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The Visible Ordering of Things

Like many ethnographies, this book pursues a mythic path trod by the culture it purports to investigate. The story of A'aisa, the mythic hero and founder of Mekeo culture, provides the starting point, and the destination. It is appropriate, therefore, to retell his exploits here. This is not a complete version, nor an esoteric version of his story, but rather a bare outline such as is known to all ordinary Mekeo men and women, and even children.

A'aisa was found by an old woman, Epuke, who picked up a dried branch from the ground while collecting firewood. She took it home later to find concealed inside it a small boy. Childless and alone, the old woman adopted him as her own.

As a boy, A'aisa goes hunting with the adult men. They find nothing, but little A'aisa, with his special knowledge, bags a huge catch. The men then grab A'aisa's game from him, pretending it is theirs and take it home, leaving nothing for A'aisa and his old mother. A'aisa is angry and determined to have revenge. He invites the women of the village to go fishing with him, but he tricks them. With his special powers, he steals the women. A huge mountain grows up under the canoe in which the women and he spend the night, leaving them stranded there. A'aisa refuses to return the women to their husbands, despite their pleas. The men come after A'aisa, swearing to kill him and regain their wives, but as they begin to throw their spears and fire arrows at him, A'aisa, from the top of the mountain, strikes them down with his powers. The women weep and loudly beg A'aisa to have pity on their husbands. At last, he relents and brings the men to life again, and tells them to return home.

Having demonstrated his superior powers and having punished the men for their meanness, A'aisa now gives them some of his special knowledge. He

confers upon humankind ritual knowledge, and then creates the roles of the man of kindness (*lopia auga*), of the spear (*iso auga*), of cinnamon bark (*faia auga*), and of sorrow (*ugauga auga*). Along with these gifts, he also bestows death upon human beings.

The final episode of A'aisa's story deals with his quarrel with his brother Isapini. Isapini visits his brother but encounters what appears to be a small boy but in fact is A'aisa in disguise. Isapini asks to speak to the boy's father, failing to recognise A'aisa. Whereupon A'aisa is insulted and moved to anger. He decides to kill Isapini's son, his own namesake, A'aisa, with *ugauga* sorcery, thus originating both *ugauga* sorcery and jealousy (*pikupa*). Isapini retaliates by killing A'aisa's son, his namesake Isapini, with his own powers of *mefu* sorcery. The grieving A'aisa leaves Mekeo carrying the decomposing body of his son and searches for a place to bury it. He finally leaves the world of the living for good and makes his abode at Kariko, a hill on the coast toward the west, in the direction of the setting sun, where he still is believed to dwell with the shades of the dead.[1]

A'aisa's gifts to humankind included esoteric knowledge, death, and—as I shall show—self-consciousness. The task of this book is to unravel the threads that, for Mekeo, bind all three.

Although this study is primarily a descriptive ethnography, it is admittedly an unusual one in that it moves away from the social relationships, social interactions and shared cultural beliefs that are the usual focus of the ethnographic endeavor. My subject matter consists of dreams, waking visions, reverie—various kinds of elusive subjective experiences revealing the subtle, almost invisible interaction between the Mekeo mundane order of things and the hidden realm of sacred and cosmic forces. Perhaps this might be regarded as an "ethnography of inner experience," an exploration of the inner worlds of particular Mekeo individuals. Yet this seems too pretentious a label and to promise much more than I can hope to deliver. It would be claiming far too much to suggest a charting of inner experience of the same order as that possible for the ethnographer of the visible, public aspects of a culture. I cannot provide a "thick description" (Geertz 1975c) of Mekeo inner worlds in the sense of a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of them. At best, I can offer glimpses, evocative rather than definitive, yet still revealing. In short, this book must itself be regarded as exploratory in its methods and approach.

The material on esoteric knowledge, cosmology, dreaming and subjective states which provides the major focus of the book derives from fieldwork carried out in the early 1980s. My understanding of Mekeo culture, however, also draws upon fieldwork done a decade earlier from 1969–1971 (and in several prior and subsequent short visits). The radically different perspectives emerging from these two phases of fieldwork create an antinomy threaded through the whole work. The reader must be ever wary of the movement in the text between these two contrasting perspectives, a tension which I shall not

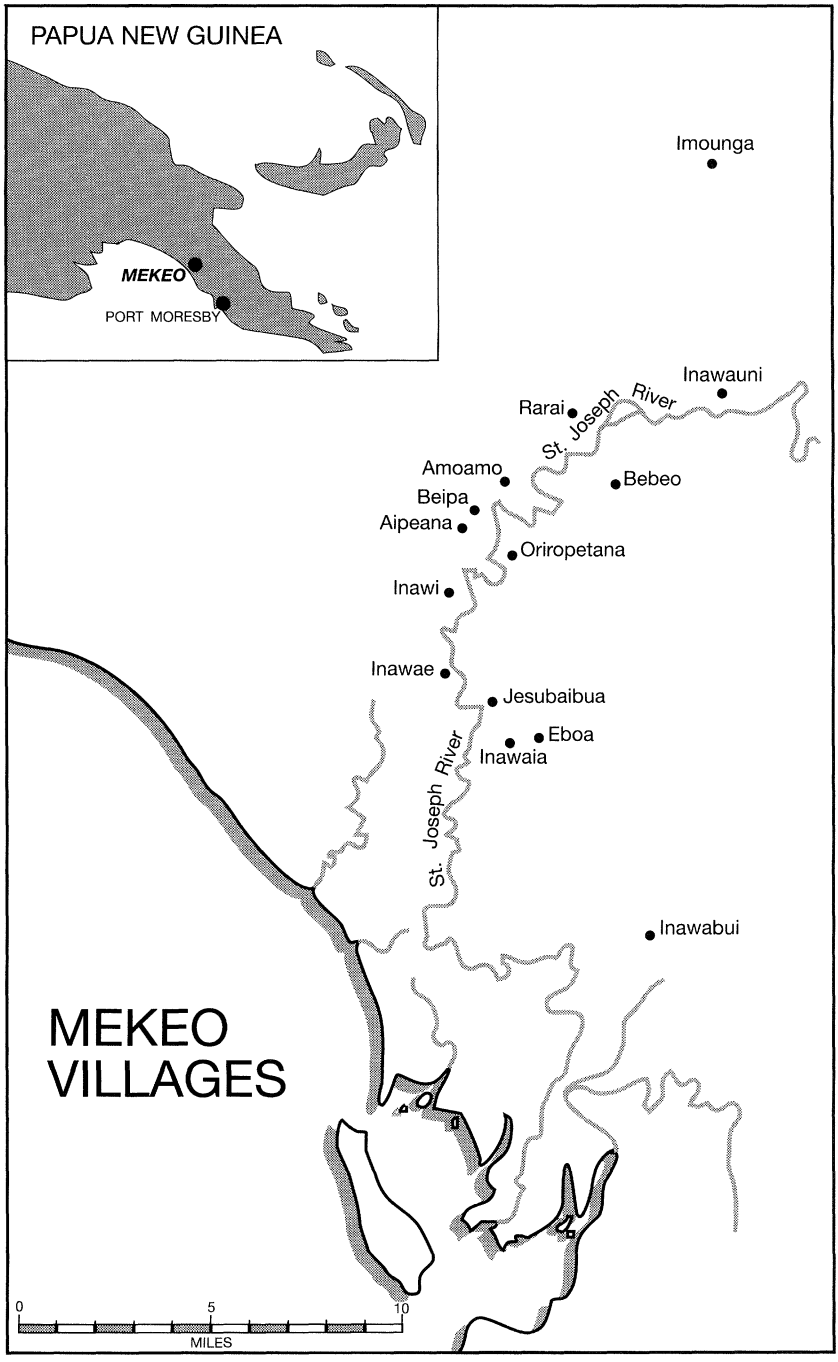
attempt to resolve until the final chapters. It is more usual in ethnographic works to open with at least a brief discussion of the nature of the fieldwork undertaken. I postpone this, however, until chapters 3 and 4 for the simple reason that no brief account will suffice.

Visual Impressions

Inner worlds cannot, of course, be understood in isolation from the public, outer worlds with which they interconnect. My account begins where every ethnographic enquiry, although not necessarily its reporting, must start: with what one can actually observe of Mekeo culture and social action, and with the explanations members give of its workings. Much is revealed in the actual, visible layout of communities. Although changes have occurred over the decades my fieldwork has spanned, the general appearance and tenor of village life in the early 1980s had not altered greatly since the mid-1960s. What is described here refers, unless otherwise specified, to the early 1980s. I follow the convention of an "ethnographic present" to indicate the particular chronological vantage point afforded to me, but obviously changes have occurred since, and are continuing to occur.

Mekeo culture conveys an immediate visual sense of order and harmony—a sense of order underlined in the articulate descriptions Mekeo themselves give of their society. My first impressions of their large, populous villages was of a smooth, measured pace of life. There was an appearance of formality in the structuring of village space and in the calm and dignified manner in which men and women went about their daily tasks. As I learned more, these initial impressions only seemed confirmed. It is a culture where hereditary status plays a large part: everyone seems to know precisely their appropriate place in the scheme of things and are ever conscious of the dangers of forgetting it. Even in the bustle and excitement of grand feasts there is an imposing air of organization, of time-honored ceremonial hospitality and etiquette. In the center of the village, at the clan meeting houses, hosts and guests play their parts urbanely; hereditary clan leaders and elders preside over affairs with impassive dignity. Overall, one cannot fail to gain the impression of a smooth and careful social ordering of things. There has been much recent comment on the emphasis Western cultures give to visual modes of perception and analysis (reviewed by Clifford 1986:11–12) and hence their dominance in ethnographic writing. Nevertheless, I am confident the following chapters will show that concern with appearances and visible surfaces—and what they conceal—are as much a focus of Mekeo cultural interest and elaboration as my own.

Oral tradition tells that the Mekeo people originated in the mountains and then descended to the plains, settling at various locations and driving before them the Waima and Roro people until they occupied all the fertile plains and only the arid coast was left to their enemies.[2] Like their coastal neighbors, the Waima and Roro (Monsell-Davis 1981) and the Nara-Kabadi people located


PAPUA NEW GUINEA
MEKEO
PORT MORESBY
Imounga
Inawauni
Rarai
St. Joseph River
Amoamo
Bebeo
Beipa
Aipeana
Oriropetana
Inawi
Inawae
Jesubaibua
Eboa
Inawaia
St. Joseph River
Inawabui
MEKEO VILLAGES
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MILES

immediately to the east (Wilson 1975), the Mekeo are an Austronesian-speaking group. Culturally and linguistically, they are closely related to the Bush Mekeo people, who inhabit the more inaccessible swampy region to the northwest (Mosko 1985). Further north, into the mountains, are the Kuni, and beyond them the Mafulu and other non-Austronesian mountain peoples; to the west are the non-Austronesian peoples of the Papuan Gulf.

Situated between the coast and the mountains, and occupying the richest agricultural land in the region, the Central Mekeo were, and are, in an advantageous position to trade their abundant garden crops for the produce of both coastal and mountain regions and to control access to trade routes between coast and mountains. Since the Second World War, and especially since the opening of the Hiritano Highway to Port Moresby in the mid-1970s, Mekeo have become cash-rich by selling their garden produce and betel-nut harvest in the markets of the capital. Most villages boast locally owned trade stores, and many people own trucks and other vehicles. In the early 1980s there was constant travel to and from Port Moresby as people went to town to sell their produce (this was one respect in which village life had changed notably since the late 1960s, when vehicles were scarce and passable roads were few). Rich in terms of subsistence crops—the staples include plantains and taro as well as many introduced plants—and with the ready availability of cash from the sale of produce in town, Mekeo are not unaware of their advantages over less well-situated, less well-endowed groups such as their coastal neighbors. They are justly proud of their fertile and abundant land and boast of a way of life that gives them everything they need, and more, without excessive labor.

Mekeo live in large nucleated villages, ranging in size from the largest of about 1,000 inhabitants to the smallest of about 130; Mekeo number approximately 7,000. The community in which I conducted fieldwork was the third largest, with a population of just under 900.[3] The region is located on the central Papuan coast, about seventy miles northwest of the capital, Port Moresby. Fourteen villages are situated along the St. Joseph River as it traverses a fertile plain that extends inland from the coastal hills of Waima to the foothills of the mountains to the north. Occasionally, on very clear days, the mountains are visible—steep, craggy, and of a startling intense purple against the tropical sky, almost like a child's painting. There are usually no such vistas, however, and beyond the cleared spaces of human settlement one tends to feel shut in by the surrounding bush, the gardens, or large stretches of cane grass. Perhaps for this reason Mekeo refer to entering the village as "going outside" (*pealai*) or going "out into the open." Cut off from the cooling sea breezes by the coastal hills, the Mekeo plain is intensely hot and humid, and much of it is flooded in the wet season, December to April.

A Mekeo village community is composed of named patrilineal descent groups, each, ideally, with its own hereditary leader (*lopia*) and its own *ufu*, or meeting house.

The *Ufu* are large open structures found in central, prominent positions in the village. They are roofed with thatch (or, nowadays, iron), and are built on posts, as are the domestic dwellings, with broad steps or ladders at the front by which to enter. The dwellings of the members of the descent group, where married men live with their wives and children, cluster behind each group's *ufu,* thus dividing the village settlement into a number of different wards. These divisions are not, however, immediately apparent since the houses of black palm, bamboo, and thatch are built close together in rows along a clear central thoroughfare. This is the *pagua inaega* (literally, the belly or womb of the village);[4] it is usually many yards wide, with the *ufu* of each descent group facing it directly and the domestic houses ranged behind.

Ufu have no walls, and since these structures face the central thoroughfare of the village, what takes place there is visible to all. Mekeo appreciate generosity and largesse, and fortunately they can indulge in it. Anyone, I was assured, might go to any *ufu* (each descent group represented in the village is supposed to maintain at least one) and be provided with food and shelter. As a visitor, I was in fact usually taken by my contacts to one or another of the community's *ufu,* where we would be received with some ceremony. A mat would be carefully spread out for us to sit on, and men would arrive, shake our hands, and sit down to talk and chew betel nut. Women also would come to shake hands, perhaps because I am a woman, but did not stay, although some would soon reappear to bring refreshments which the men served. (The *ufu* is reserved for the men; women can gather in the *ufu* only to mourn a corpse that has been laid there just prior to burial.)

On my first visits to the region in the late 1960s, I was received everywhere with an almost embarrassingly extravagant hospitality. I could not sit down to talk for a few minutes with people I might find on their veranda without someone insisting on preparing a large cooked meal or serving a lavish tea with store-bought sweet biscuits, bread, and tinned meat. Should I protest, people would explain it was the custom and that any visitor should be received in this way. Indeed, it was the special duty of the *lopia* to provide hospitality to all visitors who came to their *ufu.*

A large village is composed of several descent groups and is an impressive sight with its wide open central space and long rows of houses. Such a community, of several hundred inhabitants, conveys an almost metropolitan air (cf. Guis 1936). From either end of the central plaza, tracks or roads lead out of the village. Pigs and dogs occasionally wander across this central space and vehicles drive through it, yet it has an air of formality. As one walks down the plaza, one becomes aware of the scrutiny of the people sitting concealed on their verandas or resting in the shade beneath the houses. There is no shade in the *pagua inaega,* the sun beats down and reflects off the flat sandy ground; no trees, fences, or other encumbrances clutter this carefully cleared and swept

area. It is impossible not to feel a little self-conscious and exposed whenever one traverses this imposing, preeminently public space.

A more informal route is the path circling the outer periphery of the settlement. Between the last row of houses and the surrounding bush is a cleared space, but it is a much less tidy one than the central plaza. Some shade is provided by the surrounding bush and the occasional shrub and tree allowed to grow here. This is the village's "backyard"; here are found small sheds and outhouses, fowl yards, pigs and dogs (both of which roam freely but are more likely to be found scavenging here), and people chopping wood, splitting coconuts to feed pigs or make copra, making their way to or from the river (still the community's only water supply in the 1980s) to fetch water or to bathe, or returning from the gardens.[5] Most people in fact move around the village via either this backyard or the space between rows of houses, rather than across the central plaza. This area on the village's periphery extends several yards behind the outer row of dwellings to a natural wall of bush and tall trees. People retire into the shelter of this surrounding growth for defecation, each household using the area just to the back of its dwelling; the domestic pigs that scavenge here dispose of refuse. Many little paths lead through the encircling bush to the river, to the gardens, and to the areas of bush and cane grass stretching beyond. People locate gardens at some distance from the village to avoid the need to construct fences to keep out domestic pigs.

At the very edge of the settlement, where the backyard merges into thick bush, and well separated from the other houses, may be found an occasional small dwelling referred to as a *gove.* In the past, young bachelors and widowers of all ages were required to live in *gove;* throughout both phases of my fieldwork, however, the segregation of unmarried youths and widowers was not strictly observed.[6] Most young men spent the time before marriage away from the village, either at school or in paid employment. Only a few elderly widowers chose to live permanently segregated in this way; in my experience, they were usually individuals identified as powerful and feared ritual experts. Just as one cannot spend long in a Mekeo community without being told something about the duties and functions of the *lopia,* so it is that one is warned about the dangerous presence of the *ugauga,* possessors of death-dealing ritual powers. Such persons are not, however, unidentified bogeymen or despised misfits, as in some Melanesian societies (Stephen 1987b). They are men of rank who employ their lethal rituals to uphold the social order and the authority of the *lopia.* Their location, at the very margin of domestic space in the encircling bush where people hide themselves to defecate, is indicative of the dark forces with which they are said to deal.

A brief examination of the layout of the settlement begins to reveal a sketchy outline of a social ordering (cf. Hau'ofa 1981:chapter 3). At the center of society are the descent group meeting houses, the *ufu,* presided over by the

descent group heads, the *lopia.* Ranged behind these public centers of collective activity are the private houses of the adult married men, their wives, and children, as well as unmarried girls and widows. Beyond this middle domestic space, on the periphery of the settlement, are found the *gove,* small shelters occupied by unmarried males, bachelors, and widowers. These marginal males without women are suspected of associating with the *ugauga,* who are reputed to maintain secret dwellings (*fauapi*) deep in the bush, where they are presumed to practice their dangerous rituals.

The orderly, structured sense of space conveyed in the layout of the village is underlined in the controlled movements, gestures, and careful deportment of its inhabitants (cf. Hau'ofa 1981:117–19, 301–302). Men carry themselves tall, heads held high, with straight backs and shoulders, giving the impression of height even in its absence. They move smoothly, creating a very deliberate and careful public presentation of self. Mekeo always contrive to look unruffled. Males pay more attention to grooming and self-decoration than women; indeed, they often convey a dandified, almost effeminate vanity to some European eyes. Mekeo men, however, do not, as European rumor would have it, dress to attract male lovers but, rather, to inspire female admiration. In the Mekeo view, it is men, not women, who must make themselves beautiful to the opposite sex. Fashions change even in Mekeo villages, but in the late 1960s and 1970s, male beauty required a tall, wasp-waisted figure and lightly but strongly muscled limbs. A great rounded halo of hair, carefully teased and trimmed, and a smooth, light brown to yellowish skin, free of all facial and body hair, were also *de rigueur.* Most men either removed their eyebrows entirely, or plucked them to a fine line, giving their smooth, almost oriental, faces with high cheekbones a somewhat haughty expression. On holidays and special occasions, married men dress in close-fitting, ankle-length sarongs of plain bright red, yellow, or blue, cinched tightly at the waist with a fancy belt. Scarfs, bead necklaces, earplugs and earrings, flowers in the hair, and arm bands and leg bands complement outfits worn with a deliberately nonchalant elegance. Young unmarried youths, ever on the lookout for prospective brides, usually take pains to look their best at all times in the hope of attracting female attention. Even elders may go to considerable lengths to present a fine appearance in public. By the 1980s, young unmarried men were adopting more of the European-influenced styles of Port Moresby—tradestore-bought shorts and shirts, jeans and T-shirts—and only older men continued to favor the distinctive attire just described.

Females, including young girls, never lavish much attention on their appearance beyond keeping themselves neat and clean, and there was no change to be observed in female dress in the early 1980s. For a brief time after her marriage, a bride's in-laws customarily decorate, oil, and dress her elaborately so that she can be shown off to all, and during this period as a newly married woman (*amage mamaga*) the bride does no physical work. Women and girls, as they themselves will insist, are usually far too busy to be bothered about

unnecessary primping. They cut their hair close to their heads, wear few ornaments, and usually dress in rough grass skirts for gardening and in simple trade-store skirts and blouses for less heavy work. On holidays and special occasions they wear new clothes of bright colors, but never with the calculated effect and studied elegance of the men. Nevertheless, it should not be imagined Mekeo women are colorless drudges. They are confident and assertive in their bearing, they openly boast of their physical strength and are proud of their capacity for hard work. Indeed, young girls are said to be admired more for the strength they display in hard work than for their prettiness. Tall, sturdily built, muscular girls are much admired. Females move purposefully, speak assertively, gesture firmly: even girls give the impression of strong, motherly capability. To an outsider they may evince a straightforward homely honesty, especially compared with the artificiality of dress and makeup common to women in Western cultures, yet there is a reserve and subtlety behind this apparent openness, as there is behind every aspect of Mekeo life. Overall, Mekeo are a handsome people, and what a person lacks in looks can always be made up for by style. Certain individuals, both male and female, are possessed of unique and striking beauty, and such beauty is not necessarily limited to youth.

Gender Relationships

This is a patrilineal society in which group membership, property rights, rank, and ritual knowledge are transmitted through males, and as is common in most Melanesian societies, the important divisions of labor are based on gender. To women fall the continuous backbreaking work of weeding, planting, and maintaining gardens, and carrying heavy loads of vegetables, firewood, and water; they feed the pigs and other domestic animals; they cook, clean, wash, keep the village swept and tidy, and look after their large families. Young unmarried girls usually work even harder at these tasks than married women, as they are not debilitated by childbearing and breast-feeding or hampered by the care of babies and small children. A Mekeo woman longs for the time when she has a daughter old enough to be of real help to her. A middle-aged woman I knew well, who had six handsome sons, was forever telling me how hard her life had been because she had borne only male offspring, who just created work for her. She lived for the day when the eldest would marry and she would have a strong young daughter-in-law to take the burden off her aging shoulders. Another family I knew had several hefty, hardworking unmarried daughters whom the mother did not want to see marry until she had daughters-in-law to replace them. Females are a valuable asset in any household, and are so not only for their childbearing capacities.

In contrast to the daily grind experienced by women and girls, males perform tasks that require short bursts of intensive labor: they clear bush for new

gardens, construct fences, build and repair houses, and hunt and fish. Adolescent boys and young unmarried men, unlike girls, are not expected to work hard but are free to spend their time largely as they please. In the past, adolescence was a time when youths devoted themselves primarily to courting and finding a suitable bride (see also Hau'ofa 1981:116–20). For the last three decades or so, however, most boys have spent these years away at school or working for a wage away from the village. Today, men and youths drive trucks and tractors and engage in various business activities, but female labor is still required in any farming activity. Both men and women share the task of taking garden produce and betel nut to sell in town.

Males are not unaware that overall theirs is an easier life; they will tell you that this is just how things are. I have often heard men comment, as we sat back leisurely, chatting in the clan meeting house while sweating women ran back and forth delivering endless platters of cooked food and huge kettles of tea and coffee: "We don't force our girls and women to work, they are happy to do it. Their mothers did it and now they do. Women are proud of their work."

To large extent, women share this view, at least in their public expressions of opinion. They are proud of the vital contribution made by their labor. They point out that without them, life simply could not go on: there would be no gardens, no food, no pigs, no people—nothing. They know their contributions are essential and valued, and they are aware they are valued as persons because of their femininity (and not in spite of it).

The word for female, *papiega* (*papie* = married woman; *ga* = suffix of relationship), has strongly positive connotations. The definition of a nonhuman or inanimate object as "feminine" is its capacity to multiply or to contain additional entities. Something that is male (*maguaega*) is both a single and sterile entity; thus land described as female is fertile and productive, whereas male land is infertile. A truck might be regarded as female because it carries many people, a car as male because it carries only one (or few). A single quartz crystal charm (used in many esoteric rituals) is *maguae* (male); a cluster is *papiega* (female). Women are regarded as more altruistic since they look after others, whereas men are concerned with their own selfish pursuits. Elderly parents of both sexes bemoan the lack of adult daughters to look after them in their old age, just as younger women complain of the lack of girl children to help in daily tasks. Old people declare that sons ignore them and daughters-in-law only look after their own parents; one's best hope of loving care in old age is to have daughters of one's own. Men, both sexes say, have hard hearts (*gua'i ke inoka*), only women are really kind.

Evidently there is in Mekeo culture little of the bitter misogyny or rampant sexual antagonism and anxiety (reviewed by Herdt and Poole 1982) reported for many New Guinea cultures, particularly, though not exclusively, of Highlands cultures. There are no secret male cults from which women are excluded and no male initiation rites; women are not segregated from the rest of the

household during menstruation (although they do not cook for others at this time or work in the gardens). Husband and wife normally sleep together, occupying the same dwelling with their offspring; this, however, is largely the result of the influence of the Catholic mission and of other changes that followed pacification and colonial rule (Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981). In the past, married men slept in their *ufu,* leaving the domestic dwellings to the women and children, while unmarried men and widowers slept in the *gove.* Restrictions on the sexes cohabiting apply only during certain ritual practices and for a stipulated time following childbirth.

Despite the relative ease of relations between the sexes, there is not quite the same sense of sexual freedom and open eroticism reported for some coastal and island societies, particularly matrilineal groups such as the Trobrianders (Malinowski 1932). There is a seemingly puritanical streak in Mekeo that can not be attributed solely to the influence of European missionaries, since the coastal Waima, who have been exposed to the same pressures, are renown among their Mekeo neighbors for their open sexual dalliances and for the freedom granted to both sexes in erotic matters. In contrast, Mekeo observe a double standard that is almost Victorian in flavor. Adultery is an expected male pastime, although such things are always kept out of the public eye for the sake of decorum. Women must be faithful to their husbands; moreover, they are said by males to be scarcely interested in sex. Unmarried girls are required to be chaste and are carefully watched over (see also Hau'ofa 1981:120–21). It is not that Mekeo think women are frigid, like the hysterical nineteenth-century Viennese or Victorian lady—Mekeo women are more robust souls. Yet it is thought female sexuality is more slowly aroused, less immediate, perhaps less insistent, than is male desire. Women, in keeping with cultural convention, are so reticent about such matters that I have available only male views. Whatever their innermost erotic desires, Mekeo women do not easily reveal them, but that may add to their attraction in the eyes of males, who believe females are unattainable without special ritual aid to overcome their natural aloofness from erotic pleasure. It is also for this reason that males employ the artifice of self-decoration to acquire a bride; that Western culture reverses this view perhaps gives it an odd piquancy in our eyes.

Sexuality and eroticism, whether in courting, marital relations, or illicit affairs, are matters private and covert in this culture (see also Hau'ofa 1981: 120–24). Both men and women behave with great decorum in public. In most group activities the sexes are usually segregated; men and women are never left alone together unless they are married or are very close relatives. Gestures of affection such as kissing or embracing between adults are permitted in public only in the greetings and farewells of close kin. Young couples must keep their courting secret, and everyone contrives to keep their sexual dalliances out of the public eye. This is not to say, of course, that in small communities, where everyone knows everybody's business, such matters remain unknown for long,

but dissembling and disguise is the norm. People tend to speak of these things in veiled terms and innuendo, and not openly in gossip.[7] The tensions of erotic attraction and desire are thus carefully screened behind the smooth, impassive face of the visible social order.

The Social Ordering

The immediate visual impressions of order and structure in a Mekeo community are confirmed by the careful structuring of leadership according to the seniority of birth and lineage, in the formalized but friendly relationships between affines, and in the permanent relationships of reciprocal feast exchanges which link descent groups. The aim of this study is not to reassess Mekeo social organization but merely to provide a brief outline to contextualize the discussion of esoteric knowledge and the self. Inevitably, I do touch upon problems of defining various aspects of social structure, particularly as raised in other studies (Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985), but in terms of the broad outlines being sketched, my picture of Mekeo society varies little from that presented in more detail by Hau'ofa.

Local Groups and Descent Groups

A Mekeo village (*pagua*) is an independent social and political unit, managing its own internal affairs; in the past, the clans combined as a whole to meet the threat of external aggression. The region came under colonial control in the 1890s, and intervillage warfare was brought to a halt by 1900. Local groups, descent groups, and the ordering of social relationships within the community were not seriously disrupted by this external intervention (Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981). Throughout the period I worked in the region, villagers managed their day-to-day affairs with a minimum of interference from the Australian colonial government and, later, the national government.

Within the village settlement, the patrilineal descent groups (*ikupu*) provide the most important focus of social relationships. In principle, each village-based descent group has its own hereditary leader (*lopia*) or leaders, maintains its own meeting house (*ufu*), and directs its own internal affairs. Rights to residential, gardening, and foraging land are based on descent group membership. The members consider themselves to be closely related, as brothers descended from brothers; men build their houses together, contribute to one another's marriage payments, bury their dead in the same ground, and provide mutual help and labor in all manner of tasks. Under the direction of their descent group head, they engage in feast exchanges with other descent groups to mark important social occasions—in particular, death. Women leave their natal group on marriage but retain strong ties with it and continue to participate in various ways in its collective activities. The importance of females born of the

descent group is further emphasized in the work obligations that a husband owes his wife's descent group (I will return to this shortly).

I refer to these descent groups (*ikupu*) as "clans" for the sake of convenience. The Mekeo term *ikupu* is used to refer to: a) the separate lineages of a clan, b) clan sections made up of two or more lineages, c) the localized village-based segment of a clan, and d) the clan in the broadest sense as the sum of its village-based segments. Some clans, in the latter sense, have segments in two or more villages. Although the members of all the different village-based segments of the same clan consider themselves to be related, and may maintain special ties with one another, for all purposes it is the village-based segment that is the functioning social unit, and I shall henceforth refer to it simply as a clan. The community in which I lived comprises eleven different named clans. Some of these groups, however, are too small or too weak to have their own leaders and ritual experts, and thus must align themselves with larger clans since only a properly installed clan head can perform the death ceremonies. A large clan, which may have several hereditary leaders and ritual functionaries, is commonly divided into three sections. The internal divisions of such a group may prove to be rather more complex when the lineage structure is investigated via actual genealogies of its members, but according to the stated ideal, and often in fact, a threefold structure prevails. I refer to these internal divisions as "clan sections."

The clan sections are ranked in order of seniority and are usually said to represent the descendants of three named brothers; the precise genealogical links to the founding brothers cannot always be recalled, but often are. The descendants of the eldest brother constitute the senior section of the clan and are usually designated by the term *lopia* linked to the clan name, thus Paisapaisa Lopia. *Lopia* is also the term used to refer to the leader of the village-based clan. The genealogically most senior member of the *lopia* clan section (who is, or should be, the direct descendant of the eldest of the founding brothers) is the most important, the senior (*fa'aniau*), the leader of the entire group. Only the *lopia fa'aniau* can perform the mourning ceremonies. The descendants of the second brother constitute the second section of the clan; this is usually referred to as the Eke, the junior section, thus Paisapaisa Eke. The head of this section, who is regarded as the direct descendant of the second founding brother, is referred to as the *lopia eke,* the junior leader. He is considered to be an assistant to the *lopia fa'aniau,* but maintains his own meeting house, where the men of his section gather. The third clan section, comprising the descendants of the third brother, is the Iso, literally "spear" section; its leader is the *iso auga* (spear man), or *iso lopia.* As the name suggests, he and his section were responsible for leading the group into battle. In the early 1980s, the title and position of war leader still existed in many clans. The head of the war section, like the *lopia eke,* maintains his own meeting house and presides over the internal affairs of his own section. But the death ceremonies for

members of the Iso section, as for the other two sections, must be conducted by the *lopia fa'aniau.*

Members of the clan section build their houses together, clustered behind their *ufu,* thus indicating their separate identity within the clan. Often the section comprises a single lineage, and members trace their descent—once again—from three brothers, thus separating lines of descent even within the lineage according to the seniority of birth of a set of founding brothers. Mekeo descent groups can thus be seen to be conceptualized as siblings descended from sets of (conventionally, three) male siblings, rather than from a single common ancestor. Agnatic kinsmen are referred to as one's *aga akina*—brothers senior in birth and brothers junior in birth (to the speaker). Siblings of opposite sex (regardless of one's sex) are termed *afakua.*

As the term *aga akina* (senior and junior brothers) suggests, seniority of birth order is a key principle in the structuring of descent groups. The first-born brother, by virtue of his seniority, is considered to have precedence and authority over his juniors, who owe him respect and obedience. Two brothers (and sometimes two sisters), a senior and a junior, are the prominent characters in many Mekeo myths, as in the myth of A'aisa and his younger brother, Isapini. Social relationships, and conflicts, are culturally conceptualized in terms of relations between senior and junior male siblings rather than between fathers and sons. Indeed, A'aisa, the mythological hero responsible for founding the existing social order, had no father and only an adoptive mother, but he had a younger brother with whom he had a fatal quarrel, leading to the killing of each other's sons.

The close relationship between brothers, which provides the model of ties and obligations that link men, is revealed in the A'aisa myth to contain the potential for bitter and murderous rivalry. Clan histories explain that the present divisions of clan groups into localized segments scattered throughout different villages has come about over generations because of fratricidal conflict similar to that initiated by A'aisa himself (Seligman 1910; Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985). Many such conflicts and fissioning of descent groups have taken place within living memory. When an irreconcilable internal quarrel developed, a section, a lineage, or a few individuals belonging to the clan would decide to leave the rest of the group. This involved seeking residence and land somewhere else—sometimes within the same village settlement, thus necessitating an alliance with another existing clan. For example, a quarrel within the Lopia Fa'a section of Oaisaka clan in the 1920s led to two brothers leaving their natal clan and seeking land from Ogofoina, another large clan in the same village. The sons of these two brothers, and their offspring, are now said to constitute a separate clan (*ikupu*), called Ogofoina Lopia Fa'a. Although people agree that the eldest son of the eldest of the two brothers who initiated the break should be the *lopia,* the new group has never mustered the resources to establish

its own head, and it relies upon the head of its host clan, Ogofoina, to officiate at mourning rituals.

When breakaway groups moved to different villages or, in the past, founded new settlements, they would, if they flourished, eventually establish their own leaders and become politically and ritually independent while still recognizing their origin from the senior group (see also Hau'ofa 1981). In the process of fissioning, however, the system of segmentary lineages found among African peoples (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) did not develop since the new group, as it expanded, replicated the ideal structure of clan segments ranked in order of seniority, so as to form anew the ideal threefold structure of senior, junior, and war sections.

Associated with the principle that dictated seniority of birth of male siblings as the basis for the descent group structure, and the expectation that the first-born brother would exercise benevolent influence over his juniors, was an assumption that junior lines would undertake the dangerous, aggressive roles and rituals necessary to defend the group and to punish those who flouted the moral order. The roles of war leader and the lethal rituals of sorcery (*ugauga*) were undertaken by junior brothers and by junior sections of the clan, but they were expected to use their powers at the direction of the first-born brother and, under his benign influence, to serve the common good of the clan as a whole. A tendency toward a proliferation of leadership and ritual roles based on the division of senior and junior lines seems to have motivated a process of internal differentiation into sections within the village-based clan (see also Hau'ofa 1981: chapter 7).

Large clans commonly display the threefold structure just described, but there is an observable tendency, even within the clan section, for further divisions along the lines of senior versus junior. For example, Oaisaka clan in Inawi village has three sections, Oaisaka Lopia Fa'a (the senior section), Lalae (the junior section), and Oaisaka Iso (the war section). The war section, however, is further differentiated into a senior line and a junior line and has recognized senior and junior war leaders (Hau'ofa 1981:193 describes a similar example). In the case of Paisapaisa clan, another large group divided into three sections, the war section, Paisapaisa Iso, is also renown for its possession of the lethal rituals of *ugauga.* The senior line of the war section retained the position of war leader for itself, while passing over to a junior line the knowledge of *ugauga* rituals.

As a village-based clan, or even a clan section, increased in size and moved too far from the ideal of a set of brothers and their offspring, senior and junior lines gradually emerged and established their own leaders and ritual specializations. Thus the stage would be set for a more radical split wherein junior lines might seek complete autonomy from senior lines. With the establishment of colonial control and the imposed peace that followed, local grouping and

land boundaries tended to be frozen (Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981); as a consequence it became difficult to found new settlements. Breakaway groups had to re-establish themselves somewhere else in the same village, or in another established settlement where they had to assume a subordinate position in relationship to their host group (as in the case of Ogofoina Lopia Fa'a). A proliferation of leadership roles within the clan section, such as the senior and junior war leaders of Oaisaka clan, was perhaps a way to deal with a situation in which establishment of complete independence for a new group was no longer possible.

Remnants of once-populous and powerful clans, like Ugo in Inawi village, have almost died out and thus no longer have their own leaders. These groups also must align themselves with larger clans possessing functioning *lopia.* Thus a situation emerges in which a few large powerful clans become the foci of clusters of smaller groups. The village that was the site of my fieldwork, with its eleven named clans, consists of three such clusters centering around Ogofoina, Oaisaka, and Paisapaisa clans, with Gagai clan as a single independent group. In terms of their internal affairs, these four groups are independent of one another; each holds its own death feasts and the feasts to install new leaders and inaugurate new meeting houses. The founding clan of the village, Oaisaka (from which the village derives its correct Mekeo name, Oaisaka), is considered to have precedence over the others since it is the most senior. The senior leader (*lopia fa'aniau*) of Oaisaka is considered to be senior to, and therefore higher in prestige than, all the other senior *lopia* of the village. While this might add weight in negotiations, it in fact confers no functionally superior authority.

Every fully functioning independent clan is linked to at least one, and sometimes two or more, other clans, in a special relationship termed *ufu apie,* a rather enigmatic term that has had several readings by different scholars (Seligman 1910; Hau'ofa 1981; and in particular Mosko 1985). Desnoes's ''Mekeo Dictionary'' (1941:998) defines the term thus: ''Friends, the allies with which one intermarries (Les amis, les alliés avec lesquels on se marie).'' The literal meaning he gives as, ''The *ufu* (clan meeting house) of the other side or: of the other end of the village (L'ufu de l'autre côté, ou: de l'autre bout de village.''[8] If the *ufu apie* relationship represents a remnant of dual organization, the problem still stands that there now exists a chaos of such relationships, often involving more than one other clan and often linking clans of different villages; these relationships may be in some cases still operative, in others defunct. On the basis of my own observations of social practice, and the explanations villagers have given, it appears to me the *ufu apie* relationship retains importance because it is a clan's *ufu apie* who are the major recipients of meat and food gifts at its most important feasts. When a descent group installs a new *lopia,* builds a new meeting house, or conducts the ceremony to end the period of mourning for the dead, it is the group's *ufu apie* who are the most honored and most important guests, and it is to them that the best and largest

shares of meat and vegetables are presented. It is in fact the *lopia* of the *ufu apie* who must be invited to perform the final ritual acts for installing a new leader and removing mourning for the dead. This is a reciprocal relationship: the *ufu apie* return these gifts and services when it is their turn to hold mortuary feasts and other events. A careful investigation of actual *ufu apie* relationships reveals they can be terminated and new ones formed but, in principle, they are regarded as involving long-established, permanent ties with other groups. The ideal is of balanced reciprocity between allies.

The *ufu apie,* as Desnoes points out, are also considered proper and appropriate marriage partners (see Hau'ofa 1981:166). But marriage choice is not restricted to them, indeed could not be, since one cannot marry into either one's father's or one's mother's descent group. If a man's father had married a woman from an *ufu apie* clan, he could not himself marry into it since that would be his mother's clan. Only the next generation could do so. Brothers-in-law have special obligations to each other in providing labor for feasts, which means that when the *ufu apie* are called upon to be the most important guests at a feast, the *ufu apie* men, who are married to the host's daughters and sisters, have to provide labor for the occasion. Consequently, it is very undesirable for the *lopia* of a clan to marry a woman from his *ufu apie* as this would place him in two incompatible roles: as the chief guest of honor and as a laborer at his *ufu apie*'s feasts!

There are no formal relationships today that link or bind entire village communities to other communities. Relationships that cut across villages are between descent groups or individuals. The term *Mekeo,* as so often the case in Papua New Guinea, is a colonial inheritance, not an indigenous category. It refers to communities who consider themselves to belong to two separate groups, the Pioufa and the Ve'e. Once again the precise nature of this division and its significance in the past is difficult to determine (although it is, of course, of interest when attempting to reconstruct ideal forms of social structure, but that is not my concern here). People today still identify themselves and their villages as either Pioufa or Ve'e (roughly speaking, the division coincides with the West and East Mekeo). This indicates a sense of common origin and stock, of a common cultural inheritance and local history uniting those who identify themselves as either Pioufa or Ve'e. But there are no longer formal institutions of any kind expressing this identity; even in the past, Pioufa villages fought Pioufa, and Ve'e villages fought Ve'e.

Marriage, Affines, and Relations Traced through Women

A person cannot marry into either his or her own clan, or into the clan of his or her mother. When I asked people to explain why marriage within these groups is prohibited, they did not refer to degrees of relationship or the sharing

of blood or other forms of body substance. Instead, they explained that if a man were to marry a woman of his own descent group, or of his mother's group, then the people who were making the payments to the bride's family and those who were receiving the payments would be one and the same, which is patently ridiculous and unsatisfactory. For the Mekeo, it all comes down to marriage payments.

Marriage payments are described as compensation for the loss of a woman. Parents are indeed reluctant to allow strong, hardworking girls to marry, as the family's daily subsistence may depend primarily on them, particularly if the mother is getting old, is ill, or has many small children. I referred earlier to a mother who refused to let her daughters marry until she had daughters-in-law to replace them. The father confided he used certain spells and charms to prevent the girls from falling in love and thus being lost to the family. Many people, he assured me, did likewise. In a similar vein, parents discourage their daughters from courting and love affairs, and often beat them for encouraging a suitor's attentions. Girls' relatives do not relinquish their rights to their labor and the offspring they will eventually produce without adequate compensation. (At the same time, the girls themselves, it is said, would feel ashamed and devalued if their families simply allowed them to leave without protest.) Four clans are involved in marriage payments: the groom's agnates, who supply the major part of the payment; the groom's mother's agnates, who provide a lesser portion; the bride's agnates, who receive the largest portion; and the bride's mother's agnates, who also receive a share (see also Hau'ofa 1981:158–159). People observe that a girl's father and brothers look forward to a handsome compensation when she marries.

Marriage takes place either by arrangement between the parents or by elopement when the couple runs off without the girl's parents' knowledge and announces the *fait accompli* of their union. (There was also rumored to be marriage by rape where a girl might be literally kidnapped against her will by a man and then forced to cohabit with him; one very aggressive, surly man, with a generally sinister reputation in the community was said to have acquired his wife in this manner.) Most marriages nowadays are elopements. Marriage thus usually begins in acrimony and outrage on the part of the girl's family, who suddenly find their daughter taken from them without their knowledge or permission. Sometimes at this stage the parents will intervene to take the girl back. The couple either remains in hiding with relatives elsewhere or, if the girl's family succeeds in getting her back, she might run off again until her parents finally are induced, by promises of handsome marriage payments, to accept the situation.

An incident during my first years of fieldwork dramatized this when a girl eloped from the clan section in which I was living. Her relatives managed to find her and they forcibly brought her back. Because she threatened to run away again, they set up a post in the central thoroughfare in front of the clan's houses

(and directly in front of mine), where the whole village could witness what was going on, and tied the girl by her arms and legs to the post. She stood there for hours in the burning sun. Finally, the groom's relatives managed to mobilize their resources; toward evening they appeared walking slowly up the plaza from their own clan ward, each person bearing a tree branch festooned with dozens of Australian banknotes and valuable feather decorations. After being paraded up the center of the village, these flamboyant "money trees" were duly presented as peace offerings to the girl's relatives. The girl was then released from her public humiliation, although not handed over to her prospective groom until further payments were assured. The bride's relatives were extremely angry because they considered the boy's people to be an indigent lot who would never be able to raise a decent marriage payment. Thus it was only through the dramatic gesture of the money trees that the groom and his clan prevailed.

This was an extreme case, and I never witnessed another similar performance. Nevertheless, this single "social drama" (Turner 1957) strikingly illustrated the conflict of interests and emotions aroused in the social act of marriage: the righteous anger of the family whose daughter had been "stolen" from them; the peace offerings of the groom's kin who were anxious to prove that they were respectable people ready to pay for what they had taken; the girl, humiliated and punished for deserting her kin without their knowledge and without concern for their rights; and, finally, the vindication of her action by the groom's relatives' public demonstration of their esteem for her. The dynamic of the situation is clear: outrage and anger of those who lost a valuable member of their group, appeasement and placation by those who gained a valuable new member.

Although marriage usually begins in a situation where the bride's relatives' anger must be assuaged by suitably generous gifts, the groom's relatives have the advantage because they are in possession of the bride. It is usually several years before the major portion of the marriage payments are complete. Not surprisingly, in these circumstances quarrels and tensions are ever present, yet, as is usual for Mekeo, these are rarely aired openly. Ostensibly, relationships between in-laws are expected to be close and amicable. In addition to the marriage payments, and payments at the birth of children, the husband is personally obligated to provide labor at feasts held by his wife's descent group. The brothers-in-law (*ipa gava*), the men married to women born of the clan, play a key role in the mortuary ceremonies. Certain tasks can be performed only by them: they must dig the grave and, later, build a fence around it. The wives of the men of the clan cook and prepare food while the clan members, men and women, mourn the deceased. These obligations are taken very seriously and although men often complain of the time involved, they do not dare shirk them (see also Hau'ofa 1981:150–51).

Mekeo are reluctant to give up their daughters to other cultural groups because foreign spouses cannot be depended on to provide essential labor.

Since most Mekeo villages are large and comprise several descent groups, many marriages take place within the community, a factor that no doubt makes the *ipa gava* obligations somewhat less onerous. Mekeo villages are not far distant from one another, and people are expected to attend feasts regardless of the inconvenience. These obligations create frequent occasions when affines must interact and, generally speaking, a friendly, joking atmosphere prevails. It is considered appropriate for the *ipa gava* to "play" (*opua*), even at the mortuary ceremonies, as this is thought to help cheer up the mourners. Occasionally, special feasts are held by a clan to fete its *ipa gava.* Hau'ofa (1981:130ff.) has thoroughly documented the underlying hostility that surfaces in the humiliating nature of the accompanying *opua,* in which, for example, the *ipa gava* may be presented with huge amounts of cooked meat which they are forced to eat in public until they vomit. They then begin to eat again until every morsel has been consumed. Nevertheless, tensions are never allowed to erupt into open violence.[9] On an individual level, brothers-in-law are often close friends and helpers who are on good terms. As in most Melanesian societies, marriage involves ongoing exchanges and obligations over the lifetime of the couple.

Although women leave their natal group on marriage to live with and work for their husband's descent group, they maintain close ties with their own agnates (see also Hau'ofa 1981:130). They attend their clan's feasts with their husbands, not to work but to be waited on by their clan brothers' wives. On their deaths, their bodies are taken to their own clan for mourning and burial, and their clan performs the death feasts. Women visit their agnates frequently and can always find refuge there if they are ill-treated by husbands or in-laws. Parents always seem happy to care for and raise their daughters' children, even though they accept the father's clan's rights to them. In the close interaction that takes place between brothers-in-law, men ensure their sisters are properly treated and will rebuke a husband if the wife seems ill, tired, or overworked. When husband or wife dies, the in-laws supervise the mourning period of the surviving spouse—a period that demands segregation from society, or confinement in the case of widows, for a year or more. Spouses are rarely held directly responsible for a partner's death, yet the relatives of the deceased almost always take the attitude that the surviving spouse was somehow negligent. Should the bereaved spouse fail to display appropriate grief or be lax in observing the strict mourning procedures, the in-laws complain loudly in public and seek covert revenge if sufficiently provoked (see also Hau'ofa 1981:151–52).

Leadership and Ritual Specialization

The complexity of Mekeo leadership and ritual specialization has been described by several ethnographers (Seligman 1910; Belshaw 1951; Stephen

1974; Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985). "Peace chiefs," "war chiefs," "senior peace chiefs," "junior peace chiefs," "peace sorcerers," "war sorcerers," various "chief's functionaries," and lesser ritual experts, such as "prayer men," have been identified. The terms *chief* and *sorcerer* have been commonly employed ever since Seligman's research was published in 1910, but I have nevertheless decided to avoid them here. Seligman presumably based his usage on the ethnographic writings of the missionaries of the Catholic Mission of the Sacred Heart (Sacré Coeur), from whom he obtained most of his information about the Mekeo. I have come to the conclusion this long-standing terminology is misleading, making the task of accurate ethnographic description more difficult than necessary. "Chief" implies a functional, political role that is largely inappropriate in this cultural context. "Sorcerer" has a specific anthropological usage (i.e., a person attributed with ritual death-dealing powers), which is confusing since many other persons besides "peace sorcerers" and "war sorcerers" are attributed with such powers. Furthermore, the term has negative connotations of a subtly misleading kind (Stephen 1987b).

A literal translation of Mekeo terms conveys more vividly the meanings attached to different roles and will promote an appreciation of their nuances; indeed, it provides a useful way to begin to describe the different leadership roles. Students of Mekeo culture are fortunate to have the Mekeo-French dictionary compiled in the 1920s and 1930s by Father Desnoes, a priest of the Sacred Heart mission. Although never published, Desnoes's two-volume typewritten manuscript (1941) is a remarkable work of scholarship, providing, in its large number of entries and meticulous investigations of meanings and usage, a vast compendium of Mekeo culture. I have found it of the greatest value as an independent check on my own understanding and as a means of deepening my knowledge of the language: I have already referred to its authority and shall have frequent occasion to do so throughout this book.

The two most prominent roles are that of *lopia* and *ugauga*—"chief" and "sorcerer," respectively. According to Desnoes (1941:627), the word *lopia* means "chief, dignity or position of a chief (chef, dignité de chef)." Its second meaning he notes as "good, handsome (bon, beau)" as an adjective; "goodness, kindness (bonté)" as a subject; and "well, properly (bien, comme il faut)" as a verbal suffix. The word *lopia* is not, however, except in abbreviated form, used alone to refer to a leader or chief; rather, one says *lopia auga,* "he is a chief," or *oi lopia aumu,* "you are a chief." *Au* is the word for man, with the suffix *ga* indicating its relationship to the preceding word. Thus *lopia auga* is a man of *lopia,* and *lopia* is used in the sense of good, kind, benevolent—which is, as people will tell you, exactly what the *lopia auga* must be. I can think of no single English word precisely capturing all the connotations of *lopia,* but "a man of kindness" comes close. *Lopia* is often used as an adverb to mean "correctly," "properly"; thus I would ask people whether I had spoken correctly or pronounced something properly and they would reply, if

it were correct, "*Lo* [you] *ifa* [spoke] *lopiani.*" One refers to people doing or making things properly thusly: "*Ke* [they] *kapaisa* [made it] *lopiani.*"[10]

The first meaning of the term *ugauga* listed in Desnoes's "Mekeo Dictionary" (1941:1018) is "sorcerer, sorcery" (sorcier, sorcellerie). The second listed meaning is "sad, dejected" (triste, abattu). I have sometimes heard the term used in ordinary speech to mean "lament" or "groan with sorrow" (*e ugauga ugauga*—the repetition of the word produces an onomatopoeic representation of lamentation). As Desnoes indicates, the word by itself may indicate "sorcery" or "sorcerer," but when one wants to specify "sorcerer," one says *ugauga auga*—a man of *ugauga.* Thus he is, literally, "a man of sorrow." The term has a double meaning when used in this way, since the *ugauga* causes sorrow to others by inflicting disease or death upon them, but at the same time he, himself, must be in a state of mourning. The ritually active *ugauga,* a veritable man of sorrow, is almost always a widower; his sombre dress and isolation from society are in general imposed on widowers.

In addition to the *lopia* and the *ugauga,* there are also the *iso,* the war leader, and the *faia,* the specialist in war sorcery. These offices have usually been translated as "war chief" and "war sorcerer," respectively, implying a correspondence and a neat opposition between the pairs that is not accurate. *Iso* literally means "spear"; thus we have "the man of the spear" (*iso auga*). *Faia* is the name of a particular kind of ritual used to bring about death by violent means, including accidents such as falls, attacks by wild animals, and deaths in battle. *Faia* also means "cinnamon bark," a substance used ritually for its properties in attracting spirit presences. The *faia auga* might thus be literally rendered as "man of cinnamon bark." The same pattern is followed in the terms that describe the *lopia*'s important functionaries (see also Hau'ofa 1981): the "man of the knife" (*aiva auga*) and "the man of the string" (*uve auga*), whose job it is to assist the *lopia* at feasts by cutting and dividing the meat presented to the guests (see also Hau'ofa 1981:207). There are, in addition, as I noted when discussing the structure of descent groups, senior (*fa'aniau*) and junior (*eke*) *lopia,* and senior and junior *iso.*

One can discern in this variety of roles four distinct kinds of major functionaries: *lopia, ugauga, iso,* and *faia.* Within each speciality, there might also be found senior (*fa'aniau*) and junior (*eke*) lines. Customarily, the *lopia,* the man of kindness, took precedence and had effective control over the other three. The man of the spear could involve the clan in battle only with the agreement of the man of kindness, who also acted as peacemaker. The man of sorrow punished only at the direction or with the permission of the man of kindness, who ensured that only miscreants, not the law abiding, were victims. The rituals of the man of cinnamon bark determined which of his own men would die in battle; he acted in consultation with the man of kindness, *not* the man of the spear, so as to spare as many as possible and to see that troublemakers rather than righteous men fell in battle. My informants stressed that the *iso auga* did

not control the *faia,* he merely led his clan into battle. The rituals of the *faia* of the two opposing sides determined which side won. The role of the *faia* in relation to the *iso* is thus not directly comparable to the relationship of the *ugauga* to the *lopia.*[11] Instead, all three roles—*iso, faia,* and *ugauga*—were in principle subordinate to the *lopia.* One of my most expert informants demonstrated this graphically by holding up his right hand and pointing to the long middle finger, saying "This is the *lopia.*" Then using his left hand, he clasped his other shorter fingers around the middle finger and said, "These are *iso, faia, ugauga;* they assist him, they stand beside the *lopia.*"

In the past, a reciprocal feasting relationship existed between the man of the spear and the man of kindness. When the *lopia* attended feasts held by the heads of other descent groups, he would share the meat and food presented to him with his spear man. Likewise, when the spear man attended feasts held by the spear men of other descent groups, he would share the meat he received with his *lopia.* As already noted, only the senior man of kindness can perform the death ceremonies. In a sense, death links the four roles: the spear man's actions lead to death in battle, as do the ritual actions of the cinnamon bark man, while the man of sorrow brings death in peacetime. It remains to the man of kindness to perform the ceremonies that bring the period of mourning to an end and restore normal social life following the disruption of death.

The senior *lopia,* we have seen, heads the senior section of his clan, while the *iso, ugauga,* and *faia* are members of junior sections and lines. Thus the man of kindness is the benevolent elder brother, using his seniority and authority to direct the actions of his younger brothers. He is at the apex, the middle finger of the hand, ensuring the proper maintenance of the social order. Although warfare ceased prior to 1900 (Stephen 1974), the titles and special ritual knowledge associated with both the *iso* and the *faia* were maintained.[12] Men of the spear continued to install their eldest sons in their place and the rituals of *faia* sorcery were passed on to the appropriate heirs, but there were no longer special functions associated with war. Spear men do not today carry spears or lead their men into battle, nor have they done so for three or four generations; they now act as lineage heads, as junior men of kindness despite their warrior heritage. *Faia* sorcery, formerly used to determine who died in battle, could be employed for other kinds of violent deaths; its practitioners are thus regarded as little different from the *ugauga.* When identifying the important men of the community, people often refer separately to the *lopia aui,* the *iso aui,* the *faia aui* and the *ugauga aui,* but throughout the entire period of my fieldwork, the major division in function and symbolism was between the *lopia* and the *ugauga* (as is indicated by Hau'ofa's [1981] research).

Although there is a significant relationship between leadership roles and the structuring of the descent group, there is no simple one-to-one correlation between them. The threefold structuring of sections of many large clans does not directly correlate with the fourfold division of *lopia, ugauga, iso,* and *faia.*

Every village-based clan has its own *lopia,* or it must be allied with another clan that does, but only a few clans have their own *ugauga.* Both are said to be essential to the social order, but people explain that any *lopia* can call upon the services of any *ugauga,* regardless of his descent group membership. Large village-based clans, however, usually do have an *ugauga* lineage or one allied with them, and they usually have an Iso section and a man of the spear heading it. Cinnamon bark men are found much more rarely, and few clans, even large ones, can boast them. Just as the man of kindness can call upon any man of sorrow when need be, so he can enlist the ritual assistance of a cinnamon bark man. Precisely how this operated in times of war is not entirely clear.

It is difficult to reconstruct with confidence the nature of leadership and ritual specialization prior to pacification since it is beyond the reach of living memory. Just as it is hard to identify precisely what today represents the survival of earlier forms and what represents changes brought about by pacification and colonial rule. One might object that the word *lopia* is sometimes used in conjunction with the other three terms, and thus one may hear of *iso lopia, faia lopia,* and *ugauga lopia,* suggesting that the term *lopia* means simply "chief" or "leader." It is my conviction that these combinations are anomalous usages—contradictions in terms developed in the necessary process of communicating to government and mission the indigenous cultural forms. Different kinds of leaders or chiefs were easily comprehensible to the external authorities, more subtle distinctions were not. Thus it has become common for Mekeo themselves, especially when explaining their culture to outsiders, to use the term *lopia* in a sense sometimes shorn of its primary meaning of benevolence and kindness. Hau'ofa (1981:190) makes the identical point. But regardless of its primary meaning, there can be little doubt, given the detailed descriptions of other ethnographers as well as myself, when the word *lopia* (or *lopia auga*) is used by itself, my translation "the man of kindness" is appropriate. The man of kindness and the man of sorrow have more than merely social or political functions; they have a symbolic significance encapsulating on many levels Mekeo understanding of themselves and their world. In the next chapter I will explore further the complex "evocational fields" (to use Sperber's [1975] concept), surrounding these key symbols (Ortner 1973).[13]

Although the effects of external influence are not the focus of this study, it is impossible to describe Mekeo culture without reference to them. Since the late nineteenth century, there has been continuous contact and interaction with missionaries, government officers, traders, adventurers and travelers, and several ethnographers (see Seligman 1910; Egidi 1912; Williamson 1913; Guis 1936; Belshaw 1951; Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985). The first government station was established in the region, on land belonging to Aipeana village, in 1890. The same year, the Catholic Mission of the Sacred Heart, already established on Yule Island, set up their first stations inland. Within less than a decade, the entire Mekeo region was reported to be well under gov-

ernment control; tribal warfare had ceased and the Catholic mission could count a large number of converts in every Mekeo community (Stephen 1974). The first village schools were set up by the Sacred Heart missionaries even before they built their churches (Dupeyrat 1935). My oldest informants all attended school for two or three years. Elders would often roar with laughter when recounting their school days to me, declaring all they ever learned was to say their prayers! Nevertheless, thanks to the devoted efforts of the Catholic mission in the pre-war years, in the late 1960s many middle-aged and older people could read and write their own language and speak adequate English. Some had achieved full literacy in English, had become teachers, and had even trained for the priesthood.

Prior to the Second World War, the region was a quiet colonial backwater. There were few European settlers or enterprises in the immediate vicinity, although many young men did seek occasional work as laborers on European plantations in the Nara and Kabadi region to the east. The well-intentioned but unfortunately clumsy efforts of Sir Hubert Murray's regime to promote indigenous economic development through the introduction of "Native Tax" and village plantation schemes did much to strain relationships between the Mekeo and the colonial government but little to improve the economy. It was not until the war, when every able-bodied man was conscripted to provide labor for the Bulldog and Kokoda trails, that the narrow horizons of village life opened up onto a wider world. The war brought new experiences and new hopes and expectations to the Mekeo, and new policies for economic and social development to the Australian colonial administration (Stephen 1974).

The pace of life for Mekeo changed dramatically after the war, as it did for many Papuans. Whereas previously men worked on nearby plantations to raise their tax money, now they traveled to Port Moresby to find employment as laborers and domestic servants; others went for secondary or technical education or to the Catholic mission schools on Yule Island. Soon it became the norm for young men to spend the time before marriage away from the village. In the villages, too, there were new opportunities: government-sponsored programs for rice growing and for village cooperatives in the 1950s and, in the 1960s, various government-assisted plans for individual economic enterprises (Stephen 1974). Villagers were discovering an easy and reliable source of cash by marketing their locally grown betel (*areca*) nuts in the town. The growth of Port Moresby itself, increasing opportunities for education, and the beginnings of policy to localize government appointments meant that by the early 1960s there were many better jobs than laboring and domestic service available to Papua New Guineans. The success of mission and government educational policies was becoming evident by the late 1960s. When I began fieldwork, everyone under the age of thirty could speak fluent English, and most could read and write simple English. Girls, as well as boys, were undertaking secondary schooling and were training to become nurses and teachers. The gov-

ernment-sponsored programs for economic development in the 1950s and 1960s were admittedly a disappointment on both sides, yet there were achievements. Individuals and small groups set up small retail stores, bought tractors and motor vehicles, and experimented with various ventures to earn cash. The 1960s saw political change in the establishment of local government councils and the beginning of elections for a national assembly. The pace of change continued to accelerate over the next two decades.

Despite the many external influences over the last century, Mekeo culture retains a richness and coherence of its own—a fact Hau'ofa emphasizes (1981:3–5, 20–25). These are no pure, primeval, untouched primitive people; Mekeo are well aware of the existence of a wider world. Their culture and society has had to adapt to many foreign influences and demands. Much of what one assumes to be "traditional" culture turns out to be, in fact, a creative adaptation of introduced influences (for example, the distinctive and stylish male dress). Culture is not, as we always seem to need to remind ourselves, a static entity, but a continuously adaptive process that is learned and created anew in the development and maturation of each individual culture bearer (Herdt 1989a:27–30). The puzzle is not how cultures change, since change is inevitable, but rather how cultures retain identity in change. That, however, is not the question explored in this book. It is the coherence of Mekeo culture, as I knew it in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, that concerns me. The visible ordering of Mekeo society I have described is not a historical reconstruction of what things were like in some hypothetical "traditional" past, but what I observed. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that this harmony has been achieved in the face of so much external pressure for change. Life in a Mekeo village is not merely orderly and harmonious, it is curiously self-contained. Surrounded by the natural abundance afforded by fertile gardens and land, the people are confidently assured of their material well-being, and they continue to find meaningful a way of life very different from that which they know lies just beyond their villages. Undoubtedly Mekeo culture has and is changing, as do all cultures, but it continues to be *their* culture, with its own inherent order and style.