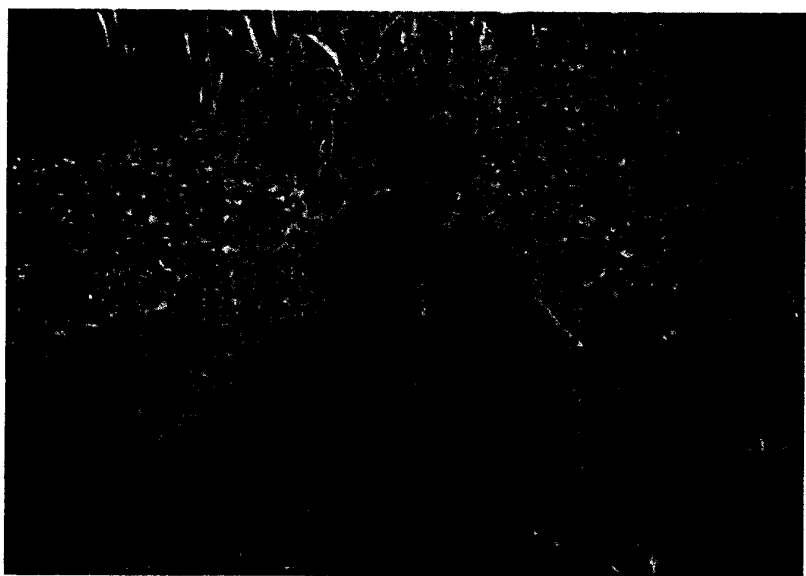


Dance house



One of the leaders of the *Wege* community in the Kamu Valley in their communal garden

CHAPTER 2

Ethnographic notes

This chapter provides a brief ethnographic background.¹ This chapter will only briefly deal with the people's origin, their technology, their economy, their leadership style at the time of contact with the *ogai*. Where necessary, I will show how this brief account of ethnography is directly related to present study: Zakheus Pakage and his communities.

2.1 Origins

The Me believes that their forefathers came to the Paniai region from the east. The stories of migration speak of the movements of people from the east to the western direction. The people today traced this history of migration of the founders of their clans and then go on to restate the history of their settlements up to the present place. Each clan or sub-clan has their own story of how their forefathers came and settled where they live today. Such origin stories are kept secret and often are used to legitimate positions particularly by shamans or cult leaders today or when there is a land dispute, etc. The origins stories are also important in shaping the people's religious orientations today. The religious leaders in particular make use of such account to support their arguments that when their forefathers migrated to the Paniai region generations ago, they were accompanied by Gods, guardians spirit of the clan, who had chosen the location which they occupy today. The history of Zakheus Pakage's clan and the stories of the origin of the Pakage clan is an example to this. This will be shown in Chapter 5 as to how the people interpreted the work of Zakheus in the 1950s.

¹ For more detail ethnographic account by the time of contact with Western culture see Pospisil (1971, 1972, 1977).

2.2 Technology

By the time of contact with Western culture the Me were utilizing their natural resources to meet their needs for shelter, food and weapons. The people devised various tools to meet their needs. These tools were mostly made of bamboo, wood, stone, rattan, etc. Bamboo or bones of an animal were used to remove splinters or arrows tips from war victims, and *yuma mito*—nose plugs used for decorative purposes. The people made arrows out of bamboo; but also *buka* which was used to cut pork or meat. The people also made *gau*—which was used to fetch drinking water from the river or lake.

Wooden tools used in land cultivation were: *kopa*—a long digging stick to make holes for seeds to be planted, *patau* and *wadi*—two types of short digging sticks, the former was used by males to make ditches for drainage and the latter was used by women to dig up sweet potatoes; tree bark for women's skirt, raft, dugout canoes, and its paddles for transportation on the lakes and along the rivers, *poti* and *yenu* for fishing shrimp and crayfish in the lakes.

Weapons

Bows and arrows are made of bamboo and variety of woods. These arrows were used in hunting and warfare.

Clothing

The primary clothing of the people consists of *koteka*—a penis gourd for man—and *moge*—a woman's skirt—made of dried tree bark. The *koteka* vines are still grown in or near the village mostly in the swampy areas and river banks or in lake. The gourd fruit that are still young are eaten but the old ones which have turned yellow are picked and dried. Then their contents are removed and the outer part is scrapped clean. They then are ready to be sold or used as a penis cover. The gourd is kept in its place by string made of dried tree bark.

The women skirts were made of different types of dried tree bark taken from the forest. The trees useful for skirts did not grow in nearby forests. For this reason men were responsible to supply women with tree bark. The men usually spent days and night to secure them. After they took the bark home, women in turn made skirts, string bags or fishing nets.

Shelter

The pre-contact house of the Me had a rectangular type. It could have a number of rooms, depending on the needs. The wives and children usually lived in the smaller rooms. Each room had its own fire place and entrance door. The grown up boys and men occupied the main room.

The *Wege Bage*, who are the subject of this study, particularly those in the Kamu area, attempted to preserve their customs and culture which relied on this simple wood, stone and bone technology. When the *Wege Bage* began their activities in the Kamu Valley the leaders attempted to get their followers use and make wooden tools such as: wooden spoons instead of buying the ones made by the *ogai*, which were being sold at a government subsidized price in the early 1960s.

2.3 The economy

The Me economy entered on three interrelated activities, namely: the cultivation of sweet potatoes pig raising and *mege* or cowrie shell making activities. The sweet potatoes production is essential for pig raising. There are two methods of cultivation. In the mountain slopes a slash and burn technique is used. On the valley floor 'intensive complex cultivation' as Pospisil calls it, is carried out. In the second method the soil is turned over with a *patau*—a spade like tool. A system of rectangular beds with drainage ditches surrounding them is made (Pospisil 1978: 8).

After cutting down trees and surrounding the prospect garden with a fence—in case of garden in the mountain sides—and after the garden beds are formed—on valley floors—by the men and the women take up the responsibility of burning, planting, weeding the garden and harvesting the crops. As for pig raising, women and children are responsible for feeding the pigs; men furnish the pigs with a place of shelter. Aside from this the man spends most of his life conducting business meetings with other fellow men to earn as much *mege* as possible. These meetings take place almost everyday: where three or more men get together, they exchange *mege*, buy and bargain and borrow.

By the time of the first contact with Western culture took place the Me were practicing what Pospisil calls 'primitive capitalism' which according to Pospisil has the following characteristics: the existence of true money in the form of *mege* shells, saving and speculation, a market regulated by the law of supply and demand, an emphasis on wealth that in its magnitude surpassed that encountered in the Western society, the dominant position of sales in the exchange of commodities, the use of paid labor and of lease contracts, combined with a strong indigenous version of individualism (Pospisil 1978: 29). Pospisil is right on his comments on the people at the time of his research that 'they had replaced typical preoccupation with the supernatural and ritual by secular and profit-motivated outlook on life' (Pospisil 1978: 4). For this reason some sectors of *Wege* communities observed this development and at-

tempted to change the course of their history. These *Wege* communities who were concerned for religious renewal argued that 'the people's mind at that time was blinded by the *mege* and the pig' (MK, Idakebo June 12, 1988).

Indeed, by the 1950s, the cowrie shell among the Me served as a true money in the modern society. With this money the people could buy anything, from food, domesticated animals, various artifacts, to payment for different forms of services such as: building a house, fetching firewood or repairing a bridge or a garden fence, payment for a bride, etc.. It was assumed that in order to survive one had to have *mege*. For this reason the leaders of *Wege Bage* who are the subject of this study reacted by arguing that 'even without the cowrie shell we can still go through life'. In fact, according to the latter a better life could be enjoyed without the *mege*.

Local commodities changed hands through sales. Marketing of such commodities took place every day. As it was shown above, generally women worked in the garden and raising pigs, while men were involved in *ede pede*—direct *mege* making activities such as: selling pigs, or other domesticated animals, visiting the distant relatives to collect their long-overdue loans, or to look for people who could loan them some cowrie shells. The pig feast is a most important institution in the Me society, which serves as a political and economic institution. 'Often well over a 1000 sellers and buyers gather in order to offer their produce for sale or to make necessary purchases with their money. Usually hundreds of pigs are slaughtered during this day and the meat is distributed through sales, loans or repayment of debts. The trading is, of course, not limited to pork and pigs. The people offer for many other products of their labor such as salt, bamboo and gourd containers, bundles of dried inner bark, axes, knives and necklaces. Since a pig feast attracts people from far away places, even from other Papuan tribes, this feast function also as an important institution of inter-regional as well as intertribal trade' (Pospisil 1978: 21).

The price of the commodities were determined by a number of factors. One of them is relation between the buyer and the seller. The price tend to be lower when the buyer is a relative or close friend with the expectation that the buyer would give similar price to the former in the future. More important is the supply and the demand. If the supply exceed the demand then the price of local commodities fall. When *udi urua*, the time when supply of shrimp went up, a string bag full of shrimp can cost one *bomoye* but at the time supply exceed the demand rise three or four bags of shrimp can cost one *bomoye*. The same is true for the sale of sweet potatoes. When the water surface goes up due to flood the people who have their gardens usually get panic in search of buyers in face of gardens that are sinking. When this happens the price drastically falls.

It is important to stress that the sweet potato production in this region was the people's foundation of life. As will be noted in Chapter 5, when the production of the sweet potato declined due to floods and to other environmental crises in this region, it affected the people's existing socio-religious and economic situation. This change brought about the emergence of new religious leaders who claim to preach a new era of socio-economical and political freedom.

2.4 The leadership

The local influential leaders whom Pospisil calls the headmen organized socio-economic activities at the time of contact. They achieved their position due to their success in the sweet potato production, pig breeding and the accumulation of large numbers of *mege*, and by exercising their speech-making skill in expressing their arguments.

The Me headmen's situation come close to the Mount Hagen Big-men described by Strathern:

They are polygynists, using their wives and the wives' relatives as resource base for the production of pigs and for intergroup diplomacy. They held together groups of men in a society which until the Australians came, recognized no authoritative rulers. They settle disputes by exploiting subtle cross-cutting pressures and appealing to overall values of group solidarity in the face of enemies. In the past they both planned warfare and were prominent peace-makers. They hold no position as of right by birth, although in practice there is a good deal of de facto succession to big-man status between fathers and sons. Instead, they must depend on the force of their arguments, their oratorical powers, and their ability to manipulate situations with reference to men's interests in exchanges of wealth. They are prominent too in speech-making at marriages when new alliances are created between families of different clans through the transfer of goods in bride wealth exchanges (Strathern 1979: xvii).

They maintained their support for their position by extending loans or credit to those who were in need such as: those who needs money to pay for their debts, or those who want to hold a birth feast following a child's birth or to pay for a bride. Conducting negotiations with representatives from other groups outside of their own is another strategy to advance their leadership position. A headman's role is that of deciding war and peace and within the

group his role is one of an authority in handling conflicts or problems arising among his supporters. His words carries weight in economic and social aspects. Being an important man, the headman decides the date of a pig feast and pig markets, and inducing others to become co-sponsors for pig feast (Pospisil 1978: 51ff). They also managed and decided the date of *akabade* which is wealth exchange institution, because they were the ones who were prominent in raising, giving and receiving wealth exchange.

Again what Strathern says about the Mount Hagen leadership when the first *ogai* arrived in the area is similar the Me headmen.

The big man had built up an elite network of exchanges based on labor, pigs, credit and pearl shells (as well as other categories of shells). But these networks never hardened into hereditary chiefship, aristocratic lineages or any rigid social stratification. Warfare's exigencies led to people seeking refuge, family circumstances and sickness brought ill-luck to some individuals. Big-men sized upon these situations to increase their domain of power and they certainly did extract labor from other men of least status converting it into prestige for themselves (Strathern 1987: 259).

Their supporters consist mainly of their close relatives, debtors and other people who come from poor families who rely on the support of the headmen. There were others who come to stay there and work for them for some months to obtain financial aid particularly to pay for the bride price. Other than these were the so-called immediate relatives who in one way or another support the headmen due to their emotional ties or the networks of duties, rights and expectations for their future economic and social guaranties it brings.

As noted earlier, their position as leaders, is not permanent one. It can be lost. As Pospisil said,

Since the basis for political leadership depends on successful pig breeding which in turn are affected to a great extent by the state of individual's age or quality of judgment, the political structure and leadership pattern in the *Kapauku* society is in a constant flux. New individuals emerge as influential leaders only to lose their positions some years later to younger and more successful pig breeders and traders (Pospisil 1978: 49).

When the *ogai* came to the Paniai region, this socio-economic situation underwent a drastic change. A few of the Me local leaders took the initiatives to closely associate themselves with the *ogai*. Some of them were: Weakebo Mote, Auki Tekege, Bowadi Mote, Moniwatia, etc. (Boelen 1955: 178-199).

However, many of the headmen refused to cooperate with the *ogai* and demonstrated this in a series of revolts, as will be seen in the following chapter. In fact, they attempted to drive the new settlers away from the region. The change of attitude on the part of people in the village level took a gradual course. How did this change come about? How did the whites get settled? what were their activities in the region which brought about such changes in the region? and the question of how did the people view the activities of the *ogai*? The following chapters will attempt to address these questions.