

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

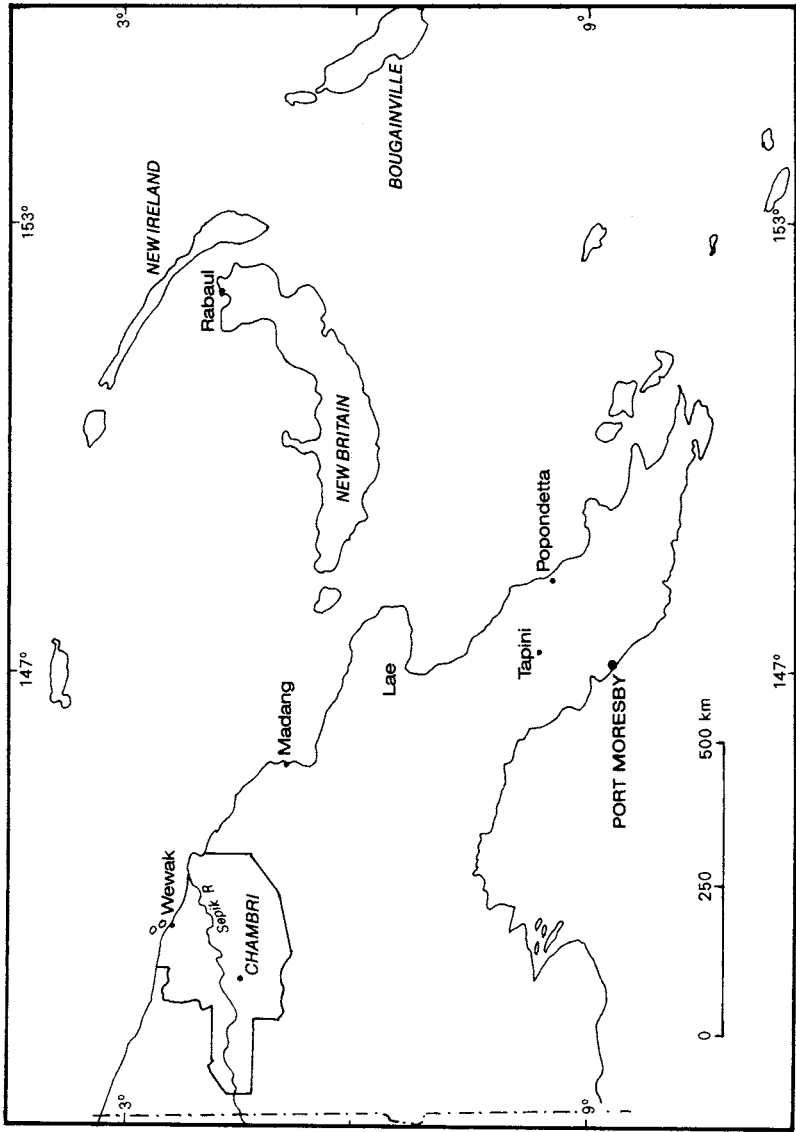
On writing the Chambri

“When there is development there is always changes. We must choose the best way to cause the development.” We found this unelaborated statement in 1987, under the heading of “Social Studies,” on one of the last pages of Angela Imbang’s school notebook still remaining in the outhouse. When Angela copied it the previous year from the blackboard of the Chambri Community School, she was in her sixth and for her, as for most Chambri and other Papua New Guinea children, the final year of formal education in a nationally determined curriculum.¹

Angela was not a strong student. Certainly she felt scant motivation to preserve her notebooks, and she in fact understood little of the English she had written down. Because she had not done well enough to be admitted to high school, she doubted she would ever have a regular job. Yet, the expectations about development contained in the statement she copied had become pervasive in Papua New Guinea and were fully endorsed by Angela and other Chambri (and, in our experience, by many other Papua New Guineans).² While recognizing that their lives were constrained by, for instance, the educational requirements of even low-level clerical jobs they had come to believe, nonetheless, that their lives were, and should be, significantly different from the lives of those who came before and those who would come after them. Furthermore, they believed that they would, through their choices, be able to lead better lives.

This book is primarily about the changes, choices and constraints in the lives of the twentieth-century Chambri we have come to know either directly, through our own continuing field work which first began some fifteen years ago, or indirectly, through (in large measure) the research during 1933 of Margaret

Cambridge University Press
0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System
Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Map 1 Chambri within the East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

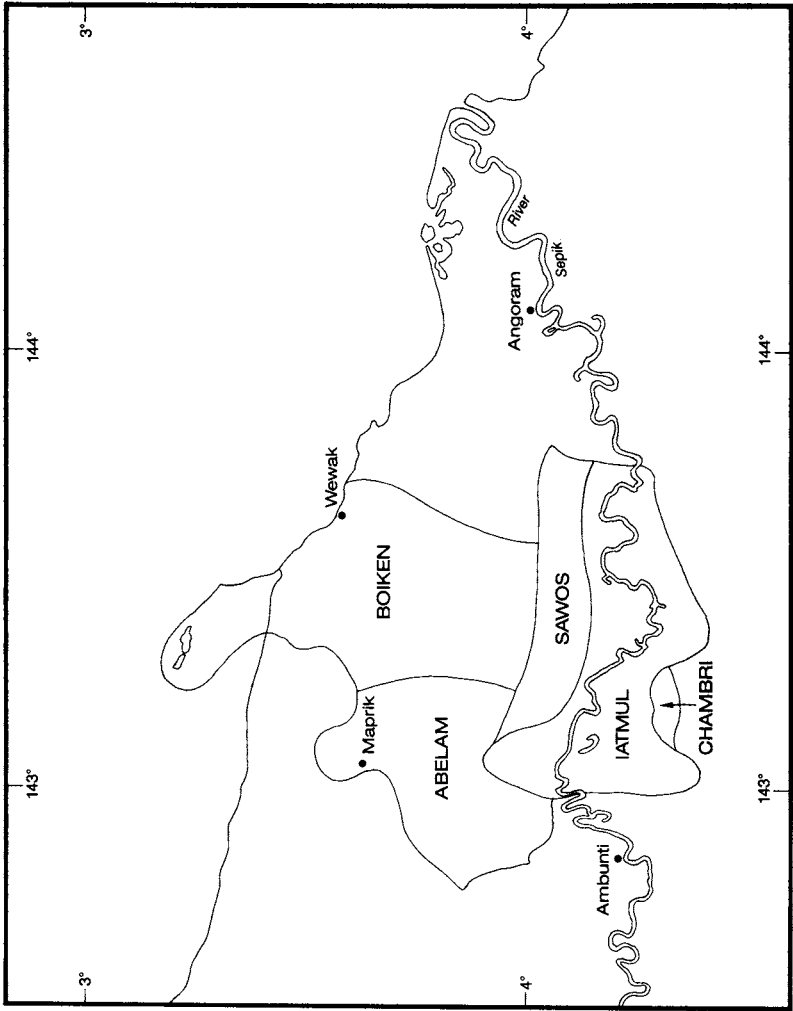
[More information](#)*On writing the Chambri* 3

Mead and Reo Fortune. This book is also about how small-scale societies like Chambri, peripheral to the major centers of influence, must struggle to fashion lives of relative autonomy within a world system premised on assumptions concerning social relationships, about power and control different from their own. Throughout, our effort has been to pursue an anthropology in which ethnographic representations convey the encounter between such peripheral societies and the larger system in a manner that might foster rather than subvert their attempts to maintain autonomy.

Well before European contact in the twentieth century, the Chambri lived in three densely settled, largely endogamous villages of Indingai, Wombun and Kilimbit on an island-mountain in Chambri Lake, south of the Sepik River (see Map 1). Their sociocultural system had developed in complex interaction with those of their neighbors of the Middle Sepik: the Iatmul, Sawos and the Sepik Hill peoples.³ All were sedentary; they had different environmental resources; and they exchanged their surpluses in a regional system. None was economically autonomous. Principally, the Chambri supplied fish to the Sepik Hills peoples and the Iatmul supplied fish to the Sawos. Each received sago in return. (See Maps 2 and 3 for the location of peoples and places mentioned throughout this book.) This was a system of regional dependency in which the development of particular villages within each group was shaped and constrained by that of the others. However, within this context of dependency and mutual influence, the Iatmul became militarily and culturally dominant. Although never able to act with full autonomy or authority, and often at war among themselves, they were able through a masterly blend of warfare, intimidation and flattery to shape and maintain the regional pattern for their own benefit.⁴

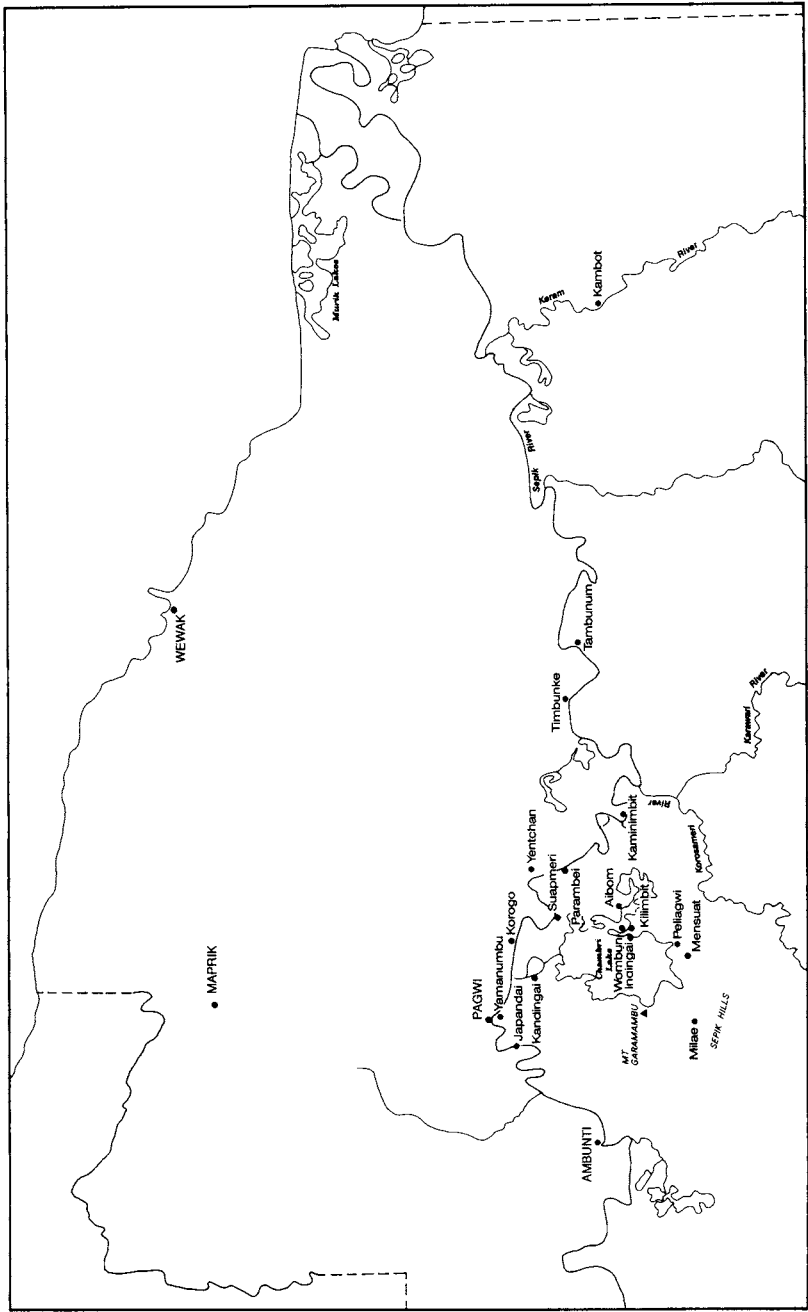
From their position on the fish-rich Sepik waters the Iatmul were able to develop larger and more powerful villages than their sago-supplying neighbors of the bush and swamps.⁵ However, these large villages faced nutritional problems. They had need of regular deliveries of sago to be exchanged for fish. As long as the Iatmul remained powerful they could require the Sawos to make the necessary deliveries. Their strategy was to keep the Sawos in their niche and that niche was away from the water. The Sawos were to produce sago and remain dependent on Iatmul for fish.⁶

Cambridge University Press
0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System
Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Map 2 Linguistic and cultural groups of importance to this study.

Cambridge University Press
0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System
Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Map 3 Some Sepik villages within the East Sepik Province.

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

These large Iatmul villages also faced organizational problems. The internal cohesion which gave them their military power rested in large part on a complex system of exchanges, focused on ties created by marriage. These ties required shell valuables.⁷ The importance of these valuables to the Iatmul and, eventually, to the Chambri, determined in major part the relationship between these two groups. The Chambri resources of principal interest to the Iatmul were their specialized trade goods of stone tools (made by men from Chambri quarries) and woven mosquito bags (made by women from reeds found in Chambri Lake). The Iatmul acquired these Chambri commodities with shell valuables previously obtained from the Sawos. Then, reserving a portion of these commodities for their own use, they traded the rest to the Sawos for yet further valuables. These they used in their own internal transactions and in trading for additional Chambri goods.

The Iatmul strategy to ensure Chambri cooperation in providing these items was to treat them as valued allies. Under these conditions of Iatmul hegemony but relative peace,⁸ the Chambri could closely observe and emulate their formidable and impressive neighbors.⁹ Indeed, the Iatmul encouraged the Chambri to elaborate a ritual and social system based largely on a Iatmul model. This stimulated Chambri demand for shell valuables and, in turn, increased their incentive to trade their specialized goods to the Iatmul. In fact, through imitation and interaction, and through occupying a comparable ecological position as fish producers, the Chambri came to duplicate many features of the Iatmul pattern. Their villages did become relatively large; they sought to control their Sepik Hills neighbors as the Iatmul did the Sawos. They never, however, developed a comparable military capacity.¹⁰

The Chambri lived largely safe from Iatmul attack until Europeans arrived on the coast of New Guinea at the turn of the century. The system then changed: in particular, the introduction and diffusion of European steel tools and cloth mosquito nets destroyed the market for Chambri products and transformed the relationship between the Chambri and the Iatmul. Fighting between the two became increasingly frequent until about 1905, when the Chambri fled their island rather than risk further military encounters with Iatmul, whose ferocity had been augmented by the acquisition of a German shotgun.¹¹

In 1986, when Angela copied the passage on development, change and choice into her notebook, some eighty years had passed since the Iatmul drove the Chambri from their island.

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Sixty-two years had passed since the Australian Administration had sufficiently pacified the Iatmul to allow the Chambri to return home. Fifty-three years had passed since Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune visited them and then made them famous as the “Tchambuli.” (In Mead’s view, Tchambuli women dominated over men.)¹² Some thirty-five years had passed since the beginning of extensive labor migration to distant plantations. Twenty-seven years had passed since the completion on Chambri of an impressive Catholic church, constructed of Western materials including colored glass panes. Thirteen years had passed since Deborah Gewertz first began her research among the Chambri. Some ten years had passed since *Salvinia molesta*, a South American fern, had been accidentally introduced, probably by a Catholic priest. It had so choked the lakes and rivers that the fishing and trading economy of the entire region was devastated.¹³ And some two years had passed since a weevil, *Cyrtobagus singularis*, introduced by a research scientist and paid for largely by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, brought the *Salvinia* under control. And, of course, much more happened in those intervening years, including a world war, the achievement of Independence for Papua New Guinea and the inauguration of education, Western style. In this new educational system Papua New Guinea teachers required their students, Angela among them, to copy statements in partially understood English about development . . .

But, to understand the nature and significance of this history, a portion of individual and community experiences and actions during the period must be brought into better focus. These experiences and actions, after all, both registered and to some extent shaped events.

Angela was the daughter of Deborah’s best Chambri female friend and one of her most helpful informants. Angela was also, through her mother, the granddaughter of Walinakwan, a man described by Margaret Mead as one of the best dancers in the three Chambri villages.¹⁴ Walinakwan, we were to discover during this most recent field-trip, had been much more than a dancer of renown. He had been entrusted with the care of two beautifully carved and powerful water drums, Posump and Ponor, named after the two ancestral crocodiles whose spirits animated them. Anyone participating at an initiation when these drums were used knew by the resonance of their thumping bark that these spirit crocodiles were fully present. (The resonance was produced when

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)



1 Posump and Ponor displayed in the National Museum.

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*On writing the Chambri* 9

their open ends were thrust up and down in the water.) So knowledgeable of the secret names that invoked ancestral power were those who carved and bespelled these powerful drums that Walinakwan, according to Angela's mother and many others, had slept next to them inside his woven mosquito bag. His purpose was to absorb their power and to protect them from enemy raids. As both sources and repositories of his power, his viability and that of his clan depended on their safety.

We had seen these drums, but not at Chambri. We saw them in Port Moresby, at the National Museum. During Deborah's first period of field-work in 1974, they had been sold by Walinakwan's successor and clan brother, Wapiyeri, for several hundred dollars to an Australian artifact buyer. He, in turn, sold them to the museum for considerably more.

Wapiyeri had been desperate for money; although his sons were away at work, they were not remitting and he alone had to fulfill the obligations incurred through his own three marriages and those of his sons. (Money had by this time replaced shell valuables for ceremonial payments.¹⁵) He had hoped the sale of the drums would enable him to maintain his prestige. Instead, the sale provoked widespread condemnation and ill feeling. Even before the actual sale, when news of the impending sale leaked, many objected. They argued that because these drums were essential to the initiatory complex, they should be inalienable. Others claimed that, if the drums were to be sold, they were entitled to a major portion of the payment: after all, their ancestors had provided the trees from which the drums had been made or the tools with which they had been carved.

After several weeks of uproar, Wapiyeri nevertheless accomplished the sale with Deborah's unwilling and unwitting help. Wapiyeri instructed his youngest son to smuggle them out to the waiting buyer when next, as Deborah's research assistant, he accompanied her to the coastal town of Wewak where she went to resupply. Thus, unbeknown to Deborah, Posump and Ponor, concealed by her assistant in copra bags as though they were smoked fish destined for urban kin, left Chambri in her canoe, powered by her motor, operated by her boatman.

The trouble was not over. Suangin, the eldest member of Walinakwan's line still living on Chambri in 1987, made this clear to us when he came to enlist our help near the time of our departure. He explained that ever since Posump and Ponor had left Chambri sickness and misfortune had beset members of his

Cambridge University Press

0521395879 - Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

Excerpt

[More information](#)



2 Suangin asked us to take exact measurements and photographs of the water drums.