Highland New Guinea

Geography

The highlands of Papua New Guinea, the largest island in Melanesia, take up approximately 70,000 square miles towards the middle of the island. The area ranges within a few degrees south of the equator and receives at least 80 inches of rain per year, though it’s drier more inland. The altitudes of the highlands range from about 3,500 feet to 9000 feet. The inland areas are more seasonably variable than the coasts, receiving both drought and frost. (Brown 1978)

Agriculture

The people of the highlands, who depend on subsistence farming, practice shifting, which involves letting land lie fallow, sometimes for years. Many of the dominant forests have been removed by burning and cutting for cultivation, though this happens more towards the coast. Their main crops include many varieties of sweet potatoes, bananas, sugarcane, taro, and yams. They are also provided with many animals for food from the forests, including doves, parrots, cockatoos, and chickens that are kept but not eaten. The island doesn’t naturally have a wide variety of mammals. There are rats, mice, bats, and pigs which are important hunting game. Wild pigs maybe be killed with no prior plan for them, but domesticated pigs are very valuable property. (Brown 1978)

Population and Clans

Some of the peoples of the Highands include the Enga, Chimbu, Kapauku, and Dani. Within these groups are many clans and sub-clans. Clans, whether large or small, are generally defined as a group of common patrilineal descent. A clan settles together in one area and the men are initiated. People live in small villages and cultivate the nearby land. Population density across the highland tends to “decline from west to east.” (Brown 1978:99)

Population is generally dispersed throughout the highlands, and clans that are nearby to each other are usually considered a region of kinship. Clans further away are considered enemy territory and contact is limited. (Connolly and Anderson 1987)

Traditions

Initiation involves several activities considered to cleanse the boys and introduce them as men. At a young age they are secluded from their mothers for a period of time. When older, they force leaves into their noses and long canes down their throats to produce bleeding and vomiting though, in more recent times the severity and duration of the rituals has been relaxed. Initiations usually take place near a river so that the discharged material believed to be the polluted influence of women can be washed away and the boys become men. As male dominance is an important value in their society the initiation rituals have a general theme of minimizing contact with and influence from women. (Brown 1978)

Marriage
As a clan is generally a group of common descent, marriage within ones clan is not allowed. As in many cultures marriages are often arranged, sometimes to strengthen inter-clan relations and to promote trading between two groups. Before marriage adolescent boys and girls are allowed courting parties during which they socialize, the boys try to impress the girls with shows of courage and strength. The parties are chaperoned by older members of the clans, there to protect the girls. (Brown 1978)

Marriages are arranged by the older members of the clan. (Connolly and Anderson 1987) Girls may choose who to marry, but this doesn’t happen often. A tradition sometimes practiced is that of the “sister exchange” where two clans, each with a son and a daughter, have the two pairs marry. This ensures good treatment within each marriage because each son is married to his sister-in-law. This is not the only marriage tradition practiced but it shows the importance of good relations between clans and the continuation of familial ties. (Brown 1978)

Polygamy is practiced among the New Guinea Highlanders, but has declined recently due to missionary influence. There is an advantage to having several wives in that the man “gains in affinal ties to other clans.” (Brown 1978)

Enga
Enga is a language spoken in the central highlands of New Guinea by around 150,000 and is also the name given to the group of people that speak it. One of the largest groups of the Enga are the Mae Enga which will be used as an example for all the other Enga. In the Mae, all members with the same surname are in a group called a phratry, which are followed patrilineally. Members of a clan live in houses dispersed throughout their territory however men and women do not live in the same houses due to the “deep-seated fear of sexual pollution” (Meggitt 1997:2).

Conflicts
Within phratries is a subgroup called the clan that numbers around 350 people. Clans of the Mae usually live in an area that is between one and two square miles and due to this small area, arguments arise. Land is by far the cause of most arguments, with pig theft coming in a distant second. Most arguments that are between members of the same clan are usually ended peacefully by talking out the issue and agreeing on a solution. Arguments between members of different phratries are less likely to end in negotiation than arguments of members of the same phratry. The most prominent end to an argument is an exchange of pigs. Pigs are important in Enga society as a way to obtain prestige. Pigs are given away, mostly during ceremonies, to other members of the clan or phratry as a show of prominence. (Meggitt 1997)

Conflicts Between Whole Phratries
Fighting among the people is dealt in different ways depending on the people involved. If the fighting is between different phratries there may be, but very rarely, a “great fight” in which all the men in all the clans of a phratry join to fight all the men of a different phratry. These fights are organized and are used to show the skill of the warriors and to gain prestige. When members of a clan which wish to go into battle they consult the Big Men. If the Big Men agree, members of the clan contact members of the other clans in the phratry to join the fight. If they agree, the clans meet on a hill chant insults at the opposing phratry trying to get them to fight. If the other phratry agrees they agree on a time and place and the battle is set. Individual one on one fights, used to show off the skill of the phratry, precede the battle. Afterwards the battle begins with a hail of arrows. Arrow fire is the biggest cause of wounding and death since hand-to-hand combat isn’t encouraged. Once the fighting is done for the day, the Big Men from each side decided on an appropriate amount of pork to give the opposing phratry to restore peace. Members of the clan that provoked the fight are required to pay back the losses in men to fraternal clans for starting the fight. Payment is usually paid in the form of pigs. (Meggitt 1997)

Intraclan Conflicts
Fighting between members of the same clan is discouraged since members of the same clan are viewed as brothers, however fighting still does occur. The Big men are generally able to bring peace by having the aggressors trade items such as pigs. However when the Big Men’s proposal is rejected, war may break out between small groups that support either aggressor until peace is reached. Fighting between members within a clan rarely becomes brutal due to the fraternal feeling between combatants. (Meggitt 1997)

Interclan Conflicts Within a Phratry
Ninety five percent of all fights that occur between members of a different clan of the same phratry occur over land. Similarly to fighting between members of the same clan, Big Men propose an exchange of goods to end the feuding but warfare does break out when the proposal is rejected. Also similarly is that limitations are placed on the brutality of the fighting because both clans are “brothers.” (Meggitt 1997)

Interclan Conflicts Between Different Phratries
Inter-clan fighting between clans that are not of the same phratry is the most brutal form of warfare. The limitations to not effect all out warfare are ignored. The goals of these attacks is to take over and demoralize the enemy clan by using everything from surprise attacks to desecrating holy structures in an effort to get the enemy to lose taste for the fighting. (Meggitt 1997)

Contemporary Themes
Europeans came into contact with the highlanders as early as the 16th century, many of them implemented missionary efforts. Part of the European influence included teaching the highlanders to read and write English. Today, literacy has become and important part of New Guinean society. A word in a highland dialect meaning “prestige” used to be associated with having many wives. Today the word has come to mean prestige derived from being educated and literate. (McKeown 2006)

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