

THE KÁFE: A NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS GROUP

From his ship off the southwest coast of Papua, the Dutch navigator Jan Carstensz observed and noted in his journal in 1623 the presence of high mountain ranges, in parts covered with snow, in the interior of the island. The peaks he saw are part of the central cordillera that traverses most of the length of the island of New Guinea. For nearly 300 years thereafter, despite 19th century explorations to ever more remote places of the globe—both to satisfy the needs of individual adventurers and the avid curiosity of a large European readership—no one undertook to explore the ranges of central New Guinea. Not until 1907-1915 and 1920-1922 were protracted expeditions mounted into the interior of then Dutch New Guinea; and the interior of Australian New Guinea remained a mystery until the late 1920's and 1930's, when missionaries, gold prospectors, and finally government patrol officers made their way into the Central Highlands. Somewhat unexpectedly they found a very large population already living there.

Harold G. Levine



"Kunai" country of the Goroka Valley.

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All photographs by the author.



New Guinea's Highlanders number over a million, roughly 40% of the combined modern populations of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya. Although there are marked cultural differences among the Highlands peoples, there are broad similarities as well. They include the sweet potato as the staple crop (though in a few areas taro and yams are also important), descent groups based on an ideology of patrilineality, and pigs as the most important valuables and status markers.

The group of Highlanders with whom I lived and worked between June 1971 and January 1973 refer to themselves as Káfe. They were apparently first contacted by Europeans in the late 1920's when the Lutheran missionary Flierl and his party crossed over from the Markham into the upper Dunantina system of the Bismarck ranges. In the early 1930's a government post was established in the Kamanontina Valley to the east of the Dunantina. In 1935 the anthropologist Reo Fortune made a trip to the Kamanontina Valley; and while most of his observations remain unpublished the articles which are available provide an exciting, albeit limited, account of the Káfe at the initial stages of Western contact and, as such, allow comparison with my own material collected among a highly similar group of people 35 years later.

The majority of the Káfe live in the valleys and on the slopes of the Dunantina and Kamanontina Rivers of the Eastern Highlands District of Papua New Guinea. Numbering, today, about 24,000 the Káfe reside in villages and scattered hamlets at altitudes ranging between 4,600 and 6,800 feet above sea level. The Káfe tend to divide themselves into two groups on the basis of the ecological niche inhabited: there are the "kunai" (Pidgin English for a type of high grass) dwellers at the lower altitudes and the "bush" (or forest) dwellers at higher ones. For both, sweet potatoes are the staple crop, and taro is important, while corn, beans, peas, and various greens supplement the diet. At lower altitudes yams and peanuts can also be grown. Both groups, of course, are pig-breeders; but the more extensive grassland available to "kunai" dwellers probably allows a larger carrying capacity for pigs.

My work centered in two "bush" villages named Hómaya and Báfo located along a small tributary of the upper Dunantina system. Hómaya is the larger of the two villages, with a total resident population varying around 270 persons compared with approximately 110 in Báfo. The core of these villages, as for all the Káfe, is one or more groups of patrilineally related men (45 adult married men in Hómaya and 28 in Báfo) with their in-married spouses, children, and other dependents. The largest descent grouping

recognized by the Káfe is the *nófira* (literally, "rope" or "vine") which, for our general descriptive purposes here, may be characterized as a named, exogamous clan whose members theoretically can trace descent from a common ancestor but who do not necessarily reside together and may have little or no contact with each other. The "clan-parish" (also called *nófira*), on the other hand, is the sub-set of those members of the clan who do live together and who, individually, have rights in land within the parish. Localized lineages and sub-lineages (extended families) make up smaller, though unnamed, units within the clan-parish. The lineages function primarily as mutual aid groups in communal enterprises such as gardening, house-building, and feasting. Other group activities, such as those connected with initiation, marriage, warfare, sorcery, and death, are organized on the clan-parish level and provide occasions for trying to resolve disagreements arising from conflicting interests among the lineages and sub-lineages.

Each parish with its one or more patrilineally based groups, whose members reside patrilocally (at least in theory), forms a more or less autonomous unit. The sphere of influence and inter-village dealings of any one village tends to be restricted. Each clan-parish normally has between two and four enemy clan-parishes and a similar number of allies. Within a clan-parish, however, each member can be related to other clan-parish groups by marital, maternal, or other blood kin links. The clan-parishes with which an individual has such personal connections may or may not coincide with the clan-parishes collectively distinguished as either friends or enemies. Thus, for example, it is possible for a Hómaya man to have affinal kin (to whom he is bound by a variety of social obligations and more informal forms of support) who, with the rest of their parish mates, are regarded as enemies of Hómaya.

Political and other parish-level decisions are made collectively, usually following a lengthy series of discussions in which those involved put forth their own ideas, get a sense of how others are thinking, and eventually arrive at a position that will be acceptable to everyone. Issues, to use our terms, are not "brought to a head" or "forced to a vote." By avoiding confrontation, undesirable and unwanted schisms are avoided; and the size, strength, and cohesiveness of the parish are maintained.

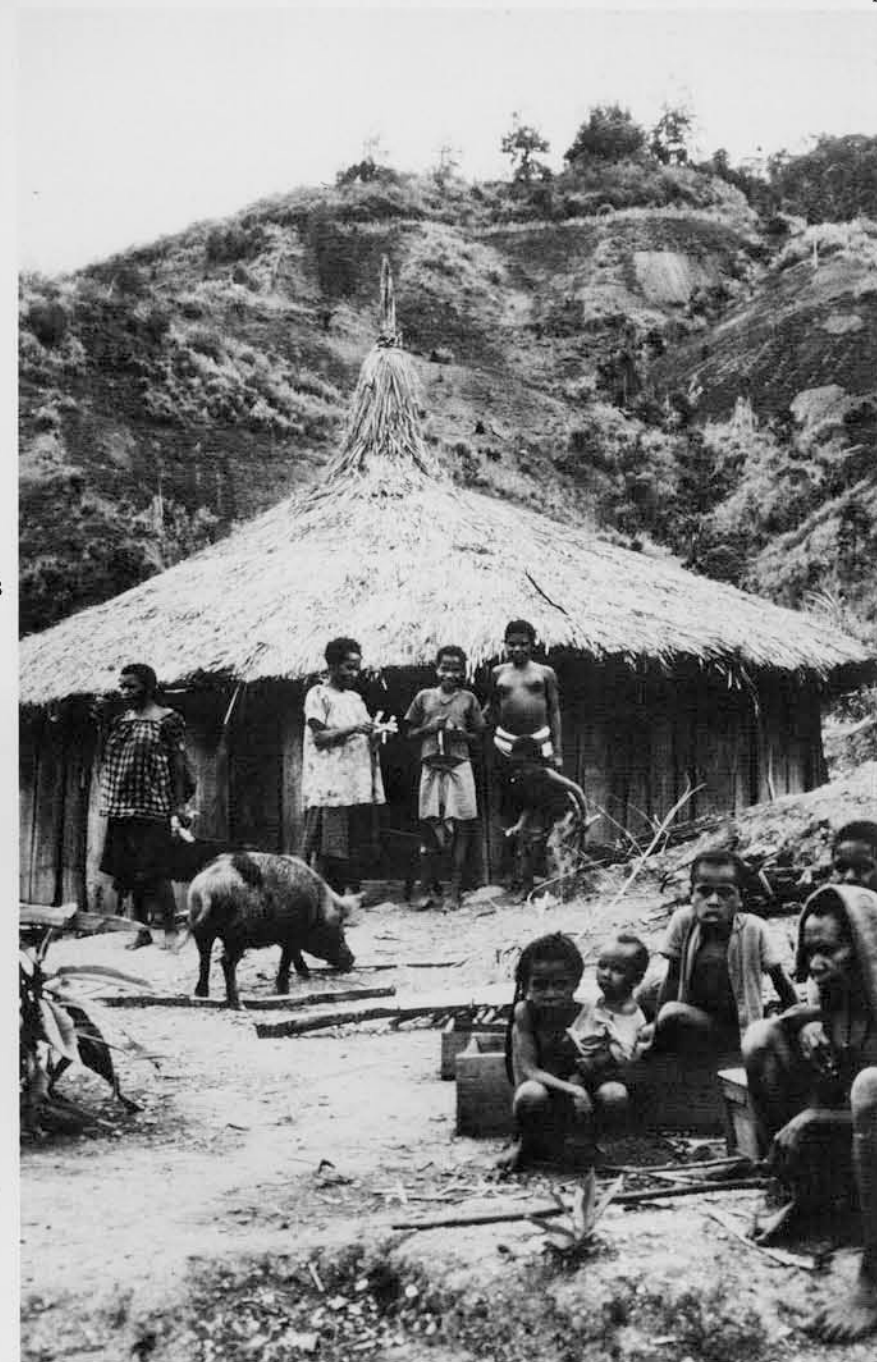
An important clan-parish concern is the marriage of its young men and women, though actual preparations and arrangements are centered in smaller sub-units. In a certain sense marriages are contracted between two groups, but this does not mean that the man and woman involved are merely passive or

1 Part of Hómaya village.

2 Teen-age girl feeding the pigs at her family's pig house.

3 Lower montane rain forest—or "bush" country—along a mountain ridge of the upper Dunantina. Lower on the slope are Káfe garden plots in different stages of preparation and growth.

4 Extended family group (minus husband).



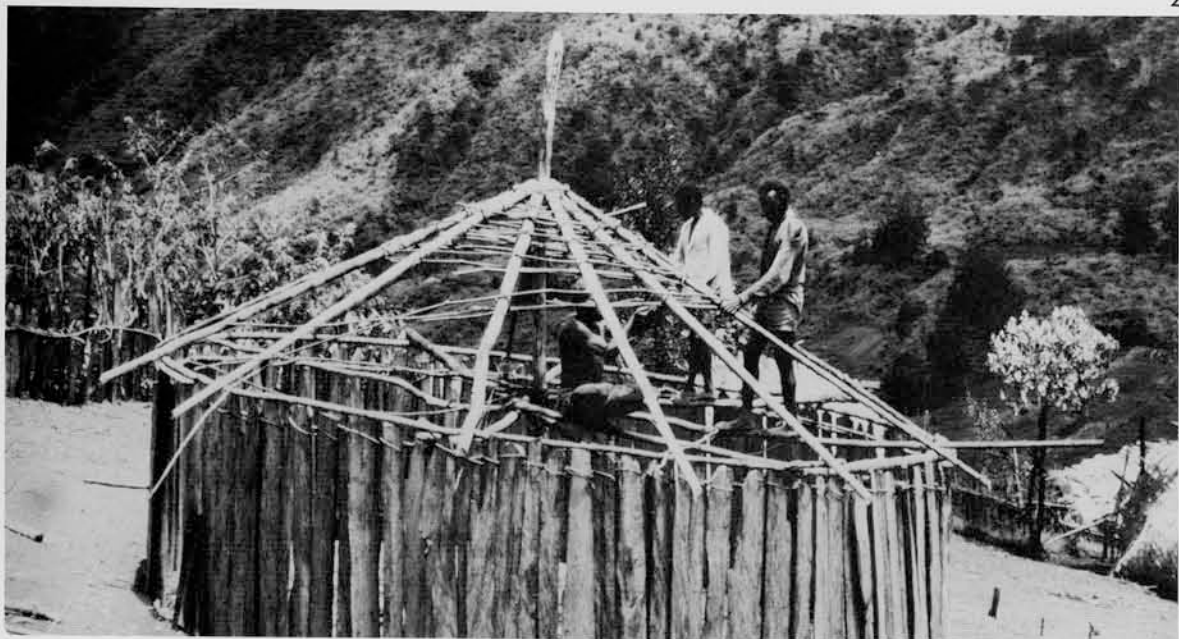


even unwilling parties in political maneuvering. Brideprice—in the form of pigs, bird plumes and, nowadays, Australian currency—amounts to more than can be provided by the resources of a single individual. Thus kin must be called upon to contribute. In addition, the guardian “parents” of the bride (never the real parents) who accept the brideprice must themselves make presentations to the groom’s family that are beyond a single family’s resources, and the brideprice they receive is redistributed to those who cared for the young woman during her youth and who helped in preparations for the marriage. Finally, because the new wife will almost certainly go to live in her husband’s parish and join work groups made up of her husband’s kinsmen, the latter have an active concern in her selection.

1 A young woman (center) tries on new bark-cloth skirts before her marriage. Such occasions are normally gloomy as the bride will be separated from her family and girlhood friends.

2 Building a typical round house.

3 An early morning fire from an earth oven *mumu*.



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4 Husband and wife making preparations for a communal feast at an earth oven *mumu* site. Stones are heated by burning timber. Once hot enough they will be covered with inedible greens and then with the food to be cooked. More greens will be laid on top of the food and then dirt on top of the greens. Hollowed out sections of bamboo are pushed into the center of the mound. Water poured into the bamboo filters down to the red-hot rocks causing steam which cooks the food in one to two hours.



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1 Preparation of dirt mounds in which sweet potato cuttings will be planted.

2 Pieces of pork are laid down (on leaves) prior to their dispersment at a funerary distribution.

3 One's views on a subject are typically presented—often as a harangue—at a public occasion such as a feast.

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Suggested Reading
Glasse, R. M. and M. J. Meggitt, Eds.

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The High Valley. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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New Guinea: The Last Unknown. London: Angus and Robertson.

Watson, James B., Ed.
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"New Guinea: The Central Highlands," *American Anthropologist* 66 (4), Part 2 (Special Publication).

In day-to-day activities husbands, wives, and their children are primarily concerned with the family's gardens and pigs. Fencing and building, breaking new ground, planting, garden-tending and harvesting, house-building and repairing, feeding the pigs, and food preparation are common tasks. Also, with the Australian introduction of coffee as a cash crop in the late 1950's, seasonal pruning of trees and picking and processing beans have been added to the work of both sexes. More involved, but less regular, activities stem from the decision to hold a public feast, negotiate a marriage, receive or visit other kin, and so on. During the day, the village is virtually deserted; only the old men and the young children entrusted to them may be around. At night people may occasionally stay in their gardens or in pig houses at some distance from the village, or the men may go hunting for the nocturnal arboreal mammal known in Pidgin English as karpul. When the Káfe return to the village at dusk, their gregariousness becomes evident as they move continually from house to house to visit and talk.

Káfe life must also be viewed in the light of social change. By now, of course, it has become a truism that the whole "primitive" world is having to face, and in some cases is succumbing to, the pressures of an ever-expanding Western civilization. The description of Káfe society given above portrays it as it is today and as it largely was prior to contact with Whites. Some traditional activities and institutions, however, have either been eliminated (such as warfare) or modified (such as initiation) because of mission disapproval or government prohibition. The point, however, is that Káfe life, though changed, is not in a shambles. Missionaries have tried to discourage the payment of death compensation to a man's maternal kinsmen after his death, so the Káfe have adjusted by making such compensation *before* a man dies, thus following mission teachings but not denying a much older cultural obligation of repaying the man's mother, through her blood kin, for her fertility, her ordeal in giving him birth, and her labor in raising him through infancy. There are many such adaptive changes in Káfe life and their study is a fascinating project in itself.

As such flexible adjustments to changing circumstances suggest, the Káfe are far from being "slaves of custom." They resemble many other New Guinea societies in allowing a great deal of individual choice. It can be a problem for the anthropologist to recognize that there is much more fluidity in the system than preconceived theories relating to culture and custom may lead him to expect.

Thus the composition of clans is not solely a product of biological descent reckoned through males. A man may go to live with his wife's clan-parish, with his mother's,

or with allies, and in time be "adopted" into the group. A genealogical fiction of patrilineal relationship is often developed later to ratify in principle what had already been accomplished in fact. Kinship terminologies, and the obligations that go with them, may also be open to choice. A person may be related to another in more than one way and will approach him in terms of one or another possible relationship, depending on circumstances. Study of these options and how they are manipulated can be useful for our understanding of kinship systems and their workings generally.

An interesting feature of Káfe culture is *tébe kre néntie*, literally he—or they—prepare a fire. The term refers to the meeting together of blood kin with a new bride or groom during the night before the marriage is to take place. The meeting begins as an occasion for adults to instruct the prospective groom or bride in his or her new duties. As the evening wears on, however, the discussion becomes more varied, and less concerned with instruction in married life. Gradually the meeting becomes transformed into a socially legitimate occasion for expressing grievances and hostilities towards one another. Thus, a group of wives may berate, and possibly even strike, another woman from the same natal village whose behavior has been criticized by outsiders and has led to their embarrassment; or a man may criticize another man for never helping his patrilineal kin by contributing pork or work for public events.

Tébe kre néntie very much resembles certain types of therapeutic and encounter groups in the United States. There is no doubt that important psychological functions are carried out through the vehicle of the *tébe*, especially useful in a culture where dispute is minimized and people attempt to reach agreement harmoniously. For the anthropologist the *tébe* reveals how actual behavior departs from the ideal and the tensions and grievances that these departures generate.

There are other matters in which the study of Káfe society promises to shed light: maintenance of group boundaries and the channeling of aggression through sorcery; a form of public speaking called *frónka ge* which enables the user to accuse, reprimand, and/or inform others without the embarrassment, shame, or danger of directly speaking the truth; and the extreme diversity found in the handling of death and mourning and its implications for our understanding of ritual. As remote as the Káfe appear, therefore, their study contributes not only to our knowledge of Highlands New Guinea societies, it also provides data for better understanding human beings generally, including ourselves. **21**