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THE DEATH OF A GREAT LAND
Ritual, History and Subsistence Revolution
in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea

VOLUME I

Text

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of The Australian National University,
Canberra, January 1995.**

Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original work of the author

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Ballard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "C".

Chris Ballard

ABSTRACT

The relationship between environmental conditions and the decisions and actions of historical agents is the central issue of this thesis. In a brief review of the role that social and environmental factors have played in archaeological explanation, I describe the scope for a form of archaeological ethnography in which particular attention is paid to the contrast between the different worlds of meaning in and through which historical agents address their environments.

In the context of a debate over the impact of sweet potato upon society and environment in the New Guinea Highlands, the history of wetland use emerges as a focus for competing positions on the nature of explanation for relationships between societies and their environments. My study addresses this debate through consideration of the recent history of Huli-speaking communities of the Tari region, in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Part B sets out an ethnographic model of the relationship between Huli people and their environment. External and Huli perceptions of landscape, society and agricultural production are presented in order to permit explanations for change that encompass both the intentions of Huli agents of the recent historical past, and the broader social and environmental processes of which those historical individuals cannot have been aware. The roles of cosmology and ritual in the relationship between Huli and their environment are singled out for the contrast they evince between an external, Western concept of historical progress and a Huli notion of continuous, entropic decline in the world and in society.

The history of a particular landscape, the Haeapugua basin, is addressed in Part C. Detailed oral historical accounts of land tenure and wetland use set a context for the archaeological investigation of the Haeapugua wetlands and wetland margins. On the basis of archaeological and palaeoenvironmental evidence, it is possible to demonstrate the significance of environmental change in placing broad limits on the possibility of wetland reclamation; this leaves unanswered, however, the more complex issue of human agency and decision-making in the processes and actual timing of wetland reclamation and abandonment.

Through reference to the role of ritual in the relationship between Huli and their environment, as set out in Part B, Part D attempts an explanation for wetland reclamation at Haeapugua. The oral history of migration from the central Huli basins is shown to reflect an increase in population consequent upon the local adoption of sweet potato. While acknowledging the importance of population pressure on dryland resources, I suggest that the more significant imperative for the Huli who undertook the reclamation of the Haeapugua wetlands was the increased demand for fodder with which to augment the production of pigs. Pressure on dryland resources, decline in soil quality and increasing social conflict were all interpreted by Huli as tokens of entropic decline, of the death of the land. Within the framework of Huli cosmology, the appropriate response to these changes was the innovation and elaboration of ritual and it was the greater requirements of pigs for sacrifice and for exchange in ritual contexts that provided the immediate impetus for wetland reclamation.

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