THE HIGHLANDS
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Double title page
Group of pig killers adorned for a ritual gathering. PNG, Highlands.
Kandep. Photo Josette and Charles Lenars.

Illus. 1
Village surrounded by temporary shelters built to welcome the participants of a major pig festival. PNG, Highlands.
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The conquest of the Papua New Guinea Highlands was driven by the thirst for gold. Exploration was slow going. A few determined men opened the first bastions in mountains that had never been penetrated before. In the early 1930s, Michael Leahy and his brothers, believing in the promise of new gold deposits, organised several expeditions. When they reached the central mountain range, which everyone believed to be covered in uninhabited forests, they were amazed to discover a string of inhabited valleys filled with flourishing food crops. While the financial outcome of these expeditions proved a disappointment, this tardy discovery opened up a new territory for anthropological research. A territory all the more fascinating, in that these Highlands populations had scant relations with the populations that had been known up until then.

We would have to wait until after the war to glean a more accurate idea about the populations sheltered in these valleys. The region is a patchwork of languages, all non-Austronesian, for which it is still very difficult to establish a specific map. We can, however, cite from east to west the eleven Anga groups, then the Fore, Tairora, Gahuku, Benabena, Siane, and Gimi; further west live the Chimbu-Chuave, the Wahgi, and the Hagen. Beyond them stretch the territories of the Enga and the Duna—the two most important groups in terms of numbers of speakers. South of the central mountain range live the Huli, then the Mendi, and the Kewa. In the regions of the Sepik sources live the Min groups, whose languages are closely related to the inhabitants of the West Papua Highlands, such as the Mek and the Dani from the Wamena Valley.
All these societies have often been described as being “united in diversity”. Despite frequent wars, the coexistence of multiple groups has given rise to a complex network of exchanges. The strong solidarity between patrilineal clans is sealed by marriages and exchange ceremonies (Illus. 4). Material culture is a priori modest. None of these groups have created ceremonies like those in the lowlands where objects, architecture, and sculptures play a central part. However, a few rare examples of boards painted with clan emblems, sculptures (cat. 121), or woven figures (cat. 123), objects linked to initiation cycles, have been found in eastern Papua. Generally, the Highlands people do not own goods, but accumulate them to supply their exchanges. These objects of trade are primarily pigs, mother-of-pearl, feathers, furs, shells, axe blades (cat. 122), body ornaments (cats. 146, 161), rain capes, pottery, and, in certain regions, salt bars and vegetable oil. Consumable items can become
objects of exchange, at which point they function as markers of social relations, such as salt bars which grow in value as they are traded by groups living increasingly far from the initial site of production. Other items, such as shells, are imported—sometimes from very far. A shell has no intrinsic value apart from the one people are willing to give it. Yet the inhabitants of the Highlands could not imagine how, where, and by whom these objects, whose forms and substance were like nothing they had ever known, were produced. For Highlands people, shells were shrouded in mystery; they attributed the value of wonder to these extraordinary objects, a value based as much on the form of the shell as on its pearly reflections. Obtaining these objects required long chains of exchange that were never supposed to break, to avoid the source drying up forever. Thus, in order to give, you had to receive, and he who received was always indebted to his donor. The cycle of exchanges is infinite (Illus. 4-5).

The value of other objects is based on the mastery of their mode of production, which is often long and complex. Woven or plaited items take time—not just the time to go out into the forest and gather the
materials used to make them, but also to treat the materials before plaiting them, which can take several hours (cat. 123). Axe blades need to be cut and polished, a fastidious process. These hours of labour are an essential factor in the object's value, on the same plane as the knowledge and skill required to make it. Only a few men fully master the technological chains, thereby, in effect, reducing production. Added to this, is the rarity of the source materials: axe stones, especially the better quality ones, are extracted from quarries scattered in limited numbers over the entire territory. The birds of paradise live in scarcely populated regions located in remote areas that are hard to reach.

These societies follow a political system that has often been described as acephalous, or headless. Each group recognises the authority of a man, designated in New Guinea Pidgin as "Big Man". The Big Man does not inherit his power, he acquires it through his know-how, his capacity to organise his clan's work, and his ability to conduct exchanges on a large scale. A Big Man must be a gifted orator with a strong personality and a keen sense of organisation. To make his clan's exchanges successful he must consolidate a large number of groups as well as goods.

During major exchange ceremonies, the clans demonstrate their power and strength. These gatherings can have different names and take on different forms depending on the groups: the moka for the Hagen, the tee for the Enga or the mok in for the Mendi. They are competitive exchanges: the hosts must give more than they receive. In the 1930s, and particularly after the Second World War, the introduction of large quantities
of mother-of-pearl, first by gold hunters and then by the colonial powers, provoked a veritable inflation in moka ceremonies. Huge numbers of pigs and shells were exchanged. These ceremonies were responsible for the reorganisation of the political balance between the groups. They gave rise to increasingly complex networks of alliance that took over from the compensation system for the men lost in battle.

Elsewhere, as in the Wahgi Valley, these ceremonies reached an astounding level of elaboration and refinement. They gave the men and women the opportunity to show off finery and ornaments of dazzling array. Here we encounter ephemeral, ostentatious art compositions. The adornments, true structural ensembles of colour and matter, assert the power of an individual who not only must...
ills. 5
Exhibition of large pearl shells carved into crescents and mounted on sheets of resin painted with ochre, to be exchanged at an upcoming moka. PNG, Highlands, Mendi Valley. Photo Françoise Girard, circa 1950.

Cat. 124
Je exchange stone. Papua Province of Indonesia, Wamena Valley, Dani group. These green shale stones adorned with plaited orchid fibres and a belt made of dried leaves were part of the compensatory bride price. L: 45.5 cm. inv. 4099-9.

have accumulated a number of elements through exchanges (feathers, shells, marsupial teeth), but who also must have borrowed some for the event (thus depriving other family members of the pleasure of appearing adorned). For a man from the Highlands, taking part in an exchange ceremony is about demonstrating his skills of persuasion and the scope of his alliance networks.
The aspect of these body ornaments and the synchronisation of the dances are a way of gauging the general state of the host group, the only group to adorn themselves during these events. The brighter and shinier the feathers and the bodies, the more synchronised the dances, the more the group shows its strength and unity. In fact, this potential is not so much the act of men as the product of the infallible alliance a clan maintains with its ancestral spirits. In certain regions, for example, among the Duna and the Enga peoples, the spirits that make men handsome and attractive are female. Associated to certain male spirits who hold magic formulas, these female spirits make men's hair grow—a sign of masculine power. In these regions, appearance and the aesthetics of objects are as much the work of ancestors as of men.

Note
* New Guinea Pidgin mixes terms from local languages with English and German words.