METAMORPHOSIS OF THE CASSOWARIES
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METAMORPHOSIS OF THE CASSOWARIES

Umeda Society, Language and Ritual

BY

ALFRED GELL
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a modified version of a Ph.D. thesis written while I was attached to the London School of Economics, first as a graduate student and later as a lecturer. It was revised while I was a lecturer at the University of Sussex. I am grateful to both of these institutions for helping me in conducting my research.

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DONATUS, POGWA, JULUS, POM, AUYAI, MADA, AMASU, AIWE, WIYE, WAPI, FAI, FI, YIP, KIWE, WEB, HODAI, SOWAI, MAGWI, LUCE, ZENO.

T’dam tda naivem!

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I

The Umeda Setting

i. Introduction

This book is divided into three main parts: firstly an account of the social structure of Umeda village (Chapter 2) followed by a discussion of kinship terminology, language and symbolism (Chapter 3) and finally, a descriptive analysis of the ida ceremony, the ritual of sago fertility (Chapters 4 and 5). The present chapter is by way of an introduction: I shall not broach any of my major themes here, leaving them to the later chapters, since my present purpose is to place the Umedas on the map, giving some idea of their physical surroundings; and also to say a little about their material culture and economic life. But first, a word about the contact situation.

ii. Contact and Administration

The fieldwork on which this thesis is based was carried out between February 1969 and July 1970 in Umeda village, which is one of four villages which, together, make up the Waina-Sowanda census area in the West Sepik District of New Guinea. My investigations did not extend beyond the limits of the Waina-Sowanda census area, though some of the features of social structure and ritual which characterize the four villages in the Waina-Sowanda area have been found elsewhere in the Sepik district, and also occur in accounts of groups to the west, across the Irian border. My conclusions, therefore, apply primarily to the Waina-Sowanda area (i.e. to a population of no more than c. 960 individuals). It is perhaps regrettable that it is only possible to speak in terms of such a tiny aggregate of people, but that, indeed, is very much a feature of work in the less ecologically favoured regions of New Guinea. Population, in the Waina-Sowanda area and the surrounding region as well, is extremely sparse; though figures for population per square mile would be misleading, since in certain pockets of country quite dense...
populations are found, and a relatively intensive exploitation of the environment. This is particularly true of the Wasengla valley, to the north of the Waina-Sowanda area.

The Waina-Sowanda area is shown on Map 1. The four villages, Umeda, Punda, Sowanda and Waina-Wyalla are administered from Imonda patrol post, six hours' walk away (there were no motorable roads of any kind in Imonda sub-district in 1969-70). Five councillors were elected by villagers in the area. They represent their villages (Waina-Wyalla being counted as two villages by the administration) on the Walsa Local Government Council. Other councillors were elected by the Imonda and Walsa villages, and the council met every six weeks at the Imonda patrol post.

The administrative history of the Waina-Sowanda area is rather complex. The first outsiders to penetrate the area were Malay bird-of-paradise hunters, who, armed with primitive flintlock muskets, sporadically visited the area during the first half of the century. Later, with the establishment of the Dutch rule in West New Guinea before the war, occasional patrols visited the western part of the area, after about 1930, without setting up a permanent administrative presence. After 1950, Dutch activity increased considerably, the Waris patrol post (now just on the other side of the Irian border) was established, and missionaries of Dutch origin entered the area, introducing large quantities of metal implements and cloth. During the fifties the stone technology of the area was largely superseded, though some stone implements are still in use, particularly sago pounders, which have no steel equivalent. By the late fifties, the Dutch were firmly established, particularly in the Western villages; rest houses were built, native authorities instituted (certain men are still called 'korano', a hangover from this period) and the missions sent catechists, trained in Hollandia, to teach the people to read.

With the expulsion of the Dutch in 1962 a sudden about-face occurred. Previously considerable vagueness existed as to the precise location of the boundary between Dutch and Australian territory; but when the Dutch were replaced, unexpectedly, by the Indonesians who were far from being at the time well-disposed towards the Australian regime in New Guinea, this comfortable vagueness was rapidly superseded by a meticulous definition of mutual boundaries.
It was discovered that the territory to the west of the Waris patrol post ('the Waris enclave') lay to the west of the \(141^\circ E\) dividing line, and steps were at once taken to put the whole area firmly under Australian control. Imonda patrol post was
built, together with the air-strip, and Australian patrols entered the Waina-Sowanda area for the first time.\(^1\)

The Australian patrols found considerable disparity in the degree to which the impact of Dutch presence had made itself felt in the 'Waris enclave' of which the Waina-Sowanda area was a part. Along the course of the Wasengla river, and close to Waris itself, contact had been intensive, both as to administrative and Mission activity. Many were literate in Malay, having been trained as catechists. In the Waina-Sowanda, however, the Dutch had done little; the area was not really under control, there were no literate men, and Malay was not spoken. Evidently, the Dutch had chosen not to involve themselves, both because the area is inaccessible from Waris, and because, lying so far to the east, they regarded it as outside their sphere of influence, though they did not refrain from sending patrols there, more out of curiosity than anything else, no doubt.

To begin with, the Australians had little trouble in establishing administrative control. The people, lacking a sufficiency of metal tools, were eager to work on the construction of the air-strip and the patrol post, so as to obtain them.

Patrols were threatened at various times during the sixties, but there was no serious trouble between the villagers and the administration, until 1967, when a patrol sent to recapture a man of Umeda who had escaped from prison was threatened by a large body of men, and had to retire. Subsequently, about 20 men of Umeda were imprisoned. These men were not the only ones who were taken away. I was told that an equal number of men drawn, this time, from Umeda, Punda and Sowanda, were advised that they would benefit from a period as labourers in the plantations outside the area. These men were flown to Wewak (the first time, needless to say, that they had been inside an aeroplane) to the compound where would-be plantation labourers are concentrated before being despatched to their employers. While waiting to be deployed, in the camp, the Waina-Sowanda men — who were the 'newest' group in the camp at the time — were victimized by more sophisticated Sepiks. They determined to run away, so as to regain their homes. Their only means of ascertaining where they were, was the memory

\(^1\) For a journalist's account of the 'Wild men of Waina' see Willey 1966.
of what they had been able to see out of the window of the aeroplane which flew them to Wewak. They had seen the line of the mountains, and the river, and the higher mountains on the other side. Having broken out of the camp they subsequently split up into separate groups, living on what they could steal, always trying to follow the line of the Torricelli mountains. Most were recaptured before reaching home, though a few made it the whole way. One was shot as a suspected sorcerer, and they had many close escapes. The experience was decidedly educative for those who participated, though not, perhaps, all that the administrative powers would have wished. At present, only four Umadas and a handful of men from the other villages have had any plantation experience and the idea is, on the whole, very unpopular: mainly, I think, because the experiences of the ex-prisoners and the ‘runaways’ has tended to reinforce the feeling of distrust and fear of other New Guineans inculcated into the people by their brushes with native policemen.

The impression I received from administrative personnel was that the ‘Waina-Sowandas’ were, by today’s standards a ‘difficult’ lot; trouble – of a minor kind – was never far from the surface; inexperienced officers were not permitted to patrol the area alone. Violence never directed towards myself, threatened on a number of occasions while I was in the field, and one shooting did take place, but on the whole I found that full-scale warfare had been definitively suppressed even before the Australians arrived in 1962. At no time was warfare anything like as endemic as it was, say, in the Highlands: and the Umadas were indeed grateful for the suppression of major warfare, since it removed the insistent pressure of the more numerous Walsa groups to the north, who threatened, at one time, to dislodge certain Waina-Sowanda groups entirely. Sporadic killings, generally in revenge for supposed acts of sorcery, are another matter – it is likely that such attempts will continue.

The sensitivity, on the part of the Administration, to even quite trivial happenings in the Waina-Sowanda arose both out of the troubles of 1967–8, and the fact that the area abuts directly onto the international border. 1969 was the year of the ‘act of free choice’ in West Irian which occasioned the arrival of a number of refugees from Indonesian rule into the West Sepik district. None of these, as it happened, passed through the Waina-
Sowanda, but the area was considered sufficiently sensitive from a military point of view, to be twice patrolled by the army, as well as being placed under the surveillance of specially briefed military personnel called 'Civil Affairs Officers' whose military role was an open secret, despite their discreet official title.

The Administration was generally popular, and the Local Government Council, though not very well understood by the people, provided an efficient means of communication between the Administration and the villagers and vice-versa. Real efforts were being made to educate the population politically, in preparation for independence. In the fields of health and education little had been done.

There was no medical aid nearer than Imonda, and no resort was made to help so far afield. Consequently, the health of the community left much to be desired; there were many deaths during my time in the field. In education, no progress at all can be recorded. No literate individuals were to be found in Wainasowanda, either in Malay or pidgin English, let alone English proper. A catechist had been established in Umeda for some years, but had failed to teach any of the children to read, though they had acquired a number of mournful mission ditties. The catechist was a Walsa, who was aided and abetted by his clan-brother, the ex-catechist, whose career had ended with a term of imprisonment for the abduction of a married woman. They were both very popular. They lived on the charity of the villagers, which was humiliating for them: the catechist's salary being only five dollars a month. They often contrasted their present indigence with the rich life they led as schoolboys in Hollandia, feasted on rice and fish, while now they had to survive on sago and bamboo shoots. They also contrasted their condition with that of the European missionaries, who lived in state and comfort on the mission station at Imonda, well-fed and with little in the way of work to do since few people lived near the station.

Meanwhile, besides giving religious instruction, the catechist was supposed to teach the three R's. Unfortunately, it was the form, rather than the substance of these skills which was transmitted to their pupils, who could write the letters of the alphabet, but had no clue as to the sounds they represented. Writing was a ritual activity, and many had had strange formulae such as AFR or RNT tattooed on to their arms. Maths was still more of a
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performance; my young informants were always keen to borrow paper and biros to practise writing out addition sums. The 'sum' always ran:

1 + 1 = 2 
2 + 2 = 2 
3 + 3 = 6 
4 + 4 = 4 
1 + 2 = 3 
2 + 3 = 4 
3 + 4 = 7

At best, the catechist was an effective teacher of pidgin English. Most pidgin had been learned by the ex-prisoners, by those who had been labourers, or from casual contacts with policemen and other agents of the administration. All the children and young men under twenty or so knew pidgin, though some were very unwilling to speak any. A few men aged up to 30 knew pidgin, about five speaking it very well, including the Umeda councillor, Pom. The general knowledge of pidgin is increasing all the time, especially since the catechist also teaches it to girls, who do not have access to the kinds of relationships through which the men have learned pidgin. But literacy, even in pidgin, is another matter; at present there seems little prospect of educational advance in the Waina-Sowanda.

To conclude on administration: though sporadic contact with Europeans has occurred over the last 20–30 years, for most of this time the influence exerted has been slight, except, perhaps, in the matter of the suppression of warfare. Since 1962, administration has been more intensive, in response to the underlying factor of the 'confrontation' with Indonesia which focussed attention on to the border areas of New Guinea. But the effects have been slight, and mission penetration has also been superficial only. Considerable material changes have resulted – notably the universal introduction of metal tools and, to a lesser extent, cloth. A little money circulates, but in no sense has money penetrated native economic activity: it is spent on trade-store goods, particularly clothes and tinned fish – otherwise it goes in Council Tax (50 cents per capita in 1970). Horizons have been widened – as far as the perimeter of Vanimo prison, one might say – but little fundamental change has occurred in the attitudes of the people. There has been no Cargo Cult activity. The activities of the administration are regarded neither with hostility,
nor much enthusiasm. It is difficult to assess what the future has in store; in the absence of any possibility for economic development in the immediate vicinity – cash-cropping on a large scale is ruled out because of the proximity of the border – it is likely that more and more men will be induced to work in other areas, where they will take their families, leading eventually to the liquidation of the Waina-Sowanda villages, which are poorly placed to benefit from general economic development.

iii. THE LAND

The Waina-Sowanda census area lies in a depression between the Bewani Mountains, to the north, and the Border mountains to the south. A ridge (the Awis) demarcates the northern boundary of the Waina-Sowanda village territories: the Wasengla valley, over the watershed, is controlled by the Walas villages. To the south, the country shelves away towards Amanab. The many small rivers and creeks are all tributaries of the Hordern river, which enters the Sepik itself east of Green river patrol post, some 40 miles to the south. On all sides, the country is hilly and broken, though not mountainous. To the east, the land becomes more and more marshy and the rivers drain north into the Bembi. The main rivers – which are not properly marked on any map available at present, are shown on the sketch map of the Umeda area. From the air, the Waina-Sowanda area looks quite flat; the dense tree cover concealing the many minor corrugations, the rocky limestone outcrops breaking through the prevailing friable mudstone, the steep gullies, marshy depressions and so on which make walking in the area more tiresome, especially in the wet season, than an aerial impression would seem to suggest.

The geology of the area – recent yellowish sedimentary deposits – may be responsible for its low fertility, as compared for instance to limestone areas, and still more so areas on the Sepik with volcanic soils which support heavy populations. The poor drainage and low altitude (c. 900 feet) also means very malarial conditions, further contributing to the low population density.

The prevailing vegetation of the area is dense primary forest. There are no grassland areas, though in some intensively cultivated areas, especially in the vicinity of permanent hamlet sites, groves
of permanent bamboo are found. These anthropogenic bamboo groves are an important source of food, however. There are also large areas of secondary bush, which are used for making gardens, since the trees, being smaller, may be more easily felled. The primary forest areas are used for hunting and collecting, as well as for new gardens, if necessary. Swampy areas and creeks, of which there are a great many, are marked by many small stands of sago, the staple food of the people. There are no large swamps and hence no really extensive sago stands, such as are found on the banks of the Sepik river itself, but the great number of these smaller sago stands makes up for this. Sago appeared to grow almost anywhere, except on truly rocky terrain, which was hardly to be found except on the Awsis, though it was concentrated in the lower, swampier, parts of the territory. It is probable that all the sago has been planted since the majority of the palms found are infertile, producing no seeds. The planting may have taken place over a great many generations, ever since sago people first inhabited the area, down to the present day, the older stands regenerating themselves as the newer ones were planted, gradually filling out the available sites.

iv. SETTLEMENT (see Map 2)
The four villages consist of a variable number of nucleated hamlets: Sowanda contains 10 separate hamlets, Waina-Wyalla only three. Umeda, the village with which I shall be mainly concerned, has six hamlets. The hamlets are all sited on relatively high ground, i.e. on low ridges. Villages cover quite large areas; it takes 20 minutes to walk from one end of Umeda village to the other, the hamlets being separated by stretches of secondary bush and bamboo groves. The villages are quite close to one another. Sowanda, Punda and Waina are all within three-quarters of an hour's walk from Umeda.

The villages are not pallisaded or surrounded by areas cleared of vegetation to discourage surprise attacks, though the ridge top sites do confer some military advantage. Attacks on villages do not seem to have been a common occurrence in pre-contact times, though they did take place (most fighting seems to have taken place in the bush).

The nucleated hamlets vary greatly in size. A typical hamlet
IO THE UMEDA SETTING

contains some 10 or so houses of wood and sago stems thatched
with sago leaves. Houses may be built either on the ground, or,
more usually, on stilts. The houses are simple, plain, and without
decoration. They are used, less for living in, than for storage
purposes: the inhabitants usually sleeping on the verandah or
underneath the house in good weather, only retiring inside when
forced to do so by rain or high winds. In front of the houses
there is a plaza, kept more or less free of weeds, where hamlet
activities are carried on, and, on occasion, ritual. However – and
this perhaps is rather an important point – there is no ‘Men’s
House’ such as is so commonly found in New Guinea village
societies. Each house is inhabited by a nuclear family, with or without additional members, or by groups of siblings of either sex. When the men congregate together for discussions of matters of common interest, to smoke or chew areca, they do so in the open, in the plaza.

Surrounding the hamlet are numbers of coconut palm, which, dominating the tangled secondary vegetation on the slopes of the hamlet ridge, mark out the hamlet-site from afar. Also planted on the slopes of the ridge are breadfruit and areca nut. Some colour is lent to the hamlet by decorative shrubs, cordylines and the shrub codiaum variegatum as well as introduced hibiscus and convolvulus.

Paths radiate out from the hamlet site, leading to the other hamlets and into the bush: these paths are narrow, overgrown and slippery, no attempt being made, except, occasionally, under administrative stimulus, to keep them in good order.

As will be explained in a later section, the people do not live in the permanent hamlets on the village ridge for a great part of the time. Besides the main hamlets, there are to be found, throughout the Waina-Sowanda area, a great many semi-permanent bush encampments and garden houses, which are used by the inhabitants when working sago, gardening, and hunting in the bush. The habitations found at these bush sites range between the simplest of shelters made of sago fronds propped on a framework of sticks, to relatively elaborate houses with walls and limbum floors. Some bush sites contain a number of separate houses, but it is more common to find long, open-sided shelters with raised beds ranged down either side, which can accommodate 20 or 30 people at a time. These are rather like Asian or South-American 'Long-houses' except that they are not used permanently, and that they generally lack walls. The more important of these bush sites are virtually separate, miniature hamlets, away from the main village: however all the inhabitants maintain houses in the main village as well, even if for most of the time they live at bush sites. The uniqueness of the village, as opposed to the 'bush' hamlet-sites is marked by the fact that it is only at the village site that coconut plantations are found, even though it would be perfectly possible to plant coconuts at the semi-permanent bush sites. The bush sites are marked by plantations of breadfruit and areca nuts, as well as decorative shrubs etc.
Numbers of semi-permanent bush sites are generally found grouped together in neighbourhoods occupied by particular clans or groups of allied clans who co-operate together in bush work. They may be surrounded by areas of gardens and secondary bush, with bamboo groves. These neighbourhoods reproduce, on a smaller scale, the pattern seen in the village (i.e. separate nucleated hamlets separated by secondary bush). Surrounding the bush neighbourhoods are large tracts of undisturbed forest, in which there are isolated gardens and here and there a hunting lodge or a sago-working site. Away from the village and the more intensively used tracts close to it, where the bush encampments are found, there is no shortage of land: but closer to the village, and especially where the four villages have borders with each other, there are areas of relatively intensive occupation, and here conflicts over the control of resources may arise.

V. THE PEOPLE

I did not collect data on physical anthropology. In general it may be said that the people show typical Papuan traits, being fairly short in stature, often muscular, particularly the men, and with considerable variability in skin colour, albinism occurring sporadically.

It was apparent that the environment was far from being a healthy one, and the ill-effects of malaria were exacerbated by a poor diet, particularly where the women and children were concerned. The enlarged spleen characteristic of malarial conditions was seen throughout, and was particularly marked in the children. I saw at least one case of rickets, and others no doubt had resulted in the deaths of the affected children. Infant mortality was high, and was increased, possibly, by female infanticide. Still more serious was a marked incidence, while I was in the field, of maternal mortality, which inevitably also resulted in the deaths of the new-born children as well. The people were also affected by dysentery and parasites, not to mention tuberculosis, filarial infections, tropical ulcers, and skin ailments, tinea and grille. Life expectancy was low, especially for women, but also for men. Perhaps I can exemplify this best by the fact that in Umeda village not one man could point to his own son's son, though this is in part a consequence of the late age of marriage for men.
About the temperament of the people it is perhaps not necessary to say anything, since it will appear at large below. But perhaps I should say here that they always showed themselves very friendly towards me, and were excellent informants except in that they drew the line at telling me, a young man and a bachelor, about certain things, particularly magical techniques, which were the prerogative of older, married men. Their main occupation, apart from productive work, was conversation, particularly, long, elaborate bouts of mildly competitive raillery, with much recourse to a stock of standardized obscenities. They neither stood on their dignity, nor ever behaved deferentially: they were highly egalitarian. They only occasionally indulged in angry rhetoric, generally against absent wrongdoers (e.g. sorcerers, adulterers) and still more rarely in actual violence. There were no 'big men' of the classic New Guinea variety, though some senior men were, certainly, influential and accorded some tacit respect. There were no significant inequalities in material possessions, consequently, no men wielded any social power on the basis of wealth. In this, they are somewhat aberrant by New Guinea standards. Previously, some men had reputations as pre-eminent fighters, but these men exercised no leadership over the society as a whole: the ultra-aggressive personality was not admired. The admired man was a good hunter, a good husband, but above all a man who was always 'open', willing to talk, to joke, to reveal himself in witty imitations and lay himself open to the sallies of his companions. The secretive man was regarded with suspicion: he was consumed, it was believed, with sexual jealousies, personal animosities which might tempt him to call in a sorcerer to destroy the unfortunate victims of his hatred.

vi. Material Culture

Before European contact, only stone tools were available to the people, who were not in contact with centres of trade. The implements made were small stone axes of polished basalt(?) usually about 3-4 inches long, hafted to a V-shaped handle. There are still large quantities of these axes in the region, but they are only used for ceremonial or magical purposes. For normal use they have been replaced by imported axes, bush-knives, and a few Malay cutlasses, made from discarded motor-
car springs by natives of West Irian. Considerable expertise is shown in the tempering of crude, blunt, ill-made trade-store knives till they acquire a very fine edge indeed (this is done by heating them repeatedly and burying them in special earths).

Metal tools are far from being, as yet, in adequate supply: much borrowing of these implements takes place, and many of the available tools are more or less broken, chipped, with improvised handles: still, they suffice.

One important implement is still made of stone: this is the sago powder (hon), a conical stone with a depression hollowed out in the base. This is lashed to a V-shaped handle, with the hollow base pointing downwards. With this implement pith is scraped out of the felled sago log, and is crushed in the trunk. Hon are made by selecting a suitable oval pebble which is then laboriously hammered into shape against an anvil stone. There is no steel tool to replace this pounder, though, outside the Waina-Sowanda area I saw a small fish tin, fastened to a base of wood, being used for the same purpose.

An axe, a bushknife, a sago pounder, and perhaps a small pocket knife are the most important of the tools used by Waina-Sowandas. In use besides are bone awls, scrapers made of the claws of parrots and the teeth of bandicoots, pig-bone spoons, chips of glass and flint, as well as more disposable items such as bamboo knives (previously used for barbering, but now only for butchery, having been replaced by razor-blades – mostly horribly blunt).

The weapon used by the people is the bow and arrow; spears are unknown. Bows, about six feet long, are made of black palm, arrows are tipped with bamboo blades in the main, though some metal heads, worked from discarded petrol drums outside the region, are in use as well, and are regarded as greatly superior to bamboo in killing-power. For warfare, barbed heads of black palm are used.

Cane armour was worn in battle, protecting the abdomen and chest of the warrior. This is an idiosyncracy of the region: evidently, it afforded considerable protection against arrows.

While the items mentioned hitherto are owned, made, and used, in the main, by men, the women have their special skills as well. Their particular province was making bark-cloth blankets (now replaced mainly by imported cotton blankets and calico
THE UMEDA SETTING

Male clothing consists of the aforementioned net-bag, and a selection of the other items. Besides the net-bag, most adult men wear penis-sheaths made of globular yellow gourds with incised black designs, which they make. Older men and the young go naked, however. Women donned skirts on marriage, and did not relinquish them at any time thenceforth, adding new aprons, front and back, as the earlier *strata* wore out. (Most were 'married' well before puberty.) Both sexes wore additional decoration in the form of flowers, perfumed leaves inserted in armbands or hair, feathers, and some paint or powder, from time to time, especially at rituals: as I shall discuss in due course, it was the young men who were the most assiduous in self-decoration. Most men possessed one or more pairs of shorts, which were originally handed out by the missions, and the women had cotton skirts and some tatty dresses and blouses: these were not worn except when administrative patrols were in the area. Relatively new imported items of clothing were worn by their owners at rituals, on occasion, but this practice was not widespread since imported clothes are still very scarce and hard to come by. It must be said that they were eagerly sought.

Pottery was never used in the area in pre-contact times, since Waina-Sowanda lies a long way from the pottery-producing areas on the middle Sepik and on the coast, and there seems to have been no long-distance trading in the area. Instead of pots (or imported substitutes) buckets made of folded spathes of the limbum palm are used for transporting water and other substances, and for cooking sago jelly. The method will be described at another place.

One other important technological device, the sago leaching apparatus, will be described in the next section.

vii. ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The basic foodstuff of the region is sago. Palms are felled by men with axes, and the outer bark is stripped from the upper surface of the felled sago-log with axe and bushknife. The pith is pounded by the men, who load the pounded material into
limbuk buckets. The women then take the pith to the nearest source of running water and leach it using the apparatus. This apparatus is made of sago spathes mounted on a framework of sticks. The filter, bound to the lower end of the spathe in which the washing is done is made of coconut-fibre. The water, containing the granules of starch which have been leached out of the pith, drains into a sump at the bottom, made of the second sago spathe. There, the starch settles in the bottom while the water drips out over the lip of the sump. From time to time the water is drained off and the sedimented starch is scooped out, to be packed in leaves.

I cannot state in figures the average product of a sago palm processed in this way – besides which it is evident that palms may vary very widely as to their starch content – but it can be said that a productive unit of a man and a woman can produce enough starch in a day to feed four or five times their number: intensive work on processing sago by members of the community can result in the quite rapid accumulation of surpluses. However, sago is at its best within a month or two of having been processed, unless it has been stored in specially constructed pits, which is not generally done.

Gardening activity comes a poor second to sago. All adult men have gardens, which unlike sago production, can be undertaken without the participation of women. Married men with wives are the most important gardeners however, the women doing most of the weeding and harvesting, though by no means all of it. Men are always responsible for the clearing off and burning of the garden, and the magical operations needed to make it grow. Men also do the fencing, which is done when the garden is half grown. Gardens are often made by groups of men co-operating together, each taking a separate sector within a common perimeter fence. The most important crop, but not the most esteemed, is taro. Yams are preferred as food, but do not grow very well in the poor, clayey, soil. The longest yam was no more than a foot and a half in length, a far cry from the 10-foot monsters reported from certain Sepik groups. Other crops are pitpit, sugar-cane, tobacco, apica, piper vine and a variety of greens – as well as magical herbs and perfumes.

Cultivated trees are coconuts, breadfruits, areca, and ‘tulip’ (gucum guemon). These make a very important contribution to
diet, particularly the leaves of *guetum giemon* which come second to bamboo shoots as a relish to be eaten with sago. Coconuts are not very plentiful, and are tabooed for long periods at a time for ritual reasons.

Collecting is important, particularly of bamboo shoots, which are the almost invariable accompaniment of any meal for more than half the year – many a meal consists of sago, bamboo shoots, and nothing else. Bamboo shoots are more important in the diet than any garden crop. Other items which are gathered in season are mangoes, cucurbits, and a variety of fruits, mushrooms, leaves etc. Most collecting is done by women.

Animal protein is provided by hunting. A few pigs are kept (never more than four in Umeda during my stay, and similar numbers in the other villages) but are not bred in captivity; these domestic pigs had been captured in the forest when small and bred up. A boar will be gelded. The contribution to diet of these pigs – which are really pets, though frequently very dangerous, ill-natured pets – is insignificant. Most meat comes from hunting wild pig in the forest, an activity which takes up a great deal of the time of the male members of the community. It cannot be said that meat from this source is plentiful, either; the best hunters did not kill more than one or two pigs a year. Pig-meat was eeked out with smaller game, possum, bandicoot, wildfowl etc., while the children caught still smaller game, lizards, frogs, mice, grasshoppers. Fish were caught in the streams, either by poison, or manually. Grubs, particularly sago grubs, made an important and welcome contribution to diet; less important, but also very welcome, were megapode eggs.

Many dogs were kept, to assist in hunting; they were half-wild, and lived mainly by what they could kill for themselves, or steal. My impression was that the dogs remained attached to their human patrons less for the food they received, than for the caresses of the women and children, and the privilege of sleeping by the fires.

There was remarkably little development of trade or exchange, and no system of ceremonial exchange, such as frequently encountered elsewhere in New Guinea. There was no standard medium of exchange, such as goldlip or cowrie shells or similar kinds of primitive ‘money’. This negative factor is of considerable importance in interpreting Waina-Sowanda social organization.
The idea of 'exchange' is, none the less, present, but the items that are exchanged are not material valuables, or livestock, but women. There is also a certain amount of formal gift-giving between kinsmen. Brideprice and death payments are not a feature of Waina-Sowanda economic activity.

In short, the economy of the area is very small-scale subsistence activity, with little emphasis either on gardening or livestock, and a very considerable emphasis on collecting and hunting — although the sago is planted, the kind of economic pattern of activity it engenders can hardly be called agriculture, and bears a much greater resemblance to the life of 'hunters and gatherers'. There are no specialist economic roles, or entrepreneurial roles: each family unit is self-supporting, though garden work is done communally, particularly the forest clearance and fencing operations. There is no long-distance trade to speak of — I noticed a single example of a heavy cowrie woman's necklace, only to discover that the cowries had been collected by the woman's son when visiting the prisoners in Vanimo jail, on the coast. Evidently, one or two items did filter in from the coast (40 miles to the north across a mountain range) in pre-contact times, but in insufficient quantities to engender a system of ceremonial exchange of valuables. I saw no items in use which could have originated on the Sepik. The people seem to have known about the existence of the sea previous to contact — though the first to see it were the prisoners and labourers who left the villages in the sixties — but as far as I know they had no knowledge of the Sepik river.

I will have more to say about economic activity in Chapter 2, and later on, in relation to the organization of the productive calendar by the ritual cycle, in Chapter 4. These notes should suffice to give the general background.
The Social Structure of Umeda Village

i. INTRODUCTION
In this chapter I will distinguish a number of 'levels' of social structure, and I shall proceed to discuss them in turn, beginning with the most inclusive. The levels I distinguish are as follows: the connubium; the village; village moieties; bush associations; the hamlet; hamlet moieties; clans and sub-clans; the household.

The basic theme of my analysis of Umeda social structure will be the role of alliances, originally set up via marriage exchange, as the means for establishing relationships between units larger than the sub-clan. I will also show how the idea of alliance is at the basis of the dual organisation into village and hamlet moieties. In later sections I will also say something about interpersonal kinship relations, marriage and sorcery.

ii. THE UMEDA-Punda CONNUBIUM
(a) Language
The four villages shown as part of the Waina-Sowanda group of villages on Map 1 fall into two dialect groups: Umeda-Punda, to the east, speak one dialect, Waina-Wylla and Sowanda, to the west, speak another, mutually intelligible dialect. The dialects spoken to the south, in the Amanab sub-district are not intelligible to Umeda speakers – (I shall call the Umeda-Punda dialect 'Umeda' henceforth). The dialects spoken by the Walsa people and the Imondas, to the north and east, are more cognate to Umeda speech than the Amanab dialects; communication with these groups is carried on in a sort of jargon, combining elements of both languages and pidgin expressions as well. A tentative classification of the languages of the whole area has been essayed by Loving and Bass of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (1964) but no progress has been made in systematic research on
any of these languages. Certain features of the Umeda language are discussed in Chapter 3.

(b) The three connubia

The two eastern Waina-Sowanda villages, Umeda and Punda intermarry and form a connubium together. Waina-Wyalla forms a second connubium and Sowanda a third: these latter villages are endogamous. A few marriages link Punda with two villages to the south, Wamuru and Yafar, in the Amanab subdistrict (Map 1), but for most purposes it is satisfactory to treat Umeda-Punda as a closed connubium. Similarly, occasional marriages have taken place between Waina-Wyalla and Walsa groups to the north, and between Waina-Wyalla and Sowanda, but these I did not study in detail. One Umeda is the offspring of a widow of Sowanda origin, who took up residence in Umeda. Apart from these isolated cases Waina-Wyalla and Sowanda are endogamous villages: they are certainly generally spoken of as such by the inhabitants.

Umeda and Punda have a common tradition of origin. A site, now overgrown with secondary forest and marked by a hunting-lodge, called Iuvnugkebe ('the place of rotten houses') is the traditional spot upon which the ancestral coconut palm grew from which Toag-tod, the first man and generic ancestor of the Umedas and Pundas, emerged, together with his dogs, his pigs, cassowaries etc. The Iuvnugkebe site is equidistant from both Umeda and Punda, which are about half an hour's walk apart. It is said that Umedas and Pundas inhabited a common village on this site before dispersing: the Umedas moving downstream along the course of the Mesa river, the Pundas moving upstream to the headwaters (see the course of the Mesa sketched in on the map). However, a closer examination of the traditions surrounding the various component parts of the Umeda-Punda connubium reveal that, if this story is true, i.e. that Umeda and Punda once inhabited a single village, it is not the whole truth. In fact, a considerable number of groups in the area are immigrants from elsewhere. For instance, though the present Iuvnugkebe site is on the boundary between Umeda and Punda territory, in no-man's land, the site is in fact occupied and utilized by a group of Pundas known as the edapul-terai 'children of the edapul-fern'. Now the Iuvnugkebe site is highly tabooed to all the other
Umeda-Punda clans (in fact, while passing it in the path between Umeda and Punda, travellers avert their eyes and hurry by). But to these edapud-terai it is neutral, since they trace their origin, not to the coconut palm which grew on the luvnukebe site, but to the forest fern. Their tradition of origin is different, and moreover, they have, at some time in the past, migrated from the village of Wamuru (otherwise known as Evada) in the Amanab sub-district. Such factors as these – and I shall have occasion to mention other, similar, instances, tend to be glossed over in speaking of the Umeda-Punda connubium as a whole: at one level of discourse, undapuda (Umeda-Punda) is seen as a homogeneous whole – while in other contexts distinctions are drawn.

(c) Relations outside the connubium

The traditional enemies of Umeda and Punda are the Sowandas and the Walsa tribes. Members of Umeda and Punda might participate in war-parties directed against either of these enemies: they would not, conversely, combine with Walsas or Sowandas against each other. Some distinction must be drawn between Walsa and Sowanda as categories of enemies. Warfare with Sowanda was distinctly ‘sporting’ in character, whereas the battles with Walsa groups were more deadly in nature. Sowanda has a separate origin myth, but the largest of the present Sowanda hamlets is of Umeda origin (the Sowanda agwatodna hamlet, Namosid). Relations between Umeda and Sowanda are close, despite the absence of marriage, and traditional kinship relations, based on putative marriage exchanges in the past, are maintained between members of individual Umeda and Sowanda clans. The villages are within shouting distance, and warfare, if it broke out between Umeda and Sowanda, would be heralded by some nights of mutual shouting and name-calling between the two villages, and would take place in an agreed spot, pre-arranged between the two sides. Armour would be worn, and, judging by genealogies I received, deaths were infrequent in battles of this ‘formal’ kind with Sowanda. Very different, it seems, were the raids which took place between parties of Walsa and Umeda warriors. While women and children were spared in fights with Sowanda – in fact, women participated as spectators and arrow-retrievers – in fights with the Walsas women and children were fair game. Formal battles do not seem to have been the rule.
between these antagonists; instead, sneak raids on isolated sago-parties or hamlets left unguarded claimed many lives till the arrival of the Dutch and the establishment of Waris patrol post resulted in the pacification of the Walsa, a change much to the advantage of the people of the eastern hamlets of Umeda, whose continued existence, was, it seems, seriously threatened by the raids of the numerically superior Walsa.

Outside the connubium, the cause of warfare and killings was conflict over resources. The Walsa groups today claim to be short of territory for exploitation as sago-planting land and hunting grounds. They certainly seem more crowded than the Waina-Sowanda groups, though it is difficult to say whether they are genuinely short of land. At any rate, the Walsas now claim that but for the arrival of the Dutch in the fifties, they would have wiped out the village of Umeda altogether, and would have occupied its territory. This is an exaggeration: the western Umeda hamlets (Wahumda and Sinai) did not seem to have suffered at all from Walsa raids. The eastern hamlets, particularly Kedewaina and Klahunnda, seem to have suffered severely. The largest Umeda hamlet, Wuhumda, is the one whose territory is the least accessible from the Walsa villages to the north.

The Umedas had no reciprocal territorial ambitions vis-à-vis the Walsa: such raids as they made into Walsa territory were retaliatory, and seem to have been on a small scale. In military terms the Walsa seem to have had the edge on Umeda.

Fighting with Sowanda also arose out of conflicts over resources, but of a different order of seriousness. Being in close proximity, Umeda and Sowanda were very familiar with each other's territory and resources. There was no dispute over where the boundary should lie, certain landmarks – large trees, stones or rivers being accepted markers of territory, nor had either side ambitions to take over territory wholesale, as the Walsa wished to take over some, or all, of Umeda territory. Instead conflict arose over stealing from gardens, poaching fish, grubs, or game, and escalated as each side took retaliatory steps against the real or imagined encroachments of the other. A typical sequence might be: an Umeda sees that a bandicoot's lair has been disturbed (a dog might do this, on its own) – he suspects a Sowanda poacher. He enters Sowanda territory and burns down a hunting-lodge. The Sowandas, outraged, reply in kind. Umedas burn a Sowanda
garden-house, and pillage the garden. At this point a battle becomes likely. The clan of the wronged parties on either side collect their allies from within the connubium and commence the mutual shouting mentioned previously. The mobilization is far from general: Sowanda, with half the population (c. 180) of Umeda-Punda (c. 400) is not at a disadvantage, since only individual clans and their allies are involved: moreover, as I mentioned, certain relationships (which are respected in battle) subsist between Umeda and Sowanda clans, increasing the 'security circle'. (The phrase is Peter Lawrence's, cf. Lawrence 1971.) In the melee, fighting is mainly between individuals, and absolute numbers on either side - likely to be no more than 20 or so - do not greatly matter. The warriors, painted black, wearing their body armour, advance on each other, the basic tactic being to induce the opposing warrior to release his arrow too soon, so that he can be taken at the rush before having time to draw his bow again, or flee. Fighting took place in the forest, providing plenty of natural cover. In this form of fighting, or duelling, as it might be called, deaths, if they occurred, resulted not from immediately mortal wounds but from infected sores which could result from the relatively minor damage usually inflicted. The vital organs were effectively protected by the armour, but there were many instances of wounds to the buttocks and thighs, evidently the consequence of firing too soon and an unsuccessful effort to escape from the presence of the cooler Bowman. The arrows used were hideously barbed, but I was told that some men were expert at extracting such arrows by cutting in from the other side and pulling them through the flesh. All the older men had been wounded, some frequently, and pointed to their scars - like President Johnson - with proud grins.

(d) Non-antagonistic relations outside the connubium

Because the connubium is not absolutely stable over time, but the product of slow processes of accretion and fragmentation certain relationships persist with groups no longer members of the connubium, but who were, at earlier periods, allied to it by marriage. This persistence of alliance relationships is a cardinal feature of social structure in the region, as I will detail at length below. I have mentioned the existence of such relationships between certain Umeda clans and opposite numbers in Sowanda:
the men of Namosid speak of themselves as ‘daughters’ (mol) of Umeda – the ‘mother’ (ava). That is, as descendants of Umeda women married to Sowanda men. This is a façon de parler only. Another tradition, maintained in Umeda, is that the Sowandas (of Namosid, at least) split off from Umeda in the distant past, as a result of a quarrel about stealing magical white earth (ogurubwe). I did not have an opportunity to discuss this tale with the Sowandas themselves: as far as I know they regarded themselves as no less autochthonous than the Umedas, i.e. as progeny of an ancestral coconut palm. (However, it must be stressed, that the myths of origin do not form a coherent system. At one level, Umedas, Pundas, Sowandas and all the rest are satuda that is, ‘children of the coconut’ referring to the primary origin myth, while each separate social unit or clan, generally has an origin story of its own, not necessarily compatible with the primary myth.)

Besides this general idea that Sowanda, or Namosid, is the ‘daughter’ of Umeda, more specific relationships unite particular clans, who claim to have intermarried in the past. Members of such clans will refer to each other as kumini/awanagai, i.e. as extra-clan ‘fathers’ and ‘brothers’ (see below, section iv). Such men would avoid wounding one another in a fight: they would also be in a position to visit one another’s houses, either in the bush, or, more rarely, in the village, and exchange hospitality.

Sowanda is not the only neighbouring group with whom old alliance relationships persist in this form. In the case of Punda’s relations with Wamuru and Yafar, such relations are not confined to merely putative marriages, since exchanges of women still occur. Meanwhile, the edapud-terai maintain links with those with whom they exchanged when they were part of Wamuru. Turning to Umeda, the same is true of the relation of Waina clan with Imonda – this Waina must not be confused with the village ‘Waina’ (in Waina-Wyalla) which is quite separate. This clan originally inhabited a site equidistant between the main Umeda ridge and Imonda, to the east, known as Nissankebe. At that time, they intermarried with the Imondas. They left that site after having been reduced by an epidemic and joined with Kede clan to form Kedewaina hamlet. The original relationship with Imonda is still kept alive, although it is Imonda that is blamed for the epidemic which caused them to abandon their
Nissankebe hamlet. The other villages have similar links: for instance, Waina-Wyalla has links with Walsa groups, and with Sowanda.

There is, however, a special category of extra-connubial relationship which has nothing to do with traditions of alliance relationships in the past. This is the *sehe* relationship, which is a relation voluntarily entered into between individuals who acknowledge no previous connection, but who contract a formal friendship. One would call these 'trading partnerships' if trade were a more important feature of life in the region: as it is small quantities of gifts do pass along these channels, latterly in increasing quantities, but the benefits are more social than economic.

*Sehe* relationships are specific to particular hamlets: thus Kedewaina hamlet has relations of this kind with Epini, a Walsa village, while Klalumda hamlet has relations to Mindepoke, another Walsa village, and so on. Punda hamlets do not contract relations with Walsa villages, but with villages to the south, in the Amanab area. The existence of *sehe* bonds between individuals does not preclude the hamlets concerned from making war on one another.

The relationship is entered into between coevals of equal social status. A namesake (*awnan*) is a suitable choice, if practicable. Meetings will take place casually in the bush, and if visits are exchanged between members of different connubia, the visitor will place himself under the patronage of his *sehe* partner for the duration of his visit. In warfare, *sehe* partners would avoid one another, like allies. Small gifts, but not large payments of valuables, passed between partners. In pre-contact times such partnerships were the source of the small quantities of trade beads, shells, and similar objects, which found their way into the Waina-Sowanda area. More significant, probably, were exchanges of magical and other cultural knowledge. It is still the practice to stock up with magical perfume plants or other magical materials, when visiting a foreign village. And no doubt, though I have little direct evidence on this point, innovations in ritual practice were communicated through these channels. Mada, an old man of Kedewaina, one of my main informants, had a detailed knowledge of Epini (Walsa) garden magic, which he represented, for my benefit, as Umeda magic, till other
informants of mine contradicted him. New varieties of garden crops also entered the area in this way.

iii. THE VILLAGE: UMEDA AND PUNDA

Having said something about the relation between the con-nubium and its neighbours, I now turn to the relations between its two component villages.

(a) Village names

The spellings Umeda, Punda, Waina, Wyalla, and Sowanda are those used by the Government. Umedas pronounce the name of their village 'umda (with the stress falling on the first syllable) and the names of the other villages 'puda, sa'wada, 'waina, wagala. The Government spellings conform, not to the local pronunciation of the names of the villages, but to the Imonda-Walsa pronunciation.

I use the Government spelling for village names, partly because they have appeared, and are likely to continue to appear, in the literature on New Guinea, and partly because it is convenient to have some means of distinguishing, orthographically, between 'Village' names, and the same names when used as names of clans and hamlets. Thus when referring to Umeda, the village, I write 'Umda', when referring to the hamlet also called by that name, I write 'Umeda'. The same applies to Punda (the village) versus 'Puda' (the clan/hamlet).

The villages take their names from the name of the clan associated, in each case, with the founding ancestor. In the context, it is usually clear whether it is to the whole village, or only that particular segment of it, to which reference is made.

(b) The formation of the village

The villages, as I have described, consist of groups of hamlets sited on a common ridge. Umeda and Punda both have six hamlets each. The villages have come into being by a process of accretion, which will be described in more detail in the sections on village moieties and clans.

Together, the villages of Umeda and Punda form a single entity, recognized by the inhabitants themselves, based on territorial propinquity, marriage, economic and ritual association,
and mingled with antagonism stemming from sorcery, and its expression, fighting. Solidarity and conflict both enter into the relationship.

When speaking in general terms, informants would recognize a generalized mother's brother/sister's son relationship between the two villages. But the villages were not exogamous: not everybody was the offspring of marriages involving both villages. By no means all Umedas had a mother's brother in Punda, or vice-versa: the extension of such a generalized matrilateral alliance across village lines was a polite fiction, like calling the Sowandas the 'daughters' of Umeda. The usage stemmed, not from its true applicability to the individual case, but from the fact that marriage exchange was, none the less, the basis of the relation between the two villages.

Marriage is patri-virilocal. There were no cases in Umeda of men permanently residing with their wives' people: though this did not preclude husbands from spending periods living with affines in the bush. The majority of women's first marriages involve sister-exchange, either of true sisters, or classificatory sisters. Marriage will be discussed in detail later; here, it is necessary only to say that the basic unit of exogamy is the hamlet (not the village) and that hamlets may marry women of other hamlets with whom they are not already allied, i.e. groups with whom they have not exchanged women for at least two generations. Marriage takes place without brideprice — a fact which it is necessary to emphasize, because it is in striking contrast to the situation usually encountered in New Guinea — but is reciprocated by gifts of meat which must be rendered while the marriage lasts, and by informal gifts and services from time to time. The basic means of reciprocating the gift of a woman, is a counter-gift, also of a woman. The proportion of actual sister-exchanges is very high.

The basic units which engage in marriage exchange are the hamlets, and the component clans within particular hamlets, rather than villages as whole units. None the less, people are prepared to speak of Umeda and Punda 'exchanging' (magritav) as whole units. There is an element of wishful thinking in this. I will later discuss the severe demographic imbalance between the sexes which is a feature of both Umeda and Punda. Women were a very scarce resource: in fact, women were the major scarce good
distributed by the social structure. It was clearly comforting to think of Punda as a pool of available women – especially from the standpoint of my main informants, who were the younger, unmarried men.

The facts were somewhat different: far from being rich in women, Punda was even less provided with them than Umeda, though the situation was helped by the fact that Punda obtained a number of women from Wamuru and Yafar. In both Umeda and Punda, the majority of marriages took place within the village.

The village is only notionally a unit for alliance and marriage purposes: in the domain of ritual, the unity is much more firmly established, as we shall see. Umeda and Punda co-operated wholesale in major curing ritual, and individual Pundas and Umedas collaborated in curing rituals of a more minor kind. Co-operation in curing ritual was the more significant, for both parties, in that suspicions of sorcery ran high between the two villages. Sorcery, and the antagonism generated by it, was the second major strand, with marriage, in the relations between the two villages. Marriage and sorcery are directly correlated in the eyes of the people – according to my Umeda informants, all deaths, or almost all, were the result of sorcery, and all sorcery came from Punda. The Pundas denied – as the Umedas did too – that they practised sorcery: they attributed deaths to Umeda sorcerers and sorcerers from Wamuru and Yafar. The Umedas – who did not marry with Wamuru and Yafar, never blamed sorcery on them. And similarly, neither village accused Sowanda of sorcery, although Sowanda was the 'traditional enemy' of both villages – because they did not marry the Sowandas. Waina (clan) married with Imonda until, as mentioned above, they were decimated by an epidemic. This epidemic (of dysentery) was blamed on two Imonda sisters, Yas and Mut, who solicited their Imonda kin to kill the Wainas, which they did so effectively that (to quote the story my informant gave me), 'the rivers were dammed up with dead bodies'. After this, the Wainas ceased to marry Imondas and now they state that they do not fear Imonda sorcery any more.

I will discuss sorcery in detail in a separate section, since it is an aspect of interpersonal relations, as well as being a factor in the political antagonism between the two villages. The point I