas, marsupials tethered to posts, fruits, and vegetables stacked all over. The predominant item was large wheel-shaped parcels of pandanus nuts, tied together and decorated with colorful leaves, moss, and flowers. The visiting En-

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dugwa tribesmen, faces painted, wearing feathers and shells, carrying weapons and drums, were a column of dancing warriors who entered the arena in a series of rushes led by men holding spears. Kamenegu also joined together in a mock-fighting formation, to oppose them.

After these preliminaries, leading men spoke of the intertribal exchange relations, and the size of the Kamanegu gift. The gift itself, I discovered, was made up of many hundreds of individual parcels, gifts from one person to another. It took hours for the heap to be dismantled parcel by parcel and for each recipient's name to be called out to come forward and take the parcel. Women, for the most part wives of the recipients and often sisters or daughters of the donors, shouted their appreciation of parcels, acknowledging that their kinsmen had presented a gift to their husband and family. I found that this group and individual character of intergroup gifts was repeated in every form of Chimbu transaction. In this way I began to appreciate the facets of interpersonal and intergroup relations.

Before my departure, I acknowledged the help and hospitality of the Mintima people. We prepared quantities of festive foods, with rice, meat, and vegetables. Speeches were made to tell the assembled group how I had come to live at Mintima and the people had shown me their ways, invited me to their festivities, and I had joined in their activities. The whole quantity of feast food could be admired, and then it was divided among the individuals, families, and groups present. Some distant visitors were told to take their portion and tell their people of the event. Generosity brings prestige in highland society and gifts of food can serve as signs of generosity and as indicators that an important event has taken place. Learning to direct and allocate portions at a feast stands, I feel, as a measure of my understanding of Chimbu. Over the years of my visits to Chimbu, I became a member of the Mintima community, contributing to payments and receiving a share in distributions. In 1976, eleven years after my last visit, my earlier contributions were recalled. If I had once, years before, helped in a marriage payment, I was allocated a share by the husband when he received a gift.

In addition to my gratitude to the Chimbu, I am also deeply indebted to the colleagues with whom I have discussed the high-

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lands, and whose works I have read over twenty years. The bibliographic references are limited to works used directly in the text, and cannot enumerate the sources of all the materials. Most of the ethnographic research was done within the period from 1950–1975, and accounts refer to this period. The reader can assume that, except as mentioned, statements refer to the highland peoples as they existed soon after contact, that is, after 1935 when they had accepted colonial, mostly Australian, administration. Change in the ecological and social system had not yet become definitive. I hope that my use of the works of others, and my own observations, do not misrepresent the highlands way of life during this time.

*January, 1978*

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