

*Introduction*

**NEW APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING  
TRADITIONAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY**



This book is a response to an anthropological model of how to understand New Guinea societies that I have confronted repeatedly for half a century. The model I refer to emerges from what is often called the “ethnographic approach” in which the anthropologist studies people from a particular tribe, ethnic group, society, or ethnolinguistic group. This model assumes that all of the world’s people can readily and conveniently be grouped into distinct ethnolinguistic groups, each with their own unique cultures and languages. The model presupposes that each of these societies should be studied in its own terms, as if it were essentially disconnected from all other societies in its neighborhood. The problem with this model is that relatively few societies today or ever before have been totally disconnected from neighboring communities. Nearly all societies at all times have interacted with neighboring communities despite differences in language, culture, and their general orientation.

Even the most perfunctory reading of history demonstrates that nearly all societies in all parts of the world were, and continue routinely to be in contact with neighboring—and often more distant—communities. Many if not most of these societies have long had contact with people and communities with quite different languages and often their own distinctive local cultures.

The point is that the world’s peoples have nearly always been in contact with people who speak languages different from their own. The Roman Empire, for example, was built up of numerous societies that spoke a dazzling array of different languages. Gradually, over many centuries, these diverse

peoples participated in broader political formations that we understand as parts of the Roman Empire and that might well have emerged centuries earlier in Ancient Greece under the empire of Alexander the Great, had his premature death not disrupted the process. In these ancient societies some form of centralized power integrated diverse European and Asian peoples and in the Roman case encouraged the formation of Romance languages across much of the empire.

For more than a century, anthropologists have spent years studying the so-called primitive and tribal societies of Africa, Oceania, or North and South America. Most monographs from all of these regions show that tribal and village societies in Africa, New Guinea, and much of the Americas were anything but isolated from neighboring societies. These societies maintained their distinctive identities despite interacting with other societies and the cultural borrowings that must surely have occurred from time to time. Ironically, only the distinctive features of individual societies, rather than the kinds of interactions they had with their neighbors, have provoked the deep interest of most anthropologists. In my view, it has been an anthropological fiction for the past century that tribal societies were isolated from one another. Our research along the North Coast of New Guinea demonstrated that these communities were linked and had considerable interaction, despite speaking many different languages from several unrelated language families.

One of the key goals of the present volume is to understand how one very large group of societies were integrated despite having considerable linguistic diversity.

For the so-called “primitive” societies, which lack overarching political control by one group or one social class, it has long been assumed by definition that these societies cannot have any form of broad regional organization because they lack a centralized authority. It is often assumed that any broad coordination among diverse groups requires some centralized power.

On New Guinea’s North Coast, we found no centralized authority at all. However, we did find a kind of deep coordination among individuals in many diverse communities over a broad region and with many distinctive ethnolinguistic groups. New Guinea societies represent communities that largely lack the all-embracing social and political hierarchies, the social stratification, and the centralized leadership that most Western people assume is necessary for any sort of political integration to occur. This assumption has long been that a large group of communities, speaking a variety of diverse languages, cannot have a broad regional coordination without some central authority. Nevertheless, early Field Museum anthropologist Albert B. Lewis and our team found evidence of broad coordination without any form of central authority. People in our study area exchanged

different arrays of available resources, and inhabited varied environments. Regular exchanges of useful products were at the heart of this network from Madang to the Indonesian border, a distance of about five hundred kilometers. These transactions are at the heart of this study.

### **Anthropology's Traditional Focus on Relations within Ethnolinguistic Groups Misses Any Understanding of Ties between Groups**

The earliest accounts of New Guinea societies from the 1870s until the beginning of World War I in 1914 described what foreign observers noticed as they traveled through the region. Nearly all of these were travel narratives (e.g., D'Albertis 1878; Bevan 1890; Champion 1932; see also Ballard 2016) or accounts by missionaries documenting their efforts to establish their missions (see, e.g., Abel 1901; Chalmers 1886, 1887; Chalmers and Gill 1885; King 1909; Lawes 1879).

All of this changed with Malinowski's (1922) pioneering study of the Kula network in his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. *Argonauts* focused on relations between communities in a regional network as much as it did on the distinctive local features and social patterns in the Trobriand Islands.

Interestingly, Malinowski's first account of the Trobriand Islands was not so much a study of Trobriand culture as it was an account of inter-group relations, a fact that has been generally overlooked by most anthropologists for much of the last century. Most later scholars look at *Argonauts* as the prime example of an ethnographic study, when it alone of Malinowski's books was distinctively not a traditional sort of ethnography but a regional study of exchange among different communities in the Massim region. True, *Argonauts* was written from a Trobriand Islands point of view, but it describes the integration of a broad regional system, encompassing many island communities, each with their own cultural and linguistic individuality. Malinowski's later works (e.g., 1926, 1927, 1929, 1935) were much more what we expect of an ethnographic study of one or another aspect of the lives of Trobriand islanders, and offered little insight into any other society in the broader Massim region as *Argonauts* had. These later studies by Malinowski, focused as they were almost exclusively on the practices and understandings of the Trobrianders, are much more typical of what we now understand as an ethnographic study. *Argonauts* was clearly doing something different: trying to make sense of a regional network of exchange relations (Küehling 1998, 2005). Malinowski's focus on the Trobriands has inspired considerable interest in the region ever since. Annette Weiner (1976), whose work focused on women's roles in Trobriand societies, also inspired more than a

dozen other studies of women in Melanesian societies. Stuart and Thomson (2012) offer a more recent appraisal by one of Malinowski's great-grandsons, with commentary by several anthropologists, who have either been interested in the Massim or in Malinowski's role in shaping Melanesian anthropology.

All of Malinowski's later monographs were the model of an ethnographic study. What intrigued me when I began my research around Aitape was the same sort of regional problem that initially interested Malinowski when he began his Trobriand Islands research—namely, how did people in different communities interact within a region filled with islands that mostly had access to similar kinds of resources, raw materials, and finished products. There was far less environmental variation in the small islands of the Massim that made up the Kula ring than there is on the Aitape coast. Given the obvious variations in different communities up and down the North Coast, how did people around Aitape organize relations with communities on the coast, on the islands, and in the interior? These were the questions I was attempting to answer in 1993 when I began my research along the North Coast, based on Ali Island, within sight of Aitape town. And as far as I could tell from the rather limited number of ethnographic accounts available, Aitape was a linguistic mish-mash of languages from several different language families, a point we will consider in some depth in Chapter 2.

### **Shifting the Focus from within to between Groups**

By focusing principally and primarily on relations *within* the communities that anthropologists study rather than relations *between* communities, anthropologists have largely overlooked this important component of the human experience, namely that humans in most societies interact with whomever they come into contact. Sometimes these interactions are hostile, as the history of tribal fighting in many parts of New Guinea—particularly the Highlands—confirms; sometimes these relations are quite friendly and mutually supportive, despite speaking different languages and in spite of having somewhat different cultures. This latter pattern characterizes relations between and among communities on the North Coast. During two years of field research in and around Aitape, I never heard of any significant fighting along the coast in my study area. Field Museum curator A. B. Lewis heard of hostility and tension in Sissano lagoon between the Warapu people who lived on a small island in the lagoon and the Sissano and Arop people. As noted in the Preface, this tension emerged after an earthquake caused their island to sink and Warapu people had to swim to the shore

where Sissano people lived (Welsch 1998b, vol. 1: 128f). Since the end of World War II, Warapu, Sissano, and Arop people have peacefully shared the lagoon and its rich resources of fish, despite the fact that Warapu language seems completely unrelated to Sissano and Arop languages, both of which are Austronesian.

This book addresses these patterns of multi-ethnic networks that have long characterized the North Coast of New Guinea. This pattern of exchange among communities along the coast is what we will explore here, focusing primarily on a single strip of coastal communities along the North Coast of this vast island, primarily from the coast east of Wewak around the mouth of the Sepik River to the coast around what is now Jayapura in Indonesian New Guinea.

The question at the heart of this book is how did people speaking many different languages interact, exchange useful goods and products, and maintain ties from one generation to the next without any common, shared language? Since the introduction of Pidgin English and English, communication is far more straightforward than it was a century or more ago. But Pidgin and English have not lessened the very large number of languages spoken along the North Coast. The large number of languages spoken across my study area has done nothing to limit contact between groups. Everyone has learned enough of one or another of their friends' languages to get by. In addition, the introduction of Pidgin during German times, and English after World War I, has made communication that much easier. Nevertheless, all of these communities had longstanding and persistent relations with many groups, many of whom spoke languages quite different from their own. The issue was how did North Coast people manage these relations, often with people in forty, fifty, or even ninety communities?

### **The Field Museum's Efforts to Understand the North Coast of New Guinea**

In 1909, when Field Museum anthropologist Albert B. Lewis (1868–1940) set off from Chicago for New Guinea and the Melanesian islands, he was apparently the earliest anthropologist to notice the extraordinary amount of trade and social interaction among diverse groups in this part of what was then German New Guinea (Welsch 1998b). His boss at the Field Museum, anthropologist, then chief curator, George A. Dorsey (1868–1931), had visited a number of the same communities the year before while on a round-the-world tour for which he sent back to the *Chicago Tribune* just under a hundred short newspaper articles. Eighteen of these columns were about German New Guinea (Dorsey 1909). Despite visiting the North Coast and

Friendship and Exchange Along the North Coast of New Guinea

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interacting with villagers in many communities that Lewis would later visit, Dorsey failed to notice the intensive volume of trade and social interactions along this coast. Dorsey, in fact, seemed oblivious to the integrated network of relationships that existed along the North Coast of New Guinea from the Huon Gulf in the east to at least the eastern shore of Cenderawasih Bay in what is now Indonesian New Guinea, a stretch of roughly a thousand kilometers (Welsch 1998b). I have long suspected that while Dorsey was typically a keen observer, he wasn't focused on relationships between communities because he was popping into various ports of call and never stayed long enough to really observe what was going on. Lewis, by contrast, traveled from village to village on foot or by local dugout or outrigger canoe. He slept in native houses, occasionally staying in a government rest house if the villagers had built one to facilitate the colonial administration.

Lewis spent a little more than three months along the North Coast from early September to early December 1909, visiting areas from Humboldt Bay in Dutch New Guinea and Vaimo in the far west of German New Guinea to Aitape and Yakumul, all communities in my study area discussed in this volume. He returned to the North Coast the following April, spending four months moving up and down the coast largely east of the Sepik River. Many among this latter group of communities were not directly part of my field project, although some of my informants in the eastern villages in my study area had friends near the mouth of the Sepik. A number had some contacts east of the Sepik mouth, but I did not visit any of these communities as part of this project. I have visited villages in the Murik lakes for other projects, but was unable to include anyone from these villages in the survey I made for this study.

The research of Kathy Barlow, Lissant Bolton, and David Lipset (1986) for the Australian Museum directly confirms the general tenor of relationships along the entire North Coast. The goal of their project was to document North Coast objects in the Australian Museum that had little or no accompanying information from the collectors. Their study tends to be overly focused on the Murik people, where both Barlow (1985) and Lipset (1984) had conducted their dissertation research. Bolton had not conducted her dissertation research at the time, and, in fact, had not begun her graduate studies. Despite this bias from Lipset and Barlow, the general feel of this project largely confirms what we found further west down the coast. Not so much in terms of the details of exchange, but they did notice as Lewis had that many objects did move around from village to village. I would later spend nearly a year and a half documenting similar relationships from the mouth of the Sepik to the Indonesian border.

I arrived in the Aitape area in the spring of 1993 and established myself on Ali Island, staying in a simple house rented to us by Adolph Woichom,

whom John Terrell and I had met on our first visit in 1990. Wilfred Oltomo from the National Museum in Port Moresby joined me and was instrumental in helping me arrange visits to other communities, cataloging collections, and the like. Terrell joined me several months in after I had established myself on Ali Island and had developed a protocol for interviewing about friendship up and down the coast. Wilfred was especially helpful in tackling any and every logistical challenge. Because Terrell, Oltomo, and I were based on Ali Island near Aitape, our data was clearly focused during the first six or seven months on the four islands off Aitape (Tumleo, Ali, Seleo, and Angel) and their friends up and down the coast. During the last six months of this fieldwork, I attempted to fill in as many gaps in my data set as possible. I consistently focused on collecting interviews about hereditary friends from people in communities that I had not previously surveyed along various parts of the coast, and especially in some of the small inland villages and in communities down the coast east of Aitape. In this effort, I was conscientiously trying to fill in whatever gaps seemed to exist in my sample. My interviews were sometimes more clustered in some communities than in others, mostly because the more heavily populated communities seemed to need more interviews to characterize their variation. Also, it was often easier to get three or four men to sit down for an interview in a large village, while in one of the small inland settlements it often happened that I could find only one or two men to interview. If they were brothers or first cousins there was no point in interviewing both, as their responses to my survey would be remarkably similar because the two men would essentially share the same network of friends in other villages.

Most studies have biases, and coastal and island communities around Aitape were for me one unavoidable bias. These coastal and island communities had large populations compared with nearly all of the inland villages. Much as I tried to disperse my interviews into other communities where I had few interviews, coastal and island communities were so much more densely populated and were so central to the whole system that the best I could do was not to over-sample any of the east coast villages and to try not to interview first cousins or brothers.

At first, when visiting villages around Aitape and the Berlinhafen islands, Lewis seemed surprised to see so much interaction among communities along the coast. It is a striking contrast from Dorsey's (1909) visit to German New Guinea a year earlier, as Dorsey noticed almost nothing of inter-village exchange, restricted as he was to the communities visited by the German government steamer *Siar*, typically with only a couple of hours ashore in most communities. This difference between the styles of the two anthropologists was likely explained by the fact that Dorsey always traveled with German colonial officials while Lewis was largely left

to travel on his own between villages on the coast. Lewis, for example, often traveled by native canoe up and down the coast and occasionally by foot, and always went where he wanted to go, while Dorsey visited villages where the German officials wanted to stop in their small ship, the *SS Star*, under the command of Captain Voogdt. Thus, Dorsey primarily stopped at the larger villages where Voogdt thought that he could acquire curios from the villagers or laborers who were willing to work on one of the plantations for a year. Voogdt allowed Dorsey to collect on his own, but Voogdt had his entire crew of six or eight men acquiring things for his collection and Dorsey was but one man.

Dorsey's (1909) goal was to see the country and write short articles for the *Chicago Tribune* about his travels, and his collecting for the museum seems in many respects to be largely secondary, even though he explained in great detail for the Field Museum board of trustees and the administration that collecting was one of his key goals from the trip. Compared to Lewis's collecting, Dorsey's seems quite secondary. But secondary or not, Dorsey's collection helped shape the Field Museum's early collections and prior to Lewis's return it made up the largest part of the museum's Melanesian collections. When Dorsey returned from New Guinea, the Field Museum's New Guinea collection was clearly the largest in North America. However, Lewis's collection dwarfed all the other earlier collections combined, and remains the single largest collection from New Guinea and Melanesia made by any particular collector from any country during the entire twentieth century. Even the important collections in Berlin are built up from more than a dozen key collectors and many of these collections were divided between the national museum in Berlin and the home museum of each collector.

Lewis's principal goal during his expedition was to collect objects for the Field Museum. As he moved from village to village along the coast, Lewis made lists of specimens he purchased in his small pocket notebooks, and he routinely took note of the objects he acquired in one community that had come from other communities whenever he was aware of it. The Field Museum's catalog cards, which are the primary documentation of each object in the museum's collection from this period, had only one space for locality, which gives one a sense of how the early museum staff understood the relationship between objects and places: every object should be associated with a single place.

When writing up his catalog cards, Lewis identified every object's locality as where he had collected it, but when he knew that the object had been made elsewhere, he added a note on the card indicating where it had been made. These roughly three hundred objects (which represent one-fourth of his collection from this area) indicated a significant movement of objects

from one community to another up and down the coast. Lewis doesn't say for certain, but we now know that most of these exotic goods were obtained through exchanges with friends, rather than through conquest or exchanges at a local market. There seem to have been no markets anywhere along the coast in my study area in Lewis's and Dorsey's day. Today and in the 1990s when I was most active in the Aitape area, the market at Aitape was quite important, but mostly for provisioning the more than a hundred families from the region who worked for the government, the mission, or one of several private businesses. However, in Lewis's time there was no market of any significance, and anyone living at the station would have relied on relatives and friends for their sago and other vegetable foods.

By acknowledging that a certain number of objects in his collection had moved from one community to another—between 10 and 20 percent of the objects collected on the North Coast—Lewis helped us see how interactive people along the North Coast were. Exchanges of objects were central to these interactions. His fieldnotes are checkered with notes about how people in one community got some item or another from some other community. Sometimes these were unusual or even unique transactions, as in the case of certain carvings or ornaments; at other times, such as the exchange of smoked fish for earthenware pots used for preparing sago, they were descriptions of what appeared to Lewis as part of a regular or sometimes an annual exchange. In all of this Lewis appears to have been unique as a collector of New Guinea ethnographic collections from just about any museum around the world before World War I. He was quite systematic about recording in his notes, and later on the Field Museum's catalog cards, where objects were made as well as where he collected them (Welsch 1998b).

In 1909, when Dorsey was back in Chicago, and Lewis was in German New Guinea, the Field Museum purchased part of Captain Voogdt's collection. Lewis had even met Voogdt briefly during his travels, but Voogdt had returned to Germany on leave, and was mostly interested in getting the best price for the curios in his collection. Most of this collection had been assembled on the same trip in the *Siar* that Dorsey had taken. Thus, Dorsey and Voogdt's collections represent the same communities at precisely the same moment in time. Voogdt got on well with Dorsey and Voogdt had planned to sell all of his collection to him. However, when someone in Chicago sent several of Dorsey's *Tribune* articles back to friends in Germany, Voogdt got a chance to read Dorsey's account of the Germans in the colony, complete with criticisms of Voogdt himself (Welsch 1998b: 231–232; Dorsey 1909). After reading the Dorsey clippings that were circulating in Germany, Voogdt cut off all contact with Dorsey and decided to sell his collection to the curio dealer Umlauff, in Hamburg. Stunned by

Dorsey's disrespect, Voogdt wrote a short note to Dorsey that I found in the Field Museum archives, asking "Why did you do it?"

Voogdt cut off communication with Dorsey and the Field Museum about selling off his collection. The price Voogdt received from Umlauff was likely less than he might have received from Dorsey, but at least he didn't have to put up with the indignity of being criticized any further. Voogdt and a number of other Germans in the colony remained quite upset with the Field Museum and its curators. Being cut off from German officials meant that Lewis had to find his way from village to village with the help of villagers rather than the help of German residents. Closer contact with villagers in moving around and when he stayed in one or another of the villages gave him much closer contact with the people and taught him a great deal more about their way of life than anything Dorsey had experienced.

For Voogdt, the collection itself was only important as a source of income; its documentation, aside from the most cursory assignment of an object to a particular village, was largely irrelevant to him, and one suspects his notes were often somewhat of a haphazard guess. For Dorsey, having an accurate locality to associate with each object was important, but he too was not the least bit concerned about where the objects originated. In this, Lewis differed completely from Dorsey.

Once Dorsey had returned to Chicago, he contacted Umlauff in Germany and arranged with them to purchase a substantial part of Voogdt's collection, so that by 1912 the museum had acquired three collections from German New Guinea assembled by Dorsey, Voogdt, and the part of Voogdt's collection sold to Umlauff. Lewis's collections from German New Guinea began arriving in Chicago some months earlier and were stored in one of the galleries in the Field Museum's original building in Jackson Park, waiting for Lewis's return. Dorsey's collection, Voogdt's collection, and the collection Umlauff had purchased from Voogdt all needed to be cataloged, as did Lewis's own collection. By the time all of his collections arrived in Chicago, Lewis had roughly twenty to twenty-two thousand objects to catalog (Welsch 1998b, 2000). Lewis seems to have written catalog cards for about two-thirds of his own collection; for the remainder, he was assisted by museum staff. Lewis's own collection was the largest single collection ever assembled from New Guinea by any single collector from any country, and it remains the premier Melanesian collection in North America. In addition to German New Guinea, Lewis visited Papua (the southeast quadrant of the island), Dutch New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Fiji, and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia).

If one considers the Lewis Collection together with the other three collections—Dorsey, Voogdt, and Umlauff—these four collections represent the largest assemblage of objects from the North Coast of New Guinea in

any North American museum. Only the Ethnological Museum in Berlin has a collection comparable in size from this stretch of New Guinea's North Coast from around this period. As the official imperial museum, the museum in Berlin got a share of every collection sent back from the colony to Germany. What the Berlin museum lacks are the details of how each object was collected (when and where), which often remained with the fieldnotes of each collector together with part of the collection sent back to the home museum. My impression, from having seen part of this collection, is that nearly all of the Berlin objects have information only about where the objects were collected. Only the Otto Schlaginhaufen collection in Dresden has some additional information about the movement of objects from one community to another. Even this information, while likely quite accurate, is also rather limited, comparable to that provided by Lewis. Since Lewis and Schlaginhaufen met one another in the Aitape area, it is possible that they discussed this movement of objects up and down the coast. I cannot assess whether Schlaginhaufen observed this in the field or later saw it in his notes, but one thing is certain: Lewis recognized that objects and foodstuffs flowed between communities and Schlaginhaufen likely was aware of this movement of objects too.

The comments of the late twentieth-century curator of the museum in Dresden, Frank Tiesler, in his publications and in person, suggest that he too was well aware of the movement of objects up and down the coast. What was never clear to me was whether Tiesler has picked this up from the many sources about exchange that he found in the literature or if he discerned this from Schlaginhaufen's notes now at the Dresden Museum.

Lewis's specimen lists are generally definitive about where each object was collected, and his notes and catalog cards help flesh out the movement of objects along the coast. Dorsey's (1909) newspaper articles sometimes add information and context of how an object was collected, but early in the twentieth century having a specific village or community to associate most objects with was a major benefit of both of these collections. It was clearly an improvement over what we see in other contemporary collections. Of the two Americans, however, only Lewis understood the basic character of exchange on the North Coast. Schlaginhaufen may have understood some of this flow as well, but it was left to his successor at the Dresden Museum, Frank Tiesler, to identify details of this flow, just as it was left to me to make sense of what Lewis observed about exchange along the coast.

Dorsey observed many things along the North Coast, but the most important point that I note from his account is that the German administration thought they were in firm control of the colony. In contrast, Lewis's observations suggest that in most parts of German New Guinea, particularly along the coastal villages considered in this book, the Germans had

minimal control. They had established only one patrol post west of Madang (at Aitape in 1906). In 1909, Aitape was a tiny station with a few government officers and traders living there, plus several Catholic missionaries (see Hempenstall 1978). That was the extent of regular, direct foreign presence west of the Sepik River.

The German government and the Catholic mission encouraged pacification everywhere in the colony, but around Aitape the region was essentially pacified when the Germans established Aitape station, and it had been quite peaceful for many decades.

Besides Dorsey's and Lewis's accounts, we also have brief written accounts of some of the other visitors to Aitape and neighboring communities at or around the same time (Dorsey 1909; Friederici 1910a, 1910b; Neuhaus 1909, 1910, 1911; Schlaginhaufen 1910a, 1910b; and Lewis in Welsch 1998b; see also Welsch 1999, 2000, 2003). The Field Museum exchanged some of its collections from the North Coast with other museums (see, e.g., Thoms 2019, who describes the exchange with the University of Michigan's museum in Ann Arbor). To date, the largest part of the Lewis, Dorsey, Voogdt, and Umlauff collections from the North Coast have stayed in Chicago.

The other problem that I have confronted is that none of the collectors from 1908 and 1909 had a complete understanding of relations between the pairs of people who had ultimately exchanged things. Lewis seems to have recognized that a great volume of foodstuffs, fish, pork, sago, tubers, and other foods were being exchanged as well as a wide variety of objects of the sort he was collecting. He did not stay long enough, however, to really understand how pervasive such exchanges were, or how essential they were to creating and maintaining ties between communities along the coast. None of the other pre-World War I visitors (e.g., Dorsey, Schlaginhaufen, Friederici, and Neuhaus) had any better sense of exchange along this coast. It was very early days for viewing New Guinea societies from the vantage point of exchange. That would only begin in the 1960s.

## **Subsequent Anthropological Research on the North Coast**

Aside from British anthropologist Camilla Wedgwood's (1930, 1933, 1934, 1937) research on Manam island in 1932, there was very little ethnographic or anthropological research on the North Coast from 1913 until the late 1950s. Wedgwood's research is solid, and well researched (Lutkehaus 1985; Wetherell and Carr-Gregg 1990), but my point is that her anthropological work is detailed about social life on Manam. Wedgwood's was an ethnographic study about Manam islanders that largely ignored any relationships

that Manam islanders may have had with people on the mainland up and down the coast. Both Wedgwood and Lutkehaus (1995) were so focused on relations on the island that they say almost nothing about regional relations in the area. Nevertheless, Manam islanders were deeply engaged in exchange with communities up and down the coast.

Peter Lawrence (1964), who conducted research around Madang in the late 1950s, presents a very different kind of study from any of the travel narratives of the early scholars (Dorsey 1909; Friederici 1910a, 1910b; Neuhaus 1909, 1910, 1911; Schlaginhaufen 1910a, 1910b, 1920, 1959; Lewis in Welsch 1998b), or Wedgwood's (e.g., 1934) ethnographic study of Manam. Lawrence's (1964) regional study—*Road Belong Cargo*—is a study of the cargo cult centered on Madang and the Rai coast to the east. Although Lawrence approached this as any other ethnographic project, his study dealt with people from dozens of communities, who spoke several different local languages. As this was a post-World War II study, nearly everyone had been adversely affected by the war and the Japanese occupation of the region for more than three years. Nearly all of the men in these communities spoke Pidgin English comfortably enough, and they all ascribed to a fairly narrow set of ideas about a millenarian cult led by a man named Yali, which was the focus of Lawrence's study.

This popular movement was clearly multi-cultural, but it also emerged from such a narrow set of similar communities that Lawrence found it easy to study the cult in all the communities he visited and he apparently used Pidgin English to do so. Yali himself clearly saw his movement as a pan-New Guinean movement and was not at all concerned with local cultural identities, but promoted a more general view of native–white relations that minimized the importance of local cultural affinities. Like several other similar movements that have emerged in Papua New Guinea, this cargo cult was clearly multi-cultural in the sense that it spread over many diverse communities with distinct languages and cultures. For example, in 1993 in the Aitape area, I learned from several old men that some of Yali's men had traveled at least five hundred miles from Madang to Aitape to recruit adherents to the cult and to solicit support for the Yali movement. My informants suggested that Aitape men were not very interested in Yali's movement, but they did receive Yali's men to discuss joining the movement hundreds of kilometers down the coast. The expectation of these cult leaders had been that people around Aitape were likely to be supportive, but as far as I could ascertain, there was little interest in Yali or his movement in our region. I have always believed that Aitape people were completely disinterested in Yali's movement because they simply hadn't experienced the inter-racial indignities that people in Madang had. There were, after all, very few white men in and around Aitape at the time, and not many more when I

first arrived in 1990. It was not until 1998, after the devastating tsunami, that I started to see lots of white people in Aitape and in the villages, when Australian disaster groups flew up for a couple weeks at a time to help out. Even these visits were very short-lived, generally no more than a month or two.

Lawrence's study prompted a number of other studies of cargo cults and similar phenomena in many parts of New Guinea, but in nearly all cases these studies presented these pan-New Guinean movements as something new and innovative, rather than dealing with a multi-ethnic configuration of communities that had existed along large parts of this coast for a century or more. The Yali cult and several other movements in various parts of Papua and New Guinea were clearly examples of novel movements that incorporated people from several different ethnolinguistic communities. However, these were not the only ways for communities speaking different languages to establish regular interaction.

What I observed from the Sepik River to the Indonesian border was a broad set of long-term relationships that I understand as "friendship." Most communities on earth have patterns of friendship and they undoubtedly vary in one way or another in different places. What is clear is that contact with Europeans brought new ways of creating relationships that had not been available before, though there were always friendly relationships with villagers from many different communities up and down the coast.

Lawrence's analysis was unquestionably ethnographic, but clearly quite different from what most anthropologists in the 1960s expected to find in the pristine and previously uncontacted parts of the island. The clear model anthropologists typically used to understand the social patterns of this vast Melanesian region was that these sub-regions were made up of groups of individual societies that were distinct ethnolinguistic groups strung along the coast like pearls on a string. What was really happening along the North Coast, from the Indonesian boundary to the Huon Gulf, was a much more intensive interaction among communities speaking different local languages than most pre-World War II observers had typically assumed.

We can see this from Lewis's account jotted down in pencil in his small diary notebooks. The problem is that during his lifetime, Lewis never stressed what he observed. After 1909 there was little research along the North Coast; nobody had much sense of how interconnected these communities were. Nobody, including me, had much understanding of these connections until I started inquiring about the friendship networks of more than one hundred individuals along this coast.

People along the North Coast traded useful products, and they engaged in long-term economic alliances to provide for people up and down the coast, while speaking a wide variety of different languages. The linguistic

diversity of the 100,000 people at the core of my study area along this coast was greater than that found in almost any similarly sized area in indigenous North or South America prior to the time of Columbus or in most parts of Africa, or elsewhere in New Guinea and the Melanesian islands. The linguistic variation found along the North Coast is about as complex and diverse as any place on earth.

Despite this linguistic diversity, nearly everyone in my study area, from the Indonesian border to the Sepik River, had regular social ties with people speaking a variety of different languages. Linguistic differences have been no barrier to social engagement since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, and likely much, much earlier. We will discuss more of the implications of this level of language diversity in Chapters 2 and 3.

### **The Heyday of the Ethnographic Study in New Guinea**

After two decades or so of sending graduate students to the Highlands, and a few to the Sepik or to sites along the North Coast, the Massim, and the Papuan Gulf, nearly every one of the graduate students sent off to New Guinea in the 1960s and 1970s was encouraged to focus principally on a single ethnic group, so much so that in 1977, in compiling a bibliography of anthropological dissertations about New Guinea, George Westermarck and I could associate nearly all of the doctoral dissertations produced in the United States and Canada dealing with New Guinea as focused on one ethnic community or another (see Westermarck and Welsch 1977). Indeed, it was the heyday for ethnographic studies of individual societies or ethnic groups, as if this were the *only* way to understand New Guinea societies. Quite bluntly, ethnographies of a particular society were the kind of dissertation that most doctoral committees in the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia expected graduate students to write. Nobody on these dissertation committees objected to doctoral students collecting other kinds of social data, including data from a variety of different societies in any particular neighborhood, but the dissertations that emerged from these studies generally needed to be focused on one society, not on interactions among people from many different societies.

La Trobe anthropologist Ross Bowden, who worked primarily with the Kwoma people in the Washkuk hills along the Sepik River, did additional research in communities surrounding the Kwoma. Beginning in the early to mid-1970s, Bowden had studied the Kwoma and their art (e.g., 1983, 2022). While studying the Kwoma, Bowden also spent some time with Manambu people, and has recently published a study of Yalaku warfare (2023). It is not clear what triggered these other studies, but it shows that even in

the early to mid-1970s, some anthropologists were interviewing people in various groups outside the ethnic groups they were officially studying. The pattern of writing up one's research as an ethnography persists, however. Bowden tends to write about one or another of his several ethnic groups, rather than systematically comparing the three or showing how one society influenced the other.

Lorraine Sexton's (1986) research proved to be the real exception. She had chosen, during the course of her fieldwork, to live in a village that consisted of a community speaking three different local languages as well as Pidgin, a language that spread widely across the Highlands in the 1950s after laborers were hired on the coast to work in Highlands communities. With so many different indigenous languages, Pidgin became the lingua franca across the Central Highlands, much as it had in the villages where Peter Lawrence had conducted his research nearly twenty years earlier. One assumes that most adults could understand a fair bit of all three languages spoken in Sexton's community, but without Pidgin as a lingua franca to communicate within the broader community, people would need to speak two or three different local languages. I doubt that during my visit I quite understood what Sexton was aiming for by settling in a community with such a complex pattern of languages, but once her book about the Wok Meri movement was published (Sexton 1986), it became clear that she was not really interested in traditional cultural patterns or traditional languages as much as she was in this modern movement to expand incomes for women across the Highlands and other parts of Papua New Guinea. The movement also hoped to improve women's life conditions by raising their status within households and communities, and she paid almost no attention to the indigenous languages people spoke or the ethnic groups they belonged to. This was a type of research that anthropologists should have been considering, if not pursuing, all along. The "my tribe" model clearly shaped how a majority of us approached our fieldwork.

Something similar was also going on among Africanists in anthropology departments across the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Many Africanists conducted studies focused on particular ethnic groups in particular former colonies. Thus, the issues we are addressing are broader than New Guinea and the Melanesian islands, but much more obvious in New Guinea than in most other regions around the world.

Thomas Harding's research in the Vitiaz Strait was a striking exception to this pattern. He and his then graduate school advisor Marshall Sahlins at the University of Michigan had collaborated briefly on a research project at the eastern end of the North Coast and across the Vitiaz Strait that separates the Huon Peninsula from the west end of New Britain (Harding 1967; Thoms 2019). *Voyagers of the Vitiaz Strait* was the first modern study

that centerpieced inter-group exchange, and it remains an important study. *Voyagers* was well received by anthropologists, but oddly, in retrospect, this ground-breaking study generated few imitators and virtually no comparable study in any part of New Guinea among the next hundred American dissertations about New Guinea. It did not even generate much discussion within the discipline, much to Harding's dismay, I am sure. While it is hard to say for certain, I have always assumed that this detailed ethnography of exchange simply didn't fit the ethnographic model most anthropologists have pursued. Harding's work remains an important foundation upon which studies like my own have built.

The vast majority of these ethnographic projects were studies of a single society. Many studies acknowledged that members of the centerpiece community had important contacts with various outside ethnic groups, but inter-group ties were rarely central to these studies and appear mostly as asides in most monographs. Harding's study was so different from what most graduate students had been writing—and would continue to write for the next two decades—that it got shoved to the side as new “my tribe” studies emerged one after another in dissertation after dissertation. It was only in the mid to late 1980s, when graduate students began to frame their projects as broader than a single society, that we see anything like Harding's or, before him, Malinowski's early Massim research.

## **The Goals of This Study**

My chief aim in the present study is to document how the ways in which anthropologists have traditionally studied New Guinea societies, as if they were isolated societies with a few minor interactions with neighboring groups, is fundamentally the wrong way to envision New Guinea and Melanesian societies. The North Coast of New Guinea is not composed of isolated ethnic groups, each with their own distinctive cultures. Indeed, the hallmark of North Coast societies is that, however diverse their languages, they form a connected series of societies linked through persistent bonds of friendship that I will call “hereditary friendship.” These bonds are passed down from parents to children as much as possible. The institution of friendship allows the entire system to function, to provide friends with needed foodstuffs, raw materials, and manufactured goods.

What makes these friendships stand out is that many of the friends in any family's network will speak foreign languages. Indeed, the North Coast is among the most complex linguistic scenes on earth. Yet people have learned enough of each other's languages to be able to communicate and maintain warm and friendly relations. These relationships are what provisions people

up and down the coast. Only in the interior villages, within five or twenty miles of the coast, are people self-sufficient enough not to depend on their friends for basic subsistence.

It is certainly true that whether kinsmen live up to their obligations as kin, they remain family. With friendship, friends can only remain friends if they meet their obligations and help look after the needs of their friends. They may not live up to the hopes and desires of their friends, but they need to appear as if they are trying to do so. Life along the North Coast has always been difficult, but friends up and down the coast have made life manageable for most. Individual men can rarely manage their friends by themselves, but often call on their siblings, uncles, aunts, children, and nieces and nephews to help assemble gifts. Maintaining one's friends has always been a family affair, even if the relationship is typically centered on a pair of men, one from each family. Because these relationships are intended to be passed down to children and grandchildren, they are always family affairs. The heart of this book is about how people up and down the North Coast maintain, build on, and conceptualize these important relations.

Let us begin by considering what an early generation of anthropologists had found out about friendship relations along the North Coast.